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Alumna Lieke Wijnia curates new exhibition at Museum Catharijneconvent



photography Marco Sweering

Lieke Wijnia was one of those students for whom it was clear from the start what her academic focus at University College Utrecht would be: she was determined to do 'something' with Art and Culture. She is now curator of Modern & Contemporary Art at Museum Catharijneconvent – the national museum for Christian art and heritage in The Netherlands. We talked to Lieke about her time at University College Utrecht, the Mary Magdalene exhibition which is now on display, and her educational and professional journey, which has taken some unexpected turns, but eventually led her to where she hoped to be.

Lieke, what did you do after UCU?

After graduating from University College Utrecht in 2006, I pursued two Masters: Cultural Heritage at Utrecht University, and Art History at Courtauld Institute of Art in London, where I specialised in my personal interest: French art of the second half of the 19th century.

I initially applied for the Master's Programme Museum Curator in Amsterdam, but I was not admitted. This was a disappointment for me, as I was sure I wanted to engage more in curatorial work, but back then my broad education was not considered the right background for this programme. I knew I had to figure out alternatives ways to get there, and the two Master's I completed turned out to offer a great combination of heritage studies and art history.

After completing my Master's, I did a lot of project based work. My first job was in a gallery, but there I learned that a commercial environment wasn't right for me. I had the ambition to do a PhD, but again I faced rejection a number of times. Just when I decided to let go of the idea, a friend told me about a vacancy for a PhD position at Tilburg University, that focused on a combination of Religion, Heritage and Culture Studies. I immediately sensed that for this position, my interdisciplinary education was an advantage. And indeed I was offered the job!

Upon obtaining my PhD, I spent several years of working as Postdoc and lecturer (at University College Tilburg). Then I applied – and was hired for – my current job as curator at Museum Catharijneconvent, where I instantly had the same gut feeling as when I applied for my PhD; my broad and generalist background would be a perfect match. I love the combination of research, working with objects and the connection with the public.

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What does a work day look like for you?

As for most people, my day starts with emails, emails, emails...

When we work on the preparation of an exhibition, we collaborate in a broader project team consisting of a curator (me), education, marketer, objects registrar and a project manager. Really a lot of people are involved. And currently we are also working on plans for a new presentation of our collection: we aim to do more storytelling and work more thematically in our displays. This is a multi-year effort though, it won't be ready for another four or five years.

What I also enjoy is answering questions from the public. Sometimes people contact us because they think they may have an interesting object for the museum. Especially early on in preparation for the Mary Magdalene exhibition, there was quite a buzz surrounding the project, and many people reached out to us.

The idea for an exhibition on Mary Magdalene already existed before I started working for Museum Catharijneconvent. It was a logical follow up to previous exhibitions on other important individuals in the history of Christianity.

One of my favourite objects from this exhibition is an installation by American artist Patricia Cronin who created an altar for girls and women in the Magdalene Laundries in Ireland. In these places unmarried pregnant women were put to work and exploited until well into the 20th century. It shows that Mary Magdalene as a symbol for women's promiscuity and sinful behaviour is still prevalent in modern times. This installation is about real life, and the impact perception and judgement can have on peoples' life.

How do you look back to your time at University College Utrecht?

I recall how little I knew at that time. Enrolling at University College Utrecht proved to be a fantastic first step to move out and become independent. I got to know the world through the international community. Even when you have a pretty good idea of what you want to do in the future, life will always take unexpected turns and offer opportunities where you didn't expect them. This is why I am happy I chose the broad and internationally oriented curriculum at UCU, rather than a more specialised Arts and Culture study programme.

University College Utrecht teaches you to look at things from different perspectives and I still benefit from this in my job. When we work on an exhibition, I am open to including other art or image forms, including contemporary music and film. Others may look at that differently. A reviewer called the Mary Magdalene exhibition a 'pinball machine', and I take that as a compliment. I believe our multidisciplinary approach created the right starting point for building the exhibition.

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Do you have any advice for current students?

Explore your possibilities and dare to ask! If you develop an interest in something, find professors, specialists and other professionals who know a lot about it, and ask them about their field of expertise. Most people are most willing to give advice and help you; you don't have to do it all by yourself.

More information

More information on the Mary Magdalene exhibition can be found on the website of Museum Catharijneconvent. The exhibition is on display until 9 January 2022. In order to visit you need to book a time slot. Aside to her work as curator at Museum Catharijneconvent, Lieke Wijnia will assume a teaching position at UCU in September 2021. She will be co-teaching the Museum Studies (fall) and Heritage (spring) courses with Tijana Zakula.

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