



# ARTY STORIES

BOOK 4

NORTHERN EUROPE  
Revolution & Evolution



**Art and life  
across the centuries**

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for  
Noko

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*Liberty leading the battle, 1830 Eugene Delacroix, Louvre, Paris*  
*The Fighting Temeraire, tugged to last berth, Turner, 1839, National gallery, London*

# *'ARTY STORIES'*

*Art & Life across the centuries*

*'Seeing people's lives brings their art to life'*

An introduction for art lovers and students alike into the stories behind individual works of art and their evolution over centuries. This series of six books tells the stories of events and lives and the influence of art on these changing societies. How art evolved from primarily a tool to shape society, into a purely artistic expression.

Together they provide a sweeping framework in which to follow and understand the struggles and triumphs of people in the evolving changes through peace and war from 3,000BC until today. Produced in a new and accessible introduction celebrating the myriad lives and wonderful art over the centuries.

This holistic approach is also designed for younger students to create an interest for complementary studies in both art and history and contributes to the UK Educational targets of Key Stage 3:

*'know how art and design both reflect and contribute to the culture, creativity and wealth of our nation'.*

This also contributes to the educational debates in the USA on the benefits of art to the health of society.

Supported by the Arts Council, England as: *'creative and engaging for young people'* -  
*'the opportunities to stimulate young people's interest and imagination are evident'.*

*Centuries of great art are a gift to us all*

## Books in this Series

Book 1	Egypt - Greece - Rome	Empires & Games
2	The Renaissance in Italy	The Patron & The Artist
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## Book 4

# NORTHERN EUROPE

## Revolution & Evolution

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## Northern Europe – The Netherlands

Outside of Italy and prior to the Renaissance, art was taking very different paths in very different worlds. It was the Dutch who had first taken paintings to a new level with oils on canvas. Trade brought rich customers who wanted bright paintings to hang on their walls and to send home.

At the start of the 15<sup>th</sup> century the Dutch artist Jan van Eyck had developed painting with linseed oils, building up translucent layers for a 'glazed' finish to enhance the colours. Through their trade routes from the Dutch East Indies, they could import bright pigments from as far away as Baghdad and exotic Persia. Colours were natural, not manufactured and the deep blue of lapis came from Afghanistan. Millions of years ago lapis was thrown up from 35-40 km underground where the extreme heat and pressure had transformed yellow sulphur into a deep ultramarine blue – worth more than gold! Using oils also meant that the Dutch could paint on a ship's canvas rather than oak board and the canvas could then be rolled up and sent by sea or overland in smaller and faster carts. Paintings became more available and much more exciting. (1)

The Dutch already had established routes for their art as the Netherlands became a centre of trade between the north from England, Russia and Scandinavia and the south with France, Italy and Constantinople (now Istanbul). Bankers provided letters of credit for payment and these wealthy bankers had come from Italy and wanted to send some of this wonderful new art back home. At that time Italian artists were still using an egg-based paint and could not produce the same impression of depth and colour achieved with oils. The bankers spent much of their wealth on portraits, 70 years before the Italian painters such as Michelangelo and Leonardo.

Jan van Eyck was the first to produce realistic portraits that reflected the sitter's character. He worked for the fabulously wealthy Duke of Burgundy, acting as ambassador and spy with his travels termed 'secret commissions'. His artistic notoriety and the patronage of the Duke, opened many doors otherwise held closed.

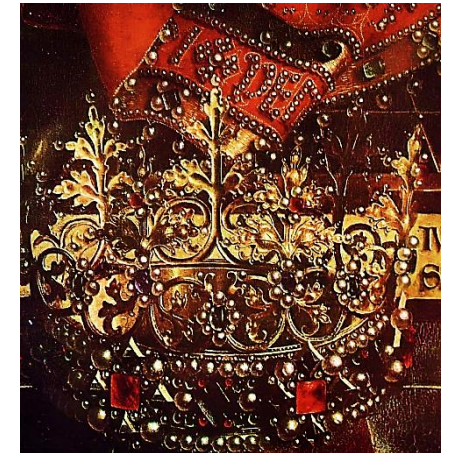




This self-portrait by the artist Jan van Eyck shows him looking challengingly at the viewer with an inscription reading 'as I Eyck can'. With the exaggerated folds of the bright red 'turban' he was showing prospective customers the colour, detail and accuracy of his own work. These true to life portraits were a new skill appreciated by the aristocracy to favourably display themselves and when looking for a wife from another country could see not just her looks, but gave an insight into her character.

Van Eyck displayed an incredible level of detail, as in these excerpts from his Ghent altarpiece. The detail and richness of colour that he achieved stands out and also shows how he was a master of portraying the brilliance of jewellery.

*Self-portrait, Jan van Eyck, 1433 National Gallery, London*



The altarpiece was opened on feast days to show rich religious symbols

*Ghent Altarpiece, Jan & Hubert van Eyck, 1432, St. Bavo's, Cathedral, Ghent. (Excerpts are from the top 2<sup>nd</sup> and centre panels)*

## Children's games and town festivals

But as all these bankers, Kings and Dukes lived these privileged lives, what of everybody else, the poor – what were their lives like in Northern Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century?

