

The seventeenth century was a period during which Dutch society underwent dramatic change. Spain's cultural and spiritual domination finally ended in 1648, after years of sporadic fighting, when Holland formally became recognised as a republic. This new status had a profound political, social, and economic effect on the country, which was reflected in the visual arts of the period. The role of patronage also underwent changes, as the artists could no longer rely on the support of the church and aristocracy, leaving painters to find alternative markets for their works. These new circumstances also led to conspicuous changes in the style and subject matter of their work.

With the signing of the Treaty of Munster in 1648, Holland finally broke free from the domination of the Spanish Court, and adopted a democratic style of Government.(V:pg514.) The power of the Dutch crown was considerably reduced, and the monarch, Prince William of Orange became a figurehead rather than a ruler. The artists had depended almost entirely on the patronage of the nobility, who commissioned large works to grace the walls of their palaces and stately homes. But the changes in Holland and the constitutional reforms led to the privileges enjoyed by the aristocracy becoming curtailed at this time. This restriction of privilege ultimately led to many of the aristocracy leaving Holland, taking with them their artistic patronage. Those who stayed could no longer afford to order large and numerous works of visual art.

As the struggle for independence became one "...for religious as well as civic liberty", (V: pg. 514.) the pervasive and controlling power of the Catholic Church and consequently its patronage, became diminished. As Protestantism, particularly Calvinist Protestantism took the place of Catholicism, art and the artists lost a great patron and commissioner, as paintings for ecclesiastical and didactic purposes became non-existent. The Dutch Calvinists actively discouraged art and colourful adornment in their churches regarding it as a form of superstitious, iconic worship. Consequently their church "... interiors were whitewashed and neither statues nor paintings graced the walls"(II: pg36.)

The power in Holland and subsequently the support of the arts now rested almost entirely with the bourgeoisie. The unprecedented power and commercial prosperity of the bankers and merchants, who made up this new middle class, would almost certainly have allowed them to take the place of the now redundant aristocracy. But they had no history of art patronage, and at the beginning of the seventeenth century had no desire to become involved in the arts. (III: pg43.) It could therefore be suggested that financial support of the arts would have been an anathema to the ruling mercantile classes, as it was too closely associated with the aristocracy, their privileges, and their unwillingness to support the cause of independence.

Painters could no longer rely on the commission of works of art to finance their work, but instead had to sell competitively through dealers and at art fairs. They were now compelled to paint "... for a local market."(III: pg43.). The new competitiveness brought about by the open market resulted in a greater variety of subject specialisation "...according to specific genre"(IV: pg203.) and it could be suggested through this specialisation that an accurate pictorial history of Dutch life in the seventeenth century has been recorded. The new art buying public consisted of artisans as well as wealthy merchants, "All in general striving to adorn their houses, especially the outer or street room, with costly pieces, butchers and bakers not much inferior in their shops which are fairly set forth,...blacksmiths, cobblers... will have some picture or other by the forge and in their stall"(I: pg3.)

An immediate consequence of trading on the open market was the reduction in the size of the works. Large works for large houses, which had previously been produced by arrangement, were unsuitable for the more modest sized homes of the middle classes. The style and subject matter also changed dramatically, (VII: pg106.) as the "...religious and monarchic" art of earlier years did not represent the beliefs and type of society that the new patrons wanted. Consequently art became "...secular and civic"(VII: pg106.) and was dominated by works depicting everyday life, still life and landscapes. Dutch customers wanted pictures around them that reflected their way of life, their world, their moral values and their newly instilled national pride.

As the new purveyors of art required a distinctive type of work to reflect their Calvinist beliefs, the use of "moralising genre" by painters such as Jan Vermeer, (V: pg521.) became far more important. Emblematic devices were not a new phenomenon, the Catholic Church were using them to convey their own particular message to the laity. These symbols had to be of a simplistic nature and easily recognisable, so that the message could be easily understood and interpreted correctly. The Dutch during this period were extremely concerned with sex and sexuality, using words that were closely interpolated in the Dutch language, so that a play on words could be used. For example, the Dutch word 'luit', the musical instrument the Lute, is also close to the Dutch word for Vagina. A Lute in an artist's work could be seen as a symbolic portrayal of a woman's sexuality. Emblematic devices were also used to portray moral issues and the dangers of decadence, which were seen by the Dutch as important issues of the day. Vices such as sexual impropriety, and virtues such as purity, were symbolised by in the former case, oysters and in the latter case, the Lily. The human being also has to be aware of the fact that one's life is constantly ebbing away. This understanding and the constant awareness of people's mortality were significant to the Dutch of the 17th century. (V: pg519.) This viewpoint is epitomised in Dutch paintings, by devices such as an overturned glass with the contents spilling out, or a smoking pipe that has been extinguished. That appearances can be deceptive was also important, as nothing should be taken for granted and not everything was what it seems. This can be seen in the example of using a lemon in a piece of work. A lemon looks beautiful, but is sour to the taste and this could be construed as being the case for a beautiful woman, and it should be virtue and not beauty that should be rewarded. The mercantile patrons involvement in the practical world of commerce and their distrust of "imagination and idealisation", (V: pg520.) led them to favour art works that embodied a sense of realism. This distinctive character was unique as "in Holland alone was to be found the phenomenon of an all embracing realism, which was unparalleled in both comprehensiveness and intimacy." (VI: pg14.) Realism was to be found in all genres of painting, including landscapes, which were

typical of Dutch taste during the period, and for which there was a popular demand. This was probably due to the new found independence, as the nation discovered itself and enjoyed a sense of civic and national satisfaction, which was to sweep through Holland during this period.

The same civic and national pride did however; provide the artists with a few commissions of another kind. Since the demise of religious and aristocratic support, Dutch artists were rarely asked to paint on a large scale, but military groups were an exception. Holland was proud to honour its soldiers who had given them freedom from Spain, and the soldiers themselves wanted to display the fact that they had helped forge their country's independence. The most famous group portrait of this era was "The Company of Captain Frans Banning Cocq and Lieutenant Willem Van Rytenburch", more commonly known as "The Night Watch". Painted by Rembrandt in 1642, it typifies the camaraderie and bonhomie of the Dutch Militiamen whom, although by now no longer active soldiers, "... kept alive memories of the heroic days of struggle against authoritarian Spain..." (V: pg516.)

Dutch paintings of the seventeenth century were produced in the main for purchase on the open market by individual middle class patrons. The prices paid were on the whole very low and painters "... saw their work as a business, with the hours of labour and cost of material determining the price they asked for"(II: pg36.). The relatively low cost of buying a painting meant an artist had to sell their works in quantity in order to make a living. Consequently artists had to paint pictures that people would buy. Middle class tastes of the day were for representations of everyday life combined with symbolic and moralistic overtones. Dutch artists responded by producing easel paintings of intimate size, which provided a concentration of content in which motifs of everyday life were portrayed with peculiar naturalism and careful craftsmanship. The art of this century was surely brought into being by its patrons, who dictated the type of art they wanted, and it is this patronage which has left the legacy of an extremely detailed record of Dutch society and culture in the seventeenth century.

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