

**Art, slavery and morality**

Jip Meijers

S4797442

Supervision: Prof. dr. J.P. Wils

## Table of content

1. Introduction	p. 3
2. Museum ethics	p. 4
2.1 <i>Colonial looted art</i>	p. 5
2.2 <i>What about slavery?</i>	p. 5
3. The moral status of slavery	p. 6
3.1 <i>The moral status of slavery in the Dutch Golden Age</i>	p. 6
3.2 <i>The curse of Ham</i>	p. 6
3.3 <i>The current results of slavery</i>	p. 7
4. Aesthetics and morality	p. 7
4.1 <i>Radical aestheticism</i>	p. 8
4.2 <i>Sophisticated aestheticism</i>	p. 9
4.3 <i>Radical modernism</i>	p. 9
4.4 <i>Moderated moralism</i>	p. 9
5. The Rijksmuseum: a case study	p. 9
5.1 <i>The historical connection</i>	p. 10
5.2 <i>The invisible connection</i>	p. 10
5.3 <i>The visible connection</i>	p. 11
6. Back to aesthetics and morality	p. 12
6.1 <i>“Allegory on the Abdication of Emperor Charles V in Brussels”</i>	p. 12
6.2 <i>“Still Life with a Gilt Cup”</i>	p. 13
6.3 <i>The (in)visible connection</i>	p. 13
6.4 <i>“Portrait of Laurens Reael</i>	p. 13
6.5 <i>“Piet Heyn dish”</i>	p. 14
6.6 <i>“Cup and Saucer with an Abolitionist Scene”</i>	p. 14
6.7 <i>Ethical or practical?</i>	p. 14
6.8 <i>Practical reason: Dutch Code of Ethics</i>	p. 15
7. Conclusion	p. 16
8. Bibliography	p. 17
9. Appendix	p. 19

## **ABSTRACT**

This article is about what the ethical criteriums are on which we can base our moral judgment about artworks that are connected to the slavery past. In order to answer this, we will be looking into the historical and contemporary moral status of slavery, as well as different positions on aesthetics and morality and evaluating real artworks from the Rijksmuseum. The position that does most justice to the complex reality of the museum is moderate moralism.

Keywords: *slavery, aesthetics, morality, moderate moralism, museum ethics*

## **1. Introduction**

'How can we create an exhibition about slavery? We do not own any objects connected to slavery, right?' was the first reaction of Taco Dibbits, director of the Rijksmuseum, when he was introduced to the idea of a slavery exhibition in his museum (2Doc 2021). However, after this first response Dibbits added that he would like his conservators to research all objects to see whether his belief was true.

The results were contrary to Dibbits initial thoughts: several objects in the Rijksmuseum's collection did have a connection to slavery. According to Dibbits:

Many of the works in the Rijksmuseum's permanent collection have links with the Netherlands' slavery past. It's a relationship you probably won't notice at first glance, and one you won't read about on the museum label next to the object (Rijksmuseum n.d.).

Thus in 2017 the slavery exhibition was announced, and in 2021 the exhibition opened its doors for visitors. Its goal was to show that slavery has been an essential part of Dutch history, that has not been visible in the Rijksmuseum until this exhibition. The exhibition was a way to present a more complete picture of Dutch history, which slavery is a part of (Sint Nicolaas and Smeulders 2021, 9).

After this exhibition, the Rijksmuseum did not return to its usual form of ignoring the Dutch slavery past. In the museum's permanent collection signs have been added to inform visitors why and how the artwork is connected to the slavery past (Rijksmuseum n.d.). It is a way to create awareness under visitors what it actually is they are looking at.

In light of recent discussions in museum ethics about colonial art, it is very interesting to look into this specific part of colonial history: slavery. What are the ethical criteriums on which we can base our judgments about artworks that are connected to the slavery past? The collection of the Rijksmuseum will serve as a case study in this article, since it is impossible to determine the moral load of every piece of art that is somehow connected to slavery. The Rijksmuseum has determined all objects in their collection that are somehow connected to the Dutch slavery past and has thus a clear and framed data set to investigate in this article.

To answer this question, it is important to note that it contains multiple sub questions. First of all, it is a question about establishing the moral load of artworks: how can we determine the moral load of the historical objects in the Rijksmuseum? Secondly, we ask about the relationship between art, or aesthetics, and morality: should our moral judgment of an artwork have any influence on the aesthetic value of the work? And lastly: how can we apply our moral judgment onto the artworks in the Rijksmuseum?

In order to answer the main question of this article, we will first dive into the discipline of museum ethics. This is a philosophical field of research engaged with ethical dilemmas in museums. I will show that slavery is an overlooked subject, although it ties perfectly in with the current debates in the field.

Subsequently, we are looking into the question on how to determine the moral value of an artwork. Should we project our current moral ideas onto historical artworks, or do we evaluate them through an historical lens? After determining from what perspective to look at the artworks, it is time to dive deeper into the consequences of morality in art. Art usually has only to do with aesthetics – whether an artwork is beautiful or not – instead of moral values like “good” or “bad”. There are four main positions in the philosophical debate about the relationship between aesthetics and morality: radical aestheticism, sophisticated aestheticism, radical moralism and last but not least, moderate moralism.

Thereafter we can dive deeper into the collection of the Rijksmuseum and determine what the moral load is of the artworks that are connected to the slavery past. First, we will see that there are three ways an artwork can have this connection: a historical, an invisible or a visible connection. The way an artwork is connected, influences the moral load of the work. Secondly, I am going to show why not all artworks belong to one of these three connections, and that context therefore really matters in determining the moral load. Finally, I will argue what position is most fitting for this specific topic of art with a connection to the Dutch slavery past.

## **2. Museum ethics**

Dilemmas of what to do with certain artworks are part of the field of museum ethics. This field is occupied with the search ‘to provide a purposeful, philosophical framework for all that the museum does’ (Besterman 2016, 431). Such a philosophical framework should not only focus on a responsibility towards the artworks, but museum ethics has also a responsibility towards other human beings.

