

VU Amsterdam objects and their stories

140 years of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

1910-1915 The commemorative tile of the Valerius Clinic

This unknown little tile reveals a piece of medical education history at VU Amsterdam. And for Abel Thijs, internist at Amsterdam UMC, it gets him thinking about connections: between body and soul, personal belief and healthcare, the present and the future.

From professor to hospital, and the value of a little tile

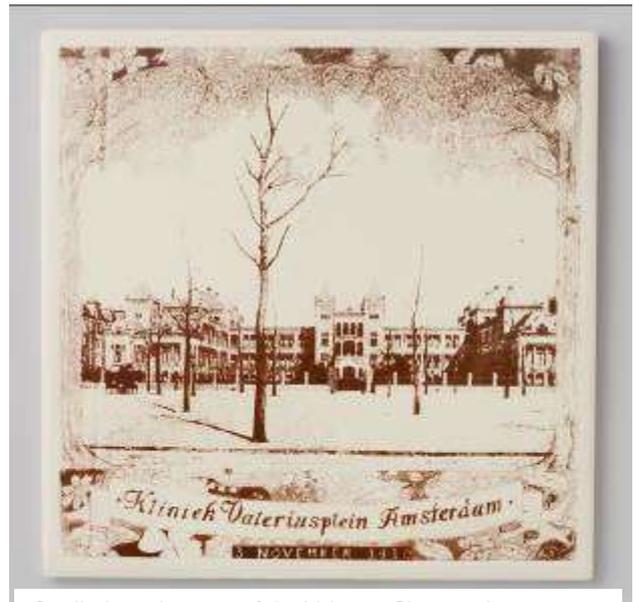
by Ab Flipse and Liselotte Neervoort

This little tile is one of the few physical objects that evoke the turbulent history of the Medical Faculty at VU Amsterdam. It depicts the entrance of the [Valerius Clinic](#) and states the date of the clinic's opening: 3 November 1910. The entrance seems to match a photograph from ca. 1935, before the major rebuilding work in 1937-1941. Tiles such as this were often made to mark a jubilee or commemoration. And both the clinic's first fifty and hundred years were celebrated in grand style. However, there is nothing to definitely connect one of these two occasions to the object at hand. In 2017, [following much controversy](#), the building was demolished, but by then it was no longer customary to make such tiles, unfortunately. The tile might also have been produced to mark the reconstruction in 1937, when the characteristic little towers disappeared and the building gained a new, equally characteristic facade.

Ever since the founding of VU Amsterdam in 1880, there had been a desire to set up the university's own faculty of medicine, to train its own 'Christian doctors'. Officially, the medical faculty only began its work in 1950, but its history actually goes back much further.

The first Professor of Medicine was appointed as early as 1907: [Leendert Bouman](#), a psychiatrist. The university also collaborated intensively with the 'Association for Christian Care for the Insane and Nervous Disorder Patients'. In 1910, this led to the creation of the Valerius Clinic on Valeriusplein, a square in Amsterdam, where Bouman became medical director. In 1919, a second professor was appointed: [Frits Buytendijk](#) who headed the Physiological Laboratory, also accommodated on Valeriusplein. With three professors the department could have gained the status of an independent faculty, but unfortunately, that never came about; Buytendijk departed in 1924, and in 1925, Bouman was appointed professor in Utrecht, after which he was only able to devote a few hours a week to VU Amsterdam. His successor Lammert van der Horst took up work as a psychiatrist at the Valerius Clinic in 1924, and was then appointed professor at VU Amsterdam in 1928.

VU Amsterdam also trained doctors, despite not having a medical faculty. A part of the programme, indeed a large part, was provided at the municipal university (later the University of Amsterdam), and some courses were provided by VU Amsterdam, at the Valerius Clinic, in the Physiological Laboratory and the Paedological Institute, which opened in 1929. In 1930, these institutions were joined by the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics, with the [laboratory](#) that was built on De Lairesestraat in 1933. And so, a range of VU institutions arose on Valeriusplein in the fields of psychiatry, physiology, biology and paedology, but it still didn't add up to a medical faculty.



Small tile with image of the Valerius Clinic, maker unknown, undated, VU Heritage and Collections, VU Amsterdam, photo Rene den Engelsman

In 1950, a true medical faculty was finally created and this was cemented with the construction of the [VU Academic Hospital](#), or AZVU, in Buitenveldert, which officially opened in 1966. The same site is still home to Amsterdam UMC, VUmc location.

Ab Flipse is the university historian of VU Amsterdam, and Liselotte Neervoort is the curator of the university's Academic Heritage.



Façade of the Valerius Clinic, 1935, photographer unknown, Photo collection Protestant Heritage | HDC, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Connection: reflections on a little tile

We don't know the exact origin of the tile, nor why it was made. And we can say little with certainty about either the past or the future of academic healthcare in Amsterdam. This gives us space to let our thoughts and dreams range further.

The word that occurs to me when I consider this tile, and the current situation of VUmc, or more precisely 'Amsterdam UMC, Boelelaan location', is connection.

In very direct terms, we currently have the connection between two university institutes, the medical centres of the UvA and VU Amsterdam, each with its own history and now moving into a shared future. But this association may be a little obvious. I also see three other meanings.

The first meaning is the connection between *physis* (φύσις) and *psyche* (ψυχή). These concepts were brought together by the two initial professors, the psychiatrist Bouman and the physiologist Buytendijk. Both these professors were, it should be said, themselves convinced that a (sick) human being should be understood as a unity of body and soul. And this indeed still presents an important challenge to modern medicine: both in psychiatry and in the often highly technological healthcare at a general or academic hospital. The mystery of the interaction between these two aspects of human life remains a challenge for the professionals of our time. It is not possible to fully unravel the puzzle.

Secondly, I think of the connection between personal belief (presented either more or less explicitly) and healthcare. You might think that medical care, training people to be care providers and carrying out research in this field would be at odds with such a personal belief. The story accompanying this tile shows, however, that this connection can actually be productive, as long as belief is understood broadly and not imposed in a categorical way.

And thirdly, we have the connection between past and future. Back then, just as now, collaboration was required between universities, disciplines, institutions. But above all: between people with a passion for the work, in order to create such a fine degree programme as one that trains people to be doctors. In this respect, there's nothing new under the sun.

May these three connecting elements continue to be part of the core of academic healthcare in this city, and continue to have positive effects far beyond the city boundaries!

Abel Thijs, in his role as internist at Amsterdam UMC, is closely involved in medical education at VU Amsterdam.