



Adam van Breen  
Dutch, c. 1585 - 1640

# *Skating on the Frozen Amstel River*

1611

oil on panel

overall: 44.3 × 66.5 cm (17 7/16 × 26 3/16 in.)

framed: 55.88 × 78.74 × 5.08 cm (22 × 31 × 2 in.)

Inscription: on gable of manor house: 16011

The Lee and Juliet Folger Fund, in honor of Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr. 2010.20.1

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## ENTRY

In Adam van Breen's engaging painting, people of all ages and classes take to the ice near Amsterdam on a bright, wintry day. In the foreground, a stylish group from the highest echelon of society has gathered. The woman, who is having her skates tied onto her shoes by a young attendant, wears a lemon, hooped skirt known as a farthingale and a raspberry-toned *vlieger*. Her hair is coiffed in high-piled curls, the latest fashion during the first decade of the 1600s. The woman standing near her wears a Brabant *huik*, a popular headdress consisting of a flat, round disc with a small upstanding spike and floor-length black veil.[1] The ladies' equally stylish escorts sport breeches and jerkins, boots and spurs, tall hats bursting with ostrich feathers, and swords hanging from bandoliers. At right, three stately men, more solemnly dressed and without skates, quietly converse, seemingly pleased by the festive ambiance. Nearby, a boy propels himself with sticks on a *priklee* (small push sled), while an orphan from the Amsterdam Burgerweeshuis, recognizable by his red- and black-paneled shirt,[2] carries a *colf* stick over his shoulder. He greets a couple who glide hand-in-hand on long-bladed skates, dressed in the height of 17th-century Dutch fashion: he with a green jerkin and gold breeches tied at the

knees with ribbon and she with a black *vlieger*, a long garment worn over her bodice and skirt. Farther back, in front of the large pink windmill, two figures race perpendicular to the rest of the river traffic. Although the leading skater wears a *huik*, his breeches identify him as a man. His quick pace and the presence of the second figure in hot pursuit suggest that the first skater is more likely a thief than a cross-dresser, who is fleeing the scene of the crime.

Skating scenes were highly popular in the Netherlands in the first half of the 17th century, likely in part due to a series of severe winters in the Low Countries known as “the Little Ice Age.” Van Breen, who was active in The Hague, Amsterdam, and Oslo, was particularly adept at such scenes, which belong to a rich tradition that originated in the Southern Netherlands. Much like David Vinckboons (Dutch, 1576 - c. 1632), who immigrated to Amsterdam from Antwerp in the mid-1580s and was likely his teacher, Van Breen relished capturing the rhythms of the skaters, the intricacies of their costumes, and the subtleties of the weather. Indeed, atmospheric conditions permeate *Skating on the Frozen Amstel River* as wind blows smoke from a chimney, causes flags to flutter, and fills the sails of an iceboat.

Unlike many imaginary winter landscapes, *Skating on the Frozen Amstel River* depicts an identifiable location on the Amstel just south of Amsterdam. The profiles of two of the city’s churches visible in the distance also appear in a view of Amsterdam *Hans Bol* painted in 1589 [fig. 1]: the large, wide building at the left is the Nieuwe Kerk and the distant church to its right with a tall steeple is the Oude Kerk. The third church, which overlaps with the Oude Kerk and is in the southernmost part of town, is the Zuiderkerk. This church does not appear in Bol’s view of Amsterdam because it was not built until 1603–1611.[3] Interestingly, the church spire was not constructed until 1614, three years after Van Breen executed *Skating on the Frozen Amstel River*. It is possible that the deeper blue paint defining the Zuiderkerk’s tower was a compositional revision Van Breen made to the completed painting after the church’s spire had been added.

The specificity with which Van Breen captured the temporal and physical qualities of Amsterdam extends to the two prominent foreground structures: the house on the left bank of the Amstel and the mill on the right. The house is a handsome building replete with a stepped gable facade, four chimneys, and a surrounding fence painted in red, white, and black—the municipal colors of Amsterdam. The mill, painted pink and enriched with gray chevron-patterned bands strikes a festive tone. The vertical position of the uppermost sail signals that the mill is in use.

