THE ROLE OF DUTCH ART IN GOETHE'S ESTHETIC DEVELOPMENT

Charles N. Genno, Toronto

Goethe's preoccupation with the visual arts, especially painting, began when he was a schoolboy in Frankfurt am Main in the late 1750's and continued, in varying degrees, throughout his life. It is difficult for us today to appreciate the fact that until the age of thirty-nine he was not at all sure whether his main talent lay in painting or literature. In a famous passage in his autobiography Dichtung und Wahrheit he gives a rather droll account of one attempt to solve the dilemma while wandering along the banks of the Lahn River at the age of twenty-three. Flinging his pocket knife into the river, he resolved to become an artist if he saw it fall but to abandon the plan if the sinking of the knife were concealed by an overhanging bush of willows. The ambiguous result of this test of fate was that the sinking knife was concealed by the extreme twigs of the willow, while the splash from the fall was visible.(1) Fourteen years later, in 1786, still uncertain about his true vocation, he set out for Italy to settle once and for all this inner conflict. By February, 1788, his decision to devote his life primarily to literature had been made. But he continued to sketch until the end of his life and after Italy he spent much time writing about art and collecting engravings and drawings.(2)

Long before Goethe finally abandoned all hope of becoming a successful painter, he had recognized the importance of his interest in art for his poetic creativity. He was particularly aware of the contribution of Dutch art to his aesthetic development. The purpose of this essay is to assess the significance of this contribution by studying changes in his attitude towards Dutch art from his formative years to the last years of his life.

To comprehend fully the important influence that Dutch art exerted on Goethe one needs to know something about the cultural climate of Frankfurt am Main while he was growing up. It was an ancient free city which had preserved much of its medieval character and, as a bourgeois Protestant stronghold, resisted the baroque-rococo tastes of the courts and the Catholic cities in the south. Goethe's father, Johann Caspar Goethe, who was a patron of the arts, was not entirely unimpressed by the rococo, as a family portrait in shepherd's costume by Johann Conrad Seekatz, court painter in Darmstadt, indicates.(3) Commissioned in 1762, it presents the four family members in a rustic setting, with young Goethe in a tricorne hat tying a pink ribbon around a lamb's neck while his sister Cornelia stands nearby clutching a doll. Since a trip to Venice and other parts of Italy in 1740 Johann Caspar had developed an interest in baroque art. As early as 1745, however, he started collecting Dutch paintings and soon afterwards began to purchase works by a group of contemporary local artists, the so-called 'Frankfurter Maler' (The Frankfurt Painters), who painted in the Dutch tradition. Since the sixteenth century Frankfurt had

been one of the leading centres outside of Holland for the promotion of Dutch art, largely because of the influx of artists, such as Martin van Valckenburg, Hendrik van der Borcht and Hendrik van Steenwyck, who sought refuge from the religious wars there. The Frankfurt Painters in the 1760s were carrying on in the tradition of their artistic forebears, extolling realism, naturalism and simplicity as the sine qua non of great art.

In his autobiography Goethe relates how he came under the sway of Dutch art at the tender age of ten. In 1759, in the midst of the Seven Years' War, Frankfurt was occupied by French troops and, as fate would have it, the Comte de Thoranc, an avid champion of the arts, was billeted with the Goethe family. Soon after settling in, he invited the Frankfurt Painters Hirt, Schutz, Trautmann, Nothnagel, and Juncker to the house, bought what they were willing to sell, and commissioned some two hundred and fifty additional paintings. Young Goethe's attic bedroom was converted into a studio for the artists. Here over the next two years the boy was able to observe painters at work. It is safe to say that Goethe's lifetime absorption with the arts began during this period and that the source of his future aesthetic principles was the naturalism pervading the works of these disciples of the Dutch School. It is significant that Goethe, when he mentions one or another of the Frankfurt Painters in his autobiography, associates the individual with one of the Dutch masters; for example, Trautmann with Rembrandt, Schutz with Sachtleven, and Juncker with the various Dutch still-life painters.(4) Looking back on this period in later life, he acknowledged the importance of his contact with these men for the development of his conception of life:

