Innovation in Seventeenth Century Dutch Landscape Painting with a comparison to the Hudson River School

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This paper will investigate the development and innovation of Dutch landscape painting in the Golden Age and draw parallels and distinctions with the Hudson River School. Readings, guided city walks, museum visits, and immersion into Dutch culture while at the NEH seminar, as well as my personal experience as a landscape painter, inform and influence this choice of topic. Fortuitously, two related exhibits at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, bracketed the NEH Seminar. Prior to the seminar on view was Golden: Dutch and Flemish Masterworks from the Rose-Marie and Erjk van Otterloo Collection. After the seminar and on view through November 6, is Painting the American Vision. Visits to both exhibits and reading their catalogues further enhance my understanding and appreciation of both Dutch and American landscape painting.

In the Netherlands during the seventeenth century an extraordinary number of excellent paintings were created by an unprecedented number of artists, many of whom were prodigious, versatile, technically proficient, and innovative. It coincided with the beginning of “Dutch dominance in the rich trades” (Israel, p. 548). Upon winning their independence, “Dutch artists turned to their own lives and landscapes and invented an independent artistic tradition” (Rose p. 8-9). Many of the greatest of these, such as
Rembrandt, Hals, and Vermeer are well known and referred to by us as Dutch Masters. However, there was such a concentration of excellence that many others of high caliber are often overlooked, many of them landscapists.

The Dutch artists were well trained, spending years in apprenticeship with accomplished and more mature artists, often family members. When artists were deemed read--masters in their own right--they would join the artists’ guild, often called St. Luke’s. This guild, like those for other professions, would both promote and place restrictions on the activities of its members, in this instance, the production and sale of paintings. Initially there were residency requirements and sales were limited by membership, commissions, auctions, and fairs. The guilds also served as a social club of colleagues and helped to provide for its members in times of need. However, over the course of the century, as commissions decreased and the demand for art by the growing middle class increased, art was more often sold on the open market. “The fierce competition of the art market meant that many artists lived a miserable hand-to-mouth existence” (Rose p.12). Holland’s independence from Spanish rule and the incredible wealth that came with the expansion of trade and economic activity brought about by the success of the VOC and the VIC, which created a growing market for art. Many talented artists from the southern Netherlands, who flocked to the cities of the northern Netherlands both to escape religious persecution and find work, filled that need. So many Flemish artists settled in Haarlem, it was named “the Florence of the North” (Kiers and Tissink p. 37).

In order to keep up with this increased demand for paintings, the Dutch artists increased production without sacrificing quality by specializing in a particular genre,
such as history painting, portraiture, genre, landscape, seascape, still life, or floral painting. “In the early years of the century, history paintings (religious, mythological, and religious works) were the most common type, but after 1650, landscapes exceeded them” (Sutton p. 112). “By mid-century, it was the most widely produced and collected category of painting and, on average, one of the most affordable. While landscape encompassed numerous modes, from the pastoral to the allegorical, its least assuming theme was its most innovative: the local land” (Westerman p. 104). Monetary value coincided with a hierarchical order of these specialties as well as with the size of the paintings, with larger historical paintings receiving the most amount and small floral paintings receiving the least. Alan Chong examines the inventories of Dutch landscape painting showing price fluctuations in the market and presents tables that demonstrate that “the prices and availability of landscape paintings made them the art form of the middle-class” (Sutton p. 104-120).

By specializing, artists created similar paintings again and again and carried particular motifs over from one painting to another. This afforded them repeated experience, increased skill, and greater speed. Even within each genre there were sub-specializations to further increase production and ensure high quality. This was particularly true of landscapes, which experienced tremendous innovation. “Hercules Segers for example, was a specialist in rugged mountain landscapes, Jan van Goyen concentrated on river and polder scenes, Aert van der Neer dedicated himself to making nocturnal pieces and Jan Porcellis became a specialist in portraying the tempestuous sea” (Kiers and Tissink p. 129). Phillip Konnick is known for his highly original “majestic panoramas” with a “convincing sense of depth” (Duparc, p. 190.)
Since some Flemish artists of the 16th century specialized in painting landscapes but only as backgrounds, “the emigration of such specialists from Flanders to the North at the end of the 16th century must have been an important stimulus to the development of landscape painting as an independent genre in Holland” (Kiers and Tissink p. 37). Some landscape artists concentrated on river views, dunes, cityscapes, panoramas, farm or marine paintings but many were quite versatile and could easily produce work of excellence in other areas of specialization, especially to take advantage of the art market during this time of heightened competition and commercialization. “Everything points to the existence of great demand for landscapes, a demand which was gladly met by hundreds of specialized landscape painters (Kiers and Tissink p. 129).

