

BEHIND THE SCENES OF THE PERIOD ROOM

They arrived at Het Nieuwe Instituut in big crates, the dismantled period rooms stored away for years in the depot of the Amsterdam Museum. The 'Empire Room' is to be reconstructed for the first time in forty years. Unpacking is an exciting activity. Restorers carefully place the cornices and ornaments on big tables like pieces of a puzzle, gradually assembling the room board by board, panel by panel. The public can follow all this activity and enjoy a glimpse behind the scenes of the period room (fig. 0 a, b).

The period rooms come from the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, where they have been on show till the 1970s. Their home was in the northern wing of the ground floor, on the side where the Van Gogh Museum is now located (fig. 1). These galleries contained no modern art – that was on view in the rest of the museum – but the collection bequeathed to the city of Amsterdam by the widow Lopez Suasso. Her bequest consisted largely of applied art, as well as some old paintings. While the Stedelijk Museum was under construction (1892–1895), a number of old houses and interiors in the city were threatened by demolition. Some rooms were considered so exceptional that they were incorporated into the galleries of the Stedelijk. These 'period rooms' formed a fitting setting for the Suasso collection, which included a number of Empire pieces of furniture.

Het Nieuwe Instituut takes the period rooms as the point of departure for the exhibition 1 : 1 PERIOD ROOMS BY ANDREAS ANGELIDAKIS, which runs from February to April 2015 in the main gallery (fig. 2). With his installation, architect and artist Andreas Angelidakis breathed new life into them as a way of reflecting on museum exhibition models: the period room and the 'white cube'. It is a journey of discovery that takes in fragments of history and a quest to find new creative possibilities for the historical material. This prompts the question: why is the phenomenon of the period room attracting attention right now? What does the period room evoke in people today?

The period rooms included in the presentation at Het Nieuwe Instituut are the Empire Room, the Green Room, the Beuning Room and the Jacob de Wit room (fig. 3 a–d). The Beuning Room is currently on view at the new Rijksmuseum, after some elements of it featured in the Rococo exhibition in 2001. Parts of the Empire Room were presented at the Amsterdam Historical Museum (the current Amsterdam Museum) for an exhibition in 2004–2005. By then it was already clear how much the room was a composition of original, altered and also newly made components.

Dating largely from the eighteenth-century, the period rooms served as formal reception spaces for well-do-to Amsterdam burghers. Two of them are detailed in the Rococo style, and two in the neoclassical style. By 'period room' standards, they are relatively authentic, and even three of the ceilings are intact; a complete room with accompanying furniture and fabrics is very rare, certainly for the eighteenth century (fig. 4).

In 1975 the period rooms were transferred from the Stedelijk Museum to its depot. Willem Sandberg, director since 1945 of what was then called the Gemeentelijke Musea, instigated a series of radical changes inside the museum. The period rooms had to go because Sandberg needed more space for modern paintings. He wanted to transfer the period rooms to a new location, namely the Willet-Holthuysen Museum, a canal house that had also been bequeathed to the city of Amsterdam, along with its interiors and collection (fig. 5).

Just as in the Rijksmuseum by architect P.J.H. Cuypers, the walls of the galleries at the Stedelijk, the work of architect A.W. Weissman, were all gradually painted white. Those white galleries made Willem Sandberg the father of the 'white cube', the ultimate presentation form for art without context. Painting, as well as applied art, had gradually evolved to become an autonomous art that required no context, people thought.

The development of the period room model in Dutch museums can be held up as a history of development, decline and rebirth. This form of presentation was deemed appropriate for presentations that focused on history, folklore or art. From the 1920s on, we see a clear decline in appreciation of the period room as a result of changing ideas about museum presentations. The period room found itself in difficulty, particularly in museums that started to profile themselves more as art museums, among them the Rijksmuseum and Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Interest has risen again since the end of the twentieth century, however. People have reconsidered the idea that art, as well as applied art, is better presented in a neutral setting.

H I S T O R Y O F T H E P E R I O D R O O M

The period room, understood as an interior reconstructed inside a museum, has a long history that dates back to the nineteenth century. The phenomenon can be linked to the emergence of art history as an academic pursuit and the museum as a treasury of our cultural heritage. The term 'period room' combines the words P E R I O D and R O O M and, as such, refers on the one hand to architecture as a collection of rooms and on the other to the period of their design: the signature or style in which the space is finished and furnished. Usually, a period room includes nothing more than a combination of various elements such as wooden panelling and furnishings with similar stylistic features or from the same period. A unity of design or origin is usually absent, although this is often the goal of the curators. Sometimes the period is very broadly defined and can span a whole century. Not infrequently, there is a series of model rooms, for example from the sixteenth and later centuries, from the middle ages, from the renaissance or baroque periods, or detailed in the so-called Louis styles, neo-styles or modern styles (fig. 6).

