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#### DOI

[10.51769/bmgn-lchr.7028](https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.7028)

#### Publication date

2022

#### Document Version

Final published version

#### Published in

BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review

#### License

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[Link to publication](#)

#### Citation for published version (APA):

Plets, G., & Kuijt, M. (2022). Gas, Oil and Heritage: Well-oiled Histories and Corporate Sponsorship in Dutch Museums (1990-2021) . *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review*, 137(1), 50-77. <https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.7028>

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# Gas, Oil and Heritage

## Well-oiled Histories and Corporate Sponsorship in Dutch Museums (1990-2021)

GERTJAN PLETS AND MARIN KUIJT

How does corporate sponsorship shape the narration and curation of Dutch history in public museums? This article evaluates the significance and impact of private funding in the Dutch heritage and museum sector. By focusing on three museums that have received funding from Dutch oil and gas companies we foreground specifically the nexus heritage, oil, and funding. We show how a particular type of 'energy literacy' is promoted, a narrative that is favourable to the agenda of the gas and oil sector. Our explorations are based on interviews with museum officials, an analysis of policy documents, and a close reading of exhibitions. By describing the impact of oil and gas money on the Dutch heritage sector, this article charts the growing influence of corporate players in the Dutch public cultural sector. Following neoliberal reforms in 2011-2012 promoting cultural entrepreneurship and self-sufficiency, museums and heritage sites had to act even more like businesses and attract sponsorships and gifts from private players. This development is part of a global retraction of the state in the public sector. Our discussion of the intricacies of corporate heritage funding in the Netherlands shows that through a fairly limited investment, enterprises acquire disproportionate outreach and influence in the cultural heritage field, an environment that is generally perceived by the public as reliable and independent.

Hoe beïnvloedden private spelers en bedrijven de manier waarop musea de Nederlandse geschiedenis vertellen en presenteren? Dit artikel onderzoekt het belang en de invloed van private financiering in de Nederlandse erfgoed- en museumwereld. We onderzoeken de invloed van de industrie op de publieke erfgoedsector aan de hand van drie musea die in de voorbije decennia geld hebben ontvangen van de Nederlandse olie- en gasindustrie. Dit artikel beschrijft hoe een bepaald 'energiediscours' wordt gepromoot in tentoonstellingen, een narratief dat

de olie- en gassector in een positief daglicht stelt. De resultaten van dit onderzoek zijn gebaseerd op interviews met medewerkers van musea, een analyse van beleidsdocumenten en een *close reading* van de tentoonstellingen die worden, of werden, gefinancierd door de industrie. Het artikel brengt de groeiende invloed van private spelers in de Nederlandse cultuursector in kaart door de impact van de olie- en gasindustrie op de Nederlandse erfgoedsector te beschrijven. Het gevolg van neoliberale hervormingen in de periode 2011-2012 is dat cultureel ondernemerschap en financiële onafhankelijkheid worden aangemoedigd, wat er voor zorgt dat het voor musea en erfgoedsites steeds noodzakelijker wordt om zich op te stellen als bedrijven die sponsorcontracten met, en giften van, partners uit de industrie moeten najagen. Deze evolutie is niet eigen aan Nederland en maakt deel uit van een wereldwijde ontwikkeling waarbij de staat zich uit de culturele sector terugtrekt. Onze analyse toont echter dat de unieke financieringsmechanismen voor private spelers in Nederland ervoor zorgen dat bedrijven met een minieme investering een disproportionele zichtbaarheid en invloed verkrijgen in het culturele erfgoedveld, een omgeving die door de bevolking over het algemeen wordt beschouwd als betrouwbaar en onafhankelijk.

### Introduction: a different type of methodological nationalism in the study of heritage politics<sup>1</sup>

On 13 May 2014, representatives of the Netherlands Open Air Museum and the Dutch Petroleum Company (NAM – *Nederlandse Aardolie Maatschappij*) unveiled the latest addition to the public museum: the pumpjack BRK-10. After they ceremoniously pressed the start button, BRK-10 swung back into action. Not to pump oil as it had done between 1983 and 2013 just north of Rotterdam, but to nod for eternity as a heritage object celebrating the Dutch post-war gas and oil boom. After the ceremony, the museum's director Willem Bijleveld contextualised this piece of rusty industrial heritage, wedged between two Dutch farmsteads from the sixteenth and seventeenth century. According to Bijleveld, the pumpjack epitomises the Dutch welfare state and post-war modernisation. Ultimately, '[b]ecause of pumpjacks, and the exploration of gas and oil, we are extremely prosperous in the Netherlands'.<sup>2</sup> The NAM, a joint venture between Royal Dutch Shell and ExxonMobil, not only donated the pumpjack, but also provided €80,000 for its installation and

1 This article was first published as *online first* on the website of BMGN - LCHR on 2 September 2021. You can find this version here, <https://bmgn-lchr.nl/article/view/7028/online-first>. This second version published in BMGN 137:1 has been updated and revised, see the enclosed corrigendum. The *online first* article provoked a reply by Ad Maas, to

be consulted here <https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.11658>, and the authors' response here, <https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.11667>.

2 'Opening jaknikker in Openluchtmuseum', *YouTube*, uploaded by RTV Arnhem, 14 May 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u2YEDuGz5pk>. Accessed on 8 January 2020.

exploitation costs, and for the development of educational projects for the period 2012-2022.<sup>3</sup>

Over the past four decades, critical examinations of the (mis)uses of the past have ensured that today, museums and cultural heritage are understood as political artefacts, culturally assembled over time through a complex web of power relations.<sup>4</sup> Building on those timely contributions that outlined how heritage was used as an instrument in nineteenth and twentieth-century statecraft, most contemporary research continues to explore heritage-making and the politics of museums along the same lines: both are seen as products of the state that are primarily geared at constituting national identities and governing populations. The different explorations of the politics of heritage in the Netherlands are no exception. Dutch research continues to view the state and nationalism as the main protagonist and structuring agenda. This is the case in this journal, in academic teaching on heritage, and in the politics of historical culture.<sup>5</sup>

In the humanities and social sciences, discussions about methodological nationalism, defined as the tendency to use the nation state and its borders as the dominant unit of analysis, impact the approaches to the study of heritage and memory politics.<sup>6</sup> In this article we propose to expand these discussions about the methodological issues in studying heritage and museums beyond a focus on scale alone. For those fields of study that explore the politics of history, we argue that there are similar methodological issues with the tendency to foreground the state as the main mobiliser of the past and nationalism as the accompanying agenda. Simply put, studies that explore the power relations that texture heritage and memory making have a tendency to focus primarily on the actions of the state and nationalist agendas. Within

- 3 Netherlands Open Air Museum, 'Jaarverslag 2015', *Netherlands Open Air Museum*, 2015, [https://issuu.com/nederlandsopenluchtmuseum/docs/jaarverslag\\_2015?fr=sYTFkNDg4OTczOQ](https://issuu.com/nederlandsopenluchtmuseum/docs/jaarverslag_2015?fr=sYTFkNDg4OTczOQ). Accessed on 9 August 2021.
- 4 Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London 1995); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca 1983); Anthony Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford 1999).
- 5 Paul Bijl, 'Colonial memory and forgetting in the Netherlands and Indonesia', *Journal of Genocide Research* 14:3/4 (2012) 441-461. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2012.719375>; James Kennedy, 'The Dutch Canon Debate: Reflections of an American', *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 121:1 (2006) 99-105. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.6343>; Niek van Sas, 'Geschiedenis – Herinnering – Identiteit: De historici en het Nationaal Historisch Museum', *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 124:3 (2009) 419-430. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.7013>.
- 6 Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, 'Methodological nationalism and beyond: nation-state building, migration and the social sciences', *Global Networks* 2:4 (2002) 301-334. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-0374.00043>; Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney, 'Introduction', in: Chiari De Cesari and Ann Rigney (eds.), *Transnational Memory: Circulation, Articulation, Scales. Media and Cultural Memory / Medien und kulturelle Erinnerung* 19 (Berlin 2014) 1-25. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110359107.1>.

heritage studies, non-state players have received limited consideration at best.<sup>7</sup> This lack of attention in Europe stands in sharp contrast with early warnings from the United States where, since the presidency of Ronald Reagan (1981-1989), American museums were increasingly becoming part of a 'corporate sponsored history machine' that provided national audiences with historical views that aligned with the corporate sector's interests.<sup>8</sup> A notable exception in European research are the criticisms directed at the influx of oil money in the art sector. This came into the limelight in the aftermath of the 2010 British Petroleum Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Following this disaster, several scholars and activists noticed how 'big oil' had become an active cultural player in mobilising art museums such as the Tate to construct a favourable image.<sup>9</sup>

In this paper, we go beyond merely drawing attention to the significant impact of non-state players in the Dutch heritage and memory field. By exploring the dynamics underlying corporate patronage and the socioeconomic climate in which museums have become compelled to ask for financial gifts, we aim to increase literacy about the intricacies of corporate influence. By making the tactics and mechanisms of corporate players visible, we encourage critical reflection on their indirect impact on the narrations of history in the public sphere.

