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*JHNA* Conversations 2

Yao-Fen You (*moderator*), Tamalia Alisjahbana, Karina Corrigan, Femke Diercks

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# A Curatorial Roundtable Revisiting *Asia in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Golden Age*

## JHNA Conversations 2

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*As the cultural sector continues to grapple with the exclusionary practices that structure museums, which the transformative events of 2020 made all the more urgent, JHNA commissioned two roundtables to reflect on the challenges of curating Northern European art. The first, [“Expanded and Expanding Narratives in the Museum,”](#) published in the summer 2021 issue, united four curators in discussion about the evolving trajectory of art history and the possibilities for new narratives in exhibitions and installations.*

*The second roundtable concentrates on the groundbreaking exhibition *Asia in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Golden Age*, organized in 2015–16 by the Rijksmuseum and the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. The exhibition brought together a wide range of exquisite objects, from porcelain and furniture to jewelry and paintings, as a lens through which Dutch culture of the seventeenth century could be deconstructed within a framework of global networks. [The accompanying catalogue](#) foregrounded the historical context of the Dutch presence in Asia and articulated the diverse nature of Batavian society, thereby broadening consideration of the consumption of such luxury goods in Amsterdam. Yet even in the seven years since the exhibition opened, conversations around fundamental issues, such as the use of the term “golden age,” and the recognition that the harms of the past live on in the present of underserved populations, have radically expanded the understanding of what an exhibition of Dutch art should and can do. The discussants in this second roundtable, which included two co-curators and a member of the advisory committee from the cultural sector in Indonesia, reflect on the humility and resourcefulness necessary to present shameful racist and colonialist 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, all while maintaining their commitment to scholarly rigor and ethical standards. They addressed new research and presentation methodologies that inherently expand inclusiveness and surface new types of historical data, leading to a more people-oriented, rather than object-oriented, presentation of art history. Both conversations, edited and condensed for clarity for publication in JHNA, were organized and moderated by Dr. Yao-Fen You, in her capacity then as the 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 second roundtable, April 2021

- **Tamalia Alisjahbana**, Heritage Consultant, Jakarta
- **Karina H. Corrigan**, Associate Director – Collections and H. A. Crosby Forbes Curator of Asian Export Art, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA
- **Femke Diercks**, Head of Decorative Arts, Rijksmuseum
- **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

## Origin Stories: Championing the Decorative Arts

- 1 **Yao-Fen You:** First of all, I want to commend you again for having mounted such an important exhibition. To bring together a show of that scale with the kinds of objects was really incredible. The logistics of that! I was really blown away. And one image that I will never forget are those giant containers of spices at the entrance to the exhibition at PEM [Peabody Essex Museum] (fig. 1)! I would love to revisit the origins of the *Asia in Amsterdam* exhibition project, which I know you touched on in the acknowledgments of the catalogue, as well as discuss how the presentations diverged at the two institutions. Unfortunately, I did not get to see the show in Amsterdam, but I am curious if the visitor-centered approach that shaped the presentation at PEM also guided the Rijksmuseum's display. I would also like to know how the exhibition dovetailed with the Rijksmuseum's reinstallation that was also afoot then.
- 2 **Karina Corrigan:** At PEM, we are constantly trying to make our exhibitions as multisensory as possible in the belief that, by engaging all the senses, we can more deeply reach our audiences. Those giant cylinders that welcomed visitors to the exhibition contained nutmeg, cloves, and cinnamon, and they smelled wonderful! Their scent was a powerful and visceral reminder that this narrative started with the search for spices in Asia.
- 3 As to the show's origins, this is a project that grew over many years, even as early as 2009, when I was serving as the coordinating curator for PEM's traveling exhibition *Golden: Dutch and Flemish Masterworks from the Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo Collection*. While working on the Van Otterloo show, I proposed to PEM's leadership that we organize a small tandem exhibition to feature some of the seventeenth-century Dutch-market Asian export art holdings from PEM's collection. Much to my delight and surprise, Dan Monroe [PEM's executive director at the time], suggested we expand it into a larger-scale independent exhibition for a later date. At that time, the Rijksmuseum was still planning their long-awaited new building and reopening, so most of the Rijksmuseum's collections were not on display. Jan van Campen [Curator of Asian Export Art at the Rijksmuseum], Menno Fitski [then Curator of Japanese Art, now Head of Asian Art, at the Rijksmuseum], and Femke Diercks are all longtime colleagues and friends. They sold the project to the Rijksmuseum leadership, who generously agreed to lend works to my show.

- 4 Femke, perhaps you could speak to when the Rijksmuseum went from being a lender to a smaller-scale, PEM-generated show to being a partner in the planning for this larger, co-organized exhibition?
- 5 **Femke Diercks:** For us, the inception and the go-ahead for the show happened while we were in the midst of the preparations for the reinstallation of the permanent collections in 2013. The new installation combines paintings, decorative arts, and historical objects in a chronological display, so the idea of combining paintings with decorative arts on an equal footing was at the top of everybody's mind. I see the Rijksmuseum's installation of *Asia in Amsterdam* as a brainchild of the driving principles behind the museum's reinstallation. We were lucky to have also worked closely with Jan van Campen, who was the third co-curator of the show, as well as with Pieter Roelofs, then curator of seventeenth-century paintings [now head of Paintings and Sculpture], and Martine Gosselink, then head of the History department [now director of the Mauritshuis]. Bringing together the collections of the Rijksmuseum and the Peabody Essex felt like a great opportunity.
- 6 **KC:** At the outset, we sought to bring together the highest caliber of works in all media and to allow those objects to speak for themselves. All three curators—Femke, Jan, and I—are decorative arts historians, and we were excited to exhibit decorative arts in direct and equal dialogue with paintings (figs. 2, 3, 4). This is perennially a challenge for those of us who work principally in the decorative arts: to have our collections stand shoulder-to-shoulder with paintings.
- 7 **YFY:** Some of the reviews were critical of the word “luxury,” which I doubt would have been used without the strong decorative arts component. I thought it was a really smart way to talk about so many different types of media by reframing those objects as commodities.
- 8 **KC:** To be transparent, the marketing department wanted us to include the word “luxury” in the title. The development and finalization of an exhibition title is a lot like making sausage! But, “luxury” was not an inappropriate word for the show because of our desire to represent the pinnacle of technical and aesthetic achievement across media during this period. For us, “luxury” spoke to the changing meaning and value of materials within different contexts. Porcelain—a major player in our narrative—is a telling example (fig. 5).
- 9 The raw materials used to produce it were of little worth alone. In China, where porcelain was a locally manufactured product, it derived its value from the technical skills of the potter and the talents of the painter. In Europe, porcelain's appeal rested with its physical attributes as well as its rarity and exoticism. We wanted to find ways to underscore that porcelain, lacquer, and silver were on a par with, if not more expensive and extravagant than, some of the costlier paintings produced during this period. We sought to reintegrate these luxuries into a historical presentation of seventeenth-century material culture in a way that had not been done before for our audiences. But in advocating for the decorative arts so passionately, we missed the boat on other narratives that should have been more central, such as the violence associated with the

