



MEADOWS MUSEUM ANNOUNCES ACQUISITION OF TWO PAINTINGS BY BAROQUE-ERA WOMEN ARTISTS

**A Still Life by Josefa de Ayala and a Painted Cell Cross by
María Josefa Sánchez illuminate the artistic contributions of
women to the Iberian peninsula.**

DALLAS (SMU)—July 30, 2024—The Meadows Museum, SMU, today announced that it has acquired two 17th-century works by women artists: a still life by Josefa de Ayala (c. 1630–1684) and a painted cell cross by María Josefa Sánchez (active 1639–1652). Ayala was a seminal figure in Iberian Baroque art who achieved recognition and numerous commissions during her lifetime, and was one of the few independent, documented women artists from the period. Together, the acquisitions are indicative of a vibrant artistic climate on the peninsula which did allow women some freedom of expression. Both were purchases made with funds from The Meadows Foundation, and both will be on view in the Meadows’ galleries by the fall.

“We are thrilled to add these significant works to our collection,” said Amanda W. Dotseth, Linda P. and William A. Custard Director of the Meadows Museum. “The exquisite example of Ayala’s work showcases the artist’s masterful technique and her strength at infusing still-life compositions with both aesthetic beauty and profound symbolic meaning, while Sánchez’s moving cell cross not only demonstrates her artistic skill but also highlights her role in fashioning the religious expression and spirituality of the time. We look forward to the educational and research opportunities that will stem from these acquisitions, and what we will uncover about the lives of women artists in the 17th century.”

Josefa de Ayala (c. 1630–1684)—also known as Josefa de Óbidos, after the town in which she spent much of her life—was born in Seville before her family relocated to her father’s native Portugal. Like many female artists of the time, Ayala was born into a family of artists and was trained by her father, the painter Baltazar Gomes Figueira. He had close personal and stylistic ties to some of Seville’s most influential artists who most likely influenced her artistic development, such as Francisco de Herrera the Elder (who was also godfather to Ayala), Francisco de Zurbarán and Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, all of whom are represented in the Meadows’ collection. Ayala never married nor did she ever take orders as a nun, but rather unusually, was granted the status “donzela emancipada” (emancipated woman) at age 29, which allowed her to live and work independently. Her career flourished in Portugal, where she secured numerous ecclesiastical and private commissions, and during her lifetime produced around 150 paintings, making her one of the most prolific artists of the period. Although little is known about her life, surviving archival evidence shows that she supplemented her income as an artist through real estate investments, suggesting she enjoyed greater financial independence and success at a time when few women achieved such status.

The newly acquired *Still Life* (c. 1680) exemplifies Ayala's prowess in creating dynamic and intricate compositions. The painting features an array of fruits, vegetables, and flowers arranged on a dark ledge, a device common among still-life painters active in Iberia including Juan Sánchez Cotán and Juan van der Hamen. Some of the fruit and vegetables Ayala includes have clear biblical and Christological connotations: the melon, onions, and cucumbers that sustained the Israelites in the wilderness; the apple that makes its fateful appearance in the Book of Genesis; and the ripe grapes used to make the wine of the Eucharist. However, she completes the composition by including cherries and figs, pears, leafy greens, and non-edible decorative elements like flowers. The inclusion of small insects adds a special touch, very much characteristic of Ayala's work, and showcases her keen observation and ability to break the stillness of her compositions with life. All of this is painted with a deep understanding of the visual impact of tenebrism, with its dramatic contrasts between light and dark, and which further enhances the three-dimensionality and realism of the scene.

"Ayala's work betrays a skillful blend of artistry and thematic depth," Dotseth went on to say. "Her still lifes in particular reveal the clever but playful use of trompe l'oeil to convey complex religious themes as well as an adept use of decorative elements to engage and please the eye. This dynamic and ambitious composition represents a major addition to our collection of still-life painting and complements the museum's extensive holdings by 17th-century Spanish artists."

María Josefa Sánchez (active from 1639 to 1652, probably in Castile) specialized in crafting cell crosses, popular objects for private worship in Spain and Latin America. While some have argued that Sánchez could have been a nun or a novice, the use of the word "doña" in her signed crosses suggests she could have been a noblewoman; despite the lack of documentation about her life, the existence of signed works indicates a certain level of recognition and prestige. She may have been related to Clemente Sánchez, known for similar crosses in the 17th century, but while Clemente is mentioned in historical records, María Josefa's name remains absent. Sánchez's art has garnered attention in recent years through exhibitions such as "Spain: Art and Empire in the Golden Age" (San Diego Museum of Art, 2019) and "Making Her Mark: A History of Women Artists in Europe, 1400–1800" (Baltimore Museum of Art and Art Gallery of Ontario, 2024); about ten such crosses by Sánchez have survived to the present day, two of them now in American collections (Chicago Institute of Art and Allen Memorial Art Museum, both signed). In addition to the signed crosses attributed to her, unsigned works believed to be hers continue to surface, indicating ongoing interest in her artistic legacy.

Sánchez's oeuvre exhibits a style close to Luis de Morales (1510/11–1586), whose art was widely disseminated through print. The visual similarities between Sánchez's *Cell Cross* (c. 1640s) and the *Pietà* by Morales in the Meadows' collection are evident; both artists share a taste for elongated figures, a limited palette, and a heightened sense of spiritual devotion and contemplation. A crucified Christ dominates the composition, shown here looking upward and wearing a crown of thorns. His elongated limbs and expressive features are reminiscent of the Mannerist style. Blood flows from the wounds inflicted by the nails and from Christ's brow, staining the otherwise pristine loincloth. On either

side of Christ, the arms of the cross bear representations of Saint Francis of Assisi marked with the stigmata (left) and Saint Anthony of Padua cradling the infant Jesus and holding martyr's palm (right). The lower part of the cross showcases the Virgin of the Apocalypse, an iconographical variation of the Immaculate Conception. Clad in a white tunic and adorned with a blue star-studded mantle, she is crowned by the sun and surrounded by twelve stars. Standing atop a crescent moon, she tramples upon a serpent, symbolizing triumph over evil.

Dotseth added that, "As a functional object and one of private devotion, the acquisition of a painted cell cross will stimulate research on its hitherto little known painter and shed light on personal devotional practices in early modern Iberia."

These two paintings—now the earliest in the collection known to be by women artists—join the growing number of works by women artists in the collection, which include Luisa Roldán (1652–1706), Francisca Efigenia Meléndez y Durazzo (1770–1825), María Blanchard (1881–1932), Helen Escobedo (1934–2010) and Cristina García Roderó (b. 1949).

About the Meadows Museum

The Meadows Museum is the leading U.S. institution focused on studying and presenting the art of Spain. In 1962, Dallas businessman and philanthropist Algur H. Meadows donated his private collection of Spanish paintings and funds to start a museum at Southern Methodist University. The museum opened to the public in 1965, marking the first step in fulfilling Meadows's vision to create "a small Prado for Texas." Today, the Meadows is home to one of the largest and most comprehensive collections of Spanish art outside of Spain. The collection spans from the 10th to the 21st centuries and includes medieval objects, Renaissance and Baroque sculptures, and major paintings by Golden Age and modern masters.

###

CONTACTS:

DALLAS
Becky Mayad
Mayad PR
becky@mayadpr.com
214-697-7745

MADRID
Julián Hernández Miranda
julian.hdez58@gmail.com
+ 34 630 963 735

IMAGES: