



Jan Asselijn  
Dutch, c. 1610 - 1652

# *The Tiber River with the Ponte Molle at Sunset*

c. 1650

oil on canvas

overall: 41.2 × 54 cm (16 1/4 × 21 1/4 in.)

Inscription: lower right, in monogram: JA

Florian Carr Fund, New Century Fund, and Nell and Robert Weidenhammer Fund 2012.129.1

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## **ENTRY**

Jan Asselijn's radiant painting depicts a quiet late afternoon scene unfolding along the Tiber River near the Ponte Molle, also known as the Milvian Bridge. Forming part of the Via Flaminia, which linked Rome to Florence, this bridge spanned the river just north of the Eternal City and was its principal access from the north. [1] The Milvian Bridge gained great fame as the site of Constantine the Great's decisive battle against Maxentius in 312 CE, after which Constantine converted to Christianity. [2] For Asselijn, however, this historic event was of less significance than the bridge's picturesque character and the way it evoked the quiet beauty of the countryside in the Tiber River valley. A herder driving his cattle through the water and two horsemen, who have stopped to converse along the river's bank, activate the painting's foreground, their importance to the scene evident in the vivid accents of light falling on their bodies. At right, a well-dressed gentleman gestures to a boatman, whose small cargo vessel drifts along the current as it passes through one of the bridge's arches. From atop the Ponte Molle, two figures observe the activity below.

Jan Asselijn, a major figure in the Dutch Italianate tradition, traveled from Amsterdam to Rome in the mid-1630s to join a group of Dutch and Flemish artists known as the *Schildersbent*, or Band of Painters (also often referred to as the *Bentvueghels*, or Brotherhood of Artists). They were primarily interested in depicting scenes of everyday life and views of the Roman *campagna*, and generally fused these two pictorial realms by portraying ordinary people going about their daily activities near buildings, bridges, and ruins dating from antiquity. Asselijn often joined his colleagues from the *Schildersbent* on excursions into the countryside to make drawings, which he executed with brown pen and wash to capture the effects of light and shadow. [3] For example, he and Jan Both (Dutch, 1615/1618 - 1652) likely visited the Ponte Molle in the late 1630s, at which time Asselijn drew the west-facing side of the bridge and Both viewed it from the east in preparation for an etching of the site. [4] Many of the locations Asselijn visited had been favorites of earlier members of the *Schildersbent*, such as Cornelis van Poelenburch (Dutch, 1594/1595 - 1667). Close parallels exist in Asselijn's drawings of ancient ruins, among them those of the Palazzo Maggiore on the Palatine Hill, and in those of his predecessor. [5]

Asselijn left Rome for Amsterdam in the early 1640s, stopping for a while in Lyon, where he married. He then traveled to Paris, where he and his Dutch colleague Herman van Swanevelt (Dutch, c. 1600 - 1655) received a joint commission for a series of Italianate paintings for the Hôtel Lambert, an indication that he had already established an international reputation. [6] While in Paris, Asselijn also worked closely with the printmaker Gabriel Perelle (French, 1603 - 1677), who made a series of prints of Roman ruins based on Asselijn's designs. For his preparatory drawings, Asselijn consulted the pen and wash drawings that he had made from life in Italy, among them his imposing *Ruins of the Palazzo Maggiore on the Palatine* (Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin). [7]

Asselijn eventually settled in Amsterdam in 1647, where he found a thriving demand for his evocative Italianate scenes. His greatest period of activity as a painter was, in fact, during the late 1640s and early 1650s, the very years in which he executed the Gallery's painting of the Ponte Molle. The exact chronology of his paintings from this period is difficult to establish because he rarely dated his works. The smooth finish, polished rendering of details, and golden light of this modestly scaled work seem to reflect his manner from the late 1640s, shortly after he returned from Paris. His paintings of the early 1650s, prior to his untimely death in 1652, are often larger in scale and more dramatic in character. His changes in style

are evident in a comparison of the Gallery's painting to another depiction of the Ponte Molle, now in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich. [8] The latter has larger and more dramatic pictorial elements in the bridge and sky, greater human activity, and stronger contrasts of light and dark but lacks the calm serenity of *The Tiber River with the Ponte Molle at Sunset*.

The dating of the Gallery's painting to around 1650 is reinforced by infrared reflectography, which reveals that Asselijn's initial concept depicted ruins similar to those from his Parisian period. Prior to painting the bridge, Asselijn had blocked in the ruins of the Palazzo Maggiore on the Palatine. He based these ruins on the drawing that he had made in Rome, which he had also used for his preparatory drawing for Perelle's print. The infrared reflectogram further reveals that at the left of this earlier composition Asselijn had included two arched wooden structures that probably depict cranes or some type of lifting devices. [9] Unfortunately, no comparable pictorial elements have yet been found in Asselijn's other paintings or drawings with which to identify their function.

