Amsterdam, queer capital of the world

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This book uses different words to describe the diversity of the rainbow community. The decision was made to use the words used by interviewees or in research itself. See also the conclusion of the book on the value of words.

Calibri: The Calibri font has been deliberately used, after the Trump administration labelled it "woke" in 2025.

I dedicate this book to my partner Sam and my son Mick.

Sam

You gave me back my faith in life and love.
Home is not where you were born, but where you feel safe.
خانه جایی نیست که انسان در آن متولد شده باشد، بلکه جایی است که در آن امن و خوب باشد.

Mick

My rock. We could handle anything, just as we promised each other.


OPEN HUIS
amsterdam

Chapter layout

Foreword: Silence is not an option

When I first walked through Amsterdam as a young gay man of nineteen, in 1981, I felt a sense of liberation I had never experienced anywhere else. Streets, discos, bars, and cafés where I could truly be myself — and the realisation that generations before me had fought for that freedom. Amsterdam carried a magical reputation: the place for anyone who didn't fit the mould. You were welcome. *Amsterdam, gay capital of the world*, as it was called back then. Yet no matter how often I hear that phrase today, something gnaws at me. Because behind the flags and the annual Canal Pride celebration lies a different reality. I speak with young people who still hear "homo" used as a daily insult at school. I meet older people who wonder whether they must return to the closet when they enter a nursing home. I listen to refugees who believed Amsterdam would be their safe haven, only to encounter discrimination, bureaucracy, and endless waiting lists. It felt necessary to write down what is truly happening in this beautiful city.

Between pride and doubt

Amsterdam is a city of firsts: the first women's and queer café Saarein, the founding of the COC, the Homomonument, the Gay Games, and the world's first lesbian and gay marriages. Time and again, the city has shown how boundaries can be pushed. Those moments of courage and progress are precious to me and rightly celebrated around the world.

At the same time, reality is complex. Statistics on discrimination and insecurity are sobering. The stories of the people I interviewed — locals, expats, refugees, seniors, tourists — reveal that freedom in Amsterdam is anything but guaranteed. For some, the city is a dream come true. For others, it feels like a façade behind which uncertainty and exclusion persist. Silence is not an option, even when it's about the city of Amsterdam.

Why this book

With this book, I want to take stock. Is Amsterdam still the queer capital of the world, or is that title mainly a memory of the 1980s and 1990s? The chapters guide you through the stories of residents and visitors, through research and facts, through iconic moments in our history, and through the darker sides of the present.

I do not write to undermine Amsterdam's image. On the contrary: only by honestly acknowledging our shortcomings can we continue to carry the title of queer capital with conviction. Freedom is not an endpoint but an ongoing task. Be proud. Enjoy. Live fully. But never be naïve. Rights can never be taken for granted. Once again, we face forms of repression the queer community has always known — and perhaps, in some ways, has always had to expect.

For me, this book is a journey through the city that shaped me: a city that brings joy yet can also disappoint; a city that often inspires and always makes you think. Amsterdam is a mirror. It shows what we have achieved, but also how fragile those achievements remain.

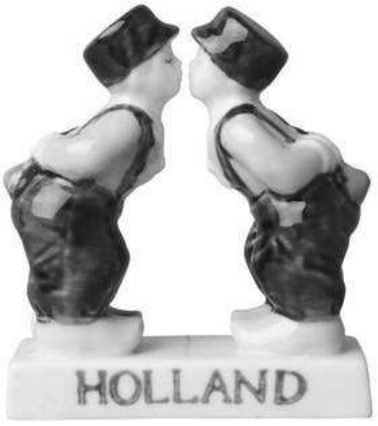
While I was writing the Amsterdam newspaper *Het Parool* published a front-page study showing that acceptance in the city is declining. You will find these studies in this book, within the analytical articles and interviews. You will also find victories — such as the first marriages, after twenty-five years of struggle for equality, conducted at City Hall on 1 April 2001 by Mayor Cohen. Victories that made history. I sincerely hope they do not remain only history. I also honour those on whose shoulders we stand, to whom we owe deep gratitude: from Anna Blaman to Mathilde Santing, from Gerard Reve to René Klijn. I reflect on pioneering moments in music and theatre as well — not only the well-known *Foxtrot*, but also the very first Dutch song about homosexuality by Jaap van der Merwe (1956), the daring *Romeo en Julio* by Jules de Corte sung by Gerard Cox (1974), the global disco protest song *As Long as It's Love* by Theo Vaness (1979), and the unforgettable theatre programmes of Robert Long and Jongewaard from 1980 onward. Very Dutch but influential!

What happened to acceptance and tolerance?
I invite you to look with me. To read the stories of Amsterdammers from every corner of the world — natives, newcomers, expats, and visitors alike. To celebrate the highlights of our queer history, but also to face the questions so many are asking. What happened to acceptance and tolerance? How have the freedoms we fought for been eroded? Where does this new repression come from? And more importantly: how can we turn the tide?

Alongside pride in the city's milestones, this book confronts these questions through four extensive interviews with people who were there — and who are still here. At the same time, it can be read as a guide to discovering what makes Amsterdam so special: go out, be present, be joyful, and stay aware. All of this is possible at once.

My heartfelt thanks to everyone who trusted me with their stories and allowed me to speak about what matters most to us: life in the city of Amsterdam.

