Dutch Civilisation in the Seventeenth Century

and other essays

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Dutch Civilisation in the Seventeenth Century

Were we to test the average Dutchman's knowledge of life in the Netherlands during the seventeenth century, we should probably find that it is largely confined to odd stray notions gleaned from paintings. True, one or two will have read Vondel or Hooft, or even Spinoza, and few will have forgotten all they were taught at school about our great leaders, sailors and the servants of the East India Company, but their recollections of political and historical events are likely to be hazy. Moreover, what they lack in general knowledge they but rarely make good with any real appreciation of the work of our great masters, let alone of those twin treasure-houses of art and history combined: drawing and engraving.

Had we applied the same test a century ago, in the age of Potgieter and Jacob van Lennep, the results would have been quite different: in 1840, knowledge of history, in the ordinary political sense of the word, was far greater than it is today. Literature, too, was much better known, if only by its greatest works. Art, on the other hand, played a far less important part in nineteenth-century man's historical vista than it does in ours. Here we come up against an intellectual transformation that was not confined to our country alone: as more and more visual material for the appreciation of the past became quite generally available, so thinking and writing about the past fell into increasing

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neglect. In what follows, we shall try to eschew the one-sided aesthetic view of today as much as the one-sided political approach of the last century, and look at civilisation in the widest possible context.

Though Dutch civilisation in the seventeenth century is a thing of the past, and hence intangible, it was so full of life that we can hardly think of it as an abstraction. In order to grasp it more fully, we cannot do better than start from that mainspring of all historical knowledge: our perpetual astonishment that the past was once a living reality. In the case of the Netherlands, this amazement is particularly great. How was it possible, we ask, that so small and relatively remote a country as the young Republic should nevertheless have been so advanced politically, economically and culturally? We can see why Athens and Florence, Rome and Paris should, in their time, have all been centres of culture, but it seems incredible that their mantle should have fallen, for however brief a time, on a small water-logged country between the Ems and Vlie and the Maas and Scheldt.

Nor does this peculiar phenomenon exhaust our wonder. For it leads us directly to another marvel: where else was there a civilisation that reached its greatest peak so soon after state and nation came into being? It must be remembered that a hundred, indeed only fifty years before Rembrandt’s birth, there was no Dutch nation in the sense in which we here speak of it. Even while the passionate strains of national unity were being sounded by the Sea Beggars, Prince William of Orange was still trying diligently, and without much hope of success, to discover the form best suited to the Dutch state. He did not live to see it born, and no one in the anxious years of 1584-1588 could have told what lay in store for the Netherlands. And then, there it suddenly was, a new state, built on the shaky foundations of the Union of Utrecht, a torso of the rich Low Countries which Burgundy had joined together and which Charles V had possessed.

The young commonwealth still faced the urgent and seemingly hopeless task of armed liberation. For many years its chances of survival were to hinge on the capture of such small towns as Breda, Delfzijl, Geertruidenberg, Nijmegen, Zutphen, and Groningen. And all that while our sailors were venturing further and further into polar regions and into India, with the result that the trade of Amsterdam and the volume of shipping in the towns round the Zuiderzee grew daily, while state and nation gradually took shape. Far too narrow a shape, you might say, if you are the kind who disagrees with history. However, it remains a fact that glorious Brabant and fierce Flanders could contribute little more to the Republic than the national fervour of the refugees and later, much later, the fragments of land that the Republic conquered by force of arms—a fact we may deplore, but one that we can never alter. The Republic became a separate state and its people a nation apart. And onto its small stage there now crowded, within less than a century of its birth, a pageant of great deeds and distinguished figures: statesmen, generals, sailors, painters, poets and scholars, and founders of commercial empires. Can you point to another nation that reached its cultural peak so soon after its creation?

Our astonishment would be somewhat tempered were we to find that, in the seventeenth century, Dutch culture was merely the most perfect and clearest expression of European culture in general. But such was not the case. On the contrary, lying though it did between France, Germany and England, our country differed so greatly from them and in so many respects, that it proved the exception and not the rule.

It has become quite the thing to stamp the kind of civilisation Europe enjoyed in the seventeenth century with the title of ‘Baroque’. Stamp is the right word, and the unfor-
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his concern with simple and ordinary, sometimes too ordinary, situations, his warmth, his jovial morality and down-to-earth humour, are far more expressive of the soul of the people than of the patrician. His deep love of nature and, country life (down-to-earth, moreover, and not romantic) a love that sought its expression neither in the pastoral nor in the idyllic, but welled up freely and easily from the heart, more than compensates us for those of his writings whose excessive intellectualism and exaggerated reasonableness we find so irksome. Truly, those who wish to understand seventeenth-century Holland must read Huygens as well as Vondel, the man who captured the style, enthusiasm and greatness of his age. Huygens', like Vondel's, poetry is full of classical and Biblical allusions, but precisely because he does not invariably take us into the loftiest spheres, he, more than Vondel, shows us the true, everyday Holland we know so well from our great painters and engravers.

It is well known that our seventeenth-century compatriots had little appreciation of Dutch art and, where they did, they liked it for the wrong reasons. Poets rather than painters were held in high esteem. This point has recently been dealt with in an excellent paper by Gerard Brom. Most painters of petty-bourgeois origin and their social prestige rarely exceeded that of their class. None of them was honoured as Rubens, Van Dyck or Velazquez were abroad; in fact, they were not deemed worthy of much, if any, notice, and even Jan Vermeer or Hercules Seghers were generally ignored or completely forgotten. Our painters were uneducated men, and our noble regents would write to them, if at all, with a measure of kindly but unmistakable condescension. Only Rembrandt succeeded in gaining attention, not so much by his work as by leading the life of a semi-bohemian recluse, but that, too, did not prevent him


from ending his days on a note of suffering and proud defiance, as his last self-portraits show us only too clearly.

Now this disdain of art and artists had a remarkable consequence. For had the artist's path taken him from his master's studio and years of study in Italy straight to a high position among the ranks of merchants, churchmen and magistrates, perhaps the greatest masterpieces would never have seen the light of day.

The fact that painting and drawing were by far the most important expressions of Dutch art in the seventeenth century cannot be explained—if it can be explained at all—by a single well-defined cause. No doubt, the very special conditions under which our culture arose played an important part in this process. Almost all the proportions were small—down to the size of the country, the distances between towns, the differences between the various classes. Hand in hand with these small gradations went a high degree of general prosperity and a lively interest in culture and intellectual pursuits. Artists in our country had to rely almost perforce on the decoration of plane areas, i.e. on painting, drawing, or etching—there was little scope for great architecture or sculpture, not so much due to the absence of stone as to the lack of patrons. Palaces and elaborate monuments are the prerogatives of great princes, cardinals and nobles and in Holland such men did not exist.

