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Guided tour in Amsterdam Museum
Photo: Francoise Boleschowski

Guided tour in Amsterdam Museum by Marysa Otte
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Jie LIU

Biography

Jie LIU, serves as an Associate Professor and curator in National Library of China.Member of the International Council of Museums and IEEE. Her research focuses on ancient collections, iconography and digital art curation.

The function and visual culture in Chinese garden landscape

Chambers, the British court architect who visited China in the 18th century, once introduced Chinese gardens in this way: “In China, gardening is a specialized profession, and only a few people can achieve the environment.” Therefore, Chinese gardeners are not florists, but artists and philosophers.”

“Window” in Chinese gardens not only has the effect of viewing through space, but also the different shapes of flower windows are endowed with rich cultural and historical connotations. In China “heaven” is endowed with divine meaning, it is supreme and rules everything.The sun symbol is related to the celestial phenomena.The windows are often expressed by the imitation sun pattern, cross pattern, etc. In the hollow flower turn of the garden, we can see the sun pattern flower window and stone carving.There are also solar symbols on Chinese New Stone age pottery decorations.In the OuYuan garden of Suzhou Gardens, there are flower windows that represent the sun rising above the clouds.The cross flower window is also related to the sun, which comes from the sun worship pattern in the ancient Chinese script. The cross represents the sun, and the two people bow down to the cross represents the worship of the sun.In Suzhou garden building components, the skip carving window has become a unique architectural decoration.The various hollow patterns decorated in the window holes integrate the dual functions of light transmission and aesthetic view. The hollow patterns primarily consist of floral, avian, and animal motifs, as well as depictions of mountains, rivers, and geometric shapes. Additionally, they incorporate elements related to the ancient Chinese literati culture such as musical instruments (Qin), chess games (Weiqi), books, and paintings. The Chinese instrument Qin window is adorned with a Qin carving, accompanied by intricate ice plum blossom motifs surrounding it.The window is adorned with a intricately carved Go board. There is a thread-bound book moulded in the window Chessboard and thread bound books are often decorated with peony, pomegranate and other flowers and plants background. The window is decorated with a scroll, surrounded by geometric figures and decorative rattan. This is an important functional landscape that Chinese gardens display by borrowing and skip carving scenes.Plants which decrate around these windows, such as Nantian bamboo, caryophylla and podocarpus echo each other.Plant combination arrangement add to the interest of the garden display.

There is a close relationship between the construction of Chinese garden water system and the transformation of visual landscape. Garden water system has the function of dividing areas. In addition, through the creation of different water directions, the viewer can travel according to different flow lines and transition to different functional areas. Water-related garden buildings such as pavilions, terraces, buildings and pavilions have become unique architectural forms that form different visual levels. In the courtyard, the combination of poems inscribed board,plants,rocks and artificial bonsai in the courtyard have become indispensable elements to increase visual richness.

The collection in exhibition of garden's landscape

1. Display landscape displacement of space

Usually, we use storage and display Spaces that match with the museum architectural standards as the main places for museum display. Because in this specialized space, in the sense of cultural collection protection, the cultural relics can be collected and preserved for a long time. However, from the perspective of cultural relics collection and display, transferring cultural relics to the original environment where they do not belong is not a good way to interpret their historical and cultural significance.

Therefore, as a garden space, it has its own unique collection. The original display and possession of collection in the garden, or placed in the appropriate location of the exhibition may become a way for us to re-integrate the function of cultural space in urban space.In the environment of the exhibition hall, museums in order to restore the historical and cultural scenes corresponding to a certain piece or a certain theme cultural relic, we often spend materials, even tissue engineering to complete this task. Instead of that, it is better to move the museum's display environment into the existing urban space. Parks and gardens have their own historical, artistic and cultural properties as leisure places that the public can visit to them.In addition, many Chinese gardens have their own collections, so bringing them into the corresponding theme exhibitions is our original intention to carry out this practice. In the third part of the curatorial practices, we will talk about some exhibition cases that are suitable for the Chinese garden landscape.

2. The landscape of the visit streamline

Here,we will discuss the relationship between exhibition space and urban leisure space. As a part of urban leisure space, the garden takes into account the different visiting effects caused by different travel routes from the perspective of landscape, plants, ponds, rocks and so on. Chinese gardens themselves have strong creativity in the flow of visit lines. Compared with the artificial circuit created by the exhibition wall and space division in the exhibition hall of the museum, it has more natural interest of the integration of human and nature. The unexpected encounters and surprises that go beyond the roadmap.

The design of the exhibition hall streamline is often related to the order of the exhibit unit display, according to the chronological order of the antiques exhibit, or to the content planning of the unit order has become the basis for the design of the visiting line. Chinese garden design fully considers the relationship between landscape installation and architectural function in landscape construction. Not limited to the indoor exhibition hall planning in the museum's existing buildings.

3. The exhibition value of existing antique furnishings in gardens

In ancient times, Chinese gardens primarily belonged to private residences. The furnishings of these gardens varied according to the different functions of spaces such as halls, bedrooms, pavilions and study rooms. Ancient furniture gradually became a significant component of the garden heritage collection.

The garden furniture are often made of rosewood, pear and Nanwood, especially the mahogany furniture made in 18th centruy. The craftsman pay attention to simplicity, lines and fine elegance of the production process. The chairs, tables, beds, cabinets and screens in the furniture have all become the exhibits in gardens.

In Chinese gardens, there is a value that is close to cultural meaning and more with the temperament of nature and humanity is **bonsai**. Although bonsai plants have the characteristics of prosperity and decline, they have different schools in Chinese gardens and become part of the landscape display. Flower pots are not only special existence in collection value, Yixing purple clay pots, Jingdezhen ceramic pots also become the collections in gardens. In bonsai art, the selected form of plant and age have a particular treatment.

Lingnan style bonsai is often graceful.In Anhui Province, cypress trees and plum bonsai are most popular. Sichuan bonsai is more common in begonia, black persimmon wood. Jiangsu bonsai is represented by Yangzhou and overlapping with micro landscape.Bonsai can not only become the exhibits in the garden residence display, but also have the function of transition and connection between the units of exhibition. Placing them at the junction of the prologue, the restoration of the landscape or the transformation of the unit, or even the transformation of the color in different environment which all have the characteristics of beauty, heritage and function.

Because of the residence function of the garden, the calligraphy traces left by the literati have also become a collection that can be fully utilized for garden display.Garden calligraphy is different from calligraphy which written on paper or silk fabrics. It is often engraved on brick, stone and wood. In the Suzhou style garden, the book strip stone itself has collection value. For example, the calligraphy in the Liu Garden includes the works of famous Song Dynasty calligraphers such as Su Shi, Huang Tingjian, Mi Fu, as well as the works of famous scribes such as Han Qi, Ouyang Xiu, Yu Qian, Fan Chengda, etc.

The stone is shaped by nature to form a natural form style. In the scenery of Chinese garden, pay attention to the effect of echoing the scenery with the lake and mountain plants. Here,stone plays an important role. Taihu stone is a kind of limestone often used in Chinese gardens.Spaces with stones are often paired with plants and ponds. The stones themselves through different forms of stacking also become the display of visual segmentation provides the possibility.

In the section of the exhibition content, different stone and interior furnishings distinguish different themes, Twin peaks and single mountains are frequently used, as well as piled into lions, crabs and other forms of stone have become an extension of garden interest. In the formation of interior landscape, the exhibition flow line which formed by garden architecture often integrates the courtyard connection between the front hall and the backyard of the interior room. The height head of the cloisters and steps are based on the order of the architectural form.

4. Immersive restoration of folk scenes

Gardens have a close relationship with traditional Chinese festivals, intangible cultural heritage skills exhibition, poetry collection and other activities. They have also become a practical attempt to break through the limitations of the exhibition hall and realize the living display of intangible cultural heritage. Taking Kunqu Opera performance as an example, the rhythm and dynamic posture of Kunqu opera have the same aesthetic spirit with Chinese garden architecture. The Kunqu opera is delicate and graceful, garden music, coupled with drinking, tea and other elegant interaction with ancient traditions, the display of intangible cultural heritage skills in the garden has become a form of regeneration expression of traditional Jiangnan culture.

After the Humble Administrator's Garden was acquired by Zhang Luqian, a wealthy businessman , the sound effect function of garden architecture was fully taken into account when the pavilion was rebuilt. The pool build a thirty-six Yuanyang hall, the top structure of the hall for the roll shed, vault-shaped roof. Singing in the hall lingering sound around the beam, lasting. There is an tearroom in each of the four corners of the pavilion, which is a place for performers to rest, change clothes, make up and wait for the stage.

In holding the exhibitions with festive characteristics, the garden itself has the function of restoring the scene of ancient life. Therefore, it is more appropriate to move the museum's exhibitions related to traditional festivals into the garden space. In southern China,on the Lantern Festival people carry lanterns and walk on bridges. The Lantern Festival and Lantern Festival exhibition are placed in the garden environment, whether it is a bridge or a corridor eaves, it has become a natural display space and an architectural form that can be relied on. At the same time, since ancient times, Chinese people have the custom of appreciating the moon on the Mid-Autumn Festival, which is often carried out in the pavilions or corridors of gardens, drinking alcohol, composing poems, tasting tea and snacks are very common. The creation of poems and paintings about the Mid-Autumn Festival is also numerous. In the collection related to the Mid-Autumn Festival, furniture, tea sets, wine pots lamps, mooncake molds are displayed in the garden scene, which appropriately provides the exhibition with a display environment that can perceive the changes of seasonal temperature, weather and light. This kind of environment is incomparable to the lighting and scene restoration construction of the exhibition hall.

Garden curatorial practices beyond collections

1. Shanghai Museum Museum roof garden and Exhibition The resonance of wood and stone: Jiangnan Scholar's Rocks and Shanghai-style Penjing)

Since its completion, the East Pavilion area of Shanghai Museum has fully integrated the characteristics of modern urban architecture space and urban land. Use Chinese Jiangnan culture as the core create a roof garden display space where integrating museum architecture with Chinese garden.

This exhibition will belong to the original landscape display of the garden, such as bonsai, garden stone as a collection through display into the museum collection category.Such exhibitions expand the range of museum collections.The garden architecture endowed with the rich connotation of Jiangnan culture, the curatorial practice of cross-exhibition space and the new definition of traditional museum collection is constructed.

Chinese "four famous stones" : Taihu stone, Lingbi stone, Yingshi, Kunshi and Shanghai style bonsai all play a major role in creating this exhibition and spanning collections and gardens. Ancient stones, famous stones, Shanghai style bonsai, orchids let the audience wander in the interest of mountains and forests in the roof space of the metropolis, and the garden collection display of this roof space is also connected with the Jiangnan Creation exhibition Hall located on the top floor of the building. As the scholar Richard Rosenblum has observed, "the stones are changed by the way they are placed." Remove the base, the stone is restored to a natural object. Put it back on the seat and it goes from stone to art again.

Orchids as the representative flowers in the interior furnishings of Chinese gardens which form a single living display unit in this exhibition.

Orchid cultivation in China has a long history, dating back to the late Tang Dynasty (618-907). Orchid cultivation became more popular in China during the Song Dynasty(960-1279).From the 17th century to the 19th century, works on orchid culture and orchid art gradually increased. Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Shanghai areas became the center of cultivation and appreciation of Wenlan(Orchid specie), meanwhile orchid markets and fairs appeared.

Particularly, in the past 60 years, the Shanghai Botanical Garden and the Japanese orchid community keep strengthened exchanges and cooperation and cultivated new orchid varieties. In this exhibition unit, the orchid landscape displays the combination of garden plants, garden collections and museum collections, highlighting the beauty of Jiangnan culture in China, and presenting the elegant feelings of traditional Chinese literati in a three-dimensional manner.

