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Political Sites and Collective Identities in Hendrick Avercamp's Ice-Skating Landscapes

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ABSTRACT

In the first decades of the seventeenth century, Hendrick Avercamp was among the first Dutch painters to prioritize local landscape subjects as a source of pictorial interest. Avercamp's ice-skating scenes offer a vision of a prosperous society emerging in the Northern provinces in the midst of the Dutch Revolt against Spain. This paper argues that Avercamp's work, rather than simply celebrating a quaint pastime, invites a more political reading. Avercamp's use of nascent symbols of Dutch identity – particularly the tricolour flag – tie his paintings inextricably to the political cause of Dutch autonomy, and suggest the political consciousness of the citizens of the young Republic.

KEYWORDS

Tricolour; landscape; immigration; diversity; identity; nationalism; William of Orange

Introduction

The ice-skating landscapes of Hendrick Avercamp glide between the invented and the observed, the playfully imaginary and the intimately real. Populated with numerous figures occupied with all manner of tasks, Avercamp's paintings are anecdotal landing sites for almost any conceivable personality. The beholder standing before *Winter Landscape* can readily relate to the men in the middle ground who skate breezily alone, to the couples who hold hands to steady themselves on the ice, or to the bystanders who prefer to watch safely from the snowy banks of the frozen canal (Figure 1). Avercamp's figures point to the sheer variety of the human experience of winter, from communal behaviours to personal habits deployed to weather the cold. The landscape that surrounds these evocative characters is fantastical, and pivots around an imaginary castle. Upon closer inspection, however, the setting resolves itself into a historically specific place. A tricolour flag, just barely visible in the distance, appears tucked between the dominant form of the tree in the foreground and the castle in the centre. Like the skaters, the flag enlivens the scene, and anchors the otherwise fictitious landscape in a historical time and location. Its inclusion suggests that Avercamp's figures share not only their capacity for merriment despite the harsh conditions, but also their affiliation with a distinct political entity.

By the time Avercamp began crafting images of his native land, the men and women of the Dutch Republic had experienced several tumultuous decades of war, displacement, and political negotiation. The 1608 *Winter Landscape*, one of Avercamp's earliest dated paintings,



Figure 1. Hendrick Avercamp. *Winter landscape*. 1608. Oil on panel. 13 × 21 7/8 in. (33 x 55.5 cm). KODE Art Museums and Composer Homes, Bergen. M.43. Photo by Dag Fosse.

coincides almost precisely with the inception of the Twelve Years Truce (1609–1621), the ceasefire agreement reached between the united Northern Netherlandish provinces and the king of Spain, Philip III. After more than forty years of warfare that led to the political division of the Low Countries, the newly created Dutch Republic entered a brief period of peace with the Truce.¹ Born in Amsterdam in 1585, Avercamp lived and worked in a society made more diverse by the events of the Dutch Revolt, which had instigated waves of migration away from the Spanish-dominated Southern provinces.² Citizens of the new Republic engaged with recent history and current events through popular media, especially pamphlets and broadsheets, which spurred the formation of narratives based on shared experiences.³ Avercamp's paintings seem to capture one broad conception of a community: a profusion of activities and temperaments represented as a unified group despite so many individual differences. Yet Avercamp consistently provides another indication of the potential bond among his figures, in the form of the Dutch tricolour sprinkled throughout his ice-skating scenes. Avercamp displays the flag in paintings as early as the *Winter Landscape with a Castle on an Island* in Cologne, dated to about 1605, and even in his rare summer landscapes.⁴ Their socio-political context suggests that these flags, which flew during the Revolt as a mark of William of Orange's role in the resistance, constitute more than anecdotal touches, yet their presence has received little attention from art historians. The tricolour flag connects Avercamp's depictions of quotidian existence to local experiences and to rhetoric about the fatherland that sought to foster a sense of collective identity and celebrated self-governance in the early decades of the Dutch Republic.⁵

The art historical context of Avercamp's work also reveals the extent of his originality. His paintings belong to a moment in the early seventeenth century when Dutch landscape was developing into an independent genre. Simultaneously, painters were experimenting with what would come to be known as genre scenes, depictions of everyday life in the early

modern Netherlands, albeit in a mediated form. Avercamp's ice-skating scenes exhibit characteristics of these two genres, both too often restricted by modern interpretations of Dutch artists' interest in 'realism.'⁶ Like several painters and especially printmakers in the first two decades of the seventeenth century, Avercamp prioritized the local landscape as a new source of pictorial interest. However, I propose that Avercamp's work invites a more political reading than is normally given to it. His inclusion of so many figures – which pushes his paintings to the border between landscape and genre scene – amplifies the viewer's sense of potential belonging within a diverse society. Most importantly, Avercamp uses nascent symbols of Dutch identity, particularly the flag, to ally his charming paintings with the political cause of Dutch autonomy and self-determination.

United in Winter Labour and Leisure

Hendrick Avercamp was eccentric. Firstly, in his decision to spend the bulk of his life and career in the small town of Kampen; away from his native Amsterdam, Avercamp had few followers of note and seems to have worked independent of a workshop.⁷ His distance from urban centres also resulted in a relative lack of surviving information about his life. Most of the confirmed details of his biography amount to brief mentions in archival documents.⁸ The impressive number of paintings and drawings by Avercamp that survive suggest that he was a busy and prolific painter while based in Kampen. Because he rarely dated his work, his paintings are generally arranged into stylistic groups comprising a period of a few years, but across this chronology there is consistent attention to the figures and vignettes that communicate the range of activities on the ice. In each rendition, Avercamp carefully describes particularities of costume, accessories, and even hairstyles, drawing from his substantial repository of figural studies.⁹ Avercamp is especially attached to certain motifs: skating couples holding hands, reliable modes of transportation such as sleighs and ice yachts, groups conversing along the edges of the frozen canal. In addition, the tricolour flag materializes frequently from the atmospheric haze that Avercamp uses to give the landscape its wintery character.¹⁰

