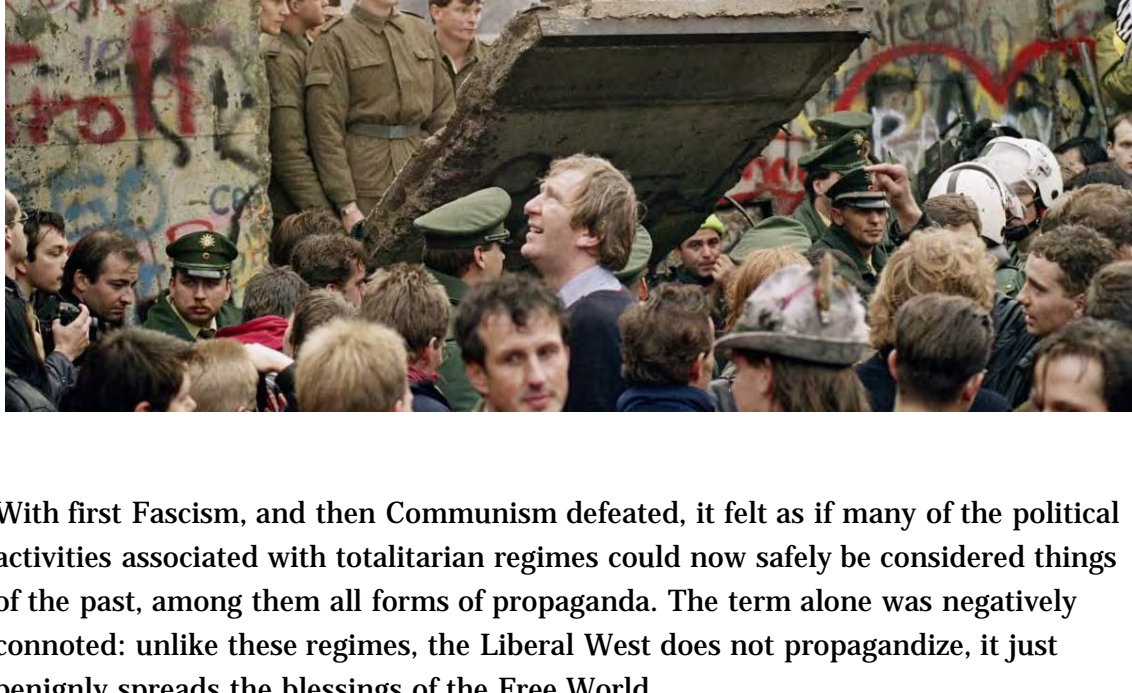


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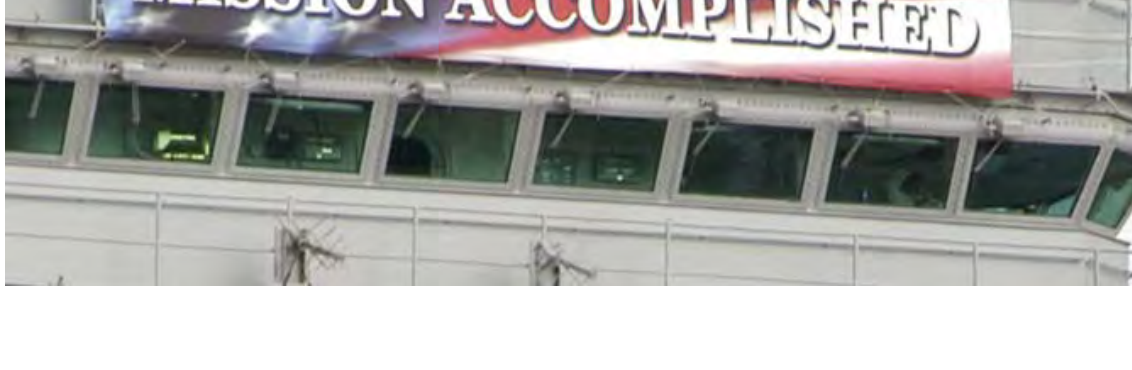
DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
18 April 2023

In the late 1980s, some optimistic thinkers believed that the progress of history, then still understood as the sacrosanct project of the European Enlightenment (and one that had found its manifest destiny in a democratic world order under American rule), had effectively triumphed. The Soviet Union, which had been described as the “Evil Empire” by Ronald Reagan on March 8, 1983, in a notorious speech delivered to the National Association of Evangelicals, was about to collapse. In the summer of 1989—still *before* the fall of the Berlin wall—Francis Fukuyama declared the “End of History”: “What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.” (In 1992, the essay was expanded into a book of the same name.)