These very circumstances, however, gave a great impetus to the graphic arts, and especially to painting as it emerged after the Renaissance—divorced from altar pieces and murals (which latter, in any case, could not have flourished in the wet climate of Holland) and destined instead for the town hall, the poor house, or even the private dwelling. And art with this social function demands little more than love of the look of things, artistic skill, and a large number of enthusiasts clamouring for its products. Now the demand for paintings was far greater and more constant in the Netherlands, with its prosperous population, and in Holland
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in particular, than in any other country. Nor were the patrons to be sought exclusively among the richest and noblest, as a mere glance at commissioned portraits will suffice to show. Rembrandt and Frans Hals did not merely paint mayors and leading dignitaries but also writing-masters, preachers, Jewish physicians, engravers and goldsmiths. From the study by Fruin¹, we know that foreign visitors to our country were taken aback by the widespread desire to own works of art. Good paintings could be bought in Rotterdam fairground booths, and were wont to grace the walls of even the humblest houses. You will not find a cobbler, an English traveller wrote, who does not own a painting. Another suggested that the Dutch bought paintings as a form of investment; it was no rarity, he said, for a small farmer to spend a fortune in this way. In view of the general availability of much sounder investments, this suggestion strikes me as a little far-fetched. Thus in 1668, during the riots in Amsterdam, when a number of houses were sacked, and the damage was assessed, people deplored the fact that the mediocre family pieces of Mayor Boreel were thought to be more valuable than the exquisite art collection of Captain Spaaroor, a simple soldier.

It is regrettable in a way that our ideas about the past are so largely based on paintings. Even literature takes second place to art with most of our people, and when it comes to political and social history, the great majority is completely at sea. This applies to some extent to all of us, and we cannot possibly help it: the visible beauty of a painting casts an irresistible spell over our spirit. We shall return to art and literature again, but before doing so, we must first look at two other aspects of our culture: religion and science.


Because it is other-worldly and also because of its very message, the Church invariably tends to break down sharp divisions between social groups. We have already seen that in the Netherlands, these divisions were, in any case, less sharp than in most other countries. Nevertheless, even here the Church could play this part, and Calvinism, once it became the dominant religion, worked in that very direction, not so much by deliberate intent as by force of circumstance. The pastor called at the castle as well as on the shopkeeper. His was an important yet exceedingly delicate position. For the most part, the clergy was recruited from among the middle-classes. By the very nature of Calvin's church, the servants of God's word were preachers first and shepherds of their flock second. Hence they saw their task chiefly as one of addressing, admonishing and persuading —their office led them automatically to judge, and often to condemn, state and society alike. The servants of the ruling church thus became the upholders of views that, albeit they could not yet be called public opinion in the full sense of the term, nevertheless had sufficient authority not to be dismissed as mere whims. Quite unavoidably, the pastor's views had a democratic flavour. A son of the people himself, he proclaimed the Word of God in the tongue of the people. That voice was not at all revolutionary. The aristocratic system as such was not even questioned, yet there was a clear wariness of complacent government from the cushioned eminence of the mayoral chair. From the church, the sounds of non-aristocratic, popular notions constantly filtered through to the town hall. Although the clergy had no voice in the town or the States and although a magistrate would from time to time call them to order with a: Come, come, gentlemen, leave us to deal with our business while you mind your own, the temporal authorities
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Stevin, Snellius, Leeuwenhoek and Swammerdam followed their chosen path, and even found a modicum of fame along it. In only one case did scientific genius go hand in hand with social prestige, respect, recognition and a carefree life—in the case of Christian Huygens.

Although his father, Constantine Huygens, died only eight years before him, Christian seems like a figure from quite another age or world. Moreover, father and son led quite disparate personal lives; Christian, the bachelor, who lost his mother early on and was educated by his father; Constantine, absorbed in his children. They shared many things, among them a great love of music, a firm practical hold on life (Christian himself polished the lenses for his astronomic observations and discoveries) and an astonishing versatility. For Christian, too, was a man of many talents: Latin scholar, mathematician, lawyer and fine draughtsman—it was he who drew the portrait for Cornelis Visscher's engraving in Constantine's Korenblomen, a work that appeared in the same year and under the same imprint as Christian's own Horologium. If I could look more deeply into Christian's heart than my historical training permits, I should no doubt discover many more points of agreement between the son, whose essential Dutch character not even years of absence in France could wipe out, the father and even the grandfather, and thus adduce glowing proof of the inheritance of talent in three generations of what was, from the outset, a highly gifted family. But in this brief sketch I can hope to do no more than recall that Christian Huygens was a brilliant scientist who lived at a time when the concept of science, as we understand it today, was barely born.

Indeed, in this essay we are forced to ignore a great many matters that played an essential part in the cultural life of the time. I am thinking in particular of our mills, dikes and fortifications; of our shipwrights, of the work of Nicolaus Witsen and Cornelius van Yk; of our travellers and explorers; of our laws and our administration. I should also have liked to discuss at some greater length our precocious attempts to provide a measure of social welfare based on Christian charity—our reformatories, workhouses and orphanages, primitive though they were by modern standards, were far in advance of anything found in most other countries.

Finally the greatest gaps of all: in this essay devoted to the age and country of Spinoza, we must keep silent about philosophy, nor have we the space to discuss music in the age of Sweelinck. In accordance with the intentions declared in the Preface, we shall therefore proceed directly to the subject of Dutch art.

Art is probably the one aspect of seventeenth-century Dutch culture with which the modern reader is fairly familiar. Most of us have daily contact with it in all its forms—painting and engraving, architecture and sculpture—and it would seem that, barring details of peculiar interest to historians of art, the subject could hold few secrets for us. Is there anything we can usefully add in these few pages? In fact, what we shall have to say will be more in the form of questions than of positive statements.

We have mentioned the connection between the mainly urban and bourgeois structure of seventeenth-century Dutch society and the predominance of painting over sculpture. Painting had its raison d'être in the wealth and vitality of the well-to-do burghers; among them it found its inspiration, protectors and patrons. There were no great Maccenases among them, mark you; instead there was a vast number of art lovers. Paintings could be found everywhere: in the town hall and other public places, in orphanages and offices, in the houses of patricians and burghers alike—in brief, everywhere except in the churches.
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What was it that the well-to-do and cultured burgher—merchant, advocate, public servant—expected from art and saw in it? What, in other words, was the social and aesthetic function of art? Let no one answer: the quenching of a thirst for beauty. It is an anachronism to project our own aesthetic views into the minds of seventeenth-century men, for our views stem very largely from cultural developments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The artistic approach of most of Rembrandt's contemporaries was primitive in the extreme. True there was a direct response to colour and line—the result of centuries of decorative endeavour: medieval man had painted anything that would take colour, and in the seventeenth century this enthusiasm was not yet forgotten. Only forty or fifty years ago people felt it incumbent upon them to remove the colour from the stone figures that adorn so many of our gateways and gables and to reveal them in bare sandstone or freestone. Since then we have learned better. Colour has been used throughout the ages and, indeed, respect for brick and stone can go too far and become historically perverse.

