No Time for Tea: Hidden Figures of the Dutch Tea Industry

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Abstract

This paper explores the historical role women played in promoting, distributing, and establishing tea consumption in The Netherlands. Despite being the first nation to introduce tea to the Western world, and the abundance of literature and images documenting women as sapless tea drinkers, languishing their afternoons away, entertaining and sipping the amber brew in their tea houses, the latter is far from reality. Preliminary research indicates Dutch women were instrumental in establishing an elite tea industry in The Netherlands and beyond. Aptly the authors utilized the archives to explore visual and narrative data dating from 1610 to present, to find evidence of women's role in tea production, tea importation and its distribution to the rest of Europe and beyond, to include but not limited to royal patronage, the establishment and management of large tea houses, and the implementation of tea museums and tourist attractions across the Netherlands.

Keywords

Tea; nostalgia; business; traditions; feminisms; elitism

Led by the establishment of the Dutch East India Company, (VOC), the West India Company, trading posts and colonies in the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia in 1588-1672, fundamental changes took place in the Dutch economy, and households reacted accordingly by altering their consumption and trading habits (De Vries, 1994). By the late seventeenth century patterns of domesticity began to change with married women moving away from performing "assisted labour" for their husbands and establishing independent businesses of their own (De Vries, 1994; van den Heuvel, 2008). According to van den Heuvel (2007), by the end of the eighteenth century women owned the majority of independent tea and coffee retail shops in The Netherlands, yet previous research implies that the actual drinking of tea was done by women in domestic spheres and coffee by men in the more public domains (Voskuil 1988).

Although some researchers cast doubt on these gendered consumer preferences, they do acknowledge that there is too little known about women's contributions to

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the pre-industrial economy in The Netherlands (de Vries 2008; van den Heuvel and van Nederveen Meerkerk 2014). Indeed, in an earlier exploratory study we evidenced women playing a significant role in the Dutch Tea industry (Vink and Kappert 2024). One of the recommendations stemming from this work was to explore how women have been visually portrayed in, and by, the Dutch tea industry.

As such for this paper we explore alternative ways of knowing: the visual archives (Jacobs, 2008), namely commercials, paintings, newspaper articles and prints dating from the seventeenth to the twentieth century in the attempt to evidence women's contribution to the historical, political, and social context of the Dutch tea industry. In doing so, we also utilize the new historicist approach and embrace the notion that art and literature are integrated into the material practices of culture (Greenblatt 1980) as we seek to respond to the following question: How has the role of women been portrayed in the Dutch tea industry and what material has emerged that could support a new narrative?

We begin with an outline of the history of tea in The Netherlands, detail our research process, to include the value of using the new historicist approach (Greenblatt 1980), and subsequently discuss some of our key finding. We conclude this paper by acknowledging the challenges encountered in collecting and analysing historical visual data and offer recommendations for future research.

The Historical Context: Dutch tea timeline

The Dutch Era, of 1588-1672 was a period characterized by trade, scientific developments, art, and colonization, which in turn enabled the Dutch to establish themselves as one of the foremost maritime and economic powers of the world. Consequently, during this period they founded the Dutch East India Company, (VOC), the West India Company, and trading posts and colonies in the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia.

Such acquisitions not only enabled luxury goods, new foods and raw materials such as sugar, coffee, chocolate and tea to be shipped to The Netherlands from around the world but had a profound impact on Dutch culture as "the appearance of these goods coincided with a new civility in middling and upper-class society which was conveyed in new ways of eating and socialising" (Berg and Egar 2002, 1). This ultimately changed the strategic position of Dutch women, as they pivoted between the luxury of the old nobility and the more frugal culture of the new commercial classes (Akkerman 2019). Examples of the aforementioned middling can be seen explicitly in the Dutch tea milieu.