With first Fascism, and then Communism defeated, it felt as if many of the political activities associated with totalitarian regimes could now safely be considered things of the past, among them all forms of propaganda. The term alone was negatively connoted: unlike these regimes, the Liberal West does not propagandize, it just benignly spreads the blessings of the Free World.



This is probably what Christoph Stölzl, the then-director of the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin, alluded to when he wrote in the catalogue of the museum’s seminal 1997 exhibition *Krieg der Bilder* that “the war of images is something we usually understand as an invention of the twentieth century.” The show explored, as its subtitle *Druckgraphik als Medium politischer Auseinandersetzung im Europa des Absolutismus* stated, “prints as a medium of political conflict in Europe during the age of absolutism.” It was intended as a reminder that visual propaganda goes back further in history than we might assume—at least to the age of Reformation, which first witnessed, in both text and image, the emergence of the printing press “as an agent of change” (to quote the title of Elizabeth Eisenstein’s 1979 study on the media revolution in early modern Europe).



Yet at the time of the Berlin exhibition, all of this was seen as a decidedly *historic* phenomenon, something that need hardly concern us in our thoroughly *enlightened* present. In the same vein, the eminent German art historian Willibald Sauerländer wrote in 1990 that “the interdependency [he uses the word *Verschränkung*] between art and ideology ... now belongs to an unretrievable past.” As it turns out, neither he, Stölzl nor Fukuyama read the situation accurately. Instead, William Faulkner’s famous phrase “the past is never dead. It’s not even past” probably serves us best as a constant warning against the pitfalls of today’s widespread “presentism.”

When I visited *Fake News and Lying Pictures: Political Prints in the Dutch Republic* last fall, a show that covers similar material to that in the Berlin exhibition and was organized by Maureen Warren at the Krannert Art Museum of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, it felt as though any historic distance that might have existed between us and the age(s) of propaganda had long since disappeared. Once again, we are living in a time characterized by an abundance of manipulated (and manipulative) images, one in which facts are ridiculed as “fake news” and growing swaths of the population are living in alternative infospheres dominated by tendentious “news” outlets, conspiracy theorists, and worse. Disinformation has become a fixture of politics everywhere. At the same time, the project of Western enlightenment has come under closer scrutiny. Its dark underbelly—racism, colonialism, the excruciating toll of slavery that largely established the economic basis for modern capitalism, the exploitation and genocides committed on the Indigenous populations of the Americas and elsewhere, and the systemic antisemitism of Christianity, to name but a few—is being more widely investigated and exposed.



Jacob Jansz. Coeman, *Portrait of Pieter Cnoll, Senior Merchant for the Dutch East India Company in Present-day Indonesia, and His Wife Cornelia van Nieuwenrode Together With Their Daughters Catharina and Hester and Two Enslaved Servants, 1665* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam)

The *Fake News* exhibition could not, therefore, be more timely. It is a surprising and highly original survey of seventeenth-century Dutch prints in which a couple of fabulous etchings by Rembrandt (on view at its original venue in Illinois) felt more like eye-candy than works intrinsic to the theme. What the curator sets out to reconstruct is nothing less than the omnipresent visual culture of an age we usually associate with such celebrated outlier artists as Rembrandt and Vermeer. Today, stipulated by a changed historical discourse, museums that boast substantial holdings of Dutch landscape, genre, and still-life paintings are struggling everywhere to bring new critical perspectives into their galleries (the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston even installed its own Center for Netherlandish Art in an effort to contextualize its rich Dutch and Flemish collection). In this exhibition, however, Warren demonstrates, with comparatively modest means, the “relevance” of her material to today’s viewers—

