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together we write history

What did a woman living and working in slavery know about her 'owner' over in the Dutch Republic? What did a sugar refiner in Amsterdam know of the conditions in which the raw sugar he processed was produced? And what did a freedom fighter on Curaçao know of the struggle for equal rights being waged in Europe? The exhibition *Slavery* examines the positions of ten people within the system of Dutch colonial slavery. What were their lives like? What knowledge did they possess, and how did they relate to a system in which human beings considered other human beings as their property? These questions are not easy to answer, but they do compel us to think about the meaning of colonial slavery.

Slavery is an essential part of the colonial history of the Netherlands, a history that concerns every one of us. By collectively delving into the history of slavery, we can arrive at a better understanding of today's Dutch society. With the exhibition *Slavery*, the Rijksmuseum, as the national museum of art and history of the Netherlands, aims to provide a more complete picture of that history, so that we can truly be a museum for everyone. Studying the history of slavery reveals how interwoven the slave trade and slavery are with the economic and social history of the Netherlands and how this history continues to influence society in our country, as well as those of the former colonies and overseas parts of our kingdom.

This exhibition was produced in a time of drastic social change. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented effect on our everyday lives, and it also influenced the making of this exhibition. Lenders and partners worldwide collaborated on this exhibition under often difficult circumstances. Funders, sponsors and individuals gave us their full support. The *Slavery* exhibition has been made possible in part by the Mondriaan Fund, Blockbuster Fund, Fonds 21, DutchCulture, Democracy and Media Foundation, Scato Gockinga Fonds/Rijksmuseum Fonds, Fonds de Zuidroute/Rijksmuseum Fonds and Boomerang Agency. The Rijksmuseum is grateful to these patrons for their contribution.

Our team of curators made grateful use of the knowledge, suggestions and critical observations of the many individuals who were asked, based on their expertise and background, to provide input into the exhibition. These individuals brought together the history of 'East and West', in the same way the exhibition does. We thank them, and we hope to continue to collaborate in this way with so many people from outside the museum. A multiplicity of voices is not just important when it concerns subjects like colonial history and slavery; it is essential in order for us to be able to optimally fulfil our role as the national museum of art and history of the Netherlands.

Taco Dibbits
General Director, Rijksmuseum

The Rijksmuseum is the national art and history museum of the Netherlands; its mission is to be of broad social relevance to all Dutch people. The colonial past of the Netherlands is part of this; it spans, after all, a lengthy period during which a significant portion of the foundations of the present-day Netherlands were laid. Slavery was an essential component of the colonial period, and many generations suffered unimaginable injustice as a result. This past has long been insufficiently examined in the national history of the Netherlands, including at the Rijksmuseum.

In February 2017, the Rijksmuseum announced it would programme an exhibition about slavery for the first time in its history. This exhibition would focus on the people who were part of that history, rather than be an overview of the economic history of slavery with figures and dates. This required in-depth research into a social history that has until now only scarcely been studied by the museum but which is still a living past for many people beyond its walls. A living past that, moreover, cannot readily be found in the collection of the Rijksmuseum.

A vital first step in the development of the exhibition was approaching people and bringing them together. New staff members with relevant professional as well as personal backgrounds were hired; a think tank was assembled; and there was an extensive exchange of ideas with national and international experts with various specialisms within the history of slavery. Artists and other creatives were also recruited, and contact was made with potential lenders of objects in the Netherlands and abroad. At the same time, numerous emails came in, with reactions, suggestions and proposals for collaboration or loans. The exhibition turned into an intensive four-year process, during which people in many capacities engaged in dialogue around diverse themes. Every department of the museum was involved, from management to security, personnel and communications. The resulting plans for the exhibition were discussed internally with staff and externally with Friends of the Rijksmuseum and many other stakeholders. Sometimes these were groups who were already in significant agreement; on other occasions these were groups that had not previously reflected together on how to represent this complex, controversial history. This produced a broad palette of input as well as questions such as 'Can slavery in the transatlantic region be compared to slavery in Asia?' 'As a white visitor, should I feel guilty about colonial slavery?' 'Can the museum really tell the story of my ancestors in slavery?' and 'Is the Rijksmuseum building an appropriate venue in which to present the history of slavery?' These are questions that had not previously been posed in such clear terms; questions that gained particular relevance once all these diverse parties came together around this exhibition.

