

Who Are Art Exhibitions For?: An Investigation into Narrative Choice and Public Reaction in  
Art Museums

Grace Rotwein

A thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of

Masters of Arts

University of Washington

2017

Committee:

Benjamin Schmidt

Kristine Morrissey

Wilson O'Donnell

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Museology

© Copyright 2017  
Grace Rotwein

University of Washington

Abstract

Who Are Art Exhibitions For?: An Investigation into Narrative Choice and Public Reaction in Art Museums

Grace Rotwein

Chair of Supervisory Committee:  
Benjamin Schmidt, PhD  
University of Washington

Museums are no stranger to controversy and contention surrounding exhibitions and interpretation. Curators and exhibit developers have the power, whether unintentionally or by design, to prioritize, overtly or subtly, certain groups over others. This thesis explores responses to one somewhat contentious exhibit, *Asia in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Dutch Golden Age*, and describes how an alternative interpretive technique, the Ideas, People, Objects, Physical (IPOP) Framework, could be implemented in such an exhibition. To understand responses, this study looked at reviews from both academic and popular media sources, as well as social media channels. Through this analysis, it was found that responses were complex and nuanced for a number of reasons. When considering *Asia in Amsterdam* through the lens of IPOP, it immediately becomes clear how differently this exhibition may have looked had the curators utilized an interpretive framework designed to facilitate a wider variety of visitor experiences.

## Table of Contents

<b>List of Figures</b> .....	4
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	5
<b>Chapter One: Introduction</b> .....	6
<b>Chapter Two: Relevant Literature</b> .....	12
<b>Chapter Three: Methods</b> .....	29
<b>Chapter Four: Discussion</b> .....	37
<b>Chapter Five: Conclusion</b> .....	55
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	58

## List of Figures

Figure 1: *Still Life with Beer Glass, Porcelain Dish, and Pepper*, painted by Jan Jansz. van de Velde (III) in 1647

Figure 2: Examples of Coding Scheme

Figure 3: Social Media Comments, Coded

Figure 4: Social Media Comments, Percent Positive

Figure 5: Average Likes per Instagram Post

Figure 6: Social Media, Word Frequency

Figure 7: Social Media, Word Frequency Including Synonyms

Figure 8: Chart of Review Content

Figure 9: Critical Reviews

Figure 10: Complimentary Reviews

Figure 11: Moderate/Descriptive Reviews

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my committee, Ben Schmidt, Kris Morrissey, and Wilson O'Donnell for their support and patience throughout this process. I would additionally like to thank my chair, Ben Schmidt, for all his time and help throughout this study from weekly meetings, to advice and guidance.

I would also like to thank my partner for his endless support and patience as my many books and articles took over our living space.

## Chapter One: Introduction

Elegant Chinese porcelain, highly coveted spices, intricately woven silk, and finely crafted Japanese lacquerware are just some of the ‘exotic’ Eastern goods that found their way onto ships of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) during the Dutch Golden Age. Beautifully crafted and ‘rare’ foreign goods were all the rage in seventeenth century Amsterdam, and an ambitious temporary exhibition held in both Amsterdam and Salem attempted to expose visitors to this luxurious Early Modern trend.

The exhibit *Asia in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Dutch Golden Age* was the product of collaborative efforts between the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, and the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts. This exhibition was on display at the Rijksmuseum from 17 October 2015 until 17 January 2016, whereupon it was moved to the Peabody Essex Museum. The purpose of *Asian in Amsterdam* was to explore “the transformative impact that Asian luxuries had on Dutch art and life in the seventeenth century.”<sup>1</sup> This master narrative, and, more broadly, the exhibit was met with reactions ranging from highly critical to rave reviews. Once open, *Asia in Amsterdam* was simultaneously held in esteem for its showcasing of spectacular, dazzling, and beautiful objects, and lambasted for its Eurocentric narrative and limited interpretation by a variety of commentators.

Art critics for major media outlets like the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Boston Globe* tended to praise *Asia in Amsterdam*, and the majority of public commenters, via social media, found the exhibition beautiful. Criticism of *Asia in Amsterdam* was significantly more common among academic outlets. Much of the criticism, both from social media commenters and

---

<sup>1</sup> Karina H. Corrigan, Jan van Campen, Femke Diercks and Janet C. Blyberg, *Asian in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Dutch Golden Age* (Yale University Press: New haven and London, 2015) pg 9.

academics, pertained to what was deemed the singular interpretation and presentation of objects, which some critiques suggested tended to privilege a Eurocentric history of the era. For example, one of the most critical academic reviews went so far as to assert that “the curator-authors’ selection of objects [was] on the basis of aesthetics alone [and] seem[ed] to go hand in hand with a casual regard for historical and sociopolitical parameters.”<sup>2</sup> This thesis explores the responses to *Asia in Amsterdam* in an attempt to understand the discrepancy between the opinions of academics who published reviews, the reviews of art critics for popular media, and the public responses via social media. An analysis of this controversy will illustrate the aspects of *Asia in Amsterdam* which were considered profoundly exclusive by some, and utterly beautiful by others.

Perception of museums have greatly shifted from the early modern proto museums to the informal learning centers of today. From unabashedly elitist, with few notable exceptions, to institutions merited for their commitment to serving the public, understandings of what a museum is and does have changed dramatically. Museums today are viewed primarily as public and educational institutions.<sup>3</sup> As such, the nature of any exhibition within a museum is also public.<sup>4</sup> Thus, curators and exhibit developers plan and install exhibitions for public consumption, which inevitably involves the curatorial act of imagining visitors.<sup>5</sup>

In 1994, Vera Zolberg pointed out in “An Elite Experience for Everyone: Art Museums, the Public, and Cultural Literacy,” that art museums have the unique distinction of “winning

---

<sup>2</sup> Claudia Swan, “Luxury, art, trade and power in the Dutch Golden Age: Early modern global bling,” *Arts*, TLS Feb. 26 (2016) 17.

<sup>3</sup> Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, “Art History and Its Audience: A Matter of Gaps and Bridges,” *The Two Art Histories: The Museum and the University*, edited by Charles W. Haxthausen (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2002) 45.

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Mainardi, “Repetition and Novelty: Exhibitions Tell Tales,” *The Two Art Histories: The Museum and the University*, ed. Charles W. Haxthausen (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2002) 81.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Whitehead, “Toward Some Cartographic Understanding of Art Interpretation in Museums,” Ed. Juliette Fritsch, *Museum Gallery Interpretation and Material Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2011) 55.

accolades for cultural merit and brickbats for cultural exclusiveness.”<sup>6</sup> Art museums are often praised for collecting and preserving works of art with fascinating and multifaceted histories. Historians of art are well versed in how to read the stories of an object or work of art, and extract multiple layers of rich meaning. It is, however, problematic to presume the general public has a similar level of education and practice at reading such objects. To presume that the public at large has the prerequisites necessary to elucidate rich historical context from an object is to exclude the experience of most potential visitors. Thus, the inevitable challenge for an art museum’s curator is that of “bridging the gap between what a scholar writes and what the public gains from it.”<sup>7</sup>

Most people do not prepare before attending a museum or special exhibition. They do not research the subject matter of the museum in depth, and they do not learn about the details of content and context ahead of their visit. Visitors go to museums without knowing period dates, without an understanding of the social role of color pigments, without prior knowledge of artists’ lives, or specific knowledge of biblical or mythological subjects.<sup>8</sup> That is not to say that visitors need to know all of these things in order to appreciate and enjoy an exhibition. People are drawn to museums for a range of different reasons, from the power of proximity to original objects to educational, social, and aesthetic motives.<sup>9</sup> For this reason, the curatorial act of imagining a

---

<sup>6</sup> Vera L. Zolberg, “An Elite Experience for Everyone: Art Museums, the Public, and Cultural Literacy,” *Museum Culture: Histories Discourses Spectacles*, editors Daniel J Sherman and Irit Rogoff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) 49.

<sup>7</sup> Ebert-Schifferer, “Art History and Its Audience,” 45.

<sup>8</sup> Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, “Art History and Its Audience: A Matter of Gaps and Bridges,” *The Two Art Histories: The Museum and the University*, edited by Charles W. Haxthausen (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2002) 46.

<sup>9</sup> John H. Falk, “An Identity-Centered Approach to Understanding Museum Learning,” *Curator*, 49 (2) 2006.

visitor in terms of demographics, personal, professional, and academic background, and cultural capital can be inclusive of some and exclusionary to others.<sup>10</sup>

The role of a curator is immensely important to the cultural accessibility of an exhibition. Curatorial voice and perspective determines narrative choice, which has a significant bearing on the level of inclusion/democratization of an exhibition. Curators and exhibit developers have the power, whether unintentionally or by design, to prioritize, overtly or subtly, certain groups over others. It is important to challenge traditional narratives and interpretive methods, if we aim to make the museum a place where all people have the opportunity to learn about our shared histories. The construction of historical narrative is crucial to creating an inclusive environment in museums. Such narratives must include diverse perspectives, especially in the context of museums, where interpretation has the power to “unlock understandings, and...stimulate social interactions.”<sup>11</sup>

The mixed responses to *Asia in Amsterdam*, relating to narrative, interpretation, exhibit design, and objects, illustrates the quintessential challenge facing curators and the varying responses their work may elicit. The Rijksmuseum’s installation of *Asia in Amsterdam* boasted 170 objects from the extensive collections of the Rijksmuseum, Peabody Essex Museum, and numerous museums and collectors worldwide, who loaned objects specifically for the exhibition.<sup>12</sup> To parse out responses to *Asia in Amsterdam*, both positive and negative, one object from the exhibition was selected to illustrate the many interpretive dimensions of an art work, and to serve as an exemplar of the beautiful, diverse, objects featured in the exhibit. The object

---

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Whitehead, “Toward Some Cartographic Understanding of Art Interpretation in Museums,” Ed. Juliette Fritsch, *Museum Gallery Interpretation and Material Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2011) 54.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Whitehead, “Toward Some Cartographic Understanding of Art Interpretation in Museums,” Ed. Juliette Fritsch, *Museum Gallery Interpretation and Material Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2011) 65.

<sup>12</sup> Corrigan, et. al., *Asian in Amsterdam*.

selected was *Still Life with Beer Glass, Porcelain Dish, and Pepper*, painted by Jan Jansz. van de Velde (III) in 1647.<sup>13</sup>



Figure 1: *Still Life with Beer Glass, Porcelain Dish, and Pepper*, Jan Jansz. van de Velde (III) 1647.

The mixed responses to Asia in Amsterdam, relating to narrative, interpretation, exhibit design, and objects, illustrates the quintessential challenge facing curators and the varying

---

<sup>13</sup> Rijksmuseum, “Object Data for *Still Life with Beer Glass, Porcelain Dish, and Pepper*, Jan Jansz. van de Velde (III) 1647.” <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.6366>

responses their work may elicit. Art is always political, and in an era wherein everyone has the ability, via social media and other internet channels, to react immediately, there is a lot of potential for controversy. Curators need tools to help them consider public reactions, and visitor experience, which can help them address potential issues early in the exhibit planning process.

This thesis explores responses to Asia in Amsterdam in an attempt to understand the discrepancy between various comments and reviews. An analysis of this controversy will illustrate the aspects of Asia in Amsterdam which were considered profoundly exclusive by some, and utterly beautiful by others. The goal of this research is to explore both the debate around the story presented in *Asia in Amsterdam*, and the admiration of the exhibition. Additionally, demonstrate an alternative method of interpretation Ideas, People, Objects, Physical (IPOP).<sup>14</sup> The primary research questions guiding this inquiry include:

1. What was the controversy surrounding *Asia in Amsterdam*?
2. What did responses to the exhibit look like on either side of the controversy?
3. How could applying the IPOP interpretive method alter object interpretation, and by extension create a more inclusive narrative?

---

<sup>14</sup> Ronald A. Beghetto, "The Exhibit as Planned Versus the Exhibit as Experienced," *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 57,1 (2014).

