Made for trade - Made in China. Chinese export paintings in Dutch collections: art and commodity

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Concluding remarks

In the Introduction, I argued that the virtually unknown Chinese export paintings in Dutch collections definitely have archival and documentary significance. To support this argument, I discussed in *Made for Trade* the commodity/export, historic, artistic, and material value aspects of the identified genres. Accordingly, this dissertation discusses questions such as: Are those integrated, transcultural paintings in Dutch collections to be considered as commodities or as art objects, or are both qualifications appropriate? How and when does value accruement occur in a painting's life? Is it the degree of translatability that provides aesthetic value to these paintings? Can we think of a new outlook for this painting genre? In wrapping up the discussion, I would say that it is abundantly clear that the representational and social function of the corpus with the assigned values lends the Dutch collections substantial use value.

Chinese export paintings, to a greater or lesser extent, can be considered as objects giving tangible form to spoken metaphors of success, money, sea travels, and trade deals. Their particular means of production under specific conditions and their exchange and use also illustrates contrasting Dutch and Chinese notions of value and utility of this painting genre. These notions oscillate between a dyad of high and low appraisal and assert contradictory attitudes towards this genre across different places and in the course of time. On the one hand, in nineteenth-century Holland, this genre was greatly appreciated and, consequently, enjoyed a high status. Over time, this appreciation diminished. The society at large, at least in the Netherlands, did not value Chinese export paintings and, on the whole, became detached from them. The value of this particular concept of Chinese export painting, based on relations with co-existing values and meanings, greatly diminishes in these periods of detachment.[1] The perception of the hybrid character attached to these paintings, generated from the contexts in which they originally were produced, lead to the idea that during a part of the twentieth century, these paintings were identified as mixed, inferior, and not *objets d'art* at all. They did not fit some cultural norm, either Western, or Chinese. That is why these paintings are often termed 'hybrid', a term that I have used throughout *Made for Trade* in the most positive sense to describe these artworks as products of confluences of ideas, but that has its own negative qualities too.[2] This attitude – of identifying Chinese export paintings as inferior – explains their currently largely forgotten and 'frozen' state.[3] On the other hand, in nineteenth-century China there was hardly any appreciation for these specific visual objects made for the 'red-haired barbarians'.[4] Despite the fact that these highly desired commodities were flying out of the export painting studios and thus were very profitable, they were generally met with incomprehension. This tide,

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1 Martyn Gregory, an international specialist dealer in China trade paintings, confirmed the observation that the market for and interest in these paintings is very small in the Netherlands compared to the United Kingdom, America and China (TEFAF March 2015).

2 Read more on the term 'hybridity' and its discontents in Dean & Leibsohn 2010.

3 Mr Gan Tjiang Tek (1919-) indicated that all the inventory numbers under no. 1000, including the many Chinese export paintings, were seen as unimportant during his curatorship in Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden (i.e. 1950s to 1984), due to the fact that these objects were made by anonymous artisans (conversation with Boen Ong, relative of Gan, on 9 March 2015).

4 Ever since the visit by a Dutch fleet led by Jacob van Neck in 1601 the Dutch were called 'red-haired barbarians'. This name continued to be used in China since that visit. Cai 2004, 3.

however, would turn completely. Indeed, this visual material, disseminated around the world, is extremely desired and appreciated today.[5] Will the growing Chinese interest thaw the 'frozen' objects in the Dutch museum depots, revive them, and return them to their former glory, with vibrant exchanges with the places where they were initially produced?

On behalf of all Chinese export painters, these paintings are 'voices' that speak to us about their highly commodificated art practice. Instead of scientific reports and other written documentary sources on this phenomenon, they speak to us now of those artists' past achievements. To reconstruct what was going on in the Chinese export painting market in the nineteenth century, we must interrogate and interpret these painting as we are used to do with written reports: deeply and rigorously.[6] Studying the ebb and flow of appreciation for Chinese export paintings from the moment of production to the 'consumer-end', as it is viewed today, supports the argument that Chinese export paintings are polysemic, impregnated by people with numerous interpretations and personal experiences. An urgency to protect and to revivify the interest in Chinese export paintings is a major motivation for preserving this cultural heritage. Curators, archivists, scholars, and connoisseurs can undertake activities around the overlooked artworks, which will make them valuable and meaningful again, and identify them as "physically symbolic of particular cultural and social events, and thus give them value and meaning."[7] Thus, when turned into exchangeable objects of heritage, they become part of new cultural processes.

