



# Assessing a museum collection: the matter of value

The reorganisation of a museum collection can be complicated. That was the case of the *former Museum Nusantara* (Delft), the only museum in the Netherlands solely devoted to Indonesia, comprising approximately 18,000 objects, as well as a library. Due to financial reasons, the museum closed its doors in 2013 and decisions had to be made regarding the new destination of its collection. It was a prolonged and complex endeavour due to the colonial origins of the collection and the fact that such a large-scale relocation and repatriation process was unknown until then, both on national and international levels. The Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands (RCE) was involved in this process, together with Erfgoed Delft and the National Museum of World Cultures, to ensure that the valuation of the collection and the guidelines for deaccessioning museum objects were rightfully applied.

Managing museum items or collections involves making choices. Which objects should be restored or given additional protection? Which objects should be exhibited or reallocated? And why? A collection manager is required to assess – or value – the various museum objects when apportioning budgets, submitting grant applications or drawing up evacuation plans. Valuation means to assign reasoned value to items, parts of or entire collections, by testing them against established criteria. This task plays an essential role in the work of collection managers, as it enables informing decisions regarding the preservation, protection, development and use of such objects.

This is, however, a complex endeavour as not all objects are equally important and valued, and the views of what is considered valuable change over time, depending on prevailing scientific views and the taste of the age. To help with this intricate task, the RCE developed a new system for assessing museum collections, aimed at anyone engaged in the professional management of a collection. A practical guide entitled *Assessing museum collections. Collection valuation in six steps (2014)*, has been published on the RCE's website to explain this new approach to valuation step by step.



*Former Museum Nusantara (above) and set of traditional musical instruments from the former Nusantara Collection (below) (photos: Museum Prinsenhof Delft).*

This method elaborates on earlier valuation methods and criteria, but it includes significant improvements. Its starting point is the assumption that there is always a reason for a valuation and that there are various possible perspectives from which to assess a collection. The publication highlights new and current valuation criteria and explains how value scores should be supported by arguments. It keeps the number of criteria to a minimum while still covering all relevant aspects of value. The publication and the valuation form it includes categorise and describe the most commonly used criteria – such as condition, artistic value, information value, provenance – into features and 3 main groups – culture historical, social and use –, thus facilitating the valuation process.



*In 2014, the Limburgs Museum in Venlo made use of the valuation method to support the development of the museum's collection plan. The museum's four curators, each with their own expertise, were asked to apply the valuation method to their collections. This enabled them to oversee the opportunities and shortcomings of the collections and it provided the museum with a tool to initiate discussions on acquisition and deaccessioning. The conclusions of the collection plan can be found here, in Dutch (photo: Limburgs Museum).*

Other important aspects of this method include the fact that it can be applied at different levels – individual items, sub-collections and entire collections –, and it can be used in different types of collections – art history, ethnology, technology, academic, cultural history, maritime, etc. This method provides an opportunity to define a reference framework and to pinpoint the stakeholders, and it can be used to identify opportunities for value development.



*Storage of paintings in one of the depots of the Limburgs Museum (photo: Limburgs Museum).*

The publication *Assessing Museum Collections* explains in detail the valuation process in six distinct steps, which are illustrated with examples of the application and usefulness of the method.

Furthermore, the publication includes several interviews through which professionals in the Netherlands share their experience regarding their use of the method. Indeed, the method has been applied in several Dutch museums, for different purposes. Examples of that are the Limburgs Museum in Venlo and the Zuiderzeemuseum in Enkhuizen.

This method is particular in its openness, as it assumes value ideas change over time, as well as ideas about who values heritage. Typically, this type of valuation has been almost exclusively reserved for professionals such as art and architectural historians, archaeologists, archivists, librarians and historians. In museums, this task has mostly fallen to curators, who tend to express valuation in scientific or culture-historical terms. However, the world is changing – politically, socially, economically – and so too is the way we view heritage and valuation. Nowadays, “experts” are no longer viewed as the sole authority on the value of heritage and this method reinforces this change; it recommends that the members of the valuation team come from different backgrounds, in order to contribute with different kinds of knowledge, and thus help cultivate a more nuanced view of a collection.

The final outcome of a valuation process represents the foundation for new decisions and actions. It can be used in different ways to underpin a museum's remit, to communicate the significance of a collection and to better fulfil the professional role of collection manager. A valuation can also serve as a basis for collection policy and planning. It assesses the relative values of museum objects and collections, to make decisions about interventions and to talk about conflicting interests. It can also make the stories behind the collection more accessible, increase visitors' engagement with the collection and explain why museum items and collections deserve protection and care.



*Vases and carafes produced by Kristalunie Maastricht, shown in the permanent exhibition *Limburg ... a perpetual motion of recreation* at the Limburgs Museum (photo: Limburgs Museum).*

Returning to the case of the Museum Nusantara, with the supervision of RCE valuation experts Tessa Luger and Geertje Huisman, the method outlined above proved to be very useful in the process of assessing and redistributing the objects from its collection. The entire collection has been assigned to a number of new owners in the Netherlands, elsewhere in Europe and in Asia. From the start, the goal was to offer as much as possible of the collection to Indonesia. That has succeeded – the Museum Nasional Indonesia in Jakarta made a selection of approximately 1,500 pieces, which will be conserved by the museum. Donors to the collection also received their items back. And the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands now manages 3,196 pieces, which are available for research and loans from other museums.

In order to provide insight into the complex process of relocating a museum collection, and to share lessons for the future, the National Museum of World Cultures and Museum Prinsenhof Delft wrote a publication (*Herplaatsing Collectie voormalig Museum Nusantara Delft, Lering en vragen 2013 – 2018*), where both positive and negative aspects of the process are discussed. The publication is available in Dutch and can be downloaded [here](#). Furthermore, the Nusantara Collection has been made accessible online via the website: <https://collectie-nusantara.nl>. This website is host to the entire Nusantara Collection as it existed before the museum closed its doors and each object can be traced back to its new location. Besides the usual metadata that may be expected from a museum database, the records contain also information about the valuation of the individual objects or sets of objects, as considered for the deaccessioning of the collection.

## About the experts



Tessa Luger is senior researcher at the RCE. From 2009 to 2013, she led a national research programme entitled Value and Valuation, which resulted in the publication *Assessing Museum Collections*. Luger specialises in valuation, collections management, religious heritage and historic interiors. Tessa Luger studied history, art history and American Studies in the Netherlands and the United States.



Geertje Huisman is a researcher at the RCE. From 2009 to 2013, she was member of national research programmes entitled Value and Valuation, Modern times and Object in context. Since 2015, Huisman specialises in valuation, collections management, modern interior and modern (applied and mural) arts. Geertje Huisman studied art history and was curator of modern applied arts at the state art collection at the RCE (1998-2013).

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## Questions?

Please send an email to [t.luger@cultureelerfgoed.nl](mailto:t.luger@cultureelerfgoed.nl) or [g.huisman@cultureelerfgoed.nl](mailto:g.huisman@cultureelerfgoed.nl) or have a look at our website [www.cultureelerfgoed.nl](http://www.cultureelerfgoed.nl)

Author: Sofia Lovegrove

Images: Cultural Heritage Agency, unless noted otherwise.

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Cultural Heritage Agency, Smallepad 5, 3811 MG Amersfoort.

Through knowledge and consultancy, the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands offers the future a past.