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## Abraham van Beyeren's *Visserij-bord* in the Groote Kerk, Maassluis

Hanging in the south transept of the Groote Kerk in Maassluis is an immense painted monument known as the *Visserij-bord*, or fishery board (fig. 1). It was commissioned by a group of four sea captains and presented to the church in 1649 where it has remained ever since.<sup>1</sup> Measuring seven by three meters and consisting of several painted panels, columns, mouldings and decorative carvings, the work has been called a unique creation in 17th-century art.<sup>2</sup> Certainly there does not appear to be any other Dutch monument of the period approaching its novel combination of painting, architecture and sculpture.

The *Visserij-bord* has remained problematic, however, because of uncertainties of attribution. Monograms of two artists are found on the bottom of the monument (fig. 2). One is the interwoven “*ABF*” of the Dutch marine and still life painter Abraham van Beyeren, while the second monogram “*R*”, has never been satisfactorily identified. Art historians have largely assumed that Abraham van Beyeren executed the marine scenes, while a second artist, associated with the “*R*” monogram, did the fish still lifes.<sup>3</sup> With evidence drawn from the monument itself though, and a fresh look at Van Beyeren's activity as a fish painter, it now appears that Van Beyeren alone painted the entire ensemble. Circumstances surrounding the commission of the *Visserij-bord* are known only in part. Traditionally, the monument is believed to have been undertaken upon the signing of the Treaty of Münster in 1648 which ended the Dutch War of Independence with Spain. The ensuing peace allowed the fishermen of Maassluis to return without fear to their trade. Contemporary records of the Groote Kerk and the municipal archives are, however, silent on this and details of the commission. It was not until 1653 that documents of the Maassluis College of Fishery, the organization charged with overseeing the local fishing industry, mention the monument. At the meeting of February 6, 1653, the four sea captains who commissioned the *Visserij-bord* requested reimbursement from the College. Payment was denied at this meeting and again three months later. Finally, on June 22, 1654, the wives and widows of the four sea captains, possibly feeling the College would be more sympathetic to them, petitioned for repayment and the restitution was made.<sup>4</sup> Regrettably, there is nothing further in the records pertaining to the commission.

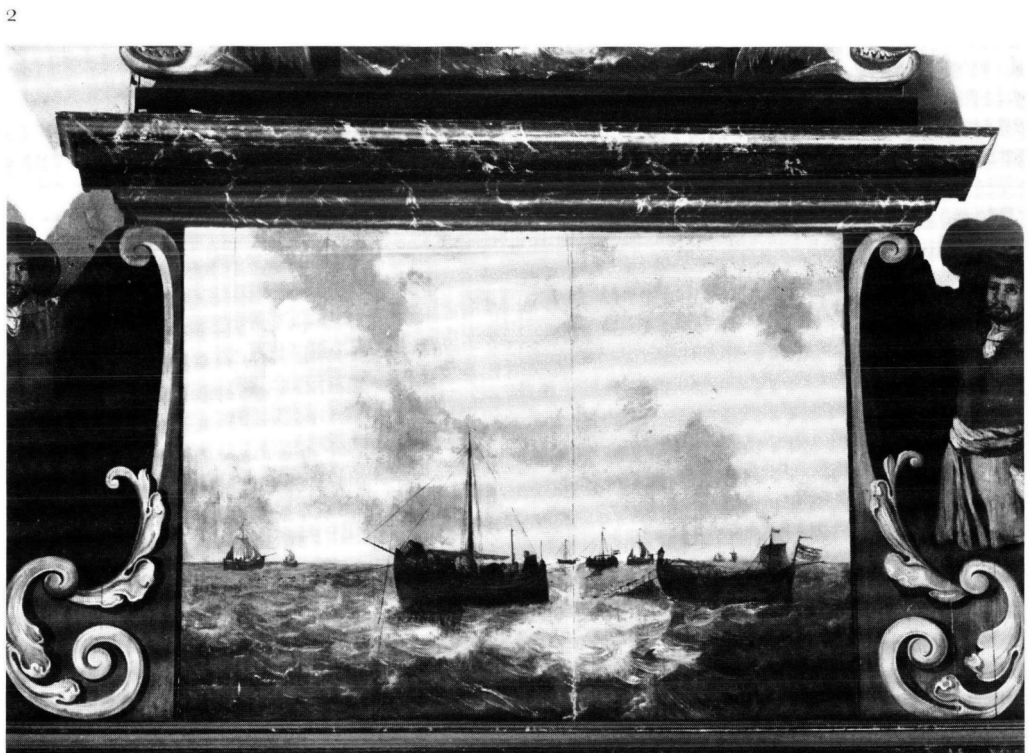
The monument is organized around a lengthy inscription in the center section signed by Bartls. Brasser, apparently a local poet.<sup>5</sup> The verse gives thanks to God for his blessings and the bounty of the sea while asking for protection against storms, robbers and other nautical perils. The poem also cites the peace



