

Observation of nature and contemplation

A consistent aim in Dutch art of the 17th century was to represent landscapes in a manner true to nature. This is how Rembrandt's etching *Landscape with a Cottage and Haybarn* presents itself to its viewer. However, this is not to say that Dutch artists would not also freely compose the image in "*schilderachtig*" (painterly) fashion so as to creatively re-interpret visible reality. Thus, Rembrandt assembled this landscape from a number of set pieces: a rural cottage; a city skyline in the left-hand distance reminiscent of Amsterdam; a stretch of the Amstel River flowing in front of the "Kostverloren" country manor.

The composition has been executed in a painterly manner. Light and dark sections of the image contrast with one another, while a rich interplay of sunlight and shade subtly is captured on the roof of the farm cottage and in the trees. The house rises like an island from amidst the flat scenery, whose winding paths and water-filled moats make it look as if it were revolving around the dwelling. Only parts of the thatched roof are intact, and also in other regards, the cottage seems to be quite run down. To the left, a hay barn is recognizable by its straw roof mounted on wooden posts, which provides shelter to a horse-drawn carriage. A door is half-open; an elderly man can be seen standing in the faint interior light, with a woman looking out of the nearby window. In the foreground, a boy fishes in the brook from a wooden jetty, accompanied by a small child toying with a basket. Further to the right, a slightly stooped figure strolls along with a small dog.

Panorama views of Amsterdam are rarely found in Rembrandt's work; it was usually the picturesque canals and streets of his home city that he would draw in his sketchbooks. Often, he would take walks through the town's surrounding countryside, where the Amstel River meandered through the polder farmland reclaimed from the sea by dikes. One of the landmarks he would repeatedly sketch with his pen was the "Kostverloren" manor house with its distinctive tower, situated at a bend in the river. This is the section of river featured in our folio, albeit as a mirror image (as a result of the print-making process).

The city and the countryside are juxtaposed: a bustling trading metropolis on the one hand and simple country living on the other. This was a theme that increasingly would be celebrated and idealized over the course of the 17th century by well-to-do city dwellers, who made it a fashion to own country retreats like the "Kostverloren" manor. Print collections depicting the charming places referred to as *plaisante plaetsen* were very much in vogue in the early 17th century. Half-decrepit farm houses, in particular, were a motif favored by many Dutch artists of the period, among them Jan van de Velde (1593-1641). They would be incorporated for their quaint effect, sometimes as part of a bucolic scene. Moreover, Dutch art of Rembrandt's time often contained hidden messages with symbolic and ethically edifying meanings. Could the half-ruined hovel, which seems in the process of being reclaimed by nature, be implicitly associated with the differing ages of the figures which enliven the scene? Could it be an allusion to the transience of human existence and the vainness of man's striving?

Rembrandt created approximately 25 landscape etchings from 1640 until 1652. Our folio numbers among the earliest and most attractive examples of this motivic category. His decision to use an elongated folio format, which is well suited for flat panoramas, may have been a nod to the earlier landscape folios of Jan van de Velde. By applying the acid to the metal plate for differing lengths of time, Rembrandt was able to create visual gradations between the delicate lines in the background areas and the bolder strokes in the foreground. Here and there, he would also add marks with a drypoint needle, whose velvety ridges added deep-black accents, e.g. in the treetops, shrubs, and small bunches of reeds and plants. Rembrandt would often re-work his etching plates and offer them on the market in differing versions. In this case, only one version exists. Based on its motif, underlying technique, and format, our folio can be seen as a complementing counterpart to the etching *Landscape with a Cottage and a Large Tree* (Bartsch 226), which also dates from 1641.