

Whose Golden Age? On A Term That's Not Fit For Purpose.

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In the Netherlands, the term Golden Age is widely used to refer to the period that roughly coincides with the seventeenth century. At that time the Republic of the Seven United Provinces was an economic and military world power. The term Golden Age became fashionable during the nineteenth century, when history was put into a nationalist context and the country had to unite, particularly around pride in heroes and supposed boom times. Now, two centuries later, that pride is fiercely criticized. Nineteenth-century monuments and street names that put this period and its heroes on a pedestal are being attacked. Even though it's subject to criticism, the term Golden Age is meanwhile still being used, including by the museum where I work as a curator—the Amsterdam Museum. We use that term routinely, primarily because it's become so embedded that everyone seems to understand what it's about. The term has a long history, however, and consequently a variety of associations. It's time to explore those associations and ask why we still use the term. And whether that's still a good idea.

My Golden Age

I'm an art historian specializing in seventeenth-century painting. My job in the Amsterdam Museum has exposed me to subjects far from art and far from that century, but my base remains Amsterdam, painting and the seventeenth century. I used the term 'Golden Age' all the time myself. It was the name of courses I took as a student; I came across the term in books and exhibitions and was never challenged to review it critically. So I didn't. I saw that the eighteenth-century artists' biographer Arnold Houbraken once used the term for the period around 1650 in Amsterdam.

At that time it was the Golden Age for art, and the golden apples (now scarcely to be found and only by difficult roads and sweat) dropped of their own accord into the mouths of the artists.¹

I didn't see much wrong in Houbraken's definition; the notion that artists could earn a lot of money at that time seemed to be true, perhaps even obvious. Needless to say, though, art history does not exist in its own little world separated from the rest of history. It's part of it and linked to everything in it. If you generalize Houbraken's comment and go beyond art and artists, and apply it to the whole history of the seventeenth century in Amsterdam or the Republic, doubts soon arise as to whether 'Golden Age' is an appropriate term for that period.

And yet, the term has certainly been used in that sense, particularly since the nineteenth century.

The Golden Age in the Nineteenth Century

Our Golden Age, do I need to tell anyone what I take it to mean? Is there one civilized Dutch person who doesn't know those words can only apply to that period of our history bounded by Leicester's departure in 1587 and the Peace of Utrecht in 1713?²

¹ 'T was in dien tyd de Gulde Eeuw voor de Konst, en de goude appelen (nu door akelige wegen en zweet naauw te vinden) dropen den Konstenaars van zelf in den mond.' Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlantsche konstschilders en schilderessen*. Amsterdam 1718-21, vol. II, p. 237 (in the biography of Ludolf Bakhuizen)

This is how Pieter Lodewijk Muller began the foreword of his major book about the seventeenth century in the Netherlands, *Onze Gouden Eeuw*, in 1897. As far as he was concerned, the term Golden Age describes a period about which 'we' really could unite, a communal past. A past was something to be proud of, proud of the art and of the military and economic clout of 'our' little country. That pride manifested itself as competition with others. The Netherlands was better than all other countries, and even beyond compare in world history.

It was when extraordinary intellectual development coincided with unparalleled prosperity and rare strength. The vigour and the fame of Florence and Venice appear to have combined in the Netherlands. One would have to go back to classical antiquity, to the Athens of Pericles, to find such general culture in such a limited area.

This narrative, of an unprecedented, unique era when power, wealth and cultural development flourished in such a tiny territory, has to have contributed to a national identity. Hence the 'our' before Golden Age, when the thriving country was our pride, our asset and a part of the identity of every 'civilized Dutch person'. The historical account thus had a clear target group—the Dutch—and an idealistic and unifying goal. History was used to serve a propagandist narrative: the Netherlands was small but nevertheless powerful, rich and a cultural leader. Dutch people who recognize this history as their own can share in the pride of their forefathers' achievements. In this way the Golden Age can also gild an individual's identity, to provide 'civilized Dutchness' with an excellence—even superiority—that others lack.

The Classical Golden Age

In 1941 Johan Huizinga wrote a wide-ranging cultural outline of the seventeenth century that he called *Dutch Civilization in the Seventeenth Century (Nederland's Beschaving in de Zeventiende Eeuw)*. So no Golden Age for him, and at the end of the book he explains why.

