

# **Nineteenth-century hand-painted Dutch ships flags. A case-study<sup>1</sup>**

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## *Introduction*

The collection of the National Maritime Museum Amsterdam contains a large number of flags – in total amounting to more than 600. These flags can be divided into several categories. There are flags designed for communication at sea, flags representing shipping companies and thus often designed for advertising purposes, or flags bearing numbers which are or were connected with specific shipping firms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Here, I would like to focus on a very specific type of flag – the hand-painted, hand-coloured and often richly decorated ships flag. Together with my colleague, Sjoerd de Meer curator at the Maritime Museum in Rotterdam, and with Alle Elbers, I have started a research project about five years ago. Through this project we try to locate as many hand-painted, hand-coloured nineteenth century flags as possible, be it in public repositories (museums) or in private collections. We deal with questions regarding material used, paints and pigments, and representations (allegories and symbols) on the flags. In the long run we intend to publish the results of our research. In my presentation I want to discuss the flags as produced by one specific painting firm in the Netherlands.

## *Painted Flags*

Shipping companies' flags, like signal flags, have been or still are designed because of their function. They convey information regarding the image of the company, or are means of communication. Hand-painted flags seem to have been designed to decorate more than to inform. In almost all cases, these flags are made of wool. Albeit the fact that some of the hand-painted flags have been used in transport over land, most flags are connected with transport over sea. A fair number of these flags are signed by the artist. Because of this signature we know that the lion's share of these flags have been manufactured by the firm of Elbers in the city of Zwartsluis in the province of Overijssel. In the nineteenth century, this city was ideally located for all sorts of maritime activities. A number of rivers come together not far from this little town. Also, the area nearby must have been characterized by smoke

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Alle Elbers, and Sjoerd de Meer, curator, Maritime Museum Rotterdam, for their willingness to share their information with me. This paper is a modest prelude to a book the three authors will publish on nineteenth-century hand painted flags (forthcoming).

caused by various industrial enterprises. These factories specialised in the production of bricks, strawboard, and potato flour. Peat, not coal was the main fuel for the factories' engines, from the early 1800s far into the 1950s.

Ships, especially designed to carry the blocks of peat, transported this commodity in huge quantities from the fields nearby. These ships were deployed to distribute the peat not only over the province, but also to more remote places like the major cities in the Netherlands – Amsterdam, The Hague, and Rotterdam.

### *The Firm*

As early as the last decades of the eighteenth century, a Laurens Elbers is mentioned in the municipal archives of Zwartsluis. His profession was glassmaker and painter.<sup>2</sup> The history of the paint firm of Elbers is better documented through account books and so-called 'schippersboekjes' (skippers books) roughly covering the era 1854-1934. It must have been a small, but influential company. Between 1854 and 1878, 8 men on average were employed. Later, this figure was reduced to three to four per year on average. Eventually, during the second half of the twentieth century, the firm had dwindled to a one man company. In 1986, Jan Elbers shut the door of the paint firm, thereby bringing almost 200 years of family business to an end. The account books are important sources. Not only do they provide information about the firm's activities, they also give almost 150 names of clients. Many of the names are related to ship owners who lived in the area near Zwartsluis, and who have been involved in the transport of peat.

### *The Flags*

The first hand painted ship's flag manufactured by Elbers dates from 1854. Fairly often, these flags bear signatures. Until about 1880, H. Elbers or H. Elbers Jhz (Johanneszoon) are mentioned as artists. Later, after their death, the company's activities were continued by a nephew, J. Elbers Hzn (Harmzoon). In later years, his sons Willem and Hendrik took the helm.

First and foremost, the paint firm Elbers was specialized in painting ships. In the nineteenth century Zwartsluis was invested with shipyards – generally relatively small enterprises, but always in need of painters who could be deployed for the maintenance of the ships. In most cases, prams and tjalks were constructed. The account books indicate that between 1854 and

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<sup>2</sup> A.Elbers, 'Scheepsschilders Elbers', *Bokkepoet*, 185 (september 2008), 32.

