



Meindert Hobbema
Dutch, 1638 - 1709

Wooded Landscape with Figures

c. 1658

oil on panel

overall: 53.34 × 67.31 cm (21 × 26 1/2 in.)

framed: 78.11 × 93.35 × 8.89 cm (30 3/4 × 36 3/4 × 3 1/2 in.)

Inscription: lower right, MH in monogram: MHobbema

Corcoran Collection (William A. Clark Collection) 2015.143.13

ENTRY

In this quiet landscape scene, two men converse as they amble along a rutted road atop a low-lying dike that separates a verdant forest from the drainage canal at the edge of a Dutch polder. The substantial buildings, churches, and towers that rise dimly along the horizon may represent Amsterdam, Meindert Hobbema's native city, but they are so distant that they barely intrude on the painting's overriding sense of nature. [1] The pale bluish-green tonality of the foliage is that of late spring, when the trees have filled out but their leaves have not yet reached full maturity. Soft pools of light suggest the freshness of the air as clouds gently flow across the Dutch sky.

The light and delicate quality of this work is characteristic of paintings executed by Hobbema in the late 1650s. Wolfgang Stechow was the first scholar to group this painting with other early works by the artist, including *A River Scene* (1658, Detroit Institute of Arts), largely because of the distinctive character of Hobbema's signature at the beginning of his career: MHobbema (with the M and H joined). [2] These two works are also comparable in the way light falling on tree-lined country roads illuminates figures traveling along them.

Although no formal records shed light on Hobbema's early training, Jacob van Ruisdael (Dutch, c. 1628/1629 - 1682) testified in Amsterdam in July 1660 that Hobbema had "served and learned with me for a few years." [3] Nevertheless, the modest character of this landscape is strikingly different from the more robust landscapes Hobbema executed in the early 1660s as a result of Van Ruisdael's influence. Thus, it would seem that Hobbema painted this work before he began his apprenticeship with Van Ruisdael, who had moved to Amsterdam from Haarlem in 1657.

Stechow suggested that the style of Hobbema's early works harkened back to paintings by Jacob's uncle Salomon van Ruysdael (Dutch, c. 1602 - 1670), who worked in Haarlem. [4] Stylistic connections between these artists are particularly evident when viewing Hobbema's *A River Scene*, which resembles in many ways Van Ruysdael's early river views where trees arch over a receding river bank. However, no documentary evidence exists to suggest that Hobbema ever trained in Haarlem, and differences between their painting techniques would seem to preclude a direct artistic relationship. Unlike Salomon van Ruysdael, Hobbema applied rather thick impastos when painting foliage, and he did not articulate individual leaves as carefully as did the older master.

Although Hobbema's earliest teacher is not known, it seems probable that he was from Amsterdam. The underlying concept of the Gallery's *Wooded Landscape with Figures* owes much to the landscape drawings and etchings of the late 1640s and early 1650s by Rembrandt van Rijn (Dutch, 1606 - 1669) (see, for example, *Landscape with a Road beside a Canal*). Rembrandt often depicted roads skirting wooded areas and waterways, and his drawings inspired a number of Amsterdam artists, including Philips Koninck (Dutch, 1619 - 1688) and Anthonie van Borssom (Dutch, 1629/1630 - 1677), who may have in turn influenced Hobbema's approach to landscape painting at the beginning of his career.

X-radiography and infrared reflectography reveal that Hobbema thought creatively about how to compose his composition and render atmospheric effects, particularly around the trees. Over the ground layer, Hobbema painted an orange-tan imprimatura that served as a midtone throughout the composition. This layer is visible in many areas of the final composition, particularly along the water and in the foliage of the trees. Hobbema left a reserve for the trees when he painted the sky and subsequently sketched in tree trunks and branches in this area with a light brown paint. After the sky paint layer had dried, Hobbema added the tree trunks, branches, and foliage. Remarkably, in some areas of the foliage, Hobbema

purposely revealed the orange-tan imprimatura by removing small amounts of the semidried paint with a tool, likely to enhance the atmospheric character of the scene and to create a greater sense of depth. Unfortunately, it is not known where Hobbema learned this distinctive painting technique, which has not been observed in the work of other landscape artists. [5]

