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*Portrait of Abraham del Court and his
Wife Maria de Keerssegieter*
Bartholomeus van der Helst
1654

Boijmans-van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam

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MASTERPIECES OF DUTCH AND FLEMISH PAINTING

by **Bernd Lindemann**

Rembrandt to Vermeer. Civil Values in 17th-century Flemish and Dutch Painting

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There may be no other country in which in the brief span of a hundred years so many paintings were executed as during the seventeenth century in the United Provinces, in Holland, as this land is commonly called abroad, or the Netherlands, to use the name it gave itself. It is estimated that between 1600 and 1700 no less than 5 million paintings were executed in small and large centers of painting, a figure that is even more surprising if you think of the distrust of holy images professed by Calvinism from the very beginning of its spread. The wave of iconoclasm it set in motion was so powerful that it cut off the most classic destination of the most significant artistic production. Today, the large churches in Dutch towns still welcome the faithful with bare whitewashed plastered walls, with plain, stark spaces, where there is no indulgence in decoration. Inscriptions and coats of arms may sometimes grace the memorial tablets and sporadic images decorate the balustrades of the galleries, but everything else is strictly image less.

What made such a prolific artistic production possible and, above all, what led the United Provinces to write a fundamental chapter in the history of European art? Among the many factors that could be cited, we should mention first of all the vitality of a pictorial tradition that went back to the beginning of the fifteenth century, the golden age of the duchy of Burgundy, and – thanks to the wealth of the cities of the Netherlands and the level of professional expertise demanded by the Burgundian court– that was already included by right among the great artistic schools of Europe. The northern provinces had been part of the duchy of Burgundy in the past, which was still alive in the seventeenth century. Although their collective consciousness told them that the Spanish king against whom they rebelled had shamefully usurped the Burgundian heritage, leading it to ruin and abolishing their ancient privileges, their loyalty to the good government of the dukes of Burgundy was still intact and in their name the stadolder, who held the highest political office, were elected.

In the second place, the Netherlands learned to relate to art in a different way from the other European countries. After the connection of art with courts, monasteries, and religious associations had waned, new relations emerged. Increasingly wealthy and numerous – in Amsterdam alone, the population had grown from 60,000 inhabitants in 1600 to 135,000 in 1640 – and in step with the European nobility, the urban upper class had discovered that paintings were a symbol of power, objects to be collected avidly. On the other hand, Holland was the Mecca of trade and consequently paintings could also become merchandise. Whereas a harsh environment and a landscape indented by wild and impassable mountains made Switzerland practically inaccessible, the level expanses of the Netherlands were crossed by a network of canals that had been dug to regulate the flow of water, but at the same time were extraordinarily effective means of transportation, faster and more practical than any way on land. Until then, trade had been based mainly on spices, textiles, and tulip bulbs, but it gradually extended to paintings as well, and that is the reason why many Dutch paintings are not very large. The fact that they were easy to handle and were less bulky made it easier to place them on the market. In the last analysis, that also explains the dissemination on an international scale of seventeenth-century Dutch works and – unlike, for example, fourteenth - and fifteenth-century Italian works – their presence in almost every museum collection in the world. They were

so successful commercially that, at least until the foundation of municipal museums, there were very few paintings from this period in their homeland.

Hans Koningsberger

The World of Vermeer: 1632–1675

New York, 1967, pp. 29-39

The War for Independence with Spain

On the evening of June 5, 1648, fireworks and bonfires in all the towns of the United Provinces celebrated victory for the Dutch in the war of independence. That morning at 10 o'clock sharp the terms of the peace treaty with Spain had been read out in a sober ceremony in the Dutch Supreme Court of Justice in The Hague.

The ceremony was planned with a dramatic sense of timing. On another June 5 at 10 o'clock in the morning precisely 80 years earlier, the war had begun, to all intents and purposes, with the execution of two of Holland's first revolutionaries. They were the Counts of Egmont and Hoorn, who had sought some relief for their country from the oppressive rule of the King of Spain.

Instead of negotiating with them, the King's representative in the Netherlands had taken them prisoner. Then, before a mute crowd in Brussels, they were beheaded, and the people pushed past the Spanish soldiers to dip their handkerchiefs in the blood of the first martyrs of the long war.

The story of that bitter conflict has a place in any account of Jan Vermeer's career. It was still going on when Vermeer was born (as it had been when his father and probably his grandfather were born); more important, it shaped the character of the whole Dutch nation, and had a direct effect on the development of seventeenth century Dutch art.

