





# An extremely rare and important marine painting

by Hans Savery the Elder



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## A work of national importance

It is Hendrick Cornelis Vroom (1608-1691), a native of Haarlem, who is generally considered to be the father of Dutch marine painting. The term is used to refer to the fact that he was the first painter to specialise in that genre of painting, producing works of superior quality. He managed to build up an impressive oeuvre of marine paintings in the beginning of the seventeenth century. It is, however, all too easy to overlook the fact that there were also Flemish-born artists who laid the foundations of the genre that flourished in the Northern Netherlands in the first half of the seventeenth century. The present painting proves that the best work of Hans Saeeyt the Elder is on a par with that of Vroom. When viewed in that light, the painting can be said to rewrite the history of the development of Dutch marine painting, which is why it qualifies as a work of national importance.



## Hans Savery the Elder, Marine Painter

The sea storm was a popular theme in marine painting at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century. Artists like Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Jan Antoniszoon and Jans Savery the Elder painted several of them. In days of old, man was thought to be a cock on the ocean, tossed about in the raging seas. The painted sea storm was originally an allegory of life, symbolised by a ship trying to reach a safe harbour. Gradually, this allegorical theme was succeeded by a more down-to-earth approach. Sea storms with sea monsters were seen first and foremost as exciting pictures, any deeper meaning came second, as seems to have been the case with the present painting.

The painter, Hans Savery the Elder, was born in Kerckijk (County Flanders) in October 1562, the son of Martin Savery and Gerlijne Janselocher, and was the eldest of five children. He had two younger sisters called Cathelijne and Mayken and two younger brothers, Jacob and Roelant, both of whom went on to become distinguished painters.

The Dutch Revolt against Spain was well underway by now. In 1579 the William provinces of the Netherlands reconciled with the Spanish King under the Union of Atrecht (Arras). The northern provinces led by William of Orange and the more important Spanish ones to form combined forces under the Union of Utrecht. Kerckijk was captured by Spain on 27th February 1580. The Spanish army was under the command of Alessandro Farnese, Duke of Parma, who was governor-general of the Netherlands. The Savery family left Kerckijk shortly afterwards and travelled north, settling in Brugge (Bruges), a town in Flanders that had greatly prospered during the middle ages. Several years after that, the Saverys moved to the Northern Netherlands, to the many where, from 1585, by 1589 the family appears to have settled in Haarlem. This same year Hans Savery married Justia Verallmann van Roelant, and the following year, after her death presumably, he married Mayken de Clerk van Adelnke. Hans Savery the Elder became a well-known marine painter. The year and the place of his death are uncertain. Although his best signed work is dated with 1602 and 1606 are also mentioned as possible dates of his decease. Hans Savery the Elder was the uncle of Hans Savery the Younger (1597-1654), with whose work his paintings are often confused. In literature, the name Hans Savery the Elder is usually referred to as Hans Savery I and Hans Savery the Younger as Hans Savery II.



А.М.Кузнецов. Битва на Лягу

1856 г.

Битва на Лягу  
А.М.Кузнецов

Морской музей в Санкт-Петербурге  
ул. Дворцовая, 28  
Санкт-Петербург



## The painting

The present painting is the key work of Hans Savery the Elder and by far the largest. Not more than a handful of his signed works is known, together with a few attributed pictures. Only works attributed to him can be found in museums in the Netherlands. The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam has a painting attributed to Hans Savery the Elder, depicting a whale that has been washed up on the coast of Naaldwijk (inv. no. A 2508). The Rembrandt Van Rijnningan Museum, Rotterdam has another attributed work on display, a painting covering ships in a storm (inv. Van der Vaart). Savery's colouring, easily recognised, and the dynamic sweep of the waves, so distinctive of his work, both play a role in attribution. In the event the present painting is fully signed and by far the most important source of material for comparison.

The present painting clearly shows that he worked as a maritime painter in the tradition of Pieter Brueghel the Elder. In fact, Hans Savery the Elder seems to be the missing link between that famous Flemish artist of the second half of the sixteenth century and the great Dutch emarine artists of the beginning of the seventeenth century, such as Hendrick Cornelisz Vroom, Cornelis Verbeek and Cornelis Claesz van Wieringen.

The painting depicts in the foreground and in the background a great number of beautifully painted ships on a stormy sea, approximately 25 in all. Many scenes are depicting the sails and the rigging, a few are signs of panic everywhere, e.g. on the ship on the extreme right of the painting, the sails are strewn all over the deck. Two sea monsters are visible, one in the left background, the other on the right. Bales and barrels are floating around in the centre. The movement of the large waves is very reminiscent of those painted by Pieter Brueghel the Elder and by Hendrick Cornelisz Vroom. Not far from him is Jane a drawing of ships in a storm in the collection of the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum (inv. no. H. Savery-1) that has traditionally been ascribed to Hans Savery the Elder. It was not attributed to Hendrick Cornelisz Vroom until the nineteen-seventies.



