

GARY SCHWARTZ

A Pregnant Past

The Dutch Seventeenth Century
in the Global Twenty-first



Amsterdam
University
Press

AMSTERDAM STUDIES IN THE DUTCH GOLDEN AGE

A Pregnant Past

The Golden Age Lectures are organized by the Amsterdam Centre for the Study of the Golden Age, part of the University of Amsterdam. All Golden Age Lectures are freely accessible at www.aup.nl/series/golden-age-lectures.

Other publications by the Amsterdam Centre for the Study of the Golden Age are published by Amsterdam University Press in the series *Amsterdam Studies in the Dutch Golden Age*, <http://acsga.uva.nl> and www.aup.nl/series/amsterdam-studies-in-the-dutch-golden-age

Recently published:

Junko Aono, *Confronting the Golden Age: Imitation and Innovation in Dutch Genre Painting 1680-1750*, 2015 (ISBN 978 90 8964 568 5)

Coen Wilders, *Patronage in de Provincie: Het Utrechtse netwerk van stadhouder Willem III*, 2015 (ISBN 978 90 8964 738 2)

Femke Deen, *Publiek debat en propaganda in Amsterdam tijdens de Nederlandse Opstand: Amsterdam 'Moorddam' 1566-1578*, 2014 (ISBN 978 90 8964 705 4)

Christopher Joby, *The Multilingualism of Constantijn Huygens (1596-1687)*, 2014 (ISBN 978 90 8964 703 0)

Thomas DaCosta Kaufman and Michael North (eds.), *Mediating Netherlandish Art and Material Culture in Asia*, 2014 (ISBN 978 90 8964 569 2)

Jan W.J. Burgers, *The Lute in the Dutch Golden Age: Musical Culture in the Netherlands ca. 1580-1670*, 2013 (ISBN 978 90 8964 552 4)

Benjamin B. Roberts, *Sex and Drugs before Rock 'n' Roll: Youth Culture and Masculinity during Holland's Golden Age*, 2012 (ISBN 978 90 8964 402 2)

Thijs Weststeijn (ed.), *The Universal Art of Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627-1678): Painter, Writer, and Courtier*, 2013 (ISBN 978 90 8964 523 4)

A Pregnant Past
The Dutch Seventeenth Century
in the Global Twenty-first

Seventh Golden Age Lecture

Delivered on 12 May 2015
by

Gary Schwartz

Amsterdam Centre for the Study of the Golden Age
University of Amsterdam

Amsterdam Centre for the Study of the Golden Age
Spuistraat 134
1012 VB Amsterdam, The Netherlands
goudeneeuw-fgw@uva.nl
<http://acsga.uva.nl/>

Academic director: Professor Lia van Gemert

Cover illustration: Adriaen de Vries (1556-1626), *Atlas*, 1626. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum
Cover design: Kok Korpershoek bno, Amsterdam
Layout: JAPES, Amsterdam

Published by the University of Amsterdam and Amsterdam University Press
© Gary Schwarz, 2015

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the written permission of the author.

Every effort has been made to obtain permission to use all copyrighted illustrations reproduced in this book. Nonetheless, whosoever believes to have rights to this material is advised to contact the publisher.

An Iranian Challenge¹

In 2007 I was invited by the Dutch embassy in Iran to give lectures on Rembrandt at various locations in Tehran. The occasion was an exhibition on Rembrandt's etchings, represented by some 100 new facsimiles, offered by the embassy to the Saba Art and Cultural Institute, a branch of the Iranian Academy of the Arts (fig. 1). On the morning of 27 June I spoke at the Dutch-British school, where I was told that the only Dutch pupil still in attendance was out of the country. The same afternoon I gave a more formal talk at the Saba Institute. The surprises in store for me there were greater. For months before my scheduled talk I scoured Internet for an announcement, with no result. What I did find was a remarkable notice on the government-owned news website Press TV – it's still up – announcing that the Dutch embassy had organized for the enjoyment of Iranian art enthusiasts an exhibition of 400 paintings and 80 drawings by Rembrandt (fig. 2).



Fig. 1: Visitors to an exhibition on the etchings of Rembrandt, Tehran, Saba Art and Cultural Institute, 2007.



Fig. 2: Press notice on the Rembrandt exhibition in Tehran (accessed 1 April 2015 at <http://edition.presstv.ir/detail/12363.html>). Image removed at unknown date from the source.

Compounding the misunderstandings, the labels on the displays suggested that they were original etchings, which they were not.² When I arrived at the Institute with embassy staff and an interpreter, we found that no audience at all had been invited. Rather than delivering the public lecture for which the embassy had flown me over, I spoke only to the director and a few associates of the Institute, through the services of an interpreter who doubled the length of my remarks and embellished them with eloquent gestures.

The evening lecture at the residence of Ambassador Radinck van Vollenhoven, delivered without interpreter, was something else. The audience for this event was the fine fleur of the intellectual and artistic community of Tehran – academics, artists, actors, filmmakers, journalists, among whom was Thomas Erdbrink himself. The question period after the talk was wonderfully lively, brightened by the drinks that the embassy was allowed to pour, in dry Iran. What made the greatest impression on me, however, was an intense discussion following the close of events. An older man approached me, with his wife, and after introducing himself as a retired professor of history, spoke to me urgently and insistently. “You must write a book about your country,” he said. “Tell how the Netherlands threw off suppression by religious fanatics and banned bigotry. Tell how your peace-loving country earned the respect of the nations of the world. Tell how it brought out the strength of its inhab-

itants and prospered. The whole world needs that book as a model and an inspiration.”

