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Holland's last epidemic of plague (1663/4) and the decline of the art of painting.

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with contribution by
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On the evening of April 29, 1663, the weather was fair and the sky clear. Suddenly, a fiery ball appeared above Amsterdam which radiated short and thick, blazing rays and then fell down (slide 2, left). Again, at the end of December, a comet appeared as if a burning torch fell from the sky (slide 2, right). After the first comet a terrible plague followed, which daily took many people. Because the winter was mild, the plague lingered, and returned in the spring of 1664 with even greater fierceness, increasing every week. Thus reported Tobias van Domselaer in the massive *Beschrijvinge van Amsterdam*, published only one year later, in 1665 (slide 3). He adds that some say that these comets infected the air, but he himself does not believe that. His account is accompanied by dramatic prints. Here you see again this first comet (slide 4), lighting the Dam Square with a glaring shine; at the right a sick person is being carried away, while two funeral processions, one in the middle and one in the background, are approaching the Nieuwe Kerk.

Van Domselaer ends his description of Amsterdam with the tragic facts: he records that in 1663, 9752 people died, and the next year no less than 24,148. The rich often fled the city, he tells. Wealthy merchants had gone to their houses in the country, also because there was little trade anyway, since almost all foreign princes and sovereigns had forbidden trade with Holland. With great precision Van Domselaer gives the gruesome numbers of the deaths in every week of both years (slide 5, left), as well as the amount of burials per graveyard (slide 5, right). According to Van Domselaer, the total of people having died in these two years amounted to the incredible number of 33,900 deaths. Since it appears impossible to verify the numbers and to establish how many deaths were exactly due to the plague, while the precise population size is also not known, it would make no sense to give percentages. If we look at the numbers in the graveyards it is clear that the Jordaan suffered most (slide 6). Naturally, it raged more heavily among the poor living close together in small houses, but also shopkeepers and craftsmen, who could not leave their shops or workshops and depended for their income on contact with others, would have been more vulnerable than the rich.

This was the last, but also the worst plague that ever ravaged Amsterdam – and not only Amsterdam. It would linger till 1666, and for some towns, like Enkhuizen, 1666 was even the worst year.

Remarkably, historians have never indicated that those disastrous years of plague must have had a significant impact on economic and cultural phenomena of that time – something that seems so self-evident to us right now (slide 7). Only one book about the plague through the ages does so in general terms (slide 8), remarking that periods of plague disrupted society and economy, but also emphasizing that it is hard to underpin this with numbers. This silence of historians corroborates what we read often nowadays: that wars are never forgotten – and indeed, the detrimental economic effect of the first Anglo-Dutch war (1652-54) is always mentioned by historians – but epidemics and pandemics, often much more devastating, seem easily erased from collective memory. But when we take a fresh look we may note in graphs or tables in books about the history or the economic history of Holland or Amsterdam a severe slump in 1663-1665; see for example, the Amsterdam expenditures for public works, and the yearly taxes on building materials in Holland and Amsterdam (slide 9). Moreover, De Vries and Van der Woude consider 1663 as “marking the onset of the new period for the economy”, and as “turning point in the long-term prices”. But in all these cases historians did not mention the plague as one of the possible factors.

For the contemporary eyewitness, in contrast, the effects were clear: “The trade is here very still for the ships are not suffered to goe to others country”, wrote an Englishman to his brother in London. And the English ambassador in Amsterdam reported in May 1664 with a kind of malicious glee: “there are dead this last week to the number of 338 at Amsterdam and if the plague thus increases within, and a warre with His Majestie without, there will be little need of that vast towne which they are making there”; he refers to the war that was on the verge of breaking out and to the fourth extension of the city then under way (slide 10).

Many of you will know the graph of the number of active Dutch artist-painters, or the number of painters in the largest cities with its peak and its steep fall (slide 11). These have become familiar since the Ecartico database came online in 2009. Before that time, Jan de Vries and Marten Jan Bok (slide 12), who, in the 1990s, were the first to point out the decrease of the number of active artist-painters as of the 1660s, had to calculate this on the basis of much less sophisticated tools.

A graph that most of you do not know was made more recently by Weixuan Li (slide 13). She developed a method to estimate the production trend of paintings on the basis of

paintings in *RKDimages* (slide 14). As she herself points out, several reservations regarding biases are possible, but the result seems convincing since it follows perfectly the graph of active artist-painters (slide 15).

What struck me last September (2020), when peering at those graphs while preparing a talk on the occasion of Marten Jan Bok's retirement, is that the slumps, first in the earlier bad years of plague, 1635 and 1655, and then the steep fall with 1664 as the turning point – and I show you also the growth rate, the percentage with which the production grows or decreases – coincides exactly with the worst years of plague (slide 16, left and middle); we see this same phenomenon in the number of painters (slide 16 right). Therefore, I came up with the hypothesis that the plague had a decisive impact on the production of paintings in the seventeenth century. But then we have to explain why, after the last plague, the market for paintings did not recover. Why this collapse in 1664, and why did it not pick up again after some time? After all, if we look at the numbers of highly skilled craftsmen in other luxury industries, such as silver- and goldsmiths, and others working in the decorative arts, these did grow considerably in the last quarter of the century (slide 17), especially as of the mid 1670s, because the rich became only richer and decorated their houses more lavishly than ever before.

Marten Jan Bok and Jan de Vries were also the first to examine the reasons of the decline. (And I show you again the graphs they did not yet have at their disposal [slide 18]). Bok, who saw overproduction and the decrease of purchasing power as the main factors of decline, also came up with the important observation that the rapid decrease of the number of active painters from the mid-1660s onwards, must have meant that positive views on painters' career perspectives began to diminish in the second half of the 1650s – in that period young boys and/or their parents must have become less enthusiastic about the risks of this rather long and costly training in the workshop of a painter. Not only the economic effects of the first Anglo-Dutch war, but also the plague of 1655 must have hit this market in the mid-1650s – in such bad times people had other concerns than buying art.

