

Manifesto: Towards a Historical Critique of Exhibitions

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Introduction

Literary critics write book reviews about new novels. Art critics review works of art and the exhibitions they are presented in. Exhibition critiques, however, seem to be much less developed.¹ In most popular reviews, most attention is usually paid to the shape, architecture and function of the building, rather than to the actual contents of the exhibition (a notable example being the reviews on the new Dutch Military Museum²). In other instances, reviews are echoes of the press releases of the organising institutions, or evaluations of the accompanying marketing message. If they do go beyond that, they tend to rely on specific disciplines such as art history. One might expect academic reviews to provide some much needed in-depth criticism. However, museums and exhibitions rarely receive substantial coverage in academic journals. Although we do find theoretical reflection on museum exhibitions, especially in the case of ethnographic museums and exhibitions, it often stops there.³ What is missing is a serious genre of exhibition critique.

What's the use, one might argue. Are exhibitions in this day and age not primarily aimed at entertaining their audiences, and should not they thus only be evaluated for the experience they offer to the visitor? And if they have an educational goal, what is the use of dissecting the facts and stories they present when historians never seem to be able to agree amongst themselves anyway and keep seeking for historical nuances? To whom would an exhibition critique be relevant, anyway? And most importantly: *won't we just be spoiling the fun?*

We argue that a historical critique of exhibitions should be – just as in the case of literary criticism and literature – an essential part of the practice of exhibiting culture. These critiques are both relevant to exhibition makers and to museum visitors. Debates on concepts, designs, narratives, and objects of exhibition can bridge the increasing gap between academia and, what we can call after Arjun Appadurai, the 'museumscape'.⁴ Whatever their main objectives, the fact is that many exhibitions tell stories that represent a vision of the past. They are explicitly or implicitly used to discuss issues such as gender, race, religion, identity, belonging, region, nation, and empire. Exhibitions work as collection acquisition motors, revitalising older collections by adding more contemporary works. These notions show the close relationship between exhibitions and society, and therefore should be evaluated from a historian's point of view. Solid historical reviews can offer a valuable contribution to the practice of

¹ In this paper, we will refer to: Henrietta Lidchi, 'The Poetics and the Politics of Exhibiting other Cultures' in Stuart Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London 2001). See also: Legêne, Susan, 'Pleidooi voor een historische tentoonstellingskritiek', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 121, 4 (2008) 462-469 and the English version at: http://ghhpw.com/legene_historical_critique.pdf

² Kirsten Hannema, 'Nationaal Militair Museum: krachtig, hyperfunctioneel gebouw', *De Volkskrant* (5 december 2014).

³ See for instance Kathleen McLean, 'Museum Exhibitions and the Dynamics of Dialogue', *Daedalus* 128.3 (1999) 83-107; Henrietta Riegel, 'Into the heart of irony: ethnographic exhibitions and the politics of difference', *The Sociological Review* 43, 1 (1995) 83-104; Steven Lavine, *Exhibiting Cultures: the Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (1991). See also the recent PhD research by Demelza van der Maas, *Verleden boven water. Erfgoed, identiteit en binding in de IJsselmeerpolders* (Amsterdam, 2014).

⁴ See: Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis 1996)

exhibitions (both to the making of and the reflection on) and to inform the public that is interested in them, so that they can reflect critically themselves.

How should one go about? It makes sense to take literary criticism as an example, and learn from the *best practices* that have been established in this field in the past decades. Especially in the field of literary criticism, reviews form an essential part of the reception of works of literature. Among literary scholars in general a consensus exists on different genres of works of fiction, and how to assess a work within its genre. Style, language, originality, internal logic – just to name a few – are basic concepts to judge the quality of a literary work. Together they form something we can refer to as the poetics of literature: ideas on what literature should be, and thus of how the reviewer positions itself in the critique of a work.⁵ In the case of academic writing, the practice of reviewing is even more important, whether it be in the form of a peer-reviewed journal, or the ‘book-review’ section that no journal can do without. Together, they form a historiography, and even more than in non-academic literature they establish (or destroy) the basis of authority and legitimacy.

