

THURSDAY, APRIL 22, 2021 HET PAROOL

David Hielkema

Profile Amsterdam Fashion Institute

Tough fashion school with a 'status aparte'

The AMFI is the largest fashion school in the Netherlands. It accepts 430 students each year and has about 1200 applications.

The Amsterdam Fashion Institute (AMFI) has received negative coverage in recent months. Students have described a culture based on fear. Nevertheless, it has been one of the most popular fashion schools for years.

Fashion schools adhere to traditional practices: tearing students down and building them back up again. Inherent in the fashion world, according to teacher Carlo Wijnands (58), but the difference is that it used to be accepted and the stories were kept under wraps. 'Students now share it on social media, where discontent is quickly fanned.'

Wijnands taught regularly at the AMFI between 2002 and 2018. He saw the fashion school grow from a relatively unknown programme to one of international renown. The past year, the programme mainly made the news when (former) students spoke out about an unsafe culture at the school.

The first reports came out last June after the school voiced its solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. Hypocritical, students wrote, reminding the school that white students were given preferential treatment and that teaching material featured stereotypical images of black people.

The second wave of criticism broke out in response to an article about MOAM founder Martijn N. in *Het Parool* and *NRC*. N. is accused of sexual misconduct by 28 men. A former student of the AMFI, the fashion designer was almost expelled several times but was still connected to the programme as an examiner until last year. In response to the allegations, the AMFI wrote that it was shocked and that it highly valued 'a safe learning environment for everyone.' Hypocritical, students wrote again, for it certainly did not feel safe. Additionally, numerous students reported that they had suffered from burnout, depression or fear of failure at AMFI.

International appeal

The AMFI is the largest fashion school in the Netherlands. It admits 430 students each year and has about 1,200 applications. The programme came into being in 1992 following a merger between the higher technical school for textile manufacturing Mr. Koetsier and the private fashion school Charles Montaigne. Designers, buyers and textile technicians (specializing in mass production of clothing) were to be educated together. 'In this way, the school hopes to close the gap between the three disciplines,' *NRC* wrote in 1992. Ten years later, it was renamed AMFI and a bachelor's–master's system was introduced.

At the time of the merger in 1992, the AMFI joined forces with the HvA. As a result, overarching rules applied: unlike art academies, the AMFI was not allowed to 'select' students. AMFI did 'advise': after an assignment, an interview and an assessment, students would be told whether they were suitable for the programme.

For the AMFI, this meant that there were fewer talented students among the applicants. Former student Gijske Krijgsman (38) also saw this in her class, and she does not consider herself a 'natural'. Before she started the programme, she was told it would be tough. She regularly pulled all-nighters and recognises the stories of crying classmates. Nevertheless, she has fond memories

of AMFI, where she graduated in 2005. 'I also felt humiliated in class. Now I see that I was just being assessed.'

Personal criticism

In 2006, Liesbeth in 't Hout (69), a graduate of the Design Academy Eindhoven, becomes director of the school. Led by In 't Hout, AMFI starts a magazine, opens a clothing store on the Spui, organizes fashion shows, has students participate in fashion and art contests, and sustainable fashion becomes an even more important pillar of the programme. She also successfully argues for a smaller programme—'Individuality should come first, not the financial interests of the HvA,'—and 330 students are admitted instead of 430.

The AMFI was on the rise, but alumni report that the learning environment was unsafe during that period as well. In 't Hout calls the now circulating reports 'horrifying' but also thinks the comments deserve some nuance. 'With 1,200 students in-house, things happen from time to time that can be quite unpleasant,' she says. Also, 'personal criticism' is a sensitive matter, according to her. 'You are what you create; that is how students see it. Criticism from teachers is part of it. You cannot teach without it.'

In 2010, the HvA management wants In 't Hout to leave. The HvA wants to centralize; the AMFI wants to maintain a 'status aparte'. In response, the advisory board of the AMFI makes its seats available. It is feared that 'the unique character' of the programme will be lost. 'Now that the AMFI finally has a proper director, one with vision, it has become about power and egos within the HvA,' said Roland Kahn, a member of the AMFI advisory board at the time, in *Het Parool*. After protests from students and teachers, In 't Hout stayed on for another year, and the AMFI retained a separate status within the HvA with its own board of directors. However, In 't Hout was the last director with a background in fashion.

In the years that follow, the AMFI features on lists of the world's best fashion schools and its alumni win prestigious fashion awards. But the school seems unable to grow with the needs of its students. Anna van der Velde (24), student between 2014 and 2019: 'The feedback was harsh, sometimes fair, but also often merciless. The teachers then justified it under the guise of 'preparing you for the fashion world'.'

Lola Vogels (24) concurs. 'Pulling an all-nighter and getting criticized can be a part of it, but not when it leads to anxiety. If you know you have a safe environment for failure, you can learn from it. Now it adds unnecessary stress.'

Joep Janmaat (27) graduated in 2020 and remembers the first year with a 'hazing-like energy'. 'Many classmates cried almost daily during the first six months when they came home at the end of the day.' The pressure was high and you just had to find a way to prove yourself, he says. 'The institute allowed little time to come to your senses between projects. One project was hardly finished or you were already on to the next.'

Janmaat witnessed AMFI taking first steps toward change in the last few years. The study programme changed in 2019 and the three tracks—management, branding and design—have become less defined. Students are now allowed to switch tracks in the first year, allowing less talented designers to pursue a degree in product management, for example.

Suffered a burnout

Former student Krijgsman now works as a designer for the fashion brand Yaya. She disapproves of misconduct but questions whether students also take a critical look at themselves. 'I've been working with interns for thirteen years now. Half of them have already suffered a burnout, want to work part-time and are shocked when they have to stay until seven o'clock in the evening. But sometimes our field requires powering through, with tough deadlines and a lot of pressure.'

According to Wijnands, AMFI is still a good institute, but there are teachers who have been there too long and need to evolve with the times if AMFI is to become safe again.

Wijnands: 'Some teachers get frustrated if a student is less talented. They are not allowed to take those frustrations out on students, and it appears that this has now happened. That has to change.'

As a teacher, you have to know how to pass on knowledge to all students, even if they are not the next great fashion designer.'

Response from AMFI

AMFI expresses its deepest regrets that it has not succeeded as an institute in creating a safe environment for all students and has hired an external agency to advise them on this. To combat racism, a task force dedicated to diversity and inclusion has been established. The new director, Dirk Reynders, wrote that AMFI remains committed to being 'more inclusive and sustainable'. The study programme was changed last year to meet 'the wishes' of students 'who have different needs' and 'a different view on the creation of fashion'. AMFI will continue to 'distinguish' itself by focusing on 'craftsmanship, expertise, creativity and entrepreneurship'.

Numerus fixus programme.

- The student satisfaction survey scores AMFI at a 3.9 on a scale of 1–5. The national average is 3.8.
- First-year students are told by teachers in their first months that about half of them will drop out. Figures show that an average of 14 percent quit in the first year. This is lower than the average (31 percent) at the HvA.
- Many students are told by teachers that it is virtually impossible to graduate according to schedule. 70 percent do seem to graduate within four years. This is higher than the average (61 percent) at the HvA.
- Since 2014, AMFI has been a numerus fixus programme and selects students.
- One-quarter of the students are international.