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## Vollon's 'View of Dieppe' in the Rijksmuseum

The *Harbor View in Dunkerque* by Antoine Vollon (1833–1900) in the Rijksmuseum<sup>1</sup> (fig. 1) can be re-identified as a view of Dieppe. Though swiftly rendered and minimally defined, the unique silhouette of the superimposed towers of St. Jacques Cathedral can be easily distinguished along the horizon line in the center of the picture. The configuration of the cathedral's dome to the east, aligned at an angle in front and slightly to the left of its square tower to the west, was frequently repeated by Vollon in other representations<sup>2</sup>—most notably in a largescale painting of *Dieppe Harbor* purchased by the 3rd Marquess of Salisbury during a trip to Dieppe in the summer of 1876, and still belonging to his descendants at Hatfield House, Hatfield, England<sup>3</sup> (fig. 2). The Hatfield painting appears to have been originally conceived and completed without the portraits of Lord Salisbury's four sons in its center foreground<sup>4</sup>, which, according to Walter Richard Sickert, were added by the artist at his patron's request at the time of purchase<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, these portraits, with their specificity of clothing and facial features, seem awkwardly juxtaposed with the integrated, repetitious forms of the small crowd of fisherfolk in the left foreground. Before its transformation into a personal memento of an English family's vacation, this technically precise, formal, unusually ambitious composition may have been destined for a Salon exhibition<sup>6</sup>. As a view of

the harbor from the shore of Le Pollet, a suburb of Dieppe, it may have been envisioned as a landscape counterpart to Vollon's monumental image of a peasant woman, *Femme du Pollet à Dieppe*, exhibited in the 1876 Salon<sup>7</sup>, who, with her basket on her back, *sabots* on her naked feet and white kerchief on her head, seems a close relative of the women on the beach in the left foreground of the Hatfield picture. For a painting of such large dimensions, the Rijksmuseum's *Harbor View of Dieppe* exhibits brilliant technical spontaneity, as demonstrated in the diversity of its long, slashing strokes, soft, feathery jabs, and thickly scumbled, sculptural clumps. Vivid blues are counteracted by boldest blacks. Such rough expressionistic vigor provides a startling stylistic contrast with the Hatfield picture, which is so stiff and linear in its effort to render concise architectural detail. Despite such obvious technical differences, the Rijksmuseum's panel virtually constitutes an enlarged detail of the lefthand portion of the painting at Hatfield House. In both pictures the artist has repeated the casually distributed figures of fisherwomen, with their backs to the viewer. The man in heavy boots and hat with turned-up brim can also be distinguished in both paintings, as can the spires of tilting masts screening the cathedral towers in the background. On the basis of its close relationship to this dated work, the Rijksmuseum's *Harbor View of Dieppe* can be

