A NOT SO GOLDEN AGE:
DECOLONISING THE AMSTERDAM MUSEUM

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Abstract: One of the contemporary uses of postcolonial studies in public spaces is to reconsider the narratives that lead visitors through history and art museums. With the transformation of the democratic citizenships from national elites into multiethnic polyphonies, museums have changed their audience. So, some categories and tropes inherited by nationalist and positivist historiographies became old – and often discriminative for some visitors. Indeed, these representations still reflect the colonial perspective of the ancient hegemonic groups. The expression *Gouden Eeuw* [Golden Age] – referred to the 17th Century Dutch Republic – may be included in these categories. For this reason, in 2019 the Amsterdam Museum decided to delete the phrase from the labels of its collections. With this paper, I will provide a bibliographical framework about the choice of the Amsterdam Museum, through the quotations of its directors, its conservators, and their theoretical references. Then, I will look at other cases of New Narratives strategies, which the Dutch Museums theorized in the last years with a postcolonial aim. Finally, I will evaluate whether this reference for the expression *Gouden Eeuw* has colonialist implications.

Keywords: New Narratives; postcolonial studies; heritage; Golden Age; tropology.

1. A case study

On 12th September 2019, the Amsterdam Museum announced that it would never use again the phrase *Gouden Eeuw* [Golden Age] to exhibit its portraits of the Dutch 17th Century. With an opinion piece, the director of the Museum and her staff officially explained that it was a curatorial turn that "can make us welcoming and relevant for a far larger group of people than we currently reach" (Kiers et al. 2019).

The decision emerged from a research whose aim was to adapt spaces and languages of the Museum to the ethnic and gender complexity of Amsterdam's citizenship. In 2017 the Museum had already started an innovative curatorial plan, the New Narratives project, to give a deeper historical framework to its heritage (*Ibidem*). The idea was to insert new voices in the public representation of the past – voices who were previously excluded by Dutch-nationalist vulgate. Therefore, the omission of some details about the history of the old Amsterdam implies the refusal of some social, ethnic, and gender groups as legitimated citizens of the contemporary city. At the head of this task, the Amsterdam Museum chose the curator Imara Limon, who is a descendant of enslaved people in Surinam during the Dutch colonization. In the context of these activities, some visitor's feedbacks showed her that the phrase *Gouden Eeuw* may imply a colonialist trope, celebrating a social system based on a discriminative and Eurocentric conception of humankind (Wigman 2019).

As written in another essay by a Limon's colleague – the artistic director Margriet Schavemaker – in this view the museum is conceived as a network between the academic researchers and the urban community. Because of its public dimension, the museum is "an institution that can be transformed, that can be and become an inclusive platform, an agent of change, and thus prove itself not to be an immutable tool simply working to maintain and reproduce hegemony" (Schavemaker 2018). So, the rejection of the phrase *Gouden Eeuw* must be intended as the result of a broader "discursive turn" within the self-awareness of these cultural organizations (*Ibidem*).

Beyond any museological aspect, the question is political – thus, the following debate became political too. There was much criticism by right-wing parties in the Dutch parliament. Some politicians would prefer to preserve the phrase *Gouden Eewe*, maybe with an annotation about the controversial social structures of those times. Some others, which are more annoyed by the question, accused the Amsterdam Museum of wanting to rewrite history (Boffay 2019). Nonetheless, the most important consideration came from the Dutch Prime Minister, Mark Rutte. He classified the choice of the Amsterdam Museum as "nonsense". Then he affirmed that he would continue to call the Netherlands of the 17th Century *Gouden Eeuw*, and he proclaimed: "Let's not waste our energy on renaming the Golden Age – a beautiful term. We can talk about what wasn't good, but let's devote our energies to creating a new Golden Age" (Botzas 2019). Speaking of a similar case[1], he resorted to his historical curriculum and he warned against "judging the distant past through today's eyes" (Boffay 2019).

When in the Netherlands someone uses or rejects the phrase *Gouden Eeuw* in public debates, it is not simply a matter of words.

2. Living words

The staff opinion was held by four people: the director Judikje Kiers, the aforementioned Imara Limon and Margriet Schavemaker, and the curator Jörgen Tjon A Fong (Kiers et al. 2019). To justify their choice, they quoted an anthology of essays, titled *Words Matter* and published in 2018 by the National Museum of World Cultures of Amsterdam (Kiers et al. 2019; Modest and Lelijveld 2018).

In this publication, a group of Dutch conservators reports witness from their own curatorial experiences. Looking at some discriminatory categories inherited by the traditional cataloguing system, these essays consider which language should be used to display the museum collections. New Narratives project embodies the last of these essays, titled *Mechanisms and Tropes of Colonial Narratives*. It was written by the sociologist and activist Hodan Warsame, and it talks about some concrete strategies "to decolonise the museum" (Modest and Lelijveld 2018, pp. 79-85). This perspective clarifies why Limon's background was relevant to recognize the ordinary Dutch-centered patterns, and in which way these patterns were silently working inside the museum tour.