The timeline on page 223 gives an overview of the transformation of value assignment, through trade and transnational mobility.[8] On the whole, we can distinguish six stages in the cultural biographies of Dutch Chinese export paintings: production, exchange, consumption, detachment, 'freezing', and revivification.[9]

And so we come full circle. This overview shows that the prospects for this painting phenomenon look good. On the one hand, revivification in the places where these paintings originated has resulted in an enormous demand for original paintings. We are seeing the newly established China trade museums and auction houses in China buy back these paintings from the places in Europe and America where they had travelled to in former days. By returning to China, where the paintings will be (re)located in all kinds of new environments, new meanings will be created through this change in their cultural identity. Here, they can reassert their position as prestigious and identity strengthening commodities that confirm the cultural autonomy of owners; a use value that, at the time of their production, was certainly true for most Western first owners. Thus, export paintings function as tangible evidential material of the early cooperation with overseas trading economies. Through today's exciting developments in the art market, the paintings will become embedded in new shifting cultural contexts through time and space. In fact, we can say that they are in perpetual flux. Their spatial mobility with visible traces of their age, usage and previous life alter their meaning and use with respect to new cultural horizons. Further, in the Pearl River delta area there seems

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5 In July 2016, five esteemed scholars from Guangzhou Sun Yat-sen University, City University of Hong Kong and the Sun Yat-sen Library of Guangdong Province (Professors Wu Yixiong, Liu Zhiwei, Jiang Yinghe, Ching May Bo and Ni Junming) have visited the Netherlands to explore future collaboration on the Dutch collections with Chinese export paintings.

6 MacGregor 2012, xvi.

7 Laurajane Smith 2006, 3, quoted in Olsen 2012, 219.

8 These data are based on provenance research on the collections in the National Maritime Museum Amsterdam, Museum Volkenkunde and the Maritime Museum Rotterdam, and the current developments in this area in Guangzhou.

9 I got the inspiration for this model from Erll, in Kaufmann & North 2014, 321–328. In the chapter 'Circulating art and material culture' she studies the question of whether a more general model of cultural mediation can be found that is applicable to research projects on the global circulation of cultural artefacts. Proceeding from communication studies, and also drawing on new media theory and memory studies, she proposes a model of transcultural mediation that features five stages: production, transmission, reception, transcultural remediation, and afterlife.

10 In the Netherlands, Van Campen's doctoral research on Royer was published in 2000, mentioning the famous Royer albums and his other spectacular paintings, including the set of winter landscapes in Tartary. Since 2013, I have noticed a sense of urgency in Dutch museums to digitalise their collections, to collaborate with universities, knowledge institutions and other cultural (museum) partners, to found material research centres, and to preserve valuable objects so that they can withstand the merciless test of time.

to be insatiability for collecting objects and sources about the historical China trade practice. As a result, I noticed during a stay with Cantonese scholars in 2013, that there is a tantalising trend to trace and publish new and unique (visual and textual) material culture, including paintings, relating to the field of the historical China trade.

On the other hand, times are changing and things are set in motion on the Dutch side. Museums have become more reflexive about nineteenth-century inheritances ("the nineteenth-century museum's concern to develop an objective, systematic representation of the world as knowable by the Western subject")[11] in considering the use of biography in and about the museum. Museum curators and collection managers increasingly view the long-overlooked status of Chinese export paintings and their confinement to difficult to access (fortunately, often well-acclimatised) museum storerooms as undesirable. Increasingly, they are seen as entwined with a museum's biography. Biographical approaches to the understanding of Chinese export paintings with an accumulated experience that affords them their use value "might inform current and future roles for the objects within the museum."[12] In recent years, some good practices have led to a major increase in the physical display of these objects that have not seen the light for years.[13] The visibility of the paintings and, importantly, their connecting narratives upgrade this national cultural heritage

STAGES OF VALUE ASSIGNMENT

1770-1870

Production period, exchange and consumption period.

