7. **1610-1650: Unlocking Potential**

When in 1935-1936 art historian Wilhelm Martin wrote about the Dutch Republic, ‘Nowhere were there in such a small area so many and such great painters’, he must have been contemplating the situation around the middle of the seventeenth century. Just forty years prior to that time, the great achievements and large-scale production to which Martin refers were still very much in the future. Potential demand for paintings increased under the influence of economic growth and an increased tendency to purchase paintings as decorative items to cover walls. Still, Dutch painters were not yet able to exploit this potential. Fifty years later, hundreds of thousands, possibly even millions, of paintings had been produced in a variety of genres, styles, sizes, and price categories by thousands of painters.

How could a relatively modest painting sector develop into an art market that was highly innovative, that accommodated an abundance of highly skilled painters, and that, at the same time, was unprecedentedly large in scale and scope? This question is divided across two chapters, with the first focusing on product and process innovations and the second on the organization of the painting industry. Both chapters deal with the decades during which the Dutch art market expanded dramatically as demand for luxury goods increased and paintings became highly fashionable. In order to analyse the relationship between Golden Age painting and commerce, this chapter will present the main quantitative and qualitative developments of Dutch painting between 1610 and 1650. In the next chapter, I will argue that existing explanations for the rapid market expansion do not suffice. As Martin himself observed long ago, socio-economic and religious circumstances go a long way towards explaining the popularity of certain genres and the volume of production, but they cannot fully account for the major artistic accomplishments.

**Golden Age painting**

Between 1610 and 1650 the number of painters active in the Dutch Republic increased by a factor of seven (Figure 7.1). As the reputation of Dutch Golden Age painting affirms, the surge in this period was not only of a quantitative nature. The number and variety of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings displayed in museum collections as well as the number of Dutch painters included in art-historical canons are perplexing. In art-historical studies of
Fig. 7.1 Number of active painters in the Dutch Republic per year, 1590-1670

Source: Ecartico, accessed 20 November 2010 (5-year moving average; semi-log scale)

Fig. 7.2 Age cohort significant European painters, per decade, 1600-1810

Source: Table 6.4; Murray sample: N=112; Kelly & O’Hagan sample: N = 221
European painting between 1600 and 1700, the Dutch are well represented. When the distribution of the number of prominent European artists per age group is plotted (the decade in which the artists reached 40 years of age) over the period between 1600 and 1800, one or two peaks stand out, depending on the sample (Figure 7.2). And only a handful of prominent painters were active in Europe in any one decade, except for the 1630s and 1650s when the number of painters peaked.

The main cause of the disruptions in the trend was unquestionably the phenomenon that would come to be known as the Golden Age of Dutch painting. No other country in the samples of Murray and Kelly & O’Hagan, with the exception of Italy in the fifteenth century, experienced the same concentration of so many prominent artists in such a short time. In Murray’s selection, sixty-four European painters were active during this period, with the Netherlands and Italy slightly ahead of France at nineteen, sixteen, and twelve painters respectively.6 In the Kelly & O’Hagan sample of 101 painters born and active in the seventeenth century, the Dutch Republic was also the main contributor, with forty-three painters.7 These figures are all the more remarkable given the small size of the country.

From large potential to real consumption

The qualitative upsurge in Dutch painting found in art-historical handbooks was underpinned by an increasing popularity of works of art during the seventeenth century. The proliferation of paintings in Dutch homes took place in a relatively short period of time.8 Around 1630, Constantijn Huygens, secretary to the Stadtholder, stated that during his youth the popularity of paintings had increased significantly.9 Almost half a century later, Samuel van Hoogstraten, painter, poet, and art critic, wrote, ‘In the beginning of this century, Holland’s walls were not as densely hung with paintings as they are now’.10 And if we are to believe the observations of foreign travellers on the number of paintings they encountered in Dutch towns, the popularity of paintings in Dutch society appears to have been quite extraordinary.11

The observed trend in the demand for paintings has been confirmed by quantitative research of probate inventories.12 Over the course of the seventeenth century, the number of paintings per Dutch household increased, and the segment of society that owned paintings broadened.13 Prior to this, only the wealthier houses had portraits adorning their walls which would have been panelled with wood, covered with tapestries, or painted with decorative patterns. The average number of paintings in Delft inventories,
for instance, doubled from 20 to 40 between the 1620s and the 1670s, and Amsterdam saw an increase from 25 to 40 paintings. Montias’s sample of paintings found in Amsterdam inventories drawn up in the 1630s and 1640s shows that many of these collections were relatively recently formed. In the inventories of this period, some two-thirds of the named artists were still alive at the time of attribution.

