



## Amsterdam Museum Report #2

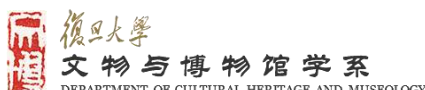
### Decolonizing the Amsterdam Museum: A Work-in-Progress to Becoming a More Inclusive City Museum

By: Csilla E. Ariese (University of Amsterdam)

Researched within Work Package 3 '*City Museums and Multiple Colonial Pasts*'  
led by Joanna Wawrzyniak (University of Warsaw).



Centre for Social Studies  
University of Coimbra



MUSEU NACIONAL DE  
ETNOLOGIA

MUSEU HISTÓRICO  
NACIONAL,  
RIO DE JANEIRO



MUZEUM  
WARSZAWY



AMSTERDAM  
MUSEUM



上海市历史博物馆  
上海革命历史博物馆  
SHANGHAI HISTORY MUSEUM  
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## Decolonizing the Amsterdam Museum: A Work-in-Progress to Becoming a More Inclusive City Museum

Dr. Csilla E. Ariese  
University of Amsterdam

### Introduction

This report was developed within the Horizon2020 project *ECHOES: European Colonial Heritage Modalities in Entangled Cities* as part of its work package 3 on ‘City Museums and Multiple Colonial Pasts.’ This work package conducts in-depth, qualitative, comparative analyses of three city museums, each representing distinct positions within colonial history. The Amsterdam Museum forms one of these three case studies. The aim of this second report on the Amsterdam Museum is twofold: to test the ECHOES modalities for practicing colonial heritage, and in doing so to identify how the Amsterdam Museum is practicing colonial heritage in an effort to decolonize. Thus, this report provides a case study of the Amsterdam Museum in order to discuss recent or current (de)colonial practices in the museum and to understand how these processes for change have taken and are taking place. Effectively, the report aims to illuminate decolonization as it is internally thought and worked through, as well as the externally visible results.

The Amsterdam Museum provides a case study from a city museum located in Western Europe. The second reports on the Shanghai History Museum/Shanghai Revolution Museum (Pozzi 2019b) and the Museum of Warsaw (Bukowiecki & Wawrzyniak 2019) prepared in parallel present case studies of city museums from two different geo-political zones (East Asia and Central and Eastern Europe). A first set of reports, published earlier this year, focused on the history and evolution of these three city museums and the current state of the museum (Ariese 2019; Bukowiecki 2019; Pozzi 2019a). These first reports provide a contextual background to the institutional histories, the histories of the cities, and the position of the museums within their local and national sphere. The research on all three of these case studies is still on-going and will result in one more set of reports, thus ultimately forming a nine-part final report of the research conducted on city museums within ECHOES. As the research is still in progress, the results presented in this report may still be altered or expanded due to new findings.

The report begins with a foundational, contextual discussion on decolonizing the museum, based on the history of the modern museum and current developments in the field. It then describes the ECHOES methodology centered on four modalities for *practicing* colonial heritage: removal, repression, reframing, and re-emergence (Kølvraa 2019). In order to make these modalities more workable for the research on the Amsterdam Museum, the framework is expanded with four *processes*: reflecting, reassessing, reorganizing, and reacting. Briefly, the research approach for studying the Amsterdam Museum is presented along with the data collected for this report. The core of the report is a description and analysis of four examples of colonial heritage practices: removal of a stereotypical image from an education program, repression in exhibited migration movies, reframing with new narratives through public events, and re-emergence embodied in the Kabra ancestral mask. Finally, the changing of the exhibition *Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age* to *Portrait Gallery of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century* is analyzed in detail to zoom in on an ongoing process of decolonization.

## The Museum Will (Not?) Be Decolonized

The museum in the modern sense was a concept developed in the West within the context of colonial empires (Bennett 1995). As such, the museum is a colonial institution and indeed many museums can trace their histories, or the histories of their collections, to the colonial project. This is true both for museums in the former metropolises as in former colonies (e.g. Cummins 2004). It is important to keep this colonial context in mind, despite knowledge of non-Western museum concepts (Kreps 2011), the emergence of grassroots museums based on different power structures, and the existence of new museums in politically post-colonial settings.

Following geo-political decolonization after WWII, efforts to decolonize the museum began primarily on the initiative of Indigenous communities who sought to regain ownership of their ancestors and objects which had been taken by colonizers. As a result, decolonizing the museum was initially heavily centered on the collections of ethnographic museums and in terms of practice focused on restitution. Even today, restitution of objects continues to be a key issue (Sarr & Savoy 2018). A core domain of traditional museum work, namely preserving collections for posterity, stands in stark opposition to other ways of treating human and material remains. As George Okello Abungu said at the 2019 ICOM triennial, if ancestors are returned “we will not preserve them, we will bury them” (7 Sept 2019). Supported in some places by legislation, some museums have taken measures for restitution of objects and have used this to argue for a changed perception of the role of the museum. Some scholars have pointed out that the term decolonization can only refer to the repatriation of Indigenous land and life and argue that it should not be used as a metaphor for other societal improvements (Tuck & Wayne Yang 2012). From this narrow view-point, decolonizing the museum would only contain a particular set of practices, primarily relating to ownership of objects and who has the right to which histories.

Yet, beyond restitution and more literal ways of decolonizing the museum, the struggle for decolonization has become broader over time to encompass a myriad of practices and processes. Decolonization has been used to refer to efforts to improve the representativeness of museum staff, to add multi-vocality to museum exhibitions, or for efforts to include more self-critique (e.g. Petrešin-Bachelez 2015). Decolonizing the museum has also included aspects such as decentering and disalienating. In terms of decolonizing terminology or the language used by museums in their exhibitions or collections (e.g. Modest & Lelijveld 2018) there is a close link to the origins of post-colonial theories which were rooted in literature. As an umbrella-term, decolonizing the museum encompasses practices and processes which do not always have direct colonial contents, but may be tied to colonial mind sets, power imbalances, or legacies.

Sumaya Kassim’s essay *The Museum Will Not Be Decolonised* (2017) reveals the deep struggles that are involved in processes of decolonization and argues that museums should not continue to exploit people of color in decolonial processes. She notes that “decoloniality is a complex set of ideas – it requires complex processes, space, money, and time, otherwise it runs the risk of becoming another buzzword” (Kassim 2017). Considering the profoundly colonial origins of the institution, it is impossible to truly decolonize the museum. This does not mean efforts are futile, only that they can never be complete.

It is in this complex setting of theoretical developments and museological challenges and changes that the Amsterdam Museum’s efforts for decolonization should be seen. As the capital of a Kingdom which still contains overseas territories in the Caribbean, Amsterdam has colonial histories and legacies which have shaped its development, population, and museum collections.

## Practices and Processes of Dealing with Colonial Heritage

Colleagues within the ECHOES project have proposed four modalities for analyzing how colonial heritage is practiced (Kølvraa 2019). They can “be thought of as indicating how different heritage practices deal with the ‘colonial ghosts’ in contemporary societies and communities” (Ibid.: 27). The overarching concept of these four modalities, as well as a paper on each of these modalities independently, has been made publicly available online in the project’s *Methodological Toolkit* (Andersen et al. 2019). This toolkit bundles short, accessible papers on different ‘keywords’ dealing with colonialism and heritage practices along with other conceptual or case study papers.

The four modalities for analyzing how colonial heritage is practiced are: **removal**, **repression**, **reframing**, and **re-emergence**. These 4Rs were designed to be malleable rather than to form a strict taxonomy. Although there is a normative dimension, there is no determined progression whereby one type of practice must necessarily lead to another, ‘better’ one. Indeed, in their conceptualizing, Christoffer Kølvraa considered that many cases of actual heritage practices “will probably contain elements of more than one mode” (Ibid.). The four modes are described in more detail below. As part of the experimental process of defining these conceptual modalities, ECHOES researchers were encouraged to play around with the application of these 4Rs and see to what extent and in which way they can be applied to the individual case studies in practice. Other colleagues have reformulated these modalities as ‘curatorial memory practices,’ for instance (Bukowiecki & Wawrzyniak 2019).

In the case of this research on how the Amsterdam Museum is dealing with the colonial heritage of the city and its collections, applying the 4Rs has led to identifications of the *result* of (de-)colonial actions. Thus, in practice, within the museum these modalities could be identified within museum ‘products.’ For instance, the action of covering up an infographic in a permanent exhibition could be identified as the result of removal (Ariese et al. 2019: 9). Although these practices were already oftentimes difficult to place within one of the four modalities, as they frequently encompassed elements from the other modalities, an additional complexity appeared. These results of actions were often points within a longer and broader trajectory of a process of dealing with colonial heritage. Thus, analyzing examples of colonial heritage practices in the form of the 4Rs led the author to also develop an additional set of 4Rs to be able to analyze the processes which underlie the practices of which results can be seen in the museum’s collection, exhibitions, programs, and events.

The four modalities for identifying the processes which underlie colonial heritage practicing are: **reflecting**, **reassessing**, **reorganizing**, and **reacting**. Again, there is no determined progression nor strict taxonomy. However, there does not seem to be as much of a qualitative dimension whereby certain modalities might be ‘better’ or ‘worse’. Indeed, it rather seems as if each modality is a valuable if not necessary part of the process in leading towards a practical result or action. These 4Rs of process will be further described below. It should be reiterated in closing that this second set of modalities originated from conducting the research of this particular case study and may not be more broadly applicable.

### Four Modalities for Practices

The four modalities for practices are conceptualized along two axes (see Figure 1). The horizontal axis differentiates between practices which fit within stable structures and those which dislocate or destabilize. Differently put, the axis indicates a degree of conventionality.