Bamber Delver, spring 2026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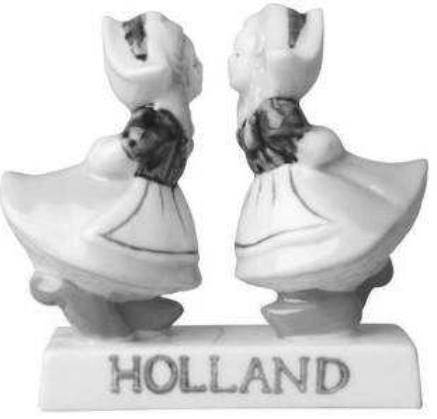
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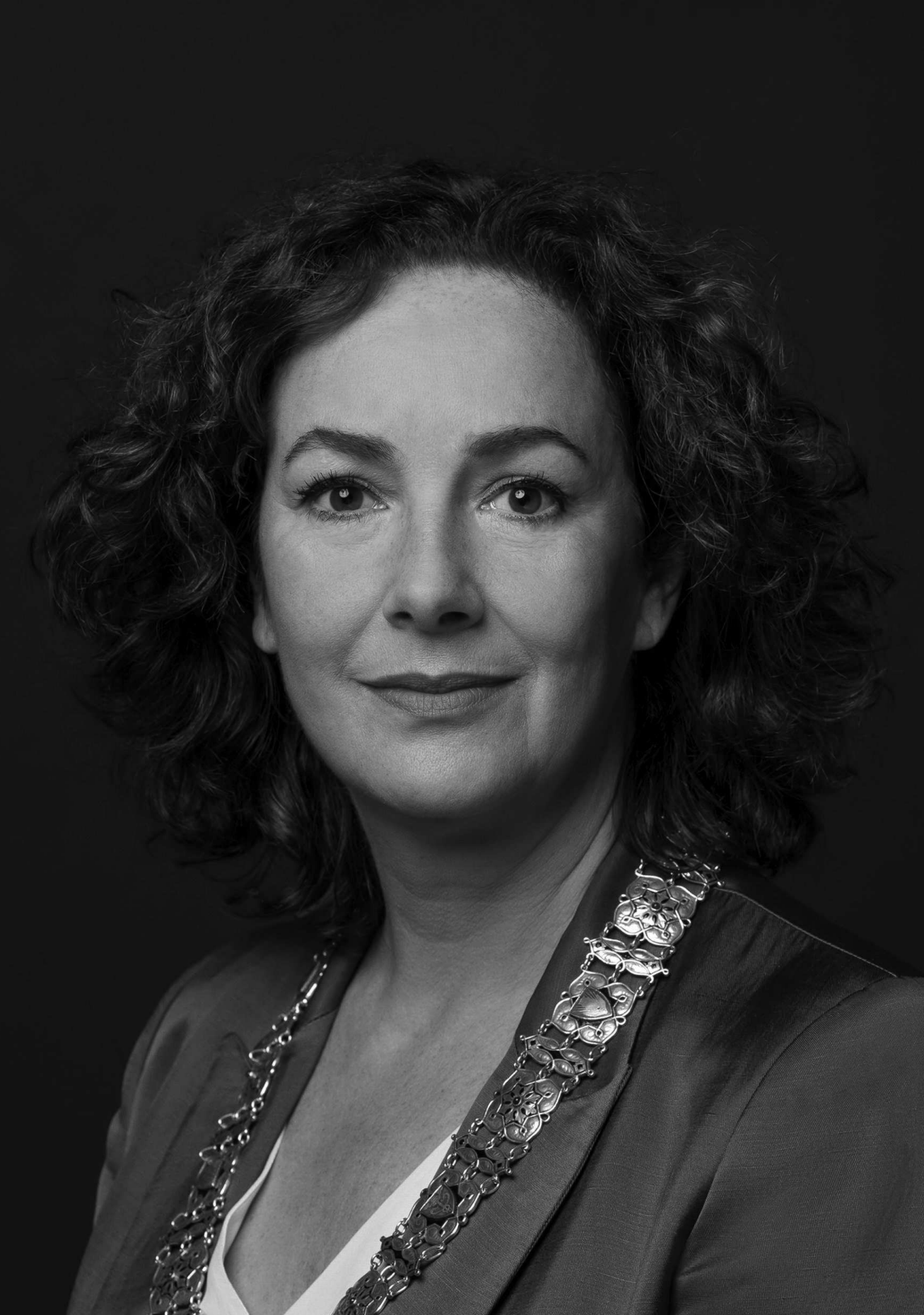


Interview with Mayor Femke Halsema:

‘Amsterdam is and remains a place that is known both within and outside the Netherlands as a place where you can be yourself in freedom and safety.’

Not every city has a pink ally like Mayor Femke Halsema. She proudly sails along as the figurehead during the annual Canal Pride. She responds firmly to incidents such as when another LGBTIQ+ person is threatened, a drag queen is beaten up or a home is vandalised. At the end of 2025, she announced a new policy in response to renewed aggression against the city's LGBT residents. She opened with a fiery speech at RITA (see photo) but also came back a few weeks later without fanfare to see how things were going. For this book, the mayor answers questions based on the other interviews that can be found further on in this book. With thanks to the mayor, or may we say Femke?

Amsterdam will be the host city for World Pride in 2026. Looking back on that other international event that turned the city pink: where were you during the Gay Games in August 1998?

“Hmm, I was on holiday in the Philippines at the time.”

At the opening of RITA, you spoke about resilience. Can you give an example from your time as mayor where you saw that resilience up close, or conversely, the vulnerability underneath it?

"I feel a bit uncomfortable giving a specific example. I think of all the stories of victims of anti-LGBTIQ+ violence. The incident I talk to people about is rarely their first encounter with discrimination and exclusion. For many people, exclusion starts at a young age, and that can leave a mark for life. At the same time, I see enormous resilience: people who, despite everything, claim their place and build loving communities. That is what motivates me time and again to continue fighting for a city where everyone can be themselves unconditionally."

Which decision in recent years do you think is indicative of how Amsterdam did or did not fulfil this mission?

“Amsterdam is and remains a place that is known both within and outside the Netherlands as a place where you can be yourself in freedom and safety. We see this in the large, diverse and active LGBTIQ+ community in our city. People continue to come to Amsterdam to be able to live as themselves. As elsewhere, the freedom of LGBTIQ+ people is under pressure in Amsterdam. We are not immune to

international developments surrounding conservative movements. We ensure that Amsterdam remains a place where you can be yourself through, for example, educational programmes about Amsterdam citizenship, our approach to combating anti-LGBTIQ+ violence, and our ambition to organise WorldPride. That wish will come true next year, which I am very much looking forward to. It is all these choices together that show that we must live up to our mission as a “queer capital” every single day."

Do you see opportunities for cooperation between the municipality, the police and queer organisations to respond more quickly and decisively to online attacks?

