

Dutch Townscape at Toronto

The Dutch Cityscape in the 17th Century and its Sources. An exhibition held at the Amsterdams Historisch Museum, Amsterdam, 17 June–28 August 1977, and the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 27 September–13 November 1977

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Catalogue: *The Dutch Cityscape in the 17th Century and its Sources/Opkomst en bloei van het Noordnederlandse stadsgezicht in de 17de eeuw*, Amsterdam and Toronto, 1977. 272 pp., 157 illus., \$18.50 (cloth), \$10.00 (paper).

The credit for recognizing the need for an exhibition dealing with the city as subject must go to Richard J. Wattenmaker, Chief Curator of the Art Gallery of Ontario, who helped to organize the exhibition with the Historical Museum of Amsterdam. Wattenmaker also contributed an excellent essay in the handsome catalogue which underscored the rôle townscape has played in the history of art. Other important contributions were made in the form of introductory essays to the various sections of the catalogue, assuring that it will continue to be of scholarly significance long after the exhibition has closed. Most valuable for their introductions to relatively inaccessible and little known material are Boudewijn Bakker's essays 'Maps, Books and Prints, The Topographical Tradition in the Northern Netherlands' and 'The Cityscape and its Sources,' as well as the individual catalogue entries in these sections. As these section titles indicate, the structure of the exhibition was developmental rather than dealing with the style or personality of individual artists, or becoming bogged down in nagging questions of attribution. This is not to indicate that such problems are not important, or present in the catalogue, but only to note that they are, at our present stage of knowledge, less important than understanding how townscape developed.

It is difficult for art historians to explain exactly why landscape developed into an important and independent genre involving all artistic media, while the closely related area of townscape was, for the most part, relegated to a secondary position. Thus, while Joachim Patinir and Pieter Bruegel the Elder produced sig-

nificant landscape pictures which altered the rôle of the entire genre, townscape, with no single important painter as its champion, languished and both literally and figuratively remained in the background. What the Toronto exhibition has been able to demonstrate for the first time is the fact that townscape, while lacking a major artistic champion, allied itself with the more technically and scientifically oriented arts of cartography and topographical rendering. At about the same time, early in the sixteenth century, the graphic arts also took up independent townscape and architectural renderings: first, as illustrations for travel books and the like, and then as the setting for independent popular prints of contemporary events or even as the carrier of seasonal imagery. In townscape, the graphic arts not only helped to bridge the gap between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but also actively contributed to the development of the genre.

Although strongly Netherlandish in coloration, the townscape was not, strictly speaking, a monopoly of the Low Countries. In the Danube Valley, where landscape as an independent art form also developed early in the sixteenth century, townscape and architectural subject matter also became important themes. Augustin Hirschvogel, for example, was a mathematician and cartographer as well as an etcher, underscoring the rôle scientific topography played in the development of townscape. In the Netherlands it is certainly significant that Pieter Bruegel was in contact with Abraham Ortelius and therefore was aware of the contributions that this technical and scientific tradition had to offer in both town and landscape.

Indeed, an interest in cartography and topographical rendering appears to be one of the preconditions for the early development of sixteenth-century townscape. Thus, it is difficult to understand, especially given the emphasis placed upon this tradition in the Toronto exhibition, why one of the most important topographical specialists of the entire sixteenth century was passed over so summarily. Only one work by Antoon van den Wyngaerde was shown (cat. no. 23), and the authors appear unaware of the important

article dealing with Wyngaerde's activity by E. Haverkamp-Begemann ('The Spanish Views of Anton van den Wyngaerde,' *Master Drawings*, VII [1969], 375-99) which called attention to his importance in the development of the topographic and panoramic townscape. As the most accomplished practitioner in the art of townscape, the peripatetic Wyngaerde was commissioned by no less a patron than Philip II to produce drawings of those cities ruled by Spain. Most unusual for the period is the fact that many of these large drawings were mounted on canvas and hung like paintings in the Escorial. Thus, Wyngaerde's works were afforded an early public showing not usually accorded works in the topographic tradition at this time. It is also not surprising to discover that Wyngaerde made several paintings of townscapes. These, unfortunately, like the large finished drawings for the Escorial, seem not to have survived. Nevertheless, it is clear that Wyngaerde was the first to attempt to bridge the gap between the more technical orientation of pure topographic rendering and the aesthetic needs of painting. Indeed, it seems quite possible that it is Wyngaerde who provided a bridge between the style of Patinir and that of Bruegel. For example, the lone Wyngaerde exhibited at Toronto, the *Bird's-eye View of Amsterdam* (1547-50) can be seen as predicting Bruegel's only surviving painting of a townscape, the *View of Naples* in the Galleria Doria in Rome. It is even possible that the two artists met in Italy. Bruegel was there in 1552-53, exactly the time that Haverkamp-Begemann places Wyngaerde in Italy.

