

GUIDELINE FOR RELIGIOUS OBJECTS

Handreiking roerend religieus erfgoed

Brief description of the Guideline

The Guideline was developed to support religious communities with assessing the significance of religious artefacts and deaccessioning religious objects in churches. Many churches and monasteries are closing their doors. This has major consequences for our religious heritage: it is expected that in due time around 150.000 religious objects shall no longer be used.

The Guideline was initiated by Museum Catharijneconvent and developed in close cooperation with the Foundation for Ecclesiastical Art & Artefacts in the Netherlands, the main religious organizations (amongst them the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Church of the Netherlands) and national heritage institutes.

The Guideline consists of two tools: a significance guide and a roadmap for deaccessioning and disposing religious objects. Not only have religious communities participated in project boards who developed the Guideline, they are also the primary users. Religious communities feel great responsibility for their religious heritage. Important is the view of the owner of the objects when assessing the significance.

The Guideline is the first tool in the world that deals with assessing the significance and disposing of religious objects. The project team, together with the project boards, has translated scholarly heritage views into an easy-to-use Guideline.



Detailed summary of the Guideline

Religious life in the Netherlands

Religious life in the Netherlands is changing dramatically. As in every European country traditional Christianity is decreasing. Every year fewer people go to church. This is mostly due to the secularization of society, in some areas combined with demographic changes. The membership of the Roman Catholic and Protestant Church decreases with 170.000 per year. Even more serious is the threat of extinction for the orders and congregations. With an average age of 85 of monks and nuns, in ten years monastic life in the Netherlands will cease to exist. It is expected that only 8 to 12 monasteries will survive. It is also expected that every week two churches will have to close their doors. These changes have an immense impact on religious communities but also on the Dutch society in general. Religious heritage is under great pressure. A visible part of our religious heritage, churches and monasteries, are being re-used or have been demolished. Over the past years several guidelines have been developed how to deal with church buildings.

Religious objects

But what about a less visible part of our religious heritage; religious objects and interiors inside these church buildings? This is important heritage as it illustrates religious life in the Netherlands and therefore a relevant part of the Dutch identity. Dutch society has always been a multi-religious society and this is well-illustrated by the variety of objects that religious communities use. These artefacts and ensembles are threatened. The expectation is that in due time around 150.000 religious objects shall no longer be used. As Museum Catharijneconvent feels responsible for not only its own collection, but for the Dutch Religious Collection as a whole, we have developed a tool to support religious communities in dealing with their religious heritage: the **Guideline for religious objects** (*Handreiking roerend religieus erfgoed*).

Close cooperation

The Guideline was made in close cooperation with the Foundation for Ecclesiastical Art & Artefacts in the Netherlands (*SKKN*), the main churches of the Netherlands and national heritage institutions. The almost ecumenical cooperation between heritage institutions and religious communities was the critical success factor of this project. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science granted a once-only subsidy to develop a solution to help safeguard this important religious heritage.

Two tools

The Guideline consists of two tools: a **Guide to assessing the significance of religious objects and collections** (hereafter: *Significance guide*), and a **Roadmap to re-using or deaccessioning religious objects** (hereafter: *Roadmap*).

In the **Significance guide** we have determined criteria that are most relevant to religious heritage. We have divided the criteria into three parts: the actual significance, primary, historic significance and comparative criteria. The actual significance focuses on the present function of an object: is it of particular value to the community, and why? We have narrowed the primary, historic criteria down to: church historical significance, historical significance and art historical significance. The comparative criteria are: rarity, the condition of an object, ensemble value, display value and documentation value. We developed a relatively easy-to-use significance form on which the owner and the heritage professional can score the objects. The significance guide contains the latest heritage views, such as the direct input of the so-called heritage community. Or the view that national heritage is not necessarily more important than local or regional heritage. This was a challenge: to translate these scholarly views into an understandable and easy-to-use guide.

The second tool is the **Roadmap** to re-using or deaccessioning religious objects. It consists of steps that could or should be taken to guarantee a transparent deaccessioning process. As religious organizations have full responsibility for their church buildings and artefacts, it was important to assure that the roadmap concurred with ecclesiastical laws and guidelines. We give several options for re-using or disposing religious objects, such as donating to another religious community in The Netherlands or abroad, donating to a museum, selling at a public auction or to private buyers. The final option we give is the most difficult one: to destroy objects. If it is decided to destroy objects one should know for sure that these objects have no or very little significance. Unnecessary to say but destruction should always be the last option. Then again we should realize that we cannot keep everything forever. The Guideline for Religious Objects is the first guideline that has dared to tackle the issue of destroying heritage.

Additional projects

The Guideline has been developed for all religