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FIRST U.S. EXHIBITION IN 25 YEARS OF LUIS MELÉNDEZ'S STILL LIFES PREMIERES AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON MAY 17 THROUGH AUGUST 23, 2009

Luis Meléndez (Spanish, 1715 - 1780)
Still Life with Beef, Bowl of Ham and Vegetables, and Receptacles, c. 1772
oil on canvas. Private collection.

Delights of the Spanish table depicted by 18th-century painter Luis Meléndez (1715-1780) will be presented to American audiences for the first time in nearly 25 years at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, May 17 through August 23, 2009. In a rare opportunity to explore the artist's working method, **Luis Meléndez: Master of the Spanish Still Life** will showcase 31 paintings, some of which have never been exhibited publicly, and nine examples of 18th-century kitchenware similar to those used as studio props by Meléndez.

"The greatest still-life painter of 18th-century Spain, Luis Meléndez had an extraordinary talent for rendering everyday objects with convincing detail, marvelous effects of color and light, and subtle variations in texture," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "We are grateful to the museums and private

collectors who graciously agreed to share their paintings, some for the first time."

Organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, the exhibition will travel to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, on view September 23, 2009, through January 3, 2010, and to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, on view February 1 through May 9, 2010. Fourteen of Meléndez's still-life paintings now in American collections will be shown with 17 relevant works by him from collections abroad, exploring the artist's creative process and celebrating his compelling artistic achievements. Loans of paintings come from major museums such as the Museo Nacional del Prado, Museé du Louvre, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, as well as from private lenders, such as Teresa Heinz and Mr. and Mrs. Thomas A. Saunders III.

Exhibition Support

The exhibition is sponsored by The Exhibition Circle of the National Gallery of Art.

It is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

Luis Meléndez (1715-1780)

In 1771 Meléndez received a commission from Charles III, Prince of Asturias (later King Charles IV), and his wife, Princess Maria Luisa, to paint an extensive series of still lifes for the New Cabinet of Natural History in the Royal Palace. The commission was intended to depict "the four Seasons of the Year...with the aim of composing an amusing cabinet with every species of food produced by the Spanish climate."

The royal commission, a central event in Meléndez's life, led to modest success with other patrons, although it was cancelled abruptly in 1776. By 1778 these rich and lifelike paintings were moved from the New Cabinet of Natural History to the recently constructed Casita del Príncipe at El Escorial outside Madrid.

Luis Meléndez, who was born in Naples, Italy, and was initially trained in the art of miniature painting by his father, Francisco Antonio, began his career with great promise, studying at the provisional royal academy of art in Madrid, an institution that his father helped to establish. Both Meléndez and his father were expelled from the academy—an event that significantly damaged the

son's career prospects.

After studying in Italy, Meléndez returned to Madrid in 1753 to assist his father with a commission to illuminate choir books for King Ferdinand VI. Although Meléndez aspired to the more prestigious post of royal painter, all four of his petitions to the king were denied. In 1780 Meléndez died shortly after declaring himself a pauper, and his reputation sank into relative obscurity.

Overshadowed for centuries by the work of fellow Spaniard Francisco Goya (1746-1828), Meléndez's paintings have received increasing attention and appreciation from scholars as well as collectors. Modern scholarly study of Meléndez's art, including extensive technical examination, has taken on new momentum in the last few decades. The National Gallery of Art acquired *Still Life with Figs and Bread* (c. 1770) in 2000, and monographic exhibitions in Madrid and Dublin in 2004 have enhanced understanding and recognition of his remarkable talents.

Exhibition Highlights

Paintings, which will be loosely grouped by subject, include nine still lifes from the royal commission and the elegant *Self-Portrait* (1746) painted while the artist was a student at the academy. The first of his characteristic vertical-format compositions, *Still Life with Small Pears, Bread, White Pitcher, Glass Bottle, and Earthenware Bowl* (1760), illustrates Meléndez's typical method of painting from foreground to background.

Meléndez often created compositions based on meals served at a particular time of year or according to the religious calendar. He presented the elements of a meatless Lenten meal in *Still Life with Cauliflower and Basket of Fish, Eggs, and Leeks* (c. 1770), for instance, and the ingredients for a traditional winter dish in *Still Life with Bread, Oranges, Garlic, Condiments, and Kitchen Utensils* (1772).

