



JOURNAL OF HISTORIANS OF NETHERLANDISH ART

Volume 13, Issue 2 (Summer 2021)

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Recommended Citation:

Yao-Fen You (moderator), Elizabeth Cleland, Alejandro Vergara, Bert Watteeuw "JHNA Conversations 1: A Curatorial Roundtable on Expanded and Expanding Narratives in the Museum," *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 13:2 (Summer 2021)

DOI:

Available at <https://jhna.org/articles/jhna-conversations-1-curatorial-roundtable/>

Published by Historians of Netherlandish Art: <https://hnanews.org/>

Republication Guidelines: <https://jhna.org/republication-guidelines/>

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ISSN: 1949-9833



## JHNA Conversations 1: A Curatorial Roundtable on Expanded and Expanding Narratives in the Museum

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*As the cultural sector continues to grapple with the challenging and transformative events of 2020 spotlighting the exclusionary practices and social norms that structure museums, JHNA commissioned two roundtables to reflect on the challenges of curating Northern European art. This first one, "Expanded and Expanding Narratives in the Museum," unites four curators in discussion about the evolving trajectory of art history and the possibilities for new narratives in the galleries. In addressing the increasing momentum for new art-historical ecologies in recent years, the participants discuss the inherently marginalizing effects of canonization; signal the tensions between the art market, perceived museum audiences, and historical collections that continue to shape museum presentations and collecting practices; and highlight some objects from the early modern period that suggest pathways forward for more expansive conversations in museum spaces. The discussion closes with a look at the global entanglement of early modern Europe.*

*This point will be taken up by the next JHNA Conversation, to be published in the winter 2022 issue, which will reconvene the curatorial team for the groundbreaking exhibition Asia in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Golden Age, organized by the Rijksmuseum and the Peabody Essex Museum in 2015–16. Discussants, including a member of their advisory committee from the cultural sector in Indonesia, will reflect on the humility and resourcefulness necessary to present shameful racist histories, the impact of sharing personal—rather than merely collective—stories in the galleries, and the need for museums to participate in the healing of historical wounds. It will also address new research methodologies that inherently expand inclusiveness and surface new types of historical data, leading to a more people-oriented presentation of art history. Both conversations, edited and condensed for clarity for publication in JHNA, have been organized and moderated by Yao-Fen You, Acting Deputy Director of Curatorial and Senior Curator and Head of Product Design and Decorative Arts, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, New York.*

## Participants in the first roundtable, March 2021

- Elizabeth Cleland, Curator, European Sculpture and Decorative Arts, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
- Alejandro Vergara, Senior Curator of Flemish and Northern European Paintings, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid
- Bert Watteuw, Director, Rubenshuis, Musea Antwerpen, Antwerp
- Yao-Fen You (*Moderator*), Acting Deputy Director of Curatorial and Senior Curator and Head of Product Design and Decorative Arts, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, New York

## Whose Stories?

- 1 Yao-Fen You: The past year has proved to be incredibly challenging for museums as we continue to navigate the dual pandemics of a deadly virus and corrosive racism. How has your curatorial vision shifted in the last few years as museums seek to attract new audiences and remain relevant while contending with outdated hierarchies and value systems? What kinds of tensions do you perceive in your curatorial ambitions?
- 2 Alejandro Vergara: Tensions between a curator's goals and the audience's expectations, as well as those of the institution, always inform exhibitions. I felt this very clearly with [\*Vélaquez, Rembrandt, Vermeer: Miradas afines en España y Holanda\*](#) [*Vélaquez, Rembrandt, Vermeer: Parallel Visions*], which included major loans from the Rijksmuseum, including Rembrandt's *The Syndics* and Vermeer's *The Little Street*, among others. The exhibition was initiated by the directors of the Rijksmuseum and the Prado to celebrate the Prado's two hundredth anniversary, and the selection of works was not governed by a central premise but rather a desire to share extremely important works of art central to the respective histories of Dutch and Spanish art to our eager audiences. But what kind of integrated story could I, as the exhibition's curator, create with these crowd-pleasing masterpieces so inherent to the construction of national identities? Take, for example, *The Little Street* by Vermeer and the Villa Medici landscapes by Velázquez. Although they are close in appearance, in size, and in date, we've never thought to put them side-by-side because Vermeer is inherently "Dutch" and Velázquez very "Spanish." But what do those concepts mean, and what would we have achieved by hanging them separately, on opposite sides of the room? By pairing them together, I wanted to push back against this enduring narrative of national schools—of art revealing the soul of a nation—to underscore similarity rather than difference. I'd like to think it worked. It was the most-visited show of old master paintings in the world that year.
- 3 YFY: We certainly have, in the past, tried to marshal artworks to speak to larger issues of nationhood and identity. Perhaps you were able to draw out the precarity of these nationalist frameworks undergirding art history, Alejandro, because you are both American and Spanish. Lizzie, being half Belgian and half British and residing in the States, perhaps you can speak to negotiating personal identity in your professional work?

