



# TRACES OF SLAVERY

in the Royal Palace of Amsterdam



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## Foreword

*Claudia Hörster, director of the Royal Collections of the Netherlands*

In 1863, the government of the Netherlands put a statutory end to the transatlantic slave trade. Nevertheless, many centuries of slavery and colonialism have left traces in not just the past, but the present as well. This history concerns us all and, unfortunately, still makes itself felt in the form of racism and discrimination. As King Willem-Alexander said: “As long as there are people living in the Netherlands who feel the pain of discrimination on a daily basis, the past still casts its shadow over our time, and is therefore very much a part of our present.”

The Royal Palace was built in the seventeenth century as the town hall of Amsterdam, the most important mercantile city of the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands at the time. Architects, artists, poets and philosophers worked together to create the “eighth wonder of the world”, a building so ingenious, so grand and magnificent that it mesmerised all who saw it, and continues to do so today. The building was Amsterdam’s way of presenting itself as the centre of the universe. In the Citizens’ Hall, the world literally lies at the feet of the City Maiden of Amsterdam, distant lands gleaming brightly in the maps that stretch across the floor beneath her imperious eye. Maps that evidence a world-spanning network, founded on overseas trade. Like many others, this building was funded in part by the profits gleaned from this trade, which relied on the domination, exploitation and enslavement of other people. The colonial system was and

remained an inextricable part of Amsterdam’s lofty position in the world, while inflicting unimaginable injustices on generations upon generations.

The entire building is an embodiment in stone and paint of moral lessons on the theme that wise government brings peace and prosperity: ‘be just’, ‘listen to advice’, ‘do not take bribes’, ‘foster peace and freedom’. These lofty ideals were not only the pride of Amsterdam, but of the entire country. During the Eighty Years’ War, the Dutch Republic rebelled against Spain, winning its freedom through a war that William of Orange justified in 1580 by emphasising the barbarity and cruelty of Spanish colonialism. Yet even as the Republic proudly sang the praises of its rebellion against Spain’s injustices, and freedom became one of the primary tenets of the Dutch identity, it forced its own cruelties of conquest, oppression and exploitation on people in the East and West Indies. It can be dumbfounding to see how the moral lessons of peace, freedom and justice that this building was designed to extol are completely silent on the injustices and deprivation of liberty that made the construction of this building possible. There is a clear double standard here, and it is difficult to understand how the brilliant minds who brought about this “eighth wonder of the world” were able to turn a blind eye to the fact that the principles and values of which they were so proud were at that very moment being violated in their own budding empire.

With this booklet in hand, we are given a new perspective on the building, its painted narratives and its history set in stone. With its concise form, the booklet does not seek to be exhaustive, nor to do justice to the depth of the visual idiom embodied in the building and the colonial history of the Netherlands. It is, however, an encouragement to turn our eyes to several little-discussed traces of slavery, briefly discussed by eleven authors and contextualised in relation to their own expertise, thus giving us an opportunity to see things we never noticed before. It is not always easy to be confronted with the cruelty of our shared history, but as the King said: “Our history has many things to be proud of, but it also offers lessons in recognising mistakes and avoiding them in the future. We cannot rewrite the past. But we can try to come to terms with it together. That applies to the colonial past as well. There is no point in condemning and disqualifying what has happened through the lens of our time. Simply banning historical objects and symbols is certainly not a solution either. Instead, a concerted effort is needed that goes deeper and takes longer. An effort that unites us instead of divides us.”







## Introduction

*Marjan Pantjes, junior curator at the Royal Palace of Amsterdam*

This is the largest, most prominent seventeenth century building in the Netherlands and remains one of the country's most important national monuments. These days, it is a Royal Palace. His Majesty King Willem-Alexander receives guests here during official state visits, and it is used for symposia and royal award ceremonies. However, the building originally served a different purpose: in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was the town hall of Amsterdam. In 1808, during the Batavian-French era in the Netherlands, Louis Napoleon claimed the town hall his palace.

When this building served as the town hall of Amsterdam, the Netherlands was not a kingdom, but the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands. The seven provinces and the major cities in the Republic had a good deal of local power, but were also centrally governed by the States General. The wealthiest and most powerful province in the Republic was Holland, with Amsterdam as its main city.

The first stone of this former town hall was laid on 28 October 1648. It was an important occasion: the Eighty Years' War with Spain had ended in May 1648, with the signing of the Peace of Münster. Amsterdam played an important role in the negotiations that led to the Republic's independence, and the town hall was built as a tribute to the victory over Spain and a symbol of that hard-won peace.

It was also a way for Amsterdam to present itself as a powerful mercantile city in the mid-seventeenth century. The Republic had developed into the central hub of an international trade network. In addition to the already thriving Baltic Sea trade, routes to Africa, Asia and America were established under the flags of the Dutch East India Company (the VOC) and the Dutch West India Company (the WIC). The wealth obtained overseas flowed back to the Republic, which prospered tremendously as a result. However, this global trade and the riches it produced cannot be separated from the trade in enslaved people, slavery and forced labour. Traces of that system are woven into the very fabric of this building.