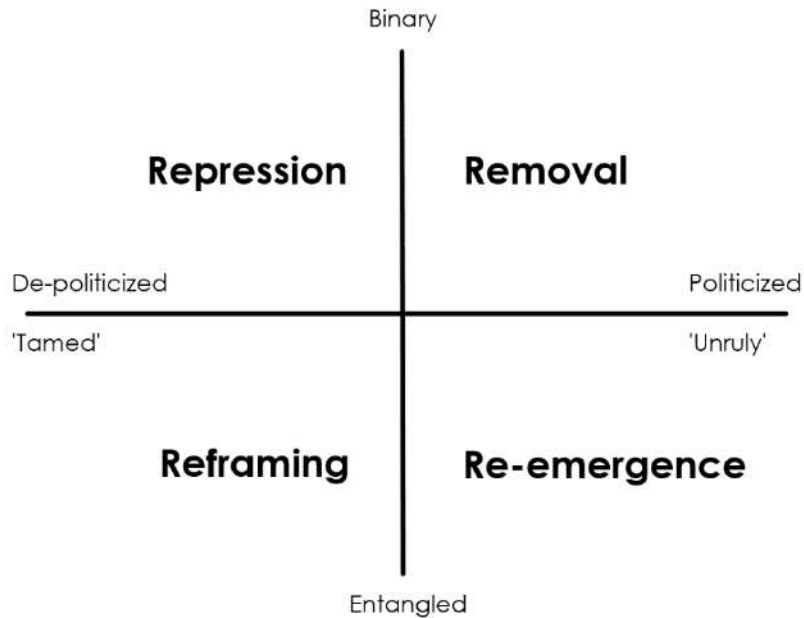


Figure 1: The four modalities for colonial heritage practices. Image: Csilla Ariese after Kølvråa 2019.

**Repression** can be seen as a societally accepted silencing or neglect, and is denoted by Kølvråa as ‘tamed’ or ‘de-politicized’ (2019: 28-29). The long-term exclusion of certain colonial histories can be placed within a continuation of stable structures and could thus be identified as repression. In the Netherlands the sustained, uncontested lack of engagement with the independence wars in Indonesia falls within the category of this modality. The denial of the brutal intrusion by the Dutch who fought to regain colonial control over Indonesia after WWII, which for many years was downplayed by applying the term ‘police actions,’ was unquestioned by the dominant groups in society. This repression is now increasingly being questioned and new academic research and cultural interest may yet change how this colonial heritage is being practiced.

**Removal**, on the other hand, is a more violent interference whereby the forced absence of a particular colonial remnant can lead to a destabilization of established social relationships, narratives, or power hierarchies. Thus, these practices are ‘politicized’ and ‘unruly’ in opposition. Removal “in a sense drags the ghosts into the light even as it demands and attempts to exorcise them” (Kølvråa 2019: 29). A concrete example which has taken place in various settings around the world is the removal of statues or monuments from urban landscapes. Such iconoclasm forcibly interferes with a (former) status quo by removing the painful memories of a past which is no longer desired. Indeed, such absences may be even more ‘visible’ than statues which are left in place within the blind spots of repression and whose power is denied through stable structures.

The vertical axis differentiates between practices which spring forth from binary thinking and those which reveal a more entangled perspective of colonialism. Thus, the axis differentiates a degree of complexity in conceptualizing the colonial. Repression and removal, exemplified above, both fall on the side of binary thinking in which clear dichotomies such as colony/metropole or colonizer/colonized are played out.

**Reframing** concerns the re-contextualization of colonial heritage in new narratives or environments (Knudsen 2019b: 41). In doing so, it often highlights complexities or hybridity which

tends to undermine strict dichotomies. However, in the ECHOES framework it is considered a modality which does not necessarily destabilize or politicize. By sensitizing larger audiences to colonial pasts, for instance, there is a risk that reframing might lead to a trivialization of those pasts. This is the case, for instance, with dark heritage tours. Thus, the act of reframing – for instance in artistic productions or leisure activities – could exert control over the colonial past through commercialization.

**Re-emergence** is seen as the key type of colonial heritage practice within ECHOES. It not only makes space for complex, entangled colonial perspectives, but actively “attempts to generate, provoke or become itself a new kind of experience of the decolonial” (Kølvraa 2019: 30). Thus, it goes beyond reframing because it definitively destabilizes and politicizes. As Britta Timm Knudsen puts it, “re-emergence allows the ghosts of the colonial past to re-appear in the becoming of new futures” (Knudsen 2019a: 48). Artistic works, performative engagements, and activism are well suited to result in practices of re-emergence.

#### ***Four Modalities for Processes***

The four modalities for decolonial processes are in the same way conceptualized along two axes (see Figure 2). The horizontal axis differentiates the extent to which a process is influenced by internal or external pressures. Thus, it shows the degree to which external voices impact the process.

**Reassessing** characterizes those (parts of) processes which take place due to external pressures, regardless of whether these are positive or negative, push or pull pressures. To exemplify, in the case of museums, calls for the repatriation of objects by indigenous groups or others from outside the museum institution may lead to museum staff reassessing their collections. Or, when museum staff visit other institutions, they may be inspired to reassess their own exhibitions or activities on the basis of examples they have observed. Thus, reassessing happens because voices and practices from outside the institution/community are heard and given the space to resonate.

**Reflecting**, on the other hand, is an internalized process whereby an individual or an institution/community are brought to different ideas through their own means. For instance, research into the museum’s own collection might result in the need to reflect on the museum’s collection policies. As a process, it can take the form of critical self-reflection whereby past practices and processes are not automatically repeated. Although there is a difference in the degree to which change is the result of external pressures, both reassessing and reflecting are ultimately combinations of internal and external influences. An individual reflecting on their own traditional mode of working might naturally be influenced to an extent by shifts in academic or public discourses.

The vertical axis makes a distinction between those processes which are based in thinking or reasoning, and those which are grounded in doing. It reveals a different type of action at the heart of the process. The two examples mentioned above, reassessing and reflecting, are processes based mostly in thinking and changes may not be very visible.

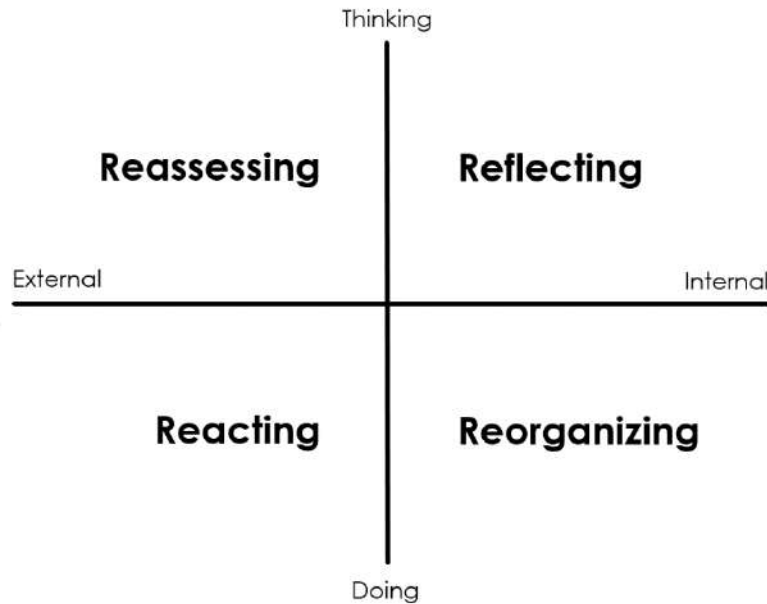


Figure 2: The four modalities for decolonial processes. Image: Csilla Ariese, 2019.

**Reacting**, as connoted in the term itself, is action-based. Inspired by external pressures, the individual or institution/community engage in practical, physical actions for change. This could be a myriad of things, such as repatriating objects from the collections or developing new educational programs by external request. The key here is that these actions are placed, to some extent, as a response or a counter-point to external voices. As such, reacting is not just externally influenced but also generally externally visible. In reacting, museums can take the opportunity to place themselves in outspokenly subjective and political positions in relation to society.

**Reorganizing**, as the fourth but not ‘final’ modality for processes, is also based in action, but decidedly more internalized. Again, these processes can take many different shapes. For instance, reorganizing might entail changing the terminology used within the museum’s collection database. Changing conceptions of the priorities of the museum might also be followed up by staff reorganizations or changes in departmental divisions and tasks. Thus, reorganizing consists of processes of doing which are led by internal pressures and are often also mostly internally visible.

Although it perhaps seems natural to think that processes of doing are preceded by processes of thinking, the reality of decolonial processes in museums are often more complex. All four modalities for decolonial processes could be taking place at the same time, perhaps with different individuals or departments, or focusing on different aspects that warrant change. Indeed, there are chances for processes to loop through these different modalities several times over, e.g. when reorganizing of exhibitions might lead to new external responses, encouraging further reassessing. Nor is it the case that doing processes are ‘better than’ thinking processes. Engaging in thinking without doing can lead to disillusionment – for both staff and outsiders – when there is no visible or perceivable change. On the other hand, doing without thinking runs the risk of resulting in actions which are unsustainable in the long term or cosmetic, tokenistic changes which lack structural embedded.



## Studying the Amsterdam Museum

### Research Approach

From the beginning, the research approach for this study of the Amsterdam Museum (AM) was designed in partnership with the museum and particularly one of the curators. As noted in the first report (Ariese 2019), the AM as an institution has a history of engagement with local communities and societal issues, as evidenced most prominently in (temporary) exhibitions and participatory projects. Additionally, some of the staff have created deliberate opportunities for external, critical reflections on the museum. The New Narrative tours, designed initially as a series of guided tours by non-staff to critique the museum and its narratives, are one recent example (interview AM\_S2). The participation of the museum as a case study for the international training program 'Sharing Stories on Contested Histories' (Kok & Smit 2018) is another. The museum's interest to research its own role in (dealing with) the colonial past of Amsterdam and its collections falls within this institutional history of social engagement and relative openness to external critique. For some of the staff members, this type of external research is welcomed as a chance to work towards decolonizing the institution (e.g. interviews AM\_S2, AM\_S6, AM\_S28).

Thanks to the museum's willingness to provide access to the institution, its staff, and its data, it was possible to design the research project on the basis of participant observation. Therefore, since the start of the research project in October 2018, I was given access to the museum as an external member of staff. This ensured that I could work within the museum and its offices, access data on the internal networked drive, freely visit the exhibition sites of the museum and its collection center, as well as attend museum activities and events. In practice, I have been working two or more days a week within the museum. I am welcome to attend meetings – such as meetings of the New Narratives team, general staff meetings, curatorial team meetings, acquisition meetings – am included in staff conversations (in person, via email, or over WhatsApp) and sent draft and internal documents. Although I had initially thought I would work at the museum as a 'fly on the wall,' my input is regularly encouraged, for instance to brainstorm future plans, but also by sharing my 'outsider' perspective. Practical matters, such as my native language skills, proximity between the university and the museum, and my previous volunteer work experience at the museum, were also helpful in building relationships of trust with museum staff members and being a regular presence.

