



Dutch Ships Ramming Spanish Galleys, 3 October 1602

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In 1617 Hendrick Cornelisz Vroom (c. 1566-1640), assisted by his son Cornelis (1591/92-1661), painted *Dutch Ships Ramming Spanish Galleys, 3 October 1602* (fig. 1).¹ We see a Dutch three-master coming towards us, the wind from the stern quarter full in the sails. The ship is not carrying the huge mainsail so that the sails on the foremast and the bowsprit can catch more of the wind and give the ship greater forward momentum. Visually, too, this accentuates her forward dynamic. With the vessel sailing at an angle towards the viewer and the mainsail furled, we get a good view of the deck, where there is much to see. The captain oversees the action high up on the poop deck, a trumpeter blows his instrument to spur on the soldiers (fig. 2), and there are a number of figures on a lower deck standing self-confidently with their legs braced. Soldiers fire their muskets at the enemy from the deck, the fo'c'sle and the head-knee. The canons project menacingly from the gun ports and can spit out their deadly fire at any moment. The heavy, almost black hull is in sharp contrast to the slender galleys in the foreground. One of the galleys is sinking. The rowers chained to their benches are disappearing into the dark sea, and the viewer is almost dragged into the depths with them.

Detail of fig. 1.

Some members of the crew are trying to save their skins by clinging to the Dutch ship (fig. 3). The Habsburg flag, identified by the Cross of Burgundy, floats in the water in the foreground. It could not be further from the flag of the Republic flying from the ship's main mast and flanked by the prince's tricolors: there can be no doubt who is the victor and who the vanquished. The other galley in the foreground is also doomed, no match for the onrushing war machine. The dark water in the foreground is made all the more threatening by the contrast with the light colours of the hazy sky. Further away, in the background on the left, we can see a number of galleys in close combat with a Dutch vessel. On the right there are high cliffs and more galleys.

Van Wieringen is always praised for his spectacular work *The Explosion of the Spanish Admiral's Ship at the Battle of Gibraltar* because of his innovative approach, concentrating on a single dramatic moment. Before this, portrayals of naval battles were usually great melees of fighting vessels. But in this painting, four years earlier, Vroom had already opted for an enlargement, zooming in on one dramatic event.² Almost never before had an artist depicted a ship coming virtually straight at the viewer so



Fig. 1

HENDRICK
CORNELISZ VROOM
AND CORNELIS
HENDRICKZ VROOM,
*Dutch Ships Ramming
Spanish Galleys off
the English Coast,
3 October 1602, 1617.*
Oil on canvas,
118 x 151 cm. Rijks-
museum, Amsterdam
(inv. no. SK-A-460).



Fig. 2

The captain and the
trumpeter on the
poop deck, detail.

Fig. 3

Seamen from the
galley cling to the
bow of the Dutch
ship, while the galley
slaves and the galley
go down, detail.



explicitly, making this a key work in the history of marine painting.

The details of the engagement Vroom depicted here are quite well known and documented. To what extent, fifteen years after the event, was he guided by the facts of what – to him – was already history? Before we pursue this question, we must examine the incident itself more closely. Remarkably, we can refer to two ship's logs from vessels involved in the action.³

In early 1602 the Spanish commander-in-chief Frederico Spinola had travelled to Spain to get eight galleys to reinforce the Spanish flotilla already anchored at Sluis. The English, the Republic's ally in the war against Spain, wanted to capture the galleys before they could reach the English Channel, and Elizabeth I asked the States-General to send out ships for a joint action.

A squadron under the command of Jacob van Duivendoorde, Lord of Obdam, was equipped for the operation and eventually sailed to the Portuguese coast to join the English and capture the galleys. In the meantime the English had already destroyed two of the eight galleys. After cruising off the Portuguese coast for some time with little result, the Dutch returned to the south coast of England. On their arrival they were alarmed when they sighted the remaining galleys. In the words of one of the log-keepers: 'On arrival off Dover we heard three shots from an English ship called *The Hope*, commanded by Admiral Sir Robert Mansell, which was lying off the coast of Calais. One of our ships also put out to sea and fired a shot, whereupon the Vice Admiral (Jan Adriaensz Cant) ordered men to climb the mast to see what was happening, and being barely aloft they shouted, "Galleys, galleys!" And we looking out to the north saw them perfectly, all six as well as others sailing and rowing towards us, followed by two ships, which continually fired at the galleys.'⁴ The four ships of the Dutch squadron

