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FACING PAGE: *View of Haarlem with Bleaching Grounds*, a detail of a painting by Dutch master Jacob van Ruisdael. The painting normally hangs in the Mauritshuis, The Hague, but as part of the first retrospective of the artist's work, it may be seen at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum from January 18 through April 11.

ROUNDTABLE

The Science Watch: An arm and a leg. By William Bennett. 6
Recent Writing: Matters of fact. By Justin Kaplan. 8
Recordings: Electronic intimacy. By "Stylus." 10
Essays: The all-news soul radio. By James B. Kobak Jr. 12
Explorations: A Gallic jewel in the Caribbean. By Sol Hurwitz. 14
Letters: Nuclear accidents. "Wolfegate." Thoreau. 16

ARTICLES

ASTROPHYSICS

Radiation, then matter, then life. Then what? 21
The broadest view of the biggest picture. By Eric Chaisson.

FINE ARTS

Jacob van Ruisdael 26
A retiring Dutch master comes into his own. By Seymour Slive.

BIOGRAPHY

Letters to Hazel 32
Walter Lippmann in a new light. By Frances Davis.

MUSIC

On tour with Yo-Yo Ma 35
An ex-prodigy and his prodigious exertions. By Lloyd Schwartz.

LITERATURE

The "creative editing" of Thomas Wolfe 41
A reply to Richard S. Kennedy's article in the September-October issue. By John Halberstadt.

DISCOVERY

Joseph Rock, "foreign prince" of China's western provinces 48A
A profile of an eccentric explorer-botanist whose most intriguing findings remain a mystery to almost everyone. By S.B. Sutton. (*DISCOVERY is bound into subscribers' and donors' copies only.*)

POETRY

By Mary Oliver and John Hollander. Pages 15 and 56.

DEPARTMENTS

This issue 4 . . . Chapter and verse 12 . . . Puzzle 19 . . . Events 47 . . . Classified 49 . . . Any questions? 55

Cover photograph by Bill King. Other photographic credits, page 18.

John Harvard's Journal, a review of University and alumni news, includes visits with Harvard's most recent Nobel Prize winners . . . News of a major gift to the Harvard Campaign . . . "Cleat" on an enigmatic football season . . . and a seedsman's tour of blossoming Harvard. This section begins on page 57.

Jacob van Ruisdael

*An old master
comes into his own.*

by Seymour Slive

Goethe, never a prodigal of praise, states categorically in his essay *Ruisdael as Poet*, published in 1816, that Jacob van Ruisdael is one of the great landscape painters: "His works satisfy all the demands that the senses can make of works of art In the purity of his feeling and in the clarity of his thought, [he] shows himself to be a poet, achieves a perfect symbolism, and at once delights, teaches, refreshes, and revitalizes us by the wholeness of his inner and outward feelings." His essay singles out a Ruisdael landscape he knew well as a painting that "will always fascinate us, it will maintain its well-deserved reputation for ever"

Although later nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics have stressed different aspects of Ruisdael's achievement, his distinction as the greatest landscapist of the heroic age of Dutch painting has remained unchallenged since Goethe's time. Yet it is only now, three hundred years after the artist's death, that a retrospective exhibition devoted to his work has been mounted. A choice selection of more than a hundred of his paintings, drawings, and etchings will be on exhibit at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum from January 18 until April 11, after their display at the Mauritshuis in The Hague.

Why Ruisdael has been kept in the wings so long remains an enigma. His output as a painter was prodigious. Today about seven hundred of his paintings are known, and his range as a landscapist is far greater than that of any of his contemporaries. A typology of Dutch landscape painting made recently by Wolfgang Stechow divided the subject into thirteen categories; Ruisdael makes stellar appearances in ten of them—forests, rivers, dunes and country roads, panoramas,

The Windmill at Wijk bij Duurstede. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (on loan from the City of Amsterdam). The towering windmill that is the principal subject of the artist's best-known landscape has been identified as one that was on the fringe of Wijk bij Duurstede, a small town situated about twenty kilometers from Utrecht, where the Lower Rhine divides into the Lek and Kromme (Crooked) Rhine.







The Jewish Cemetery. Detroit, The Detroit Institute of Arts, gift of Julius H. Haass in memory of his brother Dr. Ernest W. Haass. This imposing landscape is one of the rare works by the artist that were painted with deliberate allegorical intent. Its conspicuous tombs,

ruins, and dead trees allude to transience and the ultimate futility of man's endeavors, while the light breaking through its lowering clouds, the rainbow, and the luxuriant growth contrasting with the lifeless trees offer a promise of hope and new life.

imaginary landscapes, Scandinavian waterfalls, marines, beachscapes, winter scenes, and town views. The Fogg exhibition includes examples of each type, among them Ruisdael's most famous paintings: the Rijksmuseum's *Windmill at Wijk bij Duurstede*, the artist's classic pronouncement on the most characteristic symbol of the Dutch countryside; Dresden's and Detroit's versions of *The Jewish Cemetery*, two equally compelling landscapes painted as allegories of the transience of all earthly things; the Louvre's celebrated *Le Coup de Soleil*; and the awe-inspiring, panoramic *View of Haarlem with Bleaching Grounds*, from the Mauritshuis.

