



*The Brederode off Vlieland*

An early pen painting by Willem van de Velde the Elder



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*Portrait of William as a Child by the Fides.*  
Oil on canvas, 1771 x 2 cm. London: National Maritime Museum.

## WILLEM VAN DE VELDE THE ELDER AND THE TECHNIQUE OF 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 now so well known that only the brief outlines need 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 merchantman 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 their second son, the painter Willem van de Velde the Younger. In the mid-1630s the family settled in Amsterdam.

Van de Velde's earliest surviving drawing dates from 1638, but by 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 Harpertz. 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 de Velde's, father and son, worked as a team for much of their lives, with the father's drawings and ship portraits serving as a basis for the son's paintings. The latter always interpreted his father's studies very freely, and there is no known drawing which was copied literally in a painting. Although Arnold Houbraken states that the elder Van de Velde also took up the brush in later years, no convincing evidence has 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 de Velde's drawings and pen paintings of historic maritime events are based either on eye-witness accounts or on his own 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 actions 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 Dutch fleets pounding each other was like 'looking into a fiery furnace' ('of men in een gloeyenden 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 that he visited England, where he may have prepared the ground for his eventual emigration 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 Velde 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 de Velde, anyway, evidently found everything to their liking, for they remained in England until their deaths in 1693 and 1727.

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 *Schilderboek* of 1604, states that the technique was invented by Hendrick Goltzius, 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 the Elder 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 panel which were glued together and prepared with a rough ground applied with a pointing 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 for two or three months before the surface was hard enough to take 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 and the position of the horizon, and he might add a light grey wash to emphasize particular areas. He then 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 the illusion of depth. Variations in colour intensity were achieved by cross-hatching, a technique which is closely 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 the Elder contain an incredible amount of information about the ships themselves and the events in which they played a part.

Van de Velde probably produced his first pen paintings around 1645, and they were so skilful that it soon became a very popular art form. His patrons included the Tromp family, who commissioned a series



Willem van de Velde: *The Batavia of Scheerwateringen (The Mermaid)*, 11 July 1653. Pen painting on canvas, 7 1/2 x 10 1/2 on slip and dated 'W. de Velde 1653' in gilded van de Velde's characteristic, ribbon-shaped, Dutch initials (foreground) Willem van de Velde at work on board his galleon.

of five large pen paintings of major sea battles, and various government bodies.

Despite their meticulous detail, his 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 the drawings which he made during the Battle of Schooneveld he added the remark: 'The dignitaries' yacht, this to be made on a stock pond for one of the gentry, bringing the yacht to the fore' ('het heere-jacht, dit te maken op een galderspaniel voor een van de heeren en haer jacht vooract 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 painter and publisher Joannes Blaeu, and bought work from him.

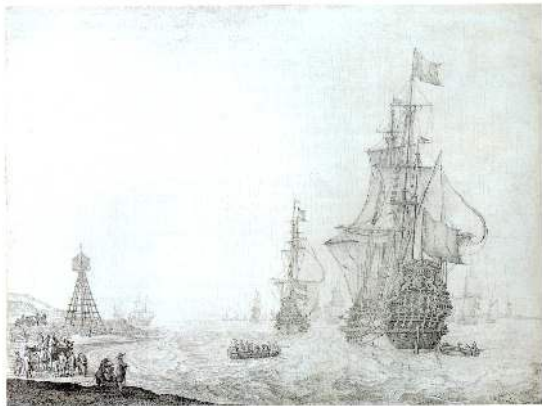
Van de Velde was very well paid by the standards of the day, when a landscape by Van Goyen, for instance, fetched no more than fifty guilders. For his gouache of the surrender of the *Royal Priare*, which he made for Cardinal de Medici in 1672, he received the princely sum of 500 guilders. In 1673 the cardinal paid him 200 guilders for three small pen paintings, and that at a time when pictures were paid for by 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 payment to 'the generosity and high juste 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 25 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 it was decided 'to allow the salary of 100 pounds per annum unto Willem Vandevelde the elder for talking and making draughts of sea fights; and the like salary of 122 pounds per annum unto Willem Vandevelde the younger for putting the said draughts into colours for *one* particular use'.