acquisition of so many of these luxuries arising directly from the labor of enslaved peoples.

- 10 **FD:** Because we were so keen to orient the narrative toward the incredible objects we love so much, there was a fear that surfacing those challenging stories would dilute our efforts to champion them. It would have been more truthful, to see and tell those stories.
- 11 **KC:** Yes, in our defense of the decorative arts in a field where scholarship skews towards painting, we did not fully embrace the darker histories that reside in *all* these works of art (and the environments in which they were made, traded, and used).

## Reckoning with Colonial Expansion

- 12 **KC:** As part of the exhibition planning, we hosted three separate events with outside advisors who helped us tremendously in advancing the project. We are joined today by one of these advisors: Tamalia Alisjabana, an Indonesian heritage consultant, who was a critical advisor to the project. Tamalia participated in the second planning meeting in Salem and raised questions about how we would address some of this darker history, specifically the atrocities perpetrated in the 1620s by the Dutch in the Banda Islands. Tamalia, could you reflect on joining us in Salem? It has obviously been a number of years, but your memories of that convening, and the dialogues we had there, would be illuminating for this conversation.
- 13 **Tamalia Alisjabana:** You invited several participants from Indonesia, as well as from India and Japan, to discuss the exhibition and offer their insights. You gave us a lot of freedom to share our thoughts. You basically said, “Whatever you think, just say it.”
- 14 I looked at the objects you planned to display and how you planned to display them, within the context of a draft storyline. You had assembled a stunning checklist of porcelain, furniture, textiles, and books; the PEM collection of decorative arts is really quite wonderful. But I found myself asking, why, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, did the arts flourish in Holland? Where did the money come from that enabled people to buy and commission such works of art? The answer is that the money came from the spice trade and from the colonies that were being created by the VOC [Dutch East India Company]. The VOC’s position as the world’s first multinational corporation, bound by no laws to regulate fair or humane trade, was key to its great wealth, and Dutch society benefited from that wealth, including the decorative arts. By monopolizing the spice trade, farmers had to sell their spices to the VOC, and then the Dutch monopolized the shipping. In the past, the Chinese, Arabs, and other peoples would go to Banda to buy their nutmeg directly; after the VOC established its monopoly, they would have to go to Batavia to buy the nutmeg from the Dutch. After a while, you could also only use Dutch vessels to ship Indonesian commodities to Batavia [inter-island] or outside of Indonesia, which eventually curtailed our local shipping industry. Nowadays, antitrust laws and other laws would not allow a multinational to do that. I felt that to create a more complete story, you should also include in the exhibition the cost of that art. Indonesia was the biggest colony that the Netherlands had in the seventeenth century, and it was probably their biggest source of wealth. The spice trade also had an enormous human cost.

- 15 During the convening, we discussed the decorative and fine arts that were created during this period, and I felt that some of the darker history behind the objects could be expressed if the exhibition added another art form, namely the performing arts. In 1621, Dutch VOC Governor General Jan Pieterszoon Coen massacred forty-four chieftains of Banda and then, directly and indirectly, most of the population of the Banda Islands, in order to obtain a lucrative monopoly over the nutmeg trade. This atrocity is only one of many stories of Dutch colonial violence in Asia, but it has had a compelling afterlife. After the massacre, as part of Banda society's search for healing, the women of Banda transformed a traditional war dance practiced in many parts of Eastern Indonesia—the Cakalele dance—into a dance telling the story of the massacre. Today, one of the methods of healing post-conflict-related stress and trauma offered by modern psychology is Creative Arts Therapy, which includes dance drama. The dance is performed to this day in the Banda Islands, and traditional Banda culture is one that is centered on the search for healing.
- 16 Des Alwi, the previous Orang Lima Besar of Banda (who could trace orang lima besars, or chieftains, of Banda in his family to the eighteenth century) shared this oral history with me. The women of Banda, who survived the massacre four hundred years ago, would have been uneducated, and yet they must have instinctively sensed what their society needed for healing. They wove the story of the massacre of the forty-four chieftains into the dance. Today, most villages in Banda have five male elders and five female elders in the village council. When the men of the village perform the war dance, they pay respect to the women first, for it was the women of Banda that helped their people to find healing and thereby kept their society and culture alive. I felt that by making this a part of the exhibition, it would enrich the understanding of the objects on display.
- 17 **KC:** We struggled with how to present the history of Dutch imperialism in Asia within the context of an art exhibition. Because the Cakalele dance continues to be practiced today, we felt that this might be an appropriate way to integrate this larger narrative of colonial violence into the exhibition in a way that would be accessible to our visitors. With Tamalia's help and historic footage taken by the former Raja of Banda, PEM created a [film](#) about its history, which ran within the first section of the exhibition.
- 18 **FD:** The recording of the dance was included in the show in Salem, but regrettably not in Amsterdam. At the Rijksmuseum, we considered the exhibition in the light of art-historical presentations and wanted to differentiate our project from traditional historical exhibitions, where objects tend to become an illustration of a point rather than presenting them as works of art on their own. We felt that, if we didn't have the objects related to the Banda massacre and the transformed Cakalele dance, we couldn't tell that story. In doing so, we gave up too easily in finding ways to represent the darker side that underpinned this celebration of beautiful objects, the darker side of this history. PEM was a little further along in their thinking and expanded the scope of the arts represented in the exhibition in order to tell the violent and exploitative story about Banda.



