

# Hendrick Avercamp

1585–1634

HENDRICK AVERCAMP, born in Amsterdam in a house next to the Nieuwe Kerk, was baptized in the Oude Kerk on 27 January 1585. In 1586 the family moved to Kampen, where Avercamp's father set up an apothecary's business that continued to be run after his death by his son Lambert. Another son also studied medicine, and the members of this well-educated family were for many years prominent citizens of Kampen.

For his artistic training, Hendrick went to Amsterdam to study with the Danish portrait painter Pieter Isaacks (1569–1625). In 1607, King Christiaan IV recalled Isaacks to Denmark, and Avercamp appears among the list of buyers at the auction of his teacher's effects as "de stom tot Pieter Isacqs" [Pieter Isaacks' mute]. Various other records testify to Avercamp's disability: in 1622, a document refers to him as "Hendrick Avercamp de Stomme," and his mother's will, drawn up in 1633, instructs that her unmarried, "mute and miserable" son Hendrick should receive, in addition to his portion of the inheritance, an extra allowance of one hundred guilders a year for life from family capital.

During his apprenticeship in Amsterdam, Avercamp came under the influence of the Flemish painters of mannerist landscapes who were then living in the city, notably Gillis van Coninxloo (1544–1607) and David Vinckboons (1576–1630/1633). It has been suggested on stylistic grounds that Vinckboons may have been another of Avercamp's teachers, but no documentation of such a relationship exists.

From his earliest works, however—the first dated examples of which come from 1601—Avercamp's style is quite individual, and is most strongly connected, not with any Amsterdam trends, but with the work of the minor Kampen artist Gerrit van der Horst (1581/1582–1629). By 28 January 1614 Avercamp was back in Kampen, where he seems to have remained until his death in May 1634.<sup>1</sup> There, in relative isolation from the mainstreams of Dutch art, he devoted himself almost entirely to the painting of winter scenes and specifically to depictions of crowds of people engaging in a wide range of activities on frozen rivers.

Avercamp had no important direct followers, although his nephew Barent Avercamp (c. 1612–1679) was his pupil, as were Arent Arentsz. (called Cabel)

(1585/1586–1635), and Dirck Hardenstein II (1620–after 1674).

## Notes

1. Avercamp, however, must have occasionally returned to Amsterdam, as is suggested by a drawing he made of the Haarlemmerpoort in Amsterdam, which was constructed between 1615 and 1618. See Amsterdam 1993a: 56, no. 23, repro.

## Bibliography

Welcker 1933/1979.  
Amsterdam 1982a.  
Blankert 1982a.  
Wiersma 1985.  
Amsterdam 1987: 254–261.  
Brown/MacLaren 1992: 3.

1967.3.1 (2315)

## *A Scene on the Ice*

c. 1625  
Oil on oak, 39.2 x 77 (15<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 30<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub>)  
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund

## Inscriptions

At lower left (in ligature): HA

**Technical Notes:** 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 is 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.

**Provenance:** Said to have been at the Imperial Hermitage Gallery, Saint Petersburg;<sup>2</sup> (D. Katz, Dieren), by 1933; J. M.

B. Beuker, Heelsum, by 1938; by inheritance to Mrs. J. C. Beuker; (A. Martin de Wild, The Hague).

**Exhibited:** *Kunsttentoonstelling van 17e Eeuwse Schilderijen*, Gemeentegalerie, Zutphen, 1933, no. 45. *Tentoonstelling van Schilderijen van Oud-hollandsche Meesters uit de Collectie Katz te Dieren*, Frans Halsmuseum, Haarlem, 1934, no. 45. *Meesterwerken uit Vier Eeuwen 1400–1800*, Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 1938, no. 52.

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.

Perhaps winter days spent on the frozen ice were not always as carefree as such a description would imply, but the pictorial and literary traditions from the seventeenth century do not allow for any other interpretation.<sup>3</sup> Primary among those who created this idyllic image was Hendrick Avercamp. In numerous landscapes such as this one he recorded the experiences of his countrymen as they skated, sleighed, talked, or just quietly observed the open expanse of smooth ice on a Dutch waterway.

