

# Maritime painter Peter J. Sterkenburg

(18-12-1955 - 23-04-2000)

*Peter J. Sterkenburg, born in Harlingen was an autodidact. He didn't feel at home at the art academy and chose to develop himself further as a painter. After a difficult initial period, sometimes he paid for his meals at Hotel Zeezicht and Anna Caspari in Harlingen with a painting, he was given assignments to the assembly line by a small circle of lovers of his seascapes. That was the reason that he was less well known in large circles at the time. He was a "wet" painter. He preferred oil paint and together with his brushwork, sometimes as many as 25 layers, a specific Sterkenburg was created. You hear waves rustle, the clouds move and every ship, whether it was a VOC ship from the 17th century or a modern lifeboat, was painted with extreme precision.*

In addition to a huge collection of books about ships, Peter had a photographic memory. That is reflected in all of his paintings. Everything is right. After he was discovered by Ton van der Werf and he was named painter of the year by KLM, he became a true celebrity in the Far East. Yet he remained a modest, often somewhat distant, person. Nearly all of his paintings were sold at four different exhibitions organized by KLM, including in Hong Kong. And back in the Netherlands, numerous follow-up assignments ensued.

The development in his work, as a result of his travels to the Far East, can be clearly seen in his "Brown Period", via "From Dark to Light", to the "Light of the East". A crown on his work was the commission for the "Amsterdam" a new cruise ship for the Holland America Line. A painting of seven meters long, representing VOC ships for Amsterdam. Unfortunately, Peter died on April 23, 2000 and was unable to complete it. Yet now and in the distant future we can still continue to enjoy his legacy: the unique maritime paintings of Peter Sterkenburg.

## Beacon on the rocks

Oil on linen, 40 x 50 cm, painted in 1996

*The narrow passage through the street of Singapore, the large number of islands, the sunken reefs and the changing tides around the island of Singapore, required careful navigation with the help of an experienced pilot in the 19th century. About 15 km before the narrow passage to the harbor, the ships sailed between the mainland and a whole series of islands that came closer and closer, so that it seemed that further progress was impossible. The access to Singapore was formed by a channel that was so narrow that only two large ships could pass each other at that point. The construction of the Raffles, Horsburgh, Sultan Shoal and other lighthouses in the 19th century significantly reduced the risk of being caught up. The Horsburgh Lighthouse, pictured here, was built in 1851 on a reef called Pedra Blanca that lies off the coast. The painting shows one of the first British steam sailing ships in the distance on the left that were still sailing when there was enough wind. A Chinese junk sails to the right. The year is 1860. The artist got his information about the lighthouse from a book with old prints from Singapore.*



# The IJ at sunset

Oil on linen, 100 x 180 cm Painted in 1992



A number of merchant ships were anchored in the 17th century with Amsterdam in the background. They were the property of the United East Indies Compagnie, the VOC, which was founded in 1602 to break the monopoly of the Portuguese in Asia. A lot of money was available in the northern Netherlands and on 2 April 1595 four trading ships sailed east under the command of Cornelis de Houtman to arrive on the island of Java in Indonesia 15 months later. At the beginning of 1597 the three remaining ships arrived, the "Amsterdam" had been left behind in Asia due to a lack of manpower and returned to the Netherlands. Of the original 240 men, only 87 were still alive, but the Dutch had discovered the way to the Far East. Presently, numerous other ships, ranging in length from 37 to 42 meters, sailed in the direction of "India". In the two centuries of its existence, the Company built nearly 1500 ships.

The high profits achieved in the 17th century on the trade in Asian products brought so much wealth that this century was called The Golden Age.





**An emerging storm** Oil on panel, painted in 1990

*There is a strong wind and the waves of the Zuiderzee have storm heads. The covered scallop, with its blade of straw, in the foreground, has just left the harbor and the skipper and his servant are busy with the sails. The swords have already been picked up, because with such a strong wind on open water damage is quickly caused. The tjalk on the right-hand side, with fork gear, wants to enter the harbor and the skipper apparently counts on the coverjalk to be on time. He keeps the sails as long as possible to keep the course in and to prevent him from landing on the harbor. The realistic way in which water and air are depicted are proof of the artist's fabulous technique.*

**Henri van der Zee en Ton van der Werf. Bound to the sea Peter J. Sterkenburg. A marine painter (1955-2000). Stichting Maritieme schilderijen Peter J. Sterkenburg, (2001).**

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[www.petersterkenburg.nl](http://www.petersterkenburg.nl) and a special offer for readers of De Blauwe Wimpel.

Peter Sterkenburg was a modest person, possessed of painting, a natural talent. That is the image that the writers are able to evoke. The art academy was not devoted to him. After a short period he decided to further develop himself. In the early days he could barely keep his head above water, but later he got so many assignments in a small circle of enthusiasts that people sometimes had to wait a long time for their painting. A major change came because General KLM Manager Ton van der Werf discovered him and KLM appointed him the artist of the year. At his subsequent exhibitions in the Far East, almost all of his paintings were already sold during the exhibitions. Yet he remained sober Frisian, fascinated by everything that has to do with ships and seas. His brushwork and how a Sterkenburg came about are described in detail in this book. The progression in his work can be clearly seen in the illustrations of his work, provided by Ton van der Werf with striking texts.

The book is, just like Peter's paintings, a valuable legacy of one of the greatest maritime painters of the twentieth century.