moored at Dover, *De Mane* with Vice-Admiral Jan Adriaensz Cant, *De Samson* with Gerbrandt Jansz Saal from Hoorn, *De Leeuwinne* with Hartman from Rotterdam and *De Hope* with Gerbrand Jansz from Enkhuizen, succeeded in overtaking the galleys near Gravelines. The ship's log reveals that this was an exciting event. There was little wind, so the slender galleys propelled by oarsmen had the advantage. The Dutch ships set all sails and the sloops that were towed behind the vessels and delayed progress were cast off and sent back to Dover with a few sailors on board. Towards the evening there was a little more wind, and slowly but surely they succeeded in drawing closer. Then darkness fell. Around midnight they suddenly saw the galleys by bright moonlight. Saal and Hartman rammed *La Lucera* and Cant rammed another ship, the *Padilla*.⁵ Two other galleys were driven ashore on the Flemish coast, one managed to reach Calais and the commander-in-chief Spinola's galley succeeded in reaching Nieuwpoort.

It was a great success at the right moment. The captains were received at court by Elizabeth I and honoured with great ceremony. The success erased the memory of the failed expedition of 1599, and was a fillip for Ostend, which had been under siege by the Spanish since 1601.⁶ As early as 8 November 1602, the States-General granted an exclusive five-year patent to the printmaker and publisher, Johannes Rem, allowing him to make, print and sell pictures of 'the arrival of the enemy's galleys and how they were rammed and stranded'.⁷ Rem dedicated the monumental print – three sheets with a text in Latin – to the States-General and Stadholder Prince Maurice.⁸

The three sheets (figs. 4a, 4b, 4c) depict the different stages of the battle, as was customary in broad sheets of this kind. Rem's print is the basis of a



Fig. 4
JOHANNES REM
(PRINTMAKER,
DESIGNER AND,
TOGETHER WITH
WILLEM JANSZ
BLAEU, PUBLISHER),
*The Destruction of the
Spanish Galleys off
the Flemish Coast*,
(3 sheets, 538 x 417
mm, 540 x 421 mm and
542 x 411 mm), c. 1602.
In the left sheet the
galleys are off Dover
Castle, followed by
two ships; the Dutch
squadron draws ahead

to block their path.
The centre sheet
shows the ramming
of the galleys, and in
the right sheet is the
Dutch squadron,
which ran into a storm
after the battle.
Besieged Ostend is in
the foreground. In the
left sheet and in the
centre the ally has
been given a modest
place – some ships are
flying English flags.
Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam (inv. nos.
RP-P-OB-80.631A, B, C).



later print by Baptista van Doetecum
in the *Journal van het Beleg van
Oostende* (fig. 5).⁹ For a long time the
episode was part of the canon of Dutch
history. Jan Luyken made prints of it
between 1679 and 1681, as did Simon
Fokke between 1756 and 1758.¹⁰

It need come as no surprise that in 1617
– fifteen years after the event – Vroom
should have devoted a painting to this
incident. Towards the end of the Truce
and well into the 1620s there was a
significant demand for works depicting
naval battles that had occurred much
earlier in the struggle against Spain.
People needed to be reminded of the
successes of the old days now that the
Truce had come to an end and the war
against Spain had to be resumed. *The
Battle of the Zuiderzee* (1573) by De
Verwer, Vroom's *The Battle of Sluis*
(1603) and *The Battle of Haarlemmer-
meer* (1603) and, topping them all, *The
Battle of Gibraltar* (1607) by Willaerts
and Van Wieringen, were all painted
then.¹² The encounter with the galleys



in 1602 also fits into this category. It was Spain's last attempt to challenge the Republic at sea, and after the destruction of the remaining galleys at Sluis, six months later, the Spanish fleet at last ceased to be a threat to the Republic. It was also a spectacular subject to depict, because at that time ramming ships was a highly unusual form of naval warfare.

When the subject of a work is as specific as this, it makes sense to think in terms of a commission. It could have come from one of the captains involved, but this seems unlikely in view of the long period that elapsed between the actual event and the painting. Admiral van Duivenvoorde himself had not taken part in the action and the highest-ranking commander present, Vice-Admiral Cant, had died in the meantime. The States-General, town councils and admiralty boards are more obvious clients. The possibilities include a commission from a government body such the council of De Maze (Rotterdam), which had been

