The longer I teach, the more I question what I teach and how I teach it. When I began my career I relied heavily on textbooks. While I haven’t been brave enough to completely give them up, in recent years I’ve relied more on the use of primary and secondary sources and historical monographs. And, as a student and teacher of World History, I am always seeking to better understand large processes of change and points of contact between societies and bring this knowledge to the classroom. It might be easier to rely on textbooks—after all, each year I get a fresh new group of students who come into my classes knowing little about World History, but I find that I have to remain excited and interested in what I teach. Being able to delve deeply into Dutch and British economic history in the summer of 2013 for five weeks in London and The Netherlands helped me to add important analysis and depth to the usual timelines and stories that I use to explain how Europeans emerged into already well-developed trans-regional trading systems.

As a world historian, I went into this seminar wanting to know more about how the Dutch overtook the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean and East Asian trading networks. Before this seminar my script about the economic emergence of Europe in the 15th century went something like this. “Before Europeans began trading in the Indian Ocean trading network in the late 1490’s, there really was not much trade going on in Europe. China was where “IT” was at. In fact, when the Portuguese began to trade in the Indian Ocean, they really had nothing to offer that others wanted. Everything of worth came from China and India, or from other places in Asia via the Silk or Spice trading routes. The Portuguese had so little to trade that they had to continually use forceful methods to back up their trading interactions in the Indian Ocean. For about a hundred years they relied on strong-arm tactics in the East, and political maneuverings in Europe, to create a European monopoly in East Asian trade. About a hundred years later the Dutch overtook the Portuguese. And, while at times they used just as much force, they also employed other, more culturally sensitive tactics to promote trade,
such as founding schools and settling emissaries who were interested in learning the language and culture of their trading partners. These practices helped them to make exclusive trade contracts with ruling elites that were longer lasting and didn’t always need to be backed up by force.” This was the basic narrative that I relied on and textbooks did little to offer more depth. I supplemented this simplistic view with student projects that explored various trading ports and the Dutch factory villages such as Dejima and Calicut. I realize that there isn’t much time in a World History class, especially in AP World History, to do more than this, but this seminar prompted me to research resources, especially visual ones, that world history teachers can use to create a more nuanced view of how Europeans entered the global sea trade.

What did I learn this summer? I was thoroughly Asia-centric in my pre-seminar teaching. While China had long been at the heart of a wide-ranging trading network that involved not only trading interests in Asia but also in the Middle East, Africa, and the Mediterranean, I became strongly convinced that it is over simplistic and incorrect to say that Europe had been a backwater in terms of trade. In fact, there was a rich tradition of long distance trade across Europe and via the Mediterranean from the early middle ages. The Dutch played a foundational role in those transactions and their strong interest and dependence on long distance trade must be understood in order to understand their trading role in the 16th through 18th centuries.

Prior to the 16th century, all goods from the Silk and Spice Routes arrived in Europe via trading networks of the Ottoman Empire. Venice became the important trading center between East and West because of the availability of transferable notes and credit in its banking houses, most notably, the Medici Bank founded in Venice in 1402, though precursors of this kind of banking existed in other Italian cities. As early as 1439 it became apparent that the center of trade was shifting northwest to Flanders due the significance of the manufacturing of cloth in that region as the Medici opened a branch office of their bank in Bruges in that year.

Yet 1439 was not the start of Flemish and Dutch dominance in global trade. First, we need to define just what ‘global trade’ is. Before this seminar I would argue that it would have to be trade between at least two “continents.” I put that word in quotes because, as a world historian, I fully acknowledge just how loaded and modern that term is. Is trade between India and China global? Is trade across the Indian Ocean global? This seminar showed me just how dependent the Dutch economy was on long distance trade as early as the 12th century. Just because it did not involve Africa or Asia does not make it any less
influential or important. My thinking has shifted to include the idea that Europe, at least the Dutch Republic, participated in ‘global’ trade long before the Portuguese rounded the Cape of Good Hope.

Throughout the middle ages the low country cities of Flanders participated in trade that relied on technology and production. The economy of Flanders before 1600 relied heavily on grain imported from the Balkans, herring imported from the North Sea that the Dutch preserved with salt from Iberia, and farming on the low lands that had been drained with the use of canals and dykes. All of these used the technology and engineering of water systems that the Dutch became famous for. Windmills turned gears and crankshafts to manufacture paint pigments for export, grind imported Balkan wheat, and saw lumber from Germany. Wool was imported from England and graded, carded, spun, and fulled into cloth in Holland. Canals from the North Sea directly to the heart of cities created shipping ports and trading centers so that all of these items could be traded in an export market. Enterprising Dutch merchants realized that tulip bulbs from Turkey would grow well in the sandy soil of Holland and fortunes based on diseased tulip bulbs that produced fantastically colored flowers fueled and wrecked many fortunes. After Europeans got a taste for Chinese porcelain, potters in Delft created look-alike tile and pottery for the masses of Europe. Most important, financial infrastructure in the form of banking houses and credit made trading in the region easy and profitable.