Centered around participant observation, part of the research has been conducted by applying methods from museum studies. For instance, museological methods were used to document and analyze the two permanent exhibitions (*Amsterdam DNA* and *World – City*), the temporary exhibitions (*1001 Women in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* in 2018 and *Fashion Statements* in 2019), and the other exhibition sites at the Hermitage Amsterdam, Museum Willet-Holthuysen, and the Cromhouthuis. Visitor studies techniques, predominantly based on observations, have also been used when participating in museum events. For the other part, the research has depended on the use of anthropological methods. Besides participant observation, this has been most apparent by conducting formal in-depth interviews with museum staff over the summer of 2019.

### **Data Collected**

A significant amount of the data collected during the 10 months of the research project has been deeply experiential. This is particularly the case for my observations of processes and interpersonal interactions. Nonetheless, I have also attempted to collect more tangible data to support the experiential. A core part of this has been writing ‘field notes’ of anything that has to do with my research at the museum. These notes contain reflections and quotes from meetings, conversations, public events, visits to exhibitions, and more. This amalgamated document contains over 55000 words and is still continuously expanding. In addition to notes, I have also created a collection of photographs. Extensive photographs enable documenting the museum’s exhibitions and exhibition sites, including overview photos as well as details of objects, design, and text panels. I have also photographed museum events and activities, such as New Narratives tours, New Collection Narrative events, exhibition openings, and special evening programs. These photographs also provide a record of the participants of these events and activities.

I also collected tangible, published data which exists within the public realm and is authored by the museum or its staff. These contain print and online publications such as journal articles, books, annual reports, and exhibition catalogues. Although many of these documents are intended for a local (Dutch) audience, some publications are bi-lingual or written for international audiences. This part of the collected data also contains media sources such as newspaper articles, opinion pieces, radio performances, social media posts and comments, and blogs. Whenever relevant to the research topics, I have collected these as PDFs or media files as much as possible.

Additionally, I have also collected data that is only internally available to museum staff. This data is again very varied. To name a few examples: video and audio recordings of public events, drafts of grant applications, policy plans, architectural plans for the museum’s upcoming full redesign, project briefs, proposals for exhibition revisions, or minutes of the meetings of the management team. This data can of course not be shared publicly. However, I am able to use it to detail my own notes, for instance, or refer to knowledge gained from such data in formal interviews.

Finally, the formal interviews are an important part of the data collected as they provide concrete, personal insights into the perceptions and modes of working of the museum staff and of the internal processes of the institution. In July-September 2019, I conducted 29 in-depth interviews with museum staff. The goal of these interviews was to understand the perceptions and experiences of staff members, particularly in terms of work they may have done which was connected to colonialism. Interviews were held with staff members directly employed by the museum, but also with freelance and volunteer staff. Although the curatorial team was best represented in the interviews, interviews were deliberately held with staff from all departments, including catering, security, guides, HR, management, commercial, and front-of-house. I announced an open call for the interviews on the AM’s intranet and at a staff ‘soap box’ meeting, as well as directly approached staff. An information sheet was given to all participants prior to the interview (see Appendix: Information Sheet) and at the start of each interview a consent form was signed (see Appendix: Consent Form) and then the interview was audio recorded.

## **(De)colonial Practices: Representing Colonial Pasts Across the Museum**

Colonialism is inherently a part of Amsterdam. Colonial remnants and legacies are also present – if not always as visible – in the city’s collections and in the Amsterdam Museum (Ariese 2019). The museum and its staff have varyingly engaged with the colonial and the results of these engagements can be more or less identified by applying the four modalities for how colonial heritage is practiced. It would be possible to identify dozens or hundreds of examples, going back to the founding of the museum in 1926, by studying archived exhibition materials, catalogue texts, photographs, and interviewing (former) staff members with long institutional histories.

For this report, I have chosen to focus only on four examples of practices, one for each modality, to enable a more in-depth analysis of each of these examples. The selection has been made to deliberately include a practice from each of the four core domains of museum work: collections, exhibitions, public programs, and events. Despite having access to former practices, this research project showed the importance of experiential knowledge in analyzing how colonial heritage is practiced. Thus, the examples selected are all results of actions which happened or were present during the time of this research. Other examples have appeared in the first report on the Amsterdam Museum (Ariese 2019: 19-21) and in a joint project report (Ariese *et al.* 2019). Below, each example will begin with a description of the example, a brief description of the process behind the resulting practice, an insight into visitors’ responses where possible, and an analysis on the basis of the ECHOES framework.

### **Removal in Programs: The ‘Indian’ Stereotype**

As per the business plan of the AM for the years 2017-2020, one of the four core target audiences are families (AHM 2016: 10). For people visiting the museum in a familial setting, the museum offers special tours, activities, programs, as well as the special family exhibition *Het Kleine Weeshuis* (The Little Orphanage). Many of these offerings are particularly made for families with (young) children. They aim to make the museum engaging and interesting for young visitors and to encourage families to experience the museum together and bond during their visit. Programs, activities, and special exhibition trails are generally developed by the educators of the museum.

The example discussed here is a ‘*praatplaat*’ or conversation-image which was developed by the museum in the spring of 2019. It is a booklet (AM 2019b) for families with children aged 3 and up and accompanies the exhibition *World – City*. The booklet is offered to families for free at the cash register and is also available for download from the museum’s website<sup>1</sup>. The center of the booklet contains a large drawn image full of characters and objects “from all eras from Amsterdam and the world with which she is connected” (AM 2019b: 2; my translation). Families can use this image within the exhibition space along with the questions in the booklet. The questions guide families to look closely at the image and also at the museum exhibition and to search for specific things. For instance, to find things in the image and the exhibition with a specific color, or people with a particular expression, or animals. Because the booklet is meant for very young children (mainly ages 3-6) the drawings are intended to be easily recognizable. To match the theme of the exhibition *World – City*, which focuses on the relationships between Amsterdam and the world, the booklet also aims to show international ties.

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<sup>1</sup> The booklet (AM 2019b) with the conversation-plate and questions is available on the museum’s website: [https://www.amsterdammuseum.nl/sites/default/files/\\_a3\\_praatplaat\\_2\\_web.pdf](https://www.amsterdammuseum.nl/sites/default/files/_a3_praatplaat_2_web.pdf)

Colonialism features in the exhibition *World – City* (see more below) and it is therefore not surprising that some of the images in the booklet would also be related to this past and its legacies. The people working on the booklet asked for input and advice from other colleagues at the museum, as well as external advice. They did not wish to completely erase colonial ties from the booklet; however, they flagged a drawing of a ‘native American’ smoking a pipe as problematic. The team felt that this image was an overly negative stereotype of indigeneity, although they also considered that it was an image which would be easily recognizable for the target audience and one that could be used as a starting point for conversations about the history of colonizing North America. Ultimately, as with other parts of the image that were changed between versions, decisions were made on the basis of two main points (pers. comm. 4 March 2019). Firstly, that selected images were inclusive in showing diversity – e.g. people of visibly different cultural backgrounds, ableness, different family compositions – thereby ensuring that diverse visitors could feel represented by the images. Secondly, that selected images were recognizable but did not contribute to creating or propagating harmful stereotypes – e.g. a female figure in a headscarf was altered from holding a baby to holding a cellphone to counter stereotypes of Muslim women as housewives and not businesswomen. On the basis of this second point, the decision was made for removal of the smoking ‘Indian’ (see Figure 3), and colonial trade was more subtly represented through sugar cubes instead of tobacco leaves.

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intention of the removal was a positively motivated one, namely that the image could have a harmful impact on visitors. Yet, the invisible way in which the removal happened perhaps makes it fit more as repression. This is not unlike the manner in which an infographic in the exhibition *Amsterdam DNA* was removed by placing a sticker over it (Ariese *et al.* 2019: 9). Although in a visible location in the exhibition, only people who knew the images was there in the past could recognize its absence (mainly museum staff), while the majority of visitors are not likely to notice the removal of the ‘ghost of the past.’ Even some staff were uncertain whether something had been removed or not (interview AM\_S14).

### **Repression in Exhibitions: Migration Movies**

The main exhibition site of the Amsterdam Museum, located in the former civil orphanage in the center of Amsterdam, currently has two permanent exhibitions: *Amsterdam DNA* (2011) and *World – City* (2018). The former was created to give a concise overview of the history of Amsterdam, primarily for a non-local audience. Although it is a chronological exhibition which is designed along a stylized timeline with infographics, it can also be thematically read through four characteristics of the city. The latter exhibition is entirely thematically designed and investigates the relationships between Amsterdam and the world. Its themes include conflict, religion, representation or branding, and migration. It is designed for local or non-local audiences who want more depth and reflection.

The example analyzed here is a video collage of migrants arriving or departing from Amsterdam which is on display within the exhibition *World – City* as part of the section on migration titled ‘Finding Happiness.’ One of the video fragments is also visible in the last part of the exhibition *Amsterdam DNA* where it is labelled ‘New Amsterdammers.’ The video collage is a loop of short film fragments with text captions and without audio (see Figure 4). It is located roughly half-way through the exhibition up a small set of stairs. Possibly due to its location just off the main line of the exhibition and up a few steps, or the darkness of the room in which the video is projected on a gray wall, or the lack of audio to draw people in, it is frequently skipped by visitors. The video collage itself has no label text, nor title or credits. The roughly 20 video fragments all show black and white footage of migrants arriving or departing, mainly via air or sea. Each fragment has a text caption: ‘Dutch soldiers returning from Indonesia, 1950,’ ‘Surinamese arrive at Amsterdam airport, 1975,’ or ‘Dutch Jews leaving for Israel, 1948.’ The video of Surinamese arrivals is the one which is also shown in *Amsterdam DNA*. There, a longer video is shown which appears to be from a news cast.<sup>2</sup> The original Dutch audio with English subtitles begins as follows: “Many times a week, planes from Paramaribo bring Surinam people leaving their country with its unemployment of 25 percent and where life is getting harder, also because of inflation. Their Dutch passport guarantees them relief here” (AM, video from 1975).

