

# Bijl-Van Urk

## Jan Porcellis

Ghent *circa* 1584 - 1632 Zoeterwoude

### *Ships in a Gale*

Oil on panel 47 x 71 cm

Signed with initials on a piece of driftwood lower left: "I P C"

Datable *circa* 1628

## Provenance

With Dr Max Stern Gallery, Düsseldorf, sold by the latter at Sale Cologne (Lempertz), 12 November 1938, lot 89 (as Jan Porcellis) Private collection, Germany, consigned to Metz, Heidelberg, 2016, and then restituted to the heirs of Max Stern

## Literature

L.O. Goedde, *Tempest and shipwreck in Dutch and Flemish art: convention, rhetoric, and interpretation*, (diss. Pennsylvania State University) 1989, pp. 180-181, ill. (as monogrammist J.P.C.)

C. Hickly, 'Two Dutch Old Masters returned to estate of Jewish dealer Max Stern', *The Art Newspaper*, 12 December 2016

Three-masters are labouring to hold their ground in a menacing tempest. The one in the foreground has thrown out an anchor to prevent being tossed against the dangerously rocky shore. Luckily the storm is subsiding. A blue sky emerges and the heavy showers have already moved to the far distance. All will be well.

This painting sums up the accomplishments of Jan Porcellis, that great pioneer of seascape painting. Unknown to scholars until its recent reappearance it is a true rediscovery and a spectacular addition to the artist's small oeuvre, which counts no more than about fifty paintings.<sup>1</sup>

Masterpieces such as the present explain why Porcellis was hailed as the foremost marine painter already in his own day.<sup>2</sup> Marine painting before Porcellis was naïve,

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anecdotal, colourful, unsophisticated and decorative. In Porcellis' hands the genre quickly matured into an independent art form that could rival with other already established branches of painting. Porcellis achieved an unprecedented level of verisimilitude in the rendition of the atmosphere. Surely it was this quality that made the perceptive connoisseur Constantijn Huygens remark that Porcellis was way ahead of Hendrick Vroom, the most respected marine painter of the older generation.

Porcellis was held in the highest esteem by fellow artists as well. They avidly collected his work. The Fleming Rubens owned one, Rembrandt six, Allart van Everdingen thirteen and the marine artist Jan van de Cappelle possessed no less than sixteen. Samuel van Hoogstraten calls Porcellis in 1678 'the great Raphael of sea-painting'.<sup>3</sup> Symptomatic for his rising fame was that in 1628, when Porcellis was living in Voorburg, the Haarlem city chronicler Samuel Ampzing included him in his *Beschrijvinge ende lof der stad Haerlem*, claiming him as a Haarlem artist.

Porcellis' contribution to marine painting is indeed formidable.<sup>4</sup> In our storm scene the powerful sense of drama, the overwhelming illusion of space and the expressive treatment of light and dark supersede the genre. Few artists were capable of instilling such a gripping realism into the traditional subject of ships in distress on a rough sea. Numerous older marine painters treated this theme that could serve as a metaphor for human failings, excessive pride, unhappy love and the affairs of state, but Porcellis was the first to make the spectacle palpable.<sup>5</sup>

Striking about our painting is the relative ease and technical economy, evidenced by the spirited brushwork and ochre ground that in particular shimmers in the water and in the blue sky, with which Porcellis conjured such a complex but fully convincing storm scene. This remarkable feature brings in mind the well-known anecdote that Hoogstraten tells about a contest between Francois Knibbergen, a painter of uniform landscapes, Jan van Goyen and Porcellis.<sup>6</sup> They each were to execute a painting in one day. The first immediately started to paint, detail for detail, and each detail seemed finished at once. Van Goyen set about in an entirely different manner. He first covered his panel with dark and lighter areas and then finished the painting effortlessly by adding a great variety of landscape motifs. Porcellis, however, seemed to waste time before actually beginning to paint, while in fact he was composing the painting in his head first. Porcellis did finish his painting before the day was out and Hoogstraten tells that his work was superior because of its 'well-chosen naturalness' and because of something extraordinary which one never sees in paintings that flow easily from the hand.

