

people; and to consider this as a process that is continuing and unstable. I hope that the complicated and uncomfortable parts of this story become central to our understanding of this culture both in the past and today. This is not a phenomenon unique to the Netherlands or the Dutch “Golden Age,” but rather is present in all instances where peoples and cultures come together. It is, however, the story that I can tell as a specialist in early modern Dutch art, a field that is especially in need of what contemporary cultural theorists are calling decolonization.

This call to decolonize, coming from students and scholars, when aimed at academia, is a call to decolonize our syllabi, our courses, and our knowledge.¹⁴ In practice, this means on the one hand expanding the canons of our fields to include the contributions of people whose experiences were or are outside of the culture’s mainstream, because of colonial or other oppressive structures that kept them there. On the other hand, decolonization means working to dismantle these structures, especially as they are integral to and replicated by our institutions. Sometimes when I’m writing and speaking and teaching, I slip into re-colonizing the Dutch “Golden Age,” dragging up stories of exploitation, finding satisfaction in creating discomfort. I worry that by discussing the colonial structures that supported the “Golden Age,” in some way I might reify or celebrate them. This is not my intention. Telling these stories is messy and complicated and can also be uncomfortable, at odds with the forces of the mainstream and the simple celebration of the past, reducible to an easy phrase like “Dutch Golden Age.” To acknowledge my own viewpoint on this story as an outsider, as an American, means I’m also grappling in parallel with my own culture’s omissions, exclusions, and simplifications, and we have our own simplified and golden phrase, “Make America Great Again.” This political slogan of the forty-fifth U.S. president, Donald Trump, suggests that we were once great and have now fallen, and we can become great again by following his leadership. The question of when the United States was great, and for whom, is never answered, and the slogan has become a rallying cry for conservative politics and white supremacists.

Complicating or nuancing the stories we tell about the past calls attention to problems with how we construct cultural understanding. Stuart Hall, in his discussion of how to find space within the story of British heritage for colonial history and diverse contemporary voices, pointed out some of these challenges.¹⁵ He notes that official British heritage would appear to be one consistent thing (which is, in itself, reductive), reflecting the experience of only upper-class white Britons. Adding to this the stories of others (he discusses specifically the experiences of

14 For an especially astute discussion of decolonization in art history, see Cohen-Aponte, “Decolonizing the Global Renaissance,” 70–75.

15 Hall, “Whose Heritage?”

the Indigenous and Africans), similarly reduces the other to another consistent, single story, often rooted further back in the past, before European contact. This is also one of the problems with the concept of hybridity, as it implies that there are pure, untouched cultures, which mix to form mixed or diluted cultures, which are in many cases viewed as inferior—there is an entire body of racist thought about miscegenation and degeneracy. In the American context, the desire to add stories from outside the Anglo-American experience to our canon, without letting in the messiness, leads to further problems. In the archeology of the Americas, for instance, scholars may aim to focus solely on pre-contact (pre-Columbus and the arrival of Europeans) sites and artifacts, representing the American history before Europeans arrived to complicate and disrupt the archeological record, rather than interrogating the moment of conflict and its aftermath. In contemporary America, we similarly speak of the Black experience, as if it is a homogenous experience, and also imply that it is independent from, rather than circumscribed by, white America and its structures.

When telling the stories of Dutching, or hybridity, or encounter, it's important not to reify the myth of untouched homogenous cultures, be they white European or other. These stories are complicated. When we attempt to tell the stories in between, the stories where cultures meet on unequal footing, we get closer to the realities of the past, but we also come up against the structures that keep these stories from being told. Our educational institutions aren't equipped to train us for or support this kind of work. On a very basic level, it's impossible to even learn all the languages and methods necessary to engage fully with just the European documents related to, in my case, Dutch global trade. I say this with a handle on several European languages, and having had the privilege to train in these for years. Our academic traditions discourage collaboration, which could bring us together with scholars working on the same questions but with different skillsets and perspectives. You'll note that this is a single-author monograph, and is thus reflective of the systemic issues I'm arguing against, because it is also a product of my training. The digital humanities, which I've been practicing since completion of my doctorate, encourage collaboration and make this kind of work more possible and indeed pleasurable, and my future work will involve partnerships and new methods.

