Framing China: performativity and narrative in museum displays of Chinese porcelain

Yang, P.-Y.

CHAPTER 3 Focalization: Comparison of the Exhibition Narratives of *Asia > Amsterdam* at the Rijksmuseum and *Asia in Amsterdam* at the Peabody Essex Museum

Who, in what context, is presented as seeing?

Patrick O'Neill, *Fictions of Discourse*

Introduction: The Power of Focalization

This chapter aims to show the importance of focalization, as both a narrative technique and an analytical tool, in the analysis of performative qualities of exhibitions. It takes the form of a comparative study of two co-organized special exhibitions: *Asia > Amsterdam* (October 17, 2015-January 17, 2016) at the Rijksmuseum and *Asia in Amsterdam* (February 27-June 5, 2016) in Salem's Peabody Essex Museum in the United States (hereinafter referred to as the PEM).[282] Many objects that were displayed in *Asia > Amsterdam* were also shown in *Asia in Amsterdam*. Most of them come from the collections of the two museums, but pieces were also borrowed from other private and institutional lenders.

Asia in Amsterdam was initially conceived as a small installation accompanying another exhibition, *Golden: Dutch and Flemish Masterworks from the Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo Collection*, hosted by the PEM in 2011. The Rijksmuseum, which was about to reopen after a ten-year renovation, agreed to lend the PEM works for this small installation. This collaboration eventually facilitated a new project of co-organizing special exhibitions in the two museums: namely, *Asia > Amsterdam* and *Asia in Amsterdam*.[283]

---

[282] The exhibition in the Rijksmuseum was initially titled *Asia in Amsterdam* as well. According to an email sent on July 15, 2016 from the art historian Jan van Campen, who is also one of the exhibition curators, the change of title was very much a graphic decision. The graphic designer at the Rijksmuseum, Irma Boom, preferred *Asia > Amsterdam* over *Asia in Amsterdam* in her designs for the posters, brochures, advertisements, and cover of the exhibition catalogue. It seems to me, however, confusing to use the mark '>' in the title, not only because it is hard to pronounce (still *in*?), but also because its meaning is ambiguous, as it looks like both a directional arrow (Asia *to* Amsterdam?) and a mathematical symbol (Asia *is greater than* Amsterdam?).

[283] Regarding the origin of the exhibition programming, see the accompanying catalogue of the exhibition: Karina H. Corrigan, Jan van Campen, and Femke Diercks, eds., *Asia in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Golden Age* (Salem: Peabody Essex Museum; Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum; New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2015), 10.

Both the Rijksmuseum and the PEM hold renowned collections of Asian export art that are inextricably connected to global trade in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. This laid the foundation for their cooperation in exhibition planning and content. The Rijksmuseum, as I have explained in the previous chapter, is a Dutch national monument that houses a collection of Asian export products associated with the VOC's overseas expansion. On the other side of the Atlantic, the PEM's collection history is also inextricably linked to early global maritime trade, as the city where the museum is located, Salem, was an important port for trade with China and the East Indies in the nineteenth century.

The PEM is the successor of the East India Marine Society, founded in Salem in 1799. The Society's members were limited to Salem's elite, people who had sailed beyond either the Cape of Good Hope or Cape Horn, and brought diverse objects back from the northwest coast of America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. The Society's charter included a provision for the establishment of a museum displaying their collection of "natural and artificial curiosities" gathered on their global voyages.[284] By 1825, the Society moved into its own building in Salem, the East India Marine Hall, now embedded within the PEM's building. The East India Marine Hall was then gradually transitioned into the Peabody Museum, which was opened in 1915.[285] Generally, from 1825 to the late 1990s, the collection of the Society was displayed as ethnographical/natural-historical materials that served to promote local knowledge about distant lands and to signal their owners' successes in global trade.[286] In 1992, the Peabody Museum was merged with the nearby Essex Institute, which was a local organization concerned with natural history, and became the PEM as seen today. In the ensuing years, the PEM has expanded its building and reimagined itself as an *art* museum. For the PEM, the idea that art can "bridge time, space, and cultural boundaries" provides a useful approach to break free from its prior historical orientation "as an institution by and about Salem sea captains."[287] Today, the museum's vision is to explore the inextricable cultural connections embodied in the collection. Particularly, Asian export art is one of the PEM's key collection categories, as it provides an important window into the profound historical relations between artistic creation and overseas trade.

According to the accompanying catalogue of the exhibition, edited by the curators from both museums, *Asia > Amsterdam* and *Asia in Amsterdam* aim to show the "transformative impact that Asian

---

[284] John R. Crimes, "Curiosity, Cabinets, and Knowledge: A Perspective on the Native American Collection of the Peabody Essex Museum," in *Uncommon Legacies: Native American Art from the Peabody Essex Museum*, eds. John Richard Grimes, Christian Feest, and Mary Lou Curran (New York: American Federation of Arts in Association with University of Washington Press, 2002), 17. The purpose of displaying the members' collections to the public was not only intellectual (spreading knowledge) but also practical, as showing objects assembled from around the world reinforced the social status of the Society's members in Salem. See Patricia Johnston, "Global Knowledge in the Early Republic: The East India Marine Society's 'Curiosities' Museum," in *East-West Interchanges in American Art: A Long and Tumultuous Relationship*, ed. Joan M. Marter (Washington DC.: Smithsonian Scholars Press, 2011), 68-79.

[285] Walter Muir Whitehill, *The East India Marine Society and the Peabody Museum of Salem: A Sesquicentennial History* (Salem: Peabody Museum, 1949), 6.

[286] See Karen Kramer Russell, "Over 200 Years of Native American Art and Culture at the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts," *Tulsa La Review* 45, no. 1 (2009): 32-44; and Johnston, "Global Knowledge in the Early Republic," 74.

[287] See Russell, "Over 200 Years of Native American Art and Culture at the Peabody Essex Museum," 7; Peggy Levitt and Katherine Cali, "Using the Local to Tell a Global Story: How the Peabody Essex Museum Became a World Class Museum," *Museum and Society* 14, no. 1 (2016), 152. The latter has a detailed discussion about the PEM's efforts to reposition itself as an art museum.

luxuries had on Dutch art and life in the seventeenth century."[288] The catalogue explains that the scope of Asia in the exhibitions specifically refers to the areas of and between India, Indonesia, China and, Japan, basically the trading sphere over which the VOC had control in the seventeenth century.[289] The term luxuries here refers to objects that were valued by the Dutch not only because of their materials (e.g. gold and gems) but also because of their fascinating craftmanship, visual and sensual allure, and symbolic function of communicating the social status of their owners.[290]

Many of the objects included in the exhibitions embody combined styles. For example, both exhibitions show a Chinese Qing porcelain sweetmeat set decorated with the coat of arms of Johannes Camphuys (1634-1695), the former Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies, who used it to serve Japanese cuisine to European guests.[291] Objects like this are fascinating not only because of their blending of materials and styles, but also because of the rich information they contain about historical interactions across cultural borders. With these objects that demonstrate once flourishing networks of trade and exchange in their visual vocabularies, the two exhibitions seek to highlight the "artistic interactions made possible through the global networks of the VOC."[292] In this sense, *Asia > Amsterdam* and *Asia in Amsterdam* echo the idea of transculturation discussed in Chapter 1 in regard to the trans-border arrangement of Ming pilgrim flasks and the narrative of transculturation in the British Museum today. As suggested, arranging and interpreting a museum object through a transcultural lens aims to draw audiences' attention to the object's past circulation across geo-cultural borders and its connections with different groups, and to show how these bring multiple meanings and identities to the object. A transcultural perspective of interpretation, as Monica Juneja and Anna Grasskamp argue, enables a shift of focus "from the site of origin of an object—the place where traditional art history situates and interprets its objects—to more interactive zones and spaces of contact in order to look at the dynamic relationships between a number of sites."[293] Arguably, this 'interactive zone' is what *Asia > Amsterdam* and *Asia in Amsterdam* create in their galleries, in which audiences are invited to see the potential of objects to illustrate historical interactions between the Netherlands and Asia.

Despite these common grounds, the two exhibitions construct very different narratives. This is not only because of their different arrangements of objects; I propose, their distinctive use of focalization also enables them to highlight different messages. The term focalization was first introduced by the literary theorist Gérard Genette in order to distinguish the question "whose point of view orients the

---

[288] Corrigan, Van Campen, and Diercks, *Asia in Amsterdam*, 9. Broadly, the two exhibitions present the transformative impact of this encounter with four themes. These are as follows: home furnishing (how Asian luxuries permitted new schemes of interior decoration); fashion (how Asian textiles with new fabrics and patterns led to new fashion); collecting and publishing (how new information about Asia facilitated the collection of objects and the publishing of printed maps and illustrated books); and artistic creation (how Asian luxuries inspired the making of Dutch art, such as still life and ceramics).

[289] Ibid., 14. This exhibition catalogue is very informative. It contains seven essays on the topic of the Dutch trade and consumption of Asian luxuries. The lavish color illustrations of the objects on display are distributed in these essays, with detailed notes on the historical interactions between Asia and Europe behind the manufacture and consumption of each piece.

[290] Ibid.

[291] This porcelain sweetmeat is collected in the PEM, object number: AE85686.A-I.

[292] Corrigan, Van Campen, and Diercks, *Asia in Amsterdam*, 16.

[293] Monica Juneja and Anna Grasskamp, "EurAsian Matters: An Introduction," in *EurAsian Matters: China, Europe, and the Transcultural Object, 1600-1800*, eds. Anna Grasskamp and Monica Juneja (Cham: Springer, 2018), 7.

narrative perspective" from the question "who is the narrator."[294] The distinction between who *sees* and who *speaks* is important as it enables a better understanding of the communicative conception of vision in a narrative. However, Genette's proposition of a taxonomy of three types of focalization (zero, internal, and external) have been criticized as confusing as they are hard to distinguish from each other in many cases.[295]

Genette's concept was substantially revised by Mieke Bal. Bal anchors focalization in the relation between "that which is 'seen' or perceived […] and the vision through which they are seen or presented."[296] In this way, she underlines the strong connection between focalization and perception.[297] Furthermore, Bal distinguishes two levels of focalization, each defined in her own way: external focalization is the first level, at which the subject of focalization—the focalizor—is a narrator located outside the represented event (the story world); when this external focalizor delegates focalization to "a character-bound focalizor" who is located in the represented event (the story world), this is second-level, internal focalization.[298] Bal's concept of focalization is hierarchically structured in that the internal or character-bound focalizor is embedded in the external or non-character-bound focalization. As such, recognizing *where* and *how* "the focalization is transferred from the first [external] to the second [internal] level" is crucial, and an issue I will discuss further in this chapter.

