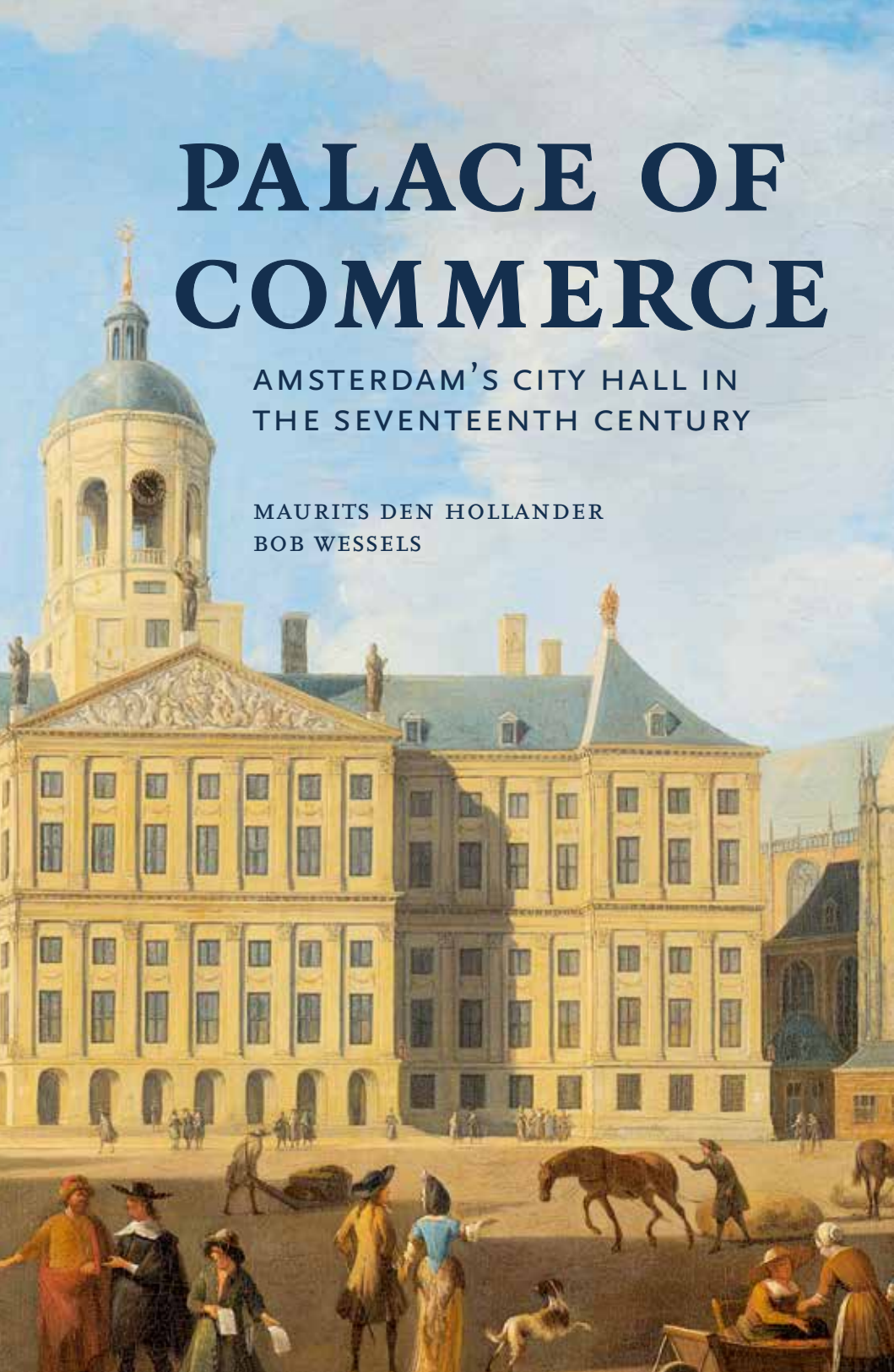
PALACE OF COMMERCE

AMSTERDAM'S CITY HALL IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

MAURITS DEN HOLLANDER
BOB WESSELS



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Cover image: Gerrit Berckheyde (1693), The City Hall on Dam Square, Amsterdam [© Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam].

