

About the Oude Kerk of Amsterdam

January 2009

The Amsterdam 'Oude Kerk' is the oldest building in Amsterdam, a European monument in the gothic style. She represents a stunning example of Dutch medieval and renaissance architecture. The whole European history has passed through this monument, which was never touched by the great, historic city fires ! She is the first Beauty in this remarkable city. It is a place of "peace & quiet", where the visitor must return again and again... And that is not so difficult, because in this 'living church' there is always something going on. With the four famous organs music is the main activity: old and new music. But all the other arts are regularly on show, like the winter exhibition by the Gerrit Rietveld Academy of modern arts or the Art in Red Light exhibition, during the months September/October 2008

Walking through Time: the first wooden chapel was there already in 1200, when the city had some 600 inhabitants. The reconstruction of this church in stone started in 1260 and on 17 September 1306 the consecration took place as the Saint Nicholas Church. That patron is still "around" in the small library chapel. When the young Rembrandt entered Amsterdam, in 1631, the Old Church was 'ready' - after 400 years of building and expanding by 15 generations of wood and stonecutters. It has been in protestant *hands* since the reformation in 1578.

This is not an ordinary building with four walls: it has the finest acoustics and also *the oldest silence* in the Netherlands. In the Calvinist tradition people strolled around here as if it were a 'plaza'. People still do and they are amazed. At times they think they are in Rome... Don't forget the tower with the 47 carillon bells. This was at one time, in the Dutch Golden Age, also a trading floor - in a church ! The shares of the World's first global corporate, the Dutch East Indies Company (or VOC) were traded here ! So people just walked around, traded, they worked here, they prayed and they made music. The location was the actual 'platform' for grand state occasions, like the burial of naval hero, admiral Jacob van Heemskerck, who died at the Battle of Gibraltar, 1607, beating the Spanish fleet. Even Lord Nelson in 1815 studied that battle. And then he met the French at Trafalgar. Admiral Heemskerck's ship, the Aeolus, adorns his modest tomb. Between the pillars, around the choir, there are two other ships: the silver *hulk* ship, St Anne (of 1350), and the s.s. Rembrandt, 1856. Together they tell a 600 year old story of Amsterdam and the Sea. This is not only the parish church of the Amsterdam Admiralty in the 17th century, these days it is still the Port church of the Dutch capital.

About Europe and beyond: Great European figures went to mass in the Oude Kerk, like emperor Maximilian of Austria and his great-grandson, the later king of Spain, Philips II in October 1549. But also Rembrandt got married in this church and in 1642 he buried his wife Saskia, at 30, under the small Sweelinck organ in grave 29. She is just one of 10.000 citizens, or 35 generations, resting in the floor covered wholly with tombstones. So Rembrandt's wife is in good company of many great figures in Amsterdam & European history. Other well-known VIP's passed the grave of Saskia, like 10-year-old Mozart - on his return from London to Vienna in January 1766. But also, in our times the author Milan Kundera was inspired to write his book "The Unbearable Lightness of Being": read it again... ! And don't forget the melancholic story "Until I find you" by John Irving, where a 'fleeing' church organist plays on the large baroque organ the very best of Bach for the Red Light ladies - in the middle of the night. Under that great organ of 1724 there rests 'the first European investor' in America. This is WIC board member Kilean van Rensselaer of whom Russell Shorto writes in his book about Manhattan and the Dutch involvement, "The Island at the Centre of the World". May be, when you visit this unique church, you will trip over the first treasury secretary of our Kingdom or *the greatest Dutchman*, composer Jan Pieterszn Sweelinck or "*our Shakespeare family*": the Vondels. Or you will step on the grave of one of the 100 Amsterdam mayors, who rest here for ever. Like 6-time mayor Coenraet van Beuningen. He played his roll in the building of Europe and - *alongside* - saved Denmark against the Swedes in 1667.

So this is not an ordinary building. Many craftsmen built it and kept it vital - with love. That restoration work continues today. Treat this beautiful heritage with care and respect.

Websites: www.oudekerk.nl and www.gravenopinternet.nl, the virtual "museum site".