

Recording the News: Herman Saftleven's *View of Delft After the Explosion of the Gunpowder Arsenal in 1654*

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A DRAWING BY the Dutch artist Herman Saftleven (1609–1685) recently acquired by the Metropolitan Museum illustrates how a leading draftsman in seventeenth-century Holland recorded a contemporary event of catastrophic proportions (Figure 1).¹ As indicated in the inscription, it represents the city of Delft after the explosion of the gunpowder arsenal of the States General on October 12, 1654. Salient points of interest are marked with letters and described in the legend below:

A. is the hole or pool 13 feet deep and full of water where the tower had stood when I drew it on October 29 new style.

B. is the Nieuwe Kerck [New Church] where the glass was destroyed and a large hole torn in the roof and was very damaged, but the coats of arms and sepulchre and the ornament on his majesty's grave was not damaged.

C. is the Oude Kerck [Old Church] where the glass and the walls were torn away. I saw a remarkable thing in this church that the wall behind the arms of Admiral Tromp was blown away but the arms were not damaged, also those of Admiral Piet Hein were similarly not damaged.

D. is the place where the Militia Hall stood and also where the maid of the Militia Hall was pulled out fully clothed from under the stones on October 27 so miserable from having been buried.

E. the trees which stand on the city walls were little or not at all damaged.²

Saftleven's drawing is the earliest known record of the devastation, showing Delft as it looked only seventeen days after the catastrophe. While posing intriguing questions of function, this study sheds light on the mechanisms used to record newsworthy places and events.

The drawing represents the city of Delft from the northeastern perimeter of the town, looking in a

southerly direction across the pool of water, marked A, situated where the arsenal once stood (Figure 2). The Nieuwe Kerk (New Church), marked B, can be found in the background at center, and the Oude Kerk (Old Church), marked C, is toward the right. The Militia Hall, marked D, stands in the foreground. The subject of the drawing is the wreckage of the city, and there are no signs of human life.

Saftleven is well known for his topographical views. Born to an artistic family in Rotterdam, in 1632 Saftleven settled in Utrecht, where he held various posts in the painters' guild between 1655 and 1667.³ Early in his career, in the 1630s, he had painted peasant interiors in the manner of his brother, Cornelis Saftleven (ca. 1607–1681) and landscapes inspired by the tonal views of Jan van Goyen (1596–1656) and Peter Molijn (1595–1661). In the next decade, he fell under the influence of two Dutch Italianate artists, Cornelis Poelenburg (ca. 1593–1667) and Jan Both (ca. 1615–1652). Saftleven established his mature style about 1650, painting panoramic and Rhenish river landscapes enlivened with anecdotal details that he based on sketches he made during travels along the Moselle and through the Rhineland.

Proficient also as a printmaker and draftsman, Saftleven produced about forty etchings between 1640 and 1669 and more than 1,100 drawings during the course of his lifetime. He sketched genre scenes, figures, interiors, and studies of plants and animals, but the majority of his drawings are landscapes and topographical views, some of which he made for the atlas of Laurens van der Hem (1621–1678), which contains one of the largest collections of maps, charts, topographical views, portraits, and illustrations of historic events compiled in the seventeenth century (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna).⁴ The Dutch poet and dramatist Joost van den Vondel (1587–1679) praised Saftleven's topographical drawings for being true to life.⁵

Saftleven's *View of Delft* dates to the time of his early artistic maturity, and its execution is characteristic of the artist's landscape drawings. The main elements of

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Figure 1. Herman Saftleven (1609–1685). *View of Delft after the Explosion of the Gunpowder Arsenal in 1654*, 1654. Black chalk, pen and brown ink, brush and brown wash on two sheets of paper, 24.9 × 74.9 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Bequest of Helen Hay Whitney, by exchange, and The Mnuchin Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. David M. Tobey and Werner H. Kramarsky Gifts, 1995, 1995.197