Since antiquity, corporate patrons and philanthropists have always sponsored the arts and culture. Austerity and neoliberal reforms following the 2007-2008 financial crisis, however, have accelerated the withdrawal of the state from the cultural sector in Europe. Cash-strapped museums and public heritage institutions consequently became more dependent on private funding.<sup>10</sup> Yet, as the examples in this article highlight, the processes of neoliberalisation and privatisation in the cultural sector are far from a zero-sum game of less state and more corporations, because the taxpayer remains

7 Notable exceptions include: Victoria Alexander, 'Art and the Twenty-First Century Gift: Corporate Philanthropy and Government Funding in the Cultural Sector', *Anthropological Forum* 24:4 (2014) 364-380. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2014.947917>; Christina Luke, *A Pearl in Peril: Heritage and Diplomacy in Turkey* (Oxford 2019). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190498870.001.0001>; Gertjan Plets, 'Heritage statecraft: When archaeological heritage meets neoliberalism in Gazprom's resource colonies, Russia', *Journal of Field Archaeology* 41:3 (2016) 368-383. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00934690.2016.1184534>.

8 Herbert Schiller, *Culture, Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression* (Oxford 1989) 7.

9 Derrick Chong, 'Tate and BP-Oil and Gas as the New Tobacco? Arts Sponsorship, Branding, and Marketing', in: Conal McCarthy (ed.), *The International Handbook of Museum Studies 2: Museum Practice* (Chichester 2015) 129-201, 196. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118829059.wbihms208>; Judy Motion, 'Undoing art and oil: an environmental tale of sponsorship, cultural justice and climate change controversy', *Environmental Politics* 28:4 (2019) 727-746, 729. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2017.1416904>.

10 Katja Lindqvist, 'Museum finances: challenges beyond economic crises', *Museum Management and Curatorship* 27:1 (2012) 1-15. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2012.644693>.



▲  
Figure 1. The pumpjack BRK-10 on display in the Netherlands Open Air Museum. Picture taken by the authors in October 2018.


Canon van Nederland

De gasbel

|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| <h3 style="margin: 0;">Jaknikker,<br/>Rotterdam, 1957</h3> <p><b>Welvaart voor het oppompen</b><br/>Voor en tussen de wereldoorlogen stoken en koken we vooral op kolen, petroleum en stadsgas. Maar in 1943 wordt onder het Drentse Schoonebeek voor het eerst een serieus olieveld ontdekt. En omdat olie een stuk makkelijker is dan kolen of petroleum, stappen we graag over. Talloze jaknikkers zoals deze uit Rotterdam pompen de olie omhoog en in menige tuin wordt een olietank ingegraven. Maar het kan nog mooier: in 1959 vindt de Nederlandse Aardolie Maatschappij een onvoorstelbaar groot gasveld onder de provincie Groningen. Door de exploitatie daarvan stroomt het geld decennialang de Nederlandse schatkist in en worden we een welvarende verzorgingsstaat. Al is er ook een keerzijde: aardbevingen in Groningen met schade aan huizen en cultuurogde.</p> <p style="font-size: small; margin-top: 10px;">Hier geplaatst in 2014</p> | <h3 style="margin: 0;">Nodding donkey,<br/>Rotterdam, 1957</h3> <p><b>Oil brings prosperity</b><br/>Prior to, and in the years between, the two world wars, coal, paraffin and town gas were the main fuels used for heating and cooking. In 1943, however, a substantial oil field was discovered for the first time beneath Schoonebeek in the province of Drenthe. As oil is so much more convenient than coal or paraffin, the people of the Netherlands were happy to make the switch to this new fuel. Countless 'nodding donkeys', such as this one from Rotterdam, were employed to lift the oil and oil tanks were buried in many gardens. Things got even better when, in 1959, the Dutch Petroleum Company found an enormous gas field beneath the province of Groningen. Money flowed into the Dutch treasury for decades thanks to this gas field, allowing the Netherlands to become a prosperous welfare state. There was also a downside, however: Groningen suffers earthquakes, causing damage to property and cultural heritage.</p> <p style="font-size: small; margin-top: 10px;">Relocated here in 2014</p> | <h3 style="margin: 0;">Pferdekopfpumpe,<br/>Rotterdam, 1957</h3> <p><b>Wohlfahrt aus dem Boden</b><br/>Vor und zwischen den Weltkriegen wird hauptsächlich mit Kohle, Petroleum und Stadtgas geheizt und gekocht. 1943 wird jedoch unter Schoonebeek in Drenthe erstmals ein substantielles Ölfeld entdeckt. Weil Öl viel gebrauchsfreundlicher ist als Kohle oder Petroleum, steigen wir alle gerne darauf um. Unzählige Pferdekopfpumpen so wie diese aus Rotterdam pumpen das Öl an die Oberfläche und in vielen Gärten wird ein Öltank vergraben. Und dann kommt es noch besser: 1959 findet die Nederlandse Aardolie Maatschappij ein unvorstellbar großes Gasfeld unter der Provinz Groningen. Durch dessen Ausbeutung fließt viele Jahrzehnte lang viel Geld in die niederländische Staatskasse und entwickeln wir uns zu einem modernen Wohlfahrtsstaat. Es gibt aber auch eine Schattenseite - Erdbeben in Groningen, die Schäden an Häusern und Kulturgütern verursachen.</p> <p style="font-size: small; margin-top: 10px;">Hier im Jahr 2014 wiedererrichtet</p> |
|--|---|--|

▲  
Figure 2. Picture of the object label that accompanies the pumpjack BRK-10. Picture taken by the authors in October 2018.



the most important contributor by far.<sup>11</sup> In addition, policy interventions promoting neoliberal self-reliance and unrealistic visitor number quotas have pushed public heritage institutions, in search of extra funding to balance their budget, into the arms of corporate players.

The lack of transparency and documentation about corporate sponsorship complicates a sector-wide analysis of the Dutch museum landscape. For this article we therefore had to combine insights and data from three Dutch museums to theorise the impact of corporate patronage on a broader level. We selected museums with a clear historical profile: the Netherlands Open Air Museum, National Museum Boerhaave and the Drents Museum. These three museums have all received support from the two biggest Dutch hydrocarbon players, namely the NAM and Shell. All three museums can be categorised as ‘public knowledge institutions’ since all of them are funded by state or regional governments.<sup>12</sup> In democratic states, public museums are generally perceived by the public as part of the public sphere, meaning that they are considered neutral sites of expert discourse and democracy.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, the messages and histories they produce hold authority and impact the national public.

For each museum, we studied how changing funding structures impacted its institutional organisation, identity, and the (historical) narratives it conveys to the public. First, we inventoried the annual financial reports of each museum, analysed details about corporate gifts, and tabularised and compared changes in the yearly budget. Secondly, on the basis of these reports, we charted the evolution in temporary exhibitions. We scrutinised exhibitions featuring themes or objects connected to the oil and gas sector. Thirdly, we interviewed representatives of each museum on site. We spoke to curators, who were often trained as historians, and representatives of the financial or fund-raising departments. As we did not want to affect relationships with specific corporate patrons, we did not explore specific cases but discussed general funding practices. The names of our informants have been anonymised in this paper.

The Drents Museum has archived most of its correspondence and designs of older exhibitions, enabling us to study early exhibitions sponsored

11 Rosemary Coombe and Melissa Baird, ‘The Limits of Heritage: Corporate Interests and Cultural Rights on Resource Frontiers’, in: William Logan, Máiréad Nic Craith and Ullrich Kockel (eds.), *A Companion to Heritage Studies* (New York 2016) 337-354. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118486634.ch24>.

12 The Netherlands Open Air Museum and National Museum Boerhaave Museum are

‘national museums’ supported by the national government, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science specifically. The Drents Museum is the main cultural historical institution of province of Drenthe and is largely supported by both the province and the municipality of Assen.

13 Jennifer Barrett, *Museums and the Public Sphere* (New York 2010). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444327922>.

by the hydrocarbon industry. For the other two museums it was very difficult to find information about collaborations with private partners anywhere in their records. Interlocutors told us that correspondence was rarely archived and that contracts between the museum and their patrons were private. We are grateful that the staff of the Netherlands Open Air Museum and the Drents Museum made time to speak to us about corporate funding. National Museum Boerhaave stated that, since 2011, they have diversified their income away from the state and are now ‘doing a really good job’.<sup>14</sup> They saw little purpose in discussing the changed funding climate and thus refused to be interviewed.