It's the term Golden Age itself that's the problem. It comes from Aurea Aetas, the cloud cuckoo land of Greek mythology that vexed us slightly in Ovid when we were at school. If our prosperous era has to have a name, let it be about timber and steel, pitch and tar, paint and ink, daring and piety, spirit and imagination.³

So according to Huizinga the term Golden Age is wrong because it's not a true reflection of that century. Huizinga does not, by the way, play down pride in the seventeenth century. He goes on to underline the virtues of the Dutch in that era (strength, vigour, the will to act, a sense of justice and fairness, compassion, piety and faith in God), which characterize the Dutch to this day. He endorses the unifying goal of history ('our prosperous era') but concludes that the century cannot be deemed a Golden Age. His concept of the seventeenth century was completely at odds with the mythological example because it was a time of hard work and not a 'cloud cuckoo land'. Despite Huizinga's vexation at school with the passage in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* about the classical Golden Age, it probably left a lasting mark on Dutch thinking about its own one. The view of the Netherlands as a

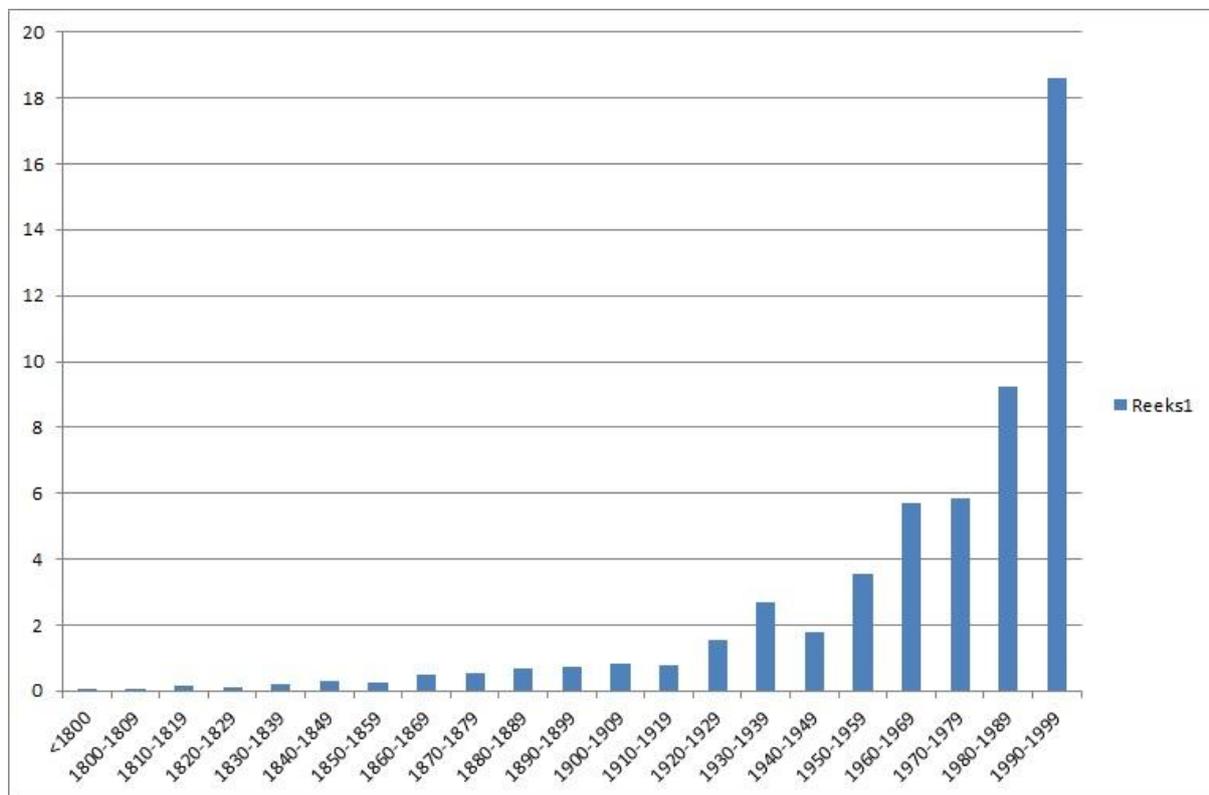
² 'Onze Gouden Eeuw, behoef ik aan iemand te zeggen wat ik daaronder versta? Is er één beschaafd Nederlander, die niet weet, dat die woorden alleen kunnen gelden van dat tijdvak onzer geschiedenis, dat besloten ligt tusschen het vertrek van Leicester in 1587 en den vrede van Utrecht in 1713.' Pieter Lodewijk Muller, *Onze Gouden Eeuw*. Leiden 1896, vol. 1, p. I

