

## There is no Such Thing as 'Dutchness' or 'Flemishness' in Seascape Painting

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[ GARY SCHWARTZ ]

In his gripping monograph of 1989, *Tempest and Shipwreck in Dutch and Flemish Art: Convention, Rhetoric and Imagination*, Larry Goedde wrote:

'The study of seascape has been constrained by the nationalist and temporal boundaries that have tended to divide most landscape studies. In view of the interwoven relationship of Dutch, Flemish and Italian seascape production over two centuries, however, it is sensible to make this survey of the pictorial tradition as broad as possible.'<sup>1</sup>

This is indeed a sensible observation, and it would be nice to think that it carried universal conviction. That has however not happened. National distinctions, whether or not based on political nationalism, continue to be taken for granted or emphatically insisted on, at the cost of the broader understanding sought by Goedde. On 26 September 2002, Christopher Brown delivered in Amsterdam the first Golden Age lecture of the Center for Golden Age Studies of the University of Amsterdam. He gave his talk the programmatic title *The Dutchness of Dutch Art*. The title was adapted from a famous book from 1956 by Nikolaus Pevsner (1902-1983), *The Englishness of English Art*. Brown said,

'Pevsner argued that the historical circumstances, economic, religious and social of English society in the eighteenth century produced a different kind of art, which was significantly different from the art produced by contemporaries elsewhere in Europe. This, applied to the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century, is essentially my argument today.... It ... seems to me ... that the great majority of paintings made [in the northern Netherlands] between about 1620 and 1670 ... had very little to do with what was happening elsewhere and that the very special circumstances of the north Netherlands led to the creation of an art which is strikingly different from the art of elsewhere in Western Europe.'<sup>2</sup>

The subject has therefore wider connotations than merely the distinction between Dutch and Flemish seascape painting. If Dutch seascape painting, one of the signature products of the Golden Age, turns out to be not at all 'strikingly different from the art of elsewhere in Western Europe', then the basis will be undermined for the assertion that different historical, economic, religious and social circumstances necessarily lead to art of a significantly different kind.



Consider as evidence four stormy seas painted between 1630 and 1690. The painter of only one of them was born in the northern Netherlands, but he did most of his work in England. One was born in Ghent and worked in Antwerp and London as well as four different Holland towns. The third was born in Antwerp and never left there, while the fourth was born in Emden in German Frisia and became Mr. Amsterdam himself in seascape. They were all formed under different circumstances of the kind adduced by Pevsner and Brown and they worked in different environments. Yet it takes specialist knowledge of seascape painting to recognize the differences between them. An observer equipped only with knowledge of the social, economic and political circumstances in the Free City of Emden, the Dutch Republic, the Spanish Netherlands and Restoration England would have no way of linking this knowledge to the work of the Dutch-Brit Willem van de Velde the Younger (p. 89), the Flemish Dutchman Jan Porcellis (p. 90), the stay-at-home Antwerper Bonaventura Peeters (p. 91) and the Frisian-German Ludolf Backhuysen (p. 92). If such links exist at all, they cannot be said to have led to 'strikingly different' artistic results.

More widely separated in time and background than these roughly contemporaneous painters of storms at sea were the authors of the ship portraits on p. 93. Pieter Bruegel the Elder was a Fleming who initiated more artistic modes than seems decent for any single person. J. van Beecq (his first name is uncertain) was born in Amsterdam more than 100 years later than Bruegel. He worked in the Netherlands and England at the beginning of his career, but for the last forty years of his life he worked in France, for Louis XIV and high officers of the French fleet. One of his masterpieces, *The Royal Prince before the wind* of 1679 in the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich is so indebted to Bruegel, as in his *Four-Mast Man o'War*, engraved by Frans Huys in the 1560s, that we can speak of a measure of sheer common identity.

Willem van de Velde the Younger (1633-1707),  
*Ships in a Stormy Sea*,  
ca. 1671-1672. Oil on canvas,  
132.2 x 191.9 cm.  
Toledo Museum of Art.

### Ideological parti pris

There is a deeper problem lying beneath these comparisons in motif and approach. What is it that makes an art historian look for fundamental differences

Jan Porcellis (1583/85-1632),  
*Vessels in a Moderate Breeze*,  
ca. 1629. Oil on panel,  
41.3 x 61.6 cm. Los Angeles,  
Los Angeles County Museum  
of Art.



between works such as these? What stands in the way of acknowledging that in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century Pieter Bruegel created and published works that served as models for the main types of maritime subjects for the next few hundred years? Some Bruegel followers were Dutch, others were Flemings or Englishmen or Frenchmen or Italians. That each master brings to the task his own local, period and individual stylistic peculiarities is only to be expected. That certain developments, such as the introduction of tonal painting, will give the genre a new twist is a necessary sign of vitality. But why, in art-historical discourse, should those features be elevated above the strikingly *similar* features of European maritime art? And why should they be conjoined with the notion of national schools?

