

## One to one

Midway through the last century, the nineteenth-century period room made way in many museums for the white cube. Modern art demanded neutral, white exhibition walls, not historically furnished rooms, and so the period room disappeared into depots. Now Het Nieuwe Instituut is taking the period room as the point of departure for a programme devoted to museum presentation models. For *1:1 Period Rooms*, architect and artist Andreas Angelidakis has designed an installation using period rooms from the collection of the Amsterdam Museum.

These period rooms, parts of which go on display at Het Nieuwe Instituut, originally come from the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, where they initially served as exhibition spaces for the extensive art collection of Sophia Adriana Lopez Suasso-de Bruijn. Suasso donated the collection, which included furniture, jewellery, pottery and porcelain to the city of Amsterdam in 1890. Many of the period rooms, consisting for the most part of eighteenth-century interiors, were taken from residences demolished to make way for a new thoroughfare between Keizersgracht and Herengracht, today's Raadhuisstraat.

In deciding to present this collection inside period rooms, the Stedelijk Museum was following a development that had already been set in motion in other museums in the Netherlands and elsewhere. The public museum as we know it today emerged in the late nineteenth century. Up until then, collections were the exclusive domain of experts, and they alone knew how to find their way through the often randomly presented collections. The arrival of the public museum heralded an intensive search for new presentation techniques to exhibit collections to a large audience, and the period room proved to be a highly suitable vehicle. Reconstructed historical interiors provided a recognisable context in which to arrange works of art and other objects according to style and period. In this sense, the period room formed a counterpart to the diorama, which became popular in museums of natural history around the same time. The diorama presented animal and plant species in their 'natural' habitat. Fuelled no doubt by the latest scientific insights, the period room and the diorama represent first and foremost a museum reality influenced by the growing public role of the new institute. Both settings focused on education and served to categorise the infinite reality of culture and nature according to style and sort in a way that was as understandable as it was evocative.

Thanks to the period room, the private residential setting entered the public domain as an object of wonder and educational device. This museum status lent examples of residential culture an idealised character. The notion of the interior as an expression of the individual, which mediates between the world inside and outside, turned out to be the ideal means of propagating ideas about national style and identity. Hence the period room says more about the nationalist view of the nineteenth-century conservator than about the stylistic period that the room supposedly represented. Such a distorted view was directly connected to the role that museums developed for themselves in the late nineteenth century. Museums felt compelled to counterbalance the increase in 'badly' designed products that industrialisation was rapidly churning out. The answer from museums was the

careful construction, or reconstruction, of a 'stylistically' pure image that was then presented as authentic proof of an idealised past and an instrument for teaching 'good taste', improving the quality of applied art and raising awareness of it. This prompted a development that extended deep into the twentieth century, and in which the interior, as a didactic tool, formed part of a moralising, civilising offensive.

Criticism of the period room wasn't long in coming. Ironically enough, the carefully constructed authenticity of these rooms was questioned on the basis of a desire for more authenticity. These interiors had lost their intrinsic value, the argument went, because they had been removed from their original context, and moreover, had to undergo all sorts of alterations so that they could even fit inside the museum building. But above all, new ideas about exhibiting art surfaced in the early twentieth century. The intrinsic qualities of a modern artwork were brought out best when presented as an autonomous object devoid of context. This 'emancipation' of the object, which coincided with the scientification of style as an ordering category and the related authenticity of a period room, broke the relation between object and space at the museum, and this break has influenced museum presentations and exhibition practice right up to the present.

At the Stedelijk Museum, conservator Willem Sandberg (the later director) decided to present artworks on clean, white walls. The historicised interior of the Stedelijk Museum had to make way for the supposed neutrality of white galleries. It wasn't until the 1970s that the last period room disappeared to create space for the rapidly expanding collection of modern art. Ever since, the so-called white cube has been the dominant typology at the Stedelijk Museum, as it is in the rest of the museum world, although that dogma has been called into question right from the start.

For Het Nieuwe Instituut, the period room has been taken as a point of departure to reconsider museum presentation models and also to enrich them with a sense of history.

Even though the white wall is of vital importance in the development of modern art and has remained dominant right up to the present, the quest for new presentation models has continued. Influenced by far-reaching digitalisation, in combination with supposed democratisation, developments in art and its reception and presentation call once more for new presentation models. Interestingly enough, 1:1 presentations are again the subject of great interest – not only in their most recent guise, but also in earlier, historicising versions of the period room. For example, the renovated Rijksmuseum now exhibits the Beuning Room, an eighteenth-century rococo interior once on view at the Stedelijk Museum. A shift has occurred, however: the room now refers to itself alone, as an expression of the style of a particular period, and it is no longer deployed as an exhibition space. In June 2014 the Louvre in Paris opened a totally renewed department of eighteenth-century decorative art, presented in a series of period rooms and thematic galleries.

A closer examination of the period room in relation to the white cube not only casts new light on their shared history but also offers ways to discuss the future of presentation models. The period room should be considered as an exhibition model

in which space and art correspond with each other, and in which a particular world, style or atmosphere could be evoked in support of the visitor experience. In the meantime, many historians and curators are convinced that the white cube – despite its claim to neutrality – should be read in the same way. With this insight – and the analogy with the period room is clear – the white wall has been transformed from an ideal, neutral background for autonomous, self-referential art, into something that provides meaning in the relation between observer, object and space. With the current interest in exhibition models and the history of exhibiting, attention has shifted from the object to the space in which it is presented. The consequences are important, and not just within the reality of the museum. For at a time when all of us are nomads, and ideas about living have changed radically, the representative and narrative potential of these spaces is of value for a much bigger, everyday reality.