

The Whale Tale: How the Leviathan Became an Emblem of the Dutch Republic through Art

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The Stranded Whale On the Beach at Zandvoort, The School of Goltzius, 1594, engraving on paper, Dutch

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The great leviathans, their sonar scrambled by the North Sea sand, were migrating not only from Atlantic to Arctic, but from the realm of myth and morality to that of matter and commodity, sometimes becoming stranded on the submarine slopes of Dutch cultural contradiction.

-Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*

Throughout the history of maritime study and exploration, humans have been intrigued by the numerous and diverse organisms residing under the oceans. But the title of most captivating sea creatures would have to be awarded to whales. Their giant size and great strength has led to a fascination that has lasted centuries since their discovery by early sailors. Stories and legends include references and prominently feature these marine behemoths. During the early days of the study of whales, it was not scientists who observed whales, but artists throughout the coasts who captured their essence into mediums to be seen by the public at large. Their renderings, though not always scientifically accurate, served as some of the first images people would ever see of whales. To truly understand the transformation of whales from legendary sea monsters with negative connotations to intriguing animals worthy of scholarly study and exploration, one only needs to look at the art produced and inspired by these creatures to comprehend just how intertwined whale strandings and the history of the Dutch Republic became during the time before whaling took over the world.

One such engraving of particular interest features a beached whale found on the shores near Zandvoort in the Netherlands. Hendrik Goltzius created a sketch of the dying pilot whale in 1594 that was later used by his pupils to create the engraving, *The Stranded Whale on the Beach at Zandvoort*.¹ It features a whale lying dead as two men measure the length of the animal and swarms of people walk

toward the corpse. In most cases this engraving was titled after the Latin and Dutch inscriptions around the image, stating that it was a tuna or “tonijn” in Dutch.ⁱⁱ However, due to the original pilot whale inspiration of the whale sketch by Goltzius and the anatomical features of the whale in question, it most resembles a pilot whale or harbor porpoise, two species common in the area of the Dutch shores.

The engraving is sometimes attributed to Jan Sanraedam, a pupil of Goltzius who would later go on to create more works involving stranded whales.ⁱⁱⁱ Sanraedam was known for reproducing the works of Goltzius.^{iv} In one of his most recognized whale engravings, *Whale Stranded at Beverwijk in December 1601*, Sanraedam shows just how heavily connoted a whale stranding was with bad omens. The image features a text not only listing all of the vital statistics taken of the whale, but also explaining all of the events that had occurred during the time when the whale landed onshore.^v At the time, the extremely important port of Ostend in Flanders was under siege, and many omens of doom had occurred after the whale had stranded including a solar eclipse.^{vi} So between the time of late 1601 and the summer of 1602, this area of the Dutch coast was experiencing heavy attacks, but only after the appearance of this whale.^{vii} Within the engraving, the image of the solar eclipse is prominent on the border along with the skeletal figure of death in the top left corner to emphasize the meaning of the beached whale even more.^{viii} Therefore, this entire engraving could function as both an oracle and description while insisting that this whale was truly meant to be understood as an omen of doom.^{ix}

Another student of Goltzius, Jacob Matham, based an engraving off of a sketch done by Goltzius of a stranded fifty-four foot sperm whale that had stranded at the fishing village of Berckhey.^x His famous error of drawing the whale’s pectoral fin as an ear was even copied by Matham in his engraving.^{xi} This print in particular was to become a model of sorts for beached whale images throughout the Flemish world which in turn transformed this stranding event into a special period in the natural history of the Dutch Republic “as much part of the collective memory as the battles and sieges.”^{xii} Matham’s composition puts the corpse within a Dutch dunescape surrounded by everyday fisherman and other villagers looking to collect the blubber from the dead animal.^{xiii} The public audience at the Berckhey site allows for a separation into two major groups: the learned people who were most concerned with reasons

for the animal's stranding and the common people who debated its superstitious significance.^{xiv} To the common people, this event was either a sign of Holland's triumph over their enemies or a sign of their disastrous loss.^{xv} In another engraved version of the Berckhey whale, the image of the event was combined with a map of the Principality of Cleves when occupied by Spanish troops in August of 1598 and an image of the atrocities these soldiers committed while occupying the towns of Cleves.^{xvi} Thus the beached whale at Berckhey was seen as the warning before the Spanish attacked Cleves.