# CITIZENS' HALL

## A European perspective

*Bert Brouwenstijn*

Three large marble maps have been laid in the floor of the Citizens' Hall. The central map shows the northern night sky, while the other two are of the Earth's Western and Eastern Hemispheres.

The Hemisphere maps are marked with brass dots, though not all are easily visible, so be sure to take a good look. A number of the dots represent capital cities. Amsterdam, for example, is clearly marked on the Eastern Hemisphere. Other dots mark trading posts of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), such as the Cape of Good Hope (now Cape Town) in South Africa and Batavia (now

Jakarta) in Indonesia. The Cape of Good Hope was a staging post where VOC ships on their way to Asia could replenish their supplies and have repairs carried out. Batavia was the headquarters of the VOC from 1619 to 1799, and as such it was of crucial importance for the administration of trade in the East.

In order to safeguard their overseas interests, the VOC and WIC needed detailed maps, which is why both companies employed the very best cartographers. Around 1652, the VOC's most distinguished cartographer, Joan Blaeu, was commissioned by the city council of Amsterdam to create maps for the floor of the Citizen's Hall. Due to his involvement with the VOC, Blaeu possessed the most up-to-date and detailed land and sea maps at the time, which he was able to use for his design.

However, Blaeu's seventeenth-century floor maps quickly wore away, and the two Hemisphere maps you see now are eighteenth century replacements. These were also made using the latest geographical insights. Areas that had not yet been explored or were simply not very important to the VOC and WIC, such as the east coast of Australia and the northwest of North America, are shown in less detail or have been left out completely.

The dots and the varying level of detail on the maps reflect the trade interests of Amsterdam and the Republic. The wealth obtained through trade in spices and other goods, including the trade in enslaved people, went hand in hand with harsh oppression of indigenous people and of the enslaved people who were transported to the Americas from Africa and Asia. These maps therefore not only present an overview of the known world at the time from a European perspective, they also reflect how the Republic saw itself as a ruler of the often ruthless world of overseas trade.



*A brass dot marks Colombo on Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) on the floor map of the Eastern Hemisphere.*



# CITIZENS' HALL

## Triangular trade

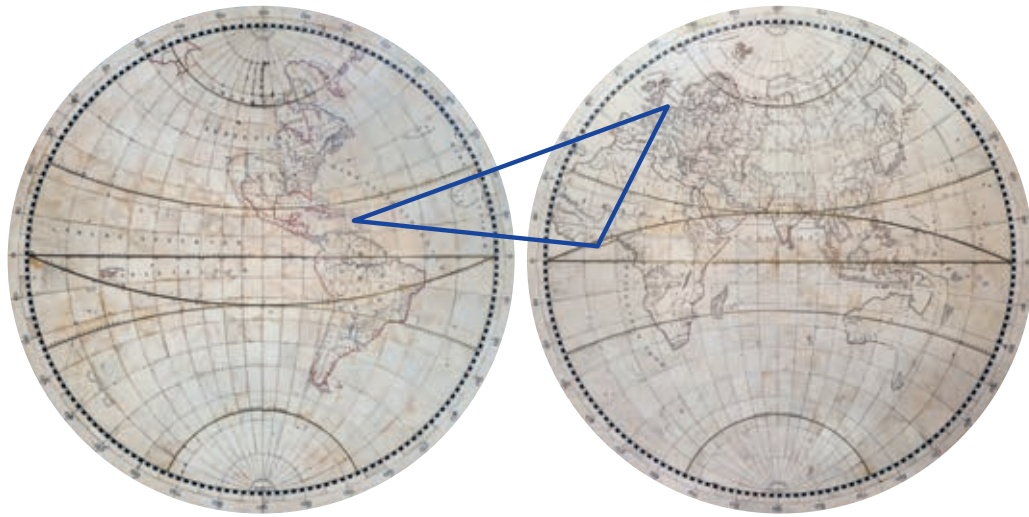
*Leo Balai*

The floor map of the Western Hemisphere shows Curaçao, above and to the right of the centre. Curaçao was conquered by the Dutch Republic in 1634. The island served as a depot from where enslaved people were sold on to the surrounding Spanish islands and the South American mainland. The slave trade that the Dutch conducted between 1623 and 1815 was organised in a manner that came to be known as the triangular trade, in reference to the three sides of a triangle.

The first side was the transport of goods such as textiles, liquor, iron, knives, mirrors and cowrie shells from the Republic to be sold in West Africa. In those days, African regions were named after the primary trade conducted there: the Pepper Coast, where traders purchased a type of black pepper (Liberia), the Ivory Coast (Côte d'Ivoire), the Gold Coast (Ghana) and the Slave Coast (Togo, Benin and parts of Nigeria). On the Slave Coast, enslaved people could only be purchased with cowrie shells. One enslaved person cost approximately 55 kilos of shells. Fort Elmina, in Ghana, was an important trading centre where traders purchased African natives for the plantations, primarily those in Suriname.

