



Aert van der Neer
Dutch, 1603/1604 - 1677

Winter in Holland: Skating Scene

1645

oil on panel

overall: 55 × 70.8 cm (21 5/8 × 27 7/8 in.)

framed: 32.25 × 38.25 × 4 cm (12 11/16 × 15 1/16 × 1 9/16 in.)

Inscription: lower left, in monogram, first and last two letters in ligature: AV DN / 1645

Corcoran Collection (William A. Clark Collection) 2014.136.37

ENTRY

Aert van der Neer possessed a remarkable ability to convey the activities and atmosphere of a winter's day. In this bright scene, men and women, young and old gather on a winding, frozen river. Nestled between the snow-dusted cottages and tall, gnarled trees lining the riverbanks, they skate, sled, ride in horse-drawn sleighs, and socialize under a cloudy, light blue sky. Among the most amusing vignettes is an intense game of *colf* (or *kolf*, a cross between modern-day hockey and golf) underway in the foreground, in which one of the players, hunched over and gripping his club, attempts to hit his target with his friends watching closely. In another charming moment, a handsome couple dressed in their finest—he with a copper-colored ensemble and a sword hanging from his belt, she in her Brabant *huik*, an old-fashioned headdress consisting of a flat, round disc with a small upstanding spike and floor-length black veil—greet equally elegant friends standing at the riverbank nearby. While the rutted, icy terrain of the riverside path indicates that winter is well underway, the sentiment of the scene is convivial and carefree—a testament to the enormous pleasure being on the ice gave to people of all ages during the 17th century.

Signed and dated 1645, *Winter in Holland: Skating Scene* belongs to a transitional moment in Van der Neer's career. [1] Although he had been active as a landscape painter since the early 1630s, his first dated winter landscape came only in 1642. [2] Van der Neer's early paintings (most of whose whereabouts are unknown) bear remarkable compositional similarities to winter scenes by Hendrick Avercamp (Dutch, 1585 - 1634) and his closest follower, Anthonie Verstraelen (1594–1641). [3] Like the works of Avercamp and Verstraelen, they tend to feature a frozen river receding into the distance with groupings of diversely dressed figures scattered across the picture plane. [4] Seen from a high vantage point but with a low horizon line, the early paintings take a broad view over the river with cottages and churches stretching along both sides, though usually only one of the banks is visible in the immediate foreground. [5]

What inspired Van der Neer to begin painting winter landscapes similar to those of Avercamp and Verstraelen is not clear, but it may have been a simple matter of opportunity. Van der Neer had been living in Amsterdam since at least 1629, having relocated from the small town of Gorinchem not far from Rotterdam. [6] When he arrived in Amsterdam, the influence of Avercamp, who had been active there before returning to his hometown of Kampen around 1613, was still quite strong. Indeed, Verstraelen, who also moved from Gorinchem around 1628, immediately began working in Avercamp's manner and quickly established himself as his successor, soon becoming one of the city's most sought-after winter landscape painters. [7] Verstraelen's career, however, was short-lived. He died in 1641, which was, as far as we know, around the time Van der Neer began painting winter landscapes. With the absence of Verstraelen, Van der Neer may have seen an opportunity to make his foray into the winter genre.

Van der Neer's earliest winter landscape of 1642 adhered more closely to the tradition established by Avercamp and continued by Verstraelen. However, *Winter in Holland: Skating Scene* signals the beginning of a shift away from their formulae. The painting maintains the single-bank view in the foreground, but the recession of space is achieved more gradually, and the figures are more numerous and densely grouped. They have also been distributed horizontally across the foreground, effecting a gentler integration of the human presence within the space of the landscape.

Infrared reflectography reveals that these compositional changes did not come easy to Van der Neer, in particular the effort to realize figural harmony. Although an overall underdrawing is not visible, there are several changes to the staffage,

including a group of figures around the short, craggy tree that he either painted out or never completed. [8] By omitting these figures, Van der Neer opened the path in the left foreground, which helps lead the eye into the depth of the painting more organically.