Jan Vermeer and his fellow artists worked in an age when almost every facet of men's lives underwent drastic changes wrought by the war and the violent events accompanying it. Holland emerged from these upheavals as an aggressive, Protestant republic with a capitalistic economy and a bourgeois society. These cultural conditions produced a climate in which artists suddenly flourished like flowers in a hothouse. It was almost as if the war had brought together all the ingredients necessary for the spontaneous generation of an artistic flame.

The rebellion that flared after the Counts of Egmont and Hoorn were executed in 1568 had actually started brewing more than a decade earlier. At that time Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, abdicated; he left Spain and the 17 provinces of the Low Countries to his son, Philip II. The people of the Lowlands were accustomed enough to outside rule their land had been subjected to foreign intervention since the Middle Ages. They had no quarrel with Charles V, who in the first place was one of them, having been born in Ghent, and who had allowed them a high degree of autonomy in conducting their own affairs.

But Philip was a different sort of man. Morose, dictatorial, fanatically Catholic, the new King hated the north, and cared for nothing but Spain and his religion. In August 1559, he paid a brief visit to the Lowlands and coldly addressed the territory's notables, the members of the parliamentary States-General. He demanded of the Dutch a three-million-guilder tribute to Spain in addition to the taxes already being paid, suppression of all Protestant sects and submission to his half-sister Margaret, the Duchess of Parma, whom he had made regent of the Lowlands. Philip then bade a hostile farewell to the States-General and set sail for Spain, which he never left again.

The first effect of Philip's harsh policies, enforced by the Duchess of Parma, was to arouse the Lowlands' Protestants, already inflamed by the anti-Papist preaching of the Calvinists. A wave of religious rebellion swept the country. Crowds attacked Catholic churches with Reformation zeal, threw down statues, and burned and smashed everything connected with the hated priesthood. One English observer said of such a riot that it "looked like hell where were above 1,000 torches brandying and syche a noise! as yf heven and erth had gone together, with fallyng of images and fallyng down of costly works." Before the month-long holocaust was over, vast treasures of medieval art had been destroyed.

The Spanish answer was brutal and ruthless. In 1567, Philip sent the Duke of Alva and 10,000 troops north to replace the Duchess of Parma, and the years of the "Spanish Fury" followed. Town after town in the Lowlands was besieged, taken and ravaged. Alva executed his mission with a zeal that made him, and by extension all Spaniards, hateful to every Dutchman. He established a court called the "Council of Troubles" to try Netherlanders for heresy and sedition (Dutchmen called it the "Council of Blood"), and it was this court of injustice that sent the Counts of Egmont and Hoorn to their deaths. By 1568 groups of 30, 40 and 50 people at a time were being condemned to die; their property was confiscated by the Crown.

Prince William of Orange

At this point the young nobility of the Lowlands began to take up arms against the oppressor. Later, the resistance to Spain became a democratic--or rather, a bourgeois-revolution; at first, however, it was led by princes and counts. The martyrs Egmont and Hoorn were among these, but the most prominent was Prince William of Orange. William's role is comparable to that played by George Washington 200 years later in the American Colonies: he was by every measure the father of the new republic. He quickly became the center of resistance in the fight, its voice, its general. He found the money and the troops. William was only 26 when King Philip left for Spain, but was already widely known as a brilliant diplomat and a man of culture as well as a dashing ladies' man. He was heir to the rich' possessions of the family of Nassau in Germany, and he was also ruler of the

When Philip took over his followers took great pains to protest their continued loyalty to their overlord. Their fight, they stated repeatedly, was not against the Crown but against the tyranny and injustices perpetrated by the representatives of that Crown. (The Dutch national anthem stems from those days, and still contains a line in which William says, "I have always honored the King of Spain.") However, Alva's harshness and the

King's refusal to compromise slowly pushed William toward an ever-more-extreme position. One is again reminded of the course of events leading to the American Revolution.

The first turning point in the war came in 1574, when the Spanish siege of Leiden was broken by Dutch seagoing guerrilla fighters called Sea Beggars. These were rough and ready mariners who banded into a semi military organization to bedevil the Spaniards wherever they could. Often they were more pirates than guerrillas, harassing peaceful shipping for their own benefit, and even occasionally raiding English coastal towns. William disapproved of their unsavory tactics and only reluctantly recognized them as part of his forces. They were, nevertheless, an effective weapon in the fight against Spain.

