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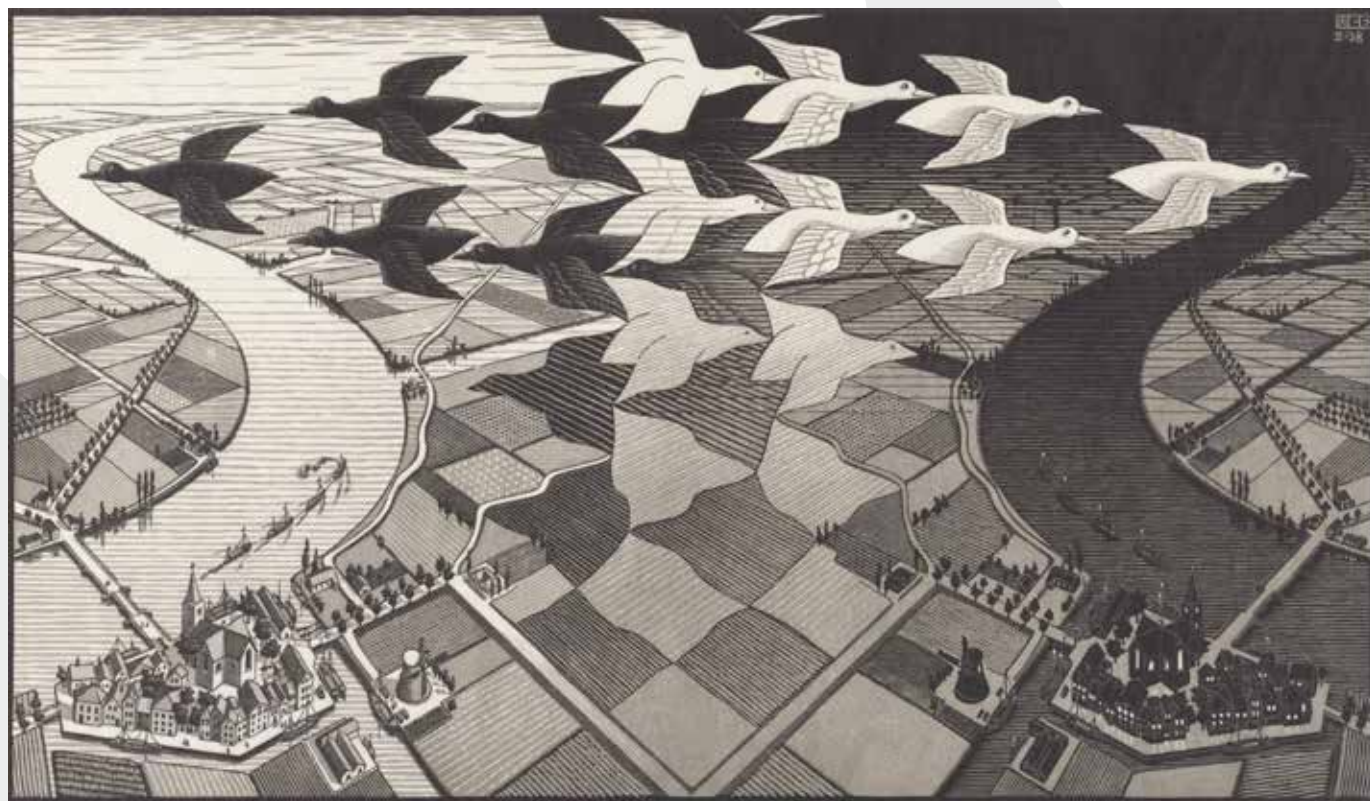
The Netherlands
Connecting with Escher

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Connecting with Escher

Leeuwarden in Friesland, a province in the north of the Netherlands, is European Capital of Culture for 2018, which makes it a perfect time to focus on the city. What many might not know is that Leeuwarden was home to one of the world's most famous artists, M.C. Escher. Isa Hemphrey makes the connections

When M.C. Escher was a child he liked to play a game. He would take two totally unrelated subjects and try to create a logical connection. For example, how would you connect a rose to a train, or a duck to a hammer? This year, his hometown of Leeuwarden holds the title of the European Capital of Culture and is celebrating its heritage and its famous residents like Escher. Yet, in reality, the artist barely lived here after he was five. But what would happen if we played his game and took mental

leaps to discover the hidden links, however obscure, between Leeuwarden and M.C. Escher?

