

Altres museus

## Setting sails on a new course! Het Scheepvaartmuseum in Amsterdam after its renovation

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## ■ INTRODUCTION

On 2 October 2011, Het Scheepvaartmuseum (National Maritime Museum; HSM) in Amsterdam re-opened its doors to the public after an extensive and costly renovation that took 4 years. HSM has emerged as an innovative maritime museum, exploring and exploiting new ways of displaying collections. Twelve brand new exhibitions awaited a projected 300,000 visitors per year. However, during the first year, no fewer than 480,000 people entered the monumental building to experience the renewed museum. The innovations do not only relate to exhibits and story-telling. In the field of research and academic programs, new approaches are stimulated and facilitated as well.

In this short article, I will elaborate on what these innovations entail, but also how they are perceived and received by the visitors. Finally, I will connect the innovations in the field of presentations and story-telling with our research program. What are these connections? What course is HSM steering and why?

## ■ THE BUILDING

Since 1973, Het Scheepvaartmuseum has been housed in 's Lands Zeemagazijn, one of Amsterdam's largest buildings. There is a parallel with the Drassanes in Barcelona in that in 1656 the city's architect Daniel Stalpaert originally designed the building to serve as an arsenal for the fleet of the Admiralty of Amsterdam. Around that time, in the middle of the seventeenth century that often has been considered the Golden Age for the Dutch Republic, Amsterdam had one of the largest ports in the world. Without exaggeration one can say that the Dutch dominated global trade, ubiquitous as they were on the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans, and in the Baltic and Mediterranean seas. Today, over 350 years later, 's Lands Zeemagazijn is still an imposing and outspoken building that exudes an air of maritime history.

## ■ RENOVATION: THE BUILDING

In 2007, an extensive renovation of the building began, to prepare the Zeemagazijn for large crowds and 21st-century needs and demands. This renovation, which was completed in 2011, consisted of a fairly large number of elements –both physically for the building as well as intellectually– focusing on how we present elements of our maritime history to the audiences. Moreover, we realised that the museum should be more than 'just' a place where thousands of wonderful artefacts are put on display. One of the sources of inspiration –at least for the author of this article– has been the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. Located in what used to be the industrial centre of this city in the Basque Provinces, the museum has provided new meaning and atmosphere to the city's district ever since its establishment in 1997. The museum is a place to visit, to meet people, to drink coffee, eat lunch, and read the newspaper. In short: a cultural icon and meeting place combined.

With this example in mind, the museum building in Amsterdam has been adapted to become a meeting place. The renovation involved the addition of new spaces for meetings, gatherings and social events. Library, museum shops and restaurant can be visited and explored without entrance tickets. Benches in the porticos on the inner court enable people to meet, read, contemplate. The highlight of the renovation, literally and figuratively, undoubtedly was the glass roof some 20 metres above the inner courtyard. The winning design for this glass roof came from Belgian architect Laurent Ney (NEY+Partners).

Ney, being inspired by the compass lines and rose as depicted on old sea charts, created a self-supporting construction that consists of about 1200 pieces of glass set in a metal frame. In order to carry the weight (200,000 kilograms of steel and glass), new foundations had to be added to the four corners of the square, seventeenth-century building. With this dazzling glass ceiling, the inner courtyard has been given a completely new function as central square and event location.



Next to the inner courtyard, events can be organised on board the replica of the Dutch East Indiaman *Amsterdam* –which also serves the museum as a highly educational tool, explaining life on board such a large ship sailing back and forth between the Dutch Republic and Asia in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. Also, the steamship *Christiaan Brunings*, originally built in 1900 as an icebreaker, is frequently deployed for cruises through the Amsterdam harbour. A large number of events annually provides substantial extra income.

### ■ RENOVATION: TARGET GROUPS

In former times, HSM had little over 200,000 visitors per year. Many of these visitors considered themselves experts in maritime history, or in maritime artifacts. For a considerable period, the average visitor was a man of about 60, (semi-)connoisseur, very much interested either in new information or in confirmation of his own expertise.

The renewed museum aims at broader audiences, while at the same time focusing on the provision of information on various levels. Therefore, it defined three different target groups: the family with (grand-)children, the irregular museumgoer who could be persuaded to visit the museum through the organization of non-museum events, and the (semi-)expert, who has a keen interest in both the individual object or artist as well as in the contextualization of historical artifacts as part of historical phenomena. To give just a few examples: *Port 24/7* and *Voyage at Sea* are installed as accessible attractions for children and (grand-)parents, whilst object-oriented exhibitions like *The Paintings* and *The Yacht Models* display the best from Het Scheepvaartmuseum's extensive collection and focus on the expert, the regular museum visitor, the connoisseur in maritime history and art. In all exhibitions multimedial and interactive elements play an important part: not only do they bring stories alive, they also enable visitors to select the amount of background information they need or want. The various exhibits are briefly discussed below.



