Dutch Golden Age

Anton van Leeuwenhoek first observes bacteria under a microscope	**1676**	
	1661–70	Jan Steen active in Haarlem, where he paints genre scenes
Christiaan Huygens describes the rings of Saturn for the first time; three years later he observes surface details on Mars	**1656**	
	1655	Johannes Vermeer registers as an independent master in the Delft guild
	1650	Gerrit Houckgeest paints the *Interior of the Nieuwe Kerk, Delft, with the Tomb of William the Silent*, a masterpiece of architectural painting
The Peace of Westphalia, ending the Thirty Years War, recognizes the Dutch Republic as an independent state	**1648**	
Chinese exports of porcelain cease, prompting a revival of local potteries, chief among them the workshops in Delft	**1647**	
Dutch explorer Abel Janszoon Tasman becomes first European to see New Zealand	**1642**	
	c.1635	The female painter Judith Leyster creates *The Young Flute Player*, a work influenced by the Utrecht Caravaggisti and others active in Haarlem at the time
Gerrit Dou, a pupil of Rembrandt, becomes known as a painter of small works of high finish and minute detail; he is the most influential of a group of Leiden artists known as the *fijnschilders* ('fine painters')	**1631**	Rembrandt van Rijn settles in Amsterdam, producing portraits, tronies, genre scenes and landscapes
	1620–30	A group of Utrecht painters led by Hendrick ter Brugghen, Dirck van Baburen and Gerrit van Honthorst work in a style influenced by Caravaggio, with strong contrasts of light and dark
Hendrick de Keyser is commissioned to sculpt a tomb for William the Silent, founder of the Dutch state in the Nieuwe Kerk, Delft; the tomb is characteristic of de Keyser's style in its Classical motifs and expressive drapery	**1614**	
Jamestown colony established by the British in North America	**1607**	
Dutch East India is granted a charter to trade with India and Southeast Asia	**1602**	
Glassmaking thrives throughout the Low Countries	**1600**	

In the Protestant Netherlands, the war against religious imagery was literal: sacred sculptures were destroyed, religious paintings were relocated, churches whitewashed. Nevertheless, scenes of actual church interiors, very popular in the second half of the century, appealed to the piety of Protestants and Catholics alike. *New Church in Delft with the Tomb of William the Silent* (1), by Gerard Houckgeest (*c.*1600–61), places the tomb of the hero of the Dutch War of Independence (1568–1648) between two enormous white, composite columns. The brilliant light cast through the church's large windows and the dramatic oblique angle through which Houckgeest directs our vision does not distract from the family paying homage to the tomb; rather their presence within this monumental space confirms that such paintings could merge spirituality with patriotism.

Protestantism and the secularization of the Dutch Republic gave rise to a wider range of genres than ever before, and the country's prosperity through global trade gave it a flourishing art market. Dutch Baroque art's exploration of everyday life and landscape appealed to contemporary private patrons interested in their own world. Painting by artists such as Jacob Van Ruisdael (1629–82) gave the sky an almost human dimension, greatly influencing the work of later artists such as the English painter John Constable (1776–1837). Many landscapes feature churning clouds and blustery winds that throw powerless birds off course but keep windmills turning, harvesting energy for the Dutch Republic. Birds often expressed an air of foreboding, which fascinated Rembrandt's pupil Carel Fabritius (1622–54). In *The Goldfinch* (2), the artist flaunted his mimetic skill through his handling of paint. With just a few deft brushstrokes, he created textures that give the illusion of plumage. Much like the sitter in a formal portrait, this little chained bird boldly meets the viewer's gaze, giving us a glimmer of the creature's vibrant personality. This picture was meant to fool the eyes: it may have originally been a *trompe l'oeil* painting for a cupboard or over the door of a wine shop.

Woman Holding a Balance (4), by Johannes Vermeer (1632–75), gives us an instantaneous flash of intimacy. Ochre, indigo and warm pinks seamlessly meld into flesh and fabric, and the glossy sheen of the gold and pearl necklaces, caused by an unusually intense light, emphasizes their preciousness. The woman becomes part of a still life, applying the introspection of a religious scene – like the one hanging on the wall – to her material world. Many have explained Vermeer's visual illusionism as the result of an optical device called the *camera obscura*, yet mere mechanics cannot explain his ability to capture the poetics of quotidian life.

Dutch Baroque portraiture blurs the boundaries between illusion and reality. The light-hearted grin in *The Laughing Cavalier* (5), by Frans Hals (*c.*1582–1666), suggests familiarity with the viewer, yet his opulent, refined attire speaks of stature. Rembrandt's *Self-Portrait* (3) uses artifice as a medium for self-promotion. By including his signature as part of the composition like a logo and by quoting Raphael's portrait of Baldassare Castiglione – the courtier who coined the concept of casual nonchalance, or *sprezzatura* – Rembrandt (1606–69) combines the conceit of the cultured gentleman artist with a conscious 'branding' of his artistic persona, disguising self-promotion as ingeniousness.

1 Gerard Houckgeest, *New Church in Delft with Tomb of William the Silent*, 1650
Oil on canvas, 73 × 60 cm / 28¾ × 23½ in
Kunsthalle, Hamburg

2 Carel Fabritius, *The Goldfinch*, *c.*1654
Oil on panel, 33.5 × 22.8 cm / 13¼ × 9 in
Mauritshuis, The Hague

3 Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-Portrait*, 1659
Oil on canvas, 84.5 × 66 cm / 33¼ × 26 in
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

4 Johannes Vermeer, *Woman Holding a Balance*, *c.*1664
Oil on canvas, 40.3 × 35.6 cm / 15¾ × 14 in
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

5 Frans Hals, *The Laughing Cavalier*, 1624
Oil on canvas, 83 × 67 cm / 32¾ × 26½ in
Wallace Collection, London