European Review, Vol. 13, No. 4, 649–659 (2005) © Academia Europaea, Printed in the United Kingdom

'The purest examples from antiquity' – Old Museums in a Modern World

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Archaeological museums often came into existence from private collections of curiosities. When official museums were created in the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, the question of which cultures belonged to the 'ancient world' (and which not) was hotly debated, as the example of the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden shows us. In addition, the role of an archaeological collection in society could be regarded in various ways. In the 19th century the 'purest examples from antiquity' were used as models for architects, artists and artisans. Nowadays antiquity seems to inspire many aspects of our culture, but much can be argued against the feeling that the classical spirit is enlightening our lives. An important role can be played by archaeological museums and their curators in a world in which the humanities are severely at risk.

A superficial look at modern culture might give the idea that we are living in a Neo-Renaissance Period: ancient Greek drama, written some 2400 years ago, has a prominent place in many theatres, in original or adapted forms. Translations of ancient writers are for sale in every bookshop. Modern architects frequently use concepts from ancient Greece and Rome. Long rows of visitors are to be seen when archaeological museums disclose the secrets of ancient Egypt or Etruria. And popular culture is provided with one historical movie after another: Hollywood gives us *Gladiator*, *Troy* and *Alexander*, to name only a few recent examples. In this article I would like to focus on the role of archaeological museums in this climate of 'revival' of the ancient world. Is it true that the classical spirit is so prominent in our modern world? And if so, how can archaeological museums benefit from these feelings of Renaissance? Before turning my attention to the role of archaeological museums today, I would like to look back at the origin of the collection of ancient art in the Netherlands and its role in society. Special

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798705000864 Published online by Cambridge University Press

attention will be given to the question of which antiquities belong in an archaeological museum, and which do not. An important question because of the implication: what is the 'ancient world'?

Cabinets and collections

To understand the archaeological museums of today, we should first briefly consider the history of these institutions and the reasons why they were created. The archaeological museum in Leiden followed the same evolution as the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford: it originated from a cabinet of curiosities and was enlarged by important donations.[1] Some antiquities were already present in Leiden as early as the 17th century in the Cabinet of Curiosities surrounding the benches of the *Theatrum Anatomicum*, the section room of the Medical Faculty. In 1669, the first catalogue of this cabinet appeared, with editions in Dutch, English, French and Latin. The Theatre became a famous attraction in Leiden, one of the 'must-sees' for visitors of the city. Not surprisingly, most of the objects illustrated life, death and the human body. In the earliest catalogue we encounter 'The liver of a young maiden of 17 years old' and 'Six stones which have been found in the bladder of the late professor Joannes Heurnius'. As human curiosities are listed 'Two shoes made of human skin' and 'Four prepared human skins, stretched on a frame, two male, one female, and one of a child'. From here it is not far into the world of the real curiosities and marvels, like 'The head of a wild boar from the Indies', 'A pot with Chinese beer' and 'The hand of a mermaid'. Egyptian mummies formed a mixture of human remains and curiosities. The first mummy in the collection was acquired in 1620 by an alumnus of Leiden University, David le Leu de Wilhem, a merchant in Aleppo, and a frequent traveller to Egypt in search of antiquities that could be useful for the Theatrum Anatomicum. Between 1620 and 1628, more Egyptian antiquities followed, such as 'An Egyptian pot in which a child has been embalmed', 'An Egyptian scarab made of cornelian' and 'The cheekbone of a mummy'. The most famous piece was a richly decorated mummy of a child, presumably of a princess. In 1771, the once so famous Theatre closed down – the remaining antiquities and curiosities were put in storage.

In 1744, an important bequest enlarged this small amount of Egyptian antiquities in Leiden. The private collection of the wealthy collector Gerard van Papenbroek (1673–1743) consisted of some 150 Greek and Roman marbles: statues, altars, busts, tombstones, urns and inscriptions. Shortly before his death, Van Papenbroek (another alumnus of Leiden University) bequeathed his precious collection of antiquities to his Alma Mater. The Papenbroek Collection was placed in the central hall of the orangery of the Hortus Botanicus, where for more than 70 years it could be visited by the public. A detailed catalogue was written by Professor Franciscus Oudendorp. The origin of many pieces in the Papenbroek

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Collection can be traced back to other collectors in the Netherlands, like those of Peter Paul Rubens (Antwerp) and Gerard Reijnst (Amsterdam).

