

Golden (C)age: A postcolonial exploration of the display of bird paintings by Melchior d'Hondecoeter in the Rijksmuseum



ABSTRACT

This thesis provides a contextual overview of prominent factors that come into play with the display of d'Hondecoeter's exotic bird paintings from their original private display in Het Loo Palace in the seventeenth century, to the public display today in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

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Introduction

In 2019, among the modern Scandinavian furniture, in the living-room furniture showroom of IKEA, I locked eyes with a pelican. Not a real pelican, nor a photographic portrayal of one, but a near photo-realistic painted pelican on a poster. As I moved closer, more birds became visible: a crane, a flamingo, a cassowary, and multiple species of waterfowl all standing near, or swimming in a pond. The poster was a reproduction of a seventeenth-century painting by Melchior d'Hondecoeter. *A Pelican and other Birds near a Pool* (c. 1680), or, as it is commonly known and referred to, *The Floating Feather*, is one of several pieces by d'Hondecoeter that is on display in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. The painting is part of the permanent exhibition of King and Stadtholder William III of Orange and his wife Queen Mary Stuart II, in the context of the flourishing arts of the seventeenth century, known as the 'Golden Age'.

When I first visited the original paintings in Room 2.22 of the Rijksmuseum in 2020, the anti-racism demonstrations after George Floyd's murder by police officers in the USA were being held in cities around the world. The demonstrations against systemic racism are an expression of resistance against current systemic racial inequality, a system which finds its roots in the colonial slave trade. The Rijksmuseum, which has over 8000 visitors a day, sets out to educate its visitors about the hey-day of the Dutch Republic, and the best painters from the 'Golden Age' in the seventeenth century. I could not help but feel uncomfortable. Here the exquisite birds were exhibited among paintings of the royal fleet, apparently with the intention to leave people with feelings of awe. Yet, while the paintings of Melchior d'Hondecoeter may be revered for their exoticness, grandeur, luxury, and artistic quality they are also inextricably linked to the shadow-side of the 'Golden Age'.

Moreover, the Museum's 'Gallery of Honour', where predominantly seventeenth-century paintings are exhibited, is filled with portraits of ordinary Dutch daily life juxtaposed with the portraits of white people of influence, who had their riches immortalized by the greatest Dutch painters, but one storyline was missing. As I walked along the gallery with the demonstrations in mind, it seemed to me that that true juxtaposition was absent for there was hardly any room in the Museum for communicating the exploitation, the invading, displacing and erasing of foreign nations. It is true that in the Asian pavilion in the basement there was an introductory label highlighting the need for reparations and research into the repatriation of possibly stolen objects from former colonies. However, while such research begins to address the problematic history of the museum's collection, it appears separate from the glorification of the Dutch Republic's colonial period that is on display in the rest of the building.¹

The present research addresses these issues of contradictory messages by focusing on a selection of bird paintings by Melchior d'Hondecoeter and what they represent in their current context of the museum.

¹ In their exhibition *Slavery* (2021), curated by Dr Valika Smeulders, Eveline Sint Nicolaas, Maria Holtrop, and Stephanie Archangel, the Rijksmuseum does tell the stories behind pieces from their collection and the subject's position in the history of the enslavement of people.

The paintings show one aspect of colonialism: the collection of rare birds from overseas colonies, and the commodification of these birds and of their representations. Furthermore, there are similarities between the portrayal and collection of these birds and perceptions of enslaved people in the seventeenth century. In the discussion that follows, the seventeenth-century power dynamics and ways of dealing with and categorising the 'other' will become apparent, as will the implications of the history of display of the paintings, from their creation specifically for the royal estates, to the Rijksmuseum's current display of them in the setting of Room 2.22, dedicated to the King-Stadholder William III of Orange and his wife Queen Mary Stuart II.

I embarked on this research because, as a birder, I was mesmerized by the lively portrayal of birds from around the world on the poster of *The Floating Feather* at IKEA. I learned, however, that the original painting is not simply an aesthetically pleasing portrayal of fancy birds: it exists in multiple interwoven contexts.

In the course of my research, I came upon the different layers of these 'exotic' bird paintings by d'Hondecoeter, from the moment they were painted, to their current display in the Rijksmuseum. What stories are behind the collection of these non-native birds? What or whom do they represent? Which choices were made by the painter, the patron, the curator and the museum, and what was and is at stake in the display of these paintings?

The corpus of paintings chosen for this research consists of three paintings that are all part of the collection of William III and Mary II on display in the Rijksmuseum: the aforementioned *The Floating Feather* (c. 1680); *The Menagerie* (c. 1690); and *The Raven Robbed of the Feathers He Wore to Adorn Himself* (1671). The paintings were all painted between 1671 and approximately 1690 when William III was patron of Melchior d'Hondecoeter.

Just as the poster of the painting was part of the interior in the showroom of Ikea to attract the middle, and upper working classes, in the seventeenth century a similar trend was all the rage among the nouveau riche and nobility. During this period, these classes often opted for an ensemble interior design.² From the wallpaper to the furniture, to the accessories, all the domestic interior was meant to fit together, including the paintings. For the richest members of society, it was possible to keep animals to be part of this ensemble of accessories, brought by ship from foreign colonies in menageries and aviaries on their estates. King William had just such a menagerie at Huis Honselaarsdijk and an aviary at Het Loo Palace. Further, the imported exotic birds were given as gifts in exchange for influence, or to establish

² Marringje Rikken, "Melchior d'Hondecoeter – Bird Painter," in *Intolerance*, eds. Willem de Rooij and Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer (Düsseldorf: Feymedia Verlagsgesellschaft, 2010), 2:17.

social relations.³ For the less well-to-do members of the elite, these exotic animals and luxury goods could be captured in paintings, and in this way displayed in the thoughtfully arranged domestic interior.

The reasoning behind focussing on these paintings is compound. First, they all share an origin as part of the Stadholder's collection of Het Loo Palace, the residence of William III and Mary Stuart II. However, for our purposes the main reason for selecting these paintings is their subject matter and the interaction between them in their current setting at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. What will come to the fore in the present research is the choice of birds, the portrayal of their demeanour, and the underlying message that their display in the Rijksmuseum conveys.

At the same time, the selection provides a particularly rich and varied sample of d'Hondecoeter's bird paintings. *The Raven Robbed of the Feathers He Wore to Adorn Himself* (fig.1) presents approximately twenty-four different species, all either native to the Netherlands or migratory birds that spend a part of the year in the Netherlands. In *The Floating Feather* (fig. 2), the birds depicted have a broader range of places of origin. Native birds and migratory birds are represented, but the attention of the viewer is predominantly drawn to the exotic birds on the left of the paintings. While there is some commotion between three birds, and a golden oriole flies overhead, the majority of the birds are calm, either focused on the viewer, or foraging. Lastly, *The Menagerie* (fig. 3) is at the other end of the spectrum. Apart from one finch, exclusively non-native species are portrayed in the scene. Two monkeys are also depicted. These monkeys and one bird hanging up-side-down, appear to be engaged in the only interaction on the canvas. The other birds look meekly towards the viewer, and two of the birds are chained at the ankle.

Arranged in this order (which reflects also the chronological order of their painting), the birds depicted in the three paintings are more and more exotic, while their demeanour is ever more timid. While *The Raven Robbed* appears to tell a rowdy story, *The Menagerie* appears as a static portrait, and *the Floating Feather* looks like a mix of the two styles. In what follows, I will explore what this means regarding their content-matter, and the mode of their display. I will ask what is at stake in the display of the bird paintings of Melchior d'Hondecoeter in the Rijksmuseum, when looking at their historical context through a postcolonial lens.

A Fresh Approach

The paintings by d'Hondecoeter have been previously discussed by a number of scholars in their art-historical context, but only to a certain extent have they been considered through a lens of religious studies and postcolonialism. The art historian Marringje Rikken is the first to write a monograph on d'Hondecoeter in which she discusses his method, patronage, the genres that he painted, and his legacy.⁴

³ Marringje Rikken, *Melchior d'Hondecoeter – Vogelschilder* (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum / Nieuw Amsterdam, 2009), 47.

⁴ Rikken, *Melchior d'Hondecoeter – Vogelschilder*.

Rikken's important monograph is also included in the three-volume work *Intolerance*, edited by Willem de Rooij,⁵ which De Rooij published in conjunction with his exhibition of the same name in the Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin in 2010-2011. The exhibition combined the bird paintings by d'Hondecoeter with Hawaiian ceremonial featherwork from the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The accompanying publication provides contextual information on d'Hondecoeter's style, the Hawaiian ceremonial clothing and statues, and gives the historical background in which both came into being. Both the published volumes and the exhibition will be discussed in this research. The former provides information that functions as a stepping stone on which this research is built, and the latter will be used as a case study to compare the current mode of display of d'Hondecoeter's paintings in the Rijksmuseum.

In many respects, the present research aims to extend and build upon the work of Willem de Rooij's *Intolerance*. While his creative approach is to highlight the historical colonial context for the visitor, through combining the works of d'Hondecoeter with Hawaiian featherwork, I use this work instead to compare and differentiate between the choices of display in the Rijksmuseum and de Rooij's exhibition.

My analysis of the paintings attempts to situate them in their historical, cultural and physical context. In particular, I draw inspiration from Rolando Vázquez's theory of 'decolonial aesthetics' articulated in his recent Mondriaan essay, *Vistas of Modernity*.⁶ In this short work, Vázquez uses postcards from the turn of the twentieth century as *Vistas*, to describe how Western aesthetics have been formed. They depict, for example, the lights of the Eiffel tower, a photo of a zoological garden, and a human zoo, and a diorama of a Neanderthal family group. The postcards function as examples of the first mass reproduction of images that work to shape and steer our perception of reality, thus creating an artificial reality. This artificial reality maintains 'colonial difference', through both reaffirming practices and ideas within modernity, and violently erasing through coloniality other worlds that fall outside of modernity, especially those of minorities.

In Vázquez' view, Western aesthetics, which he also refers to as the Western gaze or the white gaze, does not merely concern how we think about art, but should be perceived as a "domain of social life equivalent to epistemology."⁷ It is, he argues, Eurocentric, anthropocentric, and forged by two movements, namely modernity and coloniality, that perpetuate colonial difference. Modernity remains the dominant framework of perception and influences our experience of the world, with an emphasis on vision, or the gaze; by which he means "representation of the real over experience."⁸ It works through endless self-reaffirmation, and subjectification of existing Western aesthetics. One of these affirmations is the

⁵ Marringje Rikken, "Melchior d'Hondecoeter – Bird Painter," in *Intolerance 2*: 9-32.

⁶ Rolando Vázquez, *Vistas of Modernity: Decolonial Aesthetics and the End of the Contemporary* (Amsterdam: Mondriaan Fund, 2020).

⁷ Vázquez, *Vistas of Modernity*, 7.

⁸ Vázquez, *Vistas of Modernity*, 23.

designation of the contemporary: the contemporary is an artificial form of time, that is heavily demarcated by Eurocentric and white-centred standards.

The other force that maintains the colonial difference is coloniality itself, through a constant violent erasure and denial of the 'other' and other worlds. There is a double erasure at work through the historical erasure of this erasure from the 'History of Humanity'.⁹

Vázquez presses for a decolonial aesthetic that criticizes and reframes modernity, and in particular art history.¹⁰ Furthermore, he argues that "... a decolonial analysis of the modern gaze is dedicated to positioning its claim to abstraction, revealing its eurocentrism, its anthropocentrism and its contemporaneity."¹¹

Vázquez' approach is useful for the present study, because here too, the two movements of modernity and coloniality both are present in the perception and display of the exotic bird paintings. Vázquez based his account on postcards from the nineteenth and twentieth century, this research focuses on earlier visual cultures from the seventeenth century, namely the bird paintings. The tame portrayal of these birds is an example of the Western, white gaze on the colonized animal, which, it should be recalled, in the seventeenth century included the enslaved peoples that were traded and transported like livestock and kept like zoo animals. Furthermore, the comparison is strengthened if we look at the keeping and displaying of either exotic birds, or paintings thereof, as indicators of wealth and status. The same goes for black servants, and enslaved black people who were held in the Dutch Republic. They were likewise indicators of wealth and status. When portrayed in paintings, often in the background of portraits of white upper-class women, they functioned as a contrast to elevate the whiteness and wealth of the portrayed client.¹²

Another important influence for the present research is Philip Armstrong's notion of 'the postcolonial animal'.¹³ During the highpoint of the colonial trade in the seventeenth century, the Dutch Republic and other colonizing nations, came into contact with the 'other'. That 'other' came in many forms, and was manifest in different environments, wholly different from those then known to Western Europeans, with different crops, flora, and fauna. Armstrong argues, that postcolonial studies have predominantly focused on the human 'other' and its cultures, but hardly on non-human animals.¹⁴ One possible reason for this omission, he notes, is that a study centred on non-human animals could be perceived as a trivialization of the human suffering of the enslaved people. Armstrong counters this objection using Marjorie Spiegel's

⁹ Vázquez, *Vistas of Modernity*, 41.

¹⁰ Vázquez, *Vistas of Modernity*, 175.

¹¹ Vázquez, *Vistas of Modernity*, 38.

¹² Margriet Fokken and Barbara Henkes, eds., *Sporen Van Het Slavernijverleden in Groningen: Gids Voor Stad En Ommeland* (Groningen: Uitgeverij Passage, 2016), 24.

¹³ Philip Armstrong, "The Postcolonial Animal," in *Society & Animals* 10, no. 4 (2002).

¹⁴ Armstrong, "The Postcolonial Animal," 413.

argument that the idea of an absolute difference between humans and animals is itself rooted in the colonial legacy of European modernity, which trumped possible indigenous beliefs that lacked a hard division between humans and non-human animals.¹⁵ Armstrong does emphasize that in animal studies, we should respect animals just as much for their differences from us, as their similarities, and that their existence should be respected in and for itself, an important caveat that will be maintained in the present research. However, a foundational assumption of the present study is that the treatment of animals during the colonial period can be seen as an analogy for the treatment of colonized and enslaved peoples, not because the animals were treated worse than people, but because the colonized and enslaved peoples were not perceived as human.

Overview of the study

The first chapter of the present study provides a short biography of d'Hondecoeter and a sketch of the historical context of the paintings. This section will necessarily focus on some key aspects of importance for the ensuing study: the development of the artist's career, his finding his niche market of bird paintings, and the patronage of King-Stadtholder William III of Orange and Queen Mary Stuart II. This will help us to construct a picture of how the art market in the seventeenth century was embedded in and related to the colonial trade and exploitation.

