

The Batavian Athens or The Rapenburg and its Surroundings

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[ANTON KORTEWEG]

An inner city with a bit of age to it is dominated by a pair of impressive church towers and proudly displays a busy central market square where an imposing town hall draws the eye. Usually, in a Dutch town, that square also contains the town weigh-house, where incoming goods were weighed. But not Leiden. Leiden, the Key Town, the Batavian Athens, twinned with Oxford, is characterised not only by its pride and joy, the Netherlands' oldest and most famous university and a number of associated museums of international renown, but also by what it lacks. When after the fire in the winter of 1929 only the monumental Renaissance facade of its glorious old town hall could be preserved more or less intact, a whole new town hall was constructed behind that show-piece facade - one which, moreover, was not completely finished until 1948 because of the Second World War. And, making a virtue of necessity: the little streets behind the town hall were cleared to make way for a square. But that has never really become the town centre that was envisaged. Leiden's navel is still the 13th century Blauwe Steen, the Blue Stone, in the centre of Breestraat nearly opposite the unfortunate town hall. In the middle ages this stone was used, among other things, for decapitating people. Now the city buses rumble over it.

So, no central market square with town hall, church and weigh-house, such as they have in neighbouring Gouda and Delft. In Leiden the weigh-house is beside the water. Until the 19th century that was the city's main artery, carrying the trade. Leiden must have been a miniature Venice. Since then many of the innumerable canals have been filled in, a fate which has of course been spared the Rapenburg, considered, and not just by the people of Leiden, to be the most beautiful canal in Europe. One of the last to be filled in was the Mare, less than a century ago, despite the protests of the Netherlands' most famous historian of all time, J. Huizinga. Street names such as Hooigracht, Papengracht and Pieterskerkgracht still remind us of all the many waterways of the past. And yet after Amsterdam Leiden is still the city with the greatest number of canals. And the churches: not only are they not in the centre, they have no towers either. But they are still there for all that. The oldest, the Pieterskerk, is named after Saint Peter, keeper of the gates of Heaven. That is why Leiden has two keys in its coat of arms. Until 1512 this main church was adorned with a tower over a hundred metres high, a beacon on the land for the fishermen



of Katwijk ten kilometres to the west, on the North Sea. But in that year the tower collapsed and was never rebuilt. The unfinished Hooglandse Kerk (1366), a Late-Gothic cruciform basilica with the widest Gothic transept in the world – almost 66 metres – never even acquired a tower. Moreover, the interior of both churches, which were of course originally Catholic, is of a Saenredam-like plainness as a result of the Iconoclasm of 1566. Luckily, in the Saint (as it still was then) Pieterskerk Leiden's most famous painting, Lucas van Leyden's triptych, *The Last Judgement*, survived the Calvinist vandalism. This masterpiece of the northern Renaissance, where for the first time the human body is depicted naturalistically in complex postures, is now the prize exhibit in the city's museum, the Lakenhal. The chapels of numerous almshouses, old people's homes for the poor and needy, suffered the same fate. The only chapel to be spared was that of the Sint-Anna Aalmoeshuis (1489) on the Middelstegracht, which is why the 'Annahofje' has the only altar in Leiden to survive the Iconoclasm; the almshouse is now a Unesco world heritage site. Leiden's third old church, the Marekerk (1649), one of the first places of worship to be built specifically for Protestant worship, is an octagonal domed church – the pulpit, and with it the word of God, had to have pride of place in the centre. A tower was only a distraction.

Jan van Goyen, *View of Leiden*, 1650. Oil on panel, 65 x 97,5 cm. Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal, Leiden.



Academy Building at
Rapenburg, Leiden.
Photo by Anton Korteweg.

