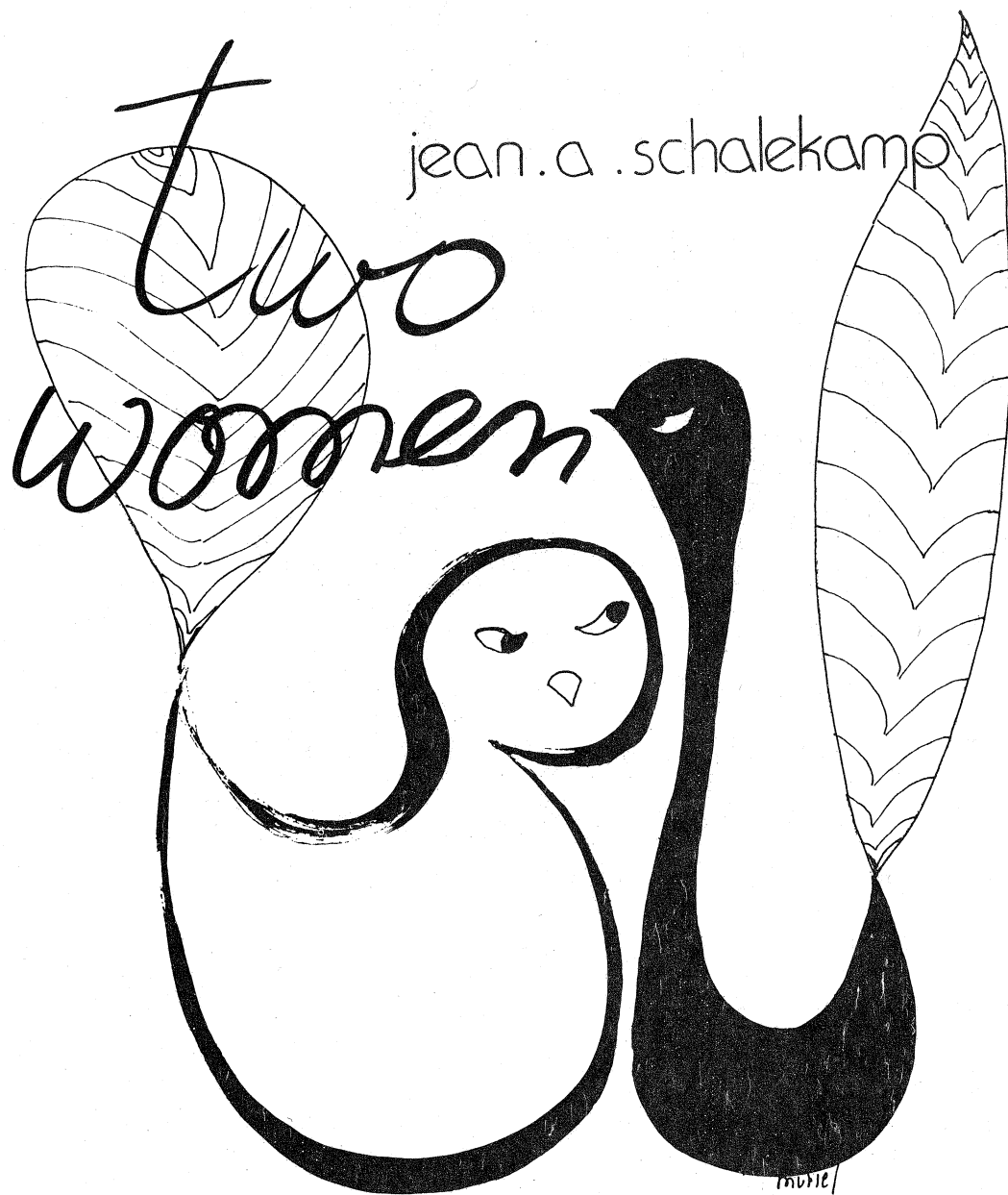


DUTCH SCENES & PERSPECTIVES



friday jan. 26 , 7.30 p.m.
106 folwell hall

Fig. 2

DUTCH STUDIES: THE MINNESOTA EXPERIENCE

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Few tasks are more difficult than describing something you've built up over a period of years, something you're fiercely proud of, without, at the same time, convincing your audience that you are an egomaniac. I've decided there is no avoiding the problem. If egomania emerges from this presentation, then egomania it must be. But I will approach the issues from a perspective other than that of public relations. My intentions, perhaps you will agree, are honorable. I will begin with a history of the Minnesota Dutch Program, add to the history a glance at what the future may hold in store and conclude with some tongue-in-cheek advice for anyone who might be considering the initiation of a Dutch Program. If you disagree with my editorial remarks, I hope, at the very least, that I will provide you with enough neutral information to do some editorializing on your own.

