

## Supporting museums – more than caring for collections (‘Collectiewacht’ - A Dutch project aimed at assisting museums with collection care)

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### Background

It all began in 1990, when the Netherlands' former minister of culture Hedy d' Ancona approved the introduction of the *Deltaplan voor het Cultuurbehoud*<sup>i</sup> (Delta Plan for Cultural Heritage), a comprehensive plan aimed at preserving Dutch cultural heritage. The worrying condition of Dutch art and cultural heritage prompted the government in The Hague to allocate generous subsidies. Museums could apply for government funding, with the Dutch state covering 40% of the total cost. The remaining 60% had to be funded by the relevant province<sup>1</sup>, municipality or private individuals.<sup>ii</sup> Phase One applied to state museums, known as *Rijksmusea*, and ran from approx. 1996/1997. This period was followed by a second phase, which continued until 2000 and also included collections at non-state museums.<sup>iii</sup> The initiatives were highly varied and ranged from passive conservation to the restoration of individual items. The approval of subsidies was highly dependent on the cultural and historical value of the relevant collection. “Delta Plan categories” A - D were defined for this purpose. The long-term *Deltaplan voor het Cultuurbehoud*<sup>iv</sup> project did a great deal to raise awareness of the preservation of cultural heritage.<sup>v</sup>

The “Collectiewacht” project partly developed from these early initiatives, which were introduced across the country. The Delta Plan led to increased understanding of the necessity of preserving art and cultural heritage. It also paved the way for the ‘Collectiewacht’ project, which successfully appeals to small, medium-sized and large museums. While earlier advisory reports were left unread in museum cupboards, the Collectiewacht project now provides practical support, by means of a subscription system.

*Collectiewacht* is a specially tailored service, which aims to improve the condition of museum collections. Its objectives can be described as follows:

- Improving the condition of collections
- Item-specific background information
- Specialist support
- On-site cooperation
- Developing practical knowledge of museum staff
- Structural condition monitoring

Parallel to activities linked to the *Delta Plan*, in 1995, the museums authority of the Province of Utrecht independently launched the MusIP<sup>vi</sup> museum registration project, which became a national initiative in 2002.<sup>vii</sup> Whereas the Delta Plan did not consider the most basic work undertaken at museums – preparation of inventories, registration and documentation - to deserve support, the MusIP 2005 project covered the majority of Dutch museums. As a result, thousands of collections at hundreds of museums were now inventoried, registered and listed electronically on the dedicated MusIP website. The practical implementation of projects of this type was assigned to the *Erfgoedhuizen*<sup>viii</sup> (heritage centres) of the provinces, which have a supporting infrastructure and play a decisive part as a catalyst, innovator and common factor within the province, together with ‘museum consultants’. Across all the provinces, these *Erfgoedhuizen* work together via the *Landelijke Contact van Museumconsulenten* (LCM<sup>ix</sup>).

### Erfgoedhuis: regional funding

The *Erfgoedhuis* of the Province of Gelderland is known as *Gelders Erfgoed*<sup>x</sup>. As well as planning and implementing various projects, ‘museum consultants’ assist approx. 200 registered museums and historical societies with museum education, exhibition supervision, cutting-edge media, documentation, folk culture, marketing and other fields, as well as collection care, which is also known as *behoud en beheer* or “preventive conservation”. They focus on the preservation of museum pieces and providing support for individual

museums on issues linked to various conservation measures. Various methods are used for the preventive monitoring and conservation of museum collections. Climate testing equipment or suitable museum materials are used to remove damage factors in exhibition and storage areas. But this only resulted in recommendations, which were in no way compulsory for the museums. Depending on the commitment of the museum management and (usually voluntary) museum staff, it was possible to achieve positive results in the field of *behoud en beheer* (preventive conservation). However, most reports were left unread on the shelves even if follow-up visits were conducted. In order to counteract this factor, the *Collectiewacht* project was set up in 1995 at the initiative of *Gelders Erfgoed*.



# Collectiewacht

## Collectiewacht – The idea

*Collectiewacht*<sup>xi</sup> continuously monitors collections, most of which can be found in museums. A professional approach and specialist expertise are essential when it comes to providing added value when advice is given. For this reason, eleven restoration teams focusing on various fields of expertise were put together for the *Collectiewacht*. These groups are based primarily on the traditional material categories that are most frequently found in museums: Paintings & Polychromy, Metals, Books & Written Documents, Wood & Musical Instruments, Glass & Ceramics, Textiles and new fields, such as Plastics in Modern Art. *Gelders Erfgoed* was also responsible for coordinating the project. The Erfgoed Gelderland partnership was entrusted with implementing the project.<sup>1</sup>

## Collectiewacht – The concept

When it comes to working closely with materials and items, a full inventory of the collection is vital. Most museums in Gelderland had taken part in the MusIP project and already digitised their collections. The *Collectiewacht* was able to take advantage of this development. Most of Gelderland's museums work with Adlib registration software. A special *Collectiewacht* version of the software was developed, which makes it possible to export and add new *Collectiewacht* information to data concerning museum items.

