

# SYMBOLIC POWER OF THE WINDMILL

Digging deeper into the history and symbolism  
of Dutch art.



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**A**s you wander through the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, amidst the assorted Vermeers, Rembrandts, still lifes and self-portraits, a certain distinctive windmill might initially escape your attention. Once you spot it, however, there is no mistaking it: the tall structure dominates the canvas, set against a cloudy sky painted in subtle greys, blues, greens, and browns. The river and the landscape are almost an afterthought, and there is no doubt as to what the artist wants us to focus on. The towering windmill in Wijk bij Duurstede is the indisputable protagonist of the painting. It is a symbol of the Netherlands, an indelible element of the country's landscape, culture, art, and everyday life.

Upon returning from a trip to the Netherlands in 1921, the Polish artist Tadeusz Makowski wrote: "I travelled slowly through Rotterdam, the famous Haarlem, La Haye. A flat landscape as far as the eye can see, canals crisscrossing the fertile fields and pastureland. Windmills dotting the landscape like wraiths, their ancient silhouettes seemingly sprouting from the soil. Masts and outlines of ships in the distance, cattle and sheep graze the fields. All real, yet looking straight from paintings by old Dutch masters. Fragments from Ruisdael and Vermeer. I admired them from my carriage window," (cited from M. Śniedziewska, *Siedemnastowieczne malarstwo holenderskie w literaturze polskiej po 1918 roku* [Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting in Polish Literature Since 1918], Toruń 2014).

Much like such Polish artists as Józef Pankiewicz, Jan Cybis, and Józef Czapski, Makowski was fascinated by the observations of the French critic Eugène

Fromentin, author of *The Masters of Past Time*. Polish writings on the art of the Netherlands and discourse on such authors as Fromentin and Johann Wolfgang Goethe have entered the canon of Polish art history and essay writing. Jan Białostocki's annotations to the Polish edition of Fromentin's *Les Maîtres d'autrefois* explains that Dutch painting cannot be separated from the terrain where it was created. This is an important point, since viewers typically attempt to situate paintings in the context of their own reality, examining them much like Makowski admired the lowlands from his train window.

Indeed, the discussions of all Polish and many other scholars of Dutch culture start from the paintings, rather than from the scenery itself. It is the paintings that are the point of departure, the key to polemicizing with the Old Masters. The windmill, on the other hand has a long history of being used for drainage in the Netherlands, making it a common element of the landscape. It was only later that it became popular with artists.

The *Windmill of Wijk bij Duurstede* showcases the classic Dutch motifs: the landscape dominated by the sky, unpredictable weather, waterways, and of course the towering structure itself. The vast scale of the windmill is a conscious attempt to elevate its symbolism, encouraging reflection, comparisons between art and reality, and continuing interpretations of the artwork.

## Dutch landscapes

The history of landscape painting dates back centuries, reflecting how people experienced and expressed their relationship with nature in different ways. Depictions of landscapes have varied according to artists' sensitivities, vision and perception of their relationship with the environment. We tend to think that the art of the Middle Ages focuses on spirituality and otherworldly matters and does not depict the beauty of the natural



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world, but this is not always the case. The opulent late-medieval illuminated miniatures, tapestries and frescoes frequently feature intricate elements of nature and humankind's reliance on the rhythm of nature. In later centuries, when the contemporary world gradually became as important to artists as the spiritual sphere, painting started revealing a sensuality closely linked with nature. However, before landscapes became a distinct genre, artists used them as a backdrop for historical, mythical and religious events and as settings for portraits. The natural world was there to enhance emotions and discreetly set the mood.

The realism of *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* (1410-1416) and other "books of hours" made for Milanese and Neapolitan patrons, attributed by some to the van Eyck brothers, soon found its way into easel painting. By the 15th century, the meticulous depiction of details in Dutch landscapes gave them an increasing autonomy. Previously depicted in the background or serving as a setting, landscapes came to the forefront. Artists focused on the impact of light and weather, bringing further realism to their faithful depictions

of nature. By the early 16th century, landscapes had become a fully-fledged genre. Dutch artists were captivated by the beauty of their country; they sought inspiration from Italian landscapes, but they found their idealized style smoothing out irregularities found in the natural world did not feel right in their native Netherlands. Landscapes extended to the entire canvases, with human figures acting as staffage, narrative elements rather than protagonists.

