

## Café

Muy buenas tardes a todos presentes, y muchas gracias a Nanne Timmer por invitarme para ser parte de este aniversario, 40 años de *Lenguas y Culturas de Latino-América*. Y felicidades a todos los que han trabajado tan duro para hacer esto posible, que este estudio aún existe.

I will continue in English but it was simply emotionally necessary to start out in Spanish. When I started here in Leiden in 1988, one of the things that drew me to study here was the experience that everybody here on campus greeted each other in Spanish, it created this wonderful feeling of being seen, of being at home and at the same time in connection to the larger world around us.

As Nanne mentioned in her introduction, I am the head of the history department at the Rijksmuseum. And ever since I took on this role six years ago, I've regularly received invitations to have coffee. It's a luxury I rarely have time for, given my schedule. But it's a pleasure to have the opportunity to have coffee with all of you today. Although, since it's a celebration, champagne would be more appropriate.

I decided to call this talk "Coffee," since it gives me the chance to start with one of my heroes, Gabriel García Márquez. His 1961 novel, *El coronel no tiene quién le escriba*, starts out with a scene in which a nameless man is making coffee in his kitchen. He scrapes the last crumbs from the bottom of the can. The narrator then adds that this coronel, since the ending of the civil war, has not been able to do anything but wait. He walks over to his wife's room and gives her the cup. And she inquires: 'And you?' And he lies: 'I have already had my cup.'

García Márquez has this wonderful way of taking you right to the heart of the human experience, in all its contradictions: the scene makes you a witness to hunger, scarcity, patience, love, without mentioning any of those words, without labeling. The experience just *is*.

I'm going to tell you a little about my background, how I came to study Latin American Studies, my career, and the work I do at the Rijksmuseum. At first glance, it doesn't seem like an obvious path. But if I take into account the developments that have shaped the fields of history and heritage in the last few decades, perhaps it's not as illogical as you might think.

I arrived in Leiden in the 1987. I had lived in Curaçao, the Netherlands, and Suriname, and my view of the world was shaped by what I had experienced and seen. It was a world of colonels who were waiting and generals who were governing. A world of 'los de abajo' and the children of Sisyphus but also of the great indigenous civilizations, the revolutionary liberators, the award-winning writers. Of the Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, English, and French conquests, of the pain of the colonial era. And of the indigenous and Creolized culture, beliefs, and faith that gave so many people around the world the

strength to get up every day and go to work, and to sing and dance at night. ‘Ojalá que llueva café en el campo’, cantaba Juan Luis Guerra, and his voice inspired people to get up and let loose, to enjoy themselves, even—or rather, despite—the ‘tiempos de cólera’. He made even those around the world who didn’t understand what he was talking about dance. Here in the Netherlands, there are countless dance studios and salsa parties where people gathered and danced. Although part of that crowd was unaware of Latin American history, or the ‘costo de la vida’ in that part of the world, and the connections that exist with life here in the Netherlands.

That began to change in the 1990s, a period when many people of Caribbean descent began to demand recognition of the slavery past as part of Dutch history. Three decades later, that call has resulted in apologies from Prime Minister Mark Rutte and our king, Willem-Alexander. The colonial past is now part of our national history. Our national history is no longer just a story of power, conquest, and profit, but incorporates the notion that life is much more complicated: there is a flip side to everything, there is injustice, there is cruelty, there is the cost of living, there are those at the bottom. And at the same time: there is love, there is altruism, there is joy, there is beauty, and there is dancing. All aspects of life that García Márquez, Mariano Azuela, Orlando Patterson, Toni Morrison, Isabel Allende, and many others taught us. And today, Bad Bunny.

When I started working at the Rijksmuseum in 2017, I was hired on a temporary contract. The museum needed extra help to carry out a unique project: an exhibition addressing the history of Dutch colonial slavery across the four continents where it took place. I was a good fit for the role because I had written a dissertation on exhibitions addressing this topic in Ghana, South Africa, Suriname, and Curaçao.

The exhibition took the Rijksmuseum’s collection as its starting point, something that had never been done before. We managed to pull it off over the course of four years, as a team of curators and incorporating the contributions, knowledge, heritage, and voices of countless groups involved. The result was on display at the Rijksmuseum in 2021, at the United Nations headquarters in New York in 2023, and has since been traveling the world in the form of paper posters.

