

Executive Board of Leiden University 1974

Seated, from left to right: Chair of the Board K.J. Cath, Rector Magnificus A.E. Cohen and members J.K. Gevers, W.G. Koppelaars and H.H. Maas. Standing: University Secretary N.F. Hofstee. Painting on canvas by Rein Dool, 1977. [On loan from Museum De Lakenhal]

Fierce controversy

Towards the end of 2022, this painting became the subject of fierce controversy within and outside the university. It was removed from the wall and placed on the floor, and was later temporarily hung back up again. This took place in the Grachtenkamer, a meeting room in the Academy Building.

As a symbol of the white-male-dominated world, this painting was felt to be out of step with how today's staff, students and management see themselves. Although the tone of the painting is clearly ironic and the gentlemen are by no means presented in a flattering way, it reflects the management culture of that time, when boards were mainly comprised of white men.

Some members of our staff therefore felt the work had to go. This sparked an intense debate in the press and on social media, and prompted angry reactions and questions. Could they simply do that? Who had the final say? And there was the historical context of the painting. Just as the present-day discussion about diversity and inclusion marks a turning point in history, this painting also represents a turning point in the era of democratisation and the recasting of hierarchical structures around 1970.

Historical context

The artwork shows the composition of the Executive Board in the period from 1974 to 1976. This was the first Executive Board to take office under the new University Governance Reform Act. Minister of Education Gerard Veringa had to implement a radical democratisation of university governance after the wave of protests and sit-ins by students at universities and colleges in 1969.

For the first time, a democratically elected University Council was installed in Leiden in 1974 that was to govern together with a partly elected, partly appointed Executive Board. From then on, the Executive Board would be answerable to the University Council.

Contemporary ideals

This painting thus marks a critical juncture in the university's history, the point when important democratic reforms were made. We currently find ourselves at a similar juncture with the call for equal representation and greater inclusion. That is: an environment where members of the university community feel they belong and can be themselves.

There is always a degree of friction in depicting the university's past and expressing contemporary ideals. That is why we believe it is important to continue to display the painting. Not least because this work of art incites discussion, about both the present and the past.