



Willem van de Velde the Elder and Younger
and the Four Days' Battle

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In the traditional hierarchy of painting genres historical themes have long been understood to hold the highest rank. It can be argued that the most successful history painter paints his or her own time. The artist will always be the most familiar with what is immediately at hand and subsequently can provide a primary source of information. In the case of the Dutch marine painter Willem van de Velde the Elder the artist was present at many of the historical events he depicted. Van de Velde worked primarily in the medium of “pen paintings,” which allowed him to make quick sketches of the marine battles he witnessed. This technique also allowed him to create extremely detailed renderings that would be much harder to realize in oil painting. His son, Willem van de Velde the Younger would achieve a greater renowned than his father and be “perceived by his contemporaries as the nation’s leading painter of seascape and shipping.”¹ Living in a time of particularly eventful maritime excursions the van de Veldes took full advantage of the opportunity to capture the thrill and adventure to be found on the high seas. Van de Velde the Elder often traveled with the Dutch navy in times of conflict and produced a number of onsite masterpieces including his three section horizontal rendering of the Four Days’ Battle, which was later used as a model for his son’s paintings of the same subject.

1666 was a disastrous year for the English people. The great plague and the fire of London set the backdrop for the violent Second Anglo-Dutch War. Dutch life was beleaguered with fewer immediate problems but saw the loss of many of its major overseas holding including New Amsterdam, which was permanently renamed New York to reflect its new allegiance. Being two of the dominant sea powers at the time conflict

¹ Jenny Gaschke, *Turmoil and Tranquility* (Greenwich and London: National Maritime Museum, 2008), 55.

over foreign territories was inevitable. “The friction was world-wide, but especially intense in West Africa, the Caribbean, and the East Indies.”² Despite the fact that the hostilities of The First Anglo-Dutch War had ended over a decade before with the English victory in the Battle of Scheveningen in 1653 a new conflict was expected to break out at any time. Van de Velde the Elder was present at the last battle of the First Anglo-Dutch War and captured the drama in a pen painting showing the burning of the English ship the *St. Andrew* (figure 1.). The scene gives a good impression of how cramped and confusing these navel battles must have been. Oil paintings created in comfortable studios far from the action rarely reflect the chaos of battle with the same authenticity. The artist himself can be seen in the left foreground of the painting recording the incident (figure 2.). He sits calmly with pen in hand aboard a small ship called a boyer. The details are intricate and show every aspect of the artist’s vessel down to the patchwork sails and elaborate pully system that controls them.

Soon after the end of the First Anglo-Dutch War “English harassment of Dutch shipping, and colonies, had reached such a pitch that that there was an all but inevitable slide toward conflict.”³ Most other European powers saw the Republic as the grieved party and both belligerents continued to amass larger navies. It was universally believed that the disciplined and united English fleet held the advantage over the Republic with its continuous internal conflicts and discord among various political factions. This presupposition seemed to be proven true at the Battle of Lowestoft, the first major conflict in the war Second Anglo-Dutch War. The Dutch entered the battle with 103 ships, 21,613 men, and 4,869 guns. The English had only a slightly larger presence, 109

² Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 766.

³ *Ibid.*, 766.

ships, but managed a decisive victory destroying or capturing seventeen Dutch warships while losing only one of their own. This battle was painted by Hendrik van Minderhout (figure 3.) the year it occurred.

Van Minderhout's dramatic painting is a good illustration of the difference in size between the Dutch and the larger English battleships. This is a rare Dutch representation of the Battle of Lowestoft. Besides historical documentation marine paintings were also propaganda tools and Dutch "defeats were rarely...depicted."⁴ There is little biographical information regarding van Minderhout's life. He is known to have been born in Rotterdam and to have joined the Guild of St. Luke in Brugge in 1652 and the Antwerp Guild in 1672. Other than this there is speculation that he may have studied in or at least visited Italy because of the classical architectural imagery that reoccurs in his paintings. Van Minderhout's skill as a painter is undeniable. His depiction of the Battle of Lowestoft certainly reflects the mood of the Republic after the defeat. The gray sky and brown water are somber reminders of how serious and deadly such maritime adventures could be. The Dutch lost over two thousand men in the battle and another two thousand were captured and taken prisoner. Fifteen years later, another talented painter, Adreaen van Diest (figure 4.) would depict the same scene with such a similar composition to van Minderhout's that it would be unrealistic to deny that this version was modeled after the earlier painting. Van Diest's sky and sea lack the gloom and somberness of the original. He intensified the drama of the scene by having what appears to be a sloop ablaze in the foreground. The overall mood of van Minderhout *Battle of Lowestoft* shows how contemporary depictions of historical events reflect a more accurate account of what

