



Ludolf Backhuysen
Dutch, 1631 - 1708

Ships in Distress off a Rocky Coast

1667

oil on canvas

overall: 114.3 x 167.3 cm (45 x 65 7/8 in.)

framed: 147.3 x 146.1 x 6.4 cm (58 x 57 1/2 x 2 1/2 in.)

Inscription: lower center on rock: LBackh / 1667

Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund 1985.29.1

ENTRY

Buffeted by violent winds and raging seas, three Dutch cargo ships struggle desperately to stay clear of a rocky coast. The threat of destruction is real, for the remnants of a shipwreck are ominously present in the foreground: a mast from the doomed ship, its Dutch flag still aloft, and cargo floating in the waves. An even more imminent danger for two of these ships is the threat of collision. One ship, its reefed sails filled with wind, races past two rock outcrops and bears down on another cargo ship that has turned into the wind to try to ride out the storm. Anxious sailors, struggling to bring their vessel under control, gesture wildly as spray from a huge wave crashes against its side. The other vessel's rear mast has broken, and the crew has cut down the top portion of its mainmast to prevent further damage. Most of its crew is on deck frantically trying to control the disengaged mast and sail.[1] The outcome of the drama is not known, but Backhuysen creates the impression that man will prevail in this battle against the forces of nature: although massive steel-gray clouds loom overhead, clear skies and a golden light in the upper left signal that the storm is about to pass.[2]

Backhuysen painted this dramatic scene in 1667, fairly early in his long and successful career as an artist. Most of his paintings from the 1660s depict identifiable ships massed in the waters offshore, whether outside the port of Amsterdam or near the island of Texel north of the Zuider Zee. Although Backhuysen delighted in activating such scenes with billowing clouds, choppy seas, and strong accents of light and dark, nothing anticipates the concentrated

drama of this work. Indeed, it is remarkable that this painting, which is both large in scale and assured in concept and execution, is the first known representation of a tempest in his oeuvre.[3]

Arnold Houbraken states that Backhuysen began his career as an artist by drawing boats.[4] The careful, descriptive style of a number of his early drawings and pen paintings suggests that at the outset he was strongly influenced by the preeminent marine painters of the day, Willem van de Velde the Elder (Dutch, 1611 - 1693) and his son Willem van de Velde the Younger (Dutch, 1633 - 1707). Houbraken nevertheless indicates that Backhuysen's first teacher was Allart van Everdingen (Dutch, 1621 - 1675), whose seascapes, with their convincing representations of turbulent seas and rugged terrains, indeed include rocks not unlike those in Backhuysen's painting [fig. 1].[5] In the end, though, Backhuysen's fascination with the effects of weather in a seascape undoubtedly stemmed from an inherent interest in the sea. According to Houbraken, "nature" was Backhuysen's true teacher. He often sailed to the mouth of the sea to observe changes of light and water along the shore, excursions that provided a vivid impression of natural effects for his paintings and drawings.[6]

The vessels depicted by Backhuysen are flutes (*fluyten*), a type of cargo ship that originated in Hoorn in the late sixteenth century. These ships were at the core of the enormous merchant fleet that was so essential to Dutch commercial prosperity. Merchants used flutes to transport a range of goods on many different maritime routes, including grain and lumber purchased in the Baltic Sea region. Many of the ships in the Baltic fleet came from Hoorn, one of the most important ports on the Zuider Zee, and the seat of one of the chambers of the East India Company.[7] Since the red-and-white striped flag of Hoorn flies from the foremast of the ship to the right, Backhuysen's scene may relate to a specific event in Hoorn's history.[8]

Even if a historic episode lies behind its conception, this tempest scene belongs to a Dutch and Flemish pictorial tradition that reaches back to the late sixteenth century. Artists as diverse as Jan Brueghel the Elder (Flemish, 1568 - 1625), Paul Brill (Flemish, 1554 - 1626), Bonaventura Peeters (1614–1652), Cornelis Willaerts (Dutch, active 1622 - 1666), Simon de Vlieger (Dutch, 1600/1601 - 1653), and Jacob Adriaensz Bellevois (Dutch, 1620/1622 - 1676) found a ready market for such works not only because of the inherent drama of their subjects but also because these scenes spoke to a deep-seated fear for all those whose lives depended on the sea. Rocky shores, in particular, had ominous overtones. On a practical level, they were to be feared in the midst of a storm, but they also symbolized inhospitable,

foreign lands as opposed to the dunes that predominate the Dutch coast.

