

LORENZO A. CASTRO

(London, active 1672 - 1686)

An English Man-O'War Running into a Crowded Continental Port

signed 'L A Castro F' (lower right)

oil on canvas

71.8 x 111.1 cm (28¼ x 43¾ in)

LORENZO A. CASTRO'S PAINTING SHOWS AN ENGLISH man-o'war entering an anonymous port. The sea is dark and choppy and storm clouds hover overhead, crowding out the bright sky on the right-hand side of the work. The tricky conditions have resulted in many of the figures in the painting struggling to control their boats. In the foreground, a man tries to push his rowing boat away from the rocks as his companions row desperately against the waves. Their efforts are echoed by the frenzied activity that takes place on the man-o'war, where the sails are being lowered and the ship is being prepared to enter the port. In the background is the port itself, where numerous other large vessels are already anchored. On the right of the composition a ship has been dragged ashore and its crew have built a fire; behind, an abandoned ship has fallen on its side.

A man-o'war was the most powerful type of armed ship from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, identifiable by its heavy cannons. They were propelled primarily by sails, unlike a galley which was moved forward primarily by oars. The extensive decoration on the stern of the ship is typical of a man-o' war, making them easily recognisable, and the English Navy often found it difficult to disguise them because of the profusion of carved works. In fact, 'it seems to have been the rule that any ship built for the Navy in the seventeenth century was heavily ornamented'.¹

Although traditionally presumed to be a *capriccio*, *An English Man-O'War Running into a Crowded Continental Port* is made all the more intriguing by the flags flying from the mastheads of the incoming English ship. Instead of the usual jacks of the period, the vessel is wearing what are termed 'the "Stuart" colours', and although it remains unclear precisely what these striped flags denoted, it is possible that they alluded to an allegiance to the Stuart Kings of England in general, and to James II in particular, after his enforced abdication in favour of William III and Queen Mary.

Castro was primarily a maritime painter, and his work within this genre was quite diverse. *The Battle of Actium, 2nd September 31 BC* provides us with a particularly contrasting work to *An English Man-O'War Running into a Crowded Continental Port*, not only in terms of subject matter, but also in composition and mood. Rather than a traditional marine landscape with a study of weather conditions, the work is more typical of history painting, with its focus on the frenzied battle. Castro's *A Galley off a Mediterranean Port*, however, contains many of the elements present in the present work not least in the close and detailed study of a large ship, which acts as the focus for the work (fig. 1). Again this port is crowded with ships and, as well as the numerous and diverse sized vessels, details of human activity in the port are also depicted. Dark clouds are encroaching on the bright blue sky, a contrast that Castro employs in both works.

Castro was born in Antwerp, of Portuguese-Jewish descent. It was here that he received his early training, possibly from his father Sebastian, being recorded in 1664 as a member of the Antwerp Guild of St. Luke. He travelled extensively to Lisbon, Genoa, Sicily and Malta, and his work certainly reflects a knowledge of Mediterranean regions, although many of the elements of his landscapes have a northern character. He appears to have settled in England between 1672 and 1686, although a Lawrence Castro is recorded there as late as 1695. In England, he painted Mediterranean scenes for a specific market and many of his works are held in English private and public collections. In style, Castro excelled in depicting figures and was indeed an accomplished portrait painter. As is evident in *An English Man-O'War Running into a Crowded Continental Port*, Castro used the contrast between light and dark to intensify his scenes.

Castro's work was heavily informed by the maritime paintings of the Willaerts family. Abraham Willaerts' (c.1603-1669) *A French Galley and Dutch Men-of-War off a Port* (National Maritime Museum, London) has similar concerns to the present work. Again, the location is an imaginary one, although the exotic appearance of the castle in the background is suggestive of a Mediterranean harbour. Willaerts achieves a successful balance between the detailed depiction of a range of vessels, and the varied and hectic human activity that takes place on the quay. Similarly, in the present work, Castro realizes a harmonious balance of dramatic landscape, the meticulous rendering of vessels, and scenes of human activity.



Lorenzo A. Castro, *A Galley off a Mediterranean Port*, c.1672-1686, National Maritime Museum, London (Figure 1)

¹ L. G. Carr Laughton, *Old Ship Figure-Heads and Sterns*, Courier Dove Publications, 2001.