Well at first with all this trade work was plentiful and the people in the towns lived well. So, they began to have larger families, but with more mouths to feed, the price of their food escalated. Then as the children grew up, there were more people to work and so wages fell, pushing them back into poverty. A life of swings and roundabouts. Their diet was black bread and peas, washed down with lashings of beer, an average of one litre a day each. The water could be too bad to drink, so it had to be beer. But they lived in close communities and celebrations and festivals were their escape from the grind of life, both for children and for adults.

One Dutch artist 130 years after van Eyck, was Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Rather than paint for the rich, he chose to record village life, providing a unique window into a now vanished folk culture and rural society. Bruegel started out in life as a designer of prints, but he moved to Brussels and switched to painting and unusually at that time, depicted peasant life. Bruegel produced many scenes of rural and town life during the 16<sup>th</sup> century and as his sons and even grandsons were to continue this work, he came to be called Pieter Bruegel the Elder.

His paintings became sought after by wealthy Flemish collectors, who were drawn to the distinct style of dozens of small figures engaged in individual pursuits, seen from a high viewpoint. This was very different to the studied and structured paintings of the day where all was carefully staged in a rigid pose.

Without these paintings we would not have such a vibrant picture of life outside of the cities.





*'Children's Games' Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1560, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna*

Amazingly in this painting, from almost 500 years ago, are 80 children's games.

Playing with dolls, a water gun, an inflated pig's bladder (like a football), masks, swing, climbing, handstand, somersault, tiddlywinks, marbles, pretend wedding, blind man's bluff, soap bubbles, riding a broom, 'hide and seek', a toy animal, walking on stilts, pole vaulting, leapfrog, rolling a hoop and that's just 20! These are games still played today.

A town full of children.

There was a poem of the time that ridiculed adults as playing foolish games in their lives like children, when perhaps they should know better, as in the next painting.



This painting has an interesting contrast with an inn (pub) on the left-hand side, with boisterous party goers dancing to a band to celebrate carnival. While on the other side is a church with nuns in black observing prayer and Lent, tending the poor and the sick. One celebrating the church religious festival and the other the carnival party. Each year there was a 'battle' between the two sides with competing floats. The fat man on the beer barrel with a pie on his head pushed by a 'clown', contrasted by 'Lady Lent' on the other, drawn by a nun and a monk.

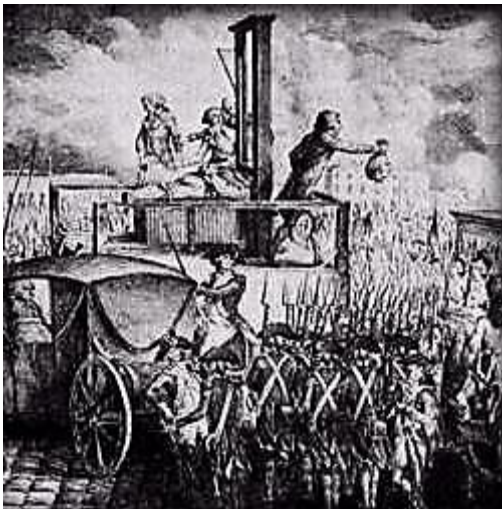


*Town Festival, 'The Fight Between Carnival and Lent', Pieter Bruegel the Elder 1559, Vienna*

In the middle of the square is the well that serves everyone with water, while at the back of the square are people preparing food and wine. On the left is a scene of joy that food is plentiful and then on the right the religious reminder of the tougher times to come before spring. Both the harvest and the church are important.

## The French revolutions

As the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries drew to a close, while the Dutch had entered a 'Golden Age' (Book 3), in France the poor began to increasingly suffer with grinding poverty and oppression, only worsening through the 18<sup>th</sup> century. France was bankrupt from supporting the American War of Independence against the hated English, with its people starving from 2 years of drought. The people rose up and the excessive and ridiculed monarchy, together with the crushing aristocrats, were thrown into jail where they promptly came before the Tribunal and people's judge to be found guilty. They would then immediately be taken to have their heads cut off by the infamous 'Madame Guillotine'. A dreadful and swift retribution in the 'Terror'.



Dragged on a cart through the crowded narrow, cobbled streets, overflowing with sewage, they faced crowds of 'citizens' crying out for their blood. Terrified and huddled together they would reach the dreaded guillotine and wait to watch those before them being beheaded, before it was their turn to walk up the steps. Between 1793 and 1794, 17,000 would make this terrible journey, to the cheers of the crowd each time the guillotine fell. (2)



Following this revolution, Napoleon became Emperor and took France on a doomed adventure to conquer all of Europe. This was stopped at the battle of Waterloo in 1815, throwing France into disarray and heralding the return of a monarchy. But this new monarchy was itself to become deeply unpopular as they sought to overrule the government and were removed by a second revolution in 1830. France struggled to keep its titular monarchy, but it would finally be removed in 1848 when a Republic was declared with an elected President, in place to this day.



