

INTRODUCTION

Dutch landscape is unique in western Europe in the sense that there is very little land in it. That is to say, a great deal of the province of Holland (which includes Amsterdam, Haarlem, Leiden, and other major cities near the North Sea) is polderland, land reclaimed from the sea or from the marshes. The word "Amsterdam" itself refers to the beginnings of that city as a small settlement next to and on top of a dam on the Amstel River. The western part of the Netherlands is unremittingly flat, with few natural resources and much water, both in canals and lakes and in the sky.

No wonder, then, that Dutch painters were the first to take full advantage of the beauty of the sky and the clouds and the sea itself. Since there is no obvious drama in the land alone, artists had to find their drama in the undramatic -- meadows with a few cows, the highpoint of a bridge over a ditch, a clump of trees, a tuft of grass. The Dutch even change our very idea of nature, since the hand of man in this reclaimed landscape is present everywhere; we are given the countryside, not wilderness.

The images in this exhibition are a fusion of this "natural" fact, the Dutch landscape as it is, with the long and powerful tradition of Dutch realism. For a variety of reasons -- the Calvinist dislike of ostentation in churches and at home, the dominance of an urban, mercantile middle class instead of a landed aristocracy, the growth of Dutch science and its emphasis on precise observation and documentation -- Dutch artists had looked hard at

the world, warts and all, from the fifteenth century on. Some artists, in fact, were scientists: Maria Sibylla Merian made exquisite watercolors of Surinamese insects and flowers, to be used as illustrations in her groundbreaking scientific treatises, and Johannes Goedaert, a gifted landscape painter, wrote and illustrated a book on moths. Anthonie van Leeuwenhoek, the perfecter of the microscope, lived in Delft and knew Jan Vermeer. Where but in the Netherlands would a map of Europe or the world -- so visual and precise, and yet so abstract -- become a common piece of household decoration? An example of this scientific, or quasi-scientific, method of creating a picture may be seen in the Baroque gallery of the Johnson Museum; the extraordinary painting of a giant thistle, the setting for a dramatic encounter among snake, lizard, snail, and insect, by Otto Marseus van Schrieck illustrates the artist's use of a terrarium, which he kept in his studio to study the small creatures he painted.

This, then, is the background and context for such works in the present exhibition as those by Willem Buytewech, Ludolf Backhuysen, and Geertruyd Roghman. In the second half of the seventeenth century, however, there is a major change in the Dutch, and even European, conception of nature. Initiated by Allart van Everdingen's trip to Scandinavia and its high cliffs, waterfalls, and towering fir trees, it reaches an extraordinary level in the work of Jacob van Ruisdael. Ruisdael finds the sublime in nature in the mundane, a broken tree trunk, a farmer's cottage huddled under an oak tree, the crash of water over a few rocks. Man and his works are threatened with ruin, overwhelmed by

nature, and nature itself is caught in a universal cycle of decay and renewal. This is a vision of the world shared by many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European and American artists and writers, and its beginnings can be seen in the etchings by Ruisdael in this exhibition.

As we might expect from such a dynamic, expanding society, Dutch artists in the seventeenth century traveled all over the world, as their compatriots explored and traded everywhere, from the Arctic Circle to Java to western Africa to Brazil. Frans Post, for example, went with Prince Maurits to the mouth of the Amazon in the late 1630s, where he observed the flora and fauna of Brazil with a sharp and innocent eye. When he returned to the Netherlands, he spent the rest of his career turning out Brazilian landscapes, with the odd armadillo hiding in one corner of the picture or another; one of these paintings is in the Baroque gallery of the Museum.

The most favored place for Dutch artists to visit, however, was Italy, where they were seduced by the Italian sun, the warm afternoon light spreading over ancient hills and ruins. To understand this attraction, we have to remember that not only is Holland flat, but, in European terms, it is new, a young country virtually without the relics of ancient Rome. This dream of Italy may be seen in the prints and watercolors in this exhibition by Hendrik Goudt, Nicolaes Berchem, Jan Both, Bartholomeus Breenbergh, and Isaac de Moucheron.

We see in Dutch art, then, the discovery of the everyday, the birch tree, the grazing cow, the tuft of grass, the walk

in the country, the sky, the documentation of the undramatic, and, in Ruisdael, its transformation into a universal vision. All of this, along with the image of Italy as the timeless and eternal country, testify to the continuing relevance of these works for our own time.
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This exhibition has been curated by Amy P. Oliver and Franklin W. Robinson, who have also written the entries in this catalogue.

Suggestions for further reading:

Ackley, Clifford S., *Printmaking in the Age of Rembrandt*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1981.

Robinson, Franklin W., *Seventeenth Century Dutch Drawings From American Collections*, Washington, 1977.

Stechow, Wolfgang, *Dutch Landscape Painting of the Seventeenth Century*, London, 1966.