

Three paintings by Francesco Noletti at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum

Keith Sciberras

Analytical and stylistic study for an approach to his technique

José Luis Merino Gorospe



**BILBOKO ARTE
EDERREN MUSEOA
MUSEO DE BELLAS
ARTES DE BILBAO**

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Celebrated by Joshua Reynolds, Francesco *Maltese*, painter of “vases, instruments, carpets, still-lives” is one of the most enigmatic figures of mid-seventeenth-century still-life painting in Rome. Held by many to be a pivotal figure in the genre of the “carpet still-life”, his real identity was incongruously concealed for centuries behind the generic nickname of *il Maltese* (pointing to Malta as his country of origin) or, even worse, the fabricated appellative Fieravino. The riddle of his true identity has now been solved and Francesco *Maltese* emerges as Francesco Noletti (c.1611-1654)¹, an artist who died in his early forties as “a celebrated painter”² in Rome. By the late 1640s, his status as a major still-life painter was unquestioned, painting for the echelon of Roman society and collaborating with famous history painters. Ironically, however, his real surname soon fell into oblivion and this eventually led to chaos over his autograph works.

The corpus of paintings attributed to the artist was one which needed both correction and direction, precisely because of the large number of still-life paintings with carpets that had been invariably assigned to him. The antiquarian market, more than anything else, had conveniently widened the umbrella so much that works by a number of different artists (albeit unknown) were indiscriminately assigned to the artist whom they called Fieravino.

Research on Francesco Noletti is still in its initial stages but ground breaking details on the artist are emerging and research is at present being conducted on his oeuvre, biography and patrons³. Still-life paintings representing carpets and precious objects have been studied and sifted and a small oeuvre of some thirty pictures of coherent stylistic, technical, compositional and tactile qualities have been assigned to the artist.

1 Sciberras 2004, p. 357-370.

2 For biographical references see *ibid.*, pp. 360-363.

3 Extensive research is being undertaken by Keith Sciberras, whilst the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum has launched a campaign of scientific analyses of his work. See Trastulli 2008, pp. 693-704.



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1. Francesco Noletti "il Maltese" (c. 1611-1654)
Still Life with a Silver Ewer, a Turkish Carpet and a Painting of the Holy Family, c. 1650
Oil on canvas, 124 x 173.6 cm
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Inv. no. 69/194



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2. Francesco Noletti "il Maltese" (c. 1611-1654)
Still Life with Fruit, a Turkish Carpet and a Book, c. 1650
Oil on canvas, 74.5 x 98.8 cm
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Inv. no. 69/195



3. Francesco Noletti "il Maltese" (c. 1611-1654)
Still Life with a Turkish Carpet and a Putto Holding a Garland of Fruit, c. 1650
 Oil on canvas, 124 x 173.5 cm
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
 Inv. no. 69/381

Of these, none included figurative work, even though Noletti is recorded to have been active in such work. At least one picture is recorded (as early as 1662) to have been painted in collaboration with Andrea Sacchi⁴. Indeed, collaboration with Sacchi stands testimony of Noletti's stature in the Roman art world. The paintings attributed to Noletti share in common the objects that are represented and the impression given is that the artist used the same objects and props for different works. Turkish carpets, richly embroidered cloths and pillows, fresh and candied fruit, flowers, ewers and vases, musical instruments, and armour make up the range of objects utilised in his work.

Three paintings from the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum representing a *Still Life with a Silver Ewer, a Turkish Carpet and a Painting of the Holy Family* [fig. 1]⁵, a *Still Life with Fruit, a Turkish Carpet and a Book* [fig. 2], and a *Still Life with a Turkish Carpet and a Putto Holding a Garland of Fruit* [fig. 3] are here being added to this oeuvre⁶. Diagnostic and technical studies undertaken during the recent conservation programme on the works have unequivocally shown that they are the work of the same hand⁷. They were executed in Rome and should date to c. 1650.

4 Getty Provenance Index, Item 0004b from Archival Document I-1859 (Costaguti Vidman), Contessa Anna Maria Costaguti Vidman, 15 September 1662, Palazzo di Rione Campitelli, Rome: *Due quadri grandi compagni, in uno de quali vi è una donna con diversi putti fatto da Mario de fiori, nell'altro un moro, et un tappeto fatto da Andrea Sacchi, e dal Maltese, ambedue cornice d'oro intagliata.*

5 Full-title: *Still Life with a Silver Ewer, a Turkish Carpet, Flowers, Frosted Fruit, a Painting of the Holy Family and Embroidered Cloths.*

6 Thanks are due to Dr Gabriele Finaldi for pointing out these works and to Dr Ana Sanchez-Lassa for facilitating research and their study. Thanks are also due to Ulisse and Gianluca Bocchi for their decisive share in the pioneering work on the artist.

7 Thanks are due to Dr José Luis Merino, Head of the Restoration Department of the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, for sharing his technical expertise.

The three paintings entered the collection of the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum through two separate donations during the 1920s and the 1930s. The two larger pictures were initially deposited at the Museum in 1925 by Antonio Plasencia (Santander, 1845-Bilbao, 1936), who subsequently formally donated them to it in 1935. Antonio Plasencia was a renowned collector and an important donor to the Museum. The smaller work entered the collection in 1927 through a donation of Laureano de Jado (Munguía, 1843-Bilbao, 1926), a leading collector and benefactor who left his entire collection to the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum at his death in 1926. Unfortunately, the works' early provenance is not known. It is obvious, however, that these paintings were executed for the higher strata of society, whose opulence and richness they reflect in the artist's specific choice of objects that animate this particular genre of still-life. This is, indeed, also confirmed by the frequent presence of the artist's work in inventories of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries⁸.

The three paintings at Bilbao were considered to be of Spanish extraction and were initially attributed to Antonio de Pereda. This attribution was revised in the late twentieth century. The first to strongly disassociate them from Pereda was Pérez Sánchez who considered them to be Italian. In 1984, he further attributed them to *il Maltese*, an attribution which was later supported by Juan J. Luna (1989) and Ana Sánchez-Lassa (2003)⁹.

A prolific and fashionable artist, Francesco Noletti attracted the attention of biographers and writers, but none of these had really bothered to record his surname and preferred to call him simply as Francesco *Maltese* or *il Maltese*; his biographical dates were also glossed over. In 1661, the Flemish biographer Cornelis de Bie noted "Francesco Malthese Tapijt-Schilder von Malta" (Francesco *Maltese*, native of Malta, specialist in pictures with carpets)¹⁰, whilst the German artist and writer Joachim Von Sandrart similarly described him as "Maltese: tapetum pictor. Immotis tum pariter celebris erat presertim in pingendis veils naturam ipsam fere attingebat"¹¹ in 1683. In 1666, André Félibien recorded two painters, "Fioravante et le Maltois en estime par les tapis et les instruments de musique, les vases et les autres choses"¹². *Il Maltese* did not pass unnoticed in inventories and a number of them, even as early as 1659¹³, record his work. In 1703-04, two paintings by *Le Maltois* in the Boyer D'Aguilles collection were engraved and published by Jacobus Coelemans. These eau-fortes, entitled *Quaedam Sensuum Instrumenta* [fig. 4] and *Omnis Salus in Ferro Est* [fig. 5]¹⁴, form the basis for stylistic attributions to the artist.

8 The inventories published in Sciberras 2005 are sufficient proof of this. Furthermore, Cardinal Federico Cornaro bought paintings from Noletti in 1651. See Barcham 2001, p. 362. Reference in documents in Banca di Roma, Archivio Storico, Fondo Banco di Santo Spirito, *Libri mastri dei depositi e dei depositi senza cedole, 1606-1689*: Libro Mastro 1651, carte 323 and 541. I thank Professor Barcham for this reference.

