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Dutch Painting in the Age of Rembrandt from the Museum of Fine Arts Boston
October 20, 2019—January 12, 2020
Main Exhibition Galleries, East Building
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Dutch Painting in the Age of Rembrandt from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

The paintings in this exhibition provide a window into a distinctive time and place. The 17th century Dutch Republic gained independence from Spain during the Eighty Years’ War (1568-1648) and quickly came to international prominence. Protestantism became its official religion, and the powerful merchant class governed together with the Princes of Orange. Local allegiances persisted in the Republic’s seven small low-lying provinces, while a worldwide presence transformed it into a global trading powerhouse.

The artists featured in this exhibition painted for an expanded marketplace that included the newly prosperous middle class as well as the wealthy elite. These painters developed numerous specialties and redefined traditional subjects. Portraits for the growing merchant class comprised most of their commissioned work. Other types of paintings were created for the open market and appealed to households across income levels.
Artists portrayed their natural surroundings and favorite pastimes, as well as religious narratives, domestic interiors, and imported luxury objects. Some paintings also referenced the broader impact of the Republic’s overseas enterprises, which included colonial expansion and the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans.

The 17th century was a time of transformation for the Dutch—political, religious, social, economic, demographic, and even geographic. The paintings on view in this exhibition bring many aspects of this world to life and have much to tell us about the legacy of this era.

This exhibition of 70 works of art from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston celebrates two exceptional gifts of Dutch paintings to that museum, from Rose-Maries and Eijk van Oterloo and Susan and Matthew Weaterbie. These works build on the MFA’s long history of collecting Dutch art.
Director introduction begins here. Audio guides available at slam.org/audio.

#DutchPainting
#STLArtMuseum
The Netherlands in the 17th Century

Fifty years before the birth of Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669), Spain controlled the part of Europe that is now the Netherlands (meaning low-lying lands), Belgium, and Luxembourg. The Dutch Republic, also known as the United Provinces, consisted of the northernmost provinces in the region that successfully joined forces to free themselves from Spanish rule. This map shows the seven provinces that originally made up the Dutch Republic: Holland, Zeeland, Utrecht, Gelderland, Friesland, Groningen, and Overijssel. The borders remained fluid, however, with Drenthe and the area known as the Generality coming under Dutch control at different times.

The province of Holland—the name often used to designate the entire present-day Netherlands—was the most dominant province, economically and culturally. Holland’s leading towns have also defined what we think of as “Dutch.” Of these, Amsterdam was the largest, its economy built on global trade. This city experienced a major expansion in the 17th century. It grew from a compact arrangement of irregular streets and waterways to include the concentric rings of canals that distinguish the city today. The province’s other prominent towns boasted significant specializations: ceramics (Delft); linen bleaching (Haarlem); the Republic’s oldest university (Leiden); and the international administrative seat of government (The Hague).
People of the Dutch Republic

The great demand for portraits in the Dutch Republic was a sign of the rapidly growing middle and upper classes. In this newly independent country, successful merchants—as well as civic and religious officials—commissioned portraits, as did the nobility. A portrait might accurately convey a person’s likeness, or it might indicate aspirations or desires. This gallery also includes portrait-like paintings that depict facial expressions or general character types.

This diverse selection of paintings represents a cross section of elite Dutch society in the 17th century. Michiel van Mierevelt of Delft was among the earliest Dutch portraitists who built his reputation on commissions from the Republic’s early leaders. Rembrandt van Rijn moved from his native Leiden to Amsterdam, where he immediately attracted commissions from the city’s clergy and merchant classes. Back in Leiden, his pupil Gerrit Dou led an influential circle of painters who memorialized their subjects using barely discernable brushstrokes.

Portraits, often commissioned for significant life events, were produced in great numbers. Recent estimates suggest that between 750,000 and 1,100,000 portraits were completed by Dutch painters in the 17th century.
Science, Travel, and Trade

The Dutch Republic became the epicenter of global commerce in the 17th century. Its strategic position on the North Sea, its extensive network of inland waterways, and its sophisticated shipbuilding industry created the conditions for this dominance. Commodities from around the world—silk, porcelain, sugar, tobacco, and more—entered Europe through Dutch ports, bringing immense wealth to the small nation. At the same time, plant and animal specimens gathered abroad fueled an unprecedented fascination with the natural world.

The Dutch East India and West India Companies made the Republic’s monopoly on global trade possible. These companies administered trading posts and colonies in Asia, Africa, and the Americas (see map). The Dutch West India Company was also responsible for managing the Dutch Republic’s participation in the transatlantic trade in enslaved people from West and Central Africa.

Few Dutch artists addressed the human toll of their nation’s overseas enterprises. Yet many paintings reveal the influence of global travel and trade on Dutch art and society. Still lifes and portraits display the imported rarities that filled the dining rooms, closets, and curiosity cabinets of the Dutch elite. Landscape paintings reflect the great distances traveled by the most adventurous artists. Whether journeying to Italy or as far as Brazil, traveling painters encountered unfamiliar regions and artistic conventions that would continue to inspire their paintings long after they returned home.
Dutch Trade Routes, c.1650

Key:
- Trade route of Dutch East India Company
- Trade route of Dutch West India Company
- Northern trade route
- Regions under Dutch control
- Ports under Dutch control
- Other major trading ports
Religion and Church Buildings

The official religion of the Dutch Republic was the Calvinist Reformed Church, one of several Protestant denominations that formed across Europe in the 16th century. Lutherans, Mennonites, and Quakers also practiced their faiths in the Republic. A Jewish community of over 1,000 lived and worshipped in Amsterdam. Catholics worshipped in secret, since their religion was officially outlawed in 1581.

Prior to the formation of the Dutch Republic, when Spain ruled the Netherlands, Catholicism was the predominant religion. In 1566, violence broke out against Catholic churches. Calvinists stripped them of their sculpture and painting and whitewashed their walls. For Calvinists, the word of God could be communicated only through preaching and the close reading of scripture—not through the veneration of sculptural and painted images.

In addition to serving as religious sites, churches (kerken) were also major civic structures, as seen in the cityscapes on view in this gallery. Locals gathered in church buildings to visit friends while peddlers sold their wares. Artist Pieter Saenredam specialized in recording church interiors, which testifies to the importance of these buildings in the lives of contemporary citizens. Other artists, such as Emanuel de Witte, followed his lead but emphasized their essential role as community spaces.
The Art of Storytelling

History painting—the telling of stories from the Bible, mythology, or the ancient world—was considered the most prestigious subject for a painter in the 17th-century Dutch Republic. Many Dutch painters, from Rembrandt van Rijn to Jan Steen, excelled at this type of painting. However, these same painters also excelled at telling stories with roots closer to home, often with humorous and moralizing overtones.

Dutch artists adapted the principles of history painting to a new, modern form with their fellow citizens front and center. Known since the 18th century by the all-purpose term “genre,” these pictures have the appearance of representing everyday life. In reality, however, genre scenes grew out of earlier traditions of narrative or allegory. Earlier prototypes include biblical narratives, representations of the five senses, the seven deadly sins, or other themes that refer, among other things, to the fragility of life.

Modern art history has traditionally separated what we call genre painting from history painting, yet both categories are fundamentally about transforming a story into a visual representation. Two examples of history painting from Rembrandt’s circle are on view, although the majority of the works are more typical genre paintings by artists with connections to Leiden. There, Gerrit Dou’s meticulous images of people posing in exaggerated window frames dominated the market.
Life in the Dutch Landscape

What caused so many Dutch painters to turn their attention to the landscape around them? The trend began in the second half of the 16th century, when painted series of the four seasons or the twelve months became popular subjects. Jacob Grimmer, for example, whose small roundel, *February*, is nearby, was celebrated for his winter scenes.

During the 17th century, countless artists began to depict the low, flat, and dune-filled countryside of the Dutch Republic. They also represented the activities that animated it, including elite stag hunts, shepherds watching flocks, and ice-skating on frozen rivers and canals.

The term “landscape” was first applied to the art of depicting one’s surroundings in the 17th-century Dutch Republic. The idea of *landschap* (or *landskip* in period English) first became a concept around the turn of the 17th century. The Netherlands, a small, emerging country predominantly near or below sea level, had already been reclaiming land from the sea to stabilize and increase its territory for centuries. It is no coincidence that it was the Dutch who popularized the naturalistic depiction of the local environment and included varied interactions of humans and animals within it.
Celebrating the Landscape

Few features of the Dutch countryside escaped the notice of artists who specialized in landscape painting. Their pictures, however, are actually evocations of the Dutch terrain rather than precise records of specific locales. Artists took elements such as rivers, marshes, sand dunes, woods, and trails and then rearranged them to achieve a more pleasing composition or a more compelling vista. The resulting views reflect a quintessentially 17th-century Dutch aesthetic recognizable to those who sought to own and display these works in their homes.

