AERT VAN DER NEER
(Gorinchem? c. 1603/04 – 1677 Amsterdam)

An Evening Landscape with a Village and a Church Tower on the Left

Signed in monogram
On canvas, 22½ x 29¾ ins. (57 x 76 cm)

PROVENANCE
Sir William Forbes
Anon. Sale, Phillips, London, 8 December 1987, lot 70
Johnny Van Haeften Ltd., London
Private collection, Austria, 1987-2001
Private Collection, U.S.A, 2001-2013

EXHIBITED
Johnny Van Haeften, Dutch & Flemish Old Master Paintings, Catalogue Six, 1988, cat. no. 15, reproduced in colour

LITERATURE
W. Schulz, Aert van der Neer, Doornspijk 2002, p. 419, no. 1179, reproduced colour plate 59 and fig. 147 (as present whereabouts unknown)

NARRATIVE
Aert van der Neer is chiefly famous for his moonlit landscapes. Although he was not the first artist to attempt to capture the special effects of moonlight, he made it his speciality and brought the genre to a new highpoint. Yet his preoccupation with unusual lighting effects was not confined solely to the hours of darkness, but included other times of the day as well, especially dawn and dusk. Van der Neer also painted winter landscapes and a few nocturnes in which the only source of light is a conflagration in one of the buildings on the riverbank.

In this serenely beautiful painting, van der Neer depicts a view on the outskirts of a small town at sunset. A canal, spanned by a small bridge, recedes from the foreground into the far distance, flanked on the left by trees, houses and a church and, on the right, by a line of trees and a distant cluster of buildings. The foreground is filled with marshy land, stumps of trees and a tumbledown old fence. The sun has almost dipped below the horizon yet its radiance continues to suffuse the sky and cast a warm glow over the landscape. Its last golden rays light up the church windows and the contours of the clouds, the trunks of trees, the lush summer foliage and the façades of houses on the left. As darkness descends, the activities of
day have all but ceased: a few people are still abroad, their darkened forms silhouetted against the luminous background. A woman and a child stroll with their dog in the cool evening air, a fisherman makes fast his boat in the shallows and a man with his horse pauses to chat at a cottage door: two cloaked figures stand in the shadows nearby. A family of ducks glides across a steely blue expanse of water: an intensely poetic mood prevails.

Although van der Neer became one of the most important landscapists of the Dutch Golden Age, virtually nothing is known of his artistic training. The biographer Arnold Houbraken mentions only that he spent his youth in a town near Gorinchem, where he worked as a steward for the lords of Arkel, but at the time of his marriage in Amsterdam in 1629, he is described as a “painter, age 25 years”. His early work bears witness to a variety of influences, including the landscapes of Jochem and Rafael Camphuysen, both natives of Gorinchem, those of Alexander Keirincx and Gillis d’Hondecote, and the winter scenes of Esaias van de Velde and Hendrick Avercamp. Nevertheless, by the early to mid-1640s he had developed a style of his own and begun to focus on the narrow range of subjects that were to dominate his production for the rest of his career: namely winter scenes and river views illuminated by the moon, or the rising or setting sun. Most of his paintings are composed along broadly similar lines: he usually chose a vantage point looking across a central body of water, with banks, trees and buildings retreating on either side, creating an illusion of depth. In the foreground, such darkened motifs as stumps of trees, logs, fences, boats and figures serve as repoussoirs further enhancing the sense of spatial recession. Whilst such compositional schemes had been developed by landscapists several decades earlier, his chief innovations were in his use of coloured light to evoke different atmospheric conditions. With a few notable exceptions, his scenes are largely imaginary.

Van der Neer’s early development can be traced with the aid of a small number of dated paintings. However, there are very few works dated after 1647 which makes it difficult to establish a chronology for his mature oeuvre, but it is generally assumed that he was highly active until about 1658, when he became an innkeeper and subsequently went bankrupt. This painting characterises his fully mature style and thus probably belongs to the period from the late 1640s to the late 1650s, when he was at the height of his powers. It demonstrates superbly van der Neer’s uncanny ability to capture that moment of transition when day gives way to night and local colours are subsumed by the encroaching darkness and warm golden hues reflected from the setting sun. In order to achieve these evocative effects, he worked with a limited palette, painting in dusky grey and burnt umber hues over an underlying layer of light ochre which is left uncovered or allowed to shine through transparent glazes in areas where the sunlight falls. To these monochromatic tones he added tints of pale yellow, golden brown and terracotta that enhance the sun’s radiance and limpid blue for the sky and reflecting water beneath. Lastly, he achieved the effect of sunlight glancing off panes of glass, trees and buildings with the addition of a few judiciously placed white highlights.

Apparently van der Neer’s work was little appreciated in his lifetime. Like many artists of his day he was forced to try his hand at other work to make ends meet, but even then, he suffered financial hardship in later life and died in poverty. It was not until the nineteenth century, when artists of a romantic persuasion turned their attentions to similar atmospheric effects that his works finally received the attention they deserved.
Aert (Aernout) van der Neer was born in 1603 or 1604 in Gorinchem, a flourishing trading city situated on the river Waal, to the east of Rotterdam and south of Utrecht. He was the son of Egerom (or Igrom) Aertsz. van der Neer, a majoor (steward or estate manager) at Fort Suikerberg in Klundert (North Brabant) and his wife, Aeltje Jansdr. According to Arnold Houbraken, in his youth the artist also served as a majoor for the lords of Arkel, who had an estate in the village of Arkel, just north of Gorinchem. It is not known where or with whom van der Neer trained as an artist. However, by 1629, the year he married Lijsbeth Govaertsdr. in Amsterdam, his marriage certificate described him as a “painter 25 years old”. It seems that the couple had settled in Amsterdam by the early 1630s, but it is possible that van der Neer had moved there several years earlier. The dates of birth of the couple’s two eldest sons, Eglon, who later became a successful genre painter and Johannes, are not recorded. However, two other sons, Pieter (1640 – before 1648) and Pieter II (1648 – before 1683) and daughters, Cornelia (1642-1683) and Lijsbeth (1645 – before 1675) were baptised in the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam.

Like a number of seventeenth-century artists, van der Neer also had a second occupation. In 1659, he was described as the keeper of a tavern called “de Graeff van Hollant” in the Kalverstraat, with his son Johannes. On 25 January 1662 he was again mentioned in a list of innkeepers, but on 12 December the same year declared bankruptcy. In an inventory of his possessions drawn up at that time, his own paintings were appraised at relatively low values, mostly five guilders or less. He continued to paint, living in a state of extreme poverty on the Kerkstraat, until his death on 9 November 1677.

P.M.