Ruisdael tried his hand at painting at least one nocturne, yet another of Stechow's categories. To our best knowledge, he did not paint Italianate landscapes—the staple of a host of other Dutch landscape specialists, not to mention Claude and Poussin—or foreign scenes (apart from Scandinavian ones), the two remaining subjects of Stechow's classification.

As for landscapes with Biblical subjects, there are merely four references to Ruisdael works of this tra-

ditional type in old sale catalogues; but in view of the artist's consistent disposition to make nature the sole protagonist of his vast corpus, the probability is high that the attributions given to these untraceable paintings were wrong. Possibly some were painted by Jacob's uncle, Salomon van Ruysdael, a leading landscapist of the preceding generation who occasionally embellished his works with religious themes. His pictures, as well as some by his son, Jacob Salomonszoon van Ruysdael, were not infrequently confounded with Ruisdael's by early cataloguers. (Unlike other members of his immediate and extended family, Jacob van Ruisdael invariably spelled his surname with an *i*, a practice that may have been based on an understandable desire not to have his landscapes confused with those done by relatives.)

In addition to showing the remarkable range of Ruisdael's themes, the Fogg-Mauritshuis exhibition contains works representative of his achievement from the time he first appeared on the scene, about 1646, an exceptionally precocious seventeen- or eighteen-year-old youth in his native Haarlem, until his final years.

We shall probably never know when he laid down his brushes for the last time, but topographical evidence in the panoramic *View of the Amstel Looking toward Amsterdam*, in the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge University, indicates that it was painted shortly before his death in 1682.

From the very beginning, Ruisdael's astonishing truth to nature and his feeling for its grandeur, the qualities upon which his reputation securely rests, are evident. By the early 1650s, when he traveled in the hilly, heavily wooded border region between the Netherlands and Germany, his forms had become larger and more massive. During this phase, giant trees, most often oaks and beeches, become the heroes of his pictures, and forest scenes, for which he had a natural affinity, gain in importance.

About 1657 Ruisdael made the short, eighteen-kilometer move from Haarlem to Amsterdam, the largest city in the Netherlands and booming center of its vast merchant-marine empire. There he remained for the rest of his life, presumably because it offered a better market than his home town. He lived, after all, at a time when the middle-class citizens of the Netherlands had an almost insatiable appetite for art. A contemporary account tells us that even butchers and bakers had paintings in their shops, cobblers had them in their stalls, and blacksmiths hung them by their forges.

Soon after his move, Ruisdael helped satisfy the public's new desire for topographical views of the metropolis. At about the same time he began to paint Scandinavian scenes like the splendid one in the Fogg's collection, with majestic firs, rugged mountains, and rushing torrents wildly cascading over huge boulders. His Nordic views are so convincing that one would think they were based upon first-hand observation of their elements, but this is not the case. His vision of them was based on art, not nature. They were derived from works by Allart van Everdingen, who introduced and popularized northern landscapes in Holland after his return from a trip to Norway and Sweden in 1644. Ruisdael's enormous and sometimes routine produc-



The Gasthuisstraat behind the Groote Kerk (Sint Laurenskerk) in Alkmaar. London, British Museum, Trustees of the British Museum. This fresh study is done in black chalk and gray wash, the artist's favorite media for achieving the tonal richness, luminosity, and suggestiveness that characterize his drawings.



The Great Beech, with Two Men and a Dog. Etching, first state. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Rijksprentenkabinet. In this etching Ruisdael's particular emphasis on the growth of powerful natural forms is keenly felt.

tion of waterfalls—they form the largest category of his *oeuvre*—is best explained as an attempt to capitalize on the vogue Everdingen sparked.

To judge from the top valuations given in Ruisdael's time to his waterfalls, they were the favorites of the collectors of his day. They continued to be highly prized until the nineteenth century, when painters (Constable was one of the first) and then critics and the wider public began to put a higher premium on the more personal beauty and fresh atmospheric effects of his dunescapes, the brooding moods of his winter scenes, the architectural strength of his mighty forest interiors, and the unmatched height and openness of the majestic skies that tower above his views of vast plains, his seascapes, and his beach scenes.

Graphic works by Ruisdael are rarer than his paintings; drawings attributable to him total just over a hundred. We can only guess how many have been lost. However, the lopsided correlation between the paintings that he made of certain themes and the drawings that have survived in these categories suggests that the number is rather large. For example, not a single drawing of a seascape or winter scene is known, and at best only one or two sketches of Scandinavian landscapes. On the other hand, there are more architectural views than one would expect. Moreover, the individual trees, shrubs, and clumps of undergrowth portrayed in his paintings are so sharply observed as to suggest he made studies or preparatory drawings, working toward that almost microscopic attention to detail found in Dürer's famous watercolors of grasses, ferns, and wildflowers. But no such studies exist.

