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Imagining Global Amsterdam:

History, Culture, and Geography in a World City

Edited by Marco de Waard

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4. Visualizing Commerce and Empire: Decorating the Built Environment of Amsterdam

Michael Wintle

In considering the 'imagining of Amsterdam' in the context of globalization, the focus of this book falls on how the city has at various times been involved in and affected by globalizing tendencies in politics, economics, and, more especially, culture. The present chapter, taking an historical approach, will consider some of the ways in which Amsterdam has viewed *itself* over several centuries in the light of various waves of globalization. It is concerned with Amsterdam's view of its own position in the world, including its position in the emerging Dutch nation, as a European capital, and as the centre of a global trading and financial empire. The interaction between these different levels of self-perception and self-representation is of particular importance: the principal objective in what follows is to uncover and unpick the kinds of ideas Amsterdammers have entertained about their city's position in the world in terms of their self-image or perceived identity, and in contexts ranging from the municipal, through the regional and the national, to the European and the global.

In doing so we shall concentrate on Amsterdam's status as an icon of commercial capitalism over several centuries, and particularly on the city's self-image in a colonial context at various points since the seventeenth century, right up to the twentieth. We shall be principally concerned with self-images in the sense of visual, graphic images in the public spaces of the city, on the façades of private houses and business premises, and decorating the great public and commercial institutions that have been built in the centre of Amsterdam, always a city more of burghers and merchants, of civic rule and civic pride, than of princes and sovereigns. In many academic disciplines, especially where an interest is shown in visual culture, there is an increasing recognition that many of the images which surround us in our daily lives are charged with meaning, and as a whole can be highly active in the social, cultural, and political process. Historians have perhaps been more reluctant than other scholars to branch out into using visual sources, but there has been a developing discussion over several decades; it is now widely accepted that a systematic use of visual images as historical evidence is not only illuminating and interesting, but perhaps even essential.[1] This 'visual history' cannot, it goes without saying, operate in isolation: the pictures, emblems, and icons must be taken alongside the written evidence in order to come to a balanced conclusion. But we can analyze images used to decorate the built environment and public space of the centre of Amsterdam to trace the ways in which the city

envisaged itself and its role in the Netherlands, in Europe, and in the world at large. As is usually the case with visual culture, complex discursive mechanisms have been involved: knowledge has been selected and encoded into the images, ideologies are represented and reinflected, and hegemonic positions are either contested or naturalized and reinforced. If rigorous source criticism is applied, then these sources can be as informative as any others, including the written ones.

These arguments about the power of images apply to all manner of visual representations and, as well, to the media involved in their production and distribution: maps, paintings, cartoons, icons, flags, currency, and other representations and symbols. In this case we shall concentrate on the buildings of Amsterdam, and in particular the decoration of them with iconographic material, usually representing nations, peoples, and continents.[2] Personifications of the city, of trade, of the sea, and of other parts of the world will be sought out on the façades of the city, together with the iconography that accompanies them. The way in which the builders, artists, civic officials, city fathers, and patrons of Amsterdam made their choices about public space over several centuries tells us a great deal about the mentality behind those acts of representation, and about the processes of identity construction in which they were involved. Indeed, iconographic material operates as a powerful agency, both reflecting and acting upon public and political life through the medium of public opinion. It is important to stress that the communication in these images between artists, patrons, and audience has always been a highly interactive one, constantly changing and modifying over time the self-imaginings held by Amsterdammers. Here we shall pinpoint some of those interchanges centred on the idea of the city's role in the world of trade and empire. It was the capital city of a global commercial empire, manifested partly in formal colonies, but also in a vast, largely unregulated and informal commercial and financial network; these, then, are images and memories of Amsterdam as a cradle of global capitalism. Amsterdam and indeed the Netherlands projected or imagined themselves in these roles. Amsterdam was imagined in a national framework, as one would expect, but also in a European context: the levels of civic, national, and continental identity are irrevocably entwined, and lend each other strength.

