

# Rembrandt celebrated man's dominion over water

by Nora Hamerman

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## Rembrandt's Landscapes

by Cynthia P. Schneider

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The young scholar Cynthia Schneider has made Rembrandt, one of the towering geniuses of Western art and one about whom many shelves of books have been written, her specialty. This, her first book, came out this past spring, just after the opening of an exhibition at Washington's National Gallery of Art of Rembrandt's landscapes in the print and drawing media, of which she was the curator (see *EIR*, April 6, 1990).

Schneider's boldest act has been to give back to Rembrandt the authorship of the disputed picture, "The Mill," a large canvas in the National Gallery of Art dating c. 1643-46. The windmill, which symbolizes the Dutch national spirit, spreads its sails in a way evocative of a crucifix high atop a bulwark, illuminated against a bright patch of sky in the midst of an approaching storm. This dramatic image was extremely famous when covered with yellowed varnish in the Romantic era, but was not included among Rembrandt's authentic paintings by most leading 20th-century scholars. The canvas was recently restored to an appearance much closer to its original colors.

Schneider made use of the wide range of recently developed scientific techniques for looking under the surface of pictures, including at many details which an irreversible darkening has made very hard to perceive. The result is that she accepts eight of the landscape paintings known today as by Rembrandt, and attributes 11 others to pupils, followers, or imitators. There are color illustrations of 14 of these beautiful landscapes in her book.

After that, timidity verging on indifferentism takes over. Much of this cautiously written book is devoted to discounting the various theories of what Rembrandt's landscape art is really about. Schneider takes pains to pick apart some specific religious interpretations which have been offered—such as those which relate Rembrandt's landscapes to the

notion that man's life on earth is merely a journey on the way to eternal life—by arguing that in many cases, this doctrine does not appear to match the details of the actual landscape or the mood of the figures. But this leaves us with a mystery: Why did Rembrandt, who has been described as "the deepest nature in the history of art," create so many landscapes—especially in the graphic media? And why do they move us as supreme works of art, when they seem to evade the kinds of literary analysis we more easily apply in the fields of portraiture and narrative painting?

The author falls into the typical problem of the over-trained graduate student. Having enumerated, perhaps disproved, every existing hypothesis about the works, she offers no hypothesis of her own. As if it weren't needed! Not only is Rembrandt's art usually quite far from "nature just as she is," but there is an inescapable feeling in these pictures of a philosophical statement as sweeping as a Beethoven "Pastoral" Symphony. What is it *about*?

## Polders

A certain insight came to this reviewer while touring the exhibition of Rembrandt's landscape drawings and etchings in Washington last spring with a friend. When I remarked, "and here you see the cows standing in the water next to the polder," my friend asked, "What's a polder?" I proceeded to explain that a polder is a piece of fertile farmland that has been reclaimed artificially from the sea by encircling it with dikes and draining water from it. Then a basic truth struck me, like that shaft of light that unexpectedly breaks through the typically overcast Dutch sky in almost every Rembrandt landscape painting, and evokes the feeling of a divine element in human affairs.

I remembered what it was that every schoolchild learns in geography class about the Netherlands: It's a nation of which more than 40% of the national territory has been created by man. A fact that is strangely not mentioned either in Schneider's book or in last spring's exhibition catalogue.

As a matter of fact, the Low Countries, including modern-day Netherlands and Belgium, were in the 14th and 15th centuries the center of some of the most technologically advanced farming in Europe, based upon water management programs. Only northern Italy, the Lombard region around the Po Valley, surpassed Flanders and Holland in this regard.

Digging canals and erecting dikes to create new farmland was the way that the Dutch people defined themselves as a nation. In the early 1600s another major advance had been made, making a science out of draining large lakes by building a number of dikes and windmills, which would pump the water in steps to higher and higher levels until it was transported all the way to the sea. The result was so dramatic that maps of the Netherlands had to be redrawn in 1612, when Rembrandt was six years old. Rembrandt, the son of a Leiden miller, celebrated all this in his art.

How ironic that the Dutch monarchy today is active in the pagan World Wide Fund for Nature, whose radical-environmentalist campaign to return Mother Earth to her "pristine" state would immediately condemn, if carried out, half of the territory of the Netherlands to be sunk into the North Sea!

The windmills were not some merely picturesque feature of the landscape, but an absolutely crucial energy machine that made this man-made system work. Since the low-lying polders filled with water whenever it rained, the Dutch had to devise a way to keep the water out of them. The wind, which is plentiful in Netherlands, turned the big sails; the turning sails turned a scoop inside the windmill. The scoop lifted the water from the polder and hurled it across the dike.

Rembrandt drew and painted these remarkable machines in all their historical specificity. For example, the hollow post mill (*wipmolen*) in the Washington painting is the prototype of the Dutch drainage mill. It was the ingenious Dutch solution to the serious technical challenge of adapting the post mill, earlier used for grinding throughout Northern Europe, to a scoop wheel, a daunting problem because the whole body of the mill turned on its post while the scoop wheel had to remain fixed in its basin.

