

TOWARDS NEW INTERPRETATIONS:

A postcolonial remediation of 'Chambers of Wonder' in the Zeeuws Museum



Bachelor Art History

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ABSTRACT/SUMMARY

In the current tendency of 'Decolonize the Museum' efforts, activists have criticized the problematic reiteration of colonial representations in the museological context and questioned what to do with such colonial heritages. In this thesis, I analyze the exhibition 'Chambers of Wonder' at the Zeeuws Museum in Middelburg. The collection contains an important part of Dutch colonial heritage that was acquired when Middelburg became a prominent port town of Holland in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Decolonization programmes have used the concept of 'remediation' in order to engage feelings of discomfort, doubt, and melancholia that concern the representational field of colonial history. Remediation is used to question the colonial representation in the contemporary environment and aims search for new ways to construct meaning. Remediating the representation strategies in 'Chambers of Wonder' thus gives insight into which knowledge is both presented and silenced by structures of power. By discussing both the collection and the way this collection is displayed, we aim to get insight into how knowledge is produced for and through the visitor. I propose to take objects from non-Western cultures, displayed in 'Chambers of Wonder, as 'diasporic' identities. Taking these specific objects as diasporic, we draw attention to their contemporary identities that both refer to a cultural history as to the history of cultural encounters and power relations up to the present day. By doing so I aim to use insights from the post-colonial discourse to offer new interpretations on the relation between the collection and the display strategies in the 'Chamber of Wonders'. Thus, we provide a remediation of the current exhibition in Zeeuws Museum, based on a post-colonial stance.

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INTRODUCTION

In the start of this research I have asked myself how my personal experience, with ‘unknown’ cultures and their heritage, has affected my epistemological stance and interest in these kinds of artefacts. This drove me back to the very reason why I came to study Art History in the first place, because -beyond an interest for the artistic creation- I often have understood artefacts as affective possessors of certain stories of the past, wondering how and where to find these stories. I will illustrate this with the use of a memory of my grandmother, who lived her first years in Indonesia when it was colonized by the Netherlands. One of the few memories I have of my grandmother, consist of the large ‘Wajangs’-dolls she had standing in her windowsills. I had found these dolls scary as a child, as they were made of dark colours and sharp-edged forms; they represented ‘the unknown’ for me. When I started this research I came back to the memory of these dolls and my grandmother, I came to understand them as affective referents to the presence of a historical past that was silenced in the family. The time that my grandmother, as a child of Dutch colonizers grew up in Indonesia and spent some childhood years in the Japanese camps, remained a mysterious and unexplained topic for me. As my interest in colonial history, and post-colonial approaches, grew in the years I became more and more aware that these dolls became carriers of the presence of some colonial histories that not only within my family but also in Dutch society, seems to remain a difficult topic of debate. An important contribution to this conviction has been articulated by academic Gloria Wekker, who elaborated in her book *White innocence* (2016) on how race and racism – that emerges from the first activities of European imperialism - remain a paradoxical and denied issue within the social, political and cultural life of Dutch society.¹

The ‘post-colonial’ is often misunderstood as a temporal concept of which ‘post’ -in its most simple sense- means ‘after’ colonialism. This has led, for some, to the assertion that the time of colonialism refers to a historic period in a well defined past. Since the late 1970s literary critics have stressed “the articulation between across the political defined historical periods, of pre-colonial, colonial and post-independence culture”.² The term ‘post-

¹ Gloria Wekker, *Witte Onschuld: Paradoxen van kolonialisme en ras* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 8-9.

² Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), 169.

colonialism' has since then been used to discuss the various cultural effects of colonial discourse, including imperial practices and neo-colonialist attitudes of present day.³ The colonial discourse addresses the various academic studies on the colonies, as well on its colonized peoples. Different studies related to biology, social and cultural science have 'scientifically constructed' the colonial subject and characterized it as being 'inferior' to the colonial culture. In the same tendency, it carries the ideological conviction of "the duty of the imperial power to reproduce itself in the colonial society, and to advance the civilization of the colony through trade, administration, cultural and moral improvement".⁴ The colonial discourse, for this reason, illustrates the idea of a unidirectional and righteous relationship between colonizers and colonized.

In his groundbreaking *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Saïd illustrates how the assumption of superiority of the colonizers culture remains dominant in the contemporary western cultural production. Moreover, Saïd illuminates how this colonial discourse has constructed "the colonizing subject as much as the colonized".⁵ Saïd uses the construction of both the 'Orient' and the "Occident" to substantiate this belief. According to Saïd, both are constructed identities that are in beheld of each other. The 'Occident', referring to the western culture, uses the 'Orient', referring to 'the (Eastern) Other', as a point of difference. This differentiation is based on superiority feelings that lie hidden in the colonial discourse, and can be found in the representational field of history, language, art, political structures and social conventions of contemporary culture.⁶ The concept of cultural hegemony, which originally derived from Antonio Gramsci, offers further insight in the consequences of 'Othering' practices. We come to understand 'cultural hegemony, with reframing of the concept by Stuart Hall as how the dominant group "strives and to a degree succeeds in framing all competing definitions of reality within their range, bringing all alternatives within their horizon of thought" leading to the permanent exclusion of certain voices.⁷ In the context of increasing migration and globalization in after most former colonies achieved independence, post-colonial studies have proved itself being a relevant field of study for the discussion of the colonial and its (dis-)continuities. This field of study has an eye for the

³ Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies*, 168-169.

⁴ Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies*, 38.

⁵ Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies*, 38.

⁶ Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies*, 37.

⁷ Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, and Sean Nixon, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2013), 333.

‘silenced’ social, political and cultural narratives concerning themes as resistance and representation, slavery and migration, racial and ethnic differences and questions of nationalism and globalization.⁸

Especially in times of dealing with waves of refugees (and other continuing moving geographies of cultures), different western geopolitical regions have –in various degrees– witnessed an increasing commentary on the ‘unwitting’ dominance of colonist ideologies and processes in contemporary social, cultural and political life.⁹ Some of this commentary has gathered, forming ‘decolonization programmes’. ‘Decolonizing’ refers in the post-colonial field to a “complex and continuing process rather than something achieved automatically at the moment of independence”.¹⁰ Decolonization, thus, describes the ‘process’ of “revealing and dismantling colonial power in all its forms. This includes dismantling the hidden aspects of those institutional and cultural forces that had maintained the colonist power and that remain even after political independence is achieved”.¹¹ In its most extreme forms, it insists the belief that “pre-colonial cultures can be recovered in a pristine form by programmes of decolonization”.¹² According to some post-African academic critics, it is unrealistic to understand decolonization as the target ‘pristine pre-colonial form of cultures’ because the decolonization process is by essence this interaction, inter-influence between two cultures. Decolonization, thus, is not about erasing the past (the colonization) but building more equal structures and modes of representation for those (hybrid) post-colonial subjects. As post-African academic Gikandi argues, decolonization forms “(...) both a symptom of the problems which arise when the narrative of decolonization is evoked in a transformed post-colonial era and a commentary on the problematic of a belated national narrative”.¹³ I come to understand the problematic of a belated national narrative as something more difficult than often assumed in idealistic activist programmes. ‘Decolonizing’ entails the re-capturing of what the ‘original’ or ‘own’ national identity of the ones colonized. This is a difficult matter, as colonization brings along cultural appropriation and transformation.