### **A story about tomatoes, cucumbers and makeup: three museums and their historicisation of the hydrocarbon industry**

*A nod to the industry that modernised the nation: the pumpjack of the Netherlands Open Air Museum*

Today, the most tangible touchstones of the impact of gas extraction in the Netherlands are the numerous historical farmsteads at danger of collapse in the province of Groningen. From the mid-1980s onwards, the intensified extraction of gas from the Slochteren gas field, which was first drilled in 1963, started to cause earthquakes.<sup>15</sup> As extraction increased, over the years, earthquakes became more common and powerful, damaging and devaluing property and destroying built heritage. More consequentially is the significant psychological stress and existential uncertainty due to the fear for future earthquakes and the unclear compensation frameworks by the gas sector and state. Following the particularly seismically active year of 2013 with over 133 recorded earthquakes of 1.5 or higher on the Richter scale, public opinion about the gas and oil sector slowly began to shift.<sup>16</sup> The government then decided to stop production at the Slochteren field from the middle of 2022 onwards.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, the drilling of hundreds of small fields underneath

- 14 Interview with representative of National Museum Boerhaave on 13 June 2019.
- 15 Ronald Pijnenburg et al., ‘Inelastic Deformation of the Slochteren Sandstone: Stress-Strain Relations and Implications for Induced Seismicity in the Groningen Gas Field’, *Journal of Geophysical Research: Solid Earth* 124:5 (2019) 5254–5282. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1029/2019jb017366>.
- 16 Niek Mouter, Auke de Geest and Neelke Doorn, ‘A values-based approach to energy controversies: Value-sensitive design applied to the Groningen gas controversy in the Netherlands’, *Energy Policy* 122 (2018) 639–648. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2018.08.020>.
- 17 Erik Wiebes, ‘Wetsvoorstel “Wat na nul” – wetswijzigingen in verband met de definitieve sluiting van het Groningenveld’, *Rijksoverheid*, 24 November 2020, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/gaswinning-in-groningen/documenten/kamerstukken/2020/11/24/kamerbrief-wetswijzigingen-definitieve-sluiting-groningenveld>. Accessed on 6 August 2021.



northern Dutch provinces and the Waddenzee that contain billions of euros in gas, will continue.<sup>18</sup>

Inhabitants of the provinces rich in hydrocarbons were sceptical about the plans of the NAM and Shell from the very beginning.<sup>19</sup> These feelings quickly evolved into anger and fear as their cultural landscape and property were devalued. All the while, the rest of the nation (especially the densely populated Randstad) and the Dutch government benefitted from this national treasure. When production at Slochteren, then Europe's largest gas reservoir, was significantly increased in the 1970s, the Netherlands became a petrostate, highly reliant on royalties paid by the gas companies for filling the treasury and balancing the budgets. Up to 2019, gas contributed 417 billion euros to the national budget in just over fifty years.<sup>20</sup> A large part of the income was invested in prestigious infrastructure projects. Ironically, most projects benefited the urban centres of the Netherlands and few investments happened in the province of Groningen.<sup>21</sup>

In the Netherlands Open Air Museum, a museum developed around preserving vernacular architecture, the gas history of the Netherlands is not narrated through a traditional homestead from Groningen destroyed by earthquakes. Rather, tomatoes and cucumbers take centre stage in the exhibition. According to the on-site and online texts accompanying the pumpjack BRK-10, these are vegetables that could finally be efficiently produced in the Netherlands because of the rich gas deposits. The texts continue to describe how gas-heated greenhouses gave rise to the substantial agroindustry in the Netherlands. Moreover, according to the museum, the CO<sub>2</sub> released by the burning of gas from Groningen did not pollute the atmosphere. Instead, the plants broke down the carbon. Consequently CO<sub>2</sub> actually fertilised the plants that produced food for

- 18 Rijksoverheid, 'Gaswinning uit kleine gasvelden', Rijksoverheid, n.d., <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/gaswinning-uit-kleine-gasvelden/gaswinning-uit-kleine-gasvelden>. Accessed on 6 August 2021.
- 19 Inhabitants of the provinces of Groningen, Drenthe and Friesland rarely have a voice in the official histories of the post-war oil boom. However, recent work increasingly shows how locals already were at start afraid of earthquakes. See: Emiel Hakkenes, *Gas: Het verhaal van een Nederlandse bodemschat* (Amsterdam 2020).
- 20 Statistics Netherlands, 'Aardgasbaten uit gaswinning bijna 417 miljard euro', *Statistics Netherlands*, 28 May 2019, <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2019/22/aardgasbaten-uit-gaswinning-bijna-417-miljard-euro>. Accessed on 17 February 2020.
- 21 A lion's share of the gas royalties was funneled to the Fonds Economische Structuurversterking, a fund for infrastructure works. In 2014 the Dutch Treasury listed the investments of the fund, disclosing an uneven distribution favoring the Randstad. See: Algemene Rekenkamer, 'Besteding van aardgasbaten: feiten, cijfers en scenario's', *Algemene Rekenkamer*, 7 October 2014, [https://www.parlementairemonitor.nl/9353000/1/j4nvgs5kjg27kof\\_j9vvij5epmj1eyo/vjnzjtoik3xt/f=/blg390594.pdf](https://www.parlementairemonitor.nl/9353000/1/j4nvgs5kjg27kof_j9vvij5epmj1eyo/vjnzjtoik3xt/f=/blg390594.pdf). Accessed on 6 August 2021.

Dutch households.<sup>22</sup> In addition to feeding the nation, the pumpjack was contrasted with the surrounding pre-modern buildings which were still heated by turf wood. Because of its efficient transportability through domestic grids, gas ensured the spread of central heating across the nation, ‘making ice flowers on the windows and hot water bottles a thing of the past’.<sup>23</sup>

Gas not only kept the nation warm and well-fed, it also made the Netherlands very prosperous. The text on the object label accompanying the pumpjack (see figure 2) explicitly intertwines the discovery of gas with the foundation of the Dutch welfare state. At the same time, environmental problems and earthquakes are mentioned merely in passing at the end of the text. As such the display positions the ‘damage to property and cultural heritage’ as a necessary evil for constituting a welfare system and modernised nation.<sup>24</sup>

Through the information infrastructure, a nuanced historical narrative is assembled that is structured around the interrelation between hydrocarbons and post-war modernisation. The narrative invokes two key tropes of modernity: the ability to overcome the whims of nature and the ability to create institutions enacting societal stability. Through zooming in on the affordances of gas in overcoming cold nights and becoming a major food producer, the narrative relays an uplifting message: gas has standardised food production and basic heating. This taps into a popular belief held in society around the ‘modernist settlement’, in which being modern is connected with a ‘systemic, society-wide control over the variability inherent in the natural environment’.<sup>25</sup>

Feelings of ‘being modern’ in the Netherlands are also often interconnected with the welfare state. Key in the public narration of Dutch modernity is the pride in having mechanisms and institutions protecting the wellbeing of the entire polity.<sup>26</sup> Ultimately, the Netherlands Open Air Museum furthers this image by positioning the break with pre-war traditional Dutch society as a direct outcome of the discovery of gas. Although it is true that the royalties from the hydrocarbon industry

22 Netherlands Open Air Museum, ‘Jaknikker openluchtmuseum in beweging gezet’, *Netherlands Open Air Museum*, n.d., <https://collectie.openluchtmuseum.nl/over-ons/nieuws/jaknikker-openluchtmuseum-beweging-gezet>. Accessed on 9 August 2021.

23 Netherlands Open Air Museum, ‘Jaknikker openluchtmuseum in beweging gezet’.

24 This is a citation from a text on the object label ‘Nodding donkey, Rotterdam, 1957’, located in the

Netherlands Open Air Museum. Please see Figure 2 for a picture of this object label.

25 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge 1993); Paul Edwards, ‘Infrastructure and Modernity: Force, Time, and Social Organization in the History of Sociotechnical Systems’, in: Thomas Misa, Philip Brey and Andrew Feenberg (eds.), *Modernity and Technology* (Cambridge 2003) 185-225, 188.

26 Kees Schuyt and Ed Taverne, 1950: *Welvaart in zwart-wit* (The Hague 2000).

bankrolled and enabled ‘modern’ evolutions<sup>27</sup>, the socioeconomic modernisation of the Netherlands actually predates the discovery of gas in Slochteren and is just as much the outcome of transnational developments, cultural transformations and political consensus.<sup>28</sup> Thus, overstating the connections between the extraction of primary deposits and societal modernisation presents us with a selective historical imaginary that simplistically places the hydrocarbon industry centre stage in the post-war development of the Netherlands.

*The depths of the Dutch hydrocarbon sector: Boerhaave’s longue durée history of Shell*

While the Netherlands Open Air Museum anchors the gas sector in post-war modernisation, National Museum Boerhaave drills much deeper and taps into the innermost layers of Dutch historiography: the ‘Golden Age’. Since National Museum Boerhaave is one of the main Dutch science museums, it zooms in on the technological and scientific affordances of oil and gas. In a temporary exhibition launched in 2011, as well as in their permanent exhibition that opened in 2017, the museum directly links over 300 years of economic prosperity and advances in the sciences to the presence of peat, coal, oil, and gas in the Dutch subsoil – four key fossil fuels. In using a *longue durée* approach, the exhibitions conceptualise Dutch hydrocarbon extraction as an unescapable historical structure that is at the heart of Dutch successes in science and engineering.

The 2011-2012 temporary exhibition titled ‘Hidden forces: Dutch people in search of energy’ (*Verborgten krachten: Nederlanders op zoek naar energie*), foregrounded the message that fossil fuels are an intrinsic part of Dutch national history. Launched in a period in which the museum was threatened with closure because it failed to diversify its income, this exhibition was made possible by Shell. The displays and catalogue explored the highs and lows of Dutch engagement with energy over time. The exhibition itself, the catalogue, and statements by museum officials in popular media, enthusiastically furthered the image that the Netherlands was the first fossil fuel economy in the world.<sup>29</sup> In this historical narrative, current dependencies on gas are positioned as resembling the Dutch proto-industrial peat extraction of the seventeenth century. This nascent fossil fuel industry is identified as one of the cardinal drivers of the Dutch ‘Golden Age’. Clearly, being a fossil fuel economy

27 Jan Luiten van Zanden, *Een klein land in de 20e eeuw: Economische geschiedenis van Nederland 1914-1995* (Utrecht 1997).

