Art of The Netherlands: Painting in the Netherlands

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Introduction

As in most European countries, the first paintings in the Netherlands can be seen on the walls of religious buildings. These were largely in the form of frescoes and religious texts such as illuminated manuscripts.

It was not until the 15th century, when the region gained wealth from its sea trades, that painting in the Netherlands came into its own, producing some of the most recognised and influential painters of the period. The earliest form of this painting is in the work of the Early Netherlandish painters, working through the 15th century. This work demonstrated decisive differences from Renaissance works produced in Italy at the time. The Italian influence and the Renaissance gradually affected these artworks via the Mannerist painters of Antwerp, and blossomed into the Baroque with the work of Rubens. This golden age of painting saw further distinctions in Flemish artworks with the introduction of new subjects of painting including, landscapes, still life and genre painting.

The golden age of painting in the Netherlands was aided by the wealth of the region at this time as well as the presence of King Philip and the Burgundian court, which allowed court artists to flourish. The influence of art of the Netherlands on the European scene grew significantly at this point, with many of its masters gaining the respect and following of numerous Italian artists. The growth of the status of 'artist' in the Netherlands is demonstrated by an increase in artists who sign their name and paint self-portraits.

Chapter 1: Early Netherlandish Painting

Early Netherlandish painting refers to the work of painters in the Low Countries in the 15th and 16th centuries. The distinctive Flemish style which emerged in the 15th century was unlike that of the Renaissance occurring in Italy at this time. The style which arose from manuscript illumination and the Burgundian court embodies both medieval artistic traditions of northern Europe with new Renaissance ideals. In this way it is categorised under both the late Gothic and the early Renaissance style.

Characteristics of Early Netherlandish Painting are a closely observed realism and attention to detail, bright, rich colours of materials and fabrics and an elaborate religious symbolism*. The Flemish works of this era are predominantly religious, and rarely display the narrative and mythology of those in Italy. One of the most significant developments of this school was its use of oil paint instead of tempera. The beginning of this period is marked by the work of Jan Van Eyck and the end by that of Gerard David in the 16th century, and was mainly centred on the flourishing cities of Bruges and Ghent.

Leading Figures

The 15th century saw Bruges become the capital of the Flemish arts, housing an important new school of art.

Other schools arose quickly in Tournai, Ghent and Louvain making the Netherlands region a virtual production house of painting. Great names in this period included the work of Robert Campin, Rogier van der Weyden, Dierick Bouts, Petrus Christus, Hugo ven der Goes, Hans Memling, and Gerard David. But by far the most prominent of these artists was one of the first, Jan Van Eyck.

Religious elements

Religious paintings, ie those used for church decoration and altarpieces, remained the most popular type of work.

The Renaissance Humanism that dominated paintings in Italy, played second place to local Flemish trends such as Devotio Moderna, a mix of Humanism and Christianity. These often placed an emphasis on emphatic subject matter such as the suffering of Christ. An example of this is the eccentric painter Hieronymous Bosch who created strange religious visions*. His most famous work is that of *Triptych of Garden of Earthly Delights*:



Triptych Garden of Earthly Delights c. 1500 Gallery of Art Museo del Prado, Madrid

Medieval heritage

The medieval heritage of the Netherlands region remains strong in Early Netherlandish works. A prominent example of this is The Ghent Altarpiece: *The Adoration of the Lamb*.

The Adoration of the Lamb found at Saint Bravo's Cathedral in Belgium is considered the most principle work of this era. The altarpiece was begun by Hubrecht van Eyck and completed by his brother Jan van Eyck.



The Adoration of the Lamb, Saint-Bavo's Cathedral

The main theme of the work is the glorification of man's salvation by the sacrifice of Christ. The subject is less dramatic and narrative then those of Italy, more visionary in its manner.

Influences from Italy

Although Early Netherlandish art developed at the same time as the Early Italian Renaissance it remains distinct from it. The works of the Flemish artists influenced and were influenced by the Renaissance painters of Italy. The international importance of cities like Bruges and the fact that many artists at this time travelled around Italy meant the transference of ideas was highly likely. It appears that during the 15th century the current of influence tended to flow from the Netherland region into Italy, rather then the other way round. This is demonstrated by the Hugo van der Goes's Portinari Altarpiece, which was brought to Florence in 1483, and which played a role in introducing the Florentine artists to trends from the north.



