

Hercules Segers and his ‘printed paintings’

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This introduction accompanies the display of the British Museum’s collection of etchings by Hercules Segers, on show in Room 90, 6 January – 6 May 2012. This is the first time the British Museum’s holdings of Segers’ prints have been exhibited as a group, and the majority have never been previously displayed.

The first section contains introductory chapters on Hercules Segers’ life, his work, his printmaking techniques and his use of colour. The second section features a list of the works exhibited. A glossary of Segers’ most used printmaking techniques and a bibliography can be found at the end of this introduction.

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I. Introduction

Segers' life

Hercules Segers (c. 1589–c. 1638) was a Dutch painter and printmaker, specialising in landscapes. He was born around 1589/90 in Haarlem, the son of the merchant Pieter Segers and Cathalijntgen Hercules.¹ He was known as Hercules Pietersz., and only started using his father's name Segers from 1621 onwards. His father was Flemish and as a Mennonite (Christian Anabaptist) probably had to leave his home country during religious persecutions. The family moved to Amsterdam between 1592 and 1596, where the young Hercules became apprenticed to another Flemish émigré, Gillis van Coninxloo, a painter specialising in imaginary wooded landscapes.² In 1612 Segers entered the painters' guild in Haarlem. He lived in Amsterdam from 1614 until 1631 where he married Anna van der Bruggen, an Antwerp native who was 16 years his senior. She never bore him children but they raised Segers' illegitimate daughter from a previous relationship: Hester Hercules also known as Nelletje. In 1619 he bought a large house on the Lindengracht in Amsterdam, which he had to sell in 1631 to pay off a debt.³ In 1632 he is mentioned in an archival document as 'presently living in The Hague'.⁴ Although the exact year he died is not known, a certain Cornelia de Witte is mentioned in 1638 in The Hague as the widow of Hercules Pietersz., perhaps Hercules Segers.⁵ Segers' name has been commonly spelled as Seghers, even though he always signed his paintings without an 'h' which will be followed here.

Biographical information about Segers is scarce, apart from few archival documents regarding his financial situation. Samuel van Hoogstraten's *Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst* (Introduction to the Academy of Painting) published in Rotterdam in 1678 is the only 17th-century source providing an insight in his life and work.⁶ Van Hoogstraten's biography of Segers is highly anecdotal but appears to

¹ In 1614 Segers claims to be 24 years old when registering for his marriage in Amsterdam (i.e. in the notice of intention to marry); see I.H. van Eeghen, 'De Ouders van Hercules Segers', in *Amstelodamum* 55 (1968), pp.73–76.

² A legal document dated January 1607 (after Coninxloo's death) from the owner Coninxloo's estate mentions that Pieter Segers still owes money for his son's apprenticeship fee; see I.H. van Eeghen, *op. cit.*, pp.73–76.

³ J.Z. Kannegieter, 'Het huis van Hercules Segers op de Lindengracht te Amsterdam', in *Oud-Holland* 59 (1942), pp. 150–157.

⁴ E. Haverkamp-Begemann, *Hercules Segers: The Complete Etchings*, The Hague, 1974, p.19.

⁵ E. Haverkamp-Begemann, *op. cit.*, p.19.

⁶ On page 312 he writes in Dutch: 'Hier by past noch een staeltje van den ongeachten en nochtans, in de konst, grooten *Herkules Zegers*: dezen bloeide, of liever verdorde, in mijn eerste groene jaren. Hy was van een gewis en vast opmerken, zeker in zijn Teykening van lantschappen en gronden, aerdich in verzierlijke bergen en grotten, en als zwanger van geheele Provinsien, die hy met onmetelijke ruimtens baerde, en in zijne Schilderyen en Printen wonderlijk liet zien. Hy benaerstichde hem de konst met onvergelykelijken yver: maer wat was 't? niemant wilde zijn werken in zijn leven aenzien: de Plaet-drukkers brochten zijn printen met manden vol by de Vettewariers, om boter en zeep in te doen, en't geraekte meest al tot peperhuisjes. Eyndelijk vertoonde hy een plaet, als zijn uiterste proefstuk, aen een kunstkooper tot Amsterdam, veylende de zelve voor klein gelt, maer wat was't? de Koopman klaegde dat zijn werken geen waer en waren, en ontzach zich byna 't koper te betalen, zoo dat den ellendigen *Herkules* ongetroost met zijn plaet na huis most, en na dat hy eenige weynige printen daer afgedrukt hadde, sneed hy de zelve aen stukken, zeggende: dat'er noch liefhebbers komen zouden, die viermael meer voor een afdruk geven zouden, als hy voor de geheele plaet begeert hadde, gelijk ook gebeurt is, want yder print is naderhant zestien dukaten betaelt geweest, en noch gelukkig diese krijgen kon; maer den armen *Herkules* had'er niets van te bet: want schoon hy zijn hemden en de

contain reliable information, mentioning that he printed on textile and cut down and re-used some of his larger copper-plates; this is corroborated by his surviving prints. Van Hoogstraten noted that nobody seemed to be interested in Segers' prints during his lifetime and that he only received recognition after his death. Later biographers such as Arnold Houbraken in his *Groote Schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen* (1718) and Jacob Campo Weyerman in his *De levens-beschryvingen der Nederlandsche konst-schilders en konst-schilderessen* (1729) merely repeated Van Hoogstraten.