⁴ Gaschke, *op. cit.*, 19.

actually occurred. After the first battle of the Second Anglo-Dutch War there was serious concern in the Republic that this war might be quickly lost. Commercial stocks plunged as a result of this belief but a vigorous shipbuilding program soon revived the Dutch peoples confidence in victory. Van Diest's painting appears somewhat romanticized compared to van Minderhout's, which adds to the argument that the closer the historical artist is to the event the more accurate will be the scene captured.

Some artists made extraordinary efforts to get as close to historical events as possible. In particular the adventurous artist Willem van de Velde the Elder was no stranger to the riggers of the high sea. After attending the Battle of Scheveningen he traveled with the Dutch navy in the defense of Copenhagen against Sweden in 1658. He was also present at the Battle of Lowestoft and every other major battle of the Second Anglo-Dutch War. During the Four Day's Battle "the Dutch Admiral, Michiel de Ruyter, expressly commanded that van de Velde be escorted by Captain Govert Pietersz in his galliot to record the battle. The artist immortalized this victory in his greatest series of...sketches, which rank among the greatest drawings in the Dutch School."⁵ One of these drawings is the three section horizontal work depicting a scene of a Dutch victory from the first day of the battle. *The Four Days' Battle: Damaged English Ships; Het Hof van Zeeland and the Duivenvoorde Burning; the Swiftsure, Loyal George and Seven Oaks Captured* (figure 5.). This is a large drawing measuring 355 x 2,388 mm (14 x 92.5 in). The loose style perfectly captures the drama of the battle. Knowing that van de Velde drew the scene in the middle of a vicious firefight gives the work an authenticity and immediacy that is rare even in the finest Dutch maritime paintings.

⁵ Keyes, *op. cit.*, 419.

The genre of marine painting as a distinct category separate from landscape is attributed to Hendrick Cornelisz Vroom from early in the seventeenth century. “By 1604 two hallmarks of Vroom’s style, his interest in history subjects and his penchant for precise description, were already recognized as distinguishing characteristics of his marine painting.”⁶ These qualities have remained a fundamental feature of the genre up until the present day. Exceptions like the marine paintings in the nineteenth century by William Turner beg the question of whether they belong in this specific category at all. Vroom established a tradition that is still very much alive today and can even be seen as a primary influence on other genres such as aviation art. The fact that Vroom chose specific historical events to illustrate is no less a contribution than his compositional choices and means of execution. Dated 1599, the artist’s *Battle between Dutch Ships and Spanish Galleys off the Flemish Coast* (figure 6.) clearly shows his influence on later marine painters. The depiction of an actual event, the Dutch ship *Tiger* ramming and sinking a Spanish galley is rendered in the exacting detail that became the norm in later paintings of sea battles. In this particular work Hendrick Vroom painted “the large Dutch warship and the foreground waves, whereas Cornelis [his son] painted the galleys and the distant landscape.”⁷ This partnership between father and son was not uncommon in the guild system. But such virtuosity being represented by both artists is extraordinary. Later in the seventeenth century Willem van de Velde the Elder and Younger would achieve unprecedented international fame in the genre that Vroom established.

