

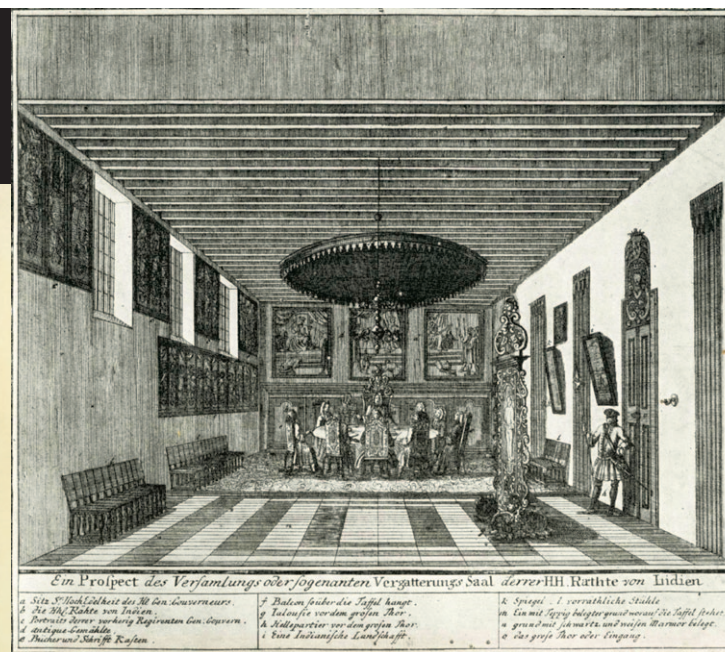
# Travelling far on “rather short legs”

This essay focuses on an impressive, almost 3 meter high, opulently carved teakwood room-screen with a human figure (probably Perseus) and two dragons, made by Chinese craftsmen in Java in the early eighteenth century, to furnish the Council Room of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in Batavia (fig. 1). We will follow this object’s travels through time and space. The aim is to gain insight into the multiple layers of heritage formation in colonial and postcolonial contexts.

Marieke Bloembergen & Martijn Eickhoff



1.



2.

ANALYSING THE ‘TRAVELS’ OF AN OBJECT is a method of historical research that can help to visualise the networks of empire and capture the dynamic relation between heritage formation on the one hand and political mechanisms of identification, inclusion and exclusion on the other hand. The screen selected for this essay is one of several travelling objects that we followed in our research project on archaeological sites and the dynamics of heritage formation in colonial and postcolonial Indonesia.

In the book we are currently writing we aim to knit these travels together and relate them to the history of sites in Indonesia.<sup>1</sup> We do this in order to understand parallel processes of identification that occur within, but also beyond the framework of states and empires. The specific research area that the Council Room screen opens up for us is the making and reappraisal of the category ‘Company-furniture’ as a Dutch-colonial national style, in reference to the VOC. In this essay we focus on the rise and further use of this style to re-examine one of the influential approaches to identity formation in (post)colonial situations that has been developed during the last two decades, namely the concept of shared heritage.

In 2009, the teakwood screen, once a part of the VOC regalia at the Batavian headquarters (the Castle of Batavia), and later, after the demolition of this castle in 1809, bought by the Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences from a local trader called Baas Adji in 1868, made headlines in the Dutch press.<sup>2</sup> That year the screen was shipped from Indonesia to the United Kingdom; it travelled as a loan from the Museum Fatahillah, the historical museum in Jakarta, to the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) in London, where it was to be one of the masterpieces in the great exhibition *1620-1800 Baroque: Style in the Age of Magnificence* (fig. 5). This did not go by unnoticed in the Netherlands.