THE PRELUDE

In the winter of 1970, I had been at the University of Minnesota for half a year. During that time, my involvement had been entirely in the teaching of German

language and literature, especially in the medieval period. No one had mentioned Dutch, nor did I anticipate Dutch becoming a topic of interest. Then, one fateful day in that winter of '70 a colleague noticed the Dutch Dictionary on my desk. He asked, apparently surprised, whether I really did know some Dutch. Having received a reply in the affirmative, he recommended that I propose a beginning Dutch course of three quarters for the following year. The next week I submitted a proposal, and shortly thereafter news came through that the proposal had been accepted. The three-quarter course "Beginning Dutch" was scheduled to make its debut during the academic year 1971/72. If this casual process of proposal and acceptance sounds like the carefree days before public universities were convulsed by taxpayer revolt and financial retrenchment, then you have received an accurate picture of the situation. Actually, the upper administrative levels of the university were already aware of the impending financial crunch, but we at the departmental level simply went about our daily business, adding courses or programs pretty much as we felt like it. It was all fairly matter of fact. I do not recall any special omens, favorable or otherwise, in connection with the Dutch proposal. There was no sense of destiny having called, of great adventure about to be embarked upon or even of impending disaster. I had been asked

to run a little experiment with a Dutch course (approximately 10 enrollments were expected for the entire year), and I had agreed to do my duty. Maybe, if all went well, Dutch would be offered again in five or six years.

THE FIRST YEAR: 1971/72

I will never forget my first Dutch class. I set off to meet my three students, at least that is the figure I had in mind at the time, and I was already looking forward to Winter and Spring Quarters, by which time I expected to be running a tutorial for the one remaining diehard. Imagine my shock and amazement when I approached a classroom with students spilling out into the hallway. At first, I assumed it must be the wrong room, but soon it was obvious that I was in the right place, and the students confirmed that they had come to learn Dutch. Some of them were not even officially enrolled university students, but were allowed to stay as visitors anyway. The official enrollment for that first year was 41, but numbers tell less than half the story. These were not the unwilling, reluctant students I had to deal with in large beginning German classes, not at all the kind of students who enroll only to fulfill a requirement. They were motivated, lively and unconventional. Each day I began to look forward to my Dutch class as a high point. I even submitted

a proposal for a one-quarter course in intermediate Dutch for the next year and remember being delighted when the proposal passed through all the committees and was approved.

But not everything was roses that first year. Retrenchment was beginning to rear its fearsome head, and Dutch was one of those courses which "frill hunters" loved to cite as not being "central to the mission of the university." Before the first quarter had even concluded, a College of Liberal Arts committee issued a report in which Dutch, alone among all Western European languages, was listed as an "exotic language." The course was a sitting duck, and I assumed it would disappear in the first wave of budget cuts. But I did not reckon with my students. They were hopping mad at the committee report and informed me they intended to do something about it. Before I could say Scheveningen, they had organized the first annual "Dutch Week" and were circulating petitions to save the program. To my amazement, the pressure was effective. The Dutch courses were allowed to remain on the books, and the university agreed to allow me to teach "Beginning Dutch" as an overload and "Intermediate Dutch" as a part of my regular teaching responsibilities. This overload teaching to keep the program afloat and expanding was to continue for the next four years. I don't think of it now as an especially heroic act. Any teacher worth his salt

would not have turned his back on the intensity of student initiative I experienced during those years.

THE SECOND YEAR: 1972/73

The positive momentum continued into the second year with enrollment up slightly to 44. Student enthusiasm was high, to the point that students voluntarily agreed to undertake an intensive program so that they could maximize their learning experience within the tight constraints of only three quarters of instruction. I agreed at that point to submit a proposal which would radically change the structure of the program: "Beginning Dutch" would be replaced by a three-quarter sequence "Intensive Dutch" with nearly twice as many credits, and two literature courses would be added. This time, however, the proposal was rejected right away by a retrenchment-minded College of Liberal Arts committee. The Dutch sequence might have remained unchanged were it not for two remarkable letters sent (without my knowledge) by one of my students, one to the chairman of the committee which rejected the Dutch proposal and the other to the dean. Consider the following excerpt from the letter to the committee chairman:

I wish to protest vigorously to you and to the Curriculum Committee your recent refusal to pass the Dutch proposal. For information's sake, may I remind you that this proposal was to increase from five to eight points the credit granted for beginning Dutch and to change the catalogue listing from "Beginning Dutch" to "Intensive Dutch."