You might suspect I am constructing an elaborate excuse here to fail at telling these stories about this history, this art history, fully and completely. I won't be able to reconstruct the past, I won't totally be able to get beyond the blind spots I have as a white American cis-het woman, but I firmly believe that the attempt matters to decolonizing the past. To do this work, these stories need to be told, with a range of perspectives that acknowledge the messiness, the ugliness, and the pain, and also the limits of our abilities. We may find in the retelling that the stories of the oppressed can't be retold, that voices have been too thoroughly excluded from the archives,



and our efforts will certainly fail at producing a 100 percent accurate account.¹⁶ However, in the attempt, we can uncover, expose, and begin to dismantle those colonial structures that still lie at the heart of our understanding of ourselves, our cultures, and our histories. While I can't adequately speak *for* those oppressed by the Dutch colonial structures, I can bare those structures to the best of my ability.

Collective Identity, Memory, Forgetting, and Innocence

I've noted several times so far in this introduction that the stories we tell about our pasts matter for our present. This book is about more than just complicating the story of the Dutch "Golden Age," it is about how the changing understanding we have about that period has affected subsequent ages. Storytelling is an important means of establishing our identities and our values, and also, importantly for this study, the objects and landscapes of art history have a central role in stimulating and transmitting those stories. My ideas here come from scholarship on collective identity and collective memory, on nationalism, and on memory and forgetting, which come from a diverse range of fields ranging from sociology and psychology to art history and cultural studies. These ideas about memory, identity, and the past have been explored in popular accounts, like David Lowenthal's *The Past is a Foreign Country* (1985) and Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), and these concepts are easily understood from our own experiences in communities.

Our identities as members of groups, ranging from a small family unit to a nation or faith, are determined by the stories we collectively tell. These stories communicate information about our pasts, but also our values. We sometimes think of these stories as factual (and might then call them "history") but they become mythical with time and distance, with the selections we make about which perspective to focus on, which details to revisit. When an individual experiences an event, she will recount it to herself and to others, and in the telling the story changes, either deliberately in the case of outright fraud, or subtly and unintentionally, as the story conforms to what else she knows, and the experiences and responses of others. As social creatures, we do this together as well, and while ritually retelling stories as a group, we tend to forget our individual perspectives and insights to conform to the larger group. These stories take on the power to define and provide evidence for broader values. This can of course be co-opted by propagandists, but it also

16 Gayatri Spivak famously asked whether the female subject of imperialism can speak, can be given agency, and concluded no, that the female subject's voice will always be undermined by the imperial structures that continue to inform academic and political work. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"



happens subtly and nearly unconsciously. When we get beyond the scale of a family, and of living memory, the group gets larger and the stories less individual. Benedict Anderson called this our “imagined community,” the group where we are unable to personally connect to each member, yet still we share stories.¹⁷ Instead of in family and social gatherings, these stories are told in school, in media, through art and ritual.

Sociologist Maurice Halbwachs’s account of collective memory, published a century ago, explains the importance of the ritual retelling of stories to establishing our memories, underscoring how the past is always worked by the present.¹⁸ For our purposes here, extending this discussion to Dutch “Golden Age” art history, Halbwachs’s conception of the means by which these stories are carried is key—he wrote of how the group must come together to tell stories (historiography and biography) and practice rituals (holidays, family meals), but also through symbol. The subjects I consider in this book comprise visual and material culture as well as landscapes, that operate in my reading of Halbwachs as symbols around which a culture rallies, that aid in the retelling of the past and which can be experienced (viewed, handled, inhabited) by people across time. Art historian and theorist Aby Warburg, writing around the same time, discussed “iconic memory” which applies to the visual, and historian Pierre Nora later wrote of “places of memory” (*lieux des memoires*). To my reading, however, neither of these concepts approaches Halbwachs’s more generalized symbol as a concept by which the material and visual production of art history, things and places that have been experienced physically in the past and present, can play a role in creating and sustaining the stories we tell as a culture about the past.

The concepts of collective identity and collective memory are most often applied to discussions on a national scale, where nationalism and national identity is based on the stories shared by citizens of that nation. For example, I, as an American schoolchild, learned the quintessential American stories of George Washington chopping down the cherry tree, Abraham Lincoln studying by candlelight, and Thanksgiving. A six-year-old Washington received a new hatchet as a gift, then cut a cherry tree, and when his father confronted him, he said, “I cannot tell a lie” and admitted his crime, and went on to be the country’s first president. Abraham Lincoln as a young man was said to stay up late reading after dark, after completing his chores and work, becoming a largely self-taught lawyer, and he was one of the country’s most powerful speakers and the sixteenth president. I learned about Thanksgiving as a celebration of harvest where early settlers and Native Americans came together for a feast of mutual generosity. These stories evoke the values

¹⁷ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

¹⁸ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*.



