Given the quantity of artworks produced in the Dutch Republic, its citizens must have been unusually sensitized to imagery—found most famously in paintings, but also in many other media, for example ceramics, textiles, stained glass, numismatics, and civic events such as the tableaux and ceremonial arches of the *Joyeuse Entrée*.¹ The creators could exploit a rich iconography which itself drew upon a medieval inheritance, an extensive knowledge of the Bible (as befits a state with large Calvinist and sectarian populations), and Renaissance classicism (popular especially among artists at the dawn of the Golden Age).

This high level of image literacy was exploited politically. For example, it has been argued that one of the finest expressions of Dutch political thought on freedom of conscience is not a text, but the stained glass window of the Janskerk in Gouda. ‘Freedom of conscience’ is portrayed as a carriage in which there are two female figures representing freedom of conscience and freedom of religion. This carriage is being pulled by female depictions of the virtues of love, justice, fidelity, concord and constancy. The carriage and its attendants are able to crush tyranny, which is depicted lying on the ground with a broken sword and spear.²


Prints and engravings also bore political messages, overt, or implicit in historical or allegorical scenes. Their pictorial nature offered a powerful set of building blocks which could be used, like pamphlets, to define the nature of political problems in a particular manner. The famous adoption of the term ‘Beggar’ (at a party given by Count Brederode in April 1566) also gave birth to its own imagery – two clasped hands holding a beggar’s bag – which rapidly spread in a range of media. It did not so much illustrate, as help to create, a dissident political culture.

Politics and power in the Republic was more easily portrayed than described: arguably ‘the complexity of human affairs is always a complexity of multiple interacting relationships; and pictures are a better medium than linear prose for expressing relationships. Pictures can be taken in as a whole and help to encourage holistic rather than reductionist thinking about a situation’. And it is usually real situations, and not theory, which are portrayed so dynamically in the prints. The rebel state had not only exploited its pictorial literacy to create a dissident political culture. It had then utilized it in the negotiations and the pragmatic Realpolitik of decision making in a state that was engaged in a war for survival over several generations, with the enemy always at the gates.

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3 The prints referred to here are the satirical prints catalogued by nineteenth-century collectors: F. Muller, De Nederlandsche geschiedenis in platen, beredeneerde beschrijving van Nederlandsche historieplaten, zinnetrenten en historische kaarten, 4 vols. (Amsterdam, 1863–82; repr. 1970) [hereafter abbreviated as FM], and G. van Rijn, Atlas van Stolk. Katalogus der historie — spot — en zinnetrenten betrekkelijk de geschiedenis van Nederland, 10 vols. (Amsterdam, 1895–1933) [hereafter abbreviated as AvS], or the collection at Simon van Gijn – Museum aan huis [hereafter abbreviated as SvG]. They can be seen, together with transcripts of the texts, in D. Horst’s well-illustrated book, De Opstand in zwart-wit. Propagandaprenten uit de Nederlandse Opstand 1566–1584 (Zutphen, 2003). In this essay ‘print’ is taken to include woodcuts and engravings.


5 P. Checkland, Systems Thinking, Systems Practice (Chichester, 1993), A16. My thanks to R. Day for drawing my attention to the importance of pictures in analysing political systems.