2. Shanghai: Immersive display of gardens and old sites

There are a large number of former gardens and old sites in Shanghai. It is an interesting attempt to carry out cultural activities with corresponding contents in them.Class Plant Garden also known as “Ma’s Family Garden”,which is a private garden located in Zhujiajiao built in 1912. There are more than 200 buildings in garden, such as welcoming hall, banquet hall, main hall, Book Castle Tower, Moon Tower, drama stage, singing platform, Lotus Pavilion, Lion Pavilion, Teacher Pavilion, stele gallery. There are calligraphy inscriptions of Ming Dynasty literati embedded in the corridor, which are engraved by Zhou Meigu who invited as the carving master. There are 12 poems of “You Xishan Temple” written by Wen Zhengming, one poem of “Plum Blossom” by Zhu Zhishan, and two poems by Tang Yin Xinza and Zhou Tianqiu written in Ming Dynasty. In the park, there are rockery, nine Bridges, lessons plant bridge, lotus pond, rice village and other sightseeing attractions. There is a theater in the rockery area of the garden. Between the theater and the stage, there is a vast empty lawn. The visitor sitting on the lawn can enjoy the drama.Here become the most suitable part of the Kunqu Opera scene restoration in the Class Plant Garden.

In the hot summer, people in Jiangnan like to go out at night to cool off, in this process, the garden designed a light show and immersive traditional drama performances. The light display and intangible cultural heritage performance skills made the old garden full of vitality and vitality.

The former Navy Club and later Sun Ke’s residence in downtown Shanghai is a blend of Islamic and Byzantine architectural styles, with the old house pond brightening up at night. Here, the immersive theater and the old architecture are perfectly integrated to stage a modern urban love drama.From the theater to the private courtyard, architecture as an immovable cultural relic has been endowed with new connotation in modern urban cultural life.

3. Nanjing: Zhan Garden and Museum Exhibition

Zhanyuan Garden is the oldest existing Ming Dynasty classical garden in Nanjing.Its history can be traced back to the Wu palace before Zhu Yuanzhang became emperor of the Ming Taizu. The palace garden given to the King of Zhongshan, is known for its rockery, named after Ouyang Xiu’s poem “Looking at the Jade Hall, as if in the sky”, and is known as the “first garden of the Southern capital” in the Ming Dynasty. It is now a national cultural heritage protection unit and a national AAAAA tourist attraction.

Zhanyuan Garden is the best preserved Ming Dynasty classical garden complex in Nanjing and it is also the only open Ming Dynasty palace. Zhanyuan garden experienced Ming, Qing, Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, Republic of China and contemporary times.Most of the gardens in the south of the Yangtze River, the history is complex, the garden has undergone changes.

There is the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom History Museum in the garden, which is the only museum dedicated to the history of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom in China. Zhanyuan Garden is an early representative of the integration of historical display and garden in the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom period.The garden integrates the environment space rich in the temperament of local residents, so it is convenient to hold exhibitions with local folk characteristics here. These exhibitions concentrate in the daily life of local people in modern times in a clay sculpture scene restoration, concentrated in interesting handicrafts, making the garden a link to the emotions of local residents for several generations.

4. Beijing: Exhibitions and cultural events in the Palace Garden

Prince Gong’s Mansion located in downtown Beijing is the Qing Dynasty palace, which has a large area of residences and palace gardens. Magnolia, begonia, peony, lotus and other flowers bloom in different seasons. According to the garden plants and the layout of the palace. Traditional opera performances are held in the Grand Theatre in the summer. This theater is located inside, and its interior is decorated with wisteria paintings, which can be called the most luxurious palace theater in the world. Since the Royal Palace Garden has crabapple flowers in full bloom every spring and summer, it has restored the poetry activity of crabapple collection according to the life scene of ancient Chinese literati.

In terms of exhibition, according to the characteristics of the palace building, make full use of existing windows, plants, courtyards, etc. The palace garden try to build exhibitions related to ancient architecture, traditional skills and ancient paintings.

To sum up, we find that the garden not only has its own collection but also has natural exhibition conditions, which can be a place of collection and a place of display. At the same time, the garden can also become the representative of local culture and be moved into the museum, so that the artifacts and landscapes that were not paid attention to before, such as rocks and bonsai become a new collection of the museum.

Senses

Transforming Karen Porridge: Heritage, Innovation, and the Praxis of Food as a Living Collection in Museum Interpretation

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Biography

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Introduction

Cultural heritage is often perceived as a static entity, preserved within museums as artifacts that serve as historical documentation. However, this perception overlooks the evolving and dynamic nature of cultural traditions, particularly food heritage. Unlike traditional museum objects that remain fixed in time, food is inherently a living cultural expression – it is practiced, shared, transformed, and adapted across generations and geographies. Food heritage provides a unique lens to understand how communities engage with their history while adapting to contemporary lifestyles.

This study focuses on Karen porridge (*Ta Po Poh*), a staple food of the Karen ethnic group in Thailand, traditionally consumed as a daily meal. Karen porridge carries profound cultural significance, connecting generations through culinary traditions and reinforcing community identity.However, as modernization and urban migration shift consumption patterns, many traditional foods risk becoming obsolete. This research seeks to address this challenge by exploring how Karen Porridge can be transformed into a ready-to-eat, freeze-dried product, making it more accessible while preserving its cultural identity. (See figure 1)

The central argument of this study is that heritage transformation serves as a crucial means of cultural communication in three fundamental ways:

1. It improves accessibility by adapting traditional consumption methods to contemporary life.
2. It fosters cultural pride by elevating everyday practices into celebrated heritage symbols.
3. It generates economic opportunities by creating sustainable heritage-based enterprises.

Figure 1

By adopting a praxis-based approach, this research directly engages with Karen communities to ensure that the innovation remains rooted in authenticity and collective ownership. This paper contributes to museum studies, food heritage discourse, and innovation theory by reinterpreting food as a living collection within heritage preservation and museum curation.

Cultural heritage is often perceived as a static entity, housed within museums as preserved artifacts, detached from its evolving role in contemporary life. However, food heritage challenges this notion by existing as a living, dynamic, and participatory practice. Unlike objects that remain unchanged within museum collections, food is continuously reinterpreted, transformed, and adapted to meet social, economic, and technological shifts. This study proposes a new conceptualization of food as a living collection, advocating for the integration of culinary heritage into museum collection management through an innovative praxis-based approach.

Heritage and innovation: A theoretical framework

The living and evolving process of heritage

Museums, archives, and historical sites are frequently used to institutionalize cultural heritage, ensuring its preservation and curation. Nevertheless, intangible cultural heritage, including oral traditions, rituals, and cuisine, cannot be preserved in the same manner as physical artifacts. Within the domain of practice and experience, intangible heritage, particularly food heritage, is present. Daily consumption, storytelling, and social interactions are the primary means of its transmission across generations. The transformation of culinary heritage illustrates the process by which communities negotiate their cultural identity in response to globalization and modernization (Mathew, E., 2024; Chauhan, Y. et al, 2025).

The function of innovation in fostering cultural sustainability The sustainability of cultural patrimony is significantly influenced by innovation. Although some scholars contend that the authenticity of traditional practices is compromised by their modification, others advocate for the preservation of heritage through innovation (Heritage, 2024). This perspective is exemplified by the transformation of Karen porridge into a freeze-dried product, which demonstrates that heritage is not lost through change, but rather preserved through adaptive methods. Traditional cuisines can be made more accessible to a wider audience while still retaining their cultural significance by incorporating novel methods of presentation and consumption.

Museums as living collections of food

Traditional museum collections emphasize tangible artifacts; however, contemporary museum practices are transitioning to incorporate participatory and intangible heritage. The administration of museum collections is complicated by the perishability and perpetual evolution of food, which serves as a medium for cultural expression. Nevertheless, the concept of food as a living collection enables the development of novel curatorial strategies, including digital narrative, interactive culinary programs, and sensory exhibitions. This research contributes to the evolving discourse on museum interpretation and heritage curation by situating Karen porridge as a masterpiece within a living collection.

This investigation implements a community-led, praxis-based research methodology that emphasizes iterative development, co-creation, and active participation. This method derives theory from real-world practice, in contrast to conventional research models that impose external frameworks onto cultural practices. The research guarantees that the transformation of Karen porridge is deeply rooted in cultural authenticity and remains adaptable to modern consumption patterns by directly engaging with the Karen community in *Phrao* District, Chiang Mai Province.

Drawing from the formative work of Olivié-Touati and Moussa (2017), the heritage innovation relationship has been characterized by a perceived tension between progress and preservation for a long time. This was depicted in conventional models as a dualistic conflict, in which heritage symbolizes stability/exploitation and innovation represents change/exploration. This dichotomy contends that organizations are compelled to select between the pursuit of novel approaches or the reinforcement of historical practices, a perspective that has been criticized for being overly simplistic (Olivié-Touati & Moussa, 2017).

Reconceptualizing this relationship, duality theory posits that heritage and innovation are interdependent forces that mutually facilitate organizational evolution. From this perspective, heritage generates inspirational capital by means of tangible assets (historic tools/products) and intangible assets (ethical values, territorial identity).

Innovation functions as an evolutionary mechanism that reframes heritage artifacts for contemporary relevance. The ‘Herivation’ paradigm is introduced by the authors, which is a recursive process that involves the merging of innovation and heritage to create trans organizational artifacts over three phases.

1. Dualism: The early-stage separation of heritage preservation and innovation initiatives
2. Duality: Mature interdependence in which heritage informs incremental innovation and innovation expands heritage repositories
3. Derivation: The ultimate convergence into unified practices that concurrently embody historical legacy and forward-thinking adaptation

This framework fundamentally undermines the notion that disruptive innovation necessitates the renunciation of heritage. Disruptive innovation may temporarily strain heritage systems before attaining renewed synthesis, whereas incremental innovation is consistent with gradual heritage growth (Olivié-Touati & Moussa, 2017). The temporal dimension is crucial; organizations develop ambidextrous capabilities, which resolve short-term tensions into long-term symbiosis.

Significant debates surrounding heritage-guided innovation include several key concerns. Firstly, there is the risk of commercialization, where cultural assets are commodified, potentially undermining their original value. Secondly, the scale paradox arises, as scaling heritage-based innovations can challenge the preservation of authenticity. Lastly, power dynamics come into play, particularly when corporate entities and community stewards have differing levels of control over the narrative during the transformation of heritage. This raises questions about who should ultimately oversee shaping these narratives.

Research methodology: a praxis-based, community-led approach

This study adopts a praxis-based methodology, in which theory emerges from real-world practices rather than being predetermined. It emphasizes community participation, co-creation, and iterative development, ensuring that the Karen people serve as active agents in shaping the transformation of their own food heritage.

Before detailing the four key phases of this process, it is important to introduce the *Vivid Ethnicity Mobile Museum* project. The *Vivid Ethnicity Mobile Museum* serves as a platform for cultural transformation, traveling across Thailand with a collection that stimulates conversations about ethnic groups through everyday life objects. The stories it presents are organic, dynamic, and continuously enriched by audience participation. Rather than being fixed narratives, they evolve as new voices and perspectives are incorporated, allowing for active accumulation of knowledge and meaning.

The *Vivid Ethnicity Mobile Museum* has also played a role in supporting the development of the *Doisithan Ecomuseum*, contributing to cultural heritage safeguarding while simultaneously generating economic opportunities through these cultural practices (Yamabhai et al., 2021).

Findings from this research demonstrate that such praxis-based, participatory approaches are effective for both safeguarding cultural heritage and creating sustainable income opportunities for communities. The transformation of *Ta Po Poh* — one of the Karen community's traditional food items — illustrates this process through four key phases, as outlined below.

