

WILLEM VAN DE VELDE THE ELDER AND THE TECHNIQUE OF THE PEN PAINTING

The life of Willem van de Velde the Elder, who ranks with his son the younger Willem as one of the finest of European marine artists, is so well known that only the brief outlines need to be given here.

He was born at Leiden in 1611, and with a naval captain for a father and a brother who was skipper of a merchant he not surprisingly developed a taste for the sea at an early age. He is known to have accompanied his father on a militia transport as a young boy, and there may have been other voyages as well. He married in Leiden in 1631, and in 1633 his wife gave birth to his second son, the painter Willem van de Velde the Younger. In the mid-1630s the family settled in Amsterdam.

Van the Velde's earliest surviving drawing dates from ca. 1635, but then he had probably been working as an artist for some time. In 1640 several engravings of his drawings were published, among them a portrait of the *Aemilia*, the flagship of Maarten Harpensz. Tromp, and a scene of the battle of Dunkirk (1638), so he seems to have made his mark as a marine draughtsman fairly soon after moving to his new home.

The Van the Veldes, father and son, worked as a team for much of their lives, with his father's drawings and ship portraits serving as a basis for the son's paintings. The latter interpreted his father's studies very freely, and there is no known drawing, which he copied literally in his painting. Although Arnold van Houbraken states that the elder Van de Velde also took up in later years, no convincing evidence have ever been found to support this. What he did do was work up his own studies into pen paintings, a technique that will be discussed below.

Van the Velde's drawings and pen paintings of historic maritime events are based on either eye-witness accounts or on his first-hand experience, for he took to observing sea battles from his own galliot or from a vessel lent to him by the government. In this way he could follow the manoeuvres and individual nations as they developed, and record them in drawings made on the spot. It was clearly a risky way of working, and definitely not for the faint-hearted, but it suited his restless, adventurous spirit. His own graphic description of the Battle of Scheveningen (Ter Heide) of 1653 was that the sight of the English and the Dutch fleets pounding each other was like 'looking into a fiery furnace' ('of men in een gloeyende oven sagh').

Willem van de Velde the Elder loved to travel, and from 1660 to 1662 he was away from home. It was probably some kind of public relations trip, and there are indications he visited England, where he may have prepared the ground for his eventual immigration with his son in 1672. There are several possible reasons for his decision to leave Holland. In the first place, the war with England and France disrupted life to such an extent that artists were finding it hard to make a living. In addition, he probably saw it as a good opportunity to disentangle himself from his chaotic family life (his wife took him to court more than once for adultery and fathering illegitimate children). Whatever the reason, it is unlikely that the two Van de Veldes went to England on the off chance of finding work. They must have had some assurance that they would find a welcome on their arrival. King Charles II was encouraging Dutch artists to settle in his realm, and he would certainly have taken an interest in marine painters, for England was one of the great sea powers. The Van the Veldes, anyway, evidently found everything to their liking, for they remained in England until their deaths in 1693 and 1707.

Willem van de Velde the Elder is best known for his pen paintings, or grisailles as they are often called. Carel van Mander, in his *Schilderboeck* of 1604, states that the technique was invented by Hendrick Golzius, but it seems that this was more in the nature of an experiment, for there are no other instances of its use from that period. It was Van de Velde who perfected the technique, which became extremely popular in the later half of the seventeenth century but fell into disuse after the first quarter of the eighteenth century.

Pen paintings were executed either on canvas, or more commonly on oak panels, which were glued together and prepared with a rough ground applied with a priming knife. The layer of ground was then carefully covered with a thin layer of lead white diluted in oil. These support layers had to be left to dry for two or three months before the surface was hard enough to make the drawing, which was executed with a sharp quill pen and Indian ink (lamp or candle black mixed with gum Arabic and water).

The artist started by drawing thin lines to indicate the main elements of the composition of the horizon, and he might add a light grey wash to emphasize particular areas. He drew in the details with a quill pen, using thicker lines and darker ink for the foreground, gradually reducing their thickness and density towards the background in order to create an illusion of depth. Variations of colour intensity were achieved by cross-hatching, a technique that is chiefly associated with engraving.

Pen painting was an extremely difficult and time-consuming process, and a large picture could take up to six months to complete. It was ideal, however, for highly detailed work, and the paintings of Willem van de Velde contain an incredible amount of information about ships themselves and the events they played a part.

Van de Velde probably produced his first pen paintings around 1640, and they were so skilful that it soon became a very popular art form. His patrons included the Tromp family, who commissioned a series of five large pen paintings of major sea battles, and various government bodies.

Despite their meticulous detail, the scenes are not always historically accurate, for he occasionally allowed himself some artistic licence in order to improve the composition or to meet a client's particular wishes. On one of his drawings, which he made during the battle of Scheveningen, he added the remark: 'the dignitaries' yacht, this to be made on a stock panel for one of the gentry, bringing the yaught to the fore' ('het heerejacht, dit te maken op een guldenspaneel voor een van de heeren en haer jacht vooraen brengen').

Van de Velde's pen paintings were greatly prized, and not just in his homeland. His admirers included Cardinal Leopoldo de Medici and his nephew Cosimo, who paid a visit to Van de Velde's studio, accompanied by Pieter Blaeu, the son of the printer and publisher Johannes Blaeu, and bought a work from him.

Van de Velde was very well paid by the standards of the day, when a landscape of Van Goyen, for instance, fetched no more than fifty guilders. For his grisaille of the surrender of the *Royal Prince*, which he made for Cardinal de Medici in 1672, he received the princely sum of 500 guilders. In 1673 the cardinal paid him 200 guilders for three small paintings, and at that at a time when pictures were paid for size.

In a letter to Lord Dartmouth of 1688, in which Van de Velde announced that he had completed five pen paintings, he left the matter of the payment to 'the generosity and high just consideration of my Lord himselfe', although he made a point of mentioning that the paintings were finer than those which he had made for two other members of the English aristocracy, for which he had received 20 and 23 pounds respectively, which was roughly one-fifth of his annual pension from the king.

Charles II and his brother James, Duke of York, were delighted to have gained the services of the two leading marine artists of the day. Found among Samuel Pepys's papers was their appointment by Charles II in which was decided 'to allow the salary of 100 pounds per annum unto Willem VandeVelde the Elder for taking and making draughts of sea-fights: and the

salary of 100 pounds per annum unto Willem VandeVelde the younger for putting the said draughts into colours for our particular use'.

On top of this basic salary the Duke of York promised them a sum of 50 pounds a year, with an additional payment for every painting delivered. Father and son were also given a large house at Greenwich, and a studio was built for them in the Queen's house, which could be extended if they were working on large commissions, such as the design of a tapestry series depicting the Battle of Solebay.

At first the Van de Veldes had their hands full with commissions for their royal patrons, and it was only when William III ascended the throne in 1688 and their contract was allowed to lapse that they found time to work for other clients. Charles II clearly knew the value of his protégés full well, for in 1673 he forbade Willem van de Velde the Elder to witness the Battle of Texel in person, for he felt that there was too great a risk of him being killed,