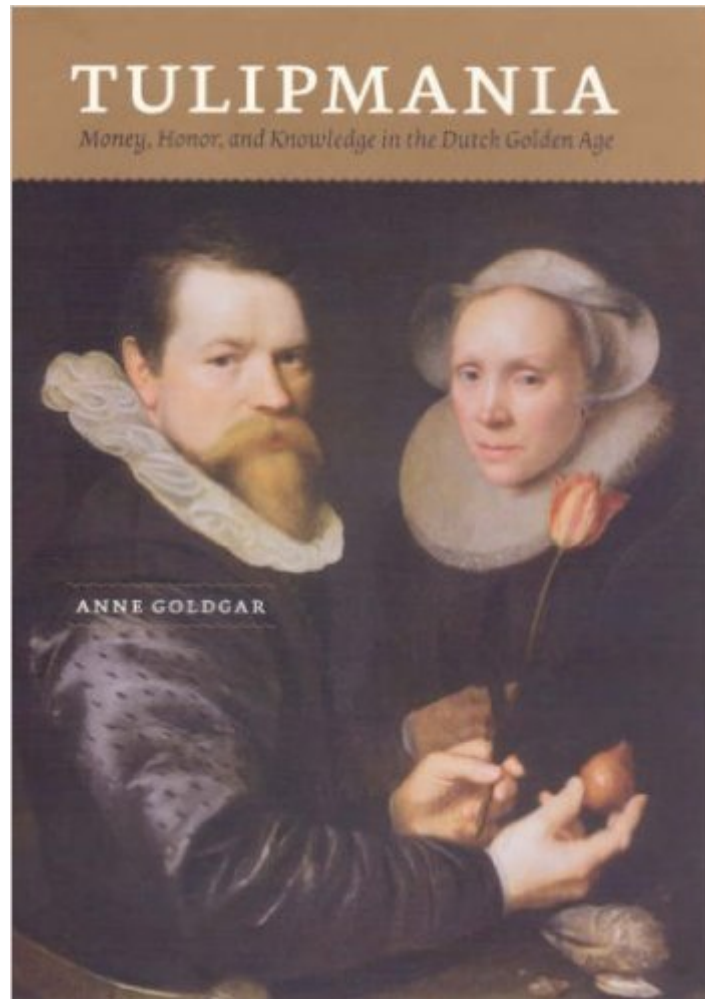


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Tulipmania: Money, Honor, And Knowledge In The Dutch Golden Age



Synopsis

In the 1630s the Netherlands was gripped by tulipmania: a speculative fever unprecedented in scale and, as popular history would have it, folly. We all know the outline of the story—how otherwise sensible merchants, nobles, and artisans spent all they had (and much that they didn't) on tulip bulbs. We have heard how these bulbs changed hands hundreds of times in a single day, and how some bulbs, sold and resold for thousands of guilders, never even existed. Tulipmania is seen as an example of the gullibility of crowds and the dangers of financial speculation. But it wasn't like that. As Anne Goldgar reveals in *Tulipmania*, not one of these stories is true. Making use of extensive archival research, she lays waste to the legends, revealing that while the 1630s did see a speculative bubble in tulip prices, neither the height of the bubble nor its bursting were anywhere near as dramatic as we tend to think. By clearing away the accumulated myths, Goldgar is able to show us instead the far more interesting reality: the ways in which tulipmania reflected deep anxieties about the transformation of Dutch society in the Golden Age. Goldgar tells us at the start of her excellent debunking book: "Most of what we have heard of [tulipmania] is not true. . . . She tells a new story." Simon Kuper, *Financial Times*

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Customer Reviews

After reading *Tulipmania*, I feel that the book could have been better than it was. Goldgar claims that she used firsthand sources that no one else has used to study the topic of Tulipmania before, allowing her to draw conclusions that no one has previously done. Essentially, Goldgar questions the traditional interpretation throughout history of Tulipmania, particularly the effect that the crisis actually had on Dutch society. Even though these new sources shed new light on the topic, I felt that the book could have been delivered in a much better way. Goldgar quickly becomes bogged down with the minutia of the tulip trade. She did talk about overall trends; however, I think the book would have been much more interesting if she didn't spend as much time writing about individual transactions or individual meetings between buyers and sellers. These are necessary to establish the validity of the argument, but I think that the book would be more enjoyable with a few less of these examples. The book also could have been improved with some overall statistics about Dutch society at the time. For example, (without giving too much away) claims about the economic conditions in the Netherlands during the early 17th century could have been backed up with more than just assertions from the author. In addition, the book does not spend a lot of time on some key issues, particularly, why the prices suddenly collapsed. This may have been out of the scope of the book, and the author does state that the issue is extremely complex and has no easy answer. But I think it would have added to the book to spend a bit more time discussing a few of the possible reasons. This is not to say that the book had no positives.

Is *Tulipmania* a good book, I was left wondering after having finished it. I guess to ask this question is to answer it. Still, by researching the tulip trade in the Dutch Golden Age, Anne Goldgar hit on archival gold. A massive amount of previously ill researched primary source material is combined with an impressive body of secondary literature. She combines insights from both historians and art historians. And with this wealth of material, Goldgar tells a concise and insightful story. As a nice topping, on every other page or so the book displays plates of illustrations from the period. But very often, one is left slightly baffled by Goldgar's train of thought. One is more or less ready to follow Goldgar when she argues that well-to-do Dutchmen liked to have collections of tulips and shells because both could be linked to the (apparently) highly-esteemed marble. Of course, there is no way of knowing whether this was true, but the connection is interesting. When from there on, she starts a discussion on the "soul-like" qualities of pets and tulips in paintings opposed to

paintings of cars and shells, she is clearly off the mark. Irritatingly, in books like these, Michel Foucault is never far away. When two neighbours in a neighbourhood of merchants have an informal chat about the price of tulips at their doorstep, in Goldgar's words they strengthen hierarchies of knowledge within constrained physical, cultural and commercial boundaries. And when these people go to the baker to buy a loaf of bread and discuss flowers over there, the customer, the baker *and* the bakery all may be identified as (being in the centre of) nodes of information. As for the historical narrative, despite all the insights of Tulipmania, I thought many themes were left ill explored.

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