

PLÁJÁS, Ildikó Zonga

Constantijn & Christiaan Huygens

At first sight there was a peculiar and discrepant contrast between the location, the poster and the content of the exhibition. Hosted by the Grote Kerk in The Hague between April 25th and August 28th the exhibition entitled *Constantijn and Christiaan Huygens, A Golden Legacy* was only one of the many collaborative projects in and around The Hague marking 2013 as “Huygensyear”. The exhibition was opened by none other than Majesty the Queen of the Netherlands on 24th April, just 6 days before her abdication of the throne in favor of his eldest son, and the expectations of success proved to be reached in no time: distinct gentlemen and ladies lined-up at every moment of the opening hours. But let us go step by step and take a closer look at the different aspects of the exhibition.

The Grote Kerk: space and beyond

The Grote Kerk as location already reveals a lot about the glamour and richness of the exhibition, which refers not as much at the number of exhibits but more at the ambitious concept and its affluent implementation. Rich here I use in both meanings, that of belonging to the high society, and in its symbolical meaning implying something at highest standards and value. For the hidebound, non-Dutch visitors at first sight it might be striking entering a church with a different purpose than that of religious motivations, yet in the Netherlands filling the historical spaces provided by churches with various cultural content has a long tradition. At this point the Grote Kerk as location for the exhibition becomes not just a curiosity (we should also keep in mind the great challenges posed by choosing such a space for an exhibition, with limited possibilities for manipulating the space as seen in the case of regular exhibition halls), but also integral part of the main concept: how to use or integrate the heritage and legacy of the past in the actuality of the present. And the Dutch curators are proving once again the higher professionalism and creativity in mastering this issue.

The poster: actuality and relevance

Arriving in front of the church the poster of the exhibition is welcoming us: Constantijn Huygens dressed in suit and wearing orange tie, with colorful folders in his hand having the logo of the Dutch government. Christiaan, his teenage son, on the other hand, is standing with his hands in the pockets of his Jeans and wearing a T-shirt with the imprint of the Saturnus. For someone with little knowledge about the Huygens family or without being familiar with the concept of the exhibition at this point these two information, i.e. the church as location and the poster, may seem a bit confusing. Let us play the ignorant, in order to experiment the richness of this exhibition without having to fight preconceptions about exhibitions or historical heritage in general. This will lead us to the third part of our initial contradiction.



Huygens Tentoonstelling © BBK/Door Vriendschap Sterker

Nevertheless before turning towards the content, by way of introduction let me mention that there are indeed a couple of historical facts which connects the protagonists, the church and the poster. The Huygens although living in the 17th century here are presented as masters of contemporary practices, and the Grote Kerk is indeed the place where father and son are buried, as proven in 2007 when during the restoration work to the bases of the tombstones of the Grote Kerk, dozens of graves were found and uncovered.

The title of the exhibition “A Golden legacy” is accurate also in the sense that represents not only the tendentious ideology behind the way the material is presented, but it is elaborated at every step resulting in a narrative which arrives at its final answer at the end of the exhibition. The poster picturing Constantijn and Christiaan Huygens in contemporary clothing reveals its final meaning in the last “room” of the exhibition. But let us make the visit together entering finally the Grote Kerk and visiting the rooms in the order suggested by the layout of the exhibition.

The exhibition: a master narrative of legacy

Entering the lobby intimate classical music introduces us to the sublime atmosphere. I have instantly noticed the distinct public, old gentlemen and chic ladies, which back then I tend to connect to the fact that it was a Sunday early afternoon, when families with young children were probably enjoying the sunshine on the playgrounds. But looking back I might have been mistaken. Entering the church I realized that in fact there was no church, but instead a fascinating other space, which revealed its miracles slowly as I advanced through the carefully planned rooms.



Oranjezaal Huis Ten Bosch © Margareta Svensson

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The first room entitled “In the seat of power” had the theme the father, Constantijn, and the way he took up the governmental and cultural elite. From the encyclopedic quotes, images and letters a great man got outlined with tremendous knowledge, diversified talents and even greater aspirations. Constantijn Huygens had several qualities: besides being a connoisseur and poet, he was the advisor of the Prince of Orange taking services as art expert and counselor for the Stadtholders. The museological language of this room is still very classical, but I didn’t have too much time to wonder about it, as the answer was just right over the doorstep.

