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Hidden Narratives: A critical analysis of the display of 20th century art in the Van Abbemuseum, a demodernising museum

Oosten, Lieske van

Citation

Oosten, L. van. (2025). *Hidden Narratives: A critical analysis of the display of 20th century art in the Van Abbemuseum, a demodernising museum*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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HIDDEN NARRATIVES

A critical analysis of the display of 20th century art in the Van Abbemuseum, a demodernising museum

Name:	Lieske van Oosten
Student number:	S2650770
E-mail:	S2650770@vuw.leidenuniv.nl
First reader:	Dr. K. de Wild
Second reader:	Dr. S. Noach Ph.D.
Specialization:	Museum Studies
Academic year:	2025-2026
Due date:	20 December, 2025
Word count excl. references and appendices:	15.407

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Abstract

As a self-proclaimed frontrunner in inclusivity and multi-vocality, the Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven, the Netherlands) aims to demodernise itself in their collection presentation *Delinking and Relinking*. However, their collection largely consists of art from the 20th century, a time of colonialism. The aim of this thesis is to analyse the created narratives in three exhibition rooms of *Delinking and Relinking* that display 20th century art to explore how effective the display methods are in demodernising the colonial collection. The exhibition rooms will be examined based on three levels of display: the positioning of the artworks, the text labels and the audio tours. These display elements will be analysed through the theoretical lenses of exhibition performativity and display agency to show how display creates meaning and that a rather colonial meaning is reinforced. Approaching display in terms of focalization will confirm this and present underlying narratives that differ from the museum's decolonial intentions. Yet, examining how stereotypical and fetishised images are countered will show the efforts of the Van Abbemuseum in demodernising. Eventually, the found results will conclude that, though the museum aims to tell decolonial stories, it largely conveys underlying stories of colonialism.

Keywords

Decolonisation, display analysis, focalization, stereotype, exhibition narrative, performativity, agency

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Introduction

The Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven, the Netherlands) presents itself as frontrunner on accessibility and multi-vocality in the museum world.¹ It aims to “demodernise” its collection. Charles Esche, until recently the director of the museum, defines demodernising as showing the multitude of art histories that arise from different (inter-)cultural contexts.² For the museum, this demodernism and decolonialism are two sides of the same coin: formerly colonised countries should decolonise, whereas former colonising countries should demodernise.³ Esche argues that this decolonial ideology should be pursued by investigating the colonial heritage in modern art and subsequently demodernising the understanding of art by searching for previously unknown or suppressed narratives and vocalising those.⁴ Though Esche does recognise that the Van Abbemuseum has not reached this and that the journey towards a demodernised museum is ongoing, the Van Abbemuseum aims to embody this with the collection presentation *Delinking and Relinking* (2021-2026).⁵ Here, the museum delinks the displayed artworks from the 20th and 21st century from familiar contexts and relinks them to new stories, creating connections between artists, artworks and cultures that often remain unseen.⁶ These new perspectives are presented with a multi-vocal exhibition design. *Delinking and Relinking* thus aims to retell art histories through a decolonial perspective, and with that, demodernise the museum.

This is in line with a general movement in the museum world that Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, academic in museum studies, calls the “post-museum”. This post-museum leaves its authoritative voice behind by including a multitude of voices and perspectives regarding both objects and intangible heritage.⁷ This is resembled in the ideas of academics Desi Dwi

¹ Van Abbemuseum, "Terugblik," in *De Tijd Vooruit: Concept Beleidsplan 25-28*, (2024), 6.

² Van Abbemuseum, "Waar We Heen Gaan," in *Collectieplan 24-25*, (2023), 6.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Charles Esche, “Demodernising to Decolonise: Delinking and Relinking in Context,” in *Delinking and Relinking: Multi-sensorial Collection Presentation: Collection Display 2021-2026*, (Van Abbemuseum, 2024), 286.

⁵ Esche, “Demodernising to Decolonise,” 287-288.

⁶ The exhibition *Delinking and Relinking* closed for a short period of time and reopened in March 2025 as *Delinking and Relinking Reshuffled*. This thesis will use the original exhibition before its reshuffling as a case study. “Collectiepresentatie: Dwarsverbanden,” Van Abbemuseum, accessed December 9, 2025, <https://vanabbemuseum.nl/nl/zien-en-doen/tentoonstellingen-activiteiten/dwarsverbanden> and Esche, “Demodernising to Decolonise,” 291.

⁷ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, "The Rebirth of the Museum," in *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, (Routledge, 2006), 152.

Priani and I Wayan Suyadnya, who state that challenging the status quo is a central part of decolonising the museum institution.⁸

The Van Abbemuseum follows these characteristics of the post-museum. *Delinking and Relinking* uses different elements of display to present different connections and perspectives to demodernise and decolonise itself. This way, the museum aims to become a demodern post-museum and move away from what Hooper-Greenhill calls the modernist museum which presented objects in fixed relationships through a colonial European lens.⁹ However, the Van Abbemuseum does exhibit artworks from the first half of the 20th century created in times of colonialism in their collection presentation. This raises interesting questions about the display methods: how does a museum display these works with a colonial background in a demodernised space? Should that colonial narrative be rewritten? Highlighted? Countered? This thesis aims to examine how effective the efforts of the Van Abbemuseum are in framing their collection of early 20th century art in a decolonial and demodern narrative. This research will contribute to the field of museum studies with a specific focus on the reproduction and challenging of colonial narratives in exhibitions.

Delinking and Relinking is divided into five “chapters” that brings the visitor along the entire collection.¹⁰ Each chapter consists of a number of exhibition rooms. The first chapter, called “Return to the Native Land” focuses on the early 20th century, actively framing artworks to counter their inherent coloniality, whereas the artworks in other rooms stem from a later time period and are often of decolonial or activist nature.¹¹ This creates opportunity to analyse the framing of the modernist art, and with that, both the effects intended by the curatorial team and the unintended effects. Therefore, within this thesis, the first three exhibition rooms of *Delinking and Relinking* will be used as case studies. As the aim of this thesis is to analyse the created narratives in the first three exhibition rooms in terms of colonialism, the research question is as follows: How effective are the display practices in presenting a decolonial and demodern narrative in the first three rooms of the exhibition *Delinking and Relinking* in the Van Abbemuseum?

⁸ Desi Dwi Prianti and I Wayan Suyadnya, "Decolonising Museum Practice in a Postcolonial Nation: Museum's Visual Order as the Work of Representation in Constructing Colonial Memory," *Open Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2022): 228, <https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2022-0157>.

⁹ Hooper-Greenhill, "The Rebirth of the Museum," 151.

¹⁰ Charles Esche and Steven ten Thije, "Dwarsverbanden," in *Delinking and Relinking: Multi-Sensorial Collection Presentation: Collection Display 2021-2026*, (Van Abbemuseum, 2024), 5.

¹¹ Ibid.

A number of scholars in museum studies have researched what effects display can have on exhibition narratives. It is no longer assumed that museums are neutral spaces.¹² Various authors agree that display defines the visitor's museum experience. Important authors in this field are performance studies scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and cultural theorist Mieke Bal. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues in her book *Destination culture: tourism, museums and heritage* that visual interest and meaning is not necessarily vested in the object itself, but is instead created by the juxtaposition of objects (display) which shows relationships that would otherwise not have been visible.¹³ From this, she concludes that display acts and has agency.¹⁴ This is in line with Bal's arguments. In her book *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis*, Bal views the museum display as a speech act.¹⁵ She argues that a narrator (the museum, the curator, etc.) speaks through the exhibition and juxtaposition of objects, and thereby shapes the viewer's experience with limited room for alternative interpretations.¹⁶ Meaning is produced by the interaction between visual elements, whether that be how the visitor is supposed to walk through the museum, the wall labels, or the positioning of objects; according to Bal, the relation between those kinds of elements contributes to the narrative expressed through the exhibition.¹⁷ Thus, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Bal agree that display can create meaning and narrative.

This agency and performativity of museum display has been reiterated by Francesca Lanz, museum studies scholar, and Jacopo Leveratto, academic in architecture. They state that exhibition design is a crucial element of display and has its own autonomy.¹⁸ It impacts the meaning of a display and therefore requires critical reading.¹⁹ How to perform such a reading has been analysed by academic Margaret Lindauer and archaeologist Stephanie Moser. Their goal is to encourage the reader to become a critical museum visitor. Lindauer teaches the reader what display elements they should pay attention to when critiquing an exhibition, such as barriers between audience and the objects, the special relationships of the

¹² Emilie Sitzia, "Public Participation and Agency in Museums," in *Cultures of Participation: Arts, Digital Media and Cultural Institutions*, ed. Birgit Eriksson, Bjarki Valtýsson and Carsten Stage (Routledge, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429266454>.

¹³ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Introduction," in *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage* (University of California press, 1998), 2-3.

¹⁴ Ibid, 1, 6.

¹⁵ Mieke Bal, "The Talking Museum," in *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis*, (Routledge, 1996), 87-88.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid, 96, 98, 112, 113, 128.

¹⁸ Francesca Lanz and Jacopo Leveratto, "Exhibitions and Design: A Perspective on the Project of Museum Display," in *Visiting the Art Museum: A Journey Toward Participation*, (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2023), 68.

¹⁹ Ibid, 72.

objects and text panels.²⁰ Expanding on this, Moser argues that the museum communicates key messages through its display.²¹ She presents the reader with an array of aspects of the exhibition, such as architecture, colour, text, layout, to be able to analyse the message of display.²² Lindauer constructs a museum critique to show how to critically approach display. Furthermore, analyses of the effects of display have mainly been researched in terms of the effects display has on the viewer or on the objects themselves. In the book *The Agency of Display: Objects, Framings and Parerga*, various authors present research on how display elements shape the meaning of objects and have effects on the viewer.²³

Art historian Pao-Yi Yang analyses these effects of display and framing on the narrative of objects. In her dissertation “Framing China: Performativity and Narrative in Museum Displays of Chinese Porcelain”, Yang connects Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s and Bal’s views on the meaning production of display.²⁴ Approaching display this way can shed light on the narrative the curator intended for the display to express, but also on the unintended and underlying narrative.²⁵ Yang applies this theoretical lens to the display of Chinese porcelain in various exhibitions to examine what different displays do with the meaning of objects.

This thesis will follow Yang’s focus on the effects of the agency and performativity of display on an exhibition narrative. However, whereas Yang’s research was more focused on the influence of display on the narrative of objects, this thesis will direct its focus on the effects of display on the narrative of exhibition rooms, a theme that has not sufficiently been researched yet. Analysing *Delinking and Relinking* in the Van Abbemuseum through this lens is important, because the museum attempts to demodernise itself: close reading the 20th century modernist, and thus inherently colonial, part of their collection will explore how effective their attempts are. It is not the aim of this thesis is to analyse the curatorial process, but to explore the effects of the curatorial choices on the exhibition narrative.

The aforementioned theories by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Bal will be of overall importance in this thesis. They show that display creates meaning which can be different from the narrative intended by the curator. The first chapter of this thesis, which closely

²⁰ Margaret Lindauer, “The Critical Museum Visitor,” in *New Museum Theory and Practice*, ed. Janet Marstine (Wiley, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470776230.ch8>, 210.

²¹ Stephanie Moser, “THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAIL: Museum Displays and the Creation of Knowledge,” *Museum Anthropology* 33, no. 1 (2010): 22, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1379.2010.01072.x>.

²² Moser, “THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAIL”.

²³ Johannes Grave et al., eds, *The Agency of Display: Objects, Framings and Parerga*, Parerga Und Paratexte, volume 2, Collections, Displays & the Agency of Objects, Dresden (Sandstein Verlag, 2018).

²⁴ Pao-Yi Yang, “Framing China: Performativity and Narrative in Museum Displays of Chinese Porcelain,” (PhD diss., Universiteit Leiden, 2021), 3-5.

²⁵ Yang, “Framing China,” 4-5.

analyses the first exhibition room called “Close Encounters”, will especially draw heavily on these theories. This room is about the cultural exchange between non-Western and Western artists.²⁶ The Van Abbemuseum argues that museums usually separate non-Western artists from Western artists, neglecting the interactions that took place between those artists and art traditions.²⁷ With the display of both categories of artists in one room, the Van Abbemuseum seems to aim to question the colonial hierarchy. This sparked the following question: What effects do the display elements have on the presentation of cultural exchanges between artists with different cultural backgrounds in the exhibition room “Close Encounters”? Looking at these effects will demonstrate how the presentation of the cultural exchanges between artists actually reinforces a colonial, hierarchical relationship between the artists.

In the second chapter, Bal’s theory on *focalisation* will be added to explore through whose eyes the visitor experiences the artworks on display in the second exhibition room called “The Homesickness of Things”. The narrative of an exhibition can be told from multiple perspectives, influencing how the artworks are understood.²⁸ This point of view from which a story is told and its relation to what is presented, is what Bal calls focalization.²⁹ It consists of three levels: the vision, the person that sees (the focalizer), and that which is seen (the focalized).³⁰ Uncovering the focalizer can reveal how the image is presented: through external or internal focalization.³¹ In external focalization, the focalizer is positioned outside the presented event. When the focalizer is participating in the event, one speaks of internal focalization.³² Analysing focalization can expose the hidden ideology of a narrative.³³

Additionally, the museum model of an exhibition speaks volumes. “The Homesickness of Things” displays its artworks in a white cube museum model. The white cube is inherently modernist and rids the works from their context, presenting them as universal.³⁴ By looking at the second exhibition room through the lens of focalization and

²⁶ The author of this thesis is aware that the notions of non-Western and Western are outdated and colonial in itself. However, as this distinction is made in the Van Abbemuseum itself, this thesis uses this terminology. Steven ten Thije and Diana Franssen, “Return to the Native Land,” in *Delinking and Relinking: Multi-Sensorial Collection Presentation: Collection Display 2021-2026* (Van Abbemuseum, 2024), 72.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Mieke Bal, “Focalization,” in *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, (University of Toronto Press, 2009), 174.