The period of the making of. Transfer to other temporal and spatial settings, and different value accruement. High value/status in Nederland. Low value/status in China.

1870-1930

Exchange and consumption period.

The period of emotional value accruement. Children and grandchildren inherit from father and grandfather; the stories behind the paintings are shared and known, the paintings are hung on walls.

1930-1960

Exchange and detachment period.

Great-grandchildren inherit from great-grandfather and taken the paintings to museums or for auction. Paintings frequently fall from grace. Period of decline of value.

1960-1990

Exchange and continued detachment period.

Low, 'frozen' status. Paintings offered for sale to museums or taken to auction. Paintings evaluated as poor quality objects and uninteresting, or even trash. Period of decline of value.

1990-2000

Detachment period.

Low 'frozen' status. No longer purchased by Dutch museums; still accepted as gifts. Status quo concerning value aspects. No particular attention (dormant).

2000-2016

Revivification. Consumption and production period.[10]

Value re-accruement. Market improves. Paintings increasingly appear in auctions (consumers are producers at the same time). High status in China. Proliferation of museums and academic research centres. Chinese interest in the history of the historical China trade and the period of the so-called Canton System (1757-1842). In China, these paintings are used to narrate these periods.

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11 Hill 2012, 1.

12 Ibid., 6.

13 Firstly, there is an initiative by the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam and Museum Volkenkunde to restore an important trio of Chinese harbour views from the Royer collection and to give them a permanent place in the gallery following the re-opening of the Amsterdam Museum in 2013 (see Chapter 5.6.). Moreover, with Rijksstudio (https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/rijksstudio), the Rijksmuseum is the first museum in the world to provide free, high-resolution access to approximately 200,000 digital objects from its collection. Secondly, the Rotterdam Maritime Museum takes good care of their part of the collection that was produced in China. In 2010, the museum organised an exhibition *Yin & Jan - China & Nederland door scheepvaart verbonden*. Seven Chinese export ship portraits and harbour views were restored specially for this exhibition. Inv.nos: P1913 to P1916, P1729, P2332, and P3815. Pauline Marchand, Rotterdam, did the restorations. A fortunate third event is the fact that, despite the unpleasant developments in the Rotterdam World Museum, which saw all the permanent curators fired, some of their Chinese export paintings were valued by the Maritime Museum Rotterdam and, despite Rotterdam City Council wanting to get rid of them, they have managed to keep hold of them. A number of beautiful sets and albums were thus saved from auction, which would probably have resulted in them leaving the Netherlands. A fourth significant fact is that both The Hague collections are being rescued from oblivion. The management of The Hague Museon has discovered the narrative and historical value of their Zhou Peichun-painting collection. In the chapter 'De wereld in beeld' of the 2014 museum guide *Museon 360°. De wereld in voorwerpen*, they published some of his watercolours with daily Chinese life scenes as an example to tell the story of 'travellers (to China) as customers'. The librarian of The Hague Royal Academy of Fine Arts informed me that the intention in the coming three years is to ensure that the albums with the Chinese export watercolours (along with other special objects) are kept in better circumstance and that they are rescued from oblivion by the Academy. He wrote: "in the future, this part of the collection will be given more attention by students and teachers. This could be in the form of exhibitions, assignments and possibly even as teaching material." (Email Marcel van Bommel, 8 September 2015).

in a meaningful manner. Moreover, an increasing number of online resources can be consulted today.[14] Understandably, these developments make me optimistic about increased accessibility to the material *Made for Trade* refers to.

