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Simon Schama The Embarrassment Of Riches

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Introduction: Unearthing the Dutch Golden Age

Few works of historical scholarship manage to transcend the boundaries of academia to become cultural touchstones. Simon Schama’s **The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age**is one such masterpiece. Published in 1987, this monumental book does not merely recount the events of the Dutch Republic in the 17th century; it delves deep into the collective psyche of a people who, against all odds, built a global empire on trade, tolerance, and a profound sense of civic duty. Simon Schama’s magnum opus remains essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the paradoxical relationship between extraordinary wealth and profound moral anxiety. This article explores the book’s core themes, its unique methodology, its lasting impact, and why it continues to resonate with readers today.

Who is Simon Schama?

Before diving into the book itself, it is helpful to understand its author. Sir Simon Schama is a British historian and art critic, renowned for his narrative flair and ability to make the past feel vibrant and immediate. He has written on a vast range of topics, from the French Revolution to the history of Britain and the natural world. However, **The Embarrassment of Riches**is arguably his most distinctive and intellectually daring work. Schama is not content with dry, linear history; he paints with a full palette, blending social history, art history, literature, and anthropology. His approach is immersive, asking not just what happened, but what it felt like to live in a specific time and place. This humanistic touch is what makes his interpretation of the Dutch Golden Age so compelling.

The Core Thesis: Prosperity and Its Discontents

The central argument of **The Embarrassment of Riches**is encapsulated in its title. The Dutch Republic of the 17th century was, by any measure, an astonishing success story. It was the wealthiest nation in Europe, a center of global trade, finance, and artistic innovation. Yet, this unprecedented prosperity was accompanied by a deep-seated cultural unease. How could a people who had fought a brutal war of independence against Catholic Spain, a war often framed in terms of moral and religious purity, justify their extravagant wealth? How could a society built on Calvinist principles of modesty, thrift, and predestination reconcile itself with the opulence of its merchants, the richness of its paintings, and the abundance of its tables?

Schama expertly unpacks this paradox. He shows that the Dutch did not simply ignore the tension; they actively and creatively managed it. The “embarrassment” was not a paralysing guilt, but a productive anxiety that shaped their entire culture. It informed their art, their domestic architecture, their rituals of charity, and their attitudes toward family, children, and the home. The great achievement of Schama’s book is to

demonstrate how this moral and emotional balancing act was the very engine of Dutch culture.

The Moral Geography of the Home

One of the most memorable sections of the book is Schama’s analysis of the Dutch home. In a society where public life was dominated by commerce and politics, the home became a sacred space, a moral sanctuary. The famous cleanliness of Dutch households was not merely a practical concern; it was a spiritual practice. A spotless floor, gleaming windows, and polished brass were outward signs of inner purity and order. The house was a microcosm of the republic itself—a well-ordered, secure, and virtuous space, distinct from the messy, risky world of trade.

Schama explores the material culture of this domestic realm in exquisite detail. He examines paintings of interiors by artists like Pieter de Hooch and Johannes Vermeer, not just as art objects, but as documents of a moral system. The women in these paintings are often shown engaged in quiet, domestic tasks: reading a letter, pouring milk, caring for a child. These are not trivial activities; they are acts of virtue, performed within a carefully guarded space that protects the family from the corrupting influences of the outside world. The embarrassment of riches meant that wealth had to be displayed tastefully, within the home, as a sign of God’s favour, not as vulgar ostentation.

Art as a Mirror of Anxiety

No discussion of the Dutch Golden Age is complete without its art, and Schama uses painting as a primary source for his cultural history. He argues that Dutch art is not simply a realistic record of daily life, but a complex language of symbols and metaphors. Still lifes of sumptuous food and exotic flowers were not just celebrations of abundance; they were also *vanitas* paintings, reminders of the transience of life and the folly of earthly pleasures. The “embarrassment of riches” is inscribed into the very canvas.

He dedicates significant attention to the genre of group portraiture, particularly the militia companies and regent groups. These paintings are about collective identity and civic pride. They show men (and occasionally women) who have achieved success, but they do so in a context of service and responsibility. The sitters are not isolated individuals; they are members of a community, bound by duty. This visual language allowed the prosperous Dutch to celebrate their status while simultaneously affirming their commitment to the common good. Schama’s readings of these works are insightful and accessible, demonstrating how art is never just aesthetic; it is always embedded in a web of social and moral concerns.

