

LUCAS VAN VALCKENBORCH

(Leuven c.1535 - Frankfurt am Main 1597)

A Rhenish Mountain Landscape with a City in the Distance

oil on canvas
53.5 x 81 cm (21 x 31 $\frac{7}{8}$ in)

LUCAS VAN VALCKENBORCH'S *A RHENISH MOUNTAIN Landscape with a City in the Distance* is a dramatic scene, filled with engrossing detail. In the foreground, a single building stands in a plateau which is nestled under some mountains. The building appears to be used for some industrial purpose and perhaps the cannon that stands nearby is an indication of it being an armoury. A torrent of water hurtles down from the mountains and drives the waterwheel at the base of the building and the thick black smoke billowing from the chimney is another detail suggestive of industry. Numerous figures mill about this plateau; some are carrying heavy loads towards the factory, others rest in the sunshine and there is also a herd of cattle grazing in the shade on the left-hand side. Towering over this scene is a steep rock formation which is dotted by a few trees. A flock of birds circle the peak, their presence emphasising that such heights are only accessible to those that can fly. The rocky landscape is densely packed with trees and a castle or monastery is perched on another peak.

Beyond this mountainous foreground is a panoramic view of the valley below. The river Rhine winds its way through the scene into the background, its vastness in keeping with the magnitude of the surrounding landscape. Flanking the river on either side is a sprawling city, from which a cathedral rises, catching the eye. Beyond the city, the landscape stretches out into the distance and the river forks in two as it passes into the wooded and mountainous background.



Lucas van Valckenborch, *Mountainous Landscape*, 1582, The Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (Figure 1)



Lucas van Valckenborch, *Landscape with a Rural Festival*, c.1590, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; Collection of Duke Choiseul, Paris, 1772 (Figure 2)

A smaller version of this subject, painted on wood, with the monogram of van Valckenborch and dated 1595 is in the Liechtenstein Collection in Vaduz, the art collection of the Princes of Liechtenstein.¹

Van Valckenborch's landscapes are his most accomplished paintings and *A Rhenish Mountain Landscape* is a fine example of his work. The nature of the landscape is comparable to the Rijksmuseum's *Mountainous Landscape* (fig. 1). A huge cliff rises into the sky, a dramatic and imposing wall of rock. It dwarfs the three labourers who look insignificant as they toil in the mountain's shadow. As in the present work, a castle is perched on a nearby peak and trees are dotted over this harsh landscape. Beyond the rock formation, van Valckenborch has depicted a panoramic view of a wide river flowing out into an extensive landscape. In addition to the compositional similarities, both works depict nature as wild, rugged, dramatic and monumental.

However, in addition to painting landscapes where nature is very much the focal point, as in *A Rhenish Mountain Landscape with a City in the Distance*, van Valckenborch did paint many scenes where human activity plays a more prominent role, such as the Hermitage's *Landscape with a Rural Festival* (fig. 2). Van Valckenborch has depicted a scene of exuberant festivity. On the left-hand side a huge throng of people

¹ Illustrated in Wied, A., *Lucas and Marten van Valckenborch, The Complete Work with Critical Catalogue*, (Freren, 1990) no. 71, p.170.





Lucas van Valckenborch, *Landscape with a Mine and Smeltery*, 1580, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (Figure 3)

dance together, creating a swirl of movement, whilst others pile onto the benches outside a tavern. In the foreground one figure has overindulged and is being helped homewards by two companions. Contrasted to these peasants are the well dressed company of ladies and gentlemen in the foreground, who mix with the revellers with an easy familiarity. However, despite this profusion of figures the landscape is recognisably the work of van Valckenborch's and is comparable to the present work. As our eye moves across the scene, the landscape plummets into a valley below, a technique used in *A Rhenish Mountain Landscape with a City in the Distance*. The two huge spreading oaks was also a favourite motif of van Valckenborch. On the right-hand side enormous jagged cliffs shoot upwards into the sky, creating an extended wall of rock that looks hostile and imposing. The landscape stretches away to the horizon and the eye passes over features such as small towns and forests and any figures are dwarfed by the vastness of this natural beauty and so *Landscape with a Rural Festival* offers a similar vision of nature as that depicted in *A Rhenish Mountain Landscape with a City in the Distance*.

Landscape with a Rural Festival came to the Hermitage from the magnificent collection of Étienne François, duc de Choiseul (1719-1785), in 1772, along with other works by artists including Nicolaes Berchem (1620-1683) and David Teniers the Younger (1610-1690) (for both see inventory). Choiseul was a French military officer, diplomat and statesman. Hugely popular and a favourite of Madame de Pompadour (1721-1764), he became Foreign Minister of France and the second most powerful person in the country behind King Louis XV (1710-1774). Noted for his liberal policies, he was eventually forced to retire to his estate at Chanteloup in 1770, but over the years he had built up an outstanding collection of Old Master paintings and was also a generous patron of contemporary French artists. As well as the Hermitage's van Valckenborch, his collection included eight works by Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669), and several by both Jacob van Ruisdael (c.1628-1682) and Claude Lorrain (c.1600-1682). He also commissioned work from Giovanni Paolo Panini (1691-1765), Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725-1805) and Hubert Robert (1733-1808). In letter to the Duke of Nivernais, Choiseul wrote 'my taste is not for the mediocre...I should prefer one beautiful picture to ten ordinary ones', and it is testament to van Valckenborch's skill that he was collected by such an esteemed and discerning connoisseur.