Between the decision of the Amsterdam Museum and this publication, there is a deeper relationship, which could explain better why the phrase *Gouden Eeuw* can be considered as a part of these colonialist tropes. In its appendix, the anthology shows some examples of discriminative words used in the ethnographic and heritage collections, and it suggests some alternatives to replace them in a more inclusive language. So, in order to indicate ethnic groups that live in the Arctic area between Greenland, Canada, Alaska and Siberia, a term with an exonymic and derogative origin as the word *Eskimo* should be swapped with the respective self-definitions of *Kalaallit, Inuit, Inuplat/Yup'ik/Alutiiq*, and *Yupighyt* (*Ivi*, p. 105). Another instance is the word *slave*, which seems to speak about a natural form of identity, without any mention of its social and violent causes. In this case, the solution is changing the word *slave* into the more prosaic term *enslaved* (*Ivi*, p. 138). A last relevant example is the word *servant*. It is used in some painting titles without mentioning the real name of represented persons – thus to remark their impersonal status of "master's property", as if they were simple objects (*Ivi*, p.

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[1] When the Mauritshuis museum in The Hague removed from its foyer the copy of a bust of its controversial namesake (John Maurice of Nassau, Prince of Nassau-Siegen and governor of the Dutch Brazil), and it chose to maintain only the original work in its display with a label about the colonialist past of this historical character (Boffay 2019).

137). In this last case, the solution is quoting the known names of these persons. In absence of the name, the enslaved status of their service is explicated (*Ivi*, pp. 18-19; 68-69).

The three examples I refer to come from different epistemic and cultural systems.

The case of *Eskimo* is an ethnographic issue. Its solution seeks to clarify the ratios of strength between two different cultural systems. So, the curators choose to insert a scientific terminology that follows the authentic voice of the observed people, and not to misrepresent them within the categories of an external, Western observer. On the other hand, the *slave* and *servant* cases seem to be sociological questions. This time, the curators' solutions are inspired by the idea that the chosen words better reveal the social relationships behind the mere reproduction of the hegemonic voice of the past. In the particular instance of the anonymized servants, the revision of labels is a framing strategy, and it is aimed at showing the artistic perspective of a historical iconography without making its ideological assessments about the current world.

This approach has origin in the elaborations of the philosophy of language studies. In her essay *Language Cannot be "Cleaned Up"* (*Ivi*, pp. 43-45), Esther Peeren quotes Michail Bakhtin's novelistic thesis, for which every linguistic representation implies the signification of a related social background. According to Peeren, verbal categorizations construct the reference for ideological perspectives. Replacing discriminatory dichotomies (such as *local/foreign* or *ethnic hegemony/ethnic minority*) with more technical ones (*autochtoon/allochtoon*) does not change their structural implications on the social ground (*Ivi*, p. 43). In this way, the claim for epistemic neutrality could be an excuse to reduce the choir of a political community to its hegemonic voice alone. As this can be done with discourses about the present, so it can be done with discourses about the past. In this view, a neutrality-claimer may hide the conflicts of the social context behind a false veil of universal impersonality. In this way, the claim for epistemic neutrality disguises a conceptual construction as if it were a natural fact. On this basis, *pace* Mark Rutte, the most dangerous political abuse of history is assuming a traditional representation of the past as if it were the past itself.

Instead, looking at their educative role, the museums must satisfy two different demands. The first one is about the right use in the museum labels of ethnographical, sociological, artistic, and historiographical categories. The other is about the ideological consequences of these technical terms in the common language of the visitors. On this basis, is the rejection of the phrase *Gouden Eeuw* a good response to these requests?

3. Tropes from historiography, tropes for heritage

In order to understand this twofold issue, primarily it is important to distinguish between *historiography* and *heritage*. Within a historicist view, historiography could be defined as a critical discipline, which maps the past events as objects that exist before inquiring them by present questions and interpretations. So, it may seem that "[i]n the mapping of this past, the imagination has no part" (White 2014, p. 19). But there is a less idealized definition: for the historiographical method may be sufficient that the questions of a historical inquire do not remain the same in the course of the research (Momigliano 1984, pp. 482-483). Like the anti-relativistic historian Carlo Ginzburg stated, past witnesses and sources are clues with a claim of reality. So, they could drive a historian to change his initial working hypothesis (Ginzburg 2006). For this conception, the historical past should reveal something new for the present.

However, this kind of objectivism is less radical than the former. It allows us to understand the hermeneutical frameworks about these clues as historians' conjectures; then, it does not exclude the possibility to make these interpretations through representational canons and tropes (Evans 1999). Therefore, phrases like *Renaissance* or *Enlightenment* are not neutral classifications, but metaphors (Ankersmit 2001, pp. 29-74). In the past, they represented the

self-awareness of certain cultural movements. Nonetheless, today historians use them to speak of broader political processes and epochal developments. These figural terms are not an obstacle for the methodological aims of historiography – this was at least the thesis of the Renaissance scholar Paul Oskar Kristeller. For him, a historian can employ these tropes without being influenced by their ideological implications (Kristeller 1998, pp. 47-48).

