

FOR
EVER
FLOW
ERS

Dedicated to master photographer ADRI VERBURG (1941-2023),
who created most of the technical photos in this book.
With thanks for the fascinating conversations and hilarious moments
behind and beside the camera.

SVEN VAN DORST

FOR EVER FLOW ERS

MASTERY AND MEANING OF FLOWER PAINTINGS
IN THE LOW COUNTRIES (1600-1700)

HANNIBAL

THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION



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Out of the Garden, Into the Lab

FLOWERS, ART, AND SCIENCE IN THE LOW COUNTRIES (1400-1700)

The Garden where it all Began

Once upon a time, there was a garden. A garden where everything was always in bloom. There were no dead leaves, no faded roses, no mucking about in the soil sowing seeds and hoping they come up. Just a perfect paradise, full of colour and scent, where time held no sway.

But that was to leave man out of the equation. For give a person perfection, and very soon they're wanting more. Eve picks a fruit, Adam takes a bite, and *wham!* Goodbye garden, hello chaos. Suddenly everything has to be planted, weeded, harvested. The carousel of the seasons goes relentlessly round, animals gobble each other up, and for man there's unending toil: sowing, tending, reaping.

Paradise now is not a place but a pipe dream. The world outside is full of peril, the playground where the devil gets his jollies. He roams the wilds, conjuring marshlights that lure the unwary into bogs and mires, then scarpering with their souls. He lurks behind trees in endless forests full of wolves and bears and brigands, terrifying travellers to death. The pious believer would do better to stay safely indoors and creep into a corner with a book. God didn't reveal himself in the Word by accident: if you want to get an inkling of the divine mystery, all you need do is read your prayer book (though maybe shut the curtains first).

In the margins of those books, flowers are popping up ever more often. At first, they're mainly symbolic. They speak in a code that would show us the way to heaven if only we could understand it. For paradise

may be a lost cause, but the Almighty is a man with a plan. Creation is littered with his ciphers. Crack the code and *voilà!*, the divine mystery is revealed. And thus, a white lily represents Mary's purity, a violet or a wild strawberry her humility. But the Virgin is also an 'enclosed garden', fertile, even though her entryway is closed.

Nature, it seems, is a manuscript. But why sit there reading when you could just as easily go for a walk? Little by little, man craves more. He's no longer happy simply to accept. He wants to understand.

Believe it when You See it

The first cracks in the old worldview appear in the Southern Netherlands, that marshy patchwork of duchies and counties and whatnot beside the grey North Sea. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, first Bruges, then Antwerp hold sway as the teeming heart of Europe. Here, merchants from all over the known world cross paths in streets that smell of spices, wet wool, and printing ink. Here, fortunes are won and lost, and the latest ideas circulate with increasing speed. Art, science, and trade – here they go hand in hand.

In the thronging streets and crowded markets, a new type of person is born: the entrepreneur. This is no knight living off his lands, no monk withdrawn into an abbey. This is someone who looks at the world with unblinkered eyes, who's ready to take risks and prepared to draw their own conclusions.

MAARTEN DE VOS

The Creation of Eve (detail), c.1570

Oil on panel, 103.5 × 104.1 cm

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Virgin and Child with Crown Imperial and Llama

PIETER CLAEISSENS II

Virgin and Child with Crown Imperial and Llama, 1614-1623

Oil on panel, 95.4 × 66.5 cm

ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION

The Virgin and Child has been painted countless times. Over and over again in museums and art collections around the world, you come across this well-known image. You find Mary and the infant Jesus in diminutive form on small medieval devotional prints and life-sized on Baroque altarpieces. This traditional scene is part of the collective memory of European art, and that tends to blur our view of it. At first glance, this *Virgin and Child with Crown Imperial and Llama* by the Bruges master Pieter Claeissens II (c.1535-1623) does not seem particularly eye-catching. But take the time for a second glance, and you'll see that this is no everyday picture.

When I first saw this painting, two things immediately roused my curiosity: the unusual and exotic flowers growing at Mary's feet and, stranger still, the animal browsing among the trees in the background, which on closer inspection turned out to be ... a llama! Where did Claeissens find the inspiration for these remarkable inclusions?

One question kept nagging at me: did Pieter Claeissens II really see this rare and valuable fauna and flora with his own eyes and draw it from life? As far as we know, he never travelled far from Bruges. Yet he depicts a llama, a South American animal, brought to Europe by explorers and returning conquistadors in the course of the sixteenth century. And what about the exotic flowers on the panel, such as the majestic bright red *Fritillaria imperialis* or crown imperial, and the yellow tulip, both native to Asia?