Future collaboration within the Netherlands

Due to a prevailing narrow definition of art, for a long time Chinese export paintings were seen as indigenous works of art and were "excluded from the art museum or gallery and often sat unrecognised in the ethnographic museum."[15] These non-European artworks were more or less denied primary display spaces in the art museums where their distinctive features could be viewed to maximum effect. However, for the future, we need to acknowledge that art museums, together with ethnographic museums, maritime museums, libraries, and archives, will become partners in collecting and collection management. As Morphy states in his paper on the movement towards a more inclusive art history, "the shifting boundaries of art require overlapping institutions that together over time can maintain the material resource that is both an integral part of the human heritage and central to understanding the past."[16] This movement, currently being embraced by scholars in the field, will lead to a new outlook on these kinds of paintings by developing new overlapping partners in collection management, by designing (virtual) institutions in which these artworks are compatible.

Today, thanks to these material hybrid signifiers with Chinese cultural dimensions in Dutch museums – from major national art museums, ethnographic and maritime museums, to a specialised naval museum – China has a substantial (visual) artefactual presence throughout the Netherlands. Most China export art collections form part of the history of the museum itself. It is interesting to discover how the biography of a museum can be used to reflect on this nineteenth-century inheritance and "to develop new ways of knowing."[17] The Netherlands still has a thriving sea transport industry in China and so should value this artistic commodity that has so much to do with earlier overseas trade. Increasing cooperation between relevant partners could help. This calls for transparency and knowledge of each other's contexts, future policy plans, and the will to share objects and ideas. For a fruitful collaboration, it is necessary to trust each other, to show solidarity and to share passion for a joint business. Mariska ter Horst concludes her chapter 'Collaboration as a response to the curatorial complexities of global contemporary art' in *Changing Perspectives* with a strong plea for cooperation "We speak of 'institutions', but we are dealing with individuals and their mutual relations. In all respects – whether practical, financial, intellectual or idealistic – I believe that particularly in these times of government withdrawal from the arts, the way forward is cooperation: interdisciplinary, international and intermuseum."[18] I can only agree with her in relation to Chinese export paintings in Dutch collections. The idea of ownership being the key to profit making now seems quite outdated to me.

A museum, embedded in culture with social and political structures, can be seen as a society relatively insulated from a commercial market.[19] Generally, it is agreed that a museum's collection is the basis for shaping its activities, but there are numerous other issues too that strongly influence museum policy. Besides political and scientific arguments, in relation to the collections of Chinese export paintings, we must also think of practical and financial matters, which explain the current state of these paintings. A museum

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14 First, the maritime online resource maritiemdigitaal.nl is a great example of an online database for collections of the Dutch maritime museums with information, albeit sometimes meagre, about ships that once headed to 'the East' and Chinese harbour views. A second example is the online collection database of the new National Museum of World Cultures. Since the merger of Museum Volkenkunde and Tropenmuseum into this new museum in 2014, there has been a huge improvement on the digital front. Their immense collection can now be researched online via a professional base. Among these recent digitisation efforts, the Zeeuws Museum and the Deventer SAB-City Archives and Athenaeum Library are worthy of mention. Both have made their Chinese export painting collections, including, for example, all images of the six Duymaer van Twist albums (Deventer), accessible since the autumn of 2015.

15 Morphy 2009, 62.

16 Ibid.

17 Hill 2012, 1.

18 Ter Horst 2012, 42.

19 Graeber 2001, 78.

has agency too: through an array of objects they make some distant places more present than others. An ethnographic museum can act as a site for first encounters with China, where ideas about this country are moulded. It is questionable, though, whether the afterlife of these paintings, once they have been extracted from the basements, will represent China to contemporary viewers and evoke memories of its earlier appearance? It is important to note that the 'museum as institution' was never really of concern to either the nineteenth-century Chinese export painter or – except for Royer – the first owners. Rather, domestic or business-like representational and social practices were at stake.

