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## Challenging the Framing of Asia and the Role of the KVVAK (Royal Asian Art Society in the Netherlands): The Asian Pavilion of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam

### Introduction

How is Asia being narrated at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, and how does the framing of Asia relate to the narration of Dutch history at that museum? In this paper I will address these questions and draw on key findings from a visitor study, to explore the role and motivation of the Royal Asian Art Society in the Netherlands (Koninklijke Vereniging van Vrienden der Aziatische Kunst, KVVAK) – a private society of art collectors and other stakeholders with an interest in art from countries in Asia<sup>1</sup> – in producing a certain narrative around the collection of artefacts from countries in Asia that they had put together. I will examine how the displays and official websites frame the collected artefacts as well as the entire collection, and discuss how the Royal Asian Art Society frames its own image.<sup>2</sup> In order to explore the production of such framings, I will describe the presentation of artefacts in the Asian Pavilion of the Rijksmuseum, which predominantly houses pieces from the Society's collection. I will also analyse the texts published on the KVVAK's official website, and promotional material about temporary exhibitions around the Asian collection that is published on the official website of the Rijksmuseum.

By discussing key findings from an empirical study, I will also explore how visitors might respond to the presentation of pieces from the collection on display in the Asian Pavilion. The visitor study was carried out on three consecutive days in April 2014, in collaboration with the Museum Studies Programme in the Department of Archaeology at the University of Leiden.<sup>3</sup> The study comprised 200 face-to-face interviews based on a structured questionnaire in Dutch or English and 183 tracking studies assessing visitors' paths through the gallery space. Due to the small size of the sample, findings are not to be understood as representative. However, the study sheds some light on the museum's historical acquisition practices, issues of contested cultural heritage and questions of

provenance and historical as well as current ownership as they might be understood by visitors, and explores key areas for further research about controversial responses to the presentation of contested cultural heritage in museums in Europe.<sup>4</sup>

### The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam

The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam identifies itself, on its official website, as a “national institute” and “the museum of the Netherlands”.<sup>5</sup> It first opened in The Hague in 1800 as the National Art Gallery (Nationale Kunstgalerij) and housed more than 200 paintings and historical objects. The museum moved to Amsterdam in 1808, when Amsterdam became the new capital. It has been in the current building since 1885, together with The Netherlands Museum for History and Art, that also moved from The Hague. While the collection of the latter formed the departments of applied art and history, the collection of the National Art Gallery presented paintings.<sup>6</sup>

The Rijksmuseum recently underwent a major ten-year refurbishment and re-opened in 2013. While the building was being modernised, the original interior design was also restored. After re-opening, the collection is no longer presented in separate departments of paintings, history and applied arts; instead, paintings, historical pieces and objects of applied art are displayed in a “single chronological circuit that tells the story of Dutch art and history”, as stated on the museum's website.<sup>7</sup>

### The Asian Art Collection

An Asian Art department was created at the Rijksmuseum in 1952, when the Royal Asian Art Society donated their collection to the museum.<sup>8</sup> Today, a number of objects from the Asian Art department are still on display in the main building of the Rijksmuseum. These include objects relating to Dutch-Asian trade since the seventeenth century, such as the model of a ship of the Dutch East India Company

(Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, VOC), Chinese porcelain and export porcelain produced in East Asia catering to the taste of European customers.<sup>9</sup>

The majority of the Asian collection, however, is presented in the newly built so-called Asian Pavilion that was opened in 2013, when the Rijksmuseum reopened after its ten-year refurbishment. The Asian Pavilion is a small detached modern building that is connected with the main building by a longish hallway. Sculptures from India, Indonesia, Vietnam and Thailand are on display on the ground floor; sculptures and other objects such as kimonos, lacquerware and ceramics from China and Japan are presented on the lower floor. The objects are made of various materials – mainly wood, bronze, silver and stone – and date from a period between 2000 BCE and 2000 CE. The pieces on display include a dancing Shiva Nataraja, a bronze statue from India of the twelfth century – "one of the finest of its kind in the world", as the museum website states.<sup>10</sup> Other examples include the Buddhist deity Guanyin, again from the twelfth century, and two Japanese temple guardians from the fourteenth century.<sup>11</sup>

Some contemporary artworks are presented together with the historical pieces. At the time the visitor study was carried out in the Asian Pavilion, two contemporary artworks were on display. The *Tea Brick*, a sculpture by contemporary Chinese artist Ai Weiwei and made of pu'er tea (2006), was exhibited as an isolated work of art mid-way on a landing of the staircase that connects the exhibition space on the ground floor with the gallery on the lower floor. Edmund de Waal's artwork *An Idea (for the Journey)* (2013), could be seen in the lower section, somewhat hidden in a narrow hallway that served as a transition area.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Royal Asian Art Society in the Netherlands (KVVAK)**

The vast majority of objects on display in the Asian Pavilion are from the collection of the Royal Asian Art Society in the Netherlands (KVVAK) that is on loan to the Pavilion. The collection owned by the Royal Asian Art Society comprises more than 1,800 objects, and forms a substantial part of the museum's department of Asian Art.

