JURY REPORT
23 November 2026

BABS GONS

JOHANNES VERMEER PRIJS 2026



Photo: Dana van Leeuwen

Babs Gons
Laureate Johannes Vermeer Award 2026
Jury Report

The Johannes Vermeer Award has been presented annually since 2009, celebrating an artist living and/or working in the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Through this prestigious state award for the arts, the Dutch Government seeks to highlight and honour exceptional artistic talent. The laureates are distinguished by their outstanding artistry and are each of great significance to their field and to society. The award is open to artists working in all disciplines.

The Minister of Education, Culture and Science, Rianne Letschert, is advised on the awarding of the prize by an independent jury. Its members are experts in their respective fields and take careful account of the breadth and diversity of artistic disciplines in their deliberations.

In selecting the winner of the Johannes Vermeer Award 2026, the jury considered, among other things, the laureate's pioneering, multidisciplinary practice and the social significance of her body of work. Her artistic practice brings together poetry, spoken word, performance and social engagement to create a genre entirely of her own, in which her language, with its remarkable expressive power, enriches both the personal and the public sphere. The jury unanimously selects Babs Gons as the winner of the Johannes Vermeer Award 2026.

A genre of her own
Babs Gons is a writer, poet, performer, presenter and programme-maker. As a poet and performer, she is regarded as one of the leading pioneers of spoken word poetry in the Netherlands. For more than twenty-five years, as an initiator, creator and artistic director, she has made an unmistakable contribution to the development and professionalisation of spoken word.

Within the Dutch poetic and literary landscape, Gons has developed a distinctive artistic and multidisciplinary genre, characterised by a strong sense of social engagement. In this multifaceted practice, the written text, the spoken word, physical presence and direct encounters with audiences reinforce one another.

She performs around the world, and her diverse body of work is widely acclaimed both nationally and internationally. Gons has received numerous accolades, including the Black Achievement Award (2018), the spoken word performance award De Johnny (2022) and the Golden Quill (Gouden Ganzenveer, 2024). From 2023 to 2025, she held

BABS GONS
JOHANNES VERMEER PRIJS 2026

the position of Poet Laureate of the Netherlands; in the final year of her tenure, the title was changed to Dichter der Nederlanden (Poet of the Netherlands).

In 2019, she compiled *Hardop (Out Loud)*, an anthology featuring the work of eighteen spoken word poets. Two years later, she published her first official poetry collection, *Doe het toch maar (Just do it, anyway)*. In 2022, a selection of her columns from *Het Parool* appeared under the title *Alles wat je liefhebt wordt mooi (Everything you love will be beautiful)*. That same year, she wrote the National Book Week poem and published the children's book *Het begint met een droom (It all starts with a dream)*. In 2026, her collection *Wie zijn we morgen (Who will we be tomorrow)* was published.

Language

Her poetry extends far beyond the printed page. It comes alive in performance and through encounters with others, finding its meaning precisely in its interplay with the audience and in the space that emerges between speaker and listener. Gons's voice, rhythm and presence are integral to her artistry. When she performs her work, audiences are immediately moved by the intensity and expressive power of her words. Her language is clear, her sentences fluid, her words precise and her intentions warm. With succinct precision, she captures the pulse of society.

The public sphere

As a multidisciplinary artist, Gons moves with remarkable ease through the cultural, social and political spheres. Wherever she speaks, from detention centres to international literary festivals, and from cultural events to national commemorations, she brings generations and communities together, enriching public discourse through the many voices and wide-ranging perspectives embodied in her artistry.

With compassion and gratitude towards her audiences, she captures society's pressing concerns and human vulnerability in seemingly simple yet incisive words. Her artistic work creates a language through which to address the issues of our time, making them deeply and tangibly felt while inviting both tenderness and strength. This is where the unmistakable significance of her body of work lies.

The personal and the collective

In Gons's publications and performances, personal experiences and social issues continually and naturally intersect. She begins with her own voice and, from there, reaches out to the voices of others. Her work touches on the things that unite and divide us: vulnerability and resilience, loss, hope and identity, and the possibility of truly connecting with one another. It invites recognition, and at the same time it encourages us to see things from a different perspective.

Time and again, she wonders: “What do people need right now?” Gons demonstrates how her work can be both deeply personal and profoundly collective. It is in this movement between the personal and the shared that her artistry reveals itself.

For Gons, this artistry does not exist in isolation. The gratitude with which she builds on the work of those who came before her, on whose shoulders she stands, and towards the audiences whose approval and disapproval have helped shape her, are defining characteristics of both the artist and her body of work. The same is true of the effortless joy she finds in creating alongside others and sharing the stage at international venues.

Gons once said: “Joy is an act of resistance.” The jury of the Johannes Vermeer Award hopes that this award will not only bring her recognition, but above all, joy. A joy that she need not first create in order to share, but that she can simply receive.

In awarding the Johannes Vermeer Award 2026, the jury recognises not only a poet and performer, but also an artist who has spent more than twenty-five years contributing to the development and professionalisation of spoken word in the Netherlands. Building on the work of those who came before her, she has given the Dutch poetic and literary landscape a distinctive and innovative voice. At the same time, she is paving the way for a new generation of creators, giving her artistry a significance that extends far beyond her own body of work.

Convinced that her oeuvre will continue to enrich the Dutch arts and inspire greater humanity and compassion, the jury unanimously awards the Johannes Vermeer Award 2026 to Babs Gons.

The jury of the Johannes Vermeer Award 2026 comprises Dagmar Oudshoorn (Chair), Ted Brandsen, Afaina de Jong and Natasja Kensmil (2021 laureate).