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Museum Art Exhibitions. Between Aesthetics and History

The subject of the paper presented here was suggested in 2014 by the organizers of the Amserdam-based CODART Congress (the international association of museum curators of the Netherlandish art), who proposed that I deliver a lecture and reflect, in my capacity as a historian, upon the new permanent exhibition of the Rijksmuseum, specifically upon its section devoted to Dutch art of the late 1500s and the 1600s.[1] In 2023, together with Antoni Ziemba, we expanded and in some places corrected my text, and he supplemented it with the history of the Rijksmuseum and the problematics of post-colonial revision of collections and exhibitions.

Having visited the museum's galleries, I immediately realized that the central problem of the curators was the relationship between art and history, that is, between the production, circulation, and reception of works of art – defined according to historically variable criteria – and the society in which they were created and received, which also changed over time. This problem itself has a history: for a long time, it was not even acknowledged as a problem and when it became one, it was not always stated in the terms I used here. Moreover it was tackled in two different ways: it was discussed in philosophical and art historical literature, and in parallel it was avoided or resolved in curatorial practice through the choice of objects to be displayed together as elements of the same set and through their arrangement in what was believed to constitute a meaningful whole. I shall speak here about both these ways because philosophical and art historical discussions exerted an influence upon curators whose practice, in its turn, influenced philosophers and art historians. And I shall look at them from a historical perspective because I am convinced that one cannot understand the opinions expressed by the latter and the decisions implemented by the former without positioning them in their proper time and their proper place.

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In the first half of the 17th century, there were only four art museums in the world. All were Italian – outside Italy, museums did not exist. Our four art museums are: Capitoline collection in Rome (**fig. 1**), Uffizi in Florence (**fig. 2**), Vestibule of the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice, and Pinacoteca Ambrosiana in Milan. Museums in Rome and in Venice exhibited only ancient

[1] The text was published online: Krzysztof Pomian, *Museum Art Exhibitions between Aesthetics and History*, <www.codart.nl/images/Pomian_paper.pdf>, [retrieved: 22 September 2022].

sculpture. The other two exhibited also modern art. In contradistinction to Ambrosiana where initially only paintings were present, Uffizi was an encyclopaedic museum. Paintings were exhibited there together with sculptures and in the Tribuna also together with naturalia, exotica, and curiosa. Tribuna of the Uffizi was conceived, indeed, as a representation of the visible and invisible world, of art and nature, of the four elements, of the land, fire, sea, and of sky; in a word – of the whole of being. It was an exhibition of marvels, of exceptional and hence stupendous works produced by exceptional men and of equally exceptional works produced by nature at the peak of her creative power. The same pattern was often applied in princely collections north of the Alps which eventually became museums.

The 18th century invested Art with the significance and value it had had never received before; henceforth, it is Art with a capital A. The new philosophical dignity of Art which went together with its social promotion was a corollary of the anthropocentric stance dominant in the Enlightenment culture and divulged by Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Man* (1734). From this perspective Art is an achievement of Man not as belonging to nature, i.e., to the visible world, but as endowed by the Supreme Creator with an invisible creative power which makes him a truly godlike being. Of this creative power Art is the highest, the fullest, and the noblest expression. It is, to use Kant and Hegel's later notion, a second Nature – perfect and ideal, an act of novel Creation. Under particularly favourable circumstances, some exceptionally gifted individuals are enabled by their creative power to transcend temporal limitations and to give to their ideas a visible form so as to project into being works to be admired for all eternity. It follows that Art is unique, it is considered as universal, its rules are thought to be valid in all places and all times, its exemplary works are notable ancient buildings, ancient sculptures, and no less outstanding – modern masterpieces of painting that should be familiar to all artists; they are known more often than not through the medium of images, miniature models, plaster casts, copies or prints. The motherland of Art in Antiquity was Greece; its motherland in modern times is Italy.

This idea of Art which permeated the culture of the Enlightenment even before having been clarified and codified in Winckelmann's masterpiece *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (1764) had several practical consequences. It conferred an unprecedented importance to the art museum promoted to the role of a temple of new anthropocentric religiosity: a place to celebrate Man in the works of Art as God was celebrated elsewhere in the works of nature. The desire for the art museum spread therefore among the cultural elite, and enlightened opinion put pressure on art collectors in general and particularly on princes to open their collections. It eventually resulted in the multiplication of art museums north of the Alps. It resulted also in defining the frontier between Art and nature and a separation of their respective productions. Art museums and natural history museums began to evolve along different lines. In the study of nature, attention slowly shifted from the exceptional to the commonplace, from the distant to the close, from the marvellous to the ordinary. On the contrary, the study and the display of art privileged exceptional artists and extraordinary works. Another consequence of the Enlightenment idea of Art was the delineation of the frontier between Art and all human production that does not belong to it, and the display of Art so as to isolate it from anything that could compete with it for the gaze of the spectator.

Art as far as museums were concerned was reduced to paintings, sculptures, engraved gems, medals, coins, drawings, and prints. The two latter, despite being intrinsic to Art, could not be exhibited in the same manner as paintings and sculptures. Furniture, jewellery, silver, ceramics, tapestries, etc. were relegated to the realm of minor, decorative, or applied arts which meant that they were not placed on the same footing as Art with capital A. Even the

latter was exhibited so as not to mix its different modalities. Paintings were separated from sculptures, pinacothecas from glyptotheques. The separation of Art from nature and from different human productions not included into Art was introduced in museums and galleries in the course of the 18th century. It was a slow process because of the resistance of people accustomed to the traditional display of objects, because of its cost and because it entailed the requirement of more space. In some cases, it was completed only in the second half of the 19th century. Ultimately old museums were restructured and new ones were arranged from their inception according to new principles. There was, however, one important exception to this rule. It was the Museo Ercolanese at Portici near Naples officially opened in 1758 (**fig. 3**) which exhibited objects excavated in Herculaneum and in Pompeii. On display were sculptures, mosaics, and frescoes but also ceramics, weapons, tools, and kitchen, and household implements. Such a *mélange des genres* did not stem from a desire to place works of art in their context. It was simply necessary to secure excavated objects. The museum was at the same time a storeroom. When it had been transferred to Naples, Art was separated from non-Art and paintings from sculptures.

Despite the separation of paintings and sculptures, the principle which presided over the placement of the latter and the hanging of the former was initially the same in both cases: it was that of aesthetic delectation, of pleasure given to the senses, in this case to the sense of sight. What curators wanted was to create a striking effect at the first glance, to compose a set of paintings which would be perceived and acknowledged at the very moment of entering the room – displayed as being in harmony one with another because of their colours, compositions, drawings, and formats, sometimes also their subjects, regardless of authorship. In the case of sculptures, groups were composed according to a similarity of figures they represented. This principle was later called, with respect to paintings, that of the "flower-bed" (**fig. 4**). It was an eminently subjective principle valid in a display of a private collection whose owner could follow his wishes without restraint, but much more difficult to legitimate in a museum setting – a public institution visited by people with different sensibilities and even different tastes, and where therefore the principles of display had to allude to a universal validity. Already in the 18th century it was criticized as unsatisfactory for it could be applied only to a room or to a segment of a gallery but not to the gallery as a whole. Locally it could arouse a sensory delight. Globally it left, in visitors with more stringent requirements, the feeling of disorder.