> Das Auge was vor allen anderen das Organ, womit ich die Welt fasste. Ich hatte von Kindheit auf zwischen Malern gelebt, und mich gewohnt, die Gegenstände wie sie in Bezug auf die Kunst anzusehen. (HA, IX, 224)
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> The eye was, above all others, the organ with which I seized the world. I had from childhood on lived among painters and had grown used to looking at objects as they did, in relationship to art.

His enthusiasm for their style of painting increased as he familiarized himself with the original paintings of Dutch masters in various collections in Frankfurt.

In October 1765, at the age of sixteen, Goethe arrived in Leipzig with the intention of studying law. During his three-year stay there he spent most of his time not attending lectures on jurisprudence, but with painters and art collectors. A major influence on the direction that his aesthetic development was to take was his friendship with his drawing teacher, Adam Friedrich Oeser. Oeser is generally regarded as the founder of Neo-Classicism, a movement that arose partially as a reaction against

the rococo-baroque style. Thus he strengthened in Goethe an antipathy that he had already acquired from the Frankfurt Painters. Rather than looking to northern climes for his models, Oeser looked to ancient Greece. He tried to teach his pupil the same lesson that he had instilled in his friend Johann Winckelmann, the author of Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke (Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works), earlier: the credo of "noble simplicity and calm greatness." The concepts that Oeser implanted in Goethe's mind at this impressionable stage in his life were slow in developing. Only after he had outgrown the Storm and Stress phase of the 1770s was he intellectually prepared to assimilate Oeser's aesthetic gospel.

Of more immediate influence on his artistic taste at this stage were his contacts with important art collectors and experts, such as Huber, Kreuchauff, Winkler and Richter, all of whom showed a decided predilection for Netherlandic art. It is not surprising that when he stole off for a twelve-day trip to the art gallery in Dresden at the end of February, 1768, he virtually ignored the ancient and Italian masterpieces there in favour of the Dutch artists, whose works, he believed, were much closer to nature.

One of his favourite painters at this time was Adriaen van Ostade, who was born in Haarlem in 1610. A follower of Adriaen Brouwer, van Ostade in his early works dealt mainly with groups of peasants in their modest homes or in taverns. There is an interesting episode in Dichtung und Wahrheit in which Goethe describes his return from the gallery to the cobbler's home where he was staying in Dresden. It illustrates the deep impact that van Ostade's paintings had made on him:

> Als ich bei meinem Schuster wieder eintrat, um das Mittagsmahl zu geniessen, trauete ich meinen Augen kaum: denn ich glaubte ein Bild von Ostade vor mir zu sehen, so vollkommen, das man es nur auf die Galerie hätte hängen dürfen. Stellung der Gegenstände, Licht, Schatten, bräunlicher Teint des ganzen, magische Haltung, alles, was man in jenen Bildern bewundert, sah ich hier in der Wirklichkeit. Es war das erstemal, dass ich auf einen so hohen Grad die Gabe gewahr wurde, die ich nachher mit mehrerem Bewusststein übte, die Natur nämlich mit den Augen dieses oder jenes Künstlers zu sehen, dessen Werken ich soeben eine besondere Aufmerksamkeit gewidmet hatte.

> When I returned to my shoemaker's for dinner, I scarcely believed my eyes; for I thought I saw before me a picture by Ostade, so perfect that all it needed was to be hung up in the gallery. The position of the objects, the light, the shadow, the brownish tint of the whole, the magical harmony, everything that one admires in those pictures, I saw here in reality. It was the first time that I perceived in so high a degree the gift which I later made use of more consciously; namely, that of seeing nature with the eyes of this or that artist to whose works I had just devoted special attention.

