



Willem van de Velde the Younger
Dutch, 1633 - 1707

Ships in a Gale

1660

oil on panel

overall: 72.4 x 108 cm (28 1/2 x 42 1/2 in.)

framed: 91.1 x 126.1 x 5.7 cm (35 7/8 x 49 5/8 x 2 1/4 in.)

Inscription: lower center on rock: W.V.V. / 1660

Patrons' Permanent Fund 2000.72.1

ENTRY

Ships in a Gale is one of Van de Velde's early, and excellently preserved, masterpieces, a work filled with the drama of ships struggling to avoid menacing rocks in a storm-tossed sea. [1] A fierce wind howling across the sky and whipping the water has created huge white-capped waves that relentlessly buffet two sailing ships, one flying a Dutch flag and the other an English flag. Their crews, having taken down the ships' upper masts and furled their sails, desperately try to ride out the storm.

The English ship to the right is in a particularly perilous state. Not only is it dangerously close to the looming, angular rocks rising from the deep, but it also flounders broadside to waves that crash violently over its gunwales. A mainsail has come unfurled and flaps wildly in the wind. Human tragedy seems imminent, particularly for the sailor who hangs precariously over the waves from a line attached to the bowsprit. In the foreground victims of the storm try desperately to save themselves. Some row through the turbulent surf in a small dinghy, while one sailor swims toward a large rock onto which two of his companions have already managed to scramble.

Ships in a Gale

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Van de Velde enhanced the physical and emotional drama of this scene with his fluid brushwork, cool palette, and focused light effects. Cold, steel-gray clouds seem to move before one's eyes, flowing diagonally across the sky, their dark thick forms at once overlapping and merging with lighter cloud masses. Pockets of light stream down on the foaming whitecaps, boats, and rocks below, accentuating and enlivening their forms. With great pictorial sensitivity Van de Velde juxtaposed the English ship against dark clouds while silhouetting the Dutch ship against a lighter and calmer portion of the sky.

Simon de Vlieger (Dutch, 1600/1601 - 1653), with whom Van de Velde studied for about two years around 1650, greatly influenced the artist's compositional ideas with his depictions of ships in distress in stormy seas near rocky coasts [fig. 1]. [2] De Vlieger's paintings, however, are more tonal in character and do not have the dramatic light effects that give Van de Velde's painting such poignancy. Van de Velde's ships and the ways they move in the water, moreover, are remarkably accurate, the result of the thorough training he received in the workshop of his father, Willem van de Velde the Elder (Dutch, 1611 - 1693).

Rocky coastlines do not exist in the Netherlands, and, aside from the inherent drama of ships floundering in storms near huge outcroppings, such scenes generally alluded to the danger of sailing in foreign seas. Paintings of ships in distress, moreover, often had allegorical associations referring to the uncertainties of human existence. [3] While Van de Velde's painting would fit within this iconographic tradition, the concurrence of a Dutch and an English ship raises the possibility that this work alludes to an actual maritime event that took place during the First Anglo-Dutch War (1652–1654), when a four-day storm in the Gulf of Lyon in December 1653 caused the shipwrecks of a squadron of Dutch vessels and their English prizes. [4] In the mid-1680s Van de Velde depicted this maritime disaster in a comparable painting of English and Dutch ships thrashing along a rocky coast. [5] Unlike the latter work, none of the ships in the National Gallery of Art painting can be specifically identified, but it seems probable that the same incident served as the inspiration for both scenes.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014

