

Exhibition Review

Slavery, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Valika Smeulders, Head of the Department of History; Eveline Sint Nicolaas, Senior Curator of History; Maria Holtrop, Curator of History; Stephanie Archangel, Junior Curator of History. May 18, 2021–August 29, 2021. <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/stories/tentoonstellingen/slavernij>

The first impression upon entering the exhibition *Slavery* in the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum is one of solemnity. The exhibition itself starts with an emotional bang, at least for those who wear headphones: ringing bells from former plantations and nursery rhymes and songs uttering protest against exploitation and lawlessness seem to set the tone. In reality, however, they function as prelude to a series of more traditional, aesthetically pleasing exhibition rooms. The visitors—mostly



Exhibition room with legcuffs. (Photo by Paul Knevel)

white—behave accordingly: in silence they look at the exhibited objects, meanwhile focusing on the recommended accompanying audio tour. This solemn silence not only reveals much about the exhibition style of the Rijksmuseum, but almost seems indicative of the way the Dutch treat their contested pasts.

Slavery as a topic came rather late to Dutch public history. For a long time, slavery has been seen by many as a purely historical subject, something from a past long gone. In recent times, things have changed. Due to the activities of a new generation of activists and grassroots movements within the Surinamese and Antillean communities, slavery has become a hot topic in the Netherlands, more and more intertwined with debates about racism, inequality, and exclusion. The efforts to acknowledge this past resulted in the inauguration of the National Slavery Monument in 2002 and were further amplified around 2013, when the commemoration of the Dutch abolishment of slavery in 1863 generated new public attention. Ever since, various museums have become active participants in this public dialogue: they have opened their doors for critical interventions by activists and artists, developed new (postcolonial) narratives and organized special contemporary exhibitions, often in close collaboration with representatives of the Surinamese and Antillean communities.

This critical public engagement with the Dutch colonial past plays an important role in the ongoing process of criticizing dominant historical narratives and labels (such as the “Golden Age” to describe the seventeenth century), questioning dominant knowledge production and museum traditions, and coping explicitly with the perspectives of the descendants of former enslaved people. As such, these efforts of coming to terms with a past long marginalized time and again generate fierce reactions from more conservative sides in Dutch society, who would rather stick to the celebrated Dutch self-image of freedom, tolerance, and a sound commercial spirit.

It was thus big news when, in 2017, the Rijksmuseum announced its plan to organize a major slavery exhibition. How would Holland’s most prestigious national museum deal with such a contested topic and newly developed counter-narratives? The more so, because the museum still openly celebrates the “Golden Age” of Dutch painting and is housed in a majestic, almost cathedral-like nineteenth-century building that reminds us in its scale and decorations of the cultural nationalism of earlier days.

It was also a daring decision in another sense: museum objects related to slavery are generally a lot less easy on the eye than the paintings of Rembrandt or Vermeer. Nor are they easy to find. One of the main problems for any museum working with this theme is the fact that there are so few tangible remnants of slavery, leaving the overwhelming majority of enslaved people without faces, stories, voices, or even names. That simple fact motivated the curators of the exhibition to research collections afresh, including their own: looking with different eyes for things that had always been there, but had previously been overlooked. It is especially here that the descendant knowledge mobilized by the museum seems to have paid off. Listening



Installation made with beads from the Caribbean island Statia. (Photo by Paul Knevel)

to the voices of many outside the museum, including activists and specialists normally not involved in historical exhibitions, has stimulated the curators to think outside their traditional disciplinary boxes and include less familiar historical sources such as oral traditions, archeological research, and modern art interventions in their quest and in the exhibition itself. In the end, they managed to present 140 (art) historical objects in the exhibition, including loans from museums all over the world.

Interestingly, one of the highlights of the exhibition was already part of the collection: Rembrandt's huge portrait of a wealthy young woman named Oopjen Coppit (1634). Oopjen's family wealth was based on sugar produced in slavery overseas. An archival document in an exhibit case nearby gave evidence of the rape of an enslaved woman in Dutch Brazil by Maerten Daay, Oopjen's second



Rembrandt's portraits of Oopjen and Marten. (Photo by Rijksmuseum)

husband. The document is chilling in its matter-of-factness, its grim content in stark contrast with the grand painting. Considering the fact that the Dutch government in 2015 paid millions to obtain Oopjen's portrait (and that of her first husband Marten), it is a remarkable statement of the museum to frame it this way. The narrative has changed from a proud "this is us in our Golden Age" to an uncomfortable "this is who we don't want to be anymore." It is without any doubt one of the great achievements of the exhibition that its makers dared to present such new critical perspectives, in the process informing the visitors and the users of the catalogue of the many difficulties (and sometimes possibilities) to overcome the silences around the topic and the necessity to read historical documents—be they written, visual or otherwise—against the grain.

Oopjen was one of the ten personal historical figures—enslaved and enslavers—around which the exhibition was structured. These figures were carefully chosen, not only from all over the world, but also with different roles and coming from different time periods. Together they gave the makers the opportunity to present slavery as the multifaceted topic it is: from examples of living in slavery or taking advantages of enslaved labor to stories about resistance and freedom.

The exhibition was in many respects a huge success. Its official opening on May 18, 2021, by the Dutch king was a big media event. Despite COVID-19 restrictions, nearly eighty thousand people visited the exhibition over a period of three-and-a-half months. Many more visited the elaborate accompanying, and

still ongoing, online exhibition: a clever example of the audio guide made visible, with impressions of the exhibition rooms and photographs of all the objects presented.¹

Having said that, this was not an exhibition easy to connect with. The Rijksmuseum sadly missed the opportunity to break with its traditionally hesitant policy towards adventurous scenography, so there were no film projections or other means which could have helped to bring the history of slavery to life. Even though the museum took an uncharacteristically personal approach in the audio tour, the general look and feel of the exhibition was aesthetic and detached. Even a branding iron of the Dutch West India Company was presented so stylishly that it is hard to imagine the burnt flesh of the people it was once used on. In consciously avoiding the most horrible images of slavery, the museum created an exhibition that was respectful to the descendants but also very distant and polished. In trying to do justice to its legacies, the late anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot once described slavery as a ghost, “both the past and a living presence.” The problem of historical representation, he continued, “is how to represent that ghost,



Branding iron of the Dutch West India Company in the *Slavery* exhibition. (Photo by Laura van Hasselt)

¹ “Slavery,” exhibition website, Rijksmuseum, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/stories/exhibitions/slavery>.

something that is and yet not.”² That ghostlike character was somehow missing in the exhibition.

The fact that the main communication medium in the exhibition was an audio guide did not help. The tour contained personal stories about the ten main characters in the exhibition, both in Dutch and in English. These carefully scripted stories were told by different descendants of enslaved and enslavers. This personal angle was well chosen, but its length and the undramatic presentation of the texts demanded a lot of concentration: each audio clip was between four and five minutes, and there were also many text labels for the visitor to read. More importantly, the headphones were physically in the way of creating a shared experience of the exhibition.

Despite the different choices that could have been made in the design of the exhibition, it was groundbreaking because of its topic and approach. The Rijksmuseum has left the Dutch no doubt: they should acknowledge the fact that for centuries they played a major role in human trafficking. Moreover, all their colonies, from Surinam to the Dutch East Indies, were built on slavery. The Rijksmuseum is not the first Dutch museum to convey this uncomfortable message. However, there could be no better place to reach the Dutch elite than in this most prestigious of museums, once the temple of nationalism.

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² Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), 146–47.