

DIALOGUES BETWEEN  
**ANTONI VAN LEEUWENHOEK**  
AND **JOHANNES VERMEER**

Dirk van Delft &  
Elisa Pesapane

# *What if...?*



Amsterdam  
University  
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Inkijkexemplaar



# What if...?

DIALOGUES BETWEEN ANTONI VAN LEEUWENHOEK  
AND JOHANNES VERMEER



ANTONI VAN LEEUWENHOEK and JOHANNES VERMEER were roughly the same age, they were extremely curious and they grew up in the bustling city of Delft in the

seventeenth century. Nowadays, they are world famous. Both explored and created new worlds.

Van Leeuwenhoek discovered the miraculous micro-life with his self-built microscopes, Vermeer toyed with light and painted masterpieces such as *Girl with a Pearl Earring* and *View of Delft*. What if... they knew each other? What if they were best friends who discussed private and work-related issues that affected them in crucial moments in their lives? Masters in art and science, but at the same time people of flesh and blood, forever bound by light.

In *What if...? Dialogues between Antoni van Leeuwenhoek and Johannes Vermeer* by author Dirk van Delft and visual artist Elisa Pesapane, their conversations are recorded in both words and images.

'Like the possibility that Rembrandt van Rijn and Baruch Spinoza were buddies in Amsterdam, sharing deep thoughts about man, God and fate, the chance that in Delft Johannes Vermeer and Antoni van Leeuwenhoek exchanged ideas on optics, space and light is a speculation that sets the imagination on fire. We can be thankful that Dirk van Delft and Elisa Pesapane were unable to resist the temptation of butting into the discussion we'd love them to have had, enlivening and enlightening our understanding of the contributions of these two giants to art and science.' — Gary Schwartz (art historian)

#### ABOUT THE MAKERS:

Dirk van Delft is guest researcher at Instituut-Lorentz for theoretical physics of Leiden University and former director of Rijksmuseum Boerhaave (history of science and medicine). He recently published biographies of meteorologist Christoph Buys Ballot, particle physicist Martinus Veltman and microscopist Antoni van Leeuwenhoek.

Elisa Pesapane is an artist, curator and writer. She creates multidisciplinary art projects and publications, both solo and with colleagues from other fields, such as *Liefde na Auschwitz* (Love after Auschwitz) with Arnon Grunberg.

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maetge Jans,

Dito. 1. kind maetge, vader Abraham Gijnding &, moeder is -  
Tegetge Wisselink &, getuygdes Jacob Wijntjes van Jans,  
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Dito 1. kind Cris, vader J. pich &, moeder Sara Willems,  
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Dito. 1. kind Custama, vader Johannit van der, moeder Jitge  
Jans, getuygdes Wynant Wijntjes &, & maetge Leent

Dito. 1. kind Jans, vader J. Willems van der Wilde, moeder  
Teetge Willems Coolb, getuygdes Johannes van der Wilde &  
Willems Willems Coolb, & Leentge Jans,

volk de Maent November. 1632

4. Dito. 1. kind Teunis, vader Philipp Teunis &, moeder Leentge -  
Jacob, getuygdes Teunis Philipp &, Jing Teunis &, -  
Magdalena, & Leentge Jans & &



# Introduction



**THEIR NAMES** are listed on the same page of the Nieuwe Kerk's (New Church's) baptismal book in Delft: Joannis and Thonis. Within the same week, the Reformed Church's minister

on duty baptized the two most famous sons Delft ever produced: Johannes Vermeer and Antoni van Leeuwenhoek, on 31 October 1632 and 4 November 1632, respectively. With masterpieces such as *The Girl with a Pearl Earring*, *View of Delft* and *Allegory of Painting*, Vermeer would become world famous. Today he is considered one of the greatest painters ever. Unfortunately, this happened posthumously for him, whereas Van Leeuwenhoek enjoyed international fame during his lifetime due to his pioneering microscopic discoveries. This 'father of microbiology' was the first to spot unicellular organisms, bacteria and sperm cells, thus unlocking a new, unknown world full of miraculous life, invisible to the naked eye.

