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Wintle, M.

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37. Interlocking identities

Amsterdam, the Netherlands and Europe in the built environment of the capital

Michael Wintle

Architecture can capture and project identity. Kings and presidents try to secure their legacy with palaces and museums in prominent places; eminent citizens project their achievements and wealth by building imposing residences; even ordinary citizens instinctively choose dwellings which they think reflect their style and taste. And the same is true of cities, especially capital cities. Amsterdam, like other European capitals, presents itself by commissioning its built environment at various levels and in successive periods, especially its public buildings.

There is a common popular assumption that political identities are singular, fixed items; you have one, and it involves loyalty and allegiance to a particular body or unit, most usually a nation state. If you are Dutch, then your primary loyalty or identification is with the Netherlands, and sharing that identity with something else – another country for example – will weaken or even damage your Dutch identity. Half-measures are signs of weakness: you can only have one identity, and it is the same for everyone. Remember the trouble Princess Maxima got into when she had the cheek to suggest in 2007 that there was no single Dutch national identity? Perhaps the most notorious perceived clash of identities happens when *national* and *European* identities collide: many would take the view that the more you identify with Europe, the less strong your national identity becomes.

If that kind of view characterises populist rhetoric, then it is far too simplistic. Our identities always involve loyalties to all sorts of different things, like family, gender, age group, ideology, religion, region, country, continent and much else. In addition those loyalties change over time in themselves and in relation

to others, but together they make up a complete, total identity which is the sum of those many different allegiances. Some strands may be more important than others, but identities are invariably multiple.

Here I shall illustrate this by looking at the way three kinds of identity not only coexist, but actually support each other in Amsterdam. Those three forms are ones which might be seen as being especially mutually incompatible: the local identity of the city of Amsterdam, the national identity of the Netherlands, and a European identity. Amsterdam is a particularly good but by no means unique example: a similar exercise could be conducted in London, Lisbon, Vienna, or other capitals. In Amsterdam I will show how these three kinds of collective identity have worked together and strengthened each other over time. This mutual support system has been going on for centuries, and I shall highlight it by looking at the way the three identities are broadcast on many of the buildings in the centre of the city: the visual culture which surrounds us all the time has been and still is immensely important in reinforcing messages like this. These images in stone, adorning the built environment of the capital, actively support a three-level identification with the town, the country and the continent. Amsterdam is displayed and honoured as the great trading port and capital city; the Netherlands is reflected as a fine nation and country and a productive economy; and Europe is revealed as the best continent in the world: different from and superior to the rest of the world.

Take the example of the Royal Palace on the Dam, or the Town Hall as it was when it was built, around 1650, by Jacob van Campen, and his sculptor Artus Quellinus. In the west tympanum, shown in Figure 1, the four continents of the world are shown bringing their tribute to the maid of Amsterdam, who is supported by the two river gods below, the IJ and the Amstel. To the left of Amsterdam we see Europe, wearing rich clothes and a crown (queen of the world), with various symbols of her superiority: a warhorse to show her strength in war, a bull linking her with the ancient world through the myth of Europa and the

Figure 1 – Artus Quellinus, Amsterdam and the continents, c. 1648, frieze in the west (rear) tympanum of the Royal Palace, the Dam, Amsterdam.



Bull, a horn of plenty and bunches of grapes to show her natural riches and sophistication, and books to show her learning and wisdom. Africa, further to the left, is represented by a naked (and therefore primitive) woman; she has an exotic lion and elephant with her, and is bringing ivory and bales of goods as tribute. To the right of Amsterdam, we see Asia, accompanied by a camel and wearing a turban; she has (as always) a censer and some Turkish tulips, reminding us of the tulip fever of 1636-37. On the extreme right is America, with a feather headdress and a crocodile, tobacco, sugar and silver-mining. Amsterdam is of course the star of this show, but she is the capital of the Dutch Republic, a great trading nation with a worldwide network, and she is herself part of Europe, the best and most powerful queen of the continents. This is a piece of Eurocentric, Dutch, Amsterdam promotion, and it is an image found all over the Netherlands in the 17th century in architecture, books, paintings, sculpture, and many other forms of applied art. Identifying with Amsterdam, the Netherlands and Europe goes perfectly together, and indeed the three levels strengthen each other.

