The making of Dutch flower culture: Auctions, networks, and aesthetics
Gebhardt, A.C.

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Horticultural Aesthetics

There are things
we live among 'and to see them
is to know ourselves'

George Oppen
Horticultural Commodities in Context

The Aalsmeer auction is not the only institution in the Dutch horticultural production chain to have merged with other local businesses and associations over the years, nor is it the only space in the industry where vital networking occurs. The annual International Horti Fair held in Amsterdam RAI presents an important platform for cutting edge technologies, services, and providers, and attracts visitors from around the world eager to showcase what they have to offer, to see the latest and future trends, and to meet people. This Horti Fair is the biggest of global horticultural events, and evolved alongside, and partly through, the Aalsmeer auction. The original Flower Trade Show developed in Aalsmeer in 1963 from Bloemenlust and CAV (Aalsmeer’s founding auctions); in the nineteen-seventies it moved to the current FloraHolland centre in Aalsmeer, and focused on what was called ‘food crop horticulture and technique’ and ‘floriculture, floricultural technique, and trade.’ Combining after 1972 to make the NTV, which pushed forward Dutch horticulture’s international agenda, the show quickly became the premier promotional event for Dutch horticulture. In 2008, the last year I attended the week long Horti Fair, it attracted almost 48,000 visitors from more than 100 countries.

Through Amsterdam RAI’s vast show hall loitered thousands of people, mostly consisting of men wearing dress shirts and jeans. Booths offered demos and horticultural tackle, and tents hosted exhibits varying from conveyor belts circulating potted orchids beneath LED lights to floral arrangement competitions taking place before speakers booming House music. In these Horti Fair venues, the breadth of technical enterprise behind the production, presentation, and transportation of commercial flowers and plants is on display. It’s a good place to get acquainted with the sweep of the industry53, to observe people interacting at an event actively promoted as a

53 Consider the array of services offered at the Horti Fair: air conditioning and heaters, bamboo stakes, barcode printers, biological cultivation systems, cases and crates, ceramics, cleaning machines, climate control, closed cultivation systems, CO2 units, crop protection products, cultivation gutter systems, decontamination, decoration materials, de-stackers, displays, drip irrigation systems, electric tractors, electric wagons, electronic vending systems, energy management machines and consultancy, environmental monitoring systems, fertilizers, films, cultivation floors, floriculture management systems, floristry supplies, flower processing lines, flue gas condensers, fork lift trucks, garden plants, glass and plastic greenhouses, greenhouse construction, materials, and control equipment, growing benches, growing media, harvesting wagons, machines and equipment, import and export services, internal transport and delivery systems, irrigation systems, laboratory equipment, leaf suction machines and leaf blowers, light fittings, liquid carbon dioxide, liquid manure dispensing systems, load carriers, logistic systems, measurement and control equipment, soil membranes, anti-root membranes, mineral wool, mist systems and atomizers, mixing machines, oasis foam, organic fertilizers, packaging machines and materials, picking systems, pipes, plant growing cabinets, planting machines, platform wagons, potting
networking opportunity, and to meet all sorts of professionals from many segments of
the value chain. Like other aspects of the industry, the event is firmly embedded in
Dutch civic life. Horti Fair’s 2010 chairman, Edald van Vliet, was the former alderman
of Westland, the first mayor of Lansingerland (appointed in 2007), and represents a sort
of power player and uniting figure in politics and horticulture, the kind of Dutch
network man Elke Heemskerk called a “big linker” (2006: 95). Individuals like this
illustrate just one way horticulture connects with political, social, and commercial
institutions in the Netherlands. In addition to these sorts of figures, annual events also
do a lot to support the industry, ranging from the bloemencorsos, which emphasize
aesthetic and folkloric facets of Dutch horticulture, to trade shows like the Horti Fair,
which encompasses business, technical, and aesthetic aspects.

In 2008, the Horti Fair in Amsterdam RAI offered some curious displays of
floral aesthetics, including a tent devoted to ‘the art of the possible’ featuring artificially
colored flowers. Few people seemed interested in that one the afternoon I visited, and
stepping through the striped flap of the entrance, my eyes fell on the single rose
illuminated in a glass display case. Each of the three people standing before it seemed
surprised, or slightly repulsed. Two of them quickly moved on, and I was left with
Hans, a fiftyish former rose grower and current breeder who bore a striking resemblance
to Bruce Willis. Hans wrinkled his nose. It turned out that he knew the rose’s designer,
averted that he was slightly embarrassed for the guy, an acquaintance. The rose was
sprayed purple with silver glitter, a burlesque thing in a sleek black vase. If this long-
stemmed bloom under a spotlight had been a performer, it might have been late Elvis—
rhinestone studded, entrancing, and mawkish. Hans and I were transfixed by its gaudy
glamor and the sheer shellacked surface of its flawless form. Roses dipped in tints and
misted in sparkles don’t arouse many consumers in the Netherlands, but are most
popular in France, which was the market for this rose. Something about its artificiality,
or the emotions it triggered, or the awareness of all this fanfare, capital, and marketing
around flowers and plants suddenly seemed rather odd.

As I nodded and gawked at the display, it struck me, as though for the first time,
that flowers really are commodities, and that as important as auctions, institutional
practices, history, infrastructure, and networking are to this global business, the
horticultural industry is fundamentally about the creation and evolution of these fragile
objects. The realization that this commodity drives the industry seemed both obvious

machines, potting soils, pretreatment chemicals, propagation, protective netting, pruning equipment,
pumps, reverse osmosis, robotization, roller tables, rolling gutter systems, screening and darkening
systems, seed drills, seed trays and seeds, sensor techniques, shadow netting, sleeving and sleeving
machines, horticultural software, soil tillage, sorting machines, spray robots, sprinkler systems, subsidies,
tax and legal advice, tissue culture, tracking & tracing, water storage systems, water treatment, weed
control, and, last but not least, assistance with wholesale trade.
and strange. Clearly, the trade is organized around selling plants and cut flowers, but what seemed so remarkable was the extent of infrastructure, money, and planning that goes into it, the level of technical wizardry in growing and transportation, the pageantry of institutional events, the compelling appeal of the flowers, and the passion and sentiment of so many figures in the industry. The cumulative effect was impressive and seemed unparalleled. And yet, in many respects other agricultural trades might not be so different: the industrialization of the process certainly isn’t unique, and many farmers have sentimental attachments to their crops or their animals (Mullin 2007: 280). Also, in lots of ways, flowers resemble other commodities. As with bananas or wheat, flowers are mass produced; like copper and tomatoes, their value is set each day via auction; and they have a quality economists call fungibility, which means that like coal or sugar each identical unit has equal value—one orange gerbera should be indistinguishable from any other from the same lot. Production is carefully controlled to create a homogenous crop, to eliminate individual distinctions and imperfections. It’s only a slight exaggeration to say that growers, breeders, and buyers alike aspire for each bloom to achieve a sort of archetypal form akin to a Platonic ideal. Color, bud size, stem length, and much more must be reliably generated again and again. Both producers and consumers want predictable, stable qualities with little variance; blemishes, aberrations, and idiosyncrasies reduce the market value.

But if there’s clearly a science to production, the products themselves are aesthetic objects, and part of their appeal is that they’re enticing, delicate, and evanescent. Commercial flowers are luxury goods, and are typically distinguished from mineral or food commodities as optional and even superfluous, since one buys flowers only once one’s basic needs are taken care of. But while it’s true that in the twentieth century, the dramatic rise in wealth and a market for commercial goods enabled the emergence of the commercial flower industry, the same can be said of many agricultural products, livestock, industrial metals, and plenty of other commodities (Zeigler 2007, Strating 1993, Stewart 2009). These industries and commodities are what they are today because of a large, middle class consumer market. No one doubts that we need food, but not commercial flowers, to survive. But actually, this reasoning doesn’t carry too far, since it’s equally true that human society could endure without bananas, beef, oranges, and many other supposedly essential commodities. Nevertheless, these various commodities are hardly interchangeable with horticultural products; they do belong in different categories. After all, on occasions of affection, mourning, celebration, and intimacy, people don’t typically exchange string beans. Flowers are most distinct from other commodities not because they’re less essential, but because of their sentimental attractions and meanings.

They tug at our emotions, nourish a sense of beauty, characterize traditions, and inspire wonder—an anomalous sort of commodity. Marx may as well have been
referring to twenty-first century commercial flowers when he wrote, “A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (Marx 1967 [1867]: 83). That shimmering rose in its Horti Fair showcase may have lacked metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties, but its appeal certainly inspired curiosity; it was indeed a queer thing, and its peculiarities lay not only in its appearance but in its effects on us. Above all, the horticultural product is bound up with emotional and aesthetic needs and impulses. For consumers of cut flowers, these objects always and inevitably communicate social and cultural meanings. Ornamental flowers have no utilitarian purpose, nor do they ensure the smooth functioning of the contemporary world economy, but how we assess their value and how we exchange them both socially and commercially do suggest some things about cultural logic, and about how and in whose interests the market works. In this sense, so-called luxury items are very revealing.

Bourdieu elaborated a close correlation between goods production and taste production, and demonstrated how certain things, mannerisms, and language function as markers of distinction (1984). In certain ways, the consumption of common commodities like potatoes and petroleum reveals less than that of specialized goods—since values of leisure and pleasure coalesce precisely around things that aren’t necessities. In Bourdieu’s rendering, “none is more obviously predisposed to express social differences than the world of luxury goods, and, more particularly, cultural goods, because the relationship of distinction is objectively inscribed within [them]” (1984: 226). What distinguishes the common from the special has largely to do with taste. More than indicating individual preference, “taste is what brings together things and people that go together,” so our relationship to these objects can be especially enlightening (Bourdieu 1984: 241). Our taste—what we prefer, consume, and how we go about consuming things—communicates a host of social and cultural information about many things, including affection and other emotions, identity, aesthetics, societal position, gender, class, nationality, and community. “Furthermore,” notes Catherine Zeigler, “when consumers select and use commodities to satisfy specific cultural needs and desires, they also confirm that these goods have special value in relation to particular cultural understandings—that they offer channels for the circulation and confirmation of meaning. And because certain commodities have cultural significance that is widely shared, people use them deliberately to shape roles, identity, status, and relationships” (2007: 4).

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54 This is not entirely true, since some popular commercial cut flowers are being developed for medicinal purposes (chrysanthemums, for instance, have been used to create arthritis medication), but most consumers don’t buy ornamental flowers for their remedial properties.
Horticulture’s social significance is crafted through aesthetics by many along the production chain, particularly breeders and florists, as well as those in a lab or greenhouse. As in the early days of tulip cultivation, scientific, commercial, and cultural interests overlap in the creation of floral aesthetics. And even more than during those early days of Dutch horticulture, today the floral commodity is grown, marketed, and distributed in an international context. In this world system, the Dutch set aesthetic and market trends, which are partly, but not entirely, forged through technology, capital, efficient production and distribution, and other material factors. Breeders and florists influence market trends and aesthetics, but more broadly, aesthetics evolve and are sustained through relationships and practices—male networks, infrastructure, institutions, and social traditions. The first century of the Dutch flower auction system has produced or encouraged a number of activities and traditions that self consciously invoke an imagined past—tulip naming ceremonies and bloemencorsos most notably, but traditions like Valentine’s Day and Mother’s Day are also largely sustained by the flower industry. Many of these traditions are about honoring, enhancing, and enriching relationships. So the conception of horticultural aesthetics is closely involved in the emotional and cultural meanings and social function of plants and flowers, which in turn, shape the production of the commodity.