So it was no wonder that when Amsterdam Dutch merchants, pressed by restrictions placed on them during the Dutch Revolt against the Spanish (1566-1648), sent out their first fleet of ships into the Indian Ocean in 1592, that they were ready and willing to add the rich trades of the East to their already strong portfolio of bulk trades in the West. They had generations of trading experience supported by solid financial institutions and they were willing to take on the risk of trade in the East because risk had always been at the heart of their business and they had always adapted to change.

One example of this is that by 1592 the focus of Dutch trade and shifted from Flanders in the South to Amsterdam in the North. The creation of the Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (“VOC”), a charter that the States-General of the Netherlands granted in 1602, highlights the strong role that the Dutch Republic played in matters of trade. It is certainly not incorrect to say that the Dutch Republic existed to promote trade and the merchant class in each of its cities.

What I offer here is a random group of documents that I gathered during the seminar. These documents focus on a new narrative that I want to use in my classes of how the Dutch
gained international economic prominence. The document set begins with a spotlight on cartography and moves to a collection of interesting material culture objects that highlight aspects of the Dutch in world trade. Students of world history can use these documents in a number of ways that include document analysis assignments, change over time essays, comparative essays, and document-based essays. They can also be used in class discussions about the role of state-supported trade and cross-cultural encounters caused by trade. I provide an introduction and brief interpretation of each document in hopes that my finds during this seminar will enlighten not only my teaching, but may inspire students and teachers to ask questions and probe further.

Document 1
Portrait of Petrus Plancius
Petrus Plancius, 1552-1622, was a religious figure, a scientist, and a businessman. Before he became one of the founders of the VOC he was interested in the geography of world trade. He studied maps that the Portuguese brought back from Asia and began publishing world maps in 1590. As he gained new information from various Portuguese voyages he continued to publish new maps.
Document 2
Orbis Terrarum by Petrus Plancius, 1594
This 1594 world map, the third that he published, is known for its detail of the Far East and the Arctic. Plancius attempted to depict a Northwest Passage, an idea that he was keenly interested in because it would allow the Dutch to avoid the Spanish and the Portuguese and provide on their voyages to Asia. He initiated Willem Barents’s three voyages to locate such a passage and some argue that this map was used to encourage the crews of these voyages to take the lengthy and dangerous voyages—notice the open sea between the Arctic and North America. Japan also clearly appears on this map highlighting the increased information the Portuguese were gaining in East Asia. Knowing that this information was closely guarded by the Portuguese displays both Plancius’s connections and his willingness to invest considerable sums for cartographic information.

Document 3
Nova Francia alio nomine dicta terra nova, 1592
This map by Plancius clearly shows his interest in the New World and the possible waterways that might lead to a Northwest Passage. Details on this map of the coastal regions clearly show that Asia was not the only world trade region the Dutch were interested in for their future trade. Four years after this map was published Plancius helped found the VOC.
Celestial Globe by Willem Jansz Blaeu, c1700

From the late 16th century and throughout the 17th century, the firm Blaeu created both terrestrial and celestial globes for mariners to use on their voyages in calculating distance. This fine example is from the Amsterdam Maritime Museum.

Itinerario: Voyage Ofte Schipvaert van Jan Huyghen van Linschoten naer Oost ofte Portugaels Indien (Travel account of the voyage of the sailor Jan Huyghen van Linschoten to the Portuguese East India), by Jan Huyghen van Linschoten, 1597.
Jan Huyghen published this amazingly beautiful volume in 1597 after spending many years in Asia. The large book shelters beautifully drawn and colored fold-out maps and images that are works of art. Jan Huyghen travelled first to Spain when he was thirteen to join his brother who was employed there. Eventually Jan, through the good offices of his brother, secured an appointment as the secretary to the Archbishop of Goa. This position enabled him to travel to the various Portuguese trading ports in Asia. While the Itinerario’s maps are beautiful and detailed, what is even more striking are the collection of drawings about Asians and their surroundings. It is unclear whether Huyghen actually visited all of the places depicted in these paintings—he likely received information about many of the ports and distant places from Portuguese sailors—but it is quite apparent that he collected and interpreted the information he gathered as a sort of primer for Dutch expansion into the Portuguese markets.ii While some have argued that these representations were not meant to scrupulously depict Asian scenes but served more as moral interpretations of “otherness,” the images in this publication cannot be discounted as tools for Dutch venture seekers wanting to capitalize on trade in the East.iii “This was the book,” one historian wrote, “that launched a thousand ships.”iv All quotes for these documents come from Boogart’s “Civil and Corrupt Asia.”

