



# Tulipomania

An unbelievably fascinating account of the great tulip craze of the 17th century.



Allegory upon the Tulip Mania by Jan Breughel the Younger

Seventeenth-century artworks, and especially still life paintings, frequently showed brightly coloured tulips: this detail prompts us to recall the incredible Dutch phenomenon that was called tulipomania and which disrupted many aspects of economical and social life during the third and fourth decades of the seventeenth century.

The plant reached Europe secretly from Turkey in 1544 with the help of diplomat Ogier Ghislain de Busbecq; initially the flowers were a single colour, but collectors went wild over the new shapes and the striped and variegated breeds with multicoloured marbling developed in European greenhouses. One of the most famous promoters with a passionate love of tulips, was the French-Dutch botanist, Charles de L'Escluse (Clusius), who was also a renowned author.

Within a few decades the increasing demand for tulip bulbs raised the cost out of all proportion to the point that in 1624, certain varieties became prohibitive in price. The variety known as *Semper Augustus*, illustrated by the painter Franciscus De Geest in the famous florilegium *Hortus Aemoenissimus*, published in 1668, exceeded the value of all the others, to the point where three bulbs could reach a price of 30,000 florins, almost the price of a house on the canals in Amsterdam!

Payment could often be made in merchandise instead of cash. The Viceroy tulip could be



## On the street



exchanged for (dicunt !): 2,500 florins, plus 2 cartloads of wheat, 2 cartloads of rye, 4 fatted oxen, 8 fatted pigs, 12 fatted sheep, 2 barrels of wine, 4 barrels of beer, 1000 pounds of cheese, a bed, a silver goblet and various garments. Certain merchants sold bulbs that had only just been planted, or others that were not yet placed in the soil. In short, the equivalent of modern “futures” investments in tulips.

All this led to such a level of speculation that many people sold their homes and land to buy tulips; a government intervention became necessary to rein in this excessive behaviour, especially in 1637. In April of that year the Dutch government declared all speculative contracts invalid, and fixed a set maximum price of 50 florins per bulb: prices plummeted and a large number of investors were ruined. Evidence of this widespread frenzy is shown in the famous painting by Jan Brueghel the Younger, entitled *A Satire of Tulip Mania* (1640): a biting satire that depicts a world populated with monkeys engrossed with tulips.

As well as the florilegium by Franciscus De Geest, which is an authentic hand-crafted masterpiece composed of two hundred pages of flower illustrations in watercolours, a large number of authors also included the brightly coloured tulips in their botanical texts: those with a passion for illustrations and antique phytography will be fascinated with the herbals by the naturalists Basilius Besler (*Hortus Eystettensis*, 1613), Rembert Dodoens, who was the first to employ the term “tulipa” (*Florum et Coronarium Odoratumque Nonnullarum* in 1568 and *Cruydt-Boeck* in 1571); from the same period is a publication by Mattia L’Obel (*Kruidt-boeck*). The earlier work *Catalogus plantarum* by Conrad Gesner, a scholar from the early sixteenth century, was not published until two hundred years later, while it is believed that the first to describe the tulip was Valerius Cordus, in an appendix in a book printed in 1561: *Annotationes in Pedacii Dioscoridis de Materia medica libros V*.

The Flemish diplomat Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, ambassador to Ferdinand I at the Turkish Court of Suleiman the Magnificent, who was the first to bring tulips to Vienna, described the flower in his famous and popular book: *Legationis turcicae epistolae quatuor* (1581).

An extremely important role was played by Carolus Clusius in his *Rariorum aliquot stirpium per Hispanias observatarum historia* (1576), again in his *Pannonias observatorum Historiae* (1583) and his *Rariorum plantarum historia*; Clusius was one of the leading tulip producers in Leiden and had developed an important collection as early as 1591, placing bulbs from Turkey on the market at very high prices.

The early seventeenth century saw the rise of numerous famous botanists and artists: one who deserves to be mentioned was Crispijn van de Passe with his *Den blom-hof* and *l’Hortus floridus* (both published in 1614).

With their beautifully coloured illustrations, all of these authors helped to contribute towards igniting the passion for the tulip which within a few years led to a frenzy all over Holland and a part of Europe.

