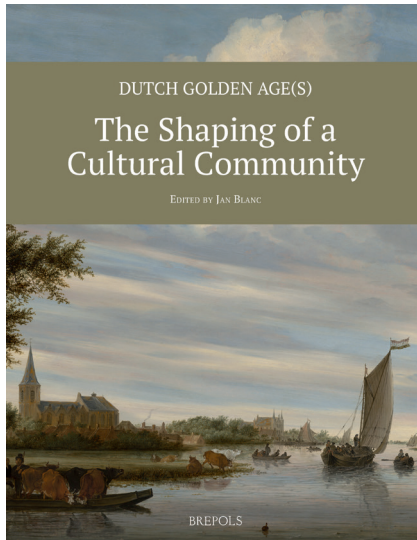


Review

Jan Blanc (ed.), *Dutch Golden Age(s). The Shaping of a Cultural Community*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2020, 243 pp. ISBN 9782503591070.



‘Is it ill-advised, and perhaps even dangerous, to devote a research project and a book series to the notion of the “Dutch Golden age” in our day and age?’ asks Jan Blanc in his closing essay of this volume. From my own experience, as a curator of the Amsterdam Museum that announced to stop using the term in September 2019, it is easy to recall some of the ‘dangers’ Blanc is referring to. Questioning the term ‘Golden Age’ is also to ask questions about the very cultural community the term is related to, and quite some people will not take that lightly, and get upset or even angry. Still, to answer Blanc’s question: no, it is not ill-advised, nor even dangerous (although certainly uncomfortable at times). It is most of all very necessary and overdue to examine the historical terminology that we have come to take for granted.

This volume, the first of a new series *Gouden Eeuw. New Perspectives on Dutch Seventeenth-Century Art*, comprises nine essays by scholars from various fields of research in seventeenth-century Dutch art and beyond. The book begins with three essays under the heading ‘Myths and Translations’. Céline Bohnert investigates how the notion of Ovid’s Golden Age changed in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, focusing mostly on France and Germany. In an impressive parade of writers and philosophers she minutely details the incorporation of Christian (later specifically Catholic and Protestant) meanings. With the birth of modernity, she claims, the idea of the progressive development of humanity took hold, changing the Golden Age from a distant past – or even a myth or a poetic antithesis of the present time – to the present itself, the highwater mark of development so far. In the second essay, Maria Aresin provides an interesting case study of four grisailles by Gerard de Lairesse – once decorations of the entrance hall of an Amsterdam canal house – depicting the *Four ages of man*. She convincingly suggests that De Lairesse might have conceived his own time as a bronze age, an age of science, navigation, and



Fig. 1 Gerard de Lairese, *The Amsterdam City Virgin*, c. 1675, oil on canvas, 130 x 144 cm, Amsterdam, Amsterdam Museum.

justice. If we allow ourselves a peek at an allegory on Amsterdam by the same painter, this suggestion becomes even more credible (fig. 1). The Amsterdam city virgin is firmly placed within similar bronze age symbols of navigation and trade. The cornucopia the virgin holds, moreover, are filled with coins, not fruit.

Jan Blanc's essay traces the meanings of the notion of Golden Age in the late sixteenth and seventeenth century in the Netherlands. He finds similar changes in this notion for the Netherlands that Céline Bohnert traced for other European countries: the idea of a Golden Age shifting from a distant mythic past to a prosperous present. Marten Everart, for example, wrote of a present Golden Age that surpassed the ancient one as early as 1589. Blanc shows that this idea of a present (or near-future) Golden Age was widespread in Dutch writings. He also demonstrates how the Golden Age myth was instrumental in justifying power in the Dutch Republic, such as in the case of Frederick Henry. Blanc continues with landscape and cityscape paintings, which he claims also present us with idealizations that tried to reconcile the contradictions between early modern life in the Republic and the

self-image of living in a Golden Age. I am not completely persuaded. This might have been true for some, especially the Arcadian, Italianate landscapes, yet landscapes also served to highlight religious ideas about God's creation and the place of mankind in it. The numerous boastful cityscapes proudly displaying the new buildings (such as the Amsterdam town hall) and places of trade logistics (warehouses, ports, and ships) in the Republic and around the world look more like glorifications of the Republic's power and wealth than a reference to the Golden Age idea. When other discrepancies between the Golden Age myth and the seventeenth-century reality in the Republic are taken up by Blanc, he shows that writers noted them and found solutions: wealth was justified by pointing out cultural and scientific progress that presumably was the outcome of that wealth. Social stratification was justified by pointing to (idealized) Dutch morals and values.