The Royal Asian Art Society was founded in 1918

upon a private initiative, with the twofold intention "to stimulate interest in art from Asia and to unite art lovers in the field".<sup>13</sup> In 1932, the society opened its own museum. Before being moved to the Rijksmuseum in 1952, the collection was displayed in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.<sup>14</sup> Significant pieces for the collection were bought by the society's co-founder and first chairman, the banker Herman Westendorp, in their countries of origin in the 1930s. Acquisitions, donations and bequests continue to be added to the collection today.<sup>15</sup> For example, the Shiva Nataraja and the Guanyin were acquired in 1972, and further pieces were acquired on the occasion of the society's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1993 and the opening of the Asian Pavilion in 2013.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, the Royal Asian Art Society "co-ordinates her acquisitions with the curators of Asian art of the Rijksmuseum."<sup>17</sup>

However, some pieces on display in the Asian Pavilion do not belong to the collection of the Royal Asian Art Society. The aforementioned Japanese temple guardians, for example, were purchased by the Rijksmuseum in 2007, with the support of several private and public funds and foundations.<sup>18</sup> Further activities of the Royal Asian Art Society include part-funding a chair at Leiden University, and the publication of a magazine three times a year to enhance academic research. To celebrate its centenary in 2018, the society organised a special exhibition, which it describes on its website as "a jubilee exhibition in the society's own home: the Asian Pavilion in the Rijksmuseum" and a symposium in cooperation with the Rijksmuseum.<sup>19</sup>

### **Framing images**

As stated earlier, the website claims that the main aim of the Royal Asian Art Society was "to stimulate interest in art from Asia and to unite art lovers in the field".<sup>20</sup> In other words, the society aims to raise the visibility of artefacts from countries in Asia, and enhance the influence of art collectors and dealers in shaping the newly emerging field of interest.

To further analyse the image that the Royal Asian Art Society creates for itself, I will explore in more depth their official website. The Royal Asian Art Society emphasises that its aim has always been to collect "objects of art that were considered art in their countries of origin".<sup>21</sup> No ethnographic objects, nor

export art were collected, only "unique objects of art that are of the highest level of quality".<sup>22</sup> The disinterest in and neglect of artworks made for export to Europe and the focus on ostensibly high quality art objects reflect a controversial notion of authenticity. In exclusively acquiring high art objects, the Royal Asian Art Society was also instrumental in producing a certain idea of what constitutes art from countries in Asia. Indeed, the society's website highlights that their collection has set standards in helping shape an idea of Asian art in Europe and further afield: "a number of iconic pieces [...] immediately gave the collection an international appeal".<sup>23</sup> It seems that the Royal Asian Art Society has been eager to compete with other international collections of artefacts from Asian countries. In this context, its association with the Rijksmuseum is significant. The society's collection is on long-term loan not to the Museum Volkenkunde, the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden, but to "the most important art museum in the Netherlands: the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam [...] where it [...] can be admired in its own 'home': the Asian Pavilion".<sup>24</sup>

This stated aim of the Royal Asian Art Society was further explored in the opening lecture *The highest of cultures: motives of VVAK [sic] members* presented at a conference at the Rijksmuseum on 23 June 2018 by one of the Society's board members, as stated on the Society's website.<sup>25</sup> The conference section about collecting policies notes that "the heyday of collecting non-western art is over now. Today, the export and import of art from other continents is strictly regulated. The provenance of each object must be checked on the (legal) [sic] circumstances of its acquisition and origin."<sup>26</sup> The slightly nostalgic undertone is combined with the self-proclaimed aim of "protecting [Asian art and heritage] while at the same time trying to attract a broader and younger audience."<sup>27</sup>

It is worth noting that the Rijksmuseum, in general, seems to share the image as framed by the Royal Asian Art Society. A survey of exhibitions at the Rijksmuseum between 1885 and 2019 is quite revealing. Between 1885 and 1993, the museum presented five exhibitions that in some way or another addressed the Dutch Golden Age (Gouden Eeuw), then increased significantly to fifteen between 1998 and 2019.<sup>28</sup> Temporary exhibitions about the Golden Age peaked dur-

ing the years of the closure of the permanent display due to refurbishment, between 2003 and 2013.

