

He also had a number of pupils, including Hendrick and Jan Claesz. Rietschoof, Michiel Maddersteg, Jan Dubbels, Pieter Coopse, and Anthonie Rutgers.

In addition to the seascapes for which he is famous, Backhuysen painted some portraits, allegorical compositions, and townscapes. Besides his work as a calligrapher, he was also a printmaker. He was married four times, and died after a long illness in Amsterdam, where he was buried in the Westerkerk on 17 November 1708.

Bibliography

Houbraken 1753, 2: 236–244.
Smith 1829–1842, 6 (1835): 401–458, 561–568; 9 (1842): 777–785.
HdG 1907–1927, 7 (1923): 211–322.
Bol 1973: 301–307.
Preston 1974: 3–6.
Nannen 1985.
Amsterdam 1985.
Minneapolis 1990: 82–97, 402–403.
Brown/MacLaren 1992: 5–6.

1985.29.1

Ships in Distress off a Rocky Coast

1667
Oil on canvas, 114.3 x 167.3 (45 x 65 7/8)
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund

Inscriptions

On rock at lower center: *LBackb/ 1667*

Technical Notes: The painting has been lined with the tacking margins trimmed. No reduction of the picture plane has occurred. A cream-colored ground, which covers the fine-weight, plain-woven support, is visible through the thinly applied paint. Thin, fluid, opaque paint layers are blended wet into wet with minimally impasted highlights and finely drawn paint lines in the rigging. The paint condition is excellent, with losses confined to the paint edges and only minor abrasion. Discolored varnish and retouchings were removed when the painting was restored in 1985.

Provenance: Arthur George, 3rd Earl of Onslow [1777–1870], West Clandon Place, Surrey.¹ (Sale, Christie, Manson & Woods, London, 22 July 1893, no. 24); J. W. Vokins. Del Monte, Brussels.² (P. & D. Colnaghi & Co., London, in 1959); (sale, Christie's, London, 19 April 1985, no. 111).

Exhibited: *Tentoonstelling van Schilderijen*, Kunstzaal Kleykamp, The Hague, 1932, no. 41. Minneapolis 1990, no. 4.

BUFFETED BY VIOLENT WINDS and raging seas, three Dutch cargo ships struggle desperately to stay clear of a rocky coast. The threat of destruction is

real, for the remnants of a shipwreck are ominously present in the foreground: a mast from the doomed ship, its Dutch flag still aloft, and cargo floating in the waves. An even more imminent danger for two of these ships is the threat of collision. One ship, its reefed sails filled with wind, races past two rock outcrops and bears down on another cargo ship that has turned into the wind to try to ride out the storm. Anxious sailors, struggling to bring their vessel under control, gesture wildly as spray from a huge wave crashes against its side. The other vessel's rear mast has broken, and the crew has cut down the top portion of its mainmast to prevent further damage. Most of its crew is on deck frantically trying to control the disengaged mast and sail.³ The outcome of the drama is not known, but Backhuysen creates the impression that man will prevail in this battle against the forces of nature: although massive steel gray clouds loom overhead, clear skies and a golden light in the upper left signal that the storm is about to pass.⁴

Backhuysen painted this dramatic scene in 1667, fairly early in his long and successful career as an artist. Most of his paintings from the 1660s depict identifiable ships massed in the waters offshore, whether outside the port of Amsterdam or near the island Texel north of the Zuider Zee. While Backhuysen delighted in activating such scenes with billowing clouds, choppy seas, and strong accents of light and dark, nothing anticipates the concentrated drama of this work. Indeed, it is remarkable that this painting, which is both large in scale and assured in concept and execution, is the first known representation of a tempest in his oeuvre.⁵

Houbraken states that Backhuysen began his career as an artist by drawing boats.⁶ While the careful, descriptive style of a number of his early drawings and pen paintings suggests that at the outset he was extremely influenced by the preeminent marine painters of the day, Willem van de Velde the Elder and his son Willem van de Velde the Younger, the influences that Houbraken mentions are Backhuysen's first teacher, Allaert van Everdingen, and the marine painter Hendrick Dubbels. Indeed, Everdingen's seascapes, with their convincing representations of turbulent seas and rugged terrains, include rocks not unlike those in Backhuysen's painting (fig. 1).⁷ In the end though, Backhuysen's fascination with the effects of weather in a seascape undoubtedly stemmed from an inherent interest in the sea. According to Houbraken, "nature" was Backhuysen's true teacher. He often sailed to the mouth of the sea to observe changes of light and water along the shore; such excursions provided a vivid impres-



Fig. 1. Allart van Everdingen, *Ships in a Rough Sea*, c. 1645, oil on canvas, Städelches Kunstinstitut Frankfurt, photo: Ursula Edelmann

sion of natural effects for his paintings and drawings.⁸

The vessels depicted by Backhuysen are flutes. These cargo ships were at the core of the enormous merchant fleet that was so essential to Dutch prosperity. Flutes were particularly important for trade with Scandinavia, and they traversed the Baltic Sea with loads of grain or lumber destined for Dutch markets. It would be along these trade routes that sailors would encounter cliffs and rocky shores reminiscent of the rugged terrain threatening the ships

in Backhuysen's painting. Many of the ships in this fleet came from Hoorn, one of the most important ports on the Zuider Zee, the seat of one of the chambers of the East India Company, and the city where the flute was first built in the late sixteenth century.⁹ Since the red-and-white striped flag of Hoorn flies from the foremast of the ship to the right, Backhuysen's scene may relate to a specific event in Hoorn's history.¹⁰

Even if a historic episode lies behind its conception, this tempest scene belongs to a Dutch and Flemish pictorial tradition that reaches back to the late sixteenth century. Artists as diverse as Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568–1625), Paulus Bril (1554–1626), Bonaventura Peeters (1614–1652), Adam Willelaerts (1577–1664), Simon de Vlieger (1601–1653), and Jacob Adriaensz. Bellevois (q.v.) found a ready market for such works not only because of the inherent drama of their subjects, but also because these scenes spoke to a deep-seated fear for all those whose lives depended on the sea. Rocky shores, in particular, had ominous overtones. On a practical level, they were to be feared in the midst of a storm, but they also symbolized inhospitable, foreign lands, the Dutch coast being predominantly lined by dunes.