It was all too clear that he was talking more about Iran today than about the Republic in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He was charging me with nothing less than a mission to save his country. While the idea that a book of mine about the Dutch Revolt and the Golden Age could bring about an end to religious autocracy in Iran was at least as far-fetched as the possibility that a Dutch embassy could mount an exhibition of 400 paintings by Rembrandt – more than the number of surviving works recognized today – still I was powerfully touched by what he said. What he knew about Dutch history meant more to him than the knowledge of their country’s past means to today’s Dutchmen. We can look back on four centuries during which, except for the catastrophic German occupation of 1940-1945, the Dutch could take their liberty increasingly for granted. I was embarrassed, in my relation to my conversation partner, to be the beneficiary of such precious freedoms, freedoms to which he had as much right as I.

Despite the urging of this esteemed Iranian intellectual, I have not and do not plan to write the book he outlined for me. But when I was invited to deliver a lecture for the Amsterdam Centre for the Study of the Golden Age, I had to think of him. The best service I could pay him, it seemed to me, was to question the popular image of the Dutch Golden Age, to revise it so that if it is ever again put into play as a model, it will stand up more strongly to criticism. An overly adulatory view of the past will be all too easy to discredit. Moreover, the Iranian professor is not the only one whose present-day worries affect his understanding of history. Mine do too.

The questions with which I will deal are surely not exhaustive, but they nonetheless cover a lot of ground. Was the seventeenth century the historical high-point of Dutch development? To how many inhabitants of the Netherlands was the seventeenth century a golden age? More than the newly famous one percent? How Dutch, in European and global context, *were* the Golden Age and its art? To what extent was Dutch society defined by burghers rather than farmers, peasants, soldiers, aristocrats? How tolerant were the Dutch, how Calvinist, how peace-loving, how democratic, how republican? Do present-day values concerning social justice, gender equality, and ecology affect our view of the Dutch Golden Age? Most of the issues broached are already the subject of critical enquiry on the part of colleagues whom I will gratefully cite. Nonetheless, it is my hope that in the aggregate, the points I raise will add up to a view of the Dutch Golden Age more expansive here, more restricted there

than the one we are used to. If we end up with 18-karat gold rather than 24, this will only strengthen the alloy.

The Disequal Dutch

In 1990, the esteemed founder of the Amsterdam Centre for the Study of the Golden Age, Henk van Nierop, noticed that different researchers into historical demography maintained divergent population figures for the same times and places. That led him to cast doubt, “not for the first time,” he wrote, on the value of “this kind of (pseudo-)exact data in a pre-statistical period.”³ He could not have known that the historical demographer Angus Maddison was already tooling up for a millennial study of the economy not of a particular time and place but of the entire world from the year 0 to 2000. His book was published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in Paris in 2001. Maddison’s statistics show the population of the northern Netherlands between 1600 and 1700 to have grown more than twice as much as the European average. This is no more than we would expect of a Golden Age. However, the growth of 26 percent lagged behind the 38 percent of Great Britain and the doubling of the populations of Switzerland and Portugal, so that the Netherlands ends up on the high end of the midfield. More interesting is that the growth rate of the Netherlands in the seventeenth century was less than half that in the sixteenth, which Maddison pegs at 57 percent.⁴

The economic standing of the northern Netherlands conforms to the same pattern. From 1600 to 1700 Maddison estimates an impressive doubling of gross domestic product, but for 1500-1600 a spectacular tripling (fig. 3). This was by far the largest growth in all of Western Europe. It is the only figure in Maddison’s comparative charts in which the northern Netherlands outstrips every other country in Europe. Assuming that the relative values if not the exact figures of the millennial study are reliable, one can only conclude that the strongest growth in population and wealth in the Netherlands took place before the Golden Age. This has far-going implications for our understanding of the factors involved. It means that the most crucial development of Dutch economic power took place before there was an Amsterdam stock exchange, before the birth of limited stock companies like the VOC, and when Antwerp, not Amsterdam, was the financial capital of the Western world. For the first three quarters of the century the northern Netherlands was part of the Habsburg Empire, the wealthiest people were land-owning aristocrats, and the country had yet to adopt the Calvinist ethic.

Table B-18. World GDP, 20 Countries and Regional Totals, 0-1998 A.D.
(million 1990 international \$)

Year	0	1000	1500	1600	1700	1820	1870	1913	1950	1973	1998
Austria			1 414	2 093	2 483	4 104	8 419	23 451	25 702	85 227	152 712
Belgium			1 225	1 561	2 288	4 529	13 746	32 347	47 190	118 516	198 249
Denmark			443	569	727	1 471	3 782	11 670	29 654	70 032	117 319
Finland			136	215	255	913	1 999	6 389	17 051	51 724	94 421
France			10 912	15 559	21 180	38 434	72 100	144 489	220 492	683 965	1 150 080
Germany			8 112	12 432	13 410	26 349	71 429	237 332	265 354	944 755	1 460 069
Italy			11 550	14 410	14 630	22 535	41 814	95 487	164 957	582 713	1 022 776
Netherlands			716	2 052	4 009	4 288	9 952	24 955	60 642	175 791	317 517
Norway			192	304	450	1 071	2 485	6 119	17 838	44 544	104 860
Sweden			382	626	1 231	3 098	6 927	17 403	47 269	109 794	165 385
Switzerland			482	880	1 253	2 342	5 867	16 483	42 545	117 251	152 345
United Kingdom			2 815	6 007	10 709	36 232	100 179	224 618	347 850	675 941	1 108 568
12 Countries Total			38 379	56 708	72 625	145 366	338 699	840 743	1 286 544	3 660 252	6 044 301
Portugal			632	850	1 708	3 175	4 338	7 467	17 615	63 397	128 877
Spain			4 744	7 416	7 893	12 975	22 295	45 686	66 792	304 220	560 138
Other			590	981	1 169	2 206	4 891	12 478	30 600	105 910	227 300
Total Western Europe	11 115	10 165	44 345	65 955	83 395	163 722	370 223	906 374	1 401 551	4 133 780	6 960 616
13 Small Countries			100	113	113	276	358	394	657		
Total Western Europe	24 700	25 413	57 268	73 778	81 460	132 888					

Fig. 3: World gross domestic product, 0-1998 C.E. Angus Maddison, *The World Economy: A Millennial Perspective*, Table B-18, p. 261 (accessed 1 April 2015 at <http://theunbrokenwindow.com/Development/MADDISON%20The%20World%20Economy-A%20Millennial.pdf>).

