



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Introduction: Understanding the Dutch Golden Age

Helmets, H.J.; Janssen, G.H.

DOI

[10.1017/9781316771549.004](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316771549.004)

Publication date

2018

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

The Cambridge Companion to the Dutch Golden Age

License

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Helmets, H. J., & Janssen, G. H. (2018). Introduction: Understanding the Dutch Golden Age. In H. J. Helmets, & G. H. Janssen (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Dutch Golden Age* (pp. 1-12). (Cambridge Companions to Culture). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316771549.004>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Introduction: Understanding the Dutch Golden Age

Even today few people are unaffected by the term ‘Dutch Golden Age’. So commonly has the phrase been applied to the Dutch seventeenth century in, for instance, museums, (art) history books, and tourist guides that it seldom fails to conjure up a range of iconic associations. For many, it will evoke pictures by Rembrandt, Vermeer, Hals, or one of the many other only slightly less famous painters. Others associate it primarily with Dutch economic prosperity and the Republic’s trade empire, and might envision the rich merchant houses along the Amsterdam canals, Delftware, or the great East Indiamen of the VOC. Some will think of one or two of the many wars fought by the Dutch Republic, most likely the Revolt against Habsburg Spain, the three naval wars against England, or the battles against Louis XIV’s France. Grotius, Huygens, Spinoza, and the great intellectual achievements of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic might be less prominent in the minds of most people, as would be the rest of its immense textual heritage, but still one can expect one or two mentions from that field as well. And that is only scratching the surface: evidently, the Dutch Golden Age connotes a great many very disparate things that are nevertheless distinctive enough to be called Dutch.

All such – largely positive – associations are tinged with wonder. From the seventeenth century onwards, observers of the Dutch miracle have asked themselves how a small country, with barely two million inhabitants, could have achieved prominence in such varied fields of human endeavour and competition. Explanations, then and later, have ranged widely. Seventeenth-century Protestant observers were convinced that the Dutch were God’s chosen people, and their country a New Israel, which owed its prosperity to divine providence. Other

contemporaries, such as Hugo Grotius and William Temple, sought the explanation in the history of the Low Countries and the honest and simple character of its people. Modern scholars, by contrast, have stressed the innovative characteristics of the Dutch economy, the strength and flexibility of Dutch institutions, its deliberative political culture, and its well-financed, innovative, and powerful army.¹ Like their early modern counterparts, however, they have focused on the Republic's unique achievements and tended to locate the solution of the 'Dutch enigma', as Maarten Prak termed it, in the Dutch Republic itself.²

This, evidently, is what speaking of a 'Golden Age' encourages us to do: in modern usage, it commonly serves to celebrate the sum of all the great achievements of any national community in a certain period of time, whether it be the Spanish Golden Age, Victorian England, or the Dutch Golden Age. In this manner nineteenth-century historians applied it to the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. Brimming with nostalgia, the term 'golden age' served to kindle the ambition of their own period to retrieve the national greatness of the past in the service of the nascent nation-state. This enterprise was remarkably successful. The Golden Age, both the phrase and the historical period it describes, became entrenched in Dutch memory, a cornerstone of Dutch national identity. Even today, many people in the Netherlands pride themselves on their glorious, enterprising history, much like the Victorian empire still inspires nostalgia and pride in Britain. Speaking of a Golden Age quite deliberately invites a focus on the nation.

There is an even older layer to the concept of the Golden Age that also resonates in modern usage. When early modern people thought about a Golden Age, they associated it with the classical literature of Ovid and Virgil, who had described the golden age in pastoral terms, as a time of innocence and leisure, when people lived peacefully in natural environments untainted by war. Joost van den Vondel, the Amsterdam poet laureate, translated Ovid to describe exactly this (writ. 1656, pub. 1671):

the Golden Age, which, inclined
To virtue, loved justice naturally.

...