The major effect of Goethe's trip to Dresden in 1768 was to reinforce his preference for Dutch art.

In August 1768, the young student was forced by ill health to abandon his studies and return to Frankfurt. After an eighteen-month convalescence he set out for Strasbourg, where he enrolled in courses at the medical faculty and later tried unsuccessfully to have a thesis that he had written accepted for a degree in church law. During the period that he spent in Strasbourg, from April 1770, to August 1771, under the influence of his new mentor Johann Gottfried Herder, Goethe discovered Gothic architecture, which he made the subject of his first important essay on art: "Von deutscher Baukunst" (On German Architecture). Goethe in this essay wrongly argued that Gothic architecture was German in origin. In defending it, he used the same aesthetic criteria as he had applied earlier with the Dutch painters: truth to nature and harmony with it. This philosophy of art remained constant throughout his life. What changed was his definition of truth to nature. His passion for Gothic architecture, fueled by his visits to the Strasbourg Minster, was short-lived, although it was revived some forty years later through his friendship with Sulpiz Boisserée, remembered today above all for his efforts to bring about the completion of Cologne Cathedral.

The four years between his return to Frankfurt from Strasbourg and his departure for Weimar were important for his literary development. His first play Goetz von Berlichingen appeared in 1773 and Die Leiden des jungen Werther (The Sufferings of Young Werther), the novel which brought him immediate international fame, the following year. These works established his reputation as the foremost representative of the Sturm und Drang movement. In these years Goethe also experienced a renewal of his interest in Dutch art, whose characteristics he found to be compatible with his new literary theories, based on nature, feeling, freedom and genius. In Book One of Die Leiden des Werther, his eponymous hero wanders about the countryside with a sketchbook under his arm, looking for subjects in nature to depict. In the letter of May 26 he describes a drawing of two peasant children which he has just completed. The description resembles the style of a number of the Haarlem School painters. Werther is so pleased with the result that he resolves to use only nature as his guide infuture.

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Goethe's revived enthusiasm for Dutch art was stimulated by his new friendship with Johann Heinrich Merck and by the resumption of his contact with aficionados of Dutch art, such as Ettling, Ehrenreich and Nothnagel. Concerning the influence of the latter on him, he writes in his autobiography:

> Mein durch die Natur geschärfter Blick warf sich wieder auf die Kunstbeschauung, wozu mir die schönen Frankfurter Sammlungen an Gemälden und Kupferstichen die beste Gelegenheit gaben, und ich bin der Neigung der Herrn Ettling, Ehrenreich, besonders aber dem braven Nothnagel sehr viel schuldig geworden. Die Natur in der Kunst zu sehen, ward bei mir zu einer Leidenschaft, die in ihren höchsten Augenblicken andern, selbst passionierten Liebhabern, fast wie Wahnsinn erscheinen musste; und wie konnte eine solche Neigung besser gehegt werden, als durch eine fortdauernde Betrachtung der trefflichen Werke der Niederländer. (HA,IX,563-4)

> My eye, sharpened by nature, again turned to the contemplation of art, for which the beautiful Frankfurt collections afforded the best opportunity, both in paintings and engravings; and I have been very indebted to the kindness of the gentlemen Ettling and Ehrenreich, but especially to the fine Nothnagel. To see nature in art became with me a passion, which, in its highest moments, had to seem to others, even passionate art lovers, to be bordering on madness; and how could such a penchant be better fostered than by a constant observation of the excellent works of the Netherlanders?

Goethe was afforded the opportunity to foster this penchant further during a trip along the Rhine River with his friends Lavater and Basedow in July 1774. The high points of the trip were a visit to the Düsseldorf Gallery, where his appetite for Dutch art found ample nourishment, and a stop at Schloss Bensberg near Cologne where he was impressed by paintings of the Dutch genre artist Jan Weenix (1621-1660).

