

Enriching Metadata and the Potential Benefit for Colonial Narratives in the Rijksstudio Database

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1 Introduction

The exploration into the colonial past and the cultural context of the digital collection of the Rijksstudio shows conflicting stories inseparable to the historical objects [1]. The Rijksmuseum has taken steps to address colonial-related works of art, aiming to provide a more balanced and accurate representation of history. Particularly in the Netherlands, where the violent and oppressive aspects of the Dutch Golden Age are frequently overlooked, it is crucial to acknowledge and confront these historical truths. The differences between the ways that such artefacts are displayed in the metadata might turn out to give a distorted and discontinuous picture of colonial history and, maybe, propagate digital cultural colonialism. Better metadata curated and detailed, transparent descriptions on Rijksstudio will unlock explorations to take part in a more self-aware, engaging public debate over colonial history, with all of its modern-day pertinence, and further increase the inherently educational value of the platform to the contemporary ethical norms of historical justice and restitution.

2 Ethical Issues

Rijksstudio has already begun to describe some colonial-related works of art, which is important for the correction of a more balanced history, recognising the place of the museum within the broader discourse of human history. It is important for people to appreciate the artefacts in a much more balanced manner and note the responsibility of a museum to be a curator of highly culturally rich and complex heritage (New Internationalist, 2023) [2]. Especially in the Netherlands where the connections to violence, slavery, and colonialism during the so-called Dutch Golden Age are frequently overlooked (Van Welie, 2008) [3].

However, there is quite a bit of contradiction in the colonial history presented on the platform. Artefacts at times have very detailed explanations that bring forth their colonial nature, and at other instances, they are minimally explained, and it may misrepresent the history or even misinterpret key historical accounts. This comes with fragmentation and skewing in the presentation of colonial history, which may make Rijksstudio struggle with an equitable representation of colonial history across their digital collections. Thus, the problem of disproportion when representing digital content is substantiated by the phenomena outlined by Kizhner et al. (2021) [4] in which digital cultural colonialism is represented with aggregated digital collections where some narratives are favoured. But also, Rijksstudio has great scope to expand its relevance by actually linking historical artefacts to contemporary issues of colonialism, such as those currently alive in relation to restitution and repatriation. It would raise its status from just a repository of art to a dynamic forum for historical education and debate and engage the public with the artefacts even more. Therefore, a better understanding by the general public of the ongoing significance to the cultural and historic context will, in that sense, be achieved by the Rijksstudio and allow for a more informed and active debate over colonial history and its implications in the modern world. This approach would not only enhance the educational value of the platform but also bring it more in line with contemporary scholarly and ethical standards.

Rijksmuseum and the Wereldmuseum did already carry out in-depth provenance research in the process of trying to trace the origination of the procurement of the colonial era objects. The PPROCE, or Pilot Project Provenance Research on Objects of the Colonial Era [5] is an attempt to secure a record of the acquisition history and transparency. This is in collaboration with many partners internationally concerning making provenance reports of objects public.

For instance, the Banjarmasin Diamond is currently with the possession taken as war booty from Sultan Panembahan Adam of Indonesia, which has a complex and, for the most part, controversial collection history but is under preservation within the Rijksmuseum. The diamond is marked as war booty in the description but lacks much more other metadata from the origin, which symbolises a large part of the colonial exploitation and conquest. Some of their provenances are elaborate, with evident colonial roots. In some cases, the labeling and presentation of historical artefacts are minimal, which can result in a representation that subtly alters and obscures the full historical context. This is also the inconsistency that undermines not only the effort to present a fair and accurate account of colonial history but continuously fails to enunciate it in the very description of how these items were acquired. These same points of misrepresentation and inconsistency are similar problems for Rijksstudio due to the following reason: the colonial history is usually fragmented and skewed on the site basis, this could mislead the public and resulting in a negative impact on a better understanding the collection. This kind of fragmentary approach may cause a form of digital cultural colonialism, in which some storylines are more prevalent than others leading to the marginalisation of critical historical contexts and voices. This will, therefore, be a more critical, transparent, and digital invitation to the collections of the Rijksmuseum in its physical space. These important issues will help the museum find its way, not only as a depository of art but as a living forum for historical education and as an ethical body perfectly attuned toward contemporary ideas on restitution and historical justice.

