

Work in
Progress

Re- collecting and Re- allocation

Collection Assessment,
Ethical Deaccessioning and
Multiple Stakeholders

RECOLLECTING AND REALLOCATION

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Deaccessioning shouldn't be a taboo, but instead, an area for development, where museums gather knowledge, collaborate and share their experiences as well as they can.

Stijn Schoonderwoerd (1966) is the General Director of the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (NMVW, National Museum of World Cultures) in the Netherlands, which was created April 1, 2014 through a merger of the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, the Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal and Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde (National Museum of Ethnology) in Leiden. This museum holds the world culture collection of the State, containing about 365,000 objects and 750,000 photographs, and organizes exhibitions and activities at its three locations aimed at encouraging world citizenship. Since May 1, 2017 he is also the director of Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, the world culture museum of the

City of Rotterdam which partners with NMVW, sharing the directorship, management and Supervisory Board. The Wereldmuseum holds the world culture collection of the city of Rotterdam (85,000 objects). Stijn Schoonderwoerd is also on the board of the Dutch Museums Association.

He is an economist and previously held positions as General Director of Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde, Managing Director of Het Nationale Ballet and board member of Het Muziektheater Amsterdam (now Dutch National Opera & Ballet), and Executive Director of the Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra/Netherlands Chamber Orchestra.

Foreword

“Look,” he says. “Here we have an entire cabinet, full of drums. Very nice. But what to do with ^{this so} many drums?” He continues through the depository, making frequent stops to point out collections of objects, ^{for example,} baskets, spears. He explains that he only wants to keep the good ones. There are just too many objects, and most will never be exhibited or researched. He must make choices. A red sticker means an object may stay. The remainder is destined for removal. ^{such removal,} The journalist asks if ~~this~~ won't lead to regret. No, no, says the director. He quotes a well-known Rotterdam collector who helped found his museum: “Hold on too tightly and you won't keep much.”

These plans ultimately led to dismissal of the director in question. The red stickers are gone again, and the same drums, baskets and spears still fill the cabinets. A disaster of unprecedented proportions was narrowly avoided.

It's tempting to quickly forget this episode, like a bad dream from long ago. However, ^a ~~this~~ video, which can still be found online, highlights some issues of indisputable, continued relevance. What to make of the fact that many hundreds of thousands of objects are stored in depositories, seldom or never to see the light of day? ^{shall} What is the archival value of objects which very possibly ~~will~~ never be part of an exhibition? Why do collections continue to grow, and is hardly anything

ever removed? Are there limits to ^{such} ~~this~~ growth? Society also ^{asks} ~~poses~~ ^{same} these questions.

In the cultural heritage sector, it is often noted that deaccessioning should be part of modern collection management. If this is so, why does it seldom take place? And when it does happen, what does it involve? Which ethical issues may arise? How to determine the cultural value of objects? How to handle past donations by private parties? For most museums, ^{how to deaccession remains} ~~this is~~ a relatively unfamiliar territory.

Moreover, as our museum deals with objects from all over the world, we must ^{also} ~~also~~ consider the interests of the countries and communities of origin. What form do these interests take? How to weigh ^{their stakes, those of} ~~them~~ against Dutch museums with a possible interest in the deaccessioned objects? And how to determine who exactly ‘the community of origin’ actually is? These topics are closely related to discussions ^{about} ~~on~~ the restitution of colonial heritage, and looted art in particular. Our museum stands at the center of this increasingly active international debate, and recently contributed to the international discourse by publishing ^{It is a} ~~our own~~ policies on handling claims for restitution of objects. A sensitive and politically volatile subject, which further increases the complexity involved in deaccessioning of international collections.

However, ^{the vexed nature of this conversation} ~~the vexed nature of this conversation~~

~~This~~ cannot be a reason to avoid these issues; ~~however~~. On the contrary. That nightmare with the red stickers, which took place at one of our depositories, means we can’t just indig-
nantly ignore the question of “How many drums do you need?”

Deaccessioning shouldn’t be a taboo, but instead, an area for development, where museums gather knowledge, collaborate and share their experiences as well as they can. That way, we can explore how to establish a truly modern collection policy together.

Gaining experience was one reason we agreed to support the city of Delft in deaccessioning their Nusantara collection. With 18,000 objects, this was one the largest deaccessioning projects in the recent history of Dutch museums, complicated by the fact that these were objects of Indonesian origin. We found the process extremely educational. We believe our experiences can also help inform other museums.

We therefore created this second publication in our Work in Progress series. This is a series of publications in which we share our experiences with various important topics with the rest of the sector, and invite others to do the same. In this way, we ^{hope to} ~~can~~ work together to achieve a museum sector that assumes social responsibility, ^{breaks} ~~breaks~~ new ground and ^{works} ~~works~~ to improve itself continuously. ^{breaking} ^{working}

This publication covers deaccessioning in most of its aspects, including collection assessment, the weighing of stakeholder interests, ethics and finding new destinations. In addition to our own experiences, a range of cultural heritage professionals discuss various other types of deaccessioning. This broad approach means that this publication isn’t about ‘colonial collections’ and restitution specifically. No doubt the Work in Progress series will feature a publication on the topic at some ^{Should Work in Progress be} ~~italicized?~~

point. After all, here too, ‘learning by doing’ is the only way forward.

In conclusion: Hold on too tightly and you won’t keep much. Very true. However, let go too easily, and not much will remain whole.

Stijn Schoonderwoerd

Collection Assessment

An important element seems to be missing from the conversation, namely the values different stakeholders assign to these objects.

Tessa Luger (Amsterdam, 1970) Senior specialist movable heritage Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (Amersfoort)

Tessa Luger has worked as a researcher, consultant, lecturer and trainer in the field of cultural heritage and museum studies for over twenty years, specializing in topics such as collections management, mobile heritage, historic interiors and religious heritage. For the past ten years, her focus has been primarily on the significance and value assessment of heritage collections.

From 2009–2013, she led a national research program called 'Value and Valuation of Cultural Heritage'. This program resulted in the publication of *Assessing Museum Collections. Collection Valuation in Six Steps* (2014). Luger is also the author of *Handreiking voor het schrijven van een collectieplan* (Guidelines for writing a collection plan, 2008) and co-author of *Guidelines on Ways of Dealing with Religious Objects*. Tessa Luger trained as a historian and an art historian in both the Netherlands and the United States.

Shared Heritage, Shared Values?

The debate on the return of cultural objects by Western countries to the countries of origin, in many cases their own former colonies, has intensified recently. Several countries, including Germany, France and Sweden, have drawn up or are currently working on guidelines on how to deal with this issue. The Netherlands is one of the countries debating the topic. The Dutch Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (National Museum of World Cultures), or NMVW, which manages a vast state collection of ethnographic objects, has taken the lead in this matter. This museum has not only taken up the role of moderator, but has also put its money where its mouth is by devoting itself, together with Erfgoed Delft (Delft Heritage), to the return of a large collection to the country of origin, Indonesia. However, such far-reaching initiatives are still rare in the international museum world.

Two things stand out in the treatment of the topic. First, national frameworks dominate. This is not surprising when we consider the fact that collection policies are often decided on a national level, but we may ask whether these frameworks are adequate in this case. Also, an important element seems to be missing from the conversation, namely the values different stakeholders assign to these objects. Until now, the discussion has focused on the question of the desirability of repatriation, and what objects should be handed over when, to whom and

under which conditions. By skipping over this crucial question of value, the discussion risks getting bogged down in legal squabbles about ownership. The main obstacles seem to be a fear of loss on one side, and the wish to re-appropriate lost cultural property on the other. Moreover, these objects represent much more than expressions of a certain culture or history: they can be symbols of unequal power relations, injustice and exploitation. This complicates the discussion, and practical solutions are still far off.

From 2013 till 2018, I acted as an advisor on the reallocation of the ‘Nusantara collection’. I will use this case to delve further into the question of value and share some of the insights I have gained. When Museum Nusantara in Delft closed its doors for good in 2013, its collection of 18,000 objects, originating from the former Dutch colony of Indonesia, needed a new destination. The collection’s owner, the municipality of Delft, delegated the responsibility for the reallocation of the Nusantara collection to the municipal heritage service, Erfgoed Delft. The director of Erfgoed Delft, in turn, sought to collaborate with the NMVW, since this museum maintains the largest Indonesia collection in the Netherlands. Together, they took it upon themselves to get the difficult job done.

From the start of the project, both organizations agreed upon two principles: firstly, the project team would strictly adhere to Dutch laws and guidelines. By doing so, they wanted to set an example for the Dutch museum sector. Secondly, they wished to return as much of the collection as possible to Indonesia. They assumed that even if a substantial portion of the Nusantara collection were to be repatriated, sufficient Indonesian objects

of outstanding value would remain in the Netherlands. This assumption was based on the fact that the NMVW maintains a very rich and diverse Indonesia collection, highly valued by international experts on ethnographic collections.

It soon became apparent that these principles – however logical and understandable – could not be reconciled. According to the LAMO, the Leidraad Afstoten Museale Objecten, the Dutch guidelines for the deaccessioning of museum objects adopted by the Dutch Museum Association and mandatory for all registered museums, objects should first be offered to other Dutch museums. Only if these express no interest can other options, such as transfers to non-museum or international parties, be explored. The Museum Association was willing to grant the municipality of Delft an exemption from this rule, so that it was free to contact Indonesian parties directly. This process shows how the Dutch guidelines prioritize the protection of Dutch national cultural property, ignoring the desirability of international returns of collections.

In addition to the deaccessioning guidelines, the Dutch Heritage Act was decisive in the execution of the Nusantara project. Even though this law had not yet been enforced at the start of the project, the executing parties decided to act as if it was already in effect, since it was already in the making and it was clear that its enforcement would be a determining factor. This turned out to be a prudent decision, as the law was indeed implemented in 2016, during the project (2013–2018). This new heritage act stipulates that government institutions wishing to deaccession objects they own, must first determine if these

objects merit protection as Dutch cultural property. If necessary, an independent committee of experts can be invited to make an independent assessment. Many Western European countries have adopted similar legal provisions, aimed at preventing the international export of art treasures of national importance. A previous Dutch law (the Preservation of Cultural Heritage Act) had a similar aim, but applied only to privately owned objects. Publicly owned objects were not protected under this law, because it was assumed that public bodies would not dispose of valuable cultural property without proper cause. As there have since been several incidents of (proposed) disposal from public collections for financial motives, public opinion in this matter has changed and the law has been adapted.

As a consequence of the new law, the parties collaborating on the Nusantara project, Erfgoed Delft and the NMVW, had to perform an elaborate value assessment before they could offer the collection to Indonesia. The key question was which objects were seen as indispensable to the Netherlands, and should therefore not leave the country. For this value assessment, they used the method from *Assessing Museum Collections; Collection Valuation in Six Steps*, a publication by the Netherlands Cultural Heritage Agency. Geertje Huisman and I work as assessment experts for this agency and provided guidance. The method facilitated the process and kept the discussion on the right track.

Carrying out a value assessment, or significance assessment, as it is also called, means making reasoned and verifiable

statements about the cultural value of objects and collections, in response to a question, based on previously established and defined criteria. The choice of criteria depends on the question. The publication *Assessing Museum Collections* presents common criteria as features and groups them in three main categories: Cultural Historical, Social and Societal and Use. Each category corresponds with several criteria: ‘historic’, ‘artistic’ and ‘information value’ for Cultural Historical, ‘social’ and ‘perception’ for Social and Societal and ‘museum’ and ‘economic’ for Use. The features are: condition, provenance, ensemble and rarity or representativeness. When applying the method, you can either use the full set of criteria, pick the most relevant to your situation or add your own. You then record whether and to what extent the item or collection satisfies your chosen criteria and why, using a valuation form. An important step in the process is the definition of the valuation framework, the ‘yardstick’ by which to assess your collection. To create this framework, you outline the criteria an item or collection must satisfy in general terms to be assigned a ‘low’, ‘medium’ or ‘high’ value (the scores).

To define the valuation framework in the case of the Nusantara collection, the project team needed to define ‘meriting protection’ in relation to this collection. The team consisted of the Erfgoed Delft project manager, the NMVW project manager, the head of the collections department, two curators for the Indonesia collection, a project assistant (all from the NMVW), and two value assessment specialists from the Netherlands Cultural Heritage Agency. Since the explicit aim of the project was to return the largest possible portion of the collection to

Indonesia, it was decided that the first and foremost criterion for an object to merit protection should be rarity. Rarity in this case meant that there were no or very few similar objects present within the Dutch public collection, and that the object in question differed in an essential way from those already represented. Objects that did not meet this criterion automatically failed to ‘merit protection’. Objects that did meet the rarity criterion also needed to meet one or more of the other criteria to be eligible for selection.

The complete list of criteria was as follows:

- The object is rare within the Dutch public collection; there are no or very few similar objects in the Dutch collection and the object in question differs in an essential way from those already present.
- Specific documentation about the provenance of the object is available.
- The object has a high artistic value (only in combination with one of the other criteria).
- The object is closely connected to a historic person/event/location.
- Due to the physical fragility, keeping an additional object of this type in reserve is advisable.
- The object has an obvious added value due to its connection to other objects, in the sense that the story would be incomplete if one were to remove one or more objects.

The next step was to create the ‘collection anatomy’: a reasoned division of the collection into separate units, allowing meaningful statements to be made about the significance of each unit. This turned out to be quite a challenge for such a

large and diverse collection. After much debate, the project team decided to group the objects by region, theme and collector. This helped achieve a first rough selection. The curators – both specialists in the field of Indonesian ethnography – continued to refine the divisions until these reached a level where selection decisions could be made.

This rigorous selection process led to 22% of the collection being earmarked as ‘meriting protection’. This meant the remaining 78% could be offered to Indonesia.

At first glance, both conditions of the project seem to have been met: Dutch laws and guidelines were followed, and the largest possible selection of objects from the collection offered to Indonesia. However, looking back, there are some critical notes. The value assessment focused on which objects merited protection within the Netherlands, as stipulated in the Dutch Heritage Act; an exclusively Dutch perspective on the collection. The Dutch experts assessed the collection according to criteria that were relevant within their national reference framework. This led the Indonesians to believe the Dutch were engaging in ‘cherry picking’, offering them second rate objects. That the selection requirements were imposed by Dutch law did not come across, unfortunately.

After a period of difficult communication between the Netherlands and Indonesia, representatives of both countries came together to review the collection and to give the Indonesians the opportunity to make their own selection. This led to surprising insights: objects that were indispensa-

ble to the Dutch turned out to be of little importance to the Indonesians, and vice versa. For example, objects displayed at the 1883 World Exhibition in Amsterdam qualified as historically important within the Dutch context, but held little significance for the Indonesians. In some cases, pragmatic choices were made: a collection of business cards was divided according to the language used on the card, with cards in Indonesian or Javanese going to Indonesia, and those in Dutch staying in the Netherlands. This raises the question of how the process would have gone if both countries had shared their views on the collection at the outset. The method used leaves room for this approach, even advocating multivocality and multiperspectivity. Collection valuation is presented as a dynamic process, with stakeholders adding different perspectives in order to come to a shared value assessment.

At the start of this paper, I discussed the sensitivities around the return of colonial collections. These sensitivities can make collection managers shy away from an approach to collection valuation – and possible subsequent selection – that involves a diverse, multilateral group of stakeholders. They might fear that adding an international dimension to the valuation and selection process could complicate matters. In my opinion, however, the possible negative effects do not outweigh the benefits. This is after all a shared cultural heritage: remains of a shared history, that, however painful, must be faced. In this light, it is only logical to give different stakeholders the opportunity to let their voices be heard. As far as I know, this approach has not yet been attempted. Possibly the NMVW can once again fulfil a leading role in this.

Furthermore, it is important to check national laws and guidelines for obstacles to returns and remove these if possible. It is high time that we no longer consider colonial collections exclusively as national property meriting protection, but instead as a common heritage to be distributed fairly.

Further reading:

Assessing museum collections. Collection valuation in six steps Publication by the Netherlands Cultural Heritage Agency (Amersfoort 2013).



Collectie waarderingssessie 9 juli 2015.
Fotografie Tessa Luger.

An important difference with museum deaccessioning is that often, decision makers cannot assess the collection's quality themselves. They are too likely to attach (too much) relevance to the financial aspects.

Véronique Baar is an art historian and the founder of QKunst, providing services relating to collection management and commissioned art to government institutions and corporations. Over the past fifteen years, QKunst has guided approximately

sixty companies in banking, insurance, energy and education through the (partial) deaccessioning of their collections. To this end, QKunst has developed a collection management application and a collection value chart.

(In)visibility

How Corporations Deaccession Art

‘Great bargains on ABN Amro’s artistic rejects’ was the headline of a recent RTL Nieuws article about the deaccessioning of art by ABN Amro. In my opinion, this is a false and crude impression of corporate art deaccessioning.

Naturally, there are differences in how companies and museums handle deaccessioning. After all, corporations are not restricted by guidelines in this area, and the collection is not the main focus, as it is at a museum, leading to different choices. However, for most companies, deaccessioning is a painstaking process, which takes into account the most optimal path for both the collection and the organization.

More compact collections

Deaccessioning has been a familiar concept within the museum sector. Since the Dutch Guideline for Deaccessioning of Museum Objects, the LAMO, first went into effect twenty years ago, the amount of deaccessioning projects has increased. For approximately ten years now, this has been considered a component of proper management for larger corporate collections as well. The goal may be a desired increase in quality, perhaps refining the collection if the relevance decreases due to fluctuations in collection or donation policies.

More often, deaccessioning of corporate collections is motivated by practical considerations: the depositories are full due to changes in accommodations, less wall space, or reorganization. For example, various collections were previously assembled by local Rabobank filiations. These have since combined to form larger regional banks. A more compact collection in line with the new situation is now desirable. Financial gain is very rarely the motivation, though cost savings can be: a smaller collection requires less management, at less expense.

Nuance

If a company engages the services of a curator or consultant to help with the deaccessioning, the process will be similar to that followed by their museum colleagues. Generally, a collection plan or focus is established. Additionally, the items are assessed and assigned an artistic value. Then, selection criteria are determined and the selection phase begins.