## Chapter Two: Relevant Literature

Narrative choice, privilege, and accessibility are issues that face not only museums, but concern universities, K-12 schools, and many other types of institutions. Due to the widespread relevancy of these issues, there have been several studies focusing on the challenges that surround master narratives and privilege in story telling across a variety of settings. Scholars from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds have recognized the significance of curatorial voice, narrative choice, privileged interpretation, and inclusivity/exclusivity in museums. Anthropologists, archeologists, historians, art historians, sociologists and museologists have all debated and studied the methods by which information is represented and transmitted. Hence, literature pertaining such topics falls into four major categories: History, Art History, Material Culture Studies, and Museology. Those studying education and sociology have long investigated issues relating to dominant narratives; however, for the purpose of this study, such inquiries will be considered under the umbrella category of Museology.

Many works discussed herein represent intersections between these major categories, i.e. a work that relates to both Museology and Material Culture Studies, or one that encompasses History, Art History, and Museology. This is to be expected as History and Art History tend to share principles, and Material Culture Studies and Museology are interdisciplinary by nature. All the aforementioned disciplines have something to say about objects, interpretation, and privilege.

### History:

In *Material Culture*, Henry Glassie asserted “History is not the past. History is a story about the past, told in the present, and designed to be useful in constructing the future.”<sup>15</sup> Just as history is a representation of the past, so are exhibitions using historical objects. *Asia in*

---

<sup>15</sup> Henry Glassie, *Material Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999) 6.

*Amsterdam* represented a collection of ‘things’ that are at once historical and artistic objects. In an effort to tell useful stories about the past, historians, and other scholars grappling with the study of such historical objects seek to address questions like: What are ‘things?’ Are ‘things’ different from objects or artifacts? What gives a thing value? How can we discern ‘luxury things’ and ‘artistic things’ from other types of ‘things?’ What does it mean to be a ‘thing’ that has been collected? How does time change the nature of ‘things?’ Who gets to determine the meaning of ‘things?’ How does possession affect the meaning of a ‘thing?’ How does geography change the nature of ‘things?’ How should we define the life and afterlife of a ‘thing?’

A response to the first question, ‘What are things?’ seems at first glance simple. However, as Igor Kopytoff points out in “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” the “conceptual polarity of individualized persons and commoditized things is recent and, culturally speaking, exceptional.”<sup>16</sup> Kopytoff raises the critical point that “people can be and have been commoditized again and again, in innumerable societies throughout history, by way of... slavery.”<sup>17</sup> In the context of *Asia in Amsterdam* and its emphasis on ‘luxury things,’ this raises the question, could a slave have been considered a ‘luxury thing?’ Additionally, Kopytoff draws attention to the fact that commodities are more than simply material things; they are also culturally marked as a particular type of thing.<sup>18</sup> This cultural marking adds another layer or component to the thing being marked, and thus another aspect with interpretive potential. Such layers may include luxury, artistry, exoticism, and so on.

Scholars have continually struggle with how to address various components, or layers, of things. In *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives: Historical Trajectories Transnational*

---

<sup>16</sup> Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 1988) 64.

<sup>17</sup> Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things,” 64-65.

<sup>18</sup> Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things.”

*Exchanges*, John Brewer and Frank Trentmann attempt to “develop an analysis that avoids the temptation of talking about consumption in either terms of globally advancing homogeneity or in richly detailed terms of local specificity.”<sup>19</sup> Brewer and Trentmann attempt “a different approach to time space and value” wherein, “the act of purchase occupies only a particular moment in the timeline of consumption.”<sup>20</sup> If the act of purchase represents only a moment on a timeline, then it is important to consider how interpretation in the context of an exhibit might differ for objects that are not purchased. Such objects include gifts.

As Arjun Appadurai points out in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, there is a certain significance to the methods by which things are acquired. Whether an object is gifted or loaned, as many of the objects in *Asia in Amsterdam* were, the trail of how an object made its way to into the care of a person or institution is meaningful. Appadurai illustrates that “Gifts, and the spirit of reciprocity, sociability, and spontaneity in which they are typically exchanged, usually are starkly opposed to the profit-oriented, self-centered, and calculated spirit that fires the circulation of commodities.”<sup>21</sup> A significant aspect of gift giving, which Appadurai also mentions, is that the person both giving and receiving the gift are significant and meaningful. Further, the social context of the gift is significant. A gift can facilitate social mobility, build or mend relations, or demonstrate respect or affection. In *Outline of a theory of practice*, P. Bourdieu argues that gift exchange represents an economy in and of itself.<sup>22</sup> Traditional interpretations of trade give little to no consideration to gift exchange as an

---

<sup>19</sup> John Brewer and Frank Trentmann, *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives: Historical Trajectories, Transnational Exchanges* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2006) 2.

<sup>20</sup> Brewer and Trentmann, *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspective*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 1988) 11-12.

<sup>22</sup> P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a theory of practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 171.

independent economy. Whether a thing is intended as a gift, or it by some accident becomes a gift or a loaned artifact in its “afterlife” has significant interpretive implications.

In her work, *Early Modern Things: Objects and Their Histories, 1500-1800*, Paula Findlen examines the “durability of seemingly fragile things,” and contends that the afterlife of such objects can take them across the world.<sup>23</sup> Findlen points out the inherent difficulty when attempting to tell the story of any particular thing, as all things contain multiple histories.<sup>24</sup> She argues that things multiply over time, asserting that “Certain objects become visible because they are essential, necessary ingredients of daily life but hardly unique.”<sup>25</sup> Whereas other objects “emerge into view when they become objects of desire, only to recede to the point of invisibility as they become ordinary, unfashionable, even obsolete.”<sup>26</sup> The objects presented in *Asia in Amsterdam* come into sharp focus as objects of desire and luxury objects through the exhibition’s layout and organizational ‘Ideas.’ Additionally, Findlen points to the geography of things, and how and where they travel, as essential components of the story.<sup>27</sup> Such aspects of a thing open doors for a variety of interdisciplinary approaches to interpretation from perspectives on geography, economics, history, archeology, and many more.

There is a great deal of blending among disciplines, from history and art history, to cultural material studies, when it comes to the study of things. In *Vermeer’s Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World*, Timothy Brook uses a series of seventeenth century paintings as his point of departure, combining history and art history in his investigation of the effects of global “trade on the world and on ordinary people.”<sup>28</sup> Brook uses

---

<sup>23</sup> Paula Findlen, *Early Modern Things: Objects and Their Histories, 1500-1800* (New York: Routledge, 2013) 4.

<sup>24</sup> Findlen, *Early Modern Things*, 11.

<sup>25</sup> Findlen, *Early Modern Things*, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Findlen, *Early Modern Things*, 7.

<sup>27</sup> Findlen, *Early Modern Things*, 15-16.

<sup>28</sup> Timothy Brook, *Vermeer’s Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008) 218.

the things depicted in a handful of Vermeer's paintings to explore the relationship between state formation and the history of trade. As Brook wades into matters of trade, profit, production, and consumption, he raises issues related to the ways in which commerce, specifically across cultural borders, may impact the meaning of a things.<sup>29</sup> *Asia in Amsterdam* represented an exploration of trade in luxury objects that crossed cultural borders and moved from east to west in the Early Modern Amsterdam which some scholars criticized as overly narrow. Hence, some scholarly critics would likely agree with Brook's assertion that objects as global and social complicates the traditional narrative of consumer culture, and thus discourages overly simple interpretation. In a similar vein, Glassie warns against obsession with deconstruction and revision as slow paths toward necessary truth, while leaving "most people [or in this case, things] linger in darkness, neglected and vulnerable."<sup>30</sup>

Traditionally, Western historians have privileged the written word, meaning that those left to linger in darkness are most likely to be those which place less significance on the written word. Stephen Greenblatt pointed out in *Marvelous Possessions*, that European culture around the time Cristopher Columbus arrived in the Americas in 1492 was one which did not trust verbal testimony.<sup>31</sup> The obsession with the authority of the written word and the "distinctions between people who had writing and people who did not became a crucial discourse in the New World."<sup>32</sup> In this case the act of writing operates as a technical procedure, through which peoples may express their desire for control.<sup>33</sup> Hence, historians have pointed out that dominant narratives tend to spring from the written word. Mark Carey also calls attention to the emphasis

---

<sup>29</sup> Brook, *Vermeer's Hat*.

<sup>30</sup> Glassie, *Material Culture*, 7.

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) 57.

<sup>32</sup> Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, 65.

<sup>33</sup> Glassie, *Material Culture*, 345.

on written word in *In the Shadow of Melting Glaciers: Climate Change and Andean Society*. Carey points out that although there are many scientific studies of climate change which try to estimate impact and describe potential future scenarios, there has been minimal effort to engage communities with lived experiences of such impacts.<sup>34</sup> The lack of motivation to engage with the oral traditions of such societies points to a perceptual devaluation of the stories and narratives of such communities. While scientists may not be motivated to engage with these underrepresented communities, museums, as institutions dedicated to the preservation of cultural heritage, have an obligation to do so.

Louis A. Perez Jr. also highlights the importance of engaging with communities in *Winds of Change: Hurricanes and the Transformation of Nineteenth-Century Cuba*. Further, he insists on the importance of considering not only the sources of information, but also the story one chooses to tell,<sup>35</sup> a consideration weight to curator around the world. Perez is an advocate of the value of oral histories, and integrates them into a unique and interesting narrative about hurricanes and community in Cuba during the nineteenth century. He explains that in some cases, all people had was oral tradition to determine property boundaries, as storms destroyed records.<sup>36</sup> In addition to his contemplation of oral histories, Perez brings into sharp relief a nontraditional historical actor, hurricanes.

Like Perez, Londa Schiebinger is interested in bringing the natural world and oral traditions into the master narrative of western society. In *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World*, Schiebinger brings botany into what she calls “the grand

---

<sup>34</sup> Mark Carey, *In the Shadow of Melting Glaciers: Climate Change and Andean Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>35</sup> Louis A. Perez Jr., *Winds of Change: Hurricanes and the Transformation of Nineteenth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

<sup>36</sup> Perez., *Winds of Change*, 15-36.

narratives of war.”<sup>37</sup> Schiebinger argues that considering stories that run parallel, or even contradictory, to so called master narratives can help shed light upon previously hidden aspects of “things” and bring a greater variety of voices into conversations about our past.

Where Perez and Schiebinger champion arguments that classify aspects of the natural world as “things,” i.e. hurricanes and plants, Benjamin Schmidt brings a case for place as “thing” in *Inventing Exoticism: Geography, Globalism, and Europe’s Early Modern World*. Schmidt argues that places became aligned with “consumable things and luxury items – as exotic geography segued into collecting and the material arts.”<sup>38</sup> This view is somewhat aligned with the ‘Ideas’ presented in *Asia in Amsterdam*. Geography is central to the exhibit’s theme of luxurious imports from the East, and the perception of items as ‘exotic’ contributed to their status as luxuries.

### Art History:

Luxury items, material arts, and objects “worthy” of collection tend to find their way into art museums, and/ fall under the scrutiny of art historians. Curators in art museums tend to have backgrounds in either fine art, or art history, and thus view objects through these lenses. Still lifes are one such category of thing that has frequently been investigated and analyzed by historians of art. Still life paintings are defined by their subject matter, which is essentially a carefully selected and purposefully arranged collection of inanimate, or dead, objects. These objects may be either natural, such as cut flowers, produce, and spices, or they may be man-made, such as books, glass, cloth, or porcelain. Hence, scholars of art history have a lot to say about still life, representation, “things” and object placement.

---

<sup>37</sup> Londa Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin Schmidt, *Exoticism: Geography, Globalism, and Europe’s Early Modern World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015) 227.

