

# WATER ON ROADS IN JACOB VAN RUISDAEL'S LANDSCAPE PAINTING

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**Resumo:** As estradas na pintura do século XVII das paisagens holandesas são exibidas principalmente como simples caminhos de terra batida através do campo. Na sua função primária enquanto visualização de movimentos repetitivos, elas constituem também uma porta de entrada para o observador nas paisagens pintadas como uma linha de referência. Ruisdael transforma estas linhas, que documentam também uma descoberta do território, em cenas conflituosas de figuras com água como um incómodo no seu caminho. Ele conduz directamente o observador a um momento de confronto. A água nestas estradas pode ser vista como um símbolo de reconquista de terra cultivada pela natureza. A descrição de Ruisdael da superação desses elementos aquáticos transforma a luta Holandesa para ganhar terra ao mar e proteger as suas terras da erosão numa imagem de um esforço diário de modo a encontrar um caminho através da terra.

**Palavras-chave:** Pintura; Século XVII; Paisagens holandesas; Ruisdael; Água; Estradas.

**Abstract:** The roads in 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch landscape painting are mostly shown as simple earth paths through the country. In their primary function as a visualization of repeated movement they form also an entrance for the viewer into the painted landscapes as a reference line. Ruisdael transforms these lines, which document also a discovery of the territory, into conflicting scenes of figures with water as hindrance on their way. He leads the viewer directly to a moment of confrontation. The water on these roads can be seen as a symbolic retaking of cultivated land through the nature. Ruisdael's description of the overcoming of these water elements transforms the Dutch struggle to gain land from the sea and to protect their land from erosion into an image of a daily effort to find a way through the land.

**Keywords:** Painting; 17th Century; Dutch landscape; Ruisdael; Water; Roads.

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The Dutch have an exceptional relationship to the water, which influenced their perception of nature and the Dutch landscape paintings in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In my dissertation I analysed the water motives in Jacob van Ruisdael's (1627/28 – 1682) oeuvre<sup>1</sup>, which present water in distinctive ways, and can give an insight in a special affiliation to the element. In particular the sea as a threat to the Dutch people, but also as a source of their wealth, is shown in a characteristic form by Ruisdael. He excludes the possible danger and focus on the aesthetic qualities of the seaside, by depicting figures walking barefoot through the waves<sup>2</sup>. Especially in the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Dutch took pride in their accomplishments in forming the land and the drainage of lakes and marshes. A famous saying is «God created the world, but the Dutch created Holland»<sup>3</sup>. The controlling of parts of nature, like the regulation of the groundwater level, the flow of rivers, or the extent of marshes and lakes, shaped an idea of Dutch identity in a quite young republic<sup>4</sup>.

Ruisdael created an original approach to the subject with a combination of the Dutch perception of nature and the development of a national identity. In a unique motif Ruisdael initiates a confrontation of figures with water in form of puddles on the roads. Even with the possibility to circumvent this little obstacle, the figures in the landscape scenes are shown in a direct confrontation. They are depicted going through the water instead of going around it. This transforms the marginal motif of a puddle from an accessory part to a critical element in the painted landscape. Ruisdael creates with these puddles a meaningful symbol for the Dutch relationship to the water.

## THE ROAD AS ASSESSING OF TERRITORY

The depicted road in Dutch landscape paintings of the 17<sup>th</sup> century is usually a simple earth path<sup>5</sup>. This description reproduces a characteristic portrait of the Dutch roads of that time. The landscape was pervaded with sandy tracks, which were created by the movement of people through the country. Ruisdael's depicted dirt tracks follow the real circumstances of Dutch infrastructure of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Netherlands<sup>6</sup>. As the Dutch had a comfortable transport system with ferry boats on the many rivers

<sup>1</sup> RÜCKERT, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> I.e. RUISDAEL, 2001: 444-445.

<sup>3</sup> ADAMS, 1994, 40.

<sup>4</sup> In consideration of the dramatic changes in politic, economy and religion in the Seven United Provinces, after their declared independence from Spain in 1579, the creation of national identity was focused mainly on the land itself, like Adams describes. Cf. ADAMS, 1994: 44.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. MICHALSKY, 2002: 137.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. BERGER HOCHSTRASSER, 1998: 197.

and channels<sup>7</sup>, there was little motivation to build streets between cities and villages. The undeveloped roads were just solidified dirt, a simple signs of past movement, and only «identifiable to the eye by the marks left by the carriage-wheels»<sup>8</sup>.

