

## Christiaan Huygens and the Dutch appreciation for his achievements

*Last year Christiaan Huygens is more or less rehabilitated by his acceptance for the Canon of the Netherlands. Through this, he has been regiven the acknowledgement he deserves as a scientist of large historic importance. Therefore it is now a good moment to again evaluate critically, how the Netherlands honour their great man from history.*

C.A. Grimbergen

### Tributes

The tributes to Christiaan Huygens are somewhat disappointing. There are two statues of him, one from 1949 in Rotterdam (in front of the building that used to be the National Insurance Bank) and one from 1996 in park Vreugd en Rust in Voorburg, a statue of father Constantijn and son Christiaan together. Both the statues are not at a prominent location.

There is a number of parks and streets named after Huygens, although most names Huygens refer to father/diplomat Constantijn Huygens.



Fig 1 Plaque "Grafplaats van Constantijn en Christiaan Huygens" applied to the wall of the St Jacobs church in The Hague (Foto: C.A. Grimbergen).



Fig 2 Mausoleum of Sir Isaac Newton in Westminster Abbey, London ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaac\\_Newton](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaac_Newton)).

There is no mausoleum for this great physicist, only a small marble plate (fig. 1) in the St. Jacobs church in The Hague; jointly for father and son Huygens, who are both buried there, although the exact location of the graves is not known anymore.

Compare this to the ortentatious mausoleum of Isaac Newton in Westminster Abbey (fig. 2). It is remarkable that in the St. Jacobs church there is a mausoleum for admiral Van Wassenaar Obdam, not the most prominent admiral from the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

### Huygens museum

As only remnant of importance remembering Christiaan Huygens, there is Hofwijck, the estate built by Constantijn Huygens between 1639 and 1642 in Voorburg (suburb of The Hague), nowadays still used as "Huygens Museum". Here Christiaan was spending his last years. This estate was developed in close cooperation with architect Jacob van Campen, known from the Royal Palace at Dam Square which he built as

City Hall of Amsterdam between 1642 and 1665. The terrain, on which Hofwijck was situated, had a special designed garden following the rules of harmony of Vitruvius, the famous Roman architect. Constantijn Huygens dedicated a poem to this estate “Vitaulum of Hofwijck”. It is shocking that already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was decided to construct a railway through this terrain (1868), followed by an elevated main road in the 80’s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nowadays Hofwijck is in a rather devastated condition caused by these measures (fig. 3).

