



Hendrick Avercamp

THE LITTLE ICE AGE

National Gallery of Art, Washington ♦ March 21 – July 5, 2010

Hendrick Avercamp (1585 – 1634) did not invent the winter landscape, but he was the first artist to specialize in this quintessential Dutch subject. His lively paintings, full of frost and silvery air, capture the joy that arose in the Netherlands when temperatures dropped, canals and rivers froze, and throngs of skaters ventured onto the ice. With a keen eye for detail, Avercamp masterfully depicted anecdote and gesture. In painting after painting, such as his early *Winter Landscape with a Peat Boat* (FIG. 1), c. 1608, skaters bend over to strap on blades, couples sashay hand in hand, men in fancy britches play sports, and figures slip and fall with arms outstretched and skirts askew. Avercamp's pictures are only seldom portraits of actual places, yet their descriptive power is such that they are utterly convincing in their depiction of seventeenth-century life. They undoubtedly struck a chord with his contemporaries, as the Dutch were then experiencing unusually harsh winters owing to the phenomenon known as the Little Ice Age (see sidebar). This exhibition is the first devoted solely to Avercamp's art, bringing together some thirty of the master's most delightful and renowned paintings and drawings.

THE "MUTE OF KAMPEN"

Born in Amsterdam, Avercamp was a year old when his family moved to Kampen, a small city on the other side of the Zuider Zee (a large inland sea now known as the IJsselmeer). His father, Barent, served as the town's apothecary and, later, its doctor. His mother, Beatrix Peters, bore six more children and took over her husband's business after he succumbed to the plague in 1602. Hendrick's own life is more sparsely documented. One noteworthy detail, however, is the name under which his works were sold — the "Mute of



FIG. 1 *Winter Landscape with a Peat Boat*, c. 1608, oil on panel, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva

THE LITTLE ICE AGE

Between the fourteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, the Northern Hemisphere experienced a climatic shift known as the Little Ice Age, with frequent severe winters marked by heavy snow accumulation and frozen waterways. Winter often arrived early and lasted well into spring. This phenomenon may have resulted from a number of natural factors: a change in solar activity, orbital shifts of the earth, or a weakened Gulf Stream (the Atlantic Ocean current that carries warm waters from the tropics northward). Avercamp's earliest dated painting, from 1608, came after a particularly severe winter, with temperatures averaging below freezing. Other harsh winters followed, giving the artist ample opportunity to witness firsthand the effects of frigid weather on everyday life.

Kampen." It reveals that the artist was unable to speak, which probably indicates that he was also unable to hear. This condition, it seems, did not deter his ambition; indeed, the need to rely on sight may even have sharpened his tremendous powers of observation. It was not unusual at the time for those who were deaf to lip-read or even to read and write, and Avercamp (who came from a highly educated family) must certainly have learned to communicate well enough to advance his career. He counted wealthy collectors among his patrons, and his drawings were valued as much as his paintings. Still, the artist relied on his family for support. He lived with his mother, who petitioned to have him receive an annual allowance after her death. He survived her only by several months; he had not yet reached the age of fifty when he died.

PAINTINGS

Avercamp presumably began his training in Kampen, a port of trade that was far removed from the center of the Dutch art world. About 1600 he headed to a more dynamic place—Amsterdam—to study art. He lived at the house of Pieter Isaacs, a history and portrait painter who quite likely had known Avercamp's parents when they were residents of that city. No record is left of Avercamp's apprenticeship or how long he stayed in Amsterdam. He was back in Kampen by 1613, where he seems to have remained for the rest of his life. From the outset of his career he chose winter as his main subject. His earliest paintings, such as *A Winter Scene with Skaters near a Castle* (cover), c. 1608–1609, with their gnarled trees, bright colors, imaginary settings, high horizon lines, and crowds of small figures, developed out of the Flemish tradition of landscape, disseminated in Amsterdam by artists who lived on the same street as Isaacs. This tradition began with the innovative paintings of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, the sixteenth-century master who was the first to paint winter landscapes as an independent subject. Before him, scenes of

snow and ice had appeared primarily in manuscripts, in allegorical series of the months or seasons. Under Bruegel's influence, Flemish artists began to feature winter in sets of paintings and prints depicting the seasons, with activities befitting the different times of the year. The round format that Avercamp used for his winter scene by a castle was one commonly used in Flanders for such series.

