

## SUMMARY

## Passion and Profession

### Guiding the public through Dutch museums over a century (2010)

## INTRODUCTION

The central question this paper seeks to address is the extent to which educational museum work has been professionalised since the beginning of the twentieth century. The developments in this field as discussed here will be viewed primarily through the eyes of the people who witnessed them or actively contributed to the process. What were their experiences? Has their role improved over the years? Was there any development in their position or the tasks expected of them within their job description? And do they feel improvements are still taking place following on previous changes? For the purposes of this research, the working definition of museum education (or making the encounter with museum collections to bear fruit, as was formerly the expression) is: the formal and informal learning in and driven by the museum.

Certain aspects of museum work have been important throughout the period concerned and are guiding themes in this report. These include guided tours, informative captions, teaching and educational activities and attracting new groups. The summary is divided into themes accordingly.

## SPIRIT OF THE TIME

Many of the developments that occurred in museums reflected the spirit of the time and the political climate. The desire for innovation propagated by the pioneer H.E. van Gelder, director of the Hague Gemeentemuseum 1912-1941, was in line with a broader 'civilization offensive' adhered to by the government of the day. Victor de Stuers, Minister of the Interior in 1874, played an important role. He was a great advocate of the museum as an instrument for civilization: 'Museums are among the most essential and powerful leverage tools for educating the public'. It was during the 'De Stuers' period that a national policy on culture was born. His policies resulted in an explosion in the number of museums, which grew from 50 in 1875 to around 250 by 1940.

The period after the Second World War was marked by a public feeling of optimism, militancy and general good spirits. The left-wing parties in particular were convinced that dynamic art and culture policy could play an important role in helping the country to recover from the moral and mental damage it had suffered during the war and would therefore aid post-war reconstruction. All governments increased budgets for art and culture substantially after the war. 1946 saw the state budget for museums rise from 1,986,000 guilders (in a total arts and culture budget of 5.3 million), to 10.9 million guilders (in a total budget exceeding 60 million).

On 5 December 1950, the 'Committee for the Advancement of Museum Visits' was established. This committee identified a huge gap between the museums and the general public. More attention was needed to teach young people to appreciate culture, primarily in the schools, but also through youth movements. Terms such as elevation and civilization made way for education, personal development, inner refinement and nurturing good taste. Jo Cals, State Secretary and Minister for Education, the

Arts and Science (1950-1963), put a lot of effort into realizing these ideals. A separate entry for promoting culture (e.g. via exhibitions) was added to the culture budget.

During the nineteen-seventies, the political focus on culture shifted to welfare. The responsibility for culture (and museums) was moved from the Ministry of Education, the Arts and Science, to the new Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Work. Policy on art was no longer aimed at serving art but at serving society; this basic principle was upheld for many decades. 'Social relevance' became an important criterion used to evaluate funding for institutions including the museums. Education was seen as one of the museums' key tasks in their function as welfare institutions.

In the eighties under Minister Elco Brinkman of Culture, Recreation and Social Work, the policy on culture did a U-turn. Museums were no longer seen as welfare organizations. Furthermore, in Brinkman's opinion making art accessible to 'broader layers of society' was a 'utopian ideal'. To his mind, the government should stop trying to direct people towards art, and concentrate on creating conditions conducive to a flourishing artistic and cultural life. In other words, there should be less attention for the public service task. Museum collections only increased in value if people went to see them, was Brinkman's thinking.

Minister Hedy d'Ancona largely continued the policy pursued by her predecessor Brinkman, although she put a greater focus on public services as spreading culture and stimulating cultural participation. Museums were encouraged to pay special attention to groups that had traditionally stayed away, such as ethnic minorities and the less well-educated, as a means of furthering social integration.

In 1994, cultural policy once again became the domain of a Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. This amalgamation gave an extra impulse to policy initiatives to encourage collaboration between cultural organizations and the education sector. Once again, participation in culture took its place at the root of cultural policy.

## GUIDED TOURS

Guided tours have always been the core business of many educational services. Pioneer Van Gelder, director of the Hague Gemeentemuseum 1912-1941, saw guided tours as the perfect instrument for helping people to appreciate art. His experiments with guided tours were later seen as marking the start of the educational services provided by museums. The German art historian and educational specialist Alfred Lichtwark, director of the Kunsthalle in Hamburg from 1886 onwards, was his shining example. Lichtwark successfully bridged the gap between his museum and the general public by revamping the interior of his museum and introducing the concept of guided tours.