Blanc does not say this, but strikingly similar arguments can be heard today in debates around the term Golden Age. Art and science are still used to shift the image of the century away from an aggressively mercantile nation, with all its colonial implications, to an affluent nation that produced world-class art and science. In truth, art and science form an inseparable unity with that mercantile world. Taking this perspective is a deliberate strategy of self-congratulation. The same is more or less true for ideas about Dutch morals and values. If we consider how many Dutch people then and now see themselves as egalitarian and tolerant, we deliberately select arguments and histories that affirm that idea. This is of course nothing typically Dutch and reminds one of Ernest Renan's assertion that the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, but also that they have forgotten many things. However, it makes the attempts to reconcile (historical) reality with a wish to promote an age as Golden in itself an act of propaganda.

Jeroen Jansen's essay on the seventeenth-century Dutch reception of early Greek poetry, which was closely connected with preferences of originality and invention over artistry and skill, and the essay by Stijn Bussels and Lorne Cambell, which shows how Arnoldus Buchelius was instrumental in the Dutch reception of medieval Gothic architecture, are both interesting reads, though far removed from the themes of the previous essays. I must admit I have been looking in vain for clues as to how these essays function within the context of the proclaimed subject of the volume – the construction of the Dutch notion of Golden Age from the sixteenth century onwards. The essay by Marije Osnabrugge convincingly shows how – from the perspective of artistic practice – there is no real reason to separate landscapes displaying the Netherlands from those depicting places abroad. In the art historical literature they had been separated, probably because of the interest in the meaning of landscape, Osnabrugge writes. I would like to add that it might also have to do with the tendency to emphasise the 'Dutchness' in Dutch art. Local landscapes could confirm this self-image, while landscapes of foreign lands could not. The twentieth-century distinction between the local and the far-away, however, does reflect a distinction that must have been made in the seventeenth century, too. For the artist there might not have been a great difference between painting an oak or a palm tree, but for buyers the two conveyed different meanings. Sarah W. Mallory has contributed an interesting essay on how Mauritius was imagined from its occupation by the Dutch in 1598 onward. The first prints showed the island as a utopian paradise, and these idealized depictions later became conceived as historical fact. Maria Holtrop's essay about the use of the term Golden Age

in modern times is a clear reconstruction of how the nineteenth-century use of the term differed from that in the seventeenth century. It was now used to look back at a perceived period of glory, and perhaps conveyed a longing to return to that time. Holtrop goes on to show how Golden Age then became, until recently, a value-free, marketable term that denotes prosperity and success.

In his concluding essay, Blanc proposes to see the various notions of Golden Age for what they are: fictions that are used to shape a cultural community. I agree that it would be interesting to study these collective fictions, but I would prefer to study them within a broader context of other – sometimes rivalling – fictions that tried to prove a perceived superiority, too, for example Amsterdam's (re)presentation of itself as the new Rome or Venice, or the Dutch as the new Batavians.

This book is tremendously readable and thought-provoking. If the series is to continue, however, I would find it essential to also address the power relations inherent in the shaping of a cultural community. The myth of the Golden Age above all proved to be a flexible notion that could be used by anyone that wanted to coin his own age as golden and had the means and authority to do so. It is crucial that we cast a critical eye on who is included and excluded in the cultural community, as well as who gets to decide on what to remember and what to forget. For our museum, the fact that 'Golden Age' had become a shorthand for an imagined community that excludes a significant part of our present society was an important element in our decision to avoid the term. This volume proves that it is indeed not so 'ill-advised, and perhaps even dangerous, to devote a research project and a book series to the notion of the "Dutch Golden age" in our day and age.' I look forward to the next volume of this series and hope for a stimulating continuation of this project.

Tom van der Molen, Amsterdam Museum