Understanding the dynamics of horticultural commodities at auction tells only part of the story of cut flower’s cultural performance. For a fuller appreciation of this performance, one must consider the commercial flower or plant as “a social hieroglyph—not as a thing, but as a complex relation between networks and organizations of people, as well as between states and bureaucracies—[and if we do so,] we may glimpse some of the distinguishing features of the contemporary world” 55 (Hylton 2009). But flowers are also important in themselves, as objects. They are inscrutable without looking carefully at them as things, too, and examining how people invent, breed, design, market, and consume them. To focus exclusively on their social footprint would be like trying to understand the appeal of a film by tallying box office profits but without ever seeing it or evaluating its context, or analyzing a politician’s appeal by ballot statistics alone: you would miss an essential quality.

Looking carefully at luxury goods involves a consideration of the aesthetics of their presentation. The depiction of horticultural commodities has a long historical background. How and when did flowers become commodities? What has the Netherlands contributed to the creation of flowers as a commodity? The answers are more suggestive than definitive. They involve not only contemporary traditions and social and commercial institutions, but aesthetic practices in the Dutch Golden Age.
(including mapmaking, tulip production, and still life, each of which warrants separate consideration). Mapmaking provided one way for the Dutch to “market the world,” to trade not only commodities but to promote a worldview with the Dutch Republic at the center of a global economy (Smith and Findlen 2007: 347). In this period, tulips became a metonymy for the social upheaval and the transition to a market economy. And still life painting produced in the seventeenth century drew attention to objects (particularly perishable commodities, including flowers), and this way of looking at things both reflected and helped to create the new kinds of human relationships emerging in this nascent market-capitalist culture (Hochstrasser 2007: 1-9). Still life helped to stoke popular enthusiasm and values for cut flowers. And some of the same figures involved in the tulip trade and VOC (familiar burgemeesters and stadholders such as Frederick Ruysch) also collected still life—both circulated in male networks, a particular kind of masculine, profit-driven, aesthetic circuit and value system.

**Still Life and the Invention of Commodities: an ‘Empire of Things’**

Although George Oppen likely referred to images of U.S. atrocities in Vietnam when he wrote “There are things/ we live among ‘and to see them/ is to know ourselves’”, the reflexive sentiment in these lines applies well to our affinity with commodities. The lines assert a relationship, a sort of economy, between things (which aren’t specified), people, and knowledge, regardless of whether the tone is philosophical or political. Seeing the things one lives among, really looking at them, is in fact a central tenet of the Dutch still life of the seventeenth century, and Julie Hochstrasser frames her understanding of the paintings in this way. In *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age*, she asks what the region’s “sudden and rather astonishing focus on material culture — bluntly on objects in fact — reveal to us about the history of the Netherlands, Europe, and the world in the seventeenth century” (2007: 7).

Along with the period’s colonial expansion, the Atlantic slave trade, scientific discoveries, economic innovation and prosperity, the Dutch Golden Age generated an incredible amount of art, which included not only still life, but historical scenes emphasizing allegories and religious motifs, maps, portrait painting, and other scenes of everyday life. Because of the abundance and availability of paintings (about 70,000 per year during the century [North 1997: 1]), ordinary people often displayed art in their homes.56 (The legacy of such output led J.H. Huizinga to open his long essay *Dutch Civilization in the Seventeenth Century* with the statement: “Were we to test the average Dutchman’s knowledge of life in the Netherlands during the seventeenth century, we

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56 Michael North also records that “works of art, ranging from simple prints and copies to original paintings, hung in almost all Dutch houses...[although] probably less than one percent of seventeenth-century pictures have survived (1997: 107).
should probably find that it is largely confined to odd stray notions gleaned from paintings” [1968: 9]. Still life (stilleven in Dutch) constituted an enduring segment of this visual media. It featured both familiar and exciting new objects in a medium that highlighted—and helped to arouse in viewers—their mysterious, seductive, and otherwise appealing qualities.

Still life paintings featured local products like gouda cheese and herring, southern European imports like grapes and lemons, New World treats like tobacco, as well as tea and other spices from the East. The range of these objects indicates the extent to which international trade had been literally swallowed and soaked into Dutch life. Baltic grains went in to the bread featured in so many still lifes; oranges, hazelnuts, and olives came from the Mediterranean; wines were transported from France and Spain; the VOC imported pepper, cloves, Chinese porcelain and much more; and the salt, tobacco, and sugar arrived on ships from the WIC (Dutch West India Company, West Indische Compagnie) (Hochstrasser 2007: 4-5). As painterly subjects, these objects also tended to fit in sub-genres, which in turn had typical themes, such as ‘breakfast paintings,’ which displayed upper class delicacies along with a religious reminder to avoid gluttony. Flowers became another popular subject. In the most seductive still lifes, the familiar became strange and the strange familiar: goods that had been ordinary began to seem special in the aura of painting and imagination, and new goods came to seem both thrilling and necessary. The still life helped not only to commodify flowers, but to create the first consumer driven commodity culture around the multiple goods flowing into Dutch ports during the time when Amsterdam sat at the helm of the world system (Hochstrasser 2007: 1-9). Among the common messages of these pictures, this visual language of the commodity communicated “the pride of primacy” (Hochstrasser 2007: 13-23).

And if during this era, economic and scientific dynamism spurred each other on, a passionate aesthetics helped to make sense of the dramatic changes occurring, since “visual culture was central to the life of the society” (Alpers 1983: xxv). Still life captured some of the attraction and possibility of the new goods flowing in, the devices for observation and study, and recorded some of the novel ways of seeing (Alpers 1983: 26-71). Aesthetics was inherent in all this, and manifested most apparently in collecting, gardening, and visual art. As both secular consumption and scientific interests were rising, production of floral still life surged. Some scholars of still life see explicit relationships between interest in the natural world—in plants, insects, and animals—and the origins of floral painting (Goldgar 2007: 93-95). To illustrate the close connections between art, science, and commerce, consider the Ruysch family. Frederik Ruysch was a well known botanist, anatomist, and collector, famous for his anatomical dioramas, and immortalized in Jan van Neck’s 1683 portrait, The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Frederick Ruysch. Ruysch apprenticed his daughter Rachel, aged fifteen, to the
prominent still-life painter, Willem van Aelst, and she went on to become well known herself, one of the few women in the painter’s guild, and a highly regarded artist specializing in floral still life. Another daughter, Pieternel, married Jan Munnicks, who drew flowers for Amsterdam’s Hortus Botanicus.

If both scientific and economic circumstances influenced the creation of visual art, the dissemination of images deepened and extended the reach of the economic system. Writing about the encounter between Europeans and the New World during roughly the same period, Stephen Greenblatt insists that mimetic capital (‘the stock of images, along with the means of producing those images and circulating them according with prevailing market forces’) is distinct but inseparable from other forms of capital and its reproduction (1991: 4). These images ‘accumulated, ‘banked,’ as it were, in books, archives, collections, cultural storehouses... merit the term capital [since] mimesis, as Marx said of capital, is a social relation of production... This means that representations are not only the products but producers, capable of decisively altering the very forces that brought them into being’ (Greenblatt 1991: 4-5). Put more generally, visual culture intimately intertwines with material culture. In discussing flowers together with still life paintings of flowers and other commodities, there is a risk of blurring the thing with its representation; but there is an unavoidable overlap between “objects of culture” and “cultures of the object” (Hochstrasser 2007: 7, Greenblatt 1991: 5-6). Though not specifically discussing seventeenth century Dutch still life, Walter Benjamin has argued that visual art has always had “as one of its foremost tasks...the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only later,” an apt encapsulation of the notion that the paintings functioned to stoke consumer desire for the objects featured (1955, 1968: 237).

One reason that Dutch still life continues to fascinate viewers is that the subjects seem so strikingly immediate and relevant, despite clear differences between the contemporary global economy and the seventeenth century Amsterdam-centered system, as well as between viewer perspectives now and then. Nevertheless, “[t]he allure of those rich commodities served up on silver platters without any troubling details regarding their acquisition reverberates shockingly in the glitz of today’s advertising images that can gloss so seductively over just such disturbing realities of production,” observes Hochstrasser (2007: xiv). Curiously, this still life moral economy involving goods, people, and ethics is precisely the perspective Fair Trade advocates now emphasize. Whether focusing on bananas, chocolate, or increasingly, flowers, consumers are urged to consider the circumstances in which these commodities are produced and sold. Seventeenth century viewers weren’t necessarily urged to have moral problems with the slave trade or the plantation system, but by featuring a lump of refined sugar along with a parrot or an African figure (as in several of Jan Davidsz de Heem’s paintings) these issues are implied. Whether one’s reaction was approving,
fascinated, proud, or disgusted, viewers were invited to consider the circumstances of
global trade through which these commodities circulated. And if, now, still life offers a
window for us to glimpse the past, it sometimes also seems as though those in the past
were peering through the same window toward the future, to us. Many of the historical
circumstances of the Dutch Republic, when reduced to the general or the elemental,
don’t seem far removed from the contemporary environment: wars fueled by religious
fanaticism, the burgeoning and collapse of empires, a global awareness among citizenry,
a new media that reflects and refracts the world, a fascination with consumption as well
as the thrill and thrall of worldly goods and our relationship with them.

Svetlana Alpers characterizes seventeenth century Dutch visual representation as
“an art of describing,” in contrast to a narrative art such as that produced in Italian
Renaissance painting (1983: xx). “Dutch pictures are rich and various in their
observation of the world, dazzling in their display of craft, domestic and domesticating
in their concerns. The portraits, still lifes, landscapes and the presentation of daily life
represent pleasures taken in a world full of pleasures: the pleasures of familial bonds,
pleasures in possessions, pleasure in the towns, the churches, the land” (Alpers 1983:
xxi-xxii). And with careful work, Hochstrasser contends, we may approximate “the
‘feeling value’ of these objects within the Dutch mentalité of the time, and speculate as
to how that can inform our understanding of these pictures” (2007: 7-9). With kindred
precaution, Huizinga notes that “[p]art of the meaning of this art will always escape us,”
though we may understand some things, and know that “[t]here is meaning behind every
flower in a floral painting...” (1968: 46).

Dutch still life is often characterized as the art of thinking through things. These
paintings continue to appeal to viewers because they present an unexpectedly
penetrating social gaze, rich in ideas and sympathies. Though embedded in their
seventeenth century context, by exploring one’s relationships with objects, intimacy,
and the world, they gesture at modern notions we still struggle with and are intrigued
by. As Mark Doty so elegantly put it in his meditation on Jan Davidsz de Heem’s Still
Life with Oysters and Lemon, this Dutch still life conveys:

That this is the matrix in which we are held, the generous light binding together
the fragrant and flavorful productions of vineyards, marsh, and orchard—
where has that lemon come from, the Levant?

That the pleasures of what can be tasted and smelled are to be represented,
framed, set apart; that pleasure is to be honored.