Escher's story begins not only in Leeuwarden, but also in a palace. He was born on 17 June 1898 in the former royal residence of Maria Louise van Hessen-Kassel (1688-1765), Princess consort of Orange. The palace, now the Prinsessehof National Museum of Ceramics, had by this time been separated into apartments of which the middle one belonged to Escher's father, George Arnold. On the cusp of the 20th century, Leeuwarden was a peaceful city. The canals were packed with boats

Above: M.C. Escher's *Day and Night* (1938)
© The M.C. Escher Company, B.V.

Right, top to bottom: The Fries Museum; The Prinsessehof National Museum of Ceramics; M.C. Escher's woodcut engraving *Nocturnal Rome: Small Churches, Piazza Venezia* (1934)
© The M.C. Escher Company, B.V.

bearing goods from other cities, factories churned out dairy and agricultural products, and horses and oxen were traded at the cattle market. During the hot summers, many of Leeuwarden's elite left the city due to the stench of the canals. George Arnold Escher also moved when circumstances changed; his occupation as a hydro-mechanical engineer dictated where he and his family lived. In 1903, he took his wife Sara and his five sons, of which Maurits was the youngest, and left for Arnhem around 85 miles south. Unlike Leeuwarden's elite, the Eschers would never return.

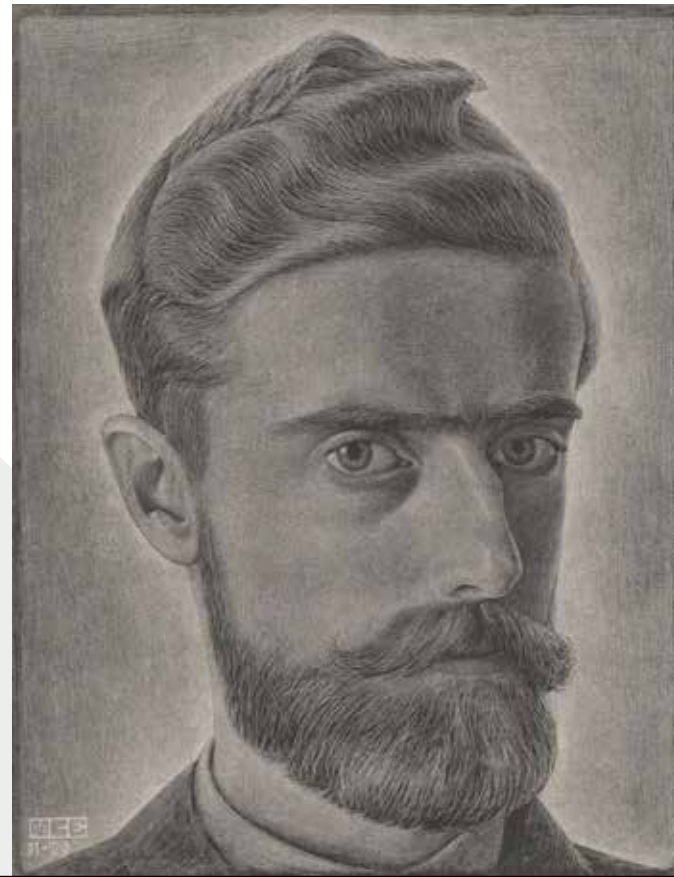
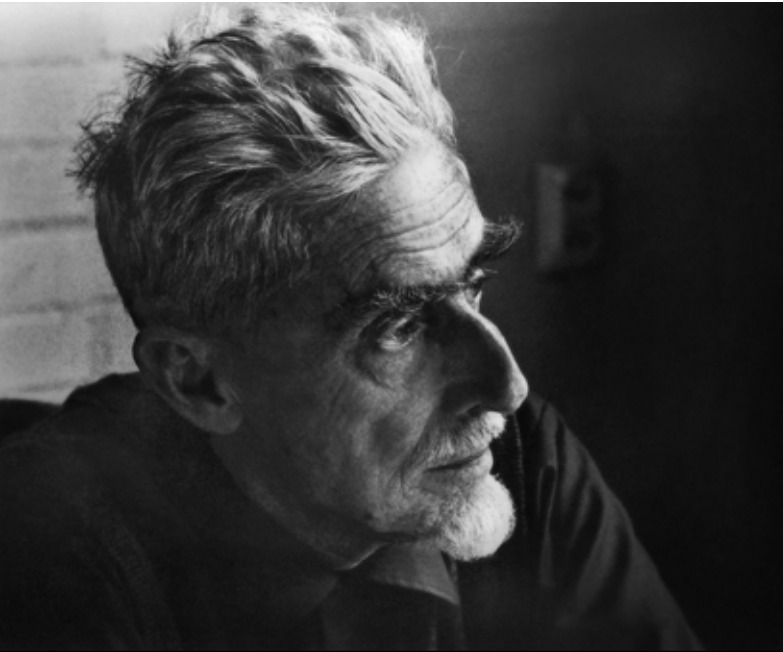
This is where Escher's relationship with the province of Friesland might seem to end. At the Fries Museum in Leeuwarden, their current exhibition *Escher's Journey* makes it very clear that it was Escher's travels outside of the Netherlands that moulded him significantly as an artist. The country's signature flat horizon, while a convenience for Dutch cyclists, seemed restrictive to him. But could a parallel be made between Escher and the Dutch landscape, albeit an unconscious one? Could we play Escher's childhood association game and find a connection?