The origins of the issue are younger than you might think. In the standard sources, from Carel van Mander's *Schilder-boeck* (1604) to Christiaan Kramm's lexicon of 1857-1864, no distinction is drawn between the Dutch and Flemish schools. For centuries, it did not occur to the compilers of compendia that the work of artists from the northern Netherlands was strikingly different from that made by Flemings. Nowhere in all those thousands of pages is the predicate Dutch or Flemish used in connection with typical stylistic features. The origins of the sharp Dutch-Flemish distinction lie in the realm of political philosophy rather than art connoisseurship. The notion was fed by the German philosopher Georg Hegel (1770-1831), who preceded Pevsner and Brown in writing that Dutch artists broke all pre-existing molds because they lived in the first 'national state that fought for its own freedom, a country that reformed the church by itself, that wrested itself from the sea on its own; a country without aristocrats, with few peasants, ... inhabited largely by burghers, [who nurture] the bourgeois spirit, entrepreneurial drive and pride in business, concern for [the] welfare [of their fellow burghers], cleanliness, pleasure in the small [things of life].'<sup>3</sup> He saw the Dutch Republic as a model for the emerging Protestant, liberal German state that would put an end to history. Dutch art of the Golden Age, distinguished from Flemish, born in an autocratic Catholic realm, was



Bonaventura Peeters  
(1614-1652), *Sailing Ships  
Near a Jetty, in a Fresh  
Breeze*, ca. 1635-1640. Oil  
on panel, 41.6 x 65.8 cm.  
Salomon Lilian Gallery,  
Amsterdam/Geneva (2014).

an important part of his proof. Among Hegel's kindred spirits were the French art historian and political activist Théophile Thoré (1807-1869), who wrote that Dutch painting of the Golden Age was 'absolutely incomparable to the rest of Europe',<sup>4</sup> to which he added the significant remark 'quite like present-day young American society, Protestant and democratic.' This phrase echoes the convictions expressed two years earlier, in 1856, in J.F. Motley's bestseller *The Rise of the Dutch Republic*. The American historian claimed as the true motherland of the United States the low-church, republican United *Provinces*, rather than the Anglican, aristocratic United *Kingdom*.<sup>5</sup> Thoré, in his quest for political salvation and his belief in the Hegelian lockstep of art and society, invested Dutch art with qualities that of necessity *had* to be lacking in Catholic, aristocratic, Habsburg Flanders. This ideological *parti pris* generated a mindset in which admiration for the heroic, free Republic and a measure of disdain for the Spanish Netherlands came to be tied up with admiration for Dutch art at the expense of Flemish. Connoisseurs and art historians embraced this message fervently. It added philosophical profundity and nationalistic resonance – and with it, political support – to their inborn habit of dividing art into schools and making fine distinctions between qualities that lay people could not see.

## Too inlandish

The first survey of Flemish and Dutch seascape painting, the book that set the terms in which the subject has since been discussed, was deeply rooted in the ideas of Hegel. The author was a German art historian with the English name Frederick Charles Willis. In 1910 he took his degree at Halle University with *Die niederländische Marinemalerei* (Netherlandish maritime painting). In the trade edition of the dissertation, he writes 'As in all branches of art, here too the tribal oppositions – *Stammesgegensätze* – between Dutchmen and Flemings are present, often in particularly sharp form.'<sup>6</sup> The Dutch succeeded in creating a more profound and internalized art, he wrote, while the few Flemings [in this field]



Ludolf Backhuysen  
(1630-1708), *Warships in a  
Heavy Storm*, ca. 1695.  
Oil on canvas, 150 x 227 cm.  
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

hardly rose above the level of surface charm. Moreover, the Dutch were children of the sea, while Antwerp was 'zu binnenländisch', too inlandish, to produce great maritime art. Flanders lacked the indispensable foundation of national rapture – 'nationale Begeisterung' – of the Republic.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, Willis is liberal enough to include Flemish masters in his survey.

In his sections on individual artists, Willis demonstrates exactly how these divisions affected the appearance of Dutch versus Flemish art. A good example is his entry on Adam Willaerts.<sup>8</sup> The art of the entire Willaerts family, he wrote, even the sons of Adam Willaerts, who were born in Utrecht, is more Flemish than Dutch. This manifests itself in the staffage, which is given lots of space, with larger figures than in most Dutch paintings. The dunes and rocky shores are constructed like stage sets. The coloring adheres to a strict tripartite division: brown foreground, dark green middle ground and bluish horizon. The Willaerts are completely insensitive to the delicate effects of the Dutch atmosphere. The depiction of shipbuilding and tackle lacks the loving attention to detail of the Dutchman Hendrick Vroom (1562/63-1640). Living as he did in landlocked Utrecht, Willaerts seems to have painted his compositions not from direct observation but from second-hand reports by others, 'Erzählungen anderer.' That is apparent from the uniform depiction of the sea, with its stiff, schematic waves. The early works, down to the early 1630s, show at least, despite their angularity, a certain Robinson Crusoe-like naïve delight in the exotic. Later he lost this fresh touch and reverted to his inborn Flemish love of wildly animated fantasies. 'An unpleasant example of this late period is the oval storm in the Rijksmuseum of 1644.'





