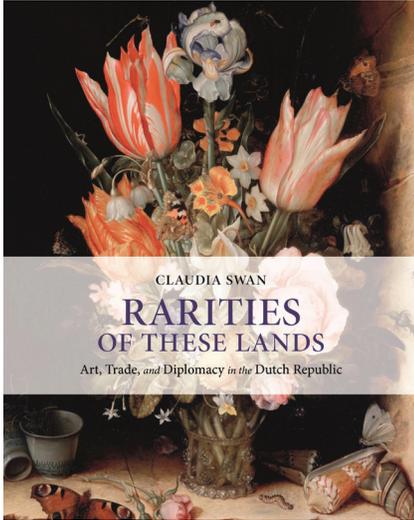


Review

Claudia Swan, *Rarities of These Lands. Art, Trade, and Diplomacy in the Dutch Republic*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2021, xx + 314 pp. ISBN 9780691207964.



Many years ago, the Dutch-American art historian Claudia Swan tells us in her new book, she came across an old article about the state gifts sent by the Dutch States-General to the Ottoman sultan Ahmed I in 1612-1613. The paper that she herself subsequently wrote about this gift, first published in *De Zeventiende Eeuw* in 2013, is now a core chapter in this wonderful and exciting book about the place of ‘rarities’ in Dutch culture and society in the early seventeenth century. Rarities were precious objects, both natural and man-made, brought to Europe from Asia (and from the New World, but that is not the subject of this book). The point Swan makes throughout *Rarities of These Lands* is how deeply Dutch material culture was transformed by its engagement with Asia, and with the Indo-

nesian spice islands in particular. This engagement received a further impetus with the establishment of the Dutch East India Company (voc) in 1602, but the Dutch obsession with exotic goods had already started during the 1590s and was well-established by the time the States-General were contemplating what they would send the sultan in 1612 in order to gain commercial access to the Ottoman Empire.

The book deals with these rarities from various angles, first of all from the perspective of trade. Whereas Asian goods had reached the European market previously through a cumbersome series of intermediary stages, the opening of direct, oceanic routes to Asia gave Europeans access to a whole new range of interesting objects. Even if the initial trade was undertaken to acquire luxury bulk products such as spices, there was also an interest from the very start in unique objects that had been unknown in Europe, or the exclusive realm of princely collectors.

This brings us to the second perspective, that of consumption. Swan demonstrates that urban collectors in Holland proved just as keen to lay their hands on these rarities. From the sources quoted in the book and its lavish illustrations, we get a strong sense of the excitement those rarities created in the Dutch Republic. A good example is Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, whose goods were inventoried after his death on the scaffold in May 1619. One of the bedrooms in his house was decorated with Indian textiles, several others had items designated as 'Indian' in them.

While Oldenbarnevelt, as one of the *voc*'s founding fathers, may have had privileged access, and collected his 'Indian' goods for their prestige as much as anything else, other and humbler collectors were seeking to better understand the world, or God's creation, by bringing together the widest possible range of natural and artificial objects in their museums – a word already used in 1597 by the Utrecht antiquarian Arnoldus Buchelius for a collection he visited in Delft. The point that comes across very clearly in this part of the book is that collecting was no longer the privilege of kings and nobles. Still, how deeply did these rarities from the East penetrate Dutch society? Economic historian Anne McCants has demonstrated that it was not until the final decades of the seventeenth century – but really only during the eighteenth – that colonial goods became the staple of mass consumption.¹ Like the sort of excellent paintings from the period that now adorn the walls of art museums around the world, these rarities were not exactly destined for the general public. They did, however, add a distinctly global flavour to what had essentially been a local culture.

This is underscored in chapter six, which tackles the third angle: diplomacy. This is perhaps the linchpin of Swan's book. In the Ottoman Empire, international trade had to be sanctioned by the state and to prepare the ground, the sultan had to be pleased as well as impressed. Dutch diplomats therefore prepared two lavish sets of gifts, which included, next to large amounts of butter, cheese, cash, and a portrait of stadtholder Prince Maurice, a dozen (dead) birds of paradise (there is another, separate chapter on them), a parrot (presumably alive), a vase of mountain crystal, a Chinese chest, and Asian-looking furniture made in Amsterdam. The message was obvious: the Dutch had access to all of the world's riches and therefore merited the trading rights they were seeking. What is striking here is how the Dutch state deliberately tried to portray itself as a global force. This state gift, in other words, was a prime example of reputation management.