The great wealth that was generated by Dutch trade, mainly in Baltic grain, North Sea herring, and beer, was earned mainly by the capitalists who financed it. Fortunately for the others, these were labor-intensive enterprises, affording jobs for sailors and captains, porters and crew bosses, clerks and administrators, brewers and barkeepers. However, the share of these groups in the welfare of the community was kept to the lowest possible minimum. The American-born Amsterdam sociologist Derek Phillips has written a moving book on the subject, *Well-being in Amsterdam's Golden Age*, in which he demonstrates how precarious the livelihood and social standing was of the majority of the city's population and evokes the personal and social misery of lives led in such insecurity.

Since the appearance of Phillips's book in 2008, in 2011 the English economist Guy Standing coined the term precariat, merging the words precarious and proletariat. His description of that present-day class applies with equal or greater force to the disenfranchised majority of Dutch people in the Golden Age:

a multitude of insecure people, living bits-and-pieces lives, in and out of short-term jobs, without a narrative of occupational development, including ... women abused in oppressive labour, growing numbers of criminalised tagged for life, ... being categorised as "disabled" and migrants...⁵

Even if this is the unfortunate case of the lowest class in most times and places, the Netherlands formed a sad nadir in this all too human tendency. Phillips quotes the disenchanting study of Lee Soltow and Jan Luiten van Zanden thus: “By international standards of the time, inequalities in wealth and income in [Amsterdam] were extreme. Over the course of the [seventeenth] century, these inequalities increased.”⁶ The figures give an idea of how extreme these differences were. In the United States today, there is widespread outrage that the richest one percent of households owns 36 percent of the nation’s wealth, and the richest ten percent some 80 percent of all assets. Listen to what the Dutch economic historian Jan Luiten van Zanden has to say about the Golden Age.

Wealth inequality was extremely high in the towns of Holland in the 17th century. Judging by the wealth tax registers, 10% of the households possessed nearly all the wealth, and the richest 1% around 40% of the total figure. More than 70%, perhaps as much as 90%, of households, were too poor even to participate in the wealth tax.⁷

Even Dutchmen of the time who did enjoy a narrative of occupational development – the great artists who have become the embodiment of the Golden Age – suffered grievously from their dependence on a fickle market. Rembrandt’s bankruptcy is legendary. Frans Hals died on the dole. Jan Steen was so heavily in debt when he died that “he was unable to fulfill his social duty of passing on to his children the same amount of capital that he inherited.”⁸ Saddest of all is the death of Johannes Vermeer. The creator of timeless images of domestic tranquility was seized by fatal despair at his lack of wherewithal and inability to support his children. His wife declared that he took this so to heart that “as if he had fallen into a frenzy, in a day and a half he had gone from being healthy to being dead.”⁹ The artists who left sizeable estates were the ones with the best aristocratic patronage, like Michiel van Miereveld, Gerard van Honthorst (fig. 4), Gerard Dou and Adriaen van der Werff (fig. 5). This is a very different picture than the classical one of the Dutch artist – call it neoclassical – as a small businessman prospering from his work for an open and anonymous market. For that matter, as Marten Jan Bok and I showed long ago, by far the largest number of paintings from the seventeenth century were copies made not by independent entrepreneurs but hired hands, working for slave wages.¹⁰



Fig. 4: Gerard van Honthorst (1592-1656), *Christ Before the High Priest*, about 1617. London, National Gallery, inv. nr. NG3679. Painted in Rome for the artist's patron Vincenzo Giustiniani, in whose house Honthorst lived.



Fig. 5: Adriaen van der Werff (1659-1722), *Self-portrait with the Portrait of his Wife, Margaretha van Rees, and their Daughter Maria*, 1699. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. nr. SK-A-465. The artist wears a golden chain presented to him in Munich by his patron Johann Wilhelm, Elector Palatine. In 1703 the elector elevated van der Werff to the nobility.

Dutchness in the Arts

The masters I have just named are generally left out of consideration in writings that stress what is taken to be the Dutchness of Dutch art, its everydayness and descriptiveness and middleclassness. I take issue with this notion of Dutchness in art. Stated simply, my objection boils down to this: one can only claim exceptionalism for Dutch art by ignoring the vast quantity of art produced in the Netherlands and by Dutch artists abroad that does not conform to a predefined idea of Dutchness. If there were specialties practiced in the Netherlands that are barely found elsewhere, this is mainly due to sheer numbers. More painters were active in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century than anywhere else in Europe. In their sometimes murderous competition, they developed more specialties, especially in genre painting, than were practiced elsewhere. To seize on these niche products as the embodiment of essential Dutchness is to reverse the order of things. The first choice of a Dutch artist working for the market was to produce art with the largest sales potential, art that excelled by pan-European standards. The niche products, such as the paintings of Vermeer, made in large measure for one patron, were a fall-back position.

Attachment to the idea of essential Dutchness has distorted the museology and history of Dutch art in far-reaching ways. When in 2013 the director of Museum Beelden aan Zee Jan Teeuwisse accepted a chair on the History, Theory, and Practice of Modern Sculpture at Leiden University, he stressed this point in his inaugural oration, calling it *Dutch sculpture: an apologia*. He felt obliged to apologize for the term Dutch sculpture because the predicate Dutch had long been denied to a production that was so plainly international. It was not until the year 2014 that any Dutch museum – the Rijksmuseum – acquired a sculpture by Adriaen de Vries, one of the major artists of his day in Italy, Prague, and Germany (fig. 6). Although he proudly signed his works *Adrianus Fries Hagiensis Batavus* – Adriaen de Vries, a Dutchman from The Hague – this cut no ice with critics who faulted him for not being more bourgeois, more down-to-earth, more *doe-normaal*, more like their idea of what Dutch art should be.



