Socio-economic Aspects of Netherlandish Painting during the Sixteenth Century

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"Art follows wealth for its rich rewards."
(*Carel van Mander* 1548 - 1606)[1]

The phenomenal output of paintings in the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century inspired several studies of the socio-economic conditions which facilitated this production.[2] Thus far, however, no explanation has been proposed for the causes of this rise in output. The highly developed art market of Holland's "Golden Age" did not come about suddenly but as a result of developments which can be traced throughout the course of the sixteenth century. A combination of historical events, economic conditions, and artistic influences during this time laid the foundation for the art industry which characterized the subsequent century. This essay will explore these circumstances and demonstrate that socio-economic aspects must be considered to understand fully the art historical developments of sixteenth-century Netherlands. I intend to show that the application of economic theory reveals that Iconoclasm and war were among the major stimuli of this increase in artists' output and that market forces were largely responsible for the changes of artists' products and production methods.

The history of the Netherlands in the sixteenth century was dominated by the drawn-out conquest of the Netherlandish provinces by Charles V which was concluded by 1549 with the formation of the Seventeen Provinces of the United Netherlands, and the subsequent rebellion against the Spanish rule culminating in the Eighty Year War of Independence (1568-1648). This virtually continuous warfare caused, in addition to the loss of lives, widespread destruction of art. Contemporary accounts specifically mention this in connection with the sacking of Antwerp during the "Spanish Fury" of 1576 and the "French Fury" of 1583.[3] Besides these martial occurrences several other events are important for this investigation.

In 1566 the first Calvinist preachers arrived in the Netherlands, and by August followers of these reformers began breaking into churches demolishing images of worship, and within two weeks, iconoclastic acts were committed in almost all of the seventeen provinces.[4] This wholesale destruction of art not only affected the churches but also private individuals, and further depleted the Netherlands' stock of art.[5] According to Calvin, painted religious images were frivolous and false, and only things which were visibly apparent should be represented for instruction and pleasure alone; his doctrine, and the destructive effects it had on religious art, thus boosted the production of secular painting.[6]

As a result of iconoclasm a number of artists left the Netherlands for neighboring countries, particularly France which had already a small Netherlandish artists' community catering to the growing patronal environment around the court.[7] Charles IX, however, demanded in 1570 that all Spanish subjects who had lived in France less than two years must leave on penalty of death. This resulted in a partial dissemination of the local Netherlandish artists' community which, in turn, positively affected Netherlandish art exports to France.

The economic development of the region during this century echoed that of the city of Antwerp which, between 1493 to around 1520, had emerged as the trading metropolis of Europe largely due to an expansion of international trade. Starting in the fourteenth century and continuing through the sixteenth, the city underwent a process of rise, expansion, maturity, and decline, experiencing simultaneously a growth in population, particularly of the middle class, and stimulating general commercial growth of the whole of the northern Netherlands.[8] This economic expansion was facilitated by a corresponding expansion of consumer credit which was vital for the stimulation of retail trade and spreading of commercial fairs.[9]

Unquestionably the economic growth of the Netherlandish cities and their urban middle class were primarily responsible for the flowering of the region's artistic production.[10] Besides expendable capital, however, patronage also required an interest in the arts. The high literacy rate, liberal social structure and general national character of the Netherlands were fertile ground for the growth of patronage. The medieval definition of the function of art was gradually replaced by the recognition that everything imaginable could be described, and the dialectic between producer and consumer stimulated the exploration of this new potential.[11] During the fifteenth century there were very few independent paintings in middle class houses.[12] Gradually in the more affluent homes there appeared votive panel paintings and the predominantly religious subject began to move from a primary to a secondary position to allow aesthetic beauty to overshadow religious content.[13] In order to economize the production process artists began to substitute cloth for panel.[14] and other cost effective devices followed during the sixteenth century.[15] Correspondingly, there occurred a change in marketing. The traditional relationship between artist and patron was being replaced to a large extent by a new system whereby painters worked for an anonymous market and attempted to sell their goods outside their workshops, either at one of the newly established markets or through a middleman, the art dealer, who began to play an increasingly important role. The risk of investing time and capital without guaranteed returns stimulated other economizing procedures which, in turn, further

fueled the market.[16] By 1560 there were over 300 masters active in Antwerp competing in an international market as independent entrepreneurs—as compared to 78 butchers and 169 bakers.[17]