- 19 Tamalia, you pointed out to us that we were not looking broadly enough. I'm really happy that this point was made in the Salem show. PEM's approach to interpretation has historically been very visitor driven, whereas the Rijksmuseum's focus has been more geared to an aesthetic presentation, which made it even more difficult to include those stories in Amsterdam.
- 20 **TA:** I think there's a zeitgeist that influences when parts of a story need to be told, and in 2015 in Holland, it wasn't time yet. The zeitgeist had not yet arrived there, but in the United States—a country that sees itself as a bastion of democracy—telling that story and including it in the exhibition was far easier. Also, you had already done so much work on the whole exhibition, that then to suddenly have to change your perspective, Femke, and include the performing arts would have been quite challenging. I think even PEM struggled a bit with that. Didn't you, Karina?
- 21 **KC:** We definitely did. But I also think that it was easier for us to tell this narrative in Salem than it was in Amsterdam. As an American institution founded in 1799, this was not technically our own history of colonial violence, whereas it was much closer to home at the Rijksmuseum. I will say, however, that my work on *Asia in Amsterdam* certainly informed the [interpretive approach to opium](#) that we take in the Sean M. Healey Gallery of Asian Export Art—the permanent gallery for the collection—which we opened in 2019.
- 22 During the planning for the Healey Gallery, we talked extensively about how to explore the central role of opium in the history of American and British trade with Asia. This wasn't a narrative we had historically told within our galleries. However, that dark narrative is intimately tied to our institution's origin story and to the ancestors of many of our Trustees and major benefactors. There are now references to the opium trade throughout the gallery, and a short film explores the devastating impact of opium production and consumption on millions of Indian and Chinese lives in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We quite consciously situated that film at the very heart of the new gallery (fig. 6).
- 23 **FD:** Pao Yi Yang, a former intern of Jan van Campen's, discussed the differences in the presentation of *Asia in Amsterdam* at the two venues in her recent doctoral dissertation about the display of porcelain in museums (Leiden University, 2021). She describes one of the exhibition's themes as a process of domestication, of re-identifying Asian goods from exotic to Dutch, from *them* to part of *us*. It struck me that the *us* in this context could be perceived as much more nationalistic or Eurocentric than I ever saw it. I do not see the past in that way. Studying a Dutch person in the seventeenth century is as close or as far away from me as studying an Indonesian person of the same period.
- 24 In other words, we assumed we had a lot less explaining to do about Amsterdam in the seventeenth century than PEM did, but we did not push the historical context enough. As a researcher, that historical distance is really clear to me, but I doubt we made it apparent enough to our visitors.
- 25 **YFY:** Would you say that the Rijksmuseum is now ready to have something like the video of the Cakalele dance as a permanent interpretive fixture in its galleries, Femke?

- 26 **FD:** I think the Rijksmuseum is ready. One of the criticisms of the permanent installations, as well of *Asia in Amsterdam*, is that it was designed with a very Eurocentric perspective. We felt that we didn't have the right objects to add narratives of people victimized by the VOC, so we hewed much closer to a traditional art-historical approach. We have learned a lot from the 2021 exhibition *Slavery*, which explicitly sought new avenues and platforms to tell the stories of enslaved people. It included oral history, songs, and vernacular objects. In this context, the dance would have been received differently.
- 27 We also learned a lot from the reactions of the public to the inclusion of these stories in the *Slavery* exhibition. With *Asia in Amsterdam*, we struggled with many of the same issues as Karina did with the gallery that talks about opium. With the *Slavery* exhibition, the museum involved the public from an early stage by sharing with them preliminary curatorial and interpretive choices and soliciting their feedback; this was part of the process from the beginning.
- 28 **YFY:** Have there been attempts to engage the Indonesian community in the Netherlands through advisory panels and focus groups?
- 29 **FD:** Not so much for the early Dutch colonial period. But we are preparing a show about the Indonesian war of independence against the Dutch after the second World War, *Revolusi! Indonesia Independent*. That exhibition has two co-curators from Indonesia, Amir Sidharta and Bonnie Triyana, who are working closely with Harm Stevens and Marion Anker and a larger advisory panel consisting of experts and community members of Indonesian ancestry.
- 30 **YFY:** Tamalia, are there relevant objects left in Indonesia? How is the Dutch seventeenth century presented in your museums? What stories are told, and how?
- 31 **TA:** In the Jakarta History Museum, there's an amazing collection of Indonesian colonial furniture from the seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries. It's one of the best collections of Dutch colonial furniture in the world. The furniture industry came to Indonesia because the Dutch East India Company imported enslaved labor from India, many of whom were excellent furniture makers, and Indonesian artists learned a lot from them. The Chinese, many of whom were connected with the sugar industry, also brought furniture-making know-how with them.
- 32 **KC:** One of the most extraordinary examples of furniture made in Jakarta in the early eighteenth century is a screen ordered by the VOC for the Council Room in the Castle of Batavia (fig. 7). It was made by Indonesian craftsmen and accommodates the need for European expressions of status and power with the Asian custom of forcing visitors to enter a room modestly. We tried very hard to borrow it for the exhibition. It had left Indonesia once before to be included in the global baroque show at the V&A [*Baroque 1620–1800: Style in the Age of Magnificence*], so we thought there was a chance we might be able to borrow it. Sadly, we were unsuccessful in securing this loan, but Jan wrote about it briefly in the catalogue. It was too important an object not to include in the project in some way.



