


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Watch (1642, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam). Small in scale but vast in visual effect, *The Three Trees* is considered one of Rembrandt's masterpieces in any medium.

(<https://artmuseum.princeton.edu/collections/objects/135185>) For Rembrandt the independent landscape became a subject of intense preoccupation during two distinct phases of his career: first in the 1630s, when he produced a group of oil paintings of largely fantastic settings, including *Stormy Landscape* (ca. 1638, Braunschweig), and then between 1641 and 1653. During the latter period he created hundreds of landscape drawings, primarily sketches of specific locations in and around Amsterdam made outdoors during walking expeditions, as well as prints in which he demonstrated a variety of styles, ranging from spare and sketchy to finished and dramatic.

Of Rembrandt's twenty-six recorded landscape etchings, *The Three Trees* is the largest and most elaborate—a strategic effort to provide a printed counterpart to his most theatrical landscape paintings of the 1630s. With tightly orchestrated chiaroscuro and atmospheric effects, this etching combines technical virtuosity and conceptual complexity to deliver a visionary spectacle incorporating what has aptly been called “meteorological melodrama”—in itself a striking feature, since the skies in Rembrandt's etched landscapes are usually left blank and cloudless.

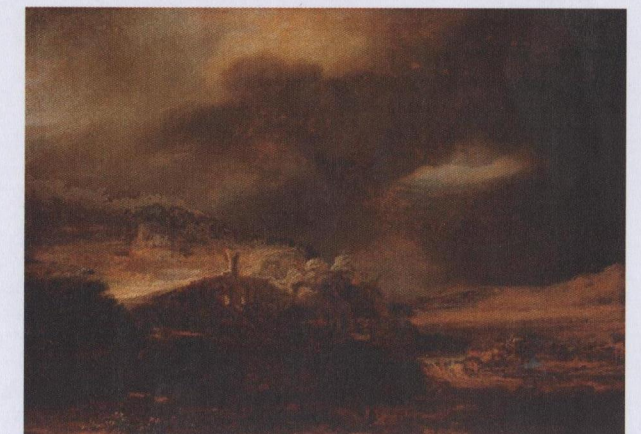


Rembrandt van Rijn (Dutch, 1606–1669), *The Three Trees*, 1643. Etching with drypoint and engraving, 21 × 28 cm. Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, Fowler McCormick, Class of 1921, Fund and Laura P. Hall Memorial Fund in memory of the Museum's dear friend and benefactor David A. Tierno

Despite attempts to identify the specific location and viewpoint of *The Three Trees*, the sweeping polderscape is now generally considered to be a distillation of motifs typical of the countryside around Amsterdam—the city generically indicated in the distance. In the middle ground Rembrandt privileged imagination over topography by evoking the essentials of a Dutch landscape: the proximity between town and countryside; the flat expanses of tilled fields with windmills, cattle, and herdsmen; the changeable weather—complete with driving rain, sweeping shadows, and emerging sunlight—and the watery mass of the dike, which serves as a platform for the three majestic and windswept trees. Additional human motifs

—including, on the far right, a seated artist sketching (a self-portrait?) and a horse-drawn wagon full of people and, in the immediate foreground, a fisherman and his female companion (left) and two (barely visible) lovers in the shadowy bower (right)—contribute to the scene's poetic power. Rembrandt's inclusion of figures within a panoramic print has numerous precedents in world landscapes by sixteenth-century Netherlandish artists such as Joachim Patinir and Pieter Bruegel the Elder, whose engraved landscapes often include rustic figures at work and play. Whereas these are delineated with great clarity, Rembrandt's human protagonists are half obscured and concealed, intended to be revealed in a slow examination of the composition.

The technical complexity of this print is grounded in Rembrandt's dexterity with the etching needle. This is apparent throughout, from the endlessly varying outlines of the trees' foliage to the intricate weblike network in the dense and dark foreground, revealing lines of different densities. These lines indicate that the plate was immersed in the acid bath more than once, resulting in blurred



contours, as in the fisherman standing at lower left. Although etching dominates, Rembrandt also employed touches of engraving in the denser passages of the right foreground. He utilized drypoint more

extensively, particularly in the heavy clouds that frame the landscape at the top and in the slanting diagonal lines in the upper left, for which he also employed a straightedge. Finally, there is a fine granular bitten tone perceptible in the fields in the middle distance at left, which could be created by sulfur tinting or by the direct application of acid to the surface of the plate, followed by burnishing. The result of this process is a dense thicket of marks that translate as sweeping and tonally rich contrasts of light and shadow when viewed from a distance.

Rembrandt van Rijn, Stormy Landscape, ca. 1638. Oil on canvas, 52 × 73 cm. Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum, Braunschweig, Germany

In the extensive scholarly literature on *The Three Trees*, its visual complexity has been mined for iconographic and contextual significance. It has inspired debates about the pronounced stormy weather component: whether the squall is approaching or receding and whether the slanting lines signify driving rain (the prevailing view) or rays of sunshine breaking through the roiling clouds. Many modern interpretations have focused on individual motifs, most notably the trees themselves, which have been read as emblems of strength withstanding the wind (referencing the Dutch triumph over Spanish rule) or as veiled allusions to the three crosses at Christ's crucifixion or the Trinity. Attention has also been paid to the lovers and fishing couple, who have been identified as erotic tropes prevalent in contemporary Dutch pastoral literature. Broader readings of the scene as a whole emphasize Rembrandt's intent to convey the essence of Dutch weather (massing clouds and intermittent showers) in a metaphysical mode—at once human and divine, granular and grand—that would have resonated with his contemporaries. Beyond its multiplicity of meanings and major influence on subsequent landscape artists, including Thomas Gainsborough and J. M. W. Turner, Rembrandt's *The Three Trees* offers a compelling universality in its extraordinary evocation of an ephemeral moment in nature.

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