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

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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
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 Zeee [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

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.


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.”


Magazine (Aug. 1887), quoted by Lionel G. Robinson, “Mr. George Hitchcock
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


EXHIBITION HISTORY


