

Interactive comment on “Enjoying the ice. Dutch Winter landscapes, weather and climate in the Golden Age, 17th century” by Alexis Metzger

Anonymous Referee #3

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This article evaluates the relationship between climate, winter weather, and its potential connections to the Dutch winter landscape genre. It argues that seventeenth-century winter landscapes overrepresented cold, dry weather based on an analysis of contemporary weather narratives. It tentatively explores several non-climatic reasons why artists might have chosen to emphasize these icy scenes. This article is intriguing, in part, because it promises to contribute to a vein of historical, climatological, and art historical scholarship dating back to at least the 1960s. As it currently stands, this article only superficially engages that literature. It suffers two primary limitations as a result. It lacks a clear explanation of its broader relevance and relies on source material with a less than critical acknowledgement of its potential and limitations. To be clear, this is a promising article that warrants further investigation. If accepted, I recommend the

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author consider the following.

Broader relevance: The author presents their study as a semi-quantitative evaluation of artistic decision-making. Why did artists choose to depict the scenes they did? Was it motivated by their experience of weather or some combination of other factors? In the aggregate, can we detect subtle shifts in climate by evaluating the prevalence of environmental conditions in winter landscape corpora over time? The author is not the first scholar to address these questions, and to their credit they reference several important studies, beginning with Burroughs in 1981 and ending with Degroot's dissertation (though strangely not his book). Hans Neuberger was addressing these ideas in 1970 and the climatologist H.H. Lamb proposed using landscapes to evaluate the prevailing character of changing summers and winters in 1967 and 1977. Bonacina was already exploring similar issues in 1939. These early efforts were not unproblematic and subsequent literature (some of which is cited) refined their methods and identified important limitations. While I don't advocate the author cite all of these sources, it may be useful to think about how this research program has change over time and where, specifically, the author sees their own contributions intersecting its most important concerns. In more recent years, the consideration of winter landscape paintings as source material for climate history has periodically reemerged, whether in the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (Kelly and Ó Gráda, 2014 and its critique by White, 2014) or Dagomar Degroot's *Frigid Golden Age* (2018). Scholars have been interested in the relationship between winter landscapes production and climate/weather for more than fifty years. The longevity of this project speaks to its ongoing relevance, but it can't be left to speak for itself. The author needs to clearly explain their intervention(s). Is this simply an attempt to assess the usefulness of landscape paintings as source material for historical climatological reconstructions? If so, what does it add to previous findings? Is it making new claims that challenge the notion that Dutch landscape artists reliably documented or 'described' environmental conditions?

The author claims that this last question has only been “partially encompassed” (56),

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but Dutch landscapes' representational fidelity has been a subject of interest (and sometimes debate) since at least the 1980s. Wayne Franits *Looking at seventeenth-century Dutch art: realism reconsidered* (1997) is a good, though somewhat dated introduction. My reading of this literature is that few art historians (or climate historians for that matter) would argue these paintings reliably recorded weather as it was experienced. This does not diminish their value for studies of climate perception or the influence of climate on culture, though it does not appear the author sees their work contributing to these latter themes. Regardless of whether the author intends their work to add to one or both of these approaches, it needs to be stated more clearly at its outset. A more substantial (and critical) evaluation of this shared historiography would more clearly point to the purpose and significance of the article, which is currently framed as a set of questions (55-56; 185; 229-230) more than an argument.

Source material: This study is based on a corpus of 49 winter landscape paintings. While I understand that an exhaustive accounting is impossible, is the Suchtelen exhibition catalog the most complete available? The answer may simply be "yes", though it's unclear if this is the case. I'm also a little curious why the author chose to restrict their study to painting. Winter landscapes appeared as prints as well, for instance. Is this because prints are not detailed or atmospheric enough to project "weathered reality?" I don't necessarily think this study should include prints, but a richer justification of the value of painting as a medium for this type of analysis might be warranted. The reliance on written narratives (mostly compiled by Buisman) to reconstruct "actual" climate is at once rich with potential and frustratingly underdeveloped. Written narratives are certainly not the only sources available to us to reconstruct historical climates. The author might have turned to historical climatological reconstructions in combination with these chronicles, letters, and weather observations either compiled by Buisman or straight from the source.

The approach as it currently stands is rich with potential because so many of these narrative descriptions suffer from similar limitations as the paintings (written often long

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after the fact, indoors and presumably insulated from the weather, based on second-hand accounts, subject to the conventions of textual genres). There is a fascinating opportunity here, I think, to critically address the strengths and the weaknesses of both sets of sources when put in conversation with one another. The author indicates as much in the discussion ("Neither images, nor documents are a true depiction of reality" (289)) If taking this approach, the author should use the original source material rather than Buisman's selections removed from context. This might also go a long way to substantiating the hypotheses in section 3.3. If LIA paintings are misleading (or an 'imaginary'), might these textual sources support these claims as well?

