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Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

Meindert Hobbema
Dutch, 1638 - 1709

A View on a High Road

1665

oil on canvas
overall: 93.1 x 127.8 cm (36 5/8 x 50 5/16 in.)
framed: 122.6 x 158.4 cm (48 1/4 x 62 3/8 in.)
Inscription: lower left: m. hobbema. / 1665
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.62

ENTRY

Hobbema's style developed very rapidly throughout the 1660s. By the middle of the decade he had opened his compositions to give a light-filled and spacious feeling to his scenes. This painting, signed and dated 1665, is an excellent example of this period of his work.[1] The road that passes through the rural village meanders diagonally into the distance, passing half-timbered houses that sit comfortably within the wooded landscape. The trees, which in earlier works form dense barriers in the middle distance (see *A Wooded Landscape*), rise only to the left of center. Otherwise, Hobbema has kept them low and relegated them to the peripheries of his scene. To judge from the patterns of light and shade, it seems to be midday. Villagers sit and relax beside the road or talk over the front stoop. Two children play with boats at a small pond beside the road, along which a mounted falconer and his attendant pass into the distance. In the center foreground an elegant couple, the man holding a stick, passes near a traveler with his knapsack resting on a cut log.

Hobbema lived and worked in Amsterdam, yet with only a few exceptions, his paintings represent rural scenes, most of which have never been precisely

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identified. As in many of his paintings, the half-timbered buildings with their tie-beam construction seen in this small village are characteristic of the vernacular architecture in the eastern provinces of the Netherlands, in the border area between the river Twente in the province of Overijssel and the western part of the German state of Nordrhein-Westfalen.[2] Two paintings by Hobbema containing buildings of this type have been identified as representing watermills that belonged to the manor house of Singraven near Denekamp, a Dutch village in Overijssel.[3] It seems probable that he derived many of his scenes (see also *A Farm in the Sunlight*) from visits to this area in the company of his teacher Jacob van Ruisdael (Dutch, c. 1628/1629 - 1682), who is known to have visited Overijssel on his trip to Bentheim in the early 1650s.[4] It is not known if Hobbema also made separate trips to this region, but buildings of this type first appear in his work around 1662 (as in *The Travelers*).

Part of the difficulty in identifying the exact location of such a view is that Hobbema freely varied architectural motifs and the placements of buildings within his works. Although this painting convinces the viewer of its fidelity to nature through the careful observation of light, gentle flow of the landscape, and attention to architectural detail, a smaller variant in the Frick Collection, New York, from the same year, *A Village among Trees*, differs in many respects [fig. 1]. While the general disposition of elements in the two paintings is extremely close, the relative scale, placement, and structural elements of the buildings are not identical. Both of these paintings, moreover, essentially elaborate upon a composition now in the Louvre, Paris, that Hobbema painted in 1662.[5]

Another similar composition, *A Wooded Landscape with Cottages* [fig. 2], in the Mauritshuis, The Hague, has been traditionally considered a companion piece to *A View on a High Road*.[6] The paintings hung as such in the Fizeau, Agar, and Grosvenor collections until the Washington painting was sold to Alfred Charles de Rothschild at the end of the nineteenth century. It is highly unlikely, however, that they were actually designed as pendants, for the compositions are parallel rather than complementary; the dimensions are also slightly different.

The presence of the elegantly dressed couple strolling on the road through the village is an unusual feature of the Washington painting. Hobbema did not usually include such figures in his paintings. Whether they represent country gentry or city visitors, vast differences exist between their social status and that of the peasants seated by the edge of the road. Curiously, given their importance within the composition, these figures are rather poorly painted; they float above the surface

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of the road and lack physical substance. They were apparently executed by a different staffage painter than the one who depicted the peasants, who have a greater sense of solidity. Although the names Adriaen van de Velde (Dutch, 1636 - 1672) and Johannes Lingelbach (1622–1674) have been suggested, the style of the peasants and the elegant couple does not resemble that of either artist.[7] The figures were present in 1786 when the painting was engraved, in reverse, by James Mason.[8]

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Meindert Hobbema, *Village among Trees*, 1665, oil on panel, Frick Collection, New York. Photo © The Frick Collection, New York

fig. 2 Meindert Hobbema, *A Wooded Landscape with Cottages*, c. 1665, oil on canvas, Mauritshuis, The Hague