In addition to her clear definitions of internal and external focalization, Bal's focalization theory will be my main paradigm for three reasons. First, Bal provides a convincing reason for using the term focalization instead of existing terms such as point of view and perspective. Genette considers focalization, on a terminological level, as merely a "reformulation" of the concept of point of view, a term that is used to "draw together and systematize" the many ideas regarding issues of visual field in narrative.[299] However, as the literary scholar Burkhard Niederhoff points out, this is "an underestimation of the conceptual differences between focalization and the traditional terms."[300] Bal, in comparison, conceives of the term focalization not just as a typology of narratives but also, and more importantly, as an analytical tool composed of the act of focalization (to focalize), the subject of the focalizing (the focalizor), and the object of the focalizing (the focalized). As Bal notes, the terms point of view and

---

[294] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1980[1972]), 186.

[295] According to Genette, zero focalization refers to a narrative in which the omniscient narrator has unrestricted vision and thus sees and is knowledgeable about more than any character in the story; external focalization refers to a narrative in which the narrator has restricted vision and sees less than a given character in the story; and internal focalization refers to a narrative in which the narrator has a restricted vision and only sees what a given character sees. See Genette, *Narrative* Discourse, 189-194. For a general discussion and criticism of Genette's concept of focalization, see Peter Hühn, Wolf Schmid, and Jörg Schönert, eds., *Point of View, Perspective, and Focalization: Modelling Mediation in Narrative* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Guyter, 2009).

[296] Mieke Bal, *Looking In: The Art of Viewing* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 43.

[297] Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative.* Second Edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997[1985]), 142.

[298] Ibid., 26, 156-158. For a discussion of the debate between Gérard Genette and Mieke Bal on the topic of focalization, see Patrick O'Neill, *Fictions and Discourse: Reading Narrative Theory* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1994).

[299] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1988[1983]), 65.

[300] Burkhard Niederhoff, "Focalization," in *Handbook of Narratology*, eds. Peter Hühn, John Pier, and Jörg Schönert (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 115.

perspective have no customary verbs to describe the processing activity, nor do they have nouns to identify the agent who performs the act of focalization. However, as Bal argues, focalization is a "subject-oriented theory."[301] In order to analyze the function of focalization, it is necessary to have terms through which the performing subject and the object of that performance can be derived and described.

Second, Bal's conception of focalization as a subject-oriented theory helps to justify my choice to bring this term into this specific chapter. In the previous two chapters, I use the term perspective to describe a particular curatorial point of view from which the meaning of an object is regarded. For example, the British Museum's transcultural perspective is revealed in its trans-border arrangement of Ming pilgrim flasks, and the Rijksmuseum's Dutch-centric perspective is revealed in its juxtaposition of Chinese porcelain with Dutch portraits. The concept of focalization enables this chapter to further examine whether the exhibition story told to audiences is subjectively filtered, or to use Bal's word "*coloured*," by a specific agent who is not a curator but a *character* located in the story world of the exhibition.[302] In this sense, focalization, as an analytical tool, contributes to a close reading of the structuring of the exhibition story, a more in-depth analysis of the meaning generated by the specific way in which the objects on display are organized.

The third reason I apply Bal's idea of focalization is that, as a cultural theorist, Bal emphasizes the manipulative effect of focalization. For her, focalization, as a term derived from photography and film, has a strong technical sense, making it a useful tool to reveal that "any 'vision' presented can have a strongly manipulative effect," and in doing so to "help us keep our attention on the technical side of such a means of manipulation."[303] Hence, what she proposes is in fact a more critical analysis of focalization as a "subtle manipulation," in order to "expose the hidden ideology embedded in a narrative structure," rather than merely another terminological label for classifying a text.[304] This provides a critical underpinning and a clear account of why I adopt focalization as an analytical tool for my comparative study of these two exhibitions.

This chapter has three sections. The first section compares the narrative structures of the two exhibitions as reflected in their overall different spatial organizations and object arrangements. The second and third sections further examine the focalization strategies practiced in certain galleries of the exhibitions. The purpose here is not to contend that each of these two exhibitions only uses a specific type of focalization, nor to evaluate which type of focalization is the most desirable. Rather, I aim to explore how the operations of different types of focalization in certain galleries of the two exhibitions contribute to highlighting specific messages.

3-1 Same Luxuries, Different Stories

Asia > Amsterdam and *Asia in Amsterdam* share the same objective of celebrating seventeenth-century Amsterdam as one of the most bustling cities in Europe and a city where the yearning for the Asian

[301] Bal, *Narratology*, 143-144.
[302] Ibid., 8.
[303] Ibid., 144.
[304] Ibid., 171.

luxuries became affordable. These Asian imports greatly changed the Dutch lifestyle and brought an air of artistic innovation to the Netherlands. Interestingly, aside from this shared curatorial intention, each of the two exhibitions has its own way of organizing its storyline and the presentation. As a result, their take-home messages may not be quite the same.

3-1-1 Asia > Amsterdam at the Rijksmuseum

Asia > Amsterdam is located in the Philips Wing, an annex of the Rijksmuseum where special exhibitions are often held. The exhibition has ten galleries: *Gallery 1 Asia > Amsterdam*; *Gallery 2 Amsterdam/The Fascination with Porcelain*; *Gallery 3 In Asia/Batavia*; *Gallery 4 Portugal and Spain in Asia*; *Gallery 5 Scholars and Collectors/Rembrandt*; *Gallery 6 Wearing Asia*; *Gallery 7 Lacquerware/Amalia and Frederick Henry*; *Gallery 8 Pronk Still Lifes/Asia in the Dutch Interior*; *Gallery 9 Interactions in Ceramics*; and final, *Gallery 10 Asia Everywhere* (**Figure 3.1**).

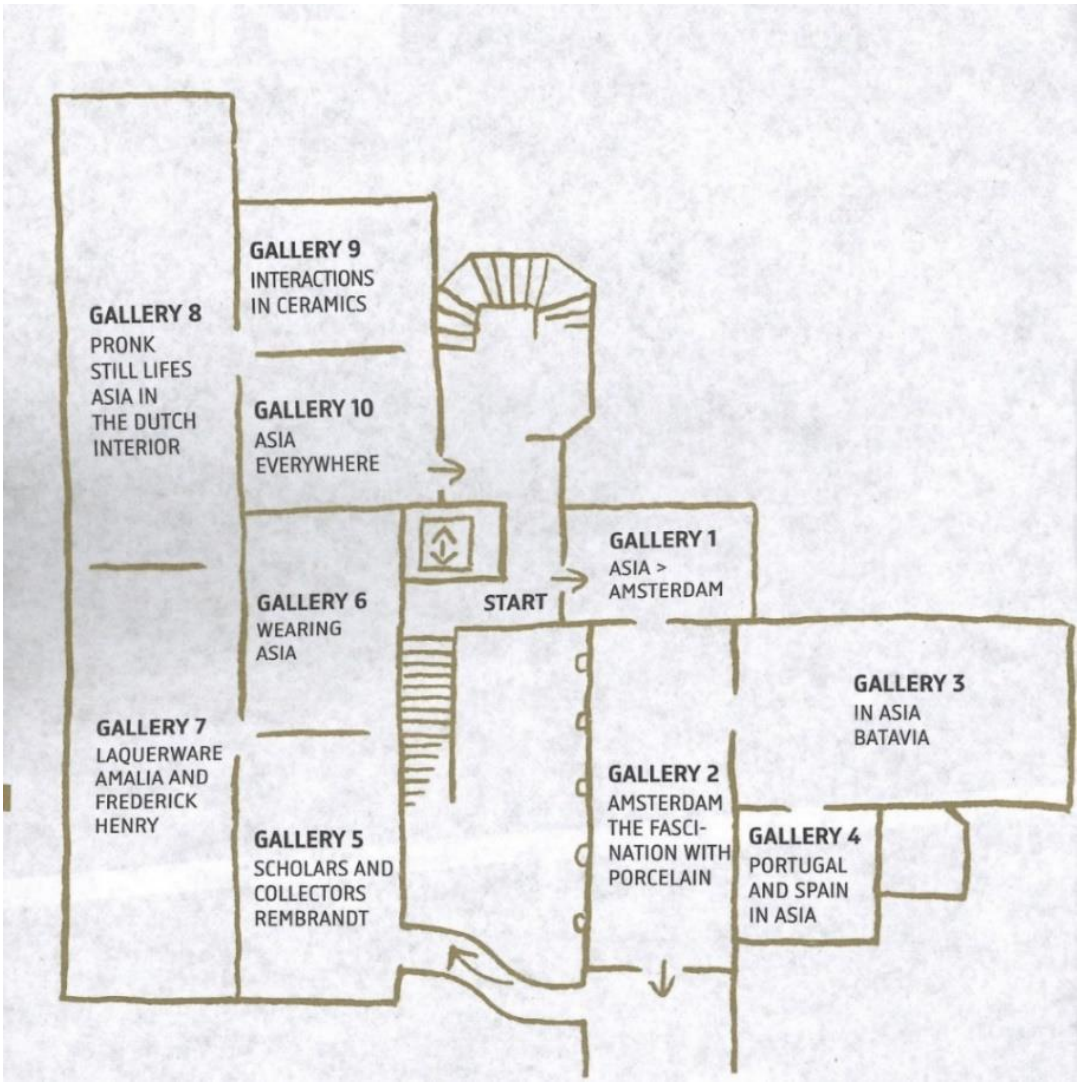

Figure 3.1 Floor plan of *Asia > Amsterdam*. © The Rijksmuseum

The gallery walls are wallpapered with a series of enlarged watercolors with garish patterns designed by the contemporary Dutch artist Kiki van Eijk. The intention here is to use these colorful wallpapers to suggest the theme of each gallery display. For example, the wallpaper in *Gallery 1 Asia > Amsterdam* immerses audiences in a blue seascape, echoing the maritime scene represented in the Dutch painting on display, *The Return in Amsterdam of the Second Expedition to the East Indies* (1599) (**Figures 3.2-3.3**). Similarly, the pattern of the wallpaper in *Gallery 6 Wearing Asia* is allegedly inspired by multicolored cotton fabric from India (**Figure 3.4**). Similar floral patterns are found on a dressing gown made in the Netherlands using cotton cloth from India which is showcased in the middle of the gallery space. However, it should be noted that, in the exhibition's galleries, there are no labels or captions to shed light on the themes of each watercolor. These ten watercolors are reproduced by the Rijksmuseum as ten greeting cards and sold in the museum's souvenir shop. It is through the texts attached behind the card box that I gleaned the theme of each of them. Thus, it is almost impossible for audiences to identify the theme of each wallpaper, let alone connect the watercolor with the corresponding gallery display. What is more, although these wallpapers are indeed visually attractive, they also run the risk of being lurid and overwhelming, pulling viewers' attention away from the objects on display, which are supposed to be the protagonists on the exhibition stage.

