

Couple With a Globe

Anthony Jordick



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

Couple With a Globe
Anthony Jordick
March 17, 2014

Paintings have long been a practical outlet for wealthy patrons looking to display their affluence. Those with enough money could afford to commission paintings by the most prominent contemporary artists, and the piece would be proudly displayed in their estate, a symbol of their achievement and status. Couple With a Globe, by Lambert Doomer is an excellent example of a painting that displays wealth and through carefully placed objects. This painting is an interesting example, because many of the items in the painting can be traced to Dutch economic activity, and their increased role in world trade and imperialism. While the painting is a clear depiction of the status of this couple, it also displays ties to various other world markets that the Dutch had become involved with through trade and colonization. This painting serves as a useful case study in the wealth of Dutch people and nation, as well as international relations with foreign markets. This paper will examine the clothing and jewelry seen in the painting, as well as the carpet covering the table, and interpret them as symbols in a global context.

The clothing that patrons choose to wear for their portraits has always reflected their nobility, wealth or status in society, and Couple With a Globe is no exception.¹ Not only does the clothing in this piece reflect the wealth of the couple, but also of the Dutch nation as a whole, whose blossoming economy was quickly becoming one of the most prominent economies in the world. The woman in the painting is wearing a dress of what appears to be silk, judging by the sheen of the

¹Hulton, "Drawings of England...", page 45.

upper sleeve and the portion of the dress in the bottom right-hand corner of the piece. In the mid-17th century, Dutch ships had begun travelling to Eastern Asia, establishing expansive trade routes and spheres of influence.² The Dutch traded extensively in spices and grains, but also in gold and other expensive luxury items like pearls and silk. Textile manufacturing in the Netherlands grew quickly right around the beginning of the 17th century, so it is conceivable that Dutch traders used Asian trade networks to establish a reliable source of raw cloth and other necessary materials for textile production.³ The silk used to make the woman's dress was likely obtained in Asia, and shipped back on one of the dozens of merchant ships travelling from Asia to Europe.

In addition to the silk used to make the dress, the woman is adorned with an abundance of pearls, from her bracelet, to her necklace and her headdress. Pearls were originally "hunted" in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, as well as several other bodies of water around the Indian subcontinent. The Dutch would have been introduced to pearls by way of their already established spice and grain trade, and may have invested in the harvesting in pearls.⁴ As merchants became wealthier, they most likely started purchasing pearls, then brought them back to Europe for consumers to buy and use in jewelry. Much like the silk used to make the dress in the painting, pearls would have been considered a luxury item, affordable only for the wealthier people of the Dutch population. The mere presence of such an item points to the excessive wealth and elevated status of the couple in Dutch

²Israel, "Dutch Primacy in World Trade, 1585-1740," page 115.

³ Israel, "Dutch Primacy in World Trade, 1585-1740," page 120.

⁴ Harreld, "Dutch Economy in the "Golden Age" (16th-17th Centuries)," page 82.

society. However, the abundance of pearls in all of her jewelry suggests that the couple may belong to some sort of merchant class, which was enjoying incredible success during the Dutch Golden Age of trade with foreign markets in shipping, trade and exploitation.⁵ Advancement in Dutch science and medicine was widely attributed to the merchant class and their dealings with foreign entities.

The prominence of pearls and silk in this painting may also suggest the influence of the culture of the Indian subcontinent in Dutch society, and the import and export of culture through trade networks with the rest of the world. Islam was quickly becoming a major religion in Southeast Asia and China, and Arabic traders who had travelled there for trade first established it in the region.⁶ Dutch merchants would have surely encountered the religion in their dealings with this region through trade. Compared to other nations in Europe, the Dutch were relatively accepting of other religions, and it is not inconceivable that some merchants may have brought back elements of other religions that they were exposed to in trade.⁷ This is of importance because the Quran mentions pearls and silk in a verse of the holy text. Verse 22:23 reads, "Indeed, Allah will admit those who believe and do righteous deeds to gardens beneath which rivers flow. They will be adorned therein with bracelets of gold and pearl, and their garments therein will be silk." Not only did pearls and silk mean signify wealth and prosperity to those in the Netherlands that could afford it, but to followers of Islam, it signifies that those who do righteous acts will be clothed in silk and pearls. It is not uncommon for

⁵ Jacobs, "Review: Matters of Exchange...", page 221.

⁶ Sluglett, "The Spread of Islam in Southeast Asia c.1275-c.1625," page 1.