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



Avercamp, who lived and worked 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 that Avercamp favored follows a rich tradition that goes back to Pieter Bruegel the Elder'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 Bruegel's son, Pieter Brueghel the Younger (1564–1638). Similar scenes appeared in prints and drawings by numerous artists, including Hans Bol (1534–1593) (fig. 1) and David Vinckboons (1576–1630/1633). A number of ice scenes, including compositions by Bol and Vinckboons, were conceived as parts of series representing the seasons of the year.<sup>4</sup> Other depictions of skaters appear in emblematic prints, where the difficulty of staying upright was associated with the slipperiness of human life.<sup>5</sup>

While Avercamp never strayed very far from these traditions, he did develop this subject matter into a specialty with its own distinctive feel. The primary way in which his work differs from that of his predecessors is in the attention he paid to the individuality of the figures in his scenes and the prominence he gave them over the surrounding landscape elements. These characteristics are particularly evident in *A Scene on the Ice*, where landscape elements are schematically rendered 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 proper middle-class burghers who stand to watch more elegant aristocrats gliding in their horse-drawn sleigh; the two friends who skate in tandem; the working-class family who unloads barrels from a work sledge; or the couple in the far distance whom others helped 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 in 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). Other drawings of individual figures and figure



Hendrick Avercamp, *A Scene on the Ice*, 1667. 3.1



Fig. 2. Hendrick Avercamp, *Standing Couple*, pen and ink and wash, Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet

groups also exist. A consequence of this method of working is that the same figures continually recur in Avercamp's paintings. Sometimes he placed them in relatively the same position, but often 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* occur, including the figure in the horse-drawn sleigh, the man leaning over to tie his skate, and, in reverse, the young couple skating hand in hand.<sup>6</sup> 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 Carter Collection (fig. 4). Here, not only are the landscape elements identical, but no less than fourteen figure groups can be found 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 pointing child in a sled, which appears on the right edge of the Washington painting and the left center of the Carter painting.<sup>7</sup>

The close relationship of the Washington and Carter paintings, and the clear superiority of the latter, has raised the question as to whether Avercamp actually executed *A Scene on the Ice*.<sup>8</sup> The question here, however, is less one of attribution than the possible impact of market forces and the degree of preservation. The Carter painting is so finely conceived that

Fig. 3. Hendrick Avercamp, *Scene on Ice*, watercolor, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Kupferstichkabinett



it seems probable that it was commissioned directly from the artist. The Gallery's painting was most likely painted for the open market; in any event, it was not given the care and attention allotted to *Winter Scene on a Frozen Canal*. Moreover, the appearance of the Gallery's painting today is hardly what it was during the seventeenth century. The paint surface has been abraded through old restorations with the result that many of the smaller figures in the middle ground and background have lost their precise forms. Some figures have been so badly damaged that they have been almost completely repainted. Occasionally, peculiar mistakes of interpretation have occurred in the repainting. One, for example, is the pole with a fish hanging at its tip that can be seen stuck in the ice in the middle of the composition. This pole should actually be held by the boy skating hand in hand with the girl, just as in the Carter painting (fig. 4). Another error in an earlier restorer's interpretation occurs with the man tying on his skate in the lower left. The small bird that so intently watches him is the restorer's creation. As in the Carter painting, the bird should be the man's other skate.<sup>9</sup>

The differences in the character of the Carter painting and the Washington painting may also be ones of chronology, although the chronology of Avercamp's work is extremely difficult to discern, for he only dated his paintings infrequently and may

well have worked in various styles simultaneously. Stylistic evidence seems to indicate that the Carter painting dates from about 1615 to 1620.<sup>10</sup> It may be assumed that the Gallery's painting was executed shortly thereafter since logic dictates that *A Scene on the Ice* must be a somewhat simplified variant. Not only is the landscape more schematically rendered, the various figure groups are not as coherently integrated. A date for the Washington painting in the early 1620s is not contradicted by dendrochronological dating, which indicates a felling date for the oak panel in the range of 1606 to 1616.<sup>11</sup> Stylistically a date in the 1620s also makes sense, for in those years Avercamp favored compositions with relatively small figures and with a loosely structured pictorial organization.<sup>12</sup>