On top of this basic salary the Duke of York promised them a sum of 30 pounds a year, with an additional payment for every painting delivered. Father and son were also given a large house in Greenwich, and a stable 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.



Wänerens de Venle  
de Lido. Tör Berström  
of Väner  
Pen drawing on paper.  
21.7 x 32.5 cm  
Signed 'W. de Venle'  
Amsterdam  
Rob. Kosterberg Gallery.



## THE BREDERODE OFF VLIELAND

This pen painting by Willem van de Velde the Elder is executed on panel and measures 21.7 x 32.5 cm. It is signed 'W.v. Velde' in angular letters at bottom right.

In the right foreground is the *Brederode*, identified by the stern decoration with the arms of Prince Frederik Hendrik, and by the inscription BRE DE RO DE on the wing transom above the gunports. Flying from the main top is the red, white and blue prince's flag, indicating that the admiral is on board. The flag on the poop is probably blue, which was the signal to weigh anchor.

The *Brederode* was one of the largest Dutch warships of her day, and was built in 1648 at the Rotterdam Admiralty yard. She mounted 59 guns, and was the flagship of Witte de With, and later of Maarten Harpertz Tromp, who was killed on board at the Battle of Scheveningen. In 1658 Witte de With was also mortally wounded on the *Brederode* during the Battle of the Sound, when she was sunk by the Swedes. In the centre foreground a small alseop is being rowed across to the flagship.

On the left is the coast of the island of Vlieland, with its large beacon. Several people have gathered on the beach to watch the fleet set sail. Slightly further off, to the left of the *Brederode*, is a ship the vice-admiral's flag at the foremast. To the right of the *Brederode*, among the many ships and vessels in the background, is a fluit, one of the commonest merchant ships of the seventeenth century. At far right is the island of Ferscheffing with the Brancaris light tower.

There are several clues which make the scene fairly easy to identify. The presence of a large fleet of merchantmen and men-of-war in the Vlie Gat can be linked to two historical events. By the mid-seventeenth century it had become customary for Dutch ships trading with Scandinavia to sail together on the same day. These merchant fleets were often escorted by squadrons of warships. In 1649 and 1645 the escort was particularly strong, for Sweden and Denmark were at war, and the Danish king was continually raising the toll dues through the Sound between the two countries, contrary to earlier agreements. On both occasions the fleet of warships was commanded by Witte de With, Vice-Admiral of Holland and West Frisia. On the first voyage he raised his flag on the *Princesse Royale*. The following year, in June 1645, he was appointed admiral especially for the expedition, and was given a fleet of 47 ships divided into seven squadrons to protect



*Dirck Sibout: Willem Lodowick de Wit (1699-1699).  
Canvas, 93 x 72.5 cm.  
Jacobus van der Meer: "Willelmus de Wit, viceconsul van Holland in  
West-Indien. Geboortelid 1699, overlijden 1707. Aetate 17. An. 1707".  
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.*

Jan Lantini, *Marine Hoopster Tromp* (1697-1613).  
Canvas, 154 x 126 cm. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

Both Tromp and Witt de Witt rose to high rank very young, beginning with and with boys. Tromp was appointed Lieutenant-Admiral of the province of Holland in 1619, and was given command of both the *Holland* and *Zierikzee* fleets. Witt de Witt, who was promoted Vice-Admiral of Holland and West-Friesland in 1637, was Tromp's second-in-command, and generally operated independently with one of the Holland southern. Adriaen De Vries was a little younger than Tromp, he had very many naval setbacks and had taken part in several daring expeditions for foreign powers. He had visited the Cape of Good Hope three times, served under Jan Pieterzoon Coen in the defence of Jakarta, with the Dutch Armada, passed through the Strait of Magellan, and had been with the fleet at the capture of the Spanish treasure fleet at Matanzas Bay in 1628. As yet in 'the hollow', he was a contemporary, outstanding and often brilliant tactician, and he was not even found to be particularly wise in water. Tromp, who although he was regarded as as bold as a bull and far more diplomatic. Their skills of each other often merged into one another. Both Tromp and De Witt were killed during the *Reykaya* de la forra in the Battle of Sitkaomogren 1634, and De Witt at the Battle of the Sound in 1658.





