

The Dutch Republic: Landscape and Still Life Painting

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of Dutch landscape and still life painting. By the end of this lesson, you'll be able to identify and define today's key terms, explain the influences on the art of this time, and identify examples of Dutch landscape and still life paintings. This will be accomplished through the exploration of:

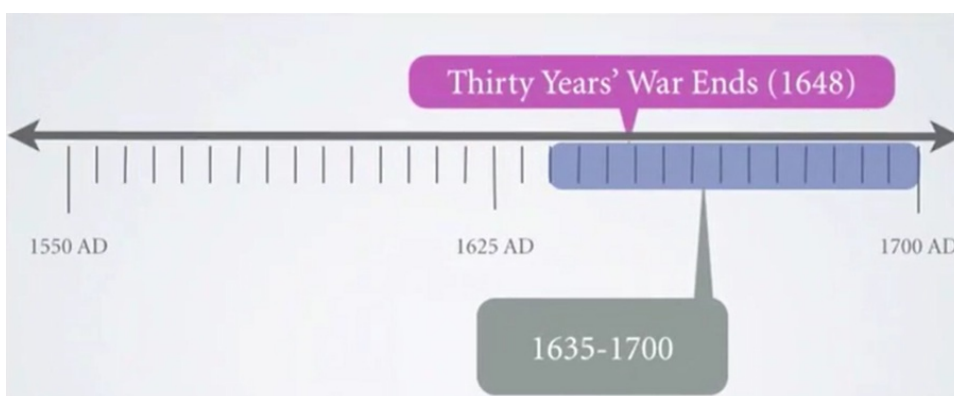


BIG IDEA

The increase in prosperity during the Dutch Golden Age led to extensive changes in the arts.

1. Location and Time Period: Dutch Landscape and Still Life Painting

The artwork that you will be looking at today covers the time period from 1635 to 1700, and focuses geographically on Flanders and the Netherlands, in Northern Europe. Note the end of the Thirty Years' War in 1648, marked on the timeline as a reference point.



2. Establishment of the Dutch Republic

The establishment of the Protestant **Dutch Republic**—which is now the Netherlands—was influenced by the oppression of the Protestants by the Catholic Spanish government that previously ruled this area.

Following victories over Spain, the establishment of an actual republic occurred without much resistance, largely due to the fact that feudalism never existed in this region. Feudalism was a widespread social system in Europe, in which nobles, or aristocrats, owned or controlled the land that the common people worked. There was no highly developed aristocratic class in this region to overthrow, as there was in places like France and England.



THINK ABOUT IT

Why do you think that feudalism never took hold in this region? Well, the swampy nature of the land itself is the primary reason. There were no large tracts of livable land to hold, so the land was essentially broken up into smaller pieces owned by families.

As drainage technology improved, more and more land could be reclaimed for use as arable and livable land. The Dutch were, in a very physical sense, constructing their own country.



TERM TO KNOW

Dutch Republic

Consisting of the Low Countries which today are the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg and formerly under the rule of the Holy Roman Empire.

3. The Dutch Golden Age: Influences on Art

There were a number of factors that influenced the artwork of the Dutch Golden Age, which this period of flourishing culture and prosperity came to be known:

- *Increase in prosperity.* During the **Dutch Golden Age**, this increase in **prosperity** led to extensive changes, because it translated to an increase in artistic patronage. More wealth meant that more people could afford to invest in art.
- *Calvinism.* Even though there was an increase in wealth, you won't see the ostentatious examples of Baroque art, like in Italy. The influence of **Calvinism**, which is a branch of Protestantism, was strong, and Calvinist attitudes regarding the abuse of religious imagery and wealth meant that Dutch paintings were generally smaller in size, and the subject matter was rather humble by comparison to the Italian baroque.
- *The Dutch Republic.* The **reclamation of land** from the sea itself—literally draining areas with water, thus producing fertile tracts of land—and the aforementioned victories over Spain, resulted in the establishment of the Dutch Republic and produced a strong sense of nationalism, which also impacted the artwork of the period.



TERMS TO KNOW

Dutch Golden Age

A period of the late 16th through 17th centuries when the Dutch achieved a high level of economic, political, and cultural success.

Prosperity

Financial success or general well-being.

Calvinism

A branch of Protestant Christianity started by John Calvin in the late 16th century, which emphasizes complete dependence on God for salvation, the equality of all members of the

congregation, and the sinful nature of human beings.

Land Reclamation

Creating new land by draining off low-lying areas near water.

