

A place of shelter

Artist Sarah van Sonsbeeck entered into a conversation with Herbert van Hasselt. A fervent heritage enthusiast, Herbert served as Director of the Oude Kerk from 2001 to 2010 and there are few people who know the monument's history like he does. They talked about Sarah's work and what connects it with the age-old building.

H: Herbert van Hasselt: So here we are in the Oude Kerk, Amsterdam's oldest building, where we may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now is opening. It's an exhibition in which you connect the church with the sea.

Sarah van Sonsbeeck: That's right. The first time that I walked around in here I was immediately awestruck by the Oude Kerk's wonderful barrel vaulting, which seemed like an upside-down boat! And when I saw that, I started to notice more and more details: there are miniature ships hanging in the church and the paintings on the ceiling reminded me of sailor's tattoos. That's no surprise, because these were created by the same men who applied tattoos, as I read afterwards.

H: The fact that the roof reminds you of a boat is certainly no coincidence. The carpenters in the ship-building yards to the east of Amsterdam were the same artisans who worked on the construction of the unique wooden vaulting. On top of that the Oude Kerk was the first harbour church and many famous mariners went to church here. As sea heroes, many of them found their eternal resting place here.

S: That maritime past is really intriguing to me. Not

just in general, but in a personal sense as well. Over the centuries the church has served different functions for the many visitors. For example, if sails had to be repaired then a medieval house was never large enough, so the church offered a solution. So it was not just a place for religion, but also a sort of extension of the home or of the public space. You can encounter that personal aspect even now. For example, behind the choir screen you can find little ships that were gouged into the wood around 1600, and so a visitor added his or her personal memory to all the history of the building.

H: That's a nice one! The significance but also the function of the church has always evolved in line with the times and its visitors. For sure it was a church, but it was a living room of sorts as well, and one of the few covered public spaces where you could briefly find shelter and calm. There are many layers to the church's history.

S: Exactly. If that meaning is always in flux, then perhaps I can add a temporary layer to it as well. You do have to look down, because we're almost right on top of it.

H: Yes, I noticed that the tombstone floor is hidden beneath golden rescue blankets. It means the graves are partially invisible. What are they doing there?

S: Well, in 2013 I made a tent comprised of golden rescue blankets: the 'Anti Drone Tent'. At the time I had read that drones were increasingly being deployed in wars, in order to attack a target from a great distance. But they're also used here in Amsterdam, to film during public events for our safety. These drones are fitted with a heat camera that can recognize people, who are warmer than their surroundings. Emergency blankets, on the other hand, retain your body's heat within, so if you're sitting in the 'Anti Drone Tent' you're invisible to drones.

H: But what are the blankets doing here?

S: For some time I've been seeing more and more images of refugees shrouded in these golden emergency blankets on the television news and in newspapers. They keep them warm after a terrible ocean crossing. The material, and likewise my work with the tent, has thus acquired a whole new meaning. Those blankets have the qualities of a house: they provide protection and shelter. That prompted me to think about the church as a safe haven, where spiritual salvation can be found.

H: And silence too... in order to catch your breath. The Oude Kerk has always been a place of shelter, a protective house of religion. Is that what you're trying to say with this work?

S: Yes and no. I thought, if I lay the golden blankets here then it might emphasize the protective aspect of the church as well as of the golden blanket. I hope that people will stop and reflect: Why is there a rescue blanket lying here? What does that mean? Perhaps the church is there to save us, or the work is protecting the history that lies beneath it, or perhaps it means something totally different?

H: But some of the graves are still visible. Why have you done that?

S: Then you can walk through the work, so the visitor suddenly has to move through the church in a totally

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H: But there's something else about those blankets. You're bringing the gold back into the church! Before the Reformation this church was full of little gold-bedecked altars. And why gold? Very simple... it's wonderful! This sparkling beauty briefly transported you very close to the most high: God. After the iconoclastic fury this was no longer allowed, as gold was perceived as heathen.

S: Yes, but I don't actually know whether this gold is so beautiful. The light that shines on it is magnificent, of course: it sparkles and gleams, it verges on kitsch. That outer beauty intrigues me, for sure. The refugees, wrapped in all that gold, almost become like abstract sculptures. Yet their context is terrible! And it's because of those blankets that these people lose their individual qualities, becoming an abstraction: 'the refugee'. I think that's a dangerous process. The contradiction of the material of the rescue blanket, visually attractive but with a newly charged meaning, in dialogue with the architecture and history of the church is what persuaded me to use it here. It first of all entices the visitor with an overwhelming visual effect. You'll then hopefully reflect upon what you're actually seeing, what this means, and how that meaning arises.

S: In closing I would actually like to ask you something, Herbert. Perhaps it's too personal, but what do you yourself think about the current migration issue?

H: The things that are currently happening in Africa and the Middle East are heartrending. As an affluent country I think that we have the duty to assist and receive people in need in our country. Furthermore, migrants contribute to our prosperity and can enrich us mentally. So then I think, are people actually aware that migration is of all time? The Netherlands would never have become what it is now without new influxes of people. People are afraid that the refugees will cost us money, but history has proven that migration has a positive influence on the economy. And that brings us back to a manifest reference to value: the gold!



The Oude Kerk and a Mylar rescue blanket, image: Sarah van Sonsbeeck