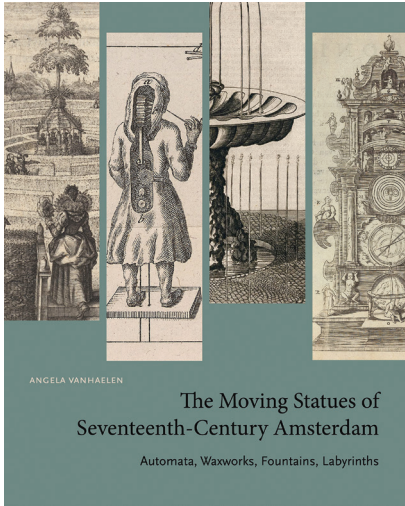


Review

Angela Vanhaelen, *The Moving Statues of Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam. Automata, Waxworks, Fountains, Labyrinths*, University Park, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2022, 211 pp. ISBN 9780271091402.



Angela Vanhaelen's new book is a book about hidden things: hidden beauty, hidden mechanisms, hidden wonders. Certainly, the subject of this wonderful cultural history has remained hidden from view as well: that early modern Amsterdam boasted several proper labyrinths, known in Dutch as *doolhoven*, both within and without its city walls, is little known beyond a handful of specialists. Such labyrinths were part of various inns with large walled pleasure gardens that were established in the early seventeenth century, and which remained in business for more than two centuries. Some were named after their main attraction: the maze. They also offered the other entertainments foregrounded in Vanhaelen's title: wax statues of political figures, dramatic, monumental fountains as well as

hidden ones that surprised the (female) visitors, and, most spectacularly of all, automata – moving statues such as Jochum, an oriental figure playing the bagpipes in the *Old Labyrinth (Oude Doolhof)* on the Looiersgracht. Lavishly illustrated, *The Moving Statues of Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* unveils the world of these once extremely popular sites.

Vanhaelen expertly guides the reader through the labyrinths to show the marvels they held, conveying vividly why they captivated contemporary visitors so much. The book is structured more or less like a walkthrough. Opening with an analysis of the images of the inconspicuous doorway to the *Old Labyrinth*, the introduction shows that we should consider the Amsterdam labyrinths as Silenus Boxes, art objects that are insignificant and unsightly on the outside but filled with precious and beautiful things rendered even more delightful due to the anticipation and surprise involved in opening them. The apt metaphor and Vanhaelen's sophisticated art historical reading of the images is also indicative of her methods in, and purpose with this book. The following chapters discuss the waterworks (chapter two), the labyrinths (three), automata (four and five), wax portraits of political figures (six), and clockwork (seven) in an essayistic manner, drawing on Vanhaelen's art

historical gaze and expertise, to interpret the significance of the entertainments provided in the inns.

Vanhaelen urges us to reconsider the cultural status of the Amsterdam labyrinths, which older scholarship has dismissed as coarse folk entertainment. In the course of their long existence, they may indeed have become that: the last *Doolhof* only closed its doors in 1862, when the novelty of their displays had long worn off, and the gardens had acquired a reputation of lower-class entertainment and as spaces of illicit behaviour in the darker corners of the maze. Yet Vanhaelen persuasively argues that they present a case of *gesunkenes Kulturgut*: whereas we tend to view them as theme parks *avant la lettre*, in the early seventeenth century the labyrinth and automata inns were patronized by all classes, including higher-class tourists, who eagerly discussed what they saw. They marvelled at the exhibits based on state-of-the-art literary, historical, and technical knowledge deriving both from highly skilled artisans such as the Lingelbach clockmaking family (the proprietors of the *New Labyrinth (Nieuwe Doolhof)*) and academics like the fascinating publican-cum-professor of Hebrew Jan Theunisz (whose case is discussed in chapter five), who used his knowledge of Arabic to perfect the hydraulics of the displays in his inn *D'os*. Similarly, the iconography of the labyrinths shows a close proximity to p.c. Hooft's drama and the vernacular learning at the Amsterdam Academy, which flourished just at the moment in the 1610s when the first labyrinth inns emerged. Rather than being dismissed by their outward appearance in later days, Vanhaelen argues, the labyrinth inns should be interpreted as the artful cultural institutions they initially were.

In the remainder of the book, she builds on this argument by insightfully contextualizing and reading the objects contained in the labyrinths' Silenus Boxes. She shows that these places of pleasure were also stores of knowledge that can profitably be read. Much of this effort involves taking art forms that are no longer recognized as such (the fountains, the automata, the waxwork), as serious art that engaged the visitor in various ways, by inciting their wonder, stirring their passions, making them reflect on the relationship between artful representations and the living body, and by educating them about history. Clockwork displays now firmly associated with low culture belonged to the 'vanguard of technology' that surpassed even the Greek and Roman masters. Vanhaelen shows that they told a complicated, Protestant historical narrative that emphasized turning points in history and urged the visitors urgently to engage with the Reformation. As awe-inspiring technology, machines such as the automata and the clockworks were means of persuasion able to convert opponents of the true religion before the end of time itself. Similarly, the revenant art of the waxwork portraits studied in chapter six could do profound ideological work by re-presenting historical figures in a way no painting could.

Vanhaelen's essayistic approach is eminently suited to highlight the gems hidden in the Silenus Box of the entertainment inns. This does come at a price: her book will not satisfy readers looking for the development of the entertainment inn, or an exhaustive, chronological history of the phenomenon. There is no mention here of Maarten Hell's book on Amsterdam inns published in 2017 or of the recent work on the country houses or *speelhuizen* that emerged near Antwerp in the sixteenth century, which offered similar kinds of entertainment to their guests, and may or may not have been direct models for the Amsterdam inns. Vanhaelen is not interested in such a kind of history; she is interested in

the objects, what they meant, and what they did. As a result, situating the various inns and proprietors figuring in the book in time and place can be a challenge. Readers who desire so are advised to keep Hell's more descriptive archival storehouse within reach.

What she does offer, however, are fascinating cultural readings and deep contextualizations of a wide range of entertainments provided by the entertainment inns. For Vanhaelen, the hidden story of the labyrinths, waterworks, wax figures, and machines on display in seventeenth-century Amsterdam's inns is foremost a story of hidden meaning, and she brilliantly teases that meaning out of the remaining sources (foremost the pamphlet advertisements of the inns). Thus the chapter on the labyrinths explores early modern significations of the multicursal maze in religious emblems as well as in Jacob Cats's didactic poem for young girls, *Houwelick (Marriage)*, which was published around the time the inns opened, and in which the monster at the centre of the labyrinth was female sexuality. Though such contexts occasionally seem loosely related to the inns themselves, Vanhaelen always circles back to the heart of the matter in time, and they invariably turn out to be pertinent and enlightening. In this case, the context of Cats's maze of young sexuality puts the gendered nature of the Doolhof displays and the fact that the Bacchus waterworks in the *Old Labyrinth* thematized female sexuality into relief, and is suggestive of the function of the 'pleasurable constrictions' of the maze for the young couples navigating it.

Through the prism of the Amsterdam entertainment inns, Vanhaelen provides a rich image of early modern culture, in which art, literature, classical knowledge, natural philosophy, technology, politics as well as migration and international exchange all shine equally bright. Vanhaelen situates the labyrinths and automata in contexts as far apart as classical mythology and Cartesian philosophy with apparent ease, and, like the hyperrealist political waxwork of chapter six, succeeds in bringing her subject back to life. Deeply researched and well-written, this delightful book deserves a wide readership.

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