The identity of the mill can be determined from a map drawn in 1629 by city surveyor Cornelis Danckertsz de Rij [fig. 2], who indicated a sawmill belonging to the family of Jan Reyersz near a bend of the Amstel River [fig. 3].<sup>[4]</sup> The relative position of this mill and the “groene molen” or green mill De Rij identified closer to the city limits on the opposite side of the river is precisely the same as in Van Breen’s painting [fig. 4]. De Rij’s map also indicates that Jan Reyersz’s mill was situated on a small island, which Van Breen suggests with the two skaters engaged in a chase along the small canal perpendicular to the Amstel.

Although De Rij did not survey the west side of the Amstel across from the mill, a document from 1626 indicates that the Borssenburg estate was located at that site.<sup>[5]</sup> Borssenburg’s history is remarkably well-documented. It is mentioned as early as 1583 as belonging to the patrician Amsterdammers Marie Jacob Dobbesdr (d. 1596) and Jacob Bors (d. 1564), from whom the house took its name. Located only about a kilometer south of the Amsterdam city gates, Borssenburg presumably functioned as a country retreat for the Bors family. After Marie Jacob Dobbesdr died in 1596, the Bors family sold the property to Abraham Verbeeck (d. 1613) and his wife, Anna Broen.<sup>[6]</sup> Abraham, who was in the arms trade, established a gunpowder manufacturing business on the property. He listed the house, its property, and a “gunpowder mill” as collateral in a business deal in 1603, and in 1609 he described himself as a *bossecruijtmaecker* or gunpowder maker.<sup>[7]</sup>

When Verbeeck died in 1613 his widow inherited the property, but sold it that same year. The inventory of the house she commissioned just prior to its sales describes it as:

a well carpentered stone dwelling with a front room, office, side room, and a vaulted basement, separated in two sections, a kitchen, three lower level rooms, each with a fireplace, four upper level rooms of which one also has a fireplace, four attic spaces including a peat storage area without a crawl space, in addition to this two privies, one upstairs and one downstairs, an interior courtyard, a rain barrel, a flower garden on the west side along the two lower rooms all of this surrounded by water, with a drawbridge along the Amstel road, and with a painted fence on the east and south side.<sup>[8]</sup>

Not only does the description of rooms, chimneys, courtyard, and drawbridge accord with the house in the National Gallery of Art's painting, but so, too, does the painted fence on the home's south and east sides.[9]

As a "portrait" of a home situated within a lively landscape, *Skating on the Frozen Amstel River* belongs to a well-established graphic tradition. For example, in 1559 and 1561 Hieronymus Cock (Flemish, c. 1510 - 1570) issued two series of prints known as *Small Landscapes* that illustrated the bucolic Antwerp countryside, including its castles and manor houses.[10] About 1608–1609, Claes Jansz Visscher (Dutch, 1586/1587 - 1652) made several drawings and one etching of the country house and orchard of the Amsterdam merchant Jan Deyman [fig. 5]. Circa 1611–1612, Visscher also published a condensed and re-etched version of Cock's *Small Landscapes* called *Pleasant Places*, which integrated identifiable castles and country houses outside the city of Haarlem into scenes of rural life.[11] Remarkably, however, there is only one example of a painting featuring an identifiable country house in a landscape prior to the 17th century: in 1578 the Flemish painter Jacob Grimmer (1525/1526–before 1590) portrayed the rural estate of the prominent Antwerp merchant Cornelis de Schot in a painting of the Kiel Canal near Antwerp.[12] Van Breen's *Skating on the Frozen Amstel River*, thus, may be the earliest 17th-century Dutch example of a country house "portrait." [13]

In *Skating on the Frozen Amstel River*, Borssenburg is part of a broader narrative about winter in Amsterdam and the pleasures to be had when the frozen surface of the Amstel was strong enough to welcome activity. Borssenburg is not simply a backdrop, however, but also a character in this carefully orchestrated composition. It is likely that Abraham Verbeeck commissioned this image of his house and it is tempting to imagine that he and his two brothers, Jacques (1575–1612) and Isaac (d. c. 1607), are those three men portrayed in the right foreground. Much as Visscher's *Pleasant Places*, which contained images, according to its title page, for those "who enjoy the varied view of country houses and the surprising turns in ever delightful roads," [14] Van Breen seems to have conceived *Skating on the Frozen Amstel River* for Verbeeck as a portrait of his home in the festive context of the bustling activities along the frozen Amstel.