In explaining the large number of paintings produced during the Golden Age, the buying behaviour of the middle levels of society, not just Dutch burghers but also artisans and even the more prosperous labourers and peasants, is crucial. As in other European countries, wealthy citizens collected paintings. In the Republic, however, even more modestly endowed households bought paintings to furnish their walls, developing a new standard for interior decoration. Collectors were increasingly buying fashionable works by contemporary masters. Paintings produced in the Dutch Republic by these contemporary masters entered the homes of both wealthy and less wealthy citizens, and within a relatively short period of time the quantity, quality, and scope of Dutch painting expanded significantly. Although some genres such as portraits were still commissioned, most of the newly acquired paintings must have been purchased on the open market within a remarkably short period of time. The increase in the number of paintings encountered in the homes of Dutch citizens should not only be attributed to increase in wealth or income. Changes on the supply side, such as the increasing interest in new genres and more specifically those introduced by immigrants from the Southern Netherlands during the phase of emergence, helped shape consumer preferences.

**Artistic novelties of the 1610s and 1620s**

Through research on notarized inventories it is possible to make reasonable assertions about the subjects of paintings that adorned the walls of Dutch households. Even though not all paintings listed in inventories were described by subject, the available data shows that landscapes became particularly popular, making up 20 per cent of the collections in the 1620s and about 35 per cent half a century later. The share of still lifes doubled from 5 per cent in the 1620s to 10 per cent in the decades that immediately followed, whilst the share of figure paintings increased from 4 per cent to 12 per cent in the 1680s. The growing importance of these genres came, according to Montias’s research, at the expense of history paintings, including those of religious subjects, whose share declined from 40 per cent in the 1620s to
10 per cent in the 1680s. During this period, portraits, however, remained relatively popular, their share increasing from just over 11 per cent to more than 15 per cent. Importantly, though, Angela Jager has recently challenged the view that the market for history paintings in the Northern Netherlands deteriorated and comprised mostly paintings that were not cheap. 

These changes in consumption patterns were underpinned by the introduction of a whole string of artistic novelties. During the previous phase, Southern Netherlands specialists introduced incremental innovations to genres that were already relatively new to northern consumers. They differentiated their products through variation rather than through novelty value. In the 1610s and 1620s, Dutch art production entered a new phase, as a new generation of painters triggered more radical innovation. Though young painters fully applied and adapted existing subjects and techniques that had been developed in the Southern Netherlands in the sixteenth century, they also managed to break with existing traditions in terms of iconography, technique, and composition. In little more than ten years, the sixteenth-century fields of specialism from the Southern Netherlands such as still lifes, landscapes, marines, merry companies, and peasant scenes developed a new look that would become the hallmark of Dutch Golden Age painting. The defining features of this evolved ‘Dutch’ fashion were broader ranges of subject matters, fewer motifs, and a more rapid production technique achieved by applying thin layers of paint in a swift manner, using a restricted spectrum of colour (palette). Images that were previously only available in prints or as motifs in paintings now became subjects in their own right.

The most popular and renowned Dutch genre was the landscape. In the 1610s, Amsterdam and Haarlem print designers and artists were moving away from the Mannerist tradition of fantastical views and extreme stylization, but initially only in prints and drawings. Esaias van de Velde was the first to translate these novelties into paintings after 1614. Departing from Flemish print designs and paintings, he depicted views of familiar landscapes near Dutch towns, applied a simpler palette, lowered the horizon, reduced the number of figures, and used a composition in which all elements were linked together by oblique lines. All these interventions created a sense of space that allowed the viewer of the painting to become increasingly involved.

Around the same time, Jan Porcellis introduced similar innovations in the depiction of seascapes. In hindsight, these painters set the stylistic direction and conventions of what would become known as Dutch landscape painting. Artists such as Jan van Goyen, Salomon van Ruysdael, and Pieter de Molyn then further developed these styles. Under their guidance, the so-called tonal period gained momentum through the 1620s. Also known
as the monochrome phase, this approach was characterized by the use of a smaller palette, simpler motifs, the blurring of lines, and more attention to sky and water. These stylistic innovations can also be observed in Dutch still lifes of the time. In the 1620s, for instance, painters such as Pieter Claesz and Willem Claesz Heda developed the subgenre of the breakfast piece, to which they also applied monochrome characteristics.

Esaias van de Velde was paramount in the development of Dutch landscape painting, but he also initiated what would become the genre of Dutch figure painting. Building on David Vinckboon’s banquet pieces, he lowered the horizon, used a diagonal composition, and adjusted motifs. However, he did not break with his theme of elegant outdoor gatherings, and another painter should be credited with the invention of indoor merry companies. Rotterdam-born Willem Buytewech arrived in Haarlem in the same year as Van de Velde and tried his luck at a range of genres and techniques including print, drawing, and painting. Even if the moving of the merry company indoors had already taken place in prints designed in the late sixteenth century, applying this to paintings proved a radical break with the outdoor companies of Vinckboons and Van de Velde.