That the Sea Beggars were able to sail up to Leiden to lift the siege is a dramatic indication of the spirit in which the Dutch fought their rebellion. Leiden is not a port. Normally it is several miles from the sea. But in their dogged defense against the troops of the Duke of Alva, the people of Leiden had opened the dikes and flooded their land to hinder the foe, the Sea Beggars actually sailed in over the fields when they went to Leiden's rescue. Thousands of acres of farm land were spoiled by the flooding, but time and again during the war the Dutch made similar sacrifices such as burning their own crops to aid the fight against the hated Spaniard.

Five years after the successful defense of Leiden, eight of the northern provinces-Utrecht, Holland, Zeeland, Guelderland, Overijssel, Friesland, Groning and Drenthe-signed a treaty called the Union of Utrecht. At the beginning of the war, each Dutch province had fought on its own under the loose control of William of Orange. Now these eight provinces were bound in a "firm union" for the common defense. Two years later they took the final step of rebellion: they abjured the King of Spain as their legal lord. The States General met in 1581 to draw up a document in justification of their moral right to act:

As it is apparent to all that a prince is constituted by God to be ruler of the people, and whereas God did not create the people slaves to their prince, to obey his commands, whether right or wrong; but rather the prince for the sake of the subjects ...[then] when he does not behave thus, but, on the contrary, oppresses them ...they may not only disallow his authority, but legally proceed to the choice of another prince for their defense.

The other prince they were turning to was William of Orange, and to King Philip it now seemed that this man was the sole cause of his troubles. Making the mistake of many statesmen before and since, Philip imagined that the war was kept going by a few men rather than by deep-seated social conflicts. So he issued an infamous "ban" which described William as "chief disturber of all Christendom and especially these Netherlands." To any man who would murder William, the ban offered forgiveness for all crimes, a patent of nobility from the Spanish crown, and 25,000 gold crowns.

Prince William's court was in Delft, which, being strategically located and easily defensible, was a stronghold of the revolutionary cause. (At this time there was no hint of the fame Delft would earn as an art center 50 years later.) There, on July 10, 1584, while William was meeting with the States-General to establish a national government, a fanatic Catholic named Balthasar Gérard sneaked into the Prince's house and shot him dead. Gérard, who had spent two years on his plot, was immediately captured, and his only reward was a quick trial, torture and death at the hands of an outraged citizenry. In the confusion that followed its leader's death, the cause of Dutch freedom did in fact suffer for a while, but Holland's anger over its hero's death was too intense to burn out. William's son Maurice took over as commander-in-chief and the fighting went on. More towns were captured and recaptured; soldiers killed and were killed; peasants saw their houses and harvests burned time and again. One region of the southern Netherlands changed hands 25 times in 11 years.

Actually, though the men of the time could not perceive it, the war had already been decided at the time of William's death. No assassination, no siege, no battle could undo the inexorable shift of the war in favor of Holland. For the Dutch revolution was, of course, not the brainchild of one man or his family. The Renaissance and the Reformation had swept aside the circumstances in which nations and populations could be passed around and inherited like so much real estate. There was no longer any bond strong enough to keep the people of Amsterdam in one empire with the monarch in Madrid.

At last, in 1600, the trend of battle became clear when the Dutch won a decisive victory at the Battle of Nieuwpoort. Though final peace would not be achieved for almost 40 years, a temporary truce was signed in 1609, and Holland was never again threatened by the Spanish armies. For all practical purposes, the United Provinces were free to develop as an independent nation from the first years of the century.

The Emergence of a New Art

Those years also ushered in the Golden Age of art, with the first paintings from the easels of Frans Hals, Hercules Seghers and Hendrick Avercamp. In fact, so closely did the birth of the new school of painting coincide with the birth of the nation that a French art historian has remarked that it was as if "the right to having a free and national school of painting had been part of the stipulations of the treaty of 1609."

This new school of painting was actually a branch of the Flemish art that in earlier centuries had produced such masters as the Van Eycks, Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Brueghel. But while Flemish masters such as Rubens and Van Dyke continued brilliantly into the seventeenth Century in the traditional vein of European art, the Dutch school moved on its own way toward an ever-more-searching realism, and established itself as a separate stream.

