

Hendrick Avercamp and The Last Little Ice Age

by Bonnie James

The Earth is presently in an Ice Age, and has been for approximately the past 2 to 2.5 million years. This Ice Age has been characterized by successive advances and retreats of a glacial ice sheet, originating in Greenland and extending across the northern portions of the North American and Eurasian continents. Just 12,000 years ago, the undisputed geological evidence shows that New York, Chicago, and all of North America northward to the Arctic regions were under a sheet of ice, estimated to have been from 1 to 2 miles thick. Mountain glaciers also extended downward from the Rocky Mountains and the Appalachians, in regions further to the south than the main glacial mass. A similar situation prevailed over most of Germany, northern France, the British Isles, Scandinavia, Poland and other parts of eastern Europe, and Russia.

Such had been the state of things on Earth for probably at least 100,000 years. Before that, a short period known as an interglacial had allowed for a warm climate, somewhat like the present, and before it another extended period of glacial advance....

Can this happen again? The most plausible theory of the causes of the Ice Ages, the theory of astronomical determination, suggests that the time is ripe for it to happen sometime soon.... Perhaps it will be the beginning of a period of several hundred years' duration, known as a

Little Ice Age, perhaps the onset of a full-scale glacial advance to last for another 100,000 years.¹

From the 14th to the early 19th Century, the planet experienced what is known today as “The Little Ice Age.” While the lowest temperatures were recorded in the half-century from 1675 to 1725, there was a particularly severe cold period from 1550 to 1650. The effects were manifested in the Northern Hemisphere by the end of grape-growing in the northern areas, the abandonment of settlements in Greenland, and a substantial advance of the glaciers down into the valleys.² As evidenced by numerous documents from the period, such as chronicles, weather diaries, ships’ logs, and local administrative records describing seasonal activities, especially those related to agriculture, Winters saw temperatures plunging well below normal, for extended periods, from November until March. From Spring to Autumn, temperatures were unusually cool as well.

In the Netherlands, freezing temperatures and deep snow had a dramatic impact on everyday life. The Winter of 1607-08 was especially harsh. One diarist in Zeeland wrote: “It froze so hard in the whole month of

1. Laurence Hecht, “Is Nature Warning Us of a New Ice Age?” *EIR*, Jan. 30, 2009.

2. Adriaan M.J. de Kraker, “Little Ice Age. Harsh Winters between 1550 and 1650,” in *Hendrick Avercamp: Master of the Ice Scene* (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 2010).

FIGURE 1



Pieter Bruegel's "Hunters in the Snow" was painted during the extremely cold Winter of 1565-66; his Winter landscapes strongly influenced those of Hendrick Avercamp, who was painting half a century later. Both artists employed abundant irony to force their audiences to confront often unpleasant realities.

February that here had never been such a freeze in living memory; people walked on the ice from Harlingen to Amsterstam and from Wieringen to Texel. In England, people drove coaches with six horses on the Thames and it was so cold on the 14th, 15th and 16th of January that many people froze to death." The register of tolls on the Maas in Limburg recorded that, "From the first of January 1608 until the twenty-seventh of February inclusive, nothing received because of the long duration of the great freeze." Reports indicate that the people, especially the poor, suffered tremendous hardships: Food was difficult to come by; warmth, nearly impossible; work was scarce; and there were a high number of deaths, particularly of children, as a result of the bitter cold.

Painters of the Little Ice Age

The National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. has mounted a wonderful exhibition, "Hendrick Avercamp: The Little Ice Age" (on view through July 5); it presents powerful visual evidence, in paintings and drawings from the period, mainly through the paintings and drawings of Avercamp (1585-1634), and a few of

his contemporaries, of the effects of the Ice Age on the lives of the Dutch people, as they struggled to cope, but also adapted to the harsh conditions, by learning to live, work, and play on the ice.

Not included in the exhibit, but prominently mentioned in the exhibition catalogue, is the influence of the great Flemish master, Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1526/30-69), on the development of the Winter landscape as a genre, and on Avercamp in particular. Among Bruegel's most well-known and beloved paintings are "Hunters in the Snow" and "Census at Bethlehem"; both were painted during one of the hardest Winters of the 16th Century, that of 1565-66.

But it was not only in subject matter that Avercamp paid homage to the earlier artist.

