

The Dutch Golden Age (Geneva, 31 May–2 Jun 18)

University of Geneva, May 31–Jun 2, 2018

Deadline: Oct 1, 2017

Jan Blanc

The Dutch Golden Age: a new aurea ætas? The revival of a myth in the seventeenth-century Republic

In 1719, the painter Arnold Houbraken voiced his regret about the end of the prosperity that had reigned in the Dutch Republic around the middle of the seventeenth century. He indicates this period as especially favorable to artists and speaks of a 'golden age for art' (Gulde Eeuw voor de Konst). But what exactly was Houbraken talking about? The word eeuw is ambiguous: it could refer to the length of a century as well as to an undetermined period, relatively long and historically undefined. In fact, since the sixteenth century, the expression gulde(n) eeuw or goude(n) eeuw referred to two separate realities as they can be distinguished today: the 'golden century', that is to say a period that is part of history; and the 'golden age', a mythical epoch under the reign of Saturn, during which men and women lived like gods, were loved by them, and enjoyed peace and happiness and harmony with nature.

Following Hesiod, Virgil and Ovid, the principal authors of the Renaissance evoked the myth of a golden age and presented it as a model for the ideal society. This was equally the case for the young Republic of the United Provinces. From the sixteenth century onwards, Dutch artists expressed the desire to revive the golden age of ancient art. This mythical revival could likewise serve as a justification of the political choices of the Seven Provinces. This is apparent when, in 1604, Karel van Mander remarks that it is necessary that the "kings" and "lords" are "fair and wise in the countries that they govern" and that "man" enjoys a "safe, calm and joyous life thanks to the application of good laws and unbending justice", so that one may speak of a 'golden age' (gulden Eeuwe). More in general the reference to the golden age functioned as a statement about the prosperity in the Dutch Republic.

Within the context of that which we might call an 'imagined community of the golden age' – following the words of Benedict Anderson (1983) – historians, philosophers, lawyers and theologians but even more so painters, poets and playwrights were mobilized in the seventeenth century to participate in the formation of the Dutch Golden Age. Organized within the project "Un Siècle d'Or? Repenser la peinture hollandaise du XVIIe siècle" (2017-2021), this conference is devoted to the artistic construction of the Dutch Golden Age during the seventeenth century. It will address four themes with regard to the Dutch Golden Age: the myth, the role of time, of space and of society.

1. The Golden Age and its myths

In the introduction of the conference we seek to define the use and functioning of myths in the construction of historical and political imaginaries in early modern Europe, specifically the myth of the golden age in the United Provinces during the seventeenth century.

2. The 'time' of the Dutch Golden Age

The first aspect of the Dutch reinterpretation of the golden age that will be addressed is that of the 'time' of the myth, in other words: the manner in which the seventeenth-century Dutchmen conceived and constructed the relation between their 'golden age' and that of the Ancients. Did Dutch artists see and construct the Golden Age as a mythical past or rather as a radiant future? In which artistic disciplines is the concept of the Golden Age most discernible and which interpretation is pervasive (e.g. nostalgic, utopist, presentist)?

3. The 'space' of the Dutch Golden Age

We will also reflect on the imaginary spaces of the Golden Age. The myth of the Golden Age was initially articulated within the context of Greek and Latin mythological literature. These landscapes were thus originally associated with the characteristics and topoi of ideal landscapes of the Classical Antiquity and the Mediterranean. Was this image of a primitive, pastoral, golden age central in artistic representations of the subject; what were the consequences of such an interpretation (e.g. for depictions of urban life); how was the idyllic image communicated to non-Europeans? Or rather, did Dutch painters aim to construct the image of another type of golden age, more idiosyncratic and in line with the social, economic and environmental reality of the Dutch Republic?

4. The 'society' of the Dutch Golden Age

The subject of the place of nature in the Golden Age automatically leads to questions about its culture, that is to say: the societal model that such a myth could or should propagate. Several interpretations of society in a golden age existed: optimist (John Locke), 'erotic communism' (Ernst Robert

Curtius) pessimist and restrictive (Erasmus, Adriaan van de Venne, Thomas Hobbes), classless or hierarchical (Plato), paradoxical (Simon Schama), etc. How were these versions of the societal model reflected in literature and visual arts? What was the place of money and wealth in the Dutch Golden Age?

Proposals

Each paper will be twenty minutes. Presentations and discussions will be in French and English; passive knowledge of these two language is thus advisable.

Proposals consist of a title and an abstract (max. 250 words), a bibliography related to the subject and a short CV (max. 100 words). Please submit your proposal to jan.blanc@unige.ch before October 1st, 2017.

Organizers

Prof. Jan Blanc (Université de Genève), in collaboration with Dr. Léonie Marquaille (Université de Lausanne) and Dr. Marije Osnabrugge (Université de Genève), within the context of the project « Un Siècle d'Or ? Repenser la peinture hollandaise du XVIIe siècle » (2017-2021).

For the full call for papers and further information, see

<https://www.unige.ch/lettres/armus/istar/siecledor/evenements/colloques/dutch-golden-age-new-aurea-aetas/>

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