Segers' work

Segers' surviving oeuvre is relatively small, only a dozen or so paintings by Segers are known, most of them showing imaginary rocky landscapes which sometimes incorporate actual topographical features. These paintings are relatively small, roughly the same size as his largest prints. The atmospheric representation of the imaginary scenes and the colour palette of brown and blue reflect the Antwerp influence of his master, Gillis van Coninxloo. His painted work was keenly collected after his death by other Dutch artists including Rembrandt, Herman Saftleven and Jan van de Cappelle.⁷

Only 183 impressions of Segers' prints are known worldwide, taken from 54 copper-plates. The largest collections are held by the British Museum and the Rijksprentenkabinet in Amsterdam.⁸ The majority of the British Museum impressions come from the British collector John Sheepshanks, who collected 17th-century prints which he sold to the Museum in 1836. Three other prints were purchased in the mid-19th century and another one in 1956. Many of his prints are only known from a single impression. Printmakers usually utilise their medium to create multiple identical impressions of their prints; Segers on the contrary gave each impression its own unique character and rarely created identical ones. To this aim Segers combined a variety of printing inks, etching techniques, varying hand-colouring and different printing supports. His etchings have often been described by scholars as 'printed paintings' as the extensive hand-colouring imbues them with pictorial qualities. He experimented with contrasting tones, working with a variety of printing techniques and colours. They are, however, not colour prints in the strict sense of the word as they are only printed in one colour. The colours were either applied to the support beforehand or after printing onto the printed surface. Segers never signed or dated his plates and so a chronology of his work is impossible. None of Segers' copper-plates is known to have survived, although Rembrandt acquired one

lakens van zijn bedde verschilderde of verdrukte (want hy drukte ook Schildery) hy bleef in d'uiterste armoede met zijn gansche gezin, zoo dat zijn bedroefde vrouwe eyndelijk klaegde, dat al wat'er van lywaet geweest was, verschildert of verprint was. Dit nam de mistroostigen *Herkules* zoo ter harten, dat hy allen met ten eynde zijnde. zijn droefheit in de wijn wilde smooren, en op eenen avont buyten zijn gewoonte beschonken zijnde, quam t'huis, maer viel van de trappen, en sterf; openende met zijn doot de oogen aen alle lief hebbers, die van die tijd af zijn werken in zoodanige waerde hebben gehouden, als ze verdienen, en altijts verdienen zullen.'

⁷ See J.G. van Gelder, 'Hercules Seghers erbij en eraf', in *Oud-Holland* 65 (1950), pp.216–226.

⁸ The latter owns 75 impressions of which 43 come from the early collection of Michiel Hinloopen (1619–1708) and 22 from Pieter Cornelis, Baron van Leyden (1717–1788) whose large collection was bought by the Rijksprentenkabinet in 1808.

of the plates after his death and re-worked it by changing the figures and the trees in the background.⁹

Segers usually devised original compositions and only rarely copied designs of other masters. Exceptions are *Tobias and the Angel* (HB 1), loosely based on Adam Elsheimer's painting, and *The Lamentation of Christ* after Hans Baldung Grien's woodcut (HB 2).¹⁰ Apart from a few still-lives, tree studies and seascapes, Segers usually conceived hauntingly beautiful, but desolate, mountainous vistas and rocky valleys covered in menacing shadows bordered by steep cliffs. The valleys are usually depicted from a high vantage point with winding roads in the foreground leading the viewer into the rest of the view. Occasionally a couple of buildings or a small town are visible in the distance. Human presence is rare and seems to have been used to emphasise the emptiness of the scene. Bare tree stumps are sometimes placed in the foreground. It is not known if Segers travelled, however, some of the views have been tentatively identified as the Swiss Alps, Tyrol, the Apennines or Dalmatia.¹¹ Possible inspirations for the iconography in Segers' art can be found in the work of earlier Flemish and Dutch landscape artists such as Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Joos de Momper, his master Gillis van Coninxloo, Lucas van Valckenborch and Hendrick Goltzius.¹²

Segers also frequently made two versions of the same subject which are often hard to distinguish but upon closer examination reveal different plates (for example HB 21-22¹³ and HB 46-47¹⁴). Another method of obtaining slightly different versions of a print was achieved by Segers by trimming many of his impressions and thus creating almost new compositions seen from different perspectives. Few impressions of Segers prints have survived with the plate-marks still visible.

Nothing is known about the distribution of Segers' prints. The small number of surviving impressions and the fact that only a handful of collectors seemed to have acquired them, suggests that they were not widely distributed.¹⁵ Part of Segers' production is probably also lost because the prints were initially treated as small cabinet paintings and hung on walls.¹⁶ This practice is in contrast to prints which were usually protected in albums. From the mid-17th century Segers' prints have attracted the attention of artists such as Rembrandt, trying to reconstruct his innovative etching techniques and printing processes. Although known and admired in a small circle of print collectors from very early on, Segers only attracted the

⁹ *The Flight into Egypt* (1848.0911.31: Bartsch 56), see E. Hinterding et al., *Rembrandt as a Printmaker*, exh.cat. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam and the British Museum London, 2000, cat.no.71. The British Museum does not hold an impression of Hercules Segers' original plate *Tobias and the Angel* (HB 1).

¹⁰ Haverkamp-Begemann (HB) reference numbers always refer to the *catalogue raisonné*: E. Haverkamp-Begemann, *Hercules Segers: The Complete Etchings*, The Hague, 1974.