Your action will serve to detract from and even to endanger an excellent language program. The pace of the Dutch class as it is currently pursued is unique at the University. It takes the student through the entire grammar in one quarter; through introductory reading and speaking practice the second quarter; and through a literature survey the third. By experience I know it is demanding. More importantly, I know it succeeds in its claims: that it teaches one as much in two quarters as other language programs do in about three-and-a-half.

In the concluding paragraphs of the letter to the dean, his tone is even more emphatic:

There is one additional point I would like to make. My experience with Dutch academically has been no less than remarkable. I have studied five foreign languages for an aggregate of probably fifteen years, and no other course has taught me so much in so short a time. The effort required to assimilate it all was indeed large; the course deserves the eight credits the Dutch proposal suggests. But what struck me so forcefully was the nature of the learning experience. It was absolutely unique in my education, and if it was a bit unusual next to other training methods, it did not suffer from it. I endorse the course -- in its present form -- without reservation.

I respectfully urge you to lend your support to both the program as a whole and to the proposal before the Curriculum Committee.

To my utter astonishment, the proposal was reconsidered and passed by the committee a short time after the arrival of these letters. Furthermore, the class' second annual "Dutch Week" revealed such strong support for Dutch on the campus that a teaching assistantship was made available for the next year. All in all, the second year was a very good year.

THE THIRD YEAR: 1973/74

This year the sun continued to shine on the program. The teaching assistant, Els Michlin, proved to be a gifted teacher, and enrollment nearly doubled to 72. It seems so important to me now, in retrospect, that Ms. Michlin was able to be associated with the program during this year and the next several years. One-person programs run the risk eventually of monotony; her presence lifted us from the rut of one-person status. This year also saw Dutch offered during the summer for the first time. But the truly important development was the emergence of a core of students interested in pursuing Dutch beyond the level of an introductory language course. They approached me during the Spring Quarter with various ideas for their future involvement with the Dutch Program. Since we all knew that proposals to expand course offerings would probably be unsuccessful, the most promising idea appeared to be the founding of a Netherlands House, a residence for students which would function also as the center for all Dutch-related activities. Planning for the Netherlands House continued right through the summer months.

THE YEAR OF THE NETHERLANDS HOUSE: 1974/75

The fourth year brought continued success in the classroom. Students continued to be highly motivated, and

enrollment was on a par with the previous year. But the dominant event of this year was the founding of the Netherlands House. The best description of our plans for the House is contained in a letter to Prince Bernhard of April 21, 1975:

Six students wanted single rooms and two were interested in sharing a double. We searched for a 7-bedroom house near the university. It was agreed that the house should have attractive common rooms on the lower level to allow for activities which would benefit both residents and non-residents. . . . Financially, the plan was simple: residents would share equally in the cost of monthly rent and maintenance. Culturally, we wanted the house to become the center for the Dutch program. The official language of the house would be Dutch. Every Thursday non-residents interested in Netherlandic culture would be invited to join us for an informal evening of fellowship and discussion. Special events such as films, guest lectures, Sinterklaas, etc., would take place in the house. One evening each week, I would donate time to give free instruction in Dutch to anyone in the community who might have an interest. It was also our hope . . . to expand our services. This expansion involved building a reference library and reading room, purchasing records, tapes, a stereo system and tape deck to establish a listening area of Dutch materials. By late summer we had found a 7-bedroom house which appeared to be ideally suited to our needs, and we embarked upon our plans with high hopes.

I might add to this that our plans for cultural events were realized beyond our wildest dreams. The Thursday evening gatherings were stimulating and enjoyable. Students came every week for free instruction. More than 50 adults and children joined us for Sinterklaas. In February, there was

an enormous costume party for carnaval. In the spring, Dutch writer Esteban López, who had come for a single lecture, enjoyed himself so much that he stayed as a guest in the Netherlands House for an entire week. And in May, there was an all-night open house for the university community which we called our "Happy Birthday Amsterdam" party.

But there was a side to the Netherlands House experience which went beyond our wildest nightmares. Allow me to quote once again from the letter of April 21, 1975:

After signing the lease it became clear that certain assumptions upon which our plans had been based were no longer valid. The American economy was in a state of crisis, and students returning for the Fall Quarter were caught in a financial squeeze with higher prices and a shortage of part-time jobs. Four of the students who had planned to live in the Netherlands House were unable to become residents. . . . Our attempts to solicit contributions were without success. . . . Since I had taken complete financial responsibility for the Netherlands House, I made up the monthly deficits . . . out of my own pocket.

