**Attachment 1**

**Mysterious Michaelina**

A Baroque genius discovered  
Interview with curator Katlijne Van der Stighelen

Nearly thirty years ago, art historian Katlijne Van der Stighelen stumbled across an exceptional painting in the depot of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, the Triumph of Bacchus (c. 1655). Her fascination grows as it appears that this monumental, complex work from the Flemish School was painted by a woman, Michaelina Wautier (1604-1689). Not only are women artists in the 17th century especially rare, Michaelina has talent and daring to spare. From that point on, Katlijne does not let go of Michaelina. Her research into the work and life of this highly talented Baroque artist reaches its current highpoint with Mysterious Michaelina. A Baroque genius discovered.

**“Women were only admitted into the Academy at the end of the 19th century, in separate classes and with a 'nude model' in a concealing outfit. And this woman is painting a work in the 17th century with primarily naked men. Unbelievable!”**

Glass ceilings are in all eras: to cause a commotion as a female artist in the 17th century was nearly an impossible task. Through her talent and just a bit of luck, the work of Michaelina Wautier (1604-1689) has not fallen through the cracks of art history in to oblivion. That is due in a significant part to the merit of art historian Katlijne Van der Stighelen.

She is the curator of Michaelina, the first overview exhibition ever in which the nearly complete oeuvre of Michaelina Wautier is presented. A fascinating acquaintance with an exceptional woman and talented artist, with – for a woman – a unknown freedom of works for the 17th century.

**Temptation, lust and drink**

**How did you become familiar with the work of Michaelina Wautier?**

Katlijne Van der Stighelen: “Around 1990, I was in Vienna to study a portrait by Anthony van Dyck. In the depot reserved for the work from the Flemish School, my attention was drawn to the Triumph of Bacchus, a highly complex work that was attributed to a female artist, Michaelina Wautier. It is such an exceptional piece: very monumental – 3.5 metres width – with a subject that you would not expect from a woman. It is a scene with a number of nude men and a daring theme: temptation, lust, drink... It is scarcely to believe that this could be made by a woman. “Women were only admitted into the Academy at the end of the 19th century, in separate classes and with a 'nude model' in a concealing outfit. And this woman is painting a work in the 17th century with primarily naked men. Unbelievable!”

**Where did she get her expertise and training from?**

KVdS: “What we know for certain is that her brother Charles was a painter, probably trained in Italy. Both Charles and Michaelina are inspired by Michael Sweerts, a very interesting and likewise mysterious artist who worked in Brussels around 1650 and established an Academy there. Without a doubt, young artists could draw with the use of live models there. Could Michaelina also have had the chance to do so? The anatomy of her nudes is so good, both with young and old men...which is completely unseen in the European context of the time, and certainly with that monumental format”

**Who was Michaelina?**

**What do we know about her background?**

KVdS: “Michaelina is born in Mons/Bergen in 1604. Her father dies in 1617. Her father was married twice: the second time with the mother of Michaelina. Michaelina had eight brothers. That probably enhanced her resilience. On the other hand, it is also very possible that her brothers staunchly protected her, but were also tolerant of that little sister. Perhaps she had a tolerant, open-minded mother. At that time, there were hardly any schools in Mons. Possibly home-schooling was organised for the boys and Michaelina could also 'profit' from that. At that time, studies for women was hardly a given. Young girls of status received a minimal education that was primarily orientated towards making them attractive as potential marriage partners: languages, conversation, music, embroidery, drawing...

When you 'read' the work of Michaelina, she must have focused upon so much more: knowledge of mythology, symbolism in art. Just take a look at the Triumph of Bacchus: not exactly a theme for a 'well-bred' young girl from the time. And certainly not because she depicts herself in the procession, as a Maenad, a follower of Bacchus, primarily for sexual entertainment. In 1638, her mother dies and Michaelina is thirty-four then. Four years later her brother Charles is in Brussels, and probably Michaelina as well. She probably lived the rest of her life with her brother Charles in a stately manor nearby the Brussels' Kapellekerk. There are also contacts with Antwerp. One of her brothers lived in Antwerp and probably Michaelina comes into contact with Paulus Pontius, a colleague of Rubens. Paulus Pontius makes an engraving after Michaelina's portrait of the Italian general Andreas Cantelmo. And two of her panels with floral pieces are adorned with ‘Antwerpse Handjes’.”