²⁹ Ibid, 175.

³⁰ Ibid, 178.

³¹ Ibid, 182.

³² Ibid, 181.

³³ Yang, “Framing China,” 99.

³⁴ Thomas McEvilley, “Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief: “Primitivism in 20th Century Art” in the Museum of Modern Art in 1984,” *Art Forum* 3, no. 23 (1984), <https://www.artforum.com/features/primitivism-in-20th->

analysing its use of the white cube museum model, the second chapter aims to answer the following question: How do the perspective through which the narrative in the exhibition room “The Homesickness of Things” is told and the museum model influence the intended decolonial and demodern narrative of the display? It will be argued that, instead of the intended narrative which presents the intercultural inspirations of painter Pieter Ouborg (1893-1956), the visitor takes on the colonial perspective of a white, European man.

The last chapter of this thesis will discuss the third exhibition room called “As Far As the Eye Can See – Biography of a Portrait” by applying theories about (countering) the stereotype by cultural theorist Stuart Hall and about the fetish by critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha. In his book *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Hall discusses the core elements of a stereotype – reduction, exaggeration and fixing – and strategies for contesting stereotypes. Bhabha covers crucial aspects of the fetish and its connection to the stereotype. This chapter explores the engagement with stereotyping and the fetish in the display of the painting *Javanese Dancer (Raden Mas Jodjana)* by Dutch painter Isaac Israëls (1865-1934). Considering the history of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia and the stereotypical and fetishised depiction of Jodjana in the artwork, this painting seems inherently colonial. How does this fit in the decolonial and demodern narrative of *Delinking and Relinking*? This chapter will therefore ask the following question: How does the Van Abbemuseum challenge the colonial aspects of Isaac Israëls’ painting *Javanese Dancer (Raden Mas Jodjana)* in their display of the painting in exhibition room “As Far As the Eye Can See – Biography of a Portrait” to encourage the intended decolonial and demodern narrative? This will show how the Van Abbemuseum challenges colonial narratives, but it will also uncover how the colonial story remains unless the visitor actively chooses to read the decolonial and demodernised story.

In each exhibition room, the theoretical lenses will be applied to three levels of display elements: (1) the way the visitor walks through the exhibition room and how the objects are positioned in relation to each other, (2) the various texts on labels, and (3) the audio tours. Each of these elements can be seen as a separate level of visitor engagement. On the first level, the visitor inevitably engages with the artworks simply by moving through the exhibition space and experiencing the arrangement of the objects. The second level requires a

century-art-at-the-museum-of-modern-art-in-1984-207620/. Thomas McEvelley and Brian O’Doherty, "Context as Content," in *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space, Expanded Edition*, ed. Thomas McEvelley and Brian O’Doherty (University of California Press, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520923607>, 79-80. Whitney B. Birkett, ‘To Infinity and Beyond: A Critique of the Aesthetic White Cube’ (Seton Hall University, 2012), 35. <https://scholarship.shu.edu/theses/209>.

conscious choice to read the text labels accompanying the artworks. The most comprehensive engagement comes when visitors actively decide to listen to the audio tours and thus take in every layer of information provided by the museum. The Van Abbemuseum provides five audio tours in *Delinking and Relinking*. The exhibition rooms discussed in this thesis are part of the Introduction Tour, Broader Story Tour and Family Tour. The Introduction Tour provides a general overview of the exhibition, whereas the Broader Story Tour functions to deepen the visitor's experience.³⁵ For this thesis, the Introduction Tour and Broader Story Tour are the most relevant, as the Family Tour does not build on the narrative of the exhibition, but merely provides an accessible story about a specific artwork for younger audiences. The Family Tour will therefore not be discussed in this thesis.

This thesis consists of three chapters that each discuss one exhibition room in *Delinking and Relinking* through a different theoretical lens. Each room is closely read based on a combination of these theories and the previously discussed levels of visitor engagement. With this research, this thesis aims to explore how effective the efforts of the Van Abbemuseum are to make their museum a demodernised space in the first three exhibition rooms due to their display of early 20th century modernist art. It will be concluded that, certainly, the museum aims to tell decolonial and demodern stories, but by closely reading the curatorial strategies and display practices through a lens of exhibition performativity and agency, focalisation and the stereotype and the fetish, it shows that, despite the efforts, *Delinking and Relinking* still conveys underlying stories of colonialism.

³⁵ "Delinking and Relinking," Van Abbemuseum, accessed November 11, 2025, <https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/see-and-do/exhibitions-activities/delinking-and-relinking>.

1. Between Intention and Interpretation: neocoloniality in display elements in “Close Encounters”

In the exhibition *Delinking and Relinking*, the Van Abbemuseum frames its collection through the relations between artists and both art historical and societal movements. Its goal is to re-present connections between artists. The exhibition room called “Close Encounters” aims to present the relationships and encounters between non-Western and Western artists, showing the role non-Western artists played in the modernist art movement and to remove the pedestal Western art has been put on.³⁶ However, upon further examination of the positioning of the artworks, their text labels and the audio tours, the effect is the exact opposite, because the non-Western artworks can be understood only in context of the Western artworks.

To uncover what narrative the Van Abbemuseum presents in the first exhibition room, performance studies scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s notion is used, i.e. that display is an active agent and creates meaning in an object through juxtaposition.³⁷ To exemplify this, she states that ethnographic objects that are not of any visual interest are brought from their original context into the museum, where interest is created by juxtaposing them with other objects.³⁸

Additionally, this chapter will apply Mieke Bal’s approach of display as a speech act performed by a narrator (the museum, the curator, etc.) shaping the viewer’s experience.³⁹ This allows to see the museum as a discourse and the exhibition as an utterance within that discourse.⁴⁰ Loose elements within an exhibition – the artwork, a caption, the object arrangement – can then be seen as a metonymy; paintings on the same wall are no longer autonomous, but are perceived as connected by the viewer, producing a certain meaning.⁴¹ In the chapter “The Talking Museum” of *Double Exposures*, Bal discusses three layers of display: the architecture of the museum, the arrangement of the artworks and the text labels accompanying the works. These elements express meaning onto the artworks; the captions emphasize one element, the arrangement something else.⁴² This rhetorical and narratological lens exposes the workings of this meaning-making process.⁴³

³⁶ Ten Thije and Franssen, “Return to the Native Land,” 71-72.

³⁷ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Introduction,” 3.

³⁸ Ibid, 2-3.

³⁹ Bal, “The Talking Museum,” 87-88.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 128.

⁴¹ Ibid, 95.

⁴² Bal, “The Talking Museum.”

⁴³ Ibid, 130.

These theoretical lenses will help answering the following question: What effects do the display elements have on the presentation of cultural exchanges between artists with different cultural backgrounds in the exhibition room “Close Encounters”? Examining how this takes shape will uncover how this exhibition room does or does not contribute to the intended multivocal and demodernised narrative of the exhibition. The goal of this chapter is to show how interaction between various elements in an exhibition room can create meaning, and how this might differ from, or even be the opposite of the intended narrative. This will contribute to the overall research topic of this thesis in that the differences between the intended and unintended narratives of the exhibition room will expose the effectiveness of the display in creating a demodernised narrative.

The exhibition room is divided into two groups based on the relationships and interactions between the artists in each group. The first group consists of Wifredo Lam (1902-1982), Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and Aimé Césaire (1913-2008), and the second group of Ossip Zadkine (1888-1967) and Alicia Penalba (1913-1982). This chapter is structured based on these groups, and will therefore discuss the artworks by Lam, Picasso and Césaire first. Within each group of artists, two display elements will be discussed: the arrangement of the artworks and the accompanying text labels. The artworks by Lam, Picasso and Césaire are accompanied by two audio tours which will also be analysed.

The spatial interaction between the artworks is the first thing the visitor experiences and it influences the narrative framing of the art and how we perceive the artworks on display. In terms of the theme of this exhibition room, the positioning of the artworks could tell the story of an equal form of cultural exchange or it could reinforce power imbalances. It will be argued that the positioning suggests that the displayed art by non-Western artists can only be understood in the context of the Western art. Examining the textual narrative on the wall labels, in turn, will uncover how these texts portray a hierarchical relationship between the artists. It will be proposed that the audio tours accompanying the artworks do present a non-Western artist in its own right, but that the aim to present encounters between non-Western and Western artists is not fulfilled in the audio tours.

1.1. The story of Picasso and Lam

1.1.1. The positioning of the artworks

First, this chapter will take a look at the first layer of display, the positioning of Wifredo Lam's painting *Le Marchand d'oiseaux* (Fig. 1) and Pablo Picasso's painting *Buste de*

Femme (Fig. 2). Both Bal and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argue that analysis of the arrangement of objects will uncover the presented meaning.⁴⁴

Wifredo Lam's painting *Le Marchand d'oiseaux* is placed in the centre of the room on the butt side of a cabinet, facing the entrance (Fig. 3). On the back wall to the right of the cabinet, the painting *Buste de Femme* by Picasso is displayed (Fig. 4). On the long sides of the cabinet, archival material of the work and life of Césaire is presented, along with records of his encounters with Lam and Picasso (Fig. 5).

In this close proximity, the visitor sees Lam and Picasso in one glance. Césaire's work in the display case is literally attached to that of Lam. Placing Lam this central, an artist who has not had this central position before in the Van Abbemuseum, suggests that Lam is the main character of the narrative of the exhibition room.⁴⁵ Picasso then, as well as Césaire, are presented as side characters, perhaps even as background characters, in Lam's story.

This might invite the visitor to compare the works purely based on similar formal aspects such as use of colour, shapes or composition, as they might not have had the chance to read the labels or listen to the audio tours yet upon first entering the room. This way, Lam's painting is understood in comparison to Picasso's work. Furthermore, because of Picasso's prominent place in the modernist art canon, the visitor might be inclined to interpret Lam's work based on what they know about Picasso, further contradicting the intention to give a Lam his own central place in the exhibition narrative. Then, Lam's painting might not be understood as a work on its own, but merely in the context of Picasso's work.

Furthermore, placing Picasso's painting in the background and foregrounding Lam's work suggests a non-equal, hierarchical relationship between the artists. It may even suggest that Lam's painting plays a more important role in the narrative of the exhibition room or would be of greater value, while the intention was to highlight the encounters between the artists. Though the artwork does play an important role in the intended narrative, historical accounts show that the relationship between Picasso and Lam was more equal than suggested by the positioning of the artworks. According to art historian Claude Cernuschi, their relationship was quite mutual, though it did seem to root in opportunity to benefit from each other.⁴⁶ For Picasso, Lam's ethnicity represented what inspired him, and with it the racial stereotypical qualities attributed to Lam, being born in Cuba to parents with Chinese and

⁴⁴ Bal, "The Talking Museum," 102 and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Introduction," 3.

⁴⁵ Ten Thijs and Franssen, "Return to the Native Land," 72.

⁴⁶ Claude Cernuschi, "Picasso," in *Race, Anthropology, and Politics in the Work of Wifredo Lam*, (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2022), 10-11.

Congolese ethnicity.⁴⁷ At the time, it was common for white people to associate with black people in an attempt to absorb those qualities.⁴⁸ Additionally, Picasso used his acquaintance with Lam, or perhaps Lam's ethnicity, to not only reinforce his own avant-garde status, but also legitimize the use of African forms in his art.⁴⁹

Lam, however, also benefited from this friendship with Picasso. Having Picasso's approval gave Lam confidence, and Picasso introduced him to his avant-garde colleagues.⁵⁰ Moreover, Picasso's interest in African forms started a fascination for Africa in Paris, and as a black person, Lam could make use of this to secure his place in the avant-garde.⁵¹

Despite the mutual relationship between Picasso and Lam and both of them sharing a fascination for the other, it must be noted that this relationship was rooted in colonialism and racism given Picasso's aestheticization of African culture. Cernuschi argues that Lam's admiration for Picasso might be related to what academic Edward Said calls the holdover of empire.⁵² This entails that the colonized often embodies the standards of the colonizer, seeing and validating their own culture through the eyes of the colonizer.⁵³ In this context, Picasso might inherently have had the upper hand in this relationship.

Thus, placing Lam in the centre of the room and Picasso in the background contradicts the historical accounts of their relationship. One might expect a narrative focused on Lam based on the positioning of the paintings, but instead the display in effect puts a non-Western artist in the context of a prominent Western artist in the modernist canon; Picasso is presented as a vital part of Lam's story, but not vice versa. This counters the intention of the Van Abbemuseum to display Western and non-Western art together on the same level, to present the exchanges that took place between all kinds of cultures, and to give Lam a central position in this story.⁵⁴

1.1.2. The text labels

The text labels accompanying the artworks in the exhibition room provide additional information about the works and the relationships between the artists, creating context for the

⁴⁷ Ibid, 10.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 10-11.