Of course, an innate love of colour does not in itself suffice to explain the extraordinary development of Dutch painting. Much more essential was the intense enjoyment of shapes and objects, the unshakable faith in the reality and importance of all earthly things, a faith that had nothing to do with philosophical realism, but was the direct consequence of a deep love of life and interest in one's environment.

All those aesthetes who, at one time or another, have decried or depreciated Dutch art and all those who have called our painters unoriginal hacks and mere copyists, have mistaken the real meaning of representational painting and its true value. A drawing or painting is always more than a mere copy; it is always an attempt to grasp what is hidden beneath the visible form, of what cannot be expressed in mere words.

And seventeenth-century artists must, indeed, have had an irrepressible need to grasp things. Nothing in their environment was too slight to be noticed. In addition, they also depicted figures from the world of their imagination, allegorically transformed into symbols. Here the vision of the subject was strictly circumscribed by style and tradition, and variety of expression very small indeed.

And what did the buyer of paintings or engravings expect from the artist? This question is as important to our purpose as that of the artist's own intent. First and foremost, they demanded a suitable subject, one, moreover, they could admire and that was presented in the way in which they were wont to see it. Next they sought and valued artistic skill and sheer technical accomplishment. They expected to derive pleasure from their paintings and also liked to show them off. The choice of subject was often determined by the particular wall on which the painting would be hung. This does not mean that seventeenth-century houses had special studies, guest-rooms, etc.—these were a later innovation, though meals were, of course, always served in the same place, and it was here that a still-life depicting fruit, game and other delicacies would usually be hung.

As a result of the great demand for paintings, many a mere owner was transformed into a collector with a gallery of his own—and not only among the very rich. In this way, the emphasis gradually shifted from enjoyment of good likenesses towards the sheer love of art and beauty. However, even the collector was not a collector in the modern sense of the word. He was far more concerned to own works of every genre than of every great master. The average buyer greatly preferred possessing a country scene, a landscape, a seascape, an allegory and above all his own portrait to owning a Van Goyen, Steen, Hals or Porcellis. There were, of course, exceptions to this rule, and a really first-class gallery was expected to include a Dürer and a Holbein—hence the many suspected forgeries.
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Any attempt to assess the artistic appreciation of earlier generations runs the danger of involving too many modern criteria. It would be ridiculous to contend that people of the time did not appreciate the full beauty of a work, simply because they failed to praise it in flowing prose. What they did write about was, in fact, the skill of the artist, the extent to which the picture accorded with the prevailing canons and its apparent faithfulness to nature. In all these matters they expressed their opinions in measured terms—and that is surely no drawback.

The question of the faithfulness to nature raises a delicate problem: many of the older generation will remember how the advent of photography changed our ideas on trotting horses, which ceased to be suitable subjects for painting. Moreover, seventeenth-century painters were quite unable to depict lions, monkeys, or elephants in a way we should call true to nature—in sharp contrast to the matchless accuracy with which Adriaen van de Velde, for instance, painted domestic animals.

One more word on the choice of subject matter by seventeenth-century Dutch artists. The modern art-lover must be careful to avoid the temptation of looking at the painter's ideas or subjects in the light of his own views and hence seeing more in them than was there. Luckily, critics have ceased to see Dostoevskian tragedies behind every Breughel, Jan Steen and Adriaen Brouwer, but this gain is offset by the fact that our artists' crude satire and coarse humour has lost much of its appeal. Thus, if we are to view their work in the way we have set out to do, namely as the cultural expression of the age in which they lived, we must try to feel our way back into the cheerful vulgarity of their minds and tastes.

Part of their art will forever elude us. It is full of arcane allusions and many of these we cannot hope to fathom even after the most careful research. Thus every bloom in every flower piece is a symbol, and the subject of every still life has emblematic as well as a natural significance. The same is true of many undecipherable details in the bearing of a market stall-keeper, servant or musician—types whom our painters and engravers so often chose as their subjects.

Because of their social function, i.e. because they were mainly intended as a form of home decoration in a bourgeois setting, paintings were automatically restricted to small dimensions. Even when they were destined for public display—paintings of regents, Civic Guards, naval battles—it was only the exceptional canvases that swelled to vast proportions. The atmosphere in which art flourished demanded neither large perspectives nor great imagination. Is it to be regretted that our artists were not expected to give vent to the passion of a Rubens? Did their imagination become stunted because there was no demand for it? Here in the North there was no resurgence of Catholic church art to encourage the painter to expand on a Rubensian scale. Lack of opportunity to develop in the grandiose Baroque manner led him to neglect large areas of poetic fantasy, and kept him out of the century's artistic fashion. Not for our artists the dazzling brilliance, pomp, ritual and majesty so dear to their colleagues abroad or the intense love of sacred mysteries. Instead, they concentrated on the intimate details of everyday life and the dreamy contemplation of far-away distances. All the essential aspects of the late Baroque: its majestic elegance, its grandiloquence, its histrionics, its loud accents, were as alien to Dutch art as the bustle of city life is to a remote province.

But we must not carry such contrasts too far for, dissimilar though Dutch art was to the work of Claude of Lorraine, Murillo, Ribera or the Italians, yet it was not entirely unrelated to the work of such famous painters from abroad as Le Nain and De la Tour, not to mention the obvious affinities between Frans Hals and Velazquez. If, in this brief space, we are to consider painting purely as an element of Dutch civilisation, we must refrain
realism in art, do we mean the belief that the external form of things must be reproduced as faithfully as possible? Surely not, for that is merely a question of honest skill, of the probity of art, as Ingres called it, and that skill was shared by artists of all periods, in Egypt and China no less than among the modern impressionists. The differences between them arise because truth and accurate draughtsmanship are not necessarily synonymous. Now, our painters did not really bother their heads about the distinction. They were too uneducated, too naive, too unacademic to do so; they were simple men who knew their job exceedingly well but scarcely knew the meaning of style, who painted as best they could, in accordance with the motto chosen by Jan van Eyck. Did they perchance also try to capture the ‘meaning’ of ‘life’? Yes, if you like, though that was not really what inspired their work. They invested life with little fantasy but with a great deal of mystery, which in fact it has. ‘Realists’ in the philosophical sense they may have been, though unwittingly, but there is little doubt that they were realists in the sense in which the word is commonly used, i.e. they were firmly convinced of the substantiality of things.

