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A Marine Paradox

The early seventeenth-century oil on panel painting *Shipping on a Rough Sea* by Dutch artist Andries van Eertvelt currently resides in the University of Notre Dame's Snite Museum of Art. The Snite is a modern structure with an understated façade centrally located on a campus full of Collegiate Gothic architecture. While not particularly out of place, it fails to truly conform to its surroundings. As one enters the main doors located beneath a plate glass clerestory and between ivy-covered walls, it is surprising to experience the soaring expanse of the atrium, something which is unanticipated from the unimposing exterior. Continuing left into the 1500-1700 gallery, a museum visitor enters a bright, though more confined, space with paintings and sculpture on display. *Shipping on a Rough Sea* is a relatively small painting hung in the corner of one of the dividers in the back of the gallery. It is placed in such a way that a casual visitor might only briefly glance at it before moving on to a next, more imposing work. If one were to remain and appreciate and analyze the piece, though, perhaps it would strike its viewer as an interesting representative of a popular genre of Dutch Baroque art.

Shipping on a Rough Sea is a seascape without any recognizable story: biblical, historical, or otherwise. The most conspicuous element in the work, which is rich in detail, is the large ship occupying the right corner of the foreground flying Islamic colors. It is being propelled dangerously close to the shore by winds and crashing waves. The ship appears to be part of a fleet, perhaps of richly loaded trading vessels or military transports, caught in a squall. The powerful waves produced by the gales of wind damage the ships and force many men overboard into the frothing sea. The sky, however, seems to be clearing on the leftmost horizon, allowing sunlight to penetrate the heavy cloud masses filling the sky and to illuminate the spray of the water and other details that add to the richness of the image. A fortress-like tower stands on the rocks in the right background. These components combine to form a work layered with potential meaning.

In order to study the work in context, it is necessary to keep van Eertvelt's background in mind. The artist was born in 1590 in the Flemish city of Antwerp, where he joined the Guild of St. Luke, married Catherine Vlieger in 1615, and studied and painted until 1627. He then went to Genoa where he studied under Cornelius de Wael for about three years. In 1630 van Eertvelt moved back to Antwerp where Anthony van Dyck painted his portrait. Because van Dyck was a talented portraitist who would go on to become a court painter for King Charles I of England this indicates that van Eertvelt had attained a certain level of recognition. Indeed, van Eertvelt is considered the first Flemish marine painter. His pre-Italian works are chromatically dark, making use primarily of green, black, and brown tones; *Shipping* fits this description well, allowing us to infer that it was completed before 1627. After Genoa, the scenes in van Eertvelt's paintings were more of calm harbors rendered with a softer palette¹. The path of the artist's life suggests that he would have been aware of contemporary religious, political, and

economic issues, as well as of other artists' styles and techniques, putting him in the position to create art that is at once aesthetically pleasing and an informed commentary on contemporary topics.

The chromatic composition and subject matter in *Shipping* reinforce the painting's sense of a moment in time rife with unpredictability also illuminated by a hint of hope on the horizon (literally and figuratively). Immediately present are the dark greens, blues, and blacks that portend an unfortunate outcome for all trapped in the storm. The dark tones create an ominous sense, along with implying great depth to the menacing seas. One could say that the palette brings out the most malevolent side of nature. Contrast is brought into the painting by the rusty red-brown scheme employed to call attention to the jutting rocks in the foreground, the wood of the ships, and the clothing of many of the figures. The brown tones draw the viewer's eye to the ship that is about to become beached on the shore, or worse, crash into the rocks just in front of the viewer's perch. Finally, van Eertvelt highlights the painting with white accents, notably using scumbling to depict spray suspended just above the waves. This gives the work a very realistic feel, as if the waves might crash at any moment. White is also employed in the sky as a means of suggesting an end to the misery brought about by the storm; hope is just beyond the horizon. While the use of color greatly enhances the portrayal of countering forces, the geometric elements in the scene create an even stronger sense of instability and uncertainty.

The diagonals present in the composition have the power to draw a viewer's eye where the artist would have it rest and to establish a sense of violent instability. The strong diagonal created by the main mast of the ship in the foreground signals that the ship is in trouble. The V-shape formed by the other mast and rigging of the ship shows the sure ruin of all aboard because such contesting forces on a single vessel imply imminent destruction. Looking over to the left, there is yet another ship depicted with its masts set at a diagonal to the horizon, illustrating that there is no help for the first ship as the others in the fleet are in just as desperate a situation. In the background though, we see a fortress standing sturdily vertical, unaffected by the chaos surrounding it. There are two classes of rock formation in the scene: jagged (in front) and smooth (under the fortress). Both are creations of nature, but while the jagged formation seems to represent forthcoming peril, the smooth one suggests stability and permanence in life. Thus the nature of the natural is paradoxical, both good and bad for mankind. Similarly, the land of shore embodies safety for those already on it, but certain death for those on a foundering vessel.

The precise depiction of the ships implies that this work may have hung in the home of a seafaring merchant. The attention to detail shows the artist painted for the "period eye," or how a contemporary viewer might have appreciated a work in context.² So, a Dutch merchant would almost certainly have been quite familiar with the structure of his sea-going vessels. Displayed at eye-level on the wall of a public room in a merchant's house, *Shipping* could have served as a reminder of the luck involved in all affairs associated with nature; man has ultimately no control over the outcome of his life. To take this notion one step further, one might suppose that nature can be equated to the capitalist market so important in Dutch and Flemish culture in the seventeenth century.³ Such a message would have been relevant to anyone involved in the mercantile trade.

The overall conflict between nature's malevolence and the perseverance of man is pertinent to any visitor to the Snite who lives in our world in which man continues to invent devices and develop methods intended to alter the course of nature in his favor. The message about fate and man's inability to control it is also relevant. Hopefully the viewer will spend the time to ponder the significance of the varied elements in van Eertvelt's *Shipping on a Rough Sea*.

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1 All biographical information comes from:

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2 Barrett, Melissa. "Period Eye: Comparative Perspectives." CitizenNewscaster.com Home of Citizen-directed News Media. Web. 21 Sept. 2010.
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3 Matthias, Diana C. J.