Previous scholarship on Avercamp has identified him as the first Dutch artist to specialize in winter and skating scenes, using him as an example of the persistent influence of sixteenth-century Flemish landscape.¹¹ His most significant predecessor, Pieter Bruegel, made monumental paintings of the seasons that themselves originate in the medieval tradition of depicting the labours and allegories of the months.¹² Avercamp's compositions seem to take their cue directly from Bruegel, particularly in that they depict both wintertime occupations and leisure activities. Scholars have also taken an interest in how Avercamp, unlike Bruegel, shows not merely peasants and countryfolk but people of several social strata mingling, or at least coexisting. The ice is likened to a town square or street, where people of all ages, professions, and status come into contact.¹³ This investigation into the types of people Avercamp portrays has produced important information about clothing habits at multiple levels of society and about practices devised to address challenges posed by the winter season. More can be said, however, about the socio-political connotations of picturing such disparate groups participating in a common activity – one that distinguished the Netherlandish experience and was celebrated as the 'sweetest pastime' in a song that appeared in the 1627 *Amsterdamsche Pegasus*.¹⁴

The paintings, to say nothing of the substantial extant studies and preparatory drawings, are a testament to Avercamp's keen eye for characteristics that individualize his figures' attitudes and behaviours. As a result, Avercamp is sometimes cast in the role of the dispassionate observer, particularly in light of his disability. Known as 'De Stomme van Kampen' ('the mute from Kampen'), Avercamp was mute and almost certainly deaf. Several scholars – taking their cue from Clara Welcker's 1979 monograph – have proposed an entirely romanticized view of Avercamp's isolation; even his preference for Kampen over Amsterdam has been presumed to be partly due to his disability.¹⁵ The present study dispenses with the notion that Avercamp's muteness propelled his isolation, and instead considers how Avercamp engaged with the political issues that preoccupied Dutch citizens at the time.

The ice-skating scene, in Avercamp's hands, presented an opportunity to update previous allegorical notions of winter using distinctive details from contemporary life. Rather than depicting an imaginary landscape or a generalized ahistorical season, Avercamp paints the present and the very recent past. His figures are busy with highly specific tasks, often multiple times within a single composition, which makes each individual or group more a narrative element than a symbolic emblem. The group that loads barrels onto a sled finds a continuation in the man pushing a sled bearing similar barrels across the ice; ice fishermen are in the middle of their work, while the duck hunter in the foreground has already captured his game (Figure 2). In some scenes, Avercamp includes bird traps, both to describe the useful old practice of capturing birds to supplement scarce food sources in the winter and almost certainly to pay homage to Bruegel's own use of the bird trap motif (Figure 3).¹⁶ Immediately surrounding these practical chores are examples of fun activities in myriad stages. Not only do people skate on the ice, sometimes hand in hand, they also tie their skates or begin to pick themselves back up after they have fallen (Figure 4). Several kinds of sleighs – horse-drawn and manually pushed – appear throughout the paintings, right alongside sleds used for transporting goods (Figure 5). Men and sometimes children play *colf*, a game that Avercamp regularly included in his winter landscapes (Figure 6). There is little spatial separation between work and play; the entire frozen canal becomes both a playground and a site for transportation and commercial affairs. There is also no strict division in terms of social status. While folks in the most expensive garments stand by or skate carefree, plenty of middling and even poor individuals also take the chance to enjoy games on the ice. The fact that people of discernibly different means seek out similar diversions is perfectly exemplified in the centre foreground of *Winter Scene on a Frozen Canal*: right behind an aristocratic couple on skates, a fisherman and a provincial girl echo their poses (Figure 7).

By picturing such an intersection of labour and leisure, Avercamp proposes that even the less fortunate can find some kind of respite and enjoyment from their lives on the outskirts of the city. This would have been an appealing vision of life in the Dutch Republic for anyone, but especially for newcomers to the region. In Avercamp's lifetime, the Dutch Republic saw a massive influx of immigrants, particularly from the Southern Netherlands. Although cities had the most dramatic increases in population, villages and small towns also swelled with people fleeing strict and difficult living conditions under Spanish rule in the Southern provinces.¹⁷ For many, what had begun as a temporary flight from their hometowns became a permanent reality by the beginning of the Twelve Years Truce, compelling these refugees to find ways to integrate. In the early decades of the Republic, experiences of suffering became crucial common ground among neighbours. Johannes Müller has shown how even newly-



Figure 2. Hendrick Avercamp. *Winter scene on a frozen canal*. c. 1620. Oil on wood. 14 ½ x 25 ¾ in. (36.8 x 65.4 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles. M.2009.106.23. www.lacma.org. Details: packing a sled, ice fishing, and bird hunting.



Figure 3. Detail of bird trap, *Winter landscape with ice skaters* (figure 9).



Figure 4. Details, *Winter scene on a frozen canal* (Figure 2).

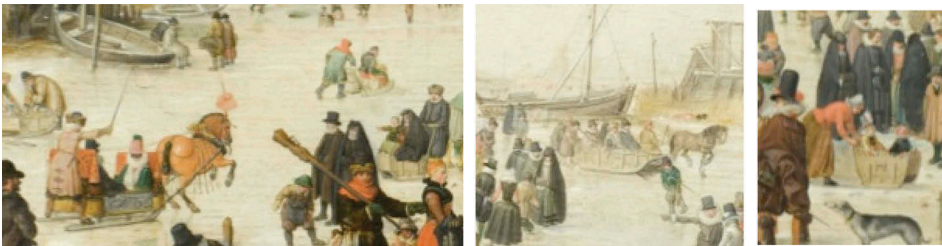


Figure 5. Details, *Winter scene on a frozen canal* (Figure 2).

arrived citizens recounted and commemorated local crises and events associated with the early Dutch Revolt, and how these memories ‘served to strengthen ties between migrants and locals.’¹⁸ In many towns in the province of Holland, families who had not been displaced had nevertheless endured sieges and occupations by Spanish soldiers; the same perpetrators featured in the stories of violence and disruption that migrants and native Hollanders continued to tell in the early seventeenth century.¹⁹ The citizens of the Northern provinces could relate to one another’s stories of hardship and seek a better way of life whether their town was their birthplace or their adopted home. For a beleaguered population, the combination of labour and leisure in Avercamp’s paintings could give the hopeful impression of prosperity to be found even in the midst of the winter.