This kind of imagery is found all over the city, and was not confined to the Golden Age: there are many examples from other periods, especially in the heyday of modern imperialism, from the 1880s to the First World War. The frontage of Central Station,

Figure 2 – Ludwig Jünger, Amsterdam and the continents, central and left tympani, Central Station façade, Amsterdam, 1880s.



built in the 1880s, has a series of sculptures in relief by Ludwig Jünger. Mirroring the Royal Palace version of more than two centuries before, there is a central figure of the Amsterdam maid and her two rivers (Figure 2, at the top), and in the panel to the left Europe and Africa are bringing her tribute (Figure 2, below).

Europe has books of learning, a jar of wine or oil, and grapes for sophistication in agriculture and diet, while Africa brings ivory, a lion and an exotic bird. On a third panel to the right (not shown here), are Asia and America, just as on the Royal Palace. There is a conscious repetition of the imagery here, again with the three main elements of identification, only this time the whole station building and its decoration is a celebration of the modern Dutch nation state, and its European status in the world; again, Eurocentrism is in the service of the Netherlands and especially of Amsterdam, and the combination works perfectly.

Throughout that period of later imperialism, many new buildings were commissioned in Amsterdam to glorify the town's commercial, political and cultural achievements, such as the Shipping House, built on the Prins Hendrikkade during the First World War, or the Colonial Institute (renamed the Royal Tropical Institute in 1949) on the Mauritskade, built between 1912 and 1926. The latter is copiously decorated with plaques and illustrations on both the inside and especially the outside of the building, and the designers had a clear message to send out: this is a celebration of the great Dutch empire, controlled from here in Amsterdam, and of European achievements set off against the primitive exoticism of the East. Again, the civic, the national and the Eurocentric combine in force to strengthen each other. Above the front entrance stand three female statues by Willem M. Retera (Figure 3): in the centre there is the Netherlands, with a freedom bonnet; the crowned figure of Europe appears on the left; and on the right we see a personification of the East Indies, in the form of an attractive, available exotic dancer from the distant, colonial archipelago. The Orient is summoned up in fantasy, but a fantasy concerned with communicating an identity for Amsterdam, the Netherlands and Europe, all supporting each other.

In the early 20th century a whole host of Amsterdam buildings continued to trumpet out the trinity of city, nation and continent, most of them built by the architects of the Amsterdam School, who with their decorative style dominated much of public architecture in the period between 1914 and 1930, especially in the capital but

Figure 3 – Willem M. Retera, statues over the entrance to the Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam, c. 1920.



also elsewhere in the Netherlands (and indeed further afield). Besides the *Shipping House* by J. van der Mey, and the Stock Exchange by H.P. Berlage, one could also point to the massive bulk of 'De Bazel' on the Vijzelstraat, built in 1924 by K.P.C. de Bazel as the headquarters of a colonial bank (*De Nederlandsche Handelmaatschappij*). All these edifices celebrate the city, the

Figure 4 – Theo Vos, sculptures of the continents on the Hotel NH Carlton, Vijzelstraat Amsterdam, c. 1928.



nation and Europe, and all support each other. A less well-known example is the Hotel NH Carlton Amsterdam (Figure 4), also on the Vijzelstraat, originally constructed to help with the shortage of hotel accommodation for the Amsterdam Olympic Games of 1928. It is festooned with all sorts of stylised and exotic images of all parts of the world: to welcome all the competing nations at the games, we

have Orientalism run riot. On the elevations facing the Muntplein and the Vijzelstraat, there are sculptures by Theo Vos of the four continents: from left to right, Europe with her bull, America with a bison, Africa with a lion, and Asia with an elephant. The imagery is not quite so detailed here, but it slots seamlessly into that powerful tradition of decorating the public built environment of Amsterdam by celebrating the capital, the country, and the continent all in one. That combination has been an essential component of the visual culture of the city for four centuries, and it is a perfect example of how – well before the time of the EU – identification with the civic, the national and the European displays not only a peaceful coexistence, but can palpably strengthen and reinforce the separate strands into a cohesive whole. Identities can be seen to have worked together here, as they still can, linking Amsterdam, the Netherlands and Europe.

The author

Michael Wintle holds the chair of Modern European History at the University of Amsterdam, where he is head of the Department of European Studies. He currently works mainly on European identity and Eurocentrism, and has published widely on Dutch and European history.

Further reading

Vanvugt, Ewald. 1998. *De maagd en de soldaat: koloniale monumenten in Amsterdam en elders*, Amsterdam, Jan Mets.

Wintle, Michael J. 2012. 'Visualizing Commerce and Empire: decorating the built environment of Amsterdam'. in: Marco de Waard (Ed.) *Imagining Global Amsterdam*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. 67-82.

(All the photographs were taken by the author.)