The amazing veracity of the Dutch marine painters was designed to satisfy a clientele that would have been intimately familiar with the scenes depicted. Ships were

⁶ George S. Keyes, ed., *Mirror of Empire* (Cambridge, New York, Port Chester, Melbourne and Sydney: Cambridge University Press), 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 193.

ubiquitous in the Republic. One great feat of nautical engineering achieved by Dutch shipbuilders at the end of the sixteenth century was the development of the large, efficient, cargo vessel known as the fluyt or fluteship. “They represented a great advance on anything previously possessed either by the Dutch or by anyone else...[and] other countries often found it more convenient to buy Dutch ships than build their own.”⁸ Merchants traveled across the globe to trade their wares and soldiers crammed into overcrowded ships risking their lives in pitched battles on the open seas. Knowledge of the anatomy of the various ships of the time would have been no means the exclusive possession of the artists who depicted them. All the various aspects of the ships’ designs would have been common knowledge among many of the patrons who commissioned or purchased the art. Accuracy was essential. The seventeenth century saw an enormous expansion in ship building in the Dutch Republic for both military and commercial purposes. Some vessels were designed simply for pleasure cruising. The bootship was a medium-sized craft with few, if any guns, and a large hold used for transporting cargo and was also used for whaling. A boyer, the boat van de Velde painted himself sailing in in his pen painting of the *Battle of Scheveningen*, was open and about 10 to 20 meters long. It could be used for a number of purposes including as a private yacht for recreation and entertainment. The East Indiaman was designed to resemble an English man-of-war. They were between 40 and 50 meters long and were heavily armed. The East Indiaman was not primarily a war vessel but rather a sturdy cargo ship capable of defending itself against pirates and unfriendly foreign vessels. They were often commandeered for warfare but were far from as effective as the frigate or the galley. Frigates were smaller

⁸, K. H. D. Haley, *The Dutch in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Thames and Hudson LTD, 1972), 19-23.

warships with a single level of cannons. They were frequently used to escort merchant vessels and usually had a carved lion on their beakhead. The galley was a warship with both sails and oars for speed and maneuverability in battle. The ship of the line was a warship designed to form a line with others of the same class to create a wall of firepower. The Dutch ship of the line had two decks of guns as apposed to the French and English versions, which could support three because they did not have to navigate the more shallow waters surrounding the cities of the Republic. Admiralty yachts were large vessels designed for the maximum comfort of those who could afford to travel in them. There were also a number of smaller fishing and utility boats such as the tow boat, the pink, the kaag, and the buss that often appear in Dutch marine painting from the seventeenth century.⁹

Larger trading ships and some military vessels could be at sea for months or even years. “In social as well as financial matters, there was little dividing the city elite and the navy, since most of the officers were members of that elite or were closely associated with it.”¹⁰ The Dutch tended to look down upon the English officers as uncouth despite that navy’s reputation for discipline. The English admiral Torrington lived aboard his flagship and had his captains attend him as servants and even dress him. He was often drunk and kept several prostitutes on the ship for his own pleasure. Alcohol, beer in the case of the Dutch, was a staple and fights were common. The pay was fair but far from excessive. The crewmen would usually receive one or two months’ pay in advance and the rest of their money at the end of the voyage. Everyone was guaranteed three meals a

⁹ Jeroen Giltaij, *Praise of Ships and the Sea: The Dutch Marine Painters of the 17th Century* (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 1997), 22-33.

¹⁰ Jaap R. Bruijn, *The Dutch Navy of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 129.

day consisting of various hulled grains for breakfast called groats and beans and sometimes meat or fish for lunch and dinner. Crewmen could expect around twelve quilters a month in times of peace and fifteen when war broke out. The national makeup of the crews were surprisingly varied. Though the officers were almost exclusively Dutch, seamen might have been from Germany, Scandinavia, Venice, Batavia, Angola, New England or even the Philippines.¹¹ This is the environment that the artist Willem van de Velde would have encountered when he set off with the Dutch navy to engage in what would become one of the bloodiest conflicts in naval history, the Four Day's Battle.

