

AERT VAN DER NEER

(Amsterdam c.1603/04 - Amsterdam 1677)

A River Landscape at Night with a Rowing Boat, a Burning City beyond

signed with double monogram 'AV N' (lower left)

oil on panel

36.8 x 45.1 cm (14½ x 17¾ in)

Provenance: Anonymous sale, Charles Sedelmeyer, Paris, 25 May, 1907, lot 144;
with Leonard Koetser, London;
from whom purchased by H. Dormond, 21 January, 1970;
Swiss Private Collection.

Exhibitions: London, Leonard Koetser Gallery, Autumn 1969, no. 2.

Literature: C. Hofstede de Groot, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch Painters* (London, 1923), p.475;
W. Stechow, *Dutch Landscape Painting of the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1968), p.181;
Exhibition catalogue, autumn 1969, Leonard Koetser Gallery, no. 2, illustrated;
W. Schulz, *Aert van der Neer*, Doornspijk, 2002, p. 473, no. 1424, pl. 315.

IN THIS DRAMATIC AND ATMOSPHERIC PAINTING, A solitary rowing boat makes its way downstream, away from the raging fire in the background. This blaze is the dominant feature of the painting, the bright whites and oranges illuminating the blackness of the night sky. Rising up from the epicentre of the fire, where Aert van der Neer's colouring is at its most intense, the silhouette of the city's cathedral spire is on the point of being engulfed by the flames. Thick black smoke rises from the city and forms dense clouds which drift across the canvas. The depiction of the fire is van der Neer's focus in this work, rather than the surrounding landscape, and he delights in capturing the



Aert van der Neer, *A River Landscape at Night with a Rowing Boat, a Burning City beyond* (Detail)



Aert van der Neer, *Burning Castle before a City*, after 1650, Private Collection (Figure 1)

subtle variation in the flames and smoke. The colours of the fire are reflected on the still river which runs back into the picture, drawing the eye towards the blaze. On the banks of the river other figures stand about by the boats watching the spectacular sight from a safe distance. In contrast to the frenzy of the burning city, there is a sense of stillness and quiet about the foreground scene. It seems almost disconnected from events in the background, an effect emphasised by the isolation of the figures, alone on the river.

Van der Neer depicted burning cities on a number of occasions, another example being *Burning Castle before a City* (fig. 1). Once more, a river is used to lead the eye back into the composition where a city





Jan Beerstraten, *The Fire of the Old Town Hall on the Dam, 7 July 1652*, c.1652-1655, Amsterdams Historisch Museum, Amsterdam (Figure 2)

is ablaze in the background. As in the present work, the monumental buildings are not depicted in detail, but their dark shapes are silhouetted against the intense colour of the flames. The way in which buildings can be picked out from the darkness reveals van der Neer's fascination for using a single light source to illuminate his paintings, and examining how this source affects the surrounding landscape. The low view point and flat nature of the landscape in both works allows a greater proportion of the canvas to be given over to the depiction of the sky, across which van der Neer has skilfully depicted the thick black clouds of suffocating smoke. In both works, van der Neer has included figures in the foreground which serve to humanise the spectacular scene; but these figures are cast in deep shadow and do not detract from the vision of the burning city.

The depiction of fire was certainly a popular subject during the seventeenth century. In part this may have been because many artists witnessed a particularly noteworthy one in 1652. The city authorities of Amsterdam had decided to replace their old town hall with proceeds from the city's growing prosperity and wealth. In 1638, Caspar van Baerle (1584-1648) had written of the building, 'Its antiquity and



Aert van der Neer, *Night Landscape with a River*, mid-17th century, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; Via the State Museum Fund from the Shuvalov Collection, St. Petersburg, 1919 (Figure 3)



Aert van der Neer, *A River Landscape at Night with a Rowing Boat, a Burning City beyond* (Detail)

dilapidation lend the building a certain venerableness. A city which is otherwise so splendidly built shows how simple she was of old'.¹ However, it was felt that the ramshackle old building should be replaced. Yet before it had been demolished it was destroyed by a devastating blaze, taking with it many historical documents and other treasures. The city was rife with rumours of arson, guards were deployed to prevent looting and there was a real sense of significance attached to the event. The momentous fire was depicted by a number of artists, including Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) and Jan Beerstraten (1622-1666) (see inventory). Beerstraten's *The Fire of the Old Town Hall on the Dam, 7 July 1652*, see figure 2, is in many ways a very different picture to *A River Landscape at Night with a Rowing Boat, a Burning City beyond*, but both works share the central concern for capturing how a powerful blaze can illuminate the nocturnal darkness. Both artists seem to have revelled in the challenge of depicting this unusual and powerful sight; the juxtaposition of brightness against the deep shadows. Although *The Fire of the Old Town Hall on the Dam, 7 July 1652* is more of a documentary work than van der Neer's fiery landscapes, both works demonstrate the artists' technical virtuosity in capturing these unusual atmospheric effects.