That the world is a dialogue between degrees of transparency—globes of the
grapes, the wine in the glass equally penetrated by light but ever so slightly less
clear than the vessel itself, degrees of reflectivity.
That the world of reflection implicates us, as well—there, isn’t that the faintest image of the painter in the base of the glass, tilted, distorted, lost in the contemplation of his little realm? Looking through things, as well, through what he’s made of them, toward us?

That there can never be too much of reality; that the attempt to draw nearer to it—which will fail—will not fail entirely, as it will give us not the fact of lemons and oysters but this, which is its own fact, its own brave assay toward what is.

That description is an inexact, loving art, and a reflexive one; when we describe the world we come closer to saying what we are. (Doty 2001: 5-6)

When Doty says that when we describe the world we come closer to saying what we are he has hit on a recurrent theme in theoretical discussions of commodities, from Marx to Barthes, and that is the overlap of people and things. Each takes on characteristics of the other, and both are transformed in this economy, restricted by the market’s potent gravity. Still lifes are meditations on these processes. Looking at pronk still lifes (sometimes called the art of the ostentatious, from pronken, to flaunt or prance about), Hal Foster sees a culture of fetishism. With their typically shiny and luxuriant surfaces, Foster says they have the effect of “lubricating” the viewer’s gaze, creating a commercial preoccupation that is provocatively ambivalent. On one hand, during the era of the Republic, the Dutch Protestant social order tended to frown on the idea that a material object could have a spiritual value. They sneered at different African culture’s ardent for talismans or amulets, which the Dutch, borrowing from the Portuguese, called fetissos (literally, fetishes). But “as religious fetishism was suppressed, a commercial fetishism, a fetishism of the commodity was released; the Dutch denounced one overvaluation of objects, only to produce another of their own”. (Foster 1993: 23)

Roland Barthes similarly noted a pious sense in still life and other Dutch painting of the era. Though by the seventeenth century specifically religious iconography ceased to dominate, a kind of religious aura nevertheless glowed from the secular scenes presented. He wrote that the proliferation of objects in such images had, in effect, “washed away religion only to replace it with man and his empire of things” (Barthes 1972: 3). That memorable phrase ‘empire of things’ captures both the Netherlands’ colonial expansion across the globe and the burgeoning consumer culture at home. He goes on to comment on the portraits of regents, “[w]hat is it then which distinguishes these men at the pinnacle of their empire? It is the numen...that simple gesture by which divinity signified its decisions” via those Dutch burghers and merchants, “this class at once social and zoological,” these traders in goods and in still life paintings (Barthes 1972: 10-11). What is so significant is the numen (the spirit or divine power) of their gaze, because actually, the participants are not concerned with the
money and the objects surrounding them, despite all the abundance that characterizes Dutch painting of the period. Ultimately, argues Barthes, the gaze focuses on you, which is to say, on us, the viewers. “You become a matter of capital, you are an element of humanity doomed to participate in a numen issuing finally from man and not from God” (Barthes 1972: 11-12).

Flowers and Dutch ‘Cultural Iconography:’ from Gift Economy to Market Society

This formative period for both consumer culture and Dutch horticulture has more to reveal through a key relationship between aesthetics and economics. These paintings expose the complexities, ironies, and suggestive absences of what has been called a Dutch “cultural iconography,” a notion akin to Geertz’s thick description (Hochstrasser 2007: xv). More than the religious and symbolic approaches traditionally used in art history, this inclusive conception incorporates visual and material culture alike to explore not merely visual representation but the wider historical context and cultural milieu. In some subtle and circuitous way, the ubiquity of these objects may have been about fortifying the Republic by inventing a mythology around trade, values, and natural goods, since as Bourdieu has argued, “[a]ppropriating ‘nature’—birds, flowers, landscapes—presupposes a culture, the privilege of those who have ancient roots” (1984: 281). The young nation was claiming its primordial roots, if Bourdieu’s view applies. This is another angle on the natural goods highlighted in still life, not least those products of horticulture. In this light, tulipmania suggests a lot about shifting values in the emerging nation, and tulips became enshrined in Dutch cultural iconography.

The tulip craze fit in with larger social structures and emotional phenomena of the time, expressed through masculine networks and commercial institutions, and generally related to curiosity, wonder, excitement, and the connections between art and nature. In order to gain entrance to upwardly mobile or elite circles, one needed to demonstrate cultural capital, which in seventeenth century urban Dutch society included knowing about both art and flowers, and often people from the very same gentlemen class were involved in both, since “the collecting of art seemed to go with the collecting of tulips” (Goldgar 2007: 122-3, 67). This world of collecting connected directly to social status, the public demonstration of taste, and this close “society of collectors...was knit together by exchange relationships and gifts” (Goldgar 2007: 70, 78). And in the world of still life painting, tulips, and other collectibles, “aesthetic values resonated constantly against each other” (Goldgar 2007: 89). At the beginning of this transitional era, personal and intellectual relationships were often pursued and reinforced through gifts; this, along with the encroachment of market forces, the popularity of painting, and the flourishing of aesthetic practices, practically ensured that, along with other objects
of still life, “commodification of the tulip was unavoidable” (Goldgar 2007: 57). But how did this particular commodity lead to, or cause, or come to epitomize crisis?

We know that the financial aspect of the crisis is largely myth. Amounts paid for tulip bulbs at the peak of their boom in the winter of 1636-1637 were not as high as is commonly thought today. The famous tulip bulb sold for the price of a canal house was an apocryphal tale, coming from a moralistic pamphlet and not from records of sales. The actual ledgers show a significant rise in tulip bulb prices, but not wildly out of proportion from the price fluctuations of other commodities (Goldgar 2007: 226). And although bankruptcy records for the period are sketchy, none can be conclusively linked with the burst bubble of tulipmania (Goldgar 2007: 247). Far from the country in tatters and ruin commonly portrayed in popular media then and remembered today, growth continued through the post crash years, industry and investment rose, overseas expansion marched on, and general standards of living improved in the Republic. In fact, as Fernand Braudel has noted, “it was in about the 1650s or 1660s that the Dutch empire reached its true dimensions” (1992: 215). So tulipmania was not an economic crisis, but a moral and social one, and it was very grave (Goldgar 2007: 240-252).

In a short span of time, Dutch society changed drastically. People were confronted with the rapid growth of urban societies, immigration, a fast and highly visible increase in wealth, an economic system that pioneered new forms of buying, selling, and planning, and also, something both troubling and exciting, the entrance and circulation of heretofore unimagined, exotic goods from places and people scarcely conceived of. Suddenly their local towns, markets, and harbors were seen to fit in a world that was much larger and stranger than previously suspected. Historians like Steven Greenblatt have highlighted wonder as one of the popular responses to the radically different people, beliefs, and goods entering European markets from the New World and other locations. But Simon Schama demonstrated that “riches seemed to provoke their own discomfort, and affluence cohabited with anxiety” (1987: 326). And Hochstrasser and Goldgar emphasize that apprehension was a common response not only to the new wealth, but to the striking changes taking place. A familiar way of life was ending, social practices and rules of exchange were abolished or transformed, and with the scale of poldering and other development projects, even the landscape beneath their feet took on a different order.

The rupture in Dutch society, the real tulipmania, reflected anxieties about the dramatic transformations going on around them, including a strong shift toward what

57 That tulipmania’s economic impact has been exaggerated is not only Goldgar’s thesis; other historians have come to similar conclusions, though less thoroughly documented and analyzed (see Van der Woude and De Vries 1997: 150-151).
today we call market values. The fascination with tulips epitomized both the delight and fears over the society in radical transition. Given the long-standing culture of face-to-face exchange, intimate social and economic networks, respect for trade, and the popularity of collecting, the abrupt collapse of tulip prices sent out shock waves. The suddenly worthless tulip bulbs inevitably raised questions and provoked uncertainty about knowledge, value, and taste. As story and rumor spread about the prices people were paying for these curious commodities valued for their beauty, tulips and the tulip trade came to stand for all that was wrong and dangerous about the social and economic changes underway. Tulips and the trade became scapegoats, helping to spur popular myths about the folly of speculative capitalism and the social decline it inexorably causes.

Mauss argued that metaphysical and mythological aspects of the exchange process infuse many objects, their owners or possessors, and often as well, ideas about the object’s origins (1990 [1950]: 45). But why might a horticultural commodity become the focal point of the crisis—and not telescopes, ship building, painting, or any number of things or contemporary processes that might conceivably have been construed as emblematic? And why tulips instead of more familiar and traditional flowers like roses, lilies, or carnations? Goldgar suggests that, in addition to the tulip’s links to social status and elite networks, the tulip trade depended on trust, since bulbs were sold in winter months while still in the ground, and the resultant blooms would not come out for several months after the sale took place. So tulipmania “fractured social relations by reminding burghers how fragile their connections were. If a debt of honor” became unreliable and unenforceable, it threw into peril a culture of negotiation and arbitration upon which stable society seemed to rest (Goldgar 2007: 251).

Because gift economies don’t involve the exchange of money, it’s easy to see them as totally unrelated to commerce. But Mauss argues that some commonalities subtly underlie gift economies and contemporary practices of trade, since contemporary economic and legal systems emerged from the sort of gift exchange value systems that were once nearly universal (1990 [1950]: 47). There are remnants of much older systems embedded in our current institutions. Yet in other ways, these sets of values and practices seem mirror images of one another. As David Graeber has observed: “In gift economies, [...] exchanges do not have the impersonal qualities of the capitalist marketplace. In fact, even when objects of great value change hands, what really matters is the relations between the people; exchange is about creating friendships, or working out rivalries, or obligations, and only incidentally about moving around valuable goods. As a result everything becomes personally charged, even property. In gift economies, the most famous objects of wealth— heirloom necklaces, weapons, feather cloaks — always seem to develop personalities of their own. In a market economy it’s exactly the other way around. Transactions are seen simply as ways of getting one’s hands on
useful things; the personal qualities of buyer and seller should ideally be completely irrelevant. As a consequence everything, even people, start being treated as if they were things too” (2009). That is the shift. In a market economy, you become a matter of capital, as Barthes said.

In another context, Walter Benjamin comes to a similar conclusion. Swooning over a book he bought at auction, he wrote that “ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them” (Benjamin 1955, 1968: 67). Yet elsewhere, Benjamin draws a different lesson. In one of his best known essays, the mechanical reproduction of art eliminated or eclipsed its distinctiveness, what he called its “aura.” As copies proliferate, art’s power is muted, blunted, refashioned into something else, something “uprooted from tradition”, which has a tendency to support dominant ideology and solidify class divisions. Though Benjamin’s critique of mass production applied mostly to visual art, one suspects a parallel phenomena going on with the bulk, uniform production of flowers that also occurred during the same period, and catered to the same consumer markets. As Catherine Zeigler has shown, over the course of the twentieth century, flowers “transformed from a delicate, fragrant, perishable luxury into a sturdy, scentless ‘affordable luxury’ that brought pleasure to many in the middle classes” (2007: 227). Techniques of mass production and distribution are what enabled this transformation, this industrialization of the process. While these techniques differ in obvious ways from what occurred in the Dutch Republic, both times and places designate periods of profound popular changes in our relationships to commodities, in how they’re produced, consumed, and regarded.

