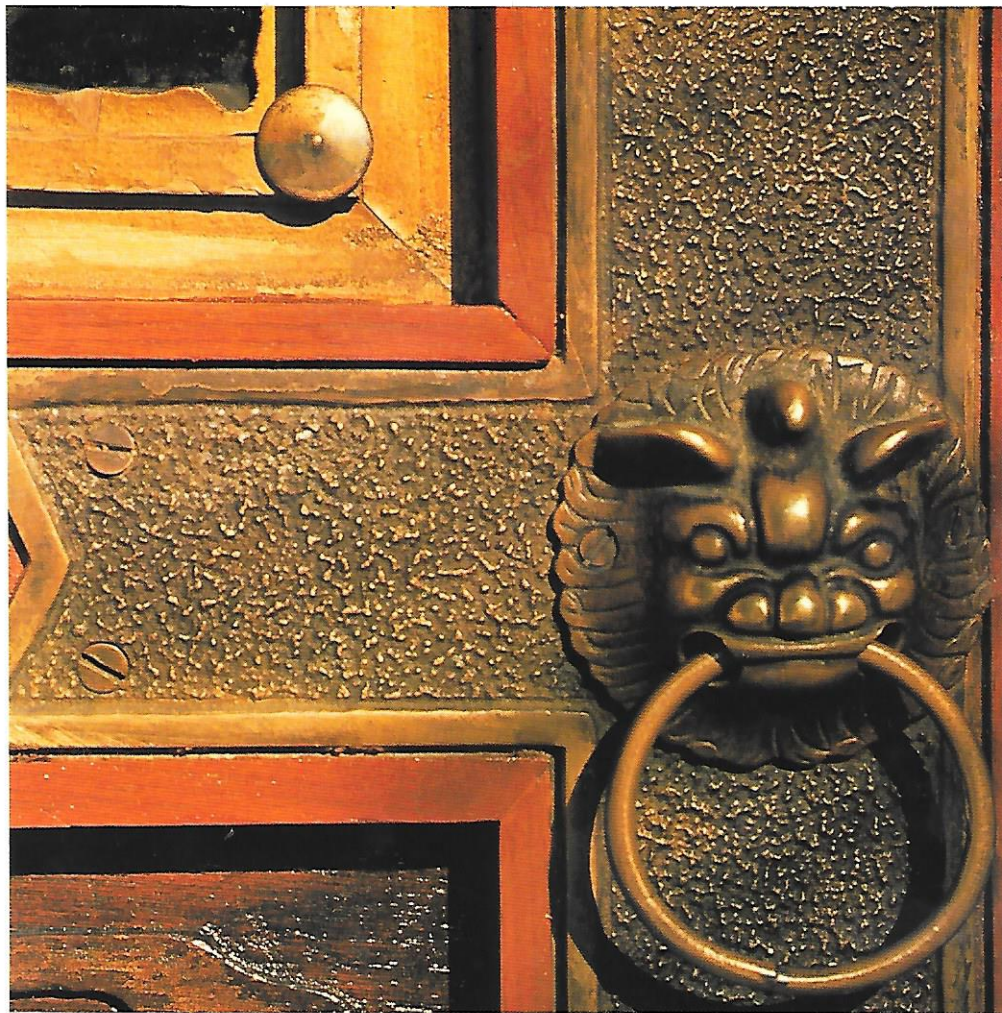


THE PENINSULA GROUP



Sea And Be Seen

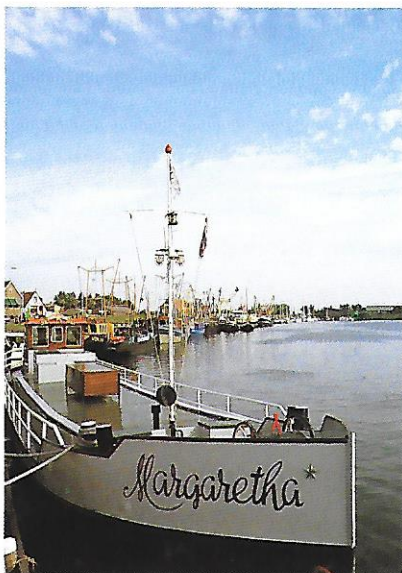
KJM brings celebrated Dutch artist Peter Sterkenburg to Hongkong in November for his first overseas exhibition - a rare chance to view his moody and dramatic seascapes.

