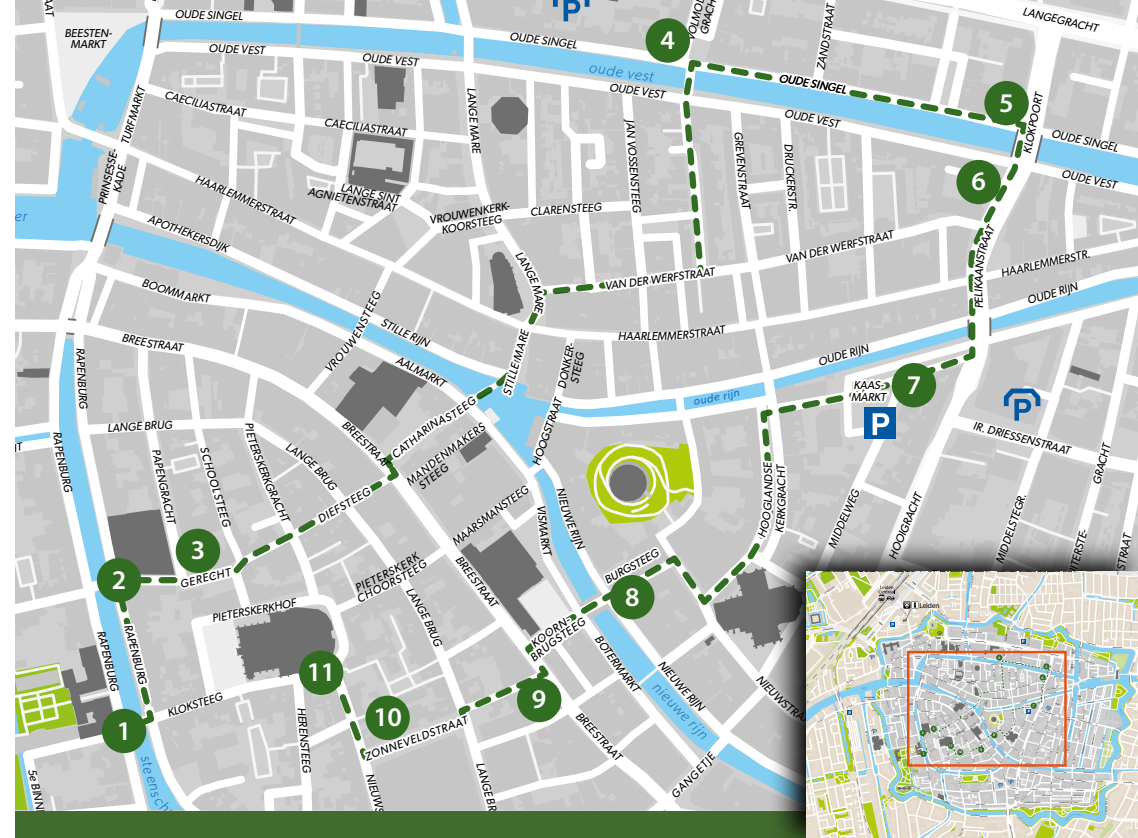
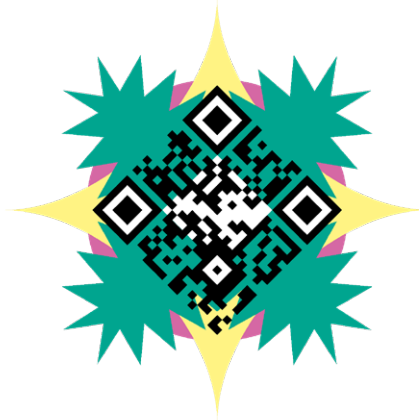


Traces of Poetry in Leiden

When you walk, cycle or drive through the streets of Leiden, it's hard to overlook them: over a hundred wall poems that adorn the Leiden walls. This project was started in the 1990s by the TEGEN BEELD Foundation, set up solely for this purpose. The several languages and beautiful design of the poems evoke many emotions amongst residents and visitors of Leiden. Some feel recognized by the city seeing their mother tongue represented, for others it brings back good memories of their student days. For some the poems awaken a new love for poetry, while others appreciate their artistic value as a work of street art. We have made a small selection of poems for this tour, showing them and the unique stories tied to them. We take you through the city along these poems and tell the stories of the people around the wall poems.