28 Schuyt and Taverne, 1950, 53-54; Auke van der Woud, *Een nieuwe wereld: Het ontstaan van het moderne Nederland* (Amsterdam 2013).

29 Botte Jellema, ‘Verborgten krachten’, VPRO, 6 October 2011, [https://www.vpro.nl/speel-POMS\\_VPRO\\_196671-verborgen-krachten-.html](https://www.vpro.nl/speel-POMS_VPRO_196671-verborgen-krachten-.html). Accessed on 12 January 2020.

is taken as an imperative for development. According to the exhibition, a surplus of energy inescapably leads to technical innovation and societal modernisation.<sup>30</sup>

Apart from merely pointing to the importance of fossil fuels in the socioeconomic development of the Netherlands, the exhibition discursively connected fossil fuels to Dutch citizenship or ‘*Nederlanderschap*’.<sup>31</sup> Throughout, the exhibition’s narrative perpetuates the image that searching for energy and fossil fuels is an intrinsic part of the Dutch national identity: a ‘typical Dutch characteristic’.<sup>32</sup> Ultimately, as curators Ad Maas and Tiemen Cocquyt explicitly argue in the summary of the exhibition: ‘Just as the struggle against water is an inseparable part of our identity, the search for energy sources is also, to a lesser extent, part of our collective history’.<sup>33</sup> This discourse positioning the hydrocarbon industry as a historic necessity for economic progress and something there is no alternative to is not only encoded in the exhibition catalogue, but also in other materials and public statements by the museum.<sup>34</sup>

Through this carefully crafted *longue durée* narrative, fossil fuels and gas more specifically are presented as an inevitable socioeconomic reality. The exhibition simultaneously culturally assembled hydrocarbons as an intrinsic part of the Dutch national identity. It is important to note that this exhibition took place at a time when people were beginning to ask questions and criticise the future of gas extraction in the Netherlands. The public sphere witnessed a growing contestation over the seismic activity in Groningen. In addition, following an outcry in the United States over hydraulic fracking, large shale gas projects in the Brabant region of the Netherlands had come into the limelight.<sup>35</sup>

Only one newspaper criticised the exhibition for focussing too much on the past and lacking a vision for the future in which renewables continue to play an important role.<sup>36</sup> Reading between the lines of the exhibition however, we find that a narrative about the energy future was being assembled: a narrative in which everything stayed the same. Instead of

30 Ad Maas and Tiemen Cocquyt, *Verborgene Krachten: Nederlanders op zoek naar energie* (Hilversum 2011).

31 Maas and Cocquyt, *Verborgene Krachten*, 8.

32 Maas and Cocquyt, *Verborgene Krachten*, 8.

33 Maas and Cocquyt, *Verborgene Krachten*, back cover.

34 This sentence was added to this article after the editorial board received a critique by Ad Maas, one of the authors of the exhibition catalogue. Maas’ reply can be found here: <https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.11658>. For more detail

about the sources we used for deconstructing the pro-hydrocarbon discourse, see our response to Maas’ reply: <https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.11667>.

35 Tamara Metzke, ‘Framing the future of fracking: Discursive lock-in or energy degrowth in the Netherlands?’, *Journal of Cleaner Production* 197:2 (2018) 1737-1745. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2017.04.158>.

36 Janneke van Reenen-Hak, ‘Beeld van de NAM’, *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, 23 November 2011, 4.

reflecting on the impending end of fossil fuels, the closing paragraphs of the catalogue explicitly questioned the efficiency of wind, sun and tidal energy projects. The curators even argued that because of its geographical limitations and lack of sun and wind '[t]he Netherlands will remain a fossil fuel country for a while'.<sup>37</sup>

Besides weaving hydrocarbons into the socioeconomic fabric of the Netherlands, National Museum Boerhaave assembled Shell as a *national* institution driving Dutch science and innovation. This is the case, not only in the 2011-2012 'Hidden forces' exhibition, but also in the 2017 permanent exhibition. Although the latter still foregrounds the importance of fossil fuels for Dutch science and society, it does so in a more nuanced way. One of the tropes with which it legitimises the fuel sector is through connecting Shell to advances in Dutch science. In this new exhibition, Shell is not described as a multinational operating across the globe, but as an intrinsic part of the Dutch national fabric enacting technological innovation. As the Netherlands prides itself on being a knowledge-based economy and a research and development powerhouse, the exhibition saliently inscribes Shell into those elements that constitute the very essence of Dutch national pride. Throughout the exhibition, which celebrates over half a millennium of Dutch science, subtle references are made to Shell (figure 3). By using a suite of objects ranging from scale models of oil platforms to geological samples, pictures of oil and gas extraction on Borneo (Indonesia) and Slochteren, and textual references underlining the importance of fossil fuels for innovations in engineering, the exhibition skilfully inserts Shell into the metanarrative of Dutch science.

Perhaps the most remarkable insertion of Shell is a video starring its director Marjan van Loon in which she reminisces about the role of her company in driving Dutch science and innovation. This short video is part of a larger video installation in which five Dutch scientists reflect on contemporary developments in the 'national' scientific establishment. In the installation, Van Loon is featured among famous professors including two Noble Prize winners. The inclusion of Van Loon and her company not only successfully inserts her into the broader history of (Dutch) science, but simultaneously provides Shell with authority and legitimacy. In contrast to the temporary 'Hidden forces' exhibition, the message of Van Loon is explicitly oriented towards the future. The exhibition references Shell's contribution to solving the energy transition question. Furthermore, a wind turbine is carefully included in the montage of the video. It seems that seven years after the 2011 exhibition in which renewable energy was depicted as illogical for the Netherlands, the wind has miraculously started to blow harder on the Dutch countryside and coast. Ultimately, the exhibition not only positions the energy transition as more practical, but also presents Shell as a key protagonist in renewables.

37 Maas and Cocquyt, *Verborgen Krachten*, 134.

# Olie, straling en vieze lucht

Energiegeschiedenis in objecten

## Onzuivere olie

Omstreeks 1900 boorden Shell en de Koninklijke Olie olievelden aan op Borneo die te veel paraffines en aromaten bevatten. Olielampen gingen ervan walmen. Chemisch technoloog W.C. Knoop jr. startte experimenten om de kwaliteit te verbeteren. Engels onderzoek toonde intussen aan dat deze 'onzuivere' olie bij uitstek geschikt was voor de bereiding van een product in opkomst: benzine. Dit olie-onderzoek markeert het begin van een roemruchte traditie van petrochemisch onderzoek.



▲  
 Figure 3. This museum label is part of the new permanent exhibition in Boerhaave that was launched in 2017 and describes the scientific innovations in petrochemistry enacted by Shell through their explorations in the Dutch colony on Sumatra, Indonesia. Throughout the exhibition small but significant references to Shell are made, inserting the company in the uplifting narrative of the museum about Dutch science and innovation. Picture taken by the authors in July 2021.



One of the museums that has collaborated with the hydrocarbon industry the longest, is the Drents Museum. Located in the same town as the headquarters of the NAM, for a long time, this provincial museum was a modest archaeological museum. They began collaborating with the NAM in 1975 when the company donated part of its geological collection to the museum. In the 1990s, the NAM intensified its association with the museum and inquired if part of the permanent exhibition could be curated around the activities of the company. In 1997, the NAM and the German oil conglomerate Wintershall – both explore oil on the Dutch-German border near Drenthe since 1943 – donated 500,000 guilders (225,000 euros) for the development of the ‘Geo-Explorer object theatre’, a state-of-the-art exhibition providing insights into the geology of the province.<sup>38</sup>

In this exhibition, which remained one of the most interactive attractions of the museum for thirteen years, the deep archaeological history of Drenthe is subtly interwoven with the importance of geological natural resources such as peat, gas, and oil. The craft of oil exploration is embodied through the voice of a local oil driller. In doing so, the exhibition romantically instantiated drilling as a cosmopolitan and technical modern job that contributes to a better understanding of the geology of Drenthe.<sup>39</sup> Earlier designs of the Geo-Explorer exhibition show that previous versions were even more celebratory. But, these designs were explicitly countered by the curators since they did not want the museum to be ‘seen as the extension of the NAM’.<sup>40</sup>

As the museum drastically expanded throughout the 2000s, it underwent a much-needed renovation to accommodate the ever-growing number of visitors. The art and archaeology exhibition was renewed, and the NAM exhibition too was updated and turned into a ‘children’s museum’ (*kindermuseum*). Proudly announced by the NAM in June 2011 as a new exhibition co-created by its own educational department and the staff of the Drents Museum, the exhibition ‘Full of Energy’ (*Boordevol Energie*) immersed children into the complex history of energy extraction and consumption.<sup>41</sup> In a 2011 blogpost on their educational platform ‘Natural Gas in the Classroom’ (*Aardgas in de Klas*), a website for teachers and pupils maintained by the educational service of the NAM, the company hinted

38 Drents Archief, Provinciaal Museum van Drenthe, 523-0028, Draft of sponsor agreement between NAM and Museum 21 April 1997.

39 Drents Archief, Provinciaal Museum van Drenthe, 523-0028, text film driller 14 July 1997.

40 Drents Archief, Provinciaal Museum van Drenthe, 523-0028, fax from Vincent

van Vilsteren to Marcel Hectors 21 July 1997.

