

Museums between Enlightenment and Romanticism. Early nineteenth century roots and modern practices

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Abstract

The early history of the three large National Museums in Leiden, the Netherlands, is characterized by Enlightenment principles such as education, instruction and foremost rationalism. However, it would be a mistake to think that the history of these museums can be adequately described by referring to enlightened, rationalist ideas only. Partly as a reaction on enlightened rationalism the Romantic movement developed at the end of the eighteenth century. It is argued that the nineteenth century history of the three large national museums in Leiden can best be understood as a process influenced both by reason and structure as well as by irrationality and 'the absence of structure'. It is most likely that modern museum practices are also influenced by the two strong European intellectual movements mentioned above. The case of the Golden Helmet, a Roman helmet found in 1910 in the swamp of the Peel region, serves as an example of how old museums can learn from their own past and apply these lessons to present-day museum practices. In collecting, exhibiting and cooperation with local partners, it is better to acknowledge a tension between reason and emotion, instead of a development towards more rationalism.

Introduction

The three large National Museums in the small Dutch town Leiden were and still are firmly anchored in that powerful intellectual movement that we call the eighteenth century Enlightenment. Although all three were founded in the beginning of the nineteenth century, eighteenth century ideas dominate the mission statements of the three bastions of scholarship in the Dutch museum landscape. The National Museum of Antiquities was founded in 1818, the National Museum of Natural History in 1820 and the National Museum of Ethnology in 1837 (although some authors trace the origin of the Museum of Ethnology back to 1816, when the Royal Cabinet of Rarities in The Hague was founded (EFFERT 2008). Humanism, universalism and a strong belief in rationalism as a way to improve our knowledge of nature and culture were seen as important guidelines for the new museums. However, is it justified to describe the history of the Leiden museums (and many other museums) – which were so close to an academic, scholarly frame of reference – by means of reason and rationalism alone? In this article I argue that although the official policy papers, research plans and publications are full of, explicit and implicit, references to 'enlightened' ideas the reality of museum practices may show a completely different picture. Keeping this in mind, may give us some ideas on what to do with our collections, how to make our old collections more operational in a new, contemporary context.

Museums and the Enlightenment

For the very beginning the three national, 'Leiden', museums had strong ties with the University. The collections of the National Museum of Antiquities grew out of the University's collection of antiquities and coins, and for a long time the museums had to report directly to the Broad (*Curatorium*) of the university. There was however also a direct relationship to the ministry, and sometimes even the King, over passing the university. Particularly the Museum of Natural History and the Museum of Antiquities had a strong interest in scientific research and were therefore closely linked to the university (EFFERT 2008, 191).

A good example of how the founding of the national museums was rationalized - what kind of arguments were used - can be a memorandum of Philip Franz von Siebold, the founding father of the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden, in which he pleaded for setting up an ethnographic museum:

“The human being, in his many-sided development under foreign climes, is therefore the chief subject matter of an ethnographic museum. It provides an invigorating, instructive and, therefore, useful material enabling the acquisition – whilst remaining on national soil – of knowledge about inhabitants of far away countries and the study of their particular characteristics.

Yes, it is even a moral and religious duty to busy ourselves with our fellow men and to learn to detect his good qualities, and thus to become more tolerant of his strange external appearance (which, without us knowing quite why, may even repel us), and help us to become closer to him” (cited in TER KEURS 2005, 17).

‘Instruction’, ‘acquisition of knowledge’ are typical late eighteenth century Enlightenment ideals. The ‘many-sided development’ of human societies (we would now say ‘cultural diversity’) is a slightly different matter, but I will come back to that later.

