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Jamestown Settlement interprets the founding of Jamestown, America’s first permanent English settlement, and the diverse cultures, including Powhatan Indian, European and African, that converged in 17th-century Virginia. The Yorktown Victory Center tells the story of the American Revolution and the development of the new nation.

“The 17th Century: Gateway to the Modern World,” at Jamestown Settlement November 16, 2011, through August 15, 2012, was organized by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in cooperation with the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation and is supported with grants from James City County and Altria Group and other private donors.

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Front cover image: Sir Thomas Dale, ca. 1609-1619, English, oil on canvas. VMFA, Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund.
During the 17th century, scientific advances, economic developments, and changes in social and philosophical boundaries revolutionized the world. The term “sea change,” coined by Shakespeare and inspired by daring voyages across the Atlantic, is a fitting designation for this transformation that began, quite literally, as Europe’s economic center shifted from the Mediterranean Sea to the Atlantic Ocean.

By mid-century, religious strife between Catholics and Protestants had dwindled, while economic opportunities were on the rise. New shipbuilding technology, improved navigational tools and reliable maps made long-distance ocean travel commonplace. As a result, investors in joint-stock companies grew wealthy as international trading monopolies made once rare commodities plentiful and affordable.

As the century progressed, remarkable scientific discoveries laid the groundwork for modern industry, but the most profound metamorphosis was philosophical. Radical new ideas about human nature; natural rights to life, liberty and property; and the social contract between government and the governed truly opened the gateway to the modern world.

The World of the Mediterranean

The Battle of Lepanto, fought off the coast of Greece in 1571, was the last major naval battle fought by oar-powered ships. Although the alliance of Catholic Mediterranean states, including Spain, Venice and Genoa, effectively stopped the advance of the Ottoman Empire into Europe, Mediterranean fleets were swiftly becoming obsolete. As ships ventured beyond the Straits of Gibraltar, the new technologies required to successfully navigate the vast and hazardous Atlantic changed the balance of power, trade and influence in Europe.

Although the English and Dutch achieved maritime superiority in the 17th century, Italian art and culture continued to play a significant role in Europe throughout the century. Tintoretto’s exaggerated contrasts of light and dark anticipate the innovations of the influential painter Caravaggio. The new Baroque style, which often depicted strong emotions in religious scenes, was promoted by the Roman Catholic Church, which sought to counterbalance the effects of the Protestant Reformation.
Westward Ho! Conquest of the Atlantic

At the beginning of the 17th century, many Englishmen, including Sir Thomas Dale, began their careers fighting as allies of the Dutch against Spanish Catholic forces during the religious struggles that followed the Protestant Reformation. By the end of the century, the era's religious conflicts were largely resolved, while clashes developed between the English and the Dutch over commerce and trade. Englishmen who began as allies of the Dutch often ended their careers fighting against them, particularly in India.

Captain Adams, another 17th-century adventurer, first appears in surviving records as captain of the Blessing, which sailed from England to Virginia in June 1609. He re-enters the record in 1611, commanding the Hercules, which sailed from Virginia bearing letters from Sir Thomas Dale to the Virginia Council in England. He is also likely the Captain Robert Adams employed by the East India Company in 1616 who made several voyages to India.

Captain Adams, 1626, English, oil on canvas. VMFA, Gift of Hugh W. Long.

Religious Conflicts: Reformation and Counter Reformation

Religious wars devastated Europe in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Criticism of the practices and beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church gradually led to the formation of numerous new Christian denominations that were eventually categorized as Protestant. Converts to Protestantism included aristocrats such as Heinrich the Pious, the Elector of Saxony who made Lutheranism the official religion of his duchy, and William I, Prince of Orange, who led the Dutch revolt against the Spanish Habsburgs. The armed conflicts of the era, which ultimately redrew the political boundaries of Europe, included the persecution of French Protestants known as Huguenots (1562-1589), the Thirty Years War (1618-1649), the Eighty Years War (1568-1648), and the English Civil War (1642-1649).

Art was greatly affected by this religious strife as large-scale Catholic paintings and sculptures were largely rejected by Protestant nations. Book illustrations and prints, however, remained acceptable, especially as Protestant translations of the Bible into vernacular languages proliferated.