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PREFACE

On Tuesday 26 April 2022, we first set foot in Amsterdam's magnificent Royal Palace. Having met in the context of our common academic interest in the city's early modern insolvency law, we were eager to finally face Quellinus' sculpture depicting the 'Fall of Icarus' in person. After an inspiring tour, we found that the otherwise well-stocked gift store could not satisfy our curiosity about the building's history and function in the seventeenth century, when it still served as Amsterdam's city hall. We decided to write that book ourselves, intended for all those who are equally interested in the Royal Palace's hidden past of close to 400 years ago.

We chose to write a short, well-illustrated book, that combines recent historical literature with the fruits of additional archival research. The overwhelming amount of material on Amsterdam and its 'Golden Age' forced us to be selective. This means that we had to be particular about our choice of rooms in the building to describe, and about which details to include on all those intriguing burgomasters and other officials who worked in this gigantic building. Furthermore, we did not write extensively about interesting topics such as the Stock Exchange ('Beurs') or other still visible testimonies of Amsterdam's rich and unique private-public organisation of urban institutions, such as its houses of correction, orphanages, craft guilds, or even the upper floors of the city hall. The short chapters and explanatory windows are nevertheless representative of the work of the Amsterdam urban government and its administration in the seventeenth century. They tell stories and provide background scenes to the rooms and spaces of the Royal Palace that are publicly accessible today. We hope that both foreign and Dutch visitors, tourists, Amsterdam citizens and (international) academics, will appreciate the result of our imaginative and enjoyable collaboration.

The authors thank especially two members of the staff of the Royal Palace Amsterdam, Niels Breukers, Head of Finance & Operations, for his enthusiasm and advice, and Alice Taatgen, senior curator, for her

assistance with providing the latest examples of illustrations. We are also very grateful for the cooperation received from all collectors, museums, curators, and archives who selflessly made available the archival documents, photos, and illustrations enriching this book: Stadsarchief Amsterdam, Museum Rembrandthuis, Royal Palace Amsterdam, Het Mauritshuis (The Hague), Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York City), Amsterdam Museum, Miles Barton Period Paintings (London), Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen (Rotterdam), and KB Nationale Bibliotheek (The Hague). They all enabled us to reveal law, governance, and art as a trinity in this mighty building.

Maurits den Hollander
Bob Wessels
January 2025

INTRODUCTION

'Amstelodamum, the metropolis of all Holland, was the next place we came to', writes John Walker, an English tourist, in his diary in August 1671. He continues: 'On the 12th our curiosity was diverted with a sight of the stadhouse, a very costly work. The inside is illustrated with variety of painting and carved marble [...]'.[1]

Indeed, visitors of Amsterdam's historical inner city cannot fail to be impressed by the enormous, classical building on Dam Square. Since 1808 it functions as Royal Palace, a seemingly logical purpose for a complex of its size and stature. Officially it is known as The Royal Palace Amsterdam. It is the active reception palace of the Dutch Royal House. In addition, it is open to visitors as much as possible.[2]

From its official opening in 1655, however, this very building was Amsterdam's city hall. Contemporaries praised the building for its beauty. Its size and splendour reflected the city's prime position in international trade and the dignity of its urban regents and administrative officials. Those who enter the Palace in the twenty-first century can hardly imagine that this building was once a bustling collection of offices and courtrooms. It even included a prison! What originally happened in its now so serene marble halls? Who could be found in its rooms full of paintings and sculpture on a daily basis when the building's corridors were still swarming with citizens and businessmen from all corners of the world?

