



WALTER LIEDTKE (1945–2015)

A CURATOR'S LEGACY INSPIRES A PAINTER

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Walter Liedtke — art historian, curator, and writer — was a distinguished scholar of Dutch and Flemish art admired for his quiet erudition, disarming wit, and passionate interest in the aesthetic, philosophical, and psychological significance of works of art. His untimely death in a tragic train accident last February shook the interconnected worlds of art and museums; in the months that followed, he was honored in tributes by hundreds of colleagues and friends from around the globe.

Walter served for 35 years as a curator of European paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of

Art in New York. After earning his master's degree at Brown University, then a doctorate at London's Courtauld Institute of Art, he taught at Ohio State University. In 1979 a Mellon Fellowship brought him to study at the Met, where he became a curator a year later. Walter's contribution to the scholarship and appreciation of Dutch and Flemish art is exemplified by the many exhibitions he produced at the Met, including *Vermeer and the Delft School*, *The Age of Rembrandt*, *Liechtenstein: The Princely Collections*, and *Vermeer's Masterpiece: The Milkmaid*, as well as two catalogues of the museum's Flemish and Dutch paintings. Together with his wife, Nancy (an accomplished equestrian, artist, and math teacher), Walter kept horses at their home in Westchester County, an endeavor that informed his book *The Royal Horse and Rider: Painting, Sculpture and Horsemanship 1500–1800*.

Walter's respect for the curatorial endeavor underscored every aspect of his work, which encompassed caring for a collection of global importance, nurturing ideas about how works of art can yield new meanings when exhibited in unexpected ways, writing, reading, teaching, and offering impromptu gallery tours that furthered cultural diplomacy. As a landscape painter, I was

especially inspired by Walter's analyses of the artist's process, such as when he discussed the complex relationship between visual perception and artistic craft in a painting by Vermeer or a Jacob van Ruisdael.

I first met Walter when I was the director of public programs at New York City's Bard Graduate Center, where he often attended our exhibitions. I remember his courtliness and genuine gratitude when I offered him the catalogue that accompanied our landmark show, *William Kent: Designing Georgian Britain*. In a fluid tenor voice with perfect, staccato diction, he delivered a sequence of nuanced assessments of the exhibition. He remarked on the curatorial coup of installing a massive English 18th-century gilt and mahogany door from Devonshire House (in our Upper West Side townhouse gallery no less), and asked about how a royal barge — designed in 1752 for Prince Frederick — would actually navigate the River Thames while occupied by the royal family and a small orchestra. (Answer: it would not, because the musicians always followed in a separate boat.) Walter's insights that day revealed his deep knowledge of the relationship between paintings and the material goods represented in them.



(TOP) JAN VAN GOYEN (1596–1656), *View of Haarlem and the Haarlemmer Meer*, 1646, oil on wood, 13 5/8 x 19 7/8 in., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, purchase, 1871 ■ (BOTTOM) REBECCA ALLAN (b. 1962), *Secret Dutch Landscape (in Memory of Walter Liedtke)*, 2015, acrylic and watercolor on exhibition card, 6 1/2 x 9 1/2 in., collection Karen Kaminsky and Peter Tichansky ■ (OPPOSITE) Walter Liedtke (1945–2015), photo: Patrice Mattia, Metropolitan Museum of Art



Wearing a royal purple silk tie and charcoal jacket, Walter thanked me for my contributions to the exhibition's programs, and, without missing a beat, asked about my work as a painter. What stood out for me, then and later, was his appreciation of the supporting roles of museum professionals, and their expertise across the spectrum. Indeed, as the Metropolitan Museum archivist Barbara File pointed out, Walter was the kind of expert who sought out others who could offer wider or unconventional perspectives on his own work, demonstrated by his friendships with people like George Way, a retired Staten Island deli clerk who, in his spare time, became an expert collector of Dutch artifacts; Veronique and Tom Dulack, an art historian and a playwright; George Bisacca, a paintings conservator; Esmée Quodbach, an art historian who specializes in the history of collections; Arthur Wheelock, a curator at the National Gallery of Art; and Maureen Cassidy-Geiger, a scholar who curated an important exhibition about 18th-century diplomatic gifts.

Walter was an avid reader of social history for what it reveals about the iconography of material culture in paintings. Being surrounded by colleagues and collectors who were specialists in such things as 17th-century bread-baking, gilt-leather wall coverings, Tudor embroidery, and Anatolian carpets surely informed his understanding of such objects in the interiors of Vermeer and Pieter de Hooch, the still lifes of William Kalf, and Rembrandt's portraits.

This purposeful curiosity was reflected in his research on the objects in Vermeer's *The Milkmaid*, which he borrowed from the Rijksmuseum to mark the 400th anniversary of Henry Hudson's 1609 voyage from Amsterdam to Manhattan. In what Walter described as an "essay in different reflections and textures," Vermeer rendered a copper pail that others had mistakenly described as something in which milk was delivered. That was not correct,

Walter argued: because of its long handle, this pail would actually be used for collecting fish or fowl. It was this kind of art-historical detective work that reinforces Met curator Keith Christensen's memory of "how frustrating it was to take up an issue with Walter, because he never lost his temper — or never showed it — and always managed, through his urbane wit, to prevail, even when you were quite convinced that you were right!"

DUTCH LANDSCAPES IN A NEW LIGHT

This past year, thinking about Walter's work has inspired me to revisit the Dutch landscape paintings he once cared for, and in turn to explore, through my own practice, landscapes within a few hundred miles of my studio in the Bronx.

