

# 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(?)

56.2 x 63.5 cm

Provenance:

Auction, Prestel, 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.

In December 1667 Cosimo de' Medici, son of Ferdinando II, Grand Duke of Tuscany, arrived in Amsterdam during his extensive tour of north-western Europe. It is recorded that over the next few days *'he went to see paintings by various masters, among them by the draughtsman Van de Velde, by the famous painter Rembrandt...and by others.'*

Two things stand out in this sentence. In the first place Willem Van de Velde is mentioned in the same breath as Rembrandt, who was nearing the end of his life but beginning to gain international fame, and, secondly, Van de Velde is described as a draughtsman. By this time Willem Van de Velde (1611-1693) had established a reputation in Amsterdam as the leading exponent of the art of 'pen painting' or

*'penschilderij'*. By this term we understand his pictures of ships, sea battles and coastal scenes which were hand drawn in pen and ink, on canvas or wooden panel, in a manner intended to imitate engraving. It is thought that Van de Velde produced about eighty of these highly individual pictures during the course of his long and remarkable life, and it is just such a work which we are pleased to present here.

Van de Velde had a son also called Willem (1633-1707), and together they are now regarded as some of the most important marine painters in the history of art. They focused exclusively on maritime subjects, and there is no recorded work by either of them without the sea in it in some shape or form. Their lives and work were made all the more remarkable by the fact of their move to England in the early 1670s and, in time, they have come to be seen as the founders of the marine painting in Britain, a rich tradition which reached its apogee in Turner, nowadays the most famous of all British artists. The latter, on being shown a print of a Van de Velde painting, is said to have exclaimed, *'That made me a painter!'*

Even before the father, son and their families departed from Holland as the golden age of the republic drew to a close, and the armies of Louis XIV massed on its southern border, Willem the Younger had created some of the finest marine paintings in an incomparable period in art history, and we need walk no more than ten minutes from our gallery to the famous Wallace Collection to see the greatest of them all and his accepted masterpiece. The son Willem could – and did – draw most capably, but it was for his serene, coloured oil paintings that he has always been so acclaimed. For now, however, we should dwell briefly on his father's 'pen paintings', which today are much more scarce than his son's productions but every bit as sought after.

Van de Velde the Elder was born five years after Rembrandt in the same town, Leiden, and his family worked on barges on the rivers and canals there. It is clear that from an early age he was a gifted draughtsman, and this epithet has stuck with him ever since – certainly, as we have seen, it was how he was known to Cosimo de' Medici. Van de Velde did not invent the unusual technique of drawing in paint and ink on a white surface, or 'ground' – that accolade belongs to the Mannerist artist of the previous century, Hendrick Goltzius – but he adopted and perfected it to suit his speciality. Beginning in the 1640s when he used the style on vellum, he continued exploring the medium even when in London and right up to the very last years of his life, to which period belongs our example.

The appeal for a painter of ships of this painstaking, precise technique is obvious, for it allowed an artist like Van de Velde, who was intimately familiar with ships and seafaring to show the innumerable details of rigging, guns, deck fittings, stern ornamentation and other shipboard features. His most famous pen paintings depict in panoramic splendour some of the battles from the Anglo-Dutch Wars which took place in the middle of the century. Most remarkably, Van de Velde is now regarded as the first war artist in history, for he saw for himself at close-hand a number of the naval engagements of the period. In one of his paintings he shows himself at work in a small boat (called a 'galjiot' in Dutch) sketching the ships firing broadsides at each other. Cosimo de' Medici's two 'pen paintings' are today on view in the Palazzo Pitti, Florence and in the museum in Karlsruhe, Germany; in the latter, which was on display in Amsterdam, the wealth of detail is simply staggering and absorbs the viewer for minutes on end.

Not only did Van de Velde's pen paintings attract wealthy customers for the family's art studio because patrons would know that Van de Velde drew of what he knew and that he had seen such dramatic scenes at first hand, but it is clear that these productions were prized for their dual quality. On the one hand, you could spend ages studying the myriad details up close, for example the individual ships of

both sides which the artist took so much trouble to identify by their distinctive features; on the other hand, on stepping back one could take in the whole, breathtaking scene – all the more imposing, given that his largest pictures measured over eight feet in width. After the move to England, when he was already over sixty years old, Van de Velde began to paint smaller 'pen paintings' and only on canvas; the later ones are marked by a much more delicate touch and greater use of pale washes – or brushed areas – to suggest volume in sails, and to create a sea surface and sky.

A major exhibition on the Van de Veldes, father and son, has just been held at Greenwich in the very building where they set up their studio under the patronage of King Charles II. No fewer than eight of the father's '*penschilderij*' were on display – as if to remind one of their stature at the very top of a wishlist for lovers of marine art!

**Provenance:**

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