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ERWIN DE VRIES



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VRIJHEID

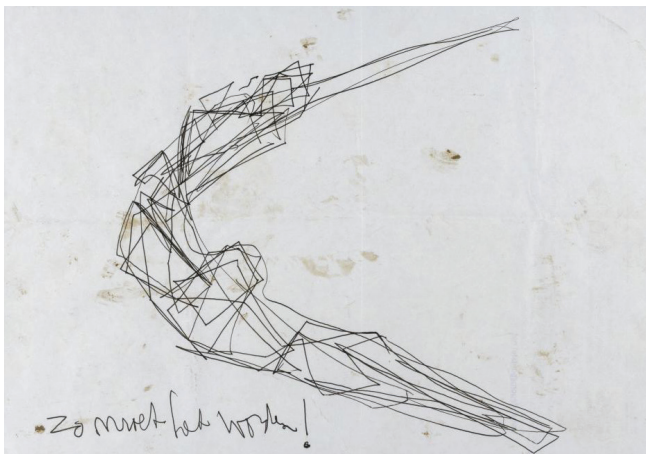
ERWIN DE VRIES

VORMEN VAN VRIJHEID

Erwin de Vries (Paramaribo, 1929–2018, Paramaribo) was a sculptor and painter. He is best known in the Netherlands as the designer and creator of the National Slavery Monument, unveiled by Queen Beatrix in the Oosterpark in Amsterdam in 2002. Every year, the Ketikoti commemoration takes place there to mark the abolition of slavery in Suriname and the Dutch Caribbean.

De Vries left behind an extensive and varied oeuvre in which he moved with virtuosity and individuality between figuration and abstraction. He alternated between creating painted plaster sculptures and lifelike bronze portraits and producing expressionist paintings and drawings. His work reflects an enormous lust for life, in which the female nude and eroticism play a central role. His use of color unmistakably testifies to his Caribbean, multicultural background.

During his school years, De Vries already stood out for his remarkable talent for drawing. He left for the Netherlands and obtained a teaching qualification in drawing from the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague in 1953. However, he did not enjoy the subsequent position as an art teacher in Paramaribo. He gave up his steady income to fulfil his greatest dream: to live as an artist. From 1959 to 1962 he studied at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam. After completing his training, De Vries quickly made a



name for himself as a sculptor and painter. He received important commissions for monuments, such as those in Paramaribo dedicated to Alonso de Ojeda, the alleged “discoverer” of Suriname, and the KLM monument at Schiphol Airport. He portrayed the emergence of the independent state of Suriname by creating numerous sculptures of Surinamese statesmen and other significant figures.

“I created my work playfully. I never thought about it. That is my strength.”

He also produced busts of prominent Dutch figures, including Simon Carmiggelt, Toon Hermans and Clarence Seedorf. His early paintings show a clear influence from the CoBrA movement, followed by a period in which he drew inspiration from “Indian” and Mexican motifs. From the 1970s onwards, his work became more European orientated in both composition and technique.

For De Vries, making art was not a job but a form of freedom. He did not feel bound to particular movements or styles that happened to be popular at the time. Instead, he followed his own impulses and disliked offering analytical interpretations of his work. His pieces emerged spontaneously and rapidly under his hands, resulting in a remarkably large body of work. “I’ve never suffered from a lack of inspiration,” De Vries explained. “When I sat down, something emerged. I created my work playfully. I never thought about it. That is my strength.”

In 1984, he returned permanently to Suriname, where he continued his successful career. In his view, there was too little attention for his work in the Netherlands. Even so, his connection with the Netherlands remained strong. In 1996, for example, his work featured prominently in the exhibition *Twintig jaar Surinaamse kunst* (Twenty Years of Surinamese Art) at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, the prestigious institution where he also held solo exhibitions in 1970 and 1998—an achievement that the temperamental and self-assured artist regarded as extraordinary. His last exhibition in the Netherlands was *Ode aan de vrouw* (*Ode to the Woman*), shown at the Kunsthal in Rotterdam in 2009.