It was forever spring, and the western breeze
In clear sunshine did with lukewarm breath caress
The flowers, which sprang from the earth afresh

The clay, untilled, freely supported grassy meadows,
 The field tirelessly yielded pregnant shafts of wheat.
 Honey and nectar flowed like water.³

This Edenic landscape, in which humans could live in prelapsarian bliss, and divine justice ruled, was truly the stuff of mythology, seemingly unconnected to Vondel's own day and age. Since this classical interpretation of the Golden Age dominated in the seventeenth century, it has long been thought that the modern idea of a Golden Age was applied to the Dutch Republic only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The phrase 'Dutch Golden Age' has yet to be found in seventeenth-century sources. Only in 1719, when the Dutch had begun to sense their diminished importance, did the painter Arnold Houbraken lament the end of 'the Golden Age' of Dutch art.⁴ Yet clearly both Vondel and his readers also associated the easy and carefree mythological era with their own period.

Indeed, seventeenth-century literature and art have done much to craft an image of the Dutch Golden Age as an age of bourgeois innocence, untouched by the harsh realities of money and power. This appears, for example, in another poem by Vondel, in which he applied the term to a new *polder*, the Beemster, which had recently been drained by Jan Adriaansz Leeghwater:

People dance and dine in the merchant's rich vicinity
 Here shines the Golden Age, in lovely bowers of bliss
 It fears not war, and circumnavigates all cliffs.⁵

This poem was written for one of the great investors in the ambitious land reclamation project, Karel Looten, whom Vondel praised for the Ovid-like metamorphosis of sea into land which his capital had brought about. Quite problematically, Vondel extolled the rich speculant's newfound leisure (on land that was also new) as a primordial state of innocence, a new beginning, thus providing the burgher audience with a self-congratulatory pastoral fantasy.⁶

In the mid seventeenth century, when the Republic was at the height of its power, such topical-pastoral images had become widespread. The idea that the Dutch Republic had recreated the Ovidian Golden Age clearly fuelled this fashion. Johan van Heemskerck's *Batavian Arcadia* (1637) is a case in point. This was a highly successful pastoral text in prose and rhyme, with realistic descriptions of peaceful Dutch

landscapes in which young amorous shepherds discussed recent Dutch history and the war with Spain. Explicitly designed to instil in Dutch youths a love for their country and pious awe for their Creator, *Batavian Arcadia* evidently played with the idea of a self-made Golden Age. Later estate poems such as Constantijn Huygens' *Hofwijck* (1653) and Jacob Cats' *Sorgh-vliet* (1655), helped by the fact that the words 'court' and 'garden' were homonyms in early modern Dutch, similarly described man-made Dutch Arcadias, peaceful gardens that were places of refuge from the hectic world of politics. In these poems, an elderly landowner could reflect in arcadian, aristocratic retreat on his own achievements as well as the recent turmoils of the state.⁷ In painting, too, Dutchified arcadias were all the rage. Inspired by pastoral scenes painted for the stadholder's court in the 1630s, burghers increasingly had themselves portrayed in pastoral surroundings.⁸ The bourgeois desire to escape from the bustle of their towns into fearless pastoral pastimes also underpins the immensely popular landscapes by Ruysdael, Hobbema, Potter, and others that held up agrarian idylls to their civic beholders, the plump cattle populating them connoting Dutch prosperity. Such textual and visual images helped to create a notion of the Dutch Golden Age as a peaceful age of sociable bourgeois free living. This image was created by and for a burgher class that was responding to the new realities of city life in the most urbanized part of Europe, and that loved to revel in, or dream of, the innocent countryside. Celebrating its own almost godlike, land-creating achievements, this class went from waves to wealth and wanted to know it.

Dirck Hals' famous *Garden Party (Buitenpartij)*, with its gathering of fashionable city folk, offers a wonderful illustration of this pastoral ideal (Figure 0.1). Showing a prosperous burgher company in a presumably Dutch countryside, Hals depicted exactly the kind of gathering Vondel referred to. Yet his painting also reveals some of the tensions inherent in that ideal. The conspicuous display of rich clothing, for instance, contrasts sharply with the simplicity of Golden Age shepherds. The introduction of exotic elements such as the chained monkey and the parrots, but also the Italianate architecture of the country house in the background, complicate Vondel's *polder* poetry, suggest a desire to be more or even other than Dutch, and hint at the world of commerce and travel that introduced them. Finally, the sword and the ruinous remains of a pillar in the foreground are indications



Figure 0.1 Dirck Hals, *Garden Party*, 1627.

that Hals' peaceful idyll is in fact situated in a landscape that has seen its share of violence and decay.

