

# THE MAN WHO MADE THE CLOTHES THAT MAKE THE MAN

## Rob of Amsterdam Leather Fashion Designer

### His Last Video Interview: June 21, 1989

On June 21, 1989, Rob Meijer, who died in 1990, took time from his busy Wednesday afternoon to sit for a video interview in his office above his Rob of Amsterdam *couture* shop and art gallery. I had first visited Amsterdam in 1969, rooming wantonly above the Argos Bar, but this was different. It was Holland at the height of the AIDS pandemic, two months after *Drummer* publisher Anthony DeBlase designed the leather pride flag, three months after the death of leather fashion photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, four months before the earthquake that destroyed the *Drummer* office, and five months before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Everyone was on edge. Turmoil was in the air.

Rob received me and Mark Henry, my husband and creative partner of ten years, because we were from *Drummer*, which was very much a leather fashion magazine. Just two hours before, we San Francisco leathermen had landed at Schiphol Airport. We had been flown in by Roger Earl and Terry Legrand, the pioneer filmmakers of the 1975 leather classic *Born to Raise Hell*. Because they liked how we directed and shot leather features for our Palm Drive Video studio, they had hired us onto their otherwise European film crew as cameramen to do a two-camera shoot for six S&M video features for their Marathon Studio based in Los Angeles. It was Terry who had convinced Rob to sit for our interview, which Mark shot.

So as a journalist, I made Rob our absolutely first stop in Amsterdam.

Rob was a lively artist who was an amusing and sophisticated man with a jovial sense of ball-busting humor. He was a businessman and sensualist with a wiry dancer's body, sporting black leather gloves with exposed fingertips, drinking Heineken Pilsener from a big green bottle, and chain-smoking cigarettes in a long holder while presiding at his desk, sitting in front of a large potted palm. He was, of course, wearing signature RoB: a black leather sleeveless shirt-vest winged with two-inch cap sleeves, epaulettes, a popped collar, and a plunging zipper neckline that was cinched by a wide studded belt over black leather trousers and boots.

He took a quick look at my big black beard and said, "I don't like beards." He was putting me on and creating a bond for the moment. There was lots of laughter during our interview. At first he did not want his face on camera, but slowly, as Rob relaxed, Mark finger-tapped Terry's brand new Sony Video 8 Pro camera, and smoothly edged him into the frame...and Rob smiled.

This carefully verbatim transcription documents an historic afternoon in Amsterdam with one of the great designer artists of authentic leather culture.

**Jack Fritscher:** Mark Henry and I landed in Amsterdam this morning, and here we are together in your office two hours later. Thank you.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Did you like downstairs?

**Jack Fritscher:** Very much. Your shop is wonderful. Some of the greatest gay artwork I've seen collected anyplace. So many stores have copies, greeting cards, prints, but not the originals you have. Because you are, I hope you don't mind my saying it out loud, a legend throughout the world what I'm trying to do is chronicle you in the context of our recent past now being destroyed by AIDS, because there is a new young generation out there right now in the clubs and bars who came out in the last eight or nine years. They don't know what sex was like before the threat of AIDS. They have no personal idea what the golden age of the 1970s was like. I think the past has no more remembrance than

the memory we give it. So I have been interviewing people who remember it, about things that were important to them or helped them create international leather culture, the international art of leather, leather politics, leather image, in short, leather fashion throughout the world. And you have been most instrumental in that.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** I'm not a good one to talk with about the past because I only think of tomorrow and I don't think about what has been because I find it very unhealthy. To get all those things back in my mind, I don't know if that is—possible.

**Jack Fritscher:** Perhaps you could just tell us a little about yourself personally. Where you came from...

**Rob of Amsterdam:** I was born in Amsterdam and had some gay lovers and at a certain moment I met a man who was into the S&M, and he tried to train me as a slave, but it only made me angry, but it got my interest, and he was the first to take me to a leather bar, and I was amazed by the people there and by the way they were dressed, and I found it all very exciting. I was at that time a designer for women's dresses, in the big sizes. And a certain woman said, "Why don't you go and work at home?" So I started my first pair of leather trousers for myself, and took it from there. Then a first customer came, and a second, until I could make a living at it, and then I gave up my job designing dresses. It is very exciting. People only come here to my shop when they are in a good mood, and if they aren't, they don't come. That is ideal.

**Jack Fritscher:** So the art of your leather, also legendary throughout the world, puts them in a good mood if they aren't already. I've certainly been turned on in the ten minutes I've been here. I want to browse and look at it, want to take it home with me. When did you first open your Rob of Amsterdam store?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** The first store was opened in 1974. In 1975, I moved down the road where we were all these years, and then the first of November last year we came to these premises, and I think it has been a good move. This is a very beautiful house, and it has lots of space where we can have our big workroom for design and cutting. So we are very happy.

