



The ‘Sharing Stories on Contested Histories’ training programme

How do you tell stories about shared cultural heritage? What should be the role of museums and other cultural institutions in facilitating a dialogical and polyphonic approach towards the presentation of histories that are difficult, perhaps even contested? And how can this be achieved? In 2018, and for the first time, an international training programme focused on telling stories about contested histories was organised in the Netherlands. As the second of three trainings is now nearing its end, this article focuses on the added value of this unique training programme for heritage and museum professionals and academics in the shared cultural heritage partner countries and elsewhere.

Initiated by the Shared Cultural Heritage programme of the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE), the three-year ‘Sharing Stories on Contested Histories’ training programme was organised together with the [Reinwardt Academy](#). The Reinwardt Academy has for long been a partner of the RCE, something we wrote about in a [Sharing Heritage Expertise newsletter](#). Arjen Kok from the RCE and Ruben Smit from the Reinwardt Academy are the project leaders of this collaborative training programme.



Wayne Modest, head of the Research Centre for Material Culture, talks about what it means to be inclusive during the 2018 training.



The participants of the 2018 training and some of the trainers at the Reinwardt Academy.

Focus on shared and contested heritage

The target group of this three-year training programme is young heritage and museum professionals and academics from the 10 partner countries of the Shared Cultural Heritage programme – Australia, Brazil, Japan, India, Indonesia, Russia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Suriname and the United States –, and from the Netherlands. Each training accepts 22 participants, 2 from each country.

The main goal is to exchange approaches and perspectives regarding multiperspectivity in understanding, communicating and presenting shared cultural heritage. More specifically, the focus is on shared heritage (and the histories it refers to) that could be considered contested. In other words, heritage that can evoke different – sometimes difficult or competing – views and emotions, depending on who is approaching that heritage. The challenge of dealing with such divergence lies in the attempt to simultaneously convey these different views and voices when presenting this heritage to the public. This is an essential task when dealing with heritage and histories that speak to different people in different ways and it is at the core of this training programme.

The importance of mutual exchange

Heritage institutions in the Netherlands and elsewhere have become increasingly aware of the need to become more polyvocal, engaging, diverse, (self-)reflective and participatory. Inclusive, representative and participatory modes of presenting and communicating about cultural heritage are seen today as adding relevance to institutions and society at large. In the Netherlands,

this awareness has resulted in an ethical reconsideration of the practices of collecting, designing exhibitions, telling stories and setting up learning programmes. This is a process that is taking place in museums, as well as other cultural (heritage) institutions, such as archives, historical sites and funds.

This training programme is based in the Netherlands, hence many of the examples and case studies used during the trainings come from the Dutch context. The cases used are nonetheless part of a work-in-progress that is far from accomplished. And it is a work that highly benefits from the exchange of experiences and perspectives with heritage and museum professionals from other countries. This training programme aims also to enable this reciprocal exchange.

A case-oriented and practical approach

The programme is case-oriented and practical in its approach, and it consists of practice-based lectures, discussions and talks, fieldtrips to museums, workshops and training sessions, as well as self-study based on selected literature. For example, in 2018, lectures given by different experts included the following topics: "Narrative space in exhibitions", "Educational purpose and social action of museums", "Empathy and Affect in the Museum" and "Emotions, networks and the making of heritage".



Emotion Networking workshop at Imagine IC, 10 December 2018.

Furthermore, the training is centred around different general themes, such as ownership, empathy and emotions. In this way, it is possible to move away from issues surrounding one particular context and historical moment, to focus, instead, on what heritage is, how it works and what it means for different people with different backgrounds. It should be noted that although it is based in the Netherlands and it is mainly focused on museums, this programme and its approach could be based on other geographic and disciplinary contexts.

Real case studies and challenges

The three-year programme is centred around the analysis of exhibitions in a given case-study museum. In 2018, the Amsterdam Museum acted as a "client" and the focus was on two of its permanent exhibitions – 'Amsterdam DNA' and 'World-City'. Specific issues or case-studies were selected within these exhibitions, which were then examined, discussed and reconsidered by the group, which was divided into smaller teams. In this sense, the museum acted as a laboratory and workshop. The lectures offered frames for and modes of looking at the different issues, while workshops enabled an active sharing of ideas. And the discussions held with other professionals during the fieldtrips introduced new insights and concepts for working and dealing with contested heritage.

It is worth mentioning that one of the topics addressed in last year's training and particularly in relation to the Amsterdam Museum was the use of the term 'Golden Age'. This is, many argue, a problematic and exclusionary term used to designate a specific period in Dutch history, roughly spanning the seventeenth century. And in 2019, perhaps partly influenced by the discussions that took place in 2018, the Amsterdam Museum decided to [stop using this term](#) in its exhibitions since it "does not adequately reflect the realities of this period".

Other organisations involved in the 2018 training included the Rijksmuseum, the National Archives, DutchCulture, the Black Archives, Imagine IC and the Tropenmuseum. In 2019, the Tropenmuseum represents the "client" museum and its exhibition '[Afterlives of Slavery](#)' the main case-study of the programme.

The added-value of a multilateral programme

A unique element of this programme is the fact that the exchange and the learning process take place on a multilateral level – amongst and between participants, lecturers/trainers and the professionals that contribute to the programme. Its multilateral character offers, even more than a bilateral training, the chance to

learn from each other and to exchange experiences, knowledge and perspectives on an international level. Views about and approaches to shared and contested heritage differ in every country. It is therefore not only interesting, but also important to bring together practices and knowledge from different countries. Through its approach, this programme gives insights into new, alternative ways of working together and sharing such experiences and knowledge. And it enables a reciprocal exploration into new ways of understanding and of presenting heritage and related histories. An example of this is can be seen in Annemarie de Wildt's (curator of the Amsterdam Museum) [article about the 2018 training](#), where she shares the insights she gained from the participants during their work at the museum.

Finally, this programme has the potential to create or strengthen connections and collaborations on an international level. For instance, participation in the 2018 training programme has already resulted in new partnerships between the participants and the partner institutions. And the participants continue to work together and to exchange expertise within the programme's alumni network. The organisers of the programme, the RCE and the Reinwardt Academy, view this continued exchange as a valuable element of the programme.



Afterlives of Slavery exhibition at the Tropenmuseum (photo: Kirsten van Santen, courtesy of the Tropenmuseum).

Questions?

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