





Rembrandt. F. 1661













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THE GOLDEN AGE

of Dutch and Flemish Painting

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TIPS FOR READING · ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THE YEAR 1648, which brought an end to the Thirty Years' War, also sealed the division of the formerly united Netherlands. The northern provinces of the land had freed themselves from Spanish rule in an eighty-year war of liberation and had adopted the Calvinist faith. The southern provinces, on the other hand, remained part of Spain and became a bastion of the Counter-Reformation for the Catholic Church. Despite this epochal conflict, in both the southern and the northern Netherlands the art of the seventeenth century, especially painting, unfolded an exceptional richness, which later generations would compare with the mythical splendor of a Golden Age.

My first two chapters seek to briefly summarize the complex political, confessional, social, and economic developments and examine their effects on the cultural milieus. But is it intellectually permissible to treat the painting of the two Netherlands as a unity, even if a divided one? Did the two art landscapes not divide themselves too starkly into a land of Catholic, early absolutist Baroque and a land of protestant-bourgeoise sobriety?

Before this cardinal question can be answered, a number of analyses of works must be carried out, and these can be found in the third, longest, chapter. The Netherlandish seventeenth century was an astonishing epoch of images, which were produced, disseminated, absorbed, and "consumed" in prodigious numbers, and of which countless—and surely the best—can still be admired in museums, private collections, and auction houses. The present book can thus offer nothing even close to a comprehensive survey, but only a concentrated selection. Even from among the painters, grouped around the major figures Rubens and Rembrandt, I could choose only the best and those who were formative for a given pictorial genre. I saw it as more important to look at their creative achievement together with the contemporary historical context than to recapitulate detailed biographies. Sketches from the life histories of individual painters can be found only when they are relevant for understanding their work as a whole.

In Chapter IV, with recourse to the question just mentioned, I attempt to work out essential commonalities between the painting of the South and North Netherlands, that is, Flemish and Dutch painting, without artificially levelling undeniably extant divergences; at the same time, these important passages offer a summarizing continuation of the previous trains of thought.

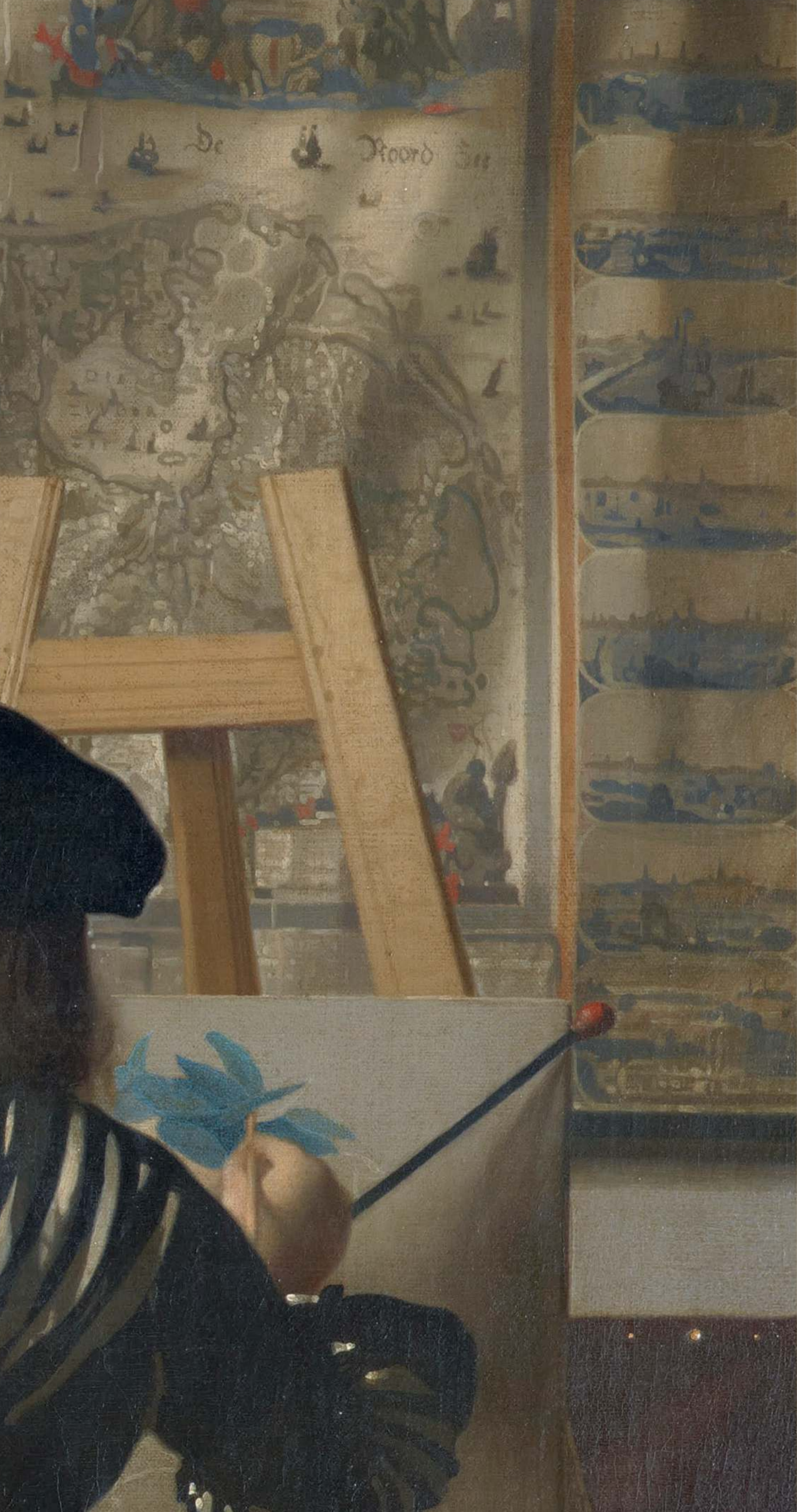
The concluding chapter seeks, on the basis of a number of case studies, to highlight more or less surprising connections between Netherlandish paintings of the epoch in question and their reception from the eighteenth century to the present.