Figure 1: The spread of tea throughout The Netherlands. (Source: Voskuil 1988, 73)

Logistically, tea spread from its original port of entry of Amsterdam to the rest of The Netherlands, but rather than travelling along the usual trading routes it travelled with the affluent Dutch society (see Figure 1). For example, on account of being the beverage of choice for Countess Maria Louise, van Hessen-Kassel, the mother of Willem IV, the then Governor of the United Provinces of The Netherlands, it travelled from the West of The Netherlands to the provinces in the East, and eventually, to the North (Kooijmans 1997). Moreover, it then travelled on to the neighbouring Province of Ostfriesland, Germany (Bohne, 2021).

However, by 1686 we begin to see a change in the attitude to tea consumption in The Netherlands, when a certain Doctor Boentekoe expressed his concern about the use and abuse of tea by women who were being physically weakened by sitting the entire day at home, drinking tea (Boentekoe 1686). This change can also be seen, for example, in Pieter van den Berge's print "Theegezelschap La grande occupation!," in which we see three women at tea, with what seems to be their most expensive crockery on display and two devils ominously watching on, in representation of idleness and sloth (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: "*Theegezelschap La grande occupation! Le veritable passetems!* (Tea Company! The Great Occupation! The real pastime!" Pieter van den Berge, 1694- 1737; Rijksmuseum.

Thus, unsurprisingly, by 1750 we begin to see a decrease in the price of tea, making it more affordable for ordinary people, and specialty stores for "koloniale waren" (Molen 1978, 29) cropping up all over the country. A renowned example being the Witte Os in Joure, Fryslân founded by Egbert Douwes and his wife Akke Thijsses, which not only sold tea but also coffee, chocolate, and dried fruits. Their son, Douwe Egberts, later worked in the shop with his wife Ymke Jacobs Visser and eventually took over the business. Upon the death of Ymke Jacobs Visser, Douwe Egberts remarried in 1791 to Lysbeth Mintjes and when he died in 1806, she continued to run the business under the name "Weduwe Douwe Egberts." In 1925, her sons took over the business and renamed it *De Compagnie - Firma Weduwe Douwe Egberts - 1806-1833* (Vink, Kappert and Bohne 2022).

Another example is that of Johannes Van Nelle who started his small shop selling coffee, tea, and tobacco in 1806 in Rotterdam (Bantje,1981.15). After his death in 1811, the company was taken over by his widow, Hendrika Brand who renamed the company *Weduwe J. van Nelle*. The Weduwe Van Nelle was known for her marketing techniques and had numerous slogans to promote her products, to include "Tasting

is buying" (Bantje 1981, 185). In the 1920s they introduced tea tastings activities at special fairs, to include the industrial fair for women, their stands were designed and decorated by young promising artists, and naturally delivered opportunities for free press (Bantje 1981, 185). After her death, the name of the company changed to *De Erven de Wed. J. van Nelle*. This name remained until 1982 (Bantje 1981, 16).

Other Dutch companies to emerge, included Theodorus Niemeijer in 1819, and Kanis & Gunnink, in 1883. The latter also established a coffee factory in the Dutch city of Kampen between 1879-1885 and added tea to their product line in circa 1920, eventually becoming part of the coffee and tea consortium JDE Peet (Vink, Kappert and Bohne, 2022). Today, The Netherlands is still one of the largest tea-consuming countries in Europe and has also begun to see a growth in the consummation of herbal fusions to include chamomile, peppermint, lemongrass, ginger, hibiscus, and various fruits (koffiethee.nl. 2020). Such growth and the introduction of new flavours and varieties of tea is anticipated to provide opportunities for the tea market, as did the emergence of bubble tea in the 1980s (Heiss and Heiss 2007).

Having provided a brief overview of the history of tea in The Netherlands, in the following section we will detail the approach used to answer our research questions, outline how we collected our data, discuss our findings, and conclude with recommendations for future research.

Methodology and Data Collection

For this paper we used visual data from the Dutch achieves to process, generate, and elicit discussion (Rose 2015), and the New Historicist approach (Greenblatt 1980), to understand the past in order to connect the women in the images with their social and political contexts, as we sought to answer our research question: How has the role of women been portrayed in the Dutch tea industry and what material has emerged that could support a new narrative?