The second side of the triangle involved the transport of the African prisoners to buyers in the Caribbean. Because of the merciless labour conditions on the plantations, the enslaved workers did not live long, so new people constantly had to be shipped from Africa. Though the slave trade was prohibited in 1815, slavery itself was not abolished until 1863. Approximately 215,000 enslaved people were brought to Suriname. By the time slavery was abolished, the enslaved population numbered only 34,443. The death toll was so high that the population had not grown over time, but decreased.

After the enslaved people had been sold in South and Central America, the proceeds were used to buy lucrative goods, such as sugar, cotton and wood. The journey back to Europe formed the third side of the triangle.



*The route of the triangular trade in goods and enslaved people.*



*Detail of America with the island of Curaçao on the floor map of the Western Hemisphere.*



## CITIZENS' HALL

### The element of Fire

*Elmer Kolfin*

The corners of the arches that lead from the Citizen's Hall to the gallery are decorated with female figures representing the elements of Earth, Water, Fire and Air. The sculptor Artus Quellinus provides a surprising depiction of Fire, on the right side of the arch diagonally below the statue of Atlas. Traditionally represented is the phoenix on the left, the mythical bird that dies in fire and is reborn from its own ashes. The woman, however, is completely novel: the sculptor chose to give her an African appearance, instead of portraying her as a white woman in a classical gown, as was customary.

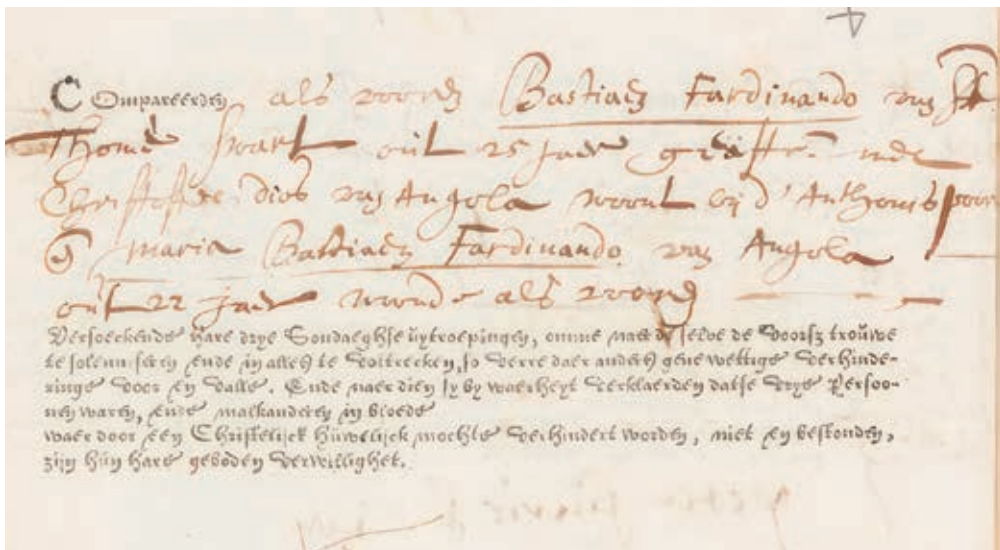
This was partly for the artistic challenge of representing a black woman in white marble, but it was also a scholarly reference to the myth of young Phaeton, who wished to steer Apollo's sun chariot. He was not strong enough and was thrown from the chariot, which then hurtled so close to the Earth that it charred people's skin black. According to the myth, that happened in Africa. The continent of Africa was often represented as a black woman from 1600 onwards. In other words, Quellinus combined Africa and Fire into a single figure.

The mayors who commissioned this work thus referenced not only classical antiquity and the elements, but also their own time and trade. In their eyes, Africa was a place where the Republic could obtain great riches, initially through the trade in gold and ivory, but from the time of this sculpture onwards – the early 1650s – increasingly through the slave trade as well.





The Market at Dam Square, 1653, Jacob van der Ulf, collection: Amsterdam City Archives.



Proof of registration of Bastiaan and Maria Fardinando's intended marriage, 1657, collection: Amsterdam City Archives.

## THRONE ROOM

### African Amsterdammers registering their intended marriage at the town hall

Mark Ponte

This room has been known as the Throne Room since 1808. However, back when this building was still the town hall of Amsterdam, it was the Magistrates' Chamber, where the magistrates passed judgement. Some of the magistrates had an additional task: as Commissioners of Marital Affairs, they registered couples who wished to enter *ondertrouw*, an official state of intended marriage. In Amsterdam, everyone who wanted to get married was obliged to register their intention to marry first. From 27 October 1656 onwards, registering that intention was done at the town hall in the room of Marital Affairs; before that, it was done in the Oude Kerk. It was also possible to get married in this Throne Room: the low area behind the richly ornamented arches was available for that purpose twice a week.

