CS0511

PIETER GERRITSZ VAN ROESTRATEN
(Haarlem 1629/30 – 1700 London)

A Vanitas Still Life with the Regalia of King Charles II

Signed, lower left, on the document: *P. Roestraten*
Oil on canvas, 40⅛ x 49⅝ ins. (102 x 126 cm)
Framed dimensions: 45 ½ x 54 ½ ins. (115 x 138 cm)

PROVENANCE
Charles Bodville Robartes (1660-1723), 2nd Earl of Radnor, London
His sale, St. James's, 7 St. James's Square, London, 1723, "some of Roestrate particularly the original Crown Mond & scepter, painted by him from the Regalia in the Tower. & other pieces of plate finely painted".[i]
Charles Alexander Loeser (1864-1928), Florence
With Robert Noortman Gallery, London, 1978
Anonymous sale, Vendu Notarishuis, Rotterdam, 15-20 January 1981, Lot 152.
Anonymous sale, Loeckx, Ghent, 24 November, 2015, lot 339
Private collection, United Kingdom, 2015 to the present day

LITERATURE:
The Notebooks of George Vertue I, The Walpole Society, Vol. XVIII (1929-30), p. 132
M. Kirby Talley, '"Small, usuall, and vulgar things": still-life painting in England 1635-1670', *Walpole Society* 49 (1983), pp. 177.
A. van der Willigen, Fred. G. Meijer, *A Dictionary of Dutch and Flemish Still-life Painters Working in Oils, 1525-1725*, p. 170, under Vanitas, "An important example was in the art trade, last with Noortman in 1978".

Pieter van Roestraten was born in Haarlem in 1630 and trained there with Frans Hals (1582/83-1666), whose daughter Adriaentje he married in 1654. In or shortly after 1663, he and his wife moved to London, where they settled in Covent Garden, close to the Palace of Whitehall and to the studios of other painters, including John Michael Wright (1617-1694) and Peter Lely (1618-1680), the King's Principal Painter.

Roestraten's reasons for moving to London are unknown, but the economic conditions of the day were likely to have been an influencing factor. From around 1660, the economy of the Dutch Republic was in decline and the demand for paintings stagnated, while by contrast in England, the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 had led to expansion in the economy and overseas trade, as a consequence of which the art market had begun to flourish. Roestraten was in fact among the first of many Dutch painters who journeyed across the North Sea in order to profit from the growing demand for pictures within courtly circles of the newly restored King Charles II.

Although Roestraten may have started out as a portraitist and painter of genre scenes, in England, he made his name as a still-life painter. His early biographers report that on his arrival in London, Lely agreed to introduce Roestraten to the King and secure him lucrative commissions on condition that he did not set up in competition as a portrait painter[ii]. It seems that Roestraten kept to his side of the agreement, for apart from a few self-portraits, no portraits by his hand are known Writing in 1706, Buckridge explained that Roestraten was instead encouraged to paint still lifes after "having perform'd an extraordinary Piece that Sir Peter Lely shew'd to King Charles, and which his Majesty approv'd"[iii]. The painting to which he refers could possibly be the *Vanitas* still life, which is today in the Royal Collection[iv]. In the years that followed, Roestraten enjoyed a steady flow of work and his pictures commanded high prices. Arnold Houbraken tells us that he was able to achieve as much as "£40 or £50 sterling for a single piece"[v]. To put these prices in context, at the end of his career, Lely was able to charge £60 for a full-length portrait and £40 for a three-quarter-length[vi].

Much of Roestraten's success appears to have depended on his ability to portray the reflective surfaces of finely wrought metal objects. Writing in the early eighteenth century, Houbraken remembered him as a "good painter of …. still lifes, in particular silver work, dishes, vases, bowls, etc., which he so naturally knew how to depict with the brush that the silver appeared to be real"[vii]. Certainly, he took every opportunity to introduce extravagant gold and silver tableware into his compositions, often as the centrepiece. In this respect, he cleverly exploited the fashion for spectacular gold and silver pieces and silver furnishings that characterised the Restoration court. The reign of Charles II saw a resurgence in the manufacture of fine silver following the civil war when silver stocks had been depleted in order to finance the Crown and later the Commonwealth.