### The living image of God

Rembrandt did not begin the unique Dutch habit—initiated during the 80-year struggle for independence that culminated in 1648 when the United Netherlands was recognized as sovereign by Spain—of elevating the portrayal of the national scenery to the status of serious painting. But he raised this to its highest level. And this is because the viewpoint that informs Rembrandt's landscapes is profoundly biblical; whether man is present or not—and usually he is, at least in the form of tiny figures in the landscapes—the consequences of his actions is always there, "subduing the earth" and making it fruitful, as mandated in the first chapter of Genesis.

And so Rembrandt gives his loving attention, in drawings, to the many varieties of farm buildings that were built upon the polders, according to the kind of agriculture practiced there, in turn depending on the kind of topography, the soil, the degree of reclamation, and so forth. The French philosopher Descartes gave the Dutch achievement a typical-

ly misleading twist: "God made the world, but the Dutch made Holland." In reality, man in the living image of God, *imago viva Dei*, created the landscape to a degree not true anywhere else in Europe, or anywhere else in the known world at that time. And then the artist, reflecting upon the creative powers of his fellow man, of his nation, draws and paints the results of this creative action, in harmony—or in struggle—with the forces of raw nature.

This profoundly religious meaning is inherent in the subject matter, but then enhanced by a kind of lofty visual punning—three trees that become like the three crosses of Golgotha, three thatched cottages like the triple portals of a Gothic cathedral, or the outstretched arms of the crucifix/windmill mentioned above—and always illuminated by that sudden shaft of celestial light.

In so doing, Rembrandt was merely lifting to the level of universal art, a kind of social expression that had already taken root in national custom. Over centuries, the millers adopted a kind of semaphore, and they would stop their mills to set the sails in patterns that served as newspapers, informing the entire countryside of an important event, such as a birth, a death, or a wedding. Catholic millers during the Reformation signaled by sail when and where a mass would be held; during the last war, millers alerted members of the Dutch underground to enemy movements.

### Rembrandt and Leonardo da Vinci

The concern of Rembrandt to paint and draw hymns of praise to man's struggle over water, links him across a century and over a span of geography he never traversed, across the Alps into northern Italy, to the person of Leonardo da Vinci, who died nearly 100 years before Rembrandt began to study painting as a lad.

Leonardo da Vinci was a great engineer, a designer not only of locks, dams, dredging machines, "water ladders," paddleboats, and countless other machines to bend the waterways of Italy and France to human needs; he was the designer of whole great systems of water transport with the potential of redrawing the political as well as the physical map. In the 1982 exhibition catalogue *Leonardo e le vie d'acqua*, issued as part of the Milan celebrations of the 500th anniversary of Leonardo da Vinci's arrival in that city, we learn that Leonardo was involved in the project to build a great canal linking Milan to the Adriatic sea, which would have provided the city with its own independent port capability, and shaken forever the economic stranglehold of Venice. This project seems to have been conceived simultaneously, just before 1490, with the better known Arno canal system, Leonardo's mind-boggling project for a canal through Florence, Prato, Pistoia, and passing near Lucca that could have permanently allayed the threat of floods, powered dozens of "automated" industries, provided cheap year-round transport for manufactured goods and raw materials, and revolutionized sanitation in the cities through which it passed.



*Rembrandt's painting, "The Mill" (Widener Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington). The windmill was the engine of national progress and Dutch ingenuity in holding back the sea; and during the Reformation, in Rembrandt's day, persecuted Catholics used the sails of their windmills to signal the celebration of a mass.*

According to one of the essays in 1982 catalogue, Leonardo was the first to systematically attempt to measure the velocity of water in calculating provision of water by man-made conduits to various parts of Milan, as opposed to the merely geometric methods of measurement which predominated before him. He thus concerned himself with the problem of measuring a continuous quantity with discrete units—a conceptual riddle which flows throughout all of his creative work. Precisely this question preoccupied Leonardo in the domain of music. In painting, he showed how to capture the effect of continuous movement, by his use of *contrapposto* (spiral posture of the figure) and *chiaroscuro* (the replacement of sharp outlines with the juxtaposition of light and dark masses), in what is intrinsically a discrete medium. Not accidentally, the landscapes which appear in almost all of his extant authentic paintings are filled with portrayals of waterways, often half-wild, half-tamed by man, and so posing a challenge. Behind the enigmatic expression of the Mona Lisa lies a true engineering enigma—how did one join, in fact, those two sharply different water levels glimpsed on the

left and right of the landscape?

Leonardo wrote that water is the greatest single threat to human life, exceeding even the danger of fire. If water left alone could be so threatening, when brought under man's control it was one of the greatest civilizing forces. Rembrandt, without being an engineer, shared Leonardo's outlook on this question.

Many of Rembrandt's painted landscapes, unlike the majority of the drawings, are not portrayals of his native Netherlands. Even the drawings often depicted faraway scenes of Italy which he could only have known through other works of art, or he combined Dutch elements with these exotic settings. In the paintings, the flow of water, or if not water, then of weather, is ever present, played off against the drama of light and the fruits of man's building efforts. And as Cynthia Schneider underlines, within these titanic settings Rembrandt never failed to place realistic figures of ordinary citizens going about their daily business—an element which the irreversibly darkened condition of the pictures has obscured for the modern viewer.