Bellevois's *Sea Storm on a Rocky Coast* [fig. 2], which was executed in 1664, only three years before Backhuysen's work, offers a particularly interesting compositional and thematic comparison. As ships are cast about in the stormy sea, some survivors of a wreck have made it to shore and are praying to God. The painting is highly anecdotal, yet its underlying concept is fundamental to this genre of images: these survivors have overcome the turbulence of life and have reached the rock of their salvation through the intervention of God, to whom they offer prayers of thanksgiving.[9] Backhuysen, on the other hand, focuses the entire drama on the ships at sea. He simplifies the image and removes the obvious theological and allegorical messages. For these sailors to survive, they must overcome the forces of nature through their own prowess as well as through the good graces of a deity above.

The painting is in a remarkable state of preservation. All of the details are intact, including the masts, sails, and lines on the ships. Particularly fascinating is the manner in which Backhuysen has indicated the spray from the waves by flicking a brush loaded with white paint against the canvas. This technique gives an immediacy to the scene that is not often found in his later works, when his manner of painting became heavier. Although no preliminary drawing for this painting is known, a drawing of a *Ship in Distress in a Thunderstorm* (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam) has much the same spirit and may have been executed about the same time.[10] There is also an excellent copy of the painting in a Dutch private collection by Hendrick Rietschoof (1687–1746).[11] A native of Hoorn, Rietschoof likely saw Backhuysen's painting in a private residence where he first copied the work on paper (Teylers Museum, Haarlem) and then transferred the image to canvas, departing from the original only in its smaller size.

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Allart van Everdingen, *Ships in a Rough Sea*, c. 1645, oil on canvas, Städelches Kunstinstitut Frankfurt. Photo: Ursula Edelmann



fig. 2 Jacob Adriaensz Bellevois, *Sea Storm on a Rocky Coast*, 1664, oil on canvas, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig

NOTES

- [1] George S. Keyes in *Mirror of Empire: Dutch Marine Art of the Seventeenth Century* (Minneapolis, 1990), 88, interprets the vessel as floundering because it has “suffered terrible damage to its masts.” However, the crew has taken control of the situation by removing the upper portion of the mast. A similar strategy against the forces of a storm can be seen in Backhuysen’s 1694 painting of the Dutch men-of-war *Ridderschap* and *Hollandia* in the midst of a hurricane in the Strait of Gibraltar (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inventory no. A 4856, repro. in P. J. J. van Thiel, *All the Paintings of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam: A Completely Illustrated Catalogue, First Supplement, 1976–1991*, trans. Michael F. Hoyle [Amsterdam, 1992], 20); the *Hollandia* is likewise shown without the top portion of the mainmast because its commander had it cut down to save the ship during the storm. See Rob Kattenburg, *Two Centuries of Dutch Marine Paintings and Drawings from the Collection of Rob Kattenburg* (Amsterdam, 1989), 42.
- [2] Lawrence Otto Goedde, “Convention, Realism, and the Interpretation of Dutch and Flemish Tempest Painting,” *Simiolus* 16 (1986): 142, views the situation more negatively. He writes that “few of the sailors in Backhuysen’s picture will survive these cliffs.”
- [3] Backhuysen painted a number of tempest scenes in later years, among them actual events (see note 2), imaginary scenes, and a few representations of biblical stories, such as *The Shipwreck of Paul*, c. 1690–1700, Stiftung Henri Nannen, Emden (color repro. in Henri Nannen et al., *Ludolf Backhuysen, Emden 1630–Amsterdam 1708: ein Versuch, Leben und Werk des Künstlers zu beschreiben* [Emden, 1985], 43).
- [4] Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlandsche konstschilders en schilderessen*, 3 vols. (The Hague, 1753; reprint,

Amsterdam, 1976), 2:237.

