



## JAIME EGUIGUREN

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*Juan van der Hamen y León*

Madrid, 1596 – Madrid, 1631

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and Apricots**

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## **Large Fruit Still Life with Pears, Figs and Apricots**

1627

Signed and dated in the lower right corner

Oil on canvas, 61 × 97.5 cm

Provenance: Rieunier–Bailly–Pommery–Mathias, Paris, 1994;

Derek Johns Ltd., London, 1997;

Caylus Anticuaria S.A., Madrid, 1999;

Private collection, Madrid;

Fondo Cultural Villar Mir, Madrid

Exhibition: Mexico City, Museo Nacional de San Carlos, 1996, *Nature and Truth*

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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.

The present canvas displays a still life organized according to a rigorously frontal and axial composition, articulated around a finely crafted gilt-bronze fruit



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

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stand placed at the exact center of the pictorial plane. The scene unfolds before a uniform dark background that eliminates any specific spatial reference and concentrates all attention on the depicted objects.

The dominant element is a large elevated vessel — a high-footed fruit stand of elegant profile, whose surface reveals delicate gilded chasing rendered through light brushstrokes that create subtle highlights — its open bowl supporting an abundant accumulation of pears arranged in stable equilibrium. The fruits are grouped into a compact, pyramidal mass, carefully ordered to avoid any sense of randomness. Their surfaces display a meticulous chromatic gradation ranging between golden greens, pinks, and warm yellows, with subtle reddish nuances that enhance the individuality of each piece. (Fig. 1)

On either side of the central fruit stand are placed two low silver dishes that establish a perfectly calculated compositional balance. These plates are characteristic objects clearly representing Spanish goldsmith work of the early seventeenth century.

To the left of the principal fruit stand is placed a low dish containing a group of figs rendered with extraordinary naturalistic attention. (Fig. 2) The fruits appear arranged in a seemingly spontaneous manner, though carefully balanced to preserve the overall compositional stability. Whole figs of oval and irregular forms can be observed, their delicate skins described through bluish, purplish, and greenish tones nuanced by silvery reflections. The surface displays subtle chromatic transitions that suggest the matte, slightly waxy texture characteristic of ripe fruit. Lateral illumination gently emphasizes the volumes without dramatization, modeling each piece as a small autonomous body. The cast shadows are short and dense, reinforcing the sense of physical proximity upon the ledge.



Fig. 2 Juan Van der Hamen, Fruit bowl with pears, figs, and apricots (detail).



Fig. 3 Juan Van der Hamen, Fruit bowl with pears, figs, and apricots (detail).

From a compositional standpoint, the figs function as a visual counterpoint to the pears in the central fruit stand: their lower, more expanded form introduces a horizontal rhythm that stabilizes the ensemble and prevents excessive verticality along the principal axis.

On the right stands a second dish containing a group of apricots (Fig. 3), arranged in a compact cluster of rounded forms that introduces an essential chromatic balance within the composition. The fruits are placed in a slight accumulation, creating a stable visual mass that counterbalances the weight of the central fruit stand.

The apricots are distinguished by their warm orange and golden tonalities, modulated through soft gradations of light that suggest the velvety smoothness of their skin. Some fruits display slightly reddened areas indicative of the natural process of ripening, while others retain more yellowish hues, contributing tonal variety without disrupting the overall harmony of the ensemble. Lateral illumination produces delicate highlights that model the volumes without excessive contrast, allowing each fruit to maintain its individuality within

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the group. Van der Hamen describes with remarkable subtlety the transition between light and shadow, achieving a tactile sensation that conveys the fleshy density characteristic of the apricot.

The three principal elements rest upon a barely visible ledge or table, defined by a narrow illuminated horizontal band that clearly separates the space of the objects from the dark background. This line functions as a visual boundary and reinforces the sense of physical proximity, placing the food almost within the viewer's reach.

From a compositional perspective, these fruits fulfill a fundamental role: their warm chromatic range acts as a visual counterpoint to the more subdued tones of the figs on the left dish and to the greenish nuances of the pears in the central fruit stand. In this way, the artist establishes a triangular balance based both on form and color, reinforcing the silent stability that characterizes his mature still lifes.

At the upper part of the canvas, a cherry branch extends horizontally across the pictorial space (Fig. 4), from which several clusters of cherries hang suspended by long stems. This element introduces a second compositional level that frames the scene from above and establishes a direct visual dialogue with the objects arranged upon the lower ledge.

The cherries are rendered with brilliant precision, described through intense red tones nuanced by luminous highlights that suggest the smoothness and moisture of their skin. Their alternating arrangement — grouped in small pairs or trios separated by dark leaves — creates a measured rhythm that guides the viewer's gaze along the horizontal axis of the painting. The leaves, treated in deep greens and dense shadows, function as a tonal counterpoint against the dark background, allowing the fruit to stand out clearly without disrupting the overall chromatic unity.

From a structural standpoint, the branch functions as a true natural frame that closes the composition at the top. While the dishes and the fruit stand establish a solid and stable base, the cherries introduce a suspended element that visually balances the lower weight of the ensemble. This relationship between what rests and what hangs creates a gently resolved tension that decisively contributes to the overall sense of order.

The result is a composition of extraordinary serenity. The absence of narrative movement, the measured disposition of each element, and the geometric clarity of the whole generate an atmosphere of contemplative stillness characteristic of early Baroque Madrid still life painting. Rather than representing a fleeting moment, the painting conveys a sense of suspended time, in which each object appears to occupy a necessary place within a perfectly balanced harmonic system.

The combination of the stability of the central fruit stand, the lateral balance of the dishes, and the airy lightness of the suspended cherries produces an impression of visual calm and intellectual harmony, transforming natural elements into a pictorial construction governed by proportion, measure, and silence.

The illumination enters laterally and is distributed evenly, avoiding violent contrasts. Light gently models the volumes, emphasizing the velvety texture of the fruits while producing controlled reflections on the metallic surface of the fruit stand. The shadows are compact yet transparent, contributing to an atmosphere of suspended stillness.



Fig. 4 Juan Van der Hamen, Fruit bowl with pears, figs, and apricots (detail).

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The work is signed and dated 1627 at the lower right (Fig. 5).

The brushwork is precise and restrained, virtually imperceptible at a moderate viewing distance, thereby reinforcing the tactile illusion of surfaces. Each object appears clearly isolated, without complex overlaps or narrative gestures, generating a sense of silent order characteristic of Madrid still life painting in the second quarter of the seventeenth century.

The ensemble conveys an impression of stability and intellectual balance, in which geometric arrangement and structural clarity prevail over any anecdotal effect, transforming natural elements into carefully ordered forms within a fully controlled visual system.



Fig. 5 Juan Van der Hamen, Fruit bowl with pears, figs, and apricots (signature).

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