

A fortune to display

A consideration of the profits in cultural terms from the *Collectie Nederland*

[i.e. the total of all Dutch cultural heritage collections]

Introduction from cultural policy statement regarding Collectie Nederland by Rick van der Ploeg,
Dutch State Secretary of Cultural Affairs, 1999-2002
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1. Introduction

'Awaken from a deep sleep', 'exposure and movement', 'late-night opening', 'de-collecting', that is, breaking up art collections and 'art in the public space'. With these and similar buzz expressions I confronted the museum world about a year ago. My audience reacted to the hum and that was exactly what I intended. I considered it high time to hold a serious debate about the fact that much of the Netherlands' cultural heritage has become invisible. In the meantime, discussions have been held here and there, inspiring the museums to new initiatives. And it's now time that I got my own ideas straight. In the policy document *Culture as Confrontation* I announced that I would present my approach in the spring of 2000 in a letter to the Dutch Lower House. This letter is a preliminary exercise for the Policy Document on Culture 2001-2004. The document will coincide with the opening of the Dutch parliament and its main feature will be my suggestions for implementing the measures I propose.

Social and cultural yields

I refer in my title to a fortune, and indeed it is one of incalculable worth in cultural, historical, scholarly, scientific and financial terms. A large part of this fortune belongs to the *Collectie Nederland*, which is in fact an abstract notion containing the idea that public art objects and art collections form part of our national virtual collection. The collection is (partly) maintained through public resources. This 'maintenance' could, as I see it, in many cases be interpreted more fully than simply meaning 'preserve in its present state'. The fortune, in my view, could contain more assets and fewer liabilities.

What I'm talking about here is in the first place the public collections. However, in some cases the fortune extends to include works in private collections. The connection might be, for example, a presentation jointly made by a museum, an art gallery and a private collector.

The shareholders of the Collectie Nederland – and they are the Dutch taxpayers – should be able to assume that the cultural entrepreneurs who curate the public cultural fortune (and this includes museums, archives, libraries and other collection curators) attempt to gain the maximum profits from their input. Not of course for the sake of financial gain. But for the sake of the social and cultural returns that expresses itself for instance through an optimal accessibility and utilisation of the Collectie Nederland for the whole of society.

Expansion

Clearly, the problem doesn't lie in a lack of interest; enthusiasm for the country's cultural heritage and (contemporary) art forms is steadily growing. We are witnessing the development of a public that's increasingly better educated, more mobile, and with ever more leisure time. Not only are these people interested more than ever before in such things as cultural heritage, they are also in search of their own identity and of establishing their own place in today's world. This is largely a result of the ever-growing movement and change within society, with the global takeover from the local, with the large-scale winning from the small.

Another consideration is that there are larger social profits to be earned from the nation's cultural fortune by making the collections more easily accessible especially for young people and for newcomers to the Netherlands. These two groups have traditionally been little attracted by the Dutch heritage. Something needs to be seriously done about this! As I see it, the Dutch collections belong to everyone. Museums have an overview position: they can see how collections are made use of, can decide what their individual speciality is going to be, are able to react promptly to movements in contemporary art, and can actively involve the public in selecting and presenting their collections.

In the document *Culture as Confrontation* I have urged the supreme importance of making this country's cultural fortune more visible over the coming years. After all, that is a sine qua non for greater use and enjoyment of this immense asset.

The ability to make use of something begins and ends with its accessibility – in both actual and virtual terms. Furthermore, it's important that the public really feels challenged to make use of this accessibility. People need to become excited – they need to hear stories that mean something to them and tell them about the society in which they live. Happily, a start has already been made. We can already observe in various places that museum visitors are becoming more numerous and diverse. But I'm pretty sure that there's still a lot to be done.

Content and quality

A lot of (museum) organizations urgently need to review and rethink their collections. In many cases there is simply too much material to look after well or to put to optimal

use. At the same time there are quite a few museums that have collections of a limited nature – either quantitatively or qualitatively. It would seem obvious that an exchange system would be to their mutual benefit.