While other cities[18] also had trade in art, Antwerp played the leading role.[19] From 1450 to 1560 the number of artists working in this city grew twenty-fold and by the middle of the century Antwerp had become the art center of northern Europe.[20] The earliest records of art dealing activity in the city, dating from the 1450s, show that imports from Brussels, Ghent, Bruges, and Tournay had to supplement the limited local supply produced then by no more than one and a half dozen artists.[21] To facilitate this, the local Dominican church leased an adjoining property to visiting artists and merchants. By 1540 the enterprise had grown to such an extent that the city decided to provide artists and art dealers with a permanent facility on the upper gallery of the Antwerp stock exchange.[22] By then Antwerp had developed into the largest all-year-round art producer in Europe with up to sixteen public outlets for art[23] supplying local and international demand.[24]

The foregoing discussion has identified the major components which led to this flourishing of artistic production. Economic expansion, appreciation of art, a high level of literacy, reduction of input costs, evolution in marketing, and a commercial hub for international distribution are clearly recognizable growth factors. There are, however, two elements which have not been recognized as contributing to this industry's expansion: iconoclasm and war. Both had in common the wholesale destruction of art, and by examining these events through a supply/demand model it becomes apparent that they were powerful stimuli for the production of supply. Demand consisted of two main groups: an increasing number of private patrons and those individuals whose livelihood was connected with selling finished works of art. The destruction of art affected both categories in terms of an overall reduction of existing stock. This, in turn, signalled the market to replace the lost stock; however, since the loss of stock also represented a loss of capital resources for middlemen and decreased the net worth of consumers by the value of the art works destroyed, it resulted in an overall reduction of the available budget. This implies that the signal to the market to replace the goods was accompanied by a signal to produce these goods at lower costs. Since production inputs relating to paintings consist of labor and material, the various cost-reducing innovations, such as specialization, collaboration, formula painting, and the switch from panel to canvas, etc., were, therefore, a direct response to market forces. Such production cost reduction lowered entry barriers and attracted resources, that is artists and middlemen, to the market resulting in an overall expansion. During periods of economic growth the expanding art market would try to meet demand and prices would rise. During phases of economic decline it would create a surplus, prices would fall and stimulate production input cost-lowering measures. While fluctuations of the economy of the Netherlands also caused fluctuations in its art market, the destruction of art works resulting from iconoclasm and war was partially responsible for its expansion. When peace was finally established in 1648, an art market which had expanded significantly for well over a century was firmly in place.

It should be noted here that the application of this economic model addresses the art market as a whole and should not be applied in this form to individual artists. The model explains, however, many of the characteristics of the market, a few of which I will now consider in greater detail.

The first to be addressed concerns the artist as producer of the goods. As early as 1382 records show that the manufacturing of art in Antwerp was regulated according to economic guidelines.[25] The fourteenth century still viewed painters largely as craftsmen, and not until the sixteenth century did they consider themselves as artists. The practice of copying was comparatively rare before 1600, but then as a result of Italian Mannerist influence, it became the very basis for studying art.[26] This approach lent itself particularly well to formula painting and the manufacturing of "potboilers."[27]

Business was conducted in a variety of ways. Direct commissions by patrons still existed, although in small numbers.[28] Most transactions consisted of purchases from existing stock of artists acting as their own retailers. To reduce inventory costs they often kept a sample selection for prospective clients who could choose an image which was executed only upon placement of an order.[29] Guild regulations governed public exhibition indicating that participation was an important marketing outlet.[30]

Finished works of art, accompanied by independent appraisals, were often accepted as payment for debts, property, and the like.[31] Such commercialization of art led to certain innovations to maximize the efficiency of production. Among them were specialization in subjects and division of labor;[32] another cost-cutting device was the mechanical repetition of designs for workshop production for inventory.[33] Artists who specialized in certain themes were often hired by others to assist in the execution of subjects or sections best suited to their area of expertise.[34] Popular among collectors were grisailles which were among the cheapest original works painters could produce.[35] Artists also designed book illustrations[36] and, very frequently, cartoons for glass painters and tapestry weavers.[37] The largest production, however, consisted of engravings which were published in large numbers and sold inexpensively to the population at large.[38]