Hot chocolate, a favorite of the Spanish upper classes since its introduction from South America in the 16th century, was showcased in Meléndez's *Still Life with Chocolate Service, Bread Roll, and Biscuits* (1770). An 18th-century copper chocolate pot and wooden whisk, like those used to make hot chocolate in Meléndez's day, will be on view in an adjacent case.

Meléndez kept in his studio a stock of props, mostly common

kitchenware, which are frequent subjects in his paintings. In *Still Life with Bread, Bottle, and Jug* (c. 1770) and *Still Life with Bread, Grapes, Jug, and Receptacles* (c. 1770), the bread, a ceramic jug with a broken plate as a lid, and wooden-handled utensils are arranged identically, except the viewpoint has shifted. Although the paintings share motifs, each one is strikingly inventive. For example, *Still Life with Pigeons, Onions, Bread, and Kitchen Utensils* (c. 1774), the first of Meléndez's works to enter an American collection in 1938, reiterates the pigeons found in *Still Life with Game* (c. 1770).

Several works by Meléndez relate to each other as pairs. The diagonal landscape settings of *Still Life with Watermelons and Apples in a Landscape* (1771), and *Still Life with Pomegranates, Apples, Azaroles, and Grapes in a Landscape* (1771) echo one another, and these works may be his first to incorporate rocky landscapes with distant buildings and cloudy skies, replacing his usual wooden tabletop and dark, undefined interior.

Technical Studies

A new investigation by the National Gallery of Art of 15 of the paintings in the exhibition was inspired by a previous technical study made by Peter Cherry, Trinity College Dublin, and Carmen Garrido, Museo Nacional del Prado, who focused on the series of 44 still lifes from the royal commission. Catherine A. Metzger, senior conservator of paintings, and Gretchen A. Hirschauer, associate curator of Italian and Spanish paintings, examined this smaller group of paintings using wherever possible a microscope, infrared reflectography (a tool frequently used to discover drawings made on the canvas prior to the application of paint), and x-radiography (a well-known diagnostic tool in the medical field, used by conservators to reveal artists' methods and compositional changes).

The combined results of the technical studies of Meléndez's paintings bring to light much about his working method. A perfectionist, he revised many of his compositions before deciding on just the right choice and placement of objects. Some of his still lifes were painted over royal portraits—the x-radiograph of *Still Life with Beef, Bowl of Ham and Vegetables, and Receptacles* (c. 1772) shows that the image we now see completely obscures a portrait of King Ferdinand VI.

Although Meléndez did not always use the highest-quality materials, his work maintained a consistently superb and refined finish.

Comparative findings from both of the technical examinations provide clues as to how this gifted artist accomplished the imitation of life throughout his career. It is clear that the items depicted at some point must have originally been painted directly from life, for the rendering of texture, color, volume, and surface anomalies can only have resulted from close observation of nature, even though no independent preparatory drawings survive.

The artist also frequently adjusted or replaced elements in his works. An x-radiograph of *Still Life with Figs and Bread* (c. 1770) shows that a large wedge of cheese originally occupied the lower right corner, berries covered the plate that now holds figs, and a knife takes the place of three berries that had spilled onto the tabletop.

Curators and Catalogue

The exhibition was organized at the National Gallery of Art by Hirschauer and Metzger.

A fully illustrated exhibition catalogue includes scholarly essays by Peter Cherry on the life and career of Meléndez, independent scholar Natacha Seseña on the everyday objects he portrayed, and Hirschauer and Metzger on the technical studies of the artist's meticulous painting method, as well as individual entries on each of the paintings in the exhibition. Published with Yale University Press, the catalogue is 220 pages with 143 color and 40 black-and-white illustrations and will be available in May 2009 from the Gallery Shops for $60 (hardcover) and $30 (softcover). To order, call (800) 697-9350 or (202) 842-6002; fax (202) 789-3047; or email mailorder@nga.gov.