The hypotheses themselves are intriguing because they begin this conversation, but they remain underdeveloped. The "Climatic" section relies on one scholar's reading of ice as a "tamed and appropriated" nature. Naturally, water could be a hazard in the Dutch Republic, but it was equally an ally. The same could be said of ice and as Degroot demonstrated in his *Frigid Golden Age*, frozen rivers, lakes, and seas provided benefits and disadvantages. Perhaps a closer evaluation of artists like Avercamp and their social milieu would indicate whether they were likely to view ice as friend or foe.

The "religious" section is the closest we come to an iconographical or iconological reading of ice scenes. Dutch paintings often evoked political, religious, and moral meaning and scholars following Panofsky have used literature like emblem books to examine these symbolic meanings. The author agrees these interpretations have merit and cites Buijsen and Sluijter, yet doesn't interpret these scenes iconographically. The author, in fact, seems to partly discount these readings by arguing that the Reformed Dutch dispelled Catholic associations of ice with the underworld. Landscapes may have lost their ties to Catholic iconography, but did they not reflect Reformed beliefs? Skating, at least according to Van Suchtelen (2001), symbolized recklessness and the transience of life for instance. While I wouldn't advocate a deep reading of every painting, it would certainly enrich these hypotheses to present a greater diversity of interpretations.

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I am also left questioning whether there are other potentially significant explanations for these winter weather imaginaries. The most obvious are the art market and the influence of artistic convention. Consumers of paintings expected to see certain stylistic and formal elements included in these paintings. Although it is fascinating to read about the meteorological coherence of Salomon van Ruysdael's (incorrectly attributed to Jacob van Ruisdael) "Drawing the Eel", just as often artists did not adhere to this degree of realism. This was the finding of John Walsh, whose chapter on 'Skies and Reality in Dutch Landscape' in *Art in History, History in Art* (1991), which is strangely absent. Indeed, Walsh singles out Salomon van Ruysdael for his striking and realistic depictions of clouds as well as their unrealistic placement and appearance in Dutch skies. He concludes these were hybrid atmospherics, partly reflecting observation, partly influenced by other artists, and partly reflecting to the formal requirements of the genre. Dutch artists may have simply deemphasized precipitation and emphasized frost because this was their (or their buyers) aesthetic preference.

The same note of caution to taking these paintings at face value would apply to other formal elements beyond clouds. In other words, the finding that "an element identified in one painting often appears in the other paintings as well" (75) MAY indicate useful information about climate, but also any number of other reasons completely unrelated to even these religious, social, or political hypotheses. I also wonder whether any changes in the art market may have influenced the timing of peaks and nadirs in the production of winter landscapes. Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude each contributed a chapter to the above volume that may point in productive directions. Finally, I'm curious about the diversity of winter landscapists represented in the corpora. Does Van Suchtelen claim the catalog is representative? (71) The author emphasizes Avercamp and notes work by Van Ruysdael, Van Goyen, and a few others. Aert van der Neer apparently painted 150 canvases, though the majority are obviously not included in this study. I'm curious because if one or several artists are disproportionately represented, then would not their artistic conventions (also the ups and downs of their careers) have outsized influence on the study? Avercamp died in 1634 during (perhaps not

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coincidentally?) one of the lulls in winter landscape production. The periodicity of artistic production that the author identifies is among its more intriguing findings, but without a clearer sense of representation in the sample, the reader is left wondering what accounts for these changes.

Minor issues: The characterization of the Little Ice Age as experienced in the Dutch Republic is problematically uniform. There is little indication that temperature and precipitation underwent substantial decadal change during the period they investigate, which of course it did. An oversight considering the relevance of decadal change in painting/climate diachronies. (23-26)

It's a bit of a stretch to so definitively claim that the Golden Age ended in 1672. The art market collapsed that year, perhaps a better justification? (39-40)

I'm not sure "cultural appropriation" is the correct term (42)

The claim that "most geographers looking at paintings either draw on cultural geography, or visual studies also seems to be a stretch – see, for instance, work on the 1674 derecho that struck Utrecht (Gerard van der Schrier and Rob Groenland, "A reconstruction of 1 August 1674 thunderstorms over the Low Countries") or Baart et al "Using 18th century storm-surge data from the Dutch Coast to improve the confidence in flood-risk estimates".

The sentence "For instance, Jan van Goyen came back to painting winter scenes in 1641, whereas his last winter scene dated from 1627" is confusing and could simply be reworded as "Jan van Goyen painted no winter scenes between 1627 and 1641."

There are also numerous grammatical and stylistic issues as well as spelling mistakes (for instance, Table 1: changes from "precipitations" to "precipitation", sea is misspelled (236), the quote that begins on 311 does not have a closing quotation mark)

In summary, there is rich potential in this article. The author is indeed correct that visual representations of climate are rich in interpretive possibility. Their study poses

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a number of fascinating interventions in this venerable tradition. With a clearer elaboration of the study's place in that literature and more critical use of textual and visual documentation, both of which will take substantial work, this article would be better positioned to find a place in *Climate of the Past*.

Interactive comment on *Clim. Past Discuss.*, <https://doi.org/10.5194/cp-2020-81>, 2020.