In the same time period, between 1885 and 2019, the Rijksmuseum presented nine exhibitions that, according to the exhibition title, addressed, in different ways, relationships between the Netherlands and non-European countries. The first of these was in 1957. Titles addressed Dutch colonies and the Dutch Empire, and also trade, including, for example, *From Gothic to Empire* (1957), *The Netherlands' Encounter with Asia* (winter of 2002/2003), *Commodities and Souvenirs* (2011), *A Well-Governed Colony: Frans Post's Illustrations in Caspar Barlaeus's History of Dutch Brazil* (2011), *Asia > [sic] Amsterdam. Luxury in the Golden Age* (winter of 2015/2016).<sup>29</sup> None of these exhibition titles critically addresses the Netherlands' colonial past, the unequal power structures at play and the Rijksmuseum's role during Dutch colonial times. However, the exhibition *Good Hope. South Africa and The Netherlands from 1600* (2017) did re-examine Dutch colonial history, and, according to the Rijksmuseum's website, an exhibition about slavery with a particular focus on the Dutch colonial period from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, is scheduled for 2020-2021. According to the museum's website, *Slavery, an Exhibition* seeks to explore how slavery and the Netherlands' colonial past impact on the present.<sup>30</sup>

If we look at the nine exhibitions (1957-2018), we see that some of the titles subsume different countries under the generalising, stereotypical umbrella term Asia and frame the unequal relationship between the Netherlands and countries in Asia as merely a trade relationship.<sup>31</sup> More than that, in order to promote the exhibition *Asia > Amsterdam. Luxury in the Golden Age*, for example, the museum website highlighted "the story of the excitement created by the Asian treasures that were shipped to Holland in the 17<sup>th</sup> century."<sup>32</sup> These "treasures from China, Japan, India and Batavia [...] poured into Amsterdam, the then bustling capital of the world, to enrich the interiors of the increasingly prosperous Dutch bourgeoisie."<sup>33</sup>

Not only can we identify strategies of othering<sup>34</sup> the artefacts by the promotional text that highlights the "special, precious materials" and the "intriguing

exotic patterns no one had ever seen before".<sup>35</sup> The text also emphasises the "sensation" the "Asian treasures" caused, the "curiosity" they aroused and the "imagination" they stimulated in the Dutch bourgeoisie at the time.<sup>36</sup> Not only is the website's perspective primarily Dutch; it also explains that Asian furniture makers were encouraged to adjust their products to Dutch interiors, patterns and taste.<sup>37</sup>

Ironically, the website labels the Dutch East India Company that organised the Dutch trade with Asia, as the "world's first multinational",<sup>38</sup> a labelling that seems to reach out to today's audiences and stimulate their imagination about exotic luxury objects. In doing so, it extrapolates old narratives about the Netherlands' glorious past as a leading trading nation and Amsterdam as "the world's harbour".<sup>39</sup>

There is no mention on the exhibition's webpages of the unequal power relationships between the Netherlands and the countries in Asia that the Dutch traded with. The Royal Asian Art Society website only touches upon the issue indirectly: in acknowledging that, "today, the export and import of art from other continents is strictly regulated".<sup>40</sup>

Both websites clearly put their focus on trade as the main narrative. It is highlighted that the Netherlands have long been a trading nation that appreciated the assumed 'exotic beauty' of Asian artefacts that, according to the Dutch Asian Art Society, "were considered art in their countries of origin" and that the museum and the Royal Asian Art Society believe to be "unique" and "of the highest level of quality".<sup>41</sup>

When the Rijksmuseum re-opened in 2013, some critics sharply rejected the "colonial nostalgia" reflected by the displays and narratives.<sup>42</sup> While the new permanent displays did address Dutch colonialism, questionable trade practices, and sometimes violent acquisition practices during colonial times, the narratives were still articulated around a notion of the Netherlands as an enterprising nation and the beauty of the acquired objects. Since the complexities of local societies and dynamic inter-Asian forms of exchange were entirely neglected, the perspective remained entirely Dutch-centred.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the Asian Pavilion had been nick-named "the small jewel box",<sup>44</sup> the exhibits presented as though forming an art installation; the sometimes colonial or post-colonial frame-

works within which they had been produced were not addressed at all.<sup>45</sup>

### Visitor response

How objects are framed in museum displays has an impact on visitors. In order to explore the impact of the framing produced by the website of the Royal Asian Art Society and, in part, the Rijksmuseum, let us examine how visitors respond to the presentation of artefacts in the Asian Pavilion. The visitor study I draw on comprised 200 interviews with visitors of the Asian Pavilion and 183 tracking studies, as indicated above.<sup>46</sup> Given the relatively small sample size of the study, the findings are not conclusive, but nonetheless allow some insight into the museum's historical acquisition practice, the collection's provenance and historical as well as current ownership as they might be understood by visitors.

