

Contextualising Heritage in the “De Grote Indonesië Tentoonstelling” at De Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam: Investigating Tourism Implications

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Abstract

The “De Grote Indonesië Tentoonstelling” at De Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam has faced scrutiny due to its display of seven Buddha heads, allegedly from the Borobudur, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, lacking contextualisation. This paper delves into recent provenance research on four Buddha heads within a Dutch museum, unravelling their historical journeys and colonial entanglements. Drawing upon heritage interpretation theory, which emphasises the importance of aligning interpretive messages with visitor expectations and integrating emotional elements to enhance understanding, the study examines the exhibition’s failure to provide comprehensive contextual information. By overlooking crucial aspects of the artefacts’ history and significance, the exhibition missed an opportunity to engage visitors in a nuanced understanding of Indonesia’s cultural heritage and colonial legacies. The paper advocates for transparent exhibition practices that prioritise dialogue with stakeholders and foster meaningful visitor experiences, aligning with the principles of ethical stewardship outlined in heritage interpretation theory. Through this lens, the study contributes to the ongoing discourse on responsible museum practices and the ethical presentation of contested heritage in the tourism industry.

Keywords: Contested heritage; Buddha heads; Provenance research; Exhibition practices; Ethical implications

Introduction

The “De Grote Indonesië Tentoonstelling” hosted by De Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam anticipated to elicit criticism, as noted by Katawazi [1], owing to its incorporation of contentious artefacts. Not only did the exhibition’s thematic content carry inherent controversy, but the inclusion of debated objects further intensified the controversial discourse. Of particular concern was the presentation of seven Buddha heads, allegedly originating from Borobudur, a site of UNESCO World Heritage distinction, devoid of contextual clarification regarding their historical provenance, socio-political implications, and evolving valuation. This study embarked upon an investigation into recent (2022) provenance research conducted on four Buddha heads housed within the Dutch National Museum for World Cultures collection, clarifying the intricate trajectories of these artefacts across history and navigating the entanglements of colonial legacy. Furthermore, this review examined the lack of contextual clarification within the exhibition, underscoring the ethical dilemmas inherent in exhibiting contested heritage without affording acknowledgement

to ongoing scholarly discourses, thereby accentuating the imperative for exhibition practices instilled with transparency, dialogic engagement and nuanced comprehension of cultural artefacts.

The Borobudur Temple in Indonesia holds significant cultural significance as one of the world’s preeminent Buddhist monuments. However, discussions surrounding the exhibition of Buddha heads believed to originate from Borobudur reveal the intricate web of colonial histories, scientific expeditions, and ongoing efforts towards repatriation. The lack of contextual information within the “De Grote Indonesië Tentoonstelling” perpetuates a narrative of cultural marginalisation and objectification, hindering visitors’ understanding of the contested backgrounds of these artefacts. Through an examination of recent (2022) provenance studies on four Buddha heads stored within the collection of the Dutch National Museum for World Cultures, this paper aims to shed light on their complex historical trajectories and colonial entanglements.

Insights into De Nieuwe Kerk's Exhibition

The exhibition at De Nieuwe Kerk aimed to provide a thorough exploration of Indonesia's extensive historical narrative and diverse cultural heritage. The exhibition sought to engage a broad audience and encourage dialogue by encompassing pivotal periods such as the Majapahit empire, the colonial era, Indonesia's struggle for independence, and subsequent political transitions. However, despite meticulous curation efforts, certain artefacts, including the Buddha's heads, introduced complexities related to Indonesia's colonial legacy and ongoing discussions on cultural repatriation. While the exhibition implied to offer a nuanced perspective, controversies surrounding contested heritage persisted, highlighting the significance of transparent and ethically informed exhibition practices. A notable omission within the exhibit was the absence of contextual information regarding the inventory numbers assigned to the displayed Buddha heads. This absence presented challenges for visitors in discerning which of the Buddha heads from the Dutch National Museum of World Cultures' collection was featured and determining their definitive attribution to the Borobudur or likelihood of originating from it, thereby impacting visitors' understanding of the artefacts' significance and historical context. This underscores the importance of providing comprehensive contextual information in exhibitions to enhance visitors' understanding and appreciation of the artefacts on display.

