Townscape

Lyckle de Vries

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Broadly speaking, any painting, print or drawing that contains a certain amount of information on the visual appearance of a town; more narrowly, a genre of painting that flourished in the Netherlands and Italy in the 17th and 18th centuries. For the broader context of this genre see Topography, Bird’s-eye view, Architectural pictures, Landscape painting, Veduta, Capriccio and Urban life.

1. Early examples, before c 1650.

Late medieval paintings from the southern Netherlands contain very detailed depictions of cities: towns seen from a distance, besides renderings of streets and squares in their centres. Among these are the view through the window in the right wing of the Mérode Altarpiece (1425, New York, Cloisters) and the city in the background of Jan van Eyck’s Virgin and Child with Chancellor Rolin (c. 1430; Paris, Louvre). The evocation of everyday life in these works is so convincing that they have often been taken as a form of documentary realism, although hardly any verifiable topographical information can be obtained from them.

In the 16th century increased travel stimulated the publication of books and prints on lands and cities both near and far. Topography became the main component of print collections. Town silhouettes emerged as a standard type of print, typically in the work of Joris Hoefnagel, as did the bird’s-eye view—half map and half aerial survey. There were also prints of individual buildings, which may be characterized as ‘state portraits’ of architectural monuments. In Netherlandish art factual documentation was long confined mainly to printmaking; the influence of topography on painting remained limited. Urban architecture was depicted in the backgrounds of many paintings but hardly ever became the main subject before c. 1650. The Italian townscape appears to have developed almost without contact with the Netherlands but nevertheless has many close parallels. Its antecedents are partly to be found in Venice, where northern artists depicted the colourful festivities on the canals and the lagoon.

(i) The Netherlands.

The genre of the townscape properly speaking emerged in the Netherlands in the third quarter of the 17th century, in the work of Jan van der Heyden and Gerrit Berckheyde (for illustration see Berckheyde family, §2). Most commonly it depicts a public space within the city limits—a street, a square or canal, surrounded by trees and buildings. Occasionally ‘portraits’ of buildings occur. Another type of townscape, showing harbours and city gates where the city meets the outside world, tends to be more open in composition, incorporating landscape elements. Lastly there are views of a town taken from a certain distance: the veduta. Various elements contributed to this genre. Hoefnagel’s town silhouettes probably inspired Esaias van de Velde’s Veere (Berlin, Gemäldegaler.) and Vermeer’s View of Delft (c. 1662; Amsterdam, Rijksmus.). Vermeer’s Street (c. 1660; Amsterdam, Rijksmus.) and the related views of backyards and walled gardens in Delft by Pieter de Hooch did not on the other hand noticeably influence van der Heyden. Scenes in streets and markets occur among the repertory of genre painters such as Sybrand van Beest or Hendrick Sorgh and must have influenced the work of Gerrit Berckheyde and his brother Job Berckheyde; they also knew the work of Pieter van Laer and other Dutch Italianates very well. Turning town architecture from background to main subject was only a small step, especially since existing buildings had already been depicted by genre painters, as in Jan Steen’s Fish Market (The Hague, Gemeentemus.). City gates and harbours were among the favourite subjects of topographical printmakers such as Reinier Nooms. Once these genre elements and landscape compositions were combined into a new specialism, a new vocabulary of themes, motifs and formulae was developed. This novel form, the last to emerge in Dutch painting, came into being as the Dutch predilection for hidden symbolism or ‘mock realism’ was diminishing. It had apparently become acceptable to make paintings without clear literary content or moral message. The townscape could simply be the image of a city dear to the heart of its owner.

Civic pride and local chauvinism must have been great stimuli for van der Heyden and his patrons; it may be indicative of their intentions that all signs of poverty, crime, noise, stench and other unpleasant phenomena are completely omitted. Cities are shown at their best, in good weather, with attention paid to historic and picturesque buildings, impressive new structures (mostly fantasized) and famous landmarks; at the same time the texture of the historically developed town holds divergent elements together. Van der Heyden masterfully gives the viewer the sense of entering an organic whole that could not possibly have been otherwise. This is done through creating spaces of a rather limited depth, opening out
only towards the viewer (as in the *Drawbridge over a Canal in an Imaginary Town*, Amsterdam, Rijksmus.), partly through choosing low viewpoints—some of his sketches must have been taken from a boat on the Amsterdam canals. The procedure involves so much manipulation of observed forms, however, that the results can hardly be called ‘realistic’, for all their meticulous rendering of details.

The topographical reliability of Gerrit Berckheyde seems somewhat greater. He suppressed details in his work, rather than over-elaborating them. Italianate sunlight brings out the main forms and overall lines, contours are straightened and simplified, and large buildings tend to be kept apart from each other. Monumentality rather than intimacy seems to have been Berckheyde’s aim. Both he and van der Heyden did much work in north-west Germany; these works, tourist souvenirs after a fashion, often cram many ‘sights’ into one composition, along with people in quaint regional costume or monks in hoods and habits. Some compositions deserve to be called capriccios from their capricious mingling of fantasy with realistic elements, but there is no clear distinction between these and regular townscapes.

Van der Heyden lived well into the 18th century, the early decades of which were difficult for Dutch artists, so that many specialisms were discontinued. It was only around the mid-century that townscape painting began to revive. The works of Paulus La Fargue, Isaak Ouwater and others are among the most charming aspects of 18th-century Dutch art. For all of them van der Heyden, with his meticulous execution of detail, formed the chief model, rather than the forceful monumentality of the Berckheydes.

(ii) Italy.