The overarching innovative concept of seventeenth century Dutch landscape painting is that it began to focus on the natural local environment and was painted with a seemingly realistic likeness. “Dutch landscape painting underwent rapid development during the first three decades of the 17th century, at which time fantasized mountain landscapes made way for natural-looking Dutch landscapes (Kiers and Tissink p. 129). It was rooted in Claes Jansz Visscher’s etchings, and others, which portrayed the local character of the land and people of Haarlem (Westerman p. 104). The work of Flemish masters Joachim Patinir (1480/85-1524) and Pieter Breughel the Elder inspired Northern artists to take up the genre, however, their landscapes were much more natural (Duparc, p. 26). Beginning in Haarlem, artists shifted away from depicting historical, allegorical and biblical subjects containing narrative and instead represented the Dutch natural surroundings and everyday life. Realism replaced idealism. The landscape itself became the prominent subject and was no longer just a background accessory as it was, for
example, in Jan van Eyck’s Ghent altarpiece. Kiers and Tissink attribute this change in prominence to greater national pride and appreciation for the beauty of nature, which they considered God’s creation (Kiers and Tissink, p.37).

Figures, called staffage, became smaller and fewer in number and were used merely for scale or to animate the scene. With the reduction in size, most landscape artists painted their own figures while many earlier artists relied on others more capable to add these figures. Strong horizontal bands of color were used to create the feeling of receding space; brown in the foreground, green in the middle, and a blue in the background. The horizon itself was often set high and there were strong areas of dark and light to add depth. Dark trees might often frame the landscape. Some early landscapes had more than one vantage point. One that showed forms in the foreground from in front of the picture plane on the ground and the other showing forms further back in space by employing a bird’s eye view from up above. Esias van de Velde “effected a radical shift, reflecting the unspoiled remaining margins of the actual Dutch landscape” (Israel, p. 558).

“Esaias van de Velde played an important role in the development of Dutch landscape painting at the beginning of the 17th century. …His painting of The Ferryboat [fig. 1] set the tone for a long tradition in the portrayal of Dutch river landscapes…. This is the first instance of the depiction of a typical Dutch river landscape in large format, making this painting one of the first highpoints in Dutch landscape painting…. His pupil Jan van Goyen, together with Salomon van Ruysdael, would develop this genre further and make repeated use of the ferryboat motif” (Kiers and Tissick p. 42-43).

In addition, there were innovations in color palette and compositional devices. During the 1620’s, Dutch landscapists started using a more subdued, darker, and limited palette. Using lots of values of just a couple hues of brown, gray, ochre, or blue, their landscapes became more monochrome and tonal. “Jan van Goyen, together with Solomon
van Ruysdael would further develop this new manner of painting…These two artists thus became the so-called masters of the tonal landscape” (fig. 2 and fig. 3). Israel explains this phenomenon of tonal paintings on the difficulty and expense of getting American and Mediterranean dyes tuffs starting in the early 1620’s. Interestingly, it also occurred in other genres (Israel, p. 559). There were innovative compositional devices that gave the Dutch landscapes a modern look. In trying to create the illusion of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface, the artist then and now uses such devices. For example, a strong dark form like a large tree in the foreground against a lighter background was used to create depth. Such a feature is known as a repoussoir. Aert van der Neer used this in many of his works in order to silhouette a form in the foreground against his skies depicting special effects of light (Duparc, p. 216). A strong diagonal form representing a dune or bush or meadow was similarly used. Using a broken line for a canal, pathway, or road to lead the viewer into the painting and further in toward the horizon to achieve a greater sense of depth is another.

