

Dutch Culture in the Golden Age



Book:

Dutch Culture in the Golden Age

J. Leslie Price

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Reviewer:

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With *Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* Leslie Price returns to the theme with which he began his long and distinguished career of teaching and research at the University of Hull. It is now almost 40 years ago that he published *Culture and Society in the Dutch Republic in the 17th Century*.⁽¹⁾ Like the book presently under review, *Culture and Society* was an essay rather than a detailed study. It focused on the different social milieus in which various forms or culture were produced, and explored the question as to why the Dutch were able to produce a school of painting of outstanding quality that was markedly independent of the general movement of artistic taste in Europe, and yet failed to produce a literature that could match it. Still very much concerned with the same issues, his most recent book testifies how far the author's thinking has advanced. *Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* is a lucid essay that offers a rich and rewarding, and exceptionally nuanced, insight into the culture – more than just painting and literature – of 17th-century Holland. The book also documents the degree in which scholarship of the Dutch Golden Age has progressed since the 1970s. The select bibliography lists only a handful of titles that were available in 1974. A fair number of the more recent studies are in English.

Dutch Culture in the Golden Age consists of three introductory chapters, six chapters exploring painting, literature, humanism and the republic of letters, science and technology, religion and theology, and political theory, and finally two concluding chapters on the impact of the culture of the Dutch Golden Age on contemporary Europe and on the 'waning' of the Golden Age, including its reception by scholars and the general public.

Like the earlier book, *Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* is cleverly organized around a central argument, which lends coherence to a book that otherwise might have ended up as a rather bland summing up of famous artists, writers, scholars, and scientists. Price argues that Dutch society in its period of greatness is justly renowned for its innovative and often surprisingly ‘modern’ achievements in the fields of economy, politics, and social relations as well as in the arts and sciences, but that these advances were offset by conservatism and the tenacious persistence of a traditional world-view. It was this tension between the forces of innovation and tradition, according to Price, that gave Dutch culture in the 17th century its peculiar character. I will come back to this central argument later, but it should be noted here that it nicely does the job of tying together the various chapters into a compelling narrative.

Price’s juxtaposition of innovative and conservative forces has resulted in an exceptionally balanced view of the society and culture of the Dutch Golden Age. Most historians have understandably tended to focus on the innovative aspects of the period and on those features that made it stand apart from the experience of the rest of early modern Europe. Obvious examples are Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude’s *The First Modern Economy*, Jonathan Israel’s *The Dutch Republic*, and, even more so, his *Radical Enlightenment*.⁽²⁾ It is only right that Price directs our attention to the fact that the inhabitants of the Dutch Republic had no cue as to where their society was heading, that they did not regard themselves as the founding fathers of free-market economics or democracy, let alone of ‘modernity’ pure and simple, and that most of them shared the religious and magic world view prevalent in the rest of early modern Europe.

Price of course does not deny the innovative elements in the economy, society, and culture of the Dutch Golden Age, nor does he try to play down its achievements. Yet in order to arrive at a proper understanding of it one should take stock of innovation as well as tradition, and understand their interplay. Take for example the economy. It was booming, but the boom was located particularly in the province of Holland and to some extent in the other maritime regions, and hardly impacted at all in the rural inland provinces, which remained more traditional socially and culturally. Urbanization reached unprecedented levels, but the ancient nobility continued to enjoy prestige, even in urbanized Holland. And even in the mercantile heartland ‘Calvinists were far from eager to embrace the spirit of capitalism’ (p. 51). A treatise by a Leiden professor in 1638 justifying taking interest on loans caused a stir, because many people clung to the traditional Christian view of usury as exploitation of the poor – a remarkable position, given that the Dutch economy as well as the war against Spain heavily depended on credit and the issuing of bonds. The notorious tulip bubble caused considerable anti-capitalist sentiment as well. And most members of the elite had enjoyed a humanist education which made them identify with the anti-commercial values espoused by Cicero and other classical authors rather than the cut-throat capitalism fashionable in mercantile circles.

Price pays ample attention to the early abatement of the persecution of witches. If the Dutch Republic was largely spared the horror of the witch-craze which affected the rest of early modern Europe, he argues, this was only because the Supreme Court in a famous ruling in 1592 decided that torture could not legally be employed in witchcraft trials. Yet throughout the 17th century most of the Dutch continued to believe in the efficacy of witchcraft and the ubiquitous activity of the devil.

The Dutch Republic’s so-called ‘discussion culture’ is a well-known indicator of its modernity. The Republic was justly famous for its freedom of expression, yet we are warned that this freedom was not without limits. The authorities did their best to uphold legislation

against libels, while certain opinions, such as antitrinitarianism, were deemed outright atheism and consequently forbidden. Several authors were convicted to prison sentences on grounds of blasphemy. Spinoza's most offensive works were famously published only after his death, and then duly banned.

Another marker of progress Price deconstructs is the relatively emancipated position of women. Women are highly visible in Dutch painting of the period, and foreign visitors commented on their assertiveness. Nevertheless, Price argues, they were legally second-class citizens, barred from (fully) taking part in economic life and in politics. 'Women remain almost invisible as far as the culture of the Golden Age is concerned: a handful of painters, many poets but few of distinction, and a bluestocking or two' (p. 93).

One of the chief arguments arguing for the modernity of the Dutch Golden Age is its religious diversity and the tolerant attitude of the magistrates towards religious dissenters. It is true that Dutch religious freedom was unprecedented as well as unrivalled in early modern Europe (except in the areas under Ottoman rule). Yet Price is at pains to point out that only the Reformed Church, as the 'public' Church, enjoyed substantial privileges, that Catholic observance remained legally forbidden until the end of the old regime (even if the authorities could usually be bribed to close an eye), and that very few people were willing to argue that religious toleration was a good thing in itself. Religious toleration was an expediency, desired by nobody, yet necessary for the conservation of civil peace and the promotion of prosperity. The principle of the separation of Church and State was still a long way off. And the social ethic of *all* churches was fundamentally opposed to the spirit of capitalism.