- 33 **TA:** You were not able to borrow it because there was criticism in the newspaper. Critics argued, “That is our best piece of furniture. What are you doing? Shipping it to the other end of the world? What if something happens to it?” I think the way to approach something like that is if you bring your valuable stuff here, then we bring our valuable stuff there to enact a reciprocal exchange of objects.
- 34 Getting back to the question at hand, I recall that there are also old, handwritten illustrated Javanese manuscripts that tell the colonial story from an Indonesian perspective. Of course, there are maps, and the weapons and costumes of the Cakalele dancers in Banda, which are quite different from those of other areas of Eastern Indonesia. The costumes in Banda are more sophisticated, as they were the costumes worn by the seventeenth-century nobility, including helmets that were clearly influenced by those worn by European seventeenth-century soldiers. They are decorated with birds of paradise.
- 35 There are also *wayangs* [traditional Javanese puppet dramas] about Jan Pieterszoon Coen’s Banda massacre. They are not seventeenth century—probably nineteenth century at best—but they reference important seventeenth-century events. That’s another resource for an exhibition, given the significance of puppetry in Indonesia.
- 36 For a museum display in Banda, it might be worthwhile to take a more anthropological approach. One could consider looking at objects like baskets with offerings for the spirits of the ancestors and costumes that were frequently renewed and objects considered heirloom objects, such as the carved prows of the war boats. These are not in museums but belong to the traditional councils of the villages and are still made today.
- 37 Finally, we have lots of ceramics. Since many ships sunk in Indonesian waters, we keep unearthing ceramics. There are also collections of VOC coins and, again from a sociological perspective, traditional boats. I think Indonesia has the largest merchant fleet of wooden-bottomed boats, with each area having its own type of boat. In Banda, of course, there are the famous *kora-kora*, or war boats.
- 38 Indonesian museums are searching for ways to present these fundamental narratives to their audiences. Exhibitions that try to tell colonial stories from an Indonesian perspective are still in the developmental phase.

### Art and/as Object

- 39 **TA:** Yao-Fen, your questions raise an issue that continues to plague institutions today: are you an art gallery or are you a history museum? Are you looking solely at aesthetics and creativity, or are you looking at these surviving works as objects with rich historical stories to tell, returning to a comment Femke made earlier? Or are you doing both?
- 40 **FD:** Your point is well taken and especially relevant for the Rijksmuseum. We have always had this split personality of being the Dutch national museum of art *and* history. After the reopening of the museum in 2013, the emphasis was on our role as an art museum. Almost ten years later,

the pendulum, in our museum and around the world, is shifting. I think we can look at *Asia in Amsterdam* as being somewhere in the middle along that continuum.

- 41 **KC:** For much of our 220-year history, PEM was defined as a global ethnographic museum. Our former director very much wanted to frame the Peabody Essex Museum as an art museum, not as a history museum or a maritime history museum. I think the challenges at the Rijksmuseum were similar to our challenges at PEM. The pendulum has similarly shifted at PEM: we are feeling much more willing to define ourselves in multiple ways. We can be a global institution, a national institution, and a local institution simultaneously—a museum that tells expanded narratives related to all those institutional identities.
- 42 **FD:** The shift toward a more inclusive narrative had started in academia already, but it has recently gained a lot of ground in public discourse. When I reread the labels from *Asia in Amsterdam* now, I can still sense our struggle in not only what to say, but also how to say it. For instance, we would not use the word “slave” now; we would always refer to people as “enslaved.”
- 43 This shows, again, how important it is to have a multitude of voices helping you shape the narrative of an exhibition. Sometimes I still feel protective of the objects. There is a risk of the object becoming an illustration of a point rather than the object itself being the point, hence the tension between the objectives of the art museum and history museum. I felt like I was defending the objects in the show by making the narrative smaller and saying, “Well, this [darker history] is just not part of what we’re talking about. We want to champion these objects right now.”
- 44 **TA:** You are not completely wrong, Femke. There are always two sides, and you have to look at both, and then try to find some way in between what you can live with as a curator and what will help the general visitor understand these multiple perspectives. But also, these are very, very beautiful objects. When I went to PEM, I thought, oh my goodness, this furniture, these objects! I felt a kind of pride, too, because so much came from Indonesia and that part of the world (figs. 8, 9, 10, 11).

## Reviewing and Reimagining

- 45 **YFY:** I think there were several decorative arts curators who were struck by how the exhibition succeeded in conveying both the beauty and the brutality of the objects. In that regard, I really thought the prompt of “So much luxury . . . at what cost?”, which appeared on the walls at the end of the first section of PEM’s *Asia in Amsterdam* installation, was so poignant and compelling (fig. 12).
- 46 **KC:** Yes, we wanted to prompt visitors to contemplate the hardships behind the production of these objects. Earlier I alluded to missed narratives, and I want to return to this topic, specifically in terms of one review of the show. Ivan Gaskell’s critical review of *Asia in Amsterdam* in [Historians of Netherlandish Art Reviews](#) really bothered me at the time, particularly because I was conscious that in one hundred years, the glowing reviews in the [Boston Globe](#), the [New York Times](#) and the [Wall Street Journal](#) wouldn’t really matter. Gaskell’s review would be the one on

record for the exhibition within the Dutch art history canon. I went back and read it in preparation for this conversation. It still stings to read it, and I think he missed the point of much of what we were trying to do from a visitor-centered perspective. But, if I am reading with an open heart, I can see that he's also critiquing the show for some of the key topics we are discussing today. If the exhibition were staged today, we would have done much more to tell the histories of violence and enforced labor that were—and are—part of global trade.

