NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

Willem van de Velde the Elder
Dutch, 1611 - 1693

Dutch Ships near the Coast

early 1650s

oil on panel
overall: 59.4 x 83.5 cm (23 3/8 x 32 7/8 in.)
framed: 68.6 x 93.4 x 3.2 cm (27 x 36 3/4 x 1 1/4 in.)
Inscription: lower right: W.V.Velde
Gift of Lloyd M. Rives 1994.61.1

ENTRY

The Dutch Republic was a great seafaring nation, whose military might, economic prosperity, and international prestige were intimately entwined with its ability to sail the high seas and to control its own coastlines.[1] The Netherlands had a flourishing shipbuilding industry, which produced boats that could sail faster and maneuver more easily than those of its prime competitors, particularly Spain, England, and Sweden. Its boats were able to fish the shallow waters near the coast, carry cargo across the stormy Baltic and North Seas, and even travel thousands of miles to the Far East and the West Indies in search of exotic spices. The pride the Dutch people felt for their country's fleet is particularly evident in the enormous expense that was directed toward the decoration of vessels both large and small. Elaborate coats of arms that were sculpted, painted, and gilded on ships' sterns identified the vessels and their owners, whether warships belonging to the Dutch admiralty, merchant ships sailing under the auspices of the East India or West India Companies, or any number of other seafaring craft owned by cities or private investors.

Willem van de Velde the Elder was a prolific and skilled draughtsman renowned for his numerous drawings in chalk, pencil, and wash of the Dutch fleet, from detailed

© National Gallery of Art, Washington

renderings of individual vessels to panoramic views of ships at anchor or in the midst of battle at sea. The admiralty thought so highly of his work that he was asked repeatedly to sail with the fleet and record what he saw. Not only was Van de Velde able to grasp the complex movements of ships in the midst of battle, but he knew the size and structure of particular vessels, which he represented with unerring accuracy and clarity. His careful drawings and paintings of the activities and appearance of individual ships and sea battles have often enabled their identification by historians, making his oeuvre one of the most important visual sources of information on the Dutch navy from this period.

Aside from his renown and legacy as a draughtsman, Van de Velde was a pioneer in the art of pen painting (*penschilderij*), a technique of working with pen on prepared panel or prepared canvas.[2] In the early 1650s Van de Velde, along with a few other marine painters, in particular Heerman Witmont (c. 1605–after 1683) from Delft and Experiens Sillemans (c. 1611–1653) from Amsterdam, perfected this remarkable manner of painting in which the composition is created with the linear vocabulary of engraving in its controlled organization of lines and use of cross-hatching.[3] The illusionistic conceit of paintings that looked like prints appealed enormously to collectors of the day, and they were highly valued.

In *Dutch Ships near the Coast*, large ships flying Dutch flags rest at anchor in choppy waters near a broad, sandy beach, seeming to await the arrival of travelers coming from shore in wooden rowboats. Van de Velde probably made this work in the early 1650s, before he began to create more complex pen paintings that included larger and more elaborate ships.[4] In its scale and character this pen painting is extremely close to *A Sea-piece with a Dutch Merchant Ship and a Swedish Flute,* in the National Gallery of Scotland, which is signed and dated 1650 [fig. 1]. Aside from the appearance of dark-finned porpoises in the foreground of both scenes, the position of the large vessels near a sandy shore is quite similar. Van de Velde may have used the same preparatory drawing in rendering the fully manned rowboat in the lower left of both works, although the size of the boat in the two paintings is not identical.

These compositional and chronological similarities may indicate that the subjects of these paintings are also comparable. The Edinburgh painting, which depicts a boat with the Swedish flag in the Dutch port of West Terschelling, seems to feature trade between The Netherlands and Sweden.[5] In the mid-seventeenth century, merchant fleets sailing to Scandinavia from Terschelling were often escorted by warships because of the ongoing maritime conflicts between Sweden and

© National Gallery of Art, Washington

Denmark. Unfortunately, even though a number of the ships' coats of arms in the National Gallery of Art painting are visible on their sterns, neither the ships nor the port have been identified. The yacht at the left, for example, has a tree on her taffrail, while the large armed frigate in the center has two rampant lions holding the coat of arms of the House of Orange. In spite of these visual markers, it cannot be determined whether a specific place or event inspired Van de Velde to create this work.[6]