In the course of the 18th century, such a hanging according to the principle of aesthetic delectation began to be replaced by a hanging according to the one which I would call that of intellectual satisfaction. It meant, first, that a painting is not an isolated work one can arbitrarily place anywhere in the neighbourhood of other paintings if their combined effect is pleasant to the eye. And it meant, moreover, that it is not only a part of the oeuvre of its author but also of a larger corpus composed of all works which belong to the same "school," with each "school" being connected to the place where it originated and developed. "Schools" were initially distinguished only inside Italy and corresponded to great artistic centres: Florence, Venice, Rome, Bologna, Naples. Such a division is very old. It is a product of the urban patriotism characteristic of Italian cultural life and is inbuilt already in the Florentine chronicles of the second half of the 14th century, in the writings of humanists and artists of the Quattrocento (especially in the juxtaposition of Florentine and Sienese or Tuscan and Venetian art), and finally in Vasari's lives of painters and all subsequent artistic literature. But only in the 18th century was it applied, as seems, to the hanging of paintings in galleries

and museums (**fig. 5**). It does not appear to have been applied at the time to the placement of modern sculptures.

Already in the late 17th century, French, Flemish, and Dutch "schools" were added to the Italian. At this point, one must be very careful in order to avoid anachronisms. The division of painting "schools" into Italian with its inner subdivisions, French, Flemish, and Dutch (or more generally Netherlandish) – and later, but still in the 18th century, also English, Spanish, and German – was based on the presence of an artistic genius who initiated a "manner" learned by his pupils and by pupils of his pupils: Raphael in Florence, Titian in Venice, the Carracci family in Bologna and Rome, Poussin in France, Rubens in Flanders, Rembrandt in the United Provinces, Durer in Germany and so on. As art was considered universal, its rules were thought to be valid in all places and all times. Artistic geniuses were supposed to introduce only modifications of such a substantial identity of Art. They were supposed, in other words, to apply in a creative manner the rules obligatory for all artists. Even when they innovate, they only make visible a potential already present in these rules. Such an idea of Art means that, in contradistinction to all other human productions, it is located outside time as it is located outside space. There is therefore a flagrant incompatibility of the division into "schools" with the claim that there is no art but national art and that each national art is governed by specific rules. Such a claim was indeed presented in the 19th century as will be seen later. Earlier, however, this prospect was still distant.

Beside the implementation of the division into "schools," the second innovation of the 18th century concerning the hanging of paintings consisted in the introduction into the display of each "school" of the chronological order. It started in Venice in the middle of the century with the entrance into collections of works painted "in the Greek manner" later called "primitives," i.e., of works dated from before Giotto. The chronological order was afterwards introduced also into the hanging of paintings produced after the "renaissance of arts." Such a "visible history of painting" was exhibited in some private collections in Venice itself and in some cities of the Venetian Republic already in the mid-18th century. The principle of chronological exhibition of paintings in a museum (or more precisely, in the royal public gallery), divided into "schools," was applied in the 1970s by Christian von Mechel, who was commissioned to transform the Belvedere Palace in Vienna for this purpose. Such an approach now could be recognized as legitimate only if it is acknowledged that the temporal position of an artist is essential to the perception of works one is looking at. And that any perception of works of art must be informed by such knowledge in order to produce not only a sensory delight but also a correct understanding of these works and an adequate assessment of their merits, i.e., the intellectual satisfaction I alluded to earlier. But this means that Art is not completely immune to time. Even if works themselves, once created, are henceforth shielded from its destructive influence, irrespective of accidents, the circumstances in which they come into being leave an indelible imprint. And this means, moreover, that the display of paintings is addressed not to simple art lovers in search of naïve aesthetic delectation but rather to *dilettanti* who, without themselves being artists, studied the lives of artists and learned about their practice, and whose perception of works of art was dependent upon the extent of their acquired learning. The difference between the former and the latter is not only cognitive. It is also social: *dilettanti* were generally of a higher social strata than the average art lovers.

Even if Von Mechel's hanging provoked some critical comments, it was not shocking in *ancien régime* Vienna. But the proposal to introduce it into a museum to be opened in the Louvre, in revolutionary France during the period of terror, aroused a fierce debate. Such a proposal was made by Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Lebrun, a famous art dealer, in his *Réflexions sur*

le Muséum national, an answer to Jean-Marie Roland, the Minister of the Interior, in charge of the museum. The letter sent by Roland to the commission responsible for the opening of the museum, stated: "A museum is not exclusively a place of studies. It is a flower-bed which must be scattered with the most brilliant colours. It has to interest the *dilettanti* while at the same time amusing the simple visitors. The museum is everyman's property. Everyman has the right to enjoy it. It is your duty to put this enjoyment, as much as you can, at the disposal of all." The insistence on "everyman" is significant. For Roland, a museum must be accessible to a visitor who is neither coming to study displayed works nor is presumed to dispose of a knowledge concerning them. He enters the museum just to enjoy what he is looking at. To the principle of a "flower-bed" Lebrun opposed his idea of a classification of paintings according to their spatial and temporal positions: "All paintings must be arranged following the order of schools and they must point out, by the very place assigned to them, to different epochs of the infancy, of progress, of the perfection and finally of the decay of art." Lebrun lost. The commission adopted "the arrangement [...] of an infinitely varied flower-bed." Later, during the Napoleonic era, Dominique Vivant-Denon introduced the distribution of paintings according to "schools" but the chronological order was introduced in the Louvre only after the revolution of 1848.

Such an order was, however, implemented already in the 1790s in a museum which faced the Louvre on the left bank of the Seine. It was called Musée des Monuments français and it was organized almost single-handedly by Alexandre Lenoir, a painter put in charge of a storeroom of objects seized from religious institutions closed by revolutionary authorities. Lenoir got the permission to open his storeroom to the public and transformed it into a museum (**fig. 6**). It exhibited mostly religious sculpture and other works of art refused by the commission in charge of the Louvre as being unworthy of the prestigious palace. Many of them were mediaeval which only added to the disfavour they incurred in the opinion influenced by Winckelmann's classical aesthetics which held a powerful grip on minds of the French revolutionary elite. There were also historical relics and specimens of artistic productions banned from art museums at that time: stained glass, tapestries, mosaics, armours and weapons... Lenoir distributed all his objects according to the centuries he believed they were produced and he did it so as to stress the singularity of each century, its unique character. At the same time he placed each century in a global historical sequence. He achieved it through the medium of lighting: dark in the crypts that corresponded to Merovingians, it progressively intensified and attained its fullness in rooms devoted to the 16th and 17th centuries. Staged in that manner, a collection of unwanted items, clashing with the dominant neoclassical taste, attracted the greater number of visitors. It became a place where the younger generation of French intellectuals discovered the art of the Middle Ages and brought it back into favour. It became even more: a model followed in different countries. And after its closing in 1816, it left a legend that made a strong mark on the further history of museums.

