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Ernst J. Bos

LEI Wageningen University and Research Centre, the Netherlands

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Landscape painting adding a cultural value to the Dutch countryside

Cover Page Footnote

Many thanks to the following organisations who freely provided photos of paintings: The Dordrechts museum
Het Haags Gemeentemuseum Het Rijksmuseum Kunsthandel Polak Musée de Douai, Frankrijk

Landscape painting adding a cultural value to the Dutch countryside

Dr. Ernst J. Bos¹

¹*LEI Wageningen University and Research Centre, the Netherlands*

Introduction

In this article it is argued that cultural values should be included in policy making on the Dutch countryside. Since the seventeenth century the Dutch landscape had been a valued subject for art painters. This inheritance provides our rural areas a unique cultural value. The focus of this article is the region surrounding The Hague, where painters from the so-called Hague School had brought a large number of sites to their canvases. This group of painters was mainly active in the second half of the nineteenth century. For this study, various sites have been located that had been painted by members of The Hague School. For these sites, the ancient paintings will be presented, as well as the views of the current situation. From comparing the scenery on the painting with current situation it follows that much of the nineteenth century rural landscapes of The Hague nowadays have been eroded by urbanisation. During the last few decades a lot of these sites have disappeared. However, some of the located sites have not changed much since the moment they have been painted, and a few are still virtually identical to the scenes in the old paintings. It follows that protecting this specific cultural aspect of the Dutch countryside is an urgent matter that should be put on the agenda of landuse policy-making as soon as possible.

Art and the Dutch landscape

The Netherlands are an example of a painter's paradise. Together with Italy and France it has produced most of the world-renowned landscape painters. Through the ages, the Dutch countryside has been a valued subject for many landscape painters. In the seventeenth century, landscape painting began to emerge as a specific and highly valued genre of painting. Besides the attractiveness of the Dutch landscape, other factors have stimulated landscape painting as well. First, painting has historically been a major form of art expression in the Netherlands. Painting as an introverted way of expression creativity fitted well into the Dutch Calvinistic mentality. The unprecedented economic growth of the seventeenth century also stimulated the demand for art in general (Bos, 2009). In addition, art painting during the seventeenth century was shifting away from religious painting towards more worldly subjects, like landscapes (Os, 2008). Later, in the nineteenth century the invention of the paint tube was an important driving force that enabled painting outside the studio (Bos *et al.*, 2008).

Notwithstanding the impact of these developments, the attractiveness of the Dutch countryside must have been a key source for landscape painting in the Netherlands. In the seventeenth century, nowadays world-renowned painters such as Jacob van Ruysdael and Meindert Hobbema immortalised the landscape on canvas. Besides the romanticised fantasy landscapes, it was mainly the agricultural landscapes that were

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portrayed. Looking at paintings by Ruysdael, we can get a clear image of the landscape around Haarlem, 't Gooi and Ootmarsum in the seventeenth century. These paintings clearly illustrate the extensive grasslands as well as the vastness of the landscape.

The eighteenth century was a time of economic decline for the Netherlands, and this was also reflected in a sharp fall in the number of painters. During the nineteenth century however, the industrial revolution also reached the Netherlands, resulting in a rise in the number of painters. One of the pioneering landscape painters of those times was Johan Barthold Jongkind (*1819-†1891), who painted agricultural landscapes in addition to seascapes and townscapes. Jongkind was a student of Schelfhout, who is regarded as one of the most important predecessors of The Hague School. In 1863 Jongkind met the much younger Claude Monet, who since then began to paint in the characteristic shades of the impressionists. Another well-known nineteenth century Dutch painter is Vincent van Gogh. He painted many Dutch landscapes and rural scenes, especially in Drenthe and in the vicinity of The Hague.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, and beginning of the twentieth, a group of painters emerged who mainly concentrated on agricultural landscapes. This group became known as the The Hague School, which had a noteworthy auxiliary branch in 't Gooi, a region just east of Amsterdam (Sillevis *et al.*, 1988). The landscapes painted by these artists were much in demand in the United States and the United Kingdom. Painters in 't Gooi, the most well known of which were Anton Mauve and Jozef Israëls, concentrated entirely on agricultural landscapes and rural life. Later, Piet Mondriaan also established himself in 't Gooi where he could paint rural scenes.

Not only Dutch painters were inspired by their landscape. Well-known painters from abroad immortalised the Dutch landscape as well. The previously mentioned impressionist, Claude Monet spent time in the Netherlands where, amongst other things, he painted agricultural landscapes, such as the tulip fields. His contemporary Emanuel Manet, also painted in the Netherlands, as did William Singer, after whom the Singer Museum in Laren was named, and Wallis Kandinsky who also captured Dutch landscapes on canvas.

