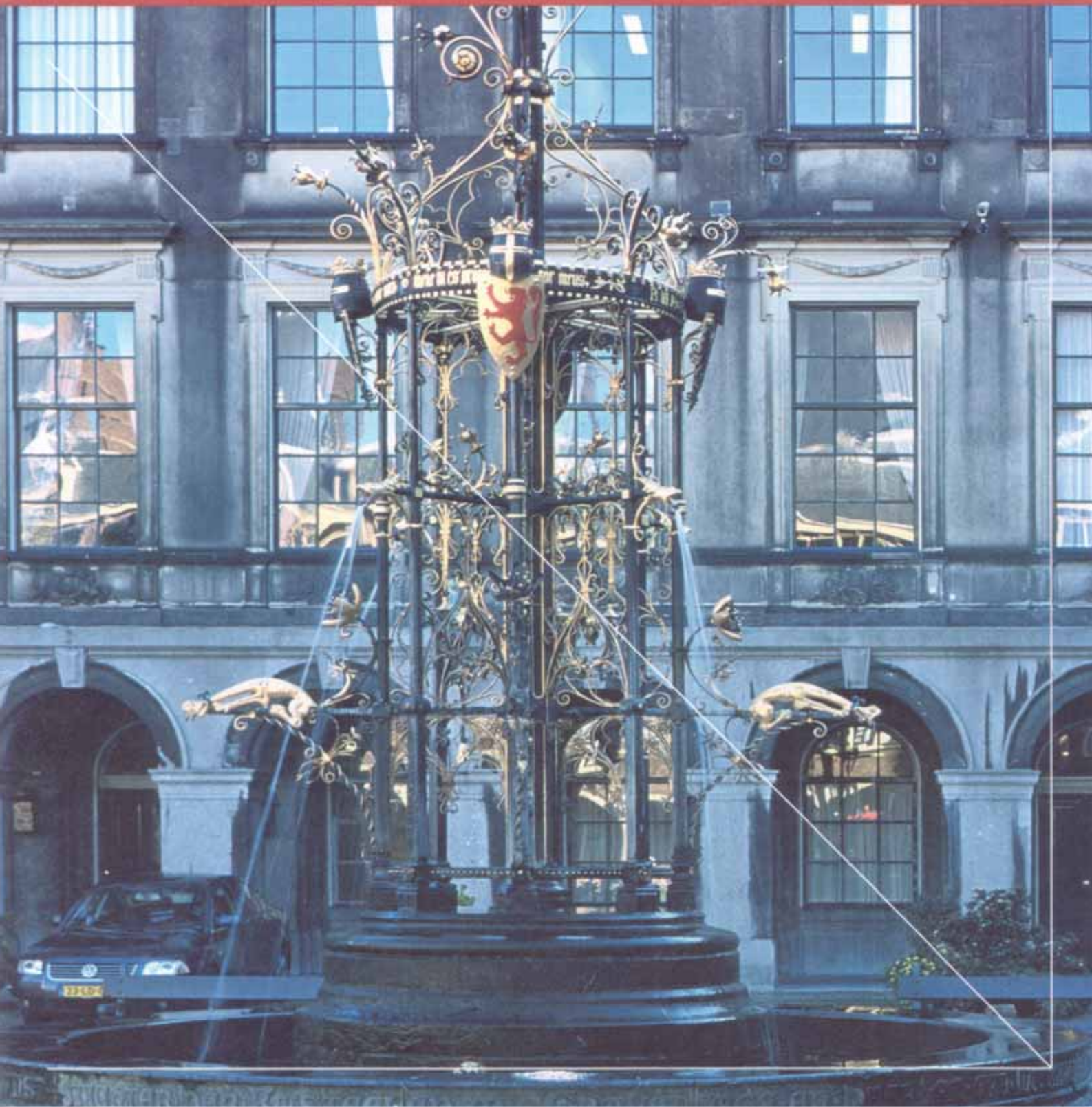
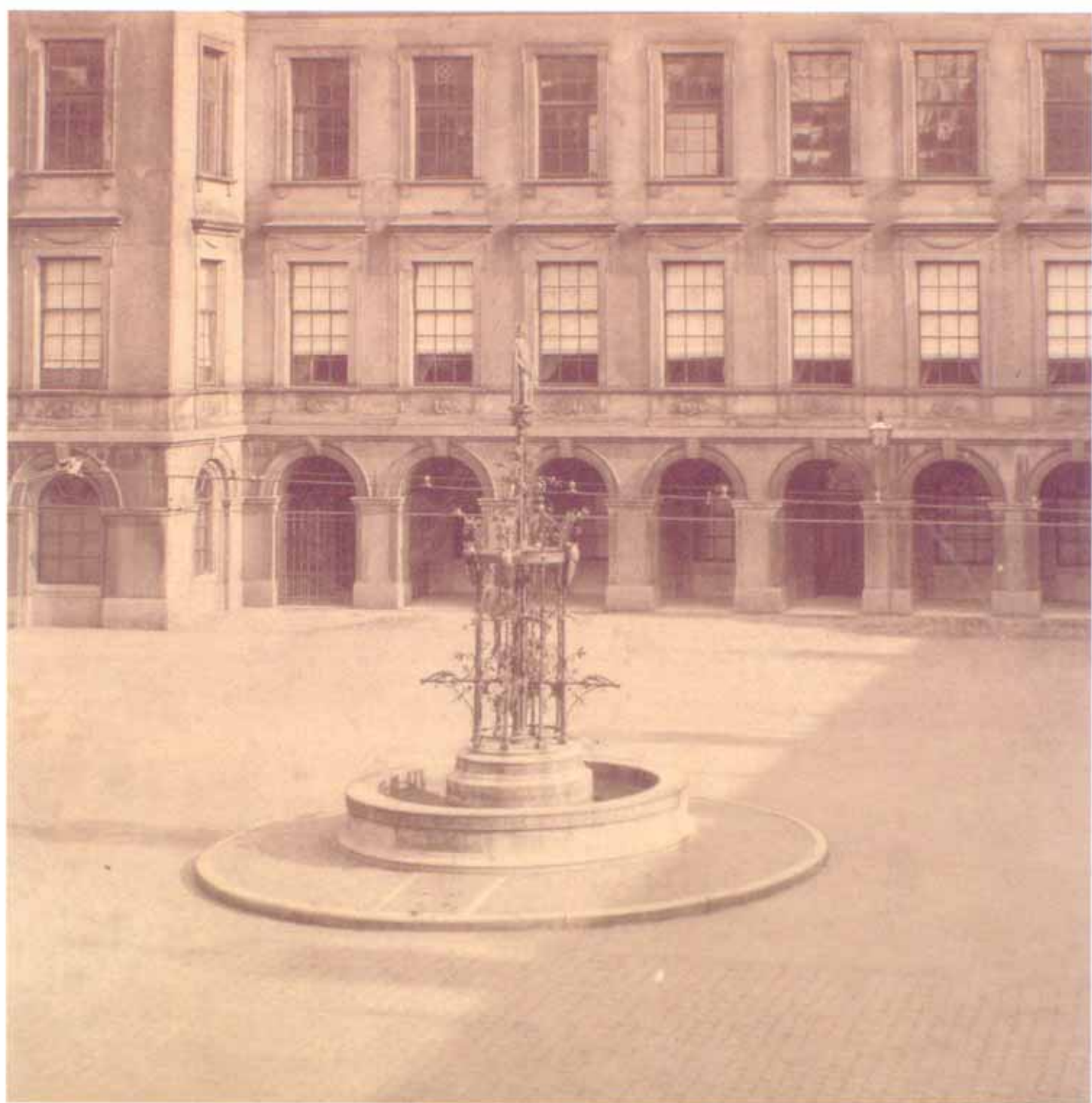
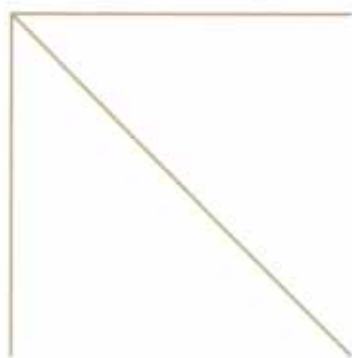