Thus began a lengthy quest as I waded through all the scientific references that Claeissens could potentially have used, searching for his source material. And eventually I found it: a costly manuscript containing hundreds of coloured drawings of fauna and flora. The collection was compiled around 1600 by polymath Anselmus De Boodt (c.1550-1632), physician, lawyer, mineralogist, and gifted draughtsman who, like Claeissens, came from Bruges. We know that De Boodt travelled extensively in Europe and spent a good part of his life in Prague, where he was personal physician to Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II (1552-1612). That discovery was an important clue and showed me the way to tell the intriguing tale behind this unique painting.

Anselmus De Boodt: a Bruges *homo universalis*

And thus I set off for the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, where Anselmus De Boodt's drawings are kept.¹ They were pasted into twelve large albums bound in carmine-red leather in the early nineteenth century. The *Historia naturalis*, as the collection is called, contains over 750 coloured drawings characterised by their extremely lifelike rendering. Four of the twelve albums contain images of flowers, plants, and mushrooms; the other eight are filled with drawings of animals. Opening them, the first thing that strikes you is how well and vividly the colours have been preserved. Below each drawing is the name of the plant or animal in 'Vlaemsch' (Flemish), Latin, and French (the last being a nineteenth-century addition). The thought that four centuries ago those same pages were literally in Anselmus De Boodt's hands sends a shiver down my spine. Could these magnificent drawings also have been handled by Pieter Claeissens II?

Settling into a corner of the library, I place a photo of De Boodt's picture of the Virgin Mary next to his open volumes. The original of the majestic crown imperial (*Fritillaria imperialis*), with its cluster of bright red bell-shaped flowers surmounted by a crest of spiky green leaves, is easy to find in Album VIII. The bright red anemones (*Anemone*), the primrose (*Primula*), the hyacinth (*Hyacinthus*), the fritillary (*Fritillaria*), the violets (*Viola*) and a spray of drooping red lilies (*Lilium*) are likewise unmistakable copies of De Boodt's drawings. Other flowers are slightly different, such as the tulips (*Tulipa*) and the daffodil (*Narcissus*).

And what about the llama in the background? De Boodt's delicate drawing of the brown-coated, white-necked animal (*Lama glama*) in Album II could be the big brother of the specimen in Claeissens's painting.²



Allegory of the Air after Arcimboldo
In: Anselmus De Boodt and Elias Verhulst,
Albums van Anselmus De Boodt, c.1596-1610
PRIVATE COLLECTION



Red Lily

In: Anselmus De Boodt and Elias Verhulst, *Albums van Anselmus De Boodt*, c.1596-1610

