

You are about to immerse yourself in a medieval story, the story of the Van Eyck family.

Although they are rated among the greatest painters in western art history, very little is known about the lives of Hubert and Jan Van Eyck. We do not know where and when they were born, where they were trained and when they settled in Ghent. They had a sister, Margaretha, and a third brother, Lambrecht, both of whom also painted, but the life of the latter two is even more cloaked in obscurity.

Not a single painting can be attributed to Hubert with certainty, despite many fruitless attempts to connect his name to paintings from that period. In the few archival documents that have been preserved, his name, which apparently was rather uncommon in early-15th-century Ghent, is spelled differently each time. Traces of payments for works by Jan or Johannes Van Eyck have been found in the accounts of Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy and Count of Flanders.

Historical information is scarce, but whatever information available constitutes the basis of this story.

The 15th-century Flanders of the Van Eyck family differed from contemporary Flanders. To understand the world they lived and worked in, it is useful to know what Flanders looked like in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In that period, the county of Flanders consisted roughly of the current Belgian provinces of West and East Flanders, with a small part of the province of Antwerp. In the north, it also included Zeelandic Flanders, the region of the current Dutch province of Zeeland between the Belgian border and the Western Scheldt.

People then believed that the social order was ordained by God. Liege lords, usually princes who ruled by the grace of God, owned the land and could grant land to vassals. In return, the vassals would hand over part of the produce and owed the liege their loyalty. The counts of Flanders were vassals of the King of France. Conflicts regularly arose when a Flemish count tried to achieve independence.

The three classes of medieval society were also considered divinely ordained: the clergy were responsible for the spiritual welfare of society, the nobility protected Christendom militarily, and the peasantry worked the land but had few rights other than their spiritual welfare and protection.

At the time of the Van Eyck brothers, Flanders was a densely populated and wealthy region. The textile industry flourished. English wool was woven into cloth, which was exported far and wide. Urban populations belonged to the same class as the peasantry (the third estate), but thanks to their economic power they were able to demand more rights and put pressure on the social structure. In the 14th and 15th centuries, Ghent and Bruges had become international trading centres, and the counts of Flanders came into conflict

with their French liege on the one hand and the rebellious cities on the other hand. The Flanders of the Van Eyck brothers was continuously on the verge of a crisis. The power of the nobility was on the wane while a new urban middle class was emerging. Wealthy merchants became an indispensable source of credit for warring princes. Professional organisations such as guilds gradually became more assertive. In the Flanders of the Van Eyck brothers, it became increasingly clear that this divinely ordained social order was not as stable as previously thought ...