SPHINX FINE ART

Lucas van Valckenborch (Leuven c.1530 - Frankfurt am Main 1597)

A Panoramic Mountain Landscape, with a City, possibly Frankfurt, beyond

oil on canvas
53.5 x 81 cm (21 x 31⅞ in)

This panoramic scene is typical of Lucas van Valckenborch's mountainous landscape paintings. The left-hand side of the work is dominated by a bare crag, projecting into the sky. In its shadow lies a dense forest, a fiercely flowing river, and a mill. Beyond this precipitous foreground is vast river valley containing a large sprawling city.

This painting is actually a larger version of a work in the Liechtenstein Princely Collections. Our work is painted on canvas, whereas the Liechtenstein version is on panel, although this change of support is not unusual for van Valckenborch, who also frequently used copper. The Liechtenstein version is dated 1595, towards the end of van Valckenborch's career, and it therefore seems likely that ours is a similarly mature work.

In a discussion of the Liechtenstein version, Walter Liedtke suggests that the city nestling in the river valley is probably based on Frankfurt.[1] Van Valckenborch certainly included faithful topographical depictions of other cities, such as Linz or Antwerp, in his work, and the Liechtenstein painting dates from his Frankfurt period. As Liedtke points out, 'the long bridge that crossed the city's wall between the town of Sachsenhausen and Frankfurt met the city's walls at a square tower like the one seen here'.[2] Liedtke also points to the fact that many of the many details, such as the round and square towers, or the scale and style of the Cathedral, recall contemporary depictions of Frankfurt. However, Liedtke also points to significant differences between sixteenth-century Frankfurt, and the city that is depicted in both ours and the Liechtenstein paintings. Therefore it seems that van Valckenborch, rather than attempting to paint a topographically accurate depiction of Frankfurt, has used Frankfurt as his inspiration. This free approach to topographical accuracy is a typical feature of van Valckenborch's landscapes.

The composition of our painting, with dramatic promontory on the left-hand side leading the eye to a valley beyond, is the same basic template which van Valckenborch used in mountain landscapes throughout his career. Alexander Wied has pointed to the consistency with van Valckenborch used this technique over the years.[3] For example paintings such as those in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, or the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, were painted over ten years before our work, and there are other even earlier examples.[4] This repeated composition is one reason why undated landscapes, such as our painting, are hard to place within the van Valckenborch's ouevre.

The present work is part of a tradition in Flemish sixteenth-century painting, known as 'world landscapes', a term used to describe panoramic vistas taken from a bird's eye viewpoint.[5] Leading figures of this genre, apart from van Valckenborch, were Joachim Patinir (c. 1480 - 1524), Herri Met de Bles (c. 1510 – after 1550), Pieter Brueghel the Elder (c. 1525 – 1569) and Hans Bol (1534-1593). Several of Bol's works, which were widely disseminated through engravings, relate closely to van Valckenborch's landscapes, particularly in the compositional arrangements. Liedtke also suggests that van Valckenborch would have seen, and been inspired by Brueghel's alpine drawings, when both artists were working in Mechelen.[6] Our painting is a typical example of this type of landscape, which aimed to convey a panoramic and awe-inspiring vision of nature, whilst simultaneously providing small precise details of everyday sixteenth-century life, exemplified in our painting by features such as the mill or the flock of sheep.

Van Valckenborch came from a Flemish family of artists, of whom at least fourteen were painters, the most notable, aside from himself, being his brother, Marten van Valckenborch I (1534-1612), and his nephews Frederik van Valckenborch (1566-1623) and Gillis van Valckenborch (1570-1622). Although he was born in Leuven, in 1560 Lucas is recorded as joining the Painter's Guild in Mechelen and here he took on pupils, married and had a son, Marten van Valckenborch II (before 1566-1597), who also became a painter.

In Mechelen, Lucas established his reputation, but in 1566, like many of his contemporaries, was forced to leave to avoid religious persecution after the Spanish occupied the southern Netherlands. Initially Lucas moved to Liège, then onto Aachen and Antwerp. In 1579 he became the court painter to the Habsburg Archduke Matthias (1557-1619), who was governor of the Spanish Netherlands in Brussels and in 1612 would become Holy Roman Emperor. Van Valckenborch's official duties included designing costumes for Matthais' guard, and painting his portraits. In 1593 he left to enter into the service of Matthais' brother Archduke Ernst (1553-1595) in Frankfurt. Much of his family had already settled there, and the influence of the van Valckenborchs on the artistic development of Frankfurt was significant.

According to the biographer Karel van Mander (1548-1606), it wasn't van Valckenborch's landscapes that attracted the patronage of Archduke Matthias, but his skill as a portraitist. He became a renowned court portraitist, painting at least six of the Archduke, and was proficient at working in both life-size and miniature. His skill as a miniaturist is evidenced by the figures that occur in his landscapes.