The tendency within the scholarly domains of history (also art and cultural history) and cultural anthropology, is to assume that worldviews, cultural concepts, everyday life and material culture, require the use of visual sources like these paintings, beyond the written records. This has triggered a different perspective on the use of visual material culture, which previously was associated with the conventions of museums and art collections, and now increasingly finds its way in academic research. The close collaboration between the partners of LeidenGlobal, a community of leading academic and cultural institutions, is an example of this desirable development; its success shows the urgency of such initiatives.[20] Other vibrant hubs within national and international networks of research partners, fostering research collaborations with individuals and institutions, are the Research Center for Material Culture (RCMC) within the Tropenmuseum and Museum Volkenkunde (the National Museum of World Cultures), the Maastricht Centre for Arts and Culture, Conservation and Heritage (MACCH), and, as briefly mentioned in Chapter 1.3., the Netherlands Institute for Conservation Art and Science (NICAS), housed in the Ateliergebouw in Amsterdam.[21] These centres serve as focal points for research on ethnographic and other collections in the Netherlands. The advent of these collaborative networks (2013-2014) makes clear that the already fluid boundaries between these previously separate intellectual and institutional worlds, are being rapidly demolished and are creating new opportunities for knowledge production.

Digital future?

Made for Trade contributes some reflections on a future museum policy regarding Chinese export painting collections. Once the community has acquired most collections, museums should do their best to preserve them. The first sentence in *Op de museale weegschaal – Collectie-waardering in zes stappen* (Assessing Museum Collections – Collection Valuation in Six Steps) states that "[V]alue is a key concept within heritage care."[22] *Assessing Museum Collections* can very well work as a practical tool in the allocation of different value types to objects and collections like the Dutch corpus of Chinese

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20 www.leidenglobal.org. The partners are: African Studies Centre Leiden (ASC), International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV), Netherlands Institute for the Near East (NINO), Rijksmuseum van Oudheden (Dutch National Museum of Antiquities), Museum Volkenkunde (National Museum for Ethnology), Roosevelt Study Center (RSC), and Leiden University.

21 http://www.materialculture.nl/en. Drawn from the different national universities of Amsterdam, Utrecht, Nijmegen and Groningen the Academic Advisory Working Group of the RCMC will ensure coordination between the centre´s research and teaching programmes and the research agendas of other research institutions with relevant programs in the Netherlands.
http://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/web/Institutes/MaastrichtCentreForArtsAndCultureConservationAndHeritageMACCH.htm. The MACCH is a transdisciplinary centre that brings together economic, legal, historical, philosophical, and practical expertise. MACCH is a partnership between the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Humanities and Sciences, and the School of Business and Economics of Maastricht University, as well as the Social-History Centre for Limburg and the Stichting Restauratie Atelier Limburg for art conservation and research (SRAL).
https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/netherlands-institute-for-conservation-art-and-science. The NICAS has a Scientific Working Group, that has as its main priority the scientific cohesion of the centre and set the necessary parameters to make sure that the research is of excellent international standard and should strengthen the position of the centre, nationally and internationally.

22 Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed (Cultural Heritage Agency, Ministry of Education, Culture and Science) 2013, 4.

export painting.[23] The six steps in the valuation process, given by the Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, are

1. Formulate the motive and the question behind the valuation and record them on the valuation form.
2. Decide what you are going to value, what reference framework you will use and who the stakeholders are. Use the reference framework form as a guide if necessary.
3. Decide the relevant criteria for the valuation and define the valuation framework – record them on the valuation form.
4. Assign value scores and support them with arguments – record this on the valuation form
5. Processing the assessment.
6. Decision or action.[24]

This tool is designed to make the problematic concept of 'value' manageable for collection managers and decision makers, so that they can decide about next future steps in the cultural biography of the painting collections involved in this study. This future might well be digital, in the form of databases, websites, and online exhibitions, or through the use of social media; they will not replace the physical museum object though. The necessary informative aspects embedded in an original painting (feel and look, technical features and evidence of use) must not be overlooked. On the contrary, getting access to a physical museum object is fundamental to its analysis. Although, Craig MacDonald in 'Assessing the user experience (UX) of online museum collections: Perspectives from design and museum professionals' states that "studies show that online museum collections are among the least popular features of a museum website, which many museums attribute to a lack of interest", it is important that existing and future online-collection interfaces are optimally designed. [25] I think that more than the disinterest of the audiences the poor user experiences discourage people to use digital possibilities to find images.