Escher created his first graphic work in 1916, a linocut print of his father. This technique involves carving into linoleum with a v-shaped chisel or sharp knife. The parts you do not carve are covered in ink and will show up on paper when pressed, while the indents will appear white. Eventually he progressed to woodcut printing, which is a similar process. This process has comparisons with the geography of his home country. Without engineering feats like dams, canals and floodgates, cities like Amsterdam could be underwater. A graphic artist will carve into a piece of linoleum or wood to dictate where ink will show on the page, like one would dig a canal to dictate what land stays dry and prospers. Both processes are ways in which carving into a flat surface will create a place, or an idea, that could not be there before. Otherwise they will disappear, either underwater or into a black inky abyss.

Exploration

Escher travelled regularly from the Netherlands after studying at the School for Architecture and Decorative Arts in Haarlem under his mentor Samuel Jessurun de Mesquita. He was a keen



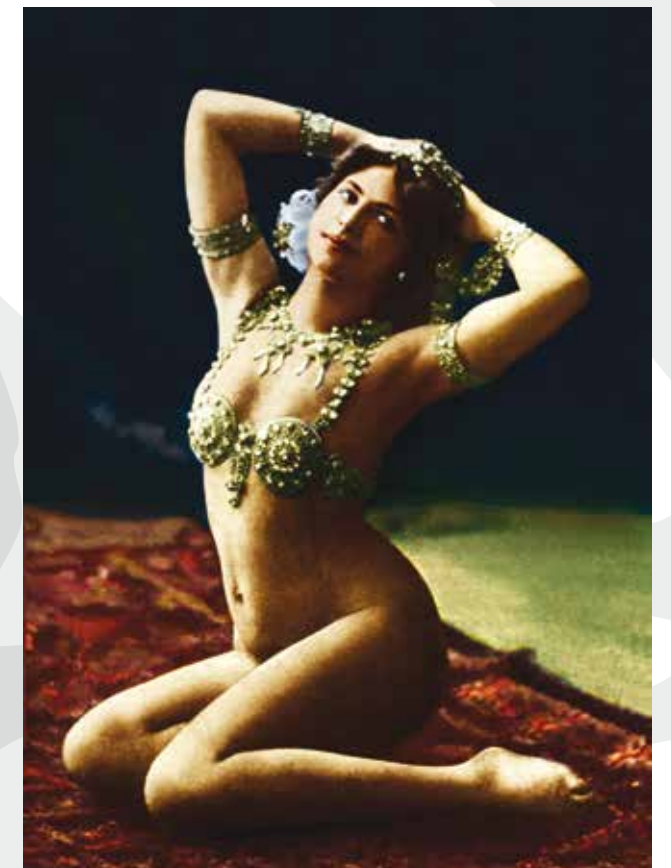
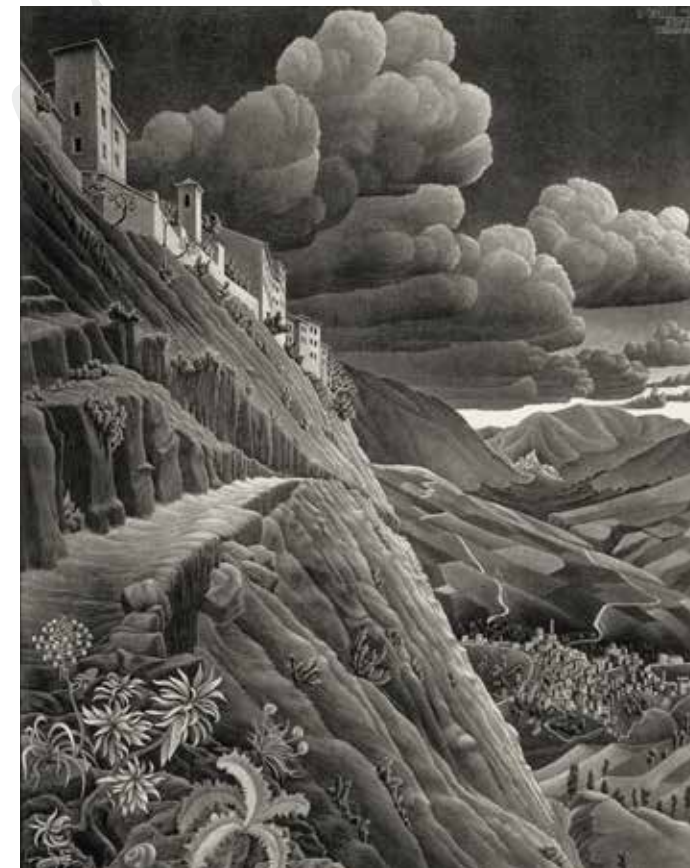