The fact that the subject of slavery was to a large extent absent from the permanent presentation of the Rijksmuseum was long explained based on the idea that there was no collection available to tell the story. But is this true? Had the museum taken a good enough look at its collection? One apt example is the handsome tortoiseshell and gold box that the Dutch West India Company (WIC) presented to stadtholder William IV of Orange, in 1749 (fig. 1)**. This was the luxurious packaging that housed the document in which William IV was**

fig. 1 **Lid of a box made for the Dutch West India Company, depicting the trade in ivory and gold as well as people, attributed to Jean Saint, 1749**

offered supreme command of the WIC. For a long time, this box was described as a magnificent example of the Rococo style, the stadtholder's favourite art movement. No heed was paid, however, to what was depicted in this style: the trade in ivory, gold as well as people, and a map showing part of West Africa and important posts for human trafficking, like Elmina Castle in the Gulf of Guinea and the island of Curaçao in the Caribbean.[1] The subject of slavery was there, presented on a platter, as it were, yet it remained long unnoticed.

Proceeding from the idea that the collections might contain more such links with slavery, the museum's collections and permanent presentation were critically examined in parallel with the research for the exhibition. A surprisingly high number of points of reference emerged. Under the title *Rijksmuseum & Slavery*, the results of this research will be on show in the permanent display for one year, with extra text labels explaining each object's connection to slavery. These links vary from portraits of people who owned plantations or occupied administrative functions in the WIC or Dutch East India Company (VOC), to depictions of stimulants like coffee and tobacco, produced in slavery, to the use of Black people as a stylistic device in applied art. The research makes clear that the history of slavery is inextricably bound with the national history of the Netherlands in its full scope and diversity. Slavery was not something that merely took place far away, on the other side of the world; it also left traces in the Netherlands. It did not only enrich the elite in their canal houses; many artisans also made a living from it as subcontractors and suppliers. This happened in Holland and Zeeland in particular, but in other provinces too. The history of slavery also extends beyond the transatlantic slave trade: in the collection objects were found with links to regions around the Indian Ocean as well.

The research for *Rijksmuseum & Slavery* produced a large number of stories, and at the same time the results made it painfully clear that these stories mainly focus on the slaveholder and not the enslaved person or people. Indeed, the collection of the Rijksmuseum was not originally assembled with a view to conveying the stories of people in slavery; a large proportion of its holdings come from the wealthy elite. What we can do, however, is point out to the visitor what may not be apparent, or is not shown, in a painting of a plantation; the awkward contrast between idyllic representation and harsh reality; and the stereotyped depictions of and lack of real faces given to enslaved people. With these added insights we reveal how intertwined slavery is with the history of the Netherlands. Yet is this openness about what these objects do not show sufficient to contribute to a sense of connection for visitors who are descended from enslaved people?

Connection or recognition is an important aspect of any visit to a museum. An inhabitant of Wijk bij Duurstede will recognize a depiction of the town's windmill; a mother will be affected by a painting of a sick child. That sense of recognition, of being able to relate to the objects on display – and therefore to history – is vital. It arouses curiosity and makes a visit to a museum worthwhile. There is a reason many people have recently been taking group photographs in front of the painting of the militia company that hangs to the right of Rembrandt's *Night Watch*. The painting is part of the Black Heritage

fig. 2 **Group photograph of participants in Jennifer Tosch's Black Heritage Amsterdam Tour in front of the militia company portrait by Bartholomeus van der Helst from c. 1640–1643**