The ideals of instruction and education, combined with a strong belief in universal humanism, were closely linked with an interest in the Classical World. The Classical World set the example. Classicism became dominant in the European building tradition, since the Greeks and the Romans had, according to prevailing ideas, found the correct proportions for a building. A fine nineteenth century example of this is the new building of the British Museum, still fully functional at the moment. Museums, but also other buildings such as many *Palais de la Justice* in France were built as Roman temples. As if they had to replace churches. A notably example of an attempt to replace churches and religion by means of architectural structures in the classical style is the Pantheon in Paris. After 1789 the French revolutionaries were in need of new heroes to worship, particularly heroes who were a good example of the superiority of reason over religion. The Pantheon offered a place to honor the people who had been instrumental in stimulating the revolution. Until today the remains of ‘Great Frenchmen’ are put down in this secular temple of reason and intellect. It is of interest to know that the Pantheon was built on a site that was formerly occupied by a church (SHORTO 2008).

Although the French revolutionaries, up to Napoleon Bonaparte, justified their actions as coming straight from enlightened rationalism, they also evoked strong sentiments in other directions. The Terror and the imperialism of the French in the period 1789 to 1815 estranged many people from the ideals of the revolution. The way the French forced their ‘enlightened’ truth on the rest of the world, evoked reactions that, among other things, gave cultural diversity a more important place in the history of ideas than intended by many Enlightenment thinkers. The revolutionaries were convinced that their model of the ideal society could be applied to the whole world (Napoleon used it as a reason to invade Egypt, see STRATHERN 2007). When, at the end of the eighteenth century the German Romantic Movement became a forceful reaction to the French revolution, ideas about the specific characteristics of particular cultures became an important part of the intellectual landscape. Two heralds of the new times to come, reacting on enlightened rationalism were Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788) and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). I will come back to the ideas of these two men below.

How crucial Enlightenment principles such as rationalism, classification, objectivity and progress were for European culture, even throughout the whole of the nineteenth century, is also stressed by the historian James Sheehan, who writes:

“Like the eighteenth century, the nineteenth was an age of collections, encyclopaedias, and dictionaries, which sought to bring together and classify knowledge of all sorts. ... [It concerned a] systematic study of the world. People in the nineteenth century wanted to chart every inlet, assemble every ancient text, create

grammars for every language, identify every species, explore every corner of the earth. Museum directors wanted to display a representative work by every great artist, zookeepers hoped to have every animal no matter how exotic, botanists every plant" (SHEEHAN 2000, 151).

The quest for antiquities and Romanticism

The first director of the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden, Caspar Reuvers (1793–1835) (who was also the first Professor in Archaeology in the world), was also a child of the Enlightenment.

"For Caspar Reuvers' generation the Classics formed a completely self-evident part of daily life, of personal development and schooling, of society's institutions, and – through neo-classicist architecture – also of the image of government, academic and cultural buildings in the towns" (HOIJTINK 2009, 6; Translation P.t.K.).

Closely associated with the University the museums from the very beginning had a scientific profile. Research was considered to be of the utmost importance, so the museums contributed strongly to the image of Leiden as the centre of scholarship in Holland. All three founding fathers of the large Leiden museums also published important scholarly works and in all three museums scientific research remained important through their histories.

There was a strong belief in the positive effects of rationality for society, which also had a large impact on the industrialization. This can be illustrated by a citation from a lecture held in Berlin by the German industrialist Werner von Siemens (1816–1892).

"And so, gentlemen, let us not get sidetracked, we continue to believe that our research and our inventiveness brings humanity at a higher level of civilization, ennobles her, ..., that it will lessen hardships, banish illnesses, enlarge a joy in life, and that it will make humanity better, happier and more content with her faith" (cited in SAFRANSKI 2009, 304; Translation P. t. K.).

However, this belief in progress – ultimately reached through rational means - was already challenged since the days of René Descartes (1596–1650). The moment the ratio became a leading principle in European culture, an anti-rationalist counter-movement in various forms appeared. At the end of the eighteenth century these undercurrents took the shape of the Romantic Movement.

