



Roelandt Savery
Dutch, 1576 - 1639

Landscape with the Flight into Egypt

1624

oil on panel

overall: 54.3 x 91.5 cm (21 3/8 x 36 in.)

framed: 71.1 x 107.6 x 5.7 cm (28 x 42 3/8 x 2 1/4 in.)

Inscription: lower left: .ROELANT / SAVERY FE / 1624

Gift of Robert H. and Clarice Smith, in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art 1989.22.1

ENTRY

A spring-fed watering trough nestled among ancient ruins high in a mountainous pass has drawn to it both man and animal, seeking nourishment from its refreshing waters. As cattle drink eagerly from the trough and sheep rest in the surrounding sun-drenched glade, activity abounds on all sides. Two travelers dressed in exotic red and green costumes gesture expansively as they talk together near the base of an adjacent ruin. Wild deer and goats in the deeply shadowed foreground react to the commotion caused by a cowherd trying to lead his cattle and goats away from the spring. The sky above is filled with large birds circling the vine-covered, circular ruins, while others head off into the distance flying in a V formation.

Almost lost in this plethora of human and animal life is a group of travelers led by camels. The travelers have already nourished themselves and are departing along a path that leads through an old stone archway to the rear. Small in scale and depicted only in ochers, the figures seem the least significant of all those present, yet the man, who has turned to look back at the scene, and the woman riding the donkey and holding her child, could be none other than the Holy Family on the Flight into Egypt. No episode from the Bible, or from other accounts of the

traumatic days during which Joseph, Mary, and the young Jesus fled Bethlehem, corresponds with this scene, but Savery's imaginative mind has here conceived a scenario for the family's traversal of the rugged terrain. As they fled, their identity remained unknown to most of those whom they met, but occasionally the story of their flight preceded them and the Child's divinity was then revealed to those who truly believed. Here, the three shepherds near the watering trough have doffed their caps because they have realized that they are in Christ's presence. One of them kneels, but the other two stare upward as though the light shining down were a miraculous one, just as on that day when an angel appeared before shepherds to announce the birth of the Child. The two gesturing figures near the Holy Family, less content than the shepherds to pause in simple adoration, may well be discussing excitedly the revelation that has just occurred. For the rest, particularly the cowherd tugging his cow's ear to lead his herd away from the water and the light, Christ's presence has gone unnoticed.

Savery painted this scene during an extremely productive and successful period following his move to Utrecht in 1619. By the 1620s his style had been well formed and clearly had great appeal. During these years he received major commissions from the city of Utrecht, and his paintings were collected in courts throughout Europe. Although his work could no longer be called innovative, patrons still valued Savery's superb mastery, and Utrecht's international flavor allowed him to continue to paint in his mannerist style long after artistic trends in other centers had begun to focus on naturalistic images of the Dutch countryside. As in this example, Savery divided his fanciful landscapes into distinct zones of alternating light and dark to provide a framework for the multiple activities he invariably included in his scenes.

The exotic character of Savery's mountainous landscapes reflects his own travels in the Tyrolean Alps and in Bohemia when he was working at the court of Rudolph II, but the landscape formations and the ruins in his paintings are essentially creations of his own imagination. Likewise, though Savery drew animals from life, those in his paintings are arranged in ways that have little to do with everyday reality. Drawing from the inspiration of his older brother Jacques, with whom he studied before the latter's death in 1603, Savery delighted in bringing together in the same composition a wide range of animals such as might have lived in the Garden of Eden or listened to the harmonies of Orpheus' lyre. [1] Thus, his paintings have a fascinating sense of being built on carefully perceived reality, despite their fanciful and rather decorative character.

The *retardataire* style of *Landscape with the Flight into Egypt* is particularly evident as its compositional prototypes are paintings Savery made during the 1610s. The earliest known of these is a fanciful landscape, signed and dated 1616, which is also the setting for a biblical subject, in this instance, the reconciliation of Jacob and Laban. In this work a comparable rounded ruin rises in the middle ground, at the base of which congregate cattle, cowherds, and the gesticulating figures of Jacob and Laban [fig. 1]. [2] Another version of this composition, now in Kortrijk, entitled *The Drink*, is also datable to about 1616. [3] Here, Savery has added a water trough from which cattle drink, similar to a that in *Landscape with the Flight into Egypt*.