Alexandra Libby

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**COMPARATIVE FIGURES**



**fig. 1** Hans Bol, *Enjoyment on the Frozen Amstel*, 1589, gouache, Miniaturenkabinett, Munich Residenzschlösser, Gärten und Seennz Museum, inv. nr.: ResMü.G 898 (Bucheit 14)



**fig. 2** Cornelis Danckertsz de Rij, *Map of the Inner and Outer Amstel from the Kloverniersburgwal to the Windrak with a design for a new road along the Weesperzijde*, 1629, black ink and colored pencil on paper, Stadsarchief, Amsterdam, inv. nr.: UZFA0002300001



**fig. 3** Detail, “het molen van Jan Reyersz”, Cornelis Danckertsz de Rij, *Map of the Inner and Outer Amstel from the Kloverniersburgwal to the Windrak with a design for a new road along the Weesperzijds*, 1629, black ink and colored pencil on paper, Stadsarchief, Amsterdam, inv. nr.: UZFA00023000001



**fig. 4** Detail, “de groene molen”, Cornelis Danckertsz de Rij, *Map of the Inner and Outer Amstel from the Kloverniersburgwal to the Windrak with a design for a new road along the Weesperzijd*, 1629, black ink and colored pencil on paper, Stadsarchief, Amsterdam, inv. nr.: UZFA00023000001



**fig. 5** Claes Jan Visscher, *Country House and Orchard of Jan Deyman*, 1608-1609, etching, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. nr.: RP-P-1888-A-12755

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**NOTES**



- [1] For regional differences between *huiken*, see Bianca M. du Mortier, “Aspects of Costume: A Showcase of Early 17th-Century Dress,” in *Hendrick Avercamp: Master of the Ice Scene*, ed. Pieter Roelofs (Amsterdam, 2009), 142–143.
- [2] On the dress of orphans in 17th-century Amsterdam, see Bianca M. du Mortier, “Aspects of Costume: A Showcase of Early 17th-Century Dress,” in *Hendrick Avercamp: Master of the Ice Scene*, ed. Pieter Roelofs (Amsterdam, 2009), 147.
- [3] Van Breen dated *Skating on the Frozen Amstel River* “16011” on the gable of the house. The construction of the date with the “0” inserted in the middle is unusual. However, based on the style of the costumes and the character of the painting, there is no reason to doubt that the painting’s date is 1611.
- [4] In 1629 the Amsterdam City surveyor Cornelis Danckerts de Rij drew a map of the inner and outer Amstel from the Kloverniersburgwal to the Windrak as the city was designing a new road along the Weesperzijde. The map, which is located in the Stasdarchief, Amsterdam (inv. nr. UZFA00023000001), identifies the boundaries and owners of all the plots of land on the western side of the South Amstel.
- [5] “Quytgescholden te hebben Jan reyersz vyff vee[r-]/tiende parten in een houtsagers molen met huijs entt betimmert en/alle het geene daer op aent ende nagelvast is staende . . . gelegen aen den amstel over borssenborgh.” See Noord-Hollands Archief, nr. 184, Oud-Rechterlijke en Weeskamer Archieven, inv. nr. 2365, 3e katern, fol. 1. Quoted in Rozemarijn Landsman, “Schilderachtig Borsenburg: Schaatsen op de Amstel door Adam van Breen,” *Amstelodamum* 98, no. 1 (2011): 22–24, 29, n. 15.
- [6] After Marie Jacob Dobbesdr and Jacob Bors’s daughter, Lijsbeth Jacobsdr (1552–1591), married the soap boiler Jacob Frans Oetgens (1540–1595) in 1568, the two first lived at the Oetgens family home “the Gilded Lily” in Amsterdam, then relocated to Borsenburg from 1583–1590. They returned to Amsterdam the following year and spent only summers at Borsenburg thereafter. Their son Jacob Bors (1573–1640) also took up a brief residence at Borsenburg in 1593, the year he married Stijntge Gerritsdr Burgherts (b. 1572), but then relocated to Amsterdam in 1594, again using Borsenburg as a summer retreat. When Marie Jacob Dobbesdr died in 1596, Jacob and Stijntge inherited the property, but they sold it the following year to Abraham Verbeeck (d. 1613) and his wife, Anna Broen. See John Elias, *De Vroedschap van Amsterdam, 1578–1795*, 2 vols. (Haarlem, 1903), 1:101; J. W. Groesbeek, *Amstelveen: Acht eeuwen geschiedenis* (Amsterdam, 1966), 174–175.
- [7] J. W. Groesbeek, *Amstelveen: Acht eeuwen geschiedenis* (Amsterdam, 1966), 174–175.
- [8] J. W. Groesbeek, *Amstelveen: Acht eeuwen geschiedenis* (Amsterdam,

1966), 175.