Community-led recipe selection

The research process began with a culinary competition within the Karen community, where each household prepared its version of *Ta Po Poh*. This approach served multiple purposes: it allowed for the identification of diverse traditional recipes, encouraged community engagement, and fostered a sense of cultural pride in the culinary tradition. A panel consisting of both village elders and researchers assessed the dishes based on authenticity, taste, and practicality for contemporary consumption. After extensive deliberation, two winning recipes were selected: Pork with Black Bean and Chicken with Dried Cabbage. These recipes were chosen for their strong connection to traditional Karen cooking practices and their potential for wider audience appeal.

Ingredient analysis and product development

Once the winning recipes were selected, the research team worked with local cooks to break down the recipes into measurable components, identifying key ingredients and their respective proportions. This analysis was essential to maintaining the integrity of traditional flavors while allowing for standardization in production. The team then experimented with different preservation methods to ensure the dish's feasibility as a ready-to-eat product. Two primary methods were considered:

1. Freeze-dried: using a **freeze-drying process (lyophilization)** to remove moisture while preserving its structure, flavor, and nutrients.

2. Retort: involves sealing the food in a pouch or container and then subjecting it to **high-temperature and high-pressure sterilization**. This process extends shelf life while maintaining the food's flavor, texture, and nutrients.

After conducting controlled experiments, freeze-drying was chosen as the optimal method, as it best preserved the dish's authenticity while allowing for ease of consumption in various settings, including urban environments.

Figure 2: Ta Po Poh Ingredients

Sensory evaluation and consumer testing

Following product development, a Ta Po Poh tasting event was organized at a cultural restaurant. This phase was crucial in refining the product through real-world feedback. Participants, including Karen villagers and urban consumers unfamiliar with the dish, provided insights into:

1. Flavor acceptability and sensory experience
2. Portion sizing and meal presentation
3. Packaging and branding considerations

Feedback gathered from the event led to further refinement of the ingredients, portion size, and final taste profile.

Branding and market positioning

With a finalized product, the next stage involved branding and packaging development (See figure 3). Instead of imposing a commercially driven design, the research team facilitated co creation workshops where Karen participants contributed to the product's visual identity and narrative storytelling. This ensured that the branding remained rooted in cultural representation while appealing to broader audiences. By integrating these four methodological phases – community engagement, scientific analysis, sensory testing, and branding co-creation – this study establishes a replicable model for heritage food transformation. This methodology not only safeguards Karen porridge's cultural significance but also ensures its adaptability and sustainability in modern contexts. The findings of this study reveal several key insights regarding the transformation of Karen porridge into a market-ready, heritage-based product. By engaging in a co-creative process with the Karen community, the research team was able to ensure that the product retained cultural authenticity while adapting to contemporary consumer needs. The results highlight the balance between tradition and innovation, the challenges and successes of food heritage transformation, and the broader implications for cultural sustainability.

Results: Key Findings

Transforming Karen porridge: Balancing tradition and innovation One of the most significant findings of this study is that heritage food transformation is not merely a technical or commercial process but a deeply cultural act of negotiation. Karen porridge, traditionally prepared at home with fresh ingredients, had to undergo changes in texture, form, and preparation methods to make it viable as a ready-to-eat product. However, the core flavors and cultural significance of the dish remained intact due to the community's active participation in every phase of its transformation.

Figure 3: Packaging

The choice of freeze-drying as the processing method, instead of retort, was essential for preserving product authenticity while achieving a surprising transformation. Freeze-dried, on the other hand, allowed for better texture retention and faster rehydration, making it the preferred method based on community feedback. These results confirm that technological interventions in food heritage must be carefully evaluated through sensory and cultural lenses.

Cultural acceptance and community engagement

A crucial factor in the study's success was the willingness of the Karen community to engage in a process of food innovation. Despite initial hesitations – fueled by concerns over whether modifying Karen porridge would compromise its traditional integrity – participatory methods such as culinary competitions, sensory evaluation events, and co-creation workshops helped foster a sense of ownership and pride.

The study found that, when given the agency to influence decisions, community members embraced the innovation process rather than resisted it. The transition from home-cooked tradition to packaged product was not perceived as cultural loss, but rather as an opportunity to expand the dish's reach while maintaining its symbolic meaning and heritage value. This finding challenges the common assumption that heritage food commercialization always leads to cultural dilution. Instead, it highlights that community involvement in every stage of transformation ensures cultural sustainability rather than commodification.

Consumer reactions and market feasibility

The results from the *Ta Po Poh* tasting event provided valuable insights into consumer perceptions and preferences. The event, which included both Karen community members and urban consumers unfamiliar with the dish, revealed that:

1. Karen participants prioritized authenticity, favoring the freeze-dried format as it retained the closest resemblance to the original dish.
2. Non-Karen consumers focused on convenience and presentation, emphasizing clear instructions, appealing packaging, and portion sizing.
3. Both groups agreed on the need for flexible serving options, with some preferring the product as a standalone meal and others seeing it as a side dish or accompaniment.

These findings suggest that successful heritage food transformation requires balancing multiple audience expectations. While retaining core cultural elements is crucial for authenticity, adapting presentation and usability makes the product more accessible to wider markets. As a result, refinements were made to:

1. Provide clear and culturally respectful packaging
2. Offer varieties of flavor
3. Offer flexible portion sizes to accommodate diverse eating habits

Branding and storytelling: heritage as an economic Asset

The study revealed that effective branding and storytelling were essential for marketing Karen porridge while preserving its cultural roots. In co-creation branding workshops, Karen participants stressed the importance of the product conveying authenticity, highlighting Karen cultural identity, and using visual storytelling to educate consumers about the dish's origins.

These insights culminated in a branding strategy focused on cultural storytelling. The final product design featured traditional Karen motifs and patterns on the packaging, included a short history of *Ta Po Poh* within each package, and provided a QR code linking to digital content showcasing Karen cooks preparing the dish in its original form.

The study found that such strategies enhance both marketability and cultural engagement. Rather than treating the product as just another food commodity, the branding ensures it is positioned as a piece of living heritage that consumers can connect with on a deeper level.

Figure 4: Ta Po Poh mixed

Heritage food transformation and economic sustainability

One of the most promising results of this study was the demonstration that heritage food transformation can generate economic opportunities for local communities. The co-creation model used in this research provides a potential blueprint for other marginalized communities to sustain their culinary heritage while entering contemporary food markets.

Several economic models were considered to support sustainable development. One approach involves small-scale, community-led production, where local businesses maintain control over both manufacturing and sales. Another option is forming partnerships with ethical food companies, ensuring that revenue streams are returned to the community. Additionally, social enterprise models were explored, where profits from sales are used to support cultural education programs in Karen villages.

The feasibility of these approaches depends on continued community involvement and institutional support. This study concludes that, while heritage food transformation presents economic opportunities, ethical considerations must guide business models to avoid cultural exploitation and profit-driven appropriation. (See figure 4)

Addressing challenges: lessons from the field

While the study successfully demonstrated that food heritage transformation can balance authenticity and adaptation, it also identified several challenges:

1. Ensuring equitable financial benefits: Heritage food commercialization often benefits larger companies rather than local communities. This research highlights the importance of community-led business models.
2. Maintaining authenticity in larger production scales: While small-batch freeze dried maintained the original flavor, scaling up production may introduce compromises.
3. Navigating cross-cultural marketing: Introducing Karen porridge to non-Karen consumers requires thoughtful messaging to prevent misrepresentation or cultural stereotyping.

Addressing these challenges will be essential in ensuring long-term sustainability for this and similar projects. The research team proposes further collaboration between marketing experts, cultural experts, and community leaders to refine the model before large-scale commercialization.

Summary of findings

In summary, this study's results confirm that heritage food transformation is possible without erasing cultural authenticity when done through community-led co-creation. The findings demonstrate that:

1. Technology (freeze-dried) can preserve authenticity when carefully selected.
2. Community involvement ensures cultural pride and acceptance of heritage adaptation.
3. Marketing and branding are crucial in making heritage food accessible to new consumers.
4. Economic sustainability requires ethical business models that benefit local producers.

These insights contribute to ongoing debates on heritage preservation, food innovation, and cultural sustainability, providing a replicable model for other communities seeking to safeguard their food traditions while engaging with modern consumption trends.

Discussion: examining the debates on food, innovation, and heritage as a living collection

This investigation has illustrated that the conversion of Karen porridge into a market ready product is not only a method of preserving heritage but also an innovation that improves cultural visibility, economic sustainability, and accessibility. Nevertheless, the results must be contextualized within the broader scholarly discourse on heritage transformation, authenticity, and commercialization. The subsequent discourse analytically evaluates the extent to which the primary arguments of this investigation are either substantiated or refuted by existing research.

The feasibility of modifying conventional food practices

The conversion of agricultural heritage into modern consumption models is widely recognized as a method of reconciling environmental sustainability and cultural preservation (Yildiz, Gozde & Hetemoglu-Venedik, Asli, 2024). This is consistent with the heritagization of Karen porridge, as this study illustrates that a culturally significant cuisine can be reinterpreted to accommodate the requirements of contemporary lifestyles without sacrificing its essence.

Nevertheless, the danger of oversimplifying cultural practices to appeal to a wider audience is also concerning. This study contends that the innovation is firmly established in community agency rather than external market forces due to the participatory nature of the project, which involved Karen villagers in the selection of recipes, testing of flavors, and finalizing packaging. In contrast to industrialized heritage food production, this process emphasizes co-creation over appropriation.

Contrary to the prevailing emphasis on digital strategies for enhancing traditional food accessibility in urban markets, this research reveals the indispensable role of physical co-creation spaces, such as community food events and in-person tastings, in maintaining product development authenticity.

Cultural pride through common heritage practices

Food is intricately linked to intergenerational knowledge transfer and cultural identity (Yildiz, Gozde & Hetemoglu-Venedik, Asli, 2024). The results of this study corroborate that Karen porridge, which was previously perceived as an everyday household staple, is now a source of cultural pride when viewed as a culinary heritage masterpiece. The local culinary competition and co-creation process transformed mundane dietary practices into a collective identity project, connecting food memory with cultural sustainability.

The potential for heritage food commercialization to diminish socio-political significance is a recognized concern. This study, however, provides evidence to the contrary. The evolution of Karen porridge emerged from a participatory process initiated through the Doisithan Ecomuseum project, collaboratively developed by Mahidol University researchers and the local Karen community. Using a community-led, co-creative approach, the transformation was not driven by external commercial forces but shaped by the community's own engagement, ensuring that cultural meaning and integrity were preserved while adapting to new economic opportunities.

Furthermore, this research contributes to a praxis-based framework that actively generates new heritage narratives through community participation, in contrast to previous studies that primarily concentrate on documenting existing food traditions.

Heritage innovation for economic sustainability

The economic potential of food heritage, particularly in the context of culinary tourism and agritourism, is strongly supported by existing research (Yildiz, Gozde & Hetemoglu Venedik, Asli, 2024). This study further supports those findings by illustrating that Karen porridge has the potential to expand beyond local consumption and into a broader market.

While heritage commercialization often risks power imbalances that deprive local producers of financial gains, this study demonstrates a counterexample. By highlighting the Karen villagers' central role in all decision-making, from branding to product testing, it refutes such critiques. The co-creation model ensures economic benefits remain within the community, preventing external stakeholder extraction.