Facing and surviving the winter was another trying ordeal that people had to endure together. While in the process of social integration and recuperation, the citizens of the



Figure 6. Right: Detail, *Winter scene on a frozen canal* (Figure 2). Left: Detail, *Winter landscape with skaters* (Figure 9).



Figure 7. Detail, *Winter scene on a frozen canal* (Figure 2).

new Republic faced some of the harshest climate conditions of the era. Avercamp lived during the so-called Little Ice Age, and his firsthand experience of multiple severe winters undoubtedly informed his work.²⁰ If the intensity of the season helped sustain Avercamp's interest in ice-skating scenes, their production amounts to a kind of historical work. Their temporal specificities go beyond merely updating the allegorical mode of thinking about winter. The season's activities also represent current events and adjustments in responses towards the winter engendered by the Little Ice Age.

The notable volume of people on the ice augments the sense of prosperity available despite inclement weather. This is especially powerful when considering that the frozen canal could get so crowded in the first place because of ongoing population growth. Kampen in particular had a history of courting immigrants, 'especially skilled immigrants in the face of competition from the Holland towns' and in 1592 offered free

citizenship to newcomers.²¹ Avercamp and his family undoubtedly witnessed these solicited waves of migration while they lived in Kampen. The hefty and conspicuously diverse group of people that takes to the ice in Avercamp's paintings becomes a microcosm of the young Republic's dynamic society, deeply affected by changes in climate and population alike.

For the contemporary viewer, the picturing of lifestyles in the present was undoubtedly more reassuring than the allegorical meditations on winter that constituted important sources for Avercamp. One of Bruegel's most well-known winter images, the print *Skating Before Saint George's Gate, Antwerp* (Figure 8), bears an inscription that creates analogies between ice-skating and man's wise or foolish conduct.²² It was standard for prints to include these sorts of captions, creating moral analogies between skating and the slipperiness of life. Avercamp's paintings are closer in spirit to the prints of the landscape pioneer Jan van de Velde, whose 1617 print *Hyems* includes a Latin inscription contradicting Ovid by suggesting that 'the young people depicted in the print outdo the Romans in their ability to take advantage of winter's cold.'²³ Van de Velde clearly delights in setting up this antagonism, referring to the beloved Dutch myth about the insurrection of the Batavians against the Romans.²⁴ Amusement in the winter season becomes a way for these artists to celebrate Dutch vitality, more so than an opportunity to contemplate life's difficulties or allegorically liken winter to man's old age. In this way, too, Avercamp belongs to a new and innovative generation of artists treating the Dutch landscape not as a canvas for moralizing messages, but as an independent subject unto itself.

The developments of landscape painting in the early seventeenth century Dutch Republic have been the subject of extensive study, driven by the sense of a radical change from the conventions and preoccupations of sixteenth-century Flemish landscapes. The prevalent argument is that Dutch artists suddenly began describing their own land and its distinctive features, 'coining ... a new symbolic visual vocabulary that emphasized the modest virtues of the homeland.'²⁵ Particularly illustrative of this phenomenon are the print



Figure 8. Frans Huys, after Pieter Bruegel the Elder. c. 1558. *Skating before St. George's gate, Antwerp*. Engraving (first state of two). 9 1/8 x 11 3/4 in. (23.2 x 29.9 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 26.72.24.



Figure 9. Hendrick Avercamp. *Winter landscape with ice skaters*. c. 1608. Oil on panel. 30 2/5 x 51 9/10 in. (77.3 x 131.9 cm). Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. SK-A-1718.

series from the 1610s published by Claes Jansz. Visscher and those engraved by Jan van de Velde. Ample scholarship has shown how these early experiments revolutionized the concept of landscape while drawing directly on Flemish sources from the previous century. The lasting effects of these print series' 'preoccupation with the communication of local values, as well as the depiction of local scenery,' cannot be overstated.²⁶ As David Freedberg has shown, these prints, with their allegedly unmediated views of towns and countryside, played a fundamental role in engendering and propagating images of a pleasing landscape that was also recognizably Dutch.²⁷ During Avercamp's lifetime and career, prints, more so than paintings, investigated the appeal and certainly the political potency of offering local sights as worthy and valuable subject matter. Although Avercamp was at some remove from artistic centres like Amsterdam where these print series circulated widely, his paintings capitalize on similar opportunities to celebrate Dutch identity.

Local Sights and Netherlandish Identity

There is an earnestness – and certainly a directness, given his medium – to Avercamp's stylistic engagement with Flemish landscape conventions. This inclination resulted partly from the significant impact of immigrant painters from Flanders and Brabant present in the Northern Netherlands by the end of the sixteenth century.²⁸ Some of Avercamp's early paintings, such as the Rijksmuseum's *Winter Landscape with Ice Skaters*, abundantly recall Bruegel's compositions, particularly with the high viewpoint and the deep plunge into the distance (Figure 9). Even in his later work, such as *Enjoying the Ice*, Avercamp retains a palette of local colour and a tendency to include even the tiniest figures in the far distance, both choices reminiscent of earlier Flemish landscapes (Figure 10). However, the *subject* of his paintings is unwaveringly Dutch. It is useful, in thinking through this combination, to consider Alexandra Onuf's recent assessment of Claes Jansz. Visscher's 1612 set of the



Figure 10. Hendrick Avercamp. *Enjoying the ice*. c. 1615–20. Oil on panel. 10 × 14 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (25.4 cm x 37.5 cm). Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. SK-A-3247.

