

# Rembrandt's *The Nightwatch*: Epitome of the Dutch Golden Age



by Thomas B. Lenihan

August 6, 2013

National Endowment for the Humanities Seminar:  
“The Dutch Republic & Britain: The Making of Modern  
Society and a European World Economy”

Dr. Gerard M. Koot

The University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth

When one thinks of the Dutch we often think of their tulips, windmills or canals. Often one may also think of their famous and prominent works of art that were produced especially during the Dutch Golden Age that occurred primarily during the seventeenth century. This “golden age” reflected the success of the Dutch Republic as a maritime and commercial power that dominated European and for a period, global trade. Wealthy merchants commissioned and purchased works of art depicting their families, guilds, landscapes and scenes of daily life in the Netherlands. Rembrandt was one of the most dominant and renowned artists of the Dutch Golden Age who art historians regard as one of the great master painters of modern times. Unlike many artists, Rembrandt was well known and sought after during his lifetime, becoming a very wealthy man. *The Nightwatch* is one of his most famous works that is often a highlight for anyone visiting the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Painted in 1642, it epitomizes the height of Dutch culture and art during its golden age. This is because of the subject matter, facial expressions and gestures and what this great work of art tells viewers about life, wealth and expectations of citizens who lived in the Dutch Republic during the seventeenth century. Considered Rembrandt’s finest work, *The Nightwatch* reveals a lot about the types of paintings commissioned by men who were devoted to the state and sought to glorify their lives and successes in the Netherlands.

The Dutch Golden Age was a period of great wealth and prosperity lasting just over one hundred years. It was largely a result of success in shipbuilding, commerce and different industries such as linen and textile production. The Netherlands finally achieved complete independence from Spain in 1648 after almost eighty years of fighting on and off. With independence accomplished and recognized with the end of the Thirty Years’ War, the Dutch Republic was able to focus on other pursuits besides war. Their geographic location had always played to their advantage, allowing the rise of a merchant class that would trade goods throughout Europe, Asia and eventually the Americas. It was these merchants that like in

Renaissance Italy especially sought material goods and works of art to decorate their homes and businesses. The Renaissance slowly spread north in the sixteenth century and would influence and impact many artists of the Dutch Golden Age.

After the Netherlands achieved independence from Spain, the Dutch Golden Age took off and witnessed the rise of a strong and prosperous merchant class, primarily consisting of Calvinists. The East Indies Company was created and engineers drained lakes in Holland which created more arable land, allowing the Dutch to expand and use their geographic location to their advantage. The Republic was a unique form of government at a time when most European nations were still monarchies. This decentralization meant there was no dynastic rule at the time, allowing cities to make their own political and economic decisions. In addition, this period would be defined by religious toleration although the country was officially Calvinist. Successful businessmen sought to enhance their image and spend their money on luxury goods as well as works of art to decorate their homes. The nicest houses in the Dutch Republic were situated by canals in cities like Amsterdam, Leiden and Utrecht. “As the Republic became more prosperous around 1600, and especially after the Truce of 1609, the market for pictures grew rapidly. This market catered for various interests and levels of income and social status.”<sup>1</sup> As time went on even the middle class wanted paintings and would purchase smaller works that would be more affordable to them. “Most pictures were bought by private, middle-class citizens, known as *burghers*, from modest artisans to wealthy regents.”<sup>2</sup> Unlike most of the rest of Europe, art wasn’t purchased primarily by churches or rulers, but by ordinary citizens. Art in the seventeenth century came to define and exemplify the prosperity and success of the Dutch Republic as one of the great powers of Western Europe.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mariët Westermann, *A Worldly Art: The Dutch Republic, 1585-1718* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 33.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

The most important and popular artist of the Dutch Golden Age was Rembrandt van Rijn. Born in Leiden to a miller in 1606, he was well educated and became seen as a master painter from an early age. Rembrandt moved to Amsterdam where he spent most of his life painting scenes from the Bible, classical history and mythology, portraits and scenes of Dutch landscapes and seascapes. His greatest talent was in portraying facial expressions and moods of individuals and groups of people from the past and real life in the Netherlands, including many self-portraits. Rembrandt was also an art teacher and collector who was famous and sought after during his lifetime. One of his most famous paintings, *The Nightwatch* as it was later named, was commissioned by an Amsterdam militia company in 1642.