This book brings alive the unfamiliar and hidden past of the current Royal Palace. Using the building in its original function and its art as our point of departure, we will shed light on the commercial, financial, legal, and constitutional history of early modern Amsterdam through the eyes of those who ruled and dispensed justice. Making use of our expertise as well as the fruits of recent historical research, it unveils the Royal Palace's past in disguise. In eight short, illustrated chapters

1 Van Strien (1998), pp. 34-35.
2 See: <https://www.paleisamsterdam.nl/en/about-palace/>.

and nine explanatory windows, we will introduce the city's regents and administrative officials who frequented the first floors of a global centre of commerce, finance, law, and governance.

From the third quarter of the sixteenth century, the city of Amsterdam steadily expanded and became economically more successful. While in 1578, the city had roughly 30,000 inhabitants, by 1700 their number had exploded to over 200,000.[3] In the first half of the seventeenth century, Amsterdam was at the centre of the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands, and in a handful of decades it grew to the height of its wealth and global influence. In 1619, Batavia was founded (present-day Jakarta in Indonesia), a colony of the Netherlands until the formal transfer of sovereignty in 1949. In 1624, Formosa (present-day Taiwan) and New Amsterdam (present-day New York City) followed, and Dutch Brazil was conquered and held between 1630-1654. In 1652 Jan van Riebeeck (1619-1677), a merchant in the service of the Dutch East India Company ('VOC'), founded a Dutch trading post in South Africa that would become Cape Town. The Dutch Republic was a world power, with Amsterdam as the centre of its global commercial empire.[4]

The city hall symbolized Amsterdam's prosperity and its pretensions as a city-state with worldwide influence. At the same time, the building was a monument to peace. Seven years before its official opening, in 1648, the Peace of Münster (Treaty of Westphalia) ended the Eighty Years' War with Spain. The Republic of the Seven United Netherlands was recognised as a sovereign state by Spain. In effect, the federal political (provincial) structure in the Dutch Republic, which had existed since the Late Middle Ages, remained the same. The military was in the hands of the States General, overarching these seven provinces. The real power, however, lay with the major cities and their merchant-regents. As a result, Dutch politics and trade were dominated by the wealthy province of Holland, and especially by its largest commercial hub: Amsterdam.[5]

Amsterdam, in turn, was ruled from its city hall. From a current political point of view, the organisation of its government is something special. In seventeenth-century Holland, our current model of a separation of powers for the governance of a state between the legislature,

3 Nusteling (1985).
4 Emmer and Gommans (2021).
5 Price (1994).

the executive, and the judiciary had not yet been developed.[6] In many areas of government, as will become clear in this book, administrative, legislative, and judicial activities were handled by the same officials. For instance, the detection, prosecution, and execution of criminals were all placed in one hand, that of the sheriff ('schout'). It represents utmost efficiency, however, at the same time uncontrollable use of distinct aspects of governmental power within a single office. The application of both civil and criminal law rested in the hands of local burgomasters and aldermen.[7] Inspired by the city hall's art and architecture, this book discusses how they collectively shaped Amsterdam and Dutch (inter)national politics.

The seventeenth-century city hall replaced an older, late medieval predecessor. In an almost entirely wooden city, the danger of fire ever loomed. The first town hall that was constructed around 1395, not much larger than a generous town house, burned down in 1421. Its successor, a larger Gothic structure possessing an open court ('vierschaar') facing Dam Square, was consumed by the huge inferno that destroyed three quarters of the city in May 1452. Duke Philip the Good lived up to his name, granting the desperate Amsterdam citizens ten years of tax freedom on the condition that they would reconstruct their houses with a minimum of two solid, stone walls each, and cover them with roof tiles instead of straw. These measures seemed effective for a long time. Over the next two centuries, Amsterdam's rebuilt medieval town hall slowly expanded as the city flourished. A number of neighbouring properties were annexed as office space for the expanding number of urban officials, courts, and institutions. By the year 1625, Amsterdam had clearly outgrown the size of its centre of governance and justice. The burgomasters started to buy up surrounding properties.