In this form the road as a simple earth path is a manifestation of movement through land, which was repeated to form a visible line and can be seen as “marks of culture upon nature”<sup>9</sup>. The walking humans access territory<sup>10</sup>, and in a country like the Netherlands, in which the forming of the landscapes in particular is defined through progress<sup>11</sup>, the appropriation of territory in form of movement gets a new meaning by a confrontation with water on the way. This Accessing of a territory can be transformed into the landscape paintings, because the road retrieves its function as a visual line in pictures. Ruisdael's descriptions of Dutch roads are not only an account of the realistic infrastructure, but also a visual aid for assessing the depicted landscape.

## PUDDLES ON ROADS AS MOMENT OF CONFRONTATION

One of the most famous paintings, in which Ruisdael shows the particular motif of a puddle on the road, is the «View of Egmond aan Zee with a Blasted Elm»<sup>12</sup> (Fig. 1). A number of interpretations have been done of this painting, but mostly without reflecting the special situation of the figure in the foreground<sup>13</sup>. The sandy road leads directly to the fishing village Egmond aan Zee in the background. But the way is disturbed by a big puddle in the foreground. The sheep walk through it. A figure following their way could have been placed aside the puddle on a dry part of



Fig. 1. © SLIVE, 2001: 48-49.

<sup>7</sup> «[...] the trekschuiten provided 78 percent of public transportation in the Friesland and Groningen regions, and 81 percent in Holland and Utrecht, in contrast with coaches, which provided for only 6 percent of intercity travel» (ADAMS, 1994: 54).

<sup>8</sup> BERGER HOCHSTRASSER, 1998: 198.

<sup>9</sup> BERGER HOCHSTRASSER, 1998: 197.

<sup>10</sup> «The perception/construction of space begins with the wanderings of man in the Paleolithic landscape» (CARERI, 2002: 42).

<sup>11</sup> Especially the progress of winning land in form of “Poldern” and “Draining” lakes and marches. See i.e. ADAMS, 1994: 51.

<sup>12</sup> RUISDAEL “View of Egmond aan Zee with a Blasted Elm”. Manchester, New Hampshire, The Currier Gallery of Art. (Ident.Nr. 1950.4). Oil on panel, 62.5 x 49 cm, dated 1648. Cf. SLIVE, 2001: 48-49. © Slive, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> See i.e. SCHMIDT, 1981: 34-36; WALFORD, 1991: 66-67 and GIBSON, 2000: 141, 166.

the road. Except it is not only shown going barefoot through the puddle, but also looking directly at the observer, which make it a critical moment for the scene. In this eye contact a deeper meaning is translated, which implicates a calculated action especially in contrast to the sheep.

The puddle in this painting is not just a typical detail of Dutch roads. Ruisdael created in this marginal motif a conflicting element. The rest of the road is clear and dry, only the puddle stands out as a separate water mirror. Only through the mirroring surface, which reflects part of the sky, the water element is reintegrated into the landscape painting. It also brings the temporal moment of the short lived character of the puddle in a constellation with the implied short life of the clouds. In this function of a mirror the puddle combines the changing qualities of nature.

Ruisdael's construction of this moment of conflict is also clear in the missing reflection of the figure on the water surface. It is possible, that it is a side product of the later integrated staffage, but it is also a deliberate failure, as Ruisdael constructed the mirror space on the water carefully. Therefore it can be seen as a calculated composition, as the figure could have been painted beside the puddle. Even if the figure was a later addition from a different painter the moment of conflict was clearly intended<sup>14</sup>.

A contribution of staffage from a different artist for Ruisdael's paintings can be found in the painting of a «Great Oak»<sup>15</sup> (Fig. 2). Nicolaes Berchem (1620 – 1683) painted the figures for this landscape scene out of the hand of Jacob van Ruisdael. In the wooded landscape with another significant road scene Berchem inserted



Fig. 2. © SLIVE, 2001: 291-293.

figures of different social standing, which meet at a cross way. Two men walking next to a horseman are depicted barefoot in a big puddle, again without a reflection on the water. And the road is also wide enough to make walking around the puddle possible. In addition the different costumes of the staffage show a moment of conflict, as the cultural standing, indicated with the clothes of the two barefoot men, requires adequate footwear. It is implied, that the men took

<sup>14</sup> As common practice, Ruisdael worked with different staffage painters throughout his career. See SLIVE, 2001: 13-14.

<sup>15</sup> Detail. RUISDAEL "The Great Oak" Los Angeles, Country Museum of Art. Ident.Nr. M. 91.164.1. Oil on canvas, 85.1 x 104.3 cm, dated 1652. Cf. SLIVE, 2001: 291-293. © LACMA <https://collections.lacma.org/node/171969>.

of their shoes before crossing the puddle. Thereby the action of passing the water directly and barefoot refers to a conscious decision.

