NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

Jacob van Ruisdael
Dutch, c. 1628/1629 - 1682

Forest Scene

c. 1655

oil on canvas
overall: 105.5 x 123.4 cm (41 9/16 x 48 9/16 in.)
Inscription: lower right: J v Ruisdael (JvR in ligature)
Widener Collection 1942.9.80

ENTRY

Ruisdael's majestic forest landscape overpowers the viewer with its large scale and the forcefulness of the image. The view is across a broad waterfall to a forest glade, in which a small flock of sheep grazes. In the middle distance, a man and a woman travel along a path that crosses the rolling hillside. The figures, however, seem all but insignificant in comparison to the massive trees and rocks that surround them. The broad, rocky ledge with its waterfall and gigantic, broken birch trees in the foreground is at once forbidding and foreboding.[1] On a rock outcropping to the right, a huge oak tree, its roots grappling for support and nourishment, towers above the forest. The stark, gray, cloudy sky and deep greenish hues of the foliage underscore the painting's somber mood.

Ruisdael painted such forest scenes of water roaring over a rocky ledge many times during his long and productive career. As suggested by the half-timbered house visible in a similar landscape in Frankfurt [fig. 1], he may have encountered such landscape elements on his travels along the Dutch-German border in the early 1650s. The National Gallery of Art's painting also shares compositional characteristics with a landscape with a waterfall by Ruisdael in the Uffizi, Florence [fig. 2], including the diminutive figures and sheep.[2]

Few of Ruisdael's paintings after 1653 are dated, so a precise chronology of his work is not possible. The general evolution of his style and range of interests, though, is now understood, and a framework exists for placing his works within certain time periods. The Uffizi painting, with its loose brushwork and more open composition, belongs to the 1670s, while the National Gallery's landscape with its closed composition and densely painted trees, is characteristic of works from the

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mid-1650s. Also distinctive for this earlier period of Ruisdael's career is the combination of the scene's rather heavy and somber mood and the delicacy of the artist's painterly touch. In this work, for example, he carefully articulated individual blades of grass and leaves, patterns of bark, and the flow of the water cascading over the rocks.

In many respects *Forest Scene* shares characteristics with *The Jewish Cemetery* in Dresden [fig. 3]. Although the subject and lighting effects are more dramatic in the Dresden painting than in *Forest Scene,* the mood, the closed composition, and the descriptive character of Ruisdael's technique for rendering details are comparable. The two paintings even share certain motifs, such as the presence of wild viburnum growing along the edge of the forest. The date of *The Jewish Cemetery* has been much debated, with suggestions ranging from 1653/1655 to 1679.[3] A broad consensus, however, places it and the Detroit version of the same subject in the mid-1650s, a date likewise appropriate for the National Gallery's work.[4]

Given the compositional and stylistic similarities between *Forest Scene* and *The Jewish Cemetery,* one must also ask whether thematic ones exist as well. As has been frequently discussed, the presence of tombs, ruins, broken tree trunks, dead birches, and rainbows in the two versions of *The Jewish Cemetery* have explicit allegorical significance. They allude to the transience of life, particularly the temporal nature of man's endeavors, and also to the hope for renewed growth.[5] Similar symbolic allusions to the power and force of the cycle of nature were almost certainly attached to the compositional elements of the National Gallery's painting. The dramatic forms of the tree stumps and the fallen birch trees establish the scene's tenor,[6] but directly behind them grow the viburnum bushes that flower in the spring, the time of life's renewal. The stream itself, which also has a symbolic function in *The Jewish Cemetery,* traditionally has served as a metaphor for the continuum of the forces of nature.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Jacob van Ruisdael, *Forest Scene with Waterfall*, mid-1650s, oil on canvas, Städelsches Kunstinstitut Frankfurt. Photo: Ursula Edelmann

fig. 2 Jacob van Ruisdael, *Landscape with Waterfall*, 1670s, oil on canvas, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

fig. 3 Jacob van Ruisdael, *The Jewish Cemetery*, mid-1650s, oil on canvas, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden. Photo: Elke Estel / Hans-Peter Klut

NOTES

[1] The identification of the foreground trees as birches was made by Dr. Henry M. Cathey, director, U.S. National Arboretum, Washington, DC, in conversation on September 25, 1985. According to Peter Ashton, Alice Davies, and Seymour Slive, “Jacob van Ruisdael’s Trees,” *Arnoldia* 42 (1982): 2–31, Ruisdael depicted beeches rather than birches. For the purposes of this entry the trees will be referred to as birches.

[2] Seymour Slive, *Jacob van Ruisdael: A Complete Catalogue of His Paintings, Drawings, and Etchings* (New Haven, 2001), 244, no. 296. Slive also identifies a related composition from the mid-1650s in a New York private collection, 219, no. 243.