"Yes, those opportunities exist, and we are making better and better use of them. The municipality, the police, the Public Prosecution Service, Discriminatie.nl and Victim Support work closely together in the approach to anti-LGBTIQ+ violence. In addition, community organisations such as the Rainbow Safety Alliance play an important role. Collaboration with RITA has led to many more reports of (online) discrimination against LGBTIQ+ people over the past year. This not only helps us to help and support the victims, but also to gain insight into how (online) discrimination occurs. We respond with campaigns and investigate the influence of conservative online discourse on gender and sexuality. Online hate is a major problem."

Which historical sites, projects or initiatives do you think should receive structural support to preserve that collective memory?

“Since 2019, we have recognised Amsterdam Pride as cultural heritage, and this annual event receives structural support from the City of Amsterdam. I continue to believe that structural support is important. Amsterdam Pride stands for the celebration of freedom and resistance to its restriction, and for me, that makes it quintessentially Amsterdam. In addition, we must remain alert to places and initiatives that are not only celebrations but also reminders: the cafés, collective spaces, archives and stories that show us where the struggle began and why it is still necessary. Keeping that history alive is a task for the entire city."

Your predecessor, Job Cohen, as BABS (Special Civil Registrar), performed the very first marriages between female and male couples on 1 April 2001. It is still an achievement of which the Netherlands can be proud. What are your views on marriage equality, and is it true that you opposed it in Parliament at the time in your position as leader of the GroenLinks party?

"Marriage equality is a prerequisite for equal treatment. It recognises that same-sex relationships have the same value as all other relationships. With marriage equality, the state sets a standard against discrimination and for inclusion. That is not true of

GroenLinks. We agreed to the law, but we were not such strong supporters of civil marriage per se, and critical comments were made that this would make civil marriage even more important."

In your daily practice, where do you notice that Amsterdammers meet each other less often outside their own circle, and what can the city do about this?

"I see that Amsterdammers meet each other less often outside their own circle, which is unfortunate and worrying. Understanding comes from knowing each other and talking about differences, but also about similarities. Social media reinforces the risk that we mainly follow people who are like us, which often reinforces misunderstandings and prejudices. The city can encourage encounters, but ultimately it also requires the willingness of Amsterdam residents to consciously step outside their own bubble."

What would you say to an 80-year-old lesbian or gay senior citizen who feels less safe today than they did thirty years ago?

"I would say: we stand with you. The courage your generation has shown deserves protection and emulation. The fact that you sometimes feel less safe now touches me deeply. It is our responsibility, as a municipality, but also as a society, to ensure that everyone can be safe and visible. Report discrimination, only then can we act. And we ask all Amsterdammers to stand up when they see injustice. We do it together."

Which recent political or social developments concern you most when it comes to that democratic foundation?

"I see a disturbing growth in intolerance, intimidation and the deliberate exclusion of the rainbow community from society. We saw that last summer in Hungary. Pride being banned, people at risk simply because they are visible.
In the Netherlands, rights are better protected, but here too we are seeing a decline in acceptance. In that respect, we are no different from other places in the Netherlands or abroad. Online hate plays a major role in this. I am very concerned about that."

You know how much the rights of LGBTIQ+ people are under threat. Are Amsterdammers sufficiently aware of the openness and safety in the city?

"Amsterdam stands firmly for the right to be yourself. We want to be a safe city for everyone, a place where you can be yourself without fear. But there is work to be done here too. Freedom can never be taken for granted, and we are not immune to

international trends that put pressure on the rights of LGBTIQ+ people. That is precisely why we must continue to realise how valuable our open society is, and that we can only preserve it by actively defending it."

What role do you see for community centres, schools and cultural institutions in breaking through those bubbles?

“They play a crucial role. Through educational programmes and meeting projects, we bring young people and adults into contact with people they might otherwise never encounter. Awareness is the first step, change follows. Schools, community centres and cultural institutions help to share stories that awaken empathy. And that is indispensable in a diverse city like Amsterdam.”

Photo: Mayor Femke Halsema opens RITA, the queer community centre.

Amsterdam: from the persecution of sodomites to today's safe haven

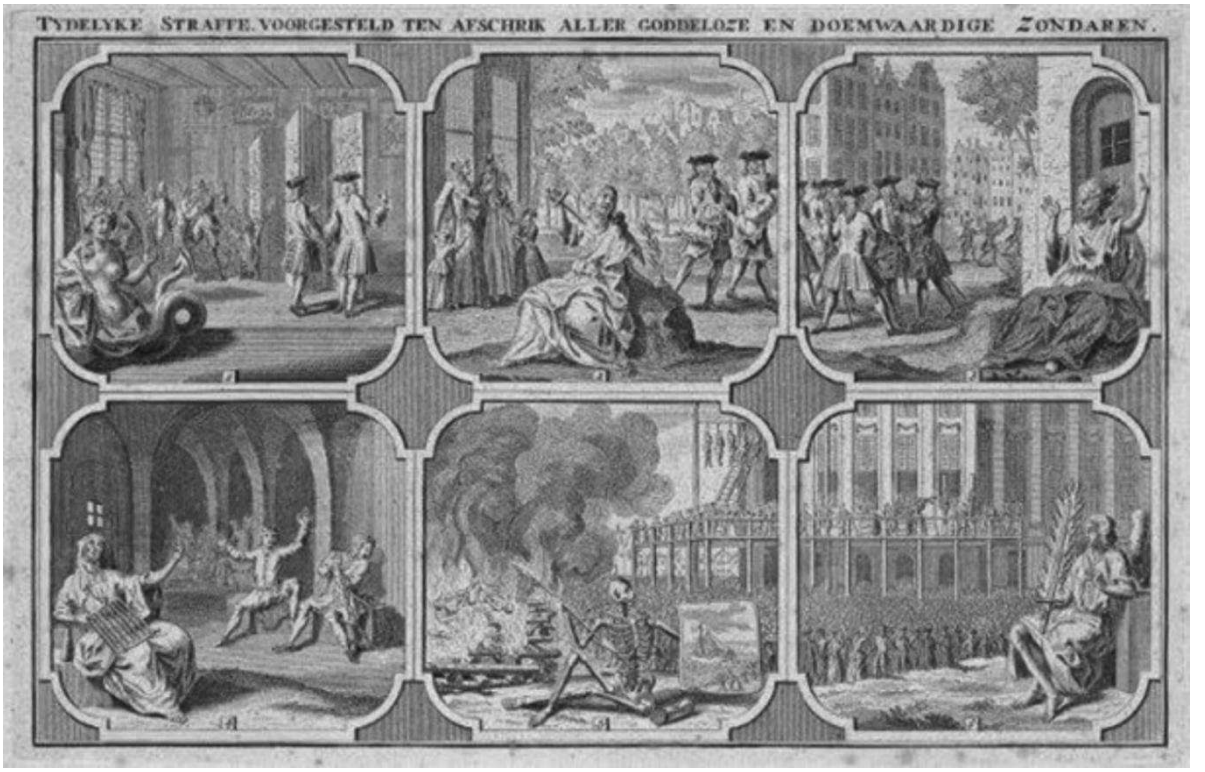
Amsterdam likes to cultivate its image as a sanctuary. An open city. A meeting place for anyone who cannot be themselves elsewhere. But beneath the glossy surface of rainbow flags, Pride celebrations and a centuries-long reputation as a tolerant trading city lies a history that is rawer, more tragic and more complex than is often told. A history in which gay lives sometimes flourished, but just as often were crushed. How Amsterdam developed from persecution, while gay men were once publicly strangled on Dam Square.