Then as now, the glitter of a Golden Age, still so prominent in modern museums, obscured many other, less glittering aspects from view. As in Roman literature, pastoral articulations of a re-actualized Golden Age paradoxically, and implicitly, functioned in a discourse of empire and power. If the new Beemster *polder* allowed the Amsterdam elites to taste the pleasures of Virgil's *Georgics*, Amsterdam, by the mid seventeenth century, resembled Virgil's Rome, hoarding the treasures of the world and commanding the seas. The city virgin that was so proudly displayed on Amsterdam's new Town Hall neatly exemplifies the connection between the pastoral and empire. Essentially a pastoral character (she also figured in Heemskerck's *Batavian Arcadia*) this composed, beautiful young girl, sitting atop Amsterdam's newly built centre of power, is shown receiving the rich spoils from all over the world as if nature itself wanted her in her idleness to receive it. She is the ultimate symbol uniting the seemingly irreconcilable states of leisurely innocence and world dominance. We can see how such appropriations of the pastoral Golden Age quite purposefully hide the less appealing aspects of the readily available tropes: the fierce power struggles both inside and outside the Republic; the violent colonial enterprise that brought about the slave trade and the human suffering

required to sustain prosperity in the neat Dutch cities is conveniently replaced by a deserving personification of purity.

At the same time, the literature and the art of the seventeenth century that helped to create the image of a golden age for future generations also breathe a deep awareness of the fragility of human endeavour and power. Indeed, as in classical literature, the very idea of a Golden Age was wound up inextricably with its own demise. Nicolas Poussin, one of the great French painters of the period, most memorably depicted this ambiguity when he painted a tomb in a pastoral landscape with the inscription *'et in arcadia ego'*: even in a Golden Age, there was no escape from death or decay, and even in a pastoral environment war might eventually penetrate. This awareness of the frailty of peace, and the need to protect the vulnerable country, was fed continuously in the Dutch Republic by the trope of the 'Garden of Holland', another common image in the art of the period that alluded to the Golden Age by presenting the province of Holland or the Republic as a whole as an enclosed garden, which needed to be fiercely guarded by a vigilant protector (usually the Dutch stadholder) against a dangerous and hostile outside world.⁹ Needless to say, such representations of the Dutch Republic as an enclosed, peaceful space, as a victim of foreign aggression and as dependent on a male descendant of William of Orange were just as ideologically charged as Vondel's poem on the Beemster. The iconic power of such images has proven very difficult to combat.

The Rise of the United Provinces

Behind the Dutch Golden Age's glittering mystique lies a complex and troubled past. Indeed, few would have predicted the emergence of a thriving Dutch Republic in the northern Low Countries in the sixteenth century. Strategically located between France, England and the Holy Roman Empire, the Netherlandish provinces had long been a key possession of the Spanish-Habsburg dynasty in northern Europe. Local opposition against monarchical rule and religious divisions caused by the Protestant Reformation, however, triggered an outbreak of violence and rebellion in the 1560s. This messy Dutch Revolt would continue for several decades, eventually splitting the area into north and south. The seven northern provinces, among them Holland, developed into

an independent, predominantly Protestant state known at the time as the United Provinces (see Map 1). The southern provinces, including the larger parts of Flanders and Brabant, remained under Spanish-Habsburg rule.