## Windmills as symbols of progress

Jacob van Ruisdael, whose *Windmill of Wijk bij Duurstede* (ca. 1668-1670, oil on canvas, 83×101 cm, Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam) we discussed at the outset, was one of the great painters of the Dutch Golden Age. He worked in the wake of the Netherlands regaining its independence, when he and other artists started seeing their homeland as worthy of celebrating and turned their attention to the scenery. This came after

Jacob van Ruisdael,  
*Windmill of Wijk bij Duurstede*, ca. 1670,  
Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam

Traditional windmills  
in the village of Kinderdijk  
in the Netherlands



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centuries of Habsburg rule, which had put the Netherlands under powerful influence of Catholic Spain since 1447. While the Holland and Flanders regions were provinces of Habsburg Netherlands, their citizens had no distinct nationality of their own, although northern Netherlands was overwhelmingly Protestant while Flanders in the south was dominated by Catholicism. Independence finally arrived in the early 17th century. Liberation from the foreign rule was a great victory against Spain's military might and brought a widespread sense of personal liberation. The treaty of Antwerp was signed in 1609, putting an end to the Eighty Years' War with Spain and ushering in freedom of religion throughout the Netherlands.

The fact that Dutch landscapes are dotted with windmills is, of course, no romantic accident. Living on land at or even below sea level would have been impossible without continual human intervention. Polders – low-lying tracts of agricultural land – were surrounded by dikes and then drained, in a practice that dates back to the 11th century. The land was prone to flooding by inland waters and the sea, and the local population worked hard to adapt it by building embankments and constructing their dwellings on the highest ground possible. Initially used to grind grain into flour, windmills were soon harnessed to drive water pumps transporting water from lower to higher regions, where it was pumped yet again by still more windmills. The drained ground could then be used for settlement and agriculture. As well as being used for drainage, windmills were also used to mill flour, press rapeseed and sunflower oil, grind mustard seeds, drive sawmills and grind pigments.

Nowadays, windmills are the Netherlands' main tourist attractions, with around 1000 old mills scattered throughout the country, mainly privately owned and sometimes still used as accommodation. This is just a tiny fraction of the numbers dotting the land-

scape three centuries ago. In 1729, the Beemster polder alone was kept drained by a whopping 629 windmills, surrounded by a complex system of dikes and embankments. The Netherlands is home to around four thousand polders of different sizes, ranging from just a single hectare to over 50,000 hectares.

For example, the Flevoland region was once a bay of the North Sea – or rather, of the “South Sea” (*Zuid-erzee*) as the Dutch would have it. The Netherlands' youngest province, it was not drained until the 20th century, when the dike separating it from the rest of the North Sea was built in 1932. Polders were being created up until 1968, serving as settlements for families from overpopulated Amsterdam and its suburbs. The region is still developing rapidly and is a hub of tulip plantations – another symbol of the Netherlands.

## Windmills in paintings

During the 1630s, Dutch painting took on an wholly nationalist focus. The landscapes became increasingly monochromatic; the moisture-saturated air diffused the sunlight, giving the world a muted palette of greys. This gave the paintings an intimate aura; the soft contours and blue-grey glaze muting bright colors were seen as superior to the dazzling, detailed Flemish style. This did not make the paintings any less colorful – the Dutch masters were skilled at making the most of the subtle shades. While Flemish landscapes were dominated by the ground and trees, Dutch artists showed a clear preference for the sky. In tandem with the almost monochromatic, nuanced shades, this gave Dutch landscapes a meditative, pensive atmosphere.

During the second half of the 17th century, artists continued to reach for traditions of monochromatic landscapes while turning their attention even more towards contemplation, peace, and quietude. They expressed their personal interpretations of nature and



started specializing in landscapes depicting the sea, fields, forests, and rivers.

