

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Swan, Claudia. Rarities of These Lands: Art, Trade, and Diplomacy in the Dutch Republic

Elizabeth Rice Mattison

Volume 44, numéro 1, hiver 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081189ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37106>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Mattison, E. (2021). Compte rendu de [Swan, Claudia. Rarities of These Lands: Art, Trade, and Diplomacy in the Dutch Republic]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 44(1), 313–316. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37106>

For Stewart, it is important for the reader to know that the anthology seeks to be “faithful to the copy-texts on which they are based, while providing enough information about the plays, in the headnotes and annotations, to enable students at all levels, to read, interpret, and even perform the plays on their own” (x). He also notes that the spelling has been modernized for accessibility, that the annotation is for explanation and context, that the dating and authorship of the plays are challenging, and that there are individual introductions to each play (x–xi).

These introductions are helpful, and the editing of the plays, which includes notes on the text and credits, involved a team of textual editors who deserve thanks. From *Mankind* and *Everyman*—both marvellous plays resembling the Middle Dutch play *Elckerlijc*, “one of the many Rederijkers’ (Rhetoricians’) plays of the low countries” (25)—the anthology takes the reader on a wonderful theatrical and dramatic journey through *Magnificence* to a play Shakespeare’s Falstaff echoes, Thomas Preston’s *Cambises*, and to *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* by Robert Greene, who criticized Shakespeare. Stewart and the textual editors remind us of the treasures of drama beyond Shakespeare.

JONATHAN LOCKE HART

Shandong University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37105>

Swan, Claudia.

Rarities of These Lands: Art, Trade, and Diplomacy in the Dutch Republic.

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. Pp. 336 + 140 ill. ISBN 9780691213521.

In the past decade, art history’s “global turn” has pushed scholars of early modern Europe to expand the field’s traditional boundaries to encompass new geographies, leading to significant interest in cross-cultural exchange. Claudia Swan’s fascinating new book takes part in this conversation, examining the political implications of trade between Europe and Asia. Her focus is the United Provinces of the Netherlands in the first half of the seventeenth century, leading up to Spain’s recognition of the Dutch Republic in 1648. Swan argues that circulation and exchange of foreign products were fundamental to the

creation of the Dutch state. Her book compellingly analyzes the networks of objects and people moving east and west, assessing the role that exotic goods played in both the self-conception and the international presentation of the young Dutch Republic.

Accounts of rarities structure this narrative of emergent Dutch statehood. The term—and title—comes from the Dutch word *rarityten*, designating desirable foreign goods. This category included fabrics like silk, natural materials such as shells, and exotic animals, dead and alive. Rarities also encompassed finished products like lacquerware and porcelain. Making the foreign goods their own through commercialization, representation, and accumulation, the Dutch became a “republic of rarities” (23).

Swan begins in Amsterdam on 19 July 1599, as Dutch ships, laden with exotic products, returned from Bantam on Java. It is in the context of maritime trade, the foundation of the Dutch East India Company and West India Company, as well as ongoing struggle for independence that this book unfolds. The first chapter sets the stage with a discussion of the rise of Amsterdam as a trading emporium. Challenging Portuguese hegemony over Asian exchange, Amsterdam claimed commercial power in tandem with the delineation of Dutch political might.

Chapter 2 examines the place of exotic materials in the Dutch home. While art historians have long studied the local products in the many paintings of interiors, Swan offers a critical corrective of the domestic space. Turning to inventories, voyagers’ accounts, and dollhouses, Swan demonstrates instead that Dutch houses were filled with precious objects from afar.

The following chapter examines Dutch collecting practices. Building on scholarship on *Wunderkammern*, Swan analyzes mechanisms for accumulation of natural and manmade things. Gardens, cabinets, and galleries became sites for rarities. Within collections like that of Amalia van Solms, foreign things accumulated various meanings, understood as representing the world and producing knowledge.