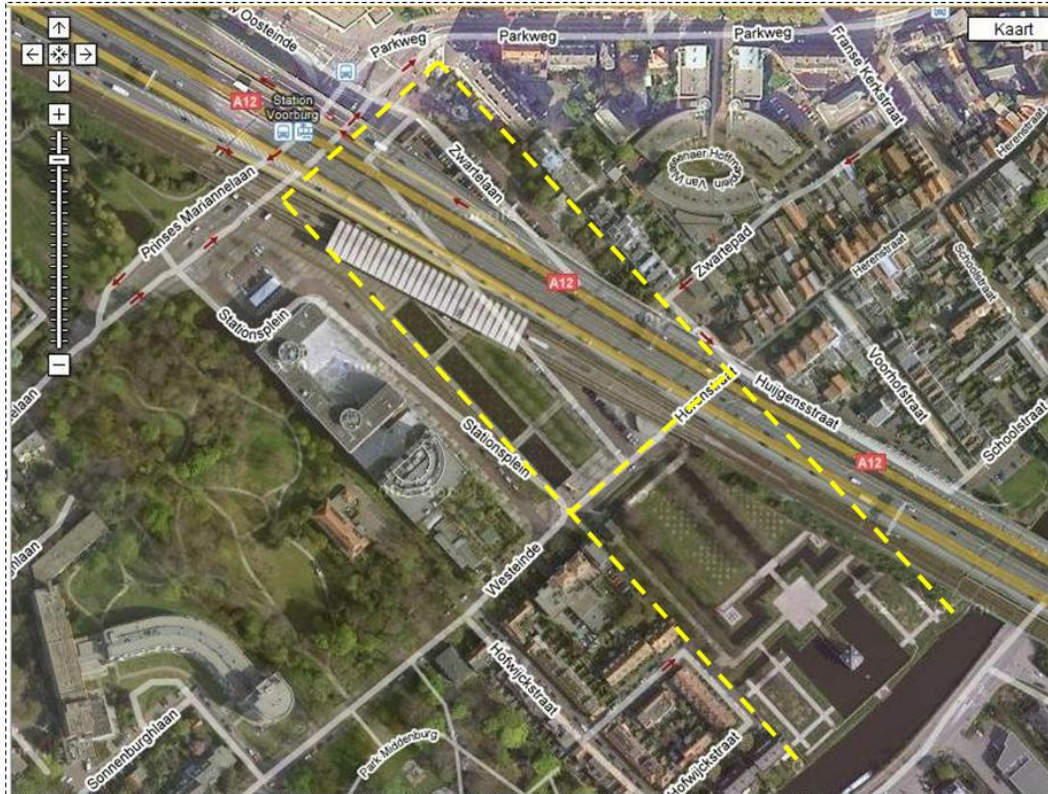


Fig 3 View from above of Voorburg. Hofwijck is situated at the bottom right in a square pond next to the De Vliet. The terrain of the original garden (yellow dotted line) is cut through by a railroad track and a main road (A12).

## Family House



Fig4 The Huygens House at the Plein square just before the demolition in 1875.

But there was also a family house of Christiaan Huygens situated at the Plein Square, that beautiful location in the center of The Hague, next to the Binnenhof (with the governmental buildings). In this house he and his brothers and sister were taught by his father and there he made his first telescopes together with his brother Constantijn and there celebrities like Descartes were regularly received. This extraordinary splendid classisistic house (fig. 4) was built between 1634 and 1637 by architects Jacob van Campen (also involved with building Hofwijck) and Pieter Post. These were not the least architects; they built among others the Sebastiaans Doelen (nowadays the Haags Historisch Museum, the Noordeinde Palace, the palace Huis ten Bosch, the Cats house and the Maurits house in 1638, also located at Plein Square (fig. 5). Also in designing the Huygens House Constantijn Huygens played a large role and he elucidated his considerations of the design in a text “Domus”, later edited as a book [4].



Fig 5 View of the Plein square ca 1690. At left the Huygens House, with at teh roof stauaes of Firmitas, Venustas en Utilitas. Further down the Maurits House is visible (building in the middle).

### Beautiful monument

But what happened in 1875 (just 130 years ago!?). It was decided to breakdown “the most beautiful house of the Netherlands” and to replace it by a ministry, the ministry of justice. The strategic people of those days wanted to abuild a “beautiful monument” with its “own Dutch character”, to which description the Huygens house did not fit apparently!!! These latter words came from the mouth of Victor de Stuers, the head of the Department of Beautiful Arts of those days and known as founder of the Dutch Monument Care!!! (We should be satisfied that they did not decide to breakdown the Dam Palace in Amsterdam from the same architect and with a comparable “character”).

The “beautiful monument” became a NeoRenaissance building from architect C. Peters realised between 1876 and 1883. It is (unfortunately) not an ugly building and has become in the meantime a Rijksmonument (National Monument). It is used now as a part of the Tweede Kamer in the original state.

The Huygens house was not the only building which became a prey of “Monument Care”; all kinds of buildings from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century were teared down and replaced by new buildings and thus the Maurits house (nowadays a museum) became the only 17<sup>th</sup> century building escaping this trend and still situated at the splendid Plein Square (and the Hofvijver (pond)).

### Is there something to repair?

Like explained, Hofwijck is nowadays enclosed by a train track and a main road and the original garden around is is more than halved. Not everyone is satisfied with this situation and luckily not everyone is ready to adapt to this situation. A couple of months ago I found an call for supporting an initiative in this respect. This initiative has the aim to bring the railway and main road underground an to create a parc with the original garden layout from 1641. In this way, the center of Voorburg would regain its face and relation with a rich past. If you want to support this initiative, you may send a response to [info@hofwijck.nl](mailto:info@hofwijck.nl) or call 070-3872311. See also: [www.hofwijck.nl/hofwijck](http://www.hofwijck.nl/hofwijck)

