THE PAINTER

Jan De Wees was an artist living in the Dutch town of Utrecht in the year 1416. An orphan after his entire family was taken during a widespread fever epidemic, Jan as a boy apprenticed under Master painter Jereon Hopps and systematically learned his trade. By age thirty-three, Jan was of average height, with long brown hair and soulful brown eyes. He had a flowing mustache and goatee. He painted with his left hand, being left-handed. A bachelor, Jan was frustrated in his attempt to find a simple bride, perhaps because from birth his right leg was about two inches shorter than his left, and he had to wear a special assisting boot. This small deformity caused Jan to walk with a slight wobble. But he was so used to it that he rarely even thought about it anymore.

Jan enjoyed the mechanics of painting as much as the creative act. He selected his color pigments himself, and ground them carefully using a glass muller on a glass grinding plate. He then mixed the various powders with linseed oil using a spatula before adding them to his palette, thinning any colors with turpentine when necessary. Using supply merchants from Germany, France, and Italy, Jan purchased lead flake white, German mine black, lemon ochre, Verona green earth, Pozzuoli red, azurite blue verditer, and Luberon raw umber. With these natural earth and mineral pigments, Jan could make the basic colors of brown, green, yellow, red, white and black. Then he could blend them to make any other color he needed.

Jan was fastidious, and he used various-sized brushes made of fine imported badger hair. He learned from Master Hopps that a finished painting must dry on the canvas for six to twelve months before applying any finishing coats of varnish. Jan relished the smells of his craft -- the chemical bouquet which blended with his talent and creativity. He also loved the tactile feel of movement through his brushes, and the way his paint colors spread, dabbed and blended in layers. But above all, Jan loved the light found outdoors in nature – its subtle shadings, secret shadows, and other mysteries.

Utrecht was a medieval walled city surrounded by a moat. The Rhine River flowed adjacent to the town, and hence connected it with the rest of Europe to the south as well as to the Great Sea to the north. Utrecht, as a result, had a robust commercial ship traffic, so the city was designed with various harbors, canals, and wharves. Another smaller river -- the Kromme Rijn -- also supplied water transportation, but it often froze in the winter, unlike the Rhine, so it was useful in only limited months. After Master Hopps died, Jan moved to a modest studio-sized upper room near the city’s tallest structure, the Dom Tower of St. Martin’s Cathedral. Completed in 1382 and standing an impressive 112 meters, the Dom offered everyone who could climb its challenging steps a superb view of the city and the surrounding countryside. Jan was always fond of the exhilarating panorama from the top.

To pay his bills and earn his living, Jan approached wealthy patrons and painted their portraits. Yet the dominant commissions for artists like Jan came from the Church: seemingly endless scenes from the Bible and the life of Christ told over and over again, with scant deviations as to form and style. Jan found the whole business monotonous and clichéd. As a result, he approached the Church for work only if he was down to his last guilder. His faith was standard -- in that he attended Mass every Sunday, went to Confession, and took the Eucharist -- but Jan found more true spiritual peace and inspiration wandering with his palette and easel in the countryside and trying to capture the changing light and colors of nature rather than listening to yet another dull sermon inside St. Martin’s. God was alive in Nature, Jan realized with delight! He speaks to me personally through His Creation!

At the Utrecht market one Saturday in October, Jan bumped into Father Jerome, one of the priests at St. Martin’s. Father Jerome was buying some fresh pork, potatoes, cheese, and bread for the rectory. Jan had been purchasing some simple fish, cabbage, turnips, and carrots for his sole daily meal. He wanted to buy some apples, milk, and honey cakes too, but those items were too expensive for his artist’s purse. Father Jerome approached Jan in the crowd and struck up a conversation. The priest was grey-haired, about ten years older than Jan and somewhat portly. His dark eyes were always wary.

“Well, Jan, I see you too are doing some shopping. How have you been? I trust your health is good. Have you been getting enough work?” Father Jerome inquired.

“Well enough, I suppose, Father. A painter can never expect to get rich, but I manage,” Jan replied humbly.

“I see. If you want to paint an Annunciation for the north side altar in the Cathedral, I can ask Bishop Albert and arrange it,” Father Jerome offered, his dark eyes holding Jan’s gaze in scrutiny. “Good Day to you then, and see you at holy services tomorrow.” The priest with his basket of foodstuffs turned and was quickly absorbed into the market crowd.