The need to stay within the bounds of the book made it necessary to focus in word and image entirely on painting. Architecture, sculpture, and the decorative arts are just as absent as are drawing and prints—the latter a shortcoming, especially in the case of Rembrandt. Despite this deficit I hope I have been able to capture the fascination not only of this one artist, but the Golden Age of Dutch and Flemish painting as a whole.

The number of publications on Netherlandish, or, respectively, Flemish or Dutch painting of the seventeenth century or on individual artists has long since become incalculable. Even the list of titles I have analyzed over several years would have been too long if I had not limited myself to citing primarily literature that is (relatively) easily accessible to a non-specialist public and which in turn contains additional literature for further reading. I have restricted footnotes to the citation of quotations and particularly important ideas in the secondary literature. The publications on the literature list that refer unmistakably to artists, themes, and so on, have thus not been cited again in the footnotes. Dates of birth and death of all the persons discussed in more detail in the text are noted in the index of names.

The present publication is also, and not least, a declaration of love for seventeenth-century Netherlandish painting. That it appears in such an exquisitely beautiful form is due to those responsible at Prestel Verlag, first and foremost Claudia Stäuble. Only because of her dedication and expertise was it possible for the project to assume form at all. I am also especially grateful to Julie Kiefer, Friederike Schirge, and Kira Uthoff, who once again sensitively and competently saw to it that the book's realization along with obtaining the images proceeded smoothly, which is not something to be taken for granted. And finally, I would like to thank Clemens von Lucius, who as usual corrected the German text with exceptional conscientiousness, Cynthia Hall for the translation into English, and Rebecca van Dyck for copyediting the English text.





I

REALITY
AND MYTH



FIG. 1
Map of the southern and northern Netherlands (States General) with the borders agreed on in 1609

FIG. 2
GERARD TERBORCH
The Ratification of the Treaty of Münster, 1648
Oil on copper, 45.4 × 58.7 cm
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

→ FIG. 3
PETER PAUL RUBENS
The Miracles of St. Francis Xavier, ca. 1617/18
Oil on canvas, 535 × 395 cm
Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie



IN 1648, THE SAME YEAR the Peace of Westphalia was signed on October 24, ending the disaster of the Thirty Years' War, Gerard Terborch¹ painted the culmination of a major event that had been enacted a month earlier (fig. 2): the ratification of the separate peace between Spain and the northern provinces of the Netherlands that had seceded from Spain, the so-called States General (fig. 1). The solemn signing had taken place in the townhall of the Westphalian city of Münster, and Terborch depicts the ceremonial gathering of the emissaries as he had personally witnessed it then and there.

The position of power of the northern, Protestant Netherlands, was never greater than in that fateful year. The confederation of autonomous regions, so small in area, extending from the Ems and the Vlie to the Maas and Schelde, had won its independence—finally sanctioned in the Peace of Westphalia—after a long, bloody revolt against Habsburg Spain, and at the same time

developed into a major force to be reckoned with in the European struggle for power.

