

Amsterdam Museum

An intervention on slavery in the Golden Age exhibition

2013

In the 'jubilee year' 2013, Amsterdam commemorates the 400th anniversary of its famous circle of canals, a Unesco World Heritage Site since 2010. 2013 is also the year of the commemoration of the abolition of slavery in 1863. Out of the nearly 12 million people that were captured in Africa and sent to the America in to slavery, the Dutch share was 5 percent. The city of Amsterdam played a big role in the Trans-Atlantic slavery and was the co-owner of the colony of Surinam. Today there are still some visual clues in the city of Amsterdam to remind us of this involvement.

In 2002 a national slavery monument

http://www.buitenbeeldinbeeld.nl/Amsterdam_O/Slavernij%20monument.htm was erected in the Oosterpark, outside the city centre. Also, the official residence of the mayor of Amsterdam was built in the 17th century by Paulus Godin, a slave trader. Since 2004 a stone plaque testifies of this history and states that slavery is a crime against humanity. For many Amsterdam institutions, some of them in the famous circle of canals, slavery is still a difficult subject. The West India House <http://www.taste.nl/west-indisch-huis-n78m78> for instance, now a popular wedding location, was the seat of the Amsterdam Chamber of the West India Company (WIC). On its website and during tours of the building it is proudly mentioned that here the decision was made to settle in New Amsterdam, later New York, but the role of the WIC in the slave trade is completely omitted. Slavery is not really a part of the collective memory of the Dutch. A small survey among museum visitors before we made the intervention, made clear that most did not know when slavery was abolished and had no idea where the slavery monument is. Even fewer attend the yearly ceremony on 1 July, the date of abolition. "It's so long ago" was a common reaction. For many descendants of the enslaved now living in the Netherlands, the memory of slavery is still part of their lives. There are family stories about enslaved great-grandparents, the ancestors are a living presence at ceremonies and they encounter racism in present-day society. Some are offended, disappointed or angry about what they consider a denial of the role of the Dutch in this history. They compare the lack of attention to the thousands of memorials on the Second World War and the Holocaust.

The Amsterdam Museum (<http://www.amsterdammuseum.nl/en/node/43>) had planned a big exhibition on the Golden Age – on the occasion of the 400 anniversary of the canals. There was little room for an extra exhibition on slavery and besides: why separate this story from the general narrative of this period in Dutch history? It was decided to create an intervention in the Golden Age exhibition focussing on these dark pages during the months around the commemoration on July 1st.



Poster: photo Angela Tellier, text in yellow translates as: “Now including the dark page”

The original exhibition provided some information on slavery, but not very extensively. For the intervention we added extra stories and objects on an additional label providing ‘the other story’ of the Golden Age. The intervention was created together with descendants of enslaved people whose comments on the original exhibition were added. For instance Winti priestess Marian Markelo: “When I walk along the canals I often think: part of this building belongs to me, because my ancestors worked hard to make it possible. Unpaid work.”

The slavery trail was marked by cloth from Surinam, printed on replicas from the collection of the Koto museum (<http://www.hetkotomuseum.org/>) in Paramaribo. Each quote was crowned by an angisa, the traditional Surinamese folded headgear, the diasporic variation of West-African female clothing.



Image: One of the exhibition rooms, with the intervention (design Opera Designers)

The way the angisa’s are folded conveys different messages and we choose the message: *Let them talk* (<http://hart.amsterdammuseum.nl/60900/nl/let-them-talk>). Originally this way of folding was used as a reaction to gossip in the market place, but we used it in a more metaphorical way. Cynthia McLeod, the famous Surinamese writer of novels on the slave period, commented on this during her opening speech of the slavery trail: “Using the *Let them talk* angisas in the exhibition is a very good

choice, because talking about this period is so important. We need to be open about it, to acknowledge that it happened and that we – white and black – are the result of it”.