As is characteristic of his early pen paintings, Van de Velde has here prepared an oak panel with a white chalk Ground, which he allowed to dry thoroughly.[7] He covered the ground with two thin layers of lead white oil paint before creating his design. The technique by which he did so, however, is not entirely clear. Visually, it would appear that Van de Velde drew his composition with a reed pen, carefully weighing his pen lines from dark to light to enhance the sense of depth. Microscopic examination, however, has revealed that many of the lines are characteristic of printed lines rather than those drawn with a pen.[8] It may well be that Van de Velde, much like Experiens Sillemans in his pen paintings, utilized a counterproof technique when creating this image.[9] He probably first made pen drawings on paper and then, with the ink still slightly wet, pressed the designs against the panel. It is likely that he composed his scene by combining a number of drawings of individual ships. The visual evidence indicates that he then reinforced the design with careful pen strokes since many of the counterproof lines were pale and/or had gaps in them because of the irregularity of the panel surface. These pen lines are particularly evident in the foreground boats.[10]

The removal of varnish during the conservation process in 2011 provided a visual surprise that is still not completely understood. Without the layers of discolored varnish, microscopic examinations revealed that the white surface beneath each and every pen line was raised. Strikingly, even where the black lines of a ship's rigging or sail had been totally abraded away, their prior existence could be confirmed through such raised lines in the underlying layer [fig. 2]. This phenomenon allowed the conservator to redraw the missing parts of the design accurately by following these raised lines with a sharp pen.[11]

This unexpected discovery seemed to raise the possibility that the previously observed printed lines were not the result of a counterproof technique, but were made by placing an engraved plate directly on the panel and passing them through a printing press. Ad Stijnman, however, carefully reviewed the visual evidence, and has convincingly determined that the lines were not the result of an

© National Gallery of Art, Washington

intaglio process.[12] Crucial to his conclusion was the fact that the lines were not made with an oil-based ink but with a lamp-black ink in a water-based binding medium.[13] He also noted that subtle brush marks were evident in the white under layer, and that these would have been flattened if the panel had been subjected to the pressure of a printing press. Stijnman suggested that raised lines may have been created by the ink causing the ground to swell, or, conversely, by the shrinking of uncovered ground layer.

The rationale for devising this extraordinary technique must have been economic. Van de Velde must have determined that the effort and expense involved in making a pen painting on panel would yield a substantial return on his investment. He almost certainly kept the technique a secret so that he would not diminish the viewer's amazement at his tour-de-force ability to draw in the detailed manner of a print.[14] Indeed, he was correct, and the wonder of these remarkable paintings still resonates today.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014

© National Gallery of Art, Washington

COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Willem van de Velde the Elder, *A Sea-piece with a Dutch Merchant Ship and a Swedish Flute*, 1650, pen and brush on panel, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh, Presented by Hew Hamilton Dariymple 1906 (NG 933)

fig. 2 Detail photograph of raised lines, Willem van de Velde the Elder, *Dutch Ships near the Coast*, early 1650s, oil on panel, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Lloyd M. Rives, 1994.61.1

NOTES

[1] I would like to thank Pien Brocades Zaalberg and Lelia Packer, former interns in the department of northern baroque painting, for their assistance in preparing this entry.

[2] These paintings are sometimes referred to as grisailles. See, for example, Michael Strang Robinson, *Van de Velde: A Catalogue of Paintings of the Elder and Younger Willem van de Velde*, vol. 1 (London, 1990).

[3] The first artist to employ the pen-painting technique was Hendrick Goltzius (Dutch, 1558 - 1617) at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Goltzius' contemporary and friend, Karel van Mander, praises three of Goltzius' pen paintings of mythological subjects, only two of which are known today: *Sine Cerere et Libero friget Venus* (1599–1602, Philadelphia Museum of Art) and *Sine Cerere et Libero friget Venus* (c. 1606, Hermitage). Van Mander considered Goltzius' technique well suited for the master's grand intentions and talent. See Karel van Mander, *The Lives of the Illustrious Netherlandish and German Painters . . .* , ed. Hessel Miedema (Doornspijk, 1994–1999). The actual initiator of this manner in the field of marine painting is not known, although Van de Velde the Elder was, by far, the finest and most renowned of the artists who made pen paintings.

© National Gallery of Art, Washington

[4] The angular, choppy character of the waves is remarkably similar to that seen in Van de Velde's prints from the 1630s and 1640s, which further suggests an early date for this painting. For more information on these prints, see P. Haverkorn van Rijsewijk, "Willem van de Velde de Oude: zijn leven en zijn werk," *Oud-Holland* 16 (1898): 70–75; see also Willem van de Velde the Elder's etching *The "Aemilia," Admiralty Ship of Holland*, c. 1639 (Museum Mr. Simon van Gijn, Dordrecht), in George S. Keyes, *Mirror of Empire: Dutch Marine Art of the Seventeenth Century* (Minneapolis, 1990), 318–319, no. 121. By the mid-1650s Van de Velde was creating works such as *The Dutch Ship "Oosterwijk" under Sail near the Shore in Two Positions,* 1654, oil on panel, National Maritime Museum, London, illustrated in Westby Percival-Prescott, *The Art of the Van de Veldes: Paintings and Drawings by the Great Dutch Marine Artists and Their English Followers* (London, 1982), 57, no. 10.