What historical configuration is embedded in the term “States General”? What identity could its direct counterpart, the southern Netherlands, invoke? Could they invoke one at all? After all, the two neighboring territories had been a political and cultural unity before becoming by-products of the eighty-year-long war for Dutch independence. The war had been waged initially by the entire country and then, following the defeat of the South, by the Protestant North on its own against the occupying forces of early Absolutist and arch-Catholic Spain. The question is whether the forcible political and confessional division also resulted in a line of demarcation in terms of art.



The Dutch Struggle for Freedom: The Divided Unity

IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY, the “waning of the Middle Ages” (Johan Huizinga), the Netherlandish regions formed an important part of the rich Duchy of Burgundy. After the marriage of the emperor’s son Maximilian to Mary, the heiress of Burgundy, in 1477, the regions were part of the multiethnic Habsburg state. In 1555, Maximilian’s grandson, Emperor Charles V, passed the entire seventeen provinces on to his son Philip II, the future king of Spain. In 1559 he in turn appointed a daughter of Charles V, Margaret of Parma, governor of the Netherlands to give the region the veneer of political self-governance. But in reality the freedoms of the cities and the estates were being crushed by Spanish centralism; a rigorous “state Catholicism” and the apparatus of the inquisition “cleansed” the land of Protestant “heretics.” Beginning in 1566, the Calvinist nobility (the Geuzen) organized the revolt, accompanied by orgies of destruction targeting Catholic houses of worship, or at least their decoration.² The occupying force reacted with brutality in the person of the Duke of Alba and in 1568 had the counts Lamoraal of Egmont and Philip II of Hoorne executed in Brussels. The bloody deed commenced an eighty-year war.

For the northern Netherlands acted quickly. The provinces of Holland and Zeeland named William I of Orange, the “Silent,” stadtholder and in 1572 called out for revolt. In 1579 the Union of Utrecht proclaimed the secession of the seven provinces, now united into a republic—Gelderland, Holland, Zeeland, Utrecht, Friesland,

Overijssel, and Groningen. The southern Netherlands joined the revolt but was forced to capitulate in 1585 after the capture of Antwerp. They now become definitively the Spanish Netherlands, which Philip II ultimately left to his daughter Isabella and her husband Albert VII of Austria as a fiefdom at the end of the century. They remained under Spanish rule until 1714 and then passed to Austrian rule.³

To prevent any confusion of terminology from arising in this book, a brief excursus is necessary: The separation between North and South brought no clarification to the perpetually fluctuating nomenclature of the parts of the land. As early as in the fifteenth century, the names “Belgia,” “Belgium,” “Belgica” (primarily in literary and scholarly textual evidence) could be found for the entire Netherlandish region together with the more demotic term “Nederland.” In 1657 Hugo Grotius gave his account of the revolt of the Netherlands (which was, after all, primarily shouldered by the northern provinces) the title *Annales et historiae de rebus Belgicis*. The word choice thus refers to the common origin of all the provinces. The persistent desire for togetherness is also demonstrated, incidentally, by the wall map in the background of Vermeer’s *The Art of Painting*, produced around 1665/66 (fig. 146). It shows all the parts of the land, regardless of their political separation, which had already been carried out, as well as colorfully jumbled cityscapes.⁴ Even as late as 1814, the Kingdom of the Two



FIG. 4
SIMON DE VLIEGER
The Frigate Amsterdam
at Den Helder, ca. 1649/50
 Oil on wood, 70.5 × 92.5 cm
 Berlin, Staatliche Museen
 zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie

Belgiums was suggested as a name for the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, set up after the fall of Napoleon. Today, “Holland” and “The Netherlands” are virtual synonyms for the modern country on the territory of the former northern provinces.

In the South the designation “Netherlandish states” and “Belgian states” appear alongside one another in documents for the last time in 1789. Henceforth the new word coinage “La Belgique” or “België” become universal practice. It should also be mentioned that Italian sources in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries used “flandri” or “fiamminghi” to refer, without distinction, to persons from the southern or northern Netherlands, and often even to the Germans. From 1648 the terms “Flanders” and “Flemish” became focused solely on the South, that is, Belgium (and in the nineteenth century distinguished the Flemish-Dutch-speaking group of the population from the Francophone Walloons in the country).⁵

While taking historical usage into account, I will henceforth use “Netherlands” and “Netherlandish” for the entire entity of North and South, “Spanish Netherlands” or “Flanders” for the southern provinces and “Flemish” for the art there; the provinces that seceded from Spain will appear in the text either as the “northern” or “Protestant” Netherlands or mostly as “Holland” (the “Dutch Republic” or “Republic of Holland”), and occasionally also as the “States General” (as in official political titles of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries).