Antoni and Johannes knew each other well. It was only a few minutes' walk from the ungainly house on Oosteinde, where Antoni's father

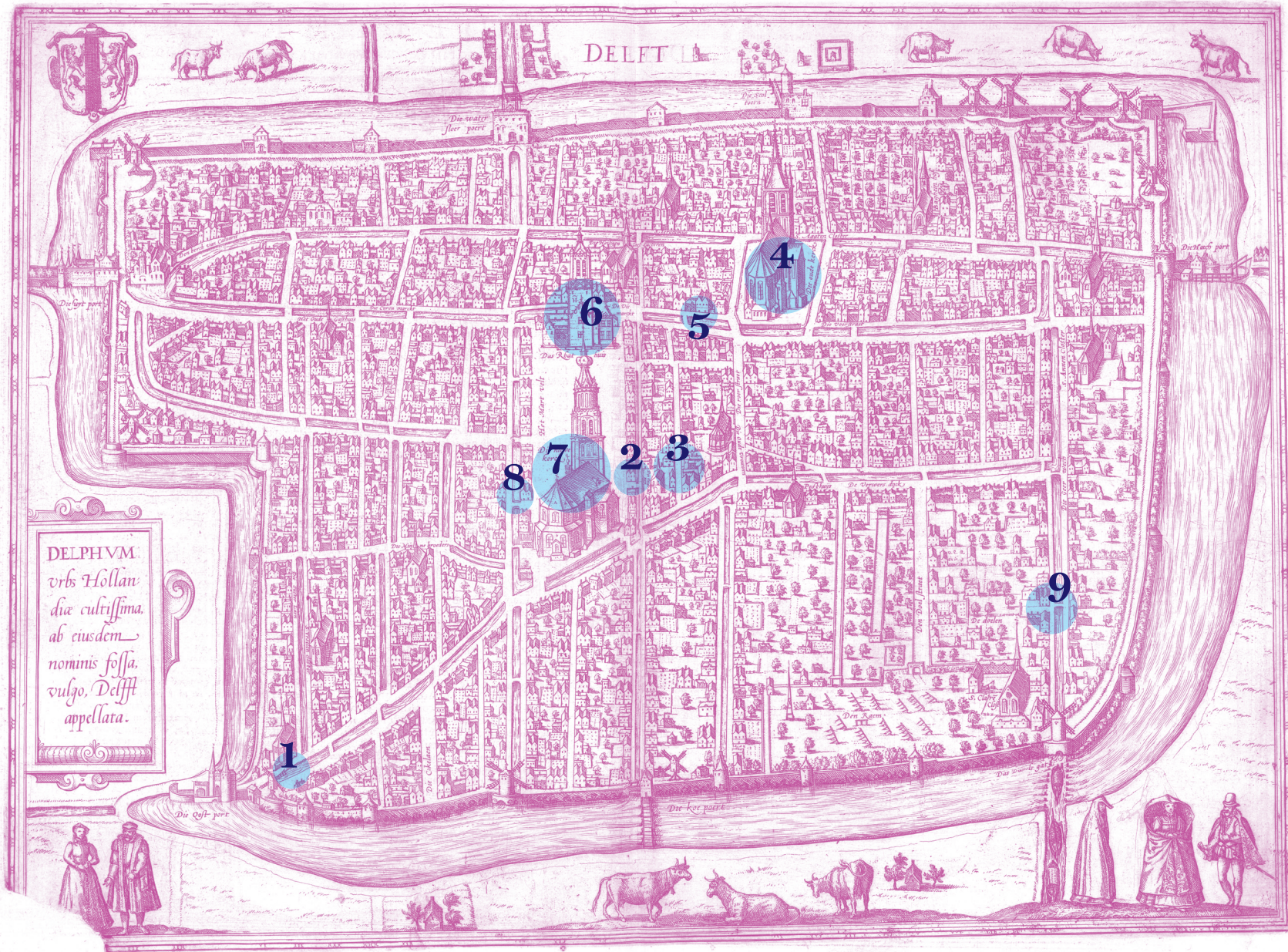
earned his living as a basket weaver, to Vermeer's father's lodge 'De Vliegende Vos' (The Flying Fox), situated along the Voldersgracht. From the age of four, they were in the same class at school, where their friendship blossomed, forging an unbreakable bond that would remain throughout their lives. Even though their personalities were very different, they remained friends to the end. Antoni was forthright, opinionated, socially adept and wildly curious whereas Johannes was introverted, withdrawn, caring and extremely precise. These differences were no obstacle to amicable contact, in which entertainment, love and suffering, as well as art and science, were frequent subjects of conversation.

In what kind of ambiance did these encounters between the two titans take place? Mid-seventeenth-century Delft had a population of twenty-five thousand and was a city past its prime. The once thriving cloth industry had shrunk considerably and one brewery after another fell into ruin due to dirty canal water and increased competition. The rise of the Delftware pottery industry could only partly compensate for this

decline. When William of Orange settled in the Prinsenhof (formerly Sint-Agatha Convent) in 1572, high walls, ramparts and an outer ring were erected to protect the city from intruders. The city walls counted eight gates; the Oosterpoort (Eastern Gate) was only a few steps away from Antoni's birthplace. Delft served as the armoury of Holland, and because of its waterway connection to the seaport in Delfshaven, the city housed offices and warehouses of both the East India Company, the West India Company and the Nordic Company (a whaling company). Antoni would take home many an exotic specimen for his microscopic research from these warehouses.

