

# REWRITING THE HISTORY OF COLONIALISM BY THE COLONIZERS: WHO COLONIZED WHOM?

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## Abstract

This article analyses three recent gestures by the Amsterdam Museum. Firstly, it discusses the museum's replacement of the term "Golden Age" with the "more descriptive term" "17<sup>th</sup> century" when labelling exhibitions and collections of artworks from that period, since the term "Golden Age" allegedly reinforces the so-called "collective amnesia" regarding the Dutch colonial past. Secondly, it examines the consequent renaming of the museum's semi-permanent collection from "Dutchmen of the Golden Age" to "Portrait Gallery of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century." Thirdly, it focuses on a photographic exhibition, the first in a series of new perspectives presented by contemporary creators in the context of Black Achievement Month, titled "Dutch Masters Revisited" and portraying 17<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch people of colour in colonial outfits. The analysis addresses three core questions: 1) What overall picture of Dutch history do these gestures really want to convey? 2) What is the origin of this "uneasy" approach to the history of slavery in the Republic of the Netherlands (1581-1795)? What lies behind this multi-ethnic makeup of the Netherlands? 3) Who are the historical non-white personalities now "included" in the Dutch (art historical) imagery, and why are they depicted in colonial outfits?

**Keywords:** Golden Age, collection, colonialism, Dutch Masters Revisited, recalibration

## Context

In mid-September 2019, several daily newspapers reported on the announcement of the Amsterdam Museum's decision to rename the *Gouden Eeuw* (Golden Age) simply as the "17<sup>th</sup> Century" (see Boffey, 2019; Boztas, 2019; Dafoe, 2019; *Dutch News*, 2019). The Golden Age represents the Netherlands' peak as a colonial imperial superpower, a centre of international finance, and an important cultural hub. At that point in history, the Netherlands was known as the Republic of the Seven United Provinces.

The Amsterdam Museum's decision stirred old wounds in Dutch society concerning its colonial past, and the issue continued to be a hot topic in public discussion. In its press release, the Amsterdam Museum

(2019) argued that the term “Golden Age” ignored and concealed the colonial history, thus reinforcing collective amnesia (see also Boztas, 2019). As Tom van der Molen, the museum’s 17<sup>th</sup>-century conservator, explained, “In Western history, the ‘Golden Age’ has an *important place strongly linked to national pride*, but the term’s positive associations such as prosperity, peace, wealth and a clear conscience don’t tell the full story of the historical reality at this time. *The term ignores the many negative aspects of the 17<sup>th</sup> century*, such as poverty, war, forced labour and *human trafficking*” (cited in Boffey, 2019; emphasis added). However, the (conservative) responses to the Amsterdam Museum’s decision were no less telling. Zohair el Yassini, an MP for the ruling centre-right People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), told *De Telegraaf* the following: “First we had to change the street signs, then the statues had to go and now the whole Golden Age is for the scrapheap? It’s a bit cowardly to want *to rewrite history*” (cited in *Dutch News*, 2019; emphasis added). *The Guardian* also reported that a spokesman for the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), Michel Rog, said the name change was a “hyper-correct idea of the Amsterdam elite [...]. Erasing the past is nonsense. Just explain that the Golden Age also had negative sides. There is nothing wrong with that. Just like a little national pride. Nothing wrong with that either” (cited in Boffey, 2019).

Nevertheless, the Amsterdam Museum stood firm on its decision; its aim, it stated, was to completely eliminate the reference to the term “Golden Age” from its gallery spaces and no longer use it in its future exhibitions (Dafoe, 2019). So, how should we interpret this entire introductory story?

