



Over the next eight years in Christchurch, van der Velden became a well-known artist around town while conceiving his second great cycle of paintings. Like the Marken funerals of the 1870s, the Otira landscapes of the 1890s are concerned with the insignificance of human life in the face of sublime nature. But critical success for an artist in New Zealand did not equal financial stability, and van Asch continued to act as his patron, accumulating a houseful of his works. On the death of his widow in 1922, the family held a lottery to divide up the paintings. The painting then known as *The Dutch Funeral* went to his son Harry, who gave it to the newly opened Robert McDougall Art Gallery in 1932 with the proviso that he should approve the hanging position. *The Press* reported that it “held the interest of everyone who visited its bay”.

Too large to ever be taken off display—it wouldn’t fit down the McDougall Gallery’s narrow basement stairs—*The Dutch Funeral* became a staple of local culture. Former Gallery director Rodney Wilson once described it as “a sort of Christchurch *Night Watch* with an immense public following”. While it’s no longer on permanent display, it remains one of the most popular works in the Gallery’s collection—and the friendship between its artist and owner is of critical significance in the account of local art history.

Lara Strongman

Cover:
Petrus van der Velden
*Burial in the Winter on the
Island of Marken (The Dutch
Funeral)* (detail) 1872
Oil on canvas
Collection of Christchurch Art
Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu,
gift of Henry Charles Drury
van Asch, 1932

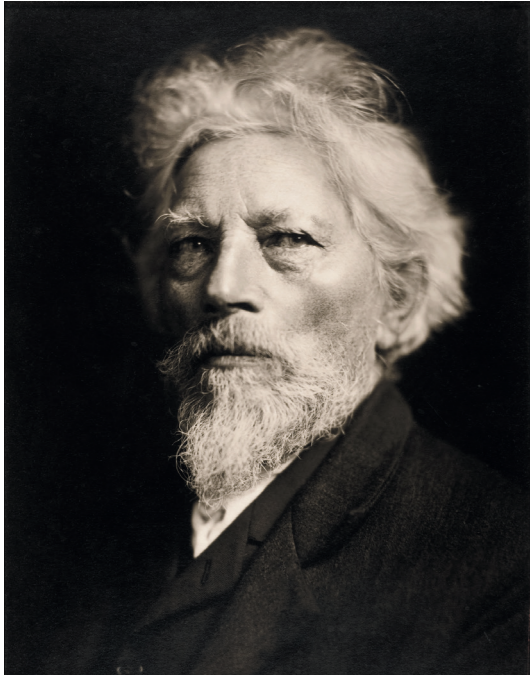
Left:
Photographer unknown
Robert McDougall Art Gallery,
Christchurch, 1932
Collection of Christchurch Art
Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu,
Robert and Barbara Stewart
Library and Archives

**CHRISTCHURCH
ART GALLERY
TE PUNA O
WAIWHETU**



Take a closer look at
Petrus van der Velden’s
**Burial in the Winter on
the Island of Marken
(The Dutch Funeral)**

Exhibition copy. Please do not remove



Petrus van der Velden's *Burial in the Winter on the Island of Marken (The Dutch Funeral)* came to New Zealand before the artist; before anyone living here had ever heard of Petrus van der Velden. It arrived in 1879 on a ship called the *Scottish Prince*, along with other emigrants from the old world to the new.

Petrus van der Velden (1837–1913) painted this major work in his studio in The Hague in 1872. Later that year he showed it to critical acclaim in Amsterdam and at the Brussels Salon, where it was exhibited as *Burial in the Winter on the Island of Marken*. The original title given to it by the artist was lost over the years in New Zealand, and the painting has been known as *The Dutch Funeral* since at least 1890. (In this exhibition, we are restoring its original title.)

Burial in the Winter on the Island of Marken is an important work in a series inspired by a place, Marken – a tiny island in the Dutch Zuyder Zee with a distinctive regional culture. (A road connection to the mainland was not built until the 1950s.) Its people lived close to the sea both physically and spiritually. Van der Velden spent extended periods there between 1871 and 1873, drawing and painting the local fishermen and their families.