In 1640 the City Council ('vroedschap') finally decided to order the design of a new city hall to replace the 'dilapidated' existing building. The Haarlem architect Jacob van Campen (1596-1657) received the commission for its construction. Before the Amsterdam magistrates could move into their new offices, however, disaster struck once more. In the early hours of Sunday 7 July 1652, the kindling stored in the city hall's attic ignited, and soon the entire building was burning fiercely. If it had not been for the bravery of a few citizens, all of the city's archives

6 The idea of a separation of powers or 'trias politica' was only developed in 1748 by Charles de Montesquieu (1689-1755) in his book *De l'esprit des loix* (*The Spirit of Law*).
7 In 't Veld and Broers (2024), esp. pp. 135-164.

Rembrandt van Rijn (1652), The Ruins of Amsterdam's Old City Hall [© Museum Het Rembrandthuis].

would have been consumed by the flames. Contemporary sources describe how they managed to salvage arms full of books and papers from the Secretaries' Office and the Orphan Chamber. It is a miracle that nobody lost their life that night.[8] And this same miracle allows us to tell you this history! Three days after the fire, the famous artist Rembrandt van Rijn himself acted as our eyewitness, producing a drawing of the smouldering ruins. The caption reads: 'Seen from the Weighing House the town hall of Amsterdam / when it burned down / 9 July 1652 / Rembrandt'.

8 Wagenaar (1765), pp. 583-84; Emeis (1981), pp. 9-26.

The Amsterdam government was temporarily dispersed over locations such as the Prinsenhof, old towers and gate buildings, and even a local inn called 'The Prince'. One can imagine the relief of the regents and officials when the first floors of the new city hall could finally be occupied. The first stone was laid on 29 October 1648. On 29 July 1655, the city hall was put into festive use, even though it was far from finished. On that day, the Amsterdam magistrates proudly headed a procession. Burgomaster Cornelis de Graeff gave a short festive speech, after which he and his colleagues received the blessings of the ministers and elders of the Dutch, Walloon, English, and German departments of the Reformed Church. Poets such as Constantijn Huygens and Joost van den Vondel showered the 'eighth wonder of the world' with praise. The only conspicuous absence was the architect, Van Campen. Only six months before the first floors of the city hall were opened, he had left the project. While the reason for his disappearance is not entirely clear, it seems that a conflict with the burgomasters about the execution of his personal architectural and iconographic plan caused the architect to leave Amsterdam. Van Campen died two years after the official opening of the city hall, in Amersfoort. It is unknown whether he was ever able to see the building with his own eyes. In the years after the festive opening, city architect ('stadsbouwmeester') Daniel Stalpaert (1615-1676) finished the construction of the upper floors. Only fifty years later, in 1705, the entire city hall as well as its decorative program had finally been completed.[9]

In its finished state, the city hall had a ground floor where the court, prison cells, as well as the Bank of Exchange were located. The building counted four floors of offices and storage spaces topped off by an attic. Today, only the ground floor and the first floor of the building are open for visitors. In the seventeenth century, too, almost all important officials and institutions could be found on these floors. Therefore, this book focuses on these main parts of the building.

In a series of short chapters, we will introduce you to the governance of Amsterdam and its authorities: burgomasters, sheriff and aldermen, and the City Council. Together they ruled the city. Their most important supporting departments were the Secretaries' Office and the Treasury. Next, we will discuss a number of important subordinate courts. The Chamber of Insolvent and Abandoned Estates and the

9 Emeis (1981), pp. 27-36; Vlaardingerbroek (2011), pp. 157-161; Goossens (2022), pp. 58-60.

Chamber of Insurance and Average serve as examples of the specialised sub-courts that lifted work off the aldermen's shoulders. They reflect the variety of local and international interests of smaller and larger entrepreneurs in contemporary day-to-day financial transactions and investments. Finally, the Orphan Chamber illustrates how over time, Amsterdam's administrators not only took care of the healthy economy of their city, but also sought to protect the interests of the weak.