*William and Anne* de Witt's *de Witt's*. The *William and Anne* off *London*.  
According to the *London* Gallery.  
Drawn, with the most of the *London*.

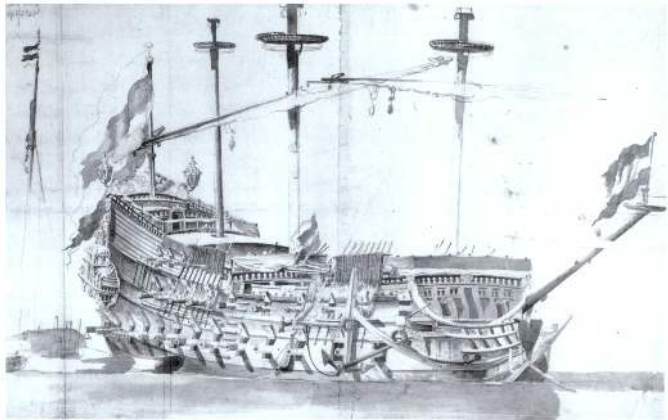
a fleet of around 300 merchantmen on their voyage north. This time De With's flagship was the *Broderode*, fresh from the builder's yard - 'still pristine and unspotted' ('daer de maeghtdom noch aen is'), as De With himself described her in a letter to the States-General in The Hague.

Given the inscription on the tracons identifying the centrepiece of this pen painting as the *Broderode*, the scene must be the departure of the second expedition to the Sound on 9 June 1645.

Van de Velde was evidently present when the fleet sailed, for he made a number of drawings of the event which he later used for several pen paintings, specimens of which are in the Lakenhal in Leiden and the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich.



*Willem van de Velde the Elder. The Merchant Fleet Sailing for the Sound on 9 June 1645. Executed by 37 Men-of-War Under the Command of Willem de With. Pen painting on paper. 71 x 105.5 cm. Leiden, Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal.*



Van de Velde did not always make his pen paintings immediately after the event, but sometimes as much as ten or twenty years later. However, there are reasons to believe that this particular grisaille was made shortly after the fleet set sail in 1645, and that it served as the model for his other pen paintings of the subject, particularly the one in the Lakenhal. Michael Robicson bases his suggestion on the fact that this grisaille is remarkably small compared to Van de Velde's other pen paintings, and that the design is simple, without the additions found in the other versions, such as extra ships in the foreground and more activity on the coast. This would indicate that this version preceded the other pen paintings, which are considerably larger.

It is known that Van de Velde was a keen student of the perspective of ships at sea, as was his friend Simon de Vlieger, who probably taught the younger Willem for several years. This grisaille suggests that Van de Velde was still at an early stage of his perspective studies, reinforcing the belief that this is one of his earliest pen paintings. That, and its artistic qualities, give it a valuable place in his fascinating oeuvre.

*Willem van de Velde the Elder, Board of the  
Breda fleet, 1651?*

*1651? oil on wood, 38.5 x 62.3 cm.*

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1651? oil on wood, 38.5 x 62.3 cm.*

*"The ship Breda, which was  
commanded by the elder Van de Velle,  
was the first to be captured by the  
English in the North Sea in 1651".  
Inscribed on the back: "de schepen van  
Breda, die in 1651 versien van  
aanleggen van Breda" ("the ships which were in  
the battle between the Dutch and the English,  
drawn from life") and also "de schepen van  
Breda, die in 1651 versien van  
aanleggen van Breda".*

*London, National Maritime Museum*





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