Furthermore, this research introduces a novel approach to heritage food studies, which typically concentrate on tourism-based economic models. This approach incorporates food heritage into everyday mobility, catering not only to tourists but also to diaspora communities and urban consumers. (See figure 5)

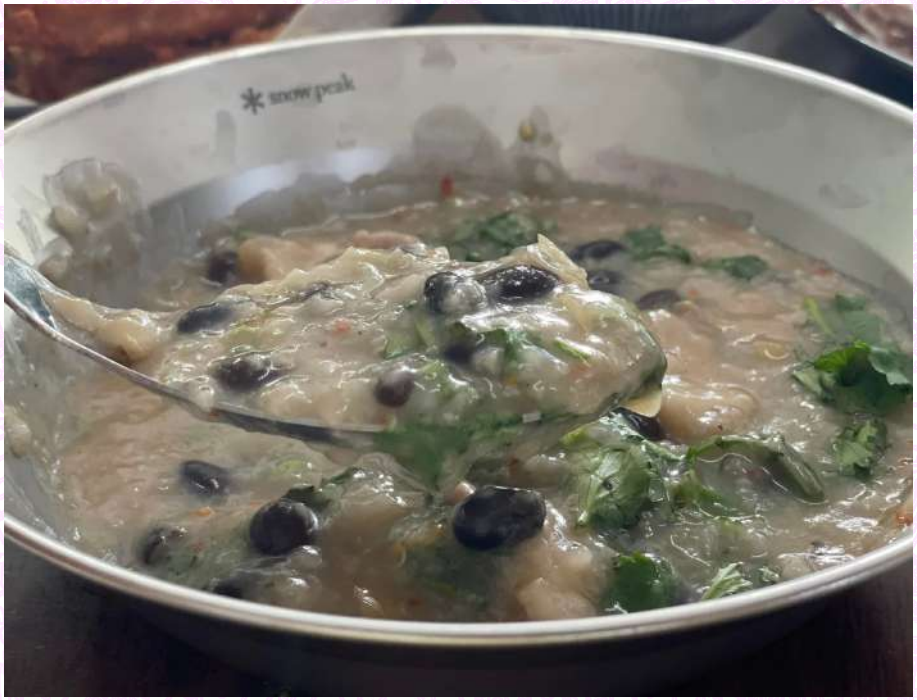

Figure 5: Ta Po Poh prepared

The ethical debate: the balance between preservation and innovation

The results of this investigation confirm that preservation and innovation are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary processes (Mathew, E., 2024; Chauhan, Y. et al, 2025). The research demonstrates the potential of modern food technology to facilitate the transmission of sustainable heritage by converting Karen porridge into a freeze-dried, ready-to-eat product.

However, critics contend that the sensory and cultural experience of traditional dishes may be compromised by culinary innovation (culture-heritage-identity-and-culinary, n.d.). The decision to employ freeze-dried instead of retort was a direct response to this critique, ensuring that the texture and flavor remained as close to the original dish as possible.

Furthermore, this study implies that community-driven innovation models may be more effective in preserving cultural integrity than external heritage policies, despite the fact that some scholars emphasize the necessity of institutional regulation in heritage transformation (Heritage, 2024). Through the SHIFT project—argues that institutional frameworks remain crucial. By integrating technologies like AI, machine learning, and haptics, the project promotes a hybrid model that combines community participation with expert-led digital transformation. It emphasizes that inclusive design and policy support are essential for bridging expertise gaps and ensuring equitable, sustainable heritage practices.

This debate underscores the fact that the transformation of Karen porridge both aligns with and challenges prevailing narratives in economic sustainability, culinary authenticity, and heritage innovation. This study contributes a novel conceptual model for interpreting intangible and edible heritage in institutional and commercial contexts by framing food as a living collection within museum curation.

Future directions

Food as a living collection can enable museums to transition from static object-based curation to interactive heritage preservation, digital narrative, and community-driven museum practices. Karen porridge demonstrates that intangible cultural heritage can be modified without compromising its originality and cultural significance, from authentic food to freeze-dried, instant food. As an immersive and informative medium, food legacy can help museums bridge tradition and innovation.

Interactive food heritage exhibitions

Museums can facilitate visitors' engagement with heritage cuisine through sensory and participatory exhibitions. Examples can be aroma-based exhibits, hands-on culinary seminars, or live cooking demonstrations as offered by the Museum of Food and Drink (MOFAD) in New York or the Basque Culinary Center Museum. This participatory model can also be adopted by local museums, which may integrate traditional foods like Karen porridge to actively engage visitors and sustain cultural heritage as a living practice.

Digital storytelling, virtual archives

As perishable heritage sparks conservatory and preservation concerns digital solutions provide a sustainable alternative to physical culinary displays. Food historians, cultural researchers, and local communities can collaborate with museums to establish interactive digital archives. Through immersive multimedia narrative, online recipe libraries, and QR-coded packaging, the historical, sociological, and culinary context of Karen porridge can be investigated. This method is reminiscent of Google Arts & Culture's 'Taste the Nation' initiative, which utilizes film, recipes, and oral narratives to document the culinary traditions of various countries.

Living museums and culinary heritage

The evolving importance of cuisine in museum curation is consistent with the proliferation of living museums, which actively engage in cultural activities. The Nordic Food Lab in Copenhagen and the Taiwan Indigenous Cultural Park are examples of how live museums can integrate culinary heritage. Potential future initiatives may encompass:

- Monthly Karen activities involving museum visitors in the preparation of meals

During culinary residencies, Karen chefs and food artisans impart their expertise. Visitors are able to investigate the culinary traditions of Karen by participating in interactive stations that rotate.

- Food Trails and Experiences Guided by Museums

Curated cultural food pathways have the potential to facilitate immersive learning experiences that extend beyond museums. Museums may provide Karen food heritage trails that allow visitors to visit Karen communities, interact with food artisans, and participate in cooking classes. There are examples of successful food heritage excursions in Japan, Italy, and Thailand. In this model, museums would contextualize Karen cuisine traditions within historical and social narratives.

Successful examples of food heritage excursions include the Wagashi Sweet Trail in Kanazawa, Okhotsk trail, Higashi Hokkaido food trail Japan; the Chianti wine trail, Toscany, Italy; and the Northern flavours Chiang Mai Food Tour in Thailand. In this model, museums would contextualize Karen cuisine traditions within historical and social narratives.

- Social innovation and culinary entrepreneurship that are facilitated by museums

Museum-led social entrepreneurship is facilitated by heritage-based culinary transformation. Using models such as the Sustainable Fashion Program at the V&A Museum, museums can collaborate with Karen communities to ethically sell Karen porridge.

Future endeavors could include museums providing branding and technical support to promote fair trade practices, establishing museum-affiliated culinary centers for Karen cuisine distribution, and utilizing sales revenue to support Karen cultural preservation as part of their social engagement and educational missions.

In conclusion, the future of museum culinary heritage curation is the transition from static display to dynamic, community-led, immersive interaction. Through interactive displays, digital storytelling, living museums, cultural culinary trails, and social enterprise models, food should be regarded as a living legacy practice. By incorporating Karen porridge into these expanding museological frameworks, museums have the potential to foster innovation for cultural preservation, thus respecting tradition and change.

The Vivid Ethnicity – A Mobile Museum in Motion

Heritage is never still – it moves, evolves, and takes new forms. In the Vivid Ethnicity, our mobile museum, culture is not an artifact to be preserved but a lived experience, carried through different ethnic groups, shared meals, and evolving traditions. Karen porridge, once rooted in daily life, now transcends its origins, embodying both heritage and innovation.

Like those who move across borders, food negotiates its place between authenticity and reinvention. In this museum, eating becomes an exhibition, cooking a living display, and food a collection that is meant to be consumed, not archived. The transformation of Karen porridge into a heritage-based ready-to-eat product is not a departure from tradition – it is its continuation, ensuring it remains relevant and accessible beyond its place of origin.

Visitors actively engage with the mobile museum through hands-on cooking workshops, storytelling sessions, and interactive food tasting. Community members contribute personal narratives and household objects, enriching the evolving collection with new layers of meaning. The mobile format allows the museum to reach diverse audiences, from rural communities to urban centers, fostering intergenerational dialogue and stimulating reflection on cultural continuity. Many visitors express surprise and pride in seeing their daily practices recognized as valuable heritage, while younger generations discover new connections to ancestral traditions through the shared sensory experience of food. (Cusripituck ed all, 2024)

In this mobile museum engaging with multiple ethnic communities, tradition is not a static exhibit but an unfolding story, told through taste, touch, and shared experience. Heritage does not stand still; it thrives in motion, passing from one generation to the next, reshaping itself while staying true to its roots. In the Vivid Ethnicity, every meal is a narrative, every shared dish a bridge between past and future. This is not just about preserving culture – it is about living it.

In Conclusion

This study provides a new paradigm for food heritage transformation, demonstrating that food can function as a living collection within museum interpretation. The praxis-based, community-led approach ensures that heritage innovation does not erase authenticity but enhances its relevance.

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Senses

Senses of Home

Jules Rijssen

Biography

Jules Rijssen is an andragogue and writer and works as a network collector at Imagine IC. He is also affiliated with NL-Lab as an expert in residence on cultural heritage and inclusivity. Here he works on inclusive networking, and advises on diversity and cross-institutional research.

Senses of Home

In the *Senses of Home* workshop, conference participants from Belgium, China, Taiwan and Thailand discussed how sensory aspects such as smell, taste and spatial aesthetics can come together.[1] Based on four case studies, we will reflect on concepts of the senses and sensory perception in relation to heritage experience and memory culture. This view of heritage is also present in the heritage practice of Imagine IC, a heritage institution with an integrated approach and a holistic view of heritage. It is a mix of an archive, a museum and a place for conversation. Based on the case studies presented and other examples from museum and heritage studies literature, it appears that multi-sensory approaches and applications in museums lead to changes in the experiences of visitors/participants.

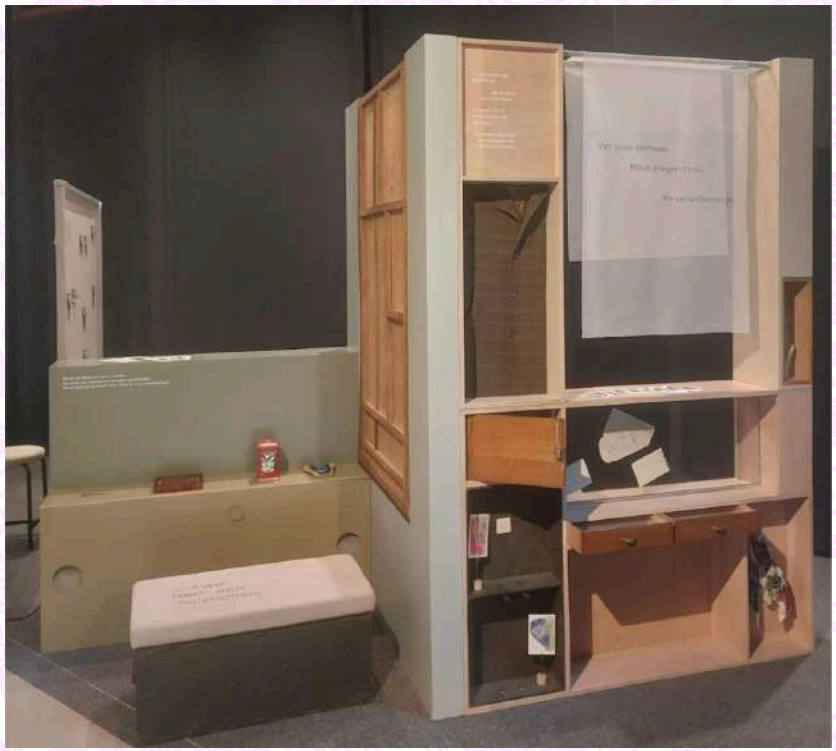
> *'The modern cultural environment has transformed museums into interactive spaces that go beyond simple display practices. The classic experience of gazing at artefacts through glass is no longer the primary focus. These institutions have evolved into interactive spaces that create emotional engagement through the deliberate delivery of sensory experiences. Museums now use the five senses to develop environments that both educate visitors and trigger powerful emotional responses. The emotional value of museum visits substantially grows when people experience carefully crafted spaces that appeal to their senses (Mackay, 2021; Jelincic et al., 2021). These immersive experiences strengthen visitor connections to historical and cultural artefacts and artistic displays, allowing abstract ideas to take on meaning that visual displays alone cannot achieve (Carlsson, 2020).'*[2]

The Garden

Nadia Babazia from the Red Star Line Museum in Antwerp (Belgium) talked about the collaborative project with the Permeke Library and SAAMO – an organisation for social community building – and a group of women with a migrant background. The Garden is a garden based on these women's stories of homesickness. All the herbs, flowers and vegetables in this garden are connected to these women's memories of home. This garden is located at the Permeke Library.