America purports to embody: honesty, hard work, generosity. But these stories, and the parts we highlight, have been cherry-picked to be positive, and also to exclude. Efforts to “cancel” or retell the stories of Columbus’s “discovery” of America and the Thanksgiving story decolonize by showing how these stories exclude the vital participation of the American Indigenous, their partial extinction, resistance, and centuries-long oppression. With these children’s stories we can see that these collective stories are not told just to create community, but can also be a means of excluding, indeed a means of collective forgetting.

Scholars of memory and nationalism may object to my extension of this approach to the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. Many argue that the rise of the modern nation-state, and subsequently nationalism, only happened circa 1800, in the wake of Napoleon. The concept of nationalism is of course also heavily intertwined with the fascist states of the twentieth century: Hitler’s Germany, Franco’s Spain, and Mussolini’s Italy. I’ll defer here to Judith Pollmann who, in an important publication of 2017, provides many examples drawn from archives, literature, and art, arguing that national identity and the imagined community can be found long before the modern era in Europe, the focus of her study.¹⁹ Two decades before this, H. Perry Chapman argued that this can be seen in the art history of the early Dutch Republic, particularly propagandist prints which had a role in developing a collective Dutch national identity.²⁰

The so-called Dutch “Golden Age” is the primary time and place around which Dutch collective identity and memory rallies—the very naming of it as a golden age underscores its importance. It is a rare situation for a culture to have their time of greatest success just at the beginning of their existence as a nation, and also that it was spoken of as a golden age as it was happening.²¹ This was an age of global reach for the culture, and that this global aspect has been forgotten in subsequent eras is a prime example of how the stories we tell of the past are revised for present needs. A golden age that happened primarily within the borders of the Netherlands excludes the stories of the decline of that global reach, when other nations of Europe came to predominate global colonialism in the eighteenth and when all European imperial powers were challenged by growing independence movements in the

19 From 2008–2013 Pollmann directed a research project, *Tales of the Revolt: Memory, Oblivion, and Identity in the Low Countries, 1566–1700*, which explored primary and secondary sources to show that modern notions of how memory works are not unique to the modern era, which contributed to this book. Judith Pollmann, *Memory in Early Modern Europe*. See also Schmidt, *Innocence Abroad*, xxii–xxiii.

20 Chapman, “Propagandist Prints.”

21 Blanc, “*Gouden Eeuw*,” 70. In the same volume, Maria Holtrop explores the use of this term in subsequent eras: Holtrop, “*Aurea Aetas*.” I look forward how this new series, growing out of the Fonds National Suisse de la Recherche Scientifique (Swiss National Science Research Foundation)-funded project, *Un siècle d’or? Repenser la peinture hollandaise du XVIIe siècle*, will continue to explore this notion.



twentieth. Significantly, it also excludes the touchier aspects of this period, namely that it was supported by the exploitation of people and resources of elsewhere. This forgetting allows for storytelling that is celebratory and golden, that makes this time a source of pride, precisely as the Dutch Premier, Mark Rutte, stated in 2019. Stuart Hall called this kind of forgetting selective amnesia, and Pollmann and Gert Oostindie also discuss forgetting.²² That I can point to scholars who theorize about forgetting, and a secondary literature that reestablishes the global and colonial reach of the Dutch seventeenth century, underscores that this forgetting was not total—these memories and facts are absolutely recallable—but also that there is a willing participation by all those who ignore this past in favor of the easier, more pleasant celebration of a story that speaks to current values.

This forgetting allows for a rhetoric of innocence which is at the heart of Dutch understandings of their present and past. In the case studies of this book, I'll show how buried the negative features and values of this period are, how difficult they are to locate in archival evidence. This is a willful hiding and forgetting, and it is also exculpatory—enabling the Dutch to claim an innocence regarding the exploitation and cruelty of what happened outside of the nation's borders, and even within. While this ugliness is buried, it also remains in plain sight in the artistic production of this age.

