The making of Dutch flower culture: Auctions, networks, and aesthetics
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Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):

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Download date: 11 Dec 2018
Early Dutch Horticulture

Why are the Dutch so successful with flowers? I don’t know, really. But we have many generations, hundreds of years, of growing flowers and other things in these sandy, swampy little places. It’s just what we do, I guess.

A trader at FloraHolland Aalsmeer
Tulips Today and Yesterday

Throughout 2009, New York honored the four hundredth anniversary of Henry Hudson’s arrival as captain of the Dutch ship, Halve Maen (Half Moon), on a journey sponsored, like many other colonial ventures of that era, by the Dutch East India Company, the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, or VOC. Many celebrations commemorated New York’s Dutch roots, including several tulip naming ceremonies. In Manhattan’s Battery Park, on the spot where the Half Moon landed, Princess Maxima dribbled champagne to baptize the bright orange ‘Henry Hudson’ tulip, and the royal couple presented the City of New York with a gift of 120,000 bulbs donated by the Flower Council of Holland, which Mayor Michael Bloomberg formally welcomed. Uptown, another tulip event honored the controversial former Netherlands parliamentarian, Ayaan Hirsi Ali. In front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, flanked by executives from Holland’s flower bulb sector and Wim Pijbes, director of Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum, Ms. Ali christened a new ‘black’ tulip, the Ayaan, which she herself helped select, and at the same time, one hundred Ayaan bulbs were commemoratively planted in front of the Rijks.

The tulip galas have hardly been confined to 2009 and New Amsterdam-New York related fêtes. Tulip naming ceremonies have become regular events sponsored by the Dutch flower industry, particularly the bulb growing sector, and are heartily endorsed by Dutch elites and the political class. In connection with Queen Beatrix’s 2008 visit to Lithuania, for instance, the Dutch ambassador, accompanied by Dutch tulip cultivar Jan Ligthart, presented a tulip named for the Lithuanian First Lady, the Alma Adamkienė tulip. In 2004, Ligthart had also bred a pink and ivory tulip in honor of then U.S. first Lady Laura Bush, and this variety was grown by Aalsmeer’s Blumex and sold at auction (though it was not too popular). At the naming ceremony, Mrs. Bush gave a short speech and was joined by Hans Westerhof, the chairman of the Royal Dutch Wholesalers Association for Flowerbulbs and Nurserystock, who grinned with pride in the photo. In recent years as well, the iconic Dutch tulip was married to the iconic Dutch airline with a new hybrid called Tulipa KLM. KLM CEO Peter Hartman and former Dutch top model Frederique van der Wal presided at the ceremony held at the Keukenhof Gardens and attended by then Dutch Minister for Foreign Trade, Frank Heemskerk.

What’s communicated through this elite participation, along with the language and emotional pitch of such events, is a sensibility familiar to class societies that Bourdieu called la distinction, where cultural consumption, particularly of art and other aesthetic objects, emphasize social and class differences; taste transforms objects and practices “into a symbolic expression of class position” (1984: 174-175). As with a lot
of marketing, the message is that this product, the tulip, offers access to a certain refined and elevated status. Tulips subtly reinforce distinctions of class and taste while at the same time offer to transcend them through purchase and consumption, which is the heart of what it means to give aesthetic judgement a name. It’s not just THAT you might appreciate tulips, or other ornamental flowers. The crux of the issue is why you feel drawn to these aspects of culture, how you consume them, and what you feel you get out of it by participating in certain social activities in particular ways. That’s an important message of these tulip events, one that helps frame a temperament of the horticultural industry both today and in the past.

It was during the seventeenth century, and largely through the tulip, that what would become the ornamental flower industry began in the Netherlands. The tulip is so familiar to us, and so much a part of Dutch vernacular, that it’s hard to imagine it’s not indigenous to the Low Countries. Today tulip bulbs are big business: the Dutch sector employs thousands of people, annual exports generate about six million euros, and over seventy percent of tulips purchased around the globe ‘have a Dutch passport,’ as is said in the industry. For another measure of the tulip’s embeddedness, look at the Keukenhof, which hosts about three quarters of a million tourists each year and presents tulips to the world often with the blessing of the royal family. So natural is it these days to be involved with cultivating, buying, or selling flowers that even many locals not involved in the industry claim that “the trade is in our blood” (Strating 1994). But there was a time when a commercial market for flowers was scarcely imaginable, when the Dutch did not trade in flowers. How it came about is part of a matrix of other events and developments, some botanical, others economic, cultural and political. Scientific ideas about the cultivation of flowers emerged with the tulip, and at the same time, values around aesthetics, class sensibility, and monetary worth. In this sense, the tulip was a touchstone for a range of modern practices and ideologies.

Along with the modern world system and the origins of capitalism, Dutch commercial horticulture takes shape in several contexts, and each helps to establish the

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30 Though bulb cultivation and bulb auctions date back to the seventeenth century in the Netherlands, the space used to grow them was quite limited until the middle-end of the nineteenth century—as recently as 1860, the Netherlands devoted just 600 hectares to flower bulbs (Gijsberts and Zwetsloot 1987: 127). This is about twelve times the area of Amsterdam’s Vondelpark or slightly less than twice the size of New York City’s Central Park. But in recent decades, according to the KAVB, the hectares devoted to flower bulb production have increased from 10,000 in 1960 to more than 23,500 in 2007. On the other hand, the number of growers has decreased. In 1960, there were 13,000 bulb growers, but by 2007 only 2000 remained. Even with its small land area, the Netherlands is the world’s top producer of bulbs (tulip, crocus, daffodil, etc): in 2005, the export value was estimated at $34,000 per hectare (Benschop et al 2010: 7). Over 3000 Dutch companies do business in hybridizing, growing, forcing, and exporting bulbs.

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sorts of relationships, values, and practices that also distinguish the industry today. These seventeenth century contexts involve tulips, the beginning of pleasure gardens, new management techniques for land and water, the formulation of cooperative enterprises like the VOC, the rapid expansion of scientific knowledge, including botany, and a distinctive aesthetic commercial sense. Though the specific contemporary institutions, including Aalsmeer’s flower auctions, only emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this seventeenth century formative period demonstrated the effectiveness of male networks and cooperative structures informed by an ideology of shared values and goals. And it turns out that these are the important general characteristics that help explain the continued Dutch dominance and excellence in world horticulture today. In this way, from the young period of the Dutch Republic, one can discern the contours of the industry that eventually took shape in the twentieth century around the cooperative, grower-owned Dutch flower auctions, these “speculative tournaments” (Appadurai 1986: 21).

The contemporary flower auctions continually offer new varieties of cut flowers which have been created by studying successive generations with the goal of manipulating them or their environments in order to produce particular aesthetic or biological effects. The tulip was the first flower in the Netherlands to be the object of such scientific and aesthetic scrutiny, and to be conceived of as a source of profit for the wealthy and aspiring classes alike. Also, because of the social upheaval known as tulipmania, the flower became associated with broader economic and cultural values. Because its story converges with the emergence of Amsterdam as the center of the world system, as well as male networks, new financial practices, botany, land management, and the popularization of pleasure gardens, the tulip is an appropriate centerpiece for a discussion of the beginning of commercial horticulture in the Netherlands. Only with an understanding of how the tulip became indigenized can the other pieces fall into place, and with them a fuller picture of the origins of Dutch horticulture.

A Timeless Quest, an Invented Tradition

Before looking into the history, though, it’s useful to clear away some of the mythology cloaking the tulip, since fables of glory and folly surround the flower, and trendy publicity campaigns elicit a glib aura of the Dutch Golden Age. Part of the press hoopla surrounding the current tulip naming ceremonies centers around entering the new varieties in The International Classified Register of Tulip Names, a ledger held by The Royal Dutch Flower Bulb Organization (KAVB31) that contains every tulip name.

31 The General Association for Bulb Growers (AVB) was founded in 1860 by a group of bulb growers, one of whom was the Haarlem grower-entrepreneur Johan Heinrich Krelage. In 1953
ever recorded in its four hundred year history. These promotional events encourage the consumer to draw a connection between the contemporary high tech industry and a wondrous Dutch past, linking flowers to prosperity, folkloric cultural roots, and the founding of the nation, which both is and is not the case. “Next year a piece of Dutch horticultural history is literally set to rise from the soil,” announced a 2009 article in FloraCulture International. This sort of hype and the ongoing tulip naming ceremonies attempt to arouse nostalgia for an imagined past and to invoke a horticultural and economic vision of the tulip trade. All of this is self consciously crafted by the industry, not least through the tulip naming rituals themselves, which are an industry invented tradition. The ideology of these events so closely follows Eric Hobsbawm’s well known formulation that one suspects tulip sector promotional people had carefully studied his book. “‘Invented tradition,’” says Hobsbawm, “is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past...” (Hobsbawm 1983: 1).

