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Tussen hamer en aambeeld. Edelsmeden in Friesland tijdens de Gouden Eeuw

Schoen, P.

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Author: Schoen, P.

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Summary

This study sets out to create a more detailed historical image of the lives and works of gold and silversmiths in Friesland during the Golden Age. The existing image of the craft in this northernmost Dutch province was until recently just a ‘bycatch’ of the investigations into the examples of the art of the Frisian goldsmiths. The interest in antique gold and silver came into being in the nineteenth century when members of the Frisian Society (Fries Genootschap voor Taal-, Letterkunde en Geschiedenis) understood their significance for the cultural heritage of the province. So this cultural elite started collecting items of gold- and silver which ultimately became part of the collection of the Fries Museum in Leeuwarden.

Influenced by ideas of a glorious national past, these early collectors admired gold and silver for various reasons. First of all these precious metals were seen as carriers of historic and genealogical information. The objects served as a link between the present and the past. Gold- and silverworks also served as proof of the province’s history of wealth. But these antiques were also valued for their iconographic information. It proved that during the Golden Age Frisian goldsmiths took notice of the contemporary work of engravers from Holland and surrounding European countries. Based on these insights Frisian goldsmiths were labeled as artists. This romantic view of craftsmanship came under some criticism during the twentieth century, but antique gold and silver continued to be labeled as an art form.

In the first part of the twentieth century two members of the Frisian Society, the archivist Rinske Visscher and the notary Nanne Ottema, wrote articles which lay the historical foundation of the goldsmiths’ trade. In 1927 an extensive silverexhibition was held in the Fries Museum to celebrate the centennial of the Frisian Society. Four years later the retired goldsmith Elias Voet jr. published his monumental study based on the objects exhibited. In his book *Merken van Friesche goud- en zilversmeden*, published in 1932, the author gave an extensive overview of goldsmiths’ marks, dateletters and hallmarks. Ottema and Voet based their writings primarily on printed historical texts and sources from the goldsmiths’ guilds in the Frisian archives. Visscher also made use of the city archives of Leeuwarden. She managed to compose biographic sketches of the goldsmiths from the Frisian capital, but she did not pay much attention to the negative sides of the trade. The daily practices, the quarrelsome behaviour within the guild and the trade in gold and

silver with Amsterdam were given only minimal attention. Subsequent authors – mostly art historians – have focused on the silver objects that had survived. That was understandable, because the facts of life were buried deep inside archives that were not easily accessible.

In this study the Frisian gold- and silversmiths and their trade are the focus of our attention. We want to know more about the circumstances under which they had to work during the Golden Age. Therefore the central question of this thesis is: in what way was the craft of the Frisian goldsmiths influenced by legal, institutional and commercial structures and what can be said about their social position? Finding answers to these questions requires an investigation into four different aspects of the craft. The Frisian cities of Leeuwarden and Bolsward were chosen as subjects for a comparison of working conditions.

The first part of this book is about the legal framework of the goldsmiths' trade during the early modern age. During the Middle Ages Friesland had been an independent country, but in 1498 the political situation changed dramatically. It lost its freedom and became a province within the Saxon empire. In 1504 the new rulers, driven by the urge to centralise government, introduced a legislation on gold and silver coins that also contained regulations for the goldsmiths' trade. During this period the mint master-general and the goldsmiths were held responsible for the official gold and silver standards. There was as yet no strong government control and the solid reputation of the goldsmith was considered sufficient proof of the quality of his products.

The connection between monetary laws and regulations for the goldsmiths was conserved under the rule of emperor Charles V. Like the Saxon dukes before him, this Burgundian-Habsburgh sovereign tried to pursue a policy of centralisation after taking over power in Friesland. In 1527 this policy resulted in a central legislation on monetary affairs for all his lands in the northern part of the Netherlands. Two years later the Frisian goldsmiths asked for a moderation of the official standard of gold and silver. This request was granted, but it resulted in a stronger supervision on the gold and silversmiths' trade. Control was put into the hands of local assay masters (*stedelijke keurmeesters*). Because of the absence of instructions and an agreement on financial compensation, the process of implementation of control stalled in Leeuwarden. In the following year governor Schenck van Toutenburgh issued a new ordinance by which the other Frisian cities also got their own assay masters. For reasons unknown this information did not reach these cities, for in 1531 they asked the High Court (*Hof van Friesland*) for the right to appoint their own assay masters. Decentralised execution of provincial legislation urged the central government to intensify their supervision. In 1531 they introduced the function of the assay master-general (*keurmeester-generaal*). This official was held responsible for the quality of gold and silver in Friesland until 1798, when the guild system was abolished in the Netherlands under French rule.