- 4 Elizabeth Cleland: That is an interesting point. Thinking of ways forward for the field, many of our predecessors were in a sort of comfort zone in terms of talking about their own cultures and what they knew best. For many of us now, we often come to art history with an inquisitiveness about objects and other cultures. Much like Alejandro, broadening the perspective beyond my own personal roots to find other interesting ways to speak to points of convergence and interconnectivity across cultures is what appeals to me. If we want to diversify audiences, we must identify new frameworks for familiar territory. I am really proud of how Maryan Ainsworth, Stijn Alsteens, Nadine Orenstein, and I strove to present a picture of Pieter Coecke van Aelst as an all-round artist in our exhibition [\*Grand Design: Pieter Coecke van Aelst and Renaissance Tapestry\*](#); he was a designer, a cartoon painter, a panel painter. Thinking of new stories to tell now, I would have concentrated on teasing out the period insights of a sixteenth-century *Antwerpenaar* who had such curiosity about the world that he chose to go to Constantinople.
- 5 Many scholars have explored the commercial motivation for the trip, tracing the chronology and route of his journey—I'm thinking here particularly of Annick Born—and discussed the culture that Coecke found in Constantinople; the court of Suleyman the Magnificent, and so forth, so fantastically researched by Gülru Necipoğlu. I would really love to grapple with Coecke's encounter with Constantinople in 1533, which was obviously so different from Antwerp of the 1530s. He created what must have been an unprecedented series of drawings while he was there. Unfortunately we don't have them anymore, but we know he copied the magnificent palaces and great figures like Suleyman. He also documented everyday people going about their normal lives in evocative portraits. When he came back to Flanders, he wanted to incorporate these into his designs.
- 6 It's fascinating to think about a series like *Customs and Fashions of Turks* ([fig. 1](#)), so central to the history of sixteenth-century Netherlandish art, and to unpack the accepted thinking that they were designed as a monumental tapestry series but never executed. Why not? Were the weavers resistant to tackling representations that were so different to what they were used to, due to logistical issues like deciding on the dyes, raw materials, and techniques that were necessary to present different physiognomies, different pigmentations, and so forth? Was it just too difficult, too challenging? Or was it more a question of what was considered appropriate, appealing, or commercially viable? That we must wait until three years after his death—twenty years after his travels—for his widow, Mayken Verhulst, to publish the designs is intriguing. Why was that? We need to move beyond our inherited comfort zones to ask these questions, even if we don't have the answers right now.
- 7 YFY: I like how you frame the issue as being about comfort zones, Lizzie. I have been repeatedly asked throughout my career why I chose to study Northern European instead of Chinese art, as it would only seem natural that I would want to study my own cultural patrimony. Truth be told, what drew me to the art and visual culture of sixteenth-century Antwerp was its status as an entrepôt with a large immigrant population. The organization of those migrant communities into their own enclaves, like the Genoese nation and the Hebrew Portuguese nation, really resonated with me—as an immigrant who grew up in the cultural

plurality that is southern California—far more than Chinese Buddhism, which is familiar and foreign to me at the same time.

- 8 **Bert Watteuw:** To return to what Alejandro said about Dutch and Spanish culture: Sometimes, I wish we [Belgians] could have this very circumscribed sense of what it means to “be Spanish” or “be Dutch.” The political history and geography of this multilingual region, precariously situated between much larger spheres of influence, challenges definition or essentialization. Southern Netherlands, Flanders, Brabant, Prince Bishopric of Liège. . . . It’s impossible to box this patchwork into a definition. I think this very porous and flexible sense of cultural identity remains an important point of consideration for framing the international careers of artists from the area. Attempts at nationalist recuperation are doomed. Rubens wasn’t a Belgian or a Fleming; the current political entities simply weren’t relevant at the time. There’s an Italian Rubens, a Spanish Rubens, a British Rubens, a French Rubens. He was a well-traveled proto-European and a polyglot. At times we might be jealous of the strong national narrative that the Dutch have; at other times I am sure it is quite restrictive. The most enduring aspects of “Flemish” identity surely are a deep mistrust of central government and of all-encompassing narratives and a strong counter-hierarchical tradition. I am now beginning to see how this space for dissent and variety can be built into how we structure our exhibitions.

## Canons and Canonization

- 9 **YFY:** If we are striving to reposition objects in our collections to create more expansive narratives, I wonder about the utility of canons—a discussion brought to the forefront by the imminent launching of the [CODART Canon](#). When I first reviewed it, I was reminded of why I fell in love with the field. Memories of Svetlana Alpers’s Art History 102 class came flooding back as I clicked my way through Van Eyck, the Limbourg Brothers, and Vermeer. Having since “strayed” from the field of painting, I also felt conflicted. Is this canon representative of our knowledge now, of where we are in the field? I noted one [tapestry series](#), two if we count the [Jan Vermeyen tapestry cartoons](#), and I wouldn’t describe any of the decorative arts pieces included—the [bridal gloves](#), for example—as particularly canonical or iconic. While the one example of [Dutch delftware](#) that made the cut is, indeed, emblematic, I would have at least expected a pair to be chosen, in addition to a garniture of five or seven vases.
- 10 **BW:** It’s like a greatest hits album, right? It’s not exciting, new material; it’s comforting and familiar singalong stuff. CODART is aware of that. I’m more interested in probing what we are including and excluding; what didn’t make the cut and why?
- 11 **EC:** Again, it comes down to audience. Are we creating the canon of what is considered important now? Or are we looking at it from the perspective of when these works were new to the original sixteenth- or seventeenth-century audiences? That would basically turn the thing on its head.
- 12 In 2017 I opened a show at The Met seeking to reintroduce our visitors to the original hierarchy of monetary worth. Drawn from the permanent collection, it’s called [Relative Values: The Cost](#)

[\*of Art in the Northern Renaissance\*](#). It centers on a Brussels tapestry and then ranks it with works in other media, including a fantastic painting by Jan Metsys, to try to help our visitors glean how an original audience would rank these works in different media, which is completely different to what we tend to do now.

