



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

A postcolonial museum?

Legacies of colonial histories in museum exhibitions in Europe, Africa, North America, and the Caribbean

van Slooten, S.

Publication date
2023

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Slooten, S. (2023). *A postcolonial museum? Legacies of colonial histories in museum exhibitions in Europe, Africa, North America, and the Caribbean*. [Thesis, externally prepared, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Sarika van Slooten

A POSTCOLONIAL MUSEUM?

Legacies of Colonial Histories in Museum
Exhibitions in Europe, Africa, North America,
and the Caribbean



Sarika van Slooten

A POSTCOLONIAL MUSEUM?

Legacies of Colonial Histories in Museum Exhibitions in Europe,
Africa, North America, and the Caribbean

Amsterdam 2023

A POSTCOLONIAL MUSEUM?

Legacies of Colonial Histories in Museum Exhibitions in Europe, Africa,
North America, and the Caribbean

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor
aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus
prof. dr. ir. P.P.C.C. Verbeek

ten overstaan van een door het College voor Promoties ingestelde commissie,
in het openbaar te verdedigen in de Aula der Universiteit
op vrijdag 3 februari 2023, te 11.00 uur

door Sarike van Slooten
geboren te Groningen

PROMOTIECOMMISSIE

<i>Promotores:</i>	prof. dr. R. van der Laarse	Universiteit van Amsterdam
	prof. dr. I.A.M. Saloul	Universiteit van Amsterdam
<i>Overige leden:</i>	prof. dr. K.J.P.F.M. Jeurgens	Universiteit van Amsterdam
	prof. dr. W.M.H. Hupperetz	Universiteit van Amsterdam
	prof. dr. A. Postma	NHL Stenden University
	dr. M.H.E. Hoijtink	Universiteit van Amsterdam
	dr. S. Sunderason	Universiteit van Amsterdam

Faculteit der Geesteswetenschappen

Het hier beschreven onderzoek/de uitgave van dit proefschrift werd mede mogelijk gemaakt door steun van NHL Stenden Hogeschool. Specifiek heeft deze financiering de datacollectie voor hoofdstuk 1 (Tropenmuseum en Rijksmuseum), hoofdstuk 2 (Engeland en Ghana), hoofdstuk 3 (Washington) en het ontwerp en drukken van dit proefschrift mogelijk gemaakt.

ABOUT THE COVER IMAGE

The following is written by the designer of the cover image

My painting – as a form – is consciously a trapdoor kind of image, in which one – looking at the foreground – only in second instance, as if a trapdoor opens, is pulled to the background, that looks like being on another plain or "layer". This I did consciously, because the foreground is in the Now, whilst the background situates mainly 170 years before in 19th century Romanticism. Although the Frenchman with a white jacket in the extreme right part of the old painting I have suggested to make eye contact with us – the visitors of a historic museum in modern "inclusive" times. Has he foreseen the Inclusivity debates from there? Is he the alter ego of the painter?

The painting in the background is from the French artist François-Auguste Biard, who lived in the 19th Century. I made a conscious choice for quoting this painter – and this particular painting of his – for many reasons. One is, that as a well-oriented traveller (he lived with his wife for years in Brazil for example) and romantic artist he made many paintings on slaves and slavery. But with a slight difference to his contemporaries. I truly suspect him of having partially conscious ambivalence about this whole slavery subject.

The darker painted couple in the foreground of my painting – discussing in a museum – sort of summarizes the whole problematics of this trapdoor painting on a new level. They are the real subject in the Here-Now. Obviously, it is meant as a copy of what

I thought was the hidden meaning in the composure of the group in the 1849 painting of Biard, where the French declare the end of slavery from their (nowadays suspicious) “standing higher & well-groomed” position to a group crawling on the dirty ground. I changed the rules and gave the speaking right and the higher position to the black man. The white woman is just listening. This is how it – to me – should be in the Inclusivism debate, as well as in our New Museology.