Hugo van der Goes's Portinari Altarpiece arrived in Florence, 1483, Web Gallery of Art, Uffizi.

Likewise the influence of Italy was increasingly felt during this period. The spirit of Flemish art was heavily Italianised with the work of Jan Gossaert, more commonly known as Mabuse, whose work bore heavy influence of Leonardo Di Vinci and Michelangelo.

Likewise the influence of Raphael is seen in the work of Michael Coxie;



Adam and Eve, Jan Gossaert, 1525, Web Gallery of Art, Staatliche Museen, Berlin

The influences from Italy grew as the centre of art production was shifted from Bruges to Antwerp. A particular style of Mannerism grew strong in Antwerp: Anterp Mannerism although now heavily influenced by Italian Mannerism maintained a latent Gothic feel, influenced by Netherlandish paintings from the previous centuries.

Mabuse was not an archetype for all Flemish painters of this period. Many of his contemporaries completely ignored the Italian influence, including Hieronymus Bosch whose original works focussed on fantasy and strange symbolism, and Joachim Patenier who is considered the first real landscape painter. In the same respect the influence of Classic Antiquity, prevalent in Italian art was far less pronounced in Early Netherlandish painting up until the 16th century.

Oil Painting

One of the most important aspects of Early Netherlandish art is its role in the introduction of oil painting into the European arts. Contrary to the popular belief, oil painting was not invented by the Flemish painters themselves, a common historical myth which attributes Jan van Eyck as

inventor of the technique. However the Early Netherlandish artists were the first to make it a useful mode of painting, and Van Eyck's perfection of new and remarkable effects of the technique were instrumental in this. By the height of the Renaissance oil painting techniques spread through Northern Europe and eventually to Italy, almost completely replacing tempura painting on the continent. Van Eyck's early mastering of this technique has led to him often being referred to as the 'father of oil painting'.



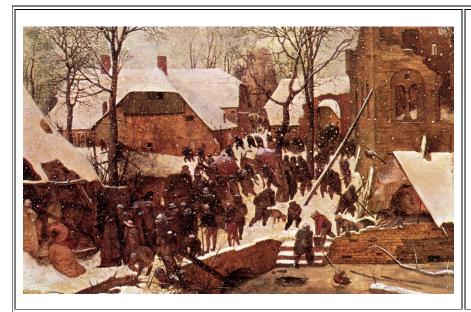
Jan van Eyck Crucifixion 1420-25, Web Gallery of Art, Metropolitan Museum NY

Non-Religious works

Other important works which developed during this century included portraiture, tapestry design and secular paintings. In portraiture in particular the wealthy cities in the Netherlands produced numerous private commissions of both a religious and secular nature. Outstanding examples of

these include Antonio Moro (Mor), who achieved an international reputation as a court portrait painter.

By mid 16th century the number of secular paintings increased and in particular a concern over the depiction of landscape and nature developed. These interests were to evolve into the great works of landscapes, still life and genre painting of the Baroque period. This can be seen in the works of Joachim Patinir and Pieter Aerten, but the leading figures of secular art in this period was Pieter Brueghel the Elder who painted realistic reflections of Flemish life.



Pieter the Elder Bruegel Adoration of the Kings in the Snow 1567, Oskar Reinhart Collection, Winterthur

Chapter 2: Dutch and Flemish Renaissance Painting

By the middle of the 16th century the influence of Italy and the Northern Renaissance, particularly that of Prague, became much more pronounced in art from the Netherlands regions. This period begins with the work of the Antwerp Mannerists and ends with the Late Northern Mannerists.

The Antwerp Mannerists

The Antwerp Mannerists showed the first influences of the Renaissance in their work without dramatically straying from the traditions of Early Netherlandish works.

A highly original artist of this time was Hieronymus Bosch. His work is strange and full of seemingly irrational imagery. Surprisingly modern and introducing a world of dreams that seems more related to Gothic art than the Italian Renaissance, although some Venetian prints of the same period show a comparable degree of fantasy.

