



MAURITSHUIS

The Hague, Netherlands

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Executive Summary

The Mauritshuis bears the name of Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen (1604–1679), who commissioned its construction and was its first occupant. In early 2018, the Mauritshuis faced an intense but brief controversy following its earlier removal of Johan Maurits' bust from its foyer. Opponents such as Piet Emmer and centre-right to right-wing politicians, including Prime Minister Mark Rutte, argued against removing historical figures and images from public spaces, claiming

that such a desire demonstrates a lack of historical understanding and would result in an 'iconoclastic fury' erasing both heroics and wrongs. On the other hand, supporters of the museum's decision to provide more context on their namesake hoped it would be a step towards engaging critically with the Dutch slavery past. This case study explores the controversy's media frenzy, its ties to the broader public discourse on Dutch colonial history, and its impact on the museum's policies and programs.

Introduction

In the 1980s, Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza commissioned a cast of the 1664 bust of Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen (1604-1679) by Flemish sculptor Bartholomeus Eggers from a composite of marble stone dust and polyester resin for the Mauritshuis Museum (see cover image). In September 2017, the Mauritshuis removed its replica of Johan Maurits' bust from the foyer without publicity. After the bust's removal was mentioned in the media, it became incorporated into the context of a larger and ongoing societal debate on the public presence of the Dutch colonial past in January 2018, it caused a major but short-lived public controversy in which political leaders were also engaged. This case study aims to offer a full overview of the intense but relatively brief public contestation in early 2018 in relation to the more long-term and research-based critical exploration of Johan Maurits' history led by the Mauritshuis.

Background

Reopening the Mauritshuis

Following a major renovation, the Mauritshuis reopened in June 2014 with a temporary exhibition that explored the building's rich history and famous occupants.¹ The replica of the bust of Johan Maurits, who had commissioned the building's construction, was included in this exhibition. Once the exhibition ended in 2015, the museum moved the bust to its lobby behind the ticket counter. Other objects, such as an authentic eighteenth-century sculpture of Johan Maurits by Jan van Logteren, were used to show the multi-faceted life and legacy of the museum's namesake in a small semi-permanent display after visitors and staff agreed that it was important to provide this context. As such, as director Emilie Gordenker said in an interview, the museum did not think much of moving a replica bust of Johan Maurits to its depot in the summer of 2017.² At the same time, the Mauritshuis was contemplating how to continue exploring and addressing its colonial heritage, including the life history of Johan Maurits.³

¹ Mauritshuis, *Annual report 2014*; Mauritshuis, "Exhibitions from the past: Mauritshuis - The Building (27 June 2014 - 4 January 2015)," ; Zihni Özdil, "Slavernij-achtergrond Mauritshuis is zorgvuldig gewist," *Historiek.net*, July 2, 2014.

² VPRO et al., "Buitenhof," season 13, episode 3, aired January 21, 2018, on NPO1.

³ Ibid.

The Legacy of Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen in the Netherlands

Johan Maurits (1604–1679) was an ambitious member of the extended Nassau family, and in the Netherlands, he is often confused with his godfather and great-uncle, *Stadtholder* Maurits of Orange (1567-1625).⁴



Figure 1: 'Portrait of Johan Maurits, Prince of Nassau-Siegen, in oval frame with coats of arms and armour' Print by Cornelis van Dalen (II), after Govert Flinck [CC0 1.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

During the Dutch Revolt or Eighty Years' War (c. 1566/1568–1648), the noble Nassau family emerged as the military leaders that fought to protect the Dutch Republic. Besides positions

⁴ Mauritshuis, "Johan Maurits," accessed March 31, 2023.

within the army, their aristocratic status and familial ties to multiple European courts also qualified them for diplomatic posts.⁵

Despite his military accomplishments in the Netherlands and diplomatic assignments in Northwestern Europe, Johan Maurits is primarily known as 'the Brazilian' because he served as the Dutch West India Company's Governor-General of its colony in northeastern Brazil from 1636 to 1644. For an ambitious aristocrat like Johan Maurits, Dutch Brazil was an opportunity to increase his wealth and power and create an enduring legacy. Accordingly, he brought artists and scientists to Dutch Brazil to capture and explore the colony and commissioned major urban building projects. However, conversely, he headed destructive military campaigns and was heavily involved in the large-scale import of enslaved Africans to Latin America and the Caribbean.⁶

