# Seventeenth-century painting in the Southern Netherlands

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The political and religious war that had wracked the Netherlands from 1568 to 1648 ended in the southern provinces – Flanders – which remained Spanish and Catholic being divided from the northern provinces around Holland that were independent and largely Calvinistic. This split to ok effect from 1579 and was recognized in the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648.

Notwithstanding this conflict, artistic production was extraordinary, particularly at Antwerp where Rubens's genius held sway. His innovative style influenced history painters and portraitists including Antony van Dyck (1599-1641) and Jacob Jordaens (1593-1678), as well as increasingly specialized genre painters whose works enjoyed a revival and boom equalled only in Holland.

Room Rubens

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Flemish and Dutch Painting

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## Peter-Paul Rubens (1570-1640)

Around 1600, Antwerp was home to a thriving production of altarpieces, along with sophisticated and decorative mythological works by Romanist painters versed in Italian mannerist art. Among them, Otto van Veen (Octavius Vaenius) (1556-1629), was to have a marked influence on Rubens. At the same time, an amateur production of reduced format, inexpensive paintings of small elegant figures in a very Italian style, exquisitely rendered in bright colours, enjoyed a resounding success. This movement, in which Frans Francken II (1581-1642) won renown, is represented here in works by Cornelis de Baellieur* (1607-1671) and Louis de Caullery* (before 1582-1621/22).

Rubens spent ten years in Italy before returning to Antwerp in 1609. Around 1615, when his innovatory style was gaining precedence, he painted a highly empathic portrait with very supple lines of the Romanist Frans Francken I (1542-1616)*. Steering clear of the dark shades of the Romanists, he created a very lifelike image with a high degree of plasticity using light tones.

The later *Allegory of Catholic Austria attacked by Protestant Princes** (c.1620-22), is a modello commemorating the 1619-21 struggle of one of the great allied Catholic powers of Flanders against Protestant forces in the Thirty Years' War. Sketched in white on a dark ground enhanced with rare flecks of bright colour, the composition is imbued with frenzied movement reminiscent of the artist's great *Hunting Scenes* (fig.1). The persuasive force of his vigorous and effective compositions, as well as his narrative imagination blending history and myth, equipped Rubens for painting great commemorative and political allegories, such as his *Life of Marie de Medicis* cycle in the Louvre.

fig.1- Peter-Paul Rubens
*The Tiger Hunt*
Rennes, Musée des Beaux-Arts
Photograph RMN / © Adélaïde Beaudouin

English translation by Susan Schneider

## Genre Painting Flourishes

In the sixteenth and, particularly, the seventeenth century, the Flemish widened the range of subjects painted to encompass most of the world around them. Gifted artists became increasingly specialized, focussing not only on traditional themes of landscape, still life and scenes of daily life, but also on interior church views (for example Pieter Neefs (c.1578-c.1655)* and Hendrick van Steenwyck (c.1580-c.1649)*), animals or battle scenes. Artists would often work together on the same painting according to their special field.

## Still Life

With its ornamental vigour, dynamic compositions and vivid hues, still life was particularly influenced by the Rubens-inspired revival.

Following Jan Davidsz de Heem (1606-1683/84), his son Cornelis de Heem (1631-1695) (*Still Life with Seafood**) and Nicolaes van Verendael (1640-1691) (*Vase of Flowers**) painted

* An asterisk indicates that the work mentionned is displayed in the room

compositions in which the organic animation of the diagonals, curves and unbalanced elements comes together in a fine execution with a sense of illusion. The clock in Verendael's painting reminds us of all that is fleeting and perishable in this world, as do the flowers, fruit and the window's reflection in the vase.

By arranging floral festoons to adorn an architectural niche, the Jesuit painter Daniel Seghers (1590-1661) reworked the formula invented by Jan Brueghel (1568-1625) of continuous garlands of flowers painted around a religious image. *The Floral Wreath with the Virgin and Child** was presented to Archduke Leopold Wilhelm, governor of the Southern Netherlands, when he visited the Antwerp convent in 1648. Abraham van Diepenbeeck (1596/99-1675), a pupil of Rubens, painted the bas-relief representing a vision of the Virgin appearing to the archduke's patron saint. The virtues of Mary and the saint are apparent in the flower symbolism.

## Landscapes

Dutch artist Cornelis van Poelenburgh (1595/96-1667) painted the figures in Flemish artist Alexander Keirincx's (1600-1652) *Landscape with Calypso** (c.1639) following in the landscape tradition of Jan Brueghel (1568-1625) and the toothsome fancy of his forests, modernized by monochrome tints probably evocative of the landscape artists from Haarlem in the 1630s.

Rubens revived the art of landscape painting through the freedom of his brushwork and colour palette, and the scope of his compositions which liberated many artists from tradition – in Antwerp with Jan Wildens (1586-1653), in Brussels in the company of Jacques d'Arthois (1613-1686)* and in Malines with Cornelis Huysmans (1648-1727), renowned for his sandy banks in full paste whose naturalistic lyricism was to impress the Barbizon painters (*Landscape with Bridge**).

Though further removed from the universe of Rubens, David Teniers the Younger (1610-1690) and Adam Frans van der Meulen (1632-1690) would nonetheless cultivate his lyrical spontaneity. Taking his inspiration from the open country of Brabant where he owned a manor house, Teniers skilfully captures its silvery light and changing wind – *Landscape with Chateau** (c.1652). Perhaps following the example of Rubens, he painted numerous views of the chateau that testify to the enduring nature of feudal imagination and interest in agricultural property in Flanders then in the grips of commercial recession (fig.2). A painter of battle scenes, before being appointed to record the campaigns of King Louis XIV, in Flanders Van der Meulen produced military tableaux within vibrantly coloured landscapes with broad brushstrokes – *Cavalcade at Rest** (c.1661).

fig.2- David Teniers the Younger
*Landscape with Chateau*
Budapest, Museum of Fine Art
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## Genre Scenes

The genre scene is dominated by the figures of Adriaen Brouwer (1605/6-1638), David III Ryckaert (1612-1661), Matthias van Helmont (1623-after 1679) and, in particular, Teniers, the author of countless cabaret, fairground and alchemist scenes. These are all indebted to the work of Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1520/25-1569) disclosed in the copies and pastiches made by his son Pieter Brueghel (1564/65-1637/38) : *Peasant Brawl**, *Head of a Lansquenet**.

Before 1640, Teniers was to abandon Brouwer's sense of sarcasm and the burlesque in favour of depicting the joys of the populace with empathy and a highly humane, quiet sense of the poetic. His *Saint George's Day Fair** is an almost Arcadian image of peasant life and nature ; his numerous *Smoke Dens* of the 1640s to 1650s are rendered in a refined dark monochrome occasionally highlighted with flecks of blue, red and white (*The Man in the White Hat**).