

The humanity of Van Dyck

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“Van Dyck 1599-1641” , *London Royal Academy of Arts, 11 September-10 December*

“The Light of Nature: Landscape Drawings and Watercolours by Van Dyck and his Contemporaries,” *British Museum, 10 September-28 November*

All the paintings referred to can be seen in the Van Dyck Virtual Exhibition on the Royal Academy Website
<http://www.royalacademy.org.uk>

Most people must be moved when they see the painting of Venetia Stanley by Anthony Van Dyck. She seems asleep, her head gently resting on her hand, but then you see one of her eyes is open in an unnatural way. You realise she is dead. Van Dyck, with just black and white paint, evokes a timeless image of serenity and beauty within death.

There are other sombre paintings in the exhibition of his works currently showing at London's Royal Academy. They reflect a seventeenth century of war, plague and premature death. However, the gallery also has evocative religious and mythological paintings and many portraits of individuals in gorgeous clothing, for which Van Dyck is most famous. They are constructed in a similar fashion, with the subject framed by a column and drapes, often with a small landscape view visible in the background. Van Dyck keeps symbolism to a minimum, so that you focus attention on the individual, particularly their facial expression and hands.

By the time I left, his Maria Louisa de Tassis had seduced me with a smile every bit as memorable as the Mona Lisa. And I felt some sympathy for King Charles I of England. Van Dyck's triple portrait of him is the epitome of royal aloofness, but he remains convincingly human with dark watery eyes.

Perhaps I had succumbed to what the historian Christopher Hill calls Van Dyck—“a conscious propagandist in the cause of absolutism,” who “falsified the truth of appearances.” Perhaps my response was a little more complex.

Van Dyck was born in Antwerp, Belgium in 1599, a city on the battle line between the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation.

The city was built on trade, particularly luxury goods. Van Dyck's father was a cloth merchant and many of Van Dyck's first patrons were merchants.

This was a time of great artistic and cultural advance, particularly in Italy, where there had been a revival of the study of classical (Greek and Roman) culture during the Renaissance. Art in this period, according to the great Russian Marxist and cultural critic Plekhanov, was “dominated by the fact that the Christian, monastic ideal of the human form was pushed into the background by an earthly ideal, whose appearance was bound up with the urban struggle for emancipation; and its realisation facilitated by memories of the she-devils of antiquity” (Plekhanov, *Art and Social Life*, p. 185).

Pictures of the Madonna, for example, are “transfused with such healthy enjoyment of a purely earthly existence, that they no longer have anything in common with the pious Virgins (of mediaeval times)” (ibid., p. 186). It was the age of Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael and Titian, and the study of perspective and human anatomy.

There was no unbridgeable gap between the Reformation and Counter-Reformation countries. Artistic styles washed up and down Europe. Trade, travel and printing aided the interaction between art forms and artists. Three-quarter-length portraits with landscapes that had originated in the Netherlands, for example, reappeared in Venetian Renaissance paintings that Van Dyck then made use of in England. The German artist Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) visited Venice and subsequently helped introduce the Italian Renaissance outlook and style to his native country. Holbein (1497-1543) decorated German churches influenced by the Renaissance style, and then emigrated to Protestant England.

Van Dyck was born in the middle of this political, social and cultural storm. The Van Dyck family were devout Catholics. Two of his sisters joined convents, one brother became a priest and Anthony himself joined a Jesuit society. Anthony Van Dyck became an apprentice to one of the leading Antwerp artists, Hendrik van Balen, when he was 10 and a couple of years later to Peter Paul Rubens.

Rubens was the leading painter in the Catholic world. He followed in the Flemish tradition of artists like Breughel, who imitated nature and painted rustic scenes, but on his travels in Italy he became influenced by the beauty and simplicity of Caracci and the naturalism of Caravaggio. He returned to Flanders, becoming the first to paint pictures on a grand scale. His works of that time are full of movement and people, whilst still having a feeling of light and space. His fellow countrymen's pictures are small, formal and stiff in comparison.

Van Dyck absorbed Rubens' artistic techniques and style. Rubens called him “the best of my pupils”. His self-portrait of about 1613, when he was 14, already shows an exceptional talent. As he looks backwards over his shoulder, he looks confident but apprehensive. Although Rubens remained a great influence on Van Dyck, he was already beginning to develop his own style.

In 1617 the leading Antwerp artists, including Rubens and van Balen, were asked to paint a series of 15 paintings for the new Kerkfabrik Sint-Paulus. Van Dyck, still only 17, was also one of them. His Christ Carrying the Cross is a powerful work.

In his preparatory drawings, he follows a design by Rubens that is pyramidal in shape. We are drawn upwards through the mass of figures, to a rider with a flag at the top of the picture. Christ moves from right to left and his whole body is visible. Soldiers march behind him and Mary stands to the left. In Van Dyck's final version, the procession is reversed. Christ has fallen to the ground and is almost invisible. His dark blue cloak seems to melt into Mary's lighter blue one. The soldiers are on top of the fallen figure, their spears thrusting towards him. He fills the whole space with the power and emotion of the figures themselves. We feel much more part of the scene.

Van Dyck, I think, surpasses Rubens' design. He makes van Balen's contribution to Sint-Paulus look amateurish.

The rising bourgeois class in Antwerp were important patrons to Van Dyck. Several portraits in the exhibition show them in their black clothes and white ruffs, proud of their new status. One such merchant (probably a member of the Vinck family) is shown standing in front of his bale of wool. Others are of family groups, a form that Rubens was most

responsible for developing, but Van Dyck makes the family seem more relaxed and natural. A portrait of the spice merchant Cornelius van der Geest is beautiful. His skin looks real, his eyes stare out at us emotionally.

