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# The Limping Chicken

The UK's deaf culture, news and arts site! Laying eggs since 2012

## Dr Rosamund Oates: The nicknames of famous deaf artists from history (BSL)

Posted on August 19, 2024 by *Editor*



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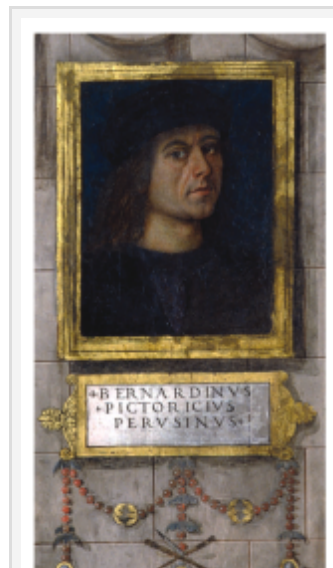
*Some of the most popular artists of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries were deaf and could charge really high prices for their work. But despite their talent they were usually given nicknames to do with their deafness.*

### Famous Deaf Artists

What does the Sistine Chapel, a Spanish palace, and a frozen canal in Holland have in common? They were all painted by deaf artists in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, who were some of the most famous, and best paid, artists in Europe.

The Sistine chapel is in the Pope's official palace in Vatican City, in Rome. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, at the height of the Italian Renaissance, Pope Sixtus IV commissioned a team of the very best painters to decorate the chapel.

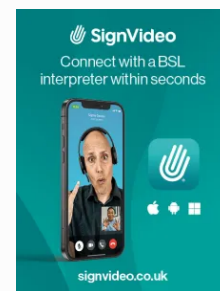
Michelangelo painted the famous ceiling, but before he started, other famous artists were employed to paint the walls – including an Italian man called **Bernadino di Betto** (1454- 1513). Bernardino di Betto was deaf and had grown up in northern Italy where he trained



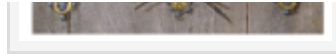
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to be an artist. The Pope and his family were so impressed with Bernadino's work on the Sistine Chapel that they employed him to paint their new apartments in the Vatican palace.



He was then asked to do wall paintings (frescos) and paintings for cathedrals across Italy, and for wealthy families. We only know that he was deaf because of his nicknames – 'sordicchio' (meaning little deaf man in Italian) and 'pinturicchio' (little painter). These nicknames were used widely at the time and are still used today. even though Bernardino did not describe himself as 'sordicchio'.

Fifty years later, another deaf man was one of the most celebrated artists of Spain. He was **Juan Fernandez Navarrete** (1526 – 1579). Navarrete was very ill when he was two or three and lost his hearing completely. His family then sent him to a local monastery in Spain, where he learned to draw and to paint. He was so talented that his family then agreed to send him to Italy to study with the best painters in Europe. He studied with artists in Naples, Milan, and Rome for fourteen years, and though his parents complained about how much money it cost them, Navarrete became incredibly skilled at drawing and painting.

In 1563, one of the most powerful men in the Western world, Philip II Spain decided to build himself a new palace. This was *El Escorial*, outside Madrid. It was a huge undertaking and is still the largest renaissance building in the world. Philip wanted the best artists and craftsmen for his palace, and so he summoned Juan Fernandez Navarrete from Italy. Juan Fernandez knew his worth, and he bargained with the King and his advisors to ensure he was paid a decent wage. Yet, despite Juan Fernandez Navarrete's skill, he was known by the nickname *El Mudo* (this means 'the mute' in Spanish). And the name stuck: over the

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following centuries, art collectors referred to him as 'El Mudo' rather than using his proper name.



In another part of Europe, one of the most famous artists of the Dutch Republic was a deaf man called **Hendrick Avercamp** (1585-1643). Hendrick was born in Amsterdam and grew up in a small town nearby, and he seems to have been deaf from birth. In his early 20s Avercamp's parents sent him back to Amsterdam to train with a friend of theirs who was a painter. He completed an apprenticeship there, and then returned to live with his parents in the small Dutch town of Kampen. This is the setting for Avercamp's famous landscapes: pictures of frozen canals in the dead of winter. You will probably recognise his pictures and you may have even received one as a Christmas card.

