



HISTORY OF 17TH CENTURY ANTWERP

Teacher's Guide to the Exhibition

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The History of the Netherlands

Certain events are important to fully understand the development of the Dutch and Flemish art in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the close relationship between the countries. It is important to understand the Dutch and Flemish political, social and economic scene then.

Nomenclature

The distinction between Holland and the Netherlands can be confusing for foreigners. The official title for the country is the Kingdom of the Netherlands; however, in English the terms the Netherlands and Holland are commonly used. The current boundaries of the Netherlands were originally larger, including present day Belgium, Luxembourg and the Northwest corner of France. Nowadays, the term The Low Countries is used in English to refer to this region. The area Holland actually consists of two provinces situated in the western part of the present day Netherlands. This is where the most important cities are situated, such as Amsterdam (the capital city), The Hague (seat of the government) and Rotterdam (world's largest harbor city). The use of the name Holland for the Netherlands is comparable with the mistaken use of England to refer to the whole of the United Kingdom.

In English, the adjective Netherlandish is used in reference to the historical configuration of the Netherlands, whereas the adjective Dutch is used to relate to the current country. Dutch is also the language spoken in the Netherlands. The term Dutch itself can be easily misunderstood. Etymological, the word stems from the German word Deutsche. Although the Dutch and Deutsche languages are related, they remain distinct.

The terminology used to different areas of present day Belgium can also be ambiguous. The northern area of Belgium, where Flemish is spoken, is called Flanders. Today the Dutch and Flemish dialects are closely connected but survive as separate languages. The southern part of Belgium is called Wallonia. In this region a dialect of French is spoken. This language is called Walloon.

Geographically, Flanders is merely the western part of Flemish-speaking Belgium. In this region, Bruges and Ghent are the most important cities. Antwerp and Brussels, however, are not included in this region. Artistic objects dating from the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries produced in the modern day Belgium region, including French-speaking areas is referred to as being Flemish.

The confusion of borders and languages originates in the turbulent history of the Low Countries in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. By the eighteenth century, northern and southern Netherlands had separated definitively.

The Middle Ages

In the middle ages, 1000-1500 AD, the Low Countries did not form a national unity but consisted of separate provinces, each governed by a count, duke or bishop with secular authority. The majority of the Low Countries however was subordinate to the German Empire, which was ruled by an emperor elected from amongst the regional patricians. In reality, the emperor did not have much authority outside his own territory; therefore, the regional heads were practically independent.

The only province in the Low Countries that belonged to the kingdom of France was Flanders. This was the most developed and prosperous region at that time. Despite the fact that the French king regularly meddled with the government of this region, Flanders still had a great deal of autonomy. Flanders' riches were predominantly based upon the textile industry. Wool needed for textile production was mainly imported from England. Throughout the Middle Ages, France and England were frequently at war. This had direct consequences in the relationship between France and Flanders, which was often turbulent. Bruges and Ghent, the most important cities in Flanders, developed into international trade centers. These cities attracted numerous merchants from southern Europe, especially Italy. Consequently, in the early fifteenth century, Bruges became the most important harbor and trade centre in northwestern Europe.

The dukedom of Brabant lay to the east of Flanders. In this region Antwerp, Brussels and's Hertogenbosch were the most important cities. By the end of the fifteenth century, Antwerp surpassed Bruges as the largest harbor city of Europe. During the Middle Ages, the economic development of Flanders and Brabant far outgrew that of Holland. However, Amsterdam eventually took over Antwerp's role as the largest trade centre of Europe. After 1585, Dutch ship rapidly gained a large share in the fishing industry and in trade of wood and grain from northern Europe.

The Golden Age

The enormous wealth brought by the international shipping industry led to great political power for the young Dutch republic and an extraordinary cultural boom. Thus, the seventeenth

century is known in Dutch history as the Golden Age. Although the real wealth was limited to small portion of society, it was remarkable how many people had paintings and other artistic objects in their homes. Other arts besides painting, such as the sciences, also bloomed in this period. The unprecedented social tolerance in the Netherlands led to the country becoming a sanctuary for political and religious refugees from throughout Europe. Amongst these were the Czech theologian and educator Comenius, the Portuguese Jewish philosopher Spinoza and the French philosopher Descartes.

By 1650, the Netherlands, barely 150 km by 150 km large with less than 2 million inhabitants, was England's equal regarding political and military influence. After this period, its much larger neighbor would slowly surpass it. The Dutch stadtholder, Willem III became king of England in 1688 through his marriage to Mary, the daughter of King of England. However, by then it was already clear that Willem III's centre of power lay in England, not in the Netherlands.

