SPHINX FINE ART



Cornelis Gerritsz. Decker (Haarlem 1620 - Haarlem 1678)

Landscape with a Village Road and Figures Conversing in the Right Foreground & Landscape with a Farmyard and Figure Drawing Water from a Well, other Figures Conversing Nearby

the latter signed 'C. Deck..r' (lower left on the well)

oil on canvas,

a pair 83.5 x 107 cm (33 x 42 in) each

Stately oaks and brooding skies dominate Cornelis Gerritsz Decker's fine pair of landscapes. In *Landscape with a Village Road and Figures Conversing in the Right Foreground,* a dense growth of trees encroaches on the village, having already hidden from sight a cottage nestled in its midst. The trees are slightly starker in *Landscape with a Farmyard and Figure Drawing Water from a Well, other Figures Conversing Nearby*, although they still appear to strain at their roots in an effort to command the scene. In both paintings, Decker imbues the oaks with strong personalities. The activities of the villagers and farm workers and the placing of the other elements in each composition seem to revolve around the imposing presence of the mighty trees. The sky, likewise, has a forceful role in each painting. The lowness of the horizon and vastness of the sky dotted with expressive clouds gives the landscapes added tension and drama.

The first of the present pair, *Landscape with a Village Road and Figures Conversing in the Right Foreground*, reveals strong contrasts in tonality between the darkness of the trees and the lightness of the sky and path on which the figures stand out. The few villagers that find their way into the scene are concentrated in the lower right portion of the canvas. Two men converse near a rickety fence, one sitting and the other standing and leaning on a cane. A well dressed gentleman, in contrast to the humble rural dwellers, stands further along the path and behind him a man on a horse stops outside the village inn. A solitary idler pauses on the bridge.

Decker gives what would otherwise be a mundane portrayal of quiet village life a heightened sense of intrigue with his masterful contrasts between dark and light, shadow and illumination. There is an air of mystery in the way the top of the peaked roof of a cottage can just be made out amongst the dense foliage of the trees on the left. In the foreground, a ramshackle gate stands unhinged. This area of the composition is heavily obscured by the trees and shrubs growing there and the cottage appears completely inaccessible.

Decker seems to delight in depicting peculiar houses and asymmetrical structures within his idyllic countryside scenes. A dilapidated hut with a thatched roof that leans sharply to the ground on one side stands in the middle of *Landscape with a Farmyard and Figure Drawing Water from a Well, other Figures Conversing Nearby,* the second painting in the present pair. On the right, a crude fence has been erected with a number of roughly hewn planks protruding in different directions. These peculiar constructions are not only points of interest in the painting but also display Decker's technical skill in representing angle and perspective. They also allow for the painterly rendering of a variety of textures and materials, which is similarly exemplified in Decker's painting *A Wooded River Landscape with a Woman Looking out over the Water, a Horseman with his Dog and another Figure Beyond* (Private Collection). Here a woman leans against a railing attached to a rough and gnarled tree trunk that curves towards a small incongruous looking outbuilding erected on the bank. A combination of planks and twigs are nailed haphazardly on top of each other to stabilise the structure, which stands on two precarious stilts reaching into the water. Whether such structures were commonplace in rural areas at the time, or whether Decker exaggerated them to enhance the rustic charm of his works, the result is very effective.

The focus of human activity in *Landscape with a Farmyard and Figure Drawing Water from a Well, other Figures Conversing Nearby* is around the well on the left of the scene, where a man fills a bucket with water. A labourer sits nearby with his arm outstretched for his companion to bandage it. Presumably he has been injured while cutting the logs that lie scattered around the farmyard. In the image of the fallen tree trunks, it is difficult to recognise the grandeur of the living ones that largely command the composition. The living oaks lean at different angles, their foliage creating dense dark patches outlined against the sky. Again, what could be a commonplace scene is given added dimension by the strong character of the trees.

A Cottage among Trees on the Bank of a Stream by Decker in the National Gallery, London, is similar to the present pair of pictures in its spirit and monumentality. The view is of a cottage tucked away on a riverbank surrounded by trees. There is little activity and no great variation in colouring, however the scene commands attention, in large part because of the dramatically twisted trunks of the trees and their distinctive craggy branches. Also notable is Decker's extensive employment of shadowing and again the sky is expansive and imposing. As in *Landscape with a Village Road and Figures Conversing in the Right Foreground* and *Landscape with a Farmyard and Figure Drawing Water from a Well, other Figures Conversing Nearby,* the depth and tonality of the composition is striking.

Decker was a pupil of Jacob van Ruisdael, one of the principle exponents of Dutch landscape painting in the second half of the seventeenth century. Van Ruisdael helped to revolutionise landscape painting, moving it away from the 'tonal phase' (*c.* 1620 - *c.* 1650), associated with the preceding generation of artists such as Jacob's uncle, Salomon van Ruysdael. Decker's naturalistic countryside scenes, distinctive colour palette and the massiveness of his trees are clearly inspired by van Ruisdael, who was an innovator in his treatment of trees in particular, giving them important functions in the landscape

rather than purely decorative significance.

Decker was also influenced by Jan Wijnants (*c.* 1635 - 1684) and Philips Wouwerman. Wijnants adopted many of the compositional strategies of van Ruisdael's forest pictures of the mid-1650s, prominently positioning stark tree-trunks as well as dense clumps of foliage in his paintings. The majority of his works relegate buildings and staffage to the middle distance rather than making them the focus of the picture, in a manner that resembles the pair of paintings seen here, and Decker's work in general. The landscape paintings of Wouwerman from the 1650s, which also emphasise broad expanses of mainly horizontal landscapes with heightened colour, have discernible parallels with Decker's paintings. Although Decker is a somewhat obscure figure, in that we know very little of his life, the accomplished artistry evident in the works examined here indicate that he deserves particular recognition within the Haarlem school of landscape painters.

Provenance:

with W. Boswell & Sons, Norwich (according to labels on the reverse);
Anonymous sale ("The Property of a Lady"), October 12, 1983, lot 63;
Anonymous sale, New York, Christie's, January 15, 1985, lot 49;
Private collection.

Artist description:

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