Although global politics, warfare, colonialism, genocide, and geo-political decolonization are clearly the cause of many of the migrations filmed, this is not made explicit in either exhibition. By identifying these migrations by date, their colonial causes remain implicit. In the silent waving of migrants disembarking from ships or departing by train, colonial pasts are effectively repressed. The curator chiefly responsible for both exhibitions describes Amsterdam as a revolving door: a city which has always seen people coming and going (interview AM\_S17). The aim of the gallery, as

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<sup>2</sup> The title screen of the video as exhibited there reads: “Arrival of Surinamers – ‘You can’t live in Amsterdam’ – 1975.”



originally designed, was to show the manifold migration stories that Amsterdam has seen over the centuries and to highlight not only immigrants but also emigrants. Besides the video collage, the rest of the gallery contains mainly personal or familial biographies with associated objects, showcasing the draw in and out of the city and the diversity of the population. The curator's interest was mainly in the global – as opposed to the local – and how Amsterdam has been entangled with the world. Yet, despite the interest in telling multi-vocal narratives through the exhibitions, this curator perceived them from a position of objectivity or neutrality. As such, particularly the migration videos are plagued by a lack of contextualization and the absence of explicit, subjective conversations about the colonial causes of these migrations or their legacies in the present.

The neutrality in the video captions echoes the societally accepted silencing of colonial pasts. The repression of the colonial violence underlying these movements of peoples – whether soldiers sent into colonial combat or civilian refugees forced to flee – is rooted in the traditional authoritative power of the colonizer. Thus, even though colonial ghosts are visible in the videos, the neglect for context and subjective evaluation renders them effectively invisible. Formal visitor studies in the museum have not focused specifically on this gallery, nor on colonial pasts. However, from my own preliminary observations, it seems that many visitors bypass this display entirely. Those who do watch the videos do not appear to have any strong reactions.

Internally, museum staff are considering revisions to both of the permanent exhibitions. The 'Finding Happiness' gallery is included in preliminary plans for revisions. It is clear that the title and main panel text of this gallery are two things that would be changed. These changes would be an important way to break away from the positive tone which is currently hidden under the 'neutral' surface of the narratives. Although there are no concrete plans for the migration videos, it is possible that the space might be used for something else entirely, such as an artistic intervention instead. This could support the emergence of new heritages.



Figure 4: Migration movies in the exhibition *World – City*, Amsterdam Museum, showing repression of colonial causes for migration. Photo: Csilla Ariese, 2019.

### ***Reframing in Events: New Collection Narratives***

In November 2018, the Amsterdam Museum began with a new series of events called New Collection Narratives (NCN). Envisioned to take place four times a year, although not necessarily quarterly, each of these NCN events takes a single object from the museum's collection as its focus. The aim of the event is two-fold: firstly, to transparently discuss the many different narratives and perspectives which a single object can encompass or carry, and secondly to gather external, critical feedback on these or new narratives (interview AM\_S2). The events have a rough format which is changed depending on the object and topic in question. Generally taking place in a setting which is conducive to dialogic knowledge exchange – such as the museum café, auditorium, or a meeting room – the object in question is always physically present for the event. In some cases, this means the object is brought in from the storage facility, in other cases the participants are taken into the museum to see the object as it is displayed. Generally multiple voices are invited, often including a curator or other staff member who has researched the object in question or was involved in its acquisition, ideally also with persons from outside the museum as speakers. So far, four NCN events have taken place, each on a Thursday from 17-19 (after opening hours), with on average 20 participants.



Figure 5: 'Pelew-eilanders' illustration by Jacques Kuyper, c. 1802, used during a New Collection Narratives event for reframing. Amsterdam Museum #TA 10627.

In July 2019, an NCN event was organized around a series of drawings by Jacques Kuyper (see Figure 5). The illustrations were created for a six-volume book<sup>3</sup> by Martinus Stuart, written 1802-1807. It is a richly illustrated ethnography of the peoples of the world, and is clearly – quite literally – colored by the perceptions of the white European men whose enlightenment ideals and ideas shaped the book. Deeply rooted in those ideals, the peoples in the book are ordered according to racist notions of evolutionary progression and degrees of ‘civilization.’ Both the descriptions and accompanying illustrations consist of deeply problematic racist, sexist, exoticizing, misogynistic, and essentializing stereotypes. The captions of the illustrations are often dehumanizing, inappropriate, or insulting. Neither Kuyper nor Stuart had themselves travelled, thus texts and illustrations are all based on the experiences of other (European) travelers.

The illustrations entered the collection of the Amsterdam Museum through the Museum Fodor. Carel Joseph Fodor had bequeathed his private collection of drawings and prints to the city of Amsterdam, leading to the foundation of the Museum Fodor in 1861. The Fodor-collection became the responsibility of the Amsterdam Historical Museum in 1963. The Kuypers-illustrations were included into the Amsterdam Museum’s collection without additional information and were catalogued under their original captions. In 1973, the six-volume book was also purchased by the museum.

The NCN event was designed to tackle a number of questions staff were trying to deal with in relation to these illustrations. Was it possible to exhibit these drawings without reproducing the gaze with which they had been made? If so, how? How could the museum catalogue these illustrations more sensitively, without erasing their original context and content? The desire to reframe these objects was not merely hypothetical: the illustrations were planned to be included in the next temporary exhibition, due to open in October 2019. Research by a curatorial intern had been an important step to revising the catalogue texts accompanying the objects (Reid 2019), but exhibiting the prints called for deeper, critical reflection. Thus, there was a sincere desire to gather external input on how these objects and their problematic issues could best be exhibited in a feasible manner. The event took place in a meeting room where the original illustrations from the museum’s collection center were displayed on tables (see Figure 6). Participants were also taken into the exhibition *World – City*. Firstly, to look at how a historic book<sup>4</sup> with illustrations of the brutal punishments against escaped enslaved persons is currently framed in the exhibition. Secondly, to view a contemporary artwork<sup>5</sup> that aims to give an imagined but personal face to freed enslaved persons whose names are recorded in historic documents. One of the curators opened the event by presenting the objects and their history and transparently voiced their own discomforts, questions, and insecurities in how best to handle these objects. Some of the participants were staff from the Amsterdam Museum or other museums. Most of the event took the form of an open discussion in which participants grappled with the questions posed and aimed to honestly and respectfully seek answers.

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<sup>3</sup> *De mensch zoo als hij voorkomt op den bekenden aardbol* [The human as he appears on the known globe], Martinus Stuart, 1802-1807. AM, #KA 15078-#KA 15083

<sup>4</sup> *Reize naar Surinamen, en door de binnenste gedeelten van Guiana* [Travel to Suriname and through the most inner areas of Guyana], John Gabriel Stedman, 1799-1800. AM, #A 39084.1.

<sup>5</sup> *Manumission Pauline*, Ken Doorson, 2016. AM, #2160.





Figure 6: Participants of the *New Collection Narratives* event looking at the Kuyper illustrations. Photo: Csilla Ariese, 2019.

Over the course of the event, while acknowledging that the complexity of the images would never fit into a simple museum label, concrete suggestions were made by the participants. Essentially, these suggestions were all ways in which reframing of the objects could take place. Allowing for complexity, reframing goes beyond binary dichotomies, without necessarily being deeply disruptive. Some of the suggestions related to how to present the information: for instance, to show historic labels next to modern labels, or to add multiple narratives through an audio guide. Other suggestions were related to the content and terminology. One participant summarized it by saying that illustrations could be contextualized in a way which deliberately reveals the ‘white spirit.’ Explicitly, labels could point out the sexualization of women of color as exoticism, or question the heteronormative biological stereotype of the nuclear family of man + woman + baby, or draw the gaze to the racist ideas behind the white skin color of the babies (the book describes how everyone is born white but how some people become darker because they are ‘dirty’). By making the white gaze overt, such labels could counter the dehumanizing taking place in the illustrations.

Certainly, reframing took place during the NCN event. This was also facilitated by inviting artist Atta de Tolk to observe the event and present his reflections at the end in the form of a spoken word performance. Depending on the way in which the suggestions for reframing gathered and archived during the event will feed into the upcoming temporary exhibition, there is certainly potential for re-emergence and disruption of colonial heritage. Stepping beyond reframing, re-emergence is more ‘politicized’ and more meaningfully impacts how people construct their heritages.

### **Re-emergence in Collections: Kabra Ancestral Mask**

The Kabra ancestral mask<sup>6</sup> is an object in the collections of the Amsterdam Museum, which is unique in terms of its creation, use, and preservation. The mask was made in 2013 by Dutch visual artist Boris van Berkum as the result of a collaborative process with Winti<sup>7</sup> priestess Marian Markelo (interview AM\_S6). Markelo was in search of visual representations of Winti ancestors, considering that the colonizers of Suriname had consistently sought to eliminate any ‘heathen’ material culture and thus few ancestral representations remained – or were locked away in museum storages. Together, Markelo and Van Berkum conducted collections research and as a result Van Berkum created the Kabra ancestral mask on the basis of a 3D scan of a Yoruba ancestral mask from the collections of the Afrika Museum. The cloth around the mask is white and blue, which are the Winti colors of mourning (see Figure 7).

The mask was used by Markelo on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2013 (*Keti Koti*; the breaking of chains), during the commemoration of the 150<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of the Dutch abolition of slavery in Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles (see Figure 8). She opened the commemoration ceremony with a libation<sup>8</sup> and in doing so was supported and accompanied by the ancestors (embodied by a dancer wearing the Kabra mask) (van Berkum 2017). For Markelo and others in the Winti community, the mask is more than simply an inanimate object. It embodies the spirits of the ancestors. With someone wearing the mask, ancestors can be present at commemorations and celebrations. At these events, descendants can dance with their ancestors, mourn them, celebrate them, sing lamentations, and connect with them.

