

Under the Magnifying Glass: Dutch and Flemish Drawings from the Museum's Collection,
September 22, 2000-January 14, 2001

In the 17th and early 18th centuries, artists working in the Low Countries (present-day Netherlands and Belgium) looked closely at every aspect of the world around them and also fashioned imagined worlds reaching back to ancient Greece and Rome. Not only did artists depict details made visible with the aid of a magnifying glass, but they applied this same scrutiny to broad views of the landscape and life within it. Three hundred years later, their rich and detailed images still have the power to captivate the eye. In the spirit of investigation, six graduate students in a seminar given by the Department of the History of Art and Architecture at Brown University placed the 19 drawings in this gallery "under the magnifying glass." Supported by a grant to the RISD Museum from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Professor Jeffrey Muller, his Mellon intern Nancy Kay, and Mariana Aguirre, Bob Brooker, Anne Heath, Andrea Lepage, Hope Saska, and Tanya Sheehan used visual clues to verify or challenge existing scholarship.

In cases where very little was previously known, they reconnected the drawings to their obscured origins. For four months, the team conducted extensive research at universities and museums in the United States and abroad. Comparing the RISD drawings to works of the same time period, region, or subject from other collections helped to place them within their historical context. Since many drawings from this period are unsigned or have been inscribed at a later date by someone other than the artist, careful examination of the drawing techniques helped to determine the proper attributions. In most cases, this was done by literally observing the lines of a drawing under a magnifying glass, noting their signature style, and then relating that style to works in other collections. An examination of the drawings on a light table, under the microscope, or with ultraviolet light revealed further information on the specific tools and materials used in their creation. Consultations with experts who visited the RISD Museum also were important for confirming specific findings and hypotheses. The team's research yielded exciting results that often significantly revised existing scholarship. Share in the investigation by picking up a magnifying glass and exploring these images with your own eyes.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Ludolf Backhuysen I, Dutch, 1631-1708
Ludolf Backhuysen I, Dutch, 1631-1708
Coastal Scene, 1800s
Pen and ink on paper
Museum Works of Art Fund 60.040

This drawing was thought to be by Ludolf Backhuysen when it was purchased in 1960, but when compared to the Backhuysen "Smalschip Recaulking on the Dutch Dunes" also on view in this gallery, this attribution proved to be suspect. Backhuysen's drawings consistently have a light graphite outline beneath the ink. Moreover, the drawing technique lacks the assurance of Backhuysen's hand. The



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team's suspicions were confirmed when the drawing was held before a light. This should have revealed the mold lines of a handmade paper. There were none, indicating that the paper was machine manufactured, a process used after 1801.

Adriaen Brouwer, Flemish, 1605/6-1638
Schoolroom Scene, 1700s
Brush with wash, pen with ink, black chalk
Anonymous gift 1998.17

An old inscription on this drawing attributes it to the famous 17th-century Flemish genre painter Adrian Brouwer (1605/6-38); however, the uneven proportions of the figures and the rough quality of the workmanship point rather to an amateur artist working in the style and tradition of such well-known Dutch and Flemish genre artists as Brouwer, David Ryckaert (1612-61), and Jan Steen (1626-79). The Brouwer inscription may be understood as a specific artist's name being used to describe a typical peasant subject, much in the way we use the term "Xerox" to describe any copy machine. Seventeenth-century Dutch schoolroom scenes are often satirical comments on the state of rural education. In this drawing, the teacher is oblivious to the fighting in the classroom. The large ceramic mug at his feet suggests that he is drinking and not teaching. A switch lies idly in front of the teacher, implying he has not inflicted enough discipline on the students. The tavern scene on the classroom wall suggests that peasants prefer the earthly pleasure of drink to the intellectual pleasure of learning.