Perhaps the most iconic building in Amsterdam is the Royal Palace on the Dam; it is certainly one of the most famous of the seventeenth-century monuments, admired by tourists and locals alike. It is at the centre of the town, and witness in the media to some of the most important showpieces of national reflection and self-imagining, for example the remembrance ceremonies which have taken place on 4 May each year since the Second World War. It was built between 1648 and 1665 by the celebrated architect Jacob van Campen as Amsterdam's Town Hall, intended to serve as the ultimate emblem of republican civic pride at the height of the Dutch 'Golden Age'. It became a royal palace in 1808, during the reign of Napoleon's brother, Lodewijk Napoleon, but as essentially an office building, without gardens, it probably never made a comfortable royal residence. It has always retained, however, its pivotal function as a focus of national feeling. The sculpted decorations on this neoclassical *lieu de mémoire*, both inside and out, were designed by the Antwerp sculptor Artus Quellinus, and Figure 4.1

shows the west or rear tympanum, which is (literally) a tribute to Amsterdam. The four continents of the world are shown as female figures bringing their gifts, or tribute, to the personified 'Maid of Amsterdam', who holds centre stage. From the time of the Roman Empire onwards there was a widespread tradition of using geographical imagery to glorify a town; often, such imagery pointed to the transfer of wealth and tributes from one area to another, from colony to metropolis. Here the object of the exercise is to glorify the city of Amsterdam, personified. She sits with arms outstretched to acknowledge the tributes, wearing the winged helmet of Hermes, the patron of trade, with a sailing ship behind her and with the maritime commercial theme emphasized by the anchors and nautical instruments at her feet. Supporting her are two river gods (the Amstel and the IJ) with their symbolic urns of flowing water.

4.1. Artus Quellinus, Amsterdam and the continents, frieze in west (rear) tympanum of the Royal Palace, the Dam, Amsterdam (ca. 1650).

On either side of Amsterdam we see the continents, also personified, offering their tribute to the centre of world commerce. On the right Asia and America are featured. Asia stands immediately next to Amsterdam, instantly recognizable by her turban and swinging incense burner. She holds the bridle of a camel in her right hand, and is accompanied by servants with boxes of jewels and precious items. This kind of iconography had been well established as early as 1600, for example in the pattern books by Cesare Ripa and others – published in many languages and editions from the 1590s onwards – which provided a guide for artists and craftsmen on how to portray personifications and their various properties or accoutrements: the seasons, the virtues, the zodiac, or – in this case – the four continents or parts of the world (cf. den Boer 1995, 53-8). These representations of towns, countries, and continents grew out of a medieval tradition which included decorating the triumphal arches erected to welcome the prince or sovereign into a town during a *joyeuse entrée* or *blijde inkomst*. The temporary ceremonial arches through which the prince would ride on formal procession to

the centre of the town would be decorated with all sorts of tributes, including personifications of the parts of the world that he or she ruled; in the Habsburg case in the Low Countries, that meant entire continents (Forster 1988, 105-15).

Here, in the tympanum on the Palace on the Dam, between the figures of Asia and Amsterdam, a child is offering a tulip to the city, referring to the Turkish (Asian) origin of this famous national Dutch flower, and of course casting a line in recent living memory to the 'tulip mania' that peaked in 1636-7, when tulip bulbs changed hands for fortunes and many speculators and investors were ruined when the bubble burst (Goldgar 2007). To the right of Asia, America is personified by Indians with feather headdresses and an alligator (also prescribed by Ripa), with accoutrements of silver mines and tobacco: this includes both South and North America. On the left of the tympanum, Europe and Africa are depicted, again instantly recognizable by their iconography. Africa is a naked black woman; her identifying animals are a lion and an elephant, and she brings ivory and other trade goods. We see Europe directly to the left of Amsterdam, on her all-important right, holding a huge cornucopia to indicate the plenty of her dominions. She alone of the continents is crowned, indicating her sovereignty over the world, with a war horse, and bulls to associate her with classical antiquity through the famous myth of Europa and the bull. A *putto* at her feet offers bunches of grapes, a sign of her sophistication in the cultivation and consumption of the fruits of the vine. Books indicate her wisdom and learning. Significantly, there is a clear and intentional hierarchy of the continents in place here: Europe is the sophisticated and senior continent, and she is most closely linked with Amsterdam (Vanvugt 1998, 23-7; van den Boogaart 1992, 125-7). The Maid is also a European; this scene thus combines Amsterdam's commercial leadership with a portrayal of European superiority, underlining how both draw strength from each other. This image was commonplace in the seventeenth century, on buildings, paintings, maps, prints, and book illustrations, and thus runs as a familiar trope through the visual culture of the period.