explorer, a yearning shared by other former Leeuwarden residents. Metalsmith Dirk van Erp (1862-1933) journeyed to Alaska during the Klondike Gold Rush to find his fortune. When he did not strike gold, he moved to California to master a less precious metal: copper. Joachim van Plettenberg (1739-1793), Governor of the Cape of Good Hope, a governorate of the Dutch East India Company, made voyages to determine the borders of the Cape Colony and supported the exploration of southern Africa. Escher never travelled this far, but in 1922 he boarded a vessel and ended up in Rome the following year.

If Escher were to see Leeuwarden today, he would discover a city brimming with diversity. In a population of over 108,000, over 28 different nationalities reside here and a multitude of languages are spoken including the Frisian dialect. Judith Spijksma, curator of the *Escher's Journey* exhibition, thinks that Escher did not feel an affinity with the Frisian culture. He instead immersed himself in Italy and Corsica, and took long journeys to study the countryside through drawings and photography and recreated it in prints and lithographs.

There is a permanent exhibition of the artist's work at 'Escher in Het Paleis' in The Hague.

Escher's change was not as outwardly provocative as Mata Hari. To survive as an artist, he decided to explore mental imagery after beholding the mosaics of the Moorish palace of Alhambra and the Mezquita in Córdoba. "He started to look more inward at how the mind works and how perception works"



Top, far left:
Portrait M.C. Escher
© The M.C. Escher
Company, B.V.

Top, left: M.C.
Escher's *Self-Portrait* (1929) ©
The M.C. Escher
Company, B.V.

Left: *A Dedication to Bacchus* (1889)
by Lawrence
Alma-Tadema

Above, left:
M.C. Escher's
Castrovalva (1930)
© The M.C. Escher
Company, B.V.

Above, right:
Mata Hari in Fries Museum © NBTC

Their comparative studies between his prints and photos of the Italian landscape bear noticeable differences. For example, in his woodcut of *Bonifacio, Corsica* (1928), the curvature of the cliff has been far more exaggerated in the print to direct the viewer's gaze upwards. In the lithograph *Castrovalva, Abruzzi* (1930), Escher exaggerated the steepness of the hillside. In *The Bridge* (1930), Escher stated that this scene was a fantasy built up from elements he witnessed in nature. It seems he wanted to evoke his experience and memory of Italy and France rather than simply recreating it.

A similar approach was made by Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836-1912), a painter of scenes of the Roman Empire who spent his youth in Leeuwarden. Alma-Tadema visited the ancient archaeological sites of Pompeii and Herculaneum and, like Escher, took photos as references for his work.