Thanks to the records of intended marriages, we know that there existed a small Black community in Amsterdam. The first time an African Amsterdam couple recorded their intent to marry at the town hall was on 17 March 1657. Their names were Bastiaan and Maria Fardinando. Bastiaan came from the West African island of São Tomé, and Maria was from Angola.

In the mid-seventeenth century, various Black families from different areas, such as Angola, Brazil and Cape Verde, lived around what is now Waterlooplein. Partly because slavery did not officially exist in Amsterdam, many of them were able to build independent lives in the city. African Amsterdam women often worked as housekeepers, while the men were usually sailors or soldiers.

People of African descent have lived in Amsterdam ever since the late sixteenth century. In fact, Amsterdam was home to people from all over world, as Jacob van der Ulf's drawing shows. A Black Amsterdammer stands by a market stall amongst the crowd of people on Dam Square. Drawings and paintings such as this were very popular and portrayed the international character of the city.







*Festoon with exotic shells, including cowrie shells, in the southeast Gallery.*



## GALLERIES

### Tropical plants and animals meant to impress

*Tinde van Andel*

Look up in the Citizens' Hall and the Galleries, and you will spot extravagant garlands of plants and animals. These festoons were carved from marble by Artus Quellinus around 1655, as ornaments for this building. Quellinus did fine work indeed: carving an opened pomegranate out of stone is no easy feat.

In addition to Dutch lettuce and oak leaves, there are exotic lemons, tulips, corn cobs, shells, tortoises and parrots – all things only a handful of people in the Dutch Republic knew about in the seventeenth century. Sunflowers, beans and corn had only recently been brought to Europe from Central America. Stuffed monkeys and tropical seashells were worth a fortune at the time. Dutch slave traders even used cowrie shells as a payment method in West Africa. After all, Amsterdam traded in people as well tropical plants and animals.

You can also see pineapples among the festoons, another valuable fruit that was solely reserved for the highest nobility. Quellinus likely never saw one in person: the sections of the pineapple are too large and the leaves are not right. What sources might the sculptor have used as a basis for his depictions of these tropical flora and fauna?

From 1630 to 1654, right before and during the construction of Amsterdam's town hall, the Republic had a colony in northeast Brazil, where enslaved Africans were forced to work on sugar plantations. Governor-General Johan Maurits had invited a group of scientists and artists to record the Brazilian flora and fauna. Among them was the painter Albert Eckhout, who returned to the Republic in 1644. He used his still lifes of Brazilian fruits to design models for wall tapestries, working in Jacob van Campen's workshop in Amersfoort. Van Campen was the architect who designed the town hall, *and* Quellinus's client. It is therefore possible that the sculptor's inspiration for the festoons came via Van Campen.



## GALLERIES

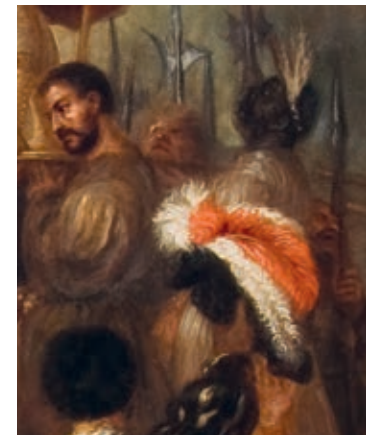
### Black Batavian

*Elmer Kolfin*

This painting by Jan Lievens, dated 1661, includes a black man. On the right, he is helping to hold up a shield upon which stands one of the leaders of the Batavian Revolution. He is wearing a headband with a kind of feather attached to it. The Batavian Revolution was a revolt by the ancient Batavians against the Romans in the year 60 AD. In the seventeenth century, the Batavians were seen as the ancestors of the Dutch.

Of course, people in the seventeenth century were well aware that there were no Black Dutch people in Roman times. The presence of this man therefore had a special meaning. He is likely a reference to the Republic's expansion across the seas, and perhaps more specifically to the slave trade. During the years when the Amsterdam town hall was being built and decorated, the slave trade grew exponentially and increasingly came to be seen as one of the pillars of Dutch wealth. Wealth that this building clearly displays, both inside and outside. In accordance with the burgomasters' instructions, Lievens would have us believe that this man is lending his strength voluntarily. Nothing could be further from the truth.

These types of paintings are not about the truth. They are meant to show what those in charge want people to believe. What we are looking at here is seventeenth century propaganda. It is a particularly bitter and even ironic example, because the Batavian Revolution was always presented as a fight for freedom. While not tolerating oppression themselves, the Dutch glossed over the slavery they inflicted on other people.