Late Northern Mannerists

The Late Northern Mannerists combined the inspiration of Italy and the Northern Renaissance with the local traditions celebrated by the Early Netherlandish painters. The most prominent

artist of this nature was Bartholomeus Spranger whose painting is characteristic of Late Northern Mannerism.



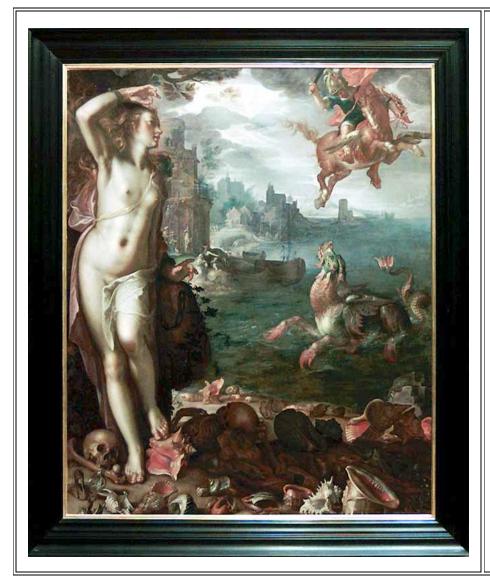
Bartholomeus Spranger Allégorie de la Justice et de la Prudence R.F. 3955 © Musée du Louvre / A. Dequier – M. Bard

For the majority of mannerist artists in the Netherlands region, Late Mannerism was a phase to be passed through on the way to the Baroque style and few artists stayed painting in this style.

The most celebrated print maker of the day, Hendrik Goltzius only stayed in the movement for five years, under the influence of Bartholomeus Spranger.

One of the reasons for the brief role of Late Mannerism was the flexibility of many Dutch painters to switch between styles, depending on commission or subject: Mannerist paintings were produced at the same time and often by the same artists of the portraits and genre scenes based on local traditions.

One exception to these artists is Joachim Wtewael. Italian Mannerism remained present in Wtewael's work even after most painters adopted the naturalistic style, making him one of the last Mannerist painters and one of the leaders in the Dutch style. Charachteristics of his style include acidic colours and figures in distorted poses.



Joachim Wtewael, Persée secourant Andromède 1611 R.F. 1982-51 © Musée du Louvre/A. Dequier -M. Bard

New Subjects of Painting

Painters from the Netherlands region were instrumental in the establishment of a wide new selection of subjects in European painting.

In particular it was the introduction of landscape and genre painting, which dominated the Dutch golden age of art production in the following era, that had the greatest impact on the European fine arts. Joachim Patinir, for example, played an important role in developing landscape, while Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Pieter Aertsen helped popularise genre painting.

Joachim Patinir is considered the first of these true landscape painters.



Joachim
Patenier,
St Jerome
in the
Desert,
1520, web
Gallery of
Art,
Louvre
Paris.

Pieter Bruegal was one of the first genre and landscape painters. Although in no way a Mannerist painter himself, Brughel was followed by Mannerist painters such as Gillis van Coninxloo in developing the landscape as a subject.



Landscape with Leto and Peasants of Lykia Web Gallery of Art, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg

The close up forest landscapes of Gillis van Coninxloo bare influence from the Albrecht Altdorfer and the earlier Danube School. Influences which are likewise evident in the works of his pupil Roelandt Savery and others.

In Italy where many of the landscapists based themselves, landscape painting became understood as a Netherlandish speciality. Two of these figures were Paul and Mattheus Brill.



Paul Bril, Diana and Her nymphs at the Hunt c. 1600 Web gallery of Art, Musée du Louvre, Paris

The Romanists

A group of Mannerist painters in the now separated southern providences of Flanders had more access to Italy, and as such became more influenced by Rome then Prague. Denis Calvaert for example had lived in Bologna and Marten de Vos and Otto van Veen had both travelled there. Van Veen became the founder a club in Antwerp dedicated to artists who had visited Rome known as the Guild of Romanists. These Romanists, sensitive to trends in Italian art, introduced a much more concentrated phase of Italian influence.



Otto Van Veen, The Artist Painting, Surrounded by his Family 1584, Web Gallery of Art, Musée du Louvre, Paris

Chapter 3: Painting in the Dutch Golden Age

The Dutch Golden Age roughly spanned the whole of the 17th century. The importance of different kinds of painting in this age was hierarchical: Baroque painting took prominence followed by history painting and that of religious subjects. The next was portrait painting followed by genre painting or scenes of everyday life and landscape and cityscape. Still life paintings were considered the least important of the categories of paintings. It is also important to remember paintings often combined these elements.

