

This letter may seem a bit odd to you in places, in that it was written in lieu of this year's Christmas letter. Nevertheless, it'll give you a feel for our life here in Amsterdam thus far.

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We didn't send out Christmas cards this year because we're spending the spring semester in Amsterdam, and the weeks preceding our departure were pretty chaotic: It's difficult to gather everything that one needs for a "simple" four month move; four of Caryl's graduate students defended their theses or dissertations during the days prior to our flight, so the holidays were spent working through endless revisions of those documents; we've got renters at our house in Chapel Hill, so it was necessary that we clean and clear out closets for their use; during the four days prior to leaving we suffered one of the worst snow-and-ice storms in history; etc., etc., etc. But at last, we've arrived in Amsterdam to commence our sabbatical (Jan 8 to May 8). And as you might imagine, life in Amsterdam is wonderful! I don't know whether you've spent much time here, but in the event that you haven't....

To begin with, the architecture is quite lovely. The buildings in the central part of the city are all several hundreds of years old, four stories tall, about the same width, and constructed of brick. Individuality is expressed in small ways – through differences in the shape of the top of the building, the type or color of brick, the form of windows, the existence of carvings and other artwork.... One encounters buildings with odd and beautiful shutters, carved sheep in stone relief-work, iron lettering listing dates of construction or occupations of owners from several centuries ago, dolphin sculpture on the roof, gold highlights on white window moldings.... all existing side-by-side in lovely harmony. Ceilings are high, windows are huge. There's a "sameness" in architecture that gives the city a very pleasant look – a pleasant uniformity such as that of Paris, if you can imagine a Dutch version of Paris. Why are the buildings of the same general age and height and construction? There was a terrible fire in the 1500's or thereabouts, and following the fire they instituted a building code. Thus.... general uniformity.

The canals give the city a wonderful appearance and feel – a little of the look and atmosphere of Venice, if you can imagine a Dutch version of Venice. The existence of water all over the city gives the place a sense of lightness, openness, airiness. There are a variety of bridge shapes; often, a bit of the bridge is outlined in white lights. Accordingly, the canals are quite lovely at night, with the lights of buildings and bridges reflected on the water. The boats are of incredible variety. Swans float by occasionally.

Our apartment is on the second of the three primary canals that form half-circles off the Amstel River. We're next to a bridge, looking down on the bridge and canal from our airy living room. The building is a couple of centuries old. The apartment is small – living room, bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom – but the rooms are quite large, with ceilings that are 20' or so high, perhaps even higher. It's a corner apartment, so there are huge windows in every room, with the lovely light of Amsterdam pouring in all day. The ceilings are intricately carved in white plaster, with lovely designs. There's an old fireplace in the living room with a gas log that provides great warmth. There's an old gold-framed mirror above the fireplace. The furniture is contemporary and enormously efficient. You know – very "Eurostyle," lots of white cabinets, every centimeter employed in the most sensible manner imaginable. (Those clever Dutch!) (Over the course of many visits to this country, we have never encountered an elevator or toilet or computer or any other sort of machine that didn't function perfectly.)

It's quite a delight to walk around the city. Amsterdam is small, so everything in the center of the city is easily accessible on foot. There are lots of beautiful old bridges and churches and public buildings. The city is filled with sculpture – in parks, in public squares, on the sidewalks. And there are gobs of pedestrians, gobs of cyclists. This looks nothing at all like city life in the US. Plus, the people are great looking. I've been told that there's only one country on earth with a taller average height than the Dutch. (I believe the Masai in Kenya are taller.) Also, Amsterdam is a very young city, filled with artists and journalists and psychotherapists and such. So there are all of these long, lean, loose-limbed, great-looking, trendily dressed, very hip people walking around. Lots of skinny jeans, boots, black shirts, stylish jackets. Lots of people with hair so blond it's almost white. And there's a kind of un-selfconsciousness about them. These people are a pleasure to watch.

The shops are a ball – lots of small, odd, unique shops selling great food or wine or chocolate or bread or coffee or art or furniture or track lighting or watches or antiques or canvas bags or umbrellas or pillows or duvets or.... If you've ever imagined it, there's a special shop for it. There's an endless feast of smells and colors. And we love Dutch taverns. Dutch beers are of enormous variety, each served in a special sort of glass, sometimes with a slice of lemon or orange on the side. The taverns feel sort of like working-class bars in the US, or like pubs in Great Britain. You know – old, dark, warm, and friendly. Frequently, wooden tables are covered with an oriental rug as tablecloth. People hang out in the taverns, spend lots of time there.