

## Occupied Landscape: Dutch Cattle Painting in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century

Heavily influenced by Italian Renaissance paintings, 16<sup>th</sup>-century landscapes were mostly Italian views or distinctly non-Dutch hilly terrain. With the beginnings of the Dutch revolt from Spanish rule in, a new pride in Dutch identity and Dutch land began to emerge and is captured in the massive number of images pouring out of Dutch visual culture of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century.<sup>1</sup> Paulus Potter, an artist who was active in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, had a short career but left a lasting mark on the genres of landscape and animal painting. Potter's *Two Cows and a Young Bull Beside a Fence in a Meadow* (1647) (Illus. 1) can be interpreted in both the context of a landscape painting and an animal painting, specifically a cattle painting. Cattle painting in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Holland grew to become nearly a genre unto itself at the time Potter was working. His pieces added to the growing number of cattle depictions of the time.<sup>2</sup> In *Two Cows*, the artist manipulates the visual interpretation of the piece through devices of composition, scale, and effect to pull the viewer into contemplation of and celebration of the rural scene. If taken in the context of landscape painting, this piece can be seen as a celebration of Dutch land and national pride with the emblematic Dutch cattle as a centerpiece. Another interpretation of the work is that is indicative of a new interest in the study of science and nature in the 17<sup>th</sup> century due to its faithful recording of animals and plants in natural surroundings. Furthermore, the popularity of paintings such as this, depicting rural scenes, may be due to nostalgia for rural life in a rapidly urbanizing culture. These scholarly interpretations

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<sup>1</sup> "Landscape," *Dutch Art: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Sheila D. Muller (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 215-216.

<sup>2</sup> "Animal Painting," *Dutch Art: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Sheila D. Muller (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 13-14.

of the work all seem to have a validity in the multi-faceted culture of the Dutch Golden Age.

Paulus Potter is primarily known as a specialist in the painting of animals, particularly cattle. His most famous work, *Young Bull* (1647) (Illus. 2), is a large painting featuring cattle in the Dutch landscape.<sup>3</sup> *Two Cows and a Young Bull Beside a Fence in a Meadow* was painted in the same year and similarly depicts cattle in a Dutch landscape, although on a smaller scale. The attention paid to the landscape can not be over-looked in this piece, as it plays a major role in this and other works Potter created. Besides being a painting of animals, this work is most definitely a depiction of the Dutch countryside. The illumination and detailed highlights on the animals in the landscape demonstrate Potter's concern for landscape lighting conditions and drama.<sup>4</sup> Also, the cloud formations in the sky show a combination of sunlight and ominous storm clouds which is typical of the weather conditions in the Dutch territories. Similar atmospheric patterns can be found in the work of other landscape artists from the period such as Jacob van Ruisdael in works such as *The Windmill at Wijk-bij-Duurstede* (Illus. 3).

Despite the concern for the landscape, the main focus of the composition and the figures featured prominently in the foreground are two cows and a bull, one sitting and the other two facing each other behind the resting cow. These three animals fill up half of the composition. Next to the cattle is the edge of a fence and a few more cattle can be seen grazing in the distance. The cattle are arranged in dynamic layers one on top of each other moving in a Z-shape through the center of the canvas and back into the depth of the space, creating a sense movement of the animals and atmosphere of the landscape. The

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<sup>3</sup> Wall text, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago: 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Peter C. Sutton, *Masters of 17<sup>th</sup>-Century Dutch Landscape Painting* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1987), 418.

open-mouthed expression of the bull and the birds in mid-flight overhead also add to the sense of motion. In the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, it was unusual for a cow to be the central focus of a work of art, therefore it is significant that the Dutch began prolifically featuring cattle in many of their works in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This sudden interest in depicting cattle as the central focus of works of art can be traced to the rise of the Dutch Republic. There is evidence that the cow became a representative symbol of the Netherlands as early as the late 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup>

Being a relatively small painting and no where near life-size, this piece does not allow for much interaction of the viewer with the subject matter. While Potter sought to bring out the body in motion and infuse life and volume in the animals he represented, the smaller scale roots this work firmly in the realm of contemplative or decorative pictures, restricted by its frame and scale.<sup>6</sup> While this piece was valued in its own time and added to the formation of a separate genre for cattle paintings in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it wasn't until the 18<sup>th</sup> century that the cattle painting became a standard in the decorative arts. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Mauritshaus 1826 catalog ranked Potter's *Young Bull* as sixth in the list of most significant art works in the world, shortly after the return of the painting to the Netherlands from France where it had been held after its capture by Napoleon. Needless to say, the importance of cattle paintings was beyond question two centuries after Potter first made works like *Young Bull* and *Two Cows and a Young Bull Beside a Fence in a Meadow*.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> John Sillevs, "Magnificent Cattle,' Leeuwarden, Fries Museum,'" *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 131, No. 1031 (Feb., 1989), 167.

<sup>6</sup> Amy Walsh, Edwin Buijsen, and Ben Broos, *Paulus Potter: Paintings, drawings, and etchings* (The Hague: Waanders Publishers, 1994), 24-25.

<sup>7</sup> John Sillevs, 167.

