

The Life of Joris Hoefnagel, Painter and Poet, of Antwerp

From Karel van Mander's Schilder-Boeck of 1604,

I find among us Netherlanders a better custom than is commonly practised among many other peoples: namely, that parents, even when they are wealthy, often have their children taught some art or craft while still young. This is especially valuable in times of war and misfortune, for experience shows that the hardships and ill fortune of this world have far less power over skill than over riches. The art one learns in youth often becomes, in times of greatest need, the final anchor of hope and a comforting refuge, preserving one from the miserable shipwreck of crushing poverty.

This proved very true in the case of the exceptionally gifted Joris Hoefnagel of Antwerp, who was born in 1545 to very wealthy parents. They intended him for commerce and constantly urged him towards the merchant's profession, against his natural inclination. For all, or nearly all, of his desire was directed towards painting, and he could not refrain, either at home or at school, from doing what Mother Nature continually prompted him to do.

If the schoolmaster took away his paper, he gathered dust or sand from the floor and drew in it with a stick or with his finger. At home he secretly hid himself in the attic with chalk. On one occasion he even drew the outline of one of his own hands upon a plank with the other hand.

An ambassador of the Duke of Savoy, who happened to be staying in his father's house, saw this and spoke highly of the boy's talent. His schoolmaster likewise praised him, with the result that Hoefnagel was allowed, at least to some extent, to devote himself to drawing.

He was also educated in literature and scholarship, for which he possessed considerable natural ability. In time he became a very learned man and an accomplished poet.

When he began travelling and visiting foreign countries, he compiled a very large book containing everything remarkable that he found or observed. He recorded methods of agriculture, wine presses, hydraulic works, customs of daily life, marriages, weddings, dances, festivals, and countless other things besides. Everywhere he went he was constantly at work. He drew every town and castle from life, together with all kinds of costumes and dress. These may be seen in a printed book of towns in which, beside the views executed in a highly painterly manner, appears the name Hoefnagel.

While he was in Cádiz (Calis) in Spain, a Netherlandish painter living there sent him a box containing various watercolours. With these he painted a very attractive view of the city of Cádiz. This was the first time he had ever worked in colour.

After returning to the Netherlands, bringing with him many curiosities, including drawings of exotic animals, trees, and other remarkable things, he received some instruction from Hans Bol.

Eventually, while living in Antwerp, he lost everything he possessed through his mercantile business. Together with his father he traded in jewels, and they had concealed many thousands of guilders' worth of valuables in a well. Only a maidservant and his wife knew of the hiding place. Through one of these, the Spanish soldiers discovered it, and everything fell into their plundering hands during the sack that is known as the Spanish Fury.

After this Hoefnagel travelled with the famous geographer Abraham Ortelius to Venice. Passing through Augsburg, they were warmly received by the wealthy Fugger family, who advised them to visit the Kunstkammer of the Duke of Bavaria in Munich.

Armed with a letter of recommendation from the Fuggers, they were granted an audience with the Duke, who showed them his entire collection. The Duke asked Hoefnagel whether he possessed any examples of his own work. Hoefnagel showed him two miniature portraits—one of himself and one of his first wife—as well as a small illuminated piece depicting animals and trees painted on parchment.

After they had returned to their inn, the Duke sent his steward—or another gentleman of the court—to ask what price Hoefnagel wanted for the little illumination of the animals, since he was unwilling to part with the portraits. Hoefnagel, who had never presented himself as a painter nor claimed any artistic distinction, felt embarrassed to ask anything for it. Ortelius therefore answered on his behalf and requested one hundred gold crowns, which the Duke immediately paid. He also asked Hoefnagel to remain in his service, an offer Hoefnagel accepted on the understanding that he would first complete his journey through Italy.

The Duke further gave him two hundred gold crowns so that his wife might travel from the Netherlands. When Hoefnagel returned to Munich he found that she had already arrived.

Thus Hoefnagel discovered through his art something better than he had been seeking. For he had originally travelled abroad intending to earn his living in Venice as a factor or commercial agent.

With Ortelius he also travelled to Rome, where they visited Cardinal Farnese. The Cardinal asked Ortelius what sort of man Hoefnagel was, whereupon the two miniature illuminations were shown to him. The Cardinal was so impressed that he wished to retain Hoefnagel in his own service and offered him one thousand guilders a year.

Hoefnagel, however, excused himself, saying that he had already pledged his word to the Duke of Bavaria. The Cardinal, who dearly loved art and took the greatest pleasure in such things, regretted this deeply, for he had recently lost his outstanding illuminator Don Giulio da Caravaggio, whose noble and skilful spirit they had seen depart this life.

Returning from Rome and Venice, Hoefnagel entered the Duke's service, where he enjoyed generous support. He received an annual allowance together with a velvet suit and a fine cloak.

Archduke Ferdinand of Innsbruck also granted him two hundred florins—equal to four hundred guilders a year—for eight years, during which time Hoefnagel undertook to illuminate a magnificently written missal. In this manuscript, being ingenious, learned, and exceptionally inventive, he filled the margins, the letters, and every available space with all manner of symbolic devices, explanatory emblems, and ingenious allusions connected with the adjacent text. He illustrated these with delightful little historical scenes of every kind.

At the end of the agreed eight years he delivered the completed book, so extraordinarily executed and so full of work that one could scarcely believe that any man could accomplish so much by hand in an entire lifetime. For this the Archduke rewarded him with two thousand gold crowns and a gold chain worth another hundred crowns.

Hoefnagel also produced for Emperor Rudolf II four books: one containing all four-footed animals, another of creeping creatures, a third of birds and flying creatures, and a fourth of fish and other swimming animals. For these he received one thousand gold crowns in cash.

He likewise illuminated a book written by what he considered the finest calligrapher in the world, consisting of examples of many different scripts. Around these he devised a rich variety of symbolic decorations, making the volume exceedingly beautiful and delightful to behold.

Through this work he entered the Emperor's service, where he was handsomely rewarded and provided with a generous annual salary.

In these provinces I know of little of his work, except for a very charming little painting owned by Jacques Razet of Amsterdam, well worthy of preservation.

To escape the disturbances and intrigues of court life, Hoefnagel settled in Vienna. He was always eager to learn and to acquire knowledge. He spent many nights awake, and was usually up by four o'clock every morning, never idle. He was constantly composing verses, Latin poems (*carmina*), or engaging in some other intellectual pursuit, in all of which he showed remarkable talent. His command of Latin was so complete that, with a Latin book before him, he could read it aloud in Dutch as fluently as though it had originally been written in Dutch.

He was a most kind-hearted and generous man, who knew how to relate everything with good judgement and eloquence.

He died in the year 1600, at the age of fifty-five.

He left behind a son, Jacob Hoefnagel, who became an accomplished and experienced painter.