Document 5, Itinerario

Frontispiece
Document 6, Itinerario

Jan van Huyghen’s Portrait
Document 7, Itinerario

Map of the Indian Ocean and Surrounding Lands
Inhabitants of Malacca and Java

“Inhabitants of Malacca, who outstrip all other Indians in language, fine manners, and amorosity. An islander from Java, an obstinate and stubborn people.” In this image Huyghens is comparing the natives of Malacca with those of Java. The Portuguese have a trading fortress in Malacca, a subordinate bishop, and a large number of merchants who have made Malacca, despite its “unhealthy air” “immensely splendid.” He contrasts the newfound civilized society of Malacca that has experienced tremendous growth and enlightened improvements, with the backwardness of East Java whose natives are “stubborn and harsh.”
Indian Woman Committing Sati

“The dead Brahman is cremated according to their law, and the wife is burned alive with him out of love for her husband.” Here Huyghens describes in a vibrant image and text the practice known as “sati” in India. His opinion of it is mixed, but by no means is it merely critical as seen for example in the comment “By mingling the ash of the husband and the wife they provide a signal example of marital fidelity, albeit by means of a cruel and barbaric ordeal.”
Document 10, Itinerario

Vessels of China and Java with reed sails and wooden anchors

Huyghens was impressed with the Chinese use and abundance of shipping vessels. He noted that “there are more ships or barks in the harbour and river of Canton than in the whole of Spain.” Also, he found the Chinese to be extremely ingenious in their use of wind power: “As they do everything with striking skillfulness, they also invented wagons with sails. They are shaped like ships with wheels, and with a favourable wind, they can travel on open land as fast as Liburnian vessels on water.”
Boats that are used for fishing in Goa and Cochin

“Boats that are used for fishing in Goa and Cochin, one hollowed out of a single piece of wood, another made from many branches bound together with ropes, the former called Almadias, the latter Tones and Paleguas, which are there in great number. They fill them with jars of fresh water to sell to the ships.” These vessels were little admired by Huyghens, as those made from tree trunks often sank. He noted, however, that the pilots of these single-manned boats easily righted them, bailed them free of water, and continued on their way.
Document 12, Itinerario

Indian Merchants

“Dress and appearance of the Indian merchants, who are very cunning in their trade. Banyans from Cambaia, very skillful in their knowledge of stones, writing, and calculating. Brahmans, the popes or priests of the Indian idols.” In this section, Huyghens makes the interesting observation that the city of Goa was inhabited by people of various origin: “heathen, Moors, Jews, and Indians.” In this image he represents three classes of upper class Indians depicting them in dress that defined their status. He also wrote highly of their skill in trade and their influence in society.
Document 13, China
Costerman Riot Plate

This Chinese export plate is a very early example of Chinese porcelain designed with Western motifs. It celebrates the Costerman Riots of 1690 which were anti-tax riots in Rotterdam. The riots were named after a town militia member who fatally stabbed a tax collector who was insisting that tax be paid on an imported casket of wine. When the town’s bailiff insisted on the death penalty for Cornelius Costerman, someone from a family named Mandeville wrote and circulated a satirical poem condemning the decision. The Mandeville family was exiled to England, where later, the son, Bernard Mandeville, would write the radical economic poem, "Fable of the Bees." Medals were struck commemorating the Costerman Riots, quite possibly by the VOC, and images on these medals were used in China for the design of this export ware on plates, cups, and saucers. The image on the plate shows a Dutch street scape with people pulling down the house of a tax collector.
Document 14, Pottery
Bartmann or Bellarmine Jug with Seal of the City of Amsterdam

These earthenware jugs were manufactured in and around Cologne and were shipped to Northern European cities, outfitted with city seals, to be used to export liquids across Europe and to the Americas and Asia. This example has the seal of Amsterdam. One jug has turned up at the American Jamestown site in the context of 1610 and they were common in the Dutch city of New Amsterdam.

These images all come from the Leiden University Library Special Collections, Leiden, The Netherlands.


Ibid., 1.


This Amsterdam jug is located in the Amsterdam Maritime Museum.