



Hendrick Avercamp
Dutch, 1585 - 1634

A Scene on the Ice

c. 1625

oil on panel

overall: 39.2 x 77 cm (15 7/16 x 30 5/16 in.)

framed: 64.8 x 102.2 x 5.7 cm (25 1/2 x 40 1/4 x 2 1/4 in.)

Inscription: lower left, in ligature: HA

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1967.3.1

ENTRY

The smooth ice of a frozen river or canal was (and is) a source of great pleasure for the Dutch. The sense of freedom it provided created an almost holiday spirit for both young and old, rich and poor. For the upper class it was a time to enjoy the brisk winter air in beautifully crafted horse-drawn sleighs; for the young at heart it offered a chance to skate along holding hands with a loved one; for others it provided a chance to play kolf, to ice fish, or just to watch the array of humanity enjoying their shared experience. Frozen waterways also served as transportation arteries that enabled the movement of people and goods, so winter days spent on the frozen ice may not always have been as carefree as this description would imply; still, the pictorial and literary traditions from the seventeenth century certainly highlight the positive aspects. [1] Primary among those who created this idyllic image of Dutch winters was Hendrick Avercamp. In numerous landscapes such as this one he recorded the experiences of his compatriots as they skated, sleighed, talked, or just quietly observed the open expanse of smooth ice on a frozen waterway.

Avercamp, who lived in Kampen, far removed from the artistic centers of Haarlem and Amsterdam, worked his entire career in a style that derived from sixteenth century prototypes, where landscape vistas were viewed from above to allow for a panoramic overview of the scene below. The specific type of winter scene favored by Avercamp follows a rich tradition that goes back to Pieter Bruegel the Elder (Netherlandish, c. 1525/1530 - 1569), such as the latter's *Winter Landscape with Bird-Trap*, 1565 (Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Brussels), a composition whose popularity can be measured by the frequent copies made by the Flemish master's son, Pieter Brueghel the Younger (Flemish, c. 1564 - 1637/1638). Similar scenes appeared in prints and drawings by other artists, including Hans Bol Hans Bol (Flemish, Flemish, 1534 - 1593) [fig. 1] and David Vinckboons (Dutch, 1576 - c. 1632). A number of ice scenes, including compositions by Bol and Vinckboons, were conceived as parts of series representing the four seasons of the year. [2] Other depictions of skaters appear in emblematic prints, where the difficulty of staying upright was associated with the slipperiness of human life. [3]

While Avercamp never strayed very far from these traditions, he did develop this subject matter into a specialty with its own distinctive feel. His work differs from that of his predecessors primarily in the attention he pays to the individuality of the figures in his scenes and the prominence he gives them over the surrounding landscape elements. These characteristics are particularly evident in *A Scene on the Ice*, in which landscape elements are rendered almost schematically while differences in the social classes and even the individuality of the figures are emphasized by their activities, costumes, and attitudes. Little vignettes can be identified: the solidly middle-class burghers who watch more elegant members of the upper class glide by in their horse-drawn sleigh; the two friends who skate in tandem; the working-class family unloading barrels from a transport sledge; or the couple in the far distance whom others help to their feet. Avercamp does not appear to have been interested in using his winter scene as a means for expressing abstract concepts, such as those associated with seasons of the year or emblematic images. On the contrary, he delighted in capturing the variety of social interactions that occur when whole communities share the pleasures of the ice.

Avercamp, as is characteristic of Dutch seventeenth-century painters, did not paint such scenes from life; rather, he composed them in his studio on the basis of drawings. One such drawing depicts the standing couple to the right of the sleigh [fig. 2]. Drawings of other individual figures and figure groups also exist. A consequence of this working method is that the same figures continually recur in

Avercamp's paintings. Sometimes he places them in relatively the same position, but often they appear in new arrangements among a different cast of characters. In a finished watercolor from Berlin [fig. 3], a number of figures similar to those in *A Scene on the Ice* can be found, including the figure in the horse-drawn sleigh, the man leaning down to tie his skate, and, in reverse, the young couple skating hand in hand. [4] A painting that has close compositional relationships to *A Scene on the Ice* is one of Avercamp's masterpieces, his *Winter Scene on a Frozen Canal* in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art [fig. 4]. Not only are the landscape elements identical, but there are no fewer than fourteen figure groups that equate to those in the Washington painting. Certain of these are in comparable locations, while others are repositioned, as in the vignette of the father pushing his wife and their pointing child in a sled, which appears on the right edge of the Washington painting and the left center of the LACMA painting. [5]

The many relationships between the Washington and LACMA paintings suggest that these two works were created in close chronological proximity. Stylistic evidence indicates that Avercamp executed the LACMA painting around 1620, at a time when he favored compositions with relatively small figures and with a loosely structured pictorial organization. [6] A date for the Washington painting around 1620 is also consistent with the dendrochronological examination of the panel, which indicates a felling date for the oak panel between 1606 and 1616. [7] Logic dictates that Avercamp executed *A Scene on the Ice* shortly after the LACMA painting since it is a somewhat simplified variant of that ambitious work. Not only is the landscape more schematically rendered, but the painting also contains far fewer figures and they are not as coherently integrated as they are in the LACMA version.