This variety of products leaving artists' studios underscores the close connection between artists and craftsmen in the sixteenth century. The former were paid similarly to stonecarvers, carpenters or smiths and the amount generally did not differentiate between heraldic or purely decorative work and panel or canvas paintings. Prices were established on the basis of labor and material costs; miniatures were valued somewhat higher, while cartoons for glass paintings or tapestries were on the lower end of the pay scale.[39] The view of artists as craftsmen gradually changed,[40] but it took until 1773 before artists were freed from guild membership and the fine arts became an officially sanctioned activity for noblemen.[41]

The entrenchment of the medieval guild system impeded the evolution of artists towards independence, but it also protected their economic interests. Guild regulations restricted the practice of painting to guild masters, and citizen's rights as well as payment of dues were a prerequisite for membership. Out-of-town newcomers were charged higher fees and imports from outside were controlled by tariffs. Such practice allowed guilds to exercise a measure of control over artistic production and its cost since they were also in charge of suppling raw materials. Guild regulations were sanctioned by civic authority and only suspended during fairs to attract outside business.[42] By the sixteenth century the guild of St. Luke had become firmly established in Antwerp with 694 registrations of master painters.[43] The second half of the century saw an increase of diversity in guild composition to include persons in non-art related activities attesting to the fact that there was still no clear distinction between artists and artisans.[44] To supplement its income and to compete with general activities of art dealing, the Antwerp St. Lucas Guild, in 1508, was granted the right to conduct periodic public art auctions[45] for a 5% commission.[46] As the century wore on and the art market increased in complexity, guild regulations adjusted to the changing conditions without losing their influence within the industry.

Although guilds were permitted to sell the products of their members, most art dealing activity occurred outside these organizations. Aside from the traditional relationship between patrons and artists and as direct purchases from studios, the selling of artists' products initially took place at the numerous markets and fairs.[47] The gradual replacement of panel with cloth paintings simplified this since the latter were easier to transport, less vulnerable to weather changes, and cheaper to produce.[48] Pictures became smaller, not only to facilitate transport but also to allow for the display of a larger selection in the limited space of a stall.[49] These stalls were frequently manned by the artists themselves[50] although it must have been common for painters to consign their works to merchants or fellow artists who attended such fairs.[51] Besides large, semi-annual or annual markets, there were also open markets and kirmesses in smaller cities.[52] These events were often organized by the church which benefited from rents charged. Since the church in the Netherlands was not allowed to become an important landholder, the sponsorship of such enterprises presented a welcome source of income.[53] Also popular were the "Friday markets" which were established in Antwerp in 1547; they existed outside of guild regulations and were a convenient way of trading artists' products.[54] Another customary marketing vehicle was art lotteries recorded as early as 1445 in Bruges and continuing throughout the next century and beyond.[55]

As the industry was getting used to trading its goods in an open market in fixed locations the establishment of regularly held and even permanent art exhibitions soon followed. This development towards marketing specialization resulted in the growing importance of middlemen. Already in the preceding century merchants in Bruges sold art in the merchant hall, but it was not until 1540 that the first year-round for-sale exhibition was established. The "Schilders pand," as it was called, was located on the upper gallery of the Antwerp stock exchange which had been divided into separate stalls and leased by the city to artists to display and sell their works. From 1565 to 1597 the entire pand was rented by one individual, the painter/dealer Bartholomaus de Momper. Its colorful history mirrored the period's political and economic turmoils, and its enterprising tenant was the first large-scale art dealer of modern times.[56] By 1517 until the mid-1540s there existed at least seven art-related public outlets in Antwerp which operated for specified periods during each year.[57] The most important, indeed the first, although not year-round,[58] art market in post-classical Europe to be housed in a building specifically constructed for that purpose was Our Lady's Pand operating from 1460 to 1560. It was organized by the church and, as figures indicate, it was not only the backbone of the church's fair income through much of the sixteenth century, but its principle merchandise was the preeminent growth industry among the church-sponsored fairs in general. The data also shows the elasticity of art prices with respect to fluctuations of the Antwerp economy,[59] and the development of Our Lady's Pand was both symptom and agent of the new practice of producing art on speculation for an open market.