This form of presentation, however, does not originate in art history, but in circles of collectors of 'antiquities', people interested in cultural history. Societies such as the Fries Genootschap and the Koninklijk Oudheidkundig Genootschap were pioneers in this field in the Netherlands. People initially spoke of 'antique' or 'historical' rooms. The first exhibition of Dutch antiquities was held in the galleries of artist society Arti et Amicitiae in 1854, since in addition to antiquarians, artists were interested in antique objects. The artists used the objects as props for their paintings set in the past, and later to lend their studios a fitting decor.

The method of categorising architecture and interior design according to style periods reached its peak in the final decades of the nineteenth century as the period room emerged. This explains the emphasis on the stylistic aspect, often at the expense of matters such as function and the client or occupant of the room. Period rooms also offer an impression of how people lived in the past. This typological component almost always refers to the house and rarely to any building, such as a town hall or stock exchange, erected for a non-domestic function. It should be noted, however, that presentations devoted to religious or political

life at the original Rijksmuseum displayed very similar characteristics to those devoted to domestic life (fig. 7).

In the nineteenth century countless interior fixtures, fittings and furnishings ended up in museums and private homes. They include chimneys, paintings on canvas, tapestries, floor and wall tiles, carvings, stucco, stained glass, and sometimes even wooden panelling. These interior fragments and 'moving rooms' arrived on the market as a result of demolition work and found their way into public and private collections and homes. They were valued for their great beauty or because they were of historical interest. The universal historical awareness of nineteenth-century society was of fundamental importance to this appreciation. Period rooms are therefore usually encountered in a museum context, yet they were also in vogue as domestic interiors, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (fig. 8).

Besides its mobility, the spatial aspect is an essential characteristic of the period room. After all, a room is a three-dimensional entity: a composition of walls (usually four), floor, ceiling, often in combination with furniture (fig. 9 a, b, c). Unlike in a historical interior, the relation of the period room to its surroundings is usually secondary, and in many cases is not as it was originally intended. That is to say that the orientation is not necessarily the same as it was in the original setting, and that the relation of the rooms to the spaces that once surrounded it is no longer intact. The point of entry may have changed position and the walls may have switched places with one another. Often, period rooms do no justice to the layered quality of the original space, which a historical interior can do.

Despite such artificial situations, a lack of material authenticity, anachronisms and furniture and finishes that don't belong together, the period room has remained a popular means of representation ever since its emergence. This can be attributed in large measure to the evocative power of the period room as a 1:1 form of representation: the period room speaks to the imagination. As such, it is similar to set design, which aims to evoke the illusion of a particular setting, as can be the case with theatre sets, model homes, showrooms, trade fair stands, (advertisement) photography, film sets and game environments.

The reason for wanting to display period rooms varied from presenting a chronological overview of usually Dutch interior history to giving an impression of domestic life in the past. Sometimes the emphasis lay on artistic value, and a collection of applied art was displayed against a backdrop of wooden panelling. In other cases emphasis was put on the historical value, and social life was depicted in the form of, for instance, historical food culture.

F U T U R E O F T H E P E R I O D R O O M

How do museums deal with period rooms today and what vision does that reveal?

The new arrangement at the Rijksmuseum observes a strict division according to century. Most galleries feature a mixed presentation of works of art and historical objects. Applied art and paintings, utensils and sculptures are grouped in attractive ensembles where the associative meaning certainly adds value. Just two period rooms are on display, one of which is the previously mentioned Beuning Room. Just like the other interior fragments on display at the museum, these rooms are showcased as independent works of art. The meaning they had in the context of everyday life is subordinate. Hence, in the Beuning Room the underlying story of

the home gatherings attended by members of the Moravian brotherhood is of secondary importance. The room is not furnished and the adjoining spaces are not mentioned. The people and the life that took place here remain invisible. Is this the future of the Dutch period room, a lifeless shell?

