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Sky's Adornments and Everyday Clouds: Arnout Smit and Abraham Storck [1]

On clouds in Dutch marine painting *08.12.2021*

Precision in the depictionof meteorological events while, at the same time, allowing for creative freedom is the defining element of 17th-century Dutch landscape painting.[2] Reproduction of weather, geology and clouds, in particular, is based on real nature, albeit with pictorial freedom, for which the term "invented reality" was coined.

In Dutch marine painting of the 17th century, this question is posed anew, as elements of this painting era can, in fact, be assigned to history painting. The central outcome of the analyses on which the compilation of the catalogue of the Inder Rieden collection is based can, under this particular aspect, be summarised as follows: The depiction of clouds and other meteorological elements in everyday scenes differs clearly from the pictorial reproduction of important military, social or political events.

In paintings portraying *everyday life* on the coast or at sea, it can serve as a general orientation that reproduction of meteorology features is very close to reality. In the sky, we then find a profanely sober rendering of meteorological realities, which achieves a precision of nature not inferior to landscape painting.[3] The free art market in the Dutch space-time continuum of this epoch bears witness to this urge for realistic representation.[4]

With naval battles, on the other hand, or other significant political and social events at sea, the marine painting moves within the realm of history painting.[5] Here, it is obvious that the depictions of *festive or heroic events* are associated with a pictorially exagge-rated cloud image corresponding to the occasion. It seems that the reproduction of meteorology in the painting is subordinated to the dramaturgy of the pictorial event in the depiction of important social, political, or military events such as royal visits, embarkations or naval battles, clouds as décor. The sky takes on the role of emphasizing the importance of the event.

These two perspectives will be examined in more detail in the following, on the basis of paintings by Aernout Smit and Abraham Storck.

Everyday weather

The scene captured by Aernout Smit in "Ships on the IJ Waterway near Amsterdam"(see Fig. 1) shows several watercraft. The everyday nature of the situation depicted is particularly evident throughthe milk barge in the left foreground. These *Waterlandse melkschuiten* were small sailing ships that ensured the supply of milk to Amsterdamfrom

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[1] This text is based on the article: "*Between everyday clouds and embellishments of the sky - Remarks on the representation of meteorological phenomena in Dutch marine painting of the seventeenth century*", in: Gerlinde de Beer: "The Golden Age of Dutch Marine Painting. The Inder Rieden Collection", Primavera Pers, Leiden 2019, Vol. I; here pp. 127-159; on the occasion of the exhibition „Under the Spell of the Sea" at Museum Bredius, The Hague, NL. For a detailed treatment of the subject of Dutch marine painting under art-historical, socio-historical and scientific aspects, we expressly recommend the comprehensive account in the exhibition catalogue.

[2] cf. various contributions at: http://bib.gfz-potsdam.de/pub/wegezurkunst/start_en.html

[3] Kaiser (2017): "It was linked to the history of the Golden Age more than any other pictorial genre." (p. 66: „*Mehr als alle anderen Bildgattungen war sie mit der Geschichte des Goldenen Zeitalters verbunden*.")

[4] Kaiser/North/Baumstark 2017, passim

[5] Daalder 1996

Waterland, east of the city twice a day. Equally common, almost classic, is the showery weather after the passage of a front with a northerly current, in which cool sea air sweeps into Holland.

Fig. 1: Aernout Smit: "Ships on the IJ Waterway near Amsterdam", c. 1675, Collection Inder Rieden, Cat. No. 61

The strong convective clouds refer to the typical, unstable vertical stratification of the atmosphere in which such cumuli form,generatingheavy showers. Downpour is visible in clear air on the horizon behind the three wooden poles of the gallows of Volewijck. Above the shower clouds, a pale blue sky extends over the entire image, an indication of medium-level to high clouds, which is not uncommon in suchmaritime cold air.

Fig. 2: Shower clouds over the sea (Cu con pra, Cb cap, Ci spi cbgen, N, Casalabate, Italy, 30.07.2006, 14:03 CEST, photo: F.Ossing)

However, on A. Smit's painting the wind direction, as indicated by the sails on the one hand and the clouds on the other, is contradictory. The view is roughly in a northerly direction, so the ships with their wind-filled sails and their flags indicate a north-westerly wind, which matches the weather conditions depicted. The shower clouds on the horizon, however, are moving in a westerly direction. Thus, although the weather in this painting is certainly depicted as the eye perceives it, the wind is inconclusive – an invented reality, in other words.

Clouds as a decorative pictorial element

The same painter depicts the sky as décor in a completely different way when the subject matter is not everyday life at sea but when he highlights an important political event. The masters of marine painting certainly did not see this as a contradiction. The separation between clouds as a sober reproduction of a natural element on the one hand and, as an emphasizing design element on the other, seems to have been quite natural to them.

While Aernout Smit's everyday maritime scene in his painting "Ships on the IJ" (Fig. 1) shows a frequently occurring weather situation near the coast in a meteorologically appropriate way, his painting "Ships in the Roads" (Fig. 3) refers to the dramatic political development for the Republic in 1671.[6] Consistently following the significance of the event, Smit has cumulus clouds pile up, with impressive, though not correct shaping.

