

Dutch Landscapes and Seascapes of the 1600s

The seventeenth-century Netherlands had a passion for depictions of city and countryside, either real or imaginary. Local scenery asserted Holland's national pride, while vistas of foreign sites recalled the extent of its overseas commerce.

Holland's ocean ports teemed with fishing and trading ships, and the tiny country's merchant fleet was almost as large as all the rest of maritime Europe's combined. Obviously, the Dutch prized seascapes and insisted on accurate renderings of each hull and rigging line. Incorporating genre incidents from everyday life, most Dutch landscapes and seascapes are animated by people working or playing.

Much of the Netherlands is a low marsh formed by the deltas of the Rhine and Maas rivers. A third of the country was actually below sea level, reclaimed behind dikes and drained through pumps run by windmills. In such a flat environment, the horizon seems to lie below one's feet; so, the sky overhead dominates the view.

A quality that sets Dutch landscape paintings apart from those of other nations is the amount of space devoted to the moist, ocean air and the sun glowing through the ever-present clouds. With their emphasis on atmosphere, Dutch landscapes might better be called "sky-scapes."

The Art Market: Collectors and Critics in Holland

Foreigners were constantly amazed at the quantity and quality of pictures in Holland. A British traveler in 1640 remarked, "As for the art of painting and the affection of the people to pictures, I think none other go beyond them . . . All in general striving to adorn their houses, especially the outer or street room, with costly pieces—butchers and bakers not much inferior in their shops, which are fairly set forth; yea, many times blacksmiths, cobblers, etc. will have some picture or other by their forge and in their stall."

Another Englishman suggested that the phenomenal investment in art was due to Holland's small size, which prevented the more usual speculation in land and livestock. Instead, the Dutch stockpiled their profits in pictures acquired through art dealers, at auctions, or from commercial fairs.

In order to attract clients in this open and competitive market, many Dutch artists began to specialize in depicting particular subject areas. Such specialization helped establish a painter's reputation in a way very comparable to modern brand names, whereby the buyer seeks a product based upon a company's proven expertise. The artists who chose to define their careers so narrowly are sometimes called the "Dutch minor masters" to distinguish them from painters such as Rembrandt, Cuyp, or Steen who portrayed a broader spectrum of life.

Seventeenth-century theorists held that the principal goal of art was to depict the human body engaged in heroic or moral action. In this aesthetic classification, landscapes and still lifes ranked at the very bottom. As is often the case, however, critical opinion did not correspond to popular taste. Dutch artists created far more scenes of nature than historical allegories, and Dutch collectors often paid as much or more for such seemingly trivial subjects than they did for literary themes.



Hendrick Avercamp
(pronounce: hen-DRICK AH-VER-kamp)
Dutch, 1585–1634

A Scene on the Ice

about 1625. Oil on panel, 0.393 x 0.771 m (15½ x 30¾ in). Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1967.3.1

All classes of Dutch society mingle while enjoying winter sports. From the lower left corner, a poor fisherman surveys the many skaters. At the center, well-dressed ladies ride in an elegant sleigh driven by a groom; the horse's shoes are spiked for traction on the slippery surface. Two little boys in the right corner play a game of *kolf*, a cross between modern-day hockey and golf. And in the background, sledges act as commercial freighters on the ice.

Avercamp, who combined the Dutch love of landscapes with scenes of daily life called *genre*, was among the first European artists to specialize in depicting winter. The pearly gray tonality here becomes ever paler and the forms less distinct as they move into the distance, subtly conveying a sense of deep space on a frosty day.

The setting may be the quiet village of Kampen northeast of Amsterdam. Very successful financially, Avercamp was called *de stomme van Kampen*, meaning "the mute of Kampen." It is known he was deaf throughout his life.



Ludolf Backhuysen
(pronounce: LOU-dolf BAKH-how-zen)
Dutch, 1631–1708

Ships in Distress off a Rocky Coast

dated 1667. Oil on canvas, 1.143 x 1.673 m (45 x 65¾ in). Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1985.29.1

The three ships in this large painting are the wide-bellied, seagoing vessels that transported much of Holland's mercantile cargo. They display the Dutch flag of orange, white, and blue. These symbols of national optimism, however, are in peril of crashing against rocks during a storm. Each ship has a broken mast and, in the lower right foreground, floating wreckage reveals that one vessel has already sunk. Amid the dark gray and steely blue clouds and water, the sun's golden rays give hope that calmer weather will soon return. The subject may be considered a *vanitas*, a reminder of the fleeting nature of earthly existence.