⁵⁰ Kaira Marie Cabañas et al, "Lam's Crossings and Critical Positions: A Chronology," in *Wifredo Lam, the Imagination at Work*, (Pace, 2022), 160.

⁵¹ Cernuschi, "Picasso," 11-12.

⁵² Ibid, 15.

⁵³ Ibid, 11-12.

⁵⁴ Ten Thije and Franssen, "Return to the Native Land," 72.

artworks.⁵⁵ Room labels introduce the exhibition room, whereas wall labels provide information about a specific artwork. According to Bal, the labels contribute to the interaction between display elements and thus add to the narrative and meanings created in a display.⁵⁶ However, it can be argued that, in the attempt to place both non-Western and Western artists together in one exhibition space and highlighting their encounters, the labels in this room “Close Encounters” create a narrative in which the Western artist plays a larger part in the story of the non-Western artist than vice-versa. This results in an unequal, neocolonial perspective on Wifredo Lam as an artist.

The label accompanying the central piece of the room, Lam’s *Le Marchand d’oiseaux* does not describe or interpret the painting. Instead, it discusses how Lam met Picasso. It contains a quote by Picasso, praising Lam by comparing the Cuban painter to himself. The label only addresses the time when Lam arrived in Paris, though he also lived in Cuba, Spain and a variety of countries in the Caribbean.⁵⁷ This represents Lam’s time in Europe with Picasso as the most memorable, even though Lam was active as an artist in his own right in every country he lived in. Notably, *Le Marchand d’oiseaux* was painted after Lam left Paris.⁵⁸

At the same time, the label accompanying Picasso’s work does not mention Lam at all, not even if or how Picasso might have been inspired by Lam. Instead, it describes the historical context of the time when the painting was made and how that is visible in the work. Lam’s label is about his connection to Picasso, whereas Picasso’s label is about the painting and the inspirations for it, suggesting that Lam was inspired by Picasso, but not vice versa. Yet, as established earlier, there was a form of mutual and equal exchange between the artists. By neglecting this, the wall labels creates a hierarchy between the artists. Additionally, the quote by Picasso on Lam’s label suggests that Picasso approved of Lam, adding to this sense of hierarchy: the famous artist praises this lesser known artist, so Lam must be worth of displaying. The effect seems to be a rather neocolonial narrative.

The display case about poet Aimé Césaire contains two labels with contextual information in addition to the labels with more technical information such as artists, materials, etc. The first label describes “Tropiques”, a literary magazine founded by, among others, Césaire. Its aim was to create equality between the French Caribbean culture and the

⁵⁵ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “The Agency of Display: Objects of Ethnography,” in *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage*, by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (University of California press, 1998), 22.

⁵⁶ Bal, “The Talking Museum,” 113.

⁵⁷ Kaira Marie Cabañas et al, “Lam’s Crossings and Critical Positions: A Chronology,” 157-158.

⁵⁸ Kaira Marie Cabañas et al, “Lam’s Crossings and Critical Positions: A Chronology.”

European culture, which coincides with the mission of this exhibition room.⁵⁹ The focus on this project instead of his own poems does emphasize the encounters between artists, but again, it also places a non-Western artist, Césaire, in the context of Western artists. This is also visible in the second label in the display case, which discusses the collaboration between Césaire and Picasso. Césaire published a collection of ten of his poems with thirty-two etchings by Picasso. Though the label highlights their collaboration, it only goes into detail about Picasso's illustrations, and not about Césaire's poems.

Taking into account these findings regarding the wall labels, it seems that they counter the intended narrative of the Van Abbemuseum, which was to highlight the interactions between artists with different cultural backgrounds and place them on the same pedestal to present a decolonial and demodern story. Instead, the texts in this exhibition room come across as rather neocolonial, presenting the dominant involvement of Western artists in the story of non-Western artists but not the other way around.

1.1.3. Audio tours

The audio tours in this exhibition room provide more context to the works and thus contribute to the narrative of the display. In this exhibition room, both the Introduction Tour and the Broader Story Tour discuss Lam's *Le Marchand d'oiseaux*. The audio tours provide a more detailed profile of Lam himself, instead of his relation to Picasso, as is the case in other parts of the room. First, a brief overview of both audio tours will be provided, then their effects on the narrative of the exhibition room will be analysed.

The Introduction Tour first goes into detail about the painting itself and possible interpretations. Then, it elaborates on Lam's life, discussing his education at the art academy in Madrid, his arrival in Paris, and his move back to Cuba with a stopover in Martinique. His connection with Picasso is only briefly mentioned, and Lam's meeting with Césaire is used as a reference to introduce the display case. The audio tour ends with an interpretation, where it is suggested that Lam had seen the good and bad in people during his travels and that that might be represented in *Le Marchand d'oiseaux*.⁶⁰

The Broader Story Tour dives deeper into Lam's cultural background and relates it to the painting. It is discussed how, through his friendship with Césaire, Lam applied elements of *négritude* to his art, a movement against the erasure of black culture by colonialism. His

⁵⁹ "Titelkaartjes vitrine Wifredo Lam/Pablo Picasso," Van Abbemuseum Library, last accessed December 19, 2025. https://mediabank.vanabbemuseum.nl/vam/files/alexandria/publiciteit/titelkaartjes/2021/Pablo%20Picasso_Wifredo%20Lam.pdf.

⁶⁰ Het Van Abbemuseum, "Innige ontmoetingen," Introductie Tour.

Afro-Cuban roots are shown in the Santeria elements in his work, an Afro-Cuban spirituality in which birds are an important symbol.⁶¹ Though the audio tour is used to redirect some of the attention to Césaire and his career, both Césaire and Lam are presented as artists in their own right. They influence each other and contribute to the same movement, reflecting exchanges between artists. This differs from the narrative suggested by the positioning of the artworks or the wall labels, where Picasso plays a significant role in both Lam's and Césaire's stories. However, the Broader Story Tour does not mention Picasso at all and with that, the goal of the exhibition room, to highlight the exchanges between Western and non-Western artists, is not achieved in this audio tour.

Thus, both audio tours provide the visitor with a comprehensive overview of Lam's life and influences on his work other than Picasso. Lam is presented as an artist in his own right, showing the role of non-Western artists in modernism. However, by nearly erasing Picasso from the narrative in the audio tours, the exhibition room loses sight of the theme of the room: exhibiting encounters between Western and non-Western artists.

1.2. The story of Zadkine and Penalba

Now that the meaning of several exhibition elements and the effects on the narrative of Lam, Picasso and Césaire have been analysed, a closer look will be taken at the second group of artists in the exhibition room: Ossip Zadkine (1888-1967) and Alicia Penalba (1913-1982). As the Introduction Tour and the Broader Story Tour do not discuss these artists, the examination of the presented narrative of this group will be focused on the positioning of the artworks and the wall labels.

1.2.1. Positioning of the artworks

Right outside the entrance of the exhibition room, the visitor encounters the sculpture *Saint Sébastien* by Ossip Zadkine (Fig. 6, fig. 8, fig. 3). *Ombre habitée* by Alicia Penalba is placed in the corner left to of the entrance (Fig. 7, fig. 9). Typically, the visitor first encounters *Saint Sébastien*. *Ombre habitée* is only revealed after the visitor enters the room and turns their attention away from the central composition of the paintings by Lam and Picasso. This way, Penalba's sculpture seems to be of secondary importance, while Zadkine's work is the first artwork the visitor sees.

When facing Zadkine's sculpture, the visitor cannot see Penalba's work. However, when standing in front of Penalba's sculpture, the visitor *can* see Zadkine's work because it is

⁶¹ Het Van Abbemuseum, "Inez van der Scheer / Wifredo Lam," Breder Verhaal Tour.

in the line of sight. This might invite the visitor to compare Penalba and Zadkine based on formal elements. Though there are certainly elements in which the two differ, for example the extents of abstraction, there is a clear visual similarity in the natural colours, their vertical orientation and organic shapes. Because *Saint Sébastien* is encountered as a solo sculpture but *Ombre habitée* is compared to Zadkine's work, Penalba is understood in comparison to Zadkine. This positioning, then, suggests a hierarchy where the Western artist (Zadkine) becomes a reference to read the art of the non-Western artist (Penalba) to.

1.2.2. The wall labels

The wall labels accompanying Penalba and Zadkine's sculptures encounter similar issues. Next to Penalba's *Ombre habitée*, the visitor reads how Penalba moved from Buenos Aires to Paris, where she discovered her love for sculpture. It also discusses that she worked at Zadkine's studio for two years before moving away from his ideologies to find her own style.⁶² It is interesting, then, that the sculpture the Van Abbemuseum chooses to display from Penalba's oeuvre has, as previously established, visual similarities to the sculpture by Zadkine. Penalba moved away from Zadkine with such determination that she destroyed her previous work.⁶³ Highlighting the encounter between these artists with an artwork created after a rigorous break with this relationship, forcefully places Penalba back into the connection with Zadkine, as if that connection is crucial for Penalba to be displayed in this room. Of course, *Delinking and Relinking* is a collection presentation which means there is a limitation to which of Penalba's works can be displayed. Yet, in that case, it can be questioned whether the relationship between Zadkine and Penalba should have been presented within this theme of the exhibition room at all as currently, the room suggests that Penalba, a non-Western artist, needs this connection to Zadkine to be displayed in this exhibition.

Whereas Penalba's wall label mentions her time with Zadkine, the label accompanying Zadkine's *Saint Sébastien* does not mention Penalba at all. Instead, the label describes the importance of the expressive force of an image to Zadkine by quoting him. An additional quote by the art critic Domien van Gent on the label praises the exhibited sculpture, reinforcing the idea that the sculpture belongs in a museum. It also

⁶² "Titelkaartjes," Van Abbemuseum Library, last accessed December 19, 2025. 2025. https://mediabank.vanabbemuseum.nl/vam/files/alexandria/publiciteit/wandteksten/2021/06.%20Zaaltekst_Bijlschriften.pdf

⁶³ Ibid.

confirms Zadkine as an authoritative figure.⁶⁴ Thus, Zadkine's label goes into detail about his work and his ideology with no mention of Penalba, while Penalba's label does mention him and is more focused on her life and her as a person instead of her art. Pairing Penalba with Zadkine this way with these text labels could be argued to reinforce the unequal, hierarchical pupil-teacher relationship Zadkine and Penalba had *before* the creation of *Ombre habitée*, countering the intended post-colonial narrative of this exhibition room.

1.3. Conclusion

The aim of the Van Abbemuseum is to give non-Western a central position in this exhibition room, as well as to counteract the separation of Western and non-Western art in museums.⁶⁵ However, the effect of this attempt at demodernisation seems quite the opposite. This thesis chapter used Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's notion of display as an active agent and Bal's theory on how display elements produce meaning to analyse the positioning of the artworks, wall labels and audio tours. Upon examination, the arrangement of the objects and the wall labels suggest a colonial, hierarchical relation between the artists. Furthermore, the proximity to the Western artworks and the invitation to compare the works could also suggest that the non-Western art can only be understood in the context of Western art. The visitor would use the Western art to know how to place the art by Lam and Penalba in the art historical canon of modernism, thus basing their interpretation of Lam and Penalba's work on that of Picasso and Zadkine. This would maintain the imbalance the Van Abbemuseum tries to erase. So, though the museum attempts to give non-Western art a central place in an exhibition about encounters between artists, the museum actually seems to reinforce the colonial relationship between the Western and non-Western artists.

However, all of this does not apply to the audio tours regarding Lam, which *do* provide the visitor with a more comprehensive overview of Lam, creating a more complete image of the artist, and his influences from other artists and his own cultural background. Yet the tours barely mention Picasso: the sole focus on Lam does not comply with the aim of the exhibition room, which is to present encounters between Western and non-Western artists.

In conclusion, a variety of elements in this exhibition room create a narrative that differs from that which the Van Abbemuseum intends to tell. This way, the museum presents the

⁶⁴ "Titelkaartjes," Van Abbemuseum Library, last accessed December 19, 2025. https://mediabank.vanabbemuseum.nl/vam/files/alexandria/publiciteit/wandteksten/2021/06.%20Zaaltekst_Bijschriften.pdf

⁶⁵ Ten Thije and Franssen, "Return to the Native Land," 72.

cultural exchanges between artists with different cultural backgrounds in a quite neocolonial way, despite their attempts to counter that.

Now that it has been examined how the various elements in an exhibition room can uncover hidden, unintended and even opposite narratives, the next chapter will take a closer look at the second exhibition room of *Delinking and Relinking*, and use it as a case study to explore how focalization and the white cube museum model can influence the exhibition narrative.