By now, it should be clear that there is no well-developed ‘methodology’ for museum reviews, let alone a historiography that ties reviews together. The very nature of the subject, of course, does not help. Exhibitions differ from books and works of art in the sense that they are temporary. A book can still be read centuries after it was first published, and although art works may travel between museums and exhibitions, they essentially remain the same. Exhibitions, on the other hand, are very volatile: they exist one moment, and the other they have moved on to a different museum where the lay-out has been reconfigured, or the objects that formed the exhibition have all returned to their respective cases and depots. The only way to relive an exhibition is through mediated records, such as photographs, film, catalogues, or reviews.

More than a book or an artwork, visiting an exhibition is a spatial experience. You can walk around between the objects and captions – not to mention all the new sorts of multi-media modes of presenting information. This multi-sensory and multimedial nature of an exhibition requires a different way of reviewing. A reviewer cannot simply ‘cite’ a part of the exhibition to support his critique. Instead, he or she should rely on more than just text to make a point. In the *Kunstlicht* theme-issue on ‘Art criticism in the networked age’ (2014) art critic Laurence Scherz discusses whether there can be art criticism without text. According to her, the answer is ‘an unequivocal: no. There’s no adequate alternative rhetorical devise...’⁶ Then the author shows how in online multimedia art criticism, texts are more and more intricately linked to images. It is these images that – in our view – should accompany a review of exhibitions. When combined with words, they can confront the reader with the exhibition in a way that words alone never could. In this way, large parts of the exhibition can still be experienced, long after it is gone.

⁵ A classic example of discussion on literary critique in the Netherlands is J.J.A. Mooij, ‘De motivering van literaire waardeoordelen’ in J.J.A. Mooij, *Tekst en lezer. Opstellen over algemene problemen van de literatuurstudie* (Amsterdam 1979) 253-278. We thank Jacqueline Bel for introducing us in theories on literary critique. Also: K.B. Wurth and A. Rigney, *Het leven van teksten Een inleiding tot de literatuurwetenschap* (Amsterdam 2006).

⁶ Laurence Scherz, ‘An Art Criticism Without Words. Arguing in (Cinematic) Images’, *Kunstlicht* 35, 2 (2014) 48.

This article pleads for a historical critique of exhibitions. All that has been said above, however, can be applied to any exhibition without the critique necessarily addressing historical issues. What is it, then, to write a historical critique? We value the current close connection between the museumscape and contemporary society: new types of museums are born and old museums employ different strategies to move closer to the public. However, in the stories that they tell they deal with history as narratives, parallels and chronologies. Academia has come to be less involved (or has involved itself less) in this changing museumscape. Meanwhile academics discuss the role of historians in nation building and the meaning of collecting and classifying culture in the making of contemporary society.⁷ It is time for historians to step up.

Furthermore, it is not just the public that is a major stakeholder in exhibitions: museums deal with all sorts of institutional, financial, political and ethical considerations as well. Such factors are not immediately visible while walking through an exhibition, but neither can we fully assess the exhibition without these factors. A historical critique, then, is not only about the way in which museums deal with the past. It also should address a wide range of contexts and perspectives on exhibitions that shape the telling of history in contemporary narratives.

In the following, we will propose a systematic ‘method’ to analyse exhibitions – to be used not as a strict guideline for a critique, but rather as a source to identify and address different perspectives and dimensions. We will put our preliminary model to the test by applying it to the exhibition *Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age* in the Hermitage Amsterdam (November 2014 - end of 2016). We discuss various theoretical and practical questions that will rise. By doing this, we hope to raise interest in a historical critique of exhibition among historians and museum professionals, and provide a solid basis for its practice.

Systematic analysis: different perspectives to analyse an exhibition

To arrive at a systematic method with which to provide a historical analysis of exhibitions, we draw and elaborate upon the work of anthropologist and museum professional Henrietta Lidchi.⁸ Weary of traditional museology’s perspective of the museum as neutral, objective and free of ideology, Lidchi approaches museums instead as institutions that construe the meanings of the objects they exhibit by drawing on their established cultural authority and as such actively participate in validating particular cultural values and worldviews. Lidchi:

‘Museums do not simply issue objective descriptions or form logical assemblages; they *generate representations and attribute value and meaning in line with certain perspectives or classificatory schemas which are historically specific*. They do not so much reflect the world through objects as use them to mobilise representations of the world past and present.’⁹ (our italics)

⁷ See for instance E. Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the shaping of knowledge* (London and New York, 1992); S. Berger en C.F.G. Lorenz, *Nationalizing the past: historians as nation builders in modern Europe* (Basingstoke 2010); M. Hoijsink, *Exhibiting the past: Caspar Reuvens and the museums of antiquities in Europe, 1800-1400* (Turnhout 2012).