The industry conjures a mythic past, but one nevertheless based on a kernel of truth. It is valid to say that the origins of the contemporary tulip trade date from the seventeenth century, the era of the Dutch Republic, and that tulips, commerce, and culture around the tulip formed part and parcel of that time and place. It is also accurate to say that the Dutch colonies of New Amsterdam brought seeds of familiar and cherished plants to cultivate in their gardens, including many of the flowers featured in seventeenth century Dutch still lifes, such as carnations, roses, crown imperials, and indeed tulips (Pavord 1999: 14). But it’s not true to claim that tulip culture was widespread across the seventeen provinces, that people of all classes got deeply involved in the trade, and that an obsession with tulips led to bankrupting an entire economy. Nor were tulip bulbs planted in a public naming ritual (Goldgar 2007: 1-19). Those are tall tales. And almost needless to say, never mentioned are the uglier aspects of Dutch Golden Age prosperity, like slavery, slaughter, and subjugation. The cultivation and sale of tulips and other ornamental flowers did not directly involve these practices, as the trade in nutmeg and cinnamon did, but colonial truculence was an essential part of the system in which tulips came to be cherished.

the Queen of the Netherlands bestowed the title of Royal (Koninglijk) and the AVB became KAVB. Krelage’s son Ernst became a leading bulb grower, President of the Dutch Gardening Council, and an author of articles and a book on Dutch horticulture. Horticultural traditions of father-son businesses and royal endorsements continue through today.
Also harkening back to a fabled history is the latest attempt to create a ‘black’ tulip. The dark maroon or indigo-brown Ayaan joins a long tradition of ‘black’ tulips in the Netherlands and evokes the centuries-old, legendary quest of Dutch hybridizers to create a truly black tulip, which is impossible to achieve, as this absence of color only exists in nature when something is dead or charred. But each attempt to create the sleek dark tulip draws on an appeal first stoked by Alexander Dumas’s mid nineteenth century murder mystery set in Haarlem, *The Black Tulip*. Dumas’s popular novel dramatized the attempt to breed an ebony tulip, which through his imagination became a symbol not merely of elusive beauty, but of justice, and this image helped fuel public interest in the flower. (However far from justice one might understand Hirsi Ali’s politics, it’s not hard to conceive of the tulip’s appeal for her as both classically Dutch and representing a graceful integrity.) But national tropes and fantasies aside, tulip cultivation was a significant part of the era, connected to pleasure gardening, land management, male networks, and early capitalist commerce and institutions.

*A Tale of Origins*

It may well be, as Anna Pavord has argued, that the tulip “has carried more political, social, economic, religious, intellectual, and cultural baggage than any other [flower] on earth” (1999: 12). But it must be stressed that that ‘baggage’ wasn’t picked up in the Netherlands alone. While an important chapter of the tulip’s history occurs in the Low Countries and the nascent Dutch Republic of the seventeenth century, tulips were already being cultivated from central Asia to the Iberian peninsula a thousand years ago. How the Dutch first took to these flowers partly grew out of other cultures’ reverence for them.

After the harsh winters along the central Asian steppes, Tartars and other nomads must have been struck by the bright tulip buds emerging from the bleak stony landscape. Some of their colors resembled blood, and the flower came to be associated with vitality and fertility; other shades like cinnabar, fiery orange, and the flush of intimate flesh evoked preciousness and passion. No one knows when the tulip first came to be cultivated, but as early as 1050 it grew in Isfahan and Baghdad, when both cities were thriving stops along the Silk Road that drew caravans of traders from the eastern Mediterranean and ships from as far off as China and the Horn of Africa. Poets sung their praises, and gardens with scented roses and multicolored tulips were said to create an earthly paradise (Dash 1999: 4-11).

Tulips were particularly prized by the Ottomans, who venerated both their vibrant hues and their shape, which vaguely resembles a turban. In fact, European names for the flower (*tulp, tulipe, tulipan*, tulip) do descend from the Turkish word for turban (*dulband*), but that’s a mistranslation, apparently originating with Ogier Ghiselin
de Busbecq, the Flemish herbalist who served as ambassador to the Ottoman Empire for several Austrian monarchs. To the Ottomans, the tulip was *lale*, a Persian term, which is reflected in the names of Turkish places such as Laleli (Place of the Tulips) and Laleli Gecidi (Tulip Pass). People from Central Asia to the Middle East, including Persians, Ottomans, and Arabs, exalted the tulip as the Flower of God, and *lale*, in Arabic script, is almost the same as Allah. People imagined the paradise of the afterlife as abounding with tulips. The Ottoman military sometimes brought tulips with them into battle as talismans, and they were similarly embroidered on clothes for luck and prosperity. By the sixteenth century, the tulip had become an integral part of Ottoman culture, regularly featured in the Sultan’s gardens, but also universally employed as an ornamental motif (Pavord 1999: 25-54).

No wonder the Ottoman’s showed them off to western visitors, or that they brought bulbs with them to trade when they travelled to Europe. Western emissaries and European visitors in ornate places like Istanbul were tantalized by and fascinated with what they saw as the exotica of the bazaar, and the sensuous allure of dark women and perfumes that inspired their burgeoning Orientalist imagination. The tulip figured prominently in this setting. And the local’s reverence and passion for these ornamental flowers struck the foreigners from the north as quite appealing, if also puzzling and strange. Unlike the ordered symmetry of Renaissance gardens, the Ottomans kept their gardens unruly and lush, and rarely cut their flowers. For people accustomed to thinking of plants and flowers as things to consume or perhaps to refine into poultices or other medicines, their cultivation solely to admire as living objects of beauty seemed peculiar. Everywhere in this region, it seemed to Europeans, people revered these flowers. Yet as prevalent and celebrated as they were in these Oriental cultures, no one had yet systematically bred, crossed, or otherwise modified the tulip for domestic cultivation. So when Europeans became interested in the tulip, it was still a wild flower, though one already possessing a worldly pedigree (Dash 1999: 25-30). Prior to the tulip’s debut in northern Europe, roses and carnations grew in the Low Countries, but failed to generate much excitement or commerce. But arriving from the East, and with their unusual, compelling colors, tulips titillated people, and came to be associated with upward mobility and a flair for the new. They became a form of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1984: 282, 291).

Although it is often conceived of as such, it isn’t immediately obvious why the economy of the Dutch Republic might be considered early capitalism32, since it

32 Furthermore, the Netherlands is usually classified in a slightly softer, more managed and tempered European model known as Rhine Capitalism or Rhenish Model Capitalism. Some of the main characteristics of this model include viewing companies as a partnership between business, unions, and communities, widely shared values about equality and solidarity, and
precedes the Industrial Revolution by several centuries. Early Dutch horticulture, and the incorporation of the tulip in the Republic occurred during this socioeconomic juncture, so it’s worth tarrying over the point. In *The First Modern Economy*, Ad van der Woude and Jan de Vries argue that the United Provinces had precociously developed markets for three modern aspects of production (land, labor, and capital), enjoyed high agricultural productivity, achieved through advanced techniques in land management and a complex social structure that enabled social mobility, a legal system that codified property rights, political and economic institutions that cooperated to promote prosperity, which in turn whet the appetite of a dynamic consumer culture. Not everyone agrees with this assessment. Because of its dominance in and focus on trade and finance, and by cornering the market on certain commodities, the Dutch Republic may actually have done “a disservice to industrialization in the short run ... Dutch concentration thus proved extremely important, but it should not therefore tempt us to exaggerate the ‘modernity’ of the Dutch. If the only ‘capitalist’ economies of the seventeenth century had been like the Dutch, we may doubt whether the subsequent development of industrial capitalism would have been as great or as rapid” (Hobsbawm 1954: 54-55).

Others (Schama 1987, Huizinga 1968) have drawn attention to the Republic’s modern character by pointing out how Dutch social life of the period revolved around cities and their urban elite, in contrast with other societies in the region whose politics and economies were still defined by their aristocracies. Also, although far from formally democratic, early Dutch social character differed from other contemporary societies in the region in another important respect. Although local populations could not elect the officials making political and economic decisions and urban planning, the dimensions of the Republic made a difference, since in the intimate space and small social circles, many local people personally knew and had contact with officials making decisions, which had the effect of inspiring a kind of limited trust, although the division of wealth and power was stark and not fundamentally different in character from other parts of Europe at the time (Prak 2005: 121-134). Though not seen as representatives carrying out the public’s will, there was enough integration, cooperation, and personal contact that decision makers didn’t seem quite as remote as in other contemporary societies. Furthermore, local authorities often followed the advice of merchants and investors, and in fact, many of the officials stemmed from these entrepreneurial ranks (Prak 2005: 4).

better regulated markets, although in Rhenish Capitalism banks are also powerful and central. It has been argued that today, after more than a decade of the European Union and the common pursuit of neoliberal austerity policies, the distinction between Rhenish and Anglo-American capitalisms has grown far less pronounced than it once may have been.

33 For instance, between 1600 and 1700, the wealth owned by the upper one percent of the population of Leiden went from 20% to 50% (Prak 2005: 125).
Karl Marx took for granted that the Dutch Republic was capitalist. In fact, Dutch trade and colonialism in the seventeenth century strongly influenced him and Engels in developing their critique and theory of capitalism, as art historian Julie Hochstrasser has pointed out. In Volume 1, chapter 31 of Capital, Marx wrote, “[t]he genesis of the industrial capitalist did not proceed in such a gradual way...The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalized the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production... On their heels treads the commercial war of the European nations... It begins with the revolt of the Netherlands from Spain...[though already by the eighteenth century] Holland had ceased to be the nation preponderant in commerce and industry” (Marx 1967 [1867]: 825). Nevertheless, Marx goes on to make another blunt statement in which he quotes Sir Thomas Raffles, a British statesman and author directly involved in defeating the Dutch to take over Java during the Napoleonic Wars. “The history of the colonial system of Holland — and Holland was the head capitalistic nation of the seventeenth century —” he wrote, “is one of the most extraordinary relations of treachery, bribery, massacre, and meanness” (Marx 1867). Although its volume of colonial trade during the seventeenth century has been estimated at around 10 percent of total foreign trade, the incipient consumer culture in the Republic and the development of capitalism in Holland would not have been possible without the colonies (Prak 2005: 121, Hochstrasser 2007: 243-249). Marx described it, curiously, with a horticultural metaphor: “[t]he colonial system ripened, like a hot-house, trade and navigation ...and, through the monopoly of the market... The treasures captured outside Europe by undisguised looting, enslavement, and murder, floated back to the mother-country and were there turned into capital” (1967 [1867]: 826, cited in Hochstrasser 2007: 244).