[3] Seymour Slive, *Jacob van Ruisdael* (New York, 1981), 68. Here, in the bibliography to his catalog entry for the Detroit version of *The Jewish Cemetery,* Slive lists the dates that various authors have ascribed to each of Ruisdael’s two treatments of the subject. (Slive places both paintings in the

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mid-1650s.) E. John Walford, *Jacob van Ruisdael and the Perception of Landscape* (New Haven, 1991), 95, dates the two versions of *The Jewish Cemetery* to "about 1653/4."

[4] A much later date for *Forest Scene* is not likely because by the mid-1660s Ruisdael had begun to paint his large vertical Scandinavian waterfall scenes that were derived from the example of Allart van Everdingen (Dutch, 1621 - 1675). In these works Ruisdael developed a greater looseness of touch, particularly in representing the spray of water falling over rocks, than is evident in *Forest Scene*.

[5] See Seymour Slive, *Jacob van Ruisdael* (New York, 1981), 34; also Yuri Kuznetsov, "Sur le symbolisme dans les paysages de Jacob van Ruisdael," *Bulletin du Musée National de Varsovie* 14 (1973): 31–41.

[6] The visual power and symbolism of the dead birch captured the imagination of the art critic Sanford Schwartz in 2006: "the fallen, broken bough of a huge white birch, trapped between rocks and the waterfall, and set off to the side of the scene, has the presence of the painting's chief actor of conscience. Presenting an image of loss and pain but also of virility, anger, and gracefulness, the tree is like one of Rembrandt's people. . . . In its stark, chalky white and black bark, the birch is at once a victim, a hero, and a figure who stands outside the drama, thinking about it." Sanford Schwartz, "White Secrets," *New York Review* (February 9, 2006), 8.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support is a medium-weight fabric with a somewhat uneven weave. The painting was lined to two pieces of fabric in 1942, at which time an old lining was removed, as was a discolored varnish.[1] The tacking margins have been flattened, inpainted, and incorporated into the picture plane, extending the painting's dimensions by approximately one inch on all four sides. The support was prepared with a thin, white ground. The paint was applied thinly in areas such as the water and some of the clouds, but thicker with some impasto in other areas such as the foliage and the highlights. The X-radiographs reveal that the artist originally painted the top of the waterfall to extend all the way to the large rock on the left side of the painting.

Minute paint losses are scattered throughout the painting, particularly in the tall tree on the left and the large tree on the right. The paint has blistered in the top left and top center of the painting.[2] Although the painting is in relatively good condition, there is a fair amount of abrasion in the sky. The painting was treated

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again in 2000 to remove the then discolored varnish and inpainting from the 1942 treatment. Dark stains in the clouds were inpainted at this time.

[1] This treatment is documented in an unsigned report from M. Knoedler & Company, Inc. (see report dated April 9, 1942, in NGA Conservation files). Presumably this treatment was performed by Louis de Wild, a New York restorer who worked on paintings for Knoedler & Company (see notes dated February 2, 1968, in NGA Conservation department files).

[2] This was probably caused by a previous lining procedure during which too much heat was used. The blisters were already present at the time of the 1942 treatment, and they are documented in the April 9, 1942, report (see Technical Summary note 1).

PROVENANCE

Probably owned by Francis Nathaniel, 2nd marquess Conyngham [1797-1876], Mount Charles, County Donegal, and Minster Abbey, Kent.[1] Sir Hugh Hume-Campbell, 7th bart. [1812-1894], Marchmont House, Borders, Scotland, by 1857;[2] (his estate sale, Christie, Manson, & Woods, London, 16 June 1894, no. 48); (P. & D. Colnaghi & Co., London); sold 1894 to Peter A.B. Widener, Lynnewood Hall, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania; inheritance from Estate of Peter A.B. Widener by gift through power of appointment of Joseph E. Widener, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania; gift 1942 to NGA.

[1] The only source of information concerning the picture's whereabouts prior to 1857 is Hofstede de Groot, whose listing of the painting is extremely confusing (Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century*, trans. Edward G. Hawke, 8 vols., London, 1907-1927: 4(1912):92, no. 285, possibly also 119, no. 367, 134, no. 418, 203, no. 643c). It seems that any or all of his four entries (nos. 285, 367, 418, and 643c) may contain information that relates to the *Forest Scene*, but these entries also contain additional and contradictory provenance listings, which must refer to at least one other painting. It nonetheless seems likely that before the *Forest Scene* was acquired by Sir Hugh Hume Campbell, it was indeed owned by a

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member of the Conyngham family of Ireland, most probably the 2nd marquess, but also possibly his father, Henry, 3rd baron and 1st marquess Conyngham (1766-1832).

[2] Gustav Friedrich Waagen, Treasures of Art in Great Britain: Being an Account of the Chief Collections of Paintings, Drawings, Sculptures and Illuminated Mss., 3 vols., London, 1854-1857, supplement: 441-442.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1866 British Institution for Promoting the Fine Arts in the United Kingdom, London, 1866, no. 59 (possibly also 1855, no. 54, and 1857, no. 79).

1877 Exhibition of Works by the Old Masters and by Deceased Masters of the British School. Winter Exhibition, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1877, no. 199.

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