Avercamp shared Bruegel's gift for storytelling, imagining lively encounters between figures and lavishing remarkable attention on details, down to the reflections of figures on ice (clearly visible in *A Winter Scene with Skaters*). His paintings, like those of the older artist, invite repeated viewing to discover all of their surprises and amusements. At first glance, the crowds of skaters in *A Scene on the Ice near a Brewery* (FIG. 2), about 1615, seem to blend together. Closer observation, however, reveals a great diversity of type: peasants, tradesmen, burghers, and aristocracy mingle, as do young and old, men and women. Avercamp captured over and over a remarkable range of poses, gestures, and activities.



FIG. 2 *A Scene on the Ice near a Brewery*, about 1615, oil on panel, The National Gallery, London (top)
Detail, FIG. 2 (left)



FIG. 3 *Ice Skating near a Village*, c. 1610, oil on panel, Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, The Hague, on long-term loan from the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (top)
Detail, FIG. 3 (left)



Even a small segment of the painting (detail, FIG. 2) bursts with captivating vignettes: A dog scampers across the ice; a mother bends over a little sled to adjust the blanket on her child; and to the right an elegant party stands in conversation, the fashionable woman warding off the chill with a black mask. In one of the more comical moments, two men

point toward a couple who have slipped on the ice. The fallen man sits next to his partner, who lies nearly flat on her face, layers of skirt thrown up to reveal bare pink skin. The motif was a favorite, occurring repeatedly in Avercamp's paintings.

The focus here is mainly on the diversions and pleasures of winter, but amid the skaters and finely dressed spectators are those with more prosaic tasks. In *Ice Skating near a Village* (FIG. 3), c. 1610, one figure traverses the ice balancing a bundle of reeds and another washes a red cloth in the frigid water, undoubtedly an unpleasant chore (detail, FIG. 3). Nor does the bitter weather stop workers in *Winter Landscape with a Peat Boat* from hauling peat-filled baskets off the docked vessel and into the nearby building (detail, FIG. 1). The scene hints at the consequences a deep freeze could have on a town and its people: the boat is stuck in the ice and must wait until the thaw to resume its task — picking up and delivering peat, an important source of fuel for heating. The boat serves as a reminder that the icy surface covers a working waterway. The Dutch overcame this adversity by finding new ways to transport goods — and themselves — on ice.



Detail, FIG. 1

A thorough chronology of Avercamp's paintings is difficult to construct, in part because most are undated. Nevertheless, paintings with windmills, wooden lift-bridges, and little thatch-roofed cottages taken directly from the artist's immediate environment (*Ice Skating near a Village*, for example) probably should be dated to the period following his return to Kampen. The scenery is more typically Dutch than are the imaginary settings of the early compositions Avercamp made in Amsterdam under the influence of Flemish artists. In later works Avercamp, like other Dutch artists of the period, began to portray the world in an increasingly naturalistic manner. This aesthetic also prevails in *Colf Players on the*

Ice (FIG. 4), c. 1625, which has radically fewer figures than are found in his other paintings. The vantage point is from ice level rather than above it, as was typical of the Flemish tradition, and no pictorial elements such as trees or buildings frame the view. Still, the variety of little episodes in his paintings is rooted in the older tradition.