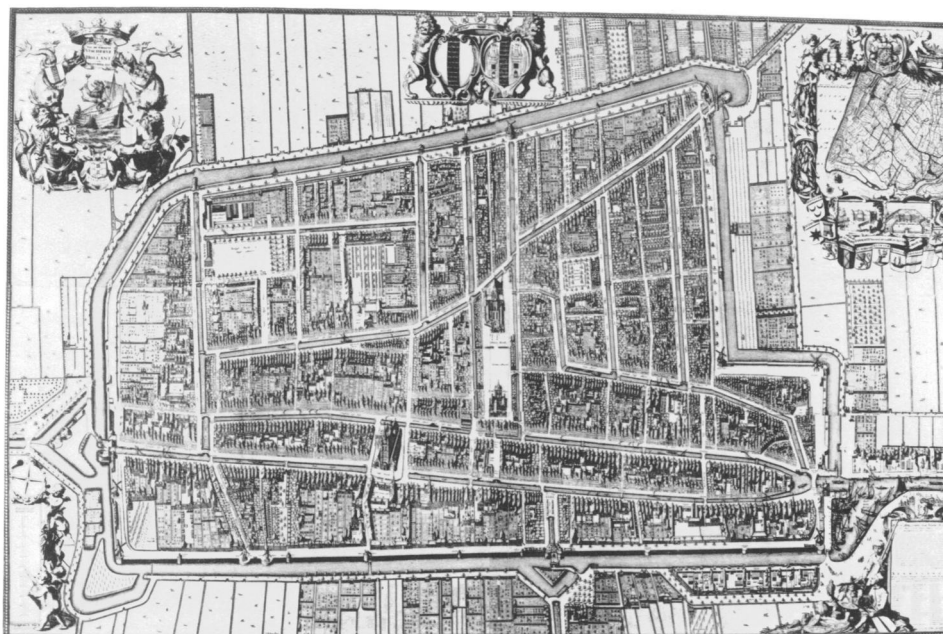


Figure 2. Romeyn de Hooghe (1645–1708) and others. *Figurative Map of Delft*, 1675–78. Engraving and etching, 160 × 180.5 cm. Delft, Gemeente Archief



the scene are sketched in with short strokes in black chalk that vary in intensity, thus suggesting both the fall of light and shade and a sense of atmosphere. Washes, added with brush, shade and further define the forms in the round. This technique was adopted by many Dutch artists in the seventeenth century—among them van Goyen and Molijn—to give their landscape drawings the appearance of having been drawn from life (*naer het leven*).⁶ Such drawings, however, often were created in the studio based on smaller chalk sketches made in situ.

The Museum's drawing appears to have been done from life not only because of its sketchy technique but also because of its informal composition. The two churches rising above the skyline interrupt the panoramic survey of the debris and a pair of trees block our view of the spire of the Nieuwe Kerk. Since artists usually drew from nature only in small sketchbooks, however, the drawing seems too large to have been made on the spot. It measures 74.9 centimeters

in length and extends across two sheets of paper joined at the center. Furthermore, the inscription was written in the past tense—*toen ick het tekende* (when I drew)—suggesting that the drawing was executed in the studio based on sketches made at the site, although no such sketches are known.⁷

Other artists worked in a similar fashion. A drawing by van Goyen of the break in the St. Anthonis Dike is based on a sketch he made when he traveled from The Hague to record the disaster at first hand (Figure 3).⁸ These sketches are so accurate that each of the different viewpoints from which he drew the dike in his sketchbook can be identified. Similarly, when Rembrandt drew the Old Town Hall in Amsterdam three days after the fire of 1652 left it in ruins, he specified the subject, time, and place of the sketch in an inscription: "The town hall of Amsterdam after it burned down on July 9, 1652, seen from the weighing house" (Museum het Rembrandthuis, Amsterdam).⁹ In his view of Delft, Saftleven also strove to accurately represent and



Figure 3. Jan van Goyen (1596–1656). *The Break of the St. Anthonis Dike, near Houtewael*, 1651. Black chalk, brush and gray wash, 11.4 × 18.4 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Rijksprentenkabinet

describe the site of the devastation but, unlike his contemporaries, he treated his subject on a much grander scale.

Saftleven drew a number of panoramas, views of his native Utrecht as studies for an engraving of 1669 commissioned by the town. These are traditional portrayals of a city.¹⁰ In them important landmarks are clearly represented and various figures populate the foreground. They are timeless and convey none of the specificity of moment that characterizes the view of Delft after the explosion. They are precisely drawn and lack the vivacity in execution that animates the Museum's drawing.

Saftleven also made a series of drawings recording another natural disaster, the tornado of 1674 that destroyed much of Utrecht.¹¹ These drawings, made

between 1674 and 1677 and acquired by the city of Utrecht in 1682, were similarly intended as finished works of art, yet they differ from the Museum's drawing in scale and execution. Conceived as a group, the sketches focus narrowly on the ruins of individual buildings, the Dom and Pieterskerck, recording them in a descriptive manner from various picturesque angles rather than from a distant, all-encompassing viewpoint. The *View of Delft* is exceptional in the monumental treatment accorded its calamitous subject.

