



*The Making of Dutch Flower Culture. Auctions, Networks dan Aesthetics*  
A.C. Gebhardt

## **A paragraph on the dissertation**

Growing tulip bulbs on the moon, and a tulip shaped island in the North Sea. Frederick Ruysch's wunderkammer and contemporary bloemencorsos. A Dutch-Chinese billionaire, aka the Orchid King, recreates a 'Dutch' town in northeast China complete with a replica of Amsterdam's central station and the International Court of Justice. A retired grower recalls a life in flowers, from the Second World War to the European Union. Dutch development policies in Ethiopia today and its former civilizing mission in Java. Auctions, cooperatives, networking, commodity culture, what might be called Dutch masculinity, and globalization. These are some of the imaginaries, themes, curious details, and perspectives you will encounter in this book. All of them pivot around Dutch flower culture, and directly or indirectly link to Aalsmeer's flower auction, the world's largest, located not far from Amsterdam. The approach, which compares elements of Dutch history with the present, resembles the way that anthropologists compare tribes and cultures. Links highlight similar traits, features, and practices as well as differences, and thus allow for a better understanding of what is shared and what is particular to, and often peculiar about, the entities under comparison.

## **Dissertation Summary**

Centered around five sets of inquiries, this thesis has used the following concepts to explore, tease out, and deepen my investigation into Dutch horticulture and FloraHolland Aalsmeer: *moral economy, commodity, world system, networks, horticulture, aesthetics, masculinity, cooperative, and the market*. In different ways, and from various angles, these concepts have helped illuminate what I argue are core aspects of Dutch horticulture and the workings of one of its core institutions, FloraHolland Aalsmeer. I have shown some of the ways that Dutch horticulture was and is embedded in national planning, policy, infrastructure, and aesthetics, both in the early stages of Dutch horticulture, with its environment of an emerging consumer and commodity culture, and in the twentieth century, as contemporary auctions and horticulture developed in its myriad influences.

This study has described patterns and relationships in different contexts and historical periods, relying on eclectic methodologies and sources that are historical, sociological, and ethnographic. It argues that modern flower culture really begins with the tulip, since it was with tulip production that science and aesthetics first came together in ways familiar to us today, where people first began in earnest to study, refine, and learn from each generation of flower. Early botany and ornamental gardening overlapped with and were made possible by scientific discoveries, inventive economic practices, and expanding commerce, as well as spatial planning, and an aesthetic consumer culture. These were cemented by social practices (male networks, shared outlook, and cooperative enterprises that distribute risk). Not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries would today's flower industry really take shape and take off. But when it did, it was through male networks coming together to create their own institutions that distribute risk. As in its foundational era, the industry was characterized by the overlap of science, business acumen, and a keen aesthetic sense. As in the seventeenth century, in the twentieth century the development of flower institutions has been made possible by state support, male networks, planning, and social policy. Masculinity helps to cement social bonds and ensure the smooth running of business both in the auction and throughout the industry. Furthermore, cooperation, historical patterns, personal camaraderie and networks define practice — not commonly accepted ideas about market principles. Similarly, aesthetics evolve and are sustained through certain traditions and social infrastructure as much as through more strictly market forces. Finally, as Dutch flower

culture continues to unfold within shifting global market forces and historical patterns, this dissertation argues that although the balance of production and consumption is changing across the globe and the Dutch role continues to evolve, the Netherlands is likely to remain at the dynamic center of the market.

Chapter 1: Early Dutch Horticulture. How did flowers become integrated commercially and culturally in the Netherlands?

Chapter 2: The Rise of Aalsmeer's Cooperative Grower's Association. How did a small town named for eel fishing come to organize the first flower auctions, and then rise to be the center of the world market?

Chapter 3: The Dutch Horticultural Auction: Traders. Why are flowers sold at auction—and for that matter, why are U.S. Treasury bonds, high art, or anything else sold in that manner? How do Dutch horticultural auctions work?

Chapter 4: Horticultural Aesthetics. What do flowers look like as commodities, and what has the Netherlands contributed to inventing, producing, and marketing these commodities?

Chapter 5: Planet of Flowers (the Dutch flower industry on the world stage). Why are more and more of the flowers sold in Aalsmeer grown in other parts of the world? And as international growing increases, how does the Netherlands maintain itself at the center of an increasingly global industry? Also, Aalsmeer's auctions were founded by growers to protect grower's interests, but what happens to them as the cooperative institution expands internationally, incorporating more and more grower-members from abroad? How do those abroad understand and relate to the industry's heart in the Netherlands.