- 47 **YFY:** Tamalia, you should know that you are praised in this review. It says, “This massacre [of thousands of the inhabitants of the Banda Islands by Jan Pieterszoon Coen in 1621] is commemorated in a narrative dance filmed some years ago on one of the islands, which is included in the exhibition as a video with a commentary by Indonesian scholar, Tamalia Alisjahbana. Hers is a rare Asian voice in the presentation of the exhibition. The inclusion of this video, produced by the Peabody Essex Museum, is laudable.”
- 48 **TA:** You should just look upon it as a challenge for the next exhibition. Anyway, he lauded PEM for including the film and that is because you fought for it, Karina.
- 49 **KC:** In terms of other new media components, we had a lot of contemporary footage of Amsterdam in the PEM installation of the project. My argument was always that the Rijksmuseum's installation of the show was literally in the heart of Amsterdam, but we had to conjure Amsterdam for our visitors in Salem. Yet we could have easily done the same thing for Jakarta. We could have conjured Jakarta for our visitors in Amsterdam and in Salem.
- 50 **YFY:** I wonder how else you would do it differently now, how you would organize the show? I noticed there are a lot of paintings in the catalogue and in the show. For instance, in Indonesia, can that story be told only through furniture and textiles, or do you need the paintings to provide that context? What would the exhibition look like if it traveled to Indonesia?
- 51 **TA:** That would be really amazing. There would be some objects that you could use from Indonesian museums, as I mentioned earlier. I suppose there are also weapons. As I said, it perhaps needs to be looked at from a sociological or anthropological perspective. By this I mean utilizing objects that are not that old. For example, a painting of the massacre created forty years ago by a well-known Moluccan artist showing his view of the massacre. Or examples of the baskets with the offerings to the spirits of the ancestors that must first be assembled and placed in sacred places before the Cakalele can be performed. I could also envision a film of the dance and associated rituals.
- 52 **KC:** Incorporating other artforms and works by contemporary artists would definitely allow us to more easily expand these historical narratives into the present. Both installations of *Asia in Amsterdam* had small contemporary components. In Salem, we included three works by the Dutch artist Bouke de Vries (born 1960), including a map of the Netherlands as it existed in the seventeenth century, which Bouke made from fragments of Chinese and Japanese porcelain and Dutch delftware (fig. 13). His fragmentary works concluded the show.

- 53 And at the Rijksmuseum, the exhibition design was in the hands of Kiki van Eijk and Joost van Bleiswijk. Van Eijk produced small watercolors inspired by works in the show and then covered the walls of the galleries with monumental-scale wallpaper adapted from those tiny paintings as part of the exhibition design (fig. 14). Thanks in part to those gorgeous walls, the show was much more beautiful in Amsterdam than it was in Salem. But I'm appallingly struck now by our myopia: both institutions commissioned Dutch artists to respond to these works. Why couldn't we have engaged Indonesian artists to respond to the works in the show? This really would have allowed us to respond—with art—to the narratives for which we didn't have objects.
- 54 One other critical flaw in our planning for *Asia in Amsterdam* was that, on a really basic level, we should have had one of the convenings in Jakarta. I think it would have been much harder for us to gloss over these narratives of violence if we had been exploring these themes while convening in the former Dutch capital of that oppression.
- 55 **FD:** We definitely discussed this early on.
- 56 **KC:** And then I got pregnant! Traveling to Indonesia after that hard-won pregnancy felt overwhelming to me. So, I fear that, in some ways, the loss of an Indonesian conving was one of the prices I paid to have Anneke [Karina's daughter, who is now eight].
- 57 **FD:** We also talked about having an Asian venue and working closely together with a museum in Indonesia, Japan, or perhaps Singapore, which would have automatically shifted our perspective. But despite our best intentions, it never got off the ground.
- 58 **KC:** Co-organizing an exhibition with two institutions is challenging; including a third in the mix threatened to overwhelm the project. We were also conscious that we were asking for many really important loans and that it was almost impossible to conceive that we'd get permission for a third venue in Asia (or in the United States or Europe, for that matter). It was definitely a dream to have a third venue in Asia, but it also was one of the many things that got left on the cutting room floor.
- 59 **FD:** But that also meant our team was not diverse. For one, we, the core team, were all art historians, and that had a huge effect on the way that we took an aesthetic view of these objects. The conversations during the roundtables and the inclusion of Martine Gosselink's essay on the Dutch East India Company's activities in Asia in the catalogue helped us tremendously, but we were still too comfortable in our team of art historians, I think.
- 60 **KC:** On a project as large and complex as this one was, it saves time to work with familiar partners. There's a level of trust that you can count on at the start of the project. But it's also essential to move outside your comfort zone, like investing time in cultivating expanded networks and bringing multiple voices to the table. I was incredibly grateful to Julie Berger Hochstrasser [an art historian and advisor to the project] for introducing us to Tamalia. Julie knew Tamalia because she had done a lot of research on the ground in Indonesia for her *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age* book [Yale University Press, 2007]. This is just one of the

many examples of why travel is so critical to all of our work. Despite the many benefits of the burgeoning Zoom culture of the last two years, nothing beats travel to expand your network and your mind.

- 61 **TA:** Because of the pandemic, museums have been forced to do a lot of things virtually. That automatically means that you get a much bigger audience. It is no longer just the people of Salem but the whole world.
- 62 **KC:** It also occurs to me that there is almost no public digital record for *Asia in Amsterdam*. Several of the lenders had photographic restrictions for their work, so at PEM, we opted to not permit visitors to take photographs anywhere in the exhibition. I don't think we could afford to do that now from a marketing perspective. I didn't have an Instagram account in 2016, so I was not personally posting on the show in ways that I would be doing now as @asianexportart. But PEM also didn't use digital platforms in more organizational ways then. We could have had an Indonesian roundtable online! It wouldn't have been the same as being in Jakarta, but it would have been better than nothing. And I'd really love to have made virtual tours of the exhibition accessible online. The Rijksmuseum's online presence is enviable, and their open-access policy toward digital images is a gold standard that other museums should be emulating. Increasing digital access to the exhibition and the related programming would have served to democratize and internationalize the exhibition.
- 63 **FD:** And yet we are just starting to look at our digital presence as a stand-alone experience for people all over the world, some of whom may never be able to visit the physical museum. Before, it was always considered a way to get people to the museum. As curators we believe nothing beats the experience of seeing actual objects, but COVID has taught us you can do a lot online with well-produced content.