In *Wooded Landscape with Figures*, Hobbema was more interested in capturing the gentle rhythms of nature than in emphasizing the human presence in this pastoral world. His reticence to include many people, born of his own weakness as a figure painter, seemingly bothered a later, probably early 20th-century restorer who overpainted the foreground. To enliven Hobbema's composition, the restorer added four cows and six sheep as well as a man and dog watching over them. When Russell J. Quandt conserved the painting in 1953, he removed this overpaint only to discover the three people and dog that Hobbema had included in his landscape. [6] Strikingly, Hobbema's figures originally did play an important compositional role. A small figure, barely discernable along the tree line near the curve of the dike, amplifies the suggestion of depth and distance. The two men in the middle of the road, one wearing a red jacket and one carrying a white sack on his shoulder, serve another important function. Not only do they provide an engaging pictorial accent that enhances the scene's pleasant charm, but they also suggest those quiet moments of communication that are crucial in establishing the social bonds essential to human existence.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

December 9, 2019

NOTES

- [1] Wolfgang Stechow, "The Early Years of Hobbema," *Art Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1959): 2–18, especially 5 (illus.), no. 3. The buildings on the horizon cannot be identified with certainty, but the tower on the right could represent the Montelbaanstoren, built in the early 16th century as part of Amsterdam's eastern ramparts.
- [2] Wolfgang Stechow, "The Early Years of Hobbema," *Art Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1959): 14.
- [3] Abraham Bredius, "Uit Hobbema's laatste levensjaren," *Oud Holland* 28 (1915): 193, no. 1.

- [4] See, for example, Salomon van Ruysdael's *River Landscape* (1643, Detroit Institute of Arts) in George S. Keyes, Susan Donahue Kuretsky, Axel Rüger, and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *Masters of Dutch Painting: The Detroit Institute of Arts* (Detroit, 2004), 216–217, cat. 88. See also Wolfgang Stechow, "The Early Years of Hobbema," *Art Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1959): 2–18.
- [5] This distinctive painting technique has not been found in other paintings by Hobbema in the collection of the National Gallery of Art.
- [6] Russell J. Quandt, "Reclamation of Two Paintings," *The Corcoran Gallery of Art Bulletin* 6, no. 3 (Oct. 1953): 2–9.
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support is a single wooden panel that was thinned in a previous treatment to 0.5–0.6 centimeters (approx. 1/4 inch). The reverse and edges are covered with wax-resin-infused fabric.

The preparatory layers include a thin white ground covered by a thin orange-tan upper ground or imprimatura. The latter was used as a midtone throughout the composition and is visible in areas such as the water on the right side of the composition, the shadows at the left edge of the road, and in smaller localized areas throughout the trees and foliage. On top of the imprimatura, Hobbema painted the sky wet-in-wet and likely in one layer down to the horizon line. The overall warm tonality in the sky is due to the thin quality of the paint layer that allows the imprimatura to show through.

The x-radiograph reveals that Hobbema left reserves for the initial placement of trees, branches, and parts of the foliage in the sky paint layer. [1] It is likely that Hobbema next applied a painted sketch using thin brown paint to refine the contours and positioning of the trees and branches, which is visible in the infrared reflectogram (IRR). [2] The IRR better reflects the placement of compositional elements in the final composition compared to the x-radiograph.

After the sky paint layer was essentially dry, the foliage was applied, and then the tree trunks and branches were painted on top of the dry layer below. There was some amount of back-and-forth layering between the foliage and smaller tree branches, but Hobbema left areas of the orange-tan imprimatura peeking through the foliage throughout the composition.

In some areas of the foliage, Hobbema used a tool to remove small amounts of paint to reveal the orange-tan imprimatura, which helped create a greater sense of depth. The quality of the edges of the paint in these areas suggests that paint was removed by the artist when the paint layers were semidry, and this effect does not appear to be caused by damage.

The support, ground, and paint layers are in good condition. There are small areas of localized cracks that have a wide aperture throughout the foliage and tree trunks. The craquelure is only in the paint layers and consequently exposing the orange-tan imprimatura below. It is likely that the cracks are associated with the use of a particular brown and/or black pigment. Despite these cracks, the paint layers remain stable. There are small scattered dabs of retouching throughout, especially in the sky, visible under ultraviolet radiation. There is a small check in the panel near the top left corner that is 5.4 centimeters long.

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

December 9, 2019

TECHNICAL NOTES

- [1] 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 in. × 17 in.). The parameters were 32 kV, 8 mA, 40 seconds, and 97.5 in. distance (from source to plate). The resulting digital images were composited and processed using Adobe Photoshop CS5.
- [2] 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; purchased 1906 by William A. Clark [1839-1925], New York; bequest April 1926 to the Corcoran Gallery of Art,

Washington; acquired 2015 by the National Gallery of Art.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1908 Loan to display with permanent collection, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 1908-1909.

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To cite: Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Meindert Hobbema/*Wooded Landscape with Figures*/c. 1658," *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/195497> (accessed September 18, 2024).