Innovations in painting technique were also used such as using an under painting and allowing it to show through, or applying paint in a more loose and rough manner in which the brushstrokes remain visible. In Rembrandt’s Stone Bridge (fig. 4). “The storm cloud at the upper right is composed of coarse brushstrokes, using little paint, so that the underpainting shows through in places…. This small Dutch landscape painting with its dramatic chiaroscuro is unique in Rembrandt’s oeuvre” (Kiers and Tissink p. 130). Rembrandt and others even used the opposite end of the paintbrush to ‘draw’ into the wet paint.
Close attention to detail and the effect of light on forms in nature became a preoccupation. The horizon was dropped below the middle of the composition, ultimately to the bottom third of the board or canvas, allowing much more room and emphasis on the sky and atmospheric effects due to changeable weather conditions. Dutch artist and theorist, Karel van Mander, recommended such effects in *The Book on Picturing of 1604* (Sturgis, p.182). In addition, a single, often low vantage point began to give their landscapes a more realistic perspective, which along with all the other innovations helped to unify the composition.

Around 1650, “…sharper contrasts between light and dark, more vibrant colors and more robust forms began to appear in the compositions of young landscape painters, such as Aelbert Cuyp and Jacob van Ruisdael. These new masters, whose works determined the face of Dutch landscape painting, created a manner of painting that was both magnificent and monumental” (Kiers and Tissink p. 221).

As in *River landscape* (fig.5). “the vast, sun-drenched landscapes of Aelbert Cuyp represent the transition from tonal landscapes of Jan van Goyen, for example to the grandiose work of Jacob van Ruisdael. Cuyp’s landscapes combine a poetic atmosphere with a powerful composition” (Kiers and Tissink p. 221). Jan van Ruisdael’s *Bleaching Fields near Haarlem* (fig. 6) is “an unparalleled panorama…of the Dutch landscape with its beautiful cloud formations. In this landscape in which the Haarlem Church of St. Bavo is visible in the background, the painter used light and color to introduce variation” (Kiers and Tissick p. 224). Similarly, in *The windmill at Wijk bij Duurstede* (fig. 7). Ruisdael makes a mere windmill take on a majestic, even heroic appearance by forcing the viewer to look up at it against such a tremendous menacing sky (Kiers and Tissink p. 224). Windmills could have strong religious and cultural associations for the Dutch people. Jacob van Ruisdael’s pupil, Meander Hobbema,
“…was considered Ruisdael’s heir as the leading Amsterdam landscape painter. He is more sensual, less spiritual and poetic, a difference that is perhaps reflected in his choice of more vivid colors. His most important work, the Avenue in Middleman’s [fig. 8] replaces the idyllic with a certain harshness. The sharply foreshortened road takes one rapidly back into space. In the spontaneous free execution of this masterpiece, Hobbema was far ahead of his time” (Rose p. 46).

The above mentioned innovations were by no means used by every artist or in each painting. Dutch artists were still individuals and that individuality was often reflected in their landscapes. Also, while the Dutch landscape artists focused on realism, they made preliminary pencil or oil sketches from direct observation in ‘plein air’ then used them as resources in the studio where they completed their paintings. They were not adverse to rearranging, replacing, adding or omitting features of their views for aesthetic purposes. Sometimes they made composites by combining two works into one.

There is scholarly debate about what caused the proliferation of and innovations in Dutch landscape painting as well as whether they contain symbolism. Simon Schama writes in *Culture as Foreground* about the need to look at 17th history, geography, and culture in determining the answer and prefers to see the elements in Dutch landscape painting as “part of a generalized repertoire of associations that had been lodged in Dutch culture” (Sutton p. 64-83). Josua Bruyn uses pictures within pictures, emblemata, and literary sources, including the bible and sermons, of the time to make his case for inherent symbolism in landscapes and puts forth an “iconographic skeleton” based on repeating motifs (Sutton p. 84-103). Scientific discoveries likely drove the interest in realism and closer observation of nature. “At the same time that the Dutch painters were experimenting with the appearance of light, scientists Newton were discussing the physical make-up of light, and Dutch scientists were experimenting with optics, the
science of light” (Rose p. 25-26). As is often the case, representations of realistic landscape in the graphic arts preceded and influenced landscape painting.