General Information

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National Gallery of Art, Press Office

Meléndez's Materials and Methods

GRETCHEN A. HIRSCHAUER
CATHERINE A. METZGER

OUR INVESTIGATION OF the fifteen paintings by Luis Meléndez in American collections, as well as a few examples from abroad,[1] drew inspiration from the exhaustive technical study by Carmen Garrido and Peter Cherry of the series of forty-four still lifes intended by Meléndez for Charles, Prince of Asturias—works that the artist called his "cavezas de la obra," the most accomplished paintings of the royal series.[2] Certainly Meléndez showed astonishing care and attention to detail in paintings destined for the royal house, and we wondered if the same would prove to be true of other works from his hand. Whenever possible, we examined each painting using a microscope,[3] infrared reflectography, and x-radiography.[4] And in our opinion this research confirms Meléndez's unswerving perfectionism in every instance. The combined findings from our examinations and those of Garrido and Cherry provide clues as to how this gifted and fastidious artist accomplished the veritable imitation of life throughout his career. Observations made here on the paintings in this exhibition are based on research from both studies.

Meléndez did not have the advantage of fine and expensive materials, yet he maintained a consistently superb finish in his paintings that defies dating on the basis of style. He often repeated motifs and compositions as well, further complicating the already difficult task of establishing a chronology of the artist's production. It might be expected that studio props such as the cork wine cooler, Alcorcón and Talavera ceramics, and other kitchen items would serve as frequent models. But ephemeral fruits and vegetables in identifiable arrangements are sometimes reiterated verbatim from one canvas to another. Artistic practice at the time did not disparage such replication; rather, the academic practice of copying was expected and actively encouraged.[5] A profitable business could be built by the efficient duplication of successful images, and despite his declarations to the contrary, Meléndez probably made at least a modest living, despite a paucity of royal commissions.

Although Meléndez apparently wanted a smooth surface on which to work, he was not interested in fashioning his own supports. Instead, he seems to

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have purchased preprimed canvases[6] along with strainers (fixed-corner stretchers) in three ready-made sizes.[7] The fabrics he used are all plain-woven linen, but the quality varies noticeably. Most of the smaller vertical-format still lifes were painted on canvases of coarse weave, with an average of 9 threads per centimeter in each direction. We examined thirteen vertical paintings (six from American collections, four from the Prado, and one each from London, Oviedo, and Valladolid), and only two, which may be of later date, are on more finely woven supports (cats. 14 and 20). The canvases Meléndez used for his horizontal still lifes are not as homogeneous. All five of the smaller horizontal compositions we studied are on coarsely woven fabrics, but a range of grades was used for the larger horizontal paintings.

Although Meléndez's first signed and dated still life, from 1759, is a small horizontal painting, our research generally supports the assumption by Garrido and Cherry that the artist produced more vertical-format paintings early in his still-life career and favored the expanded compositions allowed by larger horizontal formats as time progressed. Some of these horizontal paintings used canvases "harvested" from existing works, but most are on higher-quality supports, which may point to an improved economic

