

Jacob Olie (1834-1905): he was a pioneer in photography, captured Amsterdam during its enormous growth spurt, and was the great-great-grandfather of Joan Veldkamp. Why is Olie still so beloved?

Article by Joan Veldkamp, translation by Martin Cohen (assisted by Google Translate)

Amsterdam, 1863.

It was a steep climb, all the way to the top of Tower 8 of the Rijksmuseum. Photographer Jacob Olie was used to it; he'd stood on almost every (church) tower in Amsterdam with his tripod and camera, or hung them halfway in gutters. But this staircase seemed endless.

At the top, he found himself in a nearly dark room with slanted wooden walls. The single window, measuring about seventy by fifty centimeters, was closed with a wooden shutter.

Once opened, a breathtaking panorama unfolded of the Ice Club grounds (now Museumplein), dotted with the most beautiful buildings. To the left stood a pagoda and a gigantic ship, a replica of the mail boat that transported mail and passengers between the Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies.

Construction for the World Exhibition of the Hotel and Travel Industry, scheduled to open in March 1895, was in full swing. To the right lay the brand new Stedelijk Museum, designed by architect Weissman, built in the Dutch Neo-Renaissance style with towers, red brick, and yellow natural stone. And straight ahead stood the magnificent Concertgebouw, designed by architect Van Gendt, with its golden lyre on its roof.

State mansions rose on either side of this music temple. The whole view looked like a row of teeth with gaps here and there. Directly behind them lay the vast void: meadows and water as far as the eye could see. People could walk straight from the city into the countryside and jump over ditches.

Jacob couldn't have wished for a more beautiful view of the encroaching city he wanted to capture. It took some effort to position the tripod and camera securely in front of the window. Then he loosened the lens cap, only to screw it back on after a few seconds. It never occurred to him for a second that people, even 130 years later, would still be gazing in amazement at the scene he had just immortalized.

He considered himself an amateur photographer and didn't flaunt his photos. Now that he had bought a "magic lantern," with which he could project glass plates onto a screen or a wall, he occasionally showed a few photos to small groups. For example, at the home of the architect Berlage, a friend of his, or at schools, or at the Ons Huis (Our House) association in the Jordaan district. But then everything disappeared into the attic, where thousands of glass negatives and lantern slides were already stored in boxes.

Jacob Olie (1834-1905) – a pioneer in photography – is my great-great-grandfather. My grandmother Hanna Olie (his granddaughter) said of him: "Grandpa was interested in everything that happened around him. And he was a craftsman. What his eyes saw, his hands could create." Along with George Breitner (1857-1923) and Bernard Eilers (1878-1951), he is one of the few photographers who captured the city of Amsterdam in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But while Breitner's photographs served as a kind of sketchbook for his paintings – he concentrated on the effects of light – and Eilers increasingly focused on art and portrait photography, Jacob remained primarily interested in the city itself.

A retrospective of Jacob's life and work in the 750th anniversary year of Amsterdam also testifies to the enormous growth spurt the city experienced when he roamed the streets with his camera and tripod. He wasn't just drawn to the buildings, factories, wharves, and canals; he was equally captivated by the

people of all walks of life he encountered along the way. They play a role in almost every image. His photographs also offer a glimpse into daily life up to 1905.

Jacob lived at Zandhoek 10 for much of his life, together with his mother, Aagje, and his younger sister, Stijntje. When Jacob was twelve, his father, who had run a successful timber-rafting business, passed away. He had been married three times, and ten of Stijntje and Jacob's half-siblings lived nearby. They felt completely at home there.

Zandhoek was a bustling industrial district with factories, warehouses, and a shipping company. The air smelled of tar and smoked herring, and the streets were always lively. Shipbuilders and wealthy timber merchants lived in imposing mansions on Zandhoek itself and along the Bickersgracht and Realengracht canals. In the side streets, crammed into small (cellar) dwellings, lived poor dockworkers and raftsmen.