Van der Neer rarely depicted landscapes during daylight hours, preferring instead to paint slightly unusual light effects. For this reason, nocturnes such as *A River Landscape at Night with a Rowing Boat, a Burning City beyond*, feature prominently in his work, although rather than the drama of a fire, these landscapes are often illuminated by the piercing light of the moon. An especially fine example is the Hermitage's *Night Landscape with a River* (fig. 3). As in the present work, the painting is illuminated by a single light source in the distance. For this reason the sky in the background is brightly lit, the colours rich and deep, whereas the foreground is comparatively dark and shadowed. Once more, van der Neer's compositional skill is evident as he leads the eye through the scene, although here the thick bank of trees on the left-hand side is used, as opposed to the strong recessionary line of the river in the present work. The rustic setting is of course far removed from the urban waterway depicted in *A River Landscape at Night with a Rowing Boat, a Burning City beyond* but it is noticeable how the play of light on relatively still water is a central concern in both works. In the

¹ Van Baerle, C., 'Medicea Hospes' (1638), trans. in Schwartz, G., *The Dutch World of Painting*, exh. cat. (The Vancouver Art Gallery and the Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst, 1986), cat. no. 16.



Aert van der Neer, *Landscape with a Windmill*, c.1646,
The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; Duval Collection, St. Petersburg, 1805
(Figure 4)

Hermitage's work the light is actually refracted to a much greater extent in the sky, where the rippling undulations of the clouds are picked out in exquisite detail by van der Neer. The sense of quiet that pervades the foreground of the present work has already been discussed and a similar sense of tranquillity can be found in *Night Landscape with a River*, with its statuesque cattle and dark forbidding forest.

The light effects in van der Neer's work are not always as intense as in the previous paintings but they are invariably interesting, an example being the Hermitage's *Landscape with a Windmill* (fig. 4). In this work the sun appears to be rising and a few figures can already be seen scattered throughout the work. The soft pink light comes from the right-hand side of the work but is not consistent throughout the work, rather there is a sense of the light slowly flowing across the scene, warming the landscape as it rises into the sky. Van der Neer has beautifully captured the ephemeral nature of the dawn light, just as he captures the variety of colour and movement of the fire in the present work. It is also noticeable how certain compositional tricks recur throughout his work, for example foreground and background are united by the echo of the windmill, just as the church spire is echoed in *A River Landscape at Night with a Rowing Boat, a Burning City beyond*.

According to the biographer Arnold Houbraken (1660-1719), as a youth van der Neer lived in a small town, east of Dordrecht, working as



Aert van de Neer, *A River in Winter*, c.1645,
The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; Acquired at the sale of the Cardinal Valenti Collection, Amsterdam, 1763 (Figure 5)

a major, or steward for the lords of Arkel and in these early years he was only an amateur painter. He came into contact with the Camphuyzen brothers, Rafael (1597/8-1657) and Jochem (1601/2-59) and married their sister. This friendship probably helped to advance his career and his early work certainly bears their influence. By the 1640s he had a firmly established style and a relatively narrow range of subject matter, specialising in sunrises, sunsets, nocturnes, especially moonlit river scenes, and winter scenes such as the Hermitage's *River in Winter* (fig. 5). As we have seen, several characteristic features recur throughout his work, most notably the receding waterways, across which the light invariably plays. Small, slightly indistinct figures or cattle of often serve to animate the foreground and middle distance and there is often the silhouette of a town in the distance.

It is, however, due to 'his sensitivity to coloured light and atmosphere' that van der Neer 'is celebrated as one of the greatest Dutch landscapists'.² His art is characterised by the subtlety and skill of his tonal changes in the depiction of light as it is affected by thick cloud or encroaching darkness. Walther Bernt states that van der Neer's landscapes are 'distinguished by a poetic feeling for nature and by their successful treatment of the problem of light...He is an unequalled observer of light effects and reflection on land and water, of cloud shapes by night or in a wintry sky'.³



Aert van der Neer, *A Canalside in Holland*,
The Louvre, Paris (Figure 6)

Van der Neer's painting reveals a number of influences. His winter scenes, such as *River in Winter*, displays the same ability to capture atmosphere as in the present work. These scenes are much more populated than his other landscapes and these figures and the frozen river recall the Flemish traditions that are also evident in the bank of large gnarled trees in *Night Landscape with a River*. He also seems to have been friends with Aelbert Cuyp (1620-1691) and they sometimes worked on the same canvases. An example of this collaboration is the Louvre's *A Canalside in Holland* where it seems Cuyp depicted the staffage in the foreground and yet the painting retains the tranquil beauty that is evident in van der Neer's work (fig. 6). Van der Neer was also influenced by the 'tonal' phase of Dutch landscape painting, embodied by the work of Jan van Goyen (1596-1656) (cat. no. 89) and Salomon van Ruysdael (1600/03-1670) (cat. nos. 90 & 91), evident in the atmospheric tonalities of his work.⁴

² Sutton, P. C., *Dutch & Flemish Paintings; The Collection of Willem Baron van Dedem* (Frances Lincoln Ltd., 2002), p. 175.

³ Bernt, W., *The Netherlandish Painters of the Seventeenth Century*, vol. II (Phaidon, London, 1970), p. 85.