# The Binnenhof Fountain in The Hague

To the memory of Willem II,  
founder of the Dom in Cologne





## The Binnenhof fountain of The Hague

**Any journalist writing about the Binnenhof Fountain might easily be forgiven by all but the most fastidious of academics if they described it as being the most significant of all the Dutch nineteenth century street fountains. Fewer still would complain if those self same lax minded journalists wildly claimed it is probably the most badly vandalised fountain in Europe, whilst there would probably be universal acceptance by both journalists and properly informed academics that in terms of selling the profession of conservation to the public that this fountain offers the most significant opportunity currently available in Holland.**

**So let us start by looking at the latter, most absolute, claim in that opening paragraph -that in an age when conservators are increasingly being asked to sell their work to funders as a mixture of entertainment for the public and justification for the politicians of their investment in conservation and restoration that the Binnenhof fountain has a high profile role to play in the next few years.**

At the core of this claim to the fountain's huge significance as a potential project of national importance lies three core elements.

Firstly its universal, almost anthropomorphic, attraction to the vandals that have consistently desecrated it for over a hundred and twenty years.

Secondly the highly populist almost 'soap opera' style nature of its newspaper friendly history and thirdly it's potential as what is termed in the newspaper world as a 'runner' of a story in which the forth-coming restoration of the fountain is sold as a story that could attract long running interest and an increased profile for conservation.

The fountain, now standing on the inner square of the Binnenhof, opposite the entrance of the Ridderzaal, in The Hague, was designed by Dr. P.J.H. Cuypers in close cooperation with Jhr.Mr. V.E.L. de Stuers. Cuypers started drawing the first designs of the fountain in November 1882. De Stuers frequently gave suggestions regarding several elements of the fountain to Cuypers, sometimes adding drawings. Cuypers was a well-known architect who was in fact responsible for the building of both the Rijksmuseum and many other significant buildings all across Holland. De Stuers was head of the section cultural affairs at the department of home affairs in the Dutch government.

The fountain was designed to honour the founder of the Binnenhof; Count Willem II of Holland, it was to be made of

wrought iron and decorated with a few copper features. In July 1883 it was reported in the Schiedamsche Courant that the fountain had been completed and would soon be placed on the International Colonial and Export Trade Exhibition right behind the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. At this exhibition the fountain won a prestigious silver medal which brought it even more to public attention. Significantly it was a different basin to the one we now see as a temporarily basin had to be constructed for this exhibition.

On May 1st, 1884, the fountain was offered to the Dutch State but it took a year until the gift was accepted - maybe there was a former street policeman on the panel who anticipated the vandalism!

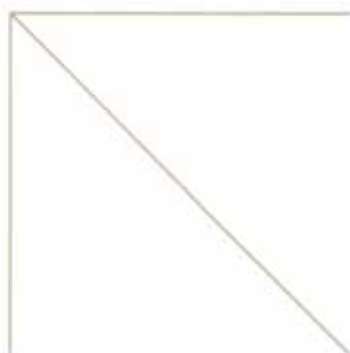
The costs of the manufacture of the fountain was 4665.76 Dutch Florins. This was paid by 86 prominent citizens from The Hague. The Dutch State was responsible for the foundation and the water supply to the fountain. The first time the fountain was seen in full operation was for the ceremony of the opening of the States General of Holland on September 21, 1885.

Being made largely of iron, the fountain has always been a problem child, particularly as it is always surrounded by water. Complex schemes of maintenance, repair and restoration has always been an inherent part of the fountains history. However, there have been times of neglect and indeed as recently as 1967, the fountain had to be removed from the Binnenhof because of its deplorable condition.

So, the first element of the fountains fascination - its unique attraction to vandals.

To return to the association with anthropomorphology, it might be easily argued that one of the core reasons for the almost constant actions of vandals on the fountain during the hundred and twenty years of its existence has been our national fascination with dogs that has seemed to over rule any transitory fashion. For the most stolen of all the fountains many attributes has been it's eight gilded dogs, indeed its quite possible that the current canines are not so much replacements as replacements of replacements with the originals adorning the homes of thugs whose other furnishings have come from a wide variety of social mores down the ages.