4.2. The Maid of Amsterdam, by Ludwig Jünger, Central Station façade, Amsterdam (1880s).

This image was not confined to the seventeenth century: its use continued through the modern age right into the nineteenth century and beyond; equivalent scenes adorn the buildings of many of Europe's capitals, but there is no better example than Amsterdam. Take, for example, the Central Railway Station, built in the 1880s; it is virtually a Dutch Victorian update of the Town Hall's imagery of 230 years before. Like so many of the city's great architectural set pieces of that period, it is covered with stone reliefs calling attention to the nobility and industriousness of the city. In pride of place, above the main entrance, there is a series of semi-circular tableaux in stone by Ludwig Jünger, again taken up with personifications of the continents bringing their goods to Amsterdam. In Figure 4.2 we see the Maid residing in the central tympanum; here she is crowned, and accompanied by her two water gods, with rudder and oar. Immediately to our right on the façade there is a tableau containing personifications of Asia and America; Asia is shown as a mandarin with coolies, and America as an Indian girl with a feather bonnet and an alligator (van Leeuwen and Romers 1988, 20-7). In the panel to the left of the centre, Europe and Africa are presented. Europe is carrying a wine jar, her child attendants holding bunches of grapes (as in the Town Hall tympanum) and a book of learning. To the rear, exotic black Africans bring to the Dutch capital their ivory, a parrot, a lion, and a bale of produce. It appears that the imagery and iconography had hardly changed over two centuries and more. Indeed, there is little doubt that the station is intended to echo the Town Hall in this respect: a vector of remembrance and identification is being drawn down the Damrak between the two buildings.

Here on the front elevation of Central Station, the continents are paying tribute to a city, the Dutch capital. This edifice was erected in the high noon of romantic nationalism in the later nineteenth century; along with other monuments of the period in the capital (such as the Rijksmuseum and the Royal Tropical Institute) its didactic purpose is clearly to glorify the Dutch nation.[3] But the worship of the nation is occurring in tandem with the glorification of the capital city and the hegemony of the hierarchy of the continents, with Europe firmly at the top; the three levels interact and reinforce each other. The ode to the capital, Amsterdam, relies on the fervour of nationalism, which in turn draws strength from the Eurocentrism of the worldview portrayed in the representations of the continents. The identity that is being promoted here is not simply that of the city: the way that this kind of identity tends to work is that it contains a number of interlocking components, each of which is important. For example, one can feel allegiance to country, religion, and family, with each of these components supporting each other. Sometimes elements within this 'identity matrix' can work against each other, for example in time of civil war, but more often than not the various components are mutually supportive (Wintle 2009, 4). That is what is happening here on the front of Amsterdam station, with the city, the nation, and Europe all making up part of the same message of self-assertion. That interrelatedness and indeed interdependence of civic, national, and continental imagery is a major burden of this chapter.

We now move on to look at specifically commercial projections of the identity of Amsterdam. Several hundreds of houses in the centre of the town and indeed

in other Dutch towns have illustrative plaques or gable stones on them, many of which – referring to bales of sugar, the name of a foreign port, or the like – indicate that the family fortune was made in a particular trade. Sometimes the decorations are draped around the famous Dutch gables at the top of the house: many have animals, or dolphins, or gods. Here we shall take just two examples from central Amsterdam, and they both concern Africa. There was a well-established tradition of visualizing Africa in a racially recognizable personification – a negro – and the associations were seldom complimentary. It fitted into the hierarchy of the continents already discussed, and Africa, along with America, was always placed at the bottom of the scale of civilization and sophistication. European superiority was a given. Figure 4.3 shows a merchant's house on the Oudezijds Voorburgwal (no. 187), built in 1663 in the style of Dutch architect Philips Vingboons, with an elaborately decorated front gable. We see the usual sculptures of trade goods and naval stores, indicating maritime trade, but the main and unusual feature is the presence of slaves. In two mirrored pairs, either side of the brick pilasters crowned by Corinthian capitals, we see black African figures holding plants which appear to be tobacco, indicating and indeed broadcasting that this is the home of a family which made its fortune by trading slaves who were probably transported to work on tobacco plantations in the Americas. This house has been known to excite outrage on the part of some visitors, especially from America, and it is not hard to see why. Amsterdam was certainly a centre of financing the slave trade, and the general trade on West Africa in the seventeenth century. This image says to the viewer: behold, here lives not simply a slave trader, but an Africa merchant, a merchant of the first hand. This is Amsterdam in commerce with (or at least financing commerce with) western Africa as part of the slaving triangle, personified by the black man.