- 13 AV: Lizzie, I love that idea. It is the best idea for a show that I have heard in a long time. It's so important. It imparts to audiences that things were different in the past. This sense of historical distance is such an important lesson to share.
- 14 YFY: Canons certainly function to confer value in the present moment, particularly in how they can inform acquisitions. One of my first acquisitions at Cooper Hewitt was an example of Gerrit Rietveld's *Red Blue Chair* from around 1923. Our wish list had included an early example of this piece in the top ten for a very long time, and it was useful to include in my justification that the chair was included in the Canon of Dutch History commissioned by the Dutch ministry in 2006. It really felt like a home run to cross off a major item on our wish list and acquire one of the fifty objects marking fifty centuries of Dutch cultural history.
- 15 Putting on my decorative arts hat again, I couldn't help noting how the breakdown of the CODART Canon reinforces the traditional hierarchy of media as taught in art history programs: approximately 60% paintings, 20% works on paper, 12% sculpture and 8% decorative arts.
- 16 EC: Agreed, Yao-Fen, but thinking about what separates the museum curator from the academic, I understand how useful canons can be for teaching. The joy for us as museum curators is when we are released from those constraints. We can rotate objects and concentrate on different areas. The danger of an authoritative presentation is losing those lovely subtleties of context. The example of Coecke shows that it can be so artificial to break an oeuvre down by medium. The tapestry, the cartoon, the *petit patron*, they are all part of the same story.
- 17 BW: For me, the call for a canon points to some insecurity around the status quo, a sense that things are up for discussion. The field has been shifting, and people do not know whether the things they hold to be canonical are, in fact, still so. I don't think the CODART Canon is an attempt at consolidation. Like the Dutch, the Flemish government wants to establish a cultural canon, a drive which again is related to changes in society. The initiative was met with deep skepticism and accusations of political recuperation in the press. After a commission was established to create this cultural canon, it became clear that its members had conflicting ideas about what culture is and what is canonical. I'm confident the end result will not be nearly as polished, uniform, or nationalist as the politician who first uttered the idea might have hoped. Admittedly, I might be open to the idea of a canon knowing that Rubens will always be in it.
- 18 AV: A good example of how curators can contribute to canons is reflected in the practical side of our job. At the Prado, some time ago we had to select works of art in our care for a list of fifty—or was it one hundred?—objects that we would prioritize for salvage in case of fire or another emergency. With regard to the Prado's Flemish collection, I'm sure we [all the curators



in this panel] would include *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Bosch, *The Three Graces* by Rubens, etc., but as Lizzie mentioned earlier about the divisions in the oeuvre of Coecke van Aelst being very artificial, artificial is what we do as creators of art historical narratives.

- 19 YFY: Generating salvage lists by rooms for my collection last summer was probably one of the most painful and tedious curatorial exercises I have ever had to do. Some of the most fascinating and important objects that distinguish Cooper Hewitt's collection are one-of-a-kind prototypes like the wood cutlery models designed by [twentieth-century Hungarian American industrial designer] Eva Zeisel, which help tell the complete story of design from start to finish. What kind of value can you put on these process materials? Because these prototypes were carved from humble materials like balsa wood, we struggled to put a monetary value on them. Further complicating the situation was that these unique objects were gifted to us by her estate.
- 20 I remember wanting to buy Dutch Delftware when I was at the Detroit Institute of Arts [DIA], to complement the great collection of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings. It was hard to make the case for spending half a million dollars on a garniture! It can be hard to convince your director and collection committee to spend that much on earthenware, given that they do not appear as prestigious or as refined as eighteenth-century porcelain, even though large and intact sets are, in fact, rarer to find on the market. These issues of value—constructed or perceived—affect our work as curators, particularly as we try to fill in gaps in our collection, with both the sexy and not-so-sexy objects, if I can be so crude, that make for a more inclusive presentation of the past and present. And right now, with several museums committing money toward the acquisition of art made by BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and People of Color] artists, including the Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields [\$2 million] and the Rhode Island School of Design [\$800,000], I wonder what the market values will be. What will \$2 million or \$800,000 mean when everyone is going for the same kind of objects?
- 21 EC: Alejandro, you are quite right: a lot of what we do is artificial and fluctuates according to current thinking. I would say that right now the value most highly placed on objects, at least for the trustees, is the potential for narrative, specifically those objects that allow us to tell stories that haven't been told. This is refreshing and liberating, a good thing for the field, but market values, as you said, Yao-Fen, are going to completely skew yet another series of variables for us to start grappling with. We are soon going to really see that affecting the market.

## Recuperating Tapestries: Goals Versus Reality

- 22 YFY: Turning to our galleries, what opportunities does the landscape of early modern Northern European art offer curators in terms of the presentation of objects beyond paintings? Perhaps we can discuss here some of the curatorial challenges in celebrating the primacy of historically important objects such as monumental tapestries. Tapestries were under my care during my time at the DIA, and I always found it frustrating that we didn't have the right space to display them properly, not to mention the costs associated with conserving them for display. It was like moving mountains even to get them properly photographed. I would have to schedule it on a day when the museum was completely closed to both the public and private events, as well as

assemble team of conservators, art handlers and photography staff. Yet, I had to overcome these logistical hurdles if I wanted their weavers' marks properly documented.

- 23 EC: Tapestries *are* challenging, especially compared to paintings! This is something we experienced when I was working on the Coecke van Aelst exhibition: fantastic paintings could be popped up on the wall in a quarter of an hour or so, but it would take an entire day to install just one piece of tapestry. To understand the power of tapestries, how they envelop a space and transform an interior, they really must be experienced in the flesh. Returning to your first question about opportunities afforded curators, access and close looking are key. Let's not forget that is the great privilege of stewarding objects.
- 24 Photographs, though necessary, are completely inadequate. In some cases, we just don't have good color photography of tapestries, especially those in smaller and private collections. Even when you have good photography, there is nothing like getting up close to the object itself to see firsthand the fading, the repairs, and the alterations. In the museum context, we are also lucky to work so closely with our colleagues in conservation. Those conversations enable us to understand the raw materials, the technique, and above all, to realize that what we're seeing now often bears very little relation to what the original audience saw three, four, or five hundred years ago.
- 25 YFY: Agreed, Lizzie. The opportunities to collaborate with conservators are, for me, some of the best parts of the job—as well as with fellow curators. Alejandro, in fact, very generously drove me to the Museo de Tapices at La Granja de San Ildefonso [Segovia] many years ago, and I will never forget what it felt like to set foot into that space and thinking that even the best photography was inadequate in preparing me for what I would see, feel, or experience in person. Some of them were literally shimmering off the walls!
- 26 AV: The most beautiful show that I have done, in my view, was a presentation of the large oil sketches Rubens made when designing the tapestries for the Eucharist series in the early 1620s [[Spectacular Rubens: The Triumph of the Eucharist Series](#)]. The Prado owns six of these original designs, which we showed with the corresponding tapestries from the Descalzas Reales convent in Madrid. The sketches were shown unframed on pedestals; behind them, you could see the final woven products (fig. 2). The paintings facilitated engagement with the tapestries, which, in a museum like the Prado, are rarely the stars of a show.
- 27 YFY: Bert, how do you see the future of tapestry studies in Belgium? I just saw the announcement that Ingrid De Meûter [Curator of Tapestries and Textiles, Royal Museum of Art and History, Brussels], will soon be retiring. I wasn't aware that Elsje Janssen [former Scientific Director of Collections at the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten in Antwerp] and another great advocate for tapestries, had also retired.