The transformation of this scene from a fanciful landscape vista to a setting for an episode from the Bible, as seen in the *Landscape with the Flight into Egypt*, is consistent with the way Savery has elaborated all aspects of his composition. Compared with the Kortrijk version, the scene here includes more animals and activity. To help structure the added pictorial elements, Savery has separated more distinctly than previously the various zones within the landscape. The scene, as a result, takes on a more artificial character, which is exacerbated by Savery's painting style in the 1620s, in which landscape elements are somewhat harder and less delicately rendered than in earlier years. Despite such tendencies toward a decorative style in Savery's artistic evolution, this work is an impressive landscape, and one that has been beautifully preserved.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Roelandt Savery, *A Rocky Landscape with a Stream and Classical Ruins, with the Reconciliation of Jacob and Laban*, 1616, oil on panel, Courtesy of Christie's. Photo © Christie's Images / The Bridgeman Art Library

NOTES

- [1] For examples of such themes in Jacques Savery's work, see *Roelant Savery in seiner Zeit (1576–1639)* (Cologne, 1985), nos. 93, 94.
 - [2] Kurt J. Müllenmeister, *Roelant Savery: Kortrijk 1576–1639 Utrecht, Hofmaler Kaiser Rudolf II, in Prag: die Gemälde mit kritischem Oeuvrekatalog* (Freren, 1988), 272, no. 168, repro.
 - [3] This scene does not appear to depict a historicizing subject. See Kurt J. Müllenmeister, *Roelant Savery: Kortrijk 1576–1639 Utrecht, Hofmaler Kaiser Rudolf II, in Prag: die Gemälde mit kritischem Oeuvrekatalog* (Freren, 1988), 278, no. 169.
-

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support consists of two horizontally grained oak boards joined horizontally at center. The panel has a slight convex warp, and a long check runs horizontally from the upper left corner. A thin, granular white ground was brush-applied overall except along narrow bands at the vertical edges. A dark reddish brown imprimatura was applied under the foreground. Infrared reflectography reveals brush-applied underdrawing, with the composition outlined and shadows

crosshatched. [1]

Paint was applied in thin, smooth layers modified by glazes and scumbles. Brushmarks are visible in the sky, and tiny flecks of impasto highlight the animals. Minimal amounts of inpainting, of two distinct applications, cover gray stains in the sky, minor losses at left, and losses along the edges, check, and panel join. No conservation work has been carried out since acquisition.

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] Infrared reflectography was performed with a Hamamatsu c/1000–03 vidicon camera fitted with a lead sulphide tube and a Kodak Wratten 87A filter.

PROVENANCE

(Anthony Speelman, London);[1] Robert H. Smith, Washington, D.C., by 1988; (sale, Sotheby Parke Bernet, New York, 14 January 1988, no. 86, bought in); Mr. and Mrs. Robert H. Smith, Washington, D.C.; gift 1989 to NGA.

[1] In a letter of 7 September 1993 (in NGA curatorial files), Anthony Speelman wrote to Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr.: "The only provenance that I have on the Savery is that it was bought in c. 1890 in Berne by the previous owner's family..."

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1991 Art for the Nation: Gifts in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1991, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

1998 A Collector's Cabinet, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1998, no. 54.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1988 Müllenmeister, Kurt J. *Roelant Savery: Kortrijk 1576–1639 Utrecht, Hofmaler Kaiser Rudolf II, in Prag: die Gemälde mit kritischem Oeuvrekatalog*. Freren, 1988: 272, no. 168a, 275, repro.
- 1991 Kopper, Philip. *America's National Gallery of Art: A Gift to the Nation*. New York, 1991: 324, color repro.
- 1991 National Gallery of Art. *Art for the Nation: Gifts in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art*. Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1991: 56-57, color repro.
- 1995 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*. The Collections of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue. Washington, 1995: 360-363, color repro. 361.
- 1996 Gifford, E. Melanie. "Jan van Goyen en de techniek van het naturalistische landschap." In *Jan van Goyen*. Edited by Christiaan Vogelaar. Exh. cat. Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal, Leiden. Zwolle, 1996: 70-79.
- 1998 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. *A Collector's Cabinet*. Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1998: 68, no. 54, repro.
-

To cite: Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Roelandt Savery/*Landscape with the Flight into Egypt*/1624," *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/71023> (accessed December 08, 2022).