

Dutch Art - Seminar 1

Dutch Golden Age - The Contexts

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WAHG

Lecture Notes No1

DUTCH GOLDEN AGE - THE CONTEXTS

Art is not produced in a vacuum

The production of art is influenced by the prevailing geographical, political, economic and social situations, religious ethos and artistic practices

THE DUTCH GOLDEN AGE OF PAINTING

It spans the seventeenth century, though most of the best works were painted between 1610 and 1670's. The painters were informed by the particular geographical, political, economic and religious moral contexts that appertained at that time in the area then known as the *United Provinces* and which became known as the Dutch Republic

The political and economic contexts

In the 16thC the Netherlands was ruled by the Hapsburg monarchs of Spain. By the middle of the century tension was rising between the Dutch and the Spanish, and this increased during the reign of Philip II. Religious differences played a large part in the troubles. The Protestant Dutch resented the overbearing Roman Catholic policies of the Spanish, and the effects of the Spanish Inquisition on the freedom of faith. Even more important however was the ever-increasing government control exercised by Madrid, and the rising taxes imposed on the Dutch. In addition to this the presence of a Spanish army caused conflict.

Between 1567 and 1573 Philip II tried to restore order in the Spanish Netherlands using an army led by the Duke of Alva. However the harsh methods used by the Duke resulted in a revolt in the Northern

Provinces led by Philip's representative in the Netherlands, *William the Silent*. Support for the revolt was particularly strong among Protestant groups such as the Calvinists.

The causes of the conflict can be summarisedⁱ as:

- ▶ **Religious** Catholic vs Calvinist
- ▶ **Political** Whereas the Spanish kingdom & its territories were ruled by centralised court the governmental structures of the Netherlandish provinces remained localised upon the cities that formed the backbone of economic power and which were ruled by a merchant elite.
- ▶ **Economic** Whereas the socio-economic power in Spain was primarily based on Land ownership and precious metal mining of the New World the Northern Provinces were based on industry and trade.

The revolt was mainly confined to the Seven Northern provinces namely: The Duchy of Guelders; The county of Holland; The county of Zealand; The former bishopric of Utrecht; The lordship of Overijssel; The free provinces of Friesland and Groningen. Collectively their combined territories became known as Holland and their inhabitants Dutch.ⁱⁱ In 1568 these Seven Provinces signed the *Union of Utrecht* that started a rebellion against Philip II of Spain which led to the 80 Years War. Their leader *William I, The Silent* Prince of Orange who declared "*I can not approve that monarchs' desire to rule over the conscience of their subjects and take away from them their freedom of belief and religion.*"

ⁱ These causes had a profound effect on the production of Art in the United Provinces which are later discussed

ⁱⁱ Apart from comparatively minor modifications they form Holland of to-day

Now these provinces were bound in a firm union for their common defence. Two years later they took the final step of rebellion: they abjured the King of Spain as their legal lord. Their States General met in 1581 to draw up a document in justification of their action. On July 10, 1584, while William was meeting with the States-General to establish a national government and declare their moral right to act against their King Philip II, a fanatic Catholic named Balthasar Gérard assassinated him.

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 favour 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.

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.

Almost every facet of people's lives underwent drastic changes wrought by the war and the violent events accompanying it. The United Provinces emerged from these upheavals as an aggressive, Protestant republic with a capitalistic economy and a bourgeois society.

The war's effects on art patronage

To a great extent the patronage of the nobility and its desire for large history paintings and the patronage of the Catholic Church for Religious Paintings ceased. Apart from portraiture artist no longer received commissions. Painters had to sell their wares in the market place and meet the demand for small cabinet paintings to fit into the urban slender houses of the bourgeoisie.

Geographical and economical contexts

The character of the people of these provinces, its qualities of toughness, of endurance, of seamanship and maritime enterprise, spring from the peculiar amphibious nature of the country, which differs from that of any other country in the world. The age-long struggle against the ocean and the river floods, which has converted the marshes that lay around the mouths of the Rhine (Rijn), the Meuse (Maas) and the Scheldt (Schelde), by toilsome labour and skill into fertile and productive soil, has left its impress on the whole history of this people. The building up of the elaborate system of dykes, dams and canals by which this water-logged land was transformed into the Holland of the closing decades of the 16thC enabled her people to offer such obstinate and successful resistance to the mighty power of the Spain under Philip II.

The Sea provided sea routes to the Baltic and through the channel to the rest of the then known world including East Indies and Japan The Low Countries were favourably positioned on a crossing of east-west and north-south trade routes and was connected to a large German hinterland through the Rhine River Dutch traders shipped wine from France and Portugal to the Baltic lands and returned with timber for their ship building yards and grain destined for countries around the Mediterranean Sea. The

Dutch exploited the wind-powered saw-mill (invented 1596) to turn timber into lumber more efficiently than their rivals. The Dutch built ships more cheaply, more quickly and better than did any of their rivals. From about 1600 to 1750, Holland had the largest merchant fleet of any nation, and the highest gross National Product per capita in the world

Influence of geography on art

The geography of the United Provinces not only moulded its peoples; spurred its maritime trade and with it wealth it also provided artists with flat landscapes where the sky is a dominant feature. It created a market for landscapes as its peoples were proud of the way that they had moulded it to their advantage through dykes, irrigation and use of wind power. The reverence for nature and the heroic spirit expressed in the work of Dutch artists account for the enduring popularity of Dutch landscape painting and the immense influence it exerted on later art, most notably in England.