Of course another evaluation of these 'dogs' is that they are not dogs at all but chimeras - a figment of the imagination, such as a dragon - and again we can ascribe their constant destruction and theft to a constant human fascination with such supernatural icons.



The archives of the NAI in Rotterdam hold the correspondence between Cuypers and the several different manufacturers of the fountain. Cuypers ordered the 'dogs' in Paris where they were embossed out of copper sheet, likewise the statue of Count Willem II. Cuypers calls the figures *chimères* (chimeras), G.J. Vincent, maker of the wrought iron parts of the fountain, calls them dragons. The final bill of the Paris company for the manufacturing of the figures observes:

*Une Statuette en cuivre martelé représentant le Comte Guillaume II et huit Gargouilles en cuivre martelé...* Probably the best designation of the figures is this last one, gargoyle, because it is linked to its function instead of its shape which can be interpreted in so many ways.

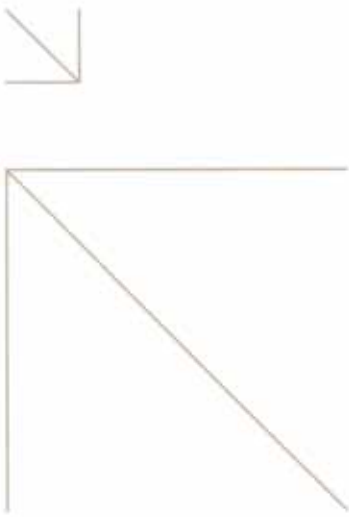
Through researches in the many archives that keep documents on the fountain and those involved, we learn that the fountain was only finally painted after its first playing in September 1885. In February 1886, a Mr Stolzenberg from Roermond (with whom Cuypers evidently shared a company) received payment for painting and gilding the fountain. It was also documented that the statuette had been gilded several times to enhance the golden lustre on top of the fountain. Other parts were gilded too, but with fewer layers of gold leaf. It has not been completely clear until now, exactly which parts were gilded. Old photographs and newspaper clippings do, however, mention the gilding of four helmets and four escutcheons. Two of the escutcheons were to have red lions on a golden font and the other two were to have black eagles. The vigorous correspondence between Cuypers and De Stuers shows that other parts were gilded, though unfortunately they do not indicate which ones. The rest of the fountain was originally painted brown. Newspaper clippings dealing with the restoration of the fountain in 1928 (for the Dutch Olympic Games) still mention the matte, chestnut brown paint on the fountain. Photographs of the fountain from the 1960s show the fountain in its current colour setting: a black glossy paint with many gold paint facings and an excessive amount of gilded ornaments. The major restoration during the early 1970s involved some background research, but probably not enough to reveal the original colours of the fountain.

Perhaps an additional attraction of the fountain to vandals has been its very phallus nature, and again we enter the world of consistent human motivations. Place a fountain with dogs, under a phallus shape, add a sword (the original sword was stolen) and then add that other elemental source of human

fascination – gold, and you end up with an artefact that might have been designed primarily to attract vandals. The proof of such an assertion being its almost constant destruction. Of course there is another possible motivation, perhaps more socio-political than those mentioned earlier, that of the religious nature of the man who stood on top of the fountain, for he was a Roman Catholic standing at the top of a fountain at the epicentre of a protestant area.

Besides being a model for Dutch blacksmithing and high quality craftsmanship, the fountain was primarily meant to honour the founder of the Binnenhof, Count Willem II of Holland. Willem II was chosen to be (German) emperor but was never officially crowned, he had the title; *papish-king*. The Dutch Official Gazette announced on September 21, 1885 that the fountain had been donated to thank the government for taking care of the restoration of the Binnenhof. The official announcement also mentioned the sentence that was planned to be carved out of the granite basin: *Ter nagedachtenis van den Graaf van Holland, Koning Willem II, den begunstiger der stedelijke vrijheden, den beschermer der kunst, den stichter der kasteelen in 's Gravenhage en Haarlem, den steenlegger van den Dom te Keulen.*