A multi-layered Chinese export painting website in the Netherlands with a presentation of all inventoried paintings could not adopt a representational approach that focused solely on image content. Naturally, such a digital tool is intended to be more than just an online image library. As many markings of references as possible concerning the paintings must be included. This means that, besides technical features and physically marked numbers or captions on the paintings themselves, information about their total trajectory from production to consumption should also be presented on such a website. This brings us back to the apparently effective tools for disentangling these commodities: a cultural biography, translation of content and materiality, and examination of multiple 'sites' and 'modalities', including documentary sources on the various genres.

By embracing digital technology, such an initiative includes improving access to the now overlooked museum items. In addition to this benefit, this will certainly enhance the profile of individual institutions, "beyond their physical parameters, sharing the knowledge contained within them as far afield as possible and fostering collaboration with specific audiences."[26] According to Gerhard Jan Nauta, an art historian specialised in visual knowledge and humanities computing, large-scale digitisation is taking place in the Netherlands by museums and archives, but this does not mean than it will serve the public on a similar scale. He states that

more than half of the digital collections in 2013

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23 See: http://cultureelerfgoed.nl/sites/default/files/publications/assessing-museum-collections_0.pdf (consulted July 2016). Concerning the methodology to valuate a collection, the criteria are classified into four main groups: "One relates to formal features, such as provenance, condition and rarity or representativeness. This leads to a description, but not yet a valuation. The other three groups of criteria relate to three value domains: culture historical, social and use value. Although these three groups are in principle of equal value, users may impose their own hierarchy if they so wish. In order to be considered part of cultural heritage, an item or collection must satisfy at least one 'culture historical' criterion." (http://cultureelerfgoed.nl/publicaties/assessing-museum-collections).

24 http://cultureelerfgoed.nl/sites/default/files/publications/assessing-museum-collections_0.pdf, Content (consulted July 2016).

25 MacDonald 2015.

26 I am much inspired by the words of Clare Harris, when she reflected on *The Tibet Album* website project at the conference 'The Future of Ethnographic Museums', at the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, in July 2013 (http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/PRMconference_lectures.html). In her paper 'The digitally distributed museum and its discontents' she examined whether the digitally distributed museum will always meet with the desired response from its users (consulted March 2016).

can only be consulted within the walls of the institution, and then sometimes only by its own members of staff. This is largely due to the legal restrictions on providing online digital collections. Copyright, for example, means that institutions with recent heritage material are limited in their possibilities.[27]

One of the primary objectives of digitisation is that the corpus will be searchable and available and incorporated in a multi-layered web resource accessible for anyone, anywhere. At the same time, we must acknowledge that such a website aims to explore the historical potential of the depicted scenes and, to cite *The Tibet Album* website,

encourages new ways of thinking about visual history, to 'reconstitute' the collections as fully as possible (that is, enable related groups of images to be seen in their various historical relationships with each other, even when they may be spread across a number of different collections), develop comparative tools and 'routes' for navigating through the collections, and to explore the content as well as the context and history of image making.[28]

That being said, as the Dutch collections with their multifaceted features are significant both in value and in size, I am confident that they have the potential to uncover more dynamic cultural interactions in the China-Netherlands trade context, and to connect the early modern and modern periods in Chinese and in Western art history in an expanded field. A second objective of a more innovative approach to this kind of material culture serves a more banal end, namely to organise a crowdfunding project, instead of selling off the artworks that are hidden away, and reinvest the money to restore sub-collections so that they can become exhibitable and exchangeable objects again.