If, in our discussion of seventeenth-century Dutch art, we are to proceed from the simple to the more complex, we must speak of Frans Hals before we turn to Rembrandt which, of course, is also the chronological order. Frans Hals was above all a spontaneous man—nothing in him was calculated or deliberate, nothing studied or affected. Whoever came under his brush might wear his best suit and smartest collar but had to leave his vanity behind. Even the noble Van Heythuysen did not get more than he deserved. Hals made no attempt to depict plainburghers with the graces of princes or heroes. We like to think of Hals’s subjects as men of solid and healthy appearance. If we look more closely, however, we shall find a number of sickly and seedy-looking faces among them. It remains one of the
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wonders of art how Frans Hals, almost eighty years old at the time, contrived to immortalise the 'Lady Governors of the Home for the Aged', these old ladies with their withered everyday faces, in such a way that, albeit we know nothing of their names and doings, we remember them as clearly as we might great princes or poets. Do not call it psychology, do not tell us Hals succeeded in probing deep into their souls — far from it. But his vision and skill were mightier than he himself knew or could have known, with the result that he created a poem redolent of a whole era and an entire people. And here, for once, he did something that Velazquez could not have equalled.

We are deliberately ignoring the Flemish school because the task of including the South would take us too far afield. Yet we must make a brief comparison between Frans Hals and Van Dyck, because that comparison sets off the typically Dutch character of Hals better than anything else. For whereas Van Dyck had grandeur, elegance, refinement and distinction — qualities that were lacking in seventeenth-century Holland and have, in any case, lost some of their lustre over the centuries, Hals had candour and honest simplicity, and these strike even the foreigner, who cannot fully understand our country and people, as the more enduring of the two.

What can we say about Jan Vermeer of Delft, one of the great masters whose work transcends all technical categories, one who humbles all the precepts of aesthetics? Let us be brief and simple. Superficially speaking, Vermeer, like so many of his friends, was a painter of every-day life. Why did he, as far as we know, so rarely seek it in portraiture? Surely not because he failed to fathom the depth of his subjects. He will show you a man, or preferably a woman, doing the simplest task, in simple surroundings, with loving care, reading a letter, pouring milk from a jug or waiting for a boat to arrive. All the figures seem to have been transplanted from ordinary existence into a clear and harmonious setting where words have no sound and thoughts no form. Their actions are steeped in mystery, as those of figures we see in a dream. The word realism seems completely out of place here. Everything is of unrivalled poetic intensity. If we look carefully, we see that Vermeer's figures are not so much Dutchwomen from the sixteenth century as figures from an elegiacal world, peaceful and calm. Nor do they wear the costume of a particular period; they are dressed like visions, symphonies in blue, green and yellow. Glowing, living reds were not very close to Vermeer's heart — even that glorious masterpiece The Painter in his Studio is neither loud nor glaring. It may be rather bold of me to say that Vermeer fails precisely when he depicts holy scenes, for instance Christ at Emmaus. For it is not with the Gospel story itself that he is primarily concerned; rather does he treat the subject as a brilliant exercise in colour. Despite his unique qualities, Vermeer is a truly Dutch painter, at least inasmuch as he, too, propounded no theses and, in the strict sense of the word, lacked a fixed style.

In discussing landscape painting, we must clearly distinguish between those artists who are ruled by the laws of composition and those to whom every theory, every cut rule, seems anathema. To my mind, Dutch landscapes are at their best when, unlike Ruisdael's Jewish Cemetery, which Goethe admired so greatly, they are non-picturesque —Van Goyen's bare banks of Haarlem Lake with its broad turbulent waves, or so many landscapes by Lambert Doomer, Janson van Ceulen and, above all, Hercules Seghers. The lack of theories and stylistic principles, and the simple devotion to their trade caused them to discover vast and unexpected possibilities — merely by following the irresistible flow of their hand. Our painters were at their best whenever, instead of subscribing to any particular style they let themselves go and thus discovered unexpected, and often unappreciated, shades of beauty in everyday life.
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Their work at its best may be called a kind of pictorial laissez-faire policy.

A factor contributing to this freedom was undoubtedly the kind of training Dutch painters enjoyed. Only a few of them went to Italy, to become lost in the hurly-burly of the typical painter's life with all its conventions. In the Netherlands themselves, they found neither Bohemia nor Academe, but learned their trade in one of the many painter's workshops that could be found throughout the country, but were particularly widespread in Holland.

As an indication of culture, the engraver's art is probably a far more reliable guide than the painter's—from the rise of woodcuts and copperplate printing in the fifteenth century to the advent of modern photographic methods of book illustration, engravings were almost unrivalled media of cultural diffusion, reaching as they did all strata of the population. We can hardly imagine today what the enjoyment and possession of engravings—from the simplest to the most highly perfect products of the taille douce, mezzotint and stipple methods—meant to their seventeenth-century owners. For whereas great paintings were kept out of the public view in private houses or displayed in public buildings that were not always accessible, everyone could afford to collect cheap prints and recognise himself and his surroundings in them.

Moreover, engraving was governed by special principles, and remained far more a branch of trade and industry than did painting. Thus no matter how high, in Düer's and Holbein's hands, was the standard of wood-carving in the sixteenth century, engraving only became an important cultural factor in the life of the people with the advent of the copperplate—in the Netherlands, with Goltzius and Jacob de Gheyn, soon followed by Jan van de Velde and so many others. The man wielding the burin generally worked to a publisher's orders, be it to produce calendar pages or series of town or village views, castles, ships, costumes or what have you. He also illustrated books, reproduced portraits and supplied emblems or vignettes. Generally speaking, his subjects were familiar—he was expected to depict what he knew and what he could see. Did he always do just that? Perhaps not, for though he kept to the model when he produced a portrait or to the architectural features of a given town view, as soon as he was left any freedom, for instance in the cycle of the months by Jan van de Velde, he would temper his faithfulness to nature with a few drops of the fantastic and romantic, and would often spoil some of his best work by placing a typical Dutch scene against a background of mountains.

In his art, he obeyed a number of conventions, for instance he would balance a group of trees in the left foreground with light and space on the right, yet he did so with a great deal of latitude which often inspired his happiest effects.

Closely though etching and engraving are related, yet their cultural function and significance are quite distinct. The etcher is free of all the restrictions and bonds that make the engraver a true craftsman. However, we must step carefully here. When we think of etchers we think primarily of Rembrandt, but we cannot really ignore Roeland Roghman, Simon de Vliegher and, above all, Hercules Seghers. Still, it is true that though the etcher, too, might work to order, he worked primarily for his own satisfaction or for that of the connoisseur. Often he himself was a painter first and foremost. The more he was left to his own devices, the more freedom he could give to his versatile needle, or to exploring the endless possibilities of applying ink in different measure. Nowhere do stylistic norms matter less than they do in etching. Here the pure artist's instinct reigns supreme, almost more directly even than in drawings, and we are often touched more deeply by the drawings than by the finished work of the great masters. Drawing strikes us as springing more directly from the heart and soul. This qual-
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ity is fully shared by etching. Is that the reason why more than one of our great painters, an Ostade or a Potter for instance, gave his best in that medium? In any case, there is little doubt that the spirit of etching, the spirit of reverie and dreaming, suits our national temperament exceedingly well.