- [9] “Een wel betimmt Steenen woonhuijs met een voorhuijs cantoir sijdelcaemerken ende een over gewelfde kelder daer inne twee kelders affgeschut, een keucken, drie Neerkaemers ijder methheure schoorsteen, vier bovenkaemers daer van de eene mede een schoorsteen is hebbende, vier solders soo cleer als turffsolder sonder vlieringe, daer boven, twee secreten, een boven ende een beneden met een binnen plaetse ende een regenback, eenen bloemthuijn int westen lancx de twee beneden caemers tsaemen rontsomme in sijn waeter leggende, met een op treckende brugge aenden amstel wech, ende met een geschildert stacketsel int Oosten ende sijden.” Noord-Hollands Archief recht. arch. 2363 fol. 267v; J. W. Groesbeek, *Amstelveen: Acht eeuwen geschiedenis* (Amsterdam, 1966), 175; quoted in Rozemarijn Landsman, “Schilderachtig Borsenburg: Schaatsen op de Amstel door Adam van Breen,” *Amstelodamum* 98, no. 1 (2011): 25.
- [10] Given the rarity of painted fences in 17th-century Dutch painting, it is not surprising that the story behind the remarkable painted fence with its red, white, and black diamond pattern is unknown. Because the colors accord with those worn by the orphans of the Amsterdam Orphanage, one of whom is shown skating down the Amstel, and the diamond shape appeared on the outer courtyard of the orphanage, there may be a connection between that civic organization and the house. Unfortunately, archival and cartographic research into a possible link between Borsenburg and one of Amsterdam’s civic institutions before the Bors and Oetgens families owned the property has been inconclusive. Prosopographic research, in combination with the detailed map by Cornelis Danckertsz de Rij of 1629, reveals that the properties on either side of the Amstel River in the vicinity of Borsenburg were owned by several powerful Amsterdam families, including the Oetgens clan. In the decades around the turn of the 17th century, males of these landowning families served either as *Weesmeester* (regent) of the municipal orphanage or as *Heemraad* (governor) of the Nieuwer-Amstel water board, or both. Whether such offices are related to the painted design on the fence is not known.
- [11] Jacqueline Burgers, ed., *In de Vier Winden: De prentuigeveerij van Hieronymus Cock 1507/10–1570* (Rotterdam, 1988): cat. nos. 31–32; Walter S. Gibson discusses the Cock and Grimmer images in *Pleasant Places: The Rustic Landscape from Bruegel to Ruisdael* (Los Angeles, 2000), 1–26; Stefaan Hautekeete, “Van Stad en Land: Het beeld van Brabant in de vroege topografische tekenkunst,” in *Met passer en penseel: Brussel en het oude hertogdom Brabant in beeld* (Brussels, 2000), 46–57; and Alexandra Onuf, “Local Terrains: The *Small Landscape* Prints and the Depiction of the Countryside in Early Modern Antwerp” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2005).



