

# *A Landscape with Oaks*

*by Jan van Goyen*

*by N. I. ROMANOV.*

**O**n visiting Holland a stranger not alien to impressions of art is always pleased to recognize in real life the features, images, and sites with which he has long been familiar from the pictures of the old Dutch masters. While transmuting everyday life into its artistic image these great poets of realism frequently succeeded in presenting even the poor, trivial realities under a grand aspect. The distinctive features of some actual spot would then lose their local character, and would be transformed into an ideally heroic landscape, fraught with a deeply thoughtful mood. Such is the case in Hercules Seghers' wonderful etchings, in Rembrandt's landscapes and in J. Ruysdael's "Jewish Cemetery".

But we can also point to examples of another kind of idealization, when the individual local character of an actual landscape in all its details is not only preserved in its artistic reflection, but, rising to a degree of grandeur, it attains a generalization of the typical feature of a given country. Such, for instance, are the views of the Dutch plain in some of H. Seghers' etchings, or, in those of Ruysdael, the deserted huts lost in the heart of a thicket (Bartsch 1, 2) and the old trees hanging over a morass (B. 4). In J. van Goyen's work we also meet with an example of a precisely similar idealization. Among the small-sized homely views, customary with him, the landscape motive with one or two oaks growing solitarily among the dunes stands out, on account of the originality of its theme and the character of its forms. These old oaks in different variations have been depicted by Goyen more than once. Of these one, dating from 1641, is to be seen in the Museum at Amsterdam, another, from 1634, in the Hermitage, and a third in the Moscow Museum of Fine Arts. This last (measuring 0.85 × 1.07 m.), painted on wood (Fig. 1) and signed: J. van Goyen 1632, is therefore one of the first earliest works belonging to the period when Goyen, having outlived Esaias van de Velde's influence, had begun to create independently. Two oaks with powerful, gnarled trunks rise from a sandy knoll; the tree-tops are withered and broken off, and some scanty foliage still clings to them. The longitudinal lines of the shadows, bushes, and horizon are crossed by the trunks of the crazy old oaks. This simply constructed framework of the picture is completed by the boldly laid on blots of a grey, cloudy sky, an olive-brown foliage, greenish-grey tree-trunks, dark-brown shadows and yellow-brown sand, forming a

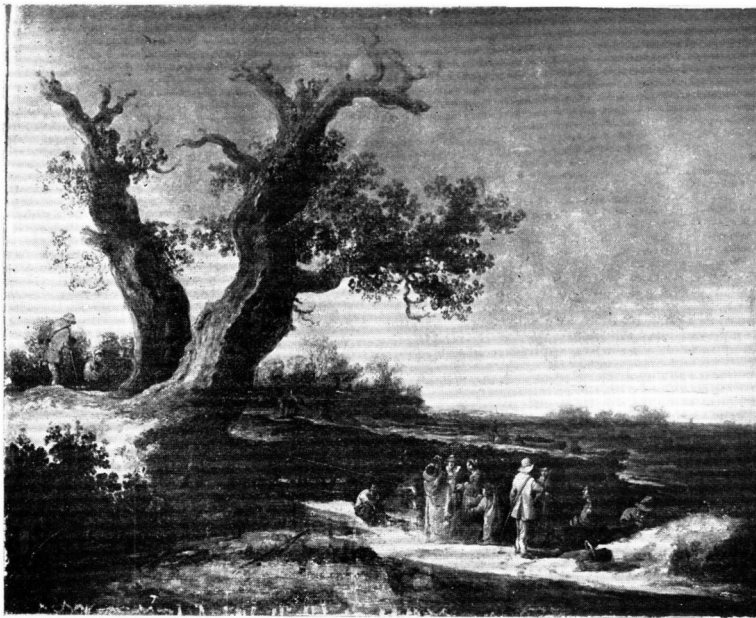


FIG. 1. J. VAN GOYEN. "LANDSCAPE WITH OAKS". 1632.  
MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, MOSCOW.

wonderfully harmonious whole. All the tones of the picture seem so closely akin to each other, as though one formed part of another.