In art as in literature, the greatest are not bound by the prevailing rules—they make their own. In the case of Rembrandt it would be ridiculous to suggest that his etching is preferable to his painting, to call him a better draughtsman and etcher than painter. There is really no sense in comparing a full orchestra to a single fiddle. When we look at his Synties or at Saul and David or the Blessing of Jacob the idea of etching or drawing does not even arise—not because they are inferior techniques but simply because they belong to a different world. All that was most profound and serious in Rembrandt, he could only express with the brush.

No one can object if, in this brief essay, no attempt is made to praise Rembrandt’s true greatness once again in glowing phrases, and if, instead, we direct our attention to the limitations of his genius. However, even the severest critic has to admit that what failings Rembrandt may have had must be sought in his paintings alone—his etchings and drawings, however simple—are as perfect as can be. The reader may think that applying the word ‘limitation’ to Rembrandt is in any case pedantic, or worse still, an attack on what is greatest in our heritage. If we use it nevertheless, it is because Rembrandt’s stature as an exemplar of Dutch culture is conditioned by some of his least qualities as much as by some of his greatest.

Rembrandt forever tried to depict a life different from that lived in the bourgeois Dutch Republic. Thus in the Portrait of Saskia, the Painter and his Wife, Hendrickje Stoffels, he decked out those nearest to him in great finery, not in order to show them as they were but simply to create good pictures. The necklaces and golden chains, the feathered hats, the loose hair, the colour—all these were not signs of the time but sheer fantasy tempered with historical and foreign elements, a flight from the present into the magnificently beautiful and splendidly noble world of his imagination. Was he fully successful in his attempts to express that world, to show us his visions in all their glory? Or did his fantasy fall a little flat, so that his figures hover in the no man’s land between the exalted and the trivial, to which simple Dutch reality is greatly preferable? The near-vulgar flourishes of the Kassel Saskia or the Dresden Rembrandt and Saskia make an almost painful contrast not only to what Rembrandt himself expressed in his greater portraits but also to the work of Frans Hals. Quite certainly, these semi-fantasies lack all the inexpressible depths that Rembrandt brought to his Gospel scenes.

On the other hand, some of his Old Testament canvases seem to share in what I make bold to call Rembrandt’s weakest side, for his visions of Oriental splendour, too, are lacking both in formal beauty and greatness of style. An example is his David and Absalom, formerly in the Hermitage Museum: David with his Sunday turban, no less than Absalom with a fancy-dress sword, looks ridiculous.

At the risk of being accused of sacrilege, I must confess that I even find some of this lack of serenity in the Night Watch—despite all the shades of light and colour and the wonderful inventiveness, I cannot help feeling that Rembrandt aimed at something far greater than he actually achieved.

Only once was he called upon to paint a truly heroic scene. For the subject of the banquet and pledge of Claudius Civilis was far more sublime than that of the march of Frans Banning Coq’s Civic Guard: the uprising of the Batavi against Rome, which culminated in that pledge, ushered in what seemed like the birth of our nation, and to portray it for the new Amsterdam Town Hall was truly the
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But did he not wish it to be just that? Did he not fail to assimilate the Baroque spirit simply because his innate Dutch disdain of formal style kept pulling him back into the narrow confines of his native bourgeois world? Or was it simply that in Dutch art and above all in Rembrandt an eternal and all-pervading sense of beauty triumphed over stylistic precepts? If it was, the triumph must have been one of honest craftsmanship, and of a simple heart. So much for my earlier version. Today I would be inclined to scrap the whole passage, and say: Leave the word Baroque alone whenever you can. Far from adding to our understanding, it usually beclouds it.¹

Let us now look briefly at some other aspects of Dutch art in the seventeenth century. On sculpture we can be very brief. As we saw, its scant contribution was largely due to the prevailing social and spatial conditions. In this land of polders, the ground had to be parcelled out in small pieces and the towns, the obvious places for statues, were generally small and their streets narrow—which does not, of course, mean that a town with large squares necessarily brings forth great sculpture. Space would surely have been found had it been wanted, but there was also the far more serious lack of patrons. Sculpture is dependent on patronage: it needs the support either of great art-lovers or else of a state ready and able to dispense largesse. Neither was present in the Dutch Republic, and this lack made itself felt over a far wider field than the one under discussion. In the Netherlands, money raised by taxation went mainly into the municipal coffers, and only to a small extent to those of the state, and the men controlling finances were for the most partburghers and merchants who preferred building almshouses and orphanages to commissioning public works of art. The churches, too, were completely closed to

¹I realise that my definition of 'Baroque' differs somewhat from that found in Schmidt-Degener's excellent and absorbing Rembrandt und der holländische Barock (Studien der Bibliothek Warburg, 19, 1928).

In his deepest heart, Rembrandt was the true son of his country and his people: you grasp the Netherlands through Rembrandt, and Rembrandt through the Netherlands. His portrayal of scenes from the Gospel, be it an etching of the Nativity, or of the Circumcision or a painting of one of the men of Emmaus, not only transcends all denominational and doctrinal differences, from Rome to Dordrecht, but even the thorny question of whether or not a particular painting is in the Baroque style. In the original draft of this essay, written in German some ten years ago, I ended this section with the following words: 'The dream-world Rembrandt sought is not entirely the world of the Baroque, but...’

greatest commission that any artist could have been asked to execute. Rembrandt rose fully to the occasion, and in so doing greatly surpassed his Civic Guard painting in depth of heroic imagination and in unrivalled greatness of style. But alas the good burghers of Amsterdam disapproved of the work, the masterpiece was not completed, the main fragment ended up in Stockholm, and Rembrandt was made to taste of the bitter tragedy of greatness once again.

If it is true that Rembrandt's limitations must be sought in the grandeur of his style, his strivings for monumental and classical effects, then it follows quite naturally that his etchings must be free of these faults. For here monumental or stylistic effects are out of place, here the artist can give free rein to his mood and inventive genius. And, in fact, though he did not deliberately discard everything that tradition and stylistic norms seemed to demand from him, in most of his etchings he surrendered freely to the magic of the needle and with a few quick strokes of his hand drew from the depths of his unfathomable spirit the most direct and telling reflection of the mystery surrounding all things. And what was true of his etchings applied, a fortiori, to his drawings, in which he could let himself go even more completely.

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sculpture, with the result that sculptors had to rely for their commissions on the family pride of the leading patricians. The church did, however, help to the extent that it allowed the erection of imposing tombs and gravestones so that, in the end, most sculptures owed their existence to the Protestant Church, after all.

