CHAPTER TWO

AN AMSTERDAM CORTEGE

The inauguration of the Illustrious School

The new school was housed in the Agnietenkapel (Chapel of Holy Agnes) on the Oudezijds Voorburgwal. Like so many institutes of higher education in the Dutch Republic, the Amsterdam Athenaeum was housed in a building of Roman-Catholic origins. The monastery had been confiscated by the city government when it took the side of the Revolt in 1578. It had two floors; on the ground floor was a naval warehouse—the entire building had been intended for such a purpose after its capture—while the upper floor contained an auditorium, with a second, smaller room at the back. In the attic was room for the books from the city library, which had previously been housed in the New Church. From now on, it was to serve as the Athenaeum’s own library. The present forecourt on the Voorburgwal was created in 1632. A gate which previously, since 1571 had embellished the municipal timberyards on the present site of the Binnengasthuis, was placed here to form the entrance to the forecourt. The date 1571 was simply changed to 1631, the actual foundation year, previous to the Athenaeum’s inauguration early in 1632.¹

The Council of Mayors and ex-Mayors would act as the governing body of the Athenaeum. They would make decisions about the Athenaeum in close consultation with the City Council. This sometimes makes it difficult to assign responsibility for individual actions, but the decisions clearly lay with the city government, for the seventeenth-century Athenaeum lacked a senate of professors. This book will refer to the Athenaeum’s governors indiscriminately as curators, mayors, the city government, magistrates, magistracy, and regents. Only when their specific identity is relevant will the curators be mentioned explicitly.

¹ Gedenkboek, 33–34.
It was with a sober ceremony that the Athenaeum was inaugurated on Thursday 8 January 1632. Although Barlaeus later praised the ‘splendour’ of the occasion,² no great celebrations had taken place—no allegorical pageants of arts and sciences, Apollo and the Muses, no triumphal arches, no homage by the civil militia. There was no ‘strong sound and amazing noise of muskets’ like that which had been heard at Leiden in 1575.³ The inauguration was nothing like Maria de’ Medici’s 1639 visit to the city, documented by Barlaeus, with its countless tableaux vivants floating on the far-hymned canals of the Venice of the North. Platforms, stages, fleets of ships, troops of horses, plays, performances—it was all there for Maria’s visit. But nothing of this was present in 1632. ‘The inauguration was not such a great event, the professors were simply escorted from their homes to the Academy by the bailiff and the heads of schools’.⁴ Indeed, on the morning of 8 January 1632 two newly appointed curators, the bailiff Jan ten Grootenhuys and the sheriff Albert Coenraetsz Burgh, went on their way to the Spinhuissteeg, where Vossius and Barlaeus had found lodgings in two adjacent houses after their arrival in Amsterdam the previous May.⁵ From the Spinhuissteeg the small cortège proceeded to the new auditorium, a walk of about two hundred metres. No mention is made anywhere of any spectators on the Oudezijds Voor- or Achterburgwal. The lecture hall itself, however, was tightly packed with regents, merchants, pastors, teachers and (future) students.

The inauguration was celebrated in poems by the two great national poets Barlaeus and Vondel. Barlaeus’s contribution was addressed to the Amsterdam City Council and consisted of 362 hexameters. Vondel presented an ornate ‘Inauguration of the Illustrious School’ dedicated to the Council member and sheriff Herman van der Pol. It is not known if the poems were actually read out on the day. At nine o’clock Vossius began his inaugural speech on the usefulness of history. One day later, on the Friday, at the same time, it was Barlaeus’s turn.

Celebratory verses were even composed in Leiden: old Petrus Scriverius wrote a Latin poem that was translated into Dutch twice,

² Barlaeus to Huygens, dd. 18 01 1632 (Blok, Barlaeus melancholic, 16): ‘non sine apparatu et pompa’.
³ Otterspeer, Groepsportret I, 11–14, who characterises the Leiden ceremony nevertheless as ‘poor’.
⁴ FAH, inv.no. 310; P.J. Knegtmans has drawn my attention to this document.
⁵ Rademaker, Leven en werk, 189 and 191.