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Epilogue: The Legacy of the Dutch Golden Age

To appreciate the legacy of the Dutch Golden Age, one does not need to travel very far. Across the world – from London and Moscow to Melbourne and New York – museums hold extensive collections of seventeenth-century Dutch art. Indeed, the majority of surviving works by Rembrandt and Vermeer are to be found outside the current Netherlands. This remarkable global distribution, somewhat similar to the diffusion of Italian Renaissance art, started early. Princes and connoisseurs throughout early modern Europe collected landscapes, still lifes, and genre paintings from the United Provinces. Catherine the Great of Russia, for one, enthusiastically expanded the tsarist holdings, turning St Petersburg into one of the largest storerooms of Dutch masters up until the present-day. The greatest sell-off, however, happened in the nineteenth century. Confronted with debts, the heirs of King William II decided to send the royal collection of paintings to auction in 1850. Virtually all lots, including iconic pieces by Rembrandt, Hobbema, and Ruysdael went to foreign buyers, eventually ending up on the walls of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York City), the Hermitage (St Petersburg), and the Wallace Collection (London). The Dutch state did not deem it its responsibility to purchase these treasures, nor did individual Dutch citizens. It is telling that in 1860 the city of Delft disposed of its collection of sixteenth-century pictures in a similar fashion. Two decades later, the trustees of Haarlem's Beresteyn Hof sought to end their financial troubles by selling three portraits, supposedly by Frans Hals, to the Louvre in Paris. This apparent indifference towards the artistic heritage of the Golden Age led the Berlin museum director Wilhelm von Bode (1845–1929) to



Figure 20.1 Johannes Vermeer, *Milkmaid*, c. 1660.

conclude that the majority of private painting collections in the Netherlands had been ‘flogged off’ during his lifetime.¹

All the same, the nineteenth-century exodus of Dutch art also triggered two unanticipated responses that would shape the modern legacy of the Golden Age. In the Netherlands, the disappearance of numerous artworks encouraged the development of a critical counter-movement, generally associated with Victor de Stuers’ call in 1873 to save Dutch heritage for the nation. By the end of the century, and particularly after the opening of the Rijksmuseum in 1885, the seventeenth-century past became an instrument for the Dutch to re-invent themselves as a proud

nation, with a great history, enduring values, and fitting colonial claims. Outside the Netherlands, meanwhile, the popularity of Dutch Old Masters contributed to a growing fascination for Dutch culture more generally. Strikingly realistic and full of suggestive meanings, seventeenth-century pictures seemed to offer uncomplicated access to a distant society whose taste and moral values were suitably modern. In the famous words of art critic Théophile Thoré-Bürger (1807–69), the works of Vermeer and his contemporaries were to be regarded as ‘a sort of photography’ (Figure 20.1).² Particularly in the United States, the appetite for this early modern pictorial realism fuelled and channelled a sense of patriotic identification. Although the Dutch presence in seventeenth-century North America had been rather limited, some American scholars now claimed that Holland, and not Britain, had been the cradle of the free, tolerant, and enterprising spirit of the American republic. In 1903, the editor of the popular *Ladies’ Home Journal* characteristically stated that the Netherlands was ‘The Mother of America’.³ Thus, as the galleries in Europe and the United States became filled with Golden Age art, pictures turned from windows to the past into mirrors through which contemporaries viewed themselves.

The Myth of Modernity

Art has been a stimulus as well as a hindrance in the scholarship of the Dutch Golden Age and assessments of its long-term impact. Behind the non-verbal medium of painting quickly loomed the positivist spectre of an anticipated modernity. Although the iconographical turn in art historical scholarship has long shown the limits of this reading, the Dutch Republic continues to be described by scholars as a driver of innovation and even modernity in Europe. As the chapters in this volume demonstrate, historians have linked the rise of capitalism, the ascendancy of bourgeois values, the invention of religious tolerance, and the advent of globalization to the Dutch Golden Age. In each case this supposed agency has also been subject to intense debate. What is more, different generations of scholars have stressed particular legacies, following their own preferences. Thus, in the imperialist mood of the late nineteenth century, the lasting effects of Dutch global expansion were highlighted, whereas the economic recovery after the Second World War triggered interest in the origins of liberal capitalism. In the later

twentieth century, coping with diversity and migration turned into popular areas of scholarship as European societies themselves changed as a result of immigration. It is telling that topics such as the Dutch engagement with military innovation have received far less scrutiny: these types of 'legacy' did not sit well with the cherished image of the modern Netherlands as an open, peace-loving society.

