WATER, WIND, AND WAVES
Marine Paintings from the Dutch Golden Age

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During the seventeenth century, the Dutch rose to greatness from the riches of the sea. With their massive fleet of cargo ships they became leaders in international maritime trade and transport, while their mighty warships commanded the high seas. They established a successful herring industry with their vast array of fishing boats, and they navigated local estuaries, rivers, and canals with their yachts and barges. The water was also a great source of enjoyment. In the warm summer months dune-lined beaches offered scenic vistas, while in the winter frozen canals provided a place for people of all ages to skate, play, and take pleasure in the outdoors. In this nation of sailors and skaters, it is no wonder that depictions of life on the water became a favorite subject of artists and collectors alike. Artists including Hendrick Vroom, Jan van Goyen, Willem van de Velde the Younger, and even Rembrandt van Rijn portrayed the water as an essential part of Dutch life and culture. This exhibition brings together some forty-five paintings, prints, drawings, rare books, and ship models to explore the multifaceted relationship the Dutch had with the water during the Golden Age of the seventeenth century.

The Military Power of the Dutch at Sea

With more than six hundred miles of continuous coastline and estuaries, a series of major rivers, and countless canals and waterways, the Netherlands is defined by water (Fig. 1). To judge from the volume of marine imagery, water has long defined its art, as well. Majestic depictions of Dutch maritime power, such as Aelbert Cuyp’s The Maas at Dordrecht, c. 1650, National Gallery of Art, Andrew W. Mellon Collection (opposite), have become synonymous with the Golden Age (Fig. 2). In this large and impressive painting, Cuyp depicted a fleet of Dutch warships, yachts, and ferryboats carrying thirty thousand soldiers who had assembled as a show of force prior to the Treaty of Münster that ended the Dutch war of independence against Spain (1568–1648).

Despite the omnipresence of water, it became a subject of Dutch artists only at the beginning of the seventeenth century, when Hendrick Vroom turned his attention to maritime scenes. Born in Haarlem, Vroom spent large parts of his career traveling from the Netherlands to Spain, Italy, Germany, and England. During that time he sailed on various transport vessels—even enduring a shipwreck off the coast of Portugal—which gave him firsthand knowledge of ships, ropes, rigging, and, above all, the splendor and power of the sea. Drawing on these experiences in his paintings, Vroom helped establish new categories of images, ranging from portraits of single ships to depictions of great convoys, and from fierce naval encounters to quiet harbor scenes.

Vroom possessed a keen understanding of naval architecture as well as a masterful ability to imbue his scenes with lifelike effects. His Fleet at Sea pictures the broadside of a twenty-four-gun Dutch warship in a harbor bustling with fishing and cargo boats (Fig. 3). The ship teems with sailors, some of whom climb the rigging. Vroom matched their dynamism with his rendering of the roiled
The Mercantile Might of the Dutch in the World

The Dutch East India Company, founded in 1602, and West India Company, founded in 1621, connected the globe through a vast network of trade routes that stretched from the Caribbean to the Indian Ocean, New Amsterdam (New York) to Asia. As they sailed the seven seas, Dutch ships transported luxury goods—exotic spices and rare flower bulbs from the Far East, salt from Brazil—as well as more utilitarian items, such as lumber from the Baltic used for construction and shipbuilding. An ugly side of this global commerce was the Dutch involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, though slave ships were rarely depicted in their marine imagery. The global scale of commerce created enormous wealth, in turn stimulating a booming art market. Scenes of maritime trade were particularly appealing to newly affluent investors, for whom they represented the means of their economic success.

