

Contribution ID: 93

Type: **not specified**

Inside/Outside the ‘Box’: Boundaries, Materiality and Affect in the Early Modern Home

Friday 19 September 2025 14:30 (1 hour)

Panel Description:

Boxes are often thought of as containers to enclose, conceal or protect items. This panel brings together three case studies of objects located within the interior spaces, found in the early modern Dutch Republic, across the Indian Ocean, and in Sri Lanka, all of which constitute personal objects with which their owners and makers maintain an intimate connection.

Objects located within these private spaces have often been analysed through the lens of fashion, decorative types, time period, or their users. With the advent of sensory history and the history of emotions, we can adopt new approaches to reconstruct how individuals, from makers to owners, would have physically encountered and interacted with objects and their materiality.

In this panel, we seek points of commonality in affective engagement with personal objects, even though our objects are found in distinct cultural contexts. By taking a closer look at the qualities that make up a ‘box’, these case studies demonstrate how boundary-making and materiality became significant in the eye of the beholder. In this way, we propose to reassess the ‘box’ as a concept and as an effective form in early modern interior spaces.

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Presenter: Christine Quach, Doctoral Candidate, University of Maryland

Title of the paper: Capturing Time: Temporal Shifts in Boxed Enclosures

Beds have a notably box-like character and appearance in the seventeenth century which raises questions about the relationship between the inside of the “box” and the exterior world. If a person is sleeping inside the box-like confines of a bed, how does their temporality differ from the one on the outside? Is there any form of interaction between the interior of the bed and the room on the exterior? And by extension, could

temporality be implicated in boxes in general, as their contents are contained at one moment and sealed off from the business of the world? This paper explores the temporal interactions between the objects inside boxes and their exterior environment. I examine how items kept in boxes play a key role in the ways in which temporality manifests inside the confined space. As temporalities may shift based on a box's content, the boundaries between the interior of the box and its exterior become blurred. Using phenomenological concepts, I explore how the enclosed space becomes permeable depending on the state of the object contained and the box's wall material. As the border between interior and exterior dissolves, temporality takes on a more complex meaning for the enclosed object.

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Presenter: Nur'Ain Taha, Doctoral Researcher, Utrecht University

Title of the paper: Whalebone Wonders: Materiality, Craft and Knowledge of Baleen Boxes in Early Modern Netherlands

At the start of the Dutch whaling industry in the early seventeenth century, the lack of knowledge in hunting and processing whales led to various attempts to find ways in maximising profits from this dangerous and high risk trade. From the covered whale oil to the utilisation of whalebone, the Noordse Compagnie undertook extensive efforts, collaborating with merchants and craft makers to maximise the commercial potential of various whale by-products. This paper examines the seemingly simple baleen boxes not merely as functional containers but as objects that are embedded with knowledge. How has the expansion of the Dutch whaling industry affected the knowledge and understanding of these marine mammals? How has encounters with whale byproducts affected the Dutch craft making industry? The shaping of the baleen into bodies of objects required craft makers to understand not only its material properties, and develop new techniques to fully exploit its potential. It also entailed various processes of administration such as regulation of patents. Through the materiality of the baleen boxes, I explore not only the knowledge of craft making, but also the long history of the Dutch whale industry in the early modern period as reflected in these objects.

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Appendix: List of Images

Keywords

Box, boundaries, temporality, materiality, affect, knowledge

E-mail

n.b.taha@uu.nl

Affiliation

Utrecht University

Position

Doctoral Researcher

Short Biography

Christine Quach is a doctoral candidate at the University of Maryland, College Park, where she specializes in early modern northern Europe. Her current work primarily focuses on the interactions between people and space as mediated by the objects they kept around their home. Her dissertation project explores the temporal connotations associated with boxes owned and used by women in the Netherlands and England during the

late seventeenth century. As the 2025–27 Kress Institutional Fellow in residence at Leiden University, she scours archival materials and regional museum collections for signs of women's boxes and their personal relationships to these ubiquitous household items in an effort to uncover how these objects ultimately paralleled key milestones within a woman's lifetime.

Nur'Ain Taha (Ain) is a doctoral researcher at the Department of History and Art History, Utrecht University, The Netherlands. Since 2023, she has been a part of the NWO-Vici 'The Dutch Global Age' project, 2023-2028. Her research within this project focuses on the global materiality and makings of objects that connects the Low Countries and the world beyond Europe by peeling their layers to trace the origins of their raw materials, the techniques of their making as well as the identities of their makers. How did Netherlandish and non-European makers make sense of the foreign in various aspects –from their forms, materials, and techniques? Through an investigation of the materials and the reconstruction of these objects, her project seeks to understand the process of (re)making, as well as the production and exchange of knowledge that took place within them. With an object-centred approach, she also hopes to unravel the complexities embedded in the histories of these objects and highlight the history of the invisible makers from the world beyond Europe.

Previously, Ain completed an MA in Asian Studies (Arts, History and Culture) at the University of Leiden and a BA in Arts (Southeast Asian Studies) from the National University of Singapore. Her interest in looking at the global trajectories of objects and the interconnections between Asia and Europe was very much influenced by her work experience working in the arts, heritage, and museum industry in Singapore. As a former Programmes Manager at the Malay Heritage Centre, her work focused on creating content and programmes that engage both local and regional communities, artists, and academics. Ain's other research interests include the history of collecting in colonial empires as well as tracing the history of diplomatic objects exchanged between Europe and the Malay Archipelago in the early modern period.

Primary authors: Christine Quach (University of Maryland); Nur'ain Taha (Utrecht University)

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Session Classification: P.4.2. Inside/Outside the 'Box': Boundaries, Materiality and Affect in the Early Modern Home

Track Classification: Organised panels