As is characteristic for paintings executed after his return to Amsterdam, Asselijn freely adapted the scene's architectural and topographical character to enhance pictorial effects. The rhythmic shadows on the arches of the bridge and the golden light spreading across the sky suggest that the scene transpires in the late afternoon, yet, given Asselijn's viewpoint from the south (the left riverbank) looking north, his golden light effects could not reflect reality. Equally imaginative is the round tower that Asselijn placed at the northern end of the bridge. As seen in both his drawing and Jan Both's etching of the Ponte Molle (see note 4), a square fortified tower actually dominated that end of the bridge. Asselijn based the round tower on another ruin, the Tomb of the Plautii, located in Tivoli next to the Ponte Lucano. [10] It is not known why Asselijn chose to incorporate this round tomb into the structure of the Ponte Molle, but he undoubtedly recognized that the brutal, fortified tower at the north end of the Ponte Molle, built for defensive purposes in the 15th century, was architecturally unsympathetic to the graceful proportions of the bridge, which was built in 109 BCE. Asselijn's decision to replace this tower with the Tomb of the Plautii may have had a historical logic in that the tomb dates from the early 1st century CE. Finally, Asselijn must also have responded aesthetically to the tomb's round shape, noting how it created a pleasing coda to the rhythmic progression of the stone arches spanning the Tiber and a gentle transition to the light-filled Roman *campagna* stretching out to the north.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

December 9, 2019

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## NOTES

- [1] I would like to thank Henriette Rahusen for her extensive research on this painting. The Ponte Molle crosses the Tiber 3.1 miles north of the 17th-century city gate and about 4.5 miles from the old Roman city center.
- [2] According to legend, Constantine had a dream in which a cross appeared in the heavens and a voice told him he would win the Battle of the Milvian Bridge if he used the cross as his standard. After he won the battle, he attributed his victory to the god of Christianity. Once he was emperor, Constantine established Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire.
- [3] For Asselijn's drawings, see Anne Charlotte Steland-Stief, *Die Zeichnungen des Jan Asselijn* (Fridingen, 1989), especially 207–208, no. 3, fig. 70, and Peter Schatborn, *Drawn to Warmth: 17th-Century Dutch Artists in Italy* (Amsterdam, 2001).
- [4] Asselijn's drawing of the Ponte Molle has at times also been attributed to Willem Schellinks (1627–1678) and Thomas Wijck (1616–1677). Jan Asselijn, *The Ponte Molle*, c. 1640, pen and brush in brown over traces of black chalk, Amsterdam Museum, legaat C. J. Fodor, TA 10315; and Jan Both, *The Ponte Molle*, etching, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1972.28.23. The Amsterdam Museum dates their drawing to 1647, however by that date Asselijn had long since left Italy and was back in Amsterdam (see Biography).
- [5] See Jan Asselijn, *Ruins of the Palazzo Maggiore on the Palatine*, c. 1640, pen and brush in brown over traces of black chalk, Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin; and Cornelis van Poelenburch, *Ruin of the So-Called Palazzo Maggiore on the Palatine*, 1622, graphite and chalk, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Purchased with the support of the Vereniging Rembrandt, with additional funding from the Prins Bernhard Fonds, the Rijksmuseum-Stichting and the De Ster Holding BV, RP-T-1989-89. Although Cornelis van Poelenburch did not paint a view of the Ponte Molle, Asselijn's luminous painting style owes much to that of his predecessor. For Van Poelenburch's paintings in the collection of the National Gallery of Art, see Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., "Cornelis van Poelenburch/*Christ Carrying the Cross*/early 1620s," and "Cornelis van Poelenburch/*The Prophet Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath*/c. 1630," *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*, NGA Online Editions, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object->

page.137505.html and <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.131041.html> (accessed September 20, 2018).

- [6] These paintings are now in the Louvre Museum, Paris, inv. nos. 984, 985, 986.
- [7] This drawing served as a model for a preparatory drawing for the print, now in the Kunsthalle, Hamburg. For illustrations of the print and preparatory drawing, see Anne Charlotte Steland-Stief, *Die Zeichnungen des Jan Asselijn* (Fridingen, 1989), 34–35.
- [8] Jan Asselijn, *Italian Landscape with Bridge*, c. 1650–1652, oil on canvas, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, inv. no. 1063. The Alte Pinakothek dates this painting 1647/1650, but Arthur Wheelock disagrees. Acknowledging the difficulties of dating Asselijn's oeuvre, Wheelock believes the Munich canvas was produced c. 1650–1652.
- [9] The infrared reflectogram is kept in NGA curatorial files.
- [10] As with the Ponte Molle, Asselijn and his colleagues, among them Jan Both, made pilgrimages to Tivoli and depicted this famous tomb and the Ponte Lucano in their paintings and drawings. For one of Asselijn's paintings of the Tomb of the Plautii, see *Southern Landscape with a Rider and Mules Forging a Stream; the Tomb of the Plautii near Rome on the Right*, c. 1651, RKD, Kunstwerknnummer 109292, Afbeeldingsnummer 0000129315.

