



Portrait of a Boy with a Miniature Three-Master

Pieter van der Werff
(Kralingen 1665 – 1722 Rotterdam)

1696

oil on canvas

48.2 x 39.2 cm

signed and dated in light paint, centered along
lower edge: "P:v. weRff fec / 1696"

PW-101



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Looking at us from his place in a decorative oval frame of palm branches painted to imitate a relief in stone, a blond-haired boy, whose sumptuous clothing includes a red velvet beret with three white feathers, is seen against a parklike background. He wears a yellow-and-gray striped suit over a shirt with lace cuffs and collar. A blue shawl trimmed with gold braid is draped over his left shoulder. Floating in the rectangular stone basin next to him is a small three-master with a reddish orange ribbon tied to it, which he holds in his right hand. As far as is known, this portrait of a boy playing with a miniature three-master is unique in Dutch painting of the seventeenth century. The miniature three-master flies the red, white and blue flag of the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands atop the mainmast and the mizzen, and a golden lion rampant adorns the taffrail (*taffarel*), the part of a ship that rises above the stern and is often decorated with ornate woodcarving. An arm holding a raised sword is discernible on the orange flag flying above the taffrail.

The canvas was signed and dated 1696 by Pieter van der Werff. This date is significant in the artist's oeuvre, because in that year he embarked on the most important commission of his career: 30 oval portraits of the directors of the Rotterdam Chamber of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and their illustrious predecessors, going all the way back to the chamber's founding in 1602.^[1] The series, intended as a gallery of honor, was meant to hang in the trade hall of the new Oost-Indisch Huis, located on the Boompjes. The cornerstone was laid in 1695 and the building was finished in 1698. Pieter van der Werff painted the first portraits from existing works—including originals by Frans Hals (1582/83–1666), Ludolf de Jongh (1616–79), and Pieter's elder brother, Adriaen van der Werff (1659–1722)—which is why he did not sign them. He did, however, sign the portraits in this series he painted from life after 1698.

Thanks to this commission, from 1696 onward Pieter van der Werff regularly found himself in the company of the most prominent families of Rotterdam, searching for portraits of deceased directors of the VOC that he could use as examples. The boy portrayed here must therefore belong to a family with VOC connections, as evidenced by both the portrait's date and the sitter's toy ship. The three-master can in fact be identified as an East Indiaman. Ships of this type, which averaged 40 meters in length, were generally used by the VOC for trade with Asia.

In addition to obvious connections with the VOC, the boy's family probably also had ties to the Admiralty on the Maze (Meuse), which would not have been unusual in Rotterdam. This link is suggested by the golden lion on the stern. The most famous ship with the name and taffrail decoration of *Gouden Leeuw* (Golden Lion) was the over 50-meter long, 82-gun three-master built in 1666 by the Amsterdam Admiralty.

Comparative Figures



It became the flagship of Admiral Cornelis Tromp, the Rotterdam-born son of Admiral Maarten Harpertsz Tromp. The *Gouden Leeuw* was one of the most famous Dutch men-of-war of its time, alongside *De Zeven Provinciën* (The Seven Provinces), the flagship of Admiral Michiel de Ruyter. Willem van de Velde the Elder (1611–93), his son Willem van de Velde the Younger (1633–1707), and Ludolf Bakhuizen (1631–1708) portrayed the *Gouden Leeuw* on several occasions, even after the vessel was retired from service in 1686.^[2] In contrast to the Rotterdam Chamber of the VOC, which played a less influential role within the organization, the Admiralty on the Maze was second in importance in Holland only to the Amsterdam Admiralty. The Maze Admiralty was in fact the oldest and most venerable admiralty college in the Dutch Republic. Serving as a representative of this admiralty was a great honor, certainly in Rotterdam. We may therefore assume that Pieter van der Werff deliberately portrayed this boy with a toy three-master that refers to the legendary *Gouden Leeuw*.^[3]