⁸ Dr. Doro Wiese, information obtained during course ‘Postcolonial Theory’ at University of Utrecht, spring 2016.

⁹ Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies*, 209.

¹⁰ Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies*, 59.

¹¹ Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies*, 56.

¹² Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies*, 58.

¹³ Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies*, 58.

An important starting point for decolonization programmes has been centred on western ethnographic museums and collections. In the last five years, critical voices arriving from activist efforts such as ‘Occupy the Museum’ have stimulated discussion on the value of ethnographic museum, collections and exhibiting strategies. Most of these movements arose in the aftermath of the ‘Occupy Wall Street’ protests in 2011, whereby the contemporary dominance of neoliberal ideology alive within museum- and art management were decried. The fruitful collaborations between academics and artists that sprouted from these protests boosted critical engagement with the museum and matters of justice, activism, memory and remembrance by starting to unmask current cultural systems of inequality. After its main manifestation in the United States, inspired European activists gathered together to take up these programmes of exposing the deeply rooted and often present colonial legacies and mind-sets under the slogan of ‘Decolonize the Museum’.

Taking this notion of ‘decolonizing’, understood within the post-colonial context, to the field of art practice, we make use of the publication drawn from the first ‘Decolonize the Museum’ conference held in MACBA Barcelona in November 2014. In the introduction of the publication the nature and relevance of the matter is drawn out with the words: “The current moment is not ‘post’, when it comes to museum practice and the power imbalance that was once installed through colonization, it is still very much part of how European societies are organized”.¹⁴ The notion of ‘de’ in ‘decolonizing’ is used to refer to the activist attitude towards the problematic reiteration of colonial representations in the museological context.¹⁵ This activist stance is both directed as a form of institutional critique and identity politics, a stance that leads to the discussion of power balances and aims to foreground the harmful- or under- represented ignorance of alternative knowledge.¹⁶ In ‘collecting life’s unknown’ Clémentine Deliss, central figure of the organization around MACBA, discusses how to ‘decolonize’ an ethnographic collection, reading the concept of ‘decolonizing’ as a form of ‘remediation’. Deliss takes ‘to remediate’ as “to bring about a shift in medium, to experiment with alternative ways of describing, interpreting and displaying the objects in the collection. To remediate also implies the remedy of a deficient situation, for example, the

¹⁴ *Decolonizing Museums* (L’Internationale Online, 2015), Introduction, 6, http://www.internationaleonline.org/bookshelves/decolonising_museums.

¹⁵ *Decolonizing Museums*, 5.

¹⁶ Clémentine Deliss, “Collecting Life’s Unknowns,” in *Decolonizing Museums* (L’Internationale Online, 2015), 10, http://www.internationaleonline.org/bookshelves/decolonising_museums.

ambivalent resonance of the colonial past”.¹⁷ This last refers to the conviction, articulated in the introduction of the publication that “calling upon cultural memory and half-gone history seems to be of utmost importance to oppose the often politically-guided amnesia and ignorance”.¹⁸ So to remediate is “to engage with that mix of discomfort, doubt, and melancholia, the *caput mortuum* phase of alchemical regeneration, transforming these objects into a contemporary environment and thereby building additional interpretations onto their existing set of references”.¹⁹ This ‘experimental methodology’ is, according to Deliss, approachable for a variety of museum and (historical) collections as it questions the current, and the potential possibilities of knowledge production.²⁰

While we could say that the ‘decolonization discourse’ has influenced contemporary cultural institutions in the Netherlands, I would, like to place this tendency in the current political and economic context, that reveal that often “for, even if the aspiration of the museum is not specifically nationalist, in order to attract funding and state support, its discourse in today’s competition between global cities is decidedly nationalist in spirit”.²¹ In the same vein as the last quote, I would like to emphasize that the goal of this research is not to see how much decolonization programmes have influenced current institutions and their practices. It is the analytical approach that these programmes offer, which can be used to remain critically examining the nature of organization, representation and distribution in current museum and art practices.

These current interests in ‘Decolonize the Museum’ programmes, and the potential of the concept ‘remediation’ for all kinds of collections and museums, inspired my research interest in the permanent exhibition ‘Chambers of Wonder’ in the Zeeuws Museum. The Zeeuws Museum has to be understood as central provider of cultural and historical background to the province. The museum is situated in the provincial capital Middelburg, which in times of the Golden Ages formed an important harbour of trade. I take ‘Chambers of Wonder’ as a relevant field of study as its exhibition strategies feature the artefacts of

¹⁷ Deliss, “Collecting Life’s Unknowns,” 28.

¹⁸ *Decolonizing Museums*, 5.

¹⁹ Deliss, “Collecting Life’s Unknowns,” 29.

²⁰ Deliss, “Collecting Life’s Unknowns,” 33.

²¹ Leendert van der Valk, “Het Tropenmuseum gaat voorop in ‘dekolonisatie,’” *NRC*, October 12, 2017, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/10/12/tropenmuseum-gaat-voorop-in-dekolonisatie-13460466-a1576878>. ;

Okwui Enwezor, “The Postcolonial constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition,” *Researches in African Literatures* 34, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 73, Project MUSE.

other cultures heritage, of which the majority is achieved in times of colonial trade. The exhibition 'Chambers of Wonder' displays a multitude of these treasures together with other curiosities, antiques and naturalia from Dutch or Zeeuwse origins. By bringing activist thoughts from the decolonization programmes to a provincial museum, I try to answer the question:

How can we 'remediate' the exhibition practices in 'Chambers of Wonder' according to the decolonization programmes?

In the research we will discuss different aspects of the exhibition 'Chambers of Wonder' in Zeeuws Museum, in order to analyze in what way a story is told. In doing this, I feel the need to emphasize that my choice for the discussed objects directly influence the research results, by the exclusion of others. However, the aim of this research does not lie in the discussion of all the objects that the exhibition contains, rather it illustrates how and why certain artefacts in 'Chambers of Wonder' are brought together and what this entails, by understanding the practice of exhibiting as an act of power.