In the foreground, standing out against the dark background of shadow, we see the figures (comparatively large ones for Goyen) of a gentleman, a lady and another man, to whom some gipsies, in front of them, are reading their fortunes in their hands. One of these carries a child in the cloak on her back. An older boy is apparently

making an attempt to lighten the basket of the lady, who is too rapt in the fortune-telling to pay any heed to him. The tones of olive, blue-green and lilac in the garments of the figures render the general colouring of the picture more vivid. To the right and left of the oaks, on the central plan, some more figures are to be seen, also some sheaves, an old boat, and, close to the right edge of the picture, a dark mass of uncertain outlines. Nearer the horizon the plain merges into bluish remoteness. A church spire and the sails of a windmill rise in the far distance, beyond the line of the horizon. But all the details of the picture lose themselves in the general harmony of the two basic tones — a brownish one and a greenish grey. The generalized character of the colouring and lines of

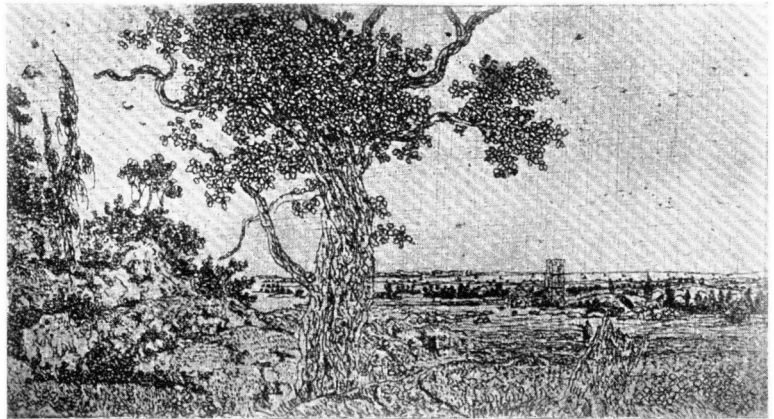


FIG. 2. HERCULES SEGHERS. "LANDSCAPE WITH OAK". ETCHING.

the composition lend a tinge of grandeur to the impression which it produces.

While preserving its thoroughly individual features, this landscape seems at the same time to be an ideally typical view of the country — one in which its “essential character” has found expression. Such an impression may have been suggested to the artist by a fortuitous motive, noticed in a definite spot. In his attempts to convey and heighten this impression the artist has reduced the whole of the composition to a simple and powerful contrast of horizontal lines

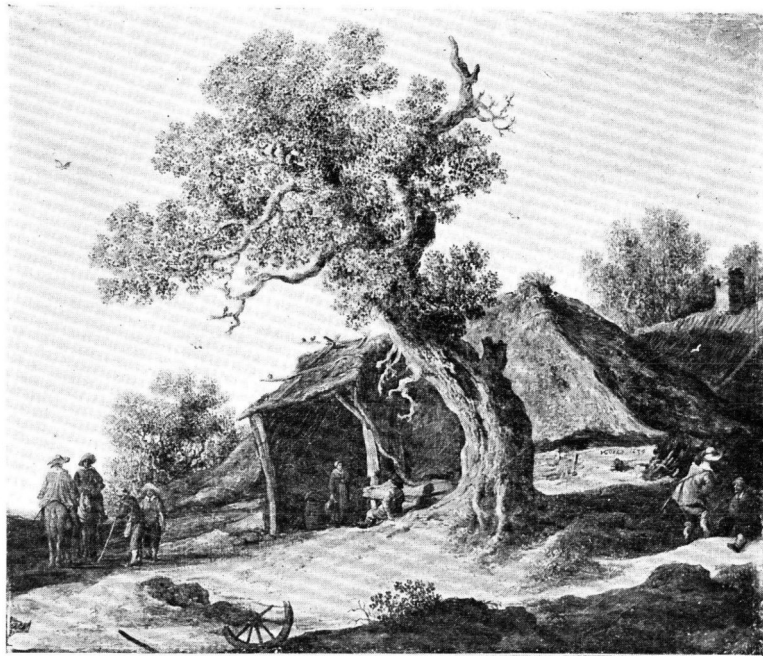


FIG. 3. J. v. GOYEN. "THE LANDSCAPE WITH THE OAK". 1634. HERMITAGE, LENINGRAD.