**Clusius and the Establishment of Horticulture in the Netherlands**

It’s only a slight exaggeration to say that the tulip entered the Netherlands through a single figure, Charles d’Ecluse, better known by his Latin name Carolus Clusius, who was born in 1526. But this man’s importance extends beyond his role disseminating tulips and establishing a link between science and aesthetics in the new field of botany. Through his travels and extensive contacts, he also helped to build networks of flower enthusiasts, and by having the VOC out scouting specimens, and by urging collaboration between artists, collectors, businessmen, regents, and others, he installed a vital link between systematic botanical inquiry, colonial exploration, and wealth accumulation. These social, scientific, and economic ties established a pattern under which early Dutch horticulture developed.
By the sixteenth century, decades before they became popular in several Netherlands provinces, a sprinkling of tulip bulbs began to circulate, attract interest, and take root across Europe through trade with the Ottomans. Cultivars had sprung up in and around Antwerp, which at that time was the major commercial center for the region. But in the sixteenth century few in the northern provinces showed interest in tulips. That changed rapidly in the seventeenth century with the arrival of Clusius. As a young man, Clusius studied botany when it was still largely a branch of medicine concerned with identifying and cultivating herbs and plants; as the Inquisition raged, he converted from a Catholic to a Protestant; he was a peripatetic character, moving around Europe, driven by his curiosity for plants. He was appointed to establish the Vienna botanical gardens, and struck up a correspondence with Ogier Ghislan de Busbecq, stationed in Istanbul, who turned him on to tulips. Inspired by tulips and going against the ethos of the day, Clusius believed plants worthy of study in their own right, not only as sources of cures, and launched a system of classification for plants based on their characteristics, an enterprise later refined and elaborated by Carl Linnaeus. Tulips intrigued him for their aesthetic appeal, and Clusius harbored a belief that beauty was an important value in plants, independent of or in addition to any practical use they might possess. Through his elaborate correspondences with contacts across Europe, Clusius garnered a considerable reputation both as a botanical expert and as a connoisseur of tulips.

When he was offered the position as head of the Leiden botanical gardens in 1592, he was already an old man, but jumped at the opportunity. This was shortly after the United Provinces had gained independence from Spain, but only in the very early stages of commercial acceleration for the northern provinces of the Republic. Among other sundry seeds, Clusius arrived in Leiden with a suitcase full of tulip bulbs, which at that point represented one of the most extensive European collections of this flower of rapidly rising popularity. Tulips adapted quickly to the United Provinces, since tulips are hardy, yield extraordinary colors and diversity, and after around 1600, when incomes began to rise, more and more people had the money and the leisure to pursue hobbies and to acquire luxury items. People experimented with ways to create petals with different colors, shapes, and patterns, though with very mixed success, since little was yet understood about plant breeding. This led both to more experimentation and to the tulips appeal, for reasons partly explained by Bourdieu, since “objects endowed with the greatest distinctive power” are those whose “possession requires time and capacities or expertise” (Bourdieu 1984: 281).

Clusius wasn’t the first to admire tulips in the United Provinces—from the sixteenth century, especially in the south, people had begun to cultivate tulips— but he was the best qualified to describe and catalogue them through careful attention, systematic reflection, and scientific reasoning. He also fomented considerable interest in the flower, and through gifts, began a wide distribution of bulbs. It’s due to his various
botanical treatises and copious letters that we know so much about the tulip’s early history in Europe, and particularly in the Netherlands. Furthermore, the secret of the Netherlands’ abundant arrays comes from the dissemination of Clusius’s tulip collection (Dash 1999: 54-63). Under Clusius’ direction, the Leiden botanical garden began to grow dozens of tulip varieties. His own personal garden began to attract attention for its multiplicity of beautiful tulips, some of which were stolen from the ground, and many of which he willingly shared, though he once complained in a letter that “if I were to satisfy every demand, I would be completely robbed of my treasures and others would be rich” (quoted in Dash 1999: 62). He sent tulip bulbs to friends and acquaintances often signed with the generous and affectionate gesture, “con amore.”

**Clusius and Networks**

This tension, between stealing and coveting tulips or sharing them in a spirit of mutual affection, captures the changing ethos of the age, one that broke down from trust and intimacy to selfishness and a more craven interest in wealth (Goldgar 2007: 304). This transition was most visible, and plainly upsetting to many, precisely because the social values circulated in such small networks. Through those networks flowed various kinds of trade and talk—of many things, including tulips, other flowers, gardening, collecting, art, and investment. In Europe, but particularly in the Netherlands, the new science and new philosophy of that era “were constant with the values embedded in commerce. Merchants took a deep interest in natural facts because they were essential to business” (Cook 2007: 410). So of course in correspondence and casual conversation, people involved in business moved seamlessly from subject to subject, and perhaps they seemed merely like different topics under the same rubric.

Tulip collecting and eventually tulipmania emerged from “a social world of visits, letters, and exchanges with liefhebbers [tulip enthusiasts]” and “Clusius...formed a central node in this community” (Goldgar 2007: 22). Clusius sat at the nexus of a botanical network stretching across western Europe, the early information age when the emerging botanical science was part of that era's enlightenment humanism. Clusius’ hundreds of collected letters suggest a map of male networks interested in the aesthetics and emerging science of plants and flowers. Similar contemporary collections of correspondence such as that of Erasmus or Grotius maintained a limited, closed circle of university-trained men who wrote in Latin. But less than half of those sending letters to Clusius composed in Latin; the rest wrote in the common tongue of people living across Europe: French, Spanish, Dutch, and German. His correspondents came from many backgrounds, from princes, aristocratic collectors and fellow humanists to printer-publishers, artists, physicians and apothecaries, and included some women (van Ommen 2009: 7-12). What united them was their enthusiasm and knowledge of the subject as well as an upward mobility. Literally through one man, a considerable amount of
botanical knowledge circulated, ranging from growing and breeding techniques (such as they were in those days), social information about collectors, funders, enthusiasts, and the locations of new varieties. No single person knew more than him, and no one had a larger collection of tulips than Clusius when he headed the Leiden botanical gardens. He maintained an extraordinarily broad network of correspondents with whom he exchanged information about seeds and bulbs: members of the VOC, botanists, collectors, merchants, and enthusiasts all wrote to Clusius about the curious, the unusual, and the exotic.

As Clusius’ diverse contacts show, the emerging humanistic botanical community was not a democratic cross section of society, as often depicted in recounts and images of tulipmania, nor did it represent a totally exclusive network of the Low Countries' upper echelons. It was a community where “apothecaries corresponded with noblemen, the minor noble Clusius with princes,” one that, partly through Clusius’ influence, began to stretch beyond the bounds of land owning wealthy nobility and into the hands of classes of regents that emerged as prosperity accelerated (Goldgar 2007: 59). The danger and instability of this environment was that the horticultural world was getting too big, was becoming cheapened, was not exclusive or elite enough. It was an ideal, imagined community rather than a strict account or census of membership, a setting where honor mixed with deception, a passion for the new and the strange combined with a core toughness. Above all, the dream was for a community of shared ideals, for an open exchange of information, ideas of mutual support and a sort of genteel masculine comportment. In reality, the tulip trade operated within small circles, a close-knit web of aficionados, and despite the fact that men besides nobles participated, the majority of the population, especially the poor, were not involved (Goldgar 2007: 59-60).

What's more, “it was only parts of the province of Holland, not all of the Netherlands, that became really interested in flowers at this time,” and did so in highly visible places such as Amsterdam, Haarlem, and Enkhuizen (Goldgar 2007: 134). These influential, powerful sectors helped to set trends, but the fact is that far more people came to satirize and mythologize tulips in the wake of tulipmania than were ever involved in the trade, in cultivating other ornamentals, or in gardening. The reaction to tulipmania and the integration of tulips to the Netherlands suggests several issues relevant to the foundation of Dutch horticulture. Not only did tulipmania reflect moral and economic values, giving a popular rebuke to the nascent capitalist system, but “tulipmania [offers] an avenue to consider the role of information and expertise in social and intellectual organization” in this crucial period of growth and invention in the Netherlands (Goldgar 2007: 136). Part of what enabled excellence in so many disparate fields—including botany, colonial exploration, and civil engineering— was the
management and flow of information through emerging institutions and social structures whose lifeblood was networks.

Social networks are groups of people and institutions linked by one or more kinds of interdependency such as kinship, values, conflict, friendship, or financial exchange and other kinds of trade, and the webs of connections that Clusius spun were no different. Mark Granovetter has shown that the flow of information through networks crucially depends not merely on the regular, stable circuits of communication, which are of course important, but on what he calls ‘weak links’ (1973, 2002). Weak links are formed between those who are not close associates or friends but acquaintances, occasional or even random companions and affiliates, since it is through them that novel information tends to enter and get distributed through the network. Without weak links, a network can resemble an echo chamber, where the same kinds of information continues to reverberate. Clusius, through his extensive grid of associations, may have functioned as a weak link by introducing information and people to the society of liefhebbers, though given his centrality to horticultural development, it wasn’t his only role.

Who comprised this network of early modern horticulturalists in the United Provinces? Few noblemen, and no ordinary maids or masons, a relatively small and insular group of folks, nor farmers, since in this period, tulip cultivation was an urban and not a rural practice, and the poshest pleasure gardens took place in the yards of wealthy regents. The vast majority of those involved in the tulip trade during the seventeenth century—initially and in the decade or so following tulipmania—were merchants and skilled craftsmen. And they DABBLED in tulips: it was not a bread and butter earning but a sideline trade, a hobby, something to bring in extra money and to divert themselves with something undoubtedly fascinating, captivating and a labor of love, but hardly all consuming financially. Their average age was 38-39, and they came from a stratum below regents, from city office holders and the like. Cultivars, buyers, and sellers (and there wasn’t a hard distinction between them) often knew each other through webs of family connections, and many of them were Mennonites. But networks of buyers and sellers were not just characterized by religion or origin, but by overlapping networks of ‘vrunden’ (friends, family, and extended family) and also more widely those with shared interests. Families didn’t sell to one another but to other families in the trade, and information passed through these intimate, trustworthy bonds, and it was communication that greased the wheels of trade, to know who had what, where to find it, how to arrange transactions (Goldgar 2007: 140-146).

