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## **Handling Museum Objects: Encouraging Touch in Cultural Heritage Institutions in the Netherlands**

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Handling Museum Objects:  
Encouraging Touch in Cultural Heritage Institutions in the Netherlands

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## Introduction

It is no secret that the experience of visiting a museum has changed dramatically over the past decades.<sup>1</sup> Museums are constantly adapting to new technologies and becoming ever more accessible to a wide variety of audiences.<sup>2</sup> Museum professional Neil Kotler has written extensively on the topic of museum strategy and how to accommodate new ways of experiencing the cultural heritage presented by museums and their collections.<sup>3</sup> He describes this new trend as “a growing attention to sociable, recreational and participatory experiences that redirects the traditional and singular focus on collections and exhibitions”.<sup>4</sup> In daily life, people spend a lot of time physically interacting with objects. For playing, working, hobby’s, or daily routine, we are constantly touching and handling everything. This changes when we step inside an exhibition. Whether this be for art, historical objects, or displays, suddenly we are no longer allowed to touch what is around us. Often in museums, even objects that had originally been built to withstand serious wear for generations are still kept beyond reach.

Museums act as a protector of an evolving cultural heritage by preserving objects, histories, and stories as well as educating about the past, and how it relates to the present.<sup>5</sup> The 2009 report “Museopathy: Exploring the Healing Potential of Handling Museum Objects” by project researchers Chatterjee *et al*, has already established the positive effects of handling objects in certain contexts.<sup>6</sup> In 2004 a one-day conference called “Magic Touch” was held at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London, that encouraged the opening of a discussion on the use of touch for museum and cultural environments.<sup>7</sup> The research in this thesis continues and complements these previous studies about the physical handling of objects in this museum context by examining to what extent five different institutions in the Netherlands currently use the physical handling of objects and materials to encourage understanding and learning. Specifically to what extent a variety of methods for allowing and encouraging the handling of objects are being used and how they fit within current museum theory. A secondary focus is to understand which methods

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<sup>1</sup> Kotler, “New Ways of Experiencing Culture”, 418; Ferreira, “City Museums”, 137

<sup>2</sup> Tempel and Thije, “Multilingual Museum Audio Tours”, 643.

<sup>3</sup> Kotler, “New Ways of Experiencing Culture”, 418.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 424.

<sup>6</sup> Chatterjee, Vreeland, Noble, "Healing Potential of Handling Museum Objects", 164-177.

<sup>7</sup> Pye, ed. *The Power of Touch*, 2007.

for physical handling, which are contemporary in museums, are most frequently used as well as how they are implemented. Multiple senses are involved with how a person may “touch” an object.<sup>8</sup> Physical and tactile touch are the most important but other senses, such as sight and hearing, impact our perception of objects we are touching.<sup>9</sup> This factor will be explored further in this thesis as some handling methods go beyond simply touching an object and engage other senses as well. Without directly critiquing any one institution, I examine the implementation of current practices to encourage their usage. This thesis takes a different direction on the critique of museums, not one that tears down the efforts of current museums to keep up with an evolving culture but rather lifts up current efforts for increasing accessibility to museum objects. I believe this is a more constructive way to examine current museum philosophy.

The organisations of focus are the Textile Research Centre and the Wevershuis in Leiden, the Openluchtmuseum in Arnhem, the TextielMuseum in Tilburg, and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. These institutions were selected for the relevancy of their current activities for implementing the handling of objects as well as the practicality of being within my expertise. The Textile Research Centre, from now on referred to as TRC, is a foundation set up in 1991 that combines the use of an exhibition space, textile archive, and workshops to help place the study of textiles within the academic field of humanities and social sciences.<sup>10</sup> With over 38,000 objects in the collection from countries and cultures all over the world, these items are used as resources for teaching, research, and publications. Founded by Dr. G.M. Vogelsang-Eastwood, the TRC is a direct response to Vogelsang-Eastwood’s experience with the inaccessibility of historical textiles for the use of hands-on experience. The TRC is not officially certified with the title “museum”, which changes some of the contexts for the themes in museum studies, such as how a museum is expected to handle a collection, but is included under the larger umbrella-term regardless due to the similarities in functioning to other museums. The Wevershuis, also in Leiden, is located in a municipal monument building and focuses on showing what “ordinary” working-class citizens’ lives were like between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>11</sup> Their goal is to show a more honest side to the lives of people in Leiden and to the socio-economics of being a textile worker. The

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<sup>8</sup> Pye, ed. *The Power of Touch*, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Textile Research Centre. “Home.” Accessed on April 21, 2022. <https://trc-leiden.nl/trc/index.php/en/>.

<sup>11</sup> Museum Het Leids Wevershuis. “Wevershuis.” Accessed on April 21, 2022. <https://www.wevershuis.nl/>.

TextielMuseum maintains Tilburg's long history with the production of textiles and includes a makers' lab both for professionals and the general public, and is working on sustainability programs.<sup>12</sup> The museum wants to encourage the city's community to be a place for activity, creation, and craftsmanship. The Openluchtmuseum in Arnhem recreates the stories of history through their presentations and collections using a walk through park exhibition style.<sup>13</sup> Visitors can learn about the history of the Netherlands from actors in period costumes as well as from movies and games located in the museum. The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam is the national museum of the Netherlands, housing many world-famous artworks and telling over 800 years of Dutch history with their large collection of objects on display.<sup>14</sup> The Rijksmuseum is a major participant in the management, conservation, restoration, research, and presentation of Dutch, European, and Asian art. These five institutions are only a few of the many cultural organisations in the Netherlands that focus on art, textiles, and history. I have selected the ones above in order to maintain a focused scope of institutions that meet relevant criteria. The institutions needed to be currently active, be publicly accessible either through online platforms or a physical location, and have clear plans for the future. There was also a practicality element for myself as I wanted to be able to visit these institutions within an appropriate time frame. Due to an internship I have been doing at the TRC, this is the collection I am the most familiar with and will shape how prevalent it is to my discussions. The internship is specifically centred around textiles, which has led me to focus slightly more on the textiles in the collections I visited.

This thesis will discuss what strategies are employed, such as workshops, exhibitions, or other initiatives to further encourage public interest in textiles. Audiences with no prior education on the subject, I argue, should be provided with tools by the cultural industry to interact with and engage with collections just as easily as scholarly researchers. This is in order to help visitors engaging with public programming gain a deeper knowledge of museum objects. For this thesis the analysis methods used will be visual and literary analysis, combining these to look at a new museum theory that focuses on engagement and the handling of objects in museums. Visual analysis will focus on the methods for handling that are accessible to visitors. This information is available both online through the organisations as well as through my own experiences of

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<sup>12</sup> TextielMuseum. "TextielMuseum." Accessed on April 21, 2022. <https://textielmuseum.nl/en/>.

<sup>13</sup> Nederlands Openluchtmuseum. "Openluchtmuseum." Accessed on April 21, 2022. <https://www.openluchtmuseum.nl/>.

<sup>14</sup> Rijksmuseum. "Rijksmuseum." Accessed on April 21, 2022. <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl>.

physically visiting the sites where I have learned about the goals and strategies employed by the staff. There are several aspects of these institutions that are of interest to this paper, for example, the exhibition space, the collection archives both online and in person, and the workshops run or hosted by the cultural institution. A level of care must be taken when it comes to objects in delicate conditions, which is why a focus is placed in this thesis on the importance of touch for the purpose of gaining knowledge, and not always on the handling of an original object. I do not believe there is a singular way the role of touch can be implemented, and the context in which touch is included can drastically change its purpose.

The topic of display is broadly studied in any country that employs the Western style of art museum and collecting that was popularised by Europeans which includes displaying large amounts of historical artefacts in one place.<sup>15</sup> The Western art museum style, which is used to some extent by all five of the selected institutions, is characterised by filtered natural light or studio lighting, high ceilings, white walls, minimal labelling, and quiet spaces.<sup>16</sup> This museum style highlights the aesthetic aspects of an object considered by the museum to be the most beautiful and disregards the rest, such as religious or spiritual connotations.<sup>17</sup> Often referred to as the “white cube”, a term coined by art critic Brian O’Doherty in the 1970s, which refers to the popular trend of museums and art galleries creating a pristine space void of spatial context for displaying art.<sup>18</sup> This style was invented for a Bauhaus exhibition in the early twentieth century and has been criticised by many, including O’Doherty.<sup>19</sup> He argues that the white cube style allows any object to turn into “art” because of the powerful ideas that are forced onto the object due to the intense focus such a display creates.<sup>20</sup> In order to capture viewers’ attention, objects must be visually appealing or part of a display that makes them appear more attractive.<sup>21</sup> Even objects typically considered not to be art, such as museum collections consisting of historical objects with themes other than art, are given the status of art when displayed in this way which is discussed further by art historian and art critic Svetlana Alpers.<sup>22</sup> Objects not designed to be examined at such close

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<sup>15</sup> Brimo and Haltman. *The Evolution of Taste in American Collecting*, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Wang, “Museum Coloniality: Displaying Asian Art in the Whitened Context.” 720.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 722.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 721.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 720.

<sup>20</sup> O’Doherty, “Inside the White Cube.” 14.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Alpers, “Museums as a Way of Seeing.” 25-32.

detail suffer as a result of this elevation to “art” status, which is compounded by the more recent popularity in recent decades of cultural groups seeking recognition through museum displays.<sup>23</sup> O’Doherty’s philosophy exemplifies what the traditional museum is and outlines the characteristics that academics, such as Kotler, argue are falling out of practice as shown by the institutions discussed here. It is important to note that other cultures’ methods of collecting outside that of Western Europe will not be relevant for this thesis due to the absence of the “white cube” in traditional collecting unless influenced by European styles.<sup>24</sup> Other types of museums, such as anthropological or ethnographic museums, may choose to display their objects differently, however the “white cube” style is the most prominent in the institutions I will be discussing.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>24</sup> Masuda, Gonzalez, Kwan, and Nisbett. “Culture and Aesthetic Preference”, 1260-1275.



## Chapter 1. Museum Theory

In this chapter I introduce the theoretical framework of this thesis which pulls inspiration from heritage and museum studies as well as a few key authors, particularly Niel Kotler. I am approaching these theories through the study of object handling in Dutch cultural institutions and exploring the function of a museum in order to examine how the role of touch contributes. The purpose of this discussion is to lead the reader to understand the context of Western museum practices. A review of recent museum studies literature shows a call for shifts in museum practices to allow for higher accessibility to the physical handling of museum objects by the general public.<sup>25</sup> The concepts of “touch” and “conservation” are suggested to be in conflict with the procedures followed in traditional museum settings while “participation” in cultural settings is becoming increasingly popular.<sup>26</sup> Most commonly, studies on the benefit of touch focus on the needs of a particular group such as children or people with disabilities, but other benefits will be covered.<sup>27</sup> The trend of moving away from traditional museum practices suggests that the institutions in the Netherlands I have selected demonstrate an understanding of proposed reasons for allowing object handling that will be discussed in following sections.