4.3. House with black Africans in the gable, Oudezijds Voorburgwal 187, Amsterdam (1663).

4.4. Personification of Africa at the top of the gable of Rokin 64, Amsterdam (ca. 1700).

Not very far away, on the central thoroughfare of the Rokin (no. 64), there is a splendid figure of Africa sculpted in the gable (Figure 4.4).[4] The house probably dates from the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, and the gable decoration is a sculpted human figure mounted on vertical boards, with a good deal of rococo embellishment and strap-work around. The figure is male, black-skinned, with stereotypical negroid facial features and tight curls. Authoritative documentation is not available, and the iconography is slightly confused: this stereotypical black African is wearing a feather headdress, with the feathers in vertical position, and carries a bow and arrow, all of which are usually attributes of America. The Amsterdam town archive website calls him a 'moor', which usually refers to an African (often from the Maghreb), and indeed the house is next to an alley which apparently used to be called the Mooresteegje, quite likely named after the house (Gemeente Amsterdam Stadsarchief). It is possible that it may represent African slavery in America, but that would be an unusual way to employ such iconography. It is also possible that the figure was painted black later on, and was originally meant to indicate America, but the facial features belie that possible explanation. The most plausible reading is that this is the house of another 'Africa merchant', showing off the origins of the family fortune. Whether it refers more directly to America or Africa, Amsterdam is picturing itself as a collection of merchant burgher-princes, controlling the commerce of vast swathes of the world, and getting very rich in the process.

In terms of visualizing Amsterdam as a capital of global trade in a more specifically colonial or even imperial context, many of the most telling images date from a later period, at the end of the nineteenth century and especially the early decades of the twentieth. With the 1880s began the period of New Imperialism, including the 'Scramble for Africa', when existing colonial empires such as the British, French, and Dutch were joined by enthusiastic newcomers like the Belgians and the Germans, and when the whole enterprise, in all European empires, intensified from a loose network of trading posts and commercial interests to a system for exporting industrialization, transport infrastructures, political systems, religions, and especially culture from Western Europe to the remoter parts of the world, particularly in the tropics. The Netherlands participated fully in this development with the military extension of territorial control over the 'Outer Provinces', especially in the East Indies, followed by the imposition of its own legislative codes and forms of administration and by the so-called Ethical Movement (a movement devoted to the project of exporting Western values to the Indonesian archipelago). In tandem with this surge of 'cultural imperialism' in the colonies (Said 1994), Amsterdam in the early decades of the twentieth century saw an unprecedentedly successful way of expressing it in the built environment, through the architectural movement known as the Amsterdam School. This movement is best thought of as a successful campaign to integrate the construction of buildings with the figurative and applied arts, mainly by placing all sorts of sculpture and other decoration, often in the Art Deco style, on the outsides of buildings. The movement also had a strong public housing wing, responsible for some of the most attractive workers' housing of the 1920s in the near outskirts of the city, including the Rivierenbuurt and De Baarsjes. The other aspect of the Amsterdam School's activities concentrated on the great public building showpieces, in the centre of the city, many of them commissioned in a colonial or imperial context.[5]

One of the best examples is the Scheepvaarthuis (or Shipping House) on the Prins Hendrikkade east of Central Station, built during the First World War by Jo van der Mey as the headquarters of six major shipping companies. It is now a luxury hotel, and it has been restored to much of its former glory. The outside of this 'temple' for the colonies is literally covered in carvings and reliefs reflecting the Dutch colonial empire, for the shipping companies gathered there were all involved in servicing the Dutch global capitalist operation, with their combined lines circumnavigating the earth in several directions, and with their hub points in the Dutch West and East Indies (Vanvugt 1998, 63-4). Clustered around the main entrance there are sculpted personifications of the oceans over which the shipping companies plied their trade, shown as exotic, mysterious women. Figure 4.5 shows the Pacific Ocean, together with some of the decoration in the stonework which is so characteristic of the Amsterdam School: as the location of the East Indies, she is oriental, exotic and passive. This and the other statues suggest receptive, alluring, and enticing places, where the shipping lines could sail in and make their fortunes in the colonial mould.

