



MUSEUM DE LAKENHAL PRESENTS

GLOBAL IMAGINATIONS

DE MEELFABRIEK LEIDEN | 27.06.15 - 04.10.15 | GLOBALIMAGINATIONS.COM

TRINKETS

Lizzy van Leeuwen

Nearly five hundred years ago, the inhabitants of the Low Countries began collecting objects and artifacts from all corners of the world. Collections were very diverse and included mounted animals and butterflies, sea shells, carved skulls, maps, manuscripts, objects used in rituals, deceased children, fossils, masks and bizarre weapons – all from newly discovered and distant lands. These exotic collections were especially entertaining to the people of early modern Europe, who loved to marvel over the many and strange shapes of God's creation. But some people obviously worried about these as well. These so-called Cabinets of Curiosity thus helped people shape a new, more complete and definitely more diverse worldview. The collections were also intensively studied by scholars, who travelled far and wide to bring order to these chaotic and large sets.

THE STRATEGY OF COLLECTING

As Europe's urge for expansion grew, these exotic objects also gained strategic importance alongside its original scientific character: they became testimonies of national honour. This is especially evident in the world fairs that were hosted all over Europe during the late nineteenth century. It gave the great colonial powers the opportunity to outdo each other through exotic displays reflecting their huge empires. The Dutch entry to a fair in 1883 even consisted of an entire imported village from Java, including the gamelan-playing and basket-weaving inhabitants. All those displays were used to cultivate a specific worldview in which national (in casu Dutch) pride was key. Dutch overseas territories were rather unsprungly referred to with the motto 'Something great is being achieved there.' Completely mapping and collecting (or: ransacking) local material culture was a natural part of that process.

But now, in the post-colonial age, we are faced with the question of how to interpret these many collections and artifacts that our ancestors have gathered over the centuries. How should we see them? Our age isn't just post-colonial, it's also post-modern: we know that nothing has a fixed

PARTNERS



De Meelfabriek
Living, working and recreation in the city of Leiden

SUPPORTED BY



FONDS21



CULTUURFONDS LEIDEN



BankGiroLoterij
CULTUUR. MAAKT JE BIJEN.



Leiden





MUSEUM DE LAKENHAL PRESENTS

GLOBAL IMAGINATIONS

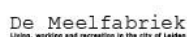
DE MEELFABRIEK LEIDEN | 27.06.15 - 04.10.15 | GLOBALIMAGINATIONS.COM

value anymore and that authenticity is a controversial concept. Every truth actually relies on a social or cultural construction. What concept can be legitimately placed at the core of a western worldview? Only one theme seems unavoidable: the centuries of exploitation and suppression, within or without a colonial framework, demand that guilt and penance should be prominently visible. After all, the West has not exactly excelled in moral behavior: the plundering, destruction and domination that followed our journeys of discovery prohibit us from taking the moral high ground. That's at least what anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss concluded in 1955. He wrote: 'A continuous, overly-stimulated civilization will always disturb the serenity of the oceans. The smells of the latitudes and the freshness of creatures is being ruined by a process that produces a suspicious, maleficent air and dooms us to collect already ruined memories. For thou, travel, above all shows us that we have thrown filth into the face of mankind.'

Lévi-Strauss didn't just see that 'filth' in the figurative way. He considered the gluttonous western material culture, embodied in our everyday consumption society, as a type of filth that would doom the world itself. The idea of globalization was a very grim prospect to him: as if the gluttonous, insatiable West unleashed a terminal disease onto the rest of the planet. That material aspect of the white man's burden is rooted in the sixteenth century and is closely related the seemingly innocent act of collecting exotic objects and curiosities.

Sixty years after Lévi-Strauss's desperate call it is obvious how advanced his thinking was. In 1972, the Club of Rome warned against the dangers of the extensive pollution that our unstoppable growth is causing. But it's not just nature's diversity that is being lost: the plurality of human society is also disappearing while social inequality is increasing. Oxfam expects that the richest one percent of the population will control more than half of the world's wealth by 2016. More than half! And again, it isn't difficult to find a link between the greed of this one percent and the early modern Cabinets of Curiosity – the trinkets – of old. When objects are taken out of their 'natural' habitat and placed in a new environment, their meaning and value changes. 'Exotic food tastes better', we call that in the Dutch vernacular. This simple principle has enabled people to earn fortunes for centuries.

