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ANALYSIS

Chapter 40

Negotiating Diversity with Heritage: Making the Case for Artistic Engagement

BRENDA BARTELINK AND GABRIELA BUSTAMANTE

Cultural Encounters

How can artistic means be utilized to foster encounters between the different heritages of different communities? Why is art an important way to engage with cultural or religious heritage in addition to museum visits? What is lost in a secular approach to heritage? What is the problem of a cultural project of "inclusion" that focuses on passive engagement with the dominant culture?

This chapter explores how African Dutch women in the city of The Hague interacted with heritage in the context of a participatory project in which they engaged with heritage in an artistic manner. The Hague, much like other European cities, has become increasingly diverse in the course of the twentieth century. As de-churching and secularization unfolded among the Dutch majority population, new forms of spiritual practice emerged outside and in response to institutional religions (Berghuijs, Pieper, and Bakker 2013). Immigration simultaneously contributed to a rise in non-European Christianities, Hinduism, Buddhism, and in particular Islam. This means that "Europe's others, who were ideologically and conceptually distanced through colonialism and deemed to be far away, are now co-present with secular atheists, protagonists of Christian religion 'as we know it' and spiritual seekers" (Meyer 2018). The copresence and entanglements of different religious and secular groups challenges Western European understandings and experiences of the world, as these can no longer be assumed to be universal. Contemporary European cities can therefore be seen as frontier zones (Meyer 2018). In such contexts, religious heritage can be considered as boundary objects (Leigh-Star 2010), or "objects at the intersection of different and often competing communities of interpretation, practice, and association" (Chidester 2018).

Yet, the potential of religious heritage to create space for active engagement with diversity matters is contested. So-called secular guardians, for example, museums and galleries, struggle to connect with diverse communities in society and the complex and layered meanings of religious heritage for them (Wijnia 2018). In addition, as Meyer notes in her introductory essay to this handbook, religious heritage is increasingly being co-opted by dominant narratives about Dutch national identity. This means that a secular, seemingly neutral, and distant approach to religious heritage may lead to privileging the loudest voices, while overlooking or sidelining the voices of







communities not in the position to engage with religious heritage and art. A secular approach to heritage may perpetuate fundamental historical inequalities, while heritage and art also have the potential to bring to live the multiple histories of religious experience and practice and the power relations in which these are embedded (e.g., Rosen, this volume).

In this chapter, we consider the potential of religious heritage to elicit conversations between people of diverse cultural, religious, and nonreligious backgrounds on how they understand themselves in relation to diverse communities in society. We understand this potential as threefold, following three related challenges we observe for religious heritage as outlined below: reflexive, explorative, and artistic.

Heritage "explorative" potential as its visual and material entry into the diverse meanings people attach to the visibility and meaning of religion (Beekers and Tamimi Arab 2016, Beekers 2017). While religious heritage is seen as a reflection of the historical formation of religion and society, engagement with religious heritage in the present creates space for exploring various and diverging sensibilities. As Wallace notes, "Implicit in the notion of heritage is a richness of some kind—traditions earned, trades passed on, a sense of pride, things worth having and rights to these things. These terms have an emotional quality to them and relate to things that strike a chord with us at a fundamental level" (Wallace 2013). Religious heritage visualizes and materializes diverse and changing forms of religious and ritual praxis around life and death. As such it holds potential to explore how religion comes into play in the everyday lives of people in diverse contexts (Ammerman 2007; Knibbe and Kupari 2020). Heritage, in other words, is not a form on which meaning is projected, but an entry point for experiencing and giving meaning to religious diversity through forms of storytelling and dialogue that are elicited.

In addition, religious heritage has "reflexive" potential that brings in more fundamental questions of power around, and in relation to heritage and art. Religious diversification in Europe takes place in the context of secular formations, which often include that religion is thought to be a largely private affair. When visible in the public domain religion is easily becoming subject of ridicule, contestation, and conflict. This happens against the background of a longer protestant/secular history that has advocated a strict separation between the material and immaterial, immanent, and transcendent dimensions of life (Chidester 2018). Christian colonial and missionary projects have profoundly influenced the religious and secular formations of contemporary societies across the globe, as well as the particular histories and positions of white Christian communities in The Netherlands (e.g., Stegeman 2021). Religious heritage bears witness to these complex and violent histories. It holds potential for reflection on one's situatedness in relation to these histories, as well as how this informs current power relations.