Some ancient items he discovered in his travels appeared in multiple paintings, like a decorative silver jug that appeared in *An Audience at Agrippa's* (1875), *A Bath* (1879), *A Silent Greeting* (1889) and *A Dedication to Bacchus* (1889). His exquisite depictions of the Roman Empire formed the aesthetic of many Hollywood films including *Ben-Hur*, *Cleopatra* and *Gladiator*. Escher's work has also been used in feature-length films like *Labyrinth* and *Inception*.

Reinvention

Escher's time in Italy bore many fruits, but eventually he was forced to leave as fascism became more prevalent there. His piece *Nocturnal Rome: Small Churches, Piazza Venezia* (1934) was exhibited at the Dutch Historical Institute in Rome, yet not long after its creation Mussolini addressed a crowd from a balcony at the square Escher depicted. This was a pivotal time for Escher. He took his wife and children to Switzerland, but found nowhere near the same inspiration in its snow-capped mountains. "When the landscape did not interest him that much anymore, an important source of inspiration was not available anymore," says Spijksma. "So, he needed something new."

On the Over de Kelders in Leeuwarden there is a small statue of Mata Hari, one of the city's most famous residents. After a divorce from her unhappy marriage in 1902, Hari was left without the Dutch high-class connections she had made and eventually gave away custody of her child. Like Escher, Hari had to reinvent herself. She moved to Paris and became an immensely popular entertainer and transformed exotic dancing into an art form. In many photos of her, she is beautifully draped in jewels and pearls.

Escher's change was not as outwardly provocative as Mata Hari. To survive as an artist, he



decided to explore mental imagery after beholding the mosaics of the Moorish palace of Alhambra and the Mezquita in Córdoba. “He started to look more inward at how the mind works and how perception works,” says Spijksma. A similar transition happened to Leeuwarden. For many centuries, Leeuwarden was close enough to the Middle Sea to trade with other countries. But when the Middle Sea silted up in the 13th century, Leeuwarden lost its ability to trade by sea and was forced to adapt and start trading locally. According to the Historisch Centrum Leeuwarden (HCL), the city became an important trading centre of crafts for the surrounding areas.

Seamless connections

It was amongst the mosaics of the Alhambra that Escher was inspired to pursue tessellations in his work. A tessellation is a pattern made up of shapes that repeat and join seamlessly. Perhaps his most astonishing feat is *Metamorphosis II* (1939-40), an almost four-metre tessellation starting with a checker board that transitions to lizards, to bees, to fish, to birds, to the city of Atrani, to a chess board, and then back to a checker board. Where Escher had previously dabbled in mental associations as

a child, through this woodcut he proved that any number of things, no matter how far apart they may seem, can be visually connected.

Within a short walk from the Prinsessehof National Museum of Ceramics there is a mural of Maria Louise van Hessen-Kassel and her husband John William Friso alongside their extensive family tree. Along the bottom are small portraits of European monarchs, from Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain to King Felipe VI of Spain. The purpose of the mural is to illustrate that, through a series of arranged marriages and unfortunate deaths, both Van Hessen-Kassel and Friso are the most common recent ancestors of every monarch in Europe. While Escher found a way to visually morph lizards to bees, Leeuwarden’s royalty managed to intertwine themselves with all the monarchies of Europe.

In Escher’s tessellation *Air and Water I* (1938), black birds in a white sky transition to white fish swimming in a black sea. The connection between water and air in Friesland also inspired Jaume Plensa’s recent fountain sculpture in Leeuwarden outside the train station. After witnessing the mist over the Frisian fields, the Spanish artist created a mist effect to shroud his marble and resin heads of a boy and girl for the *uFountains* international art project.

Above:
Leeuwarden, joint
Capital of
Culture 2018

Right, top:
Fountain in
Leeuwarden by
Spanish artist
Jaume Plensa
as part of the
uFountains
project

**Right: Mural of
Maria Louise
van Hessen-
Kassel & John
William Friso in
Leeuwarden**

All images:
© NBTC



At the Fries Museum’s *Phantom Limb* exhibition is Matthijs Munnik’s installation *Luminal* (2016). The exhibition, beginning with Escher’s words: ‘I could not resist fooling around with our established certainties’, explores how we experience reality and how our brain connects to what we see and hear.

