

Jeroen Giltaij

Dutch painting THE
GOLDEN AGE
BOOK

 BOOKS



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PREFACE

The seventeenth century is often called the Golden Age of the Netherlands, and the paintings produced in the Dutch Republic during that period are an impressive aspect of Dutch history. The century saw the rise of one artist after another, often demonstrating incredible creativity and sometimes producing large numbers of paintings. It has been estimated that there must have been between fifty and a hundred thousand artists in the period from 1580 to 1800, producing between five and ten million paintings in total. Of course these were not just the works of the great masters we know today, but it does show how deeply painting was embedded in the life of the Dutch Republic.

This book looks at those artists and their paintings in the period from around 1590 to around 1710. The intention was to give a brief overview, making grateful use of the wealth of literature on the subject. In the course of writing the book, a good 230 artists were selected, with more than 320 paintings – a selection that had to take account of the intended size of the book. The artists and their paintings are discussed and presented in twenty-one chapters in an attempt to give a representative impression of the art of the Golden

Age. The topics covered by these chapters were often more or less suggested by the paintings themselves, for example a particular movement, paintings of a certain subject or a particular project. The result was a diversity of chapters of varying length that allowed the most important artists to be discussed in a clear overview. It should be noted that not all paintings could be fitted into this scheme so neatly, and I hope some allowance will be made for the occasional expedient solution.

In principle, the paintings in the book have been chosen from the collections of Dutch museums, especially those in Amsterdam, The Hague and Rotterdam, as they happen to have the most important paintings. However, in one or two cases it was necessary to look abroad for examples of a work by a particular artist, because there were none in Dutch museums. Once you have read this book, you should really go and look at the original paintings. After all, that is the only way to appreciate them properly; the images in the book can never be more than reproductions.

The website of the Netherlands Institute for Art History was used for the spelling of the artists' names

and their dates of birth and death (*rkdartists*) and to some extent for the selection of the paintings (*rkdimages*). It should be noted that there are one or two deviations from the spellings on the website for various reasons. Other important websites were those of the Rijksmuseum and the Mauritshuis. Quotes from the Bible and the spelling of biblical names are taken from the Good News Bible (1992). The list of references contains the literature consulted specifically for this book rather than being a general overview. The key source for the tekst and chapters was the book *Het Gouden Eeuw Boek* (The Golden Age Book), compiled by the current author and published by Waanders in 2004, with Ronald de Leeuw providing the introduction and selecting the images.

The collaboration with the publishers Henk van de Wal and Johan de Bruijn went very smoothly and was a most enjoyable experience, for which I would like to thank them very much. Finally, I would also like to thank Prof. Volker Manuth of the Radboud University Nijmegen in the Netherlands, who knows a great deal about Dutch art and the literature in this field, and has published widely on the subject. He was willing to read the draft of this book and made some useful

and important comments. In putting together this book, I always found it a great privilege to be so closely involved with the art of the Dutch Golden Age.

Jeroen Giltaij



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THE HAGUE, DELFT AND AMSTERDAM AT THE START OF THE CENTURY

Although Haarlem and Utrecht were important centres, artists of considerable standing were also working in other towns. In The Hague there was Moyses van Wtenbrouck (c. 1595–no later than 1647). He mainly painted Italianate landscapes with scenes from classical antiquity. A typical example – the *Forest Pool with Hermaphroditus and Salmacis*, dating from around 1627 – can be found in the Mauritshuis (fig. 1). Wtenbrouck's style is recognisable in this landscape from the cauliflowerlike trees and the colouring, with dark green vegetation in the foreground and light blue vegetation in the background. The picture is of a story from *Metamorphoses* by the Roman poet Ovid, in which the nymph Salmacis embraces her lover Hermaphroditus, thus creating the hermaphrodite, a being that is both male and female. The solidly built Salmacis has undressed and is standing watching her lover stepping into the water. It is not certain whether Wtenbrouck visited Italy, but Leonaert Bramer from Delft (1596–1674) certainly did. He left when he was eighteen, travelling to Rome via various French towns, and only returned to Delft in 1628. There, he became an important artist. He is notable for also making frescos (wall paintings), for example for the palaces

of Honselaersdijk and Huis ter Nieuburch, although nothing has survived from those places. What has survived is the painting on the ceiling in the Dining Room of the Prinsenhof, depicting the *Ascension of Christ*, painted 1667/1669. Bramer was buried in 1674. An unusual part of his oeuvre is the small paintings he did on slate. He was already doing this in Italy, for example the *Soldiers Resting* from 1626, which is now in the Museum Bredius in The Hague (fig. 2). *The Quarrel between Ajax and Odysseus*, from around 1623/1627, is painted on copper and is in the Museum Het Prinsenhof in Delft (fig. 3). It shows the two Greek heroes arguing because they both claim the right to the suit of armour belonging to the fallen hero Achilles. Odysseus will eventually win the confrontation.