Quite apart from whether or not the country, state and popular character were favourable to the rise of sculpture, we can also ask how far what little sculpture was, in fact, produced in the Netherlands during the seventeenth century expressed the special character of the Dutch people. In general, sculpture offers less possibilities for expressing national characteristics than any other form of art. The greater its works, the closer they are to the prevailing general norms and to a near-perpetual ideal: the perfect representation of the human figure. Although it is easy enough to find appropriate adjectives to describe a number of Dutch characteristics in the work of Hendrick de Keyser or Rombout Verhulst, to do so serves little purpose, and we shall, accordingly, leave it at that.

The relationship between art and national culture has always been much clearer in architecture than it is in sculpture, particularly during the early seventeenth century when many countries reached new cultural heights, each in its own way: Spain with Cervantes, Velazquez, Lope de Vega and Calderón, England with Shakespeare and his contemporaries at home and her great expansion overseas, Sweden with her unexpected political ascendency. The Dutch Republic was unique in reaching eminence in all spheres simultaneously—in politics, trade, navigation and industry, and as a centre of art and letters. But nowhere is the typically Dutch character of our culture more striking than it is in our architecture, an instrument that seems to have been created with our state and nation in the very struggle for freedom. Of course, things are not quite as simple as that, firstly because architecture, just like any other of the arts, has its roots in the past, and secondly because in our country, with its strong regional differences, it everywhere bears traces of local character. What is remarkable is that, despite the strong Flemish influence in the South and the rich German influence in the North East, a special style should have developed that may truly be called Dutch. How much more beautiful our country would have been had the nineteenth century not scrapped so ruthlessly what the eighteenth century had allowed to fall into decay! How pitifully little has remained of the older, north-eastern style to which Groningen, for instance, owed its Great Market, one of the most beautiful squares in these parts! The small, relatively young towns of the Province of Holland, with their slender façades, supplied the overall pattern: narrow buildings with step-gables. The typical house was a development of what was originally a wooden structure, of which, however, only a few vestiges remained. Neither the half-timbered fronts nor the overhanging upper storeys were taken over, nor was the house built round an inner court. The simple form of the most usual type of house was once again the product of bourgeois simplicity, of the needs of family life with few servants. This type of building left little to the architect's imagination. In 1600, there was hardly any call for town houses with imposing interiors or staircases, and the country houses of the nobility generally preserved the massive form of the late-medieval castle, with small windows and thick walls, as they can still be found in Limburg and elsewhere.

Other buildings in demand were town halls, orphanages, assembly halls for the Civic Guards, warehouses, exchanges, depots for the great overseas trading companies, and finally country houses for the rich merchants, set in large parks and woods. Last but not least came the churches. Many of the old ones were taken over for Protestant worship, and this despite the fact that they were unsuited to the
much more austere service; others were left to decay or fell victim to wilful destruction. Meanwhile, the new faith and the new prosperity seemed to call for the building of special places of worship. Here our architects' creative talents found their worthiest and most fertile field. It was not so much originality and imagination that were demanded of them as a new interpretation of the most sacred traditions and themes, and for these they turned towards Italy and the late Renaissance. From Italy came the type of building in which seventeenth-century Dutch Protestant church architecture excelled, and which was so largely inspired by Santa Maria della Salute in Venice: the Marekerk in Leyden, the Oostkerk in Middelburg and the Nieuwe Kerk in Groningen, to name but a few. In all of them, the foreign elements were translated with simple dignity into the spirit of Dutch Calvinism. And where the central scheme was not applied, there appeared such truly national masterpieces as the Westerkerk in Amsterdam, the Nieuwe Kerk in Haarlem, and the countless village churches which followed the great examples from afar—almost all with clean proportions and beautiful in their simplicity.

If we look at secular public buildings, we find that our architects did little more at first than apply the principles of domestic architecture to them. However, a Lieven de Key who built the Fleschers' Hall in Haarlem in the simple style of a dwelling, nevertheless applied the decorative element so brilliantly and on so large a scale that his great masterpiece combines the grace of the small with the proportions of the large in unexcelled harmony. Was it also he who designed that resplendent façade hiding the medieval Leyden town hall behind a front with four gables, gay yet stately, and tranquil despite all the decorative inscriptions and flourishes?

With the exception of a few large buildings, the strength of Dutch architecture did not lie in the monumental. Yet it is one of the strongest proofs of the expansive energy of our people that our builders were called upon to produce monumental works abroad. Thus, in Denmark, they supplied their princely patrons with a host of buildings in royal dimensions but of a style that was more typical of the burgher's house. No wonder that these Danish castles strike one as being somewhat hybrid in character, as being too obviously transplanted growths.

The imaginative element in our architects was given free rein in designing towers for whatever buildings could support them. The great church towers, with their rather clumsy combination of wood, lead and copper, their bulbous forms and pinched waists, were among their less happy creations—with the exception of such masterpieces as the spire of the Westerkerk. Much more successful were the towers of the town halls: graceful to the point of whimsy, in complete harmony with the carillon inside, the embodiment, as it were, of everything that is gay and light, delicate and graceful in the Dutch character, all that reminds us of the lyricism of Hooft and Vondel. Here everything speaks of solid happiness, good humour, and faith in the future. If we compare seventeenth-century Italian architecture with our own, it is almost as if the traditional roles of the two nations had been reversed: in the Italian seicento heaviness and sombreness, in the Dutch counterpart an almost Japanese delicacy. Despite the speed with which the old landscape is now being buried under new buildings and the demands of fast traffic, this lighthearted aspect of our seventeenth-century culture is still best and most vividly preserved in its architectural remains. Only while, but fifty years ago, the old canals, houses and streets could still be found almost everywhere, and every corner of old Amsterdam was still as beautiful as Middelburg, we must now search ever more laboriously to recover the past amidst the banal signs of subsequent neglect and of still later bungling. It was through architectural beauty that seventeenth-century man
himself best appreciated the environment in which he lived. Not, mark you, in the words of the modern art critic or art lover—seventeenth-century man felt beauty rather than expressed it in words. How else could our painters and illustrators have drawn street scenes with so much love, with so much touching devotion to detail, combining the accuracy of a Van der Heyden, a Berckheyde, a Beerstraten, with the poetical vision of Vermeer’s View of Delft? Perhaps nothing fills us with greater longing for that sunny age, for its healthy life, simple outlook and firm faith than a seventeenth-century street scene.

