

The Rijksmuseum as historical museum

The Rijksmuseum, which reopened last year, explicitly advertises itself as the Museum of the Netherlands. It claims ‘to link art, history and people’ and does so by means of objects that the museum has collected since it was founded. After a number of the editors of this journal had viewed the new presentation, with particular attention to the way in which art and history presented in connection with each other, the editorial board felt the need to examine the why and wherefore of Dutch history as it is presented to us in the Cuyper’s halls in the twentieth century through the eyes of professional historians.

In doing so the *BMGN-LCHR* joined the debate on a national historical museum in the Netherlands in which it, along with the KNHG (Royal Netherlands Historical Society), has played a specific role. In the preparations for the opening the director of the Rijksmuseum, Wim Pijbes and the head of the Historical department, Martine Gosselink have claimed that their institution has taken over the function of the National Historical Museum – a claim which, in the response, has been somewhat modified.¹

We asked Geert Janssen, Anne-Laure Van Bruaene and Marieke Bloembergen in collaboration with Martijn Eickhoff, to give their reactions to the new story of the Netherlands from the point of view of their own backgrounds and areas of expertise. Each of them looked specifically at what and whose history has been visualised, which criteria appear to have determined the selection of objects, and moreover what these choices tell us of the underlying agendas and assumptions of the staff and management of the Rijksmuseum. Those responsible for the set-up, Martine Gosselink, Gijs van der Ham and Maarten Prak, have written a response and have explained their choices.

It is notable that all the critics entertain ambivalent feelings about the reinstatement of the architect of the building, Pierre Cuypers. They are of the opinion that historical insight is often subordinated to aesthetic preferences and they emphasise that the museum could deal with such problems by paying more attention to the history of the museum’s collections and the rationale on which these were based. In their eyes, however splendid, the preference for beauty means that the viewer sees Dutch history through nineteenth century eyes (Janssen). He makes a comparison with foreign museums that have put their country’s past more in context, have been broader in their judgements and therefore less teleological in their interpretation. Stressing the start and development of Dutch society clashes with the Neo-gothic architecture and decoration of Cuypers, who as an emancipated Roman Catholic, had a greater appreciation of the Middle Ages, a period that now functions only as an introduction (Van Bruaene). As a Belgian and Fleming she remarked that the shared past of the Netherlands and Belgium has been pushed to the background and that the relation between history and national identity could have problematised more. Cuyper’s restored hegemony also means that it is possible that those responsible for the exhibit set-up have fallen into the trap of Dutch cultural nationalism prevalent at the time of the museum’s founding. In the wealth of Indonesian objects exhibited, the colonial, elitist, Euro-centric view of colonial power hinders other, native and inter-Asiatic perspectives. (Bloembergen and Eickhoff).

Those responsible for the plan have picked up the gauntlet and explained their choice of a chronological, continuous and integrated display. Their point of departure was

the museum's collection of objects, and using these to show how the 'Netherlands' as a society, a state, a nation and as a culture has developed from around 1100 until well into the twentieth century. It does not matter if the visitor sees art or history as long as he or she gains an insight into the past of the Netherlands. Read why some professional historians doubt whether this set-up can really give insight into history and what the Rijksmuseum's response to these doubts is.

On behalf of the Editorial Board,

Catrien Santing

¹ Geertje Dekkers, 'Wij zijn de nationale schatkamer', *Historisch Nieuwsblad* (2011) nr. 7.