Dorothy Nott, former Chair of the Friends, discusses a painting from the Gallery's collection by one of the most important still-life painters of the 18th century.

Artwork of the Month April 2023

Luis Meléndez (1716-1780), *Still Life: Fruit, Nuts, Boxes of Sweets, and a Jar*

Luis Egidio Meléndez, *Still Life with Lemons and Nuts*, 1765-1775,
oil on canvas, 37cm x 50cm
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York Art Gallery is extremely lucky to have a painting by Luis Meléndez - or Menendez: they are very rare outside Spain, and there are only three in public galleries in this country. York's painting was purchased from the Matthieson Gallery in London by F. Lycett-Green in 1943, and generously gifted to York Art Gallery in 1955, some 30 years before the National Gallery acquired its first of two. It has proved popular and has been exhibited several times, at the Royal Academy, the National Gallery, and the Bowes Museum among others. In her catalogue raisonné, Meléndez-expert Eleanor Tufts remarks that the quality of York's painting seems comparable to those in the Prado in Madrid, and it says a good deal for the artistic sensibility of Lycett-Green that he chose to acquire this particular work.

Although of Spanish descent, Meléndez was born in Naples in 1716, only arriving in Spain at the age of one, when his father Francisco returned with his family to Spain. Both Francisco and his brother Miguel were painters of some repute, and so the young Luis was born into an artistic family. Back in Madrid, Francisco secured several commissions as miniature painter, before eventually, in 1725, becoming Miniature Painter to the King. Miniatures were very popular at that time - think for example of Richard Cosway in Britain - and Luis was able to study under his father's tuition. In addition, he was lucky enough to receive tuition from the court portrait painter, Louis-Michel Van Loo, so he had a good grounding in art.

Francisco was very concerned that Spain should have an Academy of Art in the same way as many of the cities in what was to become Italy, such as Rome and Florence, and he began to petition the King in 1726. However, it was not until 1744 that he was partially successful, in that a trial Academy was set up. Nevertheless, this comprised several sections, including a school where Luis was one of the first pupils. Given his involvement in the creation of the Academy Francisco expected to be named as Director-General. In this he was disappointed, losing out to a rival artist, and was only made director of one section. His disappointment was compounded when he entered the competition for the painting to celebrate the Academy, again losing out to a fellow competitor who had cannily included a cameo of the King within his painting. Not a man to take his humiliation lightly, Francisco wrote and published a vitriolic denunciation of the Academy in very forthright terms. Not only this, but he made his son take the printed version to the Academy, whereupon Luis was summarily dismissed. He was not even allowed to remove his own work, and this at a time when he was beginning to make his way in the world of art, painting a very confident self-portrait and, possibly, a portrait of the then king of Spain, Ferdinand IV.

Luis, by now nearly 30, left Spain for Italy, spending the first few years in Rome. We know very little of his time there, and before long he had moved on to Naples, his birthplace. At this time, Naples was under the jurisdiction of Spain following the Treaty of Utrecht in 1715. Again, little is known save that he was received by the King of Naples as an artist worthy of recognition. What we do know is that the King purchased - or at least acquired - three paintings by Meléndez, though almost certainly they were not still life works. More probably they were history paintings, at that time the most prestigious in the hierarchy of paintings, as mention is made of 'his virtuous deeds.'

Then, in 1753, Luis was asked by his father to return to Spain to assist him with a large commission. Francisco had been asked to replace the illuminated choir books, destroyed in a fire at the Chapel Royal. Time was of the essence as the replacement chapel was near completion, and the choir books were required to be in place for the grand opening. These choir books may sound simple, but in fact they were highly decorated. The central section would comprise flattering references to the royal family and/or heroic deeds, surrounded by elaborate borders of fruit, flowers, vines etc, and it is just possible that this work led to Meléndez concentrating on still life in later life, and marked the end of his career as a portrait painter vying with his many contemporaries. A traveller through Spain, Joseph Baretti, singled out Luis' work as 'especially superior' and referred to him as 'so excellent an artist'.

Once this work was completed Luis petitioned for a post as Royal Painter in Madrid. He was very hopeful at first as the King of Naples - the very one whom he had met there - was now King Carlos III of Spain. Sadly, however, he was turned down, not just once but twice. Just how, then, some 30 years after his death, 45 of his still life paintings were found in the King's dining-room at Aranjuez is unclear, but found they were, and they represent a series recording systematically all the different foods of Spain and reflecting the philosophy and spirit of the Age of Enlightenment. Similarly, it is unclear quite how he managed to maintain himself once he had finished with the choir books, as very little is known of his life at this time. What we do know is that most of the still life paintings are dated between 1759 and 1774, but that leaves gaps in his life when he may have been engaged as an illustrator for the porcelain factory at Buen Retiro. Sadly, he did not make his fortune, and in 1780, shortly before his death, unable to support himself and his wife - there were no children - he signed a declaration of poverty. The following year, his widow did likewise.