The sixteenth century also witnessed the emergence of specialized merchants in art, the art dealers. They evolved from the ranks of merchants who had traditionally sold art products,[60] or were artists who either supplemented their income by selling others' works in addition to their own or had given up painting entirely.[61] Business practices included commissioning of artists, buying at estate auctions, markets and fairs, as well as employing young artists to copy and mass produce.[62] Their business locations were mostly small shops[63] or stalls at suitable markets.

Besides local and regional demand the export trade was of particular importance. Netherlandish artists' works were sold in most European countries, with France in the lead, followed by Italy, Spain, Portugal, and, of course, neighboring Germany.[64]

For whom was all this effort in production and marketing expended? Records indicate that only a small percentage of Netherlandish paintings were acquired by the courts or the nobility.[65] The demand side consisted largely of prosperous townspeople, hospitals, churches, and civic authorities.[66] The mention of specific subjects of paintings recorded in inventories, beginning in the second half of the sixteenth century, indicates the emergence of a collector's mentality, and patrons began to recognize the claim of artists that their work entailed more than just simple manual execution.[67] It was not long before paintings began to be bought and sold by private consumers for purely speculative purposes, a trend which further fueled production but also added to the volatility of the market as a whole.

The foregoing analysis of the sixteenth century art market in the Netherlands is intended to provide a model rather than quantitative data. Each individually addressed topic is, by itself, a subject for further investigation. I hope, however, to have succeeded in providing information about the composition and

dynamics of the period's art market, further insight into its history, and a better understanding of the economic circumstances under which its art was produced.

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[1] Carel van Mander, *Dutch and Flemish Painters* translation from the Schilderboeck (New York: Mcfarlane, Warde, McFarlane, 1936) 4.

[2] For a recent summary of research pertaining to this subject see John-Michael Montias, "Socio-economic Aspects of Netherlandish Art from the Fifteenth to the Seventeenth Century: A Survey," *The Art Bulletin* LXXII, 3 (Sept. 1990): 358-373. The main focus of this survey is the seventeenth century while the preceding two centuries are addressed only peripherally.

[3] Van Mander 69, 238, 271. Van Mander describes 1584 as the year where 'Art hates Mars.' The commercial art gallery located on the second floor of the Antwerp stock exchange was completely destroyed during the Spanish Fury and its owner never fully recovered from this loss.

[4] Peter H. Crew, *Calvinist Preaching and Iconoclasm in the Netherlands 1544-69* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) 10-26.

[5] Van Mander LI, 174, 216.

[6] Keith P.F. Moxey, *Pieter Aertsen, Joachim Beuckelaer, and the Rise of Secular Painting in Context of the Reformation* (New York and London, 1977) 158-9.

[7] Van Mander 331.

[8] Herman van der Wee, *The Growth of the Antwerp Market and the European Economy* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963) II, 5-136. The period from 1521 to 1550 was one of initial crisis followed by a renewal of industry and the Antwerp urban economy. This revival was mostly due to transit trade and industrial renewal which led to a flourishing luxury industry spreading, via Antwerp, over the entire European market. Wee states that, from around 1535 on, the position of artists and artisans, in terms of wages, improved considerably (186-7, 192). The fifties brought a period of nervous activity for the Antwerp money market and introduced the final phase of the town's financial rise (205-208). Correspondingly, this and the subsequent decade witnessed a slowing down of commercial expansion offset to an extent by industrial growth (209-234). Commerce and industry suffered severely in 1566 when the iconoclasts brought the entire city to a standstill. The arrival of Alva's army from Spain to squelch the reformist rebellion brought further financial pressures through the imposition of heavy exploits (235-241). The years 1572 to 1587 were a period of crisis and marked the final phase of Antwerp's decline, accelerated by the Spanish hardship (265-268). The remaining years of the century saw a gradual recovery of commerce and industry.

