

Amsterdam Harboursight

View from the Old City Inn

By Willem van de Velde the Elder c. 1640

w.v.velde



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Willem van der Velde the Elder

Leiden 1611 – 1693 London

'Harboursight Amsterdam'

Pen painting on panel

50.6 X 65.6 cm

Signed: W. V. Velde

c. 1640

Provenance:

United Kingdom, private collection

Literature:

Van de Velde and Son, Remmelt Daalder, p 48.

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Willem van de Velde the Elder (1611-1693) is considered to be one of the most successful and prominent marine painters of the Dutch Golden Age. He came from Leiden and moved to Amsterdam with his wife and son in 1636. In later years he had a studio together with his son, Willem van de Velde the Younger (1633-1707) with a vast production of paintings and grisailles of numerous ships in battles and seascapes. As a very early embedded journalist the Elder witnessed several sea-battles in the period of the Anglo-Dutch Wars (1652-1674) in which he proved himself to be a sharp observer and skillful draftsman, especially in reproducing ships. His action sketches can almost be read as hand-writing and often come with scribbled remarks about colors and the nature of decorations. Back in his workshop he developed them into grisailles (pen paintings), while his son used them as the basis for his fabulous oil paintings.

But not only sea battles were painted: ship's portraits were a very popular product which father and son Van de Velde produced in abundance. Many captains had their ships painted, sometimes in dangerous situations, and were prepared to pay well. The Van de Veldes created a market for the genre. Other marine painters worked before them, and many followed, but none of them reached the level of craftsmanship, the meticulous detail and the atmosphere the Van de Velde paintings present. With their work they inspired many other painters of their time, and though there were fantastic artists amongst them, a Van de Velde is always recognizable. Apart from their artistic value, the work of the father and his son contributed a lot to our knowledge of the ships of those days and of the lengths our ancestors went through to gather and protect the wealth that gave the era its name in Holland: the Golden Age.

Pen paintings

Pen painting was probably not a Van de Velde invention. Before him the famous graphic artist Hendrik Golzius (1558-1617) from Haarlem experimented with his pen on carefully prepared canvas, and the Frans Hals Museum owns a pen painting on panel by the engraver Jacob Matham (1571-1631) also from Haarlem, dated 1627.

Whether or not Van de Velde was aware of their activities we do not know, but it is likely that he was. What he made looked like an engraving, but was in fact a unique product that could be hung on a wall like a painting. Golzius, Matham and Van de Velde all used graphic techniques like washes and hatching.

The possibility to draw very minute details allowed Van de Velde to show how much he knew about the construction of ships and how to sail them.

He started his career with small drawings on vellum (a fine sort of parchment), which consists of prepared, chalked and polished animal skins, in those days mostly young goats. The limited size of the skins made him look for other materials. Wood was the logical solution, though it was not without restrictions. The material naturally shrinks and expands because of temperature and moisture influences and the larger they are, the more shrinkage was to be expected. But panels of different sizes were readily available, complete with a preparation layer made of chalk and glue, sold in standard sizes. The only thing the painter had to do was to apply a coat of thin oil paint, the so-called 'imprimatura'.

A day in a life

The pen painting we describe here is a work of a different nature than the violent paintings we mentioned above. It can be characterized as an example of genre painting: an image that not so much shows a specific historic event or ship,

but which allows us a view at normal life in the artist's era. Later in life Van de Velde was to make a lot of such compositions, which seemed to sell just as well as the ones of battles and storms, mostly because of his fabulous technique.



This pen painting, hitherto unknown, even in Michael Robinson's Catalogue of 1990, was probably made around 1640, and it offers us a view of the IJ, the inlet on the south bank of which Amsterdam is situated. There is no special occasion which caused the painter to depict this image: no sea-battle or disaster, no historic event, no gunfire or smoke, no stormy weather with ships in perilous situations. Just a quiet, peaceful everyday scene on the Amsterdam seaside.

And what was he looking at? Can we see through his eyes and watch what he depicted in the same detail he drew on his white panel?

Let's give it a try.



Willem van de Velde the Elder:
Freehand sketch.

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Willem van de Velde the Elder: Freehand
sketch of the decorations of a man-of-war.

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Willem van de Velde the Elder: Convoyship
protecting several 'wide-ships'.
Grisaille on vellum.

