

Haarlem

Wandering Through Myths

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[N O P M A A S]

When I arrived at Haarlem station I was struck by a sense of déjà-vu. It felt almost as though I'd been there before, even though I was sure I hadn't. I sat down on a bench to allow the beautiful tiled pictures and fine woodwork of the waiting rooms – all dating back to 1900 – time to sink in. Slowly, other images began to merge with reality and it finally dawned on me. Of course I knew the station. It's a popular location for films. Whenever the filmmakers need a historic station, the advertisements are taken down and modern travellers are kept out. Paul Verhoeven's *Black Book* (Zwartboek) and Ben Verbong's *The Girl with the Red Hair* (Het meisje met het rode haar) and a number of other films owe some of their *couleur locale* to Haarlem railway station. Looking back, this first impression proved to be symbolic of my entire visit to the city. In Haarlem, you constantly move on the borders of reality, switching between past and present; when you leave, you're no longer entirely certain what is truth and what is myth.

Sitting on that bench, I also remembered that the filming for Steven Soderbergh's *Ocean's Twelve* made national news in 2004. A Thalys train had been brought to Haarlem just for the film – those international trains normally never visit the city. It became snagged on the overhead lines and rail traffic between Haarlem and Amsterdam was disrupted for days. Haarlem's station also had to stand in for the station of Amsterdam in that film; the media's reality is often at odds with actual facts. And here Amsterdam enters the picture, the city's big brother, a brother with whom Haarlem has a rather difficult relationship. Amsterdam is, of course, the capital city of the Netherlands and it eclipses neighbouring Haarlem in terms of culture, economy and tourists. But Amsterdam is in the province of Noord-Holland, of which Haarlem is in fact the capital and as such is entitled to pull rank on Amsterdam.

A good few Amsterdammers, particularly ones with children, have chosen to seek refuge in Haarlem, where it is quieter and safer and you can live closer to the beach and the dunes without having to miss out on all the advantages of the capital city. And it's only fifteen minutes by car or train between the two.

Haarlem Station.
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Shattered myths

There is certainly no question of Haarlem being viewed as a suburb of Amsterdam. The city has its own rich and valued history, which can be seen in many different places. I have often wondered about the ideal way to explore a city. Do you head straight for the highlights or wander around at random? Either way, you can be sure you'll miss all kinds of things, but Haarlem really calls for the second method. Firstly, because it's not so big that you can easily get lost and, secondly, because the city constantly reveals the most marvellous secrets to the attentive traveller. You'll find *hofjes* popping up all over the city: small courtyards with almshouses around a garden, where beguines and poor men and women could spend their old age in centuries gone by. These places

Market Place
with the St. Bavo's Church.
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are hidden behind small gates or impressive doors and you may need to overcome a certain reluctance to lift the latch and slip inside. But before you know it, you are surrounded by the monastic peace, order and silence that makes the busy city seem as unreal as the image before you. This isn't possible, you think, but it is possible – in Haarlem.

My decision to use the zigzag method of exploration was amply rewarded, as there are two interesting sights on either side of the station: Ripperdapark and Kenaupark. I remembered enough about the history of my homeland to realise that these parks preserved two famous names from the Eighty Years' War (1568–1648). In 1572–1573, the Spaniards laid siege to the city for seven months. Following a valiant defence, the starving city was captured: the garrison was slain and goods were looted. Kenau Simonsdochter Hasselaer is said to have played an important role during the city's defence as a leader of the women of Haarlem, who stood on the city walls and poured down boiling oil upon the enemy. Her name has become synonymous with women who can stand up for themselves. In truth, no one knows for certain that she ever actually played this role. Kenau is one of the many myths and legends that make up the history of Haarlem. But Wigbolt Ripperda was definitely one of the leaders of Haarlem's defence. He was among the 2000 leading citizens of Haarlem who met their end during the attack. Most were drowned in the River Spaarne, but Ripperda was beheaded in the marketplace.

Passing through the Hofje van Staats – where Bubb Kuyper Veilingen, the most important Dutch auction house for books, manuscripts, prints and drawings, occupies the main building – and down alleyways that took me past the old Walloon church and the neighbouring Haarlem red-light district, I made my way to the bars and restaurants of Klokhuisplein, which is surrounded by the Grote Kerk, or Large Church, also known as St. Bavo's Church, or simply the Bavo, and by the buildings where the Enschede printing house was located for over two centuries. I know my literature, so I asked the waitress if the cinnamon biscuit that came with my coffee was a '*Haarlemmer halletje*', because I'd read about them. *The Oprechte Haerlemsche Courant* mentioned this popular treat

way back in 1711, but even so the girl who brought my coffee looked at me as if I'd gone mad. When questioned further, she also proved to be unaware that our banknotes and postal stamps used to be printed only a few metres away. And she drew a complete blank when I asked her how old the Bavo was.

