

The Red-Coated Hunter v. the Provenance Detective

Ever look at that quirky little red-coated hunter in Meindert Hobbema's splendid 1665 *Wooded Landscape with a Watermill* (G311) and think that he seems oddly out-of place?

For years, MIA paintings curators have suspected that the hunter was an interloper, added a century or so after Hobbema completed the piece, said Erika Holmquist-Wall, assistant paintings curator and head of the MIA's Provenance Project. This makes her the museum's chief detective in documenting the often elusive ownership histories of art objects.

There were lots of tip-offs that the hunter was a later addition. First, his hunter's 19th century costume is that of an upper-class British gent in the late 18th or early 19th century, not a huntsman from Hobbema's 17th Holland. Second, the hunter's stance was enthusiastic, but wrong: Although he aims vaguely in the direction of birds in flight, his gun also points pointed willy-nilly at three boaters floating in a nearby stream. Third, the awkward figure is completely unlike other figures appearing in Hobbema's many paintings.

So, when might the red-coated hunter have been added? And why?

Detailed answers about the Hobbema came – almost accidentally - in the last two or three years as Holmquist-Wall combed through 18th and 19th century auction catalogs, working to establish complete ownership records – provenance - on all the MIA's Dutch and Flemish works.

"For 10 years I've been handling provenance for the collection, assisting other departments, if necessary, especially related to World War II claims," she said. In 1999, the Association of Art Museum Directors and the American Association of Museums agreed on a set of guidelines that all museums have to publish the provenance of any works with ownership gaps, especially those between 1933 and 1935. The MIA has made its findings publicly available through its online Provenance Project.

Wooded Landscape with a Watermill is an "incredibly significant" work by Hobbema - one of the three top classical Dutch landscape painters in the 17th century - created at the height of his artistic powers, Holmquist-Wall said. "It is quintessential Hobbema *if* you subtract the hunter."

Hobbema was born in Amsterdam in 1638, the son of a carpenter. At 15, he and his younger brother and sister were sent to an orphanage. Within two years, he was apprenticed to the famous landscape painter Jacob van Ruisdael. Hobbema specialized in elaborate woodland scenes. Watermills were a favorite theme. In

1668, he married and, through his wife's connections obtained the post of Amsterdam's Sealer of Weights and Measures, weighing and measuring imported wines. With a wife and job, his output of paintings slowed. The last years of his life were grim. His wife and two children died in 1704. Five years later, he died in poverty and was buried in a pauper's grave.

It is said that Hobbema painted the soul of a landscape. He loved Holland and it showed. Billowy clouds emit patches of sun light over a meandering stream, watermill and cottage rooftop. Such scenes were in great demand by wealthy patricians in Amsterdam. Given Holland's flat topography, images of verdant, woodlands were especially desirable. This particular watermill is in the hilly part of Holland, at Singraven, near the German border.

"We know exactly where this is," said Netherlandish art expert Alison Kettering, William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of Art History at Carleton College.

This was the Golden Age of Holland, a time in which people hungered for spiritual meaning, security and stability, Kettering said. Hobbema supplied it, creating a niche for himself in a highly competitive art market. With a new sawmill in the center and an oil mill at the left, the MIA's landscape is a meditation on Dutch prosperity - on the human ingenuity of harnessing nature's forces, Kettering said. The mills signaled Dutch industrial strength and national pride. Here were lush and loving depictions of the Dutch countryside, with people going about the tasks of their ordinary daily lives: men unloading bags of grain and a cowherd driving his cattle down a deeply rutted road.

For the most part Hobbema didn't paint his own figures, but collaborated with fellow figurative artists. But who worked with him on this piece? A number of contemporary candidates had been proposed, including Philips Wouwerman and Johannes Lingelbach. So Holmquist-Wall pulled hundreds of images of their work and began close comparisons.

She discovered that a Dutch painter named Dirck van Bergen, did most of the background figures in the MIA's landscape. By tracking down much of van Bergen's work, she was able to match the cows, dogs and the strange little birds in our Hobbema landscape with those in other van Bergen works. And that helped convince her that the man in scarlet was a fraud.

"You see the farmer driving the cattle along and there's an elderly hound trotting in front of him and then the little dog has sort of run ahead and scared up the birds, right off of the coast in the marsh - which is why the hunter is now stuck in there with the gun, pointing right at it," she said. "But the range - the proximity - is so strange. We really wrestled with, 'Is the dog original?' "

Then Holmquist-Wall came across a painting by van Bergen where the cattle, herdsman, even the strange little birds looked *exactly* the same. "The [drover] figure even wears the same kind of hat.

"We could definitely attribute the second hand in this painting, working with Hobbema as Dirck van Bergen. It made sense with the birds flying out like that, that the birds would also be original. And, that that hunter was just dropped in – with his gun pointing at the birds. Behind him are three men sitting in a rowboat," Holmquist-Wall chuckled. Imagine their conversation: "There's a man with a gun pointed at us across this little creek."