Upon returning to the Dutch republic, Johan Maurits deliberately created an attractive narrative of his tenure in Brazil by commissioning the prominent Dutch author Casparus Barlaeus to write a classic epic on his Brazilian accomplishments.⁷ For this purpose, Johan Maurits allowed Barlaeus to access his private archive. In contrast, as the book's commissioner, Johan Maurits actively pushed for further magnifications that did not correspond to reality.⁸ Because the curated narrative promulgated by Barlaeus' publication remained the principal source for Johan Maurits' assignment in Brazil, his public image as a gifted administrator and military leader who cared about the colony of Dutch Brazil and its inhabitants and who brought them religious freedom remained largely unchallenged until the 2018 controversy.⁹

Additionally, after World War II, in 1946, Queen Wilhelmina authorised the Royal Netherlands Marine Corps to add Johan Maurits' personal motto *Qua Patet Orbis* (wherever the world extends, see figure 1) to their emblem Dutch Marines have been carrying it ever since.¹⁰

⁵ Hendrik Richard Hoetink, "Some remarks on the modernity of Johan Maurits," In *A Humanist Prince in Europe and Brazil: Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen 1604–1679*, eds. Ernst van den Boogaart et al. (The Hague: Johan Maurits van Nassau Stichting, 1979), 6-11.

⁶ Erik Odegard, "Becoming 'The Brazilian': Johan Maurits in Brazil, 1636–1640," In *Patronage, Patrimonialism, and Governors' Careers in the Dutch Chartered Companies, 1630–1681* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 82–119.

⁷ Erik Odegard, *Colonial careers: Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen, Rijckloff Volckertsz. van Goens and career-making in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Empire* (PhD Thesis, Leiden University, 2018), 23-24; 162-163; 171.

⁸ Erik Odegard, *Graaf En Gouverneur: Nederlands-Brazilië Onder Het Bewind Van Johan Maurits Van Nassau-Siegen, 1636-1644*. (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2022), 11-17.

⁹ *Ibid.*; Please note, Johan Maurits did not establish the Royal Cabinet of Paintings Mauritshuis, which is the full name of the museum since 1822, and his collection is not part of the museum's collection. See e.g., Ellinoor Bergvelt, "Koningen en nationale musea in Nederland: Lodewijk Napoleon (1806-1810), Willem I (1814-1840) en Willem II (1840-1849)," *Leidschrift* 34, no. januari (2019): 17-37.

¹⁰ Mariniers Museum, "Qua Patet Orbis," accessed May 9, 2023; Hendrik Richard Hoetink, "Some remarks on the modernity of Johan Maurits," In *A Humanist Prince in Europe and Brazil: Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen 1604–1679*, eds. Ernst van den Boogaart et al. (The Hague: Johan Maurits van Nassau Stichting, 1979), 10.



Figure 2: 'Brazilian Landscape' Painting by Frans Jansz Post [CC0 1.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

The Legacy of Johan Maurits of Nassau-Siegen in Brazil

Johan Maurits is more well-known and seemingly less controversial in Brazil. However, despite adamant claims made by mainly Dutch people during the 2018 contestation, his public popularity does not necessarily mean that Brazilians consider Johan Maurits' actions unproblematic.¹¹

From marching bands to one of the busiest streets in Recife, many public places and organisations are named after Johan Maurits or *João Maurício*, as they know him in Brazil.¹² As a relatively uncontested historical figure, Johan Maurits is used in international relations between Brazil, Germany and the Netherlands. In June 2004, in honour of Johan Maurits' 400th birthday, the German Consul gifted a bronze replica of the bust by Bartholomeus Eggers to the State of Pernambuco and the City of Recife (see figure 3 below) on behalf of Germany.¹³

Eric Bessems, longtime correspondent in Latin America for Dutch news broadcast NOS, remarked in 2018 that Brazilians are unrealistically positive about Johan Maurits as the governor of Dutch

¹¹ NOS Nieuws, "'Omstreden' Johan Maurits is in Brazilië ongekend populair," NOS, January 22, 2018; Erik Odegard and Carolina Monteiro, "Slavery at the Court of the 'Humanist Prince' Reexamining Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen and his Role in Slavery, Slave Trade and Slave-smuggling in Dutch Brazil," *Journal of Early American History* 10, no. 1 (2020): 3-32.