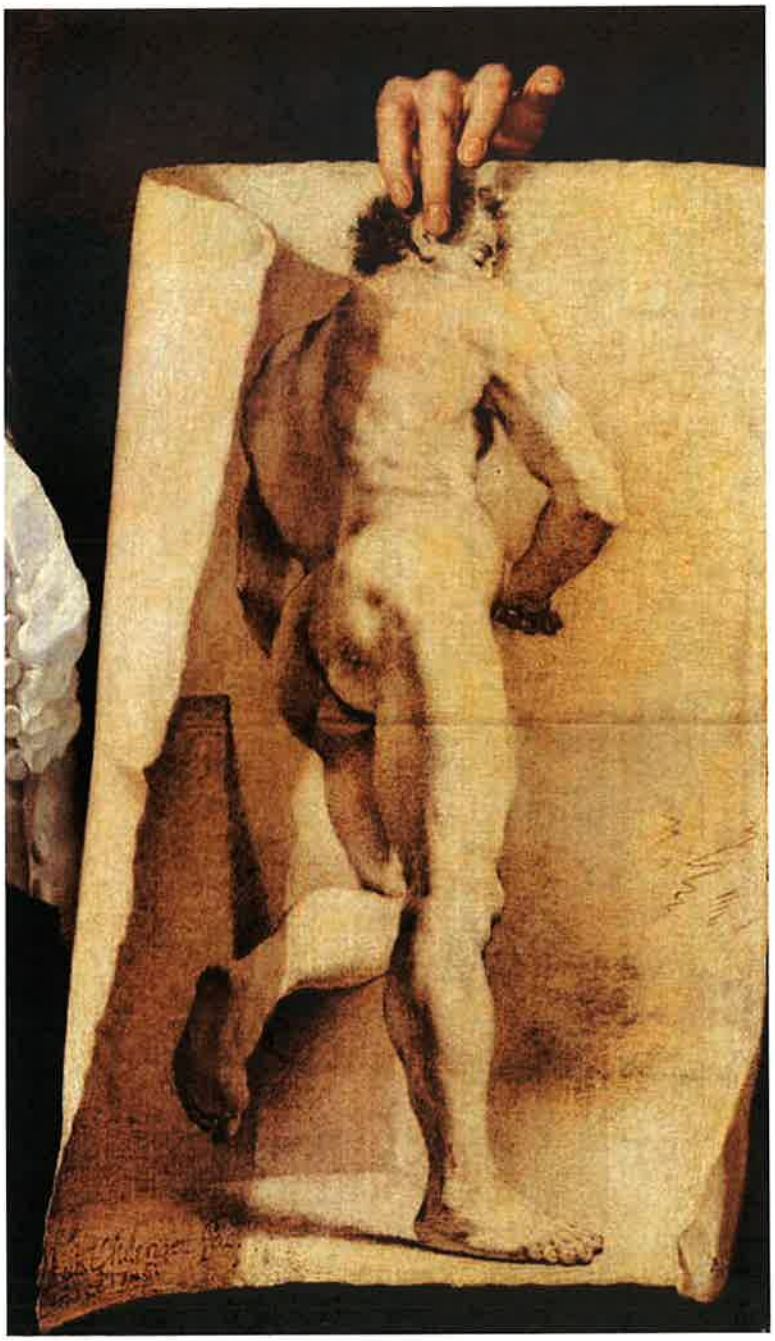

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FIG. 1 Luis Meléndez, *Self-Portrait*, 1746, oil on canvas. Musée du Louvre, Paris (see also cat. 1)

FIG. 2 Detail of figure drawing in Meléndez's *Self-Portrait*

situation as his reputation became established.[8] In the later paintings he began to introduce more painterly treatments of the still-life settings, with graduated lighting effects and the introduction of landscape backgrounds.

All of the pictures we studied have a red ground layer that was applied directly on the surface of the canvas, and some have a second layer of ground, either red or gray. Seven of the latter, on canvas of very poor quality (with knotted threads of irregular diameter in a loose interlacing of only 8 to 10 threads per centimeter), reflect unusual preparation.[9] The cusping patterns indicate that the first ground was applied on a very large piece of fabric before it was cut into the dimensions of each individual painting, and after this an x-ray-dense gray preparation layer was applied over the red priming.[10] As this gray ground does not play a role in the color of the final images, we are in agreement with Garrido and Cherry's suggestion that Meléndez, a consummate craftsman, applied the upper preparation layer to smooth a rough surface before beginning to paint. Occasionally, as noted above, the artist painted a still life over an existing composition.[11] It is interesting, and perhaps counterintuitive, that in such cases he did not apply an intermediate layer of paint to block out the previous image. Apparently as long as the surface of the underlying painting was sufficiently smooth, the representation itself did not interfere with his developing a new composition.

Meléndez undoubtedly studied his original subjects from life. His realistic description of texture, color, volume, and surface anomalies can only have resulted from close observation of the actual objects. We had hoped to discover, through technical investigation, something about his creative process. If he had made preparatory drawings on paper, he would have repeatedly made use of them in creating various compositions. Surprisingly, no independent drawings have been convincingly attributed to this artist. The sole example of a "drawing" is the painted nude study included in the artist's self-portrait (fig. 1). Form is defined with smoothly blended shadows that have a painterly quality (fig. 2). The only separate strokes of chalk consist of several scribbles

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FIG. 3 Detail of chalk holder in Meléndez's *Self-Portrait*

FIG. 4 Infrared reflectogram composite detail of cat. 19 with underdrawn line in a dry material

FIG. 5 Infrared reflectogram composite detail of cat. 1 with underdrawn line in a liquid material

in the background at right that appear to be tests of the tool's point, and the handling differs from underdrawings by Meléndez we were able to reveal through infrared technology.[12]

In Meléndez's self-portrait he shows himself holding an instrument that accommodates both black and white chalk (fig. 3). This detail might prove particularly relevant to this artist, for Spanish treatises of the time discuss white chalk, or mixtures of white chalk and white lead, as drawing tools.[13] Yet if he used this medium to sketch his compositions directly onto the canvas, it would not provide sufficient contrast with the red ground beneath to be seen with reflectography, because white chalk becomes transparent when saturated with oil. Black chalk, if not brushed away as paint was applied, could be seen with reflectography, but only a few of the lines revealed in our examinations have the appearance of a dry material (fig. 4).