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Willem van Mieris, Dutch, 1662-1747
Francis van Bossuit, Flemish, 1635 - 1692
Venus and Cupid, 1680 - 1727
Graphite on vellum
Gift of Norman and Tamara Bolotow 84.026

Willem van Mieris, son of the renowned Dutch genre painter Frans van Mieris, belonged to a group of painters in Leiden known as the *fijnschilders* ("fine painters"), famous for their detailed and exquisite work. In addition to making paintings that continued the style of his father, Willem van Mieris also produced a number of virtuoso drawings based on contemporary sculpture that he collected. *Venus and Cupid* is from a series of drawings Van Mieris made after sculptures by Franciscus van Bossuit (1635-1692), a Flemish ivory carver who lived in Amsterdam during the last eight years of his life. Of the 13 drawings in the series, 12 faithfully reproduce casts after Van Bossuit's sculptures. *Venus and Cupid* is the exception. In this work, Van Mieris combined two separate sculptures by Van Bossuit to create a new subject. Venus and the dolphin are taken from Van Bossuit's sculpture of the sea nymph Galatea, while the Cupid breaking his bow is borrowed from Van Bossuit's *Amor*. With the addition of Cupid, Galatea becomes Venus, the Roman goddess of love. The source for the poses of both Venus and Galatea is, undoubtedly, the famous Medici Venus - a revered classical Roman sculpture. Working with painstaking care in black chalk on parchment, Van Mieris proudly signed his drawing on the back, intending it to be a precious collector's item equal in value and quality to the fine ivory carvings he copied.



Jan de Bisschop, Dutch, 1628-1671
Mother & Child, after 1655
Bister ink and wash technique on paper, incised for transfer
Gift of Maida and George Abrams in memory of Professor J.Q. van Regteren Altena 81.099

This drawing is an excellent example of Jan de Bisschop's work in his typical medium of bister ink, a dark brown medium that fades over time to a rich orange tone. In terms of style, the classically posed figures reflect the artist's fascination with Italian models. His interests prompted him to travel to Italy around 1655 to study and sketch Greek and Roman sculpture as well as Italian paintings and monuments. Many of his works are direct copies from Italian models, while others are reminiscent of classical art, but do not resemble any particular object or school, as is the case with this RISD drawing. It is only the woman's halo and the fruit in the child's hand that identify



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the subjects as the Madonna and Child. Close examination reveals that the contours of Madonna and Child were incised with a burin, an engraver's tool, indicating that de Bisschop presumably intended to copy the outline of his drawing in order to produce a print of it. Many of his sketches were reproduced as prints and bound in volumes that were meant to serve as teaching models for young artists. To date, no print of this drawing has been discovered.

Pieter Holsteyn II, Dutch, 1614-1687
Study of Hyacinths, 1600s
Watercolor, pen and ink on paper
Anonymous gift 1987.109.5

In the second half of the sixteenth century, a widespread interest in procuring, cultivating, and illustrating foreign plants emerged in Holland. By the late 1630s, this interest developed into a full-fledged "tulip mania" that carried over to other extremely popular and expensive imports, including the iris, daffodil, and hyacinth. Botanicals from this period were often illustrations for sales catalogues, records of private gardens and bulb collections, or preliminary sketches for flower paintings. This drawing was originally bound into a flower book (Latin, florilegium), together with other works by the artist. According to convention, it depicts three different species of the hyacinth, with the pre-18th century classification inscribed in Dutch beneath each plant. In order to confirm the authorship of this work, the research team compared the style, media, and dimensions of other drawings attributed to Pieter Holsteyn the Younger. Not only was the attribution confirmed, but it was discovered that, due to unique similarities, it is possible that several iris drawings sold at auction were collected into a single album with this drawing. Since Holsteijn's work is largely undated and without historical documentation, one cannot positively determine the specific album within which the drawing was originally bound.