Nevertheless, Meléndez is now regarded as probably the most famous still life artist Spain has ever produced. He had been preceded in the early 17th century by Ledesma and Cotan, who had also chosen to profile fruits and vegetables, but their work differed from that of Meléndez, who chose to arrange his still life objects tangentially rather than symmetrically, which made for a more complex image. Like his predecessors he concentrated on painting commonplace, ordinary objects and in a low-key manner. The works are far removed from the colourful abundance of the Dutch still life paintings of an earlier century. Instead, he used earthy colours with sombre groupings against a dark background but subject to a strong light always coming in from the left. There is a real artistic virtuosity in his grouping of objects and the textures he brings out. If you look at York's

painting you can see how, although the arrangement appears artless, the way he has positioned the objects on the canvas creates a real three-dimensional impression, as the eye moves back past the melon, the fruits, and the sweetmeats to the boxes, and then to the jar at the back. And there is a sense of mystery: what is in the wrappers? What do the boxes hold? And what is underneath the cloth over the jar? We are left to fill this in for ourselves. As with nearly all Meléndez' works, the format is horizontal, with several objects in close proximity to the viewer. As the light comes in from the left, the right is left mainly in shadow, but with just a hint of reflection from the use of impasto. A sure line follows the contours of each object, especially the melon and the fruit at the front, with the result that they are very clearly defined and the sense of intimacy is heightened by the small size of the canvas. When I look at this canvas, I get a very strong feeling of peace. It is a very calming image, partly on account of the palette used, partly on account of the composition as it draws the eye back and back into the distance, and partly on account of the simple subject matter which requires no imagination. These are objects we might find in our own kitchens or dining rooms. We can still buy cheese – for example, Camembert - in such boxes, and some sweets are still elaborately wrapped (think Quality Street or Roses or Ferrero Rocher, for example), and the fruit is universal, especially in these days of global exchange.

Meléndez' quiet, austere approach can perhaps be explained by the state of the nation in the 18th century. In the early part of the 17th century Spain was wealthy and painting reflected this, dominated by profusion-bountiful harvests and elaborate pastries (and again think of Dutch still life, for of course, the Dutch were then subject to Spanish rule). However, by the end of the 17th century the rulers of Spain, the Hapsburgs, were in decline, with the last of the line the sickly Charles II who acceded to the throne at the age of four showing the disastrous effects of long-term intermarriage. Artists, encouraged by the Jesuits, were turning to other subjects such as vanitas paintings, profiling skulls and *memento mori* warnings of the transitory nature of life. With the expulsion of the Jesuits in the middle of the 18th century a new spirit was born and Spain enjoyed a resurgence, starting to share in the Europe-wide interest in scientific and literary progress, in short the advancement of science.

Meléndez has been compared to Jean Simeon Chardin, the 18th-century French artist, in his choice of subjects, and it has been said by a former curator of this gallery that these two artists rescued still life from simple adjuncts to architecture and decor, giving the genre a new dignity and one where it is possible to summon up a whole world of visual sensations.

However, whereas Meléndez painted with precision and ‘fini’ with very small brushstrokes, Chardin had a much looser brushwork. The new fascination with botany in the 18th century is reflected in Meléndez’ precise, objective representations of fruit and vegetables. This is at a time when Carl Linnaeus is publishing his work on binomial plant classification (which was being translated into several languages) and when botanical excursions by scientists and artists to the Americas was taking place. Meléndez may also have spent time in the great garden at the Prado, filled with plants from all over the world as well as those close to home. But his scientific objectivity was unusual amongst his contemporaries. As you can see from this painting, the objects are rendered in great and precise detail; you can almost feel the ridges on the melon and hear the crackle of the sweetmeat wrappers, while the fruit looks ready to be squeezed or crushed for juice. Note too, that the fruit is anything but perfect. Look closely, and you can see the damage on the skin. This is a realistic not an idealised representation, and one anyone can relate to. How many times have we seen imperfections in our own fruit, whether on purchase or after a few days in the fruit bowl? Interestingly, Eleanor Tufts also raises the possibility that, owing to the constant recurrence of similar objects, Meléndez’ work may contain a hidden sequence of symbols, though thus far she has been unable to establish any evidence either way. Nevertheless, this raises an intriguing possibility.

As I have mentioned, most of Meléndez’ paintings are in Spain. Specifically, most are held in the Prado, including at the last count 40 of the original 45 of the series in the royal palace. What is unclear is whether York’s painting could once have been part of the royal series, but, from what Eleanor Tufts has written and her dating of this work at probably 1770, it is entirely possible, thus bringing a whiff of Spain to the northern climes of Yorkshire.

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