Visually, the city was dominated by the Old and the New Churches, with the Market Square and the rebuilt Town Hall in between the two. Next to the Market Square was the Voldersgracht, the canal where Johannes had grown up. In 1641, when Johannes was eight years old, the Vermeer family moved from The Flying Fox to the larger 'Mechelen', a fine building on the Market Square. Here Johannes' father, assisted by his mother and his only sister Geertruy (then twenty years old),







continued the business, including their art trade, on a larger scale. Due to all the different kinds of people that visited the inn, Johannes also came into contact with artists and viewed their work at an early age.

This city in Holland, which didn't have a university but did have a thriving industry in the field of optics, provided Antoni van Leeuwenhoek with an additional advantage. Delft experienced its artistic heyday in the middle of the seventeenth century, with innovative painters such as Leonard Bramer, Carel Fabritius and Pieter de Hooch, ensuring that Johannes Vermeer felt at home. In that world, with the Guild of St Luke on the Oude Delft (it moved to Voldersgracht in 1661) as its main gathering place, technique mattered as well: preparing paint, working with

perspective, and deploying lenses, mirrors and camera obscuras for special effects. These were topics that interested the perfectionist Johannes greatly and which he very much enjoyed discussing with Antoni. And in turn, Antoni sought advice from his artistic friend regarding the depiction of minute creatures that no one could even have imagined existed.

Vermeer and Van Leeuwenhoek explored and created new worlds. Johannes played with light, shadow, colour and transparency, making discoveries that gave his paintings a unique expressiveness. Antoni was an explorer of the micro-world. Both let their imaginations run wild, ventured off the beaten path and proved to be very precise observers. They also felt a need to share the progress they made in their work

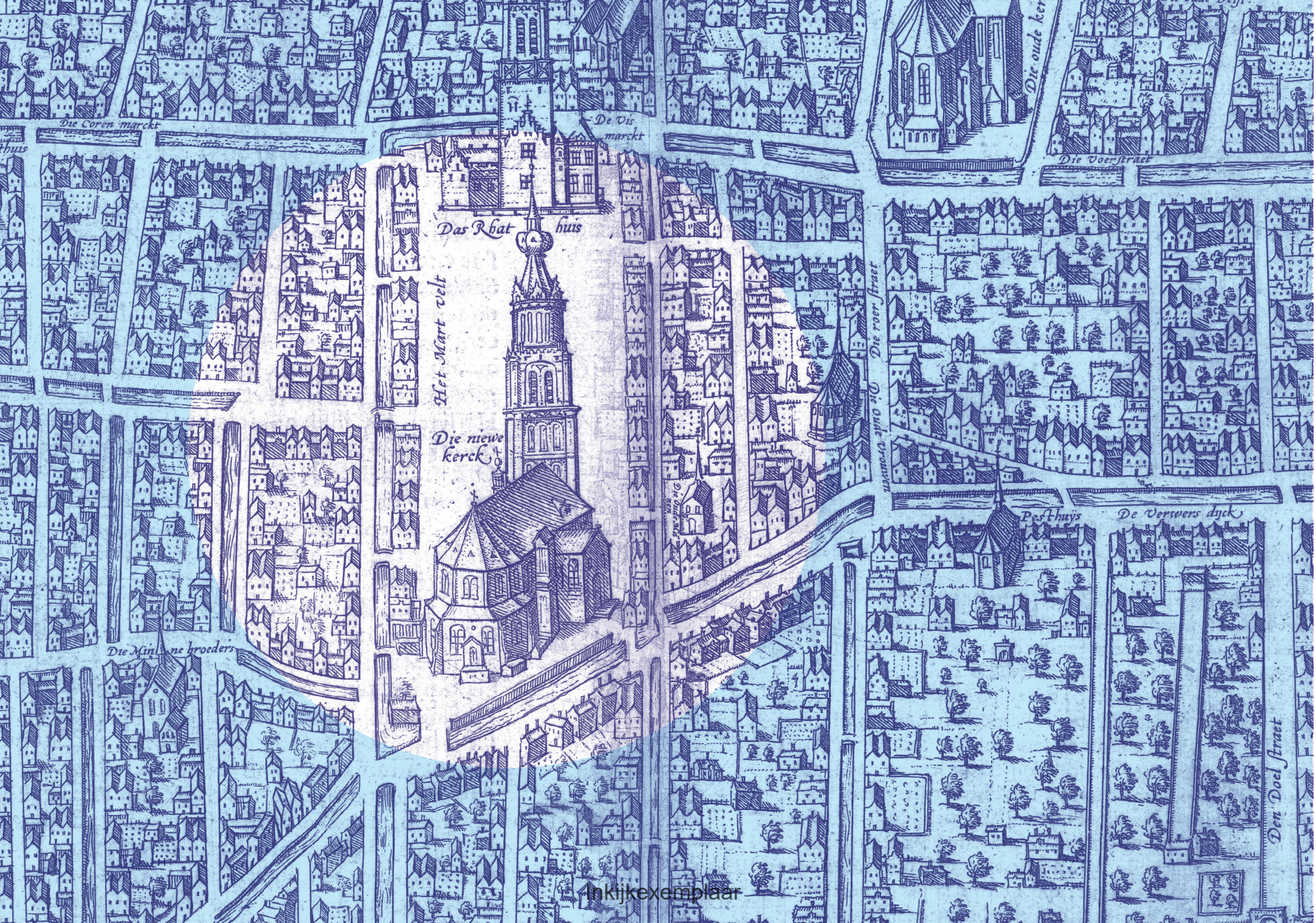
with one another. They sought each other's company during the crucial moments in their lives, either in Johannes' studio or Antoni's office turned makeshift laboratory. There were also chance encounters: on the ice rink outside the city walls, in front of the Schiedam Gate, or at the edge of the immense crater struck by the Delft Thunderclap. Constantijn Huygens, a diplomat and a poet as well as a great lover of art and science, received the two friends at his country estate, Hofwijck.