Viri Illustres

The lack of monumental high points such as towers certainly does not mean that Leiden has nothing outstanding to offer. The names of a number of world-famous figures are associated with the town. This is actually a disproportionately large number if one looks at the town's population in its heyday in the 17th century: 60,000. Of course this large number of *viri illustres* is down to the university founded in 1575 by William of Orange, who led the Revolt of the Netherlands against Spanish rule under Philip II. It is the oldest in the Low Countries apart from Louvain (1425). Rembrandt, our greatest painter after Vincent van Gogh and Johannes Vermeer, was born in Leiden in 1606 in the alley called Weddesteeg, attended the Latin school, which still exists, and painted his first works there. The alley is still there, but the house where he was born was pulled down a century ago. A plaque by way of a loincloth reminds us of this – Leiden has not always treated its past with due respect. Other great painters of the Golden Age were also born in Leiden, the best known being Jan van Goyen (who painted an unforgettable *View of Leiden* which can be seen in the Lakenhal museum), his son-in-law Jan Steen and Gerard Dou. Centuries later, the multidisciplinary artist Theo van Doesberg (1883-1931) also acquired international renown as '*constructor of the new life*' and leader of the international avant-garde. It was in Leiden, in 1917, that he founded the periodical *De Stijl*, with which the names of Mondriaan, Vilmosz Huszár, Hans Arp, Kurt Schwitters and Gerrit Rietveld are associated. And Leiden has made a significant contribution not only to the visual arts but also to literature, certainly in the last couple of centuries. It was there that in 1838, under the pseudonym of Hildebrand, the theological student from Haarlem, Nicolaas Beets, wrote his *Camera Obscura*, in which he sketches in Dickensian style a humorous picture of the blinkered life of the Dutch bourgeoisie. Almost thirty years later another prospective vicar, the pale young man François HaverSchmidt, made himself immortal under the pseudonym of Piet Paaltjens with a volume of mocking and melancholy poems not unfamiliar to Heinrich Heine, *Sobs and Sniggers* (Snikken en grimlachjes, 1867), full of *Weltschmerz*, unrequited loves and broken friendships:

*On the corner of the Hooigracht
And the New Rhine, there swore he
All his whole life long
My bosom friend he'd be*

*And half-way `twixt the Vink
And the Haagsche Schouw, there broke he
Some six weeks further on
His oath my friend to be.*

In the 1960s every Leiden University student was still presented with a copy of this volume, a national classic, by the University bookseller Kooyker, no doubt in the hope that the outlay would pay dividends. In the second half of last century it has mainly been writers of strict Calvinistic origins who had strayed from the faith of their fathers, people such as Jan Wolkers, Maarten Biesheuvel and Maarten 't Hart, who put Leiden back on the map as a city of writers.

Verses and almshouses

The first verse of Paaltjen's 'Immortelle' quoted above can be read, chiselled in stone, 'on the corner of the Hooigracht and the New Rhine'. It has quite a lot of competition. More than a hundred other poems from all over the world can be read on the walls of Leiden, though in calligraphic versions rather than perpetuated in stone. All in their original language. In Chinese, Russian (Achmatova, Tsvetajeva), Greek (Kaváfis), French (Apollinaire, Verlaine) and of course English (Cummings, Keats, Shakespeare and Yeats). If I could lean out of my window a bit to the right I would see, in the Russian, with an unobtrusive translation in Dutch below, Alexander Blok's 'Pharmacy', which is not exactly encouraging:

[...]
*Night, streets, pharmacy, lantern-light.
A futile glimmer in the mist.
If I live another twenty years -
No escape - all my fate is fixed.*

Nowhere do you come across more poetry than in Leiden. You bump into it whether you want to or not.