This sentence states the memory of Count Willem II and acknowledges many of his great achievements. The last part of the sentence mentions that Willem II was the founder of the Dom in Cologne. After the official announcement, a fierce debate started concerning the truth of this statement. Apparently the sentence has been adjusted following this debate into: *Ter nagedachtenis van Willem II, Roomsche Koning en graaf van Holland, begunstiger der stedelijke vrijheden, beschermer der kunst, stichter der kasteelen in 's Gravenhage en Haarlem.* This adjustment was also testified by the finding of the original piece of text *steenlegger van den keulschen* in the personal archives of De Stuers. The carving of the basin has been done in winter 1885-1886, after the official first playing of the fountain. More details of the fountain are connected to Willem II; the escutcheons bear his coat of arms and his supposedly favourite prayer is cut out in the top ring between the arches: *Domine spes mea a juventute mea in te confirmatus sum ex utero, de ventre matris meae tu es protector meus.*

When all these elements are enjoined; the dogs, the gold, the sword, the religious hatred, the phallus shape and the key significance of the location of the fountain we can begin to understand some of the forces that have made this such a target for vandals. So we move to the fascination of the story surrounding the designing and construction of the fountain, and fascinating it is.

Examine the story of the building of virtually any fountain in Holland and it is usually dull, but not so here. Here we have one of the key political figures in nineteenth century Holland acting in intriguing conspiracy with Holland's key architect of the time. And what fun they had. These two were real friends writing to each other both often and wittingly, enquiring about the each other's families, telling jokes, describing train journeys and returning often to one of their core shared interests – the building of a phenomenal fountain.

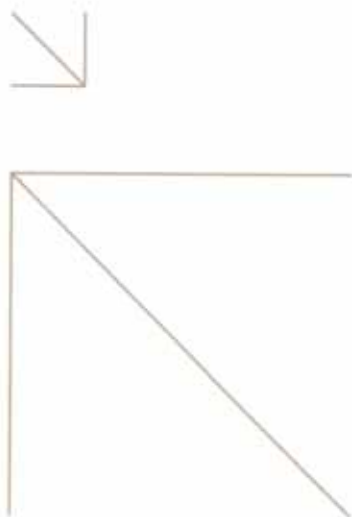
The archives of the Cuypers family are held in Roermond and include many of the letters that De Stuers sent to Cuypers. Typically of the fun they contained is a saucy allusion De Stuers wrote to Cuypers on April 28, 1884. De Stuers tells his friend how he had looked up a reference book seeking to find what the Egyptian hieroglyphic would have been for a government advisor on monuments. De Stuers, who was such a bureaucrat, was thrilled to point out to his friend that the chief characteristic of the hieroglyphic was a large phallus! Who would have guessed? De Stuers concludes.

The two of them were indeed designing a magnificent fountain. Consider; at a time when single tradesmen were sometime employed to design and construct fountains, this one was to have parts brought in at huge expense from master craftsmen in Holland, France and Germany.

Such as G.J. Vincent & Co from Schiedam, who made the wrought ironwork, the firm Monduit from Paris, who made the embossed copper gargoyles and statuette of Count Willem II and Johann Odorico from Frankfurt, who send his daughter (who was living in Amsterdam) to do the mosaics in the basin. Such perfectionism didn't come cheap. The story of how the money was collected to build this phenomenal piece of art would make a political novel in itself with intrigue building on intrigue. The first letter presenting the gift of the fountain by 86 prominent citizens from The Hague, to the State contained a few conditions on which ground this gift would be offered. The government was supposed to take care of the foundations, the water supply and the playing of the fountain. Naturally, these conditions were not welcomed by the Dutch State because they involved spending money. It took 18 more letters between the government and De Stuers before the gift was accepted, a year later. It must have been a pain staking experience for De Stuers. Indeed, we can see in the archive how he assiduously numbered all the letters in red pencil, except for the last, which is marked in green. The Dutch State then built the foundations and constructed the water pipes in a prominent position in the big inner square of the Binnenhof. (Though later moved them after the big restoration in the 1970s. Another mysterious change has been the placing of a compass card in the pavement surrounding the basin. This was done in 1953, an entirely new addition.)