At that time, there were a number of artists in Amsterdam painting in a very similar style. They are sometimes called the Amsterdam history painters. The most famous was Pieter Lastman (1583–1633), who taught Rembrandt.

This group also included the two brothers Jacob and Jan Pynas. Jacob Pynas (1592/1593–c. 1650) may have visited Rome in around 1605/1608; in the

This impressive composition shows the story of the friends Orestes and Pylades. It was told by the ancient Greek author Euripides. The two friends are in a discussion while the executioner is standing ready with his club to kill Orestes. Orestes' sister Iphigeneia is approaching on the right. In the end, all three manage to make their escape.

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PIETER LASTMAN (1583-1633)

Orestes and Pylades Disputing at the Altar, 1614

Panel, 83.2 x 126.1 cm.

AMSTERDAM, RIJKSMUSEUM





10

PIETER LASTMAN (1583-1633)

The Triumph of Mordechai, 1624

Panel, 52 x 71.5 cm.

AMSTERDAM, MUSEUM HET REMBRANDTHUIS

The most important artist among the Amsterdam history painters before Rembrandt was Lastman. Two young artists from Leiden, Jan Lievens and Rembrandt, were pupils of his. The Old Testament book Esther was a popular source of subjects for paintings in the seventeenth century. Other incidents from this book involving Esther, Haman and King Xerxes were also often portrayed.



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PIETER LASTMAN (1583-1633)

Saint John on the Isle of Patmos, 1613

Panel, 36 x 26.7 cm.

ROTTERDAM, MUSEUM BOIJMANS VAN BEUNINGEN

The young Saint John has a nimbus, or ring of light, around his head. He is writing in the book resting on his right knee, his right leg crossed over the left leg in a relaxed pose. His left hand holds his ink pot and keeps the page open at the same time. Mary has appeared in the sky on the crescent moon, together with the seven-headed beast of the Apocalypse. It is a very dynamic depiction of the young evangelist.

REMBRANDT PAINTS 'THE ANATOMICAL LESSON'

In the sixteenth century, the guild of Amsterdam surgeons had been given permission to

perform one dissection of a human body every year in order to give a demonstration of human anatomy. This took place in a theatre

known as the Theatrum Anatomicum, the first one of which was built in Leiden. Public stands were erected around the

dissecting table so that everyone could watch the demonstration. The theatre is packed in the print by Dolendo from 1609, but there are also skeletons holding flags



with texts such as “*Homo bulla*” (man is a soap bubble) that refer to the transience of human existence (fig. 1). In Amsterdam, the surgeons commissioned paintings of the anatomical lesson by the man known as the praelector (literally the reader) in the presence

of the surgeons. The first painting was commissioned in 1603 and the last in 1758. The group of nineteen paintings of anatomical lessons are kept in the Amsterdam Museum. Until 1828, the painting by Rembrandt of *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* was kept in

the Waag (the weighing house) in Amsterdam where the guild was based, but then it was sold to raise money for the fund for surgeons’ widows. It was bought by the State of the Netherlands and hung in the Mauritshuis (fig. 2).



1 ◀◀

**BARTHOLOMEUS
DOLENDO AFTER
JAN CORNELISZ
WOUDANUS**

The Anatomical Amphitheatre in Leiden, 1609
Engraving, 46.6 x 55.8 cm.
AMSTERDAM, RIJKSPRENTEN-
KABINET

2 ◀

**REMBRANDT
(1606-1669)**

*The Anatomy Lesson of
Dr Nicolaes Tulp, 1632*
Canvas, 169.5 x 216.5 cm.
THE HAGUE, MAURITSHUIS



9

CAESAR VAN EVERDINGEN (c. 1617-1678)

Holy Family, c. 1660

Doek, 129 x 105 cm.

