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Brouwer, P.

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Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe

Architecture : Dutch

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Author: Brouwer, Petra

Cultural Field: Sight and sound

Dutch national architecture emerged in the 1870s, when new interpretations of the architectural past were used to modernize Dutch contemporary architecture and townscapes. Under the pressure of economic and population growth, cities rapidly expanded, while the old city centres were restructured to accommodate new monumental buildings such as railway stations, hotels, department stores, theatres, post offices and schools.

Concurrent with this modernization process, the peculiar visual qualities of historical Dutch architecture and townscapes were brought to notice by foreign scholars and writers. The successful travel journals of the French writer Henry Havard (*La Hollande pittoresque*, 1874-77; *Amsterdam et Venise*, 1876) popularized the idea of the picturesque beauty of the 17th-century Dutch townscape. Even in their derelict state, after two centuries of economic decline, they had maintained a nostalgic charm. Travellers could sense the once glorious past of the modest port towns with their narrow streets and canals, small plots, brick houses with high-pitched roofs under a wide cloudscape, that were now on the brink of their regeneration.

In 1874 the Fortress Act introduced a new defence system (relying on land inundation rather than fortified cities) and allowed cities to dismantle their 17th- and 18th-century fortification walls. With Amsterdam as frontrunner – from the 1870s on Amsterdam's population of then 264,000 inhabitants steadily increased by 50,000 people every decade – cities in the Netherlands rapidly expanded with new residential neighbourhoods. The majority of these urban expansions were built in the Dutch Renaissance style that invoked the country's Golden Age. By this stylistic echo, and a street-naming policy that name-checked the naval heroes, statesmen, artists and writers of the Golden Age, a historical narrative was created that suggested a continuity between the burghers of the Dutch Republic and 19th-century middle classes.

The historical knowledge and re-appreciation of 17th-century Dutch Renaissance architecture in the last quarter of the century was fuelled by Belgian and German publications, such as Auguste Schoy's *Les grands architectes de la Renaissance aux Pays-Bas* (1876-78) and *Histoire de l'influence italienne sur l'architecture dans les Pays-Bas* (1879), and Georg Galland's *Die Renaissance in Holland in ihren geschichtlichen Hauptentwicklung* (1882). Such studies argued that the Dutch Renaissance, being part of the greater Northern Renaissance style, ought not to be judged by classical Renaissance standards (with formal features such as symmetry, horizontality, monumentality or the correct application of the Classical orders), but as an adaptation of Italian Renaissance motifs into a local style of ornamentation. The varied façades of red brick and white sandstone, with vases, mouldings, decorative brickwork bonds and stucco scroll-work resulted in a picturesque beauty all its own.

Central in this new appreciation of the Dutch Renaissance style was the German architect Eugen Gugel, first Professor of Architectural History at the Polytechnical School of Delft (founded in 1863). In the first edition of Gugel's widely-read

Geschiedenis van de bouwstijlen in de hoofdtijdperken van de architectuur ("History of building styles in the main architectural periods", 1869) the sole example of the Dutch Renaissance was Jacob van Campen's Amsterdam City Hall (1648-55); in the second edition (1886) the chapter on the Dutch Renaissance had grown from three to 21 pages. Referring to Schoy's and Galland's studies, Gugel presented the Dutch Renaissance as a truly national appropriation of the Italian and French Renaissance. Lieven de Key's Butcher's Hall in Haarlem (1602-03) – that had been disqualified in the 1869 edition as being too "carnavalesque" – was now a prominent example of picturesque beauty.

The rediscovered ornamental beauty of the Dutch Renaissance style was popularized for the 19th-century architectural profession by the successive editions of Gugel's architectural history, and even more so through folio size pattern books like Gugel's own *Architectonische vormleer* ("Architectural theory of forms", 1880-88), Jules-Jacques van Ysendyck's *Documents classés de l'art dans les Pays-Bas du XIème au XVIIIème siècle* (1883-89) and Franz Ewerbeck's *Die Renaissance in Belgien und Holland* (1883-89). Architects applied these historical forms and ornaments in their contemporary designs for new residential neighbourhoods, such as Amsterdam's *Vondelpark* quarter and the State quarter in The Hague.