Small Landscapes originally published by Hieronymus Cock in Antwerp in 1559 and 1561.²⁹ Onuf points out that despite taking some liberties with the original compositions, Visscher ‘is at great pains to carefully replicate the specific topographic details of each scene,’ while his attribution to Pieter Bruegel ‘further authenticates [the series]’ Flemish origins.³⁰ Visscher preserves the identification of each scene as a site in Brabant prior to its recent devastation; he offers his audience landscape images not ‘prospective or Dutch, but rather retrospective and Brabantine.’³¹

Avercamp, working in the same period, mixed native identities rather more insistently, painting landscapes that were stylistically retrospective – painted in a bygone Flemish manner – but undoubtedly Dutch. He, like Visscher, was reacting to some nostalgic appeal that Flemish associations apparently had for Dutch audiences. Onuf argues that Visscher appreciated that appeal enough to market the *Small Landscapes* and other Flemish series, promising his buyers ‘the opportunity to travel back in time as well as to traverse the widening distance between north and south.’³² If Visscher’s reprinting of Flemish series provided some cathartic alternative to actual political union between the provinces, Avercamp’s winter landscapes pay homage to former ties to the South while celebrating a new way of life exclusively available in the North.

In reality, the Dutch Republic’s immigrant population struggled with integration as they settled into their new residences. The nostalgia for images associated with the Southern Netherlands, in content or in style, coincided with the negotiation and inception of the Truce, which, for displaced Southern Netherlanders, virtually confirmed the loss of their former homes.³³ Johannes Müller has recently traced how these refugees responded to the dashed hopes of ever returning to the Southern provinces, arguing that ‘the memory of an exile past could help the children of the refugees build ties with the networks of the local host societies.’³⁴ Social connections, however, remained strongest among fellow newcomers, especially as they were sometimes excluded from participating in local politics or denied full citizenship.³⁵



Figure 11. Details, *Winter scene on a frozen canal* (Figure 2). Left: Woman wearing Holland *huik*. Right: Women wearing Brabant *huik*.

In Avercamp's ice-skating scenes, tensions between Southern immigrants and Northern Netherlanders are readily elided, although he does make room for certain markers of regional identity. In *Winter Scene on a Frozen Canal*, he carefully describes the *huik* from Holland worn by a woman at left, as well as the readily identifiable *huik* from Brabant of the group of women at right (Figure 11).³⁶ This particular painting also includes a depiction of Romani women, both with dark brown skin and babies in wraps across their backs (Figure 12). Although Romani communities had used the land near Kampen since the fifteenth century, they were mistrusted and persecuted throughout the early modern period.³⁷ Avercamp creates an idealized vision of how these individuals formed an essential part of the Dutch social world. Pictured as a social and political unit, Avercamp's men, women, and children enjoy the still recent freedom from abuse and persecution, one of the Revolt's primary positive consequences that formed the basic common ground for immigrants and their new neighbours in the Northern provinces.

Thus it is far from inconsequential that Avercamp lived and painted during the course of the Twelve Years Truce with Spain, signed on 9 April 1609 after extensive negotiations.³⁸ Avercamp's paintings depict not specific towns but composites that could stand in for a number of real places, and offer those places as sites for a new concept of unity. In the midst of debates regarding the Truce, Northern Netherlanders emphasized their attachment to and delight in the land they had endeavored to protect from Spanish tyranny for decades. Since the beginning of the Revolt in the 1560s, political imagery and dissident visual propaganda had appeared in several forms in the Northern provinces. Printed media consistently expressed a collective Netherlandish struggle, which indeed 'helped to integrate the Flemish and Brabant exiles,' as Judith Pollmann argues.³⁹ Pamphlets, broadsheets, and tracts – often embellished with allegorical images – provided opportunities for the politically conscious to communicate opinions and allegiances.⁴⁰ Between the start of the Revolt and the end of the Truce, images such as the *Leo Belgicus*, the Republic as a ship, and Hollandia



Figure 12. Detail, *Winter scene on a frozen canal* (Figure 2).

presiding over her garden repeatedly invoked the provinces' right to self-determination (Figure 13). Meanwhile, well into the seventeenth century, popular culture in the form of songs, plays, schoolbooks, and sermons perpetuated a 'national canon' of sorts that kept alive the memory of the Duke of Alva's brutal reign.⁴¹ During the Twelve Years Truce, this political rhetoric 'transformed itself into a concept of Netherlandish nationhood.'⁴² Increasingly, distinctions were made between the free Dutch Republic (*Belgica libera*) and the oppressed Southern provinces (*Belgica subdita*).⁴³ These ideas were also actively transmitted through oral discussion; thanks to an infrastructure that allowed people to travel readily into the countryside, topics that initially appeared in printed media circulating in one town could reach the Republic's rural populations.⁴⁴ Even outside urban centres, the political urgency of defending the rights and privileges of the Northern provinces was regularly felt and articulated.

Avercamp's winter landscapes form part of a phenomenon during the Twelve Years Truce whereby, in H. Perry Chapman's formulation, 'political imagery is vernacularized, or "genre-fied,"' situated within more naturalistic visual contexts rather than articulated through allegory.⁴⁵ Avercamp is among the artists in the early seventeenth century that explore Dutch identity through quotidian, ordinary motifs. His paintings show the 'cottages, country inns, ruined churches, and swinging gibbets, as well as characteristic kinds of transport' which began to 'bear the weight of cultural associations and values that rose from the identity of the native community at a specific time and place.'⁴⁶ Features that in reality marked Dutch cities and the countryside – and subsequently became symbols of Dutch identity – consistently root Avercamp's ice skating scenes in a historical time and place. The windmill, for example,