Figure 3.2 View of *Gallery 1 Asia > Amsterdam* in *Asia > Amsterdam*. On the left wall: *The return in Amsterdam of the second expedition to the East Indies* (1599). On the right wall: *Map of the East Indies* (1626-1699). In the showcase: A Japanese blue and white plate with the monogram of the VOC and a Dutch silver spice box. © The Rijksmuseum

Figure 3.3 *The return in Amsterdam of the second expedition to the East Indies* (1599), by Hendrik Cornelisz. Vroom. Oil on canvas. Size: high 102.3 cm; width 218.4 cm. Collected in the Rijksmuseum. Object number: SK-A-2858

Figure 3.4 View of *Gallery 6 Wearing Asia* in *Asia > Amsterdam*. © The Rijksmuseum

The floor plan of the exhibition reveals that its narrative is arranged sequentially, with a clear beginning and end, and an intended order (see **Figure 3.1**). This floor plan is printed in the exhibition's booklet, accompanied by all the label contents.[305] The story of the exhibition begins when Asian imports arrive in Amsterdam on the VOC's ships. The object numbered 1 in the first gallery is a painting called *The Return in Amsterdam of the Second Expedition to the East Indies* (see **Figure 3.3**). The seascape and joyous occasion marks "a commercial triumph," the label reads, "the first step towards the success of the future VOC had been taken." Compared to other galleries of the exhibition, *Gallery 1 Asia > Amsterdam* is the smallest and has the fewest showpieces. It acts as a prelude to the main story which happened after Asian luxuries were unloaded from the VOC ships. The storyline immediately shifts to Amsterdam's cityscape and Dutch domestic interiors in the next gallery.

When audiences step into *Gallery 2 Amsterdam/The Fascination with Porcelain*, what immediately greets them is a large-scale *Portrait of Wollebrand Geleynssen de Jongh* (1674) (**Figures 3.5-3.6**). The label reads:

[305] The booklet is available at the exhibition entrance and free of charge.

> Wollebrand returned to Alkmaar in 1648 after working many years for the VOC, for which he held high offices in Persia (now Iran) and India. Back home, he had himself portrayed as a successful servant of the VOC by his fellow townsman Van Everdingen.

Holding his command baton, Wollebrand is depicted in a majestic pose, echoing the height of his career, although, according to the catalogue, the portrait was in fact commissioned by the elderly Wollebrand, just a year before his death.[306] Two other paintings, *View of the Golden Bend in the Herengracht* (1671-1672) (**Figure 3.7**) and *Still Life with Precious Objects from Asia and Elsewhere* (1712) (**Figure 3.8**), are displayed around Wollebrand's portrait. According to their labels, the former shows how "the canal became the domain of the very richest [, some of whom] earned their money from trade with Asia," while the latter provides an idealized representation of how "well-to-do Amsterdammers gave precious objects from Asia pride of place in their homes." After this, audiences in *Gallery 2* will be immersed in a world of goods constituted by a series of Dutch still lifes incorporating Chinese porcelain into the idealized representations of domestic settings (**Figures 3.9-3.10**). Moving from the glorious return of fully laden ships, to a cityscape of Amsterdam with mansions on both sides of the canal, to a room corner arrangement of precious goods from Asia, to a tabletop and ledge laden with porcelain, this viewing order amplifies a joyous mood, a celebration of the prosperity of Amsterdam.

Figure 3.5 View of *Gallery 2 Amsterdam/The Fascination with Porcelain* in *Asia > Amsterdam*. The painting on the left: *Still Life with Precious Objects from Asia and Elsewhere* (1712); on the right: *Portrait of Wollebrand Geleynsz de Jongh* (1674). © The Rijksmuseum

[306] Corrigan, Van Campen, and Diercks. *Asia in Amsterdam*, 56.

Figure 3.6 *Portrait of Wollebrand Geleynsz de Jongh* (1674) by Caesar van Everdingen. Oil on canvas. Size: high 214.5 cm; width 182.2 cm. Collected in the Stedelijk Museum Alkmaar. Inventory number: 020926

Figure 3.7 (left) *View of the Golden Bend in the Herengracht* (1671-1672), by Gerrit Berckheyde. Oil on Panel. Size: high 42.5 cm; width 57.9 cm. Collected in the Rijksmuseum. Object number: SK-A-5003
Figure 3.8 (right) *Still Life with Precious Objects from Asia and Elsewhere* (1712) by Jan van der Heyden. Oil on canvas. Size: high 75 cm; width 63.5 cm. Collected in Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest

Figure 3.9 View of *Gallery 2 Amsterdam/The Fascination with Porcelain* in *Asia > Amsterdam*. © The Rijksmuseum

Figure 3.10 View of *Gallery 2 Amsterdam/The Fascination with Porcelain* in *Asia > Amsterdam*. © The Rijksmuseum

The VOC's trading network in Asia is introduced in *Gallery 3 In Asia/Batavia*. According to the gallery plan, this gallery and the next one, *Gallery 4 Portugal and Spain in Asia*, both lead viewers back to *Gallery 2 Amsterdam/The Fascination with Porcelain* before they can continue visiting the remaining galleries. This layout makes the two galleries more like two subsections of *Gallery 2* (see **Figure 3.1**). The rest of the galleries (Galleries 5-10) of the exhibition show the Dutch reception of Asian luxuries with different emphases, including scholarly collecting and studying, fashion, interior decoration, local artistic innovation (e.g. Delftware), and tea drinking. In what follows, I would like to draw particular attention to the display in the last two galleries, *Gallery 9 Interactions in Ceramics* and *Gallery 10 Asia Everywhere*. Once we associate the last two galleries with the first two galleries (*Gallery 1 Asia > Amsterdam* and *Gallery 2 Amsterdam/The Fascination with Porcelain*), a coherent narrative of the Dutch domestication of Asian goods becomes evident.

Gallery 9 Interactions in Ceramics focuses on the interactions between the visual languages of porcelain and ceramics from China, Japan, and the Netherlands (**Figure 3.11**). Its wall caption indicates how the imported Chinese and Japanese porcelain "inspired potteries in Delft [who] found a way of making a very refined kind of earthenware that could compete with Asian porcelain." The gallery shows a mixed arrangement in which pieces of Chinese and Japanese porcelain in a European style are juxtaposed with pieces of Delftware in a Chinese or Japanese style. Here, a blue and white palette is no longer necessarily an identifier of China, and might mean a piece is from Delft. Similarly, works with multi-colored decorations may not be Japanese porcelain and could be Delft earthenware. In this way, it is almost impossible for general audiences to recognize whether these ceramic (or porcelain) pieces were produced in China, Japan, or the Netherlands without reading the labels in the gallery. In this way, the arrangement blurs, to some extent, the difference between the things made in Asia and in the Netherlands. Notably, some pieces of Delftware showcased in this gallery are seen again in *Gallery 5 Innovators* in *Asia in Amsterdam*, where the focus is not how similar Delftware is to Chinese porcelain, but rather how Delft potters developed diverse products for different export markets, including Japan and France (**Figure 3.12**).

Figure 3.11 (left) View of *Gallery 9 Interactions in Ceramics* in *Asia > Amsterdam*. © The Rijksmuseum
Figure 3.12 (right) View of *Gallery 5 Innovators* in *Asia in Amsterdam*. The showcase on the left is captioned "Not all DELFTWARE is blue!" The showcase on the right is captioned "DELFTWARE for diverse markets." © The PEM

The mixed arrangement in *Gallery 9* in *Asia > Amsterdam* echoes the theme of the exhibition's final gallery, *Gallery 10 Asia Everywhere*. This final gallery shows a variety of materials, including fabric fragments from both India and Amsterdam, two pieces of silverware could be made in either the Hague or Southeast Asia, Chinese and Dutch tea services, a Dutch still life with teacups, and a Dutch painting depicting a Dutch family drinking tea. These objects are brought together to highlight a fact that after Asian luxuries were shipped to Amsterdam during the seventeenth century, they subsequently found their way throughout the Netherlands, to fascinate, to inspire, and to be absorbed into the Dutch arts and lifestyle.

Given the arrangements in the last two galleries, it seems that *Asia > Amsterdam* ends its story with an ideological subtext, showing how Asian goods were domesticated from signaling the exotic to signaling Dutchness in a process of "evolving identification."[307] This domestication process is especially visible if one compares the wall captions in the exhibition's first and final galleries:

> This exhibition focuses on the most beautiful objects from Asia to reach the Netherlands and charts their impact there. How this *exotic* luxury inspired Dutch painters, potters, lacquerware craftsmen, cabinet-makers and silk weavers is also explored. (wall text of *Gallery 1 Asia > Amsterdam*; emphasis added)

> The Asian objects that had been the subject of fascination in the beginning of the 17th century became increasingly *embedded* in Dutch culture… (wall text of *Gallery 10 Asia Everywhere*; emphasis added)

Acting as the opening and concluding remarks of the exhibition, these two wall texts outline a process of domestication: after being imported to Amsterdam, Asian goods were gradually separated from their exotic roots and became incorporated, embedded in Dutch material culture. The title of the final gallery, *Asia Everywhere*, can be understood as signaling the result of this domestication, of re-identifying Asian goods from exotic to Dutch; there seems to no need to distinguish *them* from *us*, as *they* (Asian material objects) were gradually embedded in *our* (Dutch) material culture; ultimately, *they* have become part of *us*.

Now, let us shift attention to the narrative structure of *Asia in Amsterdam* at the PEM. I will highlight differences in storyline organization and interpretive strategy between the two exhibitions.

3-1-2 Asia in Amsterdam at the PEM

Asia in Amsterdam has five galleries: *Gallery 1 Networkers*; *Gallery 2 Tastemakers*; *Gallery 3 Thought Leaders*; *Gallery 4 Fashionistas*; and finally, *Gallery 5 Innovators* (**Figure 3.13**). Clearly, these galleries are named to highlight certain groups of people who worked together to bring about great prosperity in seventeenth-century Dutch art and commerce. Like in *Asia > Amsterdam*, through the floor plan of *Asia in Amsterdam*, we can see its narrative has a clear beginning and end. The gallery walls are colored differently to help audiences maintain orientation. For example, *Gallery 3 Thought Leaders* is painted in yellow, while *Gallery 4*

[307] Dawn Odell, "Delftware and the Domestication of Chinese Porcelain," in *EurAsian Matters: China, Europe, and the Transcultural Object, 1600-1800*, eds. Anna Grasskamp and Monica Juneja (Cham: Springer, 2018), 177.