## ■ RENOVATION: EXHIBITS

There are different exhibits for these various target groups. With eleven brand new presentations, the attraction *Voyage at Sea*, and two museum ships, the renewed Scheepvaartmuseum proves to be an inspiring place for both young and old. These exhibits are divided into two categories: thematic exhibits and so-called object-oriented exhibits. They are designed by internationally renowned bureaus from abroad: two from the United Kingdom, one from Germany.

Before discussing the two categories I briefly dwell on the presentations that do not fit into thematic or object-oriented. *Voyage at Sea* is a unique and exciting virtual adventure at sea, divided into four sections. The visitor experiences what people on board ship had to endure – in storms, sea battles, but also in ordinary daily life. The images are projected in 360° – the sea, sailors and ships are all around.

The journey begins 350 years ago in the Zeemagazijn, the very building that today is home to HSM. Here, the visitor meets admiral Michiel de Ruyter as he prepares for a sea battle. In the next room, the visitor suddenly find himself on a ship riding the high seas in a raging storm, as ships all around are struggling with wind and waves. Meanwhile, pirates try to enter the ship, while 20<sup>th</sup>-century airplanes fire their guns, drop their bombs and make their turns above the ship as well. All of a sudden, the noise disappears, and 14-year old Gerrit Bakker

shares with the audience his dismay over his trip, during the 1870s, from the Netherlands to the Baltic. He reads aloud the letter he is on the brink of sending to his parents. In the third section, visitors travel to 1916, when 8-year old Gerda Kuhn and other passengers on board the Dutch ship *Tubantia* were torpedoed by a German submarine. In the fourth and final room of the exhibit, guides and artifacts return – to stress the importance of objects and *documents humains* for the reconstruction of history.

For our youngest visitors we present *Sal & Lori and Circus at Sea*, a magical sea journey.

## ■ THEMATIC EXHIBITS

We installed three large thematic exhibits. The strength of our collections combined with the current state of research and powerful, influential interested parties were important elements in the decision-making process. Whales and whaling, shipping and trade during the Golden Age, and the Port of Amsterdam were then selected as central themes for the coming five to seven years.

*The tale of the whale* tells the story of the relationship between men and sea mammal: in what way did this relationship change through the ages? In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, man knew little of the whale. For the most part, they were thought to be fearsome sea monsters. Perceptions changed due to strandings on the Dutch coast and stories told by late 16<sup>th</sup>- and early 17<sup>th</sup>-century Arctic explorers like Willem Barentsz. During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, whales were consid-





Voyage at Sea.

Tale of the whale.

See you in the Golden Age.



ered commodities of great economic value. Fear for the mighty monster had turned into fearless hunt and exploitation. Whale men followed whales in their wake, and hunted them down for the fortunes their baleen and oil could provide.

In the 19th century, after two decades of French occupation, the Netherlands tried to resume whaling. Despite various governmental and private initiatives, the industry came to an end. This part of the exhibit is based on research, recently conducted as part of a dissertation project. The whale hunt started again immediately after the Second World War, when famine combined with unemployment caused the Dutch to participate on large-scale Antarctic whaling. This continued until 1964, when the last whaling vessel flying a Dutch flag –the *Willem Barentsz*– set sail for the last time. Economic and financial problems, together with rising protests over the decimation of whale populations, brought the directors of the whaling company to bring the hunt to an everlasting halt. Today, the condemnation of the practice of hunting whales is nearly universal. Whales are threatened with extinction, and the hunt is cruel. This exhibit, intended for children from age 6 up, was made possible in part by the World Wildlife Fund.

Another thematic exhibit is *See you in the Golden Age*. In the Netherlands, we refer to the 17th century as the Golden Age. In those days, the Republic of the Seven United Provinces was one of the richest and most powerful countries in the world. And that was primarily thanks to seafaring. No country in the world had as many ships as the Netherlands. Around this time, the Dutch mercantile fleet in sheer size equalled those of France and England combined! Thanks to seafaring, trade was booming, and expanded rapidly. In 1602, The Dutch East India Company was founded, followed, in 1614, by the establishment of the Greenland Whaling Company, and in 1621 by the West India Company. Meanwhile, the growth of the fleets of the five admiralties also contributed to the rise of the Dutch Republic as maritime nation *pur sang*. As most cosmopolitan city in the country, Amsterdam developed into the 'world's staple market': goods from all continents

were stored here. However, it was not just trade that made the Republic flourish in the Golden Age. Contemporary Dutch artists and scientists are still world-famous today.

