

**The Dutch and the Baltics:  
A Long-Term Relationship that's Here to Stay  
By Dr. Amy Bryzgel**

The reciprocity between the Netherlands and the Baltic region goes back centuries. Once a nucleus of European maritime trade, Latvia's ports have hosted thousands of Dutch ships throughout the ages. Evidence of this presence can be seen perhaps most vividly nowadays in Riga in the architecture and landscape that surrounds, yet also more obscure places, for example in archeological remnants of ancient ships and antique coins, or even more subtly in contemporary political ties or religious practices. An upcoming symposium organized by the National History Museum of Latvia, and supported by the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Riga, aims to trace that evidence and explore the considerable impact that these two modern-day countries have had on one another through the ages. The purpose of the conference is to recognize the historical significance of this relationship, and demonstrate how it can serve as a model for Latvia's future role in European political and trade relations. *The Symposium on Dutch Baltic Relations in a Historical Perspective* is part of Holland Days 2008; it is open to the public and free of charge. The Dutch Ambassador to Latvia, Robert Schuddeboom, is hoping that this conference "will not only confirm, but also strengthen and improve the already robust mutual understanding between Latvia and the Netherlands."

In 2006 the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Riga produced an extensive publication that examined many aspects of Dutch-Latvian relations. Essays by eminent scholars from both countries mapped out the intricate history of interaction between people in the lands that have come to be known as Latvia and The Netherlands. Entitled *Beyond Traditional Borders: Eight Centuries of Latvian-Dutch Relations* (2006, Apgads Zelta Grauds), it is an excellent resource for those seeking an introduction to this fascinating and rich history of exchange between two regions that enjoyed great power and influence historically. This year's symposium is meant as a follow-up to that publication that will study these relations in even greater depth, as well as provoke discussion for further development in this area of research. Academics from all over Europe, including not only the three Baltic countries and the Netherlands, but also Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Poland and Russia, will be arriving in Riga to present a very specialized look at the subtle nuances of the interactions between these two regions, and explore what their discoveries can tell us about the current state of society and culture in both of these places.

According to Wicher Slagter, Deputy Head of Mission at the Dutch Embassy, the purpose of the conference is "not only to demonstrate that there were these relations in the past, but that this fruitful history can be a model for the relationships that can develop between the two nations in future." This precedent of extensive social, political, economic and cultural exchange forms a solid foundation on which to build and reinforce forthcoming communications. It should not be forgotten that despite Latvia's Cold War legacy of being part of Eastern Europe, for a much longer period, the country was politically and culturally part of *Western* Europe, and the Dutch trade routes were an integral part of that connection. As Slagter puts it "the historical Dutch link is one of the ties that bind Latvia to Western Europe," and he emphasizes that the conference "is more than of mere academic significance, but is also relevant for Latvia's place in Europe today."

The earliest mention of links between Holland and Latvia were in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, when Frisians (an ethnic group of Germanic people living in the Northern parts of the Netherlands) participated in the crusades by the Teutonic Knights against the pagan Livs and Courons. After the initial conquests, relations between the two regions were determined largely by trade agreements and shipping routes governed by the Hanseatic League. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the period known as the Dutch Golden Age, as the nation was at its peak both economically and culturally, trade with the Baltics was referred to as the “Mother Trade,” signifying the important role it played in the Dutch local economy.

A great majority of the papers presented at the conference focus on the historical maritime, trade and political relations between the Netherlands and the Baltic region. The emphasis on this area of investigation is indeed deliberate. Latvia was one of the most important trading hubs for Europe in the Renaissance era, and the Dutch played an important role in that. In fact, during the height of these commercial exchanges, more than 80% of the ships in Riga’s harbor were Dutch. Ambassador Schuddeboom stresses that what the academic research to be presented at the conference conveys is “the fact that these historical trade relations between The Netherlands and Latvia, which were interrupted during the Soviet Period, hold promise for the future.” The importance of this historical precedent for Latvia’s future is the undercurrent that will run through the conference proceedings.