An important difference with museum deaccessioning is that often, decision makers cannot assess the collection's quality themselves. They are too likely to attach (too much) relevance to the financial aspects. Moreover, in addition to the artistic and financial value, the collection may also contribute other elements of importance to the organization. Consider, for example, the value of gifts in maintaining relationships, the regional value of works by local artists, the emotional value of objects to which an employee or department feels an attachment, or the (organizational) historical value of items relating to the company or region's history.

When our team is asked to advise on deaccessioning, we do our best to offer decision makers a clear, nuanced view of the various values a collection encompasses. We define the relevance of these values for that individual collection. Then we consider which value dominates for each item, assigning percentiles and visualizing these using a value chart. This reveals any focal points within the collection; a useful foundation on which to base the selection, achieving a nuanced decision that does justice to the collection.

Made to measure

The value chart is also useful in determining various deaccessioning options. Objects of regional value may be offered to local museums, as when Rabobank Centraal Zuid-Limburg recently donated two works by regional artist Charles Eyck to the Museum Valkenburg. Art with an emotional aspect can be auctioned off among the employees, items of (organizational) historical value may be transferred externally, to a local history society, or internally, as Achmea did, defining and maintaining both an art collection and a historical archival collection.

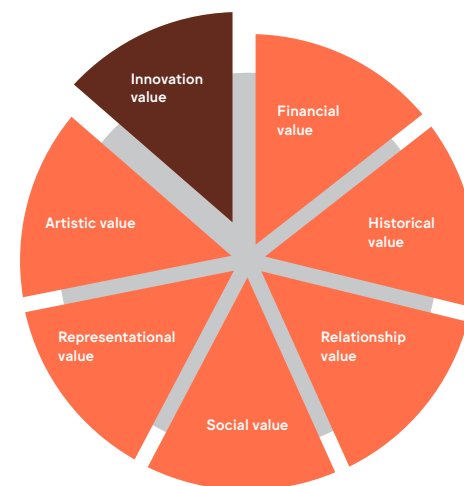
Works of great artistic merit can still be eligible for deaccessioning. Managing exceptional works of art can be burdensome, or it may be in the public interest to place these objects outside the company. For instance, KPN opted for a long term loan to the Rijksmuseum of the extraordinary 'Postkantoorreliëf' (post office relief) by Jan Schoonhoven. In 2010, ING donated over 270 valuable pieces to the Drents Museum in Assen.

LAB

Unlike museums, companies are not bound by rules relating to deaccessioning. These examples show that despite this, their deaccessioning takes social responsibility into account. Of course, they wish to avoid the reputational damage associated with poorly managed deaccessioning, but corporate social responsibility plays a role as well.

Selling at public auction is usually one of the last steps in the corporate deaccessioning process. However, because corporations, unlike museums, have no duty of disclosure, and donations often aren't publicized, this final step may be the only visible one. Headlines about 'rejects' are the result, even if the painstaking process leading up to that moment is frequently worthy of the LAMO.

A guideline for deaccessioning from corporate collections might well be useful to support curators, consultants and decision makers of corporate collections, and to provide a better foundation for and visibility within the public debate. If such a guideline were to feature a range of case studies, this could also be an interesting 'LAB' for the museum sector's discussions concerning the LAMO.

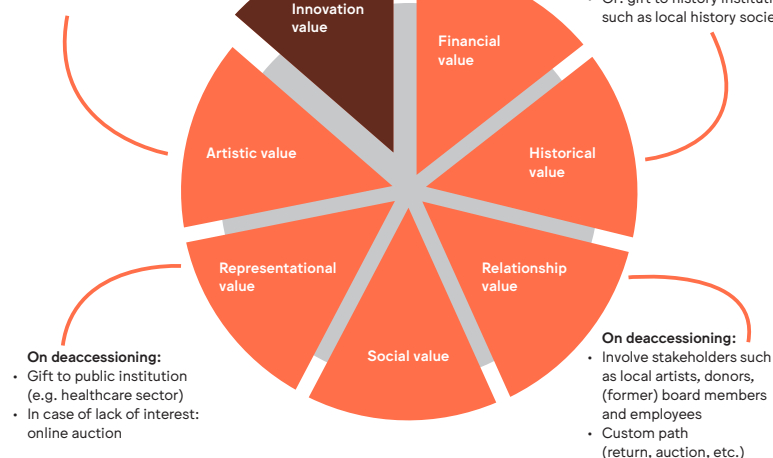


On deaccessioning:

- Gift or loan to museum
- In case of lack of interest: high-end auction

On deaccessioning:

- New internal destination such as corporate history department or archives
- Or: gift to history institution such as local history society



Illustratie 1 | Example of a collection value chart with seven different values in relatively equal proportions.

Illustratie 2 | The same value chart, with various deaccessioning paths for objects with artistic, historical, relationship, or representational value.

Ethics of Deaccessioning

A museum wishing to dispose of an object can be compared to a doctor considering euthanasia.

Rob Polak (1960) is a legal consultant, deputy judge and author. Since November 2016, he is the chairperson of the *Ethische Codecommissie voor Musea* (ethics committee for museums). Until July 2012 he was a partner at the law firm of De Brauw. He has advised museums extensively on issues relating to restitution and deaccessioning and published multiple articles on art and law. In 2005, the House of Representatives of the

Netherlands appointed him as parliamentary counsel, in which position he frequently advised the parliament on proposed legislation and litigation risks. In May 2019, under the pseudonym Robert Pollack, he published the literary thriller *De Taak* at Ambo|Anthos. Polak studied at the University of Amsterdam (UvA) and Columbia University in New York.

Registered Museums Come First

Deaccessioning Collections According to the Ethical Code for Museums and LAMO 2016

Introduction

Deaccessioning as a concept has been the subject of heated debate in the museum world for many years. A museum wishing to dispose of an object can be compared to a doctor considering euthanasia. The proposed action contradicts the basic tenets of the profession, even if it may be the least worst alternative.

The term ‘deaccessioning’ illustrates this unease. This is a euphemism for disposal, removal.

That collection deaccessioning is no simple matter is clear from how museums are understood and defined in the Ethical Code for Museums:

A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution, open to the public, in the service of society and its development. A museum acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.

In principle, a permanent institution obtains and preserves its collection for eternity. Disposal is in conflict with this idea.

For this reason, deaccessioning often leads to disquiet, which is curbed by regulations.

I will first discuss the Dutch museums' self-regulation of collection deaccessioning, known as the LAMO, the Leidraad Afstoten Museale Objecten (Guideline for Deaccessioning Museum Objects). Then, I will describe how the Ethics Commission has dealt with this self-regulation in the past, and relevant experiences gained during the deaccessioning of the Nusantara collection. Finally, I will note various weaknesses and possible solutions.

Deaccessioning in the Ethical Code for Museums

The Dutch Ethical Code for Museums ('Ethical Code') is a translation of the ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums formulated by the International Council of Museums (ICOM), the main networking organization for museums worldwide.¹ The ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums is intended as a tool for self-regulation. It sets minimum standards of professional practice and performance for museums and their staff. ICOM members undertake to abide by the ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums.

The statutes of the Dutch Museums Association stipulate that members must support and safeguard the Ethical Code in full. The Dutch National Register of Museums requires a similar commitment of museums applying for registration.

The Ethical Code contains as many as six provisions on collection deaccessioning (Articles 2.12 through 2.17). In summary, these provisions stipulate that deaccessioning must be

performed with care and that the proceeds must benefit the collection directly. Selling off part of the collection to fund a new museum roof is not acceptable. However, the Ethical Code doesn't forbid collection deaccessioning in and of itself.

The rules on deaccessioning from the Ethical Code are further defined in the LAMO guidelines for the deaccessioning of museum objects, created by the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage in 1999 and subsequently adopted by the Dutch Museums Association. The LAMO has been revised at various points since then, in 2006, in 2016 and, on an editorial level, in 2019.

LAMO 2016

The general drift of the LAMO 2016 is as follows.²

When a museum proposes to dispose of an object, it must first determine the object's owner. Often, this will not be the museum itself. The decision to dispose of the object must be made by the owner or with the owner's explicit permission.

Then, the museum must consider the impact of other stakeholders on any further plans. These can include donors, artists, heirs of donors or artists and funding agencies. Stakeholders may need to be consulted before continuing with the proposed deaccessioning. Sometimes, a stakeholder's permission will be required.

If the museum indeed decides to proceed with the deaccessioning, the object must be entered into the Deaccessions Database, along with the conditions under which the museum

is willing to transfer the object to another registered museum. LAMO 2016 refers to these as ‘award criteria’.

Subsequent actions must take into account the distinction in the LAMO 2016 between objects designated as ‘meriting protection’ or of ‘high’ heritage value, and objects not in this category. A museum may itself classify an object as ‘possibly meriting protection’, or of ‘high’ heritage value. Other museums, stakeholders and relevant experts may also designate objects listed in the Deaccessions Database as such.³

If a candidate registered museum (adequately) satisfies the deaccessioning museum’s award criteria, the object may be transferred to this registered museum, whether the object is classified as ‘meriting protection’, of ‘high’ value, or not. The LAMO refers to this as ‘transfer’ (*herplaatsen*).

If no candidate registered museum⁴ (adequately) satisfies the deaccessioning museum’s award criteria and the object is *not* classified as ‘meriting protection’, the object may be disposed of outside the museum sector. The LAMO refers to this as ‘reallocation’ (*herbestemmen*).

If no candidate registered museum (adequately) satisfies the deaccessioning museum’s award criteria, the object *does* ‘merit protection’, *and* the deaccessioning museum nevertheless chooses to proceed with the disposal, the Protection Value Assessment Committee decides the matter. A protection value assessment is performed to determine whether the object must be retained for a public collection in the Netherlands.⁵ If the

Assessment Committee decides that the object indeed merits protection and the board of the National Register of Museums also supports this conclusion, possibly after objections, then “[the object] must be preserved for national heritage purposes. The museum is not permitted to sell the object outside the Dutch public domain.”⁶

The Ethics Commission interprets the quoted text to mean that the item may not be reallocated outside the circle of registered museums.⁷

It can be inferred from this summary that the LAMO is aimed at keeping objects that may ‘merit protection’ within the circle of registered museums.

The LAMO in Practice

Introduction

I will now discuss the Ethics Commission for Museums’ recommendations concerning the LAMO and the assessment of the deaccessioning on the closure of Museum Nusantara in Delft.

*The Ethics Commission for Museums on Deaccessioning*⁸

The Ethics Commission for Museums advises on the interpretation and application of the Ethical Code, including the LAMO. Of the nineteen recommendations provided by the Ethics Commission in the course of its existence (since 1999), seven of these instances, a little over a third, relate to deaccessioning and the LAMO.

The first recommendation on these topics dates from 2005.⁹ This assessed whether the auctioning off of a work by L.J. Kleijn, intended to fund a historic street organ to be placed outside the museum, was in accordance with the Ethical Code. Deaccessioning was not the central focus of the recommendation. Instead, this concentrated on whether it was an unacceptable conflict of interest for the museum director to also chair the board of the foundation managing the organ.¹⁰

Deaccessioning did come up as a matter of interest. The commission noted that the museum had always intended to dispose of the painting, and felt this was a mitigating factor. “Museums often acquire objects that do not fit their own collection, nor can they reasonably be considered suitable for another museum’s collection,” was the commission’s opinion.

The 2011 recommendation on the controversial sale of a work by Marlene Dumas took a somewhat different view.¹¹ The commission declared this sale to be in conflict with the Ethical Code and the LAMO. The decisive factors were: (i) the museum failed to first offer the work to another museum, (ii) it was unclear whether the proceeds would be used purely to restore the collection, or also to cover the costs of renovation and depository expenses, and (iii) the decision to sell couldn’t be traced to a current collection plan. Nevertheless, the commission also determined that “offering highly valuable objects such as the work in question for sale for the market value does not contradict the letter and spirit of the LAMO.” The context makes it clear the commission was referring to sales to other museums.

The recommendation does not indicate how this decision relates to the LAMO 2006, which states: “The sale of objects between museums is not the preferred option.”¹² LAMO 2016 also states: “Sale between museums is not advisable.”¹³

The LAMO was extensively referenced in a 2015 recommendation concerning the Wereldmuseum. The museum had commenced an exceptionally large-scale deaccessioning project. This was the result of a decision to concentrate on preserving and expanding its Asia collection and dispose of many other collections, including the Africa collection. The deaccessioning did not comply with the LAMO in multiple respects: (i) the deaccessioning was not substantiated in a collection plan, (ii) the objects for deaccessioning were not registered adequately, (iii) the objects were not first offered to other museums, and (iv) the proceeds were not or not fully intended to benefit the collection.

Additionally, the commission noted that the museum had acted in breach of LAMO 2006 by offering to sell a Buddha statue bought two years earlier to other museums at the market value. The commission seemed to hold a different opinion than at the time of the 2011 recommendation concerning the work by Marlene Dumas, when it determined that offering works to other museums at market prices was not in conflict with the LAMO, in letter or in spirit. As part of their Wereldmuseum recommendation, the commission further determined that withdrawal of an object acquired relatively recently (two years previously in this case) is fundamentally incompatible with the Ethical Code and the LAMO, as this contradicts the museum’s purpose (see the

Ethical Code's definition of 'museum' in the introduction to this article).¹⁴

In a 2013 recommendation, the commission formulated conditions that allowed museums to dispose of 'bulk collections', or large groups of objects of low heritage value, even if the ownership is unclear.¹⁵ These opinions were largely incorporated in the LAMO 2016.

The 2018 recommendation concerning non-registered objects is in line with this recommendation.¹⁶ Here, the commission determined that Article 2.20 of the Ethical Code implies that museums must register all objects they wish to add to their collection. This registration involves recording the information minimally required to distinguish between museum objects (identification) and determine their current whereabouts (localization). The specific means of registration will depend on the type of object. Sometimes, for certain types of bulk collections for instance, group registration may suffice.¹⁷

The LAMO implies that objects will only be eligible for withdrawal *after* registration. If a museum does not wish to keep an acquired object and is not willing to assume responsibility for the registration, it must refuse the object and return this to the provider. For this reason, it is best if a museum does not accept objects without stipulating that it will decide whether or not to retain the objects within a reasonable period of time, while also obligating the provider to take back the objects if the museum decides not to keep them.

In a 2017 recommendation, the commission determined that artists cannot prevent a museum from withdrawing their work from its collection.¹⁸ However, the museum should inform the artist of the proposed withdrawal. If a transfer within the circle of registered museums does not prove viable and the interests of other stakeholders (such as the donor) are not in conflict, the artist has right of first refusal to buy the work at the market value. If the artist does not make use of this right and no other value is agreed, the museum may opt for an alternative reallocation (outside the museum sector). The museum should discuss this with the artist, but again, permission for the type of reallocation is not required.

A 2018 recommendation concerned a museum which was closing down and therefore needed to dispose of its entire collection.¹⁹ The committee determined that, considering the LAMO's aim of preserving objects meriting protection within the circle of registered museums, transferring objects to a municipality without a listing in the Museum Register is only permissible if, at the time of the transfer, it is clear that the collection will be entrusted to a registered museum. This recommendation did note that "the LAMO does not adequately provide for a situation where a museum is closing, and therefore has no choice but to dispose of its collection." The committee recommended addressing this situation in a future version of the LAMO.

Nusantara

The issues involved in deaccessioning a museum's collection upon its closure became apparent during the closure of Museum Nusantara in Delft in 2013. Dr. Jos van Beurden was

commissioned by Museum Prinsenhof Delft and the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, to assess this disposal of an entire collection, consisting of 18,000 objects, a library and a media collection, in his report ‘Herplaatsing Collectie Voormalig Museum Nusantara Delft’ (reallocation of the former Museum Nusantara Delft collection).²⁰ This extensive project is featured elsewhere in this publication. I will restrict my remarks to the report’s recommendations relating to the LAMO.

Van Beurden, too, notes that the LAMO is aimed at keeping objects which merit protection within the circle of registered museums. During the Nusantara deaccessioning, this led to two types of complications: Dutch museums were favored over foreign museums, and registered museums were favored over heritage institutions that were not museums, such as libraries. Those carrying out the operation acknowledged this, and communicated with the Dutch Museums Association and the Ethics Commission on the topic. The issue was the subject of various discussions and correspondence without ever resulting in a published recommendation.²¹ Erfgoed Delft, which carried out the operation, did feel supported by these communications.

These communications took place in 2015, when the ‘old’ LAMO 2006 was still in effect. This version of the LAMO indeed failed to consider reallocations outside the Netherlands. LAMO 2016, however, does not entirely preclude foreign destinations. LAMO 2016 states that if the deaccessioning museum believes that a foreign museum or community of origin can best accommodate the object, it may express this preference in the award conditions.²²

The fact that the LAMO favors registered museums over heritage institutions that aren’t museums remains unchanged in the LAMO 2016.

LAMO Weaknesses and Possible Solutions

General Remarks

Employing the LAMO 2016 in practice as described above reveals various weaknesses, mainly concerning the privileged position of registered museums. Before addressing these weaknesses, I would like to offer a few general remarks.

In practice, a document such as the LAMO 2016 cannot provide neat solutions for all situations. It would be nice if this document were more concise and legally rigorous. Future versions ought to keep this in mind.

The LAMO 2016 is aimed at museums (as were the earlier versions).²³ This is understandable, as the LAMO 2016 is an elaboration of the Ethical Code for Museums. As noted, compliance with LAMO 2016 is mandatory for those museums belonging to the Dutch Museums Association, as the statutes of the Museums Association include this obligation.²⁴ Moreover, the National Register of Museums also stipulates museums’ adherence to the Ethical Code and LAMO 2016 as a requirement for registration.²⁵

But the act of deaccessioning may only be performed by the owner or a proxy. Museums generally do not own their collections, instead managing or borrowing the items.