Frans Huys (ca. 1522-1562)  
after Pieter Bruegel  
(ca. 1520-1569),  
*A Four Master Leaving a Harbor*  
(reversed), ca. 1561-1565.  
Engraving, 22.4 x 29 cm.  
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.



J. van Beecq (1638-1722),  
*H.M.S. Royal Prince Before the*  
*Wind*, 1679. Oil on canvas,  
56 x 90 cm. Greenwich,  
National Maritime Museum.

Julius Porcellis,  
*Fishermen on Shore Hauling in Their Nets*, ca. 1630s.  
Oil on panel, 39.3 x 54.6 cm.  
Greenwich, National Maritime  
Museum.



Unfortunately for Willis's reconstruction of Willaerts's chronology and his belief that the artist reverted to genetic type in later life, the dating of the Rijksmuseum painting was misread in his time, and not just by a year or two. Not until 1960 did the Rijksmuseum hesitantly add thirty years to the age of its painting, revising the reading of the date from 1644 to 1614.

There is another historical circumstance unknown to Willis that complicates his derogation of Willaerts as a Fleming. When he wrote, it was thought that the artist was born in Antwerp in 1577 and not recorded in Utrecht until 1602. In that case he would have had his training in Flanders. We now know that he was born in London to a family of Protestant refugees from Flanders. The artist's father was registered in the Walloon Church of Utrecht by 1589. 'Adam must have crossed the North Sea about the age of ten', writes the new authority on the artist, Otto Nelemans.<sup>9</sup> In other words, neither Adam nor any other of the Willaertses who are arch-Flemings to Willis, ever set foot in Flanders, let alone wielded a brush there. Their entire training and careers were spent in the proud, free Dutch Republic. To call the work of Adam Willaerts Flemish is inadmissible and, the way Willis does it, to my mind even reprehensible. Willis discredits an entire school by associating it with a set of qualities he finds distasteful.

Willis's book may be nearly 100 years old, but it has never been criticized, let alone discredited by the field. Wolfgang Stechow still cited it approvingly in his 1966 book *Dutch Landscape Painting*.<sup>10</sup> Its only successor in monographic form is Laurens J. Bol's *Die holländische Marinemalerei des 17. Jahrhunderts* (1973) which however, like Stechow's book, leaves out southern Netherlandish painting altogether. The same is true of the two large exhibitions on Dutch marine painting in Minneapolis, Toledo and Los Angeles in 1990-1991 and in Rotterdam and Berlin in 1996-1997.<sup>11</sup> Concerning Flemish seascape painting, Bol deploys a range of adjectives that are politer than those of Willis but also disparaging: 'basically documentary, with admixtures of fantasy, violence, animation and threat.' 'Terrifying, animated and dramatic.' 'Water and clouds are nearly explosively loaded, the glaring light foreshadows calamity.' 'Northern Netherlandish marine painting, which for the sake of simplicity will be called Dutch, is not



Julius Porcellis,  
*A Fishing Boat in Rough Sea  
off a Rocky Shore*,  
ca. 1635. Oil on panel,  
44.5 x 68.6 cm. Greenwich,  
National Maritime Museum.

lyrical in its origins but narrative, descriptive. In the early years it displays affinity with southern Netherlandish land and seascapes in coloring – three-tone perspective and bright local tones in the clothing of the staffage and the banners – and in the coquettish, storytelling mentality and panoramic quality.<sup>12</sup> Pieter Bruegel, the Flemish father of it all, would have turned over in his grave.

The connoisseurship and scholarship of marine painting is full of polar opposites such as these. Whether the study of this material – or any other form of art, for that matter – benefits from that categorical style of discourse I question. My own inclination is to begin with the assumption that differences between contemporaneous or successive schools and masters are marginal rather than essential, gradual rather than fundamental. However, even if one employs polar opposition for heuristic purposes, in the case of Flemish and Dutch seascape painting things got out of hand from the start and have never been repaired.

