

## **Oils in the Cottonian Collection**

Wednesday 1 December 2013

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Good afternoon and welcome to Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery,

My name is Katy and I am a Young Explainer and a student from Plymouth University where I am studying Art History. The Young Explainers are a group of Plymouth University students from a number of disciplines that have curated a programme of events and presentations relating to the Cottonian Collection. We have undergone extensive research into the histories of individual items, the collection as a whole, and the collectors themselves.

This Art Bite will focus on the paintings in the collection by looking at them through four themes: landscape, seascape, genre and portraiture.

We will begin by looking at a selection of 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch oil landscape paintings that are hung in the Cottonian Gallery. We will examine some of the themes and influences that run throughout them, and in particular, we shall be looking at the tonal and classical phases in painting, as well as the influence of Italy on Dutch landscape painters during the 1600's.

Now, all of the Dutch landscapes we have in our collection were painted during The Dutch Golden Age. This was a period that lasted for most of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, during and after the '80 years war' for independence.

The Golden age saw the Netherlands lead the way in terms of trade, science and art, making the new Dutch republic the most prosperous in Europe. This prosperity led to a huge increase in the production of art within the Netherlands and although much of the work created at this time is classed as Baroque, Dutch Baroque paintings would often differ from their European counterparts. Their work would reflect the traditional detailed realism, reminiscent of early Netherlandish paintings and works created throughout the Northern Renaissance.

Landscape was an extremely popular genre in 17<sup>th</sup> century Netherlands, despite being ranked at the very bottom of the aesthetic classification system (this was a way of ranking the different genres in art). The theorists at the time believed the main goal of art was to produce historical paintings, works that depicted the heroic and moral actions of men. However popular opinion did not follow that of the 'art theorists', and landscapes were the easiest un-commissioned paintings to sell, as a result, Dutch artists produced far more

scenes of nature and the landscape than they did of heroic and historic battles.

Landscapes painted in 16<sup>th</sup> century Flanders influenced a lot of Dutch landscapes from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. These would have mainly been imagined and painted in the studio and from a higher view above the landscape. The Dutch landscape style then evolved from this, with artists lowering the view point to ground level. Artists also started working outside more, creating pencil sketches of the scene before painting. This meant that Dutch landscapes became more realistic and with a lot of detail and thought given to the quality of light and impressive cloud formations made possible by the low, flat horizons.

Here we have a landscape by Jacob Van Artois titled 'Landscape with figures'. Artois was a Flemish painter who was born and spent most of his working career in Brussels. He became a master in the Brussels Guild of St .Luke and owned his own workshop, where he took on and trained pupils. Although painting in Flanders, his work shows some of the important characteristics that are found in Dutch landscape paintings. Flanders like the Netherlands made up part of the Low Countries; they were called so due to the majority of the land lying at sea level and with a third of the country actually below sea level – only kept dry through the use of dykes and drains.



**Jacob van Artois** (1613-1684)  
*Landscape with Figures*  
oil on panel  
Ref No: CO1

In 'Landscape with figures' we can see how he has put the horizon about a third of the way up from the bottom of the painting. However, unlike most Dutch artists that used the low horizon to let the sky dominate their paintings, Artois has kept the land the main focus of this painting. By creating a line of trees that end with the highest being at the centre of the painting, he has created a line that draws the viewer's eye up and thus increasing the height of the land, making up for the lack of hills or mountains in the environment. The figures in the foreground also create a line that leads the viewer's eye towards the centre tree, again drawing the viewer's eye up, but also creating a sense of depth in the painting. These figures also help to add scale to the landscape, the trees tower over the figures in the foreground.

Artois has also used the aid of natural light to create depth. The overlapping layers of contrasting tones: the dark foreground, and the bright yellowish hues where the sunlight hits the middle of the painting and which is again echoed in the distance on the horizon to the left, all help to draw the viewer's eye back, into the painting and give the landscape depth.

One of the main phases in Dutch landscape is the 'tonal phase', which started in the late 1620's and lasted some 30 years. Outlines during this phase would be less defined and more prominence would be given to the sky, as the atmospheric quality of the painting became increasingly more important. Landscapes painted within this phase were typically absent of figures and often included some sort of river or lake.

Here we have 'Landscape with figures' painted by Salomon Van Ruysdael. Although we are not certain exactly when this landscape was painted, it shares many of the characteristics and style of the 'tonal phase'.



**Salomon van Ruysdael** (c.1600-1670)  
*Landscape with Figures*  
oil on panel  
Ref No: CO19

Born in 1600, Salomonn spent most of his life working and living in Haarlem. The colour schemes and compositions in his paintings are very similar to those of Pieter Molijn; one of the leading artists during the 'tonal phase' causing some to suggest that Ruysdael may have studied with the artist. Ruysdael's muted and subdued colour scheme meant that he was one of the leading artists to paint in this naturalistic style.

From about 1650's Dutch landscape painting entered a second phase named the 'classical phase'. This saw an increase in the contrasts in light and colour used in the paintings. Compositions were more expressive, often anchored by a single windmill or tree and expressing both heroic spirit and a reverence/awe for nature. One of the greatest artists to paint in this style, and arguably the most famous of all Dutch landscape artists was Jacob van Ruisdael who was actually the nephew, and was quite possibly taught by, Salomon van Ruysdael.