Still life can be approached in a variety of ways. Hanneke Grootenboer argued in *The Rhetoric of Perspective: Realism and Illusionism in Seventeenth-century Dutch Still-life Painting*, that certain specifically pictorial aspects of still life painting constituted a form of thinking.<sup>39</sup> Whereas, in her work, “Laying the Table: The Procedures of Still Life,” Joanna Woodall suggests that still life ought to be approached “by insisting on the status of the paintings as intense visual experiences that refer, primarily, to their own fabrication.”<sup>40</sup> Woodall then suggests that a “radical potential of still life was available in the seventeenth century, in conjunction with an understanding of still life with reference to permanent, externalized objects or entities.”<sup>41</sup> Investigating still life is a complicated endeavor, as such paintings contain a variety of symbolic representations, while simultaneously referring to material substances. Still life from the seventeenth century often contain materials with a specifically transient nature, food, spices, drink, flowers, and plants. Artistic significance has been attributed to the power of painting to capture and immortalize such materials.<sup>42</sup>

Woodall further argues that still life represents a form “of human perception negotiate[ing] its place not only in relation to an invisible, divine creator... but also to other kinds of creature and non-human entities.”<sup>43</sup> She builds on this argument by later pointing out what she refers to as “disturbing similarity” between representations of institutional banquets and portrayals of anatomy lessons.<sup>44</sup> Like many of her peers, Woodall is focused on works produced in Europe; the inclusion and exclusion of the art works which she considers in the

---

<sup>39</sup> Hanneke Grootenboer, *The Rhetoric of Perspective: Realism and Illusionism in Seventeenth-century Dutch Still-life Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 32.

<sup>40</sup> Joanna Woodall, “Laying the Table: The Procedures of Still Life,” *Art History*, 35, 5 (2012) 979.

<sup>41</sup> Woodall, “Laying the Table,” 980-981.

<sup>42</sup> Woodall, “Laying the Table,” 980.

<sup>43</sup> Woodall, “Laying the Table,” 981.

<sup>44</sup> Woodall, “Laying the Table,” 987.

construction of her narrative is careful and intentional, much like the inclusion of objects in a still life, or objects in an exhibit.

In her work, “Dutch Still Lifes and Colonial Visual Culture in the Netherlands Indies, 1800-1949,” Susie Protschky points out that most studies of Golden Age Dutch still life emphasize imperial cultures and economies while failing to include or address works produced in the Dutch colonies.<sup>45</sup> This is the result of interpretation and narrative choice within the field. Like the works Protschky discusses, *Asia in Amsterdam* heavily emphasized imperial cultures of luxury and trade in the exotic. Protschky asserts that “colonial still lifes were therefore iconographically distinct from their historical predecessors.”<sup>46</sup> She also points out inherent differences in the nature of items featured in still lifes produced in Europe and those produced in colonies. One such difference is the inclusion and perception of tropical fruits, “since tropical fruits circulated as food goods largely outside the sphere of international colonial capitalism, they cannot constitute commodity fetishes of the variety that scholars typically identify in...analyses of [European] Golden Age still lifes.”<sup>47</sup> This difference is notable, and weighs heavily on how such works may be interpreted.

Like Protschky, Harry Berger pays close attention to depictions of *naturalia*; however, instead of tropical fruits, Berger’s *Caterpillars: Reflections on Seventeenth-Century Dutch Still Life Painting*, focuses on flora. Flora, fauna, and various other *naturalia* appeared frequently in the still lifes on display for *Asia in Amsterdam*. Berger makes the case that Maria Sibylla Merian’s engravings of garlands of leaves or flowers poked by insect holes, articulate the gradual move away from conventional uses of the vanitas motif as a result of a more ominous realization

---

<sup>45</sup> Susie Protschky, “Dutch Still Lifes and Colonial Visual Culture in the Netherlands Indies, 1800-1949,” *Art History*, 34, 3 (2011) 510-535.

<sup>46</sup> Protschky, “Dutch Still Lifes,” 512.

<sup>47</sup> Protschky, “Dutch Still Lifes,” 512.

about “rapacious nature.”<sup>48</sup> Additionally, in his discussion of Joris Hoefnagel’s “Tarantula” (c.1592), Berger draws attention to the intentional nature of the poses in which items are included in still lifes, asserting “posing is always imposed by acts of subtle violence that attend the transformation of life into the truthiness of art. Flowers don’t come willingly to their pose. They don’t have agency.”<sup>49</sup> As Berger reflects on the lack of a flower’s agency, so too do those studying material culture investigate and question the agency of things, and how to interpret them. The agency of things is a crucial consideration for museum interpretation, and is a challenge facing curators as they work to develop poignant and impactful exhibitions.

### Material Culture Studies:

Material culture studies as a discipline is a relatively new field, with a strong bearing on museological practice. The field is also highly interdisciplinary, and as such struggles for uniformity on certain core principles. *The Handbook of Material Culture*, edited by Chris Tilley, Webb Keane, Susan Kuchler, Mike Rowlands, and Patricia Spyer defines the field of material culture studies as diffuse, uncharted, and interdisciplinary. According to the editors of this volume, material culture studies are always changing, and have historically found their primary home “within the disciplines of anthropology and archeology.”<sup>50</sup>

Thomas J. Schlereth attempts to identify and address these issues in *Cultural History and Material Culture: Everyday Life, Landscapes, Museums*. According to Schlereth, there are three issues within the field that deserve immediate attention: “questions of nomenclature... questions of methodology... and questions of theory.”<sup>51</sup> The field generally centers around the conception

---

<sup>48</sup> Harry Berger Jr., *Caterpillars: Reflections on Seventeenth-Century Dutch Still Life Painting* (Fordham University Press, 2011) 52-54.

<sup>49</sup> Berger, *Caterpillars*, 89.

<sup>50</sup> Chris Tilley, et. al. *The Handbook of Material Culture* (London, UK: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2006) 1.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas J. Schlereth, *Cultural History and Material Culture: Everyday Life, Landscapes, Museums* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992) 18.

that “materiality is an integral dimension of culture, and there are dimensions of social existence that cannot be fully understood without it.”<sup>52</sup> Material culture studies, as a field, then strives to “give material objects life in...text, to conjure up an instant in a process.”<sup>53</sup>

Another work which aims to highlight the diversity of approaches to material culture studies is *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies*. The *Oxford Handbook* is divided into five parts which respectively explore “different disciplinary perspectives upon the idea of material culture studies... six kinds of material practice... distinctions between material objects and human subjects... how the idea of material culture studies can be used to examine large entities, rather than discrete or portable objects... [and the study of] particular things.”<sup>54</sup> The examination of large entities and the study of particular things play major roles in *Asia in Amsterdam*, and the conceptualization of the exhibition broadly.

In “Introduction to New Perspectives on Material Culture and Intermedial Practice,” Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Asunción López-Varela Azcárate, Haun Saussy, and Jan Mieszkowski explore the physicality of material culture.<sup>55</sup> Their argument is introduced with a discussion of the physical nature of books. The authors examine what makes a book, and explore the physicality of eBooks as “things.”<sup>56</sup> In this view the perspective of the person investigating the thing is essential, much like in the curation of an exhibition. Whereas, in “Of Paradigms and

---

<sup>52</sup> Tilley, *Handbook of Material Culture*, 1.

<sup>53</sup> Christensen (1995) 21, as cited in Elizabeth S. Chilton, “Material Meanings and Meaningful Materials: An Introduction,” *Material Meanings: Critical Approaches to the Interpretation of Material Culture* (University of Utah Press, 1999) 1.

<sup>54</sup> Dan Hicks and Mary C. Beaudry, *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) 1.

<sup>55</sup> Steven Tötösy De Zepetnek, Asunción López-Varela Azcárate, Haun Saussy, and Jan Mieszkowski. "Introduction to New Perspectives on Material Culture and Intermedial Practice." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13, 3 (2011) 1.

<sup>56</sup> De Zepetnek, et. al. “New Perspectives on Material Culture,” 1.

Ways of Seeing: Artifact Variability as if People Mattered,” Marcia-Anne Dobres argues that “when the dynamics of human agency are taken seriously... it does make a difference.”<sup>57</sup>

While curators of *Asia in Amsterdam* present all of the items featured in the exhibit as works of art, it is significant to note that the artworks are also objects composed in particular ways to of material goods. Alfred Gell explores the basis for the distinction between artistic objects, or works of art, and artefacts in “Vogel’s Net: Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps.” In his work, Gell argues that a wide variety of artefacts could be exhibited as ‘art,’ including animal traps.<sup>58</sup> Gell asserts that if artistic objects are identifiable by their possession of an interpretation, then animal traps may be artistic objects, as they “tend to embody complex ideas and intentions... [related to] the relationship between men and animals.”<sup>59</sup> Gell provides three possible answers to his posited question “When is a fabricated object a “work of art” and when is it something less dignified?”<sup>60</sup> The responses to this question that Gell introduces are: an object is art if it is aesthetically superior, if it is interpreted using a system of ideas founded in art history, or if the object is taken to be art by an “art world.”<sup>61</sup> According to Gell, animal traps, an object that is traditionally considered mundane, utilitarian, and lacking in aesthetic value, qualifies as “art” because it provides “a model of the hunter himself and his idea of the world of the prey animal.”<sup>62</sup> This aligns with Glassie’s view that “functions and meanings are planned, then built into the object during creation.”<sup>63</sup> For Glassie creation is key, and the creator’s intent is

---

<sup>57</sup> Marcia-Anne Dobres, “Of Paradigms and Ways of Seeing: Artifact Variability as if People Mattered,” *Material Meanings: Critical Approaches to the Interpretation of Material Culture* (University of Utah Press, 1999) 7.

<sup>58</sup> Alfred Gell, “Vogel’s Net: Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps,” *Journal of Material Culture*, 1, 1 (1996) 15-38.

<sup>59</sup> Gell, “Vogel’s Net,” 15.

<sup>60</sup> Gell, “Vogel’s Net,” 15.

<sup>61</sup> Gell, “Vogel’s Net,” 16-17.

<sup>62</sup> Gell, “Vogel’s Net,” 15.

<sup>63</sup> Glassie, *Material Culture*, 67.

crucial to “puzzling the physical context together.”<sup>64</sup> For Glassie, just as for those studying museology, conceptual contexts and intent are exceptionally important for understanding objects and the people from which they come.

### Museology:

Museology is “the study of the philosophy, purposes, and organizations of museums as well as museum activities such as the collection, care, presentation, and interpretation of objects.”<sup>65</sup> Museology aims to address “the theory, history, and role of museums,”<sup>66</sup> while simultaneously assigning meaning and contextualizing “what museums do in society.”<sup>67</sup>

Since the 1980s, museology as a field has shifted away from both a sort of cultural control by Eurocentric management regimes,<sup>68</sup> and a dominant set of views about museums as sites of community power relations.<sup>69</sup> This shift has resulted in what has been deemed “new museology.”<sup>70</sup> New museology understands “the public as diverse, plural and active, rather than as a relatively homogenous and rather passive mass,”<sup>71</sup> and aims to “foster an acceptance of cultural diversity.”<sup>72</sup> New museology has developed an interest in inclusive narrative and interpretation.

Since the dawn of new museology, many researchers and museum professionals have articulated a need for museums to be much more than a home for valuable and beautiful objects.

---

<sup>64</sup> Glassie, *Material Culture*, 65.

<sup>65</sup> Christina Kreps, *Liberating Culture: Cross-cultural Perspectives on Museums, Curation and Heritage Preservation*, (New York: Routledge, 2003) 5.

<sup>66</sup> Jane R. Glaser and Artemis A. Zenetou, *Museums: A Place to Work: Planning Museum Careers* (New York: Routledge 2000) 158.

<sup>67</sup> Kreps, *Liberating Culture*, 146.

<sup>68</sup> Kreps, *Liberating Culture*, 5.

<sup>69</sup> Andrea Witcomb, *Re-Imagining the Museum* (New York, Routledge, 2003) 79.

<sup>70</sup> Rhiannon Manson, “Cultural Theory and Museum Studies,” *A Companion to Museum Studies* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2011) 23.