Around the same time, a series of travels to Italy inspired a very different subgenre, that of the Italianate landscape. Around 1620, Dutch and Flemish artists in Rome had established a semi-formal association, complete with initiation rules and club names, whose members were known as Bentveughels. With the return to the Republic of Cornelis van Poelenburch and Barthelomeus van Breenbergh, two of the leading members of the first generation of Bentveughels, the Italianate landscape started gaining ground in the Dutch Republic. Unlike the rapidly executed pictures of local landscapes by the likes of Van Goyen and De Molyn, Dutch Italianates produced elaborate and costly paintings depicting ruins and statuary fragments bathed in Italian sunlight. Meanwhile, others experimented with the production of the more traditional landscapes. Hercules Seghers, for instance, continued working on fantasy landscapes using original techniques. Still, according to Seymour Slive, he can be seen as ‘the most inspired, experimental, and original landscapist’ of his period because of his experiments in the technique of printmaking. He experimented with printing in colour, by using horizontal formats, and by printing on dyed paper or fabric. However, the techniques Seghers developed were never really adopted by the masses, unlike those introduced by Porcellis and Van de Velde.

While new subjects and techniques were being explored in landscape and figure painting, Frans Hals was busy revolutionizing portraiture. He animated group portraits through a whole range of artistic devices:
arrangement, poses, contrast in colour, expressions and, last but not least, by applying a rough-mannered, loose, and lively painting technique. Others in his peer group were changing the face of Dutch history painting. They effected a departure from northern Mannerism as it had developed in Haarlem and Utrecht in the previous phase to achieve a more realist depiction of subjects. In Amsterdam, for instance, Pieter Lastman, influenced by his stay in Rome in the 1600s and by the German-born painter and draughtsman Adam Elsheimer, experimented with the relationship between landscape and figures. He combined medium-sized figures and landscapes without letting one or the other dominate the image. Lastman along with others in the Amsterdam history painters’ circle – such as the brothers Jan and Jacob Pynas and Nicolaes Moeyaert – are often anachronistically referred to as Pre-Rembrandtists due to their influence on Rembrandt. Like the Italianate landscapists, almost all of them had spent time in Rome where they were inspired by local painting styles.

Around the same time, in Utrecht, another group of painters was also strongly influenced by Italian painting. The main representatives of the Utrecht group were Dirck van Baburen, Gerard van Honthorst, and Hendrik ter Brugghen who had all been in Rome in the 1610s and returned with new ideas about composition, colour, and subjects. The Italian painter Caravaggio was their main source of inspiration, and they became known as the Utrecht Caravaggists. These artists produced large history and figure paintings using the artistic device of **chiaroscuro**, or clair-obscur, meaning large contrasts between areas of bright light and dark shading. Caravaggio achieved a strong natural realism by close physical observation and the dramatic use of **chiaroscuro**. Although their style was only popular for a decade or two, the Dutch Caravaggists made a big impact. According to Seymour Slive, they ‘introduced one of the main currents of Baroque art into the Netherlands. Even the greatest masters of seventeenth-century Dutch painting, who were never in Italy, Hals, Rembrandt, and later also Johannes Vermeer, took decisive impulses from the Caravaggesque style’.25

Artistic innovations in the 1620s took place across all genres. Much of this happened in interaction with other countries, most notably the Southern Netherlands and Italy. Although by 1620 some of the prominent painters active during the phase of emergence had passed away, most notably Karel van Mander in 1606, Gillis van Coninxloo in 1607, and Hendrick Goltzius in 1617, the new generation of painters did not entirely replace the previous generation and their styles and subjects. In Utrecht, Abraham Bloemaert, Joachim Wtewael, and Paulus Moreelse continued their work and were later joined by Roelant Saverij and Ambrosius Bosschaert in around 1618. David
Vinckboons continued to work in Amsterdam and Cornelis Cornelisz in Haarlem. Artistic novelties developed alongside and built upon traditional conventions. These series of product and process innovations did not replace one another but collectively expanded and deepened the range of subjects and styles on offer in the Dutch art market.26

Product and process innovations

Michael Montias has presented some of the inventions by artists such as Esaias van de Velde and Jan Porcellis as process innovations.27 By combining a swifter painting technique with simpler compositions (fewer figures and objects) and more restricted colours, Porcellis and Van de Velde are considered to have set in motion a trend for producing cheaper paintings that could penetrate a broader market.28 By using more sky, more shade, and less crowding in their pictures, painters effectively reduced the amount of labour they needed to invest in the painting. Such specialized and ‘painterly’ works took much less time to complete than their meticulously executed counterparts, and since labour costs were the prime determinant of production costs, this had a dramatic impact on the price of paintings.29 Montias asserted that the works of the realistic ‘tonal’ school of landscape painting, for instance, brought substantially lower prices than those of their Mannerist predecessors (typically f15 to f30, versus f70 to f100 for the older works).30

