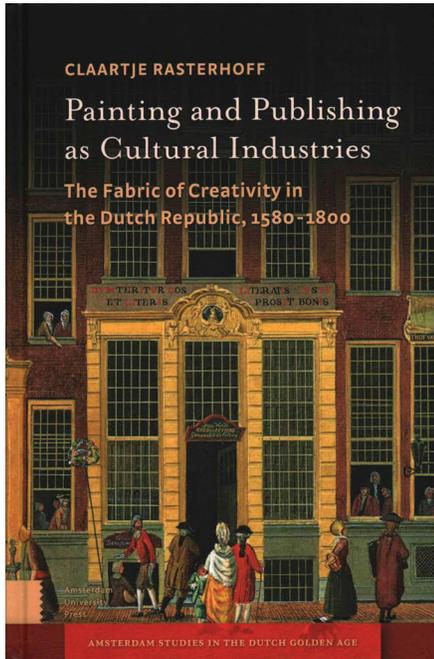


Review

Claartje Rasterhoff, *Painting and Publishing as Cultural Industries. The Fabric of Creativity in the Dutch Republic, 1580-1800*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2016, 352 pp. ISBN 978-90-8964-702-3.



The sudden increase in the production of paintings, prints and books in the Dutch Golden age and the astonishing quality of those objects have fascinated generations of historians. How could such extraordinary levels of creativity emerge in such a small nation? Traditionally, this development was explained by a combination of factors that led to changes in the demand, supply and distribution of cultural products. Claartje Rasterhoff however, now adds a fresh view on the matter in *Painting and Publishing as Cultural Industries. The Fabric of Creativity in the Dutch Republic, 1580-1800*, which is a fine-tuned version of her dissertation defended at the University of Utrecht in 2012. Rasterhoff argues that ‘the extraordinary artistic and economic outcomes [of the Dutch Golden Age] were more than the sum of [several] factors’ (p. 283), and that ‘The local organization of production proved to be just as conducive’ (p. 283). Introducing a new analytical framework to explain the

high cultural achievements in the Dutch Golden Age, Rasterhoff studied painting and publishing as cultural industries and is the first to employ the socio-economic concepts of spatial clustering and life cycle in her impressive book.

The book consists of two parts. The availability of rich data sets caused Rasterhoff to select her case studies from the fields of painting and book publishing. This dual study would allow for a fascinating comparison, which the author unfortunately does not include structurally in her book, leaving the reader with questions about the relations between these industries.

Both parts are divided into chapters that roughly mirror the different stages of the industries' life cycles: emergence, growth, maturity and decline. As others before her, Rasterhoff recognizes the Dutch Revolt and the Fall of Antwerp as significant events, or 'external shocks' (p. 36-39). At this point the business of book publishing and painting were still undeveloped when compared to Antwerp. This began to change when a large number of immigrants entered the labour market in a short period of time, among them many booksellers and painters. This coincided with a local infrastructure and socio-economic circumstances that stimulated the private demand for luxury goods, such as a growing economy and rising purchasing power. This initial period of rapid growth in the phase of emergence (1580-1610) should be interpreted as one of catching up (p. 67, 187). Nonetheless, patterns of spatial clustering emerged, especially in cities where demand was fed by specific conditions, such as the presence of an academic press in the university town of Leiden or demand for portraits in the political center of The Hague. Eventually this process resulted in increasing consumption and mass demand in the growth phase (1610-1650,) in which the until then 'untapped' market segment of the middle class was targeted. Increasing competitive pressure instigated several important product and process innovations. Cultural production increased rapidly in quantity, quality and diversity. Simultaneously, prices decreased because of cost-cutting inventions, such as downsizing the format of books, or using rapid painting techniques. It was at this stage when specific towns developed into artistic centers. Rasterhoff devotes much attention to the situation in Amsterdam, a city she describes as the most important production center of Europe.

Around the middle of the seventeenth century the rapid expansion caused saturation of local markets, which announced the stages of maturity and decline (1650-1800). This was also the time when the economic advantages of the previous phases decreased. As a result, domestic demand stagnated (in the case of books) or declined (in the case of paintings). Cultural producers responded to this by applying, once again, new business strategies; for example, they targeted the higher and lower ends of the domestic market or increasingly focused on export markets.

Rasterhoff is the first to explore the use of cluster theory to analyze early modern cultural industries. Cluster theory states that the spatial concentration of specialized industries in a specific place creates several advantages. One of these, competitive pressure, has recently been effectively explored for Amsterdam history painting in Eric Jan Sluijter's *Rembrandt's Rivals. History Painting in Amsterdam 1630-1650* (2015). Other possible benefits of industrial concentration in painting and publishing could rather easily be formulated, such as 'spillover': the unintentional transfer of skill and knowledge as result from rivalry for example, or shared guild memberships. However, the effect of spillover proved virtually impossible to measure for the Golden Age.

