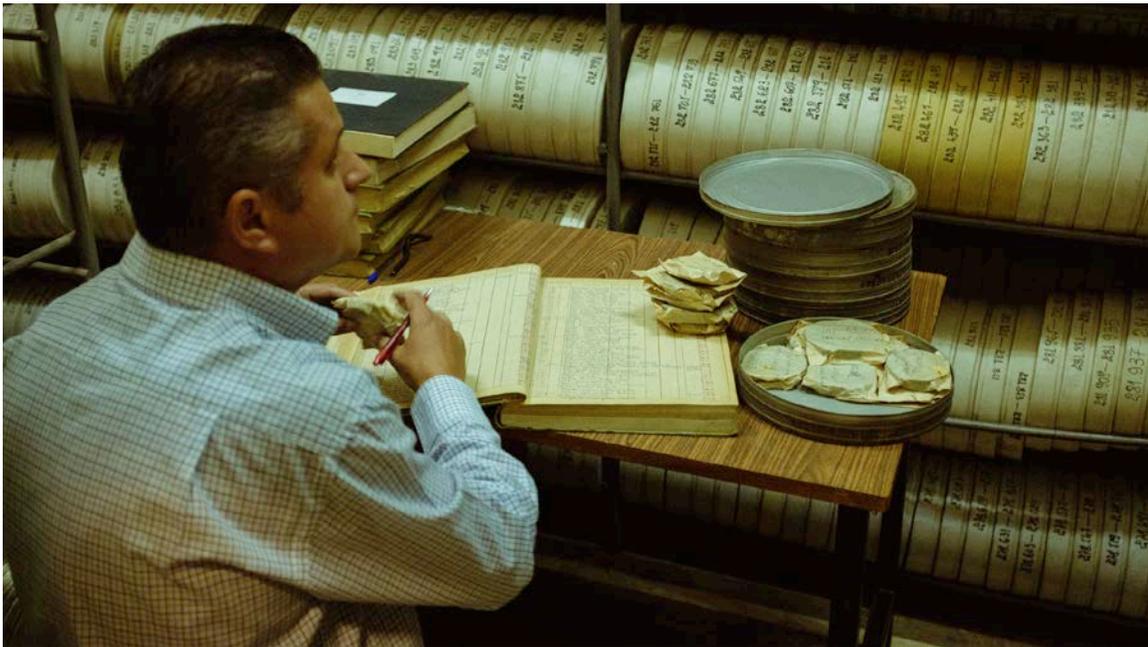


LIVING HISTORY



The past is a source of inspiration and conflict. It is an anchor for personal and collective identity and awakens feelings of nostalgia. It also challenges us to come up with innovations. European society is facing major challenges. Studying the past can help us make the world more sustainable, inclusive and economically healthy in three ways: by affording us insights into our actions, by inspiring us to seek creative solutions to societal issues, and by creating connections.

To diagnose societal challenges correctly, we need to take the long view. A longitudinal approach will help us recognise patterns and illuminate the concepts from which we derive our research and policy insights. The Western world appears to have only a short-term memory, however. It will be impossible for us to understand or tackle financial crises adequately if we focus solely on the recent past. Climate change is not a recent phenomenon, and neither are migration and globalisation.

As a knowledge-based society, the Netherlands has become uniquely proficient at studying nature and culture from an historical perspective. We also have impressive longitudinal datasets on water management, the climate, population surveys, governance, the economy, finance, migration, linguistics and culture. These datasets have been digitised and made available in recent years and are interlinked. It is therefore the perfect moment to benefit from this extensive knowledge system.

The cultural value of heritage

Besides deepening our understanding, knowing about the past can also inspire us by shedding new light on historical solutions. Heritage consists of what people care about; it mobilises and stimulates public engagement in both a positive and negative sense (for example in stereotypes and exclusion). It is important that we learn to make better use of the cultural value of heritage – alongside the more dynamic, strategic deployment of the past that has evolved since the nineties – on behalf of society and as a source of innovation.

Understanding and coming to terms with the past allows us to take a broader view of issues, put matters into perspective, and use earlier experiences to tackle present and future challenges and to inform future generations.

Besides promoting interdisciplinary and even transdisciplinary research, this route represents a dynamic, subject-driven approach to heritage. There is no objective, indisputable stock of heritage that must be protected by isolating it. Rather, heritage is about the continuous redefinition of objects in constant interaction with people. This approach to heritage is central to this route: the past is not dead, it is alive and is constantly being reinterpreted. Three game changers are pertinent at this point in time: issues related to sustainability and temporality; changes in governance; and the escalation and polarisation of public debate. The impact of this route is that it will lead to new instruments that can analyse our complex relationship with the past and make a greater contribution to the future.