For this deeply religious Christian population, depictions of nature could be seen as testaments to the work of God. These views, particularly those featuring the flat terrain and low horizon, also became celebrations of the newly declared Dutch Republic.

Competition among landscape painters encouraged specialization. Some focused on natural features of the countryside such as woodlands and waterfalls. Others chose seascapes, winter scenes, nighttime views, and wide panoramas for their subjects. Artists also made innovations in technique, using a narrow range of colors, loose brushwork, or paint applied sparingly so the grain of the wood painting support showed through. Finally, animals became signature elements for several artists, ranging from creatures populating the forest to those raised in barnyards and fields.
Jan de Bray
Dutch, 1627–1697
Portrait of a Boy holding a Basket of Fruit, 1658
oil on panel

We do not know this young boy, but his watchful expression, looking out just past our gaze, makes us feel that we can perceive his budding character. His curly golden locks and elegant red-accented attire indicate a well-to-do family.

The vine and basket of fruits add an allegorical twist, suggesting he has learned to tame the capricious ivy vine and has embraced the fruits of education and knowledge.

Surviving documents about childhood in the 17th-century Dutch Republic suggest that, in the face of high child mortality, parents then like now showed demonstrable affection and suffered childhood illnesses and losses.

They also recognized it as a distinctive time of life that was a training ground for adulthood. Jan de Bray frequently used his own extended family, including children, as models.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Charles H. Bayley Picture and Painting Fund and other funds 2019.255
Nicolaes Maes  
Dutch, 1634–1693  
Portrait of Helena van Heuvel, c.1675–79  
oil on canvas

An inscription on the back of the painting identifies this woman as Helena van Heuvel. Nicolaes Maes, who was a fashionable portraitist, painted sumptuous satin, lace, and pearls set against her delicate white skin. This example stands in contrast to the somber fashions of the early 17th century portraits nearby and demonstrates the influence of French fashion that spread across Europe in the mid-17th century. Additionally this work reflects Flemish painter Anthony van Dyck’s sway on European portraiture, which reached from the courts of London to Rome (see image). Helena was married to an Amsterdam merchant and high official of the Dutch East India Company; her stylish hairstyle and dress convey her status and wealth. The East India Company, founded in 1602, established trading posts and colonies in Asia and exerted political influence that was felt well into the 20th century.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Steven B. Belkin  
2019.313

Anthony van Dyck, Flemish, 1599–1641; *Queen Henrietta Maria of England*, 1636–38; oil on canvas; 42 1/4 in. × 33 1/2 inches;  
The San Diego Museum of Art, Gift of Anne R. and Amy Putnam  
1939.99
Antonie Palamedesz  
Dutch, 1601–1673  
Portrait of a Minister, 1654  
oil on canvas

This unidentified gentleman’s elegantly somber clothing and skullcap are signs of his Protestant faith, and he may have been a minister. Both scholars and clergymen wore caps such as this, which served to emphasize the sitter’s intellectual status. His gloves and gesturing hand directly address the viewer, although the precise meaning of these elements is not completely clear to us today. Such indicators of a passing moment in time are characteristic of 17th-century Dutch portraiture.

Antonie Palamedesz, who was born and trained in Delft, is celebrated for painting groups of anonymous, sumptuously attired young people with the same meticulous attention to surface details visible in this work. He studied with Delft’s preeminent portraitist of the previous generation, Michiel van Mierevelt, whose more statically posed portrait of Adriana van Ijlen can be seen nearby.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Edwin H. Abbot, Jr. in memory of his wife, Sarah Otis Ernst 2019.253
Rembrandt van Rijn
Dutch, 1606–1669
Portrait of Aeltje Uylenburgh, 1632
oil on panel

As the inscription at upper right tells us, this woman was 62 years old when the young Rembrandt van Rijn painted her portrait in 1632. Rembrandt’s attentiveness to the look and feel of different surfaces—blushed cheeks and weathered skin, starched linen, stiff black fabric, and fur trim—is very much on display. At the same time, the painting conveys a convincing presence: her lifelike gaze and demeanor allow the viewer to imagine something of her personality.

Rembrandt, who had just moved to Amsterdam from his native Leiden a year earlier, quickly became one of the most sought-after portraitists in his new city. Among his many clients were family and associates of his early dealer and business partner, Hendrick Uylenburgh. Aeltje was the elder cousin, not only of Hendrick, but also of Rembrandt’s wife, Saskia, whom he married two years after this portrait was made.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.250
Michiel Jansz. van Mierevelt
Dutch, 1567–1641
Portrait of Adriana van Ijlen, 1616
oil on panel

Remarkably, many Dutch portraits provide the identity of their sitters. In this case, the coat of arms behind Adriana van Ijlen’s left shoulder provides the evidence. The inscription at upper right tells us she was 66 years old at the time this image was painted. Her relatively stiff pose, along with the starched linen cap and collar, reflect a time when portraits aimed to penetrate a sitter’s soul through a static pose. The furs surely kept her warm and conveyed the status appropriate for a widow of a grain merchant and Delft politician.

The painter Michiel van Mierevelt established his reputation in Delft and The Hague, cities that were associated with the House of Orange, whose patriarchs led the Dutch Revolt. His career spanned multiple generations, and the status conveyed by his later position as court painter to the House of Orange secured a steady stream of portrait commissions.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of the Estate of Francis B. Greene in memory of Mr. and Mrs. Francis B. Greene 2019.312
Pieter Cornelisz van Slingelandt
Dutch, 1640–1691
Portrait of Johan van Musschenbroek and His Wife, 1685 or 1688
oil on panel

Portraits in the 17th-century Dutch Republic took many forms. Sometimes—as in this instance—they more closely resemble scenes from everyday life than the stiff, more formal depictions of Dutch citizens visible elsewhere in this gallery. This portrait of Johan van Musschenbroek and Margaretha van Straaten caught in the midst of making music commemorates their 1685 marriage. This musical harmony is meant to mirror that of their marriage. Their access to such leisure activity was afforded by their economic well-being. Musschenbroek and his brothers were highly successful producers of scientific instruments such as air pumps and microscopes, both 17th-century inventions benefitting from Dutch contributions.

Pieter van Slingelandt shows off his skill at painting with fine, invisible brushwork. This style, known in Dutch as *fijnschilderij* (fine painting), was a specialty of his native Leiden and originated in the work of Gerrit Dou, whose work can be seen nearby.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Charles H. Bayley Picture and Painting Fund 2019.311
Jan Baptist Weenix  
Dutch, 1621–1660  
Portrait of the De Kempenaer Family (The Margaretha Portrait),  
c.1653  
oil on canvas

Dutch family portraits typically featured the father, so this portrait of only female family members is unusual. It shows a young widow, Christina Lepper, dressed in mourning attire with the three surviving daughters from her marriage to Jacobus de Kempenaer.

Margaretha is seated with a doll next to her mother, Jacoba is the youngest in the carriage, and the eldest daughter, Christina, stands at the right. Jan Baptist Weenix may have alluded to the father’s notable absence with the two cypress trees, traditional symbols of death, and the centrally placed dog with his back to us, apparently looking for his master.

The artist, who had spent four years in Rome, specialized in Italianate landscapes, a type of 17th-century Dutch landscape art. The architecture inspired by ancient Rome and the Mediterranean landscape seen in the background demonstrate this specialty while also providing a stable setting for the widowed woman and her daughters.

Margaretha, the longest-living of the daughters, inherited this painting, and it continued to be passed down through others named Margaretha in the family for over three centuries.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.308
Caspar Netscher  
Dutch, 1639–1684  
The Young Artists, 1666  
oil on panel

By the light of an oil lamp, a student, probably 11 or 12, gazes out at the viewer while he points to the plaster cast of a cherub resting on his drawing book. A younger boy observes, holding his own simple sketch of a doll in his hand. In the 17th century, students began their apprenticeship with master painters around this age. They first copied prints and progressed to paintings, then sculpture, and finally, live figures.

Pupils copied at night, when distinct shadows better defined forms. The consistent illumination of oil lamps was preferred over candles since candle flames increased in size as the wax burned off. Caspar Netscher used a meticulous technique associated with the Leiden school of *fijnschilderij* (fine painting). Like other fine painters, however, he allowed individual brushstrokes to remain visible, seen in the staccato touches that describe the young man’s red robe and face.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art  
2019.267
Jacob Adriaensz. Backer
Dutch, 1608–1651
Young Woman Holding a Fan, c.1645
oil on panel

A young woman adorned with feathers and precious jewels casts a flirtatious glance as she draws the viewer’s attention to her low neckline with her folding fan. Here, Jacob Backer applied his skills to the type of Dutch painting known as the *tronie*, a figure study not intended as a portrait, but rather depicting a lively facial expression or fanciful costume. The woman’s loose hair, the glimpse of her white undergarment, and the half-length format suggest this *tronie* was modeled after 16th-century Italian paintings of courtesans. Such paintings, which are often racier than the one shown here, were fashionable among the wealthier collectors in Amsterdam during the 17th century.