- 28 BW: First, I just want to say that I saw the tapestry show at the Prado, and it was as brilliant as Alejandro says it was! I'm not too concerned about the future of tapestry studies in Belgium. Tapestries are an integral part of the fabric of our art history. A younger generation is approaching the subject in a new manner, looking at the economic organization and impact of this capital-intensive industry. Family networks, risk management, international expansion and marketing strategies are all being analyzed with new digital tools, particularly in Leuven. The results are exciting, but I'll admit that these types of studies, inspired by network theory, perhaps aren't as easily translated into exhibitions. Still, the field clearly attracts young scholars. I was lucky enough to be introduced to the subject by Guy Delmarcel at KU [Katholieke Universiteit] Leuven, and he is still going strong, having recently authored the *Corpus Rubenianum* volume on Rubens's *Decius Mus* series with Reinhold Baumstark in 2019. While Ingrid and Elsje will be missed, I'm not worried about continuity.
- 29 EC: There is also Koen Brosens and his whole group of current and former students, like Klara Alen and Astrid Slegten. I think he is keeping the field absolutely alive and well.
- 30 BW: The resulting databases and visualizations, such as [Project Cornelia](#), are really changing the ways in which we look at the producers of tapestries. The question also speaks to the much broader issue of the relation between academic research and curatorial practice, a complicated topic that isn't limited to tapestry studies and merits a more substantial discussion than we have time for today. At the Rubenshuis, where we [including the Rubenianum staff] are working on new installations, we are aware that there isn't a single tapestry on display in the museum. This is a great gap, as we have several in the collection. Part of the story we are telling about Rubens is about his "multimedial" aspirations, so we are looking closely at how we can integrate tapestries in the new display. Luckily, the new rooms are quite substantial, but, again, exhibiting these huge objects is no simple task. Hardcore network theory isn't very palatable for the general visitor, but the proximity of the famous Antwerp *Tapissierspand* [tapestry salesroom] to the Rubenshuis and the fact that [Rubens's second wife] Helena Fourment came from a family of silk merchants can at least hint at the importance of tapestries to the social and economic fabric of the neighborhood around the museum in Rubens's time. Our standards are perhaps slightly different from those of a traditional museum, as we are a historic house museum, which makes for a different mix of objects. We want to suggest a richly textured, lived-in space and environment. Paintings are obviously central, but we can't rely on them solely to tell Rubens's story.

## Women Artists and Makers, Seen and Unseen

- 31 YFY: Speaking of Helena Fourment, let's move on to recent developments in gender scholarship as they have informed the field, as well as discuss possible pathways forward for the study and display of women artists. I'm sorry to have missed Alejandro's show on Clara Peeters [[The Art of Clara Peeters](#)]<sup>1</sup>—which seemed long overdue—as well as the much anticipated exhibition on Michaelina Wautier [[Michaelina: Baroque's Leading Lady](#)]. Alejandro, perhaps you could talk about the Peeters exhibition?

- 32 AV: The show started in a conversation with the then-director of the Prado, who wanted to do an exhibition on a woman artist. I suggested Clara Peeters, since we have four beautiful examples by her in the collection. She was also an ideal candidate because she was one of the few women who painted professionally in Europe at the time, even painting herself into history with her exquisite self-portraits. I was surprised when, a couple of years later, at the opening press event, a journalist asked the director if we had done this show because Peeters was a woman, and he suggested otherwise. I didn't see any problem in acknowledging her gender, in saying very publicly that we wanted to do a show specifically on a woman artist.
- 33 YFY: And what was the legacy of that 2016 show?
- 34 AV: Since then, we have done shows on Sophonisba Anguissola and Lavinia Fontana, and just recently we mounted *Invitadas* [[\*Uninvited Guests: Episodes on Women, Ideology and the Visual Arts in Spain \(1833–1931\)\*](#)], which enabled us to bring out on view many nineteenth-century paintings held in storage. Examining the hostility with which women painters were treated by the Spanish art society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was a very different kind of show for us.
- 35 Still, there continues to be a big demand from the press and the academic elite that we hang more works of art by women painters at the Prado. But surprisingly, nobody has asked what we have that could be hung. How many women painters are represented at the Prado? That's such an essential question, but the answer and its implications are complicated. So far, we can identify only twenty-two women painters with works in the Prado's collection from the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries. This number triples when we get to the nineteenth century. But let's put that in context, because we have approximately 1,500 male painters represented in the Prado. Museums have definitely arrived late to the reappraisal of the role of women in art history, much later than academia, and while it took the Prado almost eighty years to organize its first monographic exhibition on a female artist, the last twenty years have seen us make great strides.
- 36 EC: It's a really interesting question about women artists. My immediate reaction is, of course, the adage that context is all, and I would say it is very much a question of medium. If one thinks about printmaking in sixteenth-century Antwerp, then yes, we have women with printmaker's licenses, including Mayken Verhulst, whom I mentioned at the beginning of our conversation. In tapestries, I'm thinking of people like the early seventeenth-century manufactory owner Catharina van den Eynde. We know she was the head of the workshop because she inherited it, as a widow of the owner of a tapestry-weaving workshop. But was she also a practitioner herself? What were the roles of women in early modern European art production?
- 37 If you walk through The Met's European Sculpture and Decorative Arts galleries, you are surrounded by the production of women, but little to none of it is acknowledged in the labels or in the attributions. As a textile person, I can say that historically there were so many female practitioners, but they run the gamut of contexts, from amateur, domestic production for personal use through to professional women artists who were part of the guild system and who

were doing it for commercial reasons.