Through the personal and professional relationship of one of the curators of the Amsterdam Museum with Markelo and van Berkum, the possibilities were discussed to take the mask into the museum’s collections (interview AM\_S6). An important point of discussion was the continued use of the mask for Winti ceremonies and dances. The mask was purchased by the AM in 2014. To accommodate the unique requirements of the object, the AM created a new category in their collections: *gebruikscollectie* (use-collection). Within this category, special conditions apply to the Kabra mask as a museum object. Although it can be stored safely within the museum’s storage facility, it can also be loaned to non-museum organizations and individuals. The object does not need to be kept in a vitrine, but is allowed to be used and worn. It does not need to be kept inside but can also be used outdoors. Since its acquisitions, the Kabra mask has been used during *Kabra Neti* (ancestral meal), a Winti Bal Masqué, and the annual *Memre Waka* (memorial journey, a walk to the mayoral residence<sup>9</sup> in Amsterdam) (Roberson 2019; de Wildt 2014a; 2014b). It has also been loaned for a longer period of time for a series of daily theater performances and for exhibition performances (Dallajee 2016).

<sup>6</sup> *Kabra vooroudermasker* [Kabra ancestral mask], Boris van Berkum, 2013. AM, #1304.

<sup>7</sup> Winti is an Afro-Surinamese traditional religion. Despite prosecution by Dutch colonizers, Winti continued to be practiced in Suriname and still has practitioners today.

<sup>8</sup> A video recording of the libation can be seen on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/xozkWz4jjXc>.

<sup>9</sup> The mayoral residence is located on Herengracht 502, where Paulus Godin lived and worked in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Godin was governor of the Dutch West India Company (WIC), director of the *Sociëteit van Suriname* (which ‘owned’ Suriname at the time), and earned part of his income through the slave trade.





Figure 7: Kbra ancestral mask, Boris van Berkum, 2013. Photo: Erik Hesmerg. Amsterdam Museum #1304.



Figure 8: The Kbra mask and Marian Markelo during the libation, 1 July 2013, with re-emergence of the ancestors. Photo: James van der Ende, Amsterdam Museum.

Adding the Kabra ancestral mask to the AM's collections has resulted in an on-going process of collaboration between AM staff, members of the Winti community, and dancers. Along the way, they have been trying to figure out best practices for the preservation, transportation, and use of the mask. For instance, the Kabra mask was initially stored in a large cardboard box, in which it could be transported to the location where it would be used. Museum staff had not included gloves in the box, assuming this would make it easier to use the mask by lowering the barriers of use. The mask is worn above the head by means of a wooden construction on the shoulders of the dancer and a head strap. However, users of the mask did not wish to touch the mask itself for its prolonged preservation and upon their request, museum staff included gloves in the box (interview AM\_S22). With use, the cardboard box experienced regular wear and tear. To solve this, a staff member of the museum built a more durable wooden case for the mask. However, the size and weight of the case have made it more difficult to transport the mask, as it does not fit into smaller cars (interview AM\_S6). Thus, the collaboration continues to refine the preservation and use of the mask as a museum object for use.

The Kabra ancestral mask can be identified as re-emergence as it has enabled the creation of new heritages and new ways of dealing with the colonial pasts. Through performances, the mask has destabilized and actively created new relationships with the past. Indeed, it has quite literally allowed “the ghosts of the colonial past to re-appear in the becoming of new futures” (Knudsen 2019a: 48). By embodying ancestral spirits, the Kabra mask has become important for the Winti community in the Netherlands as a part of intangible heritage practices and religious and ritual ceremonies. However, although this re-emergence is very important, it is mostly so for a small community. Indeed, staff of the Amsterdam Museum have also received negative critique for focusing so much continued effort on building a long-term relationship with this community. As one inhabitant of Amsterdam told a staff member, by far not everyone from Suriname follows the Winti religion (interview AM\_S3). By placing the Kabra mask as the center piece for much of the museum's engagements with the local Surinamese community, particularly around events such as Keti Koti, this may effectively exclude other Surinamese Amsterdammers. Indeed, there is a risk that focusing too much on this object as representing that community can be exoticizing. This is something for the museum to keep in mind in their continued participatory practices with various communities, as well as for other examples of re-emergence.

### **Processes of Decolonization: Changing the ‘Golden Age’ Exhibition**

In 2014, the Amsterdam Museum in partnership with the Rijksmuseum opened the exhibition *Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age* (PGGA) in the Hermitage Amsterdam. The main draw of the exhibition is the thirty enormous (mostly) 17<sup>th</sup> century group portraits from the collections of the AM and the Rijksmuseum. Due to the large size of these paintings, many of them had not been previously exhibited, or not in a space that was optimal for viewing them. The large monumental building of the Hermitage Amsterdam does have such huge exhibition halls which are well suited for exhibiting these artworks. Thus, the AM has rented a wing of the Hermitage Amsterdam for this exhibition, at least until the end of 2020.

The exhibition was designed to show the self-image of the upper classes in Dutch cities during the so-called ‘Golden Age’ (van der Molen 2016; cf. Ariese et al. 2019: 9-10). The core message of the exhibition is that it shows urban citizenship as something typical for the Netherlands, both in the past and present. The historical self-image was contextualized through the addition of



contemporary perspectives and critiques, for instance related to the role of these citizens in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In another case, reframing was practiced in the label of a painting<sup>10</sup> of a white woman and a young black boy, by purposefully focusing on the unnamed boy and leaving the woman in anonymity (interview AM\_S1):

### **A portrait of injustice**

*Portraits were intended as a permanent reminder of the person depicted, but we do not know the name of young black boy depicted here, unlike the woman he serves. In his anonymity, he reveals the injustice of the exploitation and slavery associated with international trade. The woman in the portrait saw the black boy as a status symbol rather than a fellow human being.*

AM English object label, 2014

Despite these critical commentaries and perspectives worked into the exhibition, the general impression of the exhibition remained one in which the ‘Golden Age’ and its (upper class) citizens were glorified. This was of course also due to the title of the exhibition and the marketing campaigns which have accompanied it (see Figure 9). Since the beginning of the exhibition, this perceived glorification of the ‘Golden Age’ has seen contestation and people have pointed out that the 17<sup>th</sup> century was certainly not ‘Golden’ for everyone. As such, the exhibition was criticized for not saying enough about the great human cost which led to the accrual of wealth of these citizens and may have paid for some of these portraits. Despite efforts for reframing, the main impression was one of repression.

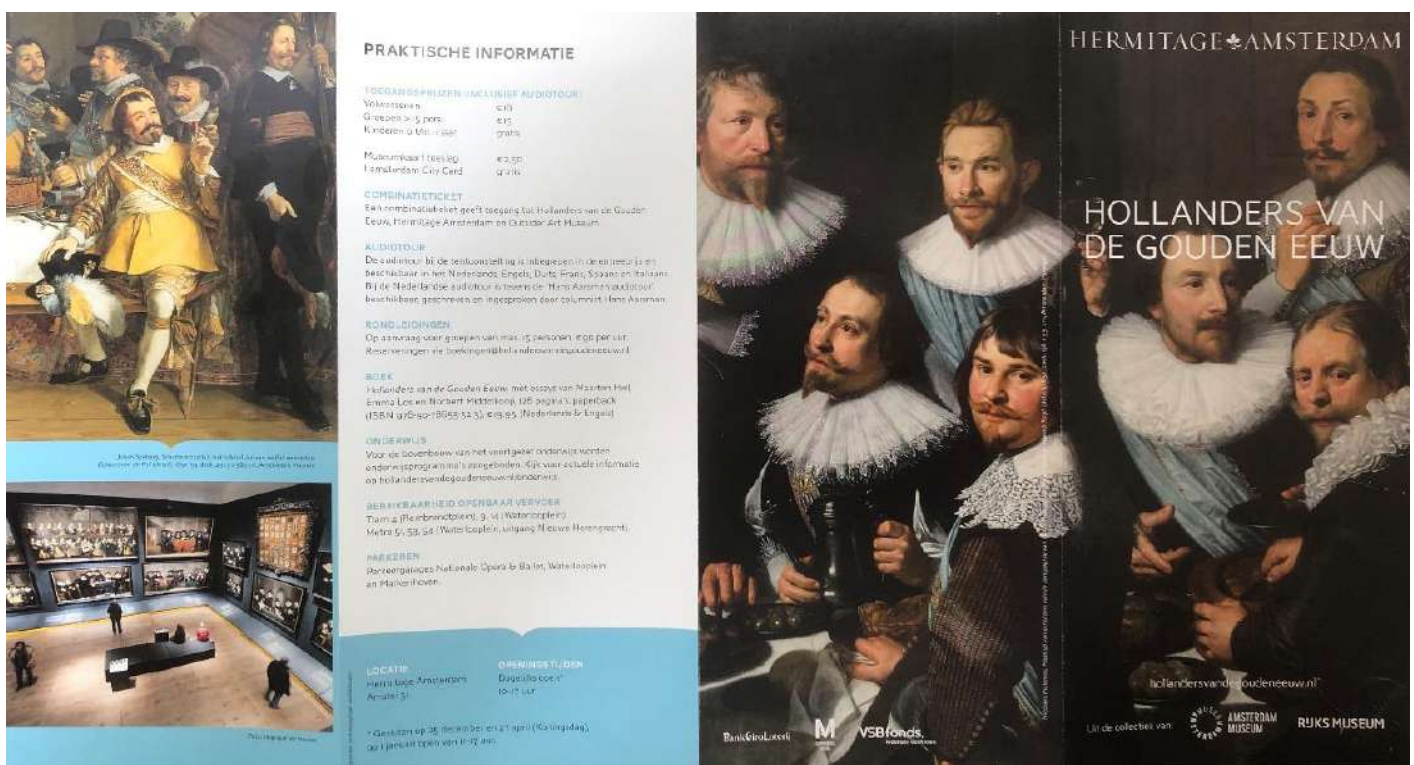


Figure 9: Dutch flyer for the exhibition *Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age* (Dutch title: *Hollanders van de Gouden Eeuw*), Amsterdam Museum.

<sup>10</sup> Portret van Margaretha van Raephorst (1625-1690), Jan Mijtens, 1668. Rijksmuseum, #SK-A-285.