1877, employees of the firm were involved in painting in no less than 81 instances. In 1876 alone, seven newly built prams were painted by Elbers.<sup>3</sup>

For this meeting in Yokohama I want to focus on the flags manufactured by the firm.<sup>4</sup> Rather typical for the Elbers flags are the allegorical scenes – with gods and goddesses from Antiquity, surrounded by barrels and crates – depicted on the colours of the Dutch national flag – red, white and blue. Over and over again, Mercury (god of trade), Ceres (goddess of agriculture), and Neptune (god of the sea) are represented, with ships on either side. Another characteristic feature is the presence of the rooster amongst the barrels. Here, the rooster symbolizes vigilance. All in all the persons depicted represent trade, shipping, and agriculture. In short: they refer to three elements crucial to the peat industry. Occasionally, the artist's name is to be found in one of the flags on the main mast, together with the year of fabrication and the number of the ship owners firm for which the flag has been decorated.

Frequently the flags bear captions indicating that they have been made to commemorate a specific happening, or to thank a specific person for services rendered. Secondary sources also mention these types of flags being donated to skippers involved in the transport of peat.

Another colourful product made by Elbers concerns the pennants. Here, the elongated white field is often decorated with floral motifs, vases, ribbons, and figures. Also, municipal coats of arms have been found, suggesting that the flag or pennant was ordered by a ship owner who held his residency in that specific city. More than once the allegorical scene described above (with Mercury, Ceres and Neptune) is repeated on the top of the pennant.

### *Revenues*

We should take into account that the documentation regarding the costs and revenues for the firm is far from complete. The account books run from 1854 to 1878 and from 1895 to 1905 – in total covering 34 years out of a total of over 200 years! Nevertheless, I have calculated that during approximately 80 years the paint firm of Elbers has sold its flags, pennants and other 'flag products' to almost 150 clients. Overall revenues are estimated to have amounted to approximately 1,000 guilders.

In his article, Alle Elbers rightly states that the production of flags has never been the 'core business' of the firm. Flags were manufactured 'on the side', and the revenues amounted to no more than 5 per cent of the total revenues. Elbers calculated that painting ships procured

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<sup>3</sup> Elbers, *idem*, 33.

<sup>4</sup> The following is mostly based on Joost C.A. Schokkenbroek, 'Dundoek zonder dikdoenerij. Negentiende-eeuwse beschilderde scheepsvlaggen en hun gebruik', *Cachet*, 134 (maart-mei 2006), 18-21; and Joost Schokkenbroek, 'Kleurrijk dundoek', *Bokkepoet* 174 (juni 2006), 4-7.

much more income for the firm and its employees. A well-painted shiny ship could be beneficiary to skipper and clients. The firm's activities were not restricted to different parts of the ship. Even parts of the inventory like buckets for potatoes, bins for bread, bunks, etc., were decorated by the firm's artist painters. Next to doing paint jobs, the firm provided all sorts of equipment needed on board. The account books regularly refer to brooms, water barrels, or even rat poison! Most bills were paid in cash. Some, however, were paid in potatoes, apples, cheese, peat, onions, or other commodities provided by Mother Nature.

### *Conclusion*

The information shared here is not more than the proverbial tip of the iceberg. Alle Elbers, Curator Sjoerd de Meer of the Maritime Museum in Rotterdam, and I are in the midst of making an inventory of nineteenth-century hand painted flags in private collections and public repositories. So far, several dozen flags – mostly ship's flags – have been documented. In order to come to grips with the provenance – and hence its use or *raison d'être* – we need to compare our findings with primary sources like the account books of the firm of Elbers. It is our wish and intention to finish the project in 2013. By then we hope to be able to welcome you in the Netherlands, and present to you the final results of our research.