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Abraham van Beyeren. *Visserij-bord*. 1649. Groote Kerk, Maassluis (Photo: Rijksdienst voor de Monumentenzorg, Zeist).

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Abraham van Beyeren. *Visserij-bord*, detail. Groote Kerk, Maassluis (Photo: Rijksdienst voor de Monumentenzorg, Zeist).

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Abraham van Beyeren. *Visserij-bord*, detail. Groote Kerk, Maassluis (Photo: Rijksdienst voor de Monumentenzorg, Zeist).



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with Spain and thanks God for bestowing the full measure of his love. On either side of the inscription stands a Corinthian column approximately six and one-half feet high. The left and right wings each contain an oval marine scene surrounded by various fish painted as if hanging by lines in their mouths. The outer portions of these panels are cut to follow the bodies and tails of the painted fish nearest the edge. Above the inscription is an architrave and narrow painted frieze extending the width of the monument and containing another marine. A series of dentils surmount the frieze and lead to the cornice. The entire entablature projects forward in the center section over the inscription. Above the entablature is a large rectangular marine surrounded by elaborately cut and painted volutes (fig. 3). A fisherman, painted on a flat



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Abraham van Beyeren. *Visserij-bord*, detail. Groote Kerk, Maassluis (Photo: Rijksdienst voor de Monumentenzorg, Zeist).

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Abraham van Beyeren. *Marine*. 1641. P. de Boer, Amsterdam (1979).

panel and cut in silhouette, stands behind each volute. Next is another cornice supporting a marine and two sea monsters, also painted and cut in silhouette (fig. 4). At the pinnacle of the monument, a whale or similar large fish appears with its mouth open to envelop the choppy sea in the small panel below.

The lower portion of the *Visserij-bord* under the inscription depicts a marine scene enframed by the pedestals of the columns (fig. 2). A second shorter inscription is then surrounded by consoles and an ornately painted scroll. The inscription reads:

The Fishery of Maassluis  
Here this worship give  
To Honor God's house  
Who has given all.<sup>6</sup>

The bottom edge of the monument contains a still life of sea shells cut in silhouette. Between the shells and scroll appears the date of the work, 1649, and the two monograms, “*R*” and “*AB*”.