## Telling Personal Stories, Making Connections

- 64 **YFY:** I want to make sure to ask Femke about the Rijksmuseum's initiative to include women in the Gallery of Honor, which was recently announced. I recall some discussion about incorporating three female painters in the Gallery of Honor, which I thought was great, but I wanted to know where the decorative arts fit into this project?
- 65 **FD:** The changes to the Gallery of Honor are one component of a four-year project, [\*Women of the Rijksmuseum\*](#), about which we are very excited. The project will assemble women's stories from our own collections, to come to a more balanced presentation, and the decorative arts will absolutely be included. For European ceramics there are quite a lot, from widows running Delftware and porcelain factories and shops to porcelain painters and women collectors.
- 66 It's still too early to say which other stories will make it into the Gallery of Honor, which traditionally has been reserved for paintings. It is always framed as a very difficult space, but in

the 1920s and 1930s, there used to be very large showcases with Delftware from the Loudon Collection smack in the middle of the Gallery of Honor.

- 67 In fact, my colleagues at the museum and I just had a discussion about the Rijksmuseum's collection of dollhouses (fig. 15), which Karina used as the foundation of her catalogue essay.
- 68 Dollhouses are important documents for how Asian export art found its way into the houses of the wealthy in Amsterdam in the late seventeenth century, but they were all commissions by women. As Jet Pijzel demonstrated in her dissertation, they represent serious collecting endeavors, on a par with collections of natural and artificial wonders that men were assembling at the same time.
- 69 Many of these stories were implied in the exhibition and the catalogue, but perhaps we failed to make them explicit.
- 70 **KC:** In Salem, we highlighted two women's stories: that of Cornelia van Nijenrode [pictured in fig. 17], a powerful Batavian businesswoman, and that of Amalia van Solms, the wife of Fredrik Hendrik, the stadholder.
- 71 **FD:** Amalia van Solms played an incredibly important role in our narrative, but we failed to emphasize her status as a high-ranking woman. In retrospect it would have been so meaningful to tell her story as a major female patron, to flesh out her choices as a woman in power and not merely as a figurehead.
- 72 **TA:** Can I just ask a quick question? I saw in the exhibition you invoke the phrase "freedom fighter," but I did not find much about it. What was that about?
- 73 **KC:** At the beginning of the exhibition in Salem, we introduced our visitors to eight people, referred to as the "players" (fig. 16), as part of a larger strategy to personalize some of the larger narrative themes of the exhibition.
- 74 At different points throughout the show, we reintroduced each of these individuals with a supplemental label that expanded their individual stories. In a Batavian family portrait by Jacob Janszoon Coeman (fig. 17), we actually call out two "players." The matriarch in this portrait is Cornelia van Nijenrode, the daughter of a VOC official and a Japanese woman, who was married to Pieter Cnoll, a VOC official. We framed Cornelia as "the insider" for her powerful role as a local trader in Batavia, and the other "player" in the portrait is an enslaved man named Untung (later called Soerapati) standing behind her. We called Untung "the freedom fighter" for the resistance to Dutch rule he fostered later in his life.
- 75 **TA:** Did Cornelia van Nijenrode actually know Soerapati?
- 76 **FD:** Yes, he was enslaved by her.



- 77 **KC:** Although enslaved, Untung was a high-ranking member of the household. Only two of the fifty people enslaved by Pieter Cnoll and Cornelia van Nijenrode were included in the family portrait! Coeman painted them slightly in shadow, behind Van Nijenrode's left shoulder. When Cnoll died, his son completely ostracized Untung. On one of my final tours of the exhibition, after staring at their faces for months, it occurred to me: Untung Soerapati was Pieter Cnoll's son! Just look at their faces! They are related, and Coeman likely knew that. When the father died, it makes sense that the son who inherited the estate shipped off the beloved elder son by an enslaved woman. If I were rewriting the label today, I would most definitely present this as a hypothesis for why Untung was included in this portrait. While we might address this painting differently today, I would still want to keep this painting as one of the banner images for the exhibition (fig. 18). It is one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse portraits in the show, and it is centered in Asia. It embodies so many of the ideas that we wanted to explore as a curatorial team.
- 78 **YFY:** Tamalia, I was just going to explain that presenting these "players" is one way of approaching exhibitions that, in America, we call the visitor-centered approach. It guided all aspects of our work at the Detroit Institute of Arts [DIA], where I worked for more than a decade. It represents a way of trying to connect with the visitor, to make these stories more engaging in hopes of appealing to a broader, more diverse audience. It dispenses with the idea that visitors need to have the art history, the history, or the background to understand and enjoy these works. The 2007 reinstallation, which opened with all-new visitor-centered galleries based on extensive evaluation data, put the DIA on the map as a leader in the field. PEM is another museum where the institutional leadership has been interested in making their collections and programs accessible and relevant to new and existing audiences, regardless of age or background. The DIA and PEM worked together on a show I organized on Fabergé that was initiated by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. It was based on their incredible holdings in the work manufactured and retailed by the famed jeweler Karl Fabergé. At the DIA, we departed from traditional approaches to Fabergé by framing the objects as products of a highly successful multinational business. In shifting the story away from male genius to the creation of a recognizable luxury brand at a defining moment in the history of modern Europe, my colleagues in Learning and Interpretation and I had in mind the spectacular rise and fall of the Detroit auto industry and the ways in which such connections would resonate with the metro Detroit audience.
- 79 The show, as conceived and interpreted by the DIA, traveled to PEM, where the presentation preserved, to a large extent, the curatorial decisions and interpretation developed by our team, including casework designs and layout, the multimedia tour, and interactive components.
- 80 Some people regard the visitor-centered approach as reductive, but it is a lot of work to create an interpretive framework that strikes the perfect balance of aesthetics, art history, and economic and political history that also prioritizes accessibility. Those critics often overlook how really good interpretation functions to help people create personal connections with extraordinary works of art either made yesterday or thousands of years ago.