Arguments about innocence are not a new phenomenon, nor, again, unique to the Dutch situation. From the earliest years of the seventeenth century, the heart of the “Golden Age,” the Dutch argued they were the primary European victims of Iberian power, having just wrested their independence from Spain. This scrappy innocent new nation was acting in defense, on the behalf of the Dutch, sure, but also for the natural rights of all nations, as Hugo Grotius argued in his 1609 *Mare Liberum*, which will be further explored in chapter 2.²³ All Europeans pointed to Spain's cruelty in the Americas, what became known as the Black Legend, while practicing the same cruelties themselves.²⁴ In his aptly-titled 2001 *Innocence Abroad*, Benjamin Schmidt masterfully explores Dutch seventeenth-century discourse on the European encounter with the Americas, which argued broadly that, like the indigenous Americans, the Dutch were the victims of Spain's cruelty; how then could the Dutch be anything BUT innocent of cruelty themselves in this shared

22 Stuart Hall, “Whose Heritage?,” 7; Pollmann, *Memory in Early Modern Europe*, chapter 6, esp. 158 speaks more broadly of ‘Acts of Oblivion,’ as vocalized, public forgetting that nonetheless is rarely complete. She also notes that a difficult memory can be overwritten with a new narrative that provides a positive, collective story. Oostindie refers to “vergeten gescheidenis” (p. 74), and notes that “Iedere generatie schrijft haar eigen geschiedenis” (p. 73) (every generation writes her own history): Oostindie, “De conflictueuze herontdekking,” 73–74.

23 Grotius, *The Freedom of the Seas*.

24 Margaret, Mignolo, and Quilligan, *Rereading the Black Legend*.



victimhood?²⁵ After the seventeenth century, Dutch dominance of global trade and colonialism waned in comparison to France, England, and Spain, so the Dutch, and their fellow small-but-mighty Portuguese rivals, have largely been excluded from the broader conversations about, and sometimes apologies for, European colonialist enterprises. Scholars in the twentieth century have minimized the role of the Dutch in the slave trade, and have suggested that the Dutch in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were just trading, not colonizing (an argument which has merit on the surface, but this is just semantics).

Gloria Wekker, in her phenomenal 2016 *White Innocence*, brings a force to this argument that Dutch culture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is founded on a forgetting of four hundred years of Dutch imperialism. An anthropologist by training, Wekker works interdisciplinarily to examine the centrality of the simultaneous celebration of and ignorance of whiteness in this nation that buries its diverse present and past through a rhetoric of innocence. Through a critical examination of the contemporary Netherlands, she argues forcefully that imperialism and race are foundational to Dutch self-identity, carried along by memory and forgetting. While her argument makes forays into the role of the earliest moments of imperialism of the seventeenth century, it is primarily concerned with modernity, and not early modernity, and I hope this book will provide a longer bridge into that past. Wekker carefully defines the dominant population of today's Netherlands, those who make a direct claim to the "Golden Age." When contemporary conceptions of the Dutch past exclude the Dutched places outside of the borders of this nation, this allows some Dutch people to claim an exclusive right to this past, and to claim that this past is only Dutch, only white. This enables the continued exclusion of people deemed non-Dutch today, generally applied to the non-white and non-Christian, though many of these so-called non-Dutch have a clear presence in the "Golden Age."²⁶

The Dutch collective memory is based on a collective forgetting of the messy, complicated, and ugly aspects of the past in favor of a glowing, golden view. The global Netherlands has been reduced in imagination to the land that lies within the borders of this country in northwest Europe, to the exclusion of people, places, and goods which were key to the flowering of the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century. This allows a Dutch cultural pride in the past which is shored up by repeated golden storytelling that is a strong cultural force against the many examples of scholarship that have been working to trouble this view of the past. The current debate about the term "Golden Age" means this discussion is finally out in the

25 Schmidt, *Innocence Abroad*.

26 This is the root of the Rembrandthuis Museum exhibition, *HERE. Black in Rembrandt's Time*, and its catalogue: Kolfin and Runia, *Black in Rembrandt's Time*. Historian Mark Ponte, one of the contributors, works to excavate from the archives the presence of Black Amsterdammers in the early modern period.



open, though it doesn't seem likely to be resolved soon. Again, this phenomenon is not unique to the Dutch case—we see it across cultures, as variations of “Make [wherever] Great Again” reach into an imagined and simplified version of the past, that hides the realities of exploitation and cruelty, and has real and violent consequences in the present for those deemed outside the stories we tell.