The LAMO 2016 gives the impression that the museum is the primary responsible party in collection deaccessioning. This is a misrepresentation, as the museum is not the owner of the objects. An owner/non-museum that has entrusted an object to a museum, to manage or on loan, may cancel their agreement with the museum and proceed with the deaccessioning. Such an owner/non-museum is not bound by the LAMO 2016 Ethical Code.²⁶ As the museum cannot prevent this, it also cannot assume responsibility. Even if a museum plays a more active role in deaccessioning an object it does not own, the museum is, at most, a *contributor* to the deaccessioning.

LAMO 2016 shows that its creators do take into account the fact that the museum may not be the owner of the deaccessioned object, but assume that the museum is the one making the deaccessioning decision, obtaining a mandate from the owner under certain circumstances.²⁷ LAMO 2016 does not address withdrawals initiated by owners/non-museums. I believe future versions of the LAMO ought to include such situations.

Privileged Position of Registered Museums

The privileged position occupied by registered museums within the LAMO 2016 can be justified by the quality assessment included in their registration process.

Such privilege may lead to complications, however, especially when a museum closes and must dispose of its entire collection. These complications were apparent during both the Nusantara deaccessioning and the case resulting in the Ethics Commission recommendation of November 20, 2018.

Moreover, the argument concerning the quality cannot justify favoring registered museums over other heritage institutions without further explanation.

The LAMO 2016 compensates for the disadvantage to foreign museums, noted in the report on the Nusantara deaccessioning, by allowing the deaccessioning museum to include a preference for a foreign museum or community of origin in the award criteria if it believes this to be the best accommodation for the object. Nevertheless, I believe a future revision of the LAMO ought to delve more deeply into the implications of deaccessioning projects with the potential for international transfers, particularly in light of the growing political and museological focus on colonial collections.

*Rob Polak*²⁸

- 1 The current version was adopted by ICOM's General Assembly on October 8, 2004.
- 2 This representation of the LAMO derives partially from the recommendation of the Ethics Commission of November 20, 2018 concerning deaccessioning of objects meriting protection on closure of a museum.
- 3 LAMO 2016, page 12, first paragraph.
- 4 'Registered museums' are those museums that meet the requirements of and are registered with the Dutch National Register of Museums.
- 5 LAMO 2016, p. 18, under 2.3, "Protective Value Criteria."
- 6 LAMO 2016, p. 18.
- 7 See recommendation of November 20, 2018, concerning deaccessioning of objects meriting protection on closure of a museum (in Dutch), at: <https://p.museumvereniging.nl/afstoting-van-de-collectie-bij-sluiting-van-een-museum>. Since then, the LAMO has been redacted to reflect this point.
- 8 Considering my position as chair of the Ethics Commission, I feel it would be inappropriate for me to comment on the commission's recommendations, whether these took place before my time or not. I have attempted to represent these recommendations in a neutral fashion.
- 9 See March 2005 recommendation (in Dutch) at: <https://p.museumvereniging.nl/museumdirecteur-laat-museale-objecten-veilen-voor-een-goed-doel>
- 10 The commission determined that, considering the circumstances, the director's actions were acceptable.
- 11 June 20, 2011 recommendation, concerning MuseumGoudA (in Dutch) at: <https://p.museumvereniging.nl/advies-topstuk-verkopen-om-bezuinigingen-op-te-vangen>
- 12 LAMO 2006, p. 10.
- 13 LAMO 2016, p. 19.
- 14 September 15, 2015 Wereldmuseum recommendation (in Dutch) at: <https://p.museumvereniging.nl/quickscan-wereldmuseum>
- 15 December 4, 2013 bulk withdrawal recommendation (in Dutch) at: <https://p.museumvereniging.nl/bulkafstoting>
- 16 June 4, 2018 recommendation concerning non-registered objects (in Dutch) at: <https://p.museumvereniging.nl/advies-inzake-de-problematiek-van-niet-geregistreerde-objecten>
- 17 See June 4, 2018 recommendation, p. 8.
- 18 June 12, 2017 recommendation, concerning sale of work by a living artist from museum collections (in Dutch), at: <https://p.museumvereniging.nl/advies-etische-codecommissie-over-afstoting-werk-van-levende-kunstenaar>
- 19 Also see the November 20, 2018 recommendation referred to in footnote 7, on deaccessioning of objects meriting protection on closure of a museum (in Dutch), at: <https://p.museumvereniging.nl/afstoting-van-de-collectie-bij-sluiting-van-een-museum>
- 20 The report can be found at: https://issuu.com/tropenmuseum/docs/voormalig_museum_nusantara_delft_-
- 21 See Herplaatsing Collectie Voormalig Museum Nusantara Delft, p. 44. I was not part of the Ethics Commission at the time.
- 22 LAMO 2016, p. 25.
- 23 In writing this paragraph and the three subsequent paragraphs, I benefitted greatly from an unpublished December 2018 memo to the Ethics Commission by Prof. T. de Boer, LL.M.
- 24 Article 4, Section 1, Dutch Museums Association statutes. This provision actually refers solely to the Ethical Code, and not the LAMO.
- 25 See Museumnorm 2015 published by the National Register of Museums. This refers to both the Ethical Code and the LAMO.
- 26 If the owner is a legal entity under public law, they are still bound by the Heritage Act. The Heritage Act falls outside the scope of this article.
- 27 LAMO 2016, p. 17.
- 28 The author is the head of the Dutch Ethics Commission for Museums. Opinions expressed in this article are his own and do not reflect those of the committee.



Former collection of the patrons
Wereldmuseum Rotterdam.
Collection no. WM-VR-2011-1.

For repatriation to achieve its decolonial aims, the process must dismantle, not replicate, the privileging of Western values, definitions, and processes.

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production of knowledge and cultural artefacts, as well as critical questions in decolonial historiography. She received her B.A. in History from Wesleyan University (CT, USA) and M.A. in History of Art from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London (London, UK).

Repatriation: One Mode of Decolonial Deaccessioning?

An Asmat mask; a Batak ritual staff; stone beads and cowrie shells. Over the course of European colonization, objects looted during wars, pilfered as “archaeological” and “anthropological” specimens, or exchanged as gifts, came to European museums built to display them as colonial trophies. These objects embody meanings for their makers and the communities from whence they came. Unfortunately, the Asmat or Batak people are not the ones to tell the stories of these objects on display. Rather, the European collectors and curators tell the stories. Filtered through the European lens, they often served to bolster European narratives, framing the objects and peoples as an “Other” that is merely part of a larger European imperial story.

As they confront that colonial legacy, governments and museums across Europe have begun to address the role of these objects in European museums, who should be responsible for their stories, and ultimately whether they should even remain in those museums. This has led to debates on repatriation, or the return of objects to communities or other stakeholders deemed to be more appropriate “owners” or “custodians.” Repatriation is one of several forms of deaccessioning – and perhaps the most controversial.

Deaccessioning an object can involve many reasons and considerations. In all cases, it means confronting the ethical

questions of who are to be the custodians and storytellers of these objects. In other words, deaccessioning museum objects is more than a practical decision; it is an ethical one. This is even more critical for “ethnographic collections,” where the interests and rights of historical communities must be considered.

Because of that, deaccessioning objects taken during colonization must integrate a decolonial approach. The movement to decolonize museums aims to decenter Western colonial perspectives and interpretations in favor of inclusive articulations of cultures, knowledges, and histories. Decolonizing a collection therefore also means decolonizing the knowledge production and management of that collection. This includes questions like whose culture is being represented? Who is doing the representation? Whose voices, knowledges, and histories are included as part of that representation? And who decides what that representation means in the broader context of the collection and museum’s narrative, as well as how the “cultures” it claims to represent are perceived?

There is no one consensus on how to best decolonize museums or collections. One possible approach, for example, is to keep an artefact, but employ an inclusive and participatory process for its research and exhibition – including how it is categorized, displayed, what information is included in the label – by involving relevant communities and integrating their perspectives. This community-based, collaborative process is being adopted by an increasing number of museums, for example the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian, as

well as local museums in North America, with descendants of indigenous communities playing the central role in how objects from their communities are interpreted and represented.

Another approach to decolonizing a collection is to deaccession the objects, relinquishing Western ownership and power over those objects. It is important that the decision and process be decolonial. That is to say, where possible, the relevant communities must lead the decision on whether the object should be deaccessioned in the first place. There are many methods of deaccessioning. Perhaps the most visible and contested is repatriation.

Many decolonial practitioners and activists (myself included) view repatriation as possibly the most ethically available way to redress colonial injustice. Even so, it is a deeply complex process, fraught with difficult questions from a decolonial perspective, not least: Who should “own” the objects? And how do we repatriate objects in a way that does not replicate or bolster power imbalances, but deconstructs them?

The first is an ethical question of whether museums should be the rightful “owner” or “custodian” of the artifacts. Existing deaccessioning and repatriation guidelines place strong emphasis on ownership. The 2016 LAMO, the Leidraad Afstoten Museale Objecten (Guideline for Deaccessioning Museum Objects) document, for example, outlines deaccessioning processes based on whether the museum is the “owner” of the object or if other owners have been identified. *The Return of Cultural Objects: Principles and Process* by the Dutch Nationaal

Museum van Wereldculturen also lists “consent of owners” as a consideration for restitution. But this is not as easy as tracing an object’s provenance.

From a decolonial perspective, the framing of “ownership” itself is already flawed, because property and ownership as we understand it today are largely Western constructs. Our understanding of “ownership” is rooted in the inherently violent history of colonial legal systems, where “property” versus “individual” were defined as legal entities by Europeans, to uphold European interests. Let’s not forget cases when non-European individuals were legally considered property, and therefore could not make claims of ownership over other properties. So, even if ownership over an artefact was documented or “legal” under the laws of the time, that does not necessarily make it ethical.

Another problem is that for many artefacts, the idea of ownership may not even be applicable. Across many non-Western communities, objects were crafted for a specific purpose, such as religious rituals or traditional ceremonies, rather than for possession. Some artefacts, such as stone or metal images of deities, cannot be said to be “owned” by anyone at all. Hinduism and Buddhism, for example, consider consecrated statues of deities to be the presence of those deities themselves. “Owning” an 11th-century bronze Cola statue of Siva Nataraja would be sacrilegious to say the least.

A decolonial approach requires the very idea of “ownership” to be defined and agreed upon through the input of multiple

voices and contexts. Even then, there is still the question of how to do this.

Practically and theoretically speaking, how can we decide who is the most appropriate “owner,” “custodian,” or “manager” of an object? Who – that is to say, which legally recognized entities – can make a claim? Is it nation-states? But since many formerly colonized nation-states did not exist when the objects were taken, wouldn’t that be ahistorical? Or should it be ethnic groups? But what happens if a group has evolved or no longer exists, or considers ethnic identities as fluid, or has no centralized representation, or if there are conflicting claims within the group?

This is a significant issue within repatriation policies today. Let’s take the example of the *Return of Cultural Objects: Principles and Process* by the Dutch Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. The document cites “community of origin” as a potential claimant and defines “community of origin” as “nations and/or communities who can demonstrate a genuine link/cultural continuity in cultural heritage terms to the cultural object(s) in question.” It further defines “cultural continuity/genuine link” as “a demonstrable continuity/genuine link between the claimants and the cultural object(s) claimed, in terms of national heritage, persistence of beliefs, persistence of culture.”

There are several issues with these definitions, not least because it assumes “nations,” “communities,” “heritage,” and “culture” as discrete, definable entities. It also defines

“continuity” and “link” in terms of “national heritage” (a very loaded term), and insists on the “persistence” of beliefs and culture, which is also a problem, most obviously because cultures and beliefs evolve even in their preservation.

This emphasis on “culture” also risks the racialization of the repatriation process – that is to say, the parties involved are invited to view claimants primarily in culturally ethnic or racial terms, and are expected to assess the validity of claims by judging the “authenticity” of the claimants’ relationship to that culture or ethnic/racial group. This could mean that museums still get to define who belongs to a particular culture, imposing discrete groupings across ethnic lines where there may have been none, and entrenching the “Othering” that decoloniality seeks to dismantle. In practical terms, there is also no specification of how to demonstrate and measure the “persistence” of culture. And again, there is the issue of who gets to decide whether present forms of a culture are adequately “persistent.” *The Return of Cultural Objects: Principles and Process* document in particular further explicitly imposes Western values by insisting that “heritage value” must be “tested in relation to analogous standards articulated by The Heritage Act (Erfgoedwet) 2016 for Dutch national heritage and culture.” In other words, it continues to privilege Western (and specifically, Dutch) definitions and standards in determining whether a culture or a community has a claim to the object in question.

As seen in this example, repatriation policies can still allocate power to Western institutions to set the terms for deaccessioning, risking the continued erasure of non-Western voices and

practices in that process. However, for repatriation to achieve its decolonial aims, the process must dismantle, not replicate, the privileging of Western values, definitions, and processes. A decolonial approach to deaccessioning must therefore center non-Western cultural understandings, including in developing ethical and actionable definitions of ownership, and subsequently in implementing ethical and actionable processes to deaccession or repatriate an artefact.



Recollecting and Reallocation

**Deaccessioning
needn't mean
removing objects
from the public sphere
altogether; instead,
it can offer a
new way to look
at these objects.**

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Her interests lie in reactivating ethnographic objects for a contemporary generation of Dutch citizens of Indonesian descent and the current decolonization of museums and their collections. Pinatih is also a board member of The Young Collectors Circle.

Recollecting Objects

Dutch museums are full of cultural, religious and artistic objects from Indonesia. They range from the Lombok Treasure in the Rijksmuseum and Museum Volkenkunde, to krisses, ceremonial objects and textiles in the Tropenmuseum and the former Nusantara Museum. These objects are deployed as metonyms for 'Indonesianness'¹, and hold meaning for various differently defined groups of people in the Netherlands – White Dutch, Indo-Europeans, Indonesians. As groups of younger Dutch citizens with a self-identified Indonesian cultural background, including myself, become more political active, some of them have questions about identity and belonging.² For example: what is my background, how do these two (or more) different cultures relate to each other, and where do or can I belong? Could objects from the deaccessioned Nusantara collection play a role in these negotiations?

The meaning of the objects changed when they were collected and shipped from the Indonesian archipelago to the West in a colonial context. Excised from their original context, they no longer served as clothing, weaponry or objects of worship. Rather, they acquired a new purpose as museum objects for the Dutch public, promoting knowledge about the development and customs of colonial societies and the great achievements of the colonizer overseas. Over time, with Indonesia's independence, the attendant political and social shifts, and

occasionally contentious relations between Indonesia and the Netherlands, Dutch ethnographic museums became more archival in function. In this setting, the objects were little more than immobile historical documents. The last twenty years have given rise to discussions on decolonization, some instigated by a generation of Dutch citizens of Indonesian descent that has seen the emergence of memory politics in relation to belonging. The objects have found a new relevance through exhibits emphasizing collection formation and colonial histories.³ However, cutbacks of the cultural budget by the Rutte government, leading to the closure of several institutions dedicated to postcolonial migrants, and repatriation concerns, these objects and their affordances⁴ are now under scrutiny again. How does a younger generation relate to this evolving discourse?

The Nusantara Museum was always a place where visitors could actively participate in Indonesian culture. Second and third generations learned about their parents' culture, viewing the display cases or playing their first notes on gamelan instruments. Clearly, the former museum's objects share a heritage, but they are no longer a single, physical unity (except on the collection website), removing the context that gave them their initial connection when they first arrived in the Netherlands. A portion of the objects have returned to their country of origin, some remain in the Netherlands, and yet others are spread across museums worldwide⁵. What role can this deaccessioned collection's objects continue to play in the Netherlands?

With an intensified debate about who belongs in the Netherlands, a younger generation has become more polit-

ical active. Counter/Narratives, a collaborative platform of diverse experts with challenging narratives on colonialism, slavery, imperialism, and racism, aims to tell an inclusive story and to increase the collective consciousness concerning these themes in the Netherlands and elsewhere. The Decolonization Network of the former Dutch East Indies, also set up by young people, was established to join forces and expand the decolonization agenda with regard to Indonesian-Dutch, Moluccan, Indonesian and Surinamese-Javanese issues, and calls for the establishment of an inclusive national slavery museum in the Netherlands. The Gepeperd Verleden (Bitter Spice) debate series reflects on the complexity of identity construction, providing a stage for multiple generations. However, this goes further than debate; young creatives are also mobilizing Indonesian objects in their work. For example, the artist Jennifer Tee, in her *Tulip Palepai, navigating the river of the world*, combines the tulip – a Dutch symbol and international trade product – with the Palepai, traditional Sumatran textiles with motifs of ships, humans and a mast as a materialization of the tree of life. According to Sumatran custom, the hand-woven Palepai hung in a home's central room, serving as a ceremonial background for weddings, funerals and other rites of passage. With this work Tee gives new life to the traditional ship's cloth, of which few original samples have survived, three of them in the former Nusantara collection. Both tulips and ship cloths have great personal meaning to the artist. In 1950, a ship brought her father, his parents and sister to the Netherlands from Indonesia, and her maternal grandfather traveled to America by ship every year for his company to trade in tulip bulbs.⁶

By making them accessible in a contemporary way to a contemporary generation of Dutch citizens of Indonesian descent, the deaccessioned objects could function as media for inquiries about identity formation. Museums can act as contact zones, studying the affordances of these objects together with communities including, but not limited to, younger generations, researching diverse narratives and providing a space for knowledge exchange; a place for interactive communication and creative engagement.⁷ Museums could also explore these objects' affordances in new ways, through digitization and reanimation, and give them a new location online.⁸

Despite the transformation of the objects' meaning when they become part of a museum collection, these artifacts still have a social life that, even after deaccessioning, can be reactivated through renewed processes of representation, connection and engagement. Appropriately relocated in a dynamic space, be it online and/or offline, they could provide a resource for a younger Dutch-Indonesian generation in their quest for identity and belonging.⁹ Deaccessioning needn't mean removing objects from the public sphere altogether; instead, it can offer a new way to look at these objects.



Collection Stichting Nationaal
Museum van Wereldculturen.
Collection no. 7082-S-300-88.
Former Collection Museum
Nusantara.