responsible for equipping the squadron, or the Admiralty of the Noorderkwartier, where the ships that destroyed the galleys came from. Unfortunately there is no substantiating evidence. Apart from decorating their own meeting rooms, the authorities used works like this as gifts, for example for the Stadholder, who was ceremonial commander-in-chief of the army and the navy.¹² In view of Maurice's preference for the land army it was of great importance to the admiralty boards to bring the fleet's successes to his attention. It is also a possibility that the client was Prince Maurice himself.¹³ It has been argued that, since the painting is one of the Rijksmuseum's museums oldest possessions and was listed in the Nationale Konstgallerij in Huis ten Bosch as long ago as 1800, it is not unlikely that it came from the Stadholder.¹⁴ The 1632 inventory of Noordeinde Palace lists a painting by Vroom hanging above the mantelpiece in Frederick Henry's bedroom ('where ships fight galleys'). It is also mentioned later, in the 1702 and 1707 Noordeinde inventories.¹⁵ We know of no other works by Hendrick Vroom in which ships and galleys are fighting.¹⁶ Two years previously his son Cornelis, with whom Hendrick often worked, had painted a *Naval Battle between a Spanish Galleon and Turkish Galleys*, which is now in the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich. In view of the subject, it seems less likely that it would have belonged to the Stadholder. Another work that would qualify in terms of subject is of the Battle of Sluis in 1603. It is undoubtedly a subject worthy of the House of Orange, but the work is attributed to Abraham de Verwer and now hangs in Sluis town hall. Taking everything into consideration, the work described as 'where ships fight galleys' may indeed be the painting in question.

Vroom had plenty of material available to him on which he could base his design. In the first place, of

**Figurliche Abbildung von dem Streit gehalten den 3. und 4. Octo-
bris: durch 7. Hollendische schiffender N. Herrn Staten / gegen 6. Spanischen Ga-
lhen / in welchem die Hollender obgelegen / vnd derer 2. in den grundt gefegelt / 2. bey Newport vnd
Duisnircken am Gessad zerfussen vnd Spinola zu Kalls ankam.**

Zuweisung diser Figur.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>A Bedeutet das Schiff von Johan Cant / der halbe Mohn.
 B Garbanti Jahrl.
 C Gerard Olis.
 D Jacob Parris Mol.</p> | <p>E Garbanti Johanß von Enchuyfen.
 F Gindrich Garman.
 G Timen Lubbers.
 H Wie sich die Galehen aller erst bei Doereten sehen liesse.</p> |
|---|---|



Im Jahr 1601. sind zu Seutilen in Hispanien zu geruff acht grosse stercke Galehen / deren Oberste war Spinola / dar vnterschieds
 den Obersten auff ward / ein jeder Galehe hatte auff vngeseht vier hundert Mannen / mit die Schlawen / bey alben noch acht hundert
 Soldaten die sel dar nach zu Lisbon einnahmen. Welche Galehen zu dem ende waren zu geruffen / vnd die Vanzagron auff Gold-
 lant Zeland / Engelant / vnlicher zu machen / von welchen obgemelte 8. Galehen die 2. nemlich eben ganz zu nicht sind gebracht /
 durch die Schiften der Koninck. Maest. von Engellant. Sie vnzige frische haben haren surgenommen lauff nach die Niederlanden zu /
 folg / sind darnach erst gecken von zwei der N. Ed. Herrn Staten Olof Schiffen / welche die Galehen nach jagen. Als Robert Mansel
 Zitter von Th. König. Maest. von Engellant die selbe Galehen gesehen / hatt er als bald sein groß Geschütz abgeschossen / vnd des Königinck
 vnd Herrn Staten Schiften / die nicht weit dar von waren / von der Galehen ankunfft zu warnen / darnach kamen vier Hollendische Schiften der
 Doereten / schossen geuelig dar zu ein / so daß ein theil der Galehen vber Boat sprangen / vnd wegen daß Mohl etwas stiller vider die sind
 noch ankommen. Bald hernach als die Mohn her fur brach / vnd etwas harder wechete / sind ihnen die Schiften nach geragt / vnd zum ersten die
 Galehen von Sanct. Philipp ganz verdoeben vnd zu grunde gebracht. Darnach haben sie die Galehe der Moexgenstein angegriffen / oberste
 gelit vnd ganz zu grunde bracht / so sind die 4. Galehen zezgangen / die andere 2. haben sie vermassen nach geragt / das deren 2. auff dem Gessad
 bey Newport zerfussen / vnd ein bey Duisnircken / der General Spinola kam noch mit sein Galehe zu Kalls in Frankreich an vnd zog
 nach Brussel / es in da von 180. Personen gefänglich in Hollandt gebracht / von welchen die Schlawen lebig gelassen / bekleidet vnd gelt in brass
 tel gegeben worden. Da von im Buch weiter zu sehen ist. B ij

Fig. 5
BAPTISTA VAN
DOETECUM (?),
'Figurliche Abbildung
von dem Streit
gehalten den 3. und 4.
Octobris (etc.)', in:
*Belagerung der Statt
Ostende, Journal*
1604, 173 x 235 mm.
Library Rijksmuseum,
Amsterdam.

course, there was Rem's print, made immediately after the engagement, and then Van Doetecum's print in *Het journal van het Beleg van Oosten*,¹⁷ which also includes a description of the event. Finally there were ships' logs; they, naturally, describe the entire voyage and also contain very detailed reports about the pursuit of the galleys and the ramming. If the States-General or an admiralty board had been the client Vroom would have been able to see those logs.