Visit the Museum’s Gallery 236 to see Utrecht artist Gerrit van Honthorst’s *Smiling Girl, A Courtesan, Holding an Obscene Image* (see image). Backer was inspired by Italian paintings, as was Honthorst, who actually traveled to Rome.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.272

Gerrit van Honthorst, Dutch, 1592–1656; *Smiling Girl, a Courtesan, Holding an Obscene Image*, 1625; oil on canvas; 32 × 25 1/4 inches; Saint Louis Art Museum, Friends Fund 63:1954
Maria Schalcken
Dutch, 1645–1699
The Artist at Work in Her Studio, c.1680
oil on panel

In her self-portrait, Maria Schalcken included many of the same elements that Gerrit Dou used in his own hanging nearby, including a palette and brushes, a plaster bust, and a book. Seated at her easel, she gestures with an animated gaze directed at her viewers, inviting us to examine her painting in progress. She is also holding a maulstick, a tool that supports and steadies the hand while painting. Above the painting a second stretcher is poised, seemingly to protect it from dust.

Successful women artists were rare in this period, and this is one of only two known works by Schalcken to survive. There are equally few facts known about her life: we know mainly that she was the sister of painter Godfried Schalcken, whose sugar-eating girl hangs nearby. This painting was long attributed to Godfried until a recent cleaning revealed Maria’s signature in the upper left corner.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art
2019.264
Dutch artists in the 17th century excelled at making self-portraits in which they could choose how to portray themselves. In this work, Gerrit Dou identifies himself clearly as a painter by the palette and brushes in his left hand. Yet he is dressed in an elegant fur-lined jacket and velvet cap and rests his hand on books, both signs of his learning and financial success. Dou was one of the most highly paid painters in mid-17th-century Holland, a reputation he earned by painting exquisitely detailed pictures—described by a contemporary as “highly valued and dearly sold.”

Dou studied painting with Rembrandt van Rijn, who was a master of the self-portrait. Like his teacher, Dou does not simply depict his painter’s tools and his success: he literally places himself inside one of his own prized paintings. His pictures inevitably include an arched stone window and a crowded sill, a distinctive framing device introduced by Dou that became his trademark.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.269
Paulus Moreelse
Dutch, 1571–1638
Portrait of a Young Woman as Flora, 1633
oil on panel

The wide-brimmed straw hat, gauzy veil, and loose, revealing gown worn by this alluring figure are far removed from the actual clothing worn by Dutch women in the 1630s. This painting is an example of a *portrait historié* (historiated portrait) in which the sitter assumes the role of a mythological, biblical, or historical figure. The unidentified woman who modeled for Paulus Moreelse chose the guise of a seductive shepherdess, a particularly fashionable choice among Dutch noblewomen in Utrecht.

The vogue for such fanciful portraits in the 1620s and 1630s can be traced to the rise of Dutch pastoral literature, which focuses on the romantic pursuits of shepherds and shepherdesses in the ancient world. To emphasize the amorous undertones of this portrait, the sitter bears the attributes of Flora, the goddess of spring and fertility: a floral wreath and roses pinned to her hat and shawl.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Mrs. Albert J. Beveridge in memory of Delia Spencer Field 2019.259
Godfried Schalcken  
Dutch, 1643–1706  
Young Girl Eating Sweets, 1680–85  
oil on panel

This young girl, her elegant orange satin dress glinting in the light, seems to playfully taunt us as she aims a sugar-coated fingertip toward her tongue. Godfried Schalcken painted many different subjects, but he is arguably best remembered for his comical scenes that focus on life’s messy moments, including overindulgence. They are often intended to depict the five senses—in this case, taste.

Schalcken depicts a young woman, here generalized rather than a specific individual, as she steals a precious taste of sugar, a rare product of the distant Dutch West Indies.

Schalcken excelled at the depiction of lustrous surfaces, as is evident in the highly polished silver sugar pot and the sheen of the woman’s dress seen here. After studying in Leiden with Gerrit Dou, the grandfather of the “fine painters,” he worked in Dordrecht, London, and The Hague.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.265
Frans Post
Dutch, 1612–1680
A Landscape in Brazil, 1663
oil on panel

This panoramic landscape presents an idealized view of the short-lived Dutch colony (1630–1654) in Brazil. On the right, a papaya tree towers over the ruins of the earlier Portuguese settlement. Along a rustic path, the colony’s diverse inhabitants are imagined in picturesque scenarios. A woman dressed in the attire of the Tupi people—one of the Indigenous groups in the region—skillfully balances a basket on her head. In the foreground, a group of African men and women engage in lively conversation. Absent from this painting is any reference to the grueling labor forced on them by Dutch colonists.

The Dutch West India Company captured northeastern Brazil from the Portuguese to gain control of the transatlantic sugar trade. Portuguese colonists had built this immensely profitable industry with a plantation workforce composed of enslaved Indigenous peoples and, to an increasing extent, enslaved Africans. The Dutch continued this system and transported over 31,000 additional enslaved workers from West and Central Africa.

The colony’s governor commissioned Frans Post to create documentary images of the landscape and built environment of Dutch Brazil to help promote the colony to potential investors and settlers. A few of those images depict sugar plantations (see map below), yet they minimize the life-threatening working conditions imposed on enslaved laborers. Over time, Post shifted to even more idyllic portrayals of the colony, like the painting exhibited here, which appealed to his steady clientele of noblemen and wealthy merchants.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.290

Joan Blaeu, Dutch, 1596–1673; Map of Pernambuco and Itamaraca, Brazil (Praefecturae Paranambucae pars Borealis, una cum Praefectura de Itamaraca) with an illustration of a sugar mill after a drawing by Frans Post, 1662; hand-colored engraving; 16 1/2 × 21 1/16 inches; in Atlas Maior; image courtesy Sanderus Antiquariaat (www.SanderusMaps.com)
Adam Pijnacker  
Dutch, c.1620–1673  
Mediterranean Harbor, c.1650  
oil on panel

This scene offers a romanticized view of a bustling Italian harbor, as Dutch merchants and a multiethnic crew of dockworkers unload and inspect shipping cargo under a sunny sky. Born in the port town of Schiedam, Adam Pijnacker was well acquainted with the business of international trade, suggested by his detailed portrayal of the ships and the variety of goods. He spent three years living in Italy, likely in the service of his father, who was a wine merchant and owner of seafaring ships. After he returned home, Pijnacker specialized in idealized landscapes and harbor scenes which, like this one, were inspired by his earlier travels. These paintings held a strong appeal for Dutch buyers who yearned to be transported to distant corners of the world.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.291
Jan Asselijn
Dutch, c.1610–1652
River Landscape with the Fort Saint-Jean and the Château de Pierre-Scize in Lyon, c.1650
oil on canvas

This landscape transports the viewer to southern France through its innovative use of color, as evident in the turquoise water, the pinkish hues of the hazy atmosphere, and the golden light. Jan Asselijn visited this site outside of Lyon, France, on his way home from Italy. There, he had been a member of the Bentveughels (Birds of a Feather), a society of Dutch and Flemish artists based in Rome. During his travels, he made numerous drawings of the architecture, landscape, and ancient ruins in Italy and France, which he later incorporated into his paintings. While the landscape and architecture shown here are distinctly Lyonnais, the ferryboat scene of a woman frightened by misbehaving mules reflects the humorous content that is often found in 17th-century Dutch art.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.294
Jan Both
Dutch, 1618–1652
An Italianate Landscape with Travelers on a Path, 1645–50
oil on canvas

In this sweeping vista of the Roman countryside, goat herdsmen meander and peasants rest beneath the golden, late-afternoon sun. Jan Both began to paint idyllic views of rural Italy while living in Rome in the late 1630s. Despite the detailed depiction of the local vegetation and rocky terrain, he constructed this composition from sketches after returning to his native Utrecht. Landscape paintings set in Italy—or “Italianate” landscapes—were popular with so-called armchair travelers, who could experience the warm glow of the Mediterranean sun without leaving the comforts of home.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.293
Joris van der Haagen Dutch, c.1615–1669
Twilight View of Schwanenburg Castle, c.1672
oil on canvas

Here, a setting sun casts a warm pink light over Schwanenburg Castle and the surrounding valley in Cleves, a city in present-day Germany. A resident of The Hague, the well-traveled Joris van der Haagen was especially drawn to the hilly, wooded countryside near the Dutch-German border.