At the other end of the spectrum is the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague. The series of period rooms from the early years of the museum, which were neatly incorporated into the building designed by H.P. Berlage during its construction, is still preserved and used intensively in the programme of exhibitions and activities. The new programme appears to be well capable of breathing new life into the period rooms. It is good to see how object and space (the display of Delfts pottery and the historical interior finishing) enhance each other and produce a balanced image in the reflective world of designer Marcel Schmalgemeijer. Likewise, modern design profits from the period room setting, blending harmoniously yet also commenting on the past (fig. 10).

In 2006 the Amsterdam Museum took the initiative to document the period rooms of the Stedelijk more thoroughly. The reason was the prospect of the rooms being given a new location in a house beside Museum Willet-Holthuysen. Plans were also drawn up for the construction of a new depot. Will there be a place in the future for an appealing glimpse of life along the canals of Amsterdam? Or will that remain a beautiful dream?

In 2010 the director of De Appel arts centre approached the Amsterdam Museum with a request to reinsert an eighteenth-century period room from the Stedelijk (the Green room) into its original building at Prins Hendrikkade 142, where De Appel was to open its doors in 2012. The museum was prepared to grant the request, but the owner of the building – the city of Amsterdam – deemed it too expensive to carry out the work. Surprisingly enough, De Appel then commissioned visual artist Barbara Visser, who designed a tapestry inspired by the crates in which the stucco ceiling was stored in pieces. It was presented in an exhibition at De Appel in 2013 (fig. 11). This is also a way of dealing with the period room: as a source of inspiration for contemporary art.

Through their exhibition and presentation policies, museums play an unmistakable role in the way we value historical Dutch interiors, interior styles and interior designers. It is clear why the Stedelijk Museum has acquired the Harrenstein Room by Gerrit Rietveld and put it on display at the new Stedelijk. The recognition of Rietveld as a modern architect and interior designer reflects the profile of a museum dedicated to modern art. It is significant, however, that the Piet Kramer interior from the same house as the Rietveld Room currently lies in the depot of the Amsterdam Museum. Will the Stedelijk do something with it when it compiles a big retrospective exhibition devoted to the Amsterdam School?

A reappraisal of the period room as a presentation model, and as a presentation goal, has also occurred internationally in recent decades. In the 1990s the Victoria and Albert Museum reopened the famous and much-loved British Galleries (fig. 12). The name alone reveals the national pride. These period rooms demonstrate the fondness felt by many British people for historical interiors. Among French people too, affinity with interior decoration and pride in the past seem boundless. At least, that would seem to be borne out by the unbelievable efforts and sums of money involved in the restoration and refurbishment (and not to forget the gilding) of the former French palaces. A presentation of late-seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century decorative art recently opened in combination with splendid period rooms in the north wing of the Louvre (fig. 13).

Such sentiments seem to play a lesser role in the Netherlands, or else pride is not projected on interior history, as it had been in the nineteenth century. At that time, period rooms were presented as a national symbol, as we saw with the Old Dutch Rooms at the Rijksmuseum. Today it is only the new Fries Museum that thinks in terms of identity. The Hindeloper Room is deployed as an icon of Friesland (fig. 14 a, b). Or could we also view the staging that Marcel Wanders recently created at the Stedelijk in that light? As an expression of pride in Dutch design?

Not only the Old Dutch but also the Hindeloper Room appeared to do well at the international exhibitions held in various world cities after 1851. Once the Netherlands became familiar with this period room at the historical exhibition in Leeuwarden in 1877, there was no going back. As a prefabricated kit and travelling promotional material, the Hindeloper Room was presented on various occasions and in various big cities across Europe, starting with the Paris World's Fair of 1878 in Paris. At the time, regional sentiment was effortlessly incorporated into the cultural nationalism that lay at the heart of the compilation of national collections and the foundation of national museums like the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

Period rooms are presented in foreign museums to give an impression of the interiors of a particular era. But the focus today also includes the story of the occupants, as is the case with the apartments of the daughters of Louis XV in Versailles. Apart from the grands appartements of the Sun King, we are afforded a glimpse behind the scenes and some insight into other aspects of life at the court.

Moreover, layers of time are cherished more today: an eighteenth-century room often remained in use in the nineteenth century, and now that may be seen. An example is the dining room for the Emperor Napoleon at the summer palace in Compiègne, which was also used by Napoleon III, and is therefore furnished with a mixture of objects from two periods. Napoleon III used both chairs from his own age and, for example, a clock from the time of his illustrious predecessor (fig. 15).

