

Fresh Woods and Pastures New

SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY DUTCH LANDSCAPE DRAWINGS FROM THE PECK COLLECTION

Introduction

THIS SELECTION of drawings from the collection of Leena and Sheldon Peck provides an excellent introduction to seventeenth-century Dutch art in general, as well as to the special nature of Dutch drawings in particular.

Dutch society in the seventeenth century was unusually dynamic. The country had just achieved independence from the Spanish after a war lasting eighty years, off and on, and Dutch access to the North Sea allowed them to establish a worldwide network of trading posts and colonies. Amsterdam became not only a major shipping center and commodity market but also a haven for European capital. Along with this prosperity there was an atmosphere of relative tolerance that encouraged creative expression. Although the political leadership of the Netherlands was in the hands of Protestants, they barely formed a majority in Holland, the most powerful of the seven provinces that made up the country. Roman Catholics continued to practice their religion, if in secret, and other Christian sects, often exiled, like the Socinians, found a home in the Netherlands, or United Provinces, as they were called. Jews, particularly from Portugal and Spain, were a prosperous and intellectually vital part of the life of Amsterdam and other Dutch cities.

Artistic expression was stimulated by an atmosphere of intellectual experimentation, especially in the sciences. The Dutch development of the microscope, for example, was important for the study of the insect world, and many artists focused on this subject, with its emphasis on precise observation. Christiaan Huygens, the creator of the wave theory of light, had a brother, Constantijn, who was a gifted landscape draftsman, and Jan van der Heyden, a prolific painter of urban scenes, was a key figure in the development of street lighting and firefighting equipment.

In other words, art and everyday life were inextricably intertwined; the dominance of a mercantile middle class, politically and economically, reinforced this connection. The members of this class became the artists' major patrons, not the church or the nobility, and they wanted, for the most part, straightforward portraits of themselves, their possessions, and the world around them. Many patrons meant many subjects for paintings, usually familiar and recognizable, and rarely esoteric allegories and the like, in spite of the emblematic references that even the most everyday subject often conveyed.

It is in this context – Dutch self-confidence and pride in the world around them – that the drawings in this exhibition should be viewed.

The Idea of "Finish"

Dutch drawings in particular have a special character. An exhibition such as this represents a voyage of discovery not only of new, almost unknown, but gifted artists, as well as the major masters, but also of a new conception of drawing itself, its function, its economics, its quantity, even its size.

To be sure, artists of the time continued to make drawings as casual notations or first thoughts for works in other media; for example, in the Peck collection a sheet by Adriaen van de Velde is a careful preparatory study for a painting. However, there was an extraordinary growth in the production of drawings as finished products, ends in themselves, and sold as such, a phenomenon that resulted in a great increase in the sheer number of these works. There are many examples of these so-called "picture drawings" or "paper paintings" and related sheets: a long series of drawings documenting the damage done to the cathedral and other buildings in Utrecht in a storm in 1674; the documentation of *kunstkamers*, encyclopedic

collections with everything from exotic seashells to unicorn horns; watercolors of tulips for sale catalogues; and many portraits, often to mark such special occasions as a wedding or graduation from the university. Certain artists seem to have made their living doing nothing but portrait drawings, including four members of the Vaillant family, while others concentrate on butterflies, bumblebees and other insects, often executed, expensively, in watercolor on vellum. Sometimes the drawings have a scientific purpose, since the line between artist and scientist was not hard and fast; careful observation was essential to both professions. Even the most modest, unpretentious subjects – flowers, pigs, peasants drinking or dancing – were given careful, elegant expression in sheets clearly made for sale.

This phenomenon of the drawing as finished product is especially apparent in the Peck collection. The three drawings by Allart van Everdingen in this exhibition are fascinating examples of this aspect of the time. Although the artist was a fairly prolific painter, he was an extraordinarily energetic draftsman, and these drawings, often highly finished and brightly colored, were clearly an important source of income for him. What is extraordinary about them is their small size; the winter landscape with skaters is less than four inches wide. Even so, it was of great enough interest to inspire a copy of the same size in the eighteenth century. Pieter Molyn, who is represented by two superb sheets in this exhibition, and Jan van Goyen, with four works made over four decades, produced hundreds of drawings that survive, and Willem van de Velde and Roelant Roghman were hardly less productive. George Keyes has called the Dutch “inveterate cataloguers of their world,” and Roghman is especially interesting for his series of several hundred drawings of castles. The pen and wash drawing by Hendrik Hondius, which shows a ruined castle near Rotterdam, is very much in this tradition of topographical documentation of sites both exotic and domestic, both dramatic and intimate, whether in Brazil, Rome, or Amsterdam. In other cases, such as that of Willem Romeyn, the number of surviving

sheets, their highly finished quality, and the very similar subjects – peasant life in and around Rome – suggest that they were popular with collectors and were put in their *kunstboeken*, which were stored in large cabinets called *kunstkasten*.