**Jack Fritscher:** In your creation of leather, have you found that you've helped leather develop its sense of style? I think you have.

In every community there is someone, like Rob of Amsterdam or Tom of Finland, who sets a style, sets a mode against which everything is measured. Rather like *Drummer* creating leather pop culture itself.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** What happened is that I started off making as high quality leathers as possible and that has over the years turned out to be my reputation. In fact, nobody is able to steal this reputation from me and to make it their own, because they think right off that I'm crazy to make such high quality. As soon as they get their fingers on an article or design from me, their first thought is "How can we copy it and make it cheaper?" But your first thought should be "How can I make it better?" So in effect, I don't have any competition. And it is a pleasure to make these things, a pleasure to handle these things, and to meet people who come to buy. In the beginning, I had trouble trying to wholesale it because it was all too expensive; but now most of the shops here sell it more expensive than we do because they don't get a 50% discount. So they have to sell it high. And that's it.

**Jack Fritscher:** Your place seems more like a gallery than a shop.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Yes, that is a thing I don't want so much. I want it in the first place to be a leather shop. For the tourists who stay up late every night, the gallery is nice in the daytime when they come in with time on their hands. If they want to, they can spend two hours here, but I don't want that art gallery to be the main thing. I'm happy I started it, and I think it has done certain things for the whole gay world, but for me it's not the more important thing. It's time consuming. You do a lot of exhibitions and you don't always sell the art so well. So in effect it has to be supported by the leather.

**Jack Fritscher:** You plan to continue the gallery in your shop?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Yes, of course. It is said that "Rob himself doesn't make 'made to measure' anymore," and that's just silly—that statement doesn't come out of my mouth. I'm very happy in what I'm doing. My brothers are happy that they are not working anymore, and I am happy that I can continue to do some more work. It is a matter of attitude.

**Jack Fritscher:** Could you tell me about some of the artists? I notice that Tom of Finland has drawn you.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Back in 1978, I had a painting made by an artist, and I wanted to throw a party. I love parties. So I thought, let's make a party for the painting and the second thought was why not give a show? And I wrote a nice letter to Tom. I said, "If you will do an exhibition here of your work, it will be the crown of my work." Of course, Tom agreed. And that's how it started. I had a Dutch photographer on [unintelligible]. And that was the beginning of the gallery. Then we continued, and I have had some very interesting artists. Some were better than others, but it is very nice to play with.

**Jack Fritscher:** When did Tom draw you?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Tom made the drawing, probably 1981. Yes. 1981.

**Jack Fritscher:** Eight years ago. Before AIDS.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Yes.

**Jack Fritscher:** You've created a lot of momentum in the last decade-plus, about twelve years, fourteen years, I guess. You've made an international mark. How do you feel about the evolution of leather wear and leather men and leather women? Do you think things have...

**Rob of Amsterdam:** In the beginning I was worried that it [leather culture and businesses] wouldn't last. And now it is hard to think that it won't exist. I am surprised to see less dyed trousers [blue jeans] worn by the gays. They start to be dressed fashionable, but now they come in their fashionable clothes and say, we want leather pants. I try not to make fashionable things. Everything must be related. I think I have found a kind of secret, how to make a pair of [signature] leather jeans: they fit always very well. And people can walk down the street and people stop them and say, you are wearing Rob's trousers. You can see it and recognize it—mainly by the cut.

**Jack Fritscher:** Did you wake up one night with that thought in your mind, or did it just evolve?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** I think I've always been good in my profession and I know how to think. That's the main problem with most people. They don't know how to think. If you know how to think you will achieve, and then there is no problem.

**Jack Fritscher:** Working with *Drummer* magazine, that's one of the problems I find with gay culture in general and gay leather in particular. Leather is not so much a thinking movement; it is more of a following movement. Some people can be led around whether it's by *Drummer* with its philosophy or by somebody in some other magazine.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Yes.

