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The colour of quality: On science, society and academic courage

A warm welcome to our students, colleagues, guests, friends, family and partners of our university.

It is a great pleasure to have you here today. Two more people ought to have stood here today: my parents. They taught me to look at colour and detail with curiosity, and it is that perspective I carry with me today.

Peter de Rijcke, Bergen, Oude Hof, 2019.

I would like to begin with this painting by my father, Peter de Rijcke. I imagine him in his studio this morning, adding the finishing touches. Maybe he added a quick touch of purple to the bridge. Feel free to think for a moment about what place he painted. I'll return to it at the end of my speech.

Images carry meaning. A painting often says more than we notice at first glance. Perhaps that is why I am so interested in symbols. The chain of office I am wearing today also

tells a story. It is an object that few people have the chance to see close up. I would like to share what struck me when I recently examined it closely for the first time.

Rembrandt van Rijn, Minerva, 1635, Oil on canvas, private collection.

Here you see the chain with our university's seal and beside it a portrait by Rembrandt. Both depict the goddess Minerva: goddess of wisdom, strategic warfare, art and justice, and guardian of the public interest. On the seal, she stands with a book in her hand, her spear resting on the ground. Rembrandt portrays her seated in her study.

In both images, the emphasis rests on knowledge, wisdom and a protected space for research. They situate the university in the classical, humanist tradition, where knowledge, art and society are inextricably linked. Minerva safeguards not only wisdom and the city, but also the beauty from which new knowledge and insights emerge.

Let us now leap forward to today. The seal and the portrait by Rembrandt are allegories rich in symbolism. I asked myself: how might a contemporary artist depict Minerva?

Photo: Erwin Olaf. Liberty, from the Siege and Relief of Leiden series (1574), 2011, collection of De Lakenhal Museum /UB Leiden.

In 2011, when I came to work in Leiden, Erwin Olaf produced a series of photos for Leiden's Lakenhal, right here in the Pieterskerk. This photo is a stark interpretation of the Siege and Relief of Leiden. Look closely and you will find Minerva standing by one of the pillars: positioned between war and peace, and among the people. Olaf chose not to portray classical heroes but instead used local residents as models for the ordinary people of Leiden. He also concealed present-day objects within the scene.

In doing so, he brought together 17th and 21st-century Leiden in the figure of a powerful, human Minerva. I am drawn to this visual line. It speaks to what is expected of universities today: rooted in a long tradition, but deeply embedded in contemporary society and political life.

If I were to imagine a new depiction of Minerva, I would want it to show that our students and staff come from all corners of the world. Working together with people from the city and region, collaborating with colleagues at home and abroad, with businesses and policymakers. In polder labs and other living labs where researchers and residents test solutions together; in quantum physics and health labs, in moot courts and legal clinics; in archaeological digs and in museums. Across Leiden and The Hague, there are countless places where the university and society meet. In that imagined painting, Minerva would be surrounded by a real hive of activity.

There are other reasons for this level of activity. In the Netherlands, there seems to be a little more breathing space around the funding of research and teaching, but concerns remain. Added to this is social and geopolitical uncertainty: wars in many parts of the world, increasingly polarised debates on culture, migration, climate and identity, the diminishing trust in our institutions, including universities.

This paints a different picture. These developments affect us and impact the lives of our students and staff. Sometimes their engagement takes the form of protest; this is part of a vibrant democracy. When that happens, what matters is that we continue to question one another’s arguments from a place of knowledge and care. In our hypothetical artwork, someone might even glue themselves to Minerva's desk – an uncomfortable but recognisable allusion to contemporary protest.

Or would Minerva set aside her book, take up her shield and step out into the street? What would you read into that powerful image?

Photo: Erwin Olaf. Minerva, from the Siege and Relief of Leiden series (1574), 2011, collection of De Lakenhal Museum /UB Leiden.

Our community sometimes finds itself in lively debate about what we expect from universities, about who decides what universities are and what they do, and whether the

university itself should have an opinion on major societal challenges. Some emphasise the importance of fundamental knowledge and theory; others focus on technological or social innovation; still others stress cultural heritage, stewardship or economic impact. These different priorities lead to different expectations: some call for time and space for uncertainty; others demand rapid, visible results; some advocate broad access to our programmes, while others argue for strict admission.