Museum studies professor Eilean Hooper-Greenhill has published several works on museum theories and the concepts of touch and culture in heritage contexts. Her definition of culture is important for understanding the role that touch plays in museums when she states that:

Culture is not an autonomous realm of words, things, beliefs and values. It is not an objective body of facts to be transmitted to passive receivers. It is lived and experienced; it is about producing representations, creating versions, taking a position, and arguing a point of view. As such, emotions and feelings are involved. The present is deeply influenced by the past, thus the interpretation of objects and collections in the past affects how they are deployed today. Knowledge is both cultural and historical, involving history and tradition. Reclaiming and rewriting history are central issues in cultural politics, and especially in the museum. Exhibitions can open up ideas that have long been suppressed, and can make formerly invisible histories visible.<sup>28</sup>

This idea that culture is something that can not be displayed as facts, but rather is a flexible and constantly changing fabric of human experience is what makes the inclusion of touch all the more relevant. In order to understand all the narratives that come with the objects in museum collections,

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<sup>25</sup> Walker, “Object Handling and Access to Museum Collections”, 205-206.

<sup>26</sup> Kotler, “New Ways of Experiencing Culture”, 419.

<sup>27</sup> Candlin, “Why Museum Visitors Touch the Exhibits”, 252.

<sup>28</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, “Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture”, 19.

as many methods to explore the possibilities should be employed as is possible. Touch is a key element of an incredible number of objects being collected due to their original purpose and the proliferation of handling we as people do in our daily lives. The Openluchtmuseum collects tools and equipment historically used by Dutch labourers and the TRC collects textiles that were meant to be worn. Hooper-Greenhill states that because museums are involved with the shaping of cultural politics, which involves subjectivity, meaning, knowledge, truth and history, museums represent the social past and world history.<sup>29</sup> She also states that knowledge can make a difference in our lives, meaning that the cultural politics of museums move past the theoretical and straight into agency and action.<sup>30</sup> Touch and handling of objects helps us acquire knowledge capable of changing our own lives as well as how different cultures and histories are represented through heightened understanding.

The historiography of museum theory shows that visitor engagement and handling are well-considered topics in the study of museums. New museum theory about the shift in traditional museum experiences, argued by Niel Kotler, will be vital to understanding to what extent handling an object changes how it can be understood.<sup>31</sup> Key publications include a 2001 article by Kotler which outlines the effects of society shifting towards enjoying combined cultural experiences instead of isolated destinations.<sup>32</sup> His definition of the traditional museum as a “walled enclave” will be key to understanding the basis of what many cultural institutions have in common as well as highlight which aspects are outdated.<sup>33</sup> Kotler also outlines other current trends in museums, such as the growing connection between museums and communities, as well as exploring more contemporary culture.<sup>34</sup> Museums deal with the ongoing problem of understanding visitor experience and finding new ways to encourage visitor engagement with exhibitions.<sup>35</sup> Archaeologist and museum theorist Alexandra Walker provides an invaluable look into the hierarchical nature of museums and argues that handling is an essential practice for understanding.<sup>36</sup> Kotler argues that museums are moving away from singular focus and traditional

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Kotler, “New Ways of Experiencing Culture”, 417-425.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 418.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Lanir, Kuflik, Sheidin, Yavin, Leiderman, and Segal, “Visualizing Museum Visitors’ Behavior”, 313.

<sup>36</sup> Walker, “Object Handling and Access to Museum Collections”.

exhibitions, while Walker argues that efforts to implement handling have limitations and must be grounded in reality.<sup>37</sup> I will be using Kotler's philosophy on what the ideal museum programme looks like while using Walker's research to keep expectations of what is possible more practical. I believe balancing an idealistic and practical viewpoint for museum strategy is essential to understanding the effects of certain ideologies.

Research such as the 2017 study by historians Geerte Savenije and Pieter de Bruijn on developing historical empathy in school children by offering multiple and new perspectives provides the context for why a deeper understanding of objects in museums is needed.<sup>38</sup> The study concludes that emotional engagement and contextual understanding are required for students to understand and empathise with historical people and events.<sup>39</sup> This was tested and achieved through an immersive museum exhibition experience about World War II involving period actors and physical engagement with relevant objects.<sup>40</sup> According to the study, students prior to the exhibition did not relate to the historical events of World War II at all; however, afterwards they were able to personally and emotionally engage with the stories due to the new perspectives they were provided with at the exhibition.<sup>41</sup> To understand current reception by visitors of museum exhibitions, researchers Joel Lanir *et al*, for example, analysed groups of visitors to determine emotional response in their 2016 study "Visualizing Museum Visitors' Behavior".<sup>42</sup> Other research includes Arno van der Hoeven *et al*'s method of collecting questionnaire feedback, testing new presentation styles, and altering established museum tradition to reach a more diverse audience.<sup>43</sup> The 2007 book *The Power of Touch* combines a variety of publications on museum theory and explores different topics about touch. These include digital implementations, community, elderly people, and those with sensory disabilities.<sup>44</sup> This book is essential for understanding the importance of handling, and also adds to Kotler and Walker's theories on museums by examining the science behind the sense of touch. How the handling of objects is dealt

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<sup>37</sup> Kotler, "New Ways of Experiencing Culture", 417-425; Walker, "Object Handling and Access to Museum Collections", 90.

<sup>38</sup> Savenije and de Bruijn, "Historical Empathy in a Museum", 832-45.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 839.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 835-836.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 837.

<sup>42</sup> Lanir, Kuflik, Sheidin, Yavin, Leiderman, and Segal, "Visualizing Museum Visitors' Behavior", 313-26.

<sup>43</sup> Hoeven and Brandellero, "Places of Popular Music Heritage", 37-53.

<sup>44</sup> Pye, ed. *The Power of Touch*, 2007.

with by institutions tasked with displaying object collections needs to change in order to maintain a cycle of interest and teach historical empathy to current and future generations.

I believe that regardless of how popular a museum is and what the visitor statistics look like, this does not affect how well a museum is doing at effectively communicating and encouraging enjoyment. In Lanir *et al*'s study, a participant responded that "the fact that people stayed there does not necessarily say that people were engaged with the exhibit, let alone learn from it".<sup>45</sup> This shows the difficulty of quantitatively measuring visitors' takeaways and the value they got out of an object or display. Inspired by the lack of hands-on engagement of traditional display styles that keep objects behind glass and ropes, the selected cultural institutions push boundaries of what can be offered to visitors in terms of education and experience. What strategies are employed by the selected institutions to encourage interactivity and engagement with their collection through the handling of objects; and, how can a contemporary museum improve public understanding and appreciation of its collections? Other questions include: What museum theory do the selected institutions engage with? What is the relationship between education and entertainment? What display and handling methods are used?

Literature discussing object handling is essential in order to understand the established museum theory. The criteria for which I will analyse the cultural institutions is based on previous literature about museum engagement and suggested strategies. This takes into account which theories are the most popular in existing publications, such as Niel Kotler and Fiona Candlin. I have studied the methods used by cultural organisations to achieve this and analysed the strategies, outcomes, and overall effectiveness. How these institutions create an engaging space, defined as the efforts to establish meaningful connections and hands-on activities with a growing audience, has formed the basis for my research. For example, the introduction of the online archive by the TRC adds a layer of accessibility for those who can not visit the physical location. Fiona Candlin explores the unacknowledged existence of touch in museums and why who is touching is more important than how they are allowed to touch when she argues:

A focus on who touches hopefully takes the discussion past its current stalemate where conservation is always the contrary of access and the only way for the museum to encompass touch is to change beyond all recognition.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Lanir, Kuflik, Sheidin, Yavin, Leiderman, and Segal, "Visualizing Museum Visitors' Behavior", 324.

<sup>46</sup> Candlin, "Don't Touch! Hands Off!", 91.

Despite what Candlin proposes, I believe museums do not need to change completely in order to accommodate touch and conservation simultaneously. Museums have already started changing and developing ways to accommodate the demand for accessibility to handling objects.

A focus on cultural institutions in the Netherlands keeps the discussion relevant to the West, and despite the institution's collections involving objects donated from different cultures, the relevance depends on the fact that the collections are based in the Netherlands. The institutions are not directly compared to each other for their practices because they have separate goals for their practice which will influence their actions. For example, the Rijksmuseum is an art museum mainly focusing on display and the Openluchtmuseum is a live history museum which focuses on historical immersion. Each institution collects and uses their objects for a different purpose. By exploring the contemporary methods of object display with relation to effectiveness of information communication and understanding, my research provides further solutions for creating engaging spaces applicable to Dutch cultural institutions. Further research relates to the demographics of visitors and how this correlates to what is displayed and how it is shown. Previous methods for determining visitor experience included surveying target groups of visitors were successful, although admitted that the results were limiting.<sup>47</sup> I believe an encouraging stance should be taken, which looks at what is being done right now that turns theories into actions and proves that the theory works.

## On Museum Studies

The study of museums and their role in society, or *museology*, is a large and constantly changing field.<sup>48</sup> To routinely critically examine the foundational rhetoric that museums are based on requires research into a variety of fields, for example, management, marketing, ethics, and current events. Museums existed before they were subjects to study, and the institutions themselves are the practical application for the theory learned. Some find it useful that a museum can be both a career path, but also a subject of research.<sup>49</sup> Kotler discusses how the difficult nature of working with the management side of institutions versus the social side leads to unnecessary competition.<sup>50</sup> Due to sharing similar demographics, it is beneficial for cultural institutions to share resources and

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<sup>47</sup> Tempel and Thije, "Multilingual Museum Audio Tours", 659.

<sup>48</sup> Dhabi and du Louvre. *Worlds in a Museum*, 14.

<sup>49</sup> Dubuc, "Museum and University Mutations", 500.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 425.

research about who is interested in heritage, and what satisfactions and dissatisfactions are being found within the current system.<sup>51</sup> The gap between the practical and theoretical side of museums is something that the TRC, for example, attempts to close by connecting these varying groups such as universities, researchers, the general public, and experts, and to create new links and ways of working together. Kotler concludes that there will only continue to be an increasing array of cultural phenomena, collaborations, competitions, and ways of experiencing culture that cannot be handled by a single institution.<sup>52</sup> This is why it is important to continually study the function of museums, in order to keep up with a society that is constantly changing and evolving. What Kotler describes as the future of museums illustrates the ambitions and ideologies that this thesis aligns with:

A successful future museum will not be an entertainment center although it will have entertaining elements. It will not be a “cabinet of curiosities,” although art and artifacts will be important elements. A future museum will not be exclusively a place supported by collectors, cultural leaders, and elites, although their presence and support will be vital. Nor will it be a place, which caters mainly to adults who can afford membership fees. A future museum will be a place that attracts young people who want to learn and enjoy recreational activities. Museums in the future will be hybrid places, combining recreation and learning, allowing visitors diversions from the intense stimuli of strolling through galleries and viewing multitudinous objects.<sup>53</sup>

According to a study done in 2011 by art historian Élise Debuc, there was already a clear progression of the function of museums away from the traditional established four: collection/conservation, research, exhibitions, and education.<sup>54</sup> Museums have expanded their programmes to include a more diverse range of functions, and Debuc establishes the eight meta-functions of the museum. While Debuc was researching the functions of museums, she noticed the need for a more interdisciplinary definition for the function of a museum.<sup>55</sup> She states that conservation is a museum’s core and most basic function, and also a tool for cultural expression, social inclusion, economic interests such as tourism, and a political tool for developing national identities.<sup>56</sup> Her broader definition of the scope of the function of a museum is in line with the previously established idea that museums are moving away from the traditional museum style and

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 424.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 425.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 423.