- 38 As Alejandro reminded us earlier, we don't want to get wrapped up in what people want to hear nowadays. We don't want to twist historical facts to provide the answers people want to read now. Admittedly, we have inherited a skewed situation created by generations of art historians who were not very interested in this topic, or who had some preconceptions and biases no one wanted to address. Thinking of a place like The Met, our collections were shaped by those historians. Even if we don't have as many women artists named as practitioners as one would hope, it is not necessarily that the works were not there to be had. Our trustees and our predecessors simply weren't interested.
- 39 It's not just a question of gender. The Met is actively trying to improve acquisitions in the field of Judaica. There are so many fascinating stories to tell with historic Judaica, and yet it's something that, until about thirty years ago, the museum just was not interested in acquiring for socioeconomic reasons. It gives us great swaths of new material to grapple with.
- 40 **BW:** It is a very complicated issue and, as Lizzie indicated, a lot of it has to do with pushing back against received wisdom and centuries of historiography. I was trained by Katlijne Van der Stighelen, so the issue of gender was very much part of my art-historical training. Though the legal position of women in early modern Flanders was markedly better than that of many other European women, we still cannot fully gauge the extent of their involvement in workshops and other businesses, as they were represented by men in legal documents. It is only in very particular circumstances, like in widowhood or in legal documents drawn up in the countryside, that women were allowed to speak for themselves. Retrieving their agency is thus very challenging and time-consuming. Pulling an artist up from the archives and establishing an oeuvre, like Katlijne has done for Michaelina Wautier, is tough going but extremely important work.
- 41 When the Wautier exhibition was on view, a patron asked me, "Would this have happened if she were a man?" I was so taken aback. It seemed that, at least to an older generation, making a monographic exhibition about a woman needed an apology. I love Clara Peeters, but she worked within contemporary expectations, producing very pristine still-life paintings. The Wautier show ended with a huge history painting (fig. 3), *The Triumph of Bacchus*, depicting a trio of naked men and a self-portrait of the artist bare-breasted, looking the viewer straight in the eye. Clearly, this was very different from the flower garlands and still lifes we have come to expect of female painters. Wautier was an exceptional talent, both as an artist and as a female artist. Her being a woman was evidently crucial to the museum's messaging, yet at the same time, it was irrelevant. There's always a tension between being casual about gender and emphatically pointing it out.

## Inspiring Exhibitions, Compelling Objects

- 42 YFY: Clearly, the narrative, and the messaging around it, is key to how an exhibition about a woman artist is received. Is there one exhibition about Northern European art, or beyond, that has illuminated your thinking about expanded narratives for our collections?
- 43 EC: In 2013, The Met hosted a lovely show called *Interwoven Globe* [[\*Interwoven Globe: The Worldwide Textile Trade, 1500–1800\*](#)], which was organized by Amelia Peck, a colleague in the American Wing. It explored how objects traverse the globe and how textile was the medium for sharing different cultures, bringing them together, and exploring what certain cultures chose to emulate and copy, whether it was in terms of design, technique, practitioners, or the influence of trade. One object in the show that encapsulated for me how exciting these new narratives could be was an eighteenth-century *wentke* from Friesland, which is a long open coat worn by women as festive dress. This remarkable example was made from an Indian chintz [a painted and dyed cotton], so it was gloriously colorful, full of very abstract designs. Just to imagine these two cultures coming together, those of eighteenth-century Friesland and colonial India, in this exuberant coat is so evocative and exciting. That was a game-changing show for me.
- 44 YFY: Did any of you see *Encompassing the Globe* [[\*Encompassing the Globe: Portugal and the World in the 16th and 17th Centuries\*](#)], which opened in DC and traveled to Brussels? By sheer coincidence, I experienced it at both venues. It essentially took the visitor back in time to when Portugal ruled the seas and led the way in connecting Europe to the rest of the world. I don't remember how it was laid out in Brussels—I only remember being really excited to see it again since it was a huge show with phenomenal loans from Vienna, China, Japan, Russia, and Mexico, etc.—but I was particularly enamored with the exhibition design when it was at the Freer Sackler, because it was nonlinear. It comprised six modules that could be viewed in any order: Portugal, China, Japan, Brazil, Indian Ocean, and Africa, allowing the visitor to navigate their own path through the exhibition. As we move forward with trying to make and hold space for multiple truths in museum didactics, I think it is equally important to consider exhibition design strategies that allow for multiple entry points.
- 45 BW: For me it was a very small exhibition at The Met that I hadn't intended to see. I was there for another show, and I walked into it by accident. It was about Matthias Buchinger [[\*Wordplay: Matthias Buchinger's Drawings from the Collection of Ricky Jay\*](#)], a man born without arms or legs who exhibited himself, and the tricks he would perform throughout Europe and the UK. He was a calligrapher and micrographer. I was blown away by this man's story and his work. I was not prepared for the tiny, amazing works on paper that made up this show. They touched on a very complicated subject, a man born without arms or legs exhibiting himself. I wondered, "Can I look at these things? Is it wrong?" Yet, the sheer brilliance of the things on display made the show into something light and pleasurable.
- 46 YFY: Bert, your conflicted feelings of joy and ambivalence remind me of my visit to the Collection de l'Art Brut in Lausanne. It's essentially a collection of outsider art made by those on the fringes of society. It was amassed by Jean Dubuffet from asylums throughout Europe. Phenomenal paintings by self-taught artists, but heartbreaking to learn that such talent was often intimately entwined with severe mental illness, like the painter who, at the age of seven,

murdered his mother with a cleaver. It was so jarring to go between the artworks, which were so enjoyable, and the labels, which were sometimes so gruesome, that it felt kind of wrong, as you say.