In chapter 3 we saw that Dutch publishers cut back on production costs by reducing the size of the books. It has been suggested that painters also applied this strategy, but as of yet there is no quantitative evidence to convincingly corroborate this.31 Fortunately, the few quantitative studies that exist on the size of Dutch paintings provide some clues.32 Ad van der Woude’s analysis of the average size of paintings in the Dutch Rijksmuseum produced by Dutch painters indicates a gradual decline in the size of paintings over time. On average, painters born between 1550 and 1599 produced larger paintings than the groups born in 1600–1649 and 1650–1699.33 His data, however, are not extensive enough to show exactly when this trend set in. Another clue can be found in the distribution of genres. The sizes of traditional subjects of religion, mythology, and other history paintings produced by the 1550–1649 cohort were on average significantly larger than landscapes, figure painting, or still lifes.34 We can combine this finding, which is based on a limited sample of paintings, with the relative distribution of subjects in probate inventories in seventeenth-century Amsterdam and collected by Montias.35 He compared inventories from the periods
1610–1650 and 1650–1679 and found that the share of landscapes, figure paintings, and still lifes increased, while the share of history paintings dropped significantly. This suggests that an increasingly large share of paintings in Amsterdam inventories were of smaller than traditional size.

Finally, the fragmented data on the oeuvres of individual artists indicates an overall tendency to produce smaller pictures from the 1620s onwards, even in traditional genres. Jonathan Israel has pointed out that artists such as Cornelis Cornelisz and Joachim Wtewael not only reduced and simplified designs and colouring but also used smaller sizes. Likewise, mythological scenes by Cornelis van Poelenburch were smaller than those of his predecessors. Amsterdam history painters like Lastman and Moeyaert also produced paintings of fairly modest size. Still, the high prices fetched for the smaller paintings by the aforementioned Van Poelenburch indicate that reductions in size did not necessarily mean that paintings became cheaper for the consumer. This points to a significant difference between pricing mechanisms in the publishing and painting industries. In the case of the former, the price of the finished product, the book, relates almost perfectly to the inputs in terms of labour and material costs. Though many painters also used similar price-setting strategies, also known as ‘valore di fatica’, there were still many exceptions.

By offering quality paintings for reasonable prices, the new generation of painters unlocked the potential demand identified in the previous chapter. Whether the primary motives of the trendsetters were artistic or economic, the consequences were unambiguous: productivity increased and paintings could be offered for lower prices without losing out on quality or necessarily threatening painters’ profits. The middle-income groups that previously could only afford copies or prints were now able to own new and original paintings by living masters. Because the artistic novelties did not replace or exclude other subjects, styles, and techniques, the range of paintings on offer expanded dramatically.

In the 1610s and 1620s, the number of paintings per household increased, the composition of the collections was transformed, the number of painters increased, and new styles, subjects, and painting techniques were introduced. In recent decades, economists and economic historians have started to interpret these developments within a single framework, generating a widely accepted consensus on the role of market forces in shaping the Dutch art market. They demonstrated how market forces could not only affect the volume of production but also stylistic developments and the quality of the produced works of art. At a glance, the explanatory framework of market forces seems to offer a straightforward interpretation of what occurred in
the Dutch market. A closer look, however, suggests that although the overall importance of market settings is indisputable, two areas of the existing analysis need to be redressed.

In general, Montias’s interpretation of the stylistic and iconographic changes in the Dutch Republic as product and process innovations is convincing. Nevertheless, there is as yet no comprehensive explanation for the timing of such innovations. Montias did not take into account that timesaving product and process innovations were also developed around the same time in other cultural industries. Books, tiles, and tapestries became simpler in design and smaller during the growth phase, adding a whole new market segment to the persistent production of expensive large-sized products and luxurious small-sized works. The fact that the trend toward smaller and simpler products took place in several industries around the same time suggests that the product and process innovations in Dutch painting could have been a response to circumstances influencing the overall market for cultural products.

Moreover, because existing explanations largely treat paintings as mere commodities, they cannot fully account for the exceptionally high levels of production or the high levels of quality that accompanied the quantitative expansion of the Dutch art market. Montias hinted at the importance of industrial organization and, in particular spatial proximity, when he asserted that innovation thrives when information flows freely between potential innovators. He also suggested that there should be a certain number, a so-called critical mass, of active individuals competing and interacting to stimulate breakthroughs, but he did not test these assumptions empirically. The issue of how these innovations came about will be addressed in the next chapter; first we turn to the question of why they occurred in the first place.

**The invisible hand of supply and demand**

A possible explanation for the parallel developments across differing cultural industries can be found in Jonathan Israel’s interpretation of the development of the tonal phase. In Israel’s view, the different phases in the development of Dutch painting are strongly related to phases in the general restructuring of Dutch commerce, industry, and retailing. In the development of Dutch world trade primacy, he distinguished phase two (1609-1621) and phase three (1621-1647). This period in Dutch Golden Age painting – characterized by the shift towards smaller paintings with more
modest subjects, in different tones and colours, and by the development of new subject matter – was strongly related to the commercial crisis in phase three, following the end(ing) of the Twelve Years Truce in 1621. Accordingly, he argues, the cutting of costs through stylistic adjustments can be interpreted as a response to the declining demand for paintings and the rising price of materials. In this view, the monochrome phase should not be seen as an example of a simple ‘market innovation’, but rather as a much wider and more complex set of artists’ responses specific to the conditions prevailing in the Dutch art market between 1621 and the mid-1640s.