Instead, the concept of *heritage* requires a different relationship between past and present. Quoting a study by Gregory Ashworth, Brian Graham and John Tunbridge on the role of heritage in multicultural societies, this use of the past is linked to "the process by which the events, artefacts and personalities of the past are deliberately transformed into a product intended for the satisfaction of contemporary consumption demands" (Ashworth et al. 2007, p. 39-40). Thus, according to Laurajane Smith, heritage is characterized by a "fundamental economic-cultural dichotomy" (*Ivi*, p. 40), and it is used to "construct, reconstruct and negotiate a range of identities and social and cultural values and meaning in the present" (cit. in Ashworth et al. 2007, p. 40). Heritage is a cultural form of "practical past" (White 2014). It determines the management of common resources and delimits the rights in the public space with selected lines of history. In a heritage context, the neutralized terms of historians come again vivid one. In this way, they build an imaginary capable to orient the policies of a society.

The paper *The Dutch Golden Age and Globalization*, written in 2011 by the professor of Art and Heritage Joop de Jong, clearly shows the contrast between these two demands (de Jong 2011). De Jong studied the contradictions caused by the imaginary of the *Gouden Eeuw* in the Netherlands already ten years ago. In the first part of his work, de Jong analyzes the Dutch Golden Age from a global perspective. The employment of this classic phrase does not compromise his attention for the migration phenomena and the discriminative customs in the Dutch Republic. Moreover, he does not minimize the brutality of colonial strategies embraced by the Dutch most important trade companies – the United East India Company (VOC) and the West India Company (WIC). Nonetheless, in the second part of the paper, he looks at the heritage of those times, and he remarks as some contemporary authorities use the adjective golden to project on the Dutch 17th Century unrealistic anticipations of present liberal societies. In this misperception, the former Dutch Prime Minister arrived to indicate in the "VOC mentality" what "the current Dutch people should hark back to as a source of inspiration" (*Ivi*, p. 59). When the phrase *Gouden Eeuw* is applied in a heritage context, it causes an erroneous embellishment of the past. Indeed, this metaphor implicitly invites to take the Netherlands of the 17th Century as a political model for an extremely different present.

If the phrase *Gouden Eeuw* is seen primarily as a metaphor, then it is possible to find in an "Ovid's naïve dreamscape" the imaginative grammar of the phrase (van der Molen 2019). In this sense, the Dutch 17th Century becomes an Arcadia, an epoch to watch through nostalgic eyes as a myth of the origin. Then, the foundation of the Netherlands becomes the highest level of a process of decadence, which must be fought under the bright colours of national pride.

This is also the thesis of the curator Tom van der Molen in defense of the Amsterdam Museum's choice (*Ibidem*). In his paper *The Problem of 'the Golden Age'*, he observes that the phrase is not a witness of the self-awareness of Dutch elites of the 17th Century. The term was coined by the artistic biographer Arnold Houbraken in the 18th century, who spoke of a "Golden Age of Art" about the wealth of Dutch painters around the 1650 (*Ibidem*). The phrase *onze Gouden Eeuw* [our Golden Age] was extended to all cultural, economic, and social aspects of the 17th Century only in 1897. This empathetic trope was proposed by the historian Pieter Lodewijk Muller, suggesting an implicit admiration for the colonial and economic hegemony of the first Dutch Republic (*Ibidem*). This is the reason why this "so beautiful term" is not innocent if it is adopted with a heritage aim. Moreover – differently from the word "Enlightenment", for instance – it is not an original phrase of the Age what it is referred. Finally, it might not efficaciously represent the economic system or the mentality of those times. This

is not an original van der Molen's opinion, but a thesis quoted from the conclusion of a famous Johan Huizinga's work, titled *Dutch Civilization in the Seventeenth Century* (1941), and applied in more recent publications by the historian Arie van Deursen. The latter refuses to use this traditional phrase and – maybe in a too much relativistic way – reminds that "[i]n an endless debate, right and wrong are always impermanent, and everyone can read their own message in a narrative" (*Ibidem*).

4. Conclusions

Within the opposition between history and heritage, Van der Molen's genealogical argumentation seems convincing. He demonstrates that the phrase *Gouden Eeuw* is not an authentic trope of the 17th Century, but a historiographic construction used by historians to represent it. When the Amsterdam Museum chose to abandon this trope, it did not hush the voice of the ancient Dutchmen. Instead, it got from the appropriate discipline and offered to its visitors the largest and clearest framework to explain those ages. In its postcolonial aim, the Museum did not deliberately invent a new narrative. It simply preferred a mere chronological account to the controversial Muller's *Gouden Eeuw*. Indeed, to become meaningful in a heritage context, the new phrase does not imply the same ambiguous relationship with a silently selected part of its audience. Less is better, and the historiographical expression *17th Century* permits to see more clearly the complexity of the events that happened in the Dutch colonial past – a past that the previous trope invited to hide, to minimize or to mislead within a dazzling mixture of nostalgia and pride.

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