<sup>71</sup> Sharon Macdonald, “Expanding Museum Studies: An Introduction,” *A Companion to Museum Studies* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2011) 8.

<sup>72</sup> Witcomb, *Re-Imagining the Museum*, 80.

Rather, sentiments have been repeatedly expressed that museums have a greater responsibility to serve their communities and champion social issues. A well-designed exhibition with a carefully constructed inclusive narrative and accessible interpretation can engage the senses, stimulate intellect, and free the imagination.<sup>73</sup> According to Maxine Greene, in “Imagining futures: the public school and possibility,” when this happens new possibilities are created, which allow visitors to break from the routine of everyday experiences and engage in “possibility thinking.”<sup>74</sup>

Addressing social issues through exhibition represents an avenue for museums to more deeply connect with audiences. Art museum exhibitions are capable of “creat[ing] a relationship between art and the viewer by provoking thought and... [expanding] perceptions.”<sup>75</sup> Historically, art museums have been assigned a more aesthetic role, considered elitist, and hence confined to the realm of bourgeois culture.<sup>76</sup> Such traditions have contributed to conceptions of art museums as intimidating institutions with imposing facades.<sup>77</sup> Additionally, art museums have a history of avoiding emphasis on things like community and “the national or civic identity of...members.”<sup>78</sup> In “The “Rocky” Dilemma: Museums, Monuments, and Popular Culture in the Postmodern Era,” Danielle Rice points out this general hostility toward the art world, and draws attention to, what she deems, the “role of the media in mythifying and representing so-called public opinion.”<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>73</sup> Ronald A. Beghetto, “The Exhibit as Planned Versus the Exhibit as Experienced,” *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 57,1 (2014).

<sup>74</sup> Maxine Greene, “Imagining futures: the public school and possibility,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 32, 2 (2000) 14.

<sup>75</sup> C. Feehan, “A Study on Contemporary Art Museums as Activist Agents for Social Change,” *Doctoral dissertation* (University of Houston: Houston, TX, 2010).

<sup>76</sup> Kacey Lewis, “The Impact of Socially Conscious Art Exhibitions: A Case Study of Art AIDS America,” *Master’s Thesis* (University of Washington: Seattle, WA, 2016).

<sup>77</sup> S. Mortaki, “Key Issues Facing Art Museums in the Context of Their Social Role,” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 2, 16 (2012), 134.

<sup>78</sup> Mortaki, S. (August 2012). Key Issues Facing Art Museums in the Context of Their Social Role. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 2(16), 136

<sup>79</sup> Danielle Rice, “The “Rocky” Dilemma: Museums, Monuments, and Popular Culture in the Postmodern Era,” *Critical Issues in Public Art: Content, Context, and Controversy* (New York: Harper Collins, Icon Editions, 1993).

Narrative and interpretive methods are crucial to museums, as all visitors are “entitled to access to museums and to seeing themselves represented in museums.”<sup>80</sup> Museums have the ability to create exhibitions with the potential to promote “tolerance, inter-community respect, and challenge stereotypes.”<sup>81</sup> This has led scholars to question the current nature of art and monuments. In her article, Rice asks questions like, “What does a monument of our age look like? Who gets to decide?”<sup>82</sup> Robert Archibald digs considerably deeper in “Narratives For a New Century,” as he ponders, “What is beautiful, what is ugly, what is right, what is wrong, how we can know the difference, and how we can agree on what to do next.”<sup>83</sup> In the same article, Archibald reflected on “Just what [makes] a good story and how do we create it? How do we choose the story? Who writes the story? Does the story have a point, or have we sunk so far into relativism and postmodernism that we are incapable of making judgments?”<sup>84</sup> The questions posed by Rice and Archibald are profound and have far reaching implications in the academic and philosophical arenas of museums. Such questions, however, may have less bearing on public experience of, and reaction to, a particular exhibition, for instance *Asia in Amsterdam*.

Where some scholars have sought explored the potential for inclusivity in museum narratives, others have explored its power to exclude through strategic propagation and suppression of certain images.<sup>85</sup> Others still, have discussed elitism in master narratives, anti-intellectualism, representations of social justice, multivocality, ownership of heritage, and the role of museums in constructing identity.<sup>86</sup> Exhibition narrative has been discussed in a variety

---

<sup>80</sup> Fleming, “Museums for Social Justice,” 2014.

<sup>81</sup> R. Sandell, “Social Inclusion, the Museum and the Dynamics of Sectoral Change,” *Museums and Society*, 2003.

<sup>82</sup> Rice, “The “Rocky” Dilemma.”

<sup>83</sup> Robert Archibald, “Narratives For a New Century,” *Museum News*, 77, 6 (1998) 33-42.

<sup>84</sup> Archibald, “Narratives For a New Century.”

<sup>85</sup> Valeria Peixoto de Alencar, “Beyond Museum Walls: Visual Narratives Through Images and History,” *International Journal of Education Through Art*, 12, 2 (2016).

<sup>86</sup> Angela Cartwright Lynskey, “Countering the Dominant Narrative: In Defense of Critical Coursework,” *Education Foundations*, 2015; Carol David, “Elitism in the Stories of US Art Museums: The Power of a Master Narrative,”

of contexts within museology. In “Writing Spatial Stories: Textual Narratives in the Museums,” Laura Hourston Hanks explored options for narrative delivery and correlations between “the written word and the space of the museum” to reveal the potential of narrative in museum design.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, Rickie Burman, Roy Ballantyne, Jan Packer, and Nigel Bond have all explored interpretive strategies and the use of individual stories to demonstrate larger narratives.<sup>88</sup> In their article, *Interpreting Shared and Contested Histories: The Broken Links Exhibition*,” Roy Ballantyne, Jan Packer, and Nigel Bond champion “Hot interpretation,” a method described by D. Uzzell in 1989.<sup>89</sup> Hot interpretation uses personal stories, a balance of despair and hope, a blend of education and persuasion, place for reflection, and a focus on the past to inform the future.<sup>90</sup> Such methods lend themselves more naturally to certain types of exhibits over others. The heavy emphasis on individual stories become significantly trickier as subject matter moves farther away in time. For instance, *Asia in Amsterdam* is concerned with the Early Modern period, specifically the seventeenth century, making it somewhat more complicated to include personal stories related to the story curators sought to tell. Hence, some other interpretive framework is necessary to engage with *Asia in Amsterdam*.

Another interpretive method discussed by a number of scholars is the Ideas, People, Objects (IPO) model, sometimes also referred to as the Ideas, People, Objects, Physical (IPOP)

---

*Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 13, 3 (1999); Eleni Beneki, James P. Delgado, Anastasia Filippopoliti, “Memory in the Maritime Museum: Objects, Narratives, Identities,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 18, 4 (2012).

<sup>87</sup> Laura Hourston Hanks, “Writing Spatial Stories: Textual Narratives in the Museums,” *Museum Making: Narratives, Architectures, Exhibitions* (Routledge: New York, NY, 2012).

<sup>88</sup> Rickie Burman, “Transforming the Jewish Museum: The Power of Narrative,” *Jewish Culture and History*, 12, 1-2 (2010); Roy Ballantyne, Jan Packer, and Nigel Bond, “Interpreting Shared and Contested Histories: The Broken Links Exhibition,” *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 55, 2 (2012).

<sup>89</sup> Ballantyne, et. al., “Interpreting Contested Histories.”

<sup>90</sup> Ballantyne, et. al., “Interpreting Contested Histories.”

model.<sup>91</sup> In the IPOP model ideas, are described as “knowledge as represented in informational perspectives and interpretations;” people refers to the “lives of others as represented in stories, biographies, videos, photographs, and audio;” objects is delineated as “artifacts as represented in the presentation, aesthetics, and descriptions of objects;” and physical is the “physicality in movement, touch, sights, sounds, and smells.”<sup>92</sup>

---

<sup>91</sup> Ronald A. Beghetto, “The Exhibit as Planned Versus the Exhibit as Experienced,” *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 57,1 (2014).

<sup>92</sup> Beghetto, “Exhibit Planned vs. Exhibit Experienced,” 2.

## Chapter Three: Methods

### Purpose:

The controversy around the narrative presented in *Asia in Amsterdam* illustrates the powerful effect that narrative can have, and the varying responses it may elicit. The purpose of this study is to examine the responses to *Asia in Amsterdam*, and apply the IPOP interpretive framework to one significant object featured in the exhibition. This study explores the reactions to *Asia in Amsterdam*, and alludes the complex alternative histories concealed within objects in the exhibition. This study addresses the questions: What was the controversy surrounding *Asia in Amsterdam*? What did responses to the exhibit look like on either side of the controversy? How could applying the IPOP interpretive method alter object interpretation, and by extension create a more inclusive narrative?

Interpretation of *Still Life with Beer Glass, Porcelain Dish, and Pepper* painted by Jan Jansz. van de Velde (III) in 1647 has the ability to delve into complicated clusters of cultural ideas about materialism and luxury, illusion and reality, trade and globalism. Three aspects of this painting were investigated in order understand the multidimensional aspects of the work, and to establish potential counter narratives. The aspects of the painting under investigation include, the status of the object as a luxury good, the painting as an object constructed from material goods, and certain items depicted in the painting.

### Approach:

Two different types of public reaction were analyzed for the purpose of this study. Posts by the Rijksmuseum on both the museum's official Facebook and Instagram pages were analyzed exclusively for the responses they elicited from the public. Additionally, reviews published by traditional media outlets and scholarly outlets were reviewed and examined.

Following the investigation of the controversy, one ‘significant’ object from the exhibition was selected and used to demonstrate how an existing interpretive framework (the IPOP method) might serve to demonstrate the plurality of any given object, and contribute to the development of alternative narratives.

Social Media

The responses to posts made by the Rijksmuseum on their both Facebook and Instagram pages were analyzed to gauge public response to *Asia in Amsterdam*. Only posts made by the Rijksmuseum related to *Asia in Amsterdam* were reviewed for public responses. A system of a priori coding was used to analyze responses to *Asia in Amsterdam* posts on Facebook and Instagram. The a priori codes were related to the IPOP interpretive framework. The coding system was separated comments based on whether the comments were reacting to ‘Ideas,’ ‘People,’ ‘Objects,’ or ‘Physical.’ The following table contains an example of a comment and how it was coded:

<b>Comment</b>	<b>IPOP Codes</b>	<b>IPOP Codes</b>	<b>Content Codes</b>
A spectacular painting, enjoyed viewing it.	Object		Positive
Too bad you only see one part of the history... Look beyond!	Ideas		Critical
will see it on the 20th			Visitation
Who is the Painter?			Other
I think it’s disturbing			Critical
Daring exhibition design, but it works. Bravo!	Physical		Positive
Love Dutch still lifes. I wrote my senior thesis on Clara Peeters last year. Glad to see you mentioned her here!	People	Object	Positive

Figure 2: Examples of Coding Scheme

As illustrated above, within the aforementioned framework, emergent coding was utilized. Emergent codes pertained to the sentiments and content expressed in comments, and included:

1. Positive
2. Critical
3. Other
4. Visitation

The ‘Visitation’ code was developed because many commenters expressed an urge to visit or attempted (via comments) to make plans to visit the exhibit; however, this does not constitute a reaction to the exhibit itself. Comments that were overly vague such as those containing only emojis, or those that only included only a ‘tag’ were not included for coding. Advertisements posted in comments were also excluded. In all, two hundred ninety social media comments were analyzed.

Additionally, all Rijksmuseum Instagram posts, beginning with the first post advertising *Asia in Amsterdam*, were investigated for the number of ‘likes’ that each post received. The number of ‘likes’ a given post receives is a snapshot of public opinion on the content of the post. Thus, separate averages were taken of the number of ‘likes’ received by Rijksmuseum posts specifically relating to *Asia in Amsterdam*, and the number of ‘likes’ received by other Rijksmuseum posts (not related to *Asia in Amsterdam*) from the day the first *Asia in Amsterdam* post appeared to the final day of the exhibit at the Rijksmuseum. Furthermore, word frequencies were analyzed for both Facebook and Instagram.