Sustainability and temporality

Although the Club of Rome's alarming report (*Limits to Growth*) was issued almost 45 years ago, it is only relatively recently that society has shifted its focus towards sustainability. By studying the meaning of the past within and for a sustainable society, this route aims to develop actual solutions to sustainability problems. Subjects of study include the recycling and reuse of data, objects, materials and buildings. But there is more to sustainability than recycling. Generally speaking, it is about dealing with the material and immaterial traces of the past with a view to the future, about questions of temporality: how do we deal with historical accumulations of art and craftsmanship, with places of remembrance, with archives, with traditions, in our rapidly changing world? We cannot keep everything. But how do we keep the things that we would rather not replace now, with a view to sustainability?

Knowledge retention

The durability of knowledge has both a cultural and an economic dimension. After all, it is expensive to keep reinventing the wheel. That is also true of research and data collection; not having a standardised, durable and acceptable method for storing historical data impedes the longitudinal analysis of patterns, monitoring and modelling. Digital durability is not only about data, then, but also about organisational structure. Important questions that we must ask as we refocus on durability, and that should lead us to develop new instruments and modes of action, are: how can historical knowledge help us achieve dramatic, innovative and sustainable landscape transformations? How can we effectuate the sustainable transformation of largescale 'young' (post-war) heritage sites despite the enormous pressure on space? How do we guarantee the endurance of historical objects and buildings that we would like to preserve, including objects made of modern materials such as plastics, sheet metal and concrete?

Expert citizens

Armed with better access to information, greater mobility, prosperity, leisure time and more education, well-informed, vocal and engaged citizens have claimed a major role for themselves in the discourse about how to deal with traces of the past and the role of the past in the present. This is true in the digital domain, where end users and heritage collections share the same data space, and it is increasingly true in the material domain as well. New knowledge about the past based on material vestiges preserved in the Dutch landscape, archaeological remains, museums, archives and the built environment has traditionally been regarded as the jurisdiction of academic and government institutions. What is new is the role of citizen science, with ordinary people contributing to our knowledge of the past through local initiatives and digital platforms. Citizen science has the potential not only to contribute significantly to research and datasets in archaeology as well museums and archives, but is also getting the public more involved in spatial planning. Ordinary people are increasingly taking responsibility for the durable production of, access to and storage of digitised and digital born heritage. The roles of heritage consumer and heritage producer, or of maker, curator and user, are converging.

Important issues raised by the rise of citizen science concern emancipation and democratisation. Experience is increasingly being regarded as knowledge. How do we go about evaluating such 'embodied knowledge'? What does the changing role of the public mean for that of professionals? How do we unite different sources of knowledge and use them to recognise patterns and trends and to develop scenarios?

Although challenging, the combination of scientific and citizen data collection, analysis and knowledge may lead to unexpected solutions that allow us to preserve our heritage and contribute to society's challenges of today.

Contested heritage

The dynamic nature of society is leading to growing diversity in our view of the past and to considerable variety in our affective engagement with it. Examples include the controversy surrounding the Dutch folklore figure 'Black Pete' (*Zwarte Piet*) and the Netherlands' involvement in the slave trade, as well as the changing role of religion and religious repertoires in our daily lives. How can a society engaged in emotionally charged processes of heritage-making foster social cohesion? How do we deal with increasingly polarised debates about individuality and identity, with so many different emotional claims being made on the past? It is precisely in this context that it seems important to invest in historical awareness and heritage wisdom. But what does that mean in actual practice? What didactic or educational instruments do we have available? What role can the past play in a society in which many different groups bring their separate histories to bear and nurture conflicting heritage values?

In a context of societal polarisation and the politicisation of identity formation, research programmes draw attention not only to divergent voices and multiple perspectives but also to a more activist attitude, for example the struggle for decoloniality. The call for engagement has consequences for how we deal with the past. Those consequences also affect academic research, which does not take place in a vacuum. Researchers are facing new challenges, which this route intends to acknowledge by developing new instruments that allow us to deal with a myriad of changing realities.

Connection

Although heritage research is already interdisciplinary to a great extent, research projects in other domains would benefit by taking the historical dimension into account, an aspect that they often lack. The aim is to add a more holistic, transdisciplinary dimension to that research. The game changers listed above also require a more demand-driven form of research, in co-creation with the authorities and the public, by developing an even closer connection with societal sectors than already exists. It is precisely that connection that will produce benefits for knowledge accretion and for society.