

Antiquity Without Humans: The Primordial Landscapes of Cornelis van Dalem

Christopher P. Heuer



Cornelis van Dalem, *The Dawn of Civilization* 1560 - 1570 Oil on panel. Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, Netherlands.

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The artist Cornelis van Dalem (1530-1575) offered the world a small corpus of painted meditations on geology. His so-called Dawn of Civilization (1565) now in Rotterdam, for example, depicts a grotto scene with early humans and animals, all amidst rocky cliffs and trees indebted to Dürer. Looking loosely to Lucretius, Dalem presents the scene as geologic in character (van Mander referred to the painter as a “fraye schilder van rotsen”). But the painting interrogates the idea of natural history and “environment” at a moment of iconoclasm and colonialism. It interrogates the very relationship between humans, animals, and matter and the “separation” that takes place in social as well as artistic terms when civilization arises from – or collapses into - the elements.

Christopher P. Heuer is Professor of Art and Architecture at the University of Rochester, where he teaches in the Graduate Program in Visual Culture. He is the author, most recently, of *Into the White: The Renaissance Arctic and the End of the Image* (Zone Books/Princeton University Press), which was named one of the “Top 5 Books in Northern Renaissance Art.”