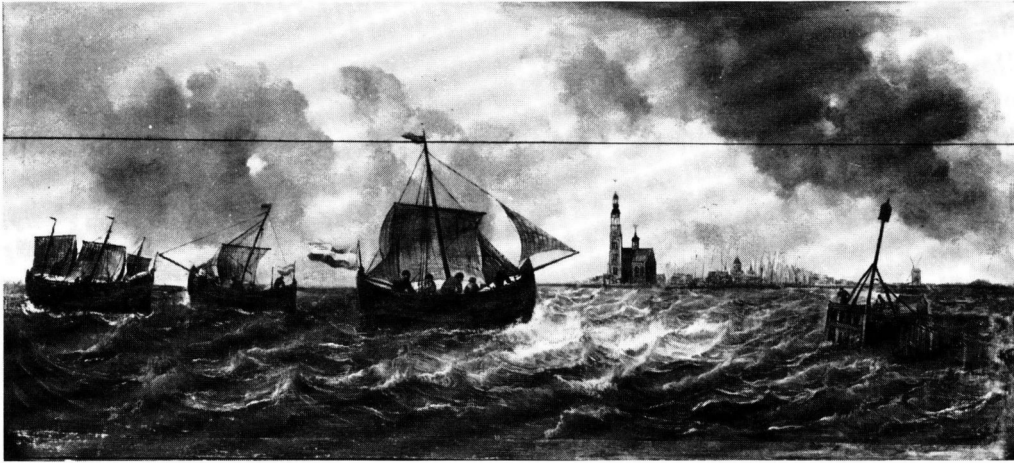
The latter initials were used by Abraham van Beyeren, an artist whose biography has been confused in several previous accounts. Abraham Hendricksz. van Beyeren was born in 1620 or 1621 in The Hague.<sup>7</sup> He was married in 1639 and a year later entered the painter's guild of St. Luke.<sup>8</sup> From all evidence, Abraham had a difficult time supporting himself as an artist. Mounting debts forced him to sell his furniture and paintings at auction in 1646 and again in 1647.<sup>9</sup> In the latter year Abraham's wife died and a few months later he married Anna van den Queborn.<sup>10</sup> Through this marriage, Abraham became related to the fish painter Pieter de Putter whose wife was Anna's aunt. The unfounded belief that De Putter was Abraham's teacher was based on this relationship.<sup>11</sup> In the years immediately following Van Beyeren's marriage there continued to be records of his debts to a variety of tradesmen in The Hague. The artist's move to Delft in 1657 was probably an attempt to escape



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his creditors.<sup>12</sup> Before he departed from The Hague, however, he was instrumental in founding the *Confrerie Pictura* in 1656.<sup>13</sup> This was essentially a new branch of the St. Luke's guild established to distinguish painters from the other craftsmen in the guild. Van Beyeren served as chairman of the *Confrerie* prior to his departure for Delft. Records of debts attest to the artist's presence in that city through 1661.<sup>14</sup> By 1663 he had returned to The Hague and re-entered the *Confrerie*. Six years later he is mentioned as living in Amsterdam and in 1674 in Alkmaar.<sup>15</sup> From 1675 to 1677 he resided in Gouda when in the latter year he moved to Overschie.<sup>16</sup> In Overschie the artist seemed to have found a degree of success for with his purchase of a house there in 1680, he is referred to as 'Monsieur Abraham van Beyeren,' a term of some distinction.<sup>17</sup> This prosperity was not long-lived as a few years later he was seeking money from family members. Upon Van Beyeren's death in Overschie in 1690, his estate, including ninety-nine paintings, was sold by the Executor to cover debts.<sup>18</sup>

There seems to be little doubt as to Van Beyeren's execution of the marine scenes in the Maassluis *Visserij-bord*. His activity in this genre can be dated to the early 1640's and it was probably his reputation in sea painting that attracted the Maassluis fishermen to him (fig. 5). Van Beyeren's marines are characterized by high cloud-filled skies, choppy seas and fishing boats under sail. He used a soft painterly technique and gray tonal scheme to produce moist atmospheric effects. In these pictures Van Beyeren was strongly influenced by Jan van Goyen (1596-1656), who settled in The Hague in 1631. Van Goyen began painting marines with choppy seas and heavy clouds in the latter half of the 1630's. Van Beyeren, who was also working in The Hague at this time, adopted the same general approach. In Abraham's pictures a silver grey hue predominates with the water usually a bluish gray or sometimes a greenish gray tone. Much of the canvas is given over to the sky with billowing masses of thick clouds lending movement and drama. In contrast to Van Goyen, Van



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Abraham van Beyeren. *Visserij-bord*, detail. Groote Kerk, Maassluis (Photo: Rijksdienst voor de Monumentenzorg, Zeist).

