

# **“God made the world but the Dutch made the Netherlands” : Marine Paintings of the Dutch Golden Age**

## **Background Notes**

**Hendrika Foster — 7 December 2022**



**Adrien van der Venne. *Winter Landscape*, 1614. Gemäldegalerie, Berlin**

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Van der Venne's painting of a winter landscape shows the orange, white and blue *Prinsenvlag* of the 17th century. The red, white and blue flag of the States General became official in 1937. This painting shows the new invention of the ice yacht which could move very fast on inland waterways. This gave the Dutch a major advantage over the Spanish. A Dutch soldier could also skate whilst carrying a gun.

The sea is an ever present, dominant factor in life in the Netherlands. Learning to control it, to some extent, has pre-occupied the Dutch for centuries and turned it into a maritime power. Other countries envied this, so the land had to be won twice, once from the sea and then from foreign invaders, and then from those who challenged the trade routes East and West to America.

The Portuguese first discovered the Spice Routes after rounding the Cape of Good Hope. Vasco da Gama in 1497 brutally established a trade route from Lisbon, round the coast of Africa, Arabia and India through the Straits of Malacca to the Spice Islands. Spain would follow, establishing an outpost in the Philippines, named for Philip II of Spain. The Spaniard's rebellious and commercially adept Dutch subjects also appreciated the commercial potential of the new Spice Route and by mid 1600s they had overtaken the Portuguese both in numbers of ships and tonnage sailing around the Cape.

In art, seascape then landscape developed rapidly as new genres. It usually also included water in the form of rivers or canals and from this, seascape painting, or marine painting, gained popularity as an expression of Dutch pride in achievement. In the highly competitive art world of the 17th century, Dutch artists became specialists in their chosen genre. Gradually, as an expression of pride in the natural surroundings, images became specifically identified with individual cities or areas. The addition of a Dutch flag or perhaps a recognisable church spire or harbour became usual, and on occasions, a 'portrait' of a ship would take pride of place.

For some artists the painting became a poetic metaphor, with a calm sea representing peace and quiet, with stormy waves indicating challenges in life and the necessity for "Calm amongst billows". In 1572, Willem I, Prince of Orange and Nassau, the Father of The Netherlands, added the device of two anchors - Double Certainty - symbol of the freedom won by the Dutch from

Spanish domination - to his motto of *Je maintiendrai* — I will maintain. The nautical symbol well represented the needs of this maritime nation.

During the 80 Years' War, the Dutch blockaded the river Scheldt thus removing Antwerp's access to the sea and crippled the maritime trade of the Southern Netherlands which was controlled by the Spanish. This triggered the rapid development of Amsterdam. The Dutch gained command of the sea which they held for a century, though they disputed it with Britain with three naval wars.

Trade requires ships which were built in unprecedented quantities. It is estimated that during the 17th century the Dutch built 40,000 seaworthy vessels. In 1670 it is estimated that the Netherlands owned just under half the total tonnage of European shipping. Trade requires protection which led to the development of a well-equipped navy. Ships were smaller than some of the English and French warships as a limited draught was necessary in relatively shallow home waters. Nonetheless, the Dutch had a well-founded reputation as formidable close-quarter fighters at sea.



**Hendrick Vroom.** *The Explosion of the Spanish Flagship during the Battle of Gibraltar 25th April 1607.* c1621. Rijksmuseum

**Hendrick Cornelisz Vroom (1566-1640).** Known as the first European artist to specialize in marine painting. Born in Haarlem, he travelled extensively, including 3 years in Italy, before returning home in 1591 to concentrate on large, detailed pictures of ships, fleets and sea battles, usually celebrating Dutch marine power. He also designed tapestries, the most famous being *The Defeat of the Spanish Armada by the English Fleet*, commissioned by Lord Howard of Effingham which hung in the House of Lords, Westminster until destroyed by the fire of 1834. In 1594 Vroom produced his first known, dated marine painting, featuring the *Harbour of Dordrecht*, destroyed in 1945. This unique skill is noted by Carel van Mander (the Dutch Vasari) in his *Schilderboek* first published in 1604. Undoubtedly Vroom's new speciality was a popular success with the Dutch who had such close links with the sea and shipping. Marine painting preceded Dutch landscape painting by two decades.