In recent times, several well-known painters, for example Rien Poortvliet, Pieter Verstappen, Ton Schulten and Hans Parlevliet used the Dutch agricultural landscape as a spearhead for their work.

Interaction with the economy

Economic growth provides a favourable climate for art. Historically, we can see this happening time and time again. In the Netherlands, the seventeenth century was not only a period of unprecedented economic growth, but the number of Dutch painters in this period was also greater than ever before. We can see a similar picture for Italy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and in France from the nineteenth century.

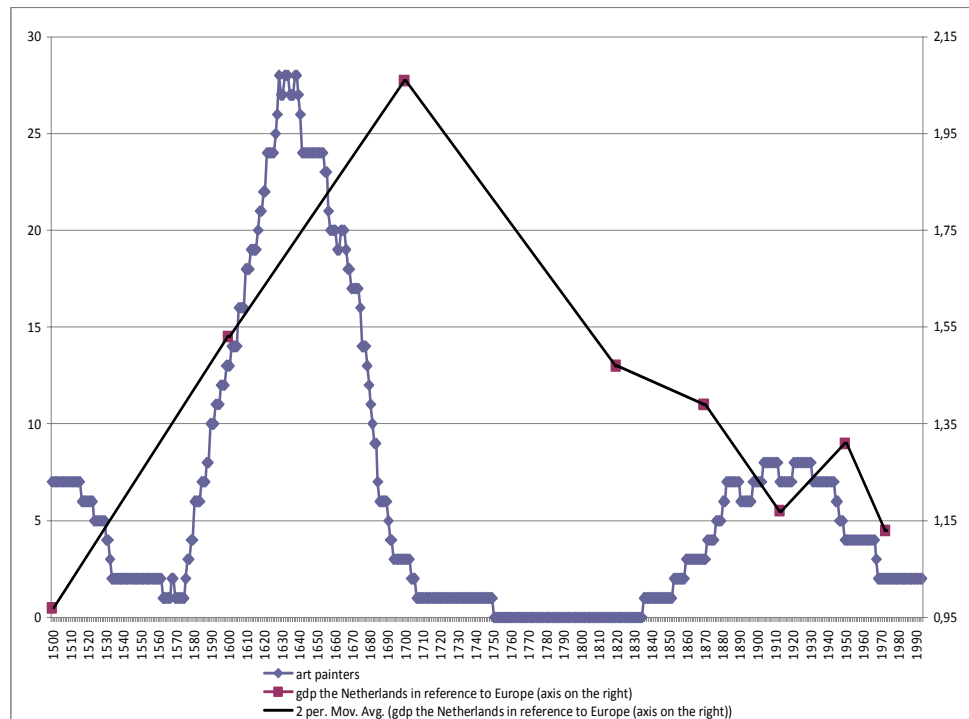


Figure 1. Number of painters and economic growth for the Netherlands (data are based on: Butler et al., 1994; Maddison, 2001)

As far as the interaction with the economy is concerned, it is also interesting to ask whether regions that are known to have been a favourable subject of landscape painters, nowadays display any related values. It is noteworthy that the South of France, where a lot of the impressionists have been painting, is nowadays a favourite holiday destination for tourists from various countries. Another interesting example is the Gooi area, which painters in the past have depicted as a strikingly picturesque region, and that nowadays is one of the most valued living areas of the Netherlands. Furthermore, the currently most well-known Dutch abstract landscape painter, Ton Schulte, concentrated on the landscapes in the region of Ootmarsum, which is becoming more and more a national centre for art galleries. It is probably no coincidence that Van Ruysdael had already discovered Ootmarsum and its environs in the seventeenth century.

New land conservation policies based on old paintings

The Dutch landscape has inspired many painters, such as those from The Hague School, whose paintings are still recognisable in some locations. This historical fact adds a special cultural value to the landscape. Given this legacy, one might expect a strong interest in preserving this cultural-historic value of the landscape. Especially, because elsewhere in Europe various initiatives have been undertaken to preserve and reveal landscapes which inhabit such cultural values. For instance, in the UK

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rural sites have been reshaped in order bring the landscapes back to the scenery on the paintings of the great Constable. In the South of France, billboards with replicas of impressionistic paintings have been placed in the landscapes where they originally have been painted.



Figure 2. A billboard in the South of France depicting an impressionistic painting (photo: Ernst Bos)

The Netherlands does not have a specific policy to protect these cultural values, although there is enough reason to do so. A first step would be to make landscape planners more aware of these cultural historical values. Thereto, the Wageningen University and Research Centre has traced down and identified the locations of a number of the views painted by The Hague School members. Photos of these locations have been made during field trips in order to compare the current views with the view on the paintings. The results are as follows.