For *Luminal*, one steps into a smooth spherical room bathed in coloured lights to create the feeling of standing in an infinite void. “To see depth, we need something to focus on. If our eyes can’t focus on anything we can’t establish what depth is. It’s a very simple way in how our body is limited and we can use that to create different experiences of reality,” says Eelco van der Lingen, curator of the *Phantom Limb* exhibition. In a similar way to *Luminal*, Escher’s *Day and Night* (1938) shows that the human brain is unable to perceive both backgrounds and foregrounds at the same time. One can only either look at the black birds or the white birds; not both.

Strange structures

For Escher, drawing was an illusion. In many of his prints he tried to overcome the flatness of the paper, like in his lithograph *Balcony* (1945) where it looks like the Maltese coastal city is bulging out of the paper. “It must have been an incredible opening for him to know that on a flat plain you can do so much more than what is possible in reality,” says Spijksma. On Leeuwarden’s flat horizon, the early inhabitants had no canals or dams to protect them from the water. Instead, the original settlers built three artificial hills, or *terpen*, to keep themselves dry.

The first mound, called Oldehove, was built around 100 CE and gradually grew in size to accommodate a large farm. There is no evidence that Escher was inspired by his hometown’s founding when he created *Balcony*, but there is undoubtedly a common goal to conquer flatness whether that be of the land or a sheet of paper. A modern example in Leeuwarden is the Slauerhoffbrug, a bascule bridge that lifts a 2,500-square-feet section of road into the air to allow traffic of the Harlinger Vaart River to pass. Raised and lowered ten times a day, the underside of the dissected section of bridge has been painted



blue and yellow like the city's flag. It is possibly the only bridge in the world to move the road in such a way and, like Escher's prints, it manipulates a structure in a way that seems improbable.

Creating such structures requires an advanced understanding of perspective, something Escher experimented with great complexity in his architectural prints. Like the pioneers of the Cubist movement, Escher's lithograph *Relativity* (1953) plays with simultaneous perspectives. A multitude of stairs intertwine upside down and right-side up seemingly in one room as faceless figures walk up and down the steps, some defying gravity. Escher took his architecture studies and created impossible structures in his prints, such as *Belvedere* (1958), *Waterfall* (1961) and *Ascending and Descending* (1960). The latter

shows a square staircase atop a tower that a line of figures appear to be climbing continuously. By manipulating perspective, Escher has created a structure that seems impossible. Yet Leeuwarden has its own seemingly impossible tower: the Oldehove. The 39-metre-high tower leans to one side by two metres and is slightly curved from architect Cornelis Frederiks' attempts to correct it. Yet this symbolic tower has been standing since construction was abandoned in 1533.

Escher described his *Ascending and Descending* staircase as a 'rather sad, pessimistic subject, as well as being very profound and absurd' because climbing it seems to get the figures nowhere. Yet Leeuwarden embraces the imperfect Oldehove, which has a glass viewing platform, with a great sense of pride. This echoes their Capital of Culture



2018 mantra of 'Dare to be Different', no doubt something an artist who challenged our idea of reality would also celebrate.

Creative inspiration

There are many more links to be made between M.C. Escher and Leeuwarden, some justifiable, others obscure. We could link Escher's lithograph *Drawing Hands* (1948) with Leeuwarden resident Jeronimus Cornelisz, who was the ringleader of one of the bloodiest mutinies in history and had both his hands cut off before being hanged for his crimes. Despite the connections we make, it cannot change the reality that Escher seemed to have few direct connections with his hometown as an adult.

But Leeuwarden does not seem to view this as a tragedy, and the city is taking steps to invest in talent development and cultural education. In other words, they want to inspire the local youth and encourage creative residents to stay. Organisation, We The North, for example, is trying to improve cultural policies by the Dutch government with collaboration from multiple provinces including Friesland. As Deputy Mayor of Leeuwarden Sjoerd Feitsma explains, to make a city extra special you need to create a 'buzz' and