Although ethical dilemmas are as old as humanity, the discipline of museum ethics is a rather recent one. It was not until 1925 that the first code of ethics was published by the American Museum Association:

Museums, in the broadest sense, are institutions which hold their possessions in trust for mankind and for the future welfare of the [human] race. Their value is in direct proportion to the service they render the emotional and intellectual life of the people (Besterman 2016, 433).

Later, somewhere in the seventies, new ethical guidelines about service to the public and caretaking of collections were published. In the nineties already appeared a new definition of the museum, since earlier definitions did not cover the social aspect between the museum and its visitors: “Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artefacts and specimens, which they hold in trust for society” (Besterman 2016, 434).

As we have seen in the above, ethical codes are never fixed and always subject to changes in society:

Ethical codes evolve in response to changing conditions, values, and ideas. A professional code of ethics must, therefore, be periodically updated. It must also rest upon widely shared values. Although the operating environment of museums grows more complex each year, the root value for museums, the tie that connects all of us together despite our diversity, is the commitment to serving people, both present and future generations (Besterman 2016, 435).

Besides, museum ethics should comprehend the complex context of museum. An ethical dilemma in a museum is rarely simply about “wrong” or “right”. It however is a choice between “competing goods”.

Currently, museum ethics is dealing with several topics, but one of them is omnipresent: the issue of looted art. There have been three major moments of art robbery in history, all in which Europe has had a leading role (Van Beurden 2022, 206) Two of these moments were in the colonial era: first in the “imperial” colonies in Africa, South America, and Asia, second in the so-called “settler colonies” like the United States, Canada, South-Africa and Australia. The last moment is more recent. It took place under the Nazi regime.

In 1998 North America and Europe decided to adopt the *Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art*. The aim of this declaration is to ‘actively seek public collections for looted works of art and to return them to their rightful owners’ (Van Beurden 2022, 215). In the Netherlands for instance this has led to the establishment of the “Restitutiecommissie voor naziroofkunst”, a restitution committee for looted Nazi art (Van Beurden 2020, 72-73). There is not yet a similar declaration for colonial looted art. Therefore, this topic is still strongly discussed within the field of museum ethics.

### 2.1 Colonial looted art

During the last couple of years there have been several examples of restitution claims by former colonies or the indigenous peoples of settler colonies. For instance, in October 2022 the former Dutch colony of Indonesia demanded the return of the Dubois Collection, which is currently exhibited in the Dutch museum Naturalis (NOS 2022). A better-known example is probably the Benin Bronzes, a collection of thousands of bronze objects taken from Benin, now known as Nigeria. Ever since Nigeria gained independence from Great Britain, there have been restitution claims for the Benin Bronzes (NOS 2021). It was not until 2021 that the first sculpture of this collection has been returned. Others are still in possession of European museums.

Within the field of museum ethics there is a strong agreement that what is stolen, should return to the country of origin. In the Netherlands there is even an advisory report for the government on how to deal with colonial objects in Dutch museums: *Koloniale collecties en erkenning van onrecht. Advies over de omgang met koloniale collectie* (Van Beurden 2021, 64-65). Summarized, the report claims that all that is stolen, should return to their rightful owners (Van Beurden 2021, 65).

### 2.2 What about slavery?

Besides colonial looted art, there is another form of art that is closely related to colonialism. This is art that has a connection with slavery, since in many of the colonized areas enslaved people were used to profit even more from the conquered land. Examples of these artworks include art that is financed with money coming from the plantations, portraits of slave owners or paintings that depict slaves.

Obviously, there is one big difference between looted art and art that is linked to slavery: the latter is not stolen. The moral status of looted art is simple: it is immoral to steal objects. However, the moral status of art linked to slavery is more difficult to determine. In this case nothing is stolen. Let us look into an example, the portraits of *Marten Soolmans* and *Oopjen Coppit* (see Appendix). Marten and Oopjen were a wealthy couple in the seventeenth century, who celebrated their marriage with portraits of the both of them by Rembrandt (Rijksmuseum 2021, 8). Contrary to colonial looted art, the paintings have never belonged to someone else before Marten and Oopjen purchased them. They are however linked to slavery: the fortune used to pay for the portraits was made by the refining of raw sugar, produced by enslaved African people (Rijksmuseum 2021, 9).

The portraits of Marten and Oopjen thus are without doubt connected to slavery. That we consider slavery as morally wrong, is nowadays obvious. However, what does this mean for the moral status of art, like these portraits? Do they carry a moral load and if so, what should we do with them?

### **3. The moral status of slavery**

To answer the above questions, it is important to go back to the first sub question of this article: how can we establish the moral load of historical artworks? In order to do so, we should look into the moral status of slavery. As said before, in our current Dutch society we consider slavery in general to be something wrong.

The present-day moral status of slavery is thus clear. However, if we want to morally evaluate artworks from the slavery era, it is also important to determine their moral load from a historical angle. Would we project our contemporary moral values onto historical art, almost all art becomes morally controversial. For instance, slavery is not a colonial invention and already existed in ancient times. Should we thus morally reject Greek and Roman art, since they accepted slavery as part of their society?

#### *3.1 The moral status of slavery in the Dutch Golden Age*

In contemporary society people are likely to believe that slavery was 'a natural and widely accepted institution among human beings, and that even the tolerant Dutch were unaware of its moral wrongs until the abolitionist movement emerged in the late eighteenth century' (Welie 2008, 48). According to historian Rik van Welie this idea is deceiving. First of all, the Dutch did actually believe that the enslavement of people was morally unacceptable. Enslaving Christians had already been prohibited by papal decrees in the medieval era (Sint Nicolaas and Smeulders 2021, 32). During the Golden Age slavery as an institution had also legally been banned in the Dutch Republic (Welie 2008, 49). According to the famous Dutch lawyer Hugo Grotius 'all people in the Dutch Provinces were considered to be free' (Nifterik 2021, 161). In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century the Dutch people even were highly committed to free Christian enslaved people: these people were European men who had been enslaved after their ships were hijacked by Nord-Africans (Sint Nicolaas and Smeulders 2021, 33).

