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# Michaelina Wautier - Rediscovering a Baroque Master

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The world famous Kunsthistorisches Museum of Vienna unveiled one of the most compelling art-historical exhibitions of recent years about the Flemish painter Michaelina Wautier which offers an unprecedented opportunity to encounter the work of a seventeenth-century artist whose talent once rivalled that of her celebrated contemporaries but whose name has long languished in obscurity.

Michaelina Wautier (c. 1614–1689), a Flemish painter active primarily in Brussels, emerges from the shadows of art history as one of the most fascinating and intellectually ambitious artists of the Baroque era. At a time when women were largely confined to still life and portraiture, Wautier boldly embraced history painting, mythological narrative, religious scenes, and large-scale compositions — genres traditionally dominated by men.

The Vienna exhibition, developed in collaboration with the Royal Academy of Arts, London, brings together nearly the entirety of her known oeuvre — approximately 29 paintings, along with drawings and prints — offering viewers a rare chance to appreciate both her technical virtuosity and stylistic range. Among the works on display are masterpieces such as The Triumph of Bacchus, a monumental mythological composition that vividly demonstrates Wautier’s command of complex figural arrangements and her bold engagement with the male body — a subject rarely undertaken by women of her time.

From the intimate precision of her portraits to the grandeur of her narrative scenes, Wautier’s work reveals a keen intellectual curiosity and an artist unafraid to transcend the conventions imposed upon her gender. The exhibition’s curators have placed her paintings in dialogue with those of Peter Paul Rubens and Anthony van Dyck, emphasizing that her artistic ambition and execution deserve recognition alongside these canonical figures.

What makes this exhibition particularly significant is not merely the assembly of works, but the context it provides for understanding Wautier’s artistic identity in an age marked by rigid social hierarchies and gendered expectations. Born likely in Mons and later active in Brussels, her biography remains fragmentary, with little archival documentation surviving. Yet it is through her paintings — including religious altarpieces, allegorical series, and finely observed portraits — that her voice resonates most emphatically.

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The Michaelina Wautier, Painter exhibition also foregrounds the rediscovery of her art: for centuries, her paintings were misattributed to male artists or to her brother Charles, a fellow painter. Only in recent decades has art historical scholarship restored her authorship and reassessed her contribution to the Baroque canon. This Viennese presentation, following earlier retrospectives such as the 2018 Antwerp show, marks a pivotal moment in the long overdue recognition of Wautier's oeuvre.

Visitors to the Kunsthistorisches Museum during this period are invited not only to admire the extraordinary technical achievement of Wautier's paintings but also to reconsider the narratives of artistic genius and artistic history. By placing her work at the centre of scholarly and public attention, the exhibition helps reshape our understanding of the Baroque and affirms Michaelina Wautier as an artist of enduring importance.

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