*The Nightwatch* shows a company gathering for a procession in a ceremonial role. About a dozen men are featured in the painting, appearing to be getting ready to march into battle. But that is not what they are doing for the Dutch were not at war at the time and this group isn't looking to fight. Militia companies or *schutterijen* sought to maintain order and quell disturbances in towns of the Netherlands.<sup>3</sup> These Dutch civic militias were often made up of craft masters, shopkeepers, dairy, herring or timber dealers.<sup>4</sup> They were basically a volunteer force that sought to protect their towns and cities, showing a civic devotion to the place where many of them were born and raised. "The officers of the militia companies were usually closely related to members of the city government."<sup>5</sup> It appears they were leaders within the community that sought to defend themselves if attacked, help neighbors who needed it and restore order when unrest occurred. These militias were a lot like guilds in that they had a function but also engaged in cultural, social and religious activities and recreation.<sup>6</sup> "*Schutters* met regularly for shooting practice, and social events, as well as for parades, and patrolling the city gates and

---

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan I. Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477-1806* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 121.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

walls. Each company had its own building with shooting range attached and, during the summer months, it was usual to hold monthly shooting competitions, ending in elaborate feasts. Like other guilds, each company had its own emblems and collection of plate and finery. From the 1520s onwards, beginning in Amsterdam, it became the custom to hang up large group portraits of members of contingents.”<sup>7</sup> This explains the commissioning of *The Nightwatch* by an Amsterdam company to be prominently displayed in their building hall. It might remind them of their duties and roles and inspire future generations to also serve the community.

The men portrayed in *The Nightwatch* were doing their community duty, not just posing for a master artist in their finest militia uniforms. Most city policing in the Dutch Republic during the seventeenth century was done by these *schutters*. “The neighbourhood watches saw it as their task not only to guard their quarter, preventing robbery and crime, but also to enforce decency and apprise the town’s *schout*, magistrates, or consistory of unacceptable behaviour. Policing had to devolve upon the neighbourhoods in this way. For the civic militia, responsible for keeping order, and maintaining a guard at the town-hall and city gates, at night, would only be called out in the event of serious disturbances.”<sup>8</sup> Rembrandt’s painting portrays these men as if they are about to march into Amsterdam perhaps to deal with an uprising. They all appear to have a role to play and look focused, prepared and ready to go. Most are carrying a gun and the two men in the center look like they are about to march off the canvas itself. The man at center left dressed in black, wearing a red sash and gesturing is Captain Frans Banning Cocq. He is obviously the militia’s leader, summoning his lieutenant to his immediate left and the others to march.<sup>9</sup> Clearly they have practiced for this very moment, for they all appear to be following Banning Cocq and his lieutenant, Willem van Ruytenburch, Lord of Vlaardingien.

---

<sup>7</sup> Israel, 121-22.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 680.

<sup>9</sup> Westermann, 148.

We know a lot about *The Nightwatch* painting due to the commission and recent work done by a Dutch historian to identify all the people portrayed. Each sitter paid a share depending on his prominence in the painting.<sup>10</sup> Obviously Captain Banning Cocq paid the most since he is the largest figure and as the militia leader probably made the most money. He was captain of one of six subdivisions of the Amsterdam Militia Company of Musketeers in 1642.<sup>11</sup> Soon after the painting was completed, Banning Cocq was elected burgomaster of Amsterdam a position he held on and off until his death in 1655.<sup>12</sup> In 2009, Bas Dudok van Heel revealed each person's identity after spending years conducting research. He also located the great hall of the civic guard building as the room where Rembrandt originally painted it (now a hotel in Amsterdam).<sup>13</sup> Around 1715 a shield was added to the painting that contained the names of particular figures in the portrait.<sup>14</sup> "Only a few of the names were known to belong to particular figures in the portrait. Dudok van Heel set out in pursuit of the men behind the remaining names. He researched their families, their financial position and their business contacts. Van Heel even found items of clothing and accessories depicted in the Night Watch mentioned in inventories of estates."<sup>15</sup> This shows that through careful research and detective work, one can make progress in solving a mystery, something historians and art historians often engage in. By identifying each person, we can learn more about them and what they may have contributed to the guild and militia. Van Heel also collated the information with the age of the various militiamen in 1642, enabling him to link each name to a figure within the painting.<sup>16</sup> Like many works of art, *The Nightwatch* tells viewers a story and each figure present is an important person who plays a role within that story, whether real or imagined.