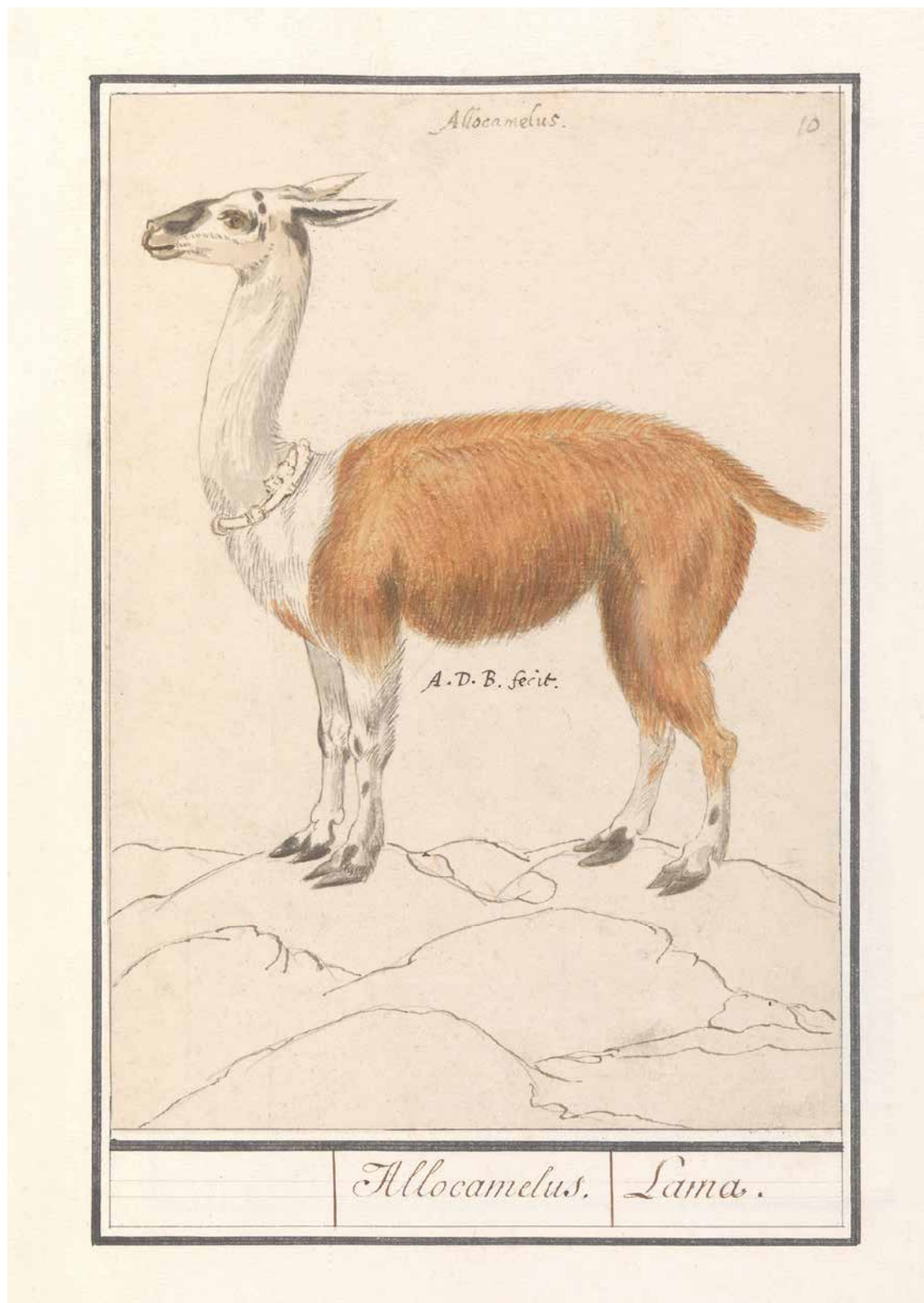
PRIVATE COLLECTION

Detail of *Virgin and Child with Crown Imperial and Llama* (p. 28)





VIRGIN AND CHILD WITH CROWN IMPERIAL AND LLAMA



Llama

In: Anselmus De Boodt and Elias Verhulst, *Albums van Anselmus De Boodt*, c.1596-1610

PRIVATE COLLECTION

Detail of *Virgin and Child with Crown Imperial and Llama* (p. 28)



KEY TO FLOWERS AND ANIMALS

- 1 *Fritillaria imperialis* (crown imperial)**
 - 2 *Primula* (primrose)**
 - 3 *Fragaria vesca* (wild strawberry)
 - 4 *Iris germanica* (bearded iris)*
 - 5 *Bellis perennis* (common daisy)
 - 6 *Narcissus pseudonarcissus* (wild daffodil)*
 - 7 *Alcea rosea* (hollyhock)*
 - 8 *Cypripedium calceolus* (lady's-slipper orchid)
 - 9 UNIDENTIFIED
 - 10 *Galanthus* (snowdrop)*
 - 11 *Fritillaria meleagris* (snake's head fritillary)**
 - 12 *Viola* (violet)**
 - 13 *Hyacinthus orientalis* (hyacinth)**
 - 14 *Lilium candidum* (white lily)*
 - 15 *Lilium* (red lily)**
 - 16 *Anemone* (anemone)**
 - 17 *Tulipa* (tulip)*
 - 18 *Taraxacum officinale* (dandelion)
- A *Unicornis* (unicorn)
- B *Lama glama* (llama)

Flowers that appear in De Boodt's *Albums* and in Pieter Claeissens's *Virgin and Child with Crown Imperial and Llama*:

** IDENTICAL * RELATED

PIETER CLAEISSENS II

Virgin and Child with Crown Imperial and Llama, 1614-1623

Oil on panel, 95.4 × 66.5 cm

ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION



*Si foret imperio imperiū præcelstus hocce.
 Hūc tū sufficiens Dñe Rūdolphe fores.
 Magne Rudolphino de semine maximo nūti
 Diuino: interno lumine maior. homo.
 Vt foret imperiū celsis conatibus æquū
 Intulit imperio te Deus ipse polj.
 Si microcosmūs, homo est, quia singula continet orbis.
 Major es imperio tū: imperij orbis enim es.*



