

**Michael North, Das Goldene Zeitalter global.
Die Niederlande im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert,
Wien, Köln, Weimar (Böhlau) 2021, 317 S., 59 Abb.,
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Twenty years after the publication of his »Das Goldene Zeitalter: Kunst und Kommerz in der niederländischen Malerei des 17. Jahrhunderts« (2001), Michael North goes back to a theme that has been central throughout his extensive and diverse career. The 2001 book was a revised edition of a book that he first published in 1992, and the current volume is a next important step in the trajectory that North has set out over the past three decades. However, the book under review is not a new revision of the above monograph, but a new encounter with a familiar topic. The title of the new book does not betray that a central focus of North's book is similar to his 2001 book: the role of art and cultural production in the Dutch Republic and in its empire as well as the topics that are represented in these various types of artistic production.

The book is structured in eleven chapters that each have a particular geographical focus and have an actor that serves as the protagonist of the chapter. We thus visit the world of the East Indian and West Indian trade companies starting from the case of Zacharias Wagener, followed by a second chapter in which Nicolaas Witsen guides us into the changes in the domestic world in the Dutch Republic. The third chapter looks at Dutch presence in the North- and East Sea area and the relation between those regions and the Dutch Republic with Christina of Sweden as the protagonist. The following chapters focus on Brasil (here particularly on Johan Maurits of Nassau-Siegen), Suriname and Curacao (highlighting Maria Sibylla Merian), New Netherland, situated on the Northern East Coast of North-America (here Margrieta van Varick gets center stage) and Capetown (with an emphasis on Angela van Bengalen). North then brings us to Batavia (Sayfoedin von Tidore), the Indian subcontinent and Sri Lanka (focusing on Hendrik van Schuylenburgh), Japan (Shiba Kokan) and finally China (Johan Nieuhof). The author thus takes his readers to almost all of the most important and eye-catching settlements of the Dutch commercial empire. Only the Mediterranean, with a Dutch merchant community in Venice and Livorno, grain shipping and other maritime traffic – the so-called *straatvaart* – and Dutch sailors who risked to become captives due to piracy, is notably absent. In his list of protagonists, we find both well- as well as lesser known figures, Dutch people as well as local actors, and men as well as women.

North's global approach, his focus on a lead actor per chapter and his interest for artistic and cultural production are all in line with new directions that historical scholarship has taken over the



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past decades. The rise of global history as a subfield has strongly marked the discipline over the last twenty years. North joins a diverse group of scholars who have moved from a primary focus on their subject in a European metropolitan context to a more global approach. And like many of them – think of the case of Elizabeth Marsh studied by Linda Colley –, he chooses to give prominence to an actor perspective. It should also be noted and applauded that, unlike many global historians who rely solely on historiography, North (together with his research assistants) has conducted substantial archival research around the globe. Thanks to this approach, the book is an elegantly balanced mix of sections that are based on that archival work and parts that rely on North's wide knowledge and familiarity with a broad range of scholarship in a variety of languages on the Dutch Republic, its empire and artistic production. Unlike various other global histories, North also has ample eye for local actors, power dynamics and material factors that shaped consumer and artistic preferences. The choice of having a lead actor and a geographical focus per chapter provides the book with a transparent structure. In some chapters this leads to an elegant interplay between observations and stories about the protagonist and a broader canvas that shows and analyses the situation in that particular place. In others, the brief opening through the lens of a protagonist may feel somewhat artificial and is relatively detached from the rest of the chapter.

As mentioned, North's previous work on the role of art in early modern Dutch society is an important point of reference. With his latest book, however, North does not seem to aspire to explicitly and straightforwardly contributing to broader debates about the functioning of art markets. Scholarship such as that of Hans van Miegroet, Neil de Marchi, Elizabeth Honig, or Filip Vermeulen, who all have worked on various aspects of the art markets of (parts of) the Low Countries in the early modern era does not serve as an explicit point of reference in North's book. It is somewhat regrettable that North does not seek that debate more explicitly and refrains from a straightforward claim about what his global perspective adds to that line of scholarship. But as his conclusion rightly suggests, the variety of observations and the diverse dynamics at play in the spaces that he investigates make it far from easy to make such a forthright claim.

This observation about historiographical debate brings up the question of who is the target audience of this book. Fellow historians with an interest in one or more of the regions scrutinized by North may find additional insights in his case studies. However, the main strength of the book is that it introduces the Dutch global empire and the rich historiography in Dutch and other languages to a German audience for whom this topic may be rather unfamiliar territory. The book is thus an excellent entry into the topic for both professional historians who come from other fields, as well as university students of early modern history or art history. North's accessible style of writing allows that the individual chapters or the book as a whole would certainly deserve their place on reading lists for both undergraduate and graduate seminars.



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Last but not least, the book may certainly also be of interest to a wider audience.

The book comes as a nicely designed and formatted hardback. It is illustrated with various color images throughout the chapters. Readers with a scholarly interest will be pleased to find footnotes that allow them to check the basis of North's observations and claims. It should be noted however, that North and his editors deliberately have chosen to be rather sparse with the notes. This seems another indicator of the book's aim of gaining both, academic readers as well as readers with a non-academic background or interest. A bibliographical list and a register facilitate the use of it as a reference work.



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