First, we present the location of the painting *The church of Overschie* by Jongkind, which he painted several times. Jongkind was looking at Overschie – then a town, now a wealthy suburb of Rotterdam – from a position close to Schiedam. Most of the houses in the painting have been replaced by others through time, although that did not happen very recently given building style of the houses on the photo. In addition to this painting of 1856, Jongkind painted the same view at least two more times, once in 1866 and in 1867. Although these later paintings portray a different season of the year and show a slightly different pallet of colours, the view of Overschie on these paintings is the same as of the painting from 1856. In other words, the paintings do not reveal any change of the view during 10 years time. Although a small industrial area is now located left from the water, the current view on Overschie, located close to the A13 highway and to the industrial areas of Rotterdam, did not change much during the last 1.5 centuries.



Figure 3. The current view on the site (photo: Ernst Bos)



Figure 4. Johan Barthold Jongkind, *The Church of Overschie*, 1856, collection Museum of Duoi

Another painting by Jongkind is *View on Delft* from 1844. Jongkind painting this view also looking towards Delft and with his back to Rotterdam. The current view is being disturbed by the presence of some industrial buildings.



Figure 5. The current view on the site (photo: Ernst Bos)



Figure 6. Johan Barthold Jongkind, *View on Delft*, 1844, collection of the Gemeentemuseum of the Hague

A panorama that has not changed at all in reference to the landscape on the painting, is *Water mill in the polder of the Leidse Dam* (1884) from Paul Gabriel (*1828 - †1903). In this painting, Gabriel depicted the last of three water mills of Stompwijk seen from the location of the second mill. The fact that Jan Hendrik Weissenbruch (*1822 - †1880) also made a painting of this scenery - this time a composition with all three mills on it - emphasizes the pictorial character of the site. Although the current view on Gabriels' landscape is unaffected, the direct surrounding of the landscape has been urbanized intensively over the last decennia.

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Figure 7. The current view on the site (photo: Ernst Bos)



Figure 8. Paul Gabriel, *Water mill in the polder of the Leidse Dam*, 1884, collection the museum of Dordrecht

Besides examples of current landscapes which correspond completely or fairly well to the view on the painting, other painted rural view have nowadays been totally absorbed by urban areas.

This is for instance the case with the view Jacob Maris (*1837 - †1899) painted in 1872, showing the panorama from the painters house in those days. The current view has only the quay and the canal in common with view on the painting. Only the name of the street from where Maris painted the view - *Near the western Mills* - reminds at the scenery from the past.



Figure 9. The current view on the site (photo: Ernst Bos)



Figure 10. Jacob Maris, *The cut off Mill*, 1872, collection of the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

The painting *View at the Trekvliet near The Hague* (1868) from Weissenbruch shows a wide landscape, with on the left the tower of the Binckhorst castle and to the right the Laak Mill (Laakmolen). Nowadays, the Bickhorst is a industrial area and the castle can only be observed from nearby, because of all the buildings that surrounds it.



**Figure 11. The current view on the site
(photo: Ernst Bos)**



Figure 12. Jan Hendrik Weissenbruch, *View at the Trekvliet near The Hague*, 1868, collection of the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

Besides Weissenbruch, Louis Apol (*1850 - †1936) was also inspired by the view and made a painting showing a closer view at the castle.



**Figure 13. The current view on the site
(photo: Ernst Bos)**



Figure 14. Louis Apol, *the Binckhorst* collection of the Polak art shop in the Hague

The map below gives an overview of the locations of the views on the ancient paintings.

From these examples it follows that much of the landscapes shown on the nineteenth century paintings have since then been altered significantly. Although not all paintings will be exact replicas of the landscapes of those days - for instance Weissenbruch painted a version of *View at the Trekvliet near The Hague* with a second Mill on it - the ongoing urbanisation of The Hague is a main cause for the disappearance of the views on the paintings. However, the disappearance of these landscapes did not always occur recently. For instance, Maris painted the *Allotment Gardens near The Hague* twice, once in 1878 and once in 1892. The latter painting shows that the allotment gardens have disappeared due to the expanding city of The Hague.

