

Jimmy van der Lak

### From painter's model to pimp?

*Op het terras (On the terrace)* by painter Nola Hatterman (1899-1984) was moved from the Amsterdam Historisch Museum to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 2012. In 2009 criminologist Frank Bovenwerk chose this painting for the cover of his book *Etniciteit, criminaliteit en het strafrecht (Ethnicity, criminality and criminal law)*. He shed new light on the man who modelled in it: Surinamese Jimmy van der Lak (1903-1990). Apart from being a painter's model, a waiter, a dancer, a boxer, an actor, and the owner of a boxing school, was van der Lak also a pimp, as Bovenkerk suggests? Does it really matter what he was?



On the terrace, Stedelijk Museum (1930)



'Ethnicity, criminality and criminal law'

by Ellen de Vries

Without any doubt, professor of criminology Frank Bovenkerk chose this illustration with care for the cover of *Etniciteit, criminaliteit en het strafrecht*: the oration he gave when he left the Willem Pompe Instituut voor Strafrechtwetenschappen in Utrecht.

In the preface of the publication he states:

*“The name of the painter’s model was Jimmy van der Lak. (...) The description of the man (...) in the Amsterdam Historisch Museum tells us that Jimmy had problems with the vice squad (1). Was he one of the first loverboys (or po’s, pooiers, as the Surinamese say)?” (2)*

Bovenkerk wrote his book when Jimmy could still be seen at the Historisch Museum (Amsterdam Museum). In an interview with the *Volkskrant* Bovenkerk tells how Jimmy smashed a café to smithereens in Paris and lounged around in a jazzclub in Amsterdam which was later closed down because prostitutes were recruited there. Bovenkerk was one of the first to ignore the taboo on the publishing of crime rates among migrants. However, at the end of his career, he surprisingly concludes: “I resist the almost irresistible inclination to reduce crime in our multicultural society to an ethnic or cultural problem.” (3)

In the *Volkskrant* he states: “In our day we would call Jimmy a loverboy. But what was his culture? He was not typically Surinamese, he answered to all the stereotypes of an American negroe of his day. Jimmy was a culturally hybrid criminal *avant la lettre*.” (4)

## **Amstel**

A culturally criminal hybrid *avant la lettre*? He almost makes it sound like a compliment. But I don’t think I find it reassuring that Jimmy was not “typically Surinamese” but answered to “all the stereotypes of an American negroe.” I look again at the reproduction of *On the terrace* which is rather dark. Before my eyes the man in the painting changes from a distinguished gentleman into a dark figure. Suddenly the clenched fist looks threatening. So do the leather gloves on the table. Before you know it he may pick them up and hit you across the face with them! What the caption, *Etniciteit, criminaliteit en het strafrecht* is not capable of conveying! The original title *On the terrace* on the other hand, suggests a languid summer holiday.

During my research for the biography of the painter of this work, the Amsterdam artist Nola Hatterman, I only rarely came across Jimmy’s name. And certainly not as a pimp or a criminal. I did read in *De eerste neger (The first negroe)* by journalist Rudie Kagie that contemporaries of Jimmy were accused of pimping. Names weren’t mentioned. (5) I only

heard a story about Jimmy. It is the anecdote Nola told her former pupil, foster son and darling Armand Baag. Nola allegedly was commissioned by the Amstel brewers to paint a distinguished gentleman who drinks a glass of Amstel beer on a terrace. Nola painted a distinguished black gentleman. Taken aback, the brewers are said to have cancelled the commission. The present owners of Amstel, Heineken, could not confirm the story. As I discovered, Nola had a rich imagination, but her story is certainly not inconceivable. Certainly not if you are mindful of the fact that advertisers identified black people mostly by the colour of their skin. **(6)** Foreign products such as coffee or cocoa but also intensely Dutch products such as stove polish and liquorice were introduced to the public with pictures of black men grinning from ear to ear. In advertisements for soap black skin was used gratefully to show us how a face can be scrubbed clean. A black consumer to recommend these products to the Dutch market? That would not have been proper! The number of black migrants – mostly Surinamese – was negligible and therefore was not an interesting target group for marketeers.

