

**Course Syllabus:  
Fromm Institute USF  
Introduction**

**Dutch Golden Age of Painting  
Spring Quarter 2021  
Ernest Newbrun DMD, PhD**

What does *Golden Age* mean? Greek and Roman poets (Hesiod, Ovid, Virgil, Lucretius) described an earlier epoch in human history as a "Golden Age" in which men and women lived in an unregulated, paradisiacal, primordial time. The peoples of the world, untroubled by fears, enjoyed a leisurely and peaceful existence. The art historian Norbert Wolf describes it as: "a national-mythological, social-utopian, nostalgic-escapist, or pseudo-religious" ideology. This classical metaphor for a period of cultural flowering and overwhelming artistic accomplishment would be applied to 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain and Florence and 17<sup>th</sup> century Amsterdam.

The Dutch Golden Age was a period in the history of the Netherlands, roughly spanning the 17th century, in which Dutch exploration, trade, science, military, and art were among the most acclaimed in the world. Starting in 1566 with the *Beeldenstorm* (iconoclastic fury) Dutch Protestants led by Calvinist nobility destroyed saintly images in churches considering them as idolatrous, and angered by Catholic oppression/inquisition, artists stopped painting for the church. In 1568 seven northern Dutch provinces, led by William of Orange, rebelled against the Hapsburg King Philip II of Spain that led to the Eighty Year War. The southern Netherlands joined the revolt but was forced to capitulate in 1585. On July 16, 1581 the United Provinces passed an Act of Abjuration (renunciation) declaring independence from Spain almost 200 years before the US Declaration of Independence. In 1585 Antwerp surrendered to the Hapsburgs and the lowlands were divided into a Protestant north and a Catholic south. Protestants living in the south were required to convert to Catholicism or were allowed to leave to the north. Protestants were especially well represented among the skilled craftsmen and rich merchants of the port cities of Bruges, Ghent, and Antwerp. Between 1585 and 1630 more Protestants moved north than Catholics moved in the other direction. By 1630 many of those moving north settled in Amsterdam, transforming what was a small port into one of the most important ports and commercial centers in the world. In addition to the mass migration of natives from the Southern Netherlands, there were also significant influxes of non-native refugees who had previously fled religious persecution, particularly Sephardi Jews from Portugal and Spain, and later Huguenots from France. Religious tolerance was effectively an important constitutional element of the newly independent state. This inevitably attracted the attention

of the religiously oppressed in different parts of the world. In 1639 the Dutch had crushed the Spanish navy in the Battle of the Downs; the Thirty Years' War ended in 1648 with the Treaty of Westphalia. The Dutch are "the envy of some, the fear of others, and the wonder of all their neighbors," wrote Sir William Temple, the English ambassador to the Dutch Republic, in 1673. The Golden Age of the Dutch Republic continued in peacetime almost to the end of the century.

The Dutch ascendancy can be attributed to its Protestant work ethic based upon Calvinism, which promoted thrift and education. This contributed to "the lowest interest rates and the highest literacy rates in Europe." The abundance of capital made it possible to maintain an impressive stock of wealth, embodied not only in a large fleet but also in plentiful stocks of an array of commodities that were used to stabilize prices and take advantage of profitable opportunities. Newly independent in 1585, the increasingly prosperous and politically powerful Dutch Republic experienced a tremendous rise in the production of artwork that was unparalleled in quantity, variety, and beauty. Painting was deeply embedded in the life of the Dutch Republic. Commenting on the Dutch fondness for pictures, British traveler, Peter Mundy, noted in 1640: "As for the art of Painting and the affection of the people to Pictures, I think none other go beyond them...."

During the seventeenth century, the Dutch Republic became a leading political power in Europe, with global trading interests. It nurtured some of the period's greatest luminaries, including Rembrandt, Vermeer, Hals, Descartes and Spinoza. In spite of its religious tolerance, artistic innovation and economic modernity, the United Provinces of the Netherlands also became known for their involvement with slavery and military repression in Asia, Africa, and the Americas.