Another significant Netherlandish draughtsman who produced topographical townscapes during the sixteenth century was also active on the Iberian peninsula, indicating that Spain, as the ultimate ruling authority of the Netherlands, may have served as a catalyst in the development of the new genre. The artist in question was Joris Hoefnagel and the drawings he made in Spain and elsewhere during 1563 and 1564 were later taken over by Braun and Hoegenberg and engraved as part of the most important book of townscapes and maps of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the *Civitates orbis terrarum* (cat. no. 27). One wonders about possible stylistic connections between Hoefnagel's views and those by Wyngaerde, but the catalogue is mute on this point. This is unfortunate, since Braun and Hoegenberg's efforts are the culmination of the entire sixteenth-century topographical townscape tradition and are certainly a self-conscious parallel to the publications of Abraham Ortelius in the field of cartography.

Certainly the most interesting and significant part of the Toronto exhibition was the section devoted to 'The City Portrayed.' The one significant omission this reviewer felt at Toronto was a painting by Pieter Saenredam. Although well represented by drawings (cat. nos. 80-83), the presence of a significant painting by this exceptional townscape and architectural specialist would have added depth to the painting

section and raised important questions concerning the chronology of the development of seventeenth-century townscape as an independent genre. Nevertheless, only Wattenmaker in his introduction called attention to Saenredam's paintings, while the artist was completely ignored by Bob Haak in his introductory essay to the section.

The townscape situation was not to change significantly until about the middle of the seventeenth century, when the innovations of Saenredam in both architectural interiors and townscape were taken up by numerous other specialists, such as Abraham and Jan Beerstraaten (cat. nos. 97 and 98; 53, 54, 99-101), Bartholomeus van Bassen (cat. no. 17), and Daniel Vosmaer (cat. nos. 128-30), as well as non-specialists such as Carel Fabritius and Johannes Vermeer. Clearly, a number of historical, political, and economic events must have contributed to this rather dramatic artistic shift. Unfortunately, Dedalo Carasso's curious essay 'The Town behind the Picture' allows the special rôle that Dutch cities played during the third quarter of the seventeenth century to become lost in the mass of his economic and demographic information. The situation certainly calls for greater historical clarification. It is no accident, for example, that the rapid rise of townscape painting in Holland coincides with what is known as the stadholderless period of Dutch history. It is during this exact period, 1653 to 1672, that townscape developed as a major artistic genre which attracted both greater and lesser painters. Unfortunately, not enough work has been done on the commissioning of townscape pictures by the various municipalities. Certainly one would also like to know more about where these pictures were displayed as well as who paid for them. Interestingly enough, townscapes were used in Italy as symbols of municipal virtue and economic strength. An early and well known example of this is Ambrogio Lorenzetti's fresco of *The Effects of Good Government* (1340) in the Palazzo