COLF

One of the most popular activities on ice—and one depicted in nearly all Avercamp's winter scenes—was the game of *colf*. A precursor of golf, *colf* entailed hitting a small wooden or sheepskin ball with a metal-headed club either toward specific targets or for as long a distance as possible. *Colf* could be played on grass, but on ice it was particularly lively, as the ball could go quite far on the slippery surface. (Unfortunately, balls could become dangerous to unsuspecting bystanders.) *Colf* typically was a gentleman's game, as indicated by the smartly dressed man taking his turn in *Colf Players on the Ice* (see FIG. 4). Two more simply dressed figures—one carrying an axe to cut through the ice and the other a net to catch some fish—watch the game silently at left. In depicting different social classes, Avercamp offered a striking juxtaposition between those fortunate enough to have leisure to enjoy the ice and those whose livelihood was made more difficult by it.



FIG. 4 *Colf Players on the Ice*, c. 1625, oil on panel, Mrs. Edward Speelman (top)



FIG. 5 *Winter Games on the Frozen River IJssel*, c. 1620, pen and ink, watercolor and gouache, over graphite, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Woodner Collection, Gift of Andrea Woodner (left)

WORKS ON PAPER

Avercamp was an excellent draftsman who apparently created an extensive body of works on paper; unfortunately, many of them are no longer traceable. Some of the extant watercolors mirror the scope of his paintings. *Winter Games on the Frozen River IJssel* (FIG. 5), c. 1620, which shows a scene outside Kampen, features the types of activities, anecdotes, and fascinating details found in his oils; the close-up view and focus on a few figures make its composition quite similar to *Colf Players*. Avercamp composed the figures by coloring in contours that were delineated with graphite. This technique is comparable to the one he used for figures in oil — bodies often appear to have been outlined in black with a narrow brush, then filled in with color.

Avercamp's works on paper offer a wider range of subjects than do his paintings. His only known nocturnal scene, *Fishers in the Moonlight* (FIG. 6), c. 1620, is a watercolor. In contrast to the busy skating parties of his best-known oils, here just a few fishermen



FIG. 9 *Skaters and Tents along the Ice*, c. 1620, oil on canvas, Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem, on loan from private collection (top)
Detail, FIG. 9 (left)

SLEIGHS, SLEDS, AND SKATES

During winter months when barges, boats, carriages, and wagons might all be rendered useless, the Dutch resorted to ingenious ways of navigating frozen waterways in a country marked by hundreds of canals and rivers. *Skaters and Tents along the Ice* (FIG. 9), c. 1620, conveys how expanses of ice acted like roads: diagonal lines of sleighs and skaters create a visual pathway toward the city in the distance. To sell refreshments to the crowds, vendors set up tents (on the ice at left). Horses shod with special shoes pulled the sleighs — some were utilitarian, but others were elegant and colorful, with gilding, ornate carving, and expensive harnesses. Their passengers traveled in comfort and style, while the poor might not own a pair of skates (detail, FIG. 9). Sleds of all types carted children, goods, and animals; single passengers could push themselves with poles, as the seated figure does in *Ice*



Skating near a Village (detail, FIG. 3). The Dutch even invented a yacht that could sail across the ice, propelled by the wind.

The Dutch had taken up skating as early as the Middle Ages. The earliest skates were carved out of the bones of animals (including deer), but in the fifteenth century long metal blades were strapped onto shoes. Demand for skates was so high in the Netherlands that creating them became an art in itself, with more expensive versions given ornamental flourishes such as blades that scrolled up (detail, FIG. 3); in Amsterdam artisans even formed their own skate-makers guild. Visitors from other countries were amazed at how adept — and quick — the Dutch were on their skates. They seemed fearless, often carrying poles to help them get out of the water in case they broke through the ice — an occurrence, not infrequent, that Avercamp depicted (detail, FIG. 3).