Key findings of the study indicate an almost equal division of visitors from the Netherlands and visitors from abroad. Only 2% of visitors stated that they had come to the museum specifically to visit the Asian Pavilion. Of the 98% of visitors who were not primarily drawn to see the collection of Asian art in the Pavilion, roughly a quarter wandered into the Pavilion by chance, another quarter visited the Pavilion because it was mentioned in the Audio Guide, and about 15% indicated that they wanted to "finish the whole museum".<sup>47</sup>

As for how visitors perceived the presentation of 'Asian' artefacts in the curatorial context of the Rijksmuseum, almost half of those surveyed saw the Asian Pavilion as a "supplement, complement or extension to the main building", more than a fifth interpreted the Pavilion as "different" and unrelated to the rest of the museum, and 5% experienced the Pavilion as confronting or contradicting the main museum building.<sup>48</sup>

While a majority, almost 80%, had visited the main museum building first, only a quarter of interviewees could remember having seen exhibits from Asian countries presented in the main building. Most of them recalled porcelain, and some also remembered seeing paintings, textiles, weapons and Asia-inspired but Dutch-made Delftware.<sup>49</sup>

The two favourite exhibits in the Asian Pavilion were the two fourteenth-century Japanese temple guardians, and the twelfth-century Indian Shiva Natar-

aja statue. It is worth noting that the museum's audio guide presents the Asian Pavilion through these two exhibits exclusively,<sup>50</sup> and perhaps not surprising that these objects have a particular impact. It seems that the museum links the Asian Pavilion and its main buildings through pre-selected objects rather than historical trade or colonial and postcolonial connections; and that it is through these objects that visitors perceive the museum's narrative. In this way, visitors may not be aware of critical narratives about the Netherlands' past and the museum's role in framing the narratives about this past.

The survey also explored visitors' responses to the co-presentation of contemporary and historical pieces in the Asian Pavilion. The findings indicate that 56% of visitors ignored Ai Weiwei's *Tea brick*, and 72% were not aware of Edmund de Waal's *An Idea (for the Journey)*.<sup>51</sup> The location of the two pieces may help explain these findings. Both were displayed separately from the historical objects: Ai Weiwei's piece was displayed on the staircase that connects the exhibition space on the ground floor and the gallery on the lower floor of the Pavilion; and Edmund de Waal's piece was displayed in a narrow passage in the gallery on the lower floor. Furthermore, those interviewees who had noticed the two contemporary artworks, did not see a relation between the contemporary and historical exhibits, or interpreted the contemporary pieces as "different" from the rest of the collection.<sup>52</sup> While the findings do not indicate whether or not the co-presentation of contemporary artworks and historical pieces reinforced the curators' and donors' intention to highlight the pieces as art of the highest level of quality, we can conclude that this specific curatorial approach remained unclear, or even unnoticed, by most visitors.

The study also wanted to assess visitors' knowledge and perception of provenance issues, acquisition practice and the ownership of the collection. While the museum expresses gratitude to the Royal Asian Art Society for supporting the museum in large writing on the wall to the right hand side of the entrance to the Asian Pavilion, the letters are in white relief against a white wall behind the visitors as they first enter the Pavilion, and are easily

overlooked. Issues such as provenance, acquisition and ownership are not clearly addressed.

According to the survey, over 90% of interviewees did not know that most pieces on display in the Asian Pavilion were collected and owned by the Royal Asian Art Society. Almost 40% knew nothing about the provenance and ownership of the collection, while 20% assumed that the pieces on display had been acquired and were owned either by public institutions or by private collectors, saying, for example:

[the collection belonged] "to collectors from colonial times"

"I assume that thieves collected them and instead of being repatriated they stayed with the government"

[the pieces are] "on loan from the countries where they are from"

[they are] "maybe from other museums, for example the Rijksmuseum [sic] Volkenkunde in Leiden."<sup>53</sup>

While a minority, less than 20%, of visitors were suspicious about the circumstances of acquisition, the findings strongly indicate that neither the role of the Royal Asian Art Society in collecting most pieces on display, nor their collecting policy, or the acquisition practice, or ownership of the collection are transparent to visitors.

Some visitors found the Asian Pavilion was "a curious supplement", and others were confused about the reasons for presenting the Asian collection in the curatorial context of the Rijksmuseum. Like the curators of the Asian Pavilion and the Royal Asian Art Society which emphasises that the Asian collection is an art collection,<sup>54</sup> these visitors apparently perceived the Rijksmuseum as an art museum as opposed to a history museum. At least one interviewee commented:

"it is odd; there is no explanation, no reason: Dutch art and then Asian art, no bridge, very sudden. Why Asian? Why not also African?"<sup>55</sup>

Others were puzzled about how to identify what the museum presents as 'Asian' art, for example:

"We know that [Asian art] consists predominantly of objects" [as opposed to paintings]

"Maybe they don't paint? What was made [in

Asia], is it always in relation to religion?"

