

# COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



Clara Peeters

(Mechelen c. 1587 – after 1636 Ghent)

*Still life with a peregrine falcon  
and its prey*

c. 1612 – 21

oil on oak panel<sup>1</sup>

33.3 x 45.7 cm.;

13 1/8 x 18 in.

signed (lower left): *CLARA P*

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## Provenance

Anonymous sale, Paris, Tajan, 16 December 2014, lot 14;  
Private collection, Antwerp.

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## Literature

A. Vergara & J. M. Rodríguez-Villa, in *The Art of Clara Peeters*, exh. cat., (ed.) A. Vergara, Madrid 2016, pp. 88-91, cat. no. 6, reproduced in colour on p. 89.

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## Exhibited

Antwerp, Museum Rockoxhuis, *The Art of Clara Peeters*, 16 June - 2 October 2016;  
Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, *The Art of Clara Peeters*, 25 October 2016 - 19 February 2017.

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A juvenile male peregrine falcon is perched on a grey partridge. Falconers refer to male hawks as 'tiercels' (from the Latin *tertius*) because they are one-third smaller than females. In the wicker basket are a common starling, a bullfinch and three finches, and before it are a bullfinch and kingfisher – their red and blue feathers add a note of colour to the dominant brownish tone. Next to the basket is a woodcock. Its head originally extended further to the right, and was adjusted on second thought by the artist.

This still life alludes to falconry, a type of hunt associated with royalty and the aristocracy since the Middle Ages, which retained its allure and prestige in the seventeenth century. In the Southern Netherlands, where Peeters painted, it was favoured by the rulers. In 1613, Isabel Clara Eugenia and Albert of Austria, who governed as joint sovereigns, passed legislation reminding their subjects of the exclusive right of the nobility to hunt '*de poil avec poil et de plume avec plume*' (fur with fur and feather with feather).<sup>2</sup> This meant that hunting should be done only with dogs and birds. The painting that we are dealing with here emanates from that cultural context, and offers an image associated with the notion of a hunt '*de plume avec plume*'. The partridge and woodcock are typical prey for the falcon. The others are below its hierarchy, but could also be used as prey.

The infanta Isabel Clara Eugenia was especially fond of hunting, including hunting with birds. She once wrote about hunting with a goshawk and a sparrow hawk that belonged to a lord near Basel and Colmar. Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568 – 1625), who worked for the court, painted a hunting excursion which included her and her husband, and also a falconer with a hooded sparrow hawk perched on his hawking glove (fig. 1). Other paintings made for her and her husband also include birds of prey.

This is one of at least three still lifes that Peeters painted starring raptors. The subject matter demonstrates her entrepreneurial spirit: she was among the first artists to paint still lifes related to the hunt, and the first, as far as is known, to paint still lifes associated with falconry.

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The similarities and differences between this painting, *Still life with Game* in the Art Museum of Estonia (fig. 2), *Still life with Sparrow Hawk, Fowl, Porcelain and Shells* in the Prado (fig. 3), and a painting signed by the artist Nicolaes Cave (fig. 4) suggest that Clara Peeters worked with the assistance of a workshop. This and the Estonia Museum painting are identical in size, and they share many features, all with some variations. The basket is the same object in both pictures, painted somewhat differently; it appears again in other works by Peeters (see, for example, fig. 5). In both paintings the raptors stand on a partridge. They are very similar in posture and outline, but they belong to different species. The bird in the Estonia Museum painting is a sparrow hawk rather than a falcon. Its body is very similar to the bird of prey in the Prado's *Still life with Sparrow Hawk, Fowl, Porcelain and Shells* (fig. 3), but the head and feet are different; the feet are oversized.

Repeating motifs was a method for increasing production that had been common practice in painter's workshops in the Southern Netherlands since the fifteenth century. Clara Peeters repeated several objects in many of her works, sometimes precisely, other times with small differences, as is the case here. She must have worked from painted models of the type that we know from other artists (see, for example, fig. 6).

The changes to the head of the woodcock and the signature on the painting that we are dealing with suggest that Clara Peeters was personally involved in its making. Also, most of the birds are true to life, and painted with characteristic care. Other features suggest the assistance of the workshop. The feet of the raptor are too thick, and the toes are too short for an animal that is primarily a bird hunter (they are more appropriate for a hunter of small mammals, such as a kestrel).<sup>3</sup> This seems at odds with the diligent Clara Peeters (who did not make this mistake with the feet in the Prado's *Still life with Sparrow Hawk* (fig. 3)). As mentioned, the same problem exists in the painting in Estonia (fig. 2). The author of the two paintings was not familiar with the actual appearance of the birds.

