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Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

Heyden, Jan van der

Dutch, 1637 - 1712

BIOGRAPHY

Jan van der Heyden was born March 5, 1637, in Gorkum, the third of eight children. His eldest brother, Goris, was a mirror maker by trade, and Van der Heyden's first training in art came from a local glass painter. The difficult—and irreversible—technique of painting images on the back of a sheet of glass enjoyed a certain popularity at the time, and several works of this type by Van der Heyden have survived. On June 26, 1661, in Amsterdam, he married Sara ter Hiel of Utrecht. He is known to have been a practicing artist at this time, and his earliest dated works are two drawn portraits of his brother-in-law Samuel ter Hiel and his bride, Jacquemijntje van der Passe, of 1659; his earliest dated painting is from 1663.

Van der Heyden's oeuvre is composed largely of cityscapes and other depictions of groups of buildings, although he did paint about forty pure landscapes. Some of his works are relatively faithful depictions of an actual location, but many others are entirely imaginary architectural fantasies. Typically, his scenes are bathed in a brilliant, crisp light of almost unnatural clarity and characterized by remarkable attention to detail. Throughout his paintings, minute features are rendered with the greatest precision, and yet the artist seems never to have allowed this technique to interfere with the creation of a balanced and harmonious composition. The great skill with which Van der Heyden distributes areas of light and shade and his general mastery of subtle atmospheric effects are in no small way responsible for the coherence and unity of his works.

Although his artistic output was considerable, most documentary records of Van der Heyden's life concern activities in fields totally unrelated to the arts. In 1670 he was appointed Amsterdam's overseer of streetlights, and in 1673 he assumed responsibility for the city's fire brigade. He was clearly greatly preoccupied with the problem of how to fight fires effectively, and, with his brother Nicolaes, devoted much time between 1668 and 1671 to inventing a new, highly successful water pumping mechanism. In 1679 he bought land on the Koestraat on which to build a house and fire-engine factory. In 1690 he and his eldest son, Jan, published a large illustrated book on the fire pump, entitled *Beschrijving der nieuwlijks uitgevonden en geoctrojeerde Slangbrandspuiten.*

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When he died on March 28, 1712, Van der Heyden was a wealthy man and had in his possession some seventy of his own paintings. His influence on other seventeenth-century artists was relatively limited, but he was an extremely important source for architectural painters of the following century, both in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe.

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