



Landscape (View of a Town)

Date

after 1753

Primary Maker

American

Medium

oil on Eastern white pine panel

Description

This overmantel depicts a lively, prosperous, densely settled town on the left and a quiet, bucolic scene on the right. The contrasting halves are separated by a body of water on which boats, ranging in size from rowboats to merchant vessels, move toward the distance. The town contains colorful two- and three-story houses, a church, and a long two-story structure that may be a public or commercial edifice. The houses are painted white, red, blue, yellow, and brown. In a wedge-shaped clearing in front of the town are several figures: a man and woman strolling toward the water, a man standing among a line of trees, and another man playing with a dog near the riverbank. There seem to be two more faces to the right of the man and dog, but their bodies are no longer visible. The bank is lined with tall trees that appear smaller as the water winds into the distance; smaller trees are scattered throughout the town. Two gaps in the trees open the view to a clearing in the foreground and a church, which is the largest and most prominent building in the image, as well as to a row of houses near the water's edge. The church has a tall bell tower and steeple, surmounted by a weather vane with a rooster in profile. The corner of that building is decorated with quoins, an architectural feature designed to simulate stone-block construction. Tiny rolling hills are visible through a gap in the tree line along the horizon. The water traces a diagonal from the bottom-left corner to just right of the center of the painting. Starting in the foreground and moving toward the distance, the eight boats on the water include one that carries three barrels and is rowed by a man; a slightly bigger boat bearing at least two faded figures and flying a single sail and a pennant; a larger vessel, carrying four men, powered by a larger sail and sporting two red pennants; and a merchant vessel flying four sails, three red pennants, and three red flags with a cross. A rowboat is docked to the right. Next is a small boat, nearly faded from view, with a canopy or cabin at its center. Near the bridge is another rowboat, with cargo at its center and a man rowing at the stern. The sails and pennants indicate that the wind is blowing gently from the left foreground to the right distance, the same direction in which the water flows. The slightly arched bridge rests on five piers; it has red sides and a drawbridge mechanism, beyond which is another single-masted vessel. Two groups of swans—one along the bottom edge near the center of the composition and another in the middle distance beside the left bank—add a picturesque note to the scene. An irregular contour along the right bank of the river forms a small inlet. In the foreground, near the water, two women stand at either end of a bench that contains the resting figure of a man whose right arm is supported by a cane. The woman in front of the bench is feeding the swans. To the right of this trio stand a man and woman in conversation. The man gestures widely with his left hand and rests his right hand on a walking stick; the woman's hands are folded in front of her. Two more figures dance near a short dock on the other side of the inlet. To the right is a red gable-end building with two arches visible. Slightly behind and to the left of this structure are several animals, perhaps deer, facing the water. There are many more trees on this side of the water, and they appear to be placed naturally; on the town side, however, the trees are arranged in neat rows and carefully organized groups. The sky is rose-colored near the horizon, shifting toward blue at the top. Although most of the overlapping elements were simply painted on top of one another, a hard contour line traces the two riverbanks and suggests that the composition was thoughtfully designed before it was produced. Contour lines were drawn to delineate the buildings, bridge, hills, and tree trunks, and these areas were then filled in with solid fields of color. Various light and dark areas—in the hills and church bell tower, for instance—convey a sense of volume. The figures were drawn on top of the landscape features, which are now visible as pentimenti. The renderings of the people reflect a limited understanding of anatomy but also demonstrate an ambitious effort to capture various poses and actions. The tree foliage was applied with a sponge, a technique that eighteenth-century decorative painters used to create a texture that is distinct from the parts done with a brush.

Dimensions

panel: 69.2 x 130.2 cm (27 1/4 x 51 1/4 in.)