In the last room of the exhibition, which deals with the way the Dutch have looked back at the Golden Age in later periods, we added photos by Nardo Brudet from his series *Slaves of Holland*. (<http://hart.amsterdammuseum.nl/66628/nl/proud-to-be-black>) Brudet reversed the roles of blacks and whites in scenes from the Transatlantic slavery. The most controversial addition was in the last room of the exhibition: a banner with *Zwarte Piet is racisme* (Black Peter is racism).



Image: Banner *Zwarte Piet is racism* and photos by Nardo Brudet

Black Peter or *Zwarte Piet* is the companion of Sinterklaas (Saint Nicholas), whose feast is celebrated on December 5th. He brings presents to the children. Black Peter is his helper, a man with a black face in a Moors costume as they were depicted on 16th century paintings. Few Dutch people know that Black Peter was relatively recent tradition invented in the mid 19th century.

(<http://www.quotidian.nl/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=quotidian;rgn=main;view=text;idno=m0301a01>)

Ever since the 1970s, when many migrants arrived from Surinam, the figure of Black Peter has been under attack. For many of the protesters *Zwarte Piet* belongs to the heritage of slavery. Some museum staff felt uncomfortable displaying this banner the banner, seeing it as 'too activist'. Others thought the museum should be a stage for these opinions. It was interesting to have these discussions in the museum, which on the level of academic staff is still a very white institution.

Another important element for this intervention and the activities around it, working within a wide network was immensely important. This ever growing network consists of academics, artists, designers, colleagues from other museums, educators, grassroots people, *Zwarte Piet* protesters and the organizers of boat tours, walks and the *Keti Koti* festival.

We organized various events before and during the intervention. During National Book Week writers read from their books on slavery. We wanted to talk about the (intangible) heritage of slavery and make connections, such as the idea of the *Keti Koti* Table (<http://ketikotitafel.nl/>), where a mix of black and white people together share their ideas and emotions around the table. We consciously choose 5th May (National Liberation Day) as the date for this meal and encouraged people to talk about difficult subjects such as the Holocaust compared to the Trans-Atlantic slavery.



Image:Keti Koto table in the Amsterdam Museum on May5th 2013. Libation by Winti priestess Marjam Markelo

On July 1st we set up a photo studio (<http://hart.amsterdammuseum.nl/64668/nl/fleurig-kei-koti-festival>) in Oosterpark at the Keti Koti (Broken Chains) festival and portrayed and interviewed the participants and shared the photos and stories online.

(<http://hart.amsterdammuseum.nl/64748/nl/kei-koti-krosi>)

We felt we successfully made the heritage of slavery more visible in the famous circle of canals. Curator Annemarie de Wildt joined the board of advisors of a new initiative: Black Heritage Amsterdam Tours (<http://www.blackheritagetours.com/index.html>) and helped grass root organizations to organize a memorial walk of slavery places. The walk about slavery took place during the Amsterdam Heritage Days. The walk was filmed and will be used in schools.

(<http://vimeo.com/74520330>)

The slavery intervention has finished now at Amsterdam Museum. The risk with projects like these is that next year the focus of the museum programme has shifted to the next subject. However, we believe connections have been made that hopefully will last. We continue to be involved in projects mapping the slavery heritage of the city. We added information and objects to the collection of the museum and in doing so permanently change the museums (and the city's) narrative. We also use the internet (<http://hart.amsterdammuseum.nl/61558/nl/de-zwarte-bladzijde-van-de-gouden-eeuw>) to make information more available and sustainable. The thinking in the museum itself has changed, through working on this subject. People have become more aware of the subject of slavery. But some things remain difficult: is it possible to raise the issue of slavery with a sponsor that has – like many Dutch companies – a history of plantation ownership? What role can and will the museum play in discussing slavery and its heritage and what do we do about heated discussions issues such as Zwarte Piet or slavery reparations?

Visitor research showed that the trail and the activities raised the historical consciousness of many visitors and participants. Visitors appreciated the intervention and felt it gave the Golden Age narrative more depth. They were surprised and sometimes touched by the opinions and feelings of

present-day Afro-Amsterdammers. And they realized that looking at history from a black perspective gives a different picture. Descendants of enslaved people felt more included in the story of the museum than they do normally.