**Jack Fritscher:** *Drummer* helps create the leather culture it reports on because readers follow the action and fashion in our pages. There is a film called *In Praise of Older Women*, and I thought how about *Drummer* doing something in praise of older men? And suddenly, the word *daddy* was on every cover. It was a word we heard in the bars and made fashionable in print.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Yes, it is nice to have a daddy. If it is a good daddy, you can learn a lot from him and you can listen to him. As you get older—I'm talking about myself now—I think you get more wisdom. You can do something with such wisdom. Yesterday I had an old friend in, and a few hours later, he telephoned me and said, "I would love to come back and have a talk with you because I admire your lifestyle and I want to get a bit out of my own problems." I think it is nice when people do that privately. It feels better and you can scream harder at them. [Laughter]

**Jack Fritscher:** Let's say this friend of yours was very specific and wanted to ask certain questions. So out of the experience of your wisdom of a lifetime, could you talk a little bit about what you said to him about what might apply to, or be useful to, other gay men?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** No. He wanted advice because it was just that he hadn't seen me for a certain time. He never knows if he wants to be seen or does not want to be seen. He is a very intelligent boy. So I don't understand his problems. I think I received you quite unusual when I said that I hate beards. [Laughter] But the moment I see you I know you're okay, I can say it.

**Jack Fritscher:** Yes.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** For me that teasing is funny. If you had a different personality, I would probably have a beard ready to stick on you to [indecipherable]. [Laughter]

**Jack Fritscher:** That's your designer's eye. Add and subtract. What's there, take it away. What's not there, add to it and see how it looks that new way.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Something like that. [Lights cigarette] I have customers that I send down directly to the leather shop, and a different kind of customer I ask them to come back some other time. I've put some customers in a corner to make them stand there until the purchase is ready and they all stand there and take it. Because they want the pants or whatever.

**Jack Fritscher:** That's wonderful ritual discipline.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Yes.

**Jack Fritscher:** It goes back to the original concept before there were leather stores that guys have to "earn their leathers" the way biker gangs make their own leather vests and overlay patches they have to earn through initiations. Older leather guys say you can't just go to a back bar in a leather shop and buy your chaps and vest. You have to earn them somehow.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Yes.

**Jack Fritscher:** So in a sense, with your own strong male personality, with your sense of Top-ness, you are disciplining them, teasing them, with a bit of S&M they may get off on while you dress them in fetish fashion. You are creating bar styles—evening wear based on leather sex appeal. They go home to jerk off enhanced in *couture* you've created.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** And it is beautiful to see someone who has come in a business suit, who has ordered a complete leather outfit and as soon as they have it on, their personality changes 100%. They walk in boots immediately like you should walk in boots. You don't recognize the person. That's beautiful. That change of attitude. I like it very much.

**Jack Fritscher:** Sort of like Henry Higgins.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Yes. [Laughter]

**Jack Fritscher:** Among some of the other artists, I notice you have a drawing by the Hun downstairs.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** That's a poster. I had visited the Hun once. But I think in his style he is a bit too exaggerated. He makes things so big you can't fantasize about it. But he has made some lovely drawings that I would like to add to my gallery. Our biggest

artist, next to Tom, is Bastille. I'll show you one of his. But the man [Bastille] is so lazy you never get things out of his hand. [stands up and shows drawing.] You see the shine and the shine on the head.

**Jack Fritscher:** That's beautiful, fantastic.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** We did a show this winter of his work and it sold very well.

**Jack Fritscher:** Can you tell me anything about his background?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** There is an American word for what he does, but I don't know it. [CAD Technology] He draws for people who want to build flats or a building and before a building is built, they need to sell it. So he makes a kind of photographic drawing that you exactly can see. He is one of the best in France for that. If you want a house with a hundred windows, he can draw that.

**Jack Fritscher:** How old is he?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Should I tell his age? Middle-aged.

**Jack Fritscher:** How long has he been doing erotic drawings?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** I think all his life. If he only draws balconies, he gets bored and then he lifts his paper, and underneath it are pornographic works. He has a very nice way of thinking and doing it.

**Jack Fritscher:** He sounds like you designing women's dresses and lifting your paper to draw men's leather trousers.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Ah! Then we have had Valvas Barea who is Brazilian, I think. Beautiful pastel drawings. He always does portraits and sometimes gets bored and sick of it and then makes a graphic-looking sex picture which is of very high quality so it is not pornographic. It is an erotic drawing.

**Jack Fritscher:** I think that is a parallel to what you've done with leather. You've taken the sheer commercial aspects—like an architect who could be just hammering out a building with a hundred balconies—and put an erotic spin on that. When you put the leather boots and leather suit on the man who comes in a business suit, you transform him and out his hidden identity. Your transformation kind of frees him up sexually. That must give you a lot of pleasure when you see a man stand up in leather and stomp out.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Yes.

**Jack Fritscher:** Has anything particularly humorous happened to you in all the years you've been doing this?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** [Rolls his eyes] I don't know. I'm not a big laugher. I love those people who can laugh with their hands slapping on their knees, but I'm not that type. I take things seriously. But I have had some people who want to be my slave and one in particular asked me, very surprised, "Do you go to the toilet by yourself? I can bring it away for you." Then he wanted to be my slave for three years. I could do whatever I wanted. But then after the three years I had to restore him to society. That's a kind of laboring not for me. It's nice when somebody comes up to you, but...