¹² "Hoe Maurits van Nassau de held van Brazilië werd," *Elsevier Weekblad*, January 19, 2018; Machiel Bosman, "Johan Maurits (1604-1679): koloniaal bestuurder van Brazilië." *Historisch Nieuwsblad*, December 17, 2013.

¹³ Stichting Monuments of the Dutch West India Company (MoWIC), "E-JOURNAAL nr. 7," November 18, 2004.

Brazil. Although Johan Maurits governed only a small portion of present-day Brazil for eight years (1637 - 1644), Brazilians like to think that Recife could have become like Manhattan under Dutch rule.¹⁴ Bessems also points to a small group of historians that tries to nuance this popular narrative with no avail.¹⁵

However, there are Brazilian dissenting voices too. Since November 2020, the Galeria de Racistas initiative has added the bronze bust to its gallery of racists, demanding its removal.¹⁶



Figure 3: 'Statue of Johan Maurits of Nassau-Siegen at the Praça da República, in Recife' Image by Paulo Castagna [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

History of the Contestation

Prelude

Following the reopening of the museum in 2014, Zihni Özdil denounced the Mauritshuis for erasing its slavery heritage with an opinion piece in the Dutch online history magazine *Historiek*.¹⁷ A few weeks later, *Historiek* published a rebuttal by Piet Emmer, which was soon followed by a

¹⁴ Carolina Monteiro, Leandro Cascon, Mariana Françaço, "From Sugar Palaces to Colonial Fortresses: discussing the heritage of Dutch Brazil in the contemporaneity," *TAG Deva*, December 18, 2018; Joan-Pau Rubiés, "Epilogue: Mythologies of Dutch Brazil," In *The Legacy of Dutch Brazil*, ed. Michiel van Groesen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 284-318.

¹⁵ NOS Nieuws, "'Omstreden' Johan Maurits is in Brazilië ongekend populair," NOS, January 22, 2018.

¹⁶ Galeria de Racistas, "Maurício de Nassau," November, 2020.

¹⁷ Zihni Özdil, "Slavernij-achtergrond Mauritshuis is zorgvuldig gewist," *Historiek*, July 2, 2014.

reply from Zihni Özdil.¹⁸ This brief public exchange can be seen as a prelude to the controversy in 2018 with less static as it presents the same arguments, underlying ideas and division lines.

Prompt

The Mauritshuis removed their bust of Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen from the museum foyer in September 2017 without publicity.¹⁹ Its removal was first mentioned in the media on January 8, 2018, in an interview with curator Imara Limon, who expressed her approval of it, in *de Volkskrant*, a Dutch national daily newspaper.²⁰ Responding to a publication by Piet Emmer, Karwan Fatah-Black argued in an opinion piece in *NRC* against the reality of a current iconoclastic frenzy (*beeldenstorm*) towards Dutch heritage since only one statue of a Dutch historical figure was removed in 2017.²¹ Because of Fatah-Black's opinion piece, the national newspaper *NRC* was alerted to the case and on January 12, 2018, they published the first news items on the bust's removal.²²

Media Frenzy

The *NRC* news item alarmed VVD MP Antoinette Laan, who tweeted on January 14, 2018, that it is wrong and un-Dutch to deal with sensitivities by burying something and not discussing it openly.²³ PVV MP Martin Bosma followed, tweeting about a politically-correct iconoclastic fury without end.²⁴ Without much information or context, these tweets brought about the Mauritshuis controversy, which lasted for about a week.