Through a 'homesickness box', participants reflect more deeply on the stories they share with each other. They call the garden their 'pharmacy', a place for healing. They take the time to build long-term relationships with the group of women. They invest in the collaboration and, above all, listen to each other's stories and let the garden grow. The aim is to provide space and time to reflect on the past and the present, so that a bridge can be built to the future. The workshop began with the spraying of orange blossom water on the hands of the audience as a welcome ritual and as a symbol: a sign that you belong. Homesickness is a common theme in migration and, at the same time, a universal feeling that we all recognise. Or, as was written on a response card at the end of the session: '*Sense of Orange brings you the sense of welcoming.*'

Nadia Babazia (left) and Jules Rijssen (right). Photo: Willem van Wijk



Heimweekast at Imagine IC³ - photo Jules Rijssen

The Tale from the Mountain.

Patoo Cusripituck presented *The Tale from the mountain: A narrative of a collection's journey from a remote area to a city*, a collaborative project between an eco-museum in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and the Karen community, whose cultural practices are under pressure. She carried out the project together with Teerawam Mingbualuang and Jitjayang Yamabhai.

Patoo told the story of Ta po po, a traditional dish that takes two hours to prepare and is strongly associated with feelings of home and togetherness. To support the community economically and make the dish more accessible, they developed an instant version, retaining the flavour and symbolism in a form adapted to contemporary life. *'With three flavours available, every bite becomes a way to taste heritage and support the continuity of the Karen community,'* said Patoo.

Patoo Cusripituck. Photo: Willem van Wijk

The collection and the Chinese garden

Jie Liu is an associate professor and curator at the National Library of China and a researcher of antique collections, iconography and curation. She presented the project *The integration of collections and Chinese garden: Cross-border curatorial practice that goes beyond the collection.*

Chinese garden philosophy states that Chinese gardeners are not gardeners, but philosophers and artists. Chinese gardens are carefully composed spaces in which elements such as stone and bamboo are placed with aesthetic and symbolic intentions. The spirit of Confucianism, Taoism and Zen in Chinese philosophy can be found here.
Conference participants were invited to consider how such gardens can be brought to life, not only visually but also socially. Various seemingly random elements from Chinese gardens were discussed, along with the symbolism of these forms.

Beyond the meaning that the designer or gardener attaches to his or her garden, what does it evoke in others who have no knowledge or understanding of the underlying philosophy? What effect does it have on people with different cultural and personal backgrounds?
That movement and stirring happens because at such moments we actively tap into the archive that is our body. This goes beyond remembering in our heads; it is about remembering in and from the body.

Jie Liu. Photo: Willem van Wijk

Aromatic Imprint: Scent as a Catalyst

The sense of smell is highly subjective, private and fleeting, but it acts as a catalyst and is anchored in memory. In collaboration with a scientific illustrator and a perfumer, Chelsea Wang of the National Museum of History in Taiwan used indigenous plants in her project *Aromatic Imprint: Scent as a Catalyst for Museum Collecting* to explore how scents can express the Taiwanese sense of belonging. This sensory approach allows for a reinterpretation of (colonial) history, tells stories that might otherwise remain outside the dominant historical narratives, and evokes deep-rooted connections to the place. In doing so, it also replaces the traditional method of simply recounting historical facts. Moreover, who writes these historical facts and thus determines history?

Reflection
Wang's subjective and highly personal approach is also in line with Imagine IC's approach and commitment to the democratisation of heritage. We also constantly strive to think about ways to reshape the conversation about heritage and meaning.

Chelsea Wang – Photo: Willem van Wijk

Reflections

Imagine IC also explores the role of smells in its collection practice. Smells related to memories of home, upbringing, neighbourhood, recipes and plants, but also related to the human body. How does our body – as the bearer of memory – behave in this regard? The memories evoked by smell are or eventually become part of our identity.

In our work practice of intergenerational collection meetings, we see the important role of specific scents. Take, for example, the case of the Bijlmer plane crash. On 4 October 1992, an El Al cargo plane crashed shortly after take-off from Schiphol Airport onto the Klein Kruitberg and Groeneveen flats in Bijlmermeer. Those involved remember not only the smell of kerosene but also that of perfume, because in addition to weapons and other items, there were also perfume bottles in the cargo hold. That specific combination of kerosene and perfume has become a carrier of the terrible memories of the plane crash. For some of them, this combination of smells is identical to the crash site. Another project launched by Imagine IC is *Groen* (*Green*). This ranges from potted plants in the living room and bedroom, on the gallery or balcony, to managing small allotments. Smell also plays a role in the practice of planting flowers and vegetables, including (medicinal) herbs. Even in the home, the scents that float around are not random. Just like the interior of the bedroom, bathroom, kitchen or entrance hall, they are part of what makes the house a home.[4]

In my personal reflection, I focus in particular on the projects of Nadia Babazia, Chelsea Wang and Professor Patoo Cusripituck and her team. There are similarities between them and our work in terms of theme, although the collection methods may differ in practice.

The food and taste components of Patoo Cusripituck's project from Thailand are closely related to our Green project. For example, in a session on what people plant in allotments, the practical question was asked: 'What do you do if you have a surplus of tomatoes, for example?' Spontaneously, recipes for sauces and other uses were shared.

Investigating smells also reveals colonial traces. These vary from specific preparation methods to the export of certain products. An example of this is the types of butter that are made in the Netherlands but cannot be found in large regular supermarkets. However, they can be found in Toko's and other types of shops run by migrants. In this way, what was considered the 'average' food culture was determined worldwide. This colonisation of smells and tastes can still be found in cities around the world today.

As in the Thai collaboration project, Imagine IC plays with the concept of culinary heritage in several of its projects and how this is not fixed but constantly changing. In the podcast series *Gekookte Geschiedenis (Cooked History)*, which we produce in collaboration with Ayra Kip of Kip Republic, we talk about food culture, identity and history from the perspective of the African-Caribbean diaspora. Are specific dishes eaten at certain milestones and what is the symbolism behind this? In the last *Gesprekksstof (Conversation Material)* we organised around the day on which the end of the Second World War is celebrated in the Netherlands, food in times of scarcity was the central theme: how does scarcity lead to the creation of new dishes? But also: how can food serve as a reminder and a source of hope in turbulent times?

Another interesting question is how you describe a smell to someone who has never smelt it before. Not understanding a particular spiritual ritual is often compared to describing a smell that is unknown to someone else. You can only know the smell if you immerse yourself in it. In this context, see the fieldwork by anthropologist Mikkel Rytter (2015), who uses the scent of the rose as a metaphor for a certain spiritual experience that you must undergo in the article of the same name, *The Scent of a Rose: Imitating Imitators as They Learn to Love the Prophet.*[5]

In this respect, I believe that scent can also be understood as a 'liminal space' in which you can wander. You can also lose your way there. When life confuses you to such an extent that even the scent that is familiar to you can upset your body in stressful situations. This is how British-Nigerian novelist Kolapo Akinola puts it in *The Bachelor's Ride*. In this novel, he gives the reader an intimate insight into the mind of his main character Toyosi, who is a sickle cell carrier. As a reader, you are confronted with the suffering and social exclusion that sickle cell carriers struggle with:

> *"Surrounded by shelves of towels and a vanity tray with colognes, detergents and other toiletries, I smelled the scents of soaps – of shea butter, of coconut milk, of pleasant fragrance. My hands smelled of onions. My head, my heart, my feet – the rest of my body – smelled of fear."*[6]

A few lines later, when he sees two children running around and playing happily in the courtyard garden from his toilet, he sighs: *"The last thing I'd expected to smell in a toilet, in this lonely position, was love."*[7] Art and scent historian Caro Verbeek argues that all emotions (such as infatuation, love, fear – but also things like illness) can be smelled. (...) But you can also determine the atmosphere through our nose. We know things through our nose. Only we are not aware of it. (...) Or that we don't have a relationship with so-and-so because our scents don't match. According to Verbeek, all scents are culturally determined and also belong to our heritage.[8]

The smell of love has not yet been discussed or researched in Imagine IC's practice, which is all the more reason to discuss this smell in conversations about home.

The cases presented, particularly those from Belgium, Taiwan and Thailand, can serve as mirror examples of Imagine IC's working practice and also reflect the results we have achieved with our network.

Scents, flavours, plants and flowers are not only seen, smelled and experienced by the participants in the discussions as something private, something stored in their inner domain, but also serve as 'glasses' through which to see and experience the world around them - from the distant past and/or the very near present.

In a gathering with senior citizens on the theme of Green, which was devoted to planting, one participant said that she was not a member of an allotment association in the Netherlands and did not have any plants in her home. She spends the winter in Suriname, where she does plant. There, she has to put her bare hands in the soil, touch it and smell it. I remember her saying that the feeling is different in the Netherlands. Is the smell of the soil the same everywhere, or is it the smell of love or the smell of fear?

In the project to preserve the distinctive Kempering garage in the Bijlmer neighbourhood of Amsterdam Zuidoost, we also learned that a neighbourhood can have a specific smell. Garages were not only places where you parked your car, but also places where informal businesses flourished, from hairdressers to moped and car repair shops. They served as (romantic) meeting places and playgrounds for children, but also as public urinals. They also served as a shelter for many homeless people and asylum seekers who had exhausted all legal remedies from the *We Are Here* movement. The smell of the garage was not just a mixture of urine and engine oil. The smell of the garage in the Bijlmer/Amsterdam was also one of youth and innocence.

Discussing these issues also requires high-quality listening skills and the attention of the participants. The ability to put yourself in the other person's shoes. Being given and giving space to share your heart and mind. Listening becomes political insofar as the aim is not merely to hear the speaker. It also appeals to what is not said. It is about being sensitive to unequal power relations, silence as protection and sometimes also as a weapon. All the more so because we know that words always have something intangible about them, no matter how clearly they are spoken.

But it is also about the question with which every conversation begins.[9] The question of who you are or what you want to share about it? Perhaps also how you say it. Seeking ideas and opinions about justice. Building a just society together.

Listening to each other forces us to embrace diversity of opinion in conversation and in society. Asking questions, listening, talking, conversation. From this perspective on our actions and those of others, we at Imagine IC explore heritage practice. Senses of Home, with its multiple sensory perspectives, is part of our current heritage practice, which we will continue to explore in the coming period.

Notes

1 Thanks to Bibi de Vries, project coordinator at Imagine IC, for proofreading, and Willem van Wijk, lecturer in Anthropology at Leiden University and PhD researcher at Imagine IC, who made some of his notes on the presentations available for this reflection.

2 Aiswarya Nettoor Veetil, 'How Museums Stir Emotions Through the Senses', in: https://www.re-thinkingthefuture.com/architectural-community/a14002-how-museums-stir-emotions-through-the-senses/

3 From 12 August to 12 October 2025, Imagine IC will be exhibiting the Heimwee cabinet from the Red Starline Museum. This cabinet functions as an open dialogue and connects two places of arrival in the Imagine IC building: Antwerp and Amsterdam.