Critics have argued that Israel’s account of both the extent of the crisis and the impact of rising prices of pigments is exaggerated. Economic circumstances may not have been as bleak as Israel made them out to be. Moreover, the initial development of product and process innovations took place during the period identified by Israel as phase two, not in phase three. Nevertheless, we should not discard his observations. Whilst there is no evidence for a decline in demand for paintings, there is evidence for discrepancies between supply and demand. Eric Jan Sluijter, for instance, has argued that demand for cheap decorative paintings by immigrants was not met by local supply. He implicitly extended and adapted Montias’s earlier point on critical mass by finding a possible explanation for timing and nature of the innovations in the concepts of economic competition and artistic rivalry. The popularity of public auctions selling cheap paintings from the Southern Netherlands, he argued, points to a gap in the art market that intensified around the time of the Twelve Years Truce. In this view, competition for market shares, triggered by imports of (cheaper) paintings from the Southern Netherlands, stimulated the new generation of painters to develop product and process innovations that cut costs and improved quality at the same time. Regardless of whether or not product and process innovations were triggered by Montias’s critical mass, by declining demand, by increasingly expensive materials, by imports from the Southern Netherlands, or by a convergence of all four, the consequences were the same. As competitive pressure intensified, so did the need for differentiation.

**Competition**

Eric Jan Sluijter observed increasing competitive pressure in the Dutch art market in the 1610s. Part of the argument is based on a series of artists’ complaints and guild activity dated around this time. From the late Middle Ages, painters in the Low Countries were organized in guilds that
encompassed a whole range of related crafts such as the Guilds of St. Luke, saddlers’ guilds, or *Onze Lieve Vrouwe* Guild (*Our Lady*) in Amsterdam. After the Revolt, painters started to organize themselves in independent visual arts guilds. Along with painters, engravers, sculptors, glass painters, bookbinders, and producers of faience all became members of the Guilds of St. Luke. The first towns in the Northern Netherlands to take this step were Amsterdam (1579) and Middelburg (1585). In Amsterdam, as others have observed, the new corporate establishment was part of a more general revival of the guild system. In Middelburg the main goal appears to have been to attract refugees from Antwerp.

A second round of guild establishments took place around 1609, after the signing of the Twelve Years Truce. It has been argued that new corporate activity was triggered by the threat of foreign competition. Once Dutch borders opened up to imports from the Southern Netherlands, cheap paintings in styles and subjects familiar to the immigrant communities could enter local markets. Dutch painters responded to this competitive threat by voicing complaints to the town magistrates and requesting a ban on public sales of paintings by foreigners. As well as underlining the problem of such competition for local painters, they emphasized the consequences for potential buyers. After complaining about the fact that the imported paintings were ‘poor copies’, ‘rubbish’, and ‘inferior apprentices’ works’, they added that ‘the good burgers here, who, by and large, have little knowledge of painting, [are being] deceived’. In a new request in 1613 it was again stressed that the imports were substandard and that buyers were deceived, as they often bought copies instead of originals at auctions. Sluijter has argued that the imports were simply inexpensive and not worthless, as local painters claimed them to be. He also does not support the claim that most buyers were ignorant about what they bought. The import of paintings from the Southern Netherlands was not new but may have intensified after the signing of the Twelve Years Truce.

Local artists’ complaints led to a tightening of existing guild privileges and the introduction of new ones, in addition to the establishment of new guilds in almost all artistically significant towns, such as Delft and Utrecht in 1611, as well as Gouda and Rotterdam in 1609. Only in Leiden were painters prevented from establishing a guild, but after presenting the decisions from Amsterdam and Delft, they received regulations stating that only local citizens were allowed to sell paintings without the need for prior consent from the burgomaster. The only exceptions to this requirement were the traditional annual markets. Given the absence of novel external factors stimulating demand – apart from population growth and the rising number
of painters active in Dutch towns – the suggestion that competitive pressure grew is not implausible.\textsuperscript{57} The timing and character of guild regulation on the art market suggest that local painters were increasingly concerned with protecting their market share. They responded by strengthening local regulations concerning the sales of paintings, as well as by experimenting with artistic novelties that developed into product and process innovations as Dutch painters started to capture new segments of demand.

**Levels of competition**

When artists like Vinckboons, Bloemaert, and Cornelisz van Haarlem entered the Dutch art market around 1588-1590, they encountered few competitors. Almost everyone was new in town and had only recently started out. Painters who entered the market in the 1610s faced a different challenge. They had to distinguish themselves, directly or indirectly, from both the generation of their masters and from each other. Due to a lack of data on output figures, we cannot measure competition in the art market by estimating market concentration. Instead, data on entrants is used (Figure 7.3). The number of entrants in local industries has implications for the level of industrial competition. New entrants can erode the power of incumbent firms as they compete among themselves for a place in the market. Artists’ entry years are determined by the year they were first mentioned in the ECARTICO database, but two adjustments were made to this data.

