

The Infinite Inspiration of the Dutch Landscape

Vince Cherniak

IT'S NOT EVERY day that some Rembrandts come to li'l ole London, but that's just one of many good reasons to take in this not-to-be-missed exhibition this month. **Storms and Bright Skies: Three Centuries of Dutch Landscapes**, at Western's McIntosh Gallery until April 5, is a touring show from the National Gallery of Canada and it offers a fine survey of the emergence and evolution of the landscape genre beginning in the late 16th century. These 65 prints and original drawings, including great masters Jacob Ruisdael and Jan Breughel the Elder amongst the 20 artists represented, give us a rare up-close view of works that you normally won't see outside a major gallery.

National Gallery curator Sonia Del Re has created a very informative presentation of these selected works from their collection, arranged to emphasize various themes, from scientific and economic development to the use of motifs such as trees and sky. "The Dutch landscape has been a source of infinite inspiration for Dutch artists," she underlines, "and their work entirely influences the course of art history, not only in the Netherlands, but all of Europe."

It's easy enough to get lost in examining the exquisite detailing and technical accomplishment in the line work of etchings like Jan Van de Velde's **On the Ice** (1641). This robust rendering of hectic activity on a frozen canal is effectively a time-travel document, transporting you into an environment long gone. Or Hans Bol's **Bird Catchers With Nets** (1582) will take you back further in this charming illustration of a way of life. In Rembrandt's **Landscape With a Cottage and Large Tree** (1641) the realism achieved reads like a photograph from a short distance.

But the real power of this show is in tracing the many social and cultural forces that brought about the rise of the subject of landscape within artistic practice. Certainly the Reformation was a major influence in shifting the importance of religious themed work in the hier-

archy of representation, where landscape was hitherto subjugated to playing a supportive role in compositions, mere backdrop. This shift initially brought about an imaginative or fantasy view in early landscape work. The views tended to be "God's eye", from on high, and this popular approach was mostly vestigial from the idealized compositional practice of religious work.

But by the 16th century, starting with Breughel, artists began to



Hendrick Willem Mesdag — Seascape [detail]

look more closely at the landscape around them, and you can follow that development towards higher realism as you move through the work in this show.

As artists turned from the realm of the imagination in the studio to working directly from nature, the Dutch landscape emerges as an elaboration of national identity, and native motifs become common. The Dutch sky is given prominence, with the special quality of light in these lowlands by the sea highlighted in many of the works here by Roelant Roghman, as well as in the focus on clouds by Ruisdael.

Equally important is the interaction with the sea for economic and military purposes, and the obvi-

ous major motif in many of the pieces here, the reliance on canals and water management infrastructure. A third of the land in Holland lies below sea level, and by 1750 there were 10,000 windmills employed in pumping water. It seems natural enough that a windmill would come under the artist's gaze on the landscape, as quaint as it may look from a contemporary point of view. But it also raises questions about ideas of beauty regarding landscapes in our own age of technical and industrial development. You can't help but think of the contentious divide in public sentiment surrounding the recent development of wind farms, for example. Do we have our own Rembrandts today celebrating wind turbines?

Certainly notions of the beautiful are ever in flux, and economic or technological develop-

to the emergence of sub-genres within the Dutch landscape — fields with cattle, or heroic trees anchoring an entire composition — that parallels that move from the rural to the urban. Trees in Rembrandt's **The Three Trees** from 1643 still bear a symbolic or iconic purpose, referencing the religious theme of the crosses of the Crucifixion. But a few years on, as seen in Anthonie Waterloo's **Water Mill Among Trees**, or Simon de Vlieger's **Forest Scene**, or **Study of a Tree in Leaf**, trees become an aesthetic subject of study in their own right. And that raises an interesting question: does it take a divide between the urban and rural, where cattle and trees are mostly commodities, for the artist to find a way to appreciate them in a new light?

The McIntosh is presenting complementary educational programs in support of the exhibit, with curator Del Re delivering a lecture on the show, as well as three artist-led exhibition tours by local artists of Dutch heritage — Wyn Geleynse, Gerard Pas and Rosemary Slood — all promising to give interesting personal perspectives on these historic works.

Slood, whose recent Immigrant group of paintings explored her Dutch roots, said she will be framing her talk in reference to her own oeuvre. "Do the works in the show bring back memories or evoke some other emotional reaction? Have my Dutch origins influenced my work? I will be giving a little historical background and then taking a very personal approach to these landscape works and drawing some comparisons to my own recent work," she says.

Pas says he will be discussing the shift from Church sponsored art to the market of merchant class consumers. "One can't understand the post-Reformation Dutch landscape work without understanding the theology and philosophy of the day," he notes.

ARTIST-LED TOURS AT MCINTOSH GALLERY

GERARD PAS
Tuesday, March 18 at 12:30 P.M.

ROSEMARY SLOOD
Tuesday, March 25 at 12:30 P.M.

<http://mcintoshgallery.ca/VINCE ART>

ments bring new insights or revelations to our collective aesthetic taste. The wealth brought through those changes in 1700s Holland created an urban life that made space for contemplating the rural life that got left behind, a space to romanticize an idealized past, a nostalgia for a way of life that was undergoing great upheaval. Equally, wealth brought about a middle class with disposable income and thus a market hungry for images. As Del Re notes, many of the images here came out in large editions with the advent of printmaking technology, and therefore had greater influence in the dissemination of style and subject than single paintings.

Del Re brings emphasis here