



Women Artists of the Golden Age: From Antwerp to Amsterdam

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Judith Leyster (1609–1660) Judith Leyster was a highly accomplished Dutch painter active in Haarlem during the 1630s, long admired in her own lifetime but later eclipsed by male contemporaries, particularly Frans Hals. Specializing in genre scenes, portraits, and lively depictions of musicians and merrymakers, Leyster developed a confident, fluid brushwork and a keen sensitivity to character and expression. Her paintings often foreground moments of performance and sociability, engaging viewers through direct gazes and informal poses. Leyster was admitted to the Haarlem Guild of St. Luke in 1633, a notable achievement for a woman artist, and ran her own workshop. Only in the late nineteenth century was her oeuvre properly disentangled from that of Hals, restoring her reputation as an inventive and independent artistic voice within Dutch Golden Age painting.

Clara Peeters (active c. 1607–1621) Clara Peeters is among the earliest specialists in still-life painting in the Northern Netherlands and a pioneering figure in the development of the genre. Active primarily in Antwerp, she is best known for her meticulously rendered banquet pieces featuring food, metalware, and luxury objects, often arranged with striking clarity and restraint. Peeters repeatedly asserted her authorship through inventive visual strategies, including inscribing her name on knife blades and embedding tiny self-portraits in the reflective surfaces of goblets and tankards. Although biographical information about her remains scarce, Peeters's signed and dated paintings testify to a sustained professional career and to women's active participation in the early seventeenth-century art market.

Michaelina Wautier (1604–1689) Michaelina Wautier was an exceptional Flemish painter whose work defies conventional expectations of women's artistic practice in the seventeenth century. Active in Brussels, she produced large-scale history paintings, mythological scenes, portraits, and genre works—an unusually broad range for any artist, and especially for a woman. Her paintings are marked by striking realism, psychological depth, and an assured handling of the nude, including male nudes, as seen in her *Triumph of Bacchus*. Wautier frequently engaged in subtle acts of self-representation, inserting herself into complex compositions that affirm her authorship. Long overlooked by art history, her oeuvre has only recently been reassembled, revealing a painter of remarkable ambition and intellectual independence who challenges entrenched assumptions about gender and artistic hierarchy in early modern Europe.

Maria van Oosterwijck (1630–1693) Maria van Oosterwijck was one of the most celebrated still-life painters of the Dutch Republic, renowned for her refined flower paintings and vanitas compositions. Trained in Delft and later active in Amsterdam, she enjoyed international acclaim, counting European monarchs among her patrons. Van Oosterwijck’s works combine botanical precision with moral and spiritual symbolism, juxtaposing blooming flowers with skulls, hourglasses, and religious texts to evoke themes of transience, devotion, and the passage of time. Her careful compositions and luminous surfaces reflect both technical mastery and intellectual seriousness. Despite her success, van Oosterwijck faced institutional barriers: she was never admitted to a painters’ guild, reportedly because of her gender. Nevertheless, her paintings secured her reputation as one of the most accomplished still-life artists of her generation.

Rachel Ruysch (1664–1750) Rachel Ruysch was among the most successful painters of her time, achieving extraordinary fame and longevity as a specialist in floral still lifes. The daughter of a botanist, she developed a deep knowledge of plant structures that informed her exquisitely detailed and dynamic compositions. Ruysch’s paintings depart from earlier symmetrical arrangements, favoring asymmetry, dramatic lighting, and a sense of organic growth that animates each bloom and insect. Her works were eagerly collected across Europe, and she was appointed court painter to Johann Wilhelm, Elector Palatine. Ruysch maintained a prolific career over six decades while raising a large family (ten children), a rare feat in early modern art. Her technical brilliance and commercial success helped redefine the possibilities available to women artists in the eighteenth century.

Maria Sibylla Merian (1647–1717) Maria Sibylla Merian was a pioneering artist and naturalist whose work bridged art and science in the early modern period. Trained as a painter, she devoted herself to the close study of insects and plants, producing detailed illustrations that documented metamorphosis with unprecedented accuracy. Her most ambitious project was her self-funded expedition to Suriname, where she studied tropical species firsthand—an extraordinary undertaking for a woman of her time. The resulting publication, *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium*, combines vivid imagery with empirical observation, challenging prevailing assumptions about natural history. Merian’s work rejected decorative convention in favor of life cycles and ecological relationships, positioning her as a key figure in the history of scientific illustration. Her legacy endures at the intersection of artistic skill, curiosity, and empirical inquiry.