

What's the Picture on Painted Demijohns?

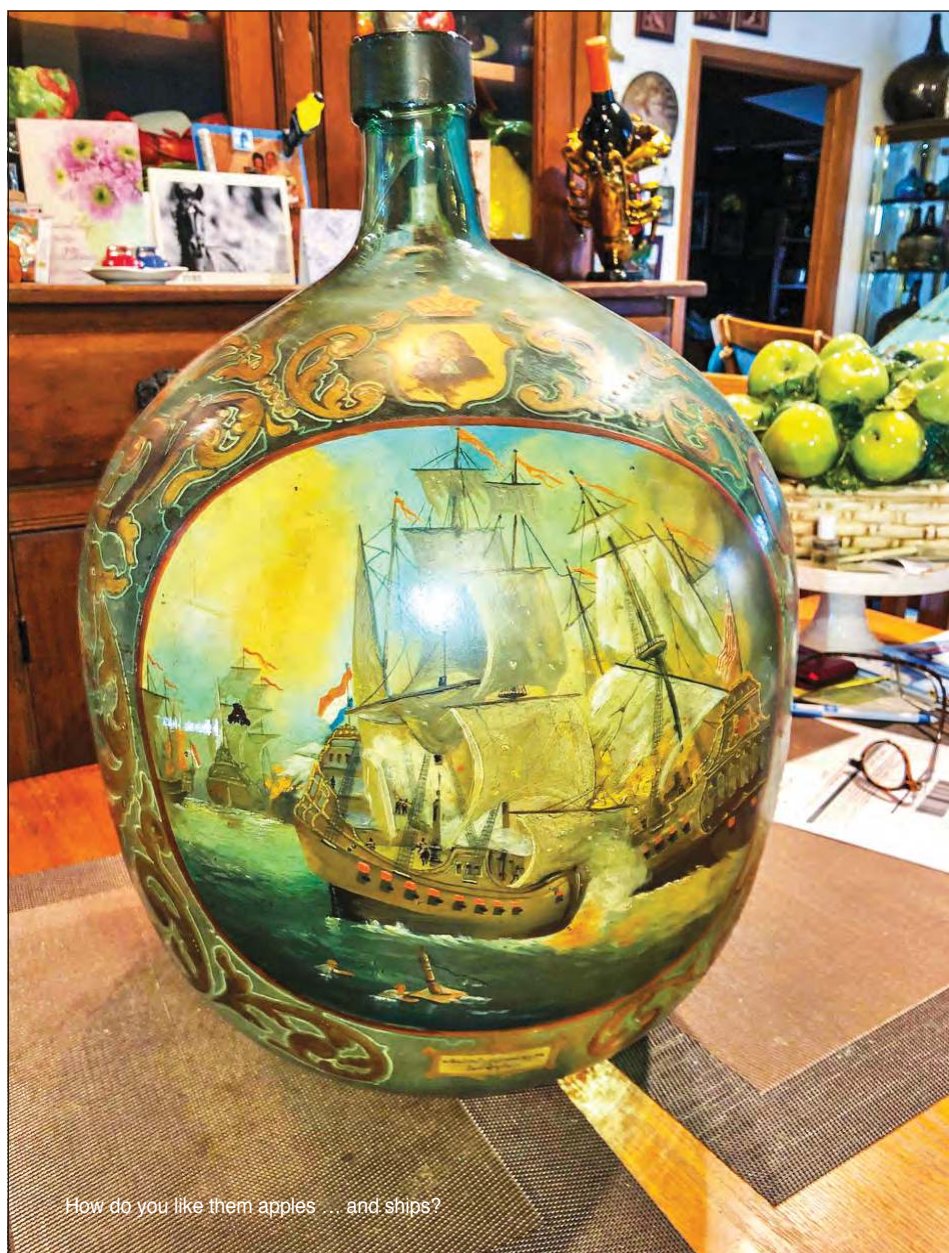
At first, the Finches drew a blank, but now they brush up on maritime history

By Ralph Finch

In the December issue of *AB&GC*, we wrote about a rare Dutch painted demijohn showing a historical Anglo-Dutch sea battle. It was offered by a Chicago firm, and after a quick exchange of emails regarding the price, we raised the white flag.

But, like the English say about buses, you wait forever for one and suddenly there are several. Regarding this Dutch demijohn, that's not quite the story. But close. (Who knew there are so many demijohns honoring Admiral Tromp ... or WHY?)

Yes, the Finches collect big old demijohns with big old painted scenes. But that doesn't mean we know what we are doing. We were sad to have not gotten the previous bottle, but you can imagine how excited we were, and very surprised, when at the end of November we got this email from a collector named Neil Haffey offering: "A demijohn, 20 inches high and 44 in circumference. It is not pontiled and has a slight kick-up; it has no nicks, cracks or scratches. The painting depicts the battle of Etna in the bay of Syracuse, near Sicily. It shows four ships (maybe five) in the midst of battle, complete with fire, explosions and two sailors hanging on to a floating timber.



How do you like them apples ... and ships?