*M. Iohannes Georgius
 Verscheus Argelt.*

Iac. ab Heyde sculpsit

30

Rudolf II's Wonder-full *Wunderkammer*

Rudolf II was a member of the Habsburg dynasty, a grandson of two Holy Roman emperors, Charles V and Charles's brother Ferdinand I, and son of a third, Maximilian II. On his father's death, he was himself proclaimed Holy Roman emperor. Prague held a particular attraction for Rudolf. He transformed the old castle into an impressive imperial residence, a hotspot for culture and science, and brought into his service leading artists, architects, magicians, alchemists, scholars, astrologers, philosophers, and humanists from all over Europe. Many of them came from the Low Countries, men like the idiosyncratic sculptor Adriaen de Vries (c.1556-1626), the goldsmith Paulus van Vianen I (c.1570-1613), architect Hans Vredeman de Vries (c.1525/26-1609), and painter Bartholomeus Spranger (1546-1611). The painters Roelandt Savery (1576-1639) from Kortrijk and Joris Hoefnagel (1542-1600) from Antwerp were also appointed to record observations of nature.⁹

Rudolf's insatiable thirst for knowledge and boundless passion for collecting culminated in one of the greatest princely *Wunderkammern* in history. Four vaulted rooms in Prague Castle were filled with objects and artefacts from all over the world. The *Wunderkammern* established a connection between nature and God's work.¹⁰

The imperial collection was divided into three categories: *naturalia*, *artificialia* and *scientifica*.¹¹ *Naturalia* or, simply put, things found in nature, usually owed their appeal to their exotic origin – a shell from India, a sunflower from the New World, or a stuffed puffer fish from tropical waters. Sometimes *naturalia* were deemed to have medicinal properties – lapis lazuli, for instance. The animals and plants were not only present in the form of two-dimensional images or as stuffed specimens, but could also be seen running or flying around in the castle gardens and menageries, which formed an extension of the *Wunderkammern*. Also included with the *naturalia* was Anselmus De Boodt's collection of drawings.

The precious *artificialia* included everything that was made by man: often extravagant and astonishing works of art, such as gold sculptures or drinking cups set with precious stones. Many *artificialia* incorporated *naturalia*, such as a hollowed-out unicorn horn (in fact a narwhal tusk) that had been transformed into a drinking cup. The emperor and De Boodt believed that the horn had poison-neutralizing power.

The last category, *scientifica*, consisted of scientific instruments that aided man's understanding of the world and the universe, like an astrolabe to measure the position of the stars, or accurate mechanical clocks.

Sadly, no images of Rudolf's legendary *Wunderkammern* have survived. But we can see how such a collection was displayed in *Historia Naturale* (1599), whose author, Neapolitan pharmacist Ferrante Imperato, describes his own highly impressive collection.¹² A print shows thousands of objects from his collection artfully arranged in cabinets or attached to walls up to the ceiling. In the right foreground, four men are deep in conversation while pointing to some objects. Most likely they are not only discussing the objects but also the tense relationship between *naturalia* and *artificialia*.¹³ For who is ultimately the more ingenious, nature or man?

JACOB VAN DER HEYDEN

Portrait of Emperor Rudolf II, c.1625

Engraving, 360 × 240 mm

ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION



JAN VERMEYEN

Unicorn Goblet of Rudolf II, c.1600-1605

Narwhal tusk mounted in gold with gemstones, 22.2 × 12.1 cm

VIENNA, KUNSTHISTORISCHES MUSEUM





The Wunderkammer of Ferrante Imperato
 In: Ferrante Imperato, *Historia Naturale*, 1672
 ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION



Cross-Pollination

The idea that accurate first-hand observation is valuable is also encountered in the concept of *ad vivum* and its vernacular equivalents: *naer 't leven*, *nach dem Leben*, *au vif*, 'from the life'.²⁵ At first, it was especially people who were portrayed in this warts-and-all fashion, but in the sixteenth century, the approach began to be adopted in mapmaking and natural-history illustration as well. 'From the life' means that you depict what you see in front of you – a realistic representation of things. According to artist and art theorist Karel van Mander (1548-1606), the artist's ingenuity (*ingenium*) should enable him not only to draw and paint *naer 't leven* (from the life) but also *uyt den gheest* (from the spirit or, in other words, from his imagination). In that way, he could show that he had mastered nature and perhaps even surpassed divine creation.²⁶