UTRECHT, MUSEUM CATHARIJNECONVENT

Mary is holding the child on her arm and mother and son give us a friendly look. She is wearing a brightly coloured dress with a shawl and has Roman sandals on her feet. John the Baptist is sitting in the background. He is taking a break from reading a book and looking upwards. He is not portrayed in the usual fashion, as an old man with a beard; here he is a middle-aged gentleman with a curled moustache. For this reason, it has been thought that this could be a portrait of the person who commissioned the painting.



10

NICOLAES BERCHEM (1621/1622-1683)

The Infancy of Zeus, 1648

Canvas, 202 x 262 cm.

THE HAGUE, MAURITSHUIS

The supreme god Zeus from Greek mythology is still an infant here as he sleeps in the lap of the nymph Adrasteia. She is holding off the goat Amalthea with her hand. A faun is carrying an enormous pitcher of milk. Zeus was the son of Cronos who devoured his own children, which is why his wife Rhea hid Zeus on the island of Crete. The painting is one of Berchem's early works, in which he demonstrates his ability to create an intriguing composition on a large scale.



17 ◀

JOHANNES VERMEER
(1632-1675)

The Milkmaid, c. 1660

Canvas, 45.5 x 41 cm.

AMSTERDAM, RIJKSMUSEUM

The girl is wearing a white headdress, a yellow top with green sleeves and a blue apron. The light falls on her forehead. She watches the milk she is pouring from a jug into a cooking pot with a look of concentration. A basket of bread is on the table along with rolls that are lit by the sun. The light on the objects is depicted by countless dots of light-coloured paint. The wall seems to be of real plaster. The light enters the room towards the right from the window, gradually and almost imperceptibly becoming less intense towards the left. That is Vermeer's mysterious light.



18 ▲

JOHANNES VERMEER (1632-1675)

Girl with a Pearl Earring, c. 1665

Canvas, 44.5 x 39 cm.

THE HAGUE, MAURITSHUIS

The girl of about sixteen is looking at us with her mouth slightly open. Her face is wonderful and there is not a single wrinkle or flaw to be seen on her skin. Her look cannot be avoided. This painting is not a portrait, although it may have been based on a model. You might call it eternal beauty. *The Mona Lisa*, the famous painting by Leonardo da Vinci now in the Louvre that is a similar kind of portrait, may be the only other painting that expresses such eternal beauty.

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JOHANNES VERMEER
(1632-1675)

Woman Reading a Letter,
c. 1663

Canvas, 46.5 x 39 cm.

AMSTERDAM, RIJKSMUSEUM

The woman is standing in profile, facing left, and is reading a letter she holds in both hands with her mouth open. The question is what is she reading? Is it a love letter? Is her lover far away, as might be suggested by the map on the wall? These are speculations to which there is no answer. The light, which Vermeer was able to paint with such consummate skill, places the figure in an enchanting, unreal world that has a poetic force.



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Text and compilation
Jeroen Giltaij

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Tessera Translations, Wageningen

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Richard Bos, Wergea

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THE GOLDEN AGE BOOK

The Golden Age Book gives a complete overview of the art from one of the most remarkable periods in Dutch history.

The seventeenth century is often known as the Dutch Golden Age, not only because of the great wealth the country amassed but also because of the impressive cultural flowering. The art of painting in particular reached a high point. Throughout the century, countless highly talented artists created masterpieces that still evoke our admiration more than four

centuries later. Their paintings are the jewels in the collections of museums all over the world.

At the start of the seventeenth century, artists began painting landscapes, still lifes, scenes from everyday life, marine pictures and church interiors in a way that had never been done before. It was as if the artists wanted to record daily life around them, but they all did this in their studios at their easels. These painters had a degree of imaginative power that we find difficult to imagine. Throughout the century, talented new artists

continued to emerge with their own styles. The art of the Dutch Golden Age is characterised by ceaseless creativity, huge levels of production and a style that was unique and typical of that time. The great names of Rembrandt, Vermeer and Frans Hals are world famous but the paintings of the lesser known old masters are often wonderful, splendid, exquisite or imposing.

The Golden Age Book was written and put together by Jeroen Giltaij, the former head curator of Old Master Paintings at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen.



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