

Using your historical knowledge describe the ways in which the two paintings reflect the economic values and social structures and culture of the Netherlands in the seventeenth century.

The Dutch Republics were different than most regions of Europe in the 17th Century. Once they had independence from Spain they worked to create a stable economy based on shipping, and a stable republic based political system based on both cooperation and independence. The two paintings from Aelbert Cuyp and Johannes Vermeer represent the the prosperity that comes to the Dutch Republics from shipping and trade, and the social structure embodying individualism and independence which supported the stability and prosperity of the region during the Dutch Golden Age

Following the 30 Years' War in 1648, the Netherlands emerged as a major world power. This was enabled because their independence was recognized and their economy was strong. The Netherlands established an advanced government with a loose republic and religious toleration. Although Calvinist, their religious tolerance allowed them to accept numerous people who had a variety of skills. Many of the skilled people rejected in France (the Huguenots) moved to the Netherlands to work and contribute to welcoming society. This created the highest standard of living in Europe and allowed their shipping and trade based industry to flourish. The Maas River painting depicts the importance of shipping to the Dutch. Much of their wealth came from the early establishment of the Dutch East India Company as well as serving as the major carrier of goods for other European powers and their colonies. In addition to shipping, the Dutch had other innovations such as the first organized banking system, a stock exchange and the development of the concept of insurance. These innovations created prosperity and stability and allowed the middle class to grow and flourish and the political system to remain less centralized due to a stable economy and society.

Along with the economy, the culture of the Netherlands grew in the 17th Century. Religious tolerance also allowed for a mix a cultures to be blended with the Dutch Culture. The mix of cultures were supported by the strong Dutch identity of personal independence and tolerance of differences. In addition the Dutch had a strong belief in the Protestant Work Ethic which was heavily influenced by their Calvinists beliefs. They did not show off their wealth and that contributed to their strong middle class. Also, due also to their geography, they lived in simple homes and home was the center of the family. This unique social structure is demonstrated by Vermeer's Woman with a Pitcher, which depicts a woman of simple dress, in a simple home performing the routine tasks of daily life using goods from their consumer based market. Most Dutch artists focused on the ordinary people, because in Dutch culture and society the ordinary people had religious, social and political importance. Also, because the Dutch economy was strong it was not necessary for married women to work so the care of the home became the work of the women. The political independence and strong economy was supported by a social structure that in turn supported the political and economic systems and a sense of national prosperity.

The 17th Century was known as the Golden Age of the Dutch. This golden age is well represented by its growing economy, its stable government system of republics and a social structure that differed from other European powers of the time. In contrast the French system of absolutism and rigid social structure (Estate System) and their focus on title and status of the wealthy noble lead to instability and limited economic growth.