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## **The Dutch Canon as guiding principle for the new National Museum of History of the Netherlands?**

The canon of the Netherlands is one of the most successful history products ever developed. Fifty windows on Dutch history were selected after meticulous and thorough consideration, and, all of a sudden, large groups of people – young people in particular – found that they were able to come to grips with the major events of history. But that was not all. Even more important, perhaps, was the mania that broke out in which a variety of towns, villages, provinces and organisations developed and published their own canon: the science canon, the canon of Amsterdam, the canon of Friesland, the Leyden canon, the maritime canon. Never before had so many people been occupied with their own history in such a constructive manner.

It was therefore not surprising that, when the Dutch Parliament decided to establish a Museum of National History of the Netherlands, with a view to visualizing the history of this country for as many people as possible, to instruct and make them enthusiastic about it, many people regarded the canon as the ideal basic principle for this Museum. Nor was it surprising that there was a general outcry when the newly appointed directors of the Museum of National History announced that the canon would be assigned 'an important, but limited place'.

This decision – our choice – was not a judgement on the canon but rather a logical consequence of what we thought a museum should be: a 21st-century museum, to be precise.

There are many definitions of a museum. The traditional nineteenth century concept is that of beautiful objects being exhibited in ostentatious surroundings. The emphasis seemed to be on exhibiting the owner's wealth, rather than on sharing knowledge with the public. In the latter half of the twentieth century, stimulated by governmental funding, many museums began to concentrate on the conservation and management of cultural and historical heritage. Every collection starts with a passion for collecting, and our shared history had to be collected and managed. But to what end? For a long time, museums have regarded the function of conservation and management as an aim in itself. I remember when I was first appointed director of a major museum in 2006, and a senior fellow-director sighed and ruefully confided that museums would be so much nicer if they were not open to visitors. He, and many with him, preferred the museum to be an exclusive sanctuary for scholars and experts, definitely not part of the public domain and most certainly not part of public

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**NATIONAAL  
HISTORISCH  
MUSEUM  
OF NATIONAL  
HISTORY**

space. The collection, and the vision of the museum director and the curators on that collection, was paramount to him; everything else seemed secondary to that.

However, changes in this concept have been evident for some time now, as in the major successful museums in the English-speaking countries, such as the TATE Museums, the Science Museum in London and the concepts around the development of the 9/11 Museum in New York. Another example is the extraordinary success of the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, where the number of visitors actually tripled after the museum had made its entire collection accessible to the public by publishing it on the Internet.

Lately, the influence of new media and technology has changed the concepts of museums even more rapidly and radically. With the whole world at their feet, at least digitally, people are making other demands on public institutions. They are better informed of the possibilities, are more emancipated and demanding and, on the whole, are also more inquisitive and have a greater appetite for information. The focus of attention is no longer the collection, but the visitor. It is not the collection that is important, but the story behind it. The collection serves as an illustration of the story to be told, and sometimes of what a visitor may wish to convey to other visitors. The exciting project at the Kröller-Müller Museum, where visitors were able to compile their own exhibition via the Internet, by making a selection of the objects they wanted to exhibit, is a modest but successful example of this.

I shall briefly cover a few basic principles of the museological concept that we have in mind for the Museum of National History:

#### **The story is more important than the collection**

The Museum of National History does not have a collection of its own, and has a very long and complicated story to tell. Or, more precisely, it must weave a large number of shorter, very different stories from many different sources into one, neatly organized, comprehensible, interesting and exciting fabric. For history is not a simple, unambiguous story for all people for all time. The fact that we do not have a collection facilitates this task: after all, it is the story that is important, not the collection. Therefore we prefer a good story, illustrated by a reproduction of Velazquez's *Las Lanzas*, to a lesser story, as the Prado museum would – understandably - not be prepared to give us the use of this masterpiece.

#### **Images are more important than text**

The story should also reflect a museological concept rather than merely functioning as a history book. Books are text, museums are images. People read books, but in a museum they look around. Images are crucial to a museum enterprise. The collection, or the objects or artefacts, are all images, and ought to be sufficiently effective that the story you want to tell can be told with a minimum of words and a maximum of impact. A museum provides an opportunity to grab people and surprise them with spectacular choices and combinations. This generates enthusiasm, and enthusiasm is the mother of interest. Interest is the fundamental requirement for the transfer of knowledge. In that respect, the Museum of National History is a dealer in enthusiasm.