¹¹ See for example C. Hofstede de Groot, 'Langs welke weg trok Hercules Seghers naar Italië?', in *Oud-Holland* 44 (1927), pp. 49–64; J.Q. van Regteren Altena, 'Hercules Seghers en de topografie', in *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 3 (1955), pp. 3–8.

¹² See *Hercules Seghers en zijn voorlopers*, exh.cat. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, 1967, pp.3–15.

¹³ See *River valley with a waterfall* (S.5518 and S.5519 for impressions of the second version, the British Museum does not hold impressions of the first version).

¹⁴ See *The Abbey of Rijnsburg* (1854.0628.73 for an impression of the first version, the British Museum does not hold impressions of the second version).

¹⁵ J. van der Waals, *De Prentschat van Michiel Hinloopen*, The Hague-Amsterdam, 1988, p.144.

¹⁶ J. van der Waals, *op. cit.*, pp.137–140.

interest of art historians in the 19th century, coinciding with the important acquisitions made by the Rijksmuseum and the British Museum.

Segers' printmaking techniques

Hercules Segers is particularly known for his extensive experimenting with new printmaking techniques in an attempt to enrich his graphic vocabulary and introduce more expression to his compositions. His greatest invention was undoubtedly the process of lift-ground etching (also known as sugar-lift or sugar-bite etching, sugar aquatint or pen method). Although no accounts by Segers of his working methods have survived, it is assumed that he used a sugar solution to draw a composition on a copper-plate either with a pen or even with a brush, as some of the lines are quite broad. The plate was then probably covered with a thin, resinous ground and bathed in hot water which made the sugar granules swell causing the ground to blister off where the design had been applied. The plate would then have been treated as usual: the exposed copper-plate bitten in an acid bath, inked and subsequently printed. The resulting lines have a granulated surface, similar to aquatint which was a later invention. This technique, allowing the artist to apply defined lines with a brush, was not practised again until the 18th century. This new technique can be best seen in *Rocky mountains with a plateau* (S.5521: HB 10.II.e) and *Valley with towns, churches and other buildings* (S.5531: HB 29.h).



(S.5519: HB 22.II.g)

Segers almost never corrected flaws occurring on his copper-plates. His experiments with different etching grounds and acid biting often caused damage to the copper. Many prints show traces of these accidents and Segers must have consciously printed from faulty plates, perhaps in order to use these imperfections to his advantage while creating original compositions. Plate tone, i.e. tiny scratches on the plate due to unpolished areas on the plate before etching, can also be noticed in some impressions such as in *Rocky mountain valley with waterfalls* (S.5535: HB 5). Areas of foul or false biting are often visible in Segers' prints, see for instance *River valley with four trees* (S.5534: HB 4.I.b), while other artists would usually consider this a failed process and try to correct it or destroy the plate. False biting of the copper-plate occurs when the acid bites areas of the plate supposed to be covered by the ground and not meant to be bitten, such as for example blank sky areas. Segers may have used etching grounds which were too soft and thus more

penetrable and more prone to cracking.¹⁷ It is also possible that Segers deliberately applied the ground too thinly in order to experiment with tonal areas, such as in *River valley with a waterfall* (S.5518: HB 22.I.c). In order to conceal areas or false biting, Segers seemed to have used stopping-out varnish, although not always effectively or evenly as can be seen in *River valley with a waterfall* (S.5518 and S.5519: HB 22).



(S.5518: HB 22.I.c)

Another interesting feature of Segers' graphic work is his inspired use of tonal areas in order to create contrasts between light and dark. The easiest method to achieve this effect is surface tone which is a layer of tone as the result of a thin film of ink left on the copper-plate before printing. Surface tone can be often seen in Segers' landscapes, especially in the skies in order to indicate clouds, see for example *Rocky mountains with a plateau* (S.5520 and S.5521: HB 10) and *View of Wageningen* (S.5526: HB 31.c).



(S.5521: HB 10.II.e)

A more complicated method for creating large areas of tone is Segers' use of very fine drypoint hatching, done after the biting of the plate and scratched directly into the copper-plate. It looks almost as though it was done with a toothed instrument.

¹⁷ The use of soft grounds evolved into the soft-ground etching technique (also called *vernis mou*) in the late 18th century.

The burred lines created by the drypoint needle pick up a lot of ink, particularly in the early impressions before the burr wears down. The result is a velvety, smudgy look of which the most striking examples can be seen in *Rocky mountains with a plateau* (S.5520: HB 10.I.b) and *Distant view with a mossy branch* (S.5527: HB 27.II.q). These darker zones were previously often described as done in a sort of aquatint technique, whereby porous ground made up of resin particles is applied to broad areas. Microscopic examination, however, clearly shows the fine lines of the drypoint needle and no traces of an aquatint ground.



(S.5520: HB 10.I.b)

Segers sometimes covered small areas of his prints with small triangular dots with a burin which also create a tonal effect, although less subtle than the previously described techniques. *Rocky mountains with a plateau* (S.5521: HB 10.II.e) features this stippled technique in the foreground.