Following the public outcry on Twitter, the removal of Johan Maurits' bust by the Mauritshuis suddenly became newsworthy six months afterwards. Because the news of the bust's removal coincided with the announcement that the J.P. Coen school in Amsterdam, named after the fourth VOC governor-general of the East Indies, Jan Pieterszoon Coen (1587 – 1629),²⁵ would change its name after 107 years, the public contestation became more emotional and muddled.²⁶

On Tuesday, January 16, the Dutch Parliament's first official working day after winter recess and a little more than a month before the Dutch municipal elections, the public-political debate moved from social media to national newspapers and television broadcasts, mostly opinion pieces and talk shows. PowNed interviewed Martin Bosma, Klaas Dijkhoff (VVD) and Jasper van Dijk (SP) from the Dutch Parliament for their daily news flash.²⁷ Elaborating on his earlier tweet, Bosma

¹⁸ Piet Emmer, "Het slavernijverleden van het Mauritshuis," *Historiek*, July 31, 2014; Zihni Özdil, "De drogredeneringen van Piet Emmer," *Historiek*, August 3, 2014.

¹⁹ Huib de Zeeuw, "Buste Johan Maurits weg uit foyer Mauritshuis," *NRC*, January 12, 2018.

²⁰ Bart Jungmann et al., "Hier zijn de Bruggebouwers van 2018," *de Volkskrant*, January 6, 2018.

²¹ Karwan Fatah-Black, "Vasthouden aan koloniale nostalgie helpt niemand verder," *NRC*, January 12, 2018; Piet Emmer, "Wordt ook Johan de Witt straks slachtoffer van een nieuwe Beeldenstorm?," *Trouw*, January 6, 2018; Piet Emmer, *Het zwart-witdenken voorbij Een bijdrage aan de discussie over kolonialisme, slavernij en migratie*. (Amsterdam: Nieuw Amsterdam Uitgevers, 2018).

²² Huib de Zeeuw, "Buste Johan Maurits weg uit foyer Mauritshuis," *NRC*, January 12, 2018.

²³ Antoinette Laan, Twitter Post, January 14, 2018, 9:01 PM @Antoinettelaan; Arjen Schreuder, "Hoe de ophef rond een buste ontstond," *NRC*, January 23, 2018.

²⁴ Martin Bosma, Twitter Post, January 14, 2018, 3:31 PM @marinbosma_pvv.; Arjen Schreuder, "Hoe de ophef rond een buste ontstond," *NRC*, January 23, 2018.

²⁵ Redactie *Historiek*, "Jan Pieterszoon Coen (1587-1629) – Stichter van Batavia," *Historiek*, December 2, 2019.

²⁶ Tom Kieft, "J.P. Coenschool verandert naam om koloniaal verleden," *Het Parool*, January 16, 2018.

²⁷ Omroep PowNed, "Mauritshuis onder vuur," aired January 16, 2018.

continued referring to the 16th-century Dutch iconoclastic fury, "It is too crazy for words, this politically correct *Beeldenstorm*".²⁸

A day later, on Wednesday, 17 January, an evocatively edited (decapitated) bust of Johan Maurits, stamped with the term *beeldenstorm*, was featured on the front page of the national morning newspaper *De Telegraaf*.²⁹ The corresponding news article briefly summarised historians Piet Emmer and Frank Ankersmi's viewpoint. Emmer and Ankersmi, both retired history professors, are rallying against rewriting history for a small group of activists and argue that "the moral vanity with which slavery is now condemned indicates a complete lack of historical awareness".³⁰

During the day, MP Antoinette Laan submitted an official request for a written answer about the busts' removal from the Minister of Education, Culture and Science, Ingrid van Engelshoven.³¹

That evening, Piet Emmer was a guest on *De Wereld Draait Door*, one of Dutch TV's most-viewed daily talk shows. Together with Karwan Fatah-Black and Taco Dibbits, Emmer was invited to talk about the heritage of slave history in the Netherlands. Host Mathijs van Nieuwkerk aptly introduced the two opposing sides in the debate. One side wants Dutch society to face up to its slavery past, while the other side argues that this is distorting history.³² Although this split largely characterised the Mauritshuis controversy, it stands out from related public debates because museum professionals joined the conversation from a different, more practice focussed, outlook.³³ For instance, Rijksmuseum director Taco Dibbits found a middle ground by saying he was against removing statues or images in general, favouring layered narratives of the past for present and future instead.³⁴

