

Universalism in Ethnographical Amsterdam – the past, present and future?

By

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On Friday June 23th of 2007, the Dutch Minister of Cultural Affairs, Ronald Plasterk, announced the foundation of a national historical museum in Arnhem, near the border with Germany. The wish to have such a national institution came forth from a discussion that followed the presentation of the canon on Dutch national history. The establishment of this canon again evolved from the awareness of a crisis in knowledge of Dutch people on their national history.

Besides many discussions on the relevance and rather selective nature of such a canon and hence on the usefulness of such a museum, we at the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam are trying to deal with our own history as a colonial museum as part of that national history. Next year, the Tropenmuseum will have finished its second large re-installment, which was started in 1990, and at this moment, we are thinking very hard about the direction our museum should be heading next. With all the complete overhauls of museums world wide, think of Quai Branly or Gothenburg, the Tropenmuseum is now trying to find out which path it needs to pave for it to be of great relevance in the future. Therefore, the museum needs to dive into its past, and needs to rethink its function as an ethnographical museum in society. Even the term ethnographical is in need of rethinking, perhaps the term cultural historical would be in better place to describe the museum in its current state. In my humble opinion, this is strongly connected to the main theme of this ICOM conference. I believe we first need to know in what direction

we are heading, what we want to do with our often historical collections and what we actually can do with our origins in colonialism.

This article starts with a short overview of the history of the Tropenmuseum. Then some aspects of the concept of universalism will be illustrated with our recently opened Africa department. Finally, some questions on the future of the ethnographic museum will be addressed.

History of the Tropenmuseum



■ Frederik Willem van Eeden

Around the 1860s, Frederik Willem van Eeden, aspired for an organised environment for all the collections on natural specimen and products from the Dutch colonies that were hidden in attics and basements throughout the Netherlands. It wasn't until 1871 that the first Colonial Museum in the world was opened in Haarlem on the west coast of the Netherlands on the ground floor of a pavilion owned by the Ministry of Internal Affairs called Welgelegen.

The museum was first and foremost a museum that dealt with natural products from the colonies. Minerals, animals, plants and wood samples were its main content. A smaller part consisted of material cultural objects from the native inhabitants of the islands, mainly covering at technical aspects. The main goal of the museum was to collect, inventory and study colonial riches and their uses. Almost all objects were donated to the museum by government institutions, crop and trade firms, companies and banks. Other collections came to the museum by private individuals who had been in the colonies. Next to the museum, there also was a laboratory in which experiments were

done on the improvement of materials. In short, one can perfectly say that the origins of the Tropenmuseum lie in trade interests, although, as said, some examples of local industry also found their way into the collection. Collections were presented according to material and/or techniques.

At the end of the first decade of the 20th century, the museum in Haarlem proved too small to hold all the collections. A new venue was sought after, and thanks to the efforts of people such as the then Minister of Colonies, J.T. Cremer, the museum was relocated to a specially built large and impressive building in Amsterdam that had to underline the national idea of “a small country being great”. In 1926, the Colonial Institute in Amsterdam opened its doors at its current location.



The Colonial Institute Amsterdam, Linnaeusstraat 1

Although more and more ethnographical objects found their way into the collection, it still remained an institution on collecting and informing on overseas property (i.e. colonial propaganda) and on promoting all colonial endeavours of the Netherlands and the colony. It had three main departments: Tropical Hygiene, Tropical Products and Ethnology, of which the last two had their own museums within the building.

Though, as said, main provenance of the collections was Indonesia and to a lesser extent Surinam, objects from all over the world found their way into the museum. They were organized along either material in the Trade Museum or geographically in the Ethnology Museum. From the 1950's onwards, with the start of decolonization, special collection travels were initiated and large collections of daily objects from among others India and the African continent were accessioned. In the 1970s, colonial products and

objects were no longer central. In stead focus was on development and change in so-called third world countries. This is reflected in the presentations and in the collections acquired at that time.