The details of who participated in the trade, how the networks functioned, and the kinds of horticultural values crystallizing in this period are important for two reasons. They describe the origins of Dutch horticulture, but they also reveal the kinds of relationships, patterns of organization, values, and practices that find expression in
today’s horticultural industry. Naturally, things change over the course of four centuries, but in many ways, a general outline took shape then which has endured. Even some institutions evolved to forms recognizable today. Tulipmania brought about ‘florist fraternities,’ for instance, where men gathered to discuss growing techniques and exchange botanical and commercial information, and by the end of the seventeenth century grower’s clubs were widespread (Pavord 1999: 169, Dash 1999: 103). Dutch villagers enjoyed the delights of horticulture, and rapidly insinuated horticulture into their regular habits and relationships. These florist fraternities have clear descendants today in grower-owned auction cooperatives, and clubs and associations of breeders and growers who meet regularly to share information.

Intimately related to the formation of these networks was the lay of the land, the geography of what today is Westland. Westland is the main area of horticulture in the Netherlands, sometimes called the city of greenhouses, since about a third of the land is under glass. Westland abuts the highly urbanized randstad, the densely populated region of connected towns and cities (including Amsterdam, Utrecht, Rotterdam, and the Hague) where over seven million people live. Several towns and municipalities make up Westland, and the Aalsmeer flower auction is located there as well. As in Clusius’ time, space and topology influence networks. The proximity of towns, the propinquity of people within those towns via schools and other institutions incubates local outlooks and loyalties in ways that advance shared interests, cooperation, and the building of relationships.

New Kinds of Institutions: the Beemster, Gardens, and the VOC

Tulip enthusiasts in Clusius’ orbit were not the only networks during this formative period. Networks and networking began to assume formal arrangements, to shape projects of colonial exploration and land management, and to beget institutions organized around shared financial interests. In addition to its informal connections, the tulip trade quickly became established with commercial companies, where authority over transactions was governed by ‘normal’ trading practices (trust, honor, and fairness) and by a semi-official board, the collegie, whose decisions were not legally binding or enforceable, but symbolic and moral (Goldgar 2007: 16-18). The collegie’s purpose was to oblige a sense of propriety in the tulip trade, which broadly meant to effect values both cultural and economic, tacit values that also informed any number of endeavors and organizations. The Beemster project represents another important example of the way cultural values and loose formal regulation governed businesses. It was the Netherlands’ first large scale poldering project, which involved draining the seventy-one square kilometer Beemster Lake near Amsterdam, a venture undertaken in 1609 and completed in 1612. Notable for its innovative feat of engineering of both land and water,
for its patterns of finance, cultural logic, and management of information, the Beemster helped to institutionalize gardening as a national practice.

Between 1550 and 1650, as the Dutch began in earnest to modify the land, they were also shaping a “moral geography” and a national ethos (Schama 1987: 25-50). As prosperity rose, the population multiplied; Amsterdam grew from 31,000 in 1578 to 150,000 by 1648 (Schama 1987: 38). Increasing population and wealth had direct consequences for resources, including land, and the Beemster project offered a number of advantages—as a place to invest, a way to increase arable land, to expand potential areas of settlement, and to aid protection against flooding. With projects like the Beemster and companies like the VOC, networks and mercantile values mutually reinforced one another. Networks of geographically and ethnically close groups of men with a shared outlook and common goals made commercial enterprises fruitful, and lead to innovations. New kinds of institutions based on the primacy of cooperation through dense social and commercial networks characterized Dutch economic behavior, and left important legacies for the horticultural industry in both values and practices.

The group who conceived of, financed, and built the Beemster comprised “a community of people...[all of whom] knew each other directly or indirectly. This was a social group forged of mutually profitable advantage,” and further solidified through friendship and marriage (Fleischer 2007: 151). This community enjoyed considerable wealth and power. Johan Oldenbarneveld, the chief minister of the Republic, enjoined dozens of businessmen to invest in the Beemster project, and upon completion, they quickly got a profitable return on their money, some via rent on the plots into which the land was divided and sold, and others via capital appreciation where some of the funds recycled directly to the local economy (Schama 1987: 38-39). Among the Beemster’s first investors were the prosperous duo, Dirck and Hendrik van Os, highly educated and socially connected merchants and brothers who had moved from Antwerp to Amsterdam and had co-founded the VOC a few years earlier. Other initial investors included urban merchants and regenten, civil servants, lawyers, and even a goldsmith, each of whom judged the drainage of the Beemster Lake a sound fiscal prospect. Even so, it was an entirely new kind of venture, on a scale that must have seemed scarcely conceivable. Making matters still more dubious, to carry out this ambitious plan, they would rely heavily on the recently developed and unproven technology of windmills. As with the funding of hundreds of ships sailing to the East for spices, where risk was divided between numerous investors, the prospective Beemster was sliced into lots and sold as stakes. With so many people looking for a place to invest their money, stakeholders quickly grew from an initial sixteen to one hundred twenty.

The Beemster project offered both practical and ideological appeal (Fleischer 2007: 151-152). Modifying the land and water, channelling and organizing them in the most efficient ways for agriculture and human settlement remain common features
today in the Netherlands’ spacial planning, which is carefully coordinated with the horticultural industry. An important part of the Dutch imaginary involves reshaping the landscape, creating arable land where before there was swamp and bog, or lake and sea. One hears this notion of parthenogenesis in the popular expression, God made the world, but the Dutch built the Netherlands.

Like the Beemster, the construction of the Republic was both physical and ideological. Certain kinds of networks were essential for efficient economic growth in the incipient capitalist world system, a system centered in Amsterdam, pioneered by the Dutch, and one that would depend on directing rapid currents of capital and knowledge. The reasons for Amsterdam’s ascendency were largely structural. By the second half of the sixteenth century, the great era of European expansion had crested, and was moving into a different phase, a ‘turning inward.’ Not that expansion entirely ended or ceased to be important, but there were “new skills required to run a financial and commercial focus of the world economy. It was the command of such skills that enabled the Dutch to seize control” of this emerging system (Wallerstein 1974: 200-209). As with the VOC, the scale and complexity of the Beemster project demanded extensive bureaucratic infrastructure and paperwork. Such an infrastructure was required in order to handle the technical specifications of the lake, patents, property rights, legal and governmental policies and practices, minutes from meetings, charts, decrees, correspondences, and other such things. Keeping records and managing paperwork posed one kind of challenge, but to make decisions, all of the parties involved had to communicate and coordinate, so information had to be organized and it had to be able to move quickly (Fleischer 2007: 153). In addition to managing information and finances through a unique blend of values and networks, the Beemster embodied the young Republic in another important way.

It was to be a garden. Planners envisioned plots of land for both agricultural and horticultural production. A long tradition of representations on official seals and political prints had depicted Holland allegorically as a garden (De Jong 2000: 34). Due to its innovative character and vision of creating a grand garden, the Beemster had a strong figurative meaning. “The young Republic of the United Seven Provinces was often imagined as recreating the ancient ‘Land of the Batavians,’ envisioned metaphorically as the Hortus Batavus or ‘Garden of Holland’. With the founding of the Republic, this horticultural typology became a symbol of peace and prosperity. Depictions of the Hortus Batavus show a seated Dutch Maiden, crowned with a spire, in an enclosed garden surrounded by flowers, globes, and an orange, the symbol of the ruling House of Orange...The Beemster was thus in principle a symbol both of the Hortus Batavus and the Dutch Maiden, and also of the young Republic” (Fleischer 2007: 147-8). The contemporary image of the Beemster is not so far removed from this. It remains a major agricultural producer, the source not only of organics but of
wholesome Dutch patrimony, and continues to brand distinctive cultural marks. It’s a world heritage site; the Beemster cooperative agricultural producers association claims that the Beemster’s original gridwork formed the template for the Dutch settlement in Manhattan; all the milk that goes to make Ben and Jerry’s ice cream in Europe comes from Beemster cows. From the outset, the Beemster was to be an immense garden, its fruits sweetened by the richness of the Republic.

**Gardens in the National Imaginary**

During the era of the Dutch Republic, not only poldering but creating a well ordered and sublime garden became popular. Private pleasure gardens offered an opportunity to flaunt one’s wealth and status in a similar way that accumulating worldly goods demonstrated one’s righteousness in the Protestant sensibility of the time. Pleasure gardens provided a way to celebrate the glory of God, to cultivate a heavenly presence on earth in order to exult a higher power. Also, by creating a sort of paradise on earth, at the same time one asserted one's privileged place in society. The notion of gardening as a way to create a worldly paradise became widespread. Using the Latin of the elite and educated, some *liefhebbers* and regents of the time even referred to the garden as a *paradisus oculorum,* a paradise for the eyes (De Jong 2000: 31). Part of this sensibility is actually built into the word, since paradise is a synonym for the Garden of Eden, and (as with the Turkish word for tulip) the etymology leads back to the Persian, where paradise was a walled-in compound with a garden (from ‘pairi’, around, and ‘daeza’ or ‘diz’, meaning wall, brick, or shape) (Goody 1993: 29). But while paradise may denote a garden, gardens did not always imply paradise.

