



Heerman Witmont (ca. 1605-Delft-1684)

Schepen op woelig water
Een penschilderij
Pen en inkt op een geprepareerd paneel 58 x 78 cm.
Gesigneerd H,Witmont

HEERMAN WITMONT

Delft c. 1605- 1684

Shipping in a storm

A 'pen painting'

on panel 58 x 78 cm.

signed lower right H. Witmont

Provenance

Auction N. Barlow e.o. Sotheby London, 6 Februari 1957, no. 18

Kunsthandel D. Vaartjes Rotterdam

Private collection

By descent

Comparative Literature

A. Knops, Een stuck van Witmont mette pen gedaan, Delft 2001

Exhibitions

Tentoonstelling van oude meesters Rotterdam Kunsthandel D. Vaartjes 1961 nr. 40

Lof der Zeevaart, Rotterdam Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Staatliche Museen Zu Berlin, 1997, cat.no. 96 (with wrong measurements)

Borg Verhildersum Leens, 2001, 'Lands schip Verhildersum. Three exhibitions around a drawing by Willem van de Velde, exh. cat. Leens 2001, cat no. 16, p. 69

Six three-masters are struggling against the waves of a rough sea. The crew of the two vessels in the fore-ground are trying to hold their course. The foremast of the vessel on the right has carried away; the top has fallen into the water and is now almost submerged. Four ships can be seen in the background, one of them in distress and beyond hope. All her masts are gone and she is drifting towards the rocks. The stern of the man-of-war in the right foreground carries the arms of Holland in the form of two lions supporting a shield surmounted by a lion rampant. Attempts have been made to identify her from other paintings or drawings, but so far without any result. She might simply be an imaginary ship with the arms used metaphorically to symbolize the fatherland in the midst of some prevailing danger.

This, however, is pure speculation. Moreover, the painting is undated.

Like most 17th-century pictures of ships in a storm, Witmont's panel leaves us in suspense as to the ultimate fate of the vessels. The frigate in the left foreground is still reasonably under control, but the ship on the right appears to have lost the fight and is at the mercy of the elements. The theme of ships tossed by the sea near a rocky coast was popular throughout the 17th century.

Witmont may have been inspired by the work of his fellow townsman Simon de Vlieger, although paintings of the subject were so prevalent that he could have been influenced by any one of a dozen or more masters. Witmont himself made several very similar paintings of the same theme. Other pen painters, including Mooij and Boumeester, also depicted ships at sea in a tempest.

In Gabriel Metsu's famous painting of a Woman reading a letter at the National Gallery (Beit Collection) in Dublin, the maid is drawing a curtain aside to reveal a painting fairly similar to Witmont's panel. Metsu's seascape is entirely in grey, which was possibly meant to give it the appearance of a pen painting. The picture shown here, however, is in brown ink.

A characteristic feature of Witmont's work are the thousands of tiny dots he uses to render waves and shadows. Traces of underdrawing in a dry medium, possibly leadpoint, are visible in many parts of the painting. The structure of the waves in rhythmic fields of light and dark was first drawn in completely.

After this was done, Witmont must have washed the darkest areas of the composition with the brush and then started work with the pen. The clouds are painted grey, without any pen work. Witmont made a number of panels depicting

ships very similar to these. One represents a vessel which is virtually identical to the ship in the right foreground here, except that she has the arms of Zeeland instead of Holland on her stern. The Kröller-Müller Museum has a panel showing a three-master which is almost exactly the same as the one on the left here (inv.no. 841). Witmont may have kept a collection of drawings in his studio to consult for ideas and inspiration.

None of his panels are dated and it is difficult to establish when they were made. The composition of the work shown here contains very few clues, as artists were making similar pictures throughout the 17th century. But the type of ship he has illustrated and the possibility that he was influenced by De Vlieger would suggest a date in or after the 1640s.

Gabriel Metsu, Woman reading a letter, oil on panel 52,5 x 40,2 cm National Gallery of Ireland Dublin, inv.no. ngi 4537

Although Heerman Witmont's place of birth is unknown, his surname suggests that his family originally came from the east Frisian town of Witmond, present day Wittmund in Germany. Heerman himself may have been born there but several older dictionaries mention The Hague as place of birth. He posted banns in Delft on 8 May 1627 for his marriage on 30 May 1627 with Jacomijntje Gillisdr. van der Vos from Oosteynde.

He is recorded as father of Gillis (born 24 February 1630, died December 1630), Wessel (1632), Maria (1640), Gillis II, who became a potter (1642) and Abraham (1648) in records of the Nieuwe Kerk in Delft. Heerman's brother Olivier also lived in Delft, and married Maria Adriaens de Lange on 2 February 1642. He owned a flourishing brandy distillery and lived in a house called Het Laersje near the Hague gate. A posthumous inventory of his estate includes two small paintings, a 'still water' and a 'storm' by his brother Heerman. Three of Olivier Witmont's sons — Jacob, Abraham and Willem — joined the Dutch East India Company and sailed to the Indies, where their uncle Leendert de Lange was in charge of VOC procurements. Heerman joined the guild of St Luke on 27 June 1644. He spent his whole life in Delft, specialising in pen paintings and drawings. He is not known to have worked in oils. An archive document describes him as an 'art draughtsman' (const teijckenaer). Heerman appears to have been reasonably successful. The Amsterdam physician Jan Sysmus, who kept a register of artists between about 1669 and 1678, wrote that Heerman made 'fine' pen drawings of 'large ships'. A few large panels, doubtlessly made on commission, have survived. Witmont's work is listed in numerous inventories from Delft. Harpert Tromp for instance, the brother of the naval hero Cornelis Tromp, had a drawing by him in his children's nursery. Witmont was also commissioned to illuminate several official letters to the Russian emperor in watercolours, and he may have designed tapestries as well. We know from a notarial document that Bartholomeus van der Gucht, the son and assistant of the distinguished tapestry weaver Maximiliaan van der Gucht, agreed to sell him a 'small house' in the Rijselstraat 'in return for drawings by [Witmont] to the value of 300 guilders, without further cash payment. The house was later sold to Bartholomeus's father. In 1676 Witmont received another modest commission from the Delft authorities, this time to design crests to serve as examples for a 'figurative map' of the city, which was published in 1678. The prices his work fetched in the 17th century fluctuated considerably. The paintings mentioned above, which belonged to Olivier Witmont, were sold for no more than 5 guilders and 15 stuyvers.' Isaack Elsevier, however, had a 'drawing' by Witmont that was valued at 30 guilders in 1650. Witmont's work was also known in Amsterdam. In 1653 Willem van de Velde the Elder was asked whether it would be possible to wash 'certain drawings' by the Delft master. Van de Velde replied in the negative. In his own day Witmont's forename was spelt variously as Heerman, Heereman, Herman and even Hendrick. On one occasion he himself signed as Heere. On 2 February 1684 Heerman Witmont was taken from his home in the Zusterslaan to his last resting place in the Nieuwe Kerk in Delft.