<sup>54</sup> Debuc, “Museum and University Mutations”, 498.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 502.

adopting a more interdisciplinary approach. Debus notes that this means the study of what is known as “museum studies” is also changing.<sup>57</sup> Once museums became a topic to study during the twentieth century, the museum and the university slowly drifted apart until the academic study began to focus only on the theoretical nature of museums and no longer provided professional development and training.<sup>58</sup> This shift back to adding practical elements in museums, such as handling objects, is what will be focused on in the following sections.

## On Traditional Museums, Touch and Conservation

The concepts of touch and conservation of museum objects are popular subjects among academics in the world of cultural studies.<sup>59</sup> Kotler argues that museums are part of an “evolving, interconnected cultural life that encourages discovery of culture as a whole fabric, in its variety of manifestations” which does require touch in some way or another.<sup>60</sup> As the modern Western public museum has slowly developed over the last several hundred years from private collections in the hands of the elite to the more open and publicly accessible displays we have today, so too have the theories of what is proper object care.<sup>61</sup> Early museums are characterised by the difference in collecting style and often objects, such as scientific inventions or naturalia, were grouped together with the goal of evoking wonder instead of by categorization.<sup>62</sup> These collections were mainly private displays by the wealthy, meaning they were not publicly accessible or available for close inspection.<sup>63</sup> This does not mean the objects were never handled, however. According to cultural historian Constance Classen, carefully selected visitors invited on private, guided tours of object collections in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were not only allowed to handle objects, it was considered polite and the socially respectable thing to do.<sup>64</sup> Touch was considered to correct the false conclusions about the traits of an object that the sense of sight would give, and was

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 500.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies; Candlin, “Why Museum Visitors Touch the Exhibits”, 252.

<sup>60</sup> Kotler, “New Ways of Experiencing Culture”, 424.

<sup>61</sup> Lubar, *Inside the Lost Museum*, 96-97; Walker, “Beyond the Looking Glass”, 10-11.

<sup>62</sup> Walker, “Beyond the Looking Glass”, 11.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Classen, *Touch in the Museum*, 275.

therefore a key part of examination.<sup>65</sup> As the popularity of these collections increased, the objects became more open to the public and the modern style of museum began to take shape.<sup>66</sup>

In order to understand to what extent institutions such as the TRC, Rijksmuseum, Openluchtmuseum, Wevershuis, and the TextielMuseum push the boundaries of traditional roles with regards to handling in a museum, those boundaries must first be defined. In a study by anthropology professor David Howes, a more recent overview of modern conservation practices in Western museums is outlined.<sup>67</sup> There are two main reasons for museums to forbid the touching of objects on display: one has a more theoretical and social justification, and the second is practical for the museums. Howes states that the shift from object handling being common practice to the current state during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries happened because the value of touch was replaced by a focus on contemplation.<sup>68</sup> Distance between visitors and objects increased as displaying a certain level of “cultural competence”, such as learning the “correct” distance from which to stand and view an artwork from, became a requirement.<sup>69</sup> This resulted in only curators and researchers having the correct expertise to allow them to handle objects in collections.<sup>70</sup> There are also practical reasons for keeping museum objects out of the hands of visitors. Repeated handling can lead to dirt build-up or damages and frequent cleaning requires care and attention; furthermore, if a museum's goal is to preserve objects then it is in their best interest to take precautions against destruction.<sup>71</sup> Former museum director Steven Lubar outlines the considerations all modern museums make about the care and importance of their collection, for example, there is the consideration of legibility over preservation in the case of museums highlighting Greek inscriptions with paint so the writing may be viewed from a distance which some may consider vandalism.<sup>72</sup> He also highlights that the objects in storage are “backup treasures” and are waiting to be used for teaching.<sup>73</sup> Even when counter-traditional museums developed in the twentieth century to allow for the handling of objects, the focus was mainly on children's education and science museums and continued to reserve “collectable” objects for

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>66</sup> Walker, “Beyond the Looking Glass”, 12.

<sup>67</sup> Howes, “Introduction to Sensory Museology”, 259–267.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Candlin, “Why Museum Visitors Touch the Exhibits”, 253.

<sup>72</sup> Lubar, *Inside the Lost Museum*, 99.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.



authorised hands only.<sup>74</sup> Only in the late twentieth to early twenty first century did handling sessions enter the programs of mainstream museums, such as at the British Museum in 2000 with their exhibition “Hands on desk”, in order to make museums more engaging.<sup>75</sup> Due to the recent nature of the shift in museums towards a more engaging role in cultural heritage, the role of touch in museums is an on-going process for academics and museums alike. Fiona Candlin argues that museum institutions need to reevaluate how they consider touch to affect the objects in a collection.<sup>76</sup> She argues that the touch of an expert cannot remain a neutral action if the touch of a bystander remains to be seen as destructive.<sup>77</sup> Handling is therefore a core aspect of both the traditional function, and the more modern functions seen today.

## On Engagement and Participation

As museum-goers transform from bystanders into active participants in museum exhibitions, many strategies have been employed to accommodate and encourage this shift.<sup>78</sup> There are several reasons for a cultural institution to want physical engagement with their collections, and for visitors to seek it out. For the institution, visitors engaging with exhibitions and objects can lead to new information through personal history, previous research, and prior experience with similar content.<sup>79</sup> Museums cannot be all-knowing entities and it is only natural that there may be visitors with pre-existing knowledge on the subject of the collection. For example, the TRC frequently works with local communities in order to correctly identify specific aspects of a textile or to which culture it belongs. A common and still unsolved criticism of the museum as a cultural institute is that it is only appealing to a small minority, ignoring the wants and needs of the impoverished and other minorities.<sup>80</sup> There is also a precedent for museums wanting to broaden their audience and connect with their community in order to facilitate a mutual flow of creativity and culture.<sup>81</sup> Ongoing discussions at the TRC about the history of Romanian embroidery are an example of these community collaborations. These discussions are part of “citizen culture”, which is when

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<sup>74</sup> Howes, “Introduction to Sensory Museology”, 262.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Candlin, “Why Museum Visitors Touch the Exhibits”, 263.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>78</sup> Kotler, “New Ways of Experiencing Culture”, 418.

<sup>79</sup> Winter, “Commenting in Museums”, 484-505.

<sup>80</sup> Black, “The Engaging Museum”, 48.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

specific communities of people get together to share and exchange lifetimes of knowledge and experience so everything may be consolidated into one place and become a useful resource for others. Other strategies for encouraging active participation include most public programming organised by an institution, such as workshops, lectures, and tours. Visitors are asked to do more than simply come and view objects on display, and are also expected to take part in the display through participating in programming.<sup>82</sup> The Openluchtmuseum provides an immersive experience for visitors and attempts to bring history to life through their exhibitions. Kotler argues that when museums organise public programming they are expanding beyond their “walled enclaves”, and thus moving away from the traditional museum style.<sup>83</sup>

Using replicas is one method to encourage the pursuit of knowledge through touch without causing damage to real objects. Often replicas can be created to such a standard that a majority of viewers will be unable to discern the difference. Institutions such as the Openluchtmuseum combine the display of collection objects with replicas as a starting point for visitors to learn about the past which may no longer exist in the same condition. Replicas shine a new light on history by helping visitors envision what objects and locations looked like when they were new; however, viewers undeniably prefer to see authentic, original objects. The creator can have just as much of an effect on the impression the object gives as the physical properties themselves.<sup>84</sup> British philosopher Constantine Sandis questions whether or not people should care about replicas, or “forgeries”, and if the obsession with originals is something that should be changed.<sup>85</sup> Certainly not all museum objects could be replaced by replicas as visitors may feel deceived if they were expecting an original which would have an effect on visitor numbers.<sup>86</sup> However, when considering a museum or exhibition's purpose for education, knowledge, and understanding, Sandis argues that a visitor should not require a certification of authenticity to make aesthetic judgements on value.<sup>87</sup> The TRC frequently uses replicas of textiles for the purposes of education, which are just as useful as originals. If replicas are not created with the specific intention to deceive an audience into believing it is an original, then the value can increase depending on the context

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 421.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Sandis, “An Honest Display of Fakery: Replicas and the Role of Museums.” 245.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 244.

the object is placed in.<sup>88</sup> The meaning of who the creator was would have a different importance in a display of relics than it would in a primarily educational setting.<sup>89</sup>

Possible health and sensory benefits are a research topic that is gaining a renewed interest in museum studies.<sup>90</sup> The idea that physically handling objects provides healing or positive impacts on a person's well-being dates back to early museum collecting in the late-medieval to early modern period. One example of this is the historic idea that religious relics contain healing or magical properties due to their connection with a saint; such as the mittens worn by cleric Padre Pio who worked as a healer in the early twentieth century. Those who encountered these mittens were said to experience miracles.<sup>91</sup> In 2009, University College London Museums & Collections and University College London Hospitals Arts collaborated to create a project titled "Heritage in Hospitals" which looked at whether handling objects provided positive impacts on participants' well-being.<sup>92</sup> This study found that after the handling of objects participants recorded having higher life satisfaction and health status due to being able to physically connect with their heritage.<sup>93</sup> In the conclusions of this study the researchers found that not only did the museum staff need to change how destructive they perceived touching the objects to be, but the participants as well.<sup>94</sup> Participants required extra encouragement before they felt comfortable handling the museum objects provided, even though few had reported believing handling sessions to be a bad idea.<sup>95</sup> This makes the conclusion of the study more interesting, because it shows that both the visitors to a museum as well as the museum itself need to change an ingrained way of thinking in order to make object handling a normal experience, but there are undoubtedly benefits. All aspects of the study of touch in museums are relevant when thinking about such a major cultural shift, even if not every piece applies to every museum. As far as I am aware none of the cultural institutions I discuss here have ever attempted to display the spiritual or healing nature of objects through handling, and it is mainly additional information to an object's history. What these studies make clear is that the act of physically handling objects has benefits not only for learning, but also

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Howes, "Introduction to Sensory Museology", 263.

<sup>91</sup> Geibusch as quoted in Walker, "Beyond the Looking Glass", 32.

