



Abraham de Verwer
Dutch, 1585 - 1650

View of Hoorn

c. 1650

oil on panel

overall: 51.1 x 94.6 cm (20 1/8 x 37 1/4 in.)

framed: 70.8 x 113.7 x 5.7 cm (27 7/8 x 44 3/4 x 2 1/4 in.)

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ENTRY

This atmospheric painting depicts the city of Hoorn from the south, the view that greeted sailors as they crossed the Zuiderzee toward this important North Holland port, a major center for trade to the Baltic, the West Indies, and the East Indies. A bank of clouds stretches across the late-afternoon sky, with only the water's ripples and a gliding sailboat to suggest the gentle breezes passing over the broad roadstead. From the viewer's low and distant vantage point, Hoorn's distinctive city profile is barely distinguishable, with, from right to left, the towers of the Noorderkerk (the North Church, dedicated to the Virgin Mary), the Grote Kerk (the Great Church, dedicated to Saint John the Baptist), and the Oosterkerk (the East Church, dedicated to Saint Anthony) barely visible above the buildings facing the water. The steepled tower in the center of the painting, behind the stern of the East Indiaman, the large ship flying the Dutch flag, is the Hoofdtoren (Head Tower), a large stone defensive structure that marked the entrance to the harbor. A contemporaneous bird's-eye-view map of Hoorn by Joan Blaeu shows the harbor filled with the masts of moored ships [fig. 1]. [1]

Abraham de Verwer rendered the distant city with great delicacy, carefully articulating the individual buildings while at the same time blending their forms

together with a brownish glaze. With thin black strokes of his brush he deftly silhouetted the dark masts of boats in the harbor against the blue-gray sky. He suggested the water's expanse by modulating the way light reflects on its surface. Subtle tonal gradations from dark to light gently lead the eye back into the distance, while a remarkable and unusual combination of colors—reddish-ocher underlying an olive glaze—gives a translucent quality to the water in the foreground.

The only activity of note in this serene image occurs on the deck of the large sailing ship—a *fluit*, recognizable by its high, round sternpost—at the left, where a group of sailors grasp lines from a block and tackle attached to the yard of the square rigging. They, and a group of workmen to their right, appear to be raising or lowering cargo into the ship's hold, presumably cargo that has been brought, or will be taken, by the smaller boat (*wijdschip*) moored alongside. Why this transfer of cargo is being made outside of Hoorn's harbor is uncertain, although it may well have been for economic reasons: ships had to pay a fee when they entered the harbor. [2] The activity on the ships, while seemingly mundane and certainly to be expected in such a setting, is in fact exceptional in Dutch paintings of the period, as very few artists depicted the actual loading and unloading of cargo.

Hoorn gained its importance as a trading center from its fortuitous location at the juncture of a number of roads and waterways in West-Friesland, the area north of Amsterdam. The Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the West India Company (WIC) both had chambers there, hence, in the first half of the seventeenth century, before the harbor began to silt up, ships sailed to Hoorn from all over the world. Fishing and shipbuilding were particularly important industries, which meant that lumber, shipped in large quantities from Norway, Sweden, and the Baltic countries, was one of the major commodities entering and leaving the port.

Hoorn's prominence as a port in the early seventeenth century is compellingly depicted in a large panoramic view of the harbor that Hendrick Vroom (1563–1640) painted for the burgomasters' chamber of the town hall in 1622 [fig. 2]. Although De Verwer must have known Vroom's *View of Hoorn*, with its high horizon, bright colors, and astonishing detail, his painting is strikingly different. De Verwer chose a low vantage point, emphasized tonal qualities over distinctive colors, and minimized rather than exaggerated the scale of the buildings. De Verwer's depiction of Hoorn also differs markedly from his own earlier manner of painting, which was fully within the Vroom tradition. [3] The atmospheric qualities of this work reflects the influence of Simon de Vlieger (Dutch, 1600/1601 - 1653) who, like

De Verwer, lived and worked in Amsterdam during the later half of the 1640s. [4] Nevertheless, it also differs from De Vlieger's paintings in the draftsmanlike delicacy evident in the rendering of the boats and distant cityscape as well as the strict horizontality of the composition. In these respects, the closest prototypes for the painting are to be found in the pen-and-wash drawings of port cities in France and the Netherlands that De Verwer made in the 1630s and 1640s [fig. 3]. [5] Indeed, stylistic comparisons with these drawings largely serve as the basis of attribution for this unsigned painting. [6]