4. Dutch Landscape Paintings

This strong sense of nationalism and pride among the Dutch, and their close connection to the land, can be seen reflected in the landscape paintings of the time. This painting, called *A Distant View of Dordrecht*, is an example of the type of symbolism that is present in Dutch landscape paintings. The importance of the dairy industry in the Dutch Republic is represented by the milkmaid and cows depicted in the foreground. The artist shows a real appreciation and understanding of the Dutch landscape.



A Distant View of Dordrecht by Aelbert Cuyp

1650

Oil on canvas

Now, note that this isn't an idyllic or invented landscape like you might see in Italian paintings. This is a very real and particular place. The church in the background is an actual church and would have been known to people familiar with this area.

The next example, Jacob van Ruisdael's *View of Haarlem from the Dunes at Overveen*, is another example of a Dutch landscape that strives for accuracy in its depictions of an actual place. Although the upper portion of the image below is cropped in order to expand the lower details for you, this image is dominated by a gorgeous **landscape** and billowing clouds that loom above the tiny buildings and people below.



View of Haarlem from the Dunes of Overveen by Jacob van Ruisdael

1670

Oil on canvas

The people in the foreground are stretching linen cloth, another important industry for the Dutch. This is an example of the pride of Dutch painters in their homeland, as well as the idea that accurate depictions of realistic details were a way of celebrating Dutch identity in their new republic.



TERM TO KNOW

Landscape

A composition that uses the theme of natural scenery usually seen from on single point of view.

5. Dutch Still Life Paintings

Still lifes were another area where the Dutch excelled, and they provide an opportunity to see the skill with which painters could so believably recreate the appearance of material textures. Dutch artists were unmatched in this area. This painting of a still life with oysters, rum glass, and silver cup approaches photographic realism.



Still Life with Oysters, Rum Glass, and Silver Cup by Willem Claesz Heda

1635

Oil on wood panel

In fact, from a distance at first glance, it could very easily be mistaken for a photograph.



Still life was about more than just realism and detail, though. Influential Protestant overtones are evoked in works of art like this. This is a depiction of prosperity but also a depiction of an allegory—meaning it had an allegorical or moral side to it. There's an appreciation of prosperity as well as reminders of mortality in this picture, in symbolic objects that are examples of vanitas, or reminders of death.



These reminders of humility and warnings about indulging in excess were very Calvinist ideas. Examples of vanitas include the cup half-filled and the cup tipped over, the inclusion of seafood (specifically oysters), and a peeled lemon, reminders that life is fleeting and, like seafood and lemons, beautiful to behold but bitter and sour to taste.



This next still life, *Late Ming Ginger Jar*, is a wonderful example of the artist's skill in depicting details and material textures, particularly in the Ming vase and Indian rug. Not only are they beautifully rendered, but they're also an indication of the exposure to India and Asia that the flourishing Dutch shipping and trading companies were facilitating.



Still Life with a Late Ming Ginger Jar by Willem Kalf

1669

Oil on canvas

Notice that, similar to the last painting, there are vanitas objects intermixed with the others. The peeled lemon, the watch, and the peach, which is a delicate fruit and quick to spoil, are examples of symbolic objects associated with mortality.

The final painting is a flower **still life** by the artist Rachel Ruysch. It too is an example of **vanitas**, in the brevity of life remaining in the freshly cut blossoms, but is also a carefully composed example of anatomical study.



DID YOU KNOW

Ruysch's eye for detail and realism likely came from her father's profession as a botanist and an anatomy professor.



Flower Still Life by Rachel Ruysch

1700

Oil on canvas

It is realistic looking, despite the fact that at this time it was impossible to have so many different types of flowers blooming at the same time. The diagonally composed flowers are balanced by the diagonal table. Ruysch's eye for floral paintings like this was very well known and respected, helping her achieve considerable fame in this genre of painting.



TERMS TO KNOW

Still Life

A work of art that depicts inanimate objects.

Vanitas

A type of painting associated with still life that contains symbols of death, such as a skull or rotting food.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about **Dutch landscape and still life painting**. You learned how to identify and define today's key terms, and how to describe the events leading to the **establishment of the Dutch Republic**. You also learned about the factors that influenced and led to extensive changes in the

artwork during the time of the prosperous **Dutch Golden Age**. Lastly, you learned to identify **examples of Dutch landscapes and still lifes**, by examining artwork from this period.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Ian McConnell.



TERMS TO KNOW

Calvinism

A branch of Protestant Christianity started by John Calvin in the late 16th century, which emphasizes complete dependence on God for salvation, the equality of all members of the congregation, and the sinful nature of human beings.

Dutch Golden Age

A period of the late sixteenth through seventeenth centuries when the Dutch achieved a high level of economic, political, and cultural success.

Dutch Republic

Consisting of the Low Countries which today are the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg and formerly under the rule of the Holy Roman Empire.

Land Reclamation

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Landscape

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