Dutch Still Lifes and Landscapes of the 1600s

Paintings depicting aspects of the natural world were so characteristic of the Netherlands that, during the seventeenth century, the Dutch words *stilleven* and *landschap* were adopted into English as "still life" and "landscape." Before the mid-1600s, though, the Dutch themselves usually referred to pictures by their individual subjects such as "breakfast piece" or "winter snow scene."

The apparent realism of much Dutch art can be deceptive. Many floral still lifes, for instance, show combinations of flowers that do not bloom at the same time of year. Likewise, some lavish banquet tables are set with partially uneaten meals, interrupted midcourse. And the landscapes may stress the hopeful light of a new dawn or the dark threat of an approaching storm. These incredible illusions of space, solidity, texture, and light often assume the role of *memento mori* ("a memento of mortality") — a reminder that life is fleeting and that God is good, but his judgment is stern.

Therefore sunny or overcast landscapes can signify, respectively, promise or menace. Imaginary bouquets might remind the viewer that real flowers, like everything else in the world, must inevitably wilt and die. Similarly, unfinished banquets may allude to life's uncertainty or serve as a call for moderation.

The Development of a Uniquely Dutch Taste

The religious and political wars that racked the Low Countries in the 1500s forced the population into mass migrations. By the mid-1600s, the survivors had settled into two lands with distinct social values and different tastes in art.

Flanders, essentially modern-day Belgium, which was the southern area closer to Catholic France and under the domination of Spain, remained Catholic and royalist. Altarpieces, court portraits, and allegories glorifying the monarchs typify the Flemish paintings in nearby galleries. Flemish artists like Rubens and Van Dyck relished vivid colors and lively movement.

Breaking away from Flanders, the northern Low Countries, nearer to Protestant Germany and Britain, merged into the United Provinces. This confederation, commonly called "Holland" after its most powerful province, became a republic mainly populated by Calvinists.

These early Protestants believed that altarpieces encouraged idol worship. Ruled by princes in name only, the Dutch elected their leaders. Therefore, without church or court patronage, artists turned toward nature and daily life for subject matter. And compared to Flemish painting, Dutch art normally employs more balanced compositions, limited palettes, and clearer light.

No hard and fast line, however, separates Dutch from Flemish styles. The two countries' largest cities — Amsterdam in the Netherlands and Antwerp in Belgium — were only ninety miles apart. Moreover, in the seven Dutch provinces themselves, all the major cultural centers lay within a day's journey of each other by horse or boat. Artists moved freely throughout the Low Countries, sharing experiences, techniques, and choices of subject matter.

Willem van Aelst
Dutch, 1626 – 1683
Still Life with Dead Game, 1661

The life-sized depiction of animals creates a tangible sense of reality. In fact, many Dutch still lifes are full-scale representations of the real objects they portray. This quarry fancifully includes a domestic rooster, wild hare and partridge, and several songbirds. Also hanging from the cords are two red velvet hoods used to train hunting falcons. The only sign of life is a fly attracted to the blood on the cock's comb.

Hidden in the shadows behind the game pouch's silver buckle, a classical bas-relief is carved in the marble pedestal. While nymphs watch, the chaste goddess of the hunt, Diana, splashes water on Actaeon, a mortal hunter who surprised her at her bath. In punishment for embarrassing Diana, Actaeon sprouts the antlers of a stag and will be killed by his own hounds.

Van Aelst, who worked in Paris and Florence before settling in Amsterdam, was one of the first still-life painters to depict hunt trophies. His superb illusions of fur, feathers, and flesh set a major precedent for later French, British, and American sporting still lifes.

Oil on canvas, 84.7 x 67.3 cm (33 ⅜ x 26 ½ in.)
Pepita Milmore Memorial Fund 1982.36.1

Aelbert Cuyp
Dutch, 1620 – 1691
The Maas at Dordrecht, c. 1650

Holland's Maas river flows through France and Belgium, where it is known as the Meuse. In Aelbert Cuyp's radiant vista over the Maas' estuary at Dordrecht, crowds jam the docks, bugles and drums sound fanfares, and cannons fire salutes. Near the end of the Eighty Years' War, Dordrecht hosted a two-week festival in honor of 30,000 soldiers. On July 12, 1646, a huge fleet of merchant and navy ships set sail to return the men home from active duty.

