

The History of Tulips: Part III

“The tulip is not native to the Netherlands. It is a flower of the East, a child of the unimaginable vastness of central Asia. So far as anyone can tell, it did not reach the United Provinces until 1570, and by then it had already been journeying for many hundreds of years from its original homeland in the mountain ranges that run north of the Himalayas along the fortieth parallel,” from the book *Tulipomania*, by Mike Dash.

Tulips, growing in the wild, did not have a wide range of color. When a virus transmitted by the aphid was unknowingly introduced to tulips, the color of the flowers began to change. Unfortunately, this also caused weakened strains of tulips but, surprisingly, did not decrease the tulip value. In fact, the introduction of a new range of colored tulips not only made them more desirable, it increased their salability to a tremendously.

After tulips were introduced to the Netherlands, most probably by the Turks by way of a traveling Flemish duke, their appeal was irrefutable. In fact, bulbs were such objects of desire it caused a manic frenzy. One showy trend among Dutch women was to wear tulips in their cleavages. This was a mark of status and a fashion declaration. There is one recorded account of a Dutch woman’s aristocratic father who, during the peak of the tulip frenzy, offered a single tulip as dowry in his daughters marriage. The betrothed gratefully accepted the exchange!

In 1637, in the peak of bulb-o-mania, one bulb was reported to have sold for 5,200 guilders. By comparison, the typical earnings of a well-off Dutch merchant in the 1630’s was 3,000 guilders. This frenzy didn’t last however. After WWII, the starving Dutch were eating them for lunch.

Looking at the history of specific plants, such as the tulip, open doors into viewing human trends, at least a particular culture in a specific period of time.

The history of tulips is entertaining to say the least, and elucidating to say the most. Reading Dutch history provides a marvelous account that can be translated into a story reminiscent of the 1929 stock market crash.

Think what it might have been like to live through a tulip crash as if your life depended on it!

It is interesting to note, here, how closely peoples sustainability in history is tied people are tied to plants. Humans have an intimate dependence on them for clothing, tools and utensils, wealth, beauty and most notably, flowers.

As we follow plant history and uncover human trends in connection to plants, we also discover the powerful impact on history caused by human appetites for spices, including salt and pepper, sugar, coffee, tea and herbs, quinine, cotton, wheat, potatoes, nicotine,

tulips and so much more. By continuing to read and learn about plants and their history we are, in fact, reading and learning about our own history.

So, my thesis is this.

Like plants, we are indigenous to the land or transplants from other continents who have either adapted to our environment or we are alien life forms who manipulate the environment to adapt to us.

Philosophy is born out topics such as these.

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