Text Liam Fitzpatrick / Photographs David Lindsey



Above: Peter Sterkenburg: "I like to capture the romance surrounding the sea ..."

Below: Harlingen harbour: "the world of ships and the sea have always held a fascination for me."



Friesland, the Dutch province to the north of Amsterdam, can pull in two the hearts of those that live there.

It is a country of rural beauty that in summertime puts on its brightest clothes for visitors from the south. The air is full of birdsong, drowsy bees hang over the fields, a light wind ripples the sweetwater of the Ijsselmeer, formerly the Zuiderzee, and in a corny but pleasant anachronism distant church bells still toll the hours from behind the swaying trees.

And yet beneath these folksy summer garments, Friesland also wears a hairshirt for it is deep in the heart of Mennonite territory. It was here that in the sixteenth century the protestant sect was founded which was to migrate in such large numbers to America and become known to the world as the Amish. Those that stayed in Friesland evolved a culture which - while not as severe as its

New World counterpart - was so upstanding that *to this day* the windows of the demure cottages that line the road from Amsterdam have, without exception, their curtains flung wide open at night, allowing passersby unforgiving scrutiny of their modest interiors. We are living respectably, the inhabitants are saying - we have nothing to hide from you. Ask a Dutch friend and you will be told that a household will be suspected of iniquity, its inhabitants fallen, for no other crime than drawing its curtains as the longer Dutch summer dusk turns to night.

Above all it is this dichotomy - between a testing moral legacy and the sweet elysian abandon of the land - that unsettles the hearts behind those naked Frisian windows in those small northern villages. For a Frisian, escape from the thick hand of rectitude also means leaving behind the glittering water and the swooping seabirds, the lazy canals and the calves growing fat in the fields, every inch of which was fought for and won from the sea - reclaimed, diked and poldered in a bitter but audacious struggle, breathtaking in

its ingenuity. And so many, not knowing whether to stay or break free, turn like Thomas in circles of indecision, pacing the same ground in eternal debate.

And maybe that is why Peter Sterkenburg paints the way he does.

For years, Sterkenburg has sat in his modest house in the tiny, coastal village of Zurich (*Surch* in the Frisian language which locals proudly continue to nourish), painting some eight hours a day, often seven days a week. Ostensibly, this



Above: The Bassa, a German windjammer, 90cm x 60cm.

huge man with a piratical expression but a warm bass of a voice seems tied forever to his easel here in Friesland. But in his mind and in his art, Peter Sterkenburg is as light as a seagull, rapid as a hawk and as free to roam the world beyond the *Afsluitdijk*.

With an almost obsessive clarity of purpose, Sterkenburg has painted canvas after canvas of wild, romantic seascapes, nothing but seascapes, so lifelike that one can smell the salt air and hear the snap of rigging on sail. His reputation is for being one of the world's leading maritime artists, but to the sensitive eye there is only one thing that the canvases which litter his studio represent: freedom. Limitless freedom and the horizons rolling under the bow. Worlds unfold under his brush and yet he has virtually always lived within a few miles of the centuries-old port

where he was born, Harlingen. The tension between these opposites is typically Frisian, and it defines him.

"My father was a sailor. He would be away for six months and then come home with all these fascinating stories and strange objects from all over the world. Thus the world of ships and the sea have always held a fascination for me," he says.

"I don't know if you know the feeling of standing on a dock in a harbour and watching the ships go by. It makes the world both smaller and larger. The ships go out to sea, and you're left wondering where they might go to. It's a romantic idea, but I've always liked that aspect of a ship. Total freedom to go anywhere it wants to. The whole world is within its reach."