The introduction of an assay master-general meant the start of a dualistic system

for the control of precious metals in Friesland. The Frisian mint masters were ultimately subordinates of the mint masters-general in The Hague. The Frisian gold and silversmiths however came under the supervision of a member from their own profession, whereas their colleagues in Holland fell under the mint masters-general. The Frisian assay master-general was accountable to the provincial governor and the States of Friesland. After 1580 he received his commission from the Delegated States of Friesland. It is not quite clear whether this official was already recruited from the ranks of the goldsmiths as early as 1531. This was certainly the case in 1587, when Hendrick Koops from Leeuwarden received his commission. Most of his twelve successors were trained goldsmiths and the majority of them lived in the capital. This is one of the reasons why the supervision of the goldsmiths' trade was always stricter in Leeuwarden than in the other Frisian towns and villages.

Once Friesland had become an independent country within the structure of the newly formed Dutch Republic of the Seven Unified Provinces, the connection between laws on coinage and the legislation for goldsmiths became more complex. The sovereign provinces had the right to produce their own coinage, but due to a constant state of war with Spain, the most powerful state, Holland, pleaded for a central agreement in the States-General. The Frisian States anxiously tried to maintain their recently restored independence and delayed the execution of these agreements. Meanwhile the supervision on the Frisian goldsmiths remained a matter of the Frisian States and in 1602 they renewed the legislation. In 1603 a new instruction for the assay master-general was issued.

The economic developments during the Dutch Golden Age did not take into account this curious expression of provincial autonomy. Due to the strong economic growth of Holland, in particular Amsterdam, the Frisian goldsmiths became ever more independent on this wealthy province for their supply of gold and silver. In the future Holland would set the price. The Frisian States however held on to a fixed selling price for precious metals. In the long run this rigid economic policy, originating from monetary necessity, put a strain on the profits of the goldsmiths and it consequently threatened their livelihood. The import of inferior silver from Amsterdam, Groningen and the German Empire by traders aggravated the problem. Hustling with the silver quality seemed the only way out for the Frisian goldsmiths. The question remains whether this illegal behaviour was widely spread. According to well-informed sources, this was certainly the case in 1695. It is hard to ascertain if the standard of first quality silver was badly corrupted, because so few examples have survived. The only way to improve our knowledge of the quality of antique Frisian silver, is to undertake a systematic survey of the metallurgic structure of objects with deviant marks. Such an enquiry could add a new dimension to the study of antique silver.

Thirty years after similar measures were taken in Holland, the Frisian States concluded in 1695 that the time had come for a purification of the existing amount

of gold and silver. In this way the much-needed silver, brought in by the taxpayer, could be trusted. This resulted in a renewal of the law. The Frisian States ordered the use of a new, fourth hallmark: the provincial lion. Silver of the old standard could easily be identified by the use of this new mark. The new regulations were mainly the result of an analysis made by the newly appointed Frisian assay master-general Jan Albertus Ketel. This goldsmith from Leeuwarden made clear that due to economic circumstances and strong competition from Holland, the times had been changing since the beginning of the century. The laws that regulated the use of gold and silver however had not changed. Ketel described a situation in which the Frisian goldsmiths found themselves caught between hammer and anvil.

But who was responsible for this downfall of the quality of the precious metals? The Frisian States put the blame on the former assay master-general Claes Clasen Balck. This goldsmith from the small town of Bolsward was the personification of the political culture of the day, in which lineage and membership of the right social-political networks was more important than personal skills and experience. The absence of serious economic competition in his hometown worsened the case. In comparison to Leeuwarden there was no severe competition in Bolsward and the members of the goldsmiths' guild lived in relative harmony with each other.

The situation in the Frisian capital was quite different. Relationships between guild members were sometimes very stressful and competition from outsiders was always a threat. In the wake of the renewal of the provincial law (*Landsordonnantie*), the goldsmiths in Leeuwarden organised their profession. A reformed guild, armed with new regulations, was better equipped to counter competition from within and from outsiders who were not qualified goldsmiths. As early as 1544 the goldsmiths in Leeuwarden had put great effort into protecting their business. They asked the High Court for an official examination for their craft. At that time it was possible to work freely in most Frisian cities without having passed a test. This situation lasted in the cities until the very end of the sixteenth century but ended in the first decade of the seventeenth century, when most of the goldsmiths' guilds were formed. However, in the countryside 'illegal' goldsmiths could work right until the moment when the guilds were finally abolished in 1798. For two centuries the goldsmiths' guilds complained about this unfair treatment.