In the sixteenth century Low Countries, gardens served practical needs, providing sustenance or medicine. They were not particularly for looking at, strolling through, showing off one’s wealth or expressing one’s identity. But in the seventeenth century, a new kind of garden began to emerge, influenced in part by the Renaissance gardens of Italy and France, yet with a distinct local character. Pragmatic gardens did not disappear, but now many Dutch gardens transformed along the same aesthetic sweep as Leiden’s Hortus Botanicus under Clusius’s stewardship, which is to say, delight, leisure, and beauty came to define the purpose, layout, and contents of these ‘pleasure’ gardens. And in the early decades of the seventeenth century, some of the crucial improvements to agriculture came through the development of horticulture. Whereas fruit and vegetables were once only cultivated in the gardens of a few rich families, now entire towns began in earnest: villages in Streek focused on onions and carrots, the Langedijk grew onions, mustard, and coriander, other places cultivated trees in nurseries (North 1997: 23, De Vries 1974: 153-4). While pleasure gardens were once the province only of wealthy landowners and now became more widespread, they did not cease to be markers of distinction. The cultivation of flowers, and tulips in
particular, became important to this new project, one that was as much social as horticultural, since these gardens showed off not only dashing hues sprouting from the soil but also a certain sensibility that was both refined and new. Now in addition to the ordinary garden for the apothecary or the kitchen, a special type of garden was intended to enchant and impress (Goldgar 2007: 43-55). More than mere showcases, gardens were also important places for social interactions, locations to discuss events of the day, horticultural news, and to meet people.

Gardening became a common past time, but especially at first, it was a relatively elite activity, and its development is inseparable from colonial ventures, the emerging economic system, and the excitement over tulips. In fact, gardening came into vogue along the same route as tulips themselves, first in the south, then in the northern Netherlands, where members of urban elites would often tend one or more gardens. This trail of development was no coincidence. In the transition from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century, the financial center of the region shifted from Antwerp to Amsterdam, and along with it moved merchants in search of opportunity, and Jews and Catholics of various means seeking religious tolerance. These people brought with them not only their expertise, but their capital, including tulip bulbs (Pavord 1999: 13-14).

Tulips and pleasure gardens (many of which displayed tulips) reflected monetary value, but even more significantly, they had entered the moral economy. Gardens fit in to a system of values sharpened by technical expertise that was literally redrawing the landscape. The popularity of gardening affected urban planning not only with poldering projects that took place at the edges of urban settlements, but pleasure gardens were primarily for city dwelling networks. Fashionable houses of wealthy regents along Amsterdam’s canal belt were laid out and built with plenty of room for gardens in the backyard. Notable not only for the style’s newness, but in a small country that claims nearly every square meter of land for efficient and functional use, the display of space for leisure and pleasure stood out conspicuously. These gardens were locations to plant and marvel at, to reflect on one’s place in the world, to consider nature and feel pride in one’s command over it, and above all to experiment with, admire, and ponder flowers (Goldgar 2007: 171). Gardening reflected and helped to develop networks, mutual economic interests, and to cultivate a refined, distinctly local sensibility. It also found expression in various forms of painting and writing.

Dutch writers of the age produced a genre of what has been called ‘garden literature,’ which included poetry, treatises, catalogues, scientific texts, and images. One mid seventeenth century example comes from classical scholar and botanist Johannes Brosterhuysen. Inspired by a line from Virgil’s Georgics which celebrated the beauty and instructive properties of plants, he composed “In Praise of Plants,” a speech to inaugurate the botanical gardens of Breda. “Who is not captured by the beauty of herbs and plants and the enormous variety of types?” he exhorted. With their fragrance and
color, said Brosterhuysen, they please the senses, evoke wonder and merit tribute. But he reserved special praise for flowers, which he called “sydera terrena,” stars of the earth. In this and other works, the garden was often specifically imagined as not only adorning or bringing out beauty, but leading to profit, and itself representing wealth and the good life (De Jong 2000: 10-26).

All literature regarding plants and flowers wasn’t celebration and encomium, however. In the wake of tulipmania there emerged cautionary tales, images, warnings against greed in which the tulip symbolized danger and corruption. Popular pamphlets were rife with this sort of thing (Pavord 1999: 132, Goldgar 2007: 3-6, 306-308, Schama 1987: 363-371). And part of this garden literature included tulip books, which were richly illustrated, privately commissioned manuscripts of up to 500 pages, with one detailed and colorful illustration per page. Since the actual flowers only bloomed during a few weeks of the year (depending on the variety, between April and September), these tulip books helped to fuel curiosity and popularity, serving like sales catalogues (Dash 1999: 89-92). These books gave images of tulips a wider circulation than the flowers themselves, but gardens were important venues to actually see them. Images and literature whet people’s appetite for the real thing.

A choice place to see the real thing was Adriaan Pauw’s garden near Haarlem, which came about partly as the result of the draining and polderization of the Haarlemmermeer, a project in which Pauw had invested. Pauw was a member of elite networks: one of the seventeen VOC directors, the Keeper of the Royal Seal of the Netherlands, an avid tulip collector and gardener. His first cousin, Pieter Pauw, sat beside Clusius as a professor of botany at Leiden University. Adriaan Pauw’s Heemstede garden estate included topiary mazes, footbridges, aviaries, and mirrored gazebos, in order to multiply the image of his tulips, and give the impression of still more abundance and prosperity (Pavord 1999: 6). The elaborate setting featured the glorious Semper Augustus tulip. The Semper Augustus was the most prized tulip of the day, whose unique stripes, and thus the cause of its rarity, resulted from an unusual virus, though this was not understood until the twentieth century. In Pauw’s time, people only knew that they were scarce, precious, and peerless. Particularly in the ambience of Pauw’s garden, this tulip demonstrated wealth and power, not only because of what people would pay for it but “because when people saw it they experienced, or could be taught to experience, or could be taught to pretend to have, certain pleasurable sensations; the sight elicited conversation as well as contemplation...[F]inanciers were able to share with other people their appreciation of the flower by exchanges of gesture and word, which were in turn associated with other cultural assumptions...in effect serving as experts on good taste and judgment” (Cook 2007: 77). So a reverence for gardens and a fascination with ornamental flowers comprised part of the Republic’s habitus, or cultural and ideological framework. That is, this taste and judgment formed a
significant aspect of the relationship between classifiable assessments and the system that produces them. Taste and judgment subsumed both a “structured structure” and a “structuring structure;” they were shaped by the socioeconomic order and in turn they helped to catalyze and perpetuate it (Bourdieu 1984: 170).

**Dutch Horticulture in the World System and the VOC**

If the socioeconomic order found local expression in places like Pauw’s garden, it was also situated in a global context which included the VOC and the emerging order of the European world system. Pauw’s garden, the Beemster, and backyards along the Herengracht can all be seen as minor stages in the production of the world system, a system that came to be centered in the modern era in Amsterdam. In other words, Dutch gardening of that era took place in a cosmopolitan arena, and as such, also nestled in with local events unfolding on the global dais. The VOC was an important global and local development. During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, pivotal Dutch institutions were developing, and while many organized around trade, and along similar precepts of networking and collective action, none were more powerful, more enduring, profitable, or left as pronounced a mark on Dutch national heritage as the VOC. Though the institutions differ in myriad ways, the VOC was founded on the same principals as Aalsmeer’s flower auctions: cooperation through networking increases market strength and distributes financial risk. Also firmly involved in agriculture, the VOC traded cloves, nutmeg, black pepper, cinnamon, and other spices originating in the East. From its founding in 1602, and at Clusius’ behest, the VOC issued a special bulletin to keep an eye out for “strange” botanical specimens, including flowering plants, to apothecaries, surgeons, and anyone on board its ships qualified to heed the call (Goldgar 2007: 25-26). In these ways, the company supplied Dutch horticulturalists (though Clusius was not particularly satisfied) as it became an important institution in the world system (van Ommen 2009: 28). But what exactly was this world system, how did it help establish Dutch horticulture, and in what ways not yet mentioned was the VOC involved? Framing developments in the world system helps to clarify the VOC’s overall position in the Republic and its direct and indirect relationships with Dutch horticulture.

As formulated by Immanuel Wallerstein, a key aspect of world systems analysis de-emphasizes the nation state as the pivotal unit of inquiry in favor of a more dispersed and global arrangement of core, periphery, and semi periphery. These three general designations correspond roughly to areas where raw materials are purchased, refined and traded, (the core); the suppliers of raw materials (the periphery, typically colonial outposts of European powers); and a liminal position that shares characteristics of both (the semi-periphery). Two facets of that division help illuminate commercial horticulture in the Netherlands. One invites us to see what was happening then in Dutch
trade, especially via Amsterdam, in a broad geographical context. Clusius’ promotion of the tulip was very much an international affair, and the growth in income, advancements in land management, and the economic effervescence of the United Provinces also took place in an international milieu, though perhaps the cumulative effects of these changes were felt most acutely on the local level.

The other benefit of world system analysis is in how it connects that period to our own of what is called globalization. In distribution especially, the contemporary flower market is plugged into the global economy, and critical facets of the early world system remain important to today’s industry. Both then and now, the Netherlands centered system revolves around the growing, buying, and circulation of horticultural commodities, cultural values and practices around markets, issues of labor, resource and land management. In both cases, the system gets crucial help from the state, is held together by male networking, economic and horticultural innovation, as well as a shared mission and sense of aesthetic and cultural values. There have been three hegemons of the world system: the Dutch, then the British, then the United States. Though the Dutch lacked the vast military force and continental separation required to be a true hegemon, being first matters (Schama 1987: 253-4, Taylor 2002: 1-3). It sets precedents, and in the case of Dutch horticulture, continues to be relevant. So the patterns and practices of the Netherlands’ Golden Age have both historical and contemporary significance for Dutch horticulture.

In the seventeenth century, Dutch in colonial outposts cultivated all sorts of plants for aesthetic pleasure, medicine, and commerce, often with a special interest to promote these plants and flowers for export, to attract covetous eyes. Dutch gardens in Cape Town and Java, important frontiers in the global trade, each served as horticultural warehouses and thruways for plants and flowers used for art and medicine, on their way to the national gardens in Leiden and in Amsterdam (Cook 2007: 317-325, Wulf 2009: 8). This international shipping network not only brought in new seeds and plants, but because they came from different kinds of soil and climates, and were transported for weeks or months on board boats, Dutch planters began to learn more about how and why things grow as they do. The Netherlands became a sort of spigot through which passed all sorts of goods, knowledge, and wealth, flowing out primarily to markets in Western Europe in which flowers were a small but increasing part. “The development of the economy in Europe [in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries] was accompanied by a growth in the market for flowers and exotic plants, in the range of species, in the demand, especially for cut flowers, the shift from crown to bouquet, and in the complexity of mechanisms of their supply” (Goody 1993: 210).