The Dutch army, it is widely allowed, is one of the few in the world to have discovered an artist of Sterkenburg's ability. It was during a period of conscription that Sterkenburg took up a brush to while away the time ("you're doing nothing else, just playing cards all day"). Painting had been a childhood passion of his, but the sketches he now began to produce were impressive enough for his officers to commission work from him, with the result that original Sterkenburgs now hang in every other Officers' Mess in the Netherlands.

Today, they also hang in private collections and museums all over the world. A brief stint at the art academy in nearby Leeuwarden followed demobilization. "And then," he recalls "by some kind of miracle maybe, I lived in a street ten houses away from an art dealer who had a business in the United States. I met him and he started to buy my paintings.

Within a mere ten years, Sterkenburg's work went from being unknown to being museum material. The volume of private commissions flowing in was so high that he was regularly turning work down. He made study trips abroad and held exhibitions in the Netherlands. This level of achievement would not have been expe-



rienced had he been a painter simply of ships. He is not. The genius of his work lies in presenting the eye with a swirling and romantic tableau of sea, ship and sky. The emotiveness lies in the use of light and the rendering of every hue, mood and aspect of water and air. Nautical enthusiasts admire Sterkenburg's depiction of historical vessels (the works are *exact*, weeks of research are spent in discovering every detail of rigging, porthole and mast), but Sterkenburg is more moved by the elements, and it is this that makes you look again at his canvases.

"The painting of sea and sky is a universal theme. The subject is always there if I just look out of my window. What I like painting most is not so

much the ships - it's the sea and sky, the capturing of a whole atmosphere."

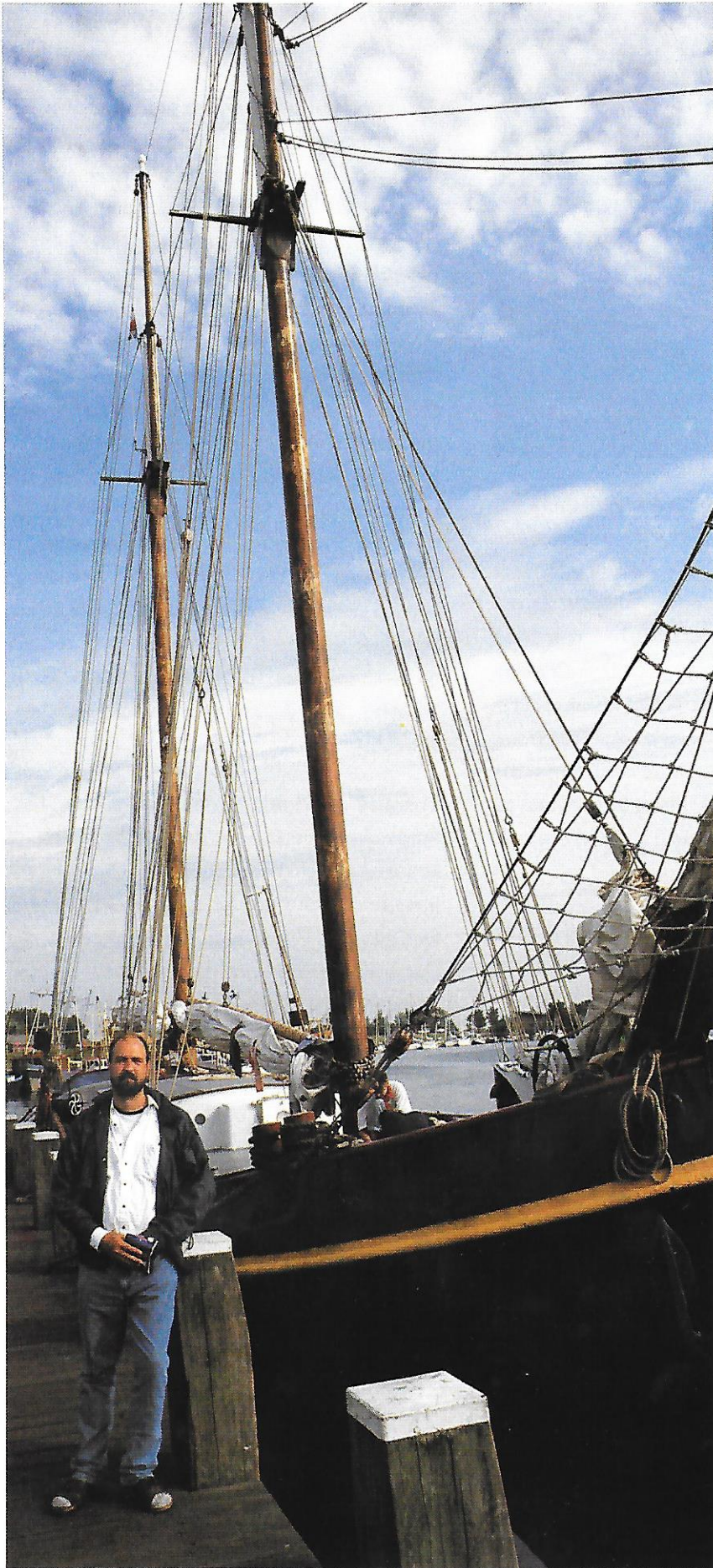
As symbols of freedom, sea and sky have captured Sterkenburg's imagination exclusively for five years, and although he has attempted no other subject in that time, his corpus of paintings is nonetheless varied, testament to his ability to observe, appreciate and record the innumerable faces of the ocean. It is also as if he is on some kind of inner quest, turning out superb canvas after canvas of distant horizons as a *katharsis* for the soul. Obvious influences include Mesdag, the nineteenth century master painter of seascapes whose studios in the Hague became the foundation of the Netherlands' first modern art museum. But Sterkenburg also sits squarely in the maritime tradition of much Dutch painting, and his work descends in a direct line from the abundant seventeenth and eighteenth century nautical canvases that hang on the walls of Amsterdam's Rijks- and Scheepvaart (maritime) museums.