Museums need to create a distinct image and specialism for themselves; I see this as a major factor in assisting both the movement and accessibility of collections. This letter isn't only about the profits to be made but also considers the content and distribution of the Dutch cultural fortune. If on the one hand we reduce the quantity while on the other hand we increase the quality we should be able to raise the value of our cultural assets. This applies both to single organizations curating collections as well as to the Collectie Nederland in its totality.

I am prepared to offer financial support also for this type of movement of collections.

The Collectie Nederland in reality

A breath of fresh air has blown through our thinking about museum collections. This is the result of creating the concept Collectie Nederland; we now see the contents of our national collections in a broader perspective. Indeed, we have exorcised a narrow-mindedness that blinkered our outlook. The way is now open for curators to discuss and reach agreements about discarding both old and new collections where this seems necessary. The moment has come to address the subject of the Collectie Nederland in all its aspects. That is to say, its exposure, or visibility, how it is used and what it means for people today, both emotionally and intellectually. As has been said, the collections are public property and should therefore be available for everyone. I would like to see a Collectie Nederland that has as its top priority the need to make concrete progress. Concretely: I'm thinking of new locations where exhibitions can be held; of buying and presenting objects; of cooperation between museums and organizations for the arts; of confrontation between old and new collections; of more extensive loans between museums; of guest curators; of virtual sites on the Internet; of selecting and rejecting. In other words, of a concrete collection. I shall return to this subject later on.

Prologues, the cultural memorandum

Since the publication of the policy document on culture titled *Choosing for Quality* (1990) the visibility and exposure of the Collectie Nederland has stood on the agenda. Up until now the expression 'collection mobility' has generally been used. What we are talking about is offering to as broad and varied a public as possible the opportunity of enjoying the many facets and stories that go to make up in the Dutch cultural heritage. Several museums have taken the bull by the horns and there are now many places where people are working to achieve these goals, but I think that more can and should be attempted.

Both the recommendations of the Council for Culture (May 1999) and the debate in the Lower House on the document *Culture as Confrontation* (November 1999) suggest there is general support for my proposals to increase both the visibility (exposure) and the movement of Dutch museum collections.

When presenting the guidelines I also outlined for the Lower House the main financial sources to back up the new cultural memorandum as well as the plan for cultural outreach. A total of 26 million Dutch guilders [in today's euros, approx. 12 million] is reserved for the 'exposure' of the Dutch cultural fortune. Of this, c. 4.5 million euros is to go on movement of collections and information and communication technology (ICT); c. 5 million euro's for acquisitions; c. 2 million euros for the archives. The concrete division and allotment of finances to the various organizations, bodies and activities will be explained and justified, partly on the recommendation of the Council for Culture that will appear in May 2000.

Resolutions

Concrete plans always include proposals, resolutions and measures to be taken. These will be discussed in details in the following sections. [...] I shall describe taking a fresh look at collections, from the point of view of 'presenting it differently'. I shall go on to propose how we may increase the quality of this cultural fortune by building collections in a different way.

Here follow my proposals, collected per heading, and set down in staccato form:

- different locations e.g. schools, Schiphol Airport, Dutch Lower House, suchlike buildings, including suggestions from provincial and local government; collections on the move;
- think about the exposure of contemporary art; about guest curators;
- set up a committee to offer me advice on improving contact between the public and contemporary art;
- integrated acquisitions policy (including collections of cultural diversity); creating an acquisitions budget within the framework of the Cultural Heritage Preservation Act;
- development of computer awareness, access to the Internet and online information for the general public, educationalists and professionals;
- guiding principle for selection and rejection, improved quality of collections;
- finally: improved lending system between museums (an umbrella agreement); making and maintaining ruling concerning exposure (visibility) of collections.

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