Although realistic in appearance, the painting combines imaginary elements that Backhuysen often used in his theatrical compositions. Complex shapes and sharp contrasts of light and shadow heighten the drama as do the massive cliffs and frothy spray.

Backhuysen, German-born, moved to Amsterdam in 1649 to study marine painting. During the last quarter of the seventeenth century he was Holland's leading seascape artist, with royal and noble patrons throughout Europe.



Jan van Goyen
(pronounce: yan van HOY-yen)
Dutch, 1596–1656

View of Dordrecht from the Dordtse Kil

dated 1644. Oil on panel, 0.647 x 0.959 m (25½ x 37¾ in). Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1978.11.1

During the 1630s and 1640s, Dutch landscapes and still lifes underwent a monochrome phase in which a single color pervades and unifies each view of nature. Here, a golden brown aura dominates the picture, from the vaporous clouds to the city skyline. Jan van Goyen increased the spaciousness of his scenes by lowering the horizon to give more emphasis to the atmospheric conditions overhead.

Van Goyen was instrumental in leading Dutch landscape painting to its full maturity. Compare his realistic view to Hendrick Avercamp's *Scene on the Ice* in this room; both works are monochrome in style. The earlier Avercamp, however, uses an artificial, bird's-eye vantage that looks down onto the scene, whereas Van Goyen creates the illusion of someone standing on the shore opposite this bustling port.

Another view of the same city is on display elsewhere in the Dutch galleries. Aelbert Cuyp's *Maas at Dordrecht*, painted about 1660, owes its convincing perspective to Van Goyen but adds a full range of colors, typical of the later, classical phase of Dutch landscapes.



Meindert Hobbema

(pronounce: MINE-dare't HOE-buh-mah)
Dutch, 1638–1709

The Travelers

dated 1663. Oil on canvas, 1.013 x 1.448 m (39⁷/₈ x 57 in). Widener Collection 1942.9.31

Hobbema studied under Jacob van Ruisdael, who is also represented in this room. As friends, they made sketching trips into the countryside together. The same motifs occasionally appear in the work of both artists, but their attitudes differed greatly. The older Ruisdael invested nature with poetic, brooding grandeur. Hobbema approached nature in a more straightforward manner, depicting quaint, rural scenery enlivened by peasants or hunters.

To create his picturesque canvases, Hobbema rearranged certain favorite elements such as old water mills, thatch-roofed cottages, and embanked dikes. Hobbema's hallmark is rolling clouds that give promise of a refreshing rain. Patches of sunshine illuminate the rutted roads or small streams that lead back into the rustic woods. All six of the National Gallery's canvases by Hobbema, which alternate on display, share these characteristics.

In 1669, Hobbema was appointed Amsterdam's inspector of imported wine. This civil-service job must have been profitable because very few paintings date from the remaining forty years of Hobbema's life.



Aert van der Neer

(pronounce: AIR't van dur NARE)
Dutch, c. 1603/1604–1677

Moonlit Landscape with Bridge

about 1650. Oil on panel, 1.102 x 0.782 m (43³/₈ x 30¹³/₁₆ in). Patrons' Permanent Fund 1990.6.1

Van der Neer was in his late twenties when he decided to become an artist. He first painted winter scenes, partly under the influence of Hendrick Avercamp. By the late 1640s, however, Van der Neer developed his own specialty of nocturnes, or night scenes. These mysteriously dark, moonlit pictures belong to the early monochrome period in Dutch art, much as Avercamp's cool grays or Jan van Goyen's warm tans.

Here, luminous clouds float before a full moon. Reflecting the moonlight, a stream runs through the center of the scene and directs attention toward a church. A village and a walled estate close the symmetrically composed space at either side. Beams from the moon glint off window panes, glow upon a fashionable couple conversing by the estate's ornate gateway, and silhouette a poor family crossing a bridge.

This nocturne's radiance is created by multiple layers of translucent and opaque paint applied with consummate technical skill. Using the handle of his brush or a palette knife, Van der Neer scraped away top layers of dark color to reveal underlying pinks, golds, and blues in the clouds.