When looking at Segers etched lines and dots, it becomes clear that he used fine needles as can be seen in the thin scratches and trial lines in *Ruins of a Monastery* (S.5514 and S.5515: HB 44) and *River valley with a waterfall* (S.5518 and S.5519: HB 22), evidently added in order to test the thickness of the ground, the etching needles and the biting of the acid. Other prints show thicker and deeper lines suggesting a longer exposure to acid and possibly even a second biting of the etching plate. Blank edges bordering the composition, but still within the plate-mark, are sometimes visible in Segers' prints such as in *Mountain valley with broken pine trees* (1840,0808.229: HB 3), *Mountain valley with fenced fields* (verso of S.5534: HB 6.I.b) and both impressions on textile of *The House in the Woods* (S.5524 and 1956,0714.62: HB 35). These blank strips along the margins are created where small banks of wax were erected along the edge of the copper-plate in order to retain the acid during biting and to prevent it from flowing off.

Segers' use of colours

In addition to his experimental printmaking techniques, Segers tried to make each of his prints look unique by applying colours to them in different ways.¹⁸ He

¹⁸ Printing on coloured paper or hand-colouring following printing had been done before, especially in Italian *chiaroscuro* woodcuts. Hendrick Goltzius also used this technique whereby an image is created

experimented with tinting the support (paper or textile) before printing, with the use of different printing inks, and the application of hand-colouring over the image after printing.

Segers' predecessors and fellow-printmakers nearly always used black printing ink. Segers, however, tried out different ink colours and the majority of his etchings are printed in green, blue and grey colours. The same plate printed with different printing inks resulted in altered effects: two impressions of *Distant view with a mossy branch* are respectively printed in black and blue (S.5528 and S.5529: HB 27). A most extraordinary print is *Ruins of the Abbey of Rijnsburg* (1854,0628.73: HB 46.c) which was printed in white ink, a difficult technique resulting in a stunning image.

Beside different colours of printing ink, Segers also made use of tinted papers or textiles as supports. Although earlier printmakers had sometimes printed on shiny white silk or satin, Segers was the first known to have made impressions on coarser textiles such as linen or cotton. Roughly 30 of his impressions are printed on cloth, often dyed grey or brown. Two impressions of *The House in the Woods* are respectively printed on fine beige cotton and coarse grey linen (S.5524 and 1956,0714.62: HB 35). It is significant that Segers only made impressions on textile in early states, when no drypoint hatching or other tonal effects were needed as they would be lost on the coarse texture. Two impressions of *The Enclosed Valley* clearly demonstrate this practice: the first state before the addition of the drypoint is printed on fine linen while the second state with drypoint is printed on paper (S.5522 and S.5523: HB 13).

Segers surprisingly never used coloured paper such as Venetian blue paper, which was readily available and particularly popular at the end of the 16th century on which to print woodcuts. Recent conservation work on the British Museum's Segers prints, however, revealed that many of Segers' papers were tinted in ochre. He probably tinted them himself, possibly dipping the papers in an ochre solution. This is not a technique commonly found in other artists' work. The clearest example can be seen in *Country road with trees and a farmhouse* (S.5532: HB 37) which has not been further coloured and still shows the original colour of the paper. The ochre tinting of the paper is more clearly seen on the *versos* of the prints.

The ochre colour is only rarely visible on the *rectos* as it is usually covered in a more or less opaque layer of colour which Segers applied with a broad brush, mostly in greys, blues, greens and pinks. An impression entirely brushed with olive-green is *The Enclosed Valley* (S.5523: HB 13.II.k).

Segers would often enhance the painted surfaces with smaller areas of translucent watercolour, usually with a smaller brush. A second impression of *The Enclosed Valley* (S.5522: HB 13.I.e) is touched with brown, grey and blue watercolour in order to define the mountains in the foreground, the middle ground and the distance. The coloured areas do not always follow the printed lines and often overlap.

by successive printing of several woodblocks in different hues of the same colour, see for example *Arcadian landscape with a shepherd* (1868,0612.1: Hollstein 377).

When Segers did not tint the paper or add further colour, he sometimes applied a transparent substance over his composition in order to give the landscape a warmer appearance. *Mountain valley with broken pine trees* (1840,0808.229: HB 3) is covered in a translucent, shiny substance (probably gum arabic varnish).

All this additional hand-colouring of the prints, makes it difficult to study the papers Segers used. The elaborate brushing of the papers with opaque colours and the extensive trimming of the impressions make it very hard to identify watermarks which might be helpful in dating Segers' etchings more precisely.¹⁹ Only three fragments of watermarks have so far been identified in the British Museum impressions which will be discussed in the list of works displayed below. Future scientific research and x-ray photography may possibly reveal more.

¹⁹ Almost half of the impressions in the Rijksprentenkabinet have been studied using x-radiography, see J. van der Waals, *op. cit.*, pp.206–207.

II. List of prints displayed

Each exhibited object is illustrated and described as follows: artist's name, title, Haverkamp-Begemann catalogue number (HB), technique, the British Museum register number and provenance details, followed by a commentary and a description of the watermarks found.

All images are courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum unless otherwise stated.

To find the British Museum's Hercules Segers prints online, visit www.britishmuseum.org/collection, go to Advanced search, select the category 'People' and search for 'Hercules Segers'. Click on 'Print made by (28 objects)' from the results.

Alternatively, to find individual prints, use the Museum number search and enter the British Museum registration, for example 'S.5534' or '1854,0628.73'.

