

VU Amsterdam objects and their stories

140 years of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

One of the objects in the collection of the VU is the painted portrait of Abraham Kuyper, preacher, politician and founder of the university. Wat does this painting still mean for the university? And how does current rector magnificus Vinod Subramaniam reflect about it?

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam was [established](#) on [20 October 1880](#) as a private university at the behest of Abraham Kuyper. Independent from the Dutch Reformed Church and State, the university was grounded firmly in society thanks to the connection with its orthodox-Protestant benefactors; it sought to link science to the Christian faith.

[Abraham Kuyper](#) (1837–1920) was a polymath with a vision. He started off as a minister, founded his own paper in 1872 ([De Standaard](#) [The Standard]), was elected as a Member of Parliament in 1874 and founded the first political party of the Netherlands in 1879 (the [Anti-Revolutionaire Partij](#) [Anti-Revolutionary Party], ARP).

Furthermore, he founded Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in 1880. He led a [schism](#) from the Dutch Reformed Church in 1886, which prompted the formation of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. This schism led to a strict Reformed subculture (or pillar) with its own church, weekly and daily paper, university and political party. Kuyper served as VU Amsterdam's first Rector and was made a professor of Theology, also lecturing on Dutch. He ceased his daily involvement in his university when he was appointed Prime Minister in 1901.

In this painted [portrait](#) of Kuyper in his study, he comes across as thoughtful and even monumental. It was presented to him for his birthday in 1907 by a delegation from the Vereeniging van Christelijke Onderwijzers en Onderwijzeressen in Nederland en Overzeesche Bezittingen [Association of Christian School Teachers in the Netherlands and the Overseas Territories] (1854–1954) as a token of gratitude for his dedication to particular education.

The painter of the portrait was [Hendrik Haverman](#) (1857–1928), who was an accomplished painter of portraits in a more traditional style than the impressionist Hague School, which was very popular at the time. It is particularly remarkable how Kuyper's face lights up from the dark background. The portrait was on display in Kuyper's study until his death. His heirs presented it to VU Amsterdam in 1921, making it the first in the collection of professor portraits, which now spans nearly 120 objects. The portrait used to adorn Senate Hall in the University Building at Keizersgracht for a long time. It was first included in the Aula's portrait gallery following the relocation to De Boelelaan, after which it ended up in Forum Hall.

Vinod Subramaniam:

My illustrious predecessor cuts an imposing, if somewhat forbidding, figure in this portrait, befitting his stature as visionary founder of a number of institutions: a newspaper, political party, church, university. That last has grown into the Vrije Universiteit of today, an institution that we can be proud of. I only hope that the current rector looks a wee bit more approachable to his colleagues and students, if not as “monumental”



Hendrik Haverman, *Prof. dr. A. Kuyper*, 1906, oil paint on canvas
Photo: Rene den Engelsman
VU Heritage and Collections

Would you like to learn more about the Kuyper Year at VU Amsterdam? Further details are available [here](#).