Schelfhout, Andreas (Dutch, 1787-1870)
Boats in a River Estuary

Andreas Schelfhout, along with Barend Cornelis Koekkoek who is also represented in the Widener University collection, was a prime exponent of 19th century Dutch Romantic landscape painting. Known to have painted alongside Schelfhout but preferring hilly terrains, Koekkoek stated about his peer, "See how a flat, simple country tableau, just as nature herself stamped it, can become the hallmark of truth, beauty and grace. That is our great Schelfhout."

This small-scale marine painting reflects the admiration so very eloquently expressed by Koekkoek. Schelfhout sets his view of Holland as a panoramic view of the estuary opening out to the low, wide horizon of the sea. Towering voluminous clouds occupy three-quarters of the composition. Among the wealth of detail, vertical and horizontal axes are played off against the underlying diagonals to generate balance and simplicity.

Schelfhout expresses the varying moods of nature in true Romantic spirit. In the distance, a storm threatens. Fishing and sailing vessels are caught in the stillness before the wind and rain arrives. Dark accents in foreground ships are set off against the luminous openings in the sky where bright light breaks through, growing towards the distance and brightening the horizon.

Schelfhout’s acute sense of observation is combined with a timeless aura. Intimate details painted with controlled strokes include the thatched roof house, the distant church steeple, the Dutch flag whipping in the wind on the ship’s mast, and fishermen setting off from their boat in a dingy. He selects types of boats which had been sailing Dutch waters for more than a couple of centuries. In a traditional vein, he shows people dependent on nature for their livelihood.

Andreas Schelfhout was born in 1787 in The Hague, the son of a gilder and frame maker in whose business he worked. By an early age, Schelfhout was painting in oils, landscapes that were the precursors of his mature works.

Between 1811 and 1815 he was apprenticed to the stage designer Johannes Breckenheimer. Here he learned to paint motifs such as city scenes and landscape but also the technical aspects of painting such as perspective and paint preparation. During this time, Schelfhout made detailed studies of the panoramic landscapes of the great 17th Century Dutch landscape painters Jacob van Ruisdael and Jan van Goyen. He also sketched en plein air in the countryside, developing his direct observations into oil paintings in the studio.

By 1816, his name was known not only in The Hague, but in Belgium and his rise to fame was rapid. In 1819 he was awarded the Gold Medal at the exhibition in Antwerp. In 1818 he became a member of the Royal Academy for Visual Arts of Amsterdam. As his reputation continued to grow, in 1822 he was given the rank of Fourth Class Correspondent of the Royal Dutch Institute.

From the early 1820s, one exhibition followed another. Initially, Schelfhout exhibited many more summer landscapes than winter ones. However, as his winter scenes grew in popularity he began to include them in the exhibitions. The evocative scenes of skaters on silvery lighted frozen canals carried him to fame so that today he is seen as foremost a painter of winter scenes.
His sketchbook *Liber Veritatis* (Book of Truth) shows that he made about twenty paintings a year and his patrons were private and royal collectors. His sketches include a few foreign views indicating he travelled abroad around 1825. In the 1830s, he visited France, England and Germany. With his exposure to the French Romantic painters and to Constable, his brushstrokes became freer and his color brighter.

Admired by his contemporaries, Schelfhout had a number of students who were to approach him in stature, among them Johan Bartold Jongkind (1819–1891), whose early works reveal his influence. Museum collections which include his work are: Riksmuseum, Amsterdam; Dordrechts Museum, Netherlands; National Gallery, London; and The Wallace Collection, London. Schelfhout’s death in 1870 marked the end of the era we now call Romanticism.

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