He made numerous detailed drawings during his travels, which he later used as source material for paintings such as this one. Van der Haagen juxtaposed the castle’s majestic silhouette in the distance with a charming foreground scene of a humble herdsman minding his flock.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Susan and Matthew Weatherbie, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.316
Willem van de Velde the Younger Dutch, 1633–1707
A Wijdschip in a Fresh Breeze, c.1665–70
oil on canvas

Under ominous skies, ships navigate the choppy waters of the Zuiderzee. This large inlet of the North Sea connected ships departing from Amsterdam to northern trade routes. In response to the expansion of the Dutch trade network in the 17th century, Dutch shipbuilders implemented important technical and design innovations. They created specialized vessels of all sizes more cheaply than any of their competitors, becoming leaders in the shipbuilding industry.

On the left, a larger, three-masted warship bears the tricolor flag of the Dutch Republic. The smaller boats in the foreground—a wijdschip and a kaag—were designed for transporting goods and passengers on inland waterways.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.319
Willem van de Velde the Elder Dutch, 1611–1693
The Brederode off Vlieland, c.1645
pen painting on panel

On the shores of the Dutch island of Vlieland, locals marvel as the country’s newest and largest warship takes its maiden voyage. With great precision, Willem van de Velde the Elder recorded the Brederode’s sails, cannonry, and stern, which bears the coat of arms of the stadtholder, the Republic’s head of state. The artist specialized in “pen paintings,” as seen here, which are actually pen-and-ink drawings on panels painted white.

The Brederode and 46 other warships accompanied a fleet of 300 merchant ships to the Baltic Sea, the center of the lumber and grain trades. Sailing to the Baltic required passing through Scandinavian waters, where the Danish king imposed heavy tolls. The Dutch refused to pay these tolls and, with this show of force, stood resolute against the king.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.297
Adriaen Coorte Dutch, 1659–1707
Still Life with Seashells, 1698
oil on paper on panel

Perched on the edge of a stone ledge, five seashells emerge from the shadows, their varying shapes, textures, and patterns illuminated by a mysterious light source. Adriaen Coorte depicted these shells with scientific precision. He placed them close to the painting’s surface, with minimal overlapping, to ensure the viewer could observe their unique physical qualities. Imported from Indonesia, the Caribbean, and Africa by Dutch trading companies, seashells were among the most highly prized commodities for collectors of natural rarities. At the same time, scholars studied the shells to gain a greater understanding of marine life around the world.

Coorte was not the only artist to recognize the aesthetic potential of seashells. Rembrandt, who had an extensive collection of foreign seashells, documented a conus marmoreus in a copperplate etching almost 50 years earlier (see image).

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.292

Rembrandt van Rijn, Dutch, 1606–69; The Shell, 1650; etching; 3 3/16 × 5 3/16 inches; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam RP-P-OB-242
Willem Kalfz
Dutch, 1619–1693
Still Life with Fruit in a Wanli Bowl, 1664
oil on canvas

This sumptuous still life reveals the variety of foreign goods that circulated in the Dutch Republic, owing to the nation’s trading prowess. Oranges and lemons arrived from the Mediterranean, carpets from Turkey, and porcelain from China. Of all the luxury objects imported from Asia, porcelain appears most frequently in 17th-century Dutch painting. Willem Kalf skillfully conveyed the physical properties that made this commodity so desirable. For example, by tilting the bowl and highlighting its white rim, he emphasizes the delicacy, sheen, and translucence of Chinese porcelain.

Working from actual examples of Chinese ceramics, Kalf translated the designs found on bowls made during the Wanli reign (1572–1620). To accurately reproduce the cobalt-oxide blue used by Chinese ceramicists, he used ultramarine paint. This expensive pigment was derived from lapus lazuli, a precious stone from the mountains of Afghanistan, which Dutch traders acquired through Venice.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.296
This portrait of an unknown man is enlivened by Frans Hals’ signature loose, gestural brushwork and the slight suggestion of a smile developing on the sitter’s face. The subject wears one of the most coveted items a Dutch citizen could own in the 17th century: a *Japonse rok*, or Japanese-style dressing gown. The Dutch East India Company started trading with Japanese merchants in 1609. After the Japanese government expelled Portuguese traders in 1639, the Dutch became the sole Europeans with access to Japanese goods.

The Japanese shogun, the military dictator, gave fine silk robes to merchants as part of the annual ceremony acknowledging the special trade agreement between the two countries. The robes were brought back to the Netherlands, where they fetched high prices. To keep up with the demand, the Dutch started commissioning *Japonse rokken* for export to the Netherlands (see image), and eventually, the robes were produced domestically using imported silk.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Mrs. Antonie Lilienfeld in memory of Dr. Leon Lilienfeld 2019.298

Men’s Dressing Gown or Japonse Rok, 1725–75; Japanese; silk; 64 3/16 × 55 15/16 × 1 3/16 inches; Collection Centraal Museum, Utrecht; 1937 gift Image & copyrights Centraal Museum, Utrecht inv.no. 8141
Rachel Ruysch
Dutch, 1664–1750
Still Life with Flowers, 1709
oil on canvas

In this floral still life, Rachel Ruysch conveyed movement with an S-shaped curve that connects the striped tulip at the top with the marigold hanging over the edge of the table. The lush arrangement includes an abundance of plant varieties, such as apple blossom, poppy, narcissus, gentian, and honeysuckle. Ruysch had access to plant specimens through her father, Frederik, who was a botany professor and a devoted collector of rarities from the natural world. As supervisor of Amsterdam’s botanical garden, Frederik encouraged members of the Dutch trading companies to collect seeds and cuttings during their overseas travels for further study by Dutch naturalists.

Ruysch was one of the most highly acclaimed female artists of her time. Her paintings commanded high prices, and poets lauded her abilities. She also served as court painter to the Elector Palatine Johann Wilhelm II in Düsseldorf, for whom she painted this still life.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.256
Jan Davidsz. de Heem
Dutch, 1606–1684
Glass Vase with Flowers on a Stone Ledge, 1655–60
oil on panel

This colorful bouquet brings together no fewer than 15 different flowers, fruits, grains, and herbs. Because these flowers bloom in different seasons, Jan de Heem likely created this composition by consulting sketches he made throughout the year. The vogue for floral still lifes during the 17th century reflected the Dutch Republic’s increased economic and scientific interest in flowers. Collectors cultivated and traded new species, while botanists studied their potential applications. Among the imported plants, the tulip—shown here in a striped red-and-white variant—was the most prized among flower connoisseurs.

Floral still lifes appealed to collectors not only for their pleasing subject matter but also for their symbolic content. Climbing up the wheat stalk, the caterpillar—which eventually transforms into a butterfly—serves as a symbol of renewal, as well as a reference to the Christian account of Jesus’ resurrection.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art
2019.257
Frans Hals
Dutch, c.1582/1583–1666
Portrait of a Preacher, c.1660
oil on panel

Identified as a preacher based on his skull cap, the subject of this painting remains unknown. His penetrating gaze draws us into the picture. Frans Hals, who worked in Haarlem, spent time reworking the face to capture an accurate likeness—skin discolorations and all. Broad, unblended strokes of flesh tones compose the face, accented with white-and-red highlights on the nose, ear, and cheek. The thick patches of paint appear distinct when viewed up close but meld into a unified whole from a distance. The heavy paint used for the face contrasts with the thinly and quickly painted background, where brush marks can be discerned and the preparatory layer of brown paint is visible through the darker covering layer.

The artist’s technical virtuosity is demonstrated by his loose manner of painting, something he pioneered. Contemporary art theorists admired Hals’ painterly style, noting that his free application of paint lends the sitter an extraordinary liveliness.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art
2019.273
Pieter Jansz. Saenredam
Dutch, 1597–1665
Church of Saint Odulphus, Assendelft, 1655
oil on panel

This interior view emphasizes the bare white walls and lack of religious decoration typical of many Dutch Protestant churches. These buildings were originally Catholic churches that were seized and stripped of their sculpture and painting by the Protestant Calvinists during the Dutch revolt against Spain.

Pieter Saenredam specialized in “portraits” of such interiors—paintings as spare and rigorous as the Calvinist doctrine itself. With a cool, restrained palette, he meticulously recorded the clear geometry of the architecture. At the same time, he included the masonry joins in the pillars and walls, the leading of the windows, and the brown discoloration of water seepage. The two visitors seen here further emphasize the scale and spare furnishings of the building. This church commemorated Saint Odulphus, an Augustinian missionary (775–855) born in Assendelft, also the birthplace of Saenredam.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Juliana Cheney Edwards Collection 2019.307
Pieter Jansz. Saenredam
Dutch, 1597–1665
The Interior of the St. Bavo Church, Haarlem, 1660
oil on panel

This monumental church dedicated to St. Bavo was the most important church in Haarlem. In depicting its interior, the artist Pieter Saenredam amplified the height of the nave and moved the placement of the intended viewer farther into the church for dramatic effect. The vertical format of the painting further accentuates the soaring vaults.

