

VU Amsterdam objects and their stories

140 years of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

1895 – 1900: Princeton cap

Ever since 1930, VU Amsterdam has regularly presented honorary doctorates to persons with exceptional achievements. VU Amsterdam founder Abraham Kuyper himself received a similar distinction in 1898, from Princeton University. The academic cape he was presented with here is now in the VU Collection. How did Kuyper react to this? And how do we see this nowadays? Read the historical account by George Harinck and the present-day reflection by Kathleen Ferrier.

[Honorary doctorates](#) are awarded by universities to persons who have made an extraordinary contribution towards science or society. As a token, many honorary doctors receive a degree certificate as well as a [cap or kappa](#) to wear over their gown. Among the hundreds of VU Amsterdam professors with their black gowns, such as on its Foundation Day, only a few in the procession usually wear such a mark of distinction. This usage entered the Netherlands from the English-speaking world, where the cap became popular around the late-nineteenth century. At Utrecht University, for example, it was introduced shortly after its 300th anniversary in 1936.



The kappa Kuyper received from Princeton university, Collection Protestant Heritage | HDC, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam did not observe this usage in 1930, when it awarded honorary doctorates for the first time. It was familiar with the phenomenon of the cap as a mark of distinction for honorary doctors, however. In [October 1898](#), Professor Abraham Kuyper had received such a cap when being awarded his honorary doctorate in Law at [Princeton University](#). As he believed the cap to be an additional distinction over and above his honorary doctorate, he wrote to his wife: 'They are so enthusiastic now, that the university has decided to name me *doctor with the cap*. I will be sure to take this ornament with me.' He used to be the sole honorary doctor at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam for a long time. While he even had multiple honorary doctorates from abroad, he wore the Princeton cap during academic ceremonies. The student H. Kaajan described his impressions of the cap on the occasion of the 1899 Foundation Day:

'At the front was the beadle of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, bearing the university mace and wearing a gown, who struck a dashing pose. Behind him was Dr A. Kuyper in a splendid black gown, over which he wore a cap that was purple and orange in parts. With his clothes and the cap on his head, he had the semblance of a powerful church leader. He was followed by all the other professors in black caps and gowns.'

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam regarded this colourful connection with academia abroad as a sign that the university's existence went beyond the domestic context alongside the national universities. Its explicitly Christian principles also made a recognisable contribution to the practice of science across the globe.

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam awards its own [honorary doctorates](#) as well to persons of exceptional distinction in science, politics or culture, including [Martin Luther King](#) in 1965 and the astronaut [Samantha Cristoforetti](#) in 2018.

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A reflection prompted by Kuyper's cap



Kuyper in 1898 wearing the kappa,
Photocollection Protestant Heritage |
HDC, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

That is how it goes with people who are prepared to lead the way: even before the general community has really understood what's going on, they've already taken another step. Sometimes even in very physical terms. That's how it was with Abraham Kuyper.

While the 'Vrije Universiteit' itself didn't grant any [honorary doctorates](#) until 1930, Abraham Kuyper himself had already received one in 1898: from Princeton University in the USA. It's significant that Kuyper was so unfamiliar with the 'honorary doctorate' as a concept, and everything associated with it, that he assumed the accompanying cape was a sort of second distinction. This might seem rather surprising. Although Kuyper seems to me like a man who firmly believed items should have a use, we also know [that he was fond of academic rituals and adornments](#). But apparently, he didn't know about this specific tradition.

But in the meantime, he was a person who crossed boundaries and returned with new things. Not only decorations – possibly superfluous in nature – but also new ideas. Years later, the first honorary doctorate was awarded by VU Amsterdam too, and now, in Kuyper Year, we can look back on a whole series of honorary doctorates, presented to various impressive personalities. Fearless people who have led the way and in doing so made a difference. People like [Martin Luther King Jr.](#), [Dom Hélder Câmara](#), [Ernesto Cardenal](#), [Karen Armstrong](#) and [Yap Thiam Hien](#).

In his own day, Kuyper was not averse to bringing 'foreign' ideas back to the university. Today, in 2020, we also know VU Amsterdam as a university that opens its doors wide to students from abroad and its windows to ideas from other countries. And what's more: it's a university that understands that without diversity and inclusion in our country and our world, no true progress is possible. More of the same, remaining stuck in your own 'bubble', this doesn't serve science and doesn't benefit the quality of society either.

In this [commemorative year](#), we, the Kuyper Year steering committee, aim to highlight the various aspects of Abraham Kuyper's personality in an honest and fair manner, to reveal his ideas, to show what drove him and why it drove him, back then, in his own age.

In my view, his broad gaze across the dikes and dunes of our small country is something that still characterises VU Amsterdam in its striving for international scope and the importance of internationalising education. Moreover, this aspiration is clearly not an ornament for VU Amsterdam, but instead an essential part of its mission, just as Kuyper's cape was for his very first honorary doctorate.

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