This seems like a paradox: seventeenth-century Dutch people were aware of the moral wrongs of slavery and proud of their freedom and tolerance, but at the same time did participate in a system of the enslavement of non-Europeans (Welie 2008, 49). First of all, this was no paradox at all to the Dutch: human beings might be naturally free, however enslavement was allowed if someone was a prisoner of war (Sint Nicolaas and Smeulders 2021, 33). Furthermore, ideas about freedom were not universal, but only applicable to fellow Christian Europeans. African or indigenous people were excluded of freedom rights (Nifterik 2021, 191). Legally, slavery was thus allowed. Besides, the paradox can be explained by the fact that the suffering of the enslaved was not visible in the Netherlands (Misevich and Mann 2016, 107-112). Enslaved people rarely passed through Dutch harbors, contrary to other commodities – as enslaved people were considered back then – like spices or sugar. For Dutch colonists returning to the Netherlands, it was even prohibited to take their enslaved back home (Welie 2008, 49).

The last indication that slavery was morally acceptable in the Netherlands is the fact that we were one of the last countries to abolish slavery (African Studies Centre Leiden n.d.). It was under international pressure that in 1814 slave trade in the Dutch colonies became illegal (Sint Nicolaas and Smeulders 2021, 54). This, however, did not mean the end of slave labor: it was only prohibited to import new enslaved people into the colonies. Although the United Kingdom abolished slavery in 1834 and France followed in 1848, it was not until 1863 the Netherlands officially ended the enslavement in its colonies (Sint Nicolaas and Smeulders 2021, 55-56). In Suriname there was even a mandatory ten-year transition, so the abolition of slavery there was only realized in 1873 (African Studies Centre Leiden n.d.).

#### *3.2 The curse of Ham*

Not only was there a legal justification of the enslavement of Black people, but there was also a religious argument. Although Dutch pastors initially dismissed slavery, their attitude

changed when the Netherlands itself became involved in slave trade (Rijksmuseum 2021, 3). In order to legitimize the enslavement of Black people, pastors used the biblical story of Ham:

(25) And he said,  
Cursed be Canaan;  
A servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.  
(26) And he said,  
Blessed be Jehovah, the God of Shem;  
And let Canaan be his servant.  
(27) God enlarge Japheth,  
And let him dwell in the tents of Shem;  
And let Canaan be his servant (Genesis 9, 25-27).

Prior to the cursing of Canaan, Noah had gotten drunken. His son Ham found him lying naked in his tent. Even though it is unclear what Ham then exactly did to his father, it was enough for Noah to curse Ham's son Canaan to enslavement (Braude 2011, 587). Important to note here is that Canaan is in *Genesis* 10 described as the founding father of Africa (Whitford 2009, 2). According to the Dutch pastors, and other clergymen, the story of Noah, Ham and Canaan meant the predestination of African people to enslavement (Rijksmuseum 2021, 3). This is how the curse of Ham became a justification for African slavery (Whitford 2009, 4).

### *3.3 The current results of slavery*

Even though there are many signs that the enslavement of non-Europeans and non-Christians was not morally objectionable in the Netherlands of the seventeenth century, determining the moral status of slavery is more complicated than that. This has to do with the fact that slavery may be something from the past, the consequences of this inhumane practice are still visible in present day society. We see this for example in discrimination and institutional racism.

According to dr. Markha Valenta the base of discrimination and institutional racism can be found in the colonial era. During this time there was a structural and formal distinction between Black and white, or European and non-European (Studium Generale 2022). This distinction-making between Black and white is a hierarchical distinction, in which white is the "superior" race. This distinction has an enormous social, cultural, economic and psychological impact (Adviescollege Dialooggroep Slavernijverleden 2021, 41). This is visible in institutional racism in the job market, housing market, the educational system and in police departments (Adviescollege Dialooggroep Slavernijverleden 2021, 8). Examples can be found in ethnic profiling by the police, or the "Toeslagenaffaire". Present day discrimination and institutional racism thus have their roots in the colonial past of the Netherlands.

The difference between Greek and Roman art, and art with a connection to the Dutch slavery past thus is that nowadays nobody suffers from the consequences slavery in the ancient times, while people in our society still endure discrimination and racism because of the enslavement of their ancestors. In a sense, slavery thus is not solely something from the past, and that is exactly why determining the moral load of these artworks should be done from a contemporary perspective.

## **4. Aesthetics and morality**

Determining the moral load of an artwork is asking about the relationship between aesthetics and morality, which brings us to the second sub question of this article: should our moral judgment of an artwork have any influence on the aesthetic value of the work? This may seem like a strange question: aesthetics and morality are completely different domains of judgments.

At first sight, the distinction between aesthetics and morality seems clear enough. Aesthetics is about what is pleasing to the senses: does something look, feel, smell, sound or taste good? [...] Anything can be – and will be – aestheticized by the human senses (Kuipers, Franssen and Holla 2019, 386).

Morality also is about judgment: is something right or wrong, good or evil? Moral judgment, however, always concerns persons and their deeds. While objects may be the trigger of moral valuation, the blame or praise usually relates to a person. This particular object should not have been made, spread, condoned, worn, written, published, photographed and funded by some person or organization (Kuipers, Franssen and Holla 2019, 386).

When thinking of art, we normally do not judge in moral terms like “good” and “bad”, we use aesthetic judgments like “beautiful” or “ugly”. This is not only the case in everyday life, but for a long time has also been a fact in philosophy. There was a strong belief that aesthetics and ethics should be different fields (Kuipers, Franssen and Holla 2019, 386).

However, both have a lot in common. First, aesthetics and morality have to do with value: they are ‘socially constructed judgments of worth’ (Kuipers, Franssen and Holla 2019, 387). These valuations are mostly formed fast and automatic but are grounded in the cultural and social realm. Besides, aesthetics and morality form hierarchical judgments. Calling something good or pretty places it above something bad or ugly. Lastly, they are both highly personal, therefore discussions about these judgments can be very emotional. The distinction between the moral and the aesthetical is thus not as segregated as some philosophers make it sound.