The LACMA painting is so finely conceived that it seems probable that it was a commissioned piece. The Gallery's painting was most likely painted for the open market; in any event, Avercamp did not give it the same degree of attention that he allotted to *Winter Scene on a Frozen Canal*. [8] The removal of extremely discolored natural resin varnish and old restorations in 2015 has revealed that the condition of *A Scene on the Ice* is far better than had been previously believed [fig. 5]. [9] Although some of the figures have suffered from abrasion, and a few damages exist in the sky and immediate foreground, the painting has retained its soft atmospheric character to a remarkable degree. While the grain of the wood panel is evident, it does not have a particularly deleterious effect on the appearance of image. Moreover, the misconceptions of a previous restorer's

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Repainting, which had negatively affected the appearance of the painting, were rectified during the painting's recent restoration. For example, a pole with a fish hanging at its tip was previously seen stuck in the ice in the middle of the composition instead of being held by the boy skating hand in hand with a girl, as is the case in the LACMA painting. Another error in an earlier restorer's interpretation was that the man tying on his skate in the lower left was being watched by a small bird. The "bird" was actually the restorer's creation, and was a misinterpretation of the shape of the man's right skate resting before him on the ice.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

June 12, 2015

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Hans Bol, *Winter Landscape with Skaters*, c. 1584/1586, pen and brown ink and wash on laid paper, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Robert H. and Clarice Smith, in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art



fig. 2 Hendrick Avercamp, *Standing Couple*, c. 1615, pen and ink and wash, Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam, RP-T-1952-344. Photo © Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



fig. 3 Hendrick Avercamp, *Scene on Ice*, c. 1620, watercolor, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Kupferstichkabinett, KdZ2230. Photo: bpk, Berlin / Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen, Berlin / Jörg P. Anders / Art Resource, NY



fig. 4 Hendrick Avercamp, *Winter Scene on a Frozen Canal*, c. 1620, oil on panel, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Mrs. Edward W. Carter Collection. Digital Image © 2014 Museum Associates / LACMA. Licensed by Art Resource, NY



fig. 5 Hendrick Avercamp, *A Scene on the Ice* (pre-treatment), c. 1625, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1967.3.1

NOTES

- [1] See Jan Six van Chandelier, 's *Amsterdammers Winter*, ed. Maria A. Schenkeveld-van der Dussen (Utrecht, 1988).
- [2] See, in particular, Hessel Gerritsz's engraving after Vinckboons, *Heyms.*, illustrated in Albert Blankert et al., *Hendrick Avercamp, 1585–1634; Barent Avercamp, 1612–1679: Frozen Silence—Paintings from Museums and*

Private Collections (Amsterdam, 1982), 150–151, cat. 33.

- [3] A print by Johannes Galle after Pieter Bruegel the Elder of an ice scene, dated 1553, is entitled “De slibberachtigheyt van’s menschen leven.” For a discussion of emblematic literature of ice scenes, see Evert van Straaten, *Koud tot op het Bot* (The Hague, 1977), 43–48. See also the colored drawings of ice scenes by Adriaen van de Venne in Martin Royalton-Kisch, *Adriaen van de Venne’s Album* (London, 1988), 326, 336–342.
- [4] For other paintings in which figure groups found in the Washington painting occur, see Clara J. Welcker, *Hendrick Avercamp (1585–1634), bijgenaamd “De Stome van Campen” en Barent Avercamp (1612–1679), “Schilders tot Campen”* (Zwolle, 1933; rev. ed. by D. J. Hensbroek-van der Poel, Doornspijk, 1979), pls. 22 and 25. See also: Pieter Roelofs, et.al., *Hendrick Avercamp: Master of the Ice Scene* (Amsterdam, 2009).
- [5] The relationship between these two paintings was thoughtfully analyzed in 1986 by Kathleen Pedersen in a graduate seminar paper at the University of Maryland (in NGA curatorial files).
- [6] For the chronology of Avercamp’s paintings, see: Pieter Roelofs, “The Paintings,” in Pieter Roelofs, et.al., *Hendrick Avercamp: Master of the Ice Scene* (Amsterdam, 2009), 48–54. For an excellent analysis of the LACMA painting, see John Walsh Jr. and Cynthia P. Schneider, *A Mirror of Nature: Dutch Paintings from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Edward William Carter* (New York, 1981), 3–7
- [7] The Dendrochronology was conducted by Dr. Peter Klein, Universität Hamburg, February 12, 1987 (letter in NGA curatorial files).
- [8] Because of somewhat more simplified composition of the Gallery painting in relation to that in LACMA, George S. Keyes doubted its attribution to Avercamp. See: George S. Keyes “Hendrick Avercamp and the Winter Landscape,” in Albert Blankert et al., *Hendrick Avercamp, 1585–1634; Barent Avercamp, 1612–1679: Frozen Silence—Paintings from Museums and Private Collections* (Amsterdam, 1982), 55 n. 25.
- [9] See the assessment of the painting in the 2014 archived version of this catalog, <http://purl.org/nga/collection/catalogue/17th-century-dutch-paintings/2014-04-24>.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support, a single oak panel with a horizontal grain, has been thinned and a cradle attached. Dendrochronology shows the panel to be from a tree felled between 1606 and 1616.[1] Triangular wood inserts replace the bottom right and left

