

# RICHARD GREEN

SIMON JACOBSZ. DE VLIIEGER

?Rotterdam 1600/1 – 1653 Weesp

Ref: CC 158

*A view of the river Maas from the shore of Schoonderloo towards the west along the mouth of the harbour of Delfshaven, with the town of Schiedam in the far distance*



Signed lower right: *S DE VLIIEGER*  
Oil on panel: 28 1/8 x 42 5/8 in / 71.4 x 108.3 cm  
Frame size: 37 x 51 in / 94 x 129.5 cm  
In a black polished seventeenth century style Dutch frame

Painted *circa* 1638-1639



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*Provenance:*

(Possibly) sale Mr. [J or T] Norman (Plymouth Dock, Devon) *et al.*, London (Hickman), 16th May 1818 [Lugt 9383] lot 44, 'A Calm. In the front three Fishermen are ballasting their Boat, to the left of whom is a Frigate; two other Ships of War are in the middle distance, and the off-scape presents the view of the City of Haerlem. A fine, clear, and silvery toned Picture'; with Aaron S. Drey, Munich, c.1920;

private collection, Belgium;

anonymous sale ('the property of a European nobleman'), Christie's London, 8th December 2005 [sale no. 7197], lot 10;

Richard Green, London;

private collection, USA

*Exhibited:*

Winona, MN, Minnesota Marine Art Museum, 2006-2022

To be included in the forthcoming catalogue raisonné of the work of Simon de Vlieger by Gillis Tak Labrijn

In this clear silvery-toned picture, at first view of a generic atmospheric nature, there are slight allusions as to its distinctive location and subject matter. Despite the omission of any shore that could contain a landmark for topographical identification, a choice to accentuate the vastness of the estuary, the combination of the pier at right with the church tower in the far distance enables the viewer to locate the scene. The tower is that of Saint John's Church in Schiedam, a small town situated relatively inland and connected to the river Maas by a fairway, where some masts can still be distinguished. The nearer harbour entrance in the middle ground at far right is that of the city of Delfshaven. Notwithstanding its proximity to Rotterdam, of which it is a borough today, the place belonged to the city of Delft and functioned as its port. The viewpoint is east from the harbour near the small dwelling of Schoonderloo. An annotated drawing in the Albertina, Vienna, possibly dating from the 1620s but touched up with watercolour at a later date, shows the location from the same position slightly turned to the right to allow for a view of the town of Delfshaven (fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Dutch school, *A view of Delfshaven from the River Maas towards the town of Schiedam*. Graphite, pen in brown, touched up later with watercolour and gouache, 3 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 12 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in / 97 x 313 mm. (enlarged). Vienna, Albertina, inv.no. 9266, as by Bonaventura Peeters.

The scene contains references to all disciplines of fishing, from the shell and crab fishermen on the sandbank that serves as a foreground repoussoir to the moored herring *buis* representing the 'Grote Visserij' (Big Fishery) and further off the pier a whaler at anchor to represent the 'Kleine Visserij' (Small Fishery), both named after the size of their trade. It could well be that the prominently depicted small frigate shown at starboard is one and the same ship as the stern viewed frigate flying the whaler's flag in the middle distance. De Vlieger may have thus found a solution to integrate the rather static genre of ship portraiture, in which a single ship was shown from different angles, into a lively landscape setting. The ship is equipped with 28 guns to protect a fishing fleet. The Bloody flag or Flag of Defiance flying at its poop signifies that the ship was ready to attack and that 'no quarter would be given', which means that surrender would not be accepted and all prisoners would be killed, as vice versa the crew would fight to the last man.

In principle the activity of whaling was reserved to the Northern Company. This cartel, the arctic equivalent of the East-Indian Company, with seats in five Dutch towns existed from 1614 until 1642 and held a monopoly on whaling in the waters near Greenland. Off the dyke at Schoonderloo were tryworks for the production of cod liver and whale oil, ran by the Leversteyn family – named after their trade – who also kept interests in the Northern Company and its short-lived offshoots.

One of these offshoots was the Iceland Company, founded in Delfshaven in 1634 by the local tradesmen Hendrick Nobel, Cornelis Musch en Joost Adriaensz van Coulster. Its administrators were Cornelis and Bartholomeus Bastiaensz Coel and Willem Willemsz Nobel. They could evade the Northern Company's monopoly by concentrating on alternative fishing grounds near Iceland. The Iceland Company equipped their first ship during the spring of 1634. The ship of 130 tons last went by the name 'De Jager' (the Hunter). Skipper Dirck Cornelisz Kint from Rotterdam had been for some years its commander. As it was common for whalers to sail out in the beginning of May, 'De Jager' was ready for departure in the harbour of Brielle at the mouth of the river Maas towards May 6th, 1634.(1) The success of the enterprise is in the painting accentuated by the favourable south to southeasterly wind.

The work may very well have been commissioned from De Vlieger by one of the above founders to commemorate the establishment of the Iceland Company. The most likely person to have been the commissioner is Van Coulster, a skipper-turned-brewer who served a unique number of four terms on the board of the Maze Admiralty, and eventually made it to Mayor of Rotterdam. As a matter of fact, Joost Adriaensz van Coulster was born in Schiedam and lived in Delfshaven. At the time, Simon de Vlieger was well connected in circles of the Maze Admiralty and received commissions from its board members. These commissions did not only include maritime paintings but also single portraits, as well as large family portraits.

Whereas Dr. Jan Kelch still considered the painting to date from 1647-8 at its reappearance in a sale at Christie's, London, in 2005, there are numerous grounds to re-establish the date of origin to the first half of the 1630s.(2) Firstly, the location is set in the proximity of the artist's studio, as he lived in Rotterdam until 1634 to move to Delft, where he would reside during the next four years before leaving for Amsterdam. The construction of the frigate with its slightly curved decks to situate the portholes between the wales (as is the custom in shipbuilding before approximately 1640), as well as its rich ornamentation do also point toward an earlier dating.(3) The bright colouring and the refinement in details are features of the Rotterdam

period. The painting stands out among the best of the artist's Rotterdam offspring, together with the beach view in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, the *Battle on the Slaak* in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, and the *Morning estuary* in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.(4)

### **Gillis Tak Labrijn**

- 1) For the charter contract, see Rotterdam City Archive, Notarial Archives (no.18), notary Arnout Wagenvelt, entry 144, deed 320, pp.634-37.
- 2) Sales cat. London (Christie's), 8th December 2005 [sale no. 7197], pp.27ff.
- 3) I am grateful to Mr. Ab Hoving, former curator of the Marinemodellenkamer, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, for his sharing his observations.
- 4) Respectively National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, BHC0774; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, inv.no. SK-A-454; and National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, inv.no. 1997.101.1.