

Art Appreciation Group

February 2020. Report by Roger Stanyon

For the February meeting we looked at the first episode of the BBC documentary *The Story of Women and Art* presented by Professor Amanda Vickery. In this episode Professor Vickery took us on a journey from Renaissance Italy, to the glittering Spanish Court of Philip II and ending in the Golden Age of the Dutch Republic, during which she discovered a hidden world of female creativity.

Amanda starts in the Vasari Corridor in Florence named after Giorgio Vasari, famous for his biographies of Italian artists. The Corridor, which joins the Uffizi Gallery, is used to exhibit the museum's famous collection of self-portraits. In it there are 1700 artists' self-portraits, but only 7% of them are by women.

She examined the sculptor Properzia de' Rossi, according to her the first great artist of the Renaissance and who she said was too good for her competitors, who traduced her character and reputation and she died penniless and alone in a paupers' hospital.

Many women did not want to fight the male artists and found life within the church and lived in convents. Amanda goes to the Santa Maria Novella to see Sister Plautilla Nelli's *The Last Supper*, which is an enormous 7m x 2m oil-on-canvas. This showed that a woman could have the same artistic ambition and talent as a Leonardo da Vinci.

After the church the most influential patron of art was the Spanish Court of Philip II and Amanda featured Sofonisba Anguissola, who became the first ever female court artist, but because she was a women she was not allowed to use the 'court artist' title and became 'lady-in-waiting'.

However could a woman be an independent artist in the Renaissance? So Amanda then discussed Lavinia Fontana who relied on commissions for her income and raised eleven children, and Artemisia Gentileschi who worked in the dramatic style of Caravaggio and specialized in scenes of female heroines, after having been raped when she was 17.

We were then taken to the Dutch Republic, where the Protestant Reformation created a very different artistic landscape and we were introduced to artist Clara Peeters, who specialized in still-life paintings with food, and the paper cutter Joanna Koerten, and who had a work

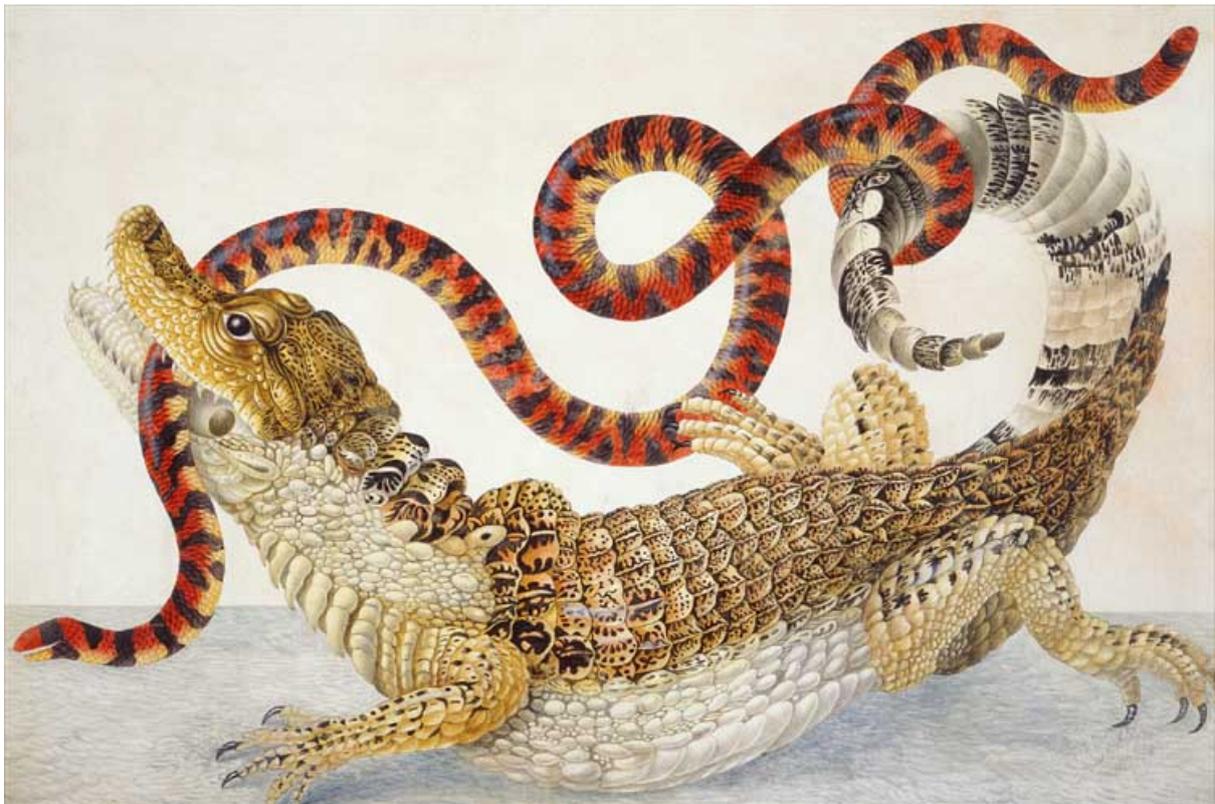
which outsold Rembrandt, and Judith Leyster who depicted domestic genre scenes.

Amanda finally discussed the German-born artist and naturalist Maria Sibylla Merian, who sailed with her daughter 5,000 miles from the Netherlands to Dutch Surinam in South America, to study the indigenous plants and insects in their tropical habitat.

After coffee we watched Dr. Francesca Whitlum-Cooper, the Myojin-Nadar Associate Curator of Paintings 1600-1800, discuss *The Adoration of the Golden Calf*, painted by the French Baroque artist Nicolas Poussin, between 1633 and 1634. It depicts the adoration of the golden calf by the Israelites, from Chapter 32 of the Book of Exodus. This was one of The National Gallery 'Talks for All' series.

Roger Stanyon

01833 631758 rogerwstanyon@gmail.com



Spectacled Caiman and a False Coral Snake by Maria Sibylla Merian. Circa 1701-1705. Windsor Castle