- 1 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. *Destination culture. Tourism, Museums and Heritage*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998.
- 2 *Untuk Selalu*. Directed by Ambar Surastri, Andrea van den Bos and Robbert Maruanajja. 2015
- 3 Van Dijk, Janneke, Legêne, Susan. Netherlands East Indies at the Tropenmuseum. *A Colonial History*. Volendam: LM Publishers, 2010. p. 9 – 25
- 4 James J. Gibson coined the term “affordances” in his book, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* from 1966. Paul Basu uses the term in relation to museums and material culture and re-thinks the significance of ethnographic object in his project *Museum Affordances*. <https://re-entanglements.net/about/>
- 5 Beurden, Jos van. *Herplaatsing Collectie Voormalig Museum Nusantara Delft 2013 – 2018 Lering en vragen*. Nationale Musea van Wereldculturen, 2018. p. 106
- 6 Jennifer Tee, Rijksmuseum, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/jennifer-tee> (accessed June 12, 2019).
- 7 Clifford, James. ‘Museums as contact zones.’ *Routes: travel and translation in the late twentieth century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997. p. 188–219
- 8 Basu, Paul, OBJECT DIASPORAS, RESOURCING COMMUNITIES: Sierra Leonean Collections in the Global Museumscape. *Museum Anthropology*, Volume 34, Issue 1, 2011. p. 28 and 38
- 9 Idem. p. 37–38

**Still, the museum
lays claim to
a collection that
has managed to
remain mostly intact,
even under difficult
circumstances.**

Wim Manuhutu (Yught, 1959) studied History at Utrecht University, where he investigated the expansion of Dutch authority on the Moluccan island of Seram in the early 20th century. From 1987 to early 2009, he was one of the directors of the Moluks Historisch Museum in Utrecht. He was responsible for the (joint) organization of exhibitions, publications, events and (initiation of) research.

Since 2009, he has owned Manu2u, which is active in areas relating to culture, heritage and diversity.

He also teaches as a guest lecturer at Amsterdam University College and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

Manuhutu has been a member of the museum committee for the Amsterdamse Kunstraad (Amsterdam municipal advisory council on art and culture) and a member of the board for the ErfgoedAcademie (cultural heritage academy) since 2019.

He is currently working on research concerning the cultural heritage of war in the Moluccas and Papua.

It Belongs to Us All

Deaccessioning by a Community Museum

When it became known that the Museum Maluku in Utrecht was to close down in 2011, this led to great turmoil within the Moluccan community. Ever since the museum opened in 1990, many had considered it the main repository and display of Moluccan history and culture. Additionally, they were concerned about what would happen to the museum's collection now. Some donors and their heirs contacted the museum to retrieve their donations.

When news items appeared, falsely stating that one of the collection's most iconic items, a jacket belonging to one of the deceased train hijackers from 1977, would be donated to the Netherlands Open Air Museum, emotions rose even further, as some members of the community found giving up an object of such symbolic importance to a *Dutch* institution unacceptable. The above illustrates the development of the value and importance attached to material heritage within the Moluccan community in the course of the Utrecht museum's existence. In the first few decades of Moluccan presence in the Netherlands, these items received little attention. Preservation of customs and practices was considered of much greater importance, partly because this residence was seen as a temporary thing.

How It All Began

The Moluks Historisch Museum (museum of Moluccan history), as it was known in 1990, was established as part of an agreement

concluded between the then largest Moluccan organization, the *Badan Persatuan* (BP), and the Dutch government in 1986. This agreement was intended to improve the difficult relations between the Moluccan community and the Dutch government. In some ways this can be seen as an early instance of reparations. The Dutch government's initial offer to establish a Moluccan monument was rejected by the BP. They preferred a 'living monument' in the shape of a museum, to preserve knowledge about Moluccan history and culture and pass this on to future generations within the community. The museum was also meant to function as a bridge with Dutch society. From the beginning, the museum was intended to be their own institution, from their own perspective. Although it was known that ethnological museums such as Museum Volkenkunde and the Tropenmuseum maintained substantial Moluccan collections, and that Dutch museums had focused on the Moluccan community in the past¹, this did not mean that the Moluccan community felt adequately represented by existing museums. The Moluks Historisch Museum was also considered supplementary to the existing national network of Moluccan social institutions at the time. From this point of view, the establishment of their own museum was also felt to be a step forward in the emancipation of the Moluccan community. When the museum was first founded, there was no actual collection. An active campaign within the community served to gather objects in support of the narration of the Moluccans' emigration to the Netherlands and the various stages of their presence there. These were generally everyday objects such as cabin trunks, cutlery and items of furniture. As the Moluccan community had no tradition of museum visits, associating these

mainly with art and a representation of history far removed from the people, there was a lack of understanding and some skepticism concerning the value of the above-mentioned objects at this stage. They were sometimes literally found in sheds and attics. Others saw the museum as an attempt by the Dutch government to de-fang their battle for political independence. Despite all this, they managed to assemble a historical collection of their own. Many donors felt loyalty-bound to donate the requested objects to the museum, which published lists of these items in a popular Moluccan monthly newsletter. That this was their own, Moluccan institution, not a subsidiary of a Dutch museum, was a vital distinction. The fact that the museum had been commissioned to tell the story of the Moluccans from their own perspective was an important consideration. Following the museum's opening in 1990, a growing willingness to donate objects to the museum could be observed. Seeing your own family objects at the museum became a point of pride and undoubtedly contributed to the Moluks Historisch Museum being seen more and more as a real museum, truly belonging to the community. In this way, the museum contributed to a growing awareness of the importance of cultural heritage in all its various forms. Successful participation by the museum in two digitization projects at the beginning of the 21st century also ensured that the museum's collections became more widely known and visible.²

Closure of the Utrecht Museum Building

The financial situation of the Moluks Historisch Museum worsened in the years following the 2008 crisis, a period during

which the permanent displays were updated and the museum received a new name (Museum Maluku), until in 2011 the board was forced to close the building. Their deliberations also took the future of the museum's various collections into account. Arrangements were made to store these in a temporary depository. Disposal was not under consideration, though they did investigate to what extent long term loans could help keep collection items publicly accessible. The website would provide public access to parts of the collection.³ The intense emotions surrounding the closure of the Utrecht museum led to concern from some donors and their heirs about the donated items. The conditions for the donations as specified on the donation form only allowed for a formal return of the items if the museum ceased to exist altogether as an organization. This was not the case here. Moreover, measures had been taken to ensure responsible storage of the collection.

The museum entered into dialogue with the donors or their heirs whenever such a return was still requested even after an explanation. The awareness of being a community museum, with an existence dependent on this community, played an important role here. The relationship between the museum and the Moluccan component of the public goes beyond normal interactions between a heritage institution and the general public. This special relationship also comes with special responsibilities. Therefore, any genuine requests to have the objects returned were always honored. In the end, this only occurred in a minority of cases, for a few dozen items. Of the objects returned to the original donors, the jacket belonging to the

deceased hijacker from 1977, mentioned earlier in this article, is probably the most striking.

However, most donations to the collection remained unclaimed. It may be that the families are no longer aware that their relatives donated items to the museum. However, it seems likelier that over those twenty years and more, the museum built up enough credit that the announcement concerning proper storage was acceptable to the majority of donors and heirs.

Now What?

Not long ago, the Moluks Historisch Museum gained a new home in The Hague. Together with the Indisch Herinneringscentrum (Indies Remembrance Center), it has now reopened as Museum Sophiahof. This means that parts of the museum's collection can be made publicly accessible again, though with a reduction in the number of objects and floor space. Still, the museum lays claim to a collection that has managed to remain mostly intact, even under difficult circumstances.

That means that the case of the Moluks Historisch Museum can be considered a story of a collection that entered hibernation temporarily, and is now slowly reawakening. Large-scale deaccessioning and disposal were avoided. For a collection that represents the cultural heritage of a specific group within Dutch society, this is, ultimately, a positive result.



1 Jacket Max Papilaja, returned to Papilaja family.

2 Cabin trunk J.J. de Lima, returned to heirs..

3 Fishing net, gift of the family of Mr. M. Ririassa, returned to donor.

All photographs @Moluks Historisch Museum

- 1 In 1984, Museum Nusantara put on the exhibition 'Pameran Masohi Maluku' and in 1988, the Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen (Royal Institute for the Tropics) published 'Maluku' by Liem Soei Liong and Wim Schroevers.
- 2 'De aankomst' (the arrival), a website created in collaboration with the National Archives, with passenger lists for the ships that transported great numbers of Moluccans to the Netherlands in 1951. The inclusion of approximately 10,000 photographs from the museum's collection in the Geheugen van Nederland (memory of the Netherlands) database.
- 3 The museum website (www.museum-maluku.nl) kept parts of the collection visible.

A Look at Municipal Collections

The Hows and Whys of Collection Reallocation for Municipalities

Introduction

Municipalities, just like other forms of government, may own (various) collections. Many of these are managed by museums, some are displayed in public areas or buildings. The remainder is often kept in municipal storage. These collections accumulate due to donations, purchases, commissions and submission of artwork as a result of the Beeldende Kunstenaars Regeling or BKR (a scheme to support visual artists, in effect from 1949 to 1987). Increasingly, municipalities are evaluating those collections not under management by museums. They consider which works are worth keeping and which might be more appropriately placed elsewhere.

This process is called disposal or deaccessioning. As an assessment process consultant and ‘clutter counselor’ for museum collections, I prefer the term ‘reallocation’. These works aren’t destroyed; instead, new owners are sought for works that no longer fit the collection. This article concentrates on art collections, though municipalities may maintain historic collections as well.

The considerations relating to the reallocation of municipal collections parallel those for museums. At the end of the twentieth century, we realized that the depositories were filling up, and ‘limiting growth’ had become a necessity. In

The considerations relating to the reallocation of municipal collections parallel those for museums.

Dieuwertje Wijsmuller is a museologist and since 2011, the owner of CreativeCultureConsultancy (CCC). This is one of only a few agencies specializing in the deaccessioning and disposal of (museum) objects. Disposal is not a goal in and of itself, but a possible result of the thorough selec-

tion and assessment of a collection. CCC advises and guides such assessments and provides support during the actual deaccessioning process in accordance with the 2016 Dutch Heritage Act. Since 2017, she has also acted as an adviser to the Dutch Council for Culture.

1999, the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage organized a symposium on this topic, putting collection reallocation on the agenda. One of the most well-known instances of deaccessioning municipal artwork had taken place over ten years earlier. The city of Hilversum decided to sell its Mondriaan in order to finance the renovation of a local theater. This led to many, many discussions and symposiums, and ultimately, to regulation of the disposal/deaccessioning process, both for museums, through the LAMO, the Leidraad Afstoten Museale Objecten (Guideline for Deaccessioning Museum Objects), and for municipalities, through guidelines for the transfer of cultural property issued by the VNG, the Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten (Association of Dutch Municipalities).

Visual Artists Support Scheme

Municipal collections often contain works obtained through the BKR, a visual arts support scheme. This was created as part of a social policy to allow artists to work to develop themselves within their field. Artists submitted works of art to the municipality and received financial support in return. The Dutch national government supplied 75% of the funding for this ‘benefit’, with the municipality contributing the remaining 25%. Due to this system, and the fact that the management and maintenance of an art collection have never been municipal core activities, large municipal collections were allowed to accumulate, of varying artistic quality. Artwork that didn’t end up on city hall walls often disappeared into attics and basements.

Reallocating BKR artwork is subject to various rules and regulations on how and when to contact the artist. For a long time, lack of transparency and confusion concerning these rules kept municipalities from taking action. When the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage instigated a large scale ‘decluttering operation’ in 2006/2007, withdrawing BKR works of insufficient national and/or museological value from its collection, this served to inspire the municipalities. They too began refining their collections.

LAMO versus VNG

Collection reallocation by Dutch municipalities differs from the process for museums on a few points. Legally, not the LAMO applies, but the Vervreemding Gemeentelijk Cultuurogoed 2016, the VNG guidelines on the transfer of municipal cultural property, drawn up in accordance with the Heritage Act (Erfgoedwet). These are less restrictive than the LAMO in some respects. For example, municipalities needn’t enter items intended for withdrawal into the Deaccessions Database, and are obligated to respond to other points of view after publication of this intention in the Staatscourant (government gazette) for only six weeks, not eight. While museums must strive to reallocate their collections ‘free of charge’ whenever possible, the VNG indicates that when reallocating objects outside the municipality, selling is the logical course of action.

Proposed deaccessioning of objects obtained through the BKR after 1979 must be announced to the artist or their heirs. Often, artists are offered the chance to buy back their own work.

The Collection as a Core Activity

For museums, managing and maintaining a collection for the community are core activities. Municipalities, however, rarely consider this part of their primary process. That means knowledge transfer concerning responsibility for the collection can be sub-optimal. One example from my own practice is an official responsible for Culture at a small municipality. He remained unaware of his own responsibility for the municipal art collection until someone pointed out that the art in the basement was going moldy and asked what he was going to do about it. On questioning, his predecessor revealed that the management of this collection was in fact included in his duties, but this had never been communicated due to lack of time.

Stakeholder Management

Just as for (local) museums, there is often a small but strongly engaged group of citizens concerned with the lot of municipal collections. Especially in smaller municipalities, lines of communication are short, and everybody knows one another. This can lead to minute examination of any changes to the collection. It's therefore crucial to establish good communications about the reallocation to keep the various stakeholders informed as to the proceedings. Donors and creators must be informed if 'their' works are earmarked for reallocation, and local media outlets can help keep the public up to date. It's a good idea to explain the reasoning behind the choices and leave room for dialogue. This is no different for museums. Experience shows that the more open and transparent the municipality, the less overwrought the responses of citizens and the media are likely to be. These responses cannot be eliminated entirely,

however. Living artists in particular aren't always happy to see works removed from public collections, perhaps fearing that their market value will plummet as a result.

Rewarding Work

When a municipality is aware of the potential treasures on their walls, in attics and basements, where knowledge is optimal, and stakeholders are informed in good time, collection reallocation can be very rewarding. Even more so if the municipality is small, with even the mayor excited by the renewed interest in and potential of the collection. Municipalities can gain renewed insight into their collections, perhaps make new acquisitions, and find new destinations outside the municipal context for objects that no longer fit the collection. Where possible, artworks are reunited with their creators. Ultimately, more of the collection ends up back on view, to the benefit of the artist, the owner, and process consultants such as myself.

Dieuwertje Wijsmuller



The Deaccessioning Process

Project 'Transfer', National Military Museum

**Clearly, the term
'disposal' still carries
a negative connotation.
More attention needs
to be paid to the positive
aspects: finding new
homes and improving the
collection quality.**

Paul van Brakel studied Dutch and History at the Nieuwe Lerarenopleiding (teacher training) in Nijmegen. On completing his training there, he studied Art History and Italian in Perugia, Italy. He also studied Museology at Hogeschool Gelderland in Nijmegen as part of its Education & Culture study program.

He has researched exhibitions (and managed projects) for the TextielMuseum in Tilburg. He was seconded to the Nederlands Artillerie Museum in 't Harde as Museum Manager by the Army Museum Delft. Since 2014, he has worked as a curator at the National Military Museum.

Van Brakel is the secretary of ICOM's ICOMAM (International Committee for Museums and Collections of Arms and Military History).

Arco Seton studied Museology at the Reinwardt Academie and has followed various courses on restoration and conservation. After a museum career including positions at the Maritime Museum in Rotterdam, Zaans Museum in Zaandam and the Army Museum in Delft, he has worked as a Collection Manager at the National Military Museum in Soesterberg since 2014. He oversees the registrars and conservation and management staff there. He was a driving force during the 2014-2016 deaccessioning project. Seton is a member of the Collections committee for the Dutch Museums Association.

The Dutch National Military Museum has re-accommodated its collection as a necessity consequence of the reorganization of the Ministry of Defence's public museums. This reorganization led to various moves and mergers, and was a unique opportunity to assess collections and create a more manageable, higher quality collection; the ambition of many a museum. The refinement, generally referred to as 'disposal' in practice, ultimately resulted mainly in the limiting of bulk goods.

Several years ago, public museums falling under the Ministry of Defence underwent a large-scale reorganization. This included a physical merger of two museums, the former Army Museum in Delft and the former Military Aviation Museum in Soesterberg. A new museum, the National Military Museum (NMM), was to be constructed at the former air base in Soesterberg.

The combined collection after the merger contained 300,000 objects. Due to the moves and the goal of a manageable collection, this collection was to be reduced by 20%. No small task! For a collection this size, that's an impressive 60,000 artifacts. These items were already excluded from the specifications for the new depository. Finding the best approach to accomplish the reduction both quickly and carefully posed a major challenge.

Transparency and ethics were the guiding principles, but what did that mean in practice? Which selection criteria to employ?

How to formulate these criteria, and on what basis? Which officials and institutions were involved? How to communicate with the outside world? What procedures to include in the implementation? What considerations were likely to be risky?

It was soon clear that to dispose of this many objects, getting rid of a single uniform or saber wouldn't achieve much. We needed to think in terms of bulk.

What exactly are 'bulk' goods, though? The LAMO, the Leidraad Afstoten Museale Objecten (Guideline for Deaccessioning Museum Objects) states: 'a large number of equivalent objects, of low cultural heritage value (quality) and poorly documented'. For the National Military Museum, that was amended to include machine-made objects. Machine-made objects can be identified through careful scrutiny, as there will be a large number of nearly identical items. Sometimes it was jokingly remarked that 'even the casting marks are the same'.

Changes were implemented at a policy level in the years leading up to the reorganization and the new museum. In 2008, a new collection plan was created for the Army Museum, focusing on 'biographical and journalistic' collecting. The aim was no longer a comprehensive, chronological history, but instead a concentration on pivotal moments, people and events in history. The typology of the objects was now less important than their usefulness as historical testimony. They were present at or brought back from operations, or illustrated an individual service member's story. This fresh perspective was applied to the existing collection as well. The plan stated that deaccessioning would take place.