41 NAM, ‘Kindermuseum boordevol energie’, *Aardgas in de klas*, 24 June 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20131008024634/http://aardgasindeklas.nl/nieuwsvandenam/nieuws/>. Accessed on 9 August 2021.

that one specific type of energy source would be the focal point of the exhibition, namely, hydrocarbons. The blogpost explicitly legitimised this focus on hydrocarbons: ‘Did you know that we need natural gas to turn on the light and that crude oil is an important resource for making make up or toys?’<sup>42</sup>

The exhibition itself, which was opened to the public in October 2012, encoded a trope that resembled the Netherlands Open Air Museum and National Museum Boerhaave into its displays: namely that ‘modern’ hydrocarbons are highly efficient and sustainable compared to the wieldy energy resources used in the past. Although the NAM intended the exhibition to be an extension of their ‘Natural Gas in the Classroom’-project and incorporated it into its funded school tours, the exhibition itself was less celebratory than the NAM’s public relations (PR) materials initially seemed to suggest. It is clear that the staff of the Drents Museum were the main authors of the exhibition and that they sought to further a different, more balanced narrative. Where the educational materials of the NAM explicitly explore how ‘gas has made the Netherlands rich’ and explain that it is an ecological resource ‘[w]ithout [which] you could actually not live’<sup>43</sup>, the exhibition zoomed in on the importance of energy efficiency and a nascent non-hydrocarbon future. Although some of the NAM discourse about the importance of oil in everyday society had a place in the displays, the exhibition raised pertinent questions about the current state of energy extraction and consumption. Contrary to the 2011-2012 exhibition in National Museum Boerhaave, where the dependency on oil was instantiated as an unescapable reality, it seems that this exhibition – meant for children – foregrounds a much more nuanced and less binary narrative.

In May 2017 this exhibition was updated to ‘*Codename Energy*’. Although this interactive exhibition is again explicitly ‘powered by the NAM’, the message it promotes has become even more nuanced. The updated exhibition is almost singularly focused on climate change and calls on children to solve the energy transition question.<sup>44</sup> Unsurprisingly, the exhibition does not identify the NAM as a cause of global warming. Rather, the exhibition associates the NAM with the environmental cause and identifies the company as an important actor in the renewable energy debate. Still, the exhibition’s discourse positions oil and gas as energy sources of the past, and argues that people need to turn a page, away from hydrocarbons.

42 NAM, ‘Kindermuseum boordevol energie’, *Aardgas in de klas*, 24 June 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20131008024634/http://aardgasindeklas.nl/nieuwsvandenam/nieuws/>. Accessed on 9 August 2021.

43 NAM, ‘Aardgas bij jou thuis’, *Aardgas in de klas*, n.d., <https://web.archive.org/>

<http://www.aardgasindeklas.nl/allesoveraardgas/aardgasbijjouthuis/>. Accessed on 9 August 2021.

44 Jan van Zijverden, ‘Codename: Energy: Kraak de code’, *Drents Museum Magazine* 35:1 (2017) 24-25.

## Searching for money to put the cherry on top of the cake: funding blockbuster exhibitions in a hypercompetitive museum landscape

The so-called *maecenas*, be it a corporate or private patron, has historically played an important role in the Dutch arts and culture sector.<sup>45</sup> However, following the Second World War, the government became the dominant player in the field, and by the early 2000s the tradition of private gifting and corporate philanthropy had lost its significance. Even during the 1980s and 1990s, when neoliberal logic centring around ideas of self-sufficiency and less state intervention became important abroad, the Dutch museum sector remained a sector that was primarily funded by the government.<sup>46</sup>

Although influential non-governmental foundations like the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds raised their profile throughout the 1990s and became increasingly important, it was not until the 2010s that private gifting became of cardinal significance.<sup>47</sup> In 2011, VVD politician and then undersecretary for culture Halbe Zijlstra, presented a new policy for the financing of the cultural sector. The most striking aspect of his policy was, without a doubt, the drastic reduction of 200 million euros a year in funding for various cultural organisations, heritage sites, and museums.<sup>48</sup> On top of these austerity measures, Zijlstra urged for a radical change in the way in which the cultural sector saw its relations with the state and taxpayers. Zijlstra deplored the strong dependency on governmental resources and encouraged the cultural sector to tap into the opportunities for gifts and sponsorships by individuals and businesses. He proposed that the government would stimulate a ‘culture of giving’ among businesses, while simultaneously stimulating a ‘culture of asking’ among cultural institutions.<sup>49</sup>

Perhaps the most consequential impact of this new policy was not the reduction in funding. Rather, the new policy was intrinsically geared at normalising a new morality amongst cultural workers. Through changing the funding criteria, a new logic was promoted in the Dutch cultural sector centring around ‘cultural entrepreneurship’. Already under previous administrations since the 1990s, museums were encouraged to act more like enterprises.<sup>50</sup> Still, quality was the main concern in deciding whether to award an organisation state funding. From 2013 onwards, new funding criteria centred around public outreach (that is visitor numbers), cultural entrepreneurship (that is, the capacity to generate independent income), education, and self-reliance. Museums had to become and act like businesses. Importantly, self-reliance

45 Renée Steenberg, *De Nieuwe Mecenas: Cultuur en de terugkeer van het particuliere geld* (Amsterdam 2009).

46 Roel Pots, *Cultuur, koningen en democraten: Overheid & cultuur in Nederland* (Nijmegen 2000).

47 Halbe Zijlstra, ‘Nieuwe visie cultuurbeleid’, *Tweede Kamer der Staten Generaal*, 32820-1,

10 June 2011, [https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/brieven\\_regering/detail?id=2011Z12464&did=2011D30836](https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/brieven_regering/detail?id=2011Z12464&did=2011D30836). Accessed on 2 November 2019.

48 Zijlstra, ‘Nieuwe visie cultuurbeleid’.

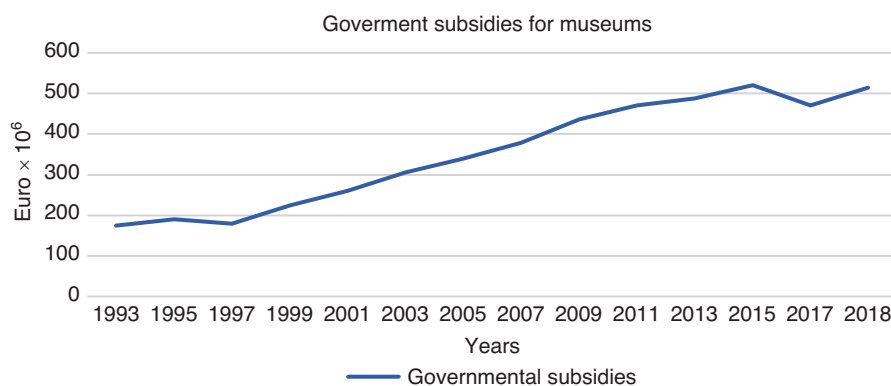
49 Zijlstra, ‘Nieuwe visie cultuurbeleid’.

50 Steenberg, *De Nieuwe Mecenas*.

entailed that each institution had to generate a minimum of 17.5 per cent of independent income of its total budget. What's more, to remain eligible for institutional funding by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, this independent income had to increase by at least 1 per cent a year.<sup>51</sup>

In the Netherlands, cultural institutions aiming for long-term institutional funding from the Dutch government, need to submit a portfolio of their activities and plans to the independent Council for Culture (*Raad voor Cultuur*). Visitor numbers, entrepreneurship, and the magical 17.5 per cent of independent income especially, have become the deciding factors in the 2010s. National Museum Boerhaave is illustrative in this respect. In their 2017-2020 evaluation, the dramatic rise in visitor numbers as well as their collaboration with Shell were lauded as best practices and reason enough for extending state support.<sup>52</sup>

This changed funding structure and undergirding morality drastically altered the cultural field in the Netherlands. Whereas in the period 2009-2012, 179 institutions were funded by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, under the new policy (2013-2016) only 82 cultural players received national support. Although this policy concerns institutions receiving public funding from the national government only, these stringent criteria served as inspiration for the provinces and municipalities that similarly slashed their cultural budgets. Larger institutions and established museums were able to meet these challenging criteria, but many smaller institutions closed down or were absorbed into large organisations. An analysis of the museums' annual budgets included in this study shows that the Netherlands Open Air Museum



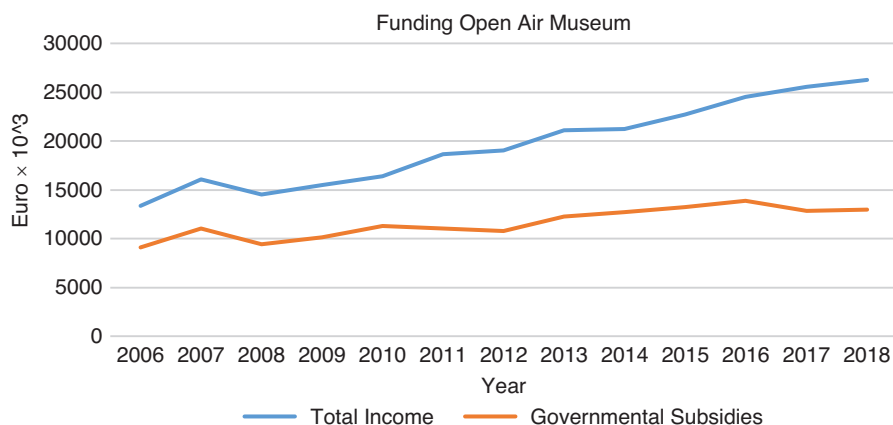
Graph 1. Evolution of the governmental funding for the museum sector, indicating a relative increase for the museum sector in the Netherlands from the mid-1990s. Statistics Netherlands, 'Museum; openstelling, collectie, bezoeken, exploitatie 1993-2009', *Statistics Netherlands*, March 2014, <https://opendata.cbs.nl/#/CBS/nl/dataset/7089mus2/table?ts=1551266367700>; Statistics Netherlands, 'Museum; bedrijfsopbrengsten en -kosten', *Statistics Netherlands*, December 2018, <https://opendata.cbs.nl/#/CBS/nl/dataset/83532NED/table?ts=1629805808563>.