⁷ Jacobs, "Review: Matters of Exchange...", page 221.

people in a new place to take up local practices through repeated or prolonged exposure. Merchants in Southeast Asia may not have converted to Islam, but they may have used cultural appropriation to apply some of the local beliefs to their own religious practices. The belief that pearls and silk are symbols of righteousness or acceptance into heaven by God may have been adopted as a belief by the merchants who now had access to these holy adornments. While this may be somewhat of a stretch, it is still possible that Dutch fashion was influenced by local customs of Southeast Asia, and clothing choices were made based on religious and cultural beliefs brought back to Europe by Dutch merchants.

Many patrons select certain objects to appear in their portraits because they symbolize wealth, status or knowledge, and these meanings are conveyed to the viewer through the piece.⁸ In addition to the clothing and jewelry, the carpet covering the table in the painting is also a status symbol. As mentioned earlier, the textile industry was a cornerstone of the Dutch economy, and the carpet is most likely a reference to the centrality of the textile industry to Dutch economic success.⁹ Many raw materials used in the Dutch textile industry were collected in Southeast Asia, where carpet-making practices had grown through the spread of Islam through Eurasia.¹⁰ The carpet covering the table in this painting alludes to what are most likely Asian origins, as well as the importance of textiles in the Netherlands during this time period.¹¹ Eventually carpets became more affordable, and Dutch homes began to use carpets as floor coverings instead of decorative coverings for tables

⁸ Sumowski, "The Corpus of the Rembrandt School Drawings," page 62.

⁹ Denny, "Islamic Carpets in European Paintings," page 1.

¹⁰ Dijk, "The VOC's Trade in Indian Textiles with Burma, 1634-80," page 502.

¹¹ Harreld, "Dutch Economy in the "Golden Age" (16th-17th Centuries)," page 1.

and other pieces of furniture. Other status symbols like musical instruments, jewelry and silver pieces were often placed on top of the carpets that rest on a table. The combination of these items is a clear display of wealth, and their prominence in the lives of wealthy Dutch families. Again, the merchant class in the Netherlands enjoyed a particularly prosperous nearly half-century during the Dutch Golden Age, when international shipping and trade were very profitable investments for Dutch businessmen. These types of portraits, depicting well-dressed individuals, living in beautiful, palatial like homes, filled with expensive items from around the world, were very common for the time period.

Couple With a Globe is an excellent example of what Dutch portraiture looked like during the Dutch Golden Age, in which international trade bolstered the economy to a level of production that rivaled nearly all major world powers. Portraits of wealthy Dutch individuals or couples were often centered around objects that displayed the wealth and power of the subjects, and their elevated status in society, and the genre was exceptionally popular at the time. The couple in this painting displays their wealth through their clothing, jewelry and possession of an object of scientific and monetary value, the globe. The silk and pearls in the portrait demonstrate ties to Southeast Asia and the Indian Subcontinent, as well as local beliefs possibly influencing Dutch cultural values. There is clearly an intimate relationship between the Dutch and their trade partners around the world, one that extends beyond a simple transfer of goods and services, into the realm of religion, social practices and cultural values.

Bibliography

- Denny, Walter. "Islamic Carpets in European Paintings". In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-.
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/isca/hd_isca.htm (October 2011)
- Dijk, Wil. "The VOC's Trade in Indian Textiles with Burma, 1634-80." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 33 (): 495-515.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20072449> (October 2002)
- Harreld, Donald. "Dutch Economy in the "Golden Age" (16th-17th Centuries)". EH.Net Encyclopedia, edited by Robert Whaples. August 12, 2004.
URL <http://eh.net/encyclopedia/the-dutch-economy-in-the-golden-age-16th-17th-centuries/>.
- Hulton, P.H. "Drawings of England in the Seventeenth Century by Willem Schellinks, Jacob Esselens and Lambert Doomer From the Van Der Hem Atlas of the National Library, Vienna: Part One: Introduction and Catalogue." *The Volume of the Walpole Society*. (1954): iii-64. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41829556> . (accessed February 19, 2014).
- Israel, Jonathan. *Dutch Primacy in World Trade, 1585-1740*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Jacob, Margaret. "Review: Matters of Exchange: Commerce, Medicine, and Science in the Dutch Golden Age." *The Journal of Modern History* 81 (): 221-222.
- Sluglett, Peter. Middle East Institute, "The Spread of Islam in Southeast Asia c.1275-c.1625." Last modified 01 2011. Accessed March 24, 2014.
<http://mei.nus.edu.sg/publications/mei-insights/the-spread-of-islam-in-southeast-asia-c-1275-c-1625>.
- Sumowski, Werner, and Walter Strauss. "The Corpus of the Rembrandt School Drawings." *Master Drawings*. no. 3 (1982): 280-285 319-322.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1553678> . (accessed February 19, 2014).