

Anton Van Leeuwenhoek, By Mary Bellis

Anton Van Leeuwenhoek of Holland (1632-1723), started as an apprentice in a dry goods store where magnifying glasses were used to count the threads in cloth. Anton van Leeuwenhoek was inspired by the magnifying glasses used to inspect the quality of cloth. He taught himself new methods for grinding and polishing tiny lenses of great curvature which gave magnifications up to 270x diameters, the finest known at that time.

These lenses led to the building of Anton Van Leeuwenhoek's microscopes which are considered the first practical microscopes, and the biological discoveries for which he is famous. Anton Van Leeuwenhoek was the first to see and describe bacteria (1674), yeast plants, the teeming life in a drop of water, and the circulation of blood corpuscles in capillaries. During a long life he used his lenses to make pioneer studies on an extraordinary variety of things, both living and non-living, and reported his findings in over a hundred letters to the Royal Society of England and the French Academy.

"My work, which I've done for a long time, was not pursued in order to gain the praise I now enjoy, but chiefly from a craving after knowledge, which I notice resides in me more than in most other men. And therewithal, whenever I found out anything remarkable, I have thought it my duty to put down my discovery on paper, so that all ingenious people might be informed thereof." - Anton Van Leeuwenhoek Letter of June 12, 1716

None of Anton Van Leeuwenhoek's microscopes exist today. His instruments were made of gold and silver and were sold by his family after he died, none have been found.

Questions:

1. How did the discoveries of Anton Van Leeuwenhoek affect human life?
2. How did the technological advance made by the development of the microscope influence the progress of science?
3. How did the new understandings in science affect the development of the microscope?
4. What knowledge did Van Leeuwenhoek use to help develop the microscope?
5. What knowledge did Van Leeuwenhoek add to the body of scientific work?
6. What did his work allow the next generation of scientists to discover?
7. What do you find most interesting about Van Leeuwenhoek?
8. Use the tombstone below to write the inscription you feel best summarizes the importance of Van Leeuwenhoek's' life.