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## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support is a thin, finely woven plain-weave canvas lined with an aqueous adhesive to a similar fabric. The tacking margins were removed during a previous treatment, and the edges of the painting were covered with brown paper tape.

There is a double ground that consists of a light red earth tone bottom layer and a thicker gray top layer. Microscopic examination of the painting along with infrared reflectography (IRR) and x-radiography helped determine that some, if not all, of the architectural elements were blocked out in brown paint, while the figures and cattle were lightly sketched out in an extremely thin, medium-rich transparent layer (small green and black particles are visible under magnification) on the completed background. [1] It is unclear if each method is used specifically for laying out a particular compositional element (architecture versus figures and animals), because the man in the bottom left corner as well as some of the cattle may have also been blocked out with brown paint.

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The paint layering of the composition is complex due to significant changes made by the artist, most of which are visible with IRR and x-radiography. This earlier version depicted a completely different architectural structure—one that would have dominated the right side of the composition, extending close to the top edge and top right corner and ending near the center. It did not include the bridge or the circular tower in the center of the design. In addition, at least two figures and one bull were lightly sketched out but not painted in the final composition, and the bottom left quadrant (above where the cattle appear in the current painting) included a tree and water well.

Dina Anchin, based on the examination and treatment reports by Michael Swicklik

December 9, 2019

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### TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] Infrared reflectography was carried out using a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera filtered to 1.5–1.8 microns (H filter). 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 × 17 in.). The parameters were 37–39 kV, 50 mA, 6 seconds, and 40 in. distance (from source to plate). The resulting digital images were composited and processed using Adobe Photoshop CS5.

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### PROVENANCE

(David Ietswaart, Amsterdam); Willem Lormier [1682-1758], The Hague;<sup>[1]</sup> (his estate sale, A. Franken, The Hague, 4 July 1763, no. 64); De Heer Yves. Gottfried Winkler [1731-1795], Leipzig, by 1768.<sup>[2]</sup> (anonymous sale, Frederik Müller et Cie at the Hotel de Brakke Grond, Amsterdam, 23 February 1904, no. 1); Joanna Maria Tydeman-VerLoren van Themaat [1861-1954], Ginneken;<sup>[3]</sup> by descent in the Tydeman family; purchased 7 November 2012 through (Rachel Kaminsky Fine Art, New York) by NGA.

[1] A catalogue of Lormier's collection was published in 1752, and served as a guide for visitors who came to see the 376 paintings. Two copies of the catalogue,

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annotated with purchase, price, and sale information by Lormier himself, are in the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie (Netherlands Institute for Art History), The Hague. See: Everhard Korthals Altes, "The Eighteenth-Century Gentleman Dealer Willem Lormier and the International Dispersal of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Paintings," *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 28, no. 4 (2000-2001): 251-311.

[2] Franz Wilhelm Kreuchauf, *Historische Erklärungen der Gemälde welche Herr Gottfried Winkler in Leipzig*, Leipzig, 1768: 101-102, no. 255.

[3] According to the dealer's prospectus, in NGA curatorial files; she lent the painting to a 1938 exhibition in Eindhoven. A copy of the 1904 sale catalogue in the NGA library is annotated with F. Müller's name as the buyer; he was perhaps also acting as a buyer's agent at the sale. A label on the painting's stretcher reads "Eigendom van: Mr M. A Tydeman, Amersfoort," and "Tydeman" is also written in black crayon on the stretcher. Joanna Maria's husband (1854-1916) and son (1884-1961) were both named Meinard.

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### EXHIBITION HISTORY

1938 Noord-Brabantsch Kunstbezit, Stedelijk van Abbe-Museum, Eindhoven, 1938, no. 37.

1948 Oude kunst in Brabants bezit: jubileum tentoonstelling, 1898-1948, Paleis-Raadhuis, Tilburg, 1948, no. 3, as *Brug over de Tiber*.

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### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1768 Kreuchauf, Franz Wilhelm. *Historische Erklärungen der Gemaelde welche Herr Gottfried Winkler in Leipzig gesammelt*. Leipzig, 1768: 101-102, no. 255.
- 1971 Steland, Anne Charlotte. *Jan Asselijn nach 1610 bis 1652*. Amstersdam, 1971: 71 fig. 46, 154 no. 183.
- 2013 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. "Jan Asselijn, The Tiber River and te Ponte Molle." *National Gallery of Art Bulletin* 48 (Spring 2013): 22-23, repro.

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