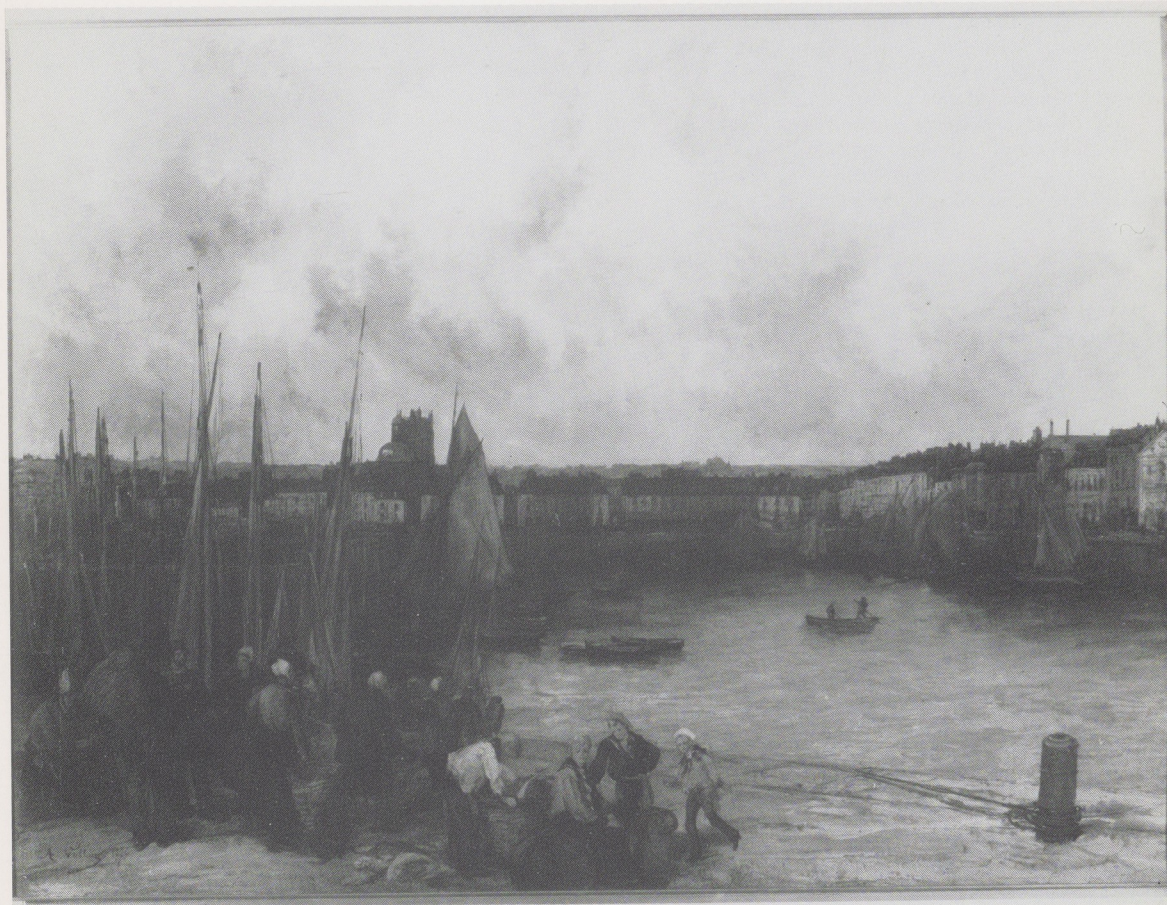


Fig. 1. Antoine Vollon, Harbor View of Dieppe. Circa 1876. Panel, 62 × 36 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.





Fig. 2. Antoine Vollon, *Dieppe Harbor*. Signed and dated 1876. Canvas, 110.5 × 151 cm. Coll. Marquess of Salisbury, Hatfield House, Hatfield. (Reproduction by courtesy of The Marquess of Salisbury)



dated c. 1876—a time when Vollon was obviously experimenting with this particular motif, as evidenced by a privately owned painting with an identical view across Dieppe harbor, which similarly represents clusters of ships' masts and figures on the beach and whose dimensions are nearly equivalent to those of the Hatfield version<sup>8</sup> (fig. 3). Like the Rijksmuseum's painting, it is remarkably spontaneous and vibrant for such a large composition. Here figures have become impromptu shorthand notations, their individualities reduced even further to anonymity. Yet the emotionally turbulent immediacy of the Rijksmuseum's version is not permitted to penetrate this congenial plein-airist atmosphere. It is difficult, and

perhaps needless, to speculate as to the order of precedence of these three painted versions. Each should be considered an independent interpretation of the same motif<sup>9</sup>. Each has the integrity and visual impact of a finished work. However, it seems reasonable to suggest that during the preparation of a potential Salon painting, Vollon was testing many stylistic alternatives. That Vollon could paint such radically different, yet equally ambitious and conceptually complete, interpretations of the same motif at nearly the same point in time indicates that his creative spirit was not confined by the dictates of static academicism. Although after 1870 Vollon was a consistently elected Salon juror and therefore a member



Fig. 3. Antoine Vollon, 'Le Port de Dieppe'. Circa 1876. Canvas, 109 × 152 cm. Private collection.



of the establishment, his advocacy of the finished 'esquisse' during the transitional decade of the 1870s demonstrates a tacit sympathy with the Impressionist cause, which, at that time, was being mercilessly criticized by conformist thinkers<sup>10</sup>. There is no documentation to prove that Vollon either attacked or supported Impressionist aesthetic ideology. However, works such as the Rijksmuseum's *Harbor View of Dieppe*, which seems stylistically comparable to Manet's harbor views<sup>11</sup>, testify that he was quietly experimenting with innovative trends in a personal quest for technical supremacy. His unbiased application of spontaneous, intuitive technique as a viable alternative in the execution of finished paintings serves to

modify the habitual over-simplification of this period as one characterized by the polarization of unreconcilable opponents—the liberals, on the one hand, and the conservatives, on the other. Vollon, who is still known primarily for his devotion to the genre of still life, deserves to be re-considered as an acknowledged master of landscape painting.