The most important discovery that Goethe made during this period, however, was largely attributable to his friend Johann Heinrich Merck. Merck had written an article on Rembrandt's engravings for the journal Teutscher Merkur in 1773. Surprisingly, Goethe had until then largely ignored this great painter, although he had had opportunity enough to view some of his masterpieces in Dresden and in Leipzig. Through Merck's influence he came to recognize the great talent of this genius whom the critics in Germany had until then either maligned or ignored.(5) In his short essay "Nach Falconet und über Falconet", which one critic has called "the most eloquent tribute we possess to the young Goethe's debt to the

tradition of Netherlandish art,"(6) he tried to rectify this obvious injustice.

The title refers to the French sculptor Etienne Maurice Falconet (1716-1791), who created the great equestrian statue of Peter the Great and who, in an article about a similar statue of Marcus Aurelius on the Capitol in Rome, argued that moulds were as good for study purposes as the marble originals.(7) What appealed to Goethe in Falconet's article were the idea of inner form as being more significant than outer form and the view that nature is the source of art. Carrying these concepts a step further, the young Storm and Stress writer argues that historical accuracy in costume is unnecessary and perhaps even detrimental because it stifles the artist's own vision. The true artist will portray the world as he knows it from his own experience, regardless of the historical event with which he is dealing. As a realist he can take the simplest, most ordinary objects around him, recreate them in his imagination and give them artistic form. As an example for his theories he cites Rembrandt's religious engraving "The Adoration of the Shepherds with the Lamp" (1654), in which simple country folk dressed in ordinary seventeenth-century garb crowd into the stable to pay their respects to Mary and her child, whom they find in a state as humble as their own. The essay which begins as an essay on Falconet ends as a eulogy to Rembrandt.

On November 8, 1775, Goethe, now twenty-six years old, arrived in Weimar at the invitation of Duke Karl August of Saxony-Weimar. The next eleven years mark the nadir of his artistic and literary endeavours. Preoccupied with his new administrative duties and a growing interest in natural science, he found little time to devote to painting. Most of his artistic energy was expended in collecting works by Dutch and German painters, especially Rembrandt and Dürer. On October 1, 1783, he visited the art gallery at Kassel, famous for its splendid collection of Dutch masterpieces, assembled at the beginning of the eighteenth century by the landgrave Wilhelm VIII, the godson of William III of Orange. He also developed an interest in the seventeenth-century Dutch landscape painter Allaert van Everdingen during this period. Nevertheless, his involvement with art, either as critic or practititioner, during these eleven years represented little more than a passing diversion.

All this was to change drastically, however, in September 1786, when he secretly set out for Italy. It was as if all his artistic urges which had been suppressed for so long in Weimar were now asserting their right to exist. For the next twenty months the visual arts became, for the first and only time in his life, the focus of all his thoughts and actions. As he became increasingly familiar with classical art, he found his enthusiasm for northern art waning. His growing disenchantment with Dutch art is evident in a letter that he wrote to Duke Karl August from Rome in December

1787, in which he contrasted the purity of form and firmness of outline of classical art with the rough realism and vague mysticism of Rembrandt's paintings. He now dismissed Gothic architecture outright as unnatural. The lessons that Oeser had tried to teach him some eighteen years earlier in Leipzig seemed so self-evident in this environment. Only now did he begin to study Winckelmann's writings seriously. His new idols became the Italian architect Palladio and Raphael, whose greatness he attributed to the fact thet they knew the laws and limitations of their craft and moved easily within these laws. Goethe's main criterion for judging artistic merit was still truth to nature, but he found it best exemplified now in the healthy serenity and stability of ancient Greek sculpture and architecture. The new criteria were nobility of soul and greatness.