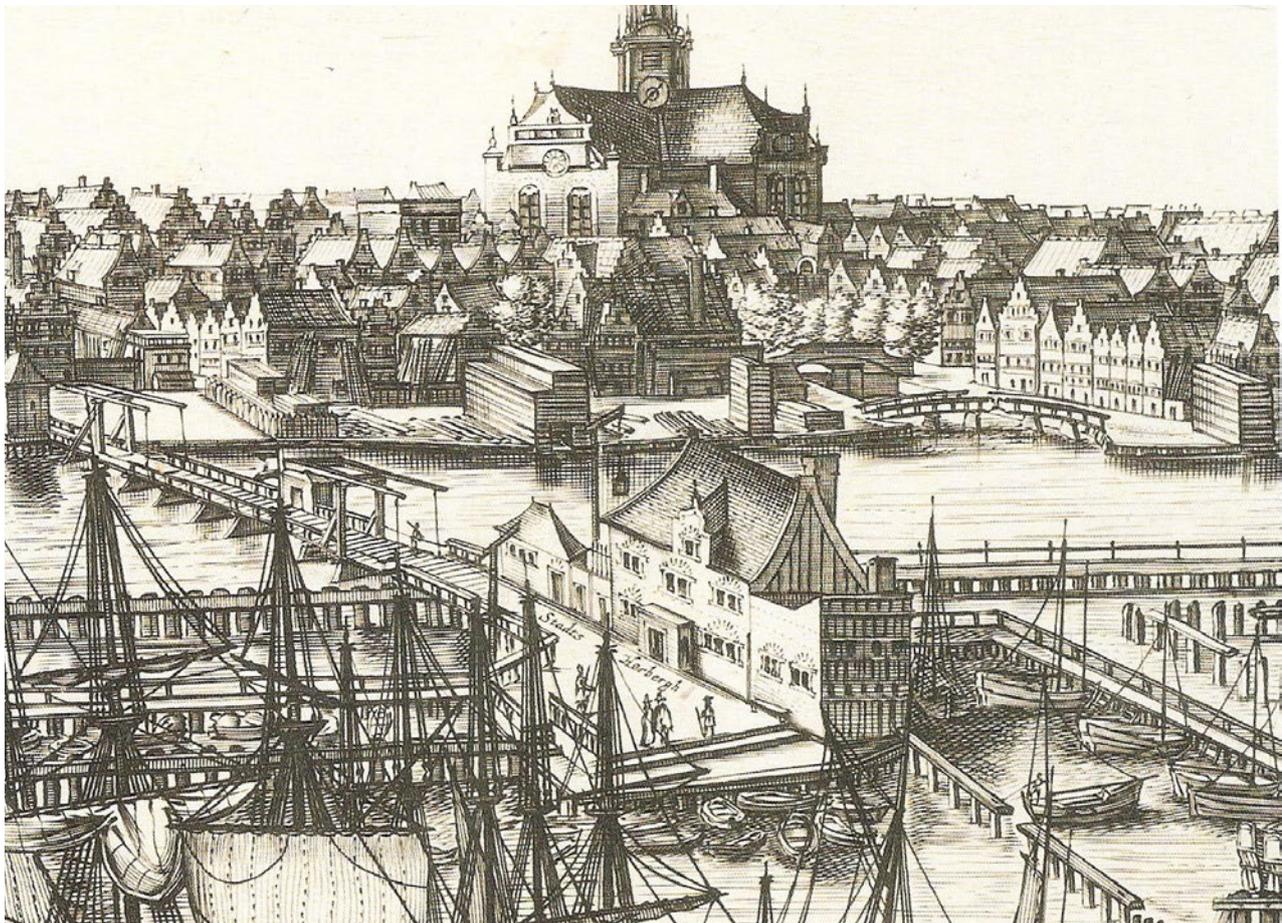
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The Old City Inn

We start with something we don't see in the picture: the exact location where the artist was standing or sitting with his sketch book on his lap. He must have been at the steps in front of the Old City Inn on the west side of the Amsterdam sea front, looking north-east towards the northern bank of the IJ. The Old City Inn was a public house, where travelers, who had arrived by ship, could recover from the cramped accommodations on board and where they could finally get a decent meal after the beans and bacon

the ship's cook had to offer. The Inn was also a pub and in that function the most logical location to berth the many yachts the upper class population of the city owned. After every relaxed sailing trip the party could have a drink in the bar-room. On city plans of those days we see the long row of pleasure vessels moored behind the Inn. Van de Velde was sitting on the other side of the building, but to show the viewer his location he took the liberty to relocate one of the yachts in a way that it is only just





Location of the Old City Inn. Map of Amsterdam and surroundings in 1770, Jan Mol.

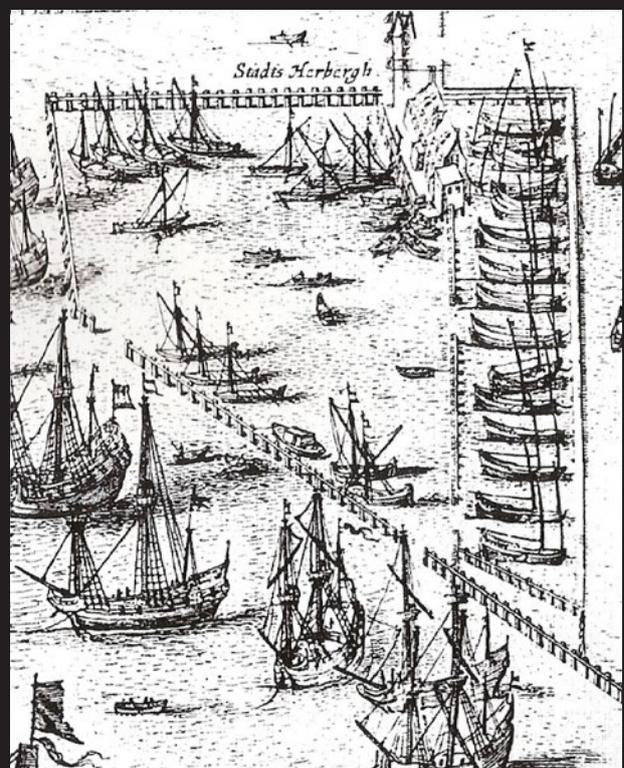
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The Old City Inn. Detail from C.J. Visscher: The skyline of Amsterdam seen from the IJ, c. 1650.