't *Secreet van Hollandt* (the Secret of Holland), as the gunpowder arsenal became known, was constructed about 1573, shortly after the outbreak of the Netherlandish revolt against Spanish rule (1568–1684).¹² Delft was an important city at this time because William I (1533–1584), prince of Orange and founder of the Dutch Republic, had moved from The Hague to the Prinsenhof in Delft upon becoming stadtholder in 1572. When the arsenal exploded in 1654, the Republic of the United Netherlands had already been recognized as an independent nation for six years with the signing of the Treaty of Münster in 1648.¹³

According to the contemporaneous account that Dirck van Bleyswijck, a Delft burgomaster, provided in his civic eulogy of 1667, *Beschryvinge der Stadt Delft*, eighty or ninety thousand pounds of gunpowder were stored in the arsenal at the time of the explosion.¹⁴ The thunderous noise was so deafening it was heard on the island of Texel in the North Sea over 120 kilometers away. The powder house was obliterated, leaving only a pool of water fifteen or sixteen feet deep on the site where it stood. Large trees were uprooted



Figure 4. Egbert van der Poel (1621–1664). *A View of Delft after the Explosion of 1654*, 1654. Oil on panel, 36.2 × 49.5 cm. London, National Gallery



Figure 5. Gerbrand van den Eeckhout (1621–1674). *The Gunpowder Explosion in Delft, October 12, 1654*, 1654. Pen and brown ink, gray wash over black chalk, 10.9 × 13.6 cm. Berlin, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Kupferstichkabinett (photo: Jörg P. Anders)

while others remained standing but no longer had any branches. More than two hundred houses were destroyed and another three hundred lost their roofs and windows. More than one hundred people were killed in the explosion, including the Delft painter Carel Fabritius (1622–1654), and over a thousand citizens were wounded.

The legend in Saftleven's drawing parallels van Bleyswijck's description in its focus on narrative detail.¹⁵ Such interest in the human drama character-

izes other contemporaneous images of the disaster. The paintings by Egbert van der Poel (1621–1664) and Daniel Vosmaer (active 1642–66), both artists in Delft, that represent the aftermath as well as the explosion itself are peopled in the foreground by young boys running from the blast, others coming to the aid of the wounded, and onlookers gathering before a view of the devastated city seen in the background.¹⁶ Known in many versions (Figure 4), these images must have been made for many years after the event to satisfy a large demand. Similarly, an illustrated pamphlet published in Amsterdam in 1654 described the explosion and called attention to the miraculous discovery of a fifteen-month-old girl found alive and well, still in her chair and holding an apple, twenty-four hours after the explosion.¹⁷ The illustration for the pamphlet designed by Gerbrand van den Eeckhout (1621–1674) focuses on the heroic efforts to save those trapped in the destruction and depicts no recognizable sites in Delft amid the wreckage (Figure 5).¹⁸ It should be considered not a first-hand record of the disaster but a dramatic reconstruction.

The precision with which Saftleven identified the points of interest in the legend of his drawing sets it apart from this tradition of representing disasters in paintings and pamphlets and ally it more closely to the cartographic tradition.¹⁹ The anonymous *Plan of Delft after the Fire of 1536*, probably a copy after a lost painting, is an early precedent (Figure 6).²⁰ It presents the city in plan from above, one of the earliest known paintings to do so, in order to document clearly the effects of the conflagration. Areas destroyed by the fire are

