



Adam Pynacker's "Bridge in an Italian Landscape" is one of 40 Dutch paintings on view at the Muscarelle Museum of Art in the exhibit "The Dutch Italianates: 17th-century Masterpieces from the Dulwich Picture Gallery." IMAGES COURTESY OF THE DULWICH PICTURE GALLERY.

## A touch of the Dutch Golden Age

*The Muscarelle Museum opens a new exhibit honoring some of the old masters.*

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If you had the money to begin collecting the greatest of the Dutch old masters, the targets at the top of your list would most likely be Rembrandt and Vermeer.

Back in the 18th century, however, the talents we admire so much today were looked down upon as also-rans. Instead, you'd be shopping for such unfamiliar names as Adam Pynacker, Nicolaes Berchem and Aelbert Cuyp.

Holy collected and widely revered, these brilliant 17th-century artists — known as the Dutch Italianates — mixed the warm light, scenery and people of the Italian countryside with a keen, definitively Northern eye for detail and the ability to manipulate paint like few others. What resulted were unusually seductive landscapes that embraced a pastoral Arcadian ideal — yet did so with such convincing detail, substance and humor that Dutch and English collectors couldn't get enough of the new genre.

These remarkable feats of skill and imagination fell from favor during the early 1800s, however, when growing pride in a more austere Dutch national style and a new English taste for stricter realism pushed such idealized images into the shadows. Not until recent years have both the critical spotlight and popular interest returned, in large part because of such blockbuster exhibits as the landmark international loan show of Cuyp paintings that brought more than 82,000 visitors to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., in 2001-2002.

Now, one of the most important images from that exhibition has returned — along with some 40 other stellar examples of the school — in new traveling show that debuted Friday at the College of William and Mary's Muscarelle Museum of Art.

Made up of hallmark paintings from Cuyp, Pynacker and Berchem as well as more than half-a-dozen others, "The Dutch Italianates, Masterpieces from Dulwich Picture Gallery," uses one of the world's premier collections of these works to stir the revisionist pot still further.

"These artists are among the best of the Dutch Golden Age in terms of their handling of color and light. They knew how to manipulate paint on a

wooden panel in ways that are unrivaled," says Muscarelle assistant director and curator Odilia Bonebakker.

"And during the 18th century, especially, they were more popular than Rembrandt. They were the most admired and most expensive artists out there."

The first members of this talented school traveled from the Netherlands to Italy in the early 1600s, drawn by both the Italian revolution in art and the beauty and warmth of the countryside.

Unlike most other artists who visited during this time, however, the keen-eyed Dutch paid as much if not more attention to the local landscape and ordinary country folk as the classical ruins and Renaissance paintings.

"They had a little society that met in a house — it was a club, essentially — in Rome. They gave each other all sorts of nicknames and called themselves the 'Bentveughel' — or 'birds of a feather,'" Bonebakker says.

"They had wild drinking parties at night and — during the day — they marched out into the countryside to paint together. But instead of showing



Aelbert Cuyp's "View on a Plain" is also on view as part of the exhibit.

much interest in classical antiquities, they mystified — even scandalized the Italian painters because of their fascination with the light and the 'low-life' characters they put into their paintings."

What often resulted were not Italian landscapes — or even Dutch landscapes — but idealized, pastoral scenes that mixed the Dutch gift for closely observing and reproducing the natural world with a new and much warmer kind of light.

"They were Dutch paintings "with an Italian accent," Bonebakker says, and when the artists returned to their native land this new kind of landscape captured the flourishing art market's pocketbook as well as its imagination.

"The Dutch market was made up mostly of merchants who were very interested in Italy and Italian-inspired landscapes. Many of them had traveled there, and they loved its golden light," she says.

"And these guys managed to capture that light in a way that had never been done."

Among the most accomplished practitioners over nearly a century of Dutch Italianate work was the Haarlem-born Berchem, whose understanding of the play of light was matched only by his consummate skill with a paintbrush.

In "Traveling Peasants," he combines a distant foothill, a shimmering stream and a group of cows and herdsmen, bathing every detail with a light so warm and rich that the atmosphere seems to ripple.

"He knows exactly what the coat of a cow looks like — and how light plays on its surface," Bonebakker says. "And if you look closely, he actually gives the grain of the wood a pictorial rule, letting it show through the paint to suggest the surface of the water."

Pynacker used his own technical mastery to even more dazzling effect in "Landscape with Sportsmen and Game," which he painted after traveling to Italy in the mid-1640s.

Long considered one of the artist's keystone works, the large canvas incorporates a dreamily precise cluster of leaves in the middle foreground,

### News to Use

► **What:** "The Dutch Italianates: Masterpieces from Dulwich Picture Gallery"

► **Where:** Muscarelle Museum of Art, College of William and Mary, Jamestown Road, Williamsburg

► **When:** Through March 22

► **Cost:** \$10 adults, children under 12 free

► **Info:** 221-2700, [www.wm.edu/muscarelle](http://www.wm.edu/muscarelle)

► **Lecture:** "Drawing on Italy," with Muscarelle Assistant Director and Curator Odilia Bonebakker, 5 p.m. Dec. 4

than an even sharper, more carefully defined cluster of birch trees to the left. Beyond this light-capped scene is a brilliantly rendered group of figures that includes a hunter, his quarry and his dogs, while a light-saturated stand of trees trails off hazily in the distance.

"There's an almost surreal kind of hyper-realism to those birch trees. He uses about 50 shades of green," Bonebakker says. "And the way the light falls through the leaves is really masterful. He knew how to recreate in paint what we see when we look at a real landscape."

Like Berchem, Cuyp probably never traveled to Italy. But he was inspired by both the light-filled landscapes and the formidable commercial success of the other Dutch artists who did.

His radiant "Herdsmen with Cows" is one of the great treasures of the remarkably rich and deep Dulwich collection — and one of the stars of both the 2003 National Gallery exhibit and the Muscarelle show.

"These are very Dutch cows — beautifully and expertly painted. And the whole scene is imbued with this warm, golden, very poetic light," Bonebakker says. "You can actually see it moving through the moisture-laden air."