Fashionistas is painted in red (**Figures 3.14-3.15**). Without the fancy patterns seen in the wallpapers in *Asia > Amsterdam*, these colored walls are less distracting.

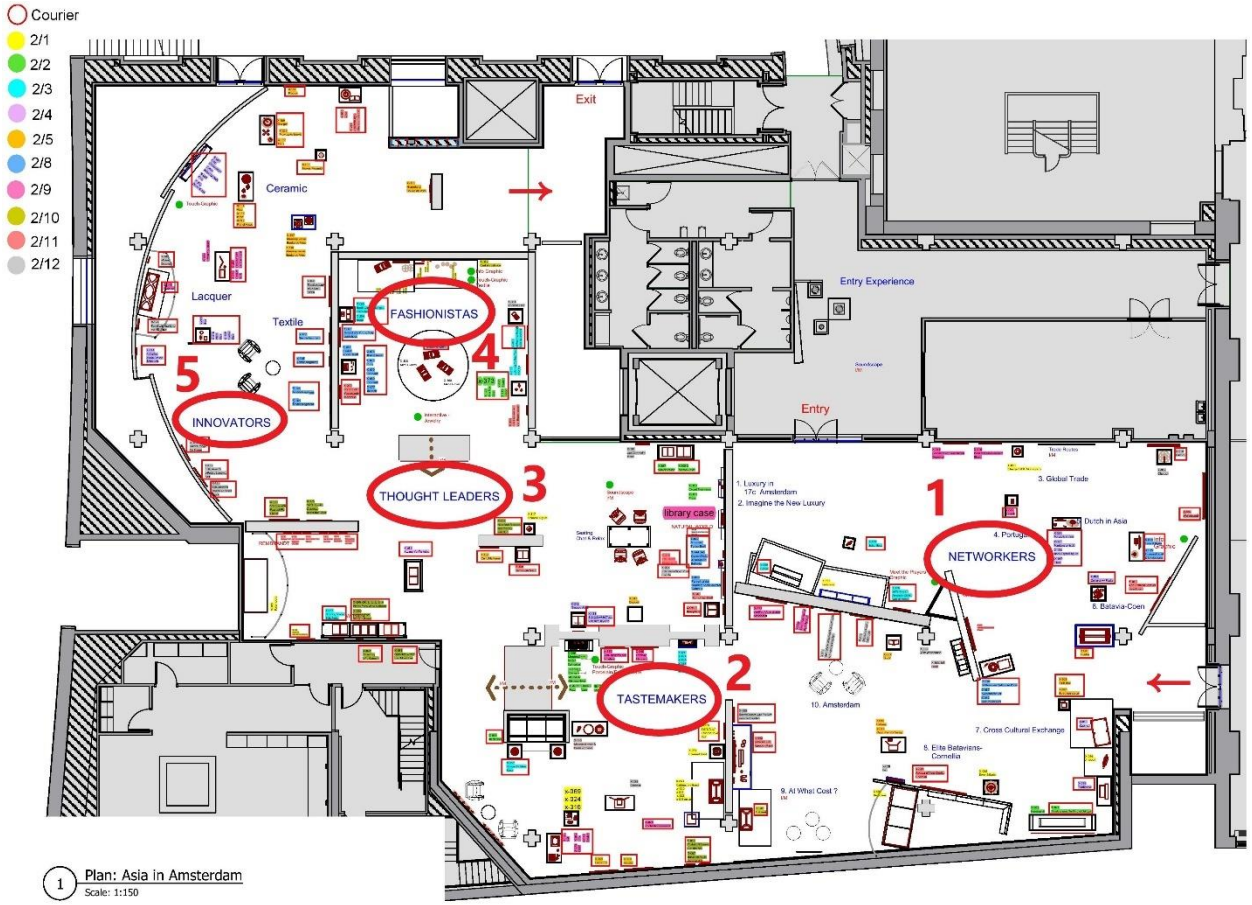

Figure 3.13 Floor plan of *Asia in Amsterdam*. The numbers 1-5 (indicating Galleries 1-5) and the red oval frames are added by the author. © The PEM

Figure 3.14 (left) View of *Gallery 3 Thought Leaders* in *Asia in Amsterdam*. © The PEM
Figure 3.15 (right) View of *Gallery 4 Fashionistas* in *Asia in Amsterdam*. © The PEM

As described in the previous section, *Asia > Amsterdam* draws attention mainly to what happened after Asian goods were imported into Amsterdam. In contrast, *Asia in Amsterdam* allocates its first, and also its largest, gallery, *Gallery 1 Networkers*, to present what happened before Asian luxuries reached Dutch

domestic interiors: that is, what happened out there in Asia. This gallery uses integrated media to map out the VOC shipping routes throughout Asia, Africa, and Europe (**Figure 3.16**). The animation offers, at a single glance, an overview of how Asian goods were exchanged for one another in inter-Asian trade, and how some of them were transported onto the Dutch ships, sailing from the VOC's Asian headquarters in Batavia, bypassing the Cape of Good Hope, and eventually reaching Amsterdam. Showcases in this gallery include maps and paintings that show the Dutch activity in Asia, some pieces of Dutch commissioned European-style furniture made in Batavia, and personalized Asian products bearing the coats of arms of the Governors-General of the Dutch East Indies. This gallery also showcases some objects that indicate Portuguese trade and missionary activity in Asia.

Gallery 1 is followed by a subsection called *Amsterdam*. This subsection displays seventeenth-century Dutch paintings and engravings that represent the economic prosperity of Amsterdam (**Figure 3.17**). Two wall infographics are also featured here; one introduces the city's population boom because of the rising global trade, and another explains the relation between the VOC and the birth of capitalism. According to Karina Corrigan, at the time the PEM's Associate Director of Collections and the curator of *Asia in Amsterdam*, this subsection is "essentially the conclusion of the first section [*Gallery 1 Networkers*]. Kind of a 'meanwhile back in Amsterdam…' moment to introduce the city to our visitors."[308] To this end, this subsection mainly displays paintings and engravings that profile Amsterdam. Indeed, compared to *Asia > Amsterdam* at the Rijksmuseum, where audiences can easily get an impression of Amsterdam right outside the museum, the exhibition at the PEM has more, or different, explaining to do. For a museum in the United States, both Asia and Amsterdam are, to a certain degree, foreign in a cultural and geographic sense. This subsection thus provides a sort of transition, a bit more information about Amsterdam before the exhibition's American-based audiences continue their visit.

Figure 3.16 View of *Gallery 1 Networkers* in *Asia in Amsterdam* with an animation of the VOC trade routes. © The PEM

[308] According to an email on October 25, 2016 from Karina Corrigan.

Figure 3.17 View of the subsection *Amsterdam* of *Gallery 1 Networkers*. © The PEM

After the *Amsterdam* subsection, the rest of the galleries (Galleries 2-5) of *Asia in Amsterdam* show how the imported Asian goods affected Dutch art and life in terms of interior decoration, scholarly collecting and publishing, fashion, and artistic innovation. These themes are basically the same as in *Asia > Amsterdam*. However, the two exhibitions have significant differences in the ways they conclude their stories and in their interpretive strategies.

Asia > Amsterdam, as suggested, adheres to the seventeenth-century timeframe throughout its narrative, and concludes its story with the idea of 'Asia everywhere', or the Dutch domestication of Asian goods. In comparison, the timeline in the final gallery of *Asia in Amsterdam*, *Gallery 5 Innovators*, is more panchronic. In addition to showing how the seventeenth-century Dutch still lifes, ceramics, textiles, and furniture were influenced by Asian luxury, the gallery displays three 2015 works by contemporary Dutch artist Bouke de Vries to indicate that such inspiration continues to this day. Two of these works are called *Memory Vessel XXX* and *Memory Vessel XXXI*, which are a pair of contemporary glass vessels filled with the collected remains of a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century Chinese porcelain jar and of a seventeenth-century Dutch delftware tobacco jar and clay pipes, respectively. The third piece, called *Homeland, Blue and White*, is a collage/map of the Netherlands today that is composed of fragments of seventeenth-century Chinese porcelain and Dutch delftware (**Figure 3.18**). All these three pieces were acquired by the PEM in 2016, ahead of the *Asia in Amsterdam* exhibition. The works by de Vries are the last showpieces, followed by the concluding wall text of the exhibition right beside the exit:

> At certain times, great achievements in art, science, and commerce come together to define a golden age. During the 17th century, art and ideas from Asia profoundly influences just such an era in the Netherlands.
> [Graphic callouts placed around the text above to list some similar moments]
> The Roman Empire
> Tang dynasty China
> Renaissance Florence
> Mughal India
> New York City in the 1920s
> Where and when will the next big moment occur?

The exit text conceptualizes the so-called Golden Age in a more collective dimension by expanding its timeline through the centuries, and concluding with an open-ended question that allows multiple responses and looks into the future.