This vast, sunny composition specifically accents one figure: the young man standing in the dinghy beside the large ship. The anchored ships at the left create a wedge-shaped mass that points toward him, as do some rigging lines. His head lies directly before the horizon, and his stark black outfit is silhouetted dramatically against the palest area of the picture, the morning mist over the far shore. Because he wears a sash with Dordrecht's city colors of red and white, he may be the festival's master of ceremonies and is probably the patron who commissioned Cuyp to document this historic event.

Oil on canvas, 114.9 x 170.2 cm (45 ¼ x 67 in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1940.2.1

Aelbert Cuyp
Dutch, 1620 – 1691
Lady and Gentleman on Horseback,
c. 1655, reworked 1660/1665

This double portrait on horseback is unique in Dutch art and seventeenth-century Europe, because equestrian likenesses usually were reserved for individual monarchs. The couple is probably husband and wife. Cuyp originally included a larger hunting party. Presumably the sitters wanted more attention directed to themselves, so Cuyp reworked and simplified the composition. The burdock plants at the left, for instance, conceal traces of several dogs now overpainted.

Reusing favorite motifs, Cuyp repeated the lady's white steed in his *Horsemen and Herdsmen with Cattle.* That picture, which portrays an imaginary hunt, is set against ruins of German castles and monasteries that Cuyp sketched during a trip up the Rhine river.

Outside the Netherlands, the five Cuyps in the National Gallery constitute the most varied collection of his work. *River Landscape with Cows* and *Herdsmen Tending Cattle* combine landscape subjects with genre scenes of daily life and animal studies. The artist, a prominent citizen of his native Dordrecht, very often depicted the cheerful optimism of a golden dawn light.

Oil on canvas, 123.2 x 172.1 cm (48 ½ x 67 ¾ in.)
Widener Collection 1942.9.15

DUTCH STILL LIFES AND LANDSCAPES

Willem Claesz Heda
Dutch, 1593/1594 – 1680
Banquet Piece with Mince Pie, 1635

Heda's largest known painting appears, at first sight, to extend the hospitality of a sumptuous feast. Yet platters and knives teeter precariously over the table's edge, while goblets and compotes already have toppled. More obvious symbols of life's transience are at the left: a snuffed-out candle and a lemon, only half-peeled.

From the 1620s to the late 1640s, Dutch artists preferred a monochrome manner for their still lifes and landscapes. Heda was a master of such cool gray or warm tan color schemes. Here, the gold, silver, pewter, and Venetian glass play against a neutral setting and a white tablecloth. Somewhat later in the mid-1600s, brighter colors would characterize the classical period of Dutch painting.

A specialist in banquet still lifes, Heda also painted breakfasts and, as a writer in 1648 noted, "fruit, and all kinds of knick-knacks." Willem Claesz Heda taught several apprentices including his son, Gerrit Willemsz Heda (the *sz* at the end of many Dutch names is an abbreviation for *szoon,* meaning "son of"). Gerrit's *Still Life with Ham,* dated 1650, reveals a strong debt to his father's style and motifs.

Oil on canvas, 106.7 x 111.1 cm (42 x 43 ¾ in.)
Patrons' Permanent Fund 1991.87.1

Jan Davidsz de Heem
Dutch, 1606 – 1683/1684
Vase of Flowers, c. 1660

Gardening and the breeding of beautiful hybrids satisfied the Dutch interest in art and in science. Exotic flowers also indicated their far-flung explorations and their expertise in botany. In fact, a "tulip-mania" swept Holland soon after tulips were imported from Turkey in the 1550s. In 1637, Amsterdam's commodity market in tulip bulbs crashed, causing capitalism's first depression.

The thirty-one species of plants in this vase cannot bloom in the same season. Many of these blossoms have emblematic meanings. The upper flowers thrive in the sunshine that streams through De Heem's studio windows which we see reflected in the crystal vase. The lower plants, farther away from the light of heaven, droop and wilt.