9 Thanks are due to Ana Sánchez-Lassa, Curator of the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, for the following literature: For *Still Life with a Turkish Carpet and a Putto Holding a Garland of Fruit* (inv. no. 69/381), see Bilbao 1904, p. 7, no. 8, "Bodegón (Frutas)," attributed to Peter Boel (?); *Catálogo de las obras...* 1932, p. 26, "Antonio Pereda, Bodegón de frutas con un ángel"; Gaya Nuño 1955, p. 164, "Bodegón de frutas sobre manta popular. Antonio Pereda"; Lasterra 1969, p. 154, no. 381, "Anónimo napolitano siglo XVIII [...] Bodegón de frutas con un ángel". Torres Martín 1971, p. 78, "Bodegón con tapiz y frutas"; Angulo/Pérez Sánchez 1983, pp. 223-224, "Bodegón de frutas con un ángel", attributed to *il Maltese*. For *Still Life with a Silver Ewer, a Turkish Carpet and a Painting of the Holy Family* (inv. no. 69/194), see Bilbao 1904, no. 9, p. 7, "Bodegón (Telas)", attributed to Peter Boel (?); *Catálogo de las obras...* 1932, no. 74, p. 27, "Antonio Pereda [...] Bodegón con flores, tapiz, etc."; Gaya Nuño 1955, p. 164, "Antonio de Pereda [...] Bodegón de frutas sobre manta popular"; Lasterra 1969, p. 90, no. 194, "Bodegón con flores y tapices [...] Antonio de Pereda"; Torres Martín 1971, p. 162, pl. 62, "Bodegón con telas y cuadro [...] Antonio Pereda y Salgado"; Bengoechea 1978, p. 173, "Antonio de Pereda"; Angulo/Pérez Sánchez 1983, p. 223, "Bodegón de flores y tapices [...] muy próximo a Fieravino *il Maltese*"; Madrid 1989, pp. 68-69, no. 18, "Francesco Fieravino *il Maltese*"; Ana Sánchez-Lassa in Genoa 2003, pp. 92-93, no. 10, "Natura morta con fiori, tappeti e un quadro. Francesco Fieravino, detto *Il Maltese*". For *Still Life with Fruit, a Turkish Carpet and a Book* (inv. no. 69/195), see *Catálogo de las obras...* 1932, p. 62, no. 272, "Bodegón, frutas y tapiz [...] anónimo de escuela española siglo XVII"; Gaya Nuño 1955, p. 164; Lasterra 1969, p. 90, no. 195, "Bodegón con frutas y tapiz. Antonio de Pereda"; Torres Martín 1971, p. 163, pl. 63, "Bodegón con frutas, telas y libro [...] Antonio Pereda y Salgado"; Bengoechea 1978, p. 174, "Antonio de Pereda"; Angulo/Pérez Sánchez 1983, p. 223, "Bodegón de frutas y tapiz [...] Fieravino *il Maltese*".

10 Sciberras 2005, p. 358; Bie 1662 (reprint 1971), p. 282; Laureati 1989, p. 768.

11 Sandrart 1683, p. 191.

12 Félibien 1666-1668 (1705), vol. IV, p. 142.

13 Sciberras 2004, pp. 358-359.

14 *Quaedam Sensuum Instrumenta*, le Maltois pinxit, I. Coelemans Sculpsit 1704, Eau-forte; *Omnis Salus in Ferro Est*, Le Maltois pinxit, I. Coelemans sculpsit 1703, Eau-forte; Mariette 1744; first published by Salerno 1984, p. 184.



4. Jacobus Coelemans (1654-1735)
Quaedam Sensuum Instrumenta, 1703-1704
 Engraving after Francesco Noletti
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



5. Jacobus Coelemans (1654-1735)
Omnis Salus in Ferro Est, 1703-1704
 Engraving after Francesco Noletti
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

In the second half of the eighteenth century, *il Maltese* also attracted the attention of other biographers and writers, including Pellegrino Orlandi, Matthew Pilkington and Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792). Once again, however, very little information emerged about him. Orlandi (ed. 1776) listed the artist as Francesco Maltese, Pilkington (1798) as *il Maltese*¹⁵, whilst Joshua Reynolds noted the artist simply as “*Il Maltese (vases, instruments, carpets, still-lifes)*” in his *Chronological List of Modern Painters*¹⁶.

The origin of the nickname or presumed surname Fieravino is a matter of concern, particularly because it significantly corrupted the artist’s identity and handicapped archival research on him. It should be made clear that there is no contemporary document that specifically refers to the artist as Francesco Fieravino and that any effort to find archival references for Fieravino always proved fruitless; it has only recently been clearly established that the surname was coined in the late eighteenth century, evidently following a mix-up with the then equally mysterious Benedetto Fioravanti¹⁷. The earliest known reference to Fieravino, or actually “Fieravins dit le Maltais”, is recorded in a catalogue inventory for the sale of the collection of the Prince de Conti (Paris) published in 1777 by Pierre Remy. This inventory listed no less than eight still-life paintings by

15 Orlandi 1704 (1776); Pilkington 1798; Laureati 1989, p. 768.

16 Beechey 1855, vol. II, p. 454.

17 Salerno 1984, p. 182; Laureati 1989, p. 768.



6. Anonymous
 Portrait of Francesco Noletti, early 18th century
 Oil on canvas, 77 x 67.5 cm
 Old University Building, Valletta

“Fieravens”¹⁸. It must be emphasized that the word Fieravino¹⁹, an italianised version of *Fieravens*, was not picked up immediately after this Parisian sale and that in England and Italy, especially, the artist continued to be referred to as “il Maltese”. The twentieth century, however, saw Fieravino being consolidated and made widespread.

The biography of Francesco Noletti is slowly emerging. Son of Vincenzo, his date of birth seems that to have been around the early 1610s. His early training in Malta is unknown but by 1640 he was certainly in Rome active as a practicing artist. In all probability, he had arrived in the city in the 1630s; his movements there are slowly being charted²⁰. By 1648, he resided within the parish of Santa Maria del Popolo, having also married a certain Giovanna, with whom he had at least two children. In 1652, as an established artist and called Francesco *Maltese*, he participated in a meeting of the *Virtuosi al Pantheon*. Unfortunately, Noletti died prematurely in Rome on 4 December 1654, thus cutting short what promised to be a notable career.

18 Remy 1777. For Remy see Marandet 2003. In 1793, another still-life with a carpet, attributed to “Fieravens”, was on sale at Vincent Donjeux in Paris. Getty Provenance Index Databases, Lot 0422[c] from Sale Catalog F-A2066: “*et un tapis, par Fieravens*”. Certainly not isolated examples, it thus seems that the surnamed emerged through the antiquarian market in Paris.

19 Thieme/Becker 1907-1950, vol. 11. The scholarly reputation of Thieme-Becker assured that the mistaken identity of Francesco Maltese as Francesco Fieravino passed without much controversy, at least until the 1980s.

20 For biographical references see Sciberras 2005, pp. 360-363 and Trastulli 2008.

His death register gives his age as 43 and, significantly, the parish priest registered him as “a celebrated painter”, thus confirming his status in the art world²¹.

Francesco Noletti is represented in an important but mediocre posthumous portrait painting now in the collection of the University of Malta [fig. 6]²². Painted in half-length, the artist is shown as a well dressed middle-aged man with long hair and moustache, even though it is not actually clear whether this portrait bears true resemblance to the artist. He holds a brush in one hand, a palette with the other and, importantly, he is accompanied by a painting set up on an easel. Even though not much is legible because of its abraded state, this inset painting shows a typical still-life of the artist. At bottom is a lengthy inscription which identifies the artist and provides a biographical outline of his achievements²³.

The three paintings at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum are significant in that they are pictures of unparalleled beauty and rank amongst the best works attributed to the artist. They belong to his typical compositional format with the objects arranged horizontally next to each other and with the voluminous folds of a carpet occupying the lower half of the composition. This expanse of carpet gave the artist an opportunity to indulge in *virtuoso* tactile effects through the use of thick impasto.

The *Still Life with a Turkish Carpet and a Putto Holding a Garland of Fruit* [fig. 3] is especially exciting and fundamentally important because of the insertion of a winged putto holding a garland across the width of the painting [fig. 7]. This is the first known picture incorporating a figure that can be safely inserted in his oeuvre. It is not clear, however, whether this putto, set in flight in beautiful foreshortening at upper left, is actually the work of Noletti or, as seems probable, the work of another artist. This is given greater credit when considering the documented reference to his collaborative work with Andrea Sacchi, as mentioned above; the putto in this picture is not the work of Sacchi.

The painting shows the still-life arrangement set on a rocky ledge, with the objects emerging in strong tonal contrast out of a dark background [fig. 8]. Depth is thus restricted to the strongly modelled frontal plane, with the dark void suggesting a natural landscape context. Pomegranates and lemons are arranged on a Turkish carpet at left to counteract other pomegranates, figs, and grapes that fall out of a wicker basket and surround a copper pot on the other side. Their naturalistic rendering is exquisite and the artist tastefully differentiates the many representations of the same fruit through confident and spirited brushwork. The Turkish carpet is a fine specimen, having a large central field with an all-over pattern of stylised floral designs against a blue ground. Its border is wide and has complex motifs in blue, red and white grounds framed by thinner guard strips of geometric design. An element of undeniable charm is introduced by the putto who lifts the red ribbon end of a garland of flowers and fruit. The garland has an assortment of apples, grapes, figs, pears and berries, whilst red chilli pepper also makes an exotic appearance. The “open-air” naturalistic setting and the treatment of the fruit emerging in strong tonal contrast is particularly close to his *Still Life*

21 His death register is as follows: 1654, 4 dicembre - Francesco Noletti, maltese, pittore celebre, di circa 43 anni, morto ieri nella sua casa in Via Laurina, in questa parrocchia, e sepolto in questa chiesa. Fu confessato da me fr. Girolamo Nicoli, romano, curato, e ricevette il ss. Viatico, con mia licenza, da p. Nicola Maria (.) da Lucca, confessore di questo convento. Archivio Storico del Vicariato di Roma, S. Maria del Popolo, Defunti 1649-1663, f. 134v. According to the inscription on the portrait in Malta [fig. 6], Noletti died during the pontificate of Alexander VII.