In 1818, Caspar J.C. Reuvens (1793–1835) was appointed Professor of Archaeology at the University of Leiden. He started with removing the Papenbroek Collection from the damp orangery and placed the marbles in a new building, in which he arranged the antiquities in categories of provenance and function. With financial aid from the Ministry of the Interior, and with the approval of King Willem I, Reuvens laid out a collecting policy, which could make his museum rival the museums in London, Paris and the various German states. In Greece he made use of the services of the Flemish Colonel B.E.A. Rottiers (1771–1857), who succeeded in acquiring splendid classical Greek sculptures. He acquired his best pieces during excavations in 1819, which he undertook with Louis Fauvel, the French consul in Athens and former rival of Lord Elgin's employees. Between 1824–26 Rottiers undertook an archaeological expedition to the Aegean, during which he excavated on the island of Milos and published the medieval architecture of the city of Rhodes.

In Tunisia, the Dutch Colonel J.E. Humbert (1771–1839) was active in unearthing the history of Carthage and in acquiring Roman statuary from Utica. During a second expedition, Humbert stayed for four years in Italy, where Etruscan and Egyptian collections were acquired, which changed the whole aspect of the young museum. Around 1830, Leiden could rival the most important museums in importance of Egyptian, Etruscan and Punic collections.

Boundaries of the ancient world

This way of acquiring Classical and Egyptian antiquities did not differ much from the activities in the neighbouring countries, but Reuvens looked beyond the range of antiquities which 'normally' were present in archaeological museums. He had original ideas about a consistent collecting policy. In his view, an archaeological museum should not focus on the classical world alone, but also on the cultures known by or influenced by the Greeks and Romans. For example, the influence of Greek and Roman art on the ancient Buddhist art of India and the subsequent temple architecture and religious statuary of Indonesia, was for Reuvens the reason to include Indian and Indonesian antiquities in his collecting policy. Other archaeological material from, for example, America was not acquired. When a collection of Mexican antiquities was offered to the museum, Reuvens wrote to the Ministry of the Interior:

> I would not cut off the possibility of enlarging our Dutch museums with the unknown objects from Mexico, but these objects should not be placed in a Museum of Antiquities, which has to confine itself to classical antiquity and to

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> those regions, which were known by the Greeks and Romans and which were influenced by their civilization, e.g. India.[2]

In the Netherlands, the Hindu and Buddhist art from the East Indies was dispersed among private collectors, the Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences in Amsterdam and the Ethnological Collection in The Hague. The latter collection of Indonesian antiquities was housed in the 'Royal Cabinet of Curiosities of Living People'. The director of the cabinet refused to send the Indonesian statues to Leiden and argued that the statues, which Reuvens desired for his archaeological museum, were part of his cabinet, because they *belonged to a still existing people*, and were therefore of ethnological value and not of archaeological interest. Reuvens replied that the ancient monuments from Indonesia were part of the extinct Hindu and Buddhist cultures, which were transformed in the course of the 15th and 16th century into an Islamic community. Civilizations, which had seen such dramatic changes in religion, could be regarded as 'extinct' and their artefacts therefore suitable for a place in an archaeological museum. Otherwise also Greek and Roman antiquities could move to another kind of museum. Reuvens wrote to the Ministry about his colleague at the Museum of Curiosities:

> The […] director of this cabinet has understood from a decision unknown to me, that Indian antiquities should also be part of that cabinet *as belonging to a still living people*. […] These Indian antiquities are from a dim and distant past and it cannot be the intention of this decision to place objects, which are of equal or higher antiquity than Egyptian, Persian or Greek artifacts, in a *modern* cabinet, only because the people still exists. I reply that essentially the borderline between a Museum of Antiquities and a Museum of Curiosities of Living People cannot be found in the respective antiquity of the objects, which is impossible to establish with certainty, but that the borderline should be drawn quite differently here. It is important for scholarship that the Indian antiquities are not separated from the Egyptian and other artifacts. Otherwise, in the near future, there will be no longer a Museum of Antiquities, because also *Roman* and *Greek* objects will be placed in a Museum of Living People, the former labelled as *Italian*, and the latter among the objects from the *Hellenic Commonwealth*. The borderline, as I may repeat, is this one: the disappearance of a people, or its later civilization, by the complete transition to the *Christian* or the *Muslim* faith.[3]

But here Reuvens encountered difficulties. It was argued that part of the Indonesian people on Java and Bali still retained the old religion and therefore their art and monuments could not be regarded as belonging to an 'extinct civilization'. Were there other boundaries to be drawn? Conrad Leemans, Reuvens' successor as keeper of the museum since 1835, offered the following solution in the first catalogue of the Indian and American antiquities of the museum:

> All remains of the Indian religion in our East-Indian territories, where the natives have adopted the learnings of Mohammed, belong to the realm of archaeology.

