

COLLECTION CONNECTION

Dutch Landscape Painting and the Classical Tradition

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Fig. 1: Jacob Pynas (about 1590–about 1648), *Landscape with Mercury and the Daughters of Aglauro*, about 1618, oil on copper. The Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy

You may be surprised by the number of Dutch artists represented in the special exhibition *Views from the Uffizi: Painting the Italian Landscape*. The artistic center of Europe in the 17th century, Rome lured artists from all over the Continent, and many Dutch painters traveled there to complete their studies. Some remained in Italy for the rest of their lives, while others took the classical landscape style back north.

Comparing landscapes by Dutch artists who studied in Rome and those by painters who never left their homeland reveals some distinct differences. However, even those who did not travel saw published prints of Italian paintings and of work by an early generation of Italian-tutored Dutch artists, resulting in hybrid landscapes that demonstrate both Dutch and Italian influence. Paintings by Meindert Hobbema and Aert van der Neer in the Taft Museum of Art's permanent collection typify mid-17th-century Dutch landscape painting. However, Van der Neer's painting also shows some Italian influence despite the artist's choice to stay in the Netherlands.

Dutch Italianates and Classical Landscape

In order to define classical landscape painting, the prevailing style in 17th-century Italy, let's look at two paintings in the special exhibition by Dutch artists who spent

time in Italy. *Landscape with Mercury and the Daughters of Aglauro* (fig. 1) by Jacob Pynas exhibits many hallmarks of the classical landscape tradition, in which paintings conveyed a moral message through religious, mythological, or allegorical themes. The landscape provides a setting for a mythological story—a scene from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The human figures, dressed in pseudo-ancient Roman attire, enact the story, but the landscape makes up the majority of the composition and serves as a staging device. Pynas emphasized the figures in the foreground by placing them at the base of the largest grouping of trees. A sunlit path winds through the composition, leading our eyes to a distant temple. The darkly painted trees in the foreground frame this distant scene, which includes hills like those typical of the Roman countryside.

Cornelis van Poelenburgh used similar devices in *Mercury and Batto* (fig. 2). The landscape once again provides a set for a mythological story. Instead of trees, the artist employed Roman ruins and a distant hill to frame the scene's main figures, who wear Roman-style clothing that places them in the past.



Fig. 2: Cornelis van Poelenburgh (1594/5–1667), *Mercury and Batto*, about 1621, oil on copper. Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy

While both artists demonstrate that they have carefully observed details from nature in the convincing depictions of the trees, ruins, and cattle, they probably invented the landscapes or assembled studies of various locales into one composition in the studio. Although this process was typical of classical landscape painting, the Dutch tradition combined observation and imagination as well. The most valued Dutch art combined the elements *naer het leven* (observed from life) with those *uyt den gheest* (from the mind).

The Homegrown Dutch Landscape

By the mid-17th century, landscape was one of the most widely sought-after form of painting in the Netherlands and became a way to communicate Dutch ideals. The prosperous Dutch Republic offered more religious freedom than other parts of Europe. The Dutch enjoyed great success in many industries, including agriculture and shipping. And, they reshaped the land itself, reclaiming it from the sea through an extensive system of windmill pumps and canals. Dutch collectors looked for landscape paintings that reflected the pride they felt in their country, its independence, and its religious autonomy; their economic prosperity; and their innovative transformation of the land.

Hobbema's *Farmland with a Pond and Trees* (fig. 3) in the Taft collection depicts a Dutch rural scene. A wooded area in the left foreground casts shadows on two cows and a



Fig. 3: Meindert Hobbema (1638–1709), *Farmland with a Pond and Trees*, about 1663–64, oil on canvas. Taft Museum of Art. Dutch artists sometimes collaborated: Adriaen van de Velde (1636–1672), who specialized in painting animals, added the figures and cattle to the right foreground. A painting by Van de Velde is in *Views from the Uffizi*.

figure. To the right, a farmer leads another cow up a dirt path toward a sunny meadow, cottages, and a mill. One peasant walks on the path, and another sits alongside it. The emphasis on the flat landscape in the distance, the water near the mill that could be a manmade canal, and the clothing worn by the figures tell us that this is a Dutch landscape devoid of mythological or allegorical references. Also, the Dutch were known for their cattle, among the hardiest and most productive in Europe, and cows often appear in Dutch landscapes. Hobbema also used the inherently Dutch compositional device of a large screen of trees allowing just a peek into the distance, a departure from the illusion of deep space framed by trees typical of classical landscape painting.

Van der Neer's *An Extensive Valley with a Distant City* (fig. 4) also captures the Dutch countryside and its remarkably flat topography that allows for expansive long-distance views. In the foreground, a man returns from a day of



Fig. 4: Aert van der Neer (about 1603–1677), *An Extensive Valley with a Distant City*, about 1662–65, oil on canvas. Taft Museum of Art

hunting. Cows graze in a pasture in the middle ground, and buildings rise above the landscape in the distance. This painting indicates the value the Dutch placed on both rural and urban life: they were proud not only of their agricultural achievements but also of the growth of their cities. A church steeple punctuates the sky, making it the most prominent feature of this distant city and suggesting the significant role religion played in daily life. Churches and other buildings in Dutch landscape paintings can often be identified, but artists sometimes shifted their locations to create a more interesting arrangement. Although Van der Neer painted a quintessentially Dutch view and devoted most of the canvas to the flat landscape, open space, and expansive sky, the classical tradition influenced his composition. He framed the scene with trees on either side and created the illusion of a view that recedes logically into space from foreground to middle ground to the distant background.

While visiting *Views from the Uffizi*, consider the sweeping impact Italian landscape painting had across Europe. In addition to 17th-century Dutch artists, French painters such as Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796–1875) and English painters including J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851), both represented in the Taft collection, demonstrate that the Italian influence endured far into the 19th century.