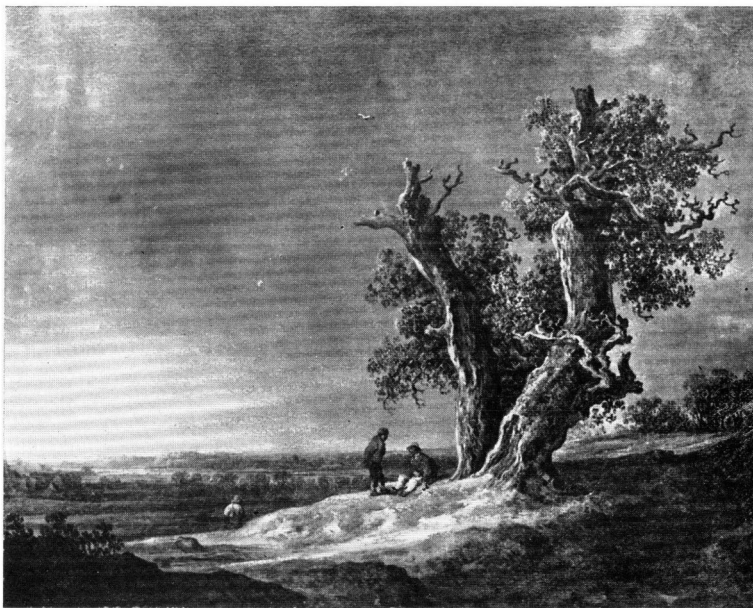


FIG. 4. J. VAN GOYEN. "LANDSCAPE WITH OAKS". 1641. RIJKSMUSEUM, AMSTERDAM.

with the aged tree-trunks rising from the bowels of the earth. The old oaks, that have lost their beauty of yore in the struggle with the elements, nevertheless, stand out so vigorously against the bare monotonous plain, that their power is at once felt, even though they are fast decaying.

Whence came this delicate perception of ideally imposing impressions, generalized and simple, which showed itself in Goyens work? Under what influence did it originate?

Of Goyen's contemporaries, Hercules Seghers was the first to paint landscapes of a fantastically original structure, fused into one common basic tone and imbued with lofty feeling. The motive of a tree towering over a plain, is twice to be found among Seghers' etchings. One large etching, "The large tree" ("Der grosse Baum"<sup>1)</sup>), personifies in an ideally powerful form the isolation of a luxuriantly spreading tree, kingly in its exuberance, amid the much smaller trees by which it is surrounded. Another small etching, "The landscape with the Oak" ("Die Landschaft mit der Eiche"<sup>2)</sup> Fig. 2), represents a solitary old oak in the middle of a monotonously flat plain. Everything in this small etching is akin to Goyen's work and in the closest affinity to his presentment of oaks growing on dunes: we see the same powerful tree-trunk with its wrinkled bark and gnarled boughs, the large stump in the foreground, a tower outlined against the horizon, low bushes to the left on low sandy hills, the curve of a road and on it the indistinctly outlined figure of a wayfarer. The contrast, so simple as to be almost schematized, between the horizontal surface of the ground and the perpendicular of the tree, the loneliness and the waste landscape — all are the same. It is also possible that the bunch of foliage growing out from the tree trunk, as well as the peculiar character of the withered crooked branches in Seghers' etching, may have served as prototypes for similar elements in Goyen's picture.