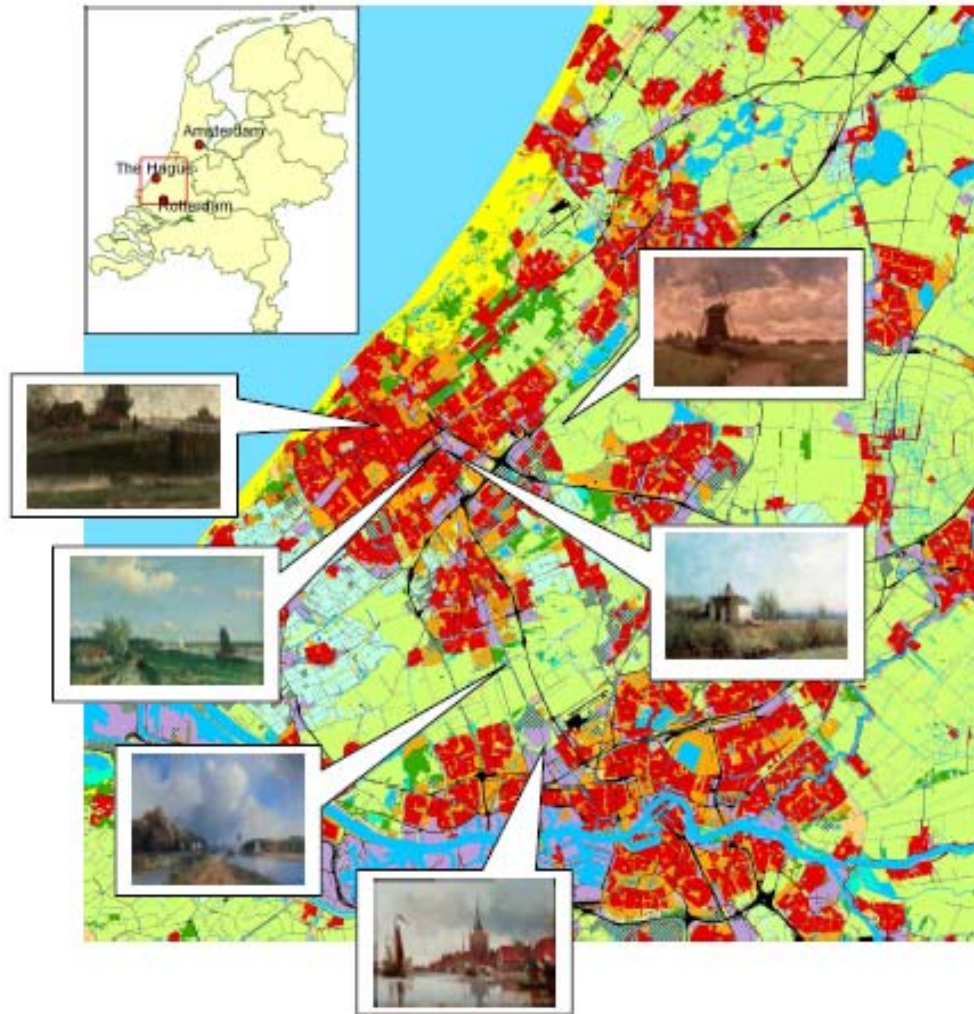


Figure 15. The locations of the views in the ancient paintings. Source: Tom Kuhlman (LEI Wageningen University and Research Centre)

As part of the project, a pilot has been initiated to place large billboards in the landscape with replicas of the original paintings on it. The media attention that followed from unveiling the billboards could be a first step towards creating awareness about this cultural aspect of the Dutch countryside.



Figure 16. A billboards near Stompwijk (photo: Ernst Bos)



Figure 17. A billboards near De Wassenaarse Slag (photo: Gerard Metz, design bureau Zwart op Wit)

Visitors to the area would thus be made more aware of the cultural historical value of the landscape. Such signs could also give the visitor a good idea as to how the location has changed over the course of time, or even in fact how it has remained much the same. Using this strategy, which would be relatively inexpensive, 'landscape painters routes' could be created, for example in the neighbourhood of The Hague or 't Gooi. In this way the cultural connection between the city (museums) and the countryside could be marketed more visibly.

The story of The Hague School can serve as a source of inspiration for achieving a cultural stratum in the modern landscape. Land conservation and planning should, therefore, be able to tune in to the experience recorded by artists of the past. The combination of the landscape and the paintings of this landscape can offer new possibilities.

Landscape and rural planning should thus be more broadly oriented, and the conservation and planning of such areas should be concentrating much more on the great cultural value so cherished by our world-renowned painters.

Conclusion

From a historical point of view the Netherlands has a unique place in landscape art. Not only did landscape painting begin in the Netherlands, but it has also been a source of inspiration for many well-known Dutch painters, as well as for those from abroad. In this respect the Dutch landscape is well regarded. From that aspect alone,

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our agricultural landscape can be regarded as a cultural historical inheritance. This project can be the start for a debate on conserving our picturesquely landscape. In order to protect the ancient landscape views, further research needs to be carried for the region of The Hague, as well as for other regions where landscape painters have been active. Examples of other regions are 't Gooi, and rural areas in the eastern part of the Netherlands. In order to reveal the cultural-historic values of these areas, frames depicting ancient paintings should be placed in these regions too. In order to do so, we can conserve a centuries-old source of inspiration which defines an important part of our cultural inheritance.

The study reveals that landscape planners should be aware of the cultural values the landscape may inhabit. Moreover, they should include the potential impact of landuse scenarios on those cultural values in the decision whether or not to intervene in the landscape, since the loss of such values is for the most part irreversible.

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The Dordrechts museum
Het Haags Gemeentemuseum
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