

VISUAL CULTURE IN EARLY MODERNITY



The *Small Landscape* Prints in Early Modern Netherlands



Alexandra Onuf

An **Ashgate** Book

The *Small Landscape* Prints in Early Modern Netherlands

In 1559 and 1561, the Antwerp print publisher Hieronymus Cock issued an unprecedented series of landscape prints known today simply as the *Small Landscapes*. The forty-four prints included in the series offer views of the local countryside surrounding Antwerp in simple, unembellished compositions. At a time when vast panoramic and allegorical landscapes dominated the art market, the *Small Landscapes* represent a striking innovation. This book offers the first comprehensive analysis of the significance of the *Small Landscapes* in early modern print culture. It charts a diachronic history of the series over the century it was in active circulation, from 1559 to the middle of the seventeenth century. Adopting the lifespan of the prints as the framework of the study, Alexandra Onuf analyzes the successive states of the plates and the changes to the series as a whole in order to reveal the shifting artistic and contextual valences of the images at their different moments and places of publication. This unique case study allows for a new perspective on the trajectory of print publishing over the course of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries across multiple publishing houses, highlighting the seminal importance of print publishers in the creation and dissemination of visual imagery and cultural ideas. Looking at other visual materials and contemporary sources – including texts as diverse as humanist poetry and plays, agricultural manuals, polemical broadsheets, and peasant songs – Onuf situates the *Small Landscapes* within the larger cultural discourse on rural land and the meaning of the local in the turbulent early modern Netherlands. The study focuses new attention on the active and reciprocal intersections between printed pictures and broader cultural, economic, and political phenomena.

Alexandra Onuf is Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Hartford, USA.

Cover Image: Johannes and Lucas van Doetecum after the Master of the Small Landscapes, *Village Road with Farms and Sheds*, 135 × 205 mm, etching and engraving on paper, 1561, Rosenwald Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (1964.8.487) (photo: NGA Images)

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To my parents, Kristin and Peter Onuf



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Abbreviations

Hollstein F. W. H. Hollstein et al., *Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings, and Woodcuts, ca. 1450–1700*. 72 vols. Amsterdam: M. Hertzberger, 1949–2010.

NHD *The New Hollstein Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings, and Woodcuts, 1450–1700*. Roosendaal, etc.: Sound & Vision, in cooperation with the Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum, 1993–.

NHD Heemskerck (2 volumes)

NHD Doetecum (4 volumes)

NHD Cort (3 volumes)

NHD Galle (4 volumes)

NHD Borcht (1 volume)

NHD Collaert (8 volumes)

NHD Frisius (2 volumes)

NHD Floris (2 volumes)

NHD Bruegel (1 volume)

NHD Bol (2 volumes)

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Portions of Chapter 3 are a revised version of an essay that first appeared as “From Print to Paint and Back Again: Painting Practices and Print Culture in Early Modern Antwerp,” in *Prints in Translation, 1450–1750: Image, Materiality, Space*, edited by Suzanne Karr Schmidt and Edward Wouk, 19–41. London: Routledge, 2017. Reprinted by permission of Routledge.

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Introduction

Reading the *Small Landscapes*

When Hieronymus Cock published the first of two series of prints now known as the *Small Landscapes* in 1559, audiences in his native town of Antwerp could hardly have been prepared for what they saw. The prints – eighteen in the first series and twenty-six in the second series issued two years later in 1561 – present a variety of views of the local countryside surrounding Antwerp in simple, unembellished compositions.¹ Rustic villages, farmsteads, pastures, and country roads are portrayed in a straightforward and immediate fashion, with only the occasional peasant or traveler dotting the landscapes. At first glance, these landscapes might seem anything but remarkable. Take, for instance, a view of a village street from the first set, which depicts an ordinary rural village much like those located in the countryside surrounding Antwerp in the mid-sixteenth century (Figure I.1). In the right foreground, a peddler strides over a hillock inward toward the center of the scene while at the left other travelers sit resting on a log, their baskets set down before them. Figures in the middle of the scene walk in pairs or small groups along the main road into the village that runs from the left foreground back to the middle distance at right along a slight diagonal. Lining the roadway, large thatch-roofed barns alternate with stone houses, one of which at far left, partially obscured, has a stepped roof and a tall chimney. A few trees, a draw well, and a couple of open sheds stand alongside the road. Together with the rough furrows in the road, the movement of the figures creates a gentle visual pull into the middle distance at right, suggesting the calm, quotidian rhythms of a country village. Another view from the series depicts an even more intimate village scene, with houses and barns nestled deeply among trees and hedges and only a single pair of travelers resting at the edge of the road (Figure I.2). The quietude of this scene makes the first appear busy by comparison. Nothing here disrupts the stillness and peace. In both prints, the open roadways proffer an invitation, beckoning us enter into these pleasant places and to experience the native terrain at first hand.

It is precisely this concentration on humble rural settings and the apparent transparency of their presentation that make the *Small Landscapes* so astonishing. The title page to the first of the two series advertises that the views were drawn “*naer d’leven*,” or from life, suggesting that the prints represent real places directly observed. Though artists recorded such views in sketchbooks and drawings before this time and incorporated rural motifs into the backgrounds of paintings, the *Small Landscapes* are the first instance of compositions of this type being published as a series of prints, intended for a wider audience of artists, art collectors, and connoisseurs. At a time when vast panoramic and allegorical landscapes dominated the art market, the *Small Landscapes* represent a striking innovation. Indeed, the prints challenge



Figure I.1 Johannes and Lucas van Doetecum after the Master of the Small Landscapes, *Village Street*, 135 × 200 mm, etching and engraving on paper, 1559, Rosenwald Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (1964.8.514)

Photo: NGA Images



Figure I.2 Johannes and Lucas van Doetecum after the Master of the Small Landscapes, *Village Road with Resting Couple*, 133 × 203 mm, etching and engraving on paper, 1561, Rosenwald Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (1964.8.489)

Photo: NGA Images

the expectations of audiences accustomed to works of art with more explicit narrative content or heroic human action. They take what had been merely the settings or backgrounds of traditional compositions and isolate them as images worthy of critical attention and aesthetic appreciation in their own right. In this way, the *Small Landscapes* are extraordinary precisely because of their ordinariness. Over the course of the two series, the forty-four images repeat and vary local rural views such as the ones described above, multiplying the sensation of a vicarious journey through the local countryside and underscoring the sense of significance conferred upon such apparently insignificant locales.