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> Regarding those places where the ancient Indian religion is still in vigour, like a small part of the island of Java and the whole of Bali, if we want to make a decision about what belongs in an archaeological museum and what not, then I would suggest to place in an archaeological museum all those objects, which are now made of another material than in the past, or after a changed or different design. Another demarcation, which was advocated by my venerated teacher the late professor Reuvens, can be found in assigning everything which belongs to religion and funerary rituals to archaeology, and all the other objects to ethnology.[4]

A change of material or design and a connection with religion or funerary rites could thus be the reason for placing artefacts in an archaeological museum. The question about what pertained to religion, and what not, remained unanswered and left room for more controversies.

In 1859 Leemans became honorary-director of the Ethnographical Museum. At various occasions he argued that the archaeological and ethnographical collections had to be combined in a new prestigious museum of ancient and modern ethnology. In his view, archaeology could be regarded as ethnology of ancient cultures. Opposition against Leemans' ideas from ethnologists frustrated his efforts to combine the museums and led to further discussions about the dividing lines between archaeology and ethnology.

The question was decided in 1903, when the Department of the Interior established a committee to decide the future of the Ethnographical Museum. Among other issues, they discussed the division of material and came to the following conclusion:

> Antiquities of the peoples of North-Africa, Western Asia and Europe, whose civilization can be considered the predecessor of our own, should find their place in the Museum of Antiquities. Everything else should go to the Museum of Ethnography. As far is known to the committee there are no objects in the latter which should move under that rule to the Museum of Antiquities. But the archaeological museum houses Indonesian, Indian and American antiquities, which belong without doubt in the Museum of Ethnography.
>
> The commission is of the opinion that as a rule the prehistorical artifacts of each people should be present in the Museum, which shows also the later civilization of that people. Of course the Museum of Antiquities houses most of these objects, especially from our own country. We advise placing objects, whose origin is still unknown, in this Museum.[5]

In the years 1903 and 1904, the archaeological artefacts from the Indies and the Americas left the National Museum of Antiquities, in total about 2000 Hindu-Indonesian antiquities and about 1600 archaeological objects from North- and South-America. Heavy protests from archaeological scholars were to no avail. The antiquities started a new future under the guidance of new curators. New boundaries had been set, which are still in full vigour today.

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Antiquities and society: role and function

Reuvens wished to spread the knowledge of archaeology to as broad a public as possible, with special attention to architects and artists. Direct acquaintance with the products of Greek and Roman craftmanship had caused French and English art and architecture to flourish. In the eyes of Reuvens this could be achieved in the Netherlands also, not by copying the French or English neo-classical examples, but by studying the originals directly and following lectures about their meaning on an academic level, using the archaeological collections in Leiden. He made his intentions clear in an address to the Dutch King, in which he wrote about the deplorable state of contemporary Dutch architecture and sculpture:

> Architecture and sculpture in our northern provinces have decayed, partly because of the parsimonious spirit of our ancestors (who were very extravagant in other ways), but mainly because of their general unfamiliarity with the beautiful examples of antiquity. Sculpture and architecture began to flourish in France during the reigns of François I and Louis XIV. Both sovereigns had imported the taste for those arts from Italy, the storehouse (so to speak) of beautiful antiquity, by bringing the ancient art into their country. Architecture is extremely popular in England nowadays because of the many travels to the beautiful ruins of Greece and the former Greek colonies. Not only the artists travel to these countries, but also the nobility and scholarly classes. Especially after the French Revolution the art of painting in that country and the taste in applied art and jewellery […] have been refined and improved. This can only be ascribed to the will (which in that period deteriorated into passion) to imitate antiquity in everything. […] The purest examples can be obtained only from antiquity.[6]

Reuvens tried to attract artists to the museum: for example he proposed that painters and sculptors, who had won first prizes at Art Academies, should be obliged to spend six months in Leiden, where they could study and copy antique sculptures and attend Reuvens' own lectures. He asked for and obtained permission to lecture in the Dutch language, instead of Latin, which was still in use at Dutch universities.

