

1994

## In Memoriam: Willem Cornelis Vis (1924-1993)

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### Recommended Citation

*In Memoriam: Willem Cornelis Vis (1924-1993)*, 28 INT'L L. 583 (1994)  
<https://scholar.smu.edu/til/vol28/iss3/3>

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## ***In Memoriam:*** **Willem Cornelis Vis (1924–1993)**

PETER WINSHIP\*

Professor Willem Cornelis Vis served as a member of the Board of Editorial Advisors of *The International Lawyer* from 1987 until his death in December 1993. Membership on the board requires just what the board's title suggests: members provide the journal's editors with advice on matters ranging from identifying suitable topics and authors to reviewing manuscripts or books. As chair of the board, I knew I could always count on Willem Vis to respond promptly and with care to pleas for help. His services will be sorely missed.

Willem Vis leaves a rich legacy of international unification projects that he worked on. As a scholar who toils in the fields that Willem Vis helped to plant and nurture, I knew Willem Vis primarily from his work with the United Nations Commission on International Trade. And great work it was! He brought to that work a thorough understanding of both doctrine and practice, a meticulous attention to detail, and—a matter not to be taken lightly—common sense. His skills were truly tested in the work that culminated in the United Nations Convention on International Bills of Exchange and International Promissory Notes of 1988. In this text he sought to meld practice with the different doctrinal traditions of the civil and common law worlds. He did so, first, as secretary of UNCITRAL and then as the representative of The Netherlands to the UNCITRAL Working Group after he began teaching. When I first met him in the mid-1980s he was hard at work on a scholarly monograph on the subject. This text has not, alas, been published, but I am sure it is a monument to his understanding of the subject and to his painstaking scholarship.

Colleagues uniformly speak about the richness of Willem Vis's life beyond the law. Among other things, he was apparently a gifted amateur musician, a voracious reader of philosophy and literature, and a talented carpenter. In the

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relatively few meetings I had with him in person, I remember him best as a stimulating conversationalist.

We pause, therefore, to remember Willem Vis for his many talents and the many services he rendered.

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ERIC E. BERGSTEN\*\*

Willem Vis, who died on December 9, 1993, was a world-recognized expert in international commercial transactions and dispute settlement procedures. He was born in Utrecht and read law, economics, and philosophy at Leyden, Nijmegen, Strasbourg, and at Magdalen College, Oxford. Professor Vis began to work for European cooperation in 1957 in the human rights and legal affairs directorates of the Council of Europe. In 1965 he became the deputy secretary-general of the International Institute for the Unification of Private Law (UNIDROIT) in Rome. In 1968 he transferred to the Secretariat of the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL), where he served first as senior legal officer and later as secretary of the Commission.

I first came to know Willem Vis in January 1975 when I too joined the UNCITRAL Secretariat. Professor Vis had taken over the Secretariat only a few months before. It was an exciting time. We were a new staff, some of the most important texts to come out of UNCITRAL were in their crucial stages of development, and meetings of the Commission were upon us, but the documentation had not been prepared. Willem was nervous that it would not all be done in time. Still, he kept to his standards of quality. He would not allow us to sign off on a document until it was correct in every detail. His insistence that the documents be done correctly at the cost of their being done on time, if necessary, was not appreciated by the documentation services that had to translate the documents into the five other United Nations languages as well as to reproduce and distribute them under time pressure. But the result was appreciated by the Commission. They knew that they could count on the quality of the Secretariat's work under the leadership of Willem Vis.

During Professor Vis's period as secretary of UNCITRAL the Commission successfully completed its work on the United Nations Convention on the Carriage of Goods by Sea, 1978 (Hamburg Rules), the United Nations Convention on

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Contracts for the International Sale of Goods, and the UNCITRAL Arbitration Rules. Work was begun on a number of new subjects, of which the most prominent was the UNCITRAL Model Law on International Commercial Arbitration. He was deeply involved in the preparation of the United Nations Convention on International Bills of Exchange and International Promissory Notes throughout his career with UNCITRAL, and for the eight years following his resignation from the Secretariat.

When the United Nations decided to transfer the UNCITRAL Secretariat from New York to Vienna, Professor Vis arranged for a teaching position at Pace University Law School. It was a new experience for him. He had not taught before, and he had to teach in a legal system that was different from that which he had been taught. He told me long afterward that he had never worked so hard in his life. I believed him; he was not one to undertake a task unless he was going to do it to the best of his abilities. One of the things of which he was the most proud was that after he taught contracts for the first time, the dean reported to him that he had had the highest student evaluations of any professor that semester. This in spite of the fact that the doctrinal elements in the law of contracts are radically different from the law he had learned at Leyden. In his mind that evaluation seemed to top any other professional award he had ever earned.

Willem Vis is gone, but not our memories of him. He leaves behind a formidable legacy of international legislation that bears the marks of his presence. He was a scholar of the old school, a marvelous teacher, and a warm friend and colleague.

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K.R. SIMMONDS\*

Professor Willem Cornelis Vis died on December 9, 1993, aged sixty-nine years.

Willem Vis was a native of Utrecht, The Netherlands, and had a multidisciplinary education in law, economics, and philosophy at the Universities of Leyden, Nijmegen, and Strasbourg. He began a long and distinguished career as an international civil servant in 1959 when he joined the staff of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. From 1965 until 1968 he served as deputy secretary-general at the International Institute for the Unification of Private Law in Rome. In 1968 he moved to the United Nations, where he became chief of the international trade law division of the Office of Legal Affairs, and, most notably, secretary of the

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United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL), which had been established in December 1966 by the General Assembly for the purpose of promoting the progressive harmonization and unification of the law of international trade. His influence upon the early development of UNCITRAL and its work was typically discreet, but, at the same time, far-reaching.

Willem Vis's penetrating intellect and profound understanding of international commercial transactions spanned a wide range of subject-matter and the approaches of many varying jurisdictions. He joined the faculty of the School of Law of Pace University in White Plains, New York, in 1980, and, over the last decade, directed its semester-abroad law program and the work of its London-based Institute of International Commercial Law. Latterly, in collaboration with the Bar Association of the City of New York, he had planned and sponsored the first-ever international moot court for the argument of international commercial arbitration cases. The first moot was held in Vienna in March 1994 and, in a fitting tribute to his memory, the moot was officially named in his honor.

Willem Vis was a stimulating and enriching friend to his colleagues and to his students. He gave generously of his unique experience and insight. He set, and demanded, the highest standards of scholarship and analysis. In his chosen field he had few equals.