22 The collection of c. 140 portraits was inherited by the Jesuit College around 1740 from the *Chaplain of Obedience Fra Giuseppe Zammit, who had himself composed a eulogy in Latin for each portrait. The collection remained in the premises of the Jesuit College, now part of the Old University of Malta.*

23 “Franciscus Noletti Melitensis. Hic magis ex sese, quam ex suis maioribus cognitus. Pictor celeberrimus. Et non unus ex multis sed inter multos admodum singularis d[i]leandi artificio quamplurimis facile princeps qui una essent aetate. Puer in describendis insignium in hac arte virorum divinis prope operibus multum temporis, studiique collocauerat quo fiebat, ut eius coloratae tabulae conducerentur a pluribus in italiam. Ac Romam praesertim, ubi mirae artis multae cernun ur mecenatem suum habuit equitem Frem Petrum Cesarinum Hieros.ni Ordinis Commendatarium. Floruit Romae sub Alexandro VII summo pontefice ubi intempestiva morte e vita sublatus est.” Significantly it identifies the artist’s patron as the knight Fra Pietro Cesarini and places his death during the papacy of Alexander VII.



7. Francesco Noletti "il Maltese" (c. 1611-1654)
Still Life with a Turkish Carpet and a Putto Holding a Garland of Fruit, c. 1650
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
 Detail

8. Francesco Noletti "il Maltese" (c. 1611-1654)
Still Life with a Turkish Carpet and a Putto Holding a Garland of Fruit, c. 1650
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
 Detail

with a Turkish Carpet, Fruit and a Violin [fig. 9] and to another *Still Life with a Turkish Carpet and Fruit* [fig. 10]²⁴; the latter has, more or less, the same dimensions.

X-ray studies and scientific tests conducted by the Conservation and Restoration Department at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum during its recent restoration campaign show a significant *pentimento* and reveal a young bare-shouldered woman²⁵ placed at the centre of the composition and looking out towards the spectators (see fig. 4 in José Luis Merino Gorospe's essay). This figure is covered by the fruit that make up the garland. The impression given is that, rather than a working modification of this work's composition, the artist chose to significantly alter the painting and thus paint over an earlier work. Comparison with the X-ray is difficult but, stylistically, compositions with bare-shouldered women placed around still-life arrangements were very popular in mid-seventeenth century Rome. Significantly, this x-ray showed that the artist also painted in this "genre".

The painting, with its open landscape context and natural objects complements the context of rich man-made objects set within an interior of the *Still Life with a Silver Ewer, a Turkish Carpet and a Painting of the Holy Family* [fig. 1]. This thematic contrast, the similar size and format, and the use of the same Turkish carpet suggest that the two paintings were originally pendants or companion pictures.

The *Still Life with a Silver Ewer, a Turkish Carpet and a Painting of the Holy Family* is another ostentatious and spectacular work which, in both invention and handling of pigment, shows the qualities of sumptuousness that made Noletti one of the most famous painters of the genre. Set against a tapestry background revealed through an open curtain, a platter of frosted fruit, a vase with flowers and an embroidered cloth are arranged on a table top covered by a large Turkish carpet [fig. 11]. The table top cuts the composition horizontally in two, whilst the carpet falls to reveal its intricate pattern and dominate the picture. This is the same carpet painted in its companion picture.

²⁴ See Bocchi/Bocchi 2004, pl. FN.18, FN.19.

²⁵ See José Luis Merino's study right after this text.



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9. Francesco Noletti "il Maltesse" (c. 1611-1654)
Still Life with a Turkish Carpet, Fruit and a Violin, c. 1650
Oil on canvas, 107 x 157 cm
Musée Fesch, Ajaccio
Inv. no. MFA8521179



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10. Francesco Noletti "il Maltesse" (c. 1611-1654)
Still Life with a Turkish Carpet and Fruit
Oil on canvas, 123 x 171 cm
Musée de Grenoble
Inv. no. MG 19



11. Francesco Noletti "il Maltese" (c. 1611-1654)
Still Life with a Silver Ewer, a Turkish Carpet and a Painting of the Holy Family, c. 1650
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
 Detail



12. Francesco Noletti "il Maltese" (c. 1611-1654)
Still Life with a Silver Ewer, a Turkish Carpet and a Painting of the Holy Family, c. 1650
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
 Detail

A small painting of the Holy Family in a gilt frame [fig. 12], beautifully rendered in thick impasto, is arranged obliquely at the right, whilst a silver ewer is placed in front of it. The painting has a blond light that radiates through the gilt frame of the Holy Family painting, the gold trimmings of the drapery, the gilt flower vase, and the texture of the frosted fruit. This finds parallel chromatic richness in the carpet pattern, the embroidered cloth, and the bellowing curtain. It is difficult not to reiterate that this painting was intended for a niche Roman market, with the choice of objects displaying both refinement and ostentation in taste. The painting of the Holy Family represented within the picture is of typical mid-seventeenth century Roman extraction, as also is its intricately carved frame with a double line of scallop shell motifs. The ewer is similarly a fine example of seventeenth century craftsmanship. The artist supplied the market with other similar works, such as the *Still Life with a Turkish Carpet, Gloves, Armour and a Gilt Ewer* (Private Collection) and the smaller *Still Life with a Turkish Carpet and a Silver Ewer* (Musée Départemental de l'Oise, Beauvais)²⁶. These are all paintings that conform to this particular genre of still-life, with a reading that does not convey moral lessons or hide allegories, symbolical interpretations, and complicated iconographies.

The very same carpet (with the same pattern and weave) portrayed in the two Bilbao pictures discussed above reappears in other paintings attributed to Noletti, including the magnificent *Still Life with a Turkish Carpet and Frosted Fruit* (Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg) and the *Still Life with a Turkish Carpet, Flowers, Fruit and Frosted Fruit* (Collezione Molinari Pradelli, Bologna)²⁷, both of which also have the sugared/frosted fruit typical of the artist. The same carpet is, moreover, shown in the Coelemans' engraving *Omnis Salus in Ferro Est*, which forms the basis for stylistic attributions to *il Maltese*. The combination of a Turkish

26 Bocchi/Bocchi 2004, pl. FN.5, FN.24.

27 Ibid., pl. FN.6, FN.12.



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13. Francesco Noletti "il Maltese" (c. 1611-1654)
Still Life with a Turkish Carpet, Fruit, Frosted Fruit, Glass Vessels and Embroidered Cloth, c. 1650
Oil on canvas, 107 x 157 cm
Musée Fesch, Ajaccio
Inv. no. MFA8521475



14. Francesco Noletti "il Maltese" (c. 1611-1654)
Still Life with Fruit, a Turkish Carpet and a Book, 17th century
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
 Detail

carpet with the richly embroidered vermillion red cloth is used in other pictures, namely *Still Life with a Turkish Carpet, a Ewer, Frosted Fruit and Embroidered Cloths* (formerly at Finarte, Milan) and *Still Life with a Turkish Carpet, Fruit, Frosted Fruit, Glass Vessels and Embroidered Cloth* [fig. 13]²⁸. The silver ewer also appears, with variations, in many of his pictures.

Smaller in size and unpretentious in composition, the third picture, a *Still Life with Fruit, a Turkish Carpet and a Book* [fig. 2] does not seem to originate from the same set. Arranged horizontally in thick folds, a Turkish carpet spreads out on a ledge that reveals the voluted end of an Ionic capital. The composition (and folds) moves from right to left, with a thick closed book and fruit falling out of a copper platter forming the simple but effective still-life [fig. 14]. Light illuminates the objects strongly from the left, picking the apples brightly and modelling the arrangement out of its dark context. The brown ground is ably used as a middle tone in the execution of the pears and the background, whilst the carpet threads and strands are thickly rendered to achieve greater texture. An inscription on the spine of the book is unfortunately no longer legible. The use of architectural elements, such as the antique capital, recurs in other compositions; an example is in the small but delightful *Still Life with a Turkish Carpet, Lemons and a Violin* [fig. 15].

This carpet, which is different from the one portrayed in the two other Bilbao pictures, reappears in other paintings attributed to Noletti, namely the *Still Life with a Turkish Carpet, Armour, a Ewer and Fruit* (Strossmayerova Galerija, Zagreb) and the *Still Life with a Turkish Carpet and Lemons* [fig. 16], together with others. The two carpets painted in the Bilbao works are, essentially, the ones that appear in most of the artist's works; they were probably a permanent reference his studio. A third carpet features in other pictures, including a newly attributed *Still Life with a Carpet, Flowers, Fruit and Dead Game* [fig. 17]. A previously unpublished *Still Life with a Pillow and Frosted Fruit* [fig. 18] is the only painting without the ubiquitous Turkish carpets that can be attributed to Noletti²⁹.

28 Ibid., pl. FN.8, FN.15. The painting at the Musée Fesch at Ajaccio forms part of a set of three works. These were attributed to Pier Francesco Cittadini, an attribution which however should be directed towards *il Maltese*.

