



Cornelis Verbeeck  
Dutch, 1590/1591 - 1637

## *A Naval Encounter between Dutch and Spanish Warships*

c. 1618/1620

oil on panel

overall (sight size): 47.63 x 141.61 cm (18 3/4 x 55 3/4 in.)

framed: 66.68 x 159.39 cm (26 1/4 x 62 3/4 in.)

Inscription: on the Dutch flag: Cornelis VB

Gift of Dorothea V. Hammond 1995.21.1-2

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### ENTRY

In 1995 two paintings of seemingly distinct maritime events, *Dutch Warship Attacking a Spanish Galley* [fig. 1] and *Spanish Galleon Firing Its Cannons* [fig. 2], were bequeathed to the National Gallery of Art from the estate of Dorothea Villard Hammond.[1] Although the Dutch and Spanish warships depicted on these panels were barely visible under layers of old discolored varnish, dendrochronological analysis [see dendochronology] of the panels determined that they were, remarkably, two unequal halves of a larger work.[2] Correspondences between the wood grain and between the cloud and wave patterns on the two segments provide evidence that *Spanish Galleon Firing Its Cannons* was the left part of the original panel and *Dutch Warship Attacking a Spanish Galley* was at the right. After removal of discolored varnish and careful inpainting of old losses, the two panels have now been framed together to reestablish the original painting's continuous composition, under the title *A Naval Encounter between Dutch and Spanish Warships*. [3]

In the slightly smaller panel on the right-hand side, a Dutch warship under full sail proudly flies an outsized red, white, and blue Dutch flag (on which the artist has signed his first name plus the initials of his last name). A solid red flag, signifying the ship's intent to engage in combat, flies defiantly at its stern. The warship has already successfully attacked a small Spanish galley, which is sinking into the stormy sea. Whereas the Spanish boat is awash in misery, the Dutch ship is alive

with triumphant activity, from the commander and trumpeter standing on the poop deck beneath the red flag to the sailors scurrying up the rigging and the soldiers reloading their muskets. As Spanish oars fly overhead from the impact of cannonballs, Dutch sharpshooters poised on the bow of their ship take no mercy as they fire down at their enemies. One Spanish soldier raises his hands in terror while another tries to leap over the ship's gunwale into the sea. A Catholic penitent wearing an ochre-colored *nazareno* holds out a small crucifix as a sign of his faith, and a red-robed turbaned figure, perhaps a Moor wearing a *djellaba*, kneels on a piece of driftwood and pleads for his life.[4]

The larger segment on the left-hand side features a Spanish galleon with its red royal standard flying from its main mast.[5] As with the Dutch warship in the other panel, its deck is alive with armed soldiers, already fighting a partially hidden, much smaller Dutch warship close to its starboard side. Verbeeck articulated the rigging of these vessels with great clarity, and carefully depicted the gestures and brightly colored costumes of each crew member. Although he included a secondary vignette in the far distance, where a Dutch warship has set fire to a Spanish galley, his clear focus in both segments was on the large foreground ships.

The pictorial narrative of the reconstructed painting is vastly different from that gleaned by looking at the individual segments separately. This much enlarged painting reveals a significantly more intense naval engagement, with the Spanish galleon in combat with two Dutch warships, one close to its starboard side and the other to its stern. Even though the outcome of this battle remains uncertain, the secondary vignette in the distant left, where the Dutch ship is clearly victorious over a burning Spanish galley, would have given a Dutch patron assurance of a Dutch victory. The painting is not known to represent an actual event or even specific ships; nevertheless, Verbeeck almost certainly intended it to be a political metaphor for the victory of the Dutch over the Spanish.

Successes at sea against the Spanish were a matter of tremendous pride for the Dutch people. As is evident in a diagram made of Verbeeck's original composition [fig. 3], Dutch ships were generally smaller than their Spanish counterparts but could sail closer to the wind and were more maneuverable in the treacherous shallows of river estuaries along the Dutch coast. Against seemingly overwhelming odds, the skilled commanders and seamen of these Dutch ships were able to defeat their heavily armed adversaries. To help combat this Dutch advantage, the Spanish would bring small Mediterranean-style galleys to the North Sea. While these vessels, which were propelled chiefly by oars, adapted easily to shifting wind

conditions, they were too lightly armed to be effective against Dutch warships.