As already drawn out, the extent of this research addresses the practice of 'collecting', but will not dive into its discussion. The theoretical and methodological approach of this research will be based on a post-colonial stance applied to the exhibition practice. The writing and publishing focused on the exhibiting practices is a relative new field that emerged from a "changing landscape of art history, with its expanding interest in social and institutional histories" and secondly, "perhaps more importantly, the curatorial boom of the late 1980s and 1990s".²² The philosopher Boris Groys has characterized the contemporary art world as an exhibition practice and in the same manner, more art critiques and theorist have written about the increasing ambivalent relationship between curator and artists nowadays. For this reason, this changing climate of the art discipline has been defined as "the curatorial turn" in the 1990s.²³ While the curator is addressed here as the prominent gesture of contemporary art practice, I would like to emphasize that the field of study on the 'curatorial turn' can also offer a deeper understanding of how the exhibition itself becomes an interesting object of study. In this research, we come to understand the 'exhibition' as "contemporary forms or rhetoric complex expressions of persuasion whose strategies aim to

²² Bruce Altshuler, "A Canon of Exhibitions," *Manifesta Journal* 11, (2010/2011): 5.

²³ Boris Groys, "Politics of Installation," *E-flux Journal* 2, (January 2009): 1, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/02/68504/politics-of-installation/>.

produce a prescribed set of values and social relations for their audiences. As such exhibitions are subjective political tools, as well being modern ritual settings, that uphold identities (artistic, national, sub-cultural, “international”, gender- or race specific, avant-garde, regional, global, etc.); they are to be understood as institutional “utterances” within a larger culture industry”.²⁴ As Paul O’Neill states, the exhibition has come to be understood as way of organizing knowledge that structures the constitution of social relations.²⁵

Thus, by focusing on the exhibition practices, I aim to expose the discursive “strategy of representations that produces certain meanings and knowledge through the display of objects”.²⁶ I will make use of a post-colonial reading of the exhibition in order to find ways to ‘remediate’ the exhibition narrative. To do so we need a better understanding of what ‘representation’ implies, and how then the exhibition (...) can also be thought of ‘like a language’, since it uses objects on display to produce certain meanings about the subject matter of the exhibition”.²⁷ The ‘system of representation’ is questioned by two forms of critique: “(...) The first [form of critic] uses the insight from semiotics, and the manner in which language constructs and conveys meaning to analysis the diversity of ways in which exhibitions create representations of other cultures”.²⁸ The insights in how meaning is constructed and produced within exhibition practices, is called ‘poetics of exhibiting’. This form of critique can be found by focusing on *what* is actually portrayed: what political

²⁴ Paul O’Neill, “The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse,” in *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance*, ed. Judith Rugg and Michele Sedgwick (Bristol: Intellect Ltd, 2007), 244.

²⁵ As Paul O’Neill states, the exhibition has come to be understood as way of ‘organizing knowledge that structures the constitution of social relations’, the conceptualization of Michel Foucault’s discourse can clarify the linkage between institutions and social meaning. Michel Foucault, cited by Hall takes discourse as, “a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about- a particular historical moment... Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But since all social practices entail meaning and meanings shape and influence what we do – our conduct – all practices have a discursive aspect.”

Information from: Stuart Hall, “The Work of Representation,” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, and Sean Nixon (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2013), 29.

²⁶ Henrietta Lidchi, “The Poetics and the Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures,” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, and Sean Nixon (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2013), 121.

²⁷ Stuart Hall, “Introduction,” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, and Sean Nixon (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2013), 21.

²⁸ Lidchi, “The Poetics and the Politics”, 121.

presence is given to the object; for whom/what is spoken?²⁹ The second critique “foregrounds questions of discourse and power to interrogate the historical nature of museums and collecting. (...) By exploring the link between knowledge of other cultures and the imperial nations, this critique considers representation in the light of the politics of exhibiting”.³⁰ The politics of exhibiting takes representations as constructions that are persuading natural or innocent images that actually always are motivated or constructed as “each representation acts to normalize some worlds and exclude others”.³¹ We can simplify this second form of critique by questioning how something is portrayed: what symbolic presence is given to the object; in what way is spoken about the object?³²

At last, I would like to point out some practical choices I have made, which will have an influence on the final results of my research. I will examine the language, imagery and model of exhibiting artefacts in ‘Chambers of Wonder’. This of course, cannot be done without addressing the context of this exhibition: the Zeeuws Museum and its curators. The analysis will thus contain of a descriptive examination of what the visitor actually sees, next to the discussion of the exhibition model in relation to the historical ‘cabinet of curiosities’. We will ‘remediate’ the founded data with the use of decolonization programmes. Having addressed the intentions and focus of my research and its limitations, I also would like to finish with my academic background and how this has influenced the epistemological beliefs of my research. Referring to what Haraway has called ‘situated knowledge’, I take up the belief that knowledge can never be universal and a researcher has always take into account his/her (social, political, economic) position and how it is influencing the producing of knowledge.³³ As a student of Art History with special interest in post-colonial themes, I have to come understand exhibition practices, and the museum more in general, as powerful texts that shape our social experiences, our memory and identities. The Zeeuws Museum has played an important role in my primary and secondary education. During frequently organized study-trips to this museum we came to know about

²⁹ Rosemarie Buikema, “The arena of imaginings: Sarah Bartmann and the ethics of representation,” in *Doing Gender in Media, Art and Culture*, ed. Rosemarie Buikema and Iris van der Tuin (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), 72-73.

³⁰ Lidchi, “The Poetics and the Politics”, 121.

³¹ Buikema, “The arena of imaginings”, 79.

³² Buikema, “The arena of imaginings”, 72-73.

³³ Sarah Bracke and Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, “The arena of knowledge: Antigone and feminist standpoint theory,” in *Doing Gender in Media, Art and Culture*, ed. Rosemarie Buikema and Iris van der Tuin (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), 45.

our region and its people. After spending some years in the capital of the Netherlands, I became interested again in what my own 'Zeeuwse' identity implies. By bringing my academic knowledge to the Zeeuws Museum, I want to question the representational practices of its cultural historical narrative that I hold as personal and important. This cultural history refers to the prominent days of Zeeland, its history to both to sea and trade with other cultures. I take 'Chamber of Wonder' as an interesting exhibition that shows how much cultures have exchanged during the centuries, and I take up its representations of non-western cultures as relevant study-cases. As I am inspired by the focus of decolonization programmes on revealing systems of inequality – I refuse to see 'Chamber of Wonder' as 'neutral' arena and take the representation of the 'Other' as something that is always problematic. However, I see I museums as potential locations of contributing to social change by deepening public debate on difficult historical and cultural issues. With this research I aim to 'remediate' certain representations in the exhibition strategy of 'Chambers of Wonder' by relating them to decolonization programmes. With my post-colonial background I aim to contribute to critical reading of this exchange, and its representation in 'Chambers of Wonder' that will make certain aspects of the exhibition visible for further discussion.

