

## Jan Wouters van Kuyck, Anabaptist Artist

*Narrator:* “Jan Wouters van Kuyck was a citizen of Dordrecht in Holland, and, according to a contemporary chronicler, ‘a man of blameless life and conversation . . . a skilful writer upon glass and painter.’ Jan Wouters was also an Anabaptist.

Early in 1572 there was a crackdown on Anabaptists in Dordrecht. Jan frequently changed where he lived, so as not to be so easily recognised. But the bailiff learned where he was staying and came with his officers and unexpectedly, without asking anything, ascended the stairs. Jan Wouters met him just as he opened the door.”

*Bailiff:* “Does Jan Wouters reside here?”

*Narrator:* “Jan Wouters was not willing to speak contrary to the truth.”

*Jan* (very loudly): “Yes, it’s me. I’m Jan Wouters van Kuyck.”

*Narrator:* “He spoke these words very loudly, so that his wife, who was in the back room, could hear it and make her escape, which she did. But their only daughter, a child of seven, remained in the room and saw her father arrested. The police ignored her. They immediately laid their hands upon Jan, and forcibly tied him up.

*Jan:* “O my lords, you are binding me, as if I were a wicked man; however, you are binding not me, but yourselves.”

*Narrator:* “Jan spent many weeks in the filthy Dordrecht jail. At times the officials treated him decently. One day the bailiff, who was still young and beardless, came up to Jan.”

*Bailiff:* “Jan, I’d like you to paint a portrait of me.”

*Jan:* “Oh?”

*Bailiff:* “I’d like you to paint me in the attitude of Solomon, where he pronounces his first sentence. You know the scene, from 1 Kings 3.”

*Jan:* “All right, all right. You get me the brushes and paint.”

*Narrator:* “The Catholic clergy were angry at this. It was delaying things.”

*Priest:* “Isn’t he disgusting, that bailiff? He’s got that prisoner – that heretic – painting his portrait, as *Solomon*. He arrested him only to have himself painted by him.”

*Narrator:* “But Jan also received brutal treatment. He was placed on the rack, and tortured terribly; the pain in his whole body was intense, and especially so in his hands. He struggled to get his hands – his painter’s hands – to write a letter to his wife.”

*Jan:* “I wrote the first page just after I had been tortured; so it is somewhat badly written. Now my hand is a little better; but I still have the marks of the sufferings of Christ; His name be praised forever.”

*Narrator:* “The officers also racked him some more, and beat him on his back. He was in great pain.”

*Torturer:* “How does this suit you? Unless you tell us about your network I will tear open your old wounds.”

*Jan:* “Dear wife, it is hard to write this to you. After further threats the torturer then let me down again, and placed me before the lords, upon the rack, sitting with my eyes blindfolded. You know the *Ecce Homo*, the work of art in which Christ is depicted appearing before Pilate? That’s how I must have looked. And the officials asked me whether I would now tell them about my Anabaptist contacts. I said that I couldn’t do it; so he racked me again, which caused me incredible pain; and when he shook me, and jerked the rope, the pain got even worse. When they could obtain nothing from me, they let me down.”

*Bailiff:* “Your face is as sweet as that of an angel, but your heart is harder than Pharaoh’s heart.”

*Jan:* “No, you know that this is not so; and the Lord will make it clear hereafter; I have simply sought my salvation.”

*Narrator:* “From prison Jan wrote letters not only to his wife but to his daughter.”

*Jan:* “Jesus said (Lk 9.23), ‘If any want to become my disciples, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.’ Remember, dear daughter, that he also said (Jn 15.20), ‘If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you.’ My beloved, I urge you, join the people who carry their crosses. That’s the way to come to Christ. He bore the cross for us. We must follow in his footsteps, and be like our Lord, the disciple like his master; and as we suffer with him, so we shall forever rejoice with him.

*Narrator:* “Jan then told his daughter what the signs were of the cross-bearing Christian.”

*Jan:* “They are not conformed to the world; they crucify their sinful flesh more and more every day . . . they strive after things that are honest and of good report; they do evil to no one; they pray for their enemies and do not resist them; their word is their seal – their yes is yes and their no is no . . .”

*Narrator:* “On Paul Sunday, 1572, Jan and Adriaenken, an Anabaptist woman leader, were gagged and led out to be executed. But Jan got the piece of wood out of his mouth.”

*Jan (loudly):* “O Lord, strengthen your feeble servant; and your poor handmaiden. It is for your name’s sake that we have come to this for which we have willingly prepared ourselves.”

*Narrator:* “The hangman then strangled Adriaenken before burning her. Before Jan was burned, he saw in the crowd some members of his Anabaptist congregation. He called out to them.”

*Jan (loudly):* “Adieu and farewell, my dear brothers and sisters, I commend you to the Lord, to the Lord who shed his blood for us.”

*Narrator:* “Then the fire was lit, and the Anabaptist artist was burned alive.”

(Based on T.J. Van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror* pp. 897ff.)

### For Reflection

1. Anabaptists are often regarded as being “against culture”. Jan was an Anabaptist artist whose hands were so damaged by torture that he was prevented from continuing to paint. Were Anabaptists really against culture or simply excluded from this?
2. According to the torturer, Jan was part of a sixteenth-century Anabaptist Network. What contributions to mission, renewal and discipleship might such networks make that institutions and congregations cannot?
3. Inquisitors regarded heretics as ‘wicked’ by definition. But a contemporary chronicler described Jan as ‘a man of blameless life and conversation’. Like many Anabaptist martyrs he did not seem to be a ‘wicked heretic’. Why did this caricature persist?
4. Where do we find today ‘the people who carry their crosses’? How do we in a more tolerant culture relate to this tradition of suffering?