This is the poster exhibition in the Caribbean, and in Africa. The exhibition featured two portraits by Rembrandt of Marten and Oopjen Soolmans, a young couple who owed their prosperity to the colonial economy, specifically the sugar industry in Brazil. Oopjen’s family had lived in Brazil and had fathered children with an enslaved woman, which means she had enslaved, Black relatives. What moves me is the way this young woman in Africa touches this reproduction of Rembrandt’s work so gently and carefully, as if she recognizes that Oopjen’s story in Amsterdam is linked to the past of Africans in the diaspora, and that these portraits by Rembrandt are also part of her heritage.

The apologies offered by the prime minister and the king, and the way the Netherlands has been confronting its colonial past, have received widespread attention and

appreciation around the world. Similarly, the introduction in 2021 of restitution policies for countries colonized during the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries has led to a renewal of relations between these nations. In the cultural sphere, the minds and voices, the topics and exchanges and who we collaborate with on a daily basis have changed. In the diplomatic sphere, conversations have shifted, creating space for enduring dialogue on heritage, ownership, and how to build and shape the cultural field through collaboration.

Which brings us back to coffee.

When I started working at the Rijksmuseum in 2017, the idea was omnipresent that Dutch national history and colonial history were separate fields, related to separate collections, housed and presented in separate museum, researched and cared for by separate professionals working for separate audiences. While the Rijksmuseum was focused on great art and triumphant national history, the World Museum was there to focus on the colonized world. But in the years since then, by doing research, bringing together interdisciplinary teams, combining knowledge, we have taken steps in fortifying the awareness that throughout history, people have never been sedentary and by traveling and migrating, our stories and our heritage have become interwoven, intertwined.

When working on the integration of the colonial past in Dutch national history, one of the questions I got most was: but does that mean that I have to be ashamed of my history? And I always found the answer in García Marquez, in Toni Morrison, in the work of all those great writers that makes us all human beings, including our glory and including our failures and faults, but without ever essentializing.

If you look through our collection, searching for coffee, you will come across 20<sup>th</sup> century pictures of people having a 'bakkie troost', as we say in Dutch. But also gorgeous coffee sets dating back to the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. You will find paintings like these, where well to do families show off their coffee rituals here in the Netherlands and Europe. You will find paintings of similar rituals in completely different parts of the world, like here in Turkey. Also, you will find depictions of the places where this coffee was planted and harvested: idyllic pictures of plantations basking in the sun. Plantations owned by Europeans, in Brazil or Suriname, and also in Indonesia. Paintings mostly used to idealize ownership and wealth. But in rare instances, we also find pictures of those who harvested the coffee beans. Pictures taken mostly by Europeans, providing us with the gaze of the outsider. So it takes effort to try and find the story of the person behind the model.

At the moment, this is the work that has gained momentum in the museum world: finding the voices, finding the stories of those that were relatively voiceless for decades and sometimes centuries. The colonized, but also women in general, and, for example, religious diversity in the Netherlands. This allows us to bring across a world view that is more complete in representing different groups. But that also, like I learned when

studying Latin American studies in the 80's, includes the beauty and the pain, the conquest and those rising up against that. The struggle and the party.

To be able to do that, we are delighted to be working with partners in the Caribbean and in Spain. Recently, for our exhibition on Frans Hals, we had this incredible painting on loan which allowed visitors to stand eye to eye with this African young man, probably brought to the Netherlands by the Dutch WIC governor of Elmina in Ghana. This was a rare opportunity, because in the paintings in Dutch collections the African young men are mostly depicted with their eyes on the main character in the picture. This meant we could reflect on the political meaning of these 17<sup>th</sup> century paintings which I published in a catalogue brought out by the Museo Thyssen Bornemisza in Madrid.

For 2029 and 2030, we are working on exhibitions centralizing the early female leaders of the Low Countries, history we share with Spain and we could not bring to life without collaboration from all over Europe, including the Iberian Peninsula. Dutch political history has underrepresented the meaning of these women, in politics, the institutional world and culturally, so we are looking forward to changing that. In an exhibition on religion, we want to speak about common political and religious rulers, like Charles the V. This was one of his archers, who lived in Antwerp, part of the low countries back then. Note the insignia on his baret, which looks like a black Madonna, a phenomenon which has been studied more profoundly in Latin context than in the NL. And after that, we are dreaming of another exhibition on the Caribbean. Drawing on pictures like this one, the very first picture of a couple in Suriname, the parents of the every first minister of color here in the Netherlands, around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I hope that my experience in finding common ground by highlighting interweaving stories, by highlighting the human experience across boundaries and time, will inspire you to enjoy your studies and after that, surprise us with YOUR views, interpretations, and insights. To share while having a cup of coffee.

Valika Smeulders April 10 2026