This highly selective and shifting scholarly focus reveals the pitfalls in assessing the long-term influence and continuing relevance of this much studied era in European history. Are references to the Golden Age by later generations indeed evidence of its 'impact' or rather proof of anachronistic frames and particular discursive strategies? And yet finding answers to such questions is not bound to fail. The very use of the concept of the Dutch Golden Age as a frame of reference – in the Netherlands and beyond – can actually teach us a great deal about how men and women interpret developments of their own time and justify their actions. In trying to capture these different types of impact, this Epilogue will focus on three key areas in which discussions about the Golden Age's legacy – real or imagined – have been particularly profound: politics, social conditions, and the economy.

Political Models

The Dutch state originated from war. While the foundation of an independent, republican polity was the unintended outcome of the rebellion against Habsburg rule, the emergence of the United Provinces quickly became a source of inspiration for later revolutionary movements. During the civil wars in the British Isles (1642–49), radical English parliamentarians regularly pointed to the powerful precedent (and the subsequent success) of the Netherlands. In *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649) John Milton drew suggestive parallels between the recent execution of King Charles I and the abjuration of Philip II in 1581. Forty years later, political and economic changes brought about by the Glorious Revolution were said to echo Dutch examples. The Whig party, who resisted King James II's dealings with the Catholic Louis XIV of France and his supposedly universal monarchical designs, viewed the Dutch Republic as the defender of Protestantism and (parliamentarian) liberty. A number of measures that were taken under the government of the new, Dutch-born King William III, notably the Toleration Act (1689)

and the foundation of the Bank of England (1694), indeed bore Dutch influence. Copying policy coincided with a growing popularity of Dutch architecture and painting in England. Some other innovations of the 1680s, including the introduction of street lighting, were a Dutch import, too. Lisa Jardine has therefore claimed that the global rise of Britain after 1689 should be understood in the context of its clever ‘plundering of Holland’s glory’.⁴

The revolutionary spirit of the eighteenth century fuelled a renewed interest in the origins and characteristics of the Dutch state. Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) argued that the Dutch Revolt had been a great watershed event in European history: for the first time, freedom had triumphed over tyranny in ways others might emulate. French and especially American revolutionaries indeed referred to the Dutch conflict when justifying their actions. In 1781, John Adams described the American Revolution as a ‘transcript’ of the revolt of the United Provinces.⁵ Adams’ bold statement has sparked a lively debate about specific connections between the Dutch Act of Abjuration of 1581 and the American Declaration of Independence of 1776. There are some striking similarities between the argumentative structure of the two texts: the elaborate list of grievances against the monarch, followed by references to unsuccessful attempts to seek redress for these grievances, leading to the conclusion that revolt is permitted. Further evidence of rhetorical adaptation may be found in later statements by the Declaration’s chief author, Thomas Jefferson, who ‘did not consider it as any part of [his] charge to invent new ideas altogether, and to offer no sentiment which had ever been expressed before’.⁶ Still, such exercises in comparative and intertextual analysis also bring out the notable differences between the two texts. Grown out of a conservative rebellion against Habsburg political reform, the Dutch Act sought to abjure Philip II in order to replace him with a new sovereign. The American Declaration, by contrast, proposed an entirely new polity, based on a set of revolutionary values. Rather than a prototype to emulate, the Act of Abjuration seems to have functioned as one of many intellectual resources that were adjusted to fit the ideals of eighteenth-century revolutionaries.