Equally intriguing is the political significance of the high quality ironwork. At much the same time as the construction of the fountain the Scots were building their key cultural icon – the Glasgow Civic centre, with every element of the building being made in or near Glasgow the notion being that this building was to showcase Scottish skills.

Here in Holland we see in the fountain the same kind of civic pride and need for showcasing only this time through a fountain. At the time of the fountain's construction, there was a considerable threat to the tradition of high quality hand craftsmanship and blacksmithing through the selling of catalogue parts for such work. It was a stated objective of the building of the fountain that it should be used as a shop window for the superior work of the craftsmen to inspire other



constructors to use their skills.

At the end of the 19th century, many cast iron artefacts were being en masse produced, according to English and France examples. Catalogue books with pictures and drawings of the artefacts that could be ordered were becoming quite common at many Dutch iron foundries. Simultaneously, a probable counter movement came up with handmade wrought iron artefacts, showing typical Dutch design. The architectural magazine *Bouwkundig Tijdschrift* part 4 of 1884 (that was completely devoted to the International Colonial and Export Trade Exhibition in Amsterdam) heavily criticized the humdrum effect of these standard models. That same magazine reviews the revival of handmade wrought iron artefacts with considerable national pride.

Another matter of interest regarding this fountain is the sectarianism associated with it, for let us not forget that this was to be a fountain built to honour a Roman Catholic, by two political powerful Catholics, yet at a location which was the epicentre of protestant power. It was little wonder that the fundraising campaign in which the Catholics sought to get the Protestants to fund their fountain of a Catholic was long and complex. It was little wonder that there were delays and arguments and compromises and deals.

Let us move to the final part of our three elements that make this fountain so fascinating and of course it is the current challenges of the restoration of the fountain and how we preserve its future generations by avoiding the constant vandalism that has plagued it for the last one hundred and twenty years. In some ways, the keys of the future challenge can be found in our examination of the past.

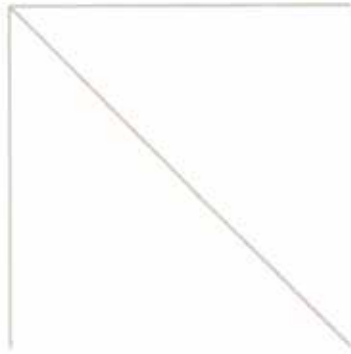
Firstly we must publicise the extraordinary and genuinely fascinating story of this fountain and how it was conceived, and fundraised for and the story of how thieves have been drawn to steal from it down the generations – for it is surely a tale that will find a ready audience in both the media and the writers of school books.

Secondly we must generate public interest in exactly how the fountain should be restored to its former magnificence and the high standard of the people that will be needed to achieve this goal. One of the things that make this fun and easily accessible to the public is that most of this restoration is not exactly rocket science and the history is so human and entertaining.

There must be no compromising on costs. It would be an appalling misuse of funds if this highly important and potentially popular project were simply farmed out to the lowest tender with little regard for either quality or the longevity of the repairs. Over the last hundred years, we have wasted huge amounts of time and money botching the repairs on Holland's most important fountain. This time we are going to get it right. In order to promote this kind of new professional excellence in the art of restoration, a new association has recently been formed. On July 1st 2005 *Restauratoren Nederland* was born. This birth was the conclusion of years of planning: a merger of the four main Dutch Conservator-Restorer's associations. The core business of this association is the construction of a system to oversee professional quality for those who are full members.

The last and perhaps most important part of our work with the fountain must be to open up discussion on the issue of how we ensure that the vandalism that has crippled the fountain for so long is finally halted. How can this be done? Fences, closed circuit television, education, or perhaps a combination of all three. Measures must ensure that the restored fountain doesn't deteriorate as so often before.

This fabulous fountain, this nationally important icon, must be restored and honoured and then preserved and protected. It is up to us as its current guardians to make sure that this is done as well as is humanly possible.



Text: Sir Maxwell MacLeod & Janine van Reekum, 2005;

In commission of the Dutch Government Building Agency (Rijksgebouwendienst) a thorough research of the history of the fountain, its former maintenance, repair and restorations and the current condition of the fountain was performed by Janine van Reekum. This research was specifically asked for before setting up the very much-needed major restoration of the fountain in the near future.



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