PARTNERS



SUPPORTED BY





MUSEUM DE LAKENHAL PRESENTS

GLOBAL IMAGINATIONS

DE MEELFABRIEK LEIDEN | 27.06.15 - 04.10.15 | GLOBALIMAGINATIONS.COM

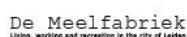
It's interesting to get to grips with this fascinating principle. How and why did this typically western love of trinkets begin? Is it now, after Lévi-Strauss, still possible to look at how western societies experience material cultures without judging?

At least modern-day art criticism offers us a new approach. The concept of 'art', which has been reserved for western artistic expressions for centuries, is currently undergoing a transformation. Art is increasingly being seen as a universal type of expression; creating visual arts is finally being recognized as a basic human instinct practiced in every corner of the globe since prehistoric times. There are thus a lot more art histories and ways to view the world than those used in the west. Objects that used to be seen as ethnic artefacts are now being redefined as works of art. Recognizing this pluriformity also contributes to the relativizing idea that (even) the west consists of unique cultural entities, based on local, historically shaped traditions, and concepts with their own worldviews.

According to anthropologist Igor Kopytoff the uniqueness of the western worldview is largely visible in the special way people and objects are separated from each other. That concept of separation, he argues, was developed in the early modern period, and cannot be found as strongly in any other culture. As an example, Kopytoff shows how differently cultures view slavery. Placed in a grey undefined area in nearly every culture of the world, a slave wasn't a 'thing' and was rarely seen as a type of goods, though didn't classify as an independent person either. Usually slaves were granted more personal freedom in later life, eventually giving them a place of relative autonomy: gradual emancipation. This was a process, but Intellectual Europe has always struggled with the concept of slavery because its undefined nature was difficult to process philosophically. Goods can be compared and traded in European philosophy, but people cannot. Prices can be affixed to tradable goods, but people are unique and therefore impossible to define in a value.

That principal separation in western thinking can also be seen in the practical issues such as abortion. The issue of whether or not an embryo is a person can lead to endless discussions. Where European cultures draw a controversial line somewhere in an embryo's growth process after a certain number of months, people in Japan argue that embryos are persons from the moment of conception. But at the same time, abortion isn't a problematic issue for them as the

PARTNERS



SUPPORTED BY





MUSEUM DE LAKENHAL PRESENTS

GLOBAL IMAGINATIONS

DE MEELFABRIEK LEIDEN | 27.06.15 - 04.10.15 | GLOBALIMAGINATIONS.COM

(Japanese) afterlife reserves a special place for the aborted; as 'lost souls', they have their own altars in temples and can be ritually remembered. The so-coveted western separation of people and objects is becoming more controversial as biotechnology is continuing to develop. Examples are manifold: organ trade, breast enlargement, surrogate mothers, genetic manipulation, egg cell donation, face transplantation. Within a few years from now, head transplants will be an actual possibility. A company that turns cremated ashes of the deceased into diamond trinkets already exists. Again and again, we are asking ourselves where to draw the line.

Kopytoff unsurprisingly names art as a typical problem area in the western intellectual controversy between persons and objects. Works of art can be found, like slaves and human organs, in an undefined area: works of art are 'things', but they cannot be traded. That's because, like people, they are unique and impossible to attach a specific value to: they are invaluable. A painting by Rembrandt is typically called irreplaceable, especially in case of theft. And yet museums are forced to ensure their collections, while the 'invaluable worth' of a painting is emphasized by the enormous sums paid for Rembrandts during auctions.