*A black man helps to carry the shield.* 19



## FORMER COUNCIL CHAMBER

### Black presence in Flinck and Bol

Imara Limon

The two enormous paintings in this Former Council Chamber, also known as the Burgomasters' Cabinet, were specially made to be placed above these mantles in the mid-seventeenth century. Govert Flinck painted *The Incorruptibility of Manius Curius Dentatus* in 1656. Here, we see someone being bribed – or rather, we see the Samnites attempting to bribe the Roman leader Manius Curius Dentatus with gold coins. However, with the aid of a simple turnip in his hand, Dentatus shows that he cannot be tempted. A black boy in the role of servant holds up the chest of gold, thus representing evil, corrupting forces.

Ferdinand Bol painted *The Fearlessness of Gaius Fabricius Luscinus* (1656), which hangs opposite Flinck's work. If you look closely, you will spot a black figure here as well: he's an elephant handler and his job is to bring the animal forth at the command of King Pyrrhus, in order to terrify and intimidate consul Fabricius. However, Fabricius boldly stands his ground. Just like in Flinck's work, Bol's painting has a black figure representing the wrong side – in this case, intimidation.

This hall is dedicated to Roman paragons of virtue, to inspire the burgomasters of Amsterdam to follow their example. Within that context, the black figures consistently play a crucial role as secondary figures or types, who are also exotically portrayed: one is associated with gold brought from afar, and the other is a half-naked figure who has tamed a wild animal. Beneath all that is the racist idea that 'the exotic Other' is a threat. Are we aware of this visual language today and its influence on how we act?





## FORMER COUNCIL CHAMBER

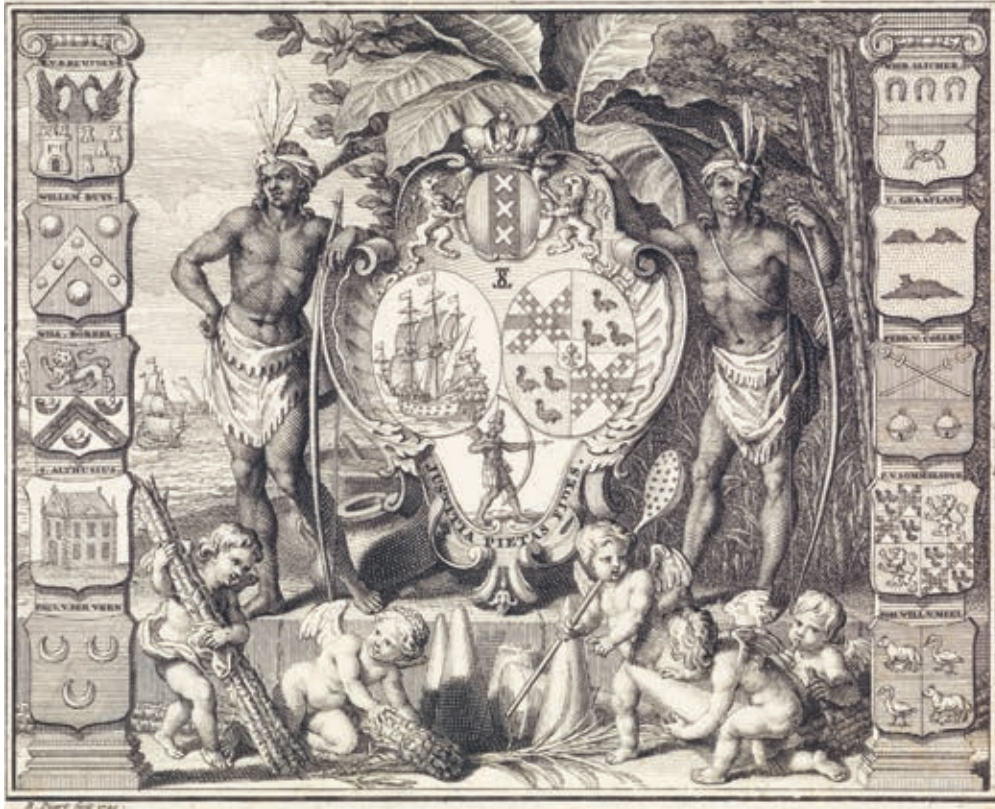
### Sociëteit van Suriname

*Karwan Fatah-Black*

The *Sociëteit van Suriname*, a cooperative involving the Dutch West India Company (WIC), the city of Amsterdam and the Van Aerssen van Sommelsdijck family, was founded here in 1683. Each of the parties became the owner of a one-third share in the colony of Surinam. They also provided the directors who would form the colony's governing board. During the first meetings of the *Sociëteit*, which later moved to the West-Indisch Binnenhuis on Singel, the subjects discussed included who would go to Surinam as governor and to which African regions slave ships would be sent.

The failed attempt in the mid-seventeenth century to build a South Atlantic colonial empire with Brazil as its centre put paid to the colonial ambitions of the Amsterdam elite for more than twenty years. The WIC shifted its trading activities, particularly the slave trade, but no longer to its own colonies. Administering a colony had turned out to be a difficult and expensive business. Interest in colonial administration eventually rekindled, however. Zeeland had conquered Surinam in 1667 and, even though the Zeeland administration had to deal with a great deal of opposition, Amsterdam was keenly interested in the progress of this profitable sugar colony. The city demanded permission from Zeeland to sail to Surinam as well.

