



**PRESENTS:**

## **ART OF THE LOW COUNTRIES**

Any survey of European art history would be incomplete without the Low Countries. Consisting today of **Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg**, the Low Countries once encompassed other regions, including **French Flanders**. The Low Countries' artistic achievements date back to the **Renaissance** and continue to the present day. For the sake of brevity, this guide will focus on a slice of that history: the **Northern Renaissance** of the late 16<sup>th</sup> century to the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Try to keep your head above water; there's quite a few Low Country painters ahead!

*By analyzing questions, you can see patterns emerge, patterns that will help you answer questions. Qwiz5 is all about those patterns. In our (Qwiz5)<sup>2</sup> guides, we present you with the most important information from a group -- the most important German composers, the most important political treaties, etc. -- and break down the key facts to help you keep them straight.*



### ***Hieronymous Bosch***

Land of Fantasy: Bosch's most famous **triptych**, ***The Garden of Earthly Delights*** (above), is pure fantasy. When closed, the panels of the triptych display a half-created Earth, **populated only by plants, without animals or humans**. When opened, the three panels depict the arc of humanity's Fall from Paradise. In the leftmost panel, Jesus addresses Adam and Eve. Countless animals, **including a unicorn**, frolic around them in the shadow of a vast **pink fountain**. The central panel features humanity in a sinful paradise, rife with **oversize fruits and shellfish**. The rightmost panel is a grotesque image of Hell, in which humans are terrorized by **birdlike demons** and tortured by **unique methods, including being crucified on oversize instruments**.

Domesticity: A more down-to-earth painting than *The Garden of Earthly Delights* is Bosch's ***Cutting the Stone***. A Flemish doctor **wearing a funnel hat** extracts "the stone of madness" from a patient via the medically dubious procedure of **trepanation**. Although the procedure may have been a common part of medical practice at the time, the painting is a wider allegory for folly. A woman sitting to the patient's right **balances a book on her head**, possibly satirizing the Flemish custom of wearing amulets made from books or scriptures.

The Distant Past: Bosch depicts the religious past in his work ***St. John the Evangelist on Patmos***. The ***pink-robed St. John*** dominates the painting's center. A ***demon*** stands to St. John's right, attempting to steal his writing tools, but is kept at bay ***by an eagle***. The evangelist's attention is directed entirely to an angel in the background. The Angel in turn gestures to the sky where a vision of ***The Woman of the Apocalypse*** is visible.

Scenes from the Homeland: While not specifically a Netherlands-inspired scene, ***Ship of Fools*** is a Bosch work that deftly satirizes the artist's milieu. The painting, the only surviving part of a broader triptych, depicts ***ten fools adrift at sea***. The fools include a ***lute playing nun and a friar***, a man trying to ***row with a giant ladle***, and a man trying to climb the ship's mast to ***grab a roasted bird tied to it***.

Buzz On: ***The Haywain Triptych***, Bosch used the symbol of the haywain to explore the idea of sin, depicting a massive haywain that drags people along with it; ***The Last Judgment triptych***, a work similar to *The Garden of Earthly Delights* that depicts the entire arc of human history from the Garden of Eden to the last Judgment.



## ***Pieter Bruegel the Elder***

Land of Fantasy: Pieter Bruegel the Elder, like his predecessor Bosch, had something of a morbid streak. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the apocalyptic fantasy ***The Triumph of Death***. This expansive oil painting features ***an army of skeletons overrunning the world***. *The Triumph of Death* rewards close scrutiny, with a story nearly everywhere you look. ***A king in the lower left corner reaches in vain for his gold***, and just above him a ***hurdy-gurdy playing skeleton crushes humans beneath a cart***. The painting's main action, to the right side of the canvas, shows the skeletal army herding the surviving remnants of humanity into a giant, ***coffin-shaped prison marked by a cross***.

Domesticity: Bruegel isn't all just murderous skeletons though. His eye for minute detail is also exemplified in paintings like ***The Hunters in the Snow***. The lower right corner of the wintry scene is occupied by the titular despondent hunters ***and their dogs*** returning to town. In the near background townspeople ***play hockey and curling on a frozen lake***. The far background depicts ***snow-capped mountains***, a geographic feature indicating that the depicted village isn't a Belgian one.





