

Jacob van Ruisdael's variation on a theme by Rubens at Bilbao

Since the first decades of the nineteenth century when Jacob van Ruisdael began to acquire the reputation he has today as the greatest landscapist of the heroic age of Dutch painting, apart from the impact Allart van Everdingen's nordic views had upon his waterfall pictures, the search for influences in his work has not produced very much. To be sure, specialists have long recognized that astonishingly precocious Jacob incorporated aspects of Cornelis Vroom's tender mood and filigree-like foliage in some landscapes done not long after he picked up his brushes in the 1640s, and during the following decades he was inspired now and then by the massive fissured tree trunks, twisted roots and branches, and rampant growth in prints of forest scenes by and after Roelandt Savery. More recently, Ruisdael's occasional debt to compositional schemes employed by Pieter Bruegel and his followers has been signalled.¹ Additionally, during the course of the last few years a fresh examination of paintings that can be securely attributed to his father Isaack van Ruisdael strengthens the supposition that he started as his father's pupil, albeit there is no question that he quickly surpassed him.² As for his uncle Salomon van Ruysdael, although it seems reasonable to assume the budding artist had close contact with him in Haarlem, a search for traces of it in his art provides precious little. Stechow rightly stresses:

'Von einem direkten Einfluss Salomons auf die Frühwerke Jacobs van Ruisdael wird man nicht sprechen dürfen; die sehr vorsichtigen Andeutungen Rosenbergs und Simons in ihren Ruisdael-Monographien wären eher noch einzuschränken als zu erweitern.'

In brief, what Ruisdael took from his putative teachers remains moot, and although it can be shown that Allart van Everdingen introduced him to an important new theme and, upon occasion, he incorporated what he learned from a handful of other immediate and more distant predecessors into his work, it cannot be claimed that any of them determined the fundamental direction of his art.

The purpose of this note is to add Rubens' name to the short list. The Flemish master's indisputable place on it is secured when Ruisdael's *Marsb in a forest at dusk* (fig. 1), datable to the mid-1650s, now in the Musco de Bellas Artes de Bilbao,³ is juxtaposed to Schelte à Bolswert's engraving (in reverse) after Rubens' *Forest at dawn with a deer hunt* (fig. 2). Ruisdael doubtlessly knew the print, but there is no reason to believe he ever saw Rubens' superb original, since 1990 a treasure of The Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 3).⁵ The surprising similarities of Ruisdael's landscape to Rubens' invention as copied by the engraver have not been noted in the literature.

In Ruisdael's landscape the hidden source of the sunset's rosy light that dramatically illuminates the blue sky, ragged whitish-pink evening clouds, and edges of tree



1
Jacob van Ruisdael, *Marsh in a forest at dusk*, signed, lower right; canvas, 78 × 92.5 cm., c. mid-1650s. Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao, no. 92/118. Photo P. de Vries, Texel

trunks and a stump finds a close parallel in the burst of light in the engraving after Rubens' forest scene, which has been interpreted by some authors as depicting the sun's effect at dawn and by others as evening.⁶ An equally compelling analogy is the arrangement of the two large twisted trees clawing at the high bank that serves as a repoussoir in each work. Turning to the trees in the center and towards the left in the pictures, we begin to find differences. Ruisdael's wind swept boughs do not exist in the Rubens. A more conspicuous change is Jacob's massing of an impenetrable wall-like clump of trees in the near middleground, while Rubens' landscape has a highly developed feeling for the spaciousness of the woods and offers numerous scattered distant vistas into it. Ruisdael's relatively close view of an extremely dense wood with merely a single glimpse of the distant horizon helps place Bilbao's picture in the mid-1650s. Only later in the decade and in the sixties does he tend to expand space in his woodland scenes and begin to depict forest interiors. Other significant differences are the emphasis Jacob places on the foreground marsh, his complete elimination of the pronounced ornamental character of Schelte à Bolswert print (in fact, the engraver managed to make the forest in his print more ornamental than the one offered by his model) and, not least, his rejection of Rubens' hunting scene. Animals and humankind play no role in Ruisdael's landscape. Unlike Rubens, he has made nature his sole subject.

2

Schelte à Bolswert, after Rubens, *Forest at dawn with a deer hunt*, engraving, 30.7 × 44 cm., c. 1635-40. Photo: Metropolitan Museum, New York



3

Rubens, *Forest at dawn with a deer hunt*, wooden panel, 61.6 × 90 cm., c. 1635. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, no. 1990.196. Photo: museum



My search through Ruisdael's large oeuvre has not turned up another landscape inspired by Rubens. On the other hand, in paintings datable a few years later, Jacob's independent creative urge enabled him to incorporate what he learned from Rubens via Schelte à Bolswert's print and from his own picture now at Bilbao. Examples are *The gnarled oak* in Santa Barbara (fig. 4)⁷ and *Edge of a wood with a pond* at Schleissheim (fig. 5).⁸ It is obvious that one to one connections do not exist between these woodland scenes and the Bilbao picture. However, their stress on large forms, sharp light accents that help untangle dense spatial relationships, and deeply poignant moods ring distinct changes on Ruisdael's variation on a theme by Rubens.



4 Jacob van Ruisdael, *The gnarled oak*, signed, lower left; canvas, 53.5 × 67.3 cm., late 1650s. Santa Barbara University Art Museum, University of California, Francis M. Sedgwick Collection, no. 60/18. Photo: museum



5 Jacob van Ruisdael, *Edge of a wood near a pond*, monogrammed, lower right; canvas, 61 × 97 cm., late 1650s or early 1660s. Munich, Staatsgemäldesammlungen, exhibited at Schleissheim, Staatsgalerie, no. 892. Photo: museum

NOTES

¹ T. Gerszi, 'Jacob van Ruisdael und die Bruegel-Nachwirkung', *Orient und Okzident im Spiegel der Kunst. Festschrift Heinrich Gerhard Franz zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. G. Brucher, et al., Graz 1986, pp. 139–46.