The evolution of these two schools of painting was clearly related to the political developments of the war. When the eight northern provinces formed their "firm union," they created a permanent division within the Lowlands, drawing a boundary that has stayed much the same to the present day. The southern provinces that did not join the union comprising modern Belgium - were neither able nor particularly anxious to break their bonds with Catholic Spain. The social system in the south was still feudal, dominated by an aristocracy that was largely French-speaking and not nationally oriented. What Protestants there were in: the south fled north many of these were businessmen from Antwerp, and their loss debilitated the southern provinces as much as did the continued Spanish occupation there. It would be two centuries before Belgium emerged as a stable, independent nation.

Trade

The northern region, which came to be known as Holland after its biggest most prosperous province, flourished. The war had not only set the boundaries of the new nation (as an 18th Century chronicler put it, "Mars had stood over the birth as midwife") but it had also changed its spirit. Most of the old liberal men of noble birth had died during the war, the new leaders were merchants and Protestants. The aggressiveness, the national pride and hatred of Spain that had been stirred up by the war were now employed in developing the strong, mercantile economy that such a small nation needed to survive among its large neighbors.

With almost a crusading spirit the Dutch began pushing Holland to greatness, and their weapon was trade. Trading was nothing new for Holland. In the 14th Century, Dutch ships had begun carrying grain and timber from the Baltic Sea ports to Western Europe and the Iberian Peninsula. On the return trip north they carried spices and other valuable goods brought from the East Indies by Portuguese ships. But then Philip II closed down all Portuguese and Spanish ports to Dutch ships, and the merchants of Holland were forced to sail to the East themselves and trade there directly. In 1597 the first three Dutch ships to make the round-trip voyage returned to Amsterdam, of the crew of 249 men only 89 had survived. Nevertheless, the following year 22 more ships left for the Far East, and from then on the number increased steadily and rapidly. In 1600, the first Dutch ship reached Japan, and presently the Dutch were the only Europeans allowed to trade there. In 1601, Oliver van Noort, former pirate and Rotterdam innkeeper, sailed west through the Strait of Magellan to the Moluccas, south of the Philippines, and home around Africa.

He was only the fourth captain in history to sail around the world (after one Portuguese and two Englishmen).

It was always trade, rather than colonizing, that provided the prime motivation for Dutch expansion, yet a colonial empire emerged in the process. The mariners built strong points on distant shores to protect their ships and stores from natives or marauding European ships; the strong points became forts, the forts led to further conquests. In 1605 the Dutch drove the Portuguese from the Moluccas; in 1618 they established a settlement called Batavia on Java; in 1624 they founded New Amsterdam in America; by 1630 they controlled trading on the northeast coast of Brazil and by 1660 had taken over from the Portuguese on Ceylon.

In European waters, by the middle of the seventeenth Century, the Dutch merchants were handling three quarters of the enormous Baltic grain trade and they virtually monopolized the Bordeaux wine trade. Even Spain relied so heavily on the cargoes carried by Dutch ships that the embargo on them in Spanish ports was relaxed. Dutch vessels had become the freight carriers of Europe.

The highest rewards came from the trade in spices, the most coveted product of the East Indies. Spices such as black pepper, cloves and cinnamon helped preserve and make palatable the dreary food of an age whose only other means of food preservation were pickling and salting. The lure of spices became as strong as the lure of gold; in the greedy struggle for East Indian resources in such places as Batavia and Ceylon, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese and eventually English traders killed one another and any of the local population who stood in their way. Rather than see prices go down or leave something for a competitor, they burned down plantations, deported entire villages and turned the natives into virtual slaves.

All this was strictly a business operation. For example, in 1644 the Board of the Dutch East India Company stated that their holdings in the Far East were not Dutch conquests but "the property of private merchants, who were entitled to sell those places to whomever they pleased, even if it were to the King of Spain." These policies paid enormous dividends to the investors in the trade. One venture in 1599 made a 400 per cent profit, and from 1630 on, annual dividends of 30 per cent and more became normal for investors in the East India Company. (On the other side of the globe, in the West Indies, Dutch seamen also sometimes found ready-made profits: after Admiral Piet Hein's capture of a \$50 million Spanish silver fleet in 1628, the West India Company paid a 75 per cent dividend.)

Later in the seventeenth century, tea became a popular item in the tropical trade. The same Doctor Tulp whom Rembrandt had immortalized in his Anatomy of Dr. Nicolaas Tulp started a great fad for tea by prescribing it for all ills; he is said to have made his patients drink 50 cups of tea a day. A colleague wrote a little book, subsidized by the East India Company, extolling tea's virtues—perhaps the first-known example of the "Doctors recommend. ..." technique of advertising.

