

# Artis Royal Zoo: Going Back to 19th Century

The concept of *Natura Artis Magistra*, or 'nature instructs the arts and sciences', is still vigorously embodied by the Amsterdam Artis Royal Zoo. About fifty statues, created during the past two centuries, are on display in the zoological gardens. Furthermore, the Artis Library and the University of Amsterdam now jointly manage the extremely valuable collection of books and reproductions amassed by the Society since its foundation.



Artis Royal Zoo was founded in 1838, near the centre of Amsterdam, the capital of the Netherlands. The principal founder of Artis, G.F. Westerman, had brought Rijndert Draak and his unique collection of stuffed animals to the Plantage district of Amsterdam. Here, the collection was put on display in the Stadsherberg, on the Middenlaan. This inn was situated opposite the buiten Middenhof, which before the end of 1838 became the birthplace of Artis. Aside from a 'Surinam jungle cat' (an ocelot), this attractive outdoor location did not yet boast much in the way of fearsome beasts. There were just some romantic ponds with an assortment of waterfowl, pheasants in elegant round cages, and a few monkeys in what used to be a house. Furthermore, of course, another house had been converted into a meeting hall for the members of the *Natura Artis Magistra* Zoological Society (founded on 1 May).

These meetings were pretty exclusive affairs, as membership was very expensive. In addition, new members had to be nominated by existing members, and approval was subject to tightly regulated ballots. Yet the Society flourished, which caused its reserves of capital to grow. Within a year, it had set up an expensive caravan in front of the city's gates, containing some truly 'dangerous' animals.

These included a lion, four tigers, hyenas, a boa constrictor, and a crocodile, with a gigantic elephant called Jack as the star attraction.



There was an enormous increase in the number of members, the first museum building was erected, and ever more plots of land were purchased in the Plantage, which at that time was still mainly occupied by numerous shipyards, country houses, and parks. There were also numerous pubs and houses of pleasure. Two country houses from that period are still being used as animal enclosures. There is also a fairly notorious tavern dating from the early 19th century, which Artis converted to the Wolf House and Dovecote in 1865. During the First World War, this Dutch Royal Mail carrier pigeon station played an important defensive role as part of the Defence Line of Amsterdam. In the Second World War, it served as a reasonably comfortable safe house for individuals who went into hiding during the occupation. It was certainly more comfortable than the bears' night-time enclosures, or the haylofts in the Predator Gallery and the Primate House, where many others hid.

The Predator Gallery, which was designed by the architect G.B. Salm, dates from 1859. Its hay lofts are still wonderfully well preserved. The first Primate House/Aviary was created in 1851-52. It was rebuilt in 1909, using plans drawn up by the architect B.J. Ouëndag. In 2011, it will reopen after extensive restoration that combines the external features of Ouëndag's creation with the latest insights in the field of animal-friendly and public-friendly accommodation.

A few years ago, the Giraffe Stable (which dates from 1863) was restored in keeping with the spirit of bygone times. It was subsequently expanded to such an extent that the giraffes – together with zebras and wildebeest – can now frolic around in a wonderfully spacious outdoor enclosure. There is also an impressive 19th century office building, 'De Volharding', which initially served as the Ethnographic Museum. A huge aviary has now been added to this structure, providing space for European vultures to glide around on their enormous wings.



In this way, Artis is attempting to preserve its monumental past while combining it with insights that are in keeping with a modern zoo. Another example is the Aquarium, which was also the brainchild of architect G.B. Salm and one of the first of its kind in Europe (1882). In addition to the atmospheric Heimans Diorama (created in 1926), it currently houses four impressive, mega-sized tanks, each containing an entire undersea biotope.

The Large Museum on the Middenlaan is where Artis first began. In a few years, its historic halls (constructed in 1850-55 by the architect J. van Maurik), which have been closed for more than half a century, will be opened once again. They will be the scene of an exciting new attraction, in which the pioneers of Amsterdam zoo's livestock will also be putting in an appearance.

The 19th century atmosphere of Artis Royal Zoo pervades the gardens. It derives not only from the presence of twenty monumental buildings, but also from the various statues, authentic larger-than-life Buddhas, garden vases, and other features associated with classically laid-out gardens. Some of the towering trees are even older than Artis itself, as are a number of monuments.

Besides its monumental trees, in the spring Artis abounds with numerous varieties of colourful tulips. During the summer months, there is the fragrant rose collection in the Dutch Garden. Throughout the autumn, its many ancient trees are clothed in red and gold, and at the close of the year it offers snowy winter images. Indoors too, there are plants aplenty. In the warm and cosy Butterfly Pavilion, for example, butterflies flutter all around you, against the backdrop of their towering host plants.

Artis's penultimate expansion dates from 1877. The very last one, which took place in 1997, involved the former railway site, where giraffes and zebras now roam. Following the Primate House/Aviary, Artis has plans for the large car park bordering these animal enclosures. This facility will be going

underground. The ultimate goal is to create more room for the residents of the venerable Predator Gallery, whose rich and eventful history reflects that of the zoo itself.

Photo: Artis/Ronald van Weeren

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