### **Reflecting: New Insights**

Since the opening of the PGGA in 2014, staff members who worked on the exhibition at the time – also due to conversations with other members of staff who were not directly involved in the exhibition – have reflected on the content and message of the exhibition. One staff member overheard a guest at the opening say “Ha! Here they are, the slavery guys” and found this deeply shocking at the time because viewing the paintings did not call up such an association for him (interview AM\_S1; my translation). Over time, this initial moment of shock inspired closer research into the objects displayed and a process of reconsideration of the message of the exhibition. These new insights took time to develop: “We paid attention to international trade, to war, to weapons’ trade, and also to slavery, but I think insufficiently and not sharply. If I look at it now [...] then I think, no, this could have been much, much better” (interview AM\_S1; my translation).

New insights into the objects on display could be used by the involved staff members to consider how the exhibition could be altered or reframed. Importantly, public debates in the Netherlands related to racism, representation, and the legacies of slavery were increasingly audible. These debates also impacted staff members whose perspectives on the ‘Golden Age’ changed, whereas a few other staff members were already at the center of these debates. Thus, over the course of 2018 concrete suggestions were drafted for changes to the exhibition, such as replacements of some of the objects. Although not as concrete, there were also suggestions that contemporary critique, for instance in the form of contemporary artworks, could be added to further contextualize the exhibition and its relationship to the present. Curators strongly felt that the historical representations of the 17<sup>th</sup> century could not be separated from the context of the present-day, and that it was not so easy – as a final panel in the exhibition had made it appear – to equate 17<sup>th</sup> century citizenship with modern Dutch urbanism.

### **Reassessing: Public Critique**

As mentioned, reflections were also influenced by external pressures, such as opinion pieces in Dutch newspapers about the exhibition (de Jong 2016) which provoked formal responses (van der Molen 2016), or occasional negative comments on social media and in written guestbook entries. Initially, this negative feedback from the public did not lead to concrete changes in the exhibition, but rather influenced the thinking of involved staff members – primarily curators. Although formal suggestions for changes to the exhibition were proposed in 2018, these changes were not prioritized and were not put into effect that year. However, the exhibition was chosen as the focus of a New Narratives tour in March 2019 to gather critical input from the public and the insights of theater maker Jörgen Tjon A Fong who was invited as the guide.

In May 2019, suddenly new external pressure arose. One of the advertisement posters of the exhibition had been vandalized in Amsterdam (see Figure 10). The anonymous intervention whited-out the faces of the men portrayed, writing ‘BLOODY’ over them. The exhibition was also retitled as ‘Portrait Gallery of the STOLEN Age.’ Photos of the vandalized advertisement were shared over Twitter, to which the AM replied “We are working continuously to improve our exhibitions, collection, and the stories which we tell about them, specifically to make them more inclusive and diverse” (AM, twitter 7 May 2019 reply to New Urban Collective). Having effectively promised that the museum was working on improvements, the earlier suggestions for changes in the exhibition were brought forward again internally. Indeed, the external critique seemed now to have resonated more strongly, not just with curators, but also marketing and PR staff, as well as management. Curatorial staff used this external push to create new momentum for changes and

a thorough reassessing of the exhibition. Indeed, one staff member pointed out that there could be a greater risk of physical harm for objects in the exhibition if action was not taken (interview AM\_S22). Further than the earlier suggestions for changes, the internal discussion now also included the general message and framing of the exhibition and how it was marketed. As one staff member noted: “I understand very well that people react to the way in which we have stepped outside with this exhibition, the way in which this exhibition is framed, that they react with pain and sadness. And so, I also understand that the poster belonging to this exhibition was besmirched” (interview AM\_S1; my translation).



Figure 10: *Portrait Gallery of the STOLEN Age*, anonymous intervention of an advertisement for the exhibition in Amsterdam. Photo posted by New Urban Collective, 7 May 2019 (Twitter).

### **Reorganizing: Revising the Campaign**

The combination of internal reflecting which had been taking place since 2014, and the reassessing which had once again been activated due to external negative critique, brought the internal process of changing the exhibition to concrete action in 2019. At the same time, a new marketing campaign was being designed for three reasons (interview AM\_S15). Firstly, visitor numbers had dropped, likely due to the exhibition having been open for 5 years and drawing fewer Dutch visitors – the assumption being that many regular Dutch museum visitors would have already seen the exhibition. Secondly, the different titles of the exhibition in Dutch and English seemed to have caused confusion in terms of foreign visitors. Thirdly, the exhibition had originally been announced as a temporary exhibition, yet without an end date. Some tourist sites and other marketing outlets had therefore not advertised the exhibition.

The ongoing development of a new marketing campaign was reorganized by including the renewed desire for altering the content and message of the exhibition. Thus, internal action was



taken: with support from the management team, marketing, PR, and curatorial staff worked together to significantly revise the exhibition. It was decided that the term ‘Golden Age’ would no longer be used in the title of the exhibition (neither in Dutch nor in English) and that any use of the term in labels would be contextualized. Together with focus groups, new concept titles were tested, aiming to select a set of Dutch/English titles which were closer together than the previous pair (interview AM\_S13). A new exhibition title would require changes to websites, flyers, signage and would be coupled with a new advertisement campaign which would also use a new image. The emphasis of the visual campaign would be on the impressiveness of the group portraits from the eyes of a visitor, rather than just on a portrait itself. Revisions to label texts were planned, as well as some changes in objects. The aim would be to include more critique of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the civilians and ways of life featured in the portraits, and to create a more inclusive exhibition. The museum could have silently made many of these alterations, but instead opted for openness and transparency in their changes and in the decisions behind these changes.



Figure 11: New advertisement for the *Portrait Gallery of the 17th Century*, outside the Hermitage Amsterdam, September 2019. Photo: Tom van der Molen.

The new exhibition title and marketing campaign was launched on 12 September 2019 (see Figure 11). The AM knew that choosing not to use the term ‘Golden Age’ would lead to criticism by populists and thus the choice was carefully and deliberately made. Internally, a Q&A document was prepared to enable staff to answer queries from press and public. The marketing campaign was launched simultaneously with a press release (AM 2019a), an opinion piece in a national newspaper (Kiers *et al.* 2019), and an essay by a curator (van der Molen 2019). Responses on social media were immediate and initially almost exclusively extremely negative, claiming the museum was ‘falsifying



history' and calling museum staff 'traitors,' among other things. By the next day, the news that the AM had "banned" the use of the term 'Golden Age' had been picked up by local and national media (e.g. AD 2019; de Telegraaf 2019; NOS 2019), as well as international media (e.g. Boffey 2019), and #goudeneeuw was trending on Twitter in the Netherlands with nearly 4000 tweets in 24 hours. The nuanced press release of the museum, explaining that the term would only be used in context but no longer as a simple synonym for the 17<sup>th</sup> century, seemed to be largely ignored. Instead, deeply emotional responses were evoked, with persons calling for the museum's subsidy to be cut, its collections burned, and its staff sacked. The Rijksmuseum issued a statement that they would continue to use the term (NOS 2019), and support from other cultural institutions was largely absent – even from those who are working on similar decolonization processes behind the scenes. Alongside the negative critique evoked by the museum's public announcement, there were also positive responses praising the decision of the museum, for instance by Dutch historians, museum professionals abroad, and communities in Amsterdam who perceived it as acknowledgement for the experiences of their ancestors who suffered during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Over the following days, slowly more voices in support for the decision could be heard in interviews (e.g. de Knecht 2019), articles (Claus 2019), and comments. Two weeks later, one of the museum's curators pointed out in an interview that the museum stood by its decision and responded to some of the questions that had been raised in the national debate (Wiegman 2019). The next day, the museum held a symposium entitled 'Whose Golden Age?'

### **Reacting: Collaborating for Change**

Although initial (social) media reactions focused strongly on the term 'Golden Age,' from the museum's perspective this was only one part of the process for change. Perhaps more significant, in terms of content, were the planned changes to the exhibition itself in terms of objects, labels, and message. Indeed, already from 2018, the museum had collaborated with a project by Urban Myth called *Hollandse Meesters Her-zien*<sup>11</sup> (Dutch Masters Revisited). This project researches historical people of color who lived in the Netherlands in the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century. Contemporary well-known Dutch persons of color are then asked to take on such a historical identity for a photo portrait in the style of Rembrandt and his contemporaries. In early 2019, and in part influenced by the external pressures mentioned above, the museum reacted by initiating a deeper collaboration with Urban Myth. They began planning an artistic project within the *Portrait Gallery of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century* (PG17C) exhibition.

Thus, the museum collaborated with theater maker Jörgen Tjon A Fong of Urban Myth and asked him to be guest curator of the exhibition *Dutch Masters Revisited*, opened in the Hermitage Amsterdam on 30 September 2019 (see Figure 12). Formally, it is announced as a temporary exhibition within the PG17C exhibition, although by presenting new narratives of color, it clearly also functions as a critical intervention<sup>12</sup> and aims to add greater inclusivity to the exhibition. The exhibition features 13 portraits by four photographers and aims to visualize historical persons

<sup>11</sup> In 2018, three portraits were exhibited in Amsterdam at OSCAM in collaboration with Urban Myth and the Amsterdam Museum. The collaboration between the AM and Tjon A Fong goes back to the research phase for the creation of the exhibition *Ferdinand Bol & Govert Flinck: Rembrandt's Master Pupils* (together with Museum Het Rembrandthuis, open October 2017-February 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Tjon A Fong refers to it as a 'temporary exhibition' and does not use the term 'intervention' as he feels it connotes something which is too temporary and not of equivalent value (pers. comm. 29 Sept 2019).

whose stories were not included in the exhibition of old. These new narratives which are added to the PG17C show the complexities of Dutch society of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, for instance by also including the story of a person of mixed descent whose father was a slave trader. *Dutch Masters Revisited* is specifically not designed to provide a colored counter-narrative of suffering during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, instead the historical persons and their narratives are exhibited to show that 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch urban society was complex, multi-layered, and multi-faceted (pers. comm. 17 Sept 2019). People are not so easily stereotyped into binary categories of white/black, colonizer/colonized, rich/poor. By placing the new photo portraits in the same hall as the old paintings, a new vision of the past is created and one in which people of different cultural backgrounds can see themselves represented. The style and size of the photo portraits aids in ensuring that they can stand their own in relation to the ‘old masters’ without exoticizing or marginalizing.

