

FREDERICK VAN VALCKENBORCH

(Antwerp 1566 - Nuremberg 1623)

A Mountainous River Landscape with a Chapel and a Tavern, with Fishermen Nearby

oil on canvas
130.8 x 192 cm (51½ x 75½ in)

THIS DYNAMIC AND LARGE COMPOSITION, DEPICTING a chapel set against an imposing bluff, displays marked contrasts between light and dark, which along with the exaggerated interplay of forms, and the animated figures in the foreground, are characteristic of Frederick van Valckenborch's unique style and reveal the influences of late Mannerism. The image hovers between a naturalistic and contrived depiction of a landscape, and the gesturing of the figures and the ominously dark and wild cliffs topped by precarious looking ruins add an element of eccentricity and whimsicality to the composition.

The present work is divided into two parts: the foreground with the chapel and the Swan Inn, and the background, a seemingly inaccessible area with two fortifications at its summit. The presence of a rickety bridge on the left of the painting suggests that there is a way to access the upper reaches of the mountain; it is, however, cut off by the edge of the canvas and does not lead anywhere identifiable. This distinction between the foreground and background of the composition and their independence from one another is again characteristic of the late Mannerist style and van Valckenborch's work in general. He displays a clear inclination towards depicting mountainous landscapes, another example of which is in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (fig. 1), and features a similarly craggy overgrown rock formation and dramatic contrasts between light and dark. The figures in the bottom left of the Rijksmuseum painting are shown attacking each other, and although fighting, their expressive gesturing is much like that of the fishermen and other characters in the present picture. Another similar large-scale landscape, featuring a chapel set before a fortified bluff with similar groups of revellers and fishermen in the foreground, was sold at Sotheby's New Bond Street, 17 December 1998, lot 48.

The chapel, bathed in sunlight, is the focal point of the present work. A bearded monk, with a rosary in one hand and a cane in the other leaves the chapel. The other prominent feature of the village is the tavern where figures are carousing outside, and their jollity and indulgence in corporeal pleasures stands in contrast to the solitary image of the monk with an empty chapel behind him. While tavern business thrives, the centre of the village's spiritual life has been neglected as indicated by the chapel's physical state of disrepair. This juxtaposition may indicate a moralising message in the painting.

Van Valckenborch was the son of the landscape painter Marten van Valckenborch I (1534-1612), from whom he may have received some initial training. His figure painting, however, even in early works, is markedly different from his father's style, which has prompted a theory that he may also have worked with an Antwerp figure painter. It has been suggested that the structure of van Valckenborch's compositions and his depiction of figures, particularly in their rounded forms and gestures, are closest to the



Frederick van Valckenborch, *Mountainous Landscape*, 1605, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (Figure 1)

work of Flemish painter Jacob de Backer (c.1555-c.1585) (see Inventory).¹ In the 1590s, van Valckenborch may have travelled to Italy with his brother Gillis, a suggestion supported by the existence of a drawing by Gillis with the inscription and date 'Roma 1595', and also by the Italian influences present in the work of both artists. Van Valckenborch moved to Frankfurt and became a citizen there in 1597. He had four sons, two of whom became painters. Only a small number of van Valckenborch's existing works are signed or monogrammed. They could, however, be described as signed in the palette on account of his distinctive style. His paintings, characterised by extremes between light and dark and fantastical elements are in contrast to his drawings, which treat landscapes in a far more naturalistic and topographically accurate manner. Van Valckenborch's dual talent for depicting people and landscapes and portraying his subjects with vigorous imagination or intent realism has led scholars such as G. T. Faggin to justifiably describe him as an artistic genius.²

A Mountainous River Landscape with a Chapel and a Tavern, with Fishermen Nearby has been confirmed by Dr. Alexander Wied as being painted by van Valckenborch.

¹ T. Gerszi: 'Quelques problèmes que pose l'art du paysage de Frederik van Valckenborch', *Bulletin du Musée hongrois des beaux arts*, xlii (1974), pp. 63-89.

² G. T. Faggin: 'De gebroeders Frederik en Gillis van Valckenborch', *Bulletin: Museum Boymans-van Beuningen*, xiv (1963), pp. 2-14.