Later that evening, the discussion continued on *JINEK*, another popular daily tv talk show. Herman Pleij represented the side arguing against the trivial and silly removal of former heroes by 'sanitising' public spaces. Pleij did not face an opponent from the other side, but host Eva Jinek and the other guests joined the debate, which included exploring the related issue of providing context.³⁵ Individuals who argue against critical engagement with the past and changes in the public sphere perceive contested traditions and images as opportunities for history education. According to Pleij, people must understand that the statues of controversial historical figures do not honour them. Instead, they serve as landmarks for histories that have shaped Dutch identity. However, taking a stance similar to Emmer's, Pleij added that people must consider the historical context of these histories and not project today's notions onto the past.³⁶

²⁸ Ibid. (trans. Helene Peereboom). Italics added to indicate an untranslated Dutch term.

²⁹ Jan-Willem Navis, "Historici hard over aantasting geschiedenis: 'Stop de vervalsing'," *De Telegraaf*, January 17, 2018.

³⁰ Ibid. (trans. Helene Peereboom).

³¹ Antoinette Laan, "Het bericht dat de buste van Johan Maurits is weggehaald uit de foyer van het Mauritshuis," *Kamerstukken II*, kv-tk-2018Z00491, January 17, 2018.

³² BNNVARA, "De Wereld Draait Door," season 14, episode 8, aired January 17, 2018 on NPO1.

³³ See e.g., Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2016) and Esther Captain, "The selective forgetting and remodelling of the past: Postcolonial legacies in the Netherlands," in *Austere Histories in European Societies* (Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2017), 59-73 for critical studies on Dutch attitudes to Dutch colonial history.

³⁴ BNNVARA, "De Wereld Draait Door," season 14, episode 8, aired January 17, 2018 on NPO1.

³⁵ KRO-NCRV, "Jinek," aired on January 17, 2018 on NPO1.

³⁶ Ibid.

Apart from a brief comment by Dutch rapper Fresku, the media focussed mainly on the opponents for the next few days. Journalist and historian Wierd Duk from *De Telegraaf* was a guest on the WNL morning show on January 18.³⁷ And CDA party leader Sybrand van Haersma Buma boldly stated, "hands off the Mauritshuis and the Coentunnel," during an interview with *AD*.³⁸ During a radio interview, even Prime Minister Mark Rutte condemned the bust's removal, calling it a "crazy step" and stating that if a museum must remove the statue of its founder and name-giver, it should also change its name. During this interview, Prime Minister Mark Rutte revealed that, like many opponents, he is against "placing our current social views on history that is further away."³⁹

Controversy resolved

A week after social media triggered the public controversy over the museum's removal of Johan Maurits' bust, the televised interview with Mauritshuis director Emilie Gordenker on Sunday, January 21, 2018, ended the commotion. As was her intention, she quickly set the record straight in a *Buitenhof* segment of less than 15 minutes. She explained that the bust's removal was part of the Mauritshuis' aim to improve their telling of Johan Maurits' story by including all aspects of his life in a balanced and nuanced way, both the positive and negative elements. Referring to the statements by Prime Minister Mark Rutte, she pointedly said that she thought it was a pity that her neighbour did not cross the bridge between his office and the museum (see figure 4, the Mauritshuis is the classicist building at the waterfront and the little tower on its right is the Prime Minister's office) before he made those remarks.⁴⁰



Figure 4: 'Hofvijver, The Hague, 20221002' Image by Gilbert Sopakuwa [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/)

³⁷ BNNVARA, "De Wereld Draait Door," season 14, episode 9, aired January 18, 2018 on NPO1; WNL, "Goedemorgen Nederland," aired January 18, 2018 on NPO1.

³⁸ Laurens Kok and Jan Hoedeman, "Sybrand Buma: Jan Pieterszoon Coen is onderdeel van onze historie," *AD*, January 18, 2018.

