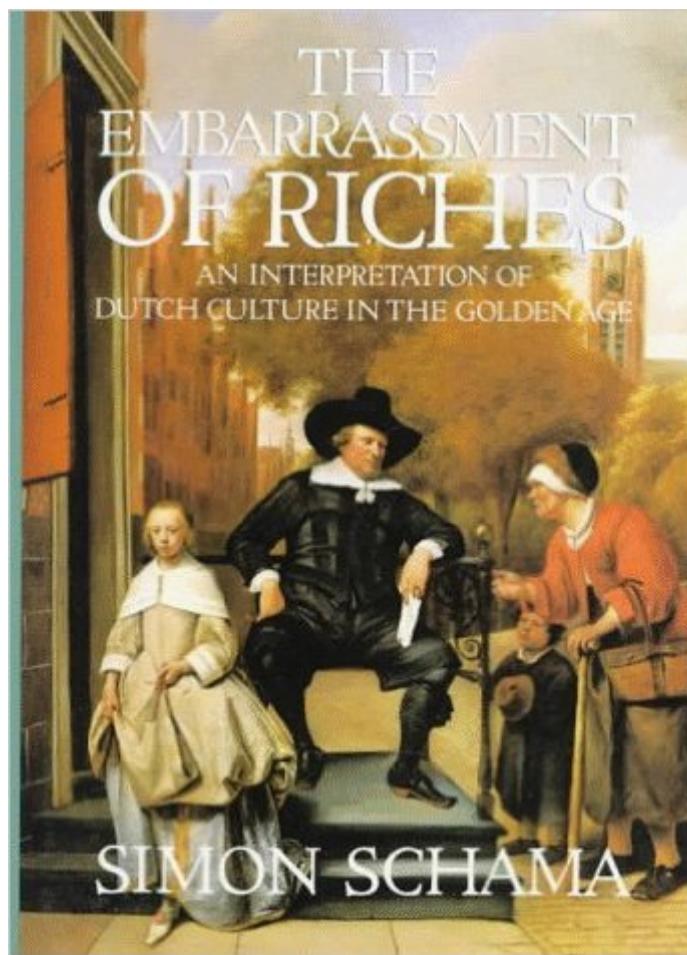


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The Embarrassment Of Riches: An Interpretation Of Dutch Culture In The Golden Age



Synopsis

In a brilliantly inventive work, bestselling author Simon Schama explores the enigma of 17th-century Holland, a nation that attained an unprecedented level of affluence, yet lived in constant dread of being corrupted by prosperity. Drawing on a vast array of period documents and sumptuously reproduced art, THE EMBARRASSMENT OF RICHES throbs with life on every page. 314 photos & illustrations.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Massive and rambling, this is a history book without very finely drawn parameters. Schama, in my reading, wanted to cover the whole of a unique humanist culture - tolerant, intelligent, united by outside threats and not so much by Calvinism, and loosely structured in the era of absolutism. Focusing largely on paintings, prints, and writings, Schama offers a dazzling tour - the only trouble is, he seems to want to cover everything, and in the process the thread of narrative is lost from the very beginning in all the luscious details. While it is far better than *Landscape and Memory* in terms of unity of theme, there are long passages where it is near-impossible to tell where Schama wants to go or what he really has to say. At its best, the book offers lovely descriptions of such varied subjects as midwives, a brief fascination with beached whales, sex, diet, and charity, to name just a few. Many of the details along the way that need explanation are very briefly referred to, such as the 80-year War of independence from Spain, the difficulties with France as Louis XIV sought to expand his national territory, and the fabulous technological achievement of reclaiming much of the land from sea silt. The reader is treated to a grand political experiment along with the art. When I next go there, my experience will be immeasurably enriched. However, at its worst, Schama appeared to me

to be showing off his erudition, which is truly incredible and hence describing way way too much while not covering more of the basics. While this certainly points to the weaknesses of my own education in history, I doubt that many readers would know the mechanisms of Dutch economic superiority or why the Tulip mania could occur there and not in Antwerp or Venice.

The Embarrassment of Riches explores the emergence of a distinctive Dutch cultural and commercial identity in the Netherlands over three generations during the seventeenth century in a comprehensive but impressively entertaining manner. The author Simon Schama (1945 -) is a well-known Oxbridge historian of English Jewish heritage, who was teaching at Harvard University when he wrote this work, but who is now based at Columbia University. His interests have included European and other social, cultural and art history, which is evident in the book's content and approach. The book explains how rebellion against the Spanish empire's cultural and religious oppression was the primary cause of the developing independent Dutch collective personality and national patriotism. As a result a wealthy republic, which temporarily led the European world in trade, art and science, was successfully created out of a loose assortment of agricultural, fishing and shipping communities of diverse languages and religious denominations. However, the consequence of this prosperity was an embarrassing ethical dilemma that dominated and shaped Dutch culture, beliefs and practices. Thus, the book emphasises the paradoxical moral tension between worldly riches and homely piety. In telling this story, Schama demonstrates an impressive capacity to inject life, vitality and insight into history. The Embarrassment of Riches displays signs of Schama's later increasing tendency to experiment imaginatively with historical analysis, to draw from other academic subjects, and to acknowledge awareness of the potential autobiographical and subjective bias in historical works.

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