Willem van de Velde the Elder was the son of a skipper and his biographer, "Houbraken simply implies he was at sea before taking up a career in art."¹² He had two surviving children including van de Velde the Younger who would exceed his father's reputation as a marine painter. Eventually both father and son would move to England to work as court painters for Charles II. As a result many of van de Velde paintings can be found today at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich. The Elder is celebrated for inventing his own unique art form, which has come to be known as pen painting or *pinceel schilderijen*. He would make rapid sketches on a white ground and come in later with more precise detail. One can see how this method would have allowed him to capture complicated scenes in the middle of confusing naval battles. "He was not alone in developing pen painting, but perfected it to a degree far beyond the ambitions or capabilities of its other practitioners."¹³ Van de Velde the Elder would use a quicker,

¹¹ Ibid., 129-142.

¹² Gaschke, *op. cit.*, 56.

¹³ Keyes, *op. cit.*, 419.

looser variation of this method to execute his monumental work for the Four Day's Battle.

Van de Velde's future employer Charles II of England saw the Republic's massive ship building campaign after the Dutch defeat by the English at Lowestoft in the first battle of the Second Anglo-Dutch War as an immediate threat. Charles had only regained the throne a few years earlier after spending much of his life in exile in the Hague after the execution of his father Charles I and the brief English Republic under Oliver Cromwell. Money was always an issue for the English crown and the Dutch Republic's wealth gave it an advantage during the Second Anglo-Dutch War. By 1666 the Dutch had rebuilt their fleet. They were stronger than ever. The Republic made it a mission to halt English shipping. "During 1666 not a single English ship passed in or out of the Baltic."¹⁴ Dutch privateers managed to capture roughly 500 English commercial vessels, many of which were auctioned off to other European powers. The conflict crippled shipping between the belligerents to the advantage of neutral counties who were more than willing to expand their shipping interests.

Early in 1666 the French and the Danes joined the Dutch Republic in its war against England. Though the Danish contribution would be minimal the mere threat of French forces was enough to contribute to the Dutch a victory in the Four Days' Battle. The Battle began on the first of June when an English fleet of 80 warships under the command of Prince Rupert of the Rhine and George Monck, Duke of Albemarle confronted the Dutch fleet of 85 ships under the command of Michiel de Ruyter. De Ruyter would become a major figure in the Dutch imagination and be the subject of

¹⁴ Israel, *op. cit.*, 773.

numerous paintings. Six nearly identical portraits were commissioned of Ruyter by the governors of the regional admiralties between 1664-7. These paintings are known to be the work of Ferdinand Bol (figure 7.). The Admiral leans on a celestial globe and holds a commander's baton in his right hand. Around his neck he wears a pendent depicting St. Michael slaying Satan. This is a sign that Ruyter was a member of the chivalric order of St. Michael, a group that had several incarnations in various countries. After the Four Days' Battle the Amsterdam admiralty awarded the commander a gold chain and sword belt, which are both featured in the portrait. There is a navigational chart and measuring devices on the table before him representing the admiral's considerable abilities at seamanship. The seascape on the right of the portrait is the work of Willem van de Velde the Younger. The background is on a second canvas to which the portrait was attached. Though from a humble origins the admiral had risen through the ranks of the navy by merit and a lifetime of experience at sea. Even before joining the military he had amassed a small fortune through private shipping ventures. After joining the navy there were numerous ways for commanders to supplement their handsome salaries by arranging for and distributing provisions on board their ships. In 1662, four years before the Four Days' Battle, Juriaen Jacobson would paint a family portrait of Admiral de Ruyter (figure 8.) that includes no less than ten figures, two dogs, and a hunting falcon. De Ruyter is still considered one of the most capable commanders the Dutch navy has ever produced.

On the first day of the Four Days' Battle a rumor reached Charles II that the French were entering the English Channel with thirty-six additional warships. To protect his fleet Monch ordered Prince Rupert to take a third of the English ships to safety at the Isle of White. This gave de Ruyter a considerable advantage. Despite his diminished

numbers Monch decided to attack the anchored Dutch fleet and the Four Days' Battle began in earnest. The only advantages Monch had were surprise and the wind at his back. The seas were too rough for the English ships to use their lower tier of guns, which happened to be their most powerful. Monch attacked the Dutch fleet's left rear, which consisted of only thirty-five ships. By noon the entire Dutch fleet was engaged and with any advantage now gone the battle started to turn bad for the English. Though few ships were lost during the long afternoon melee the Dutch *Het Hof van Zeeland* and the *Duivenvoorde* both were both set fire by English bombardment. At this time the Royal navy had developed incendiary projectiles that were new to warfare and particularly dangerous when fired at ships made of wood and canvas that were also loaded down with gunpowder. With a larger fleet the Dutch were able to capture three English men-of-war, the *Swiftsure*, *Loyal George*, and *Seven Oaks*. The actions of this first day of the battle are the subject for Willem van de Velde the Elder's magnificent pen painting and the subsequent oil painting by his son.