The Importance of Material Culture and Art History to Tell This Story

The story of the global reach of the early modern Netherlands, of the exploitation of people, places, and goods in the name of trade and later colonialism, is best told through the art history of the so-called “Golden Age.” While scholars have noted the silences of the traditional, text-based archives, the art historical archive is rich, extensive, and also much cherished. Gert Oostindie and Bert Passman argued interestingly in 1998 that there seemed to be little Dutch awareness of their country's role in the slave trade in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, based on textual documents.²⁷ The Dutch trading companies kept scrupulous accounts which we can mine for supporting information, though these tend not to indicate the attitudes of record-keepers towards the colonial project. Gloria Wekker convincingly argues that the cultural archive in which to ground this story lies instead in our minds and memories, rather than, or in addition to, the physical archives, an approach put into practice in the Rijksmuseum's 2021 exhibition, *Slavery*.²⁸ If Dutch people didn't acknowledge the broader world in text, they certainly did in art. The objects and images produced by Dutch artists, by artists and scientists exploring the world, by builders and city planners setting Dutch roots in foreign lands, and art that is made from material imported from around the world—this huge wealth of artistic material tells the stories that are harder to glean in the archives. The incredible production of art and architecture in the Dutch global “Golden Age” made available a huge body of objects and landscapes that provide visual and physical evidence of the past, and indeed, the global and un-golden nature of much of that past.

There was an incredible flowering of the arts in the Dutch “Golden Age,” supported by the growing economy, which was largely dependent on the Dutch trading empire. There were millions of paintings produced in this period, plus prints and illustrated books, and the artistic output extends from very small marvels created for curiosity cabinets to new buildings and cities. This art is sometimes explicitly about the world

27 Oostindie and Passman, “Dutch Attitudes towards Colonial Empires.” They were examining why it was that this most tolerant of nations had a too-small and too-late movement to abolish slavery.

28 Wekker, *White Innocence*, 19; the *Slavery* exhibition draws on oral histories, songs, and traditions in addition to art, artifacts, and documents, particularly in the stories of Lohkay and Sapali (esp. 196–201): Sint Nicolaas et al., *Slavery*.



outside of the Netherlands, but sometimes references this world more subtly through the depiction of foreign goods, or through the use of pigments and other materials sourced from far away. Not all of this art historical archive remains, of course, but its huge volume has enriched collections across the world and it is relatively accessible. This archive is also problematic, shaped as it is by elite notions of taste, collecting practices, and its role in shaping ideas of the past, however it is possible to work against these trends. While it may take some excavation to demonstrate how these works are evidence of and commentary on the empire, ultimately the reality of the past is laid bare by what we can see and experience. As Halbwachs speaks of symbols as a potential touchstone for the conveying of collective memory, the Dutch culture produced a vast number of symbols which have remained important for generations. That these objects and landscapes have been lovingly preserved for centuries is a demonstration that even with changing ideas of Dutchness, this so-called “Golden Age” remains central. Further, this art historical archive generates symbols around which new stories can be told, stories that acknowledge this difficult past.

The material and visual culture of the Dutch so-called “Golden Age” remains beloved, with huge Dutch art collections in the world’s museums.²⁹ That this material generates public excitement, for both Dutch and non-Dutch audiences, is clear with traveling exhibitions, like the Frick Museum’s fifteen-painting show from the Mauritshuis, which included Vermeer’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring* and Carel Fabritius’s *Goldfinch*, and which became a huge blockbuster in 2013. Exhibitions have been engaging with the global Dutch as well—such as the *Asia in Amsterdam* exhibit at the Rijksmuseum and the Peabody Essex Museum in 2015–2016.³⁰ This art tells the story of global entanglements visually and materially in a way that still engages audiences today. As will be clear from two of the cases examined in this book, the architecture of the seventeenth-century Netherlands is also cherished, and global, and can also serve as a large, inhabitable symbol around which to rally a collective memory. Visiting the Netherlands today, so many cities have preserved or recreated their historic downtowns, yes, for tourist income, but also for the sake of inhabitants. Dutch cityscapes are celebrated in miniature in Madurodam in The Hague and abroad in the Caribbean and Asia, and recreated at Huis ten Bosch in Nagasaki, Japan and in shorthand in the United States in Holland, Michigan and Pella, Iowa. This art historical archive has been cherished, saved, and recreated over generations showing a continual engagement of people with the global Dutch, and even when that global element has been ignored or forgotten, it is easy to recapture it and retell these stories.

29 With two key exception, it is always the seventeenth century being celebrated. Those exceptions are favorite Dutch modern artist, Vincent Van Gogh, though his career was primarily French, and the story of Anne Frank, which tells another important collective Dutch story of Nazi resistance and innocence.

30 Corrigan, Van Campen, and Diercks, *Asia in Amsterdam*. See also the curators’ reevaluation of the exhibit in 2022: You, Alisjahbana, Corrigan, Diercks, “A Curatorial Roundtable.”