The start phase concept was adapted and made more flexible. It is divided into the following stages:

- Stage 1            Intake & selection of material (by the coordinator)
- Stage 2            Initial assessment. The *Collectiewacht*, or more precisely a restorer from the relevant field of expertise, prepares a single inventory and defines priority levels.
- Stage 3            Subscription visits, which are conducted over 2 years. In partnership with the museum, the *Collectiewacht* coordinates the steps taken to attain these priority levels each year, which are individually adjusted to the needs of the museum.

These sub-stages are explained in greater detail below.

### Stage 1:

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<sup>1</sup> See also Coöperatie Erfgoed Gelderland, EMAC presentation, Dr. Marc Wingens, Gelders Erfgoed, The Netherlands

As soon as a museum becomes interested in taking part in the *Collectiewacht*, it is sent a contract and a comprehensive questionnaire concerning how it prepares inventories. It includes questions on the following and other aspects:

How comprehensive is the collection?

What are the museum's collection objectives?

Does it have a collection plan? Is the collection registered and digitised?

Annual summaries of climate and light values are requested. All of this makes it possible to gain a clear picture of the situation at the museum. At the same time, collecting this data helps the museum to prepare for the first visit of the project coordinator. Exhibition and storage areas are briefly inspected. The accessibility of items is assessed. The availability of item numbers is checked by means of spot checks. The completeness of data registration is discussed. Initial concrete plans are made for the visit of the applicable restorer or *Collectiewachter* (collection curator). In addition, technical data concerning the relevant material category is exported from the museum software.

Only item information is filtered out, which is relevant for the *Collectiewacht*. This information consists of the item number, name, description, material, period of creation and location.

### **Stage 2:**

Equipped with this information, the *Collectiewachter* first visits the museum, in order to make an initial assessment. This one-off visit takes up a whole day, during which the condition is assessed of the maximum possible number of items from this material category, with at least one museum worker. This assessment is based on five different priority levels, ranging from 5 = very good (no action necessary) to 1 = very poor (immediate measures required). At the same time, priority levels are defined for the item itself and for its environment. For example, a parchment document may be in outstanding condition in material terms, but it may be stored in a shoebox that is not acid-free. It goes without saying that this item would be assigned Priority Level 5 and its environment (the box) Priority Level 1. The software makes it possible to digitise this data immediately. The museum's information is not overwritten, but new fields are added. This enables the *Collectiewachter* to arrive at conclusions concerning the state of preservation and other aspects, such as the authenticity of the item.

Many collections are so comprehensive that they cannot be assessed within a single day. In this case, it is helpful, particularly with textile or paper collections, to use the *Steekproef* (sampling) method (ICN 2000) described by the ICN<sup>xii</sup>. According to this method, for example, every 5<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, etc. item is selected and evaluated from collections that consist of comparable items (e.g. hats). This makes it possible to gain a representative picture of the collection.

This initial assessment results in a detailed report, in which charts show the distribution of priority levels, in relation to the number of assessed items. Experience has shown that the clear presentation of results, by means of charts, for example, is an extremely effective communication tool for museums, in terms of telling staff how collections need to be preserved. Every visit and report is therefore specially planned and tailored to the situation of the relevant museum. Together with the charts, the summary includes a variety of tips and advice on how to protect, conserve and restore the collection. Finally, practical arrangements are made for the follow-up visit. This includes planning the ordering of suitable museum materials, such as acid-free boxes and listing all items that were assigned Priority Level 1 for their environment. Another example is listing wood items with Priority Level 1, which are actually being biologically attacked. Measures that can immediately be implemented are discussed at this stage.

### **Stage 3:**

'Subscription' visits are conducted during the second and third year of membership. Items that were assigned Priority Level 1 during the initial assessment are subjected to a follow-up inspection. If their condition has improved in the course of the year, e.g. following woodworm treatment, the priority level changes from 1 to 2. For example, Level 2 indicates that wood joints have become loose and the item cannot be transported.

The first part of the subscription visit can be seen as a continuation of the initial assessment. During the second part of the visit, small practical preventive and conservation measures are implemented at the museum, in the presence of the *Collectiewachter*. These measures can be highly varied in nature. Examples include packaging and cleaning items.

The outcomes of all these visits are also summarised in a report. The “initial assessment” Excel file is adjusted, so that a list of priorities is produced for each item. If the changes affecting each item within the same year are shown in a chart, this also produces a clear picture of the progress made within the material category.

### **Practical example: Kasteel Huis Bergh**

By means of a concrete example, we will now explain the measures, which are briefly outlined during the subscription visits.

From the very beginning, Kasteel Huis Bergh in s’Heerenberg<sup>xiii</sup>, which lies just over the border near Emmerich, has been a *Collectiewacht* member and now has three material categories: Wood, Books & Documents and Metals.



Within a year, a massive amount has been achieved. In March 2010, the Books & Documents *Collectiewachter* first visited the castle for its initial assessment.