Jacob van Ruisdael

(pronounce: ya-COB van RUE-iss-doll)
Dutch, 1628 or 1629–1682

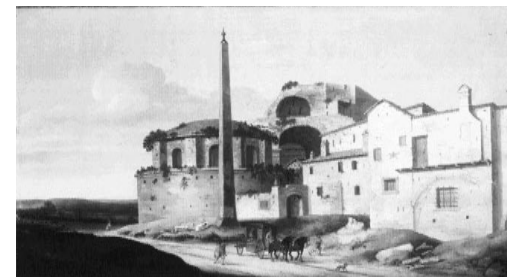
Forest Scene

about 1660/1665. Oil on canvas, 1.055 x 1.310 m (41¹/₂ x 51¹/₂ in). Widener Collection 1942.9.80

Ruisdael, who learned his craft from his father and uncle in Haarlem, became the supreme master of Holland's mid-seventeenth-century classical period of landscape. Here, the precise textures of foliage, bark, grass, rocks, and cascading water are illuminated by the cold, gray light of an approaching storm. For all its realism, though, the awesome scene is not actually part of the Dutch countryside, which has no waterfalls.

Ruisdael developed his majestic subjects by studying the works of other artists, sketching during a trip up the Rhine river to Germany, and consulting books of religious and social symbolism. The rotting trunk and stump of a white birch tree, for instance, relate the concept of death and the passage of time. Everything is in turmoil: thunderclouds threaten, and shepherds scurry for safety.

Two smaller canvases by Ruisdael are occasionally on view in this room. *Landscape* contrasts a vibrant tree to a dead trunk. *Park with a Country House* suggests the vanity of mortal pursuits. In a forgotten, unattended garden, a storm forces lawn bowlers to abandon their frivolous game. Ruisdael's famous pupil, Meindert Hobbema, adapted many of his mentor's themes but not these deeper levels of meaning.



Pieter Jansz. Saenredam

(pronounce: PEA-tare yanss SAN-rue-dam)
Dutch, 1597–1665

Church of Santa Maria della Febbre, Rome

dated 1629. Oil on panel, 0.378 x 0.705 m (14⁷/₈ x 27³/₄ in). Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.34

As the foremost innovator in the accurate depiction of buildings, Saenredam has earned the title of "first portraitist of architecture." The son of an engraver, he developed draftsmanship so precise that it is difficult to believe he never visited Italy to see the site of Saint Peter's, the subject of this convincing view. In the 1530s, the Flemish artist Maerten van Heemskerck had worked in Rome, and, a century later, Saenredam used Heemskerck's drawings as the basis for this painting.

The ancient, circular chapel of Santa Maria della Febbre stands beside the famous Vatican obelisk that, in 1586, was moved in front of Saint Peter's basilica. Behind ramshackle Old Saint Peter's rise the piers of Michelangelo's dome for New Saint Peter's. Saenredam portrayed the whole construction site as though it were an abandoned, overgrown ruin.

An artificial color scheme marks the earliest period of Dutch landscape painting, developed in the sixteenth century. To create a feeling of depth, Saenredam overlapped layers of contrasting tone from a dark foreground, through the buildings' pinkish yellow, to a distant valley in bright blues and greens.



Pieter Jansz. Saenredam

Cathedral of Saint John at 's-Hertogenbosch

dated 1646. Oil on panel, 1.288 x 0.870 m (50⁵/₈ x 34¹/₄ in). Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.33

The fifteenth-century Gothic cathedral at 's-Hertogenbosch, a town near the Maas river, glows in soft daylight. The iconoclasts, or "image destroyers" of the Protestant Reformation, had replaced the church's stained glass and whitewashed its vaults. On the choir stall at the lower left corner, Saenredam identified the subject and dated the picture 1646.

At no single moment in the cathedral's history, however, would all these furnishings, statues, and memorial plaques appear simultaneously. Saenredam's preparatory drawing of the interior, for example, is dated 1 July 1632—twelve years before this painting—and shows the altarpiece empty, hung with a curtain. Prior to his visit, the altar's painting had been removed by Catholics fleeing the Protestants. Saenredam, a close friend of the altarpiece's artist, ingeniously reinserted the missing picture in his painting.

Saenredam's systematic sketches and measurements of specific structures allowed him to create such plausible impossibilities. His scrupulous observation of lighting and textures was to influence the views of domestic interiors by Johannes Vermeer and Pieter de Hooch that may be seen in the Gallery's other Dutch rooms.

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