It is important to underscore that subsequent generations of Netherlanders have not been looking just to the past in general, but to this specific period of the seventeenth century (and primarily the first half), for stories of national importance. Cultural institutions overwhelmingly celebrate the seventeenth century, which to the uncritical eye is a charming, prosperous (but middle-class, not aristocratic), ambitious, inventive era. For example, the modern Dutch Christmas tradition of St. Nicholas (*Sinterklaas*) coming on a ship from Spain draws elements from the Dutch revolt from Spain in the late sixteenth century, and continued Dutch notions of Spain throughout the seventeenth century, though the modern tradition can be traced to a 1850 publication.³¹ These are the Dutch cultural equivalents of America's rosy stories of our founding events and founding fathers, focusing on the positive to the exclusion of the complicated and the ugly.

The artistic production of the Dutch so-called "Golden Age" thus remains central to Dutch culture into the present, and is a powerful expression of the values of this culture. The Dutch "Golden Age" is so rich in art, so materially wealthy, that we can speak of a cultural experience based in symbols, which have been preserved in museums and family collections to be revisited and stories retold. As this book will demonstrate, the global reach of this era is a story plainly told by these objects and landscapes, though, as Wekker noted, imperialism is lacking in Dutch self-image today.³² This is because the story of imperialism has been deliberately forgotten, hidden, behind golden views of this period, yet it remains there, and it remains on view. The deliberate ignoring of the ugly and difficult elements of this period becomes, in the face of so much evidence to the contrary, a Dutch cultural value.

Global Dutch Art History

In the past decades we've seen a growing intervention by art historians focusing on the global Dutch "Golden Age," a first generation including Julie Hochstrasser, Dawn Odell, and Rebecca Parker Brienen, followed by scholars like Carrie Anderson, Elmer Kolfin, Stephanie Porras, Elizabeth Sutton, Claudia Swan, and myself, and many ongoing projects.³³ However, while this is a current vogue, it remains marginalized in broader Dutch art history, with scholars either considering the existence of the global reach a given, and therefore not requiring extensive engagement, or scholars treating the global aspect of this period as a special topic, over there, rather than one intimately

31 Saint Nicholas and his servant, or Sint-Nicolaas en zjin knecht, published 1850 by Jan Schenkman.

32 Wekker, *White Innocence*, 13.

33 I'm eager to see the ongoing work of Christina An, Justin Brown, Adam Eaker, Caroline Fowler, Aaron Hyman, Cynthia Kok, Queenie Lin, Margaret Mansfield, Ellen Rife, among others, in the area of the global Netherlands.



entangled with the entire “Golden Age.” Artists who never left the Netherlands, or who only painted domestic subjects, who seemingly have no connection to the world outside, nevertheless painted with pigments sourced from abroad, depicted imported objects in Dutch interiors, and were supported by the wealth drawn from overseas trade. Engagement with the broader Dutch world is seen by many scholars as a sub-specialty, best left to a few specialists or to fields outside art history. Enforcing the divisions between disciplines and subdisciplines has continued the work of colonial structures, ensuring that the entanglement of global and domestic can be hidden and ignored. There are certainly exceptions, but I’m not alone in my frustration that the field has been slow to adapt. The discussion of empire is more central in the art histories of other European imperial powers—Spain, France, and England—and there remain many opportunities to intervene in Dutch “Golden Age” art history.

The importance of this art historical archive for understanding Dutch history and collective identity, as well as the unfinished work within this field, makes this specialty of Dutch art history so ripe for continued decisive interventions. As Dutch art continues to be celebrated by the museum-going public, and debates about the challenges of dealing openly with the past are increasingly in the public consciousness, there is work we can do in art history to further this conversation.

Chapter Outline

In this book, I discuss four moments when the Dutch “Golden Age” has been shaped and polished, centering four artistic examples that both expose and hide their global reach, representing moments when the so-called Dutch “Golden Age” was revisited and revised in order to serve the present. These are just a handful of moments, each of which could be a book on its own, and there are plenty more stories to tell, but with my choices I want to demonstrate the range of materials and artistic forms that are in play, including traditional painting, decorative arts, and architecture and urban planning. These are topics I began exploring during my graduate studies, so also are rooted in my journey through coursework, my comprehensive exams, and relationships with faculty on my committee. These moments show the spatial range of the Dutch global world, from a small tabletop in a Dutch home to a whole city on the other side of the globe, taking place on three continents and the oceans that connect them, spanning from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century.