### Exhibition Reviews

Reviews were selected to fit into one of three a priori categories:

1. Critical
2. Admiring
3. Moderate/Descriptive

Two reviews from each of these categories were analyzed. Reviews were chosen for their fit into the categories of either critical, admiring, or moderate/descriptive. Additionally, only reviews written in English were considered. Further, reviews were selected from a variety of academic and popular media sources. Reviews were analyzed to determine:

- A. What was being criticized?
- B. What was being praised?
- C. What did those who offered neither harsh criticism nor high praise have to say about the exhibit?

### Methods

Document content analysis was used to analyze both social media postings and reviews. The nature of document analysis as “systematic and analytic, but not rigid,”<sup>93</sup> lends itself to a study wherein categories initially guide the study, but others are expected to emerge as research takes place. This aligns with the descriptive nature of this study.

### The IPO/IPOP Interpretive Framework

One significant interpretive method discussed by a number of scholars is the Ideas, People, Objects (IPO) model, also referred to as the Ideas, People, Objects, Physical (IPOP) model.<sup>94</sup> In the IPOP model, ideas are described as “knowledge as represented in informational perspectives and interpretations;” people refers to the “lives of others as represented in stories,

---

<sup>93</sup> Sharan B. Merriam, ed., *Case study research in education: a qualitative approach* (Jossey-Bass, 1988).

<sup>94</sup> Ronald A. Beghetto, “The Exhibit as Planned Versus the Exhibit as Experienced,” *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 57,1 (2014).

biographies, videos, photographs, and audio;” objects is delineated as “artifacts as represented in the presentation, aesthetics, and descriptions of objects;” and physical is the “physicality in movement, touch, sights, sounds, and smells.”<sup>95</sup>

The IPO framework was the result of an extensive visitor studies initiative at the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). The team at NMAI worked with a visitor studies specialist from the Smithsonian’s Office of Policy and Analysis, and gathered data over a period of one year. The outcome of the study was the creation of the IPO interpretive framework, which was conceived of as an innovative approach to setting up an exhibit development team, selecting the objects and arrangement for an exhibit, and conceptualizing how the objects are presented.<sup>96</sup> According to the research team, results from this third survey confirmed that the data demonstrated a pattern of “people” experiences, “idea” experiences, and “object” experiences.<sup>97</sup> This study highlighted exhibit developer’s innate tendency to take their personal responses and the opinions of their peers to be representative of visitor experiences.<sup>98</sup> The researchers behind the IPO method point to the framework as a useful means to identify one’s person subjectivity, and the importance on this recognition as a way to better serve more diverse audiences.<sup>99</sup>

After the publication of this research, more data accumulated and researchers found it necessary to add another dimension to the IPO model.<sup>100</sup> The added dimension was referred to as “Physical,” and the framework was renamed IPOP. The theory that drives the IPOP framework is

---

<sup>95</sup> Beghetto, “Exhibit Planned vs. Exhibit Experienced,” 2.

<sup>96</sup> Andrew J. Pekarik and Barbara Mogel, “Ideas, Objects, or People? A Smithsonian Exhibition Team Views Visitors Anew,” *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 53, 4 (2010).

<sup>97</sup> Andrew J. Pekarik and Barbara Mogel, “Ideas, Objects, or People? A Smithsonian Exhibition Team Views Visitors Anew,” *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 53, 4 (2010).

<sup>98</sup> Pekarik and Mogel, “Ideas, Objects, or People?”

<sup>99</sup> Pekarik and Mogel, “Ideas, Objects, or People?”

<sup>100</sup> Andrew J. Pekarik, James B. Schreiber, Nadine Hanemann, Kelly Richmond, and Barbara Mogel, “IPOP: A Theory of Experience Preference,” *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 57, 1 (2014).

based on a four-faceted understanding of the kind of experiences a person will prefer. In this theory “Ideas” represents an attraction to concepts and facts; “People” represents an affinity for human connection and personal stories; “Objects” denotes an fondness for “things,” aesthetics, and craftsmanship; and “Physical” indicates the appeal of movement, sound, and smell.<sup>101</sup>

IPOP is a flexible framework that is useful to curators and exhibit development teams in at least five ways. The first three ways in which this framework is useful relate to diversity. IPOP requires exhibit development teams to consider and appreciate how people differ. Applying the IPOP framework to an exhibit development process means considering the range of experience preferences across an intended audience. Awareness of this diversity inspires more careful consideration about what is presented and how to present it.<sup>102</sup>

Not only does the IPOP framework encourage exhibit developers to consider diversity at the outset of the planning process, it also establishes a scheme for appealing to diverse preferences. The IPOP framework can be easily visualized as a matrix, wherein all planned displays for an exhibit can be placed into one of the four IPOP categories of interpretive preference. Such a matrix helps exhibit developers identify and construct patterns, balance the types of interpretive experiences offered in the exhibit, and determine how multiple experiences can be incorporated into a display.<sup>103</sup>

The final diversity related benefit of IPOP involves a deeper understanding of visitors, which informs the exhibit development process. The IPOP model removes emphasis from the preferences of key decision makers, thus allowing more room for diverse interpretive methods, and inspiring a creative process aimed at fulfilling diverse roles. Other benefits of the IPOP

---

<sup>101</sup> Pekarik, et. al., “IPOP,” 5-7.

<sup>102</sup> Pekarik, et. al., “IPOP,” 18.

<sup>103</sup> Pekarik, et. al., “IPOP,” 19.

framework include its promotion of collaboration and group decision making, and its emphasis on developing what researchers have deemed “flip experiences.”<sup>104</sup> A “flip experience” is defined by Pekarik as a visitor’s strong reaction to a different type of experience than kinds that generally tend to attract that visitor.<sup>105</sup>

### Applying IPOP to *Asia in Amsterdam*

IPOP is a method of interpretation used mostly in history museums, like NMAI and the Canadian Museum of Civilization. There is no literature documenting the usage of IPOP in art museums; however, the concepts translate well. The *Asia in Amsterdam* exhibition was primarily “Object” centric when viewing it through the lens of IPOP; however, there were also components of “Idea” and “Physical,” whereas “People,” (i.e. personal stories) were mostly absent. The main components of “Physical” experience featured in the exhibit were those of scent and tactile experiences with earthenware. *Asia in Amsterdam* featured the scent of spices prominently in some areas of the exhibit. Strongly smelling spices like pepper, cinnamon, and nutmeg that all hail from the East were openly displayed so that visitors could readily experience such sought after wares. “Idea” was not a component that was visible throughout the exhibit. Rather, the concepts that *Asia in Amsterdam* sought to highlight were most readily available near the entry point of the exhibit, and in publications about the exhibit (brochures, social media postings, museum website, advertisements, etc.).

“Object” centered experiences were clearly the star of the show for *Asia in Amsterdam*, and people responded accordingly. For each post on both Facebook and Instagram made by the Rijksmuseum about *Asia in Amsterdam*, every positive comment by someone who had seen the exhibit, or was familiar with the works exhibited, related to the aesthetic value of the exhibit or

---

<sup>104</sup> Pekarik, et. al., “IPOP,” 18-20.

<sup>105</sup> Pekarik, et. al., “IPOP,” 9.

art work. Such comments used words like “beautiful,” “wonderful,” and “exquisite.” Other positive comments related mostly to a desire to see the exhibit.

When considering *Asia in Amsterdam* through the lens of IPOP, it immediately becomes clear how differently this exhibition may have looked had the curators utilized an interpretive framework designed to facilitate visitor experience and accessibility. As one Facebook commenter on 15 December 2015 put it, “If you already know a bit more of the historical links [between] Asia-Amsterdam, the exhibition was worth the effort...” Other commenters, and scholarly critics alike, pointed to another form of inaccessibility, or exclusion, in the exhibit. In such cases, it was the narrative of *Asia in Amsterdam* which came under fire, regarded as Eurocentric, exclusionary, and “one-sided.”

### Limitations

This study is limited in its application of the IPOP interpretive framework to only one object in the exhibit. This limitation exists due to time constraints on the study. Another limitation of this study is the sources of reviews used. All of the reviews examined were written and published in English, and often were published in U.S. based media outlets (i.e. *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*). One final limitation of this study is the extent of social media platforms used. The Rijksmuseum’s official Twitter page was not used for the purpose of this study because public posts for the timeframe in question were not accessible.

## Chapter Four: Discussion

### Asia in Amsterdam and Public Opinion

The curators of *Asia in Amsterdam* chose to focus on Amsterdam as a site of international commerce at the height of the Dutch Golden Age, which spanned roughly the seventeenth century. The narrative chosen for this exhibit revolved around the prominence of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), and the unifying theme for *Asia in Amsterdam* was one of luxury and exoticism. This exhibit featured nearly two hundred objects from the collections of sixty-eight lenders.

*Asia in Amsterdam* ignited a controversy amongst commentators that resulted in an array of both praise and criticism levelled at the exhibition. Reviews ranging from descriptive, to critical, to complimentary were published on a variety of platforms including newspapers, magazines, local news broadcasts, and academic outlets. The controversy also spread to social media platforms like Facebook, with several commenters posting negative reactions to *Asia in Amsterdam*'s master narrative.

### Asia in Amsterdam on Social Media

Of the two hundred ninety comments analyzed, twenty-eight responded to 'Ideas' presented by the exhibit; two responded to 'People' presented by the exhibit; one hundred nineteen responded to 'Objects' featured in the exhibit; and three responded to 'Physical' components of the exhibit.

Ideas	People	Objects	Physical	Positive	Critical	Other	Visitation
28	2	119	3	155	17	37	101

Figure 3: Social Media Comments, Coded

Comments wherein the subject was indeterminate were coded only as either Positive, Critical, Other, and/or Visitation. Such comments included "Fantastic!" "Exquisite!" and "Interesting."

This helped to gauge public reaction to the exhibit broadly, even when the specifics of what was reacted to were unclear. ‘Other’ was used wherein it was unclear as to whether or not the commenter took on a positive or critical tone, i.e. “I don't disagree with you that it's not really challenging.”

Commenters with ‘Ideas’ based reactions were significantly more likely than those expressing ‘Object’ based reactions to respond critically on social media. Thirty-nine percent of those responding to ‘Ideas’ expressed critical/negative sentiments; whereas, only six percent of those ‘Object’ responses indicated critical attitudes. Conversely, those with ‘Object’ reactions were much more likely to react positively than those with reactions in any other category.

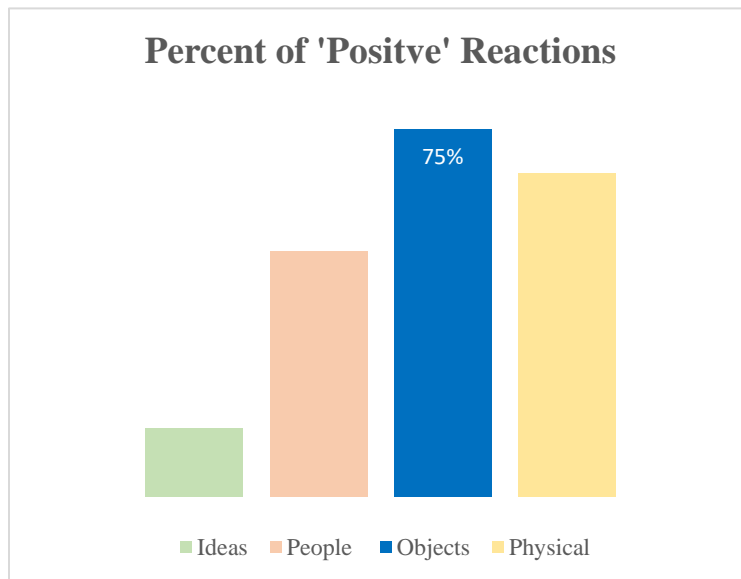


Figure 4: Social Media Comments, Percent Positive

### Instagram ‘likes’

The Rijksmuseum made their first Instagram post related to *Asia in Amsterdam 28* September 2015. The museum’s final post concerning the exhibit was made 18 January 2016. During this nearly four-month timeframe, the Rijksmuseum posted content related to *Asia in Amsterdam* fifteen times. The number of posting made by the Rijksmuseum that were unrelated

to *Asia in Amsterdam* during this same time was sixty-five. The Christmas day posting was not included in the average, as received more than seven thousand ‘likes’ and was therefore considered an outlier.