As you can probably imagine from the excerpt above, the letter of April 21, 1975 to Prince Bernhard was a plea for financial support which would allow the House to continue through the next year. As May passed by without a reply, my debts were beginning to exceed my ability to borrow. Finally, on June 30 a curt reply informed me that the matter was being passed on to the Consulate-General in Chicago.



Fig. 3

The waiting started again, and I was now unable to make the rent. I began stalling the landlord and wrote the Consul General of the urgency of our situation. And the waiting continued. Near the end of July, a full three months after the initial letter from us, a letter informed me that the matter was under consideration. The landlord was becoming threatening. The final response arrived August 7, 1975 and brought with it the collapse of our dream house. The following is an excerpt from that letter:

I have been requested by the Netherlands Embassy to ask you to point out clearly why the maintenance of the Netherlands House should be placed within the framework of the Netherlands priorities in the United States. In this context I may draw your attention to the fact that the Netherlands language programs in the United States of America are considered as the first priority, this is to say the supplying for instance of (text)-books, dictionaries (sic), periodicals and magazines by the Ministry of Education and Sciences . . .

The decision as to the renewal of the lease of the Netherlands House as of August 15 lies of course with you. In case you intend to request funds from the Netherlands Government for the upkeep of the House, your application will be forwarded to the competent Netherlands authorities, but the Embassy feels that no priority can be given to the House within the framework of the activities for the spreading of knowledge of Netherlands language and history.

A scant three days later, my landlord wrote to confirm that the lease had lapsed and that he would sue me immediately if I did not pay what was owed from the summer. After

allowing the kettle to simmer a few weeks, I collected my thoughts and rifled off a letter to the Consul General on behalf of my students and the Dutch Program. Below is the opening section:

Your letter arrived too late to offer any hope for assistance in maintaining a Netherlands House for this academic year. Lacking resources, I was forced to allow the lease to lapse and turn my attention to paying off the debts accumulated this past year. In the future, given some understanding and support, we hope to be able to qualify for a mortgage on a facility which can become a more permanent home for the Netherlands House.

Your letter of August 7 left me alternately puzzled, frustrated, depressed, outraged. You imply that language programs are to be equated to "(text)-books, dictionaries (sic), periodicals and magazines." Surely, you must be aware that a collection of books does not automatically bring about a language program. Indeed, some fine collections of Dutch materials in this country are lying in storage in university libraries because these institutions have neither students nor teachers for the language program. A successful language program needs two things above all else: 1) competent teachers and 2) enthusiastic students. The Netherlands House proved to be an excellent method of gaining and maintaining a high level of interest in our program, while at the same time providing students with instructional benefits outside the context of the classroom. For this reason alone, it was and is deserving of support, if the Embassy's first priority is indeed the furtherance of language programs in this country.

I will spare you the final paragraphs. They were born of despair and frustration, angrier than any other I have ever written. They stated things that needed stating, but I am not now, nor will I ever be, proud that the glorious Netherlands House ended with such anger and

bitterness.

THE YEAR OF CRISIS: 1975/76

The fall of 1975 found me and my students absolutely despondent over the loss of our pet project. We wallowed in self-pity, and the enrollments in "Intensive Dutch" dropped to less than half of what they had been. By Thanksgiving, I was beginning to feel this would be the last year for Dutch in Minnesota. And then a remarkable thing happened. Esteban López, the writer who had stayed in the Netherlands House the previous spring, wrote with a bold and magnificent proposal. He wanted to come the following year as writer-in-residence and would seek support in the Netherlands if I would seek support within the University of Minnesota. That turned everything around. Suddenly, there was a new project with great promise for the students. Suddenly, I could begin to focus on some of the positive aspects of this otherwise gloomy year. Ms. Michlin and I had been working on a computer textbook for some time. Now the book was being used by our beginning class and was proving highly successful. The level of performance in the classroom had never been higher. Though enrollments were down, numerous calls were coming in from prospective students who were unable to enroll because the schedule for "Intensive Dutch" was so rigid. We needed a

new, more flexible structure for our beginning language instruction to go with our efforts to establish the writer-in-residence program. The concept we fastened upon was one of individual pacing, of using the computer text to allow students to proceed at their own rate. Scheduling was likewise to be individually oriented, with the hours for consultation arranged each quarter to accommodate the students actually enrolled. Students could begin the program Fall, Winter or Spring Quarter. They could earn a few credits in the Fall Quarter and then not resume their study until Spring Quarter or the following Fall Quarter or even later. Out of this complex concept a course proposal "Beginning Dutch: Individually Paced" was born, and this time we had no difficulty gaining approval from the College of Liberal Arts. I won't bore you with the complexities of our negotiations for the writer-in-residence program. Suffice it to say that at the very last moment Esteban was successful on his side of the Atlantic and I on mine. The Dutch Program narrowly escaped extinction during the years 1975/76.