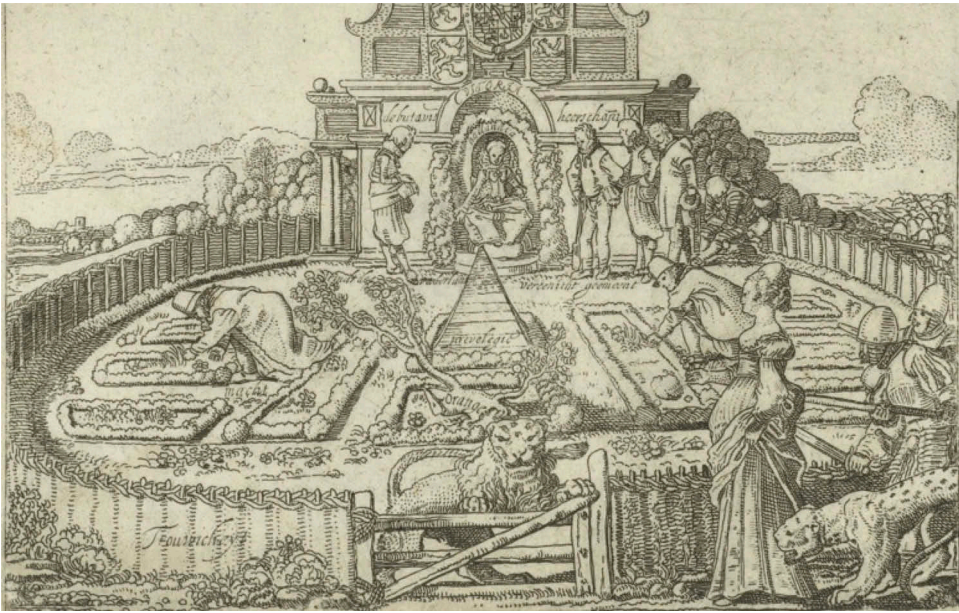


Figure 13. Willem Buytewech. *Allegory on the deceitfulness of Spain and the liberty and prosperity of the Dutch Republic*. c. 1615. Etching, engraving, and drypoint. 5 11/16 x 7 1/4 in. (14 x 18.2 cm). Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. RP-P-1935-836.



Figure 14. Left: Detail, [Figure 1](#). Right: Detail, Hendrick Avercamp. *Ice scene*. c. 1610. Oil on panel. 14 1/5 x 28 in. (36 cm x 71 cm). Mauritshuis, The Hague. Inv. no. 785.

frequently appears in the background of his compositions, acknowledging the technology that permitted the extensive use of canals in the first place ([Figure 14](#)). Enscorced unobtrusively in the busy scene, the windmill acts as a silent anchor for Dutch identity. The same can be said of the ice yachts that often sail across the ice in Avercamp's paintings ([Figure 15](#)). Patented by Adriaan Terrier in 1600, the ice yacht was a relatively new sight on the ice when Avercamp started painting, but it was immensely popular, as it could carry large numbers of people across the canal quickly (up to thirty-nine kilometers in two hours).⁴⁷ Both the



Figure 15. Hendrick Avercamp. *Winter landscape*. 1601/1615. Oil on panel. 9 4/5 x 13 2/5 in. (25 x 34 cm). Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud, Cologne. WRM 1319. Right: detail of the ice yacht.

windmill and the ice yacht represent innovations native to the Dutch Republic that were publicly celebrated. The long poem accompanying Cornelis van Sichem's print of the ice yacht from around 1605 specifically praised Dutch ingenuity and the military advantage against the Spanish that the ice yacht afforded them.⁴⁸ Such relatively new features of the landscape gave the young Republic a distinctive appearance and its citizens proof of their exceptionality.

The Adoption of the Flag

Although Avercamp's paintings do not contain overt political images such as those current during the Revolt and the Truce, his winter landscapes offer a politically charged understanding of Dutch identity. Most particular to Avercamp is the use of the tricolour that would become the national flag (Figure 16). Often as inconspicuous as the windmill or the occasional gallows on the margins of the ice, the Dutch flag is ubiquitous in Avercamp's oeuvre. It is an exceptional and unusual sight within the corpus of early Dutch landscape paintings, yet seemingly natural in Avercamp's paintings, usually appearing quietly in the background. Yet its consistent inclusion reveals how important it is to Avercamp to identify the people, the land, and the objects in his paintings as Dutch. Modern historians and political theorists have argued that nationalism is a phenomenon that originated in the nineteenth century and that the concept of the nation necessarily depends on the establishment of equal citizenship, popular sovereignty, and invented traditions that enforce a political union.⁴⁹ To be sure, plurality was a social and political reality in the early Dutch Republic. During Avercamp's lifetime, policies were constantly in flux, especially with respect to governance and religious tolerance. Nonetheless, a form of 'national consciousness' arguably emerged around the stories of the Revolt and its aftermath, and what Pollmann has called 'local memory practices' exerted a strong force in 'mediating the nation.'⁵⁰ The Dutch 'nationhood' that began to take form in the seventeenth century arose not from its previous linguistic or political ties to Germanic lands and the Holy Roman Empire, but from the culture of the Revolt and



Figure 16. Tricolour flags. Details of Figures 2, 10 and 19.

secession. The tricolour flag that appears so often in Avercamp's paintings is one of the inheritances of the Revolt, embedded into the fabric of Dutch life through the cultivation of the figure of William of Orange as the leader of the rebellion and the 'father of the fatherland.'⁵¹

The history of the flag is difficult to track clearly, which makes Avercamp's paintings all the more valuable a source of information about political visual culture in the early Dutch Republic. The watershed moment for the use of the tricolour came during the capture of Brill in April 1572 by a group of privateers known as the Sea Beggars sailing under the flag of William of Orange.⁵² The three livery colours of the House of Orange – blue, white, and orange – were subsequently worn by soldiers at the siege of Leiden in 1574, and the flag with the horizontal stripes in the same colours appeared on the masts of Dutch ships fighting the Spanish on the open seas in the late 1570s.⁵³ Although the provinces each had their own flags, the use of William of Orange's livery colours was a visual declaration of resistance and solidarity with the causes championed by the Prince of Orange and the rebellion. According to vexillologist Gabriella Elgenius, from 1597 the so-called *Prinsenvlag* was used as the sole Dutch flag.⁵⁴ Soon thereafter, a red stripe began to replace the orange band at the top of the flag, possibly as a strategy to distance the Republic from the House of Orange in deference to

the Dutch States-General, whose flag was red with a gold lion; the red stripe became the norm by around 1660.⁵⁵