The museum’s gesture is part of a broader wave of Western museums revising their colonial collections (and history) and the practices of exhibiting them, which (seemingly) contradicts the conservative rewriting of European history.<sup>1</sup>

When the Amsterdam Museum issued its press release on September 12, 2019, stating that it would no longer use the term “Golden Age”, it

1 The Rijksmuseum, another prominent museum of the Netherlands, stated that it would continue to use the word “Golden Age.” Taco Dibbits, its director, told the broadcaster NOS that even though the name referred to a time of great prosperity, that did not alter the fact that they acknowledged the dark side of this history; it was just a matter of different perspectives. In 2020, the Rijksmuseum hosted an exhibition on slavery (in Boffey, 2019) and five years ago, it had already removed racist labelling from the paintings. In 2018, Mauritshuis, a museum in The Hague noted for its Flemish and Dutch paintings from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, “removed a statue of its founder (a slave owner) to a less prominent position” (Boztas, 2019).

simultaneously officially renamed its permanent collection, “Dutchmen of the Golden Age,” to “Portrait Gallery of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.” Moreover, it announced that the “Portrait Gallery of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century,” a jointly set permanent exhibition by the Amsterdam Museum and the Rijksmuseum at Hermitage Amsterdam, would be placed in a direct (albeit temporary) dialogue (for the purpose of revising the colonial imagery) with the newly prepared photographic exhibition titled the “Dutch Masters Revised.”

Surrounded by thirty huge group portraits created in the “17<sup>th</sup> century,” the “Dutch Masters Revised” photographic exhibition was on display from September 30, 2019 to February 2, 2020. The photographs featured thirteen prominent contemporary Dutch people of colour portrayed in colonial outfits and in poses (!) echoing the style of Rembrandt and his contemporaries. These images thus re-embodied lesser-known or unknown historical Dutch personalities of colour “against the backdrop of special locations like the Rijksmuseum, Internationaal Theater Amsterdam, Museum van Loon, Hortus Botanicus and the Amsterdam Museum’s own building” (Amsterdam Museum, n.d.). Prominent non-white Dutch figures, “including footballer Ruud Gullit, rapper Typhoon, comedian/presenter Jörgen Raymann, singer Berget Lewis, politician Sylvana Simons, and hospitality tycoon Won Yip,” assumed “the role of historical Dutch citizens of colour” (with whom they supposedly share certain resemblances) and were photographed by Humberto Tan, Ahmet Polat, Stacii Samidin, and Milette Raats (Amsterdam Museum, n.d.). By engaging a community that is otherwise underrepresented (or not represented at all) in “traditional” art depictions and exhibition practices, the blinding “whiteness” of the exhibited “Portrait Gallery of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century” was thus made somehow more “polyphonic” through an “inclusive” gesture, since “a more complete picture” of the Dutch history needed to be presented. As the curator of the “Dutch Masters Revised” exhibition, Jörgen Tjon A Fong claimed: “Viewing the subjects depicted in the works presented in ‘Portrait Gallery of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century,’ one could easily (and erroneously) assume that at the time the Netherlands’ entire population was white. After all, everyone included in these group portraits is white. But while they may not be depicted in these works, the city of Amsterdam was also home to people of colour. White people and people of colour have been living together in the Netherlands for centuries. And *in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Amsterdam in particular was a home to people from all corners of the globe.*” (Amsterdam Museum, 2019; emphasis added)

### Uncomfortable history

Researching several historical and theoretical analyses that have come to life especially in the past decade, and that call into question the “optimistic assessment of the Dutch Republic as the ‘first modern economy’

that was characterised by free labour markets, the right economic and political institutions and sustained economic growth” (Fatah-Black and van Rossum, 2015, 55), it becomes evident that there is an increased interest among historians in re-analysing Dutch involvement in slavery and the Atlantic slave trade.

As is well known, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) – the “brain-child” of the leading statesman of the Dutch Republic, Johan van Oldenbarnevelt – was established in 1602. The VOC, which covered the Republic’s interests in the East Indies, possessed quasi-governmental powers in its overseas colonies. This included the right to wage war, arrest and execute convicts, negotiate treaties, mint its own coins, and create colonies. It is regarded as the world’s first form of a transnational corporation. Throughout its existence, the VOC was considered the international arm of the Dutch Republic and the symbolic power of the Dutch Empire (Wikipedia, Dutch East India Company). In 1621, the Dutch West India Company (WIC) was formed for economic warfare against Spain and Portugal in West Africa and America. It operated from 1621 to 1791, controlling Dutch involvement in the Atlantic slave trade, Brazil, the Caribbean, and North America (Wikipedia, Dutch West India Company).