The second chapter focuses on the selected paintings within the Rijksmuseum's collection. Here I will analyse the iconographic meaning of the subject-matter and the themes of the works, as well as the relationships between the paintings. This analysis will loosely follow Roelof van Straten's method of iconographic analysis as described in his book *An Introduction to Iconography* and developed from the classic iconographic method of Erwin Panofsky.¹⁶

In the third chapter, the display context of the paintings will be discussed. This section consists of four subsections that follow four display contexts of the works. The first context we shall consider is their original context of the estates of William III and Mary Stuart II. With a brief explanation of the birth of the modern museum, the second context consists of their display in the predecessor of the Rijksmuseum, namely the *Nationale Konst-Gallery*, and lastly in their current setting at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

The concluding fourth chapter consists of a short review of the discussed modes of display in each setting, and an exploratory consideration of the implications of the commercialisation of the works of Melchior d'Hondecoeter in the museum shop of the Rijksmuseum. Furthermore, there will be a brief discussion of other exhibitions of d'Hondecoeter's work to contrast the manners of display and the gaze, namely the

¹⁵ Armstrong, "The Postcolonial Animal," 413.

¹⁶ Roelof van Straten, *An Introduction to Iconography*, translated by Patricia de Man (Yverdon: Gordon and Breach, 1994); cf. Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Icon Editions, 1972).

paintings' place in the *Intolerance* exhibition in the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, and the exhibition in Sypsteyn Castle Museum in Loosdrecht.

Chapter 1. Melchior d'Hondecoeter, Patrons and Paintings

To establish how Melchior d'Hondecoeter came to paint exotic birds under the patronage of William III and Mary Stuart II, it is first necessary to provide a short sketch of the artist's life, and a picture of the art market in the Netherlands in the latter half of the seventeenth century.

Melchior d'Hondecoeter was born in Utrecht in 1636. He came from a family of painters. His great-grandfather Niclaes Jansz. d'Hondecoeter (born in Mechelen, Southern Netherlands), was a painter, though none of his paintings survived.¹⁷ Grandfather Gillis Claesz. was known for his Flemish style landscape paintings that included animals in an inconspicuous manner,¹⁸ being inspired by Roelant Savery, another well-known painter of birds, and David Vinckboons, who were his contemporaries.¹⁹ Melchior's father Gijsbert Gillisz., Melchior's mentor, was already specializing in the depiction of birds,²⁰ mostly painting waterfowl and poultry yards, but also painting allegories in which non-native birds such as cranes and parrots were depicted.²¹

When his father died in 1653, Melchior came to study under his uncle Jan Baptist Weenix, who was married to his aunt Justina.²² Weenix taught him how to paint characteristically Italianizing landscapes. These landscapes came to function as the backdrop to most of d'Hondecoeter's later paintings of exotic birds. D'Hondecoeter's relatives clearly influenced the development of his interest in the niche genre of exotic bird paintings, but it was his talent in capturing the anatomy and lively motion of birds that made his work stand out.

D'Hondecoeter painted in five distinguishable genres: poultry yards, game still-lives, bird concerts, balustrade paintings, and exotic bird paintings. These genres overlap in certain pieces: alive and dead birds can occur in the same paintings, poultry in the same frame as exotic birds such as peacocks, and exotic birds that pose on balustrades.

D'Hondecoeter already had access to the rarer species of birds through his family, but also had other means to observe the domestic and exotic animals. In Amsterdam, at the public menagerie Blauw Jan, behind the inn of Jan Westerhoff on the Kloveniersbrugwal, he had the opportunity to observe birds from other continents, such as the pelican that is present in six of his paintings, including *The Floating Feather*

¹⁷ "Niclaes Jansz d'Hondecoeter," RKD, accessed on July 27, 2022, <https://rkd.nl/nl/explore/artists/record?query=Niclaes+Jansz+d%27hondecoeter&start=0>.

¹⁸ "Rocky Landscape with Deer and Goats, Gillis Claesz d'Hondecoeter, 1620," The Rijksmuseum, accessed on July 27, 2022, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/SK-A-1740>.

¹⁹ Arnold Houbraken, *De Groote Schouwburgh der Nederlantsche Konstschilders en Schilderessen: Deel III*, ed. P.T.A. Swillens (Maastricht: Leiter-Nypels n.v., 1943), 54.

²⁰ Arnold Houbraken, *De Groote Schouwburgh*, 55.

²¹ Marringje Rikken, *Melchior d'Hondecoeter – Vogelschilder* (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum / Nieuw Amsterdam Uitgevers, 2009), 8.

²² Rikken, *D'Hondecoeter – Vogelschilder*, 11.

(c. 1680).²³ The menagerie was open to everyone who could afford the admission of four stuivers, but there were also prominent visitors such as Tsar Peter the Great.²⁴ The inventory of Westerhoff's possessions that was taken upon his wife's death showed that there was a painting present by d'Hondecoeter with a pelican on it. It is unknown if this is one of the six that is preserved until this day.

It is unknown how William III of Orange and his spouse Mary Stuart II first became aware of d'Hondecoeter's work. This might have happened through an intermediary like a guild or art dealer, which was not uncommon at the time.²⁵ Nor is it known how exactly d'Hondecoeter came to work for William and Mary, though his increasing popularity in higher social circles may be presumed to have influenced the selection by the royal patron. It is known, however, that the House of Orange rarely commissioned art from Dutch painters.²⁶ Nonetheless, both William and Mary had a love of birds, and kept multiple menageries and aviaries at their estates.²⁷ At Het Loo palace, for example, there was an aviary complete with a shell cave in the queen's Garden.²⁸ Furthermore, in her private cash book, which Mary kept between 1678 and 1689, are preserved notes for multiple purchases of birds, such as *Virginia nightingalls*.²⁹ These birds are now known as Northern cardinals, and a pair of them are also depicted in d'Hondecoeter's *The Menagerie* (c. 1692). The Stadtholder's patronage gave d'Hondecoeter access to the wide range of animals held at these menageries and aviaries, which are the main subject of the paintings that he made for William III and Mary Stuart II for their estates Het Loo, Soestdijk, and Honselaarsdijk. It is also likely that later in his career, he acquired his own aviary, for it is known that he owned an allotment outside the city.³⁰

Of course, the artistic legacy of his family is important, but to understand how Melchior d'Hondecoeter found his niche within the art market, we must also bear in mind the societal and economic context which characterized the seventeenth century. The rejection of the use of visual images to adorn church interiors in Dutch Reformed Christianity in the sixteenth century entailed the loss of an important patron for visual artists, namely the church.³¹ There was a shift towards sobriety in visual culture, that stressed a focus on the written Scriptures, and tended to eschew the visual representation of biblical and saints' lives narratives in painting, which had been a significant aspect of Catholic visual culture. The decline of commissions from the church forced artists to find clients elsewhere.

²³ Rikken, *Melchior d'Hondecoeter – Vogelschilder*, 49.

²⁴ Rikken, *Melchior d'Hondecoeter – Vogelschilder*, 49.

²⁵ Jan Six jr., "De Prijs van Kunst," interview by Hans Goedkoop, *De Gouden Eeuw*, VPRO NTR, February 9, 2013, video, 8:24-9:40, https://www.npostart.nl/de-gouden-eeuw/05-02-2013/NPS_1210662.

²⁶ Michael North, *Art and Commerce in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997), 82.

²⁷ Rikken, *Melchior d'Hondecoeter – Vogelschilder*, 48.

²⁸ Rikken, *Melchior d'Hondecoeter – Vogelschilder*, 48.

²⁹ Rikken, *Melchior d'Hondecoeter – Vogelschilder*, 48.

³⁰ Rikken, *Melchior d'Hondecoeter – Vogelschilder*, 46.

³¹ Six jr., "De Prijs van Kunst," 8:24-9:40.

Likewise, the subjects of the paintings shifted from predominantly religious themes and narratives, to the more mundane in the shape of landscapes and portraits.³² Artists of such works painted generally for an anonymous market, but portrait painters predominantly depended on commissions.³³

In the second half of the seventeenth century, after the Eighty Years War, the Dutch economy grew rapidly.³⁴ As Defoe noted, the Dutch Republic held the position of "... the middle person of Trade, the Factors and Brokers of Europe."³⁵ There was a growing class of burghers who became rich through the ranks of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the Dutch West India Company (WIC).

In this context, social standing was shown in a subtle manner through clothing, means of transportation, and property.³⁶ The furnishing and decorations of the home, including paintings, were signs of prosperity and class.³⁷ The physical dimensions of d'Hondecoeter's paintings suggest that such domestic displays of social standing were less inconspicuous than public displays.

As De Rooij notes in *Intolerance*, d'Hondecoeter's patrons were members of this new elite, and many had stakes in the VOC and the WIC.³⁸ Furthermore, it was the ships of the VOC and WIC that brought all these exotic animals to the Dutch Republic and other European nations.³⁹ In d'Hondecoeter's paintings the exoticness of the birds enables them to function as status symbols, mirroring the increasingly rich clients and their status, as well as their links to the exploitative and extractive colonial companies the VOC and WIC which brought wealth to prominent members of the elite of the Republic.

Regarding d'Hondecoeter's non-royal patrons, it is likewise unknown exactly how they became familiar with the artist's work. It may be inferred from the role the VOC and WIC members had in transporting the birds to the Dutch Republic, that they may have wanted them to be portrayed in their homes; how precisely such patrons came to know of d'Hondecoeter's oeuvre, however, is yet to be documented.

We have thus established a societal and historical context in which the paintings were created. It has become apparent that the colonial trade of the VOC and WIC is inextricably linked not only to d'Hondecoeter's access to birds to depict birds from life, but also to the rise in the market for exotic bird paintings. D'Hondecoeter moved in higher social circles due to the popularity of the subject-matter of the

³² Six jr., "De Prijs van Kunst," 8:24-9:40.

³³ North, *Art and Commerce*, 82.

³⁴ North, *Art and Commerce*, 1.

³⁵ North, *Art and Commerce*, 19.

³⁶ North, *Art and Commerce*, 57.

³⁷ North, *Art and Commerce*, 57.

³⁸ Willem de Rooij and Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer, eds., "Intolerance," in *Intolerance* (Düsseldorf: Feymedia Verlagsgesellschaft, 2010), 1:60.

³⁹ De Rooij, "Intolerance," 1:60.

paintings, which is what we will look at in the next chapter, that focuses on the iconographical interpretation of the selected works.

Chapter 2. Iconographical interpretation of the paintings

This thesis argues that there is a dialogue between the iconography of the paintings at the heart of this study and their different interpretations in the setting of Room 2.22 in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. To establish this relationship, however, it is first necessary to undertake a careful iconographical description and interpretation of the individual paintings.

In my analysis, I will loosely use Roelof van Straten's iconographic method in order to describe plausible meanings in the iconography of the works intended by the artist.⁴⁰ Van Straten's method is based on Erwin Panofsky's influential approach of iconography and iconology.⁴¹ The method is fourfold, and overlaps with Panofsky's ideas in the first three steps, namely the pre-iconographical description, iconographical description, and iconographical interpretation. The first phase entails the basic description of the painting at face value, leaving out any interpretation or suggestion of categories. The iconographical description entails a more detailed description of the subject-matter and links together the loose elements determined in the first phase, identifying their visual and textual sources. The iconographical interpretation looks at what these combined elements could mean symbolically and morally. In distinguishing iconographic interpretation (the art-historical analysis) from the cultural and socio-historical analysis, for which he uses the term 'iconology', Van Straten refines and clarifies Panofsky's third phase.⁴² This last interpretation will be discussed in the next chapter of this research.

After providing a thorough description of the paintings, this chapter concludes with a comparison of the works, and the dialogue that forms out of their contrasting subject-matters. As noted in the introduction, what binds these paintings together is their shared origin of being made to order around the same time, for the estates of William III and Mary Stuart II. This context is imitated in the present Rijksmuseum exhibition context, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

⁴⁰ Roelof van Straten, *An Introduction to Iconography*, translated by Patricia de Man (Yverdon: Gordon and Breach, 1994).

⁴¹ Van Straten, *An Introduction to Iconography*, 17.

⁴² Van Straten, *An Introduction to Iconography*, 3-4, 17-18.

2.1 *The Raven Robbed of the Feathers he Wore to Adorn Himself* (1677)

*Oil on canvas, h 189cm x w 176 cm. Het Mauritshuis, The Hague. Object number: 59. Transferred to the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam in 2018, currently not on display (Object number:SK-C-1792).*⁴³

In this painting (fig. 1) we see a myriad of birds in nature. The background consists of a pink and blue sky, with some cloud formations. There are sloping hills and trees on the right-hand side in the background. On the left in the midground the trunks of trees are visible one of whose branches extends across the top of the image, in front of the sky. In front of the trees, there is a stone structure with a vaguely distinguishable image of a winged creature sculptured on it. On top of the structure are three birds. On the ground are twelve birds. In the middle of this group in the foreground two birds are depicted fighting; one lies on its back on the ground with its wings spread out and with loose feathers on its head. The other, more colourful bird, a rooster, is depicted jumping up and plucking a feather from the head of the prone black bird. To the right of the black bird, two birds walk away with wings spread and a feather in their beaks. Scattered on the ground are various, differently shaped feathers.

The painting, known as *The Raven Robbed of the Feathers He Wore to Adorn Himself* is filled with predominantly birds that are domestic to the Netherlands and migratory birds, and a peacock, that surround the fight between a rooster and a raven. The colours appear to be slightly dull, which may be due to a varnish that has faded the richness of the paint.⁴⁴ In the top half of the painting from left to right, the following birds can be identified: an Indian peacock (no. 1) – the only non-native bird present; in the tree, a redwing (no. 2), a young European goldfinch (no. 3), a common chaffinch (no. 4), a female Eurasian sparrowhawk (no. 5), a twite (no. 6), two barn swallows (no. 7), and a great tit (no. 8) hanging from the twig on which they perch.⁴⁵ At the centre-right of the painting a common pigeon (no. 9) flies into frame, towards a grey heron (no. 10). Further left, behind the heron is depicted a blue tit (no. 12), and to the left of the peacock is what may possibly be identified as a European golden plover (no. 13). In the foreground there are depicted a greylag goose (no. 14), a Eurasian bittern (no. 15), a mallard duck (no. 16), and a Eurasian jay (no. 17). Underneath the ornamental cockerel (no. 18) appear an unidentifiable little brown bird (no. 19) and a great grey shrike (no. 20), as well as the titular raven (no. 21). Lastly, there are a black-

⁴³ “Melchior d’Hondecoster – The Raven Robbed of the Feathers He Wore to Adorn Himself,” Het Mauritshuis, accessed on January 6, 2022, <https://www.mauritshuis.nl/en/our-collection/artworks/59-the-raven-robbed-of-the-feathers-he-wore-to-adorn-himself/>.