The rich folklore and legends of Dutch culture combined with the biblical tale of Jonah can explain some of the reasons why whales were seen in such a negative light. During the 17th century, the Dutch Republic was never stable or secure enough for politicians to avoid consulting illogical omens, and therefore politics were combined with superstitions.^{xvii} In fact, the Dutch had a very strong interest in determining just where they "stood with the Almighty."^{xviii} Specifically with whales, Flemish proverb satirizing worldly ambition correlated with the tale of Jonah in that the act of being swallowed is the consequence of sin.^{xix} In addition, in the story Jonah and his crew attempt to lighten their ship by "casting barrels" before the whale and in Netherlandish vernacular, "casting barrels before a whale" meant deflecting misfortune.^{xx} With Jonah's tale being so popular at the time, his escape from the "belly of hell" in the whale was widely spread and understood as whales being a potent reminder of the consequences of disobeying the divine law.^{xxi} Whales were quite literally the "bearers of bad tidings to the sinful."^{xxii}

The other thing that must be remembered when looking at images of beached whales within Dutch culture is that during the years between 1570 and 1650, whales made their biggest mark in prints and textual verses, and this was the exact same formative period of time when the Dutch culture was being fashioned by the concerns and fears of war and religious conflict.^{xxiii} The beached whale became part of the interpretation of national fortunes or in other words a prophesy of crises that lay ahead.^{xxiv} The fact that beached whales coincided so closely with these huge military endeavors and events in Dutch history did not make it easy to separate the status as an omen from whales. For instance, in 1617, a whale stranded near Scheveningen was engraved by Buytewech and later painted by Esaias van de Velde.^{xxv}

That exact same year there was a struggle between Calvinist militants and Romanist followers, and thus the appearance of the whale on shore was immediately stated by the contemporary audience as a warning given by God.^{xxvi} In 1577 a whale stranding had inspired a vernacular text attached to a print made of the animal and in the story the whale identifies his origins in Spain and that he was sent to the Netherlands to do harm.^{xxvii} It was only once the Dutch Republic became more secure in its political standings that whale prints with oracular statements either within the text accompanying it or within the image itself would begin to decline.^{xxviii}

At this time, science was very rudimentary, but the concern to measure and study these beasts can be seen within the sketches and prints compiled throughout the Baroque period. Scientific thought at the time would mostly consider storm conditions as the principle cause of the whale's demise, and studied the creature as if it were "some sort of ship without a pilot."^{xxix} Almost all of the whales found ashore were recorded as males, and between 1531 and the end of the 17th century there were about forty whales that had been recorded stranded along the entire Flemish coast.^{xxx} However, the biggest interest among the local population was to record these marine events for future generations.^{xxxi} When Goltzius sketched the whale on the beach at Berckhey, it was recorded that doctors arrived from Leiden "armed with pomanders and measuring rods" to observe and record data about the whale.^{xxxii} These vital statistics of the whale would go into the text surrounding the engravings of this whale by multiple artists.^{xxxiii} The chronicler Petrus Christiaanszoon Bor took notes and made sketches of the Berckhey whale which he would later incorporate into his writings of the history of his country.^{xxxiv} In fact, Bor's text not only gives a description of the "monstrous ugly beast," but also shows the immense detail of the data collected from the whale which dominated his writings on the event more than anything else.^{xxxv}

The physical nature of prints was that they were easily transportable and could be used in just about every field of study as visual information to help educate.^{xxxvi} It was the primary means of communicating visual information, so it is no wonder that when recording an event as historically important to the Dutch people as a whale stranding, multiple prints and engravings were produced. People relied on prints to gain information from around Europe to keep themselves aware of the latest

developments.^{xxxvii} Hendrik Goltzius was one of the most famous engravers of his time and in one instance had to go undercover on his trip to Italy in 1590 so as not to be recognized.^{xxxviii} His prints, including those of his pupils, reached the frontiers of the known world during his lifetime and prints featuring all kinds of subjects, including whale beachings, could be purchased by collectors through street vendors, booksellers, or even through the artist themselves.^{xxxix} The spread of knowledge on marine life was indeed vast, especially due to the fact that most of the strandings occurred within the vicinity of Antwerp and Haarlem, important centers of culture and learning.^{xi} In 1577 several well-documented cases of strandings occurred and at the time attracted huge interest from the population of Antwerp.^{xii} In fact, three separate pamphlets containing prints of these whales from the 1577 strandings were put on sale by Antwerp printmakers and these pamphlets traveled throughout Europe, having a huge impact on the knowledge of whales since these were some of the first fairly accurate illustrations.^{xiii}