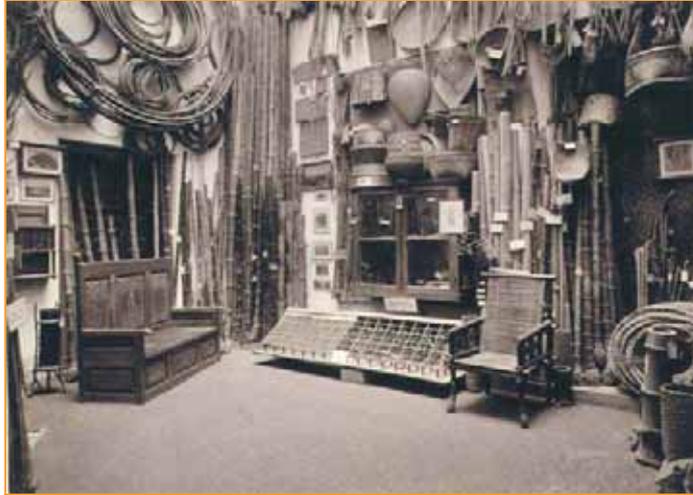
A special story surrounds the Africa collection of the museum. With its new venue in Amsterdam, the colonial museum had acquired the ethnographical collection of the nearby zoo Artis. The zoo had kept this collection, because of the Darwinist ideas on evolution in those days. This historical collection, inventoried as A-numbers, is probably one of the most important ethnographical collections of the Netherlands and included objects from Africa as well. Our historically most important objects are from these collections. However, after the Second World War, it was decided that the museum would be renamed Indische Instituut (East Indian Institute), hence concentrating on the East Indies, which resulted in a de-accessioning of many objects and almost the complete Africa collection to its counterpart institute in Leiden, the Museum of Ethnology. Up to this day, this sometimes still causes friction between the two institutions. When the museum, after Indonesian independence in 1949, had to redefine itself again as the Tropical Museum (Tropenmuseum), the museum had a gap in its collections. It had to restart collecting the tropics.

When looking at the theme of the ICOM 2007 conference, universalism, one can say that in the early days of the Tropenmuseum, there was no such approach: collections concentrated on objects from overseas possessions and it was only after independence of these colonies that the museum extended its view to the rest of the world, and actually to the people inhabiting it. New collections were assembled on South Asia, South and Central America and Africa. Although no 'typically' European objects as such were collected, Europe became more and more present in all kinds of intercultural objects that show European influence on material expressions.

The representation of Africa in the Tropenmuseum

The representation history of Africa will be used as an illustration of historical exhibition processes in the Tropenmuseum. As was the case with the typological exhibitions in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, in the colonial museum in Haarlem,

the world was categorized according to object type, in this case even type of material. African bamboo objects are placed next to objects of similar materials from all over the world.



Bamboo room, Colonial Museum Haarlem, 1890 (inv.nr. 00040407)

The postcolonial Tropenmuseum, in the beginning of the 1950s, started to focus on all non-Western areas and peoples' daily lives. The first temporary exhibition on Africa in 1951, was located in the central light hall, and existed next to other semi-permanent exhibition rooms on geographical areas and next to the show cases of the Tropical Products department. The collection of this latter museum was finally dispersed from the 1970s onwards to other relevant institutions such as the university of agriculture and botanical gardens.



Interior, Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam. Department of Cultural & Physical Anthropology, 1958 (inv. Nr. 10000055).

The photo above shows the permanent exhibition space devoted to anthropology in the Tropenmuseum in 1958. In the front case you see a for Africanists well-known Vili-costume, whereas in the left case there are still two Chokwe-figures visible, that came from the aforementioned Artis-collection. So here, that part of the world which is called Africa, has its own museum space. Next to this semi-permanent display, several temporary exhibitions on African subjects were held.

Congruent with social political developments, the department on Africa that was erected at the end of the 1970s, concentrated on the daily lives of people and on developmental issues. It was one of the most popular permanent exhibitions presented in a method for which the Tropenmuseum became well-known: the re-creation of environments.

Visitors liked the fact that they could walk through huts, across an African market and even touch the products (which were modern and mostly made of plastic).



