

# ANTOON VAN DYCK, EUROPEAN GENIUS

■ By Lucy Gordan



*The Four Ages of Man*, by Antoon van Dyck (1625-27), depicts infancy, youth — the young woman offering a gift of roses — adulthood — the soldier — and old age. It is on loan from Museo Civico di Palazzo Chiericati in Vicenza.

(Wikimedia Commons)

Open to the public until July 19, 2026, the *Palazzo Ducale* in Genoa is hosting, in the Doge's Apartment, *Van Dyck, the European: The Journey of a Genius from Antwerp to Genoa and London*. This is the most extensive monographic exhibition of the past 25 years dedicated to the Flemish painter Antoon Van Dyck (1599-1641), best known for his portraits.

Because of his peripatetic life, Van Dyck was a European painter in the literal sense of the term. Born in Antwerp to a family of wealthy silk merchants with artistic talents, Antoon painted from an early age, and during his late teens studied with Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), the leading northern European painter of the day, who became his mentor.

In 1620 or 1621, on Rubens' advice, he followed in Rubens' footsteps to Italy and for some six years settled in Genoa — hence the exhibition's location. Genoa, where Rubens had also lived between 1600 and 1607, was at its peak of power, and its art-loving merchant aristocracy customarily commissioned elegant, full-length portraits to display their wealth and influence. The city also had a strong, established community of Flemish artists, including the painters Cornelis and Lucas de Wael, who assisted Van Dyck upon his arrival, but soon grew to dislike him because of his fawnish behavior and over-elegant cloth-

ing. A devout Catholic, Van Dyck also visited Rome, Mantua, Florence, Turin and Venice to study Titian, his favorite painter, and Palermo, where he, quarantined during the 1624 plague, painted several canvases of Saint Rosalie.

Concerning Titian, at the instigation of George Villiers, Marquis of Buckinghamshire, Van Dyck had gone to England for the first time where he worked for King James I. It had been in London that, in the collection of the Earl of Arundel, he first saw the work of Titian. The Venetian's use of color and subtle modeling of form would prove transformational for Van Dyck. They offered him a new stylistic language that would enrich Rubens' earlier compositional lessons.

In 1630, King Charles, a passionate art collector who saw painting as a way of promoting his elevated view of the monarchy as well as a way to bring leading foreign painters to England, persuaded Rubens to move to England, and two years later Van Dyck followed his mentor's example. In London, Van Dyck was very well paid, provided with a home and a pension, a suite of rooms in the royal country retreat of Eltham Palace, and knighted. Until his death a decade later in London, Van Dyck, by then the official court painter, painted almost exclusively portraits of many members of the nobility and royal family, who hardly ever sat for another painter as long as Van Dyck



Left, *Self-portrait with a Sunflower*, after 1633, in a private collection. (Wikipedia)

Below, Earliest self-portrait of Van Dyck on loan from Vienna. (Wikipedia)

Right, *Portrait of Van Dyck* by Rubens, in the Royal Collection, London. (Wikipedia)



lived. He died in his Blackfriars studio on the Thames on December 9, 1641, and was buried two days later in the choir of St. Paul's Cathedral. His mortal remains and tomb, erected by King Charles, were destroyed in the Great Fire of London in 1666.

Over 50 of his more than 900 paintings are on display in Genoa, on loan from 32 museums and foundations across 22 European cities. These include the Louvre, the Prado, the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, London's National Gallery, the Uffizi, Milan's Brera Pinacoteca, Turin's Musei Reali, the Belgian Phoebus Foundation, and the Portuguese Gaudium Magnum Collection.

The works aren't displayed in chronological order, but arranged in 10 thematic sections, which highlight Van Dyck's adaptability and artistic evolution. These include "Power and Portraiture," which examines his work for aristocratic and royal clients; "Van Dyck's Three Homelands" — Flanders, Italy (specifically Genoa) and England; "Youthful Self-portraits" — the early evidence of his artistic style; "Genoese Aristocracy" — portraits reflecting his impact on the local elite, including his "portrait in red" style; "Mythology"; "Religion"; "International Portraiture" — a comparison of his styles in his three homelands; and the "Van Dyck Style" — how he defined the image of nobility.

This thematic approach highlights how he captured the spirit of each location where he worked so that his art evolved, adapted and reached maturity —

while consistently gaining international admiration and success.

Among the highlights of the exhibition is the earliest known self-portrait by the artist, painted when Van Dyck was approximately 15 years old. On loan from the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, this work opens the exhibition and immediately reveals the artist's extraordinary talent.

*St. Sebastian Bound For Martyrdom*, on loan from the National Galleries of Scotland. (Wikimedia Commons)



Other exceptional loans include the *Portrait of Charles V on Horseback* from the Uffizi; *Portrait of Alessandro, Vincenzo and Francesco Maria Giustiniani Longo* from London's National Gallery; *Samson and Delilah* from London's Dulwich Picture Gallery; and *Portrait of the Palatine Princes* from the Louvre. Also of great impact are a strikingly modern study for the figure of *Saint Jerome*, painted life-size and belonging to the Phoebus Foundation, and *The Four Ages of Man* from the Civic Museum of Palazzo Chiericati in Vicenza.

While Van Dyck the portraitist is represented with works from every phase of his career, visitors will also discover, perhaps for the first time, Van Dyck's religious paintings. This section includes celebrated masterpieces such as the monumental *Mystic Mar-*

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riage of Saint Catherine from the Prado and the intense *Saint Sebastian* from Edinburgh's Scottish National Gallery, alongside remarkable and previously unseen works, including an *Ecce Homo* from a European private collection.

Removed from the altar of the small church of San Michele di Pagana (Rapallo) — a rare event — and on display in *Palazzo Ducale*, is the only altarpiece Van Dyck ever created for a public setting: a monumental and deeply moving *Crucifixion*.

Van Dyck's paintings that are located permanently or long-term in Genoa, and not in this exhibition, are primarily housed in the Palazzo Rosso (Musei di Strada Nuova), the Palazzo Reale (Galleria Nazionale di Palazzo Spinola), and the Galleria Nazionale di Palazzo di Palazzo Spinola. They are mainly portraits of the Genoese aristocracy of the 1620s. Of particular importance in the Palazzo Rosso is the *Portrait of a Gentleman*, a



Left, *St. Rosalie Crowned by Two Angels*, The Wellington Collection, Apsley House, London. (Wikipedia)



Right, *The Crucifixion*, in the Church of San Michele di Pagana. (Courtesy of the parish)

member of the Spinola Family and *Christ Carrying the Cross*; the Palazzo Reale houses several Van Dycks including the masterpieces *Portrait of Caterina Balbi Durazzo* and his *Dying Christ*; and in the Galleria Nazionale di Palazzo Spinola are the *Portrait of Ansaldo Pallavicino* and the *Portrait of a Genoese Gentlewoman with a Child*.

Outside of Italy, many museums own Van Dycks: The Met, Dresden's Gemäldegalerie, Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum, St. Petersburg's Hermitage Museum, Antwerp's KMSKA, and the

Baltimore Museum of Art.

And not to be omitted is the fact that The Prado houses one of the most important collections of his early works and portraits; and in London's National Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery hang his portraits painted during the last decade of his life as court painter to King Charles I.○