

# WILLEM VAN DE VELDE THE YOUNGER

(Leiden 1633 – Westminster 1707)

## Two English ships in a storm near a rocky shore

Oil on canvas 32 x 42.5 cm  
Dated ca. 1675

**PROVENANCE**  
Galerie M. Schulthess, Basel, 1946; Germany, private collection

Two three-masters are driven on a sea of raging waves by a violent tempest, in the painting coming from the right. A sky with heavy storm clouds and a rough sea in which two ships are silhouetted. The ship at the front still has some remnants of sails on the masts, but they no longer contribute to the ship's heading and manoeuvrability.

The rock in the right foreground is not only meant as a *repoussoir*, but also indicates that the ship has fallen into a stone trap, literally in travail: its doom is imminent. For the ship behind it, the curtain has already fallen. Almost all the rigging is wrecked and the stern seems to have already collapsed onto the rocks.

A sliver of sunlight illuminates the scene, emphasising the splashing foam of the waves pounding on the ships. The front ship's flapping sail also lights up ominously. The chasing clouds above are rendered in subtle tones and provide a fitting backdrop for this turbulent scene.

The younger Van de Velde sought to present an atmosphere, a moment of drama and the quality of the light rather than capturing a specific event.

The dark colouring of the painting indicates that it dates from the start of his English period, and its small format suggests that he then painted it for himself.

Van de Velde became more and more interested in depicting storms and meteorological phenomena and created atmospheric effects not to be found in the work of previous painters. It is known that he could often be found on the waters of the river Thames, studying all the changing weather phenomena. Van der Velde took large sheets of blue paper with him, which he would mark all over with black and white according to eyewitness reports<sup>1</sup>.

Major commissions from the English Royal Household (Willem van de Velde the Elder and the Younger were appointed court painters by the English King Charles II), the Admiralties, and important dignitaries took up so much of their time, so there was little time left for Willem van de Velde the Younger to pursue his fascination with storms.

With this delicate storm painting, Willem van de Velde was continuing a tradition that had been popular among Dutch marine painters since the early 17th century. Ships ravaged by a violent storm on a turbulent sea are laden with associations

about doom and God's punishment for sinful behaviour. They represent a life in jeopardy, in this case literally. For Van de Velde's clients in England, where he had lived and worked since 1672, the dangers of the sea were a daily reality.

For the general public, Dutch marine art is synonymous with the Willem van de Veldes, father and son. Together with his namesake father, Willem van de Velde the Younger was one of the best marine painters in Europe. The immense importance of the Van de Veldes lies not only in the development of marine painting; they are also important as chroniclers of historical events. They were unrivalled in their accurate depiction of ships, rigging and the like, and made the most meticulous and accurate studies of life. This included elements related to navigation such as the direction of the wind, the position of the sun, the light and movement of the water.

Willem van de Velde the Younger set the tone for a new development in marine painting, incorporating atmosphere and light effects combined with sunlit colouring. Early in his career, he excelled in sublime, calm seas and coastal waters; later, the elements play a much more tempestuous role.

Willem van de Velde the Younger was Europe's leading marine painter in the 17th century. Virtually all marine painters of England in the 18th century were profoundly influenced by him.

1. William Gilpin, *Three Essays upon the Beautiful* (1808), p.132.

*The Most Eminent Dutch Marine Artist to Their Majesties King Charles the Second and King James the Second*







## SHIPS IN A GALE

*A selection of examples by Willem van de Velde the Younger*



Left: Detail of *Two English ships in a storm near a rocky shore* (fig. 1)

Middle: Detail of *A ship on the high seas in a violent storm, known as 'The Gust'*  
Oil on canvas, 77 x 63.5 cm  
Signed lower left; 'W.v.Velde f'  
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum inv. no. SK-A-1848.

Right: Detail of *Ships in a Gale*  
Oil on panel, 72.4 x 108 cm  
Signed and dated: W.V.V. / 1660  
Washington, National Gallery,  
accession number: 2000.72.1



*The painting is a joint acquisition of  
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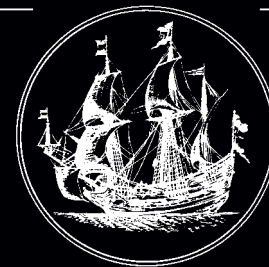
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*A Storm by Willem van de Velde the Younger  
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