Northern European art

Van Gogh's Oslo self-portrait | A rediscovered bust by Niclaus Gerhaert | Winckelmann and England
Pieter de Hooch in Delft | Van Dyck in Munich | Tony Garnier in Lyon | Nam June Paik in London
Exhibitions

conservation service (on materials and technique). This sturdy volume will sit prominently on the Van Dyck shelf and be frequently consulted in the future.


De Wind is Op!: Climate, Culture and Innovation in Dutch Maritime Painting

New Bedford Whaling Museum
2nd July 2019–1st May

by ARTHUR K. WHEELOCK JR

Filled with paintings and prints that depict Dutch whaling in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this engaging and informative exhibition, curated by Christina Connnett Brophy and Roger Mandel, is drawn almost exclusively from works in the New Bedford Whaling Museum’s permanent collection.

Over twenty paintings, including pen paintings, maps, pen-and-wash drawings, Delft tiles, ships’ furniture and a remarkable eighteenth-century grandfather clock with a ship automaton have been thoughtfully installed. The exhibition provides insights into the history and character of Dutch whaling and the opportunities it provided for artists to demonstrate their creativity, issues that were explored further in an accompanying symposium.

The paintings vary in quality, from masterpieces such as Ludolf Backhuysen’s Whaling in the Polar Sea (Fig.18) to provincial, yet energetic, works by minor Dutch and Flemish artists. Despite that unevenness, one senses the abiding pride of the Dutch in their prowess for hunting whales in the Arctic’s frigid waters.

The impact of climate change on Dutch whaling is an important leitmotif in this exhibition. The ‘Little Ice Age’ is often discussed in the context of skating scenes by Hendrick Avercamp (1585–1634), but it also affected the character of Dutch whaling in the seventeenth century.

The harsh cold that froze rivers and canals changed ocean currents, which impacted trade routes to Asia and America. The Dutch were particularly innovative in coping with these climate challenges. They not only built sledges to transport goods across frozen inland waterways, they also adapted ‘fluitschips’, their reliable transport ships for the Baltic trade, so that these vessels could hunt whales in the Arctic. Merchants sent these modified whaling ships to the spawning and feeding grounds that the Dutch had discovered at Spitsbergen Island (known today as Svalbard) and Jan Mayen Island, recognisable by its towering volcano, Beerenberg. The Dutch pursued a ‘shore-based’ method of whaling, which they learned from French and Spanish Basques who also whaled in this area. In the shallow waters off these islands they would harpoon and kill bowhead whales. Bowhead whales float after death, which allowed seamen to flense them (cut the blubber from the carcass) in their small whaling boats. Seamen would then transport strips of blubber to shore for butchering and rendering into oil in furnaces (tryworks). This type of whaling with fluitschips is seen in one of the largest and most dramatic of the paintings in the exhibition, Amsterdam whaleships at Jan Mayen, attributed to Bonaventia Peeters (1644–52), where smoke rises on the beach from trywork fires. In the painting’s foreground, a capsized boat, with seamen climbing on its overturned hull to save themselves, emphasises the treacherous nature of this battle between man and the whales they hunted.

At Jan Mayen Island, casks of processed oil would be stored in tents or sheds until whaling vessels returned to Amsterdam or other Dutch harbours. Whale oil was in great demand for lamps since it burned bright and clear. In 1654, in an attempt to market whale products and to keep the price of oil artificially high throughout Europe, a group of cities formed a Dutch whaling cartel, the Noordsche Compagnie (Northern Company). The cartel, however, had only limited success, as independent merchants also sent whaling ships to the Arctic. The growth of the whaling industry was considerable: by 1670 almost 150 Dutch whaling ships were active in Arctic waters.

The ‘shore-based’ approach to whaling at Jan Mayen Island proved unsustainable, in part because Basque marauders destroyed the
Dutch processing facility there in 1631, and in part because of climate change. Extreme cold caused shallow harbours to freeze, but whales also began to migrate to Greenland because the cold affected ocean currents. In the whaling grounds off Greenland the entire process of rendering blubber into oil had to be done on ship, which induced the Dutch to modify the designs of their whaling vessels. They constructed broad, arched-stern whaling ships, called *bootschips*, that were more capacious and stable, and better suited for whaling than the *fluitschips*.

Backhuyzen’s painting features a Dutch fleet consisting entirely of *bootschips* engaged in open-water whaling off the coast of Greenland, near ice flows populated by polar bears. The captain of the large vessel at the right, *De Vergulde Walvis* (*The Golden Whale*), identifiable by the carved and brightly painted whale on its stern board, probably commissioned this painting. The Dutch whaling flag, a right whale superimposed upon the white band of the Netherlands tricolor, flies from her taffrail. Backhuyzen, who sailed in the North Sea to study wind, waves and light, carefully studied whaling vessels in Amsterdam’s harbour and accurately painted the vessel as well as the activities of open-water whaling. In the centre foreground, he depicted seamen in a small whaleboat harpooning a thrashing bowhead whale, while seamen in another whaleboat nearby flense a whale so that its blubber could be processed into whale oil. Once the blubber had been rendered into oil, the oil would be stored on board until *De Vergulde Walvis* returned to the Netherlands.

Few artists actually sailed to the Arctic with whaling vessels and many paintings depicting Dutch ships navigating raging Arctic seas and battling enormous whales are largely fanciful. The names of those who commissioned these works are rarely known, although dramatic images of whaling in inhospitable realms would have appealed to those connected to the whaling industry. To place these imaginative visions of Dutch whaling in context, the exhibition opens by presenting late sixteenth-century...
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The mayor featured in this exhibition’s title is the charismatic Edouard Herriot, who ran the city of Lyon like a fiefdom from 1905 until his death in 1957. The architect and the show’s hero is Tony Garnier (1867–1948). Garnier – not to be confused with the designer of the Paris Opéra, Charles Garnier (1825–98) – hogs the limelight in the roll-call of Lyon’s twentieth-century architecture. He spent his whole adult career in the city, and so one must go to Lyon to get a material flavour of his work, a fine town hall in the Paris suburb of Boulogne-Billancourt apart. Architectural exhibitions, of course, are always bedevilled by abstraction because it is impossible to include the real thing. The last important show devoted to Garnier, at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, in 1990, was necessarily abstract in that sense, although accompanied by the publication of his œuvre complète. The present exhibition is broader and more enlightening. By including letters and municipal dossiers alongside drawings and photographs, it underlines the creative urban context within which Garnier worked. And by being in Lyon, it allows the visitor to seek out the reality and the present condition of much that is on display. The upshot is sometimes rewarding, sometimes not.

Garnier’s reputation will always rest on his utopian cité industrielle (Fig.20). The son of a Lyon textile designer and amateur painter, he studied architecture in the local art school before transferring to the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1890, where he mastered the prevailing blend of classicism, clear planning and modern construction. In due course he was sent to Rome. From there, alongside dutiful reconstructions of antique sites, he shocked the Beaux-Arts authorities in 1901 by sending home an elaborate design for an ideal industrial city. It was failed, provoking a row that brought him to public attention. He exhibited a reworked version of the project in 1904, but it was not then fully published.

At the time, utopianism and town planning were everywhere in the air. Garnier’s city was wholly architectural, and that has always been its appeal. The graphic elegance with which he set down separate gridded zones for housing, heavy industry and public buildings

3 The Kendall Whaling Museum, Sharon MA, was founded in 1955 by Henry P. Kendall (1870–1959).