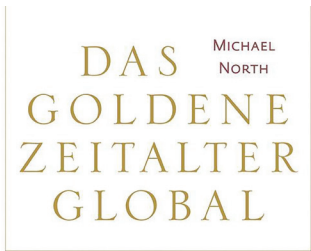


Review

Michael North, *Das Goldene Zeitalter global. Die Niederlande im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert*, Vienna/Cologne/Weimar, Böhlau, 2021, 317pp. ISBN 9783412505134.



DIE NIEDERLANDE IM 17. UND 18. JAHRHUNDERT



The German historian Michael North specialises in early modern global cultural exchange. In many books, which have been translated into different languages, he has investigated the already far-advanced globalisation of the early modern period, focusing especially on seas and oceans as spaces for the exchange of goods, art, money, people, and ideas.¹ Throughout his career, he has always been particularly interested in general Dutch history and the social history of the art market in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic.²

His new book devoted to the global ‘Golden Age’ of the Netherlands lies at the intersection of his global historical research and his special interest in the social history of the Dutch art market. Contrary to what the very general title might suggest, this study is primarily concerned with international cultural interconnections, which in North’s interpretation is primarily

devoted to the field of fine arts. North seeks to answer the question of how Dutch art was distributed and perceived throughout the world in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and what interactions it had with local cultures and traditions. Readers who are not comfortable with German will find the longer English summary at the end of the book helpful.

North starts his global expedition in the Dutch Republic itself, with a chapter titled ‘The World in the Netherlands’. He presents products from all over the world that people in

¹ Michael North, *A World History of the Seas. From Harbour to Horizon* (London 2021).

² Michael North, *Geschichte der Niederlande* (München 2013) (The Dutch translation appeared in Amsterdam by Bert Bakker in 2008) and Michael North, *Art and Commerce in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven/London 1997), which was published as a revised edition: *Das Goldene Zeitalter. Kunst und Kommerz in der niederländischen Malerei des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Cologne/Weimar/Vienna 2001).

the Dutch Republic could purchase and investigates how they dealt with these exoticized objects and consumer goods. By characterising this process as the 'domestication of foreign goods in Dutch households' (43), North wants to underline his general thesis that for the pre-modern Netherlands, it can be assumed that there was a reciprocal interweaving with non-Dutch cultures in the field of art and that Dutch relations with the world were thus certainly reciprocal at the cultural level.

North's book contains nine chapters, each devoted to different parts of the world and their cultural interaction with the Dutch Republic. Specifically, it deals with the North Sea and Baltic regions, Brazil, Surinam and Curaçao, Nieuw Nederland, Cape Town, Batavia, the Indian subcontinent and Ceylon, Japan, and, finally, China. Each chapter focuses on a specific person (such as Angela van Bengale at the Cape); even so, the chapters are not systematic, biographical case studies, but rather contain general explanations and reports on other historical figures.

North concludes that the influence of Dutch culture on the Baltic region was probably the strongest, which can certainly be well explained by the relative spatial proximity and intensive trade throughout the Middle Ages and the early modern period. North goes so far as to speak of a 'Netherlandisation' of this region, which was particularly evident by the transfer of technology and the mobility of Dutch experts.

It becomes particularly fascinating when North is able to show how Dutch influences were absorbed in faraway places and entered into synergy with indigenous cultures. To give an example, while Dutch architecture in the Baltic region was mainly spread by Dutch architects in service of local clients, he shows that in Batavia a 'Dutch-Indian' (176) living culture emerged, as the Dutch architectural model was adapted to local climatic and aesthetic demands. These new cultural products then reached the Republic's heartland through medialisation processes, such as drawings and prints.

In the context of these medialisation processes, North also shows how Western European prints were spread throughout China, and how these were received, imitated, and further developed in art production across Asia. For example, typically Dutch motifs like the pancake woman or depictions of Delftware can be found in Indian paintings, which productively interpreted the Dutch reference. On the other hand, Dutch artists such as Rembrandt were quite interested in Indian art and craftsmanship and studied these styles in drawings. In the case of Japan, North points to a lively interest in Dutch still life painting and traces processes of re-medialisation through copying, imitation, and incorporation into already known art techniques. Looking ahead to the nineteenth century, he also shows how European influence on Japanese coloured woodcuts in turn spilled back into Europe through an interest in this type of imagery, ultimately even influencing Vincent van Gogh's style.

Through the multitude of individual observations collected here, an extraordinary overall representation of the 'Dutch Golden Age' in a global perspective emerges. It is certainly worth noting that North's title not only refuses to abandon the concept of a 'Golden Age' of the Dutch Republic, but even extends it into the eighteenth century. Perhaps the question of what was actually 'golden' about this age, or who may have perceived this period as 'golden', and at whose cost, could have been expanded upon; it also shows little connection to current debates within wider Dutch society. Despite the ongoing debate about

terminology, North convincingly demonstrates through his case studies that there is no clear dividing line running through seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch history, and that Dutch culture did not lose its appeal and role model globally in the eighteenth century, but instead showed itself very open to foreign influences.

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