Verbeeck must have learned his trade, if not directly then by example, from the most important marine painter of the day, Hendrick Vroom (1566–1640). Vroom lived in Haarlem but received important public commissions from guilds and admiralties throughout the Netherlands.[6] From this master Verbeeck derived his calligraphic manner of rendering the troughs and foamy crests of waves, and learned to portray specific ships and their rigging in remarkable detail.

Nevertheless, Verbeeck's artistic personality and the nature of his patronage were different from those of Vroom. The latter usually painted on a large scale and used a high vantage point to present the grand narrative sweep of important naval battles and historic events; by contrast, Verbeeck's paintings are more modest in scale and focus on one or two ships rather than on a whole flotilla [fig. 4].

Furthermore, Verbeeck painted his marines with a much lower vantage point than did Vroom. As a consequence, in scenes such as this one, the human element—whether soldiers combating an enemy or confronting a raging storm or treacherous rocks—takes on enormous visual interest and pictorial significance.

Exactly when Verbeeck painted this marine battle scene is difficult to determine because he rarely dated his compositions. Nevertheless, the structure of the large Dutch warship, with its open gallery at the stern, and the weblike character of the rigging on the Spanish galleon suggest a date in the late 1610s. This dating is consistent with the costumes of the sailors and with the color of the Spanish flag, which was gradually changed from a red to a white field during the reign of King Philip III (1598–1621).[7] The distinctive rhythms Verbeeck used to depict the crests of the waves also suggest a relatively early date in the artist's career. In the 1620s he began to soften his manner of rendering water in response to the increased naturalism of marine painting in Haarlem. A dating of circa 1618/1620 is also consistent with information derived from dendrochronological examinations, which indicate that the oak panel supports were available for Verbeeck's use after 1610.[8]

Verbeeck's original painting was probably cut down early in its history, long before the two parts were acquired in the 1880s by the renowned journalist and railroad magnate Henry Villard.[9] National Gallery of Art frame conservator Richard Ford concluded that the profile of the black frames that surrounded the two individual panels and the manner in which they were built were consistent with seventeenth-century Dutch framing. One can only surmise that Verbeeck's painting was divided in two because the large, horizontal composition (measuring 18 ¾ inches high by

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55 3/4 inches wide) was difficult to fit into most seventeenth-century Dutch domestic settings.

The reconstruction of this work is important not only for the appreciation of Verbeeck's artistic achievements but also for our understanding of early seventeenth-century images of dramatic naval encounters between the Dutch and their adversaries. These skirmishes and outright battles were fought by valiant seamen maneuvering their formidable ships into combat with canons blazing. Verbeeck, who generally worked for private patrons, probably made this painting for a collector from Hoorn, as the red and yellow striped flag flying from the mizzenmast of the Dutch warship is the flag of that port city.[10] This vivid image would have reminded its owner of the travails and the valor of those seamen who helped free the Dutch from the oppression of the Spanish yoke. The billowing sails, complex rigging, and brilliantly colored flags of these great ships as they fired upon each other presented an unmatched visual spectacle; victor and vanquished were there for all to see.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014

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**COMPARATIVE FIGURES**



**fig. 1** Cornelis Verbeeck, *Dutch Warship Attacking a Spanish Galley*, c. 1618–1620, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Dorothea V. Hammond



**fig. 2** Cornelis Verbeeck, *Spanish Galleon Firing Its Cannons*, c. 1618–1620, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Dorothea V. Hammond



**fig. 3** Kristin Grubb, Diagram of Cornelis Verbeeck's *A Naval Encounter between Dutch and Spanish Warships (Dutch Warship Attacking a Spanish Galley and Spanish Galleon Firing Its Cannons)*