Van Gelder's deputy Ida Peelen opted for an approach that is still used today. Teachers gave an introduction during lessons in school before the children visited a museum. Peelen then showed the children round in small groups. After visiting the museum, the children were instructed to write an essay describing their experiences. The tendency in the seventies was towards more personal contact between guide and visitor. It could be defined as the evolution of a guided tour *of* the museum into a group excursion *in* the museum. Visitors were encouraged to take an active part in the tour; setting assignments was a good medium.

Most educators agreed that to be a good member of the museum teaching staff, you had to be able to give a good guided tour. And yet in the late eighties, guided tours were still on the peripheries of the main education brief, and mainly largely being given by volunteers or freelancers without specialist

training. So in the nineties, a group of educators organized a series of three-day courses, which ultimately led to the 'Guided tours; a specialist job' syllabus. But the responsibility for advancing the skills of guides gradually shifted back to the individual museums. Many of today's educators are convinced of the need for training courses for museum guides.

But not everyone considered guided tours to be the best way of imparting knowledge. In the smaller museums, 'guided tours cause bottlenecks and obstruct individual visitors'. What is more, guided tours were time-consuming. Frederik Schmidt Degener, director of the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum (1908-1921) and the Rijksmuseum (1921-1941), famously criticized guided tours, stating that they generated 'false aesthetes'. He disdainfully referred to visitors as 'herd animals' dancing to the pipes of the guide. 'I believe that to appreciate a work of art truly, one must at least be alone...' Guided tours were particularly unpopular during the seventies and eighties, when they were seen as patronizing.

## CAPTIONS

Another task of museum educators is to produce written information for visitors. In much the same way as he championed guided tours, H.E. Van Gelder also promoted the use of captions to describe objects on display. However, captions were by no means the norm. Even in the first half of the twentieth century, museums still did not commonly show the title and date of objects. Captions were thought to interfere with the aesthetic impact of the object on display.

It was not until the early seventies that captions showing the name of the object, the artist and the date became commonplace in Dutch museums. There were two distinctive types of captions: educanese and the A, B, C method. The Amsterdam Historisch Museum first introduced the so-called A, B, C method. The A text had the biggest letters. This was the main text, which indicated the theme of the room or department concerned. The B texts were written in a smaller font and contained background information about the subject. The C texts comprised more detailed information about the objects or works of art on display. They did not only give information about who made the object and when, but also described the function and/or meaning of the object.

The Rijksmuseum used a 'rival' method: so-called 'educanese'. The basic idea was to write every sentence on one line and limit each line to forty characters. This forced the person writing the captions to be concise and efficient. Clauses were unthinkable. This restrictive method was later relaxed. Both methods still provide an important reference framework for museum staff.

## OUT AND ABOUT: NEW TARGET GROUPS

The educator's work field did not confine itself to the museum; new target groups needed to be identified outside the museum. This was seen as one of the museum's 'social duties'. Once again, Van Gelder led the way in this area. Like his icon Lichtwark, he ventured outside the museum in search of primary school heads, professional bodies, the unemployed and social organizations. In the nineteen-twenties, for example, there were guided tours for the Netherlands Workers Travel Association, the General Dutch Typographers Union, members of the 'Art for People' Alliance and the Factory Workers Association.

And if the community would not come to the museum, the museum would go into the community. Under this motto, museums started organizing travelling exhibitions that were staged in the

community. Ideas like this corresponded perfectly with cultural policy of the nineteen-seventies, which was packed with the terms like social distribution and democratization. Municipal authorities in The Hague, Rotterdam and Haarlem played an active part in this development. But the seventies also saw other cities hosting exhibitions set up with the help of local residents, albeit on a very casual basis.

In the nineties, initiatives led by Minister Hedy d'Ancona prompted museums to organize projects aimed at attracting new Dutch citizens. A number of museums had already gained some experience of devising activities for 'Dutch citizens with non-Dutch origins' during the eighties. The museums considered it their duty to 'contribute to the process of getting to know each other'. At the turn of the millennium, a visit to a museum became part of the statutory civic integration course for new Dutch citizens.

In recent years, attention for the community has seen a new lease of life. The Historisch Museum Rotterdam has devised a three-step method: 'Phase one is liaison. We go out into the community, where we talk to various key figures. In phase two, we explore the topics that are of interest to the community. And in phase three, we conduct an in-depth interview with a few community members. All this information ultimately results in a presentation on location, together with the network.' In this approach, the museum works alongside the so-called community culture scouts. Culture scouts stimulate participation in culture at the community level and promote dialogue with urban institutions, such as museums. Museums in other cities have also recently started venturing outside their own four walls.