Another popular Far Eastern product was porcelain. In the first half of the seventeenth century, the Dutch imported and shipped on to the rest of Europe more than three million pieces of Chinese porcelain. The interest in porcelain led to the creation of the famous Delft Blue pottery industry, which still thrives. By 1700 Delft Blue pottery makers had become so proficient that they were exporting pieces of mixed Oriental and Dutch design back to Japan.

By no means all the goods brought in from abroad were sent on to foreign markets. Many of them stayed in Holland, as contemporary paintings clearly testify. Tobacco was as popular then as now—it was first brought from the West Indies and the Americas in the 1500s—and the unsavory dens where the common man enjoyed his smoke made a favorite subject for such genre painters as **Adriaen Brouwer** and **Adriaen van Ostade**. Other products, faithfully recorded in the art of the day, added a cosmopolitan touch of luxury to the homes of the merchants who had gambled fortunes to import them: besides porcelain there were fine silk and satin fabrics, rare woods, and Turkish carpets (used as rugs, wall hangings or tablecloths). All of these appeared as props in hundreds of paintings of interior scenes, particularly those of Jan Vermeer.

Prosperity

Most of these goods had come into Holland through the port of Amsterdam, whose importance as a commercial center grew prodigiously. Its Commercial Exchange, established in 1585 after the Spanish captured the trading center of Antwerp, prospered enormously and occupied one of the most splendid buildings in the city. Amsterdam's Bank of Exchange, founded in 1609, set up a credit system, a stable rate

of exchange and an efficient arrangement of checking accounts. By 1650 Amsterdam had become the focal point not only of Holland's trade network, but also of the European Money market.

Many elements contributed to Holland's sudden upsurge. In addition to the fervor inspired by the challenge of war, there was the effect of the new religion; many historians have suggested a strong correlation between the advent of Protestantism and the rise of capitalism. Although the great merchants of Holland were not the most ardent Calvinists ("They prefer gain to Godliness," complained the staunch English Protestant, Oliver Cromwell), their new religion, by glorifying hard work, thrift and sobriety, and by emphasizing the value of labor and the common man, provided the right psychological climate for a capitalistic economy. Another vital factor in Holland's remarkable growth was its position on the very edge of the continent, where it served as a natural gateway to Europe.

Lastly, Holland's wealth was created partly by the default of its neighbors. These countries were amazed and annoyed by Holland's success and consoled themselves by thinking it could not last long. The truth was that these nations, land wealthy but economically backward, were still bound by the fetters of feudalism and ancient financial practices. The Dutch not only initiated new, efficient trading methods, but they also understood sooner than most some of the laws of modern capitalism involving credit, interest and investment.

Self-Government

The men who profited most from this knowledge, and who became the key figures in all aspects of Dutch society, were the merchants of the nation's great cities—Amsterdam, The Hague, Utrecht, Delft and Haarlem. Not only were they financial leaders, but they also controlled the powerful town councils that served as local governments and directed the provincial States-General that met in The Hague to haggle over national policy. Since the Middle Ages, the town councils had been made up of the "most wise and rich" citizens: now, with trade the lifeblood of the country, the "most wise and rich" simply meant the most successful merchants. Thus during the entire seventeenth century, the Netherlands was governed by a mercantile upper middle class, a business oligarchy of some 10,000 families.

Just as surely as they guided Holland's politics and economics, these prosperous merchants were also instrumental in the development of Dutch art. The average burgher was newly rich and perhaps more inclined to business than to esthetics, but he was probably aware of the Lowlands' old artistic traditions. He had plain tastes, but was fond of material things, and had the money to indulge his pleasure. Paintings were an ideal investment: not only were they decorative (and undoubtedly helpful to his image as a man of substance); they were also portable and to some extent negotiable, an important consideration to a man of speculative interests and fluctuating income.

As a firm Protestant, the average burgher had no interest in traditional ornate religious art. Even his churches were stark and whitewashed, with only the organ for artistic embellishment. As a sturdy bourgeois he wanted no part of the elaborate architecture and decor favored by the nobility of other countries. What he did want was a familiar landscape, a simple scene of everyday life or, best of all, a portrait of himself in his new dignity as a free citizen, with his family, his colleagues, or doing good works for some charitable group. He was proud of his house and of his way of life, and it made perfect sense to decorate the one with pictures of the other.