⁴⁴ The painting *Landscape with exotic animals* by d’Hondecoster was recently restored and a layer of varnish was removed, which laid bare the much brighter colours underneath. The original colour scheme looks similar to that of *The Raven robbed*. Hanna Klarenbeek, “Restauratie Uitheemse Dieren,” Paleis Het Loo, accessed on July 22, 2021, <https://www.paleishetloo.nl/blog/schilderij-inheemse-dieren/>.

⁴⁵ All birds were identified with the help of Marco Glastra and Petra van der Meer from the foundation Het Groninger Landschap.

tailed godwit (no. 22), a Northern lapwing (no. 23), a grey partridge (no. 24), and a Bohemian waxwing (no. 25) in the bottom-right corner.

As its title suggests, the painting portrays a fable. This is an Aesopian fable of which there are several versions *The Bird in Borrowed Feathers*, *The Vain Jackdaw*, or *The Jackdaw and the Peacocks*. The titular bird in this painting is a raven, but there are multiple versions through the ages that have other members of the Corvidae family as the main character, such as a crow, jackdaw, or magpie. In the version ascribed to Aesop the main character is a jackdaw.⁴⁶ One version of the fable goes as follows: a proud jackdaw comes across some peacock feathers, which he puts in between his own coat. He then tries to join the peacocks, all the while mocking his own kind, the jackdaws. However, the peacocks reject him and take their feathers back. With hurt pride, the jackdaw returns to his own flock, only to find them casting him out as well for mocking them.⁴⁷

In its essence, a fable is a moral rule portrayed by, predominantly, animal actors to portray human behaviour. In *The Raven Robbed*, the importance of humility is portrayed, with the raven representing arrogance and ambition. Moreover, the consequences of pride, vanity, arrogance and self-importance are portrayed by the raven being plucked of its stolen feathers by those from whom he stole. The moral of the fable, here, is to not try and boast or pretend with other people's things and way of life: stick to your own and those who are like you accept you.

Lisanne Wepler has observed that several contemporary sources outside of the visual arts might have inspired d'Hondecoeter to portray this fable. In the graphic arts, Marcus Gheeraerts produced the fable as an engraving in 1567, and in literature it was retold by Dutch poet, writer and playwright Joost van den Vondel in his work *Vorstelijke Warande der Dieren* (1617), which reused Gheeraerts' etchings.⁴⁸ Wepler describes the fable as a portrayal of the contemporary moral of humility.⁴⁹ By using an existing story and multiple varying sources of said story as inspiration for the painting, d'Hondecoeter is himself, as Wepler notes, also 'borrowing feathers'.⁵⁰ This makes the whole ordeal somewhat ironic, but whether this was intentionally self-satirical or accidental is not known.

Another fabled animal can be found engraved on the tomb-like stone structure in the painting, possibly a griffin. This would fit with the theme of *The Bird in Borrowed Feathers* in the painting, as the griffin is a mythical animal loaded with symbolism.

⁴⁶ Aesop, *Aesop's Fables*, translated by Laura Gibbs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 156.

⁴⁷ Aesop, *Aesop's Fables*, 156.

⁴⁸ Lisanne Wepler, "Fabulous Birds – Melchior d'Hondecoeter as Storyteller," in *Intolerance*, eds. Willem de Rooij and Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer (Düsseldorf: Feymedia Verlagsgesellschaft, 2010), 2:39.

⁴⁹ Wepler, "Fabulous Birds," 43.

⁵⁰ Wepler, "Fabulous Birds," 45.

In his *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder (c. 23-79 CE), drawing on Greek sources, including Herodotus, describes the griffin as a winged monster that digs up gold. *Natural History* 7.2 reads:

In the vicinity also of those who dwell in the northern regions, and not far from the spot from which the north wind arises, and the place which is called its cave, and is known by the name of Geskleithron, the Arimaspi are said to exist, whom I have previously mentioned, a nation remarkable for having but one eye, and that placed in the middle of the forehead. This race is said to carry on a perpetual warfare with the Griffins, a kind of monster, with wings, as they are commonly represented, for the gold which they dig out of the mines, and which these wild beasts retain and keep watch over with a singular degree of cupidity, while the Arimaspi are equally desirous to get possession of it. Many authors have stated to this effect, among the most illustrious of whom are Herodotus and Aristeas of Proconnesus.⁵¹

The griffin is associated here with cupidity and covetousness of others.⁵² To put it in other words, Pliny's image of the griffin implies them taking, and vigorously protecting, precious wares from others who are not the rightful owners either. With this iconographic interpretation of the griffin, the inclusion of the griffin in this painting by d'Hondecoeter accentuates the conniving actions of the titular raven of the fable.

Another interpretation of the griffin is by Dante Alighieri, who wrote the poem *Divine Comedy* (c. 1321). In this work, which is a description of the afterlife, a griffin appears in *Purgatorio*, the second part of the poem. The griffin is described as pulling a chariot which holds Dante and Beatrice, who is his guide to the third instalment, *Paradiso*. *Purgatorio* 32.43-44 reads:

'Blessed are you, gryphon, who tears not with your beak this tree so sweet to taste, since the belly is ill twisted by it.' Thus around the massive tree the others shouted, and the double animal:
'Thus is conserved the seed of all righteousness.'⁵³

The tree that is mentioned here is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil of which Adam and Eve ate its fruit.⁵⁴ Thus, the griffin is praised for resisting temptation. This scene occurs on the sixth terrace of purgatory, which is the level of the sin 'gluttony'. The corresponding virtue to gluttony is temperance.

⁵¹ Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History of Pliny*, trans. John Bostock and H. T. Riley (London: H. G. Bohn, 1855), 123. Accessed on June 6, 2023, <https://archive.org/details/cu31924001572076/page/122/mode/2up>.

⁵² Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History of Pliny*, 61.

⁵³ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Robert M. Durling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 551 (*Purgatorio* 32.43-44).

⁵⁴ "Apocalypse Now," Digital Dante, accessed on January 6, 2023, <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/purgatorio/purgatorio-32/>.

Temperance is also the virtue and moral lesson of the fable of *The Bird in Borrowed Feathers*. The portrayal of the griffin in the painting could then be seen as supporting the lesson of this fable.

The Bird in Borrowed Feathers is the most portrayed fable by d'Hondecoeter: there are three other paintings known which represent the same fable.⁵⁵ The choice of portrayal of this fable, as well as its popularity, may be explained by the Dutch Republic's religious climate in the seventeenth century. As we noted above, after the Eighty Years War (1568-1648) with Spain, Reformed Protestantism was the dominant religion in the Dutch Republic. For the arts this meant fewer commissions for biblical and narrative portrayals and there was less room for ornamental and demonstrations of religiosity. In their place a greater emphasis was placed on righteous behaviour, and on modestly following the written word. This shift to reserved behaviour leans on following the moral principles: ostentation was to be avoided and associated with covetousness and falseness, demonstration of humility – acceptance of one's status as it is, without dressing up in 'borrowed feathers' was promoted as a societal and religious critique.

2.2 *A Pelican and Other Birds near a Pool, or The Floating Feather* (c. 1680)

Oil on canvas, h 159cm x w 144cm. The Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Object number: SK-A-175.⁵⁶

The Floating Feather (fig. 2) is divisible into four squares. Starting at the top-right and moving clockwise we first see a clouded sky with some sunlight and flying birds. The bottom-right square has a collection of different species of trees in the background. In front of the trees, birds gather next to a body of water, and a stone structure on which rests a vase-like vessel in front of which are depicted a long-necked bird with pink plumage, and a tall bird with grey and red feathers. In the foreground multiple birds are depicted in and next to a pond: some are sitting, others are standing or swimming. The bottom-left quarter is predominantly filled with a large pinkish and yellow bird that is looking over its shoulder. This bird is standing on soil with some vegetation around its feet. Behind it are depicted some birds swimming in the water. Extending from the bottom to the top-left are depicted three long-necked birds: one with a blueish and red neck, a bird with pink plumage, similar to the one in the background, and a black bird with a red cheek and a yellow adornment on its head. Above the three birds, there is a yellow and black bird in front of some green and yellow trees. All birds on the ground have their wings folded against their bodies. Among them on the ground and in the water, feathers are scattered. *A Pelican and other Birds near a Pool*

⁵⁵ Lisanne Wepler, "Fabulous Birds: Melchior d'Hondecoeter as Storyteller," 41; The other three works are: *The Crow Exposed*, at the museum of Fine Arts, Houston, *Stripped of Borrowed Feathers: The Raven-Jackdaw*, at the August Heckscher Collection, New York, and *Birds*, at the Historisch Museum, Arnhem. There might have been a fifth, named *Fable of the Raven*, which is only known by its reproduction as a steel engraving and part of a private collection.

⁵⁶ "A Pelican and other Birds near a Pool, known as 'The Floating Feather', Melchior d'Hondecoeter, c. 1680," The Rijksmuseum, accessed on January 6, 2022, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.8740>.

is unofficially called *The Floating Feather* for the accuracy of the artist's depiction of a little feather in the basin, d'Hondecoeter's trademark.

Let us attempt to identify the birds of the painting. The focus of the painting lies on the great white pelican (no. 5) that is looking at the viewer over its shoulder in the bottom-left corner of the image. Among the trees, a golden oriole (no. 1) flies by, and a blue heron can be spotted in the far distance, flying in front of the darker clouds. On the bank from left to right, a Southern cassowary (no. 2) looks in the direction of the viewer. Below him, a pintail (no. 8) lies on the ground. Left and right of the pelican are a flamingo (no. 3) and a Sudanese black crowned crane (no. 4). In the distance, there is another flamingo, as well as a sarus crane (no. 6), which is native to the Indian peninsula. A smew (no. 9) is resting, while an Egyptian goose (no. 7) stands in the foreground, with to its right, a brant goose (no. 10). In the foreground, in addition to the Muscovy duck (no.16) on the far right, which is endemic to the Americas, there are various waterfowl native to the Netherlands. From left to right there are shown: Eurasian teal (no. 11), a common merganser (no. 12), a red-breasted goose (no. 13), an Eurasian wigeon (no. 14), a common shelduck (no. 15).

Apart from the cassowary, all the birds are waterfowl, recognisable by the shape of their beaks, their webbed toes, and/or their long legs, which are adapted to wade through marshes. With the exception of the flamingos (which may represent two distinct subspecies), only one bird of each species is depicted. These are predominantly the male birds, presumably chosen because they have the most colourful plumage. Once again, the cassowary is the exception to this rule: in this instance, the male bird has slightly duller colours than the female, and a smaller casque on the head than that found on female specimens. It may be no female cassowary was available for the artist to sketch, but the female birds also tend to be highly aggressive, even unprovoked, so it could be that, were a female cassowary present, it would not have been a very safe environment for d'Hondecoeter to prepare preparatory drawings. Moreover, the male is still a colourful and remarkable bird, suitable for a vivid picture.

The birds of *The Floating Feather* are a mixture of native, non-native and migratory birds. However, the extent to which they were common in the seventeenth century, is hard to gauge with certainty. For example, the Egyptian goose is considered as an introduced species, which was originally kept as an ornamental bird. While today, it is commonly found in the Netherlands in the wild and in parks, this has only been the case since the 1960s.⁵⁷ In 1614, the first cassowary was brought from Asia to Europe and given to Prince Maurits.⁵⁸ The cassowary is exceptional on its own, but it was the overall variety and rarity of the birds in menageries that increased the status of their owners.⁵⁹ Despite the difficulty in identifying

⁵⁷ "Nijlgans," Vogelbescherming Nederland, accessed on May 21, 2022,

<https://www.vogelbescherming.nl/ontdek-vogels/kennis-over-vogels/vogelgids/vogel/nijlgans>.

⁵⁸ Marringje Rikken, "Melchior d'Hondecoeter – Bird Painter," in *Intolerance* eds. Willem de Rooij and Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer (Düsseldorf: Feymedia Verlagsgesellschaft, 2010), 2:23.

⁵⁹ Rikken, "Melchior d'Hondecoeter – Bird Painter," 2:23.

the status of all these bird, one can assume with some certainty that the cranes, flamingos, cassowary and pelican were deemed at least as exotic in the seventeenth century as they are today.

Though at first glance the painting seems devoid of symbolism, the work is, of course, not just a mere portrayal of the skills of the artist. The main subject of the painting, namely the pelican, is known for occupying a particular position in Christian symbolism. The pelican has long been compared to Jesus Christ, on account of an influential medieval tradition, deriving in part from a passage in the early seventh century encyclopaedia known as the *Etymologies*, by Isidore of Seville (*Etymologiae* 12.7.26) that suggested that the pelican kills its own offspring, but then revives them after three days, by allowing them to feed on its own blood by tearing a hole in its chest.⁶⁰ This early medieval interpretation, which had wide influence on medieval bestiaries and Christian iconography more generally, may be explained as a misinterpretation of the observation of the bird feeding its chicks from a pouch in its throat. It should be noted, however, that the pelican in d'Hondecoeter's painting is not portrayed in this typical manner with a tear in its breast, known as the 'Pelican in its Piety', nor with hungry young surrounding her. This does not necessarily exclude the possibility that the depiction of the pelican had a symbolic meaning. The iconography of the pelican was certainly widespread, and this combined with the rarity of the bird itself, may have called forth intended or unintended traditional associations.

Certainly, the pelican was a popular subject in d'Hondecoeter's paintings. There are six other paintings by the artist employing exactly the same pelican, always in the identical position looking over its shoulder to the observer. This indicates both that d'Hondecoeter made use of stencils, and also that the pelican held a certain popularity both with the artist himself, and with his patrons.⁶¹

2.3 *The Menagerie* (c. 1690)

Oil on canvas, h 135cm x w 116.5cm. The Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Object number: SK-A-173.⁶²

I will analyse this painting (fig. 3) in a different manner than the previous two, due to the importance of the symbolism of the individual subjects; the exotic birds and monkeys. This is hardly an arbitrary collection of animals. What makes the image stand out is that, apart from the Eurasian bullfinch on the branch at the top-right (no. 1), the accumulation of diverse animals consists solely of non-native species. What becomes apparent when looking at the natural habitat of the birds that the artist has chosen, is that they predominantly originate from the colonies that were part of the Dutch Empire. As the painting is estimated to be made around 1690, it is worth looking at the situation of the colonies in the years before this, during the reign of William III from 1672 onwards. I will go about the analysis as follows; every

⁶⁰ Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, and Oliver Berghof, eds., "Animals (De Animalibus)," in *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 265.