⁸ In particular, we draw on: Henrietta Lidchi, ‘The Poetics and the Politics of Exhibiting other Cultures’, in: Stuart Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London: Sage, 2001 (1997).

⁹ Lidchi, ‘The Poetics and the Politics,’ 160.

Lidchi's work can therefore be positioned in the discourse called 'new museology'. Although variously interpreted, new museology advanced from a critique of the museum's (implicit) political role in supporting the elite by privileging certain cultural expressions and tastes (i.e. what used to be called 'high culture').¹⁰ Ultimately, the purpose of Lidchi's critique has been the redistribution of (curatorial) power as well as increased museum access and representation of diverse groups.¹¹

While Lidchi is primarily concerned with the 'poetics' and 'politics' of exhibiting in the context of ethnographic museums, here we expand her approach into an explicit methodology towards the historical critique of exhibitions in different contexts. To achieve this, below we recast Lidchi's approach into a slightly reworked framework that we delineate along six dimensions to look at exhibitions, and offer a brief example:

- a. **Narrative.** The narrative dimension refers to the mental map the exhibition expresses through both textual and display devices. What narrative(s) does the exhibition construct? What visions of the world does it convey? What idea of narrativity is being presented, what notion of authorship?

In the case of the exhibition *At First Sight* in the Teylers Museum, the array of nineteenth-century scientific, criminological and anthropological objects proved to be insufficient to tell a story about the social process of biases on the basis of appearance. Instead, the narrative that was presented left anyone who did try to view it as a way of addressing these biases at a loss, as it seemed almost a normalisation of discrimination and racism—excesses of an otherwise very natural phenomenon.¹²

- b. **Academic.** The academic dimension will provide insight on the way current debates in academia are incorporated in exhibitions, to detect whether out-dated historical views are presented. Which bodies of academic knowledge do the constructed narratives mobilise, or on the contrary, blatantly ignore? Which discursive formations do exhibitions affiliate and align themselves with and speak to? How does the exhibition position itself vis-à-vis scientific knowledge?

A recent exhibition called *Breitner in Amsterdam* in the Amsterdam City Archives, promised the visitor a genuine impression of Amsterdam of the early 1900s. The claim of immediacy largely ignored the mediated nature of paintings that is generally accepted in art theory.

¹⁰ Vikki McCalla and Clive Gray, "Museums and the 'New Museology'. Theory, Practice and Organizational Change," *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 29:1 (2014) 19-35; Rhiannon Mason, "Cultural Theory and Museum Studies," in: Sharon MacDonald (ed.), *A Companion to Museum Studies* (Malden etc. 2006) 17-32.

¹¹ So how exactly do museums constitute rather than reflect reality past and present? Advancing from a poststructuralist perspective, Lidchi tackles this question with a two-pronged approach: by analysing the interrelated yet distinct 'poetics' and the 'politics' of exhibiting. Understanding exhibitions as "systems of representation," (Lidchi, "The Poetics and the Politics," 153) poetics refers to how the discrete elements of an exhibition—think of the objects on show, the explanatory texts, the display design—together produce specific meanings depending on their specificities and on how they are assembled together. However, these meanings, or knowledge, that exhibitions produce cannot, argues Lidchi, be disassociated from the power structures in which they are embedded and which they in turn facilitate/support. On the one hand, making certain cultures or cultural practices visible and rendering them intelligible draws upon certain types of knowledge. On the other hand, this very process of cultural objectification "allow[s] them to be subjected to the scrutiny of power" (ibidem, 198). Thus, in this context, the 'politics' of exhibitions refers to "the role of exhibitions/museums in the production of social knowledge," (ibidem, 185) and how this knowledge is implicated in legitimising or authorising certain power configurations.