During most of his sojourn in Italy Goethe lived in a colony of German artists in Rome, studying perspective, landscape composition, and architecture. By the end of his stay he realized that his true vocation lay in poetry, not painting. In a letter dated February 22, 1788, he announced:

> Täglich wird mir's deutlicher, dass ich eigentlich zur Dichtkunst geboren bin... Von meinem längern Aufenthalt in Rom werde ich den Vorteil haben, dass ich auf das Ausüben der bildenden Kunst Verzicht tue. (HA, XI, 58)
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> Every day it becomes clearer to me that I was really born to be a poet... From my lengthy stay in Rome I shall have the advantage of dispensing with the practice of pictorial art.

He left Rome for Weimar two months later. From this period on, the principles of classical art provided the dominant standard by which he would assess artistic merit.

After the Italian journey Goethe devoted considerable time to writing about art and collecting paintings, engravings and drawings. At the turn of the century he helped found an art journal, Propyläen, and organized a coterie of art enthusiasts, "Die Weimarischen Kunstfreunde."

Goethe's creative writings contain few direct references to Dutch art. One interesting borrowing, however, is found in his novel Die Wahlverwandtschaften (Elective Affinities), which appeared in 1809. In Part Two, Chapter Five, the narrator relates how during a party Luciane, the daughter of the house, and several others entertain the guests by live recreations of several famous paintings. For their final performance they present Gerard ter Borch's "L'Instruction

Paternelle" (1654), which Goethe knew only from an engraving by his contemporary J. G. Wille. Gerard ter Borch, one of the few major Dutch artists who did not reside in Haarlem, Amsterdam or Utrecht, was a master of painting portraits of full-length standing figures, dressed in luxurious velvet, satin, furs and jewels. There are three figures in "L'Instruction Paternelle", an older man and woman, who are both seated, and a young woman, dressed in a beautiful white satin gown, who is seen only from behind. The narrator comments that the older woman "seems to conceal a slight embarrassment" by staring into her wine glass. Goethe could not have known at the time, but perhaps sensed, that this was not a painting of a father admonishing his daughter at all, but rather of a supposedly respectable officer proffering money to a young prostitute. A recent cleaning has revealed traces of the coin, which a priggish former owner had had covered over. Its title was given to it only in the eighteenth century.This painting is an excellent example of the seventeenth-century Dutch artist's bent for realism combined with a didactic message, the moral here being that people are not always as proper as they seem. Ironically, the message of the original fits well into Goethe's novel.

Two other Dutch painters whom Goethe came to admire very much in later life were Jacob van Ruisdael and Jan van Eyck.

In 1816 he wrote an essay entitled "Kunst und Altertum am Rhein und Main" (Art and Antiquity on the Rhine and Main), in which his professed aim was "unsern Eyck in die erste Klasse derjenigen zu setzen, welche die Natur mit malerischen Tätigkeiten begabt hat" (to place our Eyck in the first rank of those whom nature has blessed with artistic activities) (9). Van Eyck (1380-1440) was born at Maaseyck and later lived at The Hague and in Bruges. In his essay Goethe attributes to van Eyck the invention of oil painting. While he did not actually invent it, he was greatly responsible for perfecting its technique.

Goethe owes his discovery of Van Eyck, as well as his renewed interest in Netherlandic art in the second decade of the nineteenth century, largely to the brothers Sulpiz and Melchior Boisserée. He first learned of their art collection from Friedrich Schlegel in 1808. Goethe met Sulpiz in Weimar in 1811 and accepted two invitations to view their collection of old German and Dutch paintings in Heidelberg, in the fall of 1814 and again in 1815. It was during these visits that his interest in van Eyck was awakened.

Of more importance to the subject of this paper than Goethe's new awareness of van Eyck, however, is his interest at about the same time in Jacob van Ruisdael, who was born in Haarlem in 1628. Ruisdael is considered by many critics to be the finest Dutch landscape painter.