Typically, Saenredam used sketches made on site to determine the finished painting. In this case he used a much earlier drawing, made in 1627. The artist faithfully recorded the cedar roofing, the carved wood pulpit, the bell-shaped sounding board at right, and the collection box for the Boys’ Orphanage in front of the pews. By using a narrow range of color, he created the tonal nuances of stark walls, which were left bare after the church was turned over to the Protestants in 1578.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.302
Pieter Jansz. Saenredam
Dutch, 1597–1665
The North Transept and Choir Chapel of Sint Janskerk, Utrecht, 1655
oil on panel

These stark white walls of the Sint Janskerk (St. John’s Church), with no religious ornamentation, reflect the 1580 prohibition of public Catholic worship in the Dutch city of Utrecht. Pieter Saenredam spent five months in Utrecht during 1636, making careful drawings of the numerous churches there. Years later, back in his studio in Haarlem, he returned to one of those drawings to create this poetic painting. The four small figures provide a sense of scale for the surrounding architecture.

This composition is among Saenredam’s most eloquent expressions of the inherent beauty of line and geometric form. Over the latticework door of the stone choir screen, the artist provided a signed inscription, identifying the site and the date for the painting.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Susan and Matthew Weatherbie, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.315
Jan van der Heyden
Dutch, 1637–1712
A View of Saint Pantaleon in Cologne
oil on panel

In this view of Cologne, Jan van der Heyden creatively rearranged various monuments to compose a pleasing scene. He positioned the ruin of the Weidenbach Cloister in the left foreground next to an embellished depiction of the church of St. Pantaleon behind it, to the right.

By placing the foreground elements in shadow, he directed the viewer’s gaze to the background church. Remodeled several times in the 17th century, St. Pantaleon always maintained its characteristic protruding entryway and paired towers. Van der Heyden simplified the decoration on its façade and added the walled garden to the right. The artist enhanced this harmonious image by contrasting the warm colors of the brick with the vivid blue of the sky.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Susan and Matthew Weatherbie, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.318
Gerrit Adrianensz Berkheyde
Dutch, 1638–1698
Church of Saint Cecilia, Cologne, c.1670–80
oil on panel

This painting, with its refined draftsmanship, crisp atmospheric effects, and subtle color harmonies, accurately records the church building’s architecture and surrounding square.

The approach is unusual for the artist, Gerrit Berkheyde, who often created fictional cityscape compositions. Berkheyde saw this church when he traveled with his brother to Cologne in the 1650s. A specialist in urban views, the artist made sketches of several cities during his travels that he later used to prepare finished paintings. Like most artists of the time, Berkheyde relied on drawings as an essential preparation for his paintings.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Museum purchase with funds donated by Mrs. Charles Gaston Smith’s Group 2019.299
Gerrit Adrianensz Berkheyde
Dutch, 1638–1698
View of Haarlem, 1671
oil on panel

Gerrit Berkheyde’s view of Haarlem focuses on the wall and barren foreground outside the city. The formidable St. Bavo Church, consecrated in 1559, is centered in the background. This foreground area was later developed during the city expansion of 1671, leading scholars to suggest that the painting was commissioned by the backers of this building project who wished to document the site. The church exterior lost its original sculptural decoration when the church, originally Catholic, was seized and turned over to the Protestants in 1578.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art
2019.305
Nicolaes Berchem Dutch, 1620–1683
Saint Peter, 1644
oil on panel

Nicolaes Berchem used thick strokes to capture the skin tones of St. Peter’s weathered face. To achieve the texture of his hair and beard, Berchem scraped away the wet paint with the handle end of his brush. Given its loosely painted style, this image may be a study or a finished work that probably was hung in the home of a religious family or individual.

According to Christian Gospel, Jesus told his follower Peter, “I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven.” The saint here is recognizable as Peter by the keys he holds, symbolic of his role as the founder of the church. Images of Jesus’ followers were popular subjects for Catholic worship.

As an early follower of Jesus, Peter was also important in Protestant denominations.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.271
Susanna, shown on a stone bench beside a fountain, was understood in the 17th century as a model of virtue. Popular among both Dutch Catholics and Protestants, her Old Testament story explained how two community elders spied on her as she prepared to bathe. They demanded she have sexual relations with them. When she refused, they threatened to claim they had witnessed her with another lover, noting that their privileged position would lend credence to their story. A later trial proved the elders lied, and Susanna was found innocent.

Hendrick Goltzius followed the biblical text by portraying Susanna’s hands clutched in prayer as she gazes toward heaven, seeking guidance. They grope toward her exposed body, their faces communicating desire. Goltzius further heightened the painting’s psychological impact by moving Susanna’s exposed body to the front of the picture plane.

In this way, the artist invited the viewer to engage in the same transgression as the elders.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Charles H. Bayley Picture and Painting Fund 2019.263
The Old Testament figure Tamar (on the right) married Judah’s oldest son who died. She then wed Judah’s second son who also died. Judah promised the twice-widowed Tamar that she would marry his youngest son, but he broke that promise. Worried that she would remain childless, Tamar hatched a plan to assure the continuation of her family line. She disguised herself as a courtesan and tricked Judah into sleeping with her.

Ferdinand Bol, a pupil of Rembrandt, captured the moment when the beautiful and determined Tamar, hidden behind a veil, receives items she demanded as pledges. She takes a signet ring from Judah and clutches the patriarch’s staff in her left hand. Later, Tamar used these belongings to identify Judah as the father of her twins. Bol has provided a lush background of oversized vegetation suggestive of fertility, perhaps alluding to the outcome of the story.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Robert Dawson Evans Collection
2019.260
Rembrandt van Rijn
Dutch, 1606–1669
Reverend Johannes Elison, 1634
oil on canvas

Maria Bockenolle (Wife of Johannes Elison), 1634
oil on canvas

This pair of Rembrandt portraits depicts Maria Bockenolle and her husband, Reverend Johannes Elison, a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church in Norwich, England. As the embodiment of education and culture, the minister wears a long, sleeveless outer garment, called a tabard, the attire of an intellectual. His broad learning is expressed further by the printed book—probably a Bible—and a handwritten journal at the right. He expresses his faith by drawing his left hand to his breast. Maria wears dress fashionable for women in England, including the broad-brimmed hat. Such hats, more commonly worn by men in the Netherlands, were trimmed in beaver fur. Extinct in continental Europe by the 17th century, beavers were only available through trade in North America.

Life-size, full-length portraits, typically chosen for royal or noble patrons, were far more expensive than the usual bust or half-length formats. This pair, commissioned by the couple’s son, a wealthy merchant, hung in his house in Amsterdam to demonstrate his status and success.

Johannes and Maria resided in Norwich from 1608 until 1639. Dutch Calvinists went to England in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, fleeing the Catholicism imposed by Spanish rule. The Elisons most likely served a congregation of such immigrants.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, William K. Richardson Fund 2019.309–.310
Emanuel de Witte Dutch, c.1617–1692
Interior of the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam, c.1660–65
oil on canvas

A celebrated painter of church interiors, Emanuel de Witte focused on the life of the townspeople. In the midst of a church service while the preacher speaks from the pulpit, citizens gossip and visit, dogs explore their surroundings, and some people listen to the sermon. A family group in the left foreground in front of the pillar may be intended as a portrait, perhaps reflecting their role as patrons for the picture.

The Oude Kerk (Old Church) served as the major Dutch Reformed Church in Amsterdam. It was a favorite subject of de Witte who, after moving from Delft in the 1650s, painted its interior more than 30 times. He was not always faithful to its architecture, however. Here, for example, de Witte elongated the pillars and moved the pews, creating a sense of spatial expanse. He enlivened his image through the play of light throughout the interior.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.300
Emanuel de Witte Dutch, c.1617–1692
Interior of the Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam, 1677
oil on canvas

When Amsterdam’s Oude Kerk (Old Church) became too small to hold its growing congregation, the larger Nieuwe Kerk (New Church) depicted here was built in the city’s central square. Emanuel de Witte faithfully recorded details of the church’s interior, such as the pointed archways and ribbed vaulting that characterize its Gothic style. The specific actions of its visitors, however, were probably his own inventions.

Gravediggers are portrayed in the foreground, removing stone flooring to prepare a tomb; their wheelbarrow and brooms stand nearby. Their efforts are overseen by a gentleman, perhaps a family member. A dog relieves itself against the foreground pillar while a man strolls in the distance with another dog by his side.