<sup>92</sup> Chatterjee, Vreeland, Noble, "Healing Potential of Handling Museum Objects", 164.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

for personal satisfaction and well-being. The theories of what traditional museum practice is, why a change is happening, and what that change will look like have been covered. We can now look at the cultural institutions I have selected to see to what extent they are participating in this shift.

## Chapter 2. Handling in Education

In the following paragraphs I will be applying the theoretical framework on museums, engagement, touch, and conservation from the previous section to the methods for handling used by the cultural institutions I have selected. Out of the many programmes that each organisation runs, I will be focusing first on the elements they have in common that feature the handling of objects in academic education. Even though each institute has a different focus for their collection I will examine how they apply the critical theories of object handling through common methods. In order to learn what these common methods are, I have visited the institutions, participated in events, seen exhibitions, met with directors, and otherwise gathered as much information as possible about their programmes. It was important that a variety of events were attended in order to get an understanding of the true scope of what each institution was capable of. I approached my visits as someone who was looking to make a connection with museum objects through touch. An important source of information has also been publications by the institutions themselves which provide a much stronger report of the activities than I can provide through an analysis of my own experience. This is also in order to avoid biases surrounding what the purpose of certain programmes were.

### Handling Through Research

The most common method used to encourage knowledge through handling is by allowing access to the collections for research purposes. Most institution's main use for their collection is to use the objects for research, education, and conservation. Not only to conserve objects for the future, many of the objects collected are also of interest to modern research as well. Such opportunities for personal research were historically reserved only for academics, students, researchers, or trusted individuals and needed to be organised in collaboration with and according to the institution's guidelines for their collection. Author and editor in *The Power of Touch*, Elizabeth Pye refers to those with extensive knowledge in museum cataloguing, restoration, and identification of value or legitimacy as "connoisseurs" and links the ideas that protecting one's

own social status as a connoisseur to why touching became taboo in museums.<sup>96</sup> The Rijksmuseum boasts an impressive research library and print studio which progresses beyond the idea of status by allowing access to anyone as long as a time slot is booked. This accessibility to the library and print collection was even maintained during the Covid-19 pandemic when the Rijksmuseum temporarily allowed for scans of documents to be taken home in lieu of physical visiting. Allowing physical documents to be acquired during a time of intense isolation and reliance on digital media shows the dedication of the Rijksmuseum to providing open access to their collections. The Rijksmuseum also conducts their own research, especially concerning objects in their collection. In early 2022, the famous *De Nachtwacht* by Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) underwent a process for restoration and detailed examination. The project required a lot of people to ensure smooth planning, and the Rijksmuseum even hired local art restoration and conservation students to help. Frequent updates of the process and results are posted to the Rijksmuseum's website which allows interested people from all over the world to keep track of the progress.

The TRC's main focus is as a "handling collection", which means every object has a purpose of being handled by visitors during workshops, exhibitions, and tours, for the educational value of touch. This functions by hosting experts in the field of textiles to teach topics while using the collection itself as primary examples and sources. The TRC hosts lectures as well as informal talks on topics which range from specific techniques such as a tulip quilt applique which ran on April 1, 2022, to an introduction to Jordanian embroidery on March 18, 2022. The unique nature of the TRC's handling collection applies the ideas of moving away from traditional museums and encourages active participation with the objects and the knowledge of the researchers.<sup>97</sup> The TRC's collection is constantly in motion as objects become important for different subjects and to different people.<sup>98</sup> For example, an embroidered dress might be useful for a workshop on a specific sewing technique, one on colour dyeing, pattern identification, or cultural heritage. While looking at objects during the workshops, the TRC actively encouraged closely examining the pieces, gently lifting up seams and flipping objects over to look at the back. I found in my own experience that the TRC is less concerned with pretending to present entirely factual information as it is concerned with building knowledge through the help of the audience community. The volunteers could be

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<sup>96</sup> Pye, ed. *The Power of Touch*, 18.

<sup>97</sup> Vogelsang, Gillian. "TRC current status and future ambition", 5.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

considered “connoisseurs” due to their knowledge about many of the objects and the cultures they represent, but it is the openness of the TRC to information provided by outside sources that leads to deeper truths.

Most of the institutions, such as the Rijksmuseum and the TRC, offer internships for students both locally and internationally to spend time working on specific projects. These internships are beneficial for students to gain practical experience working with objects in many different fields, such as curating, archiving, conservation, and management. Grants and subsidies are also available through government or funding institutions for project work if a cultural institution is looking for researchers to help with a specific project. Internships are a unique opportunity in education and employment for students to spend dedicated time working on introductory projects under the supervision of experienced museum staff and scholars. While a university education may provide strong theoretical knowledge, the practical experience of working with a collection is equally as important when trying to develop the necessary skills to further a career. An internship is typically an introduction to a certain career path or institution, and could be the first real-world experience after much time learning from textbooks. While they are strong hands-on learning opportunities, the possibilities that institutions provide for internships, research, and experience building do not add to the theory of moving beyond a traditional museum. Such opportunities for research have been the founding ideas behind museums since the beginning. Those who are sufficiently educated and trained, or those seeking education from a respected institute have more opportunities for accessing collections and objects for research, which is still seen today. However, this example is still important for establishing the long history and recognition that handling objects has always been considered important for understanding and learning.

Allowing students of all ages to have access to museum objects through their education is one way to ensure as many people as possible have had the opportunity at some point to explore objects by handling. To accommodate anything from school tours, to loaning objects, to providing resources for individual research, museum collections having connections to schools are valuable knowledge builders. The TRC recently loaned a box of objects from the German and Netherlands

regional dress section of the collection to the Osnabrück University in Germany.<sup>99</sup> This is part of an agreement to work together over the next several years on a variety of projects. The garments that were lent included all the pieces for full outfits such as hats, blouses, skirts, and aprons. The goal of the lending of these objects is for the students to help with identification to be included in the TRC catalogue, but also to gain inspiration from them and work together to design new garments and to produce an information booklet and online exhibition that will cover their research as well as the garments they create. The students were initially supposed to personally travel to the Netherlands to see the collection in person, but due to the Covid-19 pandemic they were unable to do so. Even so, the TRC was able to come up with a solution that allowed the project to go ahead anyways by shipping the items to the University. The ability to handle vintage regional dress from their home regions that cover such a variety of items is a unique opportunity provided by the TRC when such garments may normally be found behind glass.

At the TextielMuseum, opportunities are available for those interested in textile production to apply to come work on personal projects in their Textile Lab. Once working in the space, one has access to professionals and beginners alike to help with textile projects. The Textile Lab focuses on teaching manual and industrial level textile techniques that may require more complex and expensive equipment than can be easily used at home. For example, if someone is working on a project that requires a laser cutter, an official request can be submitted to the TextielMuseum outlining the project and motivation. If accepted, the project will be given scheduled time which includes extra time for experimentation. The opportunity to have access to industrial equipment and training for how to use it is essential for encouraging accessibility to production. The ability to personally experiment and conduct research about industrial production techniques in controlled and yet flexible environments makes the lab unique in the Netherlands. This freedom is beneficial for facilitating a learning environment different to that of a workshop where a certain outcome is expected. A personal project is not required in order to come visit the TextielLab, and visitors are encouraged to come watch professional textile workers in the workshop to learn what is possible when one is highly experienced. Watching work being done while it is in progress is an alternative type of display style. Visitors are not coming just to look at still objects, but rather objects in

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<sup>99</sup> Vogelsang, Gillian. "Cooperation agreement with Osnabrück University." *Blog. Textile Research Centre Leiden*. December 2, 2021. <https://trc-leiden.nl/trc/index.php/en/blog/1310-cooperation-agreement-trc-with-osnabruock-university>.

motion in the process of being created. This creates a more lively environment while also providing more context for the processes of creation that are more in-depth than an exhibition label could explain. In this way, research is being done both by those that are working in the lab, as well as visitors interested in industrial textile production.

What is different about the established style of research done in museums and how the institutions are shifting away is the difference in who qualifies for doing the research. The “research” being done is not limited to academics, but is seen by these institutions to be expanded to others, even including children. The TRC, for example, allowing the loan of objects from the collection to be sent to schools for younger students to use for projects expands the scope of who can use handling for research to school children. The projects are beneficial for the students' opportunity to handle the pieces as well as their final results being of interest to the museums, who may be able to fill missing gaps of information. Visitors are also able to schedule time to visit the TRC and conduct research for any project, personal or otherwise. This is akin to what can be done through the Rijksmuseum and TextielMuseum as well, with each institution providing an incredible amount of resources that could allow a large number of people to become somewhat of a connoisseur themselves. These resources include the physical collection, but also libraries and online information which will be expanded on in an upcoming section.

## Handling Through Workshops

More physical in nature than a lecture, workshops are a common tool to encourage participation in many fields; furthermore, they are specifically making a comeback in the textile world as younger generations become more interested in cultural heritage. With the rapid growth of globalisation over the last several decades, vital cultural traditions which include the knowledge of how to make many of the objects in museum collections have started to become lost.<sup>100</sup> In response to this, there is a growing trend to have a renewed interest in one's cultural heritage and seek out learning opportunities.<sup>101</sup> A specific case for this relates to new research being done in Canada as to how connecting youth to their cultural traditions can heal inter-generational traumas.<sup>102</sup> The passing down of techniques and traditions is an essential aspect of personal and

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<sup>100</sup> Vogelsang. "TRC current status and future ambition", 4.

<sup>101</sup> Kotler, “New Ways of Experiencing Culture”, 418.

<sup>102</sup> Good, Sims, Clarke, and Russo. "Indigenous youth reconnect with cultural identity”, 589.



national identity which has found reliable methods for continuing, such as educational workshops.<sup>103</sup> Workshops can describe a variety of activities, but more importantly they are a hands-on experience often with materials and instructions, and provide a learning experience for participants. Not every institution currently runs workshops for visitors: while I was visiting, volunteers at the Wevershuis noted about having too little space to host groups. Of the institutions that I have discussed that run workshops for visitors, there are two distinct types. One allows for or requires the handling of collection objects, and the other does not allow or require handling. Even if the handling of the collection is not part of the workshop, the foundation of a skill that is the focus of the lesson is still being passed on in some manner. Workshops that do not require handling are in no way less important for this reason, and are equally as instrumental in pushing the boundaries of the purpose of museum collections.

One of the most involved workshops provided by any of the institutions discussed in this thesis is the “Textile Intensive Course” provided by the TRC. According to the programme published by the TRC, this course is a five-day intensive event that aims to provide a full basis for textile knowledge for people at any level.<sup>104</sup> The workshops that make up this course intend to clarify common misconceptions and “demystify” textiles.<sup>105</sup> Starting from fibre identification, students spend a full day on five different aspects of textile production. After fibres the course moves on to threads and thread making which involves spinning wool, after this they are taught how to weave these threads and the endless types of weaving and techniques. From there, students begin to learn how to make other types of textiles such as ikats and velvet. A key element of the course is the hands-on nature of the skill building, specifically with textile examples from the collection. The TRC does not shy away from showing fifteenth-century velvet samples which students are allowed to carefully handle.<sup>106</sup> Countless other textiles are brought out as examples for different techniques, which students are encouraged to examine in every way possible in order to get as much information as possible about its construction. This includes some methods which might be considered strange to some, such as listening to the textiles. While a little strange at first, students are taught how to identify types of material by slowly rubbing different fibres or materials

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<sup>103</sup> Vogelsang. "TRC current status and future ambition", 4.