### **A name**

The anecdote exposed discrimination. Apparently, Nola said nothing about Jimmy himself that stuck in the minds of the people I spoke to about him. I suspect that Nola and Jimmy – who moved in the same social circles / who used to go out to the same clubs - must have met often. Maybe Jimmy was not one of her intimate friends. In any case, she did not give the canvas the name of the man she had portrayed, which she did do with the lost painting *Surinamer* (Frits Frezer) which appeared in the same year. For a long time it was unclear who the man in the outdoor café was. In reviews from the thirties he was called “negroe” or “man”. Only in 1999 he was given a name: Jimmy van der Lak. We have art historian Karin Söhngen to thank for this who chose the painting for the exhibition *Magie en Zakelijkheid – realistische schilderkunst in Nederland 1925-1945*. The catalogue of the same name for the first time made mention of his name. The painting, owned by the Stedelijk Museum, was loaned by the Amsterdam Historisch Museum until 2012. There Jimmy was regarded more or less as a model for the Surinamese newcomers who found work in sports, jazz and entertainment in the twenties and thirties.

Journalist Rudie Kagie had an interview with Jimmy six months before he died in 1990. Sixteen years later Jimmy told his story posthumously in the revised edition of *De eerste neger* (2006). Désiré Max Jules Constantijn van der Lak – better known as Jimmy van der Lak, alias Jimmy Lacky or Jimmy Lucky – was born in 1903 in Paramaribo. He was a descendant of the enslaved family from the sugar plantation Merveille (also known as Adjakka) by the Suriname river. **(7)** He told Kagie that his father was an architect and designed bridges. It seems very unlikely that Jimmy came from such a family, but anyway, when he was a little boy, Jimmy dreamed of faraway countries beyond the bridges and horizons. In an interview with *Elsevier* from 1970 he boasted about his dancing skills. The revue company of the American Louis Douglas which gave performances in Surinam, is said to have asked Jimmy to come with them on a tour to Trinidad. From there the company went to Europe. In Paris, Jimmy left the group for unclear reasons and boarded the train for Amsterdam. **(8)** To quote Albert Helman, pseudonym of the Surinamese writer Lou Lichtveld : “Memories are like shy birds that flit from roof to roof, hardly touching the tops and floating in the air again.” It is more likely that Jimmy left from Paramaribo as a stowaway on board motorship the Cottica. Anyway, the family card at the Stadsarchief Amsterdam shows that Jimmy van der Lak was registered in Amsterdam in 1926. As place where the person came from, Paramaribo is given, and not Paris. For profession or trade, servant was given, and not dancer. The dancing must have been of a later date.

### **Stowaway**

Jimmy was not the only one who crossed the ocean. At that time the most likely reason for the voyage to the Netherlands was study. In Surinam possibilities were limited. Students often came from the wealthy, light skinned Surinamese elite. The other group that came to the Netherlands consisted of seafaring men. And of course, fortune seekers like Jimmy. **(9)**

They may have been ridiculed in advertisements, but in the twenties and early thirties, in restaurants and bars and in the entertainment industry black people were much sought after. This was also the case in the art world. The Netherlands followed the lead of Paris. In the City of Light the interest in jazz and black culture that had come from Harlem in New York had developed into a veritable “negrofilia”. **(10)** The influence of African and Afro-American black culture became visible everywhere, in paintings,

photos, popular music, dance, literature, theatre, furniture design and in “negroe cabarets.” (11) Dutch painters were inspired as well. Most Surinamese people in Amsterdam knew each other. Soon the word went round that money could be made by being a painter’s model. From 1926 Surinamese and Antillian models posed for students at the Rijksacademie, other institutes of education and individual painters. (12) Nola met Jimmy through her private teacher Charles Haak. He must have been one of her first models. (13)

### Revue

In conformity with the style of the *Nieuwe Zakelijkheid* to which it is said to belong, *On the terrace* depicts attributes which tell us something about Jimmy’s function in daily life. (14) In the evening newspaper which lies open on the table we read advertisements for the light opera *Wenn der weisse Flieder wieder blüht*, and the revues *O, Yes Kitty*, *Hallo!* with Lou Bandy and Sonny Boy. It is quite possible that Jimmy figured or danced in one or maybe all of those productions. In the interview with *Elsevier* in 1970 he confirmed that he had been on stage in Carré with Lou Bandy. In other words, Jimmy had traded his servant’s work for the revues. Whether his clenched fist and leather gloves refer to his boxing career and the beer to his work as a waiter, I am not entirely sure.