¹² <http://www.teylersmuseum.nl/index.php?item=71&page=66&lang=nl>

Moreover, the exhibition catalogue does not seem to incorporate the latest research on Breitner.¹³

- c. **Material.** Examining the material dimension addresses how the exhibition constructs its narratives. We can further disaggregate the material dimension into two categories: the objects on display and the display itself. In this, it is useful to attend to the following questions: Are the objects on display ‘originals’ or reproductions? Unique or multiple? Does the exhibition itself distinguish between objects according to a classificatory scheme? What are the strategies and technologies of display: what materials, colours, lighting and routing techniques are used? How are objects positioned: in closed showcases, open display, placed in a diorama, with or without captions, and what type of captions (‘factual’, interpretative, both)? What is the relation of the display to those in other exhibitions (implicit, explicit, and unacknowledged)?

The value of analysing the materiality *in and of* exhibitions in tandem is illustrated by the case of *Dutch Design for the Public Sector I and II*, two internationally travelling exhibitions commissioned by the Dutch government as part of its cultural diplomacy programme in the 1970s.¹⁴ On the one hand, the design artefacts foregrounded in the exhibitions were those that supported social democratic welfare ideals of social mobility (equal opportunities and rights) in the Netherlands; on the other hand, the logic of the display design (lightweight, compact, emphasis on visual and tactile communication rather than text) facilitated the political mobilisation of ‘typically democratic’ Dutch culture.

- d. **Institutional.** Examining the institutional dimension provides insight into some of the structures and practices guiding the construction of meaning produced in the material and the narrative dimensions. Here too we disaggregate the institutional dimension into intra-institutional and inter-institutional. Intra-institutional refers to the function/meaning of an exhibition inside the institution hosting it. For example: what is the relationship of a certain exhibition with other exhibitions in the same museum? What institutional practices, discourses, traditions, and policies have contributed to shaping the meanings produced by the exhibition in question? Inter-institutional indicates the position of an exhibition in the ‘museumscape’. What is the implicit or explicit relationship to other exhibitions and objects in similar or different fields? Here, issues of provenance, historical reference and hidden historical links become clear.

An example where the institutional context affects the message of an exhibition can be found in Huis Doorn, an estate where the German emperor Wilhelm II lived after the First World War and which now is a museum. Last year, with help of government funding, a new pavilion was realised including a small exhibition on the war, which should become the national and official ‘Place of Remembrance’ for it. However, the estate and the pavilion do not

¹³ For example: the VU dissertation *G. H. Breitner. Vijf studies over een Amsterdamse schilder en zijn tijd* by Rita Bergsma dating from 2012 that specifically deals with this subject is barely mentioned.

¹⁴ See e.g.: Kees Broos, *Dutch Design for the Public Sector*, poster-catalogue, The Hague [?], 1978 [?] and Design Council of the Netherlands, *Dutch Design for the Public Sector*, poster-catalogue, Amsterdam [?], 1975 [?].

supplement each other and lack a common narrative. The link between the emperor (still referred to as such in the accompanying guided tour) and the war is remarkably absent.¹⁵

- e. **Marketing/trade.** Addressing the marketing or trade dimension of exhibitions further illuminates some of the structures governing the meanings they produce by addressing both questions of finances and of consumption. A useful strategy is to ‘follow the money’: who or what commissioned and paid for the exhibition? What types of written and visual information are produced ‘about’ the exhibition and in which media are they produced (catalogue, press release, educational resources, and websites)? Who is the target audience, in other words, whom is the exhibition addressing? Does the exhibition confirm or disturb visitors’ tacit expectations and view of reality? Conversely, does the exhibitional narrative challenge or contradict the marketed message of the PR department of the institution?

For example: the marketing message of the photography exhibition *Vivian Maier: Street Photographer* does not focus on the quality of the works on display, but highlights the tragic life story of their maker: an unknown American former nanny, whose photos were accidentally found after her death.¹⁶ This life story was largely absent in the exhibition itself.