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Row of pleasure vessels moored behind the Old City Inn. Baltazar Florisz van Berckenrode, 1647.

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visible in his painting. It is the stern of the vessel we see at the very left of the picture. The elaborate horse-shoe shaped carving of the stern is clearly visible. The professional sailor on the steering stand is just about to bring some order on board, while listening to his superior, the man with the collar, who is standing on the lower deck. Here the table with the food and drinks was located, together with low benches along the ship's sides, to keep the party out of the brisk wind.

Van de Velde drew a lot of these elegant vessels. The early ones (The Dutch had discovered the healing effect of a relaxing day on the water as early as the beginning of the century) had a peculiar rig: no masts, just two long backwards raking yards, which were stuck in tabernacles in the bow and in the midship. Two triangular loose footed sails with nothing to handle but the sheets allowed for easy sailing. Later on variants with masts and bezan rig with small gaffs on top of the sails and with booms below were built.

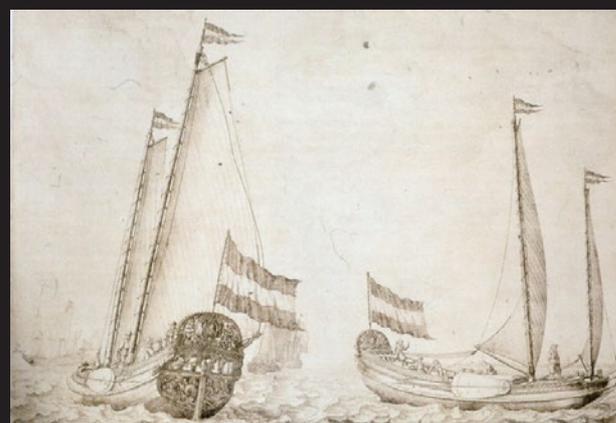


Model of a 42-foot pleasure yacht by Ab Hoving built after a contract in Nicolaes Witsen: *Aeloude en Hedendaegse Scheepsbouw en Bestier*, 1671, Amsterdam. p. 175. The rig consists of two loose footed triangular sails.

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Willem van de Velde the Elder: *Portrait of a pleasure yacht*. We see two depictions of the same pleasure yacht with masts and bezan rig with small gaffs on top of the sails and booms below. Pen painting on panel, 60 x 83,5 cm.

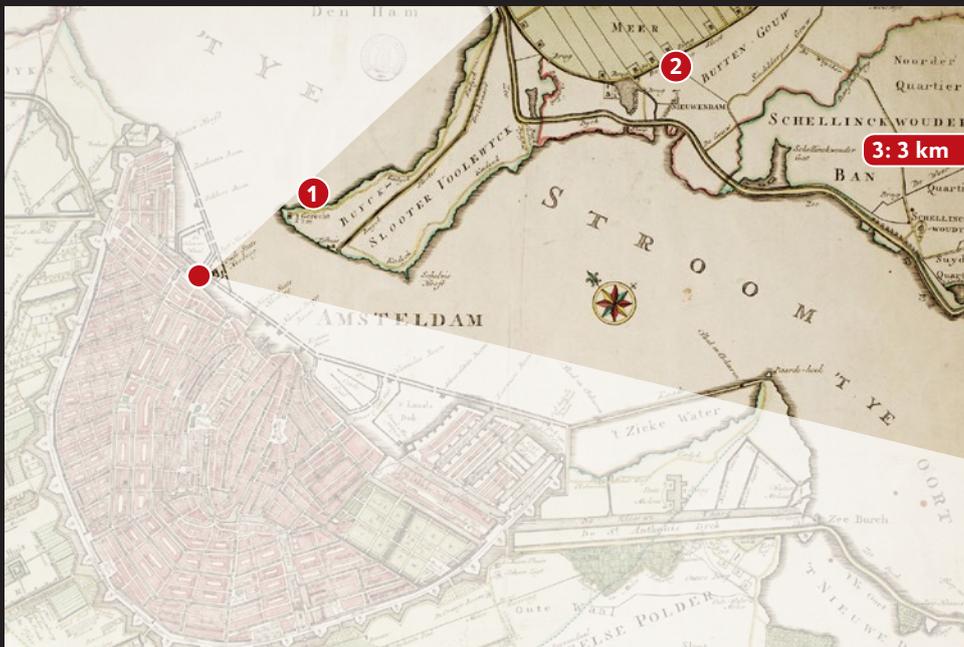
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The Other Side

We cannot help looking past the yacht and noticing the gallows on the cape of the northern bank, an area that was called Volewyck. The swaying bodies of the executed criminals were a warning to every visitor to remind him that the City Fathers did not tolerate law-breakers. The actual executions were performed on Dam Square, in front of City Hall (on the spot where the Royal Palace is located nowadays), to be watched by a great deal of the Amsterdam population, who were always looking for a diversion. After the 'party' the bodies were removed from the city centre for obvious reasons and exposed to the forces of nature in full view and as a warning for anyone who sailed into Amsterdam with undesirable plans.