In contemporary literature there are four different positions that consider whether aesthetics and morality influence each other. These are radical aestheticism, sophisticated aestheticism, radical moralism and moderate moralism.<sup>1 2</sup> I will explain each position by using an example from the Rijksmuseum: the painting *Thomas Hees and his Enslaved Servant Thomas and Nephews Jan and Andries Hees* by Michiel van Musscher (see Appendix).

#### 4.1 Radical aestheticism

According to supporters of radical aestheticism ‘art is valuable [...] if and only if it has aesthetic value’ (Schellekens 2007, 64). The moral character of an artwork is thus completely irrelevant. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Oscar Wilde expresses this idea by stating that ‘There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all’ (Wilde 2014, preface). Even the morally most repulsive artworks should thus only be valued in aesthetic terms.

Let us look at the painting by Van Musscher (Rijksmuseum 2021, 21). It is a wonderful painting, with very skilled details in for instance the clothing and tapestries, and a beautiful use of color. However, on the background we see an enslaved man, wearing a collar around his neck for everyone to recognize that he is someone’s possession. The repulsion one could feel from seeing an enslaved man is of no importance if you take the position of radical

---

<sup>1</sup> There are of course many examples in which the doubtful or even bad moral message of an artwork actually merits the value of the artwork. Art can be seen as a form of moral knowledge, this however is a different topic and not directly relevant for the sake of this article.

<sup>2</sup> No matter what position we apply to artworks, it is important to note that it is a personal consideration. We, the spectators or art, determine the moral load of an artwork. Therefore, the moral judgment of the same artwork can vary between different people.



aestheticism. The only thing that matters is the aesthetic value of the painting. The moral value is completely irrelevant.

#### *4.2 Sophisticated aestheticism*

Schellekens (2007, 65) argues that radical aestheticism is not a tenable position, since she believes that artistic content does in some cases, perhaps in the painting by Van Musscher, influence the aesthetic value of the artwork. Sophisticated aestheticism is a moderated alternative, that provides some space to acknowledge the moral load a certain works of art: 'an artwork's moral character *may* influence its intrinsic value – where such value is conceived primarily if not exclusively in aesthetic terms – but does not do so necessarily' (Schellekens 2007, 65).

This theory gives the opportunity to give room to the moral judgment about Van Musscher's painting, although this can only be done in aesthetic terms. The painting would thus be not bad or wrong, but simply less beautiful.

#### *4.3 Radical moralism*

Contrary to aestheticism, moralism claims that the moral character of an artwork is crucial in deciding how to assess and appreciate the work (Schellekens 2007, 68). This means that 'ethical merits count as artistic merits and ethical demerits as artistic demerits' (Giovanelli 2013, 335). The value of an artwork is thus completely dependent on its moral character.

If we would judge Van Musscher's painting according radical moralism, the fact that we see an enslaved man and we find this morally repulsive is the only thing that matters in judging the painting. The craftsmanship of Van Musscher is thus of no importance.

#### *4.4 Moderate moralism*

In moderate moralism there is space to acknowledge that some art can be good despite its morally objectionable character (Schellekens 2007, 68). A moral defect thus can be an aesthetic defect, so can a moral virtue count as an aesthetic virtue (Carroll 1998, 419). According to moderate moralism art also does not need to have a moral character in order to be good art, contrary to radical moralism (Schellekens 2007, 69). As we can see, moderate moralism is very similar to sophisticated aestheticism, but the starting point is different. Moderate moralism starts from the moral judgment, while sophisticated aestheticism starts with the aesthetic judgment.

For a last time back to the painting by Van Musscher. According to the position of moderate moralism the moral defect of the depiction of an enslaved man can count as an aesthetic defect.

### **5. The Rijksmuseum: a case study**

Now we have determined how we can form a moral judgment about historical artworks with a link to the slavery past, and we as well have seen how morality and aesthetics can influence each other, it is time to finally extensively dive into some examples of artworks connected to the slavery past. This is important in order to answer the third sub question in the next section.

We will take the collection of the Rijksmuseum as a case study, since it is impossible to determine the moral load of all art on this planet that has a vague connection to slavery. The Rijksmuseum has determined all objects in their collection that are somehow connected to the Dutch slavery past and has thus a clear and framed data set to work with.

The collection of the Rijksmuseum is extensive, and thus should it not be a surprise that the moral load between all these artworks can differ. We can roughly classify the artworks into three sorts of connections to the slavery past:

1. A historical connection: the artwork dates from the era of slavery;
2. An invisible connection: the connection with slavery is for most Dutch viewers not evidently visible, however the connection can be seen with some relevant background information;
3. A visible connection: the viewer immediately can see why this painting has something to do with the slavery past.

### 5.1 *The historical connection*

The historical connection is about artworks that date from the era of slavery. Now one could wonder why an artwork from this era necessarily has something to do with the slavery past, but this is the case because of the advantageous circumstances during this time for artists to create their works of art.

There are two main reasons for the flourishing art market during the Golden Age. First of all, this had to do with the disappearance of the biggest commissioner in earlier times: the Catholic church. Due to the Reformation, protestant churches took over the Netherlands. The protestants did not wish to have any decorations in their churches, contrary to the lavishly decorated Catholic churches (Rijksmuseum 2021, 5). Orders from the church thus fell away and artists start to take orders from every buyer that could afford their work.

However, in order to create a blooming art market, there had to be enough wealthy buyers of art. This brings us to the second reason: the fact that this many works of art could be produced, had all to do with the prosperity of the Netherlands during the Golden Age (Koningsberger 1967, 29–39). There are several factors that have contributed to this wealth, but one of the most important sources of income was the trade of goods from colonized areas, in which enslaved people were forced to work. Therefore all artworks in this article have a historical connection to the slavery past.