*See you in the Golden Age* aims at a young audience of 8 years and older. Here, we introduce authentic characters who actually have lived during this time. We let them tell their extraordinary stories and use these personalities as guides through Dutch maritime history. Like Amimba, the little girl who was forced into slavery at a very early age. Or Jan Janszoon Weltevree, who never wanted to go to sea in the first place, but eventually became one of the first Dutch sailors to set foot in Korea, on the other side of the world. Next to the rather glorious stories about exploration, establishment of trade routes, the huge size of fleets and large number of people who have been deployed directly or indirectly in maritime industries, we focus on colonization and slave trade as well.

The third thematic exhibit, *Port 24/7*, presents a picture of the port of Amsterdam and its surroundings. For this purpose, a twenty metre-long model of the whole port zone between Amsterdam and IJmuiden has been made and installed. Also, visitors are invited to participate in an exciting container ride to experience first-hand what a cargo container getting shipped through the port must feel like! From potato chips to sneakers to iPods, almost any product you can name passes through the port of Amsterdam before going on to the rest of the world. Ships call here to load or unload before sailing on. Goods coming in by ship go out again on freight lorries, inland waterway vessels or trains to their next destination; this can be a factory for further processing, or a store for sale to the consumer. The port of Amsterdam provides jobs for no fewer than 65,000 people, from crane operators to logistics experts. They all make sure that this flow of goods keeps moving 24 hours per day, seven days a week. It goes without saying that visitors also learn about how the port grew through the ages from its humble beginnings as a port on the river IJ to become Europe's 4th-largest port.





## ■ OBJECT-ORIENTED EXHIBITS

Next to the three large thematic exhibits, the *Sea Voyage* and the show specifically developed for very young visitors (4-6 year olds), there are seven object-oriented exhibits as well. Out of the museum's collection of about 350,000 artefacts, the curatorial staff has selected about 1,000 items to illustrate the variety, diversity and quality of this collection. In some cases the objects on display provide a chronological overview of style, artistic accomplishment, while in some other cases the staff has linked specific themes to clusters of artefacts.

In the case of the exhibit *The Paintings*, visitors are taken by the hand through 400 years of Dutch marine painting. In the seventeenth century, a lively market for paintings of seascapes emerged in the Netherlands. The maritime industry had become a major driver of the economy, in addition to being a source of national pride. People wanted to always be reminded of the ships, the ports, the sea battles, the heroism and the storms, even in their own homes. And the painters and artists of the time gave them what they wanted. The best pieces by the best painters of the day were sold for very large sums. Even the very earliest maritime masters had a unique style, experimenting with composition, perspective and the interplay of colour. As time passed, seascape painters were also influenced by new movements in the art of painting, such as romanticism and impressionism. Favorite themes were the mysterious power and beauty of nature and man's insignificance. After 1900, seascape painters were rarely at the cutting edge of the art of painting as they had been in ages past, but demand for these works remained high.

Het Scheepvaartmuseum has one of the most important collections of globes in the world. Seventy globes, all dating from before 1850, are put on display in the exhibit appropriately called *The Globes*. In this beautifully arranged exhibit, the visitor is informed about how the earth and stars were slowly and methodically mapped through the centuries. Detailed interactive elements offer whole worlds to discover and rediscover.

There was always a symbiotic relationship between the maritime sector and the globe-makers. Sailors came home with new information that the globe-makers used to apply innovations to their craft, making new and better globes that the sailors were only too happy to avail themselves of. Ships often had both a terrestrial globe and a celestial globe on board to aid them in navigation.

From very early on, globes became a symbol of knowledge and power. They were displayed in libraries and universities, and nobles and rulers often had their portraits made with one. They also became a status symbol. People who could afford one would buy one to show off. Because the demand for them was so high, globes became bigger and more beautiful. The Dutch were particularly good at making them: throughout the seventeenth century, Dutch globes were considered the best.

At present, thanks to satellite navigation it is relatively easy to find our ways. In older times, navigating was much more difficult –especially at sea. *The Navigation Instruments* will give the visitor an idea of how inventive the sailors of yesteryear were. Until the last century, ships still depended on the sun, moon and stars to know where they were. Sailors used the earliest navigational instruments –the astrolabe, the cross-staff and the back-staff– to determine how far north or south they were on the earth. All these instruments worked using the same principle: they measured the angle of the sun (or a star) against the horizon. As seafaring became more and more important, sailors needed more and more precise methods of determining their position, and developed new instruments like the octant and sextant. These instruments worked according to the same principle, but could take much more precise readings than their predecessors.

Het Scheepvaartmuseum has a huge collection of photo albums dating from the early years of photography. These photos present a beautiful and personal picture of sea travel and exotic destinations. They document what life was like in those days. The renovation of the museum provided an ideal opportunity to put a very small part of the photographs on display in the exhibit *The Photo Albums*. With the invention of the handheld



camera, the art of photography became accessible to a much larger audience. At this time, photo albums suddenly became chronicles of snapshots of the lives of enthusiastic amateurs. Many of these were seamen who wanted to create a document of their travels for their loved ones back on the home front. *The Photo Albums* is a very personal, intimate exhibit.