51 Zijlstra, 'Nieuwe visie cultuurbeleid'.

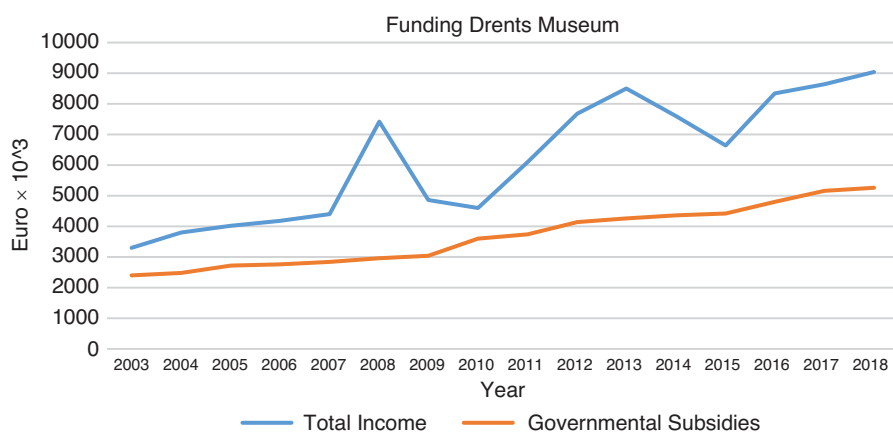
adviezen/museum-boerhaave. Accessed on 2 November 2019.

52 'Museum Boerhaave', *BIS, Raad van Cultuur*,

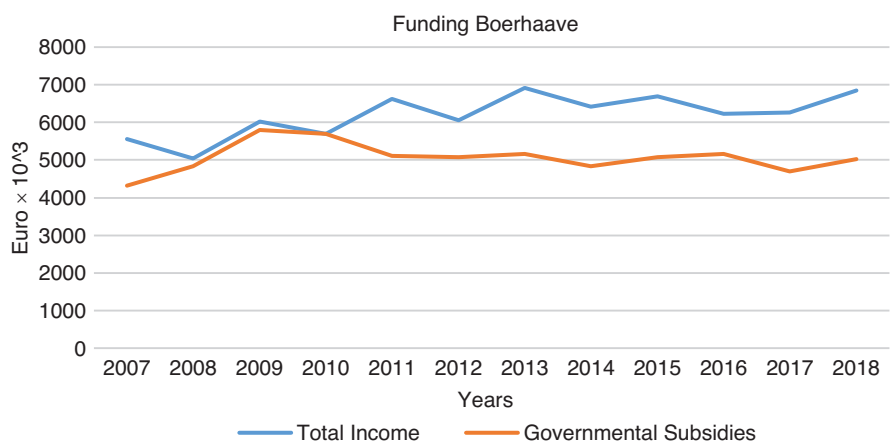
19 May 2016, <http://bis2017-2020.cultuur.nl/>



Graph 2. The total budget of the Netherlands Open Air Museum and the sums received from the government in the period 2006-2018. Annual Reports Open Air Museum 2006-2018.



Graph 3. The total budget of the Drents Museum and the sums received from the government in the period 2003-2018. Annual Reports Drents Museum 2003-2018.



Graph 4. The total budget of National Museum Boerhaave and the sums received from the government in the period 2007-2018. Annual Reports Boerhaave 2007-2018.

and the Drents Museum even received more funding than the years prior to the budget reorganisation (graphs 1 to 4). At the same time, the medium-sized National Museum Boerhaave struggled to maintain its financial position.<sup>53</sup>

At first glance it seems that public funding for the remaining institutions increased, but if one evaluates the funding criteria, it is clear that the available money is earmarked with ambitious requirements. During our interviews, curators and representatives of the financial departments of the Netherlands Open Air Museum and the Drents Museum underlined that the main impact of the new funding structure lays in the more stringent evaluation criteria which emphasise the importance of self-reliance, a balanced budget, and overambitious visitor numbers. A freelance fundraiser told us: ‘Government subsidies are meant to finance the primary goals of a museum (i.e. conservation and presentation of the collection), but not sufficient to pursue our ambitions. Yet we need to realise those ambitions to be eligible for future (other) subsidies and funds’.<sup>54</sup> As a result, so-called ‘blockbuster exhibitions’, high-profile exhibitions on popular topics attracting tens of thousands of visitors, have become a necessity for any museum that wants to fulfil its visitor and return-on-investment quota.<sup>55</sup>

Blockbuster exhibitions originated in the late 1980s, when the first and second Lubbers cabinet enacted a careful reorganisation of the Dutch museum sector.<sup>56</sup> Since Zijlstra, blockbusters proliferated and have become an everyday reality for most museums.<sup>57</sup> Because visitor numbers have become of key importance, both for the evaluation and for the independently generated income requirement, museums are intrinsically competing for visitors. This forces them to pull out all the stops for every blockbuster. As indicated by a curator we interviewed, if one wants to contend in the highly competitive blockbuster landscape, a ‘cherry on the cake’ like an innovative multimedia application is absolutely imperative.<sup>58</sup> Such features drive up the costs of an exhibition even more. As a result, the competition that is inherent to the blockbuster mentality has further ballooned the budgets of many institutions.

National grants, ticket sales, and special funding frameworks for the organisation of temporary exhibitions are insufficient to finance expensive blockbusters. In order to break even, generate the all-important 17.5 per cent independent income, or even limit the losses below a certain threshold, a so-called ‘team development’, staffed with corporate relationship managers, has become a cornerstone of most museums’ organisational structure since

53 Hanneke de Klerck, ‘Museum Boerhaave en Meermannom worden met sluiting bedreigd’, *de Volkskrant*, 2 July 2011, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/museum-boerhaave-en-meermannom-worden-met-sluiting-bedreigd-bddc71b0/>. Accessed on 11 January 2020.

54 Interview with fundraiser on 13 June 2019.

55 Interview with fundraiser on 13 June 2019.

56 Douwe Joost Elshout, *De moderne museumwereld in Nederland: Sociale dynamiek in beleid, erfgoed, markt, wetenschap en media* (Amsterdam 2016) 153.

57 Kiki Kneijens, *Voorbijgaande belevingen of blijvend fenomeen? De plaats van blockbustertentoonstellingen in het Nederlandse museumlandschap* (MA thesis; Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen 2017).

58 Interview with curator on 13 June 2019.



the 2010s. The members of these teams are mainly charged with acquiring funding, ‘asking’ for corporate sponsorships, and maintaining good relations with funders. As a curator told us: ‘Now we have a separate team development. This department has become bigger and more important, because external funding has become more important to us’.<sup>59</sup> These departments also have a say in the exhibitions themselves to ensure they appeal to audiences, current partners, and potential donors alike. A fundraiser told us: ‘The financial staff is part of the design process from the start. Usually, the curators get to decide on the content, but this is a point of contention. The financial department can choose to highlight a different part of the subject or exhibition’.<sup>60</sup>

Despite the growing importance of corporate gifting to museums, it is incredibly difficult to document the exact extent of corporate funding in the total annual budget. Whereas governmental sources are generally justified in detail in the annual budget, sponsorships from non-governmental partners are not explicated, nor are they detailed on the website of the museums or in the catalogues associated with exhibitions. Because of this lack of transparency, we were forced to evaluate the financial impact of corporate players in a more indirect way using the available sources like annual budgets, newspaper statements by corporations or museums, and the museum exhibitions themselves.

In the case of the pumpjack in the Netherlands Open Air Museum, the NAM donated €80,000 for its exploitation for the following ten years. On a total budget of at least €12,000,000 that year, the financial influence of the NAM is clearly limited. This stands in stark contrast with the strong visibility of the company in the museum’s permanent exhibition. Although National Museum Boerhaave is relatively opaque when it comes to the extent of sponsorship by Shell for the ‘Hidden forces’ exhibition, the average contribution of all corporate sponsors in the five years leading up to 2017 (when the new permanent exhibition was opened) was between 1.5 and 4 per cent of the total budget (table 1c). Evidently both National Museum Boerhaave and the Netherlands Open Air Museum provided players from the energy sector with a generous forum to promote their views on fossil fuels.