Back to the question of what the division of the country brought in its wake and what consequences it had on art. I will begin with the South:

After 1585, in addition to the rich middle class, it was the Catholic Church, supported and given privileges by the governors, that became the absolutely determining cultural force. As spearheads of the counter-reformation, the Jesuits in particular “made the Spanish provinces into their base of operations for the spiritual battle for the apostate North, the Rhineland, northern Germany, and England. ... In the 1720s the order counted over 1500 members in around 50 houses; that is comparatively speaking more than in any other European country.”⁶

Not least “Jesuit art” outwardly concealed the inexorable economic decline of the South with new splendor. In 1617 the congregation ordered two monumental paintings for the high altar of the order’s new church in Antwerp (first called St. Ignatius then later St. Charles Borromeo Church) from the court painter to the Spanish governing couple, the artist who towered over all others, Peter Paul Rubens. One of the two altarpiece panels represented the miracles of “Saint” Francis Xavier (fig. 3)—the title being an intentional anticipation, since the Jesuit missionary to the heathens, the “Apostle of India” who raises two persons from the dead in the image, was first beatified in 1619 and first canonized in 1622. The canonization anticipated in the altarpiece panel was meant to triumphally proclaim the spread of the Catholic faith carried out by the Society of Jesus, the

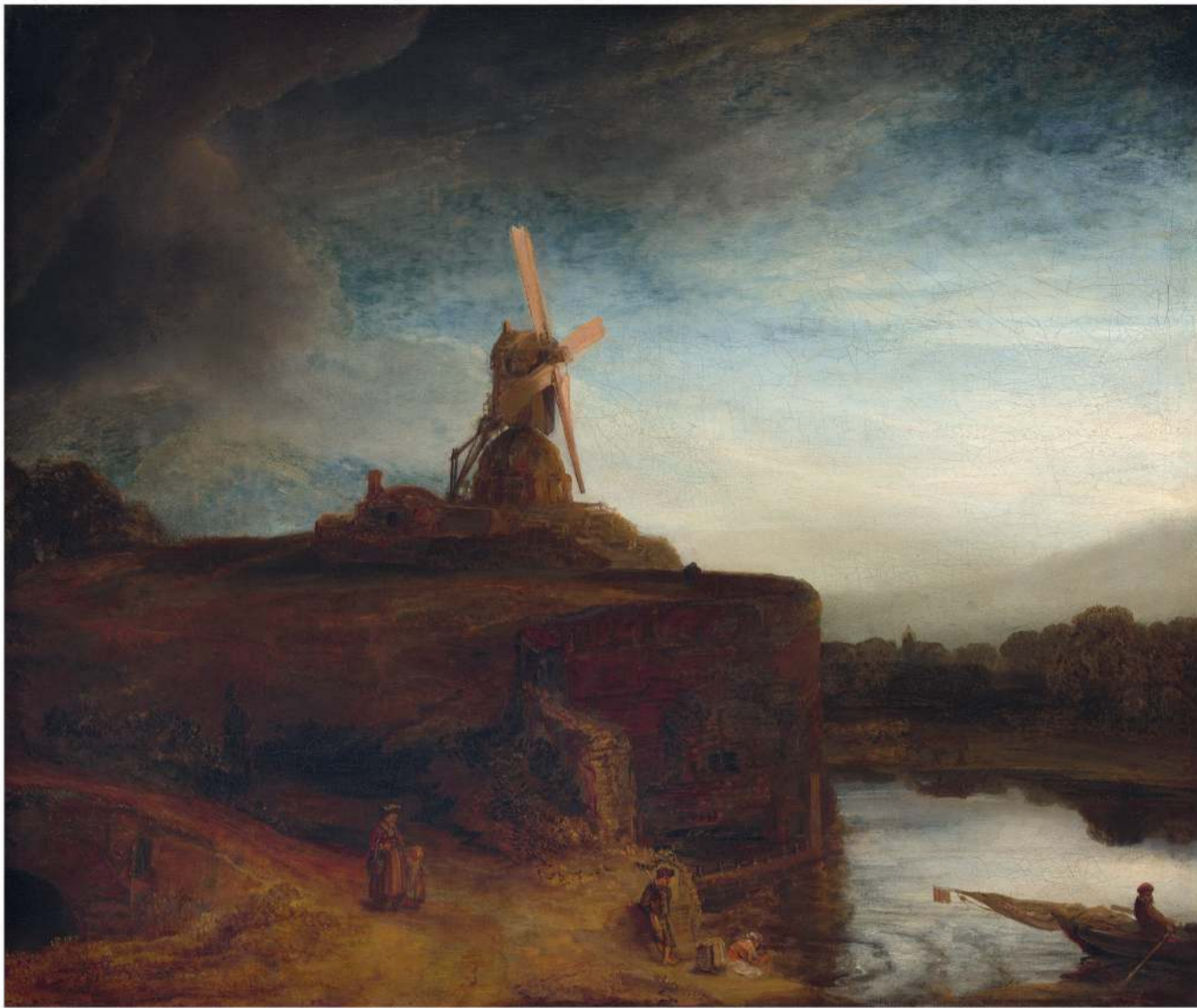


FIG. 5
REMBRANDT (?)
The Mill, ca. 1645
 Oil on canvas, 87.6 × 105.6 cm
 Washington, D.C., National Gallery
 of Art, Widener Collection

“propaganda fide,” as a divinely blessed mission.⁷ In 1620 the order also persuaded Rubens once again to develop thirty-nine ceiling paintings for side aisles and galleries of its Antwerp church. He supplied only the oil sketches; the execution was the responsibility of his large workshop under the direction of Anthony van Dyck.⁸ Even the Protestant theologian Adam Samuel Hartmann of Bohemia enthusiastically wrote about the ensemble in 1657: “But inside the splendor a[nd] grandeur so beautiful that one is almost overcome with awe.”⁹ The Jesuits, who vehemently made the spiritual spectacle into an instrument of counter-reformation propaganda and into a symbol of the “*theatrum mundi*,” knew what they had in Rubens’s stagecraft, in which this world and the next, the Christian and the mythological, sensual ecstasy and ecstatic martyrdom dazzlingly converged.

But the worldly authorities also endeavored to use monumental art as a means of staging and stylizing power. Accordingly, in 1611 the Antwerp city council resolved to collect alms at every High Mass for the repair and renovation of the houses of worship that had been ruined by the Calvinists half a century earlier. That same