"I don't know if it is really art – the sculptures are from [everyday] life and temples, daily use."<sup>56</sup>

Some visitors, questioning the definition of "art", suggested that such exhibits from Asian countries were more appropriate for an ethnological or anthropological museum rather than an art museum. They were of the opinion that:

"it [the collection] does not fit, it is very wrong [...]. [Museum] Volkenkunde in Leiden would have been better – this does not belong to the Rijksmuseum."<sup>57</sup>

Findings such as these indicate that further research is needed to clarify how these responses might be interpreted and addressed by the museum.

However, while the above answers indicate that many visitors were confused about how to categorise the collection and did not see a connection to unequal trading relationships due to European colonialism, one interviewee critically stated that there was "not enough Indonesia and Japan in relation to Dutch trade [...]". Further research is needed to determine whether such a statement indicates criticism about the museum's reluctance to clarify its stance towards their role in the Netherlands' colonial past.

Overall, findings from the study strongly suggest that the display in the Asian Pavilion frames the presented pieces as "art of the highest level of quality", as the Royal Asian Art Society states on its website,<sup>58</sup> while neglecting any sort of context – historical context, provenance, acquisition practices, ownership, cultural appropriation, etc. Thus, the collecting policy and curatorial approach seem to perpetuate rather than challenge existing Euro-centric stereotypes about art and ethnographic objects as well as Europe's, and the Netherlands', colonial past. It remains to be seen how the Rijksmuseum will address Dutch colonialism in their planned exhibition *Slavery, an Exhibition* scheduled for 2020-2021.<sup>59</sup>

## Conclusion

A network of diverse private actors and museum curators have cooperated in painting a certain picture of Asian art in the Netherlands. But, has art from Asian countries been the main narrative? Or can we identify other motivations in collecting and presenting Asian

art as "unique objects of art that are of the highest level of quality"?<sup>60</sup>

The Royal Asian Art Society played a central role in putting together a collection of artefacts from countries in Asia, producing a narrative for the Asian Pavilion, supporting research in the field and communicating results to a wider audience. At the same time, the Royal Asian Art Society has been promoting its own image by connecting, through their collecting policy, to *the* national museum, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, instead of, for example, the Museum Volkenkunde (the National Museum of Ethnology) in Leiden.<sup>61</sup> In highlighting their own activities, the Royal Asian Art Society commends itself for setting international standards in terms of what has been considered 'art from Asia'. On its website, the Royal Asian Art Society places itself in the context of Western museums: the Musée Guimet in Paris, the Museum Rietberg in Zurich, and the Asia Society in New York, among others.<sup>62</sup> Against this backdrop, the Royal Asian Art Society produces a narrative of the Netherlands as an internationally renowned, if no longer imperialist world power.

In this paper, I have shown that it is through a complex of narratives and promoted images about themselves - by both the Royal Asian Art Society and the Rijksmuseum - that the Asian Pavilion relates to the presentation of Dutch history at the Rijksmuseum. The Asian Pavilion connects to the cultural historical narrative of the Rijksmuseum through the connoisseurship and sophistication of Dutch actors rather than a mere selection of high-quality artefacts from countries in Asia.

From this point of view, a decidedly Dutch dimension emerges in light of what has been produced as Asian cultural heritage – a dimension that reaches beyond the selection of objects collected and presented. The narrative that the Asian Pavilion produces in the context of the Rijksmuseum is a kind of contestable intangible Dutch cultural heritage. Instead of considering a Dutch *perspective* on a given Asian cultural heritage, we need to scrutinise the Dutch *production* of something like a Dutch Asian cultural heritage.<sup>63</sup> We need to challenge what the Royal Asian Art Society and the Rijksmuseum have framed as Asian cultural heritage in order to demonstrate the presumed skills

of Dutch actors – collectors such as the Royal Asian Art Society, scholars they have supported and curators at the Rijksmuseum – to conceptually appropriate and re-interpret the cultural heritage of foreign countries. Finally, we need to challenge how such a narrative promotes the intellectual and cultural appropriating strategies by Dutch actors as something that might be described as the soft power of the Netherlands.<sup>64</sup>