Jan van Huysum, Dutch, 1682-1749
Studies of Butterflies and Insects, late 1600s-early 1700s
Watercolor on vellum
Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 31.089

While the pleasing arrangement of 16 insects recalls the aesthetic quality of Pieter Withoos's "Four Butterflies and a Bumblebee" (also on view), under the magnifying glass this work does not have the



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identifying features and precise rendering typical of work by an artist-entomologist. The rather haphazard arrangement of the insects and the unrealistic details of eyes, legs, and wings suggest that this work was done by an amateur. Given the style of depiction and arrangement of the insects, this work may have been used by a painter as a template or pattern sheet for a flower painting. The specific insects are common to Dutch flower pieces of the time. The rather unskilled quality of the work suggests that the insects were drawn from the paintings of a more skilled artist. The use of parchment (goat- or sheepskin- prepared for drawing), while traditionally associated with more finished works, is consistent with the identification of this drawing as a study tool. Such a sheet would likely be reused by the artist and thus would have been executed on a support more durable than paper.

Ludolf Backhuysen I, Dutch, 1631-1708
Smalschip Recaulking on the Dutch Dunes, 1670 - 1690
Pen and ink and wash technique with graphite underdrawing
Mary B. Jackson Fund 31.358

Ludolf Backhuysen was a prolific and popular marine artist. Many of his paintings, drawings, and prints survive. This drawing is unsigned, which is unusual for Backhuysen; nevertheless, the high quality of the work and the materials used strongly suggest Backhuysen's confident hand. The initial graphite outline for this drawing, difficult to detect without a magnifying lens, is characteristic of his drawings. The sheet presents a coastal or river freighter known as a smalschip that is beached for repairs. The crew can be seen at the smoking pot preparing the caulking, a water-resistant tar or resin applied periodically to the ship's hull to seal it. A number of recaulking scenes appear in Dutch 17th-century art, suggesting that these works were produced for a maritime clientele.



Jan Brueghel the Elder, Flemish, 1568-1625
Landscape with Two Windmills and a Town, after 1607
Pen and brushpoint with ink, brush and blue and green (faded to blue) washes on antique laid paper
Gift of Henry D. Sharpe 50.297

This finely executed drawing is one of several copies after an oil painting by Jan Breughel the Elder (see accompanying photograph) and was previously thought to have been produced by him. Breughel was one of the leading painters in 17th-century Antwerp. The artist



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who drafted this sheet was so clearly skilled in replicating Breughel's drawing techniques and style that it may well have been made by a member of his family or studio. Drawings by his son, Jan Breughel the Younger, and by other artists in his circle are difficult to distinguish from drawings signed by the Elder. Although the copyist included minute compositional elements, the drawing technique does not approach the delicacy of Jan the Elder's draftsmanship. This is especially evident in the use of black ink to underline areas of the drawing. Look at the shadows of the wagons and shrubbery in the lower left of the sheet. The heaviness of these lines is uncharacteristic of Jan the Elder. Additionally, none of his signed drawings are preparatory studies for his oil paintings, but instead were intended as finished pieces in themselves. The small scale and highly finished quality of the Elder's drawings made them attractive to collectors in his lifetime, thus replicating his works would have been lucrative for a copyist, as well as for the Breughel studio. Compositionally, this scene is a departure from traditional Flemish landscapes. Such views, popularized by Jan Breughel the Elder's father, the celebrated Pieter Breughel the Elder (around 1526-69), present a bird's-eye view of mountains, fields, and forests, united in one composition. By dropping the horizon line to the bottom quarter of the paper, and placing the roadway at a diagonal to the picture plane, Jan the Elder situates the viewer closer to the land and welcomes his audience into the landscape.