## Museums, Monuments, and Healing

- 81 **YFY:** About interpretive approaches, I'd like to bring up the presentation of speculative histories of art and speculative imaginaries, which seem to be on the rise in art museums. At Cooper Hewitt, my colleague Christina De León has been working with Jon Gray of Ghetto Gastro [a Bronx-based creative collective and advocacy group] to present an [Afrofuturist fictional narrative](#) around forty works in the collection, supplemented by original drawings by Oasa DuVerney. Many of the objects are not beautiful at all—some are in fact very mundane—but the lens of material culture is useful precisely because it shifts the discussion away from the cost of luxury. It's so easy to turn a blind eye to the violence underpinning an object when it's sumptuous and exquisitely worked. You can revel in its splendor. With more utilitarian objects, it can be easier to lay bare the brutality.
- 82 **TA:** I think it's important to acknowledge that museums are not just about the past but also about the present and the future. In my country, this is especially important because we created Indonesia: we're one of the only countries in the world that deliberately engineered our own language, a national language and a national culture. And we kept having these cultural polemics where we asked ourselves, who are we? Who do we want to be? Where do we want to go? What does it mean to be Indonesian? What do we want it to mean? Answering these questions is about creating a national identity, and every generation must ask itself over and over again those questions because a national identity is not a fossil but something that is constantly evolving and changing as values shift. From my perspective, a museum should play a role in creating the identity of a nation. It should connect the past with the present and the future so that it can create an arc of meaning.
- 83 **KC:** Tamalia, your points about the past connecting with the present and the future are absolutely essential for everything we are doing in museums. When proposing potential exhibitions at PEM, curators are often tasked with answering the question, "Interesting, but so what? How is this relevant to our current audiences?" As an art historian primarily of early modern art, my mind tends to live in the past so I often find this question challenging to answer, but trying to make these histories relevant (and exciting) for audiences who are less familiar with them is really one of our most important obligations as curators.
- 84 **TA:** I think 2020 was such an important year for the whole world because of the events in the United States, the cradle of democracy. As Confederate statues started to be pulled down and the Black Lives Matter movement acquired momentum, America was forced to reckon with its racist past and values. Because America is one of the leaders of the world, these ideas spread to Europe and beyond, including Indonesia, where we even have a small Black Lives Matter movement regarding the Papuans. We have to look at the racism in our own society, as well.
- 85 One of the things that has drawn attention again, in connection with the Banda massacre, is the statue of Jan Pieterszoon Coen (fig. 19).

- 86 It has been discussed often in the Netherlands and a few months ago it was also discussed in the Moluccas, where a seminar was held about what the fate of the statue should be. In the United States the attitude has been, “Pull the statues down,” but when the Moluccans (and that includes the Bandanese) were asked if the statue of Coen should be pulled down, they tended to say, no, it should be left standing.
- 87 **FD:** Just to be clear, Tamalia is referring to the statue of Jan Pieterszoon Coen in his birthplace, in Hoorn, not in Indonesia. It is one of those typical “national hero” nineteenth-century statues. I think the discussion started in 2018 about whether it should be torn down completely or repurposed in some way.
- 88 **TA:** Oh, no, it had started already in 1980. But they never did anything about it.
- 89 **FD:** So there you go. This proves how unaware I have been of earlier discussions about this.
- 90 **TA:** But the zeitgeist moved in 2020. Mita Alwi, the daughter of the previous Orang Lima Besar of Banda, said, no, I don’t think they should tear it down because it tells the story. You cannot change history; what happened, happened. But the whole story needs to be told differently. When they were going to quarter and behead the forty-four chieftains of Banda, only one of them—he was of mixed blood—spoke up, and he asked, “Gentlemen, have you no compassion?” The others remained completely silent. Mita Alwi then connected this to George Floyd’s last words, “I can’t breathe.” She said that they were in fact both saying the same thing. “Have you no compassion? I am human. Let me live.”
- 91 Mita Alwi said that the story of the massacre should be written and carved with images into the statue’s enormous pedestal and one of its sides should be engraved with the words of both the Bandanese chieftain and George Floyd, followed by “Never again such a lack of compassion.” Doing so would help turn Coen’s statue into a monument about compassion.
- 92 I would argue that the statue could only be finished in the twenty-first century, if it is turned from a statue of nationalism and conquest into a statue about compassion. And that would be in line with the culture of Banda, which is centered on the search for healing. There is such polarization in societies now that democracy will not survive if we do not find a way for healing. It is not enough to say, “We hate you because of what you did.” There also has to be forgiveness and a way forward together. And museums and their exhibitions and the stories they tell can play a role in creating a culture of inclusiveness and healing.
- 93 **FD:** That’s true. That’s absolutely true. Tamalia, thank you so much for this, it shows exactly where we have been a little bit afraid to go. You telling this story again shows how important it is to go there and to go into that place of hurt to find the healing.
- 94 **TA:** It may not be as scary as you think.

- 95 **YFY:** On that note, Tamalia, I cannot think of a better way to end our rich and stimulating discussion today. My heartfelt thanks to all of you for sharing, with integrity and honesty, your reflections on *Asia in Amsterdam*. Your candor and bravery, not to mention your deep commitment to decorative arts, demonstrates the ongoing need to approach the presentation of complicated histories—particularly racist and colonialist histories—in museums with a willingness to listen and with open hearts, curiosity, humility, and a collaborative spirit. Thank you again for your generosity of time today.

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## Biographies

**Yao-Fen You** is Acting Director of the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center. 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 Institution in 2019. She earned her PhD from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and her BA from the University of California, Berkeley.

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

**Tamalia Alisjahbana**, an Indonesian heritage consultant and the cultural editor of the *Independent Observer*, is a member of the country's National Team of Heritage Experts. She has a background in law with degrees from the University of Indonesia and the University of Cambridge. Formerly a BBC journalist, she later directed the National Archives Museum in Jakarta for thirteen years, where she curated more than thirty exhibitions. She is also an honorary member of the council of elders in Ratu village in the Banda Islands, which she has been researching for over thirty years.

[talisjahbana@yahoo.com](mailto:talisjahbana@yahoo.com)

In her curatorial practice, **Karina H. Corrigan** oversees the largest, most comprehensive public collection of cross-cultural art from China, Japan, and South Asia in the world, from which she

has organized ten exhibitions. As Associate Director – Collections, she is responsible for building the collection through new acquisitions and spearheading research on and enhancing access to all of PEM's rich and storied collections. Corrigan received a BA in Art History and Medieval Renaissance Studies from Wellesley College, an MS in Historic Preservation from the University of Pennsylvania, and an MA from the Winterthur Program in American Material Culture at the University of Delaware.