Figure 3.18 View of *Gallery 5 Innovators* near the exit of Asia in Amsterdam. The objects in the left showcase: *Memory Vessel XXX* (left); *Memory Vessel XXXI* (right). The object on the wall: *Homeland, Blue and White*. © The PEM

The raising of questions without definite answers is a key aspect that differentiates *Asia in Amsterdam* from *Asia > Amsterdam*. By drawing on interactive installations and wall captions that pose open-ended questions allowing multiple interpretations, *Asia in Amsterdam* encourages audiences to engage with the exhibition in a more bodily and self-reflective way. For example, there are three hands-on displays in the exhibition: one in *Gallery 2 Tastemakers* with a European earthenware cup and a Chinese porcelain dish (**Figure 3.19**); another in *Gallery 4 Fashionista* with four fabric swatches of wool, linen, silk, and cotton; and a third in *Gallery 5 Innovators* with three fragments of Chinese porcelain, European earthenware, and Delftware (**Figure 3.20**). Each hands-on display is accompanied by a callout that invites audiences to think for themselves based on their own bodily experiences touching the objects on the tables:

> Touch and pick up these ceramics. What difference between earthenware and porcelain can you discover? Which seems more luxurious? (caption for the interactive table with a Chinese plate and a European cup in *Gallery 2 Tastemakers*)

> Touch and compare the materials. Which ones catch the light? Which feel smooth or rough? Handle them to see which are thick or thin, heavy or nearly weightless. Imagine you are a 17th-century fashionista. Which fabric would you wear? (caption for the interactive table with fabric examples in *Gallery 4 Fashionista*)
>
> Look at and touch these ceramic fragments. What differences between porcelain and delftware do you notice? (caption for the interactive table with three fragments of Chinese porcelain, European earthenware, and Delftware in *Gallery 5 Innovators*)

All these questions have no standard answer, but might generate different ones depending on individual perception.[309]

Figure 3.19 (left) Interactive table with a European earthenware cup and a Chinese porcelain dish in *Gallery 2 Tastemakers* in *Asia in Amsterdam*. © The PEM
Figure 3.20 (right) Interactive table with three fragments of Chinese porcelain, European earthenware, and Delftware. Above: showcase with three dishes (from left to right): Dish, Portugal, 1610-1635; Dish, the Netherlands, 1630-1650; Dish, the Netherlands, 1650-1660. © The PEM

In addition to acknowledging Dutch commercial prosperity, *Asia in Amsterdam*, compared to *Asia > Amsterdam*, sheds more light on the human cost behind the luxuries it displays, and it does this by providing labels and captions with alternative interpretations. Consider, for example, the *Portrait of Wollebrand Geleynssen de Jongh* (1674) (see **Figure 3.6**). The portrait is displayed in both exhibitions (*Gallery 2 Amsterdam/The fascination with Porcelain* in *Asia > Amsterdam* and *Gallery 1 Networkers* in *Asia in Amsterdam*), and yet with different interpretations. In explaining the enslaved persons serving in the background, the label in *Asia > Amsterdam* choose an artistic perspective: "Note the stereotypical depiction of the African

[309] This design of open-ended questions and hands-on displays echoes the visitor-centric policy that the PEM has promoted for the past two decades. The policy underlines the importance of encouraging the museum's audiences to explore their own subjective experiences in their interactions with exhibitions and objects. The museum's emphasis on the subjective interpretations and experiences of audiences, as reflected in *Asia in Amsterdam*, brings it closer to what Eilean Hooper-Greenhill calls the "post-museum." In the post-museum, meanings of objects are plural rather than singular, and the meaning-making process is a two-way construction (participated both the specialized knowledge of curators and the subjective experiences of audiences are involved here) rather than a one-way transmission. See Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 142-143.

man and the little boy, which is very different from Wollebrand's portrait." In comparison, the interpretation of the portrait in *Asia in Amsterdam* uncovers the historical and social background of slavery:

> The other figures [the two Africans] portray a troubling aspect of the Dutch legacy in Asia—slavery. The Dutch enslaved thousands of Asians in VOC settlements. The Africans depicted in this painting reflect the artist's ideas about people in forced servitude—there were actually few African slaves in Asia. These figures also point to a double standard. Slavery was not tolerated in the Netherlands itself.

Clearly, the label in *Asia in Amsterdam* brings more of a moral judgement to bear than the label in *Asia > Amsterdam*.

One more obvious example of the different levels of moral criticism in the two exhibitions is seen in the *Portrait of Jan Pietersz Coen* (1625) attributed to Jacob Waben. Coen was the fourth governor-general of the VOC and founded the capital of the Company in Batavia. The painting's label in *Asia > Amsterdam* takes a somewhat implicit tone in describing Coen's negative deeds:

> In 1617 Jan Pietersz Coen became the fourth governor-general of the VOC. He founded Batavia, the Company's headquarters in Asia. He fully understood that in Asia money would be made primarily from the trade with the various settlements. To this end, he used every means at his disposal. In 1621 he forced the people of the Moluccas, after considerable bloodshed, to sell their mace and nutmeg exclusively to the VOC.

To some extent, the label gives one an impression that the considerable bloodshed (with no details regarding what exactly happened) was an unavoidable upshot of a commercial conflict of interest, a necessary price to pay. Meanwhile, the same portrait is captioned in a more reflective tone in *Asia in Amsterdam*: "A skillful yet ruthless governor-general…" Moreover, its label reads as more judgmental and informative in regards to the Bandanese massacre of 1621:

> When Coen posed for this portrait, he had already founded Batavia (now Jakarta). He began building the city in 1619 without seeking permission from the local ruler. Instead, with the aid of 17 VOC ships, he expelled the local people and burned their town to the ground. Then Coen turned to gaining control over local trade in nutmeg and mace. The trees that produced them grew only on the Banda Islands, but not everyone there would cooperate with Coen. When the people on one island refused to sell exclusively to the company, he 'remedied the situation.' Coen slaughtered the islanders in 1621; only a few hundred of the 15,000 survived. Although the Heren XVII (the VOC officials in the Netherlands) denounced Coen's conduct, they did not fire him. Watch the video nearby to see how this brutal mass murder is remembered on the island today.

Listing the number of local people killed, the label also describes more sanguinary details of the Bandanese massacre, and the VOC's disregard for this violence in order to secure its nutmeg monopoly.

The power of captioning the displayed objects in a reflective tone is also seen in the case of a painting introduced previously: *Still Life with Precious Objects from Asia and Elsewhere* (1712) (see **Figure 3.8**; see also **Figure 3.5** for its display in *Asia > Amsterdam*). As mentioned above, its interpretation in *Asia >*

Amsterdam focuses on the contained, costly treasures. However, the painting in *Asia in Amsterdam* is captioned with a question to remind audiences that there is a price for every prize: "So much luxury… at what cost?" (**Figure 3.21**). Especially troubling is the moral cost, as the introductory wall text around the entrance of *Asia in Amsterdam* notes: "[T]he human cost of the first global capitalist enterprise was sometimes high." The caption "So much luxury… at what cost?" not only reframes the way we see this picture full of luxuries from distant lands; also, considering the painting's positioning at the end of *Gallery 1 Networkers*, it reframes the way we see the luxuries displayed in the rest of the exhibition's galleries. Put differently, the painting and its caption together constitute a *frame* that potentially affects the viewing experience in the exhibition. Perhaps, the invisible human cost is what the exhibition encourages audiences to bear in mind while they are fascinated by the visible property and prosperity of the Netherlands displayed in the succeeding galleries.

Figure 3.21 The wall caption "So much luxury… at what cost?" above *Still Life with Precious Objects from Asia and Elsewhere*, right in front of *Gallery 2 Tastemakers* in *Asia in Amsterdam*. © The PEM

So far, I have compared the different narrative structures and interpretive strategies of the two exhibitions and analyzed their distinctive productions of meaning. In what follows, I will focus on specific galleries of the two exhibitions, exploring how the operation of different types of focalization in these galleries serves to create special viewing experiences and to highlight certain messages.

3-2 Internal Focalization in *Asia > Amsterdam*: Embodied Spectatorship

This section will focus on the strategy of focalization in *Gallery 2 Amsterdam/The Fascination with Porcelain* in *Asia > Amsterdam* at the Rijksmuseum. The aim is to see how the juxtaposition of Chinese porcelain and Dutch still life in the gallery, accompanied with labels prescribing a particular viewing order, constitutes an internal focalization with Dutch artists acting as the internal focalizors. This internal focalization offers audiences a specific viewing experience that can be called *embodied spectatorship*.

Embodied spectatorship refers to a sense of physical touch imaginatively evoked by the viewing subject's close engagement with the textural details of the viewed object.[310] *Asia > Amsterdam*, I suggest, offers its viewers a haptic engagement, not by means of physical touch (as in the hands-on displays in *Asia in Amsterdam*), but a *haptic way of seeing*: that is, an embodied engagement of viewers with material properties of objects generated by a tactile impression evoked by their eyes. Drawing on a phenomenological perspective on how tactile qualities can be experienced with visual perception, the film scholar Laura Marks refers to a haptic way of seeing (or haptic visuality/visual tactility, as she uses alternatively) as the viewers' inclination to perceive surface details and tactile qualities of the images on screen and thus closely engage with the tactile sense they produce.[311] A film or video might facilitate such an inclination by using close-ups to create haptic images, engaging the viewers tactilely by inviting them to see things as if touching them.[312] In *Gallery 2* in *Asia > Amsterdam*, I propose, such an inclination is facilitated by the juxtaposition of porcelain and still life with labels encouraging a specific order of viewing these objects. This order of viewing creates an internal focalization, in which the viewer is invited to perceive the viewed objects through the vision of Dutch Golden-Age artists.

Sensation is a keyword for both *Asia > Amsterdam* and *Asia in Amsterdam* to show the impact of imported luxuries on Dutch art and culture. In this context, sensation refers to both a state of intense public interest and excitement regarding Asian luxury imports and to seventeenth-century Dutch artists' and consumers' embodied experiences of the material qualities of Asian objects.[313] Chinese porcelain, in particular, was greatly appreciated by the Dutch for its unprecedented whiteness and glossiness. Specifically, in terms of *Asia > Amsterdam* exhibition, the Dutch fascination with the sensual allure of Chinese porcelain is manifested through accompanying porcelain with still life in *Gallery 2 Amsterdam/The Fascination with Porcelain* (see **Figures 3.9-3.10**).

The object labels in *Gallery 2* draw audiences to connect certain pieces of porcelain in the showcases to akin ones depicted in the paintings. This means that audiences are invited to observe the

---

[310] See Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell, *A Dictionary of Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
[311] See Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 162-164.
[312] Marks vividly describes the haptic way of seeing with reference to her viewing experience of the filmmaker Shauna Beharry's video *See Is Believing* (1991), in which an extreme close-up of a sari is employed: "I realize that the tape has been using my vision as though it were a sense of touch; I have been brushing the (image of the) fabric with the skin of my eyes." Ibid., 127.
[313] Corrigan, Van Campen, and Diercks. *Asia in Amsterdam*, 16. Referring also to the press release of *Asia > Amsterdam*: https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/press/press-releases/asia-in-amsterdam [Accessed January 20, 2021]; and an online archive of the press release of *Asia in Amsterdam*: http://john-andrews-yemh.squarespace.com/local-distractions/2015/12/1/asia-in-amsterdam-the-culture-of-luxury-in-the-golden-age [Accessed January 20, 2021].

shape, ornament, and texture of the Chinese porcelain on display—whether in showcases or in paintings—in a more attentive way. This gallery design, I propose, constitutes a specific embodied viewing experience that is engendered by internal, or character-bound, focalization that draws audiences to see the visual and material qualities of china as if through the eyes of Dutch artists.

Let us start with a porcelain beer tankard, one of the rare objects that has been portrayed in Dutch still life. This gallery showcases a Chinese beer tankard with a label encouraging viewers to look for its identical twin:

> Following protracted negotiations, in 1635 the VOC received a consignment of porcelain fashioned after wooden models, including beer tankards. Just such a vessel features in the still life by Willem Heda on display in this gallery.

