The Cultural Dimension of Dutch Overseas Expansion (Utrecht, 28 Aug 20)

Utrecht University, Aug 28, 2020
Deadline: Mar 15, 2020

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“It is only money and not knowledge that our people are seeking [in the East Indies], which is to be lamented”, complained the Amsterdam mayor and VOC governor, Nicolaes Witsen, in 1712. The Dutch trading companies may have been associated with various qualities, but an interest in culture was not one of them. None of the VOC officials even noted the presence of the world’s biggest Buddhist temple, the Borobudur, on the island of Java, leaving its re-discovery to the British in 1814. No Dutch writer tried to emulate the epic celebration of the Portuguese maritime empire by Luís de Camões. Dutch expansion had an obvious impact on the sciences and medicine, as demonstrated in Harold Cook’s Matters of Exchange: Commerce, Medicine, and Science in the Dutch Golden Age (2007). But what, if any, was its impact on culture and the humanities?

Here there is, in fact, a fruitful scholarly field that largely remains to be explored. For example, Dutch lust for money set in motion the first transfer of culture on a truly global scale, when 40 million pieces of Chinese porcelain were shipped from East Asia to Europe and the Americas. “Indies shops” in different Dutch cities sold curiosities from six continents. Travelogues – even when ordered by the VOC and predominantly mercantile in outlook – offered a wealth of ethnographic knowledge for the attentive reader. Scholarly-minded individuals could break the commercial pattern, resulting in the first Western translations of a work in Sanskrit (by Abraham Rogerius, 1651), a work of Hindu iconography (by Philips Angel, 1657), and the main work of Confucius (by Pieter van Hoorn, 1675). They must have relied on the expertise of local native speakers; non-Western perspectives come into even clearer focus with at least three Chinese men who visited the Netherlands and with the Africans who sat for Amsterdam painters.

This conference brings together historians of culture, art, literature, language, philosophy, science, and religion to arrive at a fuller picture of the cultural dimensions of Dutch overseas expansion. The keynote lectures will be given by Dr. Roelof van Gelder and Dr. Mariana Françozo (Leiden University).

Possible themes include:

- Cultural topics (art, literature, language, music, mythology, religion) addressed in travelogues
- Non-Western themes in Dutch literature and drama (from 'Moortje' to 'Zungchin')
- Representations of the world’s peoples, including enslaved persons and non-Western visitors to the Low Countries

- Trade, consumption, interpretation, and imitation of non-Western material culture
- Translations, dictionaries, and grammars
- Cultural industries (print shops, painting studios, artisan's workshops) established overseas
- Cultural education in the context of the VOC and WIC
- The impact on culture of cross-cultural encounters, slavery, servitude, and colonialism
- Challenges posed by historiographies, religions, and philosophies from beyond Europe

Working group De Zeventiende Eeuw invites all interested in this topic to send in an abstract (max. 300 w) and curriculum (max. 100 w) for a paper (in English or Dutch) of 20 minutes. Proposals for sessions, consisting of three papers, are also welcome. Deadline for abstracts: 15 March 2020, to Jaap de Haan (j.dehaan@uu.nl).

Organizing Committee: Marjolijn Bol, Surekha Davis, Jaap de Haan, Cora van de Poppe, Thijs Weststeijn

Reference:
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