4 Coccia, E. (2024), Philosophy of the Home. Domestic Space and Happiness. UK: Penguin Books.

5 Rytter, M. (2015), 'The Scent of a Rose: Imitating Imitators as They Learn to Love the Prophet', in Britta Timm Knudsen and Carsten Stage (eds) Affective Methodologies. Developing Cultural Research Strategies for the Study of Affect. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 140-160.

6 Akinola, K. (2022), The Bachelor's Ride. UK: Icongate. p. 23

7 idem 4.p.24

8 How do we capture scent in words? A conversation with Caro Verbeek: Https://overtaalgesproken.buzzsprout.com/1767106/episodes/13801186-hoe-vangen-we-geur-in-woorden-een-gesprek-met-caro-verbeek. Podcast 23 October 2023.Institute for the Dutch Language / Genootschap Onze Taal. Season 3. Episode 2

9 Meijer.E,(2022), Perhaps is another word for hope. A plea for polyphony in political and public debate. Amsterdam: De Geus.

Senses

It starts with a feeling.
To touch and being touched by museum objects

Roberto Luis Martins & Marysa Otte

Biography

Roberto Luis Martins is Curator Fashion and Popular Culture at the Amsterdam Museum. Roberto focuses on researching, collecting and exhibiting fashion and its affiliated popular culture through a sociopolitical perspective. Examples are the exhibitions 'Continue This Thread' on the power of handicrafts, and 'Grand March' on the artistic voices of the Dutch ballroom house, House of Vineyard. In the past Roberto has worked as a curator in cultural institutions as Museum Arnhem and Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, and fashion heritage platform Modemuze.

Marysa Otte serves as a Collections Advisor in the Amsterdam Museum, focusing on matters of care and conservation. She previously worked as an advisor specialising in collection management, care, and preventive conservation for museums and heritage organisations in the Province of Gelderland. Currently, she is conducting research on co-creation's intersection with decision-making processes concerning valuation, use, care, and conservation issues.

In museum settings, the risk of physical contact with objects is a significant concern. At the Amsterdam Museum, for instance, a sticker featuring an image of a hand with a bold cross is placed near displays to discourage touching. In some cases, this warning is reinforced with explicit text, such as the somewhat stern 'Please do not touch.' Despite these precautions, visitors often feel a strong urge to touch objects, particularly when clothing and textiles are presented. Clothing and fabrics evoke a tactile connection, as the sense of touch enhances our understanding of material qualities. However, physical contact with historic garments poses risks beyond immediate damage, such as tearing or breaking - it also accelerates the natural degradation of fibres. As a result, fashion exhibitions frequently present garments behind glass or within restricted display areas, limiting engagement to visual observation alone.

Yet, despite the necessity of preservation, the desire to touch is at the heart of how we experience fashion and textiles. Visitors sometimes instinctively reach out to feel materials, as touch provides a deeper understanding of texture, weight and craftsmanship - qualities that cannot be fully appreciated through sight alone. For visitors such as fashion students, tailors, reenactors and individuals with visual impairments, tactile engagement is not merely a preference but can be a crucial means of learning and connecting with (fashion) history. This raises questions as: how can museums navigate the tension between conservation and the need for sensory engagement? Also, how can we exhibit fashion more inclusively?

This article examines an exploration of unlocking a newly acquired gown, a printed cotton gown from about 1830 (see fig 1).[1] We, Marysa Otte (Senior Advisor Collections) and Roberto Luis Martins (Curator Fashion and Popular Culture) collaborated on this project and invited multiple perspectives to include in understanding how to unlock this gown to the public. In collaboration with students from various fashion related school programs (MBO & HBO)[2] and participants from the 2024 *Collecting with(in) the City Conference* (the joint ICOM CAMOC and COMCOL conference), we positioned this gown as the centrepiece of our initiative while actively engaging the diverse perspectives of the participants. We examine the dress by unravelling the (im)material stories associated with it, identifying user needs and assessing potential risks.

Figure 1: Gown, ca. 1830, in the Amsterdam Museum exhibition 'Unboxing. Fashion from the Archives' (2024). Photo by Monique Vermeulen, Amsterdam Museum

A historic gown for rental

The gown at the centre of this research dates from around 1830. Unfortunately, no information on its maker nor its original wearer have been preserved. The size and its cut tells us that it was probably made for a female teenager. The gown is striking for its high waistline and its voluminous *gigot* sleeves. The fabric is a printed cotton with floral motives. The delicate smocking at the shoulders and sleeves demonstrates the fine craftsmanship of dressmaking in this period.

Unlike many garments in museum collections, this gown was not kept as a carefully preserved inheritance, but as part of the rental stock of A. Serné, an Amsterdam-based costume company founded in 1866. Serné specialised in theatrical and masquerade costumes, later expanding into film and television. Many of its garments, including this gown, were altered and repurposed for performances, although hardly any proofs of later adjustments are visible in this gown. As interest in historical costume rentals declined, the company closed in 1993, but select pieces - like this gown -found their way into museum collections. It is, yet, unknown how long the gown has been in Serné's collection.

In close agreement with the donor, the Amsterdam Museum acquired this gown not as a static display piece but as part of its *gebruikscollectie* - or 'usable collection.' This collection challenges the idea of museum objects as untouchable, recognizing that some artifacts gain meaning through interaction. Unlike traditional acquisitions, these objects can be handled, and sometimes even worn, offering a deeper engagement with material culture.

This gown presents an interesting case for inclusion in a usable collection. Its historical significance extends beyond its initial creation, as it remained in active use for - most probably - decades within Serné's costume rental business. Though its exact journey is unknown, its function was to be handled and worn by multiple generations, reinforcing its identity as a garment meant for interaction. In addition, as the gown consists of sturdy cotton fabric, with no applied decoration such as lace or beads, its condition reduces the risk of damage compared to more fragile materials. While every historical dress carries unique details, this gown does not necessarily represent a singularly rare example within fashion history. Museums hold comparable pieces from the same period. In the most unfortunate case of complete degradation, this would not lead into a vital gap in museum collections. By embracing this gown within a usable collection, the museum expands opportunities for research, education, historical sensation and a more immersive experience of fashion history. It also challenges the museum field to rethink what it means to unlock fashion within an exhibition context.[3]

A user manual

Labelling an object as part of a usable collection is a curious concept in theory, but how does it work in practice? What boundaries need to be established? Who should be granted a tactile experience and under what conditions? What does a user manual for this gown look like? Rather than imposing predefined guidelines, we sought to explore these questions through collaboration and co-creation, gathering insights from various perspectives to develop a more informed and inclusive approach. This aligns with the findings of Jane Henderson and Ashley Lingle in their research on touching objects in museums: 'By developing frameworks designed to conceive a creative and flexible future relationship between enacting thoughtful conservation activities and enabling meaningful physical experience with cultural heritage, we can broaden the factors being considered in touch decisions.' (2023: 11).

In this first phase of the project, we engaged with key audiences to better understand the significance of touch in museum experiences. What does tactile interaction offer fashion students, museum professionals, or individuals with visual impairments? Conversely, what might be lost when granting physical access to a collection piece? To carefully unlock this gown for public engagement, we initiated dialogues with these target groups, ensuring their perspectives shaped the process. As a first step, we collaborated with about 150 students from MBO Mode, MBO Jeans School and the HBO Amsterdam Fashion Institute (AMFI). Additionally, we hosted a workshop during the COMCOL-CAMOC conference (further referred to as the Conference), where we gathered further input on the implications of tactile engagement in museum contexts. By centering co-creation in our approach, we aimed to formulate a more inclusive, sustainable model for incorporating touch into the museum experience.

The workshops were designed to explore the specific needs and expectations of participants when studying a historical garment within an exhibition space. The historical gown in question was exhibited in the mini-exhibition 'Unboxing: Fashion from the Archives' in the Amsterdam Museum, where we exercised the idea of unlocking a sensorial experience with this gown. Visitors were invited to feel the gown. Together with the students, we explored how tactility enhances their understanding of fashion's materiality, construction and historical context. Through guided discussions and hands-on interaction, we posed questions such as: 'What has touching the gown brought you? What effect does it have on the gown?' These sessions not only revealed the value of sensorial engagement but also highlighted the challenges of balancing access with conservation. During the Conference workshop, we expanded this dialogue, collectively exploring the same questions and reflecting on the answers.

Mixed feelings?

Following workshops and interviews with various groups, a broad range of emotional reactions and reflections emerged about the significance of touching the gown, along with concerns about its preservation. A central theme was the connection participants felt with the gown through tactile engagement, which made their experience of fashion history more personal.

Figure 2–3: Students from MBO observing the gown in exhibition 'Unboxing. Fashion from the Archives' (2024) Photo's by Marysa Otte, Amsterdam Museum

Students

For the students, touching the gown offered immediate insights into its materiality and construction: 'By touching, it told your eyes something different.[14] Feeling the fabric allowed them to notice design details, like hand-stitched seams and the softness of the cotton, which were hard to detect visually. Touching was often combined with flipping up the lower part, revealing the inside and construction of the gown (Fig 2 & 3). The tactile connection sparked an emotional response beyond technical aspects of fashion design. Many students expressed a sense of intimacy with the past, feeling that touching the gown allowed them to connect with its original wearer and maker: 'You get more appreciation for the maker of the dress' and: 'You can imagine how a child would have worn it'. Or, projecting it on themselves: 'You can better imagine what it feels like to wear something like this'. Some students found the gown more real and tangible when touched, bringing them closer to the historical context.

There was a small group who described the experience as 'underwhelming'. They stated that it did not offer them new perspectives and that this particular gown was not very interesting to them. 'Touch is not as important if a garment is already analysed and presented with museum research'. And: 'The gown could have also been shown inside out, so we wouldn't have needed to touch it to see the techniques'. These last responses came from the groups following a HBO educational program. The various groups were too small to draw conclusions about differences between answers from MBO and HBO students. However, it is noticeable that the MBO groups seemed more emotionally impacted by the gown, while the HBO groups thought more critically about the whole experience, suggesting alternatives for using the garment.

Even before the question of what consequences touching might have for the gown was raised, some students mentioned that it felt strange to touch something so old and that they were concerned about whether the gown would withstand it. One group suggested that - should the gown become dirty and worn - the museum could use it as a kind of educational warning of what happens with collections when you touch them.

Figure 4: Conference attendees answering questions on touching the gown during the visit to the Amsterdam Museum. Photo by Francoise Boleschowski.

Conference attendees

The attendees of the Conference were invited to touch the garment during their visit to the Amsterdam Museum (figure 4). They were initially presented with a different question than the students: *What emotion or feeling does touching the gown evoke in you?* The second question was the same as the one posed to the students, asking participants to reflect on what the act of touching the gown brought them. This approach allowed respondents to first identify their immediate emotional reaction before considering its deeper significance. The concept of a 'first' emotion was introduced as it would serve as a valuable element in the Conference workshop on the following day, which includes an 'emotion networking' session. An overview of the answers on both questions is given in table 1.