I suspect that Jimmy left for Paris around 1930 to work as a waiter in the Dutch restaurant of Leo Faust, just behind Place Pigalle. It was famous for its Dutch dishes, served by Dutch waiters. As Bovenkerk suggests, it was in Paris that Jimmy allegedly smashed a café to smithereens and was deported from France. Anyway, in 1932 Jimmy returned to the Netherlands. In the spring he danced and sang in the revue *Blank en Bruin* by Willy Walden and Frits Schakels dressed to look like an African. (15) It is not entirely clear when his boxing career started. He learned to box in the Amsterdam boxing school De Jonge Bokser in Wagenstraat. Only in 1934 his name appears in *Het Vaderland* for the first time. In the newspaper of 9 February it is reported that Jimmy will resume his training, apparently after an interval. Not a month later on 8 March 1934 an announcement is made of an international boxing match in the Zoo in The Hague in which Jimmy Lucky will appear: “well-known negroe instructor from The Hague.” This referred to the fact that Jimmy had started a boxing school in The Hague at 54

Elandsstraat. Jimmy told Kagie that the match in the zoo was his last. Jimmy showed up in the ring drugged by Hoffmann drops which should have put him to sleep for his afternoon nap. "I took a terrible beating. The referee interfered and that was the end of my boxing career." **(16)** After this Jimmy found work as a waiter at the café restaurant De Sport in Scheveningen. The business ran like a train. Black Jimmy is said to have been a sight worth seeing. If he was not there, the owner might as well have closed the place. People accosted Jimmy in the streets. "Buses would stop. (...) I was an attraction." **(17)**

### **"Negroe cabarets"**

In Paris the craze was already on the wane, but in the Randstad "negroe clubs" shot up like mushrooms. Jimmy returned to Amsterdam and found work in the "Negro Kit Cat Club" in Wagenstraat, near to the school where he had played his first boxing matches. The "Negro Kit Cat Club" was extremely popular, as was the "Negro Palace". Black waiters served mixed drinks with exotic names such as Bamboo cocktail and East-Indian. Jimmy had been promoted to head waiter. While black jazz musicians, among whom the legendary Teddy Cotton and Kid Dynamite, blew the lungs out of their body, hot men and women whirled across the dance floor. Chief inspector of police Mr Versteeg observed it with concern. He was not partial to this music and compared a visit to the "Negro Kit Cat Club" with a visit to the zoo. "In that animals' paradise one may appreciate the antics of the apes. But in the Negro Kit Cat Club the performance of these human apes is disgusting to watch." **(18)** In the police file with the name "Negroe cabarets" which lies in the Stadsarchief, there is a letter by Versteeg in which he warns for the "negroes", with their unappetizing appearance and their sexual prowess. The Dutch girls certainly did not agree with the former and the latter may have been a reason for a visit to the clubs. There were complaints about immoral behaviour. One of those complaints, which was reported on 27 November 1936, concerned – yes, indeed – Jimmy van der Lack.

"On 21 November last a man who remains unknown reported to the Vice Squad by telephone that the head waiter Jimmy Lucky and the first waiter named Emanuel (...) made it their job to become acquainted with approximately eighteen-year-old women who visited the club, the Kit Cat Club. They would make an appointment with these women to wait for them when the club closed, around 1.30 A.M. The women would then

be taken to the rooms of the waiters, where all kinds of lechery would be committed. It may even have happened that a girl was dragged inside. The informant did not know the names of the girls.”

### **Blond Geertje**

On Friday 27 November 1936 the Vice Squad went to the Negro Kit Cat Club to size up the situation. They arrested two women: Hermina Burggraaf and her friend Geertruida de Boer, both eighteen years old. It turned out that blond Geertruida – called Geertje or Gray – was in love with Jimmy. When he was asked about it by the police, Jimmy denied having had sex with her. As a reason he stated he had marriage plans with her. There are two letters in the file written by Jimmy to Gray. In the second letter dated 19 November 1936 it appears that Gray had problems at home.

“Baby, however hard and miserable your life is at home, keep this in mind, there is someone, a boy who lives and feel for me and that is Jimmy. This thought alone may help ease the pain. Well, Gray, you know what we have agreed. Every afternoon from 1 until 2 I will be at the Cityhall. After that I will be at home until 4. You can always come to me.”

It does seem as if Gray did not consort with Jimmy entirely against her wishes. The most serious accusations against Jimmy came from the same anonymous source, which later turned out to be the Surinamese Frederik Willem Reigman, whose artist name was Kid Johnson. Reigman accused Jimmy of being the head of a Surinamese gang which was a threat to “numberless underage Dutch girls.” Members of the gang were said to be musicians and waiters who worked in the Negro Kit Cat Club. Some musicians who were mentioned were Walter Rens, Michael Hidalgo and Teddy Cotton. According to Reigman they were pimps who married girls to make prostitutes of them. It seems that rancour played a part here. Jimmy was said to have taken Reigman’s job as head waiter. The report that Jimmy had smashed the café of Leo Faust to smithereens, had been in jail for three months and had been deported in 1930/31 derived from Reigman.