[9] Wee 324-334.

[10] Georg Friedrich Koch, *Die Kunstausstellung* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1967) 55.

[11] Koch 83-4. Ralph Edwards, *Early Conversation Pictures from the Middle Ages to around 1730* (London: Country Life Ltd., 1954) 11. Edwards quoted Roger Fry in *Flemish Art* (1927) 2: "...a marvelous exactitude of literal reporting and the people for whom they catered enjoyed the things of this life with so wholesome, so uncritical an appetite that they loved to find in their pictures vivid reminiscences of what was so familiar to them."

[12] Usually the walls were covered with cloth sheets which were sometimes decorated with figures. Hans Floerke, *Studien zur Niederlandischen Kunstgeschichte* (Munchen and Leipzig: Georg Muller, 1905) 2-4.

[13] Floerke 4, 5.

[14] Diane Wolfthal, *The Beginning of Netherlandish Canvas Painting: 1400-1530* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 12-13. Wolfthal points out that a clear distinction was made between artists painting on panel and the "Cleerderscriver" who painted on cloth. She also comments on the fact that cloth painting had served as a cheap substitute for tapestry and was executed in egg or glue color; only as a result of Italian influence was the medium changed to oil allowing for much finer execution.

[15] Hessel Miedema, "Over Kwaliteitvoorschriften in het St. Lucas Gilde: over 'Doodverf'," *Oud Holland* CI, (1987): 141-147. Miedema mentions a prohibition by the guild of S Hertogenbosch in 1546 against the use of panels that were not first "dead-colored" (edootverfd) which suggests that this cost-cutting device was already in use by then. Other economizing measures, such as specialization (Floerke 154), collaboration between artists etc., described by Van Mander, will be discussed below.

[16] It is interesting to note that in spite of the sixteenth-century influence of Italian ideas regarding the elevated status of painting and painters, the production of art in the Netherlands still showed an identification with the medieval craft concept. Not until the end of the century can one detect a significant change. Zirka Zaremba Filipczak, *Picturing Art in Antwerp* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987) 16n. 16.

[17] Floerke 154, citing Guicciardini. Also Laurna Campbell, "The Art Market in the Southern Netherlands in the Fifteenth Century," *Burlington Magazine* 118 (April 1976): 190.

[18] Floerke 9-11, discussing art dealing activity in Utrecht.

[19] Van Mander 76. "Fine art came to Antwerp because it followed wealth." Dan Ewing, "Marketing Art in Antwerp, 1460-1560: Our Lady's Pand," *Art Bulletin* LXXII, no.4 (December 1990): 559.

[20] Filipczak 3.

[21] Floerke 67.

[22] Floerke 8-9.

[23] Ewing 580.

[24] Ewing 579. Koch 64 notes the large number of sixteenth century Netherlandish paintings existing in neighboring countries.

[25] Koch 129, van Mander 158-160.

[26] Floerke 129-134, van Mander 158-160. The practice of copying also produced a profitable trade in forgeries. The Mannerist concept of building upon preexisting art implies that the original must be special, i.e. more expensive. One can easily see how this would promote selling of forgeries (Floerke 155). This practice pervaded the market to such an extent that specific legislation had to be passed to deal with this problem (333). Van Mander informs us that the painter Hans Bol gave up painting on canvas entirely during his stay in Antwerp (1572-84) because of widespread forgery of his work (Van Mander 270-72).

[27] Van Mander XXX, Floerke 154.

[28] Campbell 193-4. The terms of such arrangements were generally contractually agreed upon and registered with the guild or a civic authority. They included detailed specifications, deadlines, payment schedules, and a statement of penalty if any of the above were broken.

[29] Campbell 195.

[30] Campbell 194.

[31] Floerke 30-35.

[32] Van Mander 24, 173, 224, 261, 353, 425. Peter Moxey, "The Criticism of Avarice in Sixteenth Century Netherlandish Painting," *Netherlandish Mannerism*, ed. Corel Cavalli-Bjorkman (Stockholm: Stockholm Nationalmusei, 1985) 21-34.