Infrared reflectography exposed contour underdrawings made with a liquid, either paint or ink, in a few paintings that defined the curve of a handle or roughly placed a fruit or vegetable or (see cat. 27, fig. 1). A similar line defines the meeting of the artist's lips in the reflectogram of his self-portrait, proof that this was his method when sketching from life, at least in the early years of his career (fig. 5). More commonly the reflectograms and x-radiographs show changes the artist made during the paint stage—replacing one fruit or one vessel with another, eliminating or adding an item, adjusting an outline (see cat. 16, fig. 3). When painting over his own work, Meléndez usually allowed the underlying element to influence the new one, in terms of color or sometimes form.[14] When painting over another artist's work, however, he seems to have mentally erased the previous image, blocking any interference with his own design. In most instances, it is difficult to comprehend why Meléndez continued to make major revisions and minor refinements to his own compositions that would ordinarily be considered entirely pleasing and successful. We can only conclude that he had an obsessive and perfectionist nature.

Meléndez's painting process differed from common practice in that he typically began with the primary object in the foreground plane. He built the form in successive layers, starting with an overall body color, which he then modified and modeled with less-saturated values of the same hue. He provided details in at least two stages, usually with a grayer tone under a highlight of pure color (fig. 6 and cat. 20, fig. 3), and finally added darker, defining touches.[15] He then filled in the rest of the canvas, painting the various motifs that surrounded the main subject and generally proceeding from closest to farthest away. Only at this point did he complete the tabletop and backdrop or, in a few cases, the landscape setting.[16] Although Meléndez maintained a high standard for representing volume and texture throughout his pictures, he sometimes left the background elements less minutely detailed than those in the foreground. As noted above, this artist was compulsive about making changes, both large and small, even after finishing a composition.[17]

Our investigations infer a few special working methods. Comparison of like motifs from differ-

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ent paintings often showed so little variation in size and form as to make virtually certain that the image was traced from one canvas and transferred to the other.[18] Transparent tracing sheets, as well as techniques for rendering paper or parchment transparent, were described in artists' treatises beginning in the Middles Ages and thus would have been familiar in Meléndez's day.[19] The transfer of a design to a new canvas can be accomplished by several means using white chalk.[20] Surprisingly, when Meléndez painted from life, he made only cursory indications for placement, then fully worked up the item in paint. By contrast, when he transferred what we conclude is a traced image, he took more care with completing the drawing (fig. 7).

On the other hand, the Valladolid *Still Life with Melon, Jug, and Bread* (cat. 17) and the Boston *Still Life with Melon and Pears* (cat. 18) seem to represent the same cantaloupe from the same point of view—including the ribs, the cut stem, and even some of the reticulated rind—yet tracings from the two paintings make clear that the melons are very different sizes. An existing figure painting beneath

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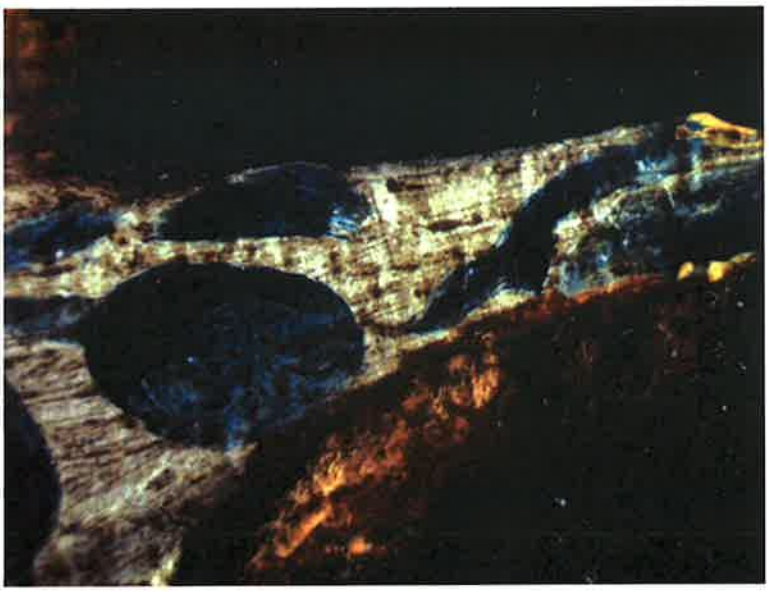