The international context offers part of the explanation for how this small nation emerging from occupation was able to maneuver itself to the center of the world system. From a period beginning in 1590 (Wallerstein 1974, Israel 1990), the Dutch came to
dominate the world system, though the Spanish, Portuguese and other European powers struggled for control and profit from links with the East and the new world. It seems an unlikely course of events for a small collection of provinces recently unshackled from occupation. In the sixteenth century, Spain and Portugal had controlled much of European trade with the East, but their power was waning when the Dutch revolt took place (1568-1609). Free from Spanish taxes, and at liberty to develop commercial enterprises, Holland immediately began to advance now with independence. And as a former part of the Spanish empire, Holland could finagle business in the Americas through established trade links to the New World. England was not yet strong enough to consistently break through the Spanish armada, but since the Dutch were already incorporated to the Spanish crown, and as a small country not perceived as a threat (unlike England and France), their fleets slipped through and they gained important footholds. This international situation combined with internal developments to allow an emerging class in the Low Countries to act autonomously.

The importance of the Dutch revolt was less ideological, less significant for the establishment of a model for national liberation, but amounted to a tidal wave in its economic impact on the European world economy (Wallerstein 1974: 204-221). In a crucial period of instability, through the middleman skills of organizing and directing the flows of information, the Dutch took control, and reoriented global trade. “Dutch world trade became a sort of precious vital fluid which kept the machine going while various countries were concentrating on reorganizing their internal political and economic machinery” (Wallerstein 1974: 214).

This talent for organization, for managing information and bureaucracy, combined with local characteristics, interests, and circumstances to give the Republic an initial edge in world system dominance. But those subtle effects, the small initial economic and strategic benefits, quickly accrued to a level of command. The United Provinces, with Amsterdam as commercial center, was soon at the helm of global trade. “Because of the Netherlands dominance in the Baltic trade (herring, fur, and other products) they became the main market for timber, which allowed them to be innovative in ship design and construction, which in turn benefitted further expansion. On this basis Amsterdam became a commodity market, shipping center, and capital market, each intertwined and interrelated, and hard to say which one was preeminent” (Wallerstein 1974: 212).

This upheaval both at home and abroad created the conditions that shaped early Dutch horticulture. Domestically, the Revolt involved a “defection of nobles from the established order” plus “radical currents from below:” the Netherlands revolution not only increased the flow of trade and goods, including fruits, spices, and other agricultural commodities, it also shook up patterns of authority. As it displaced the old order, a portion of the population outside of the traditional elite came to power. It was
this class of people who constituted most of the tulip financiers and bloemisten (Goldgar 2007: 131-194). This was one of the most significant developments within the United Provinces as the world system took shape around Amsterdam.

**East-West Flows in the World System**

Another important aspect of this system, an aspect the VOC exploited, was the deepening connection between Europe and the East. This junction was certainly commercial, but it was also far more than that. It’s worth stepping back a moment to recall that for centuries, India and China were the world’s commercial centers and were the most wealthy and technologically advanced areas on the planet, easily far more developed than Europe during the Middle Ages and until the dawn of the world system. Europeans understood East Asia as the source of stupendous affluence, exotic goods, and advanced technology. East Asia lured Dutch traders with promises of treasure and fantastic wealth, but Japan and China, in particular, were not just lands to pillage for their raw materials or exotic commodities. They represented the pinnacle of civilization, and were vital centers of trade. Though contact via the Silk Road and other routes had existed for centuries, the cultural and economic impact of such interaction was small relative to what came later. From the sixteenth century, trade opened doors between geographically isolated parts of the world, and forged links between East and West that for everyone involved would have drastic consequences, ranging from medicine and forms of knowledge, to aesthetics and objects of daily use, economic systems, the movements of population, and the development of world views. The relationship between East and West, the development of capitalism in Europe and the New World, represent vital parts of the world system.

Looking at the gradual emergence of European horticulture, Jack Goody argues for the long term interconnectedness of “systems of knowledge in East and West, especially at the time of the Renaissance,[...and] the growth of the modern world” (Goody 1993: 2). In his view, the ornamental flower market of the West owes its origins to the East, but he also generalizes the point to include many aspects of related economic and cultural practices. He is not alone in this view. David Graeber (2008), for

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34 In the decades since Wallerstein’s study was published (1974), many scholars have disputed his starting point of the early European world system in the ‘long’ sixteenth century, suggesting that this was actually not the first world system. As Janet Abu-Lughod argued: “Between AD 1250 and 1350 an international trade economy was developing that stretched all the way from northwestern Europe to China; it involved merchants and producers in an extensive (worldwide) if narrow network of exchange” (1991: 8). Nevertheless, Abu-Lughod is reluctant to characterize this as early modern capitalism or a world system, noting several interlocking ‘subsystems’ involving western Europe, Middle Eastern, and Far Eastern circuits.
one, has noted the impetus for the formation of European nation-states came from a
desire to compete with the East, in particular the centrally coordinated Chinese empire.
Also Janet Abu-lughod (1991), investigating how Europeans borrowed financial
practices from empires to the East, has gone so far as to characterize Renaissance
advances as the “Orientalization of Europe”. Other scholars including Jonathan Spense
(1983) have shown the exchange of knowledge and the debt the West owes to the East.
The point is that Europe was not sui generis, and that is as true for systems of
knowledge, economic and social practices, as for the production of commodities,
movements of people, and ultimately, the establishment of the market for flowers in
Europe. On a related note, Wallerstein declared “that world- systems analysis is not a
theory but a protest against neglected issues and deceptive epistemologies” (Wallerstein
2000: 5). This general point about the illimitable East- West flow of development is
fundamental to grasp in order to appreciate Low Country culture of flowers and the
development of the Netherland's horticultural industry.

What made those ties to the East so appealing was not merely the profit motive,
though economic gains for the VOC were quite lucrative for a long time. It was also a
way of seeing, and the East seemed very exciting, generating spices, tulips, and other
mysteries. Institutions, networks, government, and ordinary citizens alike all seemed to
want to do whatever necessary to ensure trade with the East. Hugo de Groot (Grotius),
who had written a history of the Dutch people, finding the roots of noble national
characteristics in the ancient Batavians, turned his attention to many matters, including
trade. As the leading jurist of his time and today considered the father of international
law, Grotius pleaded at the VOC’s behest for the right of the Dutch to trade with the
Indies in a work called The Free Sea (Schama 1987: 78-82). The VOC also enjoyed
considerable sway over the central governing body of the United Provinces. It was far
more than an important private trading company. In fact, the company’s activities
basically were state policy, once the government granted it a twenty-one year monopoly
on the Asian trade. One might say that the business of the Republic was business, to
paraphrase a statement often made of the twentieth century world hegemon. In addition
to conducting trade, the VOC, which supplied its own army, enjoyed the authority to
wage war, negotiate treaties, coin money, and to establish colonies. The VOC’s
territories became the Dutch East Indies, which eventually expanded to include all of the
Indonesian archipelago. The VOC, with its mandate to search out new plants and
flowers, suggests how snugly the emerging Netherlandish horticulture fit in the nation’s
colonial project. But the enterprise was also launched in a spirit of passionate and
profound curiosity about the wider world that was opening up to Europe and the
Netherlands on a larger scale than ever before. Motives for profit commingled with the
desire for discovery in medicine, spices, plants, animals, new sorts of people and ways
of living—what has been called “the search for useful medicines and beautiful creatures” (Cook 2007: 304).

Flowers, and early horticulture must be seen in this context of a drive for the new, the exotic, the marvelous and exquisite. “The enthusiasm for gardens and cabinets, in which exotic specimens could be grown and shown, and the wealth committed to their establishment and expansion, remained one of the most potent reasons for finding things out and conveying them and information about them back to the home country” (Cook 2007: 304). Horticulture in the home country didn’t develop uniformly, but tended to excel in particular areas, determined by individual gardeners and collectors, municipal gardens, scientific inquiry, wealth, and trade. And locally, this occurred within the context of a densely populated and closely integrated network of communities; globally, these networks operated in a burgeoning world system centered in Amsterdam. “Since they [the seven provinces of the Republic] had to live together, the Dutch towns could not escape the need for joint action. ‘Their interests’, as Pieter de la Court says, ‘are intertwined one with another.’ Quarrelsome and jealous, they were nevertheless subject to the law of the beehive, which obliged them to combine their efforts and cooperate in commercial and industrial activity. Together they formed a power block” (Braudel 1992: 180).

Middelburg, as one of the VOC’s ports, helped to get Dutch horticulture going, especially igniting the passion for tulips. Centrally located, having plenty of investment capital, and with an upper crust eager to show off its fluency with the fashion of the day, Middelburg quickly became a center for floriculture. Some of this new enthusiasm for flowers was class conscious, some botanical, and some of it was aesthetic. An active group of horticulturalists, including the authors of books of medicine for apothecaries and on exotic plants lived in Middelburg. These people interacted with groups of liefhebbers and many of them maintained correspondences with Carolus Clusius. Alongside this scientific and aesthetic appreciation for flowers emerged some important early still life painters with a horticultural focus. Within a decade or so, Middelburg grew into an important center promoting Netherlandish horticulture (Goldgar 2007: 26).