⁶¹ Rikken, "Melchior d'Hondecoeter – Bird Painter," 2:129-139.

⁶² "The Menagerie, Melchior d'Hondecoeter, c. 1690," The Rijksmuseum, accessed on January 6, 2022, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.8744>.

portrayed bird will be treated individually, together with their place of origin and how this relates to the relevant Dutch colonial history. Only then will I propose an interpretation of the symbolism of the painting as a whole.

The Menagerie portrays an outdoor scene. It has thirteen birds in the foreground, all with brightly coloured feathers, wings folded against their body, and two small monkeys on the right on a rug. The backdrop appears to be either a cloudy sunset or a sunrise. In the sky, in front of the clouds in the background are a couple of silhouettes of birds in black and white. There is a tree which has autumnal coloured leaves, and appears to miss some leaves already at the ends of the branches. Six of the birds are sitting on the branches of a tree on the right-hand side in the midground. The bird highest in the tree (no. 1) has a pink throat and belly, white feathers underneath its tail, and on top is black from nape to tail. As noted above, this is the Eurasian bullfinch. This bird is found, as its name gives away, almost over the whole of Europe, and in those parts of Asia with a temperate climate. This bird could then be interpreted as symbolizing this part of the world; Europe, above all the other representations in the top of the tree.

Below the bullfinch in the top-right corner are two red-beaked, tufted birds (no. 2), one more brownish around the face and belly. This is a pair (male and female) of northern cardinals, which are native to what we now know as Canada, and the North and East of the United States. The WIC was present here from 1614 onwards, with the establishment of the colony Fort Amsterdam in 1625.⁶³ When William III came to power in 1672, New Amsterdam as it was then known, was no longer part of the Dutch colonies. In 1667 during the Treaty of Breda which ended the Second Anglo-Dutch war it was traded with the English for Surinam.⁶⁴ However, Cornelis Evertsen the Youngest reconquered it for the Republic in 1673, before its definitive return into the hands of the English at the Treaty of Westminster in the following year.⁶⁵ From 1689, with the coronation of William and Mary as joint monarchs of England, this part of the world became part of their empire again. Together with the fact noted above that Mary appears to have been a fan of these birds, their native habit in the former-and-once-again North-American colony could explain their presence on the painting.

On a branch to the left of the cardinals is a multi-coloured bird (no. 3) with a blue crown, orange cheeks, a red breast, and a green body. This is an ornate lorikeet (no. 3). It is endemic to Sulawesi, which was formerly known as Celebes, when under Dutch rule from 1660.⁶⁶ The Dutch used this island mainly as an

⁶³ H. T. Colenbrander, *Koloniale Geschiedenis* vol. 1 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1925), 42.

⁶⁴ J. van Goor, *De Nederlandse Koloniën: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Expansie 1600-1975* (The Hague: Sdu Uitgevers, 1997), 65.

⁶⁵ Colenbrander, *Koloniale Geschiedenis*, 42.

⁶⁶ John Crawford, "Celebes," in *A Descriptive Dictionary of the Indian Islands and Adjacent Countries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 91.

enroute port, and had taken it from the Portuguese principally to improve their shipping routes, as the island itself and its peoples were not deemed very profitable.⁶⁷

On the lower hanging branch are two similar-looking birds (no.4) of which one is hanging upside-down, with predominantly green bodies, red tail feathers and a blue crown. These two are blue-crowned lorikeets, endemic to central Polynesia. These birds were furthest from home in the menageries in the Dutch republic, and so were the Dutch seafarers who came to these parts of the world. The first Dutch explorers of Polynesia were Abel Tasman and his crew, who arrived at the Tonga Islands and Fiji archipelago in 1643.⁶⁸

The monkeys in the foreground (no. 5) at the right have light-brown and white fur, long tails, and bare faces. They are sitting on a red rug, which has a colourful floral pattern, and tassels at the bottom. The rug is draped over a low stone wall. These are two squirrel monkeys, which are the most common species of monkeys from Latin America. This continent is only represented by the monkeys, not by birds. A possible explanation for this choice of subject might be the fact that after the Second and Third English War, the WIC was struggling and in dire condition.⁶⁹ We have noted, the Dutch had traded New Amsterdam for Surinam, but William III had no interest in expanding the territory in Surinam during his time as Stadtholder.⁷⁰

At the bottom of the frame there is a white marble ledge, which appears to be the top rail of a balustrade.⁷¹ On this ledge perch three birds. A pair toward the right of the frame (no.6) are identical in colour and size: they each have a white head and breast, a yellow belly, and dark green wings. These are two male grey-headed lovebirds (no. 6), which are endemic to Madagascar. It is unknown why two male lovebirds are portrayed. It is unusual when considered in historical context, because the purpose of the menageries was, aside from the aesthetic value and display of wealth, to breed and multiply the species. However, the choice could have been made for aesthetic purposes, as two male specimens were perhaps more appealing than one, or more appealing than a male and female set.

The bird depicted to the left (no.7) is more than double the size of the lovebirds. Its plumage is predominantly red, though it has dark green wings and a blue forehead. It bears a gold-coloured chain on its foot. This is a purple-naped lory, which is endemic to the Maluku Islands in Indonesia. This region was interesting for Dutch trade because of the presence of nutmeg, mace, and cloves.⁷²

⁶⁷ Crawford, "Celebes," 91-92.

⁶⁸ Colenbrander, *Koloniale Geschiedenis*, 155.

⁶⁹ Van Goor, *De Nederlandse Koloniën*, 65.

⁷⁰ Gert Oostindie, *De Parels en de Kroon: Het Koningshuis en de Koloniën* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 18.

⁷¹ The ledge itself also holds some significance. The marble used for the ledge is not naturally found in the Dutch region, and it is close in appearance to white Carrara marble, which is quarried around Carrara, Italy. It is a luxurious type of rock used for buildings, monuments and statues and to this day exported around the world.

⁷² Van Goor, *De Nederlandse Koloniën*, 54.

Behind and above the larger red bird in the foreground, to the right of the vase, is a green bird with long tailfeathers and a red beak (no.8) is perched on the balustrade: this is an Alexandrine parakeet. This bird is native to the Kashmir/Punjab region, but was already held as an ornamental bird in cages during the time of Alexander the Great (356 BC – 323 BC), who distributed the bird across Europe, if the stories about the origin of its name are to be believed.⁷³

On the higher stone wall, a large stone vase is positioned with two handles, decorated with reliefs and a signature at the base. The decoration is symmetrical, with on the bottom half two mirrored fish-like figures, between which a scallop shell is positioned. At the base of the vase is a large white bird with a light-yellow crest, and slightly yellow cheeks (no. 9). This is a yellow-crested cockatoo, which is endemic to Indonesia, mainly Sulawesi, just like the ornate lorikeet (no. 3). Perched on top of the vase is a very similar bird (no.10) with its yellow crest fanned-out and a silver-coloured chain on its foot. This is a sulphur-crested cockatoo, which is endemic to Australia, New Guinea and also parts of Indonesia.

Also on the top vase is a grey bird with red tail feathers visible. This is an African grey parrot (no. 11), native to West and Central Africa. This part of the world was the linchpin in the global trade, not just for the Dutch VOC and WIC, but also for other colonizing nations. West Africa was rich in gold, ivory, pepper, wax and dye-wood.⁷⁴ However, the most prominent export was that of enslaved peoples. In 1637 the WIC overtook Fort Elmina in Ghana from the Portuguese, which was an important trading post.⁷⁵ Between the fifteenth and eighteenth century the Dutch shipped approximately 600.000 Africans, which was five percent of the total estimated twelve million people that were displaced from Africa in this period.⁷⁶

The vase in *The Menagerie* appears to convey a symbolic message in a way that is similar to that found in another, earlier work by d'Hondecoeter, namely *A Hunter's Bag on a Terrace* (c.1678, fig. 6). In this painting, a stone vase holds an orange tree, symbolizing the House of Orange, of which William III was the prince. Furthermore, the vase itself bears a relief of a lion holding a wreath in its mouth, the lion being a heraldic symbol that is part of the coat of arms for the House of Nassau, the aristocratic dynasty to which William III belonged.⁷⁷ The bottom of the vase in *The Menagerie* has, in contrast, a nautical theme with the fish rising out of the water, rather like the bow of a ship. Instead of containing a tree, the vase serves as a support for birds, the origins of which point to the overseas areas that were colonized by the Dutch Republic through the exploitative and extractive trade of the VOC and WIC. The disposition of the fish

⁷³ Rob Marshall, "Alexandrine Parakeets," *Beauty of Birds*, accessed on January 6, 2023, <https://beautyofbirds.com/alexandrine-parakeets/>.

⁷⁴ Van Goor, *De Nederlandse Koloniën: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse Expansie*, 17.

⁷⁵ "Nederland Actief in de Slavenhandel," NOS, accessed on March 9, 2023, <https://lab.nos.nl/projects/slavernij/index.html#:~:text=De%20driehoekshandel,en%20textiel%20naar%20West%2DAfrika.>

⁷⁶ NOS, "Nederland Actief in de Slavenhandel."

⁷⁷ "Symbolisch Wapen," Het Koninklijk Huis, accessed on July 25, 2022, <https://www.koninklijkhuis.nl/onderwerpen/wapens/koninklijk-wapen.>

coming from left and right and meeting in the middle, could reflect simply pleasing symmetry; it could also represent both companies and their trade in east and west.

At first glance the painting appears to have the characteristics of a portrait. The birds and monkeys appear to look back at the observer, as though they posed for the artist. This gives the animals a certain anthropomorphic look, while simultaneously diminishing their wild nature. This is emphasized even further for the cockatoo on the vase, and the purple-naped lory on the marble ledge by their chains. The chains are not bolted or anchored to anything in frame, which makes the illusion even more striking. The viewer wonders: are the birds actually tied down? By extension, we may ask, are their geographical and cultural counterparts chained? In this sense, the image could be perceived as a softening of the oppressive nature of trade, but likewise the decision not to depict to what the chain is affixed could simply be an aesthetic choice.

Another question one might ask is: why are only these two birds, the cockatoo and the purple-naped lory chained? Perhaps an explanation lies in the fact that these are both species that are native to the Indonesian Archipelago. As early as 1602, the VOC held a monopoly of the spice trade through conquest in this region.⁷⁸ Given d'Hondecoeter's detailed knowledge of the birds on display in *The Menagerie*, it is not difficult to argue that this knowledge extended to the birds' origins: the exotic avian composition forms thus a representation of the Dutch overseas territories. It might be implied that the hold on the Indonesian Archipelago is emphasized with the visible chains holding these birds firmer in place than the other birds portrayed in the painting.

In any case, it would not seem overly subtle to suggest that colonial trade is the main theme of this work. The vast trade network and Dutch influence around the globe is represented in this work through the tamed and carefully disposed animals. To visualize this more concretely, we may conduct a thought experiment to turn the realistic symbolism into realism. Imagine, instead of the animals, we see in the painting the actual people they (we argue) represent. Sitting in the top of the tree is, then, not a goldfinch, but a white European man. Below this man, instead of a couple of Northern Cardinals, is a Mohawk couple. Chained to the stone vase which now portrays a VOC and a WIC ship, is not a sulphur-crested cockatoo and an African grey parrot, but a man from Papua-New Guinea with a slave collar around his neck and an enslaved man from Congo. By attending to the origin of the animals that d'Hondecoeter carefully depicted and arranged in his work, and by recognizing the Dutch colonial history in these places, it becomes apparent how this painting masks the harsh reality with a pretty picture.

⁷⁸ S. Arasaratnam, "Monopoly and Free Trade in Dutch-Asian Commercial Policy: Debate and Controversy within the VOC," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 4, no. 1 (1973): 1.

2.4 A comparison of the paintings: wildness, size, freedom

As noted in the introduction, when considered in chronological order the three paintings seem to show a development. The earliest work, *The Raven Robbed* (1677) has the birds portrayed in a wild frenzy centred on the raven and the cockerel. The background surroundings mirror this wildness: while a tomb occupies a prominent position in the midground, the remaining environment appears to be pristine nature, devoid of human interference in the form of structures or roads. In *The Floating Feather* (c. 1680), the birds look demurer. In this work, man-made structures extend further into the background than we see in *The Raven Robbed*. The pond in the background is enclosed by a stone wall, with a stone vase, similar to the one present in *The Menagerie*. Furthermore, it could similarly be argued that the unusual diversity in trees could themselves indicate human selection, and the creation of a park or garden. *The Menagerie* (c. 1690) shows the superlative degree in this managed natural environment: the stone structures have a prominent place in the composition, and the Persian rug represents an epitome of human handicraft, and of course the posed and composed collection of various exotic birds.

Furthermore, we may note that the proverbial freedom of birds encapsulated in the phrase 'free as a bird' is not evoked at all by the animals in these paintings. In *The Menagerie*, two birds are actually shown chained, but it is not just their physical chain that is visible to the viewer of the work. As we have underlined, the birds all have a tamed and posed demeanour, and lack the wildness and potential for flight that is associated with their freedom. The same can be said of the birds in *The Floating Feather*, where the birds appear to enjoy an artificially peaceful or even placid coexistence. In *The Raven Robbed of the Feathers He Wore to Adorn Himself*, however, avian wildness is more apparent in the native birds, than their supposed wild and exotic counterparts. Beaks are opened, wings spread out, and on the centre stage the raven is on his back, attacked by the rooster who has come to retrieve his feathers.

Another aspect of the paintings which should be considered is their size. Their dimensions were intended not only to fit the style and space of the assemblage rooms that were popular in the seventeenth century. They could also communicate the status and wealth of the owner of the artwork. In an invoice for the purchase of d'Hondecoeter's work for Huis Honselaarsdijk in 1680, it is recorded that the artist was paid 1.585 pounds for several works, which was a substantial sum for a painter in this period.⁷⁹

Although there are clear indicators of pride in the Dutch overseas territories in these paintings, which were commissioned by Willem III and Mary Stuart II, it must be noted that the Stadholder did not, himself, have a substantial part to play in the global trade and colonial policies. The VOC and WIC were very protective of their status as autonomous companies, free of royal interference.⁸⁰ William did receive yearly payments from the VOC and WIC, directly as dividend, and indirectly through the treasury.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Marrigje Rikken, *Melchior d'Hondecoeter – Vogelschilder*, 38.