Sadly there are no documentations about how both artists worked together. Ruisdael could have given clear instructions or Berchem may have just reacted to the given landscape scene. Considering that the stage of simple roads with water elements as hindrance was constructed by Ruisdael the figures of Berchem can be seen as a fitting contribution. The theme of a daily struggle on the simple Dutch roads is clearly presented.

The variation of this theme is also notable, as every scene seems to approach the conflicted moment with a different solution like the figures Berchem depicted for one of Ruisdael's landscapes with a flooded road, in which the staffage is shown in the moment as they prepare to cross the water on the back of cattle<sup>16</sup>. Or a figure, which Ruisdael shows in the process of clearing a partly flooded road from a fallen tree, which implies an ongoing struggle against the natural hindrances<sup>17</sup>.

The painting of a "Wooded Landscape with a Pool and Figures"<sup>18</sup> displays a crossroad near a village with a big puddle in the middle of the foreground (Fig. 3). The central road leads directly into it. A figure on the left use this flooded part of the road for a relaxed food bath. And maybe even for fishing, if the long stick it



Fig. 3.  
© LACMA <https://collections.lacma.org/node/171969>.

<sup>16</sup> RUISDAEL "Wooded Landscape with a Flooded Road". Paris, Musée du Louvre. Ident.Nr. INV.1817. Oil on canvas, 171 x 194 cm, datable about 1665-70. Cf. SLIVE, 2001: 301-302.

<sup>17</sup> RUISDAEL "Entrance to a Wood". Paris, Musée du Louvre. Ident.Nr. R.F.710. Oil on canvas, 57 x 65 cm, datable to the early sixties of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Cf. SLIVE, 2001: 303.

<sup>18</sup> Detail. RUISDAEL "Wooded Landscape with a Pool and Figures". Pasadena, California, Norton Simon Museum. Ident.Nr. M.1969.33.P (on extended loan to the Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena) Oil on panel, 70 x 92 cm, dated to the beginning of the 1650s. © LACMA <https://collections.lacma.org/node/171969>.

holds shall be a fishing-rod. This highly ironic transformation of a water element from hindrance on a road to a place of recreation, and from a marginal puddle to a deeper fish pond, shows the humoristic approach Berchem sometimes took to Ruisdael's paintings.

## BRIDGES AS TRANSITORY UTILITIES FOR THE ACCESSING OF TERRITORY

The figures are often depicting in a direct confrontation, going headlong through the water, like the shepherd in a painting of a «Landscape with a Cottage, Bridge and Sheep»<sup>19</sup> (Fig. 4). The man is not only shown going directly through the water, but also leading his flog of animals right through a small river. Next to the staffage group a wooden bridge is depicted in a desolate condition. It could be said that it is a logical decision of the man to not use this fragile construction, but in other paintings this kind of bridge is used without problems. Just like the roads are only sandy paths, the wooden bridges in Ruisdael's landscapes are seldom more than



Fig. 4.  
© CSG CIC Glasgow  
Museum Collection.

<sup>19</sup> RUISDAEL "Landscape with a Cottage, Bridge and Sheep". Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum. Ident.Nr. 612. Oil on canvas, 55.2 x 68.6 cm, datable to the early 1650s. © CSG CIC Glasgow Museum Collection.

long sticks in the water and some planks in a row with small debris sticking out at the sides.

The bridges are not depicted in this way to show their danger and fragility, but to impress the short-lived character of human constructions against the power of nature. Man will always be able to cross the water, however it is an ongoing struggle against nature, and the human constructions are always of a transitory quality.

As such the figures are often shown using these bridges regardless of their desolate state. Even shepherds with their flock of sheep are depicted going over fragile bridges, to cross the water hindrances, if it cannot be crossed directly<sup>20</sup>. However the bridges are not a simple way over water, as can be seen in their mostly ruinous constructions. They are symbols of human ingenuity, but with an element of transience. Like the sandy roads, the bridges are a possibility to accessing the territory and overcoming the water as a natural hindrance on the way. In their fragility and implied transient character, Ruisdael makes it clear, that the accessing of the territory is only a temporal achievement.

## WATER MIRRORS ON ROADS AS A CONFRONTATION WITH IMAGINARY SPACE

Ruisdael's landscapes show water elements as hindrance on the way. Nevertheless the painted roads are not only the constructed paths for staffage. They are also a reference line for the eye accessing the depicted landscapes. A water element in the foreground can also be seen as a hindrance for a visual entrance of the viewer, who is confronted with a reflecting surface.