Keeping the new policy in mind, we began selecting objects for disposal. Objects designated as 'strategic goods' went straight back to the Ministry of Defence. Due to their nature, these cannot simply be released to other museums unless the recipient is in possession of strong arguments and the correct permits. Examples of all bulk goods were retained within the collection. Reduction may be a more accurate term.

First phase (2014)

In the first phase, we began deaccessioning on a limited scale. In 2014, the NMM applied via the Cultural Heritage Agency to the Minister of Education, Culture and Science for permission to start deaccessioning various collections. These included the Army Museum's vehicle collection, the Army Museum's book collection, the former Military Aviation Museum's collection and the Realia collection. Museums with a potential interest in the vehicles were approached specifically. A separate portion was reserved for use as props within our own organization. This phase came to focus primarily on the reallocation of the former aviation museum's collection. The museum's own staff had already assessed the museological value, and performed limited provenance investigations. After the selection and research, the objects were gathered in a shed at a former operating base near Lopik in Utrecht. This was a temporary location only, and had to be vacated by the end of 2014. Therefore, reallocating these objects was a priority matter.

In aid of a clear process, a project plan and flow chart were drawn up based on the LAMO and coordinated with the Defence Materiel Organization. Items selected for disposal in this phase were defined as bulk goods of low financial value, which value

assessment was later refined. The Military Aviation Museum's collection, unlike that of the Army Museum, did not belong to the State, but to the Air Force. Until the merger with the NMM, this museum belonged to the Royal Netherlands Air Force. That meant this collection had come straight from the Air Force as part of the reorganization.

Strategic goods were kept separate. These objects, including weapons, but also tracking and navigation systems, were returned to the Defence Materiel Organization. All other objects were cleaned up and arranged on long tables. The huge variety of objects justified the organization of special viewing days. As stipulated by the LAMO, we informed the accredited museums, announcing the event only on our own website and that of the Dutch Museums Association.

The viewing days took place on September 24 and 25, 2014, by prior application only. To promote the viewing, a video with a quick overview of the selected objects was available on our website. Museums could download a registration form to apply for the viewing days. Inclusion in the Dutch Museum Register was a requirement.

During the viewing days, museums could indicate their interest in specific items in an auction-like setting, using stickers. In case of multiple candidates, we decided who would receive the object according to the principle of fair play. No objects could be removed during the actual viewing days, and transferred objects remained on loan for the first half year. This period was used for further provenance investigation and to respond to any claims by the original donors.

The administrative and logistics processes proved in need of improvement, especially the poor documentation of the bulk

goods and their entry into the collection database as such. Provenance investigation and documentation received closer attention in the second phase. Additionally, the logistics were organized differently.

Second phase (2015-2016)

A special work group created a project plan for the second phase. This plan included items such as 'Delineation' and 'Management' which identified potential risks. Repeatedly, we questioned whether we were doing the right thing, and not falsely designating objects as bulk goods. We incorporated as many as three separate 'filter moments' to allow for critical assessment of the rejected objects. The problem was that these moments always led to renewed doubt. However, our motto remained "When in doubt, toss it out." The process did result in some objects being retained.

The main issue encountered during the selection process concerned objects that were (possibly) part of a larger ensemble. Errors in the deaccessioning process primarily related to the value of such ensembles. It is possible that objects which fit the NMM's collection profile poorly belonged to a larger group, but had since become separated. The registration system is meant to prevent this, but multiple previous data migrations have resulted in occasional losses of information. The selected objects were not included in the move, but instead transferred directly to a separate location.

The work group was made up of staff from the various reorganized museums, such as a location manager, curator, and collection manager, as well as an external consultant. Guiding

principles were adherence to LAMO guidelines, transparency, and close consultation with the Cultural Heritage Agency. Permission for the actual deaccessioning was requested and received from this agency. Note that this project took place before 2016, prior to the Heritage Act currently in effect. Registered museums with military items in their collections were invited to apply for the viewing through various channels (including the Cultural Heritage Agency). A database (catalog) of objects selected for deaccessioning was included with the application form, allowing the museums an opportunity to consider the items in advance. Many did so, as was apparent from the wish lists brought to the viewing days. The storage site for the selected objects functions as a temporary depository. Therefore, it is essential that the objects stored there be easily retrievable. All objects selected for deaccessioning were provided with bar codes and listed in a separate database, as even a temporary depository requires compartmentalization in such a case.

The provenance investigation produced several names without current contact details. We advertised in five major national newspapers, inviting donors and their heirs to consult the provenance list on our website, and to contact us if their name appeared on this list. Donors and their heirs were given the opportunity to have the deaccessioned objects returned to them.

The logistics of the transfers were handled by the museum. It was soon clear that we would otherwise be overly dependent on the recipient's access to transport, and doing it ourselves speeded up the process.

Of the 20% of the collection to be deaccessioned, we managed to transfer 30 to 40%. We failed to find new destinations for the remainder. Some of these items were also returned to the Defence Materiel Organization. Others were sold at auction. In accordance with the LAMO, we set up a fund to benefit the collection and deposited the auction proceeds into this fund. As we wished to share our experience with others in the museum field, we also organized a conference titled '*Collecties voor de toekomst. Kritischer verzamelen, helderder ontzamelen*' (Collections for the future. Critical accessioning, clearer deaccessioning) (Soest, April 24, 2017). The main theme was how to achieve responsible deaccessioning, but also responsible accessioning.

Looking back, this project had a lot to teach us on multiple fronts. Responsible deaccessioning is not possible without good, solid documentation. Time to do things properly was very limited. Time restrictions are not helpful in performing proper provenance investigations. The same applies to object value assessment, especially with a changing collection policy. To keep collections manageable, deaccessioning is unavoidable. In the 1990s, the Delta Plan for Cultural Preservation already mentioned a D category, intended for objects whose presence in the collection was questionable. Clearly, the term 'disposal' still carries a negative connotation. More attention needs to be paid to the positive aspects: finding new homes and improving the collection quality.



A collection of mainly modern art, rooted in centuries-old, non-European cultural traditions, is difficult to classify.

Dr Georges Petitjean is an art historian. He studied at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and completed his PhD at La Trobe University, Melbourne. His thesis explored contemporary Indigenous Australian painting's transition from its sites of origin in the deserts of west and central Australia to the wider art world. He lived and worked in Australia for many years and since 1992, has closely followed the work of a number of artists in Central Australia and the

Kimberley. From 2005 till 2017, he was a curator at the AAMU museum for contemporary Aboriginal art in Utrecht (The Netherlands). In 2017 he was appointed curator of the Collection Bérengère Primat, one of the most significant collections of Indigenous Australian art worldwide, and the base for the Fondation Opale in Lens (Switzerland). He is the author of 'Contemporary Aboriginal Art: The AAMU and Dutch Collections' (2010).

Deaccessioning: The Case of the AAMU Collection

On June 15, 2017 the AAMU museum for contemporary Aboriginal art closed down permanently due to a lack of funds. This museum, established in the center of Utrecht in April 2001, was then the only museum in Europe entirely dedicated to contemporary Indigenous Australian art.

One year later, on June 14, 2018, Museum Volkenkunde launched its semi-permanent exhibition consisting solely of items from the former AAMU collection. When the AAMU closed, its collection was transferred to the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (NMVW, National Museum of World Cultures), becoming part of the Dutch State Collection.

It was the desire of the museum staff and directors that the collection be transferred to another museum in its entirety. As a curator, a museum for modern art (such as the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam) with an interest in (part of) the collection seemed the most optimal solution to me. After all, Indigenous Australian art is a modern art form, so modern art is the most suitable field. However, management had contacted the NMVW early on, initially to investigate the possibility of the AAMU's continued existence in a smaller format, as a partner or subsidiary of the NMVW. In the end, the decision was made to close down the AAMU altogether. The state of communications with the NMVW led to the collection being transferred there.

As part of the deaccessioning process and as prescribed by the LAMO, the Leidraad Afstoten Museale Objecten (Guideline for Deaccessioning Museum Objects), the collection was first listed in the Deaccessions Database, along with the intended transfer to the NMVW.

The NMVW accepted the entire collection, consisting of approximately 800 artworks and objects, with the exception of two works: a decorated car and a neon installation. These items were determined not to merit protection. After being listed in the LAMO Deaccessions Database for several months and actively offered to other museums (such as the Van Abbe Museum), the car was destroyed, and the neon installation returned to the artist. The NMVW's decision not to take on these objects is understandable considering their size and the accompanying difficulties, but the rejection is unfortunate.

Before this forced deaccessioning and transfer, the broader AAMU collection was itself the recipient of earlier withdrawals and transfers from other collections in the form of long-term loans, resulting in the most organized and comprehensive collection outside Australia. When the Nijmeegs Volkenkundig Museum closed in 2005, its collection of Indigenous Australian material culture went to the AAMU. The temporary transfers to the AAMU of two collections in particular, from the Groninger Museum and Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, serve well to illustrate the considerations involved in the collection and display of 'non-western' modern art by Dutch institutions. These two collections of Indigenous Australian art were placed at the

AAMU on long term loan for very different, almost diametrically opposed reasons.

In the case of the Groninger Museum, the then directors found its Indigenous Australian art, originally acquired by Frans Haks, too ethnographic in character due to the non-western origins. Furthermore, this art is directly rooted in traditions related to the creation of art going back many thousands of years. To the Wereldmuseum, on the other hand, its collection of Indigenous Australian art, created after 1945, primarily by engaged, urban artists, was too distinctly 'modern art'. Loans fell outside of the deaccessioning, and were therefore returned to their rightful owners or keepers when the AAMU closed, including the objects from the Groninger Museum and Wereldmuseum.

The two cases, involving different types of museums with divergent, almost contradictory views, reveal the precarious position also occupied by the former AAMU collection. A collection of mainly modern art, rooted in centuries-old, non-European cultural traditions, is difficult to classify. Both cases appear to confirm the need for a museum focusing specifically on Indigenous Australia. Alternatively, they also show the need to reconsider our categorizations of art and material culture.

The transfer of the (almost entire) former AAMU collection to the NMVW is a new stage in this discourse. The backgrounds of these two museums vary significantly. AAMU was established in the early 21st century as a museum of modern art, focusing exclusively on Indigenous Australia. Museum Volkenkunde (part of the NMVW) was founded in the 19th century, with a long

history as an ethnographic and colonial museum. Though the AAMU concentrated on art by a specific people from a specific region, its program of exhibitions clearly shows an ambition to present Aboriginal art in an international artistic context, often together with European and other modern art. The AAMU's desire to see the collection placed at the Stedelijk Museum or other Dutch institution for modern art is a logical continuation of this ambition. The fact that the NMVW is not a museum for modern art perhaps also played a role in the rejection of the two items mentioned earlier.

Acceptance of the AAMU collection comes with a great responsibility. The new recipients must find a way to actively promote the collection, maintaining the correct balance between the modern art aspect, and hence the contemporary voice of its makers, and the specific cultural significance.



Collection Stichting Nationaal
Museum van Wereldculturen.
Collection no. 7106-680. Former
Collection AAMU.

Multiple Stakeholders

The current discourse concerning the complex issues involved in returning African heritage from the colonial period will only increase in importance.

Dr. Adama Djigo is a historian who is affiliated with the African Studies Centre Leiden, with a PhD from the University of Paris Panthéon-Sorbonne for research on Cultural Politics in Senegal (1816–2000). Her research themes are Heritage, Cultural Politics, Identity, and the Contemporary History of

Senegal and Africa. In 2015, she published *Histoire des politiques du patrimoine culturel au Sénégal (1816–2000)*, Paris: L'Harmattan. This book focuses on the definition of cultural heritage in a scientific and institutional context and the ways in which the local population recognizes cultural heritage.

I'm Not For Sale, Nor is African Art¹

In these days of shrinking budgets, museums are reinventing themselves in order to continue to attract visitors and ensure their own self-sufficiency. At the same time as they face these financial difficulties, archaeological or tribal works of art – especially objects originating in Africa – command high prices at Western and American art fairs and auctions. Selling exceptional museum pieces to the highest bidder becomes very tempting.

One example is the proposed sale of their Africa collection by the Wereldmuseum in Rotterdam. The extensive media coverage at the time, both domestic and international², caught the attention of Rotterdam citizens, including myself. This collection is owned by the municipality of Rotterdam and consists of approximately 10,000 objects, mainly originating from Ghana, Nigeria, Liberia and the Congo. Some of these were brought over from Africa by shipping companies, traders and missionaries in the late nineteenth century, and donated to the museum in 1885. The collection subsequently expanded further thanks to purchases and gifts. In 2011, the Wereldmuseum decided to sell off this collection, partially in anticipation of the city's announced cuts to the museum's budget. The Wereldmuseum wished to concentrate on Asia going forward, and at market prices, hoped to garner over EUR 60 million in capital through the planned sale of the Africa collection. The interest would have enabled their financial self-sufficiency.

The intent behind this deaccessioning ran counter to the procedures described in the the LAMO, the Leidraad Afstoten Museale Objecten (Guideline for Deaccessioning Museum Objects). According to the LAMO, a museum collection may not be employed for financial gain. The Wereldmuseum failed to come to an agreement with other national institutions, as these could not pay market prices. Both Stichting Volkenkundige Collectie Nederland (foundation for ethnological collections in the Netherlands) and the European Ethnology Museums Directors Group denounced this sales strategy. Fearing that the objects would be bought up by private collectors, they wrote to Mr. Aboutaleb, Mayor of Rotterdam.

Shouldn't this planned transaction be considered harmful, not just to the citizens of Rotterdam, but also to the objects' communities and countries of origin? In addition to great resistance in the museum sector, public protest arose, driven by a group of engaged citizens from Rotterdam and beyond, and consisting of artists, art connoisseurs and representatives of the Surinamese-Dutch community. They formed two separate action groups; the 'Ik ben niet te koop' action committee, launched in 2013³, and 'Publieksactie Wereldmuseum', in 2014⁴. The slogan adopted by one of the action committee members, "I'm not for sale, nor is African art⁵," is a reference to the trans-Atlantic slave trade experienced by this community's enslaved African ancestors. To this community, the Africa collection is a link to African roots and ancestral traditions.

The international community of African museums (AFRICOM) has committed itself to returning ethnographic objects in the possession of European museums, Western art dealers and

private collectors⁶. In this context, the Wereldmuseum's commercial plans drew AFRICOM's attention. Dutch newspaper NRC Handelsblad reported AFRICOM's opinion as voiced by its director, Ms. Sithole. "At the least, consultation with African countries is required. If objects are revealed to have been stolen from Africa in the past, they should be returned. And if they were obtained by legal means, African museums want a chance to buy them back⁷." In an era in which modern museums are arising in such places as Gabon, the Republics of Senegal, Benin and Côte d'Ivoire, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, this statement reflects the position of many African countries.

In the end, Rotterdam's municipal council decided not to permit the intended sale. This case shows the importance of African ethnographic objects as cultural symbols and carriers of African identity. Moreover, these items reflect the shared history and heritage of different communities: African peoples, Afro-Surinamese, Afro-Antillean and Western citizens. The objects represent cultural heritage at various levels, including sensitive historic subjects such as enslavement and colonization. Putting this heritage up for sale creates frustration and shows a lack of respect. The current discourse concerning the complex issues involved in returning African heritage from the colonial period will only increase in importance. In my opinion, to find solutions that benefit all stakeholders, possible future plans for deaccessioning with regards to this heritage must take all factors into account.

These factors can include various cultural and historic aspects. Some artifacts originally had a religious function. They are

carriers of ritual traditions and narratives about actions by African societies which are part of the ancestral origins of Afro-Surinamese and Afro-Antillean communities. Some traditions were handed down through the generations, and still persist, while other rituals eventually assumed a different form. The African ethnographic objects communicate important aspects of traditional African social and political life. They function as witnesses to the material culture of the African people. They are carriers of narratives of enslavement and the colonial past, and also of memories of Western citizens from bygone days, shipowners, traders and missionaries. These are important aspects to consider when deaccessioning or reallocating shared heritage in the public domain.



Collection Wereldmuseum
Rotterdam. Collection no. 28566.
Photography Erik Hesmerg,
Amsterdam.

Collection Wereldmuseum
Rotterdam. Collection no. 4796.
Photography Erik Hesmerg,
Amsterdam.

- 1 My title was inspired by the motto of the action committee "Ik ben niet te koop" (I'm not for sale), a protest against the plans of the directorship of the Wereldmuseum in Rotterdam to sell off its African collection. I wish to express my thanks to everyone who responded to my questions and shared their sources.
- 2 <https://www.artkhade.com/fr/article/1/0/31/ventes-au-wereldmuseum-de-rotterdam> accessed February 2019.
- 3 <https://www.lejournal-desarts.fr/un-musee-neerlandais-prevoit-de-vendre-une-partie-des-collections-109701> accessed February 2019.
- 4 <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2016/09/07/kunstenaar-annex-activist-voor-het-wereldmuseum-4172360-a1520095> accessed February 2019.
- 5 <https://eenvandaag.avrotros.nl/item/protesten-tegen-verkoop-afrika-collectie-wereldmuseum/> accessed February 2019.
- 6 <https://www.theestafrican.co.ke/magazine/We-will-work-with-govts-to-get-the-artefacts-back-to-Africa-/434746-1390584-gjqb8fz/index.html> accessed February 2019.
- 7 <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2013/01/12/en-waar-laten-we-de-afrikaanse-kunst-1196220-a86088> accessed February 2019.

I think the Wereldmuseum affair has shown that though the museum audience generally assumes the role of consumer, it can transform into an active participant at need.

Olphaert den Otter (Poortugaal, 1955) studied as a visual artist at the Willem de Kooningacademie (1976–1981). He works in egg tempera, frequently in large series. One of these, the 'Refuge Morphology Series', consisting of 127 works, was exhibited in 2008 at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen. In 2020, a retrospective of his work will be on show at Museum Belvédère, Heerenveen. Den Otter also occasionally creates murals in pastels on location (Malta Contemporary Art, Valletta, Malta and

Ketelfactory, Schiedam), as well as hand-drawn animations. In addition to his practice of the visual arts, he sings as a countertenor and regularly lectures on cultural philosophy.