At the V&A the screen illustrated, in the first place, that Baroque was a ‘World Style’. For the seventeenth century was, according to the organizers of the exhibition, a time of crossing boundaries and, as a result, Baroque was the first style to appear in both hemispheres. The baroque Council Room screen illustrated this *par excellence* as it had been made in Batavia by Chinese craftsmen, working from a limited number of European pieces imported to provide examples. The catalogue concluded: “Although the screen shows European influences, its form is typically Indonesian.”<sup>3</sup> The review in the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* briefly mentioned that the screen had been presented as a masterpiece of ‘World Baroque’.<sup>4</sup> But still, even this might have come as a surprise to a Dutch audience. In the Netherlands this type of furniture is generally known as Company-furniture; furniture that, in the context of the VOC, was also produced in Indonesia, South-Africa and Sri-Lanka, and as such is often considered to be typically Dutch.<sup>5</sup>

This, however, only became the case in the early twentieth century. The fact that the material culture of the VOC-past was of a hybrid character, apparently made it difficult for experts to estimate the historic and artistic value and style, and therefore problematic to connect with. The style could be described as

a mixture of Baroque (in the Netherlands often regarded as an un-Dutch and Catholic style), Portuguese, Chinese and even Hindu influences. Only as late as 1972 did the Rijksmuseum (the Netherlands’ National Museum in Amsterdam that harbours, amongst others, the master works of the Dutch Golden Age) establish a room for the display of Dutch colonial furniture, thereby recognising it as a style of its own. Looking back at this event, one of the Museum’s curators remarked that this late arrival may be explained by the fact that experts, for a long time, did not consider the style of colonial furniture to be pure (*zuiver*).<sup>6</sup> This perspective was still alive in the Netherlands in 2009, as the reviewer in *de Volkskrant* called the screen on display at the V&A “a strange mixture of styles”.<sup>7</sup>

In the Museum Fatahillah in Jakarta, visitors can see traces of this colonial style. Although the informational text accompanying the screen is mainly factual, it also mentions that the young man depicted on the screen has “rather short legs”. This anatomical assessment originates from an observation provided by the archivist Frederik de Haan, in his book *Oud-Batavia* that celebrated the founding of the city of Batavia by the Dutch in 1619.<sup>8</sup> De Haan’s negative appraisal of the main figure on the screen may be explained by his conviction that it had been developed by a peripheral and mixed culture that was familiar with European standards only through second hand sources.

From VOC-furniture with primarily a representative function, via Chinese and European influences, to a representation of a World Style; the travels of the VOC Council Room screen show us how one and the same object has taken on different manifestations in time and in space and how it played many roles in relation to processes of identification – and it did so within and outside colonial situations, and before and after decolonisation.

To give this specific case more background we ought to look at the process in which a specific corpus of material culture from early modern time came to be recognised and canonised as typical for the VOC in the Dutch East-Indies and Indonesia. The main elements of this corpus were: forts, country-houses, city centres (especially: houses, churches and gravestones) and furniture. Here we have only space to focus on a few aspects of this corpus. Since the end of the nineteenth century, and through the interaction of connoisseurs in the colony and the mother country, and of external parties, like the specialists from the South Kensington Museum in London and the Kunstgewerbe Museum in Berlin,<sup>9</sup> the category Company-furniture as a typical Dutch-colonial national style in the Dutch East-Indies came to be defined. In the accompanying processes of identification, we can trace a mix of civic Batavian colonial and wider ‘Indisch’ nationalism, and Dutch imperial nationalism at work.

As stated above, the appropriation of the material culture of the early colonial past was problematic for such a long time in the Netherlands and the Dutch East-Indies, because of its hybridity. The character of this furniture, however, only became an object of discussion from the moment that curators of the

Museum of the Royal Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences in Batavia started to consider collecting the furniture of the Company’s era at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1898, the collector W.J. Oosterhoff published his essay *lets over Oud Indische Meubelen* (Something about Old-Indies furniture) in the illustrated journal *Elsevier*. He described the style as a mixture of baroque and Portuguese, with Hindu influences, whereas Chinese craftsman often carved the objects. However, so he emphasised: “For the Netherlands and for the Netherlands-Indies this furniture is of national importance”.<sup>10</sup>