The Rijksmuseum’s Instagram posts related that to the exhibit received notably fewer ‘likes’ than its posts during the same period that pertained to other aspects of the museum. The average number of ‘likes’ received by the sixty-five considered Instagram posts was eight hundred-ninety-one. The average number of ‘likes’ received by all postings related to *Asia in Amsterdam* was six hundred-fifteen. The lowest number of ‘likes’ received by an *Asia in Amsterdam* post was three hundred-fifty-two; the highest was eight hundred forty-seven. The lowest number of ‘likes’ received by a post unrelated to *Asia in Amsterdam* was three hundred-forty-seven; the highest, not including Christmas day, was one thousand-six hundred-thirty-four. On average posts relating to *Asia in Amsterdam* garnered two hundred-seventy-six less ‘likes’ than other Rijksmuseum posts during the same period.

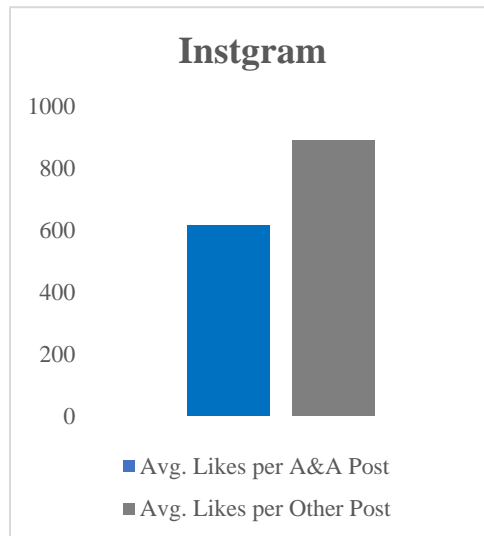


Figure 5: Average Likes per Instagram Post



When adjusted to include synonyms the most frequently occurring word was ‘see,’ followed closely by ‘beautiful.’



Figure 7: Social Media, Word Frequency Including Synonyms

The word ‘see’ and its synonyms (i.e. saw, seen, sight, watch, etc.) was always used in the context of seeing either the exhibit or a particular object featured in the exhibit. ‘See’ was used in a variety of ways, from past tense, to setting plans to see the exhibit or expressing a desire to see it. The expression of wanting to see the exhibit was not categorized as a response to the exhibit, as the commenter had not yet seen the exhibit. The frequency of ‘see’ and its synonym does indicate a level of excitement around *Asia in Amsterdam*. Of those who mentioned having already seen the exhibit, many also commented on its beauty, and generally had positive reactions. Others who expressed having seen the exhibit offered criticism and even in a few cases, indifference (i.e. “there is so much going on,” or “I don’t disagree with you that it’s not really challenging”).

#### Reviews of *Asia in Amsterdam*

Reviews were selected to fit into one of three a priori categories:

1. Critical
2. Complimentary
3. Moderate/Descriptive

Two reviews from each of these categories were analyzed. In the category of ‘Critical’ reviews, Claudia Swan’s “Early Modern Bling: Luxury, Art, Trade and Power in the Dutch Golden Age” and Dawn Odell’s “Review of *Asian in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Golden Age*” were analyzed. Both Swan and Odell are Art Historians and both of their respective reviews were published in academic outlets. The ‘Complimentary’ reviews investigated included a review published by the *Wall Street Journal* in April 2016 by Barrymore Lawrence Scherer, and a review authored by Sebastian Smee and published in the *Boston Globe* March 2016. Scherer has been an art and music critic for the *Wall Street Journal* for more than twenty years; whereas, Smee has a background in fine art and has been an art critic for the *Boston Globe* since 2008. Reviews that represented a more moderate stance on the exhibit were categorized as mostly ‘Descriptive’ and included Nina Siegal’s “How China Conquered the Dutch,” published by the *New York Times* October 2015, and Rose Kerr’s “Exhibition Review: Asia in Amsterdam,” published in *Burlington Magazine* February 2016. Siegal’s background is in fine arts and literature; she has contributed to the *New York Times* since 2012. Kerr is an Art Historian specializing in Chinese art, specifically ceramics. *Burlington Magazine* is monthly publication devoted to the fine and decorative arts.

Reviews were analyzed to determine:

- A. What was being criticized?
- B. What was being complimented?

C. What did those who offered neither harsh criticism nor high praise have to say about the exhibit?

Five of the six reviews that were analyzed used positive adjectives to describe the objects featured in the exhibit. Siegal’s review for the *New York Times* was the only one analyzed herein that avoided such terms.

<i>Critical</i>		<i>Complimentary</i>		<i>Moderate/Descriptive</i>	
Swan	Odell	Barrymore Lawrence Scherer	Sebastian Smee	Nina Siegal	Rose Kerr
dazzling	stunning	visual banquet	spectacular		only the very finest
precious	remarkably	extraordinary	wondrous		spectacular
gorgeous	expensive	intricate	gorgeous		refined
remarkable	artfully	dazzling	expensive-looking		majestic
	marvel	vivid	extraordinary		
		most beautiful	amazing		
		wonderful			
		thrilling			
		marvel			
		magnificent			
		scintillating			
		splendid			

Figure 8: Chart of Review Content

The aesthetic value of the *Asia in Amsterdam* was never called into question, even by the most critical of reviewers. All reviewers took the time to contextualize the exhibit with brief historical information about the period and about the types of objects represented in the exhibit.

Additionally, all reviewers resorted to featuring a description of at least one object on display in the exhibition.

The critical reviews published by Swan and Odell both offered at least some praise of *Asia in Amsterdam*. Swan applauded the curators of *Asia in Amsterdam* for the “tremendous

innovation to organize an exhibition focused on the Dutch Golden Age in which objects, not paintings, play the primary role.”<sup>106</sup> Whereas, Odell commended curators for the wide-ranging selection of objects and the breadth of the exhibit.

Though Swan and Odell offered certain compliments in their reviews, their respective tones were overwhelmingly critical. The table below highlights the main criticisms offered by both Swan and Odell.

**Critical**

<b>Swan (TLS)</b>	<b>Odell (CAA Reviews)</b>
Associations between luxury goods and power largely ignored.	Simplifies the variety and specificity of cultural environments through objects acquired meaning.
Selection of objects based only on aesthetics.	Focuses on a relatively brief moment.
Casual regard for historical and sociopolitical parameters.	Depicts a single point of reception (elite Dutch culture).
Objects suspended in a historical vacuum.	Construes Asia in the broadest of terms
Realities of trade, politics and warfare marginalized	Construed Europe in very narrow terms.
Violent acts of VOC agents minimized.	Suggests that simple love of luxury motivated the acquisition of objects.
Place of non-Dutch finery in Dutch political arenas unaddressed.	Not explicit whether taste for expensive/artful objects is equivalent to a desire for exotic and curious imagery.
Relationship between power and trade underplayed.	Terms “curious” and “exotic” not defined precisely.

Figure 9: Critical Reviews

The reviews of both the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Boston Globe* of *Asia in Amsterdam* in its Peabody Essex incarnation offered high praise for the installation. It is worthy of note that the *Asia in Amsterdam* as it appeared at the Rijksmuseum was different than the exhibit as it appeared at the Peabody Essex. The incarnations differed in several aspects, including the notable addition of more objects at the Peabody Essex. While *Asia in Amsterdam* at the

<sup>106</sup> Swan, “Early modern global bling,” 17.

Rijksmuseum featured one hundred seventy objects, the Peabody Essex’s show presented more than two hundred objects. Examples of the praise for *Asia in Amsterdam* offered by the complimentary reviews are included in the table below.

<i>Complimentary</i>	
<b>Barrymore Lawrence Scherer (Wall Street Journal)</b>	<b>Sebastian Smee (Boston Globe)</b>
Highlights the aesthetic and cultural legacy of this era.	Spectacular exhibition.
Demonstrates the influence of imports on Dutch arts and sciences.	Should be seen by art lovers, and everyone.
Probes the very nature of luxury.	Pretty much everything about it amazing.
Elegant interweaving of historical, social and aesthetic ideas.	
Wall texts and labels enhanced by other gallery features.	

Figure 10: Complimentary Reviews

The reviews offered by both the *New York Times* and *Burlington Magazine* represent more moderate stances on *Asia in Amsterdam*. The *New York Times* review fall neatly into the descriptive category, as it avoids adjectives that tend to carry value (i.e. beautiful, wonderful, amazing, disappointing, simple, underplayed). The *Times* uses its discussion of *Asia in Amsterdam* to explore the development of the exhibit rather than to offer either praise or critique. Alternatively, the review published by *Burlington Magazine* offers both praise and critique. The review from *Burlington Magazine* is considered to be moderate because it offers a balance of both praise and critique. Examples of what the moderate/descriptive reviews had to say can be found in the table below.

***Moderate/Descriptive***

<b>Nina Siegal (New York Times)</b>	<b>Rose Kerr (Burlington Magazine)</b>
Considers questions raised by exhibit.	Notes narrow focus of exhibit
Show was originally planned as a minor sidebar to a different exhibit	Asserts that exhibit makes a contribution to field
Notes links between PEM and the Netherlands.	Describes and compliments murals on gallery walls
Quotes curators about perceived appeal of exhibit.	Notes limitations of interpretive methods used for exhibit (introductory panels and concise labels)
Notes curator’s findings on how Western and Eastern consumers had different tastes.	Notes potential need for further instruction and guidance, and potentially further reading, including outside of the exhibit catalogue
	Categorizes and describes ‘spectacular’ exhibit highlights
	Applauds ‘rare’ opportunity to view objects included in exhibit

Figure 11: Moderate/Descriptive Reviews

*Still Life with Beer Glass, Porcelain Dish, and Pepper, Jan Jansz. van de Velde (III), 1647*

The application of the IPOP interpretive framework to one object featured in *Asia in Amsterdam* will further an understanding of how this framework may be applied to artistic objects in art museums. The IPOP method will be applied to only one object because, ideally the IPOP method does not begin with 170 preselected objects, and for the sake of practicality; individually analyzing the 170 objects shown at the Rijksmuseum’s incarnation of *Asia in Amsterdam* falls outside the scope of this study.

Three criteria were implemented in the selection of the work which would be analyzed to along the guidelines of IPOP. The first criterion was that the work, as displayed, feature minimal interpretation. The second criterion was that the object be ‘significant’ in the context of the exhibit. The third criterion was that the object have clear visual ties to the Netherlands, Asia, and the global commodity trade. Jan Jansz. van de Velde’s 1647, *Still Life with Beer Glass,*

*Porcelain Dish, and Pepper*, meets all of these criteria. The only information provided for this object briefly mentioned the painting's medium, listed some of the objects depicted in the painting, and reflected on the balance of the composition as a whole. *Still Life with Beer Glass*, was featured as one of curator Karina H. Corrigan's 'picks,' and is thus deemed a significant object in *Asia in Amsterdam*. Finally, *Still Life with Beer Glass* contains the coat of arms of Amsterdam as well as beer, chestnuts, and oysters that are likely local in origin, porcelain and silk from China, peppercorn from India, tobacco from the Americas, and many other deliberately positioned objects tying the work global trade and far flung regions of the world.

### I: Ideas

The objects chosen for display in *Asia in Amsterdam* were selected for their ability to convey the overarching *Idea* of 'Luxury.' The atmosphere of luxury within the Rijksmuseum's gallery space was compounded by specially commissioned murals to decorate the walls, and the rich scent of spices in certain areas of the exhibit. *Asia in Amsterdam* sought to communicate to visitors how taken the Dutch were with imported Asian luxury goods through a series of 170 luxurious object from the Dutch Golden Age.