### **Rebuild the Huygens House!**

If we really want to honour the Huygens family and especially Christiaan Huygens and really want to embrace them in our cultural heritage, then I personally feel that we should repair the howler/blunder made in the past and should rebuild the Huygens House at the Plein Square. It will be difficult to do that at the original spot in view of the National Monument which has been built there. But one could rebuild a 100 meters further, opposite of the Maurits House. The (not very beautiful) Ministry of Colonies, which was erected there in 1859 should be sacrificed for this. This building is now in use as office for the Tweede Kamer and possibly this function can also be realised elsewhere; where there is a will, there is a solution for an alert government. There are detailed drawings of the Huygens House. The impressive statues on the roof are still available in the garden of the Rijksmuseum and the original ceilings were transported to the house of the architect of the Department of Justice, “mister” C. Peters. The house can be restored in full glamour. The Huygens House is large enough to establish a museum (the Lakenhal Museum in Leiden is a replica of the Huygens House). This museum could give the justified attention to all merits and achievements of Christiaan Huygens and the other members of the Huygens family (and it could become the new Time Museum).

### **Remarkable observations and discoveries**

The result would be a 17<sup>th</sup> century corner of the Plein Square with two splendid 17<sup>th</sup> century buildings, both with a museum function, one devoted to Dutch painting, the other devoted to the most important Dutch scientist ever and his prominent family. This way, two elements of our heritage, Art and Culture & Science, which made the 17<sup>th</sup> century to our Golden Age, would receive decent attention.

An attention they received mainly outside the Netherlands up till now. Although dislocated by 100 meters, we could get a feeling for how Christiaan in the spring of 1654 from his roof window of this house made his observations with his own built telescope of Saturn and discovered the “guard”, the moon of Saturn, later called Titan and explained the phase of Saturn by assuming a ring around this planet. Both these achievements shocked the European astronomical society, which was already making observations for years of these phenomena. And also the fact that the first functioning model of the pendulum clock would be realized the first Christmas day of 1656 should be commemorated, two years ago, at this location.

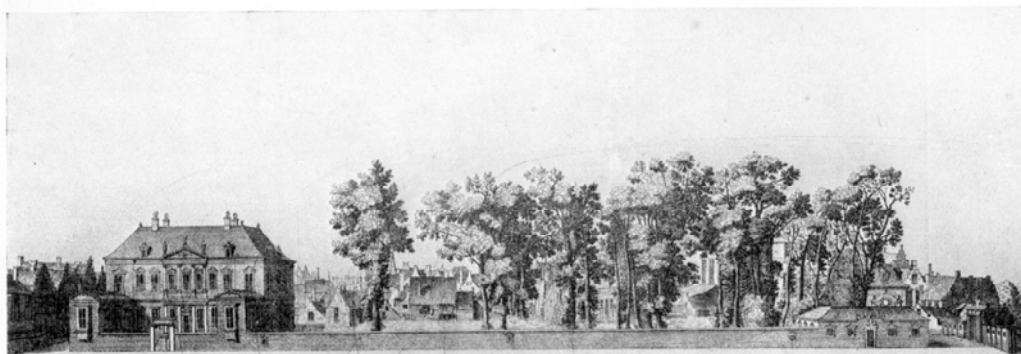


Fig 6 View on the west side of the Plein square (engraving from 1639 by Theodoor Matham after a drawing by Pieter Post). At the right the entrance of the Binnenhof (with government buildings) can be seen, the Maurits House is just outside the print.

## References

- 1) C.A. Grimbergen, Christiaan Huygens toch in canon. Tijdschrift, 07/3 p 7-8, 2007.
- 2) A. Jacobs, G. Langerak en K. van der Leer, Christiaan Huygens in Voorburg; een geniale geleerde en de naar hem genoemde prijs. Historisch Voorburg, Jaargang 13 (2), 2007. ISSN 1381-4672
- 3) T. van Strien, K. van der Leer, A. Leerintveld en B. Bregman. Hofwijck; het gedicht en de buitenplaats van Constantijn Huygens. Vereniging Hofwijck p/a Walburg Pers, Zutphen 2002. ISBN 90.5730.188.1
- 4) F.R.E. Blom, H.G. Bruin en K.A. Ottenheym. Domus; het huis van Constantijn Huygens in Den Haag. Walburg Pers, Zutphen 1999. ISBN 90.5730.057.5
- 5) Zie <http://historie.residentie.net/justitie.htm>
- 6) C.A. Grimbergen, De slinger 350 jaar toegepast: 25 december 1656 – 25 december 2006, Tijdschrift 06/4 p 3-4, 2006.