There can be no doubt that the motive of the solitary tree in the centre of a plain, rendered by Seghers now idealistically and again realistically, must be considered an original creation of his genius. When describing Seghers as a man rich in creative ideas and inexhaustible in the variety of motives for his landscapes, Houbraken points out two varieties in his compositions: in one of them, at a remote distance, we see "whole plots of land with villages and homesteads, in others his originality showed itself in his rendering of hills and rocks, which is evident from his pictures and engravings"<sup>3)</sup>. While the landscapes of the first group reproduce the real type of Dutch lowland in all its epic breadth and boundlessness, "the originality" of composition of the second kind is expressed in the romantic character of the stony valleys, surrounded by fantastic rocks, with long gloomy strips of shadow falling athwart them. A similar deep shadow falls from the oaks in Goyen's Moscow picture. A shadow, so powerful that no details can be distinguished in its depths, does not seem probable with a grey overclouded sky. But this dark spot forms a strong and simple contrast with the light on the strips of dunes, thereby heightening the grandly epic character of the impression so that it hardly needs further justification.

Dr. Hofstede de Groot has already pointed out the likeness in the

<sup>1)</sup> J. Springer. „Die Radierungen des Hercules Seghers II, Taf. XXX. „Der grosse Baum“.

<sup>2)</sup> Ibid. I, Taf. XII. „Die Landschaft mit der Eiche“.

<sup>3)</sup> A. Houbraken. „De Groote Schouburgh“ II, 137.

regard to style between some of Goyen's productions and Seghers' landscapes of a panoramic character in the Berlin Kaiser Friedrich Museum, and his river landscapes which presage such works of Goyen's as the views of Etelberg on the Rhine<sup>1)</sup>. But to such motives of Seghers' as have been reflected in Goyen's work, we must add these lonely old oaks in the midst of a waste and cheerless landscape.

A comparison of the three variations of this motive in Goyen's pictures enables us to perceive a gradually growing trend towards a grandly idealistic impression. In the Moscow picture, for instance, a sense of unrest, of something disjointed, pervades the diverging lines of the tree trunks, the quaint design in the foliage, the angular outlines of the branches and shadows in the foreground, while the large-sized genre figures divert attention from the principal, whereas, in a somewhat later variation at the Hermitage (Fig. 3), the composition is restricted to one oak-tree, which stands out against a shed and forms the central image of the picture. The foliage has already been collected into a compact mass, the human figures have been removed to the back and sides of the picture, but the plain and the line of the horizon have been completely thrown back, whereby the epic character of the impression is considerably lessened, and this treatment of the subject has resulted in producing again a charming scene, after the usual manner of the Dutch realism, quite foreign to the prototype created by Seghers. Finally, eight years later, when he is at the height of his creative maturity, Goyen goes back to the former motive in the last Amsterdam variation (Fig. 4). We have again two diverging tree-trunks, but between them there is no more clear space which breaks up the unity of the composition. The space has been filled in with the dark mass of the foliage, and the two trees have been merged into one, while the human figures have been drawn nearer. The impression of the contrast of this mass with the monotonous plain and its longitudinal lines, this time quite unbroken, is again conveyed. By drawing together and simplifying its elements, the composition acquires a truly epic breadth and power, after the manner of Seghers, to whom Goyen is most akin in this Amsterdam variation. That Goyen aimed at producing precisely this impression is evident from the size of the three pictures. They are of middle size actually, but they appear to be larger owing to their ideally epic spirit, especially in comparison to the usual size of Goyen's pictures.

Connected through his school to the idealistic style of Flemish 16th century landscape, Seghers introduced this new spirit of lofty idealism into the every-day realism of Dutch art. Seghers, a man of genius, was not understood by his contemporaries, but, as is usually the case, it was the

<sup>1)</sup> Hofstede de Groot „Beschreibendes und Kritisches Verzeichniss der Werke der hervorragendsten Hollaendischen Maler d. 17. Jahrh. B. VIII. Goyen, Nr. 102 and 103 and p. 343.

young artists of mark who were destined to appreciate him. And though Rembrandt alone was capable "of fully appreciating him"<sup>1)</sup>, still Goyen may have, at times, aspired after approaching the manner and motives of Seghers' compositions, were it only as a casual and inconstant tribute to the new trend then originating in art. In any case, he was in no wise an imitator merely. The motive received from the older master by the younger one served only as a stimulating impulse for the production of original variations in the same grandly epic manner, though in forms typical of Goyen and thoroughly individual, notwithstanding their generalisation.