1. Hercules Segers (c. 1589–c. 1638), *River Valley with Four Trees* (HB 4.I.b)
Etching with surface-tone (285 x 470mm)
S.5534 (from the collection of John Sheepshanks, acquired in 1836)



This is one of Segers' largest landscape prints and is almost the same size as the painting it copies in reverse. The painting at the Mauritshuis in The Hague, however, has been cut down at the top (see reproduction).



© Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, The Hague

The smudges in the top right corner are the result of acid accidentally spilling on the copper-plate during the biting (see detail below). Segers did not correct these imperfections before printing the plate, but instead used them to his advantage in order to create an atmospheric effect. Here they can be interpreted as clouds.



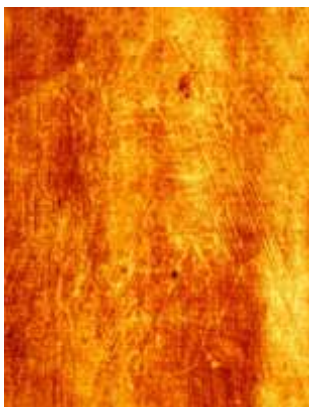
2. Hercules Segers (c. 1589–c. 1638), *Valley with Four Towers* (HB 29.h)
Etching and sugar-lift, printed in grey-green ink on ochre-tinted paper, brushed with green, touched with red watercolour (203 x 330mm)
S.5531 (from the collection of John Sheepshanks, acquired in 1836)



This is one of Segers' most striking landscapes, showing an imaginary view of a town in a valley. The buildings look northern European, perhaps inspired by his native architecture, except for the classical building in the central foreground.

This etching is a striking example of Segers' use of hand-colouring. It demonstrates Segers' precise handling of the red watercolour over an entirely olive-green background.

An unidentified watermark was revealed through transmitted light (see detail below). It shows a coat-of-arms, crowned with a fleur-de-lis (97 x 70mm).



3. Hercules Segers (c. 1589–c. 1638), *Distant View with a Mossy Tree Branch* (HB 27.I.I)

Etching and sugar-lift, printed in dark-grey ink on ochre-tinted paper, brushed with blue, touched with brown and blue watercolour (125 x 180mm)

S.5528 (from the collection of John Sheepshanks, acquired in 1836)



This panoramic landscape, framed on one side by a moss-covered tree growing by a rock face, is enlivened by a diminutive figure walking on a winding path leading into a valley.

The British Museum has three impressions of this landscape, each printed and coloured in a different way.

Each impression seems to evoke a different time of the day. The brown and blue colours here suggest dusk.

4. Hercules Segers (c. 1589–c. 1638), *Distant View with a Mossy Tree Branch* (HB 27.II.r)

Etching, sugar-lift and drypoint, printed in dark-blue ink on ochre-tinted paper, brushed with white, blue and pink, touched with red and green watercolour (136 x 188mm)

S.5529 (from the collection of John Sheepshanks, acquired in 1836)



This impression of the same landscape is rendered in light colours, predominantly light-blue and pink. The bands of shadow break up the scene and suggest the sun low in the sky at dawn or dusk. Darker tones are added by scratching thin drypoint lines in the foreground (see detail).



5. Hercules Segers (c. 1589–c. 1638), *Distant View with a Mossy Tree Branch* (HB 27.II.q)

Etching, sugar-lift and drypoint, printed in blue-green ink on ochre-tinted paper, brushed with blue-lilac and yellow (131 x 178mm)

S.5527 (from the collection of John Sheepshanks, acquired in 1836)



The colours Segers used in this impression are much lighter than in the other two shown in this case. The yellows and light-blues suggest the light of dawn. The details of the composition are clearly visible in this print because of the light tones. The isolation of the figure on the path in the centre adds to the empty desolation of the landscape.

6. Hercules Segers (c. 1589–c. 1638), *Ruins of the Abbey of Rijnsburg* (HB 46.c)
Etching, printed in yellow-white ink on black-brown-tinted paper (200 x 318mm)
1854,0628.73 (from the collection of Samuel Woodburn, acquired in 1854)



This print is very unusual in using white ink on a dark background. Segers uses tone rather than outline to render the dilapidated and overgrown ruins.



Segers' attention to detail allows the building to be identified as the Benedictine abbey of Rijnsburg in the province of South Holland, destroyed during the Siege of Leiden around 1573/4. The last remnants of these atmospheric ruins disappeared at the beginning of the 1800s.

7. Hercules Segers (c. 1589–c. 1638), *View of Wageningen* (HB 31.c)

Etching, sugar-lift and drypoint with surface-tone, printed in blue-green ink on ochre-tinted paper, brushed with olive-green; corners trimmed (86 x 255mm)

S.5526 (from the collection of John Sheepshanks, acquired in 1836)



This is a panoramic view of the Dutch town of Wageningen in Gelderland seen from an elevated point.

Together with the *Abbey of Rijnsburg* shown nearby, this is one of the few views by Segers which are of real places. Segers' vantage point gives as much prominence to the pair of windmills as to the church beyond (see detail below).



8. Hercules Segers (c. 1589–c. 1638), *Country-road with Trees and a Farmhouse* (HB 37)

Etching on ochre-tinted paper, with additions in pen and brown ink (230 x 275mm)
S.5532 (from the collection of John Sheepshanks, acquired in 1836)



This is the only known impression of this print of a dwelling set among trees, a motif also depicted in *House in the Woods*, also on view. Segers' landscapes differ from those of most of his contemporaries in often not populating them with figures or animals.

