



**Jan Beerstraten**

1622 - Amsterdam - 1666

*A Dutch Three-master and other Shipping off a Rocky Swedish Coast*

Oil on panel 89.8 x 123 cm

Signed with initials bottom, to left of centre "I B"

**Provenance**

By descent in an English noble family

Under a sunny sky with towering clouds a Dutch ship sails. More Dutch vessels can be made out in the middle zone and further distance. A Swedish three-master under full sail approaches from the right middle ground. Between the two coastlines a stiff breeze makes the waves go up. The torn flags tell us the ships have survived even heavier weather. The long shadows on the choppy water add another dramatic note.

The scene probably takes place off the Swedish coast on the Sound, a narrow strait between present day Denmark and Sweden where Dutch mercantile ships sailing to the Baltic had to pass through. The Dutch called their trade with countries bordering on the East Sea their "moedernegotie" (mother-trade). As the backbone of their economy this trade was of fundamental importance to the Dutch Republic.

The Dutch had to pay the Danish toll to pass through the Sound. In 1644 the Danish king dramatically increased the charges. The Dutch replied with adding war ships to their trade convoys thus making the Danish rethink their decision. In 1658 Sweden threatened to annex Denmark in order to control both sides control the Sound. To prevent Sweden from achieving this, the Dutch state sent a war fleet under the command of Lieutenant-Admiral Jacob van Wassenaer Obdam to secure their passage to the Baltic and to aid the Danish. The Dutch won this *Battle of the Sound*, also depicted by Jan Beerstraten (Scheepvaartmuseum in Amsterdam), and the Swedish fleet had to abandon their siege. The sudden death of the Swedish king Charles X in 1660 brought a definite end to the threatening situation and only then could the Dutch ships again sail to the Baltic undisturbed.

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# Bijl-Van Urk

Beerstraten's preserved oeuvre consists of paintings and drawings with dated works from 1642 to 1666, the year of his death. He probably started his career painting landscapes before focusing more and more on seascapes and harbour views from the early 1650s onwards. Interestingly, Beerstraten regularly depicted subjects relating to the trade with the Baltic and beyond. Apparently he dwelled in circles where he could recruit clients for this specific subject matter. The already mentioned gigantic canvas with the *Battle of the Sound* is one example. Recently a sizable panel was sold at Christie's in Amsterdam showing a view of a bay with rocks, possibly Smeerenburg; one of the settlements on Amsterdam, a small island north of Spitsbergen bordering on the Arctic Ocean used for whale fishery.<sup>1</sup>

Beerstraten travelled extensively through the Netherlands, documenting his visits to the many towns in still-preserved drawings. The artist is also known to have travelled to Norway and Sweden. This of course begs the question whether the present harbour view could be topographically accurate and based on drawing made *sur le motif*. This does not seem to be the case: The castle on the left bank cannot be identified as one of the castles on the Swedish coast along the trade route of the Dutch ships. The same fortified structure appears, albeit in slightly altered form, in another, Mediterranean harbour views.<sup>2</sup> In many of his coastal scenes Beerstraten displays a penchant for fanciful and exotic architecture while also painting city views that are topographically faithful, of his native Amsterdam and its environs in particular. It is nonetheless very likely that we are looking at the Sound through Beerstraten's imaginative eyes, given the two coastlines facing each other.

This sweeping view constitutes one of the artist's finest works. Given its large dimensions and the use of an excellent quality oak wood panel it will have been a commission, one would think possibly from an admiral of a Baltic convoy or an investor in the Baltic trade.<sup>3</sup> The ship in the centre of the composition could very well be a ship's portrait.<sup>4</sup> It flies the flag of the Zeeland admiralty from its main mast so it is conceivable that Beerstraten's patron was a member of this body.<sup>5</sup> Another Dutch three-master moored at the coast also appears to fly the Zeeland flag. Both Dutch and Swedish ships fly red flags from their sterns but Beerstraten did not include any recognizable emblem on them. From the 1660s onwards the coat-of-arms and flag of the Dutch States General was a golden lion on a red background. But since both parties fly red flags Beerstraten could have represented the blood flag, indicated a heightened state of vigilance between the Dutch and Swedish vessels. Beerstraten thus probably depicted this scene against the backdrop of the tense political situation between the Republic and Sweden during the 1650s. Typical for Beerstraten is the decidedly un-Dutch fall of light

# Bijl-Van Urk

on the water and the imposing cloudscape. This quality is often praised in his work and he is often compared for it to the famous French landscape and harbour view painter Claude Gellée (1604/05 - 1682).<sup>6</sup>

Jan was the son of Abraham Danielsz from Emden. He married in Amsterdam Magdalena Bronckhorst, the daughter of an ebony worker, in 1642. From his first marriage he had eleven children, eight of which still alive at the time of their mother's death, among whom Abraham (born 1643 or early 1644) and Johannes (baptized 8 August 1652) also became painters. Jan remarried shortly after his first wife died in 1665 but he himself died the next summer. Jan lived all his life in Amsterdam, first in the Elandstraat but after he married, he moved to a house near the Haarlemmerpoort, where he had a shop sign hung out with the name 'De schipbreuk' (The shipwreck). In 1651 he bought a house opposite the Nieuwe Doolhof on Rozengracht and here hung that same sign. An inventory of his estate drawn up after his death includes painting by fellow painters such as Jan Porcellis, Jan van der Heyden, Philips Wouwerman and Pieter de Hooch.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> 25-26 November 2014, lot 57 in Amsterdam.

<sup>2</sup> For instance one that was auctioned in Paris (Ader) 12 October 1984 (115 x 167.5 cm).

<sup>3</sup> The lion's share of Beerstraten's output is thought to have been produced on spec for the free market. See for this: L. Bronckhorst, 'De schipbreuk' van Jan Abrahamsz. Beerstraten. Hét atelier voor betaalbare marineschilderijen in Amsterdam', *Desipientia* 23 (2016), nr. 2, p. 18-22.

<sup>4</sup> Jan Beerstraten did paint 'portraits' of real shipping. Compare for instance his *Squadron of Ships under Command of Sijbrand Barandsz Waterdrinker leaving from the Taag Estuary* formerly with art dealer Theo Daatselaar (shown at Tefaf 2013; present whereabouts unknown), which contains four warships, three of which could be identified. Another example is his *View of the IJ with the Ship 'De Windhond'* (present whereabouts unknown). This was a war ship that formed part of the fleet that in 1656 together with the Danish war fleet successfully fought against the Swedish. Numerous other examples can be mentioned.

<sup>5</sup> In many of Beerstraten's marines and harbour views ships flying the Zeeland admiralty flag can be observed. Some of them even feature Zeeland sites as a backdrop. Two paintings in the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen show Zeeland ships respectively with Flushing and Fort Rammekens in the background. Middelburg was the second, and a leading port in the Republic and Zeeland was a powerful province. This may in part account for the prominence of Zeeland ships in Beerstraten's oeuvre.

<sup>6</sup> A 'View of an Italian sea port, with ships and figures, as fine as Claude' was auctioned on 18 June 1783 in London as lot 48. And on 24 September 1832 in Paris a marine was sold 'd'une couleur étonnante et vapoureux comme Claude Lorrain'.