The other thing you cannot avoid in Leiden is its 35 almshouses. No city has more of these (mostly 17th-century) houses built round a shared symmetrical courtyard with a pump and intended to house the elderly poor. They were run by governors, who met in a separate assembly-room, the Governors' Room, the show-piece of the almshouse. It was often close to the chapel, where residents had to pray for the founders' souls. Even today the almshouses are



Photo by
Anton Korteweg.

still oases of peace and quiet, one of the oldest of them being the Sint-Anna Aalmoeshuis referred to earlier. Their founders were rich citizens who hoped to earn a place in heaven through their display of social caring. Other well-known almshouses are the Stevenshofje (1487), immortalised in 1889 by the Berlin painter Max Liebermann, the Groot Sionshof and the Eva van Hoogeveenshofje. In the early 17th century the Jean Persijnhof with its beautiful sundial, close to the Pieterskerk, was home to a group of Pilgrim Fathers, English Puritans who had fled the strict control of the Anglican established church in 1609 and found refuge in tolerant Leiden. In 1620 they set sail with the Mayflower for the New World; in the United States they are regarded as the founding fathers of American society. One thing they took with them from their place of exile to their new fatherland was the annual thanksgiving service held in the Pieterskerk for the raising of the Spanish Siege of Leiden almost half a century earlier. To this day Thanksgiving Day, the fourth Thursday in November, is America's national holiday. The Leiden American Pilgrim House has been set up in a 16th century dwelling-house in the Beschuitsteeg near the Hooglandse Kerk.

The coldest spot on earth

To return to Leiden's famous men and women. Around 1700 one scholar of world renown was the physician Herman Boerhaave, whose reputation was such that a letter addressed to 'Boerhaave Europe' could be sure of reaching him. Like many of his fellow professors he lived on the Rapenburg, the canal where the Academy building is and where as students the Oranges also lived, both the present Queen Beatrix and the heir to the throne Willem Alexander, descendants of the university's founder. Another doctor, albeit of Bavarian origin, Philipp von Siebold (1796 -1866) was sent by the government as a young man of 27 to the Dutch trade delegation in Japan to gather as much information as possible in that country. A task he fulfilled more than adequately. In 1830 he returned with shiploads of objects relating to Japan: plants, animals, minerals, maps, works of art, raw materials etc. From then on he was regarded as Europe's pre-eminent expert on Japan. His house on the Rapenburg is now a museum. Behind the splendid 17th-century facade one can marvel at an extensive collection of top-quality pieces from the Japan of earlier times and of today. Two centuries after Boerhaave, Leiden University became an international leader in the field of fundamental physics. In 1908 H. Kamerlingh Onnes, Dr Deepfreeze as he is popularly called, succeeded in liquefying helium and reaching a temperature that was less than one degree above absolute zero: minus 273.15 degrees. This he did in his laboratory on the Steenschuur, after radical rebuilding now used by the Faculty of Law . For fifteen years that laboratory was the coldest spot on earth. In 1913 he received the Nobel Prize, an honour previously accorded to the Leiden physicists H.A. Lorentz and P. Zeeman (1902), and after him, in 1920, to W. Einthoven. Einstein, the father of the theory of relativity, visited Leiden regularly and was given an extraordinary professorship in 1920. Until 1946 he gave guest lectures a few times every year. Other world-famous scholars from Leiden – but now we are moving to the humanities – were the Arabist Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936), the first Westerner to visit Mecca, and the historian J Huizinga (1872-1945), whose *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen) became the standard work on cultural life in France and the Netherlands in the 14th and 15th centuries.



Photo by
Anton Korteweg.



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But people from Leiden have made a name for themselves outside the artistic and university circuit too. And they were the real thing too, not imports. Mie Swanenburg, alias *Goeie Mie*, achieved notoriety around 1880 as Holland's greatest poisoner of all time. To collect the insurance money, when working as a child minder she fatally poisoned 27 labourers' children with a mixture of sulphur and arsenic stirred into their soup. A further 45 were crippled for life. Another Leiden-born woman, Mary Servaes-Bey (1919-1998), better known as the *Zangeres Zonder Naam* (The Anonymous Songstress), the most renowned exponent of the tear-jerking Dutch sentimental song, never fazed by the drunkard who neglected his children and the grieving mother, would have been in her element. Marinus van der Lubbe was also a genuine son of Leiden. This labourer and activist made it into the history books by setting fire to the Reichstag in 1933 as an act of defiance against the rise of Nazism in Berlin.