In the second part of this study the organisation of the craft and the way in which guild regulations influenced the daily practice of the goldsmiths, are the centre of attention. At the end of the sixteenth century the population of Friesland grew in number and that offered a growing number of goldsmiths the opportunity to start their own business. In this way the goldsmiths' trade is one way of measuring the economic prosperity of the province. The growing wealth of its inhabitants showed itself in increased savings in the form of silver objects. In those days Frisian silver was made mainly by craftsmen of native origin. The influx of masters from outside the province was always very limited. Therefore the continuity of the guilds was guaranteed from within and restricted to the town popula-

tion and youngsters from surrounding areas. The laws of the Burgundy Habsburg rulers had always favoured relatives of the guild members and the children of the citizens. After 1600 the Frisian goldsmiths' guilds also applied these favouring regulations. In Bolsward and Leeuwarden approximately 40% of the apprentices had a father who was also a goldsmith. The guilds took their civil duties seriously, as they gave some town orphans a professional training. This study has not been able to establish if the Frisian goldsmiths' guilds organised a special form of social care for poor members and widows of former colleagues. In the buildings of Bolsward and its archive no sign of any form of social capital of the guild has been found. The wooden signboard of the masters from Leeuwarden closely resembles the function of the shrines that were used by the guilds in the period before the Reformation.

No evidence has been found that goldsmiths' guilds were formed on the basis of official documents in Frisian cities besides Leeuwarden in the sixteenth century. This was probably not the case. The organisation of the craft in the Frisian capital was an initiative of the goldsmiths. Their initial regulations were formalised in the Ordinance of governor Schenck van Toutenburgh. This law, published in 1530, lists a number of rules for the daily practice of the craft. The goldsmiths' guilds of Bolsward and Sneek were formed at the end of the first decade of the seventeenth century. Their main objective was to protect the economic interest of their members and the regulation of their behaviour. Before they had their own organisations, goldsmiths had been part of guilds that housed other occupations such as smiths, coppersmiths and gun makers. In small Frisian cities like Hindelopen en Workum, independent goldsmiths' guilds were never established at all. In 1600 the masters in the capital renewed their regulations, but they soon found out that the city officials were not willing to look after their interests solely. As a result the guild lost a number of legal battles with their own members over the old traditions. Especially the way in which the guild tried to use the introduction meal for newly admitted members as a means to exclude poor colleagues, was consequently attacked by the city authorities.

During the sixteenth century the Frisian goldsmiths had been protected by imperial decree, but around 1600 it became clear that the burgomasters of Leeuwarden were not prepared to follow this example. Moreover, it was in their hands to refuse or accept new guild regulations. During the seventeenth century this power shifted from the cities towards the provincial government. Frisian goldsmiths' guilds never enjoyed real political power, but individual guild members could reach influential positions. This was certainly true for the reformed members of the guilds in Bolsward. For a long period of time they were strongly represented in local government. This seems to have been the main reason why there were so few quarrels between city authorities and the guilds in Bolsward. The goldsmiths in the Frisian capital were less successful in obtaining political influence.

The renewal and publication of regulations by the goldsmiths' guilds in the first decade of the seventeenth century seems to be a direct result of the economic con-

sequences of the renewal of the *Landsordonnantie* in 1602. This law turned out to be very favourable for the goldsmiths' trade outside the cities. Although many rules were copied from previous charters, the introduction of the assaying of precious metals in the countryside was new. Offering this new opportunity, a boom-town like Heerenveen attracted several representatives of the goldsmiths' trade. Economic favours for the countryside were a logical consequence of the political structure in Friesland in which the countryside was strongly represented and held three quarters of the seats in the Frisian States. The guilds were not at all pleased with this development and strongly complained about it. Their main argument concerned the way in which the goldsmiths in the countryside could work without having passed the official test. In the eyes of the guilds these bunglers presented a great threat to consumers and state alike, because they did not possess the right skills. As a result – they argued – the standard of precious metals would ultimately deteriorate.

