

ISAAC VAN OSTADE

(Haarlem 1621 - Haarlem, bur. after 1649)

A Winter Landscape with Figures on a Frozen River, a Town beyond

oil on panel
51.2 x 76.8 cm (20 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 30 $\frac{1}{4}$ in)

Literature: Possibly 1851 Inventory, Large Drawing Room, Fasque, the Scottish seat of the Gladstones '14 Paintings - £75.0.0'.

Provenance: Fasque, the Scottish seat of the Gladstones;
thence by descent.

THIS SPIRITED WINTER LANDSCAPE DEPICTS A crowded lake, which is the scene to a host of activities. Highlighted near the centre, a group of figures stand in conversation, amongst whom a white horse - a recurring motif in Isaac van Ostade's work - stands with its head bowed. Around them, children sledge; a boat carries three people; a mother directs a gentleman, and in the distance, translucent figures skate.

The theme of crowded winter landscapes, pioneered by Pieter Brueghel the Elder (c.1525-c.1569), became extremely popular in the seventeenth century. It was one of van Ostade's favourite subjects, and he became one of the genre's finest exponents (fig. 1). He had a lively interest in people and the inclusion of dynamic figures, pointing, bending and skating, in *A Winter Landscape with Figures on a Frozen River, a Town beyond* animates the composition. His skill in rendering figures stems from his early career when, under the tutelage of his brother Adriaen van Ostade (1610-1685), who was renowned for the rustic vigour of his domestic scenes, he focused on peasant interiors.¹ Isaac van Ostade successfully transposed this skill of representing figurative scenes onto panoramic landscapes. These landscapes are notable not only for the stylised, curving forms of the figures but also for the atmospheric light effects that pervade them.

In *A Winter Landscape with Figures on a Frozen River, a Town beyond* one can sense the crisp air of this cold winter day, evoked by a refined, monochrome palette. Distancing himself from the colourful palette of his brother, van Ostade employs subtle shades of blue, ochre browns, and cold hues enlivened by carefully positioned white highlights, particularly around the main body of figures near the foreground. The watery ice shimmers as a result of such colouration, and is heightened by linear brushstrokes and a close attention to detail. The luminous atmosphere harmoniously unifies the entire composition.

A sense of space is achieved by the distant horizon and high sky, for which van Ostade allows two-thirds of the panel, with distinct, shapely clouds merging into a single mass as the painting recedes. The wide river narrows as the town and wooded landscapes either side of it converge. This technique, combined with the diminishing figures which leads the eye off towards the horizon, creates the successful illusion of depth.

Van Ostade studied with his brother Adriaen van Ostade, as recorded by Arnold Houbraken (1660-1719), the biographer of seventeenth-century Dutch artists. However, he gradually moved away from the style and domestic subjects of his brother in favour of landscapes. The artist's early landscape work suggests that he received instruction from another landscape painter, possibly

Salomon van Ruysdael (1600-1670) (cat. nos. 90 & 91), who sued Adriaen van Ostade in 1640 for 'sums due for board and tuition'. This training proved the start of a successful new direction for van Ostade, who focused largely on populated winter scenes of frozen rivers, roadside inns and village streets. He developed his own distinctive style, which was greatly facilitated by his previous experience as a figure painter.

Despite van Ostade's early death at the age of twenty-eight, his *oeuvre* is extensive and his creativity and originality striking. He made a distinctive contribution to the development of Dutch art and had a considerable influence as a painter. Claes Molenaer (c.1630-1676), Cornelis Decker (before 1623-1678), Roelof van Vries (c.1631-after 1681) (see inventory), Jan Wijnants (1631/2-1684) (cat. no. 45) and Gerrit van Hees (fl.1640) all imitated van Ostade's landscape and figure style.

The painting formerly hung in Fasque, Scotland, the house of Sir John Gladstone (1764-1851), the father of William Gladstone, Prime Minister from 1892-1894. William enjoyed spending much time at the residence, where one of the turret rooms was once reserved for his political and intellectual pursuits.

We are grateful to Dr. Bernhard Schnackenburg for suggesting that this painting could have been executed around 1642.



Isaac van Ostade, *Frozen Lake*, 1648,
The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; Collection of Count von Brühl, Dresden,
1769 (Figure 1)

¹ A substantial collection of the works of Adriaen van Ostade can be found in The Hermitage, St. Petersburg.