Isaiah Berlin paid ample attention to these fascinating undercurrents in European thought by asking attention for the works of Vico, Hamann and Herder (see BERLIN 2000, 2001). This undercurrent of anti-rationalism and finally Romanticism gained strength, as I mentioned above, in the period after the French revolution, since many people saw enlightened ideas as the cause of the violent period that followed the revolution. The end of the eighteenth century has been crucial in this respect. While Immanuel Kant formulated the apotheosis of rationalism in his three *Kritik* (Critics), in 1781, 1788 and 1790, the Counter-Enlightenment (a term first used by Isaiah Berlin) was already well under way. Kant's friend Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788) became one of his most influential opponents, although the two friends continued to respect each other throughout their lives. Hamann argued that Kant was fundamentally wrong in classifying the world and even knowledge itself in such a rigid way. According to Hamann this resulted in a distorted view of reality, in which there was not enough attention for religion or feelings and emotions. Isaiah Berlin (2000, 272–273) formulated it as follows:

"Hamann rose in revolt against the entire structure of science, reason, analysis – its virtues even more than its vices. He thought the basis of it altogether false and its conclusions a blasphemy against the nature of man and his creator; and he looked for evidence ... in the empirically ... perceived facts themselves, in direct observation of men and their conduct, and in direct introspection of his own passions, feelings, thoughts, way of life".

Another issue was the claim that enlightenment ideas are universally valid. Not only Kant's analysis of human knowledge, but also his moral principles as formulated in *Kritik der Praktischen Vernunft* (1788) were applicable, according to him, to the whole world, to all cultures. Universality was the aim, diversity was the loser. Here, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), another German thinker, strongly argued in favor of attention for what we would now call cultural diversity, stressing the importance of local differences in languages and myths and legends. With this he led the foundations for disciplines such as anthropology and linguistics. And he did this before Kant published his famous three critical works. We should keep in mind what Von Siebold mentioned in his founding statement of the Museum of Ethnology in Leiden (cited above): The 'many-sided development' of human societies. It seems to come straight from Herder.

Both Hamann and Herder can be seen as the founding fathers of the Romantic Movement, in particular the German 'Frühromantik', with writers such as the Schlegel brothers (Friedrich and August Wilhelm), Ludwig Tieck, Novalis, Fichte and Schleiermacher (see SAFRANSKI 2009). All this took place in the revolutionist period of the last decade of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Napoleon developed from a hero into a villain, when stability was threatened, when the seeds were sown for European nationalism.

In short, Romanticism is characterized by an "absence of structure" (BERLIN 2001 [1999], 134), an acknowledgement that life cannot be grasped by system builders, that life and culture are fundamentally chaotic. Secondly, the Romantics did not believe in one ideal society that could be exported to other parts of the world as well. They had attention for folk stories, for language diversity and for local cultural differences. The individuality of a culture was found to be important, not the universality of one ideal model. Particularly in literature these two characteristics led to an interest in a part of human life that had been grossly ignored by eighteenth century rationalism: an interest in unconscious dark forces.

"There is no doubt, whatever else may be said about romanticism, that it did put its finger upon something which classicism had left out, upon these unconscious dark forces, upon the fact that the classical description of men, and the description of men by scientists or scientifically influenced men ... does not capture the whole of man. It recognised that there were certain aspects of human existence, particularly the inward aspects of human life, which were totally left out, so that the picture was distorted in a very violent degree" (BERLIN 2001 [1999], 138–139).

It will come as no surprise that "Kant hated romanticism. He detested very form of extravagance, fantasy, what he called *Schwärmerei*, any form of exaggeration, mysticism, vagueness, confusion" (BERLIN 2001 [1999], 68).

Let us go back to museums, particularly to the Leiden museums which are so clearly a product of the early nineteenth century. I already mentioned the first director of the National Museum of Antiquities, Caspar Reuvens. As an enlightened humanist he actively developed the museum for the education and learning of the people. In his view all antiquities, including Indonesian ones, should be part of his universal museum. In the archive of the museum there is a drawing made by Reuvens in which he sketched his ideal museum,¹ with the Javanese statues from the Netherlands East Indies as the centre of attention.²

¹ RMO/ARA 324, 15.1.1/1, 89.

