

Education Support Pack For
PRIMARY TEACHERS



THE BOWES
— MUSEUM —

'St Luke Drawing The Virgin and Child'

15th Century

By the workshop of Dieric Bouts
The Elder

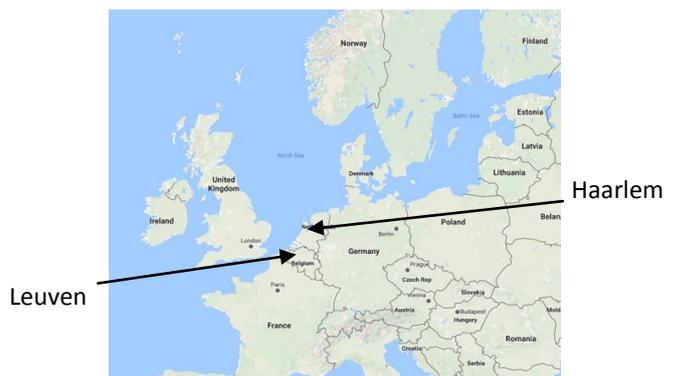
about 1440 – 1475

Oil on Canvas (109.2 cm x 86.4 cm)



All about Bouts

- Dieric Bouts the Elder (born c. 1415 – 1475) was one of the leading and most influential Netherlandish painters of his time.
- Bouts was born in Haarlem (northern Netherlands), but worked mostly in Leuven, where he became city painter in 1468.
- Bouts established a large workshop in Leuven that employed his two sons, Dirk the Younger and Aelbrecht.
- Bouts was married twice and had four children. His two daughters went to convents, and his two sons (Dieric the Younger and Aelbrecht) became painters who carried the Bouts workshop into the mid-16th century.
- Bouts painted religious subjects, from altarpieces to small devotional paintings that people kept in their homes. Bouts painted a range of subjects in a style characterised by elongated, calm, reflective figures, rich, controlled colours, and dignified, understated emotion. He is recognised for painting especially good landscape backgrounds – unusual for the time period as other artists tended to focus only on the religious content in paintings.
- Bouts tried to convey a more powerful religious experience removing the distance between the viewer and the fictive scene in his paintings.
- Paintings by Bouts's workshop are rare in the UK.
- Bouts was the first among his contemporaries to experiment with the use of single-point perspective to create a sense of depth within his paintings (in this painting you can see he is still getting used to the technique!)
- Bouts painted using oil paints. At the time of the painting, artists mixed their own paints using pigments and oils. Bouts used high quality pigments in his paint.



All about the Painting

The painting depicts St. Luke the Evangelist drawing the Virgin Mary and Child.

This extraordinary 15th century oil painting was originally painted onto an oak panel. In 1899 the image was transferred from the wooden panel to canvas by a British conservator. (This is a preventative practice for paintings on panels that are likely to be affected by environmental changes in temperature and relative humidity. It is not a popular practice in the UK but is very popular in countries including Italy, France and Russia.)

Content

- The three figures (the Virgin, Christ Child and St. Luke) are presented in an interior with a tiled floor before an arcade that opens onto a landscape – the viewer's eye is guided through the composition by the patterned tiles.
- The Virgin is seated against a damask cloth of honour and is offering fruit to the naked Christ Child.
- St Luke is sketching a preliminary drawing, in silverpoint, of the Virgin and Christ Child before him. The Saint, who is standing with one knee bent, may also be a self-portrait of the artist, or alternatively a member of the confraternity who commissioned this picture. The position of the Saint is quite unnatural; he is between the standing and kneeling position perhaps showing respect to the Virgin and child.
- Through an open door on the right-hand side of the picture, it is possible to glimpse the framed panel that St. Luke will use to paint the final composition, placed on a three-legged easel. This section of the painting is very important as it shows the artists' practice* of the time.
- This was a popular devotional subject during the C15th Renaissance, especially in the Netherlands, based on the legend of Saint Luke depicting the Virgin with Christ the Child. According to the Golden Legend, St. Luke's Gospel was revealed to him by the Virgin Mary. The Saint became the Virgin's confidant, and this role resulted in the special privilege of painting her with the Christ Child.

