

Opening speech by Wim van Saarloos, Academy President, at the awards ceremony for the 2018 Descartes-Huygens Prize, Amsterdam, 5 February 2019

Monsieur l'Ambassadeur, Excellence,
Mesdames et Messieurs, très chers lauréats,

C'est avec beaucoup de joie que je vous souhaite la bienvenue ici au Trippenhuis à Amsterdam.

Surtout bienvenue à vous, monsieur Lalliot, ambassadeur de France aux Pays-Bas. C'est un grand honneur de vous accueillir ici pour la remise du Prix Descartes-Huygens.

Et bien sûr également bienvenue aux lauréats d'aujourd'hui: Mme Katell Lavéant et Mme Marine Cotte. Nous sommes très fiers de vous avoir parmi nous et nous nous réjouissons de passer ce moment extraordinaire avec vous.

Contrairement à ce que vous pourriez attendre après ce début de mon discours, je continuerai en anglais. Ce sera un après-midi bilingue aujourd'hui: il y aura des discours en français ainsi qu'en anglais. Un bel exercice donc pour vos compétences linguistiques!

Ladies and gentlemen,

Imagine you are strolling around Amsterdam one fine summer's day in sixteen thirty-four [1634] and you find yourself near Westerkerk, still a new church then. You might very well have come across René Descartes on your walk. At that point in his life, he resided at number six Westermarkt. Descartes loved the climate of freedom in the Netherlands. '*Quel autre pays où l'on puisse jouir d'une liberté si entière,*' he wrote to a friend. These words were inscribed on the gable stone of his house in Westermarkt; we can still read them there today.

Thirty years later, a walk around the streets of Paris might find you bumping into Christiaan Huygens. He lived there for quite a long while and worked as the research director *avant la lettre* for the Académie des Sciences, founded in sixteen sixty-six

[1666]. Huygens, in his turn, felt perfectly at home in the cultural and academic circles of Paris.

Huygens admired Descartes the scientist, with whom he had become familiar thanks to his father Constantijn. History is silent as to whether they ever met in person. But it is splendid to think that the prize we are awarding today brings them – and us – together.

Descartes and Huygens symbolise the principles that our prize is meant to promote.

- They were both keen, independent thinkers who devoted their lives to science, and whose work brought progress and enlightenment to society.
- They looked beyond the boundaries of their field; they were pioneers of interdisciplinary research and united ideas from science and technology, the social sciences, and the humanities.
- They also looked beyond their national borders. Not only did both men live abroad for many years, but they were both also members of a flourishing network of scientists stretching the length and breadth of Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today we are honouring two talented young scientists who are following in the footsteps of Descartes and Huygens. They are both women – an occurrence with only a single precedent in the history of this prize, in 2013, and something that would have been almost unthinkable in the days of Descartes and Huygens, when most scientists were male. Fortunately, times have changed.

Katell Lavéant and Marine Cotte are outstanding, original thinkers and doers who use their work for the advancement of science and society.

Like Descartes and Huygens, they look beyond the boundaries of their profession and the borders of their country.

Moreover, through their work they have also helped to consolidate Franco-Dutch scientific cooperation, one of the main objectives of this prize, which was established in 1995.

How can winning this prize help to further cooperation between our two countries? Let me give you an example, drawn from my own life.

Imagine that you're strolling around Paris some twenty years ago.

You might very well have come across a Dutch physicist on your walk, still a young man in those days. That fellow was me. In 1998, I myself was the recipient of the Descartes-Huygens Prize, and I spent the subsequent year working in France at regular intervals.

I expected to be the toast of science after receiving this award. That turned out to be a fantasy and it's a lesson I'd like to share with Katell and Marine: even after winning a prize like this one, you have to take the initiative, seek out new contacts, and build on your existing alliances. If you do, however, the prize can then serve to 'grease the wheels' of scientific cooperation between our two countries.

That was important when Descartes and Huygens were alive, but it is equally important in today's Europe. Young scientists do not have an easy time of it. The climate for science can be bleak at times. Trust in authorities and official bodies is waning and science is suffering the same fate. It is up to us to prove that science is not just an opinion.

We must explain, time and again and in the clearest possible terms, what science is and what we do with our results.

We must take a critical look at ourselves and act with integrity.

To do this, we scientists in Europe urgently need each other. We can win and retain trust, but only if we work together, if we set a good example of relevant research, and if we assist and support one another.

I hope that the Descartes-Huygens Prize will, once again, help us to achieve these aims.

I would like to wish today's laureates, Katell Lavéant and Marine Cotte, all the best as they pursue their important work.

I hope that they will continue to look beyond boundaries and borders, and that the Descartes-Huygens Prize will provide encouragement and support in their endeavours.

I'm very much looking forward to an interesting meeting, so I would now like to turn the floor over to His Excellency Mssr. Philippe Lalliot, the Ambassador of France to the Netherlands.