

## VU Amsterdam objects and their stories 1960–1965 Gown worn by Rev. Dr Martin Luther King, Jr

[Photo: I7-E003858a\_01-TogaBuskes

Caption: Academic gown belonging to Rev. Jan Buskes, worn by Rev. Dr Martin Luther King, Jr in 1965, Firma Rhebergen, around 1925, Amsterdam. VU Heritage and Collections, photo by René den Engelsman, 2020]

**VU Amsterdam has had a connection with Rev. Dr Martin Luther King, Jr for many years. In 1965, it awarded an honorary doctorate to this leader of the civil rights movement. In addition, VU Amsterdam has various memorials dedicated to this extraordinary man. It also organises the annual Martin Luther King Lecture. The academic gown that he wore during the award ceremony for the honorary doctorate in 1965 has been in the collection since 2018. Sylvia van de Bunt reflects on this special object.**

### Academic gown belonging to Jan Buskes (worn by Martin Luther King)

By Liselotte Neervoort

Since the 50th anniversary of its founding in 1930, VU Amsterdam has regularly awarded honorary doctorates to individuals of exceptional achievement. In 1965, the honours were awarded to a specially select group: [Prince Bernhard](#), man of letters [Cees Rijnsdorp](#), Netherlands Antilles politician [Efraim Jonckheer](#), development economist Paul Hoffman, French sociologist [Jacques Ellul](#) and the American pastor and leader of the civil rights movement [Martin Luther King](#). There are several memorials to Dr King at VU Amsterdam: a plaque installed in 1982 and a [sculpture](#) erected in 2018, both next to the auditorium in the main building. Another special memento of him has been in the collection since 2018.

It has always been customary for the recipient to wear a black gown during the award ceremony for the honorary doctorate. However, Dr King had not brought a gown with him and had to borrow one. The only gown available that would not be too long for him was one belonging to [Jan Buskes](#), made by the famous makers of academic regalia [Firma Rhebergen](#) around 1925. And so it came to pass. Buskes hated his gown, and was known for literally throwing it into a corner of his room when he didn't have to wear it. At the time of his death in 1980, newly ordained ministers cast lots for the second-hand gown. The lucky winner had the velvet replaced, so that the regalia could be worn again for years. The refurbished gown, the accompanying cap and the original velvet were donated to VU Amsterdam in 2018.

### Modesty is a virtue

By Sylvia van de Bunt

The exciting backstory of Rev. Jan Buskes's gown was further augmented recently by Dr Jan van Butselaar. He told me the story during an [MLK interview](#). In the MLK interview series, supported by the [VU vereniging](#), VU Amsterdam alumni who met Martin Luther King during his visit to VU Amsterdam in 1965 recount their experiences. Jan remembers very vividly that Dr King, unlike the other doctoral candidates, did not wear formal evening attire. He had not brought any academic regalia from America, so he borrowed Jan Buskes's gown. They were about the same height. Buskes and Dr King were friends and real kindred spirits in their use of non-violence in the struggle against injustice and for social ideals. Buskes acted as King's guide while he was in Amsterdam and helped him out when necessary.





ANEFO, Senate Meeting on the occasion of the 85th VU Dies Natalis celebrations; Concertgebouw. Reception (from l. to r.) G. Parkes (filling in for P. Hoffman), E. Jonckheer, Queen Juliana, Martin Luther King, Prince Bernhard, J. Ellul and C. Rijnsdorp, 1965, Amsterdam, *photo collection Protestant heritage | HDC, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*

When you look at the whole group of honorary doctorates in the photograph, Dr King in his borrowed gown is the only one not dressed to the nines. It shows that for Dr King, a person's inner character was more important in life than external trappings such as race, skin colour and status. I asked Jan van Butselaar how people reacted to the award ceremony for the honorary doctorate in the Concertgebouw on 20 October 1965. His reply: *'It was an exceptionally formal occasion. Prince Bernhard was handsomely dressed in white tie. He looked picture perfect. Next to him, the simply attired minister appeared to have a look of "who am I to receive this honour"... The contrast between Dr King and Prince Bernhard was enormous... The difference in appearance between MLK and Prince Bernhard: the Prince tall, magnificently dressed, with his family and whole entourage around him. King presented quite a different picture: of small stature, Black and with only one friend in attendance.'*

A few of the interviewed VU Amsterdam alumni attended the Dies Natalis celebrations in Grand Hotel Krasnapolsky on 21 October 1965, where Dr King gave a really impressive speech. [Mr Wiersema remembers](#): *'...The students were struck dumb... He spoke with thunderous voice, and to many of us, it felt almost like a religious experience. Dr King made a formidable impression. Everyone was stunned...'* That was the real Martin Luther King: on the one hand, there was the extreme modesty in his external manner, while on the other, he exuded an inner power and zeal through the timbre of his voice and the stunning choice of words he used to communicate his mission of non-violence.

Even in 2021, the inner power and words of Dr King's [VU Amsterdam Dies Natalis speech](#) have not lost their magic and still inspire our community. Current research has shown that modesty and successful leadership often go hand in hand; see for example SERVUS Associate [Dr Milton Correia de Sousa](#).

Dr King's famous ['I Have a Dream' speech](#) (Washington DC, 1963) reveals how much he prized inner qualities over external appearance: *'I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character.'*

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