The differences between Vroom's and De Verwer's depictions of Hoorn are not just stylistic. The two paintings record a significant change in the city's distinctive profile, namely in the appearance of the bell tower on the Hoofdtoren. In De Verwer's painting the Hoofdtoren has a tall, pointed spire, quite different from the old squat, angled roofline visible in Vroom's depiction of the city. This topographical change provides a framework for the date of De Verwer's painting, for a seventeenth-century chronicle of Hoorn indicates that this new bell tower was constructed in 1651. [7]

The construction date of the clock tower raises questions about the attribution of this painting to Abraham de Verwer, since the artist died in August 1650, a year before it was completed. This seeming chronological inconsistency, however, does not preclude De Verwer's authorship of this work. Plans for the new clock tower had been underway for some time (the bell that rang on the hour was cast in 1646 and the one that rang on the half-hour was cast in 1647), and therefore it is probable that the structure itself had also been started prior to 1651. In fact, it seems likely that the new tower, which would have such a transforming effect on Hoorn's skyline, was the motivating factor for the commission of this painting from De Verwer, an artist who was renowned for his delicate and refined renderings of Dutch ports, each of which is identifiable through the distinctive profiles of its towers and spires against the sky. De Verwer died soon after painting this work, so he would never have been able to build upon its success. The painting remains a unicum in Dutch art. No other marine painting matches its purity and luminosity, which seems to anticipate, in so many ways, comparable views executed centuries later and on different shores by artists such as the American painter Fitz Henry Lane (American, 1804 - 1865) .

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Joan Blaeu, *View of Hoorn in Novum ac magnum theatrum vrbium Belgicae regiae*, 1649, engraving on paper, National Gallery of Art Library, Washington, DC, J. Paul Getty Fund in Honor of Franklin Murphy



fig. 2 Hendrick Vroom, *View of Hoorn*, c. 1622, oil on canvas, Westfries Museum, Hoorn



fig. 3 Abraham de Verwer, *Shipping on a Calm Sea*, mid-1640s, pen and brown ink, brush in brown and gray ink on paper, Peck Collection, Boston

NOTES

- [1] I would like to thank Liesje Schram from Hoorn and Rob Kattenberg from Amsterdam for information about the view and the ships De Verwer has depicted.
- [2] I would like to thank Dr. Larry Goedde of the University of Virginia for this suggestion.
- [3] Early in his career De Verwer painted large, horizontal marine battles in the manner of Vroom, who presumably taught him the art of painting (see Laurens J. Bol, *Die holländische Marinemalerei des 17. Jahrhunderts* [Braunschweig, 1973], 84–88, and A. Blaaw, “Over de Waterlands doopsgezinde schilder Abraham de Verwer van Burchstraete, over zijn vrouw Barbara van Sillevoirt, en iets over zijn vroegste werken,” *Doopsgezinde Bijdragen* 31 [2005]: 75–91). De Verwer was commissioned to paint such scenes by, among others, the Amsterdam Admiralty and the East India Company. In these brightly colored and highly detailed paintings, De Verwer generally chose a relatively high viewpoint so that the full panorama could be portrayed. Even in these works, however, De Verwer depicted distant cityscapes in an understated manner and more atmospherically than did Vroom.
- [4] De Verwer’s panoramic views were highly regarded, and he was paid handsomely for his work. In 1642 he acquired an expensive home in Amsterdam (see De Verwer Biography). It is probable that he would have known De Vlieger, who moved to Amsterdam in 1643. A painting by an anonymous Dutch artist, *A View of Naarden*, formerly attributed to De Vlieger, has been stylistically compared to the *View of Hoorn*. Wurfbein rejected an attribution of that painting to De Verwer because he felt that “analogies with signed paintings by De Verwer seem [to be] superficial.” See Maarten Wurfbein, *M. L. Wurfbein Fine Art B.V., IV* (Oegstgeest, 1992), 180–182.
- [5] In the late 1630s De Verwer traveled to France where he made a series of drawings of French ports, possibly at the behest of Prince Frederik Hendrik. De Verwer may have depicted these ports for military reasons. See Stijn Alsteens and Hans Buijs, *Paysages de France: Dessinés par Lambert Doomer et les artistes hollandais et flamands des XVIe et XVIIe siècles* (Paris, 2008), 247–256. While in France, De Verwer also painted seven townscapes in Paris, including four of the Louvre, two of which he later sold to the prince. See Madeleine Charageat, “Une vue du Louvre et de L’Hôtel de Nevers par Abraham de Verwer,” *Bulletin du Musée Carnavalet* 2, no. 1 (April 1949): 3. He also sold the Frederik Hendrik two other views. See Abraham Bredius, “Het schildersregister van Jan Sysmus,” *Oud-Holland* 8 (1890): 218.