Amsterdam Tours, organized by Jennifer Tosch. During these walks around the city, Tosch takes her groups to the Rijksmuseum and points out to them the young man of African origin who stands next to the painting's central figure, Roelof Bicker.[2] The young man, like the militiamen portrayed, is a person of flesh and blood. We do not know his name, but he must have walked around in seventeenth-century Amsterdam. He remained unnoticed by many white museum staff and visitors for years, until Jennifer Tosch changed this. She *did* notice him, and so did many other people of colour, who might even recognize part of themselves or their history in his image in the Gallery of Honour and so wish to include him in their group photos (fig. 2)**. We aim to continue to work on this recognition in the museum so that we can tell a more complete story of the Netherlands, a story in which a broad national audience can see itself reflected and that also appeals to an international audience. There is still a great deal of work to do, for it is clear that telling a shared history cannot be done based on the existing collection. With the exhibition *Slavery*, therefore, we go one step further.**

a story of many voices

At an early stage, the museum decided to make people the focus of its *Slavery* exhibition: ten different lives in the period of slavery. People who were related in all sorts of ways to the greater system of power and money; who were part of it or suffered because of it; people who had to adapt to it or who dared to rise up against it; slaveholders and enslaved people in the transatlantic context, around the Indian Ocean and in the Netherlands. In order to tell their stories, the museum went in search of as many sources as possible, sources that do justice to these people's lives – that tell *their* stories instead of telling stories *about* them.

We looked for objects outside the direct context of slavery, because the history of people in slavery does not begin at the moment they were enslaved. The seventeenth-century head-covering from the Congo, for instance, woven with palm and pineapple leaf fibres, is related to the hierarchy within the powerful Congolese royal house (p. 80, fig. 9**). We also looked for objects that say something about forming and preserving one's own culture within the system of slavery, such as a musical instrument used during Winti rituals on plantations in Suriname (p. 101). There are very few, if any, personal possessions of enslaved people. People in slavery were not allowed to own anything, and whatever they might have possessed has rarely survived. Some objects therefore represent immaterial heritage. Fifty dried plants in the herbarium of the botanist Paul Hermann, dating from around 1687, for instance, attest to the crucial knowledge people had for surviving in the forest (p. 211). They were collected during the period of Dutch slavery and make it possible to show intangible knowledge about the medicinal effects and nutritional value of plants.**

Direct testimonies from enslaved people are rare in written sources as well. In most colonies there was a ban on reading and writing, and people often had no access to paper and ink; it was also unwise to commit one's thoughts

to paper. So the autobiographical documents that are known were practically always written by formerly enslaved people looking back on their lives. The texts were often published in the context of the anti-slavery movement in Britain and the United States.[3] In the Dutch context, we know the letters of Boston Band, a man who negotiated between escaped enslaved people in the forests of Suriname and the colonial authorities there. They were preserved in their Dutch translations, but his own letters in English were lost.[4] Another written source is the will of Angela van Bengalen, a formerly enslaved woman who died a wealthy freewoman in Cape Town in 1720. In order to tell the stories of the individuals at the centre of the exhibition, written colonial sources were used as well: a journal kept on a slave ship, administrative documents or judicial records, for example. These colonial documents sometimes provide a literal account of what was said by people in slavery. Father Schinck quotes the words of Tula, a captured resistance fighter on Curaçao. And in one of the interrogation reports sent to the Society of Suriname, we can read the words spoken by the enslaved man Wally, who was arrested in 1707. Reading them gives a researcher gooseflesh, because for a moment you get very close to the person in slavery. But they remain words spoken and written down within an unequal power relationship.

In a system in which property and writing were forbidden, histories passed down orally from generation to generation were of course of vital importance. Singing is storytelling in the language of music.[5] Everywhere in the world where people lived in slavery, there was singing and dancing: to celebrate an event or to give each other strength in times of sorrow; while pounding the coffee beans or rowing the tent boat; as an outlet for frustrations; to call for resistance; or to pass stories on to the next generation. But it is not only songs that bring us closer to some of the ten individuals whose stories are told here. Interviews with elderly people, recorded in the twentieth century, provide us with access to the experiences of people in slavery. What did people who escaped the system pass on to their children? How did they phrase their story? And how do their descendants look back on this history?