On 18 September 1764, on Dam Square, in the middle of what was already the busiest square in the Republic, four men were executed by strangulation for sodomy. Among them was Willem Leske, a poultry buyer, 31 years old, barely a month after his second child, Maria, had been baptised. After their execution, their bodies were thrown into the IJ river with a hundred pounds of weight attached to each leg, a public message to all Amsterdammers: those who deviate will be removed. The executions were not an isolated incident. Between 1730 and 1811, the city conducted 234 court cases against 227 alleged sodomites. Sixteen men were put to death during those years; the rest were sentenced to years in the Rasphuis or banishment. The years 1764–1765 were particularly ruthless, with a wave of investigations and arrests. It was not justice, but a witch hunt.

The hunt for Willem Leske and his contemporaries
The trial against Willem Leske arose from a broader investigation by Chief Public Prosecutor Isaac Sweers. Two years earlier, Sweers had arrested and interrogated the surgeon François Voogd after a complaint of sexual assault. The chief public prosecutor believed that there were “networks of sodomites” around bookshops on Gapersteeg and Rokin and launched his relentless manhunt. He had the locations guarded, observed, took notes and made arrests. Diary writer Jacob Bicker Raye described the panic at the time: hundreds of men fled the city, others committed suicide out of fear by hanging, drowning or stabbing themselves. One prisoner, a “bird seller”, tried to end his life by swallowing a large coin. He survived; Sweers kept the coin as a trophy. The violence was glorified in pamphlets. The government was praised for its “divine vengeance” and Willem Leske was mocked by name in rhymes. His attempt at suicide was dismissed as weakness and shame.

Executions on Dam Square The years 1764-1765 take the crown with 80 sentences handed down to 78 people, most of them in absentia. In total, there were sixteen executions (all men) for sodomy during that period. Two by drowning, two by hanging, the rest by strangulation. Other convicts were given long prison sentences,

which they had to serve in the Rasphuis (a reformatory prison), or they were banished. Since the mid-fourteenth century, anal contact between men had been punishable by death. Nevertheless, for a long time there was little resistance to homosexuals. The persecutions changed that; more people eagerly reported offences: after all, it was an easy way to get rid of a troublesome neighbour or competitor. The executions were huge crowd pullers, and verdicts and summonses were printed and sold en masse. Prints, verses and songs about the convicts appeared. Ministers preached hell and damnation, saying that the Republic would be punished unless sodomy was eradicated. Fear took hold: many men fled abroad. They were convicted in absentia and banished. At the end of the 18th century, women arrested for lesbian behaviour. A number were convicted, not to death (they did not commit sodomy) but to light prison sentences.



Print depicting six punishments for the crime of sodomy, 1730. Print, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

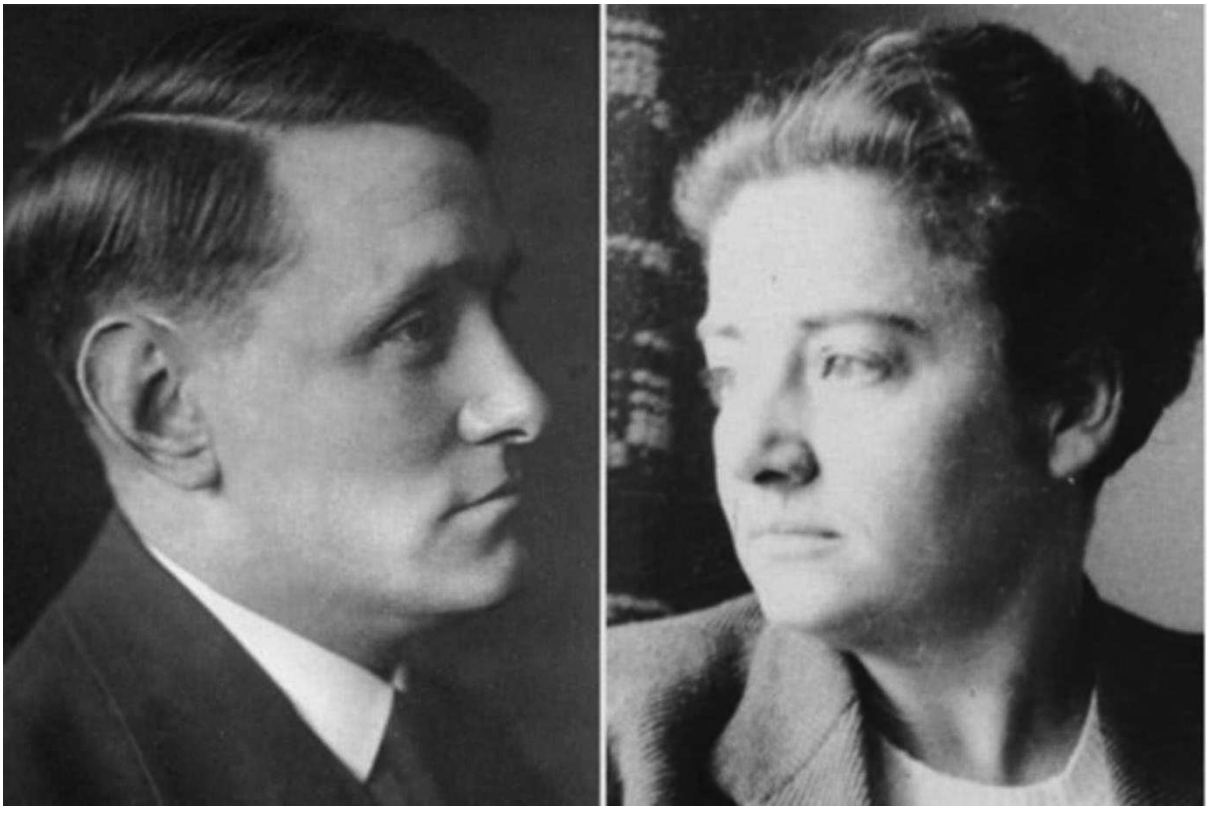
From persecution to legalisation, but freedom remains elusive

