

ATTRIBUTED TO
WILLEM VAN DE VELDE
THE YOUNGER

(Leiden 1633 - London 1707)

The Salute Shot

inscribed 'W.Diest' (lower left)
 oil on canvas (relined)
 50 x 75 cm (19 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 29 $\frac{1}{2}$ in)

IN *THE SALUTE SHOT* A BARQUE IS ENTERING A PORT and preparing to anchor; the sails are being lowered as the ship fires its guns. This firing of guns was known as a salute shot, a naval tradition well established by the late sixteenth century. A ship, upon entering port, would discharge all its guns to show that they were empty and because the reloading process was so time-consuming, the ship was effectively defenceless as it came into range of the shore batteries. It was, therefore, a recognised indicator of friendly intent. These salutes always involved an odd number of guns as naval superstition held odd numbers to be lucky and an even number of guns was fired only in times of mourning. The subject is treated by Willem van de Velde the Younger in *The Cannon Shot* (c.1680, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam).

In the present work the firing ship is clearly a British one, identifiable by the red and white flag of St. George and the elaborate decoration of the lion and unicorn of the Royal coat of arms on the stern. A welcome party is being rowed out from the shore, the silhouettes of the oarsmen lean forward in unison as the boat glides through the water. On the left-hand side a group of fishermen have just come ashore. They too lower their sails as a companion draws in the nets.

The Salute Shot is comparable to a number of van de Velde's best works, including the Hermitage's *Ship in a Calm Sea* (fig. 1). In this work a royal yacht bearing the arms of the House of Orange anchors in a port. It is surrounded by various large sailing vessels, upon which Dutch prosperity was founded, whilst on the shore various figures are bathing in the morning sun. Colin Eisler writes, 'these ships are exalted by the golden light caught in their sails' and in both of these works one of the most significant features is the way in which the light shimmers and glistens off the calm surface of the water.¹ In *The Salute Shot* this study of light is made all the more interesting on account of the skilful play of light amongst billowing clouds of gun powder smoke.

Ship in a Calm Sea was part of a collection of ninety-five old master paintings sold to Catherine the Great (1729-1796) by the famous Swiss collector François Tronchin (1704-1798). Tronchin was a financier and civic leader who was a friend of the philosophers Denis Diderot (1713-1784) and Voltaire (1694-1778). After selling much of his collection to the Empress in 1770, he continued to advise Catherine on her future purchases.

¹ Eisler, C., *Paintings in the Hermitage*, (Stewart, Tabori & Chang, New York, 1990), p. 342.

Van de Velde's father, Willem van de Velde the Elder (1611-1693), was also a marine painter and in the early part of his career he worked in his father's studio. In his youth, van de Velde the Younger was apprenticed to Simon de Vlieger (c.1600-1653) (cat. no. 57), whose influence can be seen in the atmospheric quality of the artist's work. He was precociously talented and already much sought after when he moved to London in 1673 to work alongside his father. Here he was engaged by Charles II (1630-1685), at a salary of £100, in addition to being patronised by the Duke of York (1633-1701) and other members of the aristocracy. In the early stages of his career he tended to paint calm scenes showcasing his ability to depict the sky with the utmost subtlety and skill. By the 1670s, however, he started to paint storms and sea battles, the demand for the latter fuelled in particular by the Anglo-Dutch wars in 1674. After his father's death van de Velde the Younger became the most prominent marine painter in England and was enormously influential.



Willem van de Velde the Younger, *Ship in a Calm Sea*, 1653, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg; Collection of François Tronchin, Geneva, 1770 (Figure 1)