De Witte is known for his attention to reflected light on church walls and stone floors. Contrasts in illumination between the foreground aisle and the crossing of the church, where windows admit more light, enliven the composition and establish a sense of space.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, M. Theresa B. Hopkins Fund 2019.301
Jan van der Heyden  
Dutch, 1637–1712  
View of the Westerkerk, Amsterdam, c.1667–70  
oil on panel

This scene features the illuminated east end and shadowed north side of Amsterdam’s Westerkerk (Western Church). This building is visible behind the Westerhal—a part civic guard meeting hall and part street-level meat market. Unlike the other churches portrayed in this gallery, Amsterdam’s Westerkerk was built by Protestants. It was constructed between 1620 and 1631.

Jan van der Heyden frequently took artistic license when he depicted cityscapes, although this particular view of the Westerkerk is largely accurate. In fact, when the church was restored in 2006–07, this painting helped determine the correct shade of blue to repaint the crown atop the roughly 278-foot tower. The crisp clear light and the interesting play of angles and rooflines are typical of van der Heyden’s finest production. The small figures pursuing their everyday tasks were probably painted by Adriaen van de Velde, an Amsterdam artist who often collaborated with van der Heyden.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.304
Frans van Mieris, the Elder
Dutch, 1635–1681
The Old Violinist, 1660
oil on panel

A contemplative man is framed by a window, with his violin perched on a stone ledge. By 1660, when this painting was made, such stone window frames were fashionable in the work of painters in Leiden. The presence of the serving maid in the background—where she keeps track of how many drinks (and shrimps) her customers are having—identifies the setting as an inn or tavern. The violinist is smartly dressed, yet past his prime, and his melancholic expression seems to ponder the passage of time.

Violinists typically accompanied the festivities of the lower classes. References to music in images of the upper class tend to suggest harmony—especially of love or marriage. Here, the implication is that this pensive musician has spent his life stimulating the raucous merriment of peasants. As for painting style, Frans van Mieris’ imperceptible brushstrokes can only be seen under magnification.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art
2019.266
Matthijs Naiveu  
Dutch, 1647–1721  
Boy and Girl Blowing Soap Bubbles, c.1715  
oil on canvas

The familiar theme of *vanitas* (vanity), emphasizing the ephemeral nature of life, is acted out by the bubble-blowing activity of the elaborately dressed boy on the stone windowsill.

The painting evokes the Latin phrase *Homo Bulla* (man is like a bubble), which provides a vivid image of man’s mortality. The two sculptures of standing putti (young boys) on either side of the window provide additional clues to a fuller understanding of the painting. A bird sits on the left putto’s hand while the one on the right holds a bridle. Only a tamed bird would be so familiar with a boy, and a bridle’s job is to tame, as it does with a horse. The painting’s layered message suggests the need for a moderated upbringing in light of the brevity of life.

The sculpture with putti playing with a goat below the windowsill appears repeatedly in the work of Gerrit Dou and was also adopted by many of his followers. Naiveu was among the last of them.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Museum purchase with funds donated by contribution 2019.252
Dominicus van Tol
Dutch, 1635–1676
Woman in a Window, Holding a Dead Fowl, 1650–76
oil on panel

The stone archway through which this young woman displays her dead fowl is an artificial concoction of Domenicus van Tol’s uncle and teacher, Gerrit Dou. Dutch houses did not include such features, and the improbably draped curtain is also a clue to the scene’s artificiality (despite the long history of curtains in art). The display of dead birds through a window can be traced to Rembrandt, who was Dou’s teacher (see image). There were also earlier traditions of still life paintings with game and market items, where meat and poultry were displayed in all their glory, ready for the kitchen. A 17th-century viewer might also have considered a more bawdy interpretation, since the Dutch word for bird (vogel) was also turned into a verb (vogelen), becoming slang for sexual relations.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Bequest of Mrs. Harriet J. Bradbury 2019.270

Rembrandt van Rijn, Dutch, 1606–69;
Still Life with Peacocks, c.1639;
oil on canvas; 57 1/16 × 53 3/8 inches;
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam SK-A-3981
Gerrit Dou  
Dutch, 1613–1675  
Old Woman Cutting Bread, c.1655  
oil on panel  

This modest meal of rye bread and ham is illuminated by the flame of a single lamp. The faces of the boys and the older woman, intent on their tasks, glow within the dark interior; a basket and a birdcage can be seen above their heads. Their simple refreshment consists of two of the most common foods eaten in the 17th-century Netherlands. The jug may hold beer, the drink of choice for the lower classes. Because of the way it was made, beer was safer to drink than water and was consumed even at breakfast in a concoction known as beer soup.  

Gerrit Dou was known for applying his meticulous painting style to the elegant classes as well as commonplace people and activities.  

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Henry H. and Zoe Oliver Sherman Fund 2019.268
An off-duty soldier gazes listlessly up at the tobacco smoke curling out of his mouth. Tobacco, native to the Americas, was imported to Europe in the 16th century. It was embraced, first as a medical cure-all, and then as an intoxicant to rival alcohol. In fact, people referred to smoking as “drinking” tobacco before the verb “to smoke” came into use. Several white clay pipes are featured in this composition. One of them rests on top of a brazier, the ceramic vessel that held hot coals used to light a pipe in the days before matches. Everything else—the soldier’s pose and expression, the two women (of perhaps ill repute), the card game, pearls, wine, and candlestick—strongly suggest this group is up to no good.

Utrecht artist Jacob Duck specialized in guard room and tavern scenes that highlight the military men who kept the Eighty Years’ War (1568–1648) going. When this painting was made, the war had only recently come to an end.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Susan and Matthew Weatherbie, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.317
Hendrik Gerritsz. Pot
Dutch, 1585–1657
Woman Seated at a Table (Vanitas), 1635–40
oil on panel

In Hendrick Pot’s nearly monochromatic painting, a sheet of paper tacked to the back wall literally incorporates the Latin word Vanitas (vanity) into the picture. Vanitas was a popular theme in 17th-century Dutch art, evoking the fragility of human life and focusing on the passage of time and the inevitability of death.

The mood of the room—and the woman—is somber. Surrounding the well-dressed woman are reminders of earthly pleasures that cannot be taken into the afterlife. These objects are scattered haphazardly around, like the trunk of silver and overturned tankard on the table. A violin sits unused, and songbooks are scattered across the floor.

The skull, hourglass, and candle burned down to its wick are the most familiar signs of the earthly realm, while the cards and closed tric-trac game board (similar to backgammon) on the table signal wasted pastimes. A broken tobacco pipe references not only smoking tobacco—an intoxicant newly introduced from the Americas—but also the ephemeral quality of smoke.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Mrs. Antonie Lilienfeld in memory of Dr. Leon Lilienfeld 2019.254
Jan Havicksz. Steen  
Dutch, 1626–1679  
An Elegant Company Playing Cards, c.1660  
oil on panel

This jewel-like painting presents a complex Dutch interior. People are seated around a table near an enormous hearth with a landscape painting above it. At right is a view into a second room with a window open to the neighborhood. A survey of the individuals depicted and their activities quickly reveals this is no cozy domestic scene. Jan Steen was a master storyteller who used his skill to paint numerous scenes of comedic debauchery like this one.

The woman seated in the foreground looks out at us as she reveals her superior hand in the card game. On the back of her chair hangs a sword, which must belong to the gentleman seated across from her, who concentrates on his own hand. He is evidently a soldier who either abandoned the sword upon arrival or perhaps lost it to the woman in the card game. Even the dog, sound asleep, seems to have abandoned his usual fidelity and watchfulness.

In the back room, the seated man draws a woman toward him in an embrace, thus identifying the space as an inn or, more pointedly, a brothel. Numerous other details confirm any lingering suspicions: however luxurious the interior may seem, we are looking at a setting for lax morals.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.251
Gabriel Metsu  
Dutch, 1629–1667  
Usurer with a Tearful Woman, 1654  
oil on canvas

This messy interior of a moneylender’s office is the setting for an emotional encounter. The soberly-dressed woman shows the moneylender a document in her left hand and in her right she holds a handkerchief up to her eyes. Between the two figures, an allegorical painting representing greed hangs on the back wall.

As in many Dutch genre paintings, the precise meaning of this image is hard to pin down, and indeed, it may work on multiple levels. Surely this is not a comfortable place for the woman to be in, either emotionally or physically. But is she using her tears to gain her banker’s sympathy? Is he looking down on her wretched status or simply annoyed to be interrupted? Neither role—the borrower nor the lender— was looked upon kindly by 17th-century Dutch society. In a painting like this, there is both a lesson to be learned and also an opportunity to look on the situation from multiple points of view.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Sidney Bartlett Bequest 2019.258
Aert de Gelder  
Dutch, 1645–1727  
Homer Dictating to Scribes, c.1700–1710  
oil on canvas

Homer, the legendary Greek author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, sits among a group of youthful scribes, who diligently copy down everything he says. Homer’s inward gaze is that of a blind man, which enhances the composition’s focus on the intellectual sphere. Additionally the intense concentration of the scribes suggests a similarly inward focus as they trace the words they are writing down.