It is a good example of how varied this type of collection can be. It includes book fragments, copies, drawings, prints, photos, framed works, etc. Samples were taken from 500 paper and 1500 parchment items, so that their condition could be assessed. Outstanding documentation and item registration made it possible to locate and assess all the items quickly. Together with the museum worker, a list of priorities was prepared, together with an action plan. In 2011, the *Collectiewachter* came for his first subscription visit. Comprehensive preparatory measures were implemented, based on the detailed initial assessment report. In the room, where the works were removed from their frames, new acid-free capsules and buffered sheets had already been prepared. The latter were folded to create envelopes during the visit. *Collectiewachters* and museum workers got down to work together. Items were removed from their frames and condition descriptions were prepared. When necessary, item numbers were listed and items were photographed, before being returned to their frames or packed in the appropriate boxes. Materials, which may cause damage to the items, such as metal clips, were immediately removed.

The subscription visit, which looked at the Metals material category at Kasteel Huis Bergh, focused on storage conditions and prevention of damaging environmental factors. Of course, a weapons collection is vital in this type of historic building. Together with knight's armour, swords and lances, the Metals collection includes coins and precious vessels. Most damage to metal items is known to be caused by corrosion. Fortunately, no serious corrosion processes were detected on the items. The temperature and relative humidity are appropriate. However, one major problem is that (especially young) visitors like to touch real armour. Hand perspiration and moisture combined with salt, acid and grease attack the metals. Unfortunately, however, it is often not possible to prevent the items from being touched. For this reason, items of this type were cleaned and a protective coating of micro-crystalline wax was applied. The metal wires used to hold the knight's armour together were replaced by fish wire. A further measure involved vacuum packing (sealing) silver items in PE film.

### **Collectiewacht – The results**

It becomes clear that small preventive measures, implemented with specialist support and at relatively little cost, can often result in major progress in terms of preserving art and cultural heritage. Specially tailored projects and individual support at museums have turned out to be the most successful approach. The hands-on *Collectiewacht* concept has proved itself and shows that the push to improve damage prevention, as described in the *Deltaplan voor Cultuurbehoud*, can be realistically achieved.

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### **Literature**

Trouw (Nied. Zeitschrift), 03.03.1995 edition

Trouw (Nied. Zeitschrift), 25.04.1995 edition

ICN Informatie, De steekproef als hulpmiddel bij collectiebeheer. No. 4. Amsterdam 2000

### **Illustrations**

Fig. 1 Collectiewacht Gelderland logo

Fig. 2 Kasteel Huis Bergh, Collectiewacht Gelderland

Fig. 3 Subscription visit (Books & Documents), Kasteel Huis Bergh, Collectiewacht Gelderland

### **Footnotes**

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i Further information: Deltaplan Cultuurbehoud Newsletter. No. 1 July 1992 - No. 15 May 1996. VWC /OCW.

ii TROUW 03.03.1995

iii TROUW 25.04.1995

iv Additional government documents: *Vechten tegen Verval* and *Kiezen voor Kwaliteit*

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- v Friendly letter from Nina Duggen (27.09.2012), inspector, Erfgoedinspectie (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science)
- vi MusIP=Museum Inventarisatie Projekt, website: <http://www.musip.nl>.  
Please see: Coene, Steven. Marsfelder, Sandra. Museumcollecties indelen. MUSIP als nieuw instrument voor collectiebeheersing. Utrecht 2000. De Rijke, Marianne. MusIP: Eruit halen wat erin zit. De database Collectie Nederland als bron voor museumbeleid. LCM. Utrecht 2005  
The original MusIP version, developed by the Province of Utrecht, was also based on the A-D categories described in the Delta Plan. Problems in other provinces later led to the Delta Plan categories only being used at institutional level and no longer being used country-wide.
- vii Friendly letter from Marianne de Rijke (27.09.2012), Landschap Erfgoed Utrecht, previously MusIP Utrecht project manager
- viii Erfgoedhuis= broadly similar to the museums authorities of the federal states (Länder). (They are not regional state authorities, as only some of their funding comes from the province, while the remainder is derived from member contributions, etc.).
- ix Further information on the LCM: [www.museumconsulenten.nl](http://www.museumconsulenten.nl), list of addresses of all “museums authorities”
- x [www.gelderserfgoed.nl](http://www.gelderserfgoed.nl), known as the Erfgoed Gelderland since 2013, which has its registered office in Arnhem.
- xi [www.collectiewacht.nl](http://www.collectiewacht.nl)
- xii ICN= Instituut Collectie Nederland, has not existed as a separate institution since 01/2012. Research department now based at the RCE = Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed (state cultural authority). In addition, restoration training is no longer provided by the ICN. New training opportunities are available at the University of Amsterdam (UvA): Conservering en restauratie van cultureel erfgoed (known as Restoration Studies).
- xiii Information on Kasteel Huis Bergh: [www.huisbergh.nl](http://www.huisbergh.nl)