- [12] Visscher's drawings of the Deyman house are discussed in Jan Peeters and Erik Schmitz, "Belangrijke aanwinst voor Gemeentearchief: Een blad met twee onbekende tekeningen van Claes Jansz Visscher," *Amstelodamum* 84 (1997): 33–44.
- [13] Jacob Grimmer, *A View of the Kiel near Antwerp*, 1578, oil on canvas, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp.
- [14] Although the tradition of depicting manor homes and castles in northern art dates back at least to the 15th century, when the Limbourg Brothers portrayed royal French castles in the calendar pages of *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* (c. 1412–1416, Musée Condé, Chantilly), there are no known 17th-century Dutch paintings of identifiable homes before 1611. For a discussion of early representations of country houses, see Woueter Kloek, *De kasteeltekening van Roelant Roghman*, 2 vols. (Alphen aan den Rijn, 1990), 2:77–104; Diane Mankin, "Dutch Seventeenth-Century Images of Classicizing Palaces and Villas Inside the Netherlands" (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 1996), 9–10. There are, however, many examples in later 17th-century Dutch art of "portraits" of country homes, for example in the work of Aelbert Cuyp (Dutch, 1620 - 1691) or Jan van der Heyden (Dutch, 1637 - 1712). In Cuyp's *The Avenue at Meerdervoort* (early 1650s, Wallace Collection), we see members of the Pompe van Meerdervoort family riding along the drive of their estate outside Dordrecht. Van der Heyden's *The Château of Goudestein, on the River Vecht, near Maarsen* (1674, Apsley House, Wellington Museum) is just one of five paintings Van der Heyden executed of the home of the Amsterdam burgomaster Joan Huydecoper. On images of and for the Pompe van Meerdervoort family, see Alan Chong, "Aristocratic Imaginings: Aelbert Cuyp's Patrons and Collectors," in *Aelbert Cuyp*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (Washington, DC, 2001), 35–38. Van der Heyden also produced at least seven "portraits" of Huis ten Bosch in The Hague. See Helga Wagner, *Jan van der Heyden, 1637–1712* (Amsterdam and Haarlem, 1971), 95–100; Diane Mankin, "Dutch Seventeenth-Century Images of Classicizing Palaces and Villas Inside the Netherlands" (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 1996), 13. For the thematic and iconographic function of representations of country houses in 17th-century Dutch art, see Mankin, "Dutch Seventeenth-Century Images."
- [15] Walter S. Gibson, *Pleasant Places: The Rustic Landscape from Bruegel to Ruisdael* (Los Angeles, 2000), 93.

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## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting support is an oak (est.) panel consisting of two quarter-sawn, horizontal boards that are butt-joined along the panel center. Uneven vertical saw

marks across the center of the reverse indicate the panel likely retains its original thickness of one centimeter, and all four edges are beveled.

There is a thin off-white ground layer, and the paint (est. oil) is applied thinly with only low impasto. An underdrawing was not visible in the infrared reflectogram, but the x-radiograph helped to identify reserves, which were used for sections of the left-hand house, the right-hand windmill, and the bridge.[1] There are areas in the foreground where the ground layer is easily visible, used by the artist as part of the final composition. The sky and landscape were applied broadly and wet-into-wet, while in general the trees, buildings, and figures were painted wet-into-wet over drier layers, and details were built up with small, fine brushstrokes.

The panel, ground, and paint layers are all in good condition. The panel has a slight convex warp, and it is likely the top and right edges of the panel have been slightly trimmed. This possible adjustment does not appear recent, and, based on the composition and size of the bevels, it would have been minor. There is a horizontal split in the upper right quadrant that extends 30.5 centimeters into the panel.

There are minor losses to the paint layers and old campaigns of retouching throughout. Some of the dark birds in the sky are not original; they are painted simplistically, delineated by only a few curved brushstrokes, and the pigment mixture used to paint them differs from the birds that are clearly original.

Furthermore, these birds are not visible in the infrared reflectogram, whereas those assumed to be original are visible.

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## TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] Infrared reflectography was carried out using a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera filtered to 1.5–1.7 microns (H filter). X-radiography was carried out with a Comet Technologies XRP-75MXR-75HP tube, and the images were digitally captured using a Carestream Industrex Blue Digital Imaging Plate 5537 (14 × 17 in.). The parameters were 20 kV, 5 mA, 30 seconds, and 100 inches distance (from source to plate). The resulting digital images were composited and processed using Adobe Photoshop CS5.

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## PROVENANCE

**CE** NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS  
*Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*

D'Estampes family, Château d'Ancise, Douy, France:[1] (sale, at the Château de Cheverny by Philippe Rouillac, 7 June 2009, no. 40); (John Mitchell Fine Paintings, London); purchased 12 March 2010 by NGA.

[1] Provenance as given in the 2009 sale catalogue. Additional information, including naming the Foullon de Doué family as another previous owner, was provided by William Mitchell, e-mail to Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., dated 22 February 2010, in NGA curatorial files. Douy is a small village in the Eure et Loir province of France, southwest of Paris between Orleans and Le Mans. Preliminary research into the connections between the Foullon de Doué and d'Estampes families is documented in NGA curatorial files.

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- 2010 Mitchell, William J. "Foreword." *Gallery Notes [John Mitchell Fine Paintings]* (June 2010): repro., as Winter Landscape.
- 2011 Landsman, Rozemarijn. "Schilderachtig Borssenburg. Schaatsen op de Amstel door Adam van Breen." *Amstelodamum* 98-1 (January-March 2011): 18-30, fig. 1, figs. 3, 4, 8 (details).

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