In 1620 Van Dyck set off on with his sketchbooks, following Rubens' route to Italy. The examples of his sketches in the British Museum exhibition show he was an accomplished landscape painter. Landscapes were first used as backgrounds to religious works. Then the landscapes got bigger and the religious scenes got smaller. In the 1520s the first true landscapes appeared in Germany.

The Netherlands was in its "Golden Age" of landscape painting when Van Dyck lived and his contemporaries like Poussin were drawing full landscapes. Though Van Dyck only used them for background in his portraits, he was the first to use them in England.

In Italy, he painted several fine religious pictures and portraits. He also deepened his study of the Venetian Renaissance school and in particular, Titian (1485-1576). By the time he died, Van Dyck had collected 17 of Titian's works.

In 1625, Van Dyck, painted "The Three Ages of Man," as Titian had done before him. Titian's figures—a baby, young couple and old man—sit on separate hills in a serene landscape with bright blue sky. Van Dyck treats the scene completely differently. Again, he fills the picture with his figures. The atmosphere is intimidating. An armoured soldier stands centrally with a look of lust on his face. A deathly white girl offers him some flowers. As a hunched old man looks in the opposite direction, the soldier slides his hand between the girl's thighs. Are we about to witness a rape? This is shocking stuff. Can you imagine the reaction of an audience used to Titian's version?

Titian was most famous amongst his contemporaries for his portraits, but they still have a dreamlike quality compared to Van Dyck who places human beings firmly on the earth. Van Dyck spent his last years in London as a Court Painter. He set up a workshop that, at times, was producing a painting a week. Like Rubens, he would often leave the main work to assistants, adding only the finishing touches. This may account for the variable quality of some paintings.

His time in London almost coincides with the period of King Charles the First's "personal rule". Parliament did not meet from 1628 to 1640. Charles, a Protestant, rested on the aristocracy and was opposed by the merchants and sympathetic landowners, who feared the restoration of Catholicism as it could mean the loss of their land confiscated from the Church. They concentrated their hatred on Queen Henrietta Maria, who was French and Catholic. Van Dyck was close to the Catholic court circle.

Even if Van Dyck's portrayal of power puts you off and you dislike his style, his paintings are a fascinating record of England leading up to the Civil War. His patrons found themselves on both sides in that struggle.

The Earl of Strafford was a commoner, parliamentarian and then Charles' chief adviser. He was impeached by the newly recalled Parliament in 1641 and executed after Charles signed his death warrant. In his 1632 portrait he has short hair and wears a shiny black suit of armour, an Irish wolfhound by his side (Charles had just appointed him Lord Deputy of Ireland). Van Dyck captures a marvellous feeling of tension and apprehension on Strafford's face that he develops in a further study of Strafford and his secretary in 1640.

In 1637, Van Dyck painted Lord Digby and his brother in law, Lord Russell. Russell looks every bit the Cavalier in bright red silk and satin, trimmed with gold and lace embroidery. Digby is tucked behind him, dressed soberly in black. However, Russell fought for Parliament and found himself besieging the castle of his sister and Lord Digby. It is a vivid example of a double portrait of friends—one of Van Dyck's innovations. Soon after he arrived in England in 1632, Van Dyck received a commission from the King. He had to adapt a design already specified by the King to the artist Daniel Mytens—Henrietta handing a laurel wreath to him. Mytens' portrait is very formal and flat. Van Dyck understates the

ceremonial aspect and instead shows the couple in bright but delicate clothes, their hands flowing towards each other. Charles looks lovingly towards a beautiful Henrietta.

Has Van Dyck "falsified the appearance of reality" here? The royal couple, for example, did not see each other for three years after their arranged marriage. Henrietta's niece described her as "a little woman with long lean arms, crooked shoulders, and teeth protruding from her mouth like guns from a fort". Charles obviously saw art as a way to promote himself as King of Britain, the Fortunate Isles. But I think even this picture has its subversive side. Never before had a monarch been shown in such a human rather than imperious way—the bourgeois conception of the family is undermining the ideal of the absolute monarch.

Van Dyck also broke convention by having the man on the left and woman on the right in some of his family portraits. One of his last pictures shows this in the wedding of Prince William of Orange to the 10 year old Mary, Charles' eldest daughter.

He also treated children as individuals in their own right, who bring a touch of lightness and mischief to his paintings.

Van Dyck died on December 6, 1641, aged 42, the same day his daughter was christened. He had produced nearly 1,000 paintings in his short life. He lived like an aristocrat and had Jesuit and monarchical sympathies, but this does not detract from the appeal of his art. He seems able to melt together the differing strands of European art and produce beautiful, powerful and enduring images of humanity. There is a feeling of individuality, intimacy and informality which few, if any, artists were able to grasp previously.

I am left with one lasting image; Van Dyck's "Sunflower self-portrait" of 1633. Van Dyck poses as he did in 1613, looking back over his shoulder. He wears a brilliant red silk shirt. Around his neck is a gold chain that he raises slightly with his left hand. His right hand points to an open sunflower, the size of his head. Behind a second sunflower is shut. The meaning of the picture continues to fascinate people. Most art critics say this represents Van Dyck confident at the height of his fame and wealth, with the sunflower representing loyalty to the King. However, I find his expression troubling. He says to me, "Here I am. Like a sunflower, I have followed humanity and explored its soul. It has made me rich and famous. But what does all this wealth mean when the sunflower dies?"



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