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Masonic networks, material culture and international trade : the participation of Dutch Freemasons in the commercial and cultural exchange with Southeast Asia (1735-1853)

Kroon, A.A.

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Author: Kroon, Andréa Angela

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Propositions accompanying the PhD thesis

Masonic networks, material culture & international trade *The participation of Dutch freemasons in the commercial & cultural exchange with Southeast Asia* *1735-1853*

by **Andréa A. Kroon**

1. The material culture of freemasonry is characterized by the use of a particular iconography derived from ritual practice. Because biblical themes and personifications of virtues not exclusive to freemasonry were incorporated, the influence of freemasonry is often projected where it is in fact not present.
2. Lodge buildings in the Netherlands and its overseas territories form a particular category of ritual architecture, of which the most important examples built before 1940 deserve a protected heritage status. Some are already protected, but not because of their importance to masonic heritage.
3. After 1945 most Dutch lodge archives and libraries looted by the Nazis were retrieved, but surprisingly little effort has been made to trace the fate of the ritual objects and art works which made up a large part of the identity of Dutch freemasonry. This aspect of WWII art theft urgently deserves attention.
4. The membership lists of Dutch lodges in 1756-1800 partly overlap with the employee records of the VOC, showing that (at least) 20-30% of high ranking officials in India, Ceylon and China, including Titsingh and Van Braam Houckgeest, were freemasons, while close family ties further strengthened these connections.
5. Lodges La Fidèle Sincérité and La Vertueuse in Batavia commissioned both European and Asian artists and craftsmen in 1767-1837 to produce symbolic decorations, paintings, furniture and regalia. This material culture represents a 'shared heritage' between East and West.
6. The organising of public processions and 'illuminations' on St. John's Day show that, despite their intimate character, lodges were a highly visible presence in the Dutch East Indies.
7. Both women and Eurasian men were already included in lodge activities in the 18th century. Asian servants and craftsmen were intimately involved in ritual aspects of lodge life on Java, way before the membership of Asians became commonplace in the 19th century.
8. It seems that only freemasons acted as a body of private commissioners, structurally ordering both Japanese export lacquer and Chinese export porcelain decorated with masonic symbols for use in lodges and domestic circles. Such objects were not mere exotic curiosities, but had a complex function merging ritual, social and decorative elements.
9. Besides wanting to spread masonic ideals, the founding of lodges was also spurred by a wish to line the coffers. Distance and slow communication resulted in bending the Dutch Grand Lodge's rules and even the illegal founding of a lodge in Dejima, Japan, by Hendrik Doeff in 1804.
10. One of George Washington's iconic masonic aprons shares several characteristics with related export objects, suggesting it may have been manufactured by a Chinese embroiderer.
11. William Hogarth, intimately familiar with the various stages of inebriation reached by freemasons during a table lodge, may have depicted the remnants of a lodge meeting in his engraving 'A midnight modern conversation' (ca. 1732).
12. To the many 'masonic conspiracy' theories could be added a 'museum conspiracy' theory, explaining why freemasonry is not a point of attention in research, collection, conservation or exhibition policies of Dutch public museums and heritage organisations.