Mediaeval vestiges which enchanted young visitors of Lenoir's museum were not considered then as belonging to Art. Even Lenoir himself did not place them at that level. For him and for his public they were monuments of the national past. They acquired the dignity of Art during the first half of the 19th century, at different moments in different countries. But mediaeval art contrasted with the ancient and Early Modern ones not only because of its subjects and its formal qualities. It was not a common property of European elites. It was seen as an emanation of the people, of the *peuple*, of the *Volk*, of the *lud*, of the *narod*, as rooted in its particular language, in its traditions and customs, in its collective beliefs and specific institutions, and

as opposed therefore to cosmopolitan classical art and its modern continuations. It was divided like a political and now also cultural map of Europe into French art and English art, and German art, and so forth. The substantial identity of Art with a capital A was broken. Art was nationalized. Because of that it was really historicized, invested with an inner historicity attested by the distinction of successive periods characterized by their styles: Romanesque and gothic. And it was much stronger than ever before connected to history of politics, of religion, of mores. In other words, relations between art and time and between art and space were radically changed. Henceforth art was seen to a growing extent as immersed in the former and as marked by the latter. It was losing its transcendence.

Another manifestation of the same process was the blurring of the frontier between Art – in the singular and still with its capital A – on the one side and "minor," "decorative," "applied," or "industrial" arts – in the plural – on the other side. It could not be otherwise. Leaving aside architecture which is outside our remit, mediaeval art consisted of sculpture and of works in glass, fabric, metals, wood, ceramics, precious stones, ivory, enamel, wax, and so on: all materials excluded until the 19th century from the repertoire of materials of Art. The promotion of mediaeval vestiges into the dignity of art was therefore tantamount to the promotion of these materials and of objects made of them. They were now exhibited in museums designed for the purpose, like the Musée de Cluny in Paris (since 1843) or the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg (1852), and in mediaeval departments of encyclopaedic museums. The Louvre opened one already in 1826 and the British Museum some forty years later. But the promotion of "applied" arts had also more practical causes. Considered as an efficient remedy to the flooding on the market of rubbish produced by industry, it resulted in the opening in London in 1857, in the wake of the Great Exhibition, of the South Kensington Museum exclusively devoted to "applied" arts followed by the wave of creations of museums patterned after its model in all European countries. Eventually it also influenced the acquisition policy of art museums and the display of art itself.

In the 18th century Art was considered as one and as universal. After the assimilation of mediaeval artistic productions and their promotion to the dignity of Art, it became multiple and particularized. It became multiple, because there were now as many arts as there were nations, because there were many different styles and because the hierarchy of modalities of art was eroded. And it became particularized because its form and content were thought as dependent upon the country from which it originates and the epoch from which it dates. Only Greek art and its Roman continuation were still considered in the second half of the 19th century as being universally valid. Hence, in order to satisfy museum visitors, all art, with the exception of the ancient, had to be displayed so as to make manifest its nationality and its historicity. A museum was no more a temple of anthropocentric religiosity. It became a sanctuary where the cult of the nation was celebrated. The first step in this direction was the replacement of the cosmopolitan neoclassical architecture reserved only for museums of ancient art, by the Neogothic or by another style considered in a given country as a truly national one. The contrast is striking in this respect between, for instance, the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen and the National Museum of Finland (Kansallismuseo) in Helsinki (**figs. 7, 8**) or between the Pushkin Museum and the Tretjakov Gallery (both in Moscow) (**figs. 9, 10**). A fascinating example of a building conceived as an embodiment of the national character is that of the Národní muzeum in Prague. But it is enough to look at the building of Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum to be aware that it was intended by the architect Pierre Cuypers as a materialization of "Dutchness" (**fig. 11**).

This insistence on nationality extends, not only in the latter case, to details of the interior architecture. The Prague museum is a perfect example of that (**fig. 12**). And it extends moreover to the display of collections. National art is separated from the foreign art. This was included of course in the old division into "schools." But now, even if the term "school" is still in use, it receives a different meaning in so far as national art is considered not as a modification of universally valid rules but as individualized and singularized by a nation's natural environment, by its history, its mores and its institutions. The separation of the national from the foreign art was unknown to Italian museums until the end of the 18th century. They exhibited Art with a capital A; the origins of artists were from this perspective purely accidental. The problem arose during the creation of the museum in the Louvre Palace. Initially the Musée central de l'Art as it was called, displayed only European, i.e., foreign paintings. The French ones were confined to the Musée spécial de l'École française at Versailles. The twofold opposition between *central* and *spécial* and between *Art* and *École française* is eloquent. Later, but already during the Revolution, the best French paintings were exhibited in the Louvre and after the Napoleonic wars the gallery of French painting was presented as the crown of the museum. But it was more rhetoric than reality. Until today the most prestigious gallery of the Louvre, La Grande Galerie or Galerie au bord de l'eau is occupied by Italian paintings and the emblematic masterpieces of the museum are the *Mona Lisa*, the *Nike of Samothrace*, and the *Venus of Milo*. Such a preference granted to European or universal art over the national one was characteristic also of the Altes Museum in Berlin, making it different in this respect from the Alte Pinakothek in Munich and the Gemäldegalerie in Dresden, which also presented local, i.e., German art. It is interesting to note that, in their beginnings, the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Modern Art, both in New York, reproduced the pattern set by the Louvre. They exhibited only European art and accepted American art many years after their opening.

In some museums the very distinction between foreign and national art appeared as irrelevant. So it was with the museums of former European empires: the Prado and the Kunsthistorisches Museum. As Italy and Flanders were both former provinces of the Habsburgs, with their political centres in Madrid and Vienna, Italian and Flemish art was foreign neither here nor there. Moreover, in Vienna there was no national art. Even the Vienna Secession in the late 19th century was part of an international movement and was qualified as national Austrian art only after the breaking up of the Empire following the First World War. And in Madrid there was since the beginning a balance between the art of the former European Empire and the Spanish artistic tradition with its great masters. There was also another reason to neglect the distinction between the national and the foreign art. In many countries the latter was only marginally present or completely lacking and their museums were created from the start as national museums devoted principally to the exhibition of national art. The Rijksmuseum belongs to this category.

