



Charles Frederick Ulrich

(1858-1908)

The Village Printing Shop, Haarlem, Holland, 1884

Oil on panel

21 ¼ x 23 inches

Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago, Illinois

Daniel J. Terra Collection, 1992.137

Photography courtesy Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago



by Sean Dykhouse

While I was growing up in the Midwest of the United States, both sets of my grandparents would often speak to each other, and to us children, in a foreign tongue as well as in English. Visiting their homes was such a joy for me as a little boy. My mother's parents lived in Grandville, my father's in Grand Rapids. In fact, in grade school, I remember marveling at the map of Michigan, gazing over cities like Grand Blanc and Grand Traverse Bay, assured that each was a city where *grandparents* live. Later I learned this wasn't always true.

My mother's parents, and my great aunts and uncle, often spoke in broken language at the dinner table, commenting when food was delicious. "Smaak Lekker," or quieting us loud kids at the dinner table with some curt command in 'Dutch.'

Growing up in Michigan, I was always fascinated by my 'home country' of the Netherlands. My fantasies were not of visiting far-off Russia, which I heard about every night on the TV news, not of the holy land of Jerusalem like in my grandmother's living room Bible, not even of Mexico, that 'exotic' land south of our borders that our church missionaries visited. No, I was fantasizing of Holland, which, as a child, I was certain was a land of windmills, of wooden shoes, and of

Photo: Amsterdam Canal Buildings

delicious milk chocolate letters every holiday season. “When I am old enough to travel,” I used to daydream, “I will see Europe.”

Once graduated from college, I had been to Mexico briefly and twice to the United Kingdom. But I had never been to visit my ‘home country.’ Now, with a salary, a job and paid vacation time, I was exhilarated. I made reservations, saved my nickels and dimes, and counted down the days until my trip to Holland. Having flown to England, I was prepared for a long flight in cramped quarters with a reasonably flat meal of dried, cooked meat of some kind, fish or small fowl.

Imagine my surprise when the KLM flight was delightful! A salmon dish served several hours into the trip warmed me enough to drift off peacefully, waking only in the hours of the early morning as we landed at Schiphol Airport. The flight to the Netherlands was only a little longer in hours than the flight when I had visited the United Kingdom, but the difference in atmosphere was extraordinary.

The first visit I made to England, it had been strange in the same way that being born in Connecticut made New York City seem familiar and Los Angeles a strange new world. A little different, but you got used to it. Schiphol, within seconds, was like being on another planet. I can honestly say it was like being in Legoland. I wandered for hours.

Eventually, the novelty of such a European place wore off on a Yankee like me, and I loaded onto the train that shuttled me along with the other tourists and global commuters down through the most brief and intriguing suburbs to the beautiful old train station towering at the entry square to the city. Out poured all of us gawkers, to our first sight of Amsterdam.

The square was a veritable bazaar of T-shirt vendors, sandwich board-wearing advertisers for the marijuana dens, the red light district’s offerings and worse... I picked an arbitrary direction and marched off away from the fray.

Amsterdam has a wonderful layout, as if imagined by the divine and then built and rebuilt by each generation’s finest craft workers, reclaimed and gilded every generation better and better. It is as if the roads are spokes on a wheel, radiating out and along the canals that stretch from the center of the city, by the train depot. Off I set, in search of a shop to try out my ‘Dutch.’

Seven or eight blocks away from the train station, I caught my breath and ducked into a South African Café. I wandered up to the bar, helped



Dijkhuizen Family in Ten Boer

myself to a menu, took a deep breath, ready to speak ‘Dutch.’

(Hello) I said. *(Good Morning)*. The girl behind the counter gave me a blank stare. *(Good Morning)*, I repeated. Blank stare. She politely reached out a hand and offered, “Do you speak English?”

“Yes.” I responded, “do you speak Dutch?”

“Yes,” she replied, “but what you’re speaking, that’s not Dutch.”

“What is it?” I asked. “I don’t know,” she said, “but that’s not Dutch.”

Puzzled, I perused the menu, finally selecting a sandwich of Zebra meat. I was incredulous that such a thing could be eaten, much less enjoyed, but the English-speaking South African Dutch girl served up my first European lunch on an open-faced sandwich with little stripes of mayonnaise to boot!

It wasn’t until a week’s travel through Den Haag, a wonderful walking tour of Keukenhof Gardens, and many train rides later, when I arrived in Groningen, ready to visit my family’s little village of Ten Boer, where my surname originates, that I learned the ‘Dutch’ I had learned growing up was, in fact, Frisian.

Frisian (Frysk) language, spoken in Friesland (Fryslân), is common to the north of the Netherlands. The language is usually known as West Frisian outside of the Netherlands, to distinguish it from the closely related Frisian languages of Saterland Frisian and North Frisian in Germany [Compiled from Wikipedia.org and the Frisian-English Dictionary, Anne Dyksira. Fryske Academy. A'ûk] Photos collection of the author