**Jack Fritscher:** So you find with your celebrity that you get kind of a fan following, people want to be your slave because you, the private person "Rob Meijer," have become "Rob of Amsterdam," so the private side of you has to put up with the courtship of your public self.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** The only thing I would like to say is that in the early days when I started the shop, things were much more fun, and now the business has grown so big that I have to be serious, and in one way that is a pity. But I still have my memories that I hate, but, you know? I know someone who owned a Picasso and then suddenly sold it and he said, "What nobody can take it away from me is 'I owned a Picasso.'" And I think that is quite a nice way of thinking.

**Jack Fritscher:** It's wonderful you've had these memories and experiences no one can take away from you.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** The smaller your business is, and in the beginning it was very small, we gave small parties for fifty people, and I had tattoo demonstrations by Mr. Sebastian [London piercing guru and modern primitive, Alan Oversby]. I was the person in Amsterdam who made things happen. Last year, growing bigger, we came out with some erotic [designer] wines, a white one and a red one, with an erotic label done by Eddie Sofoldman [*sic*] who is an American artist, and we launched it with a boat trip. Everybody was there and everybody wanted to be seen and it was very exciting and still people are talking about it. But it makes you tired to arrange those things. Especially when you grow bigger,

you have to be more serious. You can't afford mistakes. In the old days, it didn't matter. Now we're big, it has to be a proper party.

**Jack Fritscher:** That's one of the curses that comes with success. You can have fun at first doing it and then you have to best yourself every time because they expect that of you. "Last year I bought this from you, and so and so bought that, and I want something new." I mean, a French *couturier* couldn't have more of a burden put on him than you do.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Yes. A good thing for me—since I had been in women's dresses, ordinary dresses for just the ordinary women. The designs were always the same with little changes, perhaps a pocket, the material, the necklines. So I've learned to work in very small steps with details. I make my leather jackets, and it is very rare that they vary a little bit. But variation comes and then I get a kind of new style, which is in fact not a new style but it has something new that it didn't have before. And I like doing it.

**Jack Fritscher:** All RoB originals. What is your favorite piece of leather gear?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** I think it is codpiece trousers because they make your dick look the biggest. [Laughter]

**Jack Fritscher:** That is one of the main contributions that gay leather has given back to the world, isn't it? The Shakespearean codpiece.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** And I wear my leather wherever I go. To the restaurant or to the theater. When I want to wear leather, I will put it on whenever I want. In Amsterdam I am known for going to the theater in my leather and everybody accepts it. And that makes it easier for another person to put on his leather as well.

**Jack Fritscher:** Your erotic fashion becomes mainstream. Leather at the opera in New York and San Francisco. Is there any particular thing in the gay world that you wish had gone in another direction than it has?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** In the first place, I don't think I could do anything about the past. I don't expect much particular change for the future. I expect the leather world to continue to exist because there is nothing to replace it. So if you want to have a good male image, you almost have to wear leather.

**Jack Fritscher:** You certainly see more and more leather in the straight world as a fashion statement. Leather as a gay style has certainly influenced more people than have other gay styles.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** The thing is, a gay has to first of all accept himself as a gay. When he has done that and knows he can handle it, it is an easy step to start to wear some leather. Heterosexuals have children, often, and the neighbors and the parents coming in, so for them it is much more difficult for them to come out in that freedom; but the gay has had all the troubles he could have. So it is easy for him to become a leather boy.

**Jack Fritscher:** It's a surprise to a lot of men that they have two comings out. First is the sexual coming out, and they think that's it. Then after a few years of vanilla sex, things are getting kinkier and then they have a second coming out into all the things that leather symbolizes.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** And it usually starts towards their forties. That's my opinion. Then they want to have more out of life.

**Jack Fritscher:** In middle-age, leather is an enhancement of the body. It abstracts, cinches, girdles. You can't go around looking like a twenty-year-old forever—and who wants to? Whoever said that had to be the ideal? Leather allows a man to be hot whatever decade he is in—thirties, forties, fifties.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** I have customers in their sixties. I make them a pair of leather pants, perhaps a bit looser. Things like that. But they look terrific in it. And you wouldn't guess their age anymore.

**Jack Fritscher:** Leather adds a decade to a man's sex life. If men were restricted to jeans and Top-Sider shoes and sweaters, it would look like older men wearing younger men's clothes.