LIST OF WORKS

1. *Self portrait* (1972), lithography

Private collection

2. *Untitled* (1975), gouache

Samson Family Collection

3*. *KLM Schiphol Monument* (1964), bronze

Koninklijke Luchtvaart Maatschappij N.V.,
Collectie KLM Heritage Centre

4. *Untitled* (1970s), painted bronze

Gudrun and Sabine de Vries collection

5. *Figuurplastiek* (1960-1965), bronze

National Collection, loan from the Cultural
Heritage Agency of the Netherlands

6. *Untitled (voorstelling van een kop)* (1960-1970), bronze

Private collection

7. *Yellow tips* (1971), painted bronze

Hanneke Oosterhof Collection

8*. *Model Nationaal Slavernijmonument* (2002), bronze

Loan from Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

9*. *Gevleugelde vrijheid* (ca. 1980), bronze

National Collection, loan from the Cultural
Heritage Agency of the Netherlands

10*. *De dans* (1969), bronze

National Collection, on loan from the
Cultural Heritage Agency of the
Netherlands

11. *Untitled* (1960-1970), painted concrete and plaster

Private collection

12. *Revolutie-evolutie* (1980), bronze

National Collection, loan from the Cultural
Heritage Agency of the Netherlands

13. *Borstbeeld van H.A.E. Arron* (2000), bronze

Loan from Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

14. *Simon Carmiggelt* (1978), bronze

Het Parool

15. *Borstbeeld van Dr. J.M. den Uyl* (1979), bronze

Loan from Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

16*. *Raket naar de maan* (1968/1970), bronze

Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, acquired
with financial support from the Mondriaan
Fund

17*. *Model Alonso de Ojeda* (1964), bronze

Egger Family Collection

18. *Magic Eye* (1963), oil on canvas

National Collection, loan from the Cultural
Heritage Agency of the Netherlands

19. *Masker* (1999), painted plaster

Gudrun and Sabine de Vries collection

20. *Man en vogel* (1956), woodcut: paper and ink

Hanneke Oosterhof Collection

21. *Untitled* (1962-1968), bronze

National Collection, loan from the Cultural
Heritage Agency of the Netherlands

22. *Cliff San A Jong* (1994), bronze

Private collection

23. *Zwemmende vrouw* (1966), bronze

National Collection, loan from the Cultural
Heritage Agency of the Netherlands

* These works are highlighted in the booklet.

HIGHLIGHTED WORKS *

3. KLM SCHIPHOL MONUMENT

On the occasion of its 45th anniversary, the Association of KLM Pilots presented the airline's management with a monument in honour of all crew members who had devoted their lives to the development of KLM. On 7 October 1964, the monument was unveiled in front of the management building at Schiphol Airport in the pouring rain. The bronze sculpture on a natural stone pedestal was created by Erwin de Vries, who at that time had only recently taken up sculpture. The work depicts a bird in ascending flight, missing part of one wing. In this way, the artist sought to symbolise the transience of pilots and aircraft.

Around the same time, De Vries exhibited at the Uit de Kunst gallery in Amsterdam. According to one reviewer, he brought with him from Suriname “an extremely healthy dose of vitality, sensuality and intensity,” which never left him throughout his artistic career and always remained recognizable, as a kind of “nature expressionism.” The exhibition included an interesting preliminary study for the KLM monument, which, according to the same writer, had undoubtedly met a better fate than his sculpture *De Ontdekker* (*The Discoverer*) in Paramaribo, which was still in storage at the time (see number 17).

8. MODEL NATIONAAL SLAVERNIJMONUMENT

In 1999, the National Platform for the History of Slavery took the initiative to create a monument. A competition was organised for this purpose, and several sculptors submitted designs. There was a preference for a figurative sculpture by a black artist—one that descendants of enslaved people would recognise as a symbol of their shared slavery history.

This exhibition features the bronze cast of the winning model that Erwin de Vries created as his submission for the competition. The artist took pride in his rapid working method. He said he produced the design for the slavery monument in clay in a single afternoon. About its creation he said: “It was an almost spiritual experience. I felt the pain of the slaves, including my ancestors, but I also felt their enormous strength, despite everything they had endured. That is what I wanted to capture in the sculpture.”





The monument consists of three parts. De Vries said: “The assignment was to address the past of slavery and the present and future. For the past, I created a chained group of enslaved people; for the present, a slave breaking free; and the most important element is the future: freedom, in the belief that we will one day be completely free from discrimination.” On 1 July 2002, the National Slavery Monument was unveiled in the Oosterpark in Amsterdam. Every year, the monument is also the site of the official commemoration of the abolition of slavery by the Netherlands on 1 July 1863. This holiday is called Ketikoti, which means “broken chains.”

9. GEVLEUGELDE VRIJHEID

Erwin de Vries created the sculpture *Gevleugelde vrijheid* (*Winged Freedom*) in green-patinated bronze around 1980. The sculpture has an irregular shape. A more upright vertical section rests on a base that extends in all directions, topped by a flat plane that reaches out to one side. This upper plane represents a partially floating wing that, with its supporting structure, seeks to move toward freedom. With only one wing instead of two, flying will not be easy. Whether De Vries had a specific event in mind when he designed this sculpture can no longer be determined.