The creation of the United Provinces, then, was largely unforeseen and accidental. Nor was this new polity planned to be a republic. The Act of Abjuration of 1581, in which the rebel States General had deposed their Habsburg prince (Philip II of Spain), was initially intended to offer sovereign powers to the French or English crown. Only when these attempts failed did the rebels decide to leave the post of sovereign vacant for the time being, thus creating a new, republican federation. Political theories that underpinned Dutch republicanism were formulated after the fact, and full-swing republicanism never found wide support. The devotion to the House of Orange – the descendants of rebel leader William of Orange – is only one indication of many that popular culture remained as deeply affected by the magic of monarchism as it did elsewhere in Europe.¹⁰ The Dutch Republic's religious identity was similarly ambiguous. Officially a Protestant, Calvinist state, the United Provinces became a multi-confessional society that included a sizeable Catholic minority and, in some areas, Jewish communities.

If the Dutch Republic was an accidental creation, its rise to wealth and power, meteoric as it was, was also a highly contingent development and was under continuous threat from within as well as from without. From the 1580s, large-scale waves of immigration from the southern provinces confronted the rebel provinces, greatly bolstering their economy. Trading interests and the military conflict against Habsburg Spain encouraged the Dutch to attack Iberian possessions in Asia and the Americas and to forge a global maritime empire of their own. Sophisticated urban industries in Holland and a highly productive agricultural sector added to economic progress. Thanks to foreign and domestic immigration, the population of Amsterdam, Haarlem, Leiden, and many other towns was booming. A growing class of prosperous urban citizens thus fuelled and transformed the market, not least that of luxury products such as painting, decorative arts, and books.

When the Dutch concluded a temporary peace agreement with Habsburg Spain in 1609, the United Provinces had established themselves as a leading commercial power in Europe, with growing interests

in Asia and the Atlantic world. War continued after 1621, and it was only in 1648 that the king of Spain formally recognized the independent Dutch state at the peace conference of Westphalia. As had happened during the temporary accord of 1609–21 (the Twelve Years' Truce), the treaty of 1648 triggered domestic political conflicts. Discussions within the public, Reformed Church added to these tensions. Having grown out of military conflict, the United Provinces clearly found it difficult to cope with peace. Partly for this reason, but mainly to defend its advantageous trade position, the Dutch were soon embroiled in new armed struggles – with England, Sweden, and France – which occupied Europe in the second half of the century.

Owing to its ambiguous origins, the Dutch political system remained a peculiar mix of former Habsburg institutions that were adapted to new, republican practices. The stadholder, for example, had been a royal governor in one or more of the Netherlandish provinces under Philip II. After the revolt, he became a civil servant of the States (which regarded themselves as the new sovereigns) but also developed into a quasi-monarchical figure. As a rule, only descendants and relatives of rebel leader William of Orange were called to the prestigious office. The political and military ambitions of the princes of Orange regularly clashed with those of mercantile urban elites, notably those of Holland. Providing more than 50 per cent of all tax revenues, the province of Holland also supplied many of the Republic's great statesmen, such as Johan van Oldenbarnevelt and Johan de Witt. It is perhaps typical that both men were executed after domestic conflicts that involved the Orange dynasty. The United Provinces were not quite as united and peaceful as their name and reputation suggests.

Barely a century after its emergence, the Dutch Republic almost came to an end. In 1672 a mixture of economic rivalry, religious tensions, and diplomatic agitations led to a joint military attack by France, England, and the bishoprics of Cologne and Münster. The United Provinces miraculously survived the invasion, but their economy was hit severely, and the following decades were marked by continuing armed conflicts with Louis XIV's France. While the financial burdens of war grew, the Republic's maritime rivals gradually overtook the Dutch dominance in shipping and trading. Soon after the Glorious Revolution (1689) transformed Stadholder William III of Orange into king of England, the glory of the United Provinces faded. William now commanded a formidable alliance, and the Dutch military was still one of the strongest in Europe.

In 1713, when the peace of Utrecht formally ended an era of almost forty years of war with France, the Dutch could still cheer that they and their allies had contained Louis XIV's France. But they had punched above their weight, and the economy was exhausted. The Golden Age was definitively over.

