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Juan Pedro Peralta
Satirical Portrait of a Youth with a Coin and Bird Game, 1747

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JUAN PEDRO PERALTA

(Madrid c.1686/1688 – 1756)

SATIRICAL PORTRAIT OF A YOUTH WITH A COIN AND BIRD GAME, 1747

oil on canvas

42.5 x 60 cm; 16 3/4 x 23 5/8 in.

Signed and dated lower centre: *R / JP. DE PE / RALTA / 1747*

Provenance

Private collection, France.

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The painting presents a youth of modest appearance who fixes the viewer with a knowing smile. In his hand he displays a gold doubloon dated 1747, struck with the effigy of the recently crowned King Ferdinand VI (1713-1759), in the first full year of his reign (fig. 1). In the same hand he holds a lifeless partridge, its neck gripped firmly. On the table before him lie further birds and vessels, set against a wooded backdrop. At first glance the canvas recalls a familiar bodegón, yet the coin - placed at the very centre - turns the picture into pointed dynastic satire. By pairing Ferdinand VI's coin with the dead game, the painting likens sovereign authority with hunted quarry, stripping the new king's image of vitality and reducing it to mere merchandise. The boy's smirk and showman's gesture make the mockery explicit: royal power is presented as consumable, no more enduring than the feast it will serve. Painted in the aftermath of King Philip V's death (d. 1746), whose memory Peralta had long served and celebrated, the canvas encodes loyalty to the late monarch while exposing the artist's precarious status under Ferdinand VI. In this painting, Peralta masterfully uses his brush to transform the language of kitchen still life into a vehicle of political critique.

The dating of 1747, both in the artist's signature and on the coin, takes on particular significance when placed within the trajectory of Juan Pedro Peralta's career. Born in Madrid around 1688 and trained in the workshop of his uncle, the court painter Juan Vicente de Ribera (1668-1736), Peralta soon entered the orbit of the crown. He accompanied the court to Seville (1729-33), where he worked on the apartments in the Alcázar of Queen Elisabeth Farnese (Philip V's second wife) and produced sets for performances. On 28 July 1731, Philip V rewarded him with the esteemed title of Pintor de Cámara (confirmed in 1734), thus beginning a court career devoted to decoration, scenography and the embellishment of royal residences, above all the Buen Retiro. Philip V's death in 1746 marked the most delicate turning point in Peralta's life. That year, under the direction of Giacomo Bonavía, Peralta executed the great curtains for the royal catafalque in the Coliseo del Buen Retiro, sealing his role as painter of the late monarch's public memory. But the succession of Ferdinand VI, Philip's son by Maria Luisa Gabriela of Savoy and thus the stepson of Elisabeth Farnese, brought a more hostile atmosphere. Peralta's salary was suspended at the start of the new reign; although reinstated in 1747, the rupture was evident. In 1748 he submitted a petition requesting to be entrusted with the new decorations of the Cuarto Nuevo and the Salón de Reinos, commissions already in other hands - a clear sign of professional friction in the reorganisation of artistic patronage. At the same time, he unsuccessfully sought the post of Pintor de Obras y Bosques. It is within this political context that the painting assumes its full significance.

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A further detail of the artist's signature, seen lower centre at the edge of the table, strengthens this reading: the crowned "R". This almost certainly refers to Peralta's status as Pintor de Cámara - the initial "R" (Ricordo/Real/R.) combined with the crown as a declaration of rank. It also echoes the signature on his earlier *Bodegón de merienda* of Farnese provenance and now in the Real Academia de San Fernando (fig. 2). That work also bears inventory marks and the fleur-de-lis, further signs of the Queen's collecting milieu. This variant of signature with the crowned "R" can therefore be read not only as a sign of the painter's professional pride but also, in that charged moment, as a discreet signal of fidelity to the late Philip V despite his son's accession.

The history of this particular subject matter is also worth noting. The posthumous inventory of Elisabeth Farnese's collection (1768) records "Un retrato de un muchacho con una perdiz y un doblón de a ocho en la mano", sold to the Countess of Campoalange on 22 April 1768 - a description that seems to corresponds with the present painting. The work however is now identified with the version in the Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest, which has Farnese provenance, bearing the inventory mark of the collection and the fleur-de-lis (fig. 3). The identification of the painting mentioned in the Farnese inventory helps clarifies the sequence between the two versions: since the present canvas is signed and dated 1747, the year the coin was first minted and assumed political charge, it is likely the original conception; Elisabeth Farnese, having seen or heard of it, then commissioned her own variant - more refined in the rendering of birds and metal - for her collection. Thus the present canvas stands as the conceptual prototype, while the Budapest version is an autograph replica, tailored to royal taste as well as the queen's fondness for "kitchen" allegories that cloak politics in everyday guise.

Peralta's favour with the Queen is confirmed by other works associated with her collection: alongside the aforementioned *Bodegón de merienda* (1745), the artist's *Cazador dormido* (Patrimonio Nacional, (no inv. 10015004), Palacio Real) is also recorded in royal inventories, and he produced a further repertoire of bodegones and small genre scenes which, for all their modest subject matter, served as instruments of court memory and - in cases like this - as dynastic satire. Alfonso E. Pérez Sánchez dissertation *La pintura de bodegones y floreros en España en el siglo XVIII* (2006) gathers all the documentation that provide the archival framework that support this iconographic reading.

In summary, the present painting is far more than a charming genre picture. It constitutes a veiled act of political dissent, sharpened by its dynastic dimension: a widowed stepmother commissioning a version of a painting that mocks her stepson who had expelled her from the Court. It constitutes a veiled act of political dissent, in which Peralta's technical finesse

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in still-life painting is harnessed to embed dynastic commentary within the guise of everyday kitchen imagery. By transforming the language of the bodegón into political allegory, Peralta exposes Ferdinand VI's fragile authority while affirming his own loyalty to Philip V. Its success was immediate: Elisabeth Farnese, recognising the painting's satirical charge, commissioned her own variant for her collection. The present work thus stands as the original conception, where Peralta's crowned "R" makes explicit that his brush continued to serve the late king's memory even under a hostile new regime.

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Fig. 1. Coin minted in 1747 during the reign of Ferdinand VI (1746-1759), bearing the inscription 'FERDND VI D G HISPAN ET IND REX' ('Ferdinand VI, by the Grace of God, King of Spain and the Indies').



Fig. 2. Juan Pedro Peralta, *Bodegón de merienda con chocolatera, jícara y azucarillo, caja de dulce, vasos, pan, nueces, frutas y dos gatos*, signed "R/ PERALTA/ año 1745", Real Academia de San Fernando

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Fig. 3. Juan Pedro Peralta, *The Bird Seller*, after 1751, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.

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