29 The presence of bees in the richly embroidered pillow suggests a Barberini provenance.



15. Francesco Noletti "il Maltesse" (c. 1611-1654)
Still Life with a Turkish Carpet, Lemons and a Violin, c. 1650
Oil on canvas, 72 x 93 cm
Musée du Louvre, Paris
Inv. no. MI891



16. Francesco Noletti "il Maltesse" (c. 1611-1654)
Still Life with a Turkish Carpet and Lemons
Oil on canvas, 120 x 172 cm
Musée des beaux-arts, Nancy, France
Inv. no. 52.4.3



17. Francesco Noletti "il Maltesse" (c. 1611-1654)
Still Life with a Carpet, Flowers, Fruit and Dead Game
Oil on canvas, 98 x 148cm
Private collection, Malta



18. Francesco Noletti "il Maltesse" (c. 1611-1654)
Still Life with a Pillow and Frosted Fruit
Oil on canvas, 73 x 100 cm
Private collection, Malta

X-ray studies have also revealed a *pentimento* in the work *Still Life with Fruit, a Turkish Carpet and a Book* (see fig. 2 in José Luis Merino Gorospe's essay)³⁰. A metallic plate, or a piece of armour, was originally placed at the centre of the composition in the area beneath the book. Once again, it is difficult to gauge exactly how the work changed, but in the end the artist opted for a simpler composition.

A decade of intensive research on Francesco Noletti is finally reaping its fruit and charting out both the life and works of the artist within the complex story of the fascinating genre of Roman Baroque still-life with carpets, of which he was a pioneer. The three paintings at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum are a major addition to this oeuvre and their art-historical recovery, conservation and diagnostic studies provide data which is fundamental for any future study on the artist.

³⁰ See José Luis Merino Gorospe's study right after this text.

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Analytical and stylistic study for an approach to his technique

José Luis Merino Gorospe

This essay provides a scientific approach to the technique of Francesco Noletti, called “il Maltese”, through the three works attributed to him in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum. Although we looked for common technical features as regards specific media and the way they were used, we were also on the lookout for potential differences. Ultimately, the idea was to define the artist’s *modus operandi*.

Our research involved a standard bibliographical and documentary search, direct consultation with museums, galleries and collections owning works attributed to the artist and an analysis of the constituent elements of the three paintings in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum. The first two initiatives proved fruitless, as research on the artist is still in its infancy. The complete lack of response, at least at the time of writing, from public institutions and collections contacted, clearly suggests there are no technical studies available on Noletti’s oeuvre¹. The physical history of works of art, their changing fortunes and owners, usually provides major clues for correct attribution; by following a work’s trail over time we can sometimes trace it back to its origins. However, in this case archive data is scarce; we only know the name of the last owner and the date they became part of the Museum collection. Most of the restorations performed on the three works (it is very rare to find old paintings that have come down to us today in their strictly original state) date from before their acquisition by the Museum collection, at a time when restorers did not leave a record of each individual action performed on a particular artwork.

¹ Works attributed to Noletti or possible disciples are distributed widely in European museums and private collections; this can be easily confirmed by surfing briefly on the Internet. We requested technical information on Noletti from a good number of public collections, including the Strossmayerova Galerija in Zagreb, the Musée Fesch, Ajaccio, the Louvre and the Hermitage.

But the physical and chemical analysis of its components provides some very revealing information and we are confident the pioneering work discussed here will be useful in later research. Using the technical documentation obtained, we also attempted to define the patterns that help to profile Noletti's artistic personality, to delimit and classify the work attributed to him and, in the last instance, to map out a chronology of his technical development. The X-rays made of all three works² provided some of the most unexpected results. Constituent parts such as supports, ground layers and imprimaturas and the actual paint layer were all subjected to physical and chemical analysis. Binders, pigments and priming materials were also distinguished³. Other techniques, such as inspection with ultraviolet light, were useful for studying surface layers, while macrophotography suggested several ideas on brushwork.

To avoid confusion, in this essay we abbreviated the rather long titles given to these works today. In this work *Still Life with a Turkish Carpet and a Putto Holding a Garland of Fruit* (inv. no. 69/381) is referred to throughout simply as *Still Life with Angel*; *Still Life with a Silver Ewer, a Turkish Carpet and a Painting of the Holy Family* (inv. no. 69/194) as *Still Life with Painting*, and *Still Life with Fruit, a Turkish Carpet and a Book* (inv. no. 69/195) as *Still Life with Book*. The first two measure approximately 124 x 173.5 centimetres each, which suggests, as Sciberras notes in his essay, that they may have been a pair. Besides the measures, several similarities of technique are readily appreciable, particularly in comparison to the last, smaller one, which measures 74.5 x 98.8 centimetres. The oblong format is habitual in Noletti's output, at least in the works attributed to him until now.

Another issue that required further attention was whether the three recently restored paintings at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum had been worked on previously to any extent. There is a note in the museum archives issued in April 1957 by restorer Luis de Arbaiza⁴ in which, among other works, "two paintings by Pereda" are budgeted, Pereda being the artist to whom the two large still-life paintings were attributed at the time. Without going into detail, we can say that the technical peculiarities of the restoration measures in these differ from what we detected in the smallest of the three. All the paintings have been relined with a watery, Italian-style animal glue⁵. The two large still-lives are mounted on their stretchers —replaced in previous treatments— in such a way as to increase the original measurements between one and two centimetres either side, the original canvas being hidden by stuccos and repainting the whole perimeter around⁶. The treatment of painted surfaces in the past (cleaning and reconstruction of losses from the actual paint layer) is also analogous in these two paintings. *Still Life with Book*, however, is in its original format and although it has been subjected to treatments of the same type, the restorations detectable on the paint surface differ as regards materials and style of execution from the other two paintings. The technical disparities in old restorations coincide with the different origin of *Still Life with Painting* and *Still Life with Angel*, donated by Antonio Plasencia in 1935, from *Still Life with Book*, left by Laureano de Jado in 1927, also reinforcing the idea that the physical history of the first two is different from the third's.

2 The work was carried out by SGS Tecnos S.A., Bilbao, on portable equipment and Agfa D4 X-rays plates at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum facilities under the technical supervision of the Museum's Conservation & Restoration Department.

3 Arte-Lab from Madrid performed the microsample inspection with incident-light and transmitted light optical microscope, selective stains and microchemical tests, fluorescence optical microscope, Fourier transformed infrared spectroscopy- universal attenuated total reflectance (FTIR-UATR) and gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS). Layer thicknesses were measured using a micrometric lens with a 10 X / 0.25 objective in the widest zone of the layer. Fibres were identified from their microscopic characteristics in longitudinal and transversal sections and by observing the central filamentis reaction to a copper-ammonia reagent.

4 At that time, the Conservation & Restoration Department had not yet been set up, and this kind of work was contracted out to external restorers.

5 Although there are a number of formulas, basically it comprises paste of flour and an animal glue of the sort known as "carpenter's glue", extracted from boiled animal bones, cartilages and skins. Other additives for this adhesive include ox gall, treacle and some kind of antifungal. Restretching with this kind of glue required, among other things, the whole thing to be hot ironed, often from the suitably protected paint layers. For this reason, the impasto in the works in question is slightly flattened.

6 In old restorations, this system freed up the edge originally used by the artist to nail the canvas to the stretcher, which was often also painted, to enlarge the painting.

All the analyses on which this essay is based were performed while the three paintings were being restored at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum Department of Restoration. The analyses make a very useful tool for evaluating damage accurately and deciding on the most appropriate treatments.

To begin with, we shall concentrate on the constituent elements of each work as gleaned from the analysis, starting with the supports. In all three cases, this is a hand loom-woven linen canvas and the X-rays revealed (the backs of the canvases are hidden by the lining fabrics) that they are all fabrics with taffeta-type ligatures and a density of 7 x 7 threads/cm², for the canvases used for *Still Life with Painting* and *Still Life with Angel*, and 13 x 9 threads/cm² for *Still Life with Book*. In short, logically enough, a relatively thick canvas was used for the larger paintings and a finer one for the smallest of the three. This one retains the original edges more or less intact on either side, making the waves shapes cause by tension in the fabric visible to the naked eye in these zones.⁷ In the other two canvases, the weft is very open, with a reticulated texture that in turn can be seen in the paint layer, leading in some areas, for instance in the glazed or frosted fruit of *Still Life with Painting*, to grid-shaped craquelures, an effect known as "paving." This kind of support was typical of Neapolitan painting, Naples being a place where enormous quantities of canvases for painting were produced⁸. As noted above, they lack visible borders; the X-rays reveals that the edges in both works are in a bad condition, with irregular limits, as if the canvas had disintegrated or been torn the whole perimeter round. This affects, for example, the toes of the angel's right foot. However, the X-rays also show the tension waves on all four sides of each canvas, leaving no doubt about the fact that both have retained the original format, and have not been cut off.