By the second half of the 19th century, art, whether national or universal, had to be exhibited according to the requirements of history which now did mean much more than the display of works in the chronological order. The history in art museums was identified with that of the art and the latter, in its turn, has become in a large measure a history of styles: of their evolution in time and of the transformation of an earlier style into a later. The notion of style unified "technical and (archi)tectonical arts," to borrow from the title of Gottfried Semper's influential book (*Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten oder, Praktische Aesthetik*, 1860–1863). It erased or at least made insignificant the old frontier between the Art a with a capital A and "minor," "applied," "decorative," or "industrial" arts insofar as the former and

the latter expressed the same style, albeit in different ways related to their uses, materials, and techniques. The idea of style as common feature of contemporaneously produced works of art and therefore as characteristic of a definite period in the history of a civilization, was also present, albeit without the word having been used, in another very influential book published shortly before that of Semper: *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* of Jacob Burckhardt (1860). Forty years later, it was translated into museum practice by Wilhelm Bode – a good friend of Semper's, and a scholar who considered Burckhardt as his master. Bode, who was at that time responsible for the arrangement of the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum in Berlin (to be opened in 1904), created – apart from painting and sculpture galleries – spaces with ceilings, floors, doors, chimneys, and other interior-design elements originating from the period; he made sure that even the colour of the walls was historically appropriate, and in all rooms he placed paintings, sculptures, tapestries, furniture, and objets d'art from the period it was devoted to. He called such spaces *Stilräume* (**fig. 13**).

Bode's was not the first attempt to reconcile art as an expression of a style and history assimilated to the history of civilization in the arrangement of an art museum. Some authors assign the invention of period rooms (*salle d'époque*, *Epochenraum*, *Stilraum*) to Lenoir or to Alexandre Du Sommerard's arrangement of his collection in the Hôtel de Cluny (1833–41, before it was taken over by the state and opened to the public in 1843) (**fig. 14**). In so doing, they simply forget that both Lenoir and Du Sommerard exhibited objects from undifferentiated Middle Ages at a time when the very distinction between Romanesque and Gothic only came to be conceived. In the case of rooms with Early Modern objects (from the 16th to the mid-17th), there were – apart from the ancient term "Renaissance" – no objective and precise categories for defining style eras at all: the notions of the Baroque, or Mannerism, or the specific "Northern Renaissance," did not yet exist. Moreover, Lenoir, as we have written, divided the exhibition – rather mechanically – into centuries, from the 13th to the 17th, rather than into style epochs; Du Sommerard, on his part, grouped objects according to their function or symbolic value. Bode's period rooms are much more specific and they are usually connected to a definite style. But the term is also used for reconstitutions of interiors transported as they stood from either peasant dwellings or from castles or palaces, or yet from bourgeois homes. These real historic interiors are united by their origins as well as by their stylistic homogeneity. Bode, in his fictional, reconstructive *Stilräume*, seems to have been the first to put a stress on the latter and to apply to the arrangement of an art museum the notions of *style* and of *civilization*. And it was his example that probably launched the fashion of period rooms particularly in American museums where one can still see today some of their most accomplished specimens.

The intellectual life of the late 19th century was characterized, among other things, by the growing importance of social sciences and by the clash of ideologies. Art history was not isolated from these processes, even if its transformation from a *Geisteswissenschaft* into a social science was finalized only after the Second World War. But already before 1914 some sociologists tried to explain the role of art in society, while some Marxists attempted to show that the position of an artist with respect to social classes determines the content and form of his art and that the latter serves as a weapon in the class struggle. These ideas do not seem to have had the slightest impact on the art museum, neither at that time nor later. Interestingly, after the fall of the Romanov Empire and the victory of the Bolsheviks – when museums were also about to be revolutionized – attempts were made to rearrange the exhibitions of the Hermitage and the Tretyakov Gallery so as to illustrate the Marxist-Leninist philosophy

of history, but this did not last long and such attempts quickly fell into oblivion. In this respect, there was a striking difference between the exhibitions of Soviet museums and school textbooks, which (usually in a crude, vulgarized way) interpreted art and its history in terms of social class antagonism.

As a problem of curatorship – but not without political overtones – the relation between art and its social environment found itself in the centre of the debate during the preparations for the opening of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. They started in 1978 under the liberal presidency of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing who was the originator of the project. Following the advice of the Direction of French museums, he decided to preserve the building of the railway station inaugurated in 1900 but closed down for many years and scheduled for demolition. A new view of the 19th century, long disregarded but now rediscovered, enhanced the beauty of this example of industrial architecture. Its felicitous location in the centre of the city, on the Left Bank, made it a perfect candidate to establish a museum of 19th century art, predominantly French, in order to relieve congestion in the Louvre. The museum had to cover the period from 1848 to 1914, already individuated according to political criteria, and it had to be divided in six departments: paintings, sculpture, decorative arts, photography, graphic arts, and architecture. In 1981, François Mitterrand became the first socialist president of the Fifth Republic. As a result, the team that prepared the future museum was enlarged so as to include a historian specialized in social history, Madeleine Rebérioux. Her task was to break with the traditional presentation of works of art and to replace them in the context of the industrial revolution with its class conflicts, its political struggles and the quick changes it provoked in everyday life.

When the museum opened in 1986, it became clear that these ambitious proposals produced rather modest effects. The author herself summarized them under three headings. The first was the division of 19th century art in two periods separated by the 1870s, the decade of both political and artistic turning points: the disappearance of the Second Empire and the Paris Commune on the one side and the beginning of impressionism on the other. This division was inbuilt in the structure of the exhibition: works preceding the 1870s occupy the ground floor while impressionists are displayed under the glass roof where they benefit from better lighting. The second innovation was the gallery devoted to popular press and to the illustrated book, i.e., to the mass media of the time, important as vehicles of images and in particular of reproductions of works of art. And the third was the gallery of dates which showed events between 1848 and 1914 with the help of posters, newspapers, photography, and the like. As is obvious and as was noted at the time of the opening by the very author of these innovations, history, as different from the history of art, was either imperceptible to an average visitor, for whom the division of paintings was dictated not by political or social criteria but rather by constraints of space, or, when it was represented by the popular press and the gallery of dates, it was separated from the works of art themselves and required an effort from the visitor in order to associate the latter with the former.

Since the opening of the Musée d'Orsay 38 years had passed. In the history of museums it was a very hectic time. The Louvre took over all space of the royal palace, succeeded to expel the Finance Ministry, acquired a new central entrance, and became the Grand Louvre. The National Gallery in London received the Sainsbury Wing. Prado completed two stages of its extension which will be followed by others. The Berlin museums were at last reunified and the Gemäldegalerie went back from Dahlem to the centre of the city, while the Island of Museums was completely renewed and in some cases, like that of the Neues Museum, rebuilt from ruins left by the Second World War. The Musée d'Orsay itself has continued since 2009

an overhaul that is expected to transform it into the New Orsay by 2027.[2] These are only a few examples concerning some of the most famous European art museums. But, as far as I know, the renovation, however radical, did not attempt to organize a permanent exhibition so as to reveal a connection between the metamorphoses of art and the changes of its social, political and cultural environment. In other words, nobody tried to solve in curatorial practice the old problem of relations between art and history. No one except the Dutch.