The last pupil in Rembrandt’s workshop, Aert de Gelder continued to work in his master’s late broad and thick painting style throughout his career. This approach is still evident in this painting, produced over 30 years after Rembrandt’s death.

Even the subject reflects his time in Rembrandt’s studio, since Homer’s likeness appeared in paintings by Rembrandt around the time de Gelder was there.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Ernest Wadsworth Longfellow Fund  
2019.261
Carel Fabritius Dutch, 1622–1654
Mercury and Aglauros,  c.1645–47
oil on canvas

The mythological Greek princess Aglauros, the jealous sister of Herse, is represented in this painting just moments before she was turned to stone by the god Mercury. The pair is shown here in a space dimly illuminated by hanging oil lamps. Mercury is identifiable by the wings on his feet and the caduceus (his staff with entwined snakes) with which he will turn Aglauros to stone. As the ancient Roman poet Ovid told it, even after Aglauros was poisoned by the goddess Envy, she refused to give Mercury access to the beautiful Herse, whose loveliness had captured his attention as he flew above her village.

Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*—his account of the loves of the Graeco-Romangods—was a sourcebook for centuries of artists, including the Dutch. Indeed, the first Dutch-language painter’s manual, by Karel van Mander, was published in 1604 and contains an extended discourse on this influential source.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Martha Ann Edwards Fund 2019.262
Pieter Jansz. Saenredam  
Dutch, 1597–1665

Pieter Jansz. Post  
Dutch, 1608–1669

The Town Hall at Haarlem  
with the Entry of Prince Maurits, c.1630  
oil on panel

This painting depicts the arrival of Maurits, Prince of Orange and Governor of the Dutch Republic, in the city of Haarlem as part of a political coup in October 1618. Although this was a time of truce in the Dutch Revolt against Spain, internally the Netherlands was bitterly divided by political and religious tensions. The day after his entry, Maurits replaced the city’s council members with his supporters.

Ten years later, in 1628, a 500-page description of Haarlem was published. Pieter Saenredam, whose carefully measured church interiors are also on view in this exhibition, provided several images of notable Haarlem architecture to this project, including a view of the Town Hall (see image). Around the same time, he collaborated on this related painting with Pieter Post, who painted the figures seen here.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art  
2019.306

Jan van de Velde II, Dutch, 1593–1641; View of the Grote Market with the City Hall in Haarlem, 1628; etching;  
6 5/16 × 9 3/8 inches; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam RP-P-OB-15.533
A whole village has turned out to enjoy skating, sliding, fishing, playing, and even “sailing” on the frozen waterway. It is clear from their dress that all levels of society are present. This includes the elegantly clothed women who wear long black cloaks called *huiken*, each regional variant identified by the shape of its hood. Women a level or two down the social stratum might wear shorter skirts, like the young woman in the center foreground. Her partner wears the broad breeches, unfitted jacket, and wool cap that was common for his class.

The red building on the left is an inn, and the structure next to it that looks like the upended prow of a boat must be an outhouse. The older gentleman just outside the gate is based on earlier images of “Old Man Winter” that personify the winter season. A boat pulled up on shore in the left middle distance has been pulled out of the water to avoid damage from the ice. Just beyond, a sailboat careens into the picture mounted on skates or runners.

The weather conditions are obvious, as low clouds and a layer of mist encroach in the distance. Hendrick Avercamp was unique in the early decades of the 17th century for his specialization in painting winter scenes. This interest coincided with a cold spell in the Dutch Republic from the 1560s through the 1650s, known as the “Little Ice Age.”

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.288
Jan van de Cappelle
Dutch, c.1624–1679
A Winter Landscape with Skaters and Kolf Players, 1653
oil on canvas

In contrast to the other snow scenes included in this gallery and the next, this one is sparsely populated. Jan van de Cappelle worked in monochrome fashion, emphasizing the steely cold weather. His figures appear to embody the cold, keeping arms at their sides as they walk or skate into the wind. The figures on the ice at left are playing kolf. A precursor to golf, the game could be played indoors or out and was taken to the ice during the cold winters of the mid-17th century, inviting comparisons to ice hockey.

Jan van de Cappelle did not need to paint for a living. He benefitted from his father’s successful dyeworks and owned multiple properties in Amsterdam as well as an art collection of some 6,000 paintings and drawings by his contemporaries. Among these were apparently 900 drawings by Hendrick Avercamp, whose large winter scene is hanging nearby.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Susan and Matthew Weatherbie, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.314
Jacob Grimmer  
South Netherlandish, 1525–1589  
February, c.1570–80  
oil on panel

In this winter landscape, snow falls lightly on several travelers who pass through a low-lying village and church with a castle on the hill above. This scene can be identified as the month of February because of the astrological sign of Pisces that appears at the top. Such imagery is reminiscent of representations of the months found in 15th-century religious manuscripts. Jacob Grimmer’s contemporary Pieter Bruegel the Elder is credited as the first to make a painting of a snowy scene in 1565, his *The Hunters in the Snow*, now in Vienna (see image).

Grimmer’s small roundel, made not long after Bruegel’s painting, is the earliest landscape included in the exhibition. It is a key example of the earlier Netherlandish traditions that developed into the distinctive category of 17th-century Dutch landscape. Indeed, Grimmer’s “little winter scenes” (wintertjes) were held in high esteem by 17th-century artists: one of his wintertjes hung in Rembrandt’s house.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.289

Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Flemish, 1525–1569, *The Hunters in the Snow*, 1565; oil on oak panel; 45 13/16 × 64 inches; Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna; Picture Gallery, 1838
Isack van Ostade
Dutch, 1621–1649
Ice Scene near an Inn, 1644
oil on panel

This scene brings together many of the social strata of Dutch society: peasants, modest burghers (citizens), and well-dressed patricians. Some enjoy the pleasures of skating, sledding, and conversing. However, in contrast to the winter scene by Hendrick Avercamp nearby, labor is highlighted in this painting by the white horse pulling a heavy sleigh up the embankment. Sleighs appear to replace the ferries that would otherwise take travelers across this river.

In his relatively short life, the Haarlem artist Isack van Ostade transformed the tradition of landscape painting by creating outdoor scenes that equally emphasize landscape and genre elements.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.285
Nicolaes Berchem  
Dutch, 1620–1683  
Landscape with an Elegant Hunting Party on a Stag Hunt,  
c.1665–70  
oil on panel

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.281

Philips Wouwerman  
Dutch, 1619–1668  
The Stag Hunt, c.1659–60  
oil on copper

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The stag hunt had long been a favored leisure activity for the nobility. It remained a popular upper-class sport in the 17th-century Dutch Republic, which is apparent in Nicolaes Berchem’s painting from the elegance of the hunters’ attire and their horses. Both paintings show evidence of the collaborative nature of the hunt. In his smaller painting on copper, Philips Wouwerman portrayed a nobleman going in for the kill at the crest of a hill while the rest of the men and dogs follow on foot and horseback. Nicolaes Berchem provided a more focused scene in which the deer are cornered by dogs, horsemen, and a body of water on either side. His noble couple seems to have been brought along to observe the kill rather than participate actively.

Wouwerman and Berchem were both natives of Haarlem, a city with a long history of the hunt dating back to the earlier dukes of Holland.
Isack van Ostade
Dutch, 1621–1649
Crossing the Ford, mid 1640s
oil on canvas

The cows, sheep, shepherds and shepherdesses, low-lying water, thatched cottage, and craggy trees depicted in this painting are essential elements of 17th-century Dutch art and experience. The geography of the Netherlands, literally “low-lying country,” has always played a critical role in its history. Encountering water along a route, for example, would have been a regular occurrence. The sand dunes rising up to the group’s left typify the terrain around Isack van Ostade’s native Haarlem.

Isack, along with his older brother Adriaen van Ostade, specialized in depicting peasant life. While Adriaen’s work emphasized interior figure groups, Isack tended to focus on the lived, agricultural landscape.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.277
Jan Josephsz. van Goyen
Dutch, 1596–1656
River Landscape with Peasants in a Ferryboat, 1648
oil on panel

This landscape was based on individual sketches that Jan van Goyen brought together to form an engaging river scene. Details include a windmill, the steeple of a church, a cluster of farmhouses filled with people, and a dock. A departing ferry carries foot passengers along with riders accompanying their horses.