That's tough to process. This taboo reached the surface in Rotterdam a few years ago, when the then director of the Wereldmuseum decided to sell (or 'decollect') part of the anthropological art collection. That an institute where commerce is a taboo should turn into a 'shop' resulted in a large public outcry. The directors obviously sought to merge the sacred with the profane, which seemed to break one of the core ethical rules of western culture. After all, museums might be allowed to actually trade works of art, but nothing more than that. But even this communis opinio is being changed alongside the ongoing redefining of art itself.

PARTNERS



De Meelfabriek
Living, working and recreation in the city of Leiden

SUPPORTED BY



FONDS21



CULTUURFONDS LEIDEN



BankGiroLoterij
CULTUUR. MAAKT JE RIJKER.



Leiden





MUSEUM DE LAKENHAL PRESENTS

GLOBAL IMAGINATIONS

DE MEELFABRIEK LEIDEN | 27.06.15 - 04.10.15 | GLOBALIMAGINATIONS.COM



SAARTJIE BAARTMAN, EEN ZUID-AFRIKAANSE SLAVIN IN HET BEZIT VAN KAAPSE BOEREN, WERD IN DE 19^{DE} EEUW NAAR EUROPA GEBRACHT OM ALS ATTRACTIE TENTOONGESTELD TE WORDEN VANWEGE HAAR OPZIEBARENDE HUIDSKLEUR EN LICHAAMSBOW.

MORALITY AND THE MUSEUM

Ambiguity in the western separation of people and objects isn't uncommon. That separation system can take different shapes and meanings, depending on the context. It depends, in short, on the prevailing worldview. The sad history of the South African woman Saartjie Baartman, known as the Hottentot Venus, can perhaps best be used to illustrate that.

PARTNERS



De Meelfabriek
Living, working and recreation in the city of Leiden

SUPPORTED BY



FONDS21



CULTUURFONDS LEIDEN



BankGiroLoterij
CULTUUR MAAKT JE RIJKER



Leiden

Leiden stadsvanontdekkingen



MUSEUM DE LAKENHAL PRESENTS

GLOBAL IMAGINATIONS

DE MEELFABRIEK LEIDEN | 27.06.15 - 04.10.15 | GLOBALIMAGINATIONS.COM

The young Saartjie, a slave owned by farmers on the Cape, was brought to Europe around 1800 with the intention of exhibiting her for her unusual skin color and body shape. After her premature death, parts of her body were prepared and preserved in ethanol, before being put on display in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. Saartjie's remains were only recognized as human remains after a lengthy diplomatic discussion in 2002, after which she was finally given a proper burial in her native South Africa.

Even to this very day, Dutch anthropological and archeological museums continue to exhibit exotic people: bog bodies, Egyptian mummies, severed fingers of saints and trophies made from prepared Indian heads. These museums thus keep the links with the classic Cabinets of Curiosity alive and well. Only their scientific culture protects them from ethical complaints, ensuring that these human remains have been squarely moved to the realm of objects. But whenever a visitor comes face-to-face with a centuries-old, disfigured babe in a glass jar, a post-modern mindset cannot prevent a shiver from going down his or her spine. For a brief second, it transports us back to the sixteenth century, when the exact separation between people and things – between the sacred and the profane – was first explored. When the western worldview first began to unavoidably take shape.

ABOUT LIZZY VAN LEEUWEN

Lizzy van Leeuwen (1958) is cultural anthropologist, writer and publicist. She writes for, among others, De Groene Amsterdammer. She wrote the books *Airconditioned lifestyles*. *Nieuwe rijken in Jakarta* (1997), *Ons Indisch erfgoed* (2008), *Lost in Mall* (2011) and *De hanenbalken*. *Zelfmoord op het platteland*.

LITERATURE

- Claude Lévi-Strauss (1955) *Het trieste der tropen*. Reisverslag van een antropoloog. Nijmegen: Uitgeverij SUN (vertaling 1962)
- Claude Lévi-Strauss (1955) *Tristes Tropiques*. Translated by John Russel (1961)
- Igor Kopytoff, 'The cultural biography of things', in: Arjun Appadurai (ed.) (1986) *The social life of things. Commodities in cultural perspective*. Cambridge University Press

PARTNERS



SUPPORTED BY