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Beyeren was not as adept at painting the boats' movement in the rough sea.<sup>19</sup> Often they do not seem correctly situated in the swells of the water. Nor is Van Beyeren as precise in his depiction of the details of the boats and fishermen. The marines in the Maassluis painting were discussed by F.C. Willis who clearly attributes to Van Beyeren the large seascapes at the bottom of the work as well as the two ovals on the wings.<sup>20</sup> Willis had some reservations about the upper two marines which he compared to the early style of Simon de Vlieger (1600/01-1653). Given the 1649 date of the monument, however, he admitted such an attribution was impossible.<sup>21</sup> Although I understand Willis's reluctance to attribute these marines to Van Beyeren, I feel the explanation lies in the nature of the commission. In both seascapes the treatment of the sky and water can easily be encompassed within Van Beyeren's style. Some inconsistencies arise in the painting of the boats. The vessels, especially those in the foreground, seem heavy and rigidly conceived with little regard for their natural action in the water. It is almost as if they were studies transplanted into the scene. Indeed, this may have been the case. I believe Van Beyeren made a concerted effort to show the activity of fishing. The marines plainly depict the fishing lines and nets stretched into the sea and a catch of fish being hauled on board in the foreground vessel. Rarely, if ever, in his independent marines does Van Beyeren illustrate such activity. The detailed rendering of the mechanics of fishing may have been included in order to correspond with the specific nature of the commission by the Maassluis sea captains and the general theme of the verse below. Here, line seventeen of the inscription specifically calls for guidance in the casting of nets and rigging. Van Beyeren's attempt to depict the specifics of fishing more accurately seemingly resulted in the boats and figures being less well integrated in the water.

This correlation of iconographic details in the artistic program of the monument to aspects of the local fishing industry, or to lines in its dedicatory verse, can be seen throughout the *Visserij-bord*. The Groote Kerk itself appears in the large marine at the base of the work (fig.6). Interestingly, the church is depicted with the tower on the west side, the position in which it was being reconstructed between 1648 and 1650.<sup>22</sup> There are also several details in the work which correspond to particular passages in the inscription. Ten different kinds of fish are cited in lines eleven and twelve and eight of these can be identified with painted specimens in the wings of the monument.<sup>23</sup> In addition, line ten of the verse refers to a *hooker*, a short tubby vessel used to gather fish. This is the predominant ship in the marines. Lastly, there is a reference to

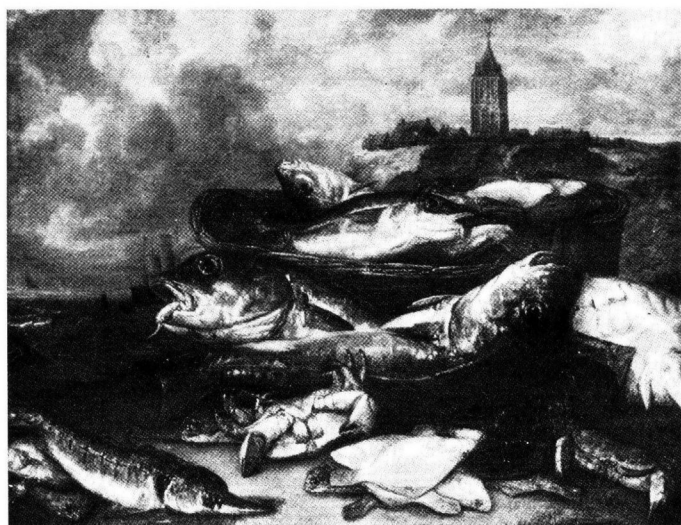
Jonah in line twenty-two. That biblical story is seemingly depicted at the top of the monument where a large open-mouthed fish approaches a small boat with figures in stormy water (fig. 4). According to the Old Testament narration, the other men in the boat threw Jonah into the sea when he confessed he was the cause of the storm.<sup>24</sup>

There remains the problem of the attribution of the fish still lifes on the Maassluis panel. Here, both the style and the species of fish depicted point to the hand of Abraham van Beyeren. Simply put, no Dutch fish painter before Van Beyeren chose to paint the wide variety of specimens seen here. Nor did any such master approach his ability to freely render the wet, glistening textures of their bodies.