NOTES

[1] The date is now completely legible below the signature, but may not always have been so clear. Indeed, the first reference to the picture that describes it as being dated is National Gallery of Art, *Summary Catalogue of European Paintings and Sculpture* (Washington, DC, 1965), 68, although Wolfgang Stechow did challenge the statement in National Gallery of Art, *Preliminary Catalogue of Paintings and Sculpture* (Washington, DC, 1941), 97–98, that the picture was "painted probably in 1665," saying "I thought I could read the date quite distinctly below the signature." (Stechow letter, June 9, 1941, in NGA curatorial files.) The date appears to be old, but is painted in a different color from the signature. Its form does not conform with the inscription on the so-called pendant, which reads "M[e]yndert Hobbema." Accounts of the signature itself are also inconsistent: Gustav Friedrich Waagen, *Treasures of Art in Great Britain: Being an Account of the Chief Collection of Paintings, Drawings, Sculptures, and Illuminated Mss.*, 3 vols. (London 1854–1857), 2:166, the brochure produced c. 1940 by Duveen Brothers, and National Gallery of Art, *Preliminary Catalogue of Paintings and Sculpture* (Washington, DC, 1941) all state that, like the earlier *A Wooded Landscape*, *A View on a High Road* is signed "Meyndert Hobbema," and Georges Broulhiet, *Meindert Hobbema (1638–1709)* (Paris, 1938), 401, and Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII.*

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Jahrhunderts, 10 vols. (Esslingen and Paris, 1907–1928), 4:413, also say that it is "signed in full." Today the lettering on the canvas clearly reads "m. hobbema," a form of signature that the artist employed more frequently than his full name. It seems likely that all or part of the original signature and date were somehow damaged and subsequently reconstructed. Further changes may have occurred at a later date, perhaps as a result of restoration or cleaning.

[2] See Josef Schepers, *Haus und Hof westfälischer Bauern* (Münster, 1960).

[3] Karl Döhmann and W. H. Dingeldein, *Singraven: De Geschiedenis van een Twentsche Havezate*, 4 vols. (Brussels, 1934), 3:144–145. The paintings are in the Musée du Louvre, Paris (no. M.I. 270; Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*, 10 vols. [Esslingen and Paris, 1907–1928], 4:401–402, no. 89; Georges Broulhiet, *Meindert Hobbema [1638–1709]* [Paris, 1938], 441; cf. fig. 1 under *A Farm in the Sunlight*), and the National Gallery, London (no. 832; Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*, 10 vols. [Esslingen and Paris, 1907–1928], 4:397, no. 76; Georges Broulhiet, *Meindert Hobbema [1638–1709]* [Paris, 1938], 220). For the relationship between the buildings painted by Hobbema and the Singraven location, see Ben P. J. Broos, *Great Dutch Paintings from America* (The Hague, 1991), 285–290, no. 32.

[4] Seymour Slive, *Jacob van Ruisdael* (The Hague, 1981), 79, no. 22.

[5] Acc. no. R.F. 1526, 31 x 40 in.; Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*, 10 vols. (Esslingen and Paris, 1907–1928), 4:431, no. 173; Georges Broulhiet, *Meindert Hobbema (1638–1709)* (Paris, 1938), 192.

[6] 86.4 x 119.4 cm, John Smith, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish and French Painters*, 9 vols. (London, 1829–1842), 6:134, no. 64; Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*, 10 vols. (Esslingen and Paris, 1907–1928), 4:413, no. 120; Georges Broulhiet, *Meindert Hobbema (1638–1709)* (Paris, 1938), 188.

[7] John Young*, A Catalogue of the Pictures at Grosvenor House, London* (London, 1820), 37, says that the figures were painted by Adriaen van de Velde (Dutch, 1636 - 1672). Several other nineteenth-century writers (John Smith, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish and French Painters*, 9 vols. [London, 1829–1842], 4:134–135; Gustav Friedrich Waagen, *Treasures of Art in Great Britain: Being an Account of the Chief Collection of Paintings, Drawings, Sculptures, and*

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Illuminated Mss., 3 vols. [London 1854–1857], 2:166; Émile Michel, *Hobbema et les paysagistes de son temps en Hollande* [Paris, 1890], 50) attribute them to Lingelbach. Ben P. J. Broos has proposed that the elegant figures were added in the eighteenth century, during a period when artists "finished" a number of seventeenth-century landscape drawings by adding figures to their foregrounds. See Ben P. J. Broos, "Improving and Finishing Old Master Drawings: An Art Itself," *Hoogsteder-Naumann Mercury* 8 (1989): 34–55. This hypothesis is, however, unlikely since the peasant seated on a log is looking at the couple.

[8] The print was published by Boydell, London, February 20, 1786.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support, a fine-weight, plain-weave fabric, has been lined with the top tacking margin trimmed. At some point or points during the painting's history, the painted canvas along the top edge was twice folded over the stretcher to serve as a tacking margin. This edge was then later restored to the picture plane, while the original tacking margins on the bottom, left, and right sides were unfolded and added to the picture plane. The present dimensions are thus slightly expanded at the bottom and sides.

