



17th-century Dutch masters had new view of the Italian landscape

By [Kurt Shaw](#), TRIBUNE-REVIEW ART CRITIC | Sunday, July 12, 2009



What: 17th-century masterpieces from Dulwich Picture Gallery, London

When: Through Sept. 20. 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays

Where: [The Frick Art Museum](#), 7227 Reynolds St., Point Breeze

Admission: Free

Details: 412-371-0600

For centuries, Italy has attracted artists, painters especially, drawn to its magnificent landscape of mountains, vineyards and olive groves. The 17th century proved to be one of the most fertile periods for this, as artists from all over Europe flocked to Rome to work alongside their Italian colleagues.

Perhaps the most remarkable and prolific artistic invasion of Italy in this period was that of the Dutch. Many Dutch artists -- some who visited Italy and others who did not -- infused their landscapes with the feel of the Roman "campaña" or countryside. The paintings they created exhibit glorious tonal control, magical handling of light, technical brilliance and humor.

Now, a little bit of that Dutch version of the Italian countryside has come to Pittsburgh, in the form of a most remarkable exhibition, "The Dutch Italianates: Seventeenth-Century Masterpieces from Dulwich Picture Gallery, London."

Featuring 39 paintings, the exhibit highlights works by 17 masters of the Dutch Italianate style, including masterpieces by Aelbert Cuyp (1620-91), Adam Pynacker (1620/1-73), Jan Both (c. 1615-52), Nicolaes Berchem (1620-83), Karel Du Jardin (1621/2-78) and Philips Wouwermans (1619-68).

The works -- some tiny, some grand -- include a variety of styles within the landscape genre: anecdotal scenes, humor and allegory, and paintings of hunts and other outdoor activities that anticipate the lighthearted subjects of the Rococo period.

These paintings are on a limited North American tour while the Dulwich, England's oldest public art gallery, is undergoing renovation. The Dulwich collection was originally formed for the king of Poland by London art dealers Noel Desenfans and his partner, painter Sir Francis Bourgeois.

At the time the collection was being formed in the 1790s, the Dutch Italianates and their works were at the height of popularity and value.

Middle-class Protestant Dutch art patrons were more interested in collecting bucolic landscape scenes rather than religious works. To accommodate them, the artists turned to the Italian campagna for their subject matter. Painters such as Both and Berchem brought back seductive visions of mountains and peasants basking under golden skies to a flat and cloudy Holland that could not get enough of them.

Sarah Hall, director of curatorial affairs at the Frick Art Museum, says the Dutch artists in Rome worked and lived together. "Known as a rowdy and fun-loving bunch, they could be seen marching together into the countryside to sketch," Hall says.

"What made their work different from other landscapists of the time, are the kinds of people who inhabited their luminous paintings. Poor peasants, especially milkmaids and shepherds, and street people, including beggars, prostitutes and traveling musicians, cavorted among classical ruins. The Italians were scandalized, but these subjects were highly marketable back in Holland. The number of Dutch artists who imitated this style and subject matter, but who never visited Italy, bears this out."

Their popular visions of Italy inspired Cuyp, Wijnants, Wouwermans and Weenix to create their own interpretation of a landscape they may never have seen. Included in the exhibit is one of Cuyp's most accomplished works, "Herdsman with Cattle," (c. 1645). The painting is one of six by Cuyp in the exhibit, but a real standout for its remarkable sense of light.

"The most stunning thing is the quality of light in the painting," Hall says. "It has this wonderful, warm glowing light."

Hall says Cuyp, one of the most famous of the Italianate artists, never actually visited Italy, and probably learned his own mastery of light effects from Jan Both.

Jan Both traveled to Italy in 1637, where he met and worked with the French landscapist Claude Lorraine (1600-1682), from whom he acquired the skill of rendering effects of golden or silvery light. His technique was hugely influential after he returned to Holland in 1642. Cuyp's paintings can be seen in comparison to Both's work, whose charming, richly colored "Road by the Edge of the Lake" is also in the exhibit.

One of the key artists of the first phase of Dutch Italianate painting, Cornelis van Poelenburch (1594/5-1667) produced luminous views of the campagna, often populated by figures from classical mythology. His "Valley with Ruins and Figures" (1627) is a carefully composed work in the classical style.

Berchem was probably the most successful and prolific of all the Italianate landscapists. He combined a fluid technique with a figural style that was very influential. He traveled to Italy in the 1650s, and his popular paintings presented colorful Italian peasants in landscapes littered

with ruins. His "Roman Fountain with Cattle and Figures" (date unknown) is a classic example, featuring animals and peasant women surrounding a Roman fountain on a bucolic hillside.

Philips Wouwermans' "Halt of the Hunting Party" from the early 1660s is a clear illustration of the connection of fanciful Dutch landscapes to the later French Rococo style. In this canvas, a well-dressed hunting party stops at a stream and is posed theatrically along a winding, rugged path, their fancy dress and prancing horses, providing a choreographed contrast to a lowly beggar offering his cap for alms in the background.

Today, Cuyp and Wouwermans are considered two of the most important Dutch Italianates – even though they never traveled to Italy. Although they, like their contemporaries, were influential throughout Europe until the end of the 1700s, by the 1830s the tide of public taste had turned against the Dutch painters of Italian landscapes.

As an interesting side note, Hall says England's great landscape artist, John Constable (1776-1837), spoke out against the artificiality of the Dutch Italianate style. Trends shifted again, however, by the time Henry Clay Frick formed his collection in New York, and several works by Cuyp and Wouwermans are included in the Frick Collection in New York.

Nevertheless, Hall says this exhibit will introduce the visitor to artists whose reputations and influence have tended to be overlooked in favor of better-known Dutch artists.

"For many this view of the Italian landscape seen through Dutch eyes will be a revelation," Hall says, "allowing the visitor to see some of the most beautiful paintings of the 17th century."