1 Emotions	2 What did touching the gown brought you
Unexpected, feeling closer, superlative	It takes away something: a museum object becomes a piece of clothing. 1830 is brought to my clothing closet. Difficult to leave my 'work state of mind'. I already gained a first new 'insight' (perspective) in this conference!
Nothing special	Not special, because the kind of fabric is well known. So: I don't need to touch it.
Concern, amazement	Information about the technique and material used in 19th century.
Surprised	The fabric is in such great condition. But: the interaction with the interviewer is more interesting than the object.
Excited, incredible to touch the collection	And a little sad, the owner is gone.
-	I was more interested, it became more real.
Makes me more curious	Makes me more interested in the dress.
Calmness	It's amazing to have the chance to touch the 'history', especially the 'museum-object'. It's a new way to create 'collective memory'. Even though I am from a different cultural background, I feel I am part of history.
Care! Respectful	I have said in my mind: 'Nice to meet you' to whom the dress belonged.
Confused	Confused, because history is … something not real or allowed to touch.
Makes it real, feeling of connection	More focused

Table 1. Responses of the eleven conference attendees on the first two questions

The responses from conference attendees indicated relatively less interest in the construction of the dress than the students. Instead, participants described various forms of connectedness, including the experience of feeling a sense of connection across cultural backgrounds through the act of touching. Some responses also reflected uneasiness about handling museum objects. One visitor provided an answer that appeared 'underwhelmed,' similar to a response from one of the student groups. However, this individual has (practical) knowledge of historic fabrics and garment construction, suggesting that understanding the gown may not require tactile engagement. In most cases, the initial emotional response is closely aligned with the second reflection. In some instances, the first emotion differed, for example shifting from concern and amazement to a more analytical focus on technique and materials. Six conference attendees responded to the third question regarding the impact of touch on the dress. The most common concern was the garment becoming dirty. One participant speculated: 'Perhaps the deterioration is accelerated by just two minutes?'

Visitors

Finally, four museum visitors answered the same questions as the conference attendees. Since the answers are diverse and express other reflections than the students and the conference attendees, we present their reactions in table 2.

Seeing the variety of answers here, it is worthwhile to interview more visitors, or to give them the possibility to react on reflection cards in a next presentation of the gown.

1 Emotions	2 What did touching the gown brought you	3 What does it do to the dress
Nostalgic feeling (my Indian grandmother wore something like that)	Touching enhances feeling It feels different from what I expected	It will change after lots of touching
Lovely, princess-like	It reminds me of the cradle for my daughter in Laura Ashley fabric and her baptism clothes. It is so soft! You are getting more feelings, emotions because of touching	It gets more value, because you can touch it
Thrilling, nostalgic, grateful	Seeing details better, impressed by how it is made Everybody learns different [touching is one of the possibilities]	In the long term it affects the wellbeing of the dress. It has more value now
Happy	You think about the child who wore it and the person who made the dress	Maybe the dress likes it! Some parts will wear out

Table 2. Responses of four visitors on the three questions

Similarities, differences and perspectives

For most respondents -whether students, visitors, or conference attendees- being able to touch the dress made their encounter with it more engaging and real; they felt more connected.

Among students, interest was naturally centred on the construction process and the techniques employed. Across all groups, connections were drawn to history, the wearer and the maker of the garment. Some responses suggested an inclusive perspective. One respondent noted that touching the dress helped her feel more connected, despite coming from a different cultural background. For another interviewee, the fabric evoked a sense of nostalgia, as it reminded him of the clothes his grandmother used to wear in India. One participant highlighted that individuals have different learning styles, with tactile engagement serving as a valuable means of both learning and connecting. This may account for the particularly enthusiastic response from the more practically inclined vocational students.

Across all groups, some of the participants voiced concern regarding the potential degradation and contamination of the gown through physical contact. These concerns appear to be more present in the museum conference group. One conference respondent suggested that the interaction and dialogue surrounding the garment were, in fact, more engaging than the act of touching itself. This focus on sharing thoughts brings us to the workshop on touching this historical gown during the Conference.

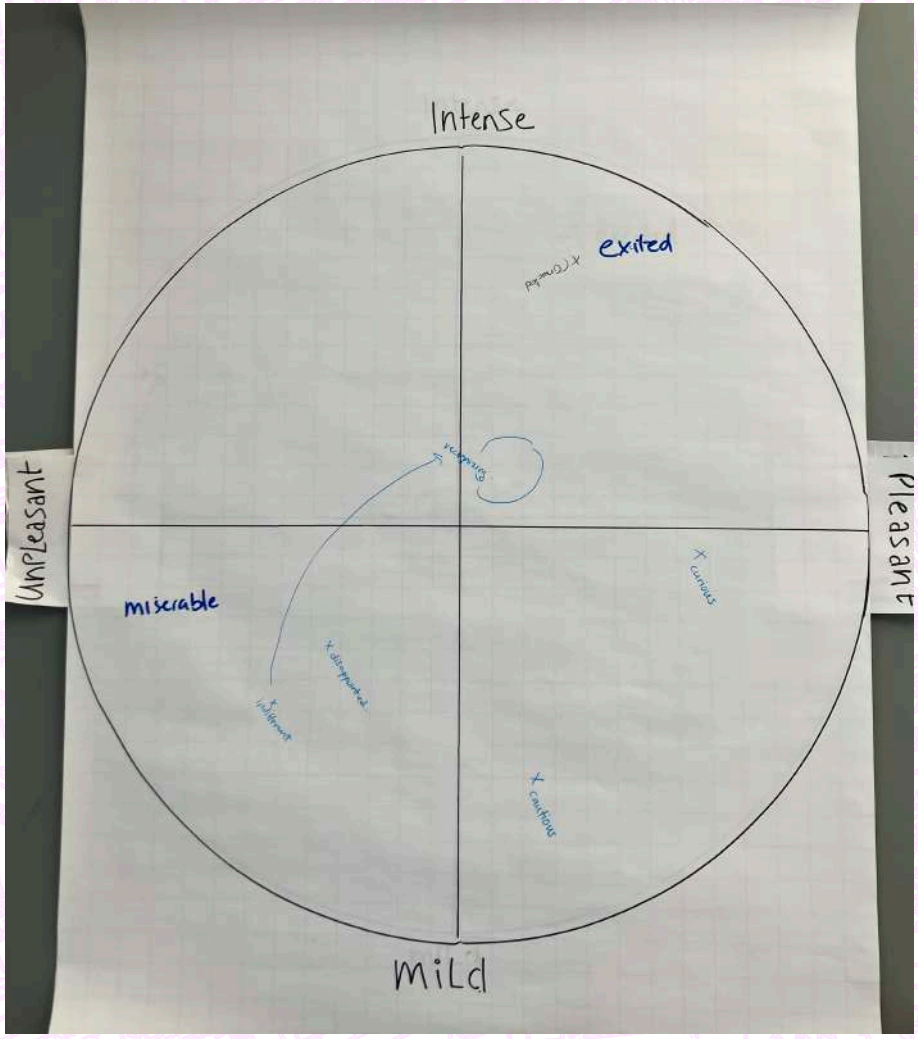


Figure 5: Mapping the responses during the Emotion Networking workshop, where it is visible (indicated with an arrow) that someone's emotion changed from 'indifferent' to a more positive emotion. [The words 'miserable' and 'excited' were written down before the workshop started as an example where to place emotions in the circle]. Photo by Marysa Otte, Amsterdam Museum

Shifting emotions, an Emotion Networking workshop with the gown

With no historical dress at hand during the workshop and only a few conference visitors who actually touched the gown the day before, we decided to use the answers of the diverse respondents and the *Emotion Networking* method for this workshop. Hester Dibbits' short description of this method:

In an emotion networking session, people are invited to share their feelings on a specific object or theme and discuss any changes that occur in these feelings during the exchange.

Changes may occur because of something a participant says, or in response to information introduced during the conversation, in the form of a text, image, or recording. Such an 'introduced voice' can shed a whole new light on the object or theme, moving the entire constellation. But it could also be that nothing or almost nothing changes. (2024: 5).

The workshop members were asked to write their first upcoming emotion(s) in a circle with axes from unpleasant to pleasant and from mild emotions to intense emotions.

After that, exchange with the other members in their group and the introduced voices from the written answers of students, conference attendees, museum visitors, textile experts and a conservator, sometimes gave them new perspectives, ending in shifts of emotions.

One of the members said that her feelings of caution of touching a historical object shifted to a positive feeling, when she heard the explanation why we had chosen this historical gown for this purpose, by listening to other group members and by reading the answers of diverse respondents.

The value of working together with diverse groups in co-creation became evident during the workshops. By listening to the needs of the different key audiences, we were provided with valuable insights on how to unlock the gown. Ultimately, the exploration of tactile engagement with the 1830s gown raised important questions about the role of touch in museum practices. It highlighted how museums can offer more inclusive experiences that engage multiple senses while navigating the balance between conservation and access. Involving various groups - from students to conference attendees to museum visitors - opened the door to new ways of interacting with fashion and history in museum settings.

After being touched : what is next?

We invited Hanneke Kramer, the external textile conservator who collaborated with us on the gown's presentation, to share her reflections on how working with the dress impacted her:

Using a historical costume as a tactile object initially goes against everything I have learned about preventive and active conservation. A costume that can be touched by visitors requires more attention than a 'regular' costume for museum display; it needs more frequent condition checks, potentially more frequent conservation treatments and a sturdier and more extensive mounting than when a costume is placed in a display case. For a conservator, this is an interesting case study from which I can learn. In hindsight, I would have mounted it differently, considering how the gown is being touched in the exhibition.

Figure 6: Conference participants during the workshop. Photo by Francoise Boleschowski

The response reveals two key insights: using a historical dress requires extra effort to maintain it in a presentable condition and it necessitates careful consideration and execution of new display methods. After the presentation, the conservator re-examined the gown, focusing on potentially delicate areas. It was found that these areas had remained largely unchanged, except for a small hook that had partially detached. Additionally, distinguishing new dirt from existing dirt and the gown's natural yellowing proved challenging.[5]

Conclusions

Our project on the historic gown led to meaningful conversations and interactions with a range of people and groups. While the outcomes aligned with our expectations, we were struck by the diversity of emotions and perspectives we encountered. Initially, our focus was on creating a user manual together with the users. However, by first listening to many individuals and groups, we expanded our understanding - and, in turn, the possibilities of what to include in a 'user manual.'

Visitors and groups deeply appreciated the chance to engage in tactile experiences, often highlighting both tangible and intangible values. This underscores that touch can play a role in fostering inclusivity. Collaborating and co-creating with diverse participants provided valuable insights into a broader spectrum of values and effective presentation methods that honour them.

The conservation of a usable collection may necessitate alternative approaches to preservation, support and protection. It is essential to consider the specific efforts, time and financial resources required to enable the museum and the communities involved to engage with these collections in a meaningful manner.

We selected fashion students as one of our main groups, as our museum aims to engage with them in mutual learning processes. The second group consisted of attendees from the Conference, as our museum was one of the hosts. Additionally, we gathered opinions from museum visitors, who sometimes provided unexpected insights. Moving forward, we would like to expand our outreach to include individuals with visual impairments. Since our previous discussions were conducted through conversations, we are also interested in incorporating reflection cards to explore whether they yield different responses. By sharing our findings with the CAMOC and COMCOL community, we hope to enhance co-creativity within and between museums, fostering mutual learning. We would greatly appreciate your feedback and suggestions to support this ongoing process.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all the collaborators in workshops and interviews, Hester Dibbits for sharing her knowledge and for her assistance during the Conference workshop, Hanneke Kramer for her work as conservator on the gown, Floor van Hulsen for collaborating during the workshops and the team of CAMOC and COMCOL for inviting us to present the workshop in the conference.

Notes

1 Gown, 1825-1835, inventory number 7338, see http://hdl.handle.net/11259/collection.116729

2 The Dutch school program Middelbaar Beroepsonderwijs (MBO) translate in English to Secondary Vocation Education, the Dutch school program Hoger Beroepsonderwijs (HBO) translate in English to University of Applied Sciences

3 Important to note that this paper, nor this research implies that we want to challenge museums to provide visitors physical access to 'all' their collection pieces. Naturally, when an object is collected to be preserved, we don't believe in 'reframing' it to a user's collection. Also, when there is a matter of uniqueness, or rare example, we believe in prioritizing the preservation of its condition.

4 Some of the student's responses were in English, other in Dutch. We translated the Dutch answers into English

5 It would be interesting to measure dust and dirt accumulation, but that would require specific measurement techniques and much more time from a textile conservator and/or technical researcher than was available now.