THE YEARS OF GROWTH: 1976-PRESENT

The presence of the writer caught the imagination of students, and the radical, new structure of the language program made Dutch infinitely more accessible. Enrollments

in 1976/77 more than tripled to 108, and the growth has continued to a high this past year of 168 enrollments. The writer-in-residence program managed also to survive its shaky start and continued with Jean Schalekamp succeeding Esteban López to be succeeded in turn this year by Henk Romijn Meijer. I must confess, however, my conviction that we would have lost the program long ago were it not for the invaluable services of Joost de Wit and the Foundation for Translation which he heads.

Most significant, perhaps, these past few years have been the negotiations to establish a BA major program in Dutch Studies. An initial success was achieved this past year when a BA minor in Dutch literature was approved, and now this year we have finally arrived: below is the interdepartmental program "Dutch Studies" for the BA degree at the University of Minnesota.

The Dutch-speaking Low Countries constitute a unique cultural community of ca 20 million speakers in the northwestern corner of Europe. The area was a world power and cultural leader in the 16th-17th centuries and has emerged again recently into the sphere of world politics with its influential role in the formation and governance of the Common Market. The Dutch genius has seldom expressed itself through nationalism or military conquest, but rather more frequently through assimilation and international enterprise. The selection of courses for this program will be based upon two emphases:

- a) the periods of significant Dutch influences in Europe (i.e., the 16th-17th centuries and the 20th century); and

- b) the Dutch genius for assimilation and international enterprise (i.e., courses dealing with the Low Countries in their European context).

Areas of Concentration:

- I. Language and Literature
- II. History
- III. Philosophy and the Arts

The Courses:

Language and Literature

Intermediate Dutch

Dutch Authors in Translation (by writers-in-residence)

Studies in Dutch Authors (by writers-in-residence)

History

Revolt of the Netherlands, 1566-1612

Economy and Society - Europe, 1348-1580 & 1580-1750

Expansion of Europe (two quarters taught with the resources of the James Ford Bell Library, one of the finest collections of rare Dutch materials of this kind in the world)

Philosophy and the Arts

General History of Western Philosophy: Modern

Philosophy from Descartes through Hume

European Heritage: Age of the Baroque

History of Renaissance and Baroque Art

15th Century Painting in Northern Europe

16th Century Painting in Northern Europe

Baroque Art in England, France and Lowlands

History of Musical Styles

Senior Project

PROJECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

This is the part I like, the part where I can let my imagination take off. Where do I want the Dutch Program to head in the years to come? For one thing, I want the writer-in-residence program to continue, but I'm hoping for the involvement of Belgium and Flemish writers in the 1980's.

The "Dutch Studies" major will have to be constantly refined and redefined based on the experience of the first brave souls who attempt it. In particular, I expect the major program to encourage my colleagues in other departments to become more "Dutch conscious" in their teaching so that I may involve them in the program. A final hope for the distant future is to reestablish, somehow, someday, the Netherlands House. The concept of the original Netherlands House wouldn't have to change a whit. All that's needed is the money . . .

ADVICE FOR PROSPECTIVE INITIATORS OF DUTCH PROGRAMS

You may have already seen through the thinly disguised posture of my history as a moral tale: Dutch is good; Dutch is threatened; Dutch triumphs in the end. We are only lacking the moral of the story, but I'm afraid I will deliberately insist on disappointing you in this respect. Morals are for endings, and the Dutch Program at Minnesota has a long, long way to go yet. But I will summon the energy to preach some words of advice to others who might wish to imitate our efforts:

Firstly: Don't spend years designing a second Camelot. Just jump in with any beginning course you can get past your administrators. If you bring some enthusiasm to your offering, your students will take it from there. Chances are if you get past the first year, the involvement of your students will make it difficult to discontinue the program.

Secondly: Always try to keep one year ahead of the administrator's ax. Listen to your students; their needs usually indicate the best next step for expansion or survival.

Finally: Recognize that Dutch can be a charming language and culture of intimate interiors. Allow time for informal gatherings, e.g., for the joyful discovery of Sinterklaas or for mellow conversation over a borreltje. Students have a keen eye for classes that refuse to separate education from life. If you refuse to allow such a separation in your Dutch Program, it will become absolutely irresistible.