

The Guilder and the Golden Age

A nation sails out to make its fortune: Holland in the 17th century

In the 17th century Holland was the most important trading nation in the Old World. The ruling class of merchants lived in the lap of luxury, and the guilder lived up to its name, gilding the good fortune of a nation that was ahead of the rest of Europe, showing the others the way.

Liberation from Spain and fairytale prosperity

At last! Holland had managed to cast off the yoke of brutal foreign rule and liberated itself from Spain. It became independent, and it grasped the opportunity and moved forwards into the sunlit uplands of a brilliant future that seemed to flow with milk and honey, butter and gold coins. Whereas the southern provinces of the Netherlands remained Catholic, and under Spanish rule, the Protestant provinces in the north seceded in 1579 and united into a union of seven provinces: Geldern, Holland, Zeeland, Utrecht, Friesland, Overijssel and Groningen. The United Netherlands, the "States General" proclaimed their independence from Spain in 1581. In the Peace of Westphalia of 1648, the independence of the Republic of the Netherlands was recognised.

What went on in the first and middle decades of the 17th century in the up-and-coming Netherlands and on the trade routes of the modern world was like a fairytale. But in reality it was the achievement of an active, energetic, open, industrious, materialistic, and even cunning, trading spirit that was unique in the Europe of those days. Whereas in the rest of Europe life generally went on in an old-fashioned, unprosperous way, the Dutch set out into the world, and with their large trading fleet brought back fruit, tea, spices, diamonds, porcelain and other luxury goods from distant continents. They set up a flourishing trade in those goods in Europe. The Dutch were the first important trading nation of the modern world. They laid the foundations for a new age, and like a flagship, they showed the rest of Europe the way.

Holland first! The leading seapower and trading nation in Europe

The wide-awake and businesslike Dutch dominated the Baltic trade during the whole of the brilliant 17th century. They had the world's largest trading fleet, and created a monopoly of maritime power; they sailed boldly to all parts of the world, including those restricted to the colonial trade of Spain and Portugal, they put a finger into every pie and founded colonial settlements of their own in the East Indies, South America, the West Indies and North America. In 1626, on a little island on the east coast of North America, they founded New Amsterdam, now called New York. They sailed to South Africa, and in 1652, where Cape Town now stands, they founded a supply station for their sea routes to India. A Dutchman called Schouten from the town of Hoorn sailed round the southern tip of South America in 1616 and named it after his home town – Cape Horn. And before Australia was called Australia, it was called New Holland. The extraordinary thing was that this almost worldwide dominance in trade was achieved by a small people, most of whom inhabited a narrow strip on the edge of Europe. Their various trading companies were united in 1602 into the *Netherlands East India Company*. In 1610, in their East Indian possessions, they founded their main base, Batavia, now called Djakarta.

But in contrast to all that, back home in Holland there arose a cosy, comfortably bourgeois society, which enjoyed the wealth that its own trading energy had brought, and lived life to the full, with relish and good spirit. It was quite a different sort of life from that overseas and on the world's

oceans; it was the haven of comfort – the home, the richly decked table, the finely furnished room, in which the interiors were collected together that we see in Dutch paintings, all of which was brought by Dutch ships from overseas, or created by industrious Dutch workers at home.

God in Holland: religion and science

It almost looked as if the Dutch had a better God than other nations, and as if their God wanted to show the Protestants in the northern Netherlands that Calvin was right when he said that the grace of God would manifest itself in the wealth of citizens. Their Calvinism seemed to lend the Dutch wings. But in that rich and colourful age, at the same time as the harbours of Holland were full of heavily laden ships, in which not only the amount of money in circulation increased, but also the waistlines of the bourgeois merchants and rulers, at that same time the Calvinist clergy were preaching against excess and extravagance – while they themselves of course also enjoyed sitting at those tables, on which the best of everything from all over the world and from their own land and sea was dished up so richly and generously.

The printer Ludwig Elzevier settled in Leiden in 1580. It was the beginning of a time of great prosperity for his family firm, which became famous for its duodecimo editions, little small-format editions, clearly printed, of such authors as Milton, Calvin, Descartes, Corneille, Molière and Grotius. At the same time, the sciences were flourishing, and Leiden was their centre: Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), the famous legal expert, originator of the concept of international law, published his "Freedom of the Seas" in 1609, and in 1625 "On the Law of War and Peace". In Holland at that time, the philosophers and authors Baruch de Spinoza (1632-1677) and René Descartes (1596-1650) were active. The Dutch theologian G.J. Vossius (1577-1649), a friend of Grotius, was a teacher of philology and head of the State College in Leiden, and was later appointed professor of Rhetoric and Greek. Holland was not only a flourishing centre of business, but a centre of science and poetry.

Peace and Plenty - swimming in money

In 1601, the States of Friesland ordered a silver coin to be minted with a value of 28 stivers or one gold guilder. At first this coin was called "silver gold-guilder", but soon came to be called "florin", after the Latin Name "Florenus" that appeared on the coins. In the 17th century the florin was minted mainly in the eastern Netherlands, and held its own against the later guilder of 28 stivers.

In the course of the 17th century, the coinage in circulation came to be dominated more and more by weaker coins such as the taler, the florin, the shilling, the double stiver and the stiver. As a result, the large silver coins such as ducats, reichstalers and lowentalers acquired a higher worth than their nominal value and disappeared from circulation.

Guilders galore! Money multiplied like herrings – the Dutch fished the choicest morsels out of the sea of money, and, with their business acumen, managed to make more and more out of their guilders.