Judging by the location of the gallows there is no doubt Van de Velde must have looked across the IJ from the steps in front of the Old City Inn. But the north bank of the inlet is not drawn with photographic accuracy. He must have narrowed his angle of view and drew the village of Nieuwendam with its church tower and its small harbor closer to the gallows than it really was. He used the same trick with the tower between the ships on the right. This still existing characteristic topped-off 16th century building belongs to another village, called Ransdorp, about 8 kilometers east from where he was standing. The tower is drawn closer and more to the left than topographically justified. Without doubt all this was done for reasons of composition. Both villages are part of the city of Amsterdam nowadays, but have kept their names.



Detail of the 1608 map by Joost Jansz Beeldsnijder, showing the distinctive square tower of Ransdorp.

BEELDBANK NOORD-HOLLANDS ARCHIEF

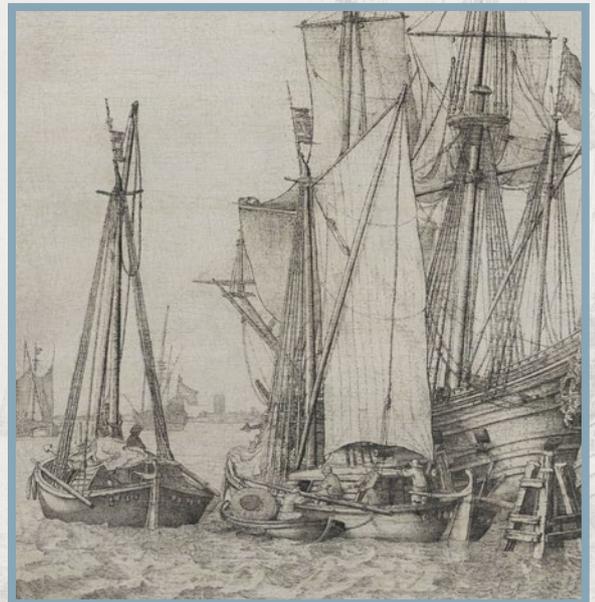
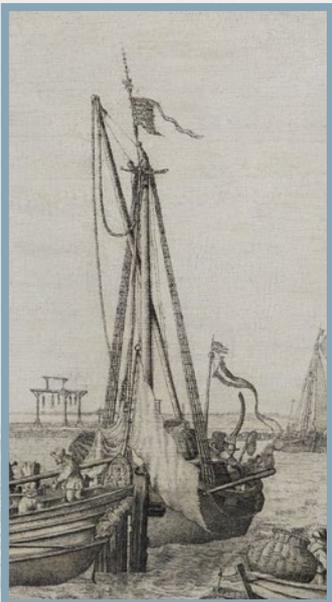
Water Hoys

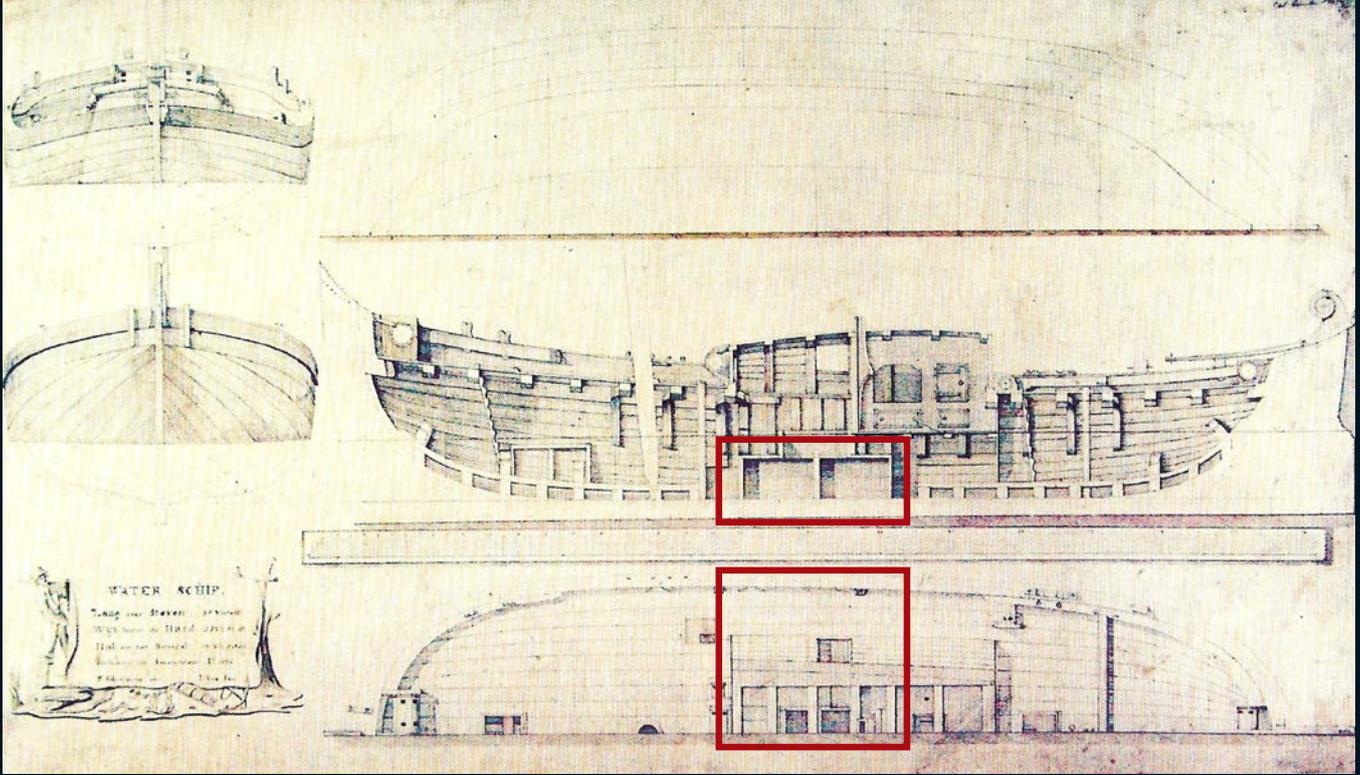
There are three fishing vessels in the picture, all of the same type. One just behind the stern of the yacht we mentioned before and two to the right, just left of the larger ships there. A 'waterschip' (litt: watership) was a fishing boat with a long pedigree. It was developed in the Middle Ages and because of its efficient shape it hardly changed over the centuries. Its underwater lines were so well designed that the vessel had no need for lee-boards, like so many other small craft of the period. It was used both for fishing eel and for herring and other salt water fish. For the latter a drag net was used, which explains the two booms protruding backwards. They kept the net open when dragged over the sea bottom. Because fishing with a such a net took a lot of force, the ship was heavily constructed. In the centre a watertight compartment was partitioned, into which the water had free access through hundreds of holes drilled in the lower outside planking. Thus the catch was kept fresh, which allowed the fishermen to spend more time at sea without having to return to the harbor.