Another way of reaching a wider audience was to organize special events. In the seventies, the Hague Gemeentemuseum offered a range of courses, talks, slide and film presentations, concerts and even 'art safaris'. By 2000, museum events were booming business. This was the year of the very first Museum Night in Amsterdam, an event aimed specifically at the younger generation. The museums opened their doors all night and put on performances and cultural activities. Many other cities have since followed suit and now organize an annual Museum Night.

*Peer-to-peer education* is a new trend designed to attract young people. It involves asking young people to help think about, set up and run exhibitions, guided tours and other activities for their peers. The Bijbels Museum in Amsterdam has been working with peer educators since 2005, and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam has been recruiting them as part of its 'Blikopeners' project since 2008.

## EDUCATION

For many years, a significant section of the museum world was opposed to children visiting museums. They thought that the art museums in particular were too high-brow for younger visitors. Frederik Schmidt Degener, director of the Boijmans van Beuningen Museum (1908-1921) and the Rijksmuseum (1921-1941), was an ardent opponent of museum visits by groups of schoolchildren (particularly primary schoolchildren): 'Our museums are meant for adults. It is ridiculous to show children around things that they are incapable of understanding.' Yet even today, showing groups of schoolchildren around museums is still a large part of the museums' work. The term education is usually taken to mean schools and the work carried out by museum educators is largely associated with activities aimed at the education sector.

However, the special sessions in which children are taught to look at art (*Kunstkijkuren*) in Amsterdam and the lessons given in the Hague Gemeentemuseum since (and before) the Second World War are living proof that even very young schoolchildren are perfectly capable of discussing visual art. Special sessions in which children were taught to look at art (*Kunstkijkuren*) were launched in 1948 in Amsterdam and are still going strong. The aim was to bring primary school children into contact with art. Children at all Amsterdam primary schools were taken round the Rijksmuseum and the Stedelijk Museum by a museum teacher (visual artist) several times a year. Later on, the Van Gogh Museum, the Tropenmuseum and the Amsterdam Historisch Museum also joined the project. The teachers use the discussion method so that children are encouraged to get a real feel for the works of art by looking at and discussing them with each other and the teacher.

Research conducted in 1993 among schoolchildren who took part in *Kunstkijkuren* from the 1950s onwards showed that the sessions had a significant effect on museum visiting in later life. Adults who attended *Kunstkijkuren* sessions while growing up in Amsterdam visited a museum 10 to 20% more often than people who grew up elsewhere and were not offered *Kunstkijkuren*. And yet *Kunstkijkuren* did not catch on in other cities. The only comparable project started in 1997 in Leiden: 'Museum and School', a project whereby schoolchildren visit eight museums during their time at primary school.

It was not until the fifties that museums started devising teaching material for schools to help them prepare children for a visit to a museum and evaluate it afterwards. By the mid-seventies, most museums had an education department that produced a programme for schools. These were the days when extensive teaching material was readily available and there was an abundance of work books, teaching manuals, educational trails and study guides. But by the eighties and early nineties, this boom was over and there were increasingly fewer educational exhibitions and projects with unlimited teaching material to attract busloads of schoolchildren from across the country.

In 1994, cultural and educational policies were reunited within the same Ministry. This gave cooperation between the museums a huge boost in the shape of the Culture and School project (1996) and the introduction of 'Cultural and Artistic Development' onto the secondary school syllabus in 1998. The umbrella objective of Culture and School was to familiarize children with art and culture from an early age. The project resulted in a number of measures designed to stimulate visits to the museums. Children in the higher classes of secondary schools, for example, undertake various cultural activities including museum visits. Schools are given funding for these activities.

Culture and School is still having an impact on the way many educators think and act, even today. Despite the fact that many museums had already been operating demand-based policy for many years, and despite numerous practical obstacles and objections, there has been a definite shift in the way museums package their range of educational activities.

## CREATIVE WORKSHOPS

The Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam was the first museum to open a children's workshop, where children from seven to twelve years old could come to 'draw and paint at liberty'. The workshop functioned outside school hours and was open on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons. The sixties saw more museums becoming active on the creative front. For example, the Hague Gemeentemuseum has had a very successful studio where it has been offering courses in 'Doing and Seeing' since 1962, the Stedelijk Museum in Schiedam provides art classes and the Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal organizes creative activities involving its own collection and exhibitions. In 1973, the newly-opened Van Gogh museum launched its own workshop. The Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde



combined school trips with a creative arrangement: playing the gamelan, making batik, Japanese drawing. Most of the 'creative workshops' or 'studios' in museums were established during the course of the nineteen-seventies.