New Dutch prosperity

The new Dutch prosperity was based almost entirely on overseas trade. In the second half of the 17th C the Dutch merchant fleet equalled that of England, France, Spain and Portugal combined. And Dutch wages are the highest in Europe, some 20% above the equivalent in England. This upstart republic, rejecting the claims of monarchy and acquiring wealth more rapidly than any other state, could not avoid provoking hostility - above all from England, its immediate neighbour over the water and its greatest rival for new international trade. The years from 1652 to 1674 include no less than three successive Anglo-Dutch Wars.

The demands of the Sea trade

The demands of the Sea trade meant that one in ten men were employed at sea. This resulted in the increase influence of women in social matters maintaining the home and family and as consumers including art

The Art of the Seven Provinces

It was an Art of *describing* as distinguished from the *narrative* Art of Italy

Some general points

- *Although painters painted in all the genres there was little demand for History Paintings.
- *Portraiture was popular as the burgers wished to record their material success through dress and its accoutrements.
- *The group portraiture was a form that was popular as it almost always displayed the group undertaking a civic duty and the cost of the commission was shared between the participants
- *Many of the paintings included a moral message.
- *Artists tended to specialized in painting a particular genre

An Artistic Flame

During the period 1610 to 1670 the United Provinces emerged 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.*

Over a breathtakingly short period, it produced artists of the stature of Vermeer, Frans Hals, Jan Steen, Jacob van Ruisdael,

Pieter de Hooch and one of the great Masters of Art – Rembrandt. These artists belonged to the same guilds; they worked in the same commercial marketplace. They knew one another's work, if only from prints. They competed, taught each other, collected each other's work, and on occasion collaborated. Many different schools of painting were busy at the same time, from portraiture to landscape, from still life to genre painting.

Centres of Artistic Activity

Whilst Amsterdam, which drew Rembrandt from his native Leiden, was at the hub of artistic activity, Haarlem, Utrecht, Delft, and Dordrecht, as well as Leiden, had important guilds of artists working independently of each other. In Utrecht, which remained largely Roman Catholic, the tradition of religious painting was kept alive by painters who had studied with Caravaggio in Rome

Utrecht Caravaggisti

A term applied to a number of Dutch painters active in Utrecht who were strongly influenced by Caravaggio's work and who in the 1620s made their city the chief centre of his style in northern Europe. The three main artists covered by the term are Baburen, Honthorst, and Terbrugghen, each of whom had lengthy stays in Rome. Terbrugghen was the first to return to Holland in about 1614, and Baburen and Honthorst followed in about 1620

Terbrugghen was the most important member of the Dutch Utrecht School. He spent ten years in Italy as a young man and he probably met there Caravaggio who exerted a great influence on him. His extant works were executed in Utrecht after returning from Italy. Sometimes he repeated the subjects of Caravaggio, like in the *Calling of St. Matthew*

Different modes or genres of paintings

Group Portraiture

No other country in Europe developed this type of portraiture and this fact makes it a strong national manifestation of Holland's culture. Owing to the prevalence of Calvinism the Church had long since ceased to be a patron of the arts. Moreover, there was in Holland no absolute sovereign or great court to provide artists with large commissions for monumental projects. Apart from occasional decorations for town halls, the only large official commissions open to Dutch painters were these corporation portraits

Genre

The schemes of genre paintings were often based on well known Dutch quotations and provide a moral. Many were painted as demonstrations of the painters' skill. In their concentration on rendering crafted stuff - the silks of Ter Bosh, the tapestries of Dou, Metsu, Mieris even bread in the case of Vermeer - these artists are asserting their prowess as the supreme craftsmen that they all possess. The tapestry the weaver weave, the glass the glassblower blows, the tiles of the tile maker, even the baker's bread - they all capture and reproduce in paint. The display of virtuosity so often found in these Dutch painters is a display of representational craft

Landscapes & Seascapes

Jacob van Ruisdael 1628-1682, is considered one of the greatest landscape painters in the history of art. He was a prolific artist who painted a wide variety of landscapes: the plains of the Dutch countryside, the dunes, seascapes, marshes, ponds, woods and hills. Two of the outstanding seascapes painters amongst many are Willem van de Velde the Elder and the Younger. Many of their paintings are displayed at the Maritime Museum

Rodger Hake



Judith Leyster self-portrait, near age 21



Terbrugghen ca.1588-1629

Van der Waerden & Michels

1609

Van der Waerden & Michels



***Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicholas Tulp,
Rembrandt 1632***