

Couple with a Globe

Daniel Dailey



Couple With a Globe, Lambert Doomer, 1684,
Oil on Panel, Netherlands

Daniel Dailey
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When observing and analyzing a work of art, it is important to understand the cultural factors that may have influenced its subject matter. The study of art history is not only about looking at the skill and style of the artwork but also using the art as a means to understanding the past. By looking at historical art objects, scholars are able to gather both the historical context in which it was created and more importantly how the people viewed themselves and their surroundings during that specific time. Lambert Doomer's painting, *Couple with a Globe*, is a great case study of how culture influences art. I argue that this painting, which displays a Dutch man and woman studying a globe, highlights Holland's position as the economic center for trade during the time. In order to support this argument, this essay will examine the painting *Couple with a Globe*, focusing on the significance of the centrality of the globe in the piece, followed by a historical analysis of Holland during the time. This examination will help explain why Doomer would have chosen to paint this subject matter.

The *Couple with a Globe* is an elegant oil painting done in 1648. The painting displays a young man and woman, both luxuriously dressed in rich cloth of the time, gathered around a globe examining it with deep admiration and intense interest. The colors of the painting pop as Lambert masterfully illuminates the figures against the dark background. Baroque influence is shown as Lambert attempts to capture a

dramatic moment in time where the man is teaching the woman about the wonders of the world.

The subject matter of *Couple with a Globe* Doomer displays the Dutch influence in the trading industry during the late 1600's that brought both wealth and innovation to the country. This is clearly apparent in the prevalence of a globe in the bottom center of the painting. Doomer brings attention to the globe through the woman in the painting who is staring at it, fascinated in her study of the world. This gaze draws in the outside viewer who follows her stare to find the large replica of Earth. The painting appears to be some sort of lesson, where the man is teaching the woman about the globe, perhaps explaining how to navigate a trade route. The globe is strategically turned so that the viewer can clearly see Europe accompanied by dotted lines and ships that show trade routes and trade ports. Both the man and woman that surround the globe are elegantly dressed, showing both their wealth and collection of worldly goods that came through this global trade centered in Holland.

In order to understand why Doomer chose this subject matter, it is important to consider what was happening in the Netherlands and around the world when this painting was created. *The Couple with a Globe* was done during a time period where the Netherlands was positioned as the major center for innovation and trade around the globe.¹ During this period called the Dutch Golden Age, the Dutch were the kings of commerce, controlling trade with Asia, which brought high commodity products

¹ Porter D. Matters of Exchange: Commerce, Medicine, and Science in the Dutch Golden Age. *JAMA*. 2007;298(11):1334-1340. doi:10.1001/jama.298.11.1339.

to the west, as well as the trade between European countries. As a result, during this 100-year time span, the northern Netherlands became the center for innovation of science, intellect and art.²

It was no coincidence that the Netherlands, a tiny country in northern Europe that lacked both population and resources, was able to drive itself to the top of global trade in the 16th and 17th centuries.³ Much of its success can be attributed to the revolt against Spain that began in 1568. The Dutch declared war on Spain due to Spain's control over the region, calling for a new Netherlands that was religiously and economically independent. This revolt, known as the Eighty Years War, resulted in much of the Southern Netherlands being directly taken over by Spanish rule. The most significant loss was the fall of Antwerp, which was at the time the main trading port of the Netherlands and the economic and intellectual center of the region. Luckily for the Netherlands, Spain's engagement in battle with the English and the Turkish Empire made them unable to move up into the northern part of the country. Consequently, northern Netherlands became the focal point in the fight against Spain's oppression creating a new society that looked to gain power and influence in the world. In support of this expansion, much of the merchants, sailors and scholars

² "The Power of Art - Rembrandt (complete Episode)." *YouTube*. YouTube, 25 Jan. 2012. Web. 14 Apr. 2014.
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZ8Wdo4LCHM>>.

³ Porter D. Matters of Exchange: Commerce, Medicine, and Science in the Dutch Golden Age. *JAMA*. 2007;298(11):1334-1340. doi:10.1001/jama.298.11.1339.

from the south migrated north to the city of Amsterdam creating a skilled labor force that was experienced in trade. ⁴

In addition to having a new skilled labor force, Amsterdam's central location in Eastern Europe and its previous trade industry promoted a quick expansion. Prior to the Golden Age, due to its infertile lands, the northern Netherlands was heavily involved in grain trade with the Baltic region. In this mutual exchange that became known as the "mother trade," the Dutch would export their high quality meats, fish and dairy products for Baltic grain. This trade was extremely important in setting the stage for the more prosperous era to come. In order to exchange their goods for grain that is heavy and sold at a relatively low cost, the Dutch mass-produced cheap but efficient ships. As other countries in Europe began to suffer drought, they then relied on this Dutch trade that stood between their location and the Baltic region. Soon the Netherlands was the main trading port, connecting this much-needed grain to the rest of Europe. Once the Dutch moved to the East and began trading higher priced goods, these ships and their central location became one of the major factors in their success. ⁵ This importance of location is shown in the *Couple with the Globe* through the positioning of the globe that centrally displays trade in Europe and the East, all connecting to Amsterdam. This positioning combined

⁴ Harreld, Donald. "Dutch Economy in the "Golden Age" (16th-17th Centuries)". EH.Net Encyclopedia, edited by Robert Whaples. August 12, 2004. Harreld, Donald.

