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Juan van der Hamen y León

Madrid, 1596 – Madrid, 1631

**Large Fruit Stand with Figs and
Flower Vases, 1623**

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Large Fruit Stand with Figs and Flower Vases, 1623

Signed and dated in the lower left corner

Oil on canvas, 57 × 95 cm

Provenance: Caylus Anticuaria S.A., Madrid, 1999;

Private collection, Madrid;

Fondo Cultural Villar Mir, Madrid.

Exhibition: Madrid, Palacio Real; Dallas, Meadows Museum, 2005–06, *Juan de Van der Hamen y*

León and the Court of Madrid.

Bibliography: Jordan, William B. 2005. *Juan de Van der Hamen y León and the Court of Madrid.*

Madrid: Patrimonio Nacional; Dallas: Meadows Museum, p. 93, fig. 6.16.

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Juan de Van der Hamen y León occupies a central position in the development of the Spanish still life during the first third of the seventeenth century and stands as one of the most refined and distinctive figures of Madrid painting under the reign of Philip IV. His brief life — he died at only thirty-five years of age — did not prevent him from achieving considerable prestige among the courtly and intellectual circles of Madrid, where he was admired both for his technical virtuosity and for the intellectual elegance of his compositions.

Born in Madrid in 1596, Van der Hamen belonged to a family of Flemish origin integrated into the administrative environment of the royal court. His father, Jehan van der Hamen, served as an archer of the royal guard, a circumstance that placed the young painter from an early age within Madrid's courtly milieu. This context proved decisive for his artistic formation and for the sophisticated character of his production, primarily intended for cultivated collectors and an aristocratic clientele rather than for the traditional devotional market.

Although documentary evidence of his training remains scarce, his painting reveals familiarity both with the Flemish tradition inherited through his family background and with the naturalistic innovations introduced into Spain following the dissemination of Caravaggism. Van der Hamen, however, quickly developed a distinctive artistic language characterized by extreme compositional clarity, controlled lighting, and an almost intellectual sensitivity toward the objects represented.

From the early 1620s onward, his name appears associated with important court commissions and with Madrid's literary circles. He was portrayed and praised by contemporaries such as Lope de Vega and Juan Pérez de Montalbán, evidence of the cultural prestige he attained during his lifetime. Unlike other specialized painters, Van der Hamen cultivated multiple genres — portraiture, religious painting, allegorical scenes, and still lifes — although it was precisely in the latter that he achieved his greatest originality.

The Spanish still life underwent a profound transformation during the first decades of the seventeenth century. In contrast to the austere naturalism inaugurated by Juan Sánchez Cotán, Van der Hamen introduced a new conception based on geometric balance, material richness, and a carefully staged yet silent theatricality.

During these years he developed his celebrated compositions featuring large central cups or fruit stands accompanied by carefully balanced lateral plates — a compositional scheme that would exert enormous influence on later generations of Madrid painters.

His career was abruptly interrupted by his death in Madrid in 1631, probably as the result of an epidemic. Despite his short life, his impact was profound: artists such as Antonio Ponce, Francisco Barrera, and Juan de Arellano inherited essential aspects of his pictorial language, consolidating the still life as one of the most sophisticated genres of Spanish Baroque painting.

Our canvas presents a still life conceived through a strictly frontal organization, in which all elements are arranged parallel to the viewer's plane and carefully aligned upon a horizontal ledge. The composition is structured around a sumptuous ornamental fruit stand placed at the center, whose dominant presence establishes the visual and hierarchical axis of the scene. This richly decorated vessel, almost sculptural in character, functions as the compositional nucleus from which the remaining objects are symmetrically ordered.

The ensemble stands out against a dark, neutral background devoid of defined spatial references, a characteristic device of Van der Hamen that intensifies the volumetric perception of the objects and directs attention toward the material precision of each element. The lateral, controlled illumination gently models the forms without producing excessive drama, creating a silent and restrained atmosphere that encourages contemplative viewing.

Upon the ledge, the artist arranges the objects with carefully calculated balance: the large central

JAIME EGUIGUREN

ART & ANTIQUES

vessel is flanked on both sides by ovoid floral vases whose symmetrical disposition reinforces the structural stability of the composition. The scene thus appears as a closed and self-sufficient space in which each object seems to occupy a predetermined place within a visual system governed by order, proportion, and clarity.

The central element of the still life consists of a large ornamental vase or fruit stand containing a group of figs crowned by a broad vine leaf, a motif that fulfills both a compositional function and a possible symbolic dimension within the visual language of the Madrid Baroque still life (Fig. 1).

The vessel takes the form of a monumental cup inspired by classical models, raised upon a circular foot and provided with curved handles and mascarón-like decorative appliqué. Its rich and elaborate execution brings it closer to an object of courtly goldsmith work or gilt bronze than to a domestic utensil, underscoring Van der Hamen's interest in luxurious objects associated with aristocratic collecting culture in the Madrid of Philip IV.

Within the vessel, the figs accumulate in a compact and stable mass that reinforces the vertical axis of the composition. The fruits alternate violaceous, bluish, and greenish tonalities, carefully modulated through even illumination that emphasizes their volume without dramatization. Resting upon them is a large vine leaf, spread horizontally, whose silhouette introduces an organic counterpoint that softens the geometric rigidity of the container.

In Van der Hamen's work, however, the fruit appears disciplined by compositional order, suggesting a reading characteristic of the Madrid still life tradition: nature subjected to reason and intellect.

The vine leaf introduces specific layers of meaning. It may be associated with Bacchus/Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility, traditionally linked to enjoyment and natural vitality; it also functions as a humanist symbol inherited from classical culture, frequently present in cultivated courtly environments; and it may suggest a moral reference to temperance, visually covering and containing the exuberance of the fruit. Its elevated position is not accidental: it acts almost as a vegetal "veil" that visually orders the ensemble, transforming natural abundance into an image governed by balance and measure.

