The Art Market in the Dutch Golden Age

The first great free market economy for art occurred in the Dutch Republic of the 1600s. This republic was the most wealthy and urbanized nation at the time. Its wealth was based on local industries such as textiles and breweries and the domination of the global trade market by the Dutch East India Company. This economic power translated into a sizeable urban middle class with disposable income to purchase art.

As a result of the Protestant Reformation, and the absence of liturgical painting in the Protestant Church, religious patronage was no longer a major source of income for artists. Rather than working on commission, artists sold their paintings on an open market in bookstores, fairs, and through dealers.

This painting is an example of the "history painting" category.

Jan Steen (Dutch, 1626–1679). *Esther, Ahasuerus, and Haman,* about 1668. Oil on canvas; 38 x 47 1/16 in. John L. Severance Fund 1964.153

THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

Still-life paintings like this one were often less expensive than history paintings.

Adriaen Coorte (Dutch, about 1660–after 1707). *Gooseberries on a Table,* 1701. Oil on paper mounted on wood; 17 7/8 x 15 1/8 in. Leonard C. Hanna Jr. Fund 1987.32

(*continued from front*) This open market led to the rise in five major categories of painting: history painting, portraiture, scenes of everyday life, landscapes, and still-life paintings. The most prized, most expensive, and often largest in scale were history or narrative paintings, often with biblical or allegorical themes. Old Testament stories were popular, such as the museum's painting by Jan Steen, *Esther, Ahasuerus, and Haman.* Still-life painting, such as *Gooseberries on a Table* by Adriaen Coorte, tended to be less expensive and smaller.

Without the financial security of commissions, many artists specialized in very specific categories, such as only painting night landscapes or flower still lifes, which meant that artists could hone an individualized style and create a larger number of paintings within a trademark niche. Some artists, such as landscape artists, cultivated a simplified style that allowed them to have a high turnover of painting stock. Other artists painted in a painstaking style that required they charge more for their paintings. In the end, the market economy and the low profit margin for paintings sent some of the artists into other fields.

The Rise of the Dutch Republic

In 1556, the Low Countries, the region comprised of modern Belgium and the Netherlands, was transferred from the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V to his son Phillip II of Spain. This transfer of power dramatically affected the region.

For Charles, the Low Countries were not only his birthplace but also an important source of wealth from the region's rich textile industry and trade market. The early 1500s was the period of the Reformation in the Catholic church, and many regions in Europe, including parts of the Low Countries, were becoming Protestant. Charles was keen to keep his beloved Low Countries Catholic, so he implemented legislation against anti-Catholic sentiment.

In his reign, the foreign-born Phillip II continued his father's policies of anti-Protestantism, increased taxation, and centralization of power. While the people of the Low Countries had seen Charles as a native son, Phillip was an outsider who spoke little Dutch and had never lived in the region. The continuation of his father's policies led to an outright revolt that would come to be called the 80 Years War. In 1579, the northern portion of the Low Countries seceded, creating the foundation of the Dutch Republic. Despite the ongoing war in the region until 1648, it was a period of relative peace and prosperity in the newly freed north.

The new Dutch Republic drew Protestant intellectuals, merchants, brewers, and artists from the regions of the Low Countries that remained under Catholic Spanish rule. This influx of a skilled population led to a strong economy, a market for art, and a large workforce to create art.

The map shows the holdings of Phillip II of Spain prior to the 80 Years War.

These maps show the progression of the 80 Years War. In 1568, William of Orange, a wealthy Protestant nobleman, led the revolt against Phillip II of Spain that would begin the 80 Years War. Seven northern provinces declared independence from Spain in 1579. Close inspection of the maps shows that while there was intermittent warfare until 1648, there was also relative political stability in some of the most economically prosperous regions of the Dutch Republic, including the province of Holland with its major city, Amsterdam.

1584–89

Dutch Holdings
Spanish Holdings
Current political borders

Amsterdam
NETHERLANDS
BELGIUM
GERMANY
LUXEMBOURG
FRANCE

1648

Amsterdam
NETHERLANDS
BELGIUM
GERMANY
LUXEMBOURG
FRANCE