Previously, art historians have attempted to identify the fish painter of the monument on the basis of the “*RV*” monogram. Ingvar Bergström tentatively suggested Pieter Verbeek and in this connection cited his fish piece of 1634 which appeared to have influenced Van Beyeren’s activity in the field.<sup>25</sup> The date of this picture was later read as 1664 which is consistent with the dates on two other Verbeek fish pieces discovered after Bergström’s publication.<sup>26</sup> Horst Gerson, therefore, rightly concluded that the similarity of Verbeek’s work to Van Beyeren’s was a result of Van Beyeren’s influence upon Verbeek rather than vice versa.

In an important essay on Van Beyeren’s fish pieces, John Bernström and Bengt Rapp suggested three other artists who might be associated with the enigmatic second monogram.<sup>27</sup> They theorized the monogram could be read as any of the following initials: PVTR, PVNRT or PVT (PUT). PVTP was identified with Pieter de Putter (ca. 1600/05-1659), an artist often mistakenly cited as Van Beyeren’s teacher. The usual form of De Putter’s signature though, was “*PVT*” which does not approximate the distinctly painted initials on the *Visserij-bord*. Moreover, De Putter’s style is dry and precise, offering little comparison with the freely painted fish in the Maassluis work.<sup>28</sup> Also unlikely is the monogram PVNRT suggested by Bernström and Rapp as that of Pieter van Noort (1600/02-ca. 1662). His standard signature included the initials ‘P.v.’ but ended with the entire last name written out. Van Noort’s style, with its smooth execution and preference for crisp curving lines, further belies his participation in the Maassluis panels.<sup>29</sup> In addition, both De Putter and Van Noort limited themselves in the variety of fish depicted in their still lifes. De Putter preferred bass, pike and smaller salt water specimens, while Van Noort usually selected fresh water fish such as perch, carp, trout or salmon. Their pictures did not include rays, large flounder, or other diverse specimens seen in the Maassluis *Visserij-bord*. Such fish began to appear regularly in Dutch painting only with Abraham van Beyeren.

It is difficult to determine exactly when Van Beyeren began his activity as a fish painter. Bernström and Rapp developed an approximate chronology for these still lifes based upon fifty authentic pictures.<sup>30</sup> Five of these works carry dates ranging from 1655 to 1669.<sup>31</sup> Of the fifty authentic fish pieces, seventeen were placed in the chronology prior to the 1655-dated picture owing to the appearance of various motifs not used in the later works, such as the repeated pose of a particular fish. These seventeen still lifes would appear to be the artist’s earliest works in the genre. The first five of these pictures depicted an arrangement of fish on a seashore with a view of dunes, fishermen, and the distant water (fig. 7). The exclusive use of a beach setting, in contrast to the interior with a table-top format employed in the artist’s other fish pieces, suggests that these pictures represent Van Beyeren’s first fish still lifes. The inclusion of a large cloud filled



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sky, water, and a shoreline also enables them to be seen as transitional works between the artist's earlier marines and his later traditional fish pieces.

Significantly, these five beach pictures demonstrate Van Beyeren's early interest in portraying a variety of sea creatures. Lobster, crabs, flounder, plaice, salmon, cod, and rays occur regularly here. The selection of fish is exactly comparable to that in the 1649 *Visserij-bord*. A preference for specimens such as flounder, rays and large cod with prominent barbels and gaping mouths especially link the works. Parallels exist not only in the details of the fish, but also in the manner they have been painted (cf. figs. 7 and 8). The ray seen in the center left of figure 8 has the same soft translucent undersides as that in figure 7. The naturally glistening skin of the cod in both works is also comparable. Given these similarities, it appears Abraham van Beyeren must be credited with the execution of the fish in the Maassluis monument.