If we consult the log, it is striking to see how close Vroom kept to the historical reality and the gruesome atmosphere of the encounter in his work. The painting, for example, features a trumpeter on the Dutch ship. In the ship's log we read, '...and turning with our ship in order to ram this galley once more, until it sunk, the same thing happened again that another ship sailed into the midst, with its trumpeter playing, "tan tara, tan tara" and immediately thereafter the [anthem] *Wilhelmus van Nassouwen*. And that terrible cry from God's enemies to the sound of this trumpet made such a melodious harmony as I dare say was never encountered at any time.'¹⁸

He also convincingly depicted the horrific fate of the chained rowers, 'and saw hardly any people aloft, but only the slaves rattling their chains and shackles and pitifully crying for mercy and salvation...'¹⁹ We also see some of the seamen on the galley attempting to save themselves by clinging to the Dutch ship, 'And our ship having struck the galley with such powerful and terrible force, at first stuck fast so that some Spaniards thought to save themselves by clinging to our hull, but were immediately thrown off.'²⁰ Vroom plainly departs from the truth on one point – no doubt deliberately. The battle, as we know, took place at night by moonlight and not during the day in clear weather.²¹

Apart from the time of day, there are other differences between Vroom's interpretation and what actually happened on 3 October 1602, particularly in the staffage in the background; nevertheless Vroom (and his son) created a convincing and powerful record of the glorious and gruesome reality as recorded in the ships' logs.²² The result is a spectacular historical work that occupies an important place in art history.

NOTES

- 1 J. Bikker, Y. Bruijnen, G. Wuestman (eds), *Dutch Paintings of the Seventeenth Century in the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam*, vol. 1, no. 337, p. 427, *Dutch Ships Ramming Spanish Galleys off the English Coast, 3 October 1602*, 1617. Oil on canvas, 118 x 151 cm (SK-A-460).
- 2 P. Sigmond and W. Kloek, *Sea Battles and Naval Heroes in the 17th-century Dutch Republic*, Amsterdam 2007, pp. 39-40. Vroom's son Cornelis, responsible for the galley and the drowning galley slaves in the foreground in this work, (G. Keyes, *Cornelis Vroom: Marine and Landscape Artist*, Utrecht 1975, pp. 30-32), had depicted a similar dramatic event two years earlier in his *Battle between a Spanish Galleon and Turkish Galleys* (National Maritime Museum, Greenwich).
- 3 National Archives The Hague, Archives of the States-General, inv. nos. 9277-78. The author

is working on a publication of the logs.

- 4 National Archives, The Hague, Archives of the States-General inv. no. 9278, fol. XCIII: 'Maer om den hoeck van Douver komende, hoorden drij schoote schieten van een koeninghinne schip, genaemt de Hope, alwaer den Admiraell sir Robbert Mansell ridder was, legghende op de custe van Calis (Calais). Ook eene van onsse schepen meer 't zee vaert ingelopen, deede ook een schoot, waromme de viceadmiraell (Jan Adriaensz Cant) geboot inde mars te climmen (om) te sien watter gaens was, maer niet so haest booven sijnde, riepen (ze), 'galleijen, galleijen'. Ende wij noordwaerts uuijt siende, saghen se perfect alle sesse benefens malcanderen aen commen zeijlen ende roeiende, vervolght sijnde van twee scheepen, die continuelijken naer galleijen schooten.'