³ 'Het is de naam Gouden Eeuw zelf die niet deugt. Hij smaakt naar die Aurea Aetas, dat mythologische luilekkerland, dat ons bij Ovidius reeds als scholieren lichtelijk embêteerde. Als ons bloeitijdperk een naam moet hebben, laat het zijn dan naar hout en staal, pik en teer, verf en inkt, durf en vroomheid, geest en fantasie.' Johan Huizinga, *Nederland's Beschaving in de Zeventiende Eeuw*. Haarlem, 1941, pp. 175-76

small but innocent and essentially peaceful and tolerant country is certainly well in line with calling the country's greatest period of economic growth and power a Golden Age.

Whose Golden Age?

The need that nineteenth-century Dutch people had to use the Golden Age as a means of national cohesion is probably understandable given the role it played in coalescing a relatively young nation state, the Kingdom of the Netherlands. This need is far less great in a globalizing world, with a society focused much more on the individual than on the nation as a whole. Yet use of the term 'Golden Age' has increased substantially in recent decades. I entered it as a search term in the Royal Library's Delpher newspaper database for each decade and then calculated the percentage that the term appears per newspaper edition in that period. It's a crude yardstick but the figures reveal such a marked trend that I'm prepared to conclude that the term 'Golden Age' was used much more frequently in the last decades of the twentieth century.



This is confirmed by the titles of publications in major libraries. Titles containing 'Golden Age' enjoy a very sizeable majority (63-77%) after 1990. There were considerably more publications than in preceding decades, but there's no doubt whatsoever that the term is used more than ever in newspapers, books, exhibitions and posters in public spaces.

But is there nevertheless still a great need for a Dutch national history to be proud of? Have globalization, migration or even the disappearance of other unifying factors such as religion in fact fuelled the need for a unifying narrative like this for a part of the population? Or is it rather that the term is used routinely and without thinking because we've simply got used to it? For every reason you can think of there is a different emphasis on the purpose and meaning of the term Golden Age.

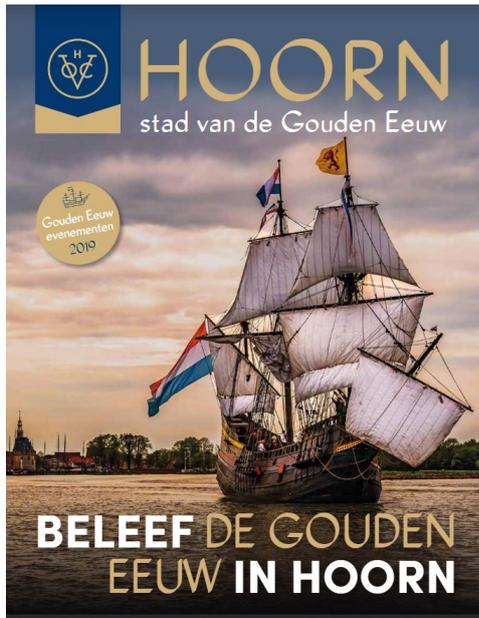
It would be going too far to analyze all this here. Suffice it to say there's both resistance to the term Golden Age and at the same time it's being used more than ever.

The Golden Age Now

Using the term 'Golden Age' for the seventeenth century has been so embedded for generations that it's had a significant influence on our view of that century. And even Ovid's dreamscape has left its mark because a Golden Age always has connotations of peace and ethical and moral progressiveness. Traditionally the Dutch Golden Age is not described using such language as conquest, conflict and repression, yet they are also characteristics of the era. Instead, the emphasis is on innovation and cultural superiority and the story is told as though trade came to Holland of its own accord. And when it comes to conflict, the Golden Age narrative cleverly puts the country in the position of David versus Goliath. The Netherlands as a tiny sodden country facing major powers—first Spain, followed by England and France. By making yourself small, you suggest that you're not the aggressor and that you engage in conflict to defend against the 'bigger enemy'. Small suggests innocent, just like the people who lived in Ovid's Golden Age. It goes without saying that this results in a distorted and incorrect view of that century.

