

**Memory, Identity and Material Culture**

The things we care about are mostly of a private nature, and have to do with our personal identities, such as the humble, Indonesian sandalwood statuette from my own parents' pre-1955 past in that former Dutch colony. While starting off as purely

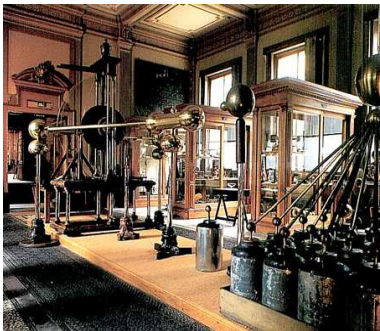


private, heritage objects often turn later and gradually into semi-public property. Such is the case with the portrait of Jan Six, painted in 1642 by Rembrandt and which is still in the Six

family's home in Amsterdam along the Amstel. A curious case of partly private, partly public heritage, since it is now a nationally protected cultural good whose every movement is under close government scrutiny.



The ways in which memory may materialise are numerous. You keep a memento, receive an inheritance, become possessor of booty or spoils taken from somewhere else, or you just keep family photos and memorabilia as conversation pieces on the coffee table. Perhaps you even build a memorial to your ancestor, a sympathetic mayor, a hero of the resistance. Sometimes you are not even aware of anything, but may discover centuries later a treasure, a forgotten museum that turns out to be a time capsule. This happened to the Teylers Museum in the Dutch city of Haarlem, founded 1783 by a private association of learned gentlemen, believers in the Enlightenment, and rediscovered just prior to its total obliteration in the 1980s. It is considered now a unique and highly valuable eye-witness of the Enlightenment in the Low Countries.



The physical form of what I call "carriers of heritage significance" may also vary widely. They can be works of art but also representative objects of a long past daily

life – mind David Lowenthal’s admonition that “The Past is a Foreign Country”! – often greatly enhancing the cultural value of historic houses, that, in their turn, are increasingly understood and interpreted in as much of their “ecological niche” as possible, including gardens and even entire cityscapes. In the end, it is the always changing but basically recognizable historical environment that is at stake.

It may even occur that unwelcome reminders of the past, or reminder of a still disturbed past, appear as unconscious markers, or haphazard memorials. This occurred with some extremely rare tomb stones of members of the Dutch nazi party NSB, which by their very rarity are now considered unique testimonials of an almost vanished memory. Or compare unwanted reminders of a not yet



acknowledged past such as the now heavily contested bronze Russian soldier statue in Estonia's Tallinn. A first step that a traumatic period is beginning to be turned into a *lieu de mémoire*, especially for educational purposes, is exemplified by the the “Terror Háza” in Budapest. This is the

Gestapo and later Secret Service HQ that was only recently turned into a memorial centre, thus facilitating the process by which history can be appropriated instead of being neglected, denied or even erased. You may wonder whether these examples truly constitute heritage objects. The answer is “yes” if and when people care about the significance of such places, or objects, in terms of their own identities – whether positive, negative or neutral.



## Forms of Heritage Care

There are as many forms of “heritage management” or perhaps, more loosely, “heritage care” as its subject can take. From hard-core protection, restoration and preservation to gentle study, scientific or not; from taking as a model for inspiration to using as an educational tool; from being a empty facade in an otherwise completely rebuilt urban ensemble or landscape to serving as the most valued asset of international mass tourism. One such example of loose inspiration are the typical Amsterdam gable shapes that are taken over as markers in modern city development elsewhere in the country. The approach that best summarises all these forms and efforts, and at the same time implies a particular mental position, is “to lovingly accompany transitions” – implying an autonomous process of change, engagement, sincerity and respect, and co-operation with other agents.

One of the key issues is: who is to act? Normally, public and private agents are rigidly separated, each obeying its own set of quite different rules of engagement. In the field of heritage, however, where values are at stake that can neither be expressed in only financial or economic terms nor in strictly private or individual ones, there is an interesting overlap, which I suggest to call a “common” area.<sup>11</sup> The values there only exist by active engagement, like love, friendship, hobby, trust. When you don't do it, it's not there.



Another often neglected aspect of standard ways of thinking about heritage in terms of public and private is that given a long enough time, these spheres somehow will start overlapping more and more. Something extremely old will, by its very rarity, lose any individual significance, since its objective rarity only makes sense in a

collective perspective.

