



Robert Henri
American, 1865 - 1929

Volendam Street Scene

1910

oil on canvas

overall: 51 x 61.1 cm (20 1/16 x 24 1/16 in.)

framed: 73.7 x 83.8 x 6.4 cm (29 x 33 x 2 1/2 in.)

Inscription: by Violet Organ, lower left: ROBERT HENRI / VO

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Gerard C. Smith 1973.70.1

ENTRY

Approximately two and a half months after the historic Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists closed in 1910, Henri relinquished control of the financially troubled Henri School of Art and went to Europe, where he spent six weeks in Haarlem before proceeding to Madrid. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries Haarlem and the quaint villages around it on the North Sea were frequented by Dutch painters associated with the Hague school, other European artists, and many American painters. [1] Henri had been to the area twice before on a brief visit in 1895 and in the summer of 1907, when he taught a class for the New York School of Art.

Volendam is a fishing hamlet on the coast of the Zuider Zee 11 miles north of Amsterdam. It became a popular haunt for European and American painters, especially after 1874, when Henry Harvard published a travel book on the region in which he recommended the town to artists because of the colorful traditional costumes worn by the inhabitants. [2] A later British travel guide noted: "Volendam is the manufactory of most of those Dutch pictorial scenes known the world over," and recommended its "quaint alleys, its magenta-clothed fishermen, its gaily

dressed girls in striped shirts and winged caps." [3] In a letter to John Sloan dated July 29, 1910, Henri reported: "Now at Volendam 'picture place' regular 'charmingly interesting artists resort' but the sky is here anyway and we are getting some sea Zuider Zee [*sic*] air and better food, don't know how long we will stay." [4]

Volendam Street Scene, one of approximately 60 canvases Henri painted during his third visit to Holland, documents rustic Dutch village life. Henri and his modernist contemporaries were attracted to the town for its combination of ancient traditions and picturesque views, [5] the same qualities that two decades earlier had led Paul Gauguin (French, 1848 - 1903) and his circle to Pont Aven, in Brittany, France. In *Volendam Street Scene*, a woman crosses the road in the center foreground, while a group of villagers go about their daily business on the right. Despite the abbreviated forms, their distinctive hats and clogs are recognizable. The painting is related to earlier pictures Henri had painted during his student years in France, such as the Brittany scene *Quay at Concarneau* (1899, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska, Lincoln).

This rapidly executed sketch exemplifies Henri's aesthetic goal of capturing instantaneousness and spontaneous visual experiences. Bennard Perlman noted how it possesses the immediacy of a *pochade*, or rapidly executed oil sketch: "Thinly painted, the yellow ochre of the foreground becomes at once the ground and a woman's skirt as brushstrokes suggest the feeling of movement among the figures and the swaying of the boat's masts along the quay." [6] The bright tonality of the painting brings to mind a description of the Dutch landscape by Henri's former teacher at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, George Hitchcock: "The north wind brings with it, summer and winter, a sky of purest turquoise; with at times a soft sun throwing over everything a yellow saffroned light, softening the lines of cast-shadows and harmonizing every object remote or at hand." [7]

Robert Torchia

August 17, 2018

NOTES

- [1] These artists included William Merritt Chase, Robert F. Blum, Gari Melchers, George Henry Boughton, George Hitchcock, and Henry Ward Ranger; see Hans Kraan, "The Vogue for Holland," in *The Hague School: Dutch Masters of the 19th Century*, ed. Ronald de Leeuw, John Sillevius, and Charles Dumas

(London, 1983), 115–124.

