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## Sex, art, torture

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Franz, the Dutch concierge in an Amsterdam hotel says he always loves to be outside the main door because Holland is a place to see all the world's beautiful women. He pontificated that the Netherlands is the only country where within walking distance one can mingle with sex, art and torture paraphernalia. This was a totally new angle for me.

I've frequented Holland umpteen times since the end of my teenage years, to muse on Van Gogh or Rembrandt's hypnotic paintings and of course for work. But Franz's ideology of enjoying sex-art-torture within walking distance never entered my sphere of reference. Perhaps he's right.

Nowhere in the world would you find near-nude young women gyrate, pout, flirt, pose to expose their sexual prowess so openly for customers and gaping tourists. Walk a bit, you'll find gay rainbow flags streaming across the streets.

Take a few more steps, then Rijksmuseum has the most treasured "*The Night Watch*" painted by *Rembrandt van Rijn* in 1642 at the height of the Dutch Golden Age. Just behind it is Vincent Willem van Gogh's somber hued 1885 painting "The Potato Eaters" and dazzling "Sunflowers" painted in 1888. Stroll ahead and the ghastly Museum of Medieval Torture Instruments displays how extremely cruel people can be.

Amidst wonderful old Dutch architecture with beautiful canals is Amsterdam's world-

famous 'De Wallen' red light district. Rows of red cubicle-like retail shop windows have scantily clad legal sex workers selling their curvaceous body as wares. In the network of alleys, sex workers rent the hundreds of tiny one-room cabins to practice their trade. Among the famous adult entertainment is a bar and club named after the banana fruit. Here drinks are free but you pay if the girls perform parlour tricks, pole dances, table dances or lap dances. To distinguish the red light district from normal living houses, a pink neon light is always there outside the window. This light sign makes it clear to relevant customers not to disturb others in the neighborhood. Why Franz said the world's most beautiful women are in his city is because 33% of the sex workers come from countries outside of the European Union. They come because the Government considers their profession to be legal. According to the European Conference on Trafficking in Women, the number of trafficked women from Central and Eastern European Countries in the Netherlands has tripled since 1990.

Amsterdam is also the place for homosexuals worldwide. A profusion of rainbow flags make evident the city's four distinctive gay districts. Amsterdam's Gay Pride celebration has street parties, club events and exhibitions where over 350,000 participants and visitors come every year. These thousands of people line the Prinsengracht and Amstel River on the first Saturday of August to watch the world's only Gay Pride parade on water. Most people would never get to see hundreds of extravagantly costumed

homosexuals like this. In bright, eccentric, revealing clothes and accessories using feathers, furs, flashy dust and bling, they make a beautiful procession in colourfully decorated canal boats. Even gay politicians, policemen and others in public professions sail along.

It's incredible how people in Medieval times enjoyed human torture, obviously with passion otherwise how could they have created such instruments like an interrogation chair full of spikes where the punished was placed naked and pressed? Or a heretic's fork, the iron cage or a press for the head which are manifested in the museum today? These devices comprised a total humiliation of a prisoner's self esteem. More than punishment, such barbarism was not professional justice but a weird game that torturers played. Even the public participated, beheadings were conducted in public too.

Then as you walk on you are on torture's doorstep. Crimes ranging from rape to murder to heresy were punished by torture in the Middle Ages. The Medieval Torture Instruments Museum has a unique collection, recreated by pictures and drawings that graphically demonstrate the dark ages. Torture was legitimate for over 3000 years to punish crimes like adultery, incest and high treason. Social status determined the kind of torture you got. Where a free man was let off with a lashing or imprisonment, a slave was executed for the same offence. Romans used torture on all enemies of the State. Later, Christian emperors of Rome decreed that to insult a priest was punishable by cutting off the criminal's hands and feet. In 1252 Pope Innocent IV approved the application of torture when the Inquisition questioned heretics. The Roman Catholic church officially prohibited tortures only in 1816.

Alongside the red light and gay community, Rembrandt and Van Gogh, even torture instruments, sleep at night when museums closed. Lively night ambience of this liberal

society may not have started only in 20th or 21st century. There has to be some link to past civilization. In the Rijksmuseum which reopened last year after a massive 10-year rebuild, when you watch Rembrandt's dramatic yet light brush stroke and craftsmanship that portrays the subtle emotion of women, you get a hint that this society sees women's nudity in different angles too. There's huge contrast in Van Gogh's depth of "The Potato Eaters" with chromatic usage of blue to focus on the poor Dutch people of that time, and the opposite, luxurious treatment in the work of Rembrandt who comes from an affluent family.

After watching Amsterdam's social culture, when you go back to the Dutch presence in India from 1605 to 1825, you wonder how the Dutch saw India in those centuries. Dutch India was never politically significant nor was its trade large, although the Dutch East India Company had settlements and trading posts in what was Dutch Ceylon, Dutch Coromandel, Dutch Malabar, Dutch Bengal and Dutch Suratte. Their inhuman aspect was importing Indian slaves to the Spice Islands and Cape Colony where they exercised authoritarian power.

Does the distance walked along Amsterdam city centre show human society's most engrossing pastime to be sex, art and torture? The Dutch being among the most liberal have intertwined desire and hate, tying that up with discipline, all within a walking distance.

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