corners. The wood grain is quite prominent, due to increased transparency of the aged oil paint and moderate abrasion overall. A thin, smooth, white ground layer is followed by a coarse, granular, gray imprimatura. The horizontal, striated strokes of the imprimatura application, visible through the thin sky, are incorporated into the design of the foreground figures.

Paint was applied in thin, smooth transparent layers with more opaque paint used in the details and white highlights. Very fine contours were applied around the figures with liquid black paint. While discrete losses are few, the paint surface has been heavily abraded, most notably in the sky near the right and along all four edges. Some figures in the middle ground were almost totally reconstructed when the painting was restored in the early twentieth century. The horse and most foreground figures have also been reinforced, sometimes quite inaccurately (see text). No conservation treatment has been carried out at the National Gallery.

[1] Dendrochronology by Dr. Peter Klein, Universität Hamburg, February 12, 1987 (letter in NGA curatorial files).

PROVENANCE

Said to have been at the Imperial Hermitage Gallery, Saint Petersburg.[1] (Firma D. Katz, Dieren), by 1933; J.M.B. Beuker, Heelsum, by 1934:[2] by inheritance to his widow, Mrs. J.C. Beuker [née De Kruyff van Dorssen]; sold 5 April 1967 through (A. Martin de Wild, The Hague) to NGA.

[1] In the catalogues for the 1934 and 1938 exhibitions in which it was included, the painting was described as having been previously in the collection of the Hermitage. However, the picture is not listed in any of that museum's collection catalogues.

[2] Labels from the 1933 and 1934 exhibitions both say that Katz was the "exhibitor," but they give two different names as the "owner" (removed from the back of the painting, now in NGA curatorial files). The owner's name on the 1933

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label is difficult to decipher, but appears to be two initials followed by “te H.” The owner’s name on the 1934 label clearly reads “J.M.B. Beuker Heelsum.”

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1933 Kunsttentoonstelling van 17e Eeuwsche Schilderijen, Gemeentelijk Museum, Zutphen, The Netherlands, 1933, no. 45.

1934 Tentoonstelling van Schilderijen van Oud-hollandsche Meesters uit de Collectie Katz te Dieren, Frans Halsmuseum, Haarlem, 1934, no. 45.

1938 Meesterwerken uit Vier Eeuwen 1400-1800, Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 1938, no. 52.

1969 In Memoriam, Ailsa Mellon Bruce, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1969, unnumbered checklist.


1997 Rembrandt and the Golden Age: Dutch Paintings from the National Gallery of Art, The Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia, 1997, unnumbered brochure.

2018

Water, Wind, and Waves: Marine Paintings from the Dutch Golden Age, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2018, unnumbered brochure.

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- 1982 Blankert, Albert. *Hendrick Avercamp, 1584-1634; Barent Avercamp, 1612-1679; Frozen Silence: Paintings from Museums and Private Collections*. Exh. cat. Waterman Gallery, Amsterdams; Provinciaal Overijssels Museum, Zwolle. Amsterdam, 1982: 55 n. 25.
- 1984 Walker, John. *National Gallery of Art, Washington*. Rev. ed. New York, 1984: 287, no. 372, color repro.
- 1985 National Gallery of Art. *European Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. Washington, 1985: 33, repro.
- 1986 Sutton, Peter C. *A Guide to Dutch Art in America*. Washington and Grand Rapids, 1986: 305, repro.
- 1995 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*. The Collections of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue. Washington, 1995: 9-14, color repro. 11.
- 2001 Spolsky, Ellen. *Satisfying Skepticism: Embodied Knowledge in the Early Modern World*. Burlington, 2001: 146-147, fig. 7.3.
- 2009 Roelofs, Pieter, ed. *Hendrick Avercamp: Master of the Ice Scene*. Exh. cat. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; National Gallery of Art, Washington. Amsterdam, 2009: 107, 169 n. 39.
- 2021 Kennicott, Philip and Matthew Cappucci. "Examining the Elements of Breathtaking Art." *Washington Post* 144, no. 225 (July 18, 2021): E10, color repro.
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