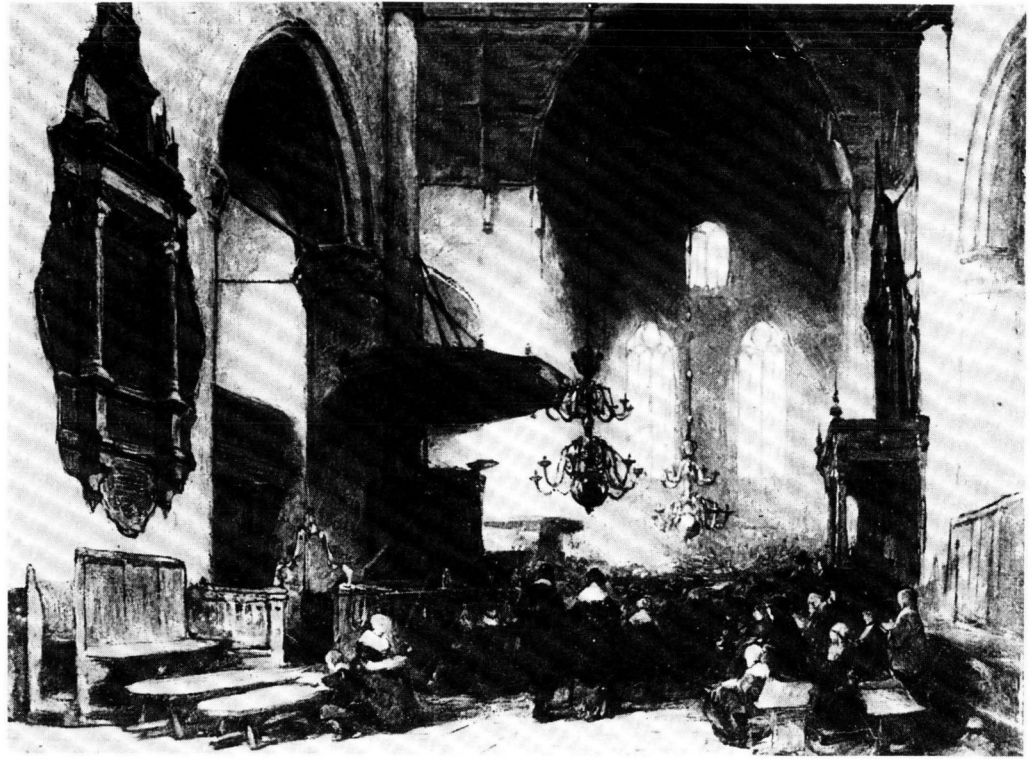
This attribution is further substantiated by an identification of the second monogram on the *Visserij-bord*. Owing to the ornate painting of its lengthy inscription, the initials may belong to the calligrapher. It was not unknown for such artists to include their signatures on guild pictures when they were called upon to record a text.<sup>32</sup> On the *Visserij-bord*, however, the "R" monogram does not closely follow the inscription, nor is it particularly elegant in form. In fact, the monogram appears more blunt than Van Beyeren's.

Another identification of the monogram was suggested by Bernström and Rapp. They speculated that in addition to Pieter de Putter and Pieter van Noort, the initials might also be read as PVT (PUT), and then be associated with Gerrit van der Put, a framemaker in The Hague.<sup>33</sup> There is a tenuous connection between Van der Put and Van Beyeren through the artist Willem Swinderwijk. The framemaker made claims against Swinderwijk in The Hague in 1652 while Swinderwijk and Van Beyeren owned paintings by each other as early as 1647.<sup>34</sup> Bernström and Rapp went no further in their argument and additional information on Gerrit van der Put has not been uncovered. Owing to this and the absence of further documentation on the commission of the *Visserij-bord*, any link with Gerrit van der Put must remain speculative at best. In all likelihood, the name of the artist with the "R" monogram may never be known. There are, however, compelling reasons to believe the initials do

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Abraham van Beyeren. *Fish Still Life*. P. de Boer, Amsterdam (1964).