Finally, we argue that religious heritage has artistic potential. Art, more than heritage, inspires new and alternative imaginaries (e.g., Wijnia 2018: 32). This case study looks at what emerges in the context of engaging with heritage in a creative and artistic manner. As we will demonstrate below, from such artistic engagements with heritage new imaginaries of living together in diversity can emerge. Our case study engages with Delft Blue, which is not a "religious" form of heritage. This was a conscious choice at the time, given that the project focused on women. Following the lived religion approach introduced earlier, we were interested in religion when and how women themselves would bring it up avoiding working with heritage that had a particular gendering (e.g., Bartelink et al. 2020). While this means that this particular case study does not speak directly to religious heritage, it offers the religious heritage sector an example to think on



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how religious heritage can become hybrid and inclusive. As we will argue, artistic engagement offers great potential for this.

Delft Blue as Method

This chapter presents findings from a research project entitled *Designing the Body*, which centered around a process of making Delft Blue porcelain figurines with participants in the study, to elicit stories and conversation in a playful manner. Designing the Body introduced diverse material and visual forms while inviting participants to bring in the aesthetics and stories from their own lives. The figurines themselves were inspired by Mexican Lupita Dolls, a local Mexican translation of Spanish porcelain dolls that Bustamante uses in her design practice (Esparragoza 2011). The painting technique, inspired by the Dutch tradition of Delft Blue, played a central role in the project. It offered a visual language for working on the embodied experiences and representations of the roles of women in society, and a narrative that allowed for further reflection on the interaction of mixed heritage and identities by the participants.

Delft Blue porcelain, which is now considered typically Dutch, started to be produced by the ceramic workshops in Delft from 1620. At that point the import of Chinese porcelain dropped, and a market emerged for local production and distribution of the blue and white ceramics that were so fashionable among the bourgeoisie (Eliens et al. 2003). Transitioning from a Chinese import to a domestic product, the visual language of Delft Blue changed over the centuries. Chinese landscapes or motifs were replaced with different aspects of Dutch lifestyle such as sea and landscapes, folkloric wisdom, music, sentiments of patriotism, religion, and also about royalty and war (e.g., Eliens et al. 2003: 28). Delft Blue ceramics became connected to Dutch identity, currently mostly visible in the tourist industry, where Delft Blue windmills, wooden shoes, tulips, as well as the kissing couple are today sold as souvenirs to visitors to the Netherlands.

The research project entitled "Designing the Body" was a participatory project initiated by researcher Brenda Bartelink, designer Gabriela Bustamante and community organizer Lerina Kwamba. We created it as a process in which engaging with visual and material forms such as fabric and objects elicited storytelling in a material, visual, and embodied way. After an introduction workshop (Let's Meet), we organized an excursion to the Royal Delft Museum to explore various aspects and dimensions of Delft Blue and its history (Let's Talk). This initiative led to various new activities proposed and planned by the participants in collaboration with the project team. These activities included a workshop to paint the figurines (Let's Create), and a closing with an exhibition of stories and figurines (Let's See), as well as a fashion show, various workshops, and cultural activities.

In the following section, we will describe the explorative and reflexive moments that emerged when the participants interacted with Delft Blue, followed by a section devoted to the artistic engagement with Delft Blue in which they replicated its aesthetics in their own manner.