**Jan Porcellis.** *Vessels in a Strong Wind.* c1630. Private Collection

**Jan Porcellis (1584-1632).** A highly talented marine painter of his time. Born in Ghent, he worked in Rotterdam, Middelburg, London, Antwerp, Haarlem and Amsterdam, before settling in Zoeterwoude in southern Holland. He accomplished the transition from early realist seascape with its emphasis on detailed multicoloured ship portraiture to a tonal monochromatic representation of skies, sea and atmosphere. Described by Van Hoogstraten as “the great Raphael of marine painting”.

**Willem van der Velde the Elder ( 1611-93).** Born in Leiden. From 1652 he was the official Dutch war artist recording the sea fights between Dutch and English navies. He evolved a grisaille painting technique which enabled him to render these engagements in a more permanent form than drawing, but with maximum speed and historical fidelity. He also painted shipping pieces in oil paint. In 1673, to escape the effects of the French invasion and a tumultuous marriage, he changed sides and settled in England with his son, Willem the Younger. In 1674 they were officially appointed naval war artists under the English Crown, with a studio in the Queen’s House at Greenwich until 1691. Both artists entered the service of Charles II and then his successor James II.



**Willem van der Velde the Younger.** *Ships on Calm Water.* c1658. Mauritshuis. A painting which had a huge influence upon J.M.W. Turner.

**Willem van der Velde the Younger (1633-1707).** Renowned as the greatest marine painter of the Golden Age. His remarkable skill with the brush, his understanding of light and his profound knowledge of and interest in weather conditions, which he would often experience first-hand out on the water with pen and paper, breathed life into all his subjects. After his move to England with his father in 1673, he painted not only records of sea battles and individual ships but also atmospheric seascapes. He is the originator of the English tradition of marine painting.

**Jan van der Capelle (1624-79).** A marine painter of the 'Classic' phase of Dutch art. He specialized in early morning or evening scenes in harbours or the mouths of rivers with ships at anchor. This included adding varying types

of dramatic skies with sunrise and sunset adding to the drama. These became a metaphor for anticipation or closure as a vessel returned to the home port. He also painted winter landscapes which included the particularly Dutch way of travel upon frozen water. Painting was a part-time activity, as Jan ran his family's dye-works, and his fortune thus made enabled him to accumulate one of the greatest art collections of the period. This included more than 500 drawings by Rembrandt as well as quantities of works by other seascape painters. Most major collections include his paintings.

During the 17th century, England and the Dutch Republic waged war three times. 1. 1652-54; 2. 1665-67; 3. 1672-74. The causes were rivalry between the two trading nations and political power struggles. The battles were largely fought at sea. During the 2nd war, England was supported by France. The end of the conflict was expedited by the unexpected Dutch attack on the English naval base at Chatham in June 1667. A chain across the river which was supposed to block the entry of enemy ships was broken by the Dutch ship *Pro Patria*. Two English ships were seized and six more were burnt. The English Admiral's ship the *Royal Charles* was sailed back to Holland as a trophy. One month later a peace treaty was signed. The Dutch Republic lost New Amsterdam in America which later became New York and received Suriname in exchange. New Amsterdam was named for the Netherlands by Peter Stuyvesant. The Dutch Navy scored numerous victories and overseas trade flourished through the 17th century. Marine artists immortalised successful commanding officers who commissioned paintings to record their heroic deeds.





**Nicolas Loockemans.** Gold and Enamel Goblets depicting the successful Dutch attack on the English naval base at Chatham. 1668. Rijksmuseum.

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