

A SYNOPSIS OF ART HISTORICAL NOTES

We do hope that these notes will give you a better insight into the five centuries of the history of painting and art dealing. This text has been compiled by us and is frequently used during the many talks and slide shows our firm organises for any interested parties.

“A collector misses the point of collecting if he knows the price of everything, but the value of nothing”

The decline and fall of Antwerp

As early as 1460, out of Antwerp's 100,000 citizens not even 20 were professional painters and accounted for, whereas by 1560, as many as 300 master painters (official members of the St. Lucas Guild) had set up independent workshops. In comparison to today's society, it seems difficult to believe that, at the same time, there were only 170 bakers and 80 butchers in this prosperous city.

The Antwerp painters developed a broad scale of new artistic genres and themes mirroring the social and religious patterns of those days. After the decline and subsequent fall of Antwerp to the Spanish in 1585, however, many of the enterprising merchants and skilled craftsmen fled from Flanders to the newly formed United Dutch Provinces. They were to have a powerful impact on the social and economic life in the North.

The 'Golden Age' in Dutch History

Amsterdam in the 16th century counted fewer inhabitants than Leiden or Utrecht, but by the beginning of the 17th century this northern city profited tremendously from the political changes in the South. While Antwerp's population declined from 100,000 to less than 50,000, the Amsterdam population grew from 30,000 to over 100,000, within one generation. Many Flemish painters settled in Middelburg, Haarlem, and Amsterdam. An excellent example of their influence in the northern provinces was the Flemish painter, Adriaen Brouwer, who worked in Haarlem between 1625 and 1631. With his Pieter Brueghel style of painting, he stimulated genre painting with interior scenes showing the life of cheerful country folk, later followed by the exceptional Adriaen van Ostade (1610–1685), who was to excel in this genre.

Eager to discover new worlds and exercising their political freedom, the Dutch developed a lively trade overseas, which led to extraordinary wealth. For over four generations, there was no holding back from what we now so aptly call 'the Golden Age' in Dutch history. Originally, most of this wealth came from the world's first real 'limited' company, the *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie - V.O.C.* ('United East Indian Company'), established in 1602. For that period, it is extraordinary to know that in six months 35,000 shareholders subscribed to a total of 6,500,000 florins in capital stock. The Amsterdam share alone amounted to 50% of that total, which is over US\$ 325,000,000 at today's rate. The buying power of the 'Carolingian' florin can today be valued at US\$ 50. A solid banking system was introduced, and the Stock Exchange building opened in Amsterdam in 1611. In that same year, the V.O.C. paid out an extra dividend over the previous nine years of a staggering 175%, partly in cash, stocks, and in 'kind', such as the spices imported from overseas. The rise of the Dutch Republic was paid for from its trade profits. And the first limited company 'V.O.C.' can equally be seen as one of the world's first 'multinationals'.

The Guilds

Holland was a country effectively made up of cities. They did not nurture a culture of aristocracy, and the influence of the Church levelled out considerably after the decline of the Reformation. It was the cities' middle class that mainly supported the social and economic daily life. This implied a broadly based wealth; there was hardly any elitism. The Protestant religion preached in favour of soberness and against waste. This simple yet strict Calvinistic feeling explains, to a great extent, the cautiousness and sobriety of the Dutch character.

The St. Lucas Guild was first constituted in France in 1391. Tradition says that the evangelist Saint Luke once painted the Virgin Mary, and was therefore nominated to become the patron saint of the arts and crafts.

To the various professions of this guild also belonged the glass-blowers, sign-writers, guilders and bronzers, restorers, book publishers, artisans and painters, art dealers, and the like.

Already in the Middle Ages, there were two groups of organized craftsmen. A so-called society of building contractors and architects, the Freemasons, who would have to adhere religiously to what their, mostly clerical, commissioners demanded. The other group were the organized guilds, with independent members. These members exercised free choice over their artistic output, while the guilds would guard the technical outlines and assist with any business disputes. They proposed schooling for students who wanted to become painters and establish their own studios. There was quality control on products, such as paints, linen, and panels, and they stimulated the general well being of their members.

Paintings as an investment

Painters cultivated the taste of the 'burgher', who did not want dramatic large canvasses at home, but rather 'a joy to their eyes'. They wanted to have value for money. Originally, the price of a traditional work was calculated to the cost of the materials and the working hours of the artists involved. No wonder that many painters needed additional resources to keep their, usually large, families afloat. As an example, we can mention Jan Steen (1626–1679), who ran a pub in Leiden or Jan van de Capelle (1624-1679), who was a textile merchant. Furthermore, there were Willem Kalf (1622-1693), who became an antique dealer, Jacob van Ruysdael (1628–1682), who was a surgeon, and Jan van der Heijden (1637-1712), who bought patents on inventions. It was just a matter of time before the society's prestige, its popularity and the use of paintings as a temporary loan, inflated the prices for works of art. We should not underestimate the importance during the 17th century of paintings as an investment. There was a lively art market, with a healthy competition.