Is there any particular political statement made here in Holland by leather? In America there seems to be such a distinction between the leather community and the vanilla majority, that the vanilla majority looks down upon leather.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** No, I don't think so in Amsterdam. Those that go in their silk blouses to bars will still go on Saturday night to the leather bar in leather. For me, I don't think the leather is necessarily related to sadomasochism, but that has become an official thing.

**Jack Fritscher:** So a leatherman can be homosexual and masculine, but not necessarily into S&M.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** I think the group that actually does S&M is very small. Terry [Legrand seeking private locations for filming] asked me about dungeons, but I don't know them in Amsterdam; but when you see the leather crowd, you should think there are hundreds of them. But I don't know where to find them.

**Jack Fritscher:** So leather is an expression of a masculine lifestyle rather than an S&M style. I think that's rather true in the United States too. We find continual pressure from magazines like the *Advocate*, which often run anti-leather articles because the original owners want gay people to wear suits to be accepted. They don't really approve of masculine gay men.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** That happens?

**Jack Fritscher:** Yes, sensational cover stories, something like "Why I Left the World of S&M Behind."

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Whatever side you are on, you need each other. They need the leather guys to support their magazine. If you start to scream at each other—No, I don't find that at all a good thing. We are lucky in Holland that we are about the freest country in the world. And we are always accepting people. And it is always the same. A few weeks ago, I appeared on a television program where I was asked questions about these things. It was a complete show about sex and it was called *On Life or Death*. You sit there and answer the questions. Now when I walk down the street, children stop and say, "Oh, I saw you on television," but nobody says, "Ugh, you wear leather." So they accept it and think it is interesting, and most people think it is interesting to know me—which is nice. [Laughs]

**Jack Fritscher:** So the leather doesn't get in the way, but it serves to set you apart from other people and identify you and it doesn't speak so loudly that it drowns out what you are saying to them when you talk about sex and life.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Yes. And then they said, they asked me the question on the television program, did I think it was dangerous for AIDS. All I said was, "Don't forget that if we in the S&M world go to have sex, usually we dress up and don't undress. So with less body exposure, I don't think there is a bigger danger."

**Jack Fritscher:** That's true. You made a distinction between leather as a masculine lifestyle as compared to an S&M signal. Where does leather fetish come in? Where two men get together and wearing the leather is part of the sex play, the vision of each other, the creaking of the leather, the smell of it, the feel of it, the sound of it.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** All you have to do is take your dick out.

**Jack Fritscher:** And you don't have to shove it into someone else.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** If you come to an S&M scene, it would be quite unusual—I don't know how to say—for the top to undress. And the other one can be nude and sent to the floor. I think that is the nice thing about it.

**Jack Fritscher:** I would love to hear you answer this question. I write about and photograph leather culture, which is an abstraction, but you are able to work hands-on with leather. We buy leather gear and wear it and get off on it, but you are able to live one step closer to it by taking a tanned hide and creating male clothing. What is it, do you think, what is the attraction of leather?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** I think it is masculinity. Leather makes people look stronger. People love the smell of leather, and it gives them a sexual kick. What I never tell them—and it is even a mistake to tell it now—is what they smell is the dye and has nothing to do with the leather itself. A pair of legs in shiny leather jeans makes the legs beautiful even if they are not so beautiful.

**Jack Fritscher:** Do you think one of its appeals is that it is an actual animal hide stretched around a pair of legs, beautiful or not so beautiful.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** I don't think anybody looks at it as an animal hide. They like the look, the touch of it.

**Jack Fritscher:** So you see the appeal of leather in and of itself. Its texture.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Yes, and not related to the animal. Jeans material is tough to touch. It is not pleasant. With leather, your hands just slide over it. That is a nice feeling.

**Jack Fritscher:** Leather has almost the velvety texture of a dick.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Yes.

**Jack Fritscher:** Because it does pick up body heat and is like a second skin. Do you think there is a bondage link inherent in tight leather that appeals to people on an unconscious level, if not on a conscious level?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** I think so, because if you have a simple thing, let's say a leather cockstrap, it always brings color to the body, the contrast of its black straps. I like to sell some long belts by which you can do some bondage. I myself admire Japanese bondage because I think it is beautiful, but I don't think it is comfortable. Rope is unpleasant material to have rubbing over your skin, but what I do with the bondage is beautiful—but not pleasant. Black leather gives more than rope and is nicer.