- 47 If you recall, I assigned some homework, which was to highlight [for our readers] an object, either from your collection or elsewhere, that might help chart future directions in our field. This show-and-tell assignment was somewhat selfishly motivated by a recent acquisition I made, pre-pandemic, of a late seventeenth-century Chinese export dish, which was most likely made for the Dutch market (fig. 4). It is a particularly marvelous example of Kangxi porcelain, but I was primarily attracted to the piece exactly for the global stories it could tell—returning to Lizzie’s point about narrative value—whether it be about export trade and production, the story of blue and white porcelain, or translation failures.
- 48 Starting in the late seventeenth century, the Chinese export porcelain market expanded to include specially ordered pieces [*chine de commande*] based on European forms and modes of decoration. Dutch merchants often brought wooden models of familiar, utilitarian Western forms such as mugs, ewers, and candlesticks for Chinese potteries to emulate. They also took European prints to China to be reproduced, such as the highly successful fashion prints [*portraits en mode*] produced by the three brothers Nicholas, Robert, and Henri Bonnard between 1685 and 1700. Resulting pieces, such as this finely painted blue and white plate featuring a garden scene at center, were coveted by European royals, aristocrats, and wealthy merchants, all eager to display their wealth and sophistication.
- 49 Such artifacts, which are at once European and Chinese in both form and decoration, fascinate me, perhaps because I feel both Chinese and American. They also demonstrate how perceptions of “foreign-ness” and the exotic can go both ways. The Chinese artisans in receipt of the print clearly struggled with making sense of Western, one-point perspective, as much as they did of the Western facial features. While the artisans did their best to render the latest in European fashion—the fontanges remind me of how Chinese mountains are depicted—they gave the figures decidedly Chinese facial features, presumably given their lack of familiarity with Europeans.
- 50 With a huge stroke of luck, I tracked down the print on which the central design is based—this almost never happens—and for which the original drawing survives—also one-in-a-million—and I was blown away by the changes between the “copy” and the “prototype.” Not only have the figures been sinicized, but some of them have been re-gendered. What did their European clients make of these changes and of the end product? Was it enough for the scenes and figures to be recognizable? What market needs were satisfied or not? These are larger questions I hope to answer in a future publication. The changes ultimately destabilize what appears to be so normalized for European eyes and for those of us so entrenched in European pictorial modes, as well as reinscribe foreignness.
- 51 BW: I have recently come across Matthias Jacque [1624–1662], who was orphaned at the age of twelve. After his parents succumbed to the plague in 1636, he was placed under the care of an



uncle with whom he repeatedly clashed because Jacques drank, smoked, stole money, and kept bad company. Exasperated, the uncle locked the teenage boy in the basement of his riverside home in Liège over Christmas of 1639. Matthias's feet froze and needed to be amputated early in 1640. This portrait of 1654 (fig. 5) is a piece of evidence in a lawsuit held before the highest court of appeal in the Holy Roman Empire, the *Reichskammergericht* in Speyer, in which Matthias Jacques claimed compensation for the loss of his feet. The case files offer an exceptionally detailed glimpse into the life of a named individual with a disability in early modern Europe. The inclusion of the portrait, intended to reveal the degree of Matthias Jacques's incapacitation to the justices, is a poignant reminder of how visual representation functioned as a legal tool in the fight for emancipation by minority groups.

- 52 The portrait itself packs a punch, particularly so as it forms a stark contrast with most other early modern representations of people with disabilities: marginal figures in manuscripts, picturesque extras in representations of the works of mercy, curious specimens of nature's workings in cabinets of curiosities. Curators and art historians have a unique contribution to make by calling attention to a broad and diverse visual discourse on disability and to an admittedly smaller yet important group of historic representations of and by people with disabilities. The subject is suited to develop new narratives not just because it is socially relevant, but also because it is about ways of seeing. It is about staring, about being stared back at, about voyeurism and exhibitionism, about what Rosemarie Garland Thomas described as "the history of being on display."
- 53 EC: Even before traveling to Constantinople, Coecke van Aelst frequently included people of color in his tapestry designs: a black Roman soldier leads the guard protecting Paul from mobs in Jerusalem (fig. 6); curly-haired, dark-skinned youths bear fasces in *Paul Before Agrippa*; a lady in a hijab leans around a tree to listen to *Paul Preaching to the Women of Philippi*. Yet, in later weavings of the *Saint Paul* series, Coecke's people of color are invariably represented as white. In *Paul Seized at the Temple*, woven in Jan van der Vyst's workshop years after van Oppen's, the Black soldier's bare arms are transformed into sleeves ending with white-skinned hands; his face and neck likewise white, his beard now a fiery, northern European red. By the time the second-generation cartoons for the *Paul* series were woven just before 1563, all of Coecke's Black figures have pale skin, blond hair, and blue eyes.
- 54 What brought about this change? And again, why was the *Customs and Fashions of the Turks* series abandoned? Were cartoons, and Coecke's intentions, diluted with each reuse? Was it, as a recent conversation with Yao-Fen set me thinking, a question of weavers' technical limitations, given their proficiency with achieving hatched shading of pinkish pigmentation? Did weavers effect this change because they knew the iron mordant required to achieve deep black and brown dyes was inherently chemically unstable and would not age well? Or was it a question of taste, even prejudice?
- 55 AV: When Rubens was in Madrid for nine months between 1628 and 1629, he copied many paintings by Titian [now in the Prado] in the royal palace with Velázquez, twenty-two years younger than him, as a witness. One of the paintings Rubens copied was *Diana and Callisto*,



[now the shared property of the National Gallery, London, and the National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh] (fig. 7). After he copied the original—in which Diana is shown as unjustly cruel, following Ovid’s description of her—Rubens painted a more compassionate version of the tale (fig. 8). Diana, to the left, shows pity towards Callisto, whose grief we can palpably feel.