All three boats on the painting show the characteristic short mast with the curved top and the traditional spritsails, held out by the heavy sail sprit. On top of the mast the elaborately adorned flagpoles are visible. The watership to the left shows a landing-net for lading out the catch from the fish-box and a curved bailer, used to remove spillwater from the vessel, both attached to the side of the ship.

The sturdy construction of the ship appeared to be profitable for tugging purposes too. Amsterdam has a long history of problems with the shallow entrance to the IJ, mainly due to a sandbank called Pampus. Waterships were used as tugs to drag large ships over the shoals. An average 40-meters long ship had a draught of four meters, the biggest ones more than five. The entrance to the IJ was in no way deep water, three meters at the most, so it often happened that ships touched the bottom or got stuck. Story has it that five or six waterships in a row, with their masts connected by a heavy rope, were capable of dragging a big ship through a meter of mud.

At the end of the century the city-carpenter Meindert Meeuwesz Bakker invented ship's camels. These were large pontoons that fitted the sides of the bigger ships to which they were strapped. The pontoons were pumped dry and raised the ship almost two meters. Waterships were the perfect tugs to transport the raised ships over the Zuiderzee to the roads of Texel and Terschelling, where they waited for the right winds to sail to their destination. For over a hundred years the ship's camels were used, until newly dug canals made them obsolete.





Pieter Glavimans: Technical drawing of a watership, 1802. The square box below the front of the cabin is the watertight compartment in which the fish is kept fresh.

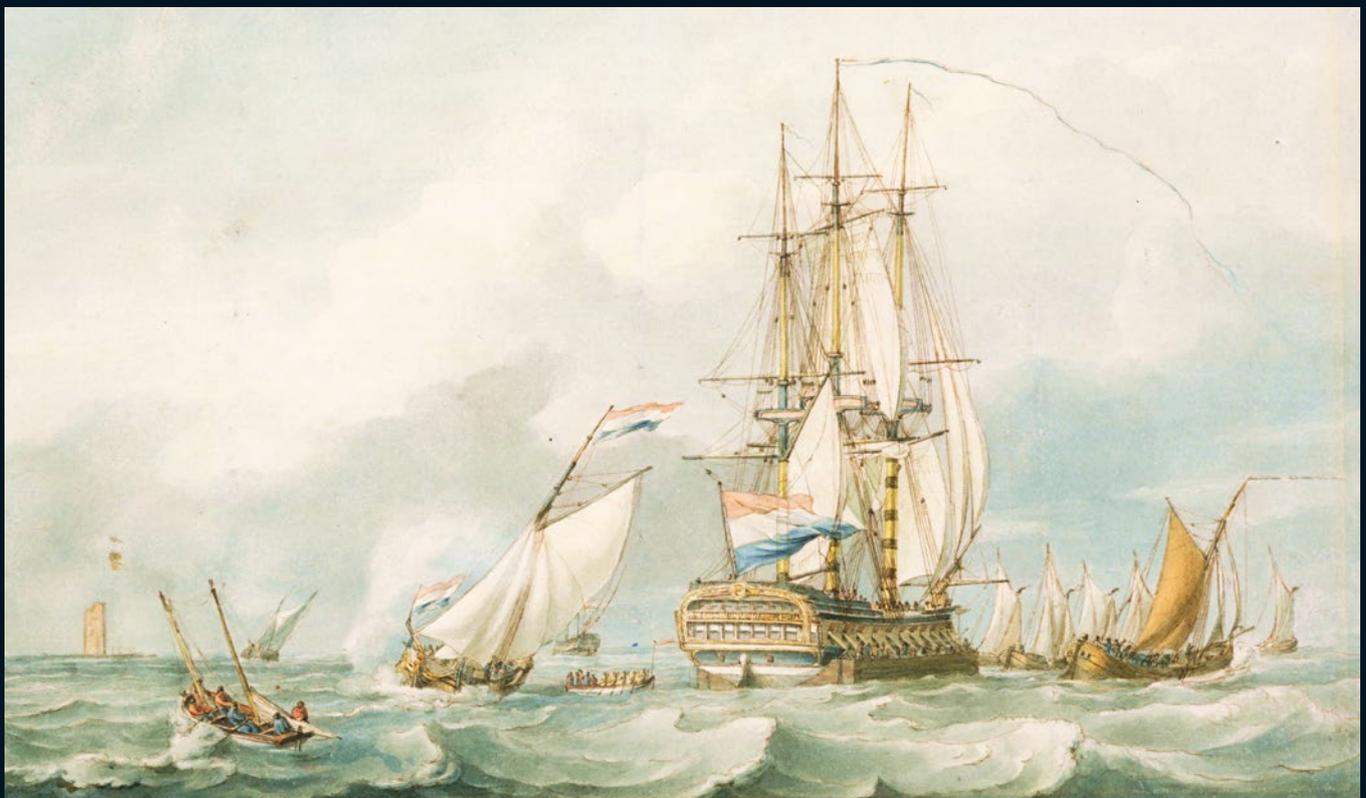
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Model of a watership.
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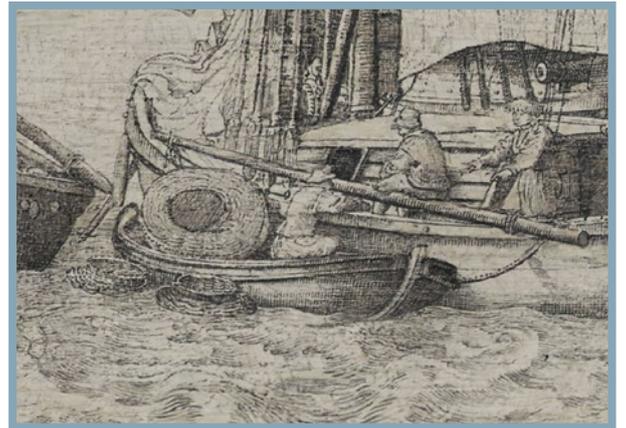
Hendrik Kobell: A ship-of-the-line on ship camels, towed by a row of waterships. 1775. Water-colour.

