

Clara Peeters (1594–ca. 1657)

Clara Peeters was one of several women who pioneered in the field of still-life painting in the early seventeenth century. Her earliest dated works, small oil paintings from 1607 and 1608, were made when she was fourteen years old. The skill evident in these meticulously painted images suggests that she had trained with a master painter. By the time she was eighteen years old, she was producing highly detailed compositions that are among the best examples of European still-life painting of the period.

Little detail is known about her life except for records of her baptism in Antwerp in 1594 and her marriage in 1639. She is best known for her images of food and for her role in developing specialized categories of still lifes, such as breakfast pieces and banquet pieces, which were arrangements of exotic foods and valuable objects. Her complex compositions of objects of various materials, such as metal, clay, wood, fish, shells, and animal fur, showed her ability to represent multiple contrasting textures and highlighted her technical skill in rendering form and perspective. By 1620 Peeters was painting arrangements of simpler foods, such as bread, cheese, and olives.

Peeters frequently included symbols in her still lifes, representing the passage of time and the temporary nature of life on earth. These symbols, such as peeled fruit, overturned glasses, and flower petals eaten by worms, were clearly understood at the time and added meaning to the work that was appreciated by seventeenth-century viewers.

Selected Bibliography

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