**Jack Fritscher:** Leather becomes as one with the body whereas rope, as you say, rubs against the body and abrades the body. I've noticed, just as you are separating leather from S&M, that Japanese bondage tends to tie the body into itself whereas Western bondage ties the body often spreadeagle to another object instead of the body pulled in on itself in a more contemplative way. Do you feel when you are in leather that your psychic vibrations are different than when you are not in leather?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Don't think so. But me is me, and I don't change no matter what I'm wearing.

**Jack Fritscher:** Maybe because you, no doubt, have a leather mindset and leather vibrations going all the time wearing leather or not. [Laughter] You are not like the customers who arrive in their business suits, put on leather, and stomp out the door. You say their aura changes. You say their character changes. I don't want to seem terribly "California," but don't you think for them that the psychic vibe also changes? You unfetter them from their ordinary life and allow them to spring free into the deeper recesses of their personality. Don't you think you're helping them act out desire by putting them in leather with the freedoms that come with it.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Yes. And it makes them happier.

[Telephone rings on the desk]

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Sorry about that.

**Jack Fritscher:** And you're famous for your studded hood, which has sort of become your international trademark piece, right? Somebody who puts that on is going to feel totally different than he has ever felt in his life.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Yes, because the thing weighs three kilos [6.6 pounds]. But because there is leather underneath, it still feels very supple and it is an experience to wear it.

**Jack Fritscher:** So just as you metamorphosed women when you were doing women's dress designs, you kind of help men to change.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** You better forget about the women. [He laughs.]

**Jack Fritscher:** Anyway, you are trend-setter.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Another thing, after my television program, people telephoned me to say, "Thank you very much for what you are doing for the S&M world. You make it more understandable and less frightening." I think to be frightened of S&M is ridiculous unless you have a stupid top who doesn't know how to act. For myself personal, the most scene I like is the mind trip. I like to be clever to people and give them remarks that they are shocked by. I had two guests here and one was a very good-looking boy, but he wants to be a slave. So I am sitting here. Everybody's talking and suddenly I stop the talk and I ask him, "Do you think you are beautiful?" And wanting to be a slave, he wouldn't dare to say he was beautiful. Then the conversation continued, and I said, "Do you think you are ugly?" Now he was *sure* that he wasn't ugly. [Laughter] But that was what shocks people. You don't need ropes and all that. Very nice.

**Jack Fritscher:** So personally, you prefer the psychological scene rather than the physical?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Right. I do tie people up. I do whip people—if necessary. But the most thing what I like is the mind-trip.

**Jack Fritscher:** Everybody will want to know what is "necessary." [Laughter]

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Some people only want to be tied up. I've had one person here who really wants to be whipped, really whipped, and I whipped the hell out of him. I took a film of that and it is the most exciting film I've ever made because while the man was

getting whipped—and I was not very friendly with it—he started to laugh and he laughed and he laughed and he laughed. And it was beautiful. He had a very happy voice, “Ho, Ho, Ho.” It was wonderful. Then I really whipped him so hard that his back had streams—how you call?—on it. And then he said, “I wouldn’t mind you doing it another time, but can I bring my photo camera with me because in about three weeks you don’t see any marks anymore, but then I will still have the memory in the pictures.” I’m surprised because I don’t like to be whipped at all. I don’t do damage to people—but they always ask for more. Then I come back to it, and all I feel while I am doing it, is that they want to prove that they can take it. It’s not about fun or sex. The biggest thing is for them is to think “I must take it and then show my marks and I can be proud that I went through it.”

**Jack Fritscher:** Do you think that’s some peculiar kind of religious twist? Like martyrdom?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** This man I’m talking about is a priest. [Hilarious laughter]

**Jack Fritscher:** I guess that answers the question. I’ve always thought the one thing religion and the state have taught young men is that they’ve got to suffer somehow—like in the military or the brig for whatever kind of manhood rituals or patriotic reasons like *Drummer* specializes in.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** One day a customer came in and told me that he was working in a psychiatric center, and I said, “Do you think you have been influenced by that over the years?” And he said, “No,” and then ordered a straitjacket. [Amused laughter] Is the film not going? Am I talking for nothing?

**Jack Fritscher:** It’s recording.

**Mark Hemry:** I was just checking the batteries. Everything’s fine.

**Jack Fritscher:** You’re not talking for nothing, believe me. You’re saying such wonderful things here.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Good.

**Jack Fritscher:** What would you say to any man—young, middle-aged, older—who had approached the point in life where he comes to look at, or stand in front of, that Bastille drawing, the rubber hood on the head, the nozzle, a complete bondage scene, breath control?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** What I usually say is, it might not be your fetish, not be what you are dreaming of, but nobody can deny that it is beautiful, and to me things being beautiful is very important. Looking at such art, some people try to realize those fantasies. With their reactions, you get very bizarre moments, but beautiful moments.