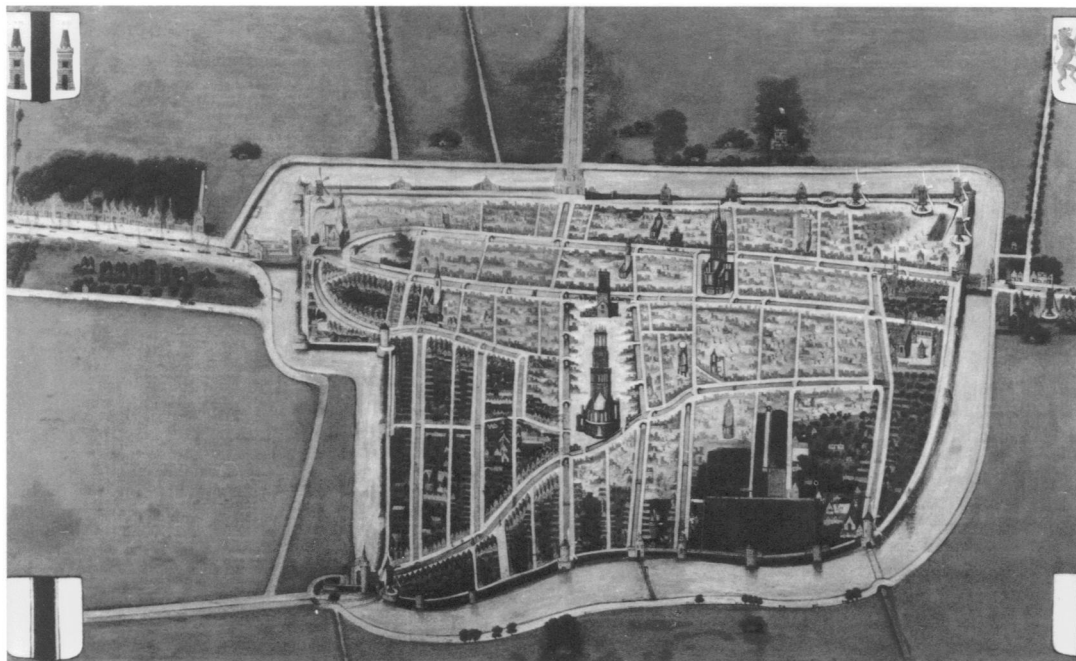


Figure 6. Anonymous. *Plan of Delft after the Fire of 1536*. Oil on canvas, 92 × 160 cm. Delft, Stedelijk Museum 'Het Prinsenhof'



Figure 7. Anonymous. *View of the Town of Deventer*, ca. 1550. Woodcut, 27.5 × 37.5 cm. Deventer, Gemeentemusea (photo: Gemeentemusea)

shown in lighter colors than those areas saved. The frame is inscribed in a manner later echoed by Saffleven's legend: "Fourteen churches many people and countless houses perished in the fire at Delft; also the town hall and the meat hall 1536." An anonymous woodcut from about 1550 portrays the city of Deventer in profile accompanied by an inscription with historical and topographical information (Figure 7).²¹



Figure 8. Esias van de Velde (ca. 1590/91–1630). *The Great Flood of 1624*. Engraving, 28.3 × 38.9 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Rijksprentenkabinet

Other parallels are found in the design of contemporary broadsheets.²² As the popular vehicle by which religious and political subjects were discussed, wartime victories chronicled, and peace negotiations debated, broadsheets were composed in a way to convey information clearly, with a title, illustration, and text. In rare instances, this format was adapted for other purposes. Esaias van de Velde (ca. 1590/91–1630)



Figure 9. Johannes Vermeer (1632–1675). *View of Delft*, ca. 1660–61. Oil on canvas, 98 × 117.5 cm. The Hague, Mauritshuis

adopted such a design for his engraving of the Great Flood of 1624, which chronicles the repair of the dike in the town of Vianen after it burst and water had inundated the countryside all the way to Amsterdam (Figure 8).²³ Saftleven seems to be the only artist to borrow this type of pictorial construction for a drawing.

Although city views were often made on commission, it appears there also existed the practice of painting and drawing these subjects on speculation. The *View of Delft* painted by Hendrick Vroom (1566–1640) in 1615 (Stedelijk Museum ‘Het Prinsenhof’, Delft), for example, was donated by the artist to the city of Delft in 1634 at which time he was given an honorarium.²⁴ This may also have been the case with Saftleven’s drawing, since its monumental scale and quality suggest it may have had a public function. But there are no indications he made it on commission for the municipality. Indeed, Saftleven possibly retained the drawing throughout his life. It is recorded in the inventory of the Dutch drawing collector Sybrand Feitama (1694–1758) and may have entered the collection of his father, Isaac (died 1709), as early as 1695, ten years after Saftleven’s death.²⁵

Saftleven’s *View of Delft* is a unique portrayal of the aftermath of a disaster dependent on several different pictorial traditions while departing from them all. It is both a panoramic city view and the record of an explosion. Its great originality lies in its reference to the language of broadsheets as a means to order information. The image is endowed with a sense of authenticity while retaining the bravura and immediacy of a freely sketched drawing.

Transcending its reportorial function, it heralds in many respects another city view, Vermeer’s *View of Delft* (Figure 9).²⁶ The drawing and the painting represent opposite sides of the city, Saftleven having made its destruction his subject and Vermeer having chosen a view from the south looking toward the Schiepoort and the Rotterdamsepoort in order to avoid the remaining signs of ruin.²⁷ But both share a quiet stillness and evocative sense of place that record Delft in the seventeenth century.