⁸⁰ Oostindie, *De Parels en de Kroon*, 17.

⁸¹ Oostindie, *De Parel en de Kroon*, 20.

However, William's lack of involvement could also be due to him being preoccupied by the Nine Years' War with the French.⁸²

In all three of the discussed paintings the realism of the portrayed landscape and animals is particularly noteworthy. The birds are painted with great attention to detail, and their markings are portrayed true to life. There is, however, an aspect in d'Hondecoeter's use of realism, which pushes the works into the realm of *schijnrealisme*, or 'seeming realism', a term first coined by Eddy de Jongh.⁸³ Seeming realism "... refers to representations which, although they imitate reality in terms of form, simultaneously convey a realized abstraction."⁸⁴ He argues that the genre of realism of the seventeenth century conveyed the mentality of the time more so than the actual life of the time as it occurred. De Jongh applied this concept to landscape painting, but it will be applied here to the selected bird paintings of d'Hondecoeter and, in the following chapter, their current display in the Rijksmuseum.

What this means for the interpretation of the subject matter of the paintings, is that the birds as individual figures are exceptionally life-like, but their tame and fixed gaze toward the observer is more characteristic of human portraiture, than of realistic animal behaviour. One might also note the effect of the overall composition. While the animals' biological features are painted with great detail, the likelihood of all birds being in such close proximity, as they are depicted in all three works, is small. The realistic portrayal of the birds as individual, is complicated by the illusion of their placid gaze, and peaceable cohabitation – a seeming realism that is at once a moral lesson, a portrayal of wealth and status, and a picture of the (imagined) colonial influence and power of the Dutch Republic overseas.

An aspect of the mentality of the seventeenth century that De Jongh underlines is "... a tendency to moralize", or "... encouragement of virtue, or an allusion to the transience of life and the finality of death."⁸⁵ In *The Raven Robbed*, the interaction of the birds refers to a fable; the portrayed behaviour of the birds seems to be motivated by human motives for certain (im)moral behaviours. This motive is the realized abstraction De Jongh talks of, and is in line with the rise of the importance of humility, which is characteristic of the Protestant morality in the visual culture of the Dutch Republic after the Eighty Year War with Spain. In *The Floating Feather* and *The Menagerie*, the gaze of the animals towards the viewer similarly seems unnatural and feels like a fabricated form of reality. The animals seem to be both captured in a snapshot, and simultaneously, carefully posed. Another indication is the composition of these particular birds together. The habitat of these tropical birds is, in most cases, not overlapping. While it is

⁸² Luc Panhuysen, *Oranje Tegen De Zonnekoning: De Strijd Tussen Willem III en Lodewijk XIV om Europa* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Atlas Contact, 2016), 375-376.

⁸³ Eddy de Jongh, "Realism and Seeming Realism in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting," in *Looking at Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art – Realism Reconsidered*, ed. by Wayne Franits (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 21.

⁸⁴ De Jongh, "Realism and Seeming Realism," 21.

⁸⁵ De Jongh, "Realism and Seeming Realism," 21.

possible that they resided in the same environment or even in the same aviary or menagerie in the Dutch republic, it seems unlikely that they would naturally pose together so closely, as d'Hondecoeter's compositions suggest. Thus, it could be argued, that this composition seems tense: something seems off. The birds are only held together by the controlling gaze of the artist for so long, as if they could walk away any second, making it so that the picture, which seems real and natural, can only be artificial and impossible.

Having given a description and interpretation of the paintings in particular with regard to the origin of the animals represented and their symbolic connections to Dutch colonial entanglements, we shall now turn to the analysis of their physical display contexts. From their original placement, the Rijksmuseum, to a temporary exhibition in the National Gallery in Berlin, to the consumption of replicas of the paintings, all these contexts tell something about the paintings and shape how the observer perceives their subject-matter and their mutual interaction.

Chapter 3. Display Contexts: From Het Oude Loo to The Rijksmuseum

In what follows, the different display contexts of the three paintings will be discussed and analysed. What can we learn about the paintings from the locations in which they were, and are, displayed? What does the physical context of the paintings highlight? Firstly, we shall consider the earliest known context of the works in Het Loo Palace. Secondly, the museal context will be discussed, from the predecessor of the Rijksmuseum, until the display of the three paintings in The Rijksmuseum today.

Roelof van Straten's question regarding iconological interpretation serves as a guide: "Why has a certain work of art arisen in a particular way; how can it be explained in the context of its cultural, social, and historical backgrounds; and how can the possible hidden meanings that were *not* explicitly intended by the artist be brought to light?"⁸⁶

3.1 Display at the royal estates

According to the provenance established by the Rijksmuseum and Het Mauritshuis, all three works were part of the inventory of Het Loo palace in the eighteenth century. However, this estate was acquired by William in 1684, thirteen years after the creation of *The Raven Robbed of the Feathers he Wore to Adorn Himself* (1671) and four years after *The Floating Feather* (c. 1680) is said to have been made. There must be an earlier provenance to these two works.

Het Loo was the palace from which William ruled as King of England and as Stadtholder of the Dutch Republic.⁸⁷ His double role as servant to the Republic and ruler of England created friction when he was in the Republic, which is why his visibility as king was limited in the governing centre Amsterdam. Het Loo was not of such significant magnitude that it could hold a whole court, but it was far enough from Amsterdam to function as a place where William could escape the representative aspect of being king, while fulfilling his royal and Stadtholder duties. Het Loo underwent two periods of renovation and extension; first in the year after the acquisition in 1684 the *corps de logis* and the French style gardens were constructed under Jacob Roman, and again after the joint ascension to the throne in 1689 under French Huguenot Daniël Marot.⁸⁸ It was upgraded with pavilions and updated interiors and gardens for the palace, to fit William's promoted rank of prince to king. This made it so he could host friends and foreign leaders there.⁸⁹ Mary never saw the renovations and extensions of the house and gardens after the acquisition of the palace in 1684, as she stayed in England when William returned to the continent.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Roelof van Straten, *An Introduction to Iconography*, translated by Patricia de Man (Yverdon: Gordon and Breach, 1994), 18.

⁸⁷ Luc Panhuysen, *Oranje tegen de Zonnekoning* (Amsterdam/Antwerpen: Uitgeverij Atlas Contact, 2016), 400.

⁸⁸ Hanneke Ronnes, "De Architectuur van Koning-Stadhouder Willem III in het Licht van zijn Vriendschapsbanden," *Virtus – Journal of Nobility Studies* 12 (2005): 78.

⁸⁹ Panhuysen, *Oranje tegen de Zonnekoning*, 402-403.

⁹⁰ Panhuysen, *Oranje tegen de Zonnekoning*, 402.

The earliest mention of the provenance of *The Raven Robbed* is in 1757, more than a century after its creation, as part of the inventory of Het Loo palace.⁹¹ One possible explanation of its whereabouts in the thirteen years between its creation and its arrival in Het Loo might be that it was acquired in 1680 for Huis Honselaarsdijk, when this was redecorated and several paintings were purchased from d'Hondecoeter.⁹² In a later inventory of Honselaarsdijk prepared in 1707, there is no mention of any paintings by d'Hondecoeter, so if this hypothesis is correct, the work had already been relocated by that time. After 1757, *The Raven Robbed* was moved to the Prince William V Gallery in The Hague, for reasons unknown.⁹³ In 1795 the painting was confiscated by the French, as part of the spoils of war, and hung in the newly established Musée Central des Arts, now known as the Musée du Louvre. Towards the end of the Batavian Republic, the work was moved back to The Hague, first to the Prince William V Gallery, and in 1822 to Het Mauritshuis. From 1954 to 2010, the work was on loan to the Fondation Custodia in Paris; the reason and circumstances of this long-term loan are unclear. Likewise, publicly accessible records do not specify where the painting was between 2010 and 2014, when it was sent on long-term loan to Het Loo Palace. The work was transferred to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam in 2018.⁹⁴

As noted above, *The Floating Feather* is dated circa 1680 by the Rijksmuseum, four years before Het Loo Palace was acquired by William III. Rikken refers to an inventory list from 1713 of the residencies of the House of Orange, described by S.W.A. Drossaers and T.H. Lunsingh Scheurleer, in which there is the mention of a "... painting of birds by Hondekoten for the mantelpiece." Rikken presumes that this refers to *The Floating Feather*.⁹⁵ Furthermore, the same inventory states the painting was hung in the same room as the two arched hunting bag pieces in Het Oude Loo, *A Hunter's Bag on a Terrace* (c. 1678, fig. 6) and *A Hunter's Bag near a Tree Stump with a Magpie* (c. 1678, fig. 5). The inventory expressly stated the latter two paintings came from Soestdijk. This could mean, indirectly, that *The Floating Feather* also formerly hung at Soestdijk, but this cannot be said for certain. In any case, the placement of *The Floating Feather* above the hearth would have given it a prominent place in the room, especially during the winter when the hearth is essential, and the furniture was focused around the fireplace.

The same inventory 1713 of Het Loo also mentions a painting with birds and monkeys of d'Hondecoeter above the door to the new constructed private cabinet of William III. This certainly refers to *The Menagerie*. In 1692, the medieval castle Het Oude Loo was renovated, and a hunting lodge was added,

⁹¹ "Melchior D'Hondecoeter, *The Raven Robbed of the Feathers He Wore to Adorn Himself*, 1677," Het Mauritshuis, accessed on July 27, 2022, <https://www.mauritshuis.nl/en/our-collection/artworks/59-the-raven-robbed-of-the-feathers-he-wore-to-adorn-himself/>.

⁹² Marringje Rikken, *Melchior d'Hondecoeter – Vogelschilder* (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum and Nieuw Amsterdam, 2009), 38.

⁹³ Het Mauritshuis, "Melchior d'Hondecoeter, *The Raven Robbed*."

⁹⁴ Het Mauritshuis, "Melchior d'Hondecoeter, *The Raven Robbed*."

⁹⁵ Marringje Rikken, "Melchior d'Hondecoeter – Bird Painter," in *Intolerance*, ed. by Willem de Rooij and Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer (Düsseldorf: Feymedia Verlagsgesellschaft, 2010), 2:22.

which was where the king's private quarters were located. The renovation came to completion three years after William and Mary's coronation in England in 1689, and the expansion accordingly reflected their new royal status.⁹⁶

What does this location imply about the reception of the painting? It is unclear whether *The Menagerie* hung above the door on the inside or the outside of the king's private quarters, but what can be said about the location is that William would have walked past the work daily upon entering or leaving his private cabinet. Furthermore, the relatively informal setting combined with the occasional presence of foreign leaders could lead to the inference that the painting was displayed there not just for the private enjoyment of the king, but also had a political significance. In short, the painting and its position within the house were expressions of power, magnifying the effect the aviaries had that were already on the estate, in the queen's garden in a grotto lined with shells.⁹⁷ While passing underneath the lintel of the door to the king's private quarters, it was necessary literally to look up to see the painting, and therefore to what it represented: the powerful influence oversees of both the Dutch Republic and the Kingdom of England, Ireland and Scotland.

3.2 The Birth of the Museum

To understand the display of the paintings in the setting of the Rijksmuseum, it is first necessary to look at the conception of the museum as an institution. Tony Bennett traces the birth of the public museum to the late eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁹⁸ The museum as an institution as we know it today finds its roots in the cabinets of curiosities and private collection rooms of royalty and nobility. In the late seventeenth century courtly society was deemed as *tout le monde*, and the only group necessary to impress by those in power.⁹⁹ The populace was indirectly influenced by the portrayal of this power, inasmuch as it was not accessible to them: power of the nobility had an air of transcendental mystique. Bennett argues that the shift from private collections of the nobility to public museums occurred as a result of broader changes in society, particularly in relation to the rise of the modern nation-state, aiding in the formation of a national identity through the display of its heritage.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, the formation of public collections should be perceived as part of the wider developments in which culture was understood as something that could be used as a useful tool to aid in governing, as "... a vehicle for the exercise of new forms of power."¹⁰¹ In other words, the museum was understood as an institution that had the ability to steer the perception and convictions of the general public. This maintained power dynamics which perpetuated inequalities between dominant and marginalized groups within the

⁹⁶ Rikken, *Melchior d'Hondecoeter – Vogelschilder*, 42.

⁹⁷ Rikken, *Melchior d'Hondecoeter – Vogelschilder*, 48.

⁹⁸ Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995), 19.

⁹⁹ Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 21.

¹⁰⁰ Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 28.

¹⁰¹ Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, 19.

European societies in which they emerged. As such the museum was intended and used as a tool for cultural governance of the populace to let them learn to see themselves as those in power see them.

3.3 First museal context

The origins of the Rijksmuseum align with the birth of the museum in Bennett's account. In 1795, the Batavian Republic came into being, after Prince Willem V fled to England and left his collection behind.¹⁰² While *The Raven Robbed* was confiscated by the French, and sent to Paris, both *The Menagerie* and *The Floating Feather* were nationalized between 1795 and 1799, and became part of the collection of the Rijksmuseum's predecessor, *the Nationale Konst-Gallery*.¹⁰³ This first national museum was formed in Huis ten Bosch, near The Hague, and led by Jan Alexander Gogel (1765-1821), who managed the state and royal domains.¹⁰⁴

Cornelis Sebille Roos (1754-1820) was appointed as inspector of the collection and gallery in 1799 and was in charge of filling the museum.¹⁰⁵ He mostly selected paintings from the princely possessions, among them the collections of Het Loo palace and Soestdijk. Several works by Melchior d'Hondecoeter were hung in a room at Huis ten Bosch, together with a double portrait of William II, prince of Orange and Henrietta Maria Stuart (the parents of William III, and aunt and uncle of Mary Stuart II), and some genre paintings.¹⁰⁶ The displayed works by d'Hondecoeter were some or all of the following: *The Menagerie*, *The Floating Feather*, *A hunter's Bag near a Tree Stump*, and *A Hunter's Bag on a Terrace*. These were all part of the princely collections of Soestdijk and Het Loo, and have uninterruptedly been part of the Rijksmuseum's collection until today.¹⁰⁷

Huis ten Bosch was a former summer residence which Frederick Henry, prince of Orange, had built for his wife Amalia of Solms in 1645.¹⁰⁸ This royal setting, together with the former princely collections which constituted the collection of the *Nationale Konst-Gallery*, explains the combination of d'Hondecoeter's painting with the portraits of what were then still assumed to be portraits of King Charles II of England and his sister, and the genre paintings.¹⁰⁹ Charles II was the uncle of William III and Mary Stuart II, and the predecessor of Mary's father James II; the identity interpreted as the subject of the female portrait was

¹⁰² Pieter J.J. van Thiel, *All the Paintings of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam – A Completely Illustrated Catalogue*, ed. Pieter J.J. van Thiel (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 1976), 10.