What is more, the political legacy of the Dutch Republic was more ambiguous than the approving claims of Friedrich Schiller and John Adams suggest. The United Provinces equally served as an ominous example to later generations. As David Onnekink’s chapter in this volume points out, particularly in the nineteenth century the

administrative structure of the Dutch Republic received a bad press from historians and politicians alike. Its incoherent, decentralized, and seemingly inefficient institutions were widely seen as unfortunate remnants of medieval times, which had prevented the Netherlands from developing into a strong, unified nation-state. Dutch politics, it appeared, was as much grounded in outdated forms of political and social corporatism as in accidental innovations brought about by the Revolt. From the later twentieth century, this mixed political culture was viewed in a more positive light. J. L. Price, for example, has suggested that it enabled the United Provinces to accommodate dissident voices better than many of its monarchical rivals. With the rising popularity of ‘consensual politics’, several scholars and politicians claimed that the Dutch Republic had laid the foundations of an enduring culture of negotiation, accommodation, and compromise in the Netherlands. According to this line of thought, the Golden Age had been instrumental in advancing the *poldermodel* and Dutch variants to ‘third way politics’ – popular catchphrases in the 1990s and early 2000s.⁷ In this way, the Golden Age era remained a touchstone through which the Dutch and foreign observers viewed the origins of civil society in the Netherlands.

Social Conditions

If the political legacy of the Dutch Republic offered an ambivalent model, its social fabric seemed to have produced more straightforward effects. A sense of egalitarianism, religious tolerance, and bourgeois values have long been seen as chief characteristics and lasting consequences of the Golden Age. In his seminal book *The Embarrassment of Riches*, Simon Schama claimed that the ‘moral geography’ of the seventeenth century continues to characterize the modern Netherlands.⁸ Its advanced welfare infrastructures supposedly paved the way for twentieth-century variants of the Dutch welfare state. The idea that tolerance was somehow rooted in early modern Dutch society enabled twentieth-century commentators to explain liberal attitudes such as policies on soft drugs, euthanasia, and gay marriage that typified the pragmatic political climate in the Netherlands of their times. Perhaps more than in any other sphere of influence, genre painting has served to confirm and reinforce the impression of an egalitarian, bourgeois society. Still, the

listing of these suggestive parallels relied on a highly selective reading of an imagined national past. As the chapters of Charles Parker and Christine Kooi demonstrate, seventeenth-century attitudes towards religious diversity were highly pragmatic, and toleration practices were grounded in local and shifting concerns. A centuries-long continuity in mentality is equally difficult to prove. After all, few historians would describe the Netherlands of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as inherently progressive, open, and tolerant.

Outside the Netherlands, the continuing social relevance of the Dutch Golden Age has been debated in a rather different context. Some nineteenth-century Americans, looking for the origins of their morals and beliefs, found them in Dutch paintings that seemed to reflect their republican, democratic, and meritocratic ideals. John Motley (1814–77) underscored the idea of a republican predecessor to the United States by reminding his readers that the Dutch too had established a republican Protestant nation that had abolished popery and absolute monarchical rule. He suitably framed William of Orange as the George Washington of the sixteenth century. Such narratives neatly fitted American self-images at the time that the United States was experiencing large-scale immigration from eastern and central Europe, which many saw as a threat to established American values.⁹ The Dutch love of ‘freedom’ furthered this affinity, even though seventeenth-century understandings of freedom(s) were quite different from nineteenth-century ones. While such simplified historical parallels lost much of their appeal in the twentieth century, in recent years a renewed debate has emerged about the role of the Dutch Republic in shaping ‘Western’ Enlightenment values. Jonathan Israel has pointed to the vibrant intellectual climate of the Golden Age, which bred radical secular views and transformed Western thinking in the following centuries.¹⁰ Just at the time that the importance of the Enlightenment is passionately debated in Europe and America, Baruch de Spinoza and his circle emerge as the new lasting heirs of the Dutch Golden Age.