One of the earliest theorists of consumption, Thorstein Veblen, argued for a relationship between production, consumption, and taste, which applies to both periods. Anticipating Bourdieu’s critiques, and specifically addressing the consumption of commercial flowers, he wrote:

By further habituation to an appreciative perception of the marks of expensiveness in goods, and by habitually identifying beauty with reputability, it comes about that a beautiful article which is not expensive is accounted not beautiful. In this way it has happened, for instance, that some beautiful flowers pass conventionally for offensive weeds; others that can be cultivated with relative ease are accepted and admired by the lower middle class, who can afford no more expensive luxuries of this kind; but these varieties are rejected as vulgar by those people who are better able to pay for expensive flowers and who are educated to a higher schedule of pecuniary beauty in the florist’s products; while still other flowers, of no greater intrinsic beauty than these, are cultivated at great cost and call out much admiration from flower-lovers whose tastes have been matured under the critical guidance of a polite environment.
The same variation in matters of taste, from one class of society to another, is visible also as regards many other kinds of consumable goods... (Veblen 2007 [1899]: 47).

From All the World to All the World: Floral Commodities in the World System

The focus on the invention of commodities and our relationship to them aren’t the only parallels between then and now. The global context in which such goods were produced, distributed, and consumed became synonymous with the system in which they circulated. But more subtly and more significantly, this context became an important dimension of the objects themselves, part of their iconography. It was not just that they were transported from faraway lands to be sold and consumed, but that part of that distance, that cachet, became insinuated in how they were depicted and imagined. In other words, part of the meaning of commodities was worldliness. To consume them, or even to witness their passage, was to partake in modern society. For the Dutch especially, an urban, cosmopolitan sensibility infused the trade in commodities. More than any particular item, or process of production and consumption, the Dutch trafficked in worldliness. Writing in the eighteenth century, Daniel Defoe accurately conveyed the situation: “[The Dutch] really are the Middle Persons in Trade, the Factors and Brokers of Europe...they buy to sell again, take in to send out, and the greatest part of their vast Commerce consists in being supply’d from All Parts of the World, that they may supply All the World again” (Daniel Defoe 1728, cited in Hochstrasser 2007, Ziegler 2007: 74). This view was well founded, not merely impressionistic. As Wallerstein has argued, managing bureaucracy and information was key to becoming the steward of the world system, and the Dutch handled this quite effectively (1974: 165-221). So, for example, Western Europe came to rely on Amsterdam’s weekly commodity price list that by 1634 included 359 different items, and by 1686 grew to 550 (Hochstrasser 2007: 18). Not only had the Republic become the conduit for commodities, it set international value and standards for them—a role not unlike that of the Netherlands today with global horticulture.

Hopkins and Wallerstein define a global commodity chain as “a network of labor and production processes whose end result is a finished commodity” (1986: 159). Though useful, their general approach to global commodities only vaguely addresses issues of power and structure within chains, and glosses over some of the more contemporary issues that come up in Gereffi and Korzeniewicz’s ‘industrial-based’ Global Commodity Chains (GCC) analysis (1994). But Hopkins and Wallerstein were most interested in the question of whether or not global chains are a recent phenomena. Discerning the contours of change over several centuries, they were less concerned with making precise definitions that might apply specifically to contemporary industrial or post industrial situations. They examined records of ships carrying wheat flour in order
to determine “whether or not there are substantial historical-empirical grounds for the claim that by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries world-economic forces were organizing production over a growing proportion of the ‘world’ delimited by the scope of their operations;” or to put it in more starkly abstract terms, they sought to evaluate “whether and to what extent a capitalist world-economy was an organizing force and structural reality” (1986: 158, 159). After several decades of publications, studies abound of the production, consumption, and theory of commodities (see Blair 2009). But despite their differences in emphasis and terminology, most theorists would probably agree with the general observation that “in terms of the structure of the capitalist world-economy, commodity chains may be thought of as the warp and woof of its system of social production” (Hopkins and Wallerstein 1994: 17).

Though industrial speed and efficiency have dramatically increased, and today there’s a high degree of interconnectivity, already in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, commodity chains encompassed different nations and continents, and tended to reach from the centers of the world system to the limits of its peripheries. And especially in the Dutch Republic, the production and distribution process took place through social and commercial networks that emerged from that humanistic society of gentlemen. As the world system developed, flowers became a significant part of the making of what has been called “the first modern economy” (De Vries and Van der Woude 1997). Jack Goody has outlined “the gradual emergence in Europe of a heightened activity in practice, in representation, and in scientific and poetic discourse, especially in the context of the incorporation of that continent in a world market which for a period it then dominated. One particular feature of this growth was the widespread use of cut flowers in urban life, strikingly so in Holland...” (Goody 1993: 25). Though clearly not the only commodity around, along with the cornucopia of delights from America, the Orient, and the Levant, flowers occupied commercial, aesthetic, and imaginative spaces in this new social economy. But as much as any particular product or dynamic of the world system, it was the idea and attraction of worldliness itself that the Dutch pioneered. Said another way, social and aesthetic forms and practices were key aspects of the system.

Illustrations and visual art captured many of these forms and practices. Widely circulated illustrations on Dutch maps and book covers might depict a Persian rug, a turbaned man, an Inca priestess, or a silk-robed Chinese emperor. In the profusion of images coming out of the Dutch Republic, maps constituted both practical and aesthetic models of geography. These visual documents presented actual ways of seeing the world, and they proliferated. The images that accompanied typical maps featured an eclectic mix of exotica celebrating the expansion of the Dutch world, and they conflated global space. The Dutch controlled many trade routes connecting Europe to the East (Java, Japan, China, Macao); to the Americas (Brazil, the Caribbean, north America);
and to the South (including the route around Cape Horn in South Africa and vast swaths of the African continent, used to propagate and profit from the Atlantic slave trade). Their commercial dominance, innovative trade practices, and guile enabled the Dutch to profit from the growing market for commodities and the sort of objects that the owners of *Wunderkammeren* (cabinets of wonder or cabinets of curiosities) sought for their collections. And at the same time that they supplied many of the objects, art, and curios, they developed compelling visual representations of that domain, through cartography and painting. Benjamin Schmidt has called this phenomena “the marketing of the world” (Smith and Findlen 2002: 349). Above all, “the Dutch were selling the idea of the world that appealed to readers, viewers, and consumers across Europe, and this idea marketed a world that was identifiably ‘exotic’” (Smith and Findlen 2002: 347).

Moreover, these images also often lent support for specific Dutch business ventures. Johan Nieuhof’s careful and complete description of Brazil was sympathetic to the Dutch West India Company (WIC) at the height of its power, for instance (Smith and Findlen 2002: 357). Business ingenuity went hand in hand with aesthetics, or vice-versa. With contemporary hindsight, it’s not hard to recognize that this visual language of the commodity dovetailed conveniently with the political agenda of legitimation (Hochstrasser 2007: 263). Sometimes, the worldly context of that message was plainly expressed, as in the 1640 still life within a still life painting by De Heem that now hangs in the Louvre. In it, “a small globe on a stand is visible...while looming behind the still life is another orb of colossal dimensions that in no uncertain terms puts the whole representation into — just that — global perspective” (Hochstrasser 2007: 263). Parallels are unmistakable with today’s marketing, and with the ongoing refinement of tulips as markers of distinction. The Dutch Republic established not only a business in art, with trade in still life, but through art and illustration spearheaded business practices of enticing and enthraling new consumers.

This amounts to more than historical background of how flowers became commodities; these images and ideas constitute part of flowers’ “cultural biography,” and in various ways, this formative period carries over in contemporary values, practices, and ideas (Appadurai 1986). Though some aspects of commodities may be mysterious (‘metaphysical and theological’), many of the abstruse qualities of things become concrete and more comprehensible when looked at vis-à-vis their cultural biography. In Appadurai’s well-known volume, Igor Kopytoff articulates why a life story offers such a useful metaphor for things. “In doing the biography of a thing,” he wrote, “one would ask questions similar to those one asks about people: what, sociologically, are the biographical possibilities inherent in its ‘status’ and in the period and culture, and how are these possibilities realized? Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far and what do people consider to be an ideal for such things? What are the recognized ‘ages’ or periods of the thing’s ‘life,’ and
what are the cultural markers for them?” (Appadurai 1986: 66). Finally, “...what is significant about the adoption of alien objects” such as tulips is “the way they are culturally redefined and put to use” (Appadurai 1986: 67).

The analysis of still life and tulips explores this last aspect of flower’s cultural biography. Understand them through their ‘life story,’ call them cultural icons or social hieroglyphs: looking not only at how these things were represented but at how they fit in the world system reveals the desires and uncertainties of Dutch society during its modern formative period, and suggests some of the ways that a cultural link between aesthetics and economics was forged. No single aspect of this environment should be understood in isolation. Prosperity, collecting, gardening, science, visual art, and a cosmopolitan sensibility all contributed to the society, and suffused the meanings of new commodities, including flowers. With a twenty-first century gaze, it’s hard to imagine how extraordinary a lemon or a clove or a tulip might have seemed. But for seventeenth century habitués of these global channels, the marvel of exotic goods was very real. The seduction came not only from their taste, look, novelty, or the lure of their mysterious origins, but from the complex narrative implied by their arrival via the commodity chain. The worldliness of goods—encompassing the desires and ambivalences of this new economic and cultural system—increased their appeal. The objects stood in for a range of values and processes, which made their beauty that much more pleasurable, and which fueled that much more fantasy and covetousness. Or, in another context, as Mark Doty succinctly put it, “beauty lies not within individual objects but in the nearly/ unimaginable richness of their relation” (2008: 24).

Creators of Beauty: Breeders, Florists, and the Marketing of Horticultural Commodities

Jade turtles, opal scarabs, blue-green butterflies encased in glass ornaments, orchids growing from the eye sockets of a stone animal skull: these and other marvels of art and the natural world have appeared in Florian Seyd and Ueli Signer’s Wunderkammer, an annual show that’s part gallery, part flower shop. Housed in a historic Amsterdam warehouse, the two florists partnered with Bloemenbureau Holland and KNOP (the Dutch Orchid Growers Association, Kring Nederlandse Orchideeen Producenten) to create a sort of flower salon, which they have done each May since 2005 with themes like “Tropical Dreams” and “Is This the End or a New Beginning?”. The Wunderkammer references European Renaissance and Dutch Golden Age history to attract viewers, setting up a sort of theater of the world where nature and art overlap. In their heyday, a collection might have included a narwal tusk, a diorama of human fetal bones, geodes, and a two headed sheep preserved in a jar. Cabinets of curiosities were ornate collections of exotic and curious objects from around the world— some came from nature, some were modified from nature or were valuable man-made things. But
Wunderkammers consisted of more than just elaborate tchotchkes of the fabulously wealthy and extravagant. They truly reflected one spirit of the age in Europe: wonder. Through a combination of science, art, and theater, viewers were often spellbound, and the owner’s status greatly enhanced. Describing one of the best known and most well preserved Dutch cabinets, that of Frederick Ruysch, Stephen Jay Gould captured the general purpose of such collections: to dazzle or “to stun, more than to order or to systematize, became the watchwords of this enterprise” (Gould and Purcell 1992: 17). Other wealthy Amsterdammers also possessed wonder cabinets, and like Ruysch, were implicated in local networks of power and influence. One of the VOC’s founder-members, Gerrit Reynst, had two sons, Gerard and Jan, both of whom contributed to the economic and aesthetic life of the Republic as collectors, and Gerard alone as head of Amsterdam’s Wisselbank. (A precursor to contemporary central banks, the Wisselbank was “literally, as well as figuratively, at the foundations of the city’s power” [Schama 1987: 345]). The Reynst brothers’ Wunderkammer consisted of naturalia (animals, fossils, minerals) and artificialia (paintings, vases, coins), and their collection became most famous in 1660, when several dozen paintings and sculptures were given to King Charles II in hopes of repairing Anglo-Dutch relations (North 1997: 116-17). In contrast with this prodigious history, Signer and Seyd’s Wunderkammer is mostly gimmick (the goal seems less to provoke and impress viewers than to entice customers). But they do invoke a past, and invite participation in an experience of the exotic, wondrous, and opulent, along with a bit of theater and history. Part of the lure for ordinary viewers today is to imagine entering that environment of lavish wealth and worldly curiosities of seventeenth century regents and the very affluent. The marketing of a playfully imagined Dutch past is a recurring theme in Dutch horticultural aesthetics, one promoted and nourished by organizations, breeders, and florists alike.