Avercamp's paintings from the first two decades of the seventeenth century consistently show the flag flying above towns enjoying the freedom from tyranny and chaos that the Revolt, at least in part, had won for them. Even after his death in 1584, William of Orange was characterized as 'an inspirational, self-sacrificing leader of the incipient rebellion' largely through the propaganda efforts of writers, lawyers, and statesmen loyal to him.⁵⁶ The tricolour inspired by his livery was an explicit visual symbol of Orange's role in the Revolt, and it came into use at the same time as representations of Orange that became embedded into the popular culture of the new Republic. The acrostic ballad known as the 'Wilhelmus,' likely written between 1568 and 1572, appears to have circulated quickly and persistently, sung as early as 1573 and still popular in the seventeenth century.⁵⁷ The presentation of Orange as a soldier of the fatherland in the 'Wilhelmus' reappeared in other rebellion songs, including one whose first stanza beckons, 'Quick seventeen Provinces! / ... Come in good cheer to meet the prince / Take your position with his banners / Everyone as a loyal man.'⁵⁸ By the time the tricolour flag came into official use, its associations with the Revolt had been firmly cemented within a larger project of mythologizing William of Orange. In Avercamp's landscapes, the flag does not commemorate or celebrate the father of the fatherland, but rather the legacy secured partly under Orange's leadership.

The vast majority of images of William of Orange produced in the late sixteenth century were prints, inhibiting the full effect of representing the tricolour flag. Flags with the three horizontal stripes do appear in prints celebrating Dutch military and commercial victories, such as Claes Jansz. Visscher's *Defeat of the Portuguese Fleet Near Bantam* (1608–1610) and his *View of Amsterdam* (1611). Painters that depicted naval battles already famous in the first decade of the seventeenth century were among the first to use the tricolour flag to identify the Dutch as an autonomous political force. Images of vessels clashing on the open ocean used flags first and foremost for legibility, amidst the profusion of information required to describe the structure of the ships, the power of the firearms, and the movement of soldiers onboard. In paintings that stage these encounters – whether they show decisive confrontations or generic visions of war waged at sea – flags also made clear the separation and confrontation between the rebels and their Spanish prime enemy. Later in the seventeenth century, marine painters continued to commemorate famous naval battles with the tricolour as an indispensable feature. The tricolour also appeared early on in paintings of ships docked or arriving in Dutch harbors, which emphasize the success of the maritime activity that transformed the economy of the new Republic (Figure 17).

For Avercamp, a more immediate source of inspiration for using the flag may have come from his colleagues in Amsterdam. The Flemish painter David Vinckboons was among the painters living in Amsterdam when Avercamp trained there, across the street from the home of Avercamp's teacher.⁵⁹ Vinckboons's only known winter scene, *Landscape with a Frozen Canal, Skaters and an Ice Yacht* from around 1610, includes the recently introduced ice yacht along with prominent Dutch flags blowing in the cold wind.⁶⁰ It is possible that the young Avercamp saw Vinckboons's painting, or one of the several copies or variants of it, and that it made an impression on him, encouraging him to continue to include the flag in his own winter scenes.⁶¹ Closer still is the work of Pieter Isaacsz., with whom Avercamp lived and studied in Amsterdam until the latter returned to his native Denmark to work for Christiaan IV.⁶² Between 1604 and 1607, Pieter Isaacs produced a painting for a harpsichord lid



Figure 17. Hendrick Cornelisz. Vroom. *The arrival in Amsterdam of the second expedition to the East Indies*. 1599. Oil on canvas. 40 ¼ x 86 in. (102.3 cm x 218.4 cm). Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. SK-A-2858.

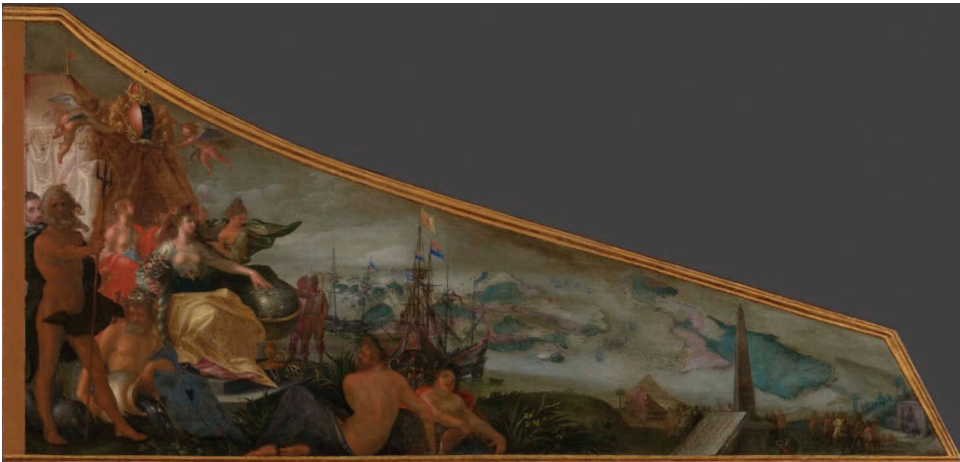


Figure 18. Pieter Isaacsz. *Amsterdam as the centre of world trade*. c. 1604–1607. Oil on panel. 31 ¼ x 65 x 1 1/5 in. (79.4 cm x 165 cm x 3 cm). Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. SK-A-4947.

commissioned by the Amsterdam city board, possibly based on a design by the Flemish Karel van Mander (Figure 18).⁶³ The lid depicts the triumphant maiden of Amsterdam surrounded by representations of the continents of Africa, Asia, and the Americas, all of which had already been visited by Dutch ships and merchants. In the centre, ships fly the tricolour flag, among others. The painting puts on display the growing mercantile wealth and reach of the Republic, down to the inscription on the stone that boasts its success even without political attachment to Spain.⁶⁴ The harpsichord lid is an outstanding example of how the independent and prosperous identity of the Dutch Republic was celebrated in paint at the turn of the seventeenth century. Given that Avercamp was under Isaacsz.'s tutelage at the time, he must have at least known about the commission.