- f. **Political.** Besides participating in discursive, material and institutional webs, exhibitions are also embedded in power structures. What are implicit/explicit historical references about political entities of belonging, such as nation, region, locality, transnational or imperial links? How does an exhibition construe notions of gender, race, religion, hard/soft identities and what role do they play?

An outstanding example of an exhibition that may be analysed in such terms is *Grand Parade*, a large art installation by the Indonesian artist Jompet Kuswidananto in the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam. Referring to the impact of colonialism on how Javanese people deal with change, this art installation on ‘syncretism’ is about history and also challenges the relationship between ethnography and art, which provides its institutional context.¹⁷

These dimensions are delineated for conceptual clarity; the questions they raise are clearly interrelated. The aim is to facilitate analysis by breaking it down into manageable components so as to explore the dynamics of their interconnectedness. As in literary critique, our (cl)aim is not to be comprehensive: a reviewer may well focus on one or some aspects in their analysis, depending on the specificities of the exhibition. Below we give an example of how these dimensions can be useful in the historical critique of the exhibition *Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age*.

Case study: Historical critique of *Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age*

In November 2014, a new exhibition opened at the Hermitage Museum in Amsterdam in collaboration with the Rijksmuseum and the Amsterdam Museum: the *Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age*. As a collaboration of three renowned museums and as its subject group portraits from the seventeenth-

¹⁵ <http://www.huisdoorn.nl/nld/paviljoen/>

¹⁶ Vivian Maier: Street Photographer was shown in FOAM, Amsterdam, from November 7th 2014 till February 1st, 2015.

¹⁷ Grand Parade - Theatrical art installation by Jompet Kuswidananto; 31 October 2014 until 22 March 2015 in the Great Hall of the Tropenmuseum. See also: Meta Knol, Remco Raben and Kitty Zijlmans, *Beyond the Dutch: Indonesië, Nederland en de beeldende kunsten van 1900 tot nu* (Amsterdam / Utrecht 2009).

century 'Golden Age', it is interesting to see how the exhibition represents this historical era. As it turns out, the exhibition might be less about Dutch culture in the seventeenth century than about modern-day Dutch society.

The exhibition's design is clear and effective, both when it comes to the routing of the visitors and to the presentation of the paintings on display. The walls of a namesake main gallery are covered to the ceiling with the large group portraits of Amsterdam's elite - even the Night Watch makes a guest appearance as a projection on a wall. These paintings should be admired for their craftsmanship and artistry. After this, smaller rooms on the second floor address issues that were not represented in the gallery. Themes highlighted here include religion, trade, or colonial expansion, and emphasis is given to the fact that the large majority of Amsterdammers were far removed from the lifestyle of the rich and powerful on display below.

These are necessary additions that provide complementary background information and this setup works quite well. However, the themes not addressed in the elitist group portraits are still represented with artworks from high culture, and hence the elite's point of view still prevails. This is a choice that the exhibition's creators have made, and as the message that is conveyed seems correct, it does not really have implications for the exhibition. It becomes more problematic, however, in the light of other (marketing) claims the exhibition makes later on.

One motive to use artworks rather than, for example, objects, is probably that they are more appealing to the visitor. The exhibition design is clearly meant to impress or even overawe him or her. However, while using the superbly painted, life-size images to create an impressive presentation, the exhibition is actually less concerned with the art historical content of the paintings than with their historical context. The narrative presented is that of the seventeenth-century merchant elite portrayed on these paintings, which ruled, it is argued, is a situation unique for Europe.

Now, we venture into the political dimension of the exhibition. In the main gallery and most of the secondary rooms, the narrative of these Dutch elite groups remains nuanced and realistic. Yes, the Republic was not ruled by an absolutist monarch or nobles - but the patricians on these paintings still formed an oligarchic ruling class. Yes, women enjoyed relative autonomy and could even be in the boards of civil institutions - but as the portraits show, they had no access to elite groups. And yes, these institutions included charitable institutions where the rich cared for the poor - but for an important part out of self-interest, and under a very harsh regime. A minor shortcoming, that again becomes more significant later on, is the constant equation of the province of Holland or even the city of Amsterdam with the whole of the Netherlands.