An example of a painting that has solely a historical connection is *The Nave and Choir of the Mariachurch in Utrecht*, painted in 1641 by Pieter Saenredam (see Appendix). Saenredam has depicted a part of the Mariakerk in the Dutch city of Utrecht. In the early days of the Dutch Republic Reformed Protestant services were still held in former Catholic Churches. This is why we see a church of Catholic architecture, but without the Catholic lavish decorations, like paintings and statues of saint (Rijksmuseum 2021, 5). The Mariachurch only kept the decorations on the pillars. We can see some visitors looking up towards these golden embellishments. On this painting we neither see any enslaved people or slave owners, nor is the painting – as far as we know of – directly financed with money made through slavery.

### 5.2 *The invisible connection*

At first glance, paintings with an invisible connection do not seem to have a link to slavery. However, if one is aware of the full context of these paintings, the connection is without doubt present. This includes artworks depicting slave owners or people involved in the VOC (“Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie” or United East India Company) or WIC (“West-Indische Compagnie” or Dutch West India Company).

An instance of such a painting is *Officers and other Civic Guardsmen of the XIX District in Amsterdam under the command of Captain Cornelis Bicker*, painted by Joachim von Sandrart in 1640 (see Appendix). It is a military group portrait, depicting a company led by Captain Cornelis Bicker. The company served as the guard of honour for Maria de’Medici when the French Queen Mother visited Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum 2021, 11). This is why they are depicted while surrounding a portrait bust of the queen.

However, what we cannot see on this painting is that Bicker was not only captain of this company, but from 1622 until 1628 also director and major shareholder of the WIC. During

his reign the WIC he conquered Portuguese Brazil, because of abundance of sugar plantations in this region. Indigenous Brazilians and enslaved Africans were forced to work on these plantations. Besides his role in the enslavement of people in Portuguese Brazil he also profited of the sugar plantations himself. Converted to euros he earned more than one million per year with the trade in sugar (Rijksmuseum 2021, 11). Even though all of this is not directly visible in this painting, we have just learned why there still is a clear connection to the slavery past.

The invisible connection, however, is a difficult connection to determine. What is invisible to one person, could be visible to someone else. Let me explain. When the idea of a slavery exhibition first was brought up in the Rijksmuseum, Taco Dibbits – the director of the museum – stated: ‘How can we make an exhibition about slavery? We do not own any objects that are related to the slavery past’ (2Doc 2021). Being a white man, Dibbits did not see any connections to slavery in his collection.

This experience was very different for Valika Smeulders, curator in the Rijksmuseum. She explains:

When I walk through the museum and see certain paintings, this is the first thing I think of: these are the people that profited of the colonial system. These people had everything to do with slavery and slave trade. For me, that is just a logical fact” (2Doc 2021).

Smeulders experienced the Rijksmuseum very different from her perspective as a Black woman. This difference in perception is not necessarily based on skin color, but it has to do with a person’s background. A white historian for instance would perhaps see the connections to slavery as well, due to their vast historical knowledge.

Maria Holtrop – also curator in the Rijksmuseum – states:

This exhibition makes me, and other white people realize that our position is not neutral. Here in the Netherlands we are the majority, which makes it seem that our perspective is the starting point, a neutral experience. This is not the case (2Doc 2021).

As Holtrop points out, the majority of Dutch people does not share the same experience as Smeulders has had. So, for most people visiting the Rijksmuseum many connections to slavery are invisible. This however does not mean that it actually is invisible. It is not a neutral position, it just is one perspective that – in the Netherlands – is shared by the majority of people. Thus, calling this the “invisible connection” is also not a neutral term.

### *5.3 The visible connection*

Less complicated is the visible connection. The term already contains its meaning: artworks with a visible connection to slavery, by depicting slaves.

We see an example in *Portrait of Jan Valckenburgh and an Enslaved Servant* by Daniel Vertangen (see Appendix). This portrait shows us exactly what the title already states: Jan Valckenburgh and a Black man, his enslaved servant. Valckenburgh was the director-general of Fort Elmina, a fortress in present-day Ghana used by the WIC to coordinate the slave trade (Rijksmuseum 2021, 26). From Fort Elmina over 550 thousand Africans were transported to North and South America and the Caribbean (Van der Ham 2016, 109). One of these enslaved men is the servant we see behind Valckenburgh, taken away from his home, family and dehumanized without any say in how to live his life (Rijksmuseum 2021, 26).

As we have seen in all examples above, the connection between the artworks and the slavery past varies enormously. Some paintings are irrefutably connected to slavery, while others have an almost farfetched link.

## 6. Back to aesthetics and morality

Now we have seen in what way artworks can have a connection – historical, invisible or visible – to the slavery past, we can finally return to the relationship between aesthetics and morality, in order to answer the third and final sub question: how can we apply our moral judgment onto the artworks in the Rijksmuseum?

This is where the issue of context becomes of great importance. How could one determine the moral load of an artwork, if you are not able to see it? This is the case for artworks belonging to the historical or invisible connection. Visitors of a museum need some form of context to establish whether or not the artwork contains a moral load. The Rijksmuseum has been friendly enough to already provide their artworks with the necessary context, explaining the history behind the artwork and pointing out what it actually is we are looking at. The relationship between an artwork and slavery is explicitly mentioned with newly added “Slavery”-signs.

### 6.1 “*Allegory on the Abdication of Emperor Charles V in Brussels*”

Let us look into an example of the full context becoming visible through the slavery-sign: *Allegory on the Abdication of Emperor Charles V in Brussels*, painted by Frans Francken (II) somewhere between 1635 and 1640 (see Appendix). According to the sign, this is what we see:

Charles V is enthroned at center. Battle weary and wracked by illness, in 1555 he divided up his empire. He gave his brother Ferdinand (left of the throne) the Holy Roman Empire, while his son Phillip (at the right) became King of Spain and Lord of the Netherlands. The three figures in the right foreground personify the continents America, Africa and Asia over which Charles’s vast empire also stretched. Neptune (left) symbolizes his power at sea (Rijksmuseum 2021, 13).