In all three cases, ground layers consist in a brown base mostly of iron oxide-rich earths, with the addition of calcium carbonate in varying, although generally low, proportions. Furthermore they are oily grounds, the binder being linseed oil. In some of the samples from *Still Life with Book* and *Still Life with Angel* a small proportion of red lead was also detected, undoubtedly added for its drying qualities. However, its presence in surface layers only, rather than in all of them suggests the additive was used unevenly. In short, the ground layers are the ones habitually found in seventeenth-century Italian painting, except for the individual taste of each artist or school as regards tonality⁹. The most interesting thing is that in *Still Life with Painting* and *Still Life with Angel* colophony, or rosin, was also detected, which points to an oleoresinous type of ground¹⁰. Although this particular additive for linseed oil as a binder is not rare, it is not found that often in European painting of the time¹¹. As the X-rays show [figs. 1, 2, 3 and 4], in all three works it is applied uniformly, which means no irregularities or spatula marks are appreciable. Only in *Still Life with Painting* do we observe a vertical mark with greater radiographic density that crosses the work on the left hand side. Rather than a defect in the ground layer, it is more likely to be due to some material on the back of the original canvas hidden by restretching. A ground imprimatura is only appreciable in *Still Life with Painting*, not in the other two. This layer comprises iron oxide-rich earths and small proportions of calcium carbonate, a red earth, bone black, shadow earth and white lead, the latter two probably added for their drying qualities [figs. 5, 6, 7 and 8]. This colour imprimatura is similar to the ground layer but slightly darker and reddish, and the artist leaves it on view in several zones as an intermediate tone for shading, a frequent practice in painting at this time.

7 A wave effect in the threads of the fabric produced by tensing it with strings on the stretcher frame. They are more accentuated on the perimeter of the canvas, gradually disappearing towards the interior.

8 On this issue, see Bruquetas 2002, pp. 272-273. For a typology of craquelure according to artistic schools, see Bucklow 2000.

9 In the 16th century, European painters began to apply coloured imprimatura on white plaster grounds, but they increasingly switched to coloured ones. Venetian artists preferred a greyish ground, but the most popular for the majority of 17th-century European schools were brown or reddish grounds. On this issue, see Maltese 1993, pp. 27 ff.

10 Rosin is the dry resin left after the distillation of the essence of turpentine from the raw resin from some conifers. See Mayer 1985, pp. 174-175.

11 See articles by Raymond White, Jennifer Pilc and Jo Kirby published under the general title "Analyses of Paint Media" (White/Pilc/Kirby 1993, 1995 and 1998).



1. Francesco Noletti "il Maltese" (c. 1611-1654)
Still Life with a Silver Ewer, a Turkish Carpet and a Painting of the Holy Family, c. 1650
 Oil on canvas, 124 x 173.6 cm
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
 Inv. no. 69/194
 X-ray

As was to be expected, linseed oil was used as binder in the paint layer. To get as accurate an understanding as possible of Noletti's palette, microsamples were taken of the greatest variety of colours. To begin with, we found a group of pigments common to the three paintings: white lead, calcium carbonate and plaster as transparent white pigments (always in a small proportion), lead-tin yellow, verdigris (copper acetate), natural ultramarine, vermillion, an organic red pigment based on an as yet unidentified colorant¹², more or less orangey earths rich in iron oxide and bone black. The two transparent white pigments, calcium carbonate and gesso, more habitually used as priming material in grounds, are associated in numerous samples with several mixtures of pigments. Their appearance here, always in small proportions, may suggest impurities (e.g. in the case of the ultramarine, it might be a residue left after the extraction of the pigment from lapis lazuli) or of some material added to adulterate the pigments, although given its presence in almost all the paint layers analyzed, we tend to the view that it is an additive used by the artist for its drying qualities, like the red lead in the ground of *Still Life with Book* and *Still Life with Angel*.

Other pigments do not coincide in all three works. These include the red earths [figs. 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10], lead-tin and antimony yellow, which appear only in the two larger paintings [figs. 11, 12 and 13]. *Still Life with Book* also contains Naples yellow (lead antimonate), used to paint a series of elements the artist eventually decided to hide [figs. 14 and 15], which means they can only be detected by X-rays. In any case,

12 The paint sample was not large enough to contain colorant in an amount sufficient to ensure accurate identification.

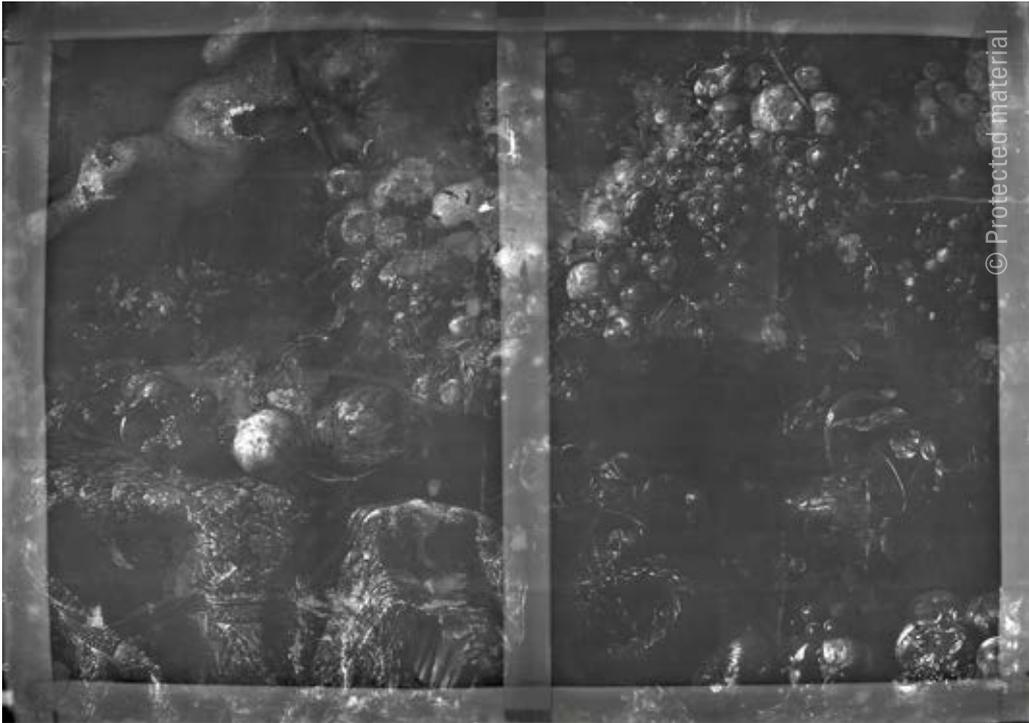


2. Francesco Noletti "il Maltese" (c. 1611-1654)
Still Life with Fruit, a Turkish Carpet and a Book, c. 1650
Oil on canvas, 74.5 x 98.8 cm
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Inv. no. 69/195
X-ray

the use of such a variety of yellows is striking, the simplest type, i.e. lead-tin yellow [figs. 5, 12, 13, 16 and 17], as mentioned above, being the common denominator in the three works¹³. Green earth is only found in *Still Life with Painting*, and in particular in the samples taken from the pitcher [fig. 7] and from the frosted fruit [fig. 11]. This repetition in two relatively disparate areas of colour suggests that it is not an isolated or one-off use in the work, although it is hardly what we might call a rare or unusual material. Contrariwise, we found Malachite green (a pigment known from ancient times although not frequently used) in the sample taken from one of the leaves in *Still Life with Book*, [fig. 16]. The Italian name for Malachite green was *verdeazzurro*, alluding not so much to the colour as to the fact that it often appears in nature associated with azurite¹⁴. Talking of blues, we were surprised by azurite, the most habitual of blue pigments, given its quality and reasonable price, not appearing in any of the samples of blues taken from all three works, which led us to deduce that ultramarine was used exclusively, a detail that makes the technical characteristics of these

13 Although these lead pigments had various names, the most generic term was *massicot*. Turquet de Mayerme refers to *massicot* in chapters 5 and 6 of his 1620 manuscript *Pictoria, Sculptoria & quae subaltermarum Artium*. See Faidutti/Versini 1974, pp. 14 and 18. In his late-sixteenth-century *Book of art*, Cennino Cennini mentions, for the first time, a *giallorino* or "yellowish colour" which, in Franco Brunellois view, would be an antimoniate of lead, obtained from lead minerals that included some impurities of antimony (see Cennini 1988, p. 75). On all these varieties of lead yellows, see *La fabbrica dei colori...* 1995, pp. 220 ff. Although less research has been done on the use of Naples yellow in the 17th century, lead yellows containing antimony have been found in Italian painting of this era, particularly in Roman painting, which is in line with the analysis of *Still Life with Book*. Sandalinas/Ruiz-Moreno 2004 is particularly interesting on this issue.

14 *La fabbrica dei colori...* 1995, pp. 265 ff.