While *Winter in Holland: Skating Scene* reveals Van der Neer's evolving effort to more naturally incorporate the human presence in nature, it also betrays his fascination with light. His selection of a bright, wintry day enabled him to experiment, for example, with how he might use selective layering of paints to convey sunlit forms and textures. Van der Neer prepared his panel with an off-white ground, which he then coated with an extremely thin tan layer. [9] Using this layer as a base color, Van der Neer articulated trees and the paneled sides of cottages with only touches of brown, while indicating the snow atop their forms using white accents. His incredibly economic painting technique also allowed him to capture various atmospheric effects. Brushing a thin, pale blue-gray across the tan layer on the near stretch of the river as well as the rutted dirt path, he conveyed the shimmery translucency of ice and frost as they catch the light. Selective touches of white impasto give texture and depth to patches of untrodden snow along the riverbank.

Around the time Van der Neer executed *Winter in Holland: Skating Scene*, he was also developing a specialty in nocturnes, or night scenes, evidently advancing his keen interest in light and atmosphere. [10] Although the Gallery's winter scene portrays a bright, midday view totally unlike the mysteriously dark, moonlit pictures that would follow, it represents an important focus in this artist's innovative and productive career.

Alexandra Libby

December 9, 2019

NOTES

[1] Wolfgang Stechow, *Dutch Landscape Painting of the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1966), 93; and Wolfgang Schulz, *Aert van der Neer* (Doornspijk, 2002), 81–82.

[2] Wolfgang Schulz, *Aert van der Neer* (Doornspijk, 2002), 82.

[3] I would like to thank Arthur Wheelock for bringing Verstraelen's work to my

attention. Hardly any of Van der Neer's early paintings can still be traced. However, many are reproduced in Schulz's catalogue raisonné. See Wolfgang Schulz, *Aert van der Neer* (Doornspijk, 2002), 146, 193, 16–177, 183; nos. 75, 244, 171, 200; illustrations 1, 2, 3, 5.

- [4] See, for example, Hendrick Avercamp, *A Scene on the Ice*, c. 1625, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1967.3.1.
- [5] Wolfgang Stechow focused on the single- versus double-bank construction in particular as a marker of Van der Neer's artistic maturation. Wolfgang Stechow, *Dutch Landscape Painting of the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1966), 93.
- [6] Van der Neer was first documented in Amsterdam on March 16, 1629, the date of his civic marriage to Lijsbeth Govaertsdr. Schulz has argued that because Van der Neer was listed as a painter on his certificate of marriage, a process that required a three-year apprenticeship that may have occurred in Amsterdam, it is possible that he had lived in that city since 1626. Wolfgang Schulz, *Aert van der Neer* (Doornspijk, 2002), 10.
- [7] Verstraelen was first documented in Amsterdam on November 11, 1628, when, at the age of 34, he married Magdalena Bosijn. A. D. de Vries, "Biografische aantekeningen betreffende voornamelijk Amsterdamsche schilders, plaatsnijders, enz. en hunne verwanten" *Oud Holland* 4 (1886): 215–224.
- [8] I would like to thank Dina Anchin and Sarah Gowen Murray for sharing their observations on the painting's technical aspects with me. See Technical Summary for this entry. The infrared reflectogram is kept in NGA curatorial files.
- [9] See the Technical Summary for this entry.
- [10] See Aert van der Neer, *Moonlit Landscape with Bridge*, probably 1648/1650, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Patrons' Permanent Fund, 1990.6.1.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting support consists of two quarter-sawn oak (est.) panels with horizontal grain, butt-joined along the center of the panel, and there is a weak convex warp.

[1] The support appears to be of original thickness (0.8 to 1 cm) and very near its original dimensions based on the tool marks on the reverse, all four edges of the reverse are beveled, and there is paint that extends over the edges. The appearance of the top edge suggests that it could have been trimmed in the past;

however, any alteration does not appear recent and would have been minor.