The accuracy and high circulation of prints began the study of whales and other marine life and continues to help shape our understanding today. Illustrations made during the period before whaling were profusely copied in later years and have greatly influenced the iconography, conceptions, and misconceptions about whales in popular and scientific works.^{xiiii} Currently, scientists attempting to collect data on the past habitats and migratory grounds of whales will reference prints such as *The Stranded Whale on the Beach at Zandvoort* to use both the textual and visual data collected by these artist and early marine biologists.^{xlv} The better understanding of the use of echo location of species such as the sperm whale explains why the North Sea surrounding the Flemish coast was such a disastrous spot for whales.^{xlv} This southern area of the North Sea is extremely shallow, making it unsuitable for whales since they would have had plenty of difficulty maneuvering around the many sandbars that plagued the Dutch coast.^{xlvi} In addition, these strandings would happen to solitary adult male bull whales, although there is data and prints taken during this period to show that pod strandings of multiple whales did occur, but not as frequently.^{xlvii} The number of strandings correlates with the number of prints produced during these periods before whaling truly began in Europe.^{xlviii} Whale strandings were not that common, as only fifteen known strandings in the North Sea occurred between 1560 and 1600.^{xlix} This helps to explain why

beachings were such popular events for the public to witness. It brought people from their terrestrial homes to the ocean where they could observe a world quite unfamiliar to them.

Looking through the prints, engravings, and writings produced during this time shows a scientific recording that has helped current members of the zoological fields better understand the history of not only the whales they study, but also the beginnings of the field of zoological study. Without the interest garnered by these highly popularized events, people would not have begun to explore their oceans, and especially would have continued to view the magnificent animals inhabiting the deep simply as sea monsters trapped in legend and lore. The transformation of whales from mythical bringers of bad tidings to classified and intriguing animals certainly began along the Flemish coast and helped to shape the history of the Dutch Republic.

ⁱ Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York: Random House Inc., 1987), 131.

ⁱⁱ Walter C. Strauss, *Hendrik Goltzius: Complete Engravings, Etchings, and Woodcuts* (New York: Abaris Books, 1977), 579.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Clifford S. Ackley, *Printmaking in the Age of Rebrandt* (Meriden: The Meriden Gravure Company, 1981), 44.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Schama, *Embarrassment*, 138.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Ackley, *Printmaking*, 46.

^{ix} Schama, *Embarrassment*, 139.

^x Ibid, 132.

^{xi} Ibid.

^{xii} Ibid.

^{xiii} Ibid.

^{xiv} Ibid, 133.

^{xv} Ibid.

^{xvi} Ibid.

^{xvii} Ibid, 139.

^{xviii} Ibid, 140.

^{xix} Ibid, 141.

^{xx} Ibid.

^{xxi} Ibid, 143.

^{xxii} Ibid.

^{xxiii} Ibid, 134.

^{xxiv} Ibid, 135.

^{xxv} Ibid.

^{xxvi} Ibid, 136.

^{xxvii} Ibid, 133.

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- xxviii Ibid, 136.
- xxix Ibid, 133.
- xxx Ibid.
- xxxi DeSmet 11
- xxxii Schama, *Embarrassment*, 131.
- xxxiii Ibid, 132.
- xxxiv Ibid, 131.
- xxxv Ibid, 132.
- xxxvi William W. Robnson, "The Passion for Prints: Collecting and Connoisseurship in Northern Europe during the Seventeenth Century," *Printmaking in the Age of Rembrandt* (Meriden: The Meriden Gravure Company, 1981), xxvii.
- xxxvii Ibid, xxix.
- xxxviii Ibid.
- xxxix Ibid.
- xl C. Smeenk, "Strandings of sperm whales *Physeter macrocephalus* in the North Sea: history and patterns," *Bulletin de l'Institut Royal des Sciences Naturelles de Belgique, Biologie* 67 (1997): 15.
- xli W. M. A. DeSmet, "Five centuries of sperm whale strandings along the Flemish coast," *Bulletin de l'Institut Royal des Sciences Naturelles de Belgique, Biologie* 67 (1997): 12.
- xlii Ibid.
- xliii Smeenk, "Strandings," 15.
- xliv Ibid.
- xlv Ibid.
- xlvi Ibid.
- xlvii Ibid.
- xlviii Ibid, 18.
- xlix Ibid, 18.

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