## The Amsterdam

The masts of the ships that can be identified serve as proof that the present painting is not a depiction of an historical event. The ship in the centre foreground bears the arms of the city of Amsterdam (including two dolphins). Javery has created a special effect by painting below the stern of that ship and just above the waves a picture of another ship in stormy weather. The ship bearing the arms of the city of Amsterdam was carrying approximately thirty guns and that number of guns tallies with the number of guns aboard the East Indiaman *Amsterdam*. The *Amsterdam* was built in Amsterdam between 1599 and 1600 and measured a thousand tons, making it an exceptionally large ship for its time and therefore a most suitable subject for the centre of such a painting. As the flagship of Admiral Jacob van Neck it headed a fleet of six East Indiamen to Asia in the year 1600, with a crew of 180 men on board. The *Amsterdam* was renowned for being both a large and a beautiful ship. In actual fact it was the largest vessel of the Dutch East India fleet, bigger than any men-of-war that had been built previously. In addition to its size, it was also well equipped to do battle at sea. In those days East Indiamen frequently served in the Dutch navy.

## The Amsterdam under Jacob van Neck

At the end of the sixteenth century trading companies were established in Amsterdam, Bantam, Veere and Middelburg in order to finance various expeditions to Asia. So as to distinguish between the companies just mentioned and the Dutch East India Company, the VOC, which was founded in 1602, the earlier companies are known as 'voerecompagnieën'. Trade with Asia was increasing at a 'tempestuous' rate at that time. 65 ships composing fifteen fleets had been despatched in just a few years' time.

One such expedition, the 'Vrede Schipvaart', under the command of Admiral Jacob van Neck, had been equipped by the Amsterdam Compagnie van Verre, also called the Oude Compagnie. On 18th June 1600 Van Neck set sail on the *Amsterdam* in a squadron of six East Indiamen. His instructions were to establish trade relations as far away as China, the Philippines and Japan. Detained by contrary winds the voyage to Asia experienced long delays. Leaving the others behind, the three fastest ships, the *Amsterdam*, the *Delft* and the *Goeda*, went on ahead. After rounding the Cape of Good Hope in January 1601, the water supply on board was running out, which necessitated a strict rationing of supplies. Some of the crew had no option but to drink their own urine in order to quench their thirst. Food supplies were also virtually exhausted which meant that the crew were fed rotten pork. In February the ship ran into a heavy storm. The rigging suffered heavy damage but fortunately all damage could be repaired. Thanks to a favourable westerly wind the coast of Sumatra was sighted at last in March.

The ships docked at Batavia nine months after leaving Holland. Van Neck consulted with local company officials and decided to leave the *De Elph* there in Batavia to take out a consignment of pepper. He wanted to sail eastwards with the *Amstel* and the *Goede* as fast as he could before the monsoon changed direction and made it impossible for him to do so. North about Celebes Van Neck set course for the Moluccas. On 2nd June he reached the island of Ternate, where a number of Dutchmen lived. Van Neck decided that this was the place from which to attack the Portuguese on the nearby island of Tidore. During the crossing sea battle before the coast of Tidore, Van Neck was hit by a cannon ball and lost his right hand. After heavy cannon fire lasting several hours the Dutch ships were forced to beat a retreat. The wounded were taken to Ternate to have their injuries seen to. As there were no opportunities for trade there, Van Neck decided to weigh anchor and try his luck in Patani on the Malay Peninsula.

Meanwhile the *Amstel* and the *Goede* were overtaken by such bad weather that they had to change course and sail northwards. The ships finally stopped anchor on 25th September near Macao, but things soon got too hot for his sailors owing to the presence of large numbers of Portuguese in the vicinity. Van Neck then decided that it was not too late to sail to Patani, and arrived there on 7th November. He and his men received a warm welcome from the local rulers and efforts to establish trading relations were successful. A contract was signed concerning the purchase of pepper. To mark the occasion the crew played the *Willelois*, the Dutch national anthem, in honour of the queen and her courtiers. It was greeted with surprise, being the first time that that kind of music was heard.

Presented with a beautiful kris, an ornamental dagger, as a gift, Van Neck left Patani with the *Amstel* and the *Goede* at the end of August 1602 and headed for home. During the voyage so many of the crew fell sick on board both ships that there were barely enough sailors to man the ships. Unfavourable weather conditions meant long delays once again. On 15th July 1603 the ships finally docked at the port of Flushing. Van Neck revealed that if the return voyage had taken any longer, all those on board would have died.

