

Timothy Brook, *Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Press, 2008), ISBN: 978-1-59691-444-5 (273 pp.)

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This short, evocative book uses a selection of paintings by Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675) as vantage points from whence to observe the emergence of the modern, interconnected world. *Vermeer's Hat* owes its title to a prominent object in the painting entitled "Officer and Laughing Girl," one of the many "doors" that Brook describes. The author finds his other entries in works such as the "View of Delft," "The Geographer" and "Woman holding a Balance." Most important for Brook are the depictions of everyday commodities and household items included in these landscape and genre paintings. These objects, he contends, are representative of the paradox which has come to serve as one of the key identifiers for the present globalized age: they are at once ordinary and exotic. The beaver hat shown in one painting, the American silver pieces in another, and the Chinese fruit bowl in a third were items that became routine components of European life in the mid-seventeenth century despite their distant provenance—so routine as to be depicted in a casual manner in Vermeer's interiors. As such, Brook argues, it was not the first contacts between peoples at the corners of the earth which produced the "global world" but rather the span when such encounters became predictable occurrences at some point roughly fifteen decades after the voyages of Columbus and da Gama.

*Vermeer's Hat* fits into a trend in recent scholarship aimed at popular audiences. Over the past decade, specialists in pre-modern history have tried to cast the notion of globalization as one with a historical pedigree. Their efforts have much to do with the current fixation on the novelty of our interconnected world, as well as with the appeal of "world history." But scholars of world history have tended to focus either on large-scale events such as the migrations of peoples or the spread of ideologies and empires in the past two centuries, saying little about the period between late Antiquity and the Enlightenment. Fully aware that global interconnectedness had its origins before the beginning of the nineteenth century, Brook and others have offered a different vision of world history. China specialists seem to have a particular gift for this, with important contributions coming from Kenneth Pomerantz (*The Great Divergence: China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, 2000), and John Wills, Jr. (*1688: A Global History*, 2001). Brook is also a specialist in Chinese history and has written extensively on trade and religion during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

The principal motor behind the enthusiasm for this subject comes from the desire to see China described as a force in modern world history on par with Europe. Brook's study, as well as Wills's and Pomerantz's, offers a needed counterweight to the heft of the Eurocentric tomes that discuss the advent of modernity in world history as if it was synonymous with the spread of European ideals of progress, egalitarianism and justice. Such an emphasis leaves out competing visions of modernity and does little to show how other cultures developed outside of European influence. The case of China is particularly challenging for world historians of the "spread of ideas" school, since China had its own vibrant intellectual traditions and exported them across Asia over the centuries. In order to redirect the debate, Brook turns toward a different period and uses trade flows and objects, rather than ideas as the unifying concept for his world history. In the seventeenth century, he contends, critical masses of consumers at different points on the globe created sustained markets for goods that needed to be transported over great distances. There is nevertheless peril in such a focus on commodities. For one, it places strong emphasis on the role played by inanimate objects rather than by individual actors, such as the painter Johannes Vermeer. Also, it reduces the

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importance of other forces such as religion as motors in the process of globalization. Certainly the seventeenth century world would have been vastly different without the parallel processes of Christian and Muslim missionary efforts that claimed thousands of new adherents at the time.

Readers of this journal will be particularly interested in what *Vermeer's Hat* has to say about the Portuguese and Spanish empires. Brook explicitly leaves aside discussion of the Age of Discovery, asserting that initial encounters did not produce the type of sustained relations between different continents which were the hallmark of the "global world." His principal focus is upon the Dutch, but the English and French also find their way into his story. So Brook's story is primarily a Northern European one with a heavy dose of Chinese culture added as well. While there are many references and vignettes about the Portuguese and the Spanish throughout the book, they seem out of place. The way Brook has told his story, the Dutch were at the center of an expanding web of relations bringing Europe into contact with Asia, Africa, and the Americas, but everywhere they went, they ran into merchants or missionaries from Iberia. *Vermeer's Hat* describes Dutch battles with the massive ships of the *Carreira da Índia*, Jesuits who speak Portuguese all across Asia, and the relentless efforts of the Northern Europeans to break an Iberian stranglehold on global commerce. The recognition of the importance of the Iberian empires by seventeenth-century Dutchmen, something that verged on obsession, is clearly a sign that there was an elaborate network of cultural and commercial exchange before the 1650s. It was simply not a Northern European one.

Given the centrality of Asia in Brook's study, it is not surprising that the Portuguese empire should be the proverbial elephant in the room. The historiography of the Iberian empires has cast so much light on the early discoveries and the later colonial period that the mature phase of empire has been cast in shadow, especially in the *Estado da Índia*. Moreover, the way that Northern European historians have written about their own imperial enterprises has purposefully marginalized the history of their competitors. The aspersions cast against the Portuguese for their decadence, especially by the Dutch and the English, began almost as soon as their East India Companies were founded; and more than a few later historians have taken their criticism at face value. What is more, the historiography of modern Asia places far more emphasis on the British, French, and Dutch presence in that region than it does on the Portuguese colonies at Goa and Macau, regardless of their longevity. So it should perhaps be expected that even an historian as talented as Brook might present a vision of the seventeenth-century Portuguese empire as the vestige of a distant past, soon to be overwhelmed by the forces of globalization harnessed by the Dutch and the English. In *Vermeer's Hat*, the Portuguese are so much the silent stones that pave the bridge between Asia and Europe upon which the Northern Europeans would conduct their commerce.

Timothy Brook's study of the mid-seventeenth century version of globalization is delightful to read. His prose is accessible and his text illustrated by color plates, but specialists may dislike the sparseness of his notation. Most enjoyable for readers familiar with European history are the numerous descriptions of Chinese life and culture, episodes written with the verve typical of Brook's other studies. In the end, *Vermeer's Hat* is very similar to Vermeer's paintings: it offers striking views of small spaces, where the details capture the viewer's eye and suggest something of the richness of the world beyond the canvas.