COMPARATIVE FIGURES

NOTES

- [1] I would like to thank Asher Kohn for his assistance on this entry.
- [2] Van de Velde's earliest dated painting is in the style of De Vlieger: *A Dutch Merchant Ship Running between Rocks in Rough Weather*, 1651, oil on panel, National Maritime Museum, London. See 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), 66–67, no. 18.
- [3] For an excellent study of this theme in Dutch art see Lawrence O. Goedde, *Tempest and Shipwreck in Dutch and Flemish Art: Convention, Rhetoric, and Interpretation* (University Park, PA, 1989). The theme of storm-tossed ships threatened by rocky shores appears in various emblem books. In Andrea Alciati's *Emblemata* (Leiden, 1556), for example, this motif represented danger to the ship of state, whereas Adriaan Spinniker, in his *Leerzaame Zinnebeelden* (Haarlem, 1714), used it to illustrate the dangers to the soul that result from a life unmindful of God.
- [4] Michael Strang Robinson, *Van de Velde: A Catalogue of the Paintings of the Elder and the Younger Willem van de Velde*, 2 vols. (London, 1990), 2:1036, suggested that the painting was commissioned to commemorate the "wreck of an English ship and the presumed saving of the Dutch ship" in 1653 after the Dutch had captured the English ship in the Mediterranean.
- [5] 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), 117, no. 123. This painting depicts the Dutch ship *Jupiter*, which was one of the vessels lost on that occasion.
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting is executed on a thin, oak panel^[1] consisting of three boards with horizontal grain, which are joined horizontally. The top plank is thicker than the other two making up the support. The reverse of the panel is beveled at the edges. The panel was prepared for painting with a medium thick, creamy white ground layer. A brown imprimatura exists beneath the water. In general the painting was executed in thin layers of paint with little texture. The paint in the sky was applied with a relatively large brush. The boats were executed in a more exacting fashion with smaller brushes. The highlights are generally executed with thicker paint

showing low impasto.

The X-radiographs show many changes including several sailboats that are much larger in scale than the current boats, as well as some figures and a different sky.

The condition of the painting is excellent. Inpainting scattered throughout the composition seems to cover slight stains, wood grain, and tiny losses. The inpainting is concentrated along the edges and the upper join. The varnish is even and fairly clear.

[1] The characterization of the wood is based on visual examination only.

PROVENANCE

Probably Proley (or Proly) collection, Paris;[1] (sale, Hôtel de Bullion by Paillet and Boileau, Paris, 20 March 1787 and days following, possibly no. 114).[2] brought to England 1823 by (Thomas Emmerson, London). Jeremiah Harman [1763-1844], Higham House, Woodford, by 1835;[3] (his estate sale, Christie & Manson, London, 17-18 May 1844, 2nd day, no. 106, as *A Storm and Shipwreck*); Edmund Higginson [1802-1871], Saltmarshe Castle; (his sale, Christie & Manson, London, 4-6 June 1846, no. 218, as *A Storm and Shipwreck*); purchased by Brown.[4] Edmund Higginson, Saltmarshe Castle; (his sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 16 June 1860, no. 32, as *A Storm and Shipwreck*); purchased by Turner.[5] Edward Sholto, 3rd baron Penrhyn [1864-1927], London; (sale, Sotheby's, London, 3 December 1924, no. 79, as *Rocky Coast with choppy sea and shipping*). possibly with (Hand, London); sold to private collection, United States, possibly Samuel Borchard [d. 1930], New York; his estate; (his estate sale, Parke-Bernet, New York, 9 January 1947, no. 38, as *A Shipwreck in a Storm off a Rocky Coast*);[6] private collection, South America;[7] (Otto Nauman, New York); purchased 16 June 2000 by NGA.

[1] The following provenance is given in the prospectus prepared by Otto Naumann at the time of the sale in 2000, in NGA curatorial files.

[2] This sale included more than twenty works by Van de Velde. See the description of Sale F-A1806 in The Getty Provenance Index Databases.

[3] John Smith, *A Complete Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent Dutch, Flemish, and French Painters*, 9 vols., London, 1829-1842: 6(1835):327-328, no. 26.

[4] A copy of the sale catalogue at the Getty Research Library is annotated "Brown," and a newspaper clipping pasted in the same catalogue reads "Lot 218...bought for 300 guineas by Mr. Brown." (Copies in NGA curatorial files.)

[5] According to a handwritten note in John Smith's sale catalogue, the painting was bought by Turner for 153 pounds, 6 shillings. A copy of the sale catalogue at the Getty Research Library is also annotated with the same information (copy in NGA curatorial files).

[6] Stuart Borchard, Samuel's son, lent the painting to a 1942 exhibition at the Detroit Institute of Arts. The 1947 sale of the "Samuel Borchard Collection" was, according to the sale catalogue, "by order of Stuart Borchard." Michael Strang Robinson, *Van De Velde: A Catalogue of the Paintings of the Elder and the Younger Willem van de Velde*, 2 vols., Greenwich, 1990: 2:1036-1038, no. 391, incorrectly states that the painting was sold by "Stuart Borchard's son" at the 1947 sale.

[7] The dealer's prospectus indicates that the private owner in South America probably acquired the painting at the 1947 sale.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1942 Five Centuries of Marine Paintings, Detroit Institute of Arts, 1942, no. 35.

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