The first moment I explore is aspirational, occurring at the beginning of the “Golden Age” and setting the stage for three moments of revision of the Dutch “Golden Age” of the seventeenth century, representing a spectrum of this process over the centuries following the waning of Dutch global economic domination. The next moment is a revision that occurs in the second half of the seventeenth century



as the Dutch East India Company begins its denouement, a change palpable across the population, as cultural forces are marshaled to celebrate the immediate past in glowing terms. In the eighteenth century, the Dutch Republic faced a crisis of identity with growing foreign influence at home and competition over colonial territory—as nationalisms develop across Europe, the Dutch sought to define themselves by looking back to, and revising, their “Golden Age.” The fourth key moment of this study spans the crisis of nationalism and World War II, decolonization, into the period of modern globalization, as a historic colonial city grapples with its complicated past. The “Golden Age” continues to figure into understandings of Dutch identity in the present, presenting a challenge to the multicultural population of the Netherlands today.

The first two moments explore the importing of goods to the Netherlands, and how the global is instrumental to artistic developments in the domestic sphere. In chapter 2, “The Gilded Cage: Dutch Global Aspirations,” I introduce the historical background of the Dutch “Golden Age” and consider the aspirations of the new Dutch Republic to expand throughout the world. The mounted nautilus cup, a popular collector’s item in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, serves as a metaphor for these aspirations, a display of the appealing exotica of the East, firmly controlled within a silver matrix designed by Dutch metalworkers. The final decade of the sixteenth century, when most extant Dutch nautilus cups were created, was a time of great anticipation of an emerging “Golden Age,” an ambition that would be fulfilled in the first half of the coming century. Chapter 3, “Gathering the Goods: Dutch Still Life Painting and the End of the ‘Golden Age,’” explores the waning of the “Golden Age.” In the second half of the seventeenth century, as the Dutch grasp on world trade began to slip, the subgenre of still life painting known as *pronkstilleven* (ostentatious still life) was popular. These sought-after paintings depicted exotic Dutch trade objects in the Dutch home with striking illusionism. This chapter considers the irregularity of the trade in an often-depicted exotic item, pepper, noting a public anxiety about this trade, and offers a reading of still life as reorganizing the far reaches of the Dutch East India Company into a smaller domestic setting. The Dutch global reach is revised to exist solely within the Dutch home precisely as spice monopolies are challenged and English and French trade grows. These chapters underscore that the global is essential to the local—as Edward Said argued in *Culture and Imperialism*.³⁴

The second half of the book explores the export outwards of Dutch ideas and architectural forms to the Dutch global empire, which retain strong ties to the Netherlands, and also expose key values of the Dutch at home. Moving into the

34 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. Bernard Porter argued that empire is not as important to developments at home as Said asserted: Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists*.



eighteenth century, chapter 4, “Dutch Batavia: An Ideal Dutch City?” explores changing conceptions of this seventeenth-century Asian capital of the Dutch East India Company. In 1754, the government of Batavia (now Jakarta, Indonesia) established a series of sumptuary laws that suggested the elite Dutch of Batavia had strayed far from Dutch behavioral ideals in the 135 years since its founding. Batavia, planned from its inception as an ordered, gridded, and canalled eastern trading capital, should have represented a Dutch ideal, yet it failed from the outset, as stagnant canals spread disease and the social order fragmented. This chapter explores how the initial form of the city and the reality of population dispersal throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries contrast with representations of the city in text and image, representing a revision of this highly multicultural and hierarchical city into something ideally Dutch. Chapter 5, “Simplifying the Past: Willemstad’s Historic and Historicizing Architecture,” examines revisions to an eighteenth-century city from the nineteenth through twenty-first centuries. Willemstad, the Dutch West India Company’s trading capital on Curaçao in the Caribbean, has always been a global city, most apparent in the island’s creole language, Papiamentu, which shows the influence of the city’s early mixed population of Dutch settlers, Iberian Jews, and enslaved Africans. The city’s resulting architectural heritage of Dutch-gabled townhouses, sprawling classicizing villas, and uniquely Curaçaoan color and curves, has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage City for precisely this multiculturalism. These global aspects, however, have been increasingly eroded as twentieth- and twenty-first-century architectural developments have emphasized the Dutch contributions. This chapter questions the selective preservation and promotion that seem to revise the global past of the city in favor of an overwhelmingly Dutch past.