And our artists truly preserved the characteristic aspect of Dutch town life, with its pleasant streets or canals and simple houses. But the spirit of the times, here as elsewhere, longed for a less familiar kind of beauty—for the exotic and exalted or the fantastic and romantic. Ruysdael was not so much renowned for depicting the peaceful dunes of Kennemerland as for his romantic rocks and currents. This eternal dissatisfaction with the known explains why our patricians so quickly tired of Dutch architecture, new and original though it was, and why it came to be looked down upon as part of a past that was altogether too restricted. The ideals of a noble and disciplined classical tradition wafted across from France and Italy and spoiled the taste for sandstone and plain brick. The step gable would no longer do but must be hidden behind rounded gable ends. When the city fathers of Amsterdam deserted the narrow streets of the ‘Oude Zij’ for ‘de Gracht’, that splendid triple ring of canals was soon adorned with houses of the kind designed by Philip Vingboons, single or double fronted, built in freestone or in black brick, all with cornices instead of pointed gables and all, however humble, based on the French hôtel or the Italian palazzo.

It sounds almost symbolic that Amsterdam, at the peak of her wealth and glory, in the very year peace was declared, should have given orders for the building of a new Town Hall and that, before it was completed, the medieval Town Hall nearby should have obliged by burning down. Van Campen’s masterpiece rose up as ‘the eighth wonder of the world’ praised by Vondel in a festive song that had the sonorous aspect and almost the length of an epic. And Constantine Huygens praised Van Campen who From our stricken and disfigured face, The Gothic squint and squalor did erase.

What strange views, what remarkable bias! Did the good Constantine really and truly think that all that went before Van Campen—for instance the work of Hendrick de Keyser and Lieven de Key and everything we call the Dutch Renaissance—was nothing but ‘squint and squalor’? I cannot believe it. For Huygens of all people was not smitten with French classicism, the sickness that sapped our culture of its national strength.

VI

With this last remark we impinge upon a question with which I should like to conclude this essay, namely why Dutch civilisation went into so rapid a decline, and in no sphere more suddenly and more markedly than in architecture. Now, it is a fact that, as soon as our architects began to hanker after rigid forms, they lost something of that crisp and rich quality we associate with our heyday and love so well. Our architecture could remain truly Dutch, truly national, only while the note of happy fantasy and native love of decoration remained dominant, while it aimed at ease rather than grandeur. Once in search of magnificence, it was irresistibly driven to imitate the model of the Romanic countries, and so lost its national identity.

In this connection, we must return to a question that I raised at the beginning, namely the relationship of Dutch art to the Baroque style, understood in its modern and, alas,
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far too general sense. Dutch civilisation, we said, had few affinities with it, some of the work of Grotius and Vondel notwithstanding. In particular, Dutch painting and architecture at their most typical were anything but Baroque, and we showed that wherever Rembrandt, the greatest master of all, strove after Baroque effects, he failed most profoundly. If this view is correct, then the conclusion that the Baroque style could not have been the driving force of our culture becomes inescapable.

Now the fact that Dutch art was so independent of the general trend further emphasises its individuality and special merit. Is the same true of Dutch literature as well? At first sight, literature would seem far less bound to stylistic fashion than art, which after all bears the whole weight of the present: it involves the use of raw materials and technical aids; it is produced in a studio, and it cannot escape from traditional craft and labour practices. The writer, on the other hand, can apparently give his imagination free rein as often as he likes or whenever his spirit drives him. And yet what do we see happening, not only in seventeenth-century Netherlands but elsewhere, too, and at all times? We find that literature remains far more tightly imprisoned than art in old formulas, patterns, concepts and laws. Seldom did our writers, even the greatest among them, dare to fly in the face of the new classicism. It oppressed their work with the weight of ancient figures. But however closely they tried to follow the classical pattern, their spirit kept breaking its bonds and returned to the atmosphere of Dutch meadows and dunes, precisely where Ruisdael and Cuyp found their noblest inspiration. Vondel himself wrote his best poetry when he transcended the classical norm.

Dutch writers are mainly visual in their approach—they see things just as the painter sees them. Bredero’s comedies are picturesque, and so to all intents and purposes are Vondel’s tragedies—this is precisely why they are bad theatre and why most of them owe their immortality to the bookshelf rather than the stage. Although Catholicism inspired Vondel with the glorious choruses of his Lucifer, it could not turn him into the kind of dramatist who, like Shakespeare, makes us tremble with emotion, or like Racine, makes us thrill to the noble sound of his stylised passion.

We still have not determined precisely how and when our all too short-lived seventeenth-century civilisation came to an end. The answer ‘with the end of the century itself’ is unhelpful. A cultural period does not change with the calendar, however tempting and useful it may be to identify some historical periods with centuries. In fact, what we are after here cannot be put in a few words, but involves answers to a whole series of questions. When did the strength ebb away, the flowering stop, the drive slacken that turned our civilisation into a worthy, albeit less illustrious, successor to Florence and Venice? What precisely was the nature of the cultural decline which unmistakably divides the Netherlands after 1700 from that of the preceding hundred years?

Let us take the most familiar case—that of our painting. As Rembrandt entered the twilight of his later years, the great age of Dutch painting was about to pass away. For when a Lairesse could succeed in captivating public taste, and one as lacking in grace as Romein de Hooghe could become the foremost book illustrator, we can no longer speak of a great age, even though a number of our greatest painters survived the 1760’s. What causes such periods of greatness to decline as if they were human lives? In this particular case, was it the rise of French fashion, was it because the old style had lost its appeal, was it pictorial repletion, or was it rather the decline of talent and skill? The change can hardly be ascribed to a social and economic decline: the country was richer than ever, and the demand for painting as great as before. Nothing stood in the way of new masters and yet they failed to appear. It would almost seem as if civilisations were born and died like so many cells
or organs, though all such comparisons are, of course, deceptive and dangerous.

The decline of literature seems to have been steeper still. For who was there to wear the poet's crown once Vondel's golden voice had fallen silent? Surely not Antonides van der Goes, whose rolling verses, at best, preserved Vondel's decorum.

Here we come face to face with an agonising fact: the general collapse of Dutch culture in the eighteenth century. The extent of the collapse is often exaggerated, but the collapse itself is an undeniable historical fact. The disturbing thing is that, at the same time that the Netherlands fell into a deep slumber, the countries round us—France and England followed by Germany—were enjoying a great cultural revival. In the years 1685-1715, which Paul Hazard has so aptly called the years of Europe's crise de conscience, what was it that stopped us from writing the kind of prose that could be read and read again? What was the cause of the withering and calcification of Dutch letters? Was it because the prose of Hooft, our early master, was too artificial and contrived to serve as an example to others? In any case, very few great writers came after him. Letter writing became bogged down in committee jargon and French phrases; scholars wrote in Latin or in Latin style, and the rest of our prose was given over to sermons. Still, even sermons can be great. Why then were there no Dutch Bossuet or Bourdaloues? Had Calvinism lost its impetus? Why no authors like Swift, Defoe or Lesage? Why did Van Effen come out grudgingly in Dutch four years before his death, after having written in French for most of his life?