His half-brothers were also in the timber trade or were sea captains, but Jacob was an outsider. He collected picture books and preferred to spend his time at home drawing by the window overlooking the Westerdok, where seagoing vessels were built and refurbished and cargo was unloaded. Mother Aagje sent her dreamy son to the French School. Yet, Jacob ultimately chose to work with his hands. He became fascinated by the construction industry and became a carpenter's apprentice.

In 2000, I visited my great-uncle Jaap Olie, who managed the family archive. Scattered throughout the study were old household books, newspaper clippings, dozens of folders containing, among other things, drawings of French and Spanish monuments, and pictures of the most important houses in Brussels in 1870. Among them stood an engraved ostrich egg. Jaap apologized for the chaos. "I've been trying to organize the estate for years, but it's not easy. The Olies don't really collect; but they just keep everything."

Jaap gave me a handwritten booklet entitled "Some particulars of a trip to Rotterdam and The Hague, June 4th and 5th, 1854." It's one of the rare documents in which Jacob, then twenty years old, wrote about himself. Together with his friend Pieter van Voornveld—also a carpenter—he spent the night away from home for the first time in his life. After a three-hour journey on an open train, the young men arrived, thoroughly chilled, at Delftsche Poort station in Rotterdam. "The first thing that caught our attention was the extraordinary vibrancy, which, outside of Amsterdam, is found nowhere else in our country."

The duo marveled at the Gothic-style station building. "But soon our eyes were drawn to the Theater, made entirely of Bentheimer stone and seemingly overloaded with statues and ornaments." Eagerly, and with an eye for detail, Jacob and Pieter took in all the buildings in the bustling city. To top it all off, they managed to sneak onto King William III's royal steam yacht. They were chased away. "But in the meantime, we had admired the beautiful yacht, decked out in gilt. The steering wheel is inlaid with mother of pearl."

That evening, they took the train to The Hague. "Our arrival there was like a cat in a strange warehouse. We went for a rambling walk until we finally came across the Hotel des Pays Bas." It would have been a perfect opportunity for the young men to visit The Hague's cafés, looking for entertainment. But no. After dinner, they went straight to their wooden beds. "Strange thoughts came over us at the prospect of spending the night in a lodging house for the first time in our lives. We still remembered a few things from our experiences and fell asleep, as it were, laughing. The next day, Jacob was enraptured by the true craftsmanship and good taste in the regency city. He wrote about the Royal Palace Noordeinde in The Hague: "The splendor there was indescribable for us,

people who had seen little." And about Huis ten Bosch: "The impression it made was magical. One was, as it were, momentarily stunned. The pleasure that enveloped us during those two days is indescribable."

The architect Leliman, where Jacob was now working, saw his euphoria and asked him to co-found the society *Architectura et Amicitia*. Every week, the members gave lectures and debated new developments in architecture.

Around that time, the development of photography, a revolutionary invention from France, was gaining momentum. In 1855, the first International Exhibition of Photography and Heliography took place in the Netherlands, and it was a huge success. The walls of the artists' society *Arti et Amicitiae* on Rokin in Amsterdam were filled with seven hundred works, primarily from France. Jacob, too, must have been amazed. Some time later, he showed the members of *Architectura et Amicitia* a collection of stereoscopic cityscapes by Pieter Oosterhuis. What he didn't mention was that he himself had begun experimenting in his own neighborhood.

He obtained recipes for making emulsions on glass plates and developing photographs from French magazines. He carefully recorded these in a notebook. On the marbled cover, he glued a heart with the word "photographie." He built a sophisticated camera, bought a lens, and cut his own glass plates.

The residents of Zandhoek suddenly saw the young carpenter lugging a wooden box and a tripod down the street. He asked them to stand motionless in front of it for as long as possible. Then he retrieved a wet sheet of glass, which he had treated with a thin layer of collodion, from the box and rushed home. By bathing that sheet in a solution of silver nitrate in his dark box bed, he then created an image that was more detailed and sharper than any the residents had ever seen before.

