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Opening extract from

Book of Famous Artists

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Jan van Eyck

1395-1441

Van Eyck was one of the first artists in northern Europe to achieve great success painting with oils. His paintings combine lifelike portraits with glowing light, convincing textures and realistic, detailed landscapes.

Portrait of a Man
(thought to be a self portrait)

This is a photograph of the city of Bruges, where van Eyck lived and worked for many years.

Jan van Eyck was born in the city of Maaseik (in what is now Belgium) in 1395. Little is known about his early life, but by his 20s, he was already a hugely successful painter. At this time, oil paints were fairly new, and van Eyck was so good with them that some later experts thought he had invented them. This wasn't true, but he was one of the first to demonstrate the amazing effects that oil painting could achieve.

Because of van Eyck's talent, he was in demand by rich and powerful clients. At the age of 31, he went to work for the Duke of Burgundy in the city of Bruges. But van Eyck also found time to paint for other well-to-do art-lovers, from rich merchants who wanted portraits of themselves, to powerful churchmen who paid for huge religious paintings.

Around 1395
Jan van Eyck is born in the city of Maaseik.

1422-4
By now, he is a court painter to Duke John of Bavaria, based at the Hague in the Netherlands.

1425
When the Duke of Bavaria dies, Jan goes to work for Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy.

1426
Jan moves to the city of Bruges, where he lives for the rest of his life.

1426-1432
During this period, Jan works on a huge religious painting for a church in the city of Ghent, in what is now Belgium.

1441
Jan van Eyck dies.

Eye for detail

Van Eyck loved detail, and his paintings often feature beautiful patterns, intricate carvings and elaborate architecture.

Although many of his paintings depict Biblical stories, he based the settings closely on the cities and landscapes of the area of the Netherlands where he lived.

Some experts think Jan had a brother, Hubert, and a sister, Margaret, who were artists too.

Virgin and Child with Chancellor Rolin

This painting was paid for by a rich churchman named Rolin, shown on the left. Opposite are baby Jesus and his mother, the Virgin Mary. Although it looks as if Rolin is in the same room, the other figures are supposed to be in a heavenly scene in his imagination, as he prays to them.

The man in the red hat

Although many paintings by van Eyck survive, not much is known about him as a person. He only left behind one portrait (opposite) that most experts believe to be a picture of himself, but it's possible he painted himself into other pictures. In the painting above, the tiny figure in the middle wearing a red hat may represent van Eyck.

Michelangelo

Michelangelo Buonarroti

1475-1564

Portrait of Michelangelo

Michelangelo was an astonishingly talented man. As well as being one of the greatest sculptors of all time, he was also an amazingly gifted painter, architect, and poet. But even his friends complained that he was grumpy, smelly, and hated being around other people.

David

This is Michelangelo's most famous work, a nude statue of the Bible character David.

Michelangelo was born in a small village near Florence, in what is now Italy. He started as an apprentice painter at 13 years old, but soon switched to sculpture. By the age of 20, he had carved a statue in an ancient Roman style that looked so convincing it was sold as a genuine antique.

Word of his talent and energy soon spread, and many of the officials asked him to carve a statue for them. He chose a huge, awkwardly shaped piece of marble that had been left behind by another sculptor, and began work on his statue, David. It took him two years to complete, and when it was finished, the Florentines adopted it as their mascot.

Michelangelo made this sketch when he was working on the statue. David holds a sling in his raised hand. David used this to kill a giant named Goliath.

March 6, 1475
Michelangelo is born in the village of Caprese, near Florence.

1488
He starts working as an apprentice painter.

1490-92
He studies sculpture at an academy founded by an important politician, Lorenzo de Medici, in Florence.

1494-5
He carves a Roman-style sculpture so convincing, it's sold as an antique.

1504
He finishes carving *David* from a vast block of marble.

1508-1512
He paints the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome.

1530
He paints *The Last Judgement* on the end wall of the Sistine Chapel.

1546
He is appointed as architect for St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

February 18, 1564
He dies in Rome at the age of 88.

The Holy Family

This painting shows the baby Jesus with his mother Mary and his father Joseph.

Michelangelo added Jesus's cousin, St. John, further back, and a row of nude male figures behind the holy family. These were inspired by ancient Roman statues.

Michelangelo was fascinated by how the human body worked, and drew from live models, even though people strongly disapproved.

In demand

By now, Michelangelo had lots of wealthy art-lovers in Florence and Rome willing to pay for his work, so he divided his time between these two great Italian cities, and between sculpture and painting. By 1503, Michelangelo's talent had been noted by the Pope, and he was called to Rome to work for him, perhaps the most prestigious position for an artist then.

Jan Vermeer

Joannis Reijniersz Vermeer

1632-1675

This figure from one of Vermeer's paintings may be meant as a self portrait. If so, it's the only portrait of Vermeer that survives.

Vermeer is now one of the most famous artists in the world. But he was not a great success in his own lifetime. His detailed, delicate paintings of domestic life didn't come to fame until 200 years after his death.

Vermeer was born in the city of Delft in the Netherlands, and lived there all his life. At the age of 20, he took over his father's business as an art dealer, and became an artist at around the same time. His studio was in a room at the front of his house, on the second floor. He shut himself up there to paint, setting up lots of props and assistants in costume to create detailed scenes, and then copying them very carefully.

View of Delft

Vermeer only painted a very few outdoor scenes. This one shows his home city which by Vermeer's time had become famous for making and exporting decorative blue and white china.

1632
Jan Vermeer is born in the city of Delft, in the Netherlands.

1652
His father dies. Jan takes over the family business as an art dealer.

1653
He becomes a member of the Guild of St. Luke, which means he is now a professional painter.

The Artist's Studio

In this painting Vermeer may be hinting at how he worked. He shows an artist at an easel, painting a costumed figure surrounded by props. But this scene may be misleading.

Some experts think Vermeer used an early type of camera, called a camera obscura, when sketching his scenes. He would have sat in a darkened cubicle at the end of his studio. Light from the scene passed through a small hole onto the canvas, where it cast an upside-down image.

Troubled times

Vermeer never made much from his art, or from his art dealing business. He seems to have been reluctant to part with his paintings, but he also lived at a difficult time for artists. Religious disputes, wars, plagues and other disasters – including an explosion that destroyed much of Delft – all made it hard for painters to find people with spare money to spend on art. When Vermeer died, at the age of just 43, it may have been money worries that brought on his final illness.

December 1675
Vermeer dies, possibly of a seizure brought on by money worries.

Summer 1675
Vermeer borrows money in Amsterdam.

1672
Wars and other problems ruin many businesses in the Netherlands.

1662
Vermeer becomes the head of the Guild of St. Luke, a sign that local painters respect his work.

1654
A gunpowder store in Delft explodes, destroying much of the city.