In collaboration with [Aboca Museum](#)



**Duilio Contin**

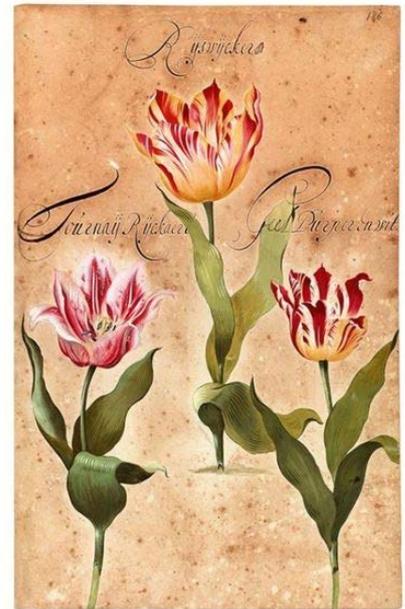
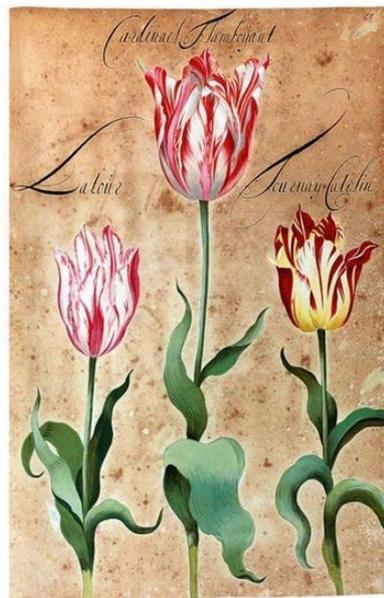
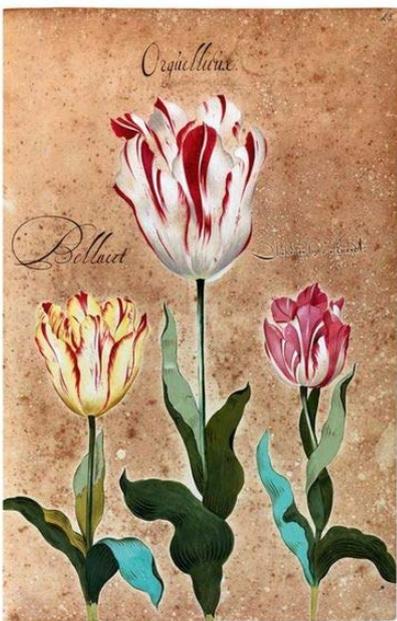
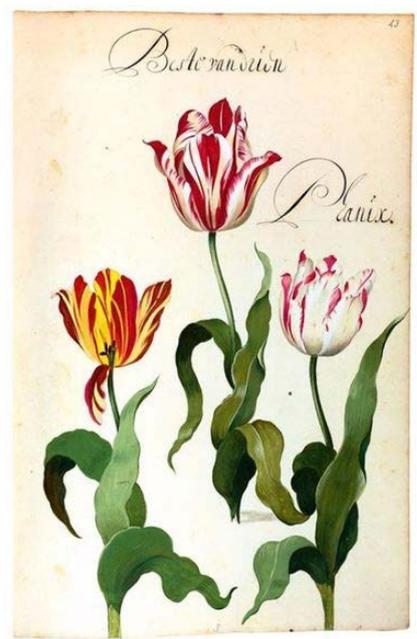
August 01, 2012

Share 0

Tweet 0

+1 0

Share



## Related articles



CULTURE

### The Stake, Chapter 1

The first appointment from the "Dream Diary"



CULTURE

### Sibling Rivalry: Movie vs. Play

Highlights from Fatal Attraction



CULTURE

### Waiting for the rain maker

The Syrian actor and thinker Duraid Laham



CULTURE

### To Let The World In

A two-volume film project



CULTURE

### The Stake, Chapter 3

The third appointment from the "Dream Diary"



CULTURE

### Mysterious Montenegrin Heritage

Archaeological site of Zlatica Monastery