



Looted Art and Contemporary Collections at the Collectie Centrum Netherlands

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When we arrived at the Collectie Centrum Nederland (CC-NL), there was no evidence of how large the collection was until we went inside. The CC-NL hosts a broad collection of materials and artworks that prioritizes both active and passive collecting. Guided by Ingrid Jacobs, William Bran, and Jacco Hooikammer throughout, this collection encompasses the hard work and time put into preserving all these objects.

The first guest lecture took place in one of the storerooms; William Bran, provenance researcher for the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands took us through the process of investigating the history of an object via two case studies: the painting *Allegorie de la Vue* by Abraham Janssens and a ceramic plate, both of which were sold during the German occupation of WWII. Bran pointed out faint inscriptions on the back of the frame which could indicate information such as the year it was painted, the artist, and sometimes the subsequent owners (legal or illegal), collections, auctions houses and dealers – the very first clues when investigating a painting. In contrast, the plate we saw was an example of how the trail can go cold: it was known to have been sold at an auction house, but its listing would have likely been “1 plate” with no further indication of its origins.





Allegorie de la Vue by Abraham Janssens

Collecting traditional clothing is important in keeping memory and tradition safe, and it is interesting to see the adaptations of it over time. For example, Jacco explained how the daughters of one of the few women in the Netherlands who still dresses in traditional clothing sewed all the parts and adjustments together and made one singular opening in the back with velcro, so that it is easier for her to receive her medical care and still have her clothes on.

Another example of the adaptations of traditional culture in clothing is the shirt our Professor Hans Piena was wearing during our visit, which has the same pattern as a traditional fabric from Jacco's home village used in women's wool skirts. That is another way of adapting to keep traditions alive, even if not in the exact same way.



Another important subject that we discussed was when Jacco showed us the Cowboys and Indians costumes many Dutch kids use, and how there is a fine line between traditional dressing up and cultural appropriation.

Our final guest lecturer, Ingrid Jacobs, explained the practice of looting during WWII and how the Nazis stole and managed art to support their agenda. Art that did not align with their vision, such as pieces by Jewish artists, expressionists, and other modern works, were labeled “degenerate” and were eliminated from German museums. Beyond visual art, the Nazis also seized libraries and took collections that conflicted with their ideology. The Nazis took art through both organized looting and unorganized plundering. Unorganized plundering was officially forbidden but happened regardless in disaster areas. A key example is Castle Nederhemert in the Netherlands. The castle was unoccupied for 6-8 weeks during the war, during which a period of uncontrolled plundering occurred. This form of looting, lacking all documentation, makes it difficult for modern historians to trace a piece's history and understand its full story.

After many years of passive collecting, the Dutch Open Air Museum recently made a shift into prioritizing active collecting in an effort to expand and preserve an unbiased breadth of cultures and

heritages. In the world of contemporary collecting, Mayke Groffen reflects on how homes can be a collection in and of itself—that any plate, lamp, or desk becomes invaluable to someone’s story. A small wooden dresser was presented to us in CC-NL, with marks on the lowest drawer that was left undisturbed. Hans Piena described the necessity of preserving the artifact because the marks reflected how the owner lived as someone who used a wheelchair in her daily life. Thus, contemporary collecting becomes not only about “saving” a piece but about maintaining an artifact that showcases the owner’s story.

In reflection, the Collectie Centrum Nederland stresses how essential it is to collect and recollect artifacts that were once lost but now found. How different identities are represented through exhibitions is not only essential to modern museum practices, but also for rethinking the past in relation to ourselves today. In other words, how we choose to reflect on the past serves our present selves.