In this case the image was printed on tinted paper. The additional work in pen and brown ink in the centre is not known elsewhere in Segers' etchings and may have been added in another hand.

9. Hercules Segers (c. 1589–c. 1638), *The House in the Woods* (HB 35.b)
Etching on beige-dyed cotton (104 x 93mm)
S.5524 (from the collection of John Sheepshanks, acquired in 1836)



A small cottage is scarcely visible among the surrounding trees. Two impressions of this print are in the British Museum, both printed on cloth with which Segers experimented in order to obtain different surface textures.

This impression is printed on fine cotton and has not been coloured by Segers which allows a detailed view of the trees and their leaves. The lightness of tone and the trimming of the trees at the top create a sense of the woods enfolding the scene.

10. Hercules Segers (c. 1589–c. 1638), *The House in the Woods* (HB 35.c)
Etching on grey-dyed linen, washed in brown and heightened with beige; varnished
(155 x 95mm)
1956,0714.62 (purchased from Mrs R Ceci in 1956)



This impression is from the same copper-plate as the print shown previously, but could not look more different. It is also printed on textile but here on much coarser cloth, possibly even a painting canvas.

Segers trimmed both impressions in different ways, thereby subtly altering the perspective and atmosphere of the prints. The extensive use of thick, dark colours on a sombre ground is radically different from the impression shown alongside.

11. Hercules Segers (c. 1589–c. 1638), *Rocky Mountain Valley with Waterfalls* (HB 5)

Etching with plate-tone and surface-tone, printed in grey-green ink (285 x 505mm)
S.5535 (from the collection of John Sheepshanks, acquired in 1836)



This is the only known impression of this large landscape, the wild desolation of the scene only relieved by the two buildings on the right side.

The light colour of the printing ink gives this imaginary landscape an eerie, unworldly feel. This atmosphere is reinforced by the lack of figures or cattle in this scene.

The clouds in the sky are defined by a combination of sparse etching lines and surface tone and some plate-tone.

12. Hercules Segers (c. 1589–c. 1638), *Rocky Mountains with a Plateau* (HB 10.I.b)
Etching and drypoint with surface-tone, printed in blue ink (130 x 197mm)
S.5520 (from the collection of John Sheepshanks, acquired in 1836)



The different impressions of this landscape are clear examples of Segers' efforts to achieve tone in his compositions to evoke different moods and times of day. The first state of this etching might look bold and unbalanced, but it clearly shows Segers' use of fine drypoint hatching in the dark-blue shadow areas (see detail below). The delicate colouring of the sky has been obtained by leaving a thin film of ink (known as surface-tone) on the copper-plate before printing.



13. Hercules Segers (c. 1589–c. 1638), *Rocky Mountains with a Plateau*
(HB 10.II.e)

Etching, sugar-lift and drypoint with surface-tone, printed in dark-blue ink on ochre-tinted paper, brushed with olive-green (135 x 208mm)

S.5521 (from the collection of John Sheepshanks, acquired in 1836)



This is an impression of the same print as the one shown above. Segers, however, refashioned the scene by printing it in a different colour on paper brushed with a lighter shade.

In this second state the drypoint tone is less strong and Segers has added sugar-lift etching to reinforce the contrasts (see detail below). This etching technique creates a well-defined tonal area with an atmospheric effect.



14. Hercules Segers (c. 1589–c. 1638), *The Enclosed Valley* (HB 13.l.e)
Etching and sugar-lift on beige-dyed linen, touched with brown, grey and blue
watercolour (110 x 192mm)
S.5522 (from the collection of John Sheepshanks, acquired in 1836)



This small landscape etching has survived in over 20 impressions, by far the most numerous of all Segers' prints which are generally known through a single impression.

It shows a desolate valley, the panorama dominated by the rich blue of the hills in the far distance.

The beige linen was printed in black ink, after which Segers applied additional colour: brown for the mountains in the foreground, grey in the middle ground and blue beyond.

15. Hercules Segers (c. 1589–c. 1638), *The Enclosed Valley* (HB 13.II.k)
Etching, sugar-lift and drypoint, printed in dark-blue ink on ochre-tinted paper,
brushed with olive-green (106 x 188mm)
S.5523 (from the collection of John Sheepshanks, acquired in 1836)



This is another impression of the same print as the one on the previous page, although it looks entirely different.

Segers added an olive-green wash instead of browns, greys and blues, thus creating a more sombre view. More tone is also obtained by the addition of fine drypoint hatching which can be particularly seen on the rocks on either side of the valley.