In 17th-century Rome, the Classical ruins, the pilgrimage churches and other points of attraction for an increasing crowd of travellers appear in miniatures by Johann Wilhelm Baur (for illustration see Baur [Bauer; Baver; Paur], Johann Wilhelm) and carefully detailed drawings by Lieven Cruyl, both of whom were northerners. However, topographical prints formed the bulk of travelling collectors’ souvenirs. The first painter to develop topography into a painterly specialism in Italian art was the Dutch-born Gaspar van Wittel. He arrived in Rome c. 1674, before he had begun his independent development as an artist and apparently without knowledge of van der Heyden’s townscapes. His work evolved from that of the Dutch Italianates, whose paintings incorporate well-known Roman ruins and other sights in Rome and the Campagna. In van Wittel’s work, as in theirs, the architecture is always embedded in the surrounding landscape, with its hills, streams and trees. The artist’s viewpoint, therefore, was never very close to a building, and large complexes are shown in overall views (for illustration see Wittel, Gaspar [Caspar] (Adriaansz.) van). His works are mostly labelled *vedute*, and they should be considered as a mixture of landscape and urban
architecture. Even his overview of the *Piazza Navona* (Rome, Gal. Colonna), taken from a third-floor window, seems to widen this already broad space. Van Wittel was a prolific draughtsman, and some of his sheets reveal the care with which he prepared the perspective construction of building groups. It is possible that he used a camera obscura in preparing his *vedute*. Some other Dutch landscape painters active in Rome also specialized in *vedute*, although van Wittel was the first and most influential. He was also the only one to work in tempera, which demonstrates the connection of his early work with that of Baur—a technical and commercial rather than a stylistic connection.

Giovanni Paolo Panini met van Wittel when he came to Rome as a young man. He soon became one of the most prominent painters of architecture in the city, but even his townscapes proper retain a strong element of genre in their staffage. The difference between Rome, spread out over its hills and still with large areas of unstructured open space, and Venice, crowded on its islands, may partly explain why the *veduta* flourished in Rome and the townscape in Venice. The first Italian specialist to paint townscapes that place the viewer in a public space surrounding him completely was Luca Carlevaris (for illustration see Carlevaris [Carlevarijs], Luca). The best and largest part of his oeuvre is his topographical prints, showing the sights of Venice, and a thorough knowledge of the rules of architecture and of perspective provided this moderately gifted artist with a solid base for his work. The rendering of buildings with the help of mathematical perspective became one of the main concerns of all Italian townscape painters, most of whom were trained as painters of stage sets or in the workshops of *quadraturisti*. Carlevaris is of importance for making the step from printed to painted topography and even more so for being the teacher of Canaletto.

Canaletto extended the limited repertory of his predecessors into a broad range of views in which not only the great festivals but also the major monuments of Venice are recorded (e.g. *Entrance to the Grand Canal, Venice*, 1730; Windsor Castle, Berks, Royal Col.). His successful career depended almost completely on the admiration of foreign travellers, mostly British, for the picturesqueness of Venice. As with van der Heyden, the semblance of realism and topographical reliability came from skilful manipulation. The painter made innumerable sketches on the spot, made use of a camera obscura and even seems to have painted oil sketches in the open air. His compositions, however, were carefully constructed in his studio, and often the traces of ruler and compass are recognizable. Perspectival effects were heightened, the scale of open spaces adapted to the demands of the composition and the relation between height and width in façades altered. Strong contrasts between light and shade enhance the theatrical effect of perspective constructions in Canaletto’s early work; his later compositions tend to be more open, his light a softer and all-pervading sunshine. His characteristic staffage figures are small in scale but carefully executed and full of witty detail.
Canaletto’s immense success with foreign collectors compelled him to leave part of his production to studio assistants, and he had a number of imitators, among whom was Michele Giovanni Marieschi (for illustration see Marieschi, Michele [Michiel] Giovanni). The career of Bernardo Bellotto, a nephew, pupil and assistant of Canaletto, mostly evolved outside Italy; the vogue for Venice and for the work of his uncle paved the way for him in Dresden, Vienna, Munich and Warsaw. The commissions he executed for Frederick-Augustus II, Elector of Saxony (reg 1733–63), translate the intimate urban poetry of Canaletto into the grandeur and monumentality suitable for a central European court.

It was only after Canaletto’s death that the townscape became Francesco Guardi’s main field of activity. Both artists treated the same themes in their views of Venice, but their styles were widely different. Guardi was not greatly concerned with perspective, nor with the recording of architectural detail; his works conjure up a dreamlike vision of a city that existed more in the imagination of its visitors than in reality. His staffage figures are suggested by specks of colour, which seem to have no contour. Surfaces of water and stone walls seem to be there only to reflect the soft sunlight in Venice’s moist atmosphere. Buildings, sky and water are unified by a very free, almost calligraphic handling of the brush.

3. Decline, after c 1750.

The hierarchy of subjects that had developed in classicizing art theory placed the townscape on a very low level, if it was willing to acknowledge its existence at all; for example, it was only late in his life that Canaletto was admitted to the Accademia in Venice. Such considerations did not affect Canaletto’s foreign patrons, nor had they influenced Berckheyde, van der Heyden and their buyers. Not long after Canaletto’s death, the Accademia realized the necessity of distinguishing between his oeuvre and the works of his imitators. Not much later the emergence of Romanticism upset all academic rules, obliterating not only the hierarchy of subjects but also the distinction between the traditional specialized genres. Townscape was practised in the 19th century, but it became one of the subjects in which artists expressed their nostalgia. Many took the past as their inspiration, preferring the 17th-century Dutch example to that of the 18th-century Venetian townscape specialists. With the advent of the railway, an innocuous form of nostalgia for historic beauty became a standard ingredient of mass tourism. In the later 19th century topography again became a safe source of income for printmakers and painters, most of whom produced rather traditional work. The combined effects of photography and of stylistic changes in avant-garde painting brought a slow and painless end to the development of townscape painting as a genre.
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