Dutch

Imaginary Scene of a Galley in a Mediterranean Harbor, 1650 - 1680
Pen and ink and wash technique on paper
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John Steiner 82.029

The galley portrayed in this drawing is a royal French ship. It can be identified by the coat of arms with three fleurs-de-lys found on both the banners and the stern plaque. The bust on the stern is probably that of Louis XIV, king of France from 1643 to 1715. Louis XIV made several trips to the Mediterranean, including one in 1660. Italian and French artists frequently created Mediterranean galley scenes, and Dutch artists who lived and traveled in Italy were also fascinated by the subject. The inscriptions suggest that the author of this work was probably Dutch. On the drawing are the words "gally" under the galley, and "flack" under the launch. These seem to be 17th-century variants on more common Dutch spellings. The watermark - the paper manufacturer's mark, visible when the sheet is held up to light - is almost certainly mid-17th-century Dutch. Even so, the style and superb draftsmanship of this drawing, when compared to the works of other Dutch artists, did not yield a positive attribution.



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Gilles van Coninxloo III, Flemish, ca. 1544-1607
Wooded Mountain Landscape, Mid 1500s-Early 1600s
Brush with wash and pen and ink on paper
Gift of Miss Ellen D. Sharpe 50.303

Originally attributed to the Flemish artist Gillis van Coninxloo, this sheet is representative of many drawings that were made in imitation of his style and technique. Coninxloo was one of the artists who popularized wooded landscape compositions that depict dense tangles of branches and undergrowth. Unlike this drawing, his forest interiors typically obscure the horizon line. The copyist's hand is indicated by the unfinished borders of the drawing, where the lines trail off and lose their specificity. This suggests that the artist was copying from another source, rather than inventing his own composition. The dark, tangled forest is not realistically described: the trees are treated as design elements, rather than individualized objects. Drawings in this ornamental style are often related to tapestry designs because of their flatness and the schematic handling of the light and shadows.



Hendrick Cornelisz. Vroom, Dutch, 1566-1640
Shipping off the Dutch Coast, 1620 - 1640
Pen and ink on paper
Museum Works of Art Fund 60.041

H. C. Vroom was an important early marine artist who specialized in depicting very detailed naval battles and other historical scenes. Even after Vroom ceased producing these paintings and drawings, his studio, which included his two sons, continued to create similar works. This image depicts a merchantman or frigate built around 1630-40 on the left and on the right a boat (Dutch word for a small utility craft). The images on the reverse, discovered in the process of removing the work from its mount for this study, were executed earlier. The sheet appears to have been trimmed to suit the drawing on view here. The reverse pictures sterns of boats from a slightly earlier time: a merchantman or frigate of 1620-30 and a "smalschip" (a coastal or river freighter). The research team compared the RISD drawing to two Vroom drawings in the Yale University Art Gallery's collection and became convinced that the RISD drawing contained enough characteristics of the Vroom family to be placed within their workshop.



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Adriaen van Ostade, Dutch, 1610-1685

Tavern Interior, 1600s

Pen with iron gall ink, brush with wash, graphite underdrawing

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 23.320

Although this drawing has been rendered in the style of Adrian van Ostade's early period, scholars have questioned a direct attribution to that artist. The subject matter, materials, and techniques are those favored by Ostade: the artist first used graphite to sketch out the composition, then continued to work out the placement of the figures with a pen and iron gall ink. (This ink can be easily identified because its high acidic content actually destroys the paper. It has caused visible damage to this sheet.) Despite these characteristics, study of the drawing's technique, particularly the hesitant and uneven nature of the pen strokes, indicates that this fine sketch is in fact a copy. The inscription "A van Ostade" at right suggests a copy made after a composition by Ostade, rather than a new creation rendered in his style. This drawing is of such good quality, however, that it was once included in the collection of Jonathan Richardson the Elder (1665-1745), a famous art connoisseur. His stamp is visible in the bottom right corner of the drawing. Rustic tavern scenes are common in Dutch 17th-century art. Many of Ostade's drawings and paintings, such as the oil "Peasants in a Tavern," on view in the Museum's fifth-floor galleries, depict male peasants sitting around tables drinking and smoking. These moralizing scenes reflect urban middle class notions of the idleness of country life.