So how did Holmquist-Wall discover all those things? And what will the MIA do with her findings? She coupled modern investigative techniques – including ultraviolet light examination - with international research.

As a provenance detective, Holmquist-Wall seeks as complete a trail as possible. The work can be tedious. She starts with old exhibitions histories and auction catalogs that may not be cited in the curatorial record, often checking several versions of catalogs from a single auction. One copy might be at the Frick Museum in New York, another at the Getty in Los Angeles, a third at the Netherlands Institute for Art History (RKD) in Amsterdam. Because the catalogs were owned by different individuals, they have different side-margin notes – prices paid, who owned the works, dealers, intermediaries and gossip little anecdotes - written in by hand.

Holmquist-Wall checks official descriptions. Many of Hobbema's works are described simply as landscapes. So she compares dimensions, whether the picture was been cut down or remounted on panels. Often there are typos. "People get things wrong." All must be figured into her calculations.

While Hobbema included small patches of red in some of his paintings, none featured such large areas of red as this hunter. Such a prominent, unavoidably stand-out feature as a red-coated hunter should have been included in every catalog description of such an important piece, she realized.

That's when the epiphany came: "It was just by reading through and comparing these early catalogs that it occurred to me that what's *not* mentioned is just as important as what IS mentioned," Holmquist-Wall realized. "**Nobody** brings up the hunter until 1828!"

Two Dutch families owned the Hobbema before it made its way to England. Neither sale description – in 1768 and 1781 – mentioned the hunter. Nor was mention made of him in an 1806 catalog, despite otherwise detailed descriptions of Hobbema's landscape for an estate sale of a Mr. Crawford, who apparently had

frequent business dealings in Holland, bought the piece there and later brought it home with him to England. Again, three years later, a similar description of the landscape omits any mention of the hunter in the 1809 sale of art owned by a Charles Offley.

Finally, 20 years later “a sportsman dress in red is shooting at wild fowl” suddenly pops up in an estate catalog for a Mr. Michael Mucklow Zachary of London. Tellingly, the entry otherwise uses language that is largely identical to that in the 1809 catalog. Yet, this is the **very first mention** of the hunter

The unavoidable conclusion: The hunter was added between 1810 and 1828 at a time that hunting pictures were wildly popular in England. But why?

“It’s impossible to know the exact reason,” Holmquist-Wall said. “We can only assume that hunter was added to make the picture more saleable for a certain market.”

The next step was bringing the public into the discussion.

“We were looking for something we could present via social media – to engage the public on Facebook or Twitter,” said Holmquist-Wall, who is also the curatorial representative on the MIA’s Social Media Team. What would the painting have looked like originally? “With digital technology, it’s so easy to take the little hunter out and see what the painting looked like when it was first painted.”

Data in hand, Holmquist-Wall went public on the MIA’s online “Bubbler” showing visitors how the painting would appear if the quirky figure were removed – or masked. Then she asked: Should the red-coated hunter be removed?

Online opinions were strong, thoughtful and, occasionally humorous:

“The hunter is indeed part of the paintings history. To remove something, even though it is objectionable, seems false, a bit like a rewrite of history,” wrote Lauren.

“The addition of the hunter destroys the proportions as well as the peace of the original. I voted to mask it,” suggested Ron Ackerley.

“I think you should add another hunter,” added Matthew Nelson, “People should never hunt alone.”

A slim majority of online visitors – 52 to 48 percent - thought the hunter should stay. Erasing him permanently is not an option. The figure's long tenure in the landscape of nearly two centuries have made it part of the painting's history. More importantly, UV light showed that pigments have become too deeply embedded with Hobbema's original paint to safely remove.

Thrilled at how the painting looked without the add-on, the paintings curatorial staff headed by Patrick Noon, Aimee Butler Chair of Paintings, decided to have the hunter painted out – “masked” - making it appear much as it did when it left Hobbema's studio. “The picture is transformed without the later figure,” Noon said. “And the landscape becomes luminous and open.”

“You're just painting over it in his style and leaving the dog in,” said Holmquist-Wall. “We've determined that the dog was likely original. It makes sense with the birds.”

The restoration will be done in the next 1 ½ years by the Midwest Art Conservation Center downstairs and will be 100 percent reversible - as is most restoration. A picture of the painting with the hunter will accompany the wall label. The idea is to help museum visitors see the piece as close to its original condition as possible - without permanently changing the work itself - in all the glory of its Dutch Golden Age.

"Projects like this remind me of why I chose to work in a museum." Holmquist-Wall said. "Even though the entire issue is rather quirky and humorous, we're contributing to the serious scholarship and historical record of the painting. It's the best of both worlds!"