The Distant Past: Bruegel's paintings also reference the mythical and religious past. One of his most famous scenes of the former is his ***Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*** (below). Interestingly, the painting with this title currently on display in Brussels is no longer believed to have been painted by Bruegel. Art historians believe ***it may instead be a copy of one of the master's earlier compositions of the same scene***. We can't be sure what details were in Bruegel's initial painting, but the extant painting displays a ***farmer plowing in the foreground***. The casual observer may miss the only sign of Icarus—a ***single leg emerging from the water behind a sailing vessel***.

Scenes from the Homeland: Bruegel's wide-ranging art often combined universal themes with the particulars of his homeland. ***Netherlandish Proverbs***, originally called ***The Blue Cloak***, is an oil-on-oak painting depicting humans and animals engaged in literal representations of Netherlandish proverbs. While there are over a hundred proverbs in the painting, some notable ones include: ***a woman tying a devil to the plow*** (symbolizing obstinacy), ***a man spinning a globe on his thumb*** (analogous to "having the world in the palm of your hand"), and ***an armored man tying a bell to a cat*** (representing a foolish, dangerous plan).

Buzz On: ***The Peasant Wedding***, a Bruegel painting of the titular event; ***The Tower of Babel***, a Bruegel painting of the Biblical monument to the folly of human ambitions; ***The Land of Cockaigne***, a comic painting by Bruegel of a fictional land of plenty in which its residents are depicted in a kind of lazy stupor.

## Johannes Vermeer

Land of Fantasy: Vermeer was an artist of the Dutch baroque, and he inherited little of Bruegel or Bosch's taste for macabre scenes of fantasy. However, that is not to say he was incapable of richly symbolic works. ***The Allegory of Faith*** is one such painting, a deeply personal work describing Vermeer's abiding Catholic faith. In the painting a **woman representing the Catholic Church** rests a foot on a globe. The painting's foreground features a **snake**, the traditional symbol of Evil, being crushed by the cornerstone of the Church. Vermeer's ***The Allegory of Painting*** is another work defined by subtle symbolism. Vermeer created a painting of himself painting a model, possibly his daughter. The **map of the Low Countries** in the background of the painting, coupled with a **visual reference to the Habsburg Holy Roman Empire** sets the painting in its wider social context.



Domesticity: Vermeer is celebrated for his paintings of everyday subjects. ***Girl with a Pearl Earring***, perhaps his most famous work, shows an anonymous girl ***in a blue and yellow headscarf*** facing the viewer. Other unknown women appear in Vermeer's artworks, such as the strikingly detailed ***The Milkmaid***.

The Distant Past: The art of Vermeer was concerned with the contemporary, but on occasion he did produce religious paintings. ***Christ in the House of Mary and Martha*** is Vermeer's largest painting, and it depicts Jesus speaking to the two sisters in their home. The coloring is somewhat subtler than in Vermeer's other work, with Christ garbed in a robe that is not in the same ultramarine hue as *Girl with a Pearl Earring* or *The Milkmaid*.

Scenes from the Homeland: The town of ***Delft*** was Vermeer's hometown, and he immortalized it in his cityscape painting, ***View of Delft***. *View of Delft's* tranquility is a testament to Vermeer's skills. The painting balances light (the sun-illuminated ***spire of the New Church of Delft***) with darkness (the clouds overhead). Even the city's roofs are balanced, split ***between blue on one side and red on the other***.

Buzz On: ***The Procuress***, a genre scene set in a brothel, notable for Vermeer including himself on the painting's left side; ***The Astronomer***, a richly-detailed Vermeer painting of the titular scientist intently studying a globe.