On account of this reappraisal in foreign and Dutch museums, it is particularly important now to call attention to the period rooms from the Stedelijk Museum, consigned to the depot of the Amsterdam Museum. After all, a permanent presentation of period rooms is not taken for granted. Moreover, attention for the subject meets the need among museum visitors to feel they are transported back in time, to learn how people used to live, and especially, to empathise with people from an earlier era.

A period room can turn a museum visit into an experience, as has been evident since the concept first appeared. Various methods have been developed for that over the past two centuries. Seemingly randomly arranged utensils, such as the remains of a breakfast or reading glasses left on an unfolded newspaper, create the illusion that the occupant has just popped out of the room for a minute. Life-size figures, as well as museum attendants or actors dressed in period costume, enhance the dramatic effect, as though the past really has come to life. All the senses are aroused today, and even sounds (music, kitchen noises, conversation) and smells (a fire in a fireplace, food being prepared) can contribute to the 'time machine experience', as at Hampton Court in London. The illusion of historical reality is complete as soon as the visitor is also invited to join the spectacle by dressing up or thinking up recipes for the recipe book of the castle owner, as is the case at Gaasbeek Castle near Brussels (fig. 16).

IN CONCLUSION

Het Nieuwe Instituut has emphasised the period room as a presentation model and raises questions about authenticity and reconstruction. Andreas Angelidakis shows how the white cube drove the period room out of the museum, as it were. Both models are a construct of a particular era and the result of a particular view of exhibition design. They also reveal a vision of the relation between object and space. These issues blend into our digital and democratic world, in which not only object and space, but also old and new, have acquired other meanings. Moreover, the process and the experience have gained in importance for the modern consumer of culture.

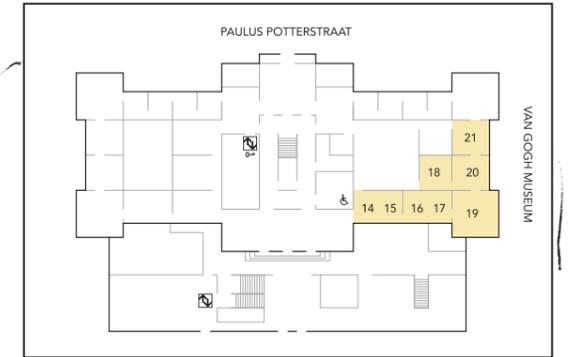
What is interesting about the presentation at Het Nieuwe Instituut is that it is a framework narrative: an exhibition of exhibition models, an image in an image. The power of the exhibition lies in the opportunity for visitors to follow the process of unpacking and piecing together the fragments. They are literally afforded a glimpse behind the wooden panels of the period room. The public sees restorers at work and can ask questions about the material. Previously, the discussion about period rooms triggered all sorts of questions about authenticity and false appearances, about context and the autonomy of art and applied art. How do we view those issues now? Is the presentation of period rooms historically responsible? Does it do justice to art and to applied art? Or are questions of this kind no longer relevant?

A noteworthy aspect of the discussion about the period room, ever since it emerged, is the museum focus on the question of authenticity. If we consider it properly, this focus is amazing, given that the period room is always a construct, and thus never authentic in the sense of an existing or inhabited interior. Like a fine novel, the period room is a composition made by people with the help of ingredients from a historical reality, and thus it belongs in its most profound sense to the realm of the imagination.