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Abraham van Beyeren. *Visserij-bord*, detail. Grootte Kerk, Maassluis (Foto van der Stelt, Maassluis).

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Johannes Bosboom. *Interior of the Grootte Kerk, Maassluis*, Present location unknown (Photo: T. Mastenbroek).



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belong to a framemaker or woodcarver.

Van Beyeren undoubtedly executed the marine scenes and probably the fish still lifes in the monument. The latter attribution is also credible because the fish painting is a comparatively small percentage of the overall work. It is unlikely that a second artist would be engaged simply to depict that portion of the monument and then be invited to share equally in the credit for the work by leaving his monogram alongside Van Beyeren's. Far more plausible is the association of the second monogram with the framemaker or carver. The extensive carving and architectural construction required in the monument – the columns, mouldings, volutes, silhouette-carved fish and fishermen – all suggest the considerable talents of a master craftsman. It may be reasonable to suppose that a framemaker would carve his initials on a work rather than paint them. Aside from the standard architectural elements, however, the *Visserij-bord* is made up of flat panels cut in silhouette. To carve one's initials in relief would then appear incongruous, especially if the monogram was to be seen with Van Beyeren's in a prominent position on the monument.

The association of the “R” monogram with a framemaker/carver is further strengthened when it is learned that even more carving adorned the *Visserij-bord* than is seen today. Wooden ship models of a *hooker* and a *buss* originally rested on either side of the cornice above the columns.<sup>35</sup> A 19th-century painting of the interior of the Grootte Kerk by Johannes Bosboom (1817-91), shows the *Visserij-bord* with the ships in place (fig. 9). A definite shelf was created here for the models. In 1850 the wooden ships were removed from the monument and placed elsewhere in the church because it was felt they obscured the painting immediately behind. Owing to the existence of these models and the considerable architectural and sculptural articulation of the monument, the second monogram on the *Visserij-bord* likely belongs to a master carver or framemaker.



Hague and there is little doubt that Abraham knew De Putter's work. In fact, the sale in 1647 of paintings owned by Van Beyeren lists a Pieter de Putter. Despite these connections, however, there is no reason to believe that De Putter was Abraham's teacher. Their styles are totally unrelated.

<sup>12</sup> Obreen, 1:62.

<sup>13</sup> Obreen, 4:60; Bol, L., 'Adriaen Pietersz. van de Vinne, schilder en teyckenaar,' *Tableau* 6 (1983): 55-65.

<sup>14</sup> Bredius, 4:1169-70.

<sup>15</sup> Bredius, 4:1172; Obreen, 2:27; Bernström and Rapp, p.8.

<sup>16</sup> G.C. Helbers, 'Abraham van Beyeren te Gouda,' *Oud Holland* 62 (1947): 164; Bernström and Rapp, p.8.

<sup>17</sup> Bredius, 7:14; Van Gelder, p.25.

<sup>18</sup> G.C. Helbers, 'Abraham van Beyeren, Mr. Schilder tot Overschie,' *Oud Holland* 45 (1928): 27-28; Van Gelder, p.25.

<sup>19</sup> Laurens J. Bol., *Die holländische Marinemalerei des 17. Jahrhunderts*, Braunschweig, 1973, p.160.

<sup>20</sup> Willis, p. 53. The author felt that the seas in the oval marines were somewhat more colorful than usual for Van Beyeren. My own observations did not support this distinction.