His wide range of subjects embraces winter scenes, panoramas, seascapes, and town views. A number of his landscapes contain motifs not normally found in Dutch paintings, such as rocky hills, rushing cascades and fir trees. Goethe's fondness for Ruisdael's paintings so late in life is very significant. He had seen some of his paintings as early as 1768 in the Dresden Gallery, but had not been particularly impressed by them. Only on his return visits in April and August of 1818 did he come to appreciate them. There are several possible explanations for his change of heart. One is that they represented a positive alternative to the Romantic art that was currently in vogue. Goethe objected to the morbid sentimentality of Romanticism and its obsession with the supernatural and death. As we noted earlier in our discussion of Rembrandt's engraving "The Adoration of the Shepherds with the Lamp", he was not opposed to the treatment of religious themes in art, as long as they were humanized. Ruisdael's paintings, then, represented for him an antidote to the sickness of the times. In his essay on him he praises "die Gesundheit seines äussern und innern Sinnes" (the health of his inner and outer meaning), and cites him as an example of a case where "der reinfühlende, klardenkende Künstler, sich als Dichter erweisend, eine vollkommene Symbolik erreicht" (the pure-feeling, clear-thinking artist, proving himself to be a poet, reaches a perfect symbolism).(10) Here Goethe underlines his main interest in Ruisdael -- the title of the essay, "Ruysdael als Dichter" (Ruisdael as Poet) , has already prepared the reader for it. He finds in his paintings a bridge between poetry and art. To illustrate this point he describes three well-known landscapes by Ruisdael. The most famous is "The Jewish Cemetery" (1660). The painting is a curious blend of reality and fantasy. Based on a cemetery in Ouderkerk near Amsterdam, the tombs are depicted as they actually appear there, but the artist improves on reality by adding some ruins, a waterfall, and a hilly area. The dead tree in the foreground and the ruins in the background symbolize the transitory nature of life. The overall effect of the painting is to raise the spectator's thoughts to eternal spiritual values.

From our earlier observations we can now appeciate why Goethe as a young man would not have cared for Ruisdael's paintings. But in his later years he became increasingly conscious of the close relationship between the laws governing art and literature. He attributed his own success as a creative writer to his early training as an artist. In a conversation with his friend and recorder Johann Peter Eckermann on April 29, 1825, Goethe told him: "Die Gegenständlichkeit meiner Poesie bin ich denn doch jener grossen Aufmerksamkeit und Übung des Auges schuldig geworden" (I owe the objectivity of my poetry to that great attentiveness and discipline of the eye). The contact that he maintained with Dutch art throughout his

life contributed in no small measure to his success as a poet.

Footnotes

1. Goethes Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe, 14 vols. (Hamburg, 1948-60). Further references to Dichtung und Wahrheit appear in the text.

2. Willi Drost, Goethe als Zeichner. Ein Beitrag zum Bilde seiner Persönlichkeit (Potsdam, 1932).

Gerhard Femmel, Corpus der Goethezeichnungen, 1 (Leipzig, 1958).

3. Bernard Gajek, Franz Götting, Jörn Görres (eds.), Goethes Leben und Werk in Daten und Bildern (Frankfurt am Main, 1966), no. 37.

4. Heinrich Sebastian Hüsgen, Nachrichten von Franckfurter Künstlern und Kunstsachen (Frankfurt am Main, 1780).

Paul Ortwin Rave, "Die holländernde Mode in der Vaterstadt des jungen Goethe", (Goethe, XII, 1950).

Ernst Beutler und Josefine Rumpf, Bilder aus dem Frankfurter Goethemuseum (Frankfurt am Main, 1949).

5. Ludwig Münz, Die Kunst Rembrandts und Goethes Sehen (Leipzig, 1934).

6. William Robson-Scott, The Younger Goethe and the Visual Arts (Cambridge, 1981), p.56.

7. Etienne Maurice Falconet, "Observations sur la statue de Marc Aurèle et sur d'autres objets relatifs aux beaux arts", (Amsterdam, 1771).

8. S. J. Gudlaugsson, Gerard ter Borch (The Hague, 1959).

9. Hamburger Ausgabe, vol. 12, p.156.

10. Ibid. p.142.