Details, FIG. 3

quietly go about their business. But the artist's eye for detail is still as apparent as ever: Tiny buildings and structures appear all along the coastline and the slight glow of torches lights a distant ship on the horizon. The moon casts reflections in the water, which Avercamp carefully rendered with fine horizontal lines. Such drawings were made for the open market and were avidly collected. Some were meant to be framed and hung on walls (see FIG. 5), rather than kept in portfolios, as was the usual practice at the time for storing works on paper.

Avercamp must have drawn often from life, although surviving examples of such drawings are rare today. One may well be the lightly sketched scene in the corner of a sheet featuring a charming study of a knife grinder at work (FIG. 7). Avercamp quickly drafted the scene at left, then reworked it and added watercolor to give body and shape



FIG. 6 *Fishers in the Moonlight*, c. 1620, pen and ink, watercolor and gouache, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



FIG. 7 *Two Studies of a Knife Grinder*, c. 1620, pen and ink, watercolor and graphite, Lent by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Royal Collection © 2010 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II



FIG. 8 *Three Richly Dressed Figures in a Landscape*, c. 1620, pen and ink and watercolor, over graphite, Teylers Museum, Haarlem

to the figures. The artist's mastery of line and his remarkable ability to render gesture are fully evident in the assured strokes that define the craftsman and the three little boys mesmerized by his task.

In addition to sketching from life outdoors, Avercamp made costume and figure studies in the studio. The artist apparently kept an abundant supply of these studies on hand, for he relied on them when composing the crowds on ice in his paintings and finished drawings. The same individuals recur in his paintings and drawings, often with slightly altered poses or dress. Each figure in the watercolor *Three Richly Dressed Figures in a Landscape* (FIG. 8), c. 1620, for example, originated in a separate, less meticulously finished study; Avercamp simply combined and placed the three in an outdoor setting. The variety of attire that he carefully recorded in both studies and paintings offers rich documentation for historians of costume. It does not, however, allow any firm dating of his work based on changes in fashion, since the artist apparently reused figures without updating clothing styles.

LEGACY

The emergence of the winter landscape as a distinct and popular genre in Dutch art can be attributed almost entirely to Hendrick Avercamp's specialization in the subject. Dutch artists, inspired by the arctic weather of the Little Ice Age, continued painting winter landscapes throughout the seventeenth century, often moving toward an increasing naturalism in their depictions. None, however, managed to capture the imagination of viewers so thoroughly as Avercamp did with his elaborate scenes of diversions on ice, which for generations have defined the image of winter in the Netherlands.

Programs

GALLERY TALKS AND TOURS

The National Gallery of Art is hosting a series of tours given in American Sign Language (ASL). Introductory gallery talks on the exhibition are also being offered throughout the duration of the show. For programming dates and details, consult www.nga.gov/avercamp.

SUNDAY LECTURES

March 21, 2010

2:00 pm, East Building Auditorium

Introduction to the Exhibition – Hendrick Avercamp: The Little Ice Age

Pieter Roelofs, curator of seventeenth-century paintings, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Hendrick Avercamp – Fashions on the Ice
Bianca M. du Mortier, curator of costume, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Book signing of the exhibition catalogue follows.

Lectures are also presented in ASL.

ON THE WEB

www.nga.gov

CATALOGUE

The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated, 192-page catalogue, *Hendrick Avercamp, Master of the Ice Scene*, by exhibition curator Pieter Roelofs, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, with essays by noted Dutch scholars.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Hours: Monday – Saturday 10:00 am – 5:00 pm, Sunday 11:00 am – 6:00 pm. Gallery Web site: www.nga.gov. For information about accessibility to galleries and public areas, assistive listening devices, sign-language interpretation, and other services and programs, inquire at the Information Desks, consult the Web site, or call 202.842.6690 (TDD line 202.842.6176).

Admission to the National Gallery of Art and all of its programs is free of charge, unless otherwise noted.

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The exhibition was organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, and the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

COVER *A Winter Scene with Skaters near a Castle* (detail), c. 1608 – 1609, oil on panel, The National Gallery, London