This occurred at a time when this art market would have been highly unstable anyway, because of overproduction. Both John Michael Montias and Marten Jan Bok established convincingly that by the 1650s an overproduction must have been generated. The size of the collection of paintings, on average, had doubled over the last three decades and the number of painters had grown much faster than the population. Newly made paintings had to compete with the rapidly increased numbers of extant paintings. Paintings - meant to be permanent and not easily thrown away - thus kept accumulating. Bok argued that this worked as long as the

demand for new paintings was still growing, but that it made this market highly vulnerable for a crisis. If the demand stagnates because of some external reason, like an economic slump caused by war - or plague I would add now! - this will impact the production of new paintings in particular.

And this is what happened, the first blow fell in the mid-1650s. And then, in 1664, came the final blow, when the number of deaths was much, much larger than ever before. With a saturated market and houses chock-full of paintings, a lot of paintings must suddenly have flooded the market (with the death of the art dealer Cornelis Doeck and his wife, for example, even as many as 576 inexpensive paintings). We also see a sudden rise in the number of painters dying in 1664 (slide 19); naturally painters were no less immune for the plague than other. Thus, after a sudden collapse of demand, and probably a wave of paintings coming on the market, especially in the cheaper sector, and the death of a substantial number of painters, who were not replaced since the number of pupils had already been declining for some time, the bubble had burst, and the market for paintings did not recover.

I use the word bubble deliberately, because Weixuan Li developed a fascinating theory, applying the concept of ‘social bubble’ (slide 20). I will leave this to Weixuan herself to explain.

[Weixuan speaking] In the article Eric Jan mentioned, I explained the concept of social bubble. It offers a novel framework to string together many well-known phenomena and explain not only the high level of innovation within a short time, but also the ensuing steep fall and absence of recovery in the art market. This concept foregrounds the social interactions between artists and enthusiastic supporters in Dutch society (slide 21). Art theorist like Van Mander had elevated the painting profession and city descriptions boasted of their painters with pride; Poets and art-lovers composed countless verses praising arts; collectors amassed large collections of paintings; militia companies and charitable institutions commissioned prestigious works; and consumers from all segments of society decorated their rooms with paintings. Although none of these behaviors is new to scholars, taken together, the interactions among painters and other members of the society wove a network of reinforcing feedbacks. These positive feedback and widespread endorsement became a powerful force that pushed up the painting production to an unstable stage which cannot be explained only by an increase in demand.

Collective over-enthusiasm, as in financial bubbles, fostered a shared attitude towards aggressive risk-taking, which cannot be rationalized by standard cost-benefit analysis. Aspiring painters, attracted by the glorified rewards of the widely renowned painters, may

have overestimated the chance of becoming superstars like Rembrandt and Dou, and underestimated the possibility of ending up like the distressed painter in Andries Both's drawing shivering in poverty. On the other hand, it was the bubble attitude with little concern for risks that led to a creative exuberance that brought Dutch art to its pinnacle within a short time.

At the same time, this collective exuberance made the art market inherently vulnerable to shocks. In the 1650s, the painting production started to show signs of instability and eventually plunged in the 1660s. The bubble burst. And the falling away from of an exuberant bubble attitude led to stagnation as no large risks were taken to explore new frontiers. The kind of innovations that abounded in earlier decades did not return. And the remaining changes were mostly of a conservative nature symptomatic for a burst bubble. I will hand it back to Eric Jan to map out the aftermath.

[Eric Jan continues] This conservatism is evident in the sophisticated stylization within the most expensive sector of small easel paintings, about which Junko Aono wrote a masterful book (slide 22, left). Only the upper section of the market was able to survive: paintings for wealthy collectors who assembled costly works for their painting cabinets (slide 22, right). They also ordered painted wall hangings and ceilings, *kamerschilderingen*, but this was still incidentally. Simultaneously, there was a quickly growing demand for painted decorative work done by *kladschilders*, coarse painters, about which Piet Bakker undertook important research (slide 23): painted gilding and marbling, and other decorative adornments in rooms, on furniture, on gables, and on coaches of the rich. But the bubble that had caused the huge, continually growing and continually innovating production of paintings by artist painters mostly in the middle or lower price category - paintings with all kinds of subjects, and in all kinds of styles, techniques and sizes, meant for burgers hanging their houses full of paintings to decorate the walls, generated by an excessive fondness of paintings, as foreign visitors noted - that bubble had burst.

Many painters left Holland for foreign countries. Art dealers tried to repair the damage by export of cheap paintings to Germany and, in particular, to the Baltic coasts, on which Angela Jager is preparing a research project. In the upper sector dealers working for the elite developed novel methods of buying and selling expensive art, as Koen Jonckheere brilliantly examined (slide 24), but in general this was all to little avail. The fundament, the exuberant 'social bubble' in the Dutch cities, the collective over-enthusiasm for paintings that had resulted in this huge production, had burst (slide 25).

To conclude: a dramatic exogenous factor, the plague, had caused a sudden collapse of demand. Endogenous factors had already been undermining the art market for some time, such as overproduction caused by the permanence of paintings, and declining number of pupils because of growing risks. It did not recover but fell to a level that was more in line with surrounding countries.

So far my hypothesis. It will probably remain a plausible hypothesis, but I have become convinced that the last and most horrifying epidemic of plague was the direct impetus for this collapse. It would have happened anyway – a bubble will burst - but this human tragedy gave the decisive blow to the golden age of Dutch painting. Though a beautiful twilight would follow (slide 26), the critical mass had vanished.