Archaeology, architects and artists

Whenever the opportunity arose, Reuvens tried to put his ideas about the influence of archaeology on society into practice. Due to the growth of the collections after the purchases in Greece, North Africa and Italy, a new museum building was a necessity. The collections were dispersed through Leiden in various depots, and the climatological conditions formed a threat to the objects; notably, the Egyptian wooden objects and the mummies started to deteriorate.

In 1826, Reuvens began to make plans to move the whole collection of

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antiquities to a new building, designed to be an 'ideal archaeological museum'. Reuvens wanted to put his ideas about modern architecture into reality by working closely with a well-known architect from The Hague, Zeger Reyers. Together they drew a neo-classical building with an entrance shaped as a Greek Doric temple. Every detail of the architecture was discussed with Reyers to make sure that the proportions were in accordance with ancient Greek architectural laws. It appears that Reuvens had plans to use the entrance to the museum for his lessons in ancient architecture, as if it were a scale model of an ancient Greek building.

Unfortunately, problems with the Trustees concerning the financial consequences of the new building put an end to this promising project, which would have created the first designed museum building in the Netherlands. Subsequently, plans were made to move the whole archaeological museum to one of the major cities in the Netherlands: Amsterdam, The Hague or Brussels, but this project did not succeed either, because of the political unrest after the insurrection of the southern provinces in 1830.

Reuvens' ideas about the influence of archaeology on contemporary society were strong and coherent. The decay of architecture and painting in the Netherlands could be turned into a new golden age by following the examples of Greek and Roman antiquity, not by imitating the neo-classical art in France and England, but by gaining direct knowledge of the ancient examples through studying the original antiquities in the museum and attending academic lectures. As a consequence not only academics were to benefit from his teachings, but also artists and architects. The plans for a new neo-classical Museum of Archaeology would have put the crown on his ideas of the benefits of archaeology for contemporary society.

Towards a new museum

After the death of Reuvens in 1835, the Trustees of the University decided to buy an already existing building to house the antiquities. In 1838, the antiquities were presented to the public in an 18th century mansion. Around 1920 the archaeological collections moved again to the former building of the Museum of Natural History on the Rapenburg canal, which became available exclusively for antiquities. A real museum came into being, but the financial situation of the 1930s made an adequate display difficult. Photographs of the period show a disposition of the objects in categories: sculptures, terracottas, glass, jewellery, and Greek vases, all presented apart, just as a strict division was observed between the departments of Egyptian, Classical, Near-Eastern and Dutch antiquities: islands on their own. In the 1950s and the 1970s a refurbishment and a modernization of design took place, but the arrangement of the objects continued to follow the 19th century model.

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In 2001, a long awaited building programme came to an end. The reinstalment of the collections has provided a unique possibility to turn thoughts and theories about a modern museum presentation into reality. In close contact with the curators, the educational staff, the architect and the interior designer, it has been decided to bring the four departments of the museum closer together: not four isolated institutions housed haphazardly under one roof, but four cultural regions bound together by one common denominator. The question was, how could one show the coherence of four departments with such cultural and topographical differences?

The answer lies in the Roman Empire. All regions and cultures presented in the National Museum of Antiquities were once part of the empire created by the Romans, which included Egypt, the Mediterranean area, the Near East and part of The Netherlands. By linking this historical fact with the collections available in the museum, it was possible to present the Roman Empire as a starting point for each visit of the galleries.

The second difference with earlier and more traditional displays is that the partition of materials has been abandoned. Material from one place and period is placed together, in order to evoke the *ambiente* of the ancient world. For example in the gallery dedicated to fifth century Athens, the grave ceramics are placed beside the grave-reliefs and not – as until now – in different galleries of sculptures and vases.

Antiquities in a 'modern' world

Let us now turn to the 21st century and try to define which role an archaeological collection can play in academia, and in society as a whole. I started this article by summing up some elements, which could be interpreted as a revival of the ancient world. A superficial look at the performing arts and popular culture will sustain this view, but when we focus on other aspects, a different perspective follows. At secondary schools, Greek and Latin are becoming endangered species, and even in the traditional *gymnasia* only one of the ancient languages is obligatory. Translated texts and general cultural studies are replacing the classical education with its roots in the Renaissance, Humanism and *Altertumswissenschaft*. Of course, this does not lead to less interest in ancient history, but it does not foster the early formation of potential specialists in classical studies. Universities have to organize special courses in Greek and Latin for their freshmen, to try to reach an acceptable level to start their study. Although specialists are still trained and working at the universities, in the past 20 years the curricula have been shortened considerably, to such an effect that the basic introduction to, for example, classical archaeology omits even the most general overview of ancient art. Some of my senior students in classical archaeology are

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not able to recognize the sculptures of the Parthenon or to give an approximate date of an early red-figure amphora. This is not their fault or negligence, but the result of the curriculum at the university and the choices made by the professional staff in view of the shortage of formative years.