Hendrick Avercamp was incredibly popular during his lifetime and afterwards. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, his paintings were some of the most expensive sold in Amsterdam and it seemed that everyone wanted one of his paintings on their wall. When you look at his paintings you can see why – they are full of life. People skate on frozen canals, other people stand around chatting or eating, often there are cheeky elements too – a naked bottom where someone has slipped over on the ice for example! His paintings were also political statements. They were a celebration of Dutch life at a time when the Netherlanders were

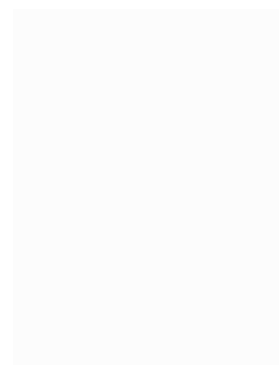
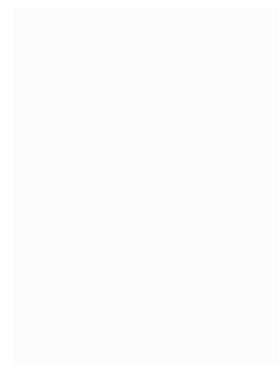
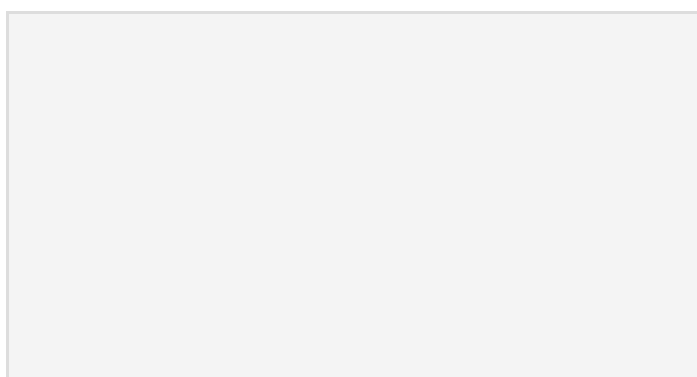
trying to gain independence from Spain, fighting a war that lasted around 80 years.

We know what Henrick Avercamp wanted to be called because he signed his paintings. This was a relatively new idea, showing that painters were starting to be recognised as artists. It was also a form of branding. Hendrick Avercamp signed his pictures with his name, or with his initials, but this is not how contemporaries knew him. Instead, they called him 'De Stomme' (which means 'the mute' in Dutch). And just like the Spanish artist, Fernandez Juan Navarrete, the name stuck for hundreds of years.

These three painters were some of the best artists in Europe, employed to work on the most prestigious projects of the time. Their art was owned by some of the wealthiest families of the day, and millions of people see their paintings today in galleries across Europe and America. Galleries are just starting to realise that it is not ok to use nicknames like 'El Mudo' or 'De Stomme': these are not the names that the artists themselves used. Instead, as one 17<sup>th</sup> century Spanish author wrote, the paintings 'speak' for themselves.

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2 Responses “Dr Rosamund Oates: The nicknames of famous deaf artists from history (BSL)” →

David  
August 19, 2024

Hmmm... Nick names? Really?

I wonder whether the author would describe women artists who were referred to as “The little woman” or “The painter with breasts”, or “The artist with a vagina” as having nick names – or might she perhaps call them sexist labels, rather like the

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audist labels above?

Michael

August 21, 2024

Interesting article and thanks for the information. Another artist, who became deaf rather than born deaf, was Goya. Yes, they are audist labels but that's how society worked at the time. People were often named by their occupation – shoemaker or shumacher. A Spanish rally driver has the name Dani Sordo (deaf) possibly because his family was historically deaf?

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