



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

Country House in a Park

c. 1675

oil on canvas

overall: 76.3 x 97.5 cm (30 1/16 x 38 3/8 in.)

framed: 98.4 x 118.4 x 6.7 cm (38 3/4 x 46 5/8 x 2 5/8 in.)

Inscription: lower left: J v Ruisdael (JvR in ligature)

Gift of Rupert L. Joseph 1960.2.1

ENTRY

Depictions of elegant country houses came into vogue in the latter half of the seventeenth century as increasing numbers of wealthy Dutch merchants built homes along the river Vecht and in other picturesque locations in the Netherlands. Artists who specialized in architectural painting, among them Jan van der Heyden (Dutch, 1637 - 1712), depicted the houses and gardens in great detail. Surprisingly, however, not all of these seemingly accurate representations portray actual structures; sometimes the scenes were purely imaginary, intended to project an ideal of country existence rather than its actuality (see Van der Heyden's *An Architectural Fantasy*). Ruisdael, who painted views of country houses only rarely during his long career, was not an artist who felt constrained to convey a precise record of an actual site, and it seems probable that this view of a country estate is an imaginative reconstruction of one he had seen.

The elegant classicist villa standing beyond the informal, almost wilderness garden in this painting contains architectural elements characteristic of country houses from the period.^[1] The façade of the yellow two-story structure in the National Gallery of Art's painting is articulated by pilasters, a stringcourse, and a balustrade. A triangular pediment, flanked by vases and small dormers, crowns the central bay. While no known structure in the Netherlands or in the western part of Germany is identical, the façade that most resembles this villa is Vredenburg, designed by Pieter Jansz Post (Netherlandish, 1608 - 1669) and constructed on Frederick Alewijn's estate in the Purmer polder near Westwijk in 1652. Long since destroyed and known today only through a contemporary engraving, the façade of Vredenburg differs in that it has giant pilasters rising the whole height of the

building and no stringcourse or balustrade.[2]

Far more important for the composition than the villa, however, is the garden. The tall Norwegian spruces that soar above the other trees would have been seen by Ruisdael's contemporaries as exotic specimens imported from Scandinavia.[3] They have been somewhat randomly placed within a form of pleasure garden, whose natural and artificial components are enjoyed by the various groups of people that meander through the grounds. On the far right figures gather near the entrance of a large vaulted pavilion covered with foliage. On the opposite side of the garden three figures gaze at an elaborate fountain, which is surmounted by a small sculpted figure of a *manneken pis* (peeing boy). An even more dramatic fountain is situated in the right center. Balanced in the waterspout high above the base is a small ball. Just beyond this fountain two figures gesture in surprise as they are suddenly caught within a trick fountain spurting up around them.

Although the form of the pavilion and trick fountains were garden elements that existed by the late seventeenth century,[4] Ruisdael does not seem to have based his scene on any particular site.[5] It would be most unusual for formal garden elements, such as pavilions and fountains, to be placed within such a wilderness garden. Wilderness gardens, moreover, were generally not placed adjacent to classicist villas where formal gardens, geometrically designed and meticulously groomed, were to be found at both the front and back of the house. Indeed, given the existence of the broken pine lying in the left foreground and the architectural fragment, perhaps a broken cornice, lying in the lower right, it would seem that Ruisdael's intent was more didactic than topographic. These two elements, symbolic of the passage of time and the transience of existence, serve as a framework against which to measure the frivolous activities of the pleasure garden.[6]

In part because the painting lacks the heroic drama of Ruisdael's scenes from the middle of his career and in part because the brushwork is quite restrained, scholars have always placed *Country House in a Park* at the end of Ruisdael's career. The restoration of the painting in 1993, however, has revealed that the brushwork and color tonalities are far more vibrant than had been believed, which suggests that the painting may date from the mid-1670s rather than around 1680 as had previously been thought. The style of the costumes worn by the staffage figures would also be possible for the mid-1670s. The painting, in any event, certainly predates two related, but weaker, late works by Ruisdael, *Country House in a Park* in Berlin [fig. 1] and *Chateau in the Park* (Fisher Gallery, University of Southern

California, Los Angeles).[7]

Ruisdael often collaborated with artists who executed staffage figures in his compositions, particularly at the end of his life. Similar figures in other paintings by Ruisdael from the 1670s appear to have been executed by the Rotterdam artist Gerrit van Battem (c. 1636–1684). The figures in this work, however, lack the solidity characteristic of Van Battem's style.[8] Indeed, there is neither technical nor stylistic evidence to indicate that anyone other than Ruisdael executed them.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Jacob van Ruisdael, *Country House in a Park*, late 1670s, oil on canvas, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie. Photo: bpk, Berlin / Staatliche Museen, Berlin / Jörg P. Anders / Art Resource, NY

