Review

Henk van Nierop:

The life of Romeyn de Hooghe 1645-1708:

Prints, pamphlets, and politics in the Dutch Golden Age

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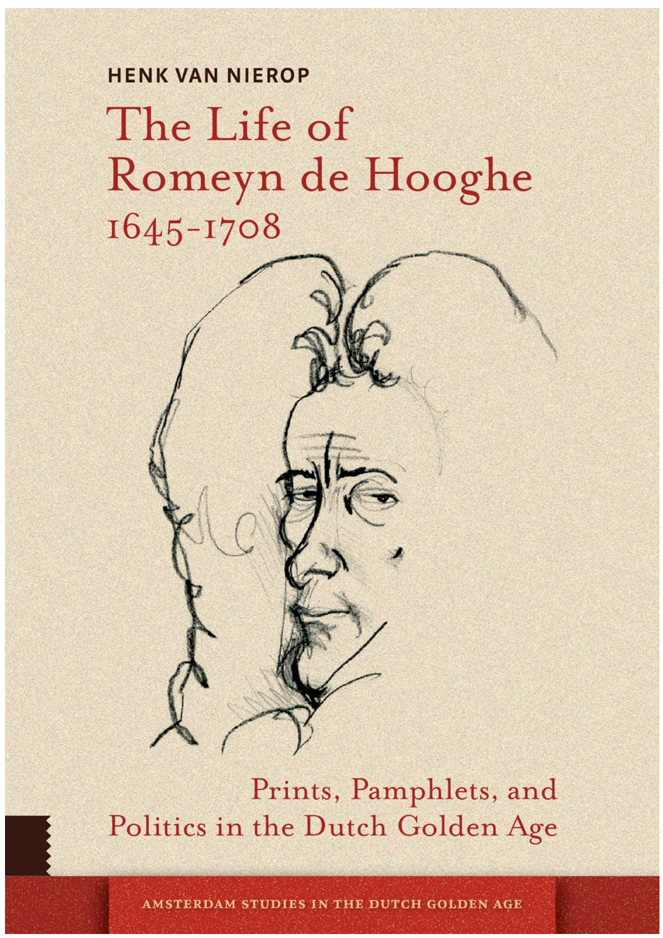

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Anyone interested in the Dutch Golden Age has seen his prints. He was, after all, the country's leading artist in the last decades of the 17th century. But unlike the more famous painters who were one or two generations his senior, Romeyn de Hooghe had not been the subject of a biography prior to Henk van Nierop's fine and nuanced study.

Romeyn was first and foremost an etcher, printmaker, and print-seller. Within ten years of striking out on his own, he became the leading Dutch printmaker. After two decades, he was the Republic's premier graphic artist. Romeyn defied the slumping art market by producing illustrations for the early modern version of coffee table books, although he illustrated every other kind of book as well. At the same time, he ignored the rules of depicting the past by combining events that happened in different eras and by showing ancient gods, Christian angels, and humans in the same image. What made him stand out, writes Van Nierop, was his "intimate knowledge of ancient history and mythology and his skill in mixing the allegorical and the historical" (p. 359). His audience was therefore in the first place educated and middle-class.

In his later years, Romeyn kept developing himself by crossing boundaries into new areas, trying his hand at painting, designing the stadholder's gardens at Het Loo, and as the anonymous author of the world's first satirical periodical. He thus lived up to his ideal of the universal artist, well-versed in multiple disciplines.

Obviously ambitious, Romeyn probably decided at a young age to overcome his humble background as son of a button maker and become a gentleman. Although the lack of funds at home prevented him from enrolling at a university, he tried to elevate his social status in whatever ways possible. Romeyn bought rural property, filled a post of magistrate at the Minor Bench of Justice in Haarlem, sought in vain to become the Pensionary of that same town, and earned a law degree, all calculated steps to present himself as a gentleman. Nor did he shy away from lies if they were useful in promoting himself, boasting for example that the king of Poland had granted him a noble title. Scholars have accepted this claim, but Van Nierop sets the record straight. It was not the only time that Romeyn distorted the truth as he sought to further his social or artistic ambitions. For the same reason, he committed large-scale fraud on at least one occasion, and betrayed his close collaborator Ericus Walten to save his own skin.

