



## The forces behind expression

Amsterdammers are famously forthright. And sometimes they express themselves not in words but in windows.

**V**ertical gardening  
Eerste Egelantiersdwarstraat 4  
Two sisters, a bunch of cats and dogs and a whole lot of dolls live at Eerste Egelantiersdwarstraat 4. The sisters, Lida and Rietje, are real Jordaaners. 'We grew up on Lindegracht for the most part of our lives until mum and dad moved here on the first floor. I later bought the second floor, and when both mum and dad died my younger sister moved in,' Rietje says.

Their house is hard to miss and has become incredibly popular over recent years; it's even a sightseeing landmark in one of Amsterdam's tourist brochures. The building itself isn't as picturesque as the older houses in the Jordaan, but the window decorations give it a unique, fairy tale-like appearance.

There are many flowers and plants, in between which different-sized dolls cling to balcony frames. If you stand for a minute to take it all in, you will also see parrots, bears, cats, birdhouses, sunflowers and butterflies, amongst many other knick-knacks.

Rietje started off small with a pot plant here and there. 'We don't have a garden—most houses in the Jordaan don't—but we have always wanted one. In the old days it was more a custom for people in the Jordaan to use all the space available for alternative means. We used the street as an extension of our living room and we put

flowers all over the walls and against windows to compensate for a garden,' Rietje says.

Soon they started to expand on their decorations as more became available. 'Every so often we go to a garden centre and we always find something new, like a birdhouse, or a little bear in a basket. So we buy it and put it up around our windows. My sister is more active with the dolls though, she used to make them for a living.'

And as the season changes, so does the display. For Halloween, the sisters dress up the dolls as witches, and for Sinterklaas and Christmas, the walls and windows are also redecorated accordingly. 'We really do it for ourselves. We know people look and take pictures. Especially during Christmas it attracts attention, because we make a real effort. It's in memory of our father who always loved Christmas. When he died in August, we put up the Christmas display in September, just because we knew he would like it. We do it in honour of him, but it also reminds us of how the Jordaan used to be.'

**Observing Pippi**  
Goudbloemstraat 131A  
On the Goudbloemstraat you will find several 'expressive' windows, but number 131A stands out pretty in pink. Its occupant, 42-year-old Saskia, has lived in Amsterdam for 20 years and works as a *sfeermaker*. A

*sfeermaker* is not just a decorator; it means someone who creates an atmosphere by making people laugh, dressing up, and creating a welcoming decor.

Saskia's lightheartedness is mirrored in her window display. On the left hangs an angel next to a Mexican skeleton, while a mirror dangles above Artis de Partis postcards. To the right, a Pippi Longstocking sits adorned next to another Artis de Partis postcard, all in front of pink curtains. 'I love Pippi, she is my idol. She'll water the flowers while it rains. She just does anything she feels like, all with good intentions and a big smile. And Artis de Partis is more the childhood nostalgia, he really gives me a sense of home,' she says.

There seems to be no clear structure, but as a whole, it looks to represent many parts of Saskia as she also mixes in social and philosophical standpoints.

If you look closer at the window you will find a small stamp of *The Little Prince* by De Saint-Exupéry. The quote below it reads: '*L'essentiel est invisible pour les yeux*' ['The essential is invisible to the eyes'].

'That's the way I see life. The small things are important and you can't always look for it. But of course the bigger issues in life should not be avoided, such as poverty. That's why I stuck on the "Make Poverty History" sticker,' Saskia says.

Saskia is also influenced by Hundertwasser, the Austrian painter who later in his career developed his theory of 'transautomatism', based in part on Surrealist automatism, but concentrated on the role of the observer, rather than the artist. As such, Hundertwasser said that every person has the right to pick up a brush and paint a one-metre area around their own windows as self-expression.

Hundertwasser figured it would make the world a whole lot more interesting, and the thought seems to be catching on. 'My neighbour has started putting out little statues and props in front of her window too. Although initially I do it for me, because I like to come home to a house that looks cute, it's also nice to see people appreciating it and reading the notes,' she says.

For Saskia, decorating her window is a way of communicating and a way of making the world a prettier place. Many passers-by would surely agree it is a colourful world looking through her rose-tinted glasses.

**Kids and food**  
Egelantiersgracht 73  
With the children away at school and her husband at work, Jose sits quietly in her back garden-house. This is where she paints and sculpts. But it's not the garden-house alone that's home to her creativity.