year the foundation stone was laid for the Capuchins’ Church, in 1615 for the Augustinian Church and the Church of the Order of the Annunciates. Apparently, each of these orders wanted a work by Rubens—who had returned from Italy in 1608 and was conversant in the “great” Renaissance painting—to decorate their high altar. The reputation that Rubens built up picture by picture rapidly helped him win clerical commissions from half of Europe. “In this environment, Rubens became for the Catholic lands of northern Europe the most productive painter of the saints. . . . With sensitivity and pious devotion, he pondered the life and the character of each individual saint and also empathized with the specific spirituality and interests of his diverse ecclesiastical clients.”¹⁰

A solemnly played “*theatrum sacrum*” of Catholic faith was integrated into the urban space of Antwerp through the sacral “programmatic images” by the hand of an artist like Rubens and other predestined painters. Thousands of Protestants, including many artists and skilled craftsmen, fled Catholic rule from the Spanish Netherlands to Holland, where there was incomparably

greater tolerance regarding confessional questions. Although Calvinism (Reformed Church) became the dominant factor there, it never acted like an exclusive state religion. Other Protestant schools and sects existed side-by-side, and even the religious practices of Catholics as well as the Spanish and Portuguese Jews who had fled their homelands were only restricted in moderation. A comparable tolerance dominated all intellectual life in Holland and made it possible—to name only two examples—for the philosophers René Descartes and Baruch de Spinoza to publish their revolutionary views.

Intellectual liberalism was accompanied by a high level of education and economic pragmatism. Compared with the rest of Europe, seventeenth-century Holland boasted the highest urban density and the lowest rate of illiteracy in both urban centers and throughout the broad rural areas. The old aristocracy had almost vanished,¹¹ and even the influence of the stadtholders from the House of Orange remained limited. The tone was set by upper-class burghers, bankers, merchants, shipowners, and tradesmen. And it was this financial aristocracy that was responsible for the economic miracle of the seventeenth century, which availed itself of the resources of earth, water, and wind with success-oriented efficiency.

Holland and the water—this meant the utilization of the inland waters, building dykes to win land from the sea, and seafaring on the world's oceans. As a consequence, many Dutch seascapes have a decidedly patriotic accent in addition to their aesthetic qualities. One such example is Simon de Vlieger's *The Frigate Amsterdam at Den Helder* (fig. 4): The fleet anchors near the beach, supplied with provisions by small sloops. The flagship, the *Amsterdam*, under sail and with open gun ports, is about to return to the convoy. On the far left, sailboats sail out to sea, "driven by that same wind that also dispels the dark clouds from the picture's right edge."¹² Under the protection of the fleet, which has a symbolic resonance in nature, the people on the coast go about their work.