Besides reacting by working with a guest curator to develop a temporary exhibition, the AM is also making some significant changes to the PG17C exhibition itself. Besides changing the name and marketing campaign of the exhibition, some of the gallery spaces are being completely redesigned in order to change the closing message of the exhibition and ask visitors for their thoughts and feelings about the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Other contemporary artworks are also added here to encourage a dialogue between past and present, such as a fragment of Ida Does’ documentary *Sporen van Suiker* (Traces of Sugar, 2017). Further galleries on the top floor have seen more subtle revisions by which a number of objects are repositioned or replaced, and some object labels are rewritten. As an example, the label for the *Portrait of Paulus Godin (1615-1690)*<sup>13</sup> was previously:

***Profit is all***

*In 1675 Paulus Godin and his fellow governors of the Dutch West India Company (WIC) win an order from the Spanish government, the Asiento de Negros, which stipulates that every year for five years they have to ship four thousand African slaves to Curaçao. A third of them have to be women. The fabulously wealthy Godin owns a magnificent canal-side house. In 1927 it becomes the official residence of the Mayor of Amsterdam.*

AM English object label, 2014

In the revision, the title immediately sets the negative tone in which the visitor is to view the portrayed individual. Furthermore, the positivity from the previous label in reference to Godin’s wealth and residence has been appropriately muted. Changes in terminology also reflect conscious decisions in decolonizing, following the suggested glossary in *Words Matter* (Modest & Lelijveld 2018). As of now, the label reads:

***Human trafficker***

*You might not think so by looking at his portrait, but Paulus Godin was a trafficker in human beings. In 1675, he and three colleagues signed a contract with representatives of the Spanish King, the Asiento de Negros. They agreed to supply the Spanish colonies with 4,000 enslaved people from Curaçao every year for five years. Godin was immensely rich and lived on the Herengracht canal, in the property that is now the official residence of the Mayor of Amsterdam.*

AM English object label, 2019

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<sup>13</sup> Portret van Paulus Godin (1615-1690), Wallerant Vaillant, 1650-1699. AM, #1447.



Figure 12: Opening of the exhibition *Dutch Masters Revisited* within the exhibition *Portrait Gallery of the 17th Century*, Hermitage Amsterdam. Photo: Csilla Ariese, 2019.

Ultimately, the changing of the exhibition of the ‘Golden Age’ reveals how different decolonial practices are employed and how different decolonial processes develop over time. Indeed, perhaps all four practices were in this case needed to get to the final result – which again will just be a step in a longer process of decolonization and increasing inclusivity. Thus, the exhibition saw removal of the term ‘Golden Age,’ a practice which was nationally felt to be deeply political and disruptive. Yet, the exhibition *Dutch Masters Revisited* has promise to lead to re-emergence: it provides a view of the colonial past which is complex and entangled. Its portraits are a way in which ghosts from the past can visually re-emerge and hopefully enable visitors to construct new heritages in the near future.

## Conclusions

This second report on the Amsterdam Museum presented the results of one of the three case studies within the ECHOES project focusing on city museums and colonial pasts. The report aimed to test the ECHOES modalities for practicing colonial heritage and to analyze how the Amsterdam Museum is practicing colonial heritage in an effort to decolonize.

In terms of testing the ECHOES modality, this study shows that it is possible to apply the 4Rs for practicing colonial heritage as categories in the case of the Amsterdam Museum. However, applying them is rather more complex in practice than it is in theory. In part, this is due to modalities overlapping. Additionally, practices that are literally ‘removal,’ might in terms of their impact be more accurately interpreted as ‘repression.’ Furthermore, depending on the researcher and the setting, the modalities allow for clear differences in how they are read and applied. Although this might make the modalities applicable in wider settings, and for multiple disciplines, it does pose challenges to comparative studies: one case’s ‘reframing’ might not align with another. Finally, in this case study, the modalities were not usable to understand the processes behind practices, which is why an additional set of 4Rs was developed. However, it is likely that these 4Rs run into some of the same difficulties in their application.

As for the second aim of the report, decolonizing the Amsterdam Museum is a work-in-progress. The museum has taken a number of good initiatives in terms of decolonizing which fit within a wider strategy for increased inclusivity. For instance, New Collection Narrative events are key opportunities for the museum to reframe objects in their collections, and have the potential to lead to re-emergence if these new insights are used for future exhibitions and programs. The process of changes with the exhibition *Portrait Gallery of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century*, and the polarized conflict surrounding the museum’s decision to no longer use the term ‘Golden Age,’ show there is a clear need for sustained engagement and dialogue. Decolonizing the Amsterdam Museum is a continual process without an end point, which requires the on-going efforts of staff, stakeholders, participants, and visitors alike. Improving the museum’s internal communication will be important to ensure that future steps towards inclusivity are supported by the organization as a whole and that all departments are prepared and capable of dealing with the resulting public impact. Ultimately, the museum continues to be a space of contention: there are those who feel the museum is not trying hard enough to be inclusive and others who feel excluded specifically because of these practices of inclusivity.

As mentioned in the introduction, this report is written parallel to similarly framed and structured reports on the Shanghai History Museum/Shanghai Revolution Museum (Pozzi 2019b) and the Museum of Warsaw (Bukowiecki & Wawrzyniak 2019). The forthcoming third set of reports will engage predominantly with the receptions of the museums’ displays and activities through various visitor studies. Thus, the aim is to ultimately collect these nine reports into a qualitative, comparative analysis of the ways in which these city museums work through their cities’ colonial pasts and thereby to identify diversified modalities and challenges for the representation of (de)colonial heritage in the contemporary world.

## **Acknowledgements**

This work forms part of the ECHOES project which has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 770248. The research took place as part of Work Package 3 '*City Museums and Multiple Colonial Pasts*' designed and led by Dr. Joanna Wawrzyniak.

I would like to thank our associate partners, the Amsterdam Museum, for their crucial part in this research and for providing access to the museum, its archives, and its data. Specifically, I am grateful to the 29 staff members, freelancers, and volunteers working at the Amsterdam Museum who generously participated in interviews. Furthermore, I am indebted to the research done by other ECHOES colleagues, particularly for the other Work Package 3 reports and for the ECHOES vocabulary. I am also thankful to WP3 colleagues and the New Narratives team for their peer-review of this report.

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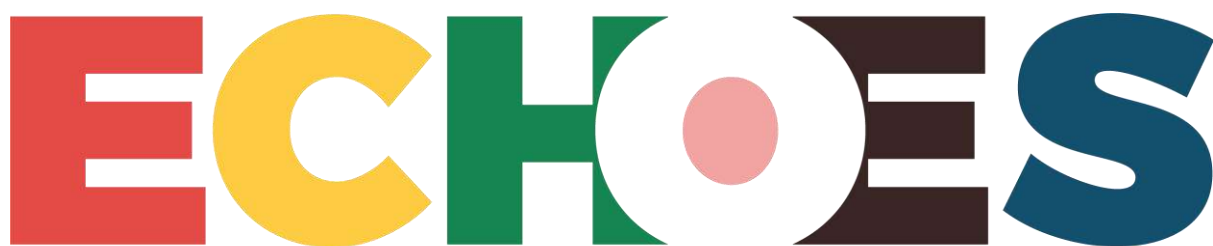
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EUROPEAN COLONIAL HERITAGE MODALITIES IN ENTANGLED CITIES

## Information Sheet

### *Informatieblad*

Dated: 8 July 2019

Gedateerd: 8 juli 2019



Centre for Social Studies  
University of Coimbra



UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM



MUSEU HISTÓRICO  
NACIONAL,  
RIO DE JANEIRO



## Request for Participation

I would like to invite you to take part in our research study. Before you decide, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read this information, and discuss it with others if you wish. If there is anything that is not clear, or if you would like more information, please ask me.

### ***Verzoek tot deelname***

*Ik wil u graag vragen om deel te nemen aan ons onderzoek. Voordat u beslist om deel te nemen is het belangrijk om te begrijpen waarom het onderzoek wordt uitgevoerd en wat deelname voor u zal betekenen. Neemt u alstublieft de tijd om deze informatie door te lezen en eventueel met anderen te bespreken. Mocht er iets onduidelijk zijn, of als u meer informatie wilt, kunt u zich tot mij wenden.*

Study title/Onderzoekstitel:

*The Amsterdam Museum and Colonial Pasts*

Name of researcher/Naam onderzoeker:

Dr. Csilla Ariese

## What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of the overarching study is to research how the Amsterdam Museum is dealing with the colonial pasts of the city and of its collections. As part of this research I have been working at the museum since October 2018 and now I am conducting a series of interviews with museum staff. These interviews will be used to write a project report, which will be made publicly accessible via the ECHOES project website.

### ***Wat is het doel van deze studie?***

*Het doel van het overkoepelende onderzoeksproject is om te onderzoeken hoe het Amsterdam Museum omgaat met het koloniale verleden van de stad en haar collecties. Als deel van dit project werk ik al binnen het museum sinds oktober 2018 en ga ik nu interviews afnemen met museum medewerkers. Deze interviews zullen worden gebruikt om een projectrapport te schrijven, dat publiekelijk toegankelijk zal worden gemaakt via de ECHOES website.*

## Why have I been invited?

As a staff member of the Amsterdam Museum, your knowledge and experiences are crucial for understanding how the museum now and in the past has dealt with the colonial past. Your perspective as part of the organisation and as participant in current and past museum projects is uniquely important. Viewpoints from different teams in the organisation are especially helpful.

### ***Waarom ben ik gevraagd?***

*Als medewerker van het Amsterdam Museum zijn uw kennis en ervaringen onmisbaar om te begrijpen hoe het museum nu en in het verleden is omgegaan met het koloniale verleden. Uw perspectief als deel van de organisatie en als medewerker in huidige en voorgaande museumprojecten is daarvoor van uniek belang. Inzichten vanuit verschillende delen van de organisatie zijn bijzonder behulpzaam.*

## Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in this research study. Taking part is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet and be asked to give your written consent. You are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason, even after the interview.

