

History of Collecting and Exhibiting (1500-Present), Dr. Hans Piena
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Open Air Museums, Heritage, and Authenticity



Blog Post – Week 4 (28 February, 2025)
Dutch Open Air Museum

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In search of the historic Dutch way of life brings us to the city of Arnhem, home to the Dutch Open Air Museum. Founded in 1912, the Dutch Open Air Museum was established to preserve the history of folk life in the country in an age of rapid urbanisation.

Heritage is often seen as a way to preserve the past, but Hans Piena's presentation reminded us "*heritage is a contemporary construct serving contemporary needs*", reflecting modern priorities, fears of loss, and the need to establish evolving identities. Peasants were romanticised in art, reinforcing class distinctions, and open-air museums have curated working farms to fit an idyllic vision of rural life since their popularization in the 18th century.

The 2003 UNESCO Convention of Intangible Heritage was a response to criticism that heritage had been too Eurocentric and focused on tangible monuments. However, as Marlous van den Akker argued, heritage is not unifying – it can exclude, reinforce ideologies, and reflect selective narratives. KIEN (Kenniscentrum Immaterieel Erfgoed Nederland) strives for bottom-up representation, allowing communities to define their own heritage, but struggles with whose voices are heard. We learned that to truly understand heritage, we must ask: *who defines it, who benefits, and who is left out?*



Figure 1. Ada Meurs' Demonstration on Traditional Dresses

We presented Christoph Brumann's (2014) heritage research approaches to our peers. Brumann identified heritage belief (positive view) and heritage atheism (critical view). He proposed heritage agnosticism, a middle ground where individual beliefs and experiences are considered though not unconditionally accepted. After presenting Brumann's argument, we asked if there is a best approach to heritage research, a difficult question with likely no correct answer.

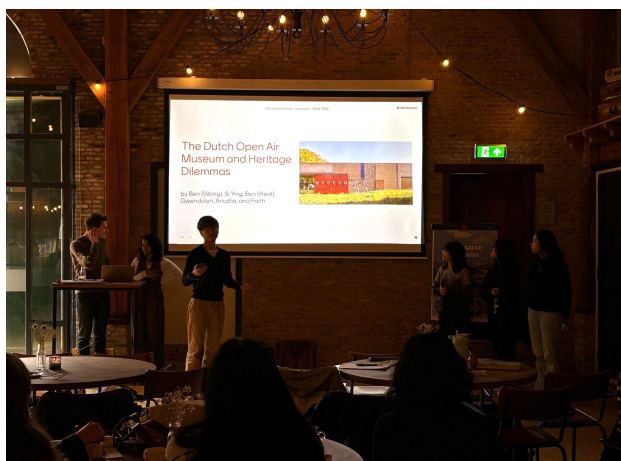


Figure 2. Our Group's Presentation on The Dutch Open Air Museum and Heritage Dilemmas

We also discussed Denis Dutton's (2004) ideas of authenticity, focusing on the differences between nominal and expressive authenticity. We asked which aspect is most important in a museum display. Our peers unanimously agreed that both aspects are important, complicating museum curators' jobs further. Finally, we asked if the Dutch Open Air Museum collecting buildings from across the country and displaying them in Arnhem is an authentic presentation.

Many of our classmates associate heritage with tradition, bringing up the question on how heritage should be presented. While some agreed that preserving heritage in its original form is crucial, most also saw benefits in the "disneyfication" of heritage – the act of turning heritage into entertainment at the expense of altering tradition. Connections can be made between the results from our poll and the research of Brumann and Dutton. Dutton emphasises that the shifting target audience from indigenous people to tourists can lead to the erosion of authenticity in heritage (Dutton 2004). However, Brumann presents an alternative perspective where the public display of tradition attracts tourists without diminishing its authenticity. Instead, external recognition reinforces its value and authenticity (Brumann 2014, p. 181). These contrasting views highlighted by the authors and our peers exemplify the existing tensions about authenticity, cultural evolution, and the preservation of heritage.

Following a delicious lunch, we were invited to a hands-on experience to learn about the traditional clothing of the agricultural town of Staphorst. With this and similar experiences, the Dutch Open Air Museum puts a greater emphasis on the role of interpreters, rather than traditionally relying on text-captions in describing its objects – highlighting the different views among visitors towards the exhibits. These insights made our stroll through the museum even more thought-provoking.

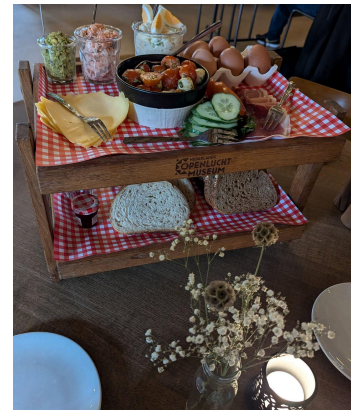


Figure 3. Our Lunch at the Dutch Open Air Museum

Bibliography

Brumann, Christoph. 2014. "Heritage Agnosticism: A Third Path for the Study of Cultural Heritage." *Social Anthropology* 22 (2): 173–88. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12068>.

Dutton, Denis. 2005. "Authenticity in Art." In *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, edited by Jerrold Levinson. Oxford University Press.