However, Van Valckenborch's most notable achievements were undoubtedly his landscapes. As discussed, in terms of composition he was very much a traditionalist, with his panoramic scenes depicted from a high viewpoint. However, he did base these works on a first-hand observation of nature to a much greater extent than some his predecessors, as reflected in his loose depiction of Frankfurt in our painting. His palette is also more sophisticated than many other sixteenth-century landscape

painters, as it is rarely schematic and mannered, rather he sensitively blends browns, blues and greens. Our painting is a late, but typical, example of his work.

We are grateful for Dr. Alexander Wied for confirming the attribution of the present work to Lucas van Valckenborch.

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[1] Liedtke, W., in *Liechtenstein: The Princely Collections,* exh. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, October 1986 – May 1986, p.282.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Wied, A., *Lucas und Marten van Valckenborch: Das Gesamtwerk Mit Kritischem Oeuvrekatalog* (Luca Verlag, Freren, 1990), p.28.

[4] The earliest example is dated 1570, see Wied, p. 137, no. 12.

[5] For an extensive discussion of this term see Gibson, W. S., *"Mirror of the Earth": The World Landscape in Sixteenth-Century Flemish Painting* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

[6] Liedtke, p. 292.

Artist description:

On 26 August 1560 Van Valckenborch joined the painters' guild in Mechelen, and Jaspar van der Linden is subsequently recorded as his pupil on 30 August 1564. Van Valckenborch later married and had a son, Marten van Valckenborch II (1566 - Vienna, 1597), also a painter, before fleeing to Liège in 1566 and then to Aachen, where his brother Marten I had settled. In 1574-5 he returned to Antwerp and, in 1579, became court painter to the Habsburg archduke, Matthias, governor of the Spanish Netherlands in Brussels from 1577 to 1582 and later Emperor (reg 1612–19). In or after 1582 he followed Matthias to Linz, finally rejoining his relatives in Frankfurt in 1592–3.

In his art Van Valckenborch was close to Pieter Bruegel the elder. His art drew on the same Flemish tradition, modifying it in a highly personal way, without recourse to then current Mannerist tendencies. Although he did not have Bruegel's skill, he never lapsed into mediocrity, and thematically his work is more varied than was formerly supposed. While his most significant achievements are undoubtedly his landscape paintings, he also made an interesting contribution to late 16th-century portraiture and subject painting, the latter with his large-scale allegories of seasonal labours. His works, many of which bear his monogram LVV and the date (with the L placed under the two Vs until 1570 and above them thereafter), always show solid craftsmanship and sometimes a brilliant technique. Unlike that of Marten I, his style did not change significantly. Judging from the relatively large number of paintings dating from his last years, he probably had a flourishing workshop, which may have included other, as yet unidentified family members. About 100 oil paintings and c.10 drawings by the artist are known.

Van Valckenborch adhered to the old conventions of composition, depicting panoramic scenes from a high viewpoint but, more than his predecessors, basing his work on first-hand observation of nature. He often mixed invention with genuine topography, as in the *Spring Landscape with the Palais Royal of Brussels* (1587, Vienna), in which the palace has been transplanted into a fantasy landscape. This mixture of realism and fantasy is quite distinct from the Mannerist tradition, being a blend of imaginary landscapes based on earlier prototypes (for example the landscapes of Jan and Cornelis Massys, Mathijs Cock and Lucas Gassel) with the naturalistic depiction of real places, the resulting 'hybrid' often being embellished with narrative details taken from everyday life. This free approach to topographical accuracy undermines attempts to localize his views and explains why, for instance, none of the many furnaces and forges that Lucas painted in expertly observed detail has ever been identified.

His preference was for rocky landscapes into which he would set these ironworks or small religious or peasant scenes. Fairs and rustic entertainments were another favourite feature, as in the *Mountain*

Landscape with Peasants Dancing and a Furnace in the Background (1577, St Petersburg, Hermitage), or the two versions of the *Landscape with a Peasant Wedding and Dance* (both 1574, Copenhagen).

In the mid-1580s Van Valckenborch painted a series of large pictures showing the labours of the months, probably for Archduke Matthias. These compositions, of which seven survive, present the traditional activities in an apparently realistic setting and thus are also of documentary interest. In this they differ from earlier Flemish examples and from the work of Pieter Bruegel the elder, who otherwise provided him with an influential model. The careful brushwork, always technically correct, is never dry or monotonous in effect. Fore-, middle- and background are not divided in a mannered or schematic way but blend delicately in a soft triad of brown, green and blue hues, often with a sensitively calculated touch of colour, such as a piece of red clothing, accentuating the foreground.

Van Valckenborch also painted close-up views of forest landscapes, a subject that reached its apogee c. 1600 in the work of such painters as Gillis van Coninxloo III and Jan Breughel I. Van Valckenborch produced striking and original compositions, such as *Cattle Pasture under Trees* (1573, Frankfurt), and *Angler at a Woodland Pool* (1590, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum), but did not pursue the form further.

Collections

Valckenborch is represented in the following collections: Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna; Louvre, Paris; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; Städel Museum, Frankfurt; Brukenthal Museum, Sibiu; Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid, amongst others.