In subsequent years we see how this furniture transformed into a Dutch artefact. This happened in the process of collecting, publishing catalogues and organising exhibitions. In 1907, in the Dutch East-Indies, the Museum of the Batavian Society opened the ‘Company Room’; and in 1919, in celebration of the founding of Batavia in 1619, it hosted the exhibition of Old-Batavian furniture.<sup>11</sup> In the Netherlands, the city of The Hague organised the exhibition *Oud-Indische Meubelen* (Old Indies Furniture) in 1901, and in 1919 the Municipal Museum in Amsterdam exhibited this furniture in a comparable way.<sup>12</sup> The ‘nationalisation’ of this furniture was completed in 1939 when Victor van de Wall published his elaborate *Het Hollandsche Koloniale barokmeubel* (Dutch colonial baroque furniture).<sup>13</sup>

When we compare the categories Oosterhoff used in 1898, with those of Van de Wall in 1939, we see a clear development: ‘oud-Indisch’ (Old-Indies) became ‘Hollandsche-koloniaal’ (Dutch-colonial). This nationalisation of an aspect of the VOC-culture is not exceptional; the first edition of Van de Walls book on country-houses of Batavia, published in 1930, was entitled *Indische Landhuizen en hun Geschiedenis* (Indies’ country houses and their history), whereas the reprint of 1944 had changed to *Oude Hollandsche buitenplaatsen van Batavia* (Old-Dutch country houses of Batavia).<sup>14</sup>

We see a similar process with regard to the archaeology of VOC-forts. In 1912 the Dutch art-historian and archival specialist J.C. Overvoorde wrote about his travels through America, Africa and Asia in 1910/11, in order to inventory what he called the ‘*Monumenten van Nederlandschen Stam*’ (Monuments of the Dutch ‘tribe’).<sup>15</sup> Overvoorde concluded that the colonial government of the Dutch East-Indies had strongly neglected ‘the stone archive’ of the VOC-time, and that it had an obligation to rescue this archive. Since the Hindu-monuments were already the object of state supported restorations, the time had now arrived for the government to turn its attention to the monuments of the ‘*Hollandsche stam*’ (the Dutch tribe).<sup>16</sup> To Overvoorde such a VOC-heritage policy was important, because, in his eyes, it could strengthen the ties between the people who for many generations had lived in the Dutch-Indies, with those in the ‘motherland’. Van de Wall, who published his *De Nederlandse oudheden in de Molukken* (Dutch antiquities on the Moluccas) in 1928, would, however, point to another political meaning of the VOC-past: the ‘uncivilized’ or unethical activities of the early colonials on the Moluccan Islands. While he agreed that many people could see this as a sullied page of VOC history, he in the end emphasised that the company also formed the ‘foundation’ of ‘our colonial authority’.<sup>17</sup>

1: The Baroque ‘Company Screen’ (early eighteenth century), photographed by the Dutch East-Indies Archaeological Service, 1930. Photographic Collection, Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV), Leiden.

2: The screen in the Council Room of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), in the castle in Batavia. Drawing by the Danish architect and draughtsman Johann Wolfgang Heijdt, 1739. Heijdt worked for the VOC from 1737-1741. From: De Haan, 1935.

3: The same screen in one of the exhibition rooms (in the very back) of the Museum of the Royal Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences, ca. 1896. Photographic Collection, Royal Tropical Museum, Amsterdam.

4: Board of the Royal Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences, posing in front of the screen that in the meantime was moved to their library/meeting room, Batavia, 1925. Photographic Collection KITLV, Leiden.

5: Cover of the Exhibition Catalogue *1620-1800 Baroque: Style in the Age of Magnificence* held in the Victoria & Albert Museum, 2009.

## Company-furniture on the move and the problem of shared heritage



shared or conflicting interests. In other words, 'shared heritage' glosses over the supra-local and transnational dimensions of heritage, or those processes of identification that go beyond the boundaries of states and empire.

