In 1632, the humanist scholar Caspar Barlaeus officially opened the newly established Amsterdam Atheneum with his inaugural lecture *Mercator sapiens* (The Wise Merchant).1 Addressing an audience of mostly merchants and magistrates, Barlaeus chose to discuss the ‘exceptionally fruitful exchange between commerce and the study of humanities and philosophy’.2 Commerce, he claimed, could not and should not exist without culture. Therefore, Barlaeus promoted the collaboration of ‘trade and philosophy’, claiming that merchants would be happiest and most likely to be successful professionally if they immersed themselves in serious study. Tracing the connection between business and scholarship back to ancient times (rather than discussing biblical perspectives), he referred to Plato, who, in his writings about the perfect state, had stressed the importance of merchants—in Barlaeus’ paraphrase, ‘not only those who buy and sell material stuff, but also those who sell to others, for a reasonable price, culture, science and art’. The Greeks, so Barlaeus observed, had realized that ideas and art were distributed together with commercial wares, and transferred by merchants via established trade routes. The foundation of a university and library in Amsterdam, then, was particularly appropriate; ‘Europe’s storeroom’ as he dubbed Amsterdam, would, from then on, also stock the products of philosophy, art and science.3 Barlaeus explicitly

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1 This essay is based on a keynote lecture given at the 2006 SHARP-conference, and subsequent papers at the Ernst-Moritz-Arndt-Universität Greifswald and the European University, Florence in 2007. Some parts of this essay were published in Keblusek 2009.


3 In his *Broederschap der schilderkunst* (1654), Thomas Asselijn similarly referred to Amsterdam as ‘the Warehouse of Europe’ (‘het Pakhuis van Euroop’): Asselijn 1878, p. 16.
referred to the gathering and distribution of *intellectual* capital as a crucial characteristic of the *mercator sapiens*; a man who was not only well versed in matters of economy, but could as easily hold his own in discussions with scholars and humanists.\(^4\) Obviously, Barlaeus was more concerned about what was in the merchant’s head, rather than what stood on the shelves of his cabinet. Whether many members of his audience did indeed aspire to this intellectual ideal remains to be seen; nevertheless, several Amsterdam traders were instrumental in the distribution of, and trade in, *exotica, naturalia*, paintings, sculpture, coins, medals and books, and many of them were avid collectors themselves.

This mutual dependency of commerce and art was also celebrated a decade later, in 1653–1654, in a series of poems by Thomas Asselijn celebrating the founding of the so-called ‘Brotherhood of Painters’ during the annual festivities on St Luke’s day. Asselijn’s poems were dedicated to one of the most prominent Amsterdam merchant-collectors, Joan Huydecoper, Lord of Maarseveen.\(^5\) Asselijn had Mercury admonish Mars and Hercules to ‘protect art with the State’: ‘Here [i.e. in Amsterdam] is the Exchange, and the money, and the love of art’. In another poem, Mercury took Apollo and Pallas on a tour of Amsterdam highlights, which made the gods realize that the city’s greatness was due to its local art scene. Indeed, the sheer number of artists and patrons rendered the city, indeed the whole nation, immortal.\(^6\) Similarly, Arnoud Houbraken in his *De Groote Schouburch* (1718–1721) confirmed that

> in these days, art flourished in the Dutch Republic, especially in Amsterdam. The advancing peace would silence Bellona, enemy of the Arts (…). Now one could see the citizens create a new love of art; one became the other’s patron, with Mr Joan van Maarseveen, Knight of

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\(^4\) Taverne 1990, p. 6, connects Barlaeus’s concept of the ideal *mercator sapiens* to the new social and intellectual status of the ‘merchant-magistrate’ (koopman-regent) in the Dutch Golden Age. Yet as we shall see below, merchant-scholars were altogether an older phenomenon. Taverne 1978, p. 445, n.92 suggests that the Athenaeum may have been established following the London examples of Gresham College and the Lectureship of Mathematical Sciences. Both institutions were supported by London merchants to provide academic foundations for commerce and trade.

\(^5\) On Huydecoper, see below.

\(^6\) Asselijn 1878, pp. 21 (‘Hier is de beurs, en ‘tgeld, en liefde tot de Kunst’) and 17 (‘Zoo kan men een Staat, een Ryk, door Kunst onsterfelyk maaken (…) / Geen eeuw, geen ryck heeft ooit zo heerelyck geblonken,/Waar in de konsten zyn zoo rykelyk gevoedt,/ Noch van Begunstigers, in zulken oevervloedt’).