[karina\\_corrigan@pem.org](mailto:karina_corrigan@pem.org)

**Femke Diercks** is head of Decorative Arts and curator of European Ceramics at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. She has been with the museum since 2009 and had previously worked on the catalogue *Paris 1650–1900: Decorative Arts at the Rijksmuseum*. She is currently working on an exhibition about the Dutch interior in the seventeenth century and the Delftware collection of the Rijksmuseum.

[fdiercks@rijksmuseum.nl](mailto:fdiercks@rijksmuseum.nl)

## Illustrations



Fig. 1 Title wall and jars of spices at entrance to *Asia in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Golden Age* at the Peabody Essex Museum



Fig. 2 Installation photo of *Asia in Amsterdam* at the Peabody Essex Museum



Fig. 3 Installation photo of *Asia in Amsterdam* at the Peabody Essex Museum





Fig. 4 Installation photo of *Asia in Amsterdam* at the Peabody Essex Museum

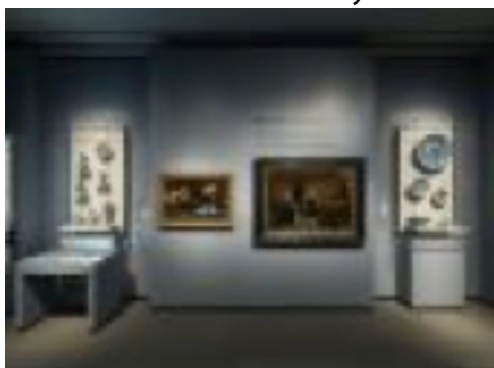


Fig. 5 Installation photo of *Asia in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Golden Age* at the Peabody Essex Museum

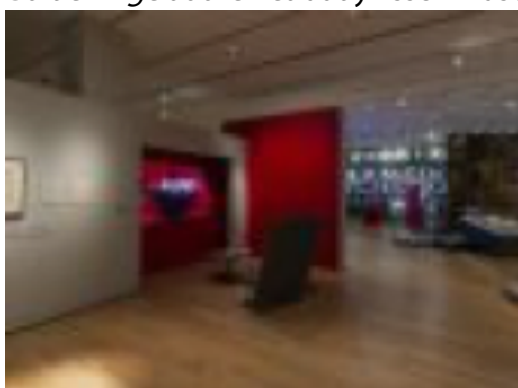


Fig. 6 Opium video installation in the Sean M. Healey Gallery of Asian Export Art at the Peabody Essex Museum



Fig. 7 Unknown artist, Batavia (Jakarta, Indonesia), Screen from the Council Room in the Castle of Batavia, early 18th century, carved teak with paint and gilding, Museum Sejarah, Jakarta

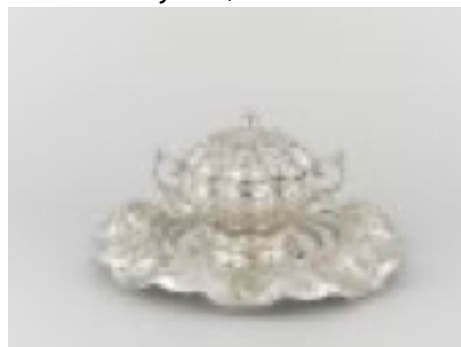


Fig. 8 Artist in Jakarta (Batavia), Indonesia, Water Bowl with Cover, ca. 1680, silver, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, BK-1965-25-A/C



Fig. 9 Artist in Coromandel Coast, India, Rocking Cradle with Hindu Mythological Figures, ca. 1700, ebony, ivory, and wood, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, BK-1966-48





Fig. 10 Artists in Jingdezhen, China, Covered bowl with Daoist Immortals, 1625–50, porcelain, Peabody Essex Museum, Museum purchase, 2001, AE85967.AB



Fig. 11 Artists on the southeastern coast of India, Palampore, 1725–50, dyed cotton, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA, Museum purchase, Veldman-Eecen Collection, 2012.22.7

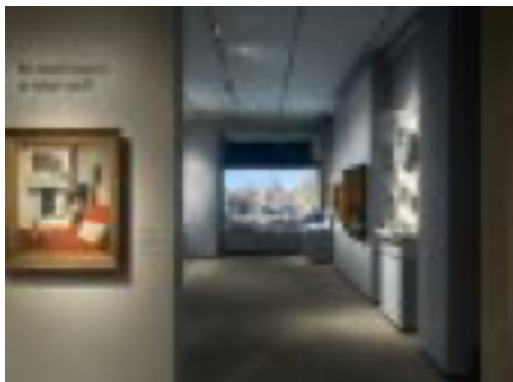


Fig. 12 Installation photo of *Asia in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Golden Age* at the Peabody Essex Museum



Fig. 13 Installation photo of *Asia in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Golden Age* at the Peabody Essex Museum, featuring historic Delftware and contemporary works by Bouke de Vries (born 1960, the Netherlands (active in London))



Fig. 14 Installation photo of *Asia in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Golden Age* at the Rijksmuseum



Fig. 15 Unknown artist, *Dollhouse by Petronella Oortman*, ca. 1686–ca. 1710, oak cabinet, glued with tortoiseshell and pewter, 255 x 190 x 78 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, BK-NM-1010



Fig. 16 Installation photo of *Asia in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Golden Age* at the Peabody Essex Museum

*van Nijenrode with Their Two Daughters and Two Enslaved Persons*, 1665, oil on canvas, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam SK-A-4062



Fig. 18 Exterior of the Peabody Essex Museum, with Coeman's *Pieter Cnoll and Cornelia van Nijenrode with Their Two Daughters and Two Enslaved Persons* as a promotional image for *Asia in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Dutch Golden Age*



Fig. 17 Jacob Janszoon Coeman (about 1632/39–1676), *Pieter Cnoll and Cornelia*



Fig. 19 Ferdinand Leenhof, *Monument to Jan Pieterszoon Coen*, 1893, bronze, Roode Steen, Hoorn, image in the public domain