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Senses

The Archive of City Imprints: Collecting Textures of Memory

Lana Bede

Biography

Lana Bede is the senior curator pedagogue at the Karlovac City Museums (Croatia). She is responsible for developing and managing museum's educational programming including the awarded Touch of Idols and Ornament in Folk Costumes, as well as co-creative and participatory projects including Museum Bee Garden and Raise your Gaze. She has curated and co-authored a range of displays including Seeing Through Touch, the inclusive art exhibition adopted for the visually impaired (the SEGD Global Design Merit Award 2020, ZGDW Winner 2020 and 2021, the Croatian Museum Association Award 2020 for the best exhibition). Her recent work focuses on urban architecture, community participation, activist museum practice and multiperspectivity.

Bede holds a MA in Art History from the University of Zagreb. Previously worked at the State Archive in Karlovac on the collections of posters and blueprints. She was presenter at the ICOM CECA Conferences, DEMHIST Open Talks 2024 and the School of Museum Studies, the University of Leicester.

'The act of remembering is never neutral.'
- Frank Vagnone

Following the principles of the Faro Convention on the value of cultural heritage for society and the new Prague ICOM museum definition, in 2022 the Karlovac City Museum in Croatia began the public engagement program titled *Raise Your Gaze*. Program's goals were raising awareness of the value of the city's architectural heritage faced with imminent destruction and recognition of this heritage as a public good and an element of the human right to culture. The program aimed to inform, educate, inspire and empower local communities. It consisted of various activities such as architectural guided walks, lectures, research and restoration workshops that implemented place-based education, on site teaching and provided as much hands-on experiences as possible. It was carried out in collaboration with researchers from the Department of Art History from the University of Zagreb, conservation specialists, independent researchers, the Karlovac State Archive, local public library, local schools, non-profit local organisations and local residents. The program was conceived and organised by me in my position as senior curator pedagogue at the Karlovac City Museum.

As a sequel of Raise Your Gaze next year, in 2023, the Karlovac City Museum started a co-creative, participatory and inclusive art project *The Archive of City Imprints* in collaboration with the visual artist Saša Martinović Kunović. *The Archive of City Imprints* project was inspired by and based on the concept of Saša Martinović Kunović' solo exhibition of the same title held 20 years ago (April-May, 2005) at the Zagreb State Archive together with the senior archivist Branka Molnar. In her solo exhibition Saša made different imprints of the city of Zagreb on clay (terracotta) tiles and Branka sorted them according to archival principles into wooden boxes, creating connected units such as wall imprints, floor imprints, drain imprints, metal fence imprints, imprints of objects from her studio yard, tree imprints, shaft imprints. The artist explained: 'I imprinted, in other words, I appropriated individual places that may seem banal in everyday environment. The streets and places where I move intensely, which are imprinted in my memory. By moving them to a different context I want to show a change in their meaning or in case of shafts, a completely imperceptible network, almost invisible to the eye but necessary for human functioning' (Martinović Kunović 2005).

Despite a considerable passage of time between Martinović Kunović's original art project and Karlovac City Museum's project, the idea behind the *Archive of Imprints* is equally fresh and relevant, easily applicable to the context of another city (of any city as a matter of fact) and scalable to museum project aiming to include a number of individuals. Also, this phenomenological approach considers the influence of a variety of senses, such as haptic and corporeal experience, not only vision, in our understanding of urban space. Haptic perception is defined as a combination of an active sense of touch and kinaesthetic perception since we explore the world through motor capabilities of our hands, fingers and bodies.

Figure 1: A blind man with his assistant making imprint of the 18th century cistern wall integrated into pavement

Figure 2: Workshop participant taking imprint of the toes of Frano Kršinić_ First Steps

According to Pallasmaa, the sensory experience should be understood as an embodied thinking (2009). Faced with an increasingly digitized and sedentary lifestyle, it was beneficial for participants to focus on haptic exploration of textures and surfaces of historic urban landscape as well as city nature, in all phases of *the Archive* making: observation, selection of motives, creation of imprints and reception.

In a series of open-air museum workshops held across the city during 2023-2025, participants of all ages (from children to seniors) and different backgrounds, some of them with disabilities, used simple and accessible clay tiles to create imprints and document various city loci that resonated with them personally. A call for participation was published on the museum's Facebook and Instagram profiles, the web page, local radio, Tv and news portals.

Workshops took place at various heritage sites in Karlovac: in the historic city centre, at Dubovac Castle (See figure 1), on an iconic pedestrian timber bridge on the River Korana erected in 1936, near the favourite bathing spots in Karlovac and a listed public city garden *Vrbanićev perivoj* featuring outdoor bronze sculptures from the second half of the twentieth century by Croatian sculptors Frane Kršinić, Ante Despot and Macedonian sculptor Tome Serafimovski (See figure 2). Every participant was given two or more raw clay tiles to use and short instructions on how to make the imprint. Participants made imprints of their own choice: mostly trees (See figure 3), floors, walls, doors, windows, different parts of urban furniture, graffiti, outdoor sculptures and anti-fascist public monuments that recently became part of contested and unwanted heritage. The freedom participants had, brought some surprises and unexpected moments such as opting for documenting scars from graffiti on the listed trees or scars of an explosion on the remnants

Figure 3: Workshop participant taking imprint of the toes of Frano Kršinić_ First Steps

of once monumental anti-fascist memorial in the city park (Vanja Radauš and Drago Ibler, *Central Monument to Fallen Partisans and Victims of the Terror of Fascism*, 1955)(See figure 4). This monument was vandalised and demolished by an explosion in the 1990s at the beginning of the Homeland War as part of the purge of unwanted heritage associated with the communist regime and state propaganda of the former Yugoslavia. Perceived as ideologically charged, sculptures were not allowed to maintain the position of physical, visual and symbolic authority in the city. However, they were not displaced and de-contextualised as in the Memento Park (Szoborpark) in Budapest (Vagnone 2024a) but removed by acts of violence. An empty backdrop wall with empty pedestals is still left as a ruin on a prominent focal point in the city - a tip of a former bastion in the park area. Once a city landmark and a great communal pride, it has become part of the contested heritage, at the same time a site of shame, a site of hate and a site of commemoration for different community members, proving that 'permanent monuments often serve less as authentic vehicles of remembrance and more as tools for controlling historic narrative' (Vagnone 20024a). (See figure 4)

Participants could also document selected motifs with photographs (but they did not opt for that) and record their personal memories and intimate reflections in writing (which was the preferred method), thus exploring how individual and institutional heritage and identity narratives may or may not overlap on different memory sites in the city. In the future oral testimonies and interviews with the participants will be added to the archive. We hope that this project will influence and facilitate the process of mediating heritage dissonance. Dissonance and plurality of interpretations are intrinsic to heritage since meaning is a social construct with culturally and politically conditioned interpretations. Within this framework Kisić introduced the concept of 'inclusive heritage discourse' in which 'dissonance is understood as a quality which unlocks and challenges the sedimentation of a single discourse and opens the space for negotiation of

meaning via diverse actions and agencies' (2016: 24). Vagnone talks of 'fluid memory' inspired by Simon Schama's view of landscape as accumulation of layers of cultural meaning over time that is not fixed but evolves as societies reinterpret their relationship with particular space (Vagnone 2024b). Re-considering the places through tangible sensation of physical features, prompted workshop participants to share their memories and emotions. 'The city and my body supplement and define each other. I dwell in the city and the city dwells in me' (Pallasmaa 2005: 40).

After the workshops, the tiles were collected and transported to the *Vjekoslav Karas* Art Gallery (part of the Karlovac Museums), air dried for a few months and then baked in the kiln of a local ceramic artist Lidija Maček. Baked tiles are permanent and can last for thousands of years. Baked tiles are organized into feature series, signed and stored in the museum in custom-made wooden archival boxes made by a local handyman Vladimir Vojak for preservation and future display. These small city fragments, symbolic and tangible at the same time, testify to our need to preserve ourselves through documenting and collecting. (Figure 5)

Figure 4: At the site of the destroyed central antifascist monument in Karlovac

Figure 5: At the site of the destroyed central antifascist monument in Karlovac

The Archive of City Imprints is (still) not a part of the official museum collections of Karlovac City Museum but a part of the documentation collection of the museum pedagogue. This is no accident. The acquisition process in the Karlovac Museum is hierarchical and traditional, governed by the acquisition committee consisting of three curators, aimed at maintaining collections based on traditional academic disciplines and 'authorized heritage discourse' (Smith, 2006). The concept of authorized heritage discourse is the dominant way of understanding and governing heritage whereas meaning of heritage is understood as a single, embedded truth waiting to be recognized and deciphered by the professional authority (Kisić, 2016: 23-24). The authorized heritage discourse favours politically desirable narratives, 'often plays a pivotal role as a reservoir for articulating identities and meanings used as arguments to justify political interests' (Kisić, 2016:27) while ignoring or censoring alternative, critical or marginalized interpretations.

Participatory approach of heritage making employed at the *Archive of City Imprints*, its democratic nature and willingness to embrace contested interpretations, brings change to the traditional heritage practice and is therefore easily seen as potentially subversive or a threat to the existing museum practices and power positions. Indeed, the first workshop of the Archive was almost cancelled despite the allocated budgeting, due to museum deputy director's last minute instructions that Karlovac City Museum has no need for such a project and can't provide technical support. The workshop, however, did take place but in the Museum's social media follow-up, the only omitted photographs among those sent to the administrators were those featuring the demolished antifascist memorial. Multiple ban attempts were experienced a year earlier related to *Raise Your Gaze* program's architectural guided walk in the historic centre of Karlovac titled *The Life and Death of Monuments in the Star* [Zvijezda]' (name of the listed conservation area of the Renaissance star-shaped fortress) which critically examined degradation and loss of architectural heritage due to maintenance neglect, failed restoration and unfortunate aspects of urban development that favours demolition of historic houses.

Another subversive aspect of the *Archive of City Imprints* is revealed in the context of the Karlovac City Museum's tacit agreement to neglect the collecting of the contemporary city for the past three decades by the museum's History Department and Cultural History Department. Reasons behind such practice are manifold as are the implications, but most of them are directly or indirectly rooted in the fear of dealing with multi-layered, often dissonant and contested interpretations of the post-conflict period, resulting in self-censorship and perpetuation a status quo within the heritage field. Kisić' general analysis of museum field practitioners in the European South East region (2016: 20) pinpoints the situation at the Karlovac City Museum

> "most did not have access or interest to embark on deeper post-modernist, constructivist or critical approaches within their field. They continued practicing their vocation perpetuating traditional processes of heritage selection, preservation and communication, without much reflection on their political position, societal ethics and engagement in issues of social justice, inclusion and pluralism. Those who do try to engage with critical theoretical,

> political or social issues within heritage practice face numerous walls – walls built by those who protect the heritage profession as traditionally practiced; walls built by mismatching the expectations of citizens who are used to boosting their identities and self-image by visiting memory institutions; walls built because of real or imagined risk of reactions by politicians and founders [...] – all of which make space for change quite limited."

In consequence, there is 'a wall' of unwillingness to accept a bottom-up alternative heritage discourse since it is seen as a deviation from the legitimized top-down way of defining, taking and collecting heritage from the point of view of the museum acquisition committee and museum staff.

Therefore, to accept and include *The Archive* within the official museum collections would require a conceptual shift in understanding heritage on behalf of the curatorial team of the Karlovac City Museum and appropriation of the inclusive heritage discourse as a new conceptual framework (Kisić, 2016: 26). Since there are no indications of such changes, the current survival strategy to preserve the Archive project is to keep it low-key, small-scale and within the conceptual and operational framework of the museum education programming which is regarded of lower status and less value, until more favourable conditions arise.

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ICOM international council of museums

CAMOC ICOM international committee for the collections and activities of museums of cities

COMCOL ICOM international committee for collecting