¹⁰³ "The Menagerie, Melchior d'Hondecoeter, c. 1690," The Rijksmuseum, accessed on July 27, 2022, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/SK-A-173>; and "A Pelican and Other Birds near a Pool, Known as 'The Floating Feather', Melchior d'Hondecoeter, c. 1680," The Rijksmuseum, accessed on July 27, 2022, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/SK-A-175>.

¹⁰⁴ Van Thiel, *All the Paintings of the Rijksmuseum*, 10.

¹⁰⁵ Van Thiel, *All the Paintings of the Rijksmuseum*, 10-11.

¹⁰⁶ Van Thiel, *All the Paintings of the Rijksmuseum*, 11.

¹⁰⁷ Van Thiel, *All the Paintings of the Rijksmuseum*, 282-283.

¹⁰⁸ "Oranjezaal," Koninklijke Verzamelingen, accessed on January 23, 2023, <https://www.koninklijkeverzamelingen.nl/2-uncategorised/138-oranjezaal>.

¹⁰⁹ Van Thiel, *All the Paintings of the Rijksmuseum*, 11.

probably Mary Henrietta Stuart, the mother of William III. The erroneous perception that the portraits depicted brother and sister, instead of William III's parents, suggests that at that time the room in the *Nationale Konst-Gallery* was dedicated to the shared lineage of William III and Mary Stuart II, and not only William's side of the family (the two families were, of course, intertwined as William and Mary were first cousins).

Another element to keep in mind is the aforementioned confiscation of the collection of William V Gallery, which made the new museum necessarily fall back on the collection of Het Loo and Soestdijk when filling its collection.¹¹⁰

This origin of the Rijksmuseum in the Konst-Gallery could also explain the future choices in display of d'Hondecoeter's painting in the theme of the second half of the seventeenth century. The current display of the works in the Rijksmuseum also consists of the separate rooms chronologically filled in with art pertaining to these eras.¹¹¹

3.4 Display in the Rijksmuseum in the Twentieth and Twenty-first century

The Rijksmuseum's name translates to 'state museum'. Prior to 1993, the museum, together with twenty-eight other rijksmusea of the Netherlands, was directly part of the Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen. Thereafter, as a result of the *Wet zelfstandig rijksmuseale diensten*, the museum came under the control of an independent (private) foundation, while the objects, which remained in the possession of the state, were given on long-term loan to the museums.¹¹² Thus, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam is in charge of the state's collection in the form of stewardship. With its 2.7 million visitors in 2019, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam had the highest number of visitors of museums in the Netherlands in that year.¹¹³ 1.7 million of these visitors were foreign tourists. In this sense, the Rijksmuseum functions as a representative of Dutch culture.

With this in mind, we may ask what choices the Rijksmuseum has made in displaying the paintings? Can changes or developments in the reasoning behind the exhibition of the works be traced in the twentieth century? What message is sent by proximity of the works to the context for which they were created? How does the current display relate to the early forms of private collection rooms of royal figures?

¹¹⁰ Frans Grijzenhout, "Tempel Voor Nederland De Nationale Konst-Gallerij in 's-Gravenhage," in *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek (NKJ)/ Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art* 35 (1984): 24.

¹¹¹ "Plattegrond," The Rijksmuseum, accessed on January 23, 2023, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/bezoek/praktische-info/adres-en-route>.

¹¹² "De Rijkscollectie," Rijksdienst voor Cultureel Erfgoed, accessed on August 8, 2022, <https://data.collectienederland.nl/vc/rijkscollecties/>.

¹¹³ Annephe van Uchelen, "Top-5 best bezochte musea: Rijks weer bovenaan, museumbezoek neemt toe," NOS, accessed on May 18, 2021, <https://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/artikel/2315513-top-5-best-bezochte-musea-rijks-weer-bovenaam-museumbezoek-neemt-toe>.

In what follows, the various modes of display of the paintings in their time at the Rijksmuseum will be discussed. The emphasis will necessarily be principally on *The Menagerie* and *The Floating Feather*, as *The Raven Robbed* has only been on long-term loan to the Rijksmuseum since 2018. Two general modes of display emerge from this history. The first mode is a decontextualized setting according to which the art is deprived of its original context.¹¹⁴ In this mode, the paintings are displayed on a plain wall, behind a rope to encourage the viewer to keep their distance. The second mode of display, in contrast, steers the viewer to place the art into a carefully curated context, and to interpret the paintings as being part of an ensemble, which, in this case, is suggestive of an 'original' setting in the chambers of William III.

It is regrettable that there are limited sources available on the former modes of display of the paintings. Some photographic documentation of the Rijksmuseum galleries in the twentieth century does, however, document the display context of some works of d'Hondecoeter, including *The Menagerie* and *The Floating Feather*. A picture which shows *The Menagerie* displayed in the first half of the twentieth century (fig.7) is described as a *Room with Paintings from the Utrechtse School* (c. 1900 – c. 1949).¹¹⁵ This collage of paintings also includes paintings from the artist's father Gijsbert d'Hondecoeter.¹¹⁶ Fourteen paintings are displayed in a symmetrical manner on a wainscoted wall, with a bench in front of it facing a different wall. The exhibition allows the visitor to inspect the paintings at close range, but, due to their symmetrical arrangement, the paintings appear to form a cohesive collage together when looked upon from further away. Judging from admittedly limited evidence of the photograph, there were no separate wall labels for each individual painting, though they may have been attached to the frame, or information provided in another manner. The visual effect, however, left room for the visitor to interpret the paintings together, as a group, rather than focus on the individual paintings separately. We can assume not much of background information is provided about the individual works, much less the individual birds represented in the paintings, in this mode of display. Instead, the focus lay on the genre, here styled the *Utrechtse School*, and thus on the background of the artists as representatives of an art-historical movement or period.

Another photograph (fig. 8) dating from around 1950 shows *The Menagerie* together with *A Pelican and other Birds near a Pool*, or *The Floating Feather*, in a different mode of display. Here, *The Menagerie* is hung above an open passage. On both sides of the doorway are portraits (possibly of William II and Mary Henrietta Stuart, or William III and Mary Stuart II), with on one side a chair. Below the left oval portrait, in

¹¹⁴ Sylvan Barnet, *A Short Guide to Writing About Art* (Hoboken: Pearson Education, Inc., 2015), 30.

¹¹⁵ "Zaal met Schilderijen van de Utrechtse School, Waaronder Landschappen, en op de Voorgrond een Bank voor Bezoekers, ca. 1900 – ca. 1949," The Rijksmuseum, accessed on May 18, 2021, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.HARCHIEF.12142>.

¹¹⁶ For example, "Watervogels, Gijsbert Gillisz. de Hondecoeter, 1652," The Rijksmuseum, accessed on December 22, 2022, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/collectie/SK-A-1322>; and "Landschap met herders, Gijsbert Gillisz. de Hondecoeter, 1652," The Rijksmuseum, accessed on December 22, 2022, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.8735>.

the foreground, is a display unit with drawings on it, with three unidentified tubes to the right of it, and a grandfather clock behind it. Again, a form of symmetry dominates in the arrangement of the cabinets next to the portraits. Above the cabinets hang on the left *The Floating Feather*, and on the right *Landscape with Exotic Animals - Menagerie of William III* (c. 1690 - 1692, fig. 4), also by d'Hondecoeter.¹¹⁷ The presence of the furniture suggests that the display is, to a certain extent, that of a period room. The display unit indicates to visitors they are being educated, and the chair is not roped off, but presumably it is safe to exhibit without visitors sitting on it. Positioned above the passage, *The Menagerie* mimics the original context of the painting at Het Loo, where it was hung above the door of the private cabinet of the king, making the viewer look up to the painting as they pass under the doorframe.¹¹⁸ It seems likely that the decision to place the painting in this location is deliberately imitative of this historical context. The furniture can be perceived as an aid in trying to recreate the feel of this original setting.

These two contrasting modes of display, on the one hand the paintings on a blank wall with only other paintings, and on the other the paintings within a decoratively furnished room of royal heritage, are the two forms which the Rijksmuseum seems to return to, when displaying the works of d'Hondecoeter. In a photograph of their exhibition in the museum in 2009, we see the former mode of display, with a hint of the latter in the form of a decorative wallpaper.¹¹⁹ The visitor is guided to keep a distance from the piece through a rope, and is informed on some background information through the accompanying label. The contents of the label are not known, however.

3.5 The Display Context in the Rijksmuseum Today

At present, the collection of the Rijksmuseum is arranged almost chronologically: the particular display context of the works should be understood within this overarching frame. The ground floor is dedicated to the eleventh century until the sixteenth century, the first floor to the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the second floor to the seventeenth century, and the top floor to the twentieth century.¹²⁰ The gallery of honour is located on the second floor and is also dedicated to the seventeenth century. It is on this floor and within this spatial context that the works presently hang.

Two general points may be made at the outset about this arrangement. First, as Bennett has stressed, the chronological display of art in museums has important implications regarding power, exclusion and inclusion. Bennett's objection to this structure is that it gives the allusion that there is one series of events

¹¹⁷ "Landschap met Uitheemse Dieren (Menagerie van Willem III), Melchior d'Hondecoeter, c. 1690 – c. 1692," The Rijksmuseum, accessed on December 22, 2022, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.687539>.

¹¹⁸ "De Menagerie – Melchior d'Hondecoeter, ca. 1690," The Rijksmuseum, accessed on December 22, 2022, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.8744>.

¹¹⁹ "Bezoekster bekijkt de Menagerie, rechts hangt een schilderij van vogels in een park, 2009," The Rijksmuseum, accessed on December 22, 2022, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/collectie/HA-0022545>.

¹²⁰ "Plattegrond," Rijksmuseum, accessed on January 23, 2023, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/bezoek/praktische-info/adres-en-route>.

that inevitably lead to the present – and to the present manifestation of the social and political order.¹²¹ This leaves room for exclusion of those who do not fit within this time and space frame. This argument is similar to Vázquez’s theory that modernity is an endless reaffirming of the same historical narrative, while coloniality is responsible for the erasure of divergent and subordinate narratives.¹²² What this means in the context of the Rijksmuseum is that a narrative is portrayed to the visitor of what is important to remember of Dutch history.

Secondly, and in a related way, the spatial disposition creates an inherent sense of hierarchy not only of the objects but of history itself. The display of the seventeenth-century art on the *piano nobile*, traditionally the most important floor of the classical building, silently communicates that this century is the ‘Golden Age’ of art. Indeed, the museum has explicitly framed their collection of the seventeenth century as the glory of the ‘Golden Age’.¹²³

However, the term does have other connotations. While ‘Golden Age’ is a term used to describe an era of the artistic and scientific flourishing in the Dutch Republic, it has become impossible to ignore that the same age was one of colonial exploitation and slave trade; d’Hondecoeter’s exotic bird paintings amply illustrate this age of ‘flourishing’ was embedded in and entangled with this systematic extraction, oppression and exploitation. Furthermore, historian Karwan Fatah-Black observes that the term ‘Golden Age’ is often brazenly used as a marketing tool by museums whenever their exhibition holds anything remotely related to the seventeenth century.¹²⁴ For these reasons, in 2019, the Amsterdam Museum decided to discard the term ‘Golden Age’ as a name for their seventeenth century exhibition.¹²⁵ Their reasoning was that the success and riches of colonialism in fact only affected positively a small group of people, and, further, they wanted to make room for providing an account for the darker side of this era.

The Rijksmuseum, in contrast, explicitly decided against changing the term. The director Taco Dibbits argued for the retention of the term by implying that it included the ‘shadow side’: “[The Golden Age] is really about a period in time and a country. There certainly is a shadow side to it, but that does not mean that you should write that term out of history.”¹²⁶ On the Rijksmuseum’s website, however, the ‘shadow side’ is markedly absent: the Dutch Republic is described as a merchant republic enjoying its heyday as world leader in trade, science, the art of war and the fine arts.¹²⁷ This short description is made up of positive wording: ‘enjoying’, ‘trade.’ There is no mention of the colonial aspect of trade. Mention is made

¹²¹ Tony Bennett, *Birth of the Museum*, 131.

¹²² Rolando Vázquez, *Vistas of Modernity*, 17.

¹²³ “The 17th Century (1600-1700),” The Rijksmuseum, accessed on May 25, 2021, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/visit/inside-the-museum/17th-century>.

¹²⁴ “Wel of Geen Gouden Eeuw,” NOS, accessed on May 18, 2021, <https://nos.nl/artikel/2301599-wel-of-geen-gouden-eeuw-laten-we-op-zoek-gaan-naar-een-nieuwe-term>.

¹²⁵ NOS, “Wel of Geen Gouden Eeuw.”

¹²⁶ NOS, “Wel of Geen Gouden Eeuw.”

¹²⁷ The Rijksmuseum, “The 17th Century (1600-1700).”

of 'the art of war' (*krijgskunst*) instead of 'warfare' (*oorlogvoering*). This overarching frame of the second floor of the Rijksmuseum emphasizes the successes of the rich merchants of the Republic, disregarding the implications this had for the rest of the country and the world.

Let us now zoom in to focus on the specific exhibition location of the works at the centre of this study: Room 2.22. This room is dedicated to William III and Mary Stuart II (fig. 10) and is part of the exhibition on the second half of the seventeenth century. The room is filled with paintings around the walls, accompanied by furniture; a large collection of Delftware is displayed in the centre of the room. The assembled items were all formerly the property of the royal couple, or were made approximately during their reign. As noted above, just as the paintings themselves belong to a style of seeming realism, the period setting of Room 2.22 in the Rijksmuseum can also be understood as a form of seeming realism. For the objects exhibited are not the pieces that were designed for a single palace. Instead, we are presented with a modern well-lit museal environment, showing candleholders that are from the same time period (but unrelated to the royal collection), a bed that is presumed to have been designed for a castle in Ommen, associated with objects made for and originally displayed in other contexts.¹²⁸ The objects, including d'Hondecoeter's paintings, are used in the museum to create a narrative, or as the stage for a narrative that the museum is trying to convey to the visiting public. Thus, the room follows the second mode of display discussed above: the ensemble room, steering the viewer to place the art into an imagined context as it could have been in its implied original setting the royal estates.