* Artists' Practice

Using black paint and a brush, artists drew a preliminary outline of their painting called an 'Underdrawing' (in this case the figures).

What you see in the Bouts painting is exactly this stage, but also the artist has started to use the vermilion pigment to create the red fabric worn by the Virgin.

You can also see the equipment artists used to paint. On view is the artist's palette with the colours used within the painting. Artists at the time made their own paint by crushing minerals into small particles and mixing them with oils to create the pigments.

In the painting you can see the different pigments stored in shells before the artist put them on the palette. You can also see the artist's brushes.

The significance

- This painting is of outstanding interest and national and international importance.
- It is closely linked with Dieric Bouts, an artist of European significance whose works are rare in general and especially in the United Kingdom.
- It illustrates a remarkable devotional and art historical subject that can be seen as a commentary on the wider fifteenth-century Netherlandish religious context, workshop practice and the changing status of the artist.
- The provenance of the painting is not fully known as there are no documents accompanying the picture. It is believed it could have been commissioned by the guild of Saint Luke for a chapel or by a wealthy private patron for display in their private chapel within their home. However, its large size suggests that it might have been conceived for a public space. It could have been displayed as a centrepiece with other artwork displayed on both sides.

Using the Painting across the Curriculum

Before looking at the painting:

With the pupils' eyes closed, introduce some key vocabulary from the painting and describe the painting to help the children to build the scene in their imagination; 'There is a lady seated with a baby on her lap...'

Pass around objects from the painting in a canvas bag so that children can feel and describe them, such as rich heavy fabric, pencil, piece of fruit... Now look at the painting.

Show the children only half of the painting. Can they imagine what the other half of the painting looks like?

Ask the children to share what they can see in the painting.

Ask open ended questions: Imagine you are in the painting what would you see, hear, feel?

Can the children choose their favourite character and copy their pose. Get the class to recreate the composition.

LINES OF ENQUIRY

Lines of enquiry begin with themes in the painting and extend to make meaningful connections and broad learning experiences. Projects that enrich learning will emerge as you explore the different contexts and possibilities that the painting creates for you and your pupils.

Portraiture: Why did people have their portraits painted? How has this changed over time? Try drawing a portrait of someone in your class.

Religion: Who is depicted in the painting? Why is this important? Where do you think a painting like this might have been displayed? Look at other paintings of the Virgin and Christ Child, what similarities and differences can you see?

Patterns: Look at the intricate patterns in the painting. Look around you – patterns are everywhere! Create a pattern design for tiles in a room by either drawing, painting or collaging.

Costume: Look at the clothing worn by the figures in the painting – what would it have been like to wear and what does it say about them? Think about how different clothing is today.

Single Point Perspective: In this painting Bouts attempts to use single point perspective to guide the viewer's eye through the painting and create a sense of depth. However, the use of single point perspective is not very accurate (look at the tiles and columns). Look at other paintings which have used single point perspective – how do they differ?

Recreate the Image: Split the painting into smaller sections and give each child a section of the painting to recreate – when the class gather their work together they will be able to recreate the image.

Glossary

Damask: a rich, heavy silk or linen fabric with a pattern woven into it, used for table linen and upholstery.

Evangelist: a person who seeks to convert others to the Christian faith, especially by public preaching. The writer of one of the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John).

Renaissance: marks the period of European history at the close of the Middle Ages and the rise of the Modern world. It represents a cultural rebirth from the 14th through the middle of the 17th centuries.

Single Point Perspective: perspective drawings make objects appear more realistic, as they appear to recede as they get further away. If the receding lines are extended they will meet at points that are called vanishing points. Single-point perspective drawings use one vanishing point, and are used to draw room interiors.

Pigment: A pigment is a coloured substance used in paint.


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Workshop of Dieric Bouts The Elder (c.1415-1475)

St Luke Drawing The Virgin and Child

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