General history of art during the 17th century

In history there are periods in which economic, scientific and cultural developments coincidence. They are the cause of an unmatched flowering period. The 17th century in the Netherlands was such a period.

We focus on the situation in the cultural sphere. When you realise, that the total number of works of art, made in the Netherlands during the 17th century, is estimated on more than two million pieces of art works (paintings as well as prints), you can only look with admiration to this century.

In the Dutch history this 17th century has received the epithet, the 'Golden' century.

In spite of the fact that the epithet "golden" has to be restricted to the first 60/70 years of that century, there is undoubtedly an incredible grow of welfare. It is also astonishing, that these economic flow happened in a relatively small country(territory) and that these provinces (gewesten) could grow to such an economic power. In another aspect these Netherlands were unique: namely the fact these provinces were an united republic and not a monarchy, as was the case in other countries.

And when we look to the arts, we can only recognize in admiration, that such a small region gave birth to such a big number of famous painters. Only to mention the most famous: Rembrandt, Vermeer, Frans Hals, Govert Flinck, etc.etc. The fact that the Netherlands were a republic without a central authority/government like a monarch in a monarchy, had no negative influence on the state of arts. For in history the central royal court always played the

role of a place of stimulation. The nobility at the court was important, as they gave the orders for the paintings and furniture etc.

But in the Netherlands the role of a rich class of nobles was fulfilled by the so called “regenten”. This was a class of rich merchants and later a class of political elite in the cities of Holland, Zeeland and Utrecht. This region in the north/western part of the Netherlands with the trade activities, with the shipping activities, was the dynamic centre of financial/economic developments.

A negative element for the arts was the fact that the protestant religion preached a lifestyle of modesty. And the ideology of Protestantism had led to the vanishing of religion sculpture and paintings in their churches. So artists could not expect orders from the protestant clergy.

In the 17th century Dutch (but also in other European countries) painters specialized in categories. So there were the following themes/categories:

- Biblical themes
- Mythological/historical themes
- Landscapes/ winter landscapes
- Still lives / vanities paintings
- Portraits of the rich economic/political elite
- Marine paintings

Is it possible to characterise 17th century Dutch painting in a few words? Yes: We could use the word REALISM.

Another element of the 17th century was architecture; Based on the classical/Renaissance building principles there was an intensive building activity, which can still be admired in Amsterdam and other cities. The so called “herenhuizen” along the famous canals, the Amsterdam City Hall, built in the years from 1648 (nowadays the royal palace), the building of a number of churches are the witnesses of the cultural flowering of the “Golden” century of the Netherlands.

On to the New Age

Although still a trading country of importance, the Dutch republic became a modest country that remained in the shadow of England and France. The highest enclave of society retained its riches from overseas, and thus could maintain a certain wealthy lifestyle, while poverty grew among the lower realms of the population.

At the end of the eighteenth century, the Netherlands was an easy target for the French invading armies, who at first occupied and then annexed the country. In 1815, the more influential European powers decided that a stronger state was required as a buffer against France. In consequence, the Northern and Southern Netherlands were again united as one nation after 300 years. However, the two countries had grown far apart: the French-speaking and very Catholic elite in the south thought of the Northern protestants as intruders. In 1830 the South separated and became the present day country of Belgium.

The Netherlands Today

The subsequent history of the Netherlands is of less importance for this account. Today, the Netherlands is still a trading nation and has worldwide influence. The present country had a population of 16million people.

In 1944, towards the end of World War II, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg founded the Benelux; a collaboration that served as a predecessor and example for the later founded European Community. In this manner, the old and historic Netherlands stood at the foundation of European Unity that has acquired a new face shaped in the form of a common currency unit: the Euro. After the horrors of two World Wars, the old and apparently irreconcilable enemies of honour seem to prove that only fraternization and cooperation can lead to a better future.

A Mixture of Religion and Commerce: Antwerp Art in the 17th century

Antwerp was a deeply religious city with the stronghold of the Roman Catholic Church. This religious sentiment permeates deeply through the fabric of the lives of people, the structure of their society and therefore, also their paintings. The paintings, no matter what their genre is, are somewhat moralising, chastising even though sometimes titillating.



Anonymous
The Virgin Mary with two gift bearers
Oil on panel
Antwerp Royal Museum of Fine Arts
Inventory 517-518

In these times, Flanders had faced the religious wars from 1566. These wars were between the Roman Catholic Church and various Protestant sects such as Calvinism and Lutheranism. The Northern Flanders leaned toward Protestantism whereas the Southern Flanders was steeped in Roman Catholicism. During this period, Antwerp faced

economic decay as ports in Northern Flanders began to exact heavy tolls from Southern Flanders provinces due to which trade suffered.

