



An exhibition now in Los Angeles goes to the heart of a great genius of still life, writes **Jonathan Lopez**.

**L**uis Meléndez firmly believed that the world owed him a great deal more in the way of acclaim and financial recompense than it ever seemed willing to bestow. Egotism of this kind is not unusual in the history of art. And given the circumstances under which Meléndez was raised, his emergence as a difficult personality was probably an unavoidable fate. His father, the prosperous miniaturist Francisco Antonio Meléndez, maintained a notoriously torrid love affair with his own personage, convinced that the decorations with which he embellished royal decrees, patents of nobility, sacred manuscripts and enamelled jewellery displayed all the hallmarks of profound genius.

The elder Meléndez was not especially popular among his fellow artists, and in 1746, when he despatched his then 29-year-old son to deliver an inflammatory letter to the newly established Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando – the Spanish royal academy – the response turned out to be just as harmful to the letter's messenger as to its author. In his missive, Francisco Antonio impudently attacked the academy's director and claimed for himself the title of founder. (He had indeed been among those who lobbied the crown to charter

# Master of light

the institution, but he had been passed over for the top job and was instead offered a largely honorary position as head of the paintings division.) As a result, Francisco Antonio was removed from his post, and Luis, one of the academy's best students, was expelled not long thereafter. Up until this point, Luis had been positioning himself for a career as a court painter, labouring for several years in the *atelier* of Louis-Michel van Loo, a French artist who was a royal painter to Philip V of Spain. It is believed that Meléndez produced copies of Van Loo's royal portraits for dissemination in the Spanish provinces and abroad, although no extant examples have yet come to light.

Judging from his self-portrait of 1747 (Fig. 1), which was probably intended as a reception piece, Meléndez showed considerable promise as a portraitist in his own right. One senses Van Loo's influence in the expert evocation of the textures of the garments, in particular the lushly scumbled blues and greys of the velvet coat and the crisp, smoothly executed white brushstrokes that define the linen cuffs, shirtfront and collar. The supercilious pose does not redound entirely to Meléndez's credit, but it makes a forceful impression. With his cool, self-confident gaze meeting our eyes, he stands with one hand on his hip and the other raised aloft, flaunting a masterful life drawing on an oversized sheet of paper. This prop was intended, most likely, to advertise his abilities in a field essential to the training of a history painter. Without support from the academy, however, Meléndez was unable to pursue that dream. This is the only figure painting by his hand now known to exist.

The exhibition on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, after its run at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, demonstrates that Meléndez – badly wounded though his pride was by the *débâcle* at the academy – went on to enjoy a productive second act, portraying not people, but fruits, vegetables, bread, ginger boxes, wine bottles and any number of other household objects in decorative paintings produced on a commission basis – a potentially lucrative endeavour that required neither court nor academy affiliation. He breathed new life into the genre of the *bodegón*, or pantry still life, established by Zurbarán, Sánchez Cotán and Juan van der Hamen, by replacing the moody foreboding of his 17th-century

The works illustrating this review are by Luis Meléndez (1715–80).

1 *Self Portrait*, 1746. Oil on canvas, 98 x 81 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris 2 *Still Life with Chocolate Service, Bread Roll and Biscuits*, 1770. Oil on canvas, 50 x 36.5 cm. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid



predecessors with a spirit of rigorous, almost scientific inquiry in keeping with Enlightenment ideals.

Unlike the Meléndez exhibition organised by Peter Cherry for the Prado in 2004, this show is not primarily monographic in intention. Its curators, Catherine Metzger and Gretchen Hirschauer, both of the National Gallery, have chosen to emphasise a series of specific themes in the artist's work, including repetition, geometry and technical innovation. They have succeeded to a great degree in lifting the veil from the master's methods and revealing several of the main preoccupations that animate his work.

To see a still-life by Meléndez is to encounter reality as observed, manipulated and distilled by a meticulous craftsman. Probably his most optically perfect work is *Still Life with Chocolate Service, Bread Roll and Biscuits* (Fig. 2), which was part of a larger commission for the Duke of Asturias. Its seemingly casual composition has, in reality, been carefully arranged and lit to bring out the textures of the objects, their recession into the depth of the picture plane and the shimmering reflections of light on their surfaces. The effect, as in so many of Meléndez's works, is pure magic – both sumptuous and hypnotic.

3 *Still Life with Watermelons and Apples in a Landscape*, 1771. Oil on canvas, 63 x 84 cm. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

Despite his unique mastery of his genre, Meléndez seems to have lived most of his adult life under a cloud of frustration. He tried repeatedly to win appointment as a royal painter but never succeeded. He had constant money worries and quarrels with customers. And in some of his later works, he appears to harken back with a wistful sense of longing to his early ambition of producing history paintings. Surely the most unusual picture in the current show is *Still Life with Watermelons and Apples in a Landscape* (Fig. 3). The dramatic lighting, low viewpoint, and outdoor setting combine to imbue the motif with a striking – and strikingly peculiar – sense of monumentality. The watermelons appear not merely to lie upon the ground but to bristle with energy, as if in preparation for battle and glory. Although this is not Meléndez's most successful composition, it is perhaps his most telling.

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