As a premise for an exhibition, luxury is a rather rich one. 'Luxury' is a term that carries weight as much today as it did hundreds of years ago, when the objects featured in *Asia in Amsterdam* were shaped. The term carries both connotative and denotative meanings that color how an object of luxury may be perceived. Luxury implies status, exclusivity, expensiveness, and rarity, but also makes claims about desires and how desires differ from needs. There are clear connections between luxury and desirability, such that to claim an object or "service as a

‘luxury’ is also to make a claim about its ‘desirability.’”<sup>107</sup> Hence, to label a thing ‘luxurious’ is to attempt to induce the consumption of the thing.

Amongst scholars, there has been some debate as to the precise definition of a ‘luxury,’ though it is generally agreed upon that luxury goods are:

- Not mass goods
- Hard to procure (rare)
- Expensive
- Objects whose value is not measured in utilitarian terms
- Beyond the realm of practicality
- Those with particular or ‘special’ qualities
- Those which confer a sense of sophistication or cultivation upon the objects owner

Additionally, luxury has historically been associated with physical or sensory enjoyment. Luxury goods have generally been considered those “whose principal use is rhetorical and social” with symbolic value being more important than their intrinsic value.<sup>108</sup> The social dynamics of luxury have shaped societies throughout history in many ways, one of the most obvious examples being sumptuary laws implemented to restrict consumption of particular goods.

According to Christopher J. Berry luxury falls into four categories: sustenance, shelter, clothing, and leisure.<sup>109</sup> Van de Velde’s *Still Life with Beer Glass, Porcelain Dish, and Pepper* contains distinct representations of each of the categories outlined by Berry. In the category of sustenance depicts pepper and lemons. As these items are both produced in other parts of the

---

<sup>107</sup> Berry, *The Idea of Luxury*, 3.

<sup>108</sup> Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008) 38.

<sup>109</sup> Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

world (likely the Mediterranean, and India), they may be considered exotic, this exoticness contributing to their status as luxurious.<sup>110</sup> The category of shelter includes furnishings and utensils, like the marbled handled knife and the porcelain dish containing peppercorns. The porcelain dish, like pepper, hails from the East, and thus is of exotic origin. It is thin, delicate looking, and brightly colored. The fine detailing, delicate petal shaped rim, and gleaming glaze give the dish a sense of superior quality and communicate its importance, along with a sense of wealth. The reference to clothing, more specifically to cloth, is in the depicting of white silk drapery. Silk, like pepper, was an expensive import from an exotic land. Silk, a soft, light, and durable material, figured into the early articulations of fashionable new styles in Europe that flourished and intensified from the twelfth century onward.<sup>111</sup> The presence of leisure as a category of luxury can be observed in the placement of the tobacco and pipe. Tobacco represents both a luxury commodity of exotic origin, and recreational pastime.<sup>112</sup>

While the central *Idea* of *Asia in Amsterdam* was ‘Luxury,’ there was also an emphasis on the *Idea* of ‘Trade,’ specifically trade with Asia. The curators of *Asia in Amsterdam* presented a narrative which focused on luxury goods imported from Asia, the Dutch infatuation with these goods, and the impact of this infatuation on the aesthetic culture of the Netherlands. There was, however, room within this narrative for the *Idea* of ‘Trade’ to feature more prominently.

### P: People

The IPOP category of *People* is difficult to address in exhibitions of this nature. Because the objects were produced, traded, and consumed hundreds of years ago, it can be tricky to

---

<sup>110</sup> Grewe and Hofmeester, “Introduction,” *Luxury in Global Perspective*, 1.

<sup>111</sup> Beverly Lemire and Giorgio Riello, “East & West: Textiles and Fashion in Early Modern Europe,” *Journal of Social History*, 41, 4 (2008) 887-916.

<sup>112</sup> James Grehan, “Smoking and “Early Modern” Sociability: The Great Tobacco Debate in the Ottoman Middle East (Seventeenth to Eighteenth Centuries),” *The American Historical Review*, 111, 5 (2006) 1352-1377.

unearth specific stories about people that visitors could readily connect with. One way around this dilemma would have been for the curators to highlight the personal story of the artist who painted the murals for the gallery space.

Alternatively, and specifically concerning the van de Velde painting, there are three potential avenues with the potential to connect visitors with the people behind the object. The first, and most obvious, route is to connect the visitor to the artist, the second is related to the provenance of the painting (i.e. who owned it? to what end? how did the Rijksmuseum acquire it?), and the third is to attempt to engage with the historical actors who produced and moved the goods depicted in the painting (i.e. merchants, farmers, fishermen, craftsmen of various sorts, and potentially slaves).

Connecting visitors with the artist and the provenance of *Still Life with Beer Glass* is difficult due to the limited scope of information available. For example, it is known that Jan van de Velde (III) was born in Haarlem 1620; that he was a printmaker, painter, and illustrator who was active from at least 1639-1662; that his marriage registered twice, first on 7 June 1642, then again on and 4 April 1643; and that he was buried in the Westerkerk in Enkhuizen 10 July 1662. Similarly, it is known that *Still Life with Beer Glass* was painted in 1647, that it was sent to auction by the widow of F. Lemker-Muller in 1908, and that it was purchased at auction by Rijksmuseum on 7 July 1908 as lot #48.

The route with the most opportunity for examining some of the complex historical narratives related to the painting and to the exhibit largely, is the one that calls for engagement with the diverse array of historical actors involved in the trade of the items so carefully arranged in van de Velde's still life. Such an approach could have addressed some of the criticisms leveled at the *Asia in Amsterdam* by academics.

Methods for connecting visitors with those involved in the seventeenth century Dutch spice trade could include tracing lines of production, specifically exploring the lives and circumstances of those harvesting peppercorn, or delving into the lives of merchant ship crews, captains, and VOC Governors. Additionally, interpretation could have included reference to household inventories, which often included reference to spice stores, as a signifier of the esteem in which spices were held.

Alternatively, visitors could have had a *People* experience through direct exposure to the potters of Jingdezhen, China. Jingdezhen was the town in southeastern China which became famous during the Yuan dynasty for the production of blue and white porcelain.<sup>113</sup> Porcelain also allows for connections to be drawn to the Arabic traders who supplied the Jingdezhen potters with Iranian cobalt to create the vivid blues of the region's distinct blue and white porcelain.<sup>114</sup> On a more localized level, there was room to allow visitors to engage with the working conditions of Dutch hot houses, which grew citrus fruits, or those who worked growing and harvesting tobacco.

### O: Objects

As previously mentioned, IPOP's *Object* centered experiences were the primary experience offered for visitors to *Asia in Amsterdam*. The selection of objects was hailed as superb by academics, popular media reviewers, and the general public. Objects were complimented and highlighted by hand painted murals commissioned especially for the exhibit and painted by artist Kiki van Eijk. Additionally, galleries were hung in a manner that allowed visitors to stand back and take in the entire scope of larger objects. As a material object, van de

---

<sup>113</sup> Anne Gerritsen, "Chinese Porcelain in Local and Global Context: The Imperial Connection," eds. Bernd-Stefan Grewe and Karin Hofmeester, *Luxury in Global Perspective: Objects and Practices, 1600-2000* (Cambridge University Press: New York, 2016) 116.

<sup>114</sup> Gerritsen, "Chinese Porcelain in Context."

Velde's *Still Life with Beer Glass* measures sixty-five centimeters tall, and fifty-nine centimeters wide. It is painted using oils paint on an oak panel. The composition is both striking and aesthetically pleasing, the work as a whole is undeniably a representation of carefully arranged luxury objects contained within a luxury object.

P: Physical

*Physical* experiences, as described in IPOP were present in two discrete ways. This first was scent. The scent of once exclusive and highly commoditized spices like pepper, nutmeg, mace and ginger were present in certain areas of *Asia in Amsterdam*. Spices played a major role in the burgeoning wealth of Amsterdam, and their inclusion in the exhibit as a luxury good is important. In addition to the intermittent inclusion of spices, visitors were offered the opportunity to have a tactile experience with earthenware made in Europe prior to the development of techniques which attempted to emulate Chinese porcelain. Visitors were also given the opportunity to handle fine Chinese porcelain to compare it to the European earthenware. Both of these *Physical* experiences relate to van de Velde's *Still Life with Beer Glass*, as both pepper and Chinese porcelain feature prominently in the painting. A further method that could have offered a *Physical* experience relates to painting as a medium.

Paint and color represent a physical medium through which visitors may have a *Physical* experience. In this case oil paint on a wooden (likely oak) panel. Oil paint has a distinct texture when both wet and dry. It also rests differently on different materials (i.e. hard canvas, soft canvas, wood). Additionally, oil paint has particular properties which made it a desirable medium to work in. Allowing visitors to experience such properties and differences in a physical manner could have allowed for a *Physical* experience and granted visitors the opportunity to engage with color in the realm of global trade.

Oil painting in its modern form was developed in the Netherland during the fifteenth century.<sup>115</sup> The technique developed in the Netherlands had a distinct advantage over other painting methods in that the preparation coated each color pigment with an oily film, thus insulating it from reactions with other pigments. This innovation reduced the risk of color distortion and made the blending of color significantly less risky, paving the way for the use of a wider range of pigments.<sup>116</sup>

Oil painting sent shock waves through the world of color and painting in the early modern period. The ability of artists to mix and blend oil paints led to the identification of a set of colors considered ‘primary colors,’ red, yellow, blue, black, and white, which was codified around 1600.<sup>117</sup> Additionally, oil based inks required for printing [likely] originated with artists’ experimentation with oil paints.<sup>118</sup> A further impact of oil painting was the devaluation of pigments with intrinsically precious qualities.

Prior to the advent of chemical dyes, artists used pigments derived from a variety of natural sources including minerals, plants, insects, and seashells, some of which were rare and valuable. Several of these coloring agents were indigenous to the Americas, the Middle East, and Asia, including plant-based indigo, ultramarine from the precious Afghan mineral lapis lazuli, scarlet from snail shells, scarlet from cochineal, papyrus, cinnabar, and lac.<sup>119</sup>

The trade in colorants has a long history which back at least as far as the trade in minerals used by Assyrians to make turquoise tiles.<sup>120</sup> Color and trade in colorants have historically been a

---

<sup>115</sup> Gage, *Color and Meaning*, 14.

<sup>116</sup> Gage, *Color and Meaning*, 14.

<sup>117</sup> Gage, *Color and Meaning*, 14.

<sup>118</sup> Mitchell M. Harris, “The Expense of Ink and Wastes of Shame: Poetic Generation, Black Ink, and Material Waste in Shakespeare’s Sonnets,” Feeser, Goggin, and Tobin, eds., *The Materiality of Color*, 68.

<sup>119</sup> Elaine M. Gibbs, “Colors and Techniques of Eighteenth-Century Chinese Wallpaper: Blair house as a Case study,” Feeser, Goggin, and Tobin, eds., *The Materiality of Color*, 253.

<sup>120</sup> Feeser, Goggin, and Tobin, eds., *The Materiality of Color*, 6.

highly-regulated and commoditized. Contracts between artist and benefactor from fifteenth century Florence often prescribed certain quantities and qualities of ultramarine (the most expensive pigment) to be used in important areas of paintings.<sup>121</sup> According to Elaine Gibbs, the value of color operates on three levels: aesthetic, economic, and social.<sup>122</sup> The aesthetic value of color is its visual impact, regulated by vibrancy, hue, shade, tint, balance, and tone. The economic impact of color refers to the labor, capital, and expertise invested in the production and circulation of pigments. The social and cultural meanings of color refer to the understanding that “it is society that makes color, defines it, gives it meaning, constructs its codes and values...”<sup>123</sup> Examples of pigment and paint mixtures, for visitors to touch and observe would offer not only another *Physical* experience. It would also help visitors engage with connect color and its meaning to conceptions of luxury, global trade, and shifting interpretations of commodities.