Engaging with Delft Blue

For participants in *Designing the Body*, their first encounter with Delft Blue often predated their arrival to the Netherlands as they were familiarized with the designs on commercial or practical products:

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"Delft Blue, that is what you see in rich people's houses in Congo, does that come from the Netherlands?", says a participant. "Yes," says another participant, "I always buy it before I go to Zambia to visit my family." Glancing over the tiny pair of Delft Blue "wooden" shoes on the table, a participant from Sierra Leone shares that she has seen women, white nuns from Europe, wearing those shoes when they worked their gardens. She only now realizes these nuns might have been Dutch.²

These examples suggest that the content of these products was more interesting than the packaging or branding itself. Only after arriving in the Netherlands, when they bought souvenirs, participants reported that they experienced a connection between the Delft Blue design and the Netherlands. At that point their own relation to these objects fundamentally changed, as they now bought it to mark their residence in The Netherlands when traveling back to their countries of origin. The anthropologist Tim Ingold refers to this "process in which beings or things literally answer to one another over time" as correspondence (Ingold 2017: 14). Correspondence emphasizes the importance of going along in the relationship between people and things to observe which forms of becoming emerge from within these experiences.

When the participants first related to the Delft Blue objects we introduced, we observed that new associations and stories emerged from within. Experiences with similar related products now established a connection between Dutch and African cultures, and the objects became part of participants' histories. Engaging with the objects and their aesthetics allowed for exploring the various meanings participants attach to Delft Blue in particular phases of their lives.

The relation to the Delft Blue objects changed, when we decided to organize a visit to Royal Delft, a museum on the history of Delft Blue. The blown-up Delft Blue images and beauty of the pieces and museum engaged the participants in the project in a very direct and visual manner. The visit to Royal Delft created a positive connection to The Netherlands and Dutch history for many of the women that participated. One participant expressed the following:

I really enjoyed this visit to Royal Delft, I think that if I had been brought here when I arrived to The Netherlands, it would have been easier for me to want to learn more about the country and be less busy [worried] about why I am here. I didn't know that Delft Blue was used to tell about Dutch History. In this way I find it more beautiful to see and easy to learn.

During the visit the group stood immersed in Delft Blue. Participants pointed at objects that reminded them of a memory or story they wanted to share about themselves or that helped them get a better grip about a part of the history of the Netherlands. This elicited conversations on beauty, personal taste, and aesthetics, as well as on the history of colonialism and international trade of The Netherlands as well as on the challenges in (re-)building their lives in The Netherlands. It seemed as if reading its beautiful white and blue narrative invited the participants to be with the inherent complexity of integration.

In addition to the explorative conversations, more reflexive conversations on how participants understood themselves in the context of The Netherlands were elicited. As we have argued







elsewhere (Bartelink et al. 2020), the realization that Delft Blue has Chinese origins and the designs have changed overtime, invited reflections on Dutch culture as hybrid and open. As the women "corresponded" with Delft Blue, the contrast between integration and citizenship procedures and women's lived experiences with "becoming" Dutch alongside Tanzanians, Ethiopians, Congolese, or Zambians became apparent. In the first the focus is on intentionality, acquiring enough knowledge (on Dutch society) and skills (language) to pass citizenship exams. In the latter the emphasis is on *attentionality*, or "the process of going along with things, opening up to them and doing their bidding" (Ingold 2017: 23). As we observed this process of attentionality emerging among the participants, it also became apparent that this required the project to evolve along with this. This included a soft focus on intended outcomes (e.g., the Delft Blue figurines as the intended art work), and a lot of space for building relations between people and the material. This included space for watching the Delft Blue, sharing associations, and stories, for sharing food, for creativity, and for attention for each other.

Making and Playing with Delft Blue

When visiting Royal Delft Blue some of the participants showed up in blue and white dresses, signaling that exploring something new is not only done by action but that it is also embodied. Through these embodied dimensions of storytelling, participants engaged with Delft Blue in an artistic manner even before we invited them to do so more explicitly through painting a figurine in Delft Blue technique (Figure 40.1).

Haimanot Belay, for example, who loved Delft Blue before the visit to the museum, decided to paint Dutch symbols such as the tulip as well as Ethiopian symbols such as the Ethiopian Orthodox crucifix on her figurine.

I made a Delft Blue representing my Ethiopian and my Dutch identity. Using Ethiopian and Dutch symbols. I used to be Ethiopian, but I have lived in the Netherlands for twenty years, and now people do not see me as Ethiopian anymore. Migrants always have this problem. I am both and you can see that in how I love the Delft Blue colors.