When the Netherlands decriminalised homosexuality in 1811 – under the influence of French legislation – it was early by European standards. This laid the foundations

for a relatively tolerant climate later. But formal legality did not mean safety. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, homosexuality was not prohibited, but it was socially almost unbearable. If it was known that you were homosexual, the police kept an eye on you and employers would rather see you gone than rich. It meant that friends, neighbours and family distanced themselves from you to avoid problems. Those who wanted to avoid social exclusion were forced to choose a life lived in the shadows. The urinals, the public toilets intended for men in the 18th and 19th centuries, served as possible meeting places. The Amsterdam authorities were not happy with this; to put an end to it, men had to be caught in the act. Since the French introduced the Code Pénal (the Penal Code) in 1811, homosexuality has no longer been a criminal offence. Although not explicitly punishable, homosexuals in Amsterdam in the 19th century could still be prosecuted on the grounds of "indecency" in public spaces. In the 19th century, partly due to the anonymity of the big city, it was one of the more tolerant places for LGBT people, despite the prevailing medical and social views that saw homosexuality as a 'deviation'. The situation deteriorated significantly from 1911 onwards with the introduction of Article 248-bis. This article made sexual acts between an adult (21+) and a minor (under 21) of the same sex a criminal offence, while the age of consent for heterosexual contact remained at 16. This article was specifically used to prosecute homosexual relations and created an unequal legal position (homosexuals were 'of age' from 21, heterosexuals from 16).

Nazi persecution, Second World War

In July 1940, the German occupiers in the Netherlands brought legislation on homosexuality into line with the strict German rules. Sexual contact between adult men was prohibited and made punishable by up to four years in prison. The existing Dutch law (Article 248bis), which prohibited sexual abuse of minors of the same sex (under 21), was tightened. During the war, homosexuals in Amsterdam (and throughout the Netherlands) were persecuted by the German occupiers. At the same time, there were several openly homosexual individuals active in the Dutch resistance, whose actions remained largely unknown after the war. Shortly after the occupation, in August 1940, the Germans introduced "Regulation 81/40", based on the German "Paragraph 175". This law made sexual acts between men punishable by up to ten years' imprisonment. The German authorities largely left the actual investigation and prosecution to the Dutch police. The Amsterdam vice squad, which had kept a "pink" list of homosexuals even before the war, cooperated with the German repression. Although persecution in the Netherlands is less systematic than the persecution of Jews, the path is the same: arrested men are sent to concentration camps, where they must wear a pink triangle. An estimated 5,000 to 15,000 homosexual men die in German concentration camps. Lesbian women were not



specifically persecuted as such under this law but could be labelled as political prisoners or “anti-social” and arrested on other grounds.
Homosexuals played an active and crucial role in the resistance. Many rebelled because of their personal convictions and experiences of oppression, with Willem Arondéus and Frieda Belinfante being the best known.

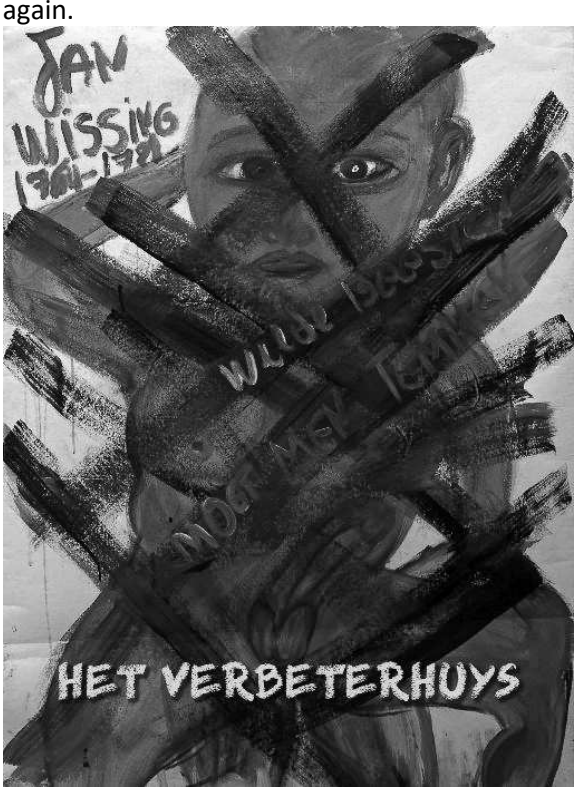
Photo: Holocaust documentation centre, Willem Arondéus and Frieda Belinfante.
QR code: Stephen Fry recounts how Frieda Belinfante and Willem Arondéus' group resisted Nazi terror.
Willem Arondéus: (1894-1943), artist and writer. He was open about his homosexuality from an early age, contrary to the mores of the day. This was daring and unusual, even in the liberal artistic circles in which he moved. He was involved in the attack on the Amsterdam Population Register in 1943. Shortly before his execution by the Germans, he told his lawyer: ‘Tell people that homosexuals are not cowards’.
Frieda Belinfante (1904-1995) was born in Amsterdam. She came from a musical family with a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother. Her father Ary was a well-known pianist and director of several music schools. She started playing the cello at the age of nine. She joined Group 2000, led by Jacoba van Tongeren, which also

included Gerrit van der Veen. Here she forged identity cards and helped numerous people go into hiding.