First of all, ECARTICO data shows a large spike in the 1610s in the number of new painters in the seven largest artistic communities in the Dutch Republic. A closer look at the underlying figures, however, reveals that this was to some extent due to biased sources. Establishment of guild-like organizations in several towns through the 1610s prompted the drawing up of membership lists. Such lists have been important sources for estimating the number of active painters in towns and, as a result, the data displays sudden leaps in the number of active painters. For example; in just a single year there were eleven new painters in Delft and seventeen in Utrecht. These figures most likely do not mirror the actual increase for that year but rather a more gradual growth in the preceding years.\textsuperscript{58} If bias in the data for Delft and Utrecht is corrected by using the average number of painters in the years preceding 1613 and subsequent to 1616, the bump decreases significantly, although it is still visible. Second, absolute figures do not tell us much about the impact of new entries on the industry as a whole. After all, the total number of active painters was increasing rapidly. Toward more plausible counts, here entry rates are calculated
by dividing the number of new painters by the total number of painters active in that same year.

These figures show that from the second half of the 1610s, the overall number of newcomers started to decline. This is hardly surprising given the fact that entry rates were so high to begin with due to the small size of the industry and the large influx of immigrant painters. What is more interesting is that entry rates started to increase again in the 1620s, this time in the absence of any exogenous shock such as the Revolt, or other exogenous factors that significantly stimulated demand for paintings. Behind these figures we find a new cohort of painters active in an increasingly competitive market, which was not only responsible for industrial growth but also for turning potential demand into real consumption and for raising overall quality levels.

Quantity and quality

The profusion of prominent Dutch painters during the Dutch Golden Age has been interpreted as a natural consequence of the size of the art market. The relationship between quality and quantity has been made explicit by Michael Montias in his book about Delft: ‘[B]ecause there were many painters in town, young people had a choice of masters from whom to learn; a wide variety of ideas sprouted to fructify even the barest soil; and there were good statistical chances that an extraordinary talent such as Vermeer’s would one day or another reveal itself’. Assuming that talent was roughly equally distributed over time and place, the Dutch Golden Age with its expanding art market was undoubtedly a favourable environment in which to unlock artistic potential.

Fig. 7.3 Entry rates and number of newcomers in the seven largest towns (left) and Amsterdam (right), 1590-1670

Source: Ecartico, accessed 7 February 2011
The historiometrical samples listed in the previous chapter make it possible to explore further the relationship between quality and quantity. They loosely represent different segments of the Dutch market for paintings. In Figure 7.4 six different samples are charted over time according to the number of births per decade. All samples show an inverse U-shape much like the one in Figure 7.1. Not surprisingly, this trend is comparable to the distribution of birth cohorts in Jan de Vries’s sample of 1760 pre-nineteenth-century Dutch painters, based on a sample of painters represented in Dutch and American museums. Overall, the more selective samples show the same trend as the mass market for paintings as represented by sample D. This suggests that the quality and quantity were indeed, as Montias suggested, closely related. However, a closer look at the similarities and differences between the samples shows two features that are worth noting and that warrant further investigation.

Painters born in the 1600s and 1610s are underrepresented in the samples. This suggests that here was a group of artists who, in art-historical hindsight, had trouble differentiating their works of art from each other as well as from their predecessors. This may be explained by the two rounds of innovation that took place in Dutch paintings. The 1610s and 1620s, as well as the 1650s, are known as innovative decades in Dutch painting. This was when the group born between 1580 and 1590, as well as those born in the 1620s and 1630s, set up shop. Arguably, the period in between these two rounds of artistic prominence, when the painters born in the 1600s and 1610s were starting out, was one of expansion in terms of scale and specialization rather than in terms of product and process innovations.

Moreover, all decades witnessed the birth of acclaimed future artists, but the peak decade of birth was the 1620s (only the A+ sample shows a high point in the 1610s). The 1620s birth cohort entered the market between 1640 and 1650; their work is seen as the apex of the Golden Age. They refined previous innovations and variations, which is most visible in the figure paintings of the so-called fijnschilders and the landscapes by Van Ruisdael. Finally, whereas most samples show a rather sudden decline in the number of births per decade, especially after the 1630s – the group of, for example, Johannes Vermeer and Meindert Hobbema – the more inclusive C and D samples show a more gradual decline. The C sample in particular still shows painters from the birth groups of the 1640s and even the 1650s, including artists such as Gerard de Lairesse, Godfried Schalken, and Adriaen van der Werff. This suggests that in the eyes of contemporary observers, the ‘sudden pull of the curtain’ on Dutch painting was much less abrupt than museum holdings suggest.
Although there was an overall correlation between prominent painters and the volume of production as represented by Figure 7.4, it was not clear-cut. The observed differences between the samples can be related to the three different stages in the life cycle of early modern Dutch painting and the type of innovation connected to the different stages. Initiated by painters born in the 1580s and further developed by a group of slightly younger
painters, a series of product and process innovations was introduced in the 1610s. Thereafter, the cohorts of the 1600s and 1610s competed more on product variations than on radical novelties, depressing the chances of entering the art-historical canons. Finally, the groups of the 1620s and 1630s are associated with a period of refinement, rather than novelty, a sign that the art market was maturing. The number of painters increased steadily after the surge in the 1620s, but after 1625 no radical iconographic, compositional, or technical innovations were introduced. Market expansion took place through imitation and differentiation, which resulted in a rapid succession of new variants. These artists filled the gap between mass market (the D sample) and the high-quality samples. In other words, they represent what distinguished the Republic from other countries and the Golden Age from other periods.