The remaining three object-oriented exhibits (*The Ship Decorations*; *The Yacht Models*, and *Glass, Silver, Porcelain*) are strongly related to material culture. The objects are the results of craftsmanship; they are either directly and physically linked to ships (like in the case of ship's ornaments) or reflect the artisans or artists idea about vessels and their histories. Ship's ornaments don't make a ship sail better, and yet ships have been decorated in all times and in all countries. Greeks, Romans, Vikings, and Dutchmen: they all decorated their ships with wooden figure heads, colourful rudder blades, rudderheads, mast shields and mast tips.

Even as early as the 17th century, people who could afford to wanted to show off with their richly decorated yachts. The exhibit *The Yacht Models* presents a long and varied overview of boyers, smaks, and sailboats covering four centuries of pleasure boating and refined craftsmanship. Finally, *The Glass, Silver and Porcelain* exhibit focuses on fine art. Naval heroes, regents and merchants were often given lavish gifts as a token of gratitude for services rendered, or in commemoration of extraordinary events. Moreover, these objects are put on display because of the stories behind them - from the glass depicting an entire naval battle to the dishware eaten from by a sultan.

In all exhibits, interactives are used to provide possibilities for visitors to enrich themselves with additional information. In the paintings exhibit, two large electronic tables allow audiences to check details. By clicking on the details, extra information is given. In the exhibit on globes, one can turn a device to discover differences in cartographic images, whereas technology is deployed in the photo albums section to such extent that pages of albums can be browsed through via projection. In ship's

decorations, lights are turned on above specific pieces of woodwork, where narratives give additional information about the history of these pieces and their locations on board. In Yacht models, devices are installed to enable the visitor to zoom in on models, By doing so, they receive information about date, maker, or clientele. Finally, two rows of cupboards in the Glass, Silver and Porcelain exhibit contain dozens of pieces of glass and silver. Visitors can come really close to the pieces, while voices in the cupboards narrate about the history of the artefacts.

## ■ RESEARCH

It has already often been stated that a museum is nothing more than a building with old stuff if no attention is being paid to at least three standard criteria: museum employees collect, present, and conduct research. Despite the fact that the Dutch government, like most governments in Western Europe, strongly advocates cut backs in the cultural arena, the board of directors of Het Scheepvaartmuseum feels the urge to support academic activities as much as possible. As a result of their support, we have been successful in developing a strong and well-renowned academic program that consists of a number of chapters. We are currently redefining the umbrella under which all these activities should be placed –where larger social issues like emigration, multi-cultural society, identity, sustainability all must be linked with particularly strong parts of the huge collections– and, of course, with individual and collective curatorial expertise.

The curatorial staff is allowed to devote about 20% of its time to research. Frequently, this research is linked to exhibits or other public programs. However, increasingly curators conduct so-called free or independent research. Four out of seven curators have been involved (or still are) in conducting Ph.D. research –on whaling history, on the firm of father and son Van de Velde (marine painters), on the canon of Dutch marine painters in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and on the perceptions and expectations explorers had of people and countries prior to setting sails to unknown

destinies. Research results in an impressive and constant stream of articles and books.

For many years already, curators teach courses at various universities –in the Netherlands, but also abroad. Faculty and museum staff develop strategies to have students become involved in using material culture as historic sources– next to (not instead of) archival documents.

In 2007, the museum has started with its Fellowships Program: three types of fellowships provide chances to three types of researchers (student, just graduated academic, well-advanced academic) to spend a number of months at the museum and explore the collections as starting points for their research. These fellowships are relatively very well endowed (€2,500, €7,500, and €30,000, respectively).

Finally, Het Scheepvaartmuseum recently installed its own chair in maritime history and maritime heritage at VU University in Amsterdam. Collaboration must lead to greater awareness amongst students, faculty, yes even society that museum collections and other representations of heritage (like buildings, landscapes, places of remembrance) can be and must be linked to more or-

dinarily used historical sources like archives. There are wonderful worlds of knowledge and new insights to be gained.

## ■ TO CONCLUDE

The renewed Scheepvaartmuseum in Amsterdam has received many prizes for the unconventional, innovative, interactive way in which it has developed its exhibits. Target groups are defined more specific than ever before. New technology in combination with century-old artefacts provides interesting and fascinating effects, experienced by about 800,000 people ever since its re-opening in October 2011. There is no collection without presentation, there is no presentation without collections. However, both presentation and collections would remain abstract and lifeless phenomenon without research. Academic activities, undertaken by both the museum curatorial staff and researchers from outside provide new insights, shed new light, and revitalize objects by new contextualization. Come to Amsterdam, and be surprised by the museum's overall story.