The contemporary fashioning of horticultural aesthetics comes largely from florists, and in other ways, from breeders. But the production chain overlaps quite a bit, so no single sector really operates in isolation. Just as auctions set prices but aren’t the only factor determining value, florists and breeders drive aesthetic innovations without being totally autonomous creators. The trend in the production chain is toward more and more integration; breeders, growers, distributors, exporters, and organizations all work together, all intersect considerably in both formal and informal ways. As FloraHolland’s current Chairman Bernard Oosterom put it recently, “Growers visit retailers and retailers visit growers,” by which he suggested not merely that these professionals drop by on each other’s turf once in a while, but that they regularly collaborate and recognize shared interests. Retail florists matter to growers and others along the production chain because they have direct contact, and often maintain enduring relationships, with

58 FloraCulture International May 2011: 24-25
consumers. Face to face contact means a lot in the sale of such emotional commodities. These commodities are first created by breeders, and later fashioned by florists.

Breeders and florists share commonalities, but differ in significant ways, too. Florists are artisans and cultural producers. Their craft shapes many aspects of the horticultural industry, by coming up with designs that influence the consumer market, by setting trends, supporting causes and organizations, and in the Netherlands especially, by their relationships with people in other parts of the value chain. Also, political and cultural icons like Lady Di or First Lady Michelle Obama employ florists to provide a signature aesthetic, and their choices and designs may reverberate back through the production chain. Breeders, too, devise horticultural aesthetics: their creations are shaped by artistic, ornamental, and market considerations, and their choices influence the chain in terms of price, volume, transportation, and many other factors. Breeding involves fashioning all sorts of characteristics—color, longevity, scent, stem length and strength, resistance to fungi or pests—and is dedicated to generating aesthetics. But breeders are somewhat insulated from the unpredictable swings of the market, like when snowstorms that keep consumers from buying inflict damages on florists, importers, exporters, and others along the chain. Sales do affect the breeder’s profits, but breeders are less vulnerable to market vagaries. They also earn royalties from the intellectual property rights and patents on their creations, which hooks their interests in policy debates to the world of high-tech multinationals, a power block that tends to be irrelevant or only of distant concern to florists.

But in the Netherlands both breeders and florists are organized, like other sectors of Dutch horticulture. They talk to each other and work together; they have formed collective institutions that protect shared interests through promotion, and legal and economic advocacy. So in addition to what they generally share—creating horticultural beauty—they cooperate, have mutual concerns, and engage in common practices. The Dutch florist’s organization is called the VBW (Vereniging Bloemist-Winkeliers); Dutch breeders have Dutch Creations, which is the association of leading horticultural breeders in the Netherlands, and CIOPORA, the International Community of Breeders of Asexually Reproduced Ornamental and Fruit Plants. The knowledge sharing and networking between breeders and florists is increasingly fluid, as demonstrated by the recent appointment of Bram Rijkers as Dutch Creations’ marketing manager from his former position as sales representative for the VBW.

Florists in the Netherlands are organized, and they have a recognized trade. Of the approximately 3,300 Dutch florists, the VBW enjoys a membership of nearly 2,000, which is over 60 percent of the total. Remarkably, this is seen as a low portion to be
involved; VBW director Marco Maasse says it’s because many bloemisten are independent-minded, and also because the organization lobbies for the whole sector, so even non-members enjoy some benefits from the VBW’s work. The VBW continues to grow, and Maasse hopes to make the florist’s sector larger, more organized, and better integrated. The sector earns one billion euro annually and employs 11,000 people (most of whom are part time or seasonal employees of established florists). 25 percent of florists buy directly from Dutch auctions, so in terms of horticultural networks and the auction community, they’re centrally positioned, and participate in the industry as both traders and florists. By promoting and crafting holidays like Mother’s Day, florists also carry on tradition (and incidentally, in the Netherlands, the average Mother’s Day purchase is 34 euro.) Many florists make a special effort to involve kids, bringing both boys and girls to the auction and to the shop, teaching them about the auction system, horticulture, arranging, and caring for flowers.

Due to their position straddling between the auction and the customer, beauty and the market, aesthetics and economics, florists have unique perspectives and often share thoughtful reflections on both practical concerns in Dutch horticulture and broader, abstract issues. In an interview with the Grote Handelsblad, for instance, Maase draws connections between price, value, worth, and beauty: “De bloemist is het beste kanaal dat waarde kan toevoegen. Het enige kanaal dat van een ‘steel met een bolletje erop’ een boodschap met emotie kan maken”60. (The florist is the best way to add value. It’s the only way that buying ‘a stem with a little bloom attached’ becomes an emotional purchase/transaction.) Maasse is equally clear about his pragmatic goals for the VBW. He wants the florist’s sector to be larger, more organized, and better integrated. A VBW campaign called ‘omarm de bloemist’ (embrace the florist) aims to make the role of florists better understood and more respected, and more essential to the horticultural business, by cooperating growers, florists, and buyers at FloraHolland. He also explains that the position of the florist in the supply chain is growing due to strong cooperation with partners and other members in the chain. As well, individual florists and respect for their profession has expanded through promotional events like Florist of the Year and numerous awards sponsored by FloraHolland, the Keukenhof, local bloemencorsos, and many other venues. But above all, success as a florist in the Netherlands depends on “personal contacts,” according to Maasse, speaking at the Floriade conference in early 2011. In direct and indirect ways, personal contacts lead to greater exposure, enhanced reputation, and more and better opportunities. But publicity is also crucial. The Flower Council of Holland recently celebrated that one of its

59 Surprised by this ‘low’ figure, interviewers have repeatedly asked Maasse why more florists aren’t part of the VBW.
60January/February 2010, Groot Handelsblad: 6
campaigns reached 100 million people, mostly in Europe, via saturation in new social
media, areas the horticultural sector has moved into actively. (To to name just a small
example, news of Seyd and Signer’s Wunderkammer circulated via announcements and
clips on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.)

Although Dutch florists have embraced the latest technology, and only began to
organize themselves in the late 1990s, their profession is not new. Flower arranging has
a long history in the Netherlands, as floral still lifes illustrate. During the seventeenth
century as well, a number of unique vases and other objects and techniques of display
came into being. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Delft ceramicists
produced lavish flower pagodas, which were stacks of dishes mounting to towers that
allowed for tall, ostentatious floral displays. In the connected worlds of design, art,
fashion, and horticulture, these objects, too, have lately been recreated to reference a
‘classic’ past of the Dutch Golden Age. Most recently, these flower pagodas
commemorated the renovation of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. (And the
reproductions were made by artisans from the Royal Tichelaar Makkum—an enterprise
itself with Golden Age roots, as one of the Netherlands’ oldest companies). Also on the
contemporary agenda, the World Horticultural Expo to be held in Venlo in 2012 seems
to reference the Golden Age, if only obliquely, with its forecast “theater of green
emotion” that hopes to create “een wereld van vervreemding en verwondering” (a world
of estrangement and wonder)61.

The designer of this theme, Anouk van Dijk, is the daughter of successful florist
Marcel van Dijk, who is also participating in the show. According to Marcel, arrangers
are working closely with growers, so that “we doen het om de sector zo goed mogelijk
neer te kunnen zetten” (to help to present the [horticultural] sector as best we can). This
point bears emphasis because it expresses a common attitude throughout the industry:
working together for the benefit of a broad collective. It’s hard to envision a florist in
the U.S., for instance, showing this communal spirit for the whole sector, but in the
Dutch horticultural industry, such sentiment is normal, even tacitly expected. Recently
at the European Conference of Florists (Florint), VBW’s former manager, Toine
Zwitserlood, made a presentation on the value of the trade associations in the
horticultural industry, in which he underscored and expanded on the sense of
community fostered by Dutch professional networks. He argued that a compelling
explanation people join trade organizations is not merely that they help protect their
interests, but—as with our attraction to flowers—for emotional reasons. Membership
serves many needs, which he listed: a feeling of solidarity; standing stronger together; a
feeling of ownership and involvement; it’s ours, for us and by us; a feeling of security;
protection from outside threats; a feeling of profit, a lot of added value in it for me. The

61 Bloemenkrant May 24, 2011: 18
ultimate goal of collectives like Dutch Creations, the VBW, and FloraHolland, said Zwitserlood, is to “create a real florist society”\(^{62}\). As both means and end, collectives impart meaning and belonging, encourage the sharing of ideas, and instill a strong feeling of democracy.

In myriad ways, then, growers and traders are essential to the industry, and to FloraHolland, but likewise, breeders and florists are also integral to Dutch horticultural institutions, traditions, and promotional events. The annual Horti Fairs in Amsterdam highlight flower arranging presentations, and these are often co-sponsored by both florists and breeders. At 2010’s Horti Fair, the most photographed and celebrated arrangement came from one of the Netherlands’ biggest breeders, Schreurs. It was a sphere of crimson roses whose long stems were attached in a spoke structure that visitors could watch florists Joop and Ria van Leeuwen assemble. With its strength and near-perfect symmetry, the architecture of this ball of large-headed Red Naomi roses seemed to defy physical laws. It resembled a dandelion going to seed, or chandelier lit by the bright red bulbs just opening. Other florists working for Shreurs and Dutch Creations (the umbrella breeder’s organization) have recently made more striking exhibits, such as Stef Adriaenssen’s “Flight of the gerberas,” which uses 3,500 red gerberas and mimics aeronotics in a sort of Rube Goldberg machine. The Flight’s movement comes from a rotating ramp of welded steel that emerges from its container and floats to the door, in order to portray “that the Gerberas are getting away from the greenhouse of the grower to the consumer!” Both the description and the enthusiasm of that exclamation point are notable. Adriaenssen conceived of this wacky contraption, in other words, as a kind of meta-commentary on—or imaginative model of—the production of horticultural commodities.