**Jack Fritscher:** So basically, what you have done, stylistically in leather and in your life, is a pursuit of beauty.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Yes. I try.

**Jack Fritscher:** You can't do better than that. Some people think pursuing beauty is chasing a guy down the street. [Laughter]

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Do you want some more water?

**Mark Hemry:** We're fine.

**Jack Fritscher:** This coffee is good. We've been up for thirty-six hours. If I seem a little punchy, it's because of that. We were crammed into small seats in the back of the plane.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** You didn't sleep at all?

**Jack Fritscher:** A couple hours. We had to change planes twice. We were on three different planes. They shove food in your face every two hours and start a movie in the middle of the night, but we had paperwork to do [proofing the galleys of my forthcoming *Some Dance to Remember: A Memoir-Novel of San Francisco 1970-1982*]. And, of course, we crossed on the Summer Solstice, which is the shortest night of the year. It got dark very late and got light very early. It was beautiful.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** What direction did you fly in? You came from Los Angeles?

**Jack Fritscher:** From San Francisco.

**Mark Hemry:** To New York, then London.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** That's horrible. You should go New York to Amsterdam.

**Jack Fritscher:** That's the way we had been scheduled. Then Pan Am in its wisdom changed its mind and everyone going to Amsterdam had to land in London and change. Thanks for asking.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Of course.

**Jack Fritscher:** Regarding the future. Terry Legrand told me that the future is very important to you because now at the end of the

eighties, you are looking to help shape that future. Do you have plans for a permanent gallery, a kind of historical leather museum of sex, art, and fashion?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** I don't think so, no. I don't know what to do, but I think the main thing is that Rob [of Amsterdam] should continue on as a business, but a museum? Those things don't work, I don't believe, because you still have to make changes all the time. You change one business for the other. You need a big stock of all kinds of art. I don't know what will happen in the future. I can't say.

**Jack Fritscher:** Who do you think in the leather world—a name or two—has been very influential to help men express leather masculinity? I would say that you are one in terms of the design and mystique of leather that you have given people in the sculptural, ritual garments that they collect and wear.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** That is very difficult to answer. There are certain people who have done a lot for the S&M world, but I don't think they have done anything in particular for the leather image. The leather image is created when you go in your own leather gear into the bar on a Friday night, and everybody is standing with his beer. That's what creates the image. But I can't give you any names.

**Jack Fritscher:** What do you think of these different leather contests with their runway fashion shows? Like our "Mr. Drummer" contest where contestants walk the stage in exotic leather outfits, and then as part of their talent show they try to act out some S&M scene on stage as if leather requires S&M—instead of just wearing the leather and going out on stage being masculine.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Being beautiful.

**Jack Fritscher:** Yes, but besides showing off the leather look on the contest runway, they put on the S&M scene on top of it, which continues to confuse the issue.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Do they have to do an S&M scene?

**Jack Fritscher:** No. I wonder why they think they have to. The producers kind of expect it theatrically. This is where I think you're making the clarifying point that wearing leather does not necessarily mean S&M. So you could be "International Mr. Leather" for IML and never whip people or tie them up, because that is

not what being “International Mr. Leather” is about. These aren’t S&M contests. Your clarification is helpful. Just because I see a hot man in leather, it doesn’t signal he’ll tear my tits off.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** [Arched eyebrow] Do you have sensitive tits? [Laughter]

**Jack Fritscher:** [Playing meek] Yes, your Top-ness. [Laughter]

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Good.

**Jack Fritscher:** I really appreciate the honesty you’ve displayed today. I know you’re busy and have to get back to your work. But with all your experience, is there anything you would like the world at large to know about?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Nothing in particular. What would I say? I hope that there will be for a long time people in leather, but that’s nonsense and doesn’t relate to whatever.

**Jack Fritscher:** When did you personally first put on your first leather in connection with sexual games?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** My own leather?

**Jack Fritscher:** Tom of Finland told me years ago that his leather fetish surfaced when he was four or five years old when he found himself drawing pictures of policemen in tight pants chasing robbers in big boots and tying them up.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** No, no. I think I started in 1973 when I made my first pair of leather pants, which were much too tight, so that I could only stand in them. I couldn’t sit. But from that moment on, I really enjoyed it, especially in the bars, with the leathersmen standing around, it was beautiful and at long last I had found men.

**Jack Fritscher:** But as a boy you never experienced leather?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** No. And I don’t so much believe in all that. I find it nonsense.