<sup>21</sup> Willis, p.53. Willis further states that the second monogram, "P", on the panel cannot be associated with any known marine painter. My research supports that conclusion.

<sup>22</sup> The tower was originally over the crossing, but was moved for fear of a weak structural construction. See T. Mastenbroek, *De Groote Kerk te Maassluis*, Maassluis, 1939, pp.51, 65-66. I am indebted to Mr. Mastenbroek for his assistance on numerous aspects of the history of the *Visserij-bord* and the Groote Kerk.

<sup>23</sup> Identification of the fish in the monument and subsequent matching with the names on the inscription is difficult for several reasons. First, Van Beyeren did not attempt to paint the specimens with perfect accuracy and often gave the observer only a partial or shaded view of each fish. Secondly, fish within the same family or even different families can be very similar in appearance, i.e., whiting and herring. Thirdly, the fish listed on the inscription may no longer be commonly known by that name. For example, today's sculpin were once considered part of the larger group of weever fish. Nevertheless, eight of the ten fish cited in the inscription can be identified in the *Visserij-bord* with some certainty: *Kabbeljauc* (cod), abundant throughout, especially lower right wing; *Both* (flounder), upper left and right wings; *schellevis* (haddock), lower left wing; *Pieter-*

*man* (weever fish); *Mackreel* (mackerel); and *Haring* (herring), all lower right wing. Two species listed in the inscription, the *Vleet* (skate), and *lengh* (ling), cannot be identified. The skate is similar to the ray and may not have been differentiated by Van Beyeren. The ling bears some resemblance to the long eel-like fish in the upper left panel, but this specimen appears more properly to be a chimeras, or ratfish. I am indebted to Mr. Steve Robertson, Curator of Marine Life, Dallas Aquarium, for the identification of the fish.

<sup>24</sup> Jonah, as a symbol of salvation, can be linked with God's deliverance of the Maassluis fishermen which is being celebrated in the monument. Although the Jonah story was rarely found in seventeenth-century marines, it was common in the sixteenth century. See: J. Richard Judson, 'Marine Symbols of Salvation in the Sixteenth Century,' *Essays in Honor of Karl Lehmann*, ed. by Lucy Freeman Sandler, New York, 1964, pp. 136-52.

<sup>25</sup> Bergström, p.235.

<sup>26</sup> H. Gerson, 'P. Verbeek,' *Oud Holland* 73 (1958):54-57.

<sup>27</sup> Bernström and Rapp, pp.7-34.

<sup>28</sup> See for example Pieter de Putter's fish pieces in The Museum Bredius, The Hague (Inv. No. 89-1916), and the Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe (No.1043).

<sup>29</sup> Representative fish pieces by Pieter van Noort can be found in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (A776, A777) and the Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal, Leiden (Nos. 349, 1129).

<sup>30</sup> Bernström and Rapp, pp.14-19.

<sup>31</sup> According to Bernström and Rapp the five authentic dated fish pieces by Van Beyeren are: 1655, Staatliche Museum, Berlin (East), No.983D; 1659, Zatzky Collection, Budejovich, Czechoslovakia; 166(1), Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent, No.1902-A; 1664, Rapps Konsthandel, Stockholm (1957); 1666, Akademie der bildenden Künste, Vienna, Inv. No. 760.

<sup>32</sup> C. Willemijn Fock and R.E.O. Ekkart, 'Johannes de Vos verwarrend rond vier Leidse schilders,' *Leids Jaarboekje* 78 (1986):53-76.

<sup>33</sup> Bernström and Rapp, p.31, n.12. Framemakers only rarely signed their works. See P.J.J. van Thiel and C.J. de Bruyn Kops, *Prijst de Lijst, De Hollandse schilderijlijst in de zeventiende eeuw*, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 1984, pp.13, 22, nt. 7, p.23, nt. 10.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid; Bredius, 5:1581, 2:515.

<sup>35</sup> Mastenbroek, p.52. The ship models now decorate the Choir railing in the Groote Kerk.