

LE CLAIRE

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KUNST



LUDOLF BACKHUYSEN

1631 Emden, East Frisia - Amsterdam 1708

Sailing Vessels off the Coast in Rough Weather

Pen and brown and black ink with brown and grey wash, over pencil, with a framing line in brown ink, on laid paper. Executed c.1670-80. Signed lower right in brown ink: *L Backh.*

163 x 247 mm.

PROVENANCE: Gebrüder Douwes Fine Art, Amsterdam – Private collection, Rhineland, Germany

A native of Emden in East Frisia, Backhuysen was the son of a scribe. By 1649 he had moved to Amsterdam where he initially followed in his father's footsteps, working as a scribe and merchant's clerk. Arnold Houbraken (1660-1719), the Dutch painter and biographer of artists, recounts how Backhuysen began drawing ships from life soon after his arrival in Amsterdam. Although he was largely self-taught, in the 1650s his work shows the influence of Willem van de Velde the Elder. According to Houbraken, his first efforts in painting date from around 1660, revealing an early talent. He began his artistic training under Allaert van Everdingen (1621-75) and went on to study under the marine painter Hendrick Jacobsz. Dubbels (1621-1707). Backhuysen was ambitious and soon began to achieve a measure of commercial success, with an ever-increasing number of commissions. Distinguished visitors flocked to his studio, among them Cosimo III de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany and Peter the Great, who was an enthusiastic sailor. When Backhuysen's biggest rivals, Willem van de Velde the Elder and Willem the Younger left Amsterdam for England in 1672-3 to work for King Charles II, his output increased, reaching its zenith in the course of the 1680s.¹

Backhuysen produced a large body of drawings in the course of his career. His sketches in pen and brown ink with brown and grey wash are swift and lively, demonstrating his skill as a draughtsman. Many of them served as preparatory studies for paintings. But he also executed more highly finished drawings, of which the present sheet is a fine example. These rank as independent works of art and were intended for sale to a relatively new class of private collector.

The present drawing depicts a maritime scene with a stormy sea and vessels off the coast in rough weather. In the right foreground in front of a wooden jetty is a *kaa*g or *tjalk* [spritsail barge], a sailing vessel with the characteristic spritsail made for shallow coastal waters. It is tacking against the wind, steering so close that the spritsail is shivering. A ray of sunlight breaks through the clouds, momentarily lighting up the vessel and its sails. The silhouettes of a four-master and other sailing vessels appear on the horizon.

The motif of a *kaa*g tacking is one of Backhuysen's preferred subjects. It probably appears for the first time in his painting *Bateaux de pêche et cabotier par gros temps*, also known as *Le Coup de vent* [Fishing Vessels and a *Kaa*g in Heavy Weather (The Gust of Wind)], executed c.1660-3. Acquired by Louis XVI for his private collection in 1784, the painting is today in the collections of the Louvre [Fig. 1]. Compositional

¹ See Hans Verbeek, 'Ludolf Bakhuizen', in Jane S. Turner and Robert-Jan te Rijdt (eds.), *Home and Abroad, Dutch and Flemish Landscape Drawings from the John and Marine van Vlissingen Art Foundation*, exhib. cat., Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam 2015 and Fondation Custodia, Paris 2016, no. 52, p. 128.

elements such as the sunlight on the vessel, the shivering sail, and the landscape with a house and trees behind a dyke are also found in the present drawing. A similar *kaag* is depicted in a painting titled *Een kaagschip in de wending* [A Sprintsail Barge Tacking] dated 1697 and now in the collection of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam [Fig. 2].

A stylistically comparable drawing also depicting a *kaag* is held in the Pushkin State Museum in Moscow [Fig. 3]. Another is in the Kunsthalle Hamburg [Fig. 4]. Both sheets demonstrate how important Backhuysen's own compositional repertoire was to him as a regular source of motifs. The present drawing was very probably executed in the same period in the 1670s.



Fig. 1: *Bateaux de pêche et cabotier par gros temps ou Le Coup de vent*
[Fishing Vessels and a *Kaag* in Heavy Weather or The Gust of Wind], c.1660-3,
oil on canvas, 46.0 x 66.0 cm.
Musée du Louvre, Paris [inv. 989]



Fig. 2: *Een kaagschip in de wending* [A Spritsail Barge Turning], 1697,
oil on canvas, 31.4 x 38.5 cm.
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam [inv. A 2316]



Fig. 3: *Seascape with Sailing Vessels*, late 1670s, pen and brown ink,
brown wash over pencil, framing line in brown ink, 158 x 270 mm.
Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow [inv. P-4637]



Fig. 4: *Fishing Vessels and Naval Ships at Sea*, c.1670-5, pen and
brown ink, brown wash, framing line in black ink, 146 x 221 mm.
Hamburger Kunsthalle [inv. 21665]