**fig. 4** Cornelis Verbeeck, *Ships off the Coast*, c. 1620, oil on panel, Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem

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**NOTES**

- [1] I would like to thank Kristin Grubb, a volunteer in the department of northern baroque paintings, who provided invaluable research on the history and character of Verbeeck's paintings, as well as Larry Goedde, professor of art history at the University of Virginia and a renowned specialist in Dutch marine painting, who carefully examined these works in the summer of 2006.
- [2] Dendrochronological studies by Dr. Peter Klein from Universität Hamburg provide conclusive evidence that *Dutch Warship Attacking a Spanish Galley* and *Spanish Galleon Firing Its Cannons* originally had been portions of one larger composition (see letter dated April 14, 1998, in NGA Conservation department files). Each panel is composed of two horizontal boards of identical widths. While the top and bottom boards came from different trees, the pattern of wood grains in each of the boards is identical in the two paintings. Hence, the boards initially were continuous. Dr. Klein determined that the trees used for these panels were cut down in the mid-1610s.
- [3] It should be noted that the two segments have been abutted together, not

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physically “joined.” The cut between the two halves has been covered by a thin strip of wood attached to the frame.

- [4] A *nazareno* is a robe with a cone-shaped hood; a *djellaba* is a long, loose-fitting robe with a hood often worn by Arabic-speaking people along the Mediterranean.
- [5] The flag consists of the Burgundian Saltire with the Spanish royal arms of Castile and Leon in the center. This information was kindly provided by Roger Quarm and Barbara Tomalson of the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, England (email, May 25, 2007, in NGA curatorial files).
- [6] Vroom began his career in the mid-1590s designing tapestries of marine subjects, including a suite of ten tapestries depicting the English defeat of the Spanish Armada that were commissioned by the admiral of the English fleet. Vroom received major public commissions from guilds and city magistrates, some of which were among the largest and costliest paintings of the early seventeenth century. He painted not only battle scenes but also depictions of the arrival or departure of dignitaries at Dutch seaports, as well as the spectacular return of Dutch ships laden with costly spices from the Far East.
- [7] This information was kindly provided by Carmen Zamarrón Moreno, Conservadora, Museo Naval de Madrid (email, May 31, 2007, in NGA curatorial files).
- [8] See note 3, this entry.
- [9] It is not known from whom Henry Villard, Dorothea Hammond’s grandfather, acquired these works.
- [10] This information was kindly provided by Rob Kattenburg, a Dutch authority on marine painting in a letter of October 1, 1987.

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### TECHNICAL SUMMARY

Each section is executed on an oak panel consisting of two boards joined horizontally. Dendrochronological analysis revealed that the upper boards of both panels came from one tree and that the lower boards of both panels came from a second tree.[1] This information, coupled with the compositional evidence, indicates that the two panels were originally one long painting, which was cut in half to form two paintings. Wood veneers and cradles have been applied to the backs of both panels.

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The ground on both panels is a thin, white layer. Thin layers of paint were built up to form the sky and water. The boats were then added by applying thin, dark paint followed by lighter, thicker paint. The finer details, such as the rigging, were added next, followed lastly by the atmospheric effects of smoke and fire.

The panels are in fairly good condition. The supports are stable and in plane, but the paint has suffered from blistering and flaking. In addition, the paint has been somewhat abraded in the rigging, the dark passages in the ships, the clouds, the blue in the sky, and the shadows in the water. The panels were treated between 2008 and 2010 to consolidate the areas of blistering and loss, to remove discolored varnish and overpaint, and to inpaint the losses and abrasion.

[1] Dendrochronology was performed by Dr. Peter Klein, Universität Hamburg (see letter dated April 14, 1998, in NGA Conservation department files). The analysis also confirmed that the wood is oak and the earliest possible felling date for the trees was 1610.

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## PROVENANCE

Henry Villard [1835-1900], New York, by the 1880s; by descent to his granddaughter, Dorothea Villard Hammond [1907-1994], Washington, D.C.; bequest 1995 to NGA.

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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