Reformers such as Luther and Calvin thought that the image worship generated in this way was pure idolatry. That is why they pleaded for churches in which images were no longer present, neither painted nor sculpted. In the course of the 16th century their ideas gained increasingly more ground, and finally in 1566 what became known as 'iconoclasm' ensued. Followers of the reformed faiths broke into churches in Antwerp too and destroyed numerous paintings and sculptures.

However, in this war, the Catholics defended by Spanish rulers become victorious and the Catholic faith secured a hold over the Low Countries. Now with the Catholic stronghold on the Southern region of Flanders, to which Antwerp belongs, religious images continued to be very important. Visual representations were very important in the Catholic Church, picturing as they did stories from the Bible and the lives of saints for those who could not read. It was just as important that they helped in praying and meditation. The image was meant to be an aid without any sacred value. During the religious wars, many churches were ransacked and so there was demand for such paintings.



The flamboyant baroque style of Peter Paul Rubens turned out to be the perfect medium to create a powerful visual representation of this message. His fellow-painters Anthony Van Dyck and Jacob Jordaens were also to paint many religious scenes for churches at home and abroad. In this way, the Catholic Church remained the main client for visual artists in the 17th century as well.

Peter Paul Rubens
The education of Mary
Oil on canvas
Antwerp Royal Museum of Fine Arts
Inventory 306

Art as the mirror of divine nature



Jan I Brueghel
River Landscape
Oil on copper
Antwerp Royal Museum of
Fine Arts
Inventory 910

The Flemish art of painting is so special because of the fact that artists there enjoyed a tradition of fantastically true-to-nature details. In many works the tiniest flower, the finest blade of grass is represented accurately. This was possible due to the use of oil paint, a technique that in its turn was developed in the Low Countries. Instead of with the traditional egg, paint pigments had been mixed with linseed or walnut oil since the 15th century. In this way the artist could work with thin layers of paint on top of each other, so that the colours had an unprecedented luminosity. In addition, this technique allows for an enormous sense of detail.

In the 14th and 15th century the mystics in the Low Countries actually assumed that the divine is not only revealed in the Bible. Indeed, those who search can find God in the smallest detail of Creation. After all, every petal, every tree was created by God. By meditating on everything that a human being sees around him, he can then also create an image of precisely that higher divine reality. It was therefore very much in the interest of artists to represent reality as accurately as possible: only then could the religious person use a visual representation while praying. Therefore the result is 'mimetic' art: art that tries to copy nature as precisely as possible.

But this does not mean that everything the artist depicted was necessarily an exact copy of reality as it existed in a very specific place and at a very specific moment. The landscapes were not realistic, they were composed of lakes, forests, mountains symbolical of the entire universe created by God. Before that time they did make sketches outside, but used them in their studios to create scenes that still exceeded the beauty of reality. Flower arrangements or garlands as the one around the portrait of Gonzales Coques and Daniël Seghers were composed in this manner: the flowers were sketched individually and combined into a garland on the painting.



Daniël Seghers and Gonzales Coques
Portrait of a man in a garland
 Oil on copper
 Antwerp Royal Museum of Fine Arts
 Inventory 803

Apart from this, we may nevertheless assume that visual art can give us a relatively good idea of how the world must have looked in the 17th century. What the representations actually show is far from timeless: they allow us to catch a glimpse of the reality that a 17th-century individual must also have seen to a certain extent. A fairground scene such as the one by Peeter Gijssels, Joos Van Craesbeeck's *Death is violent and fast* or Pieter Van Bredael's *The old ox market in Antwerp*: each one of these scenes is very far removed from reality as it looks today in present-day Belgium. Yet we cannot just regard this type of scene as a casual and literal representation of reality: such work virtually always also conveys a deeper message.

A religious world

Just as reality has to be understood as a veiled reference to the divine, many a painting has to be considered as a kind of 'pretence' which the viewer has to see through. Only in this way will the religious person find the divine.

For Christians – whether they are Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist or of any other Christian sect – history can actually be compared to a finite line that starts with Creation and will finish one day with the End of Time. On that day God the Father will judge every human being that ever lived on the basis of his or her individual life, virtues and vices. The person in question will have to spend eternity under the physical and mental pains of hell. However, if someone lived a devout, honest and chaste life, he or she will be granted admittance to the salvation of heaven.

