SPHINX FINE ART

Reinier Nooms, called Zeeman (Amsterdam 1623 - Amsterdam 1664)

Shipping before a Mediterranean Coast with a Fortified Town near a Cliff

signed ‘R. Zeeman’ (lower right)
oil on canvas
32.9 x 40 cm (13 x 15⅞ in)

In *Shipping before a Mediterranean Coast with a Fortified Town near a Cliff*, Reinier Nooms presents us with a bustling section of the rocky, undulating Mediterranean coastline. In the foreground, two rowing boats crammed full of passengers head for the shore, on which a group of figures is seen guiding them in. Behind the two mooring boats is a larger vessel, possibly a form of xebec, an extremely popular boat of the period due to its fast speed and manoeuvrability - such qualities were particularly pertinent in areas such as the Mediterranean which was constantly targeted by pirates. This ship is echoed by the silhouettes of similar vessels that disappear into the hazy horizon. On the right-hand side, a ship is being readied as a group of men are busily working to attach its sails. A fortified town is nestled under the cliffs, and various figures tend the surrounding land.

Throughout his career Nooms proudly identified himself by the surname ‘Zeeman’, which in Dutch means ‘Seaman’. It was by this title that he regularly signed his works, and his paintings reflect a sailor’s understanding and experience. For example, in the foreground of the National Maritime Museum’s *Ships being Repaired* a ship is seen lying on its side while being careened. This process involved hauling ships aground to allow their hulls to be scraped free of weed and barnacles. The men working on the upturned ship stand upon a floating raft. The unusual nature of this subject matter is reminiscent of the boat being readied in the present work. Nooms’ inclusion of the everyday activities of sailors is typical of his work and hints at his time spent at sea.

Nooms’ *oeuvre* is not restricted to paintings of ports and harbours as he also painted naval battle scenes, his *The Battle of Leghorn, 4th March 1653* being such an example. This work depicts a famous Dutch victory over the British Navy that resulted in Dutch control of the Mediterranean. Despite a very different mood and subject to *Shipping before a Mediterranean Coast with a Fortified Town near a Cliff*, the works share several characteristics, such as the a focus on the accurate rendering of the

shipping, and the similar repetition of the shapes of the vessels deep into the background

Nooms was probably self-taught as an artist, since much of his early career was spent as a sailor on Dutch merchant vessels travelling the trade routes to Paris, Italy and the North African coast. His work falls within the last two stylistic phases of seventeenth-century Dutch marine painting. Some of his paintings demonstrate the interest in light and atmosphere that typified the mid-century 'tonal' phase. Other works, such as Nooms' views of sea battles and Italian ports, have a romantic character that anticipates the more dramatic style of the late seventeenth century. Nooms' depictions of ships are full of accurate detail, demonstrating a keen eye and specialist knowledge in his delineation of features such as the hull or rigging. He often includes details of human activity in a harbour but this is rarely the focus of his work. Nooms was also a distinguished etcher, producing over one hundred and seventy plates.

Provenance:

with Galerie Jean de Maere, 1987;
De Deckére (according to a label on reverse).

Literature:

Tableaux de maîtres Flamands et Hollandais des XVIe et XVIIe siècles, Galerie Jean de Maere, 1987.

Artist description:

Nooms was a Dutch painter, draughtsman and etcher. He was probably self-taught as an artist, since much of his early career was spent as a sailor on Dutch merchant vessels, travelling the major Dutch trade routes to Paris, Italy and the North African coast. His works frequently depict marine scenes and coastal views of the ports he visited. Throughout his career he proudly identified himself by the surname 'Zeeman' (Dut.: 'Seaman'), by which title he regularly signed his works. He is now known principally as a painter of ships, whose work falls within the last two stylistic phases of 17th-century Dutch Marine painting. Some of his paintings demonstrate the interest in light and atmosphere that typified the mid-century 'tonal' phase and can be seen in the work of Willem van de Velde the elder. Other works, such as Nooms's views of sea battles and Italian ports, have a romantic character that anticipates the more dramatic style of the late 17th century.

Nooms's paintings of ships are full of accurate detail, demonstrating the keen eye and understanding of a professional sailor in his delineation of hull and rigging. Often he painted a vessel from several angles, allowing the viewer to experience its various aspects, and frequently included the everyday activities of sailors in the scene. For example, *Marine* (c. 1650–52; Rotterdam, Museum Boymans–van Beuningen) shows the three-masted warship Het Wapen van Amsterdam lying on its side in the shallow water of an Amsterdam shipyard, while, from a raft, labourers work at caulking the underside of the hull with tar. This motif became a hallmark of his numerous Dutch harbour views.

Nooms painted harbour views of Paris, Venice, Tunis, Tripoli, Algiers and Syracuse, as well as such Dutch cities as Zaandaam and his native Amsterdam. These, like his ship scenes, are characterized by close observation of detail. The small figures lining the shore often engage in activities typical of seaport life, such as loading and unloading cargo or repairing vessels at anchor. The latter are generally Dutch—emphatic patriotic symbols of mercantile power and of a prosperous trading empire. He also painted several of the major naval battles of his time, some of those in the Mediterranean probably from life, although his best-known example, the *Naval Battle of Livorno, 14 March 1653*, depicting the Dutch victory over the English, is probably based on contemporary accounts.

Nooms was also distinguished as an etcher. Among his 170 plates are two etched series of views of Amsterdam: *Verscheyde schepen en gesichten van Amsterdam* ('Various ships and views of Amsterdam'; b. 53–98) and *Nieuwe en eugententlycke afbeeldinghe der stads-poorten van Amsterdam* ('New and original representations of the city gates of Amsterdam'; b. 119–26). These

accomplished prints are among the first to concentrate on accurate rendering of architecture and were forerunners of the townscapes that were produced prolifically in the 18th century. He also made a series of views of the Louvre in Paris, which, two centuries later, inspired the French artist Charles Méryon.

Collections

Nooms is represented in the following collections: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Louvre Museum, Paris; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio; Courtauld Institute of Art, London, UK; Harvard University Art Museums, Massachusetts; Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery, University of Glasgow, Scotland; National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, UK, amongst others.