

The Bull (detail), 1647

Paulus Potter's *The Bull*, a very famous painting in its day, drew crowds to the Mauritshuis Museum in The Hague during the 18th and 19th centuries. *The Bull* is an example of Dutch realism, one of the most striking features of 17th century Dutch painting. Dutch realism is not (as may be implied by the name) simply a highly accurate representation of reality. For a number of artists, realism meant reproducing closely the way light fell on figures and objects. At first glance, a painting may appear an accurate representation of an object or a scene, but study of other related objects or scenes might have been used to create a better composition. Paintings widely praised for their realism usually involved a great deal of manipulation on the artist's part.

The Bull, with its down-to-earth subject matter, life-sized format, and astonishingly realistic details (flies on the bull's coat, the cow's 'damp' nose), is the epitome of Dutch painting. Until a few years ago, the bull in the painting was

assumed to be the depiction of an existing bull; however, wide discrepancies between the different parts of the body suggest otherwise. The drooping dewlap and horns indicate a 2-year-old animal, but the teeth (six of which are permanent) are those of a 3- to 4-year-old bull. The forequarters are very muscular, while the hindquarters are underdeveloped. The fore- and hindquarters are at an angle to the pictorial plane, while the animal's body is parallel to it. By all appearances, Potter composed the bull from a number of preliminary studies of different animals.

The first design for *The Bull* was much smaller. Seams in the canvas indicate that the painter initially intended to paint only the bull. At a later stage, he attached linen strips on either side and along the top of the original canvas, on which he added other animals, the farmer, and the landscape.

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