It was therefore very important that mankind was aware of the temporary nature of life (death is inevitable) and of the vanity (or uselessness) of worldly temptations.



Jan I Brueghel
Flowers in a vase
 Oil on panel
 Antwerp Royal Museum of Fine Arts
 Inventory 643

These themes also pervaded through visual arts. In the visual arts 'vanitas' could be expressed in numerous ways. Skulls or hourglasses were favourite motifs, but also soap bubbles or snuffed-out candles appeared frequently. Subjects that at first sight cannot easily be associated express this message: in that sense still life paintings were a favourite. Flowers will wilt and fruit will rot – it was also often depicted as such in the painting concerned, here and there the fruit is worm-eaten or exhibits a bruise, or an insect is crawling on the apparently beautiful but in fact already wilted flowers.

In their turn landscapes may also be the medium of a spiritual dimension. For was the world not created by God? Abel Grimmer's View of Antwerp translates such a thought very literally and shows a view of 17th-century Antwerp, with God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary as protectors of the city at the top.

But even if such figures were not depicted explicitly, the landscapes were often permeated by a similar



Abel Grimmer And
 Hendrik Van Balen
View on Antwerp from the Left Bank
 Oil on panel, 37.7 x 44.4 cm
 Antwerp, Royal Museum of Fine Arts
 Inventory 817

message. For the 17th-century viewers of these works a painted landscape could be the symbolic summary of the entire cosmos.

Even portraits were not spared a religious-spiritual image agenda. Michaelina Wautiers's Portrait of two girls as Saint Agnes and Saint Dorothea shows two girls who are depicted as two female saints. At that time, the holy ladies in question had been dead for hundreds of years. So the girls are only represented with the attributes of the saints, whose names they probably also bore. In this way it was hoped to call on the protection of these saints or to depict these girls as being just as virtuous as their holy namesakes.



Michaelina Wautier
*Two girls presented as Saint Agnes
and Dorothea*
Oil on panel
Antwerp Royal Museum of Fine Arts
Inventory S99

A game of supply and demand

Such scenes were not mainly created to decorate churches, and not even necessarily for high-nobility clients. The unique aspect of Antwerp art in the 17th century is the fact that the middle classes also increasingly started to play a part: burghers (rich middle classes) became an important – if not the major – market for the visual arts.

As early as the 16th century Antwerp experienced an economic boom that hardly had its equal in the Europe of the past. An economic boom of this kind resulted in many merchants amassing a fair amount of money. They invested it in impressive houses, in which there was room for decoration in the shape of paintings and prints. This generated a phenomenon that was completely unprecedented at the time. From then on, creation of arts no longer happened on the order of a specific client, such as a monarch or cleric. Artists and their studios also worked for the free market, and that was completely new.

The concept of individual taste came to the fore – what one likes may be considered rubbish by another – and therefore, the arts market expanded noticeably under the motto of ‘suited every taste’. Religious depictions, which before were mostly the only imaginable subject, were then supplemented by new categories such as landscapes, still lifes, or genre scenes. In many cases they were still permeated by a religious message or a lesson of life, but it was often undeniably shifted slightly to the background.

The emergence of these new genres went hand in hand with increasingly more functional production methods in the artist's workshop. In order to comply with the enormous demand for visual representations there was increased distribution of tasks in the studio, so that production became faster and cheaper. That is why from that moment one artist could paint the background of a scene and another, the flowers in the foreground. The little landscapes in the background became more and more prominent, and the figures increasingly smaller until they were completely absorbed and the landscape took centre stage. The same happened to flowers, the still-life parts or the scenes from everyday life, which originally only functioned as decoration for what was virtually always a religious scene. They developed into genres in their own right.

The golden age of the art of printing can also only be understood against this background. Printing had been known in Europe since the 15th century and made it possible to distribute visual representations on a hitherto unknown scale. It was easy to make hundreds of copies of an engraving, probably even many more of a woodcut. The possibility of simple reproduction made pictures affordable for anybody, even if they were made to designs of the major artists of the time.

The sum total of this was that hundreds of workshops brought thousands of visual representations on to the market every year. They were distributed from Antwerp: not only all over the Low Countries, but literally all over the known world. Prints were ideal on this level – easy to transport and available in large quantities – but Antwerp paintings were also exported in thousands of copies. In the 17th century the city on the River Scheldt functioned as the Hollywood or AOL/TimeWarner and CNN today: it played a key role in imaging all over the world.



Peter Paul Rubens
Paulus Pontius
Old woman and a boy with candles
Etching, plate edge
Antwerp Plantin-Moretus Museum/
Print Room
Inventory PK. OP.16234