---

<sup>121</sup> John Gage, *Color and Meaning: Art, Science, and Symbolism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999) 42.

<sup>122</sup> Gibbs, “Colors and Techniques of Eighteenth-Century Chinese Wallpaper.”

<sup>123</sup> Feeser, Goggin, and Tobin, eds., *The Materiality of Color*, 3.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the debate around the story presented in *Asia in Amsterdam*, and attempt to unpack the complex alternative histories concealed within objects in the exhibition through the application of an alternative method of interpretation, the Ideas, People, Objects, Physical (IPOP). The primary research questions which served to guide this inquiry included:

1. What was the controversy surrounding *Asia in Amsterdam*?
2. What did responses to the exhibit look like on either side of the controversy?
3. How could applying the IPOP interpretive method alter object interpretation, and by extension create a more inclusive narrative?

### Key Take-aways

- Public reactions can be hard to predict, it is important for curators to be aware of diverse perspectives.
- Art is always political, and will always elicit a variety of responses.
- IPOP is one example of a useful tool that can bring perceptions into sharper relief, and help curators to attempt to address potential controversies early on in planning.
- Social media has democratized criticism. Anyone can share their opinion widely, and museums must be ready to respond.

### The Controversy of *Asia in Amsterdam*

The controversy surrounding *Asia in Amsterdam* was not marked by an equal distribution of opposing opinions. Rather, the opinions of those writing for popular media sources overwhelmingly praised the exhibition for its beauty and the array of stunning objects presented. By in large, social media commenters shared the opinions of popular media reviewers, though

negative and critical comments appeared more frequently on social media than in such reviews. It was reviews published in academic outlets by art historians that were consistently critical of the exhibition.

The criticisms levelled at *Asia in Amsterdam* by academic reviewers fell primarily into three categories:

1. Oversimplification of social, political, economic, and cultural realities
2. Lack of context, specifically in terms of power dynamics and politics.
3. Limited availability of interpretive material

The criticisms levelled at the exhibition by users of social media tended to relate to a distrust of the perceived narrative of the exhibit as one which was Eurocentric, and which glossed over darker aspects of the object's histories. Additionally, social media users were occasionally displeased with the murals that were painted in the gallery spaces to accompany the exhibition.

The most pointed criticism of the exhibit came from art historians working in academia. This raises an interesting question about the nature of democracy and inclusivity in art museums. The curators of *Asia in Amsterdam* designed an exhibit that seems to have broadly appealed to its public audience, yet simultaneously alienated portions of the somewhat elite academic audience. Perhaps in this instance, exposure to stunningly crafted and beautiful original objects represents a form of democracy apart from the narrow scope of the narrative.

Those who were highly complementary of the exhibit, i.e. art critics for popular media outlets and the vast majority of social media commenters, frequently praised the diversity of objects featured in *Asia in Amsterdam*, the spectacular beauty and intricacy of the objects selected for exhibition, and presentation of 'luxury.' Those who responded to social media postings pertaining to the exhibit used word 'beautiful' more often than any other word in their

reactions, indicating that commenters perceived value in the experience of aesthetically impressive original objects, but did not necessarily connect to the narrative of the exhibit.

Overall, *Asia in Amsterdam* elicited strong, but varying, reactions from those expressing opinions through different types of outlets. This raises two questions: who are art exhibitions for? and what type of experience should be prioritized?

## Bibliography

- Appadurai, Arjun. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).
- Archibald, Robert. "Narratives For a New Century," *Museum News*, 77, 6 (1998) 33-42.
- Ballantyne, Roy, Jan Packer, and Nigel Bond, "Interpreting Shared and Contested Histories: The Broken Links Exhibition," *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 55, 2 (2012).
- Beghetto, Ronald A. "The Exhibit as Planned Versus the Exhibit as Experienced," *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 57,1 (2014).
- Beneki, Eleni, James P. Delgado, Anastasia Filippoupoliti, "Memory in the Maritime Museum: Objects, Narratives, Identities," *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 18, 4 (2012).
- Berger, Harry Jr. *Caterpillars: Reflections on Seventeenth-Century Dutch Still Life Painting* (Fordham University Press, 2011).
- Berry, Christopher J. *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- Boston Globe*
- Bourdieu, P. *Outline of a theory of practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).
- Brewer, John and Frank Trentmann, *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives: Historical Trajectories, Transnational Exchanges* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2006).
- Brook, Timothy. *Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008).
- Burman, Rickie. "Transforming the Jewish Museum: The Power of Narrative," *Jewish Culture and History*, 12, 1-2 (2010).
- Carey, Mark. *In the Shadow of Melting Glaciers: Climate Change and Andean Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- Christensen (1995) 21, as cited in Elizabeth S. Chilton, "Material Meanings and Meaningful Materials: An Introduction," *Material Meanings: Critical Approaches to the Interpretation of Material Culture* (University of Utah Press, 1999).
- Corrigan, Karina H. Jan van Campen, Femke Diercks and Janet C. Blyberg, *Asian in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Dutch Golden Age* (Yale University Press: New haven and London, 2015).
- David, Carol. "Elitism in the Stories of US Art Museums: The Power of a Master Narrative," *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 13, 3 (1999).
- Dobres, Marcia-Anne. "Of Paradigms and Ways of Seeing: Artifact Variability as if People Mattered," *Material Meanings: Critical Approaches to the Interpretation of Material Culture* (University of Utah Press, 1999).
- Ebert-Schifferer, Sybille "Art History and Its Audience: A Matter of Gaps and Bridges," *The Two Art Histories: The Museum and the University*, edited by Charles W. Haxthausen (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2002).
- Falk, John H. "An Identity-Centered Approach to Understanding Museum Learning," *Curator*, 49 (2) 2006.

- Feehan, C. "A Study on Contemporary Art Museums as Activist Agents for Social Change," *Doctoral dissertation* (University of Houston: Houston, TX, 2010).
- Findlen, Paula. *Early Modern Things: Objects and Their Histories, 1500-1800* (New York: Routledge, 2013).
- Gage, John. *Color and Meaning: Art, Science, and Symbolism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).
- Gell, Alfred. "Vogel's Net: Traps as Artworks and Artworks as Traps," *Journal of Material Culture*, 1, 1 (1996).
- Gerritsen, Anne. "Chinese Porcelain in Local and Global Context: The Imperial Connection," eds. Bernd-Stefan Grewe and Karin Hofmeester, *Luxury in Global Perspective: Objects and Practices, 1600-2000* (Cambridge University Press: New York, 2016).
- Gibbs, Elaine M. "Colors and Techniques of Eighteenth-Century Chinese Wallpaper: Blair house as a Case study," Feeser, Goggin, and Tobin, eds., *The Materiality of Color*.
- Glaser, Jane R. and Artemis A. Zenetou, *Museums: A Place to Work: Planning Museum Careers* (New York: Routledge 2000) 158.
- Glassie, Henry *Material Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).
- Grehan, James. "Smoking and "Early Modern" Sociability: The Great Tobacco Debate in the Ottoman Middle East (Seventeenth to Eighteenth Centuries)," *The American Historical Review*, 111, 5 (2006).
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
- Greene, Maxine. "Imagining futures: the public school and possibility," *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 32, 2 (2000).
- Grootenboer, Hanneke. *The Rhetoric of Perspective: Realism and Illusionism in Seventeenth-century Dutch Still-life Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
- Hanks, Laura Hourston. "Writing Spatial Stories: Textual Narratives in the Museums," *Museum Making: Narratives, Architectures, Exhibitions* (Routledge: New York, NY, 2012).
- Harris, Mitchell M. "The Expense of Ink and Wastes of Shame: Poetic Generation, Black Ink, and Material Waste in Shakespeare's Sonnets," Feeser, Goggin, and Tobin, eds., *The Materiality of Color*.
- Hicks, Dan and Mary C. Beaudry, *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- Kopytoff, Igor "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).
- Kreps, Christina. *Liberating Culture: Cross-cultural Perspectives on Museums, Curation and Heritage Preservation*, (New York: Routledge, 2003).
- Lemire, Beverly and Giorgio Riello, "East & West: Textiles and Fashion in Early Modern Europe," *Journal of Social History*, 41, 4 (2008).
- Lewis, Kacey. "The Impact of Socially Conscious Art Exhibitions: A Case Study of Art AIDS America," *Master's Thesis* (University of Washington: Seattle, WA, 2016).
- Lynskey, Angela Cartwright. "Countering the Dominant Narrative: In Defense of Critical Coursework," *Education Foundations* (2015).

- Macdonald, Sharon. "Expanding Museum Studies: An Introduction," *A Companion to Museum Studies* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2011).
- Mainardi, Patricia "Repetition and Novelty: Exhibitions Tell Tales," *The Two Art Histories: The Museum and the University*, ed. Charles W. Haxthausen (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2002).
- Manson, Rhiannon. "Cultural Theory and Museum Studies," *A Companion to Museum Studies* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2011).
- Merriam, Sharan B. ed., *Case study research in education: a qualitative approach* (Jossey-Bass, 1988).
- Mortaki, S. "Key Issues Facing Art Museums in the Context of Their Social Role," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 2, 16 (2012).
- New York Times*
- Peixoto de Alencar, Valeria. "Beyond Museum Walls: Visual Narratives Through Images and History," *International Journal of Education Through Art*, 12, 2 (2016).
- Pekarik, Andrew J. and Barbara Mogel, "Ideas, Objects, or People? A Smithsonian Exhibition Team Views Visitors Anew," *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 53, 4 (2010).
- Pekarik, Andrew J. James B. Schreiber, Nadine Hanemann, Kelly Richmond, and Barbara Mogel, "IPOP: A Theory of Experience Preference," *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 57, 1 (2014).
- Perez, Louis A. Jr. *Winds of Change: Hurricanes and the Transformation of Nineteenth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).
- Protschky, Susie. "Dutch Still Lifes and Colonial Visual Culture in the Netherlands Indies, 1800-1949," *Art History*, 34, 3 (2011).
- Rice, Danielle. "The "Rocky" Dilemma: Museums, Monuments, and Popular Culture in the Postmodern Era," *Critical Issues in Public Art: Content, Context, and Controversy* (New York: Harper Collins, Icon Editions, 1993).
- Rijksmuseum, "Object Data for *Still Life with Beer Glass, Porcelain Dish, and Pepper*, Jan Jansz. van de Velde (III) 1647." <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.6366>
- Sandell, R. "Social Inclusion, the Museum and the Dynamics of Sectoral Change," *Museums and Society*, 2003.
- Schiebinger, Londa. *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
- Schmidt, Benjamin. *Exoticism: Geography, Globalism, and Europe's Early Modern World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).
- Schlereth, Thomas J. *Cultural History and Material Culture: Everyday Life, Landscapes, Museums* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992).
- Swan, Claudia "Luxury, art, trade and power in the Dutch Golden Age: Early modern global bling," *Arts*, TLS Feb. 26 (2016).
- Tilley, Chris et. al. *The Handbook of Material Culture* (London, UK: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2006).

Tötösy De Zepetnek, Steven, Asunción López-Varela Azcárate, Haun Saussy, and Jan Mieszkowski. "Introduction to New Perspectives on Material Culture and Intermedial Practice." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13, 3 (2011).

*Wall Street Journal*

Witcomb, Andrea. *Re-Imagining the Museum* (New York, Routledge, 2003).

Whitehead, Christopher "Toward Some Cartographic Understanding of Art Interpretation in Museums," Ed. Juliette Fritsch, *Museum Gallery Interpretation and Material Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

Woodall, Joanna. "Laying the Table: The Procedures of Still Life," *Art History*, 35, 5 (2012).

Zolberg, Vera L. "An Elite Experience for Everyone: Art Museums, the Public, and Cultural Literacy," *Museum Culture: Histories Discourses Spectacles*, editors Daniel J Sherman and Irit Rogoff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).