- 56 The stories about beauty, desire, love, and sex the Greeks and Romans created express the need to deal with the insurmountable problems posed by life. From the heinous act of Jupiter to the unjust punishment of Callisto, the power of these visual narratives, so close to lived experience, help us come closer to Ovid, Homer, and Virgil. For me, these early modern representations of very human situations, with all their emotional complexities, remain deeply relevant, even invigorating.

## Reframing Today’s Narratives for Tomorrow

- 57 YFY: What are other stories you would like to tell? Can you comment on some future exhibition plans?
- 58 BW: With the art of Rubens, you’re immediately struck by the centrality of the human body, which pervades his work. There is a lot of talk at the Rubenshuis of how we could make this work for us in terms of emerging social movements like body positivity. Some of our visitors are clearly drawn to Rubens because of this. One memorable note in our guestbook came from a lady who expressed humorous dismay at being the only larger woman in a museum exhibiting robust painted bodies. It’s clearly an issue for our visitors. So much research in the humanities in the past decades has centered on the body, and a lot of current issues in museums—race, gender, class, accessibility, visual descriptions—revolve around the body. Being a historic house museum, embodied experience is an important aspect of the visitor experience. Eating, sleeping, pregnancy, illness, and other bodily aspects of early modern life are of great interest to our guests. There are so many interesting stories to tell that resonate with current social issues.
- 59 YFY: In view of the large population of people of Muslim faith in Belgium, how might we explain the story of Rubens’ fleshy nude bodies to them? If we want to really create more diverse audiences, how do we bridge that gap?
- 60 BW: Demographics in super-diverse cities like Antwerp are changing rapidly. Many Antwerp citizens have a “migration background.” Our museum audience is not changing at the same pace, which means we need to work harder to reach out to tell new stories in new ways. Clearly, Rubens made some major contributions to the visual history of “minority groups.” His depiction of Mulay Ahmad, for example, doesn’t show a “terrifying Turk” but a dignified king. There are many other ways of talking about Rubens that are perhaps more approachable. Every time Helena Fourment stepped out of her house to go to market or mass, she donned a veil, as did all female inhabitants of Antwerp. It’s in snippets of information like this that we can find ways to connect with audiences that we haven’t reached before. But since programming tailored to specific demographics can be perceived as patronizing, do we instead promote the fact that the museum has a large, enclosed garden in the middle of the city? That could also help attract

people who have never visited before. Hospitality is key, particularly for a historic house museum.

- 61 AV: I'm interested in how art history as a political tool bypasses the general public. Returning to the nationalistic use of art history we discussed at the beginning of our conversation, I'm troubled by how much the general public, or rather our marketing and communications departments, are still in the grip of this very romantic notion that so-and-so is quintessentially American, or Spanish, or Dutch.
- 62 Nationalism can be ineffectively marketed to audiences, as evident in a personal experience that I had with the adaptation of collections of early modern European art to different segments of our contemporary society. My brother married into an immigrant family from the state of Nayarit in Mexico and settled in Los Angeles. Whenever I visited him and his family, I would take my two nieces to museums like the Getty. As much as they loved going with me, I could also feel their discomfort. I had to insist that the museum was, indeed, "our place," that it belonged to all those who liked art. One summer [2002] my nieces and I went to see a show on Murillo [*Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617–1662): Paintings from American Collections*] at LACMA, which was heavily marketed to Hispanic Los Angeles, and I remember it struck me as naïve and misguided that Murillo's "Hispanic" nationality would appeal to my nieces. Is the "prompt" of a Spanish artist living four hundred years ago in Seville sufficient enough to bring in the "Hispanic" audiences? At the time, my nieces connected with Rubens's *Hunt of Meleager* as much as with 1920s photography. Whatever connects with their imagination, as Lizzie suggested earlier. What worked well in our early visits to the Getty was for me to share my fascination with things from faraway times and places. I wasn't necessarily looking for things close to myself in the past.
- 63 EC: I think one of the interesting stories that we can also tell as museum professionals, rather than academics in the field, is around shifting museum audiences and what museums have been doing to improve on that score. I have just finished co-curating a show [[\*Art for the Community: The Met's Circulating Textile Exhibitions, 1933–42\*](#)] with two of my Met colleagues, Eva Labson and Stephanie Post. It revisits a very early example of well-meant outreach by The Met in the 1930s and 1940s, which was sponsored by the Works Progress Administration [WPA]. The museum realized that although they billed themselves as New York's museum, it was a very limited demographic who were making the trip to the Upper East Side to visit the Fifth Avenue building. So what they did was put together mini-traveling exhibitions of precious objects, among them a gorgeous early seventeenth-century Barberini cope with precious [metal] wrapped threads (fig. 9). They were sent around to the outer boroughs of New York, to high schools, and to public libraries to reach the broader New York audience that might have felt that the museum was not for them. The response was incredible: from 1933 to 1942, more than two million people visited these little textile shows, which at that time was almost a quarter of the city's population. Earlier generations of museum professionals have been grappling with this issue of how to make our objects as appealing as possible to as many different people as possible.

- 64 YFY: You raise such an excellent point, Lizzie. The original layout of the DIA was, in fact, very much shaped by the concept of museum-as-time travel. With architect Paul Philippe Cret, Wilhelm Valentiner designed the ground floor as a series of evocative period rooms that allowed the citizens of Detroit to travel back in time and space to the Gothic period, to the Southern Baroque, and to eighteenth-century France. They could also travel to Asia, Mesoamerica, and Africa. Though these rooms were not authentic by any means, they were innovative in their integrated display of paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts of a given period and place. The DIA's pioneering gallery-sequence scheme was reproduced in the fourteenth edition [1929] of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* as an illustration of an ideal museum arrangement (fig. 10) As fraught an individual as Valentiner was, he was, on some level, trying to be inclusive by admitting that not everyone had the luxury of traveling as widely and frequently as he did—he traveled back to Europe at least once a year—so that if they couldn't travel outside of Michigan, he was going to bring the world to them. Responding to audiences and trying to meet them where they are—that's so key to expanding storytelling in our galleries of [Northern] European art, isn't it?
- 65 Thank you again for taking the time to participate in this lively exchange. Your curatorial and scholarly insights have been invaluable and necessary to record as we aim to move the field forward in new directions that are more accountable and transparent in the hope of presenting more complete, inclusive narratives.