Also noticeable in this scene is the schematic rendering of both the streaky front of the falcon and of the body, neck and head of the partridge, which form a continuous curve. This same trait is visible in the signed painting mentioned above by the otherwise unknown

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Nicolaes Cave (fig. 4), which is a partial repetition of the Peeters compositions.<sup>4</sup> The similarities between the two paintings suggest that Cave worked as an assistant of Peeters, collaborating on pictures such as this, and that he later went on to make spin-offs of her still lifes.

The best way to explain the collaboration of an assistant in a painting that Peeters could have easily painted on her own is as a result of the streamlining of her production process. Perhaps she painted parts of this, and other similar paintings, such as the basket with birds, leaving the rest unfinished. A client could then choose the type of raptor he or she wanted, or another way to fill in the picture. An assistant would complete the scene using models. We know this method of making paintings from the fifteenth century. Some compositions were repeated by artists such as Van der Weyden, who introduced variations at the will of a client such as changing the image of one saint for another.<sup>5</sup>

The original owner of this painting must have been someone who wanted to boast of his knowledge of falconry, but who was not actually very familiar with that activity. The awkward rendering of the feet of the falcon would have been immediately apparent to someone accustomed to seeing such birds.

We have very few clues to date this painting. It is more summary in execution than the main group of dated paintings by Peeters, which belongs to the years 1611–12.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the artist followed those paintings by streamlining her products, or she may have made two types of products simultaneously. The point of view from which the objects are seen is lower than that found in the 1611 paintings, and similar to those of 1612. The last dated painting that we know by Peeters is *Garland of flowers with a Madonna and Child*, from 1621.<sup>7</sup> We do not know if she painted after that. A date for this picture between 1612 and 1621 is therefore a safe hypothesis.

Alejandro Vergara and José Manuel Rodríguez-Villa



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**Figure 1.** Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Hunting Party with the Archdukes* (detail), c. 1611.  
Prado Museum, Madrid



**Figure 2.** Clara Peeters, *Still life with Game*, c. 1612 – 21.  
Art Museum of Estonia, Tallinn

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**Figure 3.** Clara Peeters, *Still life with Sparrow Hawk, Fowl, Porcelain and Shells*, 1611.  
Prado Museum, Madrid



**Figure 4.** Nicolaes Cave, *Still life with a Peregrine Falcon and its Prey*, c. 1625.  
With Galerie F. Devaux, Brussels, in 2008



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**Figure 5.** Clara Peeters, *Still Life of Fruit and Flowers*, c. 1612 – 13.  
Ashmolean Museum, Oxford



**Figure 6.** Ludger Tom Ring the Younger, *Animals*, c. 1560.  
Westfälisches Landesmuseum, Münster



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## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The panel edges are not bevelled, which suggests that the panel was originally larger (information based on a technical research report by © UGent, Gica&s, Ghent Interdisciplinary Centre for Art and Science). Wooden strips attached to the edges of the panel do not allow a dendrochronological report.

<sup>2</sup> See the essay by A. Vergara in *The Art of Clara Peeters*, exh. cat., (ed.) A. Vergara, Madrid 2016, pp. 38 – 39.

<sup>3</sup> There are other versions of this composition with similar problems in the depiction of the feet; see P. H. Decoteau, *Clara Peeters, 1594 – ca. 1640, and the development of still life painting in northern Europe*, Lingen 1992, ill. 50, pp. 63 – 65.

<sup>4</sup> For the painting by Cave, see the RKD website, artwork number 54614.

<sup>5</sup> L. Campbell, *National Gallery Catalogues. The Fifteenth Century Netherlandish Schools*, London 1998, p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> See A. Vergara's essay in *The Art of Clara Peeters*, exh. cat., (ed.) A. Vergara, Madrid 2016, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> See P. H. Decoteau, *Clara Peeters, 1594 – ca. 1640, and the development of still life painting in northern Europe*, Lingen 1992, ill. 19, p. 33, and the RKD website, artwork number 103201.