From 1482 until 1556, the Low Countries were under the domination of the Austrian and Spanish Hapsburg dynasties, which imposed the cruelty and injustice of the Inquisition to maintain their power. In 1556, the Dutch declared their independence from Spain, and fought a war to establish a republic, which succeeded in 1581. For the southern Netherlands, or Flanders (today's Belgium), that oppression lasted until 1794. Throughout Bruegel's works, we find evidence of this cruel tyranny, perhaps most strikingly in such paintings as the "Triumph of Death," in which can be plainly seen, those implements of torture and death widely employed by the handmaidens of the Inquisition; there is often something sinister lurking behind the apparent beauty and stillness in his paintings.

For example, a close look at "Hunters in the Snow" (Figure 1) reveals not only the beauty of the Winter landscape, but also its bleakness: You can almost feel how cold it must be, as people struggle to find food and warmth. The craggy, snow-covered mountains in the distance, seem to literally cut off the occupants of the

FIGURE 2



National Gallery of Art

Avercamp's "Skaters and Tents along the Ice" (c. 1620) presents us with a lively scene, and tells many "stories." But, there is more than meets the eye.

little village from the rest of the world. As far as the eye can see, everything is frozen. And there is something ominous about those few black crows and magpies perched on snow-covered tree branches.

Avercamp learned not only the principles of composition from Bruegel, but also his sense of dramatic irony. Think of the paintings as stage plays: Not only are there numerous "stories" being told within a single composition, but, if you peer into the drama portrayed, you will find the ironies.

Looking Past the Surface

Now, look at Avercamp's "Skaters and Tents along the Ice," from 1620 (**Figure 2**). What do you see? People from every walk of life, and every social station, gathered on the ice, which stretches back as far as the eye can see, to the small city at the horizon. (Avercamp has placed figures along perspective lines that converge in the distance, to emphasize the vast extent of the ice sheet that covers everything.) Along the perimeter, there are tents, where vendors sell their wares, and skaters can stop to warm themselves, and have a bite to eat and a hot

FIGURE 2a



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This detail shows a beggar, who stands at the center of the painting (Figure 2), ignored by all, as his more privileged neighbors swirl around him.

FIGURE 2b



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The fisherman shown in this detail from Figure 2, is very much on the sidelines, both visually and socially. He must struggle to survive under the harsh conditions.

FIGURE 2c



National Gallery of Art

This disturbing image of the gallows from Figure 2, is a powerful indication that life in the Netherlands in the second decade of the 17th Century, was cruel in more ways than simply the climate conditions.

drink. In the right foreground is an elegantly dressed family, while similarly dressed figures pass through on horse-drawn sleighs. All seems well, at first glance.

But then: Notice the figure at the center foreground—a beggar, in the midst of all the gaiety (**Figure 2a**); and there is a poor fisherman, trying to eke out a living, or perhaps just feed himself and his family, in the left foreground (**Figure 2b**). These are hints that all may not be as it appears on the surface.

If you now shift your gaze to the horizon on the far right, you will see the deeper truth emerge. What is Avercamp telling us about life in the northern Netherlands in 1620, even after independence? There are three bodies hanging from a gallows (**Figure 2c**). The wall text in the National Gallery exhibit tells about this gruesome sight, which often reappears in Avercamp's landscapes: "Such scaffolds were erected on the outskirts of cities as a warning to travelers to behave properly in that jurisdiction."

But the text fails to mention that, during this period, the genocidal Thirty Years War, beginning in 1618, raged across Europe, until the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 brought it to an end. Clearly, such scaffolds reflect the attempt on the part of civic leaders to keep the war from their doorsteps; and the gallows are ignored by the townspeople who pass underneath them, just as the beggar and the poor fisherman are ignored by their more comfortable neighbors (among whom are several ladies wearing masks—or are they blindfolds?).

Now, when you hear *your* neighbors prattle about "global warming," perhaps you will think about the last Little Ice Age, and what could be coming our way today. Of course, we needn't view this possibility with alarm, as long as mankind breaks out of the current planetary crisis, and moves rapidly to establish a Moon-Mars colonization program. The scientific breakthroughs associated with such an endeavor will allow us to solve any potential challenges on the horizon.

The artists of the Little Ice Age would surely agree.