- [5] Everdingen's tempest views may reflect his own experiences. Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlandtsche konstschilders en schilderessen*, 3 vols. (The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1976), 2:238, relates that Everdingen had been shipwrecked off the coast of Norway.
- [6] Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlandtsche konstschilders en schilderessen*, 3 vols. (The Hague, 1753; reprint, Amsterdam, 1976), 2:238. As Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann has noted (personal communication), Houbraken's comments have the character of *topoi*, rather than statements of fact.
- [7] George S. Keyes, *Mirror of Empire: Dutch Marine Art of the Seventeenth Century* (Minneapolis, 1990), 305.
- [8] Rob Kattenburg, letter of October 1, 1987, identifies the flag and adds, "Such a flag flown from the foremast usually signifies the residence of the ship's owner, whereas a flag flying from the rear mast indicates the hometown of the skipper." In the opinion of H. W. Saaltink, former curator of the Westfries Museum, "No special event from the history of Hoorn has been depicted" (letter of November 28, 1991). Both letters are in NGA curatorial files.
- [9] For an iconographic assessment of this painting, see Jochen Luckhardt in *Jacob Isaaksz. van Ruisdael: Wasserfall mit Wachturm—Eine werkmonographische Ausstellung* (Braunschweig, 1991), 28–31. Also relevant to the interpretation of such paintings is a long emblematic tradition in which storm-tossed ships, threatened by rocky shores, are given various allegorical meanings. In Andrea Alciati's *Emblemata* (Leiden, 1556), for example, this motif represented danger to the ship of state, whereas Adriaan Spinniker, in his *Leerzame Zinnebeelden* (Haarlem, 1714), uses it to illustrate the dangers to the soul that result from a life unmindful of God.
- [10] Inventory no. H. 209. This connection was noted by George S. Keyes in *Mirror of Empire: Dutch Marine Art of the Seventeenth Century* (Minneapolis, 1990), 221–222, no. 62 (repro.).
- [11] Hendrick Rietschoof, *Two Three-Masters in a Heavy Storm Off a Rocky Coast*, oil on canvas, 26 x 31 in. See Rob Kattenburg, *Dutch Old Master Marine Paintings* (Bergen, 2006), 12–13, repro.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting has been lined with the tacking margins trimmed. No reduction of the picture plane has occurred. A cream-colored ground, which covers the fine-weight, plain-woven support, is visible through the thinly applied paint. Thin, fluid, opaque

paint layers are blended wet-into-wet with minimally impasted highlights and finely drawn paint lines in the rigging. The paint condition is excellent, with losses confined to the paint edges and only minor abrasion. Discolored varnish and inpainting were removed when the painting was treated in 1985.

PROVENANCE

Arthur George, 3rd earl of Onslow [1777-1870], Richmond, and Clandon Park, near Guilford, Surrey;^[1] his heirs; (his estate sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 22 July 1893, no. 24); (J.W. Vokins).^[2] Siméon del Monte, Brussels, by 1928;^[3] sold by his heirs at (sale, Sotheby's, London, 24 June 1959, no. 22); purchased by (P. & D. Colnaghi & Co., London); (sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 19 April 1985, no. 111); purchased by NGA.

[1] The Arthur George ownership comes from labels that were formerly affixed to the stretcher (now in NGA curatorial files).

[2] The buyer is noted in an annotated copy of the sales catalogue; copy in NGA curatorial files.

[3] Published in Gustav Glück, *La Collection del Monte*, Vienna, 1928: 22, pl. 41. An old label from the back of the painting (now in NGA curatorial files) also refers to the del Monte collection.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1932 Tentoonstelling van schilderijen door oud-hollandsche en vlaamsche meesters, Koninklijke Kunstzaal Kleykamp, The Hague, 1932, no. 41.

1990 Mirror of Empire: Dutch Marine Art of the Seventeenth Century, The Minneapolis Institute of Arts; The Toledo Museum of Art; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1990-1991, no. 4.

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

2005 Time and Transformation in Dutch Seventeenth Century Art, The Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie; The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota; The Speed Art Museum, Louisville, 2005-2006, no. 34, repro.

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- 1991 Walsh, John, Jr. "Review: Los Angeles—Dutch Marine Art." *The Burlington Magazine* 133 (September 1991): 645–646, repro.
- 1995 Slive, Seymour, and Jakob Rosenberg. *Dutch painting 1600-1800*. Pelican History of Art. Revised and expanded ed. New Haven, 1995: 223-224, repro.
- 1995 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century*. The Collections of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue. Washington, 1995: 15-18, color repro. 17.
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- 2003 Wilson-Bareau, Juliet, and David C. Degener. *Manet and the sea*. Exh. cat. Art Institute of Chicago; Philadelphia Museum of Art; Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. Philadelphia, 2003: 9, fig. 8.
- 2004 Hand, John Oliver. *National Gallery of Art: Master Paintings from the Collection*. Washington and New York, 2004: 189, no. 151, color repro.
- 2005 Kuretsky, Susan Donahue. *Time and Transformation in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art*. Exh. cat. Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie; John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota; J.B. Speed Art Museum, Louisville. Seattle, 2005: 76, 178-179, no. 34, repro.

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