Figure 19. Hendrick Avercamp. *Enjoying the ice near a town*. c. 1620. Oil on canvas, glued onto a panel. 18 ½ × 35 in. (47 × 89 cm). Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. On loan from private collectors. SK-C-1705. Details of flags and gibbet.

Even in some of the earliest pieces, including the *Winter Landscape* in Bergen, Avercamp paints the flag deep within the composition, an integral part of the scene (Figure 1). In an unusual piece from around 1620, in which the figures are larger and closer to the picture plane, Avercamp paints a huge flag attached to one of many commercial tents, where revelers are preparing for rides on horse-drawn sleighs.⁶⁵ In the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's *Winter Scene on a Frozen Canal*, it appears on the mast of a boat stuck in the ice, and again, large and unfurled above the roof of an inn or tavern (see detail, Figure 16). The ambitious and multi-faceted *Winter Landscape near a Town* shows the flag flying prominently over tents offering refreshments for sale – and, significantly, it stands compositionally close to the windmill at far left (Figure 19). At far right, the flag on the mast of a tilting boat dangles above the gallows from which bodies hang. Again, Avercamp suggests a correlation between the communication of a collective Dutch identity and a common feature of the landscape: the gibbet, ‘an attribute of the town’ and an extension of the right of independent jurisdiction that symbolized the autonomy Dutch towns were so keen to preserve.⁶⁶

The tricolour, along with these features of the local landscape, helps Avercamp capture what the Dutch Republic looked like in the midst of the ongoing struggle for independence.

One of the prime motivations among the citizenry for supporting the Revolt had been the protection of individual town privileges. The issue became central to Orangist propaganda, which promised to defend and restore what the Spanish government had tyrannically invalidated, including the right to be summoned to court only in one's own town.⁶⁷ The gibbet in Avercamp's paintings gives the landscape a certain degree of specificity, like the windmill, but it also alludes to the principles of self-governance that had been established as fundamental to the identity of the new republic. Avercamp and his neighbours were undoubtedly only in the process of generating the characteristics of a national identity. Yet for decades already, the tricolour flag had been used to proclaim political separation from Spain. Avercamp's choice to complete his landscapes with the flag suggests that quotidian activity in the new Republic could express a successful bid for independence as much as the naval battles immortalized by his predecessors.

Throughout the corpus of ice-skating images by Avercamp, the flag proves to be the salient and literal banner under which the viewer understands the scene as consciously Dutch. The primary audience for Avercamp's conception of a prosperous and unified society consisted of individuals who had experienced the Revolt and its consequences. Avercamp spent most of his life in Kampen, and even the collectors in Amsterdam who bought his work often had ties to Kampen or to less urban parts of the Republic.⁶⁸ There were no prospects of an international career for Avercamp, making it unlikely that he conceived of his flags as an ambassadorial strategy, to export images of Dutchness beyond the Northern provinces. Rather, it seems that Avercamp sought to convey his allegiance to the new Republic during a time of temporary peace, through the symbols it claimed for itself. During the Twelve Years Truce, when the future independence of the Dutch Republic seemed more assured, Avercamp imagined its citizens united not only on a basic human level through labour and leisure, but also through the shared political experience increasingly represented by the tricolour. Detached from explicit textual and allegorical commentary, the flag does not signal affiliation with any particular faction or propagandistic project of the early Dutch Republic. Nevertheless, it indicates that the landscape belongs to the same political entity that could boast triumphant warships and merchant vessels marked by the distinctive red, white, and blue bands. Like the persistently popular 'Wilhelmus,' the tricolour helped express and sustain a commitment to Dutch independence and to the unification of the provinces under a successful new form of government. In his paintings, which make room for distinctions of wealth and local or regional identity, Avercamp uses the flag to argue that the Dutch Republic already existed as a distinct, thriving society.

The early seventeenth century was ripe for the kinds of pictorial innovations and changes in subjectivity that Hendrick Avercamp's ice-skating landscapes present. Interpretive complications arise precisely because so many political, cultural, and economic factors affected the production of works of art in the first decades of the Dutch Republic. Much of the scholarship on the period ultimately arrives at the notion that 'a distinctively Dutch form of art, one in which the Dutchman is eager to recognise himself and be recognised by others' emerged around this time.⁶⁹ Certainly the enthusiasm for seeing the germination of these initial nationalistic impulses later, in the paintings of the 1620s and 1630s, is understandable. Yet this recognition should not preclude the possibility of reading the political aspects of even earlier painted Dutch landscapes. Avercamp's impulses, as a painter, seem rather prescient in their art historical context. He is certainly as much a visionary as Esaias van de Velde, often presented as 'the first to create in paint the mundane, prosaic here-and-now of the prints,'



Figure 20. Esaias van de Velde. *The cattle boat*. 1622. Oil on panel. 29 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 44 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (75.5 x 113 cm). Rijkmuseum, Amsterdam. SK-A-1293. Detail: windmill and Dutch flag.

who ‘initiated a virtual flood of paintings of the local scene from the 1620s and 1630s on.’⁷⁰ The beloved *Cattle Ferry* of 1622 by Van de Velde also includes, in the background, a windmill and a tricolour flag, facing each other almost as if conversing (Figure 20). A closer look at the semantically charged motifs of Avercamp’s seemingly straightforward and charming paintings reveals an artist intent on presenting a conception of political and cultural unity in his native Republic. Avercamp’s ice-skating scenes are more embedded in the Dutch political situation of the early seventeenth-century than they initially appear to be. They make a case for further understanding the contemporary Dutch citizen as politically conscious, already actively constructing a distinctly Dutch identity around the foibles and revels of a challenging season.