The new historicist approach, also known as cultural materialism, embraces the notion that art and literature are integrated into the material practices of culture and as such, in choosing this approach we have been able to focus on the social, economic, and political circumstances women between the seventeenth and the twentieth century within their cultural and historical milieu (Greenblatt 1980). Although such an approach is mainly used to interpret texts, it is hoped that by applying it to different types of images, namely prints, paintings, and commercial publications, we will be able to construct a richer understanding of the Dutch tea industry, and the involvement of women, which may eventually lead to improving the way tea is currently being viewed in the Netherlands (Vink and Kappert 2024). For while others have focused on aspects of female consumption in the tea industry very few have revealed women's more active role in the contemporary economy (Eger 2003, 190-204).

By simply imputing the key search word "tea," and using an amalgamation of achieves, namely the Douwe and Egbert Heritage site, and that of the Rijksmuseum, we were able to locate 304 images. We then reduced our sample to those images featuring women. The final sample as illustrated in Table 1 consisted of:

- 57 commercials
- 13 paintings
- 8 newspaper articles

Table 1: Archival Images of Dutch Women and Tea (16th – 21st Century)

Century	**Commercials**	**Paintings**	**Newspapers**	**Prints**	**Codes**
17		4		1	Languishing/ weakened/ entertaining
18	4	2		2	Languishing/ weakened/ entertaining
18		1			Royal patronage
18	15	1		3	As assisted labour
18	9	3		2	In domestic spheres
19	7	2	1	2	In domestic spheres
20	5			2	In domestic spheres
20	2		2	1	Working in own business
20			1		Royal patronage
20	3			1	Languishing/ weakened/ entertaining
20	10		4		Promoting tea
20	1			1	In tea production
					Tea importation
					Tea distribution
Totals	57	13	8	15	93

Finally, we used visual analysis (Webb and Bedi 2020), to identify and explore characteristics of our sample and its historical context. From the previously cited literature, we identified codes used to describe the role of women in the tea industry (Table 1) and compared them with each visual located in the sample. According to

Delgado (2015) this is an effective way to elicit ideas and experiences that might otherwise be difficult to demonstrate social issue, and thus it enabled us to highlight the experience of a marginalized group that may have otherwise remained invisible (Delgado 2015).

Findings and Discussion

We were able to identify several similarities with the previously mentioned literature and the visual analysis. Firstly, our initial analysis revealed that most of the visuals were commercials featuring women during the eighteenth century. This reflects the growing affordability of tea for ordinary people, the rise in specialty stores for "koloniale waren" (Molen 1978, 29) and the increased number of women running or establishing stores of the period. Further, from our sample we were able to identify that painting were the preferred medium of the eighteenth century, and majority of these captured women either languishing, seemingly weakened (Boentekoe 1686) or entertaining others with tea. In keeping with the period, we can also see a distinction between the rich and affluent tea drinkers and those from the working class, not just through the way the women are attired but also how the tea is being served, and the vessels it is being served in.

As per the historical context offered in this paper, in which the concept of "middling" (Berg and Egar 2003, 1) was mentioned, we were able to identify numerous examples of this, to include women of all classes drinking tea in various settings and in a later print from Douwe and Egberts, illustrating tea as a connecting agent (see Figure 3).

