

Dutch Painting: the Golden Age and beyond

Background Notes

Beth Taylor - 26 Mar 2014



The Militia Company of Captain Frans Banning Cocq and Lieutenant Willem van Ruytenburch (known as *The Nightwatch*) by Rembrandt, 1642

Oil on canvas, 363 x 437 cm

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The Golden Age

The end of the 80 years war with Spain in 1648 saw the emergence of an independent Dutch Republic. The Republic's dominant religion was Reformed which meant that patronage turned from commissions for altarpieces and private devotional objects to those genres acceptable to Calvinist theologians – biblical narratives, still life, marine painting, landscape and portraiture. The seventeenth century was to mark a period of material prosperity in Holland and unprecedented cultural growth during which the bourgeois became the major purchasers of art. A middle class culture of people who did not speak French or Latin and were not educated in the humanist regard for classical antiquity meant that the art market was geared primarily toward meeting a taste for realist works. Genre and still life paintings often had symbols that pointed up a moral message; townscapes and landscapes reflected their peace and prosperity; seascapes reflected the importance of their sea-borne trade; portraits, notably group portraits of civic societies emphasised the importance of civic life in the republic; and architectural paintings showed the interiors of their Protestant places of worship.

Some key artists of the Golden Age.

Ambrosius Bosschaert (1573-1621)

Bosschaert was one of the pioneers of flower painting as an independent genre and initiated the Dutch tradition of flower painting. His compositions have a rich variety of flowers from different seasons arranged in a formal way. He often painted on copper and the finish and subtlety of colour which he achieved is exceptional.

Frans Hals (1582/3 – 1666)

Brought up in Haarlem, Hals was the first great artist of the 17th century Dutch school and is regarded as one of the most brilliant of all portraitists. His life-size group portrait, *The Banquet of the Officers of the St George Militia Company* (1616) was without

precedent and became a symbol of the strength and optimism of the new Republic. He was most popular during the 1620s and 30s – his best known portrait, *The Laughing Cavalier* was painted in 1624. In the latter decades of his life he painted simpler and more monochrome works, culminating in the sober restraint of his group portraits of the *Regents and Regentesses of the Old Men's Alms House* (1664).

Pieter de Hooch (1629-84)

De Hooch is especially associated with Delft as during his time there he painted the works for which he is best known -delicately lit, tranquil images of a peaceful and prosperous country like *The Courtyard of a House in Delft* (1658) and *The Pantry* (c. 1658).

Rembrandt (1606 -69)

The quality and range of Rembrandt's work, his paintings, etchings and drawings, set him apart from all his contemporaries. He is considered his country's greatest painter. In the early 1630s he established himself as the leading portraitist in Amsterdam. His most important work of this period is *Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp* (1632). He also made religious works, notably a series on the Passion commissioned by Prince Frederick Henry of Orange and his life-size *Blinding of Samson* (1636). In *The Night Watch*, Rembrandt made a dashing and powerful drama by subordinating the individual portraits to the demands of the composition. In the 1640s his success declined; turning his back on fashionable portraiture, he was declared insolvent in 1656. Nevertheless, he continued to paint great works such as *The Syndics* (1661-2) and *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (c. 1669). He made self portraits throughout his career and those of his later years are marked by dignity and emotional depth.

Jacob van Ruisdael (1628/9 - 82)

A versatile and prolific painter, Ruisdael painted forests, grain fields, beaches and seascapes, watermills, windmills, winter landscapes and Scandinavian torrents. He favoured strong forms and dense colours, using vigorous brushwork. His

approach was emotional and subjective – for him, man was insignificant compared to the power of nature. His low horizons and cloudscapes are particularly notable.

Jan Steen (1625/6 – 79)

Best known for his humorous genre scenes, many set in homes, taverns or festive gatherings. A ‘Jan Steen Household’ has become an epithet for an untidy house. He was a prolific artist, painting portraits – his paintings of children are notable – as well as historical, mythological and religious subjects. His use of colour was distinctive: note his use of salmon-red, rose, pale yellow and blue-green in paintings such as *The Skittle Players* (1660-62).

Willem van de Velde the Younger (1633 – 1707)

One of the most famous of the Dutch marine painters, he gave very accurate portrayals of ships but combined this accuracy with a feeling for atmosphere and composition. He moved to London in 1672/3 at the behest of Charles II. His influence was particularly strong in England, where the whole tradition of marine painting stemmed from him.

Jan Vermeer (1632 -75)

Now considered among the great Dutch artists of the 17th century, he was little known during his lifetime which was spent in Delft. Most of his work depicts serene and harmonious images of domestic life – one or two figures in a room lit from the onlooker’s left, engaged in domestic or recreational tasks. His predominant colours are yellow, blue and grey, his compositions are simple, his variations in texture have been described as making the surface look like “crushed pearls melted together”. His only landscape was *View of Delft*. Also unusual is the enigmatic (self?) portrait in *The Artist’s Studio*.