The windmills often perceived today as merely a touristy motif were once important instruments of the national economy. They served not only to grind grain but also, when they powered pumps, for the draining and reclamation of land. Many landscapes use them as emblems¹³ of the proud love of one's native land; this also

seems to be the case in an impressive painting—recently reattributed to Rembrandt—from the time around 1645 (fig. 5), which makes the mill the dramatic hero of the image.¹⁴

Dutch economic power proved itself throughout the world in the seventeenth century: in the monopolization of the Baltic trade, in overseas import and export trade, and in colonialization. The Dutch East India Company, founded in 1602, kept a governor in Batavia (present-day Jakarta) from 1619. Through it Holland soon dominated all the important trade routes between Arabia, Persia, India, and China; the trading company's forts stood on Ceylon and Formosa (present-day Sri Lanka and Taiwan); in addition, after the expulsion of the Portuguese in 1641, for two centuries the Dutch were the only Europeans permitted to trade in Japan.¹⁵ Its counterpart was the West India Company, initiated in 1621. Its warlike activities against Spain's South American possessions and the hijacking of the Spanish treasure fleet in 1628 contributed significantly to the decline of Iberian global power. With its help, the States General even temporarily controlled the Antilles and parts of Brazil. North America's New Netherlands also existed only briefly and was soon lost to England—in the process, New Amsterdam, the administrative center of the colony from 1624 to 1664, was renamed New York in honor of the victorious Duke of York.

In 1772 the French enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot noted down, astonished, the impressions from his travels in Holland: The people of this land are "human ants; they spread over all the regions of the earth, gather up everything they find that is scarce, useful, or precious, and carry it back to their storehouses. It is to Holland that the rest of Europe goes for everything it lacks. Holland is Europe's commercial hub. ... Wherever one goes in that country, one sees art grappling with nature, and always winning. There, wealth is without vanity, liberty is without insolence, levies are without vexation, and taxation is without misery."¹⁶ If observations like these were still possible in the eighteenth century, when Holland's heyday was already over, how much more they must have applied to the seventeenth century, a period that was referred to as a "Golden Age."

On the Way to the Golden Age

AROUND 700 BCE, the Greek epic poet Hesiod brought forth the myth of the Golden Age in his didactic poem *Works and Days: Five Ages of the World* succeeded one another. The beginning was a paradisiacal primordial time, a Golden Age. During this period, people lived without fighting or working, their environment supplied everything in abundance before the Silver, the Bronze, and the Heroic, and then finally the Iron Age brought increasingly worse conditions, making injustice and war a permanent state.

Since Hesiod, the Golden Age established itself as the longed-for goal of Western historical speculation. It gained new validity in the political propaganda under Emperor Augustus as well as in Augustan poetry, for example Virgil's fourth eclogue, and also in Horace and Ovid's first book of the *Metamorphoses*, which extols the beginning of the Golden Age with the words "aurea prima sata est aetas" (verse 89). Roman antiquity bequeathed the idea to the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and later centuries, connected with a wide variety of ideologies—of a national-mythological, social-utopian, nostalgic-escapist, or pseudo-religious sort. But the concept then degenerated into a metaphor for a period of cultural flowering and a clustering of overwhelming artistic accomplishment.

But the economic and cultural boom experienced by the Protestant Netherlands in the seventeenth century was no epiphenomenon of a "golden" age of peace. A conflict with Britannia followed the fighting with Spain.

In 1651, three years after the Peace of Westphalia, the English parliament issued a Navigation Act intended to break the Dutch dominance on the world's oceans. The following year, the States General resolved to wage a naval war against England—with initially catastrophic consequences. But the tide turned, and in 1654 the Treaty of Westminster guaranteed the Dutch their position as leading naval power for several decades. Finally, in 1672 the war against absolutist France began, which England exploited to renew attacks against the Dutch merchant fleet.

The seventeenth century brought even less tranquility, peace, and prosperity to the Spanish Netherlands. They suffered under the competition with and hostile acts of their northern neighbors—from 1585, when the States General began blockading the Scheldt, thus cutting Antwerp off from the sea and minimizing its role in overseas trade. "Our city," Rubens wrote in 1627 to a Parisian friend, "is wasting away like a body afflicted with consumption. Day after day we see the number of inhabitants shrink, since our unhappy people have no means of earning their living through handiwork or trade."¹⁷ Steps were taken to remedy the situation:

"Handiwork specialized in labor-intensive luxury goods. ... A Europe-wide network of members of Antwerp's merchant families continued to insure good business connections in all the important centers."¹⁸ Nevertheless, the great period was over, making the

flourishing of the arts and especially painting in the first half of the seventeenth all the more remarkable.