Because of the high risk involved with voyages, investors often assembled to create a company for just a single journey. Their gamble involved the threat of tropical diseases, piracy, tempestuous weather, but also the volatility of the European market for Asian goods. But the VOC began to take a longer and broader view, both anticipating and helping to forge global trade links. To manage risks, a synod of directors, under the stewardship of States-General of the Netherlands, formed a cartel to control the supply of Eastern products entering the European market. (The Dutch were also competing with the English, who had, around the same time, founded their own East India Company.) The VOC’s strategy involved investors working together with state authority to monopolize markets. This was achieved partly through military strength, as well as
considerable naval cunning, and financial ingenuity. One game the VOC played, for example, was to slightly over-supply the pepper market, in order to depress prices below the level where interlopers were encouraged to enter the market (Cook 2007:186-191). As with today’s horticultural industry, the goal was not short-term profit, but long term prosperity through market dominance. And managing the market, then as now, required inventiveness, cooperation, and consistently seeking the new. If some of the VOC’s more benign business practices enjoy a legacy today in the Netherlands, so does the VOC itself.

Today’s horticultural industry isn’t the only institution to invoke the Dutch Golden Age. In 2006, in a debate about economic revival, Prime Minister Balkenende urged the Dutch to strive to get back that VOC mentality, by which he apparently meant to recover a national spirit of optimism and entrepreneurship. (“Nederland kan het weer! Die VOC-mentaliteit, over grenzen heen kijken, dynamiek!” The Netherlands can do it again! That VOC mentality, borderless, dynamic!) His comment was embraced by some but more typically was greeted with irony and sarcasm. Several critics pointed out that the VOC committed what today would be considered crimes against humanity, so the VOC deserves to be the source of shame, not honor. But this wasn’t a popular view. More likely, for many Balkenende’s statement seemed an appropriate, if corny, appeal to national pride, and no doubt for others, mention of the VOC struck a familiar, sentimental chord.


Another potent though more ambiguous national trope circulated in 2009, on the five hundred year anniversary of John Calvin’s birth, which concerned the significance of Calvinist heritage for the Dutch. As with the VOC comments that summoned a formative image of the Dutch past, Balkenende came forward to declare that the Netherlands owes a great debt of thanks to Calvin, that Calvinism proved a benevolent and sober guiding spirit for the Dutch nation. But as many pointed out, labeling someone or something Calvinistic today could mean hoary, stingy, and uptight, or pragmatic, frugal, and trustworthy, depending on who says it, and how the term is intended. It could convey compliment, insult, a little of both, or connote an unbiased assessment. The debate over recuperating the VOC’s character, along with reverent talk of the Calvinist heritage in the Netherlands, is of the same timbre as Weber’s ‘spirit’ of capitalism. Each refers to a cultural and moral framework that fostered prosperous business practices. But to lump them together may make the discussion of the history and economics of Dutch horticulture seem rather more like metaphysical work than an

35 “Als Balkenende zegt ‘laten we blij zijn!’ dan is dat een opwekkingslied” Volkskrant, October 7, 2006

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exploration of the legacies of the past, and the past’s current cultural meanings. Still, both popular discourse around these similar notions and Weber’s use of the term invite reflection. Since Weber’s thesis concerns the Calvinist ‘character’ and its relationship to the origins of capitalism in northern Europe, it also bears directly on the foundations of Dutch horticulture.

The Protestant ‘spirit’ of capitalism refers less to religious doctrine than to the underlying feelings that transfer directly from religious experience to a more secular environment. After the Reformation and already in the early period of capitalism, wealth accumulation becomes righteous, or a just reward for righteous behavior. What we find “is not the elimination of the church’s control over everyday life, but rather a new form of control from the previous one [that would penetrate] all departments of private and public life” (Weber 1947 [1905]: 5). Qualities like thrift and the commitment to a devout life began to move beyond the plainly religious realm and to more broadly inform other values and attitudes, and particularly economic practices. Though Weber qualifies it as “a somewhat pretentious term,” this amounts to the ‘spirit’ of capitalism. He delineates four forms of what he calls ascetic Protestantism, but again, Weber’s focus is “the influence of those psychological motivations which, originating in religious belief and the practice of religion, gave a direction to practical conduct and held the individual to it” (Weber 1947 [1905]: 46). He describes the broad mental and cultural qualities of Calvinism—utilitarianism, honesty, industry, frugality—and argues that they fostered economic prosperity.

But what was of greatest economic consequence in the period of the Republic may not be Protestantism per se, rather what resulted from the environment of relative tolerance that emerged in predominantly Protestant areas. One important outcome for horticulture was that Catholics and Jews from Antwerp and other places in the south moved north, and brought with them skills and capital, in many cases also tulip bulbs and floral paintings. Their business and aesthetic sensibilities helped build momentum in horticulture. Weber’s point isn’t about the supposed religious tolerance of Protestants of course, but the anointed feeling that came to suffuse capitalism, valorizing hard work in a context of ‘free’ labor. It was a mode of thinking useful not only for the rich, but also for the poor and working people. For one thing, it explained the whole system ethically, justifying people’s social places in a moral-religious sense. Ultimately, what was coming together in the Protestant areas of the northern provinces was both an ascetic mentality and an aesthetic system of values. But there are inherent tensions in such a system, and not only between haves and have-nots. A moral predicament arises between the need to eschew ostentation but also to revel in the new beauty and exotica flooding in from around the world.

This problem was the real trauma of tulipmania. It was not a financial catastrophe, in spite of how it is typically represented. Instead, what shocked and
appalled so many about tulipmania was the bold rejection of wholesome, celebrated values for the competitive, back-stabbing, profit driven values of the market that was just coming into being (Goldgar 2007: 317). Tulipmania embodied the anxiety of riches. But of course, even though wealth in this period began to spread, the majority of people were not rich. What was widely distributed was the anxiety over the kinds of changes this new period ushered in. “Tulipmania was not an economic crisis but a moral one. By creating a novel set of cultural values and potentially altering a long standing social framework, tulipmania rendered unstable the whole notion of how to assess value” (Goldgar 2007: 17).

Tulips became a sort of metonymy, standing in for the greed and wild fluctuations that characterize capitalism. As Anne Goldgar puts it, summarizing the plethora of pamphlets and documents mocking tulip *tulipiers*, “comments on tulipmania have been comments on capitalism, and they never speak of it with approval” (Goldgar 2007: 316). Tulip culture began on the cusp of the era of the Dutch Republic, a time when cherished values like trust were called into question by avarice, hoarding, status and other undignified traits. Initially, among the regents that treated in tulips, these bulbs and flowers circulated in a world of men bound by codes of honor. Part of what this meant in terms of behavior was that bulbs and information about them would be shared freely, in a spirit of courtesy and hospitality. But a virulent system of values began to unravel all that, and in this sense the spirit of capitalism was a sort of vile infection. “The appropriate behavior for dignified gentlemen pursuing a learned past time within the context of a humanistic community was to exchange willingly; gifts, not sales, were the means of prosecuting these interlocking intellectual and personal relationships. But exchange, and friendship too, becomes more strained when the objects in question are not mere tokens, but expensive and coveted. Market forces began to intrude on a world that otherwise (despite its many merchant members) was not of the market” (Goldgar 2007: 57). Put more bluntly, the transgression and horror of tulipmania was that tulips moved from a gift economy to a capitalist one.

This transition involves more than merely different formal practices for exchanging things. A primary difference between these systems involves the values and emotions that underlie economic practices. Weber’s ‘spirit’ of capitalism is about the cultural and moral dimensions of the world’s economic system. His keen insight was to identify the emotional and social depth of capitalism, not the superficial links between prosperity and culture in a capitalist economic system.

But the idea that certain cultural values may promote or hinder economic growth remains common. It comes up in reference to the direction of the current world system, and the rise of India and East Asian countries as economic powerhouses. Weber himself of course had concluded that Hinduism, Buddhism (in India) and Confucianism and Taoism (in China) each encouraged value systems incompatible with capitalism, and
that this went a long way toward explaining why capitalism developed in the West and not in the East. Cultural and religious explanations for economic achievement abound today. To mention one case, for several decades in the twentieth century, economists commonly described India in terms of a ‘Hindu growth rate’ to explain its sluggish pace, a phrase that has more recently fallen out of favor with India’s economic boom. Cambridge economist Ha-Joon Chang has shown the shortcomings of this sort of pervasive cultural logic in a chapter of Bad Samaritans called “Lazy Japanese and Thieving Germans: Are some cultures incapable of economic development?” Using a broad range of sources, he reconstructs the historical record to remind us how, until relatively recently, the prospects for economic advancement in Japan and Germany were widely understood as preposterous. In terms of economic development, these countries were generally considered hopeless basket cases. “A century ago, the Japanese were lazy rather than hard working; excessively independent minded (even for a British socialist!) rather than loyal ‘worker ants’; emotional rather than inscrutable; light-hearted rather than serious; living for today instead of considering the future (as evidenced by their sky-high savings rates). A century and a half ago, the Germans were indolent rather than efficient; individualistic rather than cooperative; emotional rather than rational; stupid rather than clever; dishonest and thieving rather than law-abiding; easy going rather than disciplined” (Chang 2008: 184-5).

Clearly, the causative role of culture and religion in economic performance has been overstated. The idea that some cultures are more receptive than others to economic development seems both chauvinistic and absurd. Weber at least partly recognized the problem, and hoped to avoid it by saying the connection between Protestantism and capitalist prosperity was not causal but rather loosely associative. But even an associative connection is sloppy, since categories like Protestant, Hindu, or Muslim are too vague to be analytically meaningful, much less rigorous, even with Weber’s finer distinctions. These simple, pure, imagined categories are inevitably clouded by real factors such as the diversity within populations, the geographical distribution of populations, change over time, variations in language, forms of government, international institutions, and policies, to name a few. Furthermore, one can cherry-pick different traits and values to evoke fear, revulsion, or dislike, or demonstrate what one doesn’t like if one has a political axe to grind, as in the case of adherents of the clash of civilizations thesis (Chang 2008: 186).