Impression of the Africa department, 1979-2005

In 2006 the new Africa department opened, which aims to be a tribute to Africa, its cultures and its peoples. We researched the collection and, in order to exhibit “Africa” in 400m², conceptualized 5 themes in which the interesting parts of African material culture present in the museum could be shown. All five themes consist of a central object as a sort of summary, and a second layer of different related objects in sub-

themes. The exhibition starts with the theme status and position, followed by religion, masquerade, form and ends with contact and confrontation.



Africa department, 2006.

The museum wants to stress the fact that there is no such thing as Africa, and that the only thing a museum can do is exhibit objects as exemplifiers of parts of African cultures in a beautiful and respectful way. It tries to historicize the collections with a lot of audio-visual material, because the museum wants visitors to understand that material culture in Africa is constantly changing and always relates to people. It wants to show the vitality and dynamism inherent in African cultures, instead of the often dead character of African museum pieces. When possible, intercultural relationships are shown, especially the role of the imperialist west and the effects of these relationships on museum collections. In the theme of Masquerade for example, African masks aesthetically hung on the display wall are contextualised by explaining the role of these masks in European art in the 1920s. Next to it is a door to a multi-medial space, in which masks can be experienced in their original uses: as part of masked costume dances. At some points, inter-culturality is integrated from the African point of view: in the theme contact and confrontation we have three paintings on the history of Ethiopia from an Ethiopian point of view; these will be changed in due course for the paintings on the history of Congo by the Congolese artist Tshibumba.



Multimedial masquerade space.



Exhibition wall with Ethiopian art on national history

Accompanying touch screen programme

In short, the Tropenmuseum aims for the public to understand that its presentations are a consequence of several historical and personal selective processes. The museum also wants visitors to understand that the department, admittedly so confusingly called Africa, was not at all about Africa, how could it, but about the Africa collections of the Tropenmuseum. It wanted to present a counter image to that generally portrayed in the media, and to celebrate the continent and its many cultures. Whether or not we have succeeded in these objectives remains to be seen.

The Africa department is connected to the Latin America and Caribbean department. To show the relationship between these continents, the Surinam artist Marcel Pinas was asked to make an installation. In his “Reconnecting Africa”, he used material from his Maroon home village in the interior of Surinam, but also objects from the Surinam and Africa collections in the Tropenmuseum. The installation will be completed in 2008

with a documentary on DNA-research with Surinamese youngsters, including Marcel Pinas himself, who want to find their roots in Africa.



Wax figure of Indo soldier Himpies (R-164)



Wax figure of Mrs. Engelen-Koets (R-163)

One of the departments that really tries to deal with the colonial past of the Netherlands and indeed the museum, is Eastward Bound. In it, visitors experience the world of the Netherlands East Indies' colonial society. It focuses only on the colonialists, since the

museum thinks it cannot speak for the experiences of the indigenous people. Colonial society is shown as it was in its time, and people can react to that and learn new insights. Presentation methods even draw from the early days of the museum, for example by the use of wax figures. It is not a celebration of colonial society, and there are many units on the negative aspects of colonialism, for example on the atrocious wars between the Dutch and the indigenous people. Unfortunately, the exhibition is still sometimes misread as being imperialistic, and it seems the message is too subtle for some people to understand that their reaction of sometimes even disgust, is actually the effect the exhibition is supposed to have: to make people think about their past.

Conclusion

When a friend of mine read this paper, his first, and very legitimate question was, what is the definition of a universal museum? And I found myself not being able to give him a well-defined description. I could not even find one on the internet, amidst all the papers on universal museums. In the end, I told him that in general, a universal museum is understood to be a museum that covers the whole world geographically, disciplinary and in time.