COVER IMAGE:

painting, pigments & acrylic resin on cardboard
70 cm x 101,5 cm, 2021

DESIGNER:

Paksha van Slooten, Visual Artist
Amsterdam, 2022

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABOUT THE COVER IMAGE | 7

PREFACE | 15

INTRODUCTION

Legacies of Colonial Histories | 21

Museums in Contemporary Society; A Challenging Field? | 32

Situating Museum Exhibitions | 43

Museum Exhibitions in Geographies on the

Triangular Trading Route | 49

Research Question and Methodology | 59

Epistemological and Methodological Research

Limitations | 67

Consequences of Covid-19 | 69

Outline of the Study | 70

CHAPTER 1

Inclusive Exhibitions and Identity Revisited:
the Rijksmuseum and the Tropenmuseum | 77

Inclusiveness and Identity in the Museum | 78

Challenges of Inclusiveness and Identity

in Contemporary Societies | 83

Creating the Exhibitions; A Museum's Perspective | 93

PREFACE

*The world as we have created it is a process of our thinking.
It cannot be changed without changing our thinking.*

(Albert Einstein, n.d.)

Einstein's perception of what is needed to realise change perfectly reflected my thoughts as I strolled through the Rijksmuseum in 2014. While I was astonished by the grotesque and exceptional ambiance of their permanent collection, I wondered why I did not see any person of colour in these magnificent paintings.¹ Was there none, or did I have a blind spot? I began to realise that many of the paintings and objects in the permanent collection contained dreamy and romantic depictions of glorious landscapes, exciting warfare, and stately Dutch upper-class family portraits from the seventeenth century. These sceneries and settings were conditioned by slavery too, yet none of these paintings and objects reflected a fraction of it. I knew that people of colour lived in The Netherlands and other societies at the time most of these paintings were commissioned. I did establish a tenuous connection between the controversy of our Dutch colonial history and its absence from the museum, but I had difficulty accepting that the largest permanent collection of Dutch art throughout the centuries ignored the part of history which seemed most crucial for the composition of our current society. While looking at these exclusionary images of history and society, I thought "we should

¹ Apart from Jan Jans Mostaert's 'Portrait of an African Man,' Mechelen, Haarlem, c.1525 – c. 1530 <<https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/collectie/sk-A-4986/catalogus-entry>>

be doing this differently”. With ‘we’ I mean The Netherlands and potentially other societies. With ‘this’ I mean cultural and historical representations of colonialism in the museum. With ‘differently’ I mean in a different way. I did not know how until I became familiar with the theorisation of the *decolonial option*, as introduced by Professor Walter Mignolo and assistant Professor Rolanda Vázquez’s, and the concept *postcolonial museum*, as introduced to me by Professor Ihab Saloul. The postcolonial museum enables a better connection between museums that represent colonial histories in the present to contemporary debates of colonialism.² The decolonial option invites one to think beyond a European-centred understanding and classifications to construct a plural, un-authoritative understanding of history.³ As I believe change is needed in how we represent, understand, and experience colonial history in the museum today, I attempt to contribute to the imaginative (im)possibility of the construction of postcolonial museum with the decolonial option in mind. Ultimately, I hope that this study will contribute to a changing way of thinking, as prompted by Einstein to realise change, and I like to share this thesis with academia, practitioners and everyone else who has a similar appetite for such change.

² The title of this thesis ‘A Postcolonial Museum?’ is inspired by Ihab Saloul’s notion of an imagined (im)possibility to construct a postcolonial museum that rethinks colonial representations of the past in the present (Ihab Saloul, lecture and personal communication, 18 June 2021).

³ Walter Mignolo is a Professor in Romance Studies at Duke University (United States of America) and one of the course leaders of the Summer school ‘Democracy, Slavery and the Decolonial Option’ in 2014. Rolando Vázquez is an Associate Professor in Sociology at University College Roosevelt (NL) and a course leader of the Summer school Democracy, Slavery and the Decolonial Option’ in the Utrecht Summer School of 2014. <https://decolonialsummer-school.wordpress.com/>.