Chapter 4 considers the place of rarities in the United Provinces. Drawing on archival evidence, Swan considers visits to Europe by Safavid and Ottoman diplomats, whose understanding of the young Dutch state was shaped by encounters with foreign things there. This chapter also offers an important analysis of the popular Dutch painting genre of the *tronie* in Turkish costume, which featured Dutch men and women in turbans. Swan argues that these

paintings signified the adoption of the foreign in the local sphere, encapsulating the sentiment of “rarities of these lands” (134).

Swan extends this discussion of diplomacy in chapter 5. Drawing on anthropological framing, Swan analyzes the “social lives of diplomatic things” (140) and implications of gift-giving. Through exchange with foreign states, such as the tapestries and bezoars presented to the English in 1610, the Dutch presented their political identity on an international stage. The next chapter expands on the role of gifts; it focuses on the Dutch visit to the Ottoman court in 1612–13, where the ambassador presented rarities to the sultan.

In the succeeding chapter, attention turns to the commodification of natural wonders, specifically birds of paradise. This dive into natural history charts the web of trading, collecting, and representing that made the exotic birds valuable across seventeenth-century Europe. Chapter 8, meanwhile, examines manmade treasures: imported porcelain. Examining both porcelain and its depictions, Swan explores the aesthetic and material interest in these rarities, as well as the political implications of their trade. Through piracy of Portuguese vessels, the Dutch challenged Iberian domination of the porcelain market and claimed the wealth that such prized possessions epitomized.

In her conclusion, Swan discusses the intersection of trade, war, and colonialism that further shaped Dutch independence. Considerations of race might have warranted further discussion throughout the book, although this conclusion offers the important context of violence and slavery in state formation. Through the accumulation of rarities, bound up with commercial structures and political aims, the United Provinces emerged.

Richly illustrated, this book draws on an impressive variety of sources. Familiar seventeenth-century Dutch paintings appear in conversation with a wide array of prints, drawings, decorative arts, and texts. Swan writes in an engaging style, helpfully defining terms throughout. Chapters can be read individually, which makes them ideal for inclusion in teaching early modern history from a transregional perspective. Although its scope is limited to Dutch encounters with East Asia and the Islamic empires, this book makes the important argument that political formation and material exchange are inseparable. As a whole, Swan’s book offers a necessary analysis of the role of rarities in forging states and identities in the seventeenth century. This study will be of interest not only to art historians, but to any scholar exploring statecraft,

scientific history, transregional exchange, and cross-cultural encounters in the early modern world.

ELIZABETH RICE MATTISON

University of Toronto

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37106>

Teskey, Gordon.

Spenserian Moments.

Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019. Pp. xiii, 529. ISBN 978-0-674-98844-6 (hardcover) US\$45.

Gordon Teskey, an editor of Milton, has long been a fine reader and scholar of Spenser, combining learning, style, and perceptive interpretation. This book, like his recent monograph on Milton, is the culmination of decades of work on this great epic poet and older contemporary of Shakespeare. Spenser, whom Harry Levin once told me was “an acquired taste,” was a Londoner and friend of Gabriel Harvey at Pembroke Hall, Cambridge, where, as a sizar—building on his time as a poor boy at Merchant Taylors’ School—he would further his study and understanding of Hebrew, Latin, Greek, and music as well as literature in English, French, and Italian. Spenser was not affluent and perhaps he was hungrier, as Marshall McLuhan, also a Cambridge scholar, once said of James Joyce—perhaps also referring to himself—that a lack of riches made him hungry for learning (once said in conversation at the University of Toronto in 1978–1979). Spenser was talented at an early age; his English versions of poems by Joachim Du Bellay and a translation of a French version of a poem by Petrarch appeared at the beginning of a tract, *A Theatre for Voluptuous Worldlings*, in 1569. He left Cambridge in 1574 during the plague, something that might resonate with us in our own pandemic.

Teskey has a deep understanding of Spenser’s learning, language, and sense of tradition. He sees Spenser’s “striving to enrich the word itself for further meaning” (xi) as a connection with the past and the poetic tradition of Chaucer, “whom he called a ‘well of English undefyled’ (*FQ* IV.ii.32)”; yet he also notes Spenser’s “striving for enrichment by the ancient languages, by the ancient epic poets, Homer and Virgil, and by philosophers, especially Aristotle, whom the