---

<sup>10</sup> Westermann, 148.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Greenaway, *Nightwatching: A View of Rembrandt's The Night Watch* (Amsterdam: Veenman Publishers, 2006), XIII.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> "Rembrandt's Night Watch Unravelling: Identity of All the Militiamen Are Finally Revealed", March 14, 2009, accessed July 16, 2013, [www.artdaily.com](http://www.artdaily.com).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

When analyzing *The Nightwatch* there is a lot to see, describe and contemplate. While your eye is immediately drawn to the middle where we see the captain gesturing and marching toward us, flanked by his lieutenant, we also see many other faces, colors, expressions and items in the painting. The other person that stands out is one of two females to the immediate right of Banning Cocq who appears to perhaps be an angel. It looks like a light is shining on her and she's wearing a regal looking golden colored dress and crown. Turns out she's Mareike, a prominent maiden who has a fowl bird suspended from her dress.<sup>17</sup> Some have argued Mareike is the essential spirit of the painting and one theory states that she was a dwarf.<sup>18</sup> She is the mascot holding the company's emblem, the clawed chicken.<sup>19</sup> In front of her is a man dressed in all red, holding a gun that he appears to be loading. Behind these central figures are more militiamen, some holding pikes and muskets and one holding a flag, probably of the militia. To the right of the painting is a man holding a large drum and behind him appears to be another prominent man wearing a ruff around his neck, the only other man wearing this besides the captain. He too is gesturing and looking at someone else engaged in conversation. Just below them is a dog who practically blends in with the dark background and looks to be growling or snarling. The dog may represent fidelity to the militia and like them he is ready to patrol and if necessary attack. Like many artists beginning in the Renaissance, Rembrandt also includes himself in the painting. "By structuring *The Nightwatch* as one action in the company's history and by articulating its traditions and rights, Rembrandt blended the conventions of portraiture and history painting."<sup>20</sup> What makes this painting so popular and well known is that what Rembrandt did was unique in the history of art. He combined two genres to create a piece that shows power, glory, individual expression, action and prominence. The people portrayed in *The Nightwatch* are all doing something. "No two faces point the same way: everyone is looking

---

<sup>17</sup> Westermann, 149.

<sup>18</sup> Greenaway, XXXVII.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Westermann, 149.

somewhere else and every figure is differently aligned.”<sup>21</sup> They are proud to be Dutch, to be watching over their Amsterdam community, while flaunting their wealth and status in a painting that would appear prominently in their militia hall. This painting has become a symbol of Dutch nationhood.<sup>22</sup> Rembrandt shows the power and might of citizens of the Dutch Republic. It was a unique state for the seventeenth century and this shows us that many took their role seriously as citizens defending their rights and community against those who didn’t share their values, expectations or sense of responsibility. “The theatricality of *The Nightwatch* proclaims the representational function of the civic guard and simultaneously acknowledges the role play of all portraits.”<sup>23</sup>

