October 2026

Hilltop Cloud

Time Travellers Club

Dear Club Members,

On 25th October 2016 Madrid's Prado museum held it's first solo exhibition by a woman. The museum had been open since 2019, and in that time all their solo exhibitions had only featured work by male artists.

Clara Peeters (c. 1587–after 1636) was a Flemish painter who became one of the leading early practitioners of still-life painting in seventeenth-century Europe. Working primarily in the Spanish Netherlands, she specialised in meticulously detailed depictions of food, flowers, tableware and other domestic objects. Her paintings demonstrate exceptional technical skill and provide valuable insight into the material culture, dining customs and artistic developments of the period.

Although relatively little is known about her personal life, Peeters occupies an important place in the history of European art. She was one of the comparatively few women to establish a professional career as a painter during a period when access to artistic training and professional opportunities was restricted for women.

The precise details of Peeters's birth, education and death remain uncertain. She is generally associated with Antwerp, an important centre of artistic production and international trade in the early seventeenth century. Her earliest known dated paintings were produced in 1607 and 1608, demonstrating a considerable level of technical accomplishment at an early stage in her career.

The sophistication of these early works suggests that she received formal artistic training, although no definitive records identify her teacher. Her paintings are sometimes associated with the influence of Osias Beert, an Antwerp artist known for his still lifes, but this connection remains uncertain.

Peeters was active during a period when still-life painting was emerging as an independent artistic genre. Previously, depictions of food, flowers and objects frequently appeared as elements within religious, mythological or narrative compositions. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, however, artists in the Low Countries were increasingly producing paintings in which these subjects became the principal focus.

Peeters was among the artists who helped establish the genre as a subject worthy of serious artistic attention. Her surviving paintings suggest that her work attracted interest beyond her immediate surroundings, with examples appearing in collections in both the Spanish Netherlands and the Dutch Republic.

Peeters's paintings are distinguished by their precise observation of texture, light and material. She frequently depicted elaborate arrangements of food, including cheese, bread, pastries, fruit, fish and shellfish, alongside silver vessels, pewter jugs, glassware and porcelain.

Her compositions often feature a dark, relatively plain background against which objects are carefully arranged on a narrow table or ledge. The contrast between the subdued surroundings and the illuminated surfaces gives the objects a striking physical presence. Reflections on polished metal, the translucency of glass, the uneven surface of cheese and the delicate details of flowers are rendered with extraordinary care.

These paintings are not simply inventories of food and household possessions. Their compositions demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of balance, colour, perspective and the relationship between individual objects. Peeters carefully controlled the arrangement of forms, using changes in height, shape and surface to create visual interest without overcrowding the scene.

Her paintings also reflect the growing appreciation of close observation in early modern European culture. The detailed representation of plants, animals and material objects had connections with the wider development of natural history, botanical illustration and the study of the physical world. In Peeters's work, this attention to detail is combined with the decorative possibilities of painting and the visual appeal of luxury goods.

Food was a particularly important subject in Peeters's work. Her paintings include both relatively simple provisions and expensive delicacies, frequently presented alongside valuable tableware. These combinations provide evidence of the relationship between food, wealth and social distinction in the prosperous commercial communities of the Low Countries.

Antwerp was an international trading centre, connected to networks that brought goods, ingredients and luxury objects from across Europe and beyond. Imported porcelain, exotic spices, sugar and other costly commodities reflected the reach of these commercial networks. Their appearance in still-life paintings communicated not only the artist's observational skill but also the economic resources and social aspirations of potential buyers.

Peeters contributed to two related traditions of Netherlandish still-life painting. "Ontbijtjes", or breakfast pieces, depicted relatively modest meals and table settings, while "banketjes", or banquet pieces, emphasised more elaborate displays of food and valuable objects. Her paintings explored both approaches, often combining carefully arranged provisions with expensive vessels and decorative objects.

Such works could celebrate abundance and domestic prosperity, although still-life paintings could also invite reflection on the temporary nature of material pleasures. The presence of food that would spoil, flowers that would wilt and objects that reflected changing fashions could evoke the passage of time. However, the meaning of each painting must be considered individually; not every still life should automatically be interpreted as a moral warning about luxury or mortality.

One of the most distinctive features of Peeters's work is her occasional inclusion of miniature self-portraits within the reflections of metal vessels. In polished goblets, jugs and other objects, she sometimes painted a tiny image of herself at work, making the reflective surface a means of recording her own presence.

These self-portraits are remarkable for both their technical difficulty and their significance. A reflective object could distort the surrounding scene, requiring considerable skill to represent

convincingly. By incorporating herself into these reflections, Peeters demonstrated her command of perspective and light while also asserting her identity as the creator of the painting.

She also signed a number of works, sometimes placing her name on the surfaces of objects within the composition. In several paintings, an ornate silver knife bears her name. These recurring details helped establish the authorship of her work and provide important evidence for the study of her career.

The inclusion of her own image is particularly significant in the context of early modern art, when women's achievements were often less thoroughly documented than those of their male contemporaries. Peeters's self-representations offer a subtle but unmistakable declaration of artistic presence.

There is no secure evidence that Peeters belonged to the Antwerp painters' guild. Yet documentary references and the survival of paintings bearing her signature establish that she worked professionally. Her career demonstrates that women participated in the artistic economy of the Low Countries, even when the surviving records of their lives and professional activities remain incomplete.

The surviving body of work attributed to Clara Peeters is relatively small, with scholars generally identifying around forty paintings as belonging to her known oeuvre, although attribution and the precise number of authentic works remain subjects of scholarly study.

Her paintings remain important for several reasons. They demonstrate the early development of still-life painting as an independent genre, reveal the technical sophistication of Flemish artists working in the early seventeenth century, and document the objects and foods associated with prosperous households. They also provide evidence of a woman who established a distinctive artistic identity in a profession in which women faced substantial restrictions.

Clara Peeters's achievement lies not simply in the realism of her paintings, but in the precision with which she transformed ordinary and luxurious objects into carefully constructed works of art. Through her close observation of the material world, she helped establish still life as a significant form of artistic expression and secured a lasting place in the history of Flemish painting.

Your fibre takes colour inspiration from a number of palettes commonly used in Peeters paintings, but especially Still Life with Cheeses, Almonds and Pretzels. The blend uses linen, in homage to the table coverings that would have been used at this time; this is before the use of cotton in Europe. It also uses Zwartbles, a Dutch breed of sheep.

Katie

Fibre Content- In case your parcel is missing the label
12% Linen,
13% Tussah Silk,
25% Zwartbles,
50% Corriedale

Further Reading/Watching

Still Life with Cheeses, Almonds and Pretzels
https://www.mauritshuis.nl/en/our-collection/artworks/1203-still-life-with-cheeses-almonds-and-pretzels

Artworks held by the Museo del Prado
https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/artist/peeters-clara/c5fd7572-797d-4e5b-a20b-333b47099012

https://www.the-low-countries.com/article/clara-peeters-the-pioneer-of-still-life/