Fig. 3: Arnout Smit: "Ships in the Roads", 1671, Collection Inder Rieden, Cat. No. 60

[6] de Beer (2019), Cat. No. 60

Let us first look at the shape of the clouds. The dominant cumulus at the right edge of the painting shoots into the picture from the right rear to the left front. Such an inclination of clouds is caused by the increase of wind with altitude, for which the term vertical wind shear was coined: due to ground friction, the air in the atmospheric boundary layer is slowed down at ground level, while at altitude the wind speed increases with decreasing friction. This gives the clouds a sideways tilt in the direction the wind is blowing (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4: Convection cloud in wind shear (Cu con, windshear, 06.10.1984, Nago sul Lago di Garda, Italy, 16:55 CET, SW, photo: F.Ossing)

In this case, the cloud indicates a wind direction. This, however, is in contradiction to the wind direction indicated by the sails and flags of the ships.

The view is in a southerly direction towards the town of Goedereede, west of Rotterdam, with the mouth of the Meuse on the right horizon. According to the position of the sails and the flags, the large ship in the left third of the paintingis sailing before the wind in good weather towards the city visible on the horizon. The wind is blowing into the scene from the front left to the back right, i.e. from a north-easterly direction.

The piled-up convective clouds, on the other hand, indicate that the wind is blowing from the right rear to the left front. The other cumuli, which are also reproduced in a slightly oversized manner, also show such an inclination to the front left, i.e. from the southwest. The wind direction indicated by the clouds is, therefore,the exact opposite to the wind direction denoted by the ship's flags and sails. This does not occur in nature. Moreover, a second heapcloud of this type lies below the dominant cumulus on the right of the picture which is, at least meteorologically, improbable because in the same air mass these cumulus clouds have their base at the same height, the cumulus condensation level. Obviously, Arnout Smit places less significance on the actual cloud image compared with the pictorial event, magnificent sunshine in a painting with an explicitly patriotic meaning.

Conscious decision

The decision to paint an everyday sky or clouds as ornamentation was, therefore, a conscious choice on the part of the artist. This can be illustrated particularly well by the example of Abraham Storck..

In his work "The Harbour of Amsterdam, after the Glorious Revolution" (Fig. 5), Storck uses the clouds primarily to under-paint the scene. It is interesting, however, that he does not forget the meteorological reality in his painting – despite the dominance of the décor.

Numerous flags and gun salutes indicate an important event on the occasion of the Glorious Revolution.[7] It is immediately apparent that the dominant clouds in the upper third of the picture have unusual shapes. Beneath the unnatural-looking cloud heads hang long, strangely sinuous shapes that do not occur in nature. They are reminiscent of cumulus clouds, but neither their shapes nor their colouring and shadowing are close to nature.

Fig. 5: A. Storck: "The Harbour of Amsterdam, after the Glorious Revolution", c. 1689, Collection Inder Rieden, Cat. No. 63

The clouds on the horizon, on the other hand, directly above the profile of the city of Amsterdam and visible between the sails, are decidedly more naturalistic and correspond to the showery weather after a cold front. But in this painting, too, the depiction of the wind direction is contradictory. The view is roughly south-southwest.[8] The sails and flags of the ships indicate that the wind is blowing into the painting from left to right, i.e. from an easterly direction. The shower clouds on the horizon, however, move in exactly the opposite direction to the left, i.e. to the east. Below the rain cloud (cumulus congestus praecipitatio), which can be seen between the two ships in the right third of the picture, hangs a shower which – meteorologically correct and sharply observed – logically has a tilt towards the left because of the already mentioned increase in the speed of the wind with height (Fig. 6a, 6b).

Storck's painting includes, so to speak, a division into two parts: the dominant clouds in the prominently visible upper part of the sky are ornamental forms appropriate to the event, while the profane clouds on the horizon are meteorologically coherent in themselves. The festivity of the scene is reflected by the dominant decorative clouds in the sky and the decked-out ships on the water, while the everydayness corresponds to the

[7]de Beer (2019), Cat. No. 63

[8]Pieter Roelofs, pers. comm., 19. 06. 2013

subordinate clouds on the horizon and the *Waterlandse melkschuit* (milk barge) going about its daily business.

Storck was obviously a thoroughly precise observer of nature. However, he consequently subordinated its depiction to the pictorial plot.

Fig. 6a: Rain shower fall streaks in wind shear: Storck's painting (detail from Fig. 5)

Fig. 6b: Rain shower fall streaks in wind shear in real nature (Cu con pra, 20.08.2005, ~W, 17:54 CEST, Kägsdorf/Baltic Sea, Foto: F. Ossing)

Conclusion

As a result of our research on 17th century Dutch marine painting, it can be stated: in Dutch marine painting, the portrayal of the sky follows the pictorial action. Important political or social events are depicted under primarily decorative clouds in the sky that do not necessarily follow reality. Everyday scenes on the ground, on the other hand, find their counterpart in the sky in the form of an equally everyday sky that is rendered close to nature. For a detailed discussion of this approach, please refer to the comprehensive analysis in de Beer (2019).

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