At this juncture, we meet the new exhibition at the Rijksmuseum which proposes such a solution. But first a few words about the institution itself and its building.

In its long history, it has experienced three eras of development: the "old" Rijksmuseum from 1885 to 1940, the post-war Rijksmuseum from around 1945 to 1995, and the new Rijksmuseum from 2003 to 2013. Created in 1800 in The Hague, moved to Amsterdam in 1808 and located first in the former City Hall (Royal Palace), then in the Trippenhuis Palace, it moved in 1885 to a neo-Renaissance building designed by Pierre (Petrus Josephus Hubertus) Cuypers. The museum was built in the era of the Dutch "national revival" and served three symbolic functions. Firstly, it was to be the National Palace of Art and History, which is reflected in the architectural forms of a large palace building in the Dutch Neo-Renaissance style. Secondly, it was the Temple of Art and History – a temple-cathedral with a quasi-ecclesiastical structure in the central part of the building, which consisted of a vestibule (Great Hall) like a porch or a narthex, a Gallery of Honour like a large nave with side chapels, and, set off as the altar presbytery, a space for the exhibition of Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* (**figs. 15, 16**). Not without its significance here was the fact of the architect being a Catholic, which, as well as the concept of the "museum-as-national-temple" itself, aroused controversy among critics and commentators of the time. Finally, and thirdly, the Rijksmuseum, with a ceremonial vaulted passage on the ground floor on the axis of the building (fig. 15, top), was supposed to be a symbolic City Gate, located on the southern border of the historic 17th–18th-century Amsterdam. From the north, on the port side, the building of the Central Railway Station, also built by Cuypers, would be a second, similar gate to the city. Both buildings held the old mediaeval and 17th–18th-century city in the powerful clamps of "emblematic and symbolic" architecture in the "national" style, creating an axis running from the Industry building to the building of History and Art. Inside, the museum narrated the history of the Dutch by exhibiting their "national" art, construed as a symptom of history.

After the Second World War, until the 1990s, far-reaching changes took place in the Rijksmuseum and serious problems emerged. The building began to experience operational problems and its technical condition was getting worse. The passage on the axis of the building, under the Gallery of Honour, had deteriorated. There was no functional entrance and hall, as well as no adequate space to store works for the growing collection, and over

[2] The "Orsay grand ouvert" programme was launched in 2009, and the first new galleries were opened in October 2011. The aim of the project is to adapt the museum to mass attendance and improve the flow of visitors, including by renovating the courtyard, rebuilding the entrance hall, and enlarging the reception space. At the same time, the permanent-exhibition rooms and visiting routes are being rearranged under the slogan of giving more space to contemporary issues. The exhibits, previously presented in a sequence of subsequent artistic trends, will be arranged thematically, emphasizing events and phenomena of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that have references to today's society, such as: democracy, colonization, the beginnings of globalization, revolutionary movements, attitudes towards nature in the industrial era, scientific progress, women's emancipation and so on. The modernization programme should be completed in 2027, when the Daniel Marchesseau Centre de Ressources et de Recherches opens in the nearby Hôtel Mailly-Nesle.

time this condition only worsened. Therefore, new, provisional divisions were introduced inside, and the courtyards were built up with temporary exhibition compartments. As a result of alterations and renovations, the exhibition space lost its clear plan and a labyrinth of bigger and smaller rooms was created in which visitors got lost. The new aesthetics of Dutch and international modernism considered the expressive decoration and architecture of the Cuypers era obsolete, so the 19th-century frescoes and decorations were painted over, creating austere, white-walled interiors in a white-cube style. Between the 1950s and 1970s, the narrative concept was changed so that Cuypers's national history was replaced by a presentation of styles, artists, and art schools, i.e., an evolutionary history of art.

In 2003, when work on the new Rijksmuseum began, the secondary divisions were demolished and a full reconstruction and conservation renovation of the historic main building and side buildings was undertaken. The modernization, planned for five years, took ten. The grand opening took place in 2013, on 13 April, on the Queen's Birthday, the Dutch national holiday.

The new Rijksmuseum declares itself as a national institution promoting the history of the Dutch people. Its *Mission* manifesto reads: "As a national institute, the Rijksmuseum offers a representative overview of Dutch art and history from the Middle Ages onwards, and of major aspects of European and Asian art." Its distinguishing feature from other national museums and galleries was and still is the fact that from the very beginning it has combined the profiles of a historical and artistic museum. Currently, it is once again intended to provide a reconstruction (or, in fact, a construction) of the history of the nation, in which art plays a key role, not only as an illustration of historical events, but as a fundamental element of Dutch identity. Dutch art, especially painting, particularly that of the age of Rembrandt and Vermeer, is supposed to be the essence of the Dutch nationality, of "Dutchness," in general. This, in fact, is a return to the 19th- and early 20th-century historiosophical thought as we know it from the writings of Conrad Busken-Huet, Peter Lodewijk Muller, Petrus Johannes Blok, and then Frederik Schmidt Degener and Johan Huizinga – to the essentialist stereotype that both Rembrandt and lesser masters are an embodiment of the "Dutch soul," or rather the "Dutch spirit." To put it crudely, it could be said that, although they do not have great literature like the French, no great opera like the Italians, no sublime philosophy and music like the Germans, the Dutch have the great paintings of the Golden Age. And in it they illustrated other (often only alleged or wishful) components of their identity, such as: parliamentarism and democracy, bourgeois civic ethos, establishment of and respect for law, religious tolerance, social solidarity, existential rationalism and pragmatism, mercantile-financial entrepreneurship and innovation, craftsmanly efficiency and operativeness, capitalist liberalism and attention to increasing prosperity, emphasis on progress in science and technology, environmental improvement, especially the ability to control the sea and inland waters.

Let us now return to the problem that constitutes the topic of this paper – the relationship between art and history in the curatorial narrative. In the new Rijksmuseum, it has been solved by differentiating between the ground floor and the upper floors (**fig. 17**). The ground floor exhibits Christian art in its Catholic version with some local, Dutch, peculiarities (10th–16th centuries). At the next level, we start to look at art produced in a Protestant country and of a distinctly national specificity. However, if we follow the succession of levels, we begin by the 18th–19th-century art on the first floor to go back in time to the 17th century on the second and jump into the 20th century on the third. The reason for this discrepancy between spatial layout and temporal order is obvious: it is the initial location, on the second floor, of the Gallery of Honour with its highlight: Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* (**fig. 18**), the only painting which did not change its original position. Because of that, the correspondence

between the display of works and chronology is valid only for each level separately but not for the museum as a whole.