There is no denying that there is a growing interest in themes from the ancient world, but the way in which the ancients are presented to the public leaves much to be desired. Complete websites have been filled with all the nonsense in movies like *Gladiator*, *Troy* or *Alexander*. The reasons why producers of these films are not in the least interested in historical correctness are splendidly analysed by Marcus Junkelmann in his recent book about the history of the 'sandal-movie'.[7] In a way, we are reminded of the classical heritage in the Middle Ages, during which the most fantastic stories of Alexander the Great, Virgil or Nero were written down, read and believed.

Archaeological exhibitions in museums attract thousands of visitors, but do they really convey accurate knowledge of the past to the cohorts of visitors? Although there are a few exceptions (especially in Germany, where at least in museums the tradition of the *Altertumswissenschaft* is still vivid, for example the exhibition *Die Griechische Klassik – Idee oder Wirklichkeit*, Berlin/Bonn 2002), most of the archaeological blockbusters aim at the highest number of visitors, and the information provided in the exhibitions reflects this intention. It is a pity to see excellent archaeological artefacts in an exhibition about Pompeii (*From Pompeii to Rome*, Brussels 2003–4) without even the most basic information. In this exhibition, much attention is given to the agony of the poor souls who lost their lives in the tragedy of AD79: indeed so much attention, that one cannot avoid a certain feeling of voyeurism, another incentive for attracting a large number of visitors. As the folder-text puts it:

> Among the most eye-catching exhibits, visitors can see plaster and glass-fibre casts taken directly from the bodies of victims excavated on the shore at Herculaneum, and one from a girl found at Oplontis. Even charred corpses are part of the 500 exhibits (or so).

The messages conveyed by these blockbusters centre around mysteries, incredible wealth, technology, disasters and astonishment. It is like looking at a three-dimensional documentary on the Discovery Channel. The real story and the valid information behind the excellent objects is not given in the exhibitions and can at best be found in the (expensive) full-colour catalogues.

Of course, money makes the world go around, and most museums have to lure a large number of paying guests into their sacred vaults to make ends meet. But it would be a good idea not to forget or even sacrifice the educational task of museums on the altar of Mammon. A combination of blockbusters and smaller

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specialized exhibitions would sufficiently steady the cash flow without forgetting the educational task of the archaeological museum.

Possibilities in a changing world

Most curators who are working in archaeological museums are professionals with a general overview of the culture(s) under their care. They will be specialists in a certain field, but the vastness of the collection under their care forces them to have a more general knowledge of antiquity. In this way they keep various aspects of the ancient cultures alive by giving information to the public in different ways, in more direct contact with society than (for example) specialists working at a university. For students in archaeology it should be obligatory to attend at least one course in museum studies, given by curators. Knowledge about sculpture, ceramics, the history of collecting, museum ethics and the rich potential of collections will create broad orientated students. With an additional masters' degree in museum studies, they will enlarge their chances of finding a suitable position in the world of museums, or in the world of communication and presentation in a wider sense.

In a society in which traditional classical education recedes, a new task may emerge for museum professionals. During the Middle Ages the classical heritage was kept alive in monasteries around Europe. Learned monks transcribed classical texts, and by doing so saved them until the humanists and the printing press took over their task. In spite of all technological innovations, in a way we are entering (or have already entered) a period that may be compared with the Middle Ages, complete with crusades, religious revivals, obscurantism and escapism. Could the task of the archaeological museums of today be compared with the medieval monasteries? Are the keepers in these museums comparable with the monks who worked in a world of turmoil and changing attitudes towards the classical values? If so, they have a serious task to keep the ancient culture alive, by sharing their knowledge with as many people as possible, with students of ancient culture and by providing valid information about the ancient world to the public and the media. If we leave this task to Hollywood or the Discovery Channel alone, we will continue to gaze at the ancients, without considering their real message to our world and without reflecting on their value for our modern society.

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