Another special aspect of seventeenth-century Dutch drawings also has to do with this concept of “finish,” and a related phenomenon, the blurring of the boundaries between drawings, prints, and paintings. Willem van de Velde the Elder, for example, made pen paintings, seascapes in black paint on a white background on panel that convey the immediacy and spontaneity of drawings and the size and weight, as it were, of paintings. The monotype, a seventeenth-century invention, is a fusion of drawing and print; the drawing is literally made into a print, with all the freedom and uniqueness of the former and the structure and permanence of the latter. Rembrandt’s work is perhaps the best example of this mixing of the media; his etchings can become a kind of public shorthand, with one part of a plate highly worked, “finished,” and another only sketched in, with “mistakes” (such as a second left hand) left uncorrected, or a sheet of studies that is so informal that we have to turn the plate in different directions to read each sketch. The oil sketch, again a blurring of media and of the concept of “finish,” is another specialty of Rembrandt and the Dutch, especially Adriaen van de Venne, whose energetic little peasant scenes are often decorated with Dutch sayings. This mixture is made explicit in trompe l’oeil paintings where, for example, engravings or drawings are painted as if they were pinned or pasted to a board or a wall.

In the Peck collection, a work such as the later Molyn was clearly regarded as finished; the artist has drawn a border around the whole composition, as well as signing and dating it. Willem van de Velde’s seemingly casual record of a few ships in a calm sea may have had a pendant, now in an English private collection; presumably, the two works would have been conceived and sold as a pair, an arrangement usually reserved for paintings and sculpture. Even modest views of cottages and villages may have

been intended as pendants; the two drawings here by Guillam Du Bois, or rather, their very similar equivalents, are related to two paintings that were also clearly a pair.

The Development of Style

This exhibition also offers us the opportunity to study the development of style in this period. We can see such development over the decades in the work of a single artist, for example, in Bartholomeus Breenbergh, from a modest sketch of an Italian road to a haunting scene inside a vault from the last year of his life, or in Jan van Goyen, as we see him grow from a fairly stiff presentation of a village scene, proceeding step by step into the background, in the 1620s, to his remarkable mature style, with its open, allusive shorthand, flooded with light, or in Herman Saftleven, whose earlier, tight intensity opens up and becomes broader and more assured fifteen years later, in the mid-1640s. It is equally instructive to compare works from early in the century to those executed at its end. The Hondius, for example, has a clarity and precision of pen line which tends to make every detail separate and distinct; this is very different from the atmospheric impression, later on, of an almost melting landscape and figures in Adriaen van de Velde, or the buildings and trees stunned with light, their contours only sketchily defined, in Jacob van der Ulft. In addition, as Lawrence O. Goedde has pointed out, although Dutch landscape paintings and drawings often respond to specific sites, they still tend to conform to one or another formal convention or pattern; their seemingly artless, relaxed informality is paralleled by the Attic or Senecan rhetoric popular with many contemporary writers.

In this context, the two greatest landscapists of the Dutch seventeenth century, Rembrandt and Jacob van Ruisdael, take an almost modest place within this group. It is not that their drawings are less important or less powerful than their paintings; their sheets have a remarkable freshness and immediacy of vision. Rather, we see in this collection as a whole the great truth about drawings,

that the second-rank painter can make brilliant, imaginative, totally original drawings; there is an immediacy about this medium, so personal and spontaneous, that makes it a great leveler among artists. For example, Michiel Carrée's paintings are fairly conventional repetitions of the Italian landscape formula established by Nicolaes Berchem and his generation of Dutch painters, but his drawings have a wonderfully chaotic mixture of Dutch windmill, Italian natural bridge, and Rhine landscape that gives him a special place among Dutch draftsmen. Similarly, Willem Romeyn's paintings rarely achieve the quiet dignity and strength of his pen and wash drawings, with peasants and their animals caught in the late afternoon Italian sunlight.

