



'So feminine, or a woman's most characteristic'.

Women painters played an important role in the art of flower still lifes. At a time when women were certainly not expected to develop professionally, we find a number of very talented female painters and researchers who managed to achieve international fame.

Rachel Ruysch, Maria van Oosterwijck, Judith Leyster, Clara Peeters, Michaelina Wautier, Maria Sybilla Merian: they are far less famous than Rembrandt, Vermeer or Frans Hals, yet they were celebrated in their own time and their work ended up in royal and noble collections. After their death, they were often forgotten or their works were attributed to male colleagues - it was simply 'impossible' for a woman to paint so beautifully. While Gerard de Lairese still proclaimed in his 1707 'Groot Schilderboek' (Great Book of Painting) that no subject was 'so feminine, or a woman's most characteristic' as the flower still life.

In the exhibition 'In Full Bloom', these women are featured again: no less than one third of all works on display were painted by them. The most famous and successful painter among these women is probably **Rachel Ruysch** (1664-1750). Her flower still life in the exhibition (*Vase of Flowers*, 1700) is extra special because in this bouquet the flowers are already past their prime and one flower has even been cut off. Ruysch was apprenticed to Amsterdam's best flower painter, Willem van Aelst, whom she soon surpassed. She also surpassed her painter husband, with whom she had ten children, and so had to combine her great career with her family. Ruysch painted floral still lifes until she was 85. Some 150 paintings by her are still known.

Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717) was an artist and researcher who left behind an extensive oeuvre of botanical drawings and pioneering scientific publications. She made colourful drawings of butterflies and insects in their natural habitat. In 1699-1701, Merian travelled with her daughter to Surinam to research the insects of that country. This resulted in her famous book *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium Ofte Verandering der Surinamse Insecten* (1705). She also published a multi-volume Caterpillar book, for which she spent her life doing research and making drawings. This book is on display in the exhibition, along with one volume of her Caterpillar book and two of her extremely detailed, colourful drawings.

In 1687, a woman from Amsterdam succeeded in doing what no one else in Europe had done before: growing a tropical pineapple - in her own heated greenhouse. **Agnes Block** (1629-1704) was already a celebrity during her lifetime. Block collected hundreds of rare plants in the garden of her country house Vijverhof on the Vecht, about which she corresponded with botanical scholars in Leiden, Amsterdam, Paris and Bologna, among other places. As was customary at the time, they exchanged seeds, bulbs and tubers. Block did not draw or paint herself, but invited botanical artists to record all

the plants and flowers in her garden. Among the artists who worked for Block were several women, such as Alida Withoos, Maria Moninckx and Merian. The exhibition includes a portrait of Block and her husband, painted by Jan Weenix. Of course her pineapple is on display.

Various princely collectors, including Louis XIV and King-Stadholder William III, had works by **Maria van Oosterwijck** (1630-1693) in their possession. Many female artists came from a family of painters (they were trained at home - for free - to contribute to the family business), but not the Delft preacher's daughter Van Oosterwijck. That makes it all the more remarkable that she was able to build up her own professional practice - despite the social and personal obstacles that were sky-high for a woman at the time. In some of her paintings, Van Oosterwijck incorporated a Christian message. The painting *Flowers in a Decorated Vase*, ca. 1670-75, shows a sunflower. In the 17th century, this flower was associated with the true believer who follows Christ, because its head follows the sun.

In full bloom

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