Works by Den Otter may be found at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Centraal Museum Utrecht, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Gemeentemuseum The Hague and in many private collections, both domestic and foreign.

Public Works

Is there a role for the public in a museum besides that of the viewer? A case study of the Publieksactie Wereldmuseum (Wereldmuseum public campaign).

Normally, the only role assigned to the public by a museum is that of the consumer. Visitors consume the objects on display, have coffee or a snack, buy a catalog or souvenir, and make way for the next visitor.

From the museum's point of view, the public is mainly a number, and higher is better.

However accurate this observation may seem, it does the museum an injustice on several counts. Increasingly, museums are considered public entertainment. They are so much more. Indeed, many vital museum activities are not for public consumption at all. Collection, studying, conservation, restoration and documentation are essential museum duties, which aren't necessarily shared with the public. Exchanging knowledge gained from collections with others (scientists or otherwise) is a (semi)public activity, however.

The means of fulfillment and relationships between all these museum duties are determined in various ways.

First, of course, there are the constantly developing museum traditions. No unequivocal definition exists; these are more a matter of what happens in practice, though they are also taught (Reinwardt Academie, various universities). Is teaching shaped by practice, however, or the practice by what is taught? All practice is informed by experience. This, in its turn, results in the creation of guidelines. For Dutch museums, these are the Code Cultural Governance and the LAMO, the Leidraad Afstoten Museale Objecten (Guideline for Deaccessioning Museum Objects). Museum directors and staff employ the Code Cultural Governance and the LAMO in practice. A supervisory board ensures that this happens correctly. Collections are seldom owned by museums. The legal owners also keep watch: the municipality, nation or province has so-called ‘meta-supervisory’ powers (appointing supervisory board members, for example).

Generally, all proceeds smoothly. Sometimes, however, things go spectacularly wrong. In these cases – very rarely – the public assumes a different role, inspired by dissatisfaction and expressed as opposition. The events involving the Wereldmuseum in Rotterdam in 2014 were such a case. That was when I launched my Wereldmuseum campaign. I will briefly relate my own view of events below.

Since my teens, I have been a frequent visitor to what was then known as the Museum voor Land- en Volkenkunde, now the Wereldmuseum. Stanley Bremer was appointed as the director in 2001, and soon revealed a strong commercial focus. Repeat media coverage pertaining to the deaccessioning of the Africa

collection triggered my interest. The removal of the Sanders collection from the museum, in protest of the proposed deaccessioning, was an act I found as understandable as it was regrettable.

On August 14, 2014, the Groene Amsterdammer published an in-depth article about the Wereldmuseum by investigative journalist Sjors van Beek, ‘Topstukken in the ramsj’¹. This article referred to the deaccessioning of an astounding proportion of the collection: 96%! I decided to share the article on Facebook, accompanied by an appeal to help stop this plan. That led to a torrent of responses, ultimately resulting in the Wereldmuseum campaign. A group of informants uncovered more and more irregularities. I was initially completely unfamiliar with the material involved, and found it difficult to grasp initially. Gradually, I succeeded, and I determined to involve local politics. I also continued to report each step on Facebook. The number of concerned parties continued to grow. I combined all the information into a series of questions to the mayor and city council of Rotterdam, addressing the council twice, as the municipality of Rotterdam is the rightful owner of this collection. Councillor Visser frequently could not answer my questions, or referred to the Wereldmuseum’s Supervisory Board. When (in November 2014) this was revealed to be a demissionary Supervisory Board, this developed into a political scandal, threatening the councillor’s position. He was forced to have the situation investigated by an independent body, the Lawson Luiten agency, as well as by the Municipal Court of Auditors. Their reports came out in the spring of 2015, and were damning to the plans proposed by the Wereldmuseum’s then-director. The director was immediately removed from office. In consultation with the judge, an

interim director and new Supervisory Board were appointed. The combination of a hands-off government and a climate promoting cultural entrepreneurship had created a situation in which a director, normally responsible for the management of and access to the municipal collection, could instead make a determined attempt at dismantling the same. The proceeds from the collection were to be invested in developing a boutique hotel within the museum building, with rooms adorned by what remained of the museum's treasures. Convincing politicians of the absurdity of the situation took considerable effort. The tide refused to turn until the reports revealed the complete lack of commercial traction for this cultural entrepreneurship, as well as the city's failure to provide responsible meta-supervision. Though the LAMO would surely have prevented deaccessioning at such a scale, a situation had been allowed to arise in which museum duties could be neglected in favor of an attempted dismantling of the institution. Thankfully, this was prevented barely in time.

This summary of events reveals several points. First and foremost, this type of situation is extremely rare. All systems of self-regulation had failed. Due to the exodus of scientifically trained staff, no solid opposition was presented in-house (at the end, the museum had only nine employees!). Only one option remained; a genuinely independent individual who could lead the way to a solution, preferably one with broad public support. And that's exactly what happened. At such moments, the museum functions as a public space, where anyone is free to assume responsibility.

The reports by the Lawson Luiten agency and the municipal Court of Auditors gave a general indication of how matters had come this far. Perhaps we could explore whether the Code Cultural Governance and LAMO were sufficiently effective. Also, couldn't the Museums Association have helped get the Wereldmuseum back on track? An updated version of the LAMO is now available (2016). The introduction states: "After some years of experience implementing the LAMO in practice, and in light of several controversial deaccessioning cases, there was a demand for a more detailed explanation of the procedure (...)." Can this (also) be seen as a reference to the Wereldmuseum affair? Another new development is the creation of the Cultural Heritage Act. These are new and more powerful instruments to help achieve a solid museum practice.

The Wereldmuseum has become part of the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (NMVW, National Museum of World Cultures). The collection is again secure. The museum building is currently undergoing a thorough renovation; parts will reopen to the public later this year. The public can re-assume its role of visitor. The public campaign has been shelved. The Wereldmuseum is to exhibit a specifically Rotterdam character, maintaining its own individual presence within the NMVW collective. With the museum located at the center of our country's most multicultural city, it would be wonderful if it also became the heart of the city in practice. That would involve the attraction of a very different museum audience, where initially, the numbers are much less relevant than the composition. This would make the museum objects into true 'public works', and allow the museum to work publicly; participating fully in the

dynamics of the city and providing a new and different energy.

I think the Wereldmuseum affair has shown that though the museum audience generally assumes the role of consumer, it can transform into an active participant at need. This should inspire museum directorships and politicians to gratitude, but also to self-reflection. Am I truly serving the public good? Are my policies not overly focused on commercial aspects? Do our institutions fulfill a role that a critical public can take seriously? In addition to entertainment, do we also offer material for critical reflection?

If we use the garden as a metaphor, the LAMO only covers the weeding. The Code Cultural Governance describes ideal landscaping features and the conditions for responsible management. Personnel and staff function as capable, trained gardeners, putting all skillfully into practice. The public wanders through the garden, learning, enjoying and harvesting the fruits.

¹ <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/topstukken-in-de-ramsj>



Collection Wereldmuseum
Rotterdam. Collection no. 68278.
Photography Jan van Esch,
Amsterdam.

It is also vital for private donors and their heirs, who often feel a bond with the recipient museum, to have a say in the deaccessioning process, in order to avoid damaging any further inclination to donate.

Dr. Renée Steenbergen Steenbergen is an art historian. For her doctoral thesis, she researched private art collecting in the Netherlands. In 2008, she published her second book, *De Nieuwe Mecenaz. Cultuur en de terugkeer van het particuliere geld* (the new patron; culture and the return of private funding). Until recently, Steenbergen

was a senior research fellow at Utrecht University and editor-in-chief of a magazine aimed at the non profit sector. Since 2015, she has been a board member of the Royal Society of Asian Art in the Netherlands, handling Donations and Legacies. www.kvvak.nl

Deaccessioning in Consultation with Private Donors

The closure of a government-funded museum was a new phenomenon within the Dutch cultural sector. Because museums preserve our cultural heritage, the common assumption was that they would continue to exist forever. Clearly, times have changed. In 2013, after a period of increasing budget cuts, the city of Delft decided to close down its ethnographic museum Nusantara, established over a hundred years ago. The collection, owned by the municipality, needed to be disposed of in accordance with the LAMO, the Leidraad Afstoten Museale Objecten (Guideline for Deaccessioning Museum Objects). This deaccessioning process revealed a shortcoming in this guideline, namely the lack of instructions on how to deal with objects gifted by still living, private donors.

This was the situation confronting the KVVAK, the Vereniging van Vrienden der Aziatische Kunst (Royal Society of Asian Art in the Netherlands), in 2016, when two of its members reported Delft's failure to provide clarity as to the destination of their gifts to Museum Nusantara. The KVVAK as a society has existed for over a century, and possesses a highly regarded collection of art objects, primarily from East and Southeast Asia. This collection is on permanent loan to the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, which displays the most prized items in their Asian Pavilion.

The intended gift to Nusantara consisted of a valuable collection of 125 Indonesian and Southeast Asian textiles. The donation agreement did not account for the possibility of the museum's closure, as this did not seem a plausible scenario to anyone at the time. Therefore, no provision had been made for what should happen to the gifted objects in such a situation. The donors were concerned about the lot of their erstwhile collection, particularly as repeated requests for information to Erfgoed Delft had not garnered a clear response. The donors had no objection whatsoever to the objects being moved to a different museum, where they would still be accessible to the public. They also wished their carefully curated collection to remain intact. They were strongly against the textiles being sold at auction, in whole or in part; an altruistic gift should not be used for financial gain by the recipient. They were also concerned about possible 'restitution' to the countries of origin, as it was unclear whether the fragile textiles would be handled and stored under proper conditions. They had hoped to have a vote in the new destination of the surrendered items.

Therefore, the Asian art society, which did not yet possess any ceremonial textiles, consulted its partner, the Rijksmuseum, on possibly petitioning through the LAMO for the preservation of this collection in its entirety for the Netherlands. The city of Delft acceded to this request, and the items were transferred between the museums, after which the Rijksmuseum passed them on to the private KVVAK. Since then, items from the collection have regularly been on view at the Rijksmuseum's Asian Pavilion.

At the time, this process was an exception to the rule, but in

2016, in parallel to the events described above, the LAMO changed, adding several crucial sections with suggestions on dealing with private donors and their heirs. For the preparatory phase, the section on 'Provenance' contains the following: (...) "Additionally, it is important to consider the interests of any relevant outside parties such as *former owners*, *donors*, still living artists, funding organizations and others." In Appendix 3, under 'Determination of Ownership' in the section on 'Gifts':

(...) Also, ethical considerations can be reason to take special care when deaccessioning gifts. A gift is not a one-sided judicial act (as in the case of a legacy), but a *reciprocal* agreement concluded through offer and acceptance, with due regard for the associated requirements.

(...) Consider informing the donor or their heirs of the intended deaccessioning of the object. If the donor or heirs object to the deaccessioning, the museum may decide to *return the object*. The museum may also decide to renegotiate the agreement with the donor or heirs."

The reference to the moral or ethical aspects involved in dealings with donors is an important addition. The purely legal standpoint; that no restrictions were made, and therefore, the museum has no responsibility towards the donors, often appears harsh to donors, and denies the validity of their concern for the gifted items.

It is also vital for private donors and their heirs, who often feel a bond with the recipient museum, to have a say in the deaccessioning process, in order to avoid damaging any further inclination to donate.

The KVVAK appreciates Delft's willingness to honor the donors' request, which allowed their textile collection to be transferred to a publicly accessible collection. This is in alignment with the great importance of private donors to public art collections and the provision of optimal public access to cultural heritage.



A selection of the Indonesian and Southeast Asian textiles on display in the Asian Pavilion of the Rijksmuseum. www.vvak.nl

We don't want
to give away the gifts
we were given by the
public. Therefore, we
are very reserved in our
deaccessioning.

Taco Dibbits is the General Director of the Rijksmuseum. He was previously curator of 17th-century paintings and later Head of Fine and Decorative Arts, also at the Rijksmuseum. Prior to joining the Rijksmuseum, he was the director of the Old Masters department at Christie's in London. Dibbits studied art history at VU University Amsterdam and the University of Cambridge.

Wayne Modest is the head of the Research Center of Material Culture. He is also professor of Material Culture and Critical Heritage Studies (by special appointment) in the Humanities faculty at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam (VU). Modest was previously head of the curatorial department at the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam; Keeper of Anthropology at the Horniman Museum in London, and Director of the Museums of History and Ethnography in Kingston, Jamaica.

In the Service of the Public: Museums and the Question of Deaccession

An interview with Taco Dibbits **TB**. Interview conducted by Wayne Modest **WM**.

Note: This interview took place at the Ateliergebouw of the Rijksmuseum, in the office of the director, on 08/03/2019. This transcription represents what was discussed as closely as possible. We have, however, made minor edits for clarity and ease of reading as well as removing aspects of the conversation not specifically relevant to this publication.

WM Hello Taco, thanks for speaking with me. This will be about deaccessioning for a publication we are working on at the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (NMVW, National Museum of World Cultures), and part of our Work in Progress series. Words Matter was the first in the series.

TD But is it about repatriation? Or is it also about deaccessioning of, say, Delft tiles that we think are no longer important to our collection and wish to sell at auction? Everything?

WM The latter, and less about repatriation. Repatriation is of course also relevant and we can talk about it at the end of our interview, but we hope to do a follow up publication, which will be more about the repatriation issue. Of course, it depends on what you feel comfortable talking about, bringing in issues of restitution is okay as well.

TD I think you should ask the questions and probably I will start and you can say Taco, this is not interesting.

Deaccessioning at the Rijksmuseum

WM So let us start by perhaps talking about deaccessioning, and whether or not at this point the Rijksmuseum has a policy on deaccessioning?

TD Yes, we do.

WM And if you could describe the basics of what that policy entails.

TD Basically, our policy is that the collections of the Rijksmuseum are entrusted to us by the public – partly the state, partly the city – but a really large part is the public, and we want to be a safe place to give something. We don't want to give away the gifts we were given by the public. Therefore, we are very reserved in our deaccessioning (as you'd say in Dutch). We also follow the Dutch Guideline for Deaccessioning Museum Objects (the Leidraad Afstoten Museale Objecten, LAMO) in deaccessioning collections. However, first of all, we would only do so only if we feel that the object no longer has a function within the Rijksmuseum, if it is better placed within another museum. For example, we did so for two paintings from a castle in Purmerend, which we knew we would never display, and were not part of the core collection of the Rijksmuseum – that is, the old Rijksmuseum collection. We gave them to the museum in Purmerend.

We also... if objects do not fulfill a public function. If, for example, they are in storage and we know where they came from, and they were part of a public interior somewhere else,

we could place them there again, either on long-term loan or by giving them to that institution. But that location has to be accessible to the public. We look at whether the institution has a public function, and how it is administered. This is to ensure that it is a solid institution.

A Safe Space for Donors

TD The selling of objects to generate money to acquire new objects, we do not do. This is part of our commitment to being a safe place for donors. If we did sell an object... objects that are a total loss, damaged. For example, we had a collection of broken tiles that was placed in the attic of the museum in around 1885, with no historical or art historical value, and we got rid of it.

WM Get rid of it, what do you mean?

TD We first offered the collection to other museums. But if the Rijksmuseum does not want something, no other museum wants it. Because we also have the function of kind of a national archive for objects. It is never with the aim to generate money... I think that the discussion of deaccessioning is very different for museums of contemporary art. This is because I think the collecting of contemporary art has a very different dynamic. At a certain point, something becomes modern art or it goes into the garbage. So there you have to have more flexibility, you're able to adapt faster, it is a whole different dynamic. The Rijksmuseum is very conservative in our de-collecting, deaccessioning.

WM And is there...

TD However, we are not the only ones who decide. In the

case of restitution or repatriation, we feel that if things were stolen, they should go back to their owners.

WM You ask me to say when something is relevant, well this is relevant.

TD That is perhaps more relevant to your museum. What I mean is that it is different for us. The problems are very different with large quantities of objects like yours. If it comes to restitution of looted art during the second world war, I think that we should not weigh the current importance to our museum. I don't steal your bicycle and say "Yeah, but I use it so much, I can't give it back."

I think we should do so in the case of looted art or stolen art, or art that acquired under circumstances where there is a, how to describe it, an unacceptable difference in power. I think we should strive to come to a solution together with the country of origin. And yes, I do think that one of the complexities is to whom to repatriate. But that shouldn't stop us from restitution. I think that we have used this excuse too often in the past. To whom will we give it back? Will we give it back to an individual, to a community, or to a country that didn't exist at the time? That is a complex matter, but that shouldn't stop us from giving things back. As I said before, I'm sure that once we do research together, we can come to a solution that's good for the receiving parties as well. I'm simplifying, but sometimes you must.

WM You mentioned a few instances when the Rijksmuseum has deaccessioned objects, for example, the Purmerend paintings. Are these written up? Is there somewhere where I could find documentation on this?

TD Yes, but this is a long time ago, and it's a long time since we last deaccessioned anything to another museum in that way.

WM So, when was the last time that you deaccessioned you'd say? An estimate is fine.

TD Ten years ago or so. The Purmerend ones must have been somewhere in 2005 or 2006. But these are often long term loans, or objects that we feel don't really fit the collections. The core collections are collections, not single objects, but collections that came to the Rijksmuseum as a group in the 19th or early 20th century. Objects that were important to the building of the Rijksmuseum collection. Those objects are designated as the core collection. We would not deaccession those objects. They can, however, be placed on long term loans. We have a lot of long term loans in the Netherlands, but also abroad.

I think in the end, museums serve the public. If you can best achieve that [public function] by either a long term loan or deaccessioning, that is your task; independent of where the object will go. For example, we have had paintings on long term loan from a museum in Douai, in northern France, since the 1960s. In return, they loaned us a portrait of Huygens by Jan Lievens. This sort of loan is really to the public benefit. Another example is the copy of the Night Watch in the Rijksmuseum from the National Gallery in London. This is a long term loan that really benefits the public. In the case of the paintings in Purmerend, it really benefits the public that they are shown there. I think that this is also, however complicated, the case for some repatriations; you hope to find a solution to the public benefit together. But you have to find it together, without setting rules beforehand.