Initially, the Dutch transported slaves to northern Brazil, and in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, they had a controlling interest in trading in the Spanish colonies. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, today’s Suriname and Guyana became important markets, and from 1612 to 1872, the Dutch administered some 10 fortresses along the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana), from which slaves were transported across the Atlantic. The trade declined from 1780 to 1815. The Dutch part of the Atlantic slave trade is estimated at around 550,000–600,000 Africans. In 1863, the Netherlands was one of the last countries to abolish slavery, although the decision was made already in 1848. Moreover, only in 1873 would the slaves in Suriname be fully free, as the legislation stipulated a mandatory 10-year transition (The African Studies Centre Leiden, 2020).

In their recent article on “The Importance of Atlantic Slavery for the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Dutch Economy,” Pepijn Brandon and Ulbe Bosma (2019) argue that the Atlantic slave-based activities in the Dutch economy in 1770 “contributed 5.2 per cent to the gross domestic product of the Dutch Republic, and even 10.36 per cent of the GDP of its richest province, Holland. Moreover, 19 per cent of Dutch imports and exports at that time (expressed in value) consisted of goods produced by the enslaved in the Atlantic,” such as sugar, coffee, and tobacco (for comparison, today’s digital economy contributes around 6.5 per cent to the US GDP).

In their 2015 study, Karwan Fatah-Black and Matthias van Rossum point out that this violent colonial history is still largely perceived as part of the “overseas” European expansion history. Their article challenges this prevalent national misconception that colonies were detached from

the metropolises and their political, economic, and cultural development (2015, 57). This myth, they argue, which suggests the absence of the *institution* of slavery, the *practices of slavery*, and the *actual presence of slaves* on the Netherlands’ soil, nevertheless persists to the present day (2015, 58). It is perpetuated, among other things, by speculative interpretations of an old story claiming that the first recorded group of more than a hundred slaves who arrived on Captain Pieter van der Haegen’s ship in November 1596 in the port city of Middelburg (in the south-west of the Zeeland province) was “freed” following a decision by the local authorities (see Hondius, 2008, 85-86). However, in a survey of archival material, Dienke Hondius has convincingly argued that, “What had at first seemed a stand against slavery by the local Dutch authorities turned out to be merely a decision to uphold slavery and the slave trade at a certain distance – overseas” (2008, 87).

Fatah-Black and van Rossum precisely assert that slavery existed as a real institution, with slaves from both the West and East Indies (although in small numbers) brought to the Republic. Moreover, once the slaves arrived, they did not gain their freedom (72). This physical presence of slaves attests to the institution of slavery as being more than an overseas phenomenon (72). “This is crucial, as the enslaved with their presence in the metropolis embodied the important links between the histories of slavery and slave trade, often overseas, and the history *in* and *of* the Dutch Republic. The holding of slaves was *en vogue* amongst exactly those elites directing the Dutch Republic and Dutch Empire through its political, cultural and economic institutions.” (2015, 72; emphasis in the original)

### Vocabulary (missing)

Kwame Nimako, in his book *The Dutch Atlantic: Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation* (co-authored with the late Glenn Willemsen), investigates the Dutch involvement in Atlantic slavery, demonstrating how slave trade and slavery intertwined economic, social, and cultural elements, including nation-state formations in the Netherlands and throughout Europe. He also contends that “the Dutch lexicon has no word for race or racism” (2011, 187). How can one discuss (the contemporary forms of) racism when the language lacks the word for it? During the presentation of his book, Nimako (2011) asked straightforwardly: How do you narrate the state’s history of slavery if there are no heroes of abolitionism?