The story of an unprecedented, unique era, when power, wealth and cultural development flourished in such a tiny territory, has meanwhile been linked to the term Golden Age for no end of schoolchildren, students and museum visitors. The image conjured up by 'Golden Age' has been the guiding principle in preparing canons, collecting and exhibiting museum collections, and the self-image of the country, towns and cities. Although there is an increasing focus on slavery in the seventeenth-century Netherlands, for instance, the core of the idealistic, naive view of the 'Golden Age' retains its standing. The 350th anniversary of Rembrandt's death will be a prominent feature of 2019 under the title of *Rembrandt and the Golden Age*. Cities such as Middelburg and Hoorn are taking the opportunity offered by the year to 'celebrate the Golden Age'. The website that explains the 'Golden Age' year in Middelburg refers to slavery as 'a dark stain in Middelburg's history'—incidentally in the middle of overblown urban pride about that century—but in an acrobatic verbal U-turn in the following sentence the city is described as 'a dedicated advocate of human rights, where the Four Freedoms Award, presented under the auspices of the Roosevelt Foundation' *bears witness* to that history. What does bears witness mean? Do we have to thank the history of slavery for the fact that Middelburg respects human rights now?

Linking a 'happy outcome' ('the Four Freedoms Award') with the history of slavery is a rather uncomfortable way of preventing shame or historical guilt from standing in the way of pride, just as terms like dark stain, shady side or black page suggest that slavery, exploitation and war were an exception in the naive image of which we believe we have to be proud. It is of course wrong that all the immoral behaviour at that time was an exception and all that was innovative, ethical and aesthetic the guiding principle. Both sides of the coin belong to the story. The term 'Golden Age' is an obstacle to such a multifaceted narrative.



The front of the Golden Age glossy magazine published by Hoorn Council and Hoorn Marketing

Hoorn is likewise showcasing its pride in a year full of the Golden Age. In the foreword to a glossy magazine published by the council, the mayor of the 'city of the Golden Age' says that Hoorn wants to give even more exposure to the 'atmosphere and spirit' of that century. 'Our rich history has left a huge imprint on the city's character and DNA. And we're proud of it.'⁴ To be perfectly honest it's staggering how Hoorn deals with the legacy of Jan Pietersz Coen (1587-1629), who was born there. In the same glossy magazine, he's described as a competent administrator. 'He certainly was and is not uncontroversial' is the comment here, and later the history of the statue of Coen in Hoorn is discussed. That's where we find the following passage. 'He was one of the architects of the Dutch East India Company's successful trading empire and founder of Batavia [present-day Jakarta]. But he was also responsible for the depopulation of the Banda Islands, during which thousands lost their lives.' The upshot of the 2012 popular initiative to have the statue removed is described as 'adding a note to the dark side'. Even genocide is presented as an exception in an otherwise Golden Age.

Yet the texts from Middelburg and Hoorn do not stand alone. The umbrella Holland Marketing website about the *Rembrandt and the Golden Age* year says the following.

*The Dutch Republic was a force to be reckoned with thanks to flourishing trade in Europe and far beyond, scientific developments, a powerful army and distinct advances in art. This period of prosperity in the seventeenth century will be celebrated in 2019 in a number of Dutch towns and cities. Seize this opportunity to discover the influence that this period of growth has had on the Netherlands. It was, after all, during this era that the Dutch East India Company was founded (the first company ever to be listed on a stock exchange), new movements in painting emerged, and major technological discoveries were made. It therefore comes as no surprise that a range of exhibitions will feature these advances and innovations from the Golden Age.*⁵

It is extraordinarily striking that—despite growing concerns about the problematic aspects of the Dutch seventeenth century—the way the seventeenth century is talked about is still extremely consistent with what was happening at the end of nineteenth century. Pride and a focus on the exceptional have top priority and the foundation of the Dutch East India Company is described

⁴ Hoorn. *Stad van de Gouden eeuw*. Hoorn 2019.