The distinctiveness of these economic and maritime relations between Holland and the Baltic region will be examined more closely during the proceedings of the conference. For example, Dr. Els S. van Eijck van Heslinga will put forth her analysis of a collection of recently discovered ship papers from several centuries of Dutch-Baltic trade. Archaeologist Tomasz Bednarz of Poland will provide the results of his excavations of an 18<sup>th</sup> century Dutch merchant ship wreck found in the Gdansk Bay. And scholar Lennart Bes, from Leiden University, will present his project of an internet-based Baltic Connections database that can be used for scholars researching the seafaring connections between the countries in the Baltic area and the Netherlands.

The strong maritime and trade relations were reflected in other areas of daily life, as commercial and financial exchange spilled over into other sectors, such as art and architecture, religion, education, and even sport. The most obvious examples of the Dutch influence on local culture can be seen in a panorama of Riga’s city centre. One example that *Beyond Traditional Borders* mentions is the Von Dannenstern House at 21 Maršala iela in the Old Town, which was built by the Dutch merchant of the same name who owned a wine shop in Riga. Located not far from what is now the Centrs Shopping Mall, it is a building that citizens pass every day, yet most likely rarely consider its Dutch origins. A bit further afield, in the Quiet Centre, is a park that was built by Peter the Great fashioned after Dutch gardens that he had seen in Holland. Although only a portion of the original garden survives, it is frequented daily by pensioners and toddlers alike. Known originally as “The Imperial Garden,” and more commonly as “Peter’s Park” or “The Tsar’s Garden,” today it is simply called Viestura Darzs, or Dziesmusvetki Darzs. According to Sergei Zhuravliov, from the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts and Sciences, it was as a result of the Tsar’s order for linden trees to be imported from Holland that we can enjoy the shade of this quiet city park to this day.

Making visual connections between architectural and artistic styles in the Netherlands and Latvia is only the first step, however. The aim of the Symposium is to take those discoveries further. For example, Professor Konrad Ottenheim, in his presentation, *Architectural Influences from the Low Countries in the Baltic Region (17<sup>th</sup> c.)*, pushes the discussion further than mere style, focusing not only on the role of patronage in the arts, but also the manner in which knowledge about Dutch architecture was spread. Other scholars, however, have chosen to present the lesser-told stories of cultural exchange, for example Janis Kreslins, who will reveal the results of his research into how book culture has transformed the cultural makeup of the region.

It should not be forgotten that cultural exchange always works both ways. While it is not unusual that the Dutch Golden Age would exert a strong influence over other nations that had not yet reached such considerable economic and cultural heights, there is much to be said for how those nations on which The Netherlands built its greatness have influenced and affected Dutch culture themselves. It could be said in many ways the foundations of the city of Amsterdam was quite literally built on Latvian roots, insofar as – owing to the growth of the timber trade in the 18<sup>th</sup> century – several of the city's buildings were built using Latvian timber.

Although most of the papers to be presented at the Dutch Baltic Symposium will focus on the Dutch influence on the Baltic region, what these discussions will most likely provoke is further investigation and discovery in the other direction, that the relationship between the two areas was indeed reciprocal. The great amount of topics that will be presented on trade and maritime relations only support the fact that the Dutch have already begun to recognize the unquestionable significance of the Baltic region on their country's development, and the relevance of these historical relations to Latvia's future economic and political development. What further investigation in this conference will certainly reveal is the undeniable presence of Dutch roots at the heart of contemporary Latvian society. With that in mind, Latvia is reminded of its rightful place in Europe, which was only made official through EU accession in 2004. While we often speak of the *contemporary* world as a global one, what these scholars of history, art, politics and religion will no doubt demonstrate is not only how multi-cultural our modern European nations are now, but also how truly diverse they always have been.

H.E. Ambassador Robert Schudeboom and The Royal Netherlands Embassy in Riga invite all those with an interest in the dynamic and prolific cooperation between the Latvian and Dutch people to attend the symposium sessions on April 25 and 26 at the National History Museum of Riga in the Riga Castle, 3 Pils Laukums, Vecriga. The sessions will take place between 9AM and 6PM on both days, in English and in German, and will feature a key-note speech by Dr. Jaap R. Bruijn of the Netherlands and Dr. James C. Kennedy of the United States. An updated version of the program can be found at [www.netherlandembassy.lv](http://www.netherlandembassy.lv).