Discussing the “Dutch exceptionalism and its politics of racism-denial” as playing a role in the “pasteurization of history” and being an intricate part of institutional racism, Zihni Özdil (2014, 54) argues that Dutch historiography, culture, and lexicon lack analytical depth in understanding history, unlike the English-speaking world. Özdil claims that there is no

analytical differentiation between the concepts of “slave” and “enslaved” in mainstream Dutch discourse, although “the Afro-Dutch community introduced the term ‘enslaved’ in an act of ‘epistemic disobedience’ around fifteen years ago [...]. The dismissal of analysis by black and non-black people of color stems for a great deal from the institutionalized marginalization, fuelled by pasteurization, which keeps the spectrum of mainstream academic and public debate extremely narrow” (54-55). Part of this Dutch exceptionalism is the politics of denial concerning the terms “whiteness” and “white privilege,” as allegedly bearing no substantial weight for the Netherlands’ (colour-blind) society; according to Özdil, both terms are being consistently replaced with the more “neutral” term “blank” (58).

Hondius reasons straightforwardly that none of the Black slaves that were forcibly brought to the Netherlands during its Golden Age were named slaves (2008, 87), which indicates a language structure that deliberately avoids appropriate terminology for slavery and enslavement. This shameful abstraction of slave-owning relations persisted for a long time in the Netherlands and, in a certain sense, finally came to an end with the general abolition of slavery in the colonies on July 1, 1863 (Fatah-Black and van Rossum, 2015, 58). As argued by Fatah-Black and van Rossum, the history of slaves who came to and stayed in the Netherlands mostly remains hidden. Nevertheless, it resurfaces in notarial deeds and inventories (where enslaved people are noted as part of the household *mobilia*), passenger lists (which the colonial authorities used to track and record all inward and outward movements of passengers), records of incidental court cases (held about their status in the Republic), and numerous artworks portraying prominent Europeans with their black servants (61). “Together these sources give the impression of a small but often unproblematic presence of enslaved people and people of colour in Dutch towns” (61).

### Recalibration:<sup>2</sup> The Blacks of the Golden Age

Part of the aforementioned exhibition called “Dutch Masters Revisited,” presented as promoting “inclusion and social equity,” may have had the opposite effect, as stated by the museum’s artistic director Margriet Schavemaker, by perversely “whitewashing” the Dutch slavery past and covering up “poverty more generally. Not everyone participated in the Golden Age, not at all” (Schavemaker cited in Siegal, 2019).

What is observable are recalibrations, to use Achille Mbembe’s term, highlighting cases that could be presented as not fitting the “overall pattern.”

2 Here I refer to Achille Mbembe’s term used as a subtitle to his *Critique of Black Reason* (2017).

One of the photographic images portrays the “*bom servo*” (good servant) Elieser, whose master Paulo da Pina paid for a prominent grave at the Jewish cemetery of Ouderkerk near Amsterdam in March 1629. Fatah-Black and van Rossum (2015, 62) point out that Elieser’s name references the head servant of Abraham’s household in the book of Genesis (the Afro-Dutch and Jewish community now jointly organize an annual pilgrimage by boat to Elieser’s grave). The majority of data on seventeenth-century household slavery in Amsterdam stems from the records of the Jewish community (62; see also Hondius, 2008).

Another newly portrayed historical figure is Elisabeth Samson, an 18<sup>th</sup>-century freeborn black woman. She was a coffee planter and exporter using slave labour in the Dutch colony of Suriname, becoming one of the wealthiest women of her time. “That’s why her image is one of 13 diverse portraits [...] added to a collection of paintings of the city’s wealthiest trade groups,” the so called “sea of all white and mostly male faces”? (Siegal, 2019) Among the other new portraits on display is Jacob Rühle, born in Elmina (Gold Coast) to a slave trader Anthony Rühle and an African mother, Jaba Botri. He followed in his father’s footsteps to become a slave trader and was also a member of the ruling council at Elmina, the chief financier of the local Dutch administration in the 1720s (Klooster and Oostindie, 2018, 118). Among the portrayed one also finds Sychnecta, a Mohawk Indian, a man displayed in an Amsterdam Blauw Jan tavern in 1764 (Mason, 1996, 139); Blauw Jan was “one of the common and truly popular institutions to which East Indies and West Indies exotica gravitated,” and “which doubled as a zoo or menagerie, [where] one could not only see a New Netherland’s beaver, but exotic people also” (Hamell, 1999, 175).

