

Only a handful of people are allowed in the Duke of Burgundy's study at Prinsenhof palace in Bruges. So I'm feeling a bit uncomfortable as the duke looks at me.

'Are you ready to achieve great fame by taking service with me?' the duke asks rather haughtily and with undeniable flair. 'Your task consists of organising receptions and celebrations, creating paintings whenever it pleases me as well as providing me with advice on projects. You will receive more information in due time. You may also work for other people, but what I commission always takes precedence. You will be paid an annual wage of one hundred pounds. Are you satisfied with that?' 'You may stay in this city for a short while, but I want you to take up residence in Lille, as I have some important assignments for you over there. You will also have to make several journeys and you will get the opportunity to see the world! That is all for now.'

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The duke's main concern is ensuring his succession, and as a result he has to remarry. For this purpose, a banquet will be organised that will be attended by several prominent ladies. This time, I do not have to provide the decorations for the banquet, but paint the prospective wives. This will make it easier for the duke to make a choice. In addition, the work of art also needs to capture the moment for future generations.

One by one, the prospective wives enter my tiny studio next to the banquet hall. The ladies find sitting in the dark very exciting, as I portray them using a candle, lens and mirror in a darkened room. Fortunately, I have a lot of experience with painting portraits, so my work is going smoothly.

Musicians, copious dishes and a generous amount of drinks add lustre to the banquet. The ladies' numerous lap dogs and the falcons of some noblemen are more challenging to immortalise in paint. I hope the duke will be pleased with my work.

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My thoughts go out to my brother Hubert. His death has left me confused. I think about the many conversations in Hubert's studio about our daily activities. I think about how he listened with interest when I announced that the use of texts in our paintings would give them a distinct appeal and impact on the audience. I even believe these texts ensure that the works of art will continue to exist in centuries to come!

I also think about the way Hubert strived for perfection throughout his life. I know how it feels: I often look at something that filled me with pride in the past and realise that I can do better.

Hubert passed away twelve days ago. For twelve long days, the panels of what should have been his masterpiece have remained untouched in his studio ...

I need to consult with Mr Vijd. The nice gesture of the Ghent alderman to have Hubert and Margareta interred in his chapel has profoundly moved me. In return, I will gladly complete the altarpiece that will adorn the chapel.

Jan Van Eyck