



Van de Velde & Zoon, zeeschilders. Het bedrijf van Willem van de Velde de Oude en Willem van de Velde de Jonge, 1640-1707

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Remmelt Daalder, *Van de Velde & Son, sea-painters*

Summary

No other Dutch sea-painters have received more attention by historians and art historians than the Van de Veldes: Willem van de Velde the Elder (1611-1693) and his son Willem van de Velde the Younger (1633-1707). Indeed, one scholar in particular spent most of his working life focusing on the artists and their huge production of drawings and paintings: Michael Strang Robinson (1910-1991), curator of the National Maritime Museum (NMM) in Greenwich. And with good reason, as the Van de Veldes spent many years in England and the NMM owns the largest collection of their works in the world. Robinson laid the foundation for deeper research by compiling a number of catalogues of the Van de Velde oeuvre, totaling seven volumes. Up to now no comprehensive monograph on the Van de Velde studio has been written. In this book I describe their careers as examples of a 17th century family firm specializing in maritime art. Their artistic development in itself is not my subject. This book, rather, considers how they developed their products to keep apace with the art market.

Willem van de Velde the Elder came from a family that had recently migrated to the Dutch Republic. His grandparents lived in Oostwinkel near Ghent before leaving the war-stricken Southern Netherlands to settle in Leiden around 1585. One of their children, Willem Willemsz van de Velde (ca. 1572-c. 1630), was the father of the artist Willem van de Velde, later called 'the Elder'. Willem van de Velde the Elder, born in Leiden in 1611, grew up in a maritime milieu. Both his father and his elder brother Gerrit were masters of an inland barge and, although there is no solid proof, it looks as if Willem started his working life as a sailor. He may have had lessons from the painter Cornelis Liefrinck, his neighbour in Leiden, but there are no indications that he ever had any formal drawing lessons. In the early 1630s, however, he must have decided to embark on a new career as an artist. He moved from Leiden to Amsterdam (c. 1634) with his wife Judick van Leeuwen and his son Willem, later called the Younger. Amsterdam was a booming centre of shipping and maritime industries and Willem van de Velde the Elder specialized in the production of prints of maritime subjects. The earliest indications that Van de Velde found work in that sector can be found in a number of designs for prints of ships and sea battles. Around 1640 he created a new product: pen paintings of maritime subjects. This required an extremely time-consuming technique, using refined drawing with pen and brush in black ink. At first he worked on vellum, but soon he switched to panel and canvas in order to make larger works. With this new type of maritime art Van de Velde targeted discerning art buyers, who were willing to pay a relatively high price for something special: a drawing that would not decay with time and could even be cleaned 'with a sponge', as the artist claimed.

Willem van de Velde the Younger joined the family studio in the early 1650s, after a period of training by his father and an apprenticeship with Simon de Vlieger, the leading marine painter at the time. The Van de Velde studio on the Nieuwe Waalseiland, a recently built neighbourhood on the bank of the river Y, developed different 'production lines': large (pen) paintings made to order and usually commissioned by navy officers like admiral Cornelis Tromp and smaller oil paintings on speculation for those who wanted a fitting wall decoration. Analysis of the Montias Database of 17th Century Dutch Art Inventories and the Getty Provenance Index proves that ownership of one or more marine paintings was not restricted to people from the maritime trades, but that 'zeetjes' (little seascapes) by various sea painters could be found in a spectrum of households.

The Van de Veldes might have been even more successful in receiving high paying commissions had they possessed an impeccable reputation, but this was not the case. There is the Younger's first marriage, which soon proved a failure and was annulled on the basis of his wife's alleged adultery, though effectively a pretext for a legal divorce. There are also the Elder Van de Velde's extramarital adventures to consider, which must have been widely frowned upon. In fact Willem van de Velde the Elder seems to have fathered several illegitimate children and his affairs even caused a temporary legal separation from his wife Judick van Leeuwen.

This study shows that the Van de Velde studio had a clear division of labour. The father did most of the research and accompanied the Dutch war fleet in a small vessel (a *galjoot*) to observe naval actions at sea. A number of times he reported to the authorities afterwards, probably showing his drawings as an explanation. This suggests that he may have been on the payroll as a kind of dispatcher for the navy. The sketches he made at sea became part of the studio archive and the basis for paintings by both father and son. Willem van de Velde the Younger seems to have worked in the studio most of the time, but occasionally he travelled to the coast to witness the movements of the fleet.



Willem van de Velde the Elder, *Dutch ships under way in a moderate breeze from the Anchorage off Vlieland*, ca. 1645, pen painting on panel, 42 x 62 cm, ex-Kunsthandel Rob Kattenburg (Robinson 1990a, p. 110, nr. 820).

The Van de Velde family was in many ways connected to naval circles and the shipping industry. Maertgen van de Velde, sister of the the Elder, for instance, married Jacob Agges, commissioner of the Amsterdam Admiralty on the island of Vlieland. Agges supervised the traffic on the Vlie, the passage between the Waddenzee and the North Sea. Many drawings and pen paintings of shipping in this area demonstrate that the Elder often stayed there with his sister and brother-in-law, allowing easy access also to high-ranking naval officers. Other relatives worked for the admiralty too, or married into seafaring families, providing more contacts and potential buyers.