The artists, now completely reliant on the private citizen's patronage, responded to his demands with an energy and genius that more than matched the vigor and imagination of the merchants themselves. The result was not only a vivid portrait of a nation and a time but a brilliant chapter in art history as well. From the pictorial record left by this artistic outburst, as well as from accounts of contemporary writers, a clear image emerges of what life was like for the country's middle classes amidst all the fighting, trading and speculating. After 1600, there was very little left of the aristocratic way of life in the United Provinces. The new republican society had shun itself of its worldly and ecclesiastic princes. The House of Orange maintained a small court at The Hague which boasted a coterie of elegant, French-speaking, dueling gallants; but the general tenor of life was set by the merchants. There were few visible class distinctions among these men and their houses reflected their simple tastes. Ostentation went against the grain—because they were Protestants, because they had just emerged from the austerity of the war and because their business ventures by their very nature were highly speculative—and a man's house, like the things in it, was an investment that he might have to dispose of at any moment. So the furniture of a middle-class house at the beginning of the century was not very different from what would have been found in the late Middle Ages: a few tables, cupboards, a linen closet, several alcove beds built into the walls, a desk. The mantelpiece might be decorated, and the walls of the best room might have wainscoting, but the rest of the rooms were whitewashed.

Contemporary Life

Above all, the house was clean. Contemporary travelers from England, France and Italy, after noting the abundance of food and absence of beggars in Holland, often exclaimed about the immaculate appearance of the interiors. One Frenchman wrote: "Dutch women pride themselves on the cleanliness of their house and furniture to an unbelievable degree. They never seem to stop washing and scrubbing all the wooden furniture and fittings." Another visitor added, "They would prefer to die of hunger surrounded by their shining cauldrons and sparkling crockery rather than prepare any dish that might possibly disarrange this perfect symmetry"—an observation that seems not quite so far-fetched after a study of the spotless kitchens portrayed in so many seventeenth-century canvases.

Later, as Holland prospered, some domestic luxuries began to appear as evidence of accumulated wealth—a change recorded in the paintings of the last half of the century. Gradually the decoration became more refined as walls were covered with tapestry or gilded leather. Now came the satins, rugs and porcelains; oak gave way to fine Oriental woods; tea tables, mosaics, marble, bronze and crystal artifacts were imported to grace the more elaborate houses.

Even with this new interest in luxuries, daily life for the most part remained simple. Beer was the main beverage for the well-to-do merchant's family, and his house had far fewer servants' rooms than a comparable establishment in France or England; the richest might employ one valet plus two maids for heavy household work. In all countries the middle classes were strong believers in simple virtues, in the family and the home, but there was an important difference in Holland: there the middle class set the tone for the whole country.

Education and Life for the Lower Classes

One thing besides money and art that particularly concerned the Hollander was education. As early as the sixteenth century, Erasmus had commented on the unusually high number of educated people in Holland, and in the mid-1600s the Portuguese emissary in The Hague reported with considerable exaggeration that "there is not a cobbler here who does not add French and Latin to his own language." By the middle of the seventeenth century, the Netherlands could boast five universities with such fine international reputations that more than half their students came from abroad.

The high level of literacy led to a flourishing printing trade in Dutch- language books. Most popular was the Bible, in a new official Dutch translation; next came the poems of Jacob Cats, whose homilies and morality verses were found in almost every own household-by 1665 an illustrated collection of Cast's works had sold 50,000 copies. Books about the new voyages and adventures in far countries were also sold in astounding numbers. The lack of censorship, moreover, made Holland, and especially Holland, the clearing houses for many works by refugees from England, France and Spain. In 1585, cartographer Lucas Wagenaef published his *Mariner's Mirror*, two volumes of sailing directions and charts which were immediately translated, copied and printed all over Europe. (In the English language such books are still called "Waggoners" by old-fashioned skippers.) From then until almost 100 years later, with the death of Johan Blaeu, son of the cartographer and map publisher Willem Blaeu, Dutch map making was the finest in Europe. For citizens ashore, it became fashionable to hang beautifully illustrated navigational charts on the walls of their houses as decoration-a fashion that is reflected in many contemporary paintings, as in Vermeer's *Officer and Laughing Girl*.