Considering the Rijksmuseum's and the Royal Asian Art Society's self-images as promoted through their websites, not only do we have to reconsider the specific narrative of Asia in this Asian cultural heritage, we also need to scrutinize the opaque, intangible Dutch structure that has produced and keeps reproducing this particularly Dutch cultural heritage. We need to examine the Europeanising effects of such a conceptual, academic and cultural appropriation, that enables the formation of a research area or the shaping of academic disciplines as emphasised by the Royal Asian Art Society through their different activities. Processes of conceptual appropriation that are crucial in constituting a discourse in the first place – Spivak's epistemic violence<sup>65</sup> comes to mind – have been slightly neglected in recent, rather object-focused international debates about provenance as (material and or legal) ownership, restitution and repatriation.<sup>66</sup>

As findings from the visitor study indicate, while a small number of visitors are suspicious of the processes of acquisition and ownership, others do not seem to actively question these issues. We can assume that the complex processes of appropriation and controversial self-images framed by private actors and public institutions as explored in this paper are likely to remain obscure to most visitors, especially if such processes and framings are not clearly addressed. Instead of representing the collections of private stakeholders that set up a society to promote their own ideas and interests, public museums such as the Rijksmuseum need to be more self-critical, and question their own museological and curatorial practices as well as the collecting and appropriating activities of the Royal Asian Art Society. As long as museums see themselves as preservers and keepers of a cultural

heritage, without questioning that cultural heritage, they are complicit in the described processes of material, conceptual and cultural appropriation. We need new exhibition models, that are less object-centred, but address diverse curatorial contexts, in fact entire cultural ecologies or eco-systems, beyond provenance and contested acquisition practice. Only then can we rethink the museum and its role in the now, and consider narratives and frameworks entangled with, but also independent from Western colonialism and post-colonialism, and from Western appropriation.<sup>67</sup>

## Endnotes

1. Royal Asian Art Society (KVVAK), Asian Art Society: [www.vvak.nl/en/asian-art-society/](http://www.vvak.nl/en/asian-art-society/), 24-02-2019.
2. See Annette Loeseke, *From Sanctuary for Art and Science to Centre of World Culture? Universalising Effects at Berlin's Museum Island from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, in: *Proceedings of the Conference Museum Universalities in Western Cultural Capitals in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century*, Université de Paris-Nanterre 2017, eds. Sandra Kemp and Hervé Inglebert (under review).
3. The study was carried out in collaboration with Anna Grasskamp, University of Heidelberg, Mariana de Campos Francozo, museum studies programme at the department of Archaeology of the University of Leiden in the Netherlands, and postgraduate as well as doctoral students in the museum studies programme at the University of Leiden.
4. Key findings from the study were published in two articles that provide further background about the research: Annette Loeseke and Anna Grasskamp, *Framing 'Asia': Results from a Visitor Study at the Rijksmuseum's Asian Pavilion*, in: *Aziatische Kunst*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2014, p. 49-55; Anna Grasskamp and Annette Loeseke, *Asia in Your Window Frame: Museum Displays, Window Curators and Dutch-Asian Material Culture*, in: *World Art*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2015, p. 18-20.
5. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Organisation/Vision and Mission: [www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/organisation/vision-and-mission](http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/organisation/vision-and-mission), 24-02-2019.
6. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Organisation/History of the Rijksmuseum: [www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/organisation/history-of-the-rijksmuseum](http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/organisation/history-of-the-rijksmuseum), 24-02-2019.
7. Ibid.
8. [www.vvak.nl/en/asian-art-society/](http://www.vvak.nl/en/asian-art-society/), 26-02-2019.
9. Grasskamp and Loeseke 2015, *Asia in Your Window Frame*, p. 10-11.
10. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, General Information/Asian Pavilion: [www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/general-information/building-and-presentation/asian-pavilion](http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/general-information/building-and-presentation/asian-pavilion), 28-04-2018.
11. Ibid.
12. Loeseke and Grasskamp 2014, *Framing 'Asia'*, p. 50.
13. Royal Asian Art Society (KVVAK), Asian Art Society: [www.vvak.nl/en/asian-art-society/](http://www.vvak.nl/en/asian-art-society/), 26-02-2019.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, General Information/Asian Pavilion: [www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/general-information/building-and-presentation/asian-pavilion](http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/general-information/building-and-presentation/asian-pavilion), 28-04-2018.
19. Royal Asian Art Society (KVVAK), Asian Art Society: [www.vvak.nl/en/asian-art-society/](http://www.vvak.nl/en/asian-art-society/), 26-02-2019.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.