In chapters 8 and 9 two of Willem van de Velde the Elder's important international contacts are discussed in detail: the Swedish general and admiral Carl Gustav Wrangel (1651-1652) and two members of the Medici family in Florence (1667-1672), the later archduke Cosimo III and his uncle, cardinal Leopoldo de' Medici. Cosimo even paid a visit to the Van de Velde studio in 1667. The well-placed 'agent' Michel le Blon introduced Van de Velde the Elder to Wrangel and Pieter Blaeu, member of the Blaeu family of publishers and cartographers, did the same with the Medici. This demonstrates Van de Velde's ambitions and entrepreneurial spirit. Correspondence with their patrons in Sweden and Italy respectively yield a trove of details concerning Van de Velde's pen painting technique, pricing and the production time and transport of paintings over long distances.

The crisis of 1672, the 'Disaster Year', when the Dutch Republic was attacked by almost all its neighbours, was a turning point for many Dutch artists, including the Van de Veldes. With the art market at a standstill the Van de Veldes moved to England, one of the enemies of the Dutch Republic. While for us such a move would be deemed treason, in the 17th century 'total war' did not exist and communications between enemy countries were not completely blocked. In fact the Van de Veldes were probably invited by King Charles II and his brother James, Duke of York, later King James II, a testimony to their international esteem. There are several indications that Van de Velde the Elder already had met these Stuart princes and accompanied the restored king Charles II to England on the fleet that left from Scheveningen in 1660. Once in England, a royal pension was provided for both, as was a studio in the Queen's House in Greenwich and a number of commissions from the King and his brother made for a very successful new career. Their privileged position as court painters immediately granted access to the highest circles in England and numerous commissions resulted. Willem van de Velde the Younger for example made paintings for Ham House in Richmond upon Thames, the new mansion of John Maitland, Duke of Lauderdale and for Sir Richard Edgcumbe at Mount Edgcumbe in Cornwall.

Apart from a single battle in 1673 Willem van de Velde the Elder ceased sailing with the fleet, as he had so often done in Holland. The vast stock of drawings, brought over from Amsterdam, however, provided the studio with ample material to continue its production of marine art. This archive was replenished with sketches and drawings of English shipping, made in the surroundings of Greenwich and during inspection voyages with the retinue of Charles II and James II. The Van de Veldes also profited from the growing interest in the arts during the booming Restoration period. In addition, they brought something new to the art market, namely, marine painting, a specialty that hardly existed beyond the Netherlands.

In art historical literature the emigration of 1672-73 is seen as the beginning of a decline. This reappraisal of father and son Willem van de Velde argues, rather, that these artists successfully adapted to the tastes and wishes of a new clientele, who preferred spectacular stormy seascapes over the calmer and more subtle mood of Willem van de Velde the Younger's Dutch period. Admittedly, Willem van de Velde the Elder's talent was more limited than his son's and his most innovative work doubtlessly dates to before 1672, but the fact that in England he started to paint in oil and make tapestry designs, makes clear that he, despite his advanced age, successfully adapted to the challenges posed by his new surroundings. Besides, until his death he remained the manager of the studio and must have brought in many new clients. Michael Robinson has argued that father and son split up and started separate studios around 1680. There is no proof of this, however: they continued to work together until the Elder's death.

After the Glorious Revolution of 1688 the Van de Veldes lost their privileged position at the Stuart court. Unfortunately the new king, their fellow-countryman William III of Orange, lacked the enthusiasm for maritime affairs of his father-in-law James II, and so the Van de

Veldes left Greenwich for London. Father and son found new dwellings in Sackville Street, Westminster, in two houses next to each other. Their business does not seem to have suffered from this move and navy officers, like Admiral Edward Russell, continued to purchase and commission ship's portraits and sea battles. Willem van de Velde the Elder died in Westminster in 1693. Fourteen years later the Younger was buried next to his father in St. James's Church, Piccadilly.

The 'Van de Velde studio' has been the subject of much speculation. Almost every contemporary maritime artist in England, from Isaac Sailmaker to Peter Monamy, has been named as a studio assistant. The huge production of paintings from the Van de Velde studio (at least some 800 oil paintings) is the main reason for these assumptions and far flung suggestions. This study argues that none of these other artists were actually employed by the Van de Veldes and that the studio remained an exclusive family affair: the two Willem van de Veldes, Cornelis, a son of the Younger and possibly his brother Willem one or two of his sisters, and Johan van der Hagen, Cornelis' brother in law.

Cornelis van de Velde (1674-1714) and Johan van der Hagen continued the family firm after Willem van de Velde the Younger's death. Seven years later, in 1714 (and not in 1729, as is commonly assumed), Cornelis van de Velde died in London. With his death the final curtain fell over the Van de Velde studio.

The success of the Van de Velde family business must be attributed to the fruitful combination of several factors: Willem van de Velde the Elder's flexibility, his feeling for entrepreneurship and marketing, and the artistic talents of both Van de Veldes, the Younger even more so than his father. As a result of this study the outlines of their 70 year long business success can now be understood. This research greatly benefits from the availability of relevant sources relating to the art market in the Netherlands, especially the work of John Michael Montias. When more sources become available about the art market in England, the insight in the way family firms like the Van de Velde studio functioned, may be further refined.