**Marieke Bloembergen** is a researcher at the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies in Leiden (KITLV). Her research interests include the political dynamics of knowledge production, as well as post-colonial policing, in (post-)colonial Indonesia in a widening and trans-Asian context (bloembergen@kitlv.nl)

**Martijn Eickhoff** is a cultural historian, specialized in the scholarly activities in dictatorial or colonial settings and the historical culture of times of war and regime change. He works as a researcher at the NIOD - Institute for War, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies in Amsterdam and is lecturer at the Radboud University Nijmegen (RUN) (m.eickhoff@niod.knaw.nl)

## Notes

- 1 See also Marieke Bloembergen and Martijn Eickhoff 2011, 'Conserving the past, mobilizing the Indonesian future. Archaeological sites, regime change and heritage politics in Indonesia in the 1950s', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* (BKI) 167-4 (2011): pp 405-436.
- 2 *Notulen Directievergadering Bataviaasch Genootschap* 8 maart 1868, 19.
- 3 Michael Snodin and Nigel Llewellyn eds., *1620-1800 Baroque. Style in the Age of Magnificence*, (London 2009) 114-115 and 329-330.
- 4 Bernard Hulsman, 'Barok was de eerste globale stijl voor kunst. Tentoonstelling Victoria & Albertmuseum werpt nieuw licht op de barokke stijl', *NRC*, 24-6-2009.
- 5 J. Terwen-de Loos, *Het Nederlands koloniale meubel. Studie over meubels in de voormalige Nederlandse koloniën Indonesië en Sri Lanka* (Franeker 1985) 8-9.
- 6 T.H. Lunsingh Scheurleer, 'Stichting Cultuurgeschiedenis van de Nederlanders Overzee 1961-1986. Terugblik en perspectief', *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 35-1 (1987) 4-9, there 4 and 7-8.
- 7 Gert-Jan van Teeffelen, 'Overdaad in tijd van soberheid', *De Volkskrant*, 10-4-2009.
- 8 F. De Haan, *Oud Batavia. Platenalbum druk II* (Bandoeng 1935) C23.
- 9 For the specialists and objects in London and Berlin, see: W.J. Oosterhoff, 'Iets over Oud Indische Meubelen', *Elseviers geïllustreerd Maandschrift* 10 (1898) 318-338, there 323-324. Compare with: V.I. van de Wall, *Het Hollandsche koloniale barokmeubel. Bijdrage tot de kennis van het ebbenhouten meubel omstreeks het midden der XVIIIe en het begin der XVIIIe eeuw* (Antwerpen 1939) XVI and 42-62.
- 10 W.J. Oosterhoff, 'Iets over Oud Indische Meubelen', *Elseviers geïllustreerd Maandschrift* 10 (1898) 318-338, there 338.
- 11 M. Serrurier-ten Kate, *De Compagnie's Kamer van het Museum van het Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen* (Batavia 1907); L. van Vuuren, *Catalogus van de historische tentoonstelling: ter gelegenheid der herdenking van het drie-honderd-jarig bestaan* (Weltevreden 1919)
- 12 G.P. Rouffaer, 'Oost en West'. *Tentoonstelling van Indische Kunstnijverheid. Groep III Oost-Indische Weefsels, Javaansche Batik's en Oud-Indische Meubelen* (Den Haag 1901); J.W. IJzerman, *Catalogus van de tentoonstelling ter herdenking van het 300-jarig bestaan van Batavia, gehouden in het Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Juni-Juli 1919* (Amsterdam 1919).
- 13 V.I. van de Wall, *Het Hollandsche koloniale barokmeubel. Bijdrage tot de kennis van het ebbenhouten meubel omstreeks het midden der XVIIIe en het begin der XVIIIe eeuw* (Antwerpen 1939).
- 14 V.I. van de Wall, *Indische Landhuizen en hun geschiedenis* (Batavia 1932); V.I. van de Wall, *Oude Hollandsche buitenplaatsen van Batavia* (Deventer 1944).
- 15 J.C. Overvoorde, *Verslag van het onderzoek naar de monumenten van Nederlandsen oorsprong of onder Nederlandsen invloed ontstaan in de vroegere Nederzettingen buiten Europa* (Leiden 1912).
- 16 Vincent Kuitenbrouwer has recently argued that 'stam' should be regarded as the Dutch version of Britishness; it can best be translated as 'tribe', as it has a clear ethnic and cultural connotation. J.J.V. Kuitenbrouwer, *A War of Words: Dutch pro-Boer Propaganda and the South African War (1899-1902)* dissertation University of Amsterdam (2010).
- 17 V.I. van de Wall, *De Nederlandsche oudheden in de Molukken* ('s-Gravenhage 1928).
- 18 J. Terwen-de Loos, *Het Nederlands koloniale meubel. Studie over meubels in de voormalige Nederlandse koloniën Indonesië en Sri Lanka* (Franeker 1985) 15.
- 19 W.Ph. Coolhaas, 'Inleiding', *Wonen in de Wijde Wereld, een Tentoonstelling van de Stichting Cultuurgeschiedenis van de Nederlanders Overzee - Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam* (1964) 3-12, there 12.
- 20 See for example: Intan Mardiana Napitupulu, S. Engelsman and E.W. Veen, 'Voorwoord directeuren', in: Endang Sri Hardiati and P. Ter Keurs eds., *De Ontdekking van het Verleden. Indonesia* (Amsterdam 2005) 6.