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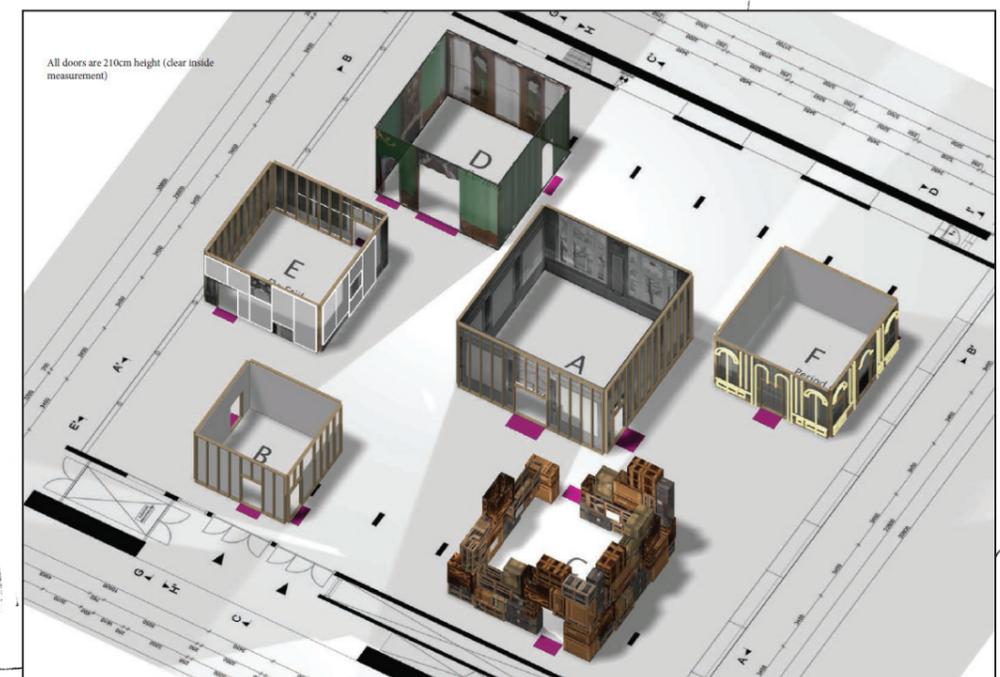
0A. Photo by Johannes Schwartz of the crates in which the pieces of the period rooms from the Stedelijk Museum arrived at Het Nieuwe Instituut.



1. Current ground floor plan of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, indicating Gallery 14 to 21 and the Lopez Suasso Room. This shows the current arrangement with the gallery numbers from 1975 when the period rooms were dismantled. Image: Amsterdam Museum



0B. Photo of the structure of slats with, attached to them, sections of room panelling from the Empire Room in the exhibition by Andreas Angelidakis. Photo: Johannes Schwartz.



2. Digital bird's-eye perspective of the installation by architect and artist Andreas Angelidakis at Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam. A to F: a succession of six rooms, composed of pieces and projections of four of the eight period rooms at the Stedelijk Museum. Image: Het Nieuwe Instituut

3. Period rooms from the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. For more information, see: www.hetnieuweinstituut.nl.



3A. The neoclassical house at Keizersgracht 185 that was demolished to make way for the construction of Raadhuisstraat. Although the room dates from 1802, there is no trace of the French-influenced Empire style in the panelling. The room was, however, furnished with Empire furniture when presented at the Stedelijk.

The dimensions, proportions and colour schemes no longer correspond with the eighteenth-century situation. The Corinthian pilasters of the wall panelling had to be extended some distance to fit into the museum gallery. Moreover, the gallery was wider than the panelling, and a totally new situation was created on the side with the window: doors, skirting board, cornices and wall with a window set in it were all probably made new. The Empire Room (gallery 21) at the Stedelijk was fitted with wallpaper 'in style'. Original components that have been preserved, such as the ceiling, mantel-piece and pilasters, have been altered. Photo: Amsterdam Museum



3C. The so-called Beuning Room was located in gallery 19 in the north-western corner pavilion of the Stedelijk Museum. The room is named after the patron Matthijs Beuning, who inherited the house at Keizersgracht 187 in 1744 from his extremely wealthy mother. It is a room with exceptionally rich panelling in Rococo style and executed in mahogany, a rarity for this period. The Moravian Brotherhood, which the Beunings were members of, must have held their gatherings here. The pieces of the plastered corridor and the stairs are still housed in the depots of the Amsterdam Museum. Photo: Amsterdam Museum



3B. The Green Room, adorned with panelling painted light green with gilded touches, was presented in gallery 14 of the Stedelijk Museum. This room originally came from a house at Prins Hendrikkade 142 and was decorated in the style of the French King Louis XIV. A mantle painting in tones of grey ('grauwtje') was transferred to the front room of Museum Willet-Holthuysen. Photo: Amsterdam Museum



3D. The Jacob de Wit Room was located in gallery 20 and was composed of interior elements of various origin. The room is named after the painter Jacob de Wit because of the ceiling he created. It dates from 1748 and was taken from the house at Herengracht 250. It is currently on view in the front room at Museum Willet-Holthuysen. Photo: Amsterdam Museum



