

Looking for Happiness in the Golden Age



Painting of the Dam with fully constructed Nieuwekerkstoren: city hall overlaid. Cornelis de Bie, after Jacob van der Ulft, 1653. Image: Amsterdam Museum

‘In Amsterdam, that’s where it happens! Due to the economic prosperity in the last decades, the city has grown tremendously, both in geographic size and population. The city is full of life and has become a popular destination for travel. From all over the place, merchants, immigrants, those looking for happiness, nobleman, and refugees have been drawn to the city because of its toleration, the beauty of its canals, and the possibility of finding their fortune. Now is the right time to visit!’

Text: Benjamin B. Roberts

This is not excerpted from Lonely Planet: Amsterdam. It is from the late seventeenth century travel guide *Amsterdam voor vijf duiten per dag* [Amsterdam on Five Pennies a Day]. It is a reminder that Amsterdam has an enormous pull for foreigners, especially young people seeking jobs and happiness.

In the seventeenth century when the travel book was published, Amsterdam was one of the most modern cities in

Europe. Dutch society was in the throes of re-inventing itself with a new religion (Protestantism), a new form of government (a republic), a new economy (liberalism). As young residents of the city were at the helm of these developments, tolerance for other groups (Huguenots, Jews), and freedom of press (almost any book could be published without censorship and distributed throughout Europe) grew during the Dutch Golden Age.

Abandoning their homes

Today the city’s recent demographic growth is primarily due to the newcomers who are 20-34 year-old. They make up 238,847 of the 834,713 inhabitants of the city, more than a quarter of the total population of Amsterdam. That’s good news for the city. Young people come to the city for jobs, but they also generate more employment by creating demand for housing, services, and other goods in the urban economy.

Not only was Amsterdam in the seventeenth century an extremely young city, but the majority of young people in Amsterdam’s population at that time were migrants from the Southern Netherlands (nowadays Belgium), the Scandinavian countries, and Westphalia in Germany, who came to the city to find their good fortune and happiness. Most came because the harbor desperately needed manpower to load and unload ships as well as to man the ships that journeyed to and from the Baltic Sea territories, Southern Europe, and also to the Far East and Americas. Young men, especially in rural areas in Northern Europe where there was war and destruction (such as the Thirty Years War), had no other option than to flee. They packed their bags, abandoned social ties and structures, and started anew in Amsterdam.

Festivities

In the seventeenth century, Amsterdam was a boomtown. From 1578 to 1700 the city grew from an average size town of 30,000 inhabitants to 200,000 residents, the third largest city in Europe after London and Paris. There was an abundance of jobs in the merchant trade, the commercial industry, and factories. Besides employment, Amsterdam became a city of excitement with numerous taverns, gambling halls, smoke dens, and brothels. That tradition had already begun as early as the Middle Ages, when the city’s harbor attracted men who sought recreation while off their ship and so visited the cafes where prostitutes sought clients.

The modern notion of happiness stems from the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, when French philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed that happiness was no longer a utopian dream for the few but could also be obtained by anyone.

Amsterdam grew up before this Enlightenment idea became widespread. Still, with its economic boom and young people from all over Europe, Amsterdam was a place where one could pursue happiness.