**Did Michaelina, as progressive as she was, not get into trouble?**

KVdS: “That probably did not happen because Michaelina was part of an exceptionally exclusive environment. She even had connections with the Court of Archduke Leopold-Willem. Who resided in Brussels around 1643-1655. A very devout man, but also a man with a big affection for art and culture. He allowed an opera to be performed for the first time in Brussels, after the Parisian model. He had an extensive collection of art, of which the Triumph of Bacchus also was part. The work moved to Vienna in 1655 along with the Archduke. The works were inventoried in Vienna, amongst which were four works by Michaelina Wautier. That is the basis for all further research. The other side of the coin is that although she could express herself in that privileged environment, nothing was written about her in the 17th century. Nowadays, her family members have absolutely no idea about artists in the Wautier lineage.”

**Proficient across the board**

**She is not the only female artist from the time, however, what precisely makes her so unique?**

KVdS: “The female artists in the Southern Low Countries from this period are nearly all specialists', women that apply themselves to a single theme. We have very good female floral painters, very good female still-life painters: I am thinking of Clara Peeters here. Aside from Michaelina Wautier, there is not a single female painter from the Southern Low Countries who deals with all of the disciplines. She makes historical pieces, monumental paintings with a mythological or religious theme, she paints amazingly good portraits, genre paintings and floral pieces. She mastered all of the genres from the time, in both small and large format. And, she was talented. She was so talented that some artists were surprised over the fact 'that a woman could make such works'. There is a glass ceiling in the arts as well for women.”

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**Is her talent the only reason for this overview exhibition?**

KVdS: “In A Room of One’s Own, Virginia Woolf invents an imaginary sister of William Shakespeare. Would she become just as famous as her brother? Not without her own money and privacy, a room of one’s own. Michaelina Wautier was everything that most women in the time could not be: multifaceted, idiosyncratic, uninhibited... A fascinating, self-assured, highly talented woman that for once is not a victim. Someone who has training and uses her talent to create the works that she wants to make, not those that were imposed upon her by her environment. And with that she also gained success: consider the Archduke Leopold-Willem who had various works of hers in his possession.

**“A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.”**

**― Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own**

Michaelina Wautier was no dilettante, no amateur, in the sense that she was probably paid for her work. Maybe she took her example from Anna Francisca de Bruyns? De Bruyns made an altarpiece for the church close to the parental home of Michaelina. It is a good chance that Michaelina knew her. Anna Francisca de Bruyns, however, was indeed a victim of her time. Upon her marriage, she was forced to abandon the arts, which made her very unhappy. Was Michaelina never compelled to get married? She realised that if she would marry, that would spell the end of her career as an artist, and did she not stay single as a result of this? That also came with a price: she remained childless.

**In search of the Five Senses**

**You have been successful to collect more or less her entire oeuvre for this exhibition...**

KVdS: “There are twenty-six works that are attributed to her with certainty: we shall be able to view nearly all of them at the exhibition. There is also a wonderful series: the Five Senses, five individual paintings, dated and signed, that were auctioned in Valenciennes in the late 19th century. One of those was sold in Paris in the 1970s. As such, they were probably split up from each other and in the meantime have gone missing. Such a shame! There is still the hope that we shall still one day come across their trail. Much of her work is privately owned. I think that there indeed are some recent purchases present. Not all, of course. Probably, there is also work amongst what a family has collected over time. However, because the name of this female artist is still now steadily becoming familiar, the attention to her work is likewise growing. In March 2016, the Portrait of the Jesuit Martino Martini (1656), originally valued at 12,000 euro, was sold for 450,000 euro. The art world expects that we shall hear more from this woman. And, as such, Michaelina Wautier is also becoming financially interesting.

**“The day that we could discover letters by Michaelina Wautier, then we shall also be able to become acquainted with her voice.”**

**What does the future bring?**

KVdS: “I want to further study the unusual, rich iconography of Michaelina Wautier: an iconography by which she experimented and that she further expands upon. And I ask myself whether she came in contact with literature by women from the 17th century. There were already publications by women about women's rights. Did they influence her? I would very much like to hear her own voice. It would be so wonderful if I were to be able to find something that she had written. “The day that we could discover letters by Michaelina Wautier, then we shall also be able to become acquainted with her voice.”

Interview: Tin Vancutsem