² The Javanese antiquities were transferred to the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden in 1903. Due to a change in policy the non-European antiquities were assigned to the Ethnology Museum and the antiquities of the cultures that were seen as the 'glorious' predecessors of European culture (Mesopotamia, Greek, Roman) remained at the Antiquities Museum.

It is not clear what Reuvers knew about the early Romantic movement in Germany and other European countries, but Friedrich Schlegel (one of the main representatives of the 'Frühromantik') wrote a study on Greek Poetry and Myths (published in 1797). We don't know (yet) if and how well Reuvers knew Schlegel, but somehow the ideas of the Romantic movement must have been in the air, especially since the post-Napoleonic era struggled with the formation of a new stability. And although the Romantics did not offer the required stability, through Herder's legacy they did offer an appreciation for local cultures, for the countryside, for myths of origin which formed the basis of nineteenth century nationalism (and *Blut und Boden*). This 'localization of culture' was an important element of the Romantic movement.

So how rational and how planned was the formation of collections for the new Museum of Antiquities? Or was there more "absence of structure" than we are so far willing admit?

Reuvers certainly did his best to rationalize all his acquisitions, but did the reality of collecting always follow Reuvers' ideals? No, it did not. Reuvers had agents in the field (in Italy, Greece, Egypt and Tunisia) and he instructed them thoroughly about what to collect for the museum. He certainly had clear ideas on what the new museum should look like and what its purpose should be. One of Reuvers' agents in the field was Jean Emile Humbert (1771–1839), a Dutchman who always wrote his letters in French, because he had difficulties with writing in Dutch. Being of an upper class family he had been raised with the French language, which was quite normal at the time. Humbert worked for Reuvers in Tunisia, but his later trips for the museums were mainly in Italy. Reuvers wanted Humbert to travel on to Tunisia again, but somehow Humbert managed several times to postpone the trip. In two occasions we know why he did not continue his trip.

1. He was informed that the Dutch consul in Tunisia saw him as a threat, since there was a rumor that Humbert's final aim was to become the new consul. And the Dutch consul wanted his own son to succeed him. Humbert decided to avoid a confrontation and stayed in Italy, not informing Reuvers of the real reason (HALBERTSMA 1995, 63–64).
2. At another occasion, some years later, Reuvers again had to insist to Humbert that he had to continue to Tunisia and again Humbert did not react the way Reuvers wanted. This time the reason was a relationship with a woman. Reuvers heard the rumor in Leiden and wrote a letter to Humbert informing him what he had heard. At the same time he politely informed Humbert that he was not the one to have spread the rumor (HALBERTSMA 1995, 71–72, 81).

These rather unscholarly reasons for not doing what his scholarly master wanted him to do did however result in the purchase, by Humbert in Italy, of a great Egyptian collection and a great Etruscan collection for the museum. At a third occasion Humbert bought a collection without the permission of his boss in Leiden. Reuvers and the minister were furious. However, this unscholarly behavior of an agent in the field gave the National Museum of Antiquities some collections that are still among the best in the world.

Humbert's actions show that he was certainly not a true rationalist, solely guided by enlightened principles. He was not like Alexander von Humboldt, who seemed only to have lived for "measuring the world" (KEHLMANN 2005). In the beginning of their cooperation Humbert and Reuvers had a good relationship, but later a distance was felt between Humbert's circumstances in the field and Reuvers' academic position. Reuvers had no real feeling with the situation in the field. And Humbert had his own problems. His first wife died at a young age and their daughter died a few years later. When finally he met Margarita Terrini, the Italian girlfriend Reuvers wrote about in his letter, he was not allowed to marry her since he was a Protestant and she a Catholic. We know that Humbert was, at times, an emotional and melancholic man, and Halbertsma concludes his study on Humbert with the observation that "European romanticism had reached North Africa" (HALBERTSMA 1995, 152–154).

“The image of the ruin as an illustration of the nullity of human efforts fascinated Humbert” (HALBERTSMA 1995, 156). This is indeed the attitude of a true Romantic.