By means of texts, explanatory windows, and illustrations, we will shed light on the hidden past of Amsterdam's Royal Palace. For further reading we added a selection of sources in footnotes. At the end of the book, you will find a glossary, a bibliography, and an index.

◗ The Amsterdam city hall was crowned by a gilded weathervane, depicting the traditional 'hulk' ship that is also present on the urban seal [© Royal Palace Amsterdam, photo: Tineke Dijkstra].

WINDOW: AMSTERDAM'S 750TH BIRTHDAY?

In 2025, the city of Amsterdam proudly celebrates its 750th birthday. Why is the year 1275 officially regarded as the origin of Amsterdam as a city? What events mark this important date?

Between 1265 and 1275, a dam was built in the river Amstel to protect the region of Amstelland from the encroaching waters of the river IJ. The dam connected the existing small hamlets of craftsmen's residences on its banks. In this way it created a kind of natural harbour in the river Amstel. At the time, the landlord, the count of Holland, levied tolls for the use of waterways. The amount was usually determined by a percentage of the value of the ship's cargo, with a certain maximum (e.g. 5 marks). In 1275, Count Floris V granted the inhabitants of Amsterdam toll freedom for using land- or waterways in his territories. This was inspired by the concept of a 'geleide', the guarantee of the security of a person and his goods (property) during his journey by a territorial lord, usually to foreigners. The privilege of toll freedom granted on 27 October 1275 to 'the people living in Amsterdam' (L. *homines manentes apud Amstelredamme*) greatly stimulated the development of trade in the nascent city. The document is the earliest surviving written record of habitation in what is now called Amsterdam.[1]

Of immense importance for the autonomy of the citizens was the codification of a formal city law, confirmed by the count in a town charter. This comprised a system of rights and duties that confirmed the city's administrative and legal autonomy. It made the city independent vis-à-vis the lord, and territorially lifted it out of the surrounding countryside and the customary land law applicable there. Citizens ('poorters') of Amsterdam were granted the right to issue ordinances ('keurrecht'). Within the 'freedom' of Amsterdam, a person would henceforth be tried by the aldermen. The town charter thus created an autonomous jurisdiction, applicable to the territory of the city. Within the city, the administration of justice was governed by urban law and its amendments over time. These took the form of ordinances ('keuren'). Ordinances were regulations of all kinds directed towards the city's residents. They related to such subjects as government, public order, and safety. They also contained regulations on commerce and industry. In this period, the jurisdiction in Amsterdam formally belonged to sheriff and aldermen.

In the line of town charter acquisitions in Holland, Amsterdam was the fifth in line after the older cities of Dordrecht (1220), Haarlem (1245), Delft (1246),

1 Verkerk (2017).

Palace of Commerce invites you to discover the hidden past of Amsterdam's Royal Palace. It reveals this magnificent buildings' origin as Amsterdam's City Hall in the seventeenth century, the 'Dutch Golden Age'. Contemporaries praised the building for its beauty. Its size and splendour reflect the city's prime position in international trade across the globe, as well as the dignity of its urban regents and administrative officials. Those who enter the Royal Palace today can hardly imagine that this building was once a bustling collection of offices and courtrooms. It even included a prison! What originally happened in its now so serene marble halls? Who could be found in its rooms full of paintings and sculpture on a daily basis, when the building's corridors were still swarming with citizens and businessmen from all corners of the world? Using the art and architecture visible today as our point of departure, the authors shed light on the history of early modern Amsterdam through the eyes of those who ruled and dispensed justice. The regents and administrative officials who frequented the floors of Amsterdam's global centre of commerce, finance, law, and governance are introduced in a compelling selection of short and richly illustrated stories.

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