In retrospect Van Neck had reason to be proud of his achievements, helped by the fast-sailing *Amstel*: he had returned with a rich consignment of pepper having opened up new areas of trade. The commercial ties with Patani proved to be of immense importance, not just in connection with importing pepper, but also in the years to come with importing Chinese silk and porcelain. All the while China cut itself off from foreign trade, it was possible to obtain the goods just mentioned by trading with Chinese junks off Patani.

## The Hollandsche Tuyn



The other ships depicted in the painting are all Amsterdam men-of-war, which were of exceptional importance circa 1600. The ship on the extreme right bears the arms of the province of Holland on its stern and is probably the *Hollandsche Tuyn*, sometimes known as the *Goet Rok Hollandsche Tuyn*. In 1600 or thereabouts it was the largest ship belonging to the Amsterdam Admiralty. It was built in 1598 in Amsterdam, measuring 1000 tons and with a length of approximately 40 metres. At the time it was given the nickname 'the giant of the seas'. The *Hollandsche Tuyn* was twice as large as its predecessor, the *Hepirus*, and was circa eleven metres longer. It had been built to replace the *Hepirus*, which had sunk in the winter of 1597. Admiral Jan van Duysenwoorde, Maurits, Stadtholder of Holland, and the councillors of the Amsterdam Admiralty stayed in close contact during the ship's construction and they all had a say in the way it was fitted out.

In 1599 the *Hollandsche Tuyn* was the flagship of Admiral Pieter van der Doet during his expedition against Spain, sailing in an all-Dutch armada numbering no less than 73 ships, and with more than 8,000 men on board. The fleet first attacked the Azores, after which half of the force went on to enter the Bay of Guinea in West Africa where it plundered the island of São Tomé. At the beginning of 1600 tropical malaria struck unexpectedly, felling the ships and their decimated crews to return home. Admiral Van der Does was among the victims of this dreaded disease. The loot fell short of the sum needed to reimburse the high cost of the expedition, which although unsuccessful went down as a landmark in Dutch naval history since it was the first all-Dutch initiative ever taken by the Dutch navy. Its failure almost resulted in the *Hollandsche Tuyn* being sold to the Dutch East India Company. Between 1603 and 1605 the ship made several voyages to Brazil, returning mainly with formal sugar as its cargo. The Duke of Florence purchased it the following year as an addition to his fleet.

## The Neptunus and the Windhond

The predecessors of the *Hollandse Tijl*, the *Neptunus* (500 tons) and the *Windhond* (300 tons) are depicted in the present painting in the centre left background and to the extreme left, respectively. Both ships were built in Amsterdam in 1584 for the Amsterdam Admiralty. The *Neptunus* and the *Windhond* were much larger than any previous boats and pinaces. Until 1584 the maximum size varied between 80 and 140 tons. The *Windhond* made a number of voyages between 1584 and 1607, for example, to England, France and Russia. The *Neptunus* was the flagship of Admiral Jan van Duynsvoede at the battle of Cadix in a combined fleet with its English allies against the Spanish in 1596. It served also as his flagship during the so-called 'Island-voyage' in 1597, another Anglo-Dutch expedition against Spain. This time, however, the voyage had to be aborted because of bad weather at sea. The *Neptunus* sank in a storm near Plymouth. A large number of its guns could not be recovered until later that year.



## Conclusion

To recapitulate it appears that it was Hans Savery the Elder's intention to depict the finest examples of Amsterdam ships around 1600. The more recent ships are displayed in the foreground of the present painting, the earlier examples in the background. The lives of the ships were not all smooth sailing: there was success one moment and failure the next. It is tempting to link the fate of these ships with the sunny weather and the sea monsters in the rough waves.

It was the first time that the increasingly bold Dutch Republic had shown initiative and undertaken such long-distance expeditions. The Dutch navy had defiantly moved away from escorting a convoy of merchant ships in favour of undertaking offensive operations, which created a desperate need for larger ships to facilitate such undertakings. In view of the fact that the most important ships were built in Amsterdam at that time, it is highly likely that Savery painted the present panel for a person who was actively engaged in the shipbuilding programme which had been launched in Amsterdam in the 1590s. The painting, therefore, could have been commissioned by an Amsterdam magistrate, a councillor of the Amsterdam Admiralty or an administrator of the Dutch East India Company.

The painting can be interpreted as aligning the city of Amsterdam, which at about that time was braving both storms (wars) and monsters (the Spanish). Not only that, but the central position in the painting of the East-Indiaman *Amsterdam* can also be seen as representing a triumph for the nascent Dutch East India Company, which was formed indeed, about the time that the present picture was painted. This year marks the 400th anniversary of that important historical event.

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