Although Isack van Ostade frequently represented travelers halting before an inn (The Halt at the Inn), the focus on the activities of workmen restocking an inn, as in this painting, is exceptional. Here a horse-drawn sledge has stopped before the mottled, brown brick façade of a rustic inn where two laborers strain under the weight of a keg of beer they are lifting with the aid of a yoke. The innkeeper stands in the doorway ready to direct them inside. Above him hang traditional Dutch symbols of welcome and promised conviviality for an inn: a beer jug and two barrel staves adorned with a grapevine. [1] Perched on the chimney is a stork, whose presence, as a traditional emblem of the traveler, was encouraged by innkeepers. [2] Around the building are sights that would have greeted visitors to such a village. A woman seated under a canopy sells her wares, probably pancakes, to an eager clientele of men and children. Near this group a lame man hobble along supported by his cane and stick. Farther down the road a quack, standing before a large bulletin board, tries to convince his audience of the wonders of his cures. Adding to the picturesque character of the scene are the animals that occupy the foreground: a hen and a rooster scratch and peck, and two dogs lap up the water that has spilled over the edge of the trough, while a third dog, anxious to join them, is restrained by his youthful master.

Inns were the social meeting point for all facets of Dutch society. Whether a welcome wayside in the midst of the coastal dunes, an imposing building on a city square, or a modest structure in one of the villages that dotted the countryside, inns provided food, drink, a setting for business transactions, and occasional
lodging. More important, however, inns served as a forum for entertainment, whether it be conversing, gaming, or relaxation during the celebration of a kermis or other holiday. As is suggested in Van Ostade's painting, the environment might have been picturesque, but it was seldom genteel. John Ray, an English traveler who visited the Dutch Republic in 1663, described innkeepers as being “surly and uncivil.” Ray also found the food hardy—stews, beef, pickled herrings, cheeses, bread—but rather basic and quite expensive: “Their strong Beer, (thick Beer they call it, and well they may) is sold for three Stivers the Quart, which is more than three pence English.” [3]

In contrast to the horizontal format of The Halt at the Inn, which he probably also painted in 1645, Van Ostade chose a vertical format for this work. As a consequence this painting is composed along a single diagonal that recedes to the left rather than with the counterbalancing diagonals found in The Halt at the Inn. This dynamic composition reinforces the sense of activity and enlivens the streetscape. As seems to have been his standard procedure, Van Ostade must have composed this painting in his studio on the basis of drawings he made from life. A comparison with his Halt at the Inn of 1646 in Vienna [fig. 1] suggests how he may have freely adapted his models from one painting to the next: the hobbling man in the Washington painting certainly derives from the same prototype as does the man carrying a bucket at the left in the Vienna painting. Presumably similar modifications occurred with building and animal studies as well.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.
April 24, 2014

COMPARATIVE FIGURES

Workmen before an Inn
© National Gallery of Art, Washington
fig. 1 Isack van Ostade, *Halt at the Inn*, 1646, oil on panel, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Photo: De Agostini Picture Library / G. Nimatallah / The Bridgeman Art Library

NOTES


[2] The stork always returns to the same nest, so innkeepers hoped that travelers would likewise return to their particular inn. There seems to have been no scarcity of storks in the Netherlands if one is to judge from the comments of John Ray in his *Observations Topographical, Moral, and Physiological; Made in a Journey Through Part of the Low-Countries, Germany, Italy, and France* (London, 1673), 56.


TECHNICAL SUMMARY
The painting is on a single-board panel with a vertical grain. The original chisel marks are visible on the back. The ground is a smooth, light brown layer of medium thickness. It is allowed to show through the thinly applied paint layers. In the sky the paint was applied more thickly, with low impasto and strong brushwork.

The painting is in very good condition, although small, scattered losses are visible in ultraviolet light. Minor pentimenti in the large tree in the center of the painting and the dogs in the foreground are visible to the naked eye. The painting has not been treated since acquisition.

PROVENANCE


[1] In 1779, Hendrick Meyer (1744-1793) made a drawn copy of the painting (Amsterdam Historisch Museum, inv. no. A 10716), either when it was in Van Tol’s collection or at the time of the painting’s sale. See Ingrid Oud and Leonoor van Oosterzee, Nederlandse Tekenaars geboren tussen 1660 en 1745, Amsterdam and Zwolle, 1999: 120.
[2] The lacquer seal on the rear of the panel carries the heraldic crest of the De Brienen van de Grootelindt family. Genealogical information on the family was provided by the Centraal Bureau voor Genealogie, The Hague.

[3] According to an annotated copy of the sale catalogue in the NGA Library. This could have been either C.J. Nieuwenhuys, who was based in Brussels (and later London), or his brother, François Nieuwenhuys, who was in Paris.

[4] This was possibly Antoine-Marie-Albert Héron de Villefosse (1845-1919).

[5] Dr. Virch, in his letter to Arthur Wheelock of 4 June 1991 (in NGA curatorial files), provided the provenance of the painting from the Duits Gallery to the Brod Gallery. However, his information is at odds with the Duits Gallery Records, according to which Duits sold the picture on 30 July 1970 to “Mertens” (Box 38, no. 1946, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles).

EXHIBITION HISTORY


BIBLIOGRAPHY