There is a double ground that consists of a lower off-white layer and a yellow-tan upper layer. Each layer is thin and applied overall. [2] On top of the tan layer, the artist applied a cool gray layer overall, which is incorporated into much of the final image; the color serves as the midtone in the ice of the middle ground, the background buildings, and the lighter tones in the clouds.

Examination with infrared reflectography (IRR) reveals that while an overall underdrawing is not visible, the artist first delineated most of the figures in black paint on top of the landscape and then incorporated the black lines into the figures as he painted. [3] These black lines can be seen best using IRR, but are also visible under normal light. There are also several artist changes, including painting out and/or not completing four figures near the left bank of the ice.

The paint medium is estimated to be oil and was applied thinly and predominantly wet-into-wet. The darker colors of the sky and ice, the earth tones of the land and trees, and the figures were painted on top of the cool gray layer. For the sky, the lighter cloud tones had already been applied, and so the darker colors were painted around the cloud formations. After these layers were dry, the trunks and branches of the larger trees on the right side of the composition as well as additional white highlights and the details of the figures were painted over the essentially completed landscape.

The painting is in good condition. There are several small cracks in the wood, but the panel is structurally sound. There are minor ground and paint losses, several accretions, and areas of abrasion. The latter is most prevalent in areas of thin dark paint. The current varnish is clear and saturating. There are minor areas of retouching within the sky and along the panel edges.

Dina Anchin, based on the examination report by Sarah Gowen and the examination notes and technical entry by Melanie Gifford in *Antiquities to Impressionism: The William A. Clark Collection, Corcoran Gallery of Art* (Washington, DC, 2001).

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TECHNICAL NOTES

- [1] X-radiographs of the painting indicate that the boards are butt-joined. The x-ray images show the change in the grain along the joint. X-radiography was carried out with a Comet technologies XRP-75MXR-75HP tube. The image was captured digitally using a Carestream Industrex Blue Digital Imaging Plate 5537 (14 in. × 17 in.). The x-radiographs were taken using 25kv, 5mA, 25 seconds, with 100.25 in. distance from the source to the plate. The digital x-radiograph captures were mosaicked using Adobe Photoshop CS5.
- [2] In an examination report dated May 2002, Melanie Gifford speculated that the panel might have been commercially prepared with these two ground layers.
- [3] Infrared reflectography was carried out using a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera filtered to 1.1–1.4 microns (J filter).
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PROVENANCE

Sir George Donaldson [1845-1925], London, by 1902;^[1] (his sale, London, 1906); purchased 1907 by William A. Clark [1839-1925];^[2] bequest 1926 to the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; acquired 2014 by the National Gallery of Art.

[1] Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *Beschreibendes und kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*, 10 vols., Esslingen and Paris, 1907-1928: 7(1918):501, no. 568. J.A. Viccars, who explains his reasoning in correspondence with the Corcoran Gallery of Art in 1967 and 1984/1985 (five letters in NGA curatorial files), suggests that Hofstede de Groot's numbers 551 and 567, as well as 568, are all the same painting. No. 551 is noted as being no. 69 in the Van Leyden sale in Paris on 10 September 1804. No. 567 is noted as being no. 118 in Madame de Falbe's sale at Christie's in London on 19 May 1900; Viccars writes that the painting was bought at this sale by the London dealer P. and D. Colnaghi.

[2] Dana H. Carroll, *Catalogue of Objects of Fine Art and Other Properties at the Home of William Andrews Clark, 962 Fifth Avenue*, Part I, Unpublished manuscript, n.d. (1928): 130, no. 65.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1959 Loan Exhibition. Masterpieces of the Corcoran Gallery of Art: A Benefit Exhibition in Honor of the Gallery's Centenary, 1959, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

2001 Antiques to Impressionism: The William A. Clark Collection, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 2001-2002, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

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- 1992 Sutton, Peter C. *Dutch & Flemish Seventeenth-century Paintings: The Harold Samuel Collection*. New York, 1992: 127, 129, no. 1, repro.
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- 2002 Schulz, Wolfgang. *Aert van der Neer*. Translated by Kristin Lohse Belkin. Doornspijk, 2002: 142, nos. 7, 59, repro.
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