3. Francesco Noletti "il Maltesse" (c. 1611-1654)
Still Life with a Turkish Carpet and a Putto Holding a Garland of Fruit, c. 1650
Oil on canvas, 124 x 173.5 cm
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Inv. no. 69/381
X-ray



4. Francesco Noletti "il Maltesse" (c. 1611-1654)
Still Life with a Turkish Carpet and a Putto Holding a Garland of Fruit, c. 1650
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Detail of x-ray in which the hidden female form in the background is clearly visible

paintings of particular interest. We found it in the samples taken from the carpets in all three [figs. 6, 9 and 18], where it is mixed in varying proportions with lead white to achieve a gradation of blues, being present even in the deep layers, suggesting liberal use. Something similar was found in the sample taken from a grape in *Still Life with Angel*, where the violet tone is achieved with a base of ultramarine mixed with white lead on which was applied a more or less transparent layer of violet, itself obtained by mixing vermilion, an organic red colorant, white lead and ultramarine [fig. 19]. We even found ultramarine in tones achieved with very complex mixtures of pigments, in which another, cheaper pigment could certainly have been used with similar results, as in, for instance, the pitcher [fig. 7] and in the gilt yellow of the frame in *Still Life with Painting* [fig. 8]. The fact is that a correspondence can be established between the use of such an expensive pigment as ultramarine, and the type of elements depicted, oriental rugs and carpets, gold and silverwork, veined tulips, paintings with elaborate frames and the like; in short, luxury and occasionally exotic objects that could well have come from remote countries. However that may be, the works must have been costly, designed to cover a demand for decorative, ostentatious objects from a wealthy group of clients prepared to spend lavishly.

Cross-sections showed certain likenesses in the way colour was applied in the three works. For instance, the same process is followed for the greens of the curtains in *Still Life with Painting* [fig. 5] and the greens of the leaves in the other two works [figs. 12 and 16]: first a dark green layer was applied, with a lighter green tone on top, obtained by adding clear pigments (lead whites or yellows) to the previous mix. Microsamples taken from a peach in *Still Life with Book* [fig. 10] and from a pomegranate in *Still Life with Angel* [fig. 20] show that they were treated in the same way, with a more or less yellow colour (depending on the addition of a small proportion of verdigris or vermilion in either case) being applied on a red base colour. Although there are some correspondences in key features in the artist's painting, such as rugs and carpets, there are also some divergences. The areas coloured red were painted on a dark red base with scarlet tones added on top, these being obtained in all cases from mixes of vermilion and a red lake. For the orangey red in *Still Life with Angel*, a little lead-tin yellow and antimony was added to this mix [fig. 21]. In the blue areas, the common denominator is, as we have already noted, the use of ultramarine. Samples taken from *Still Life with Painting* [fig. 6] and *Still Life with Angel* [fig. 18] contain a similar blue, although while in the latter it was mixed with white, in the former it is in a pure state, with traces of calcium carbonate only. In this case, the clearer colouring could of course be due to these impurities, although it may be the pigment was more finely ground, all of which would in fact suggest the use of different types of ultramarine¹⁵. The rug in *Still Life with Book* was resolved using a technique different to the one used in the other two works, as different and perfectly distinguishable colours (blue, red, white or green, depending on the decorative motif) were applied by brushstrokes on a dark red base, comprising particularly red earths and lakes. The artist used this method to "weave" the carpet fleck by fleck [fig. 9], achieving, through what might almost be described as trompe l'oeil, a texture very close to the one the real model must have had.

The X-rays study brought to light some very interesting features, some of which we have already commented on in relation with the supports. But *Still Life with Book* and *Still Life with Angel* had one or two surprises in store. In the X-rays of the former [fig. 2] two elements can be made out, though not easily identified, in the lower right quadrant that the artist later painted over. The first, located between the folds of the carpet,

15 Natural ultramarine was very expensive, not just because the raw material was costly, but also because it required a painstaking process to extract the pigment from the lapis lazuli. Turquet de Mayerne gives several formulas in his treatise (see Faidutti/Versini 1974, pp. 88 ff.). Mediaeval and later writers give innumerable recipes for the best method for obtaining different varieties depending on their purity: the deeper and more beautiful the blue, the purer it was. Such writers also often mention the peculiarity that, whatever the degree of purity, the colour became lighter the finer the pigment was ground, such lighter varieties being reserved particularly for illumination (see, for example, Brunello 1975, pp. 103 ff.).



5. *Still Life with a Silver Ewer, a Turkish Carpet and a Painting of the Holy Family*. Cross section of a sample taken from a shiny part of the curtain: 1, grey-brown ground consisting of earths and a very low proportion of calcium carbonate (65 μm); 2, layer of imprimatura composed of earths and a miniscule proportion of calcium carbonate, lead white, red earth, umber earth and boneblack (30 μm); 3, dark green composed of lead white and verdigris, with a low proportion of gesso and earths (55 μm); 4, light green from lead white, lead-tin yellow and low proportions of verdigris and calcium carbonate (50 μm); 5, varnish (10 μm)



6. *Still Life with a Silver Ewer, a Turkish Carpet and a Painting of the Holy Family*. Cross section of a sample taken from the blue of the carpet: 1, grey-brown ground composed of earths and a low proportion of calcium carbonate (135 μm); 2, layer of imprimatura composed of earths and a miniscule proportion of calcium carbonate, lead white, red earth, umber earth and boneblack (55 μm); 3, layer of almost pure ultramarine, with only a very low proportion of calcium carbonate (40 μm); 4, varnish (20 μm)



7. *Still Life with a Silver Ewer, a Turkish Carpet and a Painting of the Holy Family*. Cross section of a sample taken from the green-grey of a reflection of the vase: 1, grey-brown ground composed of earths and a very low proportion of calcium carbonate (100 μm); 2, layer of imprimatura composed of earths and a miniscule proportion of calcium carbonate, lead white and red earth (30 μm); 3, layer of blue composed of ultramarine and lead white with miniscule proportions of green earth, earths, boneblack and lead-tin and antimony yellow (40 μm); 4, shade of green obtained from a mix of ultramarine, lead, tin and antimony yellow, lead white and traces of earths and boneblack (60 μm); 5 and 6, layers of varnish (45 μm)



8. *Still Life with a Silver Ewer, a Turkish Carpet and a Painting of the Holy Family*. Cross section of a sample taken from the blue of the gilded yellow of the frame: 1, grey-brown ground composed of earths and a very low proportion of calcium carbonate (130 μm); 2, layer of imprimatura composed of earths and a miniscule proportion of calcium carbonate, lead white, red earth, umber earth and boneblack (35-65 μm); 3, layer of yellowish colour composed of lead-tin and antimony yellow, lead white and ultramarine and a low proportion of earths (15 μm); 4, yellow composed from a mix of lead-tin and antimony yellow and lead white (70-110 μm); 5, varnish (10 μm)



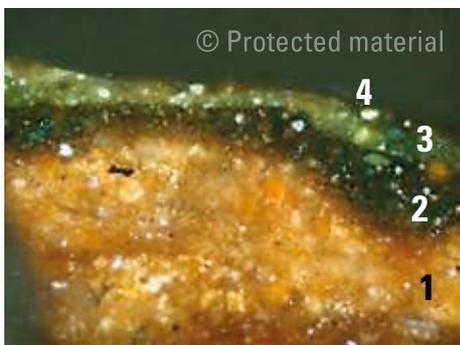
9. *Still Life with Fruit, a Turkish Carpet and a Book*. Cross section of a sample taken from the blue of the carpet: 1, grey-brown ground composed of earths and calcium carbonate (180 μm); 2, dark, slightly transparent red layer composed of an organic red colouring, calcium carbonate and low proportions of red earth and lead white (50 μm); 3, dark blue layer composed of ultramarine and a low proportion of calcium carbonate and lead white (35 μm); 4, varnish (25 μm)



10. *Still Life with Fruit, a Turkish Carpet and a Book*. Cross section of a sample taken from the yellow of the peach: 1, grey-brown ground composed of earths and calcium carbonate (120 μm); 2, layer of reddish-tinged grey-brown composed of a mix of red earth, calcium carbonate and a low proportion of lead white (35 μm); 3, yellowish colour composed of lead-tin yellow, lead white and low proportions of verdigris and calcium carbonate (80 μm)



11. *Still Life with a Silver Ewer, a Turkish Carpet and a Painting of the Holy Family*. Cross section of a sample taken from the green of one of the frosted fruits: 1, yellowish grey-brown colour composed of earths, lead white and lead-tin yellow and calcium carbonate (75 μm); 2, yellow composed of lead white and lead-tin and antimony yellow (225 μm); 3, shade of green composed of lead white and low proportions of green earth, ultramarine and calcium carbonate (60 μm); 4 and 5, layers of varnish (55 μm)



12. *Still Life with a Turkish Carpet and a Putto Holding a Garland of Fruit*. Cross section of a sample taken from the green of a leaf in the garland of fruit: 1, grey-brown ground composed of earths and calcium carbonate (250 μm); 2, layer of dark green from earths, lead white, verdigris, calcium carbonate and low proportion of boneblack (75 μm); 3, shade of green composed of verdigris, lead white, lead-tin and antimony yellow and a low proportion of ultramarine (50 μm); 4, varnish (40 μm)