[5] Michael Strang Robinson, *Van de Velde: A Catalogue of the Paintings of the Elder and Younger Willem van de Velde*, 2 vols. (London, 1990), 1:55, no. 644.

[6] I would like to thank Friso Lammertse (correspondence of February 14, 1997) for his observations about the decorations on the taffrails of these ships.

[7] For an excellent assessment of his general technique for creating these works, see Westby Percival-Prescott, "The Art of the Van de Veldes: Aims Methods and Materials," in *The Art of the Van de Veldes: Paintings and Drawings by the Great Dutch Marine Artists and Their English Followers* (London, 1982), 23–25.

[8] These printed lines were first discovered by Bart J. C. Devolder, Andrew W. Mellon Fellow in Painting Conservation at the National Gallery of Art in 2007. The distinctions he drew between printed and drawn lines were confirmed by Kimberly Schenck, head of paper conservation at the National Gallery of Art.

[9] See David Freedberg, Aviva Burnstock, and Alan Phenix, "Paintings or Prints? Experiens Sillemans and the Origins of the Grisaille Sea-piece: Notes on a Rediscovered Technique," *Print Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (September 1984): 149–172.

[10] It is also possible that Van de Velde added ink washes to help model the composition, particularly in the sky, but no traces of washes were found during the conservation of the painting.

[11] Kristin de Ghetaldi, Andrew W. Mellon Fellow in Painting Conservation at the National Gallery of Art, used these raised lines to re-create design elements that had been completely abraded. Working under high-powered magnification, she reconstructed these lines by using fine-tipped pigment

© National Gallery of Art, Washington

pens. I would like to thank Kristin for the many enlightening discussions I had with her after the discovery of these raised lines.

[12] I am very grateful to Ad Stijnman for our discussions about this issue and for his careful assessment of this material. His comments, dated September 22, 2013, are in the curatorial files at the National Gallery of Art.

[13] Stijnman noted that there is no discoloration of the white ground underneath the ink, something that would have occurred if the lines had been made with an ink in an oil-based medium.

[14] Van de Velde probably used this technique in other comparable pen paintings on panel from the 1650s, such as *Dutch Ships Coming to Anchor*, 1654, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich (38-1657), illustrated in George S. Keyes, *Mirror of Empire: Dutch Marine Art of the Seventeenth Century* (Minneapolis, 1990), 48, fig. 34, or the closely related painting in Edinburgh (see detail photograph of raised lines on *Dutch Ships near the Coast* during conservation of the panel).

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support consists of an oak panel made from two planks with horizontal grain. All four edges are beveled on the reverse. Dendrochronological analysis indicates that the earliest possible creation date for the panel is 1636.[1] The panel was prepared with a white ground. The white ground and the white paint layer on top of it[2] were both carefully applied with a brush and are relatively thin, causing the horizontal wood grain to be visible. Many of the lines in this work, particularly the delicate lines in the background, are extremely faint or almost entirely lost. They were reconstructed during a conservation treatment that began in 2011.

The panel is generally in very good condition except for a number of small chips at the edges, probably caused by frame abrasion. There is also a gash in the panel in the upper right corner of the sky. Blisters and cupping, and flake losses in the lower part of the painting, all of which had developed because of an adhesion problem between the ground layer and the white paint layer, were addressed during the current treatment.

[1] Dendrochronological analysis also showed that the wood was oak from the Baltic/Polish Region. The analysis was performed by Dr. Peter Klein, Universität Hamburg (see letter dated August 4, 1998, in NGA Conservation department files).

© National Gallery of Art, Washington

[2] The paint and ground layers were studied by the NGA Painting Conservation department with the NGA Scientific Research department using cross-sections (see report dated March 21, 2011).

PROVENANCE

(Sale, Frederik Muller, Amsterdam, 25 April 1911, no. 198). Whitney Warren [1864-1943]; by inheritance to his daughter, Mrs. Reginald B. Rives [née Gabrielle Warren, 1895-1971]; by inheritance to her son, Lloyd M. Rives [1921-2011], Newport;[1] gift 1994 to NGA.

[1] The provenance in the donor's family was provided by Mr. Rives in his letter to Arthur Wheelock of 9 September 1986, in NGA curatorial files.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1990 Robinson, Michael Strang. *Van de Velde: A Catalogue of the Paintings of the Elder and the Younger Willem van de Velde*. 2 vols. Greenwich, 1990: 1:156, no. 644.

To cite: Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., “Willem van de Velde the Elder/*Dutch Ships near the Coast*/early 1650s,” *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*, NGA Online Editions, http://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/90155 (accessed December 21, 2016).

© National Gallery of Art, Washington