Italy and the Dutch Arcadia

The title of this catalogue, "Fresh woods and pastures new," is taken from the last line of Milton's great pastoral poem, "Lycidas." The English and Continental traditions of Arcadian literature merged with a love of Italy to create a unique blend of the familiar and the exotic in Dutch art: happy, half-dressed peasants among their domestic animals playing the flute or caressing each other, with a hilly, Italianate landscape stretching into the background. The dream of Italy as a timeless, picturesque world of ease and beauty finds expression, in different forms, in several of the drawings in this exhibition. For example, all three drawings by Breenbergh are set in the Italian countryside, but they range from a quick sketch of a particular scene, made on the spot, to a dramatic set piece of a spectacular cliff to a haunting and mysterious view inside a vault, surely not a specific place but rather an almost emblematic evocation of the emotional, even spiritual overtones of enclosure and openness, deep shadow and sunlight.

Dutch artists' responses to Italy can range from the precise archaeological study by Cornelis Vroom to the Arcadian quiet of Willem Romeyn, who notes every rag and tatter of the peasant's clothes and the donkey's bundles and baskets, as well as the more dynamic, sun-splashed

wash drawings of Jacob van der Ulft, an artist deeply enamored of Italy who probably never went there. One of the most remarkable of these responses is Adriaen van de Velde's beautiful study of a hut. This scene, so explicitly Dutch, is nevertheless profoundly indebted to the landscapes, and the paintings, Adriaen saw during his long sojourn in Rome in the 1650s.

Part of the charm of Italy for Dutch visitors was the presence everywhere of ancient ruins, with daily life continuing among them. Dutch artists were fascinated by their own, domestic ruins, more recent though they were. Added to their interest in the picturesque, and in documenting the visible world, was a pride in their own history, in this country which was so newly independent. This is probably the context for two of the most impressive drawings in this exhibition by Jan Lievens and Hendrik Hondius. Lawrence O. Goedde has quoted Constantijn Huygens's commendation of "the pleasure of ruins however grey or formless they may be," and he and other writers have discussed the term "schilderachtig," referring to the old and broken, as in ancient Roman or medieval Dutch ruins but also the modest, slightly timeworn farmyard that we see in Rembrandt's drawing here.

Dutch Art Today

One of the most interesting phenomena of contemporary taste is the popularity of Dutch baroque art. Exhibitions and publications about the Golden Age abound, and they are not limited to Rembrandt and Vermeer. Dutch drawings are especially popular with collectors; at this time, there are more than 3,000 in American public and private collections. Why has this happened?

One reason might be the similarity between seventeenth-century Dutch and twentieth-century American society: republican, urban, mercantile, middle class, stable. Also, Dutch paintings are immediately recognizable in subject, craftsmanlike, largely secular, relatively small, and intended for private homes; in addition, there are many different subjects and styles, with numerous individual personalities, and, until recently, they have been relatively unen-

cumbered by theory and iconography. Another source of their popularity is their availability in the market; surely, never before had such a small country produced so many drawings. Whatever the reasons – the fact that the seventeenth is often called the first modern century, or sheer number and availability – Dutch art strikes a chord in the American psyche, and it is this spirit that infuses the Peck collection and brings us back to it again and again.

Beyond the immediate reasons for its popularity in America, why is Dutch art relevant to us today? It is truly a part of everyday life, an intense examination of the world around us, in a sense, a discovery of that world as something worth studying and recording, and celebrating. Vermeer's street in Delft, Cornelis Saftleven's pigeons, Adriaen van de Velde's hut, Rembrandt's backyard of a farm – these are all things worth looking at. To a degree, this is a function of history: the Netherlands was a new country, like ours, discovering itself and, in fact, making itself. Its language was new (in European terms), its cities were new, and newly populous, its religion, its definition as a separate political entity, its independence as such, and its global empire, were all new. Even the land itself was in the process of being reclaimed from the sea, the lakes, and the swamps. In pursuing these connections between our two republics, it is worth remembering that the Dutch golden age lasted less than a hundred years; by the last quarter of the seventeenth century, the Netherlands had lost its hegemony to England and France.

There are still other lessons that Dutch art and society offer us: its openness to all religions, its interest in science, from entomology to geometry, the end of the medieval guild and the beginning of modern industrial practice, and its fascination with new cities and old ruins, its faith in the future as well as its interest in the past. Above all, the Dutch artist seems to be saying, "I see; therefore, I am, and everything I see is of value." This collection is testimony to this fascination with the visible, this ability to take the everyday world and reveal its beauty, a lesson for which later centuries remain grateful.

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— FRANKLIN W. ROBINSON