A number of steps are necessary to achieve viable digital accessibility and permanent (online) visibility for the most important Chinese export paintings and albums in the Dutch collections:

1. Create a quantitative and qualitative overview with the objective of producing descriptions of the main subject matter, including assignment to a genre, date of production, country of origin, technical details, etc.
2. Prioritise the selection of paintings according to standards and elaborate rubrics (using the method of *Assessing Museum Collections*) relating to commodity/export value, historic value, artistic value and material value.
3. Order the digital museum search systems from cooperating parties, according to predefined standards, and make them usable for intended purposes: thumbnails and metadata widely shared, and high resolution images.
4. Design a multi-layered website.

Such a plan of attack – to responsibly make the Dutch collections visible online or, otherwise, to safeguard and preserve them for long-term use, and to make them accessible anytime, anywhere

Young man on a bed smoking opium, with two Chinese ladies, anonymous, watercolour on paper, 1850–1860, 31 x 23.5 cm, Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, loose leaf tucked in album with inv.no. 29476-3

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27 http://www.cultuurindex.nl/sector/erfgoed (consulted March 2016). Nauta is working at the DEN Foundation (Digital Heritage Netherlands) as a researcher, where research topics include monitoring digital heritage and born digital heritage. He is also employed by Leiden University, where at present (2016) he is a director of education at the Art History Department. Read further on this topic on www.nrc.nl/handelsblad/2016/02/13/blokkades-in-de-beeldbank-1587780. The Rijksstudio of the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam seems to be an exception to this practice (www.rijksmuseum.nl).

28 Mandy Sadan, http://tibet.prm.ox.ac.uk/tibet_methodology_aims.html (consulted March 2016).

– fits well with international developments. Some good examples of this approach are the touch-based interactive initiative at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, Artstor's digital media management tool *Shared Shelf*, and the database of Japanese Buddhist art in European collections.[29]

In the Netherlands, we should strive to reach a situation where (clusters of) museums with Chinese export paintings in their collection, together with, for example, Leiden University Libraries with its Asian Library (a major international knowledge hub on Asia), are able to use a similar tool to structure provenance and historical exhibition data, so that curators, scholars, and software developers can create knowledgeable visualisations through a new infrastructure of visual culture.[29] Accordingly, the Dutch national museum infrastructure requires a standard and a structure for digital records of provenance data to be usable in a development capacity. Like the initiative in the Pittsburgher museum, in the Netherlands, we should start with a pilot to demonstrate the types of stories that can be told with this type of structured data. Before such a project can scale outwards from, for example the National Museum of World Cultures (Museum Volkenkunde and Tropenmuseum) as a proof-of-concept project, we need to gather narratives and it is necessary to work on internal data structures and prototyping with the Chinese export painting collections of both museums. In tandem with the reaction of Joshua Bell, researcher at the Smithsonian Institute Washington on this museum's objects in the anthropology department, we could say that the collections in these two Dutch ethnography museums also "have constituencies around the world".[31] Ultimately, a project to make these paintings known to a wider audience, and this fits excellently the RCMC's research profile, must aim for a free and open image repository, with often emotionally moving and astonishing cultural biographies. It might be optimistic, but I think the breadth and value of the collections, combined with the current international attention for this enthralling painting phenomenon, lend them potential for a transformative experience.

Back on the stage

A museum should not only be a strongbox or treasure trove, it must also be an inclusively working and appealing space of intercultural dialogue, reaching a broad audience, surrounded by beautiful and important objects that offer, as the report 'European perspectives on museum objects' suggests, "a forum for societal dialogues so as to meet different experiences and perspectives, and a place of enlightenment and reconciliation."[32] Or, in the words of Saralyn