Museums galore

After the Great Ones of Leiden (male and female), let us see what fine sights the city has to offer. Its oldest monument is without doubt the Burcht, an early medieval castle on an artificial mound twelve metres high, set at the point where the Old and New Rhine meet. From there you have a beautiful view over the city. The oldest work of art is ten centuries older - a bronze Roman cavalry mask, discovered in 1966 in the remains of the Matilo fort, in the earth beneath Leiden. The excavators christened it 'Gordon', after the stage name of a popular folk singer. And, indeed, the likeness is striking. The mask is one of the prize pieces of Dutch origin in the National Museum of Antiquities (Rijksmuseum van Oudheden), also on the Rapenburg - this is becoming monotonous. The RMO is a museum that enjoys international recognition on account of its Egyptian collection, which is among the most important in the world. 38 mummies: alas,

Photo by
Anton Korteweg.



no Nefertiti but it does have the 'mummy maiden' Sensaor, whose face has been accurately recreated using modern scanning technology. As well as the RMO, the Lakenhal we have already referred to and the SieboldHuis, Leiden can boast a further ten or so smaller museums and three large ones – nowhere are museums thicker on the ground than here. Good for 700,000 visitors a year. Like the SieboldHuis and the RMO, these three large museums have developed out of university collections. They are the Naturalis, a little outside the centre, with exhibits that range from humming-bird to mammoth, from dinosaur to shrimp, The Museum of Ethnology (Volkenkunde) with images of Incas and Aztecs, Chinese paintings and African bronzes, and the Boerhaave Museum, devoted to the history of the natural sciences and medicine. This last is housed in the centuries-old Caeciliagasthuis, the oldest teaching hospital in Northern Europe, in which Boerhaave - and this was a first – did his teaching actually at the patient's bedside. Here one can marvel, among other things, at Antoni van Leeuwenhoek's microscopes and Christiaan Huygens' very first pendulum clock, along with his telescope and planetarium. Because it was not only in the early 20th century that Leiden played an important role in the natural sciences but also in the 17th. The prize exhibit here is the careful reconstruction of the Anatomical Theatre, which dates from 1594. The original was used in the winter for dissecting corpses - instructive for the students, and also a warning to other living beings who were allowed to watch the anatomy demonstrations. *Pulvis et umbra sumus* - we are dust, and a shadow. With the exception of Naturalis, all these museums, like the other sights such as the almshouses - for the connoisseur probably the greatest of the city's attractions - are within walking distance of each other. The distance from Morspoort to Zijlpoort, two of the ten surviving town gates which are diametrically opposite each other, can be covered in a brisk half hour's walking. And on a bike, a means of transport that even by Dutch standards is to be found in above-average numbers in a small student town like Leiden, it takes fifteen minutes - at the outside.

