



Recap: Final Presentations Sharing Stories on Contested Histories training, 2021 edition

Introducing new perspectives on a shared challenge

The third edition of the international training Sharing Stories on Contested Histories took place online between 11 and 23 April 2021. This training was organized by the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed, RCE), together with the Reinwardt Academy and focused on the issue of presenting contested histories from multiple perspectives.

The programme kicked off on 11 April with a welcoming speech by Ingrid van Engelshoven, Minister of Education, Culture and Science, who encouraged participants to “be brave in their discomfort”, as this will further the discussion on how to present contested histories from multiple perspectives. During the training, the participants joined lectures and read and viewed key learning materials, they virtually visited heritage organisations in the Netherlands, and had discussions with heritage professionals and academics. The fact that the training was carried out online, and that those involved reside in different time zones, didn’t stand in the way of an in-depth and open exchange of perspectives and expertise, and the joint development of new ideas.

(The training was) “a great opportunity to reflect in an international setting on contested histories and rethink cultural heritage practices.” – Participant

Final presentations

On 23 April 2021, on the last day of the programme, all participants gathered in the virtual studio of the RCE to discuss their findings and experiences during the two weeks of the training. This public event opened with a word of welcome from Christianne Mattijssen (Director Heritage & Arts, Ministry of Education, Culture and Science). Mattijssen thanked the trainees for dedicating their time and expertise to join in this effort to contribute to the ongoing transnational dialogue about making space for more voices, perspectives and empathy in relation to heritage. She

asked questions to the participants to learn more about their experiences during and insights gained from the training. In the next part of the event, the participants of the training (divided into four teams), presented their findings to the Rijksmuseum and the virtual audience. The Rijksmuseum was part of this training and acted as “client” organisation, inviting participants to examine one particular case-study, its upcoming exhibition “[Slavery. Ten True Stories](#)”. The question put forward by the team of curators – Valika Smeulders, Eveline Sint Nicolaas, Maria Holtrop and Stephanie Archangel – was to reflect on specific dilemmas or challenges they had encountered while preparing this exhibition. The main findings of the participants, which were presented during the online event, are summarised below.

Challenging traditions and introducing new perspectives

The first two teams discussed how exhibition approaches that challenge traditions and include new perspectives can be faced with resistance and cause friction amongst stakeholders. Such frictions can lead museums to lose touch with particular stakeholders. To address this dilemma, **Team 1** suggested viewing such frictions for the possibility they can offer to engage in a dialogue with external stakeholders, such as friends of the museum, or individuals from formerly colonised countries. Teaching tools to understand how history is produced can assist in showing that the inclusion of different sides of the same story does not imply erasing history, but rather adding more narratives and contexts.

“I really appreciated the conversations on the validity of “cultural” sources and the focus on empathy.”

– Participant

Changing perspectives and narratives within an organisation can also require changing working habits of internal stakeholders, such as employees, directors and supervisory boards. **Team 3** explored interdepartmental and cooperation strategies for including staff members towards facilitating change within an organisation. Engaging with colleagues outside one’s own department allows an exhibition to become a co-creation process that involves everyone within an organisation, whereby employees can become advocates for changes in perspective. In this way, multivocality in the exhibition is mirrored in the organisation’s own staff.

From temporary interventions to a lasting impact

The second part of the presentations discussed the dilemma regarding how temporary exhibitions can lead to changes of approaches towards collections, narratives, representation and working practices. These two presentations explored how museums can ensure that these changes have a lasting impact within the organisation. **Team 2** suggested looking beyond museum and exhibition walls, to create inclusive non-hierarchical “welcoming spaces” that can be incorporated in events and the urban landscape, where communities can become active participants in open conversation, debate and reflection.

Team 4 explored this dilemma by reflecting on how inclusivity and multivocality within the planning process can be incorporated in a museum’s working practice on a permanent basis. Looking into all the elements that come into play when preparing projects, the team introduced the “model of legacy transfer”. This model can be used to document, reflect and transfer knowledge and experiences gained during working processes in order to improve future practices.

Active involvement and open exchange

Common to all presentations was an emphasis on the need to make space for communities to actively contribute to heritage institutions. Active contribution and creation would allow communities to not only passively reflect on and interpret what an institution creates and presents, but to also actively participate in the process of knowledge production.

In response to the presentations, the Rijksmuseum’s curators expressed their appreciation of having had the opportunity to be open and transparent about their work and challenges they face within the safe space that this training created. They were also grateful for gaining different perspectives and reflections on their work from the participating young heritage professionals from around the world.

Participants

The participating young heritage professionals were: Natalia Zonova and Elena Melkumova (Russia), John Lee Candelaria (based in Japan), Kimberley Connor (Australia), Irene Meulenberg (based in Suriname), Loutinsia Sofana Plein (Suriname), Camilla Gomes and Diana Poepcke (Brazil), Nontobeko Sheryl Msomi and Beth Wyrill (South Africa), Johann Peiris and Ravini Wimalasuriya (Sri Lanka), Pankaj Bordoloi and Shraddha Bhatawadekar (India), Harits Paramasatya and Karisa Rahmaputri (Indonesia), Elizabeth Lara and Mary McCulla (the USA), Margriet Kim Nguyen, Manique Hendricks, Lise Koning and Maaïke Derksen (the Netherlands), and Michael Griff (Germany).

More information

The recording of the event can be found here: [Recording of Final Presentations Shared Stories on Contested Histories | Verslag | Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed](#)

For more information about the training, please see our publication “Shared Pasts New Perspectives”, in specific the article “Expanding Perspectives” from page 17: [Shared past - New perspectives. Shared Cultural Heritage programme 2017-2020 | Publicatie | Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed](#)