Regarding the paintings specifically, *The Menagerie* is hung halfway into the room, above a cabinet (c. 1695-1710) attributed to Jan van Mekeren, while *the Floating Feather* is hung above a small table (c.1695-1710), also ascribed to the same cabinetmaker.¹²⁹ In short, these two works are displayed as part of ensembles of domestic furnishings. On the opposite wall is hung *The Raven Robbed*. The staging of a contrast between *The Menagerie* on the one side of the room in the current display, and *The Raven Robbed* other side of the room is noteworthy. While *The Raven Robbed* portrays the morality of humility, *The Menagerie* is, in some way an explicit portrayal of the kind of borrowed feathers of the fable *The Raven Robbed* critiques. Perhaps this contrast is a deliberate curatorial jab intended to expose the contradictory messages of the royal paintings. As we have noted, however, it seems unlikely that the birds portrayed in *The Menagerie* were perceived as 'borrowed feathers' in the seventeenth century when the work was created. The colonies were conquered, and their goods seized and extracted from the

¹²⁸ "Four-poster bed, anonymous, c. 1715 – c.1720," The Rijksmuseum, accessed on March 10, 2023, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.58163>.

¹²⁹ "Cabinet, Jan van Mekeren (attributed to), c. 1695 – c. 1710," The Rijksmuseum, accessed on January 27, 2023, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.293659>; and "Table, Jan van Mekeren (attributed to), c. 1695 – c. 1710," The Rijksmuseum, accessed on January 27, 2023, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.275941>.

indigenous people and from rival nations. The subject-matter of exotic birds, and the colonies and peoples they represented, as rightfully the property of the colonizers, and not borrowed.

Having described how the works are currently displayed, in what follows, we will examine the implications of the curatorial decisions regarding the display of the artworks. The central tension is the decontextualization of the works and the subject-matter they depict – the animals themselves, and how they are reinserted in a curated ensemble in a seeming realistic manner. This reinsertion of the paintings and the portrayed animals conveys a message of authenticity and naturalness about the ‘Golden Age’. By exhibiting the paintings with furniture of the same era and similar locations, the distance in time is made more prevalent, aiding in delivering the message of authenticity to the visitor. When looking at the subject-matter alone, the pieces are at first sight timeless. This is due to the birds still existing and being more generally known, today. The furniture in the room, such as the cabinet ascribed to Jan van Mekeren, holds a more widespread association with the past, because these styles of furniture are not commonly sold as new anymore.¹³⁰ As such the ensemble suggests a link with the contemporary, but simultaneously has a historical connotation through the objects’ style. The effect that this mode of display creates by placing the paintings among contemporary pieces of furniture, is that the visitor feels less keenly the decontextualization of the artworks.

The setting of Room 2.22 coheres in the sense that the objects on display were made in the same era, in the same context of the homes of the richer layers of society. However, Vázquez critiques this as a one-sided narrative of modernity. There is a multitude of other ways in which the paintings could be displayed that do not follow the chronological narrative towards the contemporary. The implication of the arrangement is that the fate of the portrayed birds – to move from their places of origin to the European menageries, was inevitable. In this way, the coloniality within this context of the museum is perpetuated.

A consequence of the decision to have the focus on aesthetics and the glorification of the ‘Golden Age’, is that the multitude of narratives that could be told are overshadowed, including those of the animals and the people connected to them.

For example, the paintings could be placed in a natural historic narrative, highlighting their position as a source of scientific data. There could be a more complete historical narrative in which an opportunity to tell about the involuntary journey of these animals from their places of origin to the European menageries, both for the sake of this story as such, but also to further uncover how enslaved peoples were transported and kept in the same manner. The Rijksmuseum, thus, perpetuates the airbrushing of colonial history by focusing on the aesthetics of these paintings in their original elite setting.

¹³⁰ The Rijksmuseum, “Cabinet, Jan van Mekeren.”

By focusing Room 2.22 on the belongings of the royal couple, the gallery can be perceived as a continuation of the aesthetics of this era. The Rijksmuseum practices coloniality in this sense, as it refrains from telling a one-sided version of colonial history. According to Vázquez's theory of decoloniality, the term coloniality describes the process of erasure of other worlds of senses and meanings to uphold modernity.¹³¹ In the context of the Rijksmuseum, and Room 2.22 in particular, this means that the focus is on aesthetics over aesthesis; highlighting the 'Golden Age', the prosperity, without shedding a light on the plethora of stories that could be told about the seventeenth century. In order for the exotic birds to end up in the royal menageries in the Dutch Republic, there are the stories of what these birds meant to the people that lived among them in their natural habitat; of the seafarers who transported them, and of the enslaved peoples, who have their own life stories, that were displaced with them.

As established through an analysis of the display, the paintings are all deemed appropriated, in the sense that they were taken out of their original context and placed in a different setting. Although the museum has taken measures to create a similar ambience by placing the paintings above and around furniture from the same era. By taking the animals from their natural habitat and into menageries and aviaries, they are appropriated into the culture of the colonizer, but at the same time treated as 'other'. Their rarity in the colonizing countries makes them into commodities. Arjun Appadurai defines commodities as "... objects of economic value."¹³² This value is created by economic exchange. At the same time there were active measures taken to replace the local flora and fauna in the colonized territories with cattle and crops from the colonizing nations, assimilating both sides.¹³³ Furthermore, the animals that were brought back underwent another conceptual change. They were economized, and were seen as commodities rather than living beings. In other words, the value of their being-alive was perceived lower than the value they held as commodities to be sold, or to be exchanged for powerful positions and influence among the richest of society.

¹³¹ Vázquez, *Vistas of Modernity*, 17-18.

¹³² Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 3.

¹³³ Philip Armstrong, "The Postcolonial Animal," in *Society & Animals* 10, no.4 (2002), 416.

4 Concluding Reflections: Castle Sypeseteyn, Intolerance, and the Museum Shop

What has come to the fore in this research, is that the gaze on, and the display of the exotic bird paintings by Melchior d'Hondecoeter have changed according to their surroundings and their spectators. The artist made the paintings with a commissioner or yet unidentified buyer in mind. However, the artworks have made it into today's world, where the paintings are perceived by millions of museum visitors each year.

To conclude this research, we will now briefly highlight the gaze in the different display contexts discussed above, as well as the commodification of the paintings and their subject-matter, focusing on why the exotic is displayed. The gaze is not just about what is seen, but also about who is perceiving. Firstly, we have the gaze of the artist. Melchior d'Hondecoeter grew up in a family of bird painters and continued in his forefathers' footsteps. It is highly probable that this was motivated by more than just the need to find a means to make money. The poultry and waterfowl which feature most prominently in the paintings of his father and grandfather are certainly present in the earlier work of Melchior d'Hondecoeter, but later in life, there is the notable shift to the more exotic species. This could be explained by who commissioned his work and where it was hung. In the context of King William's private quarters in the seventeenth century, *The Menagerie* functioned as a powerful sign of his influence overseas to his equals who visited Het Loo palace, a significance re-emphasized by the actual birds kept in the menageries and aviaries on the estate.

A painting is made to be observed; what has changed is who perceives it, and what influences their gaze. In the original setting of the royal palaces, the paintings contributed to the display of power, meant to impress those in similar circles as William and Mary who visited the royal estates, and thus not meant to be perceived by the public. The shift from private to public is an important factor to keep in mind that happened with the formation of the modern museum. The display choices made by the museum can help steer the perception of the viewer. In the *Nationale Konst Gallery*, the room in which d'Hondecoeter's paintings were displayed already took on a function to represent the royal lineage of William and Mary. If we take Bennett's idea of the museum to function as a tool for cultural governance of the populace, using the royal context of the paintings could aid in education of the public about their place in society by those in power, shaping the power balance of society at the time.

In the Rijksmuseum today, this royal representation in which the paintings were hung is repeated through the chronological narrative the museum uses throughout. The educational element is still present, not just to educate the Dutch visitor, but also the foreign tourist on the development of the Netherlands through art, through the Western gaze that focuses on the Dutch prosperity and flourishing art, and less on the colonial trade and exploitation that happened simultaneously, and which provided the resources for this flourishing.

To contrast the current display context of d'Hondecoeter's paintings in the Rijksmuseum, below we consider two cases of how d'Hondecoeter's paintings have been exhibited recently. The first is the exhibition *Melchior d'Hondecoeter Schilder van Buitenplaatsen te gast op Sypesteyn* (2012) in castle Sypesteyn in Loosdrecht, and the second is the *Intolerance* exhibition (2010-2011) by Dutch artist Willem de Rooij. These two recent exhibitions address the matter of the gaze and its relation to power and coloniality in a different manner.

The exhibition *Melchior d'Hondecoeter – Schilder van Buitenplaatsen te gast op Sypesteyn* (2012) in castle Sypesteyn in Loosdrecht consisted of sixteen paintings by Melchior d'Hondecoeter's, as well as four by his grandfather Gilles d'Hondecoeter, and two by his cousin Jan Weenix. While none of the works by Melchior d'Hondecoeter discussed in this research were part of the exhibition, it is still worth addressing here. The paintings that were on display mainly show game still-lives, and lively portrayals of rare poultry breeds. The game still-lives mainly portray native birds and hares, which is an indication of the lifestyle of the new rich, as hunting for larger game that had been reserved to the nobility.¹³⁴ However, with the example of *A Hunter's Bag near a Tree Stump* (c. 1678, fig. 5) and *A Hunter's Bag on a Terrace* (c. 1678, fig. 6) which were made for William and Mary's estate Soestdijk, this genre also became popular amongst the nobility.

What makes this exhibition worth mentioning is the context of the castle Sypesteyn as the background in which the paintings are displayed. The castle serves to imitate the seventeenth-century stately homes. The paintings were shown in a setting that would give the viewer the idea that it is closer to their original setting of a royal palace. Moreover, for the exhibition, the Dutch poultry club provided several historical poultry breeds to roam the estate during the course of the exhibition.¹³⁵ This allowed the visitor to roam among the subject-matter of the paintings, and shifted the gaze to one inside the, albeit recreated, seventeenth-century experience. The visitor was thereby permitted not only to experience the paintings almost from within, but were also given a better understanding of the works, as they may have been perceived by William and Mary. However, the castle could be seen as another form of seeming realism: Sypesteyn was meant to resemble a seventeenth-century castle, but it was actually built in 1899 to be perceived this way.¹³⁶

Secondly, the installation *Intolerance* created by Willem de Rooij in the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin in 2010-2011 combined eighteen paintings by d'Hondecoeter with eleven pieces of Hawaiian featherwork in the form of capes, headdresses and godhead statues.¹³⁷ Among the paintings were *The Floating Feather*

¹³⁴ J. Kearney and D.H. van Wegen, *Melchior d'Hondecoeter – Schilder van Buitenplaatsen te gast op Sypesteyn* (Loosdrecht: Kasteel-Museum Sypesteyn, 2012), 9.

¹³⁵ J. Kearney and D.H. van Wegen, *Melchior d'Hondecoeter – Schilder van Buitenplaatsen*, 3.

¹³⁶ "Jonkheer Henri: De Laatste Van Sypesteyn," Kasteel-Museum Sypesteyn, accessed on January 27, 2023, <https://sypesteyn.nl/historie/de-familie-van-sypesteyn/>.

¹³⁷ Willem de Rooij, *Intolerance* (Düsseldorf: Feymedia Verlagsgesellschaft, 2010), 1:117-118.

(c. 1680) and *The Raven Robbed* (1671). All pieces were exhibited without labels, but there was an accompanying publication by the same name, consisting of three volumes of research surrounding the exhibition.

De Rooij's exhibition changes the gaze of the visitor through the use of processed elements of the exotic birds in question in the form of man-made goods. It highlights how the birds, though exotic in a European context, have had a cultural significance for the indigenous Hawaiians. Furthermore, the use of the bird feathers in clothing items closer relates the birds to the colonized peoples, which are merely represented indirectly in the paintings by d'Hondecoeter that accompany them in the exhibition. The combination of the featherwork and the paintings creates a different narrative for the portrayed birds and what they represent, from the 'Golden Age' narrative in which d'Hondecoeter's work is displayed in the Rijksmuseum. This is not to say that the Rijksmuseum is telling the wrong story, but it highlights that this is a limited version of history, focused and based on the aesthetic preferences of the white elite of Dutch society.

Furthermore, in *Intolerance* the paintings were removed further from their original context insofar as they were displayed through the use of modern, museal white walls and combined anachronistically with eighteenth-century featherwork. However, in this format, the exhibition brings the subject-matter closer to the historical, colonial context, by combining the paintings with Hawaiian featherwork that were collected in the eighteenth century. De Rooij invites the visitor to address and contemplate their own assumptions and biases of the 'other', and to engage with the complex legacies of colonialism that continue to shape our world today.

What Willem de Rooij has done is put d'Hondecoeter's paintings into perspective by placing them in a context that allows the underlying symbolism of the paintings to come out, by combining them with the feathers that bear importance to the Hawaiians. Therefore, there is room for the colonial history of collecting exotic birds and the status the paintings provided for their owners. However, without the labels and the publication readily available, the viewer is reliant on their own interpretation, based on their existing knowledge of the power structures behind the collecting and exhibiting of these paintings and objects.

What should be kept in mind when looking at the artworks in the context of any museal setting, is that the difference between reality and a representation of reality exists on a spectrum. In a museum such as the Rijksmuseum, art and historical artifacts are highly decontextualized, but shift from being completely taken out of context, to being placed in an ensemble with period furniture and earthenware. The former was the case for the display of d'Hondecoeter's paintings in 2009 in the Rijksmuseum, when the paintings were roped off and provided by a label, while the latter is currently the setting and has been on par with the mode of display as seen in c. 1950 (fig. 8). For example, the Delft Blue porcelain in showcases shows

the visitor the objects are merely on display, not as part of an interior or as a useable object.¹³⁸ On the other end of the spectrum there are period rooms. These recreate a near-complete copy of a historical interior, mostly in museums or in musealized buildings, such as castle Sypsteyn. These settings are to show art in a context of authenticity, to move the viewer further from the present, into the past.