3 Colonial Narratives through Rich Metadata

Better metadata in Rijksstudio would conclusively support future research on the colonial past, as there is a chance that it could come up with accurate, and adequately descriptive statements regarding objects. This would mean metadata that would better concern details over the provenience of objects and their historical context and circumstances of acquisition. These would help researchers discover colonial narratives and how the purchase of such artefacts had influenced the countries of origin. The more robust metadata fields could be more easily detailed to describe the colonial history of things like dates, parties, and the original cultural significance of these artefacts, enabling researchers to trace this long lineage and context for these artefacts. Also, rich metadata would ease cross-referencing sources of other collections worldwide, providing the possibility of a more holistic and interrelated understanding of colonial histories. It is perhaps more valid to the extent that this would serve, beyond academic rigor, the ethical standards of transparency and accountability at the core of a more refined debate on the colonial legacy inscribed in museum collections.

The study, *Unsilencing the Colonial Archives via Automated Entity Recognition*, by Luthra et al. (2023) [6], exemplifies how technology can play a crucial role in righting those biases within historical records. Automated entity recognition aims to raise the profiles of the underrepresented groups in the archives of the Dutch East India Company: the indigenous people and the enslaved. The work described here contributed to creating a typology of custom annotations and an annotated corpus publication that supports a more exhaustive and accessible form of these archives, further supporting the assertion that improved metadata should be adequately developed for an accurate portrayal of global colonial history. By addressing ethical considerations and avoiding speculative categorisation, Luthra et al.s work supports the broader discourse on digital heritage preservation and the decolonisation of archives, highlighting the importance of transparency and inclusivity in presenting historical narratives.

4 Enriching Metadata for Transparency and Context

1. **Provenance Research:** Conducting detailed provenance research should be carried out into the whole historic timeline of each of the artefacts making up the Rijksstudio collection. In the process, detailed tracing of the origin of an object and its history of acquisition would be done back to when they were brought in, with particular emphasis on cases of colonial exploitation and appropriation. These make the collection history more transparent and honest in that they give detailed records of who acquired what, when, and how into exactly what process. Thereby recognising and dealing with the entangled complexities of post-colonial and colonial legacies.
2. **Contextual Annotations:** Adding contextual annotations to the metadata helps denote the cultural and historical importance that each artefact holds. Such notes will then give a

good overview of the creation and acquisition circumstances of the artefacts, hence the socio-political contexts of the time. In connection to the stories, the Rijksstudio should further make sure that they have a broad range of voices representing the communities and cultures of origin, so that it will be understood what the importance of the artefact is regarding the impact of colonialism on its journey to the museum.

3. **Collaborative Input:** Regular consultation with historians, cultural experts, and representatives of the country of origin ensures inclusive and prosperous description of the metadata. This diversified contributor base considerably widens the approach of broadening the voices and, hence, insights to cover a vast range of contributions. This is where Rijksstudio will provide factually correct and sensitive metadata, free from cultural errors regarding what these artefact mean. This would help layer such metadata and, at the same time, be information that the user could use to develop digital linking and cross-referencing.
4. **Digital Linking and Cross-Referencing:** This will connect related artefacts to historical documents and academic research and seek out broader narratives and contexts for each piece. This further allows a user to have a complete and holistic view of the history of the artefact, being in a position to approach the collection with meaning and insight.

In turn, Rijksstudio should present a more complete, ethical, and transparent representation of their collections. It would involve improving metadata associated with the artefacts and also deploying facsimiles in a way that respects the authenticity of the original works but deepens context and re-engages the truly informed public. Respect for contemporary scholarly and ethical standards is, in this manner, guaranteed.

5 Conclusion

In the contemporary digital age, the role of online platforms in the preservation and dissemination of cultural heritage has become increasingly more significant. Rijksstudio serves as an example of how digital technologies can facilitate in-depth engagement with historical artefacts. By providing access to high-resolution images and metadata, Rijksstudio allows for comprehensive examination and study of cultural objects open to everyone. Rijksstudio has the ability to take complex histories behind artefacts to light by careful provenance research down to the contextual annotation in its detailed metadata. Rijksstudio can illuminate the complex histories behind each artefact. Collaborating with a diverse array of historians, cultural experts, and representatives from the artefacts countries of origin will foster a multifaceted and inclusive representation of history. In this way, Rijksstudio is not only about the cause of preserving art but also about all types of transparency, accountability, and historical justice, thereby leading to an augmented public debate on the permanent impacts of colonialism.

References

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