Stock exchange fever in Amsterdam

The men of the church did not only preach against gluttony and luxury. They also attacked forgery or the dilution of the currency by the use of tin or lead instead of silver, a serious crime in a country which was in any case flooded with hard currency. But the new church of the wealthy dealers was the Bourse, the stock exchange, in Amsterdam. The Dutch were the real founders of the modern stock market and futures market. The "tulip crash" of 1637 was the first stock exchange crash in history.

In 1609 an exchange bank was established in Amsterdam. Their new wealth made the Dutch the "bankers of Europe". Since Dutch seamen also acted as middlemen for the whole of Europe, their merchant fleet was three times as large as that of any other state. So the wealth of Holland, and the value of the shares in the West India and East India companies rose immensely.

The riches of artistic wealth: "painted good fortune"

At the same time as the economic boom, there was a flowering of painting throughout the Netherlands. Never at any other time in the history of art has there been such an abundance of great master painters in so small a space.

The most famous of them in the southern Netherlands, in Flanders, was Peter Paul Rubens, (1577-1640), richly favoured by fortune, not only because he commanded the most square feet for his paintings in museums, but because of his imagination, the richness of his representational luxuriance and the material monumentality with which he treated mythological and historical scenes. As a painter he was colourful, sensuous, able to impress everyone with sheer size and drama. The brilliant flowering of painting in Flanders is also exemplified by Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641). His fame rests above all on his portraits; he worked in the workshops of Rubens, and after his travels, he became the celebrated court painter to King Charles I in London.

Jakob Jordaens (1593-1678) was apart from Rubens and van Dyck the most important Flemish painter of the 17th century. He created above all genre paintings and conversation pieces.

In the southern Netherlands there also lived and worked the painter Adriaen Brouwer (1606-1638), who painted the lively domestic and country scenes and festivals, the rustic fighting and drinking scenes in which he gives us a cheerful picture of the lives of simple peasants and workmen. They are genre paintings, painted with an imaginative and ingenious humour such as was found all over the Netherlands at this time.

Light and colour

The lasting success of Dutch world trade and the increasing prosperity of the country and its population also gave birth to a brilliant flowering of painting and graphic art in the cities of the northern Netherlands, which, like the burst of economic prosperity, was unique in the history of Europe. The bourgeois possessors of wealth and power demanded self-portrayal, they wanted to be immortalised in paint. The golden age of Dutch painting in the north was inspired and commissioned by a wealthy merchant class, who wanted to see themselves, their possessions and their prosperity depicted in beautiful, realistic paintings, the "windows of art". What we can experience through those paintings is an evocation of reality, one of the most impressive tableaux in recent art history. They afford us a realistic view of that time and its people; they form, as it were, a family album of Dutch history.

Among its famous artists were Frans Hals (1580/81-1666) in Haarlem, who painted wonderfully vivid portraits and scenes, of peasants, soldiers, fishermen and citizens. Jan van Goyen (1596-1656) was one of the best and most famous landscape artists of his time. Jan Steen (1626-1679), a pupil of van Goyen, was the most versatile portrayer of the life of the ordinary people in Holland, as was Gerard Ter Borch (1617-1681), who painted charming genre pictures of domestic scenes, and also portraits. Jacob van Ruisdael (1628/29-1682) painted mainly landscapes and town views. Jan Vermeer van Delft (1632-1675) was one of the greatest painters of the 17th century. The light and the brilliance of his pictures are impressive; he achieves his effects through the fineness of his expression and his uniqueness. Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn (1606-1669), the painting philosopher, was the genius who fascinates us most in his Biblical and landscape subjects.

In the art of etching, too, Rembrandt was also a master, commanding a wide range of expression, able to put foregrounds so charmingly into the background and to bring the far distance so delightfully right up to us.

Pictures speak, words portray

Pictures have an international language, but literature is always restricted to a particular language. That may be the reason why Dutch painting has become world-famous, while the writers of that time have remained almost unknown outside their own country. Dutch literature grew out of an intellectual soil on which many books were printed and sold, where the spirit of Erasmus of Rotterdam and humanism still flourished. Some of the famous authors of that time were Joost van den Vondel (1587-1679), Jacob Cats (1577-1660) and Constantijn Huygens (1596-1687)

Adventurous voyages and the spice of life

The best of life is often described as the spice of life. And spices were part of what brought the Dutch the best of everything. But sea voyages have their losers as well as winners. Many an adventurer has found that fortune did not smile on him, or the ocean took him into a watery grave. The Dutch, too, both overseas and at home, were only human. What else could they be? After all, they had their painting philosophers and graphic artists at home, who kept holding up a mirror to the beauties of their life and activities.

But in pictorial and historical memory, the Netherlands remain a land of milk and honey, where money seemed to grow on trees. In history, as in cultural history, nothing is conceivable without its prehistory or its anecdotes. It almost seemed as if the land of milk and honey that Pieter Bruegel painted in the middle of the 16th century had come true, and as if the Dutch had discovered the source of all wealth. Or as if the Dutch had taken seriously Pieter Bruegel's portrayal of Dutch proverbs, one of which shows a ship in the distance on the sea, with the proverb "One must sail whenever the wind blows".

Britain takes over the lead

Every golden age is followed by another age in which others manage to seize the advantage. The success of the Dutch had long been a thorn in the flesh of the English. Having defeated the proud Spanish Armada (1588), they too wanted to share in riches and trade, and in the course of time they overtook the Dutch overseas, both on land and sea. After the two Anglo-Dutch wars (1652-1654 and 1664-1667), the star of Holland at sea began to sink, but at home they continued to enjoy a long sunset and the fruits of their trade. In 1667 Britain received New Amsterdam, which was renamed New York. And that marked the beginning of the Anglo-Saxon age, on the oceans of the world and in the colonial world.