Curating Contemplation: The Buddha Room at Leiden's Wereldmuseum as a Nexus of Sacrality and Museum Design

Singleton, Lorraine

Curating Contemplation:
The Buddha Room at Leiden's Wereldmuseum as a Nexus of Sacrality and Museum Design

Lorraine Singleton
S3628116
S3628116@vuw.leidenuniv.nl
Stijn Bussels
Museum Studies MA
15,344 words
2024-2025

Table of Contents

Foreword

I first visited the Buddha Room in the spring of 2024. At the time I was beginning the process of writing my master's thesis, and investigating display techniques for sacred objects. I remember sitting in the room, trying to clear my head and make sense of my thesis investigation, and frustratingly thinking to myself: "Why don't other spaces have the gravity that the Buddha Room does? I want to write about something that reaches out and grabs my attention, and this room is a perfect example of that. What is it doing differently?" Ironically, I didn't end up returning to the Buddha Room as a main topic for my thesis until months later, and at that point I looked back at my first visit to the room and wondered what took me so long. All of the statues in the room exude presence and occupy space in the room alongside the visitors who come to see them, but the Buddha statues capitalize on this effect. Because they are quite lifelike in size and appearance it is easy to confuse them not as real people, but as beings that are alive. In the many instances when I returned to visit them I noticed that I kept thinking I saw them breathe, or twitch, or sway – movements that other humans would be doing if they were sitting and meditating in front of me. However, I was under no illusion that these statues were actually moving. It is clear that they are metal statues, molded into the shape that we see before us. Furthermore, their perfect attributes, such as their effortlessly draped clothing, flawless (yet still individualized) faces and bodies, and relaxed but rigid posture emphasize their creation as an embodiment of divine ideals. Strangely, all of these factors did not detract from making these statues feel as though they are alive, but instead highlighted the ethereal presence of them. The mind attributes characteristics which we observe in other living beings, such as movement and essence. The juxtaposition between the knowing that this object is inanimate and the sensing of presence is memorable, and inspired my decision to understand the mechanisms which enabled this room to have such an effect on me. The following paper is the result of my investigation.

Introduction

Modern museums are not absent from attempts to create revered spaces within their walls. Museums in the West have generally encouraged the understanding of being a space with the power to enable transcendent encounters through art, architecture, and heritage, walking on a fine line between the sacred and the secular.[1] The concept of museum sacrality – museum spaces' ability to evoke a sense of reverence or significance, akin to a spiritual or religious experience – has gained increasing attention as museums evolve to cater to the attitudes and desires of the public. The Buddha Room in the Wereldmuseum in Leiden is an example of this intersection, and attention will be paid to the overlap between the sacred as approached from a conceptual perspective and the generalized sentiment of sacrality as approached from a new museological perspective. By framing this room within a lens of museum sacrality this paper looks to explore curators' perspective on the sacred and propose theories regarding the design and function of sacrality within the museum. How do the Buddha statues and the Buddha Room at the Wereldmuseum in Leiden operate to heighten museum sacrality, and what visual and design language does the Wereldmuseum employ to perpetuate this feeling? This paper will focus on how these statues are understood by the museum, as seen through curator interviews and curation analysis, and explore their highlighted place in the collection.

This paper uses a visual analysis of the existent Buddha Room, as well as interviews with Wereldmuseum curators Wonu Veys and Daan Kok and Wereldmuseum strategic management advisor Anne Marie Woerlee, to explore the museum's position regarding the sacrality of the Buddha Room. The former method consists of the author visiting the room on various occasions to document the composition of the room. The latter method includes discussions with the listed individuals to understand how the museum approaches specific sacred objects, and how this intersects with the understanding of the museum as a space designed for reverence and contemplation. Wonu Veys is the curator of the Oceania Hall at the Wereldmuseum and has both scholarly and curatorial experience of communicating sacred objects to the public, as seen in her joint exhibition and book *Mana Māori: The Power of New Zealand's First Inhabitants* at the Wereldmuseum (then the Museum Volkenkunde) in 2010. This interview explored the Wereldmuseum's stance on the sacred within its walls and the religious life of the objects which

[1] Buggeln, Gretchen T. "Museum Space and the Experience of the Sacred." *Material Religion* 8, no. 1 (2012): 30-50.

they exhibit. Daan Kok is the curator for the Japan and Korea Hall in the Wereldmuseum and is currently investigating the consecration and de-consecration of the Buddha statues. His investigation adds an interesting dimension to the question of sacred space in the Buddha Room – what is the relationship between the sacred nature of the objects and their cultural value? How does the design of the room blur the distinction between sacred and secular in the museum? Finally, Anne Marie Woerlee in her role as strategic management advisor oversees the collections and their relationship to stakeholders, visitors, source communities, and the vision of the museum. She was also present during the renovation of the museum and saw the Buddhas as they shifted from the old Buddha Hall to the Japan Hall, and finally to their current location in the Buddha Room. This paper did not interview visitors and instead focused on the perspective of museum personnel. This was a decision made for practical reasons, as visitor perception of the sacred is infinitely variable and could erupt at any given moment given the individual's unique background. What this paper seeks to explore is the design of the Buddha Room and the role that the sacred and sacrality play in the Wereldmuseum. These interviews function to explore the museum's stance on the sacred, sacrality, and the questions that museum staff face as they navigate this intersection.

In order to discuss the relationship between the sacred, sacrality, and museums, it is necessary to conduct an analysis of the sacred and its connection with space. The theoretical framework for this investigation, the visual analysis, and the interviews are drawn from works regarding the sacred and the profane as discussed by religious scholars Émile Durkheim and Jonathan Smith, two seminal authors in this field. These scholars have made significant contributions to the understanding of sacred space by exploring its creation, perception, role, and effects on religion and culture. Their efforts have played a pivotal role in shaping the field of religious studies and continue to impact our understanding and analysis of sacred spaces in contemporary contexts. I will also be focusing on new museological authors Carol Duncan and Gretchen Buggeln and their analysis of sacrality as an inherent aspect of Western museums, dictated by their architecture, social rituals, and a conflation of the aesthetic and spiritual experience. In focusing on the sacred within a museological framework I hope to point to the overlap between elevated experiences found in temples and those found in museums, and apply this overlap to the Buddha Room. Consequently, I will construct a theoretical overview which will be the basis for this paper.

Beginning the discussion in 1912, French sociologist Émile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* sought to profile the fundamental division in religious thought – that of

the sacred and the profane. Durkheim asserts that there is an opposing distinction between the sacred (the ideal and transcendental) and the profane (the material world).[2] Furthermore, anything can be sacred, as sacred character is 'superimposed' onto a subject.[3] Because anything can be sacred, nothing is essentially sacred. Durkheim's discussion of the sacred will be supplemented by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (et. al.) and the analysis of objects, including sacred objects, as 'commodities' in order to understand their social life as it extends beyond their physical existence and economic value.[4] Appadurai explores the transformations objects undergo as they enter the museum, and specifically how this recontextualization affects their sacred dimension. His analysis will lead to the discussion of Buddhas as 'valuable objects' and will seek to inform their display in the garden, the Buddha Hall, and the current Buddha Room. He states: "Value…is never an inherent property of objects, but a judgement made about them by subjects."[5] The understanding of 'value' bears resemblance to Durkheim's superimposition of sacred character onto an object, and this resemblance will aid in this thesis' argument of the Buddha statues' more accurate description as objects of value.

In line with Durkheim, American religious historian Jonathan Z. Smith argues that the sacred is made so through ritual and time invested in the space.[6] The sacred is not inherent – what is important in the creation of the sacred is attention focused on the object in a highly marked manner.[7] He argues: "…if we take seriously the notion of a temple, a sacred place, as a focusing lens…the ordinary…becomes significant, becomes sacred, simply by being there. It becomes sacred by having our attention directed to it in a special way."[8] The relationship between the temple and the museum both operating to focus attention on objects will be explored, as will the use of attention as a means of elevating something to the status of sacred. Smith posits that sacred nature is connected to the space in which it occupies and by the ritual in which it is used;[9] but as will be shown, sacred nature, designated space, and ritual are all elements which have found a foothold in

[2] Durkheim, Émile. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: Hollen Street Press Ltd., 1954), 37-39.
[3] Ibid., 229.
[4] Appadurai, Arjun, ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Smith, Jonathan Z. *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 55; *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 104-105.
[7] Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 55.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

the museum. The notion of ritual in connection to the creation of the sacred and museum sacrality will be important in later analyses of both the Buddha Room and the general museum experience.

Attention and ritual are pertinent to new museology's understanding of the museum as a 'generalized sacred experience/space', henceforth referred to as sacrality. In *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums,* Carol Duncan outlines the rituals which play a part in the museum experience and the subsequent impression they tend to invoke.[10] As stated by Duncan: "Like most ritual space, museum space is carefully marked off and culturally designated as reserved for a special quality of attention – in this case, for contemplation and learning. One is also expected to behave with a certain decorum."[11] There is a corresponding importance in both the fields of new museology and religious studies of ritual and attention, and this shared recognition will be discussed when pointing to the origin and effects of museum sacrality, especially as it manifests in the Buddha Room. Duncan further describes the historical ideological opposition between the role of the church and the Enlightenment-driven role of the museum, but is keen to note the conflation between the two experiences as demonstrated by and derived from the rituals visitors adhere to in both. These experiences are further influenced by the architecture of museums – "…corridors scaled for processions, halls implying large, communal gatherings, and interior sanctuaries designed for awesome and potent effigies…"[12] The museum space is culturally understood as a setting for certain rituals, and application of Smithian theory will explore the deep overlap between museums and the sacred (and the resultant sacrality). Attention will be paid to how the museum operates as an intersection of sacred and secular rituals.

Building off of this, Gretchen Buggeln in her essay *Museum Space and the Experience of the Sacred* discusses the tension of museums as they operate as sites of general sacrality but are hesitant to encourage specific sacred experiences, as this is understood as the role of the religious institution and not the secular museum.[13] She states:

> "…in the West there is a long tradition of thinking of museums as 'sacred' places in a vaguely spiritual sense, and museums seem entirely comfortable with this sensibility. Secular museums may fear promoting particular religious beliefs (proselytizing) but are generally comfortable endorsing generic transcendent experience."[14]

---

[10] Duncan, Carol. *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*. (London: Routledge, 1995), 7.
[11] Ibid., 12.
[12] Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals,* 10.
[13] Buggeln, "Museum Space and the Experience of the Sacred," 30-50.
[14] Ibid., 41.

While the museum has valid concerns regarding the encouragement of particular religious beliefs, it is virtually impossible to extricate sacrality entirely from the museum experience.[15] This relationship is further entangled via the conflation of the philosophical notion and experience of the aesthetic with the sacred, furthering the understanding of the museum as a quasi-religious space.[16] Buggeln demonstrates that the language of the sacred has been appropriated by museums as people continue to find meaning in material culture, regardless of the material culture residing within an intentionally secular space.

While there are varying implications regarding the sacred dimension of museums, I argue that the Buddhas at the Wereldmuseum function as sacred due to their singular value, accumulated since their purchase in 1883 and subsequent memorable displays. I further posit that their current display functions to highlight this value and aims to inspire awe and reverence, thus further contributing to the value of the Buddha statues. In order to do this the Wereldmuseum engages with curation that echoes both museological theory and the sacred, resulting in the fusion that is generalized museum sacrality. Because the museum is familiar and relatively comfortable with religion in its halls, it is more likely to lean on the transcendental and reverent feelings shared by both museums and religious spaces in order to create the most memorable and transformative museum experience possible. The following analysis will explore the statues and the room design to demonstrate the impact of the Buddhas on the Wereldmuseum.

[15] Ibid., 48.; nor would museums want to remove sacrality entirely, as the transcendent experience found within their halls also benefits their reputation, their revenue, and confirms their role as an important to their community.
[16] Ibid., 34.

Chapter 1

Object History – The Evolution of the Buddha Room

The statues all trace back to the Zojoji temple, a prominent Jodo-shu Buddhist temple in Tokyo, Japan. Jodo-shu Buddhism was established in 1175 and is the most widely practiced branch of Buddhism in Japan. According to the inscriptions on the back of three statues (the Dainichi Nyorai, the Yakushi Nyorai, and one of two in the collection depicting Ichiji Kinrin, RV-418-4, 1, and 5, respectively) they were cast and donated to the temple in 1648. The statue depicting the Amida Nyorai (RV-417-81) yields an inscription on its base which dates it to 1716, while the final statue depicting Ichiji Kinrin (RV-418-2) was believed to be cast in the 19th century.[17]

There were many detrimental historical factors at play in 19th century Japan. Primarily, there was the arrival of Commodore Perry in 1853 and the forced opening of Japan to international markets in the years that followed. This act of 'gunboat diplomacy' and economic imperialism resulted in unequal treaties, disrupted Japan's sovereignty, and led to long lasting consequences for both Japan and the Pacific region. Before this moment Japan was ruled by the Tokugawa dynasty (1603-1868) in what was known as the Edo Period. At the arrival of Commodore Perry the imperial household released an edict – one of the first of its kind to come from the imperial seat, without the approval of the Tokugawa shogunate, in over 200 years – which ordered the expulsion of Buddhism and the smelting of Buddhist objects for their bronze. They argued that the country needed to rapidly modernize, and bronze was needed to create cannons and ammunition to defend Japan from forces which were able to bully the country. This edict aligned with the *haibutsu kishaku* (translated literally to 'abolish Buddhism and destroy Shakyamuni', another name for Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha) sentiment, a movement which advocated for the separation of Shinto and Buddhism (*shinbutsu bunri*) and demanded the expulsion of Buddhism from Japan. Another popular rallying cry *sonnō jōi*, (which translates to 'revere the emperor, expel the barbarians'), encouraged Japanese nativism and stood against the Tokugawa, Buddhism, and Westerners, all of which were seen as against the preservation of Japanese civilization. Buddhism

[17] This statue has text on its bronze lotus petal base, but the exact translation of the text is unknown. A brief investigation with curator Daan Kok determined that there was no clear commission or consecration date on this statue. The text appeared to be repetitions of mantras with vague allusions to people and Chinese calendar years, but further research is required to definitively determine its timeline.

as an institution was closely aligned with the Tokugawa shogunate during the Edo period, and this association proved destructive for Buddhism as the Tokugawa reign dissolved.[18]

In the turmoil that followed a large portion of the Zojoji temple possessions were sold as the Tokugawa fell from grace and Europeans exploited the unequal trade agreements. Parts of this temple and mausoleum were most likely bought by Heinrich von Siebold, who brought statues, objects, and art back from Japan to Europe. Some objects were then bought by Siegfried Bing, a Parisian dealer in Japanese and Chinese art, who sent the statues to be displayed at the Colonial Trade Exhibition in Amsterdam in 1883.[19]

According to the Wereldmuseum website, the National Museum of Ethnology (known at the time as the National Ethnographic Museum) became interested in Buddhism in 1883. [20] That year it purchased many Buddhist objects, including the Amida Nyorai Buddha statue (RV-417-81) at Dirk Boer's Great Royal Bazaar in Den Haag, and four other bronze Buddha statues at the great Colonial Trade Exhibition held in Amsterdam that year in the Museumplein (RV-418-1, 2, 4, and 5; named the 'Bing Group,' from whom they were bought). Before the museum moved to its current location on the Steenstraat all five Buddhas, along with other acquired Japanese statues, were placed in an outdoor garden at the museum's Rapenburg location (see fig. 1, 2, and 3). The Buddhas were arranged in the order of Amida Nyorai, Yakushi Nyorai, Ichiji Kinrin, Dainichi Nyorai, and the second Ichiji Kinrin, with the larger Amida Nyorai and Ichiji Kinrin statues flanking the smaller three statues – a sequence which has been kept in nearly every display of the statue group at the Wereldmuseum. The three smaller statues were placed on a rock-like structure which elevated them (with the smaller Ichiji Kinrin [RV-418-5] at the highest point on the structure) and drew them further into the plant foliage. The garden was known for its magnolia and cherry trees which bloomed every spring, annually creating a beautiful display which further contributed to the aura of the statues.[21] However, the statues were exposed to the elements which was not only damaging to their material but also would never have been allowed in their original Japanese context.

When the museum moved to its current location in 1937 the Japanese curator Carel Coenraad Krieger (d. 1970) was adamant that the statues were brought inside, not left in the open air. He faced a great amount of resistance for this decision – a wall with a pond and tea house had

[18] Van der Pijl-Ketel, Christine, "Twee Japanse Boeddhabeelden in Artis," *Vereniging van Vrienden der Aziatische Kunst* 14, no. 3 (1984): 4-11.
[19] https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11840/658675
[20] Ibid.
[21] Van der Pijl-Ketel, "Twee Japanse Boeddhabeelden in Artis," 9.

already been constructed for the purpose of displaying these statues, and many complaints were published in the local Leidsch Dagblad newspaper – but eventually the statues were placed inside in a space that came to be known and appreciated as the "Buddha Hall". This hall utilized natural light and hidden mirrors to illuminate the statues, giving them an everchanging nature and adding to their presence in the space. Similar to the outdoor presentation, the statues were aligned with the smaller three on the inside and the larger two on the outside (see fig. 4 and 5). There was a heavy curtain behind them which appeared luxurious and also functioned to dampen noise. Additionally, this room was found in the first-floor wing of the building, a space at the end of the exhibition hall which is naturally very quiet. The three smaller statues were placed on updated wooden pedestals – like the larger Ichiji Kinrin which sits on a bronze lotus pedestal, the Amida Nyorai has its own bronze pedestal which it sat on in the garden and in the Buddha Hall. This base suffered heavy damage due to weather and was removed by the time the Buddhas were taken out of the Buddha Hall.

There are few who still remember this hall, but those who do are keen to note its impressive nature, unlike anything the museum has today. Annette Schmidt, curator of the African Hall at the Wereldmuseum, visited the museum as a child with her grandfather – the Buddha Hall is the only thing she still remembers from that time. She describes the palpable serenity of the room, the presence of the Buddha statues extended by the shifting light and the quiet nature of the space.[22] The hall made quite an impression on her, and she is not alone – according to Schmidt and Anne Marie Woerlee, many were very disappointed when, in 1999, the museum was redesigned and the statues were arranged in the new Japan Hall, placed under general lighting alongside other objects in the exhibition. This arrangement lacked the emphasis which the statues were given in the Buddha Hall, and eliminated the experience which visitors had grown to appreciate. In 2012 the museum was again redesigned, this time with a room (re-)dedicated to the Buddha statues and reminiscent of the old Buddha Hall. The statues now sit as a centerpiece in a room enriched with other objects from the same purchase in 1883. It is not the same as the old hall – the room is darker, there are more objects, and the space is louder due to its proximity to the museum atrium – but it nonetheless serves to spotlight the Buddha statues and create memorable experiences for those who never experienced the old Buddha Hall.

[22] Annette Schmidt, "Thesis Interviews – Annette Schmidt and Anne Marie Woerlee," interview by Lorraine Singleton, November 22, 2024, in person interview.

New Buddha Room - Visual Analysis

The Buddha Room is situated on the first floor of the museum, immediately at the top of the staircase. When visitors enter the room they are faced with five statues of the Buddha with closed eyes, flanked by other Japanese Buddhist temple artefacts on the sides of the room (see fig. 6). The room itself is darker than the brightly lit hallway which leads visitors to the space, an effect further extenuated by the dark flooring and a curtain along the walls which dampens light and sound. The color scheme of the room is very simple, consisting only of the grey/blue of the floor, seats, and statues and the red/brown of the walls and wooden statue pedestals. These wooden pedestals are organic, simple, and modern, and function to create a casual yet sophisticated display mount which does not detract from the statues themselves.

There are five round low seats, perhaps inspired by *zafu* (Japanese Zen meditation cushions), for viewers to sit on. The round nature of the couches allows for visitors to face any direction, meaning that they can see the entirety of the statue arrangement from any seating space in the room. The fabric is covered in an *asanoha* pattern, a geometric motif which symbolizes hemp leaves. Because hemp is a durable plant which grows tall and straight without requiring much attention, this pattern was traditionally used on children's clothing to bestow health and long life.

The statues themselves are slightly elevated – they are taller than standing visitors, and both sitting and standing visitors must look upwards to behold them. They are illuminated from multiple angles by overhead lights which halo the statues from above, creating an ethereal effect where each statue seems to be encompassed by light. The lighting in the room very slowly shifts from brighter to dimmer, from warm yellow light to cool white light, and the Buddha statues shift from shades of golden bronze to aged steel over the course of a few minutes.

Each statue is distinct, though there is some overlap in 'who' or 'what' is being depicted. Beginning with the rightmost statue which depicts the Cosmic Buddha of the Golden Wheel, or Ichiji Kinrin, a manifestation of the Dainichi Nyorai. One of the two larger statues in the room, this Buddha sits on an iron lotus pedestal as well as a low modern wooden base. This Buddha wears a crown representing supreme virtue and has hands placed in the mudra known as 'the First of Wisdom'. This is also the youngest Buddha, dating to the 19th century from Japan.