Few were as versatile in their work as Jacob van Ruisdael, though not even he could hide his passion for observing the sky. Sunlight changed hue as it pierced through clouds; however, the most important element of his style was a quest for a feeling of drama. He was fascinated by nature and took great pleasure in painting the sea and its destructive power, rapid rivers and even waterfalls, entirely unknown in his native Netherlands. The Dutch landscape artist Allaert van Everdingen travelled to Sweden around 1640 and his subsequent paintings had a major impact on van Ruisdael, who had never seen a waterfall. This impression and inspiration, intertwined with a sense of drama, contributed to his depiction of the exaggerated silhouette of the windmill of Wijk bin Duurstede. The artist imposed his narrative on the painting, bringing to the fore an element which might otherwise have been overlooked.

The painting depicts a landscape around the town of Wijk, near Utrecht. As well as the windmill dominating the scene, the painting is a realistic representation of the area, showing the River Lek flowing through the lowlands under a turbulent sky. The actual windmill was much smaller than shown in the painting. The illusion of depth, perspective and subtle colors come together to create a highly naturalistic vision. As a result, the windmill appears to be of the right proportions, since the other elements of the surroundings all come together at its silhouette. A few women walking along the riverside path, shown as pale shapes, do not draw our attention away from the main element. The town buildings in the distance, the shrubs and the women are all essential elements of the landscape, painted in meticulous detail and enhanced by the diffuse sunlight. The windmill is positioned at the intersection of the outlines of the sky, water,

and land. It is a cylindrical construction with a single small window and a balustraded balcony encircling the building about halfway up. The artistic illusions serve to emphasize the realism; the artist uses them to create a vision of the world in accordance with his imagination.

The nearby coast, ubiquitous waterways, mists and sunlight glowing through the clouds all make paintings depicting the Netherlands of that time extremely intimate artworks. Their atmosphere comes from the diffuse light bringing together all elements of the landscape into an almost monochromatic whole. Van Ruisdael saw the landscape through a veil of mist which blurred contours or distorted them into forms creating an illusion of optical imperfection. He intertwined traditions of almost monochromatic painting with a luminosity bringing warmer tones.

Ernst Gombrich wrote about Jacob van Ruisdael that as he was growing up, masterpieces by Jan van Goyen and even Rembrandt were already widely acclaimed, so they would have influenced his style and choice of subjects: “During the first half of his life he lived in the beautiful town of Haarlem, which is separated from the sea by a range of wooded dunes. He loved to study the effect of light and shade on these tracts and specialized more and more in picturesque forest scenes. Ruisdael became a master in the painting of dark and sombre clouds, of evening light when the shadows grow, of ruined castles and rushing brooks. In short it was he who discovered the poetry of the northern landscape” (E.H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, 1950, Phaidon).

Van Ruisdael was also described as a poet of the paintbrush by Goethe<sup>1</sup> and by the great Polish romantic poet, Adam Mickiewicz.<sup>2</sup> From a scholarly point of view, his paintings are an accurate reflection of the ideas of the era. The regained independence, freedom and right to their land inspired artists to depict the Netherlands as they saw it and as they wanted to show it to the future generations. It is notable that they shied away from portraits of national heroes and historical and battle scenes. The Protestant religion and culture was more attuned to landscape and genre painting. Dutch artists turned their attention to the natural world, creating images of a beautiful land worth preserving for the future. Jacob van Ruisdael consciously chose the windmill as a symbol of the Netherlands. ■

<sup>1</sup> J.W. Goethe, *Ruisdael the Poet*, 181.

<sup>2</sup> “As for painting: for a picture one requires viewpoints, grouping, ensemble – and sky, the Italian sky! Hence in landscape art Italy was, is, and will be the country of painters. Hence also, except for Breughel – not Van der Helle, but the landscapist, for there are two Breughels – and except Ruysdael, in the whole north where has there been a landscape artist of the first rank?” – A. Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz*, trans. George Rapall Noyes, London and Toronto, 1917.

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