

Opening
Speech Judith van Kranendonk

The Atlantic Day
3th of November 2011, 14 hrs.

Excellencies, representative of UNESCO, representatives from the embassies and countries in the Atlantic World, researchers, colleagues and other honorable guests: Welcome to the Atlantic Days! I have the honor to open the first of the Atlantic Days, here in het West Indisch Huis in Amsterdam, the former headquarters of the West India Company.

Our former prime minister has challenged us several times to be more enterprising, more adventurous. 'Show your VOC mentality', he said, and his exclamation has become since a well-known saying. I doubt very much if our present prime minister would challenge us to show a WIC mentality. The West India Company, especially the first one, was an investment company in war with Spain and in conquest on the American continent. Yes, in yesteryears we were proud of this spirit of enterprise, our admiral Piet Hein was a national hero and we honored him in a well-known song. But times have changed and in the twenty-first century we look back at this episode in an other way. And we can do so, because we still have the sources of that history.

The prime reason for organizing this conference is the newly acquired UNESCO Memory of the World status of both the archives of the West India Company and of the Middelburgsche Commercie Compagnie. These archives give insight into the history of the European expansion into West-Africa and North- and South-America. They tell us about conquest, trade, slavery and more. And just like the settlements of the WIC in Africa and America, the archives are spread all over the Atlantic World. They are a perfect example of what Mutual Cultural Heritage is about, since they are significant for the history of the countries that host these archives, but also for other countries. The WIC archives connect the Netherlands with numerous countries and, at the same time, connect countries among themselves: Brazil, Surinam, Guyana, the US, the Dutch Caribbean and Ghana.

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science together with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs started investing in Mutual Cultural Heritage cooperation since the year 2000. Sustainable maintenance and management of mutual heritage thereby ensuring preservation of mutual heritage, strengthening cultural identities, stimulate socio-economic growth in tourism, education and employment; these are the overall goals of the Mutual Cultural Heritage policy. The nomination of the WIC archives was done by the Nationaal Archief and its counterparts in the WIC related countries. The joint nomination is by itself a perfect example of what the Mutual Cultural Heritage program aims at: cultural cooperation at an international level, thereby strengthening connections and raising local awareness of the shared history.

I would like to congratulate the Nationaal Archief and its counterparts with the status of the WIC archives as UNESCO Memory of the World. We hope that now this important historical source will survive for humanity. By digitizing the sources and facilitating training in Dutch language and paleography more and more researchers in different countries will be able to make use of these archives. Today we will hear more about the efforts of the Nationaal Archief and its international counterparts in this framework.

Ladies and gentlemen, archives are part of a nations memory: democracy prevails on transparency of records. Not only of historical records like the ones we are highlighting here today, but also the ones that, probably, will be born digitally today. Our political responsibility demands not only caring for the past but also caring for the future preservation of digital born archives. The Nationaal Archief will act upon these challenges the coming years.

I would like to end by looking at the future. In these times of financial crises, there is a tendency of looking inwards, limiting the scope of international cooperation. I am very pleased to inform you, however, that in June of this year the Dutch government stated that the MCH-Program will be

continued after 2012. Both our ministries advocate the opinion that it is important to stay active at an international level, investing in bilateral and multilateral cultural relations. And of course we will monitor our activities to the economic reality and the changing needs of society. Brazil for example, a growing economic power, has a great deal of knowledge on paper conservation to offer. We can inspire each other and learn from each other. We should ask ourselves the question: What can we offer each other? We share a past, let's share a future!