<sup>104</sup> Chatziantoniou, Konstantinos. “An intensive five-day tour of the seductive world of textiles.” *Blog. Textile Research Centre Leiden*. November 23, 2021. <https://trc-leiden.nl/trc/index.php/en/102-news/1296-an-intensive-five-day-tour-to-the-seductive-world-of-textiles>.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

back and forth between their fingers while holding it close to their ears. Different source materials can make different sounds, and can allow for quicker identification than a lab analysis. This is what makes the act of handling so important for certain objects, such as textiles, as through specific techniques for handling information can be gained more efficiently than through less tactile means.

This course is unique in the Netherlands for its depth and extensive material covered. As one of the most popular activities put on by the TRC it is certainly related to Kotler's ideas about stepping outside traditional museum values. To allow for such a deep connection with a collection due to the volume of techniques and examples covered combines Kotler's ideas with Walker's arguments about the benefits of object handling. Walker also discusses the downsides to allowing such handling, object deterioration is the largest concern and "handling for the sake of handling" is equally as prominent.<sup>107</sup> Whether or not handling objects is a trend that museums are jumping on just for the sake of it brings up concerns about whether or not this will be good for the condition of objects in the future.<sup>108</sup> The TRC's establishment over thirty years ago is just one element that proves the urge to handle objects and the benefits it provides are hardly a modern trend. This point shows how difficult balancing the purpose of museums and collections as places for preserving knowledge for the future as well as educating and encouraging knowledge for the present can be. The TRC's nature as a handling collection is in opposition to a museum's duty to preserve as the handling of these pieces will inevitably lead to their deterioration. Since the TRC is not an official museum, it is not bound by any regulations for museum institutions especially with regards to object and collection care. This allows the collection to have a broader function since it is not bound to any legal institution to uphold certain values. This is especially relevant during the intensive course when a large amount of pieces are handled. Equally as relevant are the ways in which the TRC acquires the objects for the collection, which is largely donations by people with private collections as well as the volunteers own donations, who are fully aware of the handling aspect and often choose the TRC specifically for this reason.<sup>109</sup>

The Rijksmuseum is host to a number of popular courses and workshops which focus mainly on teaching specific skills for a variety of skill levels. Workshops that teach portrait drawing, cyanotype printing, and lion painting are among some of the current workshops available.

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<sup>107</sup> Walker, "Object Handling and Access to Museum Collections", 152.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Vogelsang, Gillian. "We wish some clothes could talk." *Blog. Textile Research Centre Leiden*. March 31, 2020. <https://trc-leiden.nl/trc/index.php/en/blog/987-we-wish-some-clothes-could-talk>.

The Rijksmuseum's collection serves a different function here than in previously mentioned institutions. The Rijksmuseum is an art and history museum, and what is on display is explicitly meant to be seen and not touched. The selection of drawings and paintings that are displayed in the gallery are only a small portion of what the full collection contains, and are often the museum's most iconic pieces. These are the works that workshop participants may certainly use as inspiration as they are some of the best examples of certain techniques available to the public. The collection therefore functions differently here than during the TRC's textile intensive course. Many workshops at the Rijksmuseum aim to teach participants the basics behind the Masters works, and the objects are too valuable for the public to handle. When learning to draw portraits using techniques of proportion and medium experimentation, there are an incredible number of works in the gallery to illustrate different techniques. However, even though handling a drawing or painting is useful for discerning proper texture and materials, the workshops focus on specific aspects of art techniques and do not include touch. The techniques can be taught through verbal instruction and collection objects function as inspiration more than primary examples. This type of workshop is valuable for the encouragement of participation and interest in museum objects but does not promote the handling of collection objects. The Rijksmuseum is an established and popular museum, and the popularity of their workshops shows that visitors are increasingly interested in more of what they can learn about the collection.

For more physical workshops, the Openluchtmuseum offers group bookings to learn skills such as archery, but visitors can also participate in classes on woodworking, weaving, screen printing, and embroidery. Often these workshops are included with the price of an admission ticket and only require advance registration in order to participate. To combine a tour of the museum with active skill building provides multiple mediums for visitors to learn about Dutch history. These workshops function more similarly to non-museum teaching institutions because the collection is not specifically required in order for the lessons to run. The atmosphere of the Openluchtmuseum is certainly inspiring, and the workshops are a relevant addition to their goal of educating about Dutch history, but the handling aspect is separate from the exhibition display. According to Kotler, the addition of activities, such as these, to a museum's programme are part of an attempt to reach wider audiences, increase revenue, and provide bigger and grander experiences.<sup>110</sup> He also says that this change has resulted in criticism from museum professionals

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<sup>110</sup> Kotler, "New Ways of Experiencing Culture", 420.

that a museum will lose track of their main goal, which is to protect and conserve objects and history.<sup>111</sup> I believe that the Openluchtmuseum demonstrates that it is possible to manage both.

Workshops are the strongest example of educational handling and can be found in many museum contexts outside that of historical objects, such as science museums. The immense variety of basic to advanced skills that can be taught in this manner are even still only a fraction of the techniques used to create any object in a museum collection. Workshops provide a valuable lesson for skills that allow visitors to form a deeper connection with objects, the learned skills also remove a certain mystery about the history and origin; furthermore, workshops help ensure the continuation of the creativity and knowledge that helped make museum objects in the first place. Many objects' meaning, such as tools for craft making, comes from the act of being handled. Being taught how to use, handle, and care for the tools can also help participants form a better understanding of objects.<sup>112</sup> The access to the materials required for workshops is a great way to introduce touch and multisensory experiences to a museum as an alternative to handling collection objects. Different museums focus on different aspects of creation, such as the TRC and Textielmuseums' focus on textile production for their workshops, or the Rijksmuseum' focus on art. Each institution is valuable for their ability to take participants deeper into specific topics and helps create a balance for which themes are explored. Workshops are an invaluable addition to a museums' mission to increase engagement, encourage touch, and facilitate learning.

## Digital Handling

Digital handling refers to using new technologies developed over the past decades to expand the capabilities of museums and reach new and larger audiences; for example, online archives or high resolution images of collection objects. Kotler describes museum websites as “another pathway to museum experiences beyond museum walls” and argues the online museum experience could one day compete with the onsite.<sup>113</sup> An online archive is a newly developed medium since the creation of the internet where museum visitors have a chance to see, but not touch, the extensive amount of objects a museum holds and are not currently on display. The most common point of contact a visitor has with objects in a collection is generally through carefully curated exhibitions.<sup>114</sup> An

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 422.

<sup>112</sup> Howes, “Introduction to Sensory Museology”, 263.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

archive's main purpose is to act as a reference collection for the museum staff and other researchers, and some never see the light of an exhibition.<sup>115</sup> I believe online archives fulfil similar needs that touching objects does. Clearly the tactile response is missing, however other needs, such as close inspection and freedom to linger with an object as long as is wanted are still present. Digital handling is one of the solutions for completely protecting an object from harm as the object can be safely stored, but with basic information still accessible for superficial research.

For institutions such as the Rijksmuseum and the TRC to have a free to use online catalogue of these archived items expands the accessible nature of the collections. In many cases, an online experience can be more positive than in person as actually visiting can ultimately be disappointing for some due to long lines, short viewing times, and other limitations.<sup>116</sup> Through digital archives, many of these limitations are removed and viewers may spend as much time with each piece as they wish, and with a much larger selection than what is on display onsite. Viewers are also able to make connections with a variety of new objects without being influenced by the curatorial side of a museum.<sup>117</sup> The relationship between how a person responds to an object visually and through tactile response are key to understanding the importance of an online archive. Walker states that people who visit museums no longer want to be “‘passive recipients of wisdom from on high’, instead they want to participate in meaning-making”.<sup>118</sup> An audience first needs to be aware of the existence of an object in a collection before engaging with it, and if onsite visitation is impractical then a digital experience can be a great substitute. The digital age has pushed the boundaries of what interacting with museum objects looks like.

One of the greatest difficulties in collection management is categorization of social constructs and non-quantitative data.<sup>119</sup> While digital archives increase access, they still shape the interpretation by an audience through the key words and terms used to describe the objects as well as their removal from the original space and context which could be simulated in an onsite exhibition.<sup>120</sup> An example of this is the terminology used to ensure easier online searchability - for example ‘Place of origin: America’ - at the expense of factual accuracy - ‘Place of origin: Tsoso’odo region of the Great Basin in what is commonly known as the United States of America’.

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<sup>115</sup> Pastore, “Access to the Archives?”, 3.

<sup>116</sup> Kotler, “New Ways of Experiencing Culture”, 417.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>118</sup> Walker, “Object Handling and Access to Museum Collections”, 3.

<sup>119</sup> D’Ignazio and Klein. *Data Feminism*. 100.

<sup>120</sup> Walker, “Object Handling and Access to Museum Collections”, 6.

Many terms can be used to describe the various qualities of an object, and choosing which terms to use can lead to different problems. In the case of listing place of origin, where an object comes from has a different answer according to different people depending on which map they use. The goal of an online archive is to educate a viewer about a specific object, therefore a museum must choose which terminology to use to best describe their collection. Classification systems have real consequences, such as if the data is used for visualisations or search filters.<sup>121</sup> Choosing to count and categorise objects in certain ways can increase the visibility of some labels, such as smaller, lesser known regions in larger countries.<sup>122</sup> However, this requires the museum to have perfect records of every object in their collection, which is not practical. The individual nature of viewing objects online can remove viewers from group discussions and guidance from museum staff as to the nuances of the history objects that might not have received as thorough of a catalogue description. How to remove the barrier of categorization as a means of using and finding information online and allow for true uninfluenced interpretation are ongoing subjects in museum research.