4.5. Statue of the Pacific Ocean, Scheepvaarthuis, Amsterdam (1916).

4.6. External decoration (rubber plantation) on the Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam (1920s).

The Royal Tropical Institute or Colonial Museum is similarly striking as an example of Amsterdam's self-image as the nerve centre of one of the great commercial world empires at the beginning of the twentieth century: it has aptly been called a 'cathedral of modern Dutch colonialism' (Vanvugt 1998, 77). It was built at the same time as the Scheepvaarthuis, between 1912 and 1926, and again it is covered, inside and out, in iconographic decoration and sculpture. Many of these major public buildings, not only in the Netherlands but in other countries too, had a committee of notables set up to oversee the symbolism of the decoration. Artists did the actual work, often several different ones, but the designs were submitted to and coordinated by the symbolism committee. And the committee had a very definite message in mind: the greatness of the Dutch Empire, the wonder of European achievements set off against the primitive exoticism of the East, and the glory of Amsterdam. Again, in such a message the civic, the national, and the Eurocentric combined in force to strengthen each other. High atop the façade over the front entrance on the Mauritskade there are three female statues. The top one in the centre is the Netherlands; the crowned figure of Queen Europe appears on the left; and on the right we see Asia standing alluringly by, with bare torso and in the pose of an exotic dancer. In many of the stone friezes on the outside of the building, designed by Wijnand Nieuwenkamp, the 'erotic promise of colonialism' is emphasized, showing 'the beckoning East as a sexual paradise', as we can see from the illustration of a rubber plantation in the Dutch East Indies (Vanvugt 1998, 81, 86) (Figure 4.6). Indigenous peasants are shown working the rubber trees, with both sexes naked to the waist and without head covering. The woman's breasts are exposed (as in several panels) in ways that would have been exceptional in the East, and the other emphasis is on the fecundity and lush foliage of the tropical vegetation, which is being harnessed in modern plantations for Western industries. The othered Orient is being fashioned here largely from fantasy, but it is a fantasy concerned with defining a place in the world for Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and Europe.

Another principal icon of the Amsterdam School in the centre of the city is the massive bulk of the headquarters built for the Dutch Trading Company (Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij or NHM) on the Vijzelstraat. It was built in the early 1920s, following a design by K. P. C. de Bazel. There was a very strong colonial connection: the old Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie or VOC), with its profitable exploitation of much of the maritime eastern tropics, had gone bankrupt and ceased to be operational in 1798; the Dutch Trading Company, which replaced it in 1824, was set up by King Willem I to farm the East Indies trade and to run a domestic cotton industry. It was this immensely successful organization that established the infamous 'Culture System' on Java and elsewhere in the archipelago, where it became a model for how to exploit a colony in the tropics on the basis of plantation agriculture worked by draft labour in the service of the state (which the company represented). This, the NHM, was the institution whose centenary was being celebrated by the construction of a new headquarters on the Vijzelstraat in 1924. In the course of the later nineteenth century, the commercial activities of the company had been privatized, in tune with the liberal sentiments of the day, and by the early twentieth

century it was essentially a bank, specializing in colonial business (van Goor 1997, 219-77; Wintle 2000, 214-25). In recent decades the building has served several Dutch banking houses, as a result of intense merger activity in the sector; it now hosts the city archives, and does so most elegantly. This hymn to more than three centuries of Dutch colonialism has huge external sculptures of three of the military strong men of Dutch rule in Indonesia, Jan Pietersz. Coen, Herman Willem Daendels, and J. B. van Heutsz, and typically for the Amsterdam School, there are also many reliefs, some by Lambertus Zijl, of trading and shipping activities, industry, commerce, and the like. Above the front door (it is a feature of Amsterdam School buildings that their main entrances are exquisitely worked but modest in size) the name of the first proprietor, the NHM, still appears very clearly (Figure 4.7).