The Drents Museum has been collaborating with the NAM for over four decades now. The museum staff is aware of this long-standing relationship. A curator told us: ‘We have been working with the NAM for a long period of time. The NAM is a trusted partner of the cultural sector in Drenthe’.<sup>61</sup> Although exact details remain vague and it is unclear what the NAM contributes, during the years when the permanent exhibition was changed (especially the 1997 and the 2017 updates) it contributed significantly to the annual budget. The corporate funding of the museum was especially high in the 1990s. One would expect that sizable corporate funding results in a stronger impact of the patron, an evolution international literature suggests as well.<sup>62</sup> However, in the case

59 Interview with curator on 13 June 2019.

60 Interview with fund raiser on 13 June 2019.

61 Interview with fund raiser on 17 June 2019.

62 Jasmine Proteau, ‘Reducing risky relationships: criteria for forming positive museum-corporate sponsorships’, *Museum Management and*

of the Drents Museum, it seems that a larger financial contribution does not necessarily translate into a stronger reproduction of the funder's vision.

The financial overviews of the yearly budget of the museums studied in this article based on the publicly available annual financial reports. The tables indicate the total budget, the sum of governmental subsidies and the funding received from corporate sponsors.

|      | Total Income | Governmental Subsidies | Corporate Sponsorship |
|------|--------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| 2010 | 16396,5      | 11276,6                | No data               |
| 2011 | 16629,1      | 11026,7                | No data               |
| 2012 | 17020,6      | 10773,9                | No data               |
| 2013 | 21127,3      | 12240,9                | No data               |
| 2014 | 21208,2      | 12702,4                | 148,9                 |
| 2015 | 22734,1      | 13202,9                | No data               |
| 2016 | 24541,1      | 13876,6                | 132,5                 |
| 2017 | 25577,7      | 12866,3                | 290,2                 |
| 2018 | 26244,9      | 12988,9                | 65,5                  |

Table 1a. The Netherlands Open Air Museum (Euro x 10<sup>3</sup>).

|      | Total Income | Governmental Subsidies | Corporate Sponsorship |
|------|--------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| 2010 | 4596,7       | 3610,2                 | No data               |
| 2011 | 6108,2       | 3732,8                 | No data               |
| 2012 | 7682,4       | 4148,7                 | No data               |
| 2013 | 8509         | 4260,7                 | No data               |
| 2014 | 7611         | 4359,6                 | No data               |
| 2015 | 6639,6       | 4425,5                 | No data               |
| 2016 | 8336,4       | 4509,9                 | No data               |
| 2017 | 8644,6       | 4570,8                 | 255,3                 |
| 2018 | 9038,6       | 4643,9                 | 512,5                 |

Table 1b. The Drents Museum (Euro x 10<sup>3</sup>).

|      | Total Income | Governmental Subsidies | Corporate Sponsorship |
|------|--------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| 2010 | 5698,8       | 5232,1                 | No data               |
| 2011 | 6631         | 5102,9                 | No data               |
| 2012 | 6056,1       | 5076,9                 | No data               |
| 2013 | 6921,9       | 5022,7                 | 250,2                 |
| 2014 | 6413,1       | 4829,5                 | 356,1                 |
| 2015 | 6694,7       | 4925,9                 | 272,4                 |
| 2016 | 5910,1       | 5070,2                 | 255,9                 |
| 2017 | 6270,9       | 4495,7                 | 300,1                 |
| 2018 | 6844,5       | 4906,1                 | 312,9                 |

Table 1c. National Museum Boerhaave (Euro x 10<sup>3</sup>).

Our interviews and the financial reports of the institutions clearly indicate that corporate sponsorship has become more important for the museum sector. The Zijlstra policy geared at cultivating a neoliberal morality was extremely successful due to the financial incentive it entailed. Although corporate sponsorship has been slowly increasing since the 2010s, compared to the overall budgets of museums it is remarkably limited. Nonetheless, since these corporate funds are absolutely essential in financing the indispensable additional innovative features of blockbuster exhibitions, or are desperately needed to reach the threshold of 17.5 per cent independently generated income, they significantly prescribe the rules of the game.

Compared to global examples in which energy companies often present themselves as major contributors to the total budget of museums, in the Dutch museum sector minor investments result in a disproportionate impact because of the specific funding structure.<sup>63</sup> Since the investments of the energy corporations are significantly lower than the actual costs of the exhibitions in which they are favourably represented, the remaining costs – which are significant compared to international examples – are carried by public and other private funds. Albeit indirectly, the tax payer funds the PR efforts of energy corporations.

### Enacting 'energy literacy' in a time of growing 'environmental literacy'

Commenting on the corporate patronage in the United Kingdom, Victoria Alexander encourages us to read patronage in the museum sector through the lens of Maussian 'gift exchange'.<sup>64</sup> The French sociologist Marcel Mauss argued that gifting between people or groups consists of a three-phased cycle of giving, receiving, and the obligation to reciprocate.<sup>65</sup> Mutuality is encoded within this transactional dynamic: the receiver needs to compensate. Although this reciprocity is not explicitly defined during the gifting, according to Mauss it is socially encoded in the endowment by the giver. Thus, the nature of the return by the receiver is assembled by them through an interplay between the nature of the gift and an interpretation of the needs and context of the giver. In the case of philanthropy, this means that even if the patron does not explicitly ask for a favour in return to the sponsor contract, the receiver still tends to reciprocate to ensure future gifts.

*Curatorship* 33:3 (2018) 235-242. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2018.1467274>.

63 Chong, 'Tate and BP-Oil and Gas as the New Tobacco?', 180-201; Gertjan Plets, 'Exceptions to Authoritarianism? Variegated sovereignty and ethno-nationalism in a Siberian resource frontier',

*Post-Soviet Affairs* 35:4 (2019) 308-322. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2019.1617574>.

64 Alexander, 'Art and the Twenty-First Century Gift'.

65 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies* (New York 1990).

Alexander argues that corporate players understand this dynamic. The reason why certain industries set up this cycle of gift exchange with museums is because of the respectability of certain cultural institutions. Being associated with these institutions generates reflected glory, which ultimately boosts their self-esteem and brand value. Ultimately, they seek to raise the corporation's profile through its involvement in a sector broadly conceived as apolitical and charitable.<sup>66</sup> This analysis presents corporate patronage in the museum and heritage sector as a type of 'culture washing', which is aimed at assembling the corporation not merely as a profit-driven institution in society but as a socially and culturally engaged 'good citizen'. Through sponsoring, the corporation gains a platform from the museum to raise their profile.

At the same time, growing interest from anthropologists in cultural sponsorship encourages us to see corporate donations as part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) portfolio. Using CSR initiatives, as vast literature argues, big industries attempt to structure the social and political environment in which they operate.<sup>67</sup> CSR is intrinsically political. It is used to normalise certain discourses about economic development and environmentalism. In such a reading, the goal of corporate philanthropy transcends the trope of image management alone, as it is equally about constructing a more favourable understanding of a given industry on the ground. Various examples show that energy and mining conglomerates are especially invested in museums and heritage sites, since they can be strategically employed as cultural technologies to manage the domestic and geopolitical fields of practice in which they operate.<sup>68</sup>

Museums are very powerful in this effort since they are perceived by society as embodying objectivity and value-free messaging. Commenting on the corporate involvement in the cultural sector in the United States and Germany, Mark Rectanus encourages us to conceive the involvement of corporate players in museums as a strategic 'attempt to rewrite social histories of technologies as well as institutional histories'.<sup>69</sup> So, image management, as well as producing and normalising apt discourses in the public sphere, are central aims of corporate patronage. Such discourses can be seen in the energy-sponsored exhibitions in the Netherlands Open Air Museum, National

66 Chong, 'Tate and BP-Oil and Gas as the New Tobacco?', 196; Motion, 'Undoing art and oil', 729; Mel Evans, 'Painting with Oil', *Dissent* 63:2 (2016) 11-15.  
67 Robert Brulle, Melissa Aronczyk and Jason Carmichael, 'Corporate promotion and climate change: an analysis of key variables affecting advertising spending by major oil corporations, 1986-2015', *Climatic Change* 159 (2019) 1-15. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-019-02582-8>; Dinah Rajak, *In Good Company: An Anatomy of Corporate*

*Social Responsibility* (Palo Alto 2016).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804781619>.

68 Coombe and Baird, 'The Limits of Heritage', 337-354; Luke, *A Pearl in Peril*; Fiona Starr, *Corporate Responsibility for Cultural Heritage: Conservation, Sustainable Development, and Corporate Reputation* (New York 2013).

69 Mark Rectanus, *Culture Incorporated: Museums, Artists, and Corporate Sponsorships* (Minneapolis 2002) 18.

Museum Boerhaave, and to a lesser extent the Drents Museum. Through historical narration, Shell and the NAM become embedded within the national narrative. Their technology and industrial activity is positioned as part of historical progress, and contemporary environmental impact is nuanced by drawing attention to specific historically-located benefits, namely the welfare state and the agricultural industry.

Since 2012, raising public understanding on the importance of the hydrocarbon industry has been one of the sector's key goals. Showing themselves aware of the changing societal perception of the gas sector, the 'Top Team Energy' (a collaboration between the major players in the Dutch energy and gas sector), approached a polling company to measure the public support for gas in the Netherlands in 2011.<sup>70</sup> This research indicated that support for this sector had dwindled because of the Groningen earthquakes. To counter this increasingly critical public perception, the Dutch gas sector designed a marketing strategy to influence public discourse.