We gain an even worse impression of Dutch intellectual life upon comparing such great French periodicals as the Journal des Savans with such products as the Boekzaal which a Pieter Rabus was able to peddle in this country.

Leaving aside art and literature for a moment, we may also ask whether, before the end of the seventeenth century, the Dutch people also lost some of the national qualities from which sprang our great cultural upsurge.

There is no doubt that circumstances changed. People themselves changed, too. In the course of the seventeenth century, the intellectual outlook of the Netherlands was gradually being transformed by such new factors as the rise of natural science, greater tolerance, the waning of superstition (the year 1682 brought an explanation of the real nature of comets) and, above all, the gradual acceptance of reason as a standard of life and action. Except for a few disciples of Spinoza or strange sectarians, the Dutch remained good Calvinists or Catholics, but the old rigidity, the old violence and the old religious passions gradually lost out to the spirit of the times, the dry and sober spirit of the dawning eighteenth century. As the mark of Calvin became less prominent, so the great counter-current that has inspired so many Dutchmen since the sixteenth century, gained momentum. You may call this counter-current Erasmian, if you will. You may even wonder whether, in the formation of our national character, it was not, in fact, the main current rather than the counter-current. In any case, it went with a set of ideals that became increasingly typical of us: forbearance, mildness, a very strong sense of justice, a dislike of hairsplitting and sonorous phrases, a love of tranquillity. Now, depending on our interpretation of it, tranquillity may be a very low or a very high ideal, bordering as it does on both sloth and the contemplation of eternity. Tranquillity need not be tantamount to passivity. Even in the seventeenth century, when the Netherlands produced extremely active traders, sailors and soldiers, and diligent workers and builders in all branches of industry and learning, our people longed for the serene tranquillity of a peaceful country life, surrounded by books and good friends—the kind of life so dear to Erasmus and praised by Huygens, Cats and Vondel. Yet the state was ready and
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able to defend their rights and possessions by force of arms, and the individual to perform great acts of courage, perseverance and ingenuity. However, not the long struggle with Spain, the repeated clashes with England, nor the bitter strife with France was able to turn our people into militarists;—unlike the Swedes who, after 1700, succumbed to their warlike pretensions. The Republic looked upon her part in the War of the Spanish Succession as an onerous task and a hard trial. When it was over, tranquillity seemed to be within the grasp of most of our people, and general prosperity assured for a long time to come. Whole regions of the Netherlands were covered with summer houses, from the castles and manors of the richest and most distinguished down to the smaller, domed villas of the well-to-do tradesmen. It was a way of life of a standard unrivalled in any other country, and one that went hand in hand with a high degree of public safety. The foreign visitor must truly have looked upon our country as a paradise.

However, our widespread prosperity also had its social dangers. One result was that, even in the seventeenth century, our merchants gradually turned magistrates and our entrepreneurs investors. Were we becoming a nation of rentiers? There is no doubt that the governing and moneyed classes still produced men of great energy—economic life continued to offer enough challenges even to those who did not pay daily visits to the office, exchange or wharf. But for the average regent the main business of the day had become running after his gardener or talking to his steward or notary—apart, of course, from the routine ceremonial of town government and the more serious but not too time-consuming duties of the bench. At the same time, the pursuit of classical and theological studies and flirtations with poetry gave way to the acquisition of natural history cabinets, for these had become a sine qua non of fashionable life. The overall result may have represented a gain for science, but there is no doubt that much of our national energy was dissipated in the process.

Had the Netherlands become too peaceable? Had we lost something of our heroic mettle? These are dangerous questions that may cause us to become bogged down in mere words and phrases. All the same, our general and undeniable cultural decline in the eighteenth century is closely connected with them.

For the hustle and bustle of the seventeenth century, the eighteenth century substituted a way of life that may be compared to dozing in the sunset of a long summer's day. Even the fact that it was the age of Boerhaave and 'sGravesande does not rid us of the impression that it was also an age of cultural decline, and this impression is further heightened by the realisation that our only great eighteenth-century statesman, Simon van Slingelandt, failed to speak out until it was far too late.

Historical assessment of an entire period is bound to involve some distortion, not least because we tend to measure the past with alien standards, and hence fail to give credit, where credit is due. Thus we are inclined to deprecate the dry rationalism and all-too-sober outlook of eighteenth-century Dutch life, because they fall far short of our own ideals. But if we judge them instead by the needs of those who, born in the seventeenth century, had not yet succeeded in shaking off the confusion of its thought, we shall, no doubt, think less harshly of the events that drew a veil over Rembrandt's century.

Some sixty years ago, educators and writers alike were wont to speak of our golden age. Thus in 1897, when P. L. Muller brought out his most worthy The Republic of the United Netherlands in its Heyday, the publishers insisted on changing the title to Our Golden Age. Now as Colenbrander has rightly observed in his biography of Muller, that title really belies the work. For there was no glitter at all in the
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author's matter-of-fact treatment of the state, the army and navy, the church, trade and industry, shipping, the founding of the colonies, provincial government and history, social life, literature and art. And indeed, the name of 'Golden Age' smacks of the *aurea aetas*, the classical Fools' Paradise, which annoyed us in Ovid even while we were still at school. If our great age must performe be given a name, let it be that of wood and steel, pitch and tar, colour and ink, pluck and piety, fire and imagination. The term 'golden' applies far better to the eighteenth century, when our coffers were stuffed with gold-pieces.

We in the Netherlands know that what made our country and people great in the seventeenth century—vigour, determination, justice and fair play, charity, piety and faith in God—is lost neither to us who live today nor to those who will come after us.

The Spirit of the Netherlands

I. THE ORIGINS OF OUR NATIONALITY

When I lived in Haarlem, I never passed through Zijlstraat without glancing at a modest house whose stone tablet bore the inscription INT SOET NEDERLAND flanked by two sandstone pennons with ICK BLYF GETROU and ICK WYCT NYET AF. I cannot tell why an unknown burgher should have chosen this particular slogan for his house soon after 1600, though it certainly betokens a deep love of country. As an expression of patriotism in the seventeenth century, the inscription is as eloquent as a poem by Vondel or a painting by Frans Hals or Jan van Goyen. In all of them sounds the symphonic theme of our nation and its people.

Patriotism that is not mirrored in the past is evanescent, for a nation, just like an individual, is its history. Its form and significance, sense and direction, stem from the living past. One who would cut himself off from this organic memory loses all vital orientation. Every valid idea of state and nationhood calls for knowledge and awareness of its history.

For us, in the Netherlands, this is especially clear. The origins of our country as an independent member of the European community lie in the relatively recent past—some four or at most five centuries ago. Most of our sister countries are older than we are. Portuguese, Danes and Poles could already count themselves nations (insofar as the term nation applied under medieval conditions) when even the name of 'Netherlands' was not yet in use. But, you might

2To the dear Netherlands. I shall be true. I shall not waver.