A thin, reddish ground layer is covered by a pale brown imprimatura, which has been incorporated as a mid-tone in the sky and foreground. On top of this base, the design was sketched in thin dark paint, which was allowed to remain visible in the shadows. Then the paint was built up in thin pastes. The sky was painted first with reserves left for the houses and trees. The landscape was completed before the foreground figures were added. The gabled house at far right was made smaller, and the tree to the right of the pathway was shifted slightly.

Thin bands of loss occur along fold lines and around tacking holes. The paint is rather abraded in the sky. In 1995 the painting was treated to remove discolored varnish and inpainting. At that time the sky was rather extensively inpainted to cover the abrasion.

PROVENANCE

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Mme Jean Etienne Fizeau [née Marie Anne Massé, d. 1790], Amsterdam; (sale, Amsterdam, 27 April 1791);[1] Welbore Ellis Agar [1735-1805]; by inheritance to his two illegitimate sons, Welbore Felix Agar and Emmanuel Felix Agar; sold 1806 to Robert Grosvenor, 1st marquess of Westminster [1767-1845];[2] by inheritance to his grandson, Hugh Lupus Grosvenor, 1st duke of Westminster [1825-1899], Grosvenor House, London; purchased 1912 by Baron Alfred Charles de Rothschild [1842-1918], London and Halton House, near Wendover, Buckinghamshire;[3] bequeathed to his illegitimate daughter, Almina Victoria, Countess of Carnarvon [c. 1877-1969, later Mrs. Ian Onslow Dennistoun], London; sold 1924 to (Duveen Brothers, Inc., London, New York, and Paris);[4] sold November 1924 to Andrew W. Mellon, Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C.; deeded 28 December 1934 to The A.W. Mellon Educational and Charitable Trust, Pittsburgh; gift 1937 to NGA.

[1] The Fizeau (variously spelled Fiseau, Fezeau, or Fiziau) sale was known to Frits Lugt not from an actual example of the catalogue, but because it is listed in Adriaan van der Willigen, *Naamlijst van Nederlandsche kunst catalogi veelal met derzelver prijzen en namen, van af 1731-1861, welke de verzameling uitmakern van A. van der Willigen*, Haarlem, 1873.

[2] The Ellis Agar Collection was to be sold at Christie's, London, 2-3 May 1806, and a sale catalogue was produced, but before the auction could take place the complete collection was instead sold to Lord Grosvenor, for 30,000 guineas (George Redford, *Art Sales, 1628-1887*, 2 vols., London, 1888, 1: 95). The bill of sale is preserved at the Grosvenor Estate Office Archive; the Hobbema is number 42 on this list (information kindly provided by Michael Hall, curator to Edmund de Rothschild, letter of 5 March 2002, in NGA curatorial files).

[3] The date of Alfred's acquisition of the picture was kindly provided by Michael Hall, curator to Edmund de Rothschild; see his "Rothschild Picture Provenances" from 1999 and his letter of 27 February 2002, in NGA curatorial files, in which he cites relevant documents in The Rothschild Archive, London.

[4] Duveen Brothers Records, accession number 960015, Research Library, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles: reel 292, box 437, folders 4 and 5; copies in NGA curatorial files.

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EXHIBITION HISTORY

1834 British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts in the United Kingdom, London, 1834, either no. 136 or no. 139.

1845 British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts in the United Kingdom, London, 1845, either no. 49 or no. 52.

1871 Works of Old Masters, Burlington Fine Arts Club, London, 1871, either no. 35 or no. 41.[1]

1925 A Loan Exhibition of Dutch Paintings, Detroit Institute of Arts, 1925, no. 11.

1925 Paintings by Old Masters from Pittsburgh Collections, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, 1925, no. 28.

EXHIBITION HISTORY NOTES

[1] Exhibition records for the two paintings are confusing, as two Hobbemas from the Grosvenor collection were lent to exhibitions in London in 1834, 1845, and 1871 (see Algernon Graves, *A Century of Loan Exhibitions, 1813–1912*, 5 vols. [London, 1913–1915], 3:514, 515, 517). In each of the exhibition catalogues the paintings are given nearly identical titles, and there are no descriptions provided. Frank Cundall, *The Landscape and Pastoral Painters of Holland: Ruisdael, Hobbema, Cuijp, Potter* (London, 1891), 158, mentions the 1845 and 1871 exhibitions under his listing for *A View on a High Road* and its pendant. Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century*, trans. Edward G. Hawke, 8 vols. (London, 1907–1927), does not mention these exhibitions under either picture.

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