

Jan Beerstraaten - The Castle of Muiden in Winter

by James Attfield



In this essay I will be examining 'The Castle of Muiden in Winter' which was painted by the Dutch artist Jan Beerstraaten in 1658. The painting is oil on canvas measuring a size of 96.5cm by 129.5cm. It is located at the National Gallery in London although currently it is not on display. I will be attempting to discover what this painting is all about.

The genre of this painting is landscape. It depicts a 17th century scene of the castle of Muiden which is near the city of Amsterdam in Holland. The viewer is looking at the castle from a north-easterly perspective. The castle is the main focus of the painting; it looks very old and worn as it was probably built in the 14th century. This impression is given from the palette of colours used which is a mix of dark tones such as grey, black and brown along with a mix of lighter tones like beige and white. As the name of the painting suggests the castle is shown in winter. This is illustrated by the vast dark sky which dominates the background as well as the dashes of white scattered across the castle and trees. However, the most obvious thing that tells us that it is winter is that snow and ice cover the ground. The grey hues of the sky are painted impasto to give the sky a dense cold appearance, if you look closely you can even see little specks of white resembling snowflakes. I think Beerstraaten has used chiaroscuro to good effect on the castle to reinforce the wintery feel by delicately applying white strokes of paint to highlight certain details like the tops of the turrets.

As the 'National Gallery Teacher Notes' say "This is a painting about a building, almost a portrait of it."¹ The artist creates a very accurate depiction of the castle; there are indicators to suggest that it dates back to medieval times. For instance, the walls are clearly built of stone, there is a moat, the towers are rounded and topped with battlements, the windows are small and narrow and there is a drawbridge.

Beerstraaten uses his artistic license to add detail to the foreground in order to reflect the context of the time. For example, he shows some figures walking across the wooden drawbridge into the castle. It has been suggested that these people were scholars and poets because a famous author, poet and historian named Pieter Cornelis Hooft owned the castle at the time of the painting's creation. The castle in Muiden is known to have been a meeting place for other renowned Dutch poets and scholars such as Vondel, Huygens, Bredero and Maria Tesselschade Visscher; this group has been referred to as the 'Muiderkring'.

It is noteworthy that the painting is set in winter. Many harsh winters were experienced during the 'Little Ice Age'; typically two out of three winters in the 17th century brought freezing conditions with lots of snow. As such many artists like Beerstraaten experimented with portraying this season. Indeed the artist depicts a common winter sport called kolf. Lots of figures in the painting are carrying metal/wooden clubs, these are actually kolf clubs. Elena Greer (a curator at the National Gallery) explains more about the game of kolf which was a precursor to the modern game of golf popular in the Netherlands in the 17th century. Several figures are playing the game on the frozen waters surrounding the castle, the game was generally played in large open spaces and ice was an ideal space for play. In fact the sport was eventually banned from cities because it was quite dangerous causing injuries to bystanders and damage to properties.

There is a lot further activity on the ice: some are also using it for recreation as they skate; others appear to be using it as a meeting place, for example, a group of seven figures are standing and sitting around a block of ice in the right hand corner of the scene; and some are using it as a shortcut to get to their destination. Most men folk wear a similar outfit in more muted shades whilst the women wear slightly brighter colours, I can see blue, yellow and red. It is possible to see how the artist has intricately painted the snow shoes for each figure.

On the right side of the picture we can see several buildings which could be the town of Muiden even though in reality the town would not have been visible if you were to view it from the vantage point from where it was painted. Most of the town has a low value therefore it is difficult to make out the details and to me makes the town look a little spooky and shadowy. However, it is possible to see a silhouette of a church on the horizon. There is a more prominent building which I think could be a tavern because there is a sign above the entrance, the slight red colour used to paint the building gives it a more inviting effect.

To the left of the painting Beerstraaten illustrates more frozen waterways leading to the mouth of the River Vecht and to the sea beyond. I am intrigued by the pole like structure which could be a beacon to aid navigation.

Not much is known about this Dutch artist. His full name was Jan Abrahamsz Beerstraaten, he was born in Amsterdam in 1622 and is believed to have died in 1666. His oeuvre consisted of topographical paintings i.e. paintings that attempt to illustrate the features of a particular area. His figurative artworks usually depicted marine art and landscapes and he was especially renowned for painting scenes from the First Anglo-Dutch War (e.g. 'The Battle of Scheveningen' 1653) and Dutch-Swedish War (e.g. 'The Battle of Sound' 1658). Like this painting many of his other works were set in winter (e.g. 'Skating at Sloten'). His signature appears on his paintings in a variety of different ways. This is how it looks on this particular painting 'I. *BEER-STRAATEN. /1658*' (the N is reversed).

Based on historical evidence I believe this painting was unlikely to have been commissioned and was probably painted by Beerstraaten in the hope that through an art dealer he could make a sale to a wealthy merchant who wanted a painting for their home. Art dealing had started to develop as a business in 17th century Holland as the country became more affluent as a result of international trade which increased after the Dutch people broke free from their Spanish Catholic rulers and created their own Protestant Republic. At this time lots of artists started to work in Holland and many, like Beerstraaten, specialised in particular genres of paintings.

For me the painting tells me about Dutch society at this time. When I first looked at it I thought the castle looked gloomy and uninviting. However, after I had learnt it was a

meeting place for the 'Muiderkring' it made me imagine a warm, cosy environment within. I could visualize them reading their poems seated around a large table in front of a roaring fire, it seems like these people are very lucky and privileged. I think the depiction of the weather is very important to this painting as it emphasises the contrast to the lives of the ordinary people who are outside in the freezing cold. Their lives seem to be harder, I noticed that some of them are carrying heavy loads on their backs; some look as if they are hunched over as they trudge wearily along the pathways. Although I like the way they are making the best of their everyday lives by engaging in recreational activities like skating and kolf.

Obviously, the painting is about the castle itself and presents to us an accurate representation of an actual medieval castle which still exists today. It makes me think about the thought that went into the design of the castle to make it fit for purpose and the amount of work it must have taken to build it without the technology we have today. For instance, it makes me wonder how the rounded towers were created and consider how many men were involved in creating the moat.

Beerstraaten succeeds in creating a captivating scene of the castle in Muiden during one of the harsh winters in 17th century Holland. For me the dark, menacing sky is the most striking element of the painting, it almost makes me feel chilly just to look at it! A dramatic sky seems to be a motif in the paintings of this artist.

References

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¹ http://www.takeonepicture.org.uk/pub/pdf/notes_muiden.pdf [30 March 2017]

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