Breeding companies employ florists, so through both artistry and science, they mold horticultural aesthetics. Their organizations are also major industry power players. Their decisions and their lobbying of policymakers have global consequences. To see how this is so, consider that eighty percent of roses sold worldwide today come from just eight breeding companies. (And, as of 2010, there are only thirty-five rose breeding companies in the world.) As has been the trend with auctions, Dutch breeding companies have merged to become exponentially larger, more powerful, and more effective in influencing segments of the production chain. Armada provides one example. Forged in 2006 from five leading companies in breeding, propagation, marketing, and the sales of ornamentals, one of Armada’s advantages is to be able to finesse different parts of the production at once. Among other activities, their breeding division pushes the interests of breeder’s rights, licenses, and the sales of cuttings and young plants outside Europe (notably India). Many breeders who are part of Dutch

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\(^{62}\) Florint online presentation, 2010
Creations also belong to CIOPORA, the main international flower and plant breeder’s organization, 60 percent of whose membership is in the EU. Devoted to protecting property rights, today CIOPORA counts more than 130 members from five continents. Though female florists are common in the Netherlands, the industry can not count many active female breeders. One exception was the creator of the Ayaan tulip, the dark maroon-brown bloom named for Ayaan Hirsi Ali, by Lydia Boots of Lybo Hybridizing, who hybridized ‘Gavota’ and ‘Gander’s Rhapsody’ (two other well-regarded flowers). Due to it’s dark mystique and the ongoing attempts to make a ‘black’ tulip, the Ayaan earned Boots some market and industry recognition. Though respected, not everyone thinks breeders (male or female) deserve their often exalted positions; some believe breeders do little more than levy a tax on grower’s hard work. But in trade magazines and among horticultural executives, breeding has been called “the engine of endurable floriculture”63. Given breeder’s market strength, I was not surprised to find ambivalent attitudes among growers and traders regarding their role in the industry.

By contrast, across the industry, florists’ contributions seem widely appreciated. People see them as artists or craftspeople, figures who make beauty with beauty. Floral arrangement is thought of as “puur handwerk,” a pure craft or skill, as a sort of affectionate manual labor, so that “de bloemen groeien uit je vingers” (flowers grow out of your fingers), as is sometimes said. Craft, Richard Sennett has argued, belongs to the category of social capital, and is a meaningful but neglected part of such capital (2008). With craftwork, knowledge, skills, and values are passed on through social interaction, something which occurs between individuals, but individuals operating within institutions (either narrowly or broadly defined). To acquire these skills, one participates in tradition. Whether as carpenters, lab technicians, or conductors, craftspeople dedicate themselves not to pursuing profit, but primarily to their work, since that provides a sense of intrinsic value (Sennett 2008). For the individual performing the work, craftsmanship offers “emotional rewards:” “they take pride in their work” (certainly the case for many doing horticultural arranging), and “people are anchored in tangible reality” (Sennett 2008: 21). Though Sennet doesn’t mention florists, it’s hard to find a reality more tangible and more elemental than earth, water, plants, and flowers.

People who insist that ornamental flowers are superfluous because they serve no survival purpose may also object to the notion that florists are craftsmen, since unlike carpenters or weavers, they don’t produce something pragmatic for daily tasks. But even if one accepts that their work isn’t ‘practical’, is such criticism really relevant, since an aesthetic sense and a connection to tradition are clearly important to many of these artisans? Besides, taking the assumptions of this point of view to their conclusion, doesn’t the vision of a society without art or beauty, in which everything has only a

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63 FloraCulture International February 2007: 2
functional use, belong to the world dystopic science fiction, or to the policies of certain dictatorships, and not to a thoughtful discussion of the political economy of flowers? Florists I have spoken to see flowers as an essential aspect of daily experience, and not only because their livelihood depends on flowers. While it is a business, and many Dutch florists have a family background in the horticultural industry, most of them see their choice of profession as one option among many. They’re florists not for the money or for lack of other opportunities, but because they enjoy the work. “My life is surrounded by beauty,” several have told me. And it is not just the abundance of blooms and plants that brings satisfaction. Making a personal emotional connection with people around their love or grief can also feel tremendously fulfilling. The craft has its own rewards, as well: it’s gratifying to create arrangements just to be beautiful, to please the senses, to appeal to aesthetic and emotional needs, or hopes, or expectations. For Sennett, craftwork is seated more in community than in the market. Moreover, working with inanimate objects “turn[s] the craftsman outward;” it depends on curiosity, openness, and in some ways is the opposite of commercial work (Sennett 2008: 289). Peter Otto, the manager of ‘cooperative affairs’ at FloraHolland, drew an important contrast between the commercial flowers and craftwork: “big chains like Albert Heijn sell products; florists sell emotion.”

That’s the defining characteristic of floral commodities, their aesthetic and emotional appeal. Some of FloraHolland’s promotional materials state this straightforwardly: “emotion is reserved only for the versatile and colorful commodity that forms the core of this powerful trade empire.” FloraHolland Aalsmeer is not just a commercial center for sales and distribution, but an important node in the network of florists and the production of horticultural aesthetics. It is a critical resource for florists, and a big player in floral design. FloraHolland regularly hosts florists and each week displays new arrangements at the entrances to its auctions, but at the site itself also, florists come together, and interact with other sectors of the chain as both florists and traders buying through the clock.

Other florists that don’t buy through the clock, do purchase garden supplies, cut flowers, and plants through FloraHolland’s wholesale center, Cultra, with its “cash and carry” on-site facility. Located in one section of the auction building, it is a world unto itself, with forty-five thousand square meters of space. It includes two wholesalers of cut and dried flowers (Weerman and Dobbeflowers), a wholesaler of indoor and garden plants (Waterdrinker), two wholesalers of hardware and floral supplies (Duif and Basic&Trends), one wholesaler of packaging (Zwapak) and one wholesaler of hydroponic plants (Nieuwkoop Europe). In Cultra, one encounters florists not only from the Netherlands and neighboring Germany and Belgium, but occasionally too from other places around the world. One April morning, I happened on a group of Slovenian floral teachers hosted by someone from the Dutch Flower Academy. They were
watching a floral design demonstration, set up on some tables outside Waterdrinker, and one of them told me he was less impressed with the arrangements than with the quality of gladiolas and other flowers used. Purchased that morning at auction, they were fresher than many of the flowers with which he was accustomed to working.

As an institution, FloraHolland popularizes floral aesthetics, not only through these numerous connections with florists, but by sponsoring regular aesthetic competitions, and through cooperation with organizations and institutions. The Boerma Instituut (Holland’s International Floral Design School), for instance, sits just 1500 meters from FloraHolland Aalsmeer and is housed in a former greenhouse. Another instance of how horticultural institutions are embedded in local communities, Aalsmeer residents often host international students attending the Boerma Instituut. Floral training gives instruction and experience on the gamut of issues that florists face, from basic knowledge of horticulture and the use of chemicals and pesticides to color and composition in the art of arranging. They also learn the techniques for dyes and glitter which adorned that compelling purple rose at the 2008 Horti Fair.

**Horticultural Pageantry in the Netherlands: Bloemencorsos and the Keukenhof**

Florists and breeders take active part in two prominent horticultural traditions in the Netherlands, *bloemencorsos* and the Keukenhof gardens, both of which are well known for their extravagant aesthetics. Taking place between March and September, these seasonal events have very different styles and appeal, but are complimentary. *Bloemencorsos* attract locals, the Keukenhof draws tourists, and the industry markets and celebrates them both.

In early August, if you pass through Westland’s verdant countryside, you might find fleets of colorful floats gliding through the waterways. In 2008, over the course of three days, along the 70 kilometer stretch of canals between Delft, Vlaardingen, and Maassluis, over 250,000 people assembled to watch hundreds of performers on dozens of barges sliding by. One such 20 meter barge called Chinese Wall featured a dragon-headed prow and a spike-tailed stern of tightly packed green carnations that snaked through the water. On board, situated among an abundance of flowers and crenellated cardboard parapets, were four men and two women with white painted faces, all of whom dressed in ebony and cherry silk robes, and sported multi colored hats or black ‘Asian’ wigs. With his arms folded and hands hidden in his sleeves, the man posing as a Chinese emperor stood above a banner which read “Carpe Diem,” and from time to time, he bowed. A few meters away, another float, called “Origin of the World,” hosted five ethereal figures wearing loose fitting gowns that riffled in the wind, each person donning a hat with broad curling horns, or butterfly wings, or antennae with matching aquamarine dishes bouncing at the ends. Each boat was loaded with thousands of
flowers—gladiolas, gardenias, gerberas, dahlias, and more, in all manner of chartreuse, electric pink, indigo, orange...And thousands of people crowded along the banks of the canals, watching, cheering, lounging in lawn chairs, and sipping beer in the sun.

This frame of the floating parade represents a snapshot from just one of the Netherlands’ bloemencorsos. An even better-attended procession, Westland’s, drew over 300,000 spectators in 2011, an impressive number given that the Westland municipality of south Holland has a population of only 100,000. (For over sixty years, until 2007, Aalsmeer had its own corso, but decided to end it and join forces with that of Westland.) Each year, the bloemencorsos feature a different theme using flowers, plants, fruits, and vegetables produced in the region’s glasshouses, in pageants that include music, performances, contests, elaborate costumes, spectacular designs and other arresting decorations. The flower parade’s origins date from the early twentieth century (about the same time as Aalsmeer’s flower auctions) and their growth over the past hundred years mirrors the rise of the horticultural industry, which sponsors and encourages them. Though the flower parades began partly as a way to foment popular support for the industry, and marketing remains an important element in the events, many see the bloemencorsos as part of a timeless tradition, something echt-Dutch. Like tulip naming ceremonies, they are a recent invention. But unlike tulip naming ceremonies, which are publicity stunts for unveiling new tulips and are attended by industry executives, breeders, politicians, and royalty, bloemencorsos are widely beloved, involving dozens of local civic groups (baton-twirling troops, theater and musical organizations, neighborhood clubs) as participants, and many more people as spectators and supporters. Participants and onlookers alike revel in the imaginative spectacle, and florists relish the chance to come up with something that might stand out in such outstanding company. One of the florists I met, Geertje Stienstra, talked about the excitement and challenge of designing something for a float. “Whatever you make, it has to be able to withstand several days in sun, wind, rain, whatever summer weather the Netherlands brings. But it should also be elaborate, colorful, playful, creative, and unexpected—and new.”

Stienstra is a member of the VBW, is featured on the Dutch Creations website, and often buys flowers and plants at FloraHolland Aalsmeer’s Cultra, which was where I met her one December afternoon. She studied flower arranging for four years, and has been working professionally for almost twenty years, specializing in weddings, funerals, shop decorations, and demonstrations. In 2002, she designed several floats in Eelde’s bloemencorso, and has performed demonstrations at Horti Fairs, and placed well in many competitive arranging contests, including 2001’s “100 Bridal Bouquets for Maxima.” Asked what is the most important quality of a good florist, she pursed her lips and frowned for a moment, then said “I guess more than the knowledge, colors, composition and all that stuff, which matters a lot, the most important thing is to have
the right feeling. The right feeling for the event, the people involved, sensing the right flowers to communicate that.” Aesthetics should always work to evoke the appropriate emotions, she maintains, whether in a bloemencorso, at a funeral, or among the gardens of the Keukenhof.