25. Royal Asian Art Society (KVVAK), *VVAK Lustrum Symposium: Collecting Asian Art in the Western World – Past, Present and Future*. International Symposium celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Asian Art Society in the Netherlands, Amsterdam, 28-06-2018, programme: <https://www.vvak.nl/wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/vvak-programma-A5-d-WEB-1.pdf>, 26-02-2019.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, About the museum/Organisation/History of the Rijksmuseum: [www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/organisation/history-of-the-rijksmuseum](http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/organisation/history-of-the-rijksmuseum), 26-02-2019; Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, What's on/Exhibitions past: [www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/whats-on/exhibitions-past](http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/whats-on/exhibitions-past), 26-02-2019.
29. *Van Gothiek tot Empire* (1957), *De Nederlandse ontmoeting met Azië* (2002-2003), *Handelswaar en souvenirs* (2011), 'A Well-Governed Colony': *Frans Post's Illustrations in Caspar Barlaeus's History of Dutch Brazil* (2011), *Asia > Amsterdam. Luxury in the Golden Age* (2015/16): Overzicht Tentoonstellingen 1883-2016, Rijksmuseum, Organisation/History of the Rijksmuseum/TENTOONSTELLINGEN\_RIJKSMUSEUM: [www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/organisation/history-of-the-rijksmuseum](http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/organisation/history-of-the-rijksmuseum), 24-02-2019.
30. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, What's on/Exhibitions/past: [www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/slavery-an-exhibition](http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/slavery-an-exhibition), 28-02-2019, from the website: "This exhibition testifies to the fact that slavery is an integral part of our history, not a dark page that can be simply turned and forgotten about. And that history is more recent than many people realize: going back just four or five generations you will find enslaved people and their enslavers. For the very first time, in 2020 the Rijksmuseum will hold an exhibition devoted entirely to this subject. Slavery is found in many cultures, places and times, but this exhibition focuses on slavery in the Dutch colonial period, spanning from the 17th to the 19th century."
31. See Grasskamp and Loeseke 2015, *Asia in Your Window Frame*, p. 13.
32. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, What's on/Exhibitions past: Exhibition *Asia > Amsterdam*: [www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/asia-in-amsterdam](http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/asia-in-amsterdam), 26-02-2019.
33. Ibid.
34. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, London 1978; Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, *The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives*, in: *History and Theory*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1985, p. 247-272.
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36. Ibid.
37. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, Asian Pavilion: [www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/general-information/building-and-presentation/asian-pavilion](http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/general-information/building-and-presentation/asian-pavilion), 28-04-2018.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Royal Asian Art Society: [www.vvak.nl/en/asian-art-society/](http://www.vvak.nl/en/asian-art-society/), accessed 26-02-2019. he emphasis, by the Royal Asian Art Society, on artistic quality is supported by curators at the Rijksmuseum: see William Southwork, *A Preliminary Response to 'Framing "Asia"'*, in: *Aziatische Kunst*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2014, p.56; Grasskamp and Loeseke 2015, *Asia in Your Window Frame*, p. 17 on Tapati Guha-Thakurta's interpretation of the categorisation of non-Western sacred objects as art, craft or folk art as epistemic violence: Tapati Guha-Thakurta, 'Our Gods, Their Museums': *The Contrary Careers of India's Art Objects*, in: *Art History*, vol. 30, no. 4, 2007, p. 630.
42. Marieke Bloembergen et al., *Koloniale nostalgie in het Rijksmuseum*, in: NRC Handelsblad, 15 Juni 2013. Re-published by Framed: <http://framerframed.nl/blog/koloniale-nostalgie-in-rijksmuseum/>, 26-02-2019.
43. Bloembergen et al. 2013, *Koloniale nostalgie in het Rijksmuseum*.
44. Grasskamp and Loeseke 2015, *Asia in Your Window rame*, p. 18, endnote 22: "The term was repeatedly mentioned in the presentations during the 'Pavilion Days' organised for the Society of the Friends of Asian Art (VVAK), 11-12 October 2012."
45. Grasskamp and Loeseke 2015, *Asia in Your Window Frame*, p. 13.
46. See introduction. Loeseke and Grasskamp 2014, *Framing 'Asia'*; Grasskamp and Loeseke 2015, *Asia in Your Window Frame*, p. 18-20.
47. Loeseke and Grasskamp 2014, *Framing 'Asia'*, p. 50.
48. Loeseke and Grasskamp 2014, *Framing 'Asia'*, p. 53.
49. Loeseke and Grasskamp 2014, *Framing 'Asia'*, p. 52.
50. Loeseke and Grasskamp 2014, *Framing 'Asia'*, p. 49.
51. Loeseke and Grasskamp 2014, *Framing 'Asia'*, p. 50.
52. Loeseke and Grasskamp 2014, *Framing 'Asia'*, p. 52.
53. Loeseke and Grasskamp 2014, *Framing 'Asia'*, p. 53; Museum Volkenkunde, National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden: <https://www.volkenkunde.nl/en>, 28-02-2019.
54. See Southwork 2014, *Preliminary Response to 'Framing "Asia"'*, p. 56.
55. Loeseke and Grasskamp 2014, *Framing 'Asia'*, p. 53.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
58. Royal Asian Art Society, Asian Art Society: [www.vvak.nl/en/asian-art-society/](http://www.vvak.nl/en/asian-art-society/), 26-02-2019.
59. [www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/slavery-an-exhibition](http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/slavery-an-exhibition), 28-02-2019.
60. Royal Asian Art Society (VVAK), Asian Art Society: [www.vvak.nl/en/asian-art-society/](http://www.vvak.nl/en/asian-art-society/), 26-02-2019.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid.
63. See Said 1978, *Orientalism*, p. 9-11; and Can Bilsel's comparable interpretation of the Pergamon Museum in Berlin: Can Bilsel, *Introduction*, in: Can Bilsel, *Antiquity on Display. Regimes of the Authentic in Berlin's Pergamon Museum*, Oxford 2012, p. 1-28: "The German archaeologists discovered and shipped home fragments of the lost originals. However, the arrangement of these fragments as monuments within the Pergamon Museum reflects the scholarly ingenuity and aesthetic disposition of Prussia in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries." (17) "In providing a prehistory of the Pergamon Museum [...] I am nevertheless interested in establishing the museum's radical modernity: its embeddedness in modern German intellectual, socio-cultural history and in the shifting theories of art and architecture." (27).
64. Michael Falser and Monica Juneja, 'Archaeologizing' *Heritage and Transcultural Entanglements: An Introduction*, in: 'Archaeologizing' *Heritage? Transcultural Entanglements between Local Social Practices and Global Virtual Realities*, eds. Michael Falser and Monica Juneja, Heidelberg 2013, p. 1, that address the connection between the concept of heritage in modern societies as well as the political transcultural order it produces and the politics of nation building: "There are many facets to the study of heritage in modern societies; the concept is part of a transcultural order that has emerged in the last two centuries. A child of the European Enlightenment, it circulated under the aegis of colonialism across the globe where it was harnessed to the civilizing programme of the colonial state and at the same time appropriated by the agenda of nation building to wrest locality from the global constellation of empire."
65. Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' *Revised Edition, from the "History" Chapter of Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, in: *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind C. Morris, New York 2010, p. 24f.
66. Loeseke 2017, *From Sanctuary for art and science to Centre of World Culture?* (under review).
67. Monica Juneja, *Debatte zum 'Postkolonialismus'*, in: *Werkstatt-Geschichte* 34, 2003, p. 88-96: p. 91-92 and 96 on her critique about a Euro-centric approach to entangled histories, and p. 90, on Edward Said's approach to examine European historiography and self-definition against the backdrop of Europe's encounter with non-European regions of the world, see Said 1978, *Orientalism*, p. 323-328 on the "standardization of taste" (324) and Orientalism as ideological fiction that is produced by scholars at universities in Europe and the USA and reproduced globally. Also see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Connected Histories. Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia*, in: *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 31, no. 3, 1997, p. 761, about his critique of those postcolonial approaches that remain Euro-centric; Shalini Randeria and Sebastian Conrad, *Geteilte Geschichten - Europa in einer postkolonialen Welt*, in: *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus. Postkoloniale Perspektiven in den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften*, eds. Shalini Randeria and Sebastian Conrad, Frankfurt / Main 2002, p. 9-49.



