



Simon de Vlieger
Dutch, 1600/1601 - 1653

Estuary at Day's End

c. 1640/1645

oil on panel

overall: 36.8 x 58.4 cm (14 1/2 x 23 in.)

framed: 50.2 x 72.4 x 6.7 cm (19 3/4 x 28 1/2 x 2 5/8 in.)

Inscription: lower right: S DE VLIEG[ER]

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ENTRY

By the mid-seventeenth century the Dutch Republic was the greatest sea power in the world. Dutch ships sailed the seven seas, from the Caribbean to the Indian Ocean, assuring not only military security but also wealth. Indeed, the Republic's far-reaching trade brought to its shores everything from exotic spices to rare flower bulbs. The Dutch fleet also carried more essential goods such as lumber from Poland, used for the construction of buildings and ships, and provided wood for artists' panel paintings such as this one.

Simon de Vlieger, who lived and worked at various times in Rotterdam, Delft, and Amsterdam, was one of the most important and influential Dutch marine artists. Active from the 1620s to the 1640s, he created works that established a link between the turbulent tonal paintings of his teacher Jan Porcellis (1584–1632) and the sun-filled, tranquil images of his student Willem van de Velde the Younger (Dutch, 1633 - 1707). De Vlieger was a versatile artist who was equally comfortable painting dramatic storms or stately parade pictures, all of which he enlivened with small figures carefully situated within the pictorial context.

De Vlieger knew the sea and the ships that sailed it. He accurately recorded the distinguishing features of the various types of boats, from large warships to small fishing boats and cargo vessels, and set them convincingly in the water. But it was his sensitivity to the atmospheric effects of water and sky along the North Sea that separated him from most other marine painters. He was unmatched in his ability to effectively capture the subtle ranges of grays and gray-blues found along coastal waters.

De Vlieger's most innovative paintings, including this *Estuary at Day's End*, convey the flavor of daily life along the Dutch coast. In this restrained and sensitive composition, he has shown two workers applying pitch to the hull of a small cargo ship, probably a *galjoot*, resting on a sandbar at low tide, while near the boat gray smoke rises from the fire that heats a pot containing the pitch. Directly behind the *galjoot* clouds of smoke billow from the sides of a *fluit*, the large square-rigger, as it fires a salute. [1] The most dramatic atmospheric effect, however, is created by the crepuscular rays radiating outward through the vigorously painted clouds. Such rays are typically observed at the beginning or at the end of the day, when the sun is low and clouds obstruct the light. Since the billowing clouds in this painting are more likely to be found in the afternoon than in the morning, this scene probably depicts activities taking place as twilight approaches. [2]

The maintenance of ships was of utmost importance for this seafaring nation, and De Vlieger's focus on workmen caring for the hull highlights one of the most essential responsibilities of a ship's owner. As depicted in this image, the operation frequently was undertaken at water's edge by beaching a boat on a sandbar, which would have become exposed at low tide. The tall pole with a barrel at the top behind the breakwater to the right of the *galjoot* is, in fact, the equivalent of a seventeenth-century lighthouse, there to warn sailors of the dangerous sandbar, which would not have been visible at high tide. Shorebirds nested in the barrels of such structures, and in foggy weather or at twilight, when the marker itself was not visible, sailors would watch the birds' flight patterns as an indicator of what lay ahead.

De Vlieger, who spent much of his career as a marine painter, would certainly have witnessed such maintenance operations, and he probably would also have been aware of earlier artists' depictions of similar scenes. Porcellis' *Fishers on the Shore*, c. 1622–1625 [fig. 1], might have been one such prototype. The motif would appear later in paintings by Van de Velde the Younger, in particular his *Ships on a Calm Sea* from the early 1660s [fig. 2]. Nevertheless, it is striking that De Vlieger

does not seem to have returned to this subject.

De Vlieger was fascinated with perspective and with the difficulty of suggesting spatial recession across a flat body of water. He wanted to create a system with which he could accurately situate boats of different sizes and at varied distances from the foreground plane. A sheet of ten perspective drawings he made in 1645, about the time he painted this work, demonstrate different approaches to solving these problems [fig. 3]. One of the means he used to calculate relative scale was to establish a modular system, largely based on the size of an adult male. Because De Vlieger knew the sizes of boats relative to the average height of a man, he could then determine how far below the horizon he should situate the boat to make it appear to float at the proper level. De Vlieger used this method when determining the placement of the small transport boat at the left of this painting. Moreover, by silhouetting the boat, the rowers, and their cargo of barrels against the distant light-filled waters he further used this pictorial element to reinforce the sense of special recession.

Although De Vlieger's great renown is as a marine painter, he also painted religious subjects that had a connection to the sea, such as *Christ on the Sea of Galilee* (Kunstsammlung der Universität Göttingen). In addition, he designed stained-glass windows for cathedrals in Delft and Amsterdam. His religious interests raise the possibility that De Vlieger found spiritual inspiration in the natural world about him, which might explain his remarkable decision to include the dramatic crepuscular rays. Today, such rays are sometimes referred to as "God rays" or the "fingers of God," and such associations may also have been made in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century. One can easily imagine that their presence here would have signified that God is looking out for, and blessing, the Dutch people as they go about their lives and work to maintain their livelihood. Whether or not there is a symbolic component, the effects of light and atmosphere in this quiet scene, which remain in a remarkable state of preservation, give the painting a tremendous sense of drama.

Arthur K. Wheelock Jr.