- [2] See Henry Harvard, *The Dead Cities of the Zuyder Zee: A Voyage to the Picturesque Side of Holland*, trans. Annie Wood (London, 1875), 39–43.
- [3] *Handbook to Holland*, 8th ed. (London, n.d.), 125.
- [4] Bennard B. Perlman, ed., *Revolutions of Realism: The Letters of John Sloan and Robert Henri* (Princeton, NJ, 1997), 197.
- [5] Annette Stott, *Holland Mania: The Unknown Dutch Period in American Art & Culture* (New York, 1998), 50, has argued that the indistinctness of the forms in *Volendam Street Scene* gives it a “generic appearance” that diminishes its “Dutchness,” and thus reflects a modern style practiced by a later generation of American artists that “conflicted with the traditional subjects and values on which the town had built its reputation.”
- [6] Bennard B. Perlman, *Robert Henri Painter* (Wilmington, DE, 1984), 111.
- [7] George Hitchcock, “The Picturesque Quality of Holland,” *Scribner’s Magazine* (Aug. 1887), quoted by Lionel G. Robinson, “Mr. George Hitchcock and American Art,” *Art Journal* 43 (Oct. 1891): 292.
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The unlined, medium- to heavy-weight, plain-weave fabric support remains mounted on its original stretcher, and the stretcher keys are stamped with “Fredrix Artist Materials, New York. [1] The tacking margins are intact, so the buff ground was likely commercially prepared. [2] The artist first made a rudimentary sketch in dark paint, over which he applied colors with rapid and loose brushstrokes in low impasto. The X-radiograph has little density, indicating that there was very little white lead used in the paint mixtures. There are no discernible changes visible in the X-rays. No underdrawing was evident in infrared examination. Other than a small retouched area on the mast of the second boat on the left, the painting is in excellent condition. The surface is coated with a slightly discolored, natural resin varnish.

TECHNICAL NOTES

- [1] In this case, an extra set of tack holes exists, indicating that the painting was once removed from its stretcher. But it still seems that this stretcher is the original one.

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[2] The priming covers all of the tacking margins, indicating that the canvas was primed before painting. This treatment usually indicates that the priming was commercially prepared rather than applied by the artist.

PROVENANCE

(Chapellier Galleries, New York), by 1969; Mr. [d. 1994] and Mrs. [d. 1991] Gerard C. Smith, Washington, D.C.; gift 1973 to NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1969 American Art Selections, Chapellier Galleries, New York, 1969, no. 24, repro.

1969 Robert Henri: Painter-Teacher-Prophet, New York Cultural Center, 1969, no. 53, repro.

1977 Extended loan for use by Secretary Patricia Roberts Harris, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Washington, D.C., 1977-1979.

1981 Extended loan for use by Justice John Paul Stevens, The Supreme Court of the United States, Washington, D.C., 1981-1984.

1984 Robert Henri, Painter, Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington; Pennsylvania State University Museum of Art, University Park; Cincinnati Art Museum; Phoenix Art Museum; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1984-1985, no. 66, repro.

1987 Extended loan for use by Ambassador John Shad, U.S. Embassy residence, The Hague, The Netherlands, 1987-1989.

1989 Extended loan for use by Ambassador Howard Wilkins, U.S. Embassy residence, The Hague, The Netherlands, 1989-1992.

1993 Extended loan for use by Secretary Michael Espy, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C., 1993-1995.

2005 Extended loan for use by Ambassador Craig R. Stapleton, U.S. Embassy residence, Paris, France, 2005-2009.

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2009 Dutch Utopia: American Artists in Holland, 1880-1914, Telfair Museum of Art, Savannah; Taft Museum of Art, Cincinnati; The Grand Rapids Art Museum; Singer Museum, Laren, The Netherlands, 2009-2011, no. 20, repro.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1980 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1980: 174, repro.
- 1981 Williams, William James. *A Heritage of American Paintings from the National Gallery of Art*. New York, 1981:199, repro, 202.
- 1984 Perlman, Bennard B. *Robert Henri, Painter*. Exh. cat. Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, 1984: 110-111, no. 66, color repro.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 200, repro.
- 1997 Perlman, Bennard B., ed. *Revolutionaries of Realism: The Letters of John Sloan and Robert Henri*. Princeton, 1997: xi, 200 fig. 28.
- 1998 Stott, Annette. *Holland Mania: The Unknown Dutch Period in American Art & Culture*, New York, 1998: 50, repro.
- 2009 Stott, Annette. *Dutch Utopia: American Artists in Holland, 1880-1914*. Exh. cat. Telfair Museum of Art, Savannah; Taft Museum of Art, Cincinnati; Grand Rapids Art Museum; Singer Laren Museum, The Netherlands, 2009-2011. Savannah, 2009: no. 20, 120, repro. (catalogue also published in Dutch in 2010: *Dutch utopia : Amerikaanse kunstenaars in Nederland 1880-1914*).
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