Jan thought about the priest’s suggestion with mild but genuine disgust. He had no intention of doing another boring rendering of Mary and the angel Gabriel. He yearned for something new, fresh, exciting! He walked back to his lodgings with his slight wobble. Once home, he made a fish stew with his market purchases. After eating and cleaning up, he grabbed his painting equipment and went out past the canals and windmills until he found his favorite forest about a two hour walk from town. Although the air was getting chilly and the skies were turning grey, Jan felt vibrant and alive as he smelled the salt air coming in from the north. Could be a storm, he surmised. But he had a warm coat over his rough tunic and a wool cap, so he was not very concerned about the weather as he started to paint a stately old gnarled oak with birds nesting in its branches.

At Confession several days later, after recounting his sins and receiving absolution, Jan was shocked when Father Jerome asked him while he was still kneeling in the confessional: “Have you decided to paint that Annunciation for us? Bishop Albert has given his consent.”

Jan was caught off guard, so after a long pause, he sighed and then murmured the truth: “No, Father. I am not interested. I’m sure you can hire another artist for the commission. I am sorry to disappoint you, but I prefer now to paint outdoor scenes of nature and of real people, not saints and angels.” Jan had never intended to be so frank, especially to a priest. His words – once released freely, in blunt honesty – escaped like a torrent.

Jan heard Father Jerome gasp, then clear his throat. “My son, what you just said has me gravely concerned. Your soul and your very eternal salvation may be in jeopardy! You must immediately beg Our Lord for forgiveness. I fear that your thinking has slipped into the evil realms of pride, pagan nature worship, humanism, maybe even the new blasphemy of dreaded Protestantism! Repent of your thoughts now, my son!” Father Jerome pleaded, his voice rising and cracking.

Jan was so taken aback and confused by the priest’s outburst that he fled the confessional without responding and slightly wobbled quickly out of the Cathedral.

Over the next two weeks, Jan poured his emotions completely into his work. He even skipped Sunday Mass twice, and did not go back for weekly Confession, hoping to avoid further chastisement from Father Jerome. He went down many times to the Great Sea instead, and painted the waves and the changing light at various times of the day upon the waters and the shoreline. He painted boats and seabirds. He even used his imagination to paint scenes from stylized memory. He was in a blissful creative frenzy! He gave thanks to God for the gift of his talents and for the good health to produce several impressive canvases – even though he knew they would never be bought by anyone due to their radical style and subject matter. Still, he was comforted by his efforts and was confident, and he was convinced that he was on the right path to some kind of artistic breakthrough. Farmers were amused when Jan was discovered with his easel, feverishly painting in their fields, and gossip soon spread about the “crazy painting Dutchman.” But his supplies and modest funds were being depleted by the day, and he would soon need to garner the commission of another portrait from another wealthy burgemeester or merchant. A means to an end, thought Jan. I’ll just have to stomach it.

It was then that the civil authorities unexpectedly arrived at Jan’s humble abode early one drizzly November morning. He had been summoned to appear before Bishop Albert for some serious “questioning.” The guards escorted Jan to the Bishop’s Palace in Maarssen, a full day’s journey from Utrecht. When he arrived, Jan was taken to an audience chamber where the Bishop sat on a raised platform in an ornately carved and cushioned chair. A roaring fire in the fireplace warmed the room. The white-haired Bishop wore scarlet robes and skullcap, and looked both imposing and annoyed. Jan stood before him.

“Jan De Wees, I have been informed by our faithful brother Father Jerome in Utrecht that you have refused the honor of an artist’s commission to paint a holy Annunciation. Is this true, and if so, how do you explain yourself?” Jan noticed a priest scribe hurry next into the chamber to take testimony.

Jan carefully and patiently explained that he was still a Catholic and was obedient to all Church doctrines, but that he had understood that the suggestion to paint the Madonna was a voluntary offer which he was free to either accept or decline.

“Isn’t it true that you declared to Father Jerome that you were no longer interested in painting angels and saints, and that you preferred outdoor nature scenes and real people?” the Bishop demanded. Jan meekly nodded. “Proclaim it aloud, so the scribe may note it!” the Bishop hissed. “I said words to that effect,” Jan admitted. The scribe scribbled without looking up.