[33] Stephen H. Goddard, "Brocade Patterns in the Shop of the Master of Frankfurt: An Accessory to Stylistic Analysis," *Art Bulletin* LXVII (1985): 401-417. Lynn Jacobs, "The Marketing and Standardization of South Netherlandish Carved Altarpieces: Limits on the Role of the Patron," *Art Bulletin* LXXI (1989): 203-229.

[34] Van Mander 125, 254, 311.

[35] Van Mander LVII.

[36] Van Mander 299.

[37] Van Mander LIX, 23, 125, 170, 239, 261, 400, 411.

[38] Van Mander 49, 52, 74, 83, 109, 290, 291, 364-5.

[39] Floerke 160-3, 178-9, Filipczak 41.

[40] Filipczak 30-1, mentioning Frans Floris' inscription "invenit et fecit" accompanying his signature which emphasized, in her opinion, that painting, besides manual execution, also involved the invention of an idea. She also points out that forgers could earn more money through forging of "Old Masters" than through their own work as an indication of the tendency towards non-craft pricing (44). Van Mander tells of the high price Moro received for a portrait of Count Alva's concubine (144), which further underscores this change in attitudes, as does his statement regarding expensive paintings by rich artists.

[41] Floerke 163 n.353 refers to the edict of Maria Theresia.

[42] Campbell 191. As van Mander informs us, these regulations were frequently challenged, as was the system as a whole.

[43] Filipczak 12 n.3.

[44] Filipczak 12.

[45] Floerke 38, 42, 44. Often estate auctions were used to undermine guild regulations by adding otherwise prohibited goods to their inventory.

[46] Koch 67.

[47] Koch 73.

[48] Koch 62.

[49] Such stalls' rents were established on the basis of the amount of display space.

[50] Floerke 15, on Adriaen Prevost showing his paintings in three stalls in Bruges in 1532 at the market of the Minorite monastery; Albert Cornelius of Bruges paid, in 1515-16 and 1522 rent for market stalls; Simon Brnnynch of Antwerp sold his miniatures at the Bruges market. Van Mander (XXVII, 60) reports that the wife of the painter Jan de Hollander travelled to the markets "making good profit" while he stayed at home.

[51] Floerke 88-89, Campbell 196-7 discussing artists who travelled to these markets.

[52] Floerke 12,13. See also Jean C. Wilson, "The participation of painters in the Bruges 'pandt' market, 1512-1550," *Burlington Magazine* 125 (August 1983): 476-479 for more detailed discussion of this subject.

[53] Bernard Hubertus Vlekke, "The Dutch before 1581," *The Netherlands*, ed. Bartholomew Landheer (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1943): 28. Floerke 60.

[54] Floerke 39, 40.

[55] Floerke 55, 56.

[56] Floerke 60, Filipczak 21, 41. Koch 64, mentions that the art fair in the Hradschin in Prague under Rudolf II was modeled after the Antwerp Schilders pand.

[57] Ewing 559, 569.

[58] Ewing 569. Shortly after 1540, Our Lady's Pand shifted to year-round selling in response to competition from the newly opened Schilders pand at the Bourse.

[59] Ewing 558-583, for corroborating data as well as a detailed discussion of the history of 'Our Lady's Pand.' The pand is also mentioned by Koch 56n.120.

[60] Floerke 91-2, 114, 116. Merchants such as dealers in devotional objects, book dealers, jewelers, frame makers, etchers, engravers, and even junk dealers.

[61] Floerke 86-89, van Mander 148, Campbell 196-7, Koch 66.

[62] Floerke 85-6.

[63] Van Mander 229. Although Ewing describes the inventory of the painter/dealer Jan van Kessel as consisting of over 600 paintings.

[64] Floerke 74-80. Jean Adhemar, "French Sixteenth Century Genre Paintings," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute* 8 (1945): 192-3. Campbell 197, Koch 59 61, van Mander 79, 216.

[65] Wolfthal 19, Campbell 188-90.

[66] Campbell 188-90. For names of specific collectors and general comments on patronage see Floerke 164-65, 171, and van Mander 20, 55, 69, 101, 156, 173, 187, 267.

[67] Filipczak 44-5.