2. Focalization and the white cube: the unintended narratives in “The Homesickness of Things”

The second exhibition room in *Delinking and Relinking* is called “The Homesickness of Things”. It presents the life story of Pieter Ouborg (1893-1956) through 21 of his works, along with *Composition avec des cordes* by Joan Miró (1893-1983) (Fig. 10) and *Interrogation – what kind of bird are you?* by Max Ernst (1891-1976) (Fig. 11). Additionally, the room displays three Indonesian masks (Fig. 12-14). The aim of “The Homesickness of Things” is to showcase how the Dutch artist Ouborg was inspired and touched by Indonesian culture. His first encounter with Indonesian culture took place in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, where he visited the exhibition *Ancient Javanese and Contemporary Balinese Hinduism*. The native Indonesian objects on display left such an impression on him that he travelled to Indonesia.⁶⁶ Both the spiritual elements of Indonesian culture and his encounters with art by his European contemporaries influenced the development of his artistic style.⁶⁷

At first glance, this combination of Indonesian and European culture seems to be in line with the aim of the exhibition *Delinking and Relinking*: a fully multivocal collection presentation that creates space for cultural differences and moves away from the perspective of the European, white man traditionally presented in museums.⁶⁸ However, upon further examination, it seems as if the exhibition room actually reinforces the exact perspective the Van Abbemuseum wants to eliminate through its use of internal focalisation and displaying the artworks in a white cube museum model. There are a few aspects of the exhibition room that inspire this hypothesis. Before encountering Ouborg’s works, the intended route through the room leads the visitor past Miró, Ernst and the Indonesian masks, the works Ouborg inspired his artistic style on, before encountering Ouborg’s works. What does this imply? Additionally, the texts on the room label and wall labels, as well as the audio tours, seem to reinforce a certain perspective on the visitor through which the art works are framed – that of Ouborg. Through which gaze does the visitor approach the artworks? Through that of a Dutchman visiting Indonesia in a time of colonization, or through the eyes of members of Indonesian communities? And lastly, what effects does the display of the works in a white cube museum model have on the modernist artworks on the one hand, and the Indonesian

⁶⁶ Ten Thijs and Franssen, "Return to the Native Land," 73.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 74.

⁶⁸ “Voor mensen van nu én straks: beleidsplan 21-24,” Van Abbemuseum, accessed December 19, 2025, https://mediabank.vanabbemuseum.nl/vam/files/alexandria/publiciteit/beleidsplannen/1.%20VAM_Beleidsplan%2021-24_JUN20_def.pdf

masks on the other? In short, how do the perspective through which the narrative in this exhibition room is told and the museum model influence the intended decolonial and demodern narrative of the exhibition room?

A story can be told from multiple perspectives, and the same applies to the narrative structure of an exhibition.⁶⁹ Different perspectives will bring different experiences, and this will influence the meanings and values of the artworks on display. The point of view through which a story is told and its relation to what is presented, is what Mieke Bal calls *focalization*.⁷⁰ It consists of three levels: the vision, the person that sees (the focalizer), and that which is seen (the focalized).⁷¹ Uncovering the focalizer can reveal how the image is presented: through external or internal focalization.⁷² In external focalization, the focalizer is positioned outside the presented event. When the focalizer is participating in the event, one speaks of internal focalization.⁷³ Analysing focalization can expose the hidden ideology of a narrative.⁷⁴

Following art historian Pao-Yi Yang's application of focalization to exhibitions, this chapter will bring to light through what perspective the artworks are presented. Does the visitor experience the artworks through the view of the curator – external focalization- or does internal focalization frame the art through the eyes of a character in the exhibition narrative, such as one of the artists displayed?⁷⁵ Defining this perspective will uncover what narratives the Van Abbemuseum intentionally and unintentionally presents when displaying modernist artworks in the exhibition room. Moreover, by further analysing the display method of the artworks, this chapter will examine how the white cube model further affects the narrative presented by the museum.

In short, this chapter aims to show how internal focalization in an exhibition can manipulate the visitor into looking at the displayed works through a perspective of a white, European man and how the white cube museum model reinforces this. It also explores how the visitor can experience that as objective due to the nature of the museum as an institution. By applying this to the exhibition room "The Homesickness of Things", this chapter will examine how the focalization, the museum model and the authoritative power of the museum as an institution affect the demodernity and the decoloniality the Van Abbemuseum aims for

⁶⁹ Bal, "Focalization," 174.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 175.

⁷¹ Ibid, 178.

⁷² Ibid, 182.

⁷³ Ibid, 181.

⁷⁴ Yang, "Framing China," 99.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

in the exhibition narrative of *Delinking and Relinking*. It will be argued that by juxtaposing European modernist artworks with Indonesian masks in a white cube model and by guiding the viewer through the exhibition room in a particular viewing order, the exhibition articulates the perspective of a Dutch artist, Pieter Ouborg, engaging with and reinterpreting aspects of Indonesian culture and European modernism. This internal focalization offers audiences a specific experience of the displayed artworks and is reiterated in the texts of the wall and room labels and in the audio tours.

This chapter contains four sections. The first section examines how the visitor's route through the exhibition room influences their perspective on the displayed works. The second section will exemplify this further by analysing the room label and wall labels of the exhibition space. In the third section, the effects of the audio tour will add to this. It will be argued that how the visitor walks, reads and listens contribute to viewing the artworks from the perspective of Pieter Ouborg through internal focalisation. In the last section, this chapter will argue how the display method of the room, combined with the authority of the museum, presents the subjective position of the visitor as Ouborg as an objective truth.

2.1. The effects of the visitor's route

First, this chapter will examine the effects that the way the museum encourages the visitor to walk has on how the visitor views the objects in the exhibition room "The Homesickness of Things". Mieke Bal highlights the effect the way one moves through a museum can have on the narrative of the exhibition, as it creates meaning and thus can be used to frame the works of the exhibition in a certain way.⁷⁶ These kinds of signifying effects, Pao-Yi Yang argues, can expose the effects the interplay of this spatial narrative and the narrative constructed by the curators of the exhibition can have on the visitor.⁷⁷

When moving on to the room "The Homesickness of Things", the visitor enters a white room, contrasting with the warm colours of the preceding space (Fig. 15). The visitor encounters a cubical display case with multiple drawings on each side (Fig. 16). Behind the display case, modernist paintings hang on the wall. To the right is the entrance to the next exhibition room, so it seems that the natural way to move through this space is clock-wise. Turning left, the visitor encounters two large paintings: *Composition avec des cordes* by Joan Miró and *Interrogation – what kind of bird are you?* by Max Ernst (Fig. 17) Next, there are

⁷⁶ Bal, "The Talking Museum," 96.

⁷⁷ Yang, "Framing China," 5.

three masks from Indonesia (Fig. 17, fig. 18). The other works in the room are works by Pieter Ouborg (Fig. 19).

The curator's choice to have the visitor encounter the Miró, Ernst and masks first seem to be fitting with the theme of this exhibition room. The Van Abbemuseum calls this exhibition room "a small solo exhibition", which focuses on painter Pieter Ouborg and his inspirations.⁷⁸ This is also explained on the room label, which the visitor finds next to the entrance of this room. According to the room label, the artist encountered art by Miró and Ernst in press images and he became acquainted with Indonesian culture through an exhibition.⁷⁹ A year later, he travelled to Indonesia and found his style as an artist, combining elements from both modernist art and Indonesian culture.⁸⁰ This recreation of Ouborg's encounters with what would become his main sources of inspiration for his work, invites the visitor to look for the elements that could have inspired Ouborg. The visitor searches for elements of Miró, Ernst and the masks in Ouborg's work. The visitor might recognise the expressive use of colour of Ernst and Miró in Ouborg's works, or the line work in the masks. The visitor is invited to look at these artworks through Ouborg's view. This is a form of internal focalisation.⁸¹ In short, the walking tour, and thus the visitor following that path, takes on the position of the character through which the artworks are perceived: Pieter Ouborg.

2.2. The effects of the text labels

In addition to the visual experience of the room, the text labels also encourage a specific perspective. The visitor first encounters the room label. This label points out the theme of the space: Pieter Ouborg's search for spirituality and finding it in Indonesia. It also describes Ouborg's upbringing and how he first encountered Indonesian culture and why he was inspired by that culture as well as by modernist artists. This label thus deems both Indonesian cultures and Miró and Ernst to be inspirations for Ouborg. A visitor reading the room label is likely to adopt this way – Ouborg's way- of looking at the masks and at the paintings by Miró and Ernst.

Following the path suggested by the positioning of the artworks, the visitor encounters Miró's *Composition avec des cordes*, a large, colourful, abstracted painting. The

⁷⁸ Ten Thije and Franssen, "Return to the Native Land," 73.

⁷⁹ "Wandteksten," Van Abbemuseum Library, last accessed December 19, 2025, https://mediabank.vanabbemuseum.nl/vam/files/alexandria/publiciteit/wandteksten/2021/05.%20Zaaltekst_Zaleen.pdf.

⁸⁰ Ten Thije and Franssen, "Return to the Native Land," 73-74.

⁸¹ Gérard Genett, "Mood," in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, (Cornell University Press, 1990), 189.

accompanying wall label describes Miró's thought process behind the figures in his work with a direct quote.⁸² The label does not mention Ouborg. The wall label of Max Ernst's *Interrogation – what kind of bird are you?* does not reference Ouborg either. Though the text does not go into detail about the painting, it does give the visitor information about Ernst's inspirations caused by his upbringing – a strictly religious upbringing quite similar to that of Ouborg.⁸³ Both Miró and Ernst are given a voice by describing the inspirations behind their paintings on the wall labels. The visitor is likely to view their paintings from the artists' perspectives.

This changes when the visitor encounters the Indonesian wajang topèng masks. Though the wall label explains how the masks were used to tell a myth during the Wajang Topèng dance called Topèng Besar in Cirebon, Java, the text also describes how the mystical and magical elements ascribed to the masks inspired Ouborg to collect them.⁸⁴ By naming what inspired the painter about these masks, the way the visitor looks at the objects shapes itself accordingly, making the visitor look through Ouborg's view.

Next, the visitor moves to the walls containing five of Ouborg's paintings, and the display case consisting of 16 of his works, mostly drawings and sketches. Notably, no additional information is given about the works other than factual characteristics such as name, date, materials, etc. This invites the visitor to create meaning based on what they have seen and learned previously about Ouborg's inspirations, recognising elements in Ouborg's works reflecting these. For example, they might see Miro's expressive use of colour or Ernst's rough brush strokes in Ouborg's *White Cross*, or Miró's dreamlike figures in Ouborg's drawings such as *Die hem belagen* or *Forward*. Elements of the Indonesian masks or influences of Ouborg's life in Indonesia might be recognised in the drawings *Landschap* or *Vrouwenkop*. The visitor will see what elements about modernism and Indonesian culture inspired Ouborg, recognise those elements in the original objects and thus view those objects through Ouborg's eyes.

Thus, inviting the visitor to look at the displayed works through Ouborg's eyes, the labels trigger a form of internal focalisation. This way, the labels deem the works that Ouborg

⁸² "Titelkaartjes," Van Abbemuseum Library, last accessed December 19, 2025, https://mediabank.vanabbemuseum.nl/vam/files/alexandria/publiciteit/wandteksten/2021/06.%20Zaaltekst_Bijsc_hriften.pdf, 50-51.

⁸³ "Titelkaartjes," Van Abbemuseum Library, last accessed December 19, 2025, https://mediabank.vanabbemuseum.nl/vam/files/alexandria/publiciteit/wandteksten/2021/06.%20Zaaltekst_Bijsc_hriften.pdf, 53-54

⁸⁴ Ibid.

used to come to his style as inspiration to a Dutch artist, instead of creating the dialogue the Van Abbemuseum intended in the exhibition *Delinking and Relinking*.

2.3. The effects of the audio tours

Apart from reading, the audio tours add an interesting additional layer of interpretation, which in turn reframes the art works on display. In the episode of the Introduction Tour of this exhibition room, the visitor listens to an overview of the displayed art and the purpose of “The Homesickness of Things”. The tour describes Ouborg’s life, from his upbringing to his time in Indonesia. It talks about the surreal elements in works by artists as Miró and Ernst that inspired him, as well as how the rituals and art forms of Indonesia spoke to him. The tour ends with Ouborg’s criticism on the usage of non-Western art forms by Western artists. According to Ouborg, those artists only used the shell of the art forms and not the meaningful traditions.⁸⁵ Ouborg’s criticism implies that he thought of himself as encompassing all aspects of the Indonesian culture in his art.

How, then, does the Introduction Tour influence the way the visitor looks at the art in this room? By stating that Ouborg included both the outer and inner form of Indonesian culture in his art, the visitor is invited to look for those elements in Ouborg’s works. Yet, those elements are aspects of a culture perceived by Ouborg, a white, Dutch man. Ouborg’s works, then, present an appropriated version of the Indonesian culture. By quoting Ouborg but not criticising him, the Introduction Tour frames this appropriation as if the entirety of Indonesian culture is represented in Ouborg’s works. The audio tour does point out that Ouborg’s critique on other artists using non-Western art elements is merely his perspective. Even so, the visitor is not invited to look at the Indonesian masks from a different perspective than Ouborg’s. As with the text labels, the Introduction Tour leads the visitor to assume Ouborg’s perspective through internal focalisation.

However, the Broader Story Tour does criticise Ouborg’s appropriation. First, it follows the lines of the Introduction Tour, but it ends with criticising the artist by stating that, even though Ouborg criticised colonialism, he did not realise he exoticized objects himself.⁸⁶ This is a shift from internal to external focalisation and it allows the visitor to step back and look at the bigger picture; external focalisation creates a panoramic overview and moves away from Ouborg’s perspective.⁸⁷ However, does this counterbalance the fact that the visitor

⁸⁵ Van Abbemuseum, “Het heimwee der dingen,” Introductie Tour, 1 min., 34 sec.

⁸⁶ Het Van Abbemuseum, “Bibi de Vries / Ouborg,” Breder Verhaal Tour, 2 min., 25 sec.