³⁹ NOS, "Met het Oog op Morgen," aired January 19, 2018, on NPO Radio 1.

⁴⁰ VPRO et al., "Buitenhof," season 13, episode 3, aired January 21, 2018, on NPO1.

Following Gordenker's interview, Prime Minister Rutte tweeted that the removal of Johan Maurits' bust was a poorly chosen example for his argument against assessing the distant past by contemporary norms and that he would be happy to revisit the Mauritshuis soon.⁴¹

Decision-Making Processes

Legally, the Mauritshuis is a foundation and, therefore, an independent entity. However, through the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science's structural funding scheme *culturele basisinfrastructuur musea* (basic cultural infrastructure for museums), the Dutch national government structurally subsidises the Mauritshuis, accounting for more than 30% of the museums' revenue in 2018.⁴² As the Mauritshuis is a significantly publicly funded institute next to the Binnenhof, seemingly evoking a glorious Dutch past, the largely instinctive reaction of the public and parliament is understandable. Museums emerged within the nation-state framework, driven by nationalist ideology, to preserve and share the historical heritage of a specific society and culture. Despite the evolution of museum practices since the nineteenth century, public museums like the Mauritshuis are still generally expected to be "indicators of a nation's status and prestige".⁴³ Nevertheless, if subsidised museums do not violate their grant agreement, the ministry and the national government cannot interfere directly.

Dutch politicians can question governmental policies and actions, as MP Antoinette Laan did by submitting parliamentary questions to the politically responsible minister, Ingrid van Engelshoven (D66), who answered:

Through the basic cultural infrastructure, I enable museums to present Dutch history to a broad audience in cooperation with numerous other organisations and initiatives. I leave it up to the cultural institutions to determine how they give substance to this, both within and outside the institutions. It is important to me that, in this way, they make their own contribution to the reflection and deepening of an open and inclusive social conversation about Dutch history.

Changing views on history are closely linked to the debate on history itself. New insights constantly enrich the discussion on the significance of figures and events from our national history. It is desirable for municipalities and public cultural organisations, such as museums, to respond to this social discussion. Museums like the Mauritshuis can play an important role in such social discussions by providing additional context, reflection, and depth.⁴⁴

Politically, this concluded the Mauritshuis controversy but not the continuing debate on the Dutch

⁴¹ Mark Rutte, Twitter Post, January 21, 2018, 3:54 PM @MinPres.

⁴² Mauritshuis, Annual Report 2018.

⁴³ Geisler, Robert and Elżbieta Nieroba, "Museum Transition Toward Market-Oriented Identity: Between Social Issues and Public Policy." *Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo* 10, no. 4 (2022): 9.

⁴⁴ Ingrid van Engelshoven, "Antwoord op vragen van het lid Laan-Geselschap over het bericht dat de buste van Johan Maurits is weggehaald uit de foyer van het Mauritshuis," Kamerstukken II, kv-tk-2018Z00491, February 6, 2018.

identity crisis.⁴⁵ A year later, in 2019, Margriet Schavemaker's announcement that the Amsterdam Museum would no longer use the term 'Golden Age' was seemingly similarly condemned. For example, Prime Minister Rutte called it nonsense to revoke such a beautiful phrase, stating that the Dutch should be proud of their nation's seventeenth-century successes. However, despite the occasional resurfacing of the Dutch identity crisis, something had shifted, and the entry of the politics of representation started to impact Dutch museum practises.⁴⁶

The decision to calmly explain and justify the removal of Johan-Maurits' bust from the museum's lobby through an in-depth interview with director Emilie Gordenker on Dutch public television proved effective. Unfortunately, although the museum started actively communicating its motivations for storing the bust from the start of the commotion, the ensuing controversy overshadowed its efforts. However, by opting for a one-on-one interview instead of participating in a talk show, the museum managed to finally convey its message without getting burned by the fiery debate.