Fig. 6: Adriaen de Vries (1556-1626), *Atlas*, 1626. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

In the history of architecture, this exclusionary attitude has led to vicious extremes. The leading historian of architecture in the Netherlands in the first half of the twentieth century was Frans (F.A.J.) Vermeulen, professor at the Academy of Architecture and a high-ranking official of the Monuments Service. Vermeulen was a member of the Dutch Nazi party NSB and an adherent of a *Blut-und-Boden* aesthetic. His history of Dutch architecture was the standard work on the subject for half of the twentieth century. A pernicious combination between the two that manifested itself in the volume on the seventeenth century, published in 1943, was noted and criticized by the fearless art historian Eddy de Jongh.¹¹ It occurs in a section of Vermeulen's survey entitled "Godenschemering" – the twilight of the gods – dedicated to decadence in the latter Golden Age. Vermeulen writes that

foreign ["volksvreemde"; French and Jewish] influences explain the fact that symptoms of decay manifest themselves [in the Dutch soul; "de Nederlandsche volksziel"] first and foremost in the spiritual and cultural realms, especially in the arts, where the growing tendency to intellectual analysis and rationalism – so markedly characteristic of the French as well as the Jewish mentality – exercised their chilling effect in architecture, as in literature and painting.¹²

I touch on this painful subject because the racism and anti-Semitism that Vermeulen built into his scholarship has been passed over in embarrassed silence by architectural historians rather than confronted and disputed. Anyone who finds himself in agreement with Vermeulen's stance on national identity would do well to take extra care not to encourage others who might be susceptible to his ideology. Disentangling the study of human differences from racism can be trickier than you would expect. The architectural historian Lex Bosman is currently writing a biography of Vermeulen in which the relation of his irreproachable scholarship to his all-too-reproachable ideology will again be addressed.

The book is prefaced by a remarkable notice by Wouter Nijhoff, head of the Martinus Nijhoff publishing house that brought out the book, the third in a set begun in 1925. I like to think that the notice was a daring act of anti-Nazi resistance. Nijhoff wrote in plain disgust that he was discontinuing publication beyond volume 3 because "Mr. V." had broken his promises time and again and failed to deliver even a single sheet of copy for the coming volume (fig. 7). If Nijhoff's disgust was also directed at Vermeulen's bigotry, then all credit to him!

BERICHT VAN DEN UITGEVER

De uitgever sluit hiermede het „Handboek tot de Geschiedenis der Nederlandsche bouwkunst” door Frans Vermeulen, af. Sedert 1920 is de heer V. er mede bezig en de gestadige onderbrekingen — welke dikwijls jaren duurden — heeft hij, terwille van het werk, geduldig gedragen. Aan alles komt tenslotte een eind, ook aan geduld. Toen, twee jaar na de promotie van den heer V., niettegenstaande zijn toen ook weer herhaalde, reeds zoo dikwijls niet nagekomen, beloften, geen blad copie was ontvangen heeft hij besloten aan dezen onmogelijken toestand een eind te maken.

Het boek van den heer Vermeulen is hierbij dus afgesloten.

Dit derde en laatste deel, waarvoor hij de registers op dezelfde wijze heeft laten samenstellen als die op de vorige deelen, eindigt met de geschiedenis van den Lodewijk XIV-stijl (het begin van de 18e eeuw).

De Uitgever

W. N.

Fig. 7: “Publisher’s Notice,” from F.A.J. Vermeulen, *Handboek tot de geschiedenis van de Nederlandse bouwkunst*, vol. 3, The Hague (Martinus Nijhoff) 1943.

Concerning Dutchness in culture, the fact of the matter is that no Dutch writer or artist of the Golden Age thought of typical Dutchness as a positive recommendation. This extends to a field in which the Dutch were truly predominant in Europe, the collecting, study, depiction, publication on and trade in exotic produce and rarities. Earlier this year, the American historian Benja-

min Schmidt published an illuminating study entitled *Inventing Exoticism: Geography, Globalism, and Europe's Early Modern World*. Most of the book is about Dutch endeavors in the production and circulation of non-Dutch materials. Dutch printers were particularly successful at obtaining Jesuit manuscripts and drawings and turning them into Dutch-brand forms of geography that became European standards. Most of the 200 illustrations in his book emanate from the Netherlands, no matter what their first source. Schmidt writes pointedly:

Why did *Dutch*-made presentations of the exotic world enjoy such phenomenal *Europe*-wide success? The answer lies in the qualified Dutchness of the products, the European perspective of their pitch, and the new form of geography that resulted. Among the most important shifts in the brand of exotic geography devised over this period in Dutch ateliers is its relative *un*-Dutchness: the considerable effort extended by producers to efface any parochial Dutch presence in their works and to adopt a broadly European view of things.¹³

Schmidt makes a compelling argument for a surprising, counter-intuitive conclusion. The Dutch of the Golden Age, he writes, through the import of exotic products that they sold throughout Europe, were the prime authors of a new global discourse. This led not only to a new conception of the exotic world but also a new conception of Europe, in which Europeanness, not local nationality, supplied the main identity. This reality had already been forced on me by my study of Dutch artists in Safavid Persia.¹⁴ Throughout the first half of the seventeenth century, successive shahs of Persia liked to have a European artist at court, and all of them were Dutch. Nonetheless, there seems to have been no word for their nationality other than *farangi* – Franks, a term applied indiscriminately to all Europeans. Historians of art and culture who continue to insist on Dutch uniqueness in the Golden Age, not only global but local as well, are contradicting the values of the very age they are studying.