Economics

Dutch economic progress was already attracting attention and admirers in the seventeenth century. Puzzled by Holland’s achievements in shipping, industry, and global trade, Sir William Temple recorded, ‘we are

still as much to seek what it is that makes people industrious in one Country, and idle in another'.¹¹ Emulating Dutch policies and innovations became popular among many early modern governments. Tsar Peter the Great of Russia spent extensive time in the harbours of Amsterdam and made use of his impressions in building his model city of St Petersburg. At the same time, governments of surrounding countries, notably France and Britain, sought to impose protectionist measures that served to sabotage Dutch successes in overseas trade. Both strategies contributed to the gradual economic decline of the United Provinces in the eighteenth century. Still, both admirers and critics would later regard the corporate, mercantile character of the Dutch economy as the cradle of modern capitalism. In *Das Kapital* (1867), Karl Marx viewed the Dutch Republic as the ominous catalyst of industrial bourgeois society, which advanced social-economic inequalities and colonial exploitation. Other economic historians have been more reluctant in their assessment, pointing out that the Dutch may have been innovative in the integration of trade, industry, and agriculture, but that they somehow failed to capitalize on these advantages during the industrial revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Quite how far the Dutch economy should be regarded as the first 'modern economy' or as the initiator of capitalism remains unclear, but its history continues to serve as a powerful frame of reference in academic literature.¹²

This is also true for the global ambitions of the Dutch Republic, which enabled the Netherlands in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to maintain a vast overseas empire, stretching from Suriname and the Caribbean to Indonesia. Throughout the world, numerous visual remnants of the Dutch Golden Age can be found, from gabled town houses and military forts to street plans and canals. Architectural heritage is even recreated in Dutch-inspired theme parks in the United States, Japan, and China. Their cheerful, celebratory character stands in stark contrast to the grim heritage of Fort Elmina at Ghana, a large Dutch slave-trading complex that reminds visitors of the humanitarian costs that came with Dutch capitalism. The long-term effects of the Dutch presence in Asia, Africa, and the Americas have thus been both profound and mixed. The Dutch engagement with the Atlantic slave trade and plantation economies contributed to the demographic and ecological transformation of these areas. In Asia, a long history of human exploitation and military repression continues to affect societies

in Indonesia and elsewhere. Whereas the heritage and history of the Dutch East and West India Companies have long received a critical approach in these countries, in the Netherlands itself the colonial legacy long remained a blind spot. Post-colonial criticism has been slow to take hold in Dutch academic scholarship. Only in 2015 did the Rijksmuseum decide to review and adapt the titles and descriptions of artworks to accommodate current (post-)colonial sensitivities. Such initiatives coincided with public discussions about the inclusivity and diversity of the Golden Age past and its darker sides. If the Dutch Republic bred a culture of tolerance, it was as much the historical incubator of South Africa's apartheid regime. While compromise and accommodation may have been enduring political legacies of the United Provinces, the Dutch presence overseas also left a heritage of repression and violence. Baruch de Spinoza, Jan van Riebeeck, and Jan Pieterszoon Coen were part of the same society.

The impact of the Dutch Golden Age, then, is never fixed or clear-cut, depending as it does on the historical perspective of the interpreter. What many assessments over the ages tend to have in common is a narrative of exceptionalism. Since the Dutch case did not seem to fit into the larger European pattern, scholars have been keen to privilege its economic, social, and political developments as unique and distinctly Dutch. Claims about their lasting impact have rested on similar assumptions. For this reason, the very attempt to identify long-term continuities has also found its critics. There may be striking parallels between the Golden Age and the modern Netherlands, they argue, but what exactly do they reveal or explain? Contrasting examples are equally numerous, and several historians have pointed to the misleading nationalist focus of claims about pre-modern continuities. Whatever perspective one takes, it is undeniable that the inhabitants of the Dutch Republic had no clue as to where their society was heading. Indeed, there is little evidence that they regarded themselves as innovators of free-market economics or toleration, let alone 'modernity'.¹³ As this book has sought to emphasize, the Dutch Golden Age may have fostered economic innovation and scientific experiment, but it also prided itself on its resistance to political 'novelties' and protection of social hierarchies and tradition. Above all, its history was not as golden as later generations want us to believe.

Notes

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