Their candid conversations during such moments, sometimes at unexpected locations, which continued until Johannes' death, are chronicled here in the following chapters.

#### IMPORTANT LOCATIONS IN DELFT

1. BIRTHPLACE ANTONI, OOSTEINDE
2. MECHELEN INN, MARKT
3. BIRTHPLACE JOHANNES, VOLDERSGRACHT
4. OUDE KERK (OLD CHURCH)
5. ANTONI'S HOME, HIPPOLYTUSBUURT
6. TOWN HALL
7. NIEUWE KERK (NEW CHURCH)
8. JOHANNES' HOME, OUDE LANGEDIJK
9. LOCATION DELFT THUNDERCLAP





Die Corin markt

De Vis markt

Die oude ker

Die Voerstraat

Das Rhat hus

Het Mart velt

Die nieuwe kerck

Die roer straat

Pest huys

De Venwers dyck

Die Minne broeders

Den Doel straat

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# I *The Classroom*

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 7TH, 1641



**THE CLASSROOM** located in the alley behind the Market Square is a mess. It's stuffy, the walls are covered with mould and sparse light penetrates the narrow window. It's swarming with children, boys and girls, about fifty altogether, most of them between the age of five and ten. Above their incessant twittering, occasionally loud cries can be heard. The floor is littered with empty baskets, toppled cups, single shoes and the occasional piece of headwear. ABC books, sheets of paper, slates and pencils are lying all around. On the walls there are plates with the alphabet, storage cupboards and wooden schoolbags. A pitcher next to a work table is waiting to be kicked over.

Amid all the muck, the youngest children wander across the floor, rascals chase each other or get into mischief. But most pupils sit at the tables and practice either spelling difficult words or transcribing letters. Others are busy reciting prayers and psalms by heart, which their school-

master will test them on tomorrow. That same schoolmaster, who also serves as a gravedigger and is the cantor in the church, sits behind a lectern on a platform. The situation in his classroom doesn't warrant harsh intervention, even though earlier that morning he summoned two hoodlums in front of him and beat them with the rod. But there are no excesses at the moment, and one by one the students report back to his desk to be tested. If they make a mistake, they are irrevocably slapped on the fingers with the rod and several unfortunate pupils will walk away in pain.

At the large table next to the schoolmaster, the two friends Antoni and Johannes, aged eight, are engrossed in their work. With a quill dipped in ink, they are very accurately transcribing letters. They started doing this last week, after having practiced with a piece of chalk on a slate for quite some time. It is meticulous work, and unaccustomed to this task, they try to hold the quill properly. Regrettably, the writing doesn't go nearly as well as they would like it to. But they are not distracted, neither by the moaning elsewhere in the

classroom nor by the show-off who has climbed on his desk to sing his psalm verse. This happens without any remarks from the schoolmaster, even if he is very out of tune.

'Shall we quiz each other?' suggests Antoni as he dips his quill into the ink.

'That's a good idea,' Johannes responds without looking up. He sweeps his curls away from his face and continues writing his 'm'.

'What does the law of God demand of us?' begins Antoni.

'To love God above all else and our neighbour as ourselves,' Johannes replies without faltering. He has finished writing the 'm', with graceful arcs, and is starting on an 'r'. Gothic letters will come later. Undeniably, he has more talent for drawing than his friend. The teacher's drawing lessons on the Voldersgracht are starting to pay off. Antoni, on the other hand, is more adept at sharpening the tip of the quill.