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29 http://www.cmoa.org/provenance-research (consulted September 2015). The Carnegie initiative, called Art Tracks: The provenance visualization project, includes the whole narrative of ownership in a painting's journey over time and space. "The framework of Art Tracks will transform what are currently dry, un-engaging museum provenance and exhibition records into lively historical narratives about art, museums, and history, thus enhancing visitors' experiences of artworks both in the museum and on the web", as is written on the museum's website. Jeffrey Inscho's blog reads: "The ability to ask impossible questions and receive answers previously inaccessible, across a museum's full collection and (eventually) across many museums' collections, is a resource art historians and scholars would find extremely valuable." (Inscho 2014).
http://www.artstor.org/sharedshelf (consulted March 2016). The Shared Shelf tool is used by four scholarly American knowledge centres (Harvard University, University of Delaware, Lafayette College and SUNY Purchase) who, with this tool, support faculty campus wide, building image collections for research, teaching and learning, and providing access beyond their institutions.
http://aterui.i.hosei.ac.jp:8080/index.html (consulted March 2016). The Japanese Buddhist art in European collections web-based database is jointly built by a team of scholars from Japan and Switzerland (Research Center of International Japanese Studies of the Hosei University and the Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies of the University of Zurich), and includes Japanese Buddhist objects from 46 museums worldwide. The materials on this database are the intellectual property of third parties and are, thus, protected by internationally recognised laws of copyright and intellectual property.

30 Accordingly, I support the idea of Judy Luther, President Informed Strategies of Shared Shelf, presented in her white paper 'Digital media management / Shared Shelf' that including image management in a library's resources is consistent with the expanded view that libraries are not limited to acquiring published information, but can play an active role in the creation of new knowledge (Luther).

31 Bell 2015, 14.

32 Schilling et al. 2016, Greeting (preface) by Hans Martin Hinz, President of the International Council of Museums (ICOM).

Reece Hardy, director of the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas, a museum "can offer you these objects of beauty and pleasure for your consideration and your interpretation while providing context and research and understanding from the museum side."[33] In addition, a museum, in contrast to other educational institutions, is "uniquely characterised by processing and promoting information, knowledge as well as insight through historical, cultural and natural-history objects and collections."[34] Despite this idea, the current *zeitgeist* advocates reducing the size of invaluable (read: unseen) museum items and is questioning the public value of collections, and it is gaining attention. The fact that museums should collect with future generations in mind and because it is not possible to know, after all, what future audiences will value, donations and acquisitions, are "still far more common than disposals."[35] I count on intelligent decision-makers, who understand that collections exist for more than display and who recognise that they also provide "a vital source of information for researchers across a wide variety of disciplines who benefit from the thorough approach of curators over several centuries."[36] In addition to research collections, behind-the-scenes tours that demonstrate a depot collection to a broad audience are proving a big success. Thus, the higher quality storage conditions that make the depots suitable for receiving groups of visitors are essential for publicly validating multifaceted museum work.

In conclusion, the lack of exhibition space in museums is widely acknowledged. However, more Chinese export paintings should be on display, at least once in their lifetime. These valuable, transcultural artworks, with their specific use values and their many stories, are forever linked with and give important insight into the Dutch trading episode with 'the East' between the 1770s and the 1870s. To emit a national agency that cares about culture and appreciates "museum-learning,"[37] the significance of the Dutch collections ought to be experienced in a cutting edge exhibition, responsibly composed by a (community co-produced) curatorial team. In the making-of-process of such an exhibition, for example, the museum can organise 'painting appraisal days'. Everyone who owns a Chinese export painting at home can come along to show their piece to Chinese painting experts and valuers, to hear their appraisal of its historic, artistic, material, and financial value. In return, the museum will get a rich palette of stories connected to the cultural biographies of these still 'hidden' pieces of art. Such a show, produced from the perspective of "from the now to the past,"[38] together with other objects that signal 'China' in an integrated organic context, would provide possibilities to delve deeper on the internet to find the narratives and scholarly strands behind them. Moreover, I am convinced that their archival significance and their aesthetical beauty will amaze many. Likewise, their impact will help to dissolve the boundaries between the dichotomy of art that is 'Western' and art that is 'Chinese'. Ultimately, they will create a relationship between visitors, the culture at large, and with future generations, either 'here' or 'there'. Equally important, their visibility would put an end to the almost global ignorance about the Dutch collections.

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33 Wishna 2014.

34 Schilling et al. 2016, Greeting (preface) by Hans Martin Hinz, President of the International Council of Museums (ICOM).

35 Brown 2015.

36 Ibid.

37 Elwick 2013.

38 Zian & Waslander 2014