This 17th-century, wood-and-lacquer Inca vessel incorporates Spanish influences into its traditional design. Catholic priests in Spanish colonies worked to eradicate all beliefs and customs that conflicted with their Roman Catholic faith. VMFA, Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund.
Enlightenment! New Philosophies and Technologies

The 17th century is often called the Age of Reason. The era’s scientific and social changes paved the way for the full flowering of the Enlightenment in the 18th century. Natural philosophers emphasized reason and systematic observation of nature. The groundbreaking laws of force and motion formulated by Galileo, Kepler and Newton resulted from the new scientific method that relied on experimentation and precise measurement of speed, mass and position. The development of coordinate geometry by Descartes and calculus by Newton and Leibniz provided the era with critical new mathematical tools. Production of maps and illustrated atlases increased rapidly as the physical world was accurately measured and systematically charted.

The new scientific perspective in turn inspired philosophers to ask new questions such as, “What is knowledge?” “How is knowledge acquired?” and “What do we really know?” The answers that developed established revolutionary new ideas about human nature, natural rights, religious toleration and forms of government.

New Trade Routes and Products

The English, Dutch and French successfully established new trading ventures throughout the 17th century. The English East India Company was chartered in 1600 to create trading opportunities in the East Indies, although ultimately the English traded mainly with the Indian subcontinent. The Dutch East India Company was founded in 1602, and the French East India Company in 1664.

The products traded by these joint-stock companies included coffee, tea, cotton, spices and tobacco, which explorers first brought to Europe in the 1500s. Initially, it was merely a curiosity, but its popularity skyrocketed after Virginia planters began to develop sweeter-tasting varieties. Tobacco reached India and China within a century, and its use was widespread among northern Indian nobility by the 18th century.

These international trading connections are often reflected in 17th-century art, from the gentlemen enjoying tobacco in “Tavern Scene” and “Chattar Singh of Chamba Smoking a Huqqa,” to the European-style dress of the lady in “Woman Raising Her Hands Towards the Sun.”
Silver and Silversmiths

Seventeenth-century silversmiths benefited from the increased importance of tableware that had begun during the Renaissance. The use of forks while dining spread throughout Europe following their introduction into France by Catherine de Médicis, who married Henri II in the mid-16th century. This custom, along with other formal dining traditions, was adopted by English upper classes by the mid-17th century. Demand grew rapidly for items such as silver serving platters, tureens, trays, plates and cutlery. Wealthy clients showed off their prosperity and social position by commissioning extensive silver table services. Imported products such as sugar, tea and coffee, which became more readily available through 17th-century trading connections, also were served in specialized silver containers.

In the late 17th century, large numbers of French Huguenot silversmiths fled to England to escape religious persecution in their native land. Many of these highly skilled artisans and designers found positions in English workshops, where they introduced the latest French designs.

Portraits: Faces of the New Century

The portraits in this exhibition illustrate the diversity of the genre in the 17th century. The “Medal of Henri IV and Marie de Medicis,” the “Coronation of James I” and the “Akan Commemorative Head,” for example, honor wealthy and powerful individuals. For many centuries, the vast majority of portraits represented the uppermost ranks of society. New economic opportunities in 16th- and 17th-century Europe, however, made it possible for moderately wealthy merchants, artisans and other professionals to commission portraits.

Portraits of William Byrd and Jane Salmon Morrice point to their privileged position within the rising middle class. The unknown English artists who created these two paintings possessed a competency with oil paint that is lacking in American colonial-era portraits of Edward and Elizabeth Brodnax. Prints and engravings were often the primary examples of portraiture available to itinerant, often self-taught, painters such as Nehemiah Partridge, a situation that contributed to the stiff, linear style of these early paintings.

Commemorative Head, Akan culture (Ghana), ca. 18th century, terracotta with traces of polychrome. VMFA, Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund.

William Byrd I as a Young Boy, English, 17th century, oil on canvas. VMFA, Gift of Mrs. Edmund Randolph Cocke in memory of George Byrd Harrison, M.D.

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