16. Hercules Segers (c. 1589–c. 1638), *Mountain Valley with Broken Pine Trees* (HB 3)

Etching and drypoint in black ink; varnished (280 x 405mm)

1840,0808.229 (from the collection of William Esdaile, acquired in 1840)

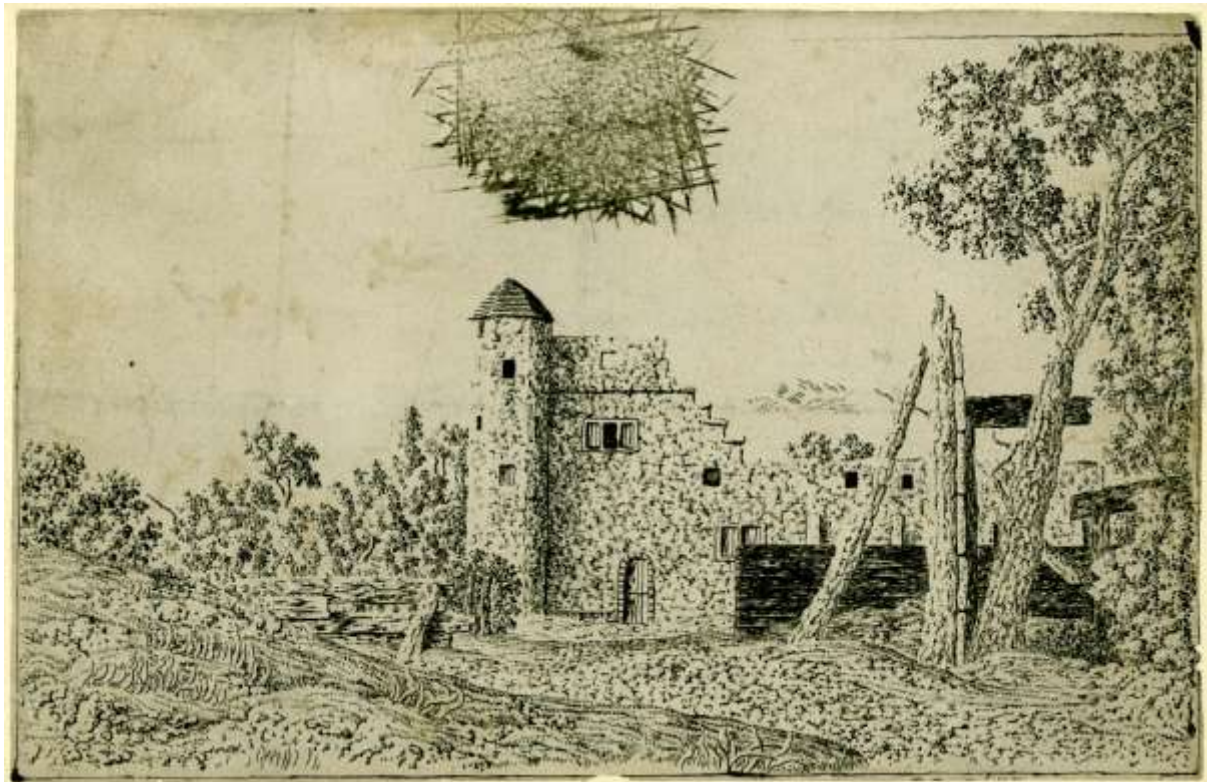


This is the only known impression of this etching showing a rocky valley with bare trees in the foreground. Some of the etched lines are particularly thick indicating that they were bitten by the acid twice. The blank edge along the lower margin is the result of a thick frame of wax having been applied all around the copper-plate to prevent the acid from flowing off. Unusually the paper has not been tinted in ochre but has been varnished after printing instead.

An unidentified watermark (63 x 38mm) was revealed through infrared reflectogram.



17. Hercules Segers (c. 1589–c. 1638), *Ruins of a Monastery* (HB 44a)
Etching, sugar-lift and drypoint, printed in black ink (138 x 210mm)
S.5514 (from the collection of John Sheepshanks, acquired in 1836)



This is one of only two known impressions of this print, both of which are in the British Museum and shown in this display. The ruins have so far not been identified and may be an invention of the artist.

The cross-hatched lines in the top part were probably applied by the artist to test the thickness of the etching needle or the softness of the etching ground. It is a sign of Segers' idiosyncrasy that he printed the plate with this mark of his working method.

An unidentified watermark was revealed through transmitted light (see detail below). It shows the lower half of an eagle with initials 'CN' or 'ND' (78 x 53mm).



18. Hercules Segers (c. 1589–c. 1638), *Ruins of a Monastery* (HB 44b)
Etching, sugar-lift and drypoint, print in black ink (100 x 210mm)
S.5515 (from the collection of John Sheepshanks, acquired in 1836)



This impression comes from the same copper-plate as the one shown above.

Segers is known to have experimented by trimming identical impressions in different sizes in order to change the perspective. In this case the paper has been trimmed by the artist or a later collector, creating a more focused view as well as leaving out the dark mass of cross-hatching in the sky.

The annotation 'Harculus Segers fecit' in the lower margin is probably not in Segers' hand.

19. Hercules Segers (c. 1589–c. 1638), *Rocky Mountains with a Forked Tree* (HB 15.II.d)

Etching, sugar-lift and drypoint, printed in light-blue ink on ochre-tinted paper, brushed with grey-blue, touched with greenish-brown watercolour (120 x 195mm) S.5516 (from the collection of John Sheepshanks, acquired in 1836)



An extensive valley seen from a high vantage point is a recurrent theme in Segers' work. A lone figure seen walking on the road at centre accentuates the emptiness of the whole scene.

The paper was first tinted with ochre-brown pigment, after which the etching was printed in blue ink. Segers then painted the whole composition in a milky grey-blue colour and applied brown watercolour to the mountains in the middle distance.