The very nature of van de Velde the Elder's technique allowed for a freshness that is often lacking in marine painting. Because the genre, as a rule, involves such minute detail of the exact anatomy of the ships depicted there is often a stiffness that doesn't appear in the Elder's painting of the first day of the battle. All of the ships seem to be in individual motion and much of the specific details are ignored for the sake of the drama. It must be understood that the circumstances in which the artist found himself would have contributed to the emotional impact of the scene. Cannonballs must have literally been flying over his head and landing around him as he executed his painting. The sun would have been obliterated by the flumes of smoke from the thousands of canons continually

firing and the noise must have been deafening. Van de Velde would have experienced all of the fear and excitement of the of the participants in the battle but managed to keep his head in order to record the confusing melee. In the pen painting the clouds of smoke from the cannons mimic dark storm clouds engulfing the dozens of ships. Tiny transport vessels are shown in the foreground relaying orders that may have allowed the Admirals to make some sense of the confusion.

“Van de Velde the Younger painted this [same] subject (figure 9.) on several occasions”¹⁵ The Younger’s depictions lack the immediacy and grittiness of his father’s work. There is a certain idealism reflected in the beautiful blue sky and the burning Dutch ships are not included in the composition. The captured English ships are flying Dutch flags and only one vessel is shooting off its canons. The water is blue and fairly tranquil and the number of ships in the painting are a small in comparison to those depicted by the Elder. Also the extreme horizontal shape of the Elder’s pen painting allows for a sense of vast space impossible to capture on a more traditionally shaped canvas. But despite this the Younger’s version of the scene is much more polished and finished. It looks like a thoroughly completed composition with all the minute detail one would expect from the best examples of Dutch marine painting.

The night of the first day of action saw a fireship attack on the English warship the *Henry*. A fireship is any vessel loaded down with combustibles and sent out in the direction of the enemy. The cargo would be set ablaze at the moment of contact by a skeleton crew who then would then escape on smaller boats. Two of the fireships reached the *Henry* but she managed to escape by avoiding the worst of the blaze and lumbering

¹⁵ Keyes, op. cit., 251.

back to port. Almost out of ammunition the *Henry* fired its remaining shot and managed to strike and kill Dutch Admiral Cornelis Evertsen. Hostilities ended at 10 pm with the Dutch having lost five ships and the English eleven. Most of the damaged ships were able to make it back to port for repairs.

On the second day of the battle Monck, still vastly outnumbered, decided to try for another direct assault. De Ruyter managed to split the English line and proceeded to bombard and damage the English fleet. De Ruyter commanded the Dutch flagship *De Zeven Provinciën*. The ship, itself, became a popular subject of Dutch marine painting and has remained such a romantic and legendary vessel that the name is still used for an entire class of modern air-defense frigates in the Royal Netherlands Navy. One example of this is an undated painting of *De Zeven Provinciën* by Abraham Storck (figure 10.) that also happens to be of the Four Days' Battle. The ship is also prominent in Ludolf Backhuysen's painting of the battle (figure 11.). Both Storck and Backhuysen do an excellent job of capturing the confusion of the battle suggesting they must have been familiar with van de Velde's pen paintings.

The second day of the Four Days' battle saw more losses for the English. Monck had only thirty-four seaworthy ships by the end of the day. Around three in the afternoon the Dutch received another twelve warships as reinforcements. Hopelessly outnumbered the English fleet tried to escape to the west with the Dutch in full pursuit. Monck was hoping to regroup with Prince Rupert and the ships that had pulled back to the Isle of White the day before.