Simon Schama is a prominent historian who has written about the Dutch Golden Age and narrated several popular documentaries, including *The Power of Art*. Each segment focused on a prominent modern Western artist, including one on Rembrandt. After introducing viewers to the artist and his life, Schama spent a good amount of time focusing on analyzing *The Nightwatch*. His insights are important in explaining why this painting was so revered then and now. A company of cloth merchants and part-time militia men commissioned it as many guilds of the day did, since Amsterdam was a corporate town<sup>24</sup>. Rembrandt made something heroic out of a world of merchants and money, revealing a group of fictitious citizen soldiers ready to defend Amsterdam’s freedom in the seventeenth century.<sup>25</sup> According to Schama, the fairytale idea behind *The Nightwatch* is what we see: overdressed textile men playing toy soldiers on Sundays. While at first glance it may appear chaotic, freedom and order miraculously held together, much as Schama believes Rembrandt thought the Dutch themselves did.<sup>26</sup> They were a free nation, no longer ruled by Spain and had no monarch at the time. The burghers ruled Amsterdam and the

---

<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Jones, “Time to revisit Rembrandt’s The Night Watch, a glowing symbol of democracy”, May 6, 2013, accessed July 16, 2013, [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Westermann, 149.

<sup>24</sup> Simon Schama, *The Power of Art* (London: British Broadcasting Company, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

glory of their city revealed the secret of their success.<sup>27</sup> Schama's analysis in this documentary provides new insights and perspective about the painting and the times in which it was created. He also explains why this painting epitomizes the Dutch Golden Age, since it brings together wealthy leaders in a group portrait, blending portraiture and history painting, two common depictions of art from the period that were usually separate genres. These part-time militia men wanted to appear glorious and tough perhaps for themselves, their customers and family members. The reality is they were not real soldiers but of course history and art tends to glorify military men so perhaps they sought to join their ranks through this painting. It's as if they are saying "don't mess with us" and "look at what we have achieved through our hard work, ideals and devotion to our city and nation."

Today many tourists flock to see *The Nightwatch*, one of if not the most popular paintings on view at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. The painting is so popular and well known that for the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Rembrandt's birth in 2006, a bronze-cast representative of it was created and unveiled. Since 2012 it has been in the Rembrandtplein, a main square in Amsterdam named for one of the city's most renowned citizens.



Rembrandtplein, Amsterdam, Holland, July 29, 2013

---

<sup>27</sup> Schama

In conclusion, *The Nightwatch* is a painting that glorifies the Dutch Golden Age. Combining group portraiture with history painting, Rembrandt created a true masterpiece that embodied the culture of the Dutch Republic at the height of its power and influence in the seventeenth century. While many paintings like this were commissioned by different Dutch guilds and militias, *The Nightwatch* is unique because of all the action and especially the 3-D effect with Captain Banning Cocq and Lieutenant van Ruytenburch appearing to march off the canvas. The gestures, expressions and lighting are remarkable and make this one of the best known and most popular paintings in art history. Rembrandt created a masterpiece that epitomized what life was like for those who had influence in Amsterdam during its prosperous golden age. He made the militia men seem like soldiers with different expressions and roles to fulfill. His ability to convey mood and emotion is clear in this painting and it makes the viewer want to join them. *The Nightwatch* takes us back in time to a place known for its culture, toleration, representative government and wealth especially from trade and shipbuilding. It is an icon of tolerance, diversity and the magic golden light that makes a society work.<sup>28</sup> The painting embodies what the Golden Age of the Dutch Republic was all about: order, defending rights, status, purpose and responsible citizenship. For many Dutchmen, this painting represents what their nation's history is all about and it continues to resonate as a source of pride and achievement by the artists and people portrayed in it over 400 years ago.

---

<sup>28</sup> Jones

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Greenaway, Peter. *Nightwatching: A View of Rembrandt's The Night Watch*. Amsterdam: Veenman Publishers, 2006.

Israel, Jonathan I. *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477-1806*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Jones, Jonathan. "Time to revisit Rembrandt's The Night Watch, a glowing symbol of democracy." May 6, 2013. Accessed July 16, 2013. [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk).

"Rembrandt's Night Watch Unravelling: Identity of All the Militiamen Are Finally Revealed." March 14, 2009. Accessed July 16, 2013. [www.artdaily.com](http://www.artdaily.com).

Schama, Simon. *The Power of Art*. DVD. London: British Broadcasting Company, 2006.

Westermann, Mariët. *A Worldly Art: The Dutch Republic, 1585-1718*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.