Without its university Leiden would have been an average Dutch provincial city like Haarlem, Alkmaar or Gouda, albeit somewhat atypical since it had neither tower or market. With the university, as early as the end of the 16th century the city acquired an international presence through the influx of foreign scholars, who included many Huguenots. In the 17th century the University of Leiden became a meeting-place for the greatest scholars in the Protestant world and Leiden itself the 'Stronghold of liberty' - *Praesidium libertatis*. That Alma Mater is indebted to the city for its courageous stance when it was besieged by the Spaniards in 1574, at the time of the Revolt. For more than four months the beleaguered stronghold held firm, undeterred by 5,000 deaths from hunger and plague. Mayor Pieter Van der Werf had offered himself, in true Roman fashion, as a meal for his starving and desperate fellow-citizens ('*Just eat me then*'). A 19th-century painting of enormous dimensions by M.I. Bree depicting this fine specimen of magisterial solidarity hangs in the Lakenhal. But on the 3rd of October the Spaniards took to their heels and the city was relieved. William of Orange had flooded the surrounding land along the Rhine and that proved too much for the enemy. Ever since then 3rd October has been Leiden's official festival day. Early in the morning the population are treated to herring and white bread, the food with which the liberators delighted the desperate people of Leiden. In the evening they eat hotchpotch, a stew with meat, potatoes and carrots, which, tradition has it, the besiegers were tucking into shortly before they were surprised by the rising water. A dish, by the way, that no one outside Leiden would eat unless they had to, and that Leiden folk themselves prudently consume only on the 3rd October. On that day Leiden is one huge open-air folk festival with a procession, a big fair and music. And above all with lots of smoked herring, white grapes and candy-floss. One half of the population abandons itself to it completely, the other half flees the city. Be that as it may, to thank the city for its brave resistance, in 1575 William of Orange, the leader of the revolt against Spanish rule, gave Leiden a university that is still the most prestigious in the Netherlands. In 2009 the city had no fewer than 22,000 students out of a total population of 116,000. That is almost one in five. Famous holders of honorary doctorates include Winston Churchill, Nelson Mandela and Queen Beatrix. They wrote their names on the walls of the so-called sweat-chamber, the waiting-room for anxious examination candidates in the Academy Building, the heart of the university. Its walls also bear the names, often inscribed with the aid of a ladder placed there for the purpose, of thousands of ordinary students who sweated there but not in vain: *Hic sudavit sed non frustra*. Now there is no room left; even the table has had its chips. Twelve years after the foundation of the university, namely in 1587, for the benefit of medical science a botanical garden was laid out behind the Academy Building: the Hortus, which in the 18th century was associated with the name of the famous Swedish biologist Linnaeus, the founding father of the systematic classification of plants, and before that in particular with the name of Clusius, the scholar who designed the garden. This Frenchman, who had laid out Emperor Maximilian II's herb garden in Vienna in 1573, moved to the Batavian Athens in 1593 at the age of 66. Into his new botanical garden he imported the tulip, which originated in Turkey and which was to begin its triumphal march throughout Europe from Leiden. The botanical garden in Leiden is the second oldest outside Italy – Leipzig's dates from 1580.

The hottest spot on earth

It was not only the Siege of Leiden that turned out well in the end. Nearly two and a half centuries later, on the 12th of January 1807, Leiden was hit by another catastrophe, the Gunpowder Disaster. On that day a ship carrying gunpowder exploded near the Steenschuur, the continuation of the Rapenburg, wiping out a whole residential district and leaving 160 dead and 2000 injured. The blast could be heard in The Hague; a hard-of-hearing professor who lived close to the explosion asked his housekeeper whether she had said something. Louis Napoleon, Bonaparte's brother and King of Holland in that French period, who had learnt Dutch from the Leiden poet and scholar Willem Bilderdijk and used to say '*Ik u konijn*' (I your rabbit) when he meant '*Ik uw koning*' (I your king), gained popularity by visiting the scene of the calamity within a few hours. He led the rescue work in person. For decades the disaster area was left untouched. In 1859, the university built a laboratory on the spot that on that 12th January 1807 had undoubtedly been among the hottest in the world - the very same laboratory in which half a century later Kamerlingh Onnes created the coldest spot on earth. And at the end of the 19th century a park was laid out there - no superfluous luxury in a city centre as compact as Leiden's. It was named the Van der Werf Park, after the mayor who had defied the Siege in 1575. He also acquired a statue of himself there. The victims of the Gunpowder Disaster had to manage without a monument. Only a simple, barely visible little plaque in the quay wall marks the spot where the gunpowder ship and its explosive cargo blew up.

No church towers, no 'market square', a famous university, five large and some ten smaller museums, 35 almshouses, 100 wall poems in dozens of different languages, 20,000 students and tens of thousands of bikes. That's Leiden. ■

Translated by Sheila M. Dale

Anton Korteweg gazing at his street in Leiden.

Photo by David Samyn.