Given how innovative these prints were when they first appeared, it should come as no surprise that scholars have long sought to determine the artist responsible for designing such groundbreaking images. A group of twenty or so related drawings has survived, about half of which were used as models for the prints and none of which is signed or dated.² Since René van Bastelaer first proposed in 1908 that these sketches were drawn by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, scholars have struggled to confirm the identity of the designer.³ Over time, an enormous variety of sixteenth-century artists has been proposed as the master responsible for these drawings; in addition to Pieter Bruegel,⁴ Cornelis Cort,⁵ Matthys Cock,⁶ an artist in the circle of Cornelis Massys,⁷ Hieronymus Cock himself,⁸ Hans Bol,⁹ Cornelis van Dalem,¹⁰ and the otherwise little-known Joos van Liere¹¹ have all been considered.¹² No consensus has emerged. It is entirely possible that the drawings used for the *Small Landscapes* were executed by a number of different artists working in and around Antwerp in the 1540s or 1550s. Some scholars have identified the hands of at least two separate draftsmen in the group of drawings.¹³ This issue is not likely to ever reach a satisfactory conclusion.

Indeed, it seems less profitable to dwell on the authorship of the initial designs than to investigate what happens to these images once Cock transfigures them from drawings into prints. Borrowing from Roland Barthes, we might characterize this as a shift in focus from the author to the reader. Barthes argues that in the traditional modern approach to literary analysis,

the explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author ‘confiding’ in us.

However, such an approach fundamentally confines a text to a single, final meaning that acts “to close the writing.” Barthes proposes instead that “it is language which speaks, not the author.” This paradigm allows for a multiplicity of “writings” that free the text from this limit:

thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author.

As such, “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.”¹⁴ If we turn from texts to images, Barthes’s interpretive model provides a fruitful way to reconsider the *Small Landscapes*. It permits us to turn our attention away from the “author” of the drawings – the particular artist or artists who made the sketches – and their potential

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motivations for making them. Instead, we turn from the origins of the drawings to their destinations, and the many readers who encountered and “wrote” them anew. We might say that the first of these readers was Hieronymus Cock himself. Once the images were disseminated as prints, they entered into much a broader readership, both shaped by and helping to shape myriad artistic, cultural, and political meanings over time. This model of readership grants an independent autonomy to the image, freed from the intentions of its maker, that finds agency in the fertile interaction with its viewers.¹⁵ By departing from narrower concerns of artistic authorship, this book will offer new insights into the contextual importance of these prints that previous scholarship has not addressed.

This print series was one of Cock’s most ambitious undertakings, matching in scope the most extensive of his other print series.¹⁶ His commercial gamble on an untried artistic formula proved successful, and the prints reached broad, international audiences. Moreover, the series remained in print for at least a century. Three editions were published in Antwerp by the Galle publishing dynasty in the seventeenth century and Claes Visscher issued a copied set in Amsterdam in 1612. These later editions clearly signal the ongoing relevance and resonance of the series, a phenomenon that has never been adequately investigated. How could such apparently simple images sustain their artistic and cultural currency for almost a century? This book charts the diachronic history of this series over this extended period of active circulation, from 1559 to the middle of the seventeenth century. Adopting the publication lifespan of the prints as the framework of the study, I analyze each of the successive states of the plates and the changes to the series as a whole as they moved from the hands of one publisher to another. By taking this *longue durée* approach, we can begin to uncover the shifting artistic and contextual valences of the images at their different moments and places of publication. While this study remains limited to this single series of landscapes, it facilitates new perspectives on the trajectory of print publishing over the course of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries more generally, highlighting the seminal importance of print publishers in the creation, perpetuation, and dissemination of visual imagery and cultural ideas.

As such, this book contributes to a recent spate of studies on early modern print publishers. This direction of scholarship was inaugurated by Timothy Riggs’s dissertation on Hieronymus Cock (1971). Cock has since been the subject of a major recent exhibition and publication (2013) that updated and expanded upon much of Riggs’s work, clarifying the range and extent of Cock’s operations and underscoring the fundamental importance of prints in shaping the Renaissance more broadly.¹⁷ Other Netherlandish publishers have likewise received significant attention, including Philips Galle, Claes Visscher, and Hendrick Hondius.¹⁸ Excellent new studies on the wider networks of publishers in both seventeenth-century Antwerp and Amsterdam have also been undertaken.¹⁹ Similar work is being conducted on print publishers active in Rome.²⁰ Because it assesses all of the editions of the *Small Landscapes*, this study will perforce consider the work of several publishers, highlighting the interconnections between them and their output in a way that more monographic studies focused on individual publishing firms do not.

This diachronic approach also focuses attention on the active and reciprocal intersections between printed pictures and broader artistic, cultural, economic, and political phenomena. Given their long publication history, these prints furnish a unique opportunity to study how the appearance, content, and meaning of early modern