In her final chapter, Swan returns to the acquisition of the Asian rarities. While she discusses the commercial context in an earlier chapter, she now claims that these rarities were often forcefully taken from their rightful owners – 'prized possessions' she calls them, with a pun on the word for what pirates gained from their doubtful activities. There are already hints of this claim in chapter one, as Swan notes that a 'great number of the costly wares whose arrival in abundance in the United Provinces was so widely celebrated were loot, captured abroad' (44), or that '[a] very large proportion was war booty' (45). The theme is picked up in chapter eight, as well as in the book's conclusion, 'Spoils of War'. 'Looted art'

1 Anne McCants, 'Exotic goods, popular consumption, and the standard of living. Thinking about globalization in the Early Modern world', *Journal of World History* 18 (2007) 433-462; Anne McCants, 'Poor consumers as global consumers. The diffusion of tea and coffee drinking in the eighteenth century', *Economic History Review* 61 (2008) 172-200.

is currently a trending topic. At the time of writing this review, Dutch television is running a series called *Roofkunst*, discussing the Kandy cannon in the Rijksmuseum and the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum, as well as similar works of art in other European museums that have entered the collections with a dubious provenance. To claim that many of the precious objects discussed – and pictured – in this book were in fact looted, is therefore not merely an academic issue, but has potentially far-reaching consequences.

There can be no doubt that some of it was indeed loot, but Swan's claim that 'a very large proportion' was forcibly obtained appears difficult to sustain for want of evidence. In chapter eight, Swan focuses on the arrival in Zeeland of a Portuguese ship, the *São Tiago*, captured by the Dutch in 1602. The victims here were other Europeans, rather than Asians, and the complaints of one of them, the Italian merchant Francesco Carletti, loom large in this chapter. It is possible that the Portuguese had, in turn, 'looted' their cargo in Asia, but this is not clear. Who the real victims were, then, remains somewhat unclear: Europeans or Asians? Because Swan focusses her discussion on porcelain, we can do the same. It is well-known that the main Asian centre of porcelain production, in the Chinese city of Jingdezhen, had been active for several centuries before the Dutch arrived, and exported to other regions in Asia already for a long time. By the mid-sixteenth century, Chinese producers were supplying Portuguese merchants with products specifically decorated for Portuguese consumers.² There was much appetite among European collectors for porcelain. Philip II, for example, owned thousands of pieces. Dutch ships travelling to Asia during the 1590s brought back small quantities of porcelain, presumably bought in Asian markets. Already in 1603, the VOC instructed its merchants travelling to Asia to acquire porcelain, possibly in response to the excitement raised by the capture of the *São Tiago* in 1602, but they were explicitly referencing price-listings for porcelain from Amsterdam.³ In other words: there was a market in Holland and in Europe, and supply from the Indonesian archipelago, where the VOC was doing business. As Clulow has recently underlined (see also Arthur Weststeijn's review in this issue), especially during the early stages, the Dutch presence in South-East Asia was oftentimes precarious and VOC officials were not in a position to 'loot' at will. Unless more evidence is produced, then, Swan's claim strikes me as overstressing the nowadays popular point that the Dutch were soldiers as much as they were merchants.

Still, *Rarities of these Lands* is a magnificent achievement. It manages to integrate art historical and historical perspectives on the history of a single country into a compelling tale of global connections and entanglements. This book is the fruit of an impressively wide reading of both visual and written sources, and thus manages to paint an unusually rich picture of the early stages of the Dutch Golden Age. Swan herself avoids those words 'Golden Age', and perhaps for good reasons (see also Tom van der Molen's review in this issue), but she nonetheless shows what an extraordinary time it was.

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² Anne Gerritsen, *The City of Blue and White. Chinese Porcelain and the Early Modern World* (Cambridge 2020).

³ Cynthia Viallé, 'Camel cups, parrot cups and other Chinese Kraak porcelain items in Dutch trade records, 1598-1623', in Jan van Campen and Titus Eliëns (eds.), *Chinese and Japanese Porcelain for the Dutch Golden Age* (Zwolle 2014), 37-51.