I soon got the answer to that question (built between 1310 and 1520; the tower was added at a later date) on the other side of the church, on the Grote Markt, the marketplace, where an elderly gentleman was enthusiastically telling an interested group about all the sights. I discreetly joined the group, as a non-paying guest, but I would more than make up for my free lecture later. Wim Vogel – that turned out to be the man's name – had written a topographical guide to literary Haarlem. I discovered that this aspect of the city's history also went back a long way. On one corner of the Grote Markt, the great Renaissance scholar and writer Dirck Volkertszoon Coornhert (1522–1590) started a printing press, while on the other corner was the printing press of Abraham de Casteleyn (1628–1681), who founded the *Oprechte Haerlemsche*



Courant in 1656, the world's oldest surviving newspaper. This square is dominated by the Bavo, which has another curious Haarlem legend attached to it. In 1218–1219, the Egyptian seaport town of Damietta was conquered during a crusade. The harbour was closed off with a heavy chain, but the Haarlemmers broke through it in a ship which had a saw attached to it. The story is apparently untrue, but every night, between nine and half past, the Damiaatjes, the bells brought back from Egypt, ring out from the Bavo's tower to commemorate this feat. The church is also the burial place of the famous poet Willem Bilderdijk (1756–1831), who spent the last years of his life in Haarlem. Bilderdijk awarded himself the noble title of 'Heer van Teisterbant', along with the authority to conduct and annul his own marriages, all through direct appeal to God, with whom he was apparently on good terms. Opposite the Bavo is the town hall of Haarlem, the former hunting lodge of the Counts of Holland, which dates back to the fourteenth century.

The Spaarne with Teylers
Museum on the right.
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Villa Welgelegen.
©Fay Asselbergs.

Vogel reserved his most exuberant eloquence for the most controversial myth from Haarlem's history. We were standing at the foot of a bronze statue of a monk-like figure who, somewhat triumphantly, was holding aloft a block with the letter A on it. This was the statue of Laurens Janszoon Coster, who for centuries, particularly in the Netherlands, was believed to have invented the art of printing with movable type in around 1420, thereby, with God's help, spreading the light of knowledge across the world. When this statue was unveiled in 1856, with great festivity, the rain was pouring down. Maybe it was the Supreme Being's way of showing that he did not entirely agree. In fact, even at the time, there were Haarlemmers who doubted Coster's claim, but they didn't mention it because no one wanted to dampen the party spirit. It reflects well on the legend-loving city that it was a Haarlemmer, Adriaan van der Linde, who in the second half of the nineteenth century found arguments to prove that the figure of Coster was a composite of two people, a sexton and a candle-maker, who had this much in common: neither of them had invented printing with movable type. But the statue remained and the story continued to appear in history books until well into the twentieth century.

Bar-hopping

After Wim Vogel's audience had thanked him with a round of polite applause, I invited him for a drink, because I realised that I'd found an unexpected and inexhaustible source of information. We headed for a table outside Brinkmann, the famous café-restaurant, which has been renowned for its coffee and croquettes since 1879. Vogel talked with great enthusiasm about the buildings we

could see: the Vishal, or fish hall, where the Haarlemmers used to buy the seafood brought by women from Zandvoort, and where now Haarlem's finest artists display their work; the Vleeshal, the meat hall, built for the local butchers in the early sixteenth century by city architect Lieven de Key, and now the Frans Hals Museum's modern-art annexe. Beside it, the Verweyhal, named after Haarlem painter Kees Verwey (1900–1995), about whom numerous anecdotes are still doing the rounds. If he didn't like you, he'd chase you down the stairs with his walking stick, even if you were the mayor himself.

Was it because he rarely found such an eager listener? Did he have nothing better to do? Was he bored? Whatever the reason, Vogel offered to take me on a tour of a few of the city's highlights. I gratefully accepted his offer. I paid the bill and we set off. Past the Toneelschuur, a theatre designed by Joost Swarte, the internationally renowned comic artist and graphic designer. To Teylers Museum, the oldest museum in the world, with its diverse collection of art, minerals, historical devices and other artefacts. Vogel introduced me to the Head of Exhibitions, an enthusiastic storyteller, who, gasping for air as he delivered his unstoppable torrent of words, had tales to tell about even the smallest piece of rock and tiniest prehistoric mouse tooth. He was even able to give us a fascinating lecture about the labels that were attached to the exhibits centuries ago. We visited the Frans Hals Museum, formerly a home for old men, and looked at Hals's magnificent *schuttersstukken*, his paintings of the city guard; we walked along shopping streets, gazing not at the display windows, but above them, at the impressive facades, and sampled the atmosphere of various *hofjes*. My guide was not a young man and all that talking was thirsty work, so we stopped off at every bar we passed. Our spirits rose, along with the beer bill.