### **Chronology alone is not inviting**

With regard to the layout of the museum, the choice between a chronological approach and thematic one was difficult and controversial. We have always been honest about this. In our view there are four basic ways to unlock history: chronologically, thematically, on the basis of historical characters, and on the basis of historical places. A mature museum uses all four, as it leads to a greater diversity and therefore caters for more tastes. And as the saying goes, now that I have mentioned the word ‘taste’: variety is the spice of life.

### **No past without the present**

The connection between present and past must not be underestimated. Showing the relationships between history and current developments and events will not only generate an increased interest in history, a museum can also create a context that leads to better understanding. Because in the end, why do we want our citizens to know their own past if it wasn't to better understand their present. Comparing the assassination of the De Witt brothers (in 1672) with that of Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn (in 2002) shows that there are many differences, but also some similarities, which adds to knowledge about both events. A museum that only deals with the past is a dead museum and leaves the visitors' imagination unmoved.

### **A museum stands out best in public space**

The Museum of National History should be a museum for everyone in the Netherlands. It should be easily accessible to everyone, and the story we want to put across should be told in a pleasant, comfortable environment. Easy accessibility does not only mean that we want the museum to be housed in a building with a low threshold, but rather that the information should be accessible in places where people already are: in the streets, at school, and at home. This requires some explanation:

Let's return to the Museum's primary aim: to reach as many people as possible with the history of the Netherlands. In spite of all the recent changes in museological concepts, it is still a fact that trying to reach large groups of people by means of a museum building will inevitably lead to disappointment. In our country, the Open-air Museum in Arnhem boasts the largest number of Dutch visitors – our primary target group. However, although it attracts approximately half a million visitors per year, there are still 16 million Dutch citizens who are not reached. Apparently, to achieve our goals, we must adapt our museological concept further. In other words, we will literally have to start thinking ‘out of the box’ of the museum as a building.

In consequence, the Museum of National History will appear on radio and television, move into the country with mobile exhibitions and manifestations, and approach schools with its educational programme, rather than waiting for the schools to have saved up enough time and money to visit the museum. But above all, it means that the Museum of National History must claim a digital presence within which all other resources used by the museum must be connected to one another and to the visitor, either virtually or physically.

Thus, the Museum of National History will enrich the narrative of the Netherlands with the oral version of the history of people who have actually made and experienced this history. This 'oral history' must be made accessible to people in their homes, in stations and libraries, via radio broadcasts, on the Internet, and as a reinforcement of the story as presented in the museum building itself.

As an example of this intention, the Museum of National History has sought co-operation with broadcasting companies to develop an annual series of historical television programmes, supplemented with exhibitions, books, manifestations and websites, which should work to the advantage of both parties where it concerns the aim of reaching a greater audience by offering a more varied choice.

Accordingly, in a four-year period, the Museum of National History will film all the canon windows in co-operation with the children's television programme Klokhuis, and use these broadcasts as starting points for its educational programme.

For many years, thinking in terms of target groups for museums has been a booming business for consultants and marketers. However, it is not a good idea to let your range be limited by a lack of creativity and conceptual boundaries. The Museum of National History's target group is the entire Dutch population plus a large number of visitors from abroad. We can only reach that target group by operating on every conceivable level, in which no means of communication should remain unused. We need not lure everybody into the museum, but rather attempt to reach people in the places where they feel most comfortable for picking up our message. This requires a strong brand name and a good, attractive story – a story that must also be nourished by the people themselves, as it makes them realize that history belongs to all of us and that even the greatest historical events are experienced on an individual level. History is all around us, and the same should go for the Museum of National History. The Museum of National History is a brand name that stands for high quality and a low threshold.

Finally, let's return to the canon. In a museological concept as broad and diverse as the one we have in mind, all-important historical events are represented, of course, including the fifty canon windows. However, taking the fifty windows as the basis for our concept would limit us in our freedom to elaborate in the way we feel history should be elaborated. Our concept encompasses everything that interests any visitor. History must be felt as a three-dimensional experience – broad, high and deep. In education it would be sensible to use obvious benchmarks in a clear context. In a museum it is crucial to capture the visitors' attention and take them on a journey of wonder and engagement in such a way that no one will ever be able to say that history is boring, or that they are impervious to it. In such a world there is no space for rigid, unambiguous structures, only for creativity and versatility. It is the Museum of National History' intention to take the lead, and you are all kindly invited to join us.

Erik Schilp, March 2010

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**Noot voor de redactie (niet voor publicatie):**

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