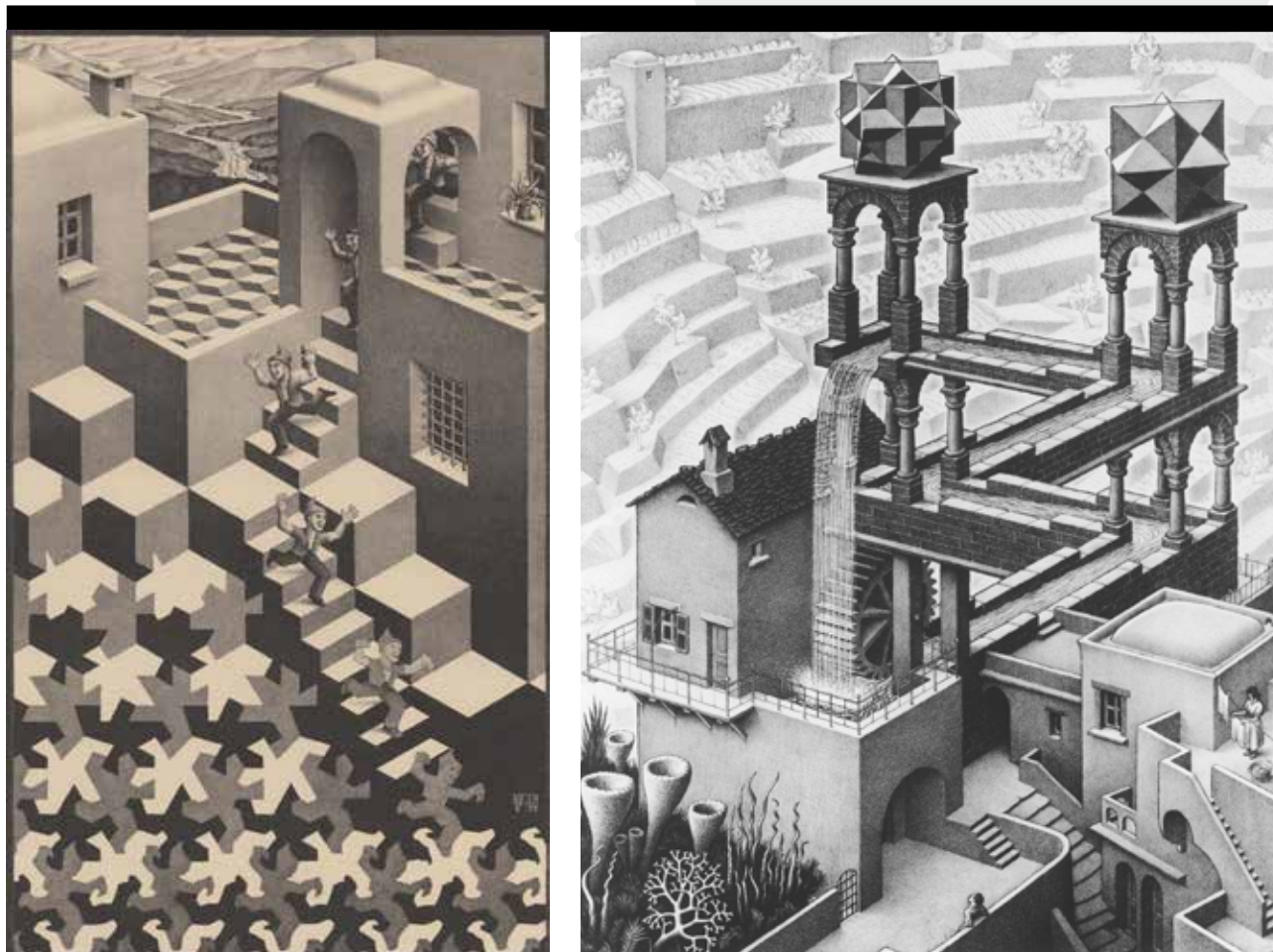
have people, like artists, capable of looking at their surroundings in a different way.

One can only guess at what kind of artist Escher would have been had he stayed in the Netherlands, or even Friesland. For now, his legacy serves his hometown by helping it shine as a beacon of culture in Europe. The discussed links between his life and work and Leeuwarden are fascinating and astonishing when discovered, despite the fact that they are limited. But the benefits of his association as a tool for inspiring the locals and creatives could be huge for this small city. It has to be, because when asked what happens when a place loses its creative community, Feitsma simply responds: "Death". ●

Far left: M.C. Escher's *Cycle* (1938) © The M.C. Escher Company, B.V.

Left: M.C. Escher's *Waterfall* (1961) © The M.C. Escher Company, B.V.

Above: Leeuwarden at night. Image: © NBTC



Escher's Journey is on at The Fries Museum, Leeuwarden, until 28 October and *Phantom Limb* until 6 January 2019.

For more information see www.friesmuseum.nl/en/
For more information about events around Leeuwarden as European Capital of Culture see www.friesland.nl/en/european-capital-of-culture

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