But Rasterhoff does draw stimulating claims from spatial clustering as an analytical tool. For example, she suggests that the success of cultural industries may have depended on the distinct urban structure of the Dutch Republic. Cultural production was concentrated in a limited number of towns, specifically the ones within the urban grid now referred to as the *Randstad*, an urban area consisting of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, Utrecht, and several other towns in their surroundings. The author convincingly argues that painters and publishers benefited from the clustering of producers, consumers, and suppliers in their

town, which allowed for interactions and connections, resulting in intentional and unintentional knowledge and skills transfer. In addition, these urban producers and consumers also profited from the interaction between other towns, which was facilitated by an efficient system of infrastructure. In this view, Rasterhoff argues, the *Randstad* already constituted a cluster in its own right. This ‘unique combination of urban openness and entrenchment in specific local industrial production systems’ (p. 294) is yet another factor that explains the explosive growth of the industries in the first half of the seventeenth century.

Amsterdam becomes dominant in the book when Rasterhoff discusses the growth phase. The distribution of booksellers and publication titles (table 4.1, p. 93) and active painters (table 8.2, p. 218) clearly shows how the scale of both industries exploded in the first half of the seventeenth century – even though one might wonder why academic texts are excluded from the sample of non-ephemeral titles, at the expense of the production numbers of publishers active in university towns, especially because local dynamics play such an important role in Rasterhoff’s argument. The vast number of titles published in Amsterdam was extraordinarily high and the town housed an astonishing number of painters: nearly as many as The Hague and Haarlem combined. What explains the success of Amsterdam within this cluster of the *Randstad*? If we can attribute growth to this ‘unique combination of openness and local embeddedness’ (p. 294), as Rasterhoff suggests, was this mix more typical of Amsterdam than of other cities? John Michael Montias (‘Art Dealers in the Seventeenth-Century Netherlands’, *Simiolus* 18 [1988], pp. 244-256) and Marten Jan Bok (*Vraag en aanbod op de Nederlandse kunstmarkt 1580-1700*, PhD. diss., Utrecht University, 1994.) already suggested that Amsterdam’s art market was exceptionally open as opposed to that in other cities of the Dutch Republic.

Success in the painting industry, however, constitutes to more than the number of products and producers. Rasterhoff introduces artistic prominence as a proxy measurement for the distribution of ‘innovation’ or quality (p. 177-183). Her model is fully based on art-historical appreciation, measured by the mentioning’s of painters in a variety of written sources: a selection of modern reference books about art in general (‘international prominence’), lexicons of Dutch art in particular (‘national prominence’), and contemporary collections of painter’s biographies (‘contemporary appreciation’). However, this reflects the canonical status of the artists at the time of publication rather than reputation in their lifetime. In this regard, the contemporary category feels incomplete. Based on the lexicons of Van Mander (1604), Houbaken (1718-1721), Van Gool (1750-1751) and Van Eynden and Van der Willigen (1816-1840), the seventeenth century is underrepresented. Moreover, Houbraken’s *De groote schouburgh* (1718-1721) had a tremendous impact on the formation of the canon and thus the other consulted reference books, as has recently been demonstrated (Filip Vermeylen, Maarten van Dijck and Veerle de Laet, ‘The Test of Time: Art Encyclopedias and the Formation of the Canon of 17th-century painters in the Low Countries’, *Empirical Studies of the Arts* 31 [2013], pp. 81-105). The painters discussed by Houbraken reflect that the author was particularly well-informed about painters active in Amsterdam, where he lived, and Dordrecht, where he was born; mentioning, for example, Johannes Vermeer only in passing in the biography of Christiaan van Couwenbergh. Could the dominance of Amsterdam at least partly be explained by Houbraken’s network? It would be very interesting to compare names of painters listed in contemporary probate

inventories and the prices their works fetched on the art market with the rankings provided by art historical references. Rasterhoff's model does, however, give an indication of the distribution of artistic prominence and therefore serves her purpose.

Painting and Publishing as Cultural Industries is an impressive and significant publication, which demonstrates the use of cluster theory as an explanatory framework for the extraordinary achievements in painting and publishing in the Dutch Golden Age. Even though the line of progress and decline of these sectors is well known, Rasterhoff is the first who has identified, discussed and explained the development of these industries. On a methodological level, the greatest asset of this book is the use of a new analytical framework to the study of cultural industries, which will be of great help to understand other cultural achievements, in other times and places.

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