

JOHN MITCHELL

FINE PAINTINGS



Willem van de Velde the Elder (Leiden 1611 - Greenwich 1693)

An English two-decker lying-to at sea in a moderate breeze, with boats pulling towards her

oil, pen and ink, and wash en grisaille on canvas,
signed and indistinctly dated 169(?)

Sold Summer 2014

A magnificent English warship, a two-decker of sixty or seventy guns, is seen from three-quarters astern heaving to. On her poop deck a large part of the ship's company is gathered, and her sails are being variously backed or hauled down to take way off the ship. At the starboard bow her best anchor is just about to sink below the waves. About the ship several crowded pinnaces make their way towards her, and, not far off her starboard quarter, two sister ships are seen on the opposite tack also taking in sail. Further beyond, across the whole horizon, the rest of the squadron stands out to sea. This is a late masterpiece by the great Dutch marine painter Willem van de Velde the Elder, presented for the first time since it was last recorded at a sale in Germany nearly ninety years ago.

This painting is one of Van de Velde the Elder's distinctive 'pen paintings' or *penschilderij* as they were known in the artist's native Dutch. At a time of renewed interest in the work of Van de Velde and his son, Willem the Younger, this re-emergence of this canvas is nothing less than a revelation. For it establishes that Willem van de Velde the Elder could still turn out a highly detailed, competent ship portrait in his preferred *penschilderij* technique even in the very final years of his life. It must be remembered that most of his pen paintings – seventy-seven being a credible estimate – date from before 1672, and that only eighteen are recorded from then on until his death in 1693. This pivotal change in his output is attributable, of course, to the artist's move to England with his son in 1672 or 1673, with its attendant implications for their patronage and the value of their work.

Upon their arrival in England and for nearly fifty years afterwards, the Van de Velde family was paramount in the field of marine painting and brought popularity to the subject, which in turn engendered a new domestic school of maritime art. Van de Velde the Elder himself had grown up in the era of the flourishing first generation of Dutch realist marine painters – the earliest in the history of art – and had

been at work doing ship drawings en grisaille as early as the 1640s. His presence as an established court painter in later Stuart England therefore constitutes an important link between early Dutch marine art and the English sea painters of the early Georgian period, among whom Charles Brooking was pre-eminent. (Brooking was both the Van de Veldes' greatest apologist and the finest English marine artist until Turner.)

In the gilded history of picture collecting in Britain in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, 'Vandervelde' became a generic term encompassing father, son and workshop, to the point that their separate identities were suppressed. Indeed, it is this writer's belief that by the term 'a Vandervelde' the connoisseurs understood specifically an oil painting by Willem the Younger, and that in their minds the father was dismissed as merely a prolific, if assiduous, draughtsman. Nor were these noble collectors necessarily mistaken, for it is generally agreed today that Van de Velde the Younger was a far more talented artist, and that his influence on subsequent marine painters was the greater. It is also the case nowadays, however, that 'father' Van de Velde's work is excessively rare compared to that of his son and that art historians have come to a greater appreciation of the Elder's stature as an artist.

As with so many artists, even ones as eminent as the Willem van de Veldes, the documentation of their lives is fragmentary. There are few letters to turn to, and no mention by spirited Dutch diarists of the time, only official records of births, marriages and deaths and instructions about their work with the Dutch and, later, English fleets. Much about them has therefore, inevitably, been left to conjecture, but the signal factual distinction between father and son is that the Elder frequently went to sea throughout his life and, most famously, observed at close range ships in action in several of the significant naval engagements of the Anglo-Dutch Wars. Grounded in the tradition of the pioneering Dutch marine artist Hendrick Vroom (1566 -1640), there was no more patient and astute observer of ships than Willem Van de Velde the Elder, and there are literally thousands of his drawings in existence today, ranging from rapid sketches of sea battles to huge friezes commemorating the same events. His large-scale ship portraits in black chalk with grey washes survive in their hundreds, too, as do those of his son working in identical fashion. Indeed it has been said that 'as a result of the Van de Veldes we know more about the appearance of individual Northern ships in the seventeenth century than we do of those in the eighteenth' (E.H.H.Archibald, 'The Willem van de Veldes; Their Background and Influence on Maritime Painting in England', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, cxxx/5310 (1982), pp. 347-360).

It is traditional to assume that Willem the Younger worked from his father's painstaking, often hard-won drawings to create his own remarkable oil paintings. Happily for scholars, even wise King Charles II acknowledged their working relationship in his oft-quoted contract of January 1674, in which he agrees to give:

the Salary of one hundred pounds p. Annum unto William Van de Velde the Elder for taking and making Draughts of seafights, and the like Salary of One hundred pounds p. Wnnm unto William Van de Velde the Younger for putting the said Draughts into Colours for our particular use.

This neat distinction does not, alas, survive under closer scrutiny of these artists, and the huge quantity of paintings and drawings that the Van de Veldes produced has caused considerable problems of attribution. Even Michael Robinson's wildly ambitious attempt at a catalogue raisonné of their combined efforts (see Literature above) makes no attempt to separate the work of father and son, and at the same time greatly overstates the roles of studio hands in their authentic works.

It seems that at some point in the 1650s Van de Velde the Elder began to work up his careful drawings into elegant and informative compositions for his patrons using the *penschilderij*, or *pinceel schilderijen* technique. To quote one modern biographer, 'He [Willem the Elder] was not alone in developing pen painting, but perfected it to a degree far beyond the ambitions or capabilities of its other practitioners' (George S. Keyes, *Mirror of Empire – Dutch Marine Art in the Seventeenth Century*, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1990, p.419). Intended to furnish or adorn, Willem's pen paintings were also expected to inform, and ships are drawn therein with sufficient precision to be identified. (It is only a matter of time, we hope, before the subject of ours can be named.) Acute observation of ships in action combines with a flair for decorative composition in his battle scene paintings, of which good examples are *The Battle of the Sound* (London, National Maritime Museum) and *Battle of Scheveningen* (Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum). The curiously static feel and over-stylization of his earliest paintings are conspicuous by

their absence in our example from four decades later. Indeed the latter displays all of the technical interest of his earlier work but is, if anything – and some good judges agree with this writer – enriched and mellowed by a harmony and softening of tone redolent of the artist's advancing years.

Pen paintings on canvas begin to appear in Van de Velde the Elder's oeuvre in the mid-1660s, a notable example being *The Battle of the Sound*, 29 October 1658 dated 1665, bought by Cosimo de' Medici in Amsterdam in 1667 (Florence, Palazzo Pitti, oil on canvas, 143 x 300 cm.) Generally it may be said that his paintings become smaller and more delicate in later years (see for example *An English three-decker with the fleet in light airs* (1680), National Maritime Museum, BHC 0859). In Van de Velde's *penschilderij*, outline drawing with pen and brush in inks would be followed by cross-hatching and other engraving-like techniques to produce shade and gradations of tone. Pale washes would then be applied, as here to suggest volume in sails, to create a sea surface and sky. Before any of this could happen, however, the white lead priming of the canvas over a gesso layer had to be allowed to harden sufficiently to accept the artist's methods and, lastly, his varnishes.

In the well-charted, teeming waters of the golden age of Dutch art, the Van de Velde straits remain comparatively little explored, and seem to have much to offer up. We are told that an exhibition about them is planned for 2016 in Amsterdam; for this reader, at least, it cannot come soon enough.

Provenance:

auction at Prestel's, Frankfurt-am-Main, 18-19 November 1921

Literature:

M.S.Robinson, *The Paintings of the WILLEM VAN DE VELDES*, National Maritime Museum, 1990, 2 vols., p.96, no. 796