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Galería de Arte

Soraya Cartategui

Dear friends,

In this month of February the gallery presents this interesting article dedicated to the art and winters of the Dutch Golden Age.

We hope you enjoy it.

Best wishes,
Soraya Cartategui



JAN VAN KESSEL III

(Amsterdam 1641 - 1680)

“Winter landscape with figures”

Oil on canvas

42 x 52 cm. (16,53 x 20,47 in.)

During the Golden Age, The Netherlands experienced a series of very cold winters. Between 1600 and 1700 winters were much longer than usual, even spreading over ten weeks in some years. The most frigid of these were recorded in the first quarter of the seventeenth century, a period that has come to be known by historians as the “Little Ice Age.” During this period, the Dutch experienced the most severe winters on record, corresponding to the years of 1607-08 and 1620-21.

Ice and snow covered entire fields and towns and canals and rivers came to a frozen stagnation, impeding the navigation of inland waterways, which were crucial for transporting food and household goods to cities and villages. As a result of this, the standard flow of businesses was also disrupted. The tremendous cold forced the villages of the countryside into severe isolation, forcing villagers and their livestock to live in very harsh and limiting circumstances. Furthermore, during this period of wartime with Spain, the icy climate only served to facilitate foreign invasion with the freezing of the canals.

Two of the crucial characteristics of the Dutch painting of the Golden Age were specialization and, of course, the secularization of art, which turned artists away from depicting religious scenes to instead focus on representations of reality. Therefore, it is not surprising that the sufferable and cruel winters of this ice age were reflected in the art of the time. Painters began to illustrate snowy landscapes, genre scenes with skaters, and icy channels and waterways, bereft of boats.

This portrait of society and the happenings of the time has the ability to illuminate the benign details of the seventeenth century world. For example, it is very interesting to examine the scenes of frozen lakes, crowded by figures playing and skating, an activity that was very popular at the time and could be enjoyed by aristocrats and peasants, rich and poor, children and elders. In these genre scenes we are able to see these diverse groups, unified in the joyful activity of playing sports outdoors, or even using skates as a means of travel along the frozen canals. This winter world temporarily destroyed the barriers of class and social status. It is not uncommon to see works depicting luxurious sleighs, pulled by beautiful horses adorned with feathers and embroidered blankets, right alongside villagers sitting in a wooden box, pulled by a mere donkey or even another peasant. These class compositions are not rare, and were well received, even during that century.

Painters like Hendrick Avercamp (1585-1634) and Esaias van de Velde (1587-1630) were some of the major proponents of winter landscapes. Their techniques were studied and learned by Flemish painters exiled in The Netherlands such as David Vinckboons or Gillis van Coninxloo. Flemish landscape painters were known for their technique, academic attention to detail, and perfectionism. They created their works in their studios, without studying and considering the reality of the scenes that they were painting. On the contrary,

seen before, they would focus on painting their villages or hometowns.

In the seventeenth century artists stopped painting winter scenes only as allegorical symbols, but rather from a developed interest in the snowy landscapes. Specialists began to appear alongside artists who focused in other genres, but also greatly enjoyed painting wintry landscapes. By mid-century, Aert van der Neer (1603-77) and Jan van de Capelle (1626-79) showed great innovation in their work. They were fascinated by the effects of the winter light, and began to play with certain colors and tones of white, gray, and silver to create a theatrical atmosphere. Notably, A. Van der Neer became known for his nocturnal landscapes, using his mastery of light to illuminate icy rivers under the moon. Other artists created different styles, like “Italianates,” their styles appear as capricious constructions of the pure Italian style. Jan Asselinj (1614-52), Nicolaes Berchem (1620-83), and Willem Schellinks (1623-78) are just a few of the artists who exemplify this technique.

However, these wintry landscapes were not limited to villages and the countryside. Important cities like Amsterdam were depicted with their magnificent buildings, squares, and watchtowers covered in snow. The canals would be seen full of stagnant boats, trapped in place by the thick winter ice. Instead, skaters would travel up and down the channels, gliding swiftly over the ice or playing colf, a sport enjoyed by the high aristocracy in teams of two or four (a precursor to modern-day golf). Still others would skate for joy, holding hands while traveling up the canals. This idea of ‘love on ice,’ was the subject of many poems and songs during the seventeenth century, and was the inspiration for many of the works of Thomas Heeremans and Jan Beerstraten.

Important landscape artists such as Salomón Ruysdael created wintry compositions, which harmoniously combined the topography of landscapes and cityscapes. One could enjoy the undulating snowy hills of the fields, filled with villagers enjoying the country, while still perceiving in the distance the identifiable church towers and buildings of a larger city.

The beauty and harmony that is reflected in winter landscapes was very much appreciated during the seventeenth century. As a result, a large desire developed for these works that continues to grow to this day; this strong interest and demand ensures that the market value continues to rise.

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