Roestraten explored the *vanitas* theme repeatedly in his still-life paintings. In this work, one of his largest and most ambitious compositions, he addresses the theme of transience and the vanity of worldly things with panache and a baroque sense of drama. A black curtain is swept back to reveal a rich array of objects on a table covered with a deep red cloth. An elaborate parcel-gilt silver cup in the auricular style takes centre stage, flanked on left and right by the jewel-studded Crown, Orb and Sceptre that formed part of the newly made regalia for King Charles II's coronation in 1661. Lurking in the shade behind is a skull crowned with a wreath

of laurel leaves, and to the right, a silver candlestick bearing a freshly snuffed-out candle, a wisp of smoke rising from the still-glowing wick. Placed near the front edge of the table are two pink roses, resting upon a crumpled document, and an open pocket watch, with a key attached to a blue ribbon. A tall silver-gilt cup and cover and a large book propped open at a page from Boccaccio's *Decameron* stand in the shadows in the back left-hand corner, while appearing on the far right is a small boy blowing bubbles: three bubbles float above the table, catching reflections from the light entering the studio window.

Many of the objects represented in Roestraten's painting are fairly common in *vanitas* still lifes – the pocket watch, the roses, the recently extinguished candle, the bubble-blowing boy (*Homo bulla* – man is but a bubble) and the skull – serving as allusions to the fragile and transitory nature of life and the ultimate triumph of death, but the way in which they are combined here with books, scrolls of paper, documents, and precious gold and silver objects that symbolise human knowledge, wealth and worldly power, gives the painting a multilayered meaning. The juxtaposition of the skull with the precious metal vessels and the pieces of the regalia - potent symbols of kingship - not only expresses the inability of accumulated wealth to stave off the inevitability of death, but above all underscores the impermanence of all worldly power. Such a message would no doubt have instantly brought to the minds of contemporary viewers the recent period of political instability during the English civil war, culminating in the execution of Charles I. The solemn mood is nevertheless offset by the painting's rich colouring and the opulence of the gold and silver objects.

This painting is probably identical to one described as "some of Roestrate particularly the original Crown Mond & scepter, painted by him from the Regalia in the Tower. & other pieces of plate finely painted", which was in the posthumous sale of the art collection belonging to Charles Bodvile Robartes, 2nd Earl of Radnor (1660-1723), in 1723[viii]. However, we do not know when or for whom such an individual piece was commissioned. It is difficult to date the still life as Roestraten rarely dated his works and his style changed very little over time. The subject matter of the painting strongly suggests that it was painted for somebody well connected in royal circles during Charles II's reign. Another question that arises is how was it that Roestraten came to have access to the regalia? It is of course possible that he was familiar with the pieces from other paintings, for example, the portrait of Charles II by his neighbour John Michael Wright, today in The Royal Collection (fig. 1). In this painting, the king is shown seated on his thrown wearing the Order of the Garter costume and Crown of State, and holding the Orb and Sceptre. The new regalia had been supplied by the wealthy banker and royal goldsmith Robert Vyner (1631-1688) for Charles's coronation in 1661, the old regalia having been destroyed during the Commonwealth. The portrait, which was probably painted in the early 1670s, was likely commissioned from Wright by the royal goldsmith himself. Vyner was also likely to have been a patron of Roestraten since three paintings attributed to Roestraten were in the sale of the Vyner collection at Sotheby's in London on 27th March 1926 (lots 10, 17 & 18).

Fig. 1. John Michael Wright, *Portrait of Charles II*, *c*. 1671-6, oil on canvas, 281.9 x 239.2 cm, The Royal Collection, inv. no. RCIN 404951.