- 5 It is not clear which ships are shown in the painting. Ships did not bear names but were usually identifiable from an image on the stern. This is why painters (at their clients' request) often depicted the ships with the stern towards the viewer. The flags flown could indicate that the vessel in the foreground is the Commander-in-Chief Vice-Admiral Johan Adriaensz Cant's ship, *De Mane*.
- 6 In 1599 the Republic undertook a large independent naval action against the Spanish for the first time, however it ended in disappointment.
- 7 'De aankomst van de galeien van den vijand en hoe zij overseijlt ende gestrandt zijn.'
- 8 K.G. Boon (ed.), compiled by I.M. Veldman and D. de Hoop Scheffer, *Andries Pauli to Johannes Rem*, in: F.W.H. Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings. Engravings and Woodcuts ca 1400-1700*, vol. xvii, 1976, p. 308, no. 2; N. Japikse, H.H.P. Rijperman (eds), *Resoluties Staten-Generaal*, Rijks Geschiedkundige Publicatiën xii, The Hague 1950, p. 323.
- 9 *Belagerung der Statt Ostende, Journal: Tageregister und eigentliche beschreibung aller gedencckwürdigen Sachen ...*, (s.p. 1604) fol. 28 verso; *ibid.*, Appendix no. 6. *Figurliche abbildung von dem Streit gehalten den 3 und 4 octobris*.
- 10 Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. nos. RP-P-OB-80.641 and RP-P-OB-80.642.
- 11 Sigmond, Kloek, op cit. (note 2), pp. 93 ff.
- 12 The Amsterdam Admiralty presented Prince Maurice with *The Battle of Gibraltar* by Cornelis Claesz van Wieringen in 1622.
- 13 In P. van der Ploeg, C. Vermeeren et al., *Vorstelijk verzameld: de kunstcollectie van Frederik Hendrik en Amalia*, Zwolle 1997, p. 16, the authors discuss the possibility that Maurice had a liking for maritime works because he received some as gifts. However, paintings like these account for an unusually small proportion of the Stadholder's collection, and in my opinion it was not Maurice's preference but the desire of the donors (the admiralties) to keep themselves 'in the picture' that explains the presence of marine paintings in the Stadholder's collection.
- 14 E.W. Moes, E. van Biema, *De Nationale Konst-Gallerij en het Koninklijk Museum: Bijdrage tot de geschiedenis van het Rijksmuseum*, Amsterdam 1909, pp. 37 and 217. Then still as a depiction of the *Battle of Gibraltar*.
- 15 '...daar de schepen met galeijen vechten.' S.W.A. Drossaers and T.L. Lunsingh Scheurleer, *Inventarissen van de inboedels in de verblijven van de Oranje's en daarmee gelijk te stellen stukken 1567-1795*. Rijks Geschiedkundige Publicatiën i, The Hague 1974, p. 208.
- 16 M. Russell, *Visions of the Sea. Hendrick C. Vroom and the Origins of Dutch Marine Painting*, Leiden 1983.
- 17 *Belaegerung der Statt Ostende*, fol. 29 verso; title page Appendix, no. II.
- 18 Log, op cit. (note 3), inv. no 9278, fol. xcvi: '... ende ghekeert wesende mett ons schip om die galleije noch eens te overseylen, tott sij gesoncken soude sijn, ghebeurde hett 't selve wederom datt een ander schip daer midden opzeijlde, spelende op sijn trompette, 'tan tara, tan tara' ende terstonchts daerop Wilhelmus van Nassouwen. Ende datt vreeselijck gheroep van Gods vijanden onder 't geluijtt van die trompette, maeckte een sodanighe melodieuze harmonie, als mij dorste tot gheenen tijden gherencontreert te hebben.'
- 19 *Ibid.*, fol. xcvi: 'ende saghen qualijck eenigh volck boven, als alleen de slaven met hare keetenen ende boeijen klapperende ende gans jammerlick om ghenade ende verlossinghe roepende ...'.
- 20 *Ibid.*, fol. xcvi: 'Ende ons schip met alsulcken machtigen ende verschrickelijcken vaert inde galleije getroffen hebbende, stack eerst vast, (zo) dat eenighe spaniaerden meenden, op genade hen te salveeren, aen ons boort vasthielden maer wierden terstont ghedepesscheert'.
- 21 *Ibid.*, fol. xcvi: 'Also datt tusschen elffe ende twelff uijren inde nacht, wij d'eerste galleije mett stuerboort halff tusschen haer groote mast ende hutte dwers inliepen waermede een sulck onverhoort groot geschrij verhief op de galleije van 'misercordia, misercordia', datt men qualijck hooren ofte sien konste. Ende ons schip met alsulcken machtigen ende verschrickelijcken vaert inde galleije getroffen hebbende ...', ('Between eleven and twelve o'clock at night we sailed broadside into the starboard side of the first galley halfway between her mainmast and the cabin and heard such a great unanswered cry raised up on the galley of 'misercordia, misercordia' that one could scarcely hear or see. And our ship with such powerful and terrible force having struck the galley...').
- 22 Vroom departs from reality in the number of galleys depicted (at least seven). In particular the galleys at anchor in front of the castle on the cliff, which is probably meant to represent Dover Castle (see the print by Rem), look odd. This must have contributed to the fact that for a long time the work was mistaken for the *Battle of Gibraltar*.