Pressure of commissions has meant that Sterkenburg, until now, has not been able to arrange a solo overseas exhibition. However, the interest of Ton van der Werf, KLM's general manager for Hongkong, has resulted in the Dutch airline organizing the artist's first international showing. Fittingly, it is to be held in The



Top: Star Ferry,
Hongkong, 70cm x 120cm.

Right: Dutch Coastal Barges
on the Zuiderzee, 50cm x 70cm.



Repulse Bay, on the southside of Hongkong island and an area rich in maritime connotations (it is named for a famous nineteenth century vessel, HMS Repulse). In the seventeenth century, Dutch fleets sailed by here in their attempts to enter the lucrative China trade. Sterkenburg is looking forward to renewing the Dutch connection, and to being part of a unique cultural exchange between two maritime cultures.

"I live a village of two hundred," he says, eyes gradually widening, "so to go to a city of five million ..."

It is as if the walls of Sterkenburg's Frisian house can no longer contain the exuberant canvases within. So much freedom, so much movement, has been depicted by him over the years that his paintings have acquired an impulse of their own. They are taking flight for Asia, a wind at their backs and fair weather ahead. The Frisian curtain has opened on Peter Sterkenburg, and for that we are grateful.

"I like to capture the romance surrounding the sea. I don't have the inclination to be absolutely perfect when it comes to the technical details of ships. That doesn't come in first place for me."

"But sea and sky represent freedom," he adds, looking around his front garden in the languid silence of the late Frisian summer.

"Freedom. That's exactly it." 🐦

Peter Sterkenburg's work will be exhibited from November 18 to 29 at The Library, The Repulse Bay, 109 Repulse Bay Road, Hongkong. The exhibition is sponsored by KLM Royal Dutch Airlines.

English photographer and designer David Lindsey lives in Amsterdam and contributes regularly to several Dutch magazines as well as to such international publications as Cosmopolitan and Harpers & Queen.

Left: Sterkenburg on the pier at the Frisian town of Makkum: "The painting of sea and sky is a universal theme."