Significant Dates on some Seventeenth Century Dutch Landscape Paintings

by WOLFGANG STECHOW

Among the assets which workers in the field of Dutch seventeenth century painting are often envied by colleagues toiling in other areas of the history of art is the wealth of dates with which they have been provided. 'Look at van Goyen', their poor cousins would say; 'did he not date almost all of his paintings so that you can indulge in the luxury of following his development from year to year? Would I had a single reliable date to work with!' However, granted that van Goyen has spoiled us, as did a few other masters, the over-all picture is not nearly so favourable. A glance at the chronological lists in Hofstede de Groot's Catalogue Raisonné will suffice to bear this out. Restricting myself to landscape painters I invite you to look up the number of dated pictures listed by de Groot for Aelbert Cuyp, Philips Wouwerman, Aert van der Neer, Jan Hackaert, Jan Both and Adam Pijnacker; of the artists not included by de Groot add Hendrick Avercamp, Cornelis Poelenburgh, Jan Asselijn and Frederik Moucheron — not to mention Hercules Seghers. In some cases there are hardly any dates available at all; in others, more or less extended periods of a master's activity lack such documentation either completely or with a few exceptions. Furthermore, there exists a considerable number of unreliable dates: those found together with forged signatures and therefore either forged themselves or belonging rightfully with another artist, and those which are recorded in earlier reports but have become illegible because of abrasion or excessive layers of varnish and grime.

In the face of such deficiencies and hazards it is obvious that we must make every effort to procure reliable information about dates for the artists mentioned above and for many others. This is not an easy task, and in many cases no efforts will avail. Some attempts have failed conspicuously, others — including those which follow here — are in danger of doing so. At least one precious date of 1659 for the early Hobbema has turned out to be the work of a forger; 1) the even more precious date of 1640 for the early Both which de Groot listed, never existed, and the picture is not by Both. 2) Of the two examples listed by de Groot for any pictures by Aert van der Neer dated in the 1650's, one — on the early Frankfurt painting — has been misread; 3) the other (HdG 567) cannot be checked, and the date on the Winter in the Mauritshuis-

1) The picture in Edinburgh, HdG 150; W. Stechow in Art Quarterly, XXII, 1959, p. 4, fig. 6.
3) HdG 32, undoubtedly a work of the 1630's; the date is illegible.
huis, which the catalogue reads 1655, is not only illegible but probably not even genuine\(^4\). Even more spectacular is the case of Jacob van Ruisdael's middle and late years. Since we must accept the date of 1661 for the Amsterdam Watermill (HdG 145) rather than Simon's reading of 1663\(^5\), we have no reliably dated painting by the master between 1661 and 1678 (Dublin, the only late date!), and this although de Groot's list adduces no less than nine paintings presumably dated between 1663 and 1673! Of these, five are untraceable (HdG 402, 567a\(^6\), 649a, 930, 1073a), one is dated 1652 instead of 1666 (HdG 576\(^7\)), two bear (or bore) a false date (HdG 181 and 757; on the former it has come off in a recent cleaning\(^8\)), and one is definitely not by Ruisdael (HdG 695\(^9\)). Finally, to end on a 'Pater peccavi' note: my rash acceptance of an error in the Louvre catalogue created a 'dated Breenbergh' of 1620 which is neither dated 1620 nor, most probably, by Breenbergh\(^10\). Sapienti sat.

Inscribed dates are, of course, not the only way to assign a firm place to a picture in a master's development. Wherever a clear-cut documentary evidence of a different nature can be adduced a date on the picture itself can easily be dispensed with. However, we all know that such cases are extremely rare in seventeenth century Dutch art, and they are least probable to occur with regard to landscape or genre paintings. And this may be an appropriate moment to emphasize the fact that costumes, valuable though their help may be, are not nearly as safe a criterion for dating works of art as has sometimes been claimed.

On the following pages I intend to call attention to a number of Dutch seventeenth century landscape paintings which to my knowledge have not been published — or, at any rate, illustrated — before and which because of their date seemed to be of sufficient interest to be made known out of context of the broader survey of the entire field I am preparing.

I. HENDRICK AVERCAMP

The earliest work by this master illustrated in Miss Welcker's monograph is the Winter of 1609 which was once in the Castle Rohoncz Collection...

\(^{4}\) HdG 494. The date gives the day and month (February 7) in addition to the year which seems to read 1635 rather than 1655; its character differs substantially from that of the monogram. A date of 1635 for the picture is improbable. Dr. A. B. de Vries kindly facilitated a close inspection of the painting.


\(^{6}\) If HdG 567a should be identical with HdG 734 the date on it must be read 1649 instead of 1669 (see Rosenberg no. 451).

\(^{7}\) Correctly read by Simon, op. cit., p. 24.

\(^{8}\) For HdG 757 see ibid. (the picture undoubtedly belongs in the early 1650's); for HdG 181, the false date of which read 1657, not 1667 (Jahrbuch der preussischen Kunstsammlungen, XLVII, 1927, p. 139), and which was therefore probably identical with HdG 190, see the catalogue of the Whitcomb Bequest, Detroit Institute of Arts, 1954, p. 31.

\(^{9}\) Eliminated by both Simon and Rosenberg, HdG 548, which reappeared at the Clowes sale in London (Christie's) on February 17, 1950, no. 49, is supposed to be dated 166. (last digit illegible).

\(^{10}\) See Eckhard Schaar in Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Instituts in Florenz, IX, 1959, p. 36.