

Salomon van Ruysdael's *A Cavalry Travelling through a Wooded Landscape*, 1658



A Cavalry Travelling through a Wooded Landscape, Salomon van Ruysdael, probably 1658, oil on canvas. The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.

Transcript

Hello and welcome to this online Tuesday Talk, part of a series presented by staff and students at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, at the University of Birmingham. My name is Robert Wenley, and I'm the Deputy Director and Head of Collections. In this talk, I will be discussing a beautiful recent addition to our collection, Salomon van Ruysdael's *A Cavalry Travelling through a Wooded Landscape*, probably painted in 1658. Ruysdael, who lived between about 1600 and 1670, is one of the most admired - if least studied - of the many great landscape painters of the so-called Dutch Golden Age. This majestic painting by him has emerged from total obscurity, and its acquisition provides a welcome opportunity to revisit the artist and explore the history and significance of this particular work.

A Cavalry Travelling through a Wooded Landscape features a troop of mostly mounted military figures, who offer an engaging narrative element to the picture. Ruysdael has seemingly followed the advice given by the Haarlem-based artist and writer Karel van Mander in 1604: 'But above all do not forget to put small figures under tall trees... Make the countryside...full of activity...and the roads travelled.' We might speculate what journey or mission these soldiers are undertaking, as their horses stop to drink from a pool. We might also be reminded that the Dutch Republic was forged from conflict and at war for much of the seventeenth century, not least with its great maritime rival, England.

The trail of soldiers leads the viewer's eye through the composition helping to create a compelling sense of depth and life to the landscape. But the real subject is unquestionably the splendid canopy of silver birch trees, their dark-hued grandeur accentuated by the pictorial devices of a low horizon and a bright expanse of sky. The brilliant depiction of the shimmering foliage and dramatically wind-blown tree-trunks reveals Ruysdael at the height of his artistic powers, in what is an especially accomplished work from his later life.

Ruysdael emerged in the Dutch city of Haarlem in the 1620s, alongside the artists Pieter de Molijn (1595-1661) and Jan van Goyen (1596-1656). Together they ushered in the remarkable phase of almost monochromatic or 'tonal' landscapes that are the hallmark of early Dutch realism. But this later work is closer in style to the refined and carefully balanced 'classicizing' compositions of Salomon's more celebrated nephew, Jacob van Ruisdael (1628/29-1682), who had probably been his pupil. All four artists are now represented in the Barber's collection by fine and well-preserved examples of their work.

Landscapes like this were rarely commissioned. They were made speculatively, and sold at fairs, out of the artist's studio, or through dealers. Artists typically made several variants of their more successful compositions. They are sometimes signed, as here, and their signature, together with their distinctive style or favoured subject matter, helped to establish the artist's name on the market. Painters usually specialised in particular subjects within a genre, to secure a niche in this crowded

market: Ruysdael mainly painted river and estuary scenes, as well as winter landscapes and images of horsemen halting by an inn. The subject of this painting is comparatively rare for Ruysdael, although it makes an interesting comparison with his young nephew's painting in the Barber of much the same date, which also shows a small pool surrounded by numerous large trees.

Salomon van Ruysdael was highly respected, rising to deacon in the local artists' Guild of St Luke (1648), and very productive, with well over 300 paintings by him surviving today. But, like many of his contemporaries, he still needed other employment to earn a living, working for a time as a merchant dealing in blue dye for Haarlem's famous linen bleacheries.

Ruysdael's painting was allocated to the Barber in 2018 through the UK Government's Acceptance in Lieu Scheme, at the wish of the Trevor Family Trust. This enlightened scheme allows for wealthy estates to offset tax owed with works of art or other chattels of historical value that are then offered to public institutions like museums and archives. Through the scheme, the Barber has acquired paintings by Renoir, Reynolds and Auerbach, as well as the Ruysdael, all transformative additions to the collection. We are most grateful to the Government and to the scheme's panel for the allocation of all these works to us.

Within the context of the 30-or-so paintings by Ruysdael in UK public collections, the Barber's is one of the latest by date and one of very few that represents a landscape without a prominent expanse of water

dominating the composition. The main elements of the scene – horsemen travelling through a wooded landscape with a low horizon – recur in a number of other paintings by Ruysdael dated between 1642 and 1664, and within those there is a cluster dating from 1656-59 that bear especially close comparison. This is significant because the date of the Barber painting as inscribed by the artist has been read as 1653, but its sensitive recent cleaning by the conservator Ruth Bubb has helped clarify that this should more probably be understood as 1658.