Because of those wet glass plates, his range was very limited. However, he was able to experiment with portraits. Of elegantly dressed local women – tightly laced and wearing enormous hoop skirts – and men in suits with tall black hats. They all posed endlessly for his camera. As if by unspoken agreement, everyone looked equally serious; there was absolutely no room for a smile. He also posed himself. Jacob posed as a homely "Zandhoeker" (*note: he lived on Zandhoek 10, a few houses down from where my close friend Sebas Gottlieb grew up on Zandhoek 5, MC*) with his dog on his lap, as a carpenter in a cap and clogs, standing on a ladder, and as a dandy in a summer coat, hat, and shawl. He had a walking stick in his hand and a pipe in his mouth.

He continually pushed his boundaries by building a permanent contact list of family and friends living throughout the city center. There, he could photograph from upstairs windows and set up a temporary darkroom. This is how he created unique images.

With Anneke van Veen, the former photography curator at the Amsterdam City Archives, I took a walk past the canal house at Amstel 18. From the upper window of this house, where Jacob's friends lived, he created a unique seven-part panorama back in 1863. The view stretches from Schapenplein with its mansions (now De Munt), along Rokin and the Rondeel inn (now Hotel de L'Europe), to the children's orphanage and the diamond factories with smoking chimneys on Vlooienburg. The Stopera now stands there.

"It's the magnum opus of Jacob's earliest city photographs," says Van Veen, who discovered the panorama by chance when she organized a retrospective of his work in 1999 and wrote a comprehensive book: *Jacob Olie Jbz (1834-1905)*. "It must have been an almost scientific undertaking. He probably used a board to mount his camera on, hanging it from the upstairs window. This allowed

him to pan from left to right. It was incredibly ingenious and unique, and also quite clever that the photos seamlessly connected."

This feat was one of the last projects from his early photography period. By then, Jacob was 29 and had become a drawing teacher at the new Ambachtsschool (Trade School), founded by the architect Leliman "for the moral advancement of the working man's children." Poor boys who were at risk of growing up "for the gallows and the wheel" could learn a solid trade at the school. Jacob himself also had to obtain a drawing diploma, and teaching took up a lot of time. He didn't get around to taking photographs anymore.

Jacob even became the school's principal; he had his hands full with it. A pocket diary from 1875 gives an idea of the rough nature of his students. For example, on January 29, 1875, two boys had to report to the police "for firing a pistol." And two weeks later, he had to sit down with boys who had assaulted a teacher.

Outside of school, Jacob also gave drawing lessons, including to Carolina ("Line") Blössman, the foster daughter of his good friend Biengreber. His pious mother had once advised him: "Son, don't marry!" But his mother Aagje had passed away, and the shy Jacob fell madly in love with Line, sixteen years younger than him. She was the first woman in the Netherlands to obtain a secondary school teaching certificate in drawing and also started teaching herself. "Jacob and Line were kindred spirits," said my grandmother Hanna Olie.

A letter from his friend Van Voornveld from 1878 reveals that Jacob had gone through a deep valley before finally daring to declare his love and propose. "I bless the moment the Gordian knot was cut. You were born for each other! My friend faded away, I might almost say gradually died away. I consider myself happy to have my friend back now!" Jacob and Line married that same year and moved—after a honeymoon visiting various Hanseatic cities—to Huidekoperstraat, near the impressive Paleis voor de Volksvlijt (Palace of Industry).

Unfortunately, their happiness was short-lived. In seven years, the couple had seven children. Jacob, Jan, Aagje, and Willem survived, but three children did not make it. The obituaries, circled in pencil in preserved newspaper clippings, attest to this. In 1886, tragedy struck again. Line died in childbirth during Willem's birth. She was only 38.