After decolonisation, the material remains of the VOC-past would gain new meanings, both in the Netherlands and Indonesia. In Indonesia, the *Lembaga Kebudayaan Indonesia* (Indonesian Culture Council) stored the colonial furniture collection in their depots.<sup>18</sup> This was the former Museum of the Batavian Society, which was handed over to the Indonesian government in 1962, then becoming the Museum Pusat (Central Museum), and subsequently, in 1978, the Museum Nasional (National Museum). But nowadays the VOC-furniture is on display again in Jakarta; most notably in the Museum Fatahillah (located in the former Batavian city hall) that was founded in 1974 and is dedicated to the history of the city region. In the Netherlands, perspectives on Company-furniture also adapted to the new postcolonial circumstances. The activities of the *Stichting Cultuurgeschiedenis Nederlanders Overzee* (Foundation for Cultural History of Dutchmen Overseas) can serve as a good example here. In 1963/4 this foundation organised the exhibition 'Wonen in de Wijde Wereld' (Living in the Wide World) at the Tropical Museum in Amsterdam. It gave a nostalgic overview of the lives of 'our ancestors overseas' with the help of texts, objects and drawings, paintings and photographs, and colonial furniture. Although the exhibition depicted colonial society as multi-ethnic, the focus was still on *Dutchmen* overseas. Nationalism – common in those early Cold War Years – was almost hidden; one of the initiators concluded that "this colonial past makes 'us' more *world citizens* than most of the other Europeans".<sup>19</sup>

It is tempting to compare this category of European world citizens to the category of Baroque as a World Style, as brought forward by the V&A in London. The description of the screen from the VOC Head Quarters in Batavia, as an example of Baroque as a World Style, certainly could fit in the self-image of the V&A as a centre of the world. The V&A description differs, however, from the Dutch appropriations of this VOC culture as typical for the Dutch Overseas, and as a specific Dutch way – rooted in VOC-history – of being a world citizen, because it leaves space for alternative ways of regarding the corpus of material culture of the VOC. And it is at this last point where there is a significant link with contemporary discussions on heritage politics towards the material remains of colonial pasts.

In recent years we have seen a shift from the use of the term 'colonial heritage' to 'shared heritage'.<sup>20</sup> The intention was to go beyond the colonial hierarchy and surpass (post)colonial sensitivities when heritage organisations in the former colonised and colonising countries collaborated. The hope was for the possibility to manage 'sensitive heritage' on a more equal base. Ironically, however, 'shared heritage' often has the effect of disregarding still-existing hierarchies and inequalities. Our research, for example, when we followed the travels of the VOC screen, made us increasingly aware that the notion is problematic in itself, since it implies that the selected forms of 'shared heritage' can only be estimated, valued, conserved, etc., within the framework of two postcolonial states and their