WM So then, you are not against deaccessioning? Perhaps I'll call this interview something about 'in the service of the

public'. What emerges a lot from talking with you, is that basically what you are saying, that fundamentally that is what is at stake. Serving the public better.

A Safe Space for Gifts

TD Yes, but also the donors. I think it's the people who give. If you say, "Taco, I have this beautiful painting and I want to give it to the Rijksmuseum, I am entrusting it to the Rijksmuseum for future generations." If we accept it, I would feel as if we were breaking a promise if we were to deaccession it. That is also why we are very selective of what we accept as gifts. Because most of the works we get are gifts.

Objects as the Nation's Wealth

TD I don't really believe in deaccessioning just because objects take up too much space. We had a very good colleague in charge of climate control and technical installations at the Rijksmuseum. He came from a background in fruit and vegetable storage. And he said, "I don't understand these discussions you always have about space. If you compare it to the amounts of storage flowers, fruit and vegetables require, it's tiny, the storage at the Rijksmuseum. This idea that it takes up a lot of space, I don't get it." This, perhaps, brings me to one of the core issues in this discussion. It is interesting that in the Netherlands, discussions of deaccessioning have taken place over the past four decades or so, well, as long as I remember. These discussions have always been there. That's also typically Dutch. We like our attics clean, and we want everything organized. In Russia,

the director of the Hermitage opens the storage door and says, "Look how rich we are, we have 25 Wouwerman paintings in storage, we don't even have to hang them up." And in France as well, your wealth as a country is also shown through the number of objects you own. In the Netherlands, we open a storage and we ask, "Why have them if they are in storage, can't we sell them?"

I think that this is very typical for a mercantile country, a small country also, where space is important. Seeing collections as merchandise, as something you have to do something with, is also this idea of cultural entrepreneurship that is so important to us. Whereas for other countries, they are connected to the wealth of the country, the pride of the country. I think that this is changing now in the Netherlands, but it is interesting to see. If we had 25 Wouwermans in the collection and 20 of them were in storage, we would ask, "Why don't we sell those twenty?" Whereas probably somebody from India would say: "What? Are you selling your national collection? I mean, what poverty is that?"

WM This ties into a rather preliminary discussion that Henrietta Lidchi and I have been having as well, about the national differences in our approaches to issues of say heritage or restitution. She is the one who brought it to my attention. In France, this might be driven by discussions about inalienability, in a kind of elitist way, and the idea of the rights to cultural patrimony. In Britain, you have a different kind of discussion around, for example, the heritage of humanity. And with us here in the Netherlands, yet another kind of discussion, which you now suggest, a more calculated discussion, a mercantile relationship.

Deaccessioning Nusantara

TD This, I think, is what went wrong in Delft. In this case we get a perspective of the way the Netherlands views, it's specific to each country, but in this case, how the Netherlands views its cultural heritage or cultural heritage kept in this country. Delft is a good example. I remember the day Martine Gosselink came to my office and said, "Could I be in the committee [to think about what happens with the collections in Delft]?" I said, "You can be part of the committee, but state very clearly that you first want to discuss the reason why they want to deaccession the collection." Because again, this is the Netherlands deciding... Maybe I'm oversimplifying, and Stijn Schoonderwoerd has told me I was wrong, but anyway. The Netherlands, or Delft in this case, decides, "We have to cut costs, so we want to close this museum down." Then we say, "Oh, so we don't want the stuff, what to do with the objects? Let's give them back to Indonesia." Without asking if they are at all interested, if they want to have them back, without a discussion on that side. Then it is said, "Yes, but we cannot do that because we've got laws and rules in the Netherlands." As if they don't in Indonesia, but anyway. "We can't give them back because we've got laws and rules and we've got the LAMO." Which means, in this case, first picking out all the best stuff, because every museum in the Netherlands can pick which ones they like, and only then giving the rest back. I just think it's... On principle, I am adamantly against that line of reasoning. I think you first explore whether you feel that a museum or objects don't serve a public function in our country anymore, then you enter into discussion, which you should anyway. You enter into discussion with the other country, the

country of origin. You ask, "How do you feel about this? Where do you think they would function best? How could we make them function better?" Etc., etc. If that country says, "Yes, we would actually like to have them here, and exhibit them here," then you repatriate them by giving them back to that country. But you can't first say.....

WM You mean you can't first cherry pick?

TD I think it's just not the right starting point. It wasn't, "Listen, we've got a museum in Delft with objects from Indonesia, why are they here, how did they come to be here? Should we enter into a discussion with Indonesia about what we are going to do with them?" Instead, it is, "We have to cut costs, we have to close down the museum, what do we do with the objects?" Well, that's the wrong way around. The background, the motivation to give them back is wrong. And then to start the whole project without even asking, "Do you [Indonesia] actually want them?" If Indonesia had done that to Holland, Holland would probably say, well, no thank you.

WM The organizational principle aside, because Stijn Schoonderwoerd already explained to you how it went, in principle, you could also say...

TD No, this is the way it went.

WM I understand what you mean and am not saying that your basic premise is wrong. In fact Jos van Beurden has made a similar criticism. It's on our website as part of a report that we (Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen and Erfgoed Delft) commissioned him to write about the process. And I acknowledge that I have criticized museums in the past about this very thing. For example, what they do with human remains. Often, we do not give back human remains because

we think there is an ethical work to be done; nor are we attempting to repair historical and contemporary injustice. We give back human remains because we don't know what to do with them and we have no space.

TD Exactly! They are not worth any money.

WM So what you are criticizing is the mercantilism, the neo-colonial principle? They are of no value to us anymore, and they cost too much, so you have them?

TD I don't even know that it's neo-colonial. The Dutch have always been very prone to mercantilism and trying to be objective. So, trying to make this one solution fit all. To me, it isn't necessarily neo-colonial... I mean I can understand you interpreting it that way. I feel it just has to do with decency, the basic morals of how you give things or how you treat each other. But maybe that is neo-colonial.

WM Perhaps, perhaps not, okay, but you are suggesting it as indecent. It is an indecent way of dealing with people. So, in principle, you have been explaining that you actually have no real opposition to deaccessioning, but you foreground the publicness of institutions as important, and how the museums (or even objects) do their public work as a starting point? And you foreground the ethics of how it is done.

TD And also... which I think is a very important thing. The amazing thing with history and with art and with objects is that they are all different. If I say, the most important thing is the public, then you could argue, well, for a looted work of art, if more people see it here than in say Jerusalem, keep it here. I would say, "No, that's not the case, no, you should give it back." However, we should be really careful not to make this one size fits all. It is different for every country and for every object. I

think it's a very good idea to start by saying, "We are first going to do research on and with Indonesia and Sri Lanka." It's a very good idea for the Rijksmuseum to do that. First, we were going to do so with NIOD, and then Stijn Schoonderwoerd, your director, said we should do it together, so now the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen is part of it. It's very good to come to the conclusion that if we do this, we should do it case by case. So, take Aceh, both your museums and ours have things from there, and maybe Bronbeek as well. I think we will then have groups of objects that belong together, and we can come to a conclusion. But it's also not saying, "Okay, we have repatriated one Indonesian object," instead of giving everything back, or them wanting everything back. I had this discussion with the British Museum. In fact, I asked Hartwig Fischer about Benin. I said, "Did they ask for all the objects back?" He said, "No, no, no." So I said, "Well, why can't you do that then?" and then responded, "Well, our trustees are scared of creating a precedent." But there is no law, so you are free to do what you want.

WM If I have it correctly, the British Museum is in a specific position. Because of their status, deaccessioning requires approval from parliament, or a change in the law. It think that this was the case with human remains.

TD I am sure that the slavery exhibition that we have planned will be all wrong. But when I became the director, it was important to me to say that this should happen now, and I don't feel that the British Museum has made that move.

WM But at the end of the day, I'd say this is a part of our practices, knowing that we are going to make mistakes, but committing to doing what we feel is correct.

TD Of course, yes, that is the first thing I said to Valika

Smeulders and Eveline Sint-Nicolaas when they started this process. I said, “Listen, we are going to do it, and everyone is going to criticize us, but I don’t care. But do realize that you will get a whole lot of shit from all parties. The only thing you can do is stay true to yourself and what you believe is good. You have to be able to defend it to yourself.”

WM I would say that the difficulty with Hartwig Fischer, if one can call it that, is that it’s hard to be in the shadow of Neil MacGregor. MacGregor was a particular kind of director, erudite, convincing, and who got support... Not that Hartwig Fischer himself isn’t good, but different.

TD But you don’t have to be the same. I am completely different from Wim Pijbes, Wim Pijbes is completely different from Ronald de Leeuw.

TD I was confronted by the man who wrote the book on the principles for restitution or repatriation...

WM Jos van Beurden.

TD He presented his paper at the University Museum in Amsterdam. I thought it was quite a difficult meeting, but also very important to me, because I was asked what I thought about the Rijksmuseum signing the Declaration of Universal Museums. I went home – and to me Neil MacGregor had been a fantastic director in 2003 – and I read the declaration and thought, this is ridiculous. As I said, it is a contract before starting the friendship. I could see that perhaps at that time what Neil MacGregor did was a very big step, something important. But the world has changed completely, and I have also changed my views. It’s constantly in motion, and I am very glad that in San Francisco [and the meeting of major museums across the world] we decided not to make a new declaration, but to state officially,

as museum directors, “This is the past, and we don’t adhere to it anymore.” I think you can’t make a new declaration when you represent such a small fraction of museums around the world.

WM But you say something which is interesting, because one important principle that is often not so much addressed in all these discussions around restitution, around provenance, etc., is the condition of exchange: what were the obligations of the exchange and what does it mean that the relationship under colonialism was one of, in many cases, gross inequality? But also whether the relationship in the present re-inscribes earlier power relations or tries to undo them. And many of us are not good at relinquishing power, as demonstrated in this Universal declaration.

TD I don’t buy it anymore. I used to, also because I wasn’t at all into these discussions, I was working in the art department, I was only thinking about Greek statues. And then funnily enough, a thought came to me at the presentation of Jos van Beurden’s book. I’ve always said restitution within the context of objects from the Jewish people and Nazi looted art is completely different. There was one man there who was a lawyer, who did a lot of work on Jewish restitution. And he said this thing which resonated with me: “If you want to start a dialogue, it is a lot about daring to be fragile.” I think that’s a very important point. Saying, as the Rijksmuseum, as I think we did, while showing doubt and an openness to criticism, “Listen, I don’t have the answer yet. It might be repatriation, it might not be, I don’t know yet.”

Of course you could say, “Come on, you are the director of the Rijksmuseum, you should know that.” But the fragility makes it possible to start talking. Otherwise there will always be that

power. Look at the building, there is already an imbalance.

WM Yes, and that's one thing we have learned as well. A big part of our work is accepting our vulnerability, that we are not the experts on everything. To accept this is to be vulnerable. And by accepting we can say that we are interested to work with others, activists, other stakeholders, to do it together but still knowing our responsibility. Perhaps another question, what do you think of the LAMO? You have been critical of the use of the LAMO for the Nusantara project.

Cultural Poverty

TD I think that in the case of restitution and repatriation, the LAMO cannot apply. It is a set of rules that were developed for a completely different type of deaccessioning. I think there is a big difference between deaccessioning, repatriation and restitution, and the motivation behind each is different. My problem with the LAMO is, and I've always said this, that a museum that deaccessions an object should offer it to other museums, yes, but I think the LAMO still does not stipulate that the museum that takes the object should not be asked to buy it. I could understand, perhaps, paying for the conservation and the administrative costs – though I'm always against museums charging each other – but you can't ask them to buy objects. In the Netherlands, most works are acquired with the help of Funds [public and private foundations] such as the Rembrandt Association or the Mondriaan Fund, or the State, or private donors. It is ridiculous to ask the Rembrandt Association, for example, to contribute towards a work to which they already

contributed earlier. You can't start selling between museums. Doing this, saying, "You must offer the object to other museums, but you are not allowed to sell it to them if they want it, you have to give it to them," also takes away a large part of the political incentive for deaccessioning. Every so many years, there is someone, from the municipality of Amsterdam, for example, saying, "Well, if we sold the Night Watch, then...." In Haarlem, that actually happened. When I started working here, they said things were quite acute for the municipality and that the museum should sell a painting by Sweerts to build a new ring road. That should be completely impossible. We in the Netherlands, or the municipality of Haarlem, sold an important painting at that time, which was bought by, and is now hanging in the Louvre. I think for a country like the Netherlands, that's just unacceptable. I think it's cultural poverty. It must be quite interesting for you because it's a completely different problem than what you deal with.

WM As we said earlier, it is different in different places. It takes time to learn these specific national practices for dealing with heritage, but I have lived here eight years now. And it is different from museum to museum, even if there are overarching similarities.

Individual Responsibility for Civic Union

TD Yeah, but the fascinating thing is that, as I sometimes say, every country deserves its own national museum. In the sense that, if you go to the MET, you see a fantastic museum of private collections, and the US is the celebration of the individual. If you go to the Rijksmuseum, you see a museum

with a deep kind of notion of civic consensus concerning acquisitions. When we buy a painting, if it's an expensive painting, we ask funds and the community for support; 10,000 people may contribute to an acquisition. In the US, it's always one individual donating to one museum. So it's a completely different mechanism. That's why we shouldn't follow the American example.

WM But it is funny that you say that, because America, funnily enough, even though there is this hyper individualism, it is also the place where the word community is used in museum practice very easily with little criticism. Here it is the opposite, the word community is very often not used. So when you think about community museums, community museum practices, whatever, that is actually based in a space for private donorship. Here, it is the total opposite, which, as you said, has the notion of the civic, but without the community. It is quite a different thing and when I came here first, because I was coming from Britain, using the word community was very easy for me. A colleague of mine at the Tropenmuseum said to me basically, "No, Wayne, that's because you are British. We don't use that kind of word here because we are individuals." So this is interesting. This idea of the hyper-individuation, the individual responsibility, which some people see as partly tied to neo-liberal mercantilism, is much stronger here than in other places.

TD Yes, it is an individual responsibility for civic union. That is the interesting thing, it is participative. And in the end, the community is the Netherlands, because it's such a small country. I do think that the sense of community in the States is completely different because of the vastness of the country.

If you go to a city in the Midwest, you really have a community because you have to drive for hours to get somewhere else.

WM That may be so. And I mean, the US is also a different place, at least in this sense, with a very different class structure. You also have the hyper wealthy and so when we talk about community, they are included in a different way.

TD Well in the US, the hyper wealthy are kind of the modern aristocracy, who have to do something for the poor. But then they of course only do things to get better benefits.

WM So to come back to the issue of deaccessioning, because I like this idea you explained, there are certain things I may also highlight in the published version of the interview. I like where you say it is a form of cultural poverty, it is a really nice statement in terms of thinking about how we, with all of this wealth as a country, how we do certain things which might in the end go against this very idea of the museum as a space for civic good.

TD I thought... what to me was very interesting was when I saw a clip on the news a few days ago about Benin City and the production of bronzes there, how bronze is still very much part of the city, it runs through the veins of the city. I didn't know that, that well. I had a kind of moral issue, because I think the Benin Bronzes should be restituted, repatriated to Benin City in Nigeria. But I also think that by acquiring a knowledge of the other, you start to understand much more. I think that's important... that one of the core duties for museums, here, is to enable the Dutch public (because the exhibitions are mainly visited by the Dutch public), to enable them to understand the current day societies where the objects originate. It makes it much more so that you say, "Yeah of course, suddenly it

makes sense.” Otherwise, to many people, Benin stays kind of abstract. For me, it was this place that beautiful objects came from, but I didn’t know much about the city.

WM But one of the discussions actually from the people from Nigeria, like other places, and this is in response to your earlier comment about the director of the British Museum saying that people do not want everything back, is that they would also want, in addition to the return of objects, to develop much more structural kinds of conversations and collaborations, to be able to think through what an art history of Benin Bronzes is. So for them, it was also an investment in partnership, and not necessarily only an investment in return. What do you think?

TD But then I would say, “Yes, I’m interested in partnership. However, I’m not going to give...” You can’t do that, because then you never get the partnership. I think you have to be open to all. What I also found interesting at that presentation of Jos van Beurden’s book was that there was somebody talking about this Benin–Cambridge dialogue (the Benin Dialogue, held in Cambridge in March 2017). There was someone presenting who mentioned another person who led that dialogue very well, and I looked them up and it was, again, a white man from Cambridge.

WM Yes, she mentioned Nick Thomas.

TD Yeah. And I find that, I don’t know. He might be fantastic and maybe I’m too kind of ... I don’t know.

WM No, no, no, I mean you should, if that is how you feel. I know Nick Thomas quite well and the truth is that his leading of the dialogue was well done. That’s not the issue I think? Nick Thomas was also in that conversation among museum directors that came out in the newspapers, when the Savoy report came

out. To some, Nick Thomas came over as really, really, conservative, his responses felt embattled.

TD How old are you? I’m 50, that’s why it’s up to us now.

WM I think he felt embattled and tired by the direction the discussion is taking. He just wrote an article for a book that he and I are editing along with a few other museum scholars, that’s going to come out in a few months’ time, and as I read this article, and knowing the work that he has been doing over the article, it is evident that he is concerned. Perhaps he, like many other museum professionals feels embattled in this current discussion.

TD And you can’t be... I mean... but maybe for me it is easy not to be angry. But you can also understand. Or I mean I always try to understand where he is coming from, or where they come from, and then I always wonder, would I have done the same? I mean, probably I would have taken similar positions, or made similar mistakes. Not that that’s an answer or anything, but to realize that we could make similar choices, or similar mistakes to those we criticize, makes you humble.