For her Delft Blue is a language in which she expresses her belonging in two cultures, the Netherlands and Ethiopia: "Delft Blue is a symbol for the encounters, the friendships and the loving dimension of Dutch society" (Bartelink et al. 2020).³ The personal meanings Haimanot attaches to Ethiopian orthodox religion found their way on her figurine, expressing that this is entangled with her everyday experience of being Ethiopian. This process of bringing together apparently unrelated things, for example, Delft Blue objects, cultural and religious identifications and experiences of becoming part of Dutch society, is conceptualized as making bisociations (Koestler qtd. in Sanders and Stappers 2013). In the following we will demonstrate how bisociations transform existing ideas through the engagement with material and visual objects.

While Haimanot's figurine is in many ways the kind of outcome we envisioned at the start of the project, other participants moved in different directions with their creations. Bahia Kihondo, for example, was not interested in making a figurine, but chose to design dresses instead. We









FIGURE 40.1 Left: Figurine painted with Delft Blue technique by Haimanot. Right: Processional cross from Amhara Region, Ethiopia.

Source: left, Brenda Bartelink, right: Wikimedia Commons.

want to explore her story in more detail here. Bahia, who migrated to the Netherlands from Tanzania, explained that she was immediately impressed by hand painted tiles at the entrance and in the main room inside the museum. Like other participants, she enjoyed learning about her 'new home country' through such beautiful things. Bahia was fascinated in particular, by a couple of dresses exhibited in the museum's shop made from silk with a contemporary version of Delft Blue prints. An experienced tailor and designer herself, she could establish a personal connection with the material and visual culture of Delft Blue.

Bahia learned the basics of cutting and sewing from a tailor living next door to her in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. In the Netherlands she began making clothes because she felt a need to engage in something creative, that would distract her from the difficult times she was going through as a refugee. She also saw it as a means to generate some income for her household. After the visit to Royal Delft Museum, Bahia indicated that—instead of painting a figurine—she was interested in designing dresses with Delft Blue printed fabric under her new fashion brand "Holland Wax Fashion." Following her visit to Royal Delft Blue, Bahia's aesthetic ambition was to search for the similarities between Dutch traditional garments and those of Tanzania and combine them into wearable dresses. The bright white collars, worn by Dutch in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and exhibited in the museum reminded her of the colorful-beaded collars traditionally worn in Tanzania (Figure 40.2). Furthermore, the diverse tones of blue used in Delft Blue reminded her of the tie-dye technique used to make the "khanga" (traditional Tanzanian garment). She integrated these aspects from both cultures into the dresses she made, which were shown at the closing event of the project. Different from Haimanot, her identification as a Muslim did not emerge as a theme in her artistic work.









FIGURE 40.2 Left: Model showing a design by Bahia Kihondo. Top right: Maasai necklace. Bottom right: The Regentesses of St. Elizabeth Hospital, Haarlem.

Source: left: Brenda Bartelink, right: Wikimedia Commons.

Both Bahia and Haimanot demonstrated that Delft Blue became a visual language that they could make their own and utilize in a way to express their multiple belongings. In other words, Delft Blue turned out to be an accessible aesthetic. Yet this only happened when they were introduced to Delft Blue as a visual and material form that was at once clear enough in terms of its "Dutchness" and hybrid enough to be used as a way of representing their multiple identities. Building on the previous section, we can see that Haimanot and Bahia were able to transform existing ideas on Dutchness (a form of belonging they work hard for but never fully arrive at) into a new Dutchness that is a becoming, as it brings together their multiple identities and multiple senses of belonging. Aesthetics in particular, seemed to invite the attentionality that elicited reflections on how participants experienced themselves as part of a new culture with its own histories of becoming. The concrete, material, and sensory experience in relation to Dutch heritage was crucial in this process.