In the foreground of *A Rhenish Mountain Landscape with a City in the Distance* is a factory of some sort, and these industrial motifs often occur in van Valckenborch's landscapes, another example being *Landscape with a Mine and Smeltery* (fig. 3). In the shadow of a cliff is a scene of heavy



Lucas van Valckenborch, *A Rhenish Mountain Landscape with a City in the Distance* (Detail)

industry, where mines are tunnelled into the rock and where fire and thick black smoke hover over the scene. None of the furnaces and forges that van Valckenborch was so fond of depicting have ever been identified but the associations of raw power which they create, perfectly accord with the rough magnitude of the mountainous landscapes in which they are set.

One of the other most noteworthy features of *A Rhenish Mountain Landscape with a City in the Distance* is the anonymous city which sprawls across the valley floor, and this is also a recurring aspect of van Valckenborch's landscapes. Sometimes he depicted views of existing places, such as Liège (Museum St-Denis, Reims) and Antwerp, but he also depicted imaginary cities, as in the present work or *Mountainous Landscape with the Temptations of Christ* (fig. 4). Once more, a panoramic view of a city has been depicted and this viewpoint firstly gives a sense of how vast the town is, as we can see it stretching away on either side of the river. The depiction of it is not detailed but the outlines of colossal buildings and bridges are discernable in the hazy blue mist. Despite this impressive view of humanity, however, the city is dwarfed by the landscape in which it is built. Mountains soar into the sky so that the tallest tower looks tiny in comparison and the countryside stretches far into the horizon, far beyond the edge of the city. Even the biblical story is relegated to a small corner of the painting, playing a subordinate role to the landscape itself. As in the present work, there is a strong sense of man being



Lucas van Valckenborch, *A Rhenish Mountain Landscape with a City in the Distance* (Detail)



Lucas van Valckenborch, *Mountainous Landscape with the Temptations of Christ*, c.1583, Rijksmuseum Twenthe, Enschede (Figure 4)

insignificant in comparison to the magnificence of nature.

Van Valckenborch's art was undoubtedly related to that of Pieter Brueghel the Elder (c.1525/30-1569), who was ten years his senior, demonstrated by a comparison between Brueghel's *Landscape with the Flight into Egypt* and the present work (fig. 1). Brueghel has painted a panoramic view over an awe-inspiring landscape: In the foreground the Holy Family make their way along a narrow path but their depiction seems of secondary importance to that of the landscape. This focus on the landscape rather than the figures is, as has already been mentioned, very much a part of van Valckenborch's style. The landscape which Brueghel depicts with such care is mountainous, rocky and intimidating. The precarious makeshift bridge that has been constructed over a precipice on the left-hand side, highlights the inhospitable nature of the landscape. The tiny figures by the bridge puts into perspective how high the cliff rises above them. As in *A Rhenish Mountain Landscape with a City in the Distance*, as the eye moves past the foreground section the landscape plunges into a valley below. Here a massive river, comparable to the Rhine in the present work, snakes along the valley into the distance, flanked along its length by the mountain range. Groves of trees grow throughout the landscape, turning the foothills of the mountains a soft shade of green. This is a landscape which celebrates the rough, untamed monumentality of nature and, like van Valckenborch's work, contains an element of the fantastical.

Van Valckenborch came from a Flemish family of artists of whom at least fourteen were painters, the most notable, aside from himself, being his brother, Marten van Valckenborch I (1534-1612), and his nephew Frederik van Valckenborch (1566-1623) (see inventory). The family was originally from Leuven but was one of many families who, for political or religious reasons, left the Spanish-occupied southern Netherlands and settled in the more tolerant German imperial cities. The van Valckenborchs, like many other families, settled in Frankfurt am Main, where they strongly influenced artistic developments in the city.

In 1560, van Valckenborch is recorded as joining the Painter's Guild in Mechelen and here he took on pupils, married and had a son, Marten van Valckenborch II (before 1566-1597), who also became a painter. However, having established his reputation, he was forced to flee to Liège in 1566 because of his Reformation sympathies. By 1575 he was back in Antwerp and two years later became the court painter to the Habsburg Archduke Matthias (1557-1619), who was governor of the Spanish Netherlands in Brussels and in 1612 would become Holy Roman Emperor. Van Valckenborch's official duties included designing costumes for Matthias' guard and painting his portraits. In 1593 he left to enter into the service



Lucas van Valckenborch, *A Rhenish Mountain Landscape with a City in the Distance* (Detail)

of Matthias' brother Archduke Ernst (1553-1595) in Frankfurt, where he died in 1597.

Van Valckenborch's most notable achievements were in his landscapes. In terms of composition he was very much a traditionalist, with his panoramic scenes depicted from a high viewpoint. However, he did base these works on a first-hand observation of nature to a much greater extent than his predecessors. He often mingled genuine topography with fantasy, for instance, *Spring Landscape with the Palais Royal of Brussels* (1587, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), in which the palace has been transplanted into a fantasy landscape. In the 1580s, van Valckenborch also painted a series showing the labours of the months, which demonstrate the brilliant technique, sensitivity of colour and lively composition that characterise his other landscapes, such as *A Rhenish Mountain Landscape with a City in the Distance*.

Yet according to the biographer Karel van Mander (1548-1606) it wasn't van Valckenborch's landscapes that attracted the patronage of Archduke Matthias, but his skill as a portraitist. He became a renowned court portraitist, painting at least six of the Archduke, and was proficient at working in both life-size and miniature. His skill as a miniaturist is evidenced by the figures that occur in his landscapes.

We are grateful to Dr. Alexander Wied, of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, who has suggested verbally, on the basis of photographs that this painting is an autograph work by van Valckenborch.



Pieter Brueghel the Elder, *Landscape with the Flight into Egypt*, 1563, The Courtauld Gallery, London (Figure 5)