

□ **He's gone, close the curtains**

A round of applause for the wondrous world of puppet theatre at the *Puppetry Museum* in Vorchten, the Netherlands.

“He's gone, close the curtains” is an expression that the old *peepshow showmen* used to shout when they closed up their theatre after the show at the fair. In his *kijkdoos* (a *peep-box*), you can see landscapes, special events, famous buildings or people, and even battles. The figures and attributes can be moved with the aid of strings or sticks.

The peepholes are sometimes fitted with a magnifying glass. A magical atmosphere can be created by having light, either natural or from a light source, shine through coloured panes in the box.

The showing in a peepshow theatre usually lasts just a few minutes and the *rarekiek* (peepshow showman) explains the scene. After the showing, the showman closes the viewing hole or draws the *curtains* across.

You could say that the peep-box is actually the predecessor of the television and the computer. And with a bit of imagination you could think that the Puppetry Museum is just a rather large peepshow. A peepshow full of surprising and unexpected glimpses of scenes. You find yourself in a succession of puppetry tableaux: a puppetry scene you can literally walk through, learn from and perhaps even get lost in.

Otto van der Mieden

Born in 1945 in The Hague, *Otto van der Mieden* is a puppeteer, and founder, director and curator of the Puppetry Museum. Since 1970 he has been collecting anything and everything to do with international puppetry with great passion: both historical artefacts – such as *shadow puppets*, *paper theatres*, *wayang figures*, *hand puppets*, *rod marionettes*, *rod puppets*, *literature* and *graphics* – and *contemporary pieces* of puppetry art. The collection, which is housed in the Puppetry Museum in Vorchten, has been open to the public since 1984. Vorchten is a little village in the northeast of the province of Gelderland, near the river IJssel.

Besides its own ever-changing temporary exhibitions, the Museum also organizes *travelling themed exhibitions* at home and abroad.

□ **Try-it-yourself**

In the Puppetry Museum, its stately home dates from 1914, visitors are guided playfully through various rooms where they can admire the different exhibitions. Children and adults alike can take an active part in the *educational treasure hunt* and *try-it-yourself game*. They can try out the various puppetry techniques for themselves and become acquainted with the different characters. There are regular *puppetry demonstrations*, and visitors might be lucky enough to see a performance in the ‘Petit Théâtre’. Unique excerpts from puppet plays by various international puppet theatre performers can be heard and watched on request. It is also possible to browse through the Museum's extensive archives or to study in the *library* [2] containing more than seven thousand international titles. If you wish to do so, please make an appointment.

□ **Trijntje Peterselie's kitchen**

You can take a stroll through the *Poesjenellen cellar*, a cosy reminder of the underground places which form the backdrop to the adventures of the *Poesjenellen* [6] (rod marionettes from Antwerp), or sustain the inner man in the buffet named after the Dutch Judy (*Trijntje Peterselie*). Even the snacks and drinks get in on the act here, taking their names from popular folk puppet theatre characters and attributes such as *Katrijn's coffee*, a *cafetière Guignol*, *gallows soup*, *swazzle candies* and *Arlecchino's apple turnovers* [10].

□ Changing exhibitions

Otto creates a new design for the Museum's display each year – with the aid of folk puppet theatre expert *Hetty Paërl* from Amsterdam – so as to bring various moments in time and space, emotions and theatre sensations together in ever-changing ways. By combining widely differing artefacts and activities, he has been able to create unusually atmospheric rooms in which almost anything seems to be possible.

*P*alindrome

In the Puppetry Museum, just as in Otto's name – which reads the same backwards or forwards – it makes no difference where you start or finish: the Museum is itself a *palindrome*. Visitors can lose themselves in a labyrinth full of puppetry glory and fun. All the exhibitions and presentations complement each other, but are equally exciting for themselves. The artefacts in the rooms all spin the same sort of web, bringing together a myriad of meaning. They can be admired for their inherent aesthetic quality, or for their contribution to the overall effect. An effect that comes to life in and through the visitor's own powers of imagination.

A semantic chain

The exhibitions invite visitors to interact with the figures and characters, and to discover what they have to say about historical and contemporary social issues. They can show how much of their significance depends on their mutual relationship, their link in a long and coherent *semantic chain*. The figures seem to find their own voices and encourage the onlooker to consider their characteristics in terms of their country of origin, class, gender and identity. The way in which the themes interact with each other, and divulge their meanings, depends largely on the imagination of the museum visitor. It is his or her fantasy, in the end, that allows the exhibits to come to life.

□ *M*useum logo

On the left-hand side of the museum *logo* [7] you can see *Jan Klaassen* [4], the Dutch cousin of *Mr Punch*: he is wielding a *club*. On the right you see the cheerful descendant of the Italian *Pulcinella*, Jan's wife *Katrijn* (the equivalent of the British *Judy*). She is waving a *carpet beater*. She is playfully tugging the letter 'E' out of the name of the museum with a string wrapped around her foot, pretending she is the puppeteer who is holding all the strings. This extra letter 'E' is a play on words in Dutch: combining a play with playing, meaning that this is not only a museum where you can look around, but specifically one where the visitor is himself asked: "Do you want to try it yourself?"

The figures in the logo also refer to various other distinctive leading characters from the tragi-comic nineteenth century folk puppet theatre, including the German *Kasperl* [5], the French *Polichinelle* and, of course, the British *Mr Punch* [1] and his wife *Judy*. These comic archetypes, with their oh-so-recognizable homely ups and downs, in reality turn a mirror onto their esteemed audience.

The figures from national puppet theatres, both male and female, allies and opponents, embodied in figures such as the *devil* and *Death*, the *monster* and *authority*, the *landlord* and the *doctor*, the German *Gretl* and the French *Mama Gigogne*, get up to just as many pranks and have the same idiosyncracies as we – people of flesh and blood – do, only they are larger than life caricatures and that makes them funny.

□ Gender

Cultures all over the world have, at some time or another, used puppets instead of people as a way of giving meaning to the world in which they live. Although some characters and physical forms are found in different regions and times, puppets usually reflect the specific features of the world in which they were created. Their characters reflect that society.

The relationship between the sexes in puppetry has a meaningful cultural aspect: it says something about the way in which that society is organized. So it is not surprising that such aspects lie at the heart of puppet theatre, just as do other crucial aspects by which man orders the society in which he lives, namely through gender, generation and social class.

Pulcinella: both male and female

The Neapolitan *Pulcinella* [9], who has a special exhibition at the museum, personifies and dramatizes these issues.

One of the most noticeable characteristics of this personage is that it is both male and female at the same time. *Pulcinella* is *hermaphrodite*.

Some *Pulcinella* figurines, photos and prints show a carnivalesque male figure, sitting on the back of an old crone in such a way that they become one. His upper body is dressed as *Pulcinella*: a white body stocking and a white hat, with his face hidden by a black half-mask. The upper body of the woman is, in fact, a puppet. *Pulcinella*'s dangling legs are nothing other than stuffed trouser legs with a pair of shoes attached to them. The whole figure is a risqué allusion to the power struggles that still define our own society today.

□ The devil's egg

In 'The devil's egg', a play for hand puppets, *Pulcinella* is seduced by a very nice hen. Poor animal: *Pulcinella* desires her, not with his heart but with his stomach. He kills the hen, roasts it and eats it up. His stomach swells up and he gets terrible cramp. This turns out to be labour pains, because shortly afterwards *Pulcinella* lays an *egg*. He incubates it. When the shell breaks, lots of little *Pulcinellinos* hatch out.

□ Applause

The Puppetry Museum invites visitors to give content to our history and give free rein to our fantasy in a personal 'mini theatre museum'. No single visitor can predict whether, how and to what extent the artefacts and puppets will affect him. What stories can we attribute to them? Whose voice will be given to the figures? The curtains are closing. *Applause!*

□ Internet

There is a lot more information about the Puppetry Museum to be found on *internet*. The Museum's website [8] – www.poppenspelmuseum.nl – is a colourful experience, richly adorned with illustrations and animations. The website contains general information about the museum and also background information on the various themed exhibitions. Most information is available in Dutch, French, German and English.

The site www.poppenspelmuseumbibliotheek.nl is intended as a source of information for a wide audience. It contains information about the collection, the museum's library and about puppet theatre in general. The texts and the many illustrations form – as it were – a *puppet theatre encyclopedia*.

□ Puppert theatre alphabet

One important component of the website is a *Puppet Theatre Alphabet* with nearly five hundred entries. This Dutch-language section contains an explanation of the terms, expressions, puppetry techniques, characteristic folk puppet theatre figures, important people and concepts.

Via the bi-lingual website www.geheugenvannederland.nl/poppenspel2 you can view around four thousand posters, prints and photos all on the subject of puppetry and related arts. Via the website www.poppenspelmuseum.nl/onderwijs you can follow a Dutch-language *puppetry treasure hunt* on the subject of folk puppet theatre.



Puppetry Museum Pamphlets

In the *museum shop* you will find a wide range of postcards, puppetry games, documentation, educational texts, books, puppets and other puppetry requisites.

The distinctively styled *Puppetry Museum Pamphlets* published at irregular intervals by the Puppetry Museum highlight puppetry related subjects of lasting or temporary importance. By means of these pamphlets and the Poppenspe(e)lmuseumnieuwsbrief/Puppetry Museum Newsletter on internet, the museum publishes information about activities, special events, exhibitions, publications and other issues of interest in and around the museum. A 'Pamphlet' can also be used to provide informative material about an exhibition. Some pamphlets are also available in French, German and English.

□ Newsletter and Scribblings

All young visitors who complete a *Puppetry Museum treasure hunt* receive a *Doepak*: the *Puppetry museum's junior newsletter*. Doepak presents some unusual theatre forms, far beyond the confines of our own fantasy! Doepak aims to stimulate the development and creativity of children and other interested parties by bringing them into contact with various art forms in the domain of (folk) puppet theatre, so that they learn to understand and appreciate them better.

Doepak consists of a Newsletter and *Scribblings*, an activity sheet. The newsletter is cheerful, educational, fun and colourful. The Scribblings suggest ideas and opportunities to work with various puppetry forms and techniques.

□ Doepak

The name 'Doepak' is the phonetic transcription in Dutch of the Czech word *dupák*. A *dupák* figure [3] moves in jerky movements like a *rod marionette*, stamping across the puppet theatre stage. Both the Newsletter and the Scribblings ramble through the wondrous world of puppet theatre. Just as a *dupák* becomes taller and shorter during his performance, so the Doepak playfully highlights greater and smaller puppet theatre subjects.

Where the *dupák* swings his arms wide as he twirls around, Doepak embraces the international world of puppetry and related arts with its hints and tips, questions and answers, illustrations and DIY activities.

□ Illustration: paper frontispiece theatre. Imprint: Verlag C. Burckhardt, Germany (nineteenth century). Postcard No. 89 033. Extra: supplement I and II.

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