

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam objects and their stories:

1980-1985 The commemorative medal and VU Amsterdam's centennial celebration

VUA-E000331 – Ger Zijlstra, Commemorative medal for VU Centenary, Amsterdam 1979, VU Amsterdam Heritage and Collections, photo by René den Engelsman, 2017

Like all Dutch universities, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam celebrates its anniversaries with commemorations and festivities. These celebrations are often especially lavish in milestone years, such as the fiftieth anniversary in 1930, when VU Amsterdam awarded honorary doctorates for the first time. Other commemorative moments are also used as an opportunity to celebrate and look back. In 1937, for example, a range of activities were held to commemorate the birthday anniversary of Abraham Kuyper, including a major exhibition on his life. Academic year 2020-2021 – which is VU Amsterdam's 140th anniversary – is also dedicated to Abraham Kuyper, this time because it marks a century since his death. Numerous activities are taking place during this 'Kuyper Year' (though many adjustments had to be made due to coronavirus restrictions), but it will not get any more lavish than the celebration of VU Amsterdam's centenary in 1980. Senior VU programmer and Kuyper Year organiser Jacob Bouwman shows that VU Amsterdam's celebrations however are socially relevant and enterprising.



The VU Amsterdam centennial celebration in 1980

By Ab Flipse and Liselotte Neervoort

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam's Dies Natalis anniversary celebration was held in October 1980 in a symbolic place: the Nieuwe Kerk on Dam square, where it all started. The event was attended by Queen Beatrix, and no fewer than nine [honorary doctorates](#) were awarded, including to Leeuwarden journalist and publicist [H. Algra](#) (Faculty of Social Sciences) and to physician-pharmacist S. Kruyt from Surabaya (Faculty of Medicine). She was the first woman to be awarded an honorary doctorate by VU Amsterdam.

But the festivities had been going on for a whole year. In October 1979, a lime tree was planted (which is still on the campus today). During academic year 1979-1980, a parade was held, a play was performed and a festival was organised. The year concluded with a performance by the VU Orchestra and VU Choir in the Concertgebouw. There were also several conferences on topics such as ICT and employment, and exhibitions on Kuyper as well as on plants from the Bible, with live plants and landscapes around the auditorium in the Main Building. All of this was captured on [film](#).

Many commemorative objects and products were made as well, from beer and liqueur to mugs and jugs, flags and clogs, and teaspoons and painted decorative plates. The statue '[De Spaarster](#)' (The Saver) was also donated on the occasion of VU Amsterdam's centennial. This commemorative medal for the centenary celebrations was designed by sculptor Ger Zijlstra. It is comprised of two bronze circles (with a small hole in the middle), the first of which bears the number 1. Together they form the number 100. According to a 1980 review, the overlap of the two circles stands for continuity, with the fully round one representing the completed past, and the partially round one representing the new, unfinished period ahead. The vertical line of the 1 stands for contrast and progressiveness. VU Amsterdam staff and students could purchase the medal for 40 guilders (about 18 euros, not adjusted for inflation).

The Kuyper Year 2020-2021

By Jacob Bouwman

The celebration of VU Amsterdam's 140th anniversary coincides with the commemoration of the death of its founder 100 years ago. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, this [Kuyper Year](#) has had to be organised largely

online. Kuyper's enduring significance is centred on three key themes: entrepreneurship, diversity and democracy. The aim is to highlight not only his importance for the university, but also his national and international significance. Oddly enough, Kuyper is better known in North America and Southeast Asia than in the Netherlands.

Rector Magnificus [Vinod Subramaniam](#) put together a steering committee that ensured this broad view. In addition to the Rector, this group included Kuyper expert George Harinck, Amsterdam municipal council member Don Ceder, Islamic theologian Anne Dijk and education law professor Renée van Schoonhoven. [Kathleen Ferrier](#), President of the UNESCO Commission, was asked to serve as chair. As a politician, Ferrier was inspired by Kuyper's words that governing is very different from administering. She had previously been involved with VU Amsterdam through a foundation that promotes the ideas of [honorary doctor Martin Luther King, Jr](#) in the Netherlands in the fight against discrimination. Martin Luther King, Jr was presented with an honorary doctorate by Rector Magnificus [Wilhelm De Gaay Fortman](#) in 1965.

At the opening of the academic year, his granddaughter [Marry de Gaay Fortman](#), a senior executive and VU alumna, recalled how refugees – including her ancestors – were welcomed in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century. They were granted a ten-year tax exemption for businesses they began in order to be able to secure a good position in the Netherlands. Queen Máxima, who was the [Dies keynote speaker](#), also addressed entrepreneurship. Turning ideas into social values together with small and medium-sized enterprises is desperately needed now that the coronavirus has plunged the economy into crisis. Her message was that students, universities and small business owners should work towards this together.

During the Kuyper Year, VU Amsterdam is encouraging entrepreneurship by presenting the [Kuyper Award](#). Students may be considered for the award by submitting their business plans. Three of them are then nominated and receive additional guidance. This is an exciting journey of discovery for students and the university. For example, it turned out that one of the nominees had returned to Romania. Other nominees were not allowed by their landlord to start a business at their room address. Even VU Amsterdam itself did not allow students to use the university's address. But all this has changed in the Kuyper Year. So in addition to starting the first political party, a newspaper, a church and a university, Kuyper's initiatives continue to create social value a hundred years after his death. That can certainly be called unflagging entrepreneurship!

Jacob Bouwman is organising secretary of the Kuyper Year steering committee and senior programme director at the new University Relations and Fundraising Department (Dienst Universitaire Relaties en Fondsenwerving, DURF).

For an overview of the stories highlighted in this exhibition, see: [VU Amsterdam objects and their stories | 140 years of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam](#)