Price also plays down the level of technological and scientific innovation reached during the Golden Age. If the Dutch were more clever than their competitors in harnessing existing sources of energy (windmills, well-designed sailing ships), they failed to achieve any real innovation comparable to the invention of the steam engine a century later. Great scientists like Stevin, Descartes, Huygens, and van Leeuwenhoek were hampered by the absence of learned societies such as the ones founded in London and Paris under royal patronage. Although these men certainly played an important role in what historians have later identified as the Scientific Revolution, the impact of their work on contemporary society was limited. Their contemporaries tenaciously continued to cling to a world view that was fundamentally Aristotelian, religious, and magical. Most of the scientists in question were unable to fathom the full implications of the new science. Natural philosophy gave better answers to questions as to how the natural world functioned, but it failed to answer the question why it did so. Jan Swammerdam became so confused in his (religiously driven) search for truth through observation and experiment that he sought refuge with the charismatic Antoinette de Bourignon, a millenarian fanatic who claimed to be the mouthpiece of God and hence demanded absolute obedience from her followers.

Next to religion and magic, Price identifies Renaissance culture and humanism as forces in Dutch society that were fundamentally conservative. Their starting point was 'an inherited body of texts of unchallengeable authority'. The task of scholarship, according to Price, was basically to explore this legacy (p. 162).

By the beginning of the seventeenth century [the impetus of the Renaissance] was fading, and a movement which had been innovative, in fact if not in intention, was beginning to be more concerned with preserving what had been achieved than with further development' (pp. 84–5).

Price, to my opinion, underrates the creative possibilities of Renaissance and humanist learning. The Renaissance never encouraged slavish copying of ancient culture, but rather its emulation. One simply cannot think of the visual arts, literature, theatre, or architecture of the 17th century without taking into consideration the tremendous impact of the culture of the Renaissance. This impact brought new themes, new styles, new ideas and new ways of understanding. With hindsight one could argue that the modern world owes more to the scientific revolution than to Renaissance humanism, but the 17th century Dutch were not equipped with such hindsight. A classical education was the tool with which they were equipped to understand their world, and they used it to its full potential. Towards the end of the book, however, Price becomes more forgiving towards Humanism, for he does acknowledge the positive influence of Erasmus, Lipsius, Scaliger (French, but working in Holland), Grotius, and Heinsius on the wider European culture.

One may also question to what extent the coexistence of innovation and tradition was distinctive for the Dutch Golden Age. Are not *all* societies characterized by simultaneous change and continuity? Innovation will usually take place in a limited number of social areas, and not everywhere at the same pace, while other areas will remain relatively stable. Imperial Germany, for example, around 1900 at the forefront of scientific and technological innovation, was reactionary in its politics. And what about the contemporary United States, still the leading nation in science and technology, as well as in cinema, the visual arts, and literature, and yet simultaneously known for a number of staggeringly conservative political and religious movements?

One could even go so far as to argue – and it has in fact been argued – that traditionalism is essentially a reaction against modernization rather than the mere survival of traditional forms of culture. Innovation breeds its own critics, and not only in the case of the Dutch Golden Age. Was ‘the invention of tradition’ a characteristic feature of the Dutch Golden Age? This is a line of inquiry Price does not pursue; but it might be worthwhile to explore to what extent movements such as the ‘Further Reformation’ (*Nadere reformatie*) or the various millenarian groups of the mid-17th century were a reaction against the capitalist ethos of the era rather than the expression of an atavistic religiosity.

There are only few books available exploring the culture of the Dutch Golden Age as a whole. Price’s earlier book is one of them, but it is by now outdated and its central thesis can no longer be upheld. Johan Huizinga’s brilliant ‘sketch’ *Dutch Civilization of the Seventeenth Century*, originally published in 1941 (3) is still highly readable, but strongly bears the marks of the period in which it was written. *1650: Hard-Won Unity* by Willem Frijhoff and Marijke Spies (4) contains a wealth of material and insights, but its focus is limited to the middle of the century, and it is too voluminous for class room use. It is remarkable that Simon Schama’s *The Embarrassment of Riches* (5) is not even mentioned in Price’s Select Bibliography. This should not come as a surprise to those readers who are familiar with his scathing criticism of that book.(6)

I have perhaps been unfair in focusing almost exclusively on Price’s juxtaposition of the innovative and the traditional. This may downplay the extent to which the author has succeeded in cramming an enormous amount of information as well as lucid insights into a very slim volume. This is a tremendous achievement. I recommend this book for classroom use. It will provide undergraduate students with all background information they need and at the same time provoke lively discussion on the peculiar character of the culture of the Dutch Golden Age.

Notes

1. J. L. Price, *Culture and Society in the Dutch Republic in the 17th Century* (London, 1974).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude, *The First Modern Economy* (Cambridge, 1997); Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477–1806* (Oxford, 1995); *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford, 2001).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Johan Huizinga, *Dutch Civilization of the Seventeenth Century* (1941).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Willem Frijhoff and Marijke Spies, *Dutch Culture in a European Perspective 1: 1650 – Hard-won Unity* (Basingstoke, 2004).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: an Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Dutch Golden Age* (London, 1986).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. *Bijdragen en mededelingen betreffende de geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, 104 (1989), 39–55 and *The American Historical Review*, 94 (1989), 158.[Back to \(6\)](#)

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