² J. Giltaij, 'The problem of Isaack van Ruisdael (1599–1677)', *The Burlington Magazine*, 134, 1992, pp. 180–2; S. Slive, 'A newly discovered painting by Isaack van Ruisdael in Philadelphia', *The Burlington Magazine*, 139, 1997, pp. 690–2.

³ W. Stechow, *Salomon van Ruisdael*, Berlin 1975, 2nd rev ed., p. 46, note 36. He also correctly emphasizes: 'Für die Annahme einer Schülerschaft des Jacob Isaaksz van Ruisdael bei seinem Onkel Salomon fehlt erst recht jeglicher Anhaltspunkt' (*ibid.*, p. 53, note 42). Jacob's relationship with his uncle Salomon and his cousin Jacob Salomonsz Ruysdael in family matters tells a different story; he made his uncle and cousin executors of a will he signed on 27 May 1667, and on 3 February 1673 he witnessed a document related to his cousin's forthcoming second marriage which took place on the following day; see Amsterdam City Archives, NA H. Friesma 3084 (film 3020), fol. 276 and *ibid.*, NA Michiel Baers 3756, fol. 235 (film 3914). I am beholden to I. van Thiel-Stroman for transcriptions of these two documents.

⁴ Provenance: Cited in the 1844 inventory of the collection Count Czernin von Chudentitz, Vienna; private collection, Austria; dealer Hans Schneider, Tutzing, Germany, 1981; dealer Sam Nijstad, The Hague, 1983; private collection, Wassenaar, c. 1984; sale, anon., London (Christie's) 13 December 1991, no. 22 (bought in); acquired by the museum in 1992. Exhibitions: *Europäische Barockmalerei aus Wiener Privat Galerien*, Kunstmuseum, Bern, 21 December 1947–31 March 1948, no. 84; on loan at the Residenzgalerie, Salzburg, from the Czernin collection by 1962 (I have been unable to determine when it left Salzburg). Literature: G. F. Waagen, *Die vornehmsten Kunstdenkmäler in Wien*, vol. I, 1866, p. 300, no. C. 65; C. Hofstede de Groot, *Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des XVII. Jahrhunderts*, vol. IV, *Jacob van Ruisdael*, Esslingen and Paris, 1911, no. 524; J. Rosenberg, *Jacob van Ruisdael*, Berlin 1928, no. 391; K. Wilczek, *Katalog der Graf Czernin'schen Gemäldegalerie in Wien*, 1936, no. 127; Residenzgalerie, Salzburg, Catalogue, 1955, no. 40; *ibid.*, 1962, no. 157; X. Castañer, *Pinturas y Pintores Vascos, Holandeses y Alemanes en el Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao*, Bilbao 1995, pp. 254–6 (erroneously said to be monogrammed; the painting is signed). A copy by Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller (1793–1865), dated 1824, was formerly in the possession of

Oskar Berggrün (cf. *Die Graphischen Künste*, 10, 1887, p. 62); it is not one of Waldmüller's eight copies of Ruisdael's paintings listed in B. Grimmschitz, *Ferdinand Waldmüller*, Salzburg 1957, an oeuvre catalogue of the Austrian artist's work. Although Ruisdael's landscape still has a powerful impact, it has suffered, especially on the right side where the paint film of the bank, the foliage and trunks of the trees that surmount it are badly rubbed. There is also general abrasion in the fore-, middle-, and background, and sky.

⁵ Rubens' landscape is fully published by W. Liedtke, 'Addenda to *Flemish Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*', *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 27, 1992, pp. 101–07. The painting was most probably in Rubens' possession at his death in 1640 (see note 6 below); then there is a gap in its history until it is recorded in Sir Joshua Reynolds' collection (*ibid.*, pp. 102–03). Liedtke dates Schelte à Bolswert's engraving c. the mid- to the late 1630s and observes he crops the view and suppresses the pool of water in the painting (*ibid.*, p. 105).

⁶ In Rubens' original it is more accurate to speak of an explosion rather than a burst of light. While recognizing that the landscape has been titled a sunset by various cataloguers Liedtke opts for calling it

dawn since the Metropolitan's painting is almost certainly identical with 'Un bois avec un chasse à l'aube de jour, sur fond de bois' listed as no. 108 in the 1640 inventory of Rubens' estate (Liedtke 1992 [note 5], p. 103). The title Liedtke accepts is used here. I also endorse his view that whether one calls the painting a sunrise or sunset will be a matter of opinion and personal experience (*ibid.*). Rubens is not the only landscapist who poses this problem. Cataloguers have debated whether landscapes by Ruisdael in Leipzig (*Pond at the edge of a wood*, no. 1056; Hofstede de Groot, 1911 [note 4], no. 480; Rosenberg, 1928 [note 4], no. 318), and at The Wallace Collection, London (*Road in a wood*, no. P247; Hofstede de Groot, 1911 [note 4], no. 1059; Rosenberg, 1928 [note 4], no. 326) represent dawn or dusk. In my view, both are evening scenes, but I readily grant my interpretations are open to question.

⁷ Hofstede de Groot, 1911 (note 4), no. 498; Rosenberg, 1928 (note 4), no. 353. After Rosenberg published the picture, it passed to Henry W. de Forest, and thence by descent to his daughter Mrs. Francis Minurn Sedgwick, Los Olivos, California, who gave it to the university's gallery in 1960.

⁸ Hofstede de Groot, 1911 (note 4), no. 495; Rosenberg, 1928 (note 4), no. 346.