



Tulipomania: The Story of the World's Most Coveted Flower & the Extraordinary Passions It Aroused

Mike Dash

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Amsterdam, 1637

For the cost of a single tulip bulb you could buy:

four oxen or
twelve sheep or
twenty-four tons of wheat or
two hogsheads of wine or
two tons of butter or
four barrels of beer or
a thousand pounds of cheese or
a silver drinking cup or
an oak bed or
a ship.

In the 1630s, visitors to the prosperous trading cities of the Netherlands couldn't help but notice that thousands of normally sober, hardworking Dutch citizens from every walk of life were caught up in an extraordinary frenzy of buying and selling. The object of this unprecedented speculation was the tulip, a delicate and exotic Eastern import that had bewitched horticulturists, noblemen, and tavern owners alike. A trade in tulips soon evolved, and for almost a year rare bulbs changed hands for incredible and ever-increasing sums, until single flowers were being sold for more than the cost of a house.

Historians would come to call it tulipomania. It was the first futures market in history -- and like all the ones that would follow, it crashed spectacularly, plunging speculators and investors into economic ruin and despair. But that was not the first instance of tulipomania -- nor would it be the last.

This is the history of the tulip, from its origins on the barren windswept steppes of central Asia, to its place of honor in the lush imperial gardens of Constantinople, to its starring moment as the most coveted -- and beautiful -- commodity in Europe. Historian Mike Dash vividly narrates the story of this amazing flower and the colorful cast of characters whose lives were inextricably entwined with it. There is the eccentric Turkish sultan Ahmed III, whose reign even to this day is known as the Tulip Era, and the French academic Carolus Clusius, the most respected botanist of his time, whose gifts of the then-unknown bulbs to friends and patrons sparked the Dutch tulipomania. There's even the lowly tavern owner Wouter Winkel, whose death in 1633 left his seven children destitute -- until they dug up his bed of tulip bulbs and sold them at auction during the height of the tulip mania, an auction that transformed his heirs from penniless orphans to wealthy young men and women who would never have to work a day in their lives. Centuries apart historically, and worlds apart culturally, this cast of characters all had one thing in common: tulipomania.

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