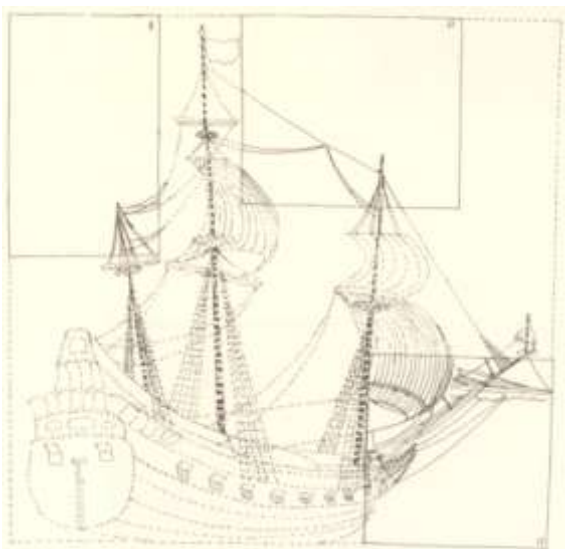
20. Hercules Segers (c. 1589–c. 1638), *Rocky Mountains with Tree Stumps* (HB 8.b)

Etching and drypoint, printed in blue ink on ochre-tinted paper, brushed with blue-grey, touched with yellow watercolour (130 x 194mm)

S.5517 (from the collection of John Sheepshanks, acquired in 1836)



This stunning view of a mountainous valley conveys a gloomy menace through the use of dark-blue and green washes. Segers re-used an old copper-plate as the dense lines in the top right corner represent the rigging of a ship. This was etched on a larger copper-plate cut down by Segers. Two other fragments of this ship appear in other prints by Segers not in the British Museum's collection (shown below).



(From E. Haverkamp-Begemann, *Hercules Segers: The Complete Etchings*, Amsterdam-The Hague, 1973, p.106.)

21. Hercules Segers (c. 1589–c. 1638), *River Valley with a Waterfall* (HB 22.I.c)
Etching and sugar-lift, printed in grey-green ink, brushed with pink (155 x 187mm)
S.5518 (from the collection of John Sheepshanks, acquired in 1836)



The rough sky in this densely-etched landscape is possibly the result of false biting of the copper-plate. The etching ground covering the plate must have been too porous or deliberately applied too thinly by Segers. This resulted in the acid irregularly biting the upper part of the plate. Segers did not seem to mind these flaws and many impressions still show signs of this false biting.

White clouds floating past the mountain have possibly been created by varnishing or stopping out parts of the plate in order to prevent the acid reaching it.

22. Hercules Segers (c. 1589–c. 1638), *River Valley with a Waterfall* (HB 22.II.g)
Etching and sugar-lift, printed in blue ink, with grey and brown watercolour
(155 x 185mm)
S.5519 (from the collection of John Sheepshanks, acquired in 1836)



This is the second state of the print shown above. Some etched lines are less distinct while others seem to be acid-bitten a second time.

The false biting in the sky has disappeared, while more trial lines appear, possibly to test the re-biting of the lines.

Specific areas are touched with grey and brown watercolour and leaves are added to the tree branches in the top left corner. It is not clear if these were done by Segers or by a later hand.

23. Hercules Segers (c. 1589–c. 1638), *Steep Cliffs bordering a River Valley*
(HB 23.I.a)
Etching, printed in beige ink (99 x 133mm)
1857,1114.1 (purchased from Alexander Emil Posonyi in 1857)



The faint, glistening ink with which this etching is printed, gives this already desolate landscape an even bleaker mood. The rocky landscape shows few signs of human presence apart from the figures on the left side and the towns in the distance.

The etched lines are so fluid that the composition almost looks like a pen drawing. The lower corners of the copper-plate were apparently cut by Segers and therefore do not show in the print.

24. Hercules Segers (c. 1589–c. 1638), re-worked by **Rembrandt** (1606–1669),
Flight into Egypt (HB 1)
Etching and drypoint on vellum (212 x 284mm)
1848,0911.31 (from the collection of the 5th Earl of Aylesford)



Rembrandt greatly admired the work of Hercules Segers and even acquired one of his copper-plates of *Tobias and the Angel* (see reproduction below). Rembrandt burnished part of the plate and transformed the figures on the right into the *Flight into Egypt*. Segers' innovative techniques must have appealed to Rembrandt who shared his interest in creating contrast of tone in his prints. This rare early impression is printed on vellum and clearly shows Rembrandt's use of burred drypoint lines.



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III. Glossary of printmaking techniques

Drypoint

Printing method whereby the line is directly scratched into the copper-plate with a sharp needle, creating a ridge of metal or burr on both sides of the line which wears off after the first few impressions.

Etching

Printing method whereby the copper-plate is coated in a ground composed of wax or resin into which the lines are drawn with a needle. The plate is then immersed in acid which bites into the metal where it is exposed. The bitten lines are then inked and printed. The longer the acid bites, the deeper the lines become and the darker they print.

Plate tone

Tiny scratches left on the copper-plate due to insufficient polishing, which pick up ink during printing.

Sugar-lift etching, also known as **sugar-aquatint** and **lift-ground process**

Printing method whereby the artist draws on the copper-plate with a sugar-solution. The plate is then coated with a ground and immersed in hot water causing the sugar granules to swell and the ground to blister off revealing the design. The plate is then ready to be acid-bitten, inked and printed in the usual way.

State

A different stage in the development of a print where changes have been made on the plate.

Surface tone

Tone created by leaving a film of ink on the copper-plate before printing.

Stopping-out varnish

Varnish applied to specific areas of a copper-plate to protect them from further biting.

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