Moving to the left, the next three statues are a group which was consecrated in Japan in 1648. These statues represent the Celestial Great Solar Buddha, or the Dainichi Nyorai, whose

hands are in the ratna mudra, which symbolizes the Jewel; a second Cosmic Buddha of the Golden Wheel, or Ichiji Kinrin, whose hands are folded in the Dhyana mudra in meditation; and a Healing Buddha, or Yakushi Nyorai, who also has his hands folded in the Dhyana mudra but holds a medicine pot. These statues are all smaller than the outer two, but are still slightly larger than visitors in the museum, further adding to their larger than life sense of presence.

The final Buddha is the Amida Nyorai, the Celestial Buddha of the West, of the setting sun and the afterlife. His hands rest in the Dhyana mudra, which is the meditation or contemplation position. This Buddha is the most important manifestation of the Buddha in the Jodo and Jodo-shu sects, and according to an inscription on its base (not on display) this statue was consecrated in 1716. This Buddha was the only one bought by the museum from Dirk Boer. At the time this paper was written it was not currently on display, as it was loaned to the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam for the exhibition *Aziatische Brons* (08/27/2024 – 01/12/2025).[23]

The other objects in the room are found on flanking sides of the Buddhas, each with their own individual spotlight descending from the lighting system in the ceiling (see fig. 7 and 8). Beginning with the left side of the room and going in a clockwise direction, visitors encounter a bronze *Shishi* lion (RV-417-102), a mythological creature imported from China. Usually these lions are found in pairs and guard the entrance of temple complexes. This statue's inscription refers to Taimasan temple, a Shinto Buddhist temple in modern-day Shimane, and dates it to 1844. The next statue is a *Shozen doji* (RV-417-100), a youth with a lotus flower, which is an allegorical representation of blessings. These statues are often found in pairs, with the *Shozen doji* placed to the left of *Jizo bosatsu* statues and a corresponding *Shoaku doji* to the right (the *Jizo bosatsu* statue is currently found in another spot in the museum).

Across the room, to the right of the doorway, is the parallel *Shoaku doji* figure (RV-417-101) – a statue of a youth with a club (though this club is missing) which allegorically represents curses. Beside this figure is an incense burner in the shape of a *Shishi* lion (RV-417-107) from the 19th century. Hanging above it is a bronze temple bell (RV-1269-9). The final object in the right-side corner of the room is a tall bronze temple lantern (RV-417-99a). These ornate objects would have decorated the walkways and entrances of a temple, but the details of their creation, location, and acquisition are unknown. All of these statues are made from bronze and, minus the temple bell, were bought from Dirk Boer in 1883.

[23] https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/zien-en-doen/tentoonstellingen/asian-bronze

Chapter 2

Sacred in Museums - *Interview with Wonu Veys*

In order to discuss general sacrality in museums it is essential to discuss how specific sacred objects affect museums, and how museums respond to, interact with, and dis/encourage this dimension. To do this I investigated the Wereldmuseum's position towards sacred objects as seen in their current halls. This ties into the new museological discourse surrounding the extent to which museums, as 'secular spaces', can engage with the sacred. If the Wereldmuseum is comfortable with specific instances of the sacred, then it is more likely to embrace and encourage general experiences of sacrality at the museum because it is already acquainted with visitors using the museum space in a quasi-religious manner. It would lean into the understanding of the museum as a transformative space of contemplation and connection, as demonstrated by its architecture, exhibitions, and/or object descriptions.

I was fortunate to conduct an enlightening interview with curator of Oceania Wonu Veys and discuss her thoughts regarding the sacred in museums, particularly referencing her hall of the Pacific at the Wereldmuseum. Veys began by stating that her interest has always lied in objects: what they do and how they operate inside and outside of the museum context, and specifically exploring how people from source communities experience and connect with objects both in storage and on display[24]. When it comes to the sacred, she states that the Pacific is full of such objects. Nowadays these are often consciously displayed, either with permission from the source community or with embedded safeguards. She gives the example of two rooms from an Abelam man's house from New Guinea which was displayed in the museum until 2012 (see fig. 9).[25] This space was originally meant for only men, but was sold to the museum with the understanding that both non-men and non-initiated individuals would have access to this. Fully aware of this context, the community was still interested in the display of these rooms. Similarly, there are Australian Aboriginal 'secret-sacred' objects and photos on display in the museum. These pieces are intended to be experienced by those who are initiated and are equipped to understand what is being shown to them, but this is not the case for all visitors. This issue is navigated by the creators of said

[24] Wonu Veys, "Thesis Interviews – Curator Wonu Veys," interview by Lorraine Singleton, October 16, 2024, in person interview.
[25] https://www.melanesian-encounters.com/RMV.html

content – often there is an initiation process for individuals to even be allowed to create works which wield this power, and these artists are equipped with strategies to package the message in a way that is safe for both initiates and non-initiates to behold. There is a depth to these works – a non-initiated visitor may see a weaving depicting 'the two sisters' and appreciate it on a superficial level for its visual stimulation, or may enjoy the story of the two sisters found on the text label, but an initiated visitor would see these dimensions while also understanding the significance and the context of the work.

The sacred obtains a new dimension once it enters a museum, particularly a Western museum, due to the understanding of museums as secular institutions.[26] Veys recounts when she was at the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac for the unveiling of a New Caledonian Kanak exhibition (*Kanak. L'art est une parole,* 2013-2014).[27] According to her, France is generally more concerned with the distinction between the religious and the secular, and at the exhibition opening there was a ritual ceremony which included a customary exchange of goods. This prompted comments in the crowd – is this religious? Can this be done here? Doesn't this action make this museum a ritual space, a religious space, when the museum should be secular? A similar experience occurred when Veys was at the Royal Academy in London for a big Oceania show a few years ago (*Oceania,* 2018).[28] Many Pacific Island visitors brought and left leaves or flowers at the bottom of certain statues to activate them, and protect both themselves and the statues from negative intentions. The Royal Academy, relatively unused to working with indigenous groups and unfamiliar with religious cultural practices that are lived within the museum, was at a loss for how to deal with these offerings. They had to confront the notion that the museum was not just a place to have intellectual debates or visual experiences, but also a space considered by some people to have sacred or religious significance.

This phenomenon, this confrontation, is also present in the Wereldmuseum, which hosts a large number of objects from the Māori community in New Zealand. The museum annually celebrates the relationship between the Māori community and the Wereldmuseum by deploying a *waka*, or canoe. Every year members of the Māori community come to Leiden for this ceremony, called 'Māori weekend', and every year the first thing they do is go to greet a *hoeroa*, a staff made out of the bone jaw of a sperm whale. Objects made from whalebone are hard, durable, and rare (the Māori traditionally did not hunt whales, but used everything from whales that washed ashore,)

[26] Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals,* 7-20.
[27] https://www.quaibranly.fr/en/exhibitions-and-events/at-the-museum/exhibitions/event-details/e/kanak
[28] https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibition/oceania

and functioned to display the *mana*, or power, of a leader.[29] The museum knows the Māori leader who made this *hoeroa* – his name was Tamati Waka Nene (b. circa 1780), a respected leader who facilitated the signing of the treaty of Waitangi which established the state of New Zealand.[30] Some Māori who come to Leiden are his direct descendants. In greeting the staff, individuals ritually acknowledge and honor the presence of their ancestor, and he makes his presence known through the staff. The visual dimension of this object, while it carries its own significance, is a small part of the sacred nature of the *hoeroa*. Māori individuals have a specific experience and cultural awareness which allows them to appreciate this object on a different level. If a visitor has no background information, it is then up to other factors (such as architecture or lighting or seating) to draw visitors in and invite them to further invest their attention.

Similarly, in 2018 the Wereldmuseum had a temporary exhibition on the Hajj, an annual Islamic pilgrimage to the city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia (*Bedevaart Naar Mekka*, 2018-2019).[31] This exhibition attracted Muslim visitors to the museum who perhaps would not have come otherwise. Veys explains how, while not a direct equivalent, coming to the museum to see this exhibition still yielded some of the sentiments of participation in the actual Hajj. This was an explicitly religious experience for some visitors, and it was facilitated not by a religious institution but the museum. The museum accepted this, and in doing so became a place of active worship, pushing the boundaries of what the museum can and cannot be. However, this exhibition was temporary – usually, temporary exhibitions are more likely to challenge ideas and push boundaries – but it serves to illustrate how the museum is looking to engage with the community, even if change comes slower to the fixed permanent exhibitions.

This interview informed this paper's discussion on the attitude towards sacred objects found at the Wereldmuseum. As can be seen there is attention given to the sacred and religious life within the museum, and the museum is looking to engage with this dimension. As previously stated, the museum's familiarity with the religious and sacred will influence its position on utilizing museum sacrality to generate the most resonant and transformative museum experience. This can clearly be seen by the allowance and encouragement of community interaction with both the *hoeroa* and at the Hajj exhibition. This engagement with the sacred will be relevant to the analysis of the Buddha Room as a site of museum sacrality.

[29] https://leiden.wereldmuseum.nl/nl/wereldverhalen/staf-hoeroa-uit-nieuw-zeeland
[30] Ibid.
[31] https://leiden.wereldmuseum.nl/nl/zien-en-doen/tentoonstellingen/bedevaart-naar-mekka

Sacred in the Buddha Room - *Interview with Daan Kok*

I was directed to the curator for the Japan and Korea Hall, Daan Kok, to answer further specified questions regarding the sacred as it manifests in the Buddha Room. Kok's incredibly articulate conversation proved invaluable in informing this thesis on the nature of the statues and space. It was enlightening to discover through this conversation that the status of consecration surrounding the Buddha statues is in question.[32] To begin, it is necessary to outline some historical context. Referencing the three smaller statues (RV-418-1, 4, and 5), he stated that many private individuals and groups from all over Japan came together to donate money and commission these to be made for the Zojoji temple, and in 1648 these statues were completed and given to the priests at Zojoji. This was a communal endeavor, and it was expected to hold a ceremony to consecrate them once they were completed. This ceremony was called *kaigen kuyou,* or 'opening eye incantations', because in the so-called Japanese middle ages (mid-twelfth century to the mid-sixteenth century) it was tradition to add painted crystal 'eyes' inside the sockets of wooden Buddhist sculptures when consecrating them. This was a quite literal 'eye opening' ceremony done to consecrate and activate objects; after this moment it was understood that the spirit of the Buddha was placed within the object, and from that point it is not only sacred but alive. For bronze sculptures this process works slightly different, as there are no crystal eyes placed in sockets, but the title of the ceremony and the resultant elevation are the same. The statues no longer are objects – they are actual manifestations of the Buddha, with a soul residing inside of them. After this ceremony these statues were placed in the Zojoji temple, where they resided for around 200 years. They presided over temple ceremonies and visitors as they prayed and meditated. However, with the Meiji Restoration in 1868 imperial power was restored and the Tokugawa shogunate, which had ruled from 1603, became obsolete. Zojoji was effectively a Tokugawa temple, complete with an opulent Tokugawa mausoleum, and lost a lot of power and financial support after this movement.

These factors resulted in a lucrative market for foreign buyers – the West, specifically Europe and the French impressionist painters, were fascinated by Japan, and there was a great demand for Japanese objects. Art, weapons, porcelain, statues, lacquerware, and other material objects were bought by dealers in Japan and shipped by boat to be sold in Europe and North America. Dealers benefitted not only from anti-Buddhist sentiments, which encouraged people to

[32] Daan Kok, "Thesis Interviews – Curator Daan Kok," interview by Lorraine Singleton, October 25, 2024, in person interview.

rid themselves of these objects (lest they be melted), but also the unequal trade treaties which were forced upon the country when it opened its market. It was relatively cheap for dealers to buy in Japan, and there were huge profit margins when the objects were sold to Japan-hungry audiences in the West. Many of the Japanese objects found worldwide in museums today are due to this export in the late 19th century.

This historical context is relevant when returning to the uncertain consecration of the Buddha statues. The Wereldmuseum is aware of the details surrounding the museum's acquisition of the statues once they reached Europe, but the nature of the acquisition in Japan is uncertain – Kok recently visited Zojoji to begin discussions of uncovering more information. The details of acquisition are important when determining the sacred status of these statues. According to Kok, just as there is a *kaigen kuyou* ceremony to 'open the eyes' of a statue, so too is there a reverse ceremony to remove the spirit from the vessel. This ceremony would take place in the event of the statue's planned removal from designated sacred grounds. As the Zojoji temple was surrounded by hostility in the late 19th century, and likely suffering from financial burdens, it is likely that selling relatively non-essential objects to European dealers was a decision they were forced to make. In deciding this they would have certainly performed the ritual to de-consecrate the statue before it was sold. However, since the nature of this transfer is unknown, there is no guarantee that this was the case. It is entirely possible that the sale happened too quickly for the ceremony to occur. This is a question Kok is interested in answering.

Both options present equally interesting possibilities for the statues. I questioned whether some sort of mark or inscription would be made on the statues to signify their de-consecration, (as the inscriptions on them denote the opposite, their consecration,) and Kok said it was entirely possible to have done so, yet the statues at the Wereldmuseum are absent of any marking of this form. Unfortunately, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. It could be that this ceremony does not necessitate marking the statue to designate its updated status, opening up the possibility to perhaps re-consecrate it if the need ever arises in the future (as there would be no need to continuously edit the status of the object on its physical form). The eye opening and closing ceremonies imply a level of transience to the sacred nature of these objects, and this transience would be further certified if an object was able to re-gain or re-lose its sacred status.

Kok's investigation adds nuance to the question of sacred space in the Buddha Room, as it posits the possibility of de-consecration – how can this room be a sacred space if the objects within are not sacred? Kok and other curators are adamant that this room serves to enchant visitors and

operate as if it, and the statues within, are sacred objects. This paper looks to explore how this effect is made possible, and if the aura of the statues is not due to their sacred status then it must be linked to another phenomenon which operates in a similar fashion and gives them value. This train of thought will be further explored in Chapter 3.1.

In addition to the statues' aura, the room is specifically designed to perpetuate certain sentiments of awe and connection. One important way in which the room encourages connection with the statues is through their distinct lack of casing. Kok comments that many visitors, particularly Japanese visitors, are surprised that they are in a position in which they can be touched. There are lots of people who are in awe and wouldn't think of stretching their hand out to touch these objects, but the possibility remains nonetheless. It is not uncommon to touch statues in various other contexts, for luck or as a form of worship where one is put in direct physical contact with the sacred. Though this presents a high risk for the longevity of the objects, there is also a greater possibility for connection by visitors. Moreover, Kok recounts how during his visit to the Kyoto National Museum he encountered sacred, consecrated Buddhist objects, still under the ownership of various Kyoto temples, displayed in a similar manner. They sit elevated, illuminated, caseless, and in a dark space (see fig. 10). This parallel in design indicates the power of this display technique – removing barriers between statue and visitor, alongside a darkened space and empyreal spotlighting, seem to be a recipe most conducive for encouraging focused and reverent experiences.

Wereldmuseum Perspective on the Sacred - *Interview with Anne Marie Woerlee*

Veys and Kok are both interested in the role of museums and the experiences they are able to provide for visitors. Traditionally, museums are concerned with 'managing the decay of objects'.[33] This includes (but is not limited to) their cleaning, their upkeep, and their protected display – in a way, the museum attempts serve as ordered screenshots of time and space (the famous Louvre curator Germain Bazin once wrote that the museum is "…a temple where time seems suspended…"[34]). The importance of highly controlled environments, including even frozen or low-oxygen spaces, in the service of preservation is paramount to the museum. That being said, both Veys and Kok note the Buddhas in the Wereldmuseum have no casing and, though not actively encouraged to do so, are able to be touched by visitors. The museum is aware that this behavior takes place, and by not doing anything to prevent it they are, in a way, allowing and condoning this action. This attitude illustrates not an abandonment of the museum's traditional directive, but a shift in perspective regarding museums and their collections. Kok states:

> "I think there's a shift in thinking about the interactions of people with objects, and that the sort of technical safeguarding of the object in the most scientific sense is no longer the only premise of what a museum object should and could do, because sometimes interactions with an object that would fall a little bit outside normal treatment - with gloves and what have you, and light sensitivity, etc, - that those kind of interactions are highly meaningful and very important for certain stakeholders in relation to collections that we have. So you can wonder about the minute change of surface texture that is almost undetectable from somebody who holds parts of a bronze Buddha statue. How does that compare to the experience that person has as a visitor?"[35]

The ability to touch the statues parallels the Wereldmuseum's position of the sacred – though not explicitly directed, the sacred is allowed a space in the museum. The preservation of an object, and its exclusive role as a representative of information, is weighed against the experience which visitors can take from their interaction.

---

[33] Kok, interview.
[34] Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals,* 11.
[35] Kok, interview, Part 1 - 22:37.

Anne Marie Woerlee, strategic management advisor at the Wereldmuseum, states that the museum aims to be as neutral as possible by balancing the sacred and the secular.[36] In most of their exhibits, encountering the sacred is not a common occurrence. When the museum does invite religion into the exhibition it is often done consciously and in continuous dialogue with the religious community. This was the case in the Hajj exhibition – there was a room dedicated to Mecca and Medina which included a praying carpet, and which Muslim individuals used as a prayer room. Other instances of religion are often done as a community event, with an invitation from the Wereldmuseum. However, the Buddhas are notable for their incitement of meditative, spiritual, and religious experiences in the current Buddha Room, (and particularly in their placement in the old Buddha Hall,) without the encouragement from religious communities. It is important to note that these experiences exist separately from institutional religion, i.e. are primarily individual and personal experiences of enlightenment. Interestingly, this dimension was much stronger in the Buddha Hall – it was placed in a quieter area of the museum; only housed the Buddha statues so visitor attention was solely directed towards them; and it was a brighter space due to the hidden windows and mirrors – and was an aspect which some curators wanted to dilute in the creation of the new Buddha Room. Specifically, researcher and former curator Matthi Forrer claimed the experiences had by visitors were a Western appropriation of Buddhism and not how Japanese individuals interacted with statues and temple space.[37] Even with the addition of other objects to the room and its location in a central part of the museum as subtle efforts to dissuade experiences of the sacred, museum staff agree that the Buddha Room continues to be a source of meaning for individuals.

Museum staff and curators are aware of the quasi-religious experiences that occur in the Buddha Room. Woerlee explains that visitors are allowed to use the room in this way, and that the museum aims to not actively prevent or interrupt such instances.[38] However, as the space is still within the confines of the museum, there are certain lines that cannot be crossed – visitors are unable to leave candles, flowers, or food offerings to the statues (or to any object, without the express permission and direction of the museum). This is due to sanitary reasons, as the museum aims to keep bugs and mold out, as well as safety reasons. So while the sacred is given room in the Wereldmuseum there are restrictions as to what it can and cannot look like – personal

[36] Anne Marie Woerlee, "Thesis Interviews – Annette Schmidt and Anne Marie Woerlee," interview by Lorraine Singleton, November 22, 2024, in person interview.
[37] Woerlee and Schmidt, interview.
[38] Woerlee, interview.

experiences of the sacred fall within the museum's understanding of its role and are allowed, but overt manifestations are not.

It is important to note a museological shift from exclusively preserving an object to paying attention to how objects and museum spaces can function to connect individuals and ideas.[39] The experiences of the visitor, both tangible and intangible, are something which museums that encourage sacrality, or who allow objects to have their own religious life within their walls, must pay attention to. This may go against their premise of 'managing the decay of objects', as well as the understanding of the museum as a secular institution, and as such the museum needs to ask itself what it is and isn't willing to be. If the museum curates a display which evokes transcendental feelings but discourages manifestations of these feelings then a discrepancy opens up where the goals of the museum do not align with the experiences of the visitors. However, the Wereldmuseum is aware of the experiences of visitors in the original Buddha Hall and the current Buddha Room, and consciously designed the new room to emulate the old hall (even though they aimed to target the cultural memory of the Buddha Hall and not the exact experiences of sacrality; perhaps the two cannot be so easily separated). According to Veys the idea was to create something that was similar to (but not exactly) the original revered context of the Buddhas – a meditative and respectful space which allowed people to connect with themselves in the presence of the statues. Kok comments that he has no doubt that for some people the room is a sacred space, even for people who are not Buddhist or not religious. Even if the statues have been de-consecrated and the room doesn't highlight them as singularly as it did in the Buddha Hall, the impact that they have on visitors is not nullified.

[39] Müller, Insa. *The Local Museum in the Global Village: Rethinking Ideas, Functions, and Practices of Local History Museums in Rapidly Changing Diverse Communities*. 1st ed. Vol. 46. (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2020): 29-57.

Chapter 3

Theoretical Analysis of the Buddha Room

This section is divided into three parts. The first section will explore the Buddhas as sacred objects by applying the theories of Durkheim and Appadurai. The next section will delve into the Buddha Room as a site of sacrality/sacred site by discussing Smith and interpreting the room's design. The final section will focus on how the room blurs the distinction of sacred and secular within the frame of new museology.