Willem and Frieda have not been forgotten, as evidenced by the musical Roze Verzet (2025) produced by OpusOne at the DeLaMar Theatre. The play (written by Daniël Cohen) shows how Willem and Frieda stood up for justice despite the risks.
The story begins with a fictional meeting in 1949, in which they look back on the war years. Other gay and lesbian resistance heroes include dancer and poet Karel Pekelharing, tailor Sjoerd Bakker and the founders of the post-war COC, Niek Engelschman and Jaap van Leeuwen. After the war, the persecution of homosexuals was hushed up for a long time. Survivors were not recognised or compensated as victims of the Nazis. It was not until 1987 that the LGBTIQ+ community received a national monument: the Homomonument on Westermarkt.

Urinal culture
It was only after the Second World War that homosexuals were allowed to open their own cafés and dance halls. In the post-war period, people lived in the closet, sometimes their entire lives. They suppressed their feelings or led double lives, with sham engagements, marriages of convenience and carefully constructed façades. At that time, gay meeting places were modest pubs, circles of friends and street locations. There was a strong urinal culture among gay men (below: Utrechtsestraat, 1923). Always in secret. Always with the fear of being discovered. Women were even further marginalised: less freedom of movement, less money, and hardly any access to public space. Over the years, a pink underworld slowly developed in alleys, pubs, dance halls and parks, which would later grow into a large visible community. This was the seed of the turbulent 1960s and 1970s, of the first gay demonstrations on Dam Square, of the Canal Parade festival, of the rainbow zebra crossings and flags

we know today. The seed for all this was sown in centuries of fighting, whispering, hoping and trying again.



Commemorated in 2025: The history of the Rasphuis

In March 2025, Brazilian artist Régis Gonçalves presented his exhibition *Het Verbeterhuis* (The Reformatory) in the ArtSpace of Arti et Amicitiae. In this work, he linked historical themes with contemporary reflections, inspired by the Rasphuis, where Brazilian wood (Pau Brasil) was planned, among other things, as a means of re-educating prisoners. The house was established in 1596 in the former Clarissan convent on Heiligeweg. It was closed in 1815, and in 1892 the building was demolished to make way for a swimming pool. Today, the Kalverpassage shopping centre stands on this site. Only young male criminals were imprisoned in the Rasphuis. Female criminals were sent to the Spinhuis. Gonçalves' project investigated the history of labour, punishment and the stories of people who were imprisoned there, including homosexual men who were convicted because of their sexual behaviour. Gonçalves: "During my research, I came across stories about homosexual men who had been sentenced to life imprisonment because of their sexual behaviour and sent to the Rasphuis. If someone was caught and arrested, they were sent to the Rasphuis, or given the death penalty, or banished from the city forever. On the entrance gate, which now leads to the Kalvertoren, is written in Latin (loosely translated): “Wild beasts must be tamed”."

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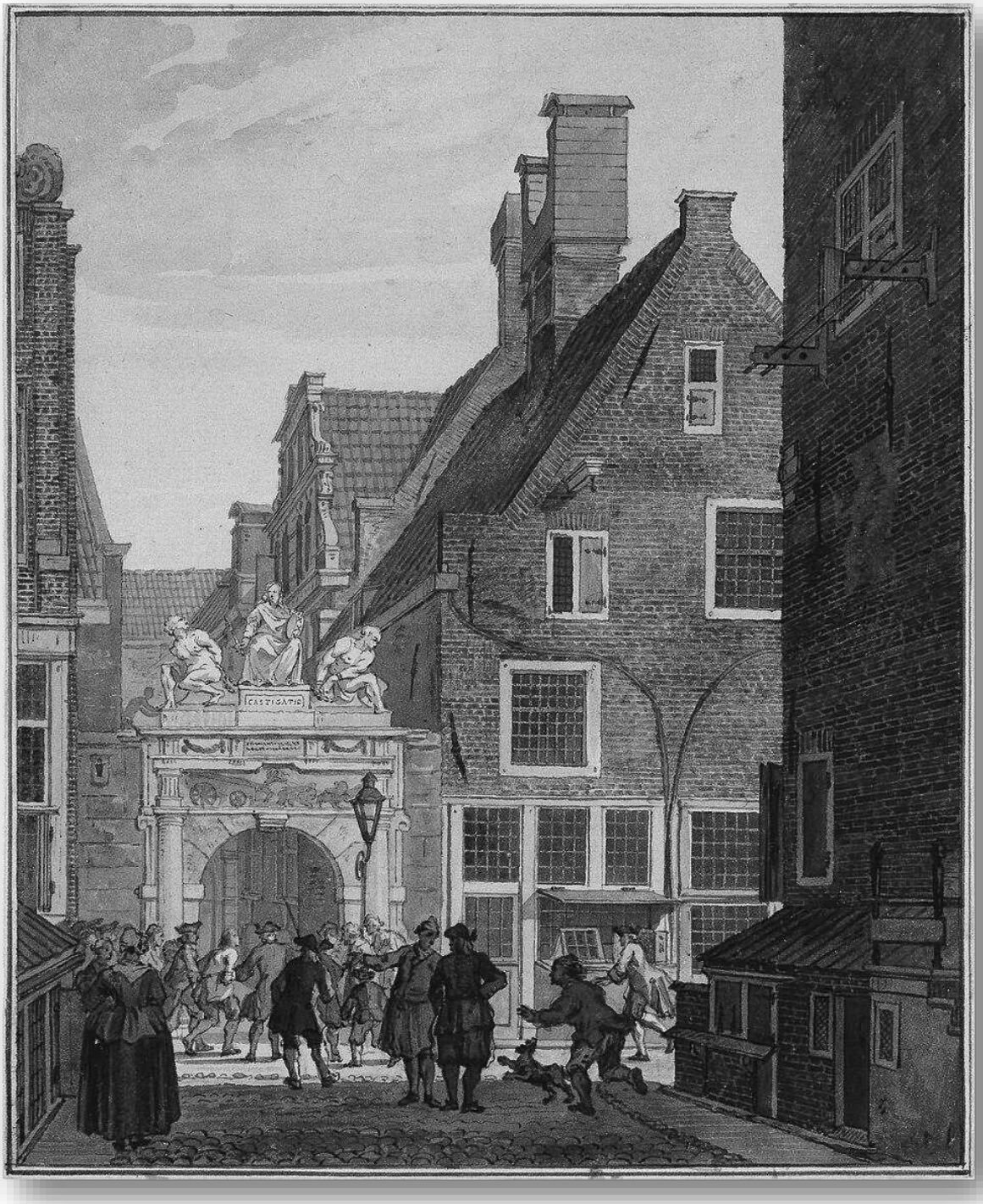
Illustration: Barent de Bakker, *Zinneprent met zes straffen op misdaad sodomie*