Such a correspondence is a necessary prerequisite of the integration of history into an art exhibition but in itself it is not enough. To do that, one must also somehow introduce historical events, personalities, social groups, institutions, customs, beliefs and the like. This is especially striking in the core section of the museum, devoted to Dutch art of the late 1500s and the 1600s (**figs.** 18, **19**). It is done in what seems to me to be a typically Dutch manner: without insistence, in a non-systematic way, but nonetheless with a clear intention of making visitors aware of great figures and major events of the Netherlands in the Golden Age, of the central place of the sea in the economy and politics of the country, of colonial expansion and the stratification of Dutch society, particularly of the role of urban patricians as a political force and as patrons of arts. Whether curators succeeded in introducing a bit of history into the minds of visitors foreign today more than ever to any historical perspective, I dare not say. A complex psychological research would be needed in order to assess the impact of the exhibition upon the public. As such a research would be very costly, it will probably never be known whether visitors leave the exhibition with an idea of the Dutch Golden Age different from the one they brought with them. I can speak therefore only about what I perceived as a peculiarity of this exhibition: the connection it tries to establish between art and history.

The art rightly occupies the centre: the Gallery of Honour present with the same name from the very beginning of the museum. It culminates with Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* which the visitor reaches after having seen masterpieces of the most famous painters of the Dutch Golden Age: among others Frans Hals, Jan Steen, Pieter Saenredam, Pieter de Hooch, Jacob van Ruisdael, Johannes Vermeer, and Rembrandt; there is also a selection of the best still lives. On both sides of the gallery, spaces focused on historical processes alternate with ones that highlight artistic phenomena. Thus the side devoted to the first half of the 17th century starts with "The Birth of the Republic" followed by "Cabinets of Curiosities," followed in its turn by "Flemish Influence" which opens into "Power Struggle in the New Republic" from which one goes through a "Print Room" to "The Netherlands Overseas." Similarly the side devoted to the second half of the 17th century starts with "The Power at Sea" (fig. 19) and leads through "Medals and Coins" and "Italianate Painters" to "Burghers in Power" and then through the "Townhouse" and "Dollhouses" – two presentations of bourgeois life – to another "Print Room" and to "William and Mary" (William III of Orange and Mary Henrietta Stuart). It seems that the purpose of such an intermingling of spaces where the stress is put on history with spaces more artistically oriented is to integrate artistic and political events, to show that both express the same society, its unity when confronted to external enemies and its occasionally violent internal strife.

The coexistence of history and art is manifest also in any single room, sometimes also in a single showcase or in even a single piece put on display. So it is with paintings which show events of lasting significance for the history of the Netherlands: the abdication of Charles V, the explosion of iconoclasm, the war against Spain on land and on sea, the treaty of Munster, or the assassination of the de Witt brothers. So it is especially with portraits of eminent historical figures – William I of Orange, Constantijn Huygens, Jan Uytenbogaert, John Maurice of Nassau-Siegen, and others – as well as self-portraits of artists. So it is with portraits of less eminent personalities and with collective portraits of companies of the urban militia or of regents of towns or of charitable institutions. All these paintings belong at the same time to art and to history. Projections of the past into the present, they represent events as their contemporaries thought appropriate to represent them and they show personalities

as they wished to be remembered. They are the iconic equivalent of narratives: of memoirs, of chronicles, of histories.

But the past is present in the Rijksmuseum spaces not only through the medium of images. Also through that of relics which represent historical events or historical figures because each one is believed to have originated with an event or to have been in touch with a historical figure. They are connected with the past by a relationship not of similarity, but of contingency – adjacency, spatial tangency, physical contact. The cannon used during wars with Spain (fig. 19), Hugo Grotius' book chest, Van Oldenbarnevelt's walking stick and executioner's sword he was murdered with, wool caps worn by whale fishers, admiral De Ruyter's goblet... – all these objects owe their interest and their value not to their artistic quality but only to their being connected by an oral or a written tradition to events or to persons whose memory, preserved during centuries, became part of the national identity of the Dutch. The existence of a tradition, be it oral or written, is in their case essential because it directs the gaze of the visitor, informs it with a definite content, and in so far as it associates an object with a name and a date, it raises an expectation which can be fulfilled only through a contact with the object. Without it a relic would not be a relic.

Yet another category of objects connects art with history. Specimens of glassware, earthenware, porcelain, silver, jewellery, furniture, clothes, tapestry, toys, and the like are, at the same time, works of art and historical relics especially when we know their previous owners, which we often do. They show their position in the hierarchy of taste, of wealth, and of power expressed in their capacity to acquire products of a long and painstaking work or goods brought from a no less long and dangerous voyage or conquered as booty. They open the window on the social differentiation and in so doing they complete the message of paintings which, when confronted, contrast burghers dressed in sumptuous often silk garments and shown in richly decorated interiors with peasants and plebeians in their clothes made of a coarse canvas drinking and eating in taverns and brothels. As well as historical relics, a reconstructed cabinet of curiosities or a model of the ship, all these examples of decorative arts enter into visual interaction with paintings and with much rarer sculptures even without a deliberate attempt to relate the former to the latter, but simply in virtue of their having been seen together at the first glance. Because of that, some connection between art and its original environment is indeed established. Is it preserved, memorized, and reflected upon by visitors when they have left the museum? Impossible to say.

With this reservation, I am convinced that the arrangement of the floor devoted to Dutch paintings of the Golden Age is a success not only because it draws unprecedented crowds to the museum, thus proving its worth on a daily basis. I believe it is a success also from a purely intellectual perspective as an example of a museography that integrates art with history: with politics, with social life, with colonialism, with wars. I wonder however whether this example may be reproduced elsewhere. It seems that in Italy, France, Spain, and in the Habsburg Low Countries paintings from the period were much more often religious or mythological stories. They were indeed products of a system where the court, the Church, and the aristocracy played a predominant role in the patronage of the arts. Landscapes and genre paintings were placed in these countries near the bottom of the hierarchy of pictorial productions, the top of which was occupied by "history paintings," actually depictions of gods and heroes of ancient mythology, or of figures from the Christian *historia sacra*, but not of modern historical events. All this resulted in the relation between paintings and history being much less straightforward than in the 17th century Netherlands. Although, as John Michael Montias had already shown in *Artists and Artisans in Delft: A Socio-Economic Study of the Seventeenth*

Century (1982), religious and mythological narratives in the years 1580 to 1680 still constituted the majority of all Dutch pictorial production, but depictions of events from the history of the Netherlands – ancient, mediaeval, and contemporary – had become a regular and highly popular thematic genre, while in the art of other countries the iconosphere of national history remained a negligible phenomenon.