NOTES

1. MMA, 1995.197. Black chalk, pen and brown ink, brush and brown wash on two sheets of paper; 24.9 × 74.9 cm; watermark: Strasbourg lily with the letter W and letters IHS(?). Monogrammed and dated in black chalk at lower left: HSL (interlaced) 1654 and inscribed across the top and bottom of the drawing. Wolfgang Schulz, *Herman Saftleven 1609–1685: Leben und Werke mit einem kritischen Katalog der Gemälde und Zeichnungen* (Berlin/New York, 1982)

pp. 75, 294, cat. no. 617; Ben Broos, “‘Notitie der Teekeningen van Sybrand Feitama,’ II: ‘verkocht, verhandeld, verëerd, geruild en overgedaan,’” *Oud Holland* 99 (1985) pp. 114, 135, nos. 7a-b, ill.

I thank Nadine Orenstein for her help in the preparation of this article.

2. The drawing is inscribed across the top *.De. Stadt.Delft. Al waer de. H.M. heere Staten haer Magusijn. tooren op den Maendach voorde middag tussen tiennen en half Elf ueren Den 12 octob: 1654. is in de locht op ge Sprongen Als: A..* The legend at the bottom of the drawings reads: *.A. is dus daennigeh gadt ofte poel al waerden tooren gestaen heeft toen ick het tekende 13 voeten diep was ende vol / waters stont sinde op den 29 octob: nieuwen stil getekent. / .B. is de nieuwe kerck. al waer de glaessen ende een groot Gadt uit het dack geslagen was ende seer beschadicht doch / de wapens ende het Sepeltuer noch geen vande ornemente om sijn hoochheijts Gadt niet beschadicht / .C. Is de oude Kerck al waer glaessen ende Mueren sijn wech geslagen Ick hebbe een Remerkabel dingen in dese Kerck gesien dat de / muer achter het Wapen vanden Admiraal Tromp was wech gesprongen ende sijn wapen bliffen gangen ende niet beschadicht noch vaden Admiraal Piet hein van gelicken niet beschadicht: / .D. de plaets al waer de Doellen heeft gestaen en ook al waer de meit vanden Doellen op den 27 octob: op dese plaets van onderen uit de steenen is / ge haelt ende met kleeren en al begraven datse soo mijserabel was getrackteert. / .E. De boomen die op de Stadts Wallen staen sinde als niet ofte weinnich beschadicht Et.*

3. On Saftleven, see J. Nieuwstraten, “De Ontwikkeling van Herman Saftlevens Kunst tot 1650,” *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 16 (1965) pp. 81–117, and Schulz, *Saftleven*, pp. 1–11.

4. Koninklijk Paleis te Amsterdam, *Een Wereldreiziger op Papier: De atlas van Laurens van der Hem (1621–1678)*, exh. cat. (Amsterdam, 1992).

5. M. Schapelhoutman and P. Schatborn, *Land and Water: Dutch Drawings from the 17th Century*, exh. cat., Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam, 1987) cat. no. 75.

6. On this subject, see Peter Schatborn, “The Importance of Drawing from Life—Some Preliminary Notes,” in William W. Robinson, *Seventeenth-Century Dutch Drawings: A Selection from the Maida and George Abrams Collection*, exh. cat., Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam, 1991) pp. 7–12.

7. The attribution to Saftleven of the studies of the tower of the Old Church in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Besançon (Schulz, *Saftleven*, p. 294 under cat. no 617), is not secure.

8. H. U. Beck, “Jan van Goyen am Deichbruch von Houtewael (1651),” *Oud Holland* 81 (1966) pp. 20–33; idem, *Jan van Goyen 1596–1656: Ein Oeuvreverzeichnis* (Amsterdam, 1972) I, cat. 243.

9. J. P. Filedt Kok, *Rembrandt Etchings and Drawings in the Rembrandt House* (Maarssen, 1972) no. VI.

10. Schulz, *Saftleven*, cat. nos. 397 and 456; see also J. W. Salomonson, “Op de wal agter St. Marye’: Topografische aantekeningen bij een onbekend schilderijtje van Herman Saftleven,” exh. cat. (Amsterdam / Oxford / New York, 1983).