At first glance we do not see anything that has to do with slavery, and at second glance – bearing this information in mind – there still does not seem to be a connection towards the slavery past. However, in preparation of the slavery exhibition, researchers of the Rijksmuseum have discovered more information about many artworks in their possession, including this painting. A second sign is therefore added:

In the right foreground of this painting, the personifications of the continents of the Americas, Asia and Africa offer their riches to Charles V. In Europe this fealty was taken for granted because Europeans considered themselves to be superior. Charles V, too, took this as a given. In 1518, as ruler of the Spanish Empire, he issued the first *asiento* (monopoly contract) to ship thousands of people directly from Africa to the Spanish colonies in South America. This was the beginning of the large-scale transatlantic slave trade, which would persist for more than three centuries (Rijksmuseum 2021, 13).

This information paints a completely new picture of this artwork. It is not simply a painting of the abdication of Charles V, it is also a painting of a man who believed the riches of other continents to be his. To make it even worse, Charles V was also one of the instigators of the transatlantic slave trade. The second sign makes us realize there indeed is a moral load present in this painting. This is exactly why context is so important. Without it, we would not have known about the colonial implications behind the painting.

## 6.2 “Still Life with a Gilt Cup”

Secondly, knowing the context behind an artwork rules out artworks with a historical connection from a moral evaluation. Let us again look into an example: *Still Life with a Gilt Cup*, painted by Willem Claesz Heda in 1635 (see Appendix). It is a highly detailed banquet piece, filled with plates of oysters, mussels and bread, goblets, glass cups and a salt cellar. In this time salt was often put in these kind of luxurious salt cellars like the one on the painting (Rijksmuseum 2021, 6). Mining salt was often done by enslaved people, who were forced to do this work barefoot in the stinging salt water and the burning sun. Salt in the Netherlands came from the salt pans in Bonaire. However, Bonaire was not conquered by the Dutch until a year after this picture was painted (Rijksmuseum 2021, 6). Therefore, a clear link to the Dutch slavery past is in this painting missing.

*Still Life with a Gilt Cup* has no connection to the Dutch slavery past, except for a historical one. It is therefore important to point out that the slavery-signs in the Rijksmuseum do not immediately imply that a painting has a moral load. I want to argue that artworks with a historical connection simply lack enough moral load to form a moral judgment. That is why these artworks do not need a moral evaluation, in order to determine their value.

## 6.3 The (in)visible connection

Now we have excluded the historical connection from the forming of a moral judgment, the invisible and visible connection remain. There are two ways of discovering the moral load of an artwork: by looking at it and by reading about it, for instance through the slavery-signs. Looking is only possible if an artwork has a visible connection. In the previous section we have seen the enslaved man on *Portrait of Jan Valckenburgh*, we know slavery is morally wrong and we can thus start deducing if this moral load should have any influence on our appreciation of the artwork.

So, could we then perhaps apply a moral load per connection? For example, artworks with a historical connection have no moral load, paintings with the invisible connection can have a moral load, depending on who is looking, and artworks with a visible connection definitely have a moral load.

No, it is not as simple as that. Again, context is of great importance here. Even though an artwork has a certain connection to the slavery past, it does not immediately mean it is “good” or “bad”. Each object deserves its own evaluation and with the help of a few examples I will show here why that is the case.

## 6.4 “Portrait of Laurens Reael”

There are many artworks that do not clearly fit into the historical, invisible or visible connection. An example is *Portrait of Laurens Reael*, by Cornelis van der Voort (see Appendix). This painting by Cornelis van der Voort portrays Laurens Reael. He was the governor-general of the VOC from 1616 until 1619, which was the highest function in Asia within the company (Rijksmuseum 2021, 15). When he returned to the Netherlands, he ordered this full-length portrait of himself. The golden chain around his neck was a present by the States-General for Reael's work in Asia.

Interesting about Reael is his objection against the enslavement of people. This had nothing to do with moral considerations, it was a profit driven viewpoint (Rijksmuseum 2021, 15). Reael strongly believed that forcing people to subject themselves to slavery was counterproductive, because they will ‘always try to escape, [...] as it is difficult to forget the delights of the country where one was born and raised’ (Rijksmuseum 2021, 15).

So, what does this say about the moral status of this painting? Reael rejected slavery, which is a noble thing to do in his time, however this was not out of the goodness of his heart but motivated by profit. Now, we could argue whether intention or consequences are more

important, but that is another discussion that is not relevant for the sake of this article. Fact is that Reael was against the enslavement of people. Is this picture therefore not morally flawed? On the other hand, we could still argue that Reael held the highest function in the VOC, a company that conquered the land of other peoples, and exploited or even murdered the natives.

### 6.5 “Piet Heyn dish”

Another example can be found in the *Piet Heyn dish* (see Appendix), a silver plate called after the famous naval “hero” Piet Heyn (Rijksmuseum, n.d.). Heyn conquered the so called “Silver Fleet” in 1628, Spanish ships filled with Mexican silver (Rijksmuseum 2021, 27). The sale of all this silver yielded almost fifteen million guilders, which the Dutch used in their war against Spain. Piet Heyns conquer was thus very important for the Netherlands. The dish is made from this silver, it is unknown who crafted it (Rijksmuseum 2021, 27).

However, the money acquired from the Spanish silver also financed the conquering of the Brazilian region of Olinda, held by the Portuguese. Olinda was the center of a very lucrative sugar production, which the Dutch now took over (Rijksmuseum 2021, 27). In order to run these sugar plantations, 25,000 enslaved Africans were transported to Dutch Brazil, where they were forced to work alongside the indigenous population of Brazil, who was also forced to work there.

This silver used for this dish thus carries a history of enslavement in it. However, the dish itself shows nothing of the slavery past. One could even argue that the silver clearly was not spent to the enslavement of people, because it was used to craft this dish. What does this say about its moral status?

### 6.6 “Cup and Saucer with an Abolitionist Scene”

And what to think about *Cup and Saucer with an Abolitionist Scene* (see Appendix)? The cup depicts an enslaved man in chains, begging to be released. An enchained man shows us the horrors of slavery; thus, we could state that this imagine is morally flawed. However, this cup was probably made and sold by anti-slavery committees (Rijksmuseum 2021, 70). The imagine might feel morally wrong, the usage of this cup was probably for a morally right cause. What then is its moral status? It is almost easier to show examples of morally complicated pictures than of imagines with a clear moral status.

