

Arabs in Mokum: Our Little Secret

The colour orange and the Canals. The expat city of Europe has many things it's known for, notorious for, and much more intangibles that one wouldn't recognise as being Amsterdamer. When mulling over what it is exactly an Arab view of Amsterdam would be, it got tricky. I couldn't quite figure it out. Looking around and trying to pinpoint little things didn't help.

I cycled over to the Greenbox Museum of Contemporary Art from Saudi Arabia, a place I hadn't known existed until this article came about (despite it being across the street from one of my favourite cafes); I poked around the Jordaan, my favourite neighbourhood and the place I call home, anchored in the Westerstraat to the Rozengracht and Haarlemmerstraat that border it; I walked around the Leidseplein and down the Leidsestraat, turning left at the end of it into the Kalverstraat, the shopping street, straight to the Dam Square. Nothing. I made the exception and wandered into the Red Light District and towards the Oude Kerk. There is a small place I know there that makes brilliant kafta and lets you smoke indoors, Wonderbar 2 (tourist trap and student coffeeshop – it's just the kafta).

On another day, I went over to the Vondelpark (it was sunny, which is rare) and the Overtoom and Valeriusstraat around it. Still nothing. From there, the Museumplein, home to art galleries aplenty and the Van Gogh Museum (closed for renovations), the Stedelijk (our MoMA), and the Rijksmuseum (reopens April 2013). Premsela, a bookstore across from the Stedelijk, had a small section on Arab and Iranian art and design. Probably temporary.

Roaming not getting me anywhere, I let my mind do the walking. Amsterdam was a mercantile town that grew up pretty quickly in the Dutch Golden Age, from Rembrandt and onwards, and has always been a refuge for the vagabonds and a home to the quirky. Colourful, Mokum (its nickname in the local dialect) is a place where cultures really come to mingle, not to sit side by side. And the thought gradually formed: that's what Amsterdam is for expats, any expats, any Arab.

It's the place where your individual identity becomes part of a whole, where you being from somewhere isn't special, even if it's interesting, because everyone's from somewhere here. The city of expats embraced everyone before and continues to do so in the most comforting of ways.

The 9-Streets is a perfect example of this looseness and friendliness, where shop owners stick their heads out and welcome you in not to hassle you into buying something, but just so that you can see what they've worked so hard to create for you – whether it's their own stuff or just their choices and collected novelties, vintage fashions, or whatever strange thing the next shop opens. Cafes and Michelin starred restaurants (and bars) fill the gaps in, but my favourite parts of the uncreatively named streets (there are nine of them, and they run in parallel of each other) are those on the peripheries, those technically outside the streets themselves: the hidden galleries and the unexpected local designer shops.

As my mind wandered, I remembered Michel, the super talented Lebanese chef, and Laziz, the Arabic night at Paradiso he caters and helped create “to introduce Arabic culture, food and music in Amsterdam and to bring Arabs together”. He’d been in the city for a long time, and he’s seen the various communities develop, from Moroccans (who’ve been there for a while), to the smaller Iraqi, Tunisian, and Palestinian groups (although I’ve never met any).

Stepping a little further out, I reached out to another intriguingly creative individual in the city, the woman behind AKKA Architects and the Architecting Interaction process, Stephanie Akkaoui. Her words on Amsterdam were beautifully apt: “it’s a very human city, it has a perfect scale; kind of large enough but not too large.”

Why do I love this mellow city? The terraces, the sunny days that make the greyness of the rest of the year worthwhile, the unpretentiousness that Michel talks about. Stephanie finds pleasure in the simpler things: “we cycle sometimes, we cross a bridge, and we just have to stop in the middle of the bridge, just to look at the houses, the lights and the dancing reflections in the canals, Amsterdam is so beautiful.” There’s no denying the understated beauty of Amsterdam’s legendary canals, with photos of them littering the interwebs on a daily basis. While the city has been working on reining in the anarchist, underground communities that had developed here since the 80s, it has still maintained its freeness and the comforting sense of belonging that everyone feels the moment they step foot on Centraal Station’s platforms.

My obsession, from Beirut to Montreal and in between, has always been Arab and Levantine creative endeavours, but Amsterdam has removed that distinction, in more ways than one. When you walk into galleries that host Egyptian, Iranian, Syrian, Moroccan, or Kuwaiti works of art (for lack of a more accurate term), that do not carry their national label with them on a daily basis, that exhibit work alongside Polish, Dutch, Spanish, Indonesian, Australian, Brazilian artists, that melt into each other not because of their identities but because of the themes of their work, you enter a completely radical (supposedly – in reality, there’s nothing radical about it) sphere of creative expression.

As Stephanie describes them, “Dutch people are very friendly and still quite independent people, a sort of friendliness different from most Arabs,” and many, like myself, find that somewhat off-putting at first, until you begin to understand and relish this welcoming and very respectful culture. Michel points out a key element of Dutchness that many of us seem to forget: the Dutch like to travel, they like to meet others, and they have an open-mindedness about them that is extremely welcoming.

My advice to you would be very simple. Spend your time walking around. Follow rabbits into holes that look ominous and buildings with hidden treasures, and you will fall in love with this massive village.