WM I have said that as well, especially when I talk to students in museum studies or people who will be curator, that one of the things I realize now, is that they, the younger generation, will be tearing me apart, criticizing my decisions, in 50 years, or even 20 years. They will question the stupid things I collected, the useless things I did. So I mean it is also part of the process. The question I have, and I just said this in a meeting in Leipzig, the question I have is whether or not we as museum workers today are actually going to do the work that is needed to change the situation, to imagine another more equitable and just kind of museum practice, or are we just going to continue the same

delaying that people before us have done. That many people before us, but even some of us working today, like me, have been a part of?

We Make Our History

TD I think we are all children of our time. And I think that we tend to relativize that a little bit, ourselves. This discussion is now getting more, I mean to relativize also the, what the point of the, the activists and how they have strengths, this discussion is also taking place because of economical and political interest of all countries.

We think this is very important now, but it's also now that Nigeria is a superpower and Indonesia is a superpower. So I think that for all sides, I mean yeah, we are products of our time. But I hope that once we realize that then we also understand our limitations a little more. On the other hand, yes, we are products of our time, but we also make our time and we are responsible as museums for making our time. We don't only... I always say, yes, it's important that people can reflect on history and make up their own minds. But we also make that history, and sometimes you have to put your foot down and make a point.

WM I mean, the Benin Dialogue is undoubtedly difficult. We hosted it recently, it was in Leiden. There is no easy answer. Yet its difficulty is also that it has been going on for several years without any real 'solution'.

TD Would it have been easier, if it had been agreed from the beginning, "Yes, we will start this dialogue and it may well lead to repatriation? Or maybe not, but let's take a look?"

WM You mean recently?

TD No, I mean at the beginning; if you could turn back time. Or do you think it would have been this difficult anyway?

WM No, it is always difficult, primarily because the stakes are high, and there are politics at play. A part of the politics is that it's not just about a museum like ours, about one museum, but about a number of museums, with different political stakes involved.

TD Yes, but should that stop us from giving things back?

WM No, but giving back is not the only issue; there is also an issue of consensus.

TD Well, you remember there was this letter after the *Goede Hoop* exhibition. I was very naive, I said, "Well, I would like to invite the person to talk." I don't exactly remember who it was, a number of people wrote it really. So I wanted to invite them to talk, and I did, but they never answered. I did not realize then that the act of writing the open letter may have been the point; it was not really about getting an answer. You write to the museum as a way to voice your critique, and that is fine.

WM We have been successful in talking to people. One of the things with talking to people, which is really good is that while there may be a lot of fights, the next discussion may lead us to work together. Throughout these discussions we can both say, oh we did not understand that this is so, which creates a kind of complicity for creating the futures that you both want, which is our responsibility as well as theirs. But the Benin dialogue is difficult, also because finding consensus among the museums across Europe is not easy.

TD But if your museum were to say, "Listen, it was nice to talk, would you like the objects back?" and they said, "Yes, we would like them back," then at least for yourself, but also maybe...

WM Of course. But one could suggest that this is a part of what we hope our framework will achieve. That said, I hope we can stop now, as I do think we have enough for this purpose. Thanks a lot.

Deaccessioning in

10

Steps



Dr. Jos van Beurden researched the Nusantara deaccessioning process, publishing the results in his report, 'Herplaatsing collectie voormalig museum Nusantara Delft' (English translation forthcoming). He is a senior researcher of Colonial Collections affiliated with the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and a fellow of the Africa Study Centre Community in Leiden. Since the early 1990s, he has specialized in the protection of cultural heritage from vulnerable countries, performing research in Africa, Asia and Europe.

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Deaccessioning in 10 Steps

Disposing of the Extensive Collection at Museum Nusantara Delft

Thanks to developments in the cultural heritage sector, deaccessioning projects are becoming more common. These can be dramatic events that give rise to strong emotions. They can become the subject of debate, both within the sector and in the media. The public may take an interest. This was the case during the recent disposal of the extensive collection of the Nusantara Museum in Delft. When this municipal museum closed its doors for good in early 2013, it needed to relocate over 18,000 artifacts, 16,000 photographs and images, and 8,000 books and other written materials; mainly relating to the history and culture of Indonesia. The city of Delft was willing to fund one year of storage, after which the entire collection needed to be gone. The municipal department Erfgoed Delft (Delft Heritage) was in charge of the deaccessioning. They subsequently turned to the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (NMVW, the National Museum of World Cultures) for advice. From the beginning, the intent was to offer as many objects as possible to Indonesia, the country of origin, preferably to regional museums that could put them to good use.

Ultimately, the deaccessioning took five years to complete, not one. Thanks to the efforts of Erfgoed Delft and the NMVW, all objects remained in the public domain. The process was unique to itself, as every deaccessioning project is. Even so, some steps will be common to any heritage institution going through the process of disposal.

Step 1

Find a partner

Whether your organization is large or small: don't attempt deaccessioning alone. Major institutions can benefit from a partner's constructive and critical input. Smaller ones are greatly helped by a larger partner's broader network and better overview of the type of collection being deaccessioned.

Immediately following the decision to close down the museum, Erfgoed Delft asked (former) members of staff to advise them on the collection's future. The ethnographic museums in Rotterdam and Leiden were mentioned as possible destinations. Nothing came of this, partly because the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science felt that the Indonesia collection in the Netherlands was already large enough. Erfgoed Delft, a municipal institution, then engaged Museum Volkenkunde to act as their main adviser. This museum in Leiden merged with the NMVW in 2014, and will be referred to as such going forward. The institutions were familiar to one another through the Stichting Volkenkundige Collectie Nederland (foundation for ethnological collections in the Netherlands). The Leiden museum was an obvious candidate due to its extensive Indonesia collection and international network. It had collaborated with the Museum Nasional Indonesia in Jakarta for many years, and suspected that the offer of collection objects with Indonesian origins would find enthusiastic acceptance there. It was also eager to gain deaccessioning experience, as the approaching merger of the Leiden museum with the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam and the Afrika Museum in Berg and Dal, and the accompanying collections, was likely to lead to deaccessioning as well. As events proceeded, the decision to find an experienced partner frequently proved invaluable, though it did pose additional requirements as to the clear delineation of tasks and responsibilities.

Step 2

Learn from earlier deaccessioning efforts

Your institution is not the first to opt for deaccessioning. Descriptions of many of these earlier efforts exist. Some stakeholders and experts are happy to talk about their experiences and the lessons they have learned. Make sure to consult these works and contact the stakeholders and experts.

Examples of major (attempted) deaccessioning projects include the KIT Royal Tropical Institute library (420,000 books and journals), National Military Museum (60,000 objects), Nijmeegs Volkenkundig Museum (11,000 objects), Wereldmuseum Rotterdam (<10,000 objects), and various institutions with religious cultural properties (multiple smaller instances). The lessons here are very diverse. Make deaccessioning as public as possible to reach interested parties outside the usual channels; unexpected parties may reveal themselves. A collection may garner very little interest; now what? Anticipated auction results can be overly optimistic. External resistance can cast deaccessioning in a new light.

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Step 3

Ensure sufficient time, care, money and staff

Your directors may provide only limited time and resources for deaccessioning. Things must happen fast to make way for new plans. Don't fool yourself. Deaccessioning requires lots of time, lots of care, lots of money, and lots of work. Ignore this and suffer the consequences later. Prepare for setbacks. Plan a flexible approach, with time for reflection. Don't let yourself be rushed.

Deaccessioning almost always takes place under pressure. An institution is closing down, and the collection must find a new home quickly. It must unexpectedly share space with another organization. Or it needs to cut expenses and downsize its depositories. Priorities shift, making part of the collection superfluous. The immediate curator is reluctant to part with the objects, but colleagues are more focused on the future and their own collections.

Deaccessioning begins by drawing up a project plan to gain insight into the time, care, money and human effort required. The process isn't complete until the last objects have been disposed of, and all the bills paid (and payments received). To get from the first to the second point, objects must be transported and stored. Staff must review which objects to retain for the Dutch State Collection. A hierarchy of candidate recipients must be determined. Transfer agreements must be concluded. Deaccessioning the collection of the Nijmeegs Volkenkundig Museum spanned five years. Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden required more than three years to find new homes for two thousand Japanese objects and clothing ensembles. The canceled deaccessioning of the Africa collection by the Wereldmuseum in Rotterdam engaged the city and museum for years.

Though the city of Delft was only willing to pay for a year of storage, Erfgoed Delft ultimately required five years to dispose of over 18,000 objects, an image collection and library, and going any faster really wouldn't have been feasible. Transparency and clear communication can help engage clients, funding agencies and interested parties in the deaccessioning process.

Step 4

Time registration

Time registration provides accurate insight into the burden on staff and allows for accountability. Don't be afraid to open up to others. You are helping to increase knowledge in the cultural heritage sector about realistic expectations as to resources and staffing requirements.

Erfgoed Delft and the advisers at NMVW were able to provide estimates of the time required for a few steps in the Nusantara deaccessioning process. Three Erfgoed Delft staff members and four from Hizkia van Kralingen, the company storing the collection, registered all the objects. This was scheduled to take a year; it ultimately took a year and a half. Three NMVW staff members completed assessment forms for each object to determine whether these should be retained for the Dutch State Collection. This took approximately 230 days. Unexpected issues crop up during registration and assessment. Information is unavailable, registration numbers are incorrect, etc. Factor such delays into the schedule.

Step 5

Inventory all stakeholders

Before starting the deaccessioning process, create a list of all possible involved and interested parties: the owners of the objects intended for withdrawal (national or local government, donors, lenders, etc.); candidate recipients for parts of the collection, both domestic and foreign; deaccessioning opponents. Take their objections, emotions and possible actions seriously. Determine each stakeholder's interests and rights. Enter into dialogue, either individually or through shared meetings. Clearly note everyone's rights and obligations, and inform the recipients of the associated costs.

The project plan for the Nusantara deaccessioning defined the identification of and communication with stakeholders as 'very important'. As events proceeded, the numbers grew.

Erfgoed Delft interacted with:

- The city of Delft and Delft political parties
- Three Dutch ministries: Education, Culture and Science (incl. National Cultural Heritage Agency and Cultural Heritage Inspectorate), Foreign Affairs (incl. Jakarta embassy), Finance (customs)
- Three Indonesian institutions: Ministry of Education and Culture, Museum Nasional Indonesia, embassy in The Hague
- The Dutch Museums Association
- Three funding agencies: the municipality, the Mondriaan Fund and the Nusantara Delft Foundation
- Three companies providing services: Hizkia van Kralingen for transportation, storage, etc., Cit for the ICT and Veilinghuis Peerdeman auction house
- Eight museums and a university library within the Netherlands
- Five museums outside the Netherlands, in Austria, Sweden, Malaysia, South Korea and Singapore
- Opponents of the deaccessioning
- Media outlets in the Netherlands and Indonesia

Erfgoed Delft and the NMVW often interacted with multiple members of the same organization.

A 'Museum Nieuw Nusantara' group protested the deaccessioning, especially the offering of the collection to Indonesia. Communications were difficult. This group submitted 2,000 more objects to the Museum Register as possibly meriting inclusion in the Dutch State Collection. These 2,000 objects were in addition to the 3,196 already selected for the Dutch State Collection. The submission was unsubstantiated, but added delays. The media also occasionally commented negatively on the process and the involved parties.

Step 6

Investigate laws and regulations

Deaccessioning in the Netherlands must comply with the LAMO, the Leidraad Afstoten Museale Objecten (Guideline for Deaccessioning Museum Objects) and the Heritage Act (Erfgoedwet). These regulations clarify which objects merit protection as part of the Dutch State Collection, as well as specifying guidelines for inclusion in the Deaccessions Database. Make sure to determine what bodies must come to what decisions at what steps of the process.

In 2015, Erfgoed Delft asked the Museums Association to lift the LAMO requirement allowing Dutch registered museums first pick of any objects in the Deaccessions Database. At the time, Erfgoed Delft still operated under the assumption that the Nusantara collection would transfer to the Museum Nasional Indonesia in Jakarta in its entirety (minus any objects returned to the donors and lenders, or reserved for the Delft Collection and Dutch State Collection). In that case, Erfgoed Delft would be left with nothing requiring entry into the Museums Association's Deaccessions Database, making an award procedure for Dutch museums unnecessary. With this exemption, they could complete operations within a year. The exemption was won, but then the Indonesian government let it be known that it was not interested in acquiring such a large collection (see Step 9).

Step 7

Communication strategies are crucial

Withdrawal plans can generate resistance, both internally and externally. External stakeholders can have conflicting interests, or just be opposed on general principles. Internally, deaccessioning requires a great deal of effort on top of the museum's daily activities. Due to the time pressure and the fact that communicating about deaccessioning is an art in itself, internal and external communications can be fragile. Therefore, design a communication strategy and monitor its implementation, especially in the case of large-scale, complex deaccessioning.

As the Nusantara deaccessioning involved two partners, and both institutions included employees uninvolved in the actual deaccessioning, but still affected, an internal communication strategy was a requirement.

A more optimal strategy would have resulted in a more inclusive, more effective process.

A solid external communication strategy was also necessary, as the deaccessioning in general, and the involvement of Indonesia in particular, caused quite a commotion among the public and in the media. Although the project plan indicated that communication was 'very important' and defined three potentially 'difficult' groups, external communication was largely unstructured, and no tools were provided to help tackle these difficult groups.

Step 8

Moving, registration and assessment

When deaccessioning, first determine which objects are donated or on loan and contact the donors or lenders. Once these parties have received their desired objects, the remainder of the objects selected for disposal go back into storage. Each object is registered as accurately as possible. Subsequently, experts determine which objects merit protection and must be retained for the Dutch State Collection. Then and only then can the remaining objects be listed in the Deaccessions Database.

Erfgoed Delft kept back 459 objects for the Delft Collection. A portion of these are now on view at Museum Prinsenhof. Approximately 500 objects were returned to donors and lenders. The remaining objects were transported to Hizkia van Kralingen's storage facilities. The move took four and a half weeks. In the depository, a corridor was fitted with long tables and photographic equipment. One by one, Van Kralingen employees removed each object from the rack, unwrapped it, noted the inventory number, and took at least two pictures, over 30,000 pictures altogether. Erfgoed Delft staff checked the data and entered the photographs, a brief description and other relevant data into the TMS collection information system. This was a major project.

In May of 2014, the National Cultural Heritage Agency helped develop a framework for assessment of the Nusantara collection. The NMVW curators followed this framework, completing thousands of assessment forms. To avoid bias, they consulted historians at Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, colleagues at Erfgoed Delft and within their own organization. Based on that advice, the curators decided whether to select the object for the Dutch State Collection. Ultimately, 3,196 objects were declared to merit protection, included in the Dutch State Collection and stored in a NMVW depository. This too was very time-consuming.

Step 9

Country of origin

Deaccessioning a collection acquired in a colonial context means considering the country of origin's interests as well. Investigate the country of origin's cultural policies early on. The amount of interest can be highly variable. Additionally, we often have no control over the recipient in the country of origin (the government, a national museum, regional museum, [former] ruling house, community, or even a specific family). The return process can strengthen existing bonds, form new contacts or conversely, be a one-time event and the sum of the relationship.

When deaccessioning the collection of the Nijmeegs Volkenkundig Museum (2005–2010), originating mostly in Indonesia, contacting the country of origin was not a consideration. When the Wereldmuseum in Rotterdam proposed to sell its Africa collection in 2011 to decrease its reliance on subsidies and bridge various financial gaps, a great outcry ensued. Ethnographic museums in the Netherlands feared valuable treasures would disappear from the Dutch public domain. Critics in various African countries pointed out that many of these objects had religious or ceremonial significance and had been removed without the population's permission. They objected to the use of these artifacts to solve Dutch financial woes.

From the start, the deaccessioning of the Nusantara collection was intended to include offering items from the collection to Indonesia. Erfgoed Delft and the Leiden museum couldn't officially discuss the matter with Indonesia before clarifying which objects were destined for the Delft Collection and Dutch State Collection. According to the LAMO, museums in the Netherlands were allowed to make the first selection. They therefore requested and received an exemption from the LAMO in order to commence discussions with Indonesia.

Informal talks in Jakarta revealed that the Museum Nasional Indonesia favored the return. During a visit by the Director-General of Culture from the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture, a verbal agreement was concluded concerning the return of the remaining objects. Indonesia would cover the related expenses.

Though many in the Netherlands believe that 'a deal is a deal', the Dutch side underestimated the differences with Indonesian customs. The new Director-General of Culture in Jakarta decided there were too many objects, and that the transportation and insurance costs would be excessive. In the end, an agreement was reached to take on 1,500 objects, to be selected by Indonesia, roughly 10% of the original offering. They did not take the means of acquisition into account, instead focusing on which objects could be useful to Indonesia, aligning with existing collections and filling gaps. The remainder of the collection was listed in the Deaccessions Database.

Step 10

Determine the order of recipients

**Which institution is eligible to receive disposed objects?
What happens if two or more parties are interested in the
same objects? Determine and announce the answers to these
questions as soon as you can.**

Erfgoed Delft decided that only registered, successful museums with sufficient storage would be eligible. Dutch museums had priority over foreign museums, and European museums over those from other continents. Museums with old ties and similarity to Museum Nusantara were preferred. Acquiring museums needed to be willing to bear the transportation costs and sign a transfer agreement. Candidates' requested objects must fit their collection profile. Erfgoed Delft assigned high importance to the documents and arguments museums submitted in support of their applications. The order of recipients determined by Erfgoed Delft was not open to dispute.

Within the Netherlands, objects were transferred to the Museon (434), Museum Bronbeek (2,651), National Museum of Antiquities (23), Puppetry Museum (1,412), Coda (346), Amsterdam Pipe Museum (62), Liberation Museum Zeeland (45) and Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (8). The Leiden University Library gained various palm leaf manuscripts (16). In Europe, the World Museum in Vienna and the National Museum of World Cultures in Sweden received objects (79 and 36 respectively).

Asian destinations included the Sarawak Museum in Malaysia (412), the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore (151), and the Asia Cultural Centre in South Korea (7,744). The latter offered to take all remaining objects.

Indonesia selected 1,500 items, and the Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte personally handed over one object, a Buginese kris, to Indonesian President Joko Widodo.

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