Up to this point, little critical remarks can be made on the exhibition's seemingly historical correct narrative. However, it goes awry when it tries to reach out to the visitors beyond its original topic of these group portraits. In two of the rooms giving background information a direct link is made between the seventeenth-century men and women on the paintings and the presumed characteristics of their society on the one hand, and the modern-day Dutch and Netherlands on the other. The first of these rooms contains photographs by the Dutch photographer Taco Anema, who portrayed in 2014 the boards of directors of various associations, such as football clubs, scientific societies, and women's organisations. 'The elitist alliances of the seventeenth century ultimately evolved into a huge

egalitarian consultation culture,' reads the accompanying writing on the wall. These associations symbolise an assumed typically Dutch consultation culture or *overlegcultuur*.

In the second of these rooms, which is the very last one of the exhibition, the link to the present again emerges:

'Think back to the portraits of the governors. One thing was missing: hierarchy. These overseers wanted to convey their united endeavour to achieve consensus. This attitude lives on and is so typical of their approach that the Dutch even have a word for it: "polderen".'

In the room one can have his or her picture taken in an interactive studio in seventeenth-century style which digitally combines the portrait of the visitor with those of random earlier visitors, in this way symbolising a Dutch *overlegcultuur*.

The link between the historical and the contemporary is problematic in several ways. Such continuity in cultural and social norms throughout four centuries is highly disputed in academia. If we focus on the *poldermodel*¹⁸ as the umbrella term for these 'typically Dutch' traits, historian Henk te Velde probably expresses the opinion of most academic historians when he writes that we do not have to take statements on this specific continuity between the past and the present in Dutch history 'too serious'.¹⁹ Usually, the explanation is found in the need to protect the land from the sea and boils down to this: because the Dutch had to cooperate to maintain their dikes and polders, cooperation and consensus is ingrained in Dutch culture. Notwithstanding Te Velde's qualification of them, statements like this are not hard to find, however - a prominent producer of them is professor of literature Herman Pleij, who tries to find the historic origins of this Dutch culture or even identity.²⁰ Earlier authors who emphasised the impact of the early modern water management on Dutch culture were Simon Schama with his *The embarrassment of riches*, and even Johan Huizinga in his classic *Nederland's [sic] beschaving in de zeventiende eeuw*. A recent example in presenting the past as source of typically Dutch traits is Russell Shorto's *Amsterdam*.²¹ As said, the exhibition in the Hermitage is not alone in finding the source of a 'typically Dutch' mentality in a period from the past. But still, it is clear that the exhibition has picked a side in this debate.

Even then, however, we have to conclude that the way the exhibition does this is unconvincing and hardly surpasses the level of a cliché. First, it presents the continuity as plain fact rather than a constructed view of the past. Secondly, the exhibition contradicts itself, and obviously so. How can it claim that there is no hierarchy in the portraits, when it first tells the visitor that only the elite was portrayed on these paintings, and that 'In most civic guard portraits the officers are placed in the centre'? Having first made a point of emphasising the economic and social inequality of

¹⁸ Strictly speaking the *poldermodel* is a term coined in the 1990s to describe the harmonious way in which Dutch employer's and employee organisations reached agreement in socioeconomic affairs. More generally, it refers to a broader mentality of deliberation aimed at reaching consensus. Both are supposed to be typical for Dutch society.

¹⁹ Henk te Velde, 'Het poldermodel. Een introductie', in: Dennis Bos, Maurits Ebben and Henk te Velde (eds.), *Harmonie in Holland. Het poldermodel van 1500 tot nu* (Amsterdam 2007) 9-29, there 25.

²⁰ For example, *Erasmus en het poldermodel: essay* (Amsterdam 2005); or his most recent book: *Moet kunnen. Op zoek naar een Nederlandse identiteit* (Amsterdam 2014).

²¹ Simon Schama, *The embarrassment of riches. An interpretation of Dutch culture in the Golden Age* (New York 1987); Johan Huizinga, *Nederland's beschaving in de zeventiende eeuw* (Haarlem 1941); Russell Shorto, *Amsterdam. A History of the World's Most Liberal City* (New York 2013).

seventeenth-century society, why do the exhibition's creators now argue that the portraits represent a spirit of egalitarianism?