The beer tankard with metal lid and floral patterns that Heda depicted looks almost the same as the one in the glass case (**Figures 3.22-3.24**). Interestingly, the label of Heda's painting leaves another clue for audiences, encouraging them to carefully look around the gallery again:

> Dutch painters excelled in the precise rendering of materials. To this end, some of them sought rare objects to depict, such as this beer tankard and Kraak porcelain bowl. The motif on this bowl also occurs on an early 17th century Chinese plate in the display case in this gallery.

The motif this label refers to is a shield showing a hydra with two human heads and five of beasts. The matching ornament is found on a Chinese charger showcased nearby (**Figure 3.25**).

Figure 3.22 (left) Beer tankard made in Jingdezhen, China. 1635-1640. Porcelain with European silver mounts. Collected in Museum de 5000 Morgen, Hoogeveen, The Netherlands. Ill. from: Corrigan, Van Campen, and Diercks, *Asia in Amsterdam* catalogue, 267
Figure 3.23 (right) *Breakfast Still Life* (1638) by Willem Heda. Oil on canvas. Size: High 118.4 cm; width 97.5 cm. Collected in Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg

Figure 3.24 Detail of Figure 3.23

Figure 3.25 Chinese charger, 1600-1620. Collected in the PEM. Object number: E84086

There are more visual pairings in this gallery waiting for audiences to uncover them. Take, for instance, a Chinese bowl decorated with deer which is showcased together with the hydra charger (**Figure 3.26**). A similar piece with a matching lotus-shaped rim and kraak-style panels (though the decoration is not the same) is depicted in *Still Life with Cheese* (1615) (**Figure 3.27**). The thinness of the porcelain bowl in the still life is accentuated by the carefully piled up apples (**Figure 3.28**). A typical large kraak dish

showcased in the gallery also has a twin in *Still Life with a Turkey Pie* (1627) (**Figures 3.29-3.31**). According to the label of *Still Life with a Turkey Pie*: "Especially eye-catching are the porcelain plate and the nautilus shell." A similar turbo shell mounted on a stand of silver-gilt is also showcased in *Gallery 2* (**Figure 3.32**). Its label indicates: "As with porcelain, the fascination for such shells lay chiefly in the material, the lustrous nacre and the thin wall." In addition to this material connection, the juxtaposition of the mounted shell and Chinese porcelain in *Still Life with a Turkey Pie* and in the exhibition's *Gallery 2* further evokes the early modern European conception of porcelain's dual status as both an artificial artifact (*artificialia*) and a natural treasure (*naturalia*). As the art historian Thijs Weststeijn suggests in considering the collocation of porcelain and shells in seventeenth-century Dutch still life: "the etymology of the term porcelain that related its constitution to seashells, harking back to Marco Polo's day when the term *porcellana* derived from a type of thin white shell resembling a piglet (*porcellino*)."[314] The dual natures of porcelain are equally expressed in its spatial arrangement in European cabinets of curiosities in combination with sets of natural and artificial objects.[315] Back to the display in *Gallery 2*, another visual pairing is alluded to in the label of *Still Life with Oysters and Confectionery* (1610) (**Figures 3.33-3.34**): "In the centre of this still life, the Flemish painter Isias Beert depicted a so-called klapmuts, a deep, broad-based, lipped porcelain bowl." Such bowls were made specifically for the European market and, indeed, it is not difficult to find a comparable porcelain bowl with identical lotus-shaped rim and kraak-style panels showcased nearby and labelled "*klapmuts*" (**Figure 3.35**).

Figure 3.26 Chinese bowl, 1580-1600. Collection of Thomas Lurie. No.465

[314] Thijs Weststeijn, "Cultural Reflections on Porcelain in the 17th-century Netherlands," in *Chinese and Japanese Porcelain for the Dutch Golden Age*, eds. Jan van Campen and Titus M. Eliëns (Zwolle: Waanders Uitgevers, in collaboration with Rijksmuseum Amsterdam; Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, Groninger Museum, Keramiekmuseum Princessehof Leeuwarden, 2014), 216.

[315] For more about the connotations behind the display of Chinese porcelain in European cabinets of curiosities, see Stacey Sloboda, "Displaying Materials: Porcelain and Natural History in the Duchess of Portland's Museum," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 43, no. 4 (2010): 455-472.

Figure 3.27 *Still Life with Cheese* (1615) by Floris Claesz. van Dijck. Oil on panel. Size: high 82.2 cm; width 111.2 cm. Collected in the Rijksmuseum. Object Number: SK-A-4821

Figure 3.28 Detail of Figure 3.27

Figure 3.29 Chinese porcelain kraak dish, 1610-1630. Collection of Thomas Lurie. No.583

Figure 3.30 *Still Life with a Turkey Pie* (1627) by Pieter Claesz. Oil on panel. Size: high 75 cm; width 132 cm. Collected in the Rijksmuseum. Object number: SK-A-4646

Figure 3.31 (left) Detail of Figure 3.30
Figure 3.32 (right) Mounted turbo shell, 1607. Size: 19x14.5x11.5 cm. Collected in Gemeentemuseum in The Hague. Object number: 1009592

Figure 3.33 *Still Life with Oysters and Confectionery* (1610) by Osias Beert I. Oil on canvas. Size: high 74 cm; width 108.5 cm. Private Collection

Figure 3.34 (left) Detail of Figure 3.33
Figure 3.35 (right) Chinese porcelain klapmuts, 1590-1610. Collection of Thomas Lurie. No.735

Pacing between porcelain and still life, looking attentively at their visual (and even tactile) qualities so as to correlate them, there seems to be an internal act of focalization implied in such a viewing experience. As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, Mieke Bal conceptualizes internal focalization as hierarchically lower and embedded in "the all-encompassing vision" of external

focalization.[316] Thus, Bal reminds us to note the "attribute signs," or markers of shifts in focalization level, which indicate the shift from first-level external focalization to second-level internal focalization.[317] In a literary text (e.g. a novel), Bal argues, such verbs as "see" and "hear," which "communicate perception," usually act as attribute signs.[318] An example that Bal provides here is a set of three narrative sentences: Mary participates in the rally; I saw that Mary participated in the rally; Michele saw that Mary participated in the rally. Clearly, the agent "which is doing the perceiving, and whose perceptions are being presented to the reader" is different: in the first sentence there is an external focalizor; in the second sentence 'I' becomes the internal focalizor; while in the third sentence, 'Michele' acts as the internal focalizor.[319] According to Bal, in this set of sample sentences the verb form 'saw' indicates where "the focalization is transferred from the first [external] to the second [internal] level."[320]

This kind of transition from external to internal focalization with the verbs of perception mediated in between is vital to expose the Dutch-grounded internal focalization in *Gallery 2*, for a shift from external to internal focalization is equally observed in this gallery. In explaining the relation between porcelain and still life, the gallery's wall caption adopts an externally focalized narrative:

> […] Prior to 1600 Antwerp was the centre of trade for Asian goods. Asian riches thus featured in Flemish still lifes already early in the 17th century. After Amsterdam took over this leading position and trade in the Dutch Republic increased, porcelain became a coveted item that was depicted countless times in paintings by Dutch artists.

The focalizor of the text is un-personified. However, the maneuvering of audiences into attentive looking in *Gallery 2* may guide them to see and perceive the visual and material qualities of Chinese porcelain as if through the eyes and the hands of Dutch artists. This suggests a shift from external to internal focalization, or how the focalization is rendered to a certain character (i.e. the seventeenth-century Dutch artists) in the story world. In this sense, what the gallery really enacts is not just "the fascination with porcelain," as indicated in its title, but rather a *subjectivized* fascination with porcelain.

Particularly, the use of internal focalization in *Gallery 2* promotes an embodied mode of spectatorship. Such an embodied spectatorship generated through a Dutch-grounded internal focalization performs a sensory transposition. This sensory transposition mostly comes from how the viewer is invited to respond to the haptic compositions of Dutch still lifes in an embodied way, thereby facilitating sensory impressions of both sight and touch. The haptic compositions of Dutch still-lifes are structured with two senses of tactility. The first is the tactility elicited by the exquisite depictions of material textures. Textural characteristics of objects are so meticulously depicted in Dutch still lifes that they create an intertwining of vision and touch, as the viewer seems to be able to *see* the coolness of pewter plates and the smoothness of porcelain plates. In the words of the historian Simon Schama, Dutch still life "makes the eye do the work of the hand, registering the alternations experienced in running fingers

316 Bal, *Narratology*, 158.
317 Ibid.
318 Ibid., 158-159.
319 Ibid., 157.
320 Ibid., 158.

over changing surface textures and temperature."[321] But in *Gallery 2* in *Asia > Amsterdam*, the viewer not only *sees* the rich material texture of the things depicted; more importantly, with the specific object arrangement and suggested viewing order in this gallery, their vision is as if they are *seeing through* the eyes of the Dutch painters of the seventeenth century. The haptic viewing experience generated in this gallery, then, is one that is specifically filtered by the subjective sensory impressions of the Dutch artists; that is, we (audiences) are here seeing how the Dutch saw and perceived china.

The second sense of tactility in Dutch still life is generated by a sense of touch invoked through the invisible presences of the hands of the Dutch artists (and/or the bourgeoisie owners) who set up these tableaus with carefully placed materials. Most of the still-life paintings displayed in *Gallery 2* show idealized representations of dinner tables composed of careful arrangements of foods and vessels. Still lifes of the dinner table, to paraphrase the art historian Norman Bryson, set up a "haptic space" through making the viewer "much more aware of the human hand in establishing the scene."[322] Bryson's point helps to draw attention to the otherwise invisible presence of the hands of the Dutch artists or bourgeoisie in carefully organizing these tabletops: stacking the cheese, slicing the bread, peeling the lemon, cutting the apple, overturning the glass, spooning the pie, and filling the porcelain bowl with fruits or confectionery, to name just a few tactile interventions. Viewed in this way, the pictorial space of Dutch still life is full of marks left by hands. The display strategy in *Gallery 2* in *Asia > Amsterdam*—the juxtaposition of porcelain and still life, accompanied by labels instructing a particular viewing order, through which the akin pieces of porcelain in the showcases and in the paintings are closely associated with one another—I propose, acts to enhance audiences' attention to these visible marks left by invisible hands.