## Acknowledgements

On behalf of the authors, Yao-Fen You would like to thank Jacquelyn N. Coutré (Eleanor Wood Prince Associate Curator, Painting and Sculpture of Europe, The Art Institute of Chicago) for her critical support and assistance in organizing and publishing this conversation. In addition to her astute editorial interventions, Jacquelyn took on the thankless but critical task of transcription. She has been the ideal collaborator, stewarding this project from inception to completion with generosity, compassion, and great humor.

## Biographies

Yao-Fen You oversees Cooper Hewitt's holdings of nearly 39,000 objects in Product Design and Decorative Arts that form an important, comprehensive resource for the history of American and European decorative arts and design. She has held curatorial positions at the Detroit Institute of Arts, Fogg Art Museum/Harvard Art Museums, the University of Michigan Museum of Art, and the J. Paul Getty Museum prior to joining the Smithsonian in 2019. She earned her PhD from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and her BA from UC Berkeley.

[YouY@si.edu](mailto:YouY@si.edu)

Elizabeth Cleland is responsible for post-medieval European textiles at The Met, where she has worked since 2004. Lecturing and teaching regularly, publishing widely on early modern European tapestries, she has co-curated exhibitions exploring themes of collaboration and competition in sixteenth-century artistic design, production and market, as well as patronage at the Tudor and Valois courts. She studied at London's Courtauld Institute of Art, where she earned her MA and PhD as a British Academy scholar.

[elizabeth.cleland@metmuseum.org](mailto:elizabeth.cleland@metmuseum.org)

Alejandro Vergara grew up in Madrid and Houston, the son of a Spanish father and an American mother. He attended university in Madrid and received his PhD at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York in 1994. Before joining the Museo Nacional del Prado in 1999, he taught at the University of California, San Diego and at Columbia University. He is currently Senior Curator of Flemish and Northern European Paintings.

[alejandro.vergara@museodelprado.es](mailto:alejandro.vergara@museodelprado.es)

Bert Watteeuw studied art history and social and cultural anthropology at the Catholic University of Leuven. After a PhD fellowship from the Research Foundation Flanders, he joined the Rubenianum, Antwerp, as a researcher in 2011. Since 2015, he has been employed by the Rubenshuis, Musea Antwerpen, combining scientific research with museum work and serving as the project coordinator of the architectural master plan for the Rubenshuis site. In summer 2021, he was appointed director of the Rubenshuis.

[Bert.Watteeuw@stad.Antwerpen.be](mailto:Bert.Watteeuw@stad.Antwerpen.be)

## Illustration



Fig. 1 Celebration of a circumcision from the frieze *Ces Mœurs et fachons de faire de Turcq* (Customs and Fashions of the Turks), published by Mayken Verhulst (1518–1600) after designs by Pieter Coecke van Aelst (1502–50), 1553, woodcut, 35.5 x 69.9 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1928, 28.85.6 (artwork in the public domain)



Fig. 2 Installation photo, *Rubens: El triunfo de la Eucaristía*, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, 2014, showing Rubens's modello in front of The Victory of Truth over Heresy, woven by Jacob Geubels II (1599–before 1633) after Rubens's design (photo: Museo del Prado)





Fig. 3 Michaelina Wautier (1604–89), *The Triumph of Bacchus*, ca. 1643–59, oil on canvas, 270.5 x 354 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, GG\_3548 (artwork in the public domain)



Fig. 4 China (Jingdezhen), with scene after Nicholas Arnoult (1650–1722), *Dish*, 1685–1700, porcelain, 7 x 34.3 cm. Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, New York, Museum purchase from Charles E. Sampson Memorial Fund, 2020-4-1 (artwork in the public domain)



Fig. 5 Unidentified Artist, *Portrait of Matthias Jacque*, 1654, watercolor and bodycolor on paper, 41.5 x 52 cm. State Archives, Liège (artwork in the public domain)



Fig. 6 Detail from *Saint Paul Seized at the Temple of Jerusalem*, from a set of the *Life of Saint Paul*, designed by Pieter Coecke van Aelst (1502–50), ca. 1529–30, woven under the direction of Paulus van Oppenem, Brussels, before 1558, wool and silk threads. Patrimonio Nacional, Madrid, TA 32/2 (artwork in the public domain)



Fig. 7 Titian (1488/90–1576), *Diana and Callisto*, 1556–59, oil on canvas, 187 x 204.5 cm. National Gallery, London, NG6616 (artwork in the public domain)



Fig. 8 Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), *Diana and Callisto*, ca. 1635, oil on canvas, 202 x 325 cm. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, P001671 (artwork in the public domain)



Fig. 9 Unidentified Italian Artist, *Cope made for Antonio Barberini (1607–71), Grand Prior of Rome in the Order of Saint John and the Knights of Malta, 1623–28*, Embroidery in silk and metal thread, on lampas with four pattern wefts tied in twill weave, with applied gold fringes, 133.4 x 302.3 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Walter Jennings, 1911, 11.101 (artwork in the public domain)

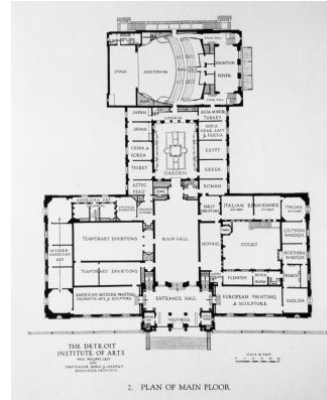


Fig. 10 Paul Philippe Cret (1876–1945), *Plan of the Main Floor of the Detroit Institute of Arts, 1928*. Research Library and Archives, Detroit Institute of Arts (Courtesy Detroit Institute of Arts Research Library & Archives)