I. Towards the 'Chambers of Wonder'

In my analysis I aim to offer a 'remediation' of the representation strategies in 'Chambers of Wonder'. Taken the notion of 'representation' as the act of making present, in both a political as a symbolic way, we are concerned with what is made present and how this is done. The first gives insight in the collection displayed in 'Chambers of Wonder'. We will be focused on the 'colonial heritage' addressing the variety of artefacts that are brought together; where they came from and how they have been achieved. We will also have eye for the institutional context that possesses this collection present day. Secondly, we ask how these artefacts are displayed in 'Chambers of Wonder'. As we will see, 'Chambers of Wonder' refers to the historic cabinets of curiosities with a specific display strategy. By discussing both the collection as the way they are displayed, we aim to get insight in how knowledge is produced for the visitor. This knowledge is questioned for its relation to historical dimensions of power. At the same time we try to provide new insights.

The 'Chambers of Wonder' can be found in the attic of the Zeeuws Museum, where "three large shipping crates contain displays inspired by historical curiosity cabinets. Each cabinet is a world in microcosm".³⁴ The general introduction text that is printed on the wall of entrance offers the general context of the three chambers and their enclosed matter. While the chambers contain objects that differ from weapons, clothing, jewellery, and objects used in daily life to objects used for rituals or religious activities, these objects are brought together for their 'novelty' or 'curiosity': "The display cases are packed full of the most varied items from Zeeland and from exotic, distant lands. Some are simply beautiful to look at and others have extraordinary stories to tell. What they have in common is that they all inspire wonder. What is it? Where does it come from? Why is it here? The objects inspire, they help you to discover new things or to revive memories."³⁵ This welcoming text shows its appeal for an active participation - the curiosity - of the visitor, providing him/her questions for how to approach the collection. In this way, I come to understand that the aspirations of 'Chambers of Wonder' can be understood as the incitement of an active and personal dialogue between display and visitor. The visitor not a passive receiver of information but is encouraged to be active, to be wondered. An important question for this

³⁴ Visitors entrance text from 'Chambers of Wonder', Zeeuws Museum, accessed on December 15, 2017.

³⁵ Visitors entrance text from 'Chambers of Wonder', Zeeuws Museum, accessed on December 15, 2017.

research is following from this first observation: what tools are given to promote this conversation? Are these enough tools to communicate properly with those objects? While exhibition gives the freedom to the visitors to come up with their own associations and interpretations - it helps its visitor by using different themes to organize its content. The 'Chambers of Wonder' are categorized by three different principal themes: Home & Trade, Life & Death and Power & Pomp. In the visitor's guide, that lies at the entrance of the exhibition, these themes are explained as "Home & Trade features all manner of objects relating to trade, domesticity and leisure activities", "Life & Death contains objects associated with birth, family, religion and burial" and the chamber entitled "Power & Pomp is devoted to mankind's need for power and ostentatious display".³⁶ These themes suppose relations between the present artefacts and their historic usage or origin that makes it easier for the visitor to come up with his/her own associations. It stays, however, questionable if this conversation is equal: without misinterpretations or bad appropriation by the visitor.

³⁶ *The Chambers of Wonder*, Middelburg: Zeeuws Museum, 2012. Exhibition Catalogue.

I.I What collection is displayed in 'Chambers of Wonder'?

I.I A proper reading of the collection

To have an overview on the collection of 'Chambers of Wonder', containing around the 800 objects, we have a look at the visitor's guide. These printed guides contain thematic introductions texts to each chamber of wonder, and a documentation list of the corresponding objects present in these chambers. Next to their titles or a subscription of what they depict, it assigns their (assumed) date, origin, and often by whom they were acquired. As there are only four hardcopies lying at the entrance of 'Chambers of Wonder', I suppose that this guide is only meant for the visitor who wants to have more detailed information about the collection displayed. That providing this information is not the main goal of this exhibition, as we have already understood in the introduction text.

Referring to what was also stated in the general introduction text, the collection in 'Chambers of Wonder' comprises of "the most varied items from Zeeland and from exotic, distant lands". This termination makes us -the visitor- directly aware of the fact that some of these curiosa must be non-familiar to us. What information does the visitor's guide provide, next to these words? Before knowing where to search for, a proper understanding of what is meant with 'exotic' is needed. The notion of "exotic" has often been used to describe the "distantly foreign or strange for the sake of novelty or picturesque effect, without concern for accuracy or comprehension. (...) Exotic implies then the idea of "outside"; hence, in Occidental poetry, it refers to what is "outside" the Western traditions".³⁷ From a post-colonial standpoint, and in from the activist stance of different decolonization programmes, this notion of the 'exotic' is taken as problematic. Ethnographic and anthropological studies have brought up this notion of the 'exotic' to create an idea of non-Western cultures as 'primitive', 'erotic' and 'barbaric' in contrast to the more 'developed' and 'civilized' Western Culture. This idea of 'exotic' was in the colonial discourse often used to subscribe its colonial subject: to construct a hierarchy of cultures.³⁸

Applying this notion of 'exotic' to the information given in the visitor's guide, I take these objects 'outside of the Western traditions' refer to objects from non-Western origin.

³⁷ *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. 4th ed. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012.

³⁸ Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies*, 79.

Most of these objects are drawn from Indonesia and few from Canada or African destinations. The documentation illustrates, moreover, that most of these objects were gained in the seventeenth and eighteenth century when the harbours of Middelburg and Vlissingen played a central role in the Dutch trade. Both harbours played an important role during the Dutch slave trade.³⁹ Thus, these objects from distant lands were mostly gained in the encounter of different countries during the Golden Ages and times of European colonization. For this reason I come to understand the collection of ‘Chambers of Wonder’ containing an important part of Dutch colonial heritage. From this point on, I will be focused on these objects in ‘Chambers of Wonder’, which derive from these “exotic, distant lands” while understanding this collection of Non-Western artefacts as partly connected to the Dutch colonial history.