Section 3.1 – The Buddha Statues as Sacred Objects

As discussed, Durkheim's theory asserts that sacred character is affixed onto a subject, whether it be a space or an object.[40] The author describes:

> Religious [sacred] force is only the sentiment inspired by the group in its members, but projected outside of the consciousnesses that experience them, and objectified. To be objectified, they are fixed upon some object which thus becomes sacred; but any object might fulfil this function. In principle, there are none whose nature predestines them to it to the exclusion of all others; but also there are none that are necessarily impossible. Everything depends upon the circumstances which lead the sentiment creating religious ideas to establish itself here or there, upon this point or upon that one. Therefore, the sacred character assumed by an object is not implied in the intrinsic properties of this latter: *it is added to them*. The world of religious things is not one particular aspect of empirical nature; *it is superimposed upon it*. [41]

Religious sentiment is what drives the creation of the sacred and ties it to an object, and the awakening of the Buddha statues in Japan readily aligns with Durkheim's understanding of the sacred. It is believed that they were all consecrated between 1648 and 1883 – after which they

[40] Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 229.
[41] Ibid.

began receiving religious attention from Buddhists inside of the Zojoji temple. The fact that the statues were made in the form of Buddhas was important and intentional, but their form is not what designated their sacred status. The consecration ceremony operated as the mechanism by which these statues were converted into sacred objects, 'projecting' the religious experience from followers onto the objects.

It is certain that the statues were sacred in their original context within the Zojoji temple. The question turns to their status now as objects in a museum. The circumstances regarding their acquisition in Japan are uncertain, and thus it is impossible to know if they were deconsecrated or not (though Kok is fairly certain that they are deconsecrated. However, without proof this is only a logical assumption). Because of this, analyzing these statues as exclusively 'sacred objects' is either not verifiable or not accurate. Furthermore, it does not account for how the nature of the statues evolved as they resided in Europe for the past ~200 years. To account for this, the analysis will instead focus on how sacred and singular objects operate in museums. Anthropologists Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff explore material culture and its commodification, and specifically detail the complex transformations that sacred objects undergo as they enter museum collections. They describe sacred things as 'terminal commodities', made to be removed from regular cycles of exchange and circulation[42] – this division between these objects and other exchanged commodities is only strengthened as objects are further separated from their original social contexts and placed in museums.[43] Once an object is within a museum it is re-contextualized, as it shifts from being a source of active ritual to that of scientific inquiry and public display. An object obtains radically new meaning and value in the museum – similar to Durkheim and Smith's understanding of the sacred, 'value' is never an inherent property of an object but a judgement made about it by subjects.[44] While an object might lose its sacred dimension due to the process of re-contextualization, this loss does not equate to the loss of an object's value or power.

Though not originally intended for commodification, the Buddha statues were entered into the market at the Amsterdam Colonial Trade Exhibition in 1883 and purchased by the Wereldmuseum. Appadurai states: "The diversion of commodities from specified paths is always a sign of creativity or crisis, whether aesthetic or economic. Such crises may take a variety of forms: economic hardship, in all manner of societies, drives families to part with heirlooms,

[42] Kopytoff, Igor. "The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process," In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective,* edited by Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 73.
[43] Kopytoff, "Cultural biography of things," 82.
[44] Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things,* 3.

antiques, and memorabilia and to commoditize them."[45] The statues were only ever intended to function within a religious context, but this intention was thwarted in the 19th century. The statues briefly entered into the sphere of commodities, but quickly re-entered a perceived high-value but non-market sphere – this time, instead of a religious sphere from which they came, they now resided in the sphere of 'singular art', a status determined via their placement in a museum.

In applying Appaduraian analysis to the Buddha statues in the Wereldmuseum, it is possible to discuss them not through a lens of 'sacred objects', but of 'valuable objects'. Their value is determined by their diversion from the life of commodities; their presence in the museum is a confirmation of their prestige, listing them as objects superior to the world of commerce.[46] As stated by Kopytoff: "…non-saleability imparts to a thing a special aura of apartness from the mundane and the common."[47] This value is intertwined with their powerful presence – since their placement in the garden at the Rapenburg location (ca. 1883 – 1937) the statues have been memorable pieces of the museum collection (see fig. 1 and 2).[48] The singular value of the statues was further augmented by the impression they made on European audiences. Their placement in the garden of the Rapenburg building drew crowds to the city of Leiden,[49] and their life in the old Buddha Hall is so fondly remembered that it inspired the new Buddha Room. In fact, in describing the Buddha Room, the Wereldmuseum website states: "…An attempt is being made to restore that original atmosphere of the past…. Hopefully, nostalgia will return, and for countless people, diverse memories."[50] When pointing to 'nostalgia' and 'memories', the Wereldmuseum is referring to a European (and, perhaps more specifically, Dutch) sentiment, not a Japanese one. There is an inextricable cultural memory wrapped around the statues which is distinct from the memory of the statues in their original context – the statues have taken on a life of their own while at the Wereldmuseum. This memory is a multifaceted dimension that could be explored by future literature, but for the purposes of this paper it is evidence that though these objects are not products of the European religious or sacred sphere they nonetheless hold immense value to the Dutch population.

The Buddha statues had and continue to have value in their sociocultural networks, even as their context radically shifted. Their value as a sacred object, as a commodity, and as a museum

[45] Ibid., 26.
[46] Kopytoff, "Cultural biography of things," 69.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Van der Pijl-Ketel, "Twee Japanse Boeddhabeelden in Artis," 4-11.
[49] Ibid.
[50] https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11840/658675

display intersect and overlap – over time they have generated and accumulated cultural attention due to all of these factors. If sacred nature is the sentiment of a group projected onto an object then it can be claimed that according to Durkheimian theory these statues function as if they are sacred, regardless of their consecration status. Interestingly, this new 'sacred nature' is determined by museum visitors who are primarily Dutch and Western, and is separate from (but perhaps inspired by) the consecrated sacred nature they possessed in their original context. It may be that the Buddha statues lost their role as sacred objects when they left Zojoji but they were not stripped of their power, and succeeded in attaining new meaning at the Wereldmuseum.

Section 3.2 – The Buddha Room as a Sacred Space

Smith adds to the discussion by focusing on what surrounds the sacred – namely, rituals and space. He states: "When one enters a temple, one enters marked-off space in which, at least in principle, nothing is accidental; everything, at least potentially, is of significance. The temple serves as a *focusing lens*, marking and revealing significance."[51] Similar to Smith's understanding of a temple, the museum is a designated space curated to evoke specific experiences from visitors (usually experiences of awe, identity confirmation, and/or intellectual stimulation).[52] This can be seen clearly in the Buddha Room, a small space within the larger museum structure specifically dedicated to focusing attention onto the objects in the room, and using curatorial tools to encourage this effect.

The importance of intention behind the creation of sacred space is paramount to Smith – not just from the 'worshipers' and the attention which they direct to the sacred, but also the 'leaders' who control the rituals of the space and determine how worshippers approach the sacred.[53] There is a strong parallel between these religious 'leaders' and museum curators, as both are responsible for mediating the relationship between the object(s) of veneration and the individual. Curators aim to provide context and interpretation for objects to help visitors understand their significance. They communicate this through written labels as well as spatial arrangement, controlling how visitors approach and understand what is being exhibited. These factors are ways in which curators direct and manipulate the ritual surrounding an object, as they attempt to influence how much time and

[51] Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 54.
[52] Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 7-20.
[53] Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 56.

attention individuals direct to certain parts of the museum space. By understanding the ritual which takes place in their museum, curators can preemptively prepare ways to direct visitor attention and energy to make the experience as memorable and educational as possible. Visitor patterns can demonstrate how and where individuals' attention lies, and curators can analyze this and use that inertia to best activate visitor engagement. All of these factors echo the responsibilities of religious leaders, who are similarly responsible for contextualizing and communicating information regarding their sacred objects and spaces. They, too, need engagement, energy, and attention from their constituents, and actively construct rituals and forms of engagement which best balance the goals and wishes of the worshipers with the constraints of respect and preservation of the sacred. Essentially, the parallel between curators and leaders is another overlap in the conceptual understanding of the sacred and the role of museums, as both serve as mediators between a dimension of value and inaccessibility and a general populous. Both direct the attention of individuals and influence or react to rituals with the goal of widening the potential for engagement.

Turning to an analysis of sacred space, Smith notes that these spaces are ones of clarification, of transparency between the mortal world and the divine, where static and noise (i.e. the accidental) are decreased so that the exchange of information can be increased.[54] It is interesting to note that one key aspect of the Buddha Room (and of the garden and Buddha Hall before it) is that of noise dampening, currently made possible by the cloth which runs along three of the walls. By eliminating distractions ('accidents', in the eyes of Smith) visitors are able to direct their full attention towards designated objects within a space. This dimension was more prominent in the old Buddha Hall, as the hall was located in a particularly silent area of the museum. Even with the proximity to the museum entrance, the noise dampening effect and the subsequent ability to focus one's attention is still a notable aspect of the Buddha Room.[55]

Applying Smith's theory of the temple as a focusing lens to the design choices of the Buddha Room results in a perspective of sacred intention – after all, what is sacred is what has attention directed to it in a special manner.[56] Discussing and interpreting the design of the room will continue to outline the similarities between museum curation and Smithian sacrality. This will demonstrate that separate from the Buddha statues the room itself is intended to evoke and direct

[54] Ibid., 54.
[55] Woerlee explains how there originally was a plan to have a Japanese silk screen just inside the entrance to the Buddha Room to further dampen noise from the outside, as well as hide the Buddhas from view until visitors had entered the space, but this was not realized due to insufficient funds.
[56] Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 55.

certain emotions, experiences, and attention, as seen through the utilization of materials and visual design elements.

Beginning with the arrangement of the statues: the five Buddhas are lined up against the back wall, immediately visible upon entry, in a symmetrically pleasing manner by which the two larger Buddhas flank the three smaller ones. Only a portion of the statues (the three smallest ones, consecrated in 1648,) can be seen from outside the room through the doorway (see fig. 11). On the sides of the room are six other Japanese Buddhist objects which are connected to Buddhism and Japanese temples, but, even though some are quite large, they are not highlighted like the Buddhas (see fig. 7 and 8). This is partly due to the elevation of the Buddhas, which look down on visitors; conversely, visitors mostly look down onto the objects on the sides of the room. The presence of the Buddha statues overshadows that of the other objects, but the objects nonetheless aid in perpetuating the atmosphere of the room. Their metallic bodies reflect the light and, like the Buddha statues, bring in a sense of age and grandeur that is not found in the drywall and fresh paint of modern buildings. This was likely a deliberate choice which served to contextualize the Buddhas, not only historically but also experientially.[57]

In the same vein, it is important to discuss the need to look up at the statues. Kok explained that it is disrespectful to look down upon the Buddha, and so Buddha statues should always be displayed at an elevated level. This treatment serves to be respectful to the statues and their original context, but also is a curatorial choice which aims to inspire a reverence.[58] There is an echo of the raised gaze of visitors observing consecrated Buddhas at places such as the Kyoto National Museum in the raised gaze of visitors at the Wereldmuseum. This design is not a coincidence, as it is a strategy found in many religious sites and museums (such as the elevation of Michelangelo's Pietà in Saint Peter's Basilica, or of Nike of Samothrace in the Louvre) and indicates to the viewer that they are in the presence of something important.[59] By placing and highlighting an object of perceived importance this room subtly encourages certain behaviors from visitors, (such as standing directly in front of the statues and beholding them, or lowering one's voice,) and these encouraged behaviors undertaken (or not) by the visitor are a prime example of the ritual found in and embedded into the museum (ritual will be explored further in section 3.3).

[57] It is also worth noting that all of the objects in the room (with the exception of the temple bell) were bought from Bing and are most likely from Zojoji. Furthermore, many of these objects have been displayed together in the past – for example, the temple lantern and the *Shozen* and *Shoaku doji* pair were displayed with the Buddhas in the garden at the Rapenburg location. See fig. 1, 2, and 3.
[58] Woerlee, interview.
[59] By proxy, the space which houses the significant object also attains a level of importance.

Another important factor of curation is the lighting. As noted in Chapter 1, the lighting in the Buddha Room is low and continuously shifts between warmer and cooler tones. This is done to imitate the shifting natural light of the old Buddha Hall, which used hidden mirrors to ethereal effect, and echo the shifting natural light of the garden at the Rapenburg building.[60] Because there is no natural light permeating the new Buddha Room nor mirrors to animate the statues, the lights are now computer controlled and carefully coordinated to shift from bright to dim. The statues are also continuously lit from the back and directly above to ensure that they can always be seen by visitors, no matter the other shifting lights. Stephen Greenblatt, in his oft quoted essay *Resonance and Wonder*, comments on this form of lighting, stating that the so-called boutique lighting – creating a pool of light that has the surreal effect of seeming to emerge from within the object rather than to focus on it from the outside world – attempts to provoke and heighten the experience of wonder.[61] He describes the concept of wonder as "…the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention."[62] In their current location in the Buddha Room, the lighting illuminates the individual statues while not brightening the rest of the room, an effect which further directs attention towards them and denotes them as singular.

As mentioned before, the lack of casing found on all of the objects in the Buddha Room raises many issues, but it also functions to inspire a feeling of connection with the objects. They are given presence, agency, and able to become bigger than themselves due to the fact that their boundary is not limited by a physical designation. Their presentation in this room seems closer to a temple than a museum. It serves to reiterate that the Kyoto National Museum displays their Buddhas in a manner very similar to the Buddha Room – in the dark space, with enchanting lighting and high pedestals – including their lack of casing (see fig. 10). The statues in the Kyoto National Museum are sacred and thus might have restrictions on placing them in airtight or low-oxygen spaces, but if Kok is correct and these objects are de-consecrated then there are no such restrictions for the Buddhas at the Wereldmuseum. However, it is clear that these objects have a much stronger presence when outside of a case. Continuing to display them in this manner, even with the risk of being touched, is a curatorial choice to prioritize the experience of the statues over the eternal preservation of the object.

---

[60] Woerlee, interview.
[61] Greenblatt, Stephen. "Resonance and Wonder." *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 43, no. 4 (1990): 28.
[62] Greenblatt, *Resonance and Wonder*, 20.

The doorway is another marker of this space. Relatively small compared to the objects, the ceiling, and the open atrium outside of the Buddha Room, this boundary serves to mark an area distinct from other parts of the museum. The doorway to the Buddha Room uses slightly diagonal walls to have the space open up outwards from the door while allowing for as small of a doorframe as reasonably allowed in a museum. This could be a metaphor for the siphon between the sacred (the inside, a more controlled and quiet space) and the profane (the outside, with lots of light and sound and movement), but it also has the practical effect of aiding in the noise dampening of the room – the smaller the doorway, the less noise is able to enter the space. As mentioned, the noise dampening is made possible by the fabric running along the perimeter of the room, which absorbs sound and dampens light. By controlling light, noise, and traffic, this boundary is functional for a myriad of reasons, not least in its ability to encourage the focus of those already within the room.

Finally, it must be mentioned that the room encourages visitors to invest not only energy and attention towards the objects within, but also time. This is made possible due to the five low seats subtly covered in an *asanoha* pattern – a pattern which represents health and long life. Placing comfortable seats in the room is an invitation to sit with the statues, an invitation often found in front of great works of art in museum galleries across the world. Seats are another subtle way in which museums communicate the pieces they intended for visitors to interact with (along with things such as maps that indicate 'exhibition highlights') so it is notable that the Wereldmuseum has placed seating in the Buddha Room. This time investment, paired with the low noise, specialized lighting, and highlighted presence of the Buddha statues, reflects the curatorial intention of the room. All of the design choices illustrate the museum communicating to visitors and encouraging them to engage with the statues.

By analyzing the design choices of the room it is reasonable to assume that visitors would feel intrigued by the display of statues, and inspired to utilize the available seating to sit and engage with the objects. Smith argues that spaces and objects are made sacred via special attention, specifically through ritual and invested time.[63] Nowhere in the room does it claim that these objects are sacred, yet the curatorial choices nonetheless aim to incite an elevated attention directed towards the Buddhas as if they are sacred. This room intentionally intersects the historical sacred dimension of the objects with the new value they have attained as singular museum objects – it uses their perception as sacred objects to enrich the experience they can provide to visitors, a process which also augments their value as (European) cultural objects. As discussed in the

[63] Smith, *Imagining Religion,* 55; *To Take Place,* 104-105.

previous section these statues have value in the museum regardless of their status as sacred objects, a value which operates similar to sentiments of the sacred, (minus the religious rituals,) but this room capitalizes on and enforces this sentiment. It communicates to audiences that these objects are important and encourages an elevated experience that is reverent and quasi-religious. Because of the similarities between museum and sacred spaces, visitors may find the sensory and spiritual aspects of one experience graft on to the other, the secular and aesthetic conflating with the divine.[64] The implications of this blurring will be explored in the next section.

Section 3.3 – The Museum as a Sacred Space

In discussing the nature of the Buddha statues and the Buddha Room it is clear that there is often a conflation of the sacred and the secular, especially when discussing an object within a museum context. Museums, in a variety of different ways, engage with (or, alternatively, hold at bay) the sacred as it manifests within its walls.[65] This can be seen through their architecture and exhibitions, but also in maps, seating, wall texts, visitor behavior, etc. – all of which are indicative of what museums want visitors to experience and how. Architecture, installation practices, and museum policy all reflect these concerns. In order to understand how the Buddha Room relates to the sacred, it is important to understand how museums generally relate to the sacred.

The museum was long understood as a secular institution which rivaled the church; a paragon of rationality and enlightenment separated from the politics of religion and the intangibility of faith.[66] However, even detached from the enchantment ascribed to them by religion, pieces in museums were perceived as powerful due to the philosophical movement of aesthetics, which intertwined the power of art and beauty with moral sensibility. Objects in the museum were no longer merely objects but examples of the human spirit, which in itself held a powerful moral and religious dimension.[67] Art historian Carol Duncan in her work *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* describes: "…the invention of aesthetics can be understood as a transference of spiritual values from the sacred realm into secular time and space."[68] The aesthetic experience was

[64] Buggeln, "Museum Space and the Experience of the Sacred," 38.
[65] Buggeln, "Museum Space and the Experience of the Sacred," 34.
[66] Ibid., 34-35.
[67] Ibid., 36.
[68] Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals,* 14.

defined as the mode of receptivity deemed most appropriate to behold works of art so that it could transform the viewer morally, spiritually, and emotionally.[69] Already in the 18th century attention was given to the intangible power of art and objects in museums which, when approached with the correct type of attention, had the power to be as deeply meaningful as religion. Backed by philosophy, the secular museum was now also designated as a space for powerful experiences of revelation, transcendence, and transformation.

Aesthetics was an answer for the impactful experiences which could be found within the museum. Equally important in connecting the sacred to the museum were the performative rituals associated with both. For Smith, ritual is an essential aspect of elevating something to a sacred status, as it is a mechanism of affixing elevated attention to an object or space.[70] Duncan argues that rituals are embedded in the fabric of the museum, and not just found in the attention which is expected from visitors. The entire museum is a ritual site which programs the enactment of a performance into its visitors. The ritual is not a formal spectacle, but is characterized by simple things such as following a designated route, repeating a prayer, recalling a narrative, or by engaging in some other structured experience that relates to the history or meaning of the site or object.[71] Duncan's understanding of museum ritual echoes Smith's description of a temple/sacred space operating as a frame where everything within is significant and intentional – a focusing lens to mark and reveal meaning.[72]

Additionally, the divide between museum space and the outside world is clarified and enforced by architecture. For nearly two centuries most notable museums looked like classical temples, complete with grand entrances, staircases, pillars, and porticoes. These design choices originated from a Classical religious context but had been assimilated into Enlightenment ideals about architecture, beauty, and rational form.[73] Nevertheless, these monumental forms brought with them spaces that called for public ritual – "…corridors scaled for processions, halls implying large, communal gatherings, and interior sanctuaries designed for awesome and potent effigies."[74] The architecture traditionally found in museums promoted a ritual attitude and receptivity which echoed Western expectations of encountering significant cultural art and artefacts.

---

[69] Ibid., 11; 14.
[70] Smith, *Imagining Religion,* 55; *To Take Place,* 104-105.
[71] Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals,* 12.
[72] Smith, *Imagining Religion,* 54.
[73] Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals,* 10.
[74] Ibid.

The intertwining of the sacred and the museum is what this thesis refers to when it references 'sacrality'. As can be seen there is an overlap in the understanding of the museum and the sacred, as the language of the sacred was appropriated to explain the transformative experiences available in the museum.[75] Though intended to be purely rational spaces, museums are a microcosm which hold both the sacred and the secular. As summarized by Gretchen Bruggeln in *Museum Space and the Experience of the Sacred,* in the West the museum is already understood to be (and is comfortable with being understood as) sacred in a vaguely spiritual sense – however, the fear is found in promoting particular religious beliefs.[76] This resistance centers around the sensitive and often contentious nature of religion in societal contexts, and the museum's fear of isolating certain groups by inadvertently promoting one religious group over the other. This is supplemented by the discourse surrounding the housing and display of religious (and former colonial) objects in museums, as museums' ownership of said objects is called to attention. There are also financial concerns, as many institutions receive public funding and thus hesitate to endorse certain religious beliefs. The practical and political reasons for distancing the museum from religion are understandable, but they fail to counteract the sacred atmosphere that is already present in museums.

The Wereldmuseum is no exception to this discourse. As an ethnographic museum their collection exclusively contains content from other parts of the world, especially from former colonial sites. Even so, it can be demonstrated from the Veys and Woerlee interviews that the Wereldmuseum is not entirely opposed to allowing the sacred or religious a life within its premises, as seen in the treatment of the *hoeroa* and the Hajj exhibition. Because the museum is familiar and relatively comfortable with religion in its halls, it is more likely to lean on the transcendental and reverent feelings shared by both museums and religious spaces in order to create the most memorable and transformative museum experience possible.