Meanwhile, polarisation increasingly follows cultural lines: from ‘woke’ to ‘our heritage’ and ‘our culture’. In talk shows and opinion pieces, this cultural struggle sometimes spills over into claims about what ‘real science’ should be. We must guard against letting the debate on scientific quality degenerate into a battle of cultural positions or political identities. If science becomes merely a symbol in such struggles, rather than a careful pursuit of knowledge and commitment to self-critique, public trust will crumble.

Science and politics inevitably intersect. What matters is that science is more than a symbol in political debate. That is why we must not settle for caution but be willing to go further. This calls for courage: to question what we take for granted, to articulate our values and to combine scientific rigour with social engagement.

These are issues we should address, particularly on a day like today, as we celebrate the anniversary of our university. The very fact that we can discuss these matters in reasonably open ways is of immense value. It shows that we live in a democratic state in which the goals of higher education are openly debated rather than silently imposed.

As rector, I include my own discipline of scientific research in this, and I want to express a clear ambition: that we base policy more often and explicitly on what we know about how science works. Not on the convictions or opinions of a few, but on evidence of what demonstrably works well. And always grounded in our values of academic freedom, transparency, integrity and social responsibility.

The questions we must ask are: What counts as quality? What constitutes rigorous truth-seeking? When are we doing things well – and is that the same as ‘doing good’? Who decides this? And who sets the agenda for research and teaching? These are not questions for a small group of professors, but for every researcher, lecturer, student and professional in a supporting role.

We must consider whether we measure quality by speed or by thoroughness; whether academic freedom matters when we do not like the results; and whether knowledge only counts when it produces an outcome, or also when it raises new questions. We are still not comfortable with this discussion, nor are we always well informed. From my own experience, I can assure you that this is a whole new skill.

Knowledge of how science works, and how it sometimes fails, is itself the product of the very rigorous truth-seeking we claim to protect. Let us use that knowledge in debates on quality and academic freedom. It will strengthen us and the democratic state of which we form a part. The way these discussions currently play out – through funding, subtle pressure and at times even censorship or self-censorship – shows how fragile the conditions for democratic debate on science are. If we take quality and academic

freedom seriously, we must use this knowledge and protect the institutions that make rigorous science possible: our universities, research funders, libraries, data infrastructures, and independent media.

Some may interpret this as a call to retreat into the ivory tower. That is not my intention. Through our recently developed interfaculty themes, we aim to share our knowledge and expertise with society. Being connected to society does not mean being swayed by the loudest voices, but contributing to the public debate with knowledge, composure and conviction.

I want us to discuss these big questions about our university calmly and respectfully, particularly when we disagree. But the substance of these debates is equally important. All too often, these debates fall short from a scholarly perspective. It is important that we take a closer look at what we now know about science itself. My plea is that we, as a university, actively draw on that knowledge, and the institutions and people that sustain it, to keep the public debate about science and the role of universities alive. And by 'we', I mean researchers, lecturers, students, administrators and all professional staff who use their expertise to create the conditions for good scholarship. Movements such as Open Science build on this and embody these lessons in our daily work: by increasing transparency about methods and data, collaborating across borders and making it easier to share knowledge within and outside the university.

Peter de Rijcke, Bergen, Oude Hof, 2019.

Let me return to my father's painting. Here you see Oude Hof in Bergen, North Holland. It is a place he often painted. The estate was built a century after our university was founded. The main house has a 17th-century core, the arched bridge dates from the 18th century and the farmhouse and Black Barn came later. The barn once housed a sawmill, but it is now a cinema. Just last week, I hung the painting in my new study. I really like the tone and colours. My eye is always drawn to the arched bridge, which my father painted purple.

I have the colour purple before as a leitmotif in a speech, and I would like to end with it now. Purple is hard to pin down. Is it reddish blue or bluish red? For me, it represents respect and cooperation across differences and boundaries: across disciplines and generations, and between city and university. In our university, which is rich in different backgrounds, experiences and perspectives, students learn best when we place these differences side by side and bridge them with care and curiosity. This diversity is what gives our academic knowledge its quality and value. Together, we are one university.

For me, purple is the colour of the conversations we as a university aim to have: never black and white, but layered, at times uncomfortable and vulnerable, and therefore often powerful.

In that spirit, I look forward to working with you to build a university that is firmly rooted, open to the world and courageous in safeguarding the space for truth-seeking, challenge and quality.

As your rector, I will dedicate my academic expertise, my voice and my responsibility to achieving this. I look forward to meeting you – some of you again – to talking with you and to giving colour to this university together.

Thank you.