⁸⁷ Şûlamî Rimmôn-Qênân, “Text: Focalization,” in *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, (Routledge, 2001), 77.

was already repeatedly put in Ouborg's shoes? Notably, this fragment of the Broader Story Tour is the first and only time the role of colonialism is mentioned regarding this exhibition room. Given the vast Dutch colonial possession of Indonesia, one would think colonialism to be a more prominent theme in this exhibition room. Perhaps more moments of external focalisation could have presented a more nuanced image on the colonial aspects of Ouborg's fascination with Indonesia in this room.

2.4. The effects of the white cube

This white, European perspective is continued in the choice for the type of display, a white cube museum model. This creates a modernist exhibition space which also contrasts with the intended postcolonial, multi-vocal narrative of the exhibition. In 1936, Alfred H. Barr Jr. stripped the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York down to bare white walls and ceilings.⁸⁸ This became known as, "the white cube" and it became the most common way of displaying art, aiming to remove context from the exhibition space and experience art without distractions.⁸⁹ This would create neutrality and order.⁹⁰ This was countered by academic Brian O'Doherty who argues that this neutrality is illusionary, as it is actually a representation of modernism.⁹¹ Also, the white cube is argued to distance the visitor from the art: art historian Meyer Schapiro states that art is shaped by experience and by removing the art from its context, no visitor could understand art history.⁹²

This white cube and the juxtaposition of modernist art and objects from non-Western cultures were further critiqued in responses to the 1984 MoMA exhibition "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*. This exhibition juxtaposed modernist works with "tribal" objects, limited wall texts and a minimalist interior, which is reminiscent of the exhibition room in the Van Abbemuseum.⁹³ Art critic Thomas McEvelley argues that the white cube MoMA exhibition presents modernism as universal and superior, suggesting that the other objects naturally contain a modernist aesthetic, and that is what makes the objects interesting. Moreover, this modernist focus on formal aspects of the artefacts are

⁸⁸ Birkett, "To Infinity and Beyond: A Critique of the Aesthetic White Cube," 25.

⁸⁹ Elena Filipovic, "The Global White Cube," in *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*, ed. Barbara Vanderlinden, (MIT Press, 2005), 63.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 65.

⁹¹ O'Doherty and McEvelley, "Context as Content," 79-80.

⁹² Birkett, "To Infinity and Beyond: A Critique of the Aesthetic White Cube," 35.

⁹³ Birkett, "To Infinity and Beyond: A Critique of the Aesthetic White Cube," 40.

highlighted by their lack of (anthropological) information.⁹⁴ Thus, as historian James Clifford argues, the “tribal” objects were presented on modernist terms due to its aesthetic focus.⁹⁵ The presentation of the artefacts in a modernist museum model must have added to this as well.

Thus, art history shows us that presenting artefacts in a modernist museum model such as the white cube does not create a neutral display, but might trade the objects’ cultural background for a focus on its aesthetic and formal aspects. This may be beneficial for modernist art because of the “art for art’s sake” focus of the movement, but the visitor will not receive any contextual information, stripping the objects of their original meaning.

Then what effect does a white cube exhibition room such as “The Homesickness of Things” in the Van Abbemuseum have on the displayed Indonesian masks? It could be argued that it turns the attention of the visitor to the formal aspects of the masks, which is increased by the lack of anthropological information provided: though the wall label does discuss the context of the use of the masks, there is no visual presentation of how the masks are used. This forces a modernist view onto the masks, removing their function. This is similar to what Ouborg did: he saw the masks and, attracted to their mystical and magical qualities, he collected them. In a way, the exhibition room takes on this role by presenting the masks as part of their collection in a white cube room.

Thus, the white cube museum model used in exhibition room “The Homesickness of Things” does not present a neutral image and puts the visitor in the Ouborg’s shoes. These are highly subjective positions, but the position of the museum institution as an authority presents the subjective point of view of the exhibition room as neutral and objective. Museums exercise a certain power in that they, or more specifically the curators, choose what to exhibit, how to exhibit it and whose interests are represented by it.⁹⁶ Additionally, the curator knows more than the visitor, further reinforcing this power structure.⁹⁷ Yet, the choices the curator makes are highly subjective which are then presented as objective by the museum as an institution.⁹⁸ This pattern is visible in this exhibition room as well. Not only is the exhibition as a concept subjective due to the choices made in the process, this chapter previously

⁹⁴ McEvilley, “Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief,” in *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*, ed. by Jack Flam and Miriam Deutch, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, 335-350. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520935174-071>.

⁹⁵ Birkett, “To Infinity and Beyond: A Critique of the Aesthetic White Cube,” 42.

⁹⁶ I. Zeynep Damgacioglu, “Inherently Political Museums: How Does the White Cube Affect Art’s Agency?,” *We the Museum, Theory & Practice*, no. 4 (2021), 4.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

showed that the internal focalisation of the exhibition room encourages the visitor to experience the artworks through the eyes of Pieter Ouborg, which is an inherently subjective experience. Though this authoritative power of the museum is present in all exhibition rooms and not limited to this one, the effects are especially interesting in “The Homesickness of Things”: Ouborg’s perspective may be interpreted as an objective way of viewing the artworks. Thus, as the museum as an institution exercises a certain authoritative power, it can be argued that the visitor could perceive the subjective position of Ouborg in looking at works by Miró, Ernst and the Indonesian masks as a truth.

2.5. Conclusion

How, then, how do the display elements in the exhibition room “The Homesickness of Things” relate to the intended decolonial and demodern narrative in the room? To answer this question, this chapter examined the focalization that takes place in the walking tour, audio tours and labels of the exhibition room “The Homesickness of Things”. By using focalization as an analytical tool, the chapter aimed to identify through whose viewpoint the visitor experienced the exhibition and to shed light on the manipulative effect of focalisation. Additionally, analysis of the white cube model of the exhibition room showed how the Indonesian masks are presented on modernist terms, reinforcing this focalization and contrasting the intended narrative of the Van Abbemuseum.

First, the way the visitor walks through the exhibition room was examined. This paragraph proposed that the curator’s choice in the route reveals an internal focalization that invites the visitor to look at the works from the perspective of Ouborg. The exhibition frames the paintings by Miró and Ernst and the Indonesian masks as sources of inspiration for Ouborg. By walking past those works before you move to Ouborg’s art, the exhibition reimagines the experience Ouborg must have had: he encountered works that inspired him and processed elements in his artistic style. Subsequently, the visitor will look for these elements in Miró, Ernst and the masks, as well as Ouborg’s own works.

Second, this internal focalization was also found in the labels of the works in this room. The room label only describes Miró, Ernst and Indonesian culture as inspiration for Ouborg. The wall labels add to this; though the labels at the Miró and Ernst do no mention Ouborg, Ernst’s upbringing is connected to that of the Dutch painter. The labels belonging to the Indonesian masks describe their use and spiritual background, but by pointing out that that spirituality interested Ouborg, the label positions the visitor in his shoes.

Third, this chapter proposed that the audio tours reinforce this viewpoint. The Introduction Tour describes the life of the artists and what inspired him about his European contemporaries and Indonesian culture. The tour ends with Ouborg's aim to move away from the tendency of non-Western artists to only use the shell of native art forms in their art. This criticism implies that the artist did implement those art forms "correctly". Consequently, the visitor looks at his work as the right way of portraying Indonesian culture in Western art, yet this is merely a European, white male view on this. Additionally, the visitor will look for the elements in the masks that Ouborg implemented in his art, just as the painter did. However, the Broader Story audio tour does embody a moment of external focalisation, as it criticises how Ouborg exoticized the object. This might make the visitor aware of the level of subjectivity in the exhibition room.

Additionally, this chapter also examined what effects the use of the white cube display model has on this subjective narrative that analysis through focalization revealed. As the white cube is an inherently modernist method of display, presenting the Indonesian masks in this way highlights their formal aspects instead of their cultural function and invites the visitor to look at them from a modernist, purely aesthetic perspective – a perspective that is reminiscent of that of Ouborg. Moreover, the historical power and authority of the museum only reinforces this presentation of a Western, white man's perspective as the truth.

This is interesting, as the Van Abbemuseum does claim to demodernise itself by being multivocal and give a voice to multiple perspectives. In this exhibition room, it attempts to create a dialogue between modernism and Indonesia to show the vast influence Indonesian culture had on Ouborg. Yet, a dialogue requires a multitude of voices from all parties involved and this is not the case with the labels in this exhibition room. Miró and Ernst's voices are presented by labels about the thought processes and backgrounds that inspired their paintings. The Indonesian masks, however, do not speak: though their use is described, they are highlighted in context of what attracted Ouborg about the masks, as written on the label. Additionally, by presenting the masks in an inherently Western white cube museum model, their original use as well as their meaning cannot come into their own. Consequently, their voices are not part of the dialogue. Instead, it is Ouborg who "talks" through the masks. Though it must be kept in mind that "The Homesickness of Things" does not represent the entire collection presentation *Delinking and Relinking*, it is interesting that this Eurocentric view of the room seems to distance itself quite far from the multivocal aim of the Van Abbemuseum.

By using focalization to analyse this exhibition room, this chapter aimed to contribute to the broadening of this research field. As Yang states in her dissertation: “[...] how focalization works in exhibition narrative remains a relatively unexplored field.”⁹⁹ This chapter showed what narratives can be produced and how hidden, perhaps unintended ideologies can be exposed through focalization. By becoming aware of this, curators might be able to understand what meanings can lie beyond the intended narrative.

The next chapter will focus on the third exhibition room in *Delinking and Relinking*, called “As Far as the Eye Can See – Biography of a Portrait”, which aims to highlight the relationship between the people portrayed and the artist, with a focus on the life of the portrayed. It will analyse the painting *Javanese Dancer (Raden Mas Jodjana)* by Isaac Israëls (1865-1934) and discuss the presentation of the stereotypical and fetishised elements of the painting in a decolonial and demodern exhibition narrative.

⁹⁹ Yang, "Framing China," 131.

3. Creating Jodjana: displaying a colonial painting in a demodernised space

The third exhibition room of *Delinking and Relinking*, is a portrait room titled “As Far As The Eye Can See – Biography of a Portrait”. The six people portrayed are from the early 20th century painted by contemporary or present-day artists.¹⁰⁰ Instead of highlighting the life or creative process of the painter, the Van Abbemuseum puts the people portrayed in the centre of attention, intending to present the diversity in society at the time and the complexity of relationships between painter and portrayed.¹⁰¹ By doing this, the Van Abbemuseum aims to tell a story that presents the portrayed people in their own right, attempting to counter a colonial narrative.

This chapter will take a closer look at these efforts by analysing the display of the painting *Javanese Dancer (Raden Mas Jodjana)* by Isaac Israëls (1865-1934) (Fig. 21). The portrait shows the Indonesian prince Raden Mas Jodjana (1893-1972) who spent most of his life in the Netherlands as an artist, mostly in dance.¹⁰² Israëls and Jodjana met in 1916 and became friends.¹⁰³ Israëls’ depiction of Jodjana could be seen as inherently colonial – a Dutch man painting an Indonesian immigrant in times of Dutch colonialism. Yet the museum chose to include the painting in a decolonial and demodernised exhibition. How, then, does the Van Abbemuseum attempt to challenge the coloniality of Israëls’ painting? Analysing this will contribute to measuring the effectiveness of the Van Abbemuseum’s efforts to create a decolonial and demodernised exhibition narrative.

To answer this question, it must first be clear how Jodjana is presented in Israëls’ painting. It will be argued that in this presentation, colonial imagery manifests itself through stereotyping and fetishising. Theories by cultural theorist Stuart Hall and critical theorist Homi K. Bhabha are used to define the act of stereotyping and the fetish, and how these concepts are related to colonialism. By viewing *Javanese Dancer* through this theoretical lens, the first part of this chapter will show how these aspects of the colonial are present in the painting.

¹⁰⁰ Ten Thijs and Franssen, “Return to the Native Land,” 74.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, and “Wandteksten,” Van Abbemuseum Library, last accessed December 19, 2025.

https://mediabank.vanabbemuseum.nl/vam/files/alexandria/publiciteit/wandteksten/2021/05.%20Zaaltekst_Zalen.pdf

¹⁰² Ten Thijs and Franssen, “Return to the Native Land,” 74.

¹⁰³ “Titelkaartjes,” Van Abbemuseum Library, last accessed December 19, 2025.

https://mediabank.vanabbemuseum.nl/vam/files/alexandria/publiciteit/wandteksten/2021/06.%20Zaaltekst_Bijscriften.pdf and Ten Thijs and Franssen, “Return to the Native Land,” 74.

Once it is clear how these colonial elements of Israël's painting are visible, the second part of this chapter will place the painting in the context of the intended narrative of a demodernised and decolonised to answer the question: How does the Van Abbemuseum present *Javanese Dancer* by Israël? And in line with this, how does the museum display Jodjana? By analysing the text on the labels, the audio tour and by taking a closer look at the archival material displayed accompanying *Javanese Dancer*, it will be argued that these display elements present Jodjana as a whole person, countering the reducing element of the stereotype and the objectification of the fetish.

3.1. Stereotyping Jodjana

First, this chapter will examine how Isaac Israël presents Raden Mas Jodjana in the painting *Javanese Dancer*. It will argue that based on what is and is not depicted in the painting, Israël presents a stereotyped and fetishised version of Jodjana by reducing him to a Javanese dancer and erasing other histories, interests or backgrounds and fixing this "reality" through the medium of painting. But let us first dive into the concept of stereotyping in relation to colonial discourse.