On the southern side of the city, outside the original walls, I was surprised to find a beautiful square, Florapark, with monumental trees and monumental buildings. Lots of interesting facts there, too. One house, built at the end of the nineteenth century by the intellectual Johannes van Vloten (1818–1883), was made of unusual red bricks. He was an enlightened father whose offspring included three beautiful and intelligent daughters, each of whom married a prominent writer or artist – Frederik van Eeden, Willem Witsen and Albert Verwey – with the result that all three of them were unhappy in their own way. Van Vloten had his house built in the same red brick as the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam in order to demonstrate his support for what was a controversial project. People generally use bricks in a different way when they wish to express their disapproval. The large house was guarded by a tiny, yapping dog, which was apparently called Toos, because that was the name the current owner used to call it to heel.

On the edge of Florapark is a statue of Frans Hals. It ended up in that particular location because the philanthropist who paid for it believed that it should be situated close to his home and that the artist should be gazing approvingly at his house. Nearby, we encountered Villa Welgelegen, the most beautiful neoclassical building in the Netherlands, built in around 1800 by Henry Hope, an English merchant banker, and now the seat of the provincial government. We crossed the road and came to a large field, the 'Vlooienveld', or 'flea field', where every year on 5 May a popular music festival commemorates the 1945 liberation. This expanse of grass leads to a deer park with a city farm, which then turns into a beautiful stretch of urban woodland, the centuries-old



Monument for
Laurens Janszoon Coster
in the Haarlemmerhout.
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Haarlemmerhout. Vogel led me through the woodland from one curiosity to the next, including a pedestal without a statue which was unveiled in 1823 on the spot where Coster supposedly invented printing with movable type. Having cut letters from alder bark for his grandchildren, he fell asleep and woke to discover that, by divine providence, the letters had left an imprint in the sand. The Haarlemmerhout also played a part in the calculation of the year that Coster made his discovery. The trees were uprooted in 1426 during the siege of the city by Jacoba of Bavaria. According to one scholar, Coster started his experiments in 1420. Armed with these dates, the committee for the celebration to mark 400 years of printing decided to take the average, and settled on 1823.

The wood became famous in Dutch literature because of the story 'A Disagreeable Person in the Haarlemmerhout' (Een onaangenaam mens in de Haarlemmerhout) by Hildebrand (the pseudonym of Nicolaas Beets, 1814–1903). This tale expressed the hereditary animosity between Haarlem and Amsterdam in the form of a cousin from Amsterdam who comes to visit the narrator in Haarlem. The Amsterdammer is a disgruntled grouch who scoffs at all the delights of Haarlem, criticising everything as 'a poor show'. Hildebrand's grateful fellow citizens later chose to honour the writer who had fought for the city with such chivalry by erecting a monument to him in the Haarlemmerhout in 1913. A competition was held, but the winner, Jan Bronner, needed just under half a century to overcome all of the hurdles and finally have his fountain with six statues built. It was actually finished in 1962, which must be a world record.

A vision

Tired and hungry, we decided to have a bite to eat at a restaurant on Wagenweg opposite the wood, which logically also has the name 'Hout'. It turned out to be an excellent place, with good food, nice prices and very pleasant staff. During the meal, Wim Vogel had a great deal to say about the virtues of the city he loves, even though its inhabitants are sometimes described as 'houten Haarlemmers' (wooden Haarlemmers), because they have a reputation for being a little stiff. He talked about the variety of the music scene, the biennial choir festival, the organ concerts on the Müller organ in the Bavo, on which the young Mozart once played. He referred to the brewing, the damask weaving, the bleaching, the printing and the trade in flower bulbs, which had ensured the wealth of the city in the past, more so than now. He chuckled about *Haarlemmerolie*, Haarlem oil, a revolting remedy for all known ills, whose efficacy has never been proven, but which even today is still exported to distant lands and enjoys an indestructible reputation, particularly among sailors. He mentioned the baseball and the cricket that are particularly popular in this city and the football club, the HFC, which is the oldest in the Netherlands. Major names in Dutch literature also came up in the conversation, from the seventeenth-century dramatist and poet Pieter Langendijk to more recent figures such as children's author J.B. Schuil, poet Lodewijk van Deysel ('Te Haarlem waait het zeer'), writer and media personality Godfried Bomans and poet/writer Louis Ferron. And together we also came to the conclusion that Haarlem's reputation as the place where the best Dutch is spoken should be seen as yet another of the many myths that cling to this city.

I happily paid the bill at the restaurant and then I went for a wander down Eindhovenstraat. I looked inside the cosy, warmly lit living rooms, with their well-stocked bookcases, pianos and real art on the walls, and children and adults watching large plasma-screen televisions, glass in hand. And suddenly, in one of those living rooms, I saw a scene that struck me like a vision: a trio (piano, violin and cello) was sitting there, busily making music, just as might have happened one hundred years ago in that same living room. That's not possible, I thought; but it really was possible – in Haarlem.

Further along the street I unlocked my front door; then I quieted the dog and stroked the cat, brushed my teeth and went to bed content. ■