Feasting and Fasting: The Cycle of Indulgence and Restraint

A recurring theme in **The Embarrassment of Riches** is the cyclical tension between indulgence and restraint. Schama vividly describes the carnivalesque feasts of the Dutch, where enormous quantities of food and drink were consumed. These events were not simply about gluttony; they were sanctioned releases of pressure, moments when the strict norms of frugality were temporarily suspended. The feast was followed by a return to austerity, a reaffirmation of the values of hard work and modesty.

This pattern also manifested in the Dutch attitude toward charity. The republic was renowned for its institutions: orphanages, poorhouses, and hospitals. These were not just acts of compassion; they were essential for social stability and moral legitimacy. By taking care of the less fortunate, the wealthy could assuage their collective guilt. Schama shows how charitable giving was a highly ritualized and public affair, a way of converting private wealth into public virtue. The rich could be rich, provided they were also seen to be generous. This carefully managed system of “social discipline” was a crucial mechanism for coping with the embarrassment of riches.

The Legacy of Schama’s Interpretation

The Embarrassment of Riches has influenced scholars across multiple disciplines. It has been praised for its originality, its rich detail, and its narrative power. It has also been challenged, particularly by historians who argue that Schama’s portrait is too unified and that he downplays social conflicts, such as class divisions and religious intolerance. There were dissidents, outcasts, and rebels in the Dutch Republic, and not everyone shared the same “collective anxiety.” These are valid critiques, but they do not diminish the book’s achievement. Schama was attempting to describe a dominant cultural sensibility, not to write a complete social history. His interpretation has become the starting point for any serious discussion of the period.

The book’s appeal also lies in its relevance to the modern world. We live in an era of vast economic inequality, where questions of wealth, responsibility, and morality are more urgent than ever. The dilemmas Schama identifies—how to enjoy prosperity without losing one’s soul, how to balance individual success with community obligation, how to find meaning in a world of material plenty—are not just historical curiosities. They are our dilemmas too. Reading about the Dutch struggle with their own embarrassment of riches offers a powerful, if imperfect, mirror to our own times.

Schama’s Prose: A Masterclass in Historical Writing

Part of the reason for the book’s enduring popularity is Schama’s writing style. He writes with a novelist’s eye for character and detail, a journalist’s sense of pacing, and a poet’s command of language. His sentences are often long and meandering, filled with surprising juxtapositions and vivid sensory details. He can move from a description of a recipe for pickled herring to a profound meditation on mortality in a single paragraph. This narrative brio makes the book a pleasure to read, even when it is dealing with complex theoretical ideas.

Consider, for example, his description of a winter scene on a frozen canal. He does not just tell us that the Dutch skated; he makes us feel the cold air, hear the scratch of blades on ice, and sense the communal joy of a population released from the constraints of ordinary life. This immersive quality is the hallmark of Schama’s method. He believes that history should be felt as well as understood, and **The Embarrassment of Riches** is a triumphant example of that philosophy in action.

Key Themes in Summary

To fully appreciate the scope of the book, it is helpful to list its major thematic pillars:

- The Paradox of Wealth: The central tension between Protestant morality and commercial success.
- Domestic Sanctity: The home as a moral fortress against the corruptions of the public sphere.
- Civic Duty and Charity: The mechanisms through which the wealthy legitimized their status through social responsibility.
- Art as Moral Discourse: The use of painting, print, and material culture to work through collective anxieties.
- Cycles of Discipline and Release: The cultural rhythm of feasting, fasting, and celebration.
- National Identity: How a unique sense of Dutchness emerged from the struggle against the sea, against Spain, and against moral decay.

Conclusion: A Timeless Inquiry into Culture

Simon Schama’s **The Embarrassment of Riches** remains a towering achievement in cultural history. It is a book that asks profound questions about the relationship between money, morality, and meaning. While its focus is a small, watery corner of 17th-century Europe, its implications are universal. Schama shows us that every society must find its own way to manage the moral burdens of prosperity. The Dutch solution—with its emphasis on domestic virtue, civic charity, and artistic expression—was unique, but the underlying challenge is not.

For anyone interested in history, art, or sociology, this book is an indispensable read. It is a work of deep

scholarship and immense creativity, a reminder that the best history does not just inform us about the past; it illuminates our present. The embarrassment of riches, as Schama so brilliantly demonstrates, is a feeling as old as commerce itself, and as relevant as tomorrow’s news.

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