4.7. Main entrance to the Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij building, Vijzelstraat, Amsterdam (1920-5).

A revealing feature is made up of the female figures representing Europe and Asia on either side of the entrance. They were designed by J. Mendes da Costa, and his portrayal of their body language is very telling: in the case of Europe – or, by association, the Netherlands – on the right, her eyes and palms are open, and her whole pose is much more assertive than that of Asia or Insulinde, who is barefoot with eyes downcast, eroticized, and submissive (Vanvugt 1998, 46-8). Asia's arms are crossed, almost reminiscent of the attitude of a corpse. Mendes da Costa's preliminary drawings for the figures are on display inside the city archive; they reveal that he first envisioned placing small, skeletal, but human figures, some of them clearly oriental, in the skirts of the two personifications of

the continents. This aspect of the design was apparently rejected by the directors because it was thought to suggest oppression. If anything, the original designs suggest even more open- and closed-posture language in Europe and Asia than the final versions outside on the street. Again, Amsterdam is projecting itself, in the main for its own benefit but also to the world at large, as the control centre of a Dutch, European, and indeed Eurocentric world empire.

Particularly in the period of New Imperialism, from the 1880s to the First World War and beyond into the interbellum, much of the self-image of the imperialist was associated with transport technology. Shipping and airplane offices, freight forwarders, telegraph offices, railway termini, and all forms of transport buildings were festooned with images of the superiority of Europeans and their legitimating technology. Europeans, and Amsterdammers in particular, used their views of technology and scientific progress to bolster their self-image vis-à-vis the other parts of the world: it was an important component of what might be called the identity matrix of Europe, the Netherlands, and Amsterdam, in juxtaposition with the rest of the world. A fine local example in the Dutch capital is the Magna Plaza shopping mall behind the Dam, which was completed in 1899 by Cornelis Hendrik Peters as the main post office. The building as a whole is an eruption of exuberant neo-gothic fantasy in brick; it was known for a time as the Pear Palace (Perenburg), because of its crown of elongated onion-domed or pear-shaped turrets (Hageman 2007, 161).

4.8. China, corbel in the Magna Plaza building, Amsterdam (1899).

All over the outside of this building and especially on the inside, heads are carved on the corbels, personifying all the countries to which the Dutch postal service could send packages and epistles, ranging from the Congo and the Transvaal to the Netherlands itself. In Figure 4.8 we see China as a human bust on a stone corbel on the ground floor of the interior. It is stereotypically oriental, with almond eyes, a droopy moustache, a fat pigtail coming around in front of his neck, and a coolie's hat. Dozens of comparable images adorn the building; the whole of 'North America' is represented as a noble savage, with feathers and all, and this in 1899, even after the U.S. victory in the Spanish-American War. What we see here, then, is the establishing of an identity of Amsterdam and the Netherlands through cultural nationalism, technology, and empire. It is also, clearly, using that major tool of identity construction, 'othering', through portraying exoticism and difference in order to establish the 'self' as superior.

There are many examples in the city of this visualization of the position of the Dutch capital of Amsterdam as the civilized, technologically advanced ruling centre of a Eurocentric world of commerce and empire. In the Hobbemastraat, near the Rijksmuseum, there is a fairly ordinary building which probably originated as a travel agent: in the stonework there are panels showing various forms of transportation, including train, car, airship, sailing ship, and horseback. Such buildings are to be seen in many large European towns – for example in Leeds, London, and Vienna – dating from the early part of the twentieth century (Wintle 2009, 355, 379, and 417-19). In the Hobbemastraat, there are also personifications of the five continents, in which the emphasis is on European sophistication and learning, Asian spirituality, and the primitiveness of the others: imperial Amsterdam is claiming a privileged position for itself within the continental hierarchy.