Photo on next page: Gate of the Rasphuis', illustration by Reinier Vinkeles. It shows a handcuffed man being brought in.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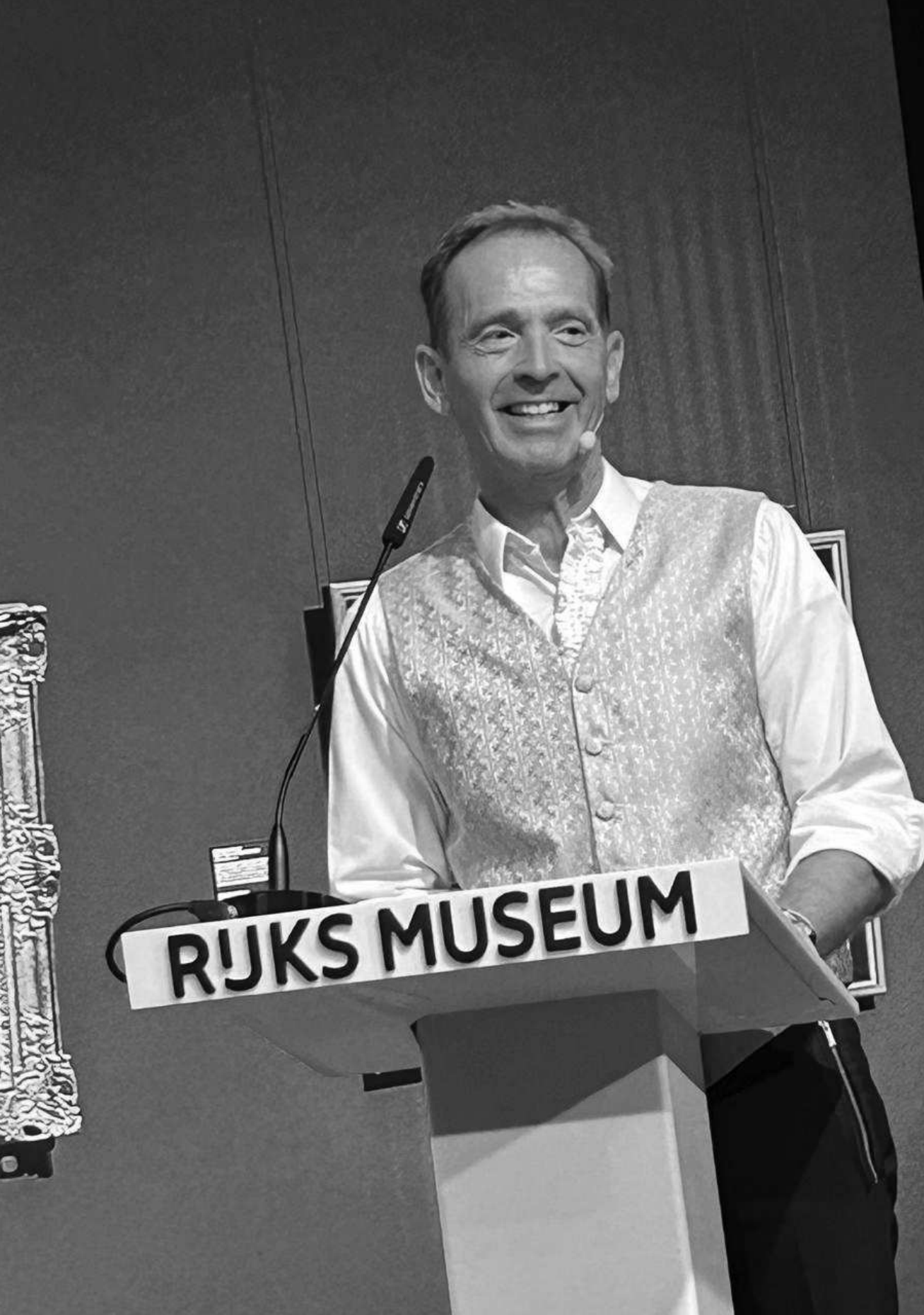
RIJKS MUSEUM

Siep de Haan, co-founder of Canal Parade: ‘Queer capital is not a title you earn once and for all. It's a mission, every day anew.’

Siep de Haan (1958) is a teacher, activist and co-founder of the Canal Parade, which first sailed through the canals of Amsterdam in 1996. Together with his partner Peter Kramer and Ernst Verhoeven, he put Pride Amsterdam on the map, with the idea that it should be a celebration for all Amsterdammers, not just the queer community. His background as a mathematics and chemistry teacher always gave him a unique perspective: in the classroom, he experienced first-hand how young people deal with diversity and how important safety and visibility are. In addition to his work in education, De Haan has played a key role in the Pride organisation and in cultural initiatives such as the Andreas Cultuur Fonds for many years. He is known for being outspoken, sometimes controversial, but always driven by the ideal of emancipation and connection. For him, Pride is not just about celebration, but also about passing on hope and opportunities to new generations. Siep has just retired; we meet at the beautiful seating area of the Stadsschouwburg.