Since Ruisdael's drawings are not nearly as familiar as his paintings, the 35 sheets in the exhibition were chosen to give an overview of this aspect of his accomplishment. Some are quick *aides-mémoire* done from nature and used as starting points for his paintings, which, in accordance with seventeenth-century practice, were done in his studio. Others are so highly finished that they must have been intended as inde-

pendent works of art. There are also a few carefully worked-up topographical views of Amsterdam that were designed expressly as models for an engraver to copy and then mass-produce.

All in all, enough drawings survive to show that Ruisdael was active as a draughtsman throughout his career. His etchings tell a different story.

Ruisdael's work as a printmaker was confined to the first decade of his career, and during this period he produced only thirteen etchings. Excellent impressions of all of them are in the exhibition. Five are extreme rarities, existing only in unique impressions, an indication that large editions of them were not pulled.

Ruisdael became a master etcher with amazing speed. By 1646, after a few tentative efforts with some tiny works about the size of calling cards, he began to produce landscape prints that rank with the finest made in Holland during the seventeenth century. An example is *The Great Beech*, one of the etchings that mark the end of his work as a printmaker. As in his paintings of heroic trees done in the early Fifties, he makes us feel the vital force of the gigantic beech's ancient trunk, which has clawed its roots into the projecting cliff, and we can sense the sap flowing through the branches and the leaves of its luxuriant crown.

In view of his auspicious start and the impressive results he achieved as a printmaker, why did he decide, after about 1655, never again to touch an etcher's needle? Perhaps the rather abrupt shift between the near and the far view in *The Great Beech*, a shift found in other prints done about the same time but not in his paintings of this phase, offers a clue. To achieve the more gradual and subtle spatial transitions found in his painted landscapes, Ruisdael would have had either to subject his etched plates to multiple bitings—a slow, tedious, and risky process—or to make extensive use of dry point or plate tone. Did he decide that the results that could be achieved by additional fussing with his etched plates were simply not worth the effort? As with so much we would like to know about him, we can only wonder if this was indeed the case.

Little has been discovered to satisfy our curiosity about Ruisdael's studio practice or about his public or private life. Not a single line written by him has survived. We cannot even try the game of guessing some of his personality traits from a portrait: none has been identified.

Inferential evidence tells us he was born in Haarlem in 1628 or 1629. The name of his master is not known. Not much in his early work corroborates the likely suggestion that he studied with his uncle. Perhaps he learned the rudiments of his art from his father, Isaack van Ruysdael, a framemaker who produced paintings as a sideline; but until one of Isaack's pictures turns up, it is impossible to say what Jacob's art may owe to his father's.

The evidence that Ruisdael studied medicine as a youth and then worked in Amsterdam as a surgeon as well as a painter is inconclusive, as is the sliver of proof that has been offered to establish that he is the same

"Jacobus Ruijsdael" who received a medical degree from the University of Caen, in northern France, in 1676.

His immediate contemporaries have not left us a word about Ruisdael or about their reactions to his art. Apart from a document establishing that Meindert Hobbema, his most gifted follower, "learned and served" with him for several years, we are in the dark regarding his connections with the many artists of his day who adopted his themes and style. Though his landscapes are listed among the holdings of seventeenth-century collectors and dealers, not a thing is known about his transactions with any of them. We have no idea how many of his pictures were commissioned and how many were done for stock, or if he ever felt that painting landscapes year after year, decade after decade, was not a joy but drudgery.

One thing, however, is certain: The pathetic account found in the earlier literature that Ruisdael died a pauper is apocryphal. The Dutch archivist H. F. Wijnman established in 1932 that it was Ruisdael's cousin, Jacob Salomonszoon van Ruysdael, who spent the last weeks of his life in Haarlem's almshouse after going insane.

Ruisdael did not die rich, but he earned his bread and enough to support his father. While Jacob was a boy, his father was dirt-poor and involved in voluminous litigation with his landlord and with small tradesmen over his unpaid bills. From the time Ruisdael began to work as an independent artist, the litigation ceased. Two wills that he prepared in his maturity show his continued, touching concern for his aged father's well-being. His early-eighteenth-century biographer, Arnold Houbraken, tells us he heard people say that the reason the artist never married was to be better able to support his old father.

The valuations made of Ruisdael's pictures continued to be respectable until the very end. Four years before his death he had enough cash on hand to lend a man four hundred guilders, although he possessed neither real estate nor securities when he died. The value of his personal possessions was appraised at two thousand guilders—not a sign of poverty, but hardly a fortune.

Today we have no way of knowing whether Ruisdael believed that he was fairly paid for his work. Yet I cannot help feeling that Ruisdael nodded his head in approval, in the paradise that is the reward of great painters, when he learned that the passionate English collector John Sheepshanks wrote to Constable in 1833, to thank him for presenting him with two of Constable's own etchings:

I can well imagine that these etchings will be sought for in another century, as the rare Ruisdaels are now—What a pity, that dealers you will not live to see, must have all the pecuniary advantage, & that you have only the prospective reputation. □

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Waterfall with a Castle and a Cottage. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, gift of Miss Helen Clay Frick. The Fogg's mighty northern landscape, with mountains, giant firs, and a

torrential waterfall, offers proof of the artist's extraordinary power of imagination. Ruisdael never saw such a scene.