One major setback for the English on the third day of the battle was the capture of Admiral Sir George Ayscue's flagship the *Royal Prince*. During the English flight the

Royal Prince ran aground on a sandbank where it was threatened by two Dutch fireships. Van de Velde the Elder created a pen painting of the capture (figure 12.). Again the Elder's work was used as a model for a painting by van de Velde the Younger after the fact (figure 13.). Comparing the two illustrations of the scene from the third day of the battle one can get a sense of how being in the middle of the action gives an immediacy and drama to the composition that is lacking in the son's painting. The oil painting is clean and idealized while the original captures a crowded and confusing battle scene that surely reflects what the Elder must have witnessed. The pen painting includes realistic touches like debris floating in the water in the foreground. The plumes of smoke from the cannons and burning fireships flow up to merge with the clouds giving the impression that the entire sky is the result human conflict. This affect is mimicked in the Younger's oil but there appears to be a desire by the artist to romanticize the scene resulting in a more sanitized depiction of the *Royal Prince's* capture.

With Monck's diminished fleet on the run victory seemed inevitable for the Dutch. Just as an English defeat appeared apparent a group of twenty warships was spotted coming from the west. Both the English and the Dutch hoped this would be reinforcement for their side but the ships turned out to be Prince Rupert returning from the Isle of Wight after failing to discover the imagined French convoy. With these additional ships reunited with the rest of the fleet Rupert Monck now had roughly sixty seaworthy vessels under his command compared to De Ruyter's seventy-eight. On the morning of the fourth day the English were joined by another five ships and some of their more damaged vessels were sent back to port. By this time the English were running low on powder for their cannons. The Dutch ships had larger cargo holds and smaller guns,

which contributed to their longevity in the Four Days' Battle. By the end of the fourth day both belligerents were exhausted and ready to wind down. Though both sides would declare themselves triumphant the Dutch were the clear victors in the battle. Losing only four to seven ships the Republic managed to capture or destroy at least twenty British vessels. The cost in human life was roughly matched on both sides. Each saw around 1,500 killed and about the same number wounded. The Dutch were able to capture an additional 1,800 or so of the English.

Two months later, in August, hostilities would break out again at the St. James Day Battle. Willem van de Velde would be in attendance here too and produce more of his pen paintings. The St. James Day Battle would prove to be a decisive, though minor victory for the English with the Dutch losing just two ships and the English one. This setback contributed to infighting within the various factions of the Republic. Because both countries had territory around the world there were conflicts throughout the Caribbean, Africa, and the East Indies. After the great fire of London and other financial setbacks Charles was running out of funds to continue the war. To conserve resources he docked most of his navy in port at the river Medway in Kent. The Second Anglo-Dutch War was brought "to a hasty conclusion...[when] de Ruyter's fleet [was sent] into the Medway to wreak havoc on the English ships...As a result, the Treaty of Breda allowed the Dutch to end the war without making any significant concessions."¹⁶ Five years later, in 1672 hostilities would break out again with the English joining the French in an attack on the Dutch Republic and there would be a Third Anglo-Dutch War. The French invaded the Netherlands and managed to march all the way to Utrecht. More wars

¹⁶ K. H. D. Haley, *The Dutch in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Thames and Hudson LTD, 1972), 178.

followed in 1689 to 1697 and 1702 to 1713. These events resulted in a period of “relative inactivity after 1720 which leads historians to speak in terms of ‘Dutch Decline.’”¹⁷

The Four Days’ Battle was one of the longest and deadliest naval battles in history. Because of his presence on the scene Willem van de Velde the Elder was able to capture the immediacy and realism of the conflict that not only resulted in his personal expressions in his pen paintings but also gave later artists a first-hand visual account on which to draw. By being willing to go to the center of the action van de Velde was able to create history paintings of the highest caliber. They are all the more relevant in that they depict his own time. There is no guesswork or romanticizing in van de Velde’s art. What he produced are the most accurate visual accounts of the battles available. Later artists and historians alike owe him a great debt.

¹⁷ Ibid., 182

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