Truthful as seventeenth-century Dutch art was in mirroring it: age, there were a few aspects of contemporary life that were largely ignored by the painters. One was poverty. The prosperity enjoyed by Holland's middle classes did not extend to everyone. Much less wealth seeped down to the lowest classes than is often assumed from the neat streets and well-ordered households that appear in so many of the era's paintings. The workhouse, the poorhouse, slum living and child labor were all evident. A laborer worked 14 hours or more a day for a few pennies; an able seaman, who ran a 50-50 chance of not coming back from an Indies voyage, made two or three guilders a week, the equivalent of a weekly salary of about \$10 today. Even though the Netherlands' standard of living compared favorably with that of any neighboring country, recent research shows that the Golden Age was far from golden far perhaps half the population.

The painters also ignored what had been the most important influence on their young nation: the war. Holland had spent decades fighting a bloody struggle, and yet there is practically no record of it in paintings except for a few sea battles and siege scenes. Soldiers there are in plenty, but they are shown enjoying themselves, and it is as if Hollanders had seen all the fighting and violence they could stand, and wanted no more of it in their art.

Economic Decline

Furthermore, even when there was no fighting going on, the seventeenth century was a time of rapidly changing fortunes and turbulent political crises-and yet little of this turmoil appears in the art. Most of the paintings cast an aura of calm well-being, an illusion that may well have represented the Dutchman's longing for a security and tranquility he had never actually known. Though they look so solid in their pictures, the successful Dutch burghers must at times have had anxious moments when they wondered how they had come such a long way in so short a time, and whether it could last.

As a matter of fact, it did not. Eventually the prosperity of Holland became self-defeating: its covetous neighbors were finally moved to use force to acquire some of it for themselves. Toward the end of the age, the English wrested control of the seas from the Dutch Navy and in 1672 French troops overran most of the northern provinces. In a new era of surging nationalism, Holland was too small to maintain its dominant position. The merchants lost their daring; prosperity induced lethargy; godliness became self-righteousness. A long period of stagnation followed for Holland, and its art languished along with it.

But during most of the seventeenth century, these tendencies had not yet come to the surface. That was the age that belonged to the men who had fought for and won their freedom: hard men, sober but given to sudden gambles; religious, proud and vain-the men who look at us from the portraits for which they posed with such obvious pride.

Food in the Dutch republic 1

Possessing the strongest merchant marine of any European nation during the seventeenth century, the Netherlands had access to foodstuffs from around the world. Wine was imported from France, Italy, and Spain, and beer from Germany. India and the Spice Islands supplied spices, while the Mediterranean made a fine source of raisins, dates, figs and nuts, and Poland and Prussia provided all-important cereal grains. The Dutch rounded out their diet with the plentiful fish, butter, cheese, fresh fruits and vegetables that were produced domestically.

In addition to providing Netherlanders with a plentiful and varied selection of foodstuffs during the Golden Age, the rich trade economy was also largely responsible for the nation's notable prosperity during this period. While not all Golden Age Netherlanders lived the high-life of the wealthy *burgerlijk* and regent classes, the Dutch generally enjoyed a higher standard of living than their counterparts throughout the rest of early modern Europe, and food historian and co-curator of the exhibition, Peter G. Rose, identifies them as "the best fed population in Europe" during this period. Moreover, as historian Simon Schama points out, those who did suffer from poverty were treated with greater dignity than they might have been. He writes:

[The Netherlands] was not a dietary democracy, much less a culinary utopia. But it was at least a society in which the "unfortunate" poor (as distinct from able-bodied vagrants) were supplied with fare meant to approximate to the diet of the more fortunate rather than stigmatize their wretchedness with a regimen of didactic meanness.

In the face of such abundance, seventeenth-century Netherlanders generally sought moderation in their everyday eating habits. However, celebratory feasts were a phenomenon of Golden Age Dutch culture, and most Netherlanders indulged in excess at least a few times a year. For example, newborn children were often welcomed with a *kindermaal* celebration and its requisite round of sweet kandeel; the feast of Saint Nicholas, New Year's Day, and Twelfth Night were similarly recognized with specialty foods. Lesser events—including a child's beginning school or apprenticeship, the purchase of a new house, or a loved one's departure on a long journey or his return home—were also acknowledged with feasts. Many Dutch burghers even celebrated *jokmaalen*, a feast of inversion during which masters and mistresses waited on their servants.

1. FOODWAYS OF THE DUTCH GOLDEN AGE

1. <http://www.albanyinstitute.org/resources/archive/dutch/dutch.foodways.htm>

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Exclusive E.V. Interviews

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