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## Summary

Taking the Asian Pavilion at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam as a case study, this paper discusses the mu-

seum's narratives about the Netherlands' colonial past and the role of private collectors such as the Royal Asian Art Society in the Netherlands (KVVAK) in producing the Asian collection. The acquisition of the collection and the museum's non-challenging narrative of the Dutch colonial past have been critically debated since the re-opening of the Rijksmuseum in 2013. By examining acquisition practices, exhibition strategies, perceptions of Asian art in the Netherlands and the role of the Royal Asian Art Society in shaping the collection, I explore how the profile of the collection and the curatorial framing of Asia relate to the presentation of Dutch (art) history in the Rijksmuseum. I also draw on findings from a visitor study about the Asian Pavilion that was carried out in collaboration with Leiden University, with the aim of shedding light on how the museum's historical acquisition practices, issues of contested cultural heritage, and questions of provenance and historical, as well as current, ownership are interpreted by visitors. Analysing how visitors respond to the presentation of Asian artefacts in the curatorial context of the Rijksmuseum, I discuss how the profile and presentation of the collection have produced narratives of Asia, and ask whether the presentation in a separate pavilion challenges, or reinforces, existing stereotypes about Asian art. In the concluding part, I argue how museums, instead of perpetuating existing stereotypes, might challenge their historical as well as current narratives of Asia and address their colonial past more transparently.

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2018) and "Studying International Visitors at Shanghai Museum" (in Lang/Reeve 2018).

### Title

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