'How do you keep it from remaining too comfortable for the visitor?' someone asked in the run-up to the exhibition. This is a legitimate question, for how can you give an accurate impression of a system based on brutal violence, exploitation and fear in a museum setting? A foot restraint, made for use in colonized territories and recently gifted to the museum, makes it possible to show something of the physical violence that was inflicted on enslaved individuals (pp. 72–73).[6] *Troncos* like these were used on plantations to punish people or to chain them down if the slaveholder feared they would escape during the night. At least four people, lying on the ground, could be bound by the feet between the wooden beams, their freedom of movement further impeded by heavy iron shackles.

During preparations for the exhibition, the Rijksmuseum also acquired a *kappa*, a cast iron kettle like those used on sugar plantations in Suriname. The kappa provides a counterpoint to the romanticized paintings of plantation landscapes in the collection (p. 95, fig. 6). This utensil, used by enslaved people on plantations, symbolizes not only the harsh working conditions but

also the skill connected with it. Slaveholders were often entirely dependent on the knowledge and experience of the people who worked for them in slavery. A *sirih* box made in Batavia at the end of the eighteenth century brings us close to the hands of an enslaved man (p. 162). Silversmith Hendrik Rennebaum put his hallmark on it, but it is probable that the enslaved man Januarij van Bengalen did the actual work, as well as make a significant contribution to the design. With this knowledge, we get closer to Januarij as a person and not as an enslaved individual.

We will never know the names of millions of people who lived in slavery, nor will we ever see their faces. To do justice to their stories, contemporary art by Benin-born artist Romuald Hazoumè has been included in the exhibition (pp. 58–61). In his installation *La Bouche du Roi*, Hazoumè brings to life the 'Middle Passage', the forced crossing from Africa to the Americas. In this he reflects on archival documents from the period, in which people are reduced to commodities. The installation, which calls upon several senses (sight, hearing, smell), offers a powerful counterpoint to the visual might of the colonial objects. It also adds an important element: the lingering effect of colonial relations in the present. Hazoumè brings to the fore not only the experiences of those who were taken away but also those of the descendants of the people left behind in Africa.

In an exhibition, visual language is important, but the language in which the story is told is just as important. We have opted to speak of enslaved men, women and children and not of slaves, except in quoted material or in text clearly written from the point of view of the slaveholder. This decision is in line with the premise of the exhibition, in which people in slavery are seen not as an anonymous category of merchandise in an inventory but as human beings. People are more than their skin colour or ethnic background, but in writing about colonial slavery, a system in which the social construct of race was an important instrument, it is sometimes unavoidable to use terms that are sensitive, or to speak in general descriptions when the subject is a person of flesh and blood. We are aware that the term 'Black' does not do justice to the skin colour of individual people, but it is sometimes used to differentiate from 'white'. By capitalizing Black when referring to people in ethnic or cultural terms, or in terms of 'race', we acknowledge the fact that this term connects people of African descent around the world, in the absence of identifiable ethnicities that have been erased by the system of slavery.

During one of the meetings about the exhibition, the Rijksmuseum was described as a temple of colonial self-aggrandizement, and the architect Afaina de Jong described the building as the physical representation of the Dutch national identity. In a museum building whose visual programme presents the former Dutch colonies solely in the context of the supposed motherland's self-sacrifice (fig. 3)**, one cannot organize an exhibition on slavery without acknowledging that building. And so that acknowledgment is reflected in De Jong's exhibition design, such as the application of colour on some wall sections, while other sections are deliberately left white as a reference to the Rijksmuseum as an institution** (fig. 4)**. Through materiality and scale, the design also refers to the role of architecture in the slavery system: the**