According to their 2021 annual report, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam had 625,000 visitors to their building in 2021, compared to 675,000 in 2020 and 2.7 million in 2019.<sup>123</sup> The sudden drop in visitations is due to the severe lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic, but the museum managed to continue activities.<sup>124</sup> The Rijksmuseum is host to an impressive online digital photographic archive of the objects in the collection. Available on their website, extremely high resolution scans of many of the artworks can be viewed at no cost, and allows viewers to zoom in to see incredible details.<sup>125</sup> This is a creative alternative to physically handling objects. The suggestion of allowing visitors to touch the surface of Johannes Vermeer's (1632-1675) "Milkmaid" would certainly be considered ludicrous, and even standing too close to the artwork is difficult due to its immense popularity. This makes it remarkable that such a high quality copy of 4500 x 4500 pixels exists on the internet, adding a new possibility for ways to interact with art. Similar to how Walker described the ways visitors used to be able to closely examine objects in

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<sup>121</sup> D'Ignazio and Klein. *Data Feminism*. 104.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>123</sup> Rijksmuseum. "Press Releases." The Rijksmuseum in 2021. December 23, 2021. Accessed on April 8, 2022. <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/pers/persberichten/het-rijksmuseum-in-2021>.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, "Home."

early museums, the Rijksmuseum gives this a modern spin by allowing a closer examination than ever possible by visitors before.<sup>126</sup>

One complication on the Rijksmuseum site, that certainly other museums struggle with as well, is the inability to publish certain images of objects in the collection due to copyright. For example, if a user searches for artist M.C Escher (1898-1972) on the Rijksstudio archive page, very few works will appear with corresponding images. The description and metadata are all present but users can not see what the object looks like. This is part of the Rijksmuseum's "Open Data Policy" which is otherwise beneficial in allowing free access to most of the images and information provided by the museum about their objects for both personal and commercial use.<sup>127</sup> For all other objects, users are allowed to reuse anything published on the Rijksmuseum website without requiring permission, which makes their website an excellent source for the most up-to-date research on their collection. Copyright is important for ensuring artists and creators receive proper acknowledgement for their work, and due to the open access policy of the Rijksmuseum this means it is not possible to have access to these objects.<sup>128</sup> This policy helps illustrate the point that not having every object freely accessible to the public may be due to a multitude of reasons beyond poor condition or high value.

On the website for the Openluchtmuseum, users can explore a digitally interactive version of the museum, complete with videos, small activities such as online quizzes, and extra information about the exhibits. For many who would be unable to travel to the physical location in Arnhem, an online tour of the museum provides an alternative solution. Users can test their knowledge on the history of objects and buildings in the museum as well as listen to podcasts recorded by museum employees and field experts about how people in the Netherlands lived in the past. The extra activities outside the main archive help make the information more visual and appeals to a wide variety of users, from children to adults, as well as the Dutch and those from abroad due to the range of depth of information provided. For example, a person born and raised in the Netherlands may be familiar with the general history of the country that someone from abroad may not be, but

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<sup>126</sup> Walker, "Beyond the Looking Glass", 11.

<sup>127</sup> Rijksmuseum. "Open Data Policy." Data. Accessed on April 21, 2022.  
<https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/research/conduct-research/data/policy>.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

there is always more to learn and the Openluchtmuseum caters to both audiences. Users are able to “dive deep into the canon of the Netherlands” through online stories.<sup>129</sup>

The TRC and the TextielMuseum also have online versions of their collection with free access available on their website. The format is not as developed as the Rijksmuseum in terms of visual aesthetics, but it serves a more practical purpose. In the online archive a brief overview of every object in the collection is given, details such as its age, location of origin, purpose, and measurements. Users are able to use keywords and refine their searches through a variety of filters provided on the platform. Most of the listings also provide up to three photographs, often showing the front, back, and a close-up of the object. Objects are often photographed in a flat, non-styled manner which provides a very basic view of its physical characteristics. This style of documentation has been criticised for its tendency to make items look unappealing and flat compared to how they look when worn on a body. When an object cannot be picked up and viewed three-dimensionally, context can be lost as to what the object is. A photograph can only do so much to provide all the context needed to understand an object, especially when presenting a three-dimensional object meant to be worn on a flat surface. This limitation does not negate the benefit of the online collection. For such a large volume of objects it is quite understandable that a small institution does not have the capacity to publish such an extensive archive. The basis of the archive provides enough information to stimulate interest in the pieces which can be explored further on request. An online archive acts as a starting point for initiating engagement with the objects.

The benefits of keeping the information on an online archive minimal include efficiency for uploading purposes as well as ease of sorting through large amounts of search results. The TRC frequently communicates through their media channels when new objects have been added to the collection, and even when a large acquisition of over 500 new pieces is made, the online archive is fully updated within a month. More information can always be added later, but if a skeleton structure can be added as quickly as possible this gives more time for the listings to be found and used by the public. The TRC and Textielmuseum’s commitment to providing information to the public quickly and consistently demonstrates an understanding of people’s interest in their collection. The element of physical touch is certainly lost in a digital medium, but the existence of such a resource is highly valuable. An online archive is a clear example of a museum or collection

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<sup>129</sup> Nederlands Openluchtmuseum. “Verdiep je online.” Accessed on April 28, 2022. <https://www.openluchtmuseum.nl/>.



stepping outside of Kotler's "walled enclave" as the collection leaves the bounds of the institution's physical location and becomes widespread digitally.

## Chapter 3. Handling in Exhibitions

Curators are allowed to touch not because they are knowledgeable of all the items in their exhibition, but simply because they are the curator. This type of touch is generally not considered a problem as their ability to properly handle objects is assumed because of their title, while a visitor's hands are assumed to be dirty regardless of expertise.<sup>130</sup> The permission to freely handle collection objects on display was the least used method by all institutions. Most often there was some level of supervision by trained professionals when objects were allowed to be touched. The fact that people will touch objects on display if they can reach them is inevitable, even if it is explicitly labelled “Do not touch”.<sup>131</sup> Even if all museums will experience this, it does not mean that the institution condones the handling of their objects. Only if an exhibition clearly designates certain objects for handling or explicitly states it as such are they actively participating in the promotion of touch. Common museum etiquette forbids the touching of exhibitions so it is presumed that unless stated otherwise, one is not allowed to touch anything.<sup>132</sup> I was surprised to find so few examples of free handling in any of the institution's collections. Although each institution was enthusiastic about encouraging participation and engagement with their collections, there was still some underlying hesitation towards complete freedom of handling. In the case of exhibitions including replicas of certain objects for visitors to handle, this can be partially considered free handling.

### Handling Replicas

Allowing visitors to handle replicas functions in one way to protect the collection.<sup>133</sup> They may also function to recreate an object otherwise lost to time.<sup>134</sup> Replicas are an excellent alternative for allowing touch in exhibitions as long as they successfully recreate a specific quality of the original object. This specification is made to make the distinction between interactive displays or digital methods of recreating objects or scenes from history. Total accuracy in replication is not needed if, for example, simply the weight of an object is being conveyed, such as the blocks of wood used at the Openlucht museum to replicate food transportation measurements. Another

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<sup>130</sup> Candlin, "Don't Touch! Hands Off!", 79.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>134</sup> Lamb, "To Play or Not to Play", 201.

example is the loom that stands in the front of the Wevershuis, which is an already antique recreation of an even older loom that has long since been missing, and is a different type of loom but aims to show the general size and functioning of the original loom. Replicating objects is a common method of research in order to prove hypotheses, recreate lost artefacts or objects, and has recently also become a popular addition to museum collections to encourage interactivity and engagement.<sup>135</sup> One of the greatest uses for replicated objects helps museums uphold their duty to conserve objects by keeping originals safely stored. Fiona Candlin argues that object replicas only demonstrate a museum's control over the visitor as to exactly what they are allowed to touch.<sup>136</sup> She also argues that in some cases, a museum may only provide replicas in order to meet certain legal accessibility requirements for the visually impaired.<sup>137</sup> The concerns over ulterior motives for including such programming in a museum are valid to consider and could be analysed per individual museum in a future study. To what extent museums have complete control over how visitors interact with displays is arguable. Candlin also demonstrated that objects will be touched regardless of intention as long as they are within reach, and when touching is allowed there is little a museum can do to limit the curiosity of visitors.<sup>138</sup>

The TRC contains a large number of replica textiles in the collection as these can be equally as useful for studying technique as an original piece. For the purpose of studying textile technique, the main difference between an accurate modern constructed textile and a historical object is the sense of awe that the latter evokes. Strictly for learning technique, primary historical examples are not necessary, but they are instrumental for inspiration and building connection between the student and the subject due to what is called the “wow-factor”. The TRC’s use of objects from the collection stimulates the emotional response from participants and reinforces their desire to continue the practices being taught. Primary examples are not always as abundant in the collection for certain demonstrations; however, in many cases it is the extreme skill and workmanship of an object that interests visitors and not the age. Quilting, for example, is a labour intensive process, and while certain antique quilts may be useful for dating patterns or looking at histories, an old quilt does not guarantee a well-made quilt. In this case, modern recreations or even original

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<sup>135</sup> Lamb, “To Play or Not to Play”, 201.

<sup>136</sup> Candlin, “Don't Touch! Hands Off!”, 72.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 71.

creations that focus more on the handiwork are more useful for learning. The object needs to meet the demands of the educational material which is what makes replicas so important.

As a teacher of bobbin lace and having a personal interest in Dutch lace, one woman and frequent TRC visitor and volunteer, Bettie Stijnman, noticed the poor condition of one of the lace caps.<sup>139</sup> Entirely through her own research using the TRC's collection and her skill she examined the fraying pattern of the lace cap and was able to recreate an entire section (Fig 1). The lace cap is in a traditional Netherlands lace style from the city of 's-Gravenmoer in the province of Noord-Brabant.<sup>140</sup> Composed of geometric motifs this style of lace is characterised by the use of square and rectangular shapes in the pattern. It is a delicate lace and prone to falling apart because it was meant to act as a cheap substitute for a higher quality Belgian lace.<sup>141</sup> Her reconstructed piece was also added to the collection as a reference piece for this specific pattern of Dutch lace.<sup>142</sup> Her participation in this project is a strong example of "citizen culture" at work in the TRC due to her sharing of knowledge in a way that can be preserved and passed on.

Stijnman's unique opportunity to work at such close proximity with the original lace cap allowed her to decipher the smallest details of the pattern. She is not a researcher or affiliated with a university, but mainly has a deep personal interest in lace making.<sup>143</sup> Her own personal interests resulted in an incredible addition to the collective knowledge available on Dutch lace patterns and lace making. A modern recreation of a historic piece is useful for many reasons. It allows future people to have a better quality and more complete version of the object to look at and research, as well as continuing the tradition of old techniques to new generations. In some cases a replicated object can lose its value to visitors due to the loss of a sense of awe, but when studying technique and patterns having a replicated version that allows the delicate original to be preserved is immensely valuable.<sup>144</sup> For objects such as the original lace cap used as a reference, it is unfortunately in too fragile of a condition to be handled during workshops as other pieces (Fig 2).

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<sup>139</sup> Gillian Vogelsang, "'s Gravenmoer lace, a reconstruction", *Blog, Textile Research Centre Leiden*, February 15, 2022, <https://www.trc-leiden.nl/trc/index.php/en/blog/1359-s-gravenmoer-dutch-lace-a-reconstruction>.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Bettie Stijnman, "Reconstruction of a woman's cap with 's-Gravenmoer bobbin lace", *Blog, Textile Research Centre*. December 16, 2021. <https://www.trc-leiden.nl/trc/index.php/en/blog/1318-reconstruction-of-a-s-gravenmoer-bobbin-lace>.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Wilson, Stott, Warnett, Attridge, Smith, and Williams. "Replicas in Museums", 447.