11. See, among others, Schulz, *Saftleven*, cat. nos. 593–614.

12. For a summary account of the historical background, see Bob Haak, *The Golden Age: Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century* (New York, 1984) pp. 162–166, 216, 226–228. A recent historical survey is Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall: 1477–1806* (Oxford, 1995).

13. On the arsenal, see J. K. van der Haagen, “Het Generaliteits-Kruitmagazijn aan de Schie,” in *Delftse Studiën* (Assen, 1967) pp.

187–228 and F. C. van Goheemen and Th. C. J. van der Heijden, “Het Generaliteits-Kruitmagazijn aan de Schie,” in Stedelijk Museum het Prinsenhof, *De Stad Delft; cultuur en maatschappij van 1572 tot 1667*, exh. cat. (Delft, 1981) II, part 1, pp. 54–56.

14. Dirck van Bleyswijck, *Beschryvinge der Stadt Delft* (Delft, 1667) II, pp. 622–634.

15. Their facts differ in enough respects, however, to suggest that van Bleyswijck never saw Saftleven’s drawing.

16. Neil MacLaren, *National Gallery Catalogues: The Dutch School 1600–1900*, 2 vols., revised and expanded by Christopher Brown (London, 1991) I, pp. 306–309, no. 1021; II, pl. 269. On Vosmaer, see Susan Donahue, “Daniel Vosmaer,” *Vassar Journal of Undergraduate Studies* 19 (1964) pp. 18–27.

17. G. van Rijn, *Atlas van Stolk: Katalogus der Historie-, Spot- en Zinneprenten betreffende de Geschiedenis van Nederland* (Amsterdam, 1897) III, no. 2246.

18. Frits Lugt, “Beiträge zu dem Katalog der Niederländischen Handzeichnungen in Berlin,” *Jahrbuch der Preussischen Kunstsammlungen* 52 (1931) pp. 48–49, no. 12815; Werner Sumowski, *Drawings of the Rembrandt School* (New York, 1980) III, no. 714x.

19. See Boudewijn Bakker, “Kaarten, boeken en prenten. De topografische traditie in de Noordelijke Nederlanden/Maps, Books and Prints. The Topographical Tradition in the Northern Netherlands,” in Amsterdams Historisch Museum and Art Gallery of Ontario, *Opkomst en bloei van het Noordnederlandse stadsgezicht in de 17de eeuw / The Dutch Cityscape in the 17th Century and Its Sources*, exh. cat. (Amsterdam/Toronto, 1977) pp. 66–75.

20. *The Dutch Cityscape*, p. 104, cat. no. 21.

21. B. van ‘t Hoff, “Een onbedende afbeelding van de stad Deventer uit het midden van de Zestiende eeuw,” *Het Boek* 31 (1952–54) pp. 1–9; *The Dutch Cityscape*, p. 110, cat. no. 26.

22. On the function of broadsheets in Holland, see A. T. van Deursen, *Plain Lives in a Golden Age: Popular Culture, Religion and Society in Seventeenth-Century Holland*, Maarten Ultee, trans. (Cambridge, 1991) pp. 134–152. See also William A. Coupe, *The German Illustrated Broadsheet in the Seventeenth Century: Historical and Iconographical Studies*, 2 vols. (Baden-Baden, 1966) and Wolfgang Harms, ed., *Deutsche Illustrierte Flugblätter des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts*, 4 vols. (Munich, 1980).

23. F. Muller, *Beredeneerde beschrijving van Nederlandsche historie, zinneprenten en historische kaarten* (Amsterdam, 1863–82) no. 1503a; Irene de Groot, *Landscape Etching by the Dutch Masters of the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1979) no. 68, ill.; G. Luijten, *Hollstein’s Dutch & Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts ca. 1450–1700* xxxii (Roosendaal, 1988) p. 245, no. 3.

24. *The Dutch Cityscape*, p. 114, cat. no. 31.

25. Broos, “Feitama,” p. 114.

26. Mauritshuis. *The Royal Cabinet of Paintings: Illustrated General Catalogue* (The Hague, 1977) p. 246, no. 92; Alan Chong, *Johannes Vermeer: Gezicht op Delft, Palet Serie* (Bloemendaal, 1992); National Gallery of Art and Royal Cabinet of Paintings, Mauritshuis, *Johannes Vermeer*, exh. cat. (Washington/The Hague, 1995) cat. no. 7.

27. E. Haverkamp-Begemann and A. Chong, “Dutch landscape painting and its associations,” in *The Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis*, H. R. Hoetink, ed. (New York, 1985) pp. 60–61.