A third point of attention is the mechanism of valuation, the attribution of significance. What's often being forgotten is that the reasons, the frame of mind, of the inheritors, the second generation of proprietors,



necessarily differs from that of their forerunners, the testators. What I receive from my parents are the carriers of a shared memory, since I shared their lives. The grandchildren did not share their grandparents' lives, and the meaning they, the third generation, confer on the inherited objects will therefore be different from mine. I would like to advocate an increased awareness of these mechanisms. Every generation has to take up a renewed position towards the remains of its past, to time and again check its present value systems against those of its testators. Are the reasons for keeping these objects in the museum still valid? If so, why? If not, what has changed, and what is our answer instead?

### Conversation

I could summarise this in the following way: the dynamics of heritage imply that it is a changing process, since society and its value systems constantly evolve. Anyone concerned should therefore be constantly in a process of active engagement, in which the changed sense of self with regard to heritage objects is frequently to be acknowledged, in order to be able to select and finally to appropriate (“Yes, this is ours and we shall take proper care of it as best as we can”). The most essential condition, I feel, is that this process is being carried out through *conversation*, in which the values a group holds are constantly being discussed, and by discussion even are brought into being. Also the “we” is crucial: who do you permit to speak up, to take part in the process, to have his voice heard?



## A charming network of archaeological parks in Italy

Here are two examples. The care of seven archaeological, monumental and natural parks in central Italy, around the Gulf of Piombino, in the ancient landscape of Etruria, has been organised by a public-private



partnership involving five municipalities, the provincial administration, several chambers of commerce, two associations of cultural experts, and no less than 33 small private enterprises. The latter mostly for services, infrastructure and construction works. It took them a long time of preparation and nearly 20 mln € investment, over half of which provided by the EU. The system opened in 1993 and is a resounding success. I give this example since I happened to visit one of the parks, in the summer of 2005 – and I was totally charmed. The basic idea is overwhelmingly present: small scale, many volunteers, a high regard for sustainability, and integration with all kinds of visitor services. Thus there is an excavation school, a visitor centre, a nice beach in the neighbourhood, respect for the environment, extremely well qualified, young experts serving a tour guides and museum operators, and a vivid conviction that the park in question is truly theirs. This is remarkable, since Italy, which to many Bulgarian cultural authorities serves as a model, has for a very long time been quite hostile to private involvement in heritage. The result was, as you may know, that for the same very long time most of the heritage was not exploited at all, and, worse, became neglected to an often high degree. But even the Italian authorities have come to understand that their administration is not only *incapable* of delivering such services, but should also consider it *undesirable* to step in the role of what society can best perform itself, locally, small scale and with a sense of true engagement.

## The Monument Upkeep Service

The second example I take from my own country, the Netherlands. Since 1973, there is an ever growing system of private initiative that helps owners of monumental buildings, both public and private owners, to take care of their property. It is called *Monumentenwacht*, or Monuments Guard. The



service consists of periodic inspections, advise, and the execution of the upkeep, based on a subscription fee. It is a voluntary service, in the sense that no-one is obliged to subscribe. Owners of scheduled monuments, however, are forced by law to keep their property in a certain state. If not, you can be fined. The nice thing about this *monumentenwacht* service is that it acts as an insurance. Some owners just don't have the time, others not the knowledge, to carry out high quality restoration or conservation works. Another argument is that the long term costs of restoration can be greatly reduced by constant, high frequency, small upkeep. To date 12,500 (28.5 percent) of all

scheduled monuments in the country are being regularly inspected by this private Monumentenwacht. Since several years, two new branches have evolved: one for archaeological monuments, which in many cases require a similar level of care, and a branch specialised in works of art in public space (KunstWacht), including parts of buildings with, for example, unique architectural features, but on buildings that are themselves not monuments as such. Also here the trick is: small scale, no-obligation based, and a belief in the joining of experts from many different disciplines.