Specialization and product variants

After the trendsetters had introduced new genres, styles, subjects, and compositional arrangements, demand for paintings could further expand. Painters started specializing not only in specific genres such as landscapes, still lifes, figure painting, portraits, and history paintings, but also in sub-genres such as merry companies and ice skating scenes. Still lifes, one of the mainstays of Dutch painting, also consisted of many sub-specializations, from flower pieces, bankejettes or ‘banquet pieces’, ontbijtjes or ‘breakfast pieces’, to depictions of dead fish. In the following section the subgenre of figure painting, more specifically merry companies, will be highlighted in order to demonstrate how, after the introduction of product and process innovations, artistic novelties were copied, emulated, adapted, and improved upon.63 The merry company had developed into an independent genre characterized by a sharp rise in production and increased variety on a limited number of motifs.64

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Van de Velde and Buytewech had introduced important stylistic changes to the motif of merry companies. Though Buytewech may have produced his few merry companies upon his return to Rotterdam, and Van de Velde continued to produce elegant outdoor companies in The Hague, both left a legacy in Haarlem. Their departure from Haarlem gave way to the first true specialist in merry companies: Dirck Hals, brother of Frans Hals (see Image 7.1). Presumably Van de Velde or Buytewech, or both, were responsible, in part at least, for his training as there are great similarities between their works and Hals’s first paintings. Hals used spatial construction and figures from Van de Velde; compositions, iconography, and technique from Buytewech; and he
added stylistic, compositional, and iconographic variants. Elmer Kolfin has emphasized how Hals ‘[…] was not an original artist who managed to create a new genre from little-known pictorial or literary traditions’, but how he was ‘[…] the one who succeeded in expanding a subject into a genre by specialising and by developing different types’.65 When it came to indoor companies, Hals was inventive, introducing the gathering of only men, smaller single figure paintings, and the adaptation to monochrome palettes.

Soon many copies were made of his work, often anonymously. Artists in other towns picked up on the successful genre of indoor merry companies and developed their own local specializations.66 In Amsterdam, variants on Haarlem’s indoor companies were introduced, differentiated by the guardroom theme which depicted soldiers during their down time. The three most renowned representatives were Pieter Codde, Willem Duyster, and Pieter Quast. Codde produced various styles, but Duyster seems to have concentrated on firelit guardrooms. These were soon imitated in Amsterdam as well as in other towns such as Delft, Utrecht, and Dordrecht. In Utrecht, Jacob Duck started out with guardroom scenes but would go on to specialize in comical brothel scenes, while Jan van Bijlert produced brothel scenes with Caravaggist influences. In Delft Anthonie Palamedesz specialized in merry companies characterized by iconographic features related not so much to merry companies from Haarlem, Amsterdam, or Utrecht, but to the fancier ones produced in The Hague – especially those by Esaias van de Velde.
Conclusion

Referring to the period of the Twelve Years Truce, Wouter Kloek has stated ‘The surge of artistic activity [...] continued unhindered’. Bob Haak pointed out that ‘there was no renaissance in 1609, nor any decline when the truce expired in 1621’. And Lyckle de Vries even went so far as to say that the chronological division between two periods, before and after the 1610s, hinders our understanding of Dutch art because it chauvinistically overstates the artistic novelties of this period. From a socio-economic perspective, choosing the 1610s as a starting point for this chapter is neither chauvinistic nor arbitrary. It was exactly in these years that the Dutch art market reached a critical juncture.

After the exogenous shock that sparked the expansion in scale and scope of the Dutch art market between 1580 and 1610, the series of innovations triggered a new growth dynamic. The timing of this famous series of product and process innovations was directly related to relative stagnation in the traditional market for cultural products. When new parties entered the market and there were no external stimuli for consumption, it became increasingly crowded. Faced with competitive pressure from Flemish competitors, from established masters in the traditional fields of history and portrait painting, from Dutch and Flemish specialists, and from each other, artists initiated various product differentiations. In the large potential market for works of art, these soon developed into the famous cost-saving product and process innovations of the 1610s and 1620s.

The more radical innovations were followed by strategies of specialization, differentiation, imitation, and emulation. Specialties were so narrow that they limited possibilities for imitation and allowed modest monopoly rents to accrue to the specialist. These specialists built on the novelties developed by the generation of the 1610s and were, in turn, imitated and emulated by other painters. Alongside imitators – or quite the opposite, innovators like Jan van Goyen, Gerard Dou, and Rembrandt – worked a wide range of more or less gifted painters, specializing in one niche or another. Together, they dramatically expanded the scale, scope, variety, and quality of paintings produced in the Dutch Republic.

