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Miguel Jacinto Meléndez
Portrait of Philip V, King of Spain (1683-1746)

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MIGUEL JACINTO MELÉNDEZ

(Oviedo 1679 – Madrid 1734)

PORTRAIT OF PHILIP V, KING OF SPAIN (1683-1746)

oil on canvas, in a painted oval

134 x 155 cm; 52 3/4 x 61 in.

Provenance

Van Tilt Collection, Brussels;

Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, sale, 29 April 1935, lot 109 (as “Hyacinthe Rigaud”);

Private collection;

Anonymous sale, Paul Martin, Versailles, 21 November 1971, lot 34 (as “Attribué à Giuseppe Maria Crespi”);

French private collection.

Reference Literature

E. M. Santiago Páez, *Miguel Jacinto Meléndez: Pintor de Felipe V*, Oviedo 1989.

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We are grateful to Elena María Santiago Páez for having confirmed the attribution of the present painting to Miguel Jacinto Meléndez (1679 – 1734).

This imposing portrait depicts King Philip V of Spain (1683-1746) in three-quarter view within a fictive oval frame. He wears a wig in the French style and is attired in a silver-grey cloak with pompous gold sleeves over a burnished cuirass, completed by a delicate jabot. The regalia of two prestigious orders, the blue silk sash of the French *Ordre du Saint-Esprit* and the golden fleece of the Spanish *Orden del Toisón de Oro*, adorn his chest. In his right hand the monarch holds a staff of command, while his extended left hand gestures towards a distant cavalry battle visible in the background. The whole scene seems to be set in a battlefield, the King himself in the proximity of a grand military tent. Philip's head is turned to engage the viewer with a steady, regal gaze, while the overall composition projects an aura of martial authority.

The painting's author, Miguel Jacinto Meléndez (1679 – 1734), lived through a key transitional phase in Spanish history: between two centuries and between the Habsburg and Bourbon courts. Leaving Oviedo and the Asturian milieu for Madrid, he quickly established himself as a painter of *retablos* and religious compositions for churches and convents, working in the idiom of the late-Baroque Madrid school. In 1712 he was appointed Painter to the King, and through his state portraits of Philip V and Isabella Farnese he effectively fixed the new dynasty's official image, at least until the arrival of Jean Ranc in 1724. He was also the uncle of Luis Egidio Meléndez, renowned for his still lifes in the second third of the eighteenth century.¹

In this portrait, the King's figure dominates the canvas, set against a dark background - only lit by the battle's fires - contrasting with his illuminated face and opulent costume. A shaft of light plays across Philip's visage and upper body, employing pronounced chiaroscuro in the Baroque manner to model his features and attire in relief against deep shadow. Within the painted oval format, Meléndez leaves space for a significant narrative backdrop: on the right side, a cavalry skirmish animates the distant landscape, while on the left, right above the King's shoulder, a high-ranked commander can be seen in profile conversing with other officers. Philip's left hand directs the viewer's attention to the battle, implicitly crediting him with martial victories. The presence of these scenes may allude to Spain's recent campaigns in Italy during the War of the Quadruple Alliance (1718-1720), during which Spanish troops claimed fleeting victories in Sicily, effectively presenting the King as a triumphant commander capable of defending his realm.

¹ See E. M. Santiago Páez, *Miguel Jacinto Meléndez: Pintor de Felipe V*, Oviedo 1989, pp. 18-27.

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Broad, confident strokes applied in distinctive zigzag touches in areas such as the drapery enliven the surface with a textural energy typical of the Madrid Baroque school, yet the overall finish remains meticulous, as details like the lace cravat, armour and fabrics are still rendered with fine precision – showing the influence of the Flemish School, especially Van Dyck. Meléndez pays keen attention to varied textures: the smooth, porcelain-like skin of Philip’s face is subtly contrasted with the lively mass of the full-bottomed wig, whose curls catch the light. At the crossroads of two stylistic eras, the artist’s use of strong luminous contrasts and sober tonality links him to the Late Baroque tradition, even as the elegance and idealising polish of the work look forward to the beginnings of the Spanish Rococo style. The work attests to Meléndez’s maturity (1679-1734) and appears to postdate creations of this kind by Michel-Ange Houasse, who arrived in Madrid in 1715, while predating the canvases of Jean Ranc, who entered royal service in late 1722.²

Appointed honorary painter and then painter to King Philip V, Meléndez portrayed Philip V in the (at least) twenty known versions, continually refining the monarch’s image. Early ones (for instance, around 1707) still recorded the King’s Habsburg facial traits, such as the prominent jaw and aquiline nose, but over time the artist progressively softened and regularised those features into a more idealised visage.³ By the 1720s, official images of Philip present a more composed and harmonious countenance, downplaying any more ungainly attributes. Both the present portrait and a similar example in the Museo del Prado (dated 1718-1722, inv. P007603, Fig. 1) exemplify this trend. In 1727 he produced a variant of Philip’s portrait for the new Royal Library (now in the Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid, inv. BNEM CE0102, Fig. 2).⁴ In that half-length painting, Philip wears the same wig, armour and orders, but instead of pointing to a battle he rests his left hand on a book, the published Statutes of the Library, to signify his role as a cultured patron and founder of that institution. The backdrop in the Biblioteca portrait is accordingly plain, with no martial scene, shifting the emphasis from military glory to enlightened peace. The Prado’s portrait of *Philip V*, presumably the prime version of Meléndez’s design, is slightly smaller in size yet shows the King in an identical pose and attire. Another comparable portrait is the circular one now at the museum of the El Burgo de Osma Cathedral. Significantly, our composition is the most expansive of the group, the only version in which the monarch grasps the baton of command, pointing at the battlefield legibly set in the background.

² J. J. Luna, *El retrato español en el Prado. Del Greco a Goya*, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid 2006, pp. 140-141.

³ Santiago Páez 1989, pp. 33-35.

⁴ Ibid. pp. 80-82

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Portraits of this kind were common and were intended for dispatch to civil and military institutions, with the aim of disseminating the likenesses of the sovereigns across the full extent of the territories that made up the vast Spanish empire; they were also sent to relatives or personages connected with the monarchy, and even to various European courts, as part of ongoing diplomatic exchanges with other states.

Philip V, a French-born Bourbon, grandson of Louis XIV, ascended the throne upon the death of Charles II of Spain in 1700 and the consequent extinction of the Habsburg line, an event that led to the War of the Spanish Succession. In its aftermath, Meléndez's portraits were enlisted in a propaganda campaign to solidify the new dynasty's legitimacy by blending French and Spanish imagery. French elements, such as the Versailles-style wig and the blue *Saint-Esprit* sash, emphasise Philip's Bourbon heritage, while the inclusion of the Golden Fleece roots him firmly in the lineage of Spain's kings. Philip's total reign (45 years and 16 days) is the longest in the history of the Spanish monarchy.⁵

⁵ See H. Kamen, *Philip V of Spain: The King Who Reigned Twice*, New Haven 2001.

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Fig. 1. Miguel Jacinto Meléndez, *Portrait of Philip V, King of Spain*, 1718-1722, oil on canvas, 82x62cm, Madrid, Museo del Prado.

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Fig. 2. Miguel Jacinto Meléndez, *Portrait of Philip V, King of Spain*, 1727, oil on canvas. Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España.

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