

# Painting from the Northern Netherlands from Gerrit Dou to Jacob Van Ruisdaël

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The seven Calvinist provinces of the Northern Netherlands grouped around Holland, the wealthiest and most highly populated, declared their independence from the Catholic provinces under Spanish domination in the South in 1579. It was only at the end of the Thirty Years' War in 1648 that Spain was to recognize this independence.

The period between 1630 and 1660 saw the assertion of the specificities of Dutch painting and the blossoming of its most famous figureheads. The collection donated to the museum by Antoine Valedau is extraordinarily rich in its examples of genre scenes and landscapes from 1645-60, a production dear to eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century collectors.

## Rooms Dou et Steen

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Flemish and Dutch Painting

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### Landscapes

At the beginning of the century, Dutch landscape artists were still evolving within the Flemish sphere of influence. Then between 1620 and 1645, Haarlem painters including Jan van Goyen (1596-1656) perfected the monochrome landscape with its dunes, canals and seascapes under a vast oppressive sky.

Before the middle of the century, this evolution spread to greater variety of colour. Thus *Three Cows in a Pasture\** (1648) by Paulus Potter (1625-1654) is captivating in its tonal sharpness while persisting in the Haarlem compositional style, with the animals standing out against the sky in a monumental fashion. The importance attached to cattle was one of Potter's innovations and would be emulated by figures such as Claes Berchem (1620-1683) (Room 8), creating as a result a hybrid genre somewhere between landscapes and animal painting.

Jacob van Ruisdael (1628/29-1682) was the inventor of lyrical landscapes that were ornamental and at times heroic. *Stormy Landscape\** dating to 1649 is a youthful work, which is dramatic in its realistic portrayal of the distraught elements, the mortified arabesque of the dead tree with its pale light and in the figures of the child and the man becoming lost in the vegetation. The near absence of human beings and the autonomy of the pure landscape seemingly endowed with a soul were to captivate the Romantics and the Barbizon painters (*Waterfall in an Oak Wood\**, 1660-65).

Along with Ruisdael, Philips Wouwerman (1619-1668) was the other post-1650 great landscape artist from Haarlem. His light colours using subtle half-tones and his nimble brushwork are forerunners of the Rococo style. *Ploughman at Rest\** (1646-48) is a Dutch avatar of the Italian *bambocciate* of Pieter van Laer (1599-after 1642) whose figures formed a genre scene. The landscape in *Small Sandscape\** (1650-52) is extensive and more ambitious ; the little figures are arranged in a natural manner ; the grey-gold tonalities bring a sense of unity to the surfaces scoured by a changing light. An accomplished painter of horses, he would often place a white horse at the centre of his equestrian scenes that met with considerable success in the eighteenth century : the *Horse Market\** and the *Army March\** (after 1660).

### Genre Scenes

At the beginning of the century, genre scenes were divided between the brightly coloured courtly scenes of meticulous workmanship of David Vinckboons (1576-1632) and the musicians and players of the Caravaggisti on their return from Italy from 1614, such as ter Brugghen (1588-1629). Between 1620 and 1640 a monochrome movement contemporary with that of the Haarlem landscape artists gained momentum with Pieter Codde (1599-1678), who specialized in scenes of fashionable life or soldiers in guardrooms. Adriaen van Ostade (1610-1685) continued in the Flemish vein of Adriaen Brouwer in his scenes of carousing and brawling.

\* An asterisk indicates that the work mentioned is displayed in the room

Between 1645 and 1650, two artists were to revive the genre scene : Gerard Ter Borch (1617-1681) and Gerrit Dou (1613-1675). Ter Borch focussed his compositions on a few figures that his gift for portraiture imbued with psychological depth. His *Young Dutch Girl pouring a Drink*\* (c.1650) still adheres to the world of the guardroom, but the sober nature of the composition and its narrative tension herald future artistry.

In Leiden in the early 1640s, Dou developed a highly masterful illusionistic technique in which the brushwork was indiscernible. The *Mousetrap*\* (c.1645-50) is one of his masterpieces, in which the virtuosity of the execution is in the service of an enigmatic scene set in a space in keeping with a mysterious chiaroscuro.

Dou's pupils were known as the *Fijnschilder* (fine painters) of Leiden, the most famous being Frans van Mieris (1635-1681) and perhaps Gabriel Metsu (1629-1667) who imitated his typical portraits of elderly people (*Herring Seller*\*, c.1656). Mieris was his match in terms of smooth, polished, miniaturist workmanship (*A Young Woman stringing Pearls*\*, 1658) while Metsu added a mellow note (*Young Man Writing*\* (1656-58). As with Ter Borch, the smaller number of figures exhibit a complex psychology.

Other artists did not partake of this movement of the *Fijnschilder* of Leiden that favoured aestheticism. From 1660, Van Ostade adopted a fine technique in response to the Leiden style, but the peasant scenes he was fond of retained a very Flemish verve (*Smoker and Drinker*\*, 1666). Jan Steen (1626-1679) was a prolific artist with an original narrative imagination linking him, like Adrian van Ostade who is said to have been one of his masters, to Flemish tradition. His realism was closely bound to popular morality and came through in meticulously detailed theatrical compositions that relate the truths of the human condition (*Rest at the Inn*\*). In this way, *As the Old Sing, So Pipe the Young*\* (c.1662), a common subject (fig.1) pushes back the curtain onto a domestic scene of fine spatial scope.



fig.1- Jan Steen  
*As the Old Sing,  
So Pipe the Young*  
The Hague, Mauritshuis  
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## The Meaning of the Images

Calvinism prohibited religious images within temples and the only scenes permitted outside were those from the Old Testament and the earthly life of Christ. Painting therefore focused on "stories" from antiquity or more recently, as well as on reality, daily life and nature. Realist subjects were often complex, religious or more often moral in content, linked to social codes and conveyed through symbols. However, the different genres (landscapes in particular) would progressively become more autonomous and, as in Flanders, artists would specialize in all aspects of reality.

Through literature, landscape became the symbolic site of peregrinations related to morality or matters of the heart : Ruisdael's *Stormy Landscape*\* may be interpreted in this way.

In Steen's *As the Old Sing, So Pipe the Young*\*, the lyrics of the song that can be read on the paper held by the old woman are an old Flemish proverb condemning the dissolute example given by the adults to the young. The symbolic ambiguity and absence of an explicit context often leaves it open to interpretation. Ter Borch's *Young Dutch Girl pouring a Drink*\* may be an invitation to moderation, but as in Van Ostade's *Smoker and Drinker*\*, the artist is probably driven by a picaresque spirit of empathy. Mieris's *Young Woman stringing Pearls*\* may be a representation of the vanity of beauty whose ornament is the pearls, or indeed the image of femininity itself in its intimacy. Does the young painter holding the mouse caught in Dou's *Mousetrap*\* mean that he is master of his instincts, traditionally symbolized by the rodent, or rather that he is able to paint illusionary scenes that deceive the onlooker ? Metsu's *Young man Writing*\* and its pendant (fig.2) bear witness to the elite's infatuation with the art of letter-writing, as also illustrated by Ter Borch and Jan Vermeer (1632-1675), and his *Herring Seller*\* is more readily understood if we know that the herring was a national dish, verging on the patriotic.



fig.2- Gabriel Metsu  
*The letter*  
San Diego, Timken Museum of Art  
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