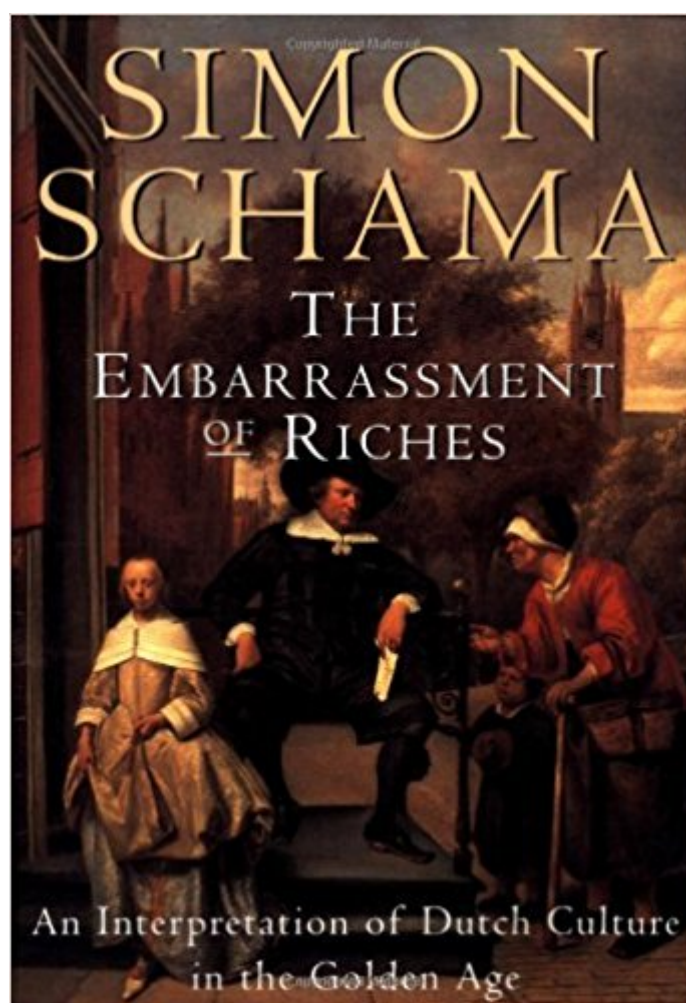


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# The Embarrassment Of Riches: An Interpretation Of Dutch Culture In The Golden Age



## Synopsis

Schama explores the mysterious contradictions of the Dutch nation that invented itself from the ground up, attained an unprecedented level of affluence, and lived in constant dread of being corrupted by happiness. Drawing on a vast array of period documents and sumptuously reproduced art, Schama re-creates in precise detail a nation's mental state. He tells of bloody uprisings and beached whales, of the cult of hygiene and the plague of tobacco, of thrifty housewives and profligate tulip-speculators. He tells us how the Dutch celebrated themselves and how they were slandered by their enemies. "History on the grand scale...An ambitious portrait of one of the most remarkable episodes in modern history."--New York Times "Wonderfully inclusive; with wit and intense curiosity he teases out meaning from every aspect of Dutch seventeenth-century life."--Robert Hughes

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Despite Calvinist sermons on thrift, the Dutch upper and middle classes flaunted their wealth in the consumer paradise that was 17th century Holland but they lived uneasily with material riches. How the Dutch reconciled piety with their commitment to profits is just one of the conundrums explored in this cultural history by a Harvard professor. Netherlandic seafarers built a world empire in just two generations; the Dutch nation's precocious rise to power as presented here helps to explain their defensive patriotism, the mania of housewives for cleanliness and the ideal of the family as a miniature commonwealth. The Dutch urge to classify was evident in everything from their tulip classification system to paintings of children's games. Delving into customs, beliefs, popular art and

quirks of behavior, Schama has fashioned a tour de force, a profound, unconventional and rewarding portrait of a people. Photos not seen by PW. Reader's Subscription Book Club alternate. Copyright 1987 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