### **Chances and Challenges: a Civil Society**

It should not come as a surprise that, to my view, Bulgaria is on the threshold, as a brand-new EU member, of a number of exciting new possibilities. Even though it may, at times, seem hard to attain, a Civil Society is the *only* way in the long run to reach a sustainable situation of heritage management.<sup>iii</sup> And to me it seems Bulgaria has a remarkable opportunity: its historical, artistic and natural legacy is enormous in many senses, and still largely intact, and, what is more, relatively unknown to the rest of the world. The set-back it may have occurred due to the political situation in the decades following WW II may be turned to its advantage. You can avail yourself of very many best practices that others have had to struggle with for years and years in order to find out what works and what not (and why). I'm sure, furthermore, that the EU is able and willing to support many initiatives in this direction. Provided, that is, that integral – *not* large scale! – approaches are taken, inclusive of both nature and culture, and with in mind both preservation and exploitation. The worst way of trying to keep something alive is by not using it.

The challenges, of course, form a mirror image of the opportunities. Just to name a few: it may be hard to not give in to the temptation of competing with the administration or with private business, instead of respecting each other's domain. I would say, try neither to act as a political party nor as a state official, nor again as a for-profit institution. You will lose the battle on all three sides when forgetting what's yours and yours only: your private, *disinterested* engagement as a civil society, and your unique role in advocacy.<sup>iv</sup> It may not be easy to quickly find common grounds with other players, but if you don't, no-one will want to accept you as a partner. Your best allies may in fact be already there. The Bulgarians societies, associations and foundations that have organised themselves for the sustainable future of the environment and nature.<sup>v</sup> It may well be useful to take a step-by-step approach, to fuse your interests with already existing nature preservation or Open Society initiatives, and to together develop an inspiring yet realistic vision that you try to share with all involved. And as for the scale: it is my deep conviction that it is local communities that are truly essential in the arena of heritage, since if anything, heritage is local. A National Trust may be a welcome support organisation for that.

#### References:

**Teylers Museum**, Haarlem (Netherlands): [www.teylersmuseum.nl](http://www.teylersmuseum.nl), and <http://www.teylersmuseum.nl/dossiers/files/Dossier%20Welcome%20to%20Teylers%20Museum.pdf>

**Terror Haza**, Budapest (Hungary): [www.terrorhaza.hu/index3.html](http://www.terrorhaza.hu/index3.html)

**Contested WW II heritage** (Dutch Council for Culture advise): [www.cultuur.nl/files/pdf/advies/mon-2003.5604.2\\_engels.pdf](http://www.cultuur.nl/files/pdf/advies/mon-2003.5604.2_engels.pdf)

**Archaeological and natural parks, Val di Cornia**, Italy: [www.parchivaldicornia.it](http://www.parchivaldicornia.it)

**Monumentenwacht**, Netherlands: [www.monumentenwacht.nl](http://www.monumentenwacht.nl)

**KunstWacht**, Netherlands: [www.KunstWacht.nl](http://www.KunstWacht.nl)

- i The classical study by David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (1985). A short and updated introduction to heritage systematics can be found in <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/citd/holtorf/2.9.html>
- ii I respectfully borrow the notion of a “Common” area, as opposed to both the private and public economic spheres, from prof. Arjo Klamer's keynote lecture to the 2004 Digital Heritage Conference held during the Dutch EU presidency at The Hague:  
<http://eu2004.digitaliseringergoed.nl/sites/cultuurtechnologie/contents/i000264/digital%20cultural%20area.ppt>
- iii For a discussion of the sometimes confusion term, see Edwards, M. (2005) 'Civil society', *The encyclopedia of informal education*, [www.infed.org/association/civil\\_society.htm](http://www.infed.org/association/civil_society.htm), and related articles through the Demos think tank ([www.demos.co.uk](http://www.demos.co.uk)).
- iv [www.nationaltrust.org](http://www.nationaltrust.org): “The [US] National Trust and its partners advocate for public policies that benefit historic preservation by:
  - passing legislation and implementing policies that preserve the historic and cultural fabric of our nation's communities;
  - protecting historic and cultural resources from inappropriate legislation, regulatory rulings, or court decisions that hinder preservation;
  - preserving community input in the policy-making process; and,
  - researching and documenting best practices and model preservation policies.”
- v The Dutch association Milieukontakt Oos-Europa ([www.eu.milieukontakt.nl](http://www.eu.milieukontakt.nl)) has long been assisting Central and Eastern European environmental initiatives to participate in sustainable regional development.