

# JOHNNY VAN HAEFTEN

OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

VP5095

## ADAM WILLAERTS

(London 1577 – 1664 Utrecht)

Dutch Ships off a Rocky Coast, with a Fish Market on the Beach, and Buildings from the City of Utrecht on the Right



Signed and dated, lower right: *A willarts / 1620*

Oil on panel, 23 x 43½ ins. (58.4 x 110.5 cm)

Framed dimensions: 31 x 50¾ x 2 ins. (79 x 129 x 5 cm)

## PROVENANCE

Janina Barcikowska

By whom loaned to the National Museum, Warsaw, until at least April 1989

Private collection, Germany

From whom acquired by the previous owner, *circa* 1990

Private collection, Europe, until 2024

Anonymous sale, Sotheby's, New York, 1 February, 2024, lot 324.

## EXHIBITED

Warsaw, National Museum, on loan, until *circa* 1989.

Adam Willaerts was born in London to Flemish parents, but settled at an early age in Utrecht, where he remained for the rest of his life. He played a leading role in the Utrecht painters' guild and was an active member of the local artistic community. During his long career, Willaerts dominated the field for marine painting in Utrecht - a city situated some 50 kilometres inland from the sea. He was held in high esteem by his contemporaries and received prestigious commissions from various public bodies, including the City and States of Utrecht and the Dordrecht Chamber of Justice. He was also involved with the decoration at Kronberg Castle in Denmark. Despite his considerable success, Willaerts fell upon hard times in old age. This may have been due in part to his own infirmity, but also to the prevailing economic conditions. After the mid-1650s, the rate of growth in the Dutch economy slowed and the demand for works of art declined. Willaerts was not the only Utrecht artist to be affected by a contraction in the art market, indeed, a number of his colleagues suffered hardship at this time.

Adam Willaerts painted seascapes and coastal views in a brightly coloured anecdotal style that reflects the artistic traditions of his Flemish heritage. His marines, often incorporating recent historical events, or biblical subjects relating to the sea, are invariably filled with numerous lively figures, ranging from elegant ladies and gentlemen to hunters and fisherfolk. The rugged mountainous shores that characterise many of Willaerts's coastal views take their inspiration from the drawings of Roelandt Savery, to which we know he had access after the latter came to live in Utrecht in 1619. Previously, Savery had worked at the court of Emperor Rudolph II in Prague during which time he made numerous drawings of the mountains around Prague. In 1621, Savery bought a large house and garden on the Boterstraat, a few doors away from the painter Paulus Moreelse (1571-1638), which seems to have become a favourite meeting place for artists in the area. In 1622, Willaerts declared that he and several other painters visited Savery almost every day<sup>i</sup>.

This well-preserved panel of 1620 exemplifies Willaerts's predilection for compositions that combine fantasy with a high degree of descriptive realism. His rugged coastal scene transports the viewer from the gentle undulations of the Dutch countryside to the coasts of distant, foreign lands. The broad sweep of a bay is flanked on the right by a craggy coastline, dotted with conifer trees, rising steeply from the green-blue sea. A crenellated gateway marks the entrance to a small town of turrets and towers clinging precariously to the mountainside. On the left, three merchantmen flying Dutch colours ride the waves in the bay, their sails billowing on the breeze. A small fishing vessel sails towards the shore, where several others have been hauled up onto the beach. A fish market is underway and men, women and children have gathered at the head of the beach where the catch of the day has been laid out on the sand. Four elegantly dressed townsfolk, attended by a black page-boy, are doing a deal with a fisherman, who stands to one side, respectfully doffing his hat. Among the other charming anecdotal details that enliven the scene are a little group of men haggling over baskets of fish, a fishwife balancing a basket on her head, and a woman seated with her husband in the right-hand corner, nursing a baby.