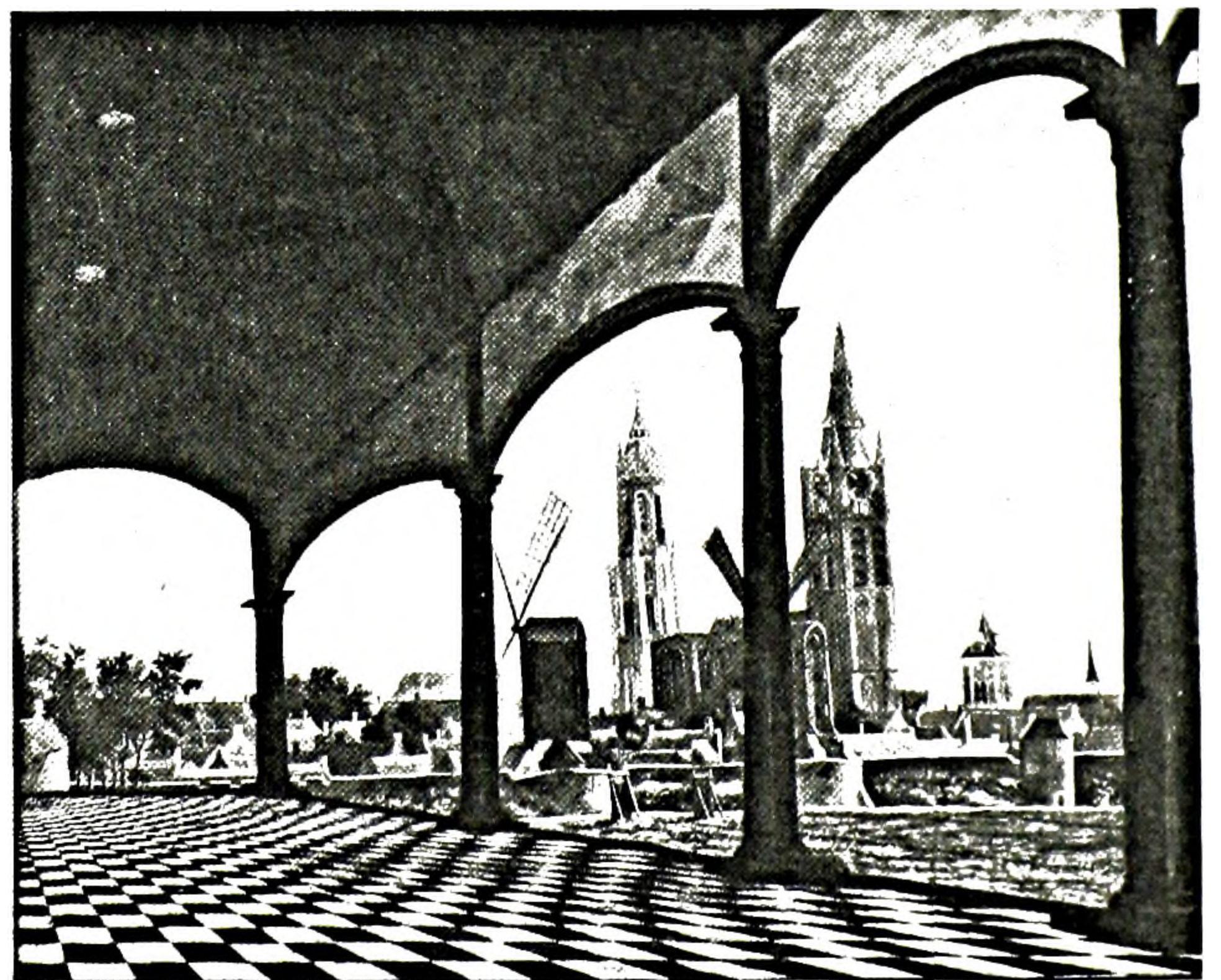


FIGURE 1. Daniel Vosmaer, *View of Delft*, 1663. Delft, Stedelijk Museum 'Het Prinsenhof.' Cat. no 129.

Pubblico in Siena. To what extent similar concepts existed in the Netherlands is still not clear.

Despite the economic superiority of Amsterdam during much of the seventeenth century, the most important centre for the development of the painted townscape during the decade 1650-60 was Delft, a fact not adequately stressed by Haak in his essay. The primacy of Delft during these years is apparent in both townscape and architectural painting, as well as in the somewhat more exotic but related area of perspective boxes or peepshows. It has been suggested that Fabritius's important *View of Delft* (1652) in the National Gallery, London, one of the key examples of the new style of painted townscape, actually formed part of a curved perspective box. Clearly these more exotic innovations, including the use of optical devices such as the camera obscura, all contributed something to the rapid growth of the painted townscape after 1650. Haak, however, does not comment upon these possibilities.

Perhaps the most intriguing element in the development of townscape in Delft was the close artistic contact, and even actual collaboration, between the

various artists, another point not adequately stressed in the catalogue. For example, Fabritius provided the design for a painting executed in 1653 by Daniel and Nicolaes Vosmaer. Fabritius also did the final retouching of the work before it was exhibited in the Delft town hall, suggesting that it may have also had civic overtones. Daniel Vosmaer, who was represented at Toronto by no fewer than four striking works (cat. nos. 128-30, as well as the *Port of Delft* from ca. 1655-60, Fundacion Luis A. Ferré, Museo de Arte de Ponce, Ponce, Puerto Rico; see Fig. 1), may have also collaborated with the genre painter Pieter de Hooch.

The primacy of Delft in townscape was probably a product of a particularly fortuitous interaction of several talented artists, a loose central government which allowed the independent action of municipal authority, and a strong sense of civic cohesion possibly fostered in the aftermath of the 1654 gunpowder explosion which cost Fabritius his life. Although Delft was among the first with this new genre, other Dutch cities were quick to adopt the new painted townscape, especially after 1660, a fact which was both demonstrated and documented in the Toronto and Amsterdam exhibition and preserved in the catalogue.

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