Collecting ethnographic objects and the absence of structure

Collecting in the field often appeared to be less systematic than the official reports make us believe. To understand the practice of collecting one needs to have letters, diaries and other unofficial documents. These usually show a more reliable image of what actually happened in the field. We are then confronted to many examples of the discrepancy between official plans and actual reality. Although collectors do not always openly report all the relevant facts in their writings (not even in their personal notes), there is ample evidence that political circumstances, manipulations of local sellers and middlemen had a big influence on the collecting practices. Western collectors were strangers in the countries where they operated, so they needed at least some local support.

As in the quest for antiquities, in ethnographic collecting many examples can be found of selective collecting in the early nineteenth century (see HARDIATI & TER KEURS 2005; TER KEURS 2007). The early collections from the Netherlands East Indies (now Indonesia), stored in the National Museum of Ethnology under serial numbers 1 and 16, are good illustrations of how haphazard collecting took place. Again we have to start with a reference to Napoleon. In 1815, after the Battle of Waterloo, the French revolutionary and imperial periods came to an end. People longed for stability and the Congress of Vienna redefined the map of Europe. North of France a strong state was intended, combining Belgium and the Netherlands in one Kingdom. One of the princes of Orange was installed as the new King William I. Nationalism, and inevitably competition between nation states, became one of most powerful driving forces of the nineteenth century and the new Dutch King was very much aware of that. He wanted to create a powerful state with colonies and with national museums owning collections from all over the world, to show the glory of the state to the people. The three large Leiden museums were all three founded under the patronage of William I. Reuvens (Antiquities), Temminck (Natural History) and Von Siebold (Ethnology) could never have started ‘their’ museums without the support of the King. William I also founded, in 1820, the *Natuurkundige Commissie*, the Natural Science Committee. The members of this committee traveled around in the Dutch colonies in the period 1820–1836. Conditions were harsh. Most expedition members died because of illnesses or violence. Medical care, which greatly improved in the course of the nineteenth century, was still far from good and most of the archipelago was still unknown area. Contact with the local population was short and usually superficial and knowledge about the people the expedition members encountered was very limited. As a consequence, one can hardly speak of any systematic collecting.

Another issue hampered the systematic gathering of ethnographic objects. None of the expedition members was a professional anthropologist. The academic discipline anthropology did not yet exist and scientists who traveled were usually geographers, zoologists or botanists. Ethnography was done by several members of the natural science expeditions as something on the side. None of the reports (TEMMINCK 1839–1844; MÜLLER 1857) of the committee’s activities in the Netherlands East Indies contain any clear description of when certain objects were collected and under what kind of circumstances (SEDYAWATI & TER KEURS 2005, 26). The main focus was on specimens of natural history, not on ethnography.

Salomon Müller (1804–1864) was the only European, of many, who survived the expeditions of the committee. He was a German natural scientist who entered Dutch colonial service to do scientific work in the colonies. He published, as an editor, the ethnographic notes of the expeditions separately (in 1857), but the material he presented had already been compiled by Temminck in his earlier, official report (1839–1844). It was information that was gathered by many different members of the expeditions. Nobody but Müller had survived to write about their experiences. Unfortunately, with only

Müller's compilation of notes it remains impossible to reconstruct the collecting circumstances of the museum's earliest ethnographic collections from the Netherlands East Indies. Müller's name did however remain firmly anchored in the documentation of the Museum of Natural History (see eg. JANGOUX & DE RIDDER 1987). He probably gave priority to the natural sciences, as it was called in those days.

Müller also reports on early collecting on the south coast of New Guinea, visited in 1828.

"There were hours of communication in sign language – the Moluccan interpreters did not understand the local language – which appeared to go well until the expedition members decided to return to their boat because night was falling. The local people tried to prevent the expedition members from leaving in their longboat, and when this failed, they began to throw spears at them. The expedition shot at them, but without killing anyone. The group of local inhabitants ran into the forest in fear, some of them leaving behind their spears, dug into the mud. The members of the expedition returned to the bank to retrieve these abandoned weapons" (SEDYAWATI & TER KEURS 2005, 27).