The reason for the large quantities of paintings on offer at f.i. the so-called 'free-markets', was the amazing fact that inhabitants were faced with a shortage of land to invest in. When the Englishman John Evelyn visited Rotterdam in 1641 he recorded in his diaries: 'It was, therefore, common practice to see a simple Dutch farmer spend 2,000 to 3,000 Pounds for these paintings'. The seascape painter Simon de Vlieger paid for his house in paintings, each costing close to 16 guilders. A painting by Gerard Dou on the other hand, made between 600 and 1000 guilders, and this was enough to buy him a house in the city.

In a flourishing economy, a free art market has always blossomed. The unparalleled growth, and distinctly bourgeois and realistic character of Dutch art were a direct result of the great economic prosperity of the predominantly protestant United Provinces, once they had gained autonomy from Spain.

The idea behind the concept of an 'economy' reappeared in Florence around 1,000 AD. Money was given in

custody to banks, which, in turn, earned well on loans. For centuries, the famous Medici banking family was the largest commissioner of art.

During the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church regarded borrowing against interest more or less as a sin, because Aristotle (384 B.C.-322 B.C.) had reasoned that money is sterile and rigid, therefore, could not produce by itself. In practice, this meant that the middle class in catholic countries did not stand much of a chance to expand their economies, because they were dependent on trade, with the implication of 'risk capital'. In the northern countries, however, the intellectual spokesman Calvin (1509-1564) argued that earning money was a moral duty, and making a profit a goal in itself. But he felt that only strict soberness and discipline would finally lead to God. The German 'politician' Luther (1483-1546), extended this belief by adding extra value to the term 'profession' with an emphasis on 'vocation'. Thus a person lived religiously by fulfilling his worldly tasks and duties, while underwriting modern capitalistic ethics.

The Calvinist doctrine condemned the worship of religious images and their display in churches, and mainly for this reason portraiture, genre painting, landscape, and still life became favourite subjects of the middle class. 'Painting' had to be able to demonstrate by itself the desirability of what money could buy.

Painting as a living

The painter, Rubens (1577-1640), one of the most gifted and famous painters of our times, received a daily income of one hundred florins, which comes to a present rate of over US \$ 5,000 per day. At one time, the well-known painter David Teniers (1582-1649) had a most productive workshop with 36 pupils. Such a pupil, already a skilled painter at a tender age, had permission to sell a few of his own works per annum in order to provide for his tuition fee. As a matter of simple 'quality control', pupils would have to obtain the master's signature on their paintings, before they left Teniers's workshop. This practice was common amongst master painters, and inadvertently caused authenticity problems for experts and art historians of later generations in the course of their researches. During the education with a master painter, apprentices were encouraged to 'copy' works and improve their skills by practicing. In the ethics of their craftsmanship, these copies were not seen as 'forgeries'. It may also be significant to learn that during the 17th century the average trade price of a copy was half that of an original. Therefore, it seemed much less complicated to adjust to the taste and fashion of the day by copying two saleable replicas than to create a new work of art.

The painter, Jan van Goyen (1596-1656), on the other hand, had more difficulty selling his own 'free-style' work, and resorted to other means of income such as speculating in tulip bulbs. They ran into large sums of twenty and thirty florins a piece. Later though, at the height of the so-called 'tulip mania' in 1636-1637, one exceptional tulip bulb could be exchanged for a whole farmstead including its livestock. Van Goyen was fortunate enough to be able to fall back on working in his wife's family inn. For many years, he was not able to buy natural colours to mix on his palette, which accounted for his well-known brownish landscapes. His widow was finally left behind with a burden of debts of up to 18,000 florins (at today's rate: US\$ 900,000), and only after all of her belongings had been sold, could she pay off her debts and was left with 270 florins. She died a month later.

Various influences

In the 18th century, the aftermath of the Golden Age, a gradual waning of creativity and a comfortable thriving on the established riches followed. It was also the time that auction sales became popular. And it was dealer/painter

Gerard Hoet (1648-1733), an art critic and publisher of art books, who was the first to edit printed sales catalogues of past and present auctions with full details, descriptions, and prices. Many Museums were founded during this century, and their collections grew with works of contemporary artists. This may also explain why it is difficult to find excellent examples by important masters, such as Cornelis Troost, Jan van Huysen, Jan Ekels, and others.