⁵ https://www.holland.com/be_nl/toerisme/ontdek-nederland/rembrandt-en-de-gouden-eeuw/350-jaar-rembrandt-en-de-gouden-eeuw.htm, consulted on 3-6-2019

without scruples as a special example of the spirit of free enterprise, without mentioning the hardship this very same company caused.

My 'Golden' Age and Other People's



This poster in Zeeburgerdijk in Amsterdam was daubed with graffiti. *Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age* was altered to *Portrait Gallery of the Stolen Age* and the faces of the men portrayed were made unrecognizable.

It's not so difficult to take the measure of others. It's trickier if you have to judge your own work and conclude that you didn't do much better. I was faced with this issue when someone daubed graffiti on the poster produced for the *Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age*, an exhibition that has been at the Hermitage Amsterdam since November 2014. I found it rather painful that the poster had been altered as a protest. This was certainly not because I condemn vandalism. Public spaces can—and in fact must!—also be spaces when there are debate and communication, and it's a fact of life that protests cannot always be within the law. So it's absolutely not the case that I disagree with the message. As emerged clearly earlier, I share the widespread unease with the 'Golden Age' and the associated feelings—in my view misplaced—of national or urban pride. This is painful because I understand and endorse the message, but at the same time I also share responsibility for this exhibition, including the title. I was one of the curators who delivered it at the time and I've been one of those responsible for it for nearly five years.

The exhibition in the Hermitage Amsterdam includes important Amsterdam heritage: the huge seventeenth-century group portraits that are unique in the world. Everyone knows *The Night Watch*, but more than a hundred of these portraits were painted. No matter what you might think about this period in the history of Amsterdam and the Netherlands, these are impressive works of art and they tell a story that is relevant to today's general public. Not as a narrative of pride, but in all its complexity the seventeenth century provides us with insight into our society and how it was created, including the community's negative facets then and now. Needless to say, we also advertise our exhibition. We want people to come and see it because of its beauty and its relevance.

When it comes to a more sensitive approach to history, I believe that society, the museum and I myself have seen massive developments over the last five to ten years, mainly thanks to the broadly based public debate about it. The statue of Jan Pietersz Coen was not the only piece of history and heritage referring to the seventeenth century that was the subject of a fierce debate. The Mauritshuis relocated a replica of a bust of Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen (1604-1679), which led to a national furore, but in the end also to the Mauritshuis's decision to investigate the man himself. The provisional result was the exhibition *Shifting Image—In Search of Johan Maurits* about the complex history of Johan Maurits and Dutch Brazil from different perspectives. The names of streets,

schools, colleges and institutions are also coming under fire. In other words, the concept of history as a source of pride is under pressure. In my opinion rightly so, although the debate is by no means over and there are therefore also dissenting voices.

When we were making preparations for the exhibition *Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age*, we were certainly aware that you can't represent the seventeenth century solely as a period of pride. We made sure we gave a place to poverty, colonialism, repression and slavery, primarily in the context of the question of where all the wealth of the seventeenth century actually came from. We were personally conscious that you can't just label slavery as a 'black page' because it was an integral part of the international trading system. Personally, I don't believe there should be a repetition of the decision to base the exhibition on the viewpoint of the gentlemen (and ladies) in the huge group portraits and what they wanted to project in their portraits. Five years later I think that the problem with this approach is that it reproduces the pride of the seventeenth-century elite, even if you clearly put it into perspective elsewhere. You're actually presenting history in a context of pride, the attitude that is also the essence of the term Golden Age.

So it's clear that the well-intentioned attention to the other side of the coin at the time does far too little to really address the ever dominant narrative of pride in the seventeenth century's wealth and power. During the five years the exhibition's been open we've received criticism regularly, sometimes at our request and sometimes not. That was painful at times, but it made a massive contribution to our own awareness. Or—referring to me personally for a moment—people like Leo Balai, Ida Does, Marian Markelo and Jörgen Tjon a Fong have radically changed my view of the seventeenth century and of the exhibition in the Hermitage. It's the same story with my colleague Imara Limon, who invited people to give their views about our exhibitions on *New Narratives* guided tours. Never again would I stage *Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age* in this way and I'm very grateful to them, in particular, for that. And yes, without exception these were people of colour who very definitely could not share the feelings of pride about that century. They see those powerful and wealthy men and women solely as symbols of a system that mistreated and repressed their ancestors and traded them as slaves. I knew the historical facts of course, but I didn't fully appreciate what they meant because they concerned me in a different way.