### 6.7 Ethical or practical?

There are two ways to approach this issue on how to determine the moral load of these artworks. The first is from an ethical point of view: how *should* we look at artworks? In order to do so, one must have a vast knowledge of the historical and cultural background of an artwork, because otherwise it is nearly impossible to form a moral judgment about the work. Or should we approach it from a practical point of view: how *do* people look at artworks? I argue to opt for a practical viewpoint. This has to do with the place these artworks are exhibited: the most visited museum of the Netherlands. We cannot expect all these visitors, who mostly come to have an enjoyable day, to become art historical experts before they can form a judgment about the artworks.

However, this does not mean that the morality of an artwork cannot influence the way we look at a painting. If you see the horrors of slavery depicted in a painting, it can be hard to look at it. It can be hard to appreciate the painting for how beautiful it is painted, if you are struck by the awfulness of the image. Especially since the Rijksmuseum accommodates the forming of a moral judgment, by showing the full story of the artworks: Marten and Oopjen are not simply gorgeous paintings by Rembrandt, we can also read that they have earned their wealth through slavery. Even though this painting does not show anything clearly related to the Dutch slavery past, the Rijksmuseum makes sure we are able to gather this knowledge.

I still argue that the moral judgment does not have to play a role in forming a judgment about artworks. People simply do not read each and every sign next to paintings. Some people just want to be bedazzled by the beauty of paintings. Other people are already saturated with information, especially in a museum as large as the Rijksmuseum. Sometimes it simply is too crowded in the Rijksmuseum to actually see or read the signs. Are these people not allowed to form a judgment about the art they see? That would be too much asked of most visitors.

The moral judgment thus *can* play a role in the appreciation of an artwork, but it *does not* have to play a role. And a moral defect does not necessarily mean that we can no longer enjoy the aesthetic value of a painting. A position that does justice to the reality of a museum is moderate moralism. Let us look back what this again means:

1. Some art can still be beautiful despite its morally objectionable character (Schellekens 2007, 68);
2. A moral defect can be an aesthetic defect, as well as a moral virtue can be an aesthetic virtue (Carroll 1998, 419);
3. Art does not need to have a moral character (Schellekens 2007, 69).

Even though it is not necessary to give attention to the moral load of an artwork, it is an interesting way of looking at art. It can deepen our understanding and appreciation of artworks. As Smeulders states: 'Walking through the museum is not simply about beauty and romance. We can get a more profound connection with the past [by knowing its moral background], and all aspects of the past. Even though some aspects can be difficult to acknowledge' (2Doc 2021).

#### *6.8 Another practical reason: Dutch Code of Ethics*

Besides, it is not only a way of deepening our understanding and appreciation of artworks, but museums are also simply obliged to provide visitors with this information. The *Dutch Code of Ethics for Museums* states: 'Musea dragen een bijzondere verantwoordelijkheid om collecties en relevante informatie zo royaal mogelijk toegankelijk te maken, met inachtneming van beperkingen die voortvloeien uit eisen van vertrouwelijkheid en veiligheid' (ICOM 2006, 13). Museums are through this code of ethics obligated to provide visitors with as much relevant information as is possible. I want to argue that giving attention to the slavery past is a form of relevant information. An example of the original plate informing us about Marten and Oopjen:

Oopjen was the eldest of three daughters of an old, affluent Amsterdam family. She sat to Rembrandt one year after her marriage. She was 23 and pregnant with her first child. The marriage was an alliance between families, old and new money. To celebrate this, monumental portraits were commissioned from the city's leading portraitist: Rembrandt (Rijksmuseum 2021, 8)

Marten and Oopjen are the only couple Rembrandt painted life-size, standing and full-length. Marten was the son of a wealthy Flemish immigrant who owned a successful sugar refinery in Amsterdam. Attired in a sumptuous costume with expensive lace and enormous rosettes on his shoes, he poses self-assuredly for Rembrandt. They probably knew one another from Leiden, where Marten had studied law (Rijksmuseum 2021, 9).

This information does not tell the full story of Marten and Oopjen. We cannot simply state they were rich people, if their wealth came from the horrible exploitation and enslavement of other people. Especially since we have seen that the enslavement of that period still has a negative influence on Black people nowadays. Thus, in order to do justice to the *Code of Ethics*, it is important to tell the full story of Marten and Oopjen. This includes their role in the Dutch slavery past.

## **7. Conclusion**

Central in this article is the question of what the ethical criteriums are on which we can base our moral judgment about artworks that are connected to the slavery past. We do this by looking into examples from the Rijksmuseum. There are four positions on if and how the moral judgment can affect the aesthetic judgment: radical aestheticism, sophisticated aestheticism, radical moralism, and moderate moralism. Determining the moral load of artworks related to the Dutch slavery past is important because of the following: this past still influences our modern society, in a negative way.

It is however not as simple as stating: slavery is morally wrong, this artwork is linked to slavery, thus it contains a negative moral load. The context of the artworks matters a lot in determining its moral load. Besides, most artworks in the Rijksmuseum are not visibly connected to the slavery past. This can make it difficult to ascribe a moral load. The Rijksmuseum however accommodates the forming of moral judgments by adding signs with extra information about the slavery past to their artworks. What is invisible on the artwork, becomes visible in text.

Back to the four positions. Moderate moralism seems to do most justice to the concrete reality of the museum. People can form a moral judgment about the artworks, and this can influence their aesthetic judgment, but it does not have to.