Long after the Dutch achieved their freedom from Spain in 1648, depictions of naval battles remained a popular artistic subject—particularly after war broke out with England, another maritime rival, in the 1650s and 1660s. Willem van de Velde the Younger was well known for his chronicles of important naval encounters with the English. Occasionally, he even produced monumental commemorative works years after these encounters had taken place, as in his Dutch Fleet Assembling Before the Four Days’ Battle of 11–14 June 1666, which he painted in 1670. In this dramatic scene, two famed ships of the Amsterdam admiralty—the Liefde (Love) at left and Gouden Leeuwen (Golden Lions) at right—set sail for a confrontation with the English that would go down in Dutch annals as a glorious naval victory (fig. 4). Aboard the Liefde, a seventy-cannon man-of-war, crewmen busily stow a half-raised anchor against the side of the hull while others scramble to unfurl the foresail; meanwhile, the Gouden Leeuwen has already embarked on its mission. Ominous clouds add to the atmosphere of excitement and anticipation on the eve of this maritime battle that would bring great pride to the Dutch nation.
In contrast to such activity in Amsterdam’s harbor, Abraham de Verwer concentrated on the hushed beauty of the water in his View of Hoorn (fig. 6). Hoorn was a major port for trade to the Baltic and the Indies and housed offices of both the East and West India Companies. Here De Verwer depicted the scene that greeted sailors as they crossed the Zuiderzee (an inlet opening to the North Sea). Sailors aboard a large cargo ship grasp at lines as they raise goods brought by the smaller transport vessel moored alongside it. De Verwer devoted much of his painting to the sky and water, rendering with great sensitivity the rose-colored band of clouds and delicate ripple of waves, the two realms divided by a small sliver of land. De Verwer’s remarkable draftsmanship is evident in the thin black strokes that articulate the many masts peaking up from the harbor and the delicately rendered towers and steeples of the city’s profile.

Transportation and Tranquility on Local Waters

When Dutch merchant ships returned home from foreign shores and fishing boats came in from the North Sea, barges carried their goods to local markets via an extensive system of coastal and inland waterways. These canals and rivers proved just as efficient for the transportation of passengers. During the seventeenth century one could go by barge from Amsterdam to Haarlem in an hour, with trips leaving every hour. The journey from Haarlem to Leiden took two hours, and that from Delft to The Hague one hour and fifteen minutes. Perhaps not surprisingly, ferryboats became a marine subject favored by Dutch painters, particularly Jan van Goyen. His View of Dordrecht from the Dordtse Kil includes a sailboat called a kaag at left ferrying passengers who embark and disembark from smaller rowboats (fig. 7). This painting captures, in a subtle range of ochers and grays, the calm serenity of the day: thick layers of clouds cover the sky, limpid sails hang from masts, and the water laps gently against the shore.

For Simon de Vlieger, moments of tranquility in and around the Dutch coast were not only beautiful, but also spiritual. In Estuary at Day’s End, two workers tar the hull of a ship resting on a sandbar at low tide (fig. 8). Black smoke from the fire heating the tar billows up and white smoke erupts from a distant ship firing a salute, yet De Vlieger created an overall placid mood with a subtle range of grays and blues. The crepuscular rays of sunlight beaming through the clouds are sometimes known as “God rays” or “fingers of God.” One can easily imagine how De Vlieger, who also painted religious subjects and made designs for stained-glass church windows, considered this atmospheric occurrence a visible confirmation of God’s blessing of the Dutch, who believed themselves to be a chosen people.

The Beauty and Power of the Sea

While the Dutch were grateful for the bounty provided by the sea, its power and unpredictability posed an ever-present risk. The Netherlands (literally, low lands) is located largely below sea level. During the early seventeenth century, tidal deluge was a constant threat, while arable, pastoral acreage was scarce. Between 1590
Cargo, mast, and flag are seen floating in the water. Anxious sailors work to bring their vessels under control as waves crash against them. The Dutch took pride in their ability to prevail against such calamities through perseverance and faith. In Backhuysen’s composition, this optimism in the face of peril is represented by the golden light breaking through the clouds at left, signaling that the storm is about to pass and that these ships will survive.

Taming the water was a matter of survival, but mastering its challenges could be a great source of satisfaction. Willem van de Velde the Younger’s Ships in a Stormy Sea captures the sense of exhilaration a sailor feels as he charges across choppy water on a windy day (fig. 10). Close-hauled to the wind, his boat triumphantly breaks through the waves. A burst of sunlight illuminates the taut sail and silhouettes the skipper who, undeterred by the steel-gray clouds overhead, harnesses the energy of nature.

The Pleasures of the Water

The water, which was so essential to the formation of the Dutch Republic, was also a great source of enjoyment at all times of the year—the summer and winter pastimes associated with it provided numerous subjects for artists. Skating scenes were extremely popular in the Netherlands in the first half of the seventeenth century, which experienced some of the severest winters of the so-called Little Ice Age. During the winter months, people of all ages and social classes would take to the ice on hundreds of frozen canals and 1640, reclamation efforts added some two hundred thousand acres of land, over a third of which came as a result of windmills pumping water into a sophisticated network of dikes, canals, and locks that helped control water levels throughout the land. The Dutch had a clear understanding of the overwhelming force and destructive power of water, for when dikes broke, the land flooded, and when storms battered ships at sea, countless lives and precious cargo were put in jeopardy. Few paintings capture the threat posed by a storm as compellingly as Ludolf Backhuysen’s Ships in Distress off a Rocky Coast (fig. 9). Dutch cargo ships buffeted by violent winds and roiling waves struggle to stay clear of the coast and avoid the fate of the doomed ship whose
planks, and a pharmacy, not to mention sheds for constructing all the ships’ constituent parts. With these resources, the Dutch built the light, fast, and reliable ships that propelled them to the forefront of global maritime trade and transport.