“I therefore fear that you have been tempted by the Evil One,” Bishop Albert proclaimed, then hastily made the Sign of the Cross. “You are hereby forbidden to paint any more unofficial artworks, which bespeak nothing but pride, pagan nature worship, and the heresy of humanism. We are placed on this earth for a short time until we can rejoin Our Father in Heaven, through the grace and mercy of His Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ. Our lives are His, to give glory to Him alone, not to indulge our own selfish thoughts and passions. Life is misery and suffering, nothing more, and flesh and mind are but mere corruption weak to temptation. To save our eternal souls, we must not wander from the narrow and hard True Path of Salvation! Therefore, I order you to return to Utrecht and destroy all of your sinful painted renderings, which were wrought in disobedience. You will paint our Annunciation commission forthrightly, to be completed in three months from today. As penance for your sins, you will be given no payment for your work, and furthermore, you must make the sacred pilgrimage to Santiago and back within the year – barefoot. Now go! You are dismissed.”

Jan was stunned at the Bishop’s harshness. Jan felt misunderstood and crushed, but the feeling of disgust at the Bishop’s unfair words kindled a startling, raging anger within his entire being. He was cornered like a hunted animal, so he had no choice but to fight back.

“I must in all good conscience refuse, your Grace. I have done nothing which is harmful to myself, the Church, or to God. Through my paintings, I an expressing my love of God’s holy creation, and the joy which I feel for His gift of life. My heart and mind are free and at peace with my decision. I must paint as I see fit. I will continue on my true path. I cannot be forced to do that which goes against my deepest innermost feelings.”

Bishop Albert went livid. Even the scribe priest sat up in shock. “Clearly, Satan the Prince of Darkness has twisted your mind and your heart, brother De Wees. You have the stench of evil about you. Let me put it to you this way. I have been warned that you paint with your left hand – a sure sign of the Devil. Plus, you were accursed from birth by a malformed leg. So we have two external bodily marks of darkness against you already. Fortunately, we have methods already devised to deal with such aforementioned mortal sin, heresy and disobedience. We must break your body and mind to save your soul from Eternal Damnation. It is the only way. Guards!” the Bishop cried.

Jan was dragged to a dank underground cell beneath the Palace, and was chained to a wall for three days without food or water. Once a day, he was offered the chance to recant his words. Each time he refused. “What you are doing to me is proof unto itself that you are wrong,” Jan weakly explained. “God will not judge you mercifully for this injustice,” he shouted once with new-found strength and conviction. Whether anyone heard or cared was unknown.

Jan was surprised to see Father Jerome arrive the morning of the fourth day. The haggard priest pleaded with Jan to recant his words, begging him to submit and obey the Bishop. When Jan moaned the one word “No,” Father Jerome blessed Jan and left, only to be replaced by a fiendish-looking torturer who had Jan carried to another dungeon. There, his arms and legs were tied down while his back was stretched downward across a curved stone column. Once in position, he was given the dreaded “water cure,” a horrid water torture procedure which had the victim force-filled with gallons of water through a funnel held in the mouth. It simulated drowning in that water entered the lungs after the stomach overflowed with liquid. The victim vomited and gasped for air in a cruel, sadistic cycle. The process was regularly halted while the victim was revived and questioned, then repeated. The agony was prolonged because the victim usually didn’t die immediately.

Jan De Wees finally died a week before Christmas Eve, after being broken on The Wheel, yet another infamous torture device. His death was a relief to the Church, for it could enter into the celebrations of the holy season of Christ’s birth without ‘distraction’. Jan’s body was buried in an unmarked pauper’s grave, without witnesses. His paintings and all of his art supplies back in his studio in Utrecht were destroyed, and his meager belongings were distributed to charity. It was as if the brave, visionary man never existed.

But the memory of Jan had an unexpected savior. In the days that followed, Father Jerome prayed and prayed on the events of Jan De Wees’ life and death. He came to the dramatic conclusion that Jan was right and that the Church was utterly, even evilly wrong. He realized for the first time that his life as a priest had been a monumental mistake. Jerome wept uncontrollably for hours and begged God for forgiveness for his role in Jan’s unfair condemnation and annihilation. Because he was a learned man and could read and write, Jerome put the entire sad tale to parchment and hid the completed document in a hollow behind some loose bricks in the stairway of the Dom Tower. His task completed, Jerome removed his priestly garb one sunny, warm spring morning and smiling, he leaped naked off the top of the Tower, 112 meters to his death. His hope was that one day, the lost story of Jan De Wees would be found.

It was, by a mason doing repairs, 274 years later…

THE END by Jack Karolewski

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