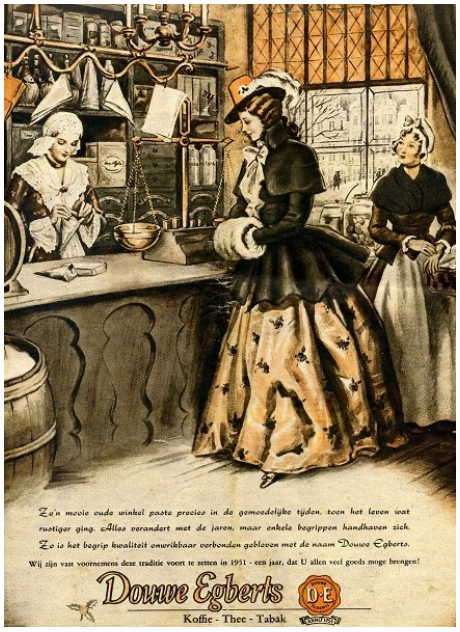

Figure 3: Douwe and Egbert Newspaper Advertisement. Douwe and Egberts 1951.

Surprisingly, despite the literature confirming that proprietors of the new tea and coffee establishments tended to be married women who had moved from performing "assisted labour" for their husbands, to their own market activities (Van den Heuvel, (2007), in our search we were unable to locate any visuals of the most commonly mentioned women: Akke Thijsses, Ymke Jacobs Visser, Lysbeth Mintjes or Hendrika Brand. Further we were unable to locate any of The Weduwe Van Nelle marketing slogans used to promote her products (Bantje 1981). However, we did find visuals which made mention of women as being the "wife of," "the mother of" or the "widow of" in accordance with the literature (De Vries, 2003) and as illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Wall mural from the Douwe Egberts Heritage Center, in Utrecht. Source: Authors, 2024.

Further, we saw the popularity of newspapers emerging during the nineteenth century and growing as a medium to promote women and tea in the twentieth century. Most of the latter entries tended to be commercials in which women were portrayed as good housewives as in the 1932 advertisement (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: "*De Goede Huisvrouw* (The Good Housewife)." Douwe Egberts advertisement, 1932.

The fifteen prints were the most diverse and ranged from seventeenth-century caricatures to eighteenth-century etchings. Although not previously addressed in the literature, through our visual search we became acquainted with the concept of using tea as a medium for courtship for example in the Reinier Vinkeles 1797 print (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: "*Man wordt geïntroduceerd tijdens de thee* (A Man Is Introduced During Tea)." Reinier Vinkeles, 1797.

Figure 7: "*Theepartij van de vorsten van Europa voorafgaand op de oorlog in 1690* (Teaparty of the rulers of Europe before the onset of war in 1690)". Cornelis Huyberts, 1689.

Although addressed in the literature, we found no visual evidence to suggest that the actual drinking of tea was done by women in domestic spheres and coffee by men in the more public domains (Voskuil, 1988). Another omission in our sample is

the idea that tea was patronized by royalty for example Countess Maria Louise, van Hessen-Kassel, or at the courtship of Amalia van Solms, Princess consort of Orange by marriage to Frederick Henry, Prince of Orange (Voskuil, 1988) unfortunately, we only found one early print depicting a gathering of all the European royals in preparation for the pending war and drinking tea (see Figure 7).

Finally, not all the early images were positive, and would be considered politically incorrect (Aroch-Fugellie, 2023), if placed outside their historical context for example that of the Tea Seller, a print by Cornelius Dusart (see Figure 8) which was not previously discussed in the literature. By the late eighteenth century, women street sellers would sell "milk tea" to the people passing by. They also sold the tea at carnivals in Amsterdam and in the Hague (Molen, 1978). Pamphlets were printed with their advertisement slogan "Kees die drinkt by mooye Kee, een leker kommetje melkthee" (Molen, 1978). The tea lady was often depicted as a voluptuous, scantily clad woman (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: "A Tea Seller." Cornelius Dusart; Rijksmusem.

Similarly, we see reference to colonization in some of the advertisements, not just in the images but also in the slogans for example in the Douwe Egberts1936 newspaper advert featuring a tea plantation, with an owner is checking that the young lady is picking the tea properly, and the slogan reads: "Perfect! That is a harvest for DE. Douwe Egberts tee, and DE coffee is the finest of the plantations" (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: Douwe Egberts advertisement, 1936.