Van Goyen created river scenes throughout his career, a talent demonstrated by how masterfully he captured the reflections in the water by applying thin glazes over the panel’s warm ground. Known for a restricted palette of tans and grays, the artist used a less monochromatic color scheme here. He also painted with a more careful technique, replacing the rapid summary brushstrokes seen in his other two landscapes in this gallery with a more deliberate application of pigment to form the trees and foliage. He also used paint that was less transparent.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo in support of Netherlandish Art 2019.275
Jan Josephsz. van Goyen
Dutch, 1596–1656
Fort on a River, 1644
oil on panel

Jan van Goyen’s loose brushwork and assured technique are well demonstrated in this river scene. Painted with his typical gray-and-brown palette, the picture displays human figures, boats, barrels, and ducks fashioned from very few brushstrokes. Instead of covering the panel with multiple layers of opaque paint, he experimented within thin, translucent washes that allowed the wood texture of the panel to shine through. Here the panel surface is evident in the foreground water beneath the reflection of the men steering the rowboat. Van Goyen subsequently applied two additional paint layers, using broad brushstrokes for the sky, yellow highlights for the sandy riverbank, and calligraphic lines for the figures.

Van Goyen’s rapid technique allowed him to create more than 1,200 paintings throughout his career. His use of relatively inexpensive pigments also meant he could offer his work at lower prices and thereby corner a specific part of the market.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Francis Welch Fund 2019.274
Aert van der Neer
Dutch, 1603–1677
Estuary at Twilight, c.1655–60
oil on panel

Amsterdam painter Aert van der Neer, a specialist in moonlit landscapes, winter scenes, and snowstorms, typically included the light source in his paintings. Here, the glow that outlines the dark clouds to the right of the sailboats indicates the presence of the moon. Dark clouds in the foreground along with the gray-and-brown tonalities signal early evening. The effect of diminished illumination on the vegetation and foreground boat, achieved through the masterful use of black pigment, enhances the sensation of dusk. The dimming light casts delicate reflections on the water and accentuates the silhouettes of the sailing and fishing boats dotting the river.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.278
The empty expanse in the foreground of this picture emphasizes the flatness of the terrain and helps to evoke the frigid temperatures of a winter’s day. Jacob van Ruisdael populated this scene sparsely. A man walks his dog at the right and another farther back in the scene. Near the center of the composition, two kolf players (a game similar to golf) wait for their crouching companion to tie his skates. Four figures surround an ice-locked rowboat in the distance, and farther still a couple walks toward the trees. Above the figures, Ruisdael has included the setting sun, which is rare for the artist, who seldom showed light sources in his paintings.

The low horizon allows for a vast, tonal sky, punctuated with streaks of golden sunlight that signal the sun’s descent. The largest compositional element is the sawmill at the right, identifiable by the groups of prepared logs at either side of the picture.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.284
Aert van der Neer
Dutch, 1603–1677
Winter Landscape with Figures in a Snowstorm, c.1655–60
oil on canvas

Although many 17th-century Dutch artists painted winter landscapes, depictions of actual snowstorms are rare. Aert van der Neer was one of the few Dutch artists of the time to paint heavy snowfalls. Here, the artist recorded the activities along a frozen canal stretching from the right foreground and curving around toward the horizon. The figures, bundled in heavy clothing, huddle or struggle against a whipping wind that bends the trees at left foreground and in the distance.

The limited palette, dominated by cool tones of white, black, and gray, evokes the frigid temperature. After completing the image, the artist painted in thousands of tiny snowflakes. Van der Neer signed the bottom center with an A superimposed on a V and a D over an N.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art
2019.286
Jan Josephsz. van Goyen
Dutch, 1596–1656
A Frozen River with Skaters, 1637
oil on panel

In the early 17th century, Jan van Goyen was among the first generation of artists who developed a new type of naturalistic landscape painting. He was one of the leaders in using a limited palette of grays and browns in landscapes. He preferred lowered horizon lines, as seen here, as well as muted colors and a focus on clouds and atmospheric effects. A distant church steeple, a windmill, and a church appear faintly along the horizon at right. People ride sleighs, skate, and smoke pipes just below. In the left foreground, a fisherman lifts a basket beside a boat frozen into the ice. The tent was probably a place to purchase hot drinks or soup; its warm interior is promised by the billowing smoke that wafts into the sky.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.287
Jacob van Ruisdael
Dutch, 1628/29–1682
View of Haarlem, c.1670–75
oil on canvas

The large building with a single tower that dominates the skyline is as recognizable to modern Dutch viewers as it would have been to those who lived in the 17th century. It is the church of St. Bavo in Haarlem, where Jacob van Ruisdael was buried in 1682. In spite of this well-known landmark, Ruisdael’s view does not reflect an accurate representation of the city from a specific point but rather a selective recreation as seen from the southwest.

Here, the artist has included domestic dwellings on the right and a fenced meadow with several sheep. A man walks his dog while three travelers follow. A field with sheaves of wheat is visible in the middle ground, and an elevated roadway on the far left holds a single pedestrian. Landscapes that emphasize the horizontal sweep of the countryside through a low horizon and vibrant light-filled skies were a type that Ruisdael first painted in the 1660s.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.303
Philips Koninck  
Dutch, 1619–1688  
Panoramic Wooded River Landscape, c.1650  
oil on canvas

Sweeping vistas of the Dutch countryside such as this were Philips Koninck’s specialty. Typically, the viewpoint for the painting seems to be from an elevated vantage point even though no such high point existed in the relatively flat Dutch terrain. Koninck used the meandering river to lead the eye deep into the scene. The effect of receding depth is enhanced by the alternating bands of shadow and sunlight. The small fisherman and his dog at the left foreground and the sailboats in the distance further animate the landscape. The sense of vastness is increased by the continuous horizon line, where no verticals interrupt it to diminish the wide expanse.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo, in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.276
Jacob van Ruisdael
Dutch, 1628/29–1682
View of Alkmaar, c.1675–80
oil on canvas

The dark sky, dominated by looming gray clouds, gives this landscape a sense of impending change, perhaps a coming storm. The view is of Alkmaar, a town close to the artist’s birthplace, one of the subjects he began to paint in the late 1660s and 1670s. Seen from an impossibly high vantage point, Alkmaar’s imposing Laurenskerk (Church of St. Lawrence)—identified by its squat spire—appears near the horizon’s midpoint. In contrast, the larger shaded buildings at left appear to be the artist’s own invention. Travelers and dogs follow the rutted and well-worn road that winds into the distance. A man and woman rest on the far left. Including figures within the landscape allowed the artist to enhance the perception of distance.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Ernest Wadsworth Longfellow Fund 2019.283
Paulus Potter  
Dutch, 1625–1654  
Spring Landscape with Donkeys and Goats  
(“The Rabbit Warren”), 1647  
oil on panel

Donkeys and goats animate this composition along with the central pollard tree and the sun-drenched thistle at lower left. Beneath the pollard tree toward the right is a hole from which a rabbit has just emerged. A peasant woman, perhaps a shepherdess, appears over a sand dune.

The short-lived but gifted Paulus Potter dedicated his career to the depiction of animals in rustic settings. Best known for his paintings of cows, Potter excelled at the realistic portrayal of many aspects of nature. His skill is demonstrated by the diverse textures of the animals’ hides, the carefully painted trees of various types, and the warm glow of the late afternoon. According to 17th-century sources, Potter often sketched his subjects while walking in the countryside outside The Hague.

The foreground group of the mother goat with two frolicking kids appears in another painting by Potter, making it likely that he based them on a drawing.

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2019.279
Jacob van Ruisdael  
Dutch, 1628/29–1682  
Wooded River Landscape with Shepherd, c.1655–60  
oil on canvas

The bare limb of the centrally placed oak, stark and leafless, provides a memorable image of the power of nature, further enhanced by the birch tree that has been uprooted by a storm. Two travelers rest beside it while a shepherd tends his sheep that trod the timbers spanning their path. The partially darkened sky and the alternation of sunlit and shadowed passages add excitement to the landscape.

The dramatic interpretation of nature is regarded as one of Jacob van Ruisdael’s most important contributions to landscape painting. This scene combines evidence of nature’s power with a bucolic distant view of a lush mountain and timbered buildings. The artist probably observed these features during his travels along the eastern border in the early 1650s.

Some writers have suggested he may have intended to inspire contemplation on the relative insignificance of man confronted by the majesty of God’s creation.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Promised gift of Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo in support of the Center for Netherlandish Art 2019.295
Jacob van Ruisdael
Dutch, 1628/29–1682
Woodland Vistas, 1670s
oil on canvas

The tall and slender birch tree at center left, with its characteristic peeling bark, draws the viewer’s attention. Its feathery foliage fans out across the billowing white-and-gray clouds that fill the sky. Unlike Jacob van Ruisdael’s earlier paintings that feature dense groupings of trees, this relatively late picture presents an airy composition where patches of illumination have infiltrated the forest. Diminutive travelers can be seen along the path that cuts through the woods. The splintery surface of the tree trunk on the right and the broken limbs beside it suggest the aftermath of a storm. Van Ruisdael was a careful observer of local trees and bushes, making his pictures accurate testaments to the botanical variety found in the Dutch Republic in the 17th century.