Learning the History and Culture of the Netherlands:
Opening Windows of Understanding Through
Historical Icons and Cultural Stereotypes

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Learning…when and where you least expect it

It seemed such an ideal experience to share with my young children at the time. Wanting to introduce them to their Dutch heritage, I thought Madame Tussaud’s Wax Museum in Amsterdam would prove the perfect place. Viewing an eclectic collection of life-sized figures with a “pop culture meets history redux” atmosphere, we could revel in a museum that lacked any hint of pretension. I hoped for a family photo with my 20th century namesake, Queen Wilhelmina. I envisioned teaching my daughters about Holland’s finest era through statues ranging from Rembrandt and Frans Hals to King William of Orange and Michiel de Ruyter. However, my idealistic notions of the Dutch Golden Age would end abruptly and my children’s historical initiation would prove unforgettable.

Enthusiastically we approached the first exhibit that promised to show pivotal people and events in Dutch history. Suddenly in the dark room, loud claps of thunder and pyrotechnic lightning drew our attention to a terrifying display: a vivid depiction of two lynched men hanging upside-down, clearly tortured and eviscerated. Maybe we had mistakenly entered the chamber of horrors. Shocked and mesmerized, we discussed who these men were and why their murder was so hideous. Although familiar with the assassination of the De Witt brothers, I could neither explain how their martyrdom held such an important place in Dutch history nor why their demise was so prominently displayed in the museum. Could the curators have instead considered starting the exhibit with the great humanist Erasmus, whose reasoned philosophy provided a template for tolerance?
Feeling disappointed and guilty for distressing my girls, I determined that day to pursue a deeper and more accurate understanding of the real history underlying my stereotypes and misconceptions of the Netherlands.

The Bodies of the De Witt Brothers, Hanged at Groene Zoodje on Vijverberg in The Hague (c. 1672-1702) Artist Unknown (www.rijksmuseum.nl)

**Learning through interaction and observation**

One of the benefits of traveling and socializing with people of another country is the mutual learning that transpires in every encounter. When those interactions are augmented by historical research of the region, the altering of presumptions and stereotypes are inevitable for the traveler. The Dutch in particular are accustomed to outsiders reducing their culture to a few symbolic articles and shrinking their history to
one glorious era of supremacy in art and trade and the World War II years. Generally, they are quite willing to enlighten visitors with their native perspective and are flattered by genuine interest in their history and culture beyond the typecasting.

Stereotypes of the Netherlands, Dutch culture and Lowlands history abound in media commentary and images. These same limitations permeate school curriculum and prevent teachers and students from gaining a fuller understanding of an often-paradoxical culture with a complex history. Yet these initial misconceptions may also offer a powerful starting point for developing a more accurate perspective of the country, since these typical cultural stereotypes and historical clichés encompass a depth of factual significance. It is safe to assume that from a very young age most children become aware of the traditional Dutch icons: windmills, wooden shoes, tulips, cows, cheese, and the famous “boy with his finger in the dike” (ironically originated from an American tale). Dutch people may almost welcome being stereotyped by those quaint images when compared to the modern impression many have of the country, as little more than a series of “cafes” where marijuana has replaced coffee, and a collection of brothels where sex is an openly sold commodity in districts aglow in red lights. To be Dutch is to be thought of as being virtually tolerant of anything and anyone.

Learning through research and breaking down stereotypes

All learning begins with prior knowledge and understanding, however limited that may be. Rather than an impediment to awareness, the basis for accurate conceptualization can begin by confronting and delving into many of the Dutch stereotypes. Sometimes the greatest wisdom is rooted in the simplest ideas.
While logic and the laws of physics defy any possibility that a young child could hold back the power of the North Sea with his finger, the story is still true. For the Dutch boy is a symbol of The Netherlands and all of its inhabitants over the centuries. These lowlanders reclaimed land from the sea, built an extraordinary network of canals, and worked collectively to construct, maintain and repair dikes and dams. They devised and refined windmills to divert water while serving other practical purposes. The Dutch used innovative means to harness and control their marshland environment. In the past century, their experience and engineering expertise has resulted in one of the most outstanding technological achievements: the Delta Works. This sophisticated collection of dams, dikes and storm barriers has been constructed over many decades to provide protection against flooding and to maintain an environmentally sound estuary ecosystem.

So the legendary young hero who saved his village from ruin by his relentless effort to hold back the water also represents the courage, stamina and ingenuity of the Dutch in their never-ending quest to overcome the Sea
Beyond its threat to the country, the North Sea provided the Netherlands (Holland and Zeeland in particular) with a gateway to prosperity and riches. The wealthy merchant class grew an economy unmatched in size and scope during the 17th century. Creating trading companies, commodity and stock markets, and shipping fleets, the Dutch dominated the movement of goods. During this era, agricultural production evolved from subsistence farming to commercial operations as the efficient use of land increased. Even an unexpected viral mutation in tulip bulbs was cause for celebration because the altered flowers became a source of massive speculation leading to incredible fortunes for some although extraordinary losses for others. Centuries later the charming images of cows and tulips only hint at the amazing agricultural output that continues to emerge from such limited land resources.