⁵ "Changing Patterns in the East." *Baltic Connections*. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Mar. 2014. <<http://www.balticconnections.net/index.cfm?>

with the lavish clothing and jewelry, displays the immense success they achieved during the time period following Spanish rule.

The innovation that occurred in the Netherlands can be linked to the establishment of the University of Leiden in 1575.⁶ This school was extremely progressive, encouraging creativity and pushing boundaries. As a result, it quickly became a gathering place for intellectuals and scholars from around the world, all of whom flocked to the Netherlands in search of religious freedom and to be part of this new intellectual era. During this time, innovations such as the pendulum clock were created that provided a more precise means of keeping time.⁷ The fields of science and math were also expanded, as scholars began to look beyond religion as they studied the world and life itself in order to form a new perspective. During this time, Anton Van Leeuwenhoek one of the most famous Dutch scientists, discovered the idea of bacteria; laying the foundation for microbiology.⁸ Finally, and most significantly in terms of this painting, the field of cartography was greatly advanced. Scholars like Petrus Plancius and Joan Blaeu were paid by the Dutch East India Company to create the best maps and globes of the time in order to improve their

⁶ Porter D. Matters of Exchange: Commerce, Medicine, and Science in the Dutch Golden Age. *JAMA*. 2007;298(11):1334-1340. doi:10.1001/jama.298.11.1339.

⁷ Herivel, John. "Christiaan Huygens (Dutch Scientist and Mathematician)." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d. Web. 13 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/277775/Christiaan-Huygens>>.

⁸ "Overview: The Curious Observer." *Lens on Leeuwenhoek*. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Mar. 2014. <<http://lensonleeuwenhoek.net/content/overview-curious-observer>>

trade efficiency with the east.⁹ The men's work in cartography was revolutionary in terms of practicality and technicality as well as visual presentation. Now sailors could triangulate exact locations through mathematical equations as well as provide step-by-step directions that were accompanied by drawings of coastal lines. These forms of navigation were paramount in propelling the Netherlands to the top of the trading industry.¹⁰

Lastly, the northern Netherlands' success in becoming and remaining religiously independent from Catholic Spain, helped to create a period of prosperity and intellectual innovation. This search for religious freedom was a main factor that sparked the revolt in the south, becoming the rallying point of the new independent nation.¹¹ Once released from their control, the northern Netherlands became a primarily Protestant nation. Unlike Catholicism, Protestantism encourages self-worship and is much more open to the ideas of science and technological study. Scholars and artists from around the globe recognized this, fleeing their oppressive countries to be a part of this new exciting nation. As mentioned earlier, this religious freedom promoted some of the greatest inventions and advances in science that

⁹ Rijkeboer, Henk. "Dutch Cartography in the 16th and 17th Century." [Www.european-heritage.org](http://www.european-heritage.org) | European-heritage.org. The European Heritage Project, n.d. Web. 19 Feb. 2014.

¹⁰ Rijkeboer, Henk. "Dutch Cartography in the 16th and 17th Century." [Www.european-heritage.org](http://www.european-heritage.org) | European-heritage.org. The European Heritage Project, n.d. Web. 19 Feb. 2014.

¹¹ Parker G. THE ORIGINS OF THE DUTCH REVOLT. *History Today* [serial online]. July 1984;34(7):17. Available from: Academic Search Premier, Ipswich, MA. Accessed April 14, 2014.

helped the nation gain more influence in the international world and economy.¹² In terms of art, Protestantism moved away from religious subject matter and focused more on everyday life, portraits, and genre paintings. This is clearly exemplified in the *Couple with a Globe* that appears to have no religious affiliation and portrays the cultural happenings of the time.¹³

Lambert Doomer's painting *Couple with a Globe* is a perfect case study of how culture affects the subject matter of a work of art. By reviewing the historical context of the Netherlands, which lines up with the date of the painting, I believe I have made a solid case that Doomer's painting reflects the Netherlands influence in trade during the 16th and 17th centuries. This is seen in the prevalence and interaction with the globe in the painting that represents this interest in global trade and displays Europe as the center of this trade.

¹² Harreld, Donald. "Dutch Economy in the "Golden Age" (16th-17th Centuries)". EH.Net Encyclopedia, edited by Robert Whaples. August 12, 2004. Harreld, Donald.

¹³ Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. "Dutch Golden Age Painting in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century European Art. N.p., n.d. Web. 24 Mar. 2014. <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hi/hi_dutchgoldage.htm>.

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<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZ8Wdo4LCHM>>.