“It depicts the sea battle in which Admiral Michiel de Ruyter was killed by a cannonball that severed his leg. He was on the ship ‘De Zeven Provinciën.’ The battle pitted Spain and Holland against the French. I have seen many demijohns honoring Admiral Tromp, but this is the first I’ve seen honoring Ruyter. Overall it is a very nice, attractive bottle.”

Yes, indeed, very attractive. And we wanted it, but buying in a category when you really aren’t too familiar is a challenge. As we told the seller what very little we knew: “With fifty plus years of collecting glass around the U.S. and in England, we have never met another collector of painted bottles. With the demijohn we got at a Heckler auction, Norman said there was only one other bidder.”

We have twelve painted bottles, from nice to great, image-wise. And price-wise? We got two for \$1,000 each from an auction house in Belgium, and they arrived in a huge box, with no damage!

But, finally, we came to terms with Neil, and in time Admiral de Ruyter lowered anchor in the small but growing Finch fleet. And in more time, we learned a little more about Admiral de Ruyter.

Editor’s note, edited from Wikipedia:

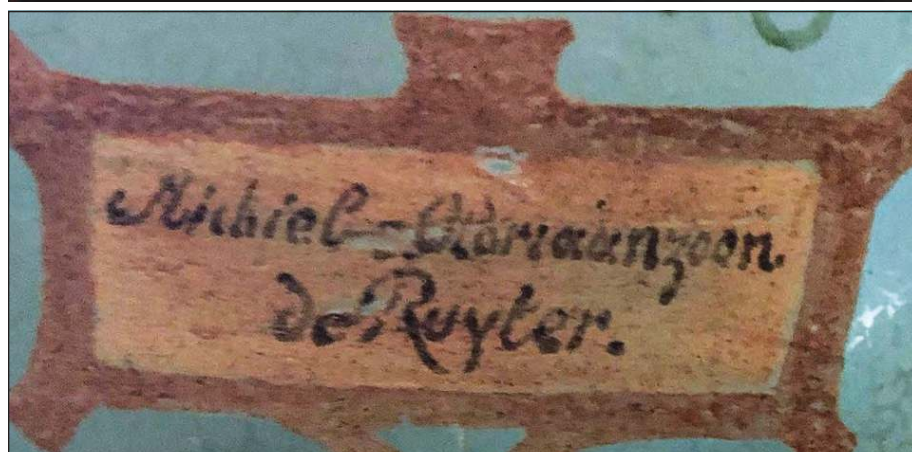
The naval Battle of Agosta, also known as the Battle of Etna, took place on April 22, 1676 during the Franco-Dutch War and was fought between a French fleet of 29 man-of-war, five frigates and eight fireships under Abraham Duquesne, and a Dutch-Spanish fleet of at least 27 warships (17 Dutch, 10 Spanish) besides several frigates and five fireships, with a Spanish admiral in overall command and Dutch Lieutenant-Admiral-General Michiel de Ruyter commanding the squadron most involved in the fighting.

TOP: These are new ships, great for use in movies.

MIDDLE: A portrait of the admiral; A closeup view of the admiral on the demijohn.

BOTTOM: The Finches found a place for the new prize to moor; Another look at the painted bottle.





The battle was intense. It ended when de Ruyter skillfully extracted his outnumbered squadron from being attacked on both sides by superior French numbers, without the loss of any ships, although de Ruyter himself was mortally wounded. Neither side lost a ship, so the result was tactically inconclusive.

The scenes on the bottle in the December article, as on the new Finch acquisition, are apparently versions of the battle recorded in a painting, "Naval Battle of Agosta," by Ambroise-Louis Garneray.

Also edited from Wikipedia: Michiel Adriaenszoon de Ruyter, March 24, 1607 – April 29, 1676, is regarded as one of the most skilled admirals in history. De Ruyter is arguably most famous for his achievements with the Dutch Navy during the Anglo-Dutch Wars. He fought English and French forces and scored several critical victories.

Often dubbed a Dutch folk hero, de Ruyter is said to have been beloved by his subordinates and seamen, and was commonly nicknamed *bestevaër* ("grandfather"), a name still used to refer to him in Dutch media.

During the Battle of Agosta, he was mortally wounded in the left leg by a cannonball. Clinging to life for a week, he died on April 29, 1676. On March 18, 1677, de Ruyter was given a full state funeral and buried in Amsterdam's Nieuwe Kerk, a 15th-century church in Amsterdam located on Dam Square, next to the Royal Palace.

The reel thing: In 2015, a Dutch film about the admiral was produced. Had we known how famous de Ruyter was (or how much money he would cost us) we would have visited his grave when the Finches were in Amsterdam. (And, I am embarrassed to admit, the first time I went to Amsterdam I visited the condom museum. Honest.)

Comments or plans to keelhaul Finch can be sent to rfinch@twmi.rr.com

TOP: The admiral was the subject of this Dutch movie, which can be found (with subtitles) on YouTube.

BOTTOM: A close-up of the demijohn's "label" reads "Michiel Adriaenszoon de Ruyter." Thank goodness, I was afraid it might say "Made in Occupied Japan."