Recent (2022) Provenance Research on Four Buddha Heads

Bloembergen and Monquil's (2022) provenance research sheds light on the acquisition of Buddha's heads by Dutch museums during the late 19th century, focusing on four Buddha heads. However, it is worth noting that the absence of inventory numbers at the exhibition in the Nieuwe Kerk remains uncertain whether these specific four Buddha heads were on display. Nonetheless, their research provides valuable insights into the broader trend of collecting objects from colonial territories for scientific study and public exhibition. Colonial officials, scholars, and collectors based in the Dutch East Indies played crucial roles in obtaining and transmitting these artefacts to European museums. This led to their commodification and detachment from their original cultural contexts. Bloembergen and Monquil's (2022) findings also address doubts surrounding the authenticity and attribution of Buddha heads in Dutch collections. Curators and experts express scepticism regarding the provenance of these artefacts, citing differences among the heads attributed to the temple. They convey that some heads may exhibit variations consistent with Borobudur's stylistic features, but uncertainties persist regarding their precise origins and attribution. However, it is also acknowledged that even at the Borobudur temple, the Buddha heads show differences in situ. This ambiguous doubt, combined with suggestions regarding the attribution of specific Buddha heads to Borobudur, reflects broader concerns about the circumstances under which these artefacts ended up in Dutch

collections and the research priorities of museums. It underscores the need for critical self-reflection and meticulous investigation into the origins and authenticity of cultural artefacts. According to the provenance research, TM-A-5947, complete with an *urna* on its head, is deemed to originate from Borobudur genuinely.

Exhibition Context

The exhibition failed to provide detailed context for the Buddha statues, leaving visitors without crucial information. The accompanying text briefly outlined the history: "In the 8th century an impressive pilgrimage site was constructed in Central Java featuring 500 life-sized sitting Buddha statues: the Borobudur. Pilgrims from many parts of Asia journeyed there and viewed scenes from the life of Buddha on the relief plates" Furthermore, it described the extensive restoration efforts in the early 20th century: "In the early 20th century, large-scale restoration of the temple complex took place. Over the centuries, the stupa had become overgrown by the jungle, subsiding to a dangerous degree and buried under a layer of volcanic ash. Only 30 per cent of the Buddha statues were unscathed, 62 per cent had been damaged (many missing their head), and the rest had disappeared. Colonial collectors stole the Buddha heads because they were popular as busts" Regarding the exhibited Buddha heads, the text noted their connection to the Borobudur style but highlighted their variations: "These Buddha heads are in the style of the Borobudur statues. They are all slightly different, for instance in size, the number of rows of haircurls, the width of the mouth, the lower lip, the shape of the eyelids and the curve of the ear".

The exhibition lacked crucial contextual details pertinent to the ongoing debate on artefact repatriation, particularly in light of the recent policy set forth by the Dutch Government following advice from the Council for Culture [3]. Not only were inventory numbers absent, impeding independent research on the artefacts, but there was also a conspicuous absence of discourse addressing broader considerations surrounding heritage repatriation. For instance, discussions regarding attributing these artefacts to Borobudur statues, as explored by van Beurden [4], were notably missing. Moreover, the exhibition failed to acknowledge the ethical dilemmas associated with showcasing contested heritage without engaging in ongoing scholarly debates. This underscores the importance of exhibition practices characterized by transparency, dialogic engagement, and nuanced comprehension of cultural artefacts (Figure 1).

In 2012, Van Beurden conducted an in-depth exploration of the complex issues surrounding the Buddha heads originating from the Borobudur temple complex, which are currently housed in Dutch museums. Notably, the Tropenmuseum, now part of the National Museum of World Cultures, demonstrated a willingness to engage in dialogue and potential repatriation efforts. Director Schenk's openness to considering returns under specific conditions marked an early shift in the museum's approach, acknowledging the colonial context of acquisition and prioritising ethical

considerations in cultural heritage management. Conversely, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, holding one Borobudur Buddha head through the KVVAK (Koninklijke Vereniging van Vrienden der Aziatische Kunst) in its collection, adopted a more cautious stance, emphasising the need for thorough evaluation and deliberation before contemplating returns. These discussions

surrounding the Buddha heads highlighted broader themes of colonial legacies, ethical responsibilities, and the evolving role of museums in addressing cultural heritage issues as early as 2012. Subsequently, these discussions led to the formulation of a governmental policy on heritage return, which was informed by the advice of the Council of Culture [3].



Figure 1: Buddha heads exhibited at the exhibit in the Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam (Photographed by R. Westerlaken on March 23, 2024).