The foundation of a professional organization for the goldsmiths at the beginning of the seventeenth century served one main purpose: the protection of the craft against outsiders. A goldsmith was compelled to become a guild member if he wanted to work inside the city walls. However, many a goldsmith would rather have been a freeman instead of being forced to attend the guild meetings. Especially in the first decades of the seventeenth century the masters in the capital met regularly, in some cases even several times a week. This proved to be a heavy burden for a small entrepreneur. Some tried to skip the meetings and were forced to pay a fine. Working together within a guild did not happen voluntary. This study has found no legal indications of economic co-operation between individual guild members, as was the case in Amsterdam. Yet the Frisian goldsmiths' guilds were willing to co-operate with each other when their mutual interests came under pressure. The brothers from Leeuwarden always took the initiative when it came to defending guild business. Their main rivals were the traders in gold and silver and Jews. The guilds were also prepared to co-operate when their achievements were threatened. In 1767 they fought a legal battle with Jacob Admiraal. This newly appointed official, whose task it was to calibrate all the scales and weights in the Republic, had received his assignment from the highest political level, the States-General. Admiraal's quarrel with the Frisian guilds showed the desire of the craft to hold on to their old familiar ways.

The Frisian goldsmiths' guilds were by no means symbols of unity and brotherhood. This was certainly the case in Leeuwarden. During the first half of the seventeenth century members often fought when they had too much to drink. Stabbing incidents and fistfights also took place. This negative behaviour was stimulated by fierce internal economic competition. However, economic rivalry did not solely occur within the city. Just outside the city wall goldsmiths were active. These craftsmen were not obliged to join the guild because they were no official citizens. In these circumstances the guild was rendered powerless. The tense relations

between the guild members were also caused by the open economic structure of Leeuwarden. Local traders in gold and silver, dealers of second-hand articles and goldsmiths from other cities profited from this situation. Even the guild members themselves sometimes took their own regulations not too seriously. Things were different in Bolsward where local goldsmiths had no fear of outside competition. Their small city had a more closed economic structure with the surrounding countryside as a market. That is why their manners were much more friendly.

Still there was a feeling of dissatisfaction within the goldsmiths' guild of Bolsward. The loss of political and social power – a consequence of the Reformation – deeply frustrated the catholic guild members. The radical religious revolution caused a removal of religious rituals from the guild procedures. Subsequently the catholic brothers became a reluctant minority. At the same time their reformed colleagues enjoyed the privileges of political power. This caused a sense of being disadvantaged. I have found few signs of open discrimination on religious grounds. By and by a kind of mutual acceptance of each other's faith developed. The best example of co-operation between brothers of different religions lay in the organisation of the assaying process. In Bolsward as in Leeuwarden catholic and reformed guild members were responsible for the standard of precious metals. In the capital however the system of automatic rotation was abandoned after 1600. Afterwards assay masters were chosen by majority vote. Henceforth the chances of deliberate exclusion increased. In the decades after 1670 there were no catholic assay masters in Leeuwarden. This seems to have been the result of a growing anti-catholic sentiment following the wars against the French king Louis XIV.

After the catastrophic year 1672 the goldsmiths encountered hard times. Due to relentless warfare heavy taxation reduced the income of the inhabitants of Friesland. Especially during the War of the League of Augsburg (1688-1697) the goldsmiths' guild of Leeuwarden complained about economic hardship. As a result they proposed several protective measures. The cost of obtaining mastership increased and individuals who tried to bypass guild regulations were sued. In Bolsward too life for members of the craft was not easy after 1700. Several brothers ran into financial difficulties. It is hard to establish if their profession generated insufficient income during this period, because a great number of goldsmiths earned money in other jobs, too.

The third part of this research focuses on the social standing of the goldsmiths and their trade patterns. In the standard model, described by the historians Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude, the goldsmiths of the Dutch Republic are seen as belonging to the broad middle class. This qualification does not seem to fit the profession in Friesland as a whole, because of considerable individual differences. Most reformed brothers in Bolsward for instance were part of the political town elite. They were firmly interconnected by marriage, owed property within the town walls and agricultural estates outside the city. Ownership of agricultural land also meant political power. Their religion gave the reformed goldsmiths the exclu-

sive right to political power and the well-paid jobs that came with it. This elite was interdependent in matters of farming out local taxation. During harsh economic periods this extra income could be very useful. Some goldsmiths, who did not belong to the local political inner circle, organized lotteries in order to get rid of their stock.