Unfortunately, the weapons that were collected during this incident can not be identified in the New Guinea collection of the Ethnology Museum. Maybe they never reached the museum.

Whatever the details, the general picture is that the practice of early nineteenth century collecting for museums had more in common with irrationality, coincidence, politics and adventure than with rational planning, scientific priorities and objectivity. The tensions between the Enlightenment and Romanticism, between reason and emotions, between objective truth and politics, between universals and cultural differences, between system and "the absence of structure" (BERLIN 2001 [1999], 134) are clearly present in the history of collecting.

New practices for old museums

How can we use the observations I made so far for present day museum practices? Is it still of interest to know what our roots are made of? Shouldn't we look at the future instead of the past? With an example of a recent museum practice I want to show how useful, also in the present-day situation, it can be to be aware of the tensions between Enlightenment and Romanticism, between structure and chaos, between reason and emotions, or between cultural uniformity and cultural diversity.

In 2010 it is a hundred years ago that the *Peelhelm* was found, close to the small Dutch village Helenaveen (at present nearly 900 inhabitants). The *Peelhelm* is locally called the *Golden Helmet*, but in reality it is made of thin gilded silver. The helmet is very fragile and it can hardly have been used in battle, because it would have been useless as protection for the head. Its style is clearly one of Roman military helmets and the inscription incised in it confirms this observation. It says that the helmet "was made by Marcus Titus Lunamis, using nearly 370 grammes of silver sheets. Its owner belonged to the sixth cavalry unit of the Equites Stablesiani. On the right side of the helmet cap it says Stablesia VI" (HALBERTSMA 2009, 178; also see POULS 2006, 25). The helmet was found with some other objects, among which were coins dated from 315 to 319 AD. So the disposition of the helmet in the swamp of the Peel (the name of the region) probably took place in or shortly after the year 319 AD. We do not know exactly why the helmet was deposited in the swamp in the Peel. At that time the area must have been difficult to cross and even for Roman soldiers it might not have been a safe place to go through. For a long time the prevailing hypothesis was that a Roman soldier left the army at the Rhine after successfully serving in it for many years. As a farewell gift he was given the *Golden Helmet*, but in the Peel swamp he drowned and his precious possessions sank away to be buried for the next 1600 years. Recently, another hypothesis was put forward. It could be that the helmet, and the accompanying objects, was in fact ritually deposited as a thanksgiving to the Gods since its owner had successfully completed his military service (VAN DRIEL-MURRAY 2006, 43–45).

The *Peelhelm* was found in 1910 by a local peat-cutter, named Gabriël (Gebbel) Smolenaars. He exhibited the helmet in his house and allowed people to see it for a small entrance fee. After some time Smolenaars became uncomfortable with the idea that burglars could also try to steal the helmet and therefore he seemed relieved that he could sell the object to the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden, for 1200 guilders (at that time an enormous amount). In fact, the helmet had soon been identified as an object of national importance and it was felt as logical to make it part of the national collection of antiquities. Since then, it has been on display in Leiden.

The helmet was effectively separated from the region where it was found. There was no contact between the Peel and the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden and the local interest in the object was seen as marginal to the national policies regarding antiquities and cultural heritage. However, the local people did not forget the helmet. A hotel/restaurant in Helenaveen was called *The Golden Helmet* and the local village centre was given the same name. On the bar in the village centre a modern motorcycle helmet lies, colored with gold paint. In the adjacent room a copy of the helmet is situated in a showcase and everywhere one sees posters with a photograph of the original helmet. The spot where the helmet was found in 1910 is marked with a stone monument.

