

Collecting Cultures in the Dutch Republic and the Spanish Netherlands

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The art markets of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic and Spanish Netherlands developed in distinct political and cultural contexts that affected the style, genre, and subject matter of artworks in the two economies. Despite their differences, the Dutch Republic and Spanish Netherlands both shared cultures of conspicuous consumption, and art markets remained concentrated within metropolitan centres, such as Antwerp, Amsterdam and Haarlem.

The Spanish Netherlands – also referred to as Flanders – was ruled by the Spanish branch of the Habsburgs from 1556 to 1714. Their reign was contested by the northern Netherlandish states. In 1648, the Protestant Dutch Republic was formally recognised by Spain as an independent nation, marking an end to eighty years of military and religious conflict.¹ The Dutch Republic – comprising seven breakaway provinces of the north – was characterised by intellectual freedom, burgeoning free markets and, above all, a predominantly Protestant faith, though other religions were tolerated. Standing in sharp contrast to its Dutch neighbour, which 'had to create a national identity that was truly new, based on its successful overthrow of an entire system of governance and religion',² this southern locale became a hub for Counter-Reformation (anti-Protestant) activities.

The different characters of the art markets in the Dutch Republic and the Spanish Netherlands were heavily influenced by the divergent courses that economic and social development took in the two regions. The Spanish Netherlands suffered major trade setbacks in the early seventeenth century due to several factors, including enduring political unrest, the Dutch economic blockade of the Scheldt River outside Antwerp from 1585, and an exodus of Protestant merchants. By 1625, less than a third of the merchants that had operated out of Antwerp during the mid-sixteenth century remained. In the city's new economy, wealth was generally concentrated within an elite class of burghers (prosperous and privileged citizens). In contrast, the Dutch Republic experienced a trade boom following its independence from Spanish rule, which correlated with the maritime prowess of the Dutch navy, and the success of its merchant and fishing fleets. An emergent middle class galvanised demand for paintings. The majority of artists in the Dutch Republic worked primarily for this market, either directly or through an art dealer based in a metropolitan centre with which they were affiliated, for instance Amsterdam, Haarlem, or Utrecht.³

In the Spanish Netherlands, the Habsburg court and Catholic Church remained the



[Fig. 1] Frans Hals (about 1582-1666) [completed by Pieter Codde (1599-1678)], 'The Meagre Company' (Officers and Other Guardsmen of the XIth District of Amsterdam, under the Command of Captain Reijnier Reael and Lieutenant Cornelis Michielsz Blaeuw), 1637, oil on canvas, 209 x 429 cm. On loan to the Rijksmuseum from the City of Amsterdam, No. SK-C-374. © Public domain.

primary patrons of the arts. There, the two religious orders that dominated Antwerp between 1625 and 1650 — the Jesuits and the Premonstratensians — frequently commissioned religious works, a feature which explains the enduring prevalence of this genre in the Netherlandish context. Many artists, such as Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641), also gained commissions through their memberships of Jesuit confraternities (brotherhoods).⁴ Commissioning in the Republic differed significantly: it largely focused on secular portraiture. Painters received commissions from provincial governments, politicians, and militia; for group portraits, the artist charged in accordance with the number of people depicted, and each generally paid for his own image.⁵ *The Meagre Company* by Frans Hals (about 1582-1666) [Fig. 1], which depicts the Amsterdam Crossbowmen's Guild, is one such example.⁶

The disparity in commissioned genres – or types of paintings – is one of several ways in which market factors affected subject matter. The Republic's open market experienced a shift away from devotional paintings for religious contexts, to predominantly secular scenes appropriate for the home.⁷ Though the prices for

specific genres fluctuated between 1600 and 1700, for most of the century, landscapes were modestly priced, at around a third of the cost of architectural subjects, and half that of religious ones.⁸ As more people chose to decorate their houses with art, demand for genres such as landscapes and seascapes increased. These were more affordable due to their relatively short production time, and their subject matter resonated with newfound patriotism in the Republic. As the market became more saturated, artists aimed to differentiate their output through stylistic innovation, and to maximise efficiency. It has been argued, for instance, that the development of Rembrandt's distinctive quick and loose brushstrokes, often considered effective in conveying lifelike movement, can in part be attributed to a drive for shorter production times.⁹ This demonstrates one of the ways in which artists adapted their practices to competitive market conditions.

Despite the enduring dominance of religious commissions for the Catholic Church, Antwerp had developed its own culture of conspicuous consumption and many burghers and nobles fashioned themselves as art connoisseurs, or *liefhebbers*. Perhaps as a way of consolidating

their cultural identity after a period of volatility, there was a preference for local art. Inventories of early seventeenth-century art collections demonstrate that 'almost no painter whose career had not been at least in some way associated with Antwerp was collected there'.¹⁰ The buying public of Antwerp was also more conservative than their northern counterparts. Collectors favoured works by artists from Antwerp's sixteenth-century heyday, when the city was the economic and cultural centre of the western world. Newcomer artists found it was more economically viable to produce works derivative of established artists such as Pieter Bruegel the Elder (about 1525-1569) than to develop their own styles. Few contemporary artists, with figures such as David Teniers the Younger (1610-1690) and Van Dyck as

notable exceptions, found success. In contrast, Amsterdam's collecting culture was generally cosmopolitan in nature and artworks were purchased from foreign artists and artists operating out of other cities.¹¹

The art markets of the Dutch Republic and Spanish Netherlands evolved in the aftermath of a period of great political volatility. This led to the emergence of two distinct contexts from which a significant proportion of canonical Western art originates. Indeed, the Dutch Republic and Spanish Netherlands ought not to be considered as wholly isolated art markets; many practices overlapped, and both economies displayed aspects of cosmopolitanism, with artists from the Spanish Netherlands, for instance, travelling to the 'enemy' Republic and abroad.

¹ The Protestant Dutch Republic had, in effect, split from the Catholic Spanish Netherlands by 1581, and other European nations had treated it as a sovereign nation from the start of the 'Twelve Years' Truce' in 1609.

² Honig 1998, p. 101.

³ North 1997, p. 82. See also Bayer 1991.

⁴ Muir 2000, pp. 51-69.

⁵ North 1997, p. 86.

⁶ North 1997, p. 86.

⁷ North 1997, p. 131.

⁸ North 1997, p. 99.

⁹ Alpers 1988.

¹⁰ Honig 1998, p. 191.

¹¹ See Ormrod 2007, pp. 11-19.

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