Now if we take another look at this painting, we can see that it doesn't actually show much of the subdued colour scheme I was talking about earlier. Can you see how the hill is bathed in a warm, golden sunlight, which contrasts with the dark greens of the trees? There are two main reasons why this painting may show more of a contrasting colour palette. One reason may have been that he was influenced by his highly successful nephew, who, painting in the style of the 'classical phase' used sharp contrasts. Or he may have taken influence from other artist such as Aelbert Cuyp who bathed his evening scenes in golden *Italian* sunlight.

Whilst National pride was extremely important in 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch art, many Dutch artists travelled to Italy (especially Rome) to study, as it was then the artistic capital of Europe. The Italian landscapes that these artists saw, drew

and painted went on to influence many Dutch artists causing romantic Italian landscapes to be produced throughout both the classical and tonal phases. However, not all of the artists that specialised in these Italianesque landscapes had visited Italy; such as Simon van der Does.

Here we have his painting 'Landscape with cattle'. I think it is safe to say that this mountain in the background is not based upon anywhere in the Low Countries but is most probably imagined from an Italian scene. Van der Does, despite specialising in this field, never travelled to Italy. However he was the son as well as pupil to Jacob I van der Does, who had spent 5 years in Rome and was also a painter of Italianate landscapes. While his father's paintings were highly reminiscent of his stay in Rome, Van der Does' landscapes are set in Arcadia. Arcadia refers to a vision of pastoral simplicity, unspoiled wilderness and harmony with nature. Whilst similar to Utopia, Arcadia does not carry the connotation of human civilisation, it is a place of natural splendor and life lived naturally, uncorrupted by human civilisation. And this is where I believe this landscape is set.



**Simon van der Does (1653-1717)**  
*Landscape with Cattle*  
oil on panel  
Ref No: CO6

The idea of Arcadia comes from an ancient Greek provenance whose sparse population of shepherds and mountainous scenery caused its name to be used as an embodiment of peace and unspoiled wilderness, and this is the scene Van der Does has created here.

Although you can make out a building in the far distance, this landscape has almost no human figures, just one lone herdsman, sitting down, watching his cattle. The whole scene has a very calming aura, the cattle grazing peacefully in the evening sun and the still water all present a scene of harmony and tranquillity. This peace is again echoed in the composition of the painting, as he has created many circular lines that run throughout the scene. The cattle create a circle, the trees on the left circle inwards, the river bank curves inward too; all of this helps to encompass the scene, creating a feeling of security.

However, Arcadia was also regarded as lost or unattainable and Van der Does portrays this in his work. The trees on the left are the darkest part of the painting and are layered on top of the light section in the middle. This not only gives depth to the painting but puts us the viewer in the dark, casting us into shadow. The trees run all the way from the top of the painting, to the bottom, blocking off part of the scene, this pushes the viewer back. They also help to

frame the scene, especially the one bending inwards. All of this pushes the viewer back out of Arcadia; we are merely gazing through a window onto this scene of tranquillity but unable to be a part of it.

These artworks were so popular that there was a huge volume of production which kept the prices low and accessible; a British traveller in 1640 remarked, “As for the art of painting and the affection of the people to pictures, I think none other go beyond them.... All in general striving to adorn their houses, especially the outer or street room, with costly pieces...; yea, many times blacksmiths, cobblers, etc. will have some picture or other by their forge and in their stall.”

A low selling price may have been favoured by the customers but many artists had to seek other jobs. Even the most successful artists, who could charge high prices for their works, would often face difficulty making a living if their type of style fell out of fashion. Both Artois and Van der Does faced money problems despite their success. Artois died in debt and Van der Does had to spend time in a poor house after his spend-easy wife died.

The next genre I would like to spend a little time talking about is another favoured in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Maritime painting. The Dutch republic owed most of its power and wealth to its fishing and trading ships and had the largest navy in Europe for most of the 1600s. The Dutch navy was at the peak of its glory so paintings that depicted the triumphs of battle were highly prized and popular.

Similar to the first landscape paintings, the first Maritime paintings were often painted from a higher viewpoint before being brought back down to eye level at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Both Van de Velde the Younger and his father: Van de Velde the Elder, were the leading Maritime Painters in the Netherlands before they moved to England in 1672.

The painting here is by William Van de Velde the Younger, called ‘A Row Galley on Fire’. As official artist for the Dutch Fleet, Van de Velde painted many battle scenes like this one. The Dutch insisted on accurate depictions of the ships that were painted and so many workshops would own precise replica models of ships in order to make the painting as accurate as possible.



**Willem van de Velde (the younger)**  
(1633-1707)  
*A Row Galley on Fire*  
oil on canvas  
Ref No: CO22

The next style painting that I will talk about next is ‘Genre Painting’. This style is usually defined as depicting scenes from everyday life, of both the aristocrats and the peasantry.