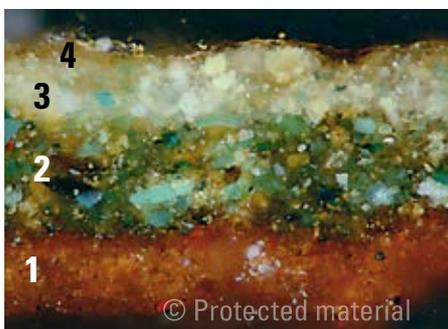
13. *Still Life with a Turkish Carpet and a Putto Holding a Garland of Fruit*. Cross section of a sample taken from the original background: 1, grey-brown ground composed of earths and calcium carbonate (300 μm); 2, dark grey-brown colour composed of boneblack, earths, lead white, and very low proportions of an organic red colouring, verdigris, lead-tin yellow and lead-tin and antimony yellow, umber earth and ultramarine (55 μm); 3, varnish (5 μm)



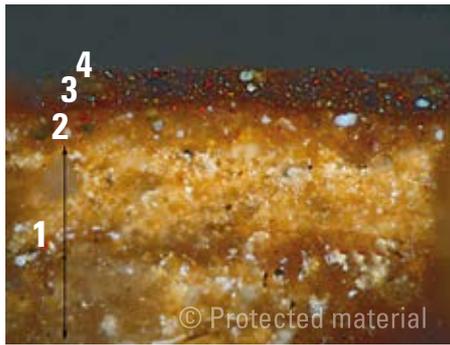
14. *Still Life with Fruit, a Turkish Carpet and a Book*. Cross section of a sample taken from one of the hidden features, possibly a piece of fruit: 1, paint layer composed of Neapolitan yellow and lead white (30 μm); 2, layer of paint comprising earths, lead white, boneblack and low proportions of calcium carbonate, gesso and verdigris (60 μm); 3, layer of varnish (10 μm); 4, retouch, probably not original, composed of boneblack (0-2 μm); 5, varnish (15 μm)



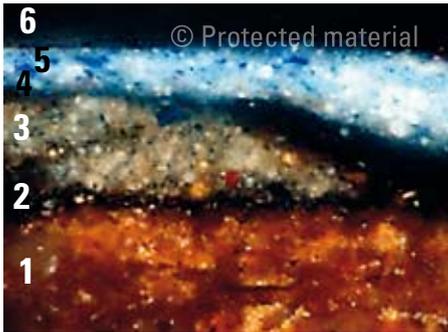
15. *Still Life with Fruit, a Turkish Carpet and a Book*. Cross section of a sample taken from one of the hidden features, possibly a metal or architectural object: 1, paint layer composed of earths, calcium carbonate and a low proportion of red lead (50 μm); 2, layer of paint comprising Neapolitan yellow, lead white and a low proportion of earths (150 μm); 3, mix composed of boneblack, lead white and traces of calcium carbonate and earths (50 μm); 4, varnish (10 μm); 5, retouch, composed of boneblack (5-10 μm); 6, varnish (5 μm); 7, retouch composed of boneblack (5-10 μm); 8, varnish (25 μm)



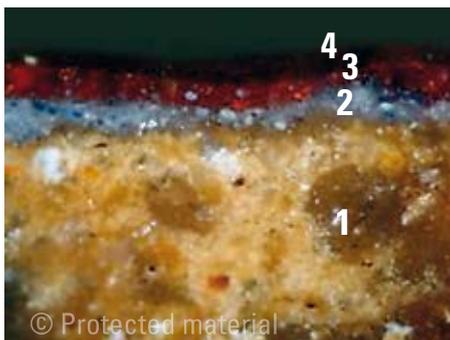
16. *Still Life with Fruit, a Turkish Carpet and a Book*. Cross section of a sample taken from one of the leaves: 1, grey-brown ground composed of earths and calcium carbonate (60 μm); 2, green layer composed of malachite, lead-tin yellow, lead white, calcium carbonate and verdigris and a very low proportion of earths (100 μm); 3, light green composed of lead-tin yellow, malachite and lead white (100 μm); 4, varnish (15 μm)



17. *Still Life with a Turkish Carpet and a Putto Holding a Garland of Fruit*. Cross section of a sample taken from the background in the zone of the hidden face visible in the X-ray: 1, grey-rown ground composed of earths and calcium carbonate (400 μm); 2, grey-brown composed of earths, leads white and calcium carbonate, (40 μm); 3, dark grey-brown colour corresponding to the background composed of boneblack, earths, lead white and very low proportions of an organic red colouring, verdigris, lead-tin yellow and umber earth (30 μm); 4, varnish (5 μm)



18. *Still Life with a Turkish Carpet and a Putto Holding a Garland of Fruit*. Cross section of a sample taken from the blue of the carpet: 1, grey-brown ground composed of earths and calcium carbonate (300 μm); 2, dark grey brown paint layer composed of a mix of earths, lead white and a very low proportion of calcium carbonate (25 μm); 3, greenish layer from ultramarine, lead white and very low proportions of verdigris and lead, tin and antimony yellow (100 μm); 4, dark blue composed of ultramarine and a miniscule proportion of lead white (10-75 μm); 5, a layer similar to the previous one but further lightened with extra lead white (45 μm); 6, varnish (10 μm)



19. *Still Life with a Turkish Carpet and a Putto Holding a Garland of Fruit*. Cross section of a sample taken from a grape in the garland of fruit: 1, grey-brown ground composed of earths and calcium carbonate (350 μm); 2, blue layer composed of ultramarine and lead white (25 μm); 3, violet layer composed from a mix of an organic red colouring, vermilion, lead white, ultramarine and traces of calcium carbonate (40 μm); 4, varnish (19 μm)



20. *Still Life with a Turkish Carpet and a Putto Holding a Garland of Fruit*. Cross section of a sample taken from the yellow of a pomegranate in the garland of fruit: 1, grey-brown ground composed of earths and calcium carbonate (60 μm); 2, red layer composed of vermilion, lead white and traces of calcium carbonate (30 μm); 3, yellowish tone from a mix of lead white, calcium carbonate and low proportions of vermilion, lead-tin and antimony yellow and earths (20-5 μm); 4, layer of lighter shade of yellow obtained using lead white and lead, tin and antimony yellow (75 μm); 5, varnish (10 μm)



21. *Still Life with a Turkish Carpet and a Putto Holding a Garland of Fruit*. Cross section of a sample taken from the red of the carpet: 1, grey-brown ground composed of earths and calcium carbonate (70 μm); 2, red layer composed of vermilion, lead white, an organic red colouring and low proportions of calcium carbonate and lead, tin and antimony yellow (35 μm); 3, dark red glaze obtained with an organic red colouring, calcium carbonate and lead white (25 μm); 4, layer of red composed of vermilion, lead white and a low proportion of lead, tin and antimony yellow (220 μm); 5, varnish (70 μm)

might be a fruit. However, the colour make-up in that zone comprises a mix of Naples yellow and white lead [fig. 14], while the yellow used for the peaches is lead-tin [fig. 10]. The second object, located close to the lower right angle, comprises a similar mix of pigments [fig. 15], but its shape calls to mind a shell or, perhaps, a vegetable. It might also be some architectural ornament, like the capital on the left, or perhaps some piece of silverwork of the kind Noletti often included in his paintings. These two hidden features may have been part of a single object framed by the folds of the rug and which the artist finally decided to cover up.

In *Still Life with Angel*, the X-rays discovery was spectacular [figs. 3 and 4]. To begin with, we found a group of pieces of fruit covered over by the background in the upper right angle. When the work was cleaned during restoration, we actually found that they could be seen faintly through the background colour; however, the X-rays demonstrated that the fruit were not mere outlines or preliminary sketches but fully finished depictions. Even more interesting is what came to light at the centre of the painting, on the garland: a female bust with the shoulders and breasts uncovered, and the face turned slightly to her right. This “ghost” emerging in the X-rays looking towards the spectator makes the work particularly unusual, because, as Sciberras notes in his essay for this Bulletin, it would indicate that Noletti did more figurative work than might be guessed from a direct viewing of his works. The X-rays highlights the figure’s perfect finish, including the final touches of light (found, for instance, in the cheeks and the upper forehead) for the modelling of the flesh tones, which makes the artist’s decision to hide something that fits in so well and which is so beautifully resolved rather surprising to say the least. But the X-rays also shows up several gaps or paint losses in the area occupied by the face that were replaced in previous, older restoration work, which, when we began this analysis, appeared integrated with the rest of the background. This raised the possibility that, at some point during previous restoration work the decision was taken to cover up the seriously deteriorated figure completely, painting it over with a colour similar to the original background¹⁶. To verify this hypothesis scientifically, we analyzed microsamples taken from areas of the background and zones of the figure’s flesh tones. Comparison of the materials in these samples showed that the composition of the colour applied to cover up the figure and the size and structure of the particles of pigment were the same [fig. 17] as the rest of the background in original zones [fig. 13]. In short, this points to the fact that the artist himself decided to cover the figure up. What reasons he had for doing so remain matter for a debate that the information available from the work itself does little to resolve.