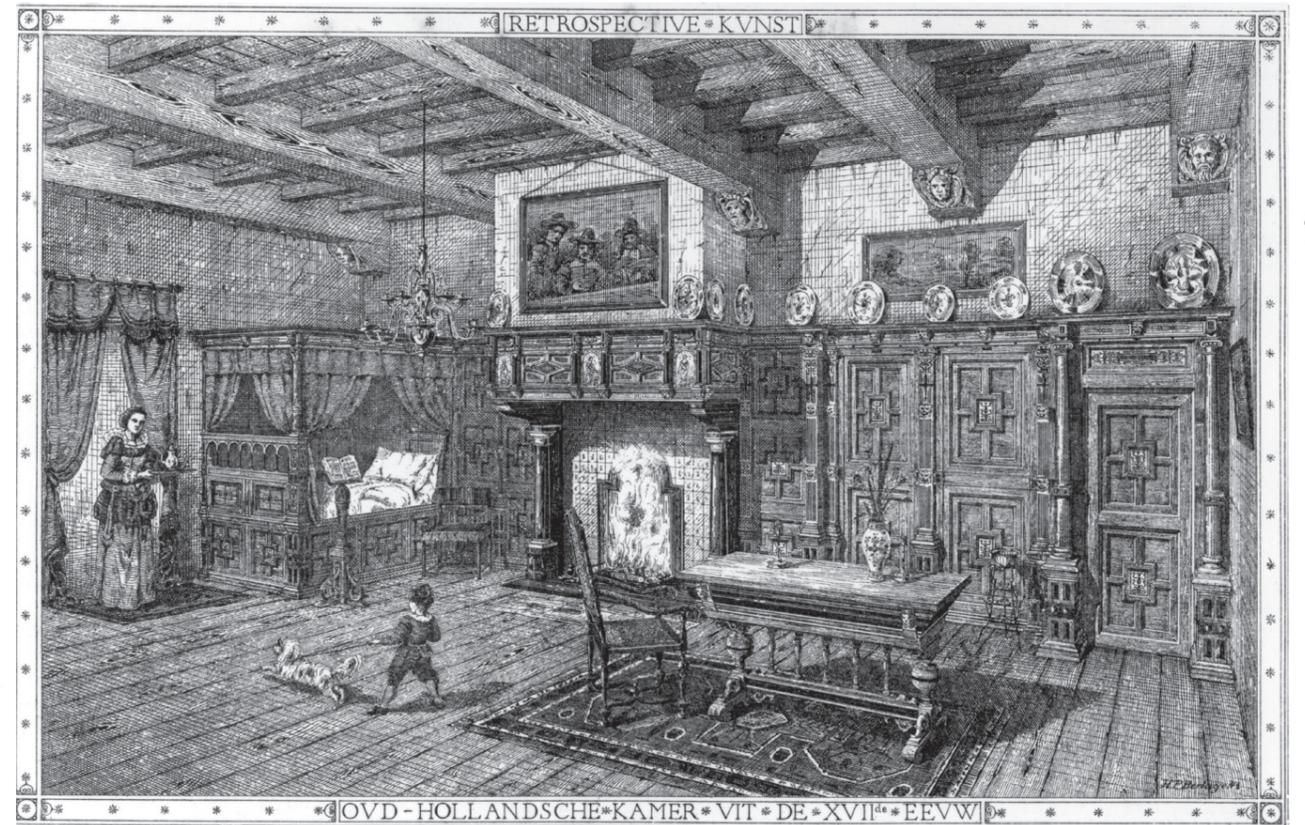
4. The Haarlem Room at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, an almost complete ensemble of late-eighteenth-century room panelling, furniture and interior fabrics designed by architect Abraham van der Hart. Photo: Rijksmuseum Amsterdam



5. The Blue Room at Museum Willet-Holthuysen in Amsterdam. Some pieces of the period rooms from the Stedelijk have been transferred to this front room on the bel-etage: the ceiling by Jacob de Wit from the Jacob de Wit Room and the mantel painting that depicts five cherubs, the allegory of autumn, from the Green Room. Photo: Amsterdam Museum



6. Some rooms were presented at the Historical Exhibition of 1876 in Amsterdam, an early example of a presentation ordered according to century. They were later kept by the Royal Society of Antiquarians. D.C. Meijer and P.H. Witkamp oversaw the composition of rooms; the architect P.J.H. Cuyper was responsible for the insertion of the various pieces in the galleries of the Oudemanshuis. Photo: Amsterdam City Archive.