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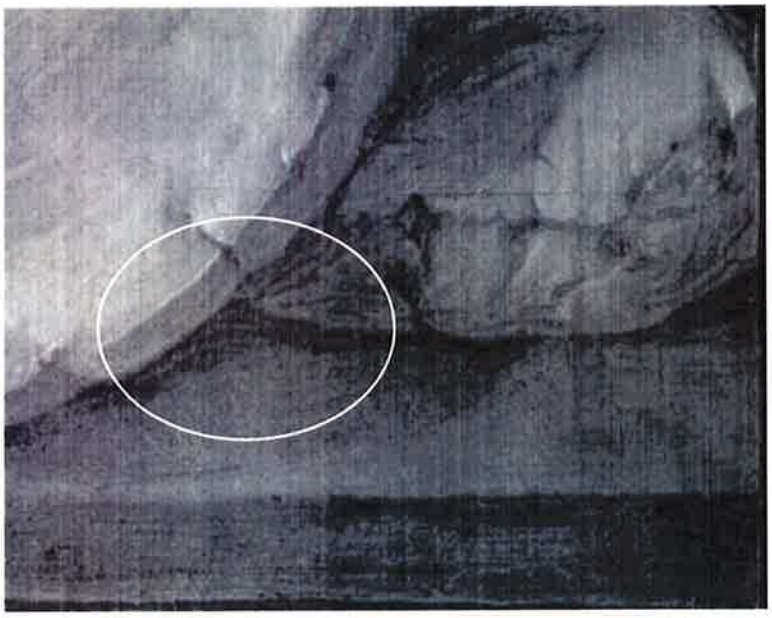

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FIG. 6 Microphotograph of cat. 11 showing complex brushwork and coloring

FIG. 7 Infrared reflectogram composite detail of cat. 13 with multiple lines of underdrawing

the Boston still life would have precluded transferring a design with white chalk (which would neither adhere well to the paint surface nor be readable over the likeness of a robed torso). Meléndez could have used a *camera lucida,*[21] projecting an image in a different size from one canvas onto another; or he might have copied the melon from one composition by means of squaring;[22] or he may simply have depicted the same melon from life two times.

On occasion Meléndez must have painted two or more canvases simultaneously or in close succession. The Oviedo *Still Life with Bread, Bottle, and Jug* (cat. 10) and the Heinz *Still Life with Bread, Grapes, Jug, and Receptacles* (cat. 11) illustrate identical arrangements of the same two loaves of bread and Alcorcón pitcher, topped with a broken Talavera plate, from which a wooden spoon handle protrudes. Each shows the scene from a slightly different vantage point. He arranged other favorite studio props in varying combinations, as we recognize several items that appear repeatedly with identical glazes and damages. Perhaps more interesting in this regard is the gradual deterioration of some props in the course of Meléndez's career: a glass bottle in a cork wine cooler is shown intact in one painting with a cork stopper attached to the neck by a string, then with a paper stopper, then with the top of the bottle broken, and finally replaced by a copper vessel. The same loaf of bread can be seen to dry out and crack from one canvas to another, and the same piece of fruit ripens from one work to the next.

No two paintings that we examined were exactly the same.[23] Thus, even with the many replications, each work was an "original" by the standards of Meléndez's time. Most of the variants were painted with the same care and attention to detail as the life studies, though the paint application was not as thick and dense when compositional issues had already been resolved. The final variant paintings were generally as richly authentic as the first life studies. Although unable to secure all of the prestigious commissioned work he sought, Meléndez maintained an exemplary consistency in painterly quality and originality throughout his career.

1 Fourteen of the fifteen paintings from American collections are included in the exhibition, but *La Merienda* from the Jack and Belle Linsky Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1982.60.39), cannot be lent by the terms of the Linsky bequest. We were also able to study cats. 10 and 27. In addition, the current owners kindly supplied us with x-radiography of cats. 3, 23, and 29, and the paintings were examined with the naked eye. Bruno Mottin in Paris provided extensive documentation for cat. 1 and allowed us to study the painting in the laboratory with him.