Shortly after, Zeeland sought to sell off control of Surinam, presenting Amsterdam with an opportunity to turn Surinam into "a second Brazil". The city had enquiries conducted to determine the level of interest in the colony of Surinam, and various merchants, shipbuilders and other entrepreneurs indicated that they were amenable to the idea of managing a colony. This led to the establishment of the *Sociëteit van Suriname*, making human trafficking and the treatment of Black people as property part of the administrative portfolio of prominent Amsterdam residents. Though this had long been limited to the WIC, it then became part of the duties of the city government.



Crest of the *Sociëteit van Suriname* with the coats of arms of its three participants: the WIC, the Van Aerssen van Sommelsdijck family, and the city of Amsterdam, 1720, Bernard Picart, collection: Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.







## BURGOMASTERS' CHAMBER

### The role of Amsterdam's burgomasters

*Pepijn Brandon*

The burgomasters of Amsterdam, whose office was here in the Burgomasters' Chamber, were well aware of their power as representatives of the largest, wealthiest and most politically influential city in the Dutch Republic. With their policies, they could affect global politics. Their daily affairs were closely connected with colonialism and slavery: whenever the burgomasters felt that the interest of Amsterdam's merchants were at risk, they actively involved themselves with the politics of state.

The burgomasters of Amsterdam made their voices heard in countless cases, including one in the summer of 1664. In the year before, England's newly established Royal African Company had carried out attacks on Dutch strongholds along the West African coast. These forts and islands, managed by the Dutch West India Company (WIC), played a major role in the trade of commodities with West Africa, as well as in the slave trade. The WIC requested military support to drive away the English, and, through various channels, the burgomasters of Amsterdam pushed for Vice-Admiral Michiel de Ruyter and his fleet to recapture the WIC strongholds. Their subsequent success partially contributed to the start of the Second Anglo-Dutch War.

Protecting Amsterdam's commercial interests was often an important objective when war loomed. This was also the case in the eighteenth century. For example, in the final phase of the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1713), the burgomasters went to great lengths to prevent the exclusion of Dutch traders from the *asiento de negros*, a lucrative contract for slave trade with the Spanish colonies.

## The House of Orange and the colonies

*Gert Oostindie*

That young woman is the eighteen-year-old Queen Wilhelmina, painted on the occasion of her investiture in 1898. The portrait radiates majestic glory, which explicitly includes the colonial dimension. It was made for the palace of the governor-general in the Dutch East Indies, the Batavia coat of arms is clearly visible in the background. The Queen represents the unity of the Netherlands and the colonies, just as her predecessors did.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the stadtholders of Orange Nassau played an important role in the national government of the Dutch Republic. This means that they were involved in colonial policy, and therefore with slavery.

After the Batavian-French era (1795-1813), the Netherlands became a monarchy. King William I considered the colonies very important and the Constitution of 1815 granted him "supreme administration" of the colonies.



Inauguration portrait of Queen Wilhelmina in the Justice Chamber, 1900, Pieter Josselin de Jong, collection: Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands.

However, that prerogative was withdrawn in 1848, during the reign of William II. Henceforth, colonial administration would be parliamentary and governmental business. However, the House of Orange retained interests in the colonies and were kept well informed of what went on there.

King William I exercised his "supreme administration" with zeal. The Cultivation System (1830-1870), which proved extremely profitable for the Netherlands, was established partly on his initiative. William II and William III were less directly involved, but continued to support colonial policy without any noticeable reservations. While they did not attempt to hinder the abolition of slavery in the Dutch East Indies in 1860 and in Suriname and the Caribbean islands in 1863, they did not actively promote it either. In a particularly bitter twist of irony, the Cultivation System, which relied on forced labour by Javanese farmers, was used to fund the compensation of the slaveholders (not the enslaved people!) for the abolition of Caribbean slavery.

The Queen Mother Emma and Queen Wilhelmina were staunch supporters of colonialism, including harsh military action. Wilhelmina continued to advocate for the preservation of the Dutch East Indies for many years. Under Queen Juliana, Indonesia and Suriname separated from the Kingdom in 1945 (with the transfer of sovereignty in 1949) and 1975, respectively. Only the Caribbean islands remained part of the Kingdom.

Like his mother Beatrix, our current king, Willem-Alexander, is closely involved with the Caribbean islands and in the debate about the Dutch history of colonialism and slavery, including the role of the House of Orange-Nassau in that history.