Painted by Jan van Goyen (1596–1656), *View of Haarlem and the Haarlemmer Meer* is particularly beloved by the Met's Dutch visitors, who often told Walter that it spoke to them more compellingly of their homeland than even a Vermeer or Rembrandt. Van Goyen's panoramic view was taken from the bell tower of St. Bavo's Church. But look again — that very building can be seen on the horizon, and the loosely painted foreground is completely invented. This is a striking example of how 17th-century Dutch painters played with the fluid relationship between realism, naturalism, and invention. Van Goyen's Haarlem stretches out beneath a churning bank of clouds, creating an optical sensation of movement reinforced by the texture of his sweeping brushstrokes. Mercurial grays and tempered indigos in the sky are mirrored in the meandering river and the smoke plume rising at center left. The duality of water as cloud and river was something that Walter must have appreciated when he spent most of 1971 exploring the Netherlands, from what he characterized as the "horizon at your knee-level" perspective of his motorcycle.

In his book *The Golden Ambiance: Dutch Landscape Painting in the Seventeenth Century*, Walter noted that, while drawing remained the most important method for recording nature directly, painters were also influenced by the revolutionary new interest in daylight and atmosphere that attested to a direct experience of the landscape, even as they were taking liberties with the actual views. Anticipating Whistler's atmospheric nocturnes of the 1870s, and Jane Wilson's more recent incandescent seascapes of Long Island, van Goyen was clearly most interested in the overall impression or spirit of a place.

Secret Dutch Landscape for Walter Liedtke is my own response to van Goyen's moisture-laden sky above the polder (an area of low-lying land reclaimed from the sea or a river). I painted it on a reclaimed exhibition card depicting a Ruisdael landscape from the renowned private collection of Boston's Eijk and Rose-Marie van Otterloo. Thinking about the relationships in Dutch painting between what is revealed and concealed, I have left part of Ruisdael's image visible in the right middle ground of my scene.

Landscape with a Cottage by Pieter de Molijn (1595–1661) is characteristic of the tonal style that defined the Haarlem School. Like his younger contemporaries van Goyen and Salomon van Ruysdael, Molijn employed the Baroque device of illuminating parts of a composition while plunging others into deep shadow. (Think of the central figures in Rembrandt's *Night Watch*.) The mystery of Molijn's painting is that its central motif is a humble mound of earth, so clearly illuminated by golden light that we can see the varied colors of the soil. The artist defines both the fallen trees and leaves through a tactile illusionism, using the paint's texture to create an equivalent of the subject's own texture. Silhouettes of trees in the middle ground are echoed in the cloud forms, and the leaves (articulated one stroke at a time) seem



to quake, their color fluttering from warmer to cooler greens. This sky, a cauldron of grays and cool whites, suggests the day could go either way, plunging into dark storms or tearing apart into brilliant sunlight. This threshold moment — before something stable changes forever — is at the heart of the picture. It is one reason why, I believe, Dutch landscape painting remains so psychologically compelling today. And it is this aspect of time and change that I aimed to capture in my own *Salt Marsh, Wellfleet*.

Because it is sensitive to light, Rembrandt's *The Goldweigher's Field*, an etching with drypoint, is not always hanging at the Met, but it's well worth studying by appointment in the Department of Prints and Drawings there. Its title is actually a misnomer dating from the 18th century, when the print was thought to represent the property of a onetime finance minister (the goldweigher). In his sweeping view, Rembrandt depicts Haarlem, Saxenburg, the church of Bloemendaal, and various fields dotted with workers bleaching linen. The landscape seems to unfurl endlessly as Rembrandt demarcates fences and architecture across

his long, narrow panorama. He created its lines with an etching needle, reworking various elements with drypoint to produce thickets of shade that draw our eye across the surface. In the Met's version illustrated here, the sky is literally made of paper, but metaphorically it is a vault of light. Here again we witness the virtuoso pairing of an artist's materials with his unique optical perception.

For me, *The Goldweigher's Field* evokes the landscape of Orient Point on Long Island's North Fork. There, lining the narrow causeway that links the peninsula to the mainland, is a primordial landscape of salt marshes and coastal beaches interspersed with historic farmhouses. Originally this land was home to the Algonquin people, who called it Poquatuck. Settlers arriving in the 17th century called it Oysterponds, but in 1836 its name was changed again to Orient Point in recognition of its easterly location. Last winter, a generous couple offered me an opportunity to spend time in nearby East Marion, a stay which yielded many studies of the marshes and maritime light. *Orient Point, December 26, 2015* was painted from Narrow River Road, near a significant site — the Tuthill slave

burial ground (c. 1840). Contemplating the lives of enslaved African-Americans who sustained a family farm on the furthest reaches of Long Island made this otherwise peaceful and uninhabited site all the more potent and meaningful.

REMEMBERING AND TRANSFORMING

Walter Liedtke's passing left a void that can never be filled, yet the example of his work and the richness of his friendship continue to inspire scholars, museumgoers, and artists like me. At its deepest level, art provides a means of transforming grief, and calls us back to re-enchantment with life. "Walter never failed to see the artist's human endeavor behind the composition of a landscape," says his friend Veronique Dulack. "He loved to describe the metaphysical quality of the Dutch landscape. With Walter, Old Master paintings just came alive." ●

Rebecca Allan is a New York-based painter who also writes on art. She is currently preparing her exhibition *Beirut to Byblos: The Enigmatic Landscapes of Lebanon at the New York Academic Center of Lebanese American University* May 18–June 15.

(TOP) REMBRANDT VAN RIJN (1606–1669), *The Goldweigher's Field*, 1651, etching and drypoint on paper, 4 3/4 x 12 9/16 in. (image), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, purchase, Jacob H. Schiff Bequest, by exchange, and Edwin D. Levinson Gift, 1945 ■ (BOTTOM) REBECCA ALLAN (b. 1962), *Orient Point, December 26, 2015*, acrylic and watercolor on paper, 7 1/2 x 17 in., collection of the artist