BIOGRAPHY

Jan Asselijn was a prominent landscape painter and draftsman in the Dutch
Italianate tradition. Born in the French town of Dieppe, France, as a child Asselijn
moved with his family to Amsterdam in 1621. There he studied with Jan Martszen
the Younger (c. 1609–after 1647), a specialist in battle scenes, and produced two
cavalry scenes, dated 1634 and 1635. Like many Dutch painters seeking to perfect
their art, Asselijn traveled to Italy after his early training, probably after November
1635.[1] The experience would influence his painting for the rest of his life.

In Rome, he became a member of the Bentvueghels (Dutch for “Birds of a
Feather”), an association of northern artists who painted views of the sun-drenched
Roman countryside, as well as picturesque scenes of everyday urban life. The
group bestowed the nickname Crabbetje, or “little crab,” on Asselijn because of his
deformed left hand.[2] Although no dated paintings survive from Asselijn’s time in
Italy, his later works show the influence of the low-life street scenes of Pieter van
Laer (Dutch, c. 1592 - 1642), as well as the light-infused landscapes of Jan Both
(Dutch, 1615/1618 - 1652), both also members of the Bentvueghels. The renowned
German writer Joachim von Sandrart praised the many “fine landscapes, small
scenes, and animals,” that Asselijn made in Italy, while the Florentine art historian
and biographer Filippo Baldinucci praised Asselijn’s renditions of capricci
(“fantasies”) and his battle scenes.[3] Asselijn was also a prolific draughtsman, and
produced many landscape drawings populated with ruins, animals, and peasants
during outings in the Roman countryside with his colleagues. These Italian
drawings continued to inform his works after he left Italy.

Asselijn returned to the Netherlands by way of Lyon, France, where he married
Antoinette Huart around 1644. He also stayed briefly in Paris, and made paintings
for the Hôtel Lambert with Herman van Swanevelt (Dutch, c. 1600 - 1655).[4] While
there, he also created preparatory drawings for three series of prints of Roman
ruins by Gabriel Perelle (French, 1603 - 1677). By 1647, Asselijn had returned to
Amsterdam, where Rembrandt made a portrait etching of him.[5] Asselijn painted
Italianate landscapes for the remaining five years of his short life. He was buried on
October 3, 1652.

Asselijn’s most innovative contribution to the Dutch landscape tradition was the
sweeping scale of his panoramic paintings. His broad views of the Roman
countryside and picturesque harbor and river scenes are characterized by a bright
palette suffused with silvery tones and rich peach and azure hues. He frequently
set his scenes in the early morning or late afternoon, using the play of raking light
and shadow to accentuate the monumentality of the Roman ruins that so often
anchored his landscapes. Traveling merchants, shepherds, herdsmen, and their
animal charges populate Asselijn’s views, their theatrical gestures helping to draw
the viewer into his scenes. Asselijn also produced a series of four winter
landscapes, a rarity among the Italianate Dutch landscape painters.[6]

The Dutch biographer Arnold Houbraken states that Frédéric de Moucheron
(Netherlandish, 1633 - 1686) and Willem Schellinks (1627–1678) studied with
Asselijn. Asselijn’s Roman studies and landscapes would later influence the work
of Adam Pynacker (Dutch, c. 1620 - 1673), Thomas Wijck (c. 1616–1677), Nicolaes
Pietersz Berchem (Dutch, 1620 - 1683), and Karel Dujardin (Dutch, 1626 - 1678).

Notes

[1] Asselijn was documented in Amsterdam as late as November 4, 1635, and there
are no dated paintings between this year and 1647, by which time he had returned
to Amsterdam; see Anne Charlotte Steland-Stief, Die Zeichnungen des Jan Asselijn
(Fridingen, 1989), 12.

en Schilderessen, 3 in 1 vol. (The Hague, 1753; repr. Amsterdam, 1976), 2:327

[3] Filippo Baldinucci, Notizie dei Professori del Disegno..., 7 vols. (Florence,
1681–1728), 4:331, 5:208.

[4] Peter Schatborn, Drawn to Warmth: 17th-Century Dutch Artists in Italy,
(Amsterdam, 2001), 101.


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