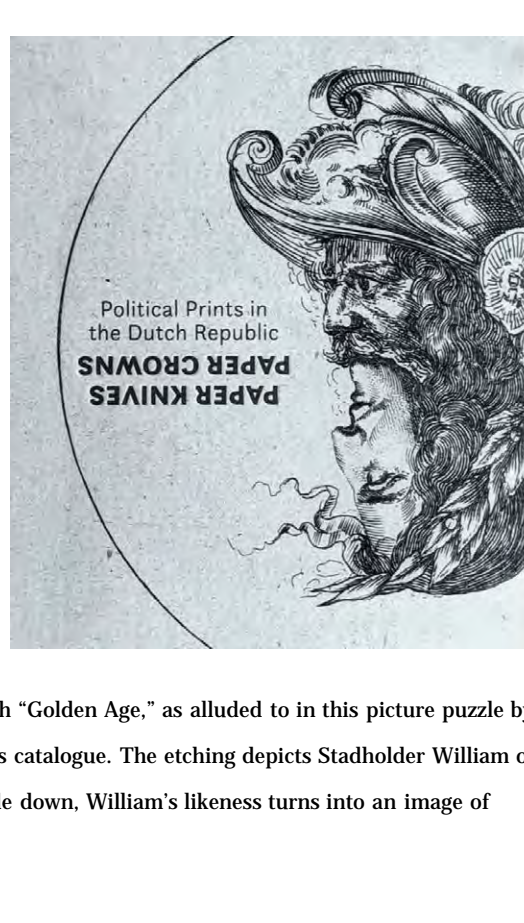
and since she is equipped with a deep understanding of the historical context, she does so brilliantly without ever falling into the trap of said presentism.



A perfect example of the exhibition’s timeliness is this pair of images. Both show Hendrik Hondius’s copy of Pieter van der Heyden’s engraving *Big Fishes Eat Small Ones*, based on a drawing by Pieter Bruegel the Elder but marketed at the time as an invention of Hieronymus Bosch (hence the inscription “H. Bos inv.” in the lower right corner). The image was originally meant to illustrate the Dutch proverb that laments the exploitation of the weak and vulnerable by those in power; in a later state, Hondius’s plate was reused with various added captions that turned the gutted fish into the “Barneveltsche Monster,” a reference to the ill-fated politician Johan van Oldenbarnevelt who was wrongly convicted for accepting Spanish bribes and executed in 1619. What is this reuse of an existing image other than, in today’s parlance, a “meme”?

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Historically, the survey starts with the northern Low Countries’ fight for independence from the Spanish crown during the Eighty Years’ War, a conflict that ultimately merged with the European Thirty Years’ War. By the time it ended in 1648, the seven northern provinces had split from both the Habsburg Netherlands and the Holy Roman Empire. In the course of these events, the Dutch Republic developed into Europe’s most wealthy and scientifically advanced powerhouse, with an expanding empire that stretched along the global trade routes established, more often than not, through ruthless military force on the part of both the Dutch East India and Dutch West India Companies, founded in 1602 and 1621 respectively. At home, these exploits provided the economic foundation for what Simon Schama has called “the embarrassment of riches” of the Dutch “Golden Age,” one grounded on international trade, colonialism, and the exploitation of people and resources.



War and peace were deeply entwined during the Netherlandish “Golden Age,” as alluded to in this picture puzzle by Romeyn de Hooghe, illustrated on the cover of the exhibition’s catalogue. The etching depicts Stadholder William of Orange, later King William III of England; when flipped upside down, William’s likeness turns into an image of Mars, the God of War.

In all of this, the wars hardly ever stopped, partly driven by power struggles from within. The Republic was ruled by a delicate balance between Regents and Stadholders, two often opposing factions referred to as Republicans and Orangists. The former represented the patrician urban elite, in essence an aristocracy of merchants who elected the regents and were interested in peace as the necessary basis for a flourishing market. The latter were named after the House of Orange-Nassau, whose member, William the Silent, had been the chief organizer of the Dutch Revolt. They continued to favor military solutions that, in turn, enabled them to stay in power. This fighting of wars abroad to solidify power at home and distract from domestic problems is, again, a political tactic that transcends all ages. Some readers might remember, for example, the Falklands War in 1982, where British forces were deployed by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to battle over a few specks of land on the other side of the globe, populated mainly by sheep of undeclared nationality; or Ronald Reagan’s 1983 invasion of Grenada (clearly a dangerous military powerhouse) in the interest of American security. As always, Shakespeare expressed it best when he let Henry IV advise his son, later Henry V: “Be it thy course to busy giddy minds with foreign quarrels.”

Review of “Fake News and Lying Pictures”