When and how did the Dutch become Dutch? At the start of the 16th century, they possessed neither common political heritage, religion, nor tongue. "The most extraordinary invention of this country . . . was its own culture," says Schama. He catalogs the elements of the Dutchman's identity. His gluttony, obsession with cleanliness, pursuit of wealth, love of family and children, and enshrinement of the home all point to dichotomies and ambivalences that shaped Dutch character. The Dutch sought a way to safeguard themselves from a fall from grace while permitting them to enjoy the bounteous benefits of the material world. The Scriptures set the framework for this discourse, humanist teachings shaped their answers. A satisfying addition to the growing literature on sensibilities in the early modern era. Recommended. David Keymer, Dean of Students, SUNY Coll. of Technology, Utica Copyright 1987 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Halfway through now, and it is hard to put down (except for those passages where the author does seem to take along time to get over dwelling on some particular (art) pieces to put in context). Having said that, the very same thing that makes it so intriguing and interesting, that is being able to explain context and add nuance before trying to draw a conclusion, can make it a challenge to get thru, at times. If you stick with it though the insight that's gained is uniquely valuable, and changes your view on history, if you had already formed some (for some reason, i.e. by roots, like me), forever. The most surprising aspect of reading though, when you're native, or somehow have a connection with the subject already (i.e. by birth, descent, etc.), is that many traits in the attitudes, culture are recognizable, as in still present today. In other words; what Schama is giving us is a time travel that allows one to understand how the particulars of a people, country, culture, came into being, and in that way you learn about yourself (if applicable), or your friend, your colleague, your ancestry, etc., (fill in as applicable). Schama does presuppose a certain amount of historic knowledge though, by way of making references that will be totally lost on you if you don't possess that. And he's not filling in, nor repeating, all the historic conflicts, details, etc., (in all honesty, it would need to send me back to 'history class'); that's not what the book is about; it is focusing and refocusing on the general attitudes and popular sentiments that prevailed time and again in the

Netherlands through the 17th century. Schama does so with his uncanny talent to portray times as if you live in them, to bring them back to life, with the help of detail, art, and his hard to match talent for story-telling.

Excellent and fact-packed assessment of the origins of Dutch character, at least from Schama's point of view, in the Golden Age. It's dense reading, and Schama assumes more knowledge of Dutch history than I have so it's tough going sometimes. Occasionally, I think a more merciless editor might have helped make it more accessible to a lay reader, but that said, I'm impressed by the breadth of the work, and am learning a lot. If you're willing to dig in, I'd recommend it.

Simon Schama - - no matter what his subject - - is worth every second spent with him. This book is endlessly fascinating, and I learned things I'd never heard about (and I'm Dutch!). He gave me new insight into the great paintings and the incredibly rich life of the Dutch golden age, and I'm recommending this book to everyone with a love of art, history, culture - - or simply great writing. Buy it!! You'll be riveted and enchanted.

This book is certainly not for everyone. I would describe it as a mountain climb. I myself found myself slugging towards the summit in certain chapters simply to get further along into the sections that held more of my interest. In some ways Schama's massive tome on the Dutch Golden Age feels like a university textbook, a work perhaps best appreciated by scholars and students; on the other hand there is some vital and intriguing research going on here, making the ascent fulfilling. Considering the book was written in the late 1980s, it still feels and reads with relevancy. Schama's style is definitely scholarly but also personal. Imagine traveling through the seventeenth century history of The Netherlands with a tour guide that is both passionate and knowledgeable, someone eager to share his research but also equally eager to draw you in with facts that are esoteric and sometimes strange - the drowning cell in a reform prison, beached whales, the symbolism of pipes, oysters and blowing bubbles in Dutch household art. Overall, it's still a fascinating trip. While visiting Holland this past spring, the Dutch are always reminding tourists that Amsterdam isn't The Netherlands. After reading Schama, I have to disagree. The Dutch are famous for their tolerance, innovation, art and science. And though this book doesn't specifically highlight any city (Amsterdam being the most famous and exemplifying the forward-thinking ideals of Dutch society), it provides an excellent in-depth look at a time when the Dutch became the 'Dutch', carving out their identity while defending themselves against the Spanish, French and English. The book is

divided four parts: Becoming, Doing and Not Doing, Living and Growing and Watersheds. Schama navigates the aspects of Dutch culture with ease as chapters seamlessly flow into each other. From discussions on the influence of Bible scripture on Patriotic fervor (the Dutch saw their territory as a kind of new Jerusalem) to the Calvinist zeal of cleanliness, there are excellent discussions here highlighted by looking at works of art and lithographs of the time as well as quoting from the writers and polemicists of the day. What I came with is how much the people of The Netherlands appreciated and loved their children. Before Dr. Spock, the Dutch were very aware of the beauty and innocence of childhood and nurtured it in their families. This and the fact that the Dutch believed in friendship in marriage, that a love based in companionship and harmony was far more successful than unions forged in finance (though I'm sure this occurred as well). I also loved the section on the mid-wife's role in Dutch society as well as the drinking and smoking habits of the rich and poor. A massive book but so rich I'm sure most readers will return to certain chapters just to revisit the interesting facts and discussions. And considering there is so much here, it's no wonder Schama's book is still in publication. A heavy one, a times a bit of a struggle but to quote Spinoza, a resident of Amsterdam in the Golden Age: "All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare."

This is a little heavy going, lots and lots of detail. I enjoyed it but did skim some sections. Maybe that's the key, read the parts you want and skip the rest. The book is so long and thorough that you'll still get your money's worth.

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