Finally, we can consider on the paintings' appropriation as commodities today, in the context of the museum shop of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Both inside and outside the museum the paintings are commodified, and the content-matter is taken further out of context. In the museum shop of the Rijksmuseum (fig. 10) a small make-up pouch with a cropped image of the crane bird of *The Floating Feather* (fig. 2, no.4) sells for €17.95, a backpack for €89.95, and on the museum website a print of the painting can be ordered for approximately €50. In the context of a garden centre (fig. 11) the throw-pillow of *The Menagerie* purely functions as a decorative object, moving away from inviting contemplation the layers of meaning of the actual painting and its history in the museum. But should one have to? Is there a certain point that looking further than the decorative purpose of an object becomes futile?

When a d'Hondecoeter throw-pillow is displayed for sale together with the increasingly popular Papua shell necklaces the image as cultural artifact is diminished to a hip, decorative item for one's home. The object is appropriated into capitalist consumerism, another legacy of colonialism, just like the institutions of museums and zoos, which preserve the past and 'the unique'. Simultaneously, this maintains the status quo that allows for Western governments and multinationals to exploit natural habitats and their inhabitants, both human and non-human animals. While the paintings of Melchior d'Hondecoeter only show a representation of birds that were taken from their habitats for the sole purpose of being kept for the status that their owners derived from their rarity, or for the pleasure of the masses, the essence of the message, namely that the extraction and representation of exotic birds was part of colonial practices that people use still today to tastefully decorate their homes, shows that these colonising patterns have not drastically changed. If people today are not aware of the colonial background of the aviaries and menageries and the portrayed exotic birds, the colonial background of the Rijksmuseum, and their power to educate the public on culture also remain veiled.

What does it mean that until this day these paintings are revered, reproduced for commercial purposes, and on display in the museum? If we apply Vázquez' theory, it could be argued that the perception of what is deemed worthy of display, and perceived as aesthetically pleasing, is a continuation of what has been regarded as exceptional and unique during the colonial period by those in power.

¹³⁸ For example, "Flower Pyramid, De Metaale Pot (attributed to), after Lambertus van Eenhoorn, c. 1692 -c. 1700," The Rijksmuseum, accessed on January 27, 2023, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.422244>.

The paintings by d'Hondecoeter in the Rijksmuseum have been preserved and are displayed, because they are of course a great example of the skills of the artist, but also because the Rijksmuseum's collection finds its roots in the inventory of the royal estates. Today's mass reproduction as posters and home decorations, continues the maintaining of the colonial difference between the West and the colonized countries.

The realism of the portrayed animals is in line with the seventeenth-century artistic trends in the Dutch Republic. During d'Hondecoeter's career, he chose increasingly exceptional and rare animals to paint, which corresponded to the taste of his wealthy customers and patrons. The portrayed animals remain exceptional for their 'exotic' appearance in the Western gaze of today. Within the context of the museum and the market for the reproduction, there is no room for the underlying narrative of colonialism. The erasure of the colonized people and the displacement of their culture and nature, and the double erasure of this erasure, reduce the paintings and their subjects to a commodity primarily for aesthetic pleasure. The current display in the museum and the popularity of reproductions of the paintings reaffirms their place in modernity as objects that only fulfil an aesthetic purpose. This discourages the museum visitor, or the consumer in IKEA, to look beyond the assemblage of exotic birds.

When looking at the historical context in which the paintings were produced, it becomes apparent how these paintings are embedded in the colonial trade. D'Hondecoeter's clientele were part of the prosperous and established classes of society. These people oftentimes had stakes in the Dutch East India Company (VOC) or the Dutch West India Company (WIC). Furthermore, it was on the VOC and WIC ships that the portrayed animals were brought to the Dutch Republic. It was in the menageries and aviaries of the richest of society that the animals were held as symbols of status. The public menagerie of Blaauw Jan in Amsterdam was the exception that put the animals, including the people that were perceived as animals, on show for the general public. Just as the zoo is a residual institution of the colonial system, so is the museum holding the treasures and representations of the so called 'Golden Age' and exhibiting the former properties of, in this instance, King William III and Queen Mary Stuart II.

When looking at the subject-matter of the paintings, namely the birds, we see that there is a story being told that mirrors human behaviour. Whether they are fighting about feathers, or are looking at the viewer indifferently, it discloses contemporary views on morality. However, their representation of the former colonies and their connection to the colonial history of the Netherlands are lost on the general public in their mass reproduction as posters, lamps and throw pillows, merely lingering for the ornithologist or amateur birdwatcher to find out upon closer inspection. Furthermore, by omitting the historical context in the labels of how the birds were obtained and what their 'exotic' nature represents, the Rijksmuseum further shapes the narrative away from the colonial history of the paintings.

Vázquez has written

“Decolonial thought starts from the awareness that there is no modernity without coloniality; that the history of progress of western civilization cannot be accounted for without the violence of coloniality; that there is no possession without dispossession; that there is no claim to universality or contemporaneity without erasure.”¹³⁹

The possession of the birds depicted by d’Hondecoeter by the royalty and nobility of western civilization, taken out of their natural habitat and placed in landscaped gardens, shows the artificiality of western aesthetics. Furthermore, the notion of owning wild animals, as is the case for owning people, fits within the colonial thought. It is peculiar to talk of dispossessing peoples and animals. Who possessed them in the first place? The idea of ownership is itself fabricated. And this is a prevailing thought. The paintings are testimony of the colonial trade and their subject and all aspects concerning their display give a glimpse of how this part of history is thought about.

¹³⁹ Rolando Vázquez, *Vistas of Modernity – Decolonial Aesthetics and the End of the Contemporary* (Amsterdam: Mondriaan Fund, 2020), 8.

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Appendix: Paintings by Melchior d'Hondecoeter & Modes of Display



Figure 1: *The Raven Robbed of the Feathers He Wore to Adorn Himself* (1677). Oil on canvas, h 189cm x w 176 cm. Het Mauritshuis, The Hague. Object number: 59. Transferred to the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam in 2018, currently not on display (Object number:SK-C-1792).¹⁴⁰

Unfortunately, as the painting is momentarily not on display, there is no current label for this painting.

¹⁴⁰ "Melchior D'Hondecoeter, *The Raven Robbed of the Feathers He Wore to Adorn Himself*, 1677," Het Mauritshuis, accessed on July 27, 2022, <https://www.mauritshuis.nl/en/our-collection/artworks/59-the-raven-robbed-of-the-feathers-he-wore-to-adorn-himself/>.



Figure 2: A Pelican and other Birds near a Pool, known as 'The Floating Feather' (c. 1680). Oil on canvas, h 159cm x w 144cm. The Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Object number: SK-A-175.¹⁴¹

The label of A Pelican and other Birds near a Pool, Known as 'The Floating Feather' in the Rijksmuseum reads as follows:

"It must have been a great honour for Hondecoeter to receive commissions from the country's ruler. He made this regal bird scene for Het Loo, the palace of William and Mary. It features a pelican in the foreground, a cassowary behind it at the left, a flamingo and a black crowned crane. Water birds congregate in and around a basin, and a feather floats on the water's surface."

¹⁴¹ "A Pelican and other Birds near a Pool, Known as 'The Floating Feather', Melchior d'Hondecoeter, c. 1680," Het Rijksmuseum, accessed on January 6, 2022, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.8740>.



Figure 3: *The Menagerie* (c. 1690). Oil on canvas, h 135cm x w 116.5cm. The Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Object number: SK-A-173.¹⁴²

The label of *The Menagerie* in the Rijksmuseum reads as follows:

“Presented here are two squirrel monkeys from Central America, two white sulphur-crested cockatoos from Australia, a grey parrot from Africa and a purple-naped lory on a chain at the lower left – from Indonesia. Hondecoeter combined these creatures and several other splendid birds in this painting, which was destined for Het Loo, the palace of William III. It hung above the door of the king’s private apartment.”

¹⁴² “The Menagerie, Melchior d’Hondecoeter, c. 1690,” The Rijksmuseum, accessed on January 6, 2022, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.8744>.



Figure 4: *Landscape with Exotic Animals* (c. 1690 – c. 1692). Oil on canvas, h 169cm x w 156.8cm. The Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Object number: SK-C-1793.¹⁴³

¹⁴³ “Landschap met Uitheemse Dieren (Menagerie van Willem III), Melchior d’Hondecoeter, c. 1690 – c. 1692,” The Rijksmuseum, accessed on December 22, 2022, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.687539>.



Figure 5: A Hunter's Bag near a Tree Stump with a Magpie, known as 'The Contemplative Magpie'. Oil on canvas. H 215cm x w 134cm. The Rijksmuseum. Object number: SK-A-170.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ "A Hunter's Bag near a Tree Stump with a Magpie, Known as 'The Contemplative Magpie', Melchior d'Hondecoeter, c. 1678," The Rijksmuseum, accessed on June 29, 2022, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.8741>.



Figure 6: *A Hunter's Bag on a Terrace* (c. 1678). Oil on canvas. H 211cm x w 137cm. The Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. Object number: SK-A-171.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ "A hunter's Bag on a Terrace, Melchior d'Hondecoeter, c. 1678," The Rijksmuseum, accessed on June 29, 2022, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.8739>.



Figure 7: Room with paintings of the Utrecht School, including two paintings by Melchior d'Hondecoeter, and two by, c. 1900 - c. 1949. Photo. The Rijksmuseum. Object number: HA-00121142.¹⁴⁶



Figure 8: Room with furniture, three paintings by Melchior d'Hondecoeter, and other paintings, c. 1950. Photo. The Rijksmuseum. Object number: HA-0000019.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ "Zaal met Schilderijen van de Utrechtse School, Waaronder Landschappen, en op de Voorgrond een Bank voor Bezoekers, ca. 1900 – ca. 1949," Rijksmuseum, accessed on July 8, 2022, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.HARCHIEF.12142>.

¹⁴⁷ "Zaal met twee portretten naast een doorgang in het midden, ca. 1950," Rijksmuseum, accessed on July 8, 2022, <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.HARCHIEF.9282>.



Figure 9: Zaal HG-2.22 bovenverdieping west: 1600-1700: William and Mary, 2013. Photo. The Rijksmuseum. Object number: HA-0028694.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ "Zaal HG-2.22 bovenverdieping west: 1600-1700: William and Mary, 2013," Rijksmuseum, accessed on December 6, 2022, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/collectie/HA-0028694>.



Figure 10: A selection of d'Hondcoeter products at the museum shop of the Rijksmuseum, 2021. Own photo.

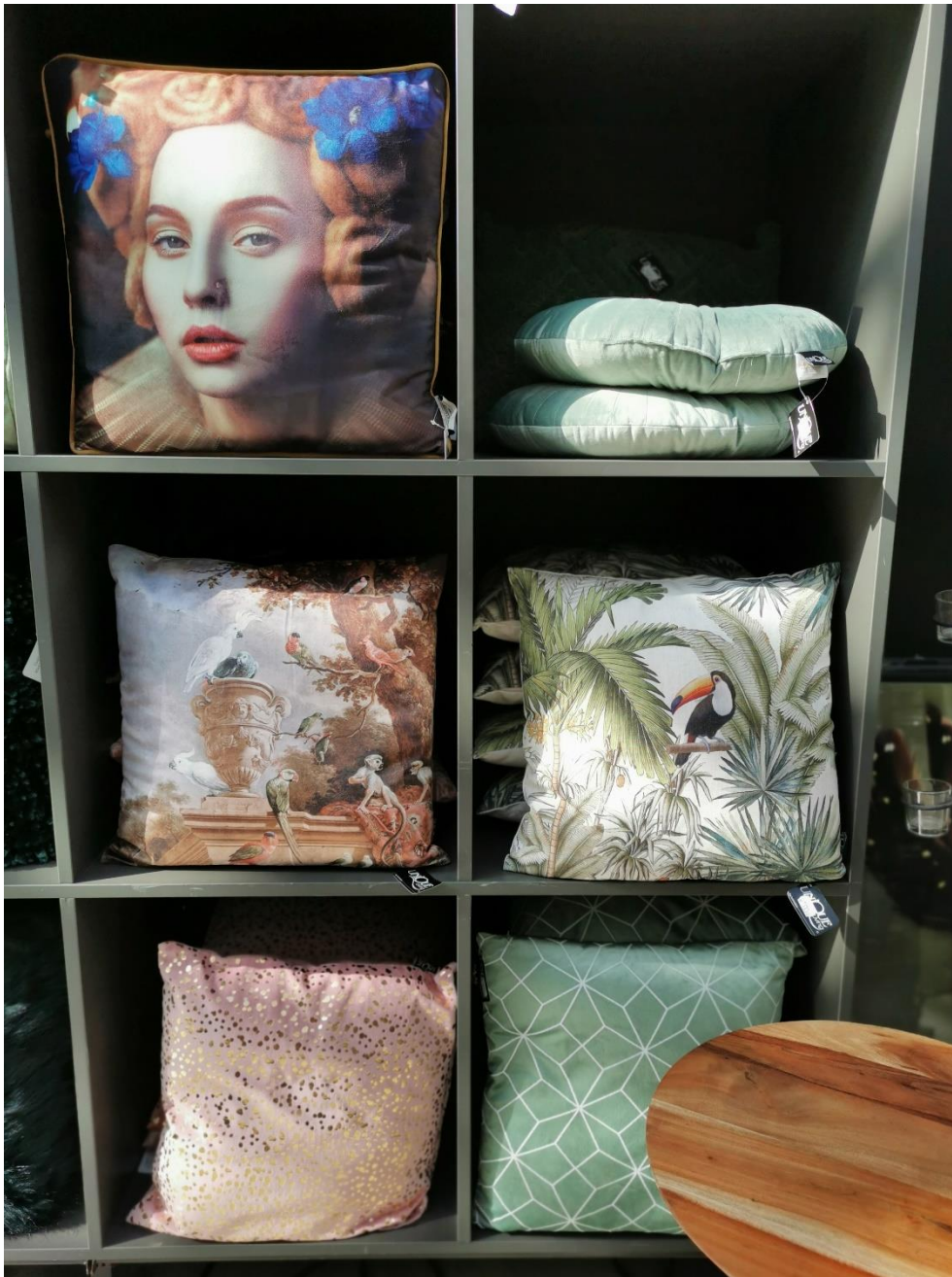


Figure 11: *The Menagerie* as a throw-pillow, displayed in *Tuinland*, a Garden Centre in Groningen, 2021. Own photo.