I.ii The history of achievement

To give power to the conviction that a large part of the collection in ‘Chambers of Wonder’ presents colonial predatory-art, we take a more concrete look at their moment of achievement. According to the documentation, most of these objects derive from the historical collection of the ‘Zeeuws Genootschap’. This society originates from 1769 when it was established as the main base for progressive arts and science in Zeeland. In order to promote its activities, it started collecting material from Zeeland and beyond, becoming the crucial provider for the provision of the ‘**ethnographic**’ collection that is seen in ‘Chamber of Wonder’ today. Argued by Ad de Jong, this society and its sources were not only focused on the provision on the cultural history and knowledge on the identity of Zeeland and its people, but also as collections of knowledge about the world in large.⁴⁰ Moreover, the Zeeuws Genootschap was therefore, according to De Jong, a typical product of the ‘Enlightenment’, based on the promotion of new ideas and knowledge production.⁴¹ Thus, these objects were obtained as relevant cases for the study of the ‘world in large’. This is emphasized when using the full name of the society, translated as, ‘Zeeuws Genootschap of Science’. Another aspect of these diasporic objects is the fact that they were predominantly

³⁹ “Zeeuwse Verhalen,” Zeeuws Archief, accessed February 6, 2018, <http://www.zeeuwsarchief.nl/zeeuwse-verhalen/>.

⁴⁰ De Jong, *Vitrines Vol Verhalen: Museumcollecties als bron voor cultuurgeschiedenis* (Amsterdam: Vossiuspers UvA, 2010), 13.

⁴¹ Ad de Jong, *Vitrines Vol Verhalen*, 13.

acquired during the seventeenth and eighteenth century in Indonesia, achieved by Dutch figures as Moens, Vos, Louijssen, Lammers and Sprenger who returned from Dutch colonies or oversee relations of trade.⁴² The objects were, thus, in these times achieved as objects of study. However, this was nothing new. Until the nineteenth century, exotic objects in western collections were always understood as ‘ethnographic’: they were read as documents that gave insight in “nations of people with their customs, habits and points of difference”.⁴³

The Zeeuws Museum contains a huge amount of objects from colonial background, and uses them for display in ‘Chambers of Wonder’ since December 2012. As we have discussed in the introduction, decolonization programmes have critically engaged with certain historic, colonial heritages that derive from non-Western cultures. Before diving into what further insight these programmes can offer for the representational practices of this museum, we have to consider how the Zeeuws Museum wants to come forth.⁴⁴ We question thus how to understand this cultural institution for both its aspirations as to gain a deeper insight in what ‘Chamber of Wonder’ means for the Zeeuws Museum.

From 2001, the museum underwent a big architectural renovation that lasted almost six years. However, the educational department of this museum remained active by organizing ‘Cultuur debatten’ from 2003 until 2005. These cultural debates were meant to boost discussions on the culture and identity of Zeeland. The publication *Zeeuws Imago*, which is drawn from these debates, gives insight in how the museum questions her own relation with and relevance for the local community from Zeeland. It is for this reason that I hold the publication as a relevant source to gain an idea what idealistic aspirations this museum holds and how it tries to position itself. One of the thematic ‘cultural debates’ revolved around the importance of history, raising the question whether or not the Zeeuws Museum’s goal should be to narrate the local cultural biography of Zeeland. It is interesting that the general introduction of this thematic debate addresses the assumed social and

⁴² *The Chambers of Wonder*, Middelburg: Zeeuws Museum, 2012. Exhibition Catalogue.

⁴³ Lidchi, “The Poetics and the Politics”, 127.

⁴⁴ While ‘Wonderkamers’ consists mainly of the collection of the ‘Zeeuws genootschap’, other exhibitions in the Zeeuws Museum contain more contemporary forms of art. The variety of the collection from the Zeeuws Museum was boosted by the establishment of the ‘Zeeuwse Museumstichting’ in 1961. This foundation collected the works that were originally part of the society, and other smaller museums as the KunstMuseum and brought this new collection to what we today know as the ‘Zeeuws Museum’ at the Abdijplein.

Information: “History,” Zeeuws Museum, accessed February 1, 2018,

<https://www.zeeuwsmuseum.nl/en/about-the-museum/organisation/what-we-do/history>.

cultural responsibilities of museums in times of increasing migration and globalisation. In the publication *Zeeuws Imago* the museum is drawn in the context of moving cultural geographies, which leads to proposition that immigrants cannot integrate without knowing something about national identity. Moreover, the introduction text makes the assumption that everybody seems to agree that this identity is to be found in our history.⁴⁵ Another publication within this thematic debate questions in what way the Zeeuws Museum should narrate this local cultural biography and what should be selected as relevant historic knowledge? From this point I want to draw a line to the interview I did with the curator Caroline van Santen. Since 2012, Caroline works as curator for the Zeeuws Museum. Moreover, she is the brain behind the exhibition ‘Chambers of Wonder’. On Wednesday 8 November 2017 I meet Caroline in the museum café for some questions. Caroline states that the diversity and rarity of all the objects gives the visitor an understanding of the history of Zeeland being an important center of trade. The history of the objects is thus used to tell about the history of Zeeland being an important location of trade. Moreover, the placement of all kinds of objects in general these, makes the exhibition aiming come back to the diversity as similarities of these cultures. I would like to get back at what the invited lecturer Gijs van der Ham states in the beginning of his article in *Zeeuws Imago*. As we are concerned with national history and historic consciousness, it is important according to Van der Ham, to question the meaning of objects displayed and what role museums can play.⁴⁶ This takes me back of the idea of exhibition that organize objects, in order to represent certain stories of both the past and the present.⁴⁷

I.iii A proposed reading of the collection

From this point on, I want to derive back to the idea of the Zeeuws Museums –or rather the ‘Chambers of Wonder’ exhibition as powerful site that is mediating narratives that shape our social experiences, our memory and identities. In this case we should say that to ‘remediate’ the way history is represented is crucial, as we have seen discussed in the *Zeeuws Imago* publication that the current field of exhibiting is related to the contemporary

⁴⁵ Valentijn Byvanck, “Musea en Geschiedenis: Inleiding,” in *Zeeuws Imago*, ed. Valentijn Byvanck (Middelburg: Zeeuws Museum, 2007), 112.

⁴⁶ Gijs van der Ham, “Musea en Geschiedenis,” in *Zeeuws Imago*, ed. Valentijn Byvanck (Middelburg: Zeeuws Museum, 2007), 113.

⁴⁷ Lidchi, “The Poetics and the Politics”, 127.

context of globalisation and migration. Holding on to the conviction of Okwui Enwezor that “the nearness today of those cultures formerly separated by their distance to the objectifying conditions of modernist history calls for new critical appraisal of our contemporary present and its relationship to artistic production”, I aim to question the strategies of representations in ‘Chambers of Wonder’.⁴⁸ This remediation will consist of an examination of its display strategies, which are based on the historic cabinet of curiosities. Then I will move to the chamber ‘Power and Pomp’ where I discuss the relation between the theme and the objects displayed. At last I dive into a specific display strategies of the chamber ‘Life and Death’ concerning an Indonesian fertility statue, before getting back to a general overview of the ‘Chambers of Wonder’.