During the late 18th century, the many excavations in Italy prompted steady visits by artists to the 'Old Rome'. This, in turn, led to a change of artistic power and showed a revival of many different styles of art, especially in France and England. In France, of course, Napoleon put his stamp on the arts of around 1800, and favoured Classicism with painters such as Jean-Louis David (1748-1825), who idolized the Emperor's triumphs.

The influence of the Art Academies was strongly felt. An important but unorthodox painter such as Eugene Delacroix (1798-1863) was only admitted to the Academy just before he died, and his critical comment speaks loudly for itself: "Beauty in art is being taught as if it is plain mathematics". After the French Revolution in 1789, the social structures changed dramatically, from the declining nobility to the more critical and free working classes.

After Napoleon's defeat in 1815, the Dutch painters distanced themselves from France, and looked more towards the East, such as Germany and Italy. In Holland, most academies for the arts were set up during this generation. Meanwhile, Louis Napoleon abolished the Guilds in 1808. And today, Douwes Fine Art is the only existing art gallery and restoration studio that was a member of the St.Lucas Guild before 1808.

One of the important influences of the 19th century Romantic and realistic feelings in painting comes from English artists such as Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788), John Constable (1776-1837), William Turner (1775-1851), and Richard Bonington (1801-1828). They travelled widely in France and Italy, and during one of the earlier Salon exhibitions in Paris in 1824, they were the inspiration of many young French painters. Their motto was: 'paint everything outdoors as you experience it, not as you would wish it to be'. The mood of nature, and the insignificance of man became a source of inspiration: the German painter Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) translated Beethoven's ode to nature, his sixth symphony, into a painting. It became one of his famous documents depicting a lonely person overlooking this vast and mountainous landscape.

Under the influence of inventions such as the steam engine, the first forms of direct communication, the railway and the steamboat, the countries' economies and their art world changed rapidly. After the final division of the Northern and Southern parts of the Netherlands into Holland and Belgium in 1830, King William III stimulated the Arts by publicly starting collecting, and by introducing scholarships for painters to develop their skills abroad. A painter like Jongkind benefitted from this opportunity.

About 1850, artists were seeking reality and political liberalism, gaining self-confidence and positivism in their work.

In this context, many French painters studied the realism and directness of Dutch 17th century landscape paintings, such as the work of Ruysdael (1628-1682) and Hobbema (1638-1709). And from 1848, a group of landscape painters settled in the small village of Barbizon, south of Paris. Amongst them were Théodore Rousseau, Constant Troyon, Jules Dupré, Charles Daubigny, Jean-François Millet, and Charles Jacque. It was their intention to paint nature 'realistically', often with loose brushwork and lots of atmosphere, resulting in 'plein-air' painting. Also, the delicate works of Camille Corot (1796-1875) should be mentioned in this context.

The social change of the working classes demanded more quality of life, and equality. Painters such as Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) and Honore Daumier (1808-1879) represented their views in art.

Around 1860, Courbet, Boudin (1824-1898), Jongkind (1819-1891), and Monet (1840-1926) met in the coastal village of Honfleur, in the local and renowned Inn of Saint Simeon. Soon after, these contacts and artistic exchanges led to the new style of Impressionism. Of course, with a little help from someone like Edouard Manet (1832-1883), whose painting 'Dejeuner sur l'herbe' caused a scandal in 1863.

In about 1874, an art critic dubbed it 'impressionism', after having seen Monet's 'l'Impression levant au Soleil'. The colours were not mixed on the palette, but in pure form painted next to each other onto the canvas, which 'trembles from liveliness and light', almost like the immediate moment of a photograph just taken. In contrast, expressionism, with pioneers such as our countryman Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), did not use their 'eyes' so much as their 'soul'!

Already as early as 1882, Isaac Israels (1865-1934), at the tender age of 17, was greeted at the French Salon as the Dutch exponent of Impressionism, whereas Georg Hendrik Breitner (1857-1923) was seen as the inspiring pioneer of the 'new movement' in Holland. With his strong temperament, he distanced himself from just 'beauty' and preferred realism in earthly colours.

Parallel to painting, the strong development in literature was impossible to stop. This in turn would help painters with their manifests in giving more depth to works of art by justifying and expressing the social and political changes in society.

In Holland, Jan Toorop (1858-1928) translated the spiritual and social feelings of Dutch society into an almost religious symbolism. Linear forms give a renewed meaning and supersede the photographic images.

Throughout Europe, breaking through to the new 'isms' of the 20th century meant a leap from the visual world to the 'spiritual world': 'from cover to content'. 'L'Art pour l'art' – art for art's sake – is fading away now. Producing art with "a message" became the new direction.



Stadhouderskade & Museumhotel, c. 1888



Painting by Carel Willink:
'The Zeppelin', 1933



Douwes Fine Art, Amsterdam, 2002

*"The old-fashioned, conscientious fine art dealer
is at heart a fanatical collector."*