One must also take into account the aforementioned specificity of the Rijksmuseum which always was first and foremost the museum of Dutch art. Foreign works never weighed much in its collection compared to universally acclaimed Dutch masterpieces. This homogeneity of the Rijksmuseum made it easier to relate in it art to history than it would be in an encyclopaedic museum like the Louvre, the Prado, or the National Gallery in London, where many "schools" of painting are represented and where, for this reason, the only relevant history would be European history. But, even if I do not believe that the solutions adopted in the Rijksmuseum can be transferred as-they-are under other roofs, I am still confident that they can furnish an inspiration for attempts to historically contextualize works of art appropriate to the singularity of each museum: of its building, its collection, its public. But this raises the question: what for? People flock to art museums to have the pleasure of looking at the original works of art. The belief in their authenticity, in their not being recent copies, in their coming without substantial changes from the past in which they allegedly originated, and in their having preserved something of a touch of the artists to whom they are attributed, is, as it seems, one of the principal motivations of museum visitors. Otherwise, they would be satisfied with good replicas or even with images on screens of their computers.

For some people, the authority of the museum is a sufficient warrant of the truthfulness of their belief in the authenticity of works it displays. Others ask for more. They wish to have arguments to justify their belief. They wish to learn why museum curators claim that this work was created by this artist. They wish to learn how they arrived to know that a given work represents what they pretend it does. Why are they sure that it is still as it was at its inception? The list of such questions is obviously much longer. The museum has to answer them in order to assert its credibility. And it has to answer them not only in catalogues and other publications but also in the exhibition itself, through its arrangement and in captions which accompany objects. But there is more to it than that. To learn about the life of the artist who is the author of the work of art we are looking at, about the identity of the person or of the body that commissioned it, about the political, social and other circumstances in which it was produced and which left on it a lasting imprint, enriches the very perception of this work because it heightens sensibility to details, directs the gaze to aspects of it which otherwise would be neglected, makes us understand something that otherwise would remain an enigma. The more we know about a work of art or about any museum exhibit for that matter, the more carefully we look at it. Perhaps, after all, the historical knowledge, far from supressing the aesthetic pleasure, enhances it and confers to it liveliness and fullness that create a desire to revive it again and again.

Postcolonial Postscript

When considering the relationship between history and art in the exhibitions of museums established in former colonial powers, the issue of the exploitation of overseas territories cannot be omitted. Here, the living history of objects collides with the museum's treatment of them as artistic objects – specimens of beauty, craftsmanship, art, abstracted from the context of the history of a given people, society, or civilization. Or, at best, as specimens of

exoticism, i.e., curiosities. This is not the place to recount the extensive scholarly reflection on the origins of "exoticism" and "orientalism," the "primitivism" and "naturalism" of "savage" living – concepts perpetuated in the modern philosophy and politics of the European West by Enlightenment writers in a sentimental version (Louis-Armand de Lahontan, Louis-Antoine de Bougainville) or a scholarly one (Guillaume Raynal), by preachers of ethical naturalism (Alexander Pope, Lord Shaftesbury, Benjamin Franklin), and by the leading philosophers of French encyclopaedism: Diderot, Voltaire, and Rousseau. This is not the place for a broader discussion on the exclusion of colonial Others from the concept of "modernity" as an intellectual formation and social structure (the "Modern Constitution" according to Bruno Latour). This exclusion dates back to the Renaissance, the era of geographical and scientific discoveries, and was established in the Age of Reason and the Age of Enlightenment, i.e., in the philosophy and science of the 17th and 18th centuries. And it continues to this day, despite postmodern criticism. It is based on the paradigm of the West as a civilization of constant change, development, growth, and progress, constant melioration and modernization, scientism and rationalization of learning, invention and discovery, the conquest of nature by technology, technicalization and mechanization of life, urbanization and capitalism, colonization and homogenization of cultures, globalization or glocalization. And all this is supposed to be foreign to "primitive peoples." Without development and progress they cannot have their history, without history they have no names, they are only a collective mass – a "people" or a "tribe." Modernity is the process of "disenchanting the world" (*Entzauberung der Welt*), as it was called by the great classic of sociology, Max Weber, as the founders of the Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, wrote about it, and as the contemporary French thinker Marcel Gauchet argues. The "disenchantment of the world" means a progressive rationalization and institutional formalization of societies, which are founded on the groundwork of science, and not on beliefs and rituals, folktales and customary traditions, religion or magic. The "disenchanted world" obviously does not include the "primitive world," a world subject to possessive Westernization.

Homi K. Bhabha writes in *The Location of Culture* (1994) that as long as the Western mentality and worldview are based on seeing separate, unequal cultures, and not on perceiving the human world as a whole of interconnected communities, there will be a continued belief in the existence of imaginary people and places: the "world of primitive peoples," the "Arab world," "Black Africa," the "Second World," the "Third World," and so on. The myth of "civilizing the savages" will also persist, introduced by the ideologists of Christian missionaryism, both Catholic and Protestant. Despite high-profile anti- and post-colonial publications, which have exerted so strong an influence on contemporary philosophy, sociology, and political science, but also popular journalism, the team of the New Rijksmuseum initially ignored the issue of mental colonialism, still persistent in the Netherlands. And again, the problem of the relationship between art ("overseas" art in this case) and (colonial) history manifested itself in space: in the disposition of the collections between the buildings.

In 2013, one of the museum's important collections was placed in a separate building, formally different and informed by a different exhibition principle: the Asian Pavilion (**fig. 20**). This separation seems symptomatic. Firstly, it is typical of the conservative, centre-rightish worldview shared by the majority of Dutch society. Secondly, it is somehow safe for its identity. It separates the problem of former colonialism from "mainstream" history presented in the main building. The two histories – of the nation within the borders of the historical country and state (federal republic of provinces, then kingdom) and of the civilizations subject to its colonial expansion – remain spatially separate. Although its separation was supposed to be an

anti-colonial gesture – a token of recognizing the cultural distinctiveness and independence of the former colonies – the Asian Pavilion does not reveal how the "oriental" collections it contains ended up in the Netherlands and Amsterdam; that they are mainly the result of the conquest of Indonesia and Ceylon and attempts to economically colonize Indochina, China, and Japan. To put it sarcastically, the pavilion is for Asians, the main building for the Dutch (and for "white" tourists), as if the former were not "genuine" citizens of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, although Indonesians and people of mixed Indonesian-Dutch origin (Indos) account for some 12 percent of the country's population (approx. 2.2 million people out of 17.8 million inhabitants). The Asian Pavilion is very beautiful as a building and as an exhibition venue, delightful in its aesthetic sophistication, but ideologically, it is controversial.

