

Galerie Canesso

Tableaux anciens

JOSEFA DE ÓBIDOS

Still life with a basket of broad beans, foxgloves, white and red roses, daisies, butterflies and snails on a stone surface

Oil on canvas, 24¾ × 39 ⅞ in (63 × 100 cm)



PROVENANCE

Florence, Leone Cei & Sons; Switzerland, private collection since 2010.

LITERATURE

Carmen Ripollés, *Josefa de Óbidos*, London: Lund Humphries, 2025 (forthcoming, September 2025).

Still life painting forms the most substantial component of Portuguese art of the Golden Age, developed through a broad and varied repertoire ranging from *bodegón* scenes to fruit and flowers and even *vanitas* pictures; and it coexists with allegory and symbolism, above all religious.

Both Carmen Ripollés and Joaquim Caetano have placed our canvas within the oeuvre of Josefa de Óbidos, as an independent work rather than produced in collaboration with her father Baltazar Gomes Figueira (died 1674), who was also a painter, and in whose workshop Josefa trained in Óbidos, Portugal.

The principal motifs of this still life – the basket of broad beans, the foxgloves and the yellow daisies – are found in a composition by Josefa signed and dated 1676, now in Santarém, Coleção Museu Municipal de Santarém, Casa-Museu Anselmo Braamcamp Freire (Inv. MMS/005463BF). The bean is a seed that symbolizes fertility, and therefore life, because it carries within it the germ of the future. The

stem of red foxgloves stretching horizontally across the background is a Marian symbol *par excellence*: the flower also had the archaic name of Our Lady's Glove, because the Virgin Mary is said to have used the foxglove to heal a wound on one of her fingers. Juxtaposed with the roses, this reinforces the allusion to the Christ's mother. Butterflies are a powerful spiritual symbol, often associated with the soul and thus with immortality, and here two of them are arranged symmetrically against the dark, naturalistically-inspired background. The introduction of this small creature is entirely characteristic of Josefa, compared to the work of her father, who was more focused on the *bodegón* scenes, as seen in his canvas in the Musée du Louvre, signed and dated 1645.

In conclusion, this still life bears the mark of Josefa's style not solely in the motifs she favoured but also in the quality of the execution, as in the highly sensitive observation of water droplets on the red rose in the foreground, near the stone surface, or the realistic, meticulous details of leaves and flower pistils and stamens, described with an almost miniaturist approach notwithstanding the considerable size of the composition.

Carmen Ripollés believes that this painting can be situated in the period when Josefa's father was still alive, or had just died (in 1674), because the canvas does not bear her signature. Indeed, she did not sign her works before her father's death, and we know of only four that are signed and dated¹. Joachim Oliveira Caetano, on the other hand, dates the picture to about 1660², during the decade when the workshop was still directed by Josefa's father.

Baltazar Gomes Figueira (1604-1674), the artist's father, was a soldier in Cadiz and then learned painting in Seville, probably with Francisco de Herrera the Elder (c. 1590-1656), who was also Josefa's godfather. In 1636, when Josefa was four years old, Baltazar brought the "new" still life genre to Portugal, in the style of Seville, which the workshop he founded in Obidos adopted as its main source of income. After studying at the Convent of Santa Ana in Coimbra, Josefa returned to Óbidos in 1653. Trained in the workshop of her father, a painter of figures but also of *bodegones*, she continued working there after his death in 1674 as a free and independent woman; her oeuvre includes sacred subjects, altarpieces for convents and monasteries, as well as portraits and still lifes for private collectors. Josefa initially used the name of her maternal grandfather (Ayala) and that of her mother (Cabrera), later signing herself as "Josefa de Óbidos".

Our painter was a cultivated individual, aware of her status and responsibilities, and living by her profession after her father's death, she resorted to public commissions to ensure she could maintain her mother and two orphaned nieces who lived with them. She strengthened her collaboration with her brother-in-law, José Pereira da Costa (active in Coimbra and Semide), as well as with her brother, the painter Antonio de Ayala. As a woman artist of the seventeenth century who had grown up in a conservative Catholic environment during an era of deep moral repression, the position she created for herself in the small court town of Óbidos is quite exceptional.

Notes:

1- The four still lifes signed by Josefa are the *Still Life with Sweets and Flowers*, 1676, oil on canvas, 85 × 161 cm (33½ × 63¾ in), Coleção Museu Municipal de Santarém, Casa-Museu Anselmo Braamcamp Freire; *Still Life with Sweets and Pottery*, 1676, oil on canvas, 84 × 160.5 cm (33⅛ × 63¼ in), Coleção Museu Municipal de Santarém, Casa-Museu Anselmo Braamcamp Freire; *Still Life with Fruit, Meat and Poultry*, 1676, oil on canvas, 83 × 157 cm (32⅝ × 61¾ in), Casa dos Patudos, Museu de Alpiarça; and

the *Still Life with a Box and a Basket of Fruit and Flowers*, dated 1677, Paris, private collection, illustrated in Vitor Serrão and Nicolas Sainte Fare Garnot, eds., *Rouge et Or: trésors du Portugal baroque*, exh. cat., Paris, Musée Jacquemart-André, 25 September 2001 – 25 February 2002, pp. 148-149.

2- Written communication, 3 December 2024.