



CHICAGO JOURNALS



History  
of  
Science  
Society

---

Huib J. Zuidervaart; Rob H. van Gent. *Between Rhetoric and Reality: Astronomical Practices at the Observatory of the Amsterdam Society "Felix Meritis," 1786–1889.*

Between Rhetoric and Reality: Astronomical Practices at the Observatory of the Amsterdam Society "Felix Meritis," 1786–1889 by Huib J. Zuidervaart; Rob H. van Gent

Review by: Bert Theunissen

*Isis*, Vol. 105, No. 3 (September 2014), p. 668

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#) on behalf of [The History of Science Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/679171>

Accessed: 13/02/2015 10:25

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*The University of Chicago Press and The History of Science Society* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Isis*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

**Huib J. Zuidervaart; Rob H. van Gent.** *Between Rhetoric and Reality: Astronomical Practices at the Observatory of the Amsterdam Society "Felix Meritis," 1786–1889.* 152 pp., illus., apps., bibl., index. Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2013. €19 (paper).

The learned society of arts and sciences "Felix Meritis" was established in Amsterdam in 1786. Two years later, the society was housed in what was called a "Temple of Enlightenment," a magnificent building on one of the principal canals whose architectural design was much more ambitious than that of the better known Teyler's Museum in Haarlem. It included, for example, a concert hall, a drawing department with an arts cabinet and an exhibition room, a reading room with an opulent library, a physics department with a large cabinet of scientific instruments, a natural history cabinet, a chemical laboratory, a balcony for meteorological observations, and a two-story astronomical observatory. According to the Dutch mathematician and physicist Jan Hendrik van Swinden, who delivered the inaugural speech, the research facilities of Felix Meritis could withstand comparison with those of larger institutions abroad.

This glorious beginning notwithstanding, Huib Zuidervaart and Rob van Gent's history of the society's astronomical and meteorological observatory is anything but a success story. Van Swinden's high hopes for the observatory as a locus for original research were never fulfilled. As it turned out, the upper-middle-class burghers who had founded the organization and constituted its membership had a hard time keeping the society and its costly facilities and collections in good condition, and there simply were insufficient funds left over for research. The problem was aggravated by the dwindling interest in scientific societies as centers of elite sociability in the course of the nineteenth century; membership numbers dropped from 420 in the early nineteenth century to under 200 in 1886, which resulted in the decision to liquidate the society in 1889.

Thus, in spite of the fact that the astronomical observatory of Felix Meritis was equipped with an impressive collection of scientific instruments, it would serve almost exclusively for lectures and demonstrations. The observatory did attract a number of talented researchers, but it seems that the society was unable to pay them enough to keep them long; most researchers soon preferred a better-paid position at a university. The society even had trouble paying for qualified public lecturers. Nevertheless, membership fees and the social prestige that was

attached to membership continued to be high, and the ballot procedure for membership was kept intact till the end. In line with this policy, the society was unwilling to allow skilled researchers of lower social rank to use the facilities for lecturing and research. An example is the very talented physicist and mathematician Jan Frederik Keijzer, a former army sergeant who had to be elected to the Dutch Royal Academy before he was allowed entrance to the observatory of Felix Meritis. Meteorology fared better at Felix Meritis: daily recordings were performed over half a century, until the Royal Dutch Meteorological Institute was established in 1854.

During most of the nineteenth century, the society itself was mainly a place where the Amsterdam elite met for pleasure and leisure—for instance, in the concert hall or the exposition rooms. There is a clear parallel here with Teyler's Museum, whose scientific collections lost the central position they had had under Martinus van Marum's directorship to the art collection, which would ensure the museum's continuing social role in the nineteenth century in a quite different way.

The authors have documented their story in detail, and *Between Rhetoric and Reality* presents many fine illustrations of the researchers, instruments, and facilities of Felix Meritis. They convincingly show how the rise of the natural sciences in the nineteenth century was paralleled by a decline in the interest of the social elite in participating in these developments. The parallel with Teyler's Museum emphasizes that we need to know more about the background of this changeover in cultural preferences in Dutch polite society.

BERT THEUNISSEN

#### ■ Recent (1950–)

**Paul M. Leonardi.** *Car Crashes without Cars: Lessons about Simulation Technology and Organizational Change from Automotive Design.* (Acting with Technology, 12.) x + 334 pp., illus., tables, bibl., index. Cambridge, Mass./London: MIT Press, 2012. \$35 (cloth).

Despite the diligent work of historians, sociologists, and philosophers of technology, many social actors have deterministic views of technological development. Those adhering to technological determinism argue that technology develops autonomously according to its own internal logic and is the most important source of organizational and societal changes.