Near the bottom, a salamander stares hungrily at a spider, while a snail, moth, and ants crawl on the marble shelf. All these creatures symbolize night and decay. On the white poppy at the top, a caterpillar and butterfly evoke the idea of rebirth from a cocoon or tomb.

De Heem spent most of his career in Antwerp in Flanders. Colorful extravagance, typical of Flemish taste, imbues his still lifes, and De Heem passed this opulence on to his followers, including Abraham Mignon.

Oil on canvas, 69.6 x 56.5 cm (27 ⅜ x 22 ¼ in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Fund 1961.6.1

Jan van der Heyden
Dutch, 1637 – 1712
An Architectural Fantasy, c. 1670

Van der Heyden specialized in architectural scenes, often recording accurate views in Holland, Flanders, and Germany or rearranging actual buildings into fantastic groupings. This scene, though, is entirely imaginary; no marble palaces are known to have existed in seventeenth-century Holland. The classical mansion reveals Italian influence but is peopled with Dutch figures. Leaving the sculpted gateway with his pack of hunting hounds, a gentleman suddenly encounters a beggar with her baby. Within the sunlit formal gardens it may be assumed that all is a dream; reality lurks outside its shadowed walls.

Blocking out his compositions in broad masses of lighted versus shaded forms, Van der Heyden depicted textures meticulously. On close inspection, one notices that every single brick can be counted!

Also an urban planner and inventor, Van der Heyden understood the practical side of architecture as well as its beauty. He designed the first street lighting in Amsterdam, was fire chief of the metropolis, and is credited with the invention of the fire hose.

Oil on panel, 49.7 x 70.7 cm (19 ½ x 27 ½ in.)
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1968.13.1

Abraham Mignon
Dutch, 1640 – 1679
Still Life with Fruit, Fish, and a Nest, c. 1675

Many Dutch still-life painters silhouetted their carefully arranged foreground objects against neutral, blank backgrounds. Similarly, the forest backdrop here is so dark it nearly conceals a stone archway. The abundance of the sea and the land is suggested by the fishing rod, bait box, and catch of fish that surround a wicker basket overflowing with fruit and vegetables.

The work forms an allegory on the cycles of life. A nest of birds' eggs implies birth. Full blossoms and ripe fruit suggest maturity. The gnarled tree stump characterizes old age. Ultimately, death appears with the fish and a lizard, being eaten by ants. The wheat and grapes offer salvation by symbolizing Jesus' blessing of bread and wine at the Last Supper.

An early biographer noted that Mignon was "especially diligent," a quality that this stunning array of textures certainly proves. After training in his native Germany, Mignon moved to Utrecht. While there he probably worked in the studio of Jan Davidsz de Heem, who had briefly returned from Antwerp. Mignon consequently acquired De Heem's Flemish taste for rich color and complex design.

Oil on canvas, 94 x 73.5 cm (37 x 28 15⁄16 in.)
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. H. John Heinz III 1989.23.1

Isack van Ostade
Dutch, 1621 – 1649
Workmen before an Inn, 1645

Tavern drinkers and idlers frequently appear in Dutch genre scenes of daily life, but depictions of workers restocking an inn are very unusual. Two laborers here are yoked together to haul beer kegs off a sledge. Their overworked, underfed horse bears the scars of a hard existence. At the cellar door a small boy carries a jug of ale, while the street teems with beggars, peddlers, and fighting dogs.

Like one other Isack van Ostade painting, *The Halt at the Inn,* this picture may suggest conflicting values represented by the tavern and the church. In both scenes, church steeples rise over the villages. Here, moreover, the inn's chimney supports a stork's nest, a traditional sign of good luck.

Isack was trained in Haarlem by his older brother Adriaen van Ostade, whose *Cottage Dooryard* hangs elsewhere in the Dutch galleries and reveals similar textures such as ivy climbing on crumbling brick.

Oil on panel, 66 x 58.4 cm (26 x 23 in.). Gift of Richard A. and Lee G. Kirstein, in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art 1991.64.1

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The works of art discussed here are sometimes temporarily moved to other rooms or removed from display.

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