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'The Collectie Nederland'

The debate on the collection and preservation of museum objects has been going on for some ten years in the Netherlands against the background of the 'Collectie Nederland' concept. This is based on the idea that every object or every collection is part of a national virtual collection. Ideally this virtual collection is of a high quality and has hardly any overlaps. How this pursuit of the ideal form influences collection building in museums may be illustrated by the academic medical collections.

Medical Collections

In addition to more than a thousand museums, the Netherlands also has universities which manage collections. In 1999, the universities of Amsterdam, Groningen, Leiden and Utrecht made arrangements for the collection and preservation of their medical collections.

The four universities agreed no longer to build collections independently but to tailor them to one another as much as possible. This guiding principle became the concept of medical academic 'Collectie Nederland'. For two years the university medical collections have therefore actually been seen more as one collection than as four separate ones.

A core collection was designated for every medical discipline. To take an example: although Utrecht University has the greatest and most important ophthalmic collection in the Netherlands, the universities of Amsterdam and Groningen also have a collection in this field. It has been agreed that only Utrecht is to collect actively and that the others will restrict themselves to passively acquiring objects, while they are also considering whether their collections would not be better accommodated in Utrecht.

This example indicates that collection managers are looking beyond the borders of their own collections and asking themselves: 'Should we preserve objects which are more at home elsewhere in the Netherlands or of which other museums have better specimens?'

Added Framework

The 'Collectie Nederland' was introduced in 1990. It may be defined as the aggregate of all publicly accessible collections in the Netherlands for which society is prepared to take responsibility.

It is an added framework, because, for years and years, museums have handled their policy objectives as the primary framework within which they build their collections.

Conditions

The umbrella concept of the 'Collectie Nederland' plays an important role when the resources are distributed at a national level for it is these that it should be decided which museum has the most right to a subsidy for restoration or for the financing of a purchase. When museums appeal to these central government financial resources they nowadays not only have to answer the question of whether the object is a true accession for their own collection but also they have to substantiate whether the object is an enrichment for the 'Collectie Nederland' as a whole. For an answer to the latter question a museum should comply with two conditions:

It should be able to look beyond the borders of its own institution and view the collection as a part of the 'Collectie Nederland',

It should be aware of the composition of the 'Collectie Nederland'.

It took some time before the Dutch museums could comply with these conditions. Shortly after the introduction of the concept, a cultural shift in thinking about collection building had to be brought about in the Dutch museums. Not only did museums operate rather individually when building collections, the knowledge of the composition and the quality of the 'Collectie Nederland' also did not appear out of the blue. With the goal-oriented application of central government subsidies, however, the necessary achievements were reached in this field.

Stocktaking

In the past five years an inventory of the size and composition of various fields of collecting has been made. First of all, the movable heritage of all thirteen universities was described. Subsequently, it was the turn for the medical, geological and botanical academic collections to be inventoried. In the third place came a national survey of movable industrial heritage, such as machines and equipment and collections of costumes, posters, computers, photographs, banners and ethnographic objects were localised and counted. In addition, a Nationaal Register Railgebonden Historisch Erfgoed [National Register of Railway Historic

Heritage] and a Register Varende Monumenten [Register of Sailing Monuments] has recently been established.

In the Museum Inventarisatie Project, MUSIP [Museum Inventory Project] the provinces have also made inventories of all the collections within their confines and work is being done on a detailed national stocktaking of natural history collections.

All these inventories have been implemented by the sectors themselves and with the financial support of central government. This explains the various and dissimilar fields of collecting.

Collection Plans

At the end of the 1980s the majority of museums knew little about the nature and the size of their own collections. Many objects were unregistered and were located in spots from where they could not be recovered. With the financial injection of the Delta Plan for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage (Deltaplan voor het Cultuurbehoud) in the Netherlands, enormous arrears were made up in the field of collection management. Objects, subcollections and collections have been registered, labelled and documented: an operation which enormously increased the museums' knowledge. To qualify for a Delta Plan subsidy, central government required museums to draw up collection plans in which they had to indicate the composition of the collections. In many cases these plans appeared to be valuable sources of information for fellow-museums, central and local governments and subsidisers. This meant that knowledge of one another's collections and thus of the 'Collectie Nederland' has grown.

De-Accessioning

As a result of the above-mentioned inventories as well as a result of the Delta Plan, museum professionals have been convinced that many museums harbour objects which would be better placed elsewhere or which had too little quality to be entitled to the name of museum object. In 1999, during the symposium Grenzen aan de groei. Selectieprocessen rond museale collecties [Limits to Growth: selection processes in museum collections] attention was given to these problems. A museum should be able to de-accession objects under strict conditions. The protocol, Leidraad voor het afstoten van museale objecten [Guideline for de-accessioning of museum objects], was even developed to this end.

De-accessioning is an opportunity to upgrade the quality of the 'Collectie Nederland'. Some collections are so large that they cannot be managed and preserved with the existing resources. Such objects do not receive the care required and are liable to perish in storage. It is better to make the collection smaller than lovingly to neglect it. The underlying idea is that more care can be taken of a smaller, qualitatively high-grade 'Collectie Nederland' than of an extensive one.

Acquisitions

The concept 'Collectie Nederland' is also a guiding principle in the field of art purchasing. The Netherlands has twenty museums with a high-grade collection of modern art. Through the mediation of the Mondriaan Stichting [Mondriaan Foundation for the Advancement of Visual Art, Design and Museums], each one of them receives an acquisitions budget of €45,000.- from central government. To avoid all these museums collecting the same objects, they have to present their collection plans for assessment by the Mondriaan Foundation. In this way harmonisation is achieved at a national level, for the mission statement of the subsidy scheme explicitly states that: "the quality and cohesion of the 'Collectie Nederland' is strengthened in the field of twentieth-century visual arts and design."

The eight ethnographical museums in the Netherlands go even further. In 1997, they founded a national acquisitions fund of their own for an amount of €136,000.-. Central government also contributes a substantial amount of almost €80,000.- to this fund. A special committee gives advice on the appeals made by the museums to this fund. In addition, the ethnographical museums avoid overlaps in collections. These museums upgrade the quality of purchases and therefore of the 'Collectie Nederland' through cooperation.

In the future, museums will increasingly work together under the umbrella of the 'Collectie Nederland'. At the same time they will formulate their collection profiles more emphatically. Now is really no longer the time when collections may overlap and scarce resources may be spent on largely comparable collections. Knowledge of the 'Collectie Nederland' is growing, not only in museums but also among governments and their advisors. If the public wants to see high-quality collections then museums will have to opt for quality. The concept 'Collectie Nederland' is a valuable touchstone in making this choice.