

Mrs Muysken was the sister of someone who is all around us today, in every room, hall, salon and corner, yes even in most of the furniture: it is the architect of this spectacular building, Mr Constantijn Muysken. I was researching his life and work a few weeks ago and then stumbled upon this event, hence me being here to tell you a little bit about the architect Muysken, this building and Muyskens extraordinary sister.

Constantijn Muysken was born in 1843 as the son of the mayor of a tiny village not far from here, called Hillegom. In 1861, when he was 22 years old, he left for the town of Delft, to study. He became a student of the very first professor of Architecture of the Netherlands, the German architect Eugen Heinrich Gugel. In his education, the emphasis was on the Italian Renaissance and the architecture of the Dutch Golden Age: the seventeenth century. Muysken finished his degree in Architecture in Hannover and worked as an assistant lecturer for a while back in Delft. In 1874, he left for what as you may know many young men of a certain stature did at the time: a Grand Tour through Italy. For more than a year he travelled to Rome, Mantua, Milano, Pavia and Bologna. There he made sketches and drawings of ceilings, arches, pillars, frames and ornamentation, that are still kept in the Dutch Archives for the History of Architecture.

When Constantijn Muysken got back to the Netherlands in 1876, he helped design the Dutch pavilion for the World Fair in Philadelphia. It's probably there that he met another member of the preparatory committee for the World Fair, he was the distinguished and gloriously rich Cornelis Jan van der Oudermeulen, stable master in extraordinary service of King William III and the late owner of this house. Van der Oudermeulen came from a family that had belonged to the wealthy upper class for centuries who had mostly married into the nobility. His wife was Julia Ewouda, countess of Randwijck. When his childless sister died, who had been married to a baron, Cornelis van der Oudermeulen was lucky enough to receive an inheritance of more than 1 million florins. And so he became a millionaire.

This huge sum of money allowed Van der Oudermeulen to give in to his desire for 'precious extravagance' (in Muyskens words). He gave the young Constantijn Muysken the assignment to design a lofty country house for his estate of 100 acres here at Oud Wassenaar. It was the first large complex that the 33 year old Muysken designed, complete with a gardener's house, coach house, stables and coachmen's houses. Van der

Oudermeulen wanted the building to reflect the social status of the lord of the house (himself) in the face of the rising nouveaux riches, who were becoming rich fast through the revenues of the upcoming new industries and colonial plantations. Thus Muysken set out to underline his client's connection with the grand Dutch past, in the form of a modern neo-Renaissance style with the typical old Dutch alternation of brick and natural stone. With the round towers on the sides and the huge stepped façade, that was so large that it had to be fixed to the roof with an iron construction, Muysken gave the building the mighty look of a castle, in Old Dutch townhouse style. He thought this would suit both the owner and the picturesque dune landscape around it perfectly.

So he gave the house a sense of Dutch national grandeur, but he clearly also took inspiration from the buildings he had studied in Italy. The enormous hallway for example is lined with columns on the ground and first floor and lit from above, so it has the look of an Italian courtyard. This is no coincidence: it has a striking similarity with the Palazzo Corte Reale in Mantua, that Muysken had visited and sketched two years earlier.

The castle was equipped with all modern conveniences; for example, the first floor had two toilets and two bathrooms including a bath that was submerged into the floor. Everything about this building was luxurious and big, bigger than normal. The rooms were wider, the ceilings higher. Constantijn even designed many of the furniture and interior paneling himself. And the house even had an electric house telegraph to communicate with the servants! The building gave Mr Van der Oudermeulen the ultimate stage for his social activities; entertaining and impressing his various guests.

Later on Constantijn Muysken would build several other country houses, villas, a church, offices and other buildings. He was a member of several influential committees and the Chairman of the Dutch Society for the Advancement of Architecture. He was awarded the prestigious rank of knighthood in the Royal Order of the Lion of the Netherlands and remained a well-known and influential architect all his life. He died in 1922, two years after his youngest sister, Geertruida Kapteyn-Muysken.

But back to 1876, when Constantijn Muysken started designing this building. His younger sister Geertruida was 21 at the time, and one day in 1876, on November 17th to

be precise, she received a letter from her best friend, about her architect brother. This is a letter which I found in the city archives of Amsterdam, and which has never been used by any historian before. The letter describes a visit to the The Hague opera house.