Opinion on the benefits of active participation in museum visits was divided. Critics thought that many of the activities had little to do with the collection or exhibition in question, and that creative activity only dealt with the formal and technical aspects of art. But all educators were in agreement about one thing: creative workshops were pointless unless they were clearly linked to the collection.

The creative workshops gradually disappeared from the museums during the eighties, only to undergo a revival at the beginning of the 21st century. Alongside numerous museums and exhibitions compiled with children in mind, the workshops also made a reappearance. Various museums reserved special areas where groups could become actively involved. They were of the opinion that children and adults learned most from a visit if they could actually make something themselves.

Of all the workshops and studios, the Hermitage in Amsterdam is the most illustrious example. All Amsterdam primary school children were invited to the museum in year four, five or six. After the visit, the whole class set to work in one of the studios. Children showing talent were selected for more intensive supervision from the museum. The Gemeentemuseum in The Hague also reinstated its studio. This Museum Studio is used exclusively for education. The visual assignments set there have a clear relationship with the exhibition on display at any one time.

## TRAINING

At the turn of the twentieth century, museum workers did not undergo any kind of formal training. Being director or curator of a museum was traditionally seen as an honorary office. It was something you did alongside your real work as a collector, lawyer, archivist, preacher, notary or art dealer. Partly thanks to the efforts of the Association of Museums, ideas about job requirements and training for museum staff became more defined: they should have a university education followed by a number of years working in a museum as a volunteer. The history of art degree programme launched in Utrecht in 1921 finally made this possible.

Right from the start, educational staff employed by museums had a wide variety of qualifications. Some were art historians or ethnologists, others art academy graduates, teachers or working artists. They learned their profession on the job. Some training courses covered the educational aspect, but it is not clear how much impact this had on the educators.

In the nineteen-sixties, a museum training programme focusing specifically on teaching educational skills to museum staff was launched by the Nutsseminarium voor Pedagogiek at the University of Amsterdam. However, educators did not consider the course to be a serious museum programme, but more of an 'initial practise round for would-be guides'.

Despite the dire need for academically-trained staff, museums, universities and government wasted many years arguing about the qualification requirements and salaries of museum staff. The breakthrough came in 1976, when a special training programme for museum staff known as the Reinwardt Academy quietly and unexpectedly came into being.

Although the Reinwardt Academy focused much attention on education, it actually produced very few educators. It mainly concentrated on the teaching, organizational and coordination side. Potential

educators often had to take a second course, such as history of art, to learn more about the actual field. Where and how future museum education staff should be trained is still a burning question.

## RESEARCH AND THEORY

The United States and England soon became role models for Dutch educators. Many teaching staff did internships, worked, conducted research or went on study trips to these countries, where they got most of their inspiration for innovation: from guided tours, catalogues for the public and appealing, comprehensible exhibitions to living history, interactive programmes, peer education and 'outreach' programmes.

These countries relied on theoretical foundations for the educational activities they established. Most Dutch educators, however, did not feel the need for theoretical foundations for their work. Instead, they trusted their own creativity when devising new projects. They were concerned that too much theory would restrict their professional and artistic leeway. Experience was a greater priority for Dutch educators.

Theoretical foundations were only taken seriously in the seventies, when more attention was paid to the more traditional educational tasks such as writing educational texts and giving tours. Educators started exploring the theoretical knowledge that might help them with their work. The successful *Kunstkijkuren* in Amsterdam are a striking example of sharing knowledge with the public on a theoretical basis. New ideas about teaching and learning processes such as 'authentic learning' and the teaching theories of Kolb, Gardner, Falk and Dierking became popular in the museums in the nineties.

The first survey of the public, carried out in 1953 in the Hague Gemeentemuseum by Gerard van der Hoek, was a revelation. As suspected, it turned out that most museum visitors lived in the more affluent areas and worked in the higher professions. Many of them also revisited museums. In short: a small group of people were visiting museums relatively often. Almost every subsequent public survey came up with the same results. Public surveys in museums became commonplace in the seventies. Since 2002, the TNS Nipo market research organization has been conducting the annual Museum Monitor, designed to collect information about the composition and characteristics of the various groups of museum visitors.