April 24, 2014

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Jan Porcellis, *Fishers on the Shore*, c. 1622–1625, oil on panel, Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt. Photo: Hessisches Landesmuseum Darmstadt



fig. 2 Willem van de Velde the Younger, *Ships on a Calm Sea*, early 1660s, oil on panel, private collection

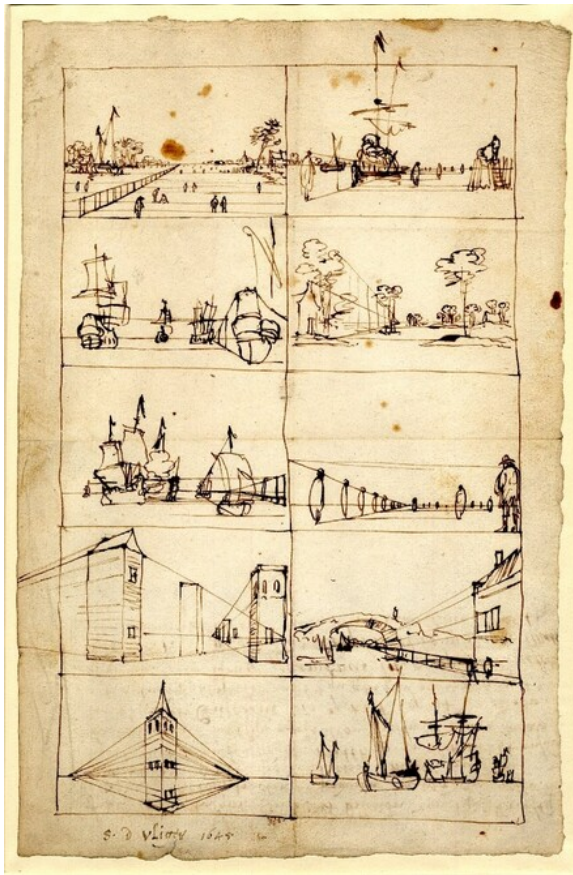


fig. 3 Simon de Vlieger, *A Sheet of Ten Studies in Perspective*, 1645, pen and brown ink, The Trustees of the British Museum, London

NOTES

- [1] For these ship types, see Leo M. Akeveld in Jeroen Giltaij and Jan Kelch, *Praise of Ships and the Sea: The Dutch Marine Painters of the 17th Century* (Rotterdam, 1996), 21–35.
- [2] I would like to thank Mr. David O’C. Starr, head of Mesoscale Atmospheric Processes Branch, NASA Goddard Space Flight Center, Greenbelt, Maryland, for his observations about these atmospheric effects (see e-mail dated April 30, 2009, in NGA curatorial files).

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support is a horizontally grained oak panel. According to dendrochronology, the earliest possible creation date for the panel is 1627.[1] All four sides have been beveled, but the bevel is by far the widest along the top edge. The other edges are narrower because the back of the panel has been planed unevenly with a pointed tothing plane. As a result of this uneven planing, the panel is significantly thicker at the top. There is a horizontal split at the top right corner of the back of the panel. The thinly applied ground is light gray. Thin paint is applied wetintowet with glazes forming the dark shadows and more pastose paint creating the highlights. A reserve was left for the large boat in the foreground and its sail, but not for the masts or the smaller boats. Infrared reflectography at 1.1 to 2.5 microns[2] reveals that there was originally another fairly large boat on the right side, where the breakwater's poles now stand. The painting is in excellent condition. A few acute paint losses are found in the sky and some of the glazes in the foreground are abraded. The largest area of abrasion is located just below and to the right of the ship in the left foreground. All of the losses and abrasion have been inpainted fairly recently. A fairly even, slightly yellow layer of varnish covers the surface. The painting has not been treated since its acquisition.

[1] Dendrochronology was performed by Dr. Peter Klein, Universität Hamburg (see report dated April 8, 1998, in NGA Conservation department files).

[2] Infrared reflectography was performed using a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera fitted with H, J, and K astronomy filters.

PROVENANCE

Edward Donner, Hurstbourne Park, Hampshire, England, by 1990; sold 1997 through (Gurr-Johns, London) to NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century

1990 Loan for display with permanent collection, National Gallery, London, 1990-1995.

1998 *A Collector's Cabinet*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1998, no. 64, fig. 25.

2000 *Art for the Nation: Collecting for a New Century*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2000-2001, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

2000 *The Glory of the Golden Age: Dutch Art of the 17th Century*, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 2000, exhibition catalogue in two volumes, no. 85 (of *Painting, Sculpture and Decorative Art* catalogue), repro., as *Seascape in the Morning*.

2018

Water, Wind, and Waves: Marine Paintings from the Dutch Golden Age, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2018, unnumbered brochure, fig. 8.

2021 *Clouds, Ice, and Bounty: The Lee and Juliet Folger Fund Collection of Seventeenth-Century Dutch and Flemish Paintings*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2021, no. 1, repro.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1998 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr. *A Collector's Cabinet*. Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1998: 35, 68, no. 64, fig. 25.
- 2000 Kiers, Judikje, and Fieke Tissink. *The glory of the Golden Age: Dutch art of the 17th century*. 2 vols. Edited by Jan Piet Filedt Kok and Bart Cornelis. Vol. 1: *Painting, sculpture and decorative art*. Exh. cat. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 2000: 1:5, no. 85.
- 2000 National Gallery of Art. *Art for the Nation: Collecting for a New Century*. Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2000: 36-37, color repro.
- 2004 Hand, John Oliver. *National Gallery of Art: Master Paintings from the Collection*. Washington and New York, 2004: 211, no. 167, color repro.
- 2007 Wheelock, Arthur K., Jr., and Michael Swicklik. "Behind the Veil: Restoration of a Dutch Marine Painting Offers a New Look at Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and History." *National Gallery of Art Bulletin* no. 37 (Fall 2007): 4, fig. 4.
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