### ***Moet ik deelnemen?***

*Het is aan u om te beslissen of u wel of niet deelneemt aan deze studie. Deelname is geheel vrijwillig. Als u besluit om deel te nemen, krijgt u dit informatieblad en zal u gevraagd worden een toestemmingsformulier te tekenen. U blijft vrij om u op elk moment en zonder opgaaf van reden terug te trekken uit het onderzoek, ook na het interview.*

### **What will happen during the interview?**

The interview will take approximately 30-60 minutes. Rather than a strict series of questions, you will be asked to talk about a few topics: your job at the museum, past jobs at the museum or elsewhere, work you have done at the museum that was related to colonial pasts, how you think colonialism is being dealt with within the organization, and your perspectives of the colonial history of Amsterdam. You will also be asked to reflect on things that used to be/happen in the museum which you miss, or things that could be added to the museum in the future. If you consent to it, the interview will be audio recorded. This recording will never be made public but will only be used for the study. With your consent, quotes from the interview may be used in publications.

#### ***Wat zal er gebeuren tijdens het interview?***

*Het interview zal ongeveer 30-60 minuten duren. In plaats van een lijst vastgestelde vragen, zult u gevraagd worden om over een aantal onderwerpen te spreken: uw functie binnen het museum, voorgaande functies binnen het museum of elders, werk dat u heeft gedaan binnen het museum dat te maken had met het koloniale verleden, hoe u vindt dat het kolonialisme behandeld wordt binnen de organisatie en uw perspectieven op het koloniale verleden van Amsterdam. U zult ook gevraagd worden om te reflecteren over dingen die vroeger gebeurden/aanwezig waren in het museum die u nu mist, of dingen die in de toekomst aan het museum toegevoegd zouden kunnen worden. Als u uw toestemming geeft, zal een audio opname gemaakt worden van het interview. Deze opname zal nooit publiek gemaakt worden, maar zal enkel voor het onderzoek gebruikt worden. Met uw toestemmingen kunnen citaten uit het interview gebruikt worden in publicaties.*

### **What are the possible benefits or disadvantages of taking part?**

The interview will take up about an hour of your time, but should not pose any further disadvantages to you. Your participation will greatly help in providing insight into the museum organisation and the perspectives on issues of colonialism among staff across different departments. The resulting report will be shared with the staff in the fall of 2019, so that it can be used for future plans and projects. Although topics such as colonialism and decolonisation of the museum are contentious topics, your quotes – if permitted – will be used anonymously and should not lead to personal risks for you.

#### ***Wat zijn de mogelijke voor- en nadelen van deelname?***

*Het interview zal ongeveer een uur van uw tijd kosten, maar zal verder geen nadelen voor u bevatten. Uw bijdrage zal zeer behulpzaam zijn om inzicht te bieden in de organisatie van het museum en de perspectieven van medewerkers van verschillende afdelingen als het gaat om zaken die te maken hebben met kolonialisme. Het resulterende rapport zal met de medewerkers gedeeld worden in de herfst van 2019, zodat het gebruikt kan worden voor toekomstige plannen en projecten. Ondanks het feit dat thema's zoals het kolonialisme en het dekoloniseren van musea gevoelig zijn, zullen uw citaten – als toegestaan – anoniem gebruikt worden en zou het niet tot persoonlijk risico voor u moeten leiden.*

### **Will I receive any payment?**

You will not receive payment for your participation. The data will not be used by any member of the project team for commercial purposes.

#### ***Zal ik een financiële vergoeding ontvangen?***

*U zult geen financiële vergoeding ontvangen voor uw deelname. De informatie zal door geen medewerker van het onderzoeksproject voor commerciële doeleinden gebruikt worden.*

### **Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?**

All information collected will be kept strictly confidential (subject to legal limitations). Confidentiality, privacy and anonymity (unless otherwise specified in the consent form) will be ensured in the collection, storage and publication of research material.

### ***Zal wat ik in deze studie zeg vertrouwelijk blijven?***

*Alle verzamelde informatie zal strikt vertrouwelijk blijven (afhankelijk van juridische beperkingen). Vertrouwelijkheid, privacy en anonimiteit (tenzij anders aangegeven in het toestemmingsformulier) zullen gewaarborgd worden in het verzamelen, bewaren en publiceren van het onderzoeksmateriaal.*

### **Where will my data be published?**

I may be sharing data collected during these interviews in several different ways. Primarily, the information from the interviews will be used for a project report which will be made publicly available via the ECHOES website in the fall of 2019. This will be my second report for ECHOES on the Amsterdam Museum, focusing on (de)colonial heritage practices. I may also use some of the data for other academic publications or (conference) presentations in the future. All written work will be published on the same website.

### ***Waar zal mijn informatie gepubliceerd worden?***

*Het is mogelijk dat ik de data verzameld tijdens deze interviews op verschillende manier zal gebruiken. Ten eerste zal de informatie uit deze interviews gebruikt worden voor een projectrapport dat openbaar beschikbaar gemaakt zal worden via de ECHOES website in de herfst 2019. Dit zal mijn tweede rapport zijn voor ECHOES over het Amsterdam Museum en zal zich richten op de-koloniale erfgoed praktijken. Mogelijk zal ik ook een deel van de data gebruiken voor andere wetenschappelijke publicaties of (congres) presentaties in de toekomst. Alle schriftelijke werken worden op dezelfde website openbaar gemaakt.*

### **To get into contact with Csilla Ariese:**

***Om contact op te nemen met Csilla Ariese:***



+31-621535581



c.e.ariese@uva.nl

You can also contact my supervisor, Dr. Joanna Wawrzyniak, University of Warsaw.

*U kunt ook contact opnemen met mijn begeleider, Dr. Joanna Wawrzyniak, Universiteit van Warsaw.*



+48-604163766



wawrzyniakj@is.uw.edu.pl

### **What if I have concerns about this research?**

If you are worried about this research, or if you are concerned about how it is being conducted, you can contact the project's Principle Investigator: Prof. John Oldfield, University of Hull Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery and Emancipation, Oriel Chambers, 27 High Street, Hull, HU1 1NE, UK. ✉ [john.oldfield@hull.ac.uk](mailto:john.oldfield@hull.ac.uk).

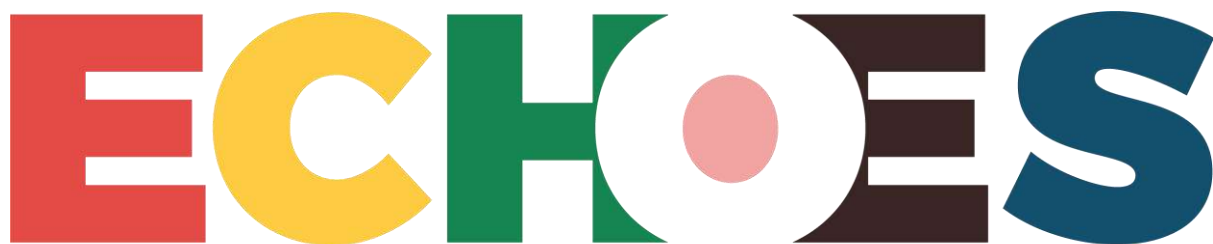
### ***Wat als ik zorgen heb over dit onderzoek?***

*Als u zorgen heeft over dit onderzoek, of over de uitvoering hiervan, kunt u contact opnemen met de onderzoeksleider: Prof. John Oldfield, University of Hull Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery and Emancipation, Oriel Chambers, 27 High Street, Hull, HU1 1NE, V.K.*

✉ [john.oldfield@hull.ac.uk](mailto:john.oldfield@hull.ac.uk).

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EUROPEAN COLONIAL HERITAGE MODALITIES IN ENTANGLED CITIES

## Informed Consent Form

*Formulier geïnformeerde toestemming*



UNIVERSITY  
OF HULL



UNIVERSITÉ  
RENNES 2



UNIVERSITY  
OF WARSAW



UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM



ces

Centre for Social Studies  
University of Coimbra



復旦大學

文物与博物馆学系

DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE AND MUSEOLOGY



MUZEUM  
WARSZAWY



AMSTERDAM  
MUSEUM



MUSEU NACIONAL DE  
ETNOLOGIA

MUSEU HISTÓRICO  
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RIO DE JANEIRO

Study title/Onderzoekstitel: *The Amsterdam Museum and Colonial Pasts*

Name of researcher/Naam wetenschapper: Dr. Csilla Ariese

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	YES JA	NO NEE
I confirm that I have read the information sheet dated 8 July 2019 for this study. Ik bevestig dat ik het informatieblad van deze studie gedateerd 8 juli 2019 heb gelezen.		
I confirm that I had the opportunity to consider the information above, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. Ik bevestig dat ik de mogelijkheid heb gehad om deze informatie te lezen, vragen te stellen, en dat deze vragen naar tevredenheid zijn beantwoord.		
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. Ik begrijp dat mijn deelname vrijwillig is en dat ik op elk moment, zonder opgave van reden, mij kan terug trekken.		
I agree to take part in this study. Ik neem deel aan deze studie.		
I agree to audio recording, solely for use within the project. Ik geef toestemming voor een audio opname, enkel voor gebruik binnen het project.		
I agree to the use of my <b>anonymised</b> quotes in research reports and publications. Ik geef toestemming voor het gebruik van mijn <b>geanonimiseerde</b> uitspraken in onderzoeksrapporten en publicaties.		
I agree to the use of my <b>name</b> when quoted in research reports and publications. Ik geef toestemming voor het gebruik van mijn <b>naam</b> bij citaten in onderzoeksrapporten en publicaties.		
I understand that individuals within the project may look at relevant sections of data collected during the study. I give permission for these individuals to have access to my records. I understand that these will not be revealed or accessible to individuals outside the project. Ik begrijp dat individuen in het project mogelijk naar relevante delen van de in deze studie verzamelde data zullen kijken. Ik geef toestemming aan deze individuen om mijn opgegeven informatie in te zien. Ik begrijp dat deze informatie niet zichtbaar of toegankelijk zal zijn voor individuen buiten het project.		

Name of Participant/Naam deelnemer

Date/datum

Signature/handtekening

Name of Researcher/Naam wetenschapper

Date/datum

Signature/handtekening