Accurate visual information in the form of lifelike sketches, drawings, and prints was thus a crucial aid to scientific study.²⁷ To create these images, artists and scholars set out on natural-history safaris, intent on portraying plants and animals down to the smallest detail.²⁸ Remember the llama that has wandered into the background of Pieter Claeissens's painting? Claeissens based it on a drawing by De Boodt. The animal is exquisitely depicted in side view, its thick coat rendered with a keen eye as to detail. Its collar and vivid portrayal leave little doubt that the drawing is of a live animal, such as De Boodt might have seen in Rudolf II's menagerie. With some pride, he placed his monogram under the llama's belly: 'A.D.B. fecit'.

However, not all the drawings in De Boodt's albums are direct observations of nature. Many of the 'true-to-life' images were borrowed from existing prints.²⁹ Take the colourful flowers, for instance: a good number of those, such as the blue irises, are based on Adriaen Collaert's popular *Florilegium* (c.1590).³⁰ Several of De Boodt's insects made their first appearance in Joris Hoefnagel's print series *Archetypa*, and he cloned interesting birds and a South American sloth from botanist Carolus Clusius's *Ecoticorum Libri Decem* (1605).³¹ Rembert Dodoens's *Cruydt-boeck* (1554) was also a source of inspiration. For instance, the strange-looking purple flower next to Mary's proper right leg in Claeissens's painting can be identified from the *Cruydt-boeck* as the lady's-slipper orchid (*Cypripedium calceolus*).³² Today an artist who went in for that kind of copying would be open to accusations of plagiarism and the theft of intellectual property, but there were no such safeguards in the early modern period.

From the correspondence between De Boodt and Carolus Clusius, moreover, we learn that the physician did not do all the drawings himself. He ordered no fewer than two hundred drawings for his albums from a certain Elias Verhulst (c.1564-1601), a painter from Delft.³³ Verhulst specialized in studies of nature and was responsible for many of the flowers.





Iris Germanica (detail)

In: Abraham Collaert, *Florilegium*, 1590
AMSTERDAM, RIJKSMUSEUM

Iris Germanica

In: Anselmus De Boodt and Elias Verhulst, *Albums van Anselmus De Boodt*, c.1596-1610
PRIVATE COLLECTION



Portraits of Botanical Artists

In: Leonhart Fuchs, *De Historia Stirpium Commentarii Insignes*, 1542
PITTSBURG, HUNT INSTITUTE FOR BOTANICAL DOCUMENTATION

GIORGIO LIBERALE AND WOLFGANG MEYERPECK

Aquilina Aquilegia Vulgaris (detail), c.1563
Carved woodblock, 22 × 15.5 × 2.2 cm
ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION



25 Tulipa purpurea oris albis. 26 Tulipa lutea rubris flammulis latis. 27 Tulipa niuca laterib. rubro purpureis punctu-
latis fundo pallide caeruleo. 10



28 Tulipa sulphurea oris
flammulis rubris

29 Tulipa alba sub lutea flammulis
latis Cramoisia colore.

30 Tulipa lutea oris sulphureis annulo rubro
punctis rubris intus pleno fundo Vario.



31 Tulipa purpurea



32 Tulipa purpurea rub. saurata
albis oris.





FOLLOWER OF JACOB MARREL
Flower Still Life with Insects, c.1630-1650
Oil on panel, 54.5 × 41.2 cm
ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION

WOMEN'S WORK

It may seem surprising to some that three women worked on the natural-history studies produced for Amsterdam's botanical garden. Yet many women in the Low Countries made a name for themselves as artists in this period, particularly in the genre of still lifes and nature studies (see Chapter 3).⁹ According to the restrictive norms and gender stereotypes of the time, the still life was deemed to be a suitable subject for women, as it supposedly required little imagination. In the eyes of the – predominantly male – critics and art theoreticians, moreover, the still life and the depiction of flowers sat right at the bottom of the hierarchy of genres, way below portraiture and even further below history painting.¹⁰ And yet... despite the lowly position it was accorded by critics, the still life remained one of the most popular genres in painting. Talented painters gained fame and fortune with it, like the Amsterdam artist Rachel Ruysch (1664-1750), so skilled that she rose to become court painter to Elector Palatine Johann Wilhelm.¹¹