Portraits of King William I and King William II, 1835 and ca. 1840-1850, Jan Adam Kruseman



# MOSES HALL

## The burgomasters' personal interests

Pepijn Brandon

This is where the *vroedschap* (city council) convened in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The city council was made up of 36 citizens who advised the four burgomasters of Amsterdam. The coats of arms of the council members on the wall illustrate how closely the city's politics were intertwined with the family interests of these regents. Burgomasters and councillors were mostly merchants and financiers from a small group of families, who unashamedly took pride in their status as members of the wealthy elite of the city. Many of the families whose coats of arms are on display here provided not just one, but two or three generations of city administrators. The fact that these men were recruited from the wealthiest mercantile families meant that almost all the family names in this room were closely connected with colonial trade.

Take the blue and red shield of Ferdinand van Collen (1681–1764), for example, at the bottom right on the wall. Ferdinand van Collen became a director of the Dutch West India Company (WIC) at the age of 28. He later served as *schepen* (judge), chief officer and burgomaster of Amsterdam. His father, Ferdinand van Collen senior (1651–1735), was a director of the *Sociëteit van Suriname* and was involved in the outsourcing of the slave trade to private traders as a director of the WIC. Ferdinand van Collen junior ceded his place on the city council in 1749, in favour of his son: Ferdinand Ferdinandsz van Collen (1708–1789). This Ferdinand Ferdinandsz was appointed representative of stadtholder William V as the chief director of the WIC in 1766, a prestigious position that he took over from the wealthy merchant Thomas Hope.

The Van Collen family was no exception in this regard. Many members of the city council simultaneously served in official positions for the city – burgomaster, chief officer, judge – and in the trading companies. Egbert de Vrij Temminck and Bonaventura Oetgens van Waveren were directors of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and later became burgomasters of Amsterdam. In 1753, Cornelis Hop was not only burgomasters, but also a director of the VOC *and* the WIC, functions that Matheus Lestevenon also held.



Council Chamber in the Town Hall of Amsterdam, 1790, Noach van der Meer naar Willem Kok, collection: Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.



## MOSES HALL

### Part of a system

*Gijs Stork*

My ancestor Dirck de Vlaming van Oudtshoorn (1573-1643) was one of the four burgomasters of Amsterdam who commissioned the construction of this town hall of Amsterdam, now the Royal Palace. His family coat of arms is therefore prominently displayed on the ceiling in the Throne Room. Back then, the Throne Room was the town hall's courtroom, where schepenen (judges) passed laws and adjudicated disputes along with the schout (chief officer). I also recognise other names and coats of arms in the other rooms of this building, including in this Moses Hall: Bicker, Six, Tulp and Valckenier, to name a few. Several of them are also my ancestors or relatives by marriage. These powerful, posh Amsterdammers wanted to show off their contributions to the city's success by putting their names and coats of arms on display.

Walking through the Palace – or rather the town hall, because that is what this building was in the era that I have a personal connection with – you can see family coats of arms everywhere. Thanks to that, you can still see what the system was at the time, who held the power, how a small group of people doled out the cushy jobs amongst themselves, and how they were involved in a much larger system that made Amsterdam enormous amounts of money at the time. Walking through this building, you can see that system: the system of power and trade, but also who wielded that power.

Through the recognition and visibility of the family coats of arms and the knowledge of my family history and the history of the city, my entire family and I are still connected to this past – the stories both told and untold, as well as the darker consequences of the deeds of the once powerful governors of the city. We are all part of a system. A big part of the colonial history of Amsterdam was a well-oiled machine: the system. That system is clearly visible in the Royal Palace.



## BEDROOM OF THE ENGLISH QUARTER

### Slave ships

*Leo Balai*

When this building was still the town hall of Amsterdam, the room now known as the Bedroom of the English Quarter was the Insurance Chamber. This office was dedicated to the insurance of sea-going ships and their cargoes. Conflicts concerning damage to ships or their cargoes were also adjudicated here. The scene above the door represents the story of Arion. After being forced to leap into the sea from his ship, Arion was saved by a dolphin, who carried him back to land. The dolphin was his insurance, as it were, who made sure that his story ended well.

The Dutch West India Company (WIC) shipped all manner of goods to Africa, where the proceeds were used to buy African prisoners. These Africans were then loaded aboard slave ships bound for Central and South America, where they were forced to work on plantations. The ships and trade goods were insured, but the prisoners were not. This was an intentional policy: the WIC assumed a loss of ten to fifteen per cent as a result of deaths during the voyage. The surviving prisoners were sold at a profit.

Slave ships were floating prisons, and particularly cruel ones at that. After the prisoners had been branded, they were loaded onto ships like trade goods and assigned a number. The men were chained down in the hold; women and children were not. The sailors were generally armed and carried whips to keep the enslaved prisoners under control. Women were often victims of rape by the sailors. Many of the prisoners died during the journey and never reached the plantations. Their bodies were dumped overboard and their number crossed off the list, as if they had never existed. Out of sheer desperation, some prisoners committed suicide by jumping overboard. Unlike Arion, they had no hope of rescue: leaping into the sea was a guaranteed death sentence.