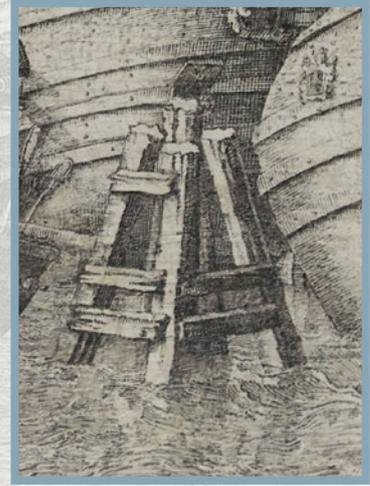
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Boats

On the foreground we see two rowing-boats with round objects on board, of which the present day spectator may wonder what they are. They are eel-traps, baskets with funnel-shaped rings inside to allow the eel in, but not let it escape. We see some of them on board the left watership. The traps were stuck to the bottom with long poles and lifted several times a day. One of them, just behind the left boat, is still half-way in the water to keep the catch fresh. The crew of the other boat alongside the watership most to the right is about to transfer the harvest of a day's fishing into the main vessel.





Dukdalf

At the stern of that watership we see a wooden construction standing in the water, which was meant to tie the ships to when mooring. In Dutch it is called a 'dukdalf'. This name is derived from the cruel Spanish governor Fernando Alvarez de Toledo, the Duke of Alba (Duc-d'Alve) (1507-1582), who executed a reign of terror in the Low Countries during the sixties and seventies of the previous century, killing a lot of people to suppress the call for freedom. This led to the Eighty-Years War (1568-1648) in which the Republic won its sovereignty.

The hate towards the governor was so deeply felt that every sailor would have loved to throw a rope around the duke's neck, which explains the name of the construction.



Titiaan: The duke of Alba.
Oil paint on canvas.



Fluits

There are two sea-going vessels to the right, which draw our attention. They are fluits. The fluit was an iconic Dutch ship type for the 17th century. Developed in the last years of the 16th century the vessel, which was initially mocked and laughed at for its slenderness, turned out to be a massive success. Within several years dozens of them sailed the European waters from Trondheim to Istanbul. They were even sold to foreign countries.

It was a remarkable vessel to look at: its bulbous pear-like shape with its prominent 'hips' and narrow taffrail were caused by the width of the upper deck. This was extremely narrow because of the Sound-tolls, which were calculated on the width of the upper deck. The narrow-decked fluit proved to be very profitable in trading with the Baltic.

It was a ship type that soon appeared in every trade one can think of. The art of adaption for every purpose is clearly visible in the many variants the vessel knew. They were easy to build and easy to sail with a much smaller crew than foreign vessels of the same sizes. Usual was a crew of twelve men. Sailing in the Baltic was popular with sailors, because of the mild discipline (often the sailors, including the skipper, originated from the same village and had known each other and their parents all their lives) and the unrationed food supply.