Before diving into the ‘how’ of the exhibition strategies in ‘Chambers of Wonder’, I want to propose something that is in line with the essential goal of this research: the remediation of representations. As we will see in ‘Chambers of Wonder’, the objects are placed in a difficult tendency of historically collected as ethnographica but in the current ‘Chambers of Wonder’ also addressed for their aesthetic value: their ‘novelty’, ‘curiosity’ and power to ‘wonder’. For this reason I come to understand these artefacts from ‘exotic, distant lands’ not as entirely ‘ethnographic’. I will do this, not the break up the relation that these objects have with their ‘assumed’ origin, or separate them from the discussion on ethnographic exhibitions, museums and art practices by the decolonization programmes. As student in post-colonial studies I take up the belief that decolonization of mindsets is needed to find progression, and it is for this reason I take the idealistic goal of the decolonization for claiming restitution not as satisfactory. For this reason I come to understand the collection as ‘diaspora’, “for an object is a migrant too with its partial knowledge, partial identities, and incompleteness”.⁴⁹ The notion of diaspora emphasises “the dispersion of people/ things from their homelands”.⁵⁰ Moreover, this notion is hold as an interesting “subject to power relations, tensions, disconnections and notions of belonging, identity and community”.⁵¹ Understanding the ‘exotic’ collection of ‘Chambers of Wonder’ as diasporic, questions their identity. I believe that identities are always ‘advanced, one that is always in flux, open,

⁴⁸ Enwezor, “The Postcolonial Constellation,” 57.

⁴⁹ Deliss, “Collecting Life’s Unknowns,” 30.

⁵⁰ *A Dictionary of Critical theory*, 5th ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

⁵¹ *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th ed., New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012.

fragmentary, in process.”⁵² So, this gives us the tools to not only discuss on what certain objects might have been in the past, but offers discussion on what these objects represent in the present day.

I.II How is this collection displayed in ‘Chamber of Wonder’?

I.II.i Cabinet of Curiosities

As the title of the exhibition already gave away, the ‘Chambers of Wonder’ refer to the historic cabinet of curiosity. *Kabinetten, Galerijen en Musea* considers the cabinet of curiosities as one of the first forms of collection display. For this reason, it is understood as the predecessor of what we today know as ‘the Museum’. The museum, namely, is taken to refer to an institution based on collections, which are concerned with sciences and art.⁵³ As the cabinet of curiosity forms an encyclopaedic collection of both, it includes “specimens, naturalia from the animal, vegetable, and mineral worlds and artificialia from an equally wide spectrum, including musical instruments, antiquities, scientific instruments, coins, weapons, and objects associated with indigenous peoples. Rarities, particularly objects considered hybrids and/or deviations from the norm, were most appreciated.”⁵⁴ These objects “associated with indigenous peoples” were categorized as ‘exotica’. These ‘exotica’ comprised objects that came from discovery journeys to ‘new’ parts and other cultures of the world. ‘Exotica’ was then used, as category to describe objects that could not fit into the existing categories, for it was often prodigious for its material, technique and/or character. It then refers again, to what we earlier have discussed as ‘exotic’, to the abnormality. The cabinets were to “represent the fruit of exploration, imperialism, technological advancement,

⁵² Gloria Wekker, “The area of disciplines: Gloria Anzaldúa and interdisciplinarity,” in *Doing Gender in Media, Art and Culture*, ed. Rosemarie Buikema and Iris van der Tuin (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), 65.

⁵³ Ellinoor Bergvelt, Debora Meijers, and Mieke Rijnders, *Kabinetten, galerijen en musea: het verzamelen en presenteren van naturalia en kunst van 1500 tot heden* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2005), 52-53.

⁵⁴ Lyndel King and Janet Marstine, “The University Museum and Gallery: A site for institutional critique and a focus of the curriculum,” in *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction*, ed. Janet Marstine (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006), 274.

scholarship, art, medicine, and mercantile adventures at the edges of the known world”, being charitable to the status of its collector. As the power of these collections was held in the belief that its objects represented universal knowledge, the collector contained a powerful position by exhibiting his ‘word view’.⁵⁵ The curatorial strategies, the narrative of the cabinet as “asserting interlocking relationships” between the objects in order to tell a story or gain curiosity, was held to high importance; this display practice made it that the collectors “metaphorically controlled the world”.⁵⁶ In contemporary exhibition practice, the supply of interlocking relationships between objects is understood for its educational potential. Making so called ‘cross-connections’, the visitors gain agency to actively participate in engaging their “own connections, exercising their ‘own informed’ imaginations”.⁵⁷ As assumed, the contemporary usage of the cabinet of curiosity-model has asserted its “potential for provoking reflexive critique of space, vision, representation, identity, knowledge”.⁵⁸ By following Deliss’ method, I try bring about “a shift in medium, to experiment with alternative ways of describing, interpreting and displaying the objects in the collection”.⁵⁹ While it seems that this remediation overlaps with the cross-connections strategy, as both search for finding new interpretations, we have seen that “to remediate also implies the remedy of a deficient situation, for example, the ambivalent resonance of the colonial past”.⁶⁰ Thus, this concept tackles the representation strategies of exhibitions, not only by questioning their narrative but also their relations to power. A decolonizing stance would demand careful intercourse with how these exhibition strategies still can draw out unquestioned relations of power. This last is important for the context of this research, as “calling upon cultural memory and half-gone history seems to be of utmost importance to oppose the often politically-guided amnesia and ignorance”.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Catie Pearce and Maggie MacLure, “The wonder of Method,” *International Journal of Research & Method in Education* 32, no. 3 (November 2009): 253, Taylor & Francis Online.

⁵⁶ King and Marstine, “The University Museum and Gallery,” 275.

⁵⁷ Pearce and MacLure, “The wonder of Method,” 256.

⁵⁸ Pearce and MacLure, “The wonder of Method,” 256.

⁵⁹ Deliss, “Collecting Life’s Unknowns,” 28. .

⁶⁰ Deliss, “Collecting Life’s Unknowns,” 28.

⁶¹ *Decolonizing Museums*, 5.