Being Tolerated: Conditional Acceptance

This year my wife Loekie and I will have been living in the same house, in Maarsse, on the Vecht River, for forty-seven years (fig. 8). When we bought it, we were handed all the house papers from 1722 on, with a summary of ownership and sales prices from 1643. From them, and from earlier publica-

tions on the house, we learned that from 1685 until 1775 De Boomgaard, as the house is named, belonged to a succession of Amsterdam Portuguese Jewish owners of the families Atthias, Salvador, Capadoce, and Teixeira de Mattos. With my own Jewish upbringing, it pleased me greatly to be able to move into a house where I could feel historically at home. Adding to my satisfaction was a remark by the historian and antique dealer Moses Gans in his *Memorbook: History of Dutch Jewry from the Renaissance to 1900*. He reports that Maarsssen was the only place in the Republic in which the Jews ever formed a majority of the population.¹⁵ This is probably overstated, but it was undisputable that Jews were welcome to live in Maarsssen, where they owned the largest estates. And why not, in a Republic founded on freedom of conscience?



Fig. 8: The Herengracht in Maarsssen, seen about 1950 from the Wilhelminaweg on the opposite shore of the Vecht.

Little by little, a less upbeat view of the matter began to take hold. Why did so many Jews live in Maarsssen, anyway? Simply stated, because they were not

allowed to live in Utrecht, a few kilometers upstream. When Utrecht was forced by the French invader to open its doors to Jews in 1795, most of the Maarsseu Sephardim moved there. In fact, only a small number of local governments admitted Jews. The last word for the time being was written by Joke Spaans, in a book of 2013 accompanying the exhibition *Traits of Tolerance: Religious Freedom in the Golden Age*:

... in Amsterdam, where Lutheran and Jewish merchants were key to the city's prosperity, they even enjoyed freedom of public worship in monumental houses of prayer. The lives of their counterparts in other parts of the Republic were frequently made miserable by the local authorities. With the support of local magistrates, Church councils stopped ministers or rabbis from entering the municipality and blocked the establishment of houses of worship.¹⁶

If the Lutherans and Jews in Amsterdam were key to the prosperity of the city, the Catholics were that even more so. Yet they and the Remonstrants were not granted the right to worship in monumental houses of prayer. This was probably because the Jews and most of the Lutherans were small groups of recent immigrants whose freedom could easily be dosed and who could be excluded from public office. The Jews were kept out of many guilds and were held completely responsible for the burdensome support of the many destitute members of their communities. (When this condition was withdrawn under heavy French pressure in 1795, the Jewish patriot Mozes Asser sighed, "They let us chant psalms in public and die from hunger.")¹⁷

The condition of Catholics and Remonstrants could not have been more different. They outnumbered Calvinists, were mainly native-born, and were interwoven at all levels with the rest of society. Nonetheless, this was not a major problem until the Geuzen made one of it. As Judith Pollman shows, Dutch Catholics at first stood behind the revolt. A two-faith solution for an independent Republic was perfectly feasible until "Calvinist regimes sent all their priests into exile, and seemed bent on denying Catholics a place in society."¹⁸ The Catholic reaction played into the hands of the Habsburgs and "sealed the division of the Low Countries." In that situation, we can only be grateful for the emergence, in Joke Spaans's phrases, of "selective tolerance" and "frowning acceptance," even if it was not all that different from the arrangements in other countries of Europe.

The School of Mars

In the past, I have excused any and all shortcomings of the Republic in living up to its shining image with one overriding argument. That is, in a century during which Germany, France, and Britain engaged in horrendous civil wars, the number of mortal victims of Dutch internecine strife can be counted on the fingers of one hand. The judicial murder of Oldenbarnevelt and the deaths of a few of the Remonstrants with whom he sided, the lynching of the de Witt brothers – that’s about it. In no other European country did large Catholic and Protestant populations get through the seventeenth century without bloody battles; the Netherlands did. The reason often advanced for the success of what Willem Frijhoff has dubbed pragmatic ecumenism is that internal tension was bad for business. That argument I find unconvincing. Was it good for French business when they expelled the Huguenots, for English business to maintain strictures against Catholicism, for the business of the German countries to allow Protestant-Catholic hostilities to escalate to the point that most combatant states went bankrupt? To say that the Dutch were innately inclined to favor business over blood approaches the brink of ethnic profiling. Nor is it easy to repeat with a straight face the judgment expressed even by Johan Huizinga that the Dutch are innately a peaceful nation.

And then I became aware, through Henk van Nierop’s book *Het verraad van het Noorderkwartier* of 1999, of a different view of the matter that had been expressed in 1930 by an art historian! H.E. van Gelder, director of the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, had done so in an article comparing the Revolt with the civil war in sixteenth-century France. Van Nierop put the issue thus:

The Revolt was a civil war, in which – with the exception of an extensive middle group that had no desire whatsoever to choose sides and that was dragged willy-nilly into events – Catholics stood against Protestants, government loyalists against rebels.¹⁹

The scales fell from my eyes. Indeed, the idea that the Netherlands had not fought a civil war while the rest of Europe had, had no basis except nationalist historiographical sleight-of-hand. Even if half of the men in arms in the Eighty Years War were mercenaries from abroad, the other half were inhabitants of the northern and southern Netherlands, and they were killing each other.

Not only did the Republic fight a civil war in the Low Countries, it also fought bloody land and sea wars with German states, France, England, Sweden, and overseas in Brazil, the Caribbean, Africa, and all over Asia. The Dutch army was known throughout Europe as the “school of Mars” for its military proficiency.²⁰ The great achievement of the Republic in this respect was in managing to turn warfare into a profit center and to fight its wars mainly in other people’s backyards. Mainly, but not entirely. The province of Holland was spared, but fighting went on in the inland provinces. And what would have happened had the 12,000-man strong army of Stadhouder Willem II not been spotted in the fog on its way to take Amsterdam in July 1650? That meaningless contingency spared the Republic a disaster from which it may not have recovered.