2 Garrido and Cherry 2004.

3 At the National Gallery of Art we used a Wild Heerbrug binocular microscope capable of 40× magnification. While traveling, we used the binocular microscopes of the paintings' proprieters when possible.

4 For infrared reflectography of the paintings in American collections as well as cats. 10 and 27, we used a FLIR Alpha Vis/InGAs camera with an InGAs detector with an extended range sensitive from 200 – 1700nm fitted with a Nikon Nikkor 50mm lens and with a Barr Associates Astronomy Filter H that restricts the incoming light to the 1.5 – 1.7 microns range. We acquired the separate images using IR Vista capture software and made the composites with Adobe Photoshop Creative Suite 2. Infrared reflectography of the paintings in the Prado and Valladolid Museums was done by the Gabinete de Documentación Téchnica at the Prado (equipment specifications given in Garrido and Cherry 2004), and at the Louvre by the Centre de Recherche et de Restauration des Musées de France. The infrared images of the two paintings from North Carolina are infrared photography, with an imaging range up to .9 microns.

5 See Francisco Pacheco, "The Art of Painting" (1649), in Véliz 1986, 35. Cherry 2006, 142, says that for Meléndez both prototype and variant had an equal aesthetic status as two originals.

6 Preprimed canvas was available by the seventeenth century. See Antonio Palomino y Velasco, "The Pictorial Museum and Optical Scale" (1653 – 1726), in Véliz 1986, 153: "Although in Madrid there are specialists who prime canvases and thus free us from this worry." The fact that Meléndez's first ground layer nearly always consists of Estuvias earth, common to Madrid, lends credibility to the idea that his canvas was prepared in standardized fashion by the artists' materials trade.

7 Our findings accorded with the identification in Cherry 2006, 117, of pictures in three distinct sizes: 48 × 35 cm, 42 × 63 cm, and 62 × 84 cm. Small variations, as much as 2 centimeters in each direction, can easily occur as a result of the lining process.

8 Cherry 2006, 114; and Garrido and Cherry 2004, 43.

9 Cats. 5, 7, 8, 10, 12, and 17.

10 The gray ground must incorporate lead white, since chalk is not x-ray dense.

11 The still lifes in cats. 18 and 21 are painted over a different painting, not by Meléndez. In cat. 16 he painted over his own composition, and the royal portrait beneath the surface of cat. 23 may be by Meléndez.

12 Infrared reflectography uses a specially manufactured camera to reveal "underdrawings" made prior to the application of paint. With infrared reflectography, because most paint is transparent in the infrared wavelength, a drawing made with a dark material can be seen as an electronic image on a monitor.

13 Véliz 1986, 28, 158, 195.

14 See cat. 16 (where original red fruits show through the paint that describes the figs, lending warm undertones), and cat. 24 (where the segmented body of a crustacean becomes the ribbed neck of a jar).

15 Garrido and Cherry 2004.

16 We believe Meléndez first began to incorporate landscape into his still lifes in 1771, when he received his first royal commission. Perhaps because he was repeating a previous composition, the landscape elements in the two paintings of artichokes (cats. 27 and 28) seem to have been planned from the inception of the work.

17 In cat. 6 Meléndez made changes using a paint containing more oil than that in the original rendering. The new paint did not dry properly, forming prominent wrinkles in the surface.

18 We made tracings and superimposed them on one another to reach this conclusion.

19 Véliz 1986, 28; Merrifield 1999, 1: 292–295; Thompson 1931, 13–14.

20 The reverse of the parchment or paper with the traced drawing could be rubbed with chalk, lead white, or a mixture of the two, then placed over the prepared canvas, and a point used to trace over the drawing, transferring thin white lines onto the canvas.

21 The device described by Johannes Kepler in his *Dioptrice* (1611) performs an optical superimposition of the subject being viewed onto the surface on which the artist is drawing.

22 This is a method of copying using a grid superimposed on the image to be copied and another on the surface to which it was to be transferred, frequently recommended in the treatises of the time. See Véliz 1986, 17, 27, 36.

23 Garrido and Cherry discuss one instance of a literal repetition of a model. *Still Life with Oysters, Plate of Eggs, Garlic, and Receptacles* exists in two editions, signed and dated the same year. See Cherry and Garrido, "Variaciones" (forthcoming).