**Unimaginable. How Van Leeuwenhoek’s microscope changed the world.**

**January 2023, Leiden – He uncovered an entirely new world, a world nobody had ever seen before, with the help of a tiny microscope. As of 18 April 2023, National Museum Boerhaave in Leiden revisits a world first discovered by Antoni van Leeuwenhoek 350 years ago. The amazing microworld becomes visible in the temporary exhibition *Unimaginable*. The exhibition also kicks off the national *Antoni van Leeuwenhoek Year*.**

**Antoni van Leeuwenhoek**

Antoni van Leeuwenhoek was a Dutch textile merchant, who acquired fame with his self-made microscope, which led him to discover an entirely new world. Antoni regularly used magnifying lenses to check fabrics. He designed a small microscope, which proved so effective that it was the first ever to reveal the microworld.

Van Leeuwenhoek made hundreds of microscopes, yet as far as is now known, only eleven of them have been preserved worldwide. This is what makes it so special that National Museum Boerhaave has no fewer than five of them in its collection. Van Leeuwenhoek’s microscope is so special that it was finalist in the 2018 national masterpiece contest *Pronkstuk van Nederland*, leavingRembrandt’s Nightwatch behind.

**The exhibition**

In *Unimaginable* we bring visitors as close to Antoni van Leeuwenhoek as possible. They can peer over his seventeenth-century shoulders as it were. *What did he see? And what made it so special?* Visitors will experience the sense of wonder and joy of those first peeks into the microworld.

We show the fine and unique collection of items Van Leeuwenhoek and his contemporaries were working with. These microscopes, sketches and letters literally make the microworld visible. We will also focus on current developments in microscopy and the techniques used. *How do you actually look at something under the microscope?* How do you record what you see? And how far are we by now able to zoom in? The exhibition also looks at the current situation. Microbiology is essential in helping to solve big questions in the field of health or medicine, to name only a few. We are better able to solve the biggest problems by getting to know the smallest.

**Top items**In addition to original microscopes by Van Leeuwenhoek, the exhibition includes original sketches and autograph letters on microscopic life by Antoni van Leeuwenhoek. For this exhibition, the Royal Society in London has kindly loaned three unique volumes, in which all autograph letters and sketches by Antoni van Leeuwenhoek have been collected.

**Visualizing the Unknown**The exhibition also highlights *Visualizing the Unknow*n, a major international research project exploring images from the early years of microscopy. This six-year research project especially focuses on the question how seventeenth-century microscopists visually recorded and shared their pioneering discoveries. The marvellous microphotography made by Wim van Egmond for this project is featured in the exhibition.

**Prestigious Award**

Every decade, the Netherlands Society for Microbiology awards the Van Leeuwenhoek Medal, a prestigious international award for impactful microbiological science. The recipient of the previous medal was Craig Venter, in 2015. The medal will be awarded again in 2023 in honour of the Antoni van Leeuwenhoek Year. The 2023 medal will be shown in the temporary exhibition.

**Activities and events**To mark this exhibition, we publish a graphic novel on Antoni van Leeuwenhoek and a glossy magazine, *ANTONI*. Two podcast episodes are produced to accompany *Unimaginable*, while a range of activities and events are organized throughout the year both within and outside the museum.

*Museum director Amito Haarhuis: “You might say that Van Leeuwenhoek, together with the other early microscopists, has laid the foundation for current scientific practice. The practice of observing, recording and communicating has evolved from the experiences of these first pioneers. And new discoveries are still being made today. It is the mission of the Antoni van Leeuwenhoek Year to stress the importance of science and imagination in our society. The exhibition magnificently visualizes all of this in an almost literally palpable way”.*

*Unimaginable* 18 April 2023 - 7 January 2024 National Museum Boerhaave, Leiden

[www.rijksmuseumboerhaave.nl](http://www.rijksmuseumboerhaave.nl)

**Antoni van Leeuwenhoek Year**

Centres of expertise, museums, educational institutions, the government and the businesses community and the media will be working together in the Antoni van Leeuwenhoek Year. Microscopists, historians, curators, artists, researchers, doctors and developers from various organizations will reach out to the public to share Van Leeuwenhoek’s story. They also demonstrate its relevance in today’s cutting-edge science. A nationwide programme of dozens of activities has been set up. In addition to National Museum Boerhaave, participating organisations include: Huygens Institute, TU Delft, Netherlands Society for Microbiology / Microcanon Foundation & De Microbenclub, Netherlands Institute for Biology, Delft City Council, Wim van Egmond, Leiden & Partners, University of Leiden, Bio Science Park Business Association and Shoreline Productions.