To give but one example, there is an association between two Chinese *klapmutsen*, one in the showcase and another in *Still Life with Oysters and Confectionery* (see **Figures 3.33-3.35**). The visual conjunction between these two *klapmutsen* kindles a rich embodied experience. The strong chiaroscuro of the painting helps to highlight tactile differences between the porcelain *klapmuts*, the pewter plates, and the glass goblets. Compared to the subtle sheen on the *klapmuts*, the pewter plates have a much brighter reflection, giving them a sense of coolness, and the glasses have a much thinner, transparent material, making part of them fade into the dark background. The *klapmuts* overflowing with confectionery gives audiences a sense of its volume (see **Figure 3.34**). The pewter and porcelain plates covered with oysters and sweetmeats look flat and shallow. Relatively, the *klapmuts* is deep, and has a thin and flattened rim on which we can see how carefully the sweets were piled up to avoid them falling. In fact, many other things' arrangement also connotes cautious handling: the wine glass on the table edge; every oyster with the meat facing up; the tilted wooden box. Connecting the *klapmuts* in the showcase with the one in the still life, a bodily intimacy—the hands of the Dutch artist (or owners) touching these materials to compose an idealized tableau—is called to mind.

This embodied spectatorship, in which a Dutch internal focalization is implied, contributes to making explicit a process of domestication. In section 3-1-1, I discussed how the Dutch domestication of

---

[321] Simon Schama, "Perishable Commodities: Dutch Still-Life Painting and the 'Empire of Things'," in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, eds. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 478.
[322] Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990), 72.

Asian luxuries from exotic to part of Dutch material culture is implied in the structure of the exhibition's storyline. The embodied spectatorship generated in *Gallery 2* also produces such an ideological imprint of the Dutch domestication of Asian goods. As Anne Gerritsen proposes, embodied experience plays an important role in the Dutch domestication of Asian goods from signaling the exotic to signaling Dutchness. Through a close reading of the painting *Thomas Hees with his Nephews Jan and Andries Hees and a Servant* (1687) by Michiel van Musscher, especially the bodily proximity of the Dutch figures with the Asian products, Gerritsen puts the following forward:

> It is through this representation of physical proximity between global goods and their consumers—their depiction within domestic spaces, their adornment of bodies, their closeness to the hands and feet that touch them—that these global goods become domesticated. They are appropriated, integrated and reinvented as goods that belong in a Dutch environment, thereby constructing a seventeenth-century Dutchness that is not confined to the geographical space of the Netherlands, but incorporates overseas territories, possessions and connection.[323]

Indeed, whether Chinese porcelain plates filled with fruits, spices such as cinnamon and cloves that are integrated into pies, or the turbo shell, these objects in Dutch still lifes act as a 'synecdoche' of the Dutch commercial empire.[324] In this sense, what audiences perceive in *Gallery 2*, perhaps, is both the Dutch perception and possession of exotic goods.

The object layout in the gallery is also significant in generating the visual discourse of china as a token of Dutch prosperity: audiences are surrounded by pieces of porcelain in showcases and in still-life paintings. This layout, in my view, acts to subjugate the viewers' senses to a spectacle of lavish abundance. It amply visualizes the ubiquity of Chinese porcelain on display in (idealized) Dutch domestic environments. The ubiquitous porcelain signals the capacity of the Dutch to gather luxury goods from distant lands into domestic interiors within reach.

An embodied viewing experience, in contrast, is not evoked in *Asia in Amsterdam*, where most of the Chinese porcelain and Dutch still lifes are not juxtaposed but separated. Many pieces of porcelain that are seen in *Gallery 2* in *Asia > Amsterdam* are showcased in *Gallery 2 Tastemakers* in *Asia in Amsterdam*, while most of the Dutch still lifes are displayed in *Gallery 5 Innovators*. (**Figures 3.36-3.37**).[325] The separation of Chinese porcelain and most of the Dutch still lifes seems to inevitably dissolve their potential sensorial connection.

---

[323] Anne Gerritsen, "Domesticating Goods from Overseas: Global Material Culture in the Early Modern Netherlands," *Journal of Design History* 29, no. 3 (2016), 232.

[324] See Hal Foster, "The Art of Fetishism: Notes on Dutch Still Life," in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, eds. Emily Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 251-265.

[325] The pieces of Chinese porcelain in *Gallery 2 Tastemakers* are grouped in two showcases. According to the labels here, one showcase contains pieces that exemplify Chinese potters' imitations of the wooden models of Dutch silver objects that the VOC staff brought to them; meanwhile, the pieces of kraak porcelain dishes and bowls in another showcase show the visual designs and material characteristics of Chinese porcelain. It should be noted here that, according to an email on November 23, 2016 from Karina Corrigan, the arrangement of Chinese porcelain in *Gallery 2 Tastemakers* also reflects the donor's will. The group of six pieces of Chinese porcelain in the first showcase (see the showcase B in Figure 3.36) are all from the collection of Thomas Lurie, who prefers his collection to be grouped together (the porcelain pieces from his collection are also grouped together in *Gallery 2 Amsterdam/The Fascination with Porcelain* in *Asia > Amsterdam* at the Rijksmuseum).

Figure 3.36 View of *Gallery 2 Tastemakers* in *Asia in Amsterdam*. A: The showcase with seven pieces of Chinese porcelain in Dutch customized shapes; B: The showcase with six pieces of Chinese porcelain decorated in kraak-style (all from the collection of Thomas Lurie). © The PEM

Figure 3.37 View of *Gallery 5 Innovators* with Dutch Still Life in *Asia in Amsterdam*. The wall caption in *Gallery 5 Innovators* refers to Dutch still lifes as one of the innovative Dutch products inspired by imported Asian objects, a new style painting that the seventeenth-century Dutch artists "developed and mastered." © The PEM

In this section, I have discussed the combination of embodied spectatorship and internal focalization found in *Gallery 2* in *Asia > Amsterdam*, and accessed the specific viewing experience this combination may offer to its audiences. Now, I shift the focus towards *Asia in Amsterdam* at the PEM. As mentioned, *Asia in Amsterdam* pays more attention to the human cost behind the prosperity of the VOC's Dutch-Asia trade. Below, I focus on the practice of external focalization in *Gallery 1 Networkers* in *Asia in Amsterdam*. External focalization allows the exhibition to construct a more general (or at least less Dutch-centric) narrative, which arises from curatorial intentions to highlight the unsettling human cost of the dazzling luxuries displayed in these galleries.

3-3 External Focalization in *Asia in Amsterdam*: Prize and Price

The layout of *Gallery 1 Networkers* provides its visitors a relatively detached viewpoint, a kind of bird's-eye view, through which both distant places—Asia and Amsterdam—are conjured up at once. The focus here shifts from Dutch and Portuguese activities in Asia to the Dutch lifestyle in Batavia, and finally to the prosperity generated by the lucrative trade network in Amsterdam. There is no indication that the focalization here lies with any specific character who participates in the plot elements. Rather, the gallery maintains an external focalization to create a panoramic overview of things happening before Asian luxuries reached Amsterdam, and of how the same historical period can be viewed differently from Dutch and Asian perspectives. The latter is manifested through the alternative interpretations provided for visitors. For example, the labels of *Portrait of Wollebrand Geleynsz de Jongh* and *Portrait of Jan Pietersz Coen* offer a notable amount of information about the slavery and historical massacre behind the rise of the vast Dutch maritime empire, as I discussed in section 3-1-2.

Perhaps, the practice of external focalization is made most prominently in the gallery's incorporation of the video, *The Cakalele Dance of Banda* (2016). In *Asia in Amsterdam*, the label of *Portrait of Jan Pietersz Coen* reminds audiences to watch this video nearby "to see how this brutal mass murder [the Banda massacre of 1621] is remembered on the island today." This five-minute video is projected around the end of *Gallery 1*, nearby the painting *Still Life with Precious Objects from Asia and Elsewhere* and the eye-catching caption "So much luxury…at what cost?" (**Figure 3.38**). The video shows how the Banda massacre has been adapted into a traditional war dance and performed in the Banda Islands in Indonesia today, accompanied by a pre-dance ritual ceremony that calls for the souls of ancestors to come back (**Figure 3.39**). As the narrator of the video, Tamalia Alisjahbana, who is a member of the council of elders in the Village of Raktu in the Banda islands, explains:

> The dancers have a flower in their mouth and this represents that they must remain silent. They may not speak about this. They have handkerchiefs tied to their hands and that represents the tears that have been shed. And behind the dancers stand people with bamboo poles with branches to which are tiled little bits of cloth and these represent the forty-four chieftains who were beheaded and quartered and their body parts stuck to the bamboos. […] In this massacre, three-quarters of the Bandanese disappeared. About ten thousand died. What remained was mainly women and children. These women were very traumatized because they were not allowed to speak about this, you know? So, what they did was they took the story of the massacre and they put it into the *cakalele* dance. At the very end of the dance comes out a person bearing

> the flower of the coconut tree, which has become the tree of life, and this symbolizes that we shall rise again. We shall survive. Our culture will survive.

This short video provides rich information on how this historical tragedy has been braided into the cultural fabric of the contemporary Banda Islands through the performance of dance and ceremony, and how the performance is made not only to transmit but also to heal the collective traumatic memory of the massacre. From the showpieces that indicate the seventeenth-century Dutch activity in Asia to the video of the contemporary Bandanese war dance, the gallery layout provides audiences an outside view through which things that happened in different times and places are co-present.

The layout of *Gallery 1 Networkers*, in terms of both time and space, reveals its narrative as predominately externally focalized. In contrast to internal focalization, external focalization means that the viewer does not look along with a specific character. The focalizor is beyond the story world, and this narrative appears less restrictive. In order to further clarify the effects of external focalization, I will here incorporate the idea of "the perceptual facet" of focalization, proposed by the narratologist Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan.

Figure 3.38 (left) View of *Gallery 1 Networkers* with a screen projecting the Banda Video (the left of this figure). © The PEM
Figure 3.39 (right) Screenshot of the video with the performance of the Banda war dance

Rimmon-Kenan's approach to focalization is quite similar to Bal's in that she agrees with Bal's model of internal and external focalization as a practicable revision to Genette's tripartite concept. Nevertheless, the focalization theory developed by Rimmon-Kenan remains distinct from Bal's in some respects. Particularly, Rimmon-Kenan argues that to consider focalization merely in the visual sense is too narrow. Instead, she points out three facets to access manifestations of internal/external focalization: the perceptual facet (sight, hearing, smell, etc.), the psychological facet (cognition and emotions), and the ideological facet (norms: ideological positions of seeing the world).[326] In this framework, the opposition between internal/external focalization becomes an opposition between restricted/unrestricted

[326] See Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. Second Edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2005[1983]), 79-84.

perception and knowledge and between involved/uninvolved emotions. Her proposition of the perceptual facet is particularly pertinent to my analysis and comparison of the different practices of focalization in these two exhibitions.