In this case, the recreation is useful not only for its durability, but also the clarity of the pattern. Each piece took Stijnman three days to create due to the complexity of the pattern design, and she even made two versions in order to perfect the design. Her pattern template is also available for those in the future interested in studying 's-Gravenmoer bobbin lace. Stijnman completed the recreations in time for an informal lecture given at the TRC on February 27, 2022, led by herself and TRC director Dr. Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood.<sup>145</sup> She came in full Rhineland traditional costume, including a lace cap, and discussed the history and importance of the caps, using her new piece as an example. The new piece is on display as part of a “mini-exhibition” by the TRC on Dutch lace caps which shows a variety of caps from the collection demonstrating different expressions of wealth and status.<sup>146</sup>

While walking through the outdoor path at the Openluchtmuseum, the trail often wanders in and out of decorated sets displaying certain time periods in the Netherlands. Every aspect of scenes from factories, to barns, to living quarters has been carefully curated to create an immersive experience. These sets were filled with a mix of actual objects and props designed to look like objects, and were placed with loose ties so visitors could pick them up and turn them over without removing them entirely from their place. The flexibility in the placement of the objects makes the sets more believable and realistic as each time the object is set down in a slightly different manner the set becomes less ‘perfect’. Some objects are attached to cables or ties keeping them in the room, but allowing for them to be picked up and turned over. Others are simply loose and have no restrictions. This is ideal for an exhibition trying to teach visitors about the lives and history of people in the Netherlands as it removes the separation between visitors and the display. Most of the props for the sets were actual objects, such as household kitchen supplies and furniture. Many are old enough that the younger generation might experience them for the first time at the exhibition, but are still common enough that conservation is not an immediate concern. Handling common objects from a more recent history is easier to justify from a conservation standpoint and is equally as necessary from an educational view.

A small aside on replicas that is worth mentioning is museum gift shops. While often quite touristy and generally looked down upon due to a stereotype of being filled with overpriced, low-

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<sup>145</sup> Gillian Vogelsang. "Sunday Textile Talk about Rijnland lace caps", *Blog. Textile Research Centre Leiden*. February 28, 2022. <https://www.trc-leiden.nl/trc/index.php/en/blog/1367-sunday-textile-talk-and-rijnland-lace-cap>.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

quality objects, the Rijksmuseum is an example of the opposite. In the shop, which is available both on the physical location as well as online, visitors can purchase stunning recreations of some of the most popular items in the collection. Not only are these replicas clearly meant to be handled, visitors are also able to take home their own piece of the collection. Delfts blue ceramics are a typically Dutch theme, and the Rijksmuseum shop is filled with ceramics that may leave some unable to tell the difference between those and the ones behind glass on display. The TRC also has a similarly wonderful shop which contains items that were originally donated but are not able to be placed in the collection. Often the reason is due to lack of storage space or duplicates. This is of course done in consultation with the donor, but it means that visitors are able to purchase and take home a wide array of different textiles, some with longer and more impressive histories than others. Several volunteers help to reuse old fabrics and turn them into new creations such as quilted pillows, or bookmarks which demonstrate certain useful sewing techniques. The use of the gift shop helps stimulate interest in continuing production of objects that are on display. Thus ensuring that certain objects will never become such a rarity that if the originals were to become lost or damaged they would be gone forever.

Ensuring knowledge is sustained for future generations is especially shown in the shop of the TextielMuseum, which contains, among other items, hand woven textiles for use in the home. Not only may visitors purchase everything from handmade blankets, hand towels, and tableware sets, but they may also learn the step-by-step process of how the textiles were made. The TextielMuseum asserts that textile production is no longer common knowledge, and aims to make this knowledge accessible again for those who did not learn it through family or their communities. Due to the mechanisation of textile production many steps become invisible. The TextielMuseums own brand “by TextielMuseum” aims to look towards a sustainable future in textile production. This involves opening discussion on poor working conditions for factory workers as well as the pollution created by industrial production. An important step in this process is teaching people how textiles are made, in which handling the textiles becomes an important aspect. Similar to how the TRC uses their collection for learning about textile production, the TextielMuseum products that may be purchased and used at home are useful for finalising a lesson on how to create good quality pieces. The TextielMuseum believes that the more transparent textile production is, the more appreciation there will be for the skill and labour that goes into each textile.

Replicas have shown to be a strong example of how touch in museums can be used for learning that benefits both the museum as well as the visitors. Not only are items considered too delicate to be touched able to be preserved, which satisfies the pressure museums face to conserve everything in their collection, but similar benefits can still be achieved. Bettie Stijnman was able to initiate a project that added to the research done by the TRC as well as create a tangible object that will provide further use in later exhibitions and research about lace. Her project also added to the collective knowledge of Dutch history and Dutch history of textiles, a topic places like the TextielMuseum, TRC, and Wevershuis are working hard to build up and preserve. Not only are the replicas used in these museums beneficial for the research, but also the practical skills that needed to be learned to recreate them. Creating or commissioning replicas encourages the hands-on learning of skills required in order to make the replica. This further helps ensure that these skills will not be lost by future generations and there will always be someone with the skills to teach and pass on first-hand knowledge.

## Supervised Handling and Engagement

Another way institutions are encouraging object handling is through supervised sessions during guided tours and controlled interactive activities. In this case, supervision follows the definition of either a visitor or group of visitors being supervised 100% by the museum, or by one person given the authority by the museum to supervise the objects while touring.<sup>147</sup> This method requires more involvement on behalf of the institution due to the time required to guide people or groups through an entire exhibition or collection.<sup>148</sup> Typical of a school session type experience, visitors are guided through the objects and given explicit instructions on what they may touch, and when. For example, during a guided tour at the Wevershuis in Leiden, it is not only possible to step inside an authentic sixteenth-century home with a working eighteenth-century wooden loom, but to also try weaving yourself.<sup>149</sup> Through the immersive experience and the hands-on activities, the Wevershuis's mission is to show "the circumstances in which 'ordinary' Leiden residents lived and worked in working-class neighbourhoods in previous centuries."<sup>150</sup> There are three looms set up

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 103-104.

<sup>148</sup> Walker, "Object Handling and Access to Museum Collections", 150.

<sup>149</sup> Museum het Leids Wevershuis. "About the Wevershuis", What does the visitor see. Accessed on April 8, 2022. <https://www.wevershuis.nl/wat-ziet-de-bezoeker/>.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., "Vision and Mission." (Translation done by author)

in the museum through which visitors are able to experiment hands-on with weaving and explore the workings of a loom. There are several models available, the large eighteenth-century loom, a smaller modern loom, and a more portable table sized loom. The three sizes help groups with different levels of prior weaving knowledge understand the mechanisms and techniques. Even children can be easily taught how to weave using the smallest loom. The looms are set up with threads by volunteers at the Wevershuis, and as each visitor adds a row or two an ever-growing band of collaborative weaving flows from the looms. Unique patterns can be created and an extensive amount of colour combinations are revealed.

The Openluchtmuseum has the strongest example of this method for supervised handling and immersion with objects. When visiting the museum visitors can book a tour through the reconstructed historical locations built by the museum. Activities are provided for visitors to learn more about Dutch history and culture, such as learning hands-on how to wash clothes using traditional techniques and archery. The activities come in a variety of types, including games, interactive elements in the tours, and educational workshops. A walking tour through different sets is filled with actors dressed in period appropriate costumes that visitors can interact with, and there are also outfits for visitors to try on and pose for photos. In one part, visitors can watch a museum staff member demonstrate how rope was spun using antique equipment. Afterwards, they can go to a wall of rope varieties to experience the texture, weight, and strength of the rope. A variety of buildings and rooms are set up throughout the tour and decorated with period-accurate furnishings that visitors can walk through to feel like they have been sent back in time. An indoor section of the museum titled “The Canon of the Netherlands” consists of a loop of small rooms that take the visitor through the development of the Netherlands right from prehistoric times to modern day. This section is filled with interactive elements on touch screens that accompany the display of objects. One example of the interactive display is a simulator for surviving the Netherlands *Hongerwinter* (Hunger Winter) of 1944-1945 where the player must balance having enough food stamps as well as money to purchase food. This style of immersion in a museum is extremely beneficial for learning and due to the diversity in the programmes it is intended to be appropriate for visitors of all ages and interests.

There is little evidence to suggest that complete immersion into a scene with historical objects is required to gain the most benefit and knowledge as it depends on the perception of the



participant.<sup>151</sup> What matters more is a clear connection between the objects shown and the activities provided. The Openluchtmuseum is a clear example of an engaging museum. The exhibitions align with many of Kotler's theories about what museum theory should be, and what exhibition styles have been moving away from in recent decades. The missing element for furthering the process was the handling of collection objects. This is not necessary in order to improve the experience at the Openluchtmuseum as it was quite engaging already, but the engagement for a large portion of the exhibitions came from screen interaction. All collection objects remained behind glass walls, which at the very least were designed in a way that completely removed light glare so the glass was usually invisible, but still separates the visitor from the object. The point of noting lack of physical access to these objects is not a critique as simple as wanting the glass barrier to be removed, as many of these objects are in delicate condition, would be unable to withstand frequent touch, and are thousands of years old. I am using this point to illustrate the difference between engagement through handling objects, and through alternative strategies such as virtual games. The outdoor part of the museum had a plethora of objects to pick up, handle, and experience through touch, however most were replicas, and it was clear that the objects had real historical value when they were behind glass.

Tours through museum exhibitions are also an extremely common method that uses supervision to facilitate handling. All five of the institutions offer some sort of guided tour. The tours act as an aid to help visitors navigate the occasionally overwhelming amount of information that an exhibition can hold by covering the highlights. In the Wevershuis during a tour, the guides make sure to point out the age of the wood on the looms and where the original architecture of the building is still visible. Visitors are then encouraged to touch and feel the textures of these surfaces, which in the case of the building may not have been an obvious point of exploration and yet provides valuable insight to the history of the building. Similarly, in the Rijksmuseum, guided as well as audio tours are useful for pointing out details in objects that might be missed on a regular walk through. Specifically noting the soft texture of a green damask wallpaper in one of the rooms that recreates a seventeenth-century Amsterdam canal house.<sup>152</sup> Museum curators and volunteers are full of information about hidden gems that can be enjoyed and may not be noticed unless

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<sup>151</sup> Prytherch and Jefsoutine. "Touching Ghosts: Haptic Technologies in Museums" in *The Power of Touch: Handling Objects in Museum and Heritage Contexts*, 234.