In the conclusion, “The ‘Golden Age’ Today,” I consider the contemporary implications of the revision of the Dutch “Golden Age” into something wholly Dutch. This chapter includes a brief consideration of the current celebration of a bucolic, quaint, and imagined Dutch culture in Holland, MI, in the annual Tulip Time festival, by a conservative religious community that migrated to the United States in the nineteenth century in a rejection of Dutchness. In an age of growing multiculturalism and cultural nationalism, and escalating clashes over what “Dutch” means, the question of how and why the past is revised to serve the present remains imperative.

Dutch Identity in Conflict

Throughout this introduction, I’ve discussed or alluded to a Dutch collective identity and cultural values which drive a revised accounting of the Dutch “Golden



Age”—revised to exclude the global and negative aspects of this period, in favor of a golden understanding of the past which continues to reflect glowingly into the present. The focus on the “Golden Age” roots this identity in the past, so as to suggest these traits are consistent and have endured for centuries, which of course, they have not, as they are constantly evolving to suit the present moment. Cultural identity is notoriously difficult to define and the line between identity and stereotypes is fuzzy. We prefer to think of our identity in positive terms, something to be proud of or strive for, though sometimes we identify negative traits to push against. A culture is never monolithic—there are those who will identify fully, partially, or not at all with the values their culture espouses. There are also many who will feel that they cannot identify with the values of the culture in which they find themselves, and indeed, cultural identities often exclude and define certain persons as not belonging.

In this book, I aim to show how the art historical archive of the early modern Netherlands and the continued grasping at that past continue to define the Dutch collective identity. The discussion of these objects and landscapes reveals that this identity is contradictory and inconsistent. We jump between the ostentation of a still life painting with rich trade objects and the plain townhouse, and between the freedom of the seas and a hierarchically arranged city plan. This examination of cultural values through art reveals the inherent contradictions. For example, while the global reach of the early modern Netherlands directly impacted the art market, as many made their fortunes on overseas trade, much of the art produced in this period focuses on domestic life (scenes set in home interiors, Dutch city views and landscapes). This focus on the domestic is seen in chapter 3, where objects from far away are reorganized on a household tabletop, reflecting, I believe, an anxiety about losing access to global trade.

Another trait that is seen across Dutch culture in past and present is humility, reflected in the plain and relatively unadorned domestic architecture explored in chapter 5. Humility is intimately connected to its opposite, pride, which manifests in the ostentatious display of riches reflected in objects like the nautilus cup or the *pronk* still life, which nonetheless are small, constrained celebrations of wealth. In eighteenth-century Batavia, the subject of chapter 4, this ostentation is curbed by sumptuary laws, designed to keep the Dutch Batavians from acting unDutch. These values are bound up in Calvinist morality, as explored most popularly by Simon Schama as “an embarrassment of riches.”³⁵ They also relate to Dutch ideas about social hierarchy, namely that hierarchy should be flattened or nonexistent, or simply hidden, which is the contradiction at the center of chapter 4. Humility and pride are also bound up with the Dutch pride in their pragmatism, on doing

35 Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches*.



what makes sense in a straightforward (and plain) way, lacking frills or hidden agendas, which is both demonstrated and contradicted by Dutch city planning and architecture in chapters 4 and 5.

Finally, there is continuum between freedom and control that chapter 2 explores. Hugo Grotius, as we will see, argues for the freedom of the seas, and the freedom of all societies to enter into trade agreements on equal and fair footing. Dutch behavior in trade proves to be both hierarchical and unfair, but the notion that the Dutch East and West India Companies were only trading with other cultures, rather than colonizing their land, goods, and people, contributes to the argument for Dutch innocence, as discussed earlier in this introduction. Innocence of this history requires strategic forgetting, which we see throughout these examples. These traits, as conflicting as they are, provide for a Dutch collective identity that is not entirely consistent, that allows for a plurality of ways to be Dutch, but also defines who is and is not Dutch. The “Golden Age” remains bound up in these questions of belonging and exclusion, innocence and guilt, and we cannot simply celebrate this past without seeing its tarnish. A final word on why I have chosen to pursue this subject: there are clear similarities between Dutch identity and American identity, especially in American ideas of social mobility, freedom, and innocence. I, as an American, am deeply uncomfortable with aspects of this collective identity, and I both push against and reflect these values, as I benefit from the happenstance of my birth into U.S. citizenship. In identifying how and why my culture and the culture I study have come to be is how I see a way to reckon honestly with a challenging past and to find a better way forward.

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