Politics in a Patriarchy

To an Iranian of today the Dutch Republic of the Golden Age may look like a democracy, but that’s not how it appeared to contemporaries. The attack of the Prince of Orange on Amsterdam was not just an incident. It was symptomatic for strained relations between burgher regents and the house of Orange, which never relinquished its dynastic ambitions. To *staatsgezinden* the Republic was an oligarchy, to *prinsgezinden* a monarchy in waiting. And as for the regents themselves – the city of Amsterdam did not find it necessary to hold more than one election (a favorable exception in a country where there were otherwise no elections at all) before the dissolution of the Republic in 1795. That was in 1578, when the members of the civic guard elected a town council that replenished itself for 217 years by cooptation. Above the council stood a city boss who dictated major affairs even during the years when he was not a burgomaster, the holder of an unofficial distinction known as the magnificat. Concerning Gillis Valkenier, holder of the magnificat from 1678 until his death two years later, the English ambassador Henry Sidney wrote one of my all-time favorite quotes in a letter of 10 August 1679.

I assure you, the Great Turk hath not more absolute dominion and power over any of his countrymen than he (monsieur Valconier) hath at Amsterdam. What he saith is ever done without any contradiction; he turns out and puts in who he likes; raises what money he pleases, does whatever he has a mind to, and yet he walks about the streets just like an ordinary shopkeeper.²¹

Later this year a groundbreaking exhibition is going to take place in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The long-time curator of Dutch and Flemish painting in the museum, Ronni Baer, is organizing an exhibition entitled *Class Distinctions: Dutch Painting in the Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer*. As the museum information puts it, “The show will reflect, for the first time, the ways in which art signals the socioeconomic groups of the new Dutch Republic, from the Princes of Orange to the most indigent of citizens.” This is an exciting prospect to which I look forward keenly. However, to phrase the issue in this way forces a certain truth on us. The ways in which art signals socioeconomic groups in the Dutch Republic are ways that were paid for and sustained by a small, wealthy group. Those were the patricians, regents, and magistracy of the cities of Holland. They are the oligarchs for whom the art was made and whose values and prejudices it reflects. The images of the most indigent of citizens – not really the right word for people who could not even dream of ever being able to pay the fifty guilders required to attain the rights of a *poorter* – those images distinguish between the deserving poor, the recipients of charity bestowed magnanimously by the one percent, and the poor who have no one to blame for their poverty but themselves (fig. 9).

It was not only art that reflects the values of the ruling class. With its patronage of the crafts and sciences, of theater and poetry, city-building and architecture, land drainage and agriculture, its all-powerful financial institutions, the global reach it attained through Russian, Baltic, and Mediterranean trade and the East and West India Companies, its success in holding off the clergy and the military as rivals for power – this small privileged group has imposed on history a vision of its country, in its time, as a Golden Age. The point would not be worth making – after all, the dominance of the rich is of all times and places – except with regard to the reputation of the Republic as a more egalitarian society than others. The same applies to the female half of society, which suffered particularly badly in the Republic. The American sociologist Julia Adams, in her book *The Familial State: Ruling Families and Merchant Capitalism in Early Modern Europe*, singles out the Netherlands as the archetype of the patrimonial, patriarchal society.

Political privilege was the backdrop against which the identity of family scions took shape, the setting in which specific forms of elite masculinity celebrating a man’s statist pedigree were enacted and elaborated. Perhaps this sounds strange, for the popular and scholarly image of the United Provinces is typically one of doughty individualistic burghers, not patriarchal power plays and elite lineage politics. Yet it is precisely in the Netherlands, where global capitalist dominance was grafted to localized family



Fig. 9: Anonymous, *Chaplain and Provost Dispensing Charity to a Poor Family*, ca. 1625-1630. Amsterdam, Amsterdam Museum, inv. nr. SA 1758. The house visit allowed the officers of charitable institutions to judge the eligibility of the recipients for their help.

rule, that the uneven and contradictory development definitive of early modern patrimonial states – and therefore also their empires – is starkly revealed.²²

The view of the Republic as a burgher nation has eclipsed other groups as well. The abiding importance of aristocrats, farmers, peasants, and the military caste has to be argued by historians again and again. The patricians of Holland, West Friesland, and Zeeland seem to have won an historiographical zero-sum game in which they as the winners have taken all.

Compared to What?

The disparities I have singled out between the image of the Golden Age and its record in history are becoming the mainstream attitude among specialists in each of the fields explored. There is every reason to believe that this will work its way into the media in the Netherlands and eventually abroad, in a long drawn-out and not uncontested process. What is still missing is comparative research placing the Dutch seventeenth century into meaningful juxtaposition with the rest of the world and the rest of Dutch history. Only the millennial report by Angus Maddison met this criterion, and it was limited to the economy. Comparative research into the European schools of painting that I conducted in the 1990s for the NWO project Dutch Culture in a European Perspective confirmed some expectations and confounded others. Taken over the entire century, the northern Netherlands contributed a larger number of artists than any other school. However, this effect was entirely due to a huge predominance in the first half of the century. After 1650, the Dutch school took a plunge from which it was never to recover.²³

Comparison of the division of genders in more than three thousand paintings made all over Europe between 1625 and 1675 produced more surprising results. All seventeenth-century painting favored men over women in portraiture, genre, and history painting. However, the balance was most equitable not in the northern and southern Netherlands, which were close to each other, with twice as many men as women, but in Spanish painting. This finding, which jibes with Julia Adams's verdict on the patriarchal Dutch, not only deserves further investigation on its own in feminist or masculinist studies; it also casts doubt on the value of conclusions drawn from research into Dutch painting in isolation from other schools. The same applies to everything. How can we judge the tolerance of foreign immigrants in the Netherlands without knowing what reception an immigrant of like background could expect in contemporaneous Poland – where, by the way, the kings were elected by the nobility – or the multi-cultural Ottoman Empire, or Confucian China?