*Asia and America offer the City Maiden of Amsterdam trade goods, detail of the tympanum on the Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal side, ca. 1655, Artus Quellinus.*



*Africa and Europe offer the City Maiden of Amsterdam trade goods, detail of the tympanum on the Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal side, ca. 1655, Artus Quellinus.*

## EXTERIOR

### Making hidden history visible

*Jennifer Tosch*

During the construction of this former Amsterdam Town Hall it was described as “the eighth wonder of the world”. The Dutch heritage, memory and dominant narrative, primarily focused on the glory of the later called ‘Golden Age’, positioned Amsterdam as a global power, and helped create an idealized national identity. Symbols of conquest, power, superiority, and prosperity are visible throughout the structure and uphold this national self-image. However, the colonial symbols of slavery, war, exploitation, and domination are also visible, but forgotten, ignored, or kept at a distance. By shifting perspectives and looking through a decolonial lens the building offers very different points of view.

The triangular tympanum high up on the building, underneath the statue of Atlas, shows the city maiden of Amsterdam surrounded by people offering her goods from all corners of the world. She, Amsterdam, is presented as the center of world trade, and, indeed, the center of the world itself. To her left, the crowned female figure representing Europe holds a cornucopia with fruits, a reference to abundance and prosperity. Behind Europe, Africa is depicted as a partially dressed black woman accompanied by a lion and an elephant, followed by people bringing goods such as ivory tusks that can be seen in the corner on the far left. To the right of Amsterdam’s city maiden, the figure of Asia leads a camel by a rein. She brings incense and spices. Lastly, America can be recognized by the figures with a feather headdress. Silver and gold is being mined and carried to the center. In its blatant imagery, the tympanum reinforces the sense of superiority that ‘great Dutch ships’ transported the ‘treasures’ from around the world: animals and products from different continents. What is more, enslaved people play an active part in this image. They are shown carrying the heavy goods.

The glorified representation of this period is not totally wrong, it is incomplete. A new age is emerging with new histories being written. If we reframe the narratives that have maintained this hierarchy, romanticism and nostalgia, the ‘future for the past’ will reflect a more balanced collective memory and cultural heritage.



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Tinde van Andel** is an ethnobotanist who works at Naturalis, Wageningen University and Leiden University. She is involved in *ERC Brasiliae*, a research project into the historic herbaria and botanic drawings from colonial Dutch Brazil (1630-1648).

**Leo Balai** is a historian with a special focus on the history of slave ships during the transatlantic slave trade. His works include *Geschiedenis van de Amsterdamse slavenhandel* (History of the Amsterdam Slave Trade) and *Herengracht 502*, a book about the history of Amsterdam's mayoral home.

**Pepijn Brandon** is professor of Global Economic and Social History at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, as well as Senior Researcher at the International Institute of Social History. He was engaged by the municipality of Amsterdam to research the role of Amsterdam's administrators in the history of slavery.

**Bert Brouwenstijn** is a GIS cartographer with the Faculty of Humanities at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. He also works as a freelance graphic designer, illustrator and 3D specialist.

**Karwan Fatah-Black** is a historian and university lecturer at the faculty of Social and Economic History at Leiden University and an expert in the field of early modern globalisation and the history of the Atlantic slave trade. He has published books about slavery and colonial administration, including *Sociëteit van Suriname 1683-1795. Het bestuur van de kolonie in de achttiende eeuw*.

**Elmer Kolfen** is an art historian with the University of Amsterdam. His area of expertise is seventeenth-century Dutch painting and printing. His book about the Batavian Series (1660-1666) in the Royal Palace, titled *De kunst van de macht Jordaens, Lievens en Rembrandt in het Paleis op de Dam*, is scheduled to be published in the autumn of 2023.

**Imara Limon** is a curator at the Amsterdam Museum. Recent exhibitions she has organised there include *Monument der Regentessen: Natasja Kensmil* (2020-2021) and *Colonial Stories: Work in Progress* (2022). In 2017, she developed the permanent programme series New Narratives in order to promote inclusiveness in the museum.

**Gert Oostindie** is professor emeritus of Colonial and Postcolonial History at Leiden University and, until 2021, he served as director of the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies. He has published many books about the history of colonialism and slavery and the postcolonial history of the Netherlands. At the request of H.M. King Willem-Alexander, Oostindie is currently leading the research into the role of the House of Orange-Nassau in the colonial history of the Netherlands.

**Mark Ponte** is a historian with the Amsterdam City Archives. He researches and writes about various topics, including the early modern history of migration and slavery of Amsterdam.

**Gijs Stork** is an art historian who digs into the history of slavery in his own ancestry. On his mother's side, he is descended from a series of prominent Amsterdam merchants and regents.

**Jennifer Tosch** is a heritage historian and the founder of Black Heritage Tours in Amsterdam (since 2013), co-founder of Sites of Memory and a member of Mapping Slavery Netherlands. Her tours bring 'hidden' history to light.



# COLOPHON

## Traces of Slavery in the Royal Palace of Amsterdam

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