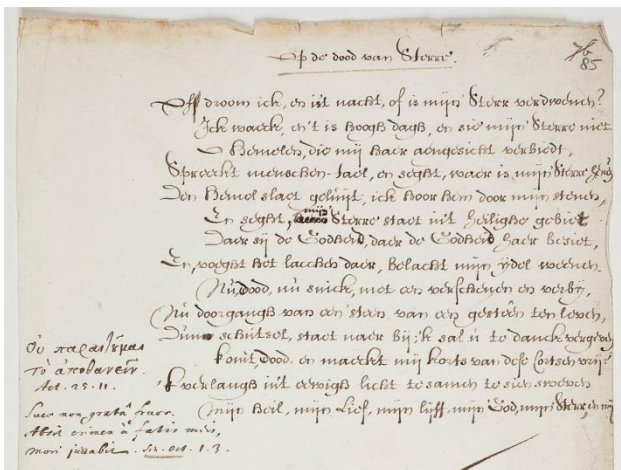
The Orange Hall, our second room was situated at the very center of the church, constituting the visual triumph of a curatorial concept which managed to get all the attention captured and all the curiosity awakened. As the most striking piece of the exhibition the Orange Hall is the full-sized exact replica of the Oranjezaal in Huis ten Bosch, the residential palace of (that time still) Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands. Her Majesty granted permission for a replica to be manufactured which was a distinctive honor and provided the unique opportunity for the broader audience to experience it in its original splendor. All of the storylines of the exhibition are meeting in this space. The Oranjezaal first of all reveals the originality of the idea locating the Huygens exhibition in the Grote Kerk. No other space than

the Grote Kerk would answer the honor of this replica, moreover it provides with the ingenious modality of dividing and organizing the interior space of the church.

Regarding the subject matter, the Oranjezaal signifies the common ground for the Huygens family and the Dutch Royal family, implying the continuity between the glory of the past and the order of the present. The Oranjezaal also represents the culmination of the Dutch architecture and painting during the Golden Age, and gives an overview of the grandeur and magnificence of the 17th century's art, also of a great importance in the history of arts.

Stepping out from the Oranjezaal, Christiaan, the genius son, gets in focus. The audience at this stage is invited to get involved at a different level in the exhibition. We are all welcome to check out for ourselves what Christiaan Huygens might have seen on 25th of March 1655 when looking at the Saturnus through his telescope. The concepts of the magic lantern, the critical spiral, the rings of the Saturnus, the pendulum clock or the wave theory of light are explained and visualized through imaginative audio-visual means and interactive models. His scientific achievements are embedded in the revolutionary scientific progress of the period but also in the family history and the epoch-marking political turns of the 17th century.

In the fourth and fifth room the light falls again on the father, Constantijn, and his eldest son, Constantijn Huygens Jr., the older brother of Christiaan. We are in the late 80's of the 17th century when Willem III the prince of Oranje manages to conquer the throne of England. The success of this action is mostly connected to the power of networking and sophisticated propaganda campaign, praising also the geniality of his mentor, Constantijn Huygens. This combination of political history, science and the arts presented through the life history of the Huygens family gives an air of familiarity and stresses the exemplary of the Dutch Golden Age.



Manuscript Constantijn Huygens © (1638) –
Koninklijke Bibliotheek Den Haag



Zaal Christiaan © Ingrid Jongens

Finally, in the last room, entitled “The past today” the legacy of the past becomes once again clean-cut. The testimony of the Golden Age gains shape in the various practices of the contemporary political and economical life. The networker, the lobbyist, the spin doctor, the propaganda or the pamphlet writer indicates some very important aspects of the all-time regimes and governments. How these tactics and techniques are used today is presented through several installations in the ambulatory of the church. The modern relevance of Constantijn and Christiaan’s legacy is thus exemplified through interactive games and panels. The fact, that the graves of father and son are just halfway between these kiosks, represents an obvious hint about the importance of this legacy.

Conclusion

As emphasized at the beginning of the review the present and past are close-knit and very much interrelated in the exhibition featuring the Huygens family. Nevertheless it also has a very straightforward moral about the social and political order of the present. From this respect it might be interesting to know that the exhibition initiated by the Huygens Exhibition Foundation of the Grote Kerk, had among its partners many of the royal and national cultural and higher educational institutions, providing a living example of how the institutional networks and the higher society functions nowadays. The patterns of how the high society and the cultural elite is interlocking with the royal family in the contemporary cultural and political practices, becomes obvious through the historical example of the Huygens family. The exhibition about the House of Orange, the Golden Age, and the development of arts and sciences thus presents the ongoing influence of the works of father and son until this very day.

Yet the exhibition also reveals a more plain understanding of the legacy of the past. Leading its visitors from room to room and emphasizing the personal aspects and family events of the Huygens, outlines the model of a warmth and exceptional family producing free spirit and grounding the exceptional, versatile and innovative achievements of these two great and influential men of enterprise and discovery, father and son, Constantijn and Christiaan Huygens.