*Liberty leading the battle, 1830 Eugene Delacroix, Louvre, Paris*

Men and women were equal in this struggle for democracy and women were portrayed as leading men into battle against the aristocrats' soldiers. Seen here in the second revolution, leading a charge over the bodies of the fallen soldiers. Baring her chest to the enemy she leads and turning with the French flag in one hand and a musket in the other, urges the men on, to raise their tempers for the battle

The painting is a celebration of the victory of the people's republic to go forward into the future, with a cry of '*Liberté, égalité and fraternité*' ('Liberty, equality and fellowship') A cry that is still heard in the French national anthem today.

In England they chose another way without terror and blood, but one that still empowered the people.

## Romance in England

When Henry VIII broke away from the church in Rome in 1532, he destroyed all the powerful and rich abbeys and discouraged religious art in the churches. (Book 3) England was now outside of the Italian Renaissance and art tended to be commissioned by the King and the landed gentry in staged portraits, particularly miniatures. Sculpture was limited to tombs.

It was not until a further 200 years later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that the industrial revolution was to bizarrely develop an art for the ordinary people and then in romantic paintings. A contradiction, but also a progress.

In the Victorian age; 1837-1901; living conditions in the new industrialised towns were terrible, with dreadful housing in slums and dangerous working conditions. These brought poverty, poor health, hunger, high child mortality and minimal education. In these living conditions people will despair and foster a dangerous resentment. Later photos came to record the people and their conditions.



Whitechapel, London, 1880's



Glass factory 1908



They portrayed the ignorant poor children who had their lives taken away from them, with no hope for the future. This suffering has been immortalised in the hymn 'Jerusalem', as 'those dark satanic mills'.



*Coal mining 1911*



*Mill workers 1910*

This was a recipe ripe for revolution as happened in France and one that the British government sought to avoid. They introduced a succession of reforms giving people the right to vote (although women had to wait another 50 years), with worker's trade unions. Public health improved with clean water through sewage removal and education was compulsory for all children. Children as young as 5 or 6 had worked 10-15 hours a day, often barefoot with no shoes, in dreadful factories and mines. This first reform only changed to a minimum age of 9 years old and working 12 hours a day. (3)

As the reforms were enacted, public bodies sought to engender a pride and ownership in their towns, with grand public buildings, as in ancient Athens. (Book 1) A national pride grew as the British Empire strode the world and 'Great Britain' under Queen Victoria, stamped its place in the world and in people's lives.



*Victorian Leeds Town Hall, 1853-1858*

People's lives became far better and with the introduction of holidays, far more enjoyable. Factory owners saw the benefits of people being healthier and happier and started out to develop a pride in their town. Public buildings for local councils and libraries were built and art galleries opened, mostly in the Greek style with pillars. For the first time the ordinary man had a civic pride and could see art in his local town and it was free for all, giving a sense of ownership.

A new urban society grew, with greater prospects, leading to a rapidly expanding middle class.

The most popular paintings were in romantic settings that gave people a dream out of their day-to-day lives of smoky and dirty towns, to a beautiful, sunny countryside. Artists looked to portray an abundance of detail with the intense colours of nature and not the elegant poses that the rich had commissioned. This art became the art of the people, not religious art or views of the upper class, but of the dreams in their lives. People now had something to imagine, away from their hard lives.

One artist who led this rebellion against the upper class and their establishment, was Holman Hunt.





*The Hireling Shepherd, 1851      William Holman Hunt  
Manchester Art Gallery*

Romantic and doomed love was a melodrama loved by the Victorians. But not all paintings were sad and some told of happiness and love, with scenes of an ideal England among the country fields, far from the smoke of industrialised towns.

The shepherd neglects his sheep who are wandering into a corn field, to be with the girl, showing her a butterfly that he had caught for her. The rosy complexions and rich landscape of sheep and corn, show a land of goodness and plenty, with time for love.

The painting is still in the Manchester Art Gallery

In strict and conservative Victorian England when women had little rights, love was a distraction from the greyness of everyday life. It was their 'cinema' and their escape to other worlds, with an art for the people.

Poetry and books began to be popular as education helped people to learn to read. Romantic dreams in the Victorian age flourished with novels by Jane Austen and Charles Dickens and poems by Wordsworth and Tennyson. One popular romantic poem was *The Lady of Shalott*, written by Tennyson in 1832. A sad tale of all consuming and tragic love. True Victorian melodrama.



*A lady lost to a doomed love*

*The Lady of Shalott, 1888, John Waterhouse,  
Tate Britain, London  
From the poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson*

The story in the poem is of the Lady of Shalott who lived 'by the island in the river, flowing down to Camelot' – fabled castle of the medieval knights. There was 'a curse on her if she stay to look down to Camelot', so she only looked out through a reflection in 'a mirror clear'. But she was lonely and one day a knight, 'bold Sir Lancelot' rode down by the river 'and as he rode his armour rang', she turned to look and 'the mirror cracked' and she cried 'the curse is come upon me'. But, she had fallen in love with 'his coal black curls' and 'down she came and found a boat' and 'she floated down to Camelot'. Then 'singing in her song, she died' as her curse had predicted, Lancelot looked down on her and said 'she has a lovely face, God in his mercy lend her grace, The Lady of Shalott'.

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