Together with Peter and Ernst, you were there at the inception of the Canal Parade. What did you want to achieve at the time – was your idea mainly a celebration or a political statement?

"When we started in 1996, we deliberately decided that it should be called “Amsterdam Pride” and not “Pride Amsterdam”. That may sound like a detail, but for us it was about pride in the city, in all its inhabitants. So not just in gay people, or as we would say today, the rainbow community. We wanted a celebration of diversity, together. Not a demonstration with placards, but a cheerful, visible celebration. From the outset, the Canal Parade was a tool to attract attention in a positive way. And to be honest, to our own surprise, it was an instant hit."

Why did you opt for a boat trip instead of a demonstration, as in other cities?

"Amsterdam was actually late to the Pride party. If we still wanted to get involved, we had to come up with something that was different. So, no march through the streets, but a parade through the canals, unique to Amsterdam. That was unique in the world. And it worked: the first edition was an instant hit. We also wanted to involve businesses and the hospitality industry, but always with that one goal in mind: visibility. Because emancipation is not only proven among yourselves, but also with the outside world.”

You have been both a teacher and an activist. How did students react to the fact that their teacher was also the organiser of the Canal Parade?

They thought it was very special. For one class, I was just their maths teacher. But at the same time, they saw me on the news and in the newspapers. That made an impression. I think it was interesting for many students to see someone from their immediate environment so committed to a greater ideal. It made it discussable.

Some had preconceptions: that gay people were weak or “not normal”. But when they saw that the same gay man was also their teacher who helped them through maths, something changed."

Can you give an example of how that worked in practice?

Yes, I'll never forget that group of girls wearing headscarves. At the beginning of the year, they sat at the back, clearly aloof. I thought they don't really know what to make of me. But over time, trust grew. At the end of the year, they gave me a bouquet of flowers. For me, that was proof that contact can break through anything. You can't impose it from above, but it happens in the classroom, step by step. And they're also good at maths!"

In the pink community, you are sometimes described as a “Relnicht” (faggot troublemaker). I find it unpleasant that people treat each other this way. How do you view this?

"Yes, I read that, and I thought it was indicative of how quickly you get labelled as an activist. I can live with that, but it's a caricature. Of course, I have often spoken out strongly – that was also part of the struggle to put Pride on the map. But it was never about causing trouble for the sake of it; it was always driven by passion and conviction. I have no idea who writes such things. For my students, it was often a mixture of surprise and curiosity. Some came in laughing and said, “Sir, you're in the newspaper again!” Others seriously wondered why someone had to be so outspoken. And that's when I could explain that emancipation doesn't happen by itself, that sometimes you have to be loud to be heard."

Nowadays, research (*) shows that many young people still consider LGBTIQ+ people to be “not normal”.

"I often thought half of my class doesn't really like me. And among boys, that percentage was even higher. It's strange to stand in front of such a group and know that they reject your identity, while you're just doing your job. Still, I've learned not to let it make me bitter. It's about investing in contact, in explanation, in safe spaces.

Because adolescents mirror what they hear at home or in their community. Only when they meet real people who are different does that image change."

Research shows that homophobia comes from multiple angles: the far right, but also religious extremists. Yet you rarely hear the latter from progressive parties. The research (2022, **) carried out by the municipality was even tried to be kept quiet by the progressive councillor, apparently because the outcome is unwelcome. How do you view that?

Siep: "I thought it was particularly poorly communicated. As an alderman, you have a responsibility to be honest, even if the results are politically awkward. What happened now gave the impression that something had to be hidden – and that immediately undermines trust. You cannot hide reality because it does not fit the progressive image. Incidentally, it was not a representative study, as too little research had been done among too few people. But I see that report as a bad signal, and the councillor should have stood up for it. Say: “This is a warning sign, we are going to do more research”, instead of sweeping it under the carpet (***). At the same time, we must also be honest: intolerance comes from different angles. Not only from Muslim youths, but also from strict Christian circles, orthodox Jewish

communities and, of course, the extreme right. The problem is broader than that. Ignoring it only makes it worse. And it is particularly painful that acceptance among young people is falling so sharply, from 63 to 43 per cent in two years. That is not an incident, it is a trend. Politicians need to be on top of that. Not brush it under the carpet but acknowledge it and tackle it."

How do you see the balance between commerce and activism within Pride? Has that shifted?

"Yes, but perhaps differently than people think. We used to be delighted that companies like Heineken, Smirnoff and Transavia supported us. Nowadays, they are often dismissed as “pinkwashers”. I see their participation as solidarity. They also risk losing customers. I think the idea that everything is commercial is too simplistic. It's more of a compliment when they participate. And don't forget: LGBTIQ people also work in those companies and are proud to be so. All those companies have a rainbow network in the workplace, all year round!"

In one of your opinion pieces, you say that the city has changed, become tougher. What do you mean by that?

Siep: "In the past, the groups were more mixed. You had drag queens, Surinamese card clubs, tourists, artists – and that worked. Now you see people digging themselves into bubbles, into boxes. That applies not only to conservative religious groups, but also to us. Within the queer community, you are sometimes judged very harshly for a small mistake. That makes us more vulnerable. And yes, social media has reinforced that."

Do you think Amsterdam is still the gay or queer capital of the world?

Siep: "Yes and no. If you look purely at the European rankings, we have dropped. Malta, Belgium – those countries are now above us (***). But I don't think you should fixate on such a list.

To me, the Netherlands still feels like a “queer capital country”. Here we can live in freedom, here a fourteen-year-old boy can say to his teacher: “So if I become gay, I can still have a good life, right?” Those are the moments that count. At the same time, the sense of normality is gone. I notice that I sometimes no longer walk hand in hand in Amsterdam because I feel the risk. And that's serious. So yes, Amsterdam is still a place of freedom and creativity, but we must work harder to keep it that way. Every edition of the Canal Parade feels like World Pride to me – and that says something. But being the queer capital is not a title you earn once and for all. It's a task, every day anew."