**Bloemencorsos** are about honoring the hard work of those in horticulture and celebrating the commodities they produce; **bloemencorsos** are also about excess, abundance, craft, and beauty. Occurring on long, leisurely summer days, they reference tradition, and among the crowds of onlookers, evoke pleasure, nostalgia, and amazement at the creativity and humor of the designs. They are flamboyant and easy-going galas. By contrast, the Keukenhof presents a far less convivial atmosphere, but one equally steeped in Dutch horticultural tradition. Constructed on the grounds of a fifteenth century countess’s estate, the Keukenhof is touted as the largest garden in the world. (The land was used for hunting and to grow herbs for the castle kitchen [*keuken* in Dutch], hence Keukenhof). In the seventeenth century, VOC captain Adriaen Maertensz Block built a second castle on the estate for a summer home. Today, the Keukenhof’s carefully managed aesthetics are striking, controlled, and have an air of refinement, a whiff of the elite. These are some of the Keukenhof’s sights: 50-meter parallel stripes of red and white daffodils edged with ferns; a multicolored tulip mosaic that recreates one of Rembrandt’s best known self portraits; a row of seventeenth-century tulip hybrids spaced along a walkway like votive candles. Located not far from Haarlem and Leiden in the Dune and Bulb region (Duin-en-Bollenstreek), the Keukenhof is devoted to the Dutch bulb growing sector, with tulips being the main attraction, and only tulips of Dutch origin. In 1949, with the hearty endorsement of Lisse’s mayor, a group of growers and buyers began a sort of garden attraction on 32 hectares of land then owned by Duke Van Linden. Each grower had his own stand to promote his flowers, and today the format hasn’t changed much—at least, it’s still a major showcase for Dutch growers and Dutch flowers more generally. The Keukenhof’s ambience is one of wealth, but also of amazement with what nature and the cultivation of nature can produce. In addition to emphasizing tradition and selected aspects of Dutch history, the Keukenhof maintains this ‘well-bred’ impression by enlisting the support of high profile figures such as models and actors, but especially through Dutch royalty and the endorsements and participation of ambassadors. One recent illustration involved the Keukenhof’s 2010 theme, *From Russia with Love*, when the Netherlands’ ambassador to Russia, His Excellency Mr. K.G. Gevorgian, showed up for a photo, and helped place the finishing touches on a flower bulb mosaic of St Basil’s Cathedral.

The Keukenhof is an important institution for Dutch horticultural aesthetics, but its audience is largely international, unlike the bloemencorso’s, which are mostly attended by locals. More tourists visit the Keukenhof than any other site in the Netherlands (870, 000 in 2009; more extraordinary still, since it’s only open for two
months per year). The Keukenhof not only promotes flowers and bulbs, but markets a sort of elevated and elegant ‘Dutchness’ imbued with a stately and prosperous past, a sense of distinction via flowers that as a tourist you’re invited to savor. But of course, the price per ticket for this experience is 14.50 euro and the savoring, it is hoped, will whet the appetite for horticultural purchases. The Keukenhof’s managing director Piet de Vries explained in 2010 how he hopes that the tourists’ visit “has encouraged them to plant bulbs in their gardens and to buy more fresh cut flowers. Also we hope they really enjoyed the event. Then they will act like true Keukenhof ambassadors, stating that if you didn’t visit the Keukenhof you didn’t visit Holland”\textsuperscript{64}. But what vision of Holland are they endorsing and nurturing?

A conservative institution in the sense that it aims to preserve flowers and floral traditions from the past, the politics of the Keukenhof also seem to tilt to the right side of the political spectrum. In addition to tulips named for first ladies and European royalty, some of their tulip naming ceremonies pay homage to nationalist figures in the Netherlands. In 2003, for instance, exactly one year after his murder, the Keukenhof unveiled the Pim Fortuyn Tulip in a solemn ceremony. Tulips with these sorts of designations have special marks of distinction: they’re assigned identities, and their clean, sleek, ‘classic’ aesthetics become associated with a politics, and a world view grounded in a ‘timeless’ image of Dutchness that collapses a sort of Golden Age kitch and yearning with a contemporary xenophobic outlook. But while the tulip names and ceremonies communicate values, their actual influence and the depth of their resonance seem dubious, since few consumers identify their tulips by name. What matters to florists, traders, exporters, and of course consumers is not that the flower is called Ayaan or Fortuyn, or that it was blessed by Queen Beatrix or Queen Paulowna. Nevertheless, these ceremonies and aesthetics adorn powerful, conservative institutions and figures. As Susan Sontag has shown, artistic forms can serve to naturalize, beautify, and aestheticize even some of the most austere and severely cruel political outlooks (Sontag 1980: 73-109). The Keukenhof emphasizes one face of Dutch horticultural aesthetics; bloemencorsos bring out another.

Taken together, these two institutions represent contrasting images of the industry and the nation. But regardless of whether the venue is a bloemencorso or the Keukenhof, flowers in the Netherlands are integral to views of the continuity of the past and the future—tradition, ritual, and aesthetic and economic legacies all contribute to the flowers’ power of distinction. Flowers are neither understood nor consumed as representing a single monolithic emotion or sensibility, but these two contrasting flower traditions represent the general range of what is found. So floral commodities possess a combination of low and high, humble and royal; they’re homespun and earthy yet noble

\textsuperscript{64} FloraCulture International March 2010: 8-9
and eminent. The product has the aura of salt of the earth cultivars and the elegance of royal families, the Pope, and heads of state. Flowers have the rustic roots of an ordinary grower and are blessed by Queens and honored by presidents and prime ministers. In this way, they’re presented as something both exquisite and ordinary, exalted and run of the mill, but in both senses, and above all, they’re traditional. Their power of distinction is not limited, flat, or unwavering, where a particular flower in a particular situation necessarily holds a particular meaning. With this in mind, it seems Bourdieu may have overstated or reified some of the specific links between goods and tastes.

His analysis of the complex interplay of class and culture assumed a uniformity among groups and norms that no longer exists in France, where in the 1960s he carried out his study. Similarly, in most other comparable societies, the homogeneity and predictability Bourdieu found has been replaced by variety and several forms of material and cultural diversity. In the Netherlands and much of western Europe, immigration and the internationalization of production have considerably altered socio-economic dynamics. Contemporary societies in many respects have grown increasingly fragmented and patterns of consumption have blurred so that class and taste don’t align as neatly as they once did (Miller 2008: 288). Yet class divisions remain as stark, or starker, than ever in wealthy countries and between wealthy and poor ones, and Bourdieu’s general conclusions still seem valid, and as relevant as ever. Values around taste and aesthetic sensibility have special resonance in the Netherlands, with its strong connections between economics and aesthetics and its unusually broad conception of art.

In fact, the notion of aesthetics in the Netherlands extends beyond horticulture, painting, writing, design and the plastic arts to include the very land itself (Shetter 1987: 31-40). The Dutch word *kunstwerk* means artwork, or a singular work of art, a masterpiece, but the term has a wider use in the Netherlands than its literal English translation. In addition to painting or pottery, *kunstwerk* also refers more generally to projects of human ingenuity, like bridges or dikes. The most conspicuous example would probably be the Delta Works, a vast water management project with hundreds of miles of dikes and over three hundred structures, including dams, sluices, locks, and storm surge barriers. Noting the grand scale of this human achievement, many have likened this feat of engineering to the Statue of Zeus at Olympia, the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus, and the other five Wonders of the World. But *kunstwerk* also applies to more ordinary infrastructural projects like polders and canals. That the same word may be used to describe sculpture, poetry, and human-made modifications to the environment suggests quite a dynamic and flexible understanding of what is meant by a work of art (Shetter 1996: 196). In this way, there’s an artistic dimension to broader and seemingly unrelated aspects of Dutch horticulture such as the steering policies to manage space and infrastructure (as with Greenports). Even the Dutch word for
fertilizer, *kunstmest*, uses the word for art (*kunst*) in an abbreviation for *kunstmatig*, or artificial.

**The Language of Flowers**

In a country where the terrain itself is seen as a sort of artwork—something forged and modified through cooperative planning and aesthetic vision—the flowers produced from that land have particular distinction, whether they bloom out of the soil or come to perfection in a greenhouse. These commodities have occupied a prominent place in the national imaginary—through still life painting, spacial planning in the past and today, and via Dutch horticulture’s densely overlapping networks, institutions, and organizations. Dutch flowers stand in the foreground of the contemporary cultural landscape, a place earned through the stoking of Golden Age nostalgia, the popularity of invented traditions like *bloemencorsos*, and the powerful, high profile celebrants of tulip ceremonies. But in whatever context, flowers are never “inert,” to use Mauss’s word; they’re bound up with emotion, a sense of beauty, cultural meanings, and historical significance (1990 [1950]: 49). In fact, floral value and flowers themselves are so deeply insinuated, so intimately tangled with the varieties of sentiment, daily life, and economic practices that they may best be grasped (or may only be described?) through figurative language. Are flowers ever just flowers? As Michael Pollan observed, “This stands for that: flowers by their very nature seem to track in metaphor...”, whether in popular traditions, the terminology of botanists, or the imagination of writers and artists (2001: 70). Metaphor pleases with its unexpected connections that nevertheless seem true; it often strikes us as beautiful the way metaphor makes the strange familiar and the familiar strange. In a sense, this is what Dutch still life did: in those paintings, things are so utterly themselves that they seem to glow from within with the world’s many aspects. They refer to much beyond themselves.

In mid seventeenth century Holland, tulips and tulip bulbs became symbols of economic disaster caused by speculative greed. They stood for a range of market values that ultimately triumphed but were also popularly scorned. Today tulips have different meanings, but are no less figuratively rich. They’re practically synonymous with the Netherlands, associated with Dutch character, and even the popular narrative of tulipmania is a story people love to tell. As a tall-tale, it approaches the status of a creation story, a narrative of the origins of modern Dutch society. It sheds light on the zany folly of Dutch excess, a calamity that’s safely distant and light, but also relevant enough to gain traction and reliably evoke smiles. However, it’s not smiles, but similes that best characterize discussions of flowers. They seem to demand comparison: they’re always like something else, even in discussing their social and historical place in the Netherlands. They’re “social hieroglyphs,” or we must properly understand them as
“cultural iconography,” and appreciate how this Golden Age history contributed to their “social biography”.

Although specific meanings to people vary over centuries and geographies, almost everywhere flowers hold rich associative and allegorical significance, and are often central to rituals of union and death, conceptions of beauty, cosmological order and the afterlife, and emotional expression (Goody 1993). Among “prehistorical and historic peoples of the Southwest and Mesomerica,” for instance, anthropologist Jane Hill concluded that “a complex system of spirituality centered on metaphors of flowers formed an integral part of [their] cultural repertoire” after studying Uto-Aztecan speech communities (Hill 1992: 117). For these people, the transcendent spiritual realm was a sort of utopia partly in and partly outside of ordinary life, which Hill called the Flower World. Their languages and cosmology are rich in horticultural metaphors. Though the Uto-Aztecan Flower World may seem far removed, some of the scope of this should feel familiar to those fluent in our dominant culture’s repertoire, where floral metaphors are deeply embedded in custom and language. We know that our reality is partly shaped by conceptual and linguistic practices and habits, by what has famously been called metaphors we live by (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

A shy but appealing girl is a wallflower. A dull person is a potted plant. A vegetable is someone who has lost mental and physical capacity due to brain damage. Romance often buds or sprouts or blossoms, but the fruit of love may well wither on the vine. Seeds of hatred or friendship or other emotions may be planted and later ripen and are sown. When someone is angry, upset, or disapproving, they may shoot a withering glance. Powerful phenomena are said to be deeply rooted; to affect a violent change is to extirpate (to uproot). Social movements flourish, though history may judge the effects baneful or beautiful. Mao, launching the Hundred Flowers Campaign in 1957, declared: “Letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend is the policy for promoting progress in the arts and the sciences and a flourishing socialist culture in our land.” The list of examples could go on, but the basic point wouldn’t change: metaphors for flowers and plants are ensconced in English and many other languages. As uncontroversial as this seems, why it is the case remains a mystery. As Georges Bataille wrote in his well known essay “The Language of Flowers”: “It is surely impossible to use an abstract formula to account for the elements that can give the flower this quality” (1985: 15).