### **Lechery**

What really happened, the file does not make clear. I did read however what Geertje de Boer told the police about Jimmy. On Tuesday 9-2-37 she confessed that after having

been arrested by the inspectors, she had continued to see Jimmy. She visited him in his house at 755 Prinsengracht. Eventually, Geertje admitted she had been intimate with Jimmy, but she denied having had sex with other men. The inspectors reported:

*“When we asked how she came by money, she declared she had worked as a mannequin three times, which had earned her thirty guilders. She refused to say for which firm she had worked, which is why we doubted the truth of her statement.”*

Geertje also stated that Jimmy has asked her for money in her house several times and that she had given him amounts varying from one guilder to two fifty.

“Also, when he asked for money, she had told him she had none. He would then search her purse and when he found money, he would give her a beating because she had lied to him. On one occasion he had struck her so hard across the face that she fell to the floor. That’s why she always gave him money, out of fear. She said her affection for him had cooled but she was afraid to stop seeing him because he had threatened he would maim her face if she did that. She also stated that she would leave the house at nine in the morning and only returned at midnight. The hours in between she would spend in Jimmy’s apartment and in dancings, among them La Gaité at Reguliersbreestraat, in Amsterdam. This case has been handed to the Vice Squad in Amsterdam.”

There is said to be a file in the possession of the Vice Squad which shows that Jimmy spent a couple of nights in a boarding house at 636 Prinsengracht with an underage girl he had met in the street and who then became a prostitute, according to the landlord.

### **Fired**

On Wednesday 31 March 1937 Jimmy was questioned himself: “without fixed profession, living at 387 Singel upstairs.” It is strange, but during this interview he states that he has lived in the Netherlands since 1931, which is demonstrably untrue. Perhaps he meant he had lived there before.

“I have lived in Holland since 1931. Before that I worked in Paris, Spain, Belgium and Germany as a waiter, a boxer, a dancer and a singer. I take on anything. From 1931 I



have had jobs like that in The Hague, Rotterdam and other big towns. In October 1936 I returned to Amsterdam. I also gave boxing lessons as well as dancing lessons and gymnastics.”

When the inspector asked if he had worked in a Dutch café in Paris, Jimmy flew into a rage.

“Now I understand who you have been talking to. I will stake my head on it if it is not Johnson [Reigman]. (...) Johnson is the biggest child rapist there is. Several girls have a child by him, but he is unconcerned. He is the biggest fraud there is.”

He did not understand that the police wanted to be informed by someone like that. It is true that Reigman’s conduct was not irreproachable. Jimmy walked out angrily. The inspector wrote down gloomily: “All my attempts to continue the interview failed. Van der Lak would not budge and refused to answer any further questions, which is the reason why there was not an extensive interview.” On account of the many complaints about immoral behaviour, the black staff of “negroe clubs” was fired.

### **Yes or no?**

Was Jimmy a pimp? When you read the reports, he does not seem to have been a good boy. However, as far as I know, Jimmy was never convicted. And apparently, the inspector did not try to interview him again. It is possible that he played the role of pimp for a while, but there is no hard evidence.

Does it really matter? It is tempting – and perhaps the power of imagination – to project present, past and future into it. The reports of the Vice Squad date from 1936-1937. *On the terrace* dates back to 1930.

From the descriptions, also by art historians, it would appear that the story behind the man in the painting seems to have become steadily more important. In the caption that the Stedelijk placed under *On the terrace* not only Jimmy is discussed but also Nola Hatterman, who claimed to feel like a ‘black person’ inside – maybe to get even with the colonial milieu in which she grew up. They are notes to dream about and give free reign to one’s fantasy. But are they important? Is the expressiveness of *On the terrace* not

mainly the work itself, and not the captions which try to capture the model and the motives of the painter in a portrait of an era.

In 1939, a reporter of the *Algemeen Handelsblad*, quite unaware of this, wrote carefree: “The large portrait of the man in front of his café is evidence of a profound degree of inner civilization and taste, both in its expression and its composition and colour combination.” **(19)**

Or like the young salesman in the bookshop of the Stedelijk, who knew exactly where Jimmy was to be seen, remarked: “Cool painting.”