Women artists did not always have access to formal training, so most of them learned in the family workshop. Whatever their relationship was, the likelihood is that Maria Moninckx was trained by Jan, given the close resemblance of her style and painting technique to his. Johanna Helena Herolt-Graff, who also collaborated on the *Moninckx Atlas*, was certainly taught by her mother, Maria Sibylla Merian. In turn, Merian had learned to paint from her stepfather, Jacob Marrel (1613/14-1681). Marrel, a highly successful floral-still-life painter, excelled in portraying tulips on parchment or paper, as well as in painting bouquets in oils on canvas or panel. There is no evidence to date that he taught Merian to work in oils, and it seems her training was chiefly focused on working in water- and body colour. Why that should be so is not entirely clear, but it may have been connected with the restrictions imposed on women in her native Frankfurt.¹²

Fortunately, the situation was different in the Low Countries, where women artists could work in oils more or less unhindered. Not only Dutch painters like Rachel Ruysch but also female artists in the Southern Netherlands, such as Antwerp's Catherine Ykens I (after 1598-after 1665). It was she who painted in oil on canvas the monumental *Still Life with Flowers and Insects* pictured here. She too learned her craft in her father's workshop. Also in Antwerp, Anna Maria Janssens (c.1605-after 1668) did likewise. Moreover, she married an artist we have met more than once in these pages, Jan Brueghel II. Only two signed works by her are known, one of them being *Holy Family with an Angel in a Garland of Flowers*.¹³ There are more surviving works by Clara Peeters (1588-1636), yet another Antwerp artist, whose still lifes even made it into Spain's royal collection.¹⁴ Her intimate *Virgin and Child in a Garland of Flowers* demonstrates her command of detailed flower and figure painting. As it happens, it is also her last signed and dated painting.

We know the work of these women because they added their names to their paintings. Despite this mark of self-respect, their works were all too often assumed to belong to the oeuvres of their fathers, brothers, or husbands. Had Maria Moninckx not signed her studies, her work would probably also have been tacitly attributed to her male relative, Jan.



CATHARINA YKENS I
Still Life with Flowers and Insects, c.1660
Oil on canvas, 114.5 × 149.4 cm
ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION





JACOB MARREL

Vase of Flowers with Snail and Stag Beetle, c.1650-1665

Oil on canvas, 52.2 × 39.2 cm

ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION

RACHEL RUYSCH

Vase of Flowers, 1700

Oil on canvas, 79.5 × 60.2 cm

THE HAGUE, MAURITSHUIS



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sven Van Dorst (1990) gained his Master's in Conservation-Restoration at the Royal Academy/University of Antwerp. After working at the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp, he completed his training at the Hamilton Kerr Institute, a department of Cambridge University.

In 2016, Sven founded the conservation studio of The Phoebus Foundation. As head of the studio, he assembled a team of passionate restorers and conservation scientists who manage the Foundation's collection on a daily basis. Among the paintings he has treated are works by masters such as Peter Paul Rubens, Jacob Jordaens, Anthonis Mor and Michaelina Wautier.

Between 2017 and 2020, Sven led the research and restoration project of the panels of the *Dymphna* altarpiece by Goossen Van der Weyden. His deep interest in the painting techniques and materials of Baroque flower painters has already led to three editions of the *Phoebus Focus* series, on Daniel Seghers, Jan Brueghel I, and Jan Davidsz. De Heem.

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COVER

JAN BRUEGHEL I
*Flowers in a Vase with a Clump of Cyclamen
and Precious Stones*, c.1605-1607
Oil on panel, 51 × 41 cm
ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION

BACK COVER

OSIAS BEERT I
Flowers in a German Tigerware Vase (detail), c.1600-1610
Oil on panel, 75.3 × 54 cm
ANTWERP, THE PHOEBUS FOUNDATION

ENDPAPERS

Details of *Vase of Flowers with Vanitas Symbols* (p. 206),
Mary Crushing the Serpent in a Garland of Flowers (p. 166),
Marriage of Joseph and Mary in a Garland of Flowers (p. 132),
Vase of Flowers with Tulips, Roses, Anemones and an Iris (p. 102),
The Child Mary Spinning in a Garland of Flowers (p. 340)
and *Virgin and Child with Crown Imperial and Llama* (p. 28)

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