There are no private archives left of Frisian goldsmiths from the Golden Age. The reconstruction of trade connections can therefore only be made on the basis of alternative historical sources. Debit accounts in inventory books provide the most interesting details. During the Golden Age Frisian goldsmiths traded intensively on a regional scale. This was still the case in the eighteenth century. Confirmation comes from the passbooks of Jan Rienstra, a silversmith from Sneek, who in the last quarter of the century became an important supplier of golden earcaps, an item of traditional Frisian womenswear. However, the goldsmiths also traded with trained specialists, such as goldworkers and chainmakers in the countryside. These trading connections prove that guild members had no problem doing business with bunglers who at the same time suffered intense criticism from their own organisations.

The fourth and last part of this study zooms in on the goldsmiths of Bolsward. Extensive investigation of numerous sources has revealed biographical data that have led to new ascriptions of maker's marks. These sources also show that there were significant differences in social status between individual masters. Some were very wealthy, while others only had limited means. The reformed goldsmiths of Bolsward do not fit in the traditional socio-political order. They were very influential within the political structure of their hometown. On a state level some even had connections with the governor. During the Landdag, the main political gathering of the year, goldsmiths from Bolsward represented their city far more frequently than did their colleagues from the other cities. Political aspirations however could prove a risk. A goldsmith was an easy target when it came to political struggle. Mere rumours about fiddling with the quality of gold and silver could lead to a political downfall and loss of reputation.

Economic profit as a benefit of political power was cut off for the Catholic masters after 1580. Some goldsmiths tried their luck in the trade of gemstones, jewels and silverwork. In the beginning of the seventeenth century we can see traces of this trade, especially in Leeuwarden. This silver did not live up to the official Frisian standard. The goldsmiths' guild sued several traders and second-hand goods merchants who imported inferior silverwork from the German Empire. Research into the market for Frisian painters in the Golden Age in Friesland by the art historian Piet Bakker has revealed interesting trade patterns in paintings from Amsterdam around 1650. Traders from the economic capital of the Republic even tried to get hold of trading positions in Leeuwarden. This kind of interference was not allowed by the better-organised goldsmiths. However, they had less grip on the illegal affairs of their own members. Silverworks from Amsterdam, which proved

to be cheaper because of the use of inferior metal quality or because it was made by specialists, could easily be imported. A Frisian goldsmith only had to press his own mark into this silver. He thereby took over responsibility for the quality of the material. In this way his mark made the object 'Frisian'. This immediately raises the question of how 'Frisian' Frisian silver is anyway?

After 1650 masters from Bolsward, but certainly goldsmiths from the Frisian capital, traded on a large scale with jewelers from Amsterdam. These international operating entrepreneurs maintained close links with countries as remote as Russia. For the transport of their valuable goods they engaged shipmasters from the West-Frisian Islands. Frisian goldsmiths bought gold and silver objects in Amsterdam, but during economically hard times some preferred to accept these precious goods in consignment. Jarich Gerrits van der Lely and Claes Fransen Baardt, who called themselves 'commissionairs', limited their entrepreneurial risks in this way. The fact that they were both of Catholic origin gives reason to believe that there was a connection between developing trade with Amsterdam in times of economic hardship and their religion. This study has not been able to establish this for a definite fact. Extensive trade contacts with Amsterdam – at one time the starting point of this study – could be determined, but further investigations will have to be made. A more detailed study can also shed light on the consequences of this trade for the originality of the Frisian silver from the Golden Age. There is still a chance that the highlights of Frisian silver are in reality silverworks made in Amsterdam. In a worst-case scenario this could lead to instances of depreciation. However, the remainder of the silverworks from Friesland could gain in importance and appeal when it is set off against a more solid historical background. Even a simple piece of silver benefits from a well-lit showcase.

Then there is still a final question: should Frisian goldsmiths be considered artists? A 'const silversmid', a qualification used in Amsterdam to describe a craftsman with artistic qualities, is yet to be discovered in the Frisian archives. This study shows that the goldsmiths' craft in Friesland was by no means advantageous for all. The guilds had wealthy members, but also craftsmen who could scarcely maintain their business. In the Frisian countryside a similar pattern can be found. For a long period of time the surviving items of Frisian silver were seen as proof of the talent of the Frisian goldsmiths in general. This study shows that the men who came closest to an 'artistic' qualification were Catholic guild members, who were involved in trade with Amsterdam jewelers. As far as we now know their trade existed mainly of gemstones, gold and jewelry. On the basis of by this insight it may be prudent to use the term 'Frisian gold' with care in the future. The description of Frisian silver as objects that bear the marks of Frisian masters and the evidence of Frisian legal marks, does not seem to be entirely reliable either any longer.