<sup>152</sup> On display in room 1.6.

specifically noted. In the case of the green damask wallpaper, from afar it looks printed and rather modern, but only on closer inspection is the texture seen to be different, and only upon touching is the full texture revealed. Tours are one of the first ways visitors used to be able to view collections, as a sixteenth century host would personally show visitors around their collection, and touching the objects would not only be permitted, it may have been rude to decline the generous offer.<sup>153</sup>

The TRC has options for both supervised and semi-supervised handling of the collection. Through links with local educational institutions both students and adults may organise group or one-on-one times to explore the objects in the depot. After one woman, Liliane Birla, saw some familiar Romanian clothing through the window while walking by, she came later with some friends while the TRC welcomed them.<sup>154</sup> As part of a community knowledge building initiative, local groups are welcomed to come to the TRC and help identify unidentified pieces. On April 2, 2022, a group of Romanian Dutch women from various cities in the Netherlands came to the TRC to help provide further information about unknown pieces.<sup>155</sup> This information will be important to a future exhibition at the TRC about the so-called “Amsel Collection” that these Romanian pieces are part of.<sup>156</sup> While the group was visiting, boxes of objects were spread out on the tables to be sorted through and examined by the women.<sup>157</sup> The bulk of the objects were blouses that are decorated with embroidery and geometric patterns in various places. The group of women were able to closely examine the pieces and help specify certain origins of patterns, meanings, history, and provide interpretations about the deep socio-historical connections of the makers.<sup>158</sup> This is a unique opportunity provided by the TRC, where information about the collection is gathered both through research done by academics as well as the public. There are large gaps in the academic study and encyclopaedic documentation of cultural dress which is being filled through the collection of objects and stories at the TRC.<sup>159</sup> The Romanian women were able to come in close contact and handle the collection in the same way they might handle their own belongings, which

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<sup>153</sup> Walker, “Through the Looking Glass”, 12.

<sup>154</sup> Vogelsang, Gillian. "The expanding Romanian collection at the TRC, and much more." *Blog. Textile Research Centre Leiden*. April 3, 2022. <https://trc-leiden.nl/trc/index.php/en/blog/1381-nmn>.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

I argue is essential for building up the knowledge of collections, such as the “Amsel Collection”. The group was supervised by Dr. Gillian Vogelsang and other TRC volunteers who were documenting the stories and information told by the Romanian women so that it may be accurately recounted in the collection archive as well as during exhibitions.

Supervision is a reasonable experience for a visitor to a museum to expect when handling possibly precious collection objects. While removing the autonomy of being trusted to responsibly freely handle objects, it otherwise is a reasonable solution to allowing objects to be handled at all. If objects are truly too delicate to trust with the general public of visitors but needs to be touched in order to be understood then it is better that some touch be allowed than none at all. Visitors need to learn how to handle museum objects and how to learn about a subject through touching which will be more difficult if they are never exposed to it. People learn how to use tools and objects every day by picking them up and trying it out, and the same can be applied to learning about history through museum collection objects.

## Conclusion

Touch plays an essential role in the function of museums and in the use of historical objects for educational purposes. Now that we know what role museums play in a cultural framework, why touch is important, and how these two themes are connected, we can understand the future potential of museum collections. The “walled enclaves” are disappearing as we are currently shifting towards a new age for museums. Overall, a thorough examination was conducted to understand why and how the selected museum institutions use methods conducive to gaining knowledge through touch using visual analysis and personal experience combined with Kotler’s and Walker’s literary theory. The main methods of handling were divided into two categories, education and exhibitions. Education was further divided into the methods of using touch through research, workshops, and digital handling while the exhibitions section was divided into replicas and supervised handling. Examining each institution in this way allowed for a clearer view of the methods used and the manners in which they were implemented. Unlike a typical compare and contrast method, institutions were each given space to demonstrate the different ways to apply the methods according to the needs of the institution. While each collection was composed of different types of objects which require different facilities and care, they were still able to be used and experienced by the public in similar ways.

When looking at the methods for how these institutions encouraged handling, it was surprising how many alternative solutions to handling collection objects were being used. The variety of activities shows immense creativity on behalf of the employees and curators to experiment with the different ways of encouraging interactivity with the exhibitions, the objects, and with the information they were teaching. Each institution was slightly different in how they handled the display of their collection, such as behind glass or not, to what extent the collection is available online, and whether or not objects could ever be handled or if they were strictly for display only. They were each demonstrating an understanding of Niel Kotler's theories on shifts in museum practices, whether or not they are actively aware of it or not. These institutions have, on average, very long, established histories within the museum world and yet are clearly moving towards the social and community based practices outlined before. The variety in activities that aim to include and target such a wide variety of demographics is a positive change from traditional museums that targeted only elite and scholarly audiences. The use of handling to encourage knowledge was clear and abundant among all institutions, with only the exact objects of handling

differing between institutions. The TRC clearly focuses on the touch and handling of every object in the collection, even specifically collecting objects for this purpose. This differs from the Rijksmuseum, which does not allow the handling of collection objects but provides numerous workshops and research opportunities to supplement the lack of touch. The efforts of each institution to encourage touch are overwhelmingly positive.

In the future I believe there should be even more additions to museum programming for handling objects. Replicas were a visible but underused method which could see increased use in future exhibitions due to their established benefits. Understandably the production of replicas is expensive and not always a practical option for institutions that struggle with funding, but are useful additions to a collection. Another option is to reevaluate the importance of perfectly preserving every object, and weighing the benefits of possible object deterioration over the knowledge gained through their use. Understanding the context in which an object was created and continuing to use it for its intended purposes could be more beneficial for present understanding than its continual preservation. The Openluchtmuseum continues to allow visitors to walk through historical buildings because the damage this creates is minimal compared to the benefits. Finding ways to balance touch, damage, and conservation is key to moving forward with how museums can adapt to changing cultural ideas about history and the role of museums. Practicality will always be a limiting factor for trying to attain the idealistic future for museums I have been examining, but with the amount of research being done in this field I believe a balance will be found. Already the willingness to experiment with techniques for handling, such as replicas and the growing popularity of handling collections, demonstrates this possibility for the future.

This thesis expanded on the previous research on tactile museum experiences, which I have discovered is lacking positive examples. This research is important for encouraging the continuing growth of museums to match the changes in society in order to preserve information while also inspiring passion for future generations. I believe the preservation and encouragement of textile knowledge and techniques is important to cultural identity, and must be studied further. The limitation of the scope of this research to the Netherlands has provided an in-depth understanding of how these institutions function which can be applied to a broader museum context. If this research were to be expanded, other museums could be analysed and compared to the results of this study in order to continue to engage in the evolving museum stratagems. For example, one study found that traditional practices, such as music styles, resonated strongly with

Dutch cultural identities regardless of how globally popular they are.<sup>160</sup> This ongoing discussion is relevant for the field of humanities and social sciences because in order to continue the current work done by museums to preserve cultural heritage and knowledge must be interesting to a new generation.<sup>161</sup> Personally, I have been constantly shown throughout the course of this study how much museums care about their collections, how much they want to share their knowledge with the rest of the world, and how enthusiastically their efforts are received by the public.

Innovating new methods of presenting knowledge is relevant to understanding how museums can move towards increasing engagement and positive public perception. Highlighting methods for increased engagement and handling of objects will help museums and curators to understand which new ideas are succeeding. Moving away from individuality in museum visitor experience towards collective cultural experiences are no longer just theory but have been placed into practice. The current way these organisations function is a small step towards the cultural shift outlined by Kotler, and further research will need to be done on how these theories for engagement can be implemented elsewhere. Digital technologies will be increasingly prevalent as new developments are made and current technology is improved. Virtual reality is one aspect of digital touch that was not explored in this thesis due to not being a prevalent method used by any of the five institutions, however this would be worth exploring further. Virtual reality is just one of the modern technologies that launches the discussion of touch in a whole new direction. The role of touch in museums is being redefined as we speak, and the institutions I have discussed have demonstrated key attributes that illustrate these changes.

In the end, the question still remains of “what is the best method for using handling as a means of encouraging knowledge?” which was never intended to be answered in this thesis. The institutions I have discussed here have proven that there is an incredible variety of methods for handling, each with pros and cons. What I present here is the conclusion that enormous efforts are being made by the Textile Research Centre, the Wevershuis, the Openluchtmuseum, the Rijksmuseum, and the TextielMuseum to keep up with and push the boundaries of what a traditional museum looks like. The implementation of a variety of handling methods shows not only an enthusiasm for encouraging learning through touch, but also demonstrates the foundations for further expansion into more methods is already set. Not only are these five institutions far from

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<sup>160</sup> Hoeven and Brandellero, “Places of Popular Music Heritage”, 37-53.

<sup>161</sup> Yang, Yumeng. “How Can the History Museums Be Engaging for Generation Z?”, 3.

“traditional” in terms of accessibility to handling objects, they clearly show there are ways to work around many of the fears surrounding the tension between conservation of collections and the need to touch in order to learn. I look forward to seeing what these five institutions as well as many others that follow a similar structure will do for allowing even more touch in the future.

## Illustrations

Fig 1. Bettie Stijnman, 's-Gravenmoer lace reconstruction, 2022, cotton, bobbin lace equipment, 49 x 12.5 cm, (TRC 2022.0316b), Downloaded April 8, 2022. [https://trc-images.nl/collection\\_images/hires/2022/2022.0316b.JPG](https://trc-images.nl/collection_images/hires/2022/2022.0316b.JPG)

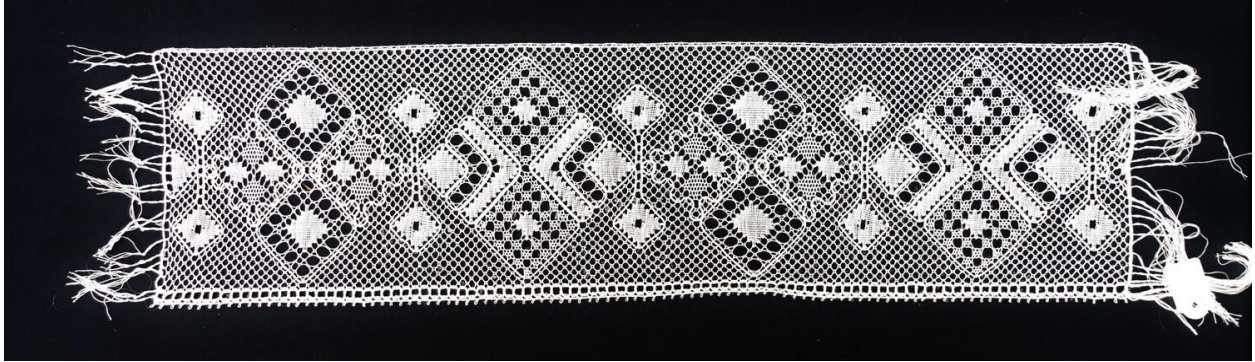


Fig 2. 's-Gravenmoer Lace cap, 1900-1920s, Factory woven cloth, machine made net, machine embroidery, handmade bobbin lace ('s-Gravenmoer lace), 29 x 26 cm, (TRC 2021.2446), Downloaded April 8, 2022. [https://trc-leiden.nl/collection/collection\\_images/normal/2021/2021.2446.JPG](https://trc-leiden.nl/collection/collection_images/normal/2021/2021.2446.JPG)





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