1. Corner Rapenburg/Nonnensteeg - Basho: Aroumiya... (A raging sea...)
2. Corner Rapenburg/Houtstraat - Shakespeare/Sonnet XXX
3. Corner Papengracht/Gerecht - Adonis/Loss
4. Corner Volmolengracht/Oude Singel - Sappho/Once...
5. Corner Klokpoort/Oude Singel - Pierre Ronsard/À son âme
6. Hoek Pelikaanstraat/Oude Vest - Cesare Simonetti/Treno in corsa
7. Kaasmarkt 4 - Konrad Bayer/Franz war
8. Corner Burgsteeg/Nieuwe Rijn - Wotkoce Okisce/Maskoke Okisce (Creek Fabel)
9. Breestraat 135 - Danila Stoianova/Rain, Lake and Wind
10. Zonneveldstraat 18 - Octavio Paz/Aquí (Hier)
11. Nieuwsteeg 1 - Marina Tsvetajeva/My verses

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Photos: Pim Rusch

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LEIDEN
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1 Basho: Aroumiya... (A raging sea...)

This proto-haiku by the Japanese poet Basho tells the story of a long sea voyage that the poet was on at that time: the Milky Way stretches between the poet and the island he sees from his boat. The poem is quite fitting for this place in the city: it is located a few hundred meters from the Leiden Japan Museum and is painted on the side wall of the house where the Leiden astronomer and visual artist Vincent Icke lived. He was not only involved in the choice of the poem, but also left his mark on the wall: any wall poem painted by Jan Willem Bruins contains a small spider in the right corner as a signature. At this poem there was also a red cherry blossom visible once, designed by Icke and composed of his initials. When Bruins was painting this poem in 1994 a group of Japanese tourists happened to pass. They were so impressed by Bruins' calligraphy that the group bowed for this painter. He painted all wall poems off the cuff.



2 Shakespeare: Sonnet XXX

Location is usually not taken into account when it comes to the placement of a wall poem. The necessity is a wall that lends itself well to the project and whose owner would like to participate. However, it sometimes happens that poem and location (perhaps coincidentally) turn out to be a surprisingly good match. This is the case with 'Sonnet XXX', a melancholic poem about friendship. The writer looks back nostalgically on his life and decides that he has always had friendship. The great thing about this is that the poem can be found on the wall of a student house, the place where lifelong friendships are formed.



3 Adonis: Loss

This Arabic poem was chosen for a festive occasion: the 400th anniversary of the study Arabic studies at the University of Leiden. Thomas Erpenius (1584-1624) was appointed in 1613 as the first professor of Arabic studies at Leiden University. The choice fell upon a poem by Adonis, a well-known contemporary poet. The poem is about loss, but also about the positive sides of it. The English text is also painted on the wall. This is not the only special thing about the design of the wall poem. The colours are tied to the poem and are inspired by the colours of the mosque in Córdoba, Spain.



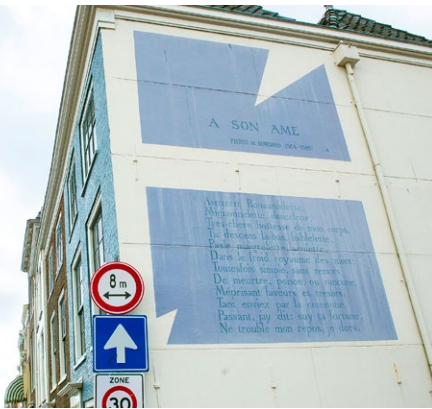
4 Sappho: Once...

Most of the poems on Leiden's walls are by male poets. This makes the works of female poets all the more special. An example is this poem by Sappho of Lesbos. She is the only woman whose verses remain from the period of ancient Greece. Plato even described her as the tenth muse. She often wrote about love between women, but this poem describes the importance of the fine arts as a way to not be forgotten. You could say that the poem is a perfect fit for the wall poem project: the art on the walls shows you the works of these poets and so their memory lives on. It was the Leiden classicist Prof. Dr. Chris Sicking (1933-2000) who suggested this poem and also translated it to Dutch. On the bottom right corner you can still see his signature: a horizontal letter S.