“Many of the paintings and prints of panoramic landscapes with a profile of Haarlem on the horizon were made for local customers, whose patronage of the Haarlem painters perhaps expressed the pride they felt in their city and its surroundings” (Kiers and Tessink p. 37).

Urban populations grew leaving some nostalgic for the countryside. Israel claims that these paintings were to “soothe their sense of loss” (Israel, p. 563). Increased wealth through trade and exposure to luxury goods and exotic species of plants and animals led to the desire to decorate their new built homes with the finer things. “A nation of practical, hard-headed merchants, bankers, and tradesmen, who valued reality more than mysticism or imagination, demanded an art that was true to nature and the visible world” (Rose p. 10). Some may have used them as a tool for quiet reflection or peaceful meditation while others desired them purely out of speculation. Dutch paintings “were at the same time a sign of culture and respectability and a profitable financial investment” (Rose p. 12).

“During the second half of the century, the preference for polished surface and virtuosity rather than genuine spontaneity, which is found in other areas of Dutch art, extended to landscape as well. After 1660, the glamour of French and Italian painting charmed the complacent Dutch middle class, who by now loved luxury more than unadorned nature. The great Dutch landscape tradition fell into decline” (Rose p. 53). Landscape painting was among the genres that declined after the economic crash of 1672 that was caused by the French invasion (Israel, p. 881). “At the close of the 17th century, there was scarcely anything identifiably Dutch about Dutch landscape paintings. Like the
Mannerists at the beginning of the century, late Dutch painters were once again more international than local in their artistic orientation” (Sutton p. 56).

Dutch landscapes may or may not contain symbolism. Whether they do or not should not interfere with our enjoyment of them or our response to them as individuals. However, given the fact that there is clear precedent of an encyclopedic iconography in other specializations, such as still life, portraiture, and genre paintings, it begs the question. Blatant symbolism in still life often refers to the transience of human life and the pursuit of spiritual life. Additional support for symbolism can be found in poetry and in writing about earlier etchings. Genre paintings include symbolism invoking moral teachings contained in the emblems that outline a code of behavior. In addition, given the restrictions on religious paintings, it seems plausible that the forms of nature itself might be symbolic of religious themes or at least have spiritual associations. “Painters have often used the subject of landscape to suggest the brevity of life and the futility of human endeavor when measured against the permanence and self-renewing cycles of the real world” (Sturgis p. 180). The elements in Jacob van Ruisdael’s *The Jewish Cemetery* “may imply the promise of passage into the afterlife for the soul of the Christian” (Sturgis p. 180). Another theme that may be inherent in the landscapes is national pride. After all, the people of this small country proved highly resourceful and industrious as they fought back the sea, reclaimed its land, proclaimed its independence from Spain, and developed an extensive and lucrative trade network.

“In the early 19th century the sky was once again treated as an essential part of the landscape, and the Dutch example must have played an important role in this revival” (Kiers and Kissink p. 221). Between 1825 and 1875, a group of painters created
landscapes in the Hudson River Valley and beyond that captured the beauty and magnificence of America’s own land. While they were influenced by European painting they set out to make theirs distinctly American. “Their mission, as they saw it, was to create an ‘American’ landscape vision based on the exploration of Nature-the natural world defined as a resource for spiritual renewal and as an expression of cultural and national identity” (Ferber p. 13). These artists were friends and colleagues who painted in a similar style and were influential in New York. They came to be known as The Hudson River School. Their paintings are monumental with a majestic, luminous light. Thomas Cole launched it along with Asher B. Durand and Thomas Doughty. Many others would follow, even a second generation. Hudson River School artists spread out looking for picturesque subjects to paint and the sublime. They ventured to the Catskills, the White Mountains, the Adirondacks, Lake George, Niagara Falls, and eventually out West. The Hudson River School artists captured the grandeur of the American landscape, the picturesque and the wilderness. They influenced conservation and preservation as well as travel and recreation. Furthermore, landscape painting has been the most popular area of art painting in American art history in the last 150 years.