## THE POSITION OF EDUCATORS

Educators often had to fight for their position and influence in museums. In 1970, The Educational Services Working Party (set up in 1967 under the auspices of the Association of Museums) organized an enquiry into educational services and work in Dutch museums. The main conclusion was 'that in a striking number of cases, the educational service had no say in the process of planning, preparing and installing exhibitions'.

This was mainly due to an underlying rivalry between educators and curators. The 'use' of a collection or exhibition for educational purposes was often at odds with the museum's duty to preserve art and culture. Managers and curators broke into a sweat at the very idea of hordes of schoolchildren running through their precious museum. Curators were (and still are) a step ahead of the education staff. Their jobs were well-established and initially often overlapped that of the museum director. Furthermore, curators were usually in the majority.

But by the seventies, the position of the educators had certainly improved to some extent. This was partly due to the rising numbers of educators; from a few dozen in 1967 to more than three hundred in 1978. Increased government attention for the public service task also enhanced their position. The 'Towards new museum policy' document (1976) was a 'breath of fresh air' to many educators and marked a turning point in their fight for recognition.

Although education came under fire in public debate during the eighties and the public relations department emerged as a new rival, the need for educators was no longer in doubt. They started to work more closely with curators when setting up exhibitions. The acquisition policy in museums began to take account of the message that potential objects would convey.

The growing emphasis on the public, and therefore on the duty to serve the public, and increased government commitment to education has boosted the position of museum educators even further over the past few decades. It cannot be a coincidence that so many of the educators interviewed are now museum directors or members of the management team.

## CONCLUSION

The connecting thread in this publication is the matter of how much more professional educational museum work has become over the decades. The book uses the following definition for professionalization: Professionalization is the process whereby a professional group acquires autonomy and status through mutual recognition and the exclusion of others, through securing deeper theoretical foundations for the knowledge and skills of the professionals, through developing visions, introducing recognized training programmes, setting up a professional association, laying down protocols and standards, codes of conduct and the like.

Between 1900 and 1945, museum work changed from being a hobby into a real job. Although recognized as such by government and society, staff with a specific responsibility for education did not at that point exist. The establishment of educational services in the fifties and the appointment of staff specifically responsible for educational tasks turned education into a specialism in the museums. During the seventies, education became a fully fledged part of the museum system. The number of educators soared, the government saw them as a serious partner and the Reinwardt Academy opened its doors.

The increased emphasis on public interest in museums elevated the status of education in museums. The autonomy of the profession is still a weak spot. The level of autonomy often depends on the leeway allowed by other players in the museum world, and educators often have to fight for their rightful position. Yet the museums' public service task is set to expand in the future and the education departments will grow with it.

## BRIEF CHRONOLOGY

### 1900-1945

The first serious consideration of the fundamental tasks of a museum (such as collecting, managing, preserving and serving the public) took place during the first decades of the twentieth century. This is when the first attempts were made at arranging collections and exhibitions to suit the public, writing captions, producing visitor guides and offering guided tours. Attracting new groups of visitors also became a priority.

### 1945-1967

Education became a specialist subject in the museums during the fifties. This public service duty was no longer the responsibility of the director and scientific staff. Educational work largely involved giving guided tours. Slide shows, publications and educational exhibitions gradually found their way onto museum programmes.

### 1967-1984

Education started to win ground during this period, particularly after publication of the ministerial policy document 'Towards new museum policy', which gave education a prominent role. Educational work involved a wide range of activities, from guided tours to informative exhibitions, from lessons in schools to showing the public around exhibitions. The Reinwardt Academy and the universities contributed to professionalization of the job.

### 1984-1995

The position of museum educators improved and changed. The traditional educational tasks such as guided tours and caption-writing were provided with a theoretical foundation. Educators took on extra tasks, such as information, public relations and sponsoring. New strategies evolved: hands-on, living history, children's museums. Attention for school projects dwindled.

### 1995-2005

Various governmental policy measures boosted the relationship between museums and the education sector. Interest grew among new sections of the public, such as new Dutch citizens, young people and other groups unfamiliar with what museums had to offer (social inclusion). Information for the public, particularly for individual visitors, became an integral feature.

### The 21st century

The role of education became increasingly important in general museum policy on public service duties. Everything revolved around visitors, whether physical or virtual, whatever age and nationality, and however actively he or she visits the museum. It is hoped that museums (including the educational aspects) will help people to develop their identity and enhance their general and personal knowledge.

Melissa de Vreede, July 2011