The painting comes from the historic collection of the Trevor family of Brynkinalt near Chirk in Denbighshire, Wales. The Trevors have lived at Brynkinalt since the house was built in 1612, and can trace their line back to 942, claiming descent from the ancient kings of both Ireland and Wales. There is, however, little documentary evidence to indicate the origins and development of the picture collection, which already numbered over 230 paintings by 1838. The Barber Ruysdael was certainly at Brynkinalt in 1928, when it was inventoried on the first floor of the Gallery. This double-height room was then, as now, the great centrepiece of the interiors at the house and principal showplace for the paintings - some 65 of the 140 or so subject pictures at Brynkinalt were recorded in this space at that time. In 1928, the Barber painting was the most valuable in the house, along with a second superb landscape by Salomon van Ruysdael - the *River Landscape with Figures in a Ferry*, signed and dated 1644, which was sold by the family in 2006. It was, however, not a pair with the Barber painting since their dimensions, dates and subjects do not match.

We can only speculate as to which member of the family acquired the two Ruysdaels and the rest of the old master picture collection. These included an early masterpiece by Peter Paul Rubens of the philosophers Heraclitus and Democritus, sold from the house in 1955 and now in the museum in Valladolid, in Spain. It is believed to have entered the Trevor family collection by descent from the famous Duke of Wellington, whose mother, Anne, was the daughter of Arthur Hill-Trevor, the 1st Viscount Dungannon, inheritor of Brynkinalt in 1703.

But while the Iron Duke may conceivably have been the source of a number of Flemish paintings in the collection, perhaps acquired as booty while campaigning in Spain, the other Dutch pictures at Brynkinalt would be less typical of his taste. In addition to the two outstanding Ruysdaels, these included a number of more modest landscapes and still lifes. Both Ruysdaels, and at least one of the other Dutch landscapes, retain their carved and gilt English 'Carlo Maratta'-style frames, which are datable stylistically to around 1765. This strongly suggests that these pictures were acquired at much the same time and reframed then by the family member who bought them. Most likely this was the 1st Viscount Dungannon, who in the 1750s commissioned or acquired fine paintings by Philippe Mercier and by Canaletto, and very probably a number of other Italian landscapes of the period, some still in the house.

The 1st Viscount's son, the Honourable Arthur Hill-Trevor, who predeceased his father in 1770, apparently was also a collector and certainly

sat to Pompeo Batoni for an impressive portrait as a young man while in Rome in 1764. It is conceivable that he purchased the Ruysdaels at around this time, especially considering his father would have been about seventy then, but the 1st Viscount remains the more likely candidate as the better-documented collector.

Beyond doubt is that until very recently Brynkinalt was home to two of the finest landscapes by Salomon van Ruysdael in any private collection in the United Kingdom, paintings that have now begun a new chapter in their respective histories. As we look again at the Barber picture we are reminded that we are all travellers passing through a world that will outlive us all.

Thank you for joining me on this Tuesday Talk. I am grateful to the Honourable Kate Hill-Trevor for her help and hospitality, and to Jack Davies for his music. Come back next week for further insights into our collections. If you have any questions or would like to continue the conversation, please get in touch with the Barber at info@barber.org.uk, or use our social media platforms.

About the speaker

Robert Wenley has been Head of Collections and Deputy Director at the Barber Institute since 2010. He was previously a curator at the Wallace Collection, London, and for Glasgow Museums. He has published and lectured extensively on Dutch and Netherlandish painting and curated exhibitions at the Barber on paintings by Govert Flinck (2015/16), Jan Steen (2017/18) and Jan de Beer (2019/20).

Further Reading

Wenley, Robert. 'Salomon van Ruysdael's *A Cavalry Travelling through a Wooded Landscape, 1658*', in Charles Dumas, Rudi Ekkart and Carla van de Puttelaar (eds), *Connoisseurship: Essays in Honour of Fred G. Meijer*. Primavera Pers: Leiden, 2020, pp. 345-50

Stechow, W. *Salomon van Ruysdael: Eine Einführung in Seine Kunst mit Kritischem Katalog der Gemälde*. Berlin, 1975 (revised ed.)