Jan de Bisschop, Dutch, 1628-1671

Allegorical Figure, 1600s

Pen and ink and wash technique on paper, with graphite underdrawing

Gift of Mr. Eric Wunsch 69.183

The stylized drapery folds and modeling of this figure reveal that the artist had an interest in classical art, particularly ancient Roman sculpture. Other drawings in this exhibition, such as Willem de Mieris's *Venus and Cupid* and Jan de Bisschop's *Madonna and Child*, were also influenced by classical Italian models. The drawing was originally attributed to de Bisschop, although the medium is unusual for him. The use of a classical style is neither exclusive to de Bisschop nor distinctive enough to secure the drawing's date or country of origin. In this case our research produced more questions than

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answers. Even the subject is puzzling. A female holding a book could refer to many allegorical and religious figures. She may be the personification of an ideal concept such as Wisdom or Rhetoric; however, the drawing does not provide enough information to confirm a precise interpretation.

David Teniers II, Flemish, 1610-1690

Figure Study, 1600s-1700s

Black chalk on paper, mounted on two larger sheets

Gift of Sumner Stone 1989.008

Despite the monogram "DT," the earlier attribution of this drawing to the Flemish artist David Teniers is unsatisfactory for several reasons. The horizontal hatching found on the barrel does not match Teniers's use of diagonal hatching. Other details, such as the disproportionate size of the gesturing hand and the use of black chalk, are also uncharacteristic of Teniers's work. His drawings are almost exclusively rendered in graphite. The subject of this sketch resembles the figures found in typical tavern scenes popular in the Netherlands at that time (see the *Tavern Interior* after Adriaen van Ostade also on view in this gallery). Teniers himself often painted images of people sitting in taverns, drinking heavily and carrying on lively conversations. Many of the figures in these works display intense facial expressions, a quality that the creator of this study captured as well.



Pieter Withoos, Dutch, 1654-1693

Study of Four Butterflies and a Bumblebee, late 1600s

Watercolor and gouache over graphite on vellum

Ernest and Pearl Nathan Fund 82.025

This watercolor is remarkable for its intricate detail and trompe-l'oeil ("fool the eye") effect, a trademark of Dutch still-life painting. Withoos's technique, which involved layering on watercolor with a very fine brush, was undoubtedly executed with the aid of a magnifying lens. The use of vellum (a fine parchment made of calf-, lamb-, or kidskin) for this drawing sets it apart from more preliminary sketches, since the precious material was only used for highly finished works. Although his work often takes on a quasi-scientific function, Withoos was first and foremost an artist by training who used insect subjects for a highly aesthetic purpose. Clearly influenced by the style of the Netherlandish miniature tradition, his work is best seen in



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relation to other 17th-century Dutch artists who combined the roles of artist and natural historian. Among the reasons for the immense popularity of insects as artistic subjects in late 16th-century and early 17th-century Europe was a growing curiosity about the previously unseen natural world, made increasingly visible by the invention and refinement of lens technology and the telescope and microscope. The honeybee is reported to have been the first insect whose parts were illustrated (published 1625) with the assistance of a microscope. The butterfly was a particularly popular subject. Its dramatic metamorphosis symbolized God's infinite power in minute form and provided an almost inexhaustible range of artistic possibilities.

Peter Paul Rubens, Flemish, 1577-1640

Peter Paul Rubens, Flemish, 1577-1640

Bacchus, late 1500s- mid 1600s

Black chalk, brush with wash heightened with white body color, slight traces of ink with brush point

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.463

This drawing is a copy of the central figures in Peter Paul Rubens's painting of Bacchus (around 1638-40), now in the Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia (see accompanying photo). Rubens was one of the most influential 17th-century artists, and many copies were made after his work. This drawing has usually been attributed to an anonymous Flemish artist. Examination of the sheet under ultraviolet light revealed faded white highlights on the figure of Bacchus. These were quite skillfully executed, leading this seminar to reconsider the suggestion of one art historian, Michael Jaffe, who believed this drawing could be the work of Jacob Jordaens (1593-88), Rubens's distinguished young contemporary (see Jordaens's *Allegory* in the gallery). Jordaens's interest in the nude, and particularly obese male nudes, might explain the isolation of the robust Bacchus, Roman god of wine and fertility, from the fuller Rubens composition; yet certain missing features make a solid connection between this work and Jordaens problematic, for example, the lack of colored washes, almost always found in the Jordaens drawings of the time. While a definite attribution is still impossible, at the very least it is evident that a Flemish follower of Rubens working in Belgium shortly after Rubens's death executed this fine copy.