Historians and the Dutch Golden Age

We live and think by the terms we use, and therefore it may not be altogether surprising that the historiography of the Dutch Golden Age in some ways reflects the mythology of the golden age invoked by seventeenth-century artists. Firstly, it has long perpetuated the myth that this Golden Age was, quite simply, Dutch, rooted in the clay celebrated in Vondel's Dutch verses. The great cultural historian Johan Huizinga argued that the 'Dutch were the exception, not the rule'.¹¹ As a result, the Dutch Republic has frequently been viewed as the 'Garden of Holland': an enclosed space of bourgeois exception surrounded by aggressive monarchs. Recent historians have been more sensitive to the perils of trying to understand the Dutch Republic in isolation,¹² not only because the Dutch economic and military successes were highly dependent on the ill fortune and civil wars of their rivals, but also because many of those who contributed to its material wealth, military might, and cultural vitality were actually immigrants. Recognizing that Dutch prosperity, strength, and creative energy were highly dependent on foreign imports and international networks, recent research tends to view the Dutch Republic not as the exception of Europe, but as its product.

It has also proven difficult to escape from the narrative of the fall inherent in the Golden Age myth. In prominent accounts of the Dutch Republic the eighteenth century is still the iron age to the golden seventeenth. Here too, a broader, international perspective helps to nuance the classical figure. It is highly questionable, after all, whether it was the Dutch Republic that changed, or the world outside it. Many of the characteristics that historians have mentioned as pre-conditions for the Dutch Golden Age were still in place in the eighteenth century. The end of the Golden Age, one might well argue, was the rise of Britain and France, not the fall of the Dutch. Those new imperial powers lured Dutch investors as well as Dutch artists to foreign capitals. That,

however, did not make those artists any less Dutch than Spinoza Portuguese. In the end, any golden age is the result of international mobilities that defy essentializing national appropriation, as the movement of power, capital, and creative energy depends on the actual movement of people who are not easily categorized.

Finally, and most harmfully, there has long been a tendency to disconnect the history of Dutch imperialism and colonialism from the history of the Dutch Golden Age. The global dimension of the Dutch Republic is usually discussed in separate books, journals, or occasionally a separate chapter. This is a choice with great ideological implications: to disconnect such subjects from the history of the Dutch Republic proper is to reproduce the fantasy figure depicted on the pediment of Amsterdam Town Hall: it allows the mental compartmentalization of the less appealing sides of the Golden Age that are in fact inextricably connected to the positive tropes usually associated to it.

Unlike early modern observers, this book cannot claim that the Dutch Republic's ascent to prominence was the providential destiny of God's chosen nation. Unlike past generations of scholars, it follows recent historians in rejecting the idea that the Dutch Republic was an exception in Europe, which was able to prosper because somehow its condition, its people, and their mentalities were different from those of other states, and which was therefore best studied in isolation. Understanding the Dutch Golden Age means to appreciate its remarkability while acknowledging its darker sides, the incongruities in its culture, the contingencies in its development, and its dependence on and interactions with European and global developments.

Instead of providing a new, comprehensive narrative of rise and fall, this book seeks to emphasize the paradoxes and silences in the historiography of this central region in Europe. While providing traditional perspectives to readers unfamiliar with seventeenth-century Dutch history, we have chosen to present the Dutch Republic as comparable to other societies in Europe. Various chapters in this book deal with subjects that have *not* become iconic of the Dutch Golden Age, such as 'the cult of war and violence', 'classicism', and 'spiritual culture', but that are central to a full understanding of the period nevertheless. It also follows that the Dutch presence in Asia, Africa, and the Atlantic world constitutes an integral part of the book.

The seven parts of this volume reflect our aim to investigate the Dutch Republic from a cultural historical, less exceptionalist, and