The variety of technical aspects covered above, including supports, structure and chemical compositions of ground layers and paint surface, and particularly the use of a material as costly as ultramarine, clearly link the three works. However, we should not ignore the different texture of *Still Life with Book* from the other two, which is patently clear in the depiction of the rugs and carpets, and which seems to derive from the type of carpet chosen. Both large still-life paintings display more impastoed brushwork, although differentiated depending on the texture of the material portrayed, as well as an identical carpet, down to the frayed fringes, painted with small touches for each strand of wool. This painterly calligraphy, visible to the naked eye [figs. 22 and 23], is also clear in the X-rays. Noletti used this rather more rigid-looking carpet, with its angular folds, as a model in numerous works, employing an identical technique to depict it in, for example, *Still Life with a Turkish Carpet and Fruit*, now in the Musée des Beaux Arts in Grenoble (see fig. 10 in Keith Sciberras’ essay), and also in the one in the Hermitage, the one in the Molinari Pradeli Collection in Bologna and one of his works in the Musée Fesch, Ajaccio. Although the texture in *Still Life with Book* is equally impastoed for

16 A treatment of this type, unacceptable to current conservation and restoration criteria, was not unusual in 19th-century practices or even the early decades of the 20th. Contemporary restorers are certainly well acquainted with its effects. Nor would it have been a surprise to find the actual figure completely reconstructed, rather like what happened with the angel. This was a treatment much in demand from private collectors, one with which (no doubt due to the extent of the practice) restorers of the time were well trained to deal.



22. Francesco Noletti "il Maltesse" (c. 1611-1654)
Still Life with a Silver Ewer, a Turkish Carpet and a Painting of the Holy Family, c. 1650
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
 Detail

the carpet, the brushwork, longer and more blended, is not so abrupt in the other component features, owing to the use of slightly more diluted paint. The magnificent three-dimensional effect of the flecks in the carpet was achieved by "twisting" the paint, while each small strand of wool was executed with thin "threads" of paint in relief [fig. 24]. Although this treatment would seem to set this work apart from its two companions in Bilbao, it does in fact coincide with the technique used in the depiction of embroidered fabrics in other works by Noletti, as well as (taking as an example one of the Bilbao paintings) the large tassel hanging in the centre of *Still Life with Painting*. This technique corresponds to a second model of carpet, softer and pusher-looking with rounder folds and longer threads of wool, which, as Sciberras has pointed out, Noletti also depicted in several attributed works, not least in *Still Life with a Turkish Carpet, Fruit and a Violin* in the Musée Fesch in Ajaccio (see fig. 9 in Keith Sciberras' essay).

These features, which interconnect the Bilbao works while also relating them to works in other collections, may be distinctive to Noletti's technique. Turning again to the model of carpet, as being one of the most characteristic features of his oeuvre, we find that in the entire output assigned to him he resorted to two typologies, both found in the works in Bilbao, each with very similar decorative patterns. Noletti must have had a number of carefully selected objects in his studio, which, combined and laid out in different compositions, helped to configure all his known production. Identifying and cataloguing such objects would almost certainly be a great help in discovering the decorative taste of the time and even in identifying the kind of clients Noletti worked for. Above all, the objects could well be a key to cataloguing his oeuvre. *Still Life with Book* would thus be included in a group of smaller works by Noletti that share the same model of carpet



23. Francesco Noletti "il Maltese" (c. 1611-1654)
Still Life with a Turkish Carpet and a Putto Holding a Garland of Fruit, c. 1650
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
 Detail

and fewer decorative features. Perhaps because they are visually simpler, one appreciates more readily the artist's taste for a particular compositional scheme, in which the carpet takes up the two lower thirds of the paint surface, with the other objects piled together close to the upper edge. This structure is to be found in other still-life paintings attributed to Noletti, like the one in the Musée Départemental de l'Oise in Beauvais or the one in the Strossmayerova Galerija in Zagreb.

The two larger paintings in Bilbao are linked to the rest of his output, both stylistically and in terms of the objects depicted, not just because of the carpet used as a model (one of the carpets most frequently found in his work) but also because of the frosted fruit, pitchers of a particular kind and other metal objects. The bunches of flowers (always the same, too, especially carnations, irises and tulips) are less habitual resources, and yet their more discreet presence is itself another detail of ostentation, remembering the astronomical prices placed on a single veined tulip bulb, a flower as ephemeral as it was coveted. Curiously, this flower, which we always associate with Holland, actually originated, like Noletti's carpets, in Turkey¹⁷. The objects are laid out perfectly to achieve an artful balance between masses; this is clear in the studiedly informal placing of each feature, from the groups of fruit, the musical instruments and even the folds in the fall of the fabrics. In *Still Life with Painting*, he introduces a feature unusual in his attributed oeuvre,

¹⁷ From the mid-sixteenth century, the Low countries imported tulip bulbs, of which there were a number of varieties, most perfectly normal and at a reasonable price. Contamination caused by what is known as the "tulip breaking virus" brought about mutations in the form of veins in the colour of the petals. These varieties provoked "tulpomania" in Holland, which ultimately led to a major economic crisis around 1637. For more on this subject, see Lisse 1992; and Fred G. Meijer's article in this Bulletin.



24. Francesco Noletti "il Maltesse" (c. 1611-1654)
Still Life with Fruit, a Turkish Carpet and a Book, c. 1650
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Detail

one that makes this painting particularly interesting. I refer to the painting-within-the-painting depicting the Holy Family. Chosen for its spiritual connotations (a rare concession, this) or possibly because it was, like the other objects, a luxury article, it is a compositional and spatial gesture, as two angles of the gilt frame touch the limits of the canvas, as if it laid on the real frame of the larger work. The other exceptional feature in Noletti's attributed output is the angel in one of the Bilbao paintings, which, as Sciberras notes in his article for this Bulletin, may be the work of another artist, a possibility difficult to prove one way or the other, at least on the basis of the technical analyses performed. What does seem highly likely, as Sciberras also points out, is that the artist used a previous work, painting over the female figure visible in the X-rays. Additional support for this suggestion comes from the way the work's composition (one certainly doesn't get the feeling that there should be a figure in it somewhere) coheres with the rest of his output.

To conclude, this scientific approach to the oeuvre of Francesco Noletti through his three still-life paintings in the Bilbao Fine Arts allows us to underscore a series of closely connected technical and stylistic features which, in turn, prompt a new set of questions. From the viewpoint of the material, the works coincide, logically enough, with the uses and practices current at that time in European schools of painting, and even more specifically with the Italian school. However, a number of even more distinctive features are available. For instance, the use of brown ground layers from a mix of earths and calcium carbonate. The agglutination of these pigments and priming materials with linseed oil and a small proportion of rosin gave rise to an oleoresinous base. In one of the Bilbao works, we also detected a reddish brown imprimatura, a detail

that may be worth verifying in other works attributed to Noletti. The artist's palette was remarkably varied, including, by way of example, the full range of lead yellows (lead-tin yellow, lead-tin and antimony yellow and Naples yellow, the only artificial mineral yellows available at the time¹⁸, as well as well-known but little used materials such as Malachite green, together with the more habitual verdigris and green earth. One apparently insignificant detail that should be taken into account in any subsequent research into Noletti, is the existence, in the majority of mixes, of traces of calcium carbonate, whether as an impurity or as a drying additive. But the most remarkable thing where pigments are concerned is the prolific use of ultramarine, the blue pigment most appreciated for its beauty, but also the most expensive, at a cost only exceeded historically by the price of gold. This liberality, which we find in mixes for colours in which the beauty of blue is not the object, also gives us an idea of how highly prized these ostentatious works must have been at the time, and of the artist's target clientele. Noletti was an outstandingly skilful painter who employed vigorous, heavily primed brushwork, cleverly adapted to the reproduction, with tactile effects included, of the texture of each material depicted, and particularly deft in fabrics and carpets.

Carefully composed in elongated formats, the works of Noletti function on two basic lines. The relatively large-scale paintings boast more complex designs, particularly in view of the variety of objects included, as is the case with the two larger still-life paintings in Bilbao. The smaller works, like *Still Life with Book* in Bilbao have fewer objects, with carpets and rugs taking up proportionally most of the painting. But some interesting work remains to be done on identifying the objects depicted, not just on the precise origin or style of the carpets and embroidered fabrics, but also on pitchers, jugs and other recipients, the fruit, the flowers and even the musical instruments. Their classification, the study of the combinations from which all the works emerge and, deriving from this, the correspondences between Noletti's still-life paintings may provide a wealth of clues in future research for cataloguing and dating correctly the work of an artist who, in a highly competitive market, marked out his territory with a very original, exuberant product, one that made his personal formula highly fashionable.

18 Numerous yellow pigments were also known to have been obtained from vegetable colourings, but, given their lack of resistance to the light, they were used almost exclusively for illumination. From the early mediaeval treatises formulas for obtaining them abounded.

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