Rimmon-Kenan refers to space and time as two sets of perceptual coordinates to distinguish internal focalization from external. For her, the external focalizor generally takes a bird's-eye view, whereas the internal focalizor suggests more limited observation. The position of the external focalizor, therefore, yields "either a panoramic view or a 'simultaneous' focalization of things 'happening' in different places."[327] This is reflected in the spatial layout of *Gallery 1 Networkers* in *Asia in Amsterdam*, in which audiences are invited to take in the overseas trading activity in Asia, the urban expansion and civic prosperity in Amsterdam, and to the commemorative ceremony that is still performed in the Banda Islands today. The temporal dimension of external focalization, for Rimmon-Kenan, is "panchronic," as an un-personified focalizor can freely grasp across the past, the present, and the future.[328] Though based in the seventeenth century, *Asia in Amsterdam* shifts its temporal position by showing the Banda video recorded in 2016.

The PEM expects that, by presenting objects from a broader viewpoint and drawing on labels and installations to offer alternative interpretations, they can increase visitors' empathy towards cultural groups other than their own.[329] However, does the thought-provoking question posed in this first gallery actually leave an impression on audiences' minds, and affect how they perceive the Asian objects shown in the rest of the exhibition? Reviews from the guest book show us an affirmative answer, at least to a certain degree:

> I liked the fact that you did not "hide" the ugly side of how all this beautiful art came to be.
>
> The Banda dance was heartbreaking.
>
> Wonderful! I especially enjoyed the film on explaining what they did to the people.
>
> A fitting show for PEM. Glad that the Banda dance was incorporated as part of the story.
>
> Thank you! It was also terrific that you included the human costs (in Asia and on the seas) in the equation.
>
> Loved it! The interpretation of social history—the massacre, the way it shapes art and culture, the human cost of trade, very well done!
>
> Such beautiful objects. Such sober backstory of colonialism unfiltered.
>
> Well-balanced history + art, nice discussion of negative aspects of colonialism/capitalism without being heavy handed.

[327] Ibid., 79.
[328] Ibid., 80.
[329] Levitt and Cali, "Using the Local to Tell a Global Story," 147.

> […] The special exhibit was fantastic because it not only touched upon a lot of the history and socioeconomics, it also brought to light the abuse and subjugation of indigenous Asian communities by some individuals in the Dutch East India Trading company. It's important to consider all these perspectives of art and history.[330]

According to this guest book, the exhibition, by incorporating the Banda video, did elicit compassion for the colonized in some audience members.[331]

Inspired by *Asia in Amsterdam*, the PEM's new Asian Export Art Gallery opened in September 2019 also offers audiences more information about the unsettling dark sides of beautiful showpieces.[332] This semi-permanent gallery features Asian luxury commodities such as Chinese porcelain, Indian textiles, and Japanese lacquerware from between the late fifteenth century and the mid nineteenth century. Certain pieces on display were seen in *Asia in Amsterdam*. Located in the center of the gallery is a video showing "the uncomfortable truth that many of these works of art were originally purchased with profits derived from the illegal opium trade." [333] To a certain extent, this installation shows the PEM's commitment to decolonization through more critical engagement with the provenance of its collections.[334] Interestingly, in 2021, the Rijksmuseum will host a new special exhibition, *Slavery*, which also commits to decolonization.[335] Focusing on the Dutch West India Company's role in transatlantic slavery and the VOC's colonial slavery in Southeast Asia, the exhibition aims to stimulate reflection on the enslaver–enslaved relationship in terms of constraint and violence.[336] The exhibition aligns with the Rijksmuseum's broader, long-term policy of rethinking its role as a national museum and its overseas

---

[330] This is an online feedback from Google which is also recorded in the file of the guest book by the curatorial team of *Asia in Amsterdam*.

[331] The Rijksmuseum also conducted a visitor survey during the *Asia > Amsterdam* exhibition. However, according to an email sent on November 28, 2016 from the museum's staff Marieke Zekveld, the survey was mainly interested in who the visitor was and how s/he got to know the exhibition, and so did not include quotes or viewpoints from visitors.

[332] According to an email on October 28, 2016 from Karina Corrigan, the curation of *Asia in Amsterdam* contributed to the reinterpretation of the PEM's collection of Asian export art.

[333] See the PEM's website 'Asian Export Art Gallery': https://www.pem.org/exhibitions/asian-export-art-gallery [Accessed January 20, 2021].

[334] For more about museums and the issue of decolonization, see Annie E. Coombes and Ruth B. Phillips, eds., *Museum Transformations: Decolonization and Democratization* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020).

[335] Since December 2015, the Rijksmuseum's Terminology Working Group has been critically scrutinizing and adjusting the terminology and titles used in labels and wall texts in exhibitions, publications, the website, and audio tours in order to replace outdated, Eurocentric, and even racist words. For example, a portrait of a young girl by Simon Maris (c. 1906, object number: SK-A-2931) was initially titled "Little Negress," and has now been retitled "Isabella," after the girl's first name. See the Rijksmuseum's website 'Terminology': https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/onderzoek/ons-onderzoek/overkoepelend/terminologie [Accessed January 20, 2021]. See also Wayne Modest and Robin Lelijveld, eds., *Words Matter: An Unfinished Guide to Word Choices in the Cultural Sector* [works in progress] (Amsterdam: Tropenmuseum; Heilig Landstichting: Afrika Museum; Leiden: Museum Volkenkunde; Rotterdam: Wereldmuseum, 2018). Online at: https://www.materialculture.nl/sites/default/files/2018-08/words_matter.pdf.pdf [Accessed January 20, 2021].

[336] To make a more balance narrative, the exhibition will incorporate immaterial sources, including the oral histories of enslaved people that have been passed down for generations. Moreover, during the exhibition period, some seventy objects on permanent display will be given an additional label emphasizing their connections with the Dutch history of slavery. See the website of the *Slavery* exhibition: https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/whats-on/exhibitions/slavery [Accessed January 20, 2021].

collection, with an emphasis on fostering "increased attention for colonial history from a variety of perspective."[337]

With these developments in mind, a potentially fruitful area for further research is how to use the concept of focalization, as both a narrative device and analytical tool, to expand perspectives of display and interpretation in response to the trend of museum decolonization. Compared to external focalization which takes a panoramic view, internal focalization could perhaps provide a more engaging approach to expand exhibition perspectives beyond dominant (formerly colonializing) cultural groups to underrepresented (formerly colonized) communities. As Bal reminds us, "the same object or event can be differently interpreted according to different focalizors."[338] With internal focalization, museums could perhaps show how differently the various characters (different internal focalizors) in their story world, such as enslaved people and slaveholders, view the same events.

Conclusion: Focalization as a Manipulation

In this chapter, I first compared the narrative structures of *Asia > Amsterdam* at the Rijksmuseum and *Asia in Amsterdam* at the PEM. I then examined how the two exhibition's different uses of focalization enable them to highlight different messages. Focusing on *Gallery 2 Amsterdam/The Fascination with Porcelain* in *Asia > Amsterdam*, I proposed that the object layout and label design here construct an internal focalization and facilitate an embodied spectatorship: inviting audiences to perceive the visual and material qualities of Chinese porcelain as if through the eyes and the hands of seventeenth-century Dutch artists. The internally-focalized narrative of the exhibition contributes to visualizing the process of domestication in which *they* (Asian material objects) increasingly became part of *us* (Dutch material culture), and it signals *our* (Dutch) capability to gather luxuries from beyond our national boundaries. This shows how whose vision a narrative primarily depends on can significantly affect how an exhibition conceptualizes a specific Self-Other relationship. By comparison, *Gallery 1 Networkers* in *Asia in Amsterdam*, on which I focused, maintains an external focalization, as there is no indication that the gallery renders the focalization to any specific character in its story world. The use of external focalization enables the gallery to take a distant, panoramic view to reveal both the price and the prize of Dutch trade with Asia.

To explore strategies of focalization in exhibitions is meaningful, for the same event can be interpreted in quite different ways through different focalizors. As an analytical tool, focalization enables a more critical reading of exhibitions, as it raises a series of complementary questions that need to be kept in mind when analyzing how certain meanings are generated: who is seeing? Who or what is seen or unseen? How do audiences engage in a viewpoint? Whose viewpoint? How does all this create or influence viewing experiences? These questions facilitate awareness of the strong visual manipulation implicit in the construction of an exhibition, and of how this mediates ways of understanding the objects on display and the exhibition's emphasis. What is more, focalization helps to identity the subject-positions produced by museum exhibitions. To put it differently, identifying the implicit subject of focalization in museum

[337] See the website of the *Slavery* exhibition: https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/whats-on/exhibitions/slavery [Accessed January 20, 2021].
[338] Bal, *Narratology*, 164.

displays and exhibitions helps to make explicit how audiences' viewing experiences might be filtered through a specific realm of subjective experience.

Focalization is a "subtle means of manipulation," as Bal points out: the "significance of certain aspects cannot be viewed unless it is linked to focalization."[339] Following Bal, this chapter applied focalization as an analytical tool, but not to judge which type of focalization practiced in the two exhibitions is better. Rather, my point is to expose how the displays in the two exhibitions perform specific types of focalization and thereby highlight specific messages that might not be easily noticed if the displays were not linked to the idea of focalization. This chapter tried to demonstrate that focalization is a fruitful lens for more careful readings of museum presentations, for making a seemingly neutral or objective display discussable and arguable, thereby exposing its performative dimension.

As a technique of display analysis, focalization helps to expand the field of visual narratology into museum exhibitions. An existing body of literature deals with issues of focalization in diverse medias, such as novels, films, graphic narrative, and picture books.[340] In comparison, how focalization works in exhibition narrative remains a relatively unexplored field. This chapter sought to identify some of the ways in which focalization can enrich the analysis of museum displays. For example, museum exhibitions operate in three dimensions and, thus, the interactions between spatial layouts of objects and movements of audiences in gallery spaces plays a key role in understanding how the effects of focalization work in museum space. Hence, not only can we understand museum displays through the concept of focalization, but also understand focalization through museum practices.

The embodied experience of seeing as if touching discussed in this chapter will be explored further in the following chapter in a case study of a very popular, yet controversial fashion exhibition: *China: Through the Looking Glass* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. I will examine how embodied spectatorship is promoted by the exhibition as a way of casting a positive light on Orientalism. This, however, results in a misleading visual narrative that performs a resurgence of Orientalist othering.

---

[339] Ibid., 171.

[340] See, for example, Perry Nodelman, "The Eye and the I: Identification and First-Person Narratives in Picture Books," *Children's Literature* 19, (1991): 1-30; Verstraten, *Film Narratology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); Slike Horstkotte and Nancy Pedri, "Focalization in Graphic Narrative," *Narrative* 19, no. 3 (2011): 330-357.