- [6] The attribution was made by Laurens Bol. See Laurens J. Bol, *Die holländische Marinemalerei des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Braunschweig, 1973), 88, fig. 87.
- [7] I would like to thank Meindert Kok from Hoorn for bringing this architectural change to my attention (e-mail correspondence of April 12, 2009, in NGA curatorial records). This information makes it clear that the date of c. 1645 that I proposed in *Pride of Place: Dutch Cityscapes of the Golden Age* (The Hague, 2008), 190–191, no. 46, is too early. For this chronicle account, see Theodorus Velius, *Chronyk van Hoorn* (Hoorn, 1740), 237.
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting was executed on an oak panel,[1] which is composed of two horizontally grained boards. On the back of the panel the edges are shallowly beveled. The ground is a very thin, white or off-white layer that does not fully hide the wood grain. The paint is also very thin, especially in the darks. There is no impasto but brushmarks are visible in the areas of thicker paint, such as the sky and water. It appears as though the artist may have left a reserve for the thickest part of the cityscape and the two large boats on the left when he painted the sky and water.

The panel has a slight horizontal convex warp and several horizontal splits stemming from the right edge. There are also small horizontal cracks in the paint that do not form a complete crackle pattern. These are most prominent in the sky. Examination with ultraviolet light revealed delicate inpainting in the sky, presumably because the paint became more translucent with time, allowing the prominent wood grain to become visible. Damage caused by the frame rabbet has been inpainted along the top, left, and right edges. The varnish remains clear and glossy. The painting has not been treated since its acquisition.

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

PROVENANCE

Mr. and Mrs. Arnoud Waller [he 1873-1953], Utrecht and Lunteren, by 1938; by descent in their family; (Johnny van Haften, London); sold May 2008 to NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1938 Oude Kunst, Centraal Museum, Utrecht, 1938, no. 91.

1964 Zee- Rivier- en Oevergezichten: Nederlandse schilderijen uit de zeventiende eeuw, Dordrechts Museum, 1964, no. 1, fig. 92, as Dutch 17th Century.

2008 Pride of Place: Dutch Cityscapes of the Golden Age, Royal Picture House Mauritshuis, The Hague; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2008-2009, no. 46, repro.

2018

Water, Wind, and Waves: Marine Paintings from the Dutch Golden Age, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2018, unnumbered brochure, fig. 6.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1964 Bol, Laurens J. *Zee- rivier- en oevergezichten: Nederlandse schilderijen uit de zeventiende eeuw*. Exh. cat. Dordrechts Museum, Dordrecht, 1964: no. 1, as Dutch School, 17th century.
- 1973 Bol, Laurens J. *Die holländische Marinemalerei des 17. Jahrhunderts*. Braunschweig, 1973: 88, fig. 87.
- 2008 Suchtelen, Ariane van, and Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr. *Pride of Place: Dutch cityscapes of the Golden Age*. Exh. cat. Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, The Hague; National Gallery of Art, Washington. Zwolle, 2008: 190-191, 241, no. 46, repro.
- 2008 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. "Abraham de Verwer, *View of Hoorn*." *National Gallery of Art Bulletin* no. 39 (Fall 2008): 22-23, repro.
- 2009 Bruyn Kops, Henriette de. *Pride of Place: Dutch Cityscapes of the Golden Age*. Exhibition brochure. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2009: 7-8.
- 2009 Wilkin, Karen. "Haarlem Renaissance." *The New Criterion* 27, no. 6 (February 2009): 48.

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