Research of this kind is of the essence for improved understanding of the past. In the global present we are swamped with international rankings of social, political, and economic parameters that are not always as fair or revealing as they might be. But scholars in the humanities have tended to avoid comparative research out of a protective instinct, I believe, for the finely tuned nuances of their specialized work, for what makes their subjects unique rather than comparable to so much else. If the field of world history tends to paint things with a too broad brush, a proper response is not to avoid it but to improve it.

An Answer for Iran

What can I say, after this revisionist tour d'horizon, to my Persian interlocutor? What distinctions have we discovered in the Dutch Golden Age? Will he be uplifted to hear that the Netherlands had

- the worst inequality of wealth in all of Europe
- a criminally oppressed lower class and a chronically insecure middle class
- a false reputation for cultural exceptionalism
- overblown praise for its treatment of immigrants and minorities
- the most patriarchal society of the European ancien régime
- a world-wide belligerence that puts nineteenth-century Prussian militarism to shame?

Despite all of this, I do have a brightening answer for him. That is, that the best answer is his own question. The Dutch Golden Age has come to stand for ideals that are indeed worthy of pursuit by anyone who admires them. If the Dutch didn't always live up to their ideals – well, who does? Even if only a small minority of the population enjoyed full rights, their status was in the minds of followers in France who fought for the extension of rights to all citizens and in Helsinki to all people on the planet. The founders of the more nearly democratic United States of America, with grand ideals that are mainly honored more in the breach than in the observance, named their country for the United States of the Netherlands. If the Dutch Golden Age is known, however exaggeratedly, for religious tolerance and acceptance of difference, egalitarian social forms, fostering the arts, world-class city planning and architecture, then it must have done something right. Something that resembles its glamorous, golden image closely enough to command credence. If through the centuries the attainments of that age have become absolutized, they can easily suffer the kind of relativizing I have applied. Palpating the gap can only enrich our understanding of the ideals as well as the shortfalls.

I also have a more personal answer. In 1965 I chose to leave my country of birth, the United States, to build a life in the Netherlands. I did so in large part out of the feeling that the precious social and civic ideals that had been inculcated into me in America were more fully realized here than there. This conviction has only been reinforced by the histories of the two countries over the past 50 years. If the Netherlands has its blue provinces and red provinces, this is hardly recognized, and it does not lead to the sheer hatred dripping from American politics. The endless process of accommodation, compromise, cooptation and power-sharing constantly going on in the Netherlands today

is traceable in the Golden Age as well. Simon Schama demonstrated this beautifully in *The Embarrassment of Riches*, the book of 1986 that in 1995 inspired Evert Rongen to coin the term *poldermodel* for the Dutch style of governance.²⁴ Another disputable but inspiring and ineradicable model. Showing up the Golden Age or polder management for what they were not may not be the point. There is something in the air in this country that makes you think of cooperation, peacefulness, and contentment. That's a lot. Even if it is little more than hot air, it provides an ideal to strive for, as the people of Iran are doing today.

That present-day concerns color our view of the past is no less true for being a truism. The idea that became popular in Dutch politics in the last cabinet formation that one can jump over one's shadow – a code phrase meaning that you compromise the principles on which you were elected – that idea is false. We are locked at the feet to our shadows. Looking at that always changing form is a valuable way to see not our bright mirror image but our shadowy dark side. The best means I know for doing both is the free and unfettered study of the humanities. A university faculty of the humanities might seem like an ivory tower housing self-indulgent hobbyists, and to some degree it is and should be that. The random walk of independent characters can lead to interesting places that you would never find on a predetermined list of destinations. But even those hobbyists, quirky as they may be, cannot avoid serving another function as well, that of a sensitive instrument registering and writing up a past pregnant with the future. The study of Norwegian is different today than it was even a quarter of a century ago. Then Norway was mainly of interest for its medieval literature. Today, philosophers and historians as well as economists are intrigued by a country that invested its profits from oil and natural gas in a future-oriented pension fund rather than using them to fill holes in the current budget, with all the resulting imbalances and disruptions we are now suffering in the Netherlands. Who knows whether the Norwegian policy is not related to value systems already present in Eddic and skaldic poems?

The university itself is not an ivory tower or an island. Administration, staff, faculty, and students, real estate management and funding, responsibility for cultural heritage, are embedded in local, national, and international society and economy. They are linked to city, central, and European government and form part of the global republic of science, learning, and letters. There is no chance that all these systems will always be in synch with each other. They each have moving parts, and every so often you're going to hear the screech of metal on metal. The lubricant required is not trying to jump over your shadow, but understanding what brought yourself and the others to

where they are, and to seek out a common or at least parallel path forward. The future of the Golden Age depends on you.