### **Course Description**

Given the huge output of Dutch 17<sup>th</sup> century art, I have had to be selective and in doing so confess to personal bias. Rather than grouping the works by artist or region, I grouped them thematically: **portraiture** that speaks to personal and professional identity, **genre** art that pictures social and family life, **landscape/seascape** depicting the countryside and the seas that surround this maritime nation, **religious/historical** art illustrating biblical stories and other legends, and **still life** showing less lifelike images but relate to that period and society.

# Dutch Golden Age Painting

## Course Schedule

Spring Quarter 2021

- May 6      **Introduction:** Course outline, references, glossary; historic fight for independence; Dutch contributions in 17<sup>th</sup> century to science, exploration, philosophy & arts; categories of paintings
- May 13     **Portraiture** the Greats: Frans Hals, Rembrandt van Rijn
- May 20     **Portraiture** (cont.) Jan Steen, ter Borch, Bol, Lievens, Sweerts et al. **Genre** various city-based schools
- May 27     **Genre** (cont.) Johannes Vermeer, Jan Victors, Carel Fabritius, Nicolaes Maes, Jan Molenaer
- Jun 3       **Genre** (cont.) Gerard Dou, Jan Steen, et al.  
**Landscape** Avercamp, van Ruysdael, Cuyp,
- Jun 10      **Seascape** Porcellis, van der Velde, van Wieringen  
**Urban Scenes** Beerstraten, van der Heyden, Saenredam
- June 17    **Biblical & Historical** Rubens, Lastman, Rembrandt, Jan Steen, Terborch
- June 24    **Biblical** (contin.) Fabritius, Bloemart, van der Helst, Lievens et al.  
**Still life** Peeters, Fyt, Claesz, der Gelder, Steenwijk, van Utrecht, de Heem, van Bayeren

Because we have a very full schedule some questions may not be answered in class but you can always send questions via e-mail.

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## Glossary

**Beeldenstorm:** iconoclastic fury, when in 1566 Dutch people furious with religious establishment stormed the churches and destroyed the images of the saints.

**Caravaggism:** A term associated with the style of the Italian artist Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610), who was known for theatrical depiction of figures with dramatic gestures, and strong contrasts of light and dark (*chiaroscuro*). This style became popular among Netherland artists, particularly those in Utrecht, in the 1610s and 1620s. The Utrecht Caravaggisti became acquainted with Caravaggio's work during their time in Rome and disseminated this knowledge to artists throughout the Netherlands.

**Chiaroscuro:** An Italian term describing an artist's use of contrasting areas of light and dark. This stylistic technique aids in the structure of form and the effects of depth and spatial illusion in a composition.

**Genre painting:** A type of painting that depicts subjects of everyday life with naturalism and seeming verisimilitude.

**Fijnschilders:** (literally "fine-painters"), were Dutch Golden Age Painters who, from about 1630 to 1710, strove to create as natural a reproduction of reality as possible in their meticulously executed, often small-scale works. They were identifiable by their "fine" manner, exquisite techniques, and extreme attention to detail resulting in works with smooth surfaces completely lacking painterly brush strokes.

**Kannekijker:** (mug-looker). Someone looking into a mug refers to an old Dutch word for a glutton, greedy for more.

**Kluchtschilder:** painter of farce

**Kwaksolvers:** quack doctors

**Pronkstilleven:** the term refers to a very ornate and ostentatious still-life painting, developed in the mid-17th century Dutch Republic.

**Rampjaar (1672):** year of disaster following the outbreak of the Franco-Dutch war when the art market collapsed.

**Schuttersstuk:** a painting of militia, *schutterij* (shooters), a civil defense guild of citizens, who liked to have their portraits painted as a group.

Stadthouder: literally "city holder" was an office of steward, designated a medieval official, the highest military officer and then a national leader. The *stadthouder* was the replacement of the duke or earl of a province.

Stilleven (still life): painting or other image of arranged inanimate natural or man-made objects, sometimes displaying living animals as well.

Tenebrism: a style of painting especially associated with the Italian painter Caravaggio and his followers in which most of the figures are engulfed in shadow but some are dramatically illuminated by a beam of light usually from an identifiable source.

Tronie: A tronie is a common type, or group of types, of works common in Dutch Golden Age painting and Flemish Baroque painting that shows an exaggerated facial expression or a stock character in costume. It is related to the French word "*trogne*" which is slang for "mug" or head.

## References

Note: References marked with an asterisk \* are highly recommended.

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