Just like the landscapes we have looked at previously, genre scenes ranked fairly low on the aesthetic classification system. However, despite their status in the artistic world, genre paintings were produced in large quantities and sometimes fetched large sums of money. They were also enormously popular in the seventeenth century, most particularly in the Netherlands. A large aspect of its popularity came from the opportunity it afforded the viewer to catch a glimpse into the private world it depicted, and to connect with the ideals shown within it. Many genre paintings often contained a moral “lesson” or “commentary”, which could be discerned through the objects placed within the composition. These may symbolise poverty or illness, or suggest purity or vice.

This piece, “A Musical Conversation” was painted by Casper Netscher between 1650 and 1655. Although Netscher is often known for the portraits he painted towards the end of his career, he began with these genre paintings.

Stylistically, “A Musical Conversation” features a lot of the aspects you would expect to find in a genre painting. For example, musical subjects such as these were commonly found in genre paintings, most commonly by the ‘master’ of Dutch painting Johannes Vermeer. These paintings usually have romantic undertones and if you look closely you can see a statue of Cupid in the background, which shows this. The expensive fabrics in this painting, like the oriental throw and satin dress were a common feature in Netscher’s works, and can be seen in others such as “A Musical Party”. The man is believed to be playing a Theorbo, which is a type of lute.

A style very similar to that of genre paintings is something known as “fancy paintings”, a term coined in the 18th century. They were very similar to genre paintings, but instead of including a moral lesson, fancy paintings went the opposite way and removed the real circumstances of the subject, thus putting across a very sentimental and romanticised view of the world. The aim of them was not to question the viewer’s morals, but simply to stir their affections. Two paintings in this collection could be classified as fancy paintings, and those are the two by William Redmore Bigg.

We have “A Girl at a Cottage Door Shelling Peas” and “Girl Gathering Filberts”. Both of these are very typical of both Bigg’s personal style, and of fancy paintings. The women in both are portrayed as virtuous and productive, and they present a very reassuring view of peasant life. Women and children were the most common subjects for this style of painting, as they perpetuate a feeling of innocence. Bigg’s work was very popular in his own time, which was the late 18th Century, and he showed his artwork at the Royal Academy almost annually until his death in 1828. He was also an intimate friend of Sir Joshua Reynolds, a selection of whose work is on display in the corner.

I would like to end this talk by discussing a couple of portraits we have on display in the gallery. The tradition of portraiture painting is present throughout art history.

There are a great number of portraits in this collection ranging from the collectors themselves Charles Rodger and William Cotton III, who's pictures I will go on to talk about later, as well as self-portraits and depictions of family members and people of interest.

The portrait that is currently hung in the corner of the gallery is of William Cotton III, the man who gifted the Collection to the city. This portrait was painted by artist Stephen Poyntz Denning in 1845. Denning, born in 1795, was an English painter who is most commonly known for painting portraits and miniatures. Cotton met Denning in Rome whilst on his Grand Tour which he underwent in 1816.

The painting itself was commissioned by Cotton III and not unlike many pictures of the era the painting shows Cotton sitting, staring out to the viewer against a plain, dark background. Cotton is shown wearing the fashions of the time, in his best attire looking well groomed and direct. The artist has used the light to draw our eyes to Cotton's face.

Portrait sitters often hold symbolist objects, like the one we have here of Catherine Savery (1693-1774) by Marcellus Laroon the Younger (1679-1772). The painting is the most conversational piece in the Collection, loved or feared by old and young. Laroon the Younger is not as well known for his portraits as of pen and ink drawings of musical assemblies and stage scenes to name but a few. As an oil painter he applied the paint thinly to the canvas which artist John Waterhouse, who painted in the latter half of the 1800's, compared his work to that of a 'stained tapestry'. Although there are a great resemblance to his influences from the Dutch painters of the era there is also a very British feel to application of the painting.

Until the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century children would be represented as 'miniature adults' in portraiture paintings and this is a prime example. The children would dress and behave like a fully grown adult. You can see through this painting that the child Catherine Savery is surrounded by symbolic objects; these are included to show the viewer her social status. Through the window we can see afar onto some land, this is used in a number of portraits of men especially to show off what they own, however in this case because at the time women could not inherit money, land etcetera it is not showing off her wealth but that of her family. It could have even just been put there to show off the skill of the artist.

The child is holding a coral teething stick, just another aid to show off the wealth of the family along with the expensive and detailed lace that is fashioned into her attire. There is no hiding the grandeur in this picture even down to the coral teething stick. The object holds its own value as coral was thought to have magical properties and would ward off evil from the child, protecting it from illness or even the spirits that attached themselves to vulnerable children. If the coral was a very strong colour and began to change, it was thought that child was infected with some kind of illness.

The painting also holds other symbolic objects referring not only wealth but religion and also her place in the family. The small dog that is sat calmly and attentive beside her is a symbol for obedience; this shows her status in the family. The bunch of grapes and the finches refer to the religion. The grapes are the blood of God on his giving of his soul at the last supper and the finches are the offering of Christian Charity.

This was the last talk in the Young Explainers program for 2013; however, we will be back in the New Year so please if you have enjoyed this talk look out for our events for 2014!