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Flemish

Six Figures Copied from Albrecht Dürer's Presentation of the Virgin,
1630 - 1640

Recto: Pen and ink on paper prepared with ink wash

Anonymous gift 83.226.1

Comparison of the drawing styles on the front and back of this sheet shows that both images were made by the same artist. The drawing on the exhibited side is copied from a woodcut, *The Presentation of the Virgin at the Temple* (see accompanying photo) by the renowned German painter and printmaker Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528). In his series "Life of the Virgin," Dürer portrayed the young Virgin Mary mounting the temple stairs. In this drawing, the artist omitted the central figure of the scene and extracted six figures from the crowd, abbreviating their features. These artistic choices, as well as the emphasis on the drapery, suggest that this is a costume study based on the Dürer print, rather than a finished work for sale. An examination of the incomplete figure study on the reverse of the sheet supports this conclusion. Here the artist focused even more dramatically on the costume and its puffy sleeves. Typical of 1630s dress, the costume itself provides us with an approximate date for the drawing. Although many elements in the two works are of fine quality, certain passages within the drawing are inarticulate, suggesting that the artist was a student: for example, the male figure clutching his hat. The action of the hand is not convincing, and the hat itself barely identifiable. It was common practice for artists to learn through copying from prints by master artists. The style of the drawing emulates Rubens and suggests a Flemish artist.



Jacob Jordaens the Younger, Flemish, 1593-1678

Allegory, mid 1600s

Black and red chalk, brush with ink washes, and traces of body color
or chalk

Museum Works of Art Fund 53.002

Jacob Jordaens, one of 17th-century Antwerp's leading artists, produced many paintings, tapestry patterns, and drawings throughout his career. This sheet is a fine example of Jordaens's mature work, although its subject has puzzled art historians for decades. Many have suggested that it represents the myth of Mercury and Herse, as told by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* (Book II, 737-51), yet the male figure at left does not wear Mercury's



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traditional winged sandals and cap, which are particularly emphasized by Ovid. The drawing might depict an allegory of abundance. It is possible that the figure thought to be Mercury is a personification of wealth and abundance, since he holds a cornucopia in one hand and a heavy purse in the other. One of the Cupids around the female figure blows a bubble, which often symbolizes both the brevity of life and the impermanence of wealth, perhaps a warning to the woman reaching out for the proffered riches.

Jan Lievensz., Dutch, 1607-1674
Landscape with Springing Deer, ca. 1635
Pen and ink
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 22.103

This drawing has been most recently attributed to Jan Lievens primarily because of physical and stylistic similarities to his other works. A drawing thought to be by Lievens at the Fogg Museum, Harvard University, makes a striking comparison (see accompanying photograph). The drawings are the same size and are damaged and worn in the same areas. In both works, the treatment of the foliage recalls Lievens's preference for bold, energetic pen marks. Lievens also often employed wavelike hills, such as those seen in this sheet, to create a pattern of motion that pushes the horizon line upward. The subject of this drawing is unusual for Lievens. His landscape drawings are typically realistic representations of the Dutch countryside. This image seems to belong to an Italian tradition of pastoral and Arcadian scenes in which the landscape is a stage set waiting for action. This is enhanced by the inclusion of two figures dressed in Italian-style clothing, who observe the scene from the right border. Considering its style, the drawing was probably made in the mid-1630s, after Lievens moved to Antwerp from Leiden, where he had worked closely with Rembrandt.

