

Avercamp, Hendrick

Born: 1585 in Amsterdam; Died: 1634 (he was 49)

When he was 1 his family moved to Kampen, where Avercamp's father set up an apothecary's business – which today would be called a pharmacist. His brothers studied medicine, and the members of this well-educated family were for many years prominent citizens of Kampen.

For his artistic training, Hendrick was sent to Amsterdam to study with the Danish portrait painter Pieter Isaacks. Various records testify to Avercamp's disability. He was so silent in the studio that his classmates named him “The Mute.”

He painted landscapes. What are landscapes?

His paintings were narrative. They told a story and therefore very simple to understand. The stories are of the sights that he saw in Amsterdam.

His paintings are colorful and lively, with carefully observed skaters, tobogganers, golfers, and pedestrians. Avercamp's work enjoyed great popularity and he sold his drawings, many of which are tinted with water-color, as finished pictures to be pasted into the albums of collectors (an outstanding collection is at Windsor Castle).

It is amazing to think that he could not hear, nor speak – so there is no means of communication except in his art. Remember that art is a universal language. We can draw a picture in O'Fallon, IL and someone in Japan or Africa can look at our picture and understand what we are communicating.

By 28 January 1614 Avercamp was back in Kampen, where he seems to have remained until his death in May 1634. There, in relative isolation from the mainstreams, Avercamp devoted himself almost entirely to the painting of winter scenes, and specifically to depictions of crowds of people engaging in a wide range of activities on frozen rivers.

His style can be characterized by a high horizon, vivid colors distributed all over the painting, tree branches drawn over the snow or the sky. His little people are depicted in black over a white background and are busy each with a slightly different daily task. In later years, atmosphere became important in his work. The horizon was brought down.

Avercamp had no important direct followers, although his nephew Barent Avercamp (c. 1612-1679) was his pupil and imitated him heavily.

The Netherlands (Holland) is laced with canals and rivers that freeze during the winter. In the seventeenth century, it was significantly colder there. From about 1550 to 1850, a phenomenon called “the little Ice Age” produced very cold and long winters that alternated with milder ones. So, during Avercamp's lifetime waterways froze more often than they do now.