

Three Outstanding Small Museums of the Netherlands



Three Dutch Museums - Images by Lee Foster

by Lee Foster

For some visitors the museum experience can be akin to drinking too many good wines at a single sitting. The results are a visual blur, with little memorable experience. The distinguished does not register as distinct.

Many museums appear large and overwhelming to the average visitor.

The Louvre, the British Museum, and the Metropolitan in New York are examples. The visitor must separate and isolate, go to the exhibit room with blindfolds in place, closing eyes to all peripheral attractions, to avoid the clash of centuries and styles.

In the Netherlands, however, the museum-makers have sought to correct this experience with three outstanding museums, each of which displays a single, unified artistic or historic subject of first-rate importance.

You can visit this trio from a base in Amsterdam. They are the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem, and the Cruquius Pump Museum

near Haarlem.

Van Gogh Museum

In Amsterdam, between the Rijksmuseum and the Stedelijk Museum, lies the Van Gogh Museum.

The Dutch have spent centuries perfecting small aspects of their society, and this museum demonstrates a tasteful touch with a ribbon of sunflowers around the building. After seeing the several sunflower pictures inside, you will probably feel that Van Gogh would have appreciated this minor echo.

Perhaps the intimacy of the museum is assured partly because Van Gogh is one of the few artists addressed by strangers on a first name basis. Appreciators of the artist tend to speak about Vincent, not Van Gogh, as if he is only a conversation away.

Inside, on three floors lit by natural lighting, some 200 of Vincent's paintings are arranged chronologically, grouped by the places where he painted.

He was the son of a preacher and a woman from a bookbinding family. His mother's favorite pastime was drawing. It is remarkable to think that Vincent painted 800 canvases and sketched another 800 drawings in the 10 short years between his 27th and 37th years.

The museum's holdings include 500 drawings and some 700 letters by Van Gogh. (If Van Gogh captivates you, complement a visit here with a look at 274 more Van Goghs in the Kroller-Muller Museum, near Aarnhem.)

In the first set of paintings the masterly "Potato Eaters" stands out. His affectionate portrayal of these destitute but honest peasants, reduced to near animalism in the struggle for survival, evokes wells of sympathy. It is interesting to see the several portrait studies that he did while preparing this theme. These early paintings were strongly affected by his sense of the desolate poverty that then prevailed in the Drenthe Province of the Netherlands, northeast of Amsterdam.

Vincent's frequent portrayal of his image might suggest an inordinate fondness for his own likeness. But the explanation may be more mundane: he lacked money for models.

His languorous "The Bedroom at Arles," the lyrical "Sunflowers," the swirling "Wheatfield with Reaper," and the troubled "Self-portrait" with one ear are satisfying pictures to see here.

After living with the presence of these images in many fine reproductions, you may be refreshed and startled to see the crisp originals, all gathered and displayed without any conflicting diversions.

The Frans Hals Museum

The Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem, an hour west of Amsterdam, carries the rationale of the small museum to its highest expression.

The focus of attention here is the incisive, sometimes scathing, portraits that Hals painted of 17th century Dutchmen and Dutchwomen of the Golden Age. These people flourished at the height of the nation's economic and political power. In Hals' portraits they appear singly or in groups. It was the custom of the day for the powerful guild and merchant organizations to order a group painting.

Hals, a perceptive portrait painter, shows the faces of these men and women with a marvelous complexity of character. Each face is a bundle of motives, usually worldly and possessed of few illusions, sometimes cynical but often ingenuous. Hals seems to catch each person's full character in the face.

The bodies seem oddly small by proportion, but, if you have ever measured the size of a modern person against a suit of medieval armor, it becomes apparent that people in earlier centuries were noticeably smaller.

"The Banquet of Officers of the Civic Guard of St. George, at Haarlem, 1627" is one of Hals' most representative masterpieces. The eleven men in the picture are opulently clothed, indulging in a sumptuous feast of food and drink. They are confident men, aware of their importance. They look accustomed to good fellowship

and a leisure that allows for amused laughter. Yet Hals also shows each of them as an individual, each adrift with his own thoughts, utterly singular in mannerisms.

The originality of the Frans Hals Museum begins, but extends beyond, this superb collection of his works. The structure itself was built in the Haarlem of Hals' time as a Home For Old Men, begun in 1606. Later it became an orphanage, and in 1913 the museum opened here. Several rooms resemble intimate interiors that might have interested Vermeer. The buildings extend around a 17th century formal garden with plants arranged in an arabesque design.

This combination of talents, the artistry of Hals and the architectural genius of Lieven de Key, Haarlem town architect of the day, makes the museum experience deeply harmonious. Artists in Hals' immediate milieu are also widely represented, ranging from landscapists to other portrait painters. Extensive furniture, silver, tiles, glassware, pottery, coins, tin, copperware, medals, and medallions from the 17th century add to the fullness of the displays. This approximation of Hals' era includes an apothecary, dolls house, and puppet theatre. Few museums present such a total immersion in a period of artistic genius.

The Cruquius Pump Museum

The Dutch joke that God may have created the world, but the Dutch created the Netherlands.

Today it is difficult to imagine what the countryside of the Netherlands must have been like when Tacitus wrote that the area consisted of "a large number of lakes north of the Rhine, fringed by sand dunes."

Sooner or later the question arises: How did the Dutch wrestle the land from the sea? If all this land was reclaimed from the sea, how and when did this occur?

The one-stop answer lies at the Cruquius Pump Museum between Haarlem and Hoofddorp, west of Amsterdam. The "Cruquius" is one of three steam-driven pumps that reclaimed the Haarlem lakes between 1849-1852 and created the Haarlem area "polders," the Dutch word for lands reclaimed from the sea.

Today the Cruquius Foundation preserves this old pumping station with its original steam engine, made in England by Harvey's foundry in Cornwall. The steam pump itself is a special relic from the age of steam.

The museum aims to interpret Dutch efforts at reclaiming land from the medieval era to the present. Exhibits describe early windmills and modern electric pumps. Elaborate models of the local Haarlem water system and of the entire country's water dynamics, complete with wave machines to simulate the sea's motion, continually retell the story of reclamation.

One model illustrates that as recently as February 1953 a combination of storms and spring tides broke the dikes in the southern part of the country, causing extensive flooding with consequent loss of life and property.

You emerge from the museum with a much better orientation to the dike system that allows the Netherlands to exist as a country of dry land rather than a series of lakes. Like the Van Gogh and Hals Museums, the Cruquius celebrates the native Dutch genius.

Other small museums in the country are also captivating, but these three enjoy world-class importance. Although other countries also emphasize the small museum, such as Mexico City's fine Diego Rivera Museum, no one does the small museum of first rate importance, devoted to a single subject, better than the Dutch.

The Dutch Museums: If You Go

The three museums are:

Van Gogh Museum, Paulus Potterstraat 7, Amsterdam

Frans Hals Museum, Groot Heiligland 62, Haarlem

Museum Cruquius, Cruquius Dijk 32, Vyfhuizen

For more tourism information, contact the Amsterdam tourism site at

www.iamsterdam.com.