Many fluits were built in the Zaan area (just north of Amsterdam) and the shipbuilders would not even wait for commissioners to build them. Sooner or later buyers came anyway and if not, the shipbuilders themselves would send the ships to the Arctic Sea to catch whales. After this the vessels were sold to tradesmen, to be used as freighters. Massive amounts of leather, fur, woods, tar, potash, wax, tallow,

Model of a whaling fluit. Fluits were easy to adapt to whale-fishing. The fenders on the ship's sides prevent damage when the boats are hoisted out of the water, the beam over the after deck was installed for hoisting the boats.

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Jacob Gerritsz Loeff: Fluits after a storm off Enkhuizen, 1660. Oil on Canvas.

PRIVATE COLLECTION

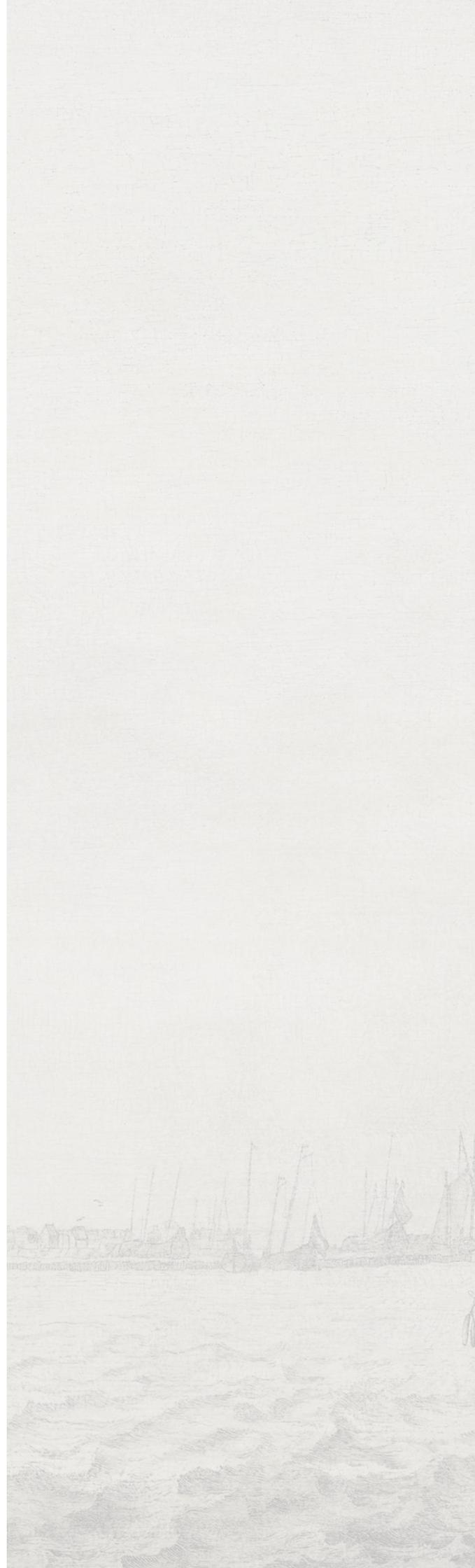


iron, copper, stockfish and alum from Scandinavia, linseed, hempseed, rye, wheat, woollen goods, yarns and linen from the Russian, Polish and the Northern Germany area were brought to Amsterdam to be traded for goods from France, Spain, Italy and the Levant, like wine, fruit, wool, cotton, silk, salt, oil, spices, lace, sugar and tobacco. In Amsterdam, the centre of this so-called 'Mother-trade', the money piled up and the wealth of the tradesmen can still be seen in the palaces they built along the Amsterdam canals. Fluits were not only spotted everywhere in Europe, even the East-India Company sent them in a slightly adapted form to Asia.

On the painting we see two distinct fluit types: To the right a small 'Noordsvaerder', about 80 foot long (23 meters) used for the Baltic trade.

To the left a so-called 'Straetsvaerder', called after the Gibraltar Strait, about 100 foot long (28 meters), a ship destined for the south of Europe. It can be recognized by its decoration on the narrow stern and its ordnance. Guns were not necessary when sailing to the Baltic Sea because of the stable political situation there, but they certainly were needed in the Mediterranean. North African pirates from Tunis, Tripoli, Sale, Algiers and Tangier and in closer waters the Dunkirk privateers were a constant threat for the traders. Cargos were taken, sailors made slaves. So bad was the situation that many sailors had insurance so that they could be bought free in case they were captured by the pirates.

It is no coincidence that Van de Velde pictured both types of fluits here. They can be regarded as the backbone of the Dutch prosperity of the century.





A distant ship

There is another vessel on the painting we want to discuss. It is the big ship in the distance and it probably plays the role of another major support of the Dutch trading empire. In fact it is hard to see whether we are dealing here with a heavy merchantman like an East-India Company ship or a man-of-war, but it is so clearly heavily armed, that it probably depicts the latter. Not necessarily an admiralty ship though. There were more organizations using warships. Cities like Amsterdam, Hoorn and Vlaardingen, so-called 'directie steden', had their own armed ships to protect their traders. They were used as convoy ships and sailed with the fleet to fend off people with wrong intentions.

The ship carries topgallant sails, suggesting that she sailed southern waters, just like the biggest of the two fluits. Topgallant sails are the third sails counted from below: first the main or fore sails, then the topsails and up above the topgallant sails. Usually admiralty ships carried them all the time, but what argues against an Admiralty or VOC vessel is that both the VOC shipyard and the Admiralty yard are situated in the eastern part of the Amsterdam harbor. It is hardly plausible that these ships would sail the



western part of the IJ, given the problems they had even entering the shallow inlet. Big ships never came to Amsterdam unless they were due for repair. To us it seems that Van de Velde has shown us the fluits as the basis of the Amsterdam wealth and the convoy ship as its protector.