Regarding the stereotype, there are a couple of strategies that characterize this form of representation in colonial discourse. According to cultural theorist Stuart Hall, stereotyping means reducing people to a few essential, simplified characteristics that are easy to understand. These characteristics are then exaggerated and presented as fixed without possibility of change.¹⁰⁴ Academic Homi K. Bhabha argues that this presenting of the colonial Other as fixed and unchangeable is the core of colonial discourse, as it acts as if the stereotype has always been as presented and it must be repeated to keep that image.¹⁰⁵ The person is turned into an object without any social or historical context outside of the stereotype.¹⁰⁶ The aim of reducing a person, or group of people, to such a stereotype in colonial discourse is to maintain the distance between the minority and the dominant power by classifying people in context of a norm set by the dominant power, excluding the minority and deeming them Other.¹⁰⁷ In conclusion, a stereotype is formed by reducing someone to a simplified version of themselves, and exaggerating this and fixing that image as reality. This

¹⁰⁴ Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other," In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall et al. (Sage, 2025), 258.

¹⁰⁵ Homi K Bhabha, "The Other Question...", *Screen* 24, no. 6 (1983): 18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/24.6.18>.

¹⁰⁶ "Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe," in *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*, 1st edn, by Kobena Mercer (Routledge, 2013), 174.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203700594>.

¹⁰⁷ Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other," 258-259.

causes a clear distinction between the dominant power (the colonizer) and the Other (the colonized).

So how are these elements of stereotyping visible in Israëls' *Javanese Dancer*, and what is the effect of the presented stereotype? To be able to recognise those elements, the painting must first be visually analysed. In his painting, Israëls places Jodjana in a seated position in the centre of the composition. Jodjana is wearing extravagant clothing with golden elements, a shawl, a headpiece and decoration reminiscent of wings. The visitor might interpret the outfit as traditional Javanese clothing or clothing specifically meant for a Javanese dancer. In the background, musicians are playing various instruments. They seem to be of Indonesian descent as well.

Looking at accounts from Jodjana's life, he was much more than just a dancer. Although Jodjana was a professional dancer and made a living out of his, according to an article of CODART published in relation to their 2005 exhibition about Israëls and Jodjana, his interest expanded from dance to other artistic disciplines such as painting and wood carving.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, he came to the Netherlands to study to become a civil servant and he grew up in close proximity to the royals of Yogyakarta, a city on Java.¹⁰⁹ However, Israëls reduced Jodjana to merely a Javanese dancer through the painting's title: it originally did not even mention Jodjana's name, only his nationality and his profession as a dancer.¹¹⁰ According to the Van Abbemuseum, Jodjana's identity in this painting was only recently revealed and they added his name to the title.¹¹¹

Additionally, the painting depicts Jodjana dressed in traditional clothing with other Indonesian people and musical instruments such as the *gamelan* (a percussion instrument). These elements highlight Jodjana's traditional Javanese characteristics, but it completely erases the fact that Jodjana had lived in the Netherlands for about five years by then and was known to combine Javanese and European elements in his dances.¹¹² Thus, it seems that

¹⁰⁸ Maartje de Haan, "Isaac Israëls en Raden Mas Jodjana: een Indische vriendschap," Exhibitions, CODART, accessed October 30th, 2025. <https://www.codart.nl/guide/agenda/isaac-israels-en-raden-mas-jodjana-een-indische-vriendschap/>

¹⁰⁹ "Titelkaartjes vitrine Isaac Israëls," Van Abbemuseum Library, last accessed December 18, 2025. https://mediabank.vanabbemuseum.nl/vam/files/alexandria/publiciteit/titelkaartjes/2021/Isaac%20Israels_Raden%20Mas%20Jodjana.pdf en "De Indische Israëls," in *De Indische Israëls*, by Jan Pieter Glerum (Waanders, 2005), 62 and Titelkaartjes," Van Abbemuseum Library, last accessed December 19, 2025. https://mediabank.vanabbemuseum.nl/vam/files/alexandria/publiciteit/wandteksten/2021/06.%20Zaaltekst_Bijsc_hriften.pdf

¹¹⁰ Ten Thijs and Franssen, "Return to the Native Land," 74.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

Israëls reduced Jodjana to an image that greatly fascinated the Dutch painter; he often depicted Javanese people in his works.

This reduced version of Jodjana is exaggerated by Israëls. The depiction of Jodjana in relation to Indonesian musicians with non-European musical instruments and the traditional clothing are reminiscent of Indonesia. However, this painting cannot be a depiction of Jodjana in his native country. Jodjana travelled to the Netherlands in 1914 and his first encounter with Israëls took place around 1916.¹¹³ Besides, Jodjana never returned to Indonesia.¹¹⁴ This means Israëls' depiction must have been based on a scene in the Netherlands, whether that be Jodjana sitting for a painting in Israëls' studio or Israëls' painting on location during a Javanese dance. It could be argued, then, that a painter as Israëls, whose oeuvre largely consists of depictions of Javanese people, would have exaggerated the Indonesian elements in this painting to fit his fascination with Indonesia and its inhabitants.

Thus, with reduction, exaggeration and fixing the depiction as reality through the medium of painting, Israëls' work shows how the Dutch painter presents a stereotyped image of Jodjana. This is what Jodjana is, a Javanese dancer, forever.

3.2. Fetishizing Jodjana

In addition to stereotyping, or perhaps because of the stereotyping of Jodjana, Israëls also fetishizes Jodjana. Jodjana, reduced to a few exaggerated characteristics and fixed in a painting, is no longer a whole but merely a part of his actual character. Only presenting this stereotype, Jodjana becomes a fetishized surface.¹¹⁵

The stereotype and the fetish, then, are closely intertwined with each other. Bhabha even argues for regarding the stereotype through a fetishist lens. His motivation for this is that in both the stereotype and the fetish, the beliefs of colonial discourse are reproduced and normalised.¹¹⁶ As a concept, fetishism is the process of objectification, in which a part stands for the whole.¹¹⁷ Fantasy plays an important role in this: it is needed to understand what *is* represented by knowing or imagining what is *not* represented.¹¹⁸ Fetishism, then, both

¹¹³ Maartje de Haan, "Isaac Israëls en Raden Mas Jodjana: een Indische vriendschap," Exhibitions, CODART, accessed October 30th, 2025. <https://www.codart.nl/guide/agenda/isaac-israels-en-raden-mas-jodjana-een-indische-vriendschap/>

¹¹⁴ "De Indische Israëls," 68.

¹¹⁵ Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other," 287.

¹¹⁶ Bhabha, "The Other Question...", 26.

¹¹⁷ Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other," 266.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

represents and does not represent the object.¹¹⁹ Subsequently, fetishism involves a fascination or desire which is both indulged and denied.¹²⁰

The aspects of fetishism are visible in Israëls' *Javanese Dancer*. Israëls' object of fascination, Jodjana as the exotic Other instead of Jodjana as a whole person, is presented in the painting. He is close enough to look at and easy to look at, with his gaze turned away from the viewer and his calm cross-legged position. Yet, because Israëls has placed him in a non-Western setting, Jodjana is distanced enough to not form a threat to the viewer. This way, the object of fascination is both indulged, because the viewer can look at it, and denied, because the depicted person is presented in the sphere of a country far away. Moreover, the painting displays a certain level of Israëls' fantasy, in that the Indonesian atmosphere is enhanced, displaying Jodjana as a fetish, derived from his stereotypical depiction.

3.3. Displaying Jodjana: labels and archival materials

This chapter will now examine how the Van Abbemuseum frames *Javanese Dancer* to fit in a decolonial and demodernised narrative. Though, as concluded, the painting itself presents Jodjana as a stereotypical and fetishised version of himself, the Van Abbemuseum counters this image by providing the visitor with information about Jodjana and the culture behind the Javanese dance, instead of focusing on the life of the painter.

As mentioned before, the painting is accompanied by a collection of archival materials in addition to its wall label. The wall label discusses shortly when Israëls and Jodjana met and that they became friends. After that, the label focuses solely on Jodjana, illustrating his love for the arts, not just dance, and how he combined Javanese and Western influences in his performances.¹²¹ Already here, Jodjana is presented as more than just a previously anonymous Javanese dancer.

The archival documents tie in with this expansion on Jodjana's character. The archive consists of a collection of photographs and sketches, as well as a video (Fig. 24, fig. 25). All are accompanied by a text label with some core information (date, material, source, etc.). One label provides an overview of Jodjana's life, interests and network. In contrast, no details are given on Israëls' life. So both the wall label and one of the text labels in the display case provide rather detailed information about the portrayed, while all the visitor learns about

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 268.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 267.

¹²¹ "Titelkaartjes," Van Abbemuseum Library, last accessed December 19, 2025.

https://mediabank.vanabbemuseum.nl/vam/files/alexandria/publiciteit/wandteksten/2021/06.%20Zaaltekst_Bijsc_hriften.pdf

Israëls is that he and Jodjana were friends. By presenting the two as friends, the Van Abbemuseum creates quite an equal relationship between them, instead of that of the active painter and the passive painted. In a sense, Jodjana becomes the more active one in this scenario, as the Van Abbemuseum presents him as the main character of this story.

With this, the museum applies one of Stuart Hall's strategies for contesting stereotypes. In his book *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices*, Hall discusses three "trans-coding strategies" that challenge a dominant way of representation.¹²² The first strategy applies the reversal of the stereotype, the second strategy substitutes positive images for the negative images produced by the dominant group, and the third challenges the form of racial representation instead of its contents.¹²³ With the information provided on *Javanese Dancer*, the Van Abbemuseum applies the second strategy. Hall argues that this second strategy attempts to give the negative image a positive spin, by turning it into a positive message or by increasing the complexity of the stereotype.¹²⁴ The Van Abbemuseum does the latter. By giving the visitor a detailed insight into Jodjana's life and career, the museum counters the reduced image of a Javanese dancer Israëls presents. Instead, Jodjana is presented as a student with a love for travelling and all forms of art. The exaggerated image of the dancer is supplemented by information on how Jodjana was influenced both by Javanese culture and by the European cultural movements at that time. By countering the reduced, exaggerated image Israëls constructed in his painting, the Van Abbemuseum presents Jodjana as a person instead of a stereotype.

The archival documents themselves are also used to create a more complex and complete image of Jodjana. Among the archive are two representations of Javanese dances – two sketches of Jodjana dancing the Tani and Shiva respectively, and one video of a Mask Dance from West Java. By providing more context to the Javanese dances, the stereotypical representation of Israëls painting loses its reductionist nature. Moreover, the video shows that the culture is still alive, countering the fixed characteristic of the stereotype. However, it must be noted that the settings of both the sketches and the video remain unknown; they might be staged in order to create an exaggerated traditional image which would add to the stereotype. Additionally, the sources of the photographs in the archival display are of Western-European

¹²² Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other," 269-270.

¹²³ Ibid, 270-274.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 274.

origin.¹²⁵ Jodjana was photographed by the Dutch photographer Henri Berssenbrugge (1873-1959), and another portrait is named *Der künstlerische Tanz Gruppe II: Exotische Tanzkünstler, Nr. 227*, according to its corresponding text label.¹²⁶ The Dutch origin of the photographer and the adjective *exotische* (meaning exotic) would suggest a rather exhibitionist character. So, though the archival materials on Javanese dance counter the reductionist and fixed character of the stereotype, they also carry a form of exhibitionism and suggest a possible exaggeration of Jodjana.

Upon first encountering *Javanese Dancer*, the layout of the room ensures that the (attempted) deconstructed stereotype is what the visitor encounters first before seeing the painting. The portraits in this room are placed facing each other, so that on first glance, the visitor knows they are entering a portrait room. The portrait of Jodjana is positioned left of the entrance, but because it faces the middle of the room, the visitor will not see it right away. Instead, the visitor first encounters the wall label and archival material of *Javanese Dancer*. This way, the Van Abbemuseum prevents the visitor from immediately adopting Israël's stereotypical and fetishized portrayal of Jodjana, and instead presents the visitor with a comprehensive profile of him first. With this layout, the museum actively rejects the reduced and exaggerated image of Jodjana, making him a person instead of a stereotype. However, this composition also prevents the visitor from easily (visually) comparing the painting and the archive, as the two are not directly juxtaposed within a single glance. This way, viewing the archival material is not imposed on the visitor and they must deliberately choose to navigate between the archive and the painting to compare them. The visitor gets to choose to read the additional information about the painting and Jodjana and with that, to deconstruct the stereotype.

It is also interesting to note that the exhibition room makes use of a white cube museum model, albeit with a few alternative aspects. The walls are white with pink stripes on the wall behind the pink cabinets, and the room is lit with indirect lighting that comes from the ceiling (Fig. 23). Academic Brian O'Doherty (1928-2022) describes the white cube as a space devoted to aesthetics, untouched by time and isolated from context.¹²⁷ This suggests a certain universal quality. Through these elements of the white cube, this museum model

¹²⁵ "Titelkaartjes," Van Abbemuseum Library, last accessed December 19, 2025.

https://mediabank.vanabbemuseum.nl/vam/files/alexandria/publiciteit/wandteksten/2021/06.%20Zaaltekst_Bijsc_hriften.pdf

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ O'Doherty and McEvelley, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space, Expanded Edition*, 14-15.

would add to the fixity of the stereotype by presenting it as universal. Yet, by providing context with the archival documents, the Van Abbemuseum moves away from the white cube's focus on aesthetics and its isolation of art by providing context about the person portrayed instead of the artist, the art style, the art movement, etc. It is not just about the visual aspects of the art – it could even be argued that that is neglected – but about Jodjana and Javanese culture. The white cube model of the exhibition room, then, is sharply contrasted with what is actually displayed. Though it is unclear what the exact intentions were for this exhibition room design, the Van Abbemuseum does present an interesting contradiction between room design and its contents.

