Hobbema was a master of rearranging frequently used compositional elements in his paintings. One encounters time and again familiar vistas, houses, groupings of trees, and figures who wander along meandering paths that pass through wooded landscapes. He built his scenes along established compositional principles, which included leading the viewer gently into the distance, either along paths or by means of alternating zones of light and dark. Remarkably, though, Hobbema’s delicate touch and ability to suggest the varied light conditions of a partly cloudy day invariably transmit the feeling of a scene painted directly from life.

Three other versions of this composition exist, none of them dated. [1] Slight differences in the shape and position of the houses and in the treatment of light suggest that the Washington painting is the earliest of the four. It is the only instance in which the house on the right is so dilapidated, with large portions of its thatched roof missing. In all the other versions the house is less oblique and lacks the small addition on the side. In these paintings the path swings slightly to the left and a large broken tree trunk in the lower left arches upward, whereas in Hut among Trees the path continues diagonally to the right and the tree trunk is less substantial.
Because Hobbema’s compositions tended to become more open during the course of the 1660s, the comparatively dense band of trees that stretches across the middle ground in this work adds further support to the idea that it is the earliest in this sequence of related scenes. In the version now in the Mauritshuis [fig. 1], the trunks are comparatively thinner and the view into the distance is less obscured than in the Washington example. [2] Since Hut among Trees is slightly more open than A Wooded Landscape, which is signed and dated 1663, and less so than A View on a High Road, signed and dated 1665, one can ascribe to it a tentative date of about 1664. To help confirm this date, a similar comparison may also be made among the respective structures of the trees in these three works. The trees in this painting are less compact and dense than the ones in A Wooded Landscape, but more so than those in A View on a High Road. This approximate date is also consistent with the distinctive light gray green color of the trees that Hobbema used in 1663 and 1664.

The painting is in excellent condition, except for the figure group and the area surrounding them. In 1984 it was discovered during conservation treatment that the mother and child figures as they then appeared were not original and were probably nineteenth-century creations. At that same time, the vestiges of two other figures, slightly larger and somewhat to their left, were discovered under the additions. The old remains were then reconstructed. More figures, including a horse, may once have accompanied them. Why these original figures were at some point physically removed and replaced is not known. The original staffage painter has not been identified.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.
April 24, 2014
NOTES


TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support, a medium-weight, plain-weave fabric, has been lined twice and the original tacking margins have been removed. The fabric was prepared with a double ground consisting of an upper dark gray layer over a white or off-white layer. Diagonal trowel marks, presumably from the application of the ground, are visible in the X-radiographs.

The paint was applied fluidly with vigorous brushmarking and refined with transparent glazes.[1] After an initial freely painted sketch, more detailed layers were applied. Infrared reflectography (vidicon)[2] shows tree trunks and branches blocked out first, then dense foliage applied, followed by individual outer leaves. Scattered small losses are found overall. The figures were severely damaged at some point by an apparently intentional attempt to remove them.

The painting was treated in 1964 when a lining was added and losses were inpainted. The painting was treated again in 1983-1985, at which time it was discovered that the central foreground, including the two standing figures had been entirely repainted during a previous restoration. Removal of the discolored varnish and repaint/overpaint, revealed vestiges of the original rendering of the woman and child, as well as a ghost image of an additional horse and rider. The figures of the woman and child were reconstructed based on the remnants, but the additional horse and rider were not, because the trace amounts that were found were insufficient.

[1] The pigments were analyzed by the NGA scientific research department using X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy and polarized light microscopy (see reports dated April 4, 1984, May 3, 1984, and August 16, 1984).

[2] Infrared reflectography was performed with a Hamamatsu c/1000-03 vidicon camera and a Kodak Wratten 87A filter.

PROVENANCE

1854;[2] by inheritance to his brother, Francis Baring, 3rd baron Ashburton [1800-1868], Grange Park; by inheritance to his son, Alexander Hugh Baring, 4th baron Ashburton [1835-1889], Grange Park; by inheritance to his son, Francis Denzil Edward Baring, 5th baron Ashburton [1866-1938], Grange Park; jointly purchased 1907 by (Thos. Agnew & Sons, Ltd., Arthur J. Sulley & Co., and Charles J. Wertheimer, all in London); sold 1909 by (Arthur J. Sulley & Co.) to Peter A.B. Widener, Lynnewood Hall, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania; inheritance from Estate of Peter A.B. Widener by gift through power of appointment of Joseph E. Widener, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania; gift 1942 to NGA.


EXHIBITION HISTORY
1890 Exhibition of Works by the Old Masters, and by Deceased Masters of the British School. Winter Exhibition, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1890, no. 85, as Landscape.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


1931 Paintings in the Collection of Joseph Widener at Lynnewood Hall. Intro.