[This article is an adaptation of the article that was published in 2009 on the website Researchlab *Black is beautiful*.]

*Ellen de Vries* is a researcher and author of *Nola – Portret van een eigzinnig kunstenaars (Portrait of a self-willed artist)* [www.nolahatterman.com](http://www.nolahatterman.com)  
[www.ellendevries.nl](http://www.ellendevries.nl)

## Literature

**Archer-Straw, Petrine** (2000). *Negrophilia, Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s*. New York: Thames & Hudson.

**Bovenkerk, Frank** (2009). *Etniciteit, criminaliteit en het strafrecht*. Den Haag: Boom Juridische uitgevers in samenwerking met het Willem Pompe Instituut voor Strafwetenschappen in Utrecht

**Cottaar, Annemarie** (2004), *Cornelis Kogeldans en Carmen van Vliet: Surinaamse modellen aan de Rijksacademie*, in: *De kunst van het overleven - Levensverhalen uit de twintigste eeuw*, uit de serie: *Cultuur en Migratie in Nederland*, (o.r.) Wim Willems. Den Haag: Sdu-Uitgevers.

**Haarnack, Carl en Schreuder, Esther** (2008), *Op het terras, Jimmy van der Lak*, p. 312-313, in: *Black is beautiful - Rubens tot Dumas, Kolfin, Elmer en Schreuder, Esther* (red.) (2008). Zwolle: Waanders Uitgevers.

**Kagie, Rudie** (2006). *De eerste neger*. Amsterdam: Mets & Schilt

**Nederveen Pieterse, Jan** (1990). *Wit over zwart - beelden van Afrika en zwarten in de westerse populaire cultuur*. Amsterdam: Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen

*Oostindie, Gert en Maduro, Emy* (1986). *In het land van de overheerser II - Antillianen*

en Surinamers in Nederland 1634/1667-1954. Leiden: Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde

**Schreuder, Esther** (2008), Afrika in het onderbewuste 1920-1960, p 317, in: Black is beautiful - Rubens tot Dumas, Kolfin, Elmer en Schreuder, Esther (red.) (2008). Zwolle: Waanders Uitgevers.

**Söhngen, Karin** (1999), De thematiek van het nieuwe realisme, het eerherstel der genres p.61-88. In: Magie en zakelijkheid, realistische schilderkunst in Nederland 1925-1945, Blotkamp, Carel en Koopmans, Ype (or). Zwolle: Waanders Uitgevers

**Vries, Ellen de** (2e herziene druk 2009). Nola - Portret van een eigenzinnig kunstenaars. Amersfoort: Klapwijk en Keijzers Uitgevers.

### Footnotes

- 1 The description runs: “Most of the Surinamese who emigrated to the Netherlands in the twenties and thirties ended up in the entertainment business or in sports. This happened to Jimmy van der Lak (stage name Jimmy Lucky) who had been born in Paramaribo in 1903. After a stay in Paris he came to Amsterdam where he worked as a boxer, a singer, a tapdancer and an actor. He was also head waiter at the Negro Kit Cat Club in Wagenstraat, until in 1937 at the instigation of chief commissioner Versteeg all the black staff of the “negroe cabarets” was fired after complaints about the seduction of Dutch girls.”
- 2 Bovenkerk, 2009
- 3 Bovenkerk, 2009:28
- 4 “Meten en benoemen,” (measuring and identifying), interview with Frank Bovenkerk, by Janny Groen and Annieke Kranenberg, *Volkskrant* 6 June 2009.
- 5 Kagie, 2006:106-115
- 6 Nederveen Pieterse, 1990:198-199
- 7 Schreuder and Haarnack, 2008:313
- 8 “Het hart op de tong,” (One’s heart on one’s sleeve) – interview with Jimmy van der Lak by Frits van der Molen, in *Elsevier* 10 January 1970
- 9 East Indies and Maduro, 1986: p 26 and further, p 45 and further
- 10 The Harlem Renaissance is referred to: a cultural movement of self-confident black writers, musicians, artists, activists and politicians in the New

York district of Harlem which existed until 1929. See Archer-Straw, 2000: 159  
and further

11 Archer-Straw, 2000: 9-16

12 Cottaar: 2004:67

13 De Vries, 2009:45

14 Haarnack and Schreuder: 2008:313

15 Kagie, 2006:84

16 Kagie, 2006:84-85

17 Ibidem

18 Kagie, 2006:110

19 In *Algemeen Handelsblad* (evening newspaper) 8 March 1939