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03 Perfectly preserved Amsterdam

Jasper Andries pulls up in front of Amsterdam's newly opened Viscafé De Gouden Hoek (The Golden Corner) on a custom-made cargo bike. He adjusts his beret, opens his blue toolbox, takes out a tub of ochre-white paint and begins to trace his brush across the glass, creating the curling, gregarious angles of the traditional Amsterdamse Krulletter. This lettering was once common in neighbourhoods such as Jordaan and De Pijp. "It's the oldest way to advertise," says the bearded illustrator-turned-sign-painter. "The challenge with the Krulletter is getting the balance right."

Typically associated with the city's brown cafés on whose windows it started to appear in the 1940s, the Krulletter was fathered by Jan Willem Joseph Visser. Bars across Amsterdam bear his signage, from the city's oldest tavern Café Karpershoek to the wood-panelled Café Hegeraad. Over the years, many of the ornate letters have worn off or been replaced; no one seemed to understand their value until sign-painter Leo Beukeboom came along. Then he took over where Visser left off, touching up or adding to the old master's work on Heineken's payroll; it had been the Dutch brewery's way of advertising.

"I just needed to see the letters, get the rhythm and the feeling, then I could do it," says Beukeboom as he explains his method for reviving the Krulletter in the 1970s. "I'd stand outside the window painting my letters and inside there would be 50 people drinking beer. They would think I was only paying attention to my letters but I'd see everything. I watched them watch me."

When Beukeboom retired in 2003 the Krulletter's fate hung in the balance. That's when another champion, Ramiro Espinoza, stepped forward. "The letters quickly caught my attention when I moved to Amsterdam," says the Argentinian type



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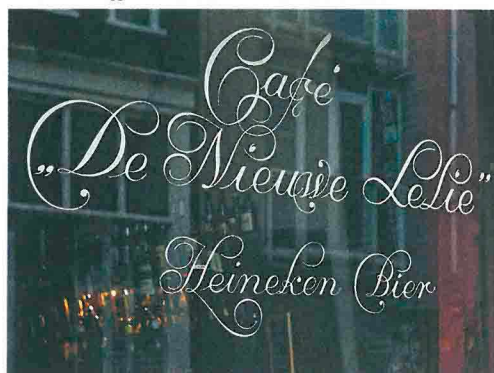
designer and author of *De Amsterdamse Krulletter* as he passes the overgrown sign at Café T Smalle, where he first encountered the style. "The more I discovered, the more I felt the responsibility to keep this tradition alive. These things make the city unique."

Espinoza tracked down Beukeboom and spent hours delving through archives. He found that this particular script was inspired by the late *cancellaresca* style – which calligraphers practised during the 17th-century Dutch Golden Age – as documented in a book by engraver Pieter van Looy Jr that Visser came across in his father's workshop. "The letters Visser created bear the distinctive features of the Baroque quill," says Espinoza. "They've resisted the test of time and have been appropriated by Amsterdam's citizens as a true expression of their culture." — *MSS*

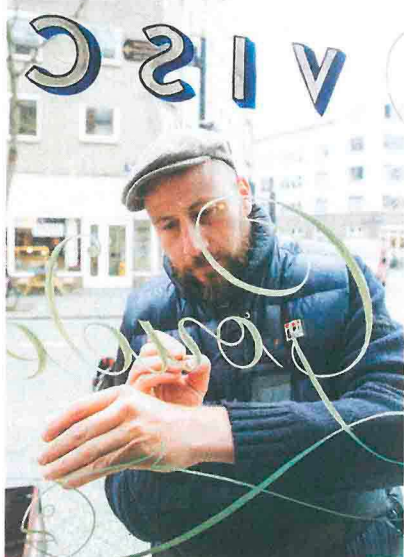
Write on

The Krulletter is not the only letter style synonymous with Amsterdam: even more prominent is the Amsterdamse Brugletter. Created for the city and modelled on the 20th-century Amsterdam School movement, steel nameplates bearing Brugletters adorn hundreds of bridges across the capital. Yet unlike the Krulletter, this style's inventor remains a mystery. And while the curly letter's future is cloudy at best, the city is invested in upholding the bridge lettering that's deemed a national heritage.

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