NOTES

- [1] The type of house and setting, for example, vaguely resemble those in a scene Ruisdael painted in collaboration with Thomas de Keyser around 1660 that depicts *The Arrival of Cornelis de Graeff and Members of His Family at Soesdijk, His Country Estate* (National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin; repro. in Seymour Slive, *Jacob van Ruisdael: A Complete Catalogue of His Paintings, Drawings, and Etchings* [New Haven, 2001], no. 80. The house in the National Gallery's painting, however, is far more elegant than that at Soesdijk, which, because it is part of a portrait commission, may be considered to be an accurate portrayal.
- [2] See W. Kuyper, *Dutch Classicist Architecture: A Survey of Dutch Architecture, Gardens and Anglo-Dutch Architectural Relations, from 1625 to 1700* (Delft, 1980), 159, 219, fig. 321.
- [3] Norwegian spruce, however, had been used in Dutch gardens at least since the 1640s. Constantijn Huygens, for example, had them at his country estate, Hofwijck, which was built about 1640. (See W. Kuyper, *Dutch Classicist Architecture: A Survey of Dutch Architecture, Gardens and Anglo-Dutch Architectural Relations, from 1625 to 1700* [Delft, 1980], 20, 153, fig. 314. The engraving there illustrated was probably made after drawings by Pieter Post and published about 1653.) By the latter decades of the seventeenth century, Norwegian spruce can be found in a number of representations of Dutch gardens. One of the most interesting of these is a print made by I. Moucheron of a bird preserve on a large estate in Heemstede where a number of spruce trees can be seen. This print is included in a bound collection of prints at Dumbarton Oaks called

Nederland. I would like to thank Sally Wages for bringing this print to my attention.

- [4] J. van der Groen, *Le jardinier hollandois* (Amsterdam, 1669). As gardener for the Prince of Orange, Van der Groen was quite influential in the Dutch Republic. Plate number 10 in his book depicts a comparable fountain in which a copper ball is suspended in the waterspout. Around the base of the fountain in the plate, moreover, waterspouts are shown spurting out of a rocky path. The accompanying text explains how these devices work and how they can be set off to “surprendre les spectateurs.” I would like to thank Sally Wages for bringing this reference to my attention.
- [5] Friedrich Gorissen, *Conspectus Cliviae, Die klevische Residenz in der Kunst des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Kleve, 1964), 102, no. 62, and Heinrich Dattenberg, *Niederrheinansichten holländischer Künstler des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Düsseldorf, 1967), no. 312, associate this scene and Ruisdael's related view of a country house and garden in Berlin (fig. 1) with Prince Johan Maurits of Nassau's Villa Vreugdenberg (Haus Freudenberg) near Kleve. This proposition, however, cannot be supported by any documentary evidence. Since Johan Maurits' country house burned down in 1669 and the painting dates from the late 1670s, the image could only represent the house after it was rebuilt in 1678, the year before the prince's death. An engraving of the site, executed about 1685 (Friedrich Gorissen, *Conspectus Cliviae, Die klevische Residenz in der Kunst des 17. Jahrhunderts* [Kleve, 1964], fig. 68), however, includes neither buildings nor a roofline that can be related to either the villa in the Berlin painting or that in *Country House in a Park*. Although the gardens surrounding Johan Maurits' villa contained tiered fountains, Roman ruins, and spruce, those elements were not found together at one site.
- [6] These associations with transience are also noted by E. John Walford, *Jacob van Ruisdael and the Perception of Landscape* (New Haven, 1991), 168.
- [7] See Seymour Slive, *Jacob van Ruisdael: A Complete Catalogue of His Paintings, Drawings, and Etchings* (New Haven, 2001), no. 554 (Berlin) and no. 576 (Fisher Gallery).
- [8] For staffage by Van Battum see, for example, Seymour Slive, *Jacob van Ruisdael* (New York, 1981), 154.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support, a fine-weight, plain-weave fabric, has been lined with the damaged, yet original, tacking margins retained. A thin, smooth white ground layer was

applied overall followed by a warm light brown imprimatura under the foreground and trees. Infrared reflectography^[1] shows a brush-applied underdrawing that notes sketchily the position of the fountain and some trees and shrubs. An oval-shaped pentimento is found between the house and fountain, and the roofline of the house was originally higher.

Paint was applied in thin layers with scumbles and glazes. The sky was painted first with reserves left for the foreground and most trees. Scattered small losses exist, mostly confined to the edges, with moderate abrasion found overall, particularly in the sky. The painting was treated in 1993 to consolidate flaking and remove discolored varnish and inpainting.

[1] Infrared reflectography was performed with a Hamamatsu c/1000-03 vidicon camera fitted with a lead sulphide tube and a Kodak Wratten 87A filter.

PROVENANCE

Savile family, Rufford Abbey, Nottinghamshire, possibly Sir John Savile, 1st baron Savile [1818-1896], or his nephew John Savile Savile-Lumley, 2nd baron Savile [1853-1931]; the latter's son, George Halifax Lumley-Savile, 3rd baron Savile [1919-2008], Rufford Abbey; (Savile family sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 18 November 1938, no. 123); Rupert L. Joseph [d. 1959], New York;^[1] bequest 1960 to NGA.

[1] Labels on the stretcher indicate that the painting was lent by Mr. Joseph to the Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, in 1942 and the Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1948.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1942 Loan to display with permanent collection, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, 1942-1948.

1948 Loan to display with permanent collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, Massachusetts, 1948.

1981 Jacob van Ruisdael, Mauritshuis, The Hague; Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1981-1982, no. 54.

1996 Obras Maestras de la National Gallery of Art de Washington, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, 1996-1997, unnumbered catalogue, color repro.

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- 1984 Walker, John. *National Gallery of Art, Washington*. Rev. ed. New York, 1984: 295, no. 385, color repro.

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- 1996 Ortiz Hernán, Elena, and Octavio Hernández R. *Obras maestras de la National Gallery of Art*. Translated by Bertha Ruiz de la Concha. Exh. cat. Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City, 1996: 72-73, repro.
- 2001 Slive, Seymour. *Jacob van Ruisdael: A Complete Catalogue of his Paintings, Drawings and Etchings*. New Haven, 2001: 417, no. 588.

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