The village Helenaveen finds itself in an underdog position. It is small and has little financial means by itself to make a strong profile to the neighboring villages and towns. However, there is a strong sense of belonging to one community. In 2009 Helenaveen was chosen as the 'Greenest' village of the Netherlands by Entente Florale, a national competition on how local people deal with their natural environment. In the report of the jury it was explicitly stated that "the inhabitants are very involved in the reconstruction of the area" (*De bewoners zijn zeer betrokken bij de reconstructie van het gebied*). And they are visibly proud of that. The inhabitants are very active in promoting Helenaveen and they also succeed in finding political support for that. As a result of this strong sense of belonging to the village – a "localization of culture" – the village counsel approached the National Museum of Antiquities with a request to get the *Peelhelm* on loan in 2010. The request was supported by a letter from the Mayor of Deurne (Helenaveen is part of the municipality of Deurne) and by mentioning other politicians such as the former commissioner of the Queen in the province.

All this triggered local competition. Within a few months there were, apart from Helenaveen, another three loan requests (from Deurne, Asten and Venlo) and it soon became apparent the museum could not hide behind the aloofness that is so characteristic for enlightened rationalism. It would have been easy to refuse on grounds of insufficient climate conditions or security procedures, but such a decision would be contradictory with recent national and provincial policies in which local cultural identities are given their proper value. It would also move the National Museum of Antiquities in a position of a conservative, national, aloof and imperialistic institution with the right to claim objects of national importance, but not sharing them with the regions where the objects came from. In short, it would – in the present political circumstances – force the museum in a defensive position. At the same time the museum has the responsibility to take care of the national collection of antiquities and it has the obligation to be critical with loan requests "in the interest of the objects". After all, the ministry finances the museum to curate collections of national importance in a professional manner.

Instead of flatly refusing to lend the *Peelhelm* to the region, the museum of antiquities choose to start talks with all parties involved. Apart from climate and security conditions the problem of local competition was clearly present in the talks. However, finally a decision was reached and the museum could announce that Helenaveen would get the *Peelhelm* on loan as the first venue and the Limburgs Museum in Venlo would be the second venue. The National Museum of Antiquities will help Helenaveen to create the conditions necessary for this loan. After Venlo the helmet will return to Leiden to become part of a small exhibition to be shown to a national public again. This solution to the

problem of dealing with four local loan requests concerning the *Peelhelm* is not favoured by all the parties involved, but at least the local newspaper *Eindhovens Dagblad* proudly announced: “Helenaveen ‘gets’ the Peelhelm!” Some people in the Peel are very happy.

Concluding remarks

The tension between enlightened rationalism, including a related aloofness from local affairs, and the Romantic claim to give importance to cultural diversity and to value local emotions is clearly present in the history of museums. It is a tension that should be recognized as a incentive behind the formation of collections, the way the collections are presented and the role museums play in national and local cultural politics. There is no movement towards more rationalism, towards a more and more enlightened museum politics (in the sense of a progressive movement based on the eighteenth century Enlightenment). The roles museums play, in the past and in present-day societies, will always be on the edges of structure and chaos, of reason and emotions and of universalism and diversity. In short, museums will have to take into account human nature and they have to play their role in the politics of culture at different levels.

Collection mobility is a key issue here. To built cultural and political bridges, which should be one of the major aims of museums (admittedly, this thought comes straight out of the Enlightenment), we need to use collections in a creative way. The *Peelhelm* case is one example, but there are many more to give. Museums need to show a willingness to see collections as active entities in the social political and cultural fields, without losing sight of the collection caring tasks they have. Museum directors and curators should have a constant critical mind on the possibilities and limitations museums have in the cultural field in which they operate. The major intellectual movements of the early nineteenth century are still very much present in museum practices. Collections should be used as active actors in a socio-cultural environment, against the aloofness of ‘ideal’ Enlightenment systems of thought. At the same time collection management rightfully has developed into a profession at its own right, based on rational schemes to guard the objects as long as possible for future generations. However, this aim of keeping as long as possible should never become the only aim of museums. Museums and collections exist to play a role in society. Keeping the collections isolated from the external world, only to be seen by curators, scholars and collections managers runs contrary to what a museum should be, and also contrary to the historical reality of the early nineteenth century roots of many European museums.

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