A key deliverable of the plan was to create 'energy literacy' in Dutch society. For the period 2012-2016 a total of €16.1 million was reserved for educational deliverables, funding cultural projects, redacted columns in the popular press and so on. Although the concept of 'energy literacy' is never explicitly defined in the strategy plan, it is clear that the concept centres around promoting an interpretative framework that encourages people to read about and recognise 'the facts' about, and positive sides of gas.<sup>71</sup> These 'facts' include gas' environmental benefits, its contribution to the Dutch economy, and its necessity for the national energy supply. It is believed that this energy literacy helps counter the growing ecological literacy and environmentalism, undermining public support for hydrocarbons.

The narratives studied above clearly overlap with the strategy of cultivating energy literacy. This overlap, both in timing and content, however, does not mean that the exhibitions discussed in this article are direct products of the PR offices of the gas industry. Unfortunately, it is incredibly difficult to trace how exhibitions are made, since internal documentation about the development of exhibitions was not available to us. That being said, interviews with curators, taken together with the impressive archive of the Drents Museum about the 1997 Geo-Explorer exhibition, signal how curators operate independently from the corporation and define the design and content of exhibitions.

In our interviews, museum representatives emphasised that they would have moral objections to direct company orders. This is also something that frequently comes up in the interpersonal communication preserved in

70 Topteam Energie, 'Gas in Balans. Innovatiecontract Gas', *Topsector Energie*, 5 February 2012, <https://www.topsectorenergie.nl/sites/default/files/uploads/TKI%20Gas/>

InnovatieContract-Gas-2012.pdf. Accessed on 4 November 2019.

71 Topteam Energie, 'Gas in Balans', 8.

the archive of the Geo-Explorer exhibition. The liaison officer of the NAM assisting with the development of the exhibition would promote content following corporate discourses. The officer's suggestions were continuously redacted and countered by the curators. When comparing the content supplied by the NAM for Geo-Explorer and the final product, the agency of the curators becomes very apparent.<sup>72</sup>

At the same time, as both the interviewees and archival materials indicate, exhibitions might be developed by the museum, but in the end, power relations between the patron and receiver propel the receiver to further some pro-corporate narratives to keep major donors close. The fact that representatives of major corporate patrons are part of the supervisory board of the studied museums further complicates the position of curators. A former Shell commissar, for instance, sits on the supervisory board of the Netherlands Open Air Museum.

Ossifying a good relationship is of key importance since museums rarely seek ad-hoc collaboration. Long-term sponsorship is more desirable in a sector where stability is imperative. This means that in the cycle of reciprocity the receiver must return the gift, so museum curators need to maintain a favourable relationship with their patrons. As indicated above, in some of the museums the 'team development' ensures that there is enough reciprocity.

Although there are great benefits to exploring philanthropy in the museum sector using a Maussian lens, modern patronage in the Dutch cultural field is not restricted to the tripartite giving-receiving-reciprocating. Since the implementation of the Zijlstra policy, museums are forced to *ask* for gifts even more than they already were during previous years. Although this act of soliciting for patronage has not been theorised at length, Alexander briefly points out how this transforms the power relations within the gift-giving cycle. Apart from providing the corporation with even more legitimacy, it forces the receiver to profoundly ascribe to the needs of the giver and to 'take on, at least at the surface level, the cultural beliefs of the giver'.<sup>73</sup> Consequently, as soon as the receiver asks for sponsorship, their agency is restricted, and the reciprocation is restructured in favour of the giver even more.

This difference between voluntary and solicited gifts becomes apparent in the examples in this study too. In the case of the Drents Museum, archival materials show that it was the NAM who approached the museum to develop an exhibition about its core business. This financial partnership continues to this day. Although the beliefs of the NAM are still subtly interwoven in the exhibitions' narrative, both in the Geo-Explorer and the

72 Drents Archief, Provinciaal Museum van Drenthe, 523-0028.

73 Ilana Silber, 'Modern Philanthropy: Reassessing the Viability of a Maussian Perspective', in:

Wendy James and Nick Allen (eds.), *Marcel Mauss: A Centenary Tribute* (Oxford 1998) 134-150; Alexander, 'Art and the Twenty-First Century Gift', 371.



more recent exhibitions for children, the discourse is much more nuanced and less laudatory in spite of substantial corporate support. While the Drents Museum *received* gifts, the representatives of the Netherlands Open Air Museum stressed that *asking* for gifts has become an extremely important task for them in the Dutch post-Zijlstra landscape. Although National Museum Boerhaave refused collaboration, internal PR material points to a climate where the museum actively solicits for gifts from Shell and other multinationals.<sup>74</sup> When exploring the energy discourse at the Netherlands Open Air Museum and National Museum Boerhaave, one can discern a drastically different narrative when compared to the Drents Museum: the former are much more directly in line with the needs and interests of the energy industry.

Only better access to sponsorship contracts and a greater overall transparency into corporate sponsored exhibitions will provide us with detailed insights into the divergent dynamics between voluntary and solicited gifts. Nevertheless, a contextual reading of the disparate representations of the hydrocarbon sector in the museums discussed here, points to a different relationship between the patron and the beneficiary. The difference between asking and receiving might encode unique power relations in philanthropic gifts, which likely explains more pro-corporate narratives. At the same time, collaborating with the energy sector for so many years has provided the Drents Museum with more institutional experience to mitigate corporate pressure.

### Conclusions: when public money funds corporate messages

In the Netherlands, up to the late 2000s, private involvement in the museum and heritage sector was limited. The advent of austerity-driven policies in 2011 promoting corporate philanthropy changed this. Although the contributions from corporate players are relatively small when compared to state funding, their impact is especially poignant due to the changed funding criteria. Because it is imperative to finance costly 'blockbusters' and to reach the 17.5 per cent benchmark of independently generated income, every euro from a corporate partner is extremely valuable.

Clearly, not every euro in a museum's budget is equal. Corporate sponsors are more powerful, despite making relatively limited financial contributions. Because of these power structures, non-state players have a profound impact on how the past is represented in Dutch public-funded museums. This article explored how strategic investments by Shell and

74 'Reddingsplan Boerhaave is nog in de maak', *Leidsch Dagblad*, 11 June 2011; Dirk van Delft, 'De vrienden van Museum Boerhaave. Presentatie congres podiumkunsten', *Slideshare*, 29 May

2012, <https://www.slideshare.net/Bureaupp/de-vrienden-van-museum-boerhaave-congres-podiumkunsten-2012>. Accessed on 8 December 2019.

the NAM resulted in museum exhibitions that favourably represent the increasingly contested Dutch gas industry. Themes like national modernisation and the deep historical entanglements of the fossil fuel industry were foregrounded in a historical exhibition to the detriment of environmental narratives. Eventually, the tax-payer indirectly funds these pro-hydrocarbon narratives, since corporate support is often too small to cover all the expenses of the temporary or permanent exhibitions in which they take centre stage.

Besides exploring the link between funding structures and representational practices, an important goal of this study was to trace the sociocultural dynamics and power relations elicited by corporate philanthropy. Although insight into the decision-making processes is complicated by a lack of transparency, it is evident that museum exhibitions are not designed by the corporations themselves. Curators at museums maintain agency and can counter corporate propaganda. Archival materials and interviews show that curators are aware of the politics of corporate funding and have little interest in being an extension of the corporation. The indirect effects of corporate funding can be better understood when analysed through a Maussian lens. In a political climate where state funding is increasingly earmarked and competition is fierce, corporate funding becomes more and more valuable. This seems to restrict the agency of the museum, ultimately ensuring that the needs of the funder become explicitly interwoven in the narrative of the exhibition.

Moreover, our findings suggest that not all museums engage with corporate funding in the same way. The Drents Museum seemed to produce a more nuanced narrative concerning gas extraction and consumption, despite receiving a larger financial contribution. On the other hand, the Netherlands Open Air Museum and National Museum Boerhaave do emulate the 'energy literacy' discourse of the oil and gas sector profoundly. We hypothesise that this discrepancy can be explained by the difference in the type of gift. In the case of the Drents Museum the NAM approached the museum first to provide funding. The other two museums received the gifts in a period where soliciting for financial support had become the dominant mode of seeking patronage. Thus, the difference between voluntary and solicited gifts impacts the nature of reciprocation.

The interpretations in this study are speculative and will remain so due to the limited amount of data available in the public records. It is a heartfelt hope of the authors that the findings of this study will be challenged and reevaluated. The authors found it disturbingly difficult to get a hold of information in the public domain. This is problematic since all three museums are still predominantly funded by taxpayers. We believe greater transparency is a first important step towards increased accountability. This will also encourage, rather than tamp down, future research because of a lack of data.

Further research will enable us to start conversations about best practices and rules of engagement. Corporate sponsorship has always been a key element of the museum sector and during times when neoliberal logics texture the bedrock of contemporary society it is expected that philanthropy will become even more important for the heritage and museum sector.

## Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the editors of *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* for their interest in this paper and their suggestions. We would also like to praise the two anonymous reviewers who provided encouraging feedback and relevant literature recommendations. Throughout the course of this paper different interlocutors provided us with documentation, insights, gossip, and confidential information. A big thank you goes out to all of our interlocutors. None of the confidential information is shared here. This research has been financed by UGLOBE centre for global challenges. Kees Müller redacted the final version of this paper.

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