Granted, the largest part of the exhibition still presents an accurate and nuanced narrative from the beginning, spatially separated from the two rooms which link past to present. But placing the link to the present at the very end of the exhibition undermines this narrative, and the minor shortcomings we observed stand out more. The equation of Amsterdam to the whole of the Netherlands is part of the same carelessness used in establishing the link between past and present. The impressive design of the main gallery was, apparently, meant less to show the beauty and quality of the paintings, and more to create a more superficial 'experience'. That the premise of the exhibition turns out to be that the group portraits are used as source material to deduce some kind of primordial Dutch national traits means its credibility plummets.

Looking at the exhibition's marketing campaign it is not hard to decide where this link to the present - which, in the exhibition, comes unexpectedly - comes from: the entire marketing message is exactly this. 'Would you like to know why the Dutch attach so much importance to freedom and equality? The answer is hanging - in life-size form - on the wall of the Hermitage Amsterdam' says a text on the exhibition's website. Statements in the press by the exhibition's curators have similar messages, and sometimes even tend to idealise the seventeenth-century. Where the exhibition tells that the charitable institutions were run by the elite out of self-interest, one of the curators is quoted that '[w]ithout those people and those institutions, it would've been a big mess (...) because they were looking after the widows and the orphans and the sick and the elderly and the poor.'²² Apparently, it was felt that the exhibition's nuanced representation of the group portraits and the culture they stem from was in itself not attractive enough, and that a catchy marketing message had to be used. It is a pity that this affects the whole exhibition to the point that it undermines its credibility.

To conclude, we should not separate these problematic issues in the exhibition's content from its institutional context, for this seems to be the key to understanding those issues. The big key, of course, is to see the exhibition in the light of Amsterdam's tourism industry (17 million visitors in 2014) and the prominence of (art) history and museums in the city's profile within this industry. But the smaller key within this context is to look at the three involved institutions themselves. The Hermitage's main involvement is providing the space. The Amsterdam Museum and the Rijksmuseum, both of which, of course, are inextricably linked to seventeenth-century history and art, provide the actual paintings. An important incentive for the exhibition was to be able to put these astonishing group portraits on display, since they were usually stored away because of their cumbersome size. Collaborating on a new exhibition provided an opportunity for all institutions involved.

Conclusion

Exhibitions are of growing importance as the large number of visitors to 'blockbuster' exhibitions like *Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age* shows. That is why exhibition critique cannot lack behind – we

²² Quote by Martine Gosselink, head of the department of history at the Rijksmuseum - more of this kind of statements can be found in this article: Nina Siegaldec, 'The Faces Behind Amsterdam's Golden Age', international edition of *The New York Times* of 4 December 2014 (http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/04/arts/international/the-faces-behind-amsterdams-golden-age.html?src=twr&_r=0).

need to develop this into a serious genre, with its own methodology, just as art criticism and literary criticism have done before. The importance of a historical critique of exhibitions is enhanced by the fact that new media in exhibitions are incorporated quickly and new tools for reflection are needed to discuss these new ways to present the past appropriately. Solid methodology is necessary, so that reviews can build upon one another.

We are convinced that historians have an important role to play in this: not only in developing this methodology, but also bringing it into practice. Exhibitions tell stories of the making of society, the meaning of culture and the building of nation – which overlaps with the tasks of historians. Historians have their own tradition of critique – the way they evaluate and build upon each other’s work in historiography – that makes them exceptionally well equipped to review these narratives. Moreover, their weight is needed to counterbalance the marketing forces that seem to have gained the upper hand and can truly distort exhibition content, as not only our case study has shown, but also many of the other exhibitions we visited in order to develop this preliminary methodology. Historians can thus offer a valuable contribution both to the making of and the reflection on the practice of exhibitions.

The methodology that we have presented here is not to be considered as a straitjacket checklist in which we expect every box to be ticked. The aspects it holds will not all be relevant in each and every case, but they form a base for systematic analysis of the intellectual and cultural effort of the various actors that are involved in exhibition making. The model that we have presented here is also not meant to be the definite framework. We hope it will be elaborated on by many exhibition reviewers and exhibition makers to come.