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About & Around
REMBRANDT

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**Special Issue of the Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies
In Commemoration of the 400th Birthday of
Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn**

**Edited by
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It is dedicated to the memory of John Michielsen

Introduction

On September 4, 1609, Robert Juet, officer in the service of the VOC, the Dutch East India Company, wrote in his journal about the inhabitants of Manhattan: “They seem to be very happy about our visit and they brought green tobacco to exchange for knives and beads.” The next day this exchange of goods continued, although those who came on board the ship *The Half Moon*, went back ashore in the evening as “we did not dare to trust them.” Close to four hundred years later, the encounters between Europeans and Americans as portrayed in this volume, have a changed direction of interests. Residents from the United States and Canada have been looking back at the country of origin of the Dutch East India Company, the Netherlands, or more accurately, the United Provinces. The reason for this is one of admiration and joy: four hundred years ago, one of the world’s most remarkable painters, Rembrandt, the man who needs no last name, was born in Leiden, in the province of Holland, part of the Low Countries. Reason for some scholars in Canada, united in the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies to invite several colleagues from different disciplines to celebrate the birthday of Rembrandt van Rijn with a volume of articles relevant to his art, his time and his culture.

During Rembrandt’s life, the Low Countries created in a relative short period of time a small miracle of economic prosperity, due to enterprising trading adventures, strong arm tactics to capture lands or people, resulting in a flow of profitable goods from across the entire globe. In their own provinces, the Dutch enlarged their country through drainage, organized an efficient transportation network, innovated agriculture and industriously applied their craftsmanship for the benefit of a now prosperous country. Besides merchandise, ideas flourished and scientists like Leeuwenhoek, Huygens or Stevin put their knowledge to practical use, resulting in inventions such as the microscope and the pendulum clock. Regarding this against a backdrop of religious turmoil of, amongst others, Catholics versus Protestants, and realizing that much of this happened during a time of war with Spain, than simple respect must make way for high admiration bordering on incredulity. In those surroundings, the arts flourished and made a welcoming bed for many talents. Rembrandt van Rijn was the *primus inter pares*.

Although the subjects of the articles vary greatly, this publication does not pretend to represent every aspect of the Dutch Golden Age, but merely a sample of subjects connected to the age of Rembrandt. Sometimes painted with a broad brush, sometimes in pointilistic details, the women and men responsible for these articles give us a look into their personal preferences and interests. All are joined with an enthusiasm for the period and a willingness to share it with a larger audience. Stephanie Dickey opens the number of important art historical articles. She researched the influence of the Italian Renaissance on Rembrandt and other Dutch artists and its consequences for the marketplace. Rembrandt’s creative process is being examined by Susan Kuretski with the help of the well known history painting ‘The Return of the Prodigal Son.’ Likewise, Amy Golahny compares versions of the Angel Raphael by Heemskerck, appearing in Rembrandt’s work. As part of a forthcoming work on Rembrandt’s relations with different religions, Shelley Perlove and Larry Silver investigate the Roman Catholics as shown in Rembrandt’s paintings, etchings and drawings. Noel Schiller analyzes a series of images depicting the five senses, painted by Jan

Miense Molenaer, who makes us reflect on the act of viewing and the reaction of our senses.

For most people the top three in seventeenth century Dutch art are Rembrandt, Hals and Vermeer. It is not surprising then that they have also been the subject of literary fiction, with some success. Gus Dierick scrutinizes the results closely and clearly marks his objections to some of the market driven imaginary figures, or the not always convincing portrayal of their fictionalized lives. The creative process remains a mystery.

Rembrandt's birthplace Leiden also housed a university, in those days the famous center of knowledge and ideas with an international aura. Vander Poel shows how classical authors, especially Horace, were in 'renaissance' here to preach Christian morality, used to write classical meters in Dutch, and being edited alongside the New testament.

There has been a long standing discussion among scholars whether the development of a Dutch national character, if one can speak of such a thing, would be influenced more by John Calvin than by Desiderius Erasmus. William van Doodewaard shows us the calvinist side and guides us firmly through the early turmoil in the republic, with Remonstrants and Contra-remonstrants, attuning religious experience with political and social reality. This found its culmination in the Synod of Dort, where according to a popular poem by Vondel "Arminy die kreeg de schop" [(Remonstrant) Arminius got the boot]. The stage was set for the United Provinces, which from then on would be a country of many different religious opinions. Even the Jewish voice was heard and given a home, as Saskia Snyder-Coenen shows in her description of the Jewish neighborhood in Amsterdam. The construction of large synagogues brought surprise and astonishment among compatriots and foreign visitors. Similarly, contemporary visitors to the Low Countries must have smiled when reading the many inscriptions that Hieronymus Sweerts collected during his walks around town and now resurrected by Ton Broos.

One of the most international among the great names of the Dutch golden age is Hugo Grotius, most famous for his humanist philosophy, his political and theological insights and brilliant legal opinions. He must have had pirates and freebooters in mind also when he wrote his treatise on the freedom of the international seas. Then again, piracy flourished most around the end of the 17th century. Raynald Laprise traces the known archival facts about Jan Willems, alias Yankey. His life illustrates the important role of Dutch pirates in the English and French Caribbean colonies. Likewise, Jan Erasmus Reining, portrayed by Basil Kingstone, walks a tightrope between the life of a hero in Dutch service, or the despised career of a privateer or worse, a pirate. Whether their lives were as glamorous as modern adventure stories or films want us to believe is a different matter.

These last two articles remind us that The United Provinces were a maritime world power to be reckoned with, also not devoid of flaws. Here is not the place to become judge, jury and executioner of persons and activities which we nowadays would not condone. It should make us reflect ever more carefully on our history, and make us think before acting in similar ways. Henry Hudson's officer Robert Juet met his American counterparts with caution and trepidation. The modern encounter between the inheritors of Manhattan and the descendants of the Gentlemen Seventeen of the Dutch East India Company is now one of good humor and free exchange of ideas, rather than tobacco for beads. Over the years, a well gained trust has also been added.

Surveying the articles as a whole, one thing is clear: in scholarship there are still many roads open and many new and different approaches and subjects possible, even to the extensively researched Dutch 17th century. Rembrandt van Rijn remains one of the most intriguing examples among them.

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