Religious Heritage as Space for Diverse Conversations

In this case study we have demonstrated how creative engagement with the heritage of Delft Blue elicited conversations between African-Dutch women, about Dutch history, identity, and multiple belongings. The visit to Royal Delft Blue, the informal interactions while walking through the museum, taking pictures, sharing food afterwards, the making of Delft Blue objects, viewing and presenting them, were all part of the process of engaging with Delft Blue. Relating to heritage in a process of attentional, creative engagement—as was visible in Bahia and Haimanot's visual and storytelling work in particular—confirms that thinking happens through making (e.g.,







Ingold 2013). The case study has furthermore demonstrated heritage can offer "ways in" to conversations between societal actors from diverse religious, irreligious and secular backgrounds to understand and experience religious diversity (Wallace 2013). As the visit to Royal Delft Museum demonstrated, the exploring of how heritage was shaped and adapted historically, opened up conversations about the histories of colonial trade and colonization, as well as about the hybridity of culture.

In the introduction we have outlined the potential of religious heritage to elicit conversations between people of diverse cultural, religious, and nonreligious backgrounds on how they understand themselves (and each other) in the context of society. We have introduced this potential as threefold: reflexive, explorative, and artistic. The Delft Blue project demonstrates that these three happen in interaction. It was not only seeing Delft Blue objects that sparked off the interaction and reflection. The possibility of replicating its beauty, of identifying as part of it, and using it to tell a meaningful story that can be shared with others, were fully part of the explorative and reflexive conversations and stories that emerged out of it.

The question that emerges is whether engaging with religious heritage could elicit conversations about religion, identity, and diversity? As a boundary object in a religiously diverse society, religious heritage has the potential of bring the religious/secular history of The Netherlands into conversation. Bartelink has worked intensively with African religious leaders in The Netherlands (e.g., Bartelink 2020), who often expressed their surprise and curiosity about the Dutch history of religious transformation and secularization. Religious heritage offers a unique and important material and visual space for exploration and reflexive engagement with diverse groups on the cultural formations of religion and secularity in The Netherlands.

However, engagement with religious heritage may be challenging. Haimanot's visualization of the Ethiopian crucifix demonstrates that religion did come up because it was important to her. In a casual conversation on "hoofddoekjes" (head coverings) following a demonstration by one of the women on tying a headscarf the Congolese way (e.g., Bartelink et al. 2020) religion was notably absent. This casualness is important. If religion would have been more directly part of the project, the conversation probably would not have happened in this way, as conversations on religion in relation to gender are often politically charged and tend to obscure women's everyday religiosities. Furthermore, it is the question whether religious boundary objects allow for such playful and creative engagement. Religious heritage easily becomes subject of contestation within and across religious communities, as well as in a broader secular dominant context (Verkaaik, Beekers, and Tamimi Arab 2016). Would Bahia's conversation between Delft Blue and Tanzanian visual and aesthetic been possible when this happened with religious boundary objects from the Netherlands and Tanzanian contexts?

Posing this question, we do not suggest that secular heritage would then be more useful in bridging differences or circumventing politics within and around religions in secular societies. The exhibition with multicultural Delft Blue kissing couples by Bustamante during Dutch Design Week 2017 is a case in point, as it was followed by a short media storm that included racist and sexist comments questioning the Dutchness of the couple of which the female figurine was wearing a headscarf (To Kiss or not to Kiss n.d.). This example speaks to the importance of being aware that heritage is not equally owned by all populations in society. However, we would argue that it is precisely because heritage leads us into reflecting on these sensibilities that it has potential to enable broader conversations.



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One of the advantages of Delft Blue was perhaps that it has an easy aesthetic read. This invites the type of engagement that enables a process of co-creation with and between various groups and people. It is up to the heritage sector to determine which forms of religious heritage can be creatively experienced by everyone, regardless of their religion, culture, gender, class, ethnicity, or other positionings, while opening up to reflections on this at the same time. Based on the Delft Blue project, we suggest this requires an attentional and relational process without a predetermined outcome.

Notes

- 1 The project has received funding from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific funding in the KIEM program (stimulating collaborative projects between designers and researchers). Project partners Bustamante and Kwamba (via her community based organization Kariboe Bibi) offered material contributions to the project. The closing event and exhibition obtained additional funding for activity costs that could not be covered under the research grant from small private fund Stichting Vrienden van Oikos.
- 2 Notes from the Let's Meet workshop, BB.
- 3 C.f. Bartelink et al. (2020) for a more extended analysis of Haimanot's story.

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