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*Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness*

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Freedom

## Freedom

Life has been full of events that have altered our sense of reality. Whether it be catastrophic wars that damaged the minds of many, plagues that shook the core of humanity, or periods of enlightenment that sparked revolutions across the globe, all these events are reminders of human fragility. Yet, in this chaos, life has always managed to find a way to overcome its delicate nature. A prime example of this is depicted through Anthony van Dyck's recreation of *Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness*. The large painting was created during a time of great distress and grievance, given that Van Dyck was quarantined due to the Great Plague of Milan (TheMet). The finalized artwork allows the viewer to understand who Anthony van Dyck was, what inspired him to create such a painting, and allows insight into the history of the artwork, the life of John the Baptist, and his role in biblical times.

Anthony van Dyck was a Flemish Baroque artist who began his career at the early age of 11, by apprenticing for a well-respected Flemish painter Hendrik Van Balen. His ability to master portraits facilitated his acceptance into the Antwerp Guild of Painters before the age of 19 (MasterWorksFineArts). He spent the following years as a member of Peter Paul Ruben's workshop, in which he utilized and mimicked the same art style as Rubens (MFA). He then matured beyond the Flemish robustness and acquired a more flamboyant and elegant art form. "In his portraits of Italian aristocrats- men on prancing horses, ladies in black gowns- he created idealized figures with proud, erect stances, slender figures, and the famous expressive 'van Dyck' hands" (MFA). He was also heavily influenced by Paolo Veronese and Giovanni Bellini, in which he began to adopt rich, warm colors. Although this color scheme is not vividly presented in his interpretation of *John the Baptist in the Wilderness*, the viewer is still able to

hint at his Venetian influences when observing the hands and deep red of John the Baptist's coverings.

Born in the first decade BCE, Saint John the Baptist spent the majority of his life in obscurity. He lived in the desert, where he began to prophesize eschatological views, emphasizing the idea that both the end times and the coming of the kingdom of heaven were near. Saint John was known by the locals as the "voice crying in the wilderness," given that he preached about the coming Messiah to wanderers. He was always seen by his disciples to be clothed in camel hair and consumed locust and honey. His outward appearance demonstrated his innocent and humble nature which was also evident in his denial of being anything greater than what God ordained. He is viewed as one of the most important theological figures by contemporary scholars, but during his lifetime, Saint John understood his role in the plan of salvation and constantly denied the idea that he was Christ, or that he was Elijah reincarnated.

Despite his objections, Jesus affirmed the fact that Elijah must come first and that he had come in the person of John the Baptist, who was chosen by God as the greatest among men and given the privilege of pointing to the Lamb of God (Simmons). He was a witness to the life of Jesus Christ, and his death foreshadowed the coming pain and suffering that Christ would endure. At the age of 32, Saint John died violently on the birthday of King Herod Antipas. His death was orchestrated by Herodias, the wife and niece of Herod Antipas, who encouraged her daughter to perform a provocative dance designed to please the king and his guests (gotquestions.org). The performance found favor in the king, who promised to give the young girl anything that she desired (Mark 6:22-23). She then went to her mother and begged for guidance, to which Herodias responded, "Ask for the head of John the Baptist!" (Mark 6:24). The young girl then returned to King Herod Antipas and asked for what her mother desired.

Ultimately, Saint John the Baptist was decapitated and his head was set on a platter that was displayed during the banquet (gotquestions.org). The pain and torment that Saint John the Baptist experienced in his final moments is beautifully intertwined with the powerful nature of God's grace in van Dyck's recreation of *Saint John the Baptist in the Wilderness*.

Upon viewing the painting, Saint John is centered in the middle and stands in contrast to the darkness surrounding him. His body emanates the main light source in the painting, which follows the popular method of illustrating the divine during the High Renaissance. Van Dyck uses his skill with luminance and color to illustrate that Saint John the Baptist played a crucial role in God's ultimate salvation plan. Additionally, He is almost completely nude, apart from the covering he has laid across his legs. This piece of clothing relates to his austere lifestyle, in which he only used clothes made from camel hair while living in the wilderness. The near nudity of Saint John the Baptist also serves as an illustration of his innocence and purity, while simultaneously presenting his eventual martyrdom. This style of painting became popular during the High Renaissance, when "imagery of the nude or mostly unclothed bodies of saints and biblical heroes and heroines functioned in religious observance and private devotion, representing, at times graphically, their torture and martyrdom" (getty.edu).

His role as the eschatological preacher who laid the way for Jesus Christ is also evinced by the figures around him. He is reading from the Bible in his left hand and holding a cross in his right. Additionally, there is a lamb seated at his feet which symbolizes his appointment as the figure who would point towards the Lamb of God. It also serves as a reminder that Saint John is not only Elijah (Matthew 11:14) but also the figure who baptized Jesus Christ (Matthew 3:13-17). His bold figure is presented in van Dyck's Venetian influence, as a powerful and beautiful figure. Saint John sits boldly, with his chest pointed out in a collected manner, despite the

impending storm seen in the background. The chaos behind him symbolizes his nearing death at the hands of the King. Yet, he sits in the middle of the wilderness, reading from the Holy Bible as he so often would, with no fear but of God himself.

The painting of *Saint John the Baptist*, as recreated by Anthony van Dyck, is a monumental masterpiece that illuminates the concealed unity between bondage and prosperity. Not only is the key figure in the painting a very important theological person, but his mere character is the epitome of freedom. During the creation of this artwork, Anthony van Dyck was a victim of his earthly reality. The Great Plague of Milan forced him to be locked away in a dull room. During this concealment, he painted a figure that stood for freedom. A man who traveled through nature, with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, to fulfill God's promise. While nature treated van Dyck harshly, Saint John found sanctuary in the veiled land. Thus, it is no surprise that van Dyck would draft such a figure during times of containment. One can only assume, that the storm behind Saint John represents the troubling times van Dyck was encountering. His death, though tragic, was necessary for Jesus Christ to continue his journey. Which in a morbid turn of events, reveals the harmonious relationship between chaos and creation.

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