Land of Fantasy: Rembrandt, like Vermeer, was an exemplar of the baroque style. Unlike Vermeer, however, he occasionally delved into mythological subjects. Rembrandt's **Danae** depicts the **mother of Perseus** reclined on a luxurious bed, welcoming **Zeus**, who remains just outside of the viewer's field of vision. **The Abduction of Europa** is another depiction of Greek myth, albeit one clothed in the trappings of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Europa is being carried into the ocean by Poseidon **in the guise of a white bull** as the former's friends look on in horror from the shoreline.

Domesticity: Rembrandt's most famous painting, **The Night Watch**, is an exquisite portrait of the civic guard of **Amsterdam. Captain Frans Banninck Cocq**, dressed in black with a red sash, directs the civic guard from the center of the painting alongside his lieutenant **Willem van Ruytenburch**. Behind the pair a young girl, the company's "**mascot**," can be seen holding a dead chicken. To the right of the painting **a dog snarls** at the company's hired drummer. The figures in the painting are nearly life-size, making **The Night Watch** Rembrandt's largest work.



The Distant Past: Some of Rembrandt's most famous paintings are his religious works. He found inspiration from The Old Testament in his ***Belshazzar's Feast***. The painting depicts a memorable scene from ***The Book of Daniel***, in which the Babylonian King Belshazzar reacts in horror to a ***disembodied hand writing a message of doom on the wall***. Rembrandt also dramatized a memorable event from The New Testament in his ***Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee***.

Scenes from the Homeland: Much of Rembrandt's art came from the people of ***Amsterdam***. One of his most famous paintings, ***The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp***, features the titular Amsterdam doctor conducting a public anatomy lesson. The ***black-clad Dr. Tulp*** dissects the arm of a cadaver, ***the former criminal Aris Kindt***. The surgeons watching the lesson, on the left side of the painting, study different parts of Kindt's body with intense concentration.

Buzz On: ***The Syndics of the Draper's Guild (also known as the Sampling Officials)***, a group portrait of officials chosen to assess the quality of cloth sold to drapers by Amsterdam's weavers; ***Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer***, an oil painting featuring the titular philosopher studying a bust of the epic poet.



## Vincent van Gogh

Land of Fantasy: Van Gogh was an artist often at war with reality. This conflict showed up in subtle yet undeniable ways in his art. Although he didn't paint in the gothic style of his Renaissance predecessors or the richly allegorical mode of his Baroque ones, his art still had its moments of unreality. One of the most famous of these was painted as a kind of joke: ***Head of a Skeleton with a Burning Cigarette***. Painted while van Gogh was still relatively young, the painting has endured on as a truly uncanny work of art.

Domesticity: One of van Gogh's seminal early works, ***The Potato Eaters***, depicts the harsh reality of the peasant experience. A small peasant family gathers around a table, below a single candle, to eat the titular item. The painting is **notable for its muted colors** as well as the **coarse features of its subjects**. However, Van Gogh's later depictions of the town of Arles, in such paintings as ***The Night Café***, are notable for their resplendent colors.





The Distant Past: Although van Gogh was deeply preoccupied with religion, it rarely showed up in his works. Later in life, when admitted to an asylum, he **reinterpreted works of Delacroix and Rembrandt** on religious themes. In his original pieces, however, the references to the religious or mythic past were oblique, if any. Some art historians propose that his **Café Terrace at Night** may in fact be a contemporary re-imagining of **The Last Supper**, but opinion is divided on this front.

Scenes from the Homeland: Van Gogh was a prolific painter of his surroundings. **The Starry Night**, perhaps van Gogh's most-beloved painting, is **a painting of van Gogh's view from the window of the asylum at Saint-Rémy**. Everyday people show up in his works as well. Van Gogh famously painted a portrait of the doctor who cared for him while in the asylum, **Dr. Paul Gachet**. The doctor himself looks somewhat like van Gogh, **a red-haired man with a glum expression on his face** who leans his head on his right arm in the 1890 painting.

Buzz On: **At Eternity's Gate (Sorrowing Old Man)**, an 1890 van Gogh painting of a bald-headed old man in a position of profound fatigue or despair, with his head in his hands; **The Yellow House**, van Gogh's home in Arles, which he painted, and briefly served a residence for Paul Gauguin as well.

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