**Jack Fritscher:** What particular style of man appeals to you? The Greg Strom bodybuilder type? Or a more average type? What kind of body do you think is best enhanced by leather? What do you prefer to see?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** I think a good body is best enhanced with leather. But another part of it is the character of the person. He makes his leather work. If he is intelligent, he knows what to do with it. I think it is more that.

**Jack Fritscher:** But personally, would you rather see a bodybuilder in leather or...

**Rob of Amsterdam:** I find bodybuilder figures horrible because their necks are always too heavy and then their shoulders drop down like a bottle, and that I find terrible.

**Jack Fritscher:** You find them difficult to drape.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Also that, but they don't look beautiful. I've had bodybuilders here and I know how to handle them, but if you point at their arm, immediately the muscle flexes. They must always make sure there is a mirror around so they can look in it. Then they are happy. And I think all those shoulders going down is not very beautiful. Bodybuilders' legs are nice, I think, because they don't go out of shape. They look heavy.

**Jack Fritscher:** One last question. Your tattoos. Were they done over a period of time?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Mr. Sebastian did them. One was done by Mad Dog [Robert Roberts] from San Francisco.

**Jack Fritscher:** Who did the eye?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** The eye was Mr. Sebastian. He lives in England and he is famous for his tattoos. In the beginning, I had contact with Mr. Sebastian and then he came here twice a year for three weeks to do tattoos.

Besides being important for the world of leather, I think I've been important for the world of tattoos because I think I have been able to lift the art of it out of a kind of cheap way of decoration. In my time [when he was tattooing], people came in Rolls Royces. One had a little swallow on his ass. My quality has been very important so that people from the highest place in society would come to me because by me they would get a good tattoo. The atmosphere was there in my shop, but it was not like a tattoo parlor, which is usually dirty and unpleasant. And I think for that I have been very important.

**Jack Fritscher:** Was that early on when you had your leather parties?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** That was in 1974-75.

**Jack Fritscher:** So at the same time you were introducing your leather clothing line, you were introducing tattoos. What about piercing? I noticed that downstairs there was...

**Rob of Amsterdam:** I myself am fairly interested in piercing and I like to do it on people. It is nice, and I always say, “You’d better come here and know that it is done as good as possible. Unless you like to have someone fuck around with piercing, where their hands are not clean and where they get excited and get carried away and just do something without being clean.” The main reason I do piercing is that I don’t want other people to fuck up.

**Jack Fritscher:** One thing readers of this piece will want to know is, what is your favorite body part to pierce? [Laughter]

**Rob of Amsterdam:** The favorite places to me are tit piercings and a Prince Albert. I think every man should have a Prince Albert. It’s exciting, it’s great, and when it’s in, you will never take it out because you are very happy with it.

**Jack Fritscher:** People I’ve talked to have said it enhances masturbation.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** It enhances masturbation, and it gives you a kind of tingling extra feeling, and I love it.

**Jack Fritscher:** How do you feel about your influence. You yourself have changed some of our sexual ways of coming on to each other, of people getting more into their personal body adornment, of more people wearing leather, of more people getting tattoos, more people getting pierced.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** I think what I’ve done makes people freer, and that freedom makes them do things.

**Jack Fritscher:** But do you think they are moving into these more aesthetic enhancements of the body in order to move away from unsafe sex and still have a wonderful time psychologically and physically? Your devotion to leather, tattooing, and piercing is furthering a new style of sex fetishism for gay pop culture, especially as the 1980s are becoming the 1990s. You mentioned my beard. I could never have had this big beard as a leather fetish style back in the 1970s because with all the Crisco, after fifteen minutes at the baths, my beard would have gone up in flames. [Laughter] Now with AIDS, many other men in San Francisco, the bears, also have big beards.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Do you know that it is beautiful to burn hair?

**Jack Fritscher:** I...have...heard...people...say...that.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** And I'm not talking about your beard. [Laughter] But I have rubbed people in oil, just a little bit, and then set a match to it and it becomes like fireworks, phtttt! It's beautiful, and it doesn't hurt, but it scares them a lot.

**Jack Fritscher:** Just a little surprise for them.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** [Leans forward with his elbows on his desk] I think we are there.

**Jack Fritscher:** I think we are there. So nobody ever comes in to see you and goes out the same?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** I hope. [Laughs]

**Jack Fritscher:** He either changes his clothes or changes his mind. Or has his mind changed.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Yes.

**Jack Fritscher:** Thank you so much for your time.

**Rob of Amsterdam:** If it gets printed in *Drummer*, I would like a copy.

**Jack Fritscher:** Definitely. I shall do that. Could we take a couple of pictures of you?

**Rob of Amsterdam:** Of course. Perfect.

**Jack Fritscher:** Thank you very much.