

KERSTIAEN DE KEUNINCK THE ELDER

(Courtrai c.1560 - Antwerp c.1632)

View of a Wide Landscape with a Town in the Background

oil on panel
41 x 55.5 cm (16 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 21 $\frac{7}{8}$ in)

THIS VAST PANORAMIC LANDSCAPE IS TYPICAL OF de Keuninck's work. In the foreground of the painting, various aspects of rural life are depicted. On the left-hand side a figure balances precariously on a ladder as he prunes the dead branches from a tree. Nearby a worker is bent double as he toils in the field, and a woman walks along, balancing an enormous load upon her head. Beyond, in the walled garden of a looming, three-storey house, numerous figures mill about, although they are too small for their activities to be discernable. De Keuninck, for the most part, has painted the figures with quick dashes of his brush, their forms indicated more through colour than line.

Throughout this foreground hilltop there is a contrast between fine detailing, such as the foliage on the tall trees, and broad brush strokes of the golden wheat field and the swathes of brown path that cut through the green surroundings. On the left-hand side, the hilltop cascades sharply away into an extensive landscape, made up predominantly of numerous fields and dense groves of trees. A distant town can be glimpsed and the pinnacles of its prominent buildings are echoed faintly in the background. An accomplished use of atmospheric perspective can be seen, with the brown and yellow tones receding to green and blue ones, and is typical of de Keuninck's landscapes. The different planes of the landscape seem disconnected and unrelated to one other so that the foreground functions independently of the background, a novel treatment of space typical of the late Mannerist style.



Kerstiaen de Keuninck the Elder, *View of a Wide Landscape with a Town in the Background* (Detail)



Kerstiaen de Keuninck the Elder, *The Fire of Troy*,
The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; Collection of P. P. Durnovo, 1925 (Figure 1)

The Hermitage's *Landscape with Tobias and the Angel*, also demonstrates de Keuninck's dramatic treatment of landscape (see cat. no. 73 for image). In this work, the figures of Tobias and the Archangel Raphael are relatively small and the narrative of their journey is alluded to, though not explicitly portrayed, by details such as the fish tucked under Tobias' arm. The focus of the painting is rather on the landscape in which the figures walk, and, although notionally the location is on the route from Ninevah to Media, the setting is very much a product of de Keuninck's theatrical imagination, as is the one depicted in *View of a Wide Landscape with a Town in the Background*. A wooded valley, through which a stream runs, is flanked on either side by vast rocky cliffs. A castle, perched on the highest of the craggy peaks, looks over the scene and beyond it the sun is hidden, although its light reflects beautifully off the clouds, a technique also employed in the present work. The clearly delineated sunbeams seen in the Hermitage's work is a stylistic trait of de Keuninck, and creates broad swathes of light and dark, which are also a feature of the present work. The theatricality of the landscape in *Landscape with Tobias and the Angel*, with its conical rock formations or the narrow bridge built over a crevice on the left-hand side, is comparable to the present work, with the heaving undulations of the landscape and details such as the gnarled tree trunks in the foreground. As seen in both works, de Keuninck's landscapes are usually extensive explorations of the dramatic pictorial effects of nature.

De Keuninck moved to Antwerp at an early age and worked in the city for the whole of his life. Throughout his career he depicted either dramatic landscapes, such as the present painting, or scenes of disaster, usually representations of either the burning of Troy or the Fire at Sodom, an example being the Hermitage's *Fire of Troy* (fig. 1)