7. Old-Dutch Room decorated the early seventeenth-century so-called 'Dordtse Panelling' from a house in Dordrecht, captured by the young architect H.P. Berlage. The panelling is presented here at the international exhibition of 1883 in Amsterdam in the new Rijksmuseum building, which was still under construction. In a slightly altered composition, the room was part of the permanent presentation at the museum from 1887 on in the galleries devoted to domestic life. The panelling is currently on view in the galleries devoted to the seventeenth century. Image: National Library of the Netherlands, The Hague.



8. Study belonging to the print collector Simon van Gijn from Dordrecht, composed of historical interior fragments, among them the chimney cap from a house in Dordrecht, completed in style by the architect C. Muysken in 1886 and altered again in 1899. Even during his lifetime, antiquarians and architects visited the house, and in 1922 it was bequeathed to the Old Dordrecht Society. Photo: Richard Boonstra.



9A-C The design tools of set design and exhibition design bear striking similarities, such as the suggestion of space by means of four, three or even two walls. The 'piece of pie' is in fact enough to suggest space, as is clearly illustrated by the sets for the photo shoots by Erwin Olaf designed by Floris Vos.

9A. In November 2013 the Het Nieuwe Instituut presented a number of his photo sets that clearly demonstrate the constructed character of Olaf's interior photography. In the photo 'Rain The Boardroom' from 2004, the scene and the furnishing, as well as the cutaway of the room, are carefully composed, just as they were in the period rooms. Photos: Erwin Olaf. Copyright: Erwin Olaf. Courtesy: Flatland gallery.



9C. Such a corner was furnished for the Historical Exhibition of 1863 in Delft: the first image of such an arrangement in the form of a piece of pie for a Dutch exhibition, indicated here largely by the raised floor, referred to as an 'attic', on which the arrangement is exhibited. Image: National Library of the Netherlands, The Hague.



10. Delftware Wonderware in the Japanese period room at the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague. Tulip vases and other items of Delft pottery played a major role in Dutch domestic life. The tulip vases by modern designers demonstrate that the feel of Delft pottery is still very much alive. Photo: Gemeentemuseum The Hague.



11. Wall tapestry designed by artist Barbara Visser and inspired by the crates containing the plaster ceiling (copy), cut into pieces, from the Green Room, which are stored in the depots of the Amsterdam Museum. The tapestry was exhibited at the exhibition at De Appel arts centre in 2013 at Prins Hendrikkade 142 in Amsterdam, in the house that originally featured the ceiling. Moving Rooms, Baroque Ceiling (Copy), Amsterdam Museum Depot, 2013. Photo: Cassander Eeftink Schattenkerk. Courtesy: Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam.



12. Detail of a ceiling design by the architect Robert Adam from the house at Adelphi Terrace 5 from about 1771, now in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The galleries devoted to neoclassicism in the British Galleries are arranged with attractive ensembles of applied arts, paintings and interior fragments. The website presents short films, images and background information about the house, the layout and the use, the client and the designers. Image: Victoria and Albert Museum London.



13. A period room inspired by the Turkish boudoirs of the Count of Artois, presented in the department devoted to eighteenth-century interior decoration at the Louvre in Paris. In addition to the many eighteenth-century palace interiors, more and more nineteenth-century galleries have been refurbished and opened to the public in recent years, among them the Apartments of Napoleon III at the Louvre. Photo: Barbara Laan.

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Conversation with Gusta Reichwein of the Amsterdam Museum on 21 January 2015. She was kind enough to grant permission to use the available documentation and images.

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14A. Hindeloper Room presented at the new Fries Museum in Leeuwarden by the architect Gunnar Daän. This period room is probably the best example of a room that has been moved about frequently for over a century, starting with the big Historical Exhibition of 1877 organised by the Provincial Friesian Society for the Study of Friesian History, Antiquity and Language. Photo: Fries Museum Collection, Leeuwarden.



14B. The Hindeloper Room presented at the World Exposition of 1878 in Paris, print from the magazine *Eigen Haard* 1878, based on a wood engraving by Smeeton Tilly. Image: National Library of the Netherlands, The Hague.



15. The dining room at the summer palace of the French king at Compiègne as it was used by Napoleon III. Photo: Barbara Laan.



16. Gaasbeek Castle near Brussels recently made a moving and gripping route based on the story of the most important residents of the castle. The creation by artist collective Wildworks and the director of the museum made a spectacle of high poetic and artistic quality. Photo: Barbara Laan.