Turning to the Buddha Room, it can be seen that the statues and the room function similar to sacred objects and spaces, as demonstrated through the room's design. However, as the statues are more accurately 'valuable objects', it is questionable if this space can be considered sacred without actually containing sacred objects. Fortunately, this question has no effect on museum sacrality, which is a general sentiment and experience rooted in the museum itself and isn't determined by the display of sacred objects. The experience of museum sacrality happens for

[75] Buggeln, "Museum Space and the Experience of the Sacred," 36.
[76] Ibid., 41.

various reasons, one of which being that the museum displays valuable objects which have the power to be transformative. Most museum objects are not understood as sacred in the religious sense, but are certainly given power due to their status as museum objects, art objects, and cultural heritage. Therefore, the Buddha Room can and does operationalize sacrality to highlight the value of the objects regardless of their sacred status – a duality possible by the similarity of 'value' and the sacred, in which their status is determined by others and enforced by the direction of heightened attention.

The Wereldmuseum is willing to lean into the sacred experience in order to curate the most memorable experience possible. They are able to do this because sacrality is already a component of the museum experience. The museum has accomplished this by designing a room which directs attention to valuable Buddha statues, not only creating a current exhibit which echoes other sacred exhibits displaying similar material, but also referencing past rooms and arrangements of the statues at the Wereldmuseum which play into the European cultural memory attached to these objects. This is important in understanding the Buddha statues and the Buddha Room, but also helps inform how the museum responds to and directs other exhibitions. As a center of culture, information, and identity, it is relevant to analyze how the Wereldmuseum might interact with the sacred as this institution has the power to influence both local and global communities.

Furthermore, this line of investigation ties the Wereldmuseum to the new museological discourse of sacred spaces in secular institutions. The question of what a museum can and should be are important as academics and museum employees look at the possibility of (or already are) shifting from passive to active members in their communities.[77] In their interviews, both Veys and Kok expressed interest in this question, and considered the possibility of breaking from traditional understandings of the museum as a space exclusively for preservation to one of meaning making, however different that may look. The Wereldmuseum is already engaging with the sacred on an active level, as mandated by its ethnographic collections, and the Buddha Room is an example of the museum's tilt towards sacrality as a way to increase museum impact and visitor resonance. The visitor is encouraged to enter the room, as it is the first thing that they encounter at the top of the stairs, and is directed to experience the Buddhas in a particular way that mirrors sacred objects. Though these objects are more valuable than sacred matters not – the curation is the same.

By incorporating the sacred into the museum there opens up a greater range of experiences for museum visitors – along with a greater amount of risks for the museum. At the same time, there

[77] Müller, *The Local Museum in the Global Village,* 29-57.

are also risks for museums who remain firm in their opposition to the sacred, as they either lose visitors who are drawn to resonant exhibitions elsewhere or are criticized for not actively engaging with their community and history. It seems that the Wereldmuseum is doing what it feels appropriate – proceeding slowly and carefully in incorporating the sacred within its walls. Nonetheless, they have done more to this end than many other museums due to the nature of their collections, which house sacred objects from around the world and which demand a certain level of care and attention.[78] In displaying the Buddha Room as a permanent exhibit the museum blurs the lines between what is sacred and what is secular, and reaps the benefits as visitors continue to see this room as a highlight of their museum visit.

[78] Ethnographic museums are typically at the forefront of museological change due to their colonial history and collections; as such they are an interesting study in how museums respond to contemporary attitudes.

Conclusion

The Buddha Room is unquestionably a significant aspect of the Wereldmuseum experience. However, this room, along with a substantial portion of the museum interior, is to be redesigned in the upcoming years. The question of how to proceed with the redesign arose within the museum's leadership, and a town hall was held to hear the opinions of the citizenry. Unsurprisingly, many residents asked not only for a Buddha Room to be included in the new museum, but specifically for the return of the old Buddha Hall, which still evokes fond memories in those who were around to experience it.[79] This anecdote is told to not only illustrate the impact that an old exhibition hall still has on some visitors, but to also point to the pivotal decisions facing the Wereldmuseum. The museum must now decide if and how to dedicate a space for the Buddhas; they must decide the extent to which they echo the previous displays of the Buddhas, now including the Buddha Room; and they must decide how far they want to lean into the dimension of sacrality, along with all of the benefits and consequences that may come of having a quasi-religious space in the museum.

Whichever direction the Wereldmuseum decides to pursue will contain a level of sacrality – the sacred already has a foothold in their museum experience, both theoretically (via aesthetics, architecture, and the displaying of valuable objects) and practically (due to the housing of active sacred objects, such as the *hoeroa*, and the invitation of active religious ritual, as seen by the Hajj temporary exhibition). As demonstrated, the fact that the Wereldmuseum is already actively engaging with the sacred implies that it is looking to the transcendental possibilities of sacrality in order to facilitate the most memorable and transformative museum experience possible. It is likely that they will continue in this direction with the museum redesign, but this is an avenue to be explored and reflected on by future academics after the redesign is completed.

This paper set out to explore the visual and design language which the Buddha Room used to heighten museum sacrality. In doing so it was essential to discuss the interplay of museums, sacrality, ritual, and value – and how these aspects are inextricable from each other. As stated by Duncan:

[79] Kok, interview; Woerlee, interview.

> [The ritual] is seen as transformative: it confers or renews identity or purifies or restores order in the self or to the world through sacrifice, ordeal, or enlightenment. The beneficial outcome that museum rituals are supposed to produce can sound very like claims made for traditional, religious rituals. According to their advocates, museum visitors come away with a sense of enlightenment, or a feeling of having been spiritually nourished or restored.[80]

The language of the sacred and the language of museums has been merged to the point where describing one risks describing the other. Indeed, the intentions of both the sacred and museums overlap as they both look to nourish, restore, and enlighten. This sacrality of museums appears to go against their Enlightenment-era intention, but instead demonstrates a continuous ability to find power and meaning in the material world. Even though religion was separated from the museum, museums could not entirely divest objects of their power and value.

The Buddha statues at the Wereldmuseum are a prime example of powerful museum objects. Though their consecration cannot be determined at this time they are nonetheless a valuable aspect of the museum, as seen through their esteemed display. This value is rooted in their status as museum objects, but augmented by the memories and experiences they have inspired since their display in the Rapenburg garden and the Buddha Hall.[81] Their current display serves to highlight and communicate their value to both new visitors and visitors who remember them from the Buddha Hall. All of their displays have intended to provoke awe and reverence within their visitors and have contributed to the cultural memory which they have amassed, a dimension which further contributes to their value in a self-perpetuating cycle.

The carefully crafted environment of the Buddha Room, specifically the lighting, arrangement, and acoustics, are crucial means of curating a sense of sacrality. The encouragement of ritual, communicated by the museum to visitors through the use of seating, silence, and darkness, directs visitors to feel at ease in the space and facilitates attention to be directed towards the objects within. In particular, the seating establishes this room as a space which time should be invested in. The combination of ritual and attention is something which new museologists and religious scholars agree can have transformative effects on objects and spaces; museums are culturally

[80] Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals,* 13.
[81] The author wonders: if there were people alive today who had experienced the Buddhas during their display in the Rapenburg garden, would they act in a similar manner as those who remember the old Buddha Hall? How was that space remembered by the people who had visited it? A string of theses documenting the Buddhas as they shifted from space to space would be quite enlightening.

understood to be places capable of enlightenment and transformation, and the Buddha Room is a demonstration of the extent of this power.

It is easy to get lost in the theoretical aspects of material culture and the assumed impacts that objects have on social relationships. A larger project would have looked at visitor experiences and combined this experiential data to an analysis of the room's curation to determine the actual experiences resultant from the curation. A comparison could then be made to the goals of the curators in the room's design to establish the degree to which they were successful in communicating awe and value. However, even without visitor data it is still possible to discuss the history, display, and intention surrounding the statues and the room, and explore the intertwined relationship between the Wereldmuseum and sacrality.

The redesign of the Wereldmuseum is an opportunity to decide how far they are willing to go in cementing sacrality in their halls. This project will not reach its completion for many years, but it is certain that there will be much discussion regarding this question in the meantime. Though many details remain uncertain, it is almost guaranteed that the Buddhas will be incorporated and displayed in some capacity. The extent to which they will be highlighted, or to which they will receive a designated space that serves to exclusively direct attention and enchant visitors, is one of many questions that museum curators, shareholders, and directors will be discussing in the upcoming years. Perhaps the Buddha Room, like the Buddha Hall before it, will become a memory restricted to those who were fortunate enough to experience it, but currently it stands as an example of the power of space in giving meaning to material culture.

Figures:

Fig. 1: Garden at the Rapenburg museum location, with the magnolia tree in bloom

Fig. 2: Garden at the Rapenburg museum location

Fig. 3: *Shozen doji* and *Shoaku doji* flanking a *Fudo Myoo (Acala)* in the garden at the Rapenburg museum location

Fig. 4: The old Buddha Hall

Fig. 5: The old Buddha Hall, close up

Fig. 6: Visitor's view of Buddhas from the right corner of the Buddha Room

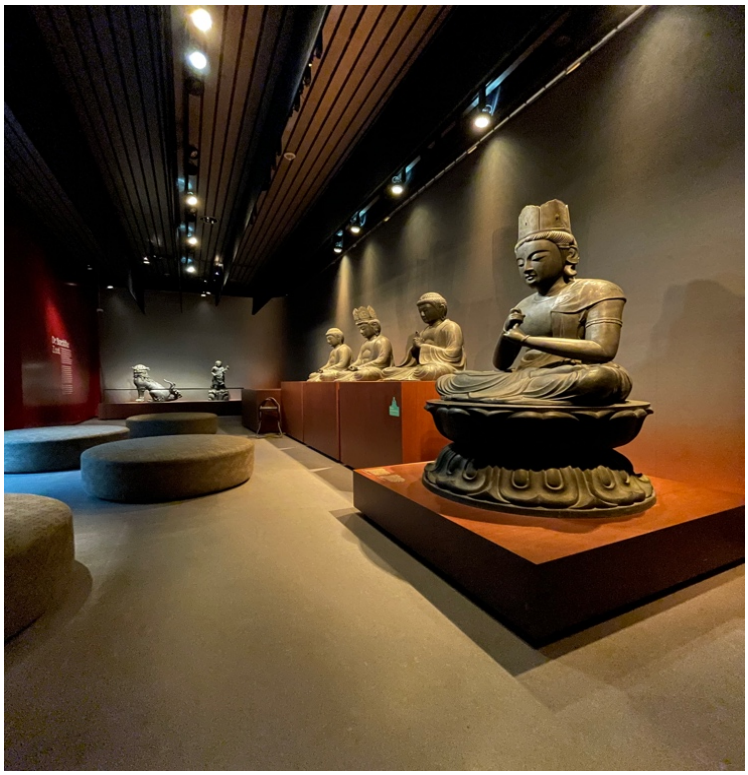

Fig. 7: Objects on the left side of the Buddha Room (*Shishi* lion [RV-417-102], *Shozen doji* [RV-417-100])

Fig. 8: Objects on the right side of the Buddha Room (*Shoaku doji* [RV-417-101], *Shishi* lion [RV-417-107], bronze temple bell [RV-1269-9], bronze temple lantern [RV-417-99a])

Fig. 9: Ancestor deity displayed in front of the Abelam man's house, from exhibition at Wereldmuseum Leiden in 2018

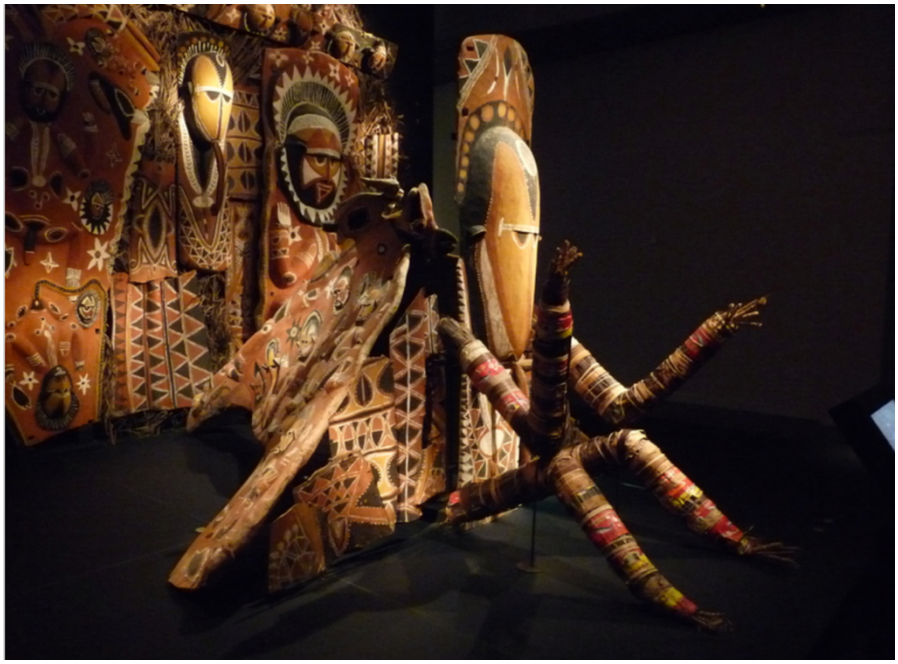

Fig. 10: Kyoto National Museum Buddha Display

Fig. 11: Buddha Room as seen from outside the room

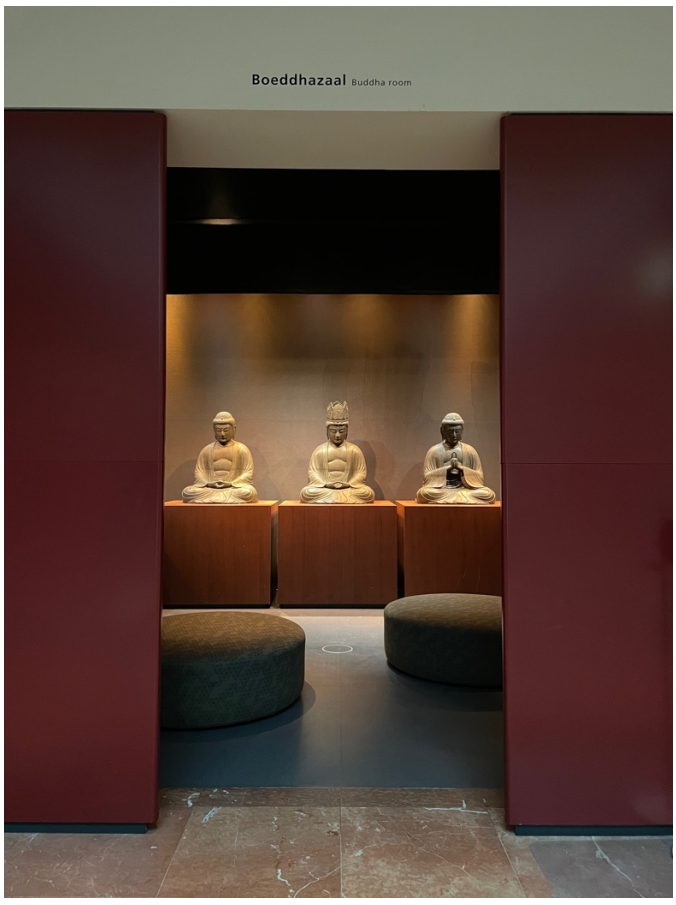

Figure References:

Figure 1. Garden at the Rapenburg museum location, with the magnolia tree in bloom. Archival material from Wereldmuseum Leiden, archive no. RV-12366. Photographed by author. November 14, 2024.

Figure 2. Garden at the Rapenburg museum location. Archival material from Wereldmuseum Leiden, archive no. RV-12366. Photographed by author. November 14, 2024.

Figure 3. *Shozen doji* and *Shoaku doji* flanking a *Fudo Myoo (Acala)* in the garden at the Rapenburg museum location. Archival material from Wereldmuseum Leiden, archive no. RV-12366. Photographed by author. November 14, 2024.

Figure 4. The old Buddha Hall. Archival material from Wereldmuseum Leiden, archive no. RV-12334. Photographed by author. November 14, 2024.

Figure 5. The old Buddha Hall, close up. Archival material from Wereldmuseum Leiden, archive no. RV-12334. Photographed by author. November 14, 2024.

Figure 6. Visitor's view of Buddhas from the right corner of the Buddha Room, Wereldmuseum, Leiden. Photo by author. September 26, 2024.

Figure 7. Objects on the left side of the Buddha Room (*Shishi* lion [RV-417-102], *Shozen doji* [RV-417-100]), Wereldmuseum, Leiden. Photo by author. November 7, 2024.

Figure 8. Objects on the right side of the Buddha Room (*Shoaku doji* [RV-417-101], *Shishi* lion [RV-417-107], bronze temple bell [RV-1269-9], bronze temple lantern [RV-417-99a]), Wereldmuseum, Leiden. Photo by author. November 7, 2024.

Figure 9. Melanesian Encounters. "Oceania Exhibition – Museum of Ethnology, Leiden." 2018. Downloaded October 26, 2024. https://www.melanesian-encounters.com/RMV.html

Figure 10. Furukawa, Mikio. “Kyoto National Museum’s ‘Heisei Chishinkan’ Opens.” *Internet Museum*. September 10, 2014. Downloaded October 27, 2024. https://www.museum.or.jp/report/522

Figure 11. Buddha Room as seen from outside the room, Wereldmuseum, Leiden. Photo by author. November 7, 2024.

Bibliography:

Primary Sources:

Kok, Daan. “Thesis Interviews – Curator Daan Kok.” Interview by Lorraine Singleton. October 25, 2024. In person interview.

Schmidt, Annette. “Thesis Interviews – Annette Schmidt and Anne Marie Woerlee.” Interview by Lorraine Singleton. November 22, 2024. In person interview.

Veys, Wonu. “Thesis Interviews – Curator Wonu Veys.” Interview by Lorraine Singleton. October 16, 2024. In person interview.

Woerlee, Anne Marie. “Thesis Interviews – Annette Schmidt and Anne Marie Woerlee.” Interview by Lorraine Singleton. November 22, 2024. In person interview.

Secondary Sources:

Appadurai, Arjun, ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

Buggeln, Gretchen T. “Museum Space and the Experience of the Sacred.” *Material Religion* 8, no. 1 (2012): 30–50.

Duncan, Carol. *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*. Routledge, 1995.

Duncan, Carol and Wallach, Allan. The Museum of Modern Art as Late Capitalist Ritual: An Iconographic Analysis. In *Grasping the World: The idea of the Museum*, ed. Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago. Aldershot, UK and Burlington, VA: Ashgate, 2004: 483-500.

Durkheim, Émile. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Translated by Joseph Ward Swain. London: Hollen Street Press Ltd., 1954.

Greenblatt, Stephen. "Resonance and Wonder." *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 43, no. 4 (1990): 11–34.

Müller, Insa. *The Local Museum in the Global Village: Rethinking Ideas, Functions, and Practices of Local History Museums in Rapidly Changing Diverse Communities.* 1st ed. Vol. 46. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2020.

Smith, Jonathan Z. *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

Smith, Jonathan Z. *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Van der Pijl-Ketel, Christine. "Twee Japanse Boeddhabeelden in Artis." *Vereniging van Vrienden der Aziatische Kunst* 14, no. 3 (1984): 4-11.

Walker, Seth. "My[Sacred]Space: Discovering Sacred Space in Cyberspace." *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 22, no. 2 (June 2010).

Websites:

Melanesian Encounters. "Oceania Exhibition – Museum of Ethnology, Leiden." 2018. Accessed October 26, 2024. https://www.melanesian-encounters.com/RMV.html

Musée du Quai Branly Jacques Chirac. "Kanak: Art is a Word." Exhibitions and Events – Kanak. Accessed on October 26, 2024. https://www.quaibranly.fr/en/exhibitions-and-events/at-the-museum/exhibitions/event-details/e/kanak

Rijksmuseum. “Asian Bronze.” Exhibition. Accessed on October 30, 2024. https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/zien-en-doen/tentoonstellingen/asian-bronze

Royal Academy. “Oceania.” Exhibition. Accessed on October 26, 2024. https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibition/oceania

Wereldmuseum Collection Database. “Amida Nyorai, de hemelse Boeddha.” Nu te zien in Vaste tentoonstelling Leiden 2011: Boeddazaal. Accessed on October 1, 2024. https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11840/658675

Wereldmuseum Leiden. “Staff (hoeroa) from New Zealand.” World Cultures. Accessed on October 26, 2024. https://leiden.wereldmuseum.nl/nl/wereldverhalen/staf-hoeroa-uit-nieuw-zeeland

Appendix – Curator Interviews

Interview – Wonu Veys
October 16, 2024.