Shipbuilding and Model-Making

The enthusiasm for marine subjects extended from two-dimensional paintings, prints, and drawings to three-dimensional ship models. The Dutch shipbuilding industry was unparalleled in Europe, both in size and in expertise. During the seventeenth century, the East India Company shipyard in Oostenburg was the largest in Europe, with 1,400 workers on-site. It included a warehouse for the goods and items amassed by the East India fleet, storage for supplies, a forge, a slaughterhouse, a steam building for bending wooden planks, and a pharmacy, not to mention sheds for constructing all the ships’ constituent parts. With these resources, the Dutch built the light, fast, and reliable ships that propelled them to the forefront of global maritime trade and transport.

Ship models, which were manufactured by the same hands that produced large-scale ships and sometimes reproduced actual, existing ships, were valuable both as documents of Dutch naval architecture and as finely crafted objects for display. Models of a modest scale were commonly owned by private collectors, while larger models were typically commissioned for the boardrooms of a large organization, such as one of the five admiralty boards of the Dutch naval administration. (Located in the main ports of Rotterdam, Zeeland, Amsterdam, Hoorn, and Harlingen, the boards were responsible for equipping the Republic’s naval fleets and managing its import and export taxes.)

In the summer months, the Dutch would gather on dune-lined beaches to enjoy sea breezes or head to swimming holes dappled with shade on secluded river banks to cool off. In Rembrandt van Rijn’s The Bathers, an intimate etching of summer recreation, men have come to an isolated spot to find respite from the heat (Fig. 12). With remarkable liveliness yet economy of line, Rembrandt conveyed the dense foliage of this private location. A series of vertical and horizontal marks suggests the stillness of the water, while the figures’ languid postures evoke the lazy mood of a hot day.
The late seventeenth-century model of a States yacht was likely created for an individual associated with the admiralty of Zeeland, the southernmost coastal province of the Netherlands (fig. 13). The roundels on the model’s stern feature the Zeeland arms as well as a red castle that is the symbol of Aardenburg, perhaps suggesting that the owner lived in that small coastal town. Yachts were light, swift vessels designed to carry out the various harbor duties of regulating shipping, collecting revenue, and preventing piracy. A small hull, such as on this model, would have allowed the yacht to go through shallow waters, and a leeboard attached to its sides would have helped stabilize its course—a design that would have been particularly advantageous for a crew charged with chasing the smugglers who plied shallow Dutch waters.

A much larger model of a States yacht may have belonged to one of the admiralty boards or to the city magistrates, though it is no longer known which one (fig. 14). Objects of this scale were certainly meant for public display—perhaps in a city hall or boardroom. This model may have commemorated the vessel used by the town magistrates to tour their harbor, or perhaps it replicated the private yacht of the admiral, who had to maneuver quickly through the fleet during naval battles. The elaborate decorations, including the figurehead and other intricate carvings, are common features of States yachts.

**THE DUTCH WERE ENORMOUSLY PROUD OF** their watery world, which they explored in paintings, prints, and drawings that are as beautiful as they are varied. Whether quiet harbor vistas or stormy seascapes, wintry skating scenes or summery bathing studies, these images tell the story of the marine activities that drove the Dutch economy, the seafaring prowess that ensured Dutch independence, and the natural beauty that assured the Dutch people of God’s presence. Their exquisite ship models reflect the importance of their shipbuilding industry and celebrate the artistry and performance of the vessels that sailed for the Dutch Republic. In this nation of seafarers, the popularity of marine imagery comes as no surprise; the extraordinary range of marine images they produced, however, is remarkable. Collectively, these works speak to the all-encompassing importance of the water in the Dutch Golden Age.
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COVER: Reinier Nooms, called Zeeman, Amsterdam Harbor Scene (detail), c. 1658, National Gallery of Art, The Lee and Juliet Folger Fund