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Indeed, the present painting must have been carefully thought through, too, before Porcellis set to work. First, the murky canopy of towering clouds so effectively contrasted with the shafts of sunlight that emanate from the left, commands the viewer's attention. Only then does Porcellis lead our eye to the action on the water. The storm scene is full of keenly observed details and each serves a clear purpose in telling the story. For instance, the seagulls circling like vultures round the vessels heighten the dramatic tension but also indicate the twists in the wind and enhance the illusion of depth. The wreckage drifting on the angry poetically evokes the hardships the vessels already have had to endure.

No doubt the present work stems from the artist's late period, when Porcellis was at the peak of his powers. The large and impeccably preserved panel stands out between his later paintings, which more often are smaller scenes featuring small shipping. Porcellis tried his hand at the subject of large ships in stormy weather earlier in his career, for instance a sea at storm, datable to around 1612, still in the mannerist style of Hendrick Vroom.<sup>7</sup> A somewhat later painting of ships in rough water is in the Hallwylska Museet in Stockholm.<sup>8</sup> A 1624 dated painting with three-masters in stormy weather in the Anhaltische Gemäldegalerie - Schloss Georgium, Dessau proves helpful in more firmly assessing Porcellis' development.<sup>9</sup> Its realism is more advanced, while retaining the dark green water that finally has disappeared in our painting to give way to a monochrome and fully convincing account of the restless sea. Allowing for a few years to elapse before Porcellis achieved this new idiom, our painting can be dated to around 1628. This rare and late masterpiece by Porcellis is a highpoint in Dutch marine painting of the Golden Age.

Jan Porcellis was the son of a ship's captain, the Flemish Jan Pourchelles, who took his family to Rotterdam, fleeing Spanish persecutions. This is where the young artist is first recorded in 1605 on the occasion of his marriage. According to the eighteenth-century biographer of artists Arnold Houbraken, Jan trained in Haarlem with Hendrick Vroom. He almost certainly started his career as a graphic artist, probably working for the Rotterdam engraver and publisher Jan van Doetechum, who specialized in maps, book illustrations and ship portraits. The latter's wife was related to the English publisher of emblem books Geoffrey Whitney, which may be the connection that explains Porcellis' stay in England. A daughter of Jan was born in London sometime before 1615. Back in Rotterdam Porcellis endured financial hardship and in 1615 he went bankrupt, leaving Rotterdam and settling next in Antwerp, where he is mentioned as a painter for the first time. In 1617 he was received as an independent master in the town's painters' guild.

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His financial troubles continued until he settled in Haarlem in 1622. Here his career finally took off. In 1624 Porcellis went to live in Amsterdam and two years later took up residence in Voorburg near The Hague. His final years were spent in the village of Zoeterwoude near Leiden, where he died a prosperous man, owning extensive properties.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A *catalogue raisonné* of Porcellis' works, paintings and drawings, was compiled by John Walsh: *Jan and Julius Porcellis: Dutch marine painters*, (diss. University of Columbia) Ann Arbor [MI], 1974.

<sup>2</sup> On the reception of Porcellis' works in his lifetime, see for example: E.J. Sluijter, 'Dien grooten Raphel in het zeeschilderen!' Over de waardering voor Jan Porcellis' sobere kunst door eigentijdse kenners', in Ch. Dumas et al. (ed.), *Liber Amicorum Marijke de Kinkelder: Collegiale bijdragen over landschappen, marines en architectuur*, The Hague 2013, pp. 343-358.

<sup>3</sup> See for this Hoogstraten's treatise: *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst: anders de zichtbaere werelt*, Rotterdam 1678, p. 238.

<sup>4</sup> See for this for example: J. Walsh, 'The Dutch marine painters Jan and Julius Porcellis, I: Jan's early career', *The Burlington Magazine* 116 (1974), pp. 653-654, *passim*.

<sup>5</sup> For the various meanings these images could harbour, see: Goedde, *op. cit.* (see under literature), *passim*.

<sup>6</sup> Hoogstraten, *op. cit.*, pp. 237-238.

<sup>7</sup> This painting is part of a series of three. One is lost, the remaining two are kept at Hampton Court. Panel 41.5 x 124.5 cm. See for this Walsh, *op. cit.* (1974), nr. A1, pp. 163-165.

<sup>8</sup> Walsh dates this painting – panel 35 x 67 cm - 1614-18, see: Walsh, *op. cit.* (1974), nr. A3, pp. 168-169.

<sup>9</sup> Panel 35 x 56 cm. See: Walsh, *op. cit.* (1974), nr. A25, pp. 205-206.