In 1897 the historian Pieter Lodewijk Muller published a description of the *Republic der Vereenigde Nederlanden in haar bloeitijd* (*The Republic of the United Netherlands in Its Heyday*). His publisher insisted that for the second edition the book be given a better sounding title: *Onze gouden eeuw* (*Our Golden Age*).¹⁹ By the time of this publication at the latest, a more than ambitious label was stamped on the Dutch seventeenth century.

The Dutch art historian Johan Huizinga also marveled at the importance of his homeland and its painting in the seventeenth century in his work *Nederland's beschaving in de zeventiende eeuw* (*Dutch Civilization in the Seventeenth Century*), which appeared in two editions by 1941. But he repudiated the slogan of the Golden Age, which to his mind was misleading: The name was unsuited because it smacked of the land of Cockaigne. “If our great age must perforce be given a name, let it be that of wood and steel, pitch and tar, colour and ink, pluck and piety, fire and imagination.”²⁰

Huizinga produced the first printed edition of his book—in the German language!—in 1933, just as the barbarism of National Socialism was spreading on the other side of the Rhine. He countered the incipient darkness with the seventeenth century of his home country, as an ideal—and idealized—construct. Bernd Roeck evaluated the resulting cultural model as follows:

“It is a paradise of harsh beauty, but a paradise after all, a Batavian arcadia, whose image the author recalls ‘in the shadow of tomorrow’ with melancholy, even pain.”²¹ All negative aspects are excluded from this retrospective view, for example the ruthless methods of the East India Company in building up their overseas empire and the slave trade it organized. Huizinga replaces the Golden Age with the nostalgia for an epoch that is virtually without a dark side, supposedly shaped by an often quite homespun but honorable middle class. The painters, too, “were of petty-bourgeois origin and their social prestige rarely exceeded that of their class. None of them was honoured as Rubens, Van Dyck or Valazquez . . .”²²

When Huizinga connects Dutch cleanliness with an esteem for all the objects of everyday life and the “simple things,” and that it is ultimately “part of our religious outlook to prize them as God’s gifts, to enjoy their beauty as such”; when he further says that in this cleanliness there is “reflected a little of our national ethos and religion,”²³ he is drawing an antithesis to the Catholic Netherlands, in which the dignity of the everyday—it would be concluded—has retreated behind a culture indoctrinated by early absolutism, in which Rubens or van Dyck were lords and not burghers.



FIG. 6
GERARD (GERRIT) VAN
HONTHORST
The Merry Fiddler, 1623
Oil on canvas, 108 × 89 cm
Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum

The Cult of Rubens and the Veneration of Rembrandt

FIG. 7
PETER PAUL RUBENS
Self-Portrait, 1623
Oil on wood, 85.7 × 62.2 cm
The British Royal Collection

IN 1795 HOLLAND was degraded to a French protectorate, the “Batavian Republic,” then in 1806 to a kingdom under French control, after which it was finally incorporated into France in 1811. After the fall of Napoleon in 1814, the Congress of Vienna decided to combine the two Netherlands, the predominantly Catholic South and the mainly Protestant North, into a unified monarchy.²⁴ Belgium’s revolution against this in 1830/31 led to its independence in 1839. The attendant confrontational nationalism reinforced the search for symbols of identity from the past. A jingoistic culture war exploited the artistic potential of the Golden Century on both sides:²⁵ The Flemish Rubens and the Dutch Rembrandt had to contend against each other as national heroes.

In 1840 the young country of Belgium honored “its” Rubens with a bronze monument on Antwerp’s Groenplaats, south of the Cathedral of Our Lady. The terracotta model of the statue, which presented Rubens as an elegant and nonchalant nobleman, went to the Rubens House, which was transformed into a museum in 1946. Rubens had purchased the house in the center of Antwerp in November 1610 and had it rebuilt until around 1620. Visitors to the city extolled the residential and studio complex as a “magnificent palace,” which unfolded an extensive allegorical program of imagery behind a modest façade.²⁶

How did the resident himself see this domicile, transformed into a sacred site? How did he want to be seen?

Not a single one of the few self-portraits celebrates him as an artist. Rather, each presents him in the guise of an aristocrat, ennobled by the Spanish king, knighted by the English king, as an internationally experienced and knowledgeable courtier and diplomat, self-confident, but this softened with formulas of humility: always in three-quarter profile, in the “bourgeoise” type of the bust portrait, yet draped in a noble cape. In the self-portrait of 1623²⁷ (fig. 7) Rubens also shows himself with a black hat, his face emerging radiantly beneath its elegantly upturned brim. The golden chain of honor bestowed on him, the newly appointed court painter, in 1609 by the archducal governing couple in Brussels is only hinted at. The background of the painting may imply an allusion to his name; in Latin, stones and reddish sky are “petrus et caelum rubens.”