Notes

1. I am deeply grateful to Lia van Gemert, Frans Grijzenhout, and Geert Janssen for honoring me with the invitation to deliver the Seventh Golden Age Lecture. This gave me the opportunity to delve into issues outside the field of art history that intrigue me and gnaw on my conscience. They and Benjamin Schmidt read earlier drafts of this text and helped me to improve the lecture. A constant source of inspiration was Rudolf Dekker's book *Meer verleden dan toekomst: geschiedenis van verdwijnend Nederland*, Amsterdam (Uitgeverij Bert Bakker) 2008.
2. See a slide show on the design of the exhibition at <http://www.ashtarydesign.com/slideshow/remb.html>. In one of the captions, the designer Kamran Ashtary says that originals could be not brought in because the insurance premium would have been prohibitive.
3. H.F.K. van Nierop, *Van ridders tot regenten: de Hollandse adel in de zestiende en de eerste helft van de zeventiende eeuw*, second, revised edition, Amsterdam (De Bataafsche Leeuw) 1990, p. 7.
4. Angus Maddison, *The World Economy: A Millennial Perspective*, Paris (OECD) 2001, tables B-2 and B-12.
5. Guy Standing, "The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class," *Policy Network*, 24 May 2011, at http://www.policy-network.net/pno_detail.aspx?ID=4004&title=+The+Precariat+%E2%80%93+The+new+dangerous+class (accessed 9 March 2015).
6. Derek Phillips, *Well-being in Amsterdam's Golden Age*, Amsterdam (Pallas Publications) 2008.
7. Lee Soltow and Jan Luiten van Zanden, *Income and Wealth Inequality in the Netherlands, 16th-20th Century*, Amsterdam (Het Spinhuis) 1998, p. 41.
8. Marten Jan Bok, "The Artist's Life," in exhib. cat. *Jan Steen, Painter and Storyteller*, Washington (National Gallery of Art) and Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum) 1996, p. 33.
9. John Michael Montias, *Vermeer and his Milieu: A Web of Social History*, Princeton (Princeton University Press) 1989, p. 212.
10. Marten Jan Bok and Gary Schwartz, "Schilderen in opdracht in Holland in de 17de eeuw," *Holland: Regionaal-historisch Tijdschrift* 23, nr. 4/5 (September 1991), pp. 183-195.
11. Eddy de Jongh, "De Nederlandse zeventiende-eeuwse schilderkunst door politieke brillen bezien," in Frans Grijzenhout and Henk van Veen (eds.), *De Gouden Eeuw in perspectief: het beeld van de Nederlandse zeventiende-eeuwse schilderkunst in later tijd*, Nijmegen (SUN) and Heerlen (OU) 1992, pp. 225-249, esp. pp. 232-236.
12. F.A.J. Vermeulen, *Handboek tot de geschiedenis der Nederlandsche bouwkunst*, vol. 3, The Hague (Martinus Nijhoff) 1943, pp. 436-438.
13. Benjamin Schmidt, *Inventing Exoticism: Geography, Globalism, and Europe's Early Modern World*, Philadelphia (University of Pennsylvania Press) 2015, p. 7.
14. Gary Schwartz, "Terms of Reception: Europeans and Persians and Each Other's Art," in Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann and Michael North (eds.), *Mediating Neth-*

- erlandish Art and Material Culture in Asia*, Amsterdam (Amsterdam University Press) 2014, pp. 25-63.
15. Repeated by Joseph Michman, Hartog Beem, and Dan Michman, *Pinkas: geschiedenis van de joodse gemeenschap in Nederland*, Amsterdam/Antwerp (Uitgeverij Contact) 1999, pp. 465-466.
 16. Joke Spaans, "A Reluctant Tolerance?" in Xander van Eck and Ruud Priem (eds.), *Traits of Tolerance: Religious Tolerance in the Golden Age*, Zwolle (Wbooks) and Utrecht (Museum Catharijneconvent) 2013, pp. 15-25, p. 20.
 17. Salvador Bloemgarten, "Die brutale Joden," *Ons Amsterdam*, November-December 2011, accessed on 12 March 2015 at <http://www.onsamsterdam.nl/tijdschrift/jaargang-2011/1158-nummer-11-12-november-december-2011?start=6>.
 18. Judith Pollmann, *Catholic Identity and the Revolt of the Netherlands, 1520-1635*, Oxford and New York (Oxford University Press) 2011, pp. 7-8.
 19. Henk van Nierop, *Het verraad van het Noorderkwartier: oorlog, terreur en recht in de Nederlandse opstand*, Amsterdam (Uitgeverij Bert Bakker) 1999, p. 19.
 20. Olaf van Nimwegen, *The Dutch Army and the Military Revolutions, 1588-1688*, Woodbridge (The Boydell Press) 2010, p. 301.
 21. Robert Fruin, "Bijdrage tot de geschiedenis van het Burgemeesterschap van Amsterdam tijdens de Republiek," in P.J. Blok, P.L. Muller, and S. Muller Fz. (eds.), *Robert Fruin's verspreide geschriften, met aantekeningen, toevoegsels en verbeteringen uit des schrijvers nalatenschap*, vol. IV, *Historische opstellen*, The Hague (Martinus Nijhoff) 1901, pp. 305-337, p. 325.
 22. Julia Adams, *The Familial State: Ruling Families and Merchant Capitalism in Early Modern Europe*, Ithaca and London (Cornell University Press) 2005, p. 4.
 23. Willem Frijhoff and Marijke Spies, *1650: Hard-won Unity*, vol. 1 of *Dutch Culture in a European Perspective*, Assen (Royal Van Gorcom) and Basingstoke (Palgrave Macmillan) 1999. Douwe Fokkema and Frans Grijzenhout (eds.), *Accounting for the Past, 1650-2000*, vol. 5 of *Dutch Culture in a European Perspective*, Assen (Royal Van Gorcom) and Basingstoke (Palgrave Macmillan) 2001.
 24. Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*, New York (Alfred A. Knopf) 1987.

Previous Golden Age Lectures

1. Christopher Brown, *The Dutchness of Dutch Art*, 2002
2. Jonathan Israel, *Monarchy, Orangism, and Republicanism in the Later Dutch Golden Age*, 2004
3. James D. Tracy, *For Holland's Garden: The War Aims of the States of Holland, 1572-1588*, 2004
4. Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Muslims in the Dutch Golden Age: Representations and realities of religious toleration*, 2006
5. Eddy Grootes, *Hoe te leven, hoe te overleven? Huygens' Dagh-werck en Hoofds Dankbaar genoegen*, 2008
6. Steven Nadler, *Spinoza and Toleration*, 2010

The Golden Age Lectures are organized by the Amsterdam Centre for the Study of the Golden Age, at the University of Amsterdam. All Golden Age Lectures are freely accessible at www.aup.nl/series/golden-age-lectures.