While the Neo-Renaissance was wholeheartedly accepted as the appropriate style for urban expansions, this could be different in the existing urban fabric. Gugel's Neo-Renaissance design for the Central University Building in the centre of Utrecht was meant to evoke associations with the Renaissance as the age of progress and humanistic scholarship; but his design was rejected by the team of state architects who preferred a Neo-Gothic style that would harmonize with the adjacent medieval Dom tower and remnants of the monastery. The stylistic conflict also manifested an underlying struggle between the national and local authorities for control over this type of important commissions.

The driving force behind the central government's involvement with architecture and national heritage was Victor de [Stuers](#) (1843–1916), a lawyer, art lover and publicist. His polemical campaigns for art as a matter of public interest and national concern induced the Minister of the Interior in 1874 to appoint a Government Advisory Council for Historic Monuments for the preservation of architectural monuments, the care of the national museum collections and the maintenance and establishment of government buildings. De Stuers became head of the Department of Arts and Sciences that was established at the Ministry of Interior in the following year.

De Stuers could benefit from a new political climate that had emerged after the proclamation of the German Empire in 1871. The intimidating presence of this powerful neighbour stirred Dutch national feelings and a quest for a national identity. As set out in his publication

Da capo: Een woord over regeering, kunst en oude monumenten (“Da capo: A word on government, art and ancient monuments”, 1875) De Stuers pressed for a strong public presence of the modern state through architecture. A small circle of De Stuers's protégés received the commissions to realize ambitious building programmes. The most prominent architect among them was Pierre [Cuypers](#) (1827–1921), already established as a highly successful architect of Neo-Gothic Catholic churches and an outspoken follower of Eugène [Viollet-le-Duc](#).

In 1876 Cuypers was appointed architect of the Central Station in Amsterdam (1881-89) and won the (much debated and murky) competition for the National Museum (*Rijksmuseum*, 1876-85). Cuypers's former assistant Cornelis [Peters](#) (1847–1932) obtained a commission for all new post offices in the Netherlands, with the opulent Main Post Office in Amsterdam (1895-99) as its highlight. Peters was also the architect of the new Ministry of Justice (1876) in The Hague, part of a larger building and restoration programme around the seat of the national government, the *Binnenhof*, which, dating back to the 13th century, had been the centre of national politics throughout the country's history. Another supporter of Cuypers, Jacob van [Lokhorst](#) (1844–1906), became state architect for all educational buildings.

The governmental architects were a recurring subject of dispute in the national as well as in the professional architectural press for their Neo-Gothic inclination and their control over a great many commissions. The national “official style” – an eclectic mix of Neo-Gothic and Neo-Renaissance elements – was attacked for its inappropriate religious, and more specifically Catholic, character.

Beyond these disputes as to the national style's characteristic features, “official style” and the Neo-Renaissance shared important features. Both styles propagated brick as a vernacular building material, investing it with associations with moral and structural honesty, soberness and high-quality craftsmanship. From the 1870s onwards the age-old practice to plaster monumental buildings (originally occasioned by the lack of natural stone in the Netherlands), was sharply criticized. Plasterwork came to be seen as “false” because of its imitation of a foreign material and hiding from view the structural logic (and possibly flaws) of the brickwork.

At the turn of the century the compound nature of the brick wall also became associated with democracy and Socialism, with Hendrik Berlage's Stock Exchange Building (1896–1903) as its foremost but peculiar monument. Taking advantage of the lack of municipal supervision, and anticipating the triumph of Socialism, Berlage did not design an Exchange Building, but a true "House of the People". Structural problems, bad acoustics (because of the bare brick walls), and the outspoken Socialist iconography of the decorative programme, drove the stock brokers out of the building as soon as their lease terminated, after a mere ten years. Notwithstanding its poor practical usefulness, Berlage's Exchange became an iconic building for the 20th century, symbolizing a sense of Dutch national character in a straightforward, modern way. To this very day, brick continues to be the most popular building material in the Netherlands, because of the associations that were attributed to the material in the 19th century.

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