

The Interior of St. Bavo, Haarlem

Pieter Jansz. Saenredam
Dutch, 1628
Oil on panel, 15 1/4 x 18 3/4 in.
85.PB.225



Background Information

Light fills the interior of the Church of Saint Bavo in Haarlem, one of the finest Gothic buildings still in existence today. Although Pieter Jansz. Saenredam based his work on careful on-the-spot studies, the painting combines two distinct views, one looking straight ahead and the other toward the chancel on the left. He even added an altarpiece and a stained glass window, which would probably already have been removed from the church by Saenredam's time. By the 1600s, Protestant churches in Holland had become relatively austere in response to the teachings of theologian John Calvin.

The overall impression is one of strong verticality, soaring space, and penetrating light, a spiritual reference to the heavens above. The inclusion of small figures accentuate the viewer's experience of exalted interior space. Saenredam described architectural elements in great detail: **vaulted ceilings**, moldings, decorative **capitals**, clustered pillars, and clerestory windows.

About the Artist

Pieter Jansz. Saenredam (Dutch, 1597–1665)

At an early age, Pieter Jansz. Saenredam's was exposed to the work of famous artists. His father, an engraver, made copies of works by artists such as Hendrick Goltzius and Abraham Bloemaert. After his father's death in 1607, Saenredam and his mother moved to Haarlem, where he worked for ten years. In 1623, he entered Haarlem's painters' guild. Three years later, commissioned to produce illustrations for a history of Haarlem, Saenredam made his first drawing of the interior of the church of Saint Bavo. From then on, he devoted himself almost exclusively to painting church interiors, always using precise perspective. Of his fifty surviving paintings, almost half show the interiors of two churches, Saint Bavo and the Mariakerk in Utrecht.

Saenredam's sacred spaces are designed for contemplation. Unlike his flamboyant predecessors who evoked the pomp, pageantry, and theatre of churches—usually Roman Catholic—Saenredam painted the whitewashed austerity of the Dutch Reformed Church. There are no processions, no clusters of worshippers at shrines. He adopted a very low viewpoint and a palette restricted to the palest of tones, and allowed few people into his bare interiors. He concentrated on depicting light, color, and space. Many Dutch artists continued his tradition, but few equaled his inventive vision.

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Questions for Teaching

Take the time to look closely at the reproduction of the painting.

Describe what you see in the painting.

What architectural elements can you identify? Use the “Architecture Vocabulary” handout as reference (see the Getty website at http://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/classroom_resources/curricula/art_architecture/arch_vocabulary.pdf).

The vantage point is the place where the artist was sitting or standing when he or she made the painting. Where do you think Saenredam’s vantage point (or viewpoint) was?
(*Note to Teacher:* If it is helpful, prompt students to compare different vantage points. Pick a space on axis, have some students stand on axis, others to either side. Have students describe what they can see from their particular vantage point, getting at the point that Saenredam’s unusual vantage point enabled him to show more of the church than would have been possible).

Discuss how two-dimensional **shapes** (circles, triangles, squares) can be transformed into three-dimensional **forms** (spheres, pyramids, cubes), using the “Elements of Art” handout as reference (see the Getty website at http://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/building_lessons/elements_art.pdf).

How successful do you think Saenredam’s methods were for representing a three-dimensional (3-D) building in a two-dimensional (2-D) painting?

Imagine that you were one of the figures in the painting. What strikes you? How do you feel? What is your sense of scale?