In the Management Foreword of the Mauritshuis' Annual Report 2018 its director Emilie Gordenker writes briefly on the museum's next steps:

In all the public outcry lasted less than a week, but it helped us to frame our position in the debate and gave focus to our upcoming plans to devote an exhibition to Johan Maurits.⁴⁷

Additionally, the 2018 Annual Report mentions that the Mauritshuis recruited Dr Erik Odegard to start an investigative study regarding Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen's role in Dutch Brazil.⁴⁸ Although the museum's preparations were already well-,advanced, the *Shifting Image - In Search of Johan Maurits* exhibition, which was on display from April 4 - July 7 2019, included the latest research from Erik Odegard. Its main aim was to "place the present-day societal discussion within a broader context" by examining "how the complex history of Johan Maurits and Dutch Brazil can be seen from different perspectives".⁴⁹ Following *Shifting Image - In Search of Johan Maurits*, the Mauritshuis continued researching Johan Maurits as a complex historical figure with the multi-year research project *Revisiting Dutch Brazil and Johan Maurits* from 2020 to 2021.⁵⁰

Lastly, as a member of the Museum Committee, director Emilie Gordenker contributed to the report for the Museums Sector Advice by the Council of Culture, which was published in April 2018.⁵¹ This report, which reflects the general viewpoint of museum professionals and cultural policymakers, states that "there is a societal expectation to frequently organise exhibitions that draw in many visitors and/or address current topics (such as diversity, slavery, LGBTQ+ issues, and

⁴⁵ Lukas van den Berge, "Dealing with Ambiguity: Johan Maurits, Black Pete and the Crisis of Dutch Identity," *Netherlands Journal of Legal Philosophy* 47, no. 1 (2018): 3–12

⁴⁶ Britta Timm Knudsen et al., "Introduction," In *Decolonizing Colonial Heritage: New Agendas, Actors and Practices in and beyond Europe* (London: Routledge, 2022), 1-21.

⁴⁷ Mauritshuis, Annual Report 2018, 39.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴⁹ Mauritshuis, "Shifting Image - In search of Johan Maurits (4 April - 7 July 2019)," accessed May 11, 2023.

⁵⁰ Mauritshuis, "Onderzoeksproject Revisiting Dutch Brazil and Johan Maurits," accessed May 8, 2023.

⁵¹ Mauritshuis, Annual Report 2018, 46.

gender disparities)".⁵² It also advises the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science to push for more attention to cultural diversity in the coming years.⁵³ And besides critically engaging with the past, the Mauritshuis has been actively involved in promoting cultural diversity since 2018 and has become more vocal about its inclusive initiatives.⁵⁴

Summary and Conclusions

After installing a permanent display on Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen, the Mauritshuis removed its replica of his bust from its lobby and stored it in September 2017. Unexpectedly, this led to a heated but short controversy in January 2018. However, as the news about the bust's removal had triggered but not informed the public debate, the controversy ended quickly with a televised interview with Mauritshuis director Emilie Gordenker.

This case study gives insight into the Dutch public debate on colonial heritage or rather its history. It provides a snapshot of the ongoing societal discussion right before or at a turning point. It shows that change is difficult and triggers resistance, even when it is not expected. However, in a speech on 19 December 2022, conservative Prime Minister Rutte, who was vehemently against critical engagement with the distant past, apologised for the Netherlands' role in the history of slavery.⁵⁵

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⁵² Raad voor Cultuur, *In wankel evenwicht*, April, 19, 2018, 4 (trans. Helene Peereboom).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

⁵⁴ Mauritshuis, "Inclusiveness and Accessibility," accessed May 8, 2023.

⁵⁵ Government of the Netherlands. "Government apologises for the Netherlands' role in the history of slavery," Press release published on December, 19, 2022; Mark Rutte, speech about the role of the Netherlands in the history of slavery, delivered on December 19, 2022.

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(Cover Image)

Cornelis van Dalen (II). "Portret van Johan Maurits, vorst van Nassau-Siegen, in ovale omlijsting met wapenschilden en wapenrusting Iohannes Mauritius Princeps (...) Markae et Ravensbergae Gubernator. etc. (title on object)." *Rijksmuseum*, May 11, 2023.

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About Contested Histories

Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon. Although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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