### *ARCHIEFSPROKKELINGEN, door A. BREDIUS.*

*Over Matthijs en Margaretha Wulfraet en een model.*

6 en 16 November 1696. Eenige personen verkiaren ten verzoeke van MATTHIJS WULFRAET, Konstschilder en mede-burger alhier<sup>2)</sup> hoe waer is: dat zij in Maart ii. zijn geweest in de herberg de Munt, „ten bywesen van Christiaan Casteleyn en Matthijs Verhagen en gehooft en gesien „hebben dat Matthijs Verhagen zig aan de voorsz. Christiaan Casteleyn formeel verhuurt en „verbonden heeft om zig door den eenen of den anderen Schilder tenbehoefte van densenven „Casteleijn, mitsgaders op desselvs kosten binnen of omtrent de vier weeken na dato van 't voorsz. „contract te laten uytchilderen op sodanige wijze als het den voorsz. CASTELEIJN naer syn sin „of caprice soude wegevalien [al was het onder de gaig]<sup>3)</sup>, en dat hy VERHAGEN ten dien eynde „voor den Schilder behoerlyk soude sitten, mits daarvoor genietende van den voorschreven „Casteleijn de somme van 20 guidens", (hiervan werd reeds een deel aan den Hospes ter hand gesteld en op het goed succes der „verhuringe" gedronken. Een poos later had Verhagen gezegd dat hij het geld al gekregen had, en aan een ander, dat hij zich gaarne weder eens zou laten uitschilderen, al was 't voor een ducaton minder. Een der getuigen heeft gezien „dat „zeeker stukje schildery, gelykende, zoo openbaar gesegt wierd, na den voorn: Matthijs „Verhagen, in 't koffyhuys van Verhoeven met een bijgeschildert vroumensch, als mede met „een verkeerbord en drie dobbesteenen, ten toon hing". Zij hadden toen met Verhagen „om „de seltsaemheid van het voorschreven voorval" gesproken<sup>4)</sup>.

6 Nov. 1696. De dochter van Thomas van Kessel (Rachei) en zijn meid verkiaren, dat drie maanden geleden in den namiddag daar ten huize kwam „de Kunstschilder MATTHIJS „WOLFRAEDT aan wien Thomas van Kessel aanteide eenig geld, voor ses stuckies Schilderije „die Wulfraet aan Van Kessel geieverd had; waeronder waren twee stuck uytbeleidende zeeker „out personagie die sy dikwils hebben hooren noemen en wel weten Matthijs Verhagen te zijn „met zeeker vroumens die haer arm om syn hals en een roemer wijn in haer hand had; zynde „verder daarby geschildert een verkeerbord leggende op een tafel en drie dobbesteenen met „drie zessen boven en voor 't verkeerbord op de tafel eenige silveren penningen, die hij Verhagen „scheen met syn hand na hem toe te halen." Wulfraet had bekend, dat dit copyen waren, door zijn dochter geschilderd naar de origineelen van hem zelf. Men had gesustineerd, dat zuik nacopieeren niet wel gedaan was, maar Wulfraet zeide dit nog meer te zullen laten doen „daerby voegende, roemsgewijse dat syn dogter daer een moye stuyver mede verdient had"<sup>5)</sup>.

*Archives by A. Bredius about the painter Matthijs Wulfraet, his daughter Margaret and a model.*

<sup>1)</sup> W. Bode. „Rembrandt und seine Zeitgenossen". 1906. Herc. Seghers, S. 120      <sup>2)</sup> Amsterdam.  
<sup>3)</sup> Deze woorden zijn weer doorgehaald.      <sup>4)</sup> Not. L. Meyer, Amsterdam.      <sup>5)</sup> Not. Bockx, Amsterdam.