It is noteworthy that neither the labels nor the archival materials refer to the colonial aspects of the painting or the Van Abbemuseum's attempts to deconstruct those. Though there might be a risk of showcasing the colonial aspects by mentioning those on a label, it might also create room to openly critically reflect on the problematic representation of Jodjana. With that, the Van Abbemuseum could have brought the visitor along in that critical analysis, training their eye as well. It could also prevent the visitor from merely glancing over the archival documents and ignoring the deconstruction of the stereotype, as it would become an integral part of the narrative. Instead, the museum has opted for a more subconscious way of decolonising and demodernising Israël's painting in an exhibition that promotes itself as demodern. How the Van Abbemuseum achieves that apparently stays subtle. It can be questioned whether such a colonial painting as *Javanese Dancer* should be displayed in a collection presentation that is promoted as a demodern exhibition if the deconstruction of the painting's coloniality remains in the background.

3.4. Displaying Jodjana: audio tours

In addition to the labels and archival materials, the audio tours also provide more background information. Though the tours do not discuss Jodjana himself, they do extensively introduce more elements of Javanese culture. Both audio tours are part of the Broader Story Tour, which enables the visitor to deepen their experience.¹²⁸ This allows the Van Abbemuseum to further counter the reduced, stereotypical and fetishized image created by Israël's painting of Jodjana.

The first episode of the Broader Story Tour discussing Javanese culture is narrated by Sadijah Boonstra, a historian and curator based in Jakarta who commits herself to reshaping

¹²⁸ "Five free multi-media tours," Collection: Delinking and Relinking, Van Abbemuseum. Accessed November 4, 2025, <https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/see-and-do/exhibitions-activities/delinking-and-relinking>.

the understanding of (post)colonial narratives.¹²⁹ In the episode, she goes into detail about *wajang*, an Indonesian form of performance surrounding myths.¹³⁰ Boonstra discusses how *wajang* had been a part of Indonesian culture for centuries before Dutch colonizers started to write down the *wajang* stories not simply out of interest, but mostly to use it as a tool to learn the ways of the Javanese people so the Dutch would know how to control them better. Later, she describes how the Dutch started to actually appreciate *wajang* and they framed the performances and stories as philosophical and mystical. Boonstra discusses the fixity of this frame, and how this lack of change and thus, the colonial interpretation of *wajang*, was reinforced by permanent exhibitions about *wajang* and the performance becoming UNESCO world heritage. She counters this by describing how *wajang* is still relevant, innovative and alive.¹³¹

The second episode of the audio tour is narrated by Silvan Vasilda. He was part of the temporary research group “Wie Zijn Wij”, who investigated the colonial past of the Dutch province Noord-Brabant.¹³² The group was involved with introducing broader perspectives in the exhibition *Delinking and Relinking*.¹³³ In the audio tour episode, Vasilda talks about his family history, specifically that of his grandfather, who grew up as a Javanese contract worker in Surinam and does not know where his Indonesian family lives. He states that that history was never told correctly, even though it was assumed as a truth. His grandfather used to be a *wajang* dancer, which motivates Vasilda to tell the history of his grandfather, family and other Javanese Surinam people through theatre.¹³⁴

Both of these episodes add an extra dimension to the culture displayed in Israëls *Javanese Dancer*. In the first episode, Boonstra provides additional information on the type of dance Jodjana used to perform. By not just explaining the dance Jodjana performs in the painting, but by discussing the entirety of *wajang*, Boonstra counters the reduction of Jodjana’s character by connecting him to a larger cultural frame. Also, the episode places

¹²⁹ “Sadiah Boonstra,” Framer Framed. Accessed, November 4, 2025, <https://framerframed.nl/en/mensen/sadiah-boonstra/>.

¹³⁰ Het Van Abbemuseum, “Sadiah Boonstra / De Javaanse Danser, Raden Mas Jodjana,” Breder Verhaal Tour, 1 min., 40 sec. en “Titelkaartjes,” Van Abbemuseum Library, last accessed December 19, 2025. https://mediabank.vanabbemuseum.nl/vam/files/alexandria/publiciteit/wandteksten/2021/06.%20Zaaltekst_Bijscriften.pdf

¹³¹ Het Van Abbemuseum, “Sadiah Boonstra / De Javaanse Danser, Raden Mas Jodjana,” Breder Verhaal Tour, 1 min., 40 sec.

¹³² Wie Zijn Wij (@wie.zijn.wij) “Wat zijn de sporen van het koloniaal verleden in Brabant?” Instagram October 21, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/wie.zijn.wij/>

¹³³ “Broader perspectives,” Collection: Delinking and Relinking, Van Abbemuseum. Accessed November 4, 2025, <https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/see-and-do/exhibitions-activities/delinking-and-relinking>.

¹³⁴ Het Van Abbemuseum, “Silvan Vasilda / De Javaanse Danser, Raden Mas Jodjana,” Breder Verhaal Tour, 1 min., 48 sec.

wajang in the context of Dutch colonialism, bringing the visitor's attention to the presence of colonialism in the painting. Additionally, by mentioning how the Dutch would fix wajang as a static concept, it could be argued that Boonstra makes the visitor aware of the effects that fixing a concept or culture has on questions of stereotyping and fetishizing.

The second episode also counters the reduction and exaggeration of the image of Jodjana. By describing a personal story of his grandfather, a wajang dancer and a Javanese contract worker in Suriname, Vasilda adds more layers to the Jodjana depicted by Israëls. Though Vasilda's family story is not a description of *Javanese Dancer*, it could be argued that adding a personal story counters the reduction of Jodjana to generalisations, and with that, the stereotype. Moreover, it shows that Jodjana's culture is not something of the past, fixed in a painting, but something that is still present today. Jodjana is no longer a part, but has started to become more and more a whole, erasing the fetishised surface.

So, the two audio tours accompanying *Javanese Dancer* add stories to the narrative of Jodjana, creating a more diverse and multifaceted story around him. Showing that elements of Jodjana's life, such as wajang are still present today, goes against the fixity of the stereotype. Unravelling the stereotype this way, Jodjana becomes a whole person again, erasing the fetish of the exotic Other as well. However, similar to the display of the archival materials, listening to the audio tour is a choice. Not every visitor listens to the audio tour during their visit – it is the third level of display elements and it requires a certain commitment. Again, the deconstruction of the stereotype and fetish is subtle and depends on whether the visitor chooses to listen to the audio tour instead of an open critique of the colonial aspects of Israëls' painting.

Conclusion

By analysing both the painting *Javanese Dancer* by Isaac Israëls and the display of the painting in the exhibition room "As Far as the Eye Can See – Biography of a Portrait", this chapter aimed to point out the colonial elements in *Javanese Dancer* as well as the ways in which the Van Abbemuseum attempts to challenge those elements.

Following theories by Hall and Bhabha, this chapter showed how the colonial elements manifest themselves through the stereotypical and fetishising imagery in Israëls' painting. Israëls presents Jodjana as nothing more than a Javanese dancer, erasing Jodjana's other interests and the fact that he combined Indonesian and European elements in his dances.

Moreover, his name was not included in the original title of the painting.¹³⁵ The few elements of Jodjana's character that are not erased, are exaggerated by placing him in an Indonesian environment, even though Jodjana had moved to the Netherlands by then. Finally, Israëls fixes this image of Jodjana through the medium of painting. Subsequently, this stereotype is fetishised – Jodjana becomes just a part of a whole, where objectification, fascination and fantasy play an important role in turning a person into a fetish.¹³⁶ The visitor can safely look at Jodjana from a distance due to his calm pose and turned away gaze. The Indonesian environment increases the distance even further because it is so different to what the Dutch visitor is used to.

How, then, does the Van Abbemuseum attempt to challenge this stereotypical and fetishised image of Jodjana? First, the wall label provides information on Jodjana, and barely anything on Israëls, turning the focus to Jodjana. By adding archival materials about Jodjana, the museum applies Hall's second strategy of removing a stereotype by increasing the complexity of the stereotype and turns Jodjana into a whole person.¹³⁷ It also presents a more equal relationship between Israëls and Jodjana. The fact that the visitor first encounters the archival materials before seeing the painting ensures that the stereotypical and fetishist elements of the painting are not the first interpretation of the visitor. Lastly, the audio tour also counters the reducing, exaggerating and fixing elements of stereotyping and fetish, as the tour goes into details of (current) Javanese culture and personal stories. This adds more elements to the story of Jodjana and counters the reduction and exaggeration. It also ensures that the image is no longer fixed in the medium. Instead, it shows that the culture is still alive.

It might still be argued that it is questionable to put this painting, with a vast amount of colonial elements, in a self-proclaimed decolonial collection presentation. Moreover, researching this exhibition room has pointed out that rejecting the colonial aspects of *Javanese Dancer* remains rather subtle: the deconstruction of the stereotype and fetish is merely an underlying narrative behind the story of relationships between the painter and painted. When the visitor chooses not to put it in the effort to visually compare the painting and the archival materials, they do pay attention to the context provided to the painting, and they do not listen to the audio tour, Jodjana remains stuck in a reduced, exaggerated version of himself fixed in the timeless white cube. Because the Van Abbemuseum does not openly

¹³⁵ Ten Thije and Franssen, "Return to the Native Land," 74.

¹³⁶ Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other," 266-268.

¹³⁷ Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other," 272-273.

share how they aim to decolonialise Israël's painting, there is a risk that the visitor might not notice the decolonial and demodern narrative if they do not actively choose to see it.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to explore the efforts of the Van Abbemuseum to decolonise and demodernise their collection by examining the narratives in the exhibition rooms displaying 20th century modernist art.

The first chapter performed a close reading of the exhibition room “Close Encounters”. Using Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s theory on the agency of display and Mieke Bal’s view of display as a speech act provided the knowledge to examine the effects of three levels of visitor engagement – the positioning of the artworks, the accompanying text labels and the audio tours. By analysing these display elements, the chapter was able to uncover how the Van Abbemuseum presents cultural exchanges between artists with different cultural backgrounds. The next chapter used Bal’s theory of focalization to analyse through whose perspective the viewer experienced the art in the exhibition room “The Homesickness of Things”. This showed how the display elements in the levels of visitor engagement influenced the intended decolonial, demodern narrative of the room. The third and last chapter of this thesis applied Stuart Hall’s view on stereotypes and Homi K. Bhabha’s discussion of the fetish. Looking at the painting *Javanese Dancer (Raden Mas Jodjana)* by Isaac Israëls through this lens, this chapter explored how the Van Abbemuseum challenges the colonial narratives of this painting in the exhibition room “As Far As the Eye Can See – Biography of a Portrait” and how effective those efforts are.

From the findings in each chapter, it could be argued that in spite of the efforts of the Van Abbemuseum to make their museum a demodernised space, close reading the curatorial strategies and display practices uncover hidden narratives that still convey colonialism. This is most clearly visible in the second chapter of this thesis. It determined that in the display elements in the exhibition room “The Homesickness of Things”, the internal focalizer was Pieter Ouborg. This means that the visitor looks at the objects in the room through the eye of a white, European man. This is reinforced by the use of the white cube museum model, which is a way of exhibiting modernist art but seems less suitable for the display of indigenous artefacts. Because of the internal focalisation and the display model in this room, the Van Abbemuseum does not succeed in creating a demodernised display.

This is also the case in the first exhibition room, “Close Encounters”. It turns out that the stories told by this exhibition room present a rather hierarchical relationship between non-Western and Western artists. Though this exhibition room tries to be innovative by showing that artists of different cultural backgrounds did interact with each other, the display elements

present the Western artists as such a vital part of the display of non-Western artists that it suggests that non-Western art can only be understood in the context of the Western art.

That the Van Abbemuseum does try to be decolonial and demodernised, is visible in the last exhibition room discussed in this thesis, “As Far As the Eye Can See – Biography of a Portrait”. Here, there were clear efforts of decolonising Israëls’ painting by countering the reduction, exaggeration and fixing of Raden Mas Jodjana. However, because they hide these strategies in the second and third levels of visitor engagement, the visitor has to actively choose to invest in this decolonial interpretation of the painting. Therefore, the casual museum visitor might only see the colonial aspects of *Javanese Dancer*.

Together, these findings show that the decolonial and demodern aim of the Van Abbemuseum is visible in the exhibition rooms, but that it does not yet weigh up to the underlying colonial narratives. Especially the theory on focalization was useful to examining the coloniality in the museum space. Establishing through whose eyes the visitor experiences the art, gives great insights. As noted by former director Charles Esche, demodernising the museum is an ongoing process.¹³⁸ This dynamic perspective provides possibilities for future efforts in becoming a demodernised museum space; current efforts in *Delinking and Relinking* are certainly not in vain, but are a start for further demodernisation of the museum institution.