Nineteenth-century Dutch national pride countered the man-of-the-world and painter-prince Rubens, proclaimed a national hero of Belgium, with the “painter-artisan” Rembrandt—downplayed to the representative of an age characterized by the concerns of the citizens and attached to his native soil. Of course he, too, had to be eternalized in a larger-than-life-sized bronze statue—in 1852 it stood on Amsterdam’s Botermarkt, renamed “Rembrandtplein” in 1876.²⁸ The Rijksmuseum, founded in the capital in 1885, functioned as a kind of Rembrandt temple; *The Night Watch* (fig. 117) was given an entire room to itself: One sought to “rediscover” in the famous painting “a distant reflection of the found-





ing of the state—a company of citizens just setting off to defend their city.”²⁹

The nineteenth-century image of Rembrandt was largely based on simplifying mystifications.³⁰ It is meanwhile well known how much the Dutch artist admired Rubens’s grandiose style and initially sought to compete with it; and it is also known that he by no means considered himself a modest painter-artisan, as many examples make clear, among them the London self-portrait of 1640 (fig. 8): Rembrandt bedecks himself in a splendid historicizing costume and an attitude that puts him on a par with earlier “painter-princes.” For the painting shown here he studied portraits by Raphael and Titian, but he took his cue even more from Albrecht Dürer’s proud *Self-Portrait* of 1498 (Madrid, Prado).³¹

Only one of his paintings, *The Conspiracy of the Batavians under Claudius Civilis* (fig. 9), seems indebted to national myth formation. To recall: In 1795 Holland was briefly given the name the “Batavian Republic.” The Germanic Batavi had settled in the Roman province of Belgica. Their revolt against Rome in 69 CE was led by Claudius Civilis, a former general in Roman military service, from a noble Batavian house. Despite military defeat he managed to work out an advantageous peace settlement. The County of Holland arose on the tribal territory of the Batavi. As a consequence, northern Netherlandish humanists of the late sixteenth century promoted the valiant and freedom-loving Batavi to predecessors of the Dutch and their fight for freedom as an analogy to the revolt of the Protestant provinces against Spain; Claudius Civilis was considered a precursor of William I of Orange. From the point of view of the city of Amsterdam, this was the historical background of the commission given to Rembrandt in 1661.

Among the decorations of the new Amsterdam town hall—its rebuilding made necessary by a fire of 1652—were giant paintings with scenes from Tacitus’s history of the Batavian revolt. Rembrandt was initially excluded from the program. He was finally brought in, rather by chance and without much enthusiasm, but only for a single history painting, which originally had the massive dimensions of over 30 square meters, of which today only 196 × 309 centimeters remain.



FIG. 9
REMBRANDT
The Conspiracy of the Batavians under Claudius Civilis, ca. 1661/62
Oil on canvas, 196 × 309 cm
Stockholm, Nationalmuseum

← FIG. 8
REMBRANDT
Self-Portrait, 1640
Oil on canvas, 93 × 80 cm
London, The National Gallery

Rather than adhering to the written version and situating the conspiracy alfresco, Rembrandt conceived of a highly dramatic company around a table in an only vaguely defined interior. He chose a scenario that blasted apart all conventions, that shocked his patron; not least because Claudius Civilis, with a kind of tiara on his head, is transformed into an Orientalized, apparently barbaric Cyclopean figure. In its entirety, the work—and especially the figure of the protagonist, regally imposing and thus not at all in keeping with a republican ideal of community and equality—seemed unsuited to the bourgeoisie city hall. The giant canvas thus hung for only a few months in 1662 in the locations for which it had been intended, then it was rolled up and shipped back to Rembrandt’s studio. Perhaps in the hope of being able to sell it to someone else, its author pruned it to the more “manageable” format now hanging in Stockholm’s Nationalmuseum. The American art historian Svetlana Alpers describes the consequence as follows: “The dimension of public order—in the state as in art—was disposed of. It was cut away with the stripping away of the setting. . . . In his cutting and reworking the work as he did, Rembrandt replaced the embodiment of the state with the body of the painting itself. The work of the artist in the studio replaced the affairs of the state.”³² In terms of painting technique and the staging of the fall of light, what remained, even in the fragment, was one of the most revolutionary paintings of the seventeenth century, in which, however, from the very beginning the subject matter of “supporting the interests of the state” had only marginal significance, if any at all.