Ruisdael also creates new space and an imaginary landscape in the middle of an imaginary landscape by setting a mirroring water element in the foreground of his paintings. He manipulates the water motif and shows a different scenery, which only relates to the rest of the landscape. The painted water surface is recognisable as a mirror in the painting, even if it cannot be compared directly with the reflected element. By stressing the manipulative input, Ruisdael makes clear, that as a painter he controls the landscape. He creates contradictory elements with painted water surfaces, which are recognizable as reflections, but do not stand in a real constellation to the rest of the composition. These small manipulations make it clear that it is a

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<sup>20</sup> I.e. RUISDAEL "Waterfall in a Mountainous Landscape with a Wooden Bridge and a House". New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Ident.Nr. 25.110.18. Oil on canvas, 54 x 41.9 cm, datable about 1680. Cf. SLIVE, 2001: 218.



Fig. 5.

© SLIVE, 2001, p. 314.

landscape illusion and not a real landscape<sup>21</sup>. The moment of illusion is paradoxical and the painted water reflection stops an imaginary entrance by confronting the viewer with the illusionistic character of the painting. In this the mirroring function of the water becomes another meaning for the viewer. The mirror in the painting is a picture in the picture – an imaginary place in an imaginary place. In this, the medium of the painting is emphasized.

Such a situation can be found in the painting of a “Pond in a Wood with a Blasted Beech Tree”<sup>22</sup> (Fig. 5). The water motif in the foreground constructs an insuperable hindrance for the figures in the back. Their road leads through the woods directly into the water. It is the end of their way, but the figures are not shown in a position of conflict. They seem to make a voluntary stop at the side of the road for resting, which transform their situation in one of recreation. There is no reason shown for the sudden end of the road. The wheel tracks in the ground make it clear that the road goes on, but the water element is characterised as a swamp through its sheer dimension and the rich vegetation in and around it.

Of course the depicted figures do not worry or are shown with any form of concern. The end of the road is an option for rest, which stress the function of this depicted road not as a connective way to another village or city, but as a road through

<sup>21</sup> On the phenomenon of reflection in paintings see MILLER. 1998: 82.

<sup>22</sup> RUISDAEL “Pond in a Wood with a Blasted Beech Tree”. St. Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum. Ident.Nr. 936. Oil on canvas, 104.5 x 128.1 cm, datable 1665-70. © SLIVE, 2001: 314.



nature with no clear destination. In addition the figures are depicted with clothes of a better social standing. This creates an image of an outing to the countryside and walking as a leisure activity. This scene shows not a problematic scene, just the moment of the strolling figures coming vis-à-vis with water and nature. At the end of the road they face the not accessible landscape and can contemplate this intact part of nature. Of course the element of the abrupt ending road is also a motif of implied renaturation of the road. The road is a sign of past movement and a cultural mark in the land. The disruption of the road through water negates the possibility of a continuative movement. Ruisdael uses a major water element, which implies a cessation of the road. Instead of the marginal motif of a puddle, which the protagonists in Ruisdael's confrontational scenes with water overcome, this swamp is permanent retransformation of a cultured part of territory into an inaccessible part of land again.

## CONCLUSION

All these pictures make clear that the problem of finding a way through the landscape is a main topic in Ruisdael's paintings. It shows a thematic relation with different methods of overcoming the conflict with water and nature. Finding a way through the 17<sup>th</sup> century landscape of the Dutch territory can be seen as a daily problem. The undeveloped infrastructure made it often hard to see the right way through the landscape.

In his thoroughly constructed scenes, Ruisdael shows a cultural phenomenon which is characterizing for the water-rich Netherlands in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The sandy roads and puddles can be seen as a truthful depicting of the real circumstances of the Dutch infrastructure.

But walking through landscape also means accessing a territory. In this the Dutch landscape painting of that time has a main motif in common. The walking figures, as the roads they are walking on, are generally seen as a sign of civilisation. The simple roads are solidified by repeated movement. In the paintings they are shown as sandy tracks through the landscape, often marked with wheel tracks. In this form the rustic roads in Dutch paintings symbolise the accessing of territory through repeated movement.

In the special example of Ruisdael's road to the village Egmond aan Zee this manifestation of an accessing of the land is ruptured with a water motif. It can be seen as a form of renaturation of the road through the water. The marginal motif of a puddle seems unimportant, but the figure is depicted walking right through

it. In this movement a re-accessing of this little part of restored nature is implied. Of course it has an ironic moment that the Dutch people, who drain whole areas from excess water, still struggle every day with water on roads. And Ruisdael made this struggle a central theme in his landscapes with road scenes, conferring a deep understanding of the interplay of culture and nature in the Dutch landscape painting of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

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