To emphasize the importance of strategies of imitation, Montias pondered an artist of average talent and ability, asking what he would have done to succeed commercially. According to Montias, ‘One option open to him [...] was to imitate artists with a popular following. This was all the more likely when he lived in another city than the artist he wished to imitate’. In the next chapter I will show how it was indeed the urban structure and
organization of production that were responsible for the impressive expansion of the art market during the seventeenth century. On top of the large and varied demand side and artistic innovations, a combination of outward openness and local entrenchment increased the volume of production, sustained the rapid succession of product variants, and fostered the high quality that characterized Dutch Golden Age painting.

Notes

1. ‘[...] geen land ter wereld ooit geweest [is] waar de behoefte om het huis te versieren met schilderkunst van eigen bodem zóó groot was en waar zóó sterk aan die behoefte werd en kon worden voldaan’ and that ‘nooit ergens op een zóó klein gebied zóóvele en zóó groote kunstenaars [hebben] gewerkt als toen in Holland’. Martin, Hollandsche schilderkunst, vol. 1, p. 36.

2. Van der Woude, ‘The Volume’.

3. This period has also been interpreted as one of continuous crisis in the art market. Nijboer, ‘Bloeiitijd als crisis’.


6. Murray, Human Accomplishment.

7. Kelly and O’Hagan, ‘Geographic Clustering’. Many thanks to the authors for sharing their dataset.

8. Van Hoogstraeten, Inleyding, p. 237; ibid. ‘In ’t begin deezer eeuw waeren de wanden in Holland noch zoo dicht niet met Schilderyen behangen, alsze tans wel zijn.’


11. Examples are quoted in: Sluijter, Verwondering over de schilderijenproductie, pp. 12-13; Sorbière, Drie brieven van Samuel Sorbière [1660], p. 86; Mundy, Travels of Peter Mundy, vol. 4, p. 70; Parival, Les délices de la Hollande, p. 25; Evelyn, The Diary of John Evelyn [1641], p. 39; Lemaitre, Relation de mon voyage, p. 291; Aglionby, Painting Illustrated in Three Dialogues, pp. 23-24.


14. This paragraph is based on Montias, ‘Works of Art in a Random Sample’, 67-88; Montias, Artists and Artisans, table 8.3; Montias, ‘Artists Named in Amsterdam Inventories’. See also De Vries, ‘Art History’, p. 269.

16. Loughman, ‘Een stad en haar kunstconsumptie’; Bok and Schwartz, ‘Schilderen in opdracht’, p. 192. In Amsterdam inventories, this category made up some ten to fifteen per cent of the total, while in Dordrecht inventories from the period 1620-1719, this was almost 25 per cent.

17. This paragraph is based on Montias, ‘Works of Art in a Random Sample’, 67-88; Montias, Artists and Artisans, table 8.3; Montias, ‘Artists named in Amsterdam Inventories’. See also De Vries, ‘Art History’, p. 269.


22. See Sluijter, ‘Jan van Goyen als marktleider’, pp. 51-52 for a good discussion of these innovations.

23. The following is based on Kolfin, The Young Gentry, pp. 103-118.


34. Ibid., pp. 306-308, 317.


37. Ibid., p. 455.

38. Sluijter, ‘Determining Value’.


41. See the historiography in the introduction to this book.

42. Montias, ‘Cost and Value’, p. 462. See also chapter 3 of this book.

43. Ibid., pp. 457-458.


45. Israel, ‘Adjusting to Hard Times’.
47. Sluijter, ‘On Brabant Rubbish’.
49. For the history of painters’ guilds see: Hoogewerff, *Geschiedenis van de St. Lucasgilden*.
52. Haak, *The Golden Age*.
55. It is noteworthy that in Middelburg there were already measures against imports in 1592.
57. See the discussion on stimuli on the demand side in chapter 3 of this book.
59. Ibid., pp. 105-106.
60. De Vries, ‘Art History’, tables 1 and 3.
61. Rembrandt (1606-1669) and Jan Lievens (1607-1674) in the 1600s; Gerard Dou (1613-1675), Barthelomeus van der Helst (1613-1670), Govert Flinck (1615-1660), and Gerard Ter Borch (1617-1681) in the 1610s; and Nicolaes Pietersz. Berchem (1620-1683), Aelbert Cuyp (1620-1691), Jan Steen (c. 1626-1679), Jacob van Ruisdael (c.1628-1682), Pieter de Hooch (1629-1684), and Gabriel Metsu (1629-1667) in the 1620s.
63. Based on Kolfin, *The Young Gentry*, pp. 105-118.
64. Ibid., p. 116.
65. Ibid., p. 107
66. Based on ibid.
69. Consider for example Sluijter, ‘Jan van Goyen als marktleider’.