In the main building itself, the history of East Indian colonization is indeed presented (or rather signalled), but it has been separated from the history of the Netherlands and placed inside rooms, outside the principal narrative line, while the theme of the glory of overseas shipping and trade dominates the main spaces. This gives the impression of a rupture in the exhibition narrative: the post-colonial "expiatory" thread, shown marginally, conflicts with the glorification of the maritime power of the former Republic and its Indian companies. While in the Asian Pavilion Eastern civilizations are presented as great and admirable cultures with their own history and art, in the exhibition areas of the main building they appear only as objects of the cultural expansion of the Dutch, devoid of their own subjectivity. They have no history there, no science, no technology, no religion, no culture, no art; we only see them through the eyes of Dutch explorers, whom, in turn, we do not see through the eyes of Asians. This is unfortunately consistent with the traditional colonial Eurocentric discourse, which denied history to "aboriginal," "primitive," "native," "tribal" cultures, granting them only the aesthetic quality of their artefacts, which allegedly functioned outside of time, outside any chronology of social change. "Primitive" meant "unchangeable," "eternal," "primary," "chthonic," and therefore deprived of the right to development and progress.

One could say that in this respect the new Rijksmuseum remained, perhaps unintentionally, a symptom of imperial-colonial thinking, and only recent years have seen a revision of this approach. Attempts were made to rearrange the permanent exhibition in the main building to highlight the colonial chapters of Dutch history. As part of the Adjustment of Colonial Terminology (since 2015) and Dutch Revision Project – Rijksmuseum (2017–22) programmes, new descriptions and commentaries were adopted for post-colonial exhibits, as well as new tour routes: "Rijksmuseum & Slavery" and "Colonial Past." In 2017, the museum launched a review of the provenance of its collections, working with researchers from Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and other post-colonial countries. Two years later, the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science (OCW) established the Provenance Research on Objects of the Colonial Era (PPROCE) project. It was a partnership program of the Rijksmuseum, the Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies (Instituut voor Oorlogs-, Holocaust en Genocidestudies, NIOD), and the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (NMVW, National Museum of World Cultures, consisting of the Tropenmuseum – Museum of the Tropics in Amsterdam, the Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal, and the Museum Volkenkunde – Ethnographic Museum in Leiden). The project was completed in 2019. Its aim was to establish a methodology for provenance research, in close cooperation with the countries of origin of the objects, with a view to possible restitution. The first six relics – specimens of ceremonial weapons looted in 1765 in Kanda – were returned to the government of Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) on 10 July 2023. The decision was made not by the museum management, but by the Minister of Culture and Media of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. A total of 478 objects are to be returned

from Dutch institutions to their original owners in Southeast Asia (mainly Indonesia) (the so-called Lombok Treasure, four statues from Singasari, a keris from Klungkung, and works of contemporary Balinese art from the Pita Maha collection). It is estimated that the Netherlands holds approximately 270,000 objects from the colonial era in various collections. The Rijksmuseum is discussing the return of another ten items to their places of origin, but its collection is believed to contain about a thousand such works.

The museum announced that it intends to return the artworks it once brought from Indonesia, and has also implemented the Pressing Matter programme for the years 2021–25, financed by the National Science Agenda (NWA) in cooperation with the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the National Museum of World Cultures, the Bronbeek Museum, the Vrolik Museum, and the university museums in Utrecht and Groningen. The aim is to develop unspecified "new theoretical models of value and property" and "new forms of restitution" that go beyond current legal regulations. And again a surly comment: isn't this perhaps about "returning without giving back," about transferring formal ownership rights, but keeping the objects themselves? A "change in the approach to heritage restitution" is hailed, and the need to develop a theory of the cultural "potential" of objects for the common tradition and for both heritages separately. We are halfway through this project, and it is still unclear what it would mean practically. For now, postcolonial restitution has remained confined mainly to the verbal sphere.

The programmes, projects, and campaigns have produced more tangible results in terms of the exhibition itself. As a result of the Rijksmuseum & Slavery campaign, 77 brief captions were added to objects in the galleries, all focused on the colonial power of the Netherlands, which was inextricably linked to the slave system. Some briefly told stories of people who were enslaved and forced to work under Dutch rule, their status reduced to that of utensils or working animals, others presented those who benefited from slavery, still others those who sought to abolish it. These labels hung from June 2021 to February 2023, first accompanying the temporary exhibition *Slavery* (2021), then on their own. *Slavery* was the second in a series of reckoning exhibitions at the Rijksmuseum. The first was *Good Hope: South Africa and The Netherlands from 1600* (2017), the last was *Revolusi! Indonesia Independent* (2022–23), devoted to the Indonesian independence struggle of 1945–49.

The context for this triad of shows was provided by intensified research on the inglorious colonial past of the Netherlands and its major role in the African slave trade from 1624 to 1863, research that also informed exhibitions in other museums of the country, namely *Shifting Image: In Search of Johan Maurits* at the Mauritshuis in The Hague (2019) and *Black in Rembrandt's Time* at the Rembrandthuis in Amsterdam (2020). The former showed the collection of the famous governor of Dutch Brazil, Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen, not in the context of his widely recognized role as the initiator of natural and ethnographic research and an active organizer of economic life in the South American overseas territory, but as a protector and beneficiary of the transatlantic slave trade. The exhibition at the Rembrandthuis carried a message that was somewhat opposite to the message of the critical exhibitions of the Rijksmuseum, especially *Slavery*. Based on archival discoveries, it promoted knowledge about the existence of a free black community in Amsterdam that lived in and around Jodenbreestraat (the street where Rembrandt lived) from around 1630 to around 1660. The exhibition separated, actually in accordance with the facts, the image of these free Africans (admittedly few) from the stereotypes of the black slave and the "Negro" ("Moor") as a figure from the world of exoticism, rooted in Dutch art at that time. Undoubtedly, this discovery of an African habitat in the metropolis of the Republic of the United Provinces was

a sensation in historical research, but it also without a doubt brought relief to the Dutch: "We were a tolerant and open society after all!" It reinforced – although this was not the curators' intention – the belief (myth?) that the Dutch country was "always" an enclave on the map of European chauvinism, anti-Judaism, and colonial racism. And this is a great remedy for healing feelings of guilt and shame.

The Rijksmuseum itself can now feel calm: it has made up for its moral guilt with three exhibitions and a short commentary on several dozen objects in the permanent exhibition (which includes approximately 8,000 exhibits, including, according to estimates, over a thousand "overseas" objects and countless works showing the splendour of life funded by slave work and colonial exploitation). It has also implemented numerous grandiose programs, projects, strategies, initiatives, campaigns, and government research grants, but their effects have been little visible to the wider public and have had no real impact on the shape of the Rijksmuseum exhibition as a whole. And in the main hall, the glory of the nation of sea conquerors, colonizers, and slave traders still triumphs. Unlike the spectacular, neat integration of the country's history with its art, carried out in the early 2000s in the galleries of the new Rijksmuseum, the latest "decolonization" of collections and exhibition galleries has not been very successful.