In the spirit of muscular Christianity and its links with empire, sport was also roped in to assist in the process of demonstrating to Europeans and Amsterdammers that they were superior in every way to the other parts of the world. Opposite the Munt Tower on the Bloemenmarkt (or Flower Market) stands what is now the NH Carlton Amsterdam Hotel, originally built by G. J. Rutgers for the Amsterdam Olympics of 1928 (Casciato 1996, 109-10). Another Amsterdam School building, its frontages on the Bloemenmarkt and the Vijzelstraat are heavily decorated in stone reliefs of symbolic figures, which include statues of the continents, attributed to Theo Vos (Figure 4.9). On the front façade, Europe is shown with her characteristic bull, and America has a bison as her identifying animal. On the side elevation, on the Vijzelstraat, Asia has an elephant, and Africa a lion. All are highly stylized, and all the facial features, except those of Europe, are drawn to emphasize their primitive natures. But this particular instance is not especially laudatory of European sophistication; more important, in terms of the mechanisms of visual culture, is to note that it is the thousandth repetition of a well-rehearsed hierarchy of the continents, emphasizing the exoticism and strangeness of the others, all centred in European Amsterdam, the Dutch capital of a global empire which encompassed them all.

4.9. Carvings of the continents, NH Carlton Amsterdam Hotel, Amsterdam (1928).

We can conclude, then, that Amsterdam, like many other major cities in Europe and elsewhere, is quite simply awash with these kinds of images. Nowadays we are hardly conscious of this banal background, this wallpaper, but it is part of the visual culture all around us. It is no less powerful for that, and actually helps set the parameters for our discourse, as is so well explained by Michael Billig (1995, 12ff.) in his study of national imagery: who would deny the power of the flapping flag in the background? The decorative tendencies of Amsterdam's well-preserved built environment, especially from the seventeenth century and from the Amsterdam School period at the beginning of the twentieth, make it a particularly fine laboratory in which to study the city's self-image or identity in its national, European, and global contexts. That image was highly self-laudatory, and drew particularly on the city's role in the world as a centre of commerce and then of a colonial empire.

This multilevel identity formation and bolstering of the self-image operated in three main arenas: the city within the nation, the nation within Europe, and Europe within the global order. The co-existence of the different levels is mutually reinforcing, and indeed the levels merge into one another in the iconography of the capital's built environment. The ubiquitous Maid of Amsterdam, who attracts tribute from all over the globe, is clearly associated with the personification of Europe, at the pinnacle of the global hierarchy of continents. At the same time, the greatness of commercial and colonial/imperial Amsterdam is linked to the self-image of the nation through the national heroes and achievements memorialized in the capital's colonially connected buildings. Amsterdam is certainly not the only imperial city in Europe to carry such images; the link between city, nation, and continent is cast in stone in many a European capital. Indeed, a good study of the imperial city across Europe in the age of New Imperialism at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, emphasizing its visual aspects, treats the metropolitan visual culture of imperialism as a pan-European phenomenon (Driver and Gilbert 1999).[6] Europeans gained strength from mu-

tual association with each other in the context of interaction with the rest of the world, despite their national differences on the home front. In the colonial context it was a case of 'Europeans' and 'others'; it is no coincidence that the time of most intense national competition in Europe, just before the First World War, was also the era of the most audacious Eurocentrism that we have ever witnessed (Wintle 2009, 399-405). And in Amsterdam in particular, the three roles of great city, national capital, and European centre of a world empire all combined to reinforce each other in forging this visual, Eurocentric identity.

Notes

1 A selection from the evolving literature: Clark (1973); Rotberg and Rabb (1988); Haskell (1993); Rose (2001); and especially Burke (2001). See also Wintle (2004 and 2009, 12-22).
2 Much of this material is treated at a European level in Wintle (2009). The present chapter approaches the issues exclusively from the point of view of the city of Amsterdam. I was first inspired in the Amsterdam register of this subject by Ewald Vanvugt's excellent but little-known work on colonial monuments in the city (Vanvugt 1998), and I am keen to acknowledge my initial debt to his book.
3 The general literature on national identity is vast; of particular use for the Dutch case are Cubitt (1998), Herb and Kaplan (1999), and Leerssen (2006).
4 I am most grateful to Tijdo van der Zee for originally pointing this figure out to me.
5 The colonial context of some of the more monumental works of the Amsterdam School has been noted in Casciato (1996, see esp. 18, 30, 50, and 214). See also Vanvugt (1998, 14-21).
6 Driver and Gilbert inexplicably (and unforgivably) lack a chapter on Amsterdam.

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