Dutch Textile Trade: Issue and Project Introduction

Carrie Anderson and Marsely L. Kehoe

Notes: This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and does not contain all the functionality and features of the digital images embedded in the online publication. Instead, the illustrations follow the text. This PDF provides paragraph numbers as well as page numbers for citation purposes.

Dutch Textile Trade: Issue and Project Introduction

Carrie Anderson and Marsely L. Kehoe

1   This issue of *JHNA* introduces the ongoing collaborative digital art history project, the Dutch Textile Trade Project (dutchtextiletrade.org). This project brings together textual, visual, material, and quantitative sources from the Dutch East and West India Companies to produce new perspectives on the historical textile trade, which has long been of interest to economic historians and art historians alike. As the essays in this issue demonstrate, the early modern textile trade is a complex and deeply interdisciplinary field of study, often tasked with interpreting obsolete, inconsistent, or unclear historical vocabularies; making sense of an extant yet regrettably incomplete material record; and confronting the implicit and explicit prejudices of imperialism. As art historians who are deeply aware of these challenges, we contend that the visual culture of the early modern world—in conjunction with economic data and extant material samples—can help shed new light on the irregularities, absences, and biases of the historical record. Indeed, one of the goals of this project is to bring an essential cultural dimension to the study of historic textiles, which can be informed by their representation in images, their reworking as garments and furnishings, and their use as currency in global trade networks, most notably the transnational slave trade. Critically, the Dutch Textile Trade Project is built on interdisciplinary collaboration and a commitment to accessibility, which is why we are happy to present these textual, visual, material, and quantitative data in an open-access format, with data visualization tools that enable users to ask their own questions as they explore the Dutch historical textile trade.

2   Project leaders Anderson and Kehoe introduce the Dutch Textile Trade Project and its historical context in the lead essay, presenting preliminary findings through a number of case studies. Seven shorter essays follow, authored by leading and emerging scholars from a range of disciplines and subfields, including art history, textile history, history, and economic history.

3   These essays are divided into two sections. In the first section, individuals and teams of researchers use the Dutch Textile Trade Project's data and web applications to pursue their own textile-related research questions. The resulting essays—which range widely in focus and geography—demonstrate how scholars can read against the grain of data from the Dutch company archives to push back against Eurocentric narratives. Sylvia Houghteling's essay, for example, opens with a discussion of a stunning ceremonial *patola*, a refined silk textile woven in Gujarat, India, that was popular in the maritime islands of Southeast Asia. In the eighteenth century—in part due to the intervention of the Dutch East India Company—elite textiles like the patola had to compete with brightly colored cotton imitations and the trade in opium, commodities that would fundamentally alter the dynamics of the textile trade in South and

Southeast Asia, as Houghteling demonstrates. The essay by Meha Priyadarshini, Deepthi Murali, Victoria de Lorenzo, and Avalon Fotheringham features the madras handkerchief—a large checked cotton square cloth that circulated in Afro-diasporic communities in the Caribbean during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—which is the focus of their project *Connecting Threads*, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council. In their essay, they use the Dutch Textile Trade Project's data and web applications to shed light on the textiles represented in Agostino Brunias's *Linen Market, Dominica* (1780; Yale Center for British Art). In the third essay, Angelina Illes explores the complicated history of the *japonse zijde rok*, a Japanese silk robe or *kosode* that was a popular ready-made garment sought after by European elites and represented in paintings like Johannes Vermeer's *Geographer* (1668–1669, Städel Museum). Using the Dutch Textile Trade Project's data and web applications, Illes examines the complex naming conventions of these robes, which could shift depending on their geographic origins and their material makeup. In doing so, Illes provides deeper context for the trade, social use, and representation of these elite textiles—and their many imitators. This section ends with a historiographic essay from economic historian Chris Nierstrasz, which draws attention to the challenges of studying historical textiles and their documentation across disciplines and illuminates some of the scholarly issues the Dutch Textile Trade Project aims to address.

4   The second section engages with a range of new approaches and intellectual concerns that frame digital humanities projects, especially those that focus on archival, data-driven research. The nature of archival research is changing as many institutions digitally reproduce documents in their collections and make them available online to researchers and the public. This accessibility opens up many more opportunities for research, but these repositories are limited in scope for various reasons that are not always communicated to the user. Deborah Hamer's essay examines one such collection, the New Netherland Papers, and provides context for understanding what stories and viewpoints are obscured if we mistakenly presume these documents tell the full story of the Dutch North American colony. She cautions that researchers must understand the limits of the emerging digital archive. Digitization can also mean pulling information and data from documents, but archival data in itself is not neutral or objective, as Lauryn Smith shows in her essay. Smith examines the underlying structure of the pioneering interactive digital database assembled by economic historian John Michael Montias (hosted by the Frick Art Reference Library), which contains invaluable information from the inventories of goods owned by seventeenth-century Amsterdamers. Smith demonstrates how a database's structure can enhance—or severely limit—access to the data itself. Jennifer Henel's short essay discusses the Dutch Textile Trade Project in the context of its contributions to the Getty Vocabularies, a resource that not only provides authoritative terminologies for art, architecture, and decorative arts, among other specialized topics, but also allows links to be made between different digital projects, thereby deepening our contextual understanding of a given term. As Henel demonstrates, linking to the Getty Vocabularies is one way to ensure a sustainable future for digital information and to broaden the impact of research in the digital humanities and digital art history.

A Note on Collaboration and Support

This project was born from collaboration, a critical—and rewarding—aspect of any digital humanities project. With this in mind, we would like to acknowledge the many contributors to this project, including Kress Postdoctoral Fellow Talitha Maria G. Schepers, project manager Jennifer Henel, and web developer Morgan Schwartz. We would also like to acknowledge and thank the many undergraduate students at Middlebury College who contributed to the building, development, and refinement of our interactive web applications, especially research assistants Sophia Afsar-Keshmiri, Bell Luo, Sanjana Roy, Nicholas Sliter, and Xingze Wang. The students of the 2021 and 2022 sections of the Middlebury College winter term course "Data Science Across Disciplines" also played an enormous role in the design and implementation of the web applications. Special thanks to Assistant Professor of Mathematics Alex Lyford, who co-taught the course and fielded an enormous number of technical questions related to our project. For a full list of our collaborators, please see our contributors page.

In addition to these fruitful collaborations, we have also benefited enormously from the critical support of a number of institutions. In 2020, *JHNA* received a grant from the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation, which provided initial support for project research and improvements to the *JHNA* platform. The Dutch Textile Trade Project is also supported by two grants from the Samuel H. Kress Foundation and grants and technical support from Middlebury's MiddData (https://www.middlebury.edu/office/midddata).