After the Golden Age

Patronage and collecting contracted in the 18th century. As the Dutch Republic lost its global trade dominance, the Dutch art market shared in the economic decline. Much 18th century art in Holland was influenced by French art. 18th century artists “did not have the power or will to produce something really newThe Republic was strong and prosperous.....further expansion unlikely; now was a time of quiet relaxation and adaptation to the fact that Holland was a small country again. The art went with the times, it became light and relaxed.” (Fuchs). See, for example, Cornelis Troost *Blindman’s Buff* 1753. 19th century art in Holland also followed the styles and ideas of art from Europe. The painters known as the Hague School dominate the later 19th century concentrating on Dutch landscapes and genre scenes. Leading members of the group included Israels, the Maris brothers and Weissenbruch. Van Gogh’s *Potato Eaters* shows a debt to the Hague School combined with the expressive qualities which were the hallmark of his later painting.

Vincent Van Gogh (1853-90)

After unsuccessful careers in his family’s art dealership and as a preacher, in 1880 van Gogh found that art was his vocation. From this time he worked single-mindedly, producing a prodigious amount of art in the last 10 years of his life. From 1881-1885, he lived in the Netherlands, painting peasants and workers – see, for example, *The Potato Eaters* (1885). He studied in Antwerp in 1885, then in 1886 moved to Paris. At this time he worked changed dramatically. Influenced by Impressionism and Japanese woodcuts, van Gogh became obsessed with the symbolic and expressive values of colours. He said of *Night Café* (1888), “I have tried to express with red and green the terrible passions of human nature”. In 1888 he settled at Arles where he painted more than 200 canvases in 15 months. Suffering from recurrent mental health crises, he entered an asylum at St Remy in 1889 where he produced over 150 works, including *Cornfield*

with Cypresses and *Starry Night*. In 1890 he lodged with Dr Paul Gachet at Auvers-sur Oise, painting 70 pictures in the last 70 days of his life, including *Wheatfield with Crows*. He died after shooting himself. Van Gogh sold only one painting during his lifetime but since the early 20th century he has been phenomenally famous.

George Hendrik Breitner (1857-1923)

Dutch painter and photographer. Breitner trained in the Hague, where he sketched the working class districts of the Hague and the dockyards of Rotterdam with van Gogh. His key motifs were people going about their daily lives. He visited Paris in 1884, and was profoundly affected by Impressionism and Japanese art. Moving to Amsterdam in 1886, he painted and photographed the life of the developing city and its working class districts. In both media he sought to capture atmosphere and “the life of the people, in the streets and in their houses”.

Piet Mondrian (1872-1944)

Dutch painter who gained international recognition as a leader of geometrical abstraction. Mondrian's early paintings were naturalistic, often in delicate greys and greens. Between 1907-1910 he made more symbolist works in primary colours. Visiting Paris in 1911, he came into contact with Cubism and produced a series of abstractions on the theme of *Trees*. With Theo van Doesberg he founded the periodical De Stijl in 1917 and became the main exponent of a style of painting he termed Neo-Plasticism. Banishing representation and three-dimensional picture space, as well as the curved line, texture and sensual colours, he designed his pictures with horizontal and vertical lines marking rectangles of primary colours. He left Holland in 1939 and settled in New York in 1940. There he made livelier abstracts of which *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* is the best known.

CoBrA

A group of Expressionist painters formed in Paris in 1948 by a number of Netherlandish and Scandinavian artists. The name of the group came from the cities of Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam. The Dutchman Karel Appel had founded Reflex an experimental group of Dutch and Belgian artists from which *CoBrA* sprang. He was one of the leading members, along with the Dane, Asgar Jorn, and the Belgian, Corneille. Their aims were to exploit free expression of the unconscious unimpeded and undirected by the intellect. The group published *Cobra Revue* and a number of monographs, as well as arranging Cobra exhibitions in Copenhagen (1948), Amsterdam (1949) and Liege (1951) before disbanding.

Cobra's art was closely connected with the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Shortly after his appointment in 1945, the museum's legendary director Willem Sandberg insistently brought experimentalism and abstraction in the visual arts to the attention of The Netherlands. He was deeply involved with the Cobra group and maintained direct contacts with the artists. As early as 1949 Sandberg organized the International Exhibition of Experimental Art, with works from artists who had joined forces under this title.

The expressionistic artworks from the Cobra artists gave rise to furious but *CoBrA* did overcome antagonism and restored some self confidence to the Dutch art community.



Hip, Hip, Hooray! by Karel Appel, 1949

Oil on canvas, 81.7 x 127 cms