Jacob was left heartbroken and with four small children. His son, Jan, later wrote about this in a family document: "I can still remember my mother's death on December 21, 1886, very well, although I was only five years old. The cause of death was puerperal fever. It was a medical error for which the attending surgeon was suspended. (...) My parents' marriage must have been very happy. Both highly esteemed people, who gave themselves completely to each other. It is truly regrettable that we children never knew motherly care. Despite father's excellent care, everything would certainly have turned out very differently if she had survived."

Jacob eventually felt unable to work at the Trade School and retired in 1890.

Was photography perhaps an outlet, a way to cope with the deep sorrow? In any case, the widower took his camera out of the closet again and devoted himself to capturing the city and its surroundings. Until his death in 1905, he continued to produce thousands of new photographs.

Meanwhile, the world around him had changed dramatically; Amsterdam was experiencing a huge growth spurt. And the wet collodion plates had been replaced by ready-made dry gelatin plates. Jacob

didn't have to develop these immediately after exposure, which increased his freedom of movement.

On excursions outside Amsterdam, he always took his family along. In many photographs, the city children, with their neat clothes and leather shoes, form a stark contrast to the country children. They wore shabby smocks, trousers, and aprons, and walked barefoot or in clogs. The class society of the Netherlands was thus captured in a single image. In Amsterdam itself, this is also clearly visible in a photograph of the bustling Utrechtsestraat in 1897, where the horse-drawn tram and carriages weave their way among the dressed-up chic, the errand boys, and the servants (the "Saartjes") in their white caps and aprons.

People were always willing to pose for Jacob. "In his photos, you can clearly see that people are almost never randomly included. Jacob directed the set, and he truly loved people," says Van Veen. "Despite his shyness, he must have been a very engaging man with great charisma. He was used to dealing with difficult children because of his vocational school; he was a father of four himself, and I think that's why he quickly knew how to strike a chord with complete strangers."

Jacob always sought heights. During Wilhelmina's coronation festivities in 1898, he wasn't among the crowds on Dam Square, but high above them, in a gutter somewhere. From the roof of a building on Reguliersgracht, he took the iconic photo of the Paleis van de Volksvlijt (Palace of Industry), at the moment the famous aeronaut Léon Mary's hot air balloon took off.

He continued this practice until he was seventy. On his birthday, he received a new camera from a group of former students from the Ambachtsschool, who wanted to pay tribute to him. But he barely used it; a few months later, he died of kidney failure.

"During his first period of photography, until 1864, he was truly pioneering and experimenting," says Van Veen. "In that second period—from 1890 to 1905—you primarily see Jacob's wealth of ideas, his worldview, and his pride in his city as an "Amsterdammer". He was technically skilled, a true craftsman, and his photographs are of incredible beauty and detail. He undoubtedly left behind a very rich collection."

Two board members of the *Genootschap Amstelodamum* discovered it only in 1959—by chance—through contact with the children of Aagje and Willem Olie. The Municipal Archives (now City Archives) was jubilant about the discovery, and the first volume was immediately purchased by then-archivist and deputy director Isabella van Eeghen. She wrote the first book about his photographs. It became a bestseller. The City Archives now holds the extensive Oil Archive, including all his paraphernalia and his wooden camera (3,700 glass negatives, 3,000 prints, and countless lantern slides). Jacob is considered a crowd-pleaser there: exhibitions of his photographs still attract thousands of people.

With Van Veen and a delegation from the Rijksmuseum, I recently climbed to the roof of Tower 8. Huffing and puffing, we arrived at the window where Jacob took his photo of Museumplein in 1895. Now, the office towers of the Zuidas, construction towers, and high-rise apartments rise on the horizon, and on the square itself are "the bathtub" (the new wing of the Stedelijk Museum), the modern Van Gogh Museum with "the boil" (the semicircular entrance), and around the pond, a vast construction site. I doubt Jacob would have been proud of the new architecture if he had been standing next to us. But he must have immediately got his camera ready to capture the latest growth spurt of his beloved Amsterdam.

Joan Veldkamp, August 20, 2025



A panorama of Amsterdam by Jacob Olie, around 1863



Self-portrait by Jacob Olie, Amsterdam 1863