I.II.II A close-reading of display strategies

In my analysis I will discuss two parts of the exhibition, and ask what insight from the decolonization programmes could offer. Firstly, I will discuss the relation between the diasporic objects and their themes and sub-themes. Secondly, I shall focus on their 'strategy of location', by looking at what cross-connections can be made. To begin with, I will be focusing on the third Chamber of Wonder entitled 'Power & Pomp'. This chamber is repeatedly "devoted to power and ostentatious display", using the sub-themes 'Struggle', 'Ostentation', and 'Decoration'. Struggle is defined by the Zeeuws Museum thusly: "Power is rarely gained without a struggle (...) Struggle can take the form of warfare but you can also fight for social justice such as religious freedom or the abolition of slavery".⁶²

In this chamber 'Struggle' is directly assigned to the display of violence, as the showcases exist of a collection of weapons (Pic. 1). The majority of weapons from 'exotic, distant' lands are from Indonesian origin, together with a knife and scabbard from the 'Blackfoot Indians' from Canada. Swords, knives and *kris* from different Indonesian islands are displayed next to a sword produced for the VOC and military pistols from Dutch and Belgian/French origin (Pic. 2). The VOC sword, next to Indonesian swords and knives, seems to refer directly to the violence or 'struggle' between the colonizers and colonized as the objects are contemporaries. The *kris* is a typical dagger from South-Indonesian origin and seems to contrast with the technologically 'more-advanced' military pistols that again derive from the same date (Pic. 3). First of all, this gives the *kris* an understanding of being a rather primitive object to gain power, but this way of display also has consequences for the more cultural and social dimension of the *kris*, which is hold as important for Indonesian culture.⁶³ The fact that the *kris* is reduced by its categorization and context as purely connected to struggle, violence and (questionable) power, makes that part of its cultural identity is alienated. Moreover, the unwitting positioning of the *kris* next to the pistols seems a symbolic reference to its 'primitive' nature. The latter is a classic colonial representation of 'exotic' ethnic groups, emphasizing their inferiority and lack of modernity, and retaining these representations to assume their unchanging traditions.⁶⁴

⁶² *The Chambers of Wonder*, Middelburg: Zeeuws Museum, 2012. Exhibition Catalogue.

⁶³ For more information: Isaac Groneman, *The Javaneese Kris* (Leiden: C. Zwartenkort Art Books and KITLV Press, 2009).

⁶⁴ Buikema, "The arena of imaginings," 78.

As the collection of ‘Struggle’ exists mostly out of objects from Indonesia, collected in times of colonialism, it seems strange to me that this is not brought up explicitly in the narrative of this exhibition. While the cabinet ‘Power & Pomp’ is not aimed to represent a particular struggle or identity, the relation between the thematic descriptions and displayed objects is alienating. This can be even emphasized by the fact that while in the thematic introduction is referred to (the abolition of) slavery, only two artefacts present this struggle. One is a plate dated around 1833, that contains an illustration of a ‘freed’ slave next to Wilberforce, a British advocate for the abolition of slavery. The other object is a bracelet made of copper from West-Africa, acquired in the nineteenth century. Both objects derive from the collection of the Zeeuws society.⁶⁵ This ignorance of the colonial past, while being present in the identity of many objects in ‘Chamber of Wonder, feels like politically-guided amnesia.

The next step in this analysis will consist of a focus on the diasporic artefacts within the second ‘Chambers of Wonder’ with the theme ‘Life & Death’. By looking at their ‘strategy of location’; by looking at what cross-connections can be made between the objects, I hope to gain insight into what meaning is created. One of its subcategories, ‘New Life’ is captioned: “In most cultures the mystery of life and death is inseparable from religion and rituals. (...) New life is a motive for the display of the beautiful Indonesian fertility statues.”⁶⁶ At the bottom of the showcase – a bit higher than the floor, the attention is drawn to a light-coloured potter sculpture. The expression of the man seems awake, its gesture is active and light emphasizes his arisen genitalia (Pic. 5). I will be focussing on this fertility sculpture that derives from Lombok, Indonesia. The object is probably older, but it is gained by Hans Warren (1921-2001), a famous writer from Zeeland and one of the alternative donors of naturalia and artificialia from Western-African and Southeast Asian origins.⁶⁷ The statue is placed within a landscape of bird-nests that are found in Zeeland and surroundings. Moreover, within this landscape two ‘aqua fortis’ preparations arise (Pic. 6). One of a crocodile descendent and one of a young porcupine from the continent Africa, acquired before 1879. Both objects were acquired for the collection of Zeeuws society.⁶⁸ As already discussed, it is not uncommon for the cabinet of curiosities to display a combination of

⁶⁵ *The Chambers of Wonder*, Middelburg: Zeeuws Museum, 2012. Exhibition Catalogue.

⁶⁶ *The Chambers of Wonder*, Middelburg: Zeeuws Museum, 2012. Exhibition Catalogue.

⁶⁷ *The Chambers of Wonder*, Middelburg: Zeeuws Museum, 2012. Exhibition Catalogue.

⁶⁸ *The Chambers of Wonder*, Middelburg: Zeeuws Museum, 2012. Exhibition Catalogue.

naturalia and artificialia. But what consequence does this case have for the diasporic object? While it is difficult to find any specific information on these objects, not more than given in the visitor's guide ('fertility statues, pottery, possible Lombok, Indonesia, 20th century, collection Hans Warren'), we take them – in the context of new life as important, historic and cultural significant objects of religious rituals. The cross-connections possibilities in this cabinet of curiosities are plural, but as the decolonization programme requests special attention to the relations of power and representations, this cross-connection seem an unwittingly copied problematic representation of ethnic minorities being compared with the world of animals to emphasize their primitive character. This gives that the object, and its cultural symbolic, are not taken serious. Or maybe only become 'eroticised', as the surroundings of this fertility statue do not bring further suggestions than referring to its relation of procreation of the wild – which seems to emphasise the primitive nature of this statue.

Let us return to the narrative, the general tone of the exhibition 'Chambers of Wonder'. As discussed earlier, the introduction text provides the visitor with some questions before entering the cabinets: "What is it? Where does it come from? Why is it here?" I will take this last question of central focus to illustrate the context in which the 'dialogue' between object and visitor is encouraged. This context suggests that most objects derive from trade activities. In the introduction text, they make a small reference to the ceiling, which is constructed in the form of an upturned ship (Pic. 7). The wooden shipping boxes in the exhibition space, themselves already a referent for trade, are abided with symbolic markers that we know from trade and shipping contexts. The markers refer to what can be found within the crates, emphasizing their value and fragility but also the dangers connected to these objects: their toxicity (Pic. 7). At last, outside the cabinets is a couch. This couch contains figurative depictions of discovery ships we know from the Golden Ages. However, it is the first time I see a little depiction of what I come to understand a brutal situation of colonial activity (Pic. 8, 9.). It is the third time I have come to visit this exhibition, and as I take a seat to look at the ceiling, I find this small image. I become overwhelmed with the feeling of incomprehension. Is this a move of 'Chambers of Wonder' trying to make small references to the colonial history of Netherland and especially of Zeeland? I wanted to end with this anecdote in order to illustrate that 'Chambers of Wonder' is an exhibition that is made with attention. With the knowledge that these objects make present a part of history of which Holland has not had the courage to confront. However, while I take the exhibition practices as ignorant of these identities of diasporic object, it is not only this history that has only made present. I take such a little effort by the

Zeeuws Museum not as sufficient. As we have illustrated, change comes when we aim to give voice, not only to represent ourselves but also our multiple counter-representations. A real dialogue is not held alone.

