











Trade, Transience and Tulip Books

How history, economics and art merge together in Bas Meeuws' work

Bas Meeuws' beautiful *Tulips* series has its roots in the Dutch tulip books and individual tulip flower studies of the seventeenth century. These magnificent flower pieces connect back to the history of botanical science and illustration, the economic development of the Netherlands and the typical Dutch genre of the flower piece.

Trade

The introduction of the tulip into the Netherlands coincides with the arrival of Carolus Clusius (1526–1609) as first director of the Hortus botanicus in Leiden. Clusius' rather large collection of tulips was the result of his work supervising the royal garden

of Maximilian II in Vienna as well as his contacts within the Turkish trade sector^{1,2}. Fortuitously, the peaty soils just behind the Dutch coastline and dune systems were highly suited to growing these bulbs. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, there were already many tulip cultivars exhibiting different colours, double-flowered forms, and petals bearing fringes or even flame-like streaks. Unknown to the growers at the time, the highly prized flame-like patterns on the petals are caused by a special tulip mosaic virus. Tulip bulbs became a highly popular and precious commodity.

The trade in—and craving for—precious plants started in the second half of the

sixteenth century with the economic development that came to be known as the Dutch Golden Age. As a result, a new class of wealthy merchants took on a novel role within society and science. Economic exchanges with the Levant, Asia and the Americas gave rise to an influx of new exotic plants arriving from different trading posts around the world. As interest grew in cultivating these plants, so did the creation of new cultivars and the subsequent flaunting of the results. Networks of nobility, politicians, scientists and wealthy merchants exchanged plant knowledge with one another as they strived to create new colour and shape variations. The flowers used to create these new varieties became known as 'florist' flowers, and the tulip was one of them.

Transience

The Early Modern popularity of flowers is also reflected in the arts. Beginning in the sixteenth century, a new genre of painting began to flourish in the Low Countries (Holland and Flanders), that became particularly popular in the seventeenth century: the floral still life or flower piece. Painting flowers was part of the traditional training of Dutch painters. By being able to convey the right coloration, contours and textures of



Fig. 01 Jacob Marrel (DE, 1614–1681), *Two tulips: the Brandenburger and the General van der Eijck*, c.1634–1681, drawing, 34.3 cm x 45.5 cm, Teylers Museum, Haarlem, inv. no. T 083b.

flowers, insects and fruits, young painters could show they had acquired the level of craftsmanship needed to pass the master's examination. Flowers were also expensive and hard to come by, so most artists would not have been able to afford more than one flower at a time. They would, therefore, make individual flower studies that could be used at a later date to compile a painted bouquet (Fig. 01). This explains why most seventeenth-century flower pieces show combinations originating in different seasons.













Mughal Botanicals

Persian inspiration for Dutch still lifes

Bas Meeuws' beautiful 2015 and 2017 *Mughal Botanicals* series has its roots in the Persian fascination for the natural world, which was influenced by the Dutch flower pieces and individual flower studies of the seventeenth century.

Cultural exchange

When Admiral Steven der Hagen landed on the coast of Malabar in 1604, the Zamorin of Calicut immediately invited the Dutch East Indian Company (VOC) to enter into a free trade agreement¹. This alliance of commerce and friendship, which was to last until 1795, resulted in the establishment of a large number of Dutch settlements along the coast of India and facilitated a bilateral interest in, and exchange of, Dutch and Indian culture.

Throughout the course of the seventeenth century, northern India

was ruled over by Mughal emperors, and the VOC conducted commercial and cultural trade and exchange under Emperors Jahangir (reigned 1605–1627), Shah Jahan (reigned 1628–1658) and Aurangzeb (reigned 1658–1707). These important Mughal emperors stimulated interest in culture and the arts at their courts, especially in poetry, painting, and, of course, architecture, the apogee of which was the Taj Mahal (commissioned in 1632). With regard to poetry and painting, the Mughal emperors commissioned beautifully illustrated and finely decorated poetry and picture books². They were also very interested in the natural world and encouraged its study in a more scientific way.

Flowers and paradise

Throughout his reign in the sixteenth century (1530–1556), Mughal Emperor



Fig. 01 Balchand (IN, 1595–c.1650), *Shah Shuja', Aurangzeb and Murad Bakhsh* [The three sons of Shah Jahan], c. 1635, painted in opaque watercolour and gold on paper, 23.8 cm x 16.9 cm, Victoria & Albert Museum collection, London, inv. no. IM.13-1925.