The fruit stand with figs and vine leaf thus becomes the conceptual center of the painting, a point where abundance, classical culture, and rational control converge, reflecting the Spanish Baroque ideal of harmony between sensory pleasure and moral order.

The glass flower vases placed on either side of the central fruit stand fulfill an essential role both compositionally and symbolically. Ovoid in form and raised on small gilded feet, they are arranged with strict symmetry, reinforcing the axial structure characteristic of Van der Hamen's still lifes. Here the artist demonstrates remarkable technical virtuosity in rendering the transparency of glass through delicate glazes and controlled highlights that suggest the thickness of the material and the presence of water within, where the stems appear slightly distorted by optical effect. Such vessels also allude to the courtly taste for luxury objects, particularly fine glass inspired by Venetian models, highly prized in the aristocratic milieu of seventeenth-century Madrid (Figs. 2a and 2b).



Fig. 1 Juan Van der Hamen Large Fruit Stand with Figs and Flower Vases (detail)

JAIME EGUIGUREN

ART & ANTIQUES

The flowers represented combine several species commonly found in Spanish painting of the period. One can identify white flowers with open petals, probably anemones or related varieties, traditionally associated with purity and fragility; small pink or orange blossoms that introduce a warm note linked to earthly beauty and refinement; and, in the right-hand vase, red roses whose presence adds a clearer symbolic dimension related to love, vital fullness, and at the same time the transience of existence. The dark foliage functions as a tonal background that intensifies the luminosity of the corollas and contributes to the overall chromatic balance.



Fig. 2a & 2b Juan Van der Hamen Large Fruit Stand with Figs and Flower Vases (detail)

Rather than constituting an explicit vanitas, the flowers introduce a silent reflection on the passage of time characteristic of early Madrid still life painting. In contrast to the solidity of the metal fruit stand and the geometric stability of the composition, the cut flowers evoke an inevitably transient beauty. Van der Hamen thus transforms the ensemble into an image of intellectual contemplation, in which luxury, nature, and compositional order merge within an atmosphere of carefully measured serenity.

The isolated fruit and the fallen flower upon the ledge constitute discreet yet highly significant elements within the language of the Baroque still life, introducing an intentional variation within a composition otherwise governed by order and symmetry (Fig. 3).

The small fruit placed in front of the fruit stand — an opened fig — fulfills, first and foremost, a visual function: it breaks the strict frontality of the ensemble and brings the scene closer to the viewer's space, creating a sense of physical immediacy characteristic of Van der Hamen. By appearing separated from the main group and moreover cut open, the fruit acquires a symbolic dimension linked to the revelation of interiority. In Baroque iconographic tradition, the opened fig could allude to natural abundance and fertility, but also to the fragility of living matter, as its exposed pulp suggests an inevitable process of deterioration. In contrast to the fruits perfectly arranged within the vessel, this individual fig introduces a subtle temporal note: nature begins to transform.

The fallen flower upon the ledge reinforces this idea. Unlike the flowers still upright in the vases, it appears detached from its stem and deprived of water, thus already removed from its vital cycle. Within the context of seventeenth-century still life painting, the detached flower functions as a classical



Fig. 3 Juan Van der Hamen Large Fruit Stand with Figs and Flower Vases (detail)

JAIME EGUIGUREN

ART & ANTIQUES

motif of transience: beauty exists, yet it is fleeting. This is not a dramatic vanitas — there are no skulls or timepieces — but rather a silent and elegant allusion to the passage of time, consistent with the intellectual sensibility of Madrid still life painting.

As for the species, the flower appears to correspond to a red carnation (or a closely related variety), recognizable by its compact, ruffled petals. The carnation, very common in Spanish Golden Age painting, could be associated with affection, human love, and nobility, but when depicted fallen it often emphasizes the idea of ephemeral beauty.

Thus, these two elements — the opened fig and the detached carnation — introduce a subtle conceptual tension within the composition: while the fruit stand and the vases represent order, permanence, and culture, the isolated objects discreetly recall the mutable condition of nature. In this way, Van der Hamen balances stability and time, transforming the still life into a silent reflection that is contemplative rather than moralizing.

The painting is signed and dated 1623 (Fig. 4).

Taken as a whole, the work reveals the extraordinary refinement achieved by Juan de Van der Hamen at the height of his artistic maturity, where technical precision, material sensitivity, and intellectual balance converge in exemplary fashion. The compositional clarity, the subtlety of the illumination, and the meticulous description of textures transform everyday objects into an image of elevated aesthetic dignity, silent and contemplative in character. Far removed from any narrative ostentation, the artist constructs a beauty grounded in proportion, chromatic harmony, and absolute control of pictorial space, achieving a still life of remarkable elegance and serenity that synthesizes one of the highest moments of early Baroque painting in Madrid.

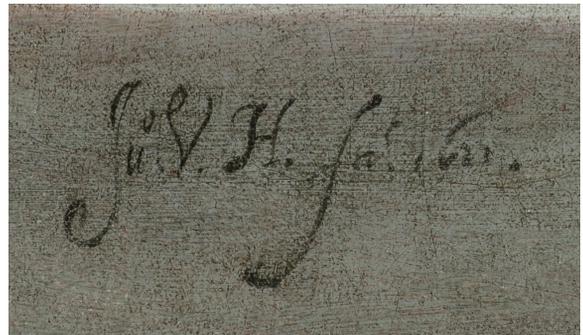


Fig. 4 Juan Van der Hamen Large Fruit Stand with Figs and Flower Vases (signature)

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