Part 1

Speaker 1 – Lorraine Singleton 0:00
Yes. All right, okay, we have recordings. Um, yes. First of all, thank you for agreeing to meet with me. Um, I have a list of questions that I wanted to sort of start off with, but first I also wanted to talk about what I was doing. So I am very interested in the Buddha room, specifically, right? And my thesis is concerned with sacred space. So and, you know, it's sort of wondering how I frame that, because I of course have it from an experiential point of view, like, what as a visitor experiences? But that was sort of, you know, there's lots of difficult things to do when it talks about like visitor experience. So I am instead focusing on the curatorial design of sacred space and all the questions that come with that. So I want to talk about your background specifically, even if it's not the Buddha room, but just sort of how your you approach these objects and your understanding of them. So that's where I'm coming from. But I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about your career journey and how you ended up at the Wereldmuseum.

Speaker 2 – Wonu Veys 1:17
First of all, my name is Wonu Veys, and I've been at the Wereldmuseum for 15 years. Yeah, it doesn't feel that long, but it is quite long. And I actually have studied first art history and then or, kind of, anthropology, material culture. So I am from Belgium, so I studied first in Belgium again, and then I moved to the UK, and studied in Norwich at the University of East Anglia. And so, so my focus has always been really on objects and what objects do and how they work, both in kind of original contexts, as in museum context. And I'm especially interested in also the link between what, you know, people from originated communities, how they experience and how they make connections to objects in museum spaces and storage and displays and so on. My particular interest is in textiles, and especially barkhoff. That's what I wrote my thesis about in the Pacific, because I am a curator for the Pacific, for Oceania, and that’s a big area. And I have,

and of course, when it when it comes to kind of sacred spaces or sacred objects, I think the Pacific is full of it. When we had, that was, until 2012 there was actually the display of the of an Abelam man's house, or of not the complete house, but two interior rooms at the house were displayed. And that's actually quite an interesting thing. I was not there when it was put up. It was there when I arrived. I mean, and it was, that's definitely an interesting space, because it is like for man normally, but when you put it in museum, and people sold it to the museum, so they knew it was going to be in the museum and it was going to be accessible to non initiated people and all these things. So they were fully aware the context was going to be very different, but still, they wanted it to be shown and seen. So I think for the visitor, it's also interesting to see, or to perhaps try to make it clear to the visitor how that worked in an original context. But what you see here is something that is very different from what you would have experienced in the original context.

Speaker 1 3:52
Yeah, yeah. I mean, and I saw you wrote a paper or a book and also curated an exhibition on the Maori taonga, right?

Speaker 2 4:02
Yeah. Maori, yeah. And that again, that was in 2010 and that was when I had just arrived, in 2009 I arrived at the museum so I immediately had, like, that was that was good, because I had, that was where my expertise was strongest. I mean, I work mainly on Polynesia, and I had experience in New Zealand, and also in Tonga and other places in Polynesia. And so that was actually quite nice, because I had worked with Maori people before. And also the, yeah, the specific kind of importance given to certain objects, not to all of them, but certain objects, but also how that extends to things that are farther away than objects themselves, because, for example, what they call often like treasures. Taonga is treasures, but taonga can also like the language can also be a treasure, or a mountain can be a treasure, and so, so then you see how these are all kind of interlinked and often, and I think that's the whole challenge in the museum, that you take a lot of the, or you see things in very static position, and even masks and things like that, that that we would never see them like that original context, because it would be dance, it would be smells, it would be, you know, sounds, movements, and so that gives a very different aspect to the whole kind of experience, and that's challenging to actually give some of that, I

mean we cannot have fires, and we also don't want to do the kind of re-creation, like diorama type thing, yeah. But to also, like, explain to visitors or make clear to visitors that we have only a very limited experience of these objects and definitely, if you're talking about kind of sacred objects or very cherished objects that's just like the visual aspect is just a tiny part of it.

Speaker 2 6:27
The tip of the iceberg, yes! And even also like language and perception, right? You know, especially here, like Western and European and English or Dutch, right? Very different from the actual context.

Speaker 1 6:41
Exactly yeah.

Speaker 2 6:42
How do you do that, yeah?

Speaker 16:43
And how do you convey certain things? And how do you not, yeah? Because I think like re-creation is impossible, but how do you have a sense of some of the kind of emotional importance, intellectual importance as well, of certain things?

Speaker 1 7:02
Yeah, and I think that's one of the things now with this thesis that I'm veering towards, which is, well, maybe can be in curatorial details or structures. That's sort of what I'm trying to work out, and how people do that, and then like to what effect, you know, so maybe you can't recreate the scene that a mask was or a statue or an artifact or an object, but, you know, you can impart a sense of gravity, by the way the room is designed, the way that it's positioned.

Speaker 2 7:34
yeah, yeah. By the way that you, for example, look down on something. or look up to something. Or have to sit down. Or the entrance is not that wide, or its really open.

Speaker 1 7:49
yeah, yeah. So that's, that's sort of what I'm trying to explore here. Um, and, you know, in regards to the Oceania Hall, um, how is your experience curating that? Do you have any goals in mind or…

Speaker 2 8:08
Well, I didn't do much, because that was just the way it was, it has not changed, actually, that much. That's not completely true. I mean, the whole museum, in theory, has not changed since 2000 here in Leiden, the other museums in Amsterdam and Rotterdam have gone through refurbishment process. Yeah, and we're actually starting it now for Leiden as well, but for the Oceania part, it was moved. So it used to be downstairs, where now the temporary exhibition space is. And there was a different, different thing, because there's one room there that has double height. And for Oceania hat's really nice, because there are a lot of big objects. So you could actually show big things there. And so that's the change that has happened when the original Oceania space moved upstairs, because the ceilings are only four meters high. So yeah, like for the large objects, a lot of our objects are 8-10 meters high, and so we could simply not show those. But apart from that, it has mainly stayed the same. And what was added was because the space was a little bit smaller than what was originally there. So I advocated to have the corridor included. So there we have like a map with the sea boats, model boats, just to also convey the idea of the importance of the sea, the sea as connected, also giving food and a space where relationships are forged and that kind of thing. But, yeah, just that wall is an addition. Yeah, all the other things same. So I didn't decide the other things.

Speaker 1 10:15
But if I'm not mistaken, there are sacred artifacts in that exhibit?

Speaker 2 10:20
Definitely, yeah, and that's sometimes really difficult, because that's, again, a western concept, sometimes, not always, but sometimes, and so certain objects are considered, for example, as only accessible to women or to men. In Australia, they have this term 'secret-sacred objects', and that's often with photographs as well, that certain photographs only man can see them, for example, because it has like knowledge that is there for groups of often initiated people, not even

or all man or all women, it's like people who have gone through the steps being allowed in. And I think in the Western sense, we also have that, because not everyone, you have you, you're getting your degree, and that gives you access to certain…

Speaker 1 11:19
People places and things!

Speaker 2 11:21
Exactly, exactly. And that happens everywhere, you go through some steps, and that gives you that access to, and you can go to certain places where other people are not allowed, you can wear certain clothes that other people are not allowed, like robes.

Speaker 1 11:37
Yeah, and how do you translate that to the museum?

Speaker 2 11:48
Yeah, exactly, and so in thinking of this, there's two things. So some of the objects are kind of sacred, or have a very special importance, and still have that in a way, that's often the case with Aboriginal objects from Aboriginal Australia, that they incorporate particular knowledge, and that's how it was explained to me in when I was in the community in Australia, They said, because I asked, like, I have seen these pictures, and I'm a woman, is that okay, is that a problem? I mean - basically they didn't tell me this way, they were nice - but basically told me I was stupid, you know, I didn't understand. And they also, well, its like when people talk to you in a completely different language, foreign language, they can tell you really big secrets, and you will hear them, while you will not hear the secrets, but you will hear the sounds, but you will actually not understand. And I think with a lot of the kind of Aboriginal art that's often what is happening, is that the you see things, beautiful or not, but don't actually understand what it is conveying, what kind of elitist knowledge it is giving to you. And especially with the contemporary Aboriginal art, people are very much aware of that. That it's going to be seen by people who know anything or are not equipped to kind of understand these things, so they always pack it in a way that only people who have the knowledge can actually understand it, and it's still safe for them, okay, they have the knowledge to understand what is being said there.

Speaker 1 13:56
And then is there a dimension as well that takes into account people who won't get it, like, oh, well, we'll also make it look nice.

Speaker 2 14:04
Well, yeah, you know. So it's, it's kind of because they have the authorization of, because not everyone is allowed to paint particular stories, for example, so they have the authorization, they know that they can paint that particular story, but they also make sure that it's not going to harm people who understand it, but it still looks nice also for people who don't get what is being said, they usually give like a first, like one layer of meaning, but not all, not the whole depth of what is being conveyed. Like, oh, this is the story of two sisters traveling the country. But for people who know, they know two sisters, they know that carries meaning. Other people its just, oh, nice story.

And there's another thing with the sacredness, is that a lot of the objects that we have in the museum used to be sacred, but are not any more, and they look perhaps sacred to us, but they're actually not active. And so a very clear example of that is the objects from new Ireland, and they were used in a, and they also still use these type of objects, for commemoration of a dead person. And so when the commemoration is happening, these objects are made, and they're always made from memory. So they never have like an example to work from, but they they're very recognizable. So they work in this, like, having the memory is actually having the power, and then the right to reproduce or to make these objects. And they are active during the ceremony, and once their ceremony is over, their function is actually also over, so they are not active anymore, and then you can get rid of them. And in the past, like, 200 years ago, they would get rid by leaving them somewhere to rot. They would disappear, and that was it. And then quite early on in the 19th century, first 1825, so when the first European visitors came in bigger numbers, they thought ‘well that's quite nice.’ They like these things, and they're not, they're not active anymore. So, but for Westerners, they looked nice and kind of active because they didn't realize and so, so, but actually, these, these things have, might have been used in a ceremony, but they're actually not sacred anymore, because they're not they're not active anymore. They have

no purpose, yeah, because they were made for a specific person, a specific commemoration, a specific time and place, and now that's finished

Speaker 1 17:16
So what about then, religious objects?

Speaker 2 17:22
yeah, well, it depends, you know, religious objects. I mean, like today in the Pacific, everyone is very Christian. People forget that, but people are very, very Christian, but they still do these kind of commemoration ceremonies and so on and that does not necessarily crash. It's also not that it's kind of kind of what you have in South America, where you have, like,

Unknown Speaker 17:45
Yeah, sort of a mixing, mixing, yeah.

Speaker 2 17:48
That's not really what is happening in the Pacific, but they kind of coexist, yeah, these things work together somehow and so a lot of these things that were in the past religious, you know, before they became Christian, have now become more cultural. So, because the religion is Christianity, but the cultural expression is this, what used to be the religious expression as well, but that's also the difference, because religion is also not that easy to separate. It's also political, it's also social, and it organizes society, but it's also the way that people exercise power. So then, from a western point of view, It would be called religion, but it's also politics and it's also sociology.

Speaker 1 18:52
It's a whole host of things, yeah, okay, okay. And then, how does that then translate to the display and maybe communication, of these?

Speaker 2 18:59
I think, I think that's, well, the way it is done now is not, I think, what we would do today, because that's 24 years old, and things, even though it might look nice, it's not necessarily the

way we would convey that sort of things now. And the Oceania gallery has not been updated, some galleries have had like small, minimal updates because they were really bad, yeah, and so they had like small updates in terms of labels. But Oceania gallery has not because it was considered not that bad. And I think, but I think for the future, that's something that we really have to think more about, because most visitors will not realize that, for example, these new Ireland images are not sacred and have not been, they have not been stolen. They have not been taken from, like a sacred site. And that has not happened, it was really the local people, so might be useful in different way. I mean, they thought we're getting money. Yeah, why not. And, and since we don't need it anymore, and it's not active anymore, it's actually fine to (sell it). And that's, of course, not the case for everything, but we don't make like, the differentiation very clear now, and that's something I would like to show in different ways, and also people are now looking more at provenance research, and that's also part of the provenance of these objects. How did they come here? How were they used? But how did they come here, and what justifies showing them? Because for some, in the Pacific, it's, I think, often, a more layered story than in certain other areas. Because in the Pacific, there were not as many, not really, actually, like these, these like punitive expeditions, or even the so called military expeditions, were actually not military expeditions. I mean, they were not violent. They were more like reconnaissance expeditions, but because they happened by military man they were called military issues, but they actually were not military. They were not, they did not come in with force and say, Oh, now we're taking over the village. And that actually did not happen. And so, so that can be a little bit, it's a little bit more layered and subtle, how things were taken. And there was a lot of exchange, actually, because in a lot of places in the Pacific, exchanging things is a way of relating to other people. And so you expect a certain type of relationship when you give objects. Of course, the relationship might not be returned or expectations might not, people might not live up to the expectations, but, but that's a way of making your world bigger, to opening up.

Speaker 1 22:37
yeah, and especially in museums now, especially, I think in ethnographic museums, that is a concern, yeah, like visitors coming in with preconceptions,

Speaker 2 22:47

exactly, exactly. And I think some of these things should be explained or made clear in more detail, and then also in different ways, not just text labels. I don't know how exactly, but text labels are not enough, because not everyone reads text labels. And so how do you make that clear that, we have in Rotterdam an exhibition where a lot of people think that we show a few bags, woven bags that were collected in 2020. And a lot of people say like, oh, but they look really old. But actually these bags, we're showing these bags to show that people have come up with a new technique that is unique, that has been transposed from another type of work, from masks, actually, that usually only man would use, and other women are using this technique to make bags. So it's quite an invasion. It's a new, new thing. So, but how do you make that clear in the display? And it says in the label. But still, people just come in and say, Oh yeah, that's a traditional bag, old,

Speaker 1 24:10
Haha yeah like 'I'm not reading. Ill just look at it.' Yeah.

Speaker 2 24:16
So I think that's a challenge, to invite the visitor to think like, oh, perhaps there's something special about this bag, something not immediately that they know, like, oh, it's new. And they are invited to think like, oh, perhaps no, there's more to this than I initially think

Speaker 1 24:39
Something to hook and draw them in. Okay, so then I wanted to sort of circle back to this. Are there any objects of importance or sacred objects in the collection right now?

<u>Part 2</u>

Speaker 2 0:18
Oh, yeah, yeah, definitely, yeah, definitely, I think, well, some of the Aboriginal objects, but also the example of some of the Maori objects we have, for example, staff, hoeroa its called, made out of the jaw bone of a whale, a sperm whale. And that we know exactly who it came from. It belonged to an important Maori leader. And when we have this *waka*, that's a whole other story, but we have this canoe, and so when people who made the canoe, or who are connected to this

canoe, come over, some of them are directly related to the person who owned that staff. And so the first thing they do is always to come and greet the staff. Because the staff is like the presence of their great grandfather. I think it's a great grandfather. And they acknowledge His presence, and he makes himself known through the staff. So in that sense, that's a really kind of very powerful object that is being recognized also, still today it has this power because of these genealogical connections. So yeah, we definitely do have some of these objects that powerful.

Speaker 1 1:52
And how does, how does curation play into that? Is there a specific way to display them?

Speaker 2 2:00
well, so that's the pity at the moment – no. I think the Buddha room is the big exception, where there was this space created that had to kind of emanate something of sacredness, and you actually see it works. Yesterday I met someone, like, someone I know, who's applying for a job, and it was just like, I mean, I was not involved, because completely different department, but we just met each other in the museum because I had a meeting with someone else. And so there he was, and he had just come out to the Buddha room, and he said, like, yeah, I just needed to come down for my interview. And I've heard lots of people who said, like, oh yeah. When I had my interview here to get the job, I went to the Buddha room to calm down, to focus. So it does work, and the display was also meant to be doing that, apart from giving information and background about the Buddhas. The display also encourages this kind of meditative state.

Speaker 1 3:26
yeah? Again, the whole thing that I'm trying to explore in this thesis is how that is made, you know, and using the objects, yes. But then curating, like, what are some techniques or tricks? Are you aware?

Speaker 2 3:42
Well, I know for the Buddha room, actually, the Buddhas were in before 2012 I think, yeah, they were in the Japan hall, and there they were displayed like the other things, you know, they were just there. I mean, lighting in the museum is not very harsh anyway, but it was just like, normal lighting, same lighting, and they were just there, and they was a text panel, and that was it. But

before that, but that was in like in the 70s, it was displayed, actually in the same room as it is now and then. And it was like hippe time, you could smoke in there

Speaker 1 4:31
Yeah, before I settled on sacred space making, I was actually going to do cultural memory, looking into that memory people held of the room.

Speaker 2 4:41
So actually, it's because so many people said, like, oh, we want our Buddha back. They were moved back. And then the meantime, there was also bookshop there. But then, yeah, we felt as a museum, I did not actually make that room, but I was off to the side, but yeah, of course we were not going to allow people to smoke inside, because that's not museum policy anymore. It was at the time that people smoked everywhere,

Speaker 1 5:20
Oh, how things have changed.

Speaker 2 5:21
Yeah. And so they wanted, the idea was to create something that was also like, was not exactly the context of the Buddhas, but the kind of atmosphere, and so that's also with the colors that we chose. It's like this deep burgundy red. The lighting as well. The seating, yeah, it's like these kind of round seats that are, like cozy, but not like

Speaker 1 6:03
Not too cozy

Speaker 2 6:04
yes, yeah, So I think these were really, like, clear choices that were made to, and to also elevate the Buddha's a little bit, so that they kind of look down on you. So these were choices made to encourage the whole atmosphere, yeah, and also not having, because labels are not next to the buddhas, they are like at the back inside, so that doesn't interfere with looking at them, but you can still get information if you want to.

Speaker 1 6:46
So kind of more like you would see it in a temple

Speaker 2 6:52
yeah, without the incense

speaker 1 6:57
haha maybe one day. Who knows!. But that's interesting, when you were talking about the original, or sort of referencing the original context of the Buddha's, not trying to recreate it, but like the atmosphere, yeah, did you all look back towards their original placement in the mausoleum?

Speaker 2 7:17
I think, I mean that was especially my colleague, the japan curator, who has been looking and even now, today, I saw him, and he was, like, referring back to the buddhas closed eyes, and then the opening of the eyes, when they are activated, actually

Speaker 1 7:36
Really?

Speaker 2 7:37
and so he was also, he's actually wondering whether they, he doesn't know whether they have been deactivated before coming here, or whether they are still considered active. That was something that he was now looking into, whether they could find something about that. Because there's a whole ceremony for these statues too, and it's called the opening of the eyes. They get like powerful and active. Because before, when they first arrived, they were actually in the garden, so they were just like in the rain. So that's also something that we would not do now. So that's the whole thing there. The objects like these have so many lives, have so many stages in their lives. And so, often, then it also comes down to, like, what do you give more prominence? Which stage do you think is more important? And that's definitely a choice, a curatorial choice, a choice that you make also depending on what story you find important for the public to go away

with, to walk away with. And that can also vary, of course, depending on the context that you're exhibiting things in. So in some contexts, it might be that you're talking about, with the staff, about the kind of active mana, the active power of this stuff, another one, it could be like ‘oh the carving is exquisite and made from a whale’. So how do you do that? A more technical explanation, which also still refers to the power, but in a very different way? So that really depends on what you want to say. And so I think the research on the Buddhas themselves is actually ongoing because, yeah, that’s what he told me this morning, you know is this, is this is actually active, are these active Buddhas or just sleeping.

Speaker 1 10:08
So interesting because a lot of the theory that I'm referencing is, you know, talking about sacred space, and there's differences between, in theory discussion, is sacred space something that we dictate, is something we choose, or something that's, you know, inherent that one person calls it hierophany. Well, I think that's so important. The Buddhas being active or inactive is also an incredibly interesting dimension to add to that. Yeah, you know, it would be cool. And I was assuming that they were sacred, they were active, but then them not being awakened, would that change the nature of the sacred space?

Speaker 2 10:51
Exactly Exactly.

Speaker 1 10:54
That’s the thesis!

Speaker 2 10:58
Interesting to think about

Speaker 1 11:00
Yea, interesting to chew on a little bit, yeah. So then the narrative for the Buddha room, now, that they went with is kind of closer to the original context than it is the earlier placements and lives of the statue? Maybe the original Buddha room, but Yeah, certainly the original Japanese context.

Speaker 2 11:20
Exactly yeah

Speaker 1 11:21
And, yeah, how to communicate that? And actually, I was wondering if you knew about the contact information for the Japan Hall curator, because I also wanted to chat with him, because this is kind of in those lines, like the original context was a mausoleum, which was part of a temple complex, right? But I'm not sure what the mausoleum was like. I mean, was it all sacred because it was in the temple, or was this, you know, not as sacred?

Speaker 2 11:52
that's something I cant answer yeah

Speaker 1 12:00
Yeah I am sort of thinking out loud here. Yeah, because I've done some sitting in the Buddha room. When I started this project I sat there for, you know, 30 minutes, and I watched, and I saw that the lighting sort of shifted as well, and I was looking, there's noise stamping on the walls. And I actually didn't, I didn't write it down, but the doorway is quite small, so there's like, noise dampening at that front. But, yeah, no. I mean, it's just like a very intentional space. And so from, you know, the visual analysis that I was doing, like, I could notice all these things, but I was also just wondering, like, from a curatorial point of view.

Speaker 2 12:41
there were definitely the kind of these conscious choices, yes, being made in terms of, like, we want this to be kind of a meditative space, a respectful space, kind of justice to the Buddhas, also where people can kind of connect in a way, if they feel like it, or just sit.

