

CORNELIS GERRITSZ. DECKER

(Haarlem 1620 - Haarlem 1678)

Landscape with a Village Road and Figures Conversing in the Right Foreground



Landscape with a Farmyard and Figure Drawing Water from a Well, other Figures Conversing Nearby

the latter signed 'C. Deck..r' (lower left on the well)
oil on canvas, a pair
83.5 x 107 cm (33 x 42 in) each

Provenance: with W. Boswell & Sons, Norwich (according to labels on the reverse);
anonymous sale ("The Property of a Lady"), October 12, 1983, lot 63;
anonymous sale, New York, Christie's, January 15, 1985, lot 49;
Private collection.

STATELY OAKS AND BROODING SKIES DOMINATE Cornelis Gerritsz Decker's fine pair of landscapes. In *Landscape with a Village Road and Figures Conversing in the Right Foreground*, a dense growth of trees encroaches on the village, already obscuring a cottage nestled in its midst. The trees are slightly starker in *Landscape with a Farmyard and Figure Drawing Water from a Well, other Figures Conversing Nearby* although they still appear to strain at their roots in an effort to command the scene. In both paintings, Decker imbues the oaks with strong personalities. The activities of the villagers and farm workers, and the placing of the other elements in each composition seem to revolve around the imposing presence of these mighty trees. The sky, likewise, has a forceful role in each painting. The lowness of the horizon and vastness of the sky dotted with expressive clouds, gives the landscapes added tension and drama.

The first of the present pair reveals strong contrasts in tonality between

the darkness of the trees and the lightness of the sky and path, against which the figures stand out. The few villagers who find their way into the scene are concentrated in the lower right portion of the canvas. Two men converse near a rickety fence, one sitting and the other standing and leaning on his cane. A well dressed gentleman, in contrast to the humble rural dwellers, stands further along the path and behind him a man on a horse stops outside the village inn. A solitary idler pauses on the bridge.

Decker gives what would otherwise be a mundane portrayal of quiet village life a heightened sense of intrigue in his masterful contrasts between light and dark, shadow and illumination. There is an air of mystery in the way the top of the peaked roof of a cottage can just be made out amongst the dense foliage of the trees on the left. In the foreground, a ramshackle gate stands unhinged. This area of the composition is heavily obscured by the trees and shrubs growing there and the cottage appears completely inaccessible.



Cornelis Gerritsz Decker, *Landscape with a Village Road and Figures Conversing in the Right Foreground* (Detail)



Cornelis Gerritsz Decker, *Landscape with a Farmyard and Figure Drawing Water from a Well, other Figures Conversing Nearby* (Detail)



Cornelis Gerritsz Decker, *A Wooded River Landscape with a Woman Looking out over the Water, a Horseman with his Dog and another Figure Beyond*, Private Collection (Figure 1)

Decker seems to delight in depicting peculiar houses and asymmetrical structures within his idyllic countryside scenes. A dilapidated hut, with a thatched roof that leans sharply to the ground on one side, stands in the middle of the second painting in the present pair. On the right, a crude fence has been erected with a number of roughly hewn planks protruding in different directions. These peculiar constructions are not only points of interest in the painting but also display Decker's technical skill in representing angle and perspective. They also allow for the painterly rendition of a variety of textures and materials, which is similarly exemplified in Decker's painting *A Wooded River Landscape with a Woman Looking out over the Water, a Horseman with his Dog and another Figure Beyond* (fig. 1). Here, a woman leans against a railing attached to a rough and gnarled tree trunk that curves towards a small incongruous looking outbuilding erected on the bank. A combination of planks and twigs are nailed haphazardly on top of one another to stabilise the structure, which stands on two precarious stilts reaching into the water. Whether such structures were common in rural areas at the time, or whether Decker exaggerated them simply to enhance the rustic charm of his works, the result is nonetheless very effective.

The focus of human activity in the second from the present pair of works is around the well on the left of the scene, where a man fills a bucket with water. A labourer sits nearby with his arm outstretched for his companion to bandage it. Presumably he has been injured while cutting the logs that lie scattered around the farmyard. In the image of the fallen tree trunks, it is difficult to recognise the grandeur of the living ones that predominantly command the composition. The oak trees lean at different

angles, their foliage creating dense dark patches outlined against the sky. Again, what could be a commonplace scene is given an added dimension by the strong character of the trees.

A Cottage among Trees on the Bank of a Stream by Decker in the National Gallery, London, is similar to the present pair of pictures in its spirit and monumentality (fig. 2). The view is of a cottage tucked away on a riverbank surrounded by trees. There is little activity and no great variation in colouring, yet the scene commands attention, in large part because of the dramatically twisted trunks of the trees and their distinctive craggy branches. Also notable is Decker's extensive employment of shadowing and his expansive and imposing sky. As with the present paintings, the depth and tonality of the composition is striking.

Decker was a pupil of Jacob van Ruisdael (1628/9-1682), one of the principal exponents of Dutch landscape painting in the second half of the seventeenth century. Van Ruisdael helped to revolutionise landscape painting, moving it away from the 'tonal phase' (c.1620-c.1650), associated with the preceding generation of artists such as van Ruisdael's uncle, Salomon van Ruysdael (?1600/03-1670) (see Inventory). Decker's naturalistic countryside scenes, distinctive colour palette and the solidity of his trees are clearly inspired by van Ruisdael, who was an innovator in his treatment of trees in particular, giving them important functions in the landscape rather than a purely decorative significance.

Decker was also influenced by Jan Wijnants (c.1635-1684) and Philips Wouwerman (1619-1668) (see Inventory for both). Wijnants adopted many of the compositional strategies of van Ruisdael's forest pictures of the mid-1650s, prominently positioning stark tree-trunks as well as dense clumps of foliage in his paintings. The majority of his works relegate buildings and staffage to the middle distance rather than making them the focus of the picture, in a manner that resembles the pair of paintings seen here, and Decker's work in general. The landscape paintings of Wouwerman from the 1650s, which also emphasise broad expanses of mainly horizontal landscapes with heightened colour, have discernible parallels with Decker's paintings. Although Decker is a somewhat obscure figure in that we know very little of his life, the accomplished artistry evident in the works examined here indicate that he deserves particular recognition within the Haarlem school of landscape painters.



Cornelis Gerritsz Decker, *A Cottage among Trees on the Bank of a Stream*, 1669, National Gallery, London (Figure 2)



Cornelis Gerritsz Decker, *Landscape with a Village Road and Figures Conversing in the Right Foreground*



Cornelis Gerritsz Decker, *Landscape with a Farmyard and Figure Drawing Water from a Well, other Figures Conversing Nearby*