The point in all of this is not to assert or prove the irrelevance of Protestantism or Calvinism to the economic development of the United Provinces—or of Hinduism or Confucianism to India’s and China’s today. Religion and culture can and do influence development in many ways. But these ways can not be reduced to a formula; nor should we pretend that categories like ‘culture,’ ‘religion,’ and ‘the economy’ are discrete
things. For the sake of argument we may speak of them abstractly, but they’re inherently more complex phenomena and intertwined with one another.

So the issue in terms of Dutch horticulture is not religion or culture per se, but to worry out the various strains of how commercial horticulture developed in this particular time and place. Today Dutch horticulture has become so naturalized as to seem inevitable, and though it might have occurred otherwise, it didn’t. It was established and unfolded through particular relationships and general patterns connected to Protestantism, networking, masculinity, aesthetics, economics, and science. The development of institutions based on cooperative principals, joint ventures, distributing financial risks, coordinating financial policy between the government and private industry—these all fell into place in the United Provinces in the seventeenth century. And these characteristics have clear descendants in today’s horticulture industry. This is not the same as saying ‘the culture’ made it happen; but certainly the values and practices that helped establish Dutch horticulture were part of the larger culture. The period of the Republic was an important beginning point, and various practices and values annealed at this time, but the past is important in another way as well. It has become a feature of the imagined community of flower growers in the Netherlands.

_Tulips Yesterday and Today_

Roses, carnations, and lilies all grew in pleasure gardens, but it was the tulip that really mesmerized people. It captured people’s scientific, aesthetic, and civic imagination, and became the focus of speculative value. Through the tulip, Dutch horticulture became ingrained. The tulip inspired fraternities, a reverence for horticultural beauty, helped situate ornamental flowers as something lucrative, and via gardening, as a kind of expression of the nation. But they took on other meanings in their own right as they became insinuated in the Netherlands. These were both negative and positive.

When Claes Pieterszoon returned in 1614 to a thriving Amsterdam after studying medicine in Leiden, the tulip’s prestige was well into its ascendancy. Pieterszoon looked at himself and found his name rather undistinguished. So he adopted a new one to match his political ambition: he chose Nicolaes Tulp and inscribed the tulip on his family shield. In addition to being a doctor, Tulp would become the treasurer and later the city magistrate of Amsterdam. But he is best known for his place in Rembrandt’s _Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp_, which hangs in the Mauritshuis museum in the Hague, and shows Tulp dissecting a cadaver’s forearm. Assuming a new surname like Tulp was not unusual in seventeenth century Holland. “As with the names of tulips, Dutch people of this period were creative with their names,” notes Golgar; other examples included Pieter Dircksz Spaerpott (Savings Bank) and Pieter Alderwerelt (All the World, since
his Herengracht home featured a globe on the roof) (2007: 113). Though some of these self chosen surnames may suggest irony or irreverence, as in Jacob Pieter Olycan (Oilcan) and Pieter Jacobsz Indischeraven (Indian Raven, or Parrot), many index important changes occurring in Dutch society. Elements of that period of Dutch history, such as the power of financial institutions, a cosmopolitan or global sensibility, and the renown of the tulip, became embedded in people’s very names (Goldgar 2007: 112-115).

But what was it about the tulip that so captivated certain people? There’s something missing so far from the discussion of the flower’s appeal. One can know how the bulbs circulated through networks of men who also took part in newly formed institutions like the VOC and the Beemster project, and understand how through the fledgling world system, the flows of goods fed a curiosity for the new and that the rising position of Amsterdam in the world economy enabled locals to buy such things. One can also appreciate the way wealth, leisure, and pleasure gardens fomented interest in flowers, and know that people began to cherish tulips, in particular. Today tulips are familiar, and may even seem rather commonplace—you can buy a bouquet in Albert Heijn for a few euro. So it’s difficult to get a visceral sense of the powerful emotional effect these flowers once had on people. But without that sense, an important aspect of the tulip’s magnetism in that era is left out.

To the seventeenth century Dutch observer, the tulip became a superlative ornament: with a stately, sublime form, and appearing in marvelous, entralling colors, it added great beauty and value to one’s garden or other surroundings. Most of all, the quality that captivated people about the tulip was its amazing capacity to produce so many different shapes and hues. It’s impossible to fully recuperate the passion these flowers once excited in people, but one gets an inkling of it in the breathless annotations of well-known seventeenth century botanist Joost van Ravelingen, published in Dodoen’s Cruydt-Boeck, and cited by Anne Goldgar. The fervor comes through in the extensive details, the run-on sentences, and the sheer volume of description, which itself embodies the celebrated diversity and variety of the tulip.

“Every year one finds new varieties and sorts which no one has ever seen before. It is yellow, red, white, purple and (as some assert) blue: or two or three of those colors are mixed within one flower, that is in the middle, or on the sides, or one or the other side of the petals, with speckles, stripes, or spots, themselves beautifully embellished: sometimes the stripes are like flames, or winged, like bunches of feathers or plumage: Sometimes one color shines above the other: that is the white and the yellow have something red shining through: one seems like gold cloth, another silver cloth...[And the early red tulips are] thoroughly red, or reddish, that is dark red, beautiful light or high red, orange red, true red or vermilion red, blood red, carmine, incarnadine, or flesh-colored, sweet red and dead or unsweet red, or yellow-brown: sometimes all these
colors are mixed with yellow or with white, or other colors, which tend toward violets or blues...For you see these sorts of Red Tulips, with gold-colored, yellow, white, or darker or lighter red, and also green and violet edges, stripes, rays, spots, and nerves, on the inside and on the outside, on the edges, on the back... These varieties are more easily wondered at than described” (Goldgar 2007: 40-41).

Wondered at, indeed. Wonder is one of several useful frames that can deepen the way we might hear this quote and understand people’s infatuation with tulips. But first it should be said that while those words might amuse contemporary ears, the point of van Ravelingen’s excerpt is not to mock such enthusiasm or demonstrate how those sober, calculating Dutch burghers went gaga for tulips. First, that’s only partly true. But one must ask, on reflection, is it so unfamiliar or so alien, after all, the emotional reaction to a thing that possesses both aesthetic and economic value, something new and colorful, with a distant and mysterious origin? Even if, as Goldgar has shown, the price swings and economic destruction of tulipmania have been exaggerated, is it so slippery a notion that a market for something both lucrative and beautiful could lead to price inflation, and inspire greed and back-stabbing? The delirious outpouring that tulips uncorked seems reminiscent of what former U.S. Chairman of the Federal Reserve Alan Greenspan meant in the 1990s when he suggested the dot com boom was driven by “irrational exuberance.” The emotional economy of tulips in the Netherlands of that era can be described as an exuberance, ebullience, or effervescence pushed forward by an urge to covet beauty. (In this context of relationships between the passion for ravishing things, economic behavior, and the market, it’s curious to recall what William Blake wrote in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell: Exuberance is Beauty.)

The zeal for tulips fits not only in to a psychological or aesthetic economy, but in to the market, where they were assigned a price. People’s wonder at their beauty makes more sense when associated with Weber’s emotional side of capitalism, and with Bourdieu’s analysis of the ways that class shapes cultural tastes. And this fascination has evolved over centuries. Today, tulip symbolism and marketing have taken the flower to new heights. They often crop up in unexpected places and unusual ways.

For instance, the European Space Research and Technology Centre in the Netherlands has been working with the European Space Agency to attempt to cultivate tulips on the moon. This is not as far fetched as it might seem. Because tulip bulbs are hearty and carry their own nutrients, they offer promising possibilities in the search for plants that might be able to adapt and grow in extraterrestrial environments. It seems like more than a coincidence that the tulip proposal would originate in the Netherlands. Like wooden shoes and toy windmills, tulips appear on the shelves of airport kiosks and tourist shops alongside miniature canal houses, cheese wheels, and caps with marijuana leaves. But they’re more than trinkets, symbols, or reminders of an imagined
past. They’re also part of a high profile, profitable industry, and are prominent in Dutch vernacular and the national imaginary.

As global-warming-driven rising sea levels threaten low lying countries like the Netherlands, people table new proposals for water management. One of the most exotic (or quixotic) plans is to construct a gigantic barrier island in the North Sea in the shape of a tulip, a civil engineering project that would dwarf the Delta Works system that took decades and massive resources to construct. Supporters of the ambitious plan, inspired by Dubai’s Palm Island, claim the isle could also alleviate the problem of overcrowding in Europe’s most densely populated region. The cause was advocated in the Dutch parliament in 2009 by center-right Christian Democratic Party (CDA) member Joop Atsma. In pleading for the project, he said: “People live on top of each other in the Netherlands. We are hungry for land. A huge area is needed for building.” The plan is unlikely to come to fruition, but in the course of its history, the Netherlands has carried out a number of ambitious civil engineering projects of comparative scope and complexity, from the Beemster to the Delta Works.

On one hand it’s tempting, though misleading, to draw too close a connection between the present and the past. Today’s flower auctions are in many important respects the products of recent developments, and evolved in nineteenth and twentieth century contexts. On the other hand, contemporary values, practices, institutions, and traditions in the horticultural industry show provocative parallels with the past, and it would be equally shallow and misleading to present everything in the contemporary industry as merely the product of events in the last century and a half. Moreover, the horticultural industry actively cultivates its own version of the Dutch past. And the global context in which Dutch flowers are grown, marketed, and distributed demands a more careful reading of contemporary social and economic developments. In his introduction to the first volume of *The Modern World System*, Wallerstein discusses the imperative for incorporating many disciplines to understanding the world system, how notions of truth evolve, and asserts that “everything is contemporaneous, even that which is past” (Wallerstein 1974: 9), a principal that echoes William Faulkner’s famous sentences: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” In looking at the marketing of tulips today, and the practices of Dutch horticultural auctions, one could hardly disagree.

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36 *Floriculture International*, November, 2009