Land in the northern Netherlands has always been scarce, especially cultivatable land. Land reclamation practices had been developing in Holland since before the middle ages, and was an on going effort in Holland through the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century. The revolt of the Dutch provinces against Spanish rule, however, temporarily interrupted the process. After 1590, a new interest and effort for land reclamation began again, and the period from 1612 to 1635 marked perhaps the most intense work on land reclamation in Holland.<sup>8</sup> Based on these tremendous engineering efforts to gain land, it is not hard to understand why land was so valuable to the Dutch. Viewing Potter's painting *Two Cows* within the context of landscape painting, the depiction of the obviously native Dutch terrain, flat with an expanse of clouds in the sky, and the presence of the cow, whose symbolic nature for the Dutch people was both in celebration of the earth and the Netherlands in general, work together in the piece to celebrate Dutch national pride and pride in their land. By painting familiar surroundings, the Dutch showed their interest in and esteem of their native countryside. The symbol of the cattle in the foreground, if it was indeed meant to be a widely recognizable symbol of the republic, is further indication of this flourishing of Dutch pride.<sup>9</sup>

In the newly formed Dutch Republic, a new attitude toward nature and animals emerged that helped popularize both landscape and animal painting in general. Although empirical science was gaining popularity in general, the development of an interest in science was further promoted by the Calvinist Church who considered the study of nature

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<sup>8</sup> Christopher Brown, *Dutch Landscape: The Early Years* (London: Westerham Press, 1986), 80-81.

<sup>9</sup> "Landscape," *Dutch Art: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Sheila D. Muller (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 215-216.

a way of knowing God.<sup>10</sup> Potter was known to have been influenced greatly in his early years by the works of Pieter van Laer, especially van Laer's 1636 print series of farm animals which manipulated the composition in order to give the illusion of space in the landscape.<sup>11</sup> In all likelihood, Potter may have copied or taken elements from van Laer's animal pictures. Potter, however, improved on van Laer's depictions and compositions of animals in his own work. *Two Cows* shows an interest in utilizing compositional devices such as the Z-shaped arrangement of the cows described earlier, to move the viewer into the space of the picture. In an improvement on van Laer's pictures, Potter's work shows a meticulous attention to detail, such as depicting the minute likeness of the hairs on the cows with naturalistic accuracy. In order to achieve this, it is highly likely that Potter went out to the meadows to sketch. Evidence that Potter sketched *naer het leven* is found in a letter Potter's step-son wrote, stating that his mother had made the comment that she never saw her husband idle and, even when he could spare an hour to take a walk with her, he brought his notebook to sketch anything he might see.<sup>12</sup>

Potter's cattle paintings glorified and celebrated pastoral Holland. Beginning in the 1580s, the Dutch urban population and the rate of urbanization rapidly increased. The massive migration to northern Dutch cities can be directly linked to the reconquest of the southern provinces by Spain and the fall of Antwerp in 1585. Additionally the growth of trade in port cities demanded that the cities boundaries be expanded for housing, industry, and harbor activities.<sup>13</sup> Paralleling the growth in urbanization and the birth of the new

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<sup>10</sup> "Animal Painting," *Dutch Art: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Sheila D. Muller (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 13-14.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Brown, "Paulus Potter. The Hague," *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 137, No. 1105 (Apr., 1995), 265-267.

<sup>12</sup> Amy Walsh, Edwin Buijsen, and Ben Broos, 45.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Brown, *Dutch Landscape: The Early Years* (London: Westerham Press, 1986), 79-80.

republic, the number of images in Holland featuring nostalgic views of the peaceful countryside grew and their popularity increased during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. One explanation for this emphasis on rural manners is that city-dwellers saw the country as more peaceful and moral than city life. The countryside came to be known as a place of health, liberty, and pleasure following the initiation of the Twelve-Years' Truce in 1609. The cow itself, as depicted in *Two Cows*, was also emblematic and celebrated for its quintessential countryside dwelling. In his poem *Hofwijck*, Constantijn Huygens compares the landowner to the "wise and moderate cow." The cow was traditionally a symbol for the earth and came to symbolize the prosperity of the Netherlands.<sup>14</sup>

Although there are various explanations for the popularity of cattle paintings in general and the significance of *Two Cows and a Young Bull Beside a Fence in a Meadow* in particular, they all work together to create a cohesive place for these works in Dutch visual culture of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. These cattle paintings seem to hold a particularly quintessential place in the repertoire of Dutch art from the time of the republic. In what is known the Golden Age of Dutch cultural production this painting and many of Potter's works are characteristically Dutch and reflect Dutch attitudes and sensibilities.

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<sup>14</sup> "Rural Life and Views," *Dutch Art: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Sheila D. Muller (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 339-340.



Illus 1: Paulus Potter, *Two Cows and a Young Bull Beside a Fence in a Meadow*, 1647. Oil on panel. 48.5 x 37 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago.

Source: Journal of the American Medical Association Website [cited Feb. 21, 2005] . Available from World Wide Web: (<http://jama.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/extract/284/3/279>)



Illus 2: Paulus Potter, *Young Bull*, 1647. Oil on canvas. 236 x 339 cm. Maurituis, The Hague.

Source: The Web Gallery of Art. [Cited Feb. 21, 2005]. Available from World Wide Web: (<http://keptar.demasz.hu/arhp/html/p/potter/>).





Illus 3: Jacob van Ruisdael, *The Windmill at Wijk-bij-Duurstede*, 1670. Oil on canvas. 83 x 101 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Source: Rijksmuseum Website. [cited Feb. 21, 2005]. Available on the World Wide Web: ([http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/aria/aria\\_assets/SK-C-211?lang=en](http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/aria/aria_assets/SK-C-211?lang=en)).

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