

Still Life of Fish and Cat



Still Life of Fish and Cat, after 1620

The Cat's Meow

Clara Peeters (1594–after 1657) helped pioneer the genre of still-life painting. She was also the first artist known to feature fish. Her arrangements of food, flowers, vessels, and the occasional feline influenced later artists.

Take a closer look

The artist's ability to replicate the appearance of things was key to her success. Note her judicious application of white paint to create the illusion of moist eyes, oysters' brackish baths, opalescent scales, and translucent shrimp shells.

Something to talk about

Most still lifes feature inanimate objects, but Peeters included a cat, a common pet at the time. How does its presence affect your experience of the painting?

Who knew?

As one of the few women working professionally as a painter in Europe at the time, Peeters should be considered a trailblazer. Owing to her gender, her life and artistic contributions went largely unrecorded by history.

Clara Peeters, *Still Life of Fish and Cat*, after 1620; Oil on panel, 13½ x 18½ inches; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Gift of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay



Portrait of a Noblewoman



Dear Dowry

The sumptuous garments and jewels adorning this woman in her wedding portrait are part of her dowry—the wealth she brings to her marriage. Unlike this sitter and other women of the day, Lavinia Fontana did not have to meet this requirement because of her earning potential as an artist.



Portrait of a Noblewoman, ca. 1580

Take a closer look

The nobility of Bologna sought **Lavinia Fontana (1552–1614)** for portrait commissions. Her ability to portray fabric textures and intricate jewelry—seen clearly in this work—appealed to her status-conscious patrons.

Something to talk about

During the Renaissance, portraits were never simply created to represent the likeness of the sitter. Consider Fontana's handling of costume, expression, and pose. What do such details communicate about this young woman's character, mood, and social standing?

Who knew?

Incorporated symbols suggest this sitter embodied qualities of an ideal 16th-century bride. The marten pelt suspended from her waist signifies fertility—this animal reproduces prolifically. The cross pendant, high collar, and affectionate dog represent piety, modesty, and loyalty.

Lavinia Fontana, *Portrait of a Noblewoman*, ca. 1580; Oil on canvas, 45¼ x 35¼ inches; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Gift of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay; Photograph by Lee Stalsworth



The Highland Raid



The Highland Raid, 1860

Grazed and Confused

Acclaimed for her sympathetic renderings of fauna, French painter **Rosa Bonheur (1822–1899)** led an unconventional life. The bold Bonheur smoked, rode astride, and collected an animal menagerie. She even obtained legal permission to wear trousers, allowing her easier access to her subjects.

Take a closer look

Bonheur's attention to details reinforces the overall mood of this painting. Glazed eyes, gaping mouths, and striding legs imply distress and haste. Ominous gray clouds compete with the sun while oblique rain showers, blowing grass, and windswept spittle underscore blustery conditions.

In her own words

"I care nothing for the fashionable. A portrait painter has need of these things, but not I, who find all that is wanted in my dogs, my horses, my hinds, and my stags of the forest."

Who knew?

The artist sketched her subjects from life before composing paintings in the studio. Her subject matter was an unusual choice since 19th-century female painters typically rendered portraits and domestic subjects.

Rosa Bonheur, *The Highland Raid*, 1860; Oil on canvas, 51 x 84 inches; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Gift of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay; Photograph by Lee Stalsworth





Stag Party?

Patricia Piccinini's sculptures celebrate unexpected confluences of the recognizable. She transports viewers to a fantastical future where hybridized beings resembling humans, animals, and machines roam the earth.



The Stags, 2008

Take a closer look

In *The Stags*, **Patricia Piccinini (b. 1965)** accentuates affinities between organic and manufactured forms. Multi-armed scooter mirrors suggest branched antlers. Sinuous fiberglass curves evoke the contours of necks and haunches. Taut vinyl resembles hide, while gears and dials mimic eyes.

Something to talk about

By mingling machine and mammal, the artist urges us to contemplate how the built and natural worlds cooperate and clash. In what instances do these environments work in concert? When do they impinge upon one another?

In her own words

"The world I create exists somewhere between the one we know and one that is almost upon us."

Who knew?

Piccinini acknowledges that her creations are born out of collaborations with specialists, including automotive engineers, model makers, and spray painters.

Patricia Piccinini, *The Stags*, 2008; Fiberglass, automotive parts, and cycle parts, 69% x 72 x 40% inches; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Gift of Heather and Tony Podesta Collection; © Patricia Piccinini; Photograph by Graham Baring



Joana Vasconcelos

Viriato



NATIONAL MUSEUM
OF WOMEN IN THE ARTS

Viriato, 2005

Off the Hook

Joana Vasconcelos (b. 1971) explores consumer culture, collective identity, and our assumptions about what constitutes art. This Portuguese artist is known for enveloping everyday items, such as pianos, laptops, or decorative objects, in crocheted and knitted material.

Take a closer look

In *Viriato*, Vasconcelos cloaks a lawn ornament in elaborate needlework, contrasting mass-produced with hand-crafted. The lacy covering invites us to peer at the details beneath, while also competing for our attention with the figure it masks.

Something to talk about

Because handmade textiles are universally rich with associations, Vasconcelos incorporates them in many of her works to encourage multiple interpretations. How do your associations with crochet and similar techniques affect your response to *Viriato*?

Who knew?

Viriato was a first-century leader in the area of present-day Portugal. He is credited with turning back an invasion of his homeland by the ancient Romans.

Joana Vasconcelos, *Viriato*, 2005; Faience dog and handmade cotton crochet, 29½ x 17¼ x 15¼ inches; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Gift of Heather and Tony Podesta Collection; © Joana Vasconcelos; Photograph by Lee Stalsworth