## Notes

The author has been accumulating information on Vollon and his works in preparation for a doctoral dissertation at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University.

<sup>1</sup> This painting measures 62 × 36 cm, oil on panel, and is catalogued in P. J. J. van Thiel et al., *All the Paintings in the Rijksmuseum*, Amsterdam/Maarsse 1976, p. 585, no. A 1901. Presented in 1900 by the dowager of R. Baron van Lynden.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, an undated painting by Vollon with the same view across Dieppe harbor in the Milwaukee Art Center, Milwaukee, Wisconsin (oil on panel, 31.5 × 40 cm). However, this painting does not represent the beach or group of figures in the foreground.

<sup>3</sup> The Hatfield picture is oil on canvas, 110.5 × 151 cm, signed and dated 1876. It is catalogued in E. Auerbach and C. K. Adams, *Paintings and Sculpture at Hatfield House*, London 1971, pp. 225-6, no. 311.

<sup>4</sup> Auerbach/Adams, *op. cit.*, (Note 3) p. 225, identifies the sons as they appear from left to right in the picture.

<sup>5</sup> Sickert's account is transcribed by Osbert Sitwell in *Noble Essences*, Boston 1950, p. 215. This account arouses skepticism because the figures of the family are erroneously described as contained in a boat on a river. However, Sitwell is probably correct in his assertion that Lord Salisbury visited Vollon in person, spied a finished painting which he particularly liked, and offered to buy it from the artist for 500 pounds, provided figures of his family were added to its composition.

<sup>6</sup> At present the author knows of no early landscapes of such magnitude. In general, Vollon preferred to paint on a smaller scale. The first time he exhibited a landscape at the Salon was as late in his career as 1886. This painting was another harbor view, smaller than the Hatfield picture, entitled *Vue du Tréport*, now in the John G. Johnson Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art.

<sup>7</sup> This impressive painting, which caused a sensation among admiring critics at the Salon, measures 183 × 105 cm and is housed in the Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague.

<sup>8</sup> This work is oil on canvas, 109 × 152 cm, in a private collection, and is reproduced in G. Pillement, *Les Pré-Impressionistes*, Zoug (Sw.) 1974, p. 293, fig. 319.

<sup>9</sup> A black crayon drawing by Vollon in the Musée Grobet-Labadié, Marseille, seems to be a preparatory sketch for the painted versions. Its composition includes summary traces of figures in the foreground and extends far to the left, including buildings along the dock which do not appear in either the Rijksmuseum or Hatfield pictures, but which can be found in the privately owned version.

<sup>10</sup> The sensationally bitter auction of Impressionist works on March 24, 1875, provides an illustration of overtly antagonistic public opinion at the time (see J. Rewald, *The History of Impressionism*, 4th rev. ed., New York 1973, p. 354). Two years later, this harsh reception had significantly improved. Yet Georges Rivière, in a letter to the editor of *Le Figaro*, in response to the 1877 Impressionist exhibition, stated that in spite of the apparent 'success' of the exhibition, criticism in the press was still almost unanimously recriminating (see L. Venturi, *Les Archives de l'Impressionisme*, reprint ed., New York 1968, vol. II, p. 306).

<sup>11</sup> Manet's *Battle of the Alabama and Kearsarge* of 1864 (John G. Johnson Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art) with its bold opposition of black and deep blue, and his *Moonlight in the Port of Boulogne* of 1869 (Musée du Jeu de Paume, Paris), with its evocation of tenebrous ships and tall masts, are certainly comparable, if not identical, in concept to Vollon's aesthetic goals.