In the same year, Erwin de Vries created the sculpture *Revolutie-evolutie* (*Revolution–Evolution*), which is also on display in this exhibition. The sculpture depicts a machine gun and stands on a pedestal. In 1982, the artist created the sculpture *Agressie* (*Aggression*), and in 1983, *Stop de bom* (*Stop the Bomb*). He made the latter work during the period of massive anti-nuclear weapons demonstrations, including one on 29 October 1983 in The Hague with some 550,000 demonstrators. Depicting social issues is not a central theme in De Vries’s work. Nevertheless, a sculpture such as *Winged Freedom* shows that freedom was a longing he cherished.

10. DE DANS

Erwin de Vries created this expressionist bronze sculpture in 1968. Judging by its graceful form and the artist’s passion for the female figure, it appears to depict a dancer. However, the artist preferred the title *De dans* (*The Dance*), in order to emphasise its expressive form. The sculpture shows a figure with a so-called “open head,” featuring a hole instead of a face. De Vries created several sculptures and paintings of women without a head or with only one arm. For him, such imperfection was both a form of beauty and

an expression of his imagination.



The dancer has one arm stretched upward, adding elegance to her movement. As in a ballerina's pose, her legs are close together and one foot extends backward. She is not wearing pointe shoes. Surprisingly, her feet resemble horse hooves. De Vries sculpted and painted countless horses. With their long manes and slender legs, horses exude a sensual power— a quality he also admired in women.

De Vries himself also loved to dance. In his studio on Utrechtsedwarsstraat in Amsterdam, he regularly organised parties in the 1960s and 1970s with performances by musician friends. He did not play an instrument himself, but instead gave himself completely over to dancing.

16. RAKET NAAR DE MAAN

De Vries created the irregularly shaped, horizontal sculpture *Raket naar de maan* (*Rocket to the Moon*) in 1968. He was probably inspired by NASA's Apollo space programme, which aimed to land humans on the moon between 1961 and 1972. Together with *De dans* (*The Dance*) and *Vrouwenfiguur* (*Female Figure*), the sculpture was part of the group exhibition *Sculptuur in Westerbork*, organised under the auspices of the Dutch Circle of Sculptors in the summer of 1968. The exhibition brought together the work of 24 talented artists.

When Erwin de Vries visited Westerbork, he discovered that *Rocket to the Moon* had not been installed. The sculpture was considered offensive because some believed they could recognise genital forms in it. The rocket does indeed bear a certain resemblance, and it later became known as *Vliegende penis* (*Flying Penis*).

De Vries lodged a complaint with the municipal council, but they stood their ground. Their reasoning was that if the exhibition had taken place indoors, the situation would have been different; however, it was held outdoors, where anyone could walk past it. The incident received media attention. The Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam purchased the sculpture and displayed it at De Vries' first solo exhibition in 1970.



17. MODEL ALONSO DE OJEDA

A large number of sculptures by Erwin de Vries are on display in Paramaribo. This did not always go smoothly. In 1962, early in his career, the artist was commissioned by the government to create a monument to Alonso de Ojeda (c. 1466–1515), the Spanish conquistador who, according to legend, was the first European to set foot on Surinamese soil in 1499. In five months, De Vries created an abstract, expressionist bronze representation of a standing figure. The daily newspaper *De Ware Tijd* wrote: “And now there is this fierce Alonso de Ojeda. A figure that seems to have been carved out of a stalactite cave (...). It is a brutal statue, a wild statue, a massive statue. It is an ultra-modern creation by an artist with a fierce talent and a powerful aptitude for wild representation.”

Nevertheless, most people were disappointed, as they would have preferred a more traditional figure in historical clothing. The commissioners were dissatisfied with what they also considered a far too modern result and initially refused to pay the artist. After the bill was finally settled, the statue was stored for years before being installed in a public space in 1965. The controversial statue, renamed *De ontdekker* (*The Discoverer*), was placed on the dyke of Fort Nieuw-Amsterdam at the confluence of the Suriname and Commewijne rivers, where it was stolen in 2011. A scale model is on display in the exhibition.

With this exhibition, Museum Beelden aan Zee presents the work of Erwin de Vries within the historical context of fifty years of Surinamese independence, an event that will be widely celebrated in both the Netherlands and Suriname in 2025.

Colofon

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Photography:

Cover: Portrait Erwin de Vries.

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P2: Erwin de Vries, sketch of woman figure for National Monument History of Slavery, The Hague, RKD, archive Erwin de Vries

P6-P7: *Model Nationaal Slavernijmonument*. Collection Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

P9: Erwin de Vries, *De dans*. Collection Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands. Photo: Rene den Engelsman

P10: Erwin de Vries - *Raket naar de maan*. Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

Backside: Erwin de Vries, *Masker*. Collection Gudrun and Sabine de Vries.

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