## 8. Bibliography

- 2Doc. 2021. "Nieuw licht: Het Rijksmuseum en de slavernij." Accessed July 7, 2023. <https://www.2doc.nl/documentaires/2021/02/nieuw-licht-het-rijksmuseum-en-de-slavernij.html>.
- African Studies Centre Leiden. "Dutch involvement in the transatlantic slave trade and abolition." Accessed July 22, 2023. <https://www.ascleiden.nl/content/webdossiers/dutch-involvement-transatlantic-slave-trade-and-abolition#abolition>.
- Besterham, Tristram. 2016. "Museum Ethics." In *A Companion to Museum Studies*, edited by Sharon MacDonald. Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing.
- Braude, Benjamin. 2011. "The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era: The Bible and the Justifications for Slavery (review)." In *The Catholic Historical Review* 97 (3): 587-588.
- Carroll, Noël. 1998. "MODERATE MORALISM VERSUS MODERATE AUTONOMISM." In *British Journal of Aesthetics* 38 (4): 419-424.
- century Dutch legal theory". In *Tijdschrift voor Rechtsgeschiedenis* 89 (1-2): 158-191.
- Giovanelli, Alessandro. 2013. "Ethical Criticism in Perspective: A Defense of Radical Moralism." In *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71 (4): 335-348.
- ICOM. 2006. "Ethische Code." Accessed June 22, 2023. [http://www.ethischecodevoormusea.nl/Ethische%20Code%20voor%20Musea\\_2006%20\(ECM%20huisstijl\)%20DEF.pdf](http://www.ethischecodevoormusea.nl/Ethische%20Code%20voor%20Musea_2006%20(ECM%20huisstijl)%20DEF.pdf).
- Koningsberger, Hans. 1967. "The World of Vermeer, 1632-1675." New York: Time Inc.
- Kuipers, Giselinde, Thomas and Sylvia Holla. 2019. "Clouded judgments? Aesthetics, morality and everyday life in early 21st century culture." In *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 22 (4): 383-398.
- Misevich, Philip and Kristin Mann. 2016. "The Rise and Demise of Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Atlantic World." Rochester: Rochester University Press.
- Nifterik, Gustaaf van. 2021. "Arguments related to slavery in seventeenth
- NOS. 2021. "Eerste beeldje van geroofde Benin Bronzes na 124 jaar teruggegeven." October 27, 2021. <https://nos.nl/artikel/2403356-eerste-beeldje-van-geroofde-benin-bronzes-na-124-jaar-teruggegeven>.
- NOS. 2022. "Indonesie vraagt topkunst en natuurhistorische vondsten terug." October 18, 2022. <https://nos.nl/artikel/2448824-indonesie-vraagt-topkunst-en-natuurhistorische-vondsten-terug>.
- Rijksmuseum. 2021. "Rijksmuseum & Slavery." Wormerveer: Zwaan Lenoir.
- Rijksmuseum. n.d. "Piet Heyn." Accessed May 15, 2023. <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/rijksstudio/historical-figures/piet-heyn>.
- Rijksoverheid. 2021. "Adviescollege Dialooggroep Slavernijverleden." Last modified July 1, 2021. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2021/07/01/adviescollege-dialooggroep-slavernijverleden-presenteert-eindrapport-ketenen-van-het-verleden>.
- Schellekens, Elisabeth. 2007. "Aesthetics and Morality." London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Sint Nicolaas, Eveline and Valika Smeulders. 2021. "Slavernij: Het verhaal van João, Wally, Oopjen, Paulus, Van Bengalen, Surapati, Sapali, Tula, Dirk, Lohkay." Amsterdam: Atlas Contact.

Studium Generale. 2022. "Slavernij en institutioneel racisme: Ons slavernijverleden." Accessed September 13, 2023. <https://www.sg.uu.nl/agenda/2022/slavernij-en-institutioneel-racisme>.

Van Beurden, Jos. 2020. "Dubieuze verwervingen en het Advies over de omgang met koloniale collecties." *Justitiële Verkenningen* 46 (4): 63-75.

Van Beurden, Jos. 2022. "Inconvenient Heritage: Colonial Collections and Restitution in the Netherlands and Belgium." Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Welie, Rik van. 2008. "SLAVE TRADING AND SLAVERY IN THE DUTCH COLONIAL EMPIRE: A GLOBAL COMPARISON." In *NWIG: New West Indian Guide / Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 82 (1-2): 47-96.

Whitford, David. 2009. "The Curse of Ham in the Early Modern Era: The Bible and the Justifications for Slavery." Londen: Routledge.

Wilde, Oscar. "The picture of Dorian Gray." 2014. London: Alma Books.

## 9. Appendix



*Marten Soolmans*  
Rembrandt van Rijn, 1634  
Oil on canvas  
h 207.5cm × w 132cm



*Oopjen Coppit*,  
Rembrandt van Rijn, 1634  
Oil on canvas  
h 207.5cm × w 132cm





*Thomas Hees and his Servant Thomas and Nephews Jan and Andries Hees*  
Michiel van Musscher, 1687  
Oil on canvas  
h 76cm × w 63cm



*The Nave and Choir of the Mariakerk in Utrecht*  
Pieter Jansz Saenredam, 1641  
Oil on panel  
h c.121.5cm × w c.95cm





*Officers and other Civic Guardsmen of the XIX District of Amsterdam, under the command of Captain Cornelis Bicker and Lieutenant Frederick van Banchem, waiting to welcome Marie de Médicis, 1 September 1638*

Joachim von Sandrart, 1640

Oil on canvas

h 343cm × w 258cm



*Portrait of Jan Valckenburgh and an Enslaved Servant*  
Daniel Vertangen, c. 1660  
Oil on canvas  
128.3cm × w 102.0cm





*Allegory on the Abdication of Emperor Charles v in Brussels*  
Frans Francken (II), c. 1635 - c. 1640  
Oil on panel  
h 132.8 cm × w 170.7 cm



*Still Life with a Gilt Cup*  
Willem Claesz Heda, 1635  
Oil on panel  
h 87.8cm × w 112.6cm





*Portrait of Laurens Reael*  
Cornelis van der Voort, c. 1620  
Oil on canvas,  
h 223cm × w 127cm



*Piet Heyn dish,*  
Anonymous, 1684 - 1687  
silver (metal)  
d 67cm



*Cup and Saucer with an Abolitionist Scene*  
Etruria Works, c. 1853 - c. 1863  
Porcelain  
h c.6cm × d c.7cm