Model of a 44-gun ship, 1648.

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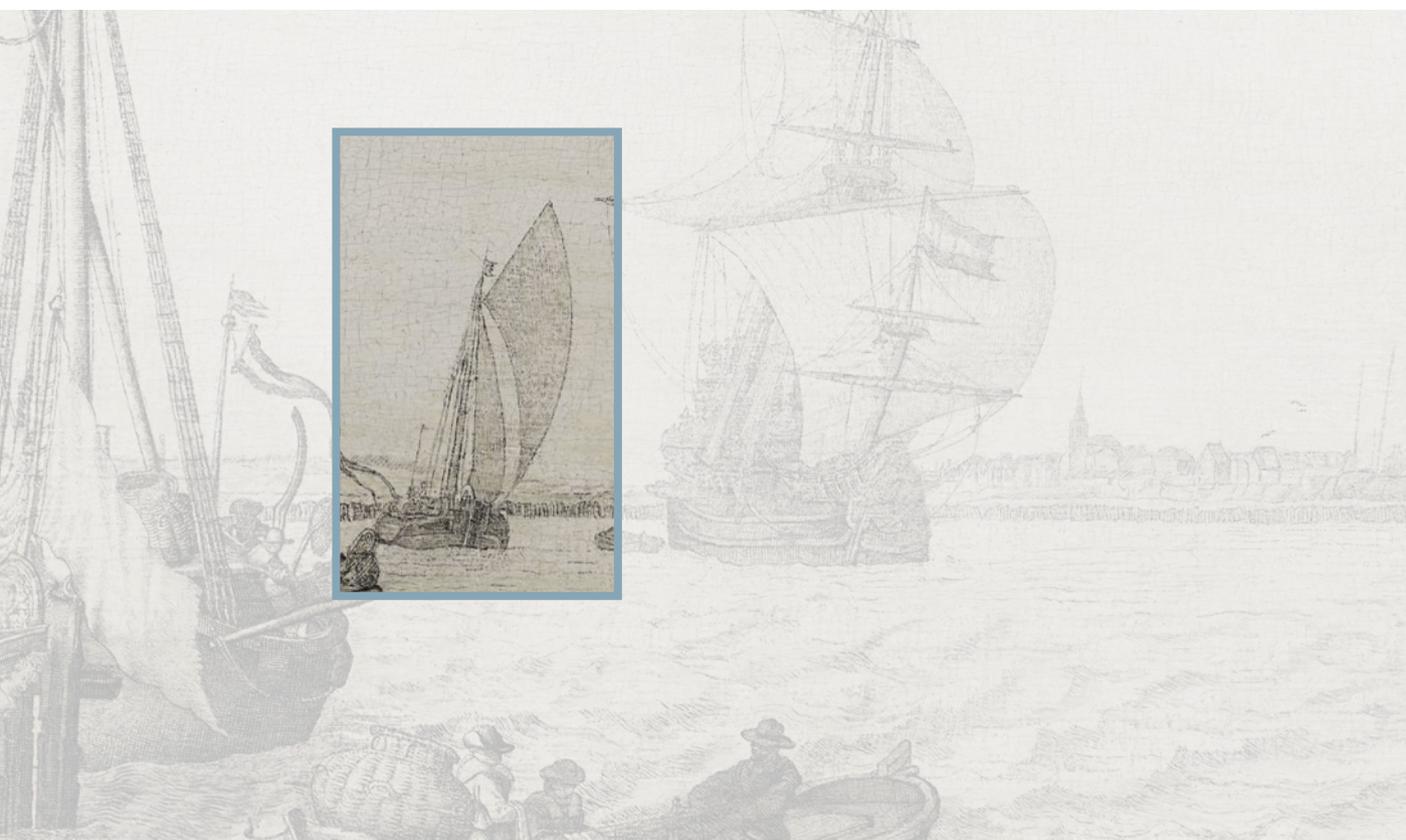
Riddles

To the left of the convoy ship we see an inshore trader with lee-boards. It is probably a galliot, but seen from this angle the type is hard to distinguish from a wide-ship or a boyer.

Another riddle is the vessel that is placed on the right far end, of the painting, hardly visible behind its two sails that are drying in

the wind. The combination of a very steep stem, a bowsprit without sails and a mast which is placed extremely far forward makes it impossible to hang a name on this ship type. Probably it was just drawn there to fill a gap in the composition.

The same may be true for the floating plank and the unidentifiable heap of rubbish, floating in the foreground. Mistakes in a pen painting are hard to correct. Did the artist try to hide a slip of his pen? Hardly imaginable.





Conclusion

There are various vessels moored at the northern bank of the IJ: more waterships, some yachts and even a three-masted ship anchored in the middle of the water.

It is an every-day scene. Peaceful and quiet with calm water and an overcast sky. There must have been hundreds, thousands of such days and Van de Velde has pictured one for us, so that, like him, we can be witness to this local view with horizons that lie far behind the other side of the IJ that we see here.

A masterpiece in its simplicity.

Sources

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