Unfortunately, we were only able to locate 1 print of a woman promoting tea in the twentieth century. We did however find women in the tea production industry over the centuries; however, we were unable to include them in our sample since they were either not Dutch women or they belonged to the former colonies. Furthermore, we did not find any women in the distribution of tea. As such, in conducting this research we can concur that too little is known about women's contributions to the pre-industrial economy in The Netherlands (de Vries 2008; van den Heuvel and van Nederveen Meerkerk 2014) we base this not least on the small number of visuals we were able to obtain from the archives.

In sum, to respond to our initial research question which asks: how has the role of women been portrayed in the Dutch Tea industry and what material has emerged that could support a new narrative? We conclude from the 93 images collected women have mainly been visually portrayed in three categories, domestic, as healers and as entertainers. However, by comparing the visual data with the written data, we see the role of women in the Dutch tea industry has not been fairly portrayed, rather what we see is the industry reducing women to mere tea sellers; from the good housewife in Figure 5, the honourable women who stand by their men in the tea shops, to the voluptuous tea sellers running around Amsterdam (see Figure 8). Such images negate the fact that from as early as 1753 Dutch women ran tea business that are still successful today. Further, we know that Dutch women were not merely wives, mothers, and widows, neither did they sit around drinking tea all day. We argue here that the abundance of visuals representing women as sapless tea drinkers, languishing their afternoons away, entertaining and sipping the amber brew in their tea houses has clouded the narrative. Further, we feel that such an image of has an impact on the way tea is viewed in The Netherlands today. As such we would like to develop a new narrative, one which promotes the value of drinking tea, as it pertains to the social interactions illustrated in some of the visuals presented in this paper, for example in Figure 8, we see all the royalty of Europe drinking tea together before going to war or even the concept of using tea as a medium for courtship (see Figure 6). Such narrative lends themselves to the reconsideration role women played in establishing the Dutch tea industry.

Challenges and Recommendations

In this final section we acknowledge some of the challenges we encountered using the archives, visual images as historical sources and in conducting a visual analysis. Firstly, there is not one archive, and gaining access to the different archives was indeed difficult. However, we acknowledge the use and availability of the Douwe and Egbert Heritage site. To avoid an over reliance on one data source, we also used images from the literature and from the archives of the Rijksmuseum. Unfortunately, we were unable to take personal collections into consideration. Secondly, although visual images are valuable historical sources, they tend to be

subjective, prone to interpretation and as such need to be examined in their original context. As such we have relied heavily on the existing literature and the New Historicism approach. Despite these challenges we feel much is to be learned from this preliminary work, and thus make the following recommendations:

- The study be extended, to include the use of personal archives. This hopefully would increase the number of visuals to be analysed.
- To conduct a comparative piece of work with the neighbouring German province Ostfriesland, since tea travelled via the Netherlands and the inhabitants are said to have similar attitudes towards tea culture and tea traditions as the Dutch (Bohne 2021), as much can be learned by such borrowing.
- To explore the visual archives in greater detail to see if there is indeed a relationship between gendered and tea (Voskuil 1988).

Conclusion

In this paper we set out to explore the role of women in the Dutch Tea industry from the 1600s. We construed this through searching the archives for visual representation and utilizing the new historicist approach. In keeping with the latter, we first discussed the historical context followed by the Dutch Tea timeline. We then briefly presented our research process and delineated our findings. Unfortunately, that latter confirmed what was already known that is, the majority of the visual and narrative data surrounding tea depicts women as hostesses and are family or household based. This further implies that in terms of "tea business" women have indeed been left out of the narrative.

By utilizing the new historicist approach, we can further rationalize those mass-market writings and visual narratives about tea culture were written for women and not by women. However, whilst this may be applicable for early material, by analysing the later material we also see that despite the time in which they were produced, has had very little impact on more recent texts which still fail to illustrate women as businesswomen but more as a nostalgic representation of former years. We ended this paper by discussing the challenges associated with the methodology and present the subsequent recommendations.

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