- Guido Jansen, 2017

Endnotes

1. Martine Fleurke, “‘. . . by meenigt’ aan de wanden en mueren . . .’: De portretten van de bewindhebbers van de Kamer Rotterdam,” in Peter Grimm et al., *Heeren in zaken: De Kamer Rotterdam van de Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (Zutphen, 1994), 93–105, with illustrations of all the portraits in the series.
2. Margarita Russell, *Willem van de Velde de Jonge: Het IJ voor Amsterdam met de Gouden Leeuw* (Bloemendaal, 1992).
3. Johan Hendrik Willem Unger, *De regeering van Rotterdam, 1328–1892: Naamlijst van personen die in of van wege de regeering ambten hebben bekleed, voorafgegaan door eene geschiedkundige inleiding over den regeeringsvorm van Rotterdam* (Rotterdam, 1892), 536, 538–39. Unger’s *Naamlijst* shows that only a limited number of Rotterdam families can be connected with this portrait. The directors of the Rotterdam Chamber of the VOC in this period (1696–98) were Josua van Belle (a well-known art collector), Dirck de Raedt, Jacob Dane (who remained a bachelor), Willem van Hogendorp, and Marinus Groeninx. In those years the representatives of the Admiralty on the Maze were Jean Beyer and Marinus Groeninx.

Provenance

- (Sale, Frederick Muller, Amsterdam, 1 June 1926, no. 1073).
- Private collection, The Netherlands [Noortman Master Paintings, Maastricht; Salomon Lilian B. V., Amsterdam, 2004].
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2004.

Exhibition History

- Norfolk, Va., Chrysler Museum of Art, on loan with the permanent collection, 2005 [lent by the present owner].
- Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, “Water, Wind, and Waves: Marine Paintings from the Dutch Golden Age,” 1 July – 25 November, 2018 [lent by the present owner].
- Abu Dhabi, Louvre Abu Dhabi, “Rembrandt, Vermeer and the Dutch Golden Age. Masterpieces from

The Leiden Collection and the Musée du Louvre,” 14 February–18 May 2019 [lent by the present owner].

- Amsterdam, H'ART Museum, “From Rembrandt to Vermeer: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection,” 9 April–24 August 2025 [lent by the present owner].
- West Palm Beach, Norton Museum of Art, “Art and Life in Rembrandt’s Time: Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection,” 25 October 2025–29 March 2026 [lent by the present owner].

References

- Ducos, Blaise. “The Dutch Miracle.” In *Rembrandt, Vermeer and the Dutch Golden Age. Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection and the Musée du Louvre*. Edited by Blaise Ducos and Lara Yeager-Crasselt, 34. Exh. cat. Abu Dhabi, Louvre Abu Dhabi. London, 2019. [Exhibition catalogue also published in French and Arabic.]
- Ducos, Blaise, and Lara Yeager-Crasselt, eds. *Rembrandt, Vermeer and the Dutch Golden Age. Masterpieces from The Leiden Collection and the Musée du Louvre*. Exh. cat. Abu Dhabi, Louvre Abu Dhabi. London, 2019, 56, no. 1. [Exhibition catalogue also published in French and Arabic.]
- Nogrady, Elizabeth. “Pieter van der Werff, *Portrait of a Boy with a Miniature Three-Master*.” In *Art and Life in Rembrandt’s Time*. Edited by Elizabeth Nogrady et al., 142–23, ill. Exh. cat. Amsterdam, H'ART Museum; West Palm Beach, Norton Museum of Art. Zwolle, 2025. [Exhibition catalogue also published in Dutch.]

Technical Summary

The support, a fine, plain-weave, rectangular fabric, has been lined. All four tacking margins have been removed and paper tape extends into the face of the painting. Pronounced cusping along the left edge and slight cusping along the remaining edges suggests the composition’s dimensions have not been significantly altered, however, the feigned oval is narrower along the upper left quadrant than along the upper right and the elements along the midpoint of the upper edge appear compressed, which suggests these edges may have been trimmed slightly. There is one numerical inscription, but no wax seals, canvas stamps, paper labels, or stencils on the reverse.

A thin, smooth, light ground layer was applied overall. The feigned oval image was constructed with layers of opaque paint followed by thin glazes and delicate dabs that create the illusion of white lace along the cuffs and collar, gold trim along the blue robe, and the richly decorated stern of the three-mast sailing ship.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. The images reveal a compositional change along the rectangular stone basin in which the miniature three-mast ship sails.



Originally, the left edge of the basin was similar in width to the front and back edges and the left rear corner of the basin remained exposed. During the paint stage, the width of the left edge was increased by a third and the blue drapery was shifted so it cascades diagonally over and obscures the left rear corner of the basin. In addition, a slight shift was made to the figure's proper left hand and adjacent drapery fold.

The painting is signed and dated in light-colored paint along the center of the lower edge.

The painting has not undergone conservation treatment since its acquisition in 2004 and remains in a good state of preservation despite drying cracks and a few small areas of loss confined to a horizontal band across the width of the lower edge.