## Mutual relations

In conclusion, a pair of images that illustrates these issues. On the right is a painting full of qualities that we have encountered above as typically Flemish: we see imaginary rock formations, large staffage figures in theatrical poses, dressed in garb with strong local tones. The water is 'badly painted, fluffy, and insubstantial.'<sup>13</sup> The fictiveness of the composition is evinced by the sharp contrast between the wind-still shore and the over animated sea. The other painting is as Dutchly descriptive as they come: small figures in tonally coordinated clothing engaged in utterly authentic fishermen's activities. 'Human activity is secondary to the prevalence of the immense sky.' The naturalism of the scene is substantiated by the unity of the composition. As you may have guessed, this is a trick opposition. Both paintings are by the same hand, that of Julius Porcellis, and both were made in the same years, that on the right about 1635 and the one on the left about five years later.<sup>14</sup> Julius Porcellis was born in Rotterdam as the son of



Jan Porcellis. Although Jan was born in Flanders and after emigration to the north returned there as a full-fledged Antwerp master before moving for the second time to Holland, he is nonetheless considered to be the main creator of the national Dutch school in the full sense. (This in itself should have been enough to block the assumption of a north-south dichotomy before it even started.)

The above reconnaissance into Netherlandish marine painting provides all the evidence needed, I propose, to support a resolve that we jettison reductive statements about Flemishness and Dutchness and renew the discussion about the mutual relations of the northern and southern Netherlands with fresh eyes and open minds. ■



Adam Willaerts (1577-1664),  
*Shipwreck off a Rocky Coast*, 1614.  
Oil on panel, 64.5 x 85.2 cm.  
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

## NOTES

1. Lawrence Otto Goedde, *Tempest and Shipwreck in Dutch and Flemish Art: Convention, Rhetoric and Imagination*, University Park and London (Pennsylvania State University Press) 1989, p. 18.
2. Christopher Brown, *The Dutchness of Dutch Art*, Amsterdam (Amsterdams Centrum voor de Studie van de Gouden Eeuw, Universiteit van Amsterdam) 2002.
3. Dedalo Carasso, 'Beeldmateriaal als bron voor de historicus,' unpublished lecture held in the Rijksmuseum on May 26, 1982. A reliable paraphrase of passages in Hegel, op. cit., pp. 194-95, 561-64, 800-05.
4. William Bürger [pseudonym of Théophile Thoré], *Musées de la Hollande*, 2 vols., Paris (Jules Renouard) 1858-60, vol. 1, p. ix.
5. 'In the third quarter of the nineteenth century a curious movement came into being in the United States. Its adherents opposed the view that Great Britain had provided the basis for American society. Well-known and less well-known, rich and not so rich Americans maintained that the Dutch Republic, which they endearingly called Holland, was the 'mother of America.' This was a fundamental change in the history of the United States. The American historian J.L. Motley first expounded this view in 1856, in his book entitled *The Rise of the Dutch Republic*.' See the website The Memory of the Netherlands, under 'Holland Mania.'
6. Fred. C. Willis, *Die niederländische Marinemalerei*, Leipzig (Klinkhardt und Biermann) 1910, p. 4.
7. Ibid., p. 27.
8. Ibid., pp. 25-27.
9. L. Otto Nelemans, 'Adam Willaerts (1577-1664), zee- en kunstschilder te Utrecht,' *Jaarboek Oud-Utrecht* 2001, pp. 25-56, p. 27.
10. Wolfgang Stechow, *Dutch Landscape Painting of the Seventeenth Century*, London (Phaidon) 1966, p. 110: 'a scholarly book of considerable substance.' Laurens J. Bol, *Die holländische Marinemalerei des 17. Jahrhunderts*, Braunschweig (Klinkhardt & Biermann) 1973.
11. George S. Keyes, exhib. cat. *Mirror of Empire: Dutch Marine Art of the Seventeenth Century*, Minneapolis (Minneapolis Institute of Arts) in association with Maarssen and The Hague (Gary Schwartz/SDU Publishers) 1990. Jeroen Giltaij and Jan Kelch, *Herren der Meere: Meister der Kunst: das holländische Seebild im 17. Jahrhundert*, Rotterdam (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen) and Berlin (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie im Bodemuseum) 1996. A more inclusive criterion is taken by Admiral Sir Lionel Preston, K.C.B., *Sea and River Painters of the Netherlands in the Seventeenth Century*, London, New York and Toronto (Oxford University Press) 1937 and Colonel Rupert Preston, C.B.E., *The Seventeenth-Century Marine Painters of the Netherlands*, Leigh-on-Sea (F. Lewis) [1974].
12. Bol, op. cit., pp. 6,7.
13. John Walsh, Jr., 'The Dutch Marine Painters Jan and Julius Porcellis – II: Jan's Maturity and "de Jonge Porcellis",' *The Burlington Magazine* 116 (December 1974), pp. 734-745, p. 742.
14. Walsh, art. cit., p. 35, for the attribution of *Ships in a Storm near a Rocky Shore*, and Gaschke, op. cit., p., nr. 37.