The Tropenmuseum is not a universal museum in this sense. We do not have Greek or Roman history, we do not have an Egyptology or Far East department, nor do we have objects from other so-called Western countries, or the important objects that signify moments in our own national history. But it seems that universalism in museums concerns more than what is geographically or temporally shown under that one roof. I believe that our museum has universality in its collections, exhibition concepts and virtual accessibility. The Tropenmuseum tries to connect different cultures spatially apart in its building, with help of cross-references through objects, texts and audio-visual material, and by emphasizing the nature of objects as having over a 1,000 stories to tell. Immaterial culture is playing a big part in this, and we are currently devising a new department on immaterial heritage. The Tropenmuseum is part of the larger Tropical Institute, and in this sense it takes part in many international intercultural museum projects. The museum is also a place where intercultural debates take place, and where alternative visions on cultural phenomena are presented.

What I like very much about the Tropenmuseum is that it is somewhat universal in its types of presentations as well: next to evocative presentations, we have purely aesthetic exhibitions, musealized environments, a photo gallery and a more or less experimental

space, in which temporary and sometimes controversial exhibitions are held about every 6 months. In 2008, the museum is organizing a conference in which the relationship between European ethnographical museums and museums in former colonial territories is central, as is the question on the social value and role of museums. The museum is also in the process of reconsidering its physical anthropological collection of human remains and the issue of repatriation. In line with this, it has become museum policy that every object has its provenance mentioned in the object texts, in order to express the museum's accountability for its collections and to make visitors realize that objects had some sort of life before they entered the museum.

Another proof of the fact that the Tropenmuseum is trying to deal with certain aspects of universalism is that currently, it is starting to discuss the geography-based specializations of curators and permanent exhibitions and that it experiments with universal theme exhibitions such as 'All about Evil' in 2005. For all of this, I believe the Tropenmuseum is a universal institution indeed.

Questions raised

I have given you this historical overview of museological processes in our museum, because I think it is relevant to keep these in mind when discussing universalism and museums. It seems to me there is a conjunctural movement in museological thinking. Many museums started out as general, global, or universal museums. Cabinets held curiosities from all over the world and from all scientific disciplines possible. In time, several departments were split off because it was rather undoable to keep the whole world under one roof, and now we see different collections being brought together again, as for example happened with the collections of the Museum of Mankind in the British Museum. Now I like the basic idea of the whole world under one roof, but is it realistic? And can we expect our public to see and understand the connections between different geographical and cultural units presented throughout our institutions themselves. This latter issue is a problem within our museum.

The issue strongly has to do with another question me and some of my colleagues keep breaking our heads over, and that is, what exactly is it that an ethnographical museum nowadays should be? This concerns its function in multicultural Western societies, its relationship to museums and people from source communities, and it very much concerns its legacy of colonial thinking. It has become clear to me the last three years that getting rid of colonial aspects in ethnographic exhibitions is more difficult than it

seems. It is about the inevitability that *the* reality does not exist; it is about ownership of knowledge and agency - who has the right to speak for a culture, a people, or a country? How can a former colonial museum with old, mostly colonial collections with all sorts of implicit values in them, properly represent world cultures today? There are many examples of different approaches to ethnographic collections in museums, such as Quai Branly and Gothenburg, but do anthropological museums have to choose either direction? Or should ethnographic collections be (re)combined with general national collections, as in London? Should the ethnographical museum as we know it be closed down, become purely cultural historical, or can we find a solution in which visitors can come to a museum on countries and people they don't know yet and be informed in a responsible and entertaining way?

These questions penetrate all aspects of museology: it has repercussions for management strategies, but also for collection policies and exhibition making. What are we to collect for the future exhibitions we would like to see in our museum? And are we collecting for the future or for future exhibitions only indeed? We have recently asked a student organization called Nucleus, which has also shared its creative thoughts on the new national historical museum in Arnhem mentioned in the beginning, to come up with their ideas on the future of ethnographic museums, and we have asked them not to be shy in controversial thinking. I think we desperately need these kinds of discussions with fellow museologists in order to come to a new concept for a museum such as ours, a museum on world cultures that is of important relevance in the 21st century for the preservation of cultural historical and contemporary heritage and the education and entertainment of all people. And before deciding on whether or not universality is a thing to go for, first this future of ethnographic museums and their historical collections must be clear.