Dutch Baroque Painters

During the brief period of Spanish Catholic rule of the Southern regions of the Netherlands, a heavily Baroque era of painting developed producing some of the Netherland's most famous painters. The centre of this artistic activity was Antwerp, although the style also flourished in Ghent and Brussels, the home of the court.

The foundations for the Baroque can be seen in the work of the late Mannerist painters such as Otto van Veen, Adam van Noort and Marten de Vos. It is the work of Peter Paul Rubens that demonstrates the full effects of the Baroque style and made him the most famous painter of this period. Rubens, who had spend eight years studying in Italy, set up an important studio in Antwerp, schooling Flemish artists in the methods of the Baroque and as such influencing the direction of Flemish art.



Pieter Pauwel Rubens, Adoration of the Magi1626-29 Web Gallery of Art, Musée du Louvre. Paris One of Ruben's most important students was Anthony Van Dyke:



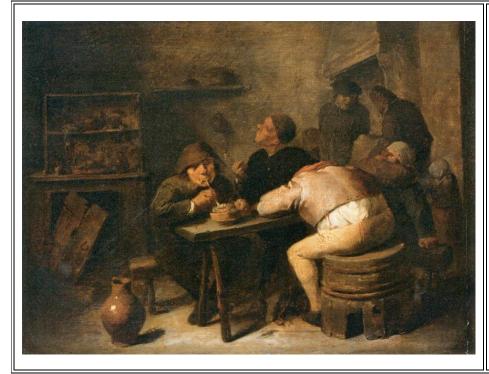
Virgin and Child with Saint Catherine of Alexandria, Anthony van Dyck, The Metropolitan Museum of Art;

History and Religious Painting

In the absence of wealthy patrons commissioning huge, awe inspiring works, large biblical or historical scenes were produced less frequently in this region than in other countries. Instead Dutch painters strived for an intimacy between picture and viewer. The influence of the Italian painters was profound in these paintings, and in particular the treatment of light inspired by the works of Caravaggio. Ruebens is accredited in helping develop the Baroque altarpiece.

Genre painting

Genre painting and the depiction of everyday themes became popular during this century. One of the most influential examples of these artists is Adriaen Brouwer (1605 or 1606–1638) who typically painted works displaying peasants fighting, gaming and drinking.



Adriaen Brouwer, Interior of a Smoking Room 1630-32 Web Gallery of Art, Musée du Louvre, Paris

Of those who depicted the grander side of life, it is the work of Adam de Coster, Gerard Seghers and Theodoor Rombouts that stand out. The most famous genre painter following Ruben's death was Jacob Jordaens who painted monumental genre scenes such as *The King Drinks* and *As the Old Sing, So Pipe the Young*.



Jacob
Jordaens,
As the Old
Sang the
Young
Play Pipes
1638 Web
gallery of
Art,
Koninklijk
Museum
voor
Schone
Kunsten,
Antwerp

Landscapes and cityscapes

The early landscape paintings of the 16th century gave way to more realistic and natural impressions in the 17th century. Drawings were made on site and alterations in perspective were made such as a lower horizon, which helped emphasise the impressive cloud formations of the region. Subjects included rivers and meadows, winter landscapes, the dunes of the western coastline and the Dutch seas, a theme that reflected the importance of trade and the glories of the Dutch navy. Cityscapes also became common with a focus on churches in particular.

Still Life

Still life painting also became popular in this period giving the artists a chance to demonstrate skills in painting textures and surfaces. Examples of artists who practiced still life painting include: Ferdinand Bol, Albert Cuyp, Gerard Dou, Willem Drost, Carel Fabritius, Govert Flinck, Jan van Goyen, Frans Hals, Pieter de Hooch, Pieter Pieterszoon Lastman, Judith Leyster, Jan Lievens, Nicolaes Maes, Maria van Oosterwyck, Adriaen van Ostade, Paulus Potter, Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, Rachel Ruysch, Pieter Saenredam, Jan Steen and Johannes Vermeer.