Geertruida's friend writes [and I quote]:

Of course I let my eyes go over the The Hague audience. I thought it was an audience *comme un autre*, but who was sitting there in the stalls of the theatre, very self-satisfied on his own? No one other than Mr. C. Muysken, architectural engineer. I don't know if he discovered me, but there's something nice about seeing a familiar face in a strange place, and to boost your sister's heart, I'd like to tell you that he looked very sweet. If the blond gentleman, who sat down next to him afterwards, was Mr. Oudermeulen, then he has a sweet appearance too.

The young Geertruida looked up to her older brother the architect, who had access to worlds that she could only dream of: university, the freedom of individual international traveling, and a career in the creative arts. And yet later in life she would succeed in achieving things that many women at the time wouldn't or couldn't.

From a young age Geertruida Kapteyn-Muysken proofed herself to be a clever and intellectually ambitious young girl. She was lucky enough to be able to attend the first Girls' Highschool of The Netherlands, which is where she met Martha, an equally gifted girl who became her best friend and who wrote the letter I just quoted. After graduating, the two girls tried to keep up their studies by teaching themselves, but Geertruida got increasingly frustrated with the lack of formal education. She reached out to a well-known feminist at the time, Helene Mercier, and through her joined the private class of a well-known progressive teacher and mentor for many young men and women: Willem Doorenbos. She took lessons with him for three years, and would read tons of books – novels, sociology books, philosophy, history, etc – and later in life she'd prove to know almost every intellectual movement of her time in great detail.

In the meantime she met an attractive and open-minded railway engineer, Albert Kapteyn, possibly through her architect brother Constantijn. And within one year, in 1880, they got married, moved to London (back then as you know the biggest city in the world) and had their first child.

I will try to stay concise here and not describe her whole life in detail. In short, what happened was that at first she had to get used to her lonely life as a mother of three children and head of the household in London. She craved intellectual stimulation and education, but didn't have the time nor the contacts to find it. At some point, she had such a severe mental crisis that she had to be submitted to a mental hospital. But she recovered, and decided that things should change. She joined several debating clubs, The West London Ethical Society and London's most radical women's club: the Pioneer Club. She started writing and translating. Her first articles were published around 1892, and she became a well-known writer and publicist throughout London and The Netherlands. She knew some of the biggest thinkers of her time: George Bernard Shaw, Sarah Grand and the Russian anarchist prince, Peter Kropotkin, who allegedly said she was an anarchist without knowing it.

Indeed, in her writings Geertruida expressed a strong anti-authoritarianism. She believed that every individual should be able to develop himself fully, without being restricted by conventions, dogmas or religious authority. Through this individual freedom to develop oneself fully, finding your own, inner life force, people would naturally reach a state of collective love and compassion. Women clearly had some catching up to do when it came to this free self-development, and so they'd need special attention, just like the poor and the working classes. So, she wasn't a feminist or a suffragette; she was a woman who had struggled with the restrictions of the conventions of society, and wanted to help all people emancipate themselves to reach their full potential, just like she had been able to do.

In the year 1900, because of the South African war, the Boerenoorlog (and the concurrent animosities between the UK and the Netherlands), AND because her husband was sick of traveling to the European mainland all the time for his work at the big American steam train company Westinghouse, they decided to move to Zürich, Switzerland. The family spent 8 years there, and again Geertruida Kapteyn-Muysken sought out to debate the future of society with intellectuals, and even revolutionaries that had fled Poland and Russia, in her salon. She wrote several essays, that were published in her first book in 1907, called 'Affirmation'. In 1908 the family moved back to The Netherlands, to The Hague. There again Geertruida Kapteyn-Muysken wrote articles

and essays, joined several progressive and feminist unions and spoke out against the sheer violence and military discourse of the First World War. Although she knew many progressive intellectuals at the time – the famous Dutch architect H.P. Berlage for example, and the radical-socialist party leader F. Domela Nieuwenhuis – she could never really get used to living in this small country again. Having lived in international, freethinking social surroundings, she thought many of the people here were narrow-minded and negligent. She radicalized in her thinking, calling herself a revolutionary anarchist towards the end of her life. She died in 1920, in a mental hospital – I don't know why she was in there, I'm still trying to find out – and was cremated at the first freethinkers cremation centre of the Netherlands, Westerveld. In an obituary, a Dutch friend described her as 'one of the greatest idealists' and 'one of the most free and open-minded spirits' of her time, with an 'almost universal knowledge of the spiritual and social currents of our time'.

I'm pretty sure that she walked around here at least once, when she was still young – 23-24 years old – to check out her brothers achievements.