Van Beurden's [5] further investigation probes into the earlier mentioned Buddha head in the Rijksmuseum (not on display in the Grote Indonesië tentoonstelling), which was included in Indonesia's restitution negotiations with the Netherlands in 1975. However, the origins of the Buddha head remain enigmatic, with suspicions of smuggling arising due to its complex acquisition history. Originally owned by banker and music historian D.F. Scheurling in the early 1920s, the Buddha head changed hands before eventually being acquired by the Rijksmuseum in 1972. Nonetheless, uncertainties persist regarding the circumstances of its detachment from its original torso and the authenticity of its acquisition. Further complicating matters is the Rijksmuseum's and the KVVAK's failure to acknowledge Indonesia's desire to recover the Borobudur Buddha head and the Netherlands' failure to uphold the 1975 international agreement for restitution. Additionally, ownership of the Buddha's head lies not with the Rijksmuseum but with the KVVAK, underscoring the influence of private collectors and associations of friends on museum policies.

Tourism implications

The "De Grote Indonesië Tentoonstelling" held at De Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam serves as a significant site for tourists engaging with cultural heritage. However, the controversy surrounding the Buddha heads, allegedly from the Borobudur, prompts a re-evaluation of tourism implications through the perspective of the heritage interpretation theory. Rooted in a constructivist framework, heritage interpretation theory serves as a vital tool for comprehending heritage sites. It goes beyond simple information dissemination by fostering social and cognitive interactions, as highlighted by Shalaginova [6]. At its core, understanding within this framework relies on the alignment between orientation expectations and visitors' interpretations. Effective heritage interpretation thus necessitates clear articulation of expectations and the development of interpretive provisions tailored to visitors' needs [6]. The interpretive process entails continuous feedback among communicators, meaning-makers, and interpretive mediums. Heritage interpreters employ framing, themes, and

narrative techniques to guide visitors' perceptions and behavior. Emotional elements are pivotal in influencing cognition and behavior [6]. Hence, effective heritage interpretation demands consideration of cultural diversity and the collective knowledge systems ingrained within it [6].

Visitor satisfaction is intricately linked to the quality of the interpretive experience. By aligning interpretive messages with visitor expectations and integrating emotional elements, heritage sites, including exhibitions ex-situ can enhance satisfaction levels [6]. The "De Grote Indonesië Tentoonstelling" underscores the intricate nature of heritage interpretation, especially within the context of contested heritage. Embracing a constructivist approach and employing effective interpretive strategies enable destinations to navigate cultural diversity and cultivate meaningful visitor experiences. Ethical stewardship, guided by established principles, ensures the responsible interpretation of heritage [6,7].

Conclusion

In conclusion, the "De Grote Indonesië Tentoonstelling" at De Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam has underscored the complexities inherent in exhibiting contested heritage without adequate contextualization. The inclusion of Buddha heads believed to originate from Borobudur, without addressing their historical provenance and socio-political implications has drawn criticism and raised ethical concerns. Provenance research sheds light on the intricate trajectories of these artefacts and their colonial entanglements, emphasizing the need for responsible exhibition practices.

The exhibition's failure to provide detailed contextual information and acknowledge ongoing scholarly debates on heritage repatriation highlights the importance of transparency and dialogue in presenting cultural artefacts. By overlooking crucial aspects of the artefacts' history and significance, the exhibition missed an opportunity to engage visitors in a nuanced understanding of Indonesia's cultural heritage and colonial legacies. Moving forward, exhibition organizers and museums must prioritize ethical stewardship and comprehensive contextualization to foster meaningful visitor experiences and contribute to broader discussions on contested heritage. By embracing transparency, dialogue, and nuanced comprehension of cultural artefacts, exhibitions can serve as platforms for education, reflection, and reconciliation in the preservation and interpretation of cultural heritage.

Recommendations

Enhanced Contextualization: Exhibitions should prioritize providing comprehensive contextual information for all displayed artefacts, especially those with contested or controversial backgrounds. This includes detailing their historical provenance, socio-political implications, and ongoing scholarly debates.

Transparency and Dialogue: Exhibition organizers should engage in transparent dialogue with stakeholders, including heritage experts, communities of origin, and visitors, regarding the presentation and interpretation of contested heritage. This dialogue can help address concerns, provide diverse perspectives, and foster mutual understanding.

Inclusive Representation: Efforts should be made to ensure inclusive representation of diverse voices and perspectives within exhibitions. This may involve collaborating with representatives from source communities, indigenous groups, and marginalized populations to co-curate exhibitions and incorporate multiple narratives.

Public Engagement and Education: Exhibitions should serve as platforms for public engagement and education, fostering critical thinking, empathy, and cross-cultural understanding among visitors. Interactive displays, guided tours, and educational programs can enhance visitor experiences and facilitate meaningful engagement with cultural heritage [7].

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