The ‘language of flowers’ was also a potent trope in nineteenth century Britain, where among certain classes different flowers and floral colors conveyed many messages, including respect and affection, fidelity and chastity, passion and romantic love. Though the specific meanings may have been new, the emotional communication of flowers was not. As Jack Goody has demonstrated, “Sexuality lies at the core of the flower’s existence and played a prominent part when it was taken up in human life”
Victorians were notoriously titillated by orchids; they found them prurient and blatantly sexual, and were part of the British empire’s domestic culture (Hansen 2000). In fact, botanist Joseph Banks’s lecherous exploits in Tahiti in the nineteenth century helped to cement a relationship that Patricia Fara has called “the Three Ss - Sex, Science and the State” (2003: 2). An overtly sexually repressed public was quite enchanted with horticulture’s graphic anatomies, alluring terminology, and explicit descriptions of fertilization.

Charles Darwin himself found orchids particularly thrilling and wrote about them enthusiastically. Though composed at the same time as On the Origin of Species, he decided his treatise on orchids did not fit with this volume. But he was convinced that “An examination of their many beautiful contrivances will exalt the whole vegetable kingdom in most persons’ estimation” (Darwin: 2). Sexual reproduction was of particular interest. Is it unrealistic to hear a little more than strait-laced, unmetaphoric diction in the ‘naked, sticky surfaces’ of his scientific writing, where for nine dramatic and minutely observed seconds he described the insertion of probosci to an orchid’s labellum? He effused: “Let a moth insert its proboscis (and we shall presently see how frequently the flowers are visited by Lepidoptera) between the guiding ridges of the labellum, or insert a fine bristle, and it is surely conducted to the minute orifice of the nectary, and can hardly fail to depress the lip of the rostellum; this being effected, the bristle comes into contact with the now naked and sticky under surface of the suspended saddle-formed disc...” (Darwin 25-26). Readers who might find this description slightly pornographic are not alone. Similar to the tulip’s sweeping popularity in the Netherlands, English Victorians pursued orchids with vigor and vim. They sought orchids from the Orinoco in Colombia to Papau New Guinea, and prized them at home through clubs, gardens, literature, and talk in elite circles. So-called ‘orchid fever’ or ‘orchid delirium’ took place in the context of Darwin’s On the Origin of Species, a wealthy expanding empire, and the accelerating science of botany. This British phenomena was connected to the nineteenth century global hunt for plants and flowers, what Andrea Wulf and others have called “colonial botany” (Hansen 2000: 49-68, Orlean 2000: 73-4, Wulf 2009). Orchids not only mesmerized Victorian society but have lately been called “the inflatable love dolls” of the plant kingdom (Pollan 2009). Clearly, metaphoric richness in horticulture is not at all unique to the Netherlands.

Nor is a supposed social mania based on flowers. Orchids and tulips aren’t the only flowers in history to be associated with social fashions, fads, or crazes. Ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans seriously valued flowers, sometimes to the point of covetousness, as in the Alexandrine fashion of Garlandomania, a popular ritual of crowning one’s lover’s head with roses (Goody 1993: 52). Nor was the passion for orchids anything new. Eric Hansen finds other examples of orchid fever as long ago as ancient China, and cites, among other evidence, Confucius’ (551-449 B.C.) declaration
of the orchid as “the king of fragrant plants” (2000: 61-62). And Hansen and Susan Orlean have demonstrated that a widespread passion for orchids is alive and well in the early twenty-first century (2000, 2000). But in earlier eras, people were gripped not just by flowers and representations of flowers but by the words used to describe them. The language was provocative, ticklish, and reinforced gender norms. Flowers were tempting and luscious but also coy and dainty, waiting passively for the active pollination of birds and bees.

Even in the contemporary lexicon of botanists, biologists, and naturalists, the anatomy, actions, and chemistry of flowers are virtually synonymous with gender and sexuality. Botanists sometimes refer to both tulip bulbs and the bifurcated tubers of some orchid seeds as “testiculates”. The nomenclature of early botanists and naturalists described stamens as floral penises and separate structures containing seeds as wombs, and still today, bees are “flying penises” (Bernhardt 1990: 18-19). At the center of the rose lies its ‘gynocium,’ from the Greek meaning women’s dwelling, and ‘male’ stamens encircle it. The gynocium of the rose is composed of ‘carpels,’ commonly known as ovaries, inside of which sit thousands of egg shaped bodies, called ovules. Ovules fertilized with the ‘sperm’ of pollen grain will mature to seed filled ‘fruits.’

Every flower represents a self contained reproductive compartment, a tiny reproductive factory. The closed carpel is what distinguishes a flower from a cone or seed pod, making angiosperms (literally, ‘seed’ sperma, inside a ‘vessel,’ angiosperm). All flowering plants are angiosperms, as opposed to pine or juniper or palm, which are gymnosperms. Flowers like roses that contain both stamens and carpels are ‘bisexual’ and ‘perfect,’ while flowers like marijuana are ‘unisex’ and ‘imperfect.’ Despite the provocative suggestions, these terms emerged from eighteenth century European botanists, a group not known for their progressive outlook on gender issues. They were a gentlemen class, men of wealth and/or privilege, who understood ‘man’s’ role as subduing, controlling, and dominating nature. “Perfect bisexuality” likely reflected their view of nature’s order, that an ideal flower was one where, as they described it, the male stamen “married” the female carpel by conveniently delivering its pollen within the same bloom (Bernhardt 1990: 29-31). It wasn’t until the nineteenth century that it was shown how few ‘perfect’ flowers actually ‘marry themselves’ Also, many flowering plants, like asparagus, have both perfect and imperfect blossoms—botanists call such an arrangement ‘polygamous.’

Other professionals devoted to flowers use terminology similarly thick with metaphor. On graduations, christenings, and other occasions when lilies are bought, sometimes florists ‘castrate’ them by snipping off their anthers in order to prevent any of the flower’s bright, greasy pollen from staining linens, gowns, and jackets. (Mischievously raising an eyebrow, an American florist once described the practice to me as “avoiding a Monica Lewinsky,” after her infamous semen-stained dress.) And the
sexual innuendo is more than a way of speaking. Flower images have also evoked passion: they’re no less frankly corporeal, and often seem flagrantly erotic. Once Carl Linnaeus had helped to make botany erotic in the public imagination through his new scientific system of identifying and defining plants by their sexual characteristics, the erotic voltage of the language as well as the accompanying images seduced many Europeans. It was not unusual for botanical textbooks to be considered pornographic. If it’s challenging to imagine how not only horticultural terminology but the pictures of flowers and plants could seem so risqué and sensual, just browse through some of the paintings of Georgia O’Keeffe. Today of course, one cannot talk about flowers, roses in particular, without also, sooner or later, talking about love, and sex.

But the carnal aspects of flowers don’t always refer to the erotic, especially when it comes to art. One case in point is visual artist Juan Manuel Echevarría. In work produced in the 1990s, he replaced the intimate inner parts of flowers with human bones to explore the violence and trauma of his native Colombia, as Michael Taussig has movingly described and examined (2003). In some, with stems arched like ribs, and stamen, phalanges, and sacrum combining to form a skeletal structure, Echevarría’s images “are so obviously not flowers” (Taussig 2003: 99). The rips and tears of their bodies are poignantly imagined, very human, and in addition to contemporary torture and colonial violence, reference Enlightenment science. The titles Echevarría gives his catalogue of mutilated and suffering flowers also plays off the latin names of these flowers. But with designations like Dracula Nosferatu, the tone is often tongue-in-cheek and irreverent, with a dose of wicked irony. When I look at these pictures that combine aspects of the natural world with human elements in a kind of faux-Enlightenment setting, I don’t think so much of the Inquisition or contemporary regimes that torture. Instead, I’m reminded of the dioramas of early Dutch anatomists—namely, those of Frederick Ruysch.

A figure connected not only to wonder cabinets and still life painting, Ruysch was one of the best known and most talented medical scientists of his day. His Wunderkammer, later purchased by Peter the Great, typifies the genre’s combination of science and art. Using human bones and organs, for instance, he created dioramas with moral messages, such as the leg bones of a fetus kicking the skull of a prostitute. He skillfully embalmed human organs and fetuses using secret recipes of his own divine that included wax, resin, talc, and cinnabar pigment (Gould and Purcell 1992: 21). Like his contemporary still life artists who painted flower vanitas that were often meditations on mortality, Ruysch created tableaux that instructed, entertained, and showed off his stunning dexterity, powers of observation, and techniques of preservation. He used the anatomies of dead people to create aesthetic objects and scenes that would endure—in a sense, defying death. His collection of oddities included a jar of baby Siamese twins, severed hands and heads set on beds of lace sewn by his daughter Rachel, and a box of
fly eggs removed from the anus of “a distinguished gentlemen who sat too long on the privy,” as his own description reads (Gould and Purcell 1992: 31). These and 2,000 other such presentations filled five rooms in his house on Amsterdam’s Bloemgracht, or Flower Canal. Contemporary viewers of what remains of his wonder cabinet are liable to find the displays ghoulishly outrageous, absurd, or deranged, particularly those involving fetuses and infants, but Ruysch regarded his work with tenderness and scientific rigor, as did many viewers of the time. Understanding his work in this way may be difficult, but is also kind of marvelous and even moving. With a drawn bow of desiccated artery, one fetal skeleton appears to play a tune on a miniature violin to accompany the lyrics “Ah fate, ah bitter fate.” Another skeletal figure grasps a string of pearls beside the caption “Why should I long for the things of this world?” (Gould and Purcell 1992: 31). This question is worth pausing over.

In unprecedented ways, longing for the things of this world was very much on people’s minds at that time, with the influx of so many new and exotic goods from around the globe and the emergence of a modern consumer culture in the United Provinces. For the Dutch of Ruysch’s period, it was a time of curiosity, anxiety, and wonder, dramatic economic growth and expansion of trade and broader knowledge of the planet, massive infrastructural projects at home, and the production of new art (including Dutch still life) at a staggering scale. From this vortex of activity and industry came the invention of commodities, and the origins of modern Dutch horticulture. Flowers were an essential part of early consumer culture that evolved in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century; as social objects and as luxury items, they were a part of ordinary life, they figured in the conception of the world system with Amsterdam at the center. Today some version of that history is recycled as a marketing tool, or a way of celebrating past glory, and in some ways, flowers function as props that lend reality to an imagined Dutch community set among theatrical parades adrift in countryside canals. But, although the bloemencorsos are local events and shape the creation of aesthetics, the ongoing evolution of floral commodities, in terms of aesthetics, production, and consumption takes place in a global arena with the Netherlands at the center. Not only growers and traders, but florists and breeders, are very conscious of this. And the work that goes into the marketing of a flower like the Horti Fair’s sparkly mauve rose comes from the lab or the greenhouse, but also emerges from social interactions and networks found in trade shows, clubs, meetings, and other aspects of Dutch horticulture’s close-knit social infrastructure.