

Exhibition Review***The Mysterious Landscapes of Hercules Segers***

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

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RACHEL HOFER

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition of Hercules Segers's work is the largest of its kind, and the first large-scale exhibition of Segers in the United States, introducing a new audience to his otherworldly landscapes. This exhibition offers a unique opportunity to see a number of Segers's prints in one location, thus allowing the viewer to compare different versions of the same print. One lasting effect of Segers's work, and the exhibition, is to dispel the idea that printmaking is solely a reproductive technique or a way of creating and disseminating mass information. It becomes clear throughout this exhibition that each impression allowed for experimentation and the creation of a discrete work of art.

The exhibition begins with a small alcove where visitors can view a video of Segers's prints animated and set to a soundtrack of waves, music, and information about his work and life narrated by the actor John Malkovich. The script underlines the mystery and genius of Segers, an artist we know little about, emphasizing the imaginary quality of his landscapes—fictional worlds Segers had never seen. These invented landscapes are manifest throughout Segers's prints, particularly visible in the number of mountains and dramatic rocky outcrops he depicted. There is no record of Segers having ever left the flat environs of the Netherlands, indicating that his panoramas were fabrications from the artist's mind.

The exhibition is comprised of three rooms filled primarily with Segers's prints, although they are interspersed with a small number of his paintings as well. These side-by-side comparisons draw connections between the prints and paintings, demonstrating that he often created the same compositions in both media. The juxtaposition also highlights the painterly nature of Segers's prints, which he achieved through the addition of hand painting and experimentation with different colored inks and papers. The result is a unique artwork with each impression.

The small scale and intricate detail of the prints create a sense of intimacy and encourage the viewer to linger over the material. One of the most effective elements of the exhibition is the display of multiple versions of the same print, altered either by experimentation with the printing materials or changes made directly to the plate. For example, in the second room six versions of *Valley with a River and a Town with Four Towers* are hung in tandem, illustrating the variation Segers could achieve just by changing the color of the ink and paper used for the print. Each version of the print provides a unique viewing experience, offering different levels of detail and further absorbing the viewer in discovering the (occasionally subtle) ways in which they diverge.

In the final room, three prints—one by Segers and two by Rembrandt—hint at the influence Segers had on the prolific younger artist. The prints illustrate the evolution of a single copper plate, originally worked by Segers in the execution of the etching *Tobias and the Angel* sometime between 1630 and 1633. Rembrandt eventually came into possession of the copper plate after Segers's death in 1638 and reworked the composition into *The Flight into Egypt*. Significantly, Rembrandt retained most of Segers's original landscape, burnishing out only the figures of Tobias and the Angel and replacing them with those of the holy family. Rembrandt owned eight paintings by Segers, and as an experimental printmaker himself, he may have drawn inspiration from Segers's work. The implications of an artist as famous as Rembrandt

looking to the work of his largely unknown predecessor do not go unnoticed. By concluding the show with this undeniable connection between Segers and Rembrandt, the exhibition effectively restores Segers, an unfamiliar name in the twenty-first century, to a position of prominence as an important figure in our understanding of seventeenth-century Dutch art.

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Images and captions:



Hercules Segers, *Valley with a River and a Town with Four Towers*, ca.1626-27. Line etching and drypoint printed in dark green, on a cream tinted ground, pen in gray ink, with gray wash, 20.4 x 32.7 cm. On loan from the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; transferred from the Koninklijke Bibliotheek, collection Pieter Cornelis Baron van Leyden. <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.37280>



Hercules Segers, *Valley with a River and a Town with Four Towers*, ca.1626-27. Line etching and drypoint printed in blue, on a gray-green ground, colored with brush, 20.7 x 33.2 cm. On loan from the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam;

transferred from the Koninklijke Bibliotheek, collection Pieter Cornelis Baron van Leyden.
<http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.37279>



Hercules Segers, *Valley with a River and a Town with Four Towers*, ca.1627-27. Line etching and drypoint printed in blue, on a brown-gray ground, colored with brush, 19.5 x 33.1 cm. On loan from the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; transferred from the Koninklijke Bibliotheek, collection Pieter Cornelis Baron van Leyden.
<http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.37283>



Hercules Segers, *Tobias and the Angel*, ca.1630-1633. Line etching printed with tone and olive green highlights, 20.1 x 27.6 cm. On loan from the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; transferred from the Koninklijke Bibliotheek, collection Pieter Cornelis Baron van Leyden. <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.37241>



Rembrandt van Rijn, *Flight into Egypt*, altered from *Tobias and the Angel* by Hercules Segers, ca.1653. Etching reworked with drypoint and burin by Rembrandt (sixth state of seven), 21.4 x 28 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Rogers Fund, 1919.