One factor blocking his ambitions was his character. As Van Nierop shows, there "was an unbalanced and roguish streak to his character that drove him to take vast and unwarranted risks, threatening to destroy his career time and again" (p. 27). Romeyn appears to have been a larger-than-life, extravert libertine who flouted social conventions. He invited moral opprobrium by allowing his wife sexual encounters with other men and by making and peddling pornographic prints. His "indecent lifestyle" (151), which was no secret to his neighbors and employees, gave rise to the publication of a work in which many of the rumors spread in Amsterdam were featured. That work was a novel based on a French original, into which various obscene stories were inserted that were centered around the figure of Romeyn de Hooghe without mentioning him by name. Consequently, his reputation, "an essential part of one's social capital" (151), was badly damaged, forcing him to move with his wife to nearby Haarlem. From there, he would regularly commute to Amsterdam, which remained the center of the global publishing industry.

Pornography was not the only accusation leveled against Romeyn. He was also said to have been a thief and a blasphemer. Blasphemy cases, as Van Nierop points out, were rare in the Dutch Republic, but it was considered a serious crime. It is clear that by contemporary standards Romeyn was guilty of blasphemy. Witnesses declared that he had called the Reformed doctrine of predestination a fraud, that the Revelation of St. John was "nothing but dreams" (298), and that the prevailing notions of resurrection and the immortality of the soul were examples of deceit. Romeyn appears to have rejected the literal truth of the Bible and wrote explicitly that religion was a human invention.

That Romeyn was able to hold his own despite the rumors was partly due to the support of the Haarlem city council. But at least as important was the protection he enjoyed among leading Orangists. Romeyn had asserted himself as a follower of William for the first time in 1672, when the latter became stadholder. In that Disaster Year, when invasions by France, England and two German countries threatened the existence of the Republic, Romeyn manifested himself as the Orangist printmaker par excellence. He would keep that up for a few years and return to making propaganda for the Orangist camp during the Glorious Revolution. Initially he seems to have sided with the prince without an ulterior motive. He did not strive at the time to find employment in court circles, although that did not make his propaganda any less effective. By presenting the prince as wise and unambitious, Romeyn contributed in no small measure to William III's victory over the troops of the English king.

As was true for the majority of the population, Romeyn was a moderate Orangist. Unlike more radical Orangists, he condemned the mob that lynched the De Witt brothers in 1672, who had been sworn enemies of the prince. He remained loyal to William for the rest of his life, which he expressed, among other things, in his unconditional support for the prince in his feud with the Amsterdam regents, whom Romeyn mercilessly attacked. After the stadholder died in 1702 with no successor on the horizon, Romeyn changed his political allegiance, but he would never criticize his former patron. The artist may have engaged in fraud and deception, but in the realm of politics he was no chameleon.

In Henk van Nierop's expert hands, this book leaves few questions about Romeyn de Hooghe unanswered. The author has succeeded in presenting his subject as the complex figure that he was: an overly ambitious libertine who did not hesitate to throw a friend under the bus, but also a brilliant artist whose style would leave a legacy far beyond his death.

About the reviewer
Wim Klooster is professor and Robert H. and Virginia N. Scotland Endowed Chair in History and International Relations at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts (U.S.), where he has taught since 2003. Earning his Ph.D. from Leiden University (Netherlands) in 1995, he has published widely on the Dutch Atlantic, smuggling, Jewish history, and the age of revolutions. His twelve books include *Revolutions in the Atlantic world: A comparative history* (New York University Press, new edition 2018), *The Dutch moment: War, trade, and settlement in the seventeenth-century Atlantic world* (Cornell University Press, 2016), and *Illicit riches: Dutch trade in the Caribbean, 1648-1795* (KITLV Press, 1998). His latest books are *Spanish American independence movements: A history in documents* (Broadview Press, 2021) and *Realm between empires: The Second Dutch Atlantic, 1680-1815* (Cornell University Press, 2018, coauthored with Gert Oostindie). Klooster is currently editing the three-volume *Cambridge history of the age of Atlantic revolutions*.