The island often flooded and seas could be rough: the possibility of death by drowning was a constant concern. He made many studies of funerals, painting the coffin at various stages of the final journey from the house to the church to the cemetery. In this painting, the coffin has left the church for the burial, and is followed by a funeral procession of adults and children.

Tradition has it that *Burial in the Winter on the Island of Marken* depicts the last journey of a drowned Marken fisherman. We don't know the name of the deceased, but a funeral for a fisherman did take place shortly after van der Velden first arrived on the island. The coffin is being pushed along the frozen ground by two male figures, while a woman – possibly his widow – is supported by two others. However, the coffin is unusually short: perhaps the funeral instead is for a child.

Van der Velden's 'figures of fishermen and peasants' were admired by the young Vincent van Gogh, who wrote to his brother Theo in 1883 that he had met van der Velden:

“He made a good impression on me at the time. ... There's something broad and rough in him that pleases me greatly ... A man who evidently doesn't seek civilization in outward things but is much further inwardly, *much much much further than most people. In short, he's a true artist, and I'd like to get to know him for I would trust him and I'm sure I would learn from him.*”

In a later letter, Van Gogh continued:

“The impression he immediately made on me was that he was a solid, genuine painter. It's a square, Gothic head – something bold or daring, and yet gentle in his look. ...There's something manly and strong in him, even if he says nothing and does nothing special. I do hope I'll get in closer touch with him at some point.”

But they never met again, and in 1890 van der Velden left the Netherlands, never to return.

Left: Stanley Andrew
Petrus van der Velden 1909
Photograph
Christchurch Art Gallery
Te Puna o Waiwhetu,
Robert and Barbara Stewart
Library and Archives



Gerrit van Asch acquired *Burial in the Winter on the Island of Marken (The Dutch Funeral)* directly from van der Velden in The Hague sometime before 1879, when the van Aschs sailed from London – they lived in Kensington – to Wellington. His granddaughter Cynthia van Asch remembered her mother and aunts telling her how the painting hung rolled up in their cabin on the voyage to New Zealand, and how the children “all bumped their heads on it as they ran about.”

Van Asch was a global pioneer of deaf education. He founded the first government funded residential school for deaf children, at Sumner. *Burial in the Winter on the Island of Marken* hung on the wall at his house at Beach Glen, Sumner. He was proud of the huge painting and often showed it to visitors. “Most expressive,” said John Macmillan Brown in 1887. “Large and very striking,” said a reporter in 1890.

Van Asch and van der Velden kept in touch through the 1880s, and van Asch sometimes enclosed photographs of New Zealand in his letters. When van der Velden's professional life took a bleak turn – there was some awkwardness over the results of an art competition, perhaps also some money problems – he left the Netherlands to make a new start in New Zealand under the patronage of his friend.



For the first six months, he lived with his family in a tent in the van Aschs' garden at Sumner. Reporting his arrival in 1890 as a “distinguished Dutch artist”, the newspaper observed that locals might be surprised to learn that van der Velden “has found much to admire in the place”. He was greatly struck, noted the reporter, “by the evidences of plutonic energy displayed by the rugged hills around.”

Van der Velden made many drawings of the road being built at Sumner at this time, extending the studies of working people he had made in Holland. He brought other paintings of Marken out with him and borrowed *Burial in the Winter on the Island of Marken* from van Asch for an exhibition of his work in the city.

Petrus van der Velden *Atmospheric Study, Sumner* c.1890. Charcoal and wash on paper. Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, gift of the A. F. Nicoll family, 1969

Petrus van der Velden *Near Sumner* 1890. Charcoal. Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, presented by the family of A. F. Nicoll, 1960

Petrus van der Velden *Study for Funeral Series* c.1872. Wash. Collection of Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, presented by the family of A. F. Nicoll, 1960