Speaker 1 13:12
or just sit, yeah. and was there a reference to this, or literature or theory, or even experience?

Speaker 2 13:22

um, I don't know actually, whether that was, I mean, I think the most obvious reference was the kind of memory of people, we want the buddha room back, what does that mean? And there were a few people in museum who had experienced that. And because, yeah, it's already, like, more than 10 years ago. So, so, yeah, I think that was, like the public memory was, was definitely a reference. And then I think, I don't know whether there was specific, like Japanese references to temples or something. I have no idea if that was a reference choice, yeah, I just. I know that it was this kind of popular, popular memory, collective memory, of the buddha room being so nice.

Speaker 1 14:21
yeah, which I again, when I initially started my investigation on this, I thought that was so cool. So I really wanted to go into there, but, you know, for the purpose of this thesis, I was like, Okay, let's be more specific, the making of this space. Yeah, okay, um, do you just also have any opinions on, on that sort of theoretical discourse of the designation of sacred things by society, or like things being more than themselves?

Speaker 2 14:53
Yeah, I think, I think it's quite interesting. I was once, well, I have a lot of kind of connections to people who work in France. In France, they're quite strict about separating the kind of religious from the secular. And so in the Paris Museum, there was an opening ceremony for a New Caledonian exhibition, a kamak exhibition. And when I was there, I heard a few people saying, Can you do this? This is, like, religious, what you are doing here. And to me, it didn't feel that religious, actually. It was the exchange, the customary exchange of goods, and that they do. But I heard just the comments of people saying, is this ok, because that makes the museum like a ritual space, religious space. The museum should be a secular space. So how does that work? So I thought that was really interesting, because here in the Netherlands, that's less prominent here that you know, the museum might be also used as a more religious sacred space, there's more of an acceptance might be the case. And I think that's just interesting to observe. Also, for example, I was in London, actually the at the Royal Academy, they, well they're also not used to working with indigenous peoples or also kind of religious cultural practices that are lived in the museum. So one they had a few years ago, the big Oceania show a lot of the Pacific Islanders, they

brought leaves, or they left leaves near certain statues. And that was just to kind of activate and protect themselves, but also the statues from the visitors, from perhaps negative intentions. And so in the beginning, the Royal Academy was like, What should we do with these leaves that are kind of left? Because it was clear that these were not just like, Oh, someone lost the leaves. It was just like, like, little offerings of things, flowers as well. And they also had to get used to that idea that this was, that museum was not necessarily just a place to have, like, intellectual debates or to have visual experiences. But that it was also considered, for some people, as a space where you could also have some sacrality to it. And yeah, and I think you see that happening more and more. I think even, I don't know, haven't been yet, but from what I've heard in the Venice Biennale, there's a lot of Indigenous artists represented, and I think for them, a lot of the visitors, like indigenous visitors, also experience that space of the high art space, as also something that can be sacred and carry some power, really powerful, but yeah, in a different way than just the kind of visual experience or emotional experience even, but really this kind of religious experience.

Speaker 1 18:50
Yeah, I think the buddha room to a certain extent also evokes that religious experience

Speaker 2 18:59
yes, yeah, for a lot of people, that's what it does, yeah?

Speaker 1 19:07
And its interesting, because you're right, it is a quasi religious inside of a museum. or a secular space? Or is it? that is the question.

Speaker 2 19:16
Yeah, is the museum a secular space? Because that's something, or we would like to think that it is a secular space. But perhaps that's not actually necessary. Perhaps we shouldn't and there again. Then you come to these boundaries that we like, we divide the world. And things are politics and some things are secular, some things are religious and some things are educational. And so perhaps the museum is a little bit more messy than we wanted or think it to be.

Speaker 1 19:57
And would that be interesting? And that's, I think, something I'm trying to explore with this, just because, yeah, it adds nuance, you know, and it would be interesting to just see hypothetically where this led,

Speaker 2 20:13
yeah. And I think, like, what we had, that was also a few years ago. It was 2016 or something, we had an exhibition on the Hajj. And so all of a sudden there were all these people, Muslim people, who came to the museum who would never have come before, but because, and the museum in that sense, almost became like, perhaps not exactly, but for some people, it was like, almost a replacement Hajj

Speaker 1 20:54
a pilgrimage in its own right

Speaker 2 20:56
it could not, I mean, if they could not make it, could not do the Hajj for themselves like the second best thing was to come to the museum, to kind of experience some of that feeling of, you know, going on a Hajj. Of course, it was not the same, but it did give people a little bit of that feeling, of that religious feeling, and so there it was clear, like, Yeah, but the museum is also doing that. I think we accepted that. But you know, it's not necessarily something that you immediately think of, that this exhibition is going to be religious experience for some people, but yeah, but it really was.

Speaker 1 21:47
yes, yeah, whether the intention is or not. But that's interesting, because then maybe it's not the question of like, is the museum religious or secular, but maybe the museum structure is an elevated space. And what does that mean? Meant elevation could fall in line with religion.

Speaker 2 22:06

Yeah, it can offer all these really different experiences and religious experiences as one of them. It could also be, could be an intellectual experience that people think, Oh, wow, this is, I had never seen things that way. Now I kind of understand the world.

Speaker 1 22:32
Yeah, eureka!

Speaker 2 22:34
I understand my position in the world a lot better, or even a psychological kind of 'oh wow yeah'. So, yeah, I think museums should try and be open to also allow that, and also, especially if you if, well, we are always saying that we want to have diverse audiences and so on, and that's also part of having diverse audiences that not everyone is experiencing things in the same way that these experiences are all valid, yeah,

Speaker 1 23:06
if you Yeah, adhere to your, I guess, mission, you know, yeah, yeah. Okay, interesting. Well, um, I was just going to sort of wrap it up and yes, there any, like, anything you want to say, any additional literature you had.

Speaker 2 23:23
Well I should remember the name, but there was this book that came out recently, you probably know it, now I cant remember it…

Speaker 1 23:34
Is it crispin paine, religion and museums?

Speaker 2 23:36
That's it!

Speaker 1 23:40
I was like, What are the odds

Speaker 2 23:51
Its something I can think of, but also perhaps this book, and it's not immediately connected, but it's like the senses, sensible objects its called. I think it's by Elizabeth Edwards, its an edited volume, that can be good in terms of, like, the kind of sensory experience, that's like with the light, but also with objects. The fact that, for example, you can touch things or not, these types of things might be interesting, That also adds, because the Buddhas are not in a case. So that also adds to the experience in this kind of glass case with a distance. I mean, they are, yes, but they're also kind of close, because you, you can touch them,

Speaker 1 24:57
can you?

Speaker 2 24:59
Well, you're not allowed to touch them, but you could touch them! The fact that it's not like impossible to do it. It's not made impossible. You could, in theory, I'm not encouraging people to do it, but that also just takes some of the barriers away and also adds to this experience. And that's something definitely that we are trying to explore in most exhibitions, actually, whether we can have like objects exhibited without cases, and then it's a kind of also risk calculation, if people climb, children, will the object be destroyed? And also just ordinary things like dust, some objects are very difficult to clean. So then make the choice not to show them in a case, because, no dust, easier to clean a case, and but that that also adds to the experience you have the possible kind of sacral, sacred feeling that you might have, or not.

Speaker 1 26:25
Yeah, that you're able to experience. I guess so. Yeah.

Interview – Daan Kok

October 25, 2024.

Part 1

Speaker 2 – Daan Kok 0:11
Have you been here today?

Speaker 1 – Lorraine Singleton 0:14
Not today, no, but the last time I was here, also this Buddha was getting cleaned, is it just getting cleaned? Like, a normal routine?

Speaker 2 0:22
No, it's out on loan to the Rijksmuseum Asian bronze exhibition. And it's the first time in a very long while that it's away, as you can see, from the light stains on the pedestal. A bit of an odd thing to focus on to start with. You can see the light damage quite exactly plotted out on the pedestal, you can still see the shadow of the object, from all angles, the impression that's left, sort of, yeah, including the sides, including the sort of half (softer) shadows. I mean, this (the other pedestals) has it as well.

Speaker 1 0:57
Wow, but it looks natural, yeah.

Speaker 2 1:02
And another fascinating thing is, just a couple of weeks before the loan was going to be actuated, so to speak, the central light, actually, you can still see it was pointing on this Buddha (the buddha now on loan) went down.

Speaker 1 1:16
It was flickering (when I saw it), yeah,

Speaker 2 1:20

There were five Buddhas and one was in the dark, which is the one that was going to be loaned. Fascinating. Tell me a little bit about your research plans. Yes, maybe outside if you don't mind. Its, I think it's the very nature of the room

Speaker 1 1:45
I feel bad! Talking in there

Speaker 2 1:50
Its one of the few places in the exhibitions where you don't want to speak at that level, but it's interesting, because I think that's probably also what your topic is about?

Speaker 1 2:01
Yes, yeah, that's one thing I was gonna mention, but yes, so a little bit about myself. My name is Lorraine, as I mentioned, and I did my undergraduate in Houston, where I'm from, in classic studies, so ancient Rome. And I came here to do my master's in museum studies, sort of just kind of to, you know, engage, still with culture. I didn't want to go into industry, and I, you know, I thought museums would be a great track. So the thesis that I'm currently working on is concerning itself sort of with the curatorial aspect of creating sacred spaces, or at least that's what I'm trying to explore right now. I'm sort of diving into a lot of theories based on the existence of sacred space. What is sacred? Right? Is it inherent? Is it something that we sort of label? And I want to not only discuss that regarding the Buddha room, but yeah, just how then can we, if it is 'we make spaces' or 'we highlight spaces', like, how do we do that? And so I've come to the Buddha room a few times to do sort of a visual analysis type thing. Really, I just sat there and, you know, experienced this space, noted down everything I saw, the lights, the positions of everything, how people moved in and out, what I felt. And then, yeah, I'm sort of at a point where I'm integrating literature into all the things that I've noticed. I also discussed with wanu about like, the things that are sacred in her Hall. And so then you know that, of course, leads to a discussion of sacred things in museums and how that sort of changes or evolves. But yeah, so I really wanted to speak with you, especially about your own research, your own experience with how this was curated. Because I, if I understand

Speaker 2 4:03

I was not here

Speaker 1 4:05
Yes, yes, yeah, but if you could, yeah, just like, talk with me about that, about anything you sort of notice, about the way that it's made up, how people react to it, yeah, yes.

Speaker 2 4:17
And did you research other sacred spaces, or other objects of sacred nature in other museums in the Netherlands? or do you make comparisons? Or do you just want to take the Buddha room?

Speaker 1 4:33
Just focus on that? Yeah. I started originally doing that sort of like comparison, or like, at least, you know, bringing in other things. But I think for the purpose of this, my thesis, it just would make more sense to be very specific about this.

Speaker 2 4:47
And so you use literature from basically museology,

Speaker 1 4:54
Sort of, it's, if I remember, it's Durkheim, Eliade, Agamben and Jonathan Smith and so they're talking about more the sacred. But if you have any recommended literature, I would love to -

Speaker 2 5:09
No, not really. It's not my field. For all curators, basically the same thing goes. We're usually specialized in some very small niche somewhere. In my case, that's a particular kind of print with poetry on them from around 1800. Very little to do with Buddhism, very little with sacred spaces, etc. But as curators, we try to be generalists and know a little bit about everything, sometimes a little bit more about some things. But, you know, obviously we can't be anywhere near specialists of everything. But during work here and meeting so many specialists who come visit and research the collections, you build up further knowledge about the things that are particular to these collections, or things that are particular to these displays, because obviously,

what you see in the permanent display is only a fraction of the actual number of items in the collections at large.
The Buddha room. Have you read about the history of the Buddha room? How much do you know? Before I start a lecture that you don't need?

Speaker 1 6:41
Well, originally I was gonna do, I mean, my thesis went through a few stages, and originally I was going to do cultural memory and the Buddha room. So I was doing research on all of the phases of it from - I would like to know more about the mausoleum, because that's the one I know least about, or its original context. But it coming here, being in a garden, and then coming inside in the old Buddha Hall, and then it being moved into the Japan Hall. And, you know, people were sort of upset, and then it came back.

Speaker 2 7:08
And where did you find this information?

Speaker 1 7:11
The Wereldmuseum, online collection. And I tried to find the source that they used, but I really wasn't able to.

Speaker 2 7:20
okay, yeah, like I always say to every student, and basically, you can see some others, I had a group from Heidelberg this morning, somehow, this fall season is really busy with student group visits, Which is fantastic, because people request enormous variety of things.

Speaker 1 7:42
Yes, yeah, interviews, for example.

Speaker 2 7:45
and interviews, yes, the Buddha room is, yeah. I mean, I think you can say it's a crowd favorite. Has been a crowd favorite for a long time, and people are interested in various aspects of it. For me, I arrived here in 2015, and I mean, apart from the Buddha that is now on loan there's no

change to the Buddha room since I started here. We do have to make some changes. I'll tell you about that later. For instance, updating the text also due to the fact that our museum changed name, and the old name is still in the text, so we need to update that anyway, but that's something that I think is interesting to discuss with you, about presentation of these Buddhas and Buddhist objects in a museum context. I do remember when the display was changed and the Buddha room no longer existed, and people were upset about that, because I was already walking around here as an intern, and I remember, I mean, from the sideline, but I remember that going on, and I remember being reinstated and being reopened.

So the Buddhas were in the room next door, so the main Japan and Korea room where they were, I think, on the same wooden pedestals that they are on now. And they were, you know, the five were basically not lined up, but more, I think three and two, if I remember correctly. But obviously in terms of display and the effect of the display was very different from the way it is now in the room here, and I've met plenty of people who have seen and experienced the original Buddha room. Also, I'm going in anti chronological order, I realize, but the photos of how they were set up in the garden of the former location of the museum in the city, Leiden city center, are in the database. And that's quite fascinating to see. It's also a very esthetically pleasing presentation. They were sitting under large white magnolia trees, and it was really quite spectacular. There are photos, I think I've seen a photo once where they are covered in snow, which is hurtful in a way, and also pretty in another way. But when the museum moved here, which is in 1935, the then director allegedly said, now they're going inside, and they made this Buddha room, in which the lighting was basically natural light that was reflected via mirrors in a sort of a lowered ceiling so that you could not see the mirror itself. But it did have an effect based on the light that came in from outside. And people say it was magical. And obviously there's a lot of people who have nostalgic feelings about the Buddha room. And in that respect, it's interesting that we are going to renovate the museum in about five years time. I mean, an overall renovation of the museum and redisplay of our collections. There's a lot of preparation going into that, obviously, and a lot of questions to external experts. But also there was sort of a town hall meeting where everybody could show up, it was very well visited, and people asked, What kind of things would you really like to see again? Obviously, you sense it coming. Somebody said ‘the buddha room!’, and, actually, I was not there, but I think the person who brought it up said ‘we would like the old Buddha room as it was in the (old museum design)

Speaker 1 12:29
Was it not in this space? (the room where it is now)

Speaker 2 12:33
No, actually, this was the, after the renovation of 2000 it was a bookshop, that I also remember, a very nice bookshop, but the original Buddha room was, I think, somewhere in the front of the building on that side. But admittedly, that one I never went to, although I could have, in hindsight, just when I arrived in Leiden to study. But at the time, I did not do it to my great regret now. And the things I've been pondering myself with concern to these Buddhas – I am not a specialist in in Buddhism. I'm not a specialist in religious studies or anything. I have an interest, like I have an interest in many things related to Japanese material culture, in Buddhism and Buddhist sculpture, etc. But I'm far from a specialist. We know that the three Buddhas in the middle, the three smaller ones in relation to the outer two Buddhas, are from zojoji, which is a temple near now Tokyo Tower, and bit by bit, a little bit more has become known, or at least known to me, about how they were acquired. I went to zojioji last year to talk with people in the office and see if we could find - I mean, that was just a preliminary visit, and sort of impromptu visit, in a way, because my hope would be to find out more, if there's anything in the records of the temple itself about the sale. One of The things I am personally very interested in, which makes a difference and doesn't make a difference at the same time, but whether they were deconsecrated. Because Buddhist statues go through a what they call, I think it's called, *Kai Gong Clio*, the eye opening ceremony, when they are new. We know of these statues that have all kinds of inscriptions on the on the back, and the others, actually the one that is now on loan…. Actually let me park this topic this sideline for a second. But the three from zojoji, they're relatively old. They're from 1648, and zojoji was a very important temple in Edo for the Tokugawa Shoguns. As a matter of fact, the second Shogun Hidetada, his mausoleum was at zojoji. It was an enormous, opulent building with the most extraordinary craftsmanship and lacquered interior and gaudy colors, etc, it was, it must have been fabulous, and it was destroyed in World War Two. I don't know if you know, but Japan donated a true to nature (scale), one to 60 scale or something, model of the mausoleum to England. It was lost for some time and rediscovered somewhere in an attic of some other castle of the royal family or so. Don't quote me on this, but that's how I understood it. And at some point then Prince Charles came to Japan with

a small beam from the mausoleum model, saying, This is the first of the many beams of which this model consists. But we will, in collaboration with Japan, make sure that it's completely fully restored and then can go on display. The model is spectacular, and it only makes you wonder about what the entire building would have looked like. The model itself, I think, is like, six meters long. And many graves of people in the Tokugawa family are still part of the grounds of zojoji.

So what fascinates me, personally is that a temple that was so powerful during Tokugawa reign sold objects to a foreign country in as little as 15 years after the Meiji Restoration, but there's a whole tendency of what they call *hai buds ki Shaku* so in favor of Shinto and bringing down Buddhism to the extent that was even possible, with the mixing of Shinto and Buddhism in Japan, but people often quote that *hai but ki shaku* movement as a factor in these kind of sales. A colleague in the museum here found out interestingly that the imperial family was not allowed to send out edicts without going by the Shogun. Moreover, the Shogun court or the shogunal government would likely want the Emperor to send out a certain edict that they devised. However, right after Commodore Perry arrived in 1854, or actually 53, but the Imperial Household, or the then emperor, issued an edict for the first time in basically 250 years, without checking with The Shogun government. And that edict said, 'Stop all that Buddhist nonsense and cast all of those bells and Buddhist sculptures of bronze that is a raw material that we need to defend ourselves. We need cannons, and we need ammunition'. And so that was basically, when you think about *hai but ki shaku*, that was really an edict that basically said, we need to expel the barbarians. That's one of those other *son no joi*, one of those other slogans at the time. And it's quite telling, I think, that that was the edict issued directly, without interference from the shoguns court or government. So I think there's a relation with that, that that paved the way for the, the outbound sale of these kind of objects. I wonder at the same time - I mean, I know that a lot of bronzes, also newly made bronzes, newly cast bronzes, the most opulent incense burners and what have you, were going to come out of japan in the late 19th century. This is also fully Japanism time. The number of the Buddhas came from Bing, the dealer in Paris, we actually know what price he sold them for to the museum. Recently, there was a Japanese professor who wanted to search the documents related to the sale, the correspondence. And since we have an ongoing digitization and registration of those correspondence archives, it was relatively easy to find which was very nice from for me personally as well to dig for them, to help this professor

find the information, but the circumstances of the sale itself, and whether the Buddha statues were de consecrated before being sold, that remains a question to me. I don't have the answer yet, although you could argue that it doesn't really matter for the effect it has on visitors when they visit.

Speaker 1 21:52
That's the thesis, yeah.

Speaker 2 21:56
But you have probably also witnessed that some people who enter this room obviously have a religious experience, or at least an experience, and a lot of people from Japan are often surprised that the Buddhas are in such a position that they can be touched by visitors, which indeed is technically possible. And I know that people do it. I wouldn't say it is promoted, but in a way, you could say that it is condoned, because we did not make it impossible, and we know that it happens. You can wonder how, I mean, obviously they are metal objects, or at least bronze objects. And, you know, oils on your skin, etc, interact with those kind of materials.

Speaker 1 22:58
There's all sorts of like, I know, if you go to Asia, there's statues, bronze statues, especially of the Buddha that are have areas that are like shinier and even, I think, Europe as well, yeah, shiny areas where people have routinely touched them

Speaker 2 23:12
It's interesting, because there are lots of people who are also obviously in awe and wouldn't think of even stretching their hand out to these objects. But recently, I also saw a woman who just basically grabbed the hand of the Buddha, actually the one that's now in the RijksMuseum.