5 Pierre Ronsard: À son âme

Initially, the TEGEN-BEELD Foundation did not let others weigh in on the question of which poem would be placed where. This poem was an exception to the rule. A Leiden resident gave this wall poem to her friend as a gift. She was friends with painter Jan Willem Bruins and her friend was allowed to choose a poem. He chose 'À son âme', a poem that was also put into song and that was sung at his mother's funeral. The poem was previously painted in a different spot in yellow but faded quickly because it was located on a south-facing wall. When that house got new residents, the poem vanished from its original place. Even at



the new location the self-willed character of the TEGEN BEELD Foundation is still noticeable. The applicant and the foundation had a discussion about the proper title of the poem. Ben Walenkamp, the creative mind behind most of the poems, did not give in; it is 'his' title displayed above the poem.

6 Cesare Simonetti: Treno in corsa

Not just "traditional poems" with a clear rhyme scheme or standard form can be found on the Leiden walls. Poems like this by Simonetti with a more abstract form, which you might not immediately label a poem, are represented in the project. In this poem, Simonetti depicted a train speeding by at full speed. Many people see it as a sword, but nothing could be further from the truth.



7 Konrad Bayer: Franz War

These cheerful yellow letters form the smallest wall poem in Leiden. The German poem is about confusion and the poem itself confuses the reader with repetitions and word play. The origins of this poem in Leiden are worth noting. With most wall poems, the Leiden residents themselves didn't have a say about which poem was chosen, but when the owner of the shop where the poem was placed contacted the TEGENBEELD Foundation they did take note of his request, to some extent. Frans Fiets asked for a French poem, since the name Frans in Dutch is also the word for 'French'. Instead of a French poem this little German poem was chosen about his namesake Franz.



8 Wotkoce Okisce: Maskoke Okisce (Creek Fabel)

From the outset, the TEGEN-BEELD Foundation wanted everyone to feel represented in the project. The foundation wanted to contribute to making people from all around the world feel welcome. That is why there are not only poems in the 'standard languages' such as French, Spanish, English or German, but also poems in lesser-known languages. This particular poem is written in Muscogee, the language of a Native American tribe, part of the Creek nation. Due to its design, the poem swirls around on the wall and so exposes the content of the text: it is about tornadoes and the origin of these whirlwinds. The Muscogee had divergent ideas about these origins. One of these theories said that tornadoes are caused by evil spirits. Whatever their cause, the fear of tornado's and their destructive power is clear.



9 Danila Stoianova: Rain, Lake and Wind

This is the only Bulgarian wall poem in Leiden. Remarkably, in the Bulgarian capital of Sofia you will find a good number of wall poems, including one in Dutch. The project in Sofia was an initiative of the Dutch embassy, inspired by the Leiden wall poems. There are now around thirty poems. The idea was that the embassy of each European country would have a poem in her native language. This is just one of the examples of cities abroad that have been inspired by Leiden. 'Rain, Lake and Wind', from Memory of a dream, paints a picture of a sleeping swan on the water. Stoianova (1961-1984) died from leukaemia at a young age. Because of the censorship in her home country her poetry was only published six years after her death.



10 Octavio Paz: Aqui

This poem is a great example of the interplay between content and location. The poem is about a street where you hear your steps echo against the walls. Standing in front of the poem you are looking at such a street and you can see what Paz must have imagined. Across the street from the poem another wall poem can be found. This is the 101st poem. Originally, the TEGEN-BEELD Foundation intended that this 101st poem would be the last, but the project proved so

popular that more wall poems were painted. The choice for 101 poems was a symbolic one: 100 would give the false impression that these are the 100 best, the most beautiful or most important poems, but that is not the case. By painting 101 poems the TEGEN-BEELD Foundation wanted to show that there is always room for more poems on the walls.



11 Marina Tsvetaeva: My verses

This Russian poem was the first wall poem placed in Leiden by TEGEN-BEELD Foundation. The poem was painted in 1992 on the wall of the Templum Salomonis bookstore. The bookstore itself does not sell Russian books yet has received regular visitors from Russia since the poem was placed. The Russians who pass by are very impressed by the poem and a portrait of the author now hangs in the shop. In this poem Tsvetaeva writes about her attempts at writing poetry in her younger years and compares her verses with fine wines: with time they will ripen and improve. When Jan Willem Bruins was painting this poem on the wall, someone shouted from a nearby window behind him that there was a mistake in the text. It was a resident of Leiden who happened to speak Russian. The error was fixed, but over the years, the old paint has started becoming visible again. If you look closely, you see the letters shining through in the second to last line. The owners of the bookstore don't mind this at all: it shows how long 'their' poem has been on this wall.



Leiden City World Walk by Leiden University – Faculty of Humanities in collaboration with LeidenGlobal.