more global perspective. Part I, 'Space and People', deals with the social and geographical structures that shaped Dutch society and which have been much researched in recent decades. Here, perhaps, Dutch exceptionalism is not entirely wrong: the Rhine and Meuse delta in which the Dutch state took shape was in many ways an exceptional part of Europe. Fortunately located, it offered protection from invasion, opportunities for traffic and trade, and rich agricultural soil. Unlike the landscape of the Ovidian Golden Age, however, it was also a labour-intensive landscape, which required constant human intervention and maintenance to become arable and prevent floodings. Part II, 'A State of War', investigates the all-important business of war, and asks how near-continuous warfare shaped Dutch society, politics, and mentalities. Part III, 'Political Culture', describes the complex functioning of the decentralized Dutch state, and the culture of debate at its heart. Deliberation, the prevalent political mode, brought with it many perils – as the Dutch were acutely aware – such as ungovernability or civil war. But when managed well, as the most talented politicians of the century could, it also had great advantages. 'Economy and Trade', Part IV, is not coincidentally the central part of the volume. Dealing both with the question of whether the Dutch Republic was indeed the first modern market economy and with the subject of global trade, it tackles some of the most-debated issues in past and current scholarship. Part V, on 'Religious Culture', perhaps best exemplifies our aim to provide a non-exceptionalist account: here the focus is not only on Dutch Calvinism and tolerance, the more exceptional aspects of Dutch religious culture, but also on religious pluralism and the spiritual culture which it shared with its neighbours. While painting, architecture, and publishing are present throughout the book, Part VI, 'Art and Literature', focuses on questions specific to cultural production, looking both at the specific genres that have so deeply affected our image of the Golden Age and at the particular markets for books and paintings. In Part VII, 'Realms of Knowledge', finally, we enter the realm of the mind. Often neglected in books on the Dutch Republic, its education, scholarship, and science were in fact foundational, for its international allure, for its maritime success, and for its societal development.

The mentalities of most of the Dutch Republic's inhabitants, the organization of its economy, its politics, and even its religion, we believe, were subject to largely the same kind of discussions and pressures found elsewhere. Instead of foregrounding distinctness, we have

therefore chosen to highlight the connections between Dutch culture and other cultures on which it depended and with which it stood in continuous and intensive contact. If the Dutch Republic developed into something quite extraordinary, this was not the result of innate difference, but rather of its manifold interactions and connections with other societies.

Notes

1. J. L. Price, *The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century*, Basingstoke, 1998; M. Prak, *The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century: A Golden Age*, Cambridge, 2005.
2. Prak, *The Dutch Republic*, 1–6.
3. Translated from J. van Vondel, 'P. Ovidius Nazoos Herscheppinge', in J. F. M. Sterck et al. (eds.), *De werken van Vondel. Zevende deel: Vertalingen uit het Latijn van Vergilius, Horatius en Ovidius*, Amsterdam, 1934, 408, ll. 131–137.
4. A. Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen (1719)*, vol. II, Amsterdam, 1976, 237.
5. Translated from J. van Vondel, 'De Beemster. Voor Karel Looten' (c. 1644), in J. F. M. Sterck et al. (eds.), *De werken van Vondel. Vierde deel 1640–1645*, Amsterdam, 1930, 609, ll. 14–16.
6. See A.-J. Gelderblom, 'Dichter bij een droogmakerij', in E. K. Grootes and S. Witstein (eds.), *Visies op Vondel na 300 jaar*, The Hague, 1979, 104–17.
7. W. B. de Vries, *Wandeling en verhandeling. De ontwikkeling van het Nederlandse hofdicht in de zeventiende eeuw (1613–1710)*, Hilversum, 1998.
8. M. Westermann, *The Art of the Dutch Republic*, New York, 1996, 40; A. McNeil Kettering, *The Dutch Arcadia: Pastoral Art and Its Audiences in the Golden Age*, Woodbridge, 1983.
9. P. J. van Winter, 'De Hollandse tuin', *Nederlands kunsthistorisch jaarboek 8 (1957)*, 29–121.
10. A. Weststeijn, *Commercial Republicanism in the Dutch Golden Age*, Leiden, 2011; J. Stern, *Orangism in the Dutch Republic in Word and Image*, Manchester, 2010.
11. J. Huizinga, *Dutch Civilisation in the Seventeenth Century*, New York, 1969, 11.
12. K. Davids and J. Lucassen (eds.), *A Miracle Mirrored: The Dutch Republic in European Perspective*, Cambridge, 1995; W. Frijhoff and M. Spies, *Dutch Culture in a European Perspective*, vol. I, 1650: Hard-Won Unity, Basingstoke, 2004.