Speaker 1 23:35
That must have been something

Speaker 2 23:37

It raises interesting questions about exactly these issues of what should museum experiences be about, and also these discussions that we have in the museum about, basically, as it's sometimes called, managing the decay of objects. Museum is a very odd project, in a way, that tries to sort of stop time on certain objects. And obviously, if you put something in an environment that is highly controlled, and even sometimes, there are things that are frozen, or things that are placed in oxygen free or very low oxygen surroundings to basically get rid of any animal life or any oxygen breathing life before things go into museum or go on transport or before they are put on display with other objects that have also gone to some sort of quarantine. In that sense, you can say that we do not… I think there's a shift in thinking about the interaction of people with objects, and that the sort of technical safeguarding of the object in the most scientific sense, is no longer the only premise of what a museum object should and could do, because in sometimes interactions with an object that would fall a bit or a little bit outside normal treatment - with gloves and what have you, and light sensitivity, etc, - that those kind of interactions are highly meaningful and very important for certain stakeholders in relation to collections that we have. So you can wonder if the minute change of surface texture that is almost undetectable of somebody who holds parts of a bronze Buddha statue. How does that compare to the experience that person has as a visitor? But then obviously we get to the question of sacred space. I think there is no doubt, or in my mind, there is no doubt that for some people, it is a sacred space. I have no doubt that people who are not Buddhist per se, or maybe not so very religious per se themselves, also feel the power or presence or the, you know, awe or enchantment - through all the semantics, you will be able to find all kinds of lovely words to express that, but - have sensations of that type when they are face to face with these sculptures, which also means that even if they are deconsecrated, which I expect actually, although I do not yet have any proof, that kind of impact is has not been removed, in a way, on that impact on our visit. But there, I mean, there have been debates, obviously, about whether museums are places for that kind of worship, whether we are looking at religious art object or just religious objects or just art objects. And, yeah, I do not have the answers clearly, but those kind of debates, I find very interesting, but to some point they are just debates. When you look at what it does to people and what people feel, and then somehow that renders the debates kind of, I mean, just returns them to theories. And/or wishful thinking, but doesn't match with the reality what happens in museums.

Part 2

Speaker 2 0:03

As you may have noticed, or maybe already knew, the lighting is sort of computer controlled, which is done to sort of emulate the effect that was in the Old Buddha room, although there it was due to natural light from outside. At first I thought that was sort of a bit new age or whatever. And I remember saying, 'Yeah, Buddhist sculptures would never be displayed like this in Japan'. However, when you go to, for instance, Kyoto National Museum, they have under their care lots of Buddhist sculptures, lot of wooden sculptures as well from temples in Kyoto. They are still in ownership of the Kyoto temples, but they are under care and also conservation care from the Kyoto National Museum, and they're on display there. They have a spectacular Buddha room with the most extraordinary objects in a display that is not so dissimilar, actually, I think, to our Buddha room, which surprised me. These objects, I think, are definitely still consecrated as they are, living Buddhist sculpture, religious sculpture, of temples for which they still are, part of their religious … collection. Collection is such a museum word. But yeah, and as we are now renovating, of course, we will need to rethink what is going to - I cannot tell you anything about it, also, because I don't know for myself, the renovation is so large and overarching that it basically reshuffles everything. If I can phrase it that way. But obviously one person saying they want the Old Buddha room back might not be enough to hold on to those plans, but we know that they are crowd favorites. There are people who often return just to come sit in the Buddha room and visit and calmly enjoy the atmosphere. I personally hope to find out more, but as a curator, it's not so easy to go after everything that interests you personally, because there's lots of other things to do. But now that I've established a contact with zojoji, I hope that I might at some point find out more, but I found inscriptions on, for instance, the lion that is around the corner, Chinese mythological lion that led to a temple actually quite far away from Edo or Tokyo, which surprised me.

And so who knows whether it will be possible to find out a little bit more here and there about where these bronze objects came from, but with the late 19th century trade imbalance, etc, I think for people in Japan, it may have been relatively lucrative to sell these Buddhas to a Japan hungry audience in Europe and also in the United States. Because, I mean, if you just look at museum collections, the number of these objects that were exported around that time quite, quite substantial.

And, yeah, I mean, it's interesting, this sort of ‘what if’ kind of reasoning that's perhaps not really of any academic interest, but given that there have been numerous fires and the enormous bombardment, especially of the fire bombings on Tokyo of the Second World War that destroyed just the entire zojoji temple complex basically. What might have happened to these? And then also the weapon industry and the expansion in Asia, from Japan by military means, what might have happened to this bronze? I mean, these kilos of bronze when, when they … they would not have been here. Please understand that this is not sort of a plea for objects were safer here than anywhere else. I'm very aware that - that's not what I mean. But I've also heard Japanese visitors say the same thing, which I find quite an interesting thought. Sometimes. It doesn't help you much in terms of academics, and also not so much in terms of your specific questions for the thesis

Speaker 1 5:55
Well it’s a thought experiment. You know, just like hypothetical removing of factors, like what would have sort of played out, you know, yeah. And here they are still, so

Speaker 2 6:08
yeah. And, I mean, there's much more to say about it, but as a start, that's my, so far, in the nine years that I'm here, and the things that I've found out myself, and the things that I have heard ,sort of the succinct (more or less succinct) story of the Buddha room thus far, and my experience with it, does that lead to any other questions on your part?

Speaker 1 6:39
I think so. I think so. And first of all that was awesome. Like, I got a lot of good stuff, and honestly, I learned a lot more like than I would have on the website. Now I'm like, okay, yeah, I need to restructure some stuff, but I did want to return to the sort of activation of the statues, and you said it was sort of an ‘eye opening ceremony’, could you tell me more about that?

Speaker 2 7:11
In wooden buddhist sculpture, in basically what you would call Japanese medieval times, they found ways to use crystal and shape that in a way that it becomes basically a lens for an eye. And so in the sculpted heads, these eyes are placed in the space, in the socket as a matter of speech,

from the inside, and those crystals are painted with, you know, irises and lenses, etc, and so, in a way, that's quite a literal sort of eye opening ceremony where the object gets activated, and the spirit of that Buddha is placed into the sculpture with a ceremony. For bronze sculpture, obviously, that works very differently after casting. It needs further preparation to be completely ready, but obviously not with crystal eye lenses or anything. But as far as I know, the ceremony, basically is called the same. I think it's *kaigang Kuo*, so opening eye incantations, I think you were translated. And, I mean, yeah, that's just very common. And so once the object is activated, it's no longer an object. Basically, it is an actual manifestation of that, that Buddha, and alive, and the soul is in the sculpture. And then, in cases, sometimes that needs to be taken out. So there is a reverse ceremony that exists as well, and I would expect that that would be carried out whenever a temple decides to de accession, so to speak, a religious sculpture. So then,

Speaker 1 9:47
So then when it when the eyes are opened, right? And it becomes not an object, but a manifestation. Is it like? What does it represent like when you experience this object, are you, like, directly in contact with the sacred, or is are you supposed to experience this object? And I mean, I guess I'm using the term object, but this experience this present, and then, like, sort of, it works as a sign for the sacred. How does is that nature? (girl wtf is this)

Speaker 2 10:22
I can't answer that.

Speaker 1 10:27
I guess that's a very like technical, I guess religious study.

Speaker 2 10:32
There are plenty of people in Leiden and in the Netherlands, throughout the world who may have wonderful and very apt answers to that, but I don't. No, I can think about it and reflect on it, but I don't think that's really worth your time. This is one of those things that I would advise you to go to a specialist. It might be interesting to speak with people like, I don't know, Jonathan Silk. I mean, there are plenty of Buddh-ologists around who have more well studied views on that,

Speaker 1 11:13
Okay, okay, then, sort of backing up then. You don't think these have been made sacred. You think they're still sort of asleep maybe?

Speaker 2 11:24
no, I think when they were made, they were consecrated, as with any Buddhist sculpture, or at least, I expect that it was. I mean, when they go to the trouble - the inscriptions give the names of all the people, private people, and also groups who have donated for the making of that sculpture. So every one of these sculptures is constructed with a lot of communal support behind it, wherever people are from, and it's sometimes nationwide networks of people who bring money together to allow the temple to create that sculpture. So I think naturally, there will be a ceremony for activating that sculpture in a way, and then they were in the temple and prayed to and ceremonies were held in front of these sculptures. But when - I think the zojoji lost a lot of power after the Meiji Restoration, not only because of the *hai but ki shaku* movement, but also because they were basically a Tokugawa temple. So it's to be expected that they lose a lot of support and a lot of financial support from the Tokugawa family. Actually, this, I haven't properly studied, that's how I imagine it went.

And so they might have just been in financial trouble and think, Okay, what is our core business? What can we retain? And maybe it was very attractive to actually sell to all these foreigners coming into Japan and buying up things. At the time, also due to the power imbalance and the unequal treaties, as they were called, it was lucrative for dealers to go and buy lots and lots of things. And as they say, when the kura were opened, so samurai families - and samurai was no longer a distinct class at that time - and samurai families had their family kura, so their storehouses. And lots of you know swords and lacquerware and old porcelains and paintings and what have you, suits of armor, etc, came out, and for some people, it was still a better deal to sell those off to foreign dealers, although for the foreign dealers, it was lucrative to buy them relatively cheaply in Japan before selling them with a large margin in Europe after transport by ship, etc, and Bing was very successful in it. And Bing made a number of trips to Japan. And it is surmised that the Buddha statues that Bing bought were sold to him, with help from one of the sons of von Siebold. I think Heinrich, he was involved in these kind of things, but I don't have

proof for that part of this, there is a story that there was an auction by zojoji, yeah. Did you find that somewhere?

Speaker 1 15:27
Well, not from zojoji, but in Amsterdam, when they were bought in like the.. Amsterdam,

Speaker 2 15:33
yes, that's different. So actually, that's a good point, in Amsterdam, you would have the palais vor volksvleit, quite a spectacular building which no longer exists, as you know, or you would have known it, because it must have been quite… and they held in 1883 the colonial trade and export exhibition, which was sort of a World Expo kind of thing. It was a big deal because it was held for half a year. And for instance - have you seen the Asian bronze exhibition in the rijksmuseum in Amsterdam?

Speaker 1 16:10
I've not.

Speaker 2 16:11
I recommend going there, checking out not, not just to see the Buddha, which is now on a trip there

Speaker 1 16:20
Yeah, that’s good to know, I was wondering where it was!

Speaker 2 16:26
Yea, but also for the pagoda, there's a bronze pagoda of around two and a half meters, or two meters and 80 centimeters, something like that, which is set up just before the staircase that leads up to the start of the exhibition. There is also an eight meter high pagoda, really quite enormous, that at one point was set up in the museum garden, I think on that side between the two legs of the building. There are old photos of that as well. It's now in parts, in storage. It's been outside for very long. It is unstable in places, unfortunately, and it needs very expensive and extensive restoration in order for it to be set up once again, if that's ever going to happen. But so the

bronzes that were shown in 1883 there were a number that were presented there through Bing and a number that were presented there through Dirk Bour, which was an Asian art dealer in The Hague and so actually, if you look at the inventory numbers, you can see that the serine (serial?) numbers are 417 and 418 both dating to 1883 so they come from different sources in a way, or at least different dealers who placed them in the exhibition in Amsterdam. And a number, I think, two Buddha statues went to the Amsterdam zoo, and they are still there.

Speaker 1 18:15
Yeah, that's online. That's what it mentioned, which is where I got most of my info. Okay then so when they were sold or acquired somehow in Japan, assuming the people of the mausoleum were like, Okay, we're gonna get rid of this, were they then able to desacralize them?

Speaker 2 18:35
What do you mean by the mausoleum?

Speaker 1 18:40
When they were acquired in Japan, like the people, the priests who were in the mausoleum,

Speaker 2 18:47
yeah, just the temple. I mean, there was a mausoleum, but these were not in the mausoleum. The mausoleum is part of the temple complex, or was part of the temple complex of zojoji, but these statues would have been in the temple itself.

Speaker 1 19:02
Okay, okay. Interesting, I thought they were in the mausoleum. But they were in the temple.

Speaker 2 19:10
Yea. I think! I am assuming. I think it would be unlikely that they were in the mausoleum in the first place. And even if they were, I think it would be unlikely for them to be… no. And also they're dating to 1648, and Hidetada… when did Hidetada die? Hidetada was shogun until …that might actually match up quite good, I don't think, because the inscriptions don't say anything related to Tokugawa Hidetada, I think… he died in 1632, so in a way, would also be odd to make

these in 1648 I think. I never thought about it, never gave it thought that these might be in the mausoleum. I'm not sure, but I don't know. I encourage you to try and find out.

Speaker 1 20:07
I'll see what I can find.

Speaker 2 20:09
Please feed back into the museum database. Actually, that's a serious remark. If you have things that you find and when you finish your master thesis, please do send us two copies, also for illustrations. Please make use of the database illustrations we have here. It will probably increase your grade, no guarantee but let's hope so. Yes, but now in seriousness, we have lots of material that might support your story or presentation of your story. But the idea being that these were sold by the temple, not in a period of war or anything. I think that if the temple wanted to de sacralize them or deconsecrate them, which I think they would have wanted, then I assume there would have been time to do that. But like I said, so far, it is assumptions,

Speaker 1 21:24
yeah, inconclusive,

Speaker 2 21:31
However, it is interesting to reflect on what effect it would have if they, let's say, would have been shipped ‘alive’, so to speak, and to what extent that influences the experiences that visitors have. I am not a very spiritual person myself, but I do find it fascinating that exactly the lamp over the Buddha that is going away on a loan was, you know, went out. And I found myself asking the Buddha when I saw it again in the Asian bronze exhibition in the Rijksmuseum, whether it was at ease there, and that's just something that sort of came to mind. And maybe that is something that I feel with other non humanoid form objects, if I may call it that as well. But in this case, I mean, I mean, I guess it's a very natural reaction of someone to see an object shaped to resemble a living being, to feel another type of compassion with What that sculpture or that object or that being might feel in another surrounding compared to a large lacquerware box or type of object. But I was a little bit surprised at myself genuinely feeling that, like, are you okay here? Which seemed to be the case.

Speaker 1 23:44
I mean its really interesting. I mean, I'm sure, you know, people grow to care about things, whether or not they're humanoid or not. But, I mean, these are a very special intersection between a lot of you know, history, context, maybe spirituality. Who knows? Right?

Speaker 2 24:00
As you know, and you will have noticed there are lots and lots of depictions of Buddhas in the Netherlands, where a lot of people, I don't know, see Buddha as sort of a character or friendly figure or whatever, with not so many religious connotations, but they do have objects and images and just, you know, basically clay figures or cheap gypsum castings or whatever, incense holders and what have you. We had a large exhibition called 'The Buddha' in this museum in 2016, 17, something like that, must have been 2016, and that went to the TropenMuseum, now wereldmuseum Amsterdam, after that, was successful in terms of visitor numbers. In both cases, quite popular exhibition. I've also seen people as soon as they step into - Dutch, white Dutch people, from what I saw, - stepping into the exhibition room and starting prayers straight away, and obviously that is the kind of exhibition that, as a whole, calls into question these sort of topics of religion and sacred space and secular nature in museum context, but in the Buddha room, that's sort of a permanent thing, obviously. It was very interesting to see it be transported as well. They had one of these machines that you transport a pallet, all these things with sort of a big handle. But they had our transporter. So they had the nicest of the nicest of these very shiny pallet transporters, and it clocked at 250 kilos.

Speaker 1 26:07
wow. Okay! is it solid?

Speaker 2 26:09
215, 215, sorry. No, they are hollow. They are absolutely hollow. That would be impossible. Then it would weigh, I don't know, 2000 kilos. But they are pretty heavy, nonetheless. All depends on the construction of course. Interestingly, the name of the casters are also in the inscription, on the buddhas. But the one that is now on loan actually has its own pedestal, and the pedestal is square, but it was never set up in this room. So what I hope to do is, when it comes

back after the loan, the plan is to get the original pedestal back and place the sculpture on its own pedestal for the first time in a long while. It's without its actual pedestal in the Asian bronze exhibition in the rijksmuseum, but the pedestals also made out of bronze. Originally, it had a metal frame, or sort of iron frame inside, but that might have to be reinforced, or at least it needs additional support from another wooden frame or whatever, to make sure that it doesn't collapse through its own bronze pedestal, which would be very sad, but it's that pedestal that holds all the names and all the inscriptions of when it was consecrated, and all those kinds of information.

Speaker 1 28:05
So they wouldn't, like, if they de consecrated it, they wouldn't like scratch out anything, or there wouldn't be any marks.

Speaker 2 28:14
I don't – that I don't know. That's an interesting question. Scratching out seems unlikely, but in a way, it's surely thinkable that people would have all the way at the end of the text, maybe say something, add some sort of incision, or, you know, incise, because most of these texts are cast into the bronze and not added later, although there are some parts where I think it might may have been added later. Bronze is not so very hard, but it's plenty difficult to basically chisel, but in a way that would have been possible to 'deconsecrated after this list'. But I mean then again, would be wonderful if we could know more about the circumstances of the sale, because maybe it was a little bit hasty. Maybe Bing said, Listen, my boat is leaving -

Speaker 1 29:16
in a day! Let's move them!

Speaker 2 29:17
That I don't know, and also transporting it. And being present when the first leg here of the transportation took place made me realize how much hauling of this enormous chunk of bronze, which it also is at the same time, has happened over the years. So it was in zojoji. It was probably cast a little way away from zojoji, although I don't know, then it would have been placed in zojoji somewhere. Not an easy task without any machinery. Then when it was sold, it would have gone to that auction. If that's indeed the case, how do you get it there? Then it

needed to go to the ship. Ships have had cranes already at that time, obviously, but then offloading it off the ship, getting it to the exhibition Amsterdam, and getting it from the exhibition Amsterdam to here, all of that was done in a time with, ships, and very few wheels.

Speaker 1 31:00
No machinery

Speaker 2 31:03
Yeah, not absolutely zero machinery but

Speaker 1 31:05
Not like we have today

Speaker 2 31:08
Not the sort of pallet machines and pallet carts that you have now.

Part 3
Speaker 2 0:30
But do you have an additional question?

Speaker 1 0:32
Yeah. While you do that, I was gonna return to the actual physical design of the room, the sort of seating arrangement that is there. I was wondering, because they're circles and they're quite low to the ground, and in trying to describe them, I was wondering if they were inspired by or could be considered zafu or like the meditation cushions. I was just wondering if you knew anything about that.

Speaker 2 1:02
No, unfortunately, not. The pattern, I think there's an *Asanoha* pattern on it, but I don't know by heart. Yeah, I'm not sure.

Speaker 1 1:29

Let me think ,there were a few other questions. I don't have my laptop with me, but yeah, so I guess I'm just thinking out loud. It would be interesting. I mean, basically the two camps -

Speaker 2 1:45
So this is the transport crate. Well, this is a very odd situation. You're never supposed to look down onto the Buddhist statue. That's also why they are here on a certain height where you can see them quite well, but not looking down. Yes…
……
Speaker 2 6:47
this ichiji kinrin had in his crown, also other Buddhist sort of plaques that have been stolen, otherwise lost. It may have been gilded, I don't know to what extent, but it looks like it was gilded here and here we don't... oh, There's more than one problem, from what I see now. And I don't know if anything was done about that, or whether it was stripped before sale, or whether it was damaged from sitting outside. That's now very difficult to find out. But when it's in the garden, the old photo from 100 years ago, you can see that they (the plaques on his crown) are still there.

Speaker 1 7:47
Really? So they were lost between that time (between being in the garden and now). Interesting.

Speaker 2 7:54
Yes, it is very painful. But if you look at the database, for the series 417 and 418 you see that there is much more, this is just a review. Let me double check. I think the 417 is the Dirk Bour and the 418 are the Bing group. And these three oldest ones in the middle, it's very interesting to see that they must have (re)used part of the mold, because the clothing, the way that a garment flows, are the same, but details are different. And this one I found. This says *Sekixu*, the old name of the province that is now Shimane on the Japanese sea coast. And this is temple 15. So temple 15 is 1844 Yeah, 1844. And I now notice that it looks like somebody wrote ‘ha’ on it with a pencil. You see that? I have never seen that before.

Speaker 1 9:14
Yeah … Without a case, you know…

Interview – Annette Schmidt and Anne Marie Woerlee

November 22, 2024.

Part 1 – Annette Schmidt

Speaker 2 – Annette Schmidt 0:11

I will introduce myself. I'm Annette Schmidt. I'm the African curator at the Wereldmuseum, and I born in Leiden. I lived in Leiden from till I was four, and between four and 18, I lived in a village nearby. And then when I went to university at 18, for the rest of my life, I lived here. And so I come from this neighborhood, and my family lives here. And when I was a child, my grandfather always took me to this museum, which was very special. And I never ever thought I would be working here, such a big time of my life in this museum, but because I'm trained as an archeologist, I worked as an archeologist for a long time, also on the African continent, but they're not a lot of jobs for African archeologists in the Netherlands, and The African curator was more or less the only one. So I've been working at the museum since 1998, and I have been curator since 2004, so for the last 20 years.

And I was talking to Daan, because with this visit of my grandfather to this museum, the Buddha Hall, was the only memory that I had. And I can't think of other things that made such an impression on me. I came to university here in 1986 so then I was in Leiden again, and probably also went to the museum, although I can't really remember. So the Buddha hall has a very… it is an impressive memory. And I must say that my memory of that room is more impressive than the Buddha room like it is now. And I think that had to do something with the serenity of it. It was not so dark as it is now. It was an enclosed room. And in that room, as far as I can remember, it was a long rectangle, a rectangle room with a bench over here with a small barrier, and then there was a sort of plateau where the five Buddhas were on. And that was it, and it was very impressive. And although I'm not religious, although I know nothing from these Buddhas, this room had, and their presence, I have to say, had an impact on you when you were there. They were a bit higher, of course, I was small at the time, so they looked upon you and that was nice.

You had a sort of…I don't know how to describe it, because I'm not religious, so I don't have that sort of vocabulary to talk about it, and I don't think that it is suitable in this sense. But the

interesting thing is that I am the keeper of a large collection from the Africa department, and I've not very often had that sort of experiences with the objects in my collection, although they can be seen as sacred, objects with the same presence. But these touched me in a way which is strange.