Although the landscape here is imaginary, Willaerts has incorporated some identifiable landmarks of Utrecht into the town perched amid the mountain peaks no doubt with a prospective purchaser in mind. The church depicted in the upper right is recognisable as the *Mariakerk*, while the city gate below can be identified as the *Gildpoort*, a gate to the so-called

*“Stadsvrijheid”* (City of Freedom), and the tower-like structure beyond recalls the *Servaastoren*, a 16<sup>th</sup>-century tower in the defensive wall of Utrecht that once marked the entrance to the *Nieuwegracht*. The choice of motifs as well as the realistic depiction of trees, rocks, buildings and figures were clearly intended to engage the eye of the beholder just as the art theorist Karel van Mander advocated in his didactic poem of 1604 addressed to young painters, *Den Grondt der Edel vrij Schilder-const* (The Foundation of the Noble, Free Art of Painting)<sup>i</sup>.

## BIOGRAPHY

According to the artist’s early biographers, Cornelis de Bie and Arnold Houbraken, Adam Willaerts was born in Antwerp, but recently discovered documents show that he was in fact born in London. His name is listed in the baptismal register of the Austin Friars Church on 21 July 1577 as the son of Flemish immigrants Adam Willaerts Snr. and Maria Sampson. The family probably moved to Amsterdam around 1589, before settling in Utrecht in 1597, where Willaerts’s father became a member of the Reformed Church. There is no record of Willaerts’s artistic training. In 1602, Adam Willaerts and Salomon Vredeman de Vries were commissioned to paint the organ shutters in Utrecht Cathedral. On 21 May 1605, Willaerts married Maeycken Adriansdr. van Herwijck, at which time he was described as a bachelor from London. In 1608, Willaerts became a citizen of Utrecht, and in 1611, a co-founder of the newly established Saint Luke’s Guild: previously painters had belonged to the saddlemakers’ guild. By that time he must have had a good reputation as a teacher for the guild records show that he registered no fewer than 14 drawing pupils in the next three years. In addition to these pupils, he also trained three of his own sons. Willaerts served as dean of the guild from 1620 to 1622, 1624 to 1631 and 1636 to 1637. In 1628, he presented a “Storm at sea” to the St. Job’s Almshouse in Utrecht, and from 1639 until his death, he served as a governor of that institution. In his old age Willaerts fell upon hard times. The Utrecht council voted him an annual allowance of 60 guilders from 1 October 1654, in addition to which he was permitted to live free of charge in the former kitchen of the St. Agnes convent. In a document, dated 1655, his son Isaack stated that his father was too old and infirm to exercise his guardianship of his deceased daughter Abigail’s children<sup>iii</sup>. Ten years later, he died, aged eighty-seven, and on 4 April 1664, he was buried in the St. Agnes convent’s chapel.

Willaerts had six children, three of whom became painters: Cornelis (?-1666), Abraham (c. 1613-1669) and Isaac (c. 1620-93). They not only assisted their father in his studio, but in the case of Abraham and Isaac, perpetuated his style of painting. A daughter Maria married the still-life painter Abraham Mignon (1640-1679) in 1675, and another daughter, Hester, married the still-life painter Jacob Gillig (1636-1701)<sup>iv</sup>. Willaerts occasionally collaborated with other Utrecht painters, including Cornelis van Poelenburgh (1594-1667) and the painter of fish still-lives Willem Ormea (1611-1673).

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<sup>i</sup> See: Ger Luijten & Ariane van Suchtelen, eds., *Dawn of the Golden Age: Northern Netherlandish Art 1580-1620*, exh. cat., Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 1994, p. 325, note 13.

<sup>ii</sup> Karel van Mander, *Het Schilder-Boeck*, Haarlem, 1604.

<sup>iii</sup> See: Ger Luijten & Ariane van Suchtelen, *ibid*, p. 325, note 21.

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<sup>iv</sup> Biographical information derived from several sources: the biography in *Dutch Paintings of the seventeenth century in the Rijksmuseum*, Amsterdam, 2007, p. 432; Jeroen Giltaij and Jan Kelch, *Praise of Ships and the Sea: The Dutch Marine Painters of the 17<sup>th</sup> century*, Rotterdam & Berlin, 1997, p. 113; Ger Luijten & Arianne van Suchtelen, *ibid*, p. 325 & Joaneath A. Spicer, Lynn Federle Orr, et. al, *Masters of Light: Dutch Painters in Utrecht during the Golden Age*, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore & the National Gallery, London 1997-1998, p. 391-392.