“Landscape painters often bathe their views in a golden and benevolent light, as if such scenes were specially blessed by God” (Sturgis p. 169). In Thomas Cole’s Oxbow (fig. 9). “God’s implied presence gives a sacredness to this harmonious spot . . .The view thus claims that those who live in the new nation of America can belong to the Promised Land of the righteous” (Sturgis p. 169). Cole puts himself in as the tiny artist at work showing he “is able to recreate for us the splendors of God’s original creation” (Sturgis p. 169). Arthur B. Durand was a great friend of Cole’s and they went on sketching outings
together. As a post mortem tribute to Cole, he created *Kindred Spirits* (fig. 10), which successfully introduced many Americans to the beautiful Catskills (Johnson, p. 548). Frederick Church, a student of Cole and leader of the next generation of landscape painters, painted in a new more idealized way, as can be seen in *Mt. Katahdin* (fig. 11). It was completed after numerous preliminary sketches under different atmospheric conditions and different points of view (Stebbins p. 78). “Painters and photographers performed a vital role in westward expansion, frequently accompanying official military and geological expeditions to record the spectacular scenery and life of indigenous peoples” (Ferber p. 151). One of those who created monumental canvases showcasing such spectacular American scenery (fig. 12) was Albert Bierstadt. His work was very popular and helped to serve westward expansion.

When comparing styles of Dutch and American landscape painting we see similarities. For example, they both paid attention to minute scientific and natural detail and usually lacked narrative subjects. They painted compositions in which the landscape was prominent and figures were smaller and subordinate. As far as their working manner, artists made preliminary sketches out of doors from real life yet would paint the final compositions back in the studio. They would rearrange elements for aesthetic purposes, mixing fantasy with reality. They painted poetic skies and paid close attention to light, shade, weather, and atmospheric effects, although the Hudson River School paintings are more idealized and romantic with more luminosity. In both cases, the graphic arts not only anticipated the painting of landscapes but also made it accessible to the public. Those artists in the forefront were succeeded by a second generation of landscape artists that built upon and enhanced the earlier tradition. The distinctive focus on landscape
followed new found political independence and national identity in each country and coincided with a relative time of peace and prosperity.

Although generally speaking there is similarity of style, there are differences as well. Many Dutch landscapes were quite small compared to the vast canvases of the Americans. The purpose of the Hudson River School paintings was quite different as reflected in their theme of exploration. The Dutch landscapes reflect the pleasure and changeability of the local natural environment.

Epilogue

NEH Seminar participants experienced first hand much of the realism depicted in the seventeenth century landscapes. We often walked under the rain laden and wind swept dark clouds that these artists devoted so much of their attention and two thirds of the canvas to. We rode bicycles through a forested grove on the way to Wassenaar or The Hague, as well as through the windswept dunes punctuated by lush vegetation and patches of sunlight along the beaches of the North Sea. We saw the seemingly endless expanses of flat land lined with irrigation ditches and bordered along property lines in the time honored fashion of a single line of equidistant trees. We passed by herds of cows, sheep, goats, and horses grazing in lush fields and polders. We rode the canals and viewed the distinctive architecture of each town. We photographed iconic windmills and felt the pulse of the sails once we climbed to the top. These elements of the Dutch environment evoke a quiet, dignified, and peaceful beauty that was realistically captured and made timeless and accessible for all to see and contemplate in the Dutch landscapes of the Golden Age.
Figures
Dutch Landscape Paintings

Figure 1
The Ferryboat
Esaias van de Velde
1622

Figure 2
After the Rain
Jan van Goyen
1631
Figure 3
Landscape with a Fence
Solomon van Ruysdael
1630

Figure 4
Stone Bridge
Rembrandt van Rijn
Late 1630’s

Figure 5
River Landscape
Aelbert Cuyp
1655-60
Figure 6

Haarlem Bleaching Fields
Jan van Ruisdael
1670

Figure 7

The Windmill at Wijk bij Duurstede
Jan van Ruisdael
1670
Figure 8

Avenue at Middleharnis
Meindert Hobbema
1689

Hudson River School

Figure 9

Oxbow
Thomas Cole
1836
Figure 10
Kindred Spirits
Asher B. Durand
1849

Figure 11
Mount Katahdin from Millnocket Camp
Frederick Church
1895
Figure 12

Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California
Aelbert Bierstadt
1868

Works Cited