By examining the exhibition rooms that display the 20th century modernist, and inherently colonial, artworks in the collection of the Van Abbemuseum, this thesis showed how colonial narratives in a museum are still conveyed even when the intention is the opposite. However, this study did not cover the effects of the exhibition rooms displaying more activist art in *Delinking and Relinking* on the overall exhibition narrative. Instead, it focused on the narratives of exhibition rooms. Placing these narratives into the context of the entire collection presentation might present different results. Moreover, performing audience research by asking museum visitors how they experienced the exhibition in terms of colonial narratives might be useful to examine how impactful the critiques in this thesis are on the experience of the visitor. These aspects thus provide further research.

In terms of exhibiting 20th century modern art, though, it seems as though the Van Abbemuseum’s display practices in presenting demodernised and decolonial narratives are not as effective as the museum might have hoped for. Colonialism lives on, even in the frontrunner of inclusive and multi-vocal museums.

¹³⁸ Esche, “Demodernising to Decolonise,” 287-288.

List of illustrations



Figure 1: Wifredo Lam, *Le Marchand d'Oiseaux*, 1962, oil on canvas, 130,03 x 98,5 cm, (Eindhoven, Van Abbemuseum, inv. no. 0206).



Figure 2: Pablo Picasso, *Buste de femme*, 1943, oil on canvas, 104,7 x 85,9 cm, (Eindhoven, Van Abbemuseum, inv. no. 0387).

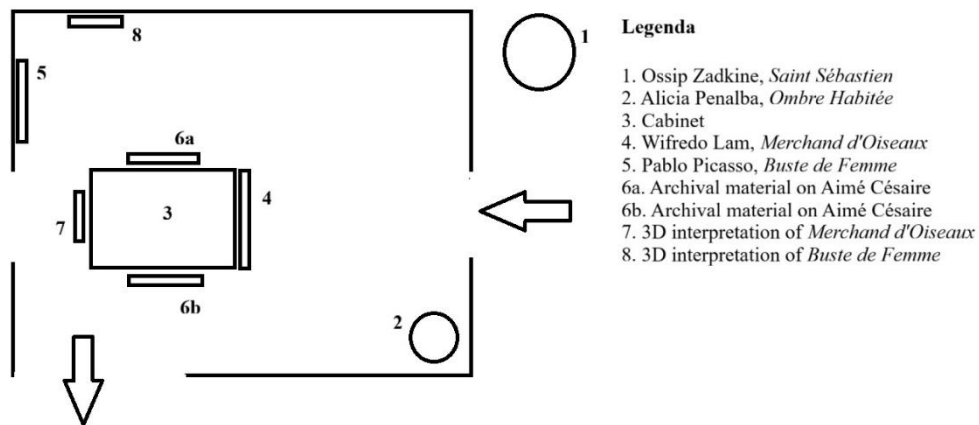


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Figure 4: view of the visitor entering exhibition room "Close Encounters" in the exhibition *Delinking and Relinking* in the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.



Figure 5: view on the left long side of the cabinet displaying archival work on Aimé Césaire.



Figure 6: Ossip Zadkine, *Saint Sébastien*, 1929, wood, height 267,5 cm, (Eindhoven, Van Abbemuseum, inv. no. 0513).



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Figure 8: Positioning of Zadkine's *Saint Sébastien*. To its left is the entrance to exhibition room "Close Encounters".



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Figure 11: Max Ernst, *Interrogation - what kind of bird are you?*, 1956-1958, oil on canvas, 147,5 x 115,5 cm, inv. no. 0115).



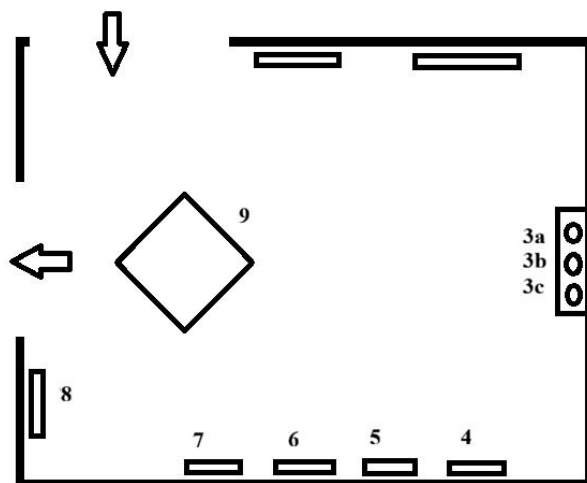
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Figure 13: Wajang mask (Kumbakarna), before 1949, 18,5 x 16,5 cm, (Eindhoven, Van Abbemuseum, loan Nederlands Museum van Wereldculturen, inv. no. B-8248).



Figure 14: Wajang mask (Dasamoeka), before 1949, 15 x 13 cm, (Eindhoven, Van Abbemuseum, loan Nederlands Museum van Wereldculturen, inv. no. B-8249).



Legenda

1. Joan Miró, *Composition avec des cordes*
2. Max Ernst, *Interrogation what kind of bird are you?*
- 3a. Wajang mask (Semar)
- 3b. Wajang mask (Kunbakarna)
- 3c. Wajang Mask (Dasamoeka)
4. Pieter Ouborg, *Wit Kruis*
5. Pieter Ouborg, *Blauw ovaal*
6. Pieter Ouborg, *Zwarte Vlek*
7. Pieter Ouborg, *Figuur*
8. Pieter Ouborg, *Op zwarte grond*
9. Display case with various sketches by Pieter Ouborg

Figure 15: floorplan of the exhibition room "The Homesickness of Things".



Figure 16: visitor's view upon entering the exhibition room "The Homesickness of Things".



Figure 17: the display of paintings by Miró and Ernst and Indonesian Wajang masks.



Figure 18: the display of Indonesian Wajang masks and paintings by Ouborg.



Figure 19: the display of Ouborg's paintings by on the walls and his sketches in the display case.



Figure 20: exhibition room "As Far As The Eye Can See - Biography of a Portrait".



Figure 21: Isaac Israëls, *Javanese Dancer (Raden Mas Jodjana)*, ca. 1921-1922, oil on canvas, 153,6 x 108,5 cm, (Eindhoven, Van Abbemuseum, inv. no. 0172).

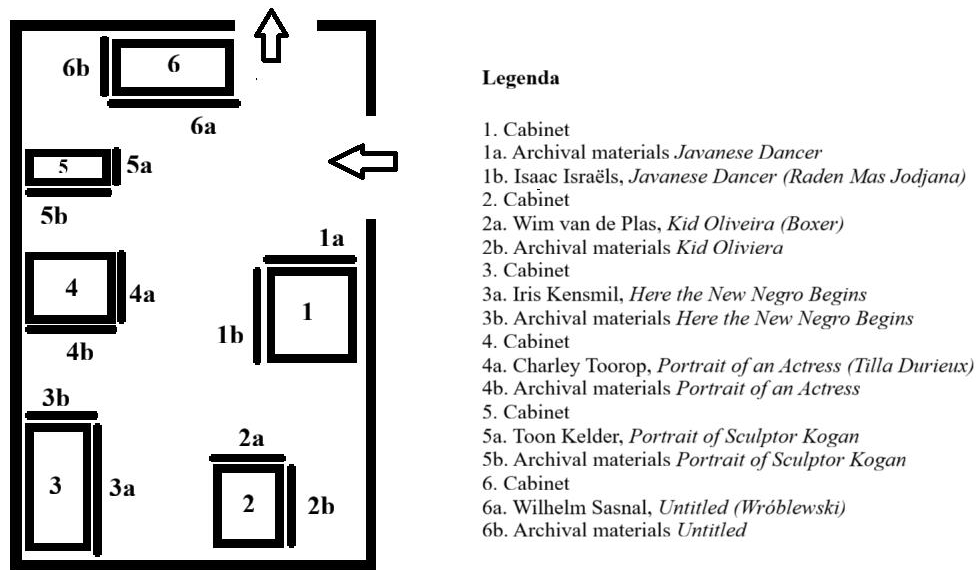


Figure 22: floorplan exhibition room "As Far As The Eye Can See - Biography of a Portrait".



Figure 23: exhibition room "As Far As The Eye Can See - Biography of a Portrait", with to the left *Javanese Dancer (Raden Mas Jodjana)* with archival materials.



Figure 24: the archival materials accompanying *Javanese Dancer* (Raden Mas Jodjana).



Figure 25: a schematic overview of the archival materials accompanying *Javanese Dancer (Raden Mas Jodjana)*.

Illustration sources

Fig. 1. Peter Cox, Eindhoven – Van Abbemuseum. Mediabank Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, downloaded 15 December 2025.

<https://mediabank.vanabbemuseum.nl/vam/start/artworks?fc=browse&queryid=ed8b974615433095f0d6b40468d023d4&order=name&column=5&listview=overview&view=preview&fileid=1&fuid=0000-0500%2F0206.TIF>

Fig. 2. Peter Cox, Eindhoven – Van Abbemuseum. Mediabank Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, downloaded 15 December 2025.

<https://mediabank.vanabbemuseum.nl/vam/start/artworks?fc=browse&queryid=74991deb301a10fd925f121dd3508b10&order=name&column=5&listview=overview&view=preview&fileid=3&fuid=0000-0500%2F0387-01.tif>

Fig. 3. Designed by author.

Fig. 4. Peter Cox, Eindhoven. Mediabank Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, downloaded 15 December 2025.

<https://mediabank.vanabbemuseum.nl/vam/start/museumarchief/2021%20Dwarsverbanden%20in%20de%20collectie%20van%20het%20Van%20Abbemuseum/Zaaloverzicht?fc=browse&queryid=1&column=5&listview=overview&view=preview&fileid=49&fuid=borgr%2Fcox%2F20211005%20015.tif>

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Fig. 7. Peter Cox, Eindhoven – Van Abbemuseum. Mediabank Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, downloaded 15 December 2025.

<https://mediabank.vanabbemuseum.nl/vam/start/artworks?fc=browse&queryid=0605d268e9675cbb81ef4c31128b7ec6&order=name&column=5&listview=overview&view=preview&fileid=1&fuid=0000-0500%2F0380.TIF>

Fig. 8. Peter Cox, Eindhoven. Mediabank Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, downloaded 15 December 2025.

<https://mediabank.vanabbemuseum.nl/vam/start/museumarchief/2021%20Dwarsverbanden%20in%20de%20collectie%20van%20het%20Van%20Abbemuseum/Zaaloverzicht?fc=browse&queryid=1&column=5&listview=overview&view=preview&fileid=38&fuid=borgr%2Fcox p%2F20211005%20002.tif>

Fig. 9. Peter Cox, Eindhoven – Van Abbemuseum. Mediabank Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, downloaded 15 December 2025.

<https://mediabank.vanabbemuseum.nl/vam/start/museumarchief/2021%20Dwarsverbanden%20in%20de%20collectie%20van%20het%20Van%20Abbemuseum/Zaaloverzicht?fc=browse&queryid=1&column=5&listview=overview&view=preview&fileid=50&fuid=borgr%2Fcox p%2F20211005%20016.tif>

Fig. 10. Peter Cox, Eindhoven – Van Abbemuseum. Mediabank Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, downloaded 15 December 2025.

<https://mediabank.vanabbemuseum.nl/vam/start/artworks?fc=browse&queryid=1&order=name&column=5&listview=overview&view=preview&fileid=620&fuid=0000-0500%2F0336-01.tif>

Fig. 11. Peter Cox, Eindhoven – Van Abbemuseum. Mediabank Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, downloaded 15 December 2025.

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Fig. 12. Wikimedia, downloaded 15 December 2025.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:COLLECTIE_TROPENMUSEUM_Houten_wajang_topengmasker_voorstellende_Semar_TMnr_1886-4.jpg

Fig. 13. Wikimedia, downloaded 15 December 2025.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:COLLECTIE_TROPENMUSEUM_Houten_wajang_topengmasker_voorstellende_Kumbakarna_TMnr_1886-7.jpg

Fig. 14. Wikimedia, downloaded 15 December 2025.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:COLLECTIE_TROPENMUSEUM_Houten_wajang_topengmasker_voorstellende_Dasamoeka_TMnr_1886-9.jpg

Fig. 15. Designed by author.

Fig. 16. Peter Cox, Eindhoven – Van Abbemuseum. Mediabank Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, downloaded 15 December 2025.

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Fig. 17. Peter Cox, Eindhoven – Van Abbemuseum. Mediabank Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, downloaded 15 December 2025.

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Fig. 18. Peter Cox, Eindhoven – Van Abbemuseum. Mediabank Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, downloaded 15 December 2025.

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Fig. 19. Peter Cox, Eindhoven – Van Abbemuseum. Mediabank Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, downloaded 15 December 2025.

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Fig. 20. Photograph taken by author.

Fig. 21. Peter Cox, Eindhoven – Van Abbemuseum. Mediabank Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, downloaded 15 December 2025.

<https://mediabank.vanabbemuseum.nl/vam/start/artworks?fc=browse&queryid=1&column=5&listview=overview&view=preview&fileid=355&fuid=0000-0500%2F0172-01.tif>

Fig. 22. Designed by author.

Fig. 23. Peter Cox, Eindhoven – Van Abbemuseum. Mediabank Van Abbemuseum Eindhoven, downloaded 15 December 2025.

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Fig. 24. Photograph taken by author.

Fig. 25. Screenshot from “Titelkaartjes vitrine Portretzaal,” Van Abbemuseum Library, 15 December 2025.

<https://mediabank.vanabbemuseum.nl/vam/files/alexandria/publiciteit/titelkaartjes/2021/Portretzaal%20overview.pdf>

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