II. CONCLUSION

In the current tendency of increasing migration and globalisation, and with the emerging of the post-colonial discourse that upholds discussion of the colonial and its continuities, we have witnessed a growing request of the museum as a site for matters of justice, activism, memory and remembrance. We have taken 'the museum' as a potential actor for contributing to social change by deepening public debate on difficult historical and cultural issues. With this tendency in mind, we moved to the Zeeuws Museum. The 'Chambers of Wonder', that forms one of the permanent exhibitions since 2012, is dedicating to show the historical prominence of the harbours of Zeeland. This conviction is drawn from both from the discussed information on the institution, its collection and from the display strategies of this exhibition. First, the curator Caroline van Santen has characterized the diversity of the collection as a reference to the historic prominence of Zeeland. Secondly, as we have looked at its collection, it entails a huge amount of objects that were achieved in times of Golden Ages and colonial expansion. Moreover, in the presentation of the exhibition direct references are made to this history of trade, as the cabinets are made of wooden shipping crates.

Bringing the content of decolonizing programmes to this museum, we have been occupied with how to 'remediate' this exhibition. This remediation insists the questioning of how knowledge is created within the exhibition and at the same time searching for new knowledges. The question: **'How can we 'remediate' the exhibition practices in 'Chambers of Wonder' according to the decolonization programmes?'** formed our general focus.

To answer this question we came back to both the collection and the display strategies in which these objects were brought. In the context of 'Chamber of Wonder', we talk about a specific strategy of display, based on the historic cabinet of curiosities. Both the Zeeuws Museum as literature on contemporary programs of education have argued the potential of these display strategies to overcome institutional categorizations, by giving the visitor agency for making 'cross-connections'. However, in this research I refuse to see 'Chamber of Wonder' as 'neutral' arena to illustrate how this 'free' dialogue, the lack of context of these objects, has till now not give agency for the non-Western objects to be part of the dialogue. By critical engagement with the language, structure and thematic categories

of this exhibition, we have seen that its representational strategies often refer back to certain colonial stereotypes, beliefs of cultural superiority and political-guided amnesia.

We have not only been focused on the exhibition strategies, but also been focused on the collection itself en aimed to propose a new stance towards these objects. In this research we have taken artefacts from non-Western cultures as important witnesses of the historic encounters between different cultures. While decolonizing in its most extreme form stands for the 'recuperation' of original identities and cultures, I act for the belief that identities are always flux, open, in progress. I refuse the idea that these collections from non-Western origin cannot be understood as solid identities that were once defined by their original context- that preserves the dominant conviction that these objects can be studied and explained. The objects that are originally called 'exotic' in the cabinet of curiosities are for this reason called 'diasporic' in my research. I argue that approaching these objects as diasporic can help the visitor to understand that these objects are migrant too, giving them a contemporary identity. Moreover, the diaspora refers also to the idea of groups that gives back these objects a sense of collective strength. As I have called them 'diasporic' to emphasize them as both historic as present identities, I also wanted to emphasize their problematic relationship to power relations. As concluded from the analysis on the exhibition, the space is given to the visitor, who can give the objects meaning. But as I have illustrated, this is quickly referring to matters of exoticism. Thus, I come to understand these objects as diaspora in order to give them an identity in the first place. This last gives the possibility to not only question the historic representations of other cultures, but also to bring these stereotypes in relation with present day, present identities of migration, refugees, globalisation in European context.

I consider that this exhibition, and the analysis has shown a problematic stance towards the direct referring to colonial culture, becomes symbolic for a bigger picture of contemporary Dutch society. As Gloria Wekker and different decolonization programmes have illustrated: the problematic representations of national identity, silencing of alternative cultural narratives and practices of cultural hegemony remain dominant practices in most European context. However, we should critically and carefully engage with what decolonizing means. Bringing this study to the 'Chambers of Wonder' in the Zeeuws Museum, this has given a special insight in how the notion of 'decolonization' is not just a metaphor for museums and education aiming to be 'better' or more social justified, but is an actual tool for questioning its power in its practices of including and excluding of certain forms of knowledge.

I thus take up this research as new field of study that discussed the identity of cultural practices of colonist heritage and question what it might symbolically means to the migrant identity. By making the problematic of this identity more visible in exhibitions, I believe that museums can take up more social responsibility. In doing this I presume that more study has to be done on how these diasporic artefacts can open up debate. How their communication with the visitor can be stimulated and equalized, without making them too much objects of pure 'wonderful' aesthetics or 'curious' histories. It still can be the wonder that be used in the first step for making contact between the visitor and object, but next the step should be that these artefacts should get space to tell its story of why they are here today and how we got part of them as much they are part of us.

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Figure 2- Chamber 'Power & Pomp': vitrine 3 – 'Struggle', Zeeuws Museum (picture: Author).



Figure 3- Chamber 'Power & Pomp': vitrine 3 – 'Struggle', Zeeuws Museum (picture: Author).

CHAMBER LIFE&DEATH: 'NEW LIFE'



Figure 4- Chamber 'Life & Death': vitrine 6 – 'Family/New Life', Zeeuws Museum (picture: Author).

INDONESIAN FERILITY STATUE



Figure 5- Chamber 'Life & Death': vitrine 5 – 'New life', Zeeuws Museum (picture: Author).



Figure 6- Chamber 'Life & Death': vitrine 5 – 'New life', Zeeuws Museum (picture: Author).

DETAILS FROM 'CHAMBERS OF WONDER', ZEEUWS MUSEUM



Figure 7- 'Chambers of Wonder', Zeeuws Museum (picture: Author).

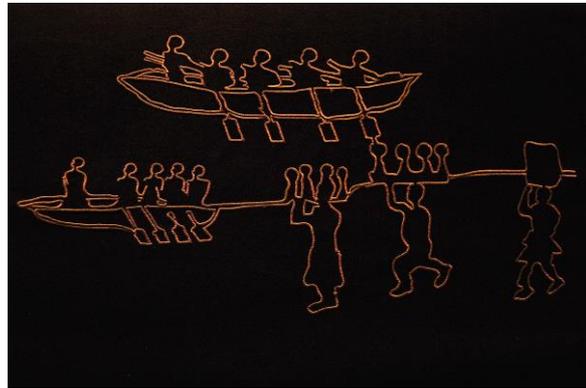


Figure 8, 9- Details from visitors couch in 'Chambers of Wonder', Zeeuws Museum (picture: Author).