Ultimately, conscious of our differences in perspective, I want us to talk about history and about what made us compatriots and neighbours. I'm no less idealistic than the nineteenth-century historians who set out to find a nationally unifying pride, but I don't consider pride (and the nation) as a suitable way to share history. We cannot make history relevant to what we are now at a really in-depth level together until we also allow such emotions as shame, guilt and fear into our view of the past and what it means to us.

That title, *Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age*, is a barrier. I appreciate that the term Golden Age is effective for marketing purposes. Obviously! It's been embedded for over a century and as far back as 1898 Pieter Lodewijk Muller commented that he didn't need to explain to anybody what he meant. And it generates associations with beauty and wealth, doesn't it? Not really, witness the vandalized poster. Currently it also conjures up other connotations, of a century of repression, murder, conquest and fighting. This means that you can't defend that title on moral grounds. And it's not necessary, either. *Portrait Gallery of the Seventeenth Century* is also satisfactory; it describes the content and it doesn't change the paintings. You do, though, open the door to other perspectives.

No Golden Age

I want to go even further. Let's remove the term Golden Age from our vocabulary. The term's not fit for purpose and never will be. It doesn't do justice to historical reality, it bears no relation whatsoever to the classical *Aurea Aetas* with all its associations of innocence, and it conjures up a distorted image of the past and the present. Furthermore, in a society that, thanks in part to that seventeenth-century history, is made up of Dutch nationals with a radically diverse view of that

history and for whom the relevance of that history varies from person to person, we can no longer get away with a one-sided narrative about a defining period in our history. 'Our history' therefore has to display an open attitude about what is 'our', unlike 'Golden Age', which creates barriers between those who fit in the historical narrative and those who don't.

A. T. Van Deursen opened his book on the seventeenth century (like Huizinga he avoided the term 'Golden Age'), *De last van veel geluk*, with a rather pointed characterization of what history is.

History does not prove, it tells. So said the ancient Romans. History is an endless discussion. So the Dutch of the twentieth century saw it. Marcus Fabius Quintilianus versus Pieter Geyl. Who's right? It's a question with no answer. In an endless discussion, right and wrong are always of passing interest only, and everyone can read their own message in a narrative. That's why we will always keep rewriting history....⁶

I agree with him completely. Every generation and every individual must be given the opportunity to create his or her own account of history, preferably connected to someone else's. But the dialogue about it needs space, space for everyone. The term 'Golden Age' limits that space for many who really want to take part in the discussion. In the end that's a shortcoming for all of us. And that's also why the term isn't fit for purpose.

In the Amsterdam Museum we will stop using the term Golden Age as a synonym for the seventeenth century immediately and in the near future we will remove it from all our communications, publicity and publications. *Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age* for instance will be called *Group Portraits of the 17th Century*. I'm very pleased that we're finally taking that step, but it's no more than that—a step. It provides us with a bit more scope for other perspectives, but those perspectives do not come automatically and not from me, a white art historian. This is why I urge us to take the step to combine the term with the exhibition *Hollandse Meesters Her-zien (Dutch Masters Re-Viewed)* by Jörgen Tjon A Fong, in which portrait photographs visualize the presence of people of colour in Holland during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and enable their stories to be told in the context of the surviving heritage. Two steps at once, so that many more can follow.

⁶ 'Geschiedenis bewijst niet, ze vertelt. Dat zeiden de oude Romeinen. Geschiedenis is een discussie zonder eind. Zo hebben Nederlanders van de twintigste eeuw het gezien. Fabius Quintilianus tegen Pieter Geyl. Wie heeft er gelijk? Het is een vraag zonder antwoord. In een discussie zonder eind zijn gelijk en ongelijk altijd slechts van voorbijgaande aard, en in een vertelling kan ieder zijn eigen boodschap lezen. Daarom zullen we ook telkens weer de geschiedenis herschrijven.' A. T. Van Deursen, *De last van veel geluk: de geschiedenis van Nederland, 1555-1702*. Amsterdam 2004, p. 9



New Narratives guided tour in the Amsterdam Museum.