Bellevois' *Sea Storm on a Rocky Coast* (fig. 2), which was executed in 1664, only three years before Backhuysen's work, offers a particularly interesting compositional and thematic comparison. As ships are

Fig. 2. Jacob Adriaensz. Bellevois, *Sea Storm on a Rocky Coast*, 1664, oil on canvas, Braunschweig, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum





Ludolf Backhuysen, *Ships in Distress off a Rocky Coast*, 1985.29.1

cast about in the stormy sea, some survivors of a wreck have made it to shore and are praying to God. The painting is anecdotal in the extreme, yet its underlying allegorical concept is fundamental to this genre of images: these survivors have overcome the turbulence of life and have reached the rock of their salvation, through the intervention of God, to whom they offer prayers of thanksgiving.¹¹ Backhuysen, on the other hand, focuses the entire drama on the boats at sea. He simplifies the image and removes the obvious theological and allegorical messages. For these sailors to survive, they must overcome the forces of nature through their own prowess as well as through the good graces of a deity above.

The painting is in a remarkable state of preservation. All of the details are intact, including the masts, sails, and lines on the ships. Particularly fascinating is the manner in which Backhuysen has indicated the spray from the waves by flicking a brush loaded with lead-white paint against the canvas. This technique gives an immediacy to the scene that is not often found in his later works, when his manner of painting became heavier. Although no preliminary drawing for this painting is known, a drawing of a *Ship in Distress in a Thunderstorm* (Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam) has much the same spirit and may have been executed about the same time.¹² A smaller version of the painting, attributed to Backhuysen, was on the New York art market in 1987.¹³

Notes

1. The Arthur George ownership, as well as the Del Monte reference cited below, come from labels that were formerly affixed to the stretcher.

2. Information taken from an old label on the back.

3. George Keyes in Minneapolis 1990, 88, interprets the vessel as floundering because it has "suffered terrible damage to its masts." However, the crew has taken control of the situation by removing the upper portion of the mast. A similar strategy against the forces of a storm can be seen in Backhuysen's 1694 painting of the Dutch men-of-war *Ridderschap* and *Hollandia* in the midst of a hurricane in the Straits of Gibraltar (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; inv. A 4856, repro. in

Rijksmuseum 1992, 20); the *Hollandia* is likewise shown without the top portion of the mainmast because its commander had it cut down to save the ship during the storm. See Kattenburg 1989, 42.

4. Goedde 1986, 142, views the situation more negatively. He writes that "few of the sailors in Backhuysen's picture will survive these cliffs."

5. Backhuysen painted a number of tempest scenes in later years, among them actual events (see note 2), imaginary scenes, and a few representations of biblical stories, such as *The Shipwreck of Paul*, c. 1690–1700, Stiftung Henri Nannen, Emden (color repro. in Nannen 1985, 43).

6. Houbraken 1753, 2: 237.

7. Everdingen's tempest views may reflect his own experiences: Houbraken 1753, 2: 238 relates that Everdingen had been shipwrecked off the coast of Norway.

8. Houbraken 1753, 2: 238. As Egbert Haverkamp-Begemann has noted (personal communication), Houbraken's comments have the character of topoi, rather than statements of fact.

9. Minneapolis 1990, 305.

10. Rob Kattenburg, letter of 1 October 1987, identifies the flag and adds, "Such a flag flown from the foremast usually signifies the residence of the shipowner, whereas a townflag flying from the rear mast indicates the home of the skipper." In the opinion of H. W. Saaltink, curator of the Westfries Museum, "no special event from the Hoorn history has been depicted" (letter of 28 November 1991). Both letters are in NGA curatorial files.

11. For an iconographic assessment of this painting, see Jochen Luckhardt in Braunschweig 1991, 28–31. Also relevant to the interpretation of such paintings is a long emblematic tradition in which storm-tossed ships, threatened by rocky shores, are given various allegorical meanings. In Andrea Alciati's *Emblemata* (Leiden, 1556), for example, this motif represented danger to the ship of state, whereas Adriaan Spinniker, in his *Leerzaame Zinnebeelden* (Haarlem, 1714), uses it to illustrate the dangers to the soul that result from a life unmindful of God.

12. Inv. no. H. 209. This connection was noted by Keyes in Minneapolis 1990, 221–222, no. 62 (repro.).

13. Sale, Christie's, New York, 13 January 1987, no. 72, oil on canvas, 26 x 31 inches.

References

- | | |
|------|---------------------------------------|
| 1986 | Sutton: 306. |
| 1986 | Goedde: 142. |
| 1989 | Goedde: 177, 202, 203, 204, fig. 161. |
| 1990 | Minneapolis: no. 4. |
| 1991 | Walsh: 645–646, repro. |