According to Mark Ponte’s (n.d.) research of baptismal and marriage registers and seventeenth-century notarial deeds, the majority of seventeenth-century black Amsterdam inhabitants “lived in what we now call the old Jewish quarter, the area around the Jodenbreestraat, the island of Vlooyenburg (now the City Hall), the former St. Antonispoort and the Leprozenhuis (Mr Visserplein). Like other poor immigrants, they often lived with several families in small cellar dwellings in alleys and corridors.”

Nevertheless, the museum’s goal, as Judijke Kiers, the director of the Amsterdam Museum, explained, is to “shine a light” on the stories of the “shared” history of the Netherlands “in the most inclusive way possible” and to “continue to reassess historical versions of truth” (cited in Boztas, 2019).

## Conclusion

By titling this paper “Rewriting the History of Colonialism by the Colonizers: Who Colonized Whom?” I aimed to expose the subtle rewriting of the view on Dutch colonialism, specifically the subtle mechanism of recalibration.

Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee opened his remarkable 2006 analysis titled “Live and Let Die: Colonial Sovereignties and the Death Worlds of Necrocapitalism” – translated into Slovenian and published in the third issue of the *Reartikulacija* journal – with a quotation from a memo Jan Coen wrote in 1775 to his staff after being appointed as Governor General for the Dutch East Indies Company: “Trade must be driven and maintained under the protection and favor of your own weapon. Trade cannot be maintained without war, nor war without trade. The times now require you to manage your general commerce with your sword in your hands.”

Banerjee (2006) further exposed the brutalities of Coen’s “prescription on how to manage trade during the glory days of what was probably the world’s first multinational corporation – [...] East India Company. In an era of European colonial expansion, the company was engaged in conquering markets, eliminating competition, securing cheap sources of raw material supply, building strategic alliances: in short everything management textbooks tell us to do 200 years later.” These colonial expansionist practices involved capital appropriation as well as the permanent destruction of indigenous industries (Banerjee, 2006).

Moreover, Banerjee (2006) concludes his text by exposing how modern nation-states have built their public power by drawing from the “private violence market.” This “intimate relationship between colonial powers and their chartered private corporations is not qualitatively different from modern privatized military corporations and imperial powers of today.” The Dutch East India Company flourished into the richest and most powerful of all, as argued by Banerjee (2006), because it was “absolute, and invested with a kind of sovereignty and domination,” making “peace and war at pleasure.”

So, I can repeat: Who colonized whom? Who profited from whom?

Mbembe’s term “recalibration”, used in his *Critique of Black Reason*, is remarkable, though he never gives its precise definition. Still, Marina Gržinić in her review of Mbembe’s *Necropolitics* (2019) captures precisely this idea of recalibration when analysing Mbembe’s use of language as a “dense literature language; a description of the fragmentation, or more accurately, of an accumulation of adjectives that present the main term always anew – racism is in this respect lavish, extravagant, excessive, and unrestrained. It proliferates as madly, poisoning, violently as to ac-

quire a form of nanoracism, as a small invisible particle, or put in the context of the current developments, like a virus” (Gržinić, 2020, manuscript submitted for publication, n. pag.). Nanoracism, as she elaborates several passages later, is “the small-minded white prejudice [...] but also the basis of another machinery, the hydraulic racism that is the machinery that works even without the computer [...]” Racism, she argues, is constitutive for both, “the occidental drives and economic subjectivity.”

Mbembe uses the notion of recalibration to expose that even though the nineteenth century was “marked by the linked processes of colonial expansion in Africa and the deliberate biologization of race in the West” that “with the help of Darwinian and post-Darwinian evolutionary thought [...] also saw the spread of eugenicist strategies in many countries and rising obsessions with degeneration and suicide [...] the problematic of race has once again burst into contemporary consciousness. The fabrication of racial subjects has been reinvigorated nearly everywhere” (2017, 20-21).

Besides antisemitic racism, colonial equating of humans with animals, and colour prejudices translated into institutional and structural racism, “new patterns of racism have emerged that reconstruct the figure of the intimate enemy within mutated structures of hate. After a brief intermission, the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first have witnessed the return to biological understandings of the distinctions between human” (21) ... which are, if I refer back to Gržinić’s review, being simultaneously hidden, hollowed, and emptied.

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