Notes

1. See Van der Steen, “A Contested Past.”
2. Sutton, “Hendrick Avercamp,” 254.
3. On the role of printed media in political discourse, see Deen et al., *Pamphlets and Politics*; and Harline, *Pamphlets, Printing, and Political Culture*.
4. For example, *Summer Landscape Near a Fort*, now in a private collection. See Figure 103 in Roelofs, ed., *Hendrick Avercamp: Master of the Ice Scene*.
5. For the political persona of William of Orange, see Swart, *William of Orange and the Revolt*. For the development of designations for the fatherland, see Duke, “The Elusive Netherlands,” 10–38.
6. For discussions of the pitfalls of this term with respect to the landscape genre, see Schama, “Dutch Landscapes”; and Freedberg, *Dutch Landscape Prints*.
7. Slive, *Dutch Painting 1600–1800*, 181. Arent Arentsz was Avercamp’s most notable follower, although ultimately of inferior talent.
8. Bikker, “Hendrick Avercamp.”
9. Walsh and Schneider, *A Mirror of Nature*, cat. no. 1.
10. De Bruyn Kops, *Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Landscape*, 256.
11. See, for example, Buvelot, *Made in Holland*, 31.
12. Sutton, “Introduction,” 19.
13. Roelofs, “The Paintings,” 59.
14. Quoted in translation in Gibson, *Pleasant Places*, 128.
15. Welcker, *Hendrick Avercamp, 1585–1634*; and Bikker, “Hendrick Avercamp,” 12.
16. See note 10 above.
17. Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, 328–329.
18. Müller, *Exile Memories*, 86.
19. See Pollmann, *Memory in Early Modern Europe*.
20. De Kraker, “The Little Ice Age,” 23.
21. Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, 331.
22. Sutton, “Introduction,” 27.
23. Levesque, *Journey Through Landscape*, 105.
24. Westermann, *A Worldly Art*, 100.
25. Schama, “Dutch Landscapes,” 71. See also Gibson, *Pleasant Places* for a compelling interpretation of the implications of depicting the native landscape.
26. Levesque, *Journey Through Landscape*, 4.
27. Freedberg, *Dutch Landscape Prints*, 20.
28. De Bièvre, *Dutch Art and Urban Cultures*, 293. Engravers like Hans Bol also impacted young painters like Avercamp, evident in his choice of a tondo format for his *Winter Scene with Skaters and a Castle* (National Gallery, London), which echoes Bol’s calendar prints.
29. Onuf, “Envisioning Netherlandish Unity.”
30. *Ibid.*, 6–7.
31. *Ibid.*, 8.
32. *Ibid.*, 9.
33. Müller, “Permeable Memories,” 289.
34. *Ibid.*, 294.
35. Müller, *Exile Memories*, 87.
36. Du Mortier, “Aspects of Costume,” 142–143.
37. *Ibid.*, 159.
38. Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, 404–405.
39. Pollmann, “Brabanters Do Fairly Resemble Spaniards,” 220–221.
40. See, for example, Sawyer, “Medium and Message.”
41. Pollmann, *Memory in Early Modern Europe*, 116.
42. Pollmann, “No Man’s Land,” 243.
43. *Ibid.*, 254.

44. Helmers, "Popular Participation and Public Debate," 133.
45. Chapman, "Propagandist Prints, Reaffirming Paintings," 50.
46. Schama, "Dutch Landscapes," 72.
47. Roelofs, "The Paintings," 61.
48. Van Suchtelen et al., *Holland Frozen in Time*, 25.
49. For a challenge to the theory of nationalism as an exclusively modern phenomenon, see the volume *The Roots of Nationalism*, especially Azar Gat, "Premodern Nations," 31–45.
50. Pollmann, *Memory in Early Modern Europe*, 96.
51. On this paternalistic conception of William of Orange, see Arnade, *Beggars, Iconoclasts & Civic Patriots*, chiefly Chapter 6.
52. Van Nierop, *Treason in the Northern Quarter*, 52.
53. Smith, *Flags Through the Ages*, 157.
54. Elgenius, "The Origin of European National Flags," 23.
55. *Ibid.*; and Smith, *Flags Through the Ages*, 157.
56. Arnade, *Beggars, Iconoclasts & Civic Patriots*, 274. For an account of the various insignia, badges, and other visual symbols used by Orange's supporters during the Revolt, see Chapter 6 in Duke, *Dissident Identities*.
57. Arnade, *Beggars, Iconoclasts & Civic Patriots*, 275.
58. Quoted in translation in *Ibid.*, 278.
59. Roelofs, "The Paintings," 36.
60. Currently in a private collection; see Roelofs, ed., *Hendrick Avercamp: Master of the Ice Scene*, fig. 20.
61. Several copies of Vinckboons's composition are still extant; for these, see Sutton, ed., *Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Landscape*, 511 and n. 4.
62. See note 2 above.
63. Van der Ham et al., *80 jaar oorlog*, 211.
64. *Ibid.*, 214.
65. In the P. C. W. M. Dreesman Collection, Brussels; see Roelofs, ed., *Hendrick Avercamp: Master of the Ice Scene*, fig. 63.
66. Blankert et al., *Frozen Silence*, 31.
67. Van Nierop, *Treason in the Northern Quarter*, 62. See also Van Nierop, "Popular Participation in Politics," 280.
68. Bikker, "The Early Owners of Avercamp's Work."
69. Bruyn, "A Turning-Point," 121.
70. Chapman, "Propagandist Prints, Reaffirming Paintings," 55.

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