#### Notes

1. Dendrochronology by Dr. Peter Klein, Universität Hamburg, 12 February 1987 (letter in NGA curatorial files).
2. Although catalogues for exhibitions held during the period that the dealer D. Katz owned the painting state that it was previously in the collection of the Hermitage, the picture is not listed in any of the museum's collection catalogues.
3. See Chandelier 1657.
4. See, in particular, Hessel Gerritsz's engraving after Vinckboons, *Heyms.*, ill. in Amsterdam 1982a, 150–151, cat. 33.
5. A print by Johannes Galle after Pieter Bruegel the Elder of an ice scene, dated 1553, is entitled "De slib-

Fig. 4. Hendrick Avercamp, *Winter Scene on a Frozen Canal*, oil on panel, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Edward William Carter



berachtigheyt van 's menschen leven." For a discussion of emblematic literature of ice scenes see Van Straaten 1977, 43–48.

6. For other paintings in which figure groups found in the Washington painting occur, see Welcker 1933/1979, (1979) plates xxii, xxv.

7. 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).

8. Keyes in Amsterdam 1982a, 55, note 25.

9. I owe these observations to Kathleen Pedersen (see note 7 above). The extended bottom edge of the pole (with fish attached), now worn away, can be faintly observed in the x-radiograph and in the surface of the paint itself when examined with a binocular microscope. The skate/shoe,

turned into a bird, is apparent as overpaint when it is examined with a binocular microscope.

10. For an excellent analysis of the Carter painting see Los Angeles 1981, 3–7.

11. See note 1.

12. See Amsterdam 1982a, 28.

## References

- 1934 "Collectie der Firma Katz."
- 1934 Niehaus.
- 1968 NGA: 2, no. 2315, repro.
- 1975 NGA: 14–15, no. 2315, repro.
- 1933/1979 Welcker: 216, no. S 73.3.
- 1982 Keyes in Amsterdam 1982a: 37–55, note 25.
- 1985 NGA: 33, repro.
- 1986 Sutton: 305, repro.

## Ludolf Backhuysen

1631–1708

LUDOLF BACKHUYSEN, whose name appears in the literature in a number of different forms (e.g. Bakhuisen, Backhuisen, Bakhuizen), was born in the German town of Emden on 18 December 1631. He was the son of a scribe, Gerhard Backhaus, and initially followed in his father's footsteps, working as a clerk in the government offices at Emden. After the family moved to Amsterdam in 1649, he held a similar post with the firm of the wealthy merchant Guilielmo Bartolotti van den Heuvel, a fellow native of Emden.

In 1656, while still apparently working for Bartolotti, Backhuysen is recorded as a member of *Kalligraphie*, a society of those proficient in beautiful penmanship. From 1650 onward he was also working as a draftsman, producing "pen-paintings" and *grisailles*. In documents of 1657 and 1660 he is still referred to as a draftsman, and although his earliest dated oil painting was executed in 1658, he did not join the painters' guild until February 1663. By this time any formal training he may have received in the art of painting must have been completed. No contemporary records of any apprenticeship survive, but Houbraken states that Backhuysen studied first with Allart van Everdingen (1621–1675) and then with Hendrick Dubbels (1620/1621–1676?).

His late start as a professional painter did not prevent Backhuysen from rapidly gaining widespread fame and patronage. After Willem van de Velde (c. 1611–1693) and his son Willem van de

Velde the Younger (1633–1707) emigrated to England in late 1672 or early 1673, he was unchallenged as the leading seascape painter of the Netherlands. Even as early as 1665 it was to him that the burgomasters of Amsterdam turned when commissioning a large view of the city's harbor to send as a gift to Hughes de Lionne, Marquis de Berny, a minister of Louis XIV of France. For this painting the artist was paid the sizable sum of 1,275 florins.

Backhuysen's clientele is reported to have included a number of other European rulers—among them Peter the Great of Russia, the king of Prussia, the elector of Saxony, and the grand duke of Tuscany—and his works continued to be extremely popular with leading collectors throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. After about 1850, however, his reputation began to wane, and only recently has he once more come to be considered a leading master of Dutch marine painting.

Backhuysen's canvases are often large and frequently depict stormy scenes. His lighting and color schemes are typically more dramatic than those of his contemporary, Willem van de Velde the Younger, although some of their works of the 1670s are rather similar and have on occasion been confused. It is not clear if one artist influenced the other at this time, or if their stylistic convergence was coincidental. A painter upon whom Backhuysen certainly did exert an influence was Abraham Storck (1644–after 1704).