Speaker 1 – Lorraine Singleton 5:03
And that's, I think, exactly why I wanted to write about them. Because I had the exact same experience, I was like, Okay, I want to do sacred objects. And I was actually looking at the hall in the Pacific here, and, you know, I was looking at the Moai heads and afterwards I sat in the Buddha room, and I was like, okay, but like, why aren't those objects doing what these are doing? What's going on with that? And I'm experiencing this room, not even the Buddha Hall, which you're right, I've heard so much about, like, they just, I mean, it's nothing compared to this hall. They had this presence and stuff and it's interesting, because in this project, I'm talking a lot about sacred and sacred space making and museums as well, and the language of the sacred I found has just kind of been like taken by museums and museology, because it serves to describe the transcendent experiences that you can find in aesthetically looking at pieces or experiencing or, like, you know, being enlightened in museum context. So, while it might be like, oh, you know, I'm not religious, I thought it was funny doing this project, because I'm like, you know, you don't have to be religious. But the actual terminology that museologists seem to be using is one that you would find in what we expect religious context.

Speaker 2 6:28
But what I think was so nice, is that there was no distraction at all. It was a very minimalistic room. It was not dark, as far as I can remember, I know that it was a time where there was still lots of freedom to do things. People smoked in museums, people prayed, all kinds of things.

So there was also people that had a direct sort of relationship with what you saw, instead of looking at just museum objects, with more distance to an object behind glass or something. And I can imagine that the room was actively used by visitors who interacted in some way with the objects themselves. It is possible that my grandfather was a smoker, that he smoked there.

Speaker 1 7:40
Unconfirmed!

Speaker 2 7:41
I am unsure!

Speaker 1 7:42
But you mentioned that people prayed in there?

Speaker 2 7:44
I don't know, but I think in that time, it was more calm and loose.

Speaker 1 7:52
And actually, and I don't know if you would know this at all, but you said your grandfather took you here. Would there be any chance that he had experienced the Buddhas when they were in the garden. Like, was he here? When that was here?

Speaker 2 8:06
When was that?

Speaker 1 8:07
So they were bought in around 1883 and they were in the garden in the old Rapenburg location, I think, until around 1937.

Speaker 2 8:15
Oh, in the Rapenburg, yeah, okay, I'm not sure. He died in ’86, it was a very long time ago.

Speaker 1 8:30
That would have been interesting, because, you know, everything for me is, like all of history right at my fingertips, but like this happened over long periods of time, and like you said, the Buddha Hall had just an impact on people. And one of the things as I was working on this paper that just came to me, I was like, did people remember the Buddhas in the garden with the same sort of, like, I don't know, excitement that they remember the Buddhas in the Buddha Hall?

Because, I mean, look at the pictures, they look really cool. I mean, they shouldn't have been in the garden, but they look really nice. So I understand why people would have liked that. And just from, like, some news and articles, I know they left an impression on people, but I don't really know what that means.

Speaker 2 9:14
And I don't know why, because they really left an impression. That's my only memory of the museum that I have from my childhood.

Speaker 1 9:23
Which is awesome!

Part 2 – Annette Schmidt and Anne Marie Woerlee

Speaker 1 – Lorraine Singleton 0:02
(…) I wanted to talk to someone who might have been there when they were curating the Buddha Room. And also, I just wanted to discuss museum strategy in general, like, just general questions about that. So I reached out to Anne Marie. So I have some pictures from the Buddha Hall and the garden. Would you like to see?

Speaker 2 – Annette Schmidt 0:27
Well, the garden I never saw, but the Buddha Hall I remember. And I when I remembered there was light blue…

Speaker 1 0:40
Carpet? Because these pictures all have sort of have like, almost sepia tone to them. Let me see, this is the up close picture. There's a few of them.

Speaker 2 0:50
Yeah, here is the railing! I remember that.

Speaker 3 – Anne Marie Woerlee 0:55
Hi, nice to meet you.

Speaker 2 1:00
I didn't know that you already had an appointment with Anne Marie!

Speaker 3 1:04
Yeah, and I said “Annette knows how to find me” so I thought we could meet in the office or somewhere else!

Speaker 2 1:11
Yes, it can be quick. We can quickly do this because you don't have a lot of time.

Speaker 1 1:17
okay, let's quickly do it. We were just looking at pictures.

Speaker 2 1:21
I was interviewed, because from my child, I was here with my grandfather! And I remember how the Buddha Hall was! Yeah, and this is the railing, but I thought there was a light blue color.

Speaker 3 1:40
It didn’t have light, the light came from the outside, that was why it was so special. So every time when there was a cloud before the sun, it went dark. I mean, I think there was some basic light, but also the natural light from outside.

Speaker 1 2:00
To make them move and look alive and stuff?

Speaker 3 2:02
Yeah.

Speaker 1 2:05

So there's a railing in the two pictures we saw, but this one does not have a railing.

Speaker 3 1:10
I don’t remember any railing either.

Speaker 1 1:13
And I wonder if they took it out for some pictures, or if it was there sometimes.

Speaker 2 2:14
But this looks different.

Speaker 1 2:18
Yeah, that's the thing that some of them look different.

Speaker 2 2:21
No, it's like the others that I can remember, not like this.

Speaker 1 2:27
but this one doesn't have the curtain in the back. And I don't know if you remember a curtain or not?

Speaker 2 2:38
I remember it like this.

Speaker 3 2:37
I know when I came here in the 80s, I don't know when you visited, there was a velvet, I think black velvet curtain…

Speaker 2:47
I was here in the 70’s

…

Speaker 2 3:38
I remembered it like this. But do we know which year it is>

Speaker 1 3:42
none of these have years, which is another thing. Daan and I were looking through all the pictures. These are from the archive here and we were like, oh, I'm not sure how to put these together, you know.

Speaker 2 3:51
but that is a problem with memories. Because I came, I returned to the museum in 90s, 1989, and with memories they can be smudged, but this is how I remembered it. But maybe that is my later memory, and not my grandfather memory, but I remember the lights. The light was special.

Speaker 3 4:24
Yeah, people liked the lights. And it was, on top of Africa hall, where South America is now. So it was on that first floor, first floor almost at the end.

Speaker 1 4:33
For some reason, thought it was in here, in this canteen.

Speaker 3 4:37
like, really, right here? No, no, no. It was special there. We cannot, yeah, because everything has been changed, I mean, the whole building in 2000, so we cannot get natural light back on the ceiling. So we sort of tried so that it looks like natural light. And so we make a day a night schedule for the lights (in the Buddha Room) but I don't know, I don't think it works anymore.

Speaker 1 5:04
I thought that was neat!

Speaker 3 5:09
Yeah, its quite neat, but I don't know.

Speaker 2 5:11
but the light is something so important

Speaker 3 5:15
So also with the children, with little children. And then I said, Well, just stay here (the old Buddha hall) and just enjoy. I'll come back in a minute, and then I went out just for them to enjoy, because there was a bench. So they sat all on the bench or on the floor, and then they were like ‘miss! The Buddhas are all moving around! Oh my goodness, they're alive!”

Speaker 2 5:47
Yeah but I think when you are small and the light suddenly turns bright or less bright then it looks like the figure is sort of come to life.

Speaker 1 5:52
that's magic!

Speaker 3 5:56
yeah, but maybe that's also why they were so impressive in the in the garden, because there was natural light

Speaker 1 6:03
that's what I thought! Yeah, here I actually have some pictures of it. And again, the pictures from the garden look great. It was Bing, it was Siegfried Bing who sold them to the museum. And I'm pretty sure, it's kind of unconfirmed, but I think van Siebold got them from Japan and brought them to Europe.

Speaker 3 6:32
Okay, then it was in his garden. That’s what now the Siebold house is.

Speaker 2 6:38
But it was a very, see that's my only memory from the museum as a child.

Speaker 3 6:44
Yeah, so people also said that, bring them back.

Speaker 1 6:50
So (the pictures of the statues in the garden) is really impressive, there's all these different images, when the grass is cut, there's some with the lamps or the lanterns,

Speaker 2 7:01
and is it in the in the botanical garden, or is it behind the Siebold? Because the trees are so much wider…

Speaker 3 7:10
And also looks more like there's more space, but yeah, maybe he had a nice garden then.

Speaker 2 7:17
Did he have such a large garden with these trees in it?

Speaker 1 7:20
I don't know. Magnolia and/or cherry blossom trees, depending on who you ask.

Speaker 3 7:28
this is Magnolia, yeah.

Speaker 1 7:30
I mean, they're just such good pictures, I think.

Speaker 2 7:35
And were these the things (lanterns) that were by the entrance?

Speaker 3 7:38
Yeah.

Speaker 2 7:39
They were, that I can still remember. And then we changed with the reopening in 2001

Speaker 3 7:48
I think this could be Siebold house. Its not that wide and not that deep.

Speaker 1 8:10
Different versions of all these pictures…

Speaker 2 8:12
They're beautiful.

Speaker 1 8:15
I mean, you're talking about shifting natural light. These are totally that.

Speaker 3 8:21
That's also nice. There was, like, on the *(unknown word),* they also have their artworks in the garden.

Speaker 1 8:28
There's some of these Buddhas that are still in Artis. They're from the same like, purchase group. They look really neat. So it's been really cool doing this project and being like, wow, and learning so much.

Speaker 2 8:48
But that was impressive. And the natural light, there was also a time that you could do much more in the museum. I think people still smoked in the museum.

Speaker 3 9:20
and I think people did, because that's what we also heard from the cleaning ladies. That they had to clean the ash up from time to time. they did all sorts of stuff in there.

Speaker 1 9:31
The museum is crazy back then.

Speaker 2 9:36
But I think the fact why I liked it much more than this is the minimalism, fact that it was only the buddhas and nothing else. And that they were a bit higher. I was a child, of course, but they looked down on you, they demanded respect in some way.

Speaker 3 10:00
The base doesn't look like it's higher there than it is here.

Speaker 2 10:02
Yeah, but I was 10!

Speaker 3 10:04
You were smaller, yeah!

Speaker 3 10:07
Because that's the same now. I think what I should change, if I could, I would put it in a more silent part of the museum

Speaker 1 10:16
okay, yeah, because it's right by the atrium.

Speaker 3 10:20
were thinking, because a lot of people come to relax and meditate or something, and that's okay. And then we wanted to have like a screen before the statues, so people could go in, and not see the room from the outside. Because I imagine people feel uncomfortable when they are just there and they know everybody is watching and things like that. So I think maybe that’s what I don’t like.

Speaker 2 10:43
That is a good idea!

Speaker 3 11:01
I think that its okay, I know that Matei, our former curator, wanted to have some more objects in the room, because he said it's not a place to meditate, that's not what they do in japan.

Speaker 1 11:08
interesting.

Speaker 3 11:11
So in 2000 we had them in the

Speaker 1 11:13
Japan Hall.

Speaker 3 11:23
Yes, in the Japan hall, and then people really got pissed. Really really really got pissed. And they were in this sort of cold blue light, it was awful. But anyways, they were part of a whole storyline, which is what I liked, because you could look at the bodhisattva from china and the buddhas from japan…

Speaker 1 11:36
And people were like, where's the Buddha Hall?

Speaker 3 11:47
Yeah, people complained, it was in all the newspapers. And then in 2010 when we made some changes around here and the whole infrastructure, and then there was the bookshop there, and it moved to here.

Speaker 2 11:59

but I think you're right in saying that it has to be more silent, because (the buddha hall) was also at the end of something. It was a sort of unexpected and then impressive and the natural light,

Speaker 3 12:14
and now people feel sort of uncomfortable in that area. It's dark, it's silent, not all of the people. And I think it's even worse in the last gallery of South America, because that's also on the first floor, and people, there may be one or two visitors, and they're very silent, they whisper when they come in. and school children, especially children, they don't feel comfortable when they don't hear anything.

Speaker 2 12:44
But what is so strange, so in my room, you have a whole room with Nkisi that are objects where spirits can house in, and they don't have that sort of impression on me, and the Buddha hall, it did. And that is so strange. Because they are more related. They come from a context that I know better, that I study, but they don't have that and the Buddha hall had it.

Speaker 3 13:14
but they give a sort of, like the Buddha also. It's a relaxed person. I mean, it teaches you to be gentle, soft. And your objects have power!

Speaker 1 13:29
They're a little scary!

Speaker 2 13:36
No that is true. But that sort of serenity, that flows over to you.

Speaker 3 13:41
Then you need, I know we had an exhibition about Japan, also on the ground floor

Speaker 1 13:48
The Buddha one?

Speaker 3 13:49
No, it was called Japan anno… something. But then we had a dojo, a whole room with tatami mats, and we had tea ceremonies there, it was lovely. Because was the silent part of the museum, you had everything from japan, we sat there and breathed, and felt the stress melt away.

Speaker 2 14:16
But you're totally right by saying that it has to do with sound and light. That is the key.

Speaker 3 14:22
And the silence, and that you can hear the birds. If you're there maybe you can hear birds.

Speaker 1 14:28
okay, yeah. Because one of the things I noticed about that room when I was doing like a visual analysis was the curtain and the small doorway, so it does serve to, like, dampen noise

Speaker 3 14:39
We tried to do it, and we tried to make that extra wall, but then the money was done, so the screen wasn't there. It was supposed to be nice, with Japanese figures on it, so you would feel a bit more comfortable. But still, if a school group is coming, or another group is coming in, it's always the noise from that that makes it upstairs.

Speaker 1 15:00
the echoes and stuff, yeah. So we were sort of talking about this, were there ever people either worshiping in the old Buddha hall or this one? Do they ever use it or engage with the statues like that?

Speaker 2 15:16
How do you define worship? within the context of the Buddha, or is that their own, new age meditating?

Speaker 3 15:25

Like meditating. Yes they do. And especially in the old hall, and that's also why the curator said, I don't like that anymore. So in the main galleries they didn't do it, I've never saw that, but in the old buddha hall yes. And also here, in the new buddha room.

Speaker 1 15:39
Do you know why they didn't want people to use it like that?

Speaker 3 15:44
No, I don't know. They said, That's not how you, that's now how people in japan come in a temple, or something like that.

Speaker 2 15:52
No, I think, maybe didn't he feel a bit like an appropriation.

Speaker 3 15:55
Yeah, it was like the Dutch way, or European way to worship. And it has nothing to do with Japanese way.

Speaker 1 16:03
So if it was like a Buddhist person using it in a, like, Buddhist religious context, would that be okay? I mean, I just trying to explore that, because one of the things in my paper I'm talking about is like the secular versus sacred nature in museums.

Speaker 3 16:20
I don't know, do people in Japanese temples worship the Buddhas?

Speaker 2 16:24
I don't know, I'm the African curator! I think so?

Speaker 1 16:28
Yeah, I think they are deities so…

Speaker 3 16:33
On a special day, isn't it then? You visit the temple? I don't know, you should ask Daan.

Speaker 2 16:41
I think you walk by, you visit, but I don't know if you sort of pray there?

Speaker 3 16:49
I don't know if you put a flower, things like that. Because what I understood from Mattei is that there is a temple, with buddhas there, and you just visited. You don't stay very long, you put a flower or something like that. So not like meditating like European people.

Speaker 1 17:10
Because, I mean, from what I know about Buddhism, and the deities and what they represent, their divine embodiments of like, certain like places, either to be reincarnated or mental states. So it made sense for me that in their original context, they were sort of used to inspire, so maybe then they would be used for meditating

Speaker 2 17:36
And that is quite general, that can be for everybody. That is not limited to followers.

Speaker 3 17:36
Its very personal, very personal.

Speaker 2 17:39
And that's why it touched a broader group. It is about serenity. It is about relaxation, coming to yourself.

Speaker 3 17:50
And everyone can interpret in their own way.

Speaker 2 17:52

And if you, for example, look at the objects in Africa hall, they only function within a very specific area, which you can never, and don't want to recreate in a museum context. So that is different.

Speaker 1 18:15
And I was talking to with Wonu Veys as well, and she, in the Pacific, said the exact same thing. I mean, these are understood in very specific community contexts. And maybe the Buddha is as well. But I think you're right, it has the possibility of reaching past that.

Speaker 2 18:29
it's on a more metalevel, where it is for everybody. And I think, for example, the things in the African hall are for specific contexts and for specific people that know that, and it only works in that way. These are much more niche, and this is much more open and global. And in the light of the Buddha!

Speaker 3 19:02
yeah, its much more open and general. And actually, we put the chairs, the low round chairs in there, so people could relax there. So that's what we wanted to achieve, but not especially that people go praying, or things like that. But if somebody wants to, they can. I mean, we would never pull somebody away. But they cannot put a candle there, they cannot put fruits there, they cannot put flowers there because, yeah, it's, it's a museum, and we don't want to have flies or other creepy crawlies around. So those are the museum rules. But of course, people are, sometimes there's somebody and you think okay, let's wait a bit, when you see someone is really in a trance, I don't know what, but it doesn't matter.

Speaker 1 20:01
And so, but correct me if I'm wrong, but there was a Buddha exhibition in 2016, did you encounter that same like, worship, in any way in that exhibition? And if so, how did you guys deal with that?

Speaker 3 20:27
I don't so. I don't think there was a special meditation room or anything.

Speaker 2 20:40
I can remember that in the last room there was a lot of Buddhas, but I don't think it was a special meditation.

Speaker 3 21:02
Actually, I think our exhibitions are quite neutral, and especially this worshiping. It's a balance, its very tight. I think then you should really do it with a community or something. We had also Lama, there's a Buddhist Museum. Lama Tashi? Its Tibetan. Because the Buddhism was also from all over the world at the buddha exhibition. And he, they also made, we made Mandelas with the sand. So people do that, the monks did it, and then people can look at it. And then after it's finished, or has been there for some days, they put it in the water.

Speaker 1 22:05
Yeah, I think you saw pictures of that or something.

Speaker 3 22:08
I think around the Buddha exhibition, I think we also did some events. So if it's about worshiping and things like that, then its normally just a community. Not us telling or directing it. But if somebody wants to pray, that’s okay. But we don't invite people to do something like that.

Speaker 1 22:32
okay, so I'm just sort of trying to outline the museum stance or policy regarding this

Speaker 3 22:39
We keep it as neutral as possible. But we also had a Hajj exhibition -

Speaker 1 22:43
Yes, I wanted to ask about that.

Speaker 3 22:45

There was also a room, it was about Mecca and Medina, yes, and then we had the praying carpet on the floor. So we asked people to get off their shoes before they entered that room.
And Muslim people also used it as a praying room. Actually, I think this museum should have a praying room, and maybe sometimes, I'm not sure, but Muslim people can go into the room, and if they know which direction to orient, then they can pray there. But I think yeah, people would really like that, appreciate it if we would have a praying room, but there it worked. And the Muslim people said, it's no problem if people come in and out, we don't care, we will just do our prayers. So it was a kind of invitation for people, but we also know that Muslim people have to pray five times a day, so if they visit it's nice that they have the room there. And we also shut off the toilet, because in the middle of this Hajj exhibition, and then there's a door to the bathroom. They didn't like that so we shut it off. Yeah, we talked to people, tried to see what they through about it,

Speaker 1 24:22
there is that sort of dialog there

Speaker 3 24:30
Yes, and we want to do it in our colleague events, or lectures, and come together and then Muslim people or Buddhist people explain.

Speaker 1 24:44
So then one last question for this. And I know you guys are very busy, so again. Thank you. I heard through the grapevine that the museum is going to be or redone so in the future. And one of the things I'm sort of wondering is what opportunity this presents, then, for the Buddhas, and if they're going to be moved or if you know, a possibility will be opened up to incorporate all these changes that you might want. If you guys had to make any room, what would that look like? Would it move back to a quieter place? Or would you incorporate that screen? Or would you take away the stuff in the room?

Speaker 3 25:29
We had a meeting with the people in Leiden some months ago? And then our director asked, what objects should come back in this museum? And then there was one lady, and she said, The

Buddha, but not like this, like the old one! And then I thought, thinking about it overnight, and I thought, what's wrong with this one? And then it came up that its too noisy.

Speaker 2 25:56
Its too noisy and it's too dark. But I also think you shouldn't incorporate them in a gallery. They should have their separate space with natural light in a more sound-less environment, at the end of something.

Speaker 3 26:25
We're probably gonna make themes now, like indigenous cultures, but also with art and so I always think it has to get displayed, and maybe they will change this room, I don't know if they will give it another space, but they have to in be somewhere. Otherwise there will be war in Leiden.

Speaker 1 26:52
Yeah, I'm ending my paper, and I'm like, I'm not sure what this room is gonna look like, but I'm pretty sure the Buddhas are going to be there somehow. And it's interesting that you say it's too dark, because one of the things I noticed is that they're actually displayed very similar to the Kyoto National Museum, which displays consecrated, sacred Buddhas in a very similar manner to this.

Speaker 3 27:20
Also with the other objects?

Speaker 1 27:22
Well, it's a much bigger room, so there's lots of objects in it, but there's also lots of Buddhas, and they're on that pedestal, like with the light almost shining in the same way, and a very dark room. I don't think I have a picture of it on my phone, but yeah, I thought it was interesting that parallel.