Though somewhat exaggerated in its depth and scope, the Dutch tolerance (and in some cases acceptance) of foreigners could also enhance the growth of capital and increase opportunities for investment. Merchants and business entities had a vested interest in allowing skilled outsiders to immigrate to the Netherlands, even when their religious beliefs differed from the norm. Tolerance, while appreciated more in modern times for its ethical worth, had an economic value as well. Yet divisive theology from within provoked intolerance and often wielded even more influence than wealth and political power.
Intolerance increased between Catholics and Protestants especially as the Dutch struggled to achieve and maintain independence from Spanish control. Calvinists in the 16th century wanted persecution of their followers to cease. Feeling ignored, they demonstrated their anger symbolically with violence towards the sacred icons of Catholicism. Rebellions attempt to overturn all that the oppressor represents politically, culturally and religiously. Thus the *Beeldenstorm* (1566) solidified the Calvinists as iconoclasts who would not tolerate the perceived excesses of the Catholic faith.

The schism that developed within the Dutch Calvinist Church had an even greater impact, especially in the political realm. Furthering their position as purist-fundamentalists, the Gomarists followed a strict interpretation of Calvinist theology and insisted that others do the same. In contrast the seemingly more tolerant Arminians followed a less rigid doctrine. Later known as Remonstrants, these more liberal minded Protestants were also more likely to support Republicanism over the centralized leadership of a *Stadhouder* from the House of Orange. Religious tolerance during this period often seems to have been granted to other factions only when it served one’s economic or political interests.

Learning through iconic windows

Today the Dutch continue to struggle with issues of tolerance and this has caused them to re-examine their own history and reassess their culture. They have recently gained a new and somewhat controversial tool to learn about and evaluate their country’s important people and events. The design and availability of this new approach has been evaluated and critiqued since October of 2006. It will definitely impact the historiography of Dutch history.

With the advent of *The Dutch Historical Canon*, the Netherlands has initiated an unprecedented historical resource that is intended to be accessed, disseminated, and debated by the entire population. *The Canon* is presented as a website complete with a winding timeline, graphics, and fifty key icons: [http://www.entoen.nu/](http://www.entoen.nu/). Each icon represents an important milestone or person in Dutch history.

*The Canon*’s origins in the government’s Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science indicates that its primary purpose is to provide a core curriculum for all grade
levels and serve as a starting point or “window” into a pivotal, longer period of time. But
*The Canon*’s broader purpose, as indicated by the Development Committee is to provide
the entire nation with a common starting point to learn and, more importantly to discuss,
the history of the Netherlands. For example Erasmus is one of the fifty icons and his
entry provides a “window” of further links and websites exploring humanism and the
religious division in Dutch history.

Consistent with the theme of shared culture, every iconic example is also the
subject of one of the Netherlands’ most famous, popular, and politically incorrect
cartoons, *Fokke and Sukke*. This further widens the appeal to the broader public. In
addition, The Canon includes a public forum for discussion and suggestions regarding the
key iconic topics.

The internationally minded Committee also built in an English translation for the
first few layers of the historical references. *The Canon* thus provides an easy way for
foreigners to learn core information regarding the Netherlands. It may also inspire other
countries to consider a similar model to encapsulate its own history.

Learning through reflection

Seven years has allowed ample time for me to reflect on and to revisit old
memories and perceptions. My foray into the unexpected wax scenario turned an interest
into a passion. My prior interest in Dutch history was comfortable and complacent. The
amazing story of the De Witts inspired me to discover why two of Holland’s most
venerated individuals lost their power and positions so severely.

The victors write history. They record their own exploits to eclipse other
historical figures whose accomplishments might have overshadowed their own or whose
influence and power may have threatened the victors’ own aspirations. While Dutch
historians acknowledge the role the De Witt brothers, especially Johan, *The Canon* does
not include them as part of the official timeline. (Even Hugo Grotius, the “Father of
International Law” who also lost favor with the *Stadhouder*, is relegated to being
represented by his book chest, rather than with his own image.) They were well educated
and well accomplished. As proponents of republicanism, they also shared an anti-
Orangist sentiment and were not inclined to support a Stadhouder. Could this have been a reason to exclude them?

The design of the Dutch history display at the wax museum is also worth questioning. The violent depiction of the De Witts is opposite a giant window in the museum that looks out over the Dam to the Royal Palace, formerly a “Town Hall” under Pensionary Johan De Witt. The juxtaposition is further emphasized by the contrasting displays that follow the De Witt sculpture: multiple members of the House of Orange in full royal attire. Visitors to the museum will depart with images of kings and queens in all of their regal splendor. Meanwhile they will only remember the De Witt brothers as victims, stripped of all dignity and human decency.

I have my photo with Queen Wilhelmina but in a future visit, I hope to find that Madame Tussaud’s Board of Directors will have considered the commissioning of one more Dutch history sculpture to redeem the memories of the Brothers De Witt. What a privilege it would be to take a photo with two of Holland’s finest leaders, as they would have wished to be remembered.
British Broadcasting Company, [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)
The Rijksmuseum Website. [www.rijksmuseum.nl](http://www.rijksmuseum.nl) August 31, 2007