Certain objects are recurring motifs in Roestraten's paintings, suggesting that they were studio props belonging to the artist, or based upon preparatory drawings or prints. For example, a distinctive silver candlestick in the form of a standing female figure on a hexagonal base, made by the London silversmith Anthony Nelme, crops up in several paintings, as does a larger silver ginger-jar. However, some of the showy metal objects that feature in his compositions can best be described as 'portraits' of individual, high-status pieces that were likely the proud possessions of the person commissioning the painting. The extravagant silver and parcel-gilt cup at the centre here is just such a singular piece. The cup in the auricular style (named after curving, organic shapes that suggest the structure of the ear) takes the form of a seashell held aloft by a merman keeling in the waves. The piece has not been identified, but it would have been made fairly recently by a goldsmith working in Augsburg, in Germany[ix], and must have belonged to a person of considerable wealth and substance.

BIOGRAPHY

Pieter Gerritsz van Roestraten was baptised in the Reformed Church in Haarlem on 21 April 1630. His father, Gerrit Maertensz van Roestraten, owned several houses in Haarlem and was a collector of salt and meat excises. Starting in 1646, Pieter trained for five years in the workshop of Frans Hals (1582/83-1666). Sometime after October 1651, he moved to Amsterdam. He was living in the Anthonie Breestraat by 6 June 1654, when he posted the banns of his marriage to Adriaentje Hals, one of Hals's daughters. On 3 October 1659, the couple – then living at the corner of the Beulingstraat – drew up their joint Will. Probably shortly after 1 May 1663, when Adriaentje witnessed the baptism of her brother Reynier Hals's son, Roestraten and his wife moved to London, where they would settle for good. Pieter was certainly in London by 2 September 1666 when the Great Fire of London broke out as he is reported to have sustained an injury to his hip during the conflagration that left him

with a limp for the rest of his life. In London, Roestraten lived in James Street, Covent Garden, the same street as the painter John Michael Wright (1617-1694) and not far from Peter Lely (1618-1680), the King's Principal Painter, and later (1693-94) in King Street, Covent Garden. It is not known when his wife Adriaentje died, but he remarried a younger woman named Clara some time before April 1700, when he made his Will. Pieter van Roestraten died without issue in London and was buried in St Paul's Church, Covent Garden, on 10 July 1700[x]. Roestraten specialised in still lifes often containing fine gold, silver or porcelain objects. He also painted genre scenes somewhat in the style of Jan Steen, and a few landscape and self-portraits. He rarely dated his paintings, making it difficult to establish a chronology for his oeuvre. Roestraten worked extensively for members of the court and the aristocratic owners of large country houses.

Self-portrait of the artist. Mezzotint by Abraham Blotelling after a painting by Pieter van Roestraten, *c*. 1673-8.

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[i] *The Notebooks of George Vertue I, The Walpole Society*, Vol. XVIII (1929-30), p. 132. See: M. Kirby Talley, "Small, usuall, and vulgar things": Still-life Painting in England 1635-1760", The Walpole Society, Vol. 49 (1983), p. 177.

[ii] The anecdote probably derives from the earliest published account of Roestraten in B. Buckridge, "An Essay towards an English school" in Roger de Piles, *The Art of Painting and the Lives of the Painters,* London, 1706, pp. 459-60.

[iii] See endnote ii above.

[iv] Pieter van Roestraten, *A Vanitas, c.* 1672-1700, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 63.8 cm, The Royal Collection, inv. no. RCIN 402604.

[v] Arnold Houbraken, *De Groote Schouburgh der Nederlantsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen,* 3 vols, Amsterdam 1718-21 pp. 191-192.

[vi] See the biography of Sir Peter Lely. Dethloff, D., Millar, O., & Barton, L. (2003). Lely, Sir Peter. *Grove Art Online.* Retrieved 9 Oct. 2026, from https://www-oxfordartonline-

[vii] See endnote iv above.

[viii] Listed in M. Kirby Talley, '"Small, usuall, and vulgar things": Still-life Painting in England 1635-1760', *The Walpole Society*, Vol. 49 (1983), p. 177.

[ix] I am grateful to Tim Schroder for his expertise in identifying the origins of the silver-gilt auricular cup.

[x] Biographical data taken from *Painting in Haarlem 1500-1850: The collection of the Frans Hals Museum,* 2006, pp. 278-279.