



A Stormy Sea
Jacob van Ruisdael, Dutch, 1628/9-1682
1650s, Oil on canvas, 38 1/8 x 58 1/4 inches
Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas

About the Artist

Jacob van Ruisdael was a student of his father, and perhaps his uncle. His specialty was landscapes, and approximately 700 paintings have been attributed to him. His landscapes express the grandeur of nature, and every part of his work is filled with energy and emotion. Art history ranks Ruisdael with Rembrandt, Frans Hals and Vermeer as one of the great 17th-century Dutch masters. He painted many types of scenes: gardens of the rural Netherlands, flat farmlands, rolling coastal areas, wooded countrysides with castles and streams, river and forest scenes, landscapes showing seasons of the year, beaches, cities, and imaginary landscapes. *A Stormy Sea* is one of Ruisdael's seascapes, which were among his most valued works.

About the Art

In this seascape, the viewer sees the grandeur and power of nature and the struggle of humans to maintain a balance with natural forces. *A Stormy Sea* was painted in the 1650s and shows an approaching storm. The view is from a pier or jetty that extends into the water. This jetty, with another pier on the left of the painting, forms the entrance to a harbor. At the far end of the main jetty, the viewer sees a beacon and two sailors with long poles who wait to help a fishing boat approaching the harbor. Other boats are being beaten about by the winds. The sky and water appear to be violent and powerful. The dark clouds are heavy and rolling forward over the turbulent water.

Rough seas were a common subject for artists of Ruisdael's time, but this work is more dramatic than most as it depicts the boat, and the humans we assume are aboard, struggling toward a safe harbor ahead of the violence of the approaching storm. Nature and its elements is the main subject and can suggest to the viewer the struggle of life and

death.

Additional Information

Jacob van Ruisdaels' speciality was the landscape, and he elevated this type of painting to the level of high art. In his work, Ruisdael portrayed nature not only with topographical accuracy, but with a sense of monumental grandeur. The artist's powers of observation were enhanced by the dramatic force he captured in his paintings. The sea was a source of wealth and power in 17th-century Dutch life. In this rare marine painting, Ruisdael conveys how quickly nature's mood can change.

Several elements of the painting suggest a broader meaning. In the sky, we see the threat of the approaching storm with sunlight visible through the clouds, possibly suggesting the conflict between good and evil, safety and danger. The beacon can be seen as a promise of safety to those who can bring their boats into the harbor.

The drama is enhanced by the large expanse of the sky that fills almost two-thirds of the canvas. The relatively small size of the men and ships in the lower part of the painting suggests the infinite and spiritual power of nature and its relationship to life.

About the Time and Place

In the Netherlands, during the period when Jacob van Ruisdael painted *A Stormy Sea*, patrons from a prosperous merchant class created a new market for artists. These merchants had gained their wealth from such ventures as banking and overseas trading. Because of the influence of the growing Protestant Church in northern Europe, the Church was no longer the chief patron of the arts. However, artists painted subjects popular with these wealthy merchants who were interested in owning works of art.

Landscapes were very popular and Dutch painters produced scenes familiar to these new patrons. Seascapes were also popular because of the close relationship the Netherlands had with the sea. Herring was an important export, and maritime trade was a significant element of the Dutch economy. Admirals commanded fleets of ships engaged in defending territories and sea-routes. Also, the Dutch were engaged in a constant struggle with the North Sea in order to protect their lands, much of which had been drained and reclaimed from the sea.