

Curaçao Layers, by Avantia Damberg

Commissioned by the Tropenmuseum for *Our Colonial Inheritance*

Several artists have created new works for *Our Colonial Inheritance*. Avantia Damberg is one of them, and she created a large installation called 'Curaçao Layers'. It is displayed with the theme *The Road to Freedom* in the exhibition. In her work, Damberg also pays homage to the indigenous people who lived and ruled Curaçao before the arrival of the Spaniards. The memory of that people has all but disappeared from modern life.

Curaçao culture takes central stage in three-part installation

Visual artist Avantia Damberg (1977) lives and works in Curaçao. Her work centres on the Curaçao culture and invites people to identify with it. History has played an important part in shaping that culture. And Damberg gives it a fresh look with materials from nature and everyday life. She is known to the public for, among other things, the coloured steps of the Otrobanda stairs in Willemstad, the capital of Curaçao.

For *Our Colonial Inheritance*, she created a huge installation consisting of three parts: ceramics, textiles, and wood. With this work, she calls attention to the lot of the indigenous people of Curaçao, the transition from enslaved to free people, and the resilience that only made the Curaçao people grow. The work is displayed in the room titled *The Road to Freedom*. This room addresses the fact that people rebelled against the colonising powers from the very beginning, through armed resistance, protests, art, books, and language.

Contemporary resistance

Damberg's work can also be seen as a sign of resistance. Resistance to the erasure of the memory of the indigenous people of Curaçao. The Curaçao language and culture are given centre stage in the installation. When asked about her drive, she quotes from *Caribbean Ties; connected people then and now*, an exhibition magazine. "*The Caribbean was the first place where Amerindian-African-European intercultural dynamics were played out. Particularly in the Greater Antilles, the Spanish experimented and developed strategies of conquest which turned out to be essential to the gradual expansion of their control over the rest of the continental Americas. Although indigenous Caribbean peoples were at the centre of the first waves of contact, they became largely invisible within colonial narratives.*"

About Curaçao Layers

Damberg's Curaçao Layers consists of three parts.

The work starts at the beginning

Part 1 Ceramics as a link between then and now

For this reason, a recurring subject in the artist's work is the graphic design in the ceramics of the indigenous people of Curaçao: the Caiquetíos. And the mark they left on Curaçao's civilisation when the Spaniards came. "Ceramics is a durable material that will last for many years to come. But it also goes back thousands of years into the past." Therefore, the first part of the artwork consists of graphic designs that the Caiquetíos used on their ceramic vases and bowls, here drawn on shards. The decorations were painted with iron oxide. The decorations were painted on in iron oxide. The Caiquetíos used this material, as did the people before them, who used it in their rock drawings.

Part 2 *Textiles referring to freedom and possession*

This part contains the manumission letters printed on textile. This type of letter proved that you were a free man or woman. By the same token, it was tangible proof that you had once been someone's property and that you finally had the right to call yourself a human being as of 1 July 1863, when slavery was abolished in the West Indies. The manumission letters used by Damberg come from the National Archives in Curaçao. The letters mention the surnames of former enslavers and enslaved persons that are still common in Curaçao today.

Part 3 *wood as a sign of flexibility and strength*

This part consists of the first and final stanzas of the national anthem of Curaçao. Together, these make up the abbreviated version that is usually sung. Damberg says: "If there is anything that unites us as a people, it is music, and especially this song, a song of the people. I always get emotional when I hear it, even though it's played on the radio every day at noon - I don't really know why." The lyrics are uplifting, and Damberg has used the national anthem in her work before. This part of the work is made of wood. "Because wood is flexible and only becomes more beautiful and powerful with everything it endures. This fits the development of Curaçao's population."

About *The Road to Freedom*

Our Colonial Inheritance is based on ten themes. Such as Trade & Encounters, Language, The world as a Supermarket, Home, and The Road to Freedom.

Resistance is the focus of *The Road to Freedom*. From the very beginning, people in the colonies rebelled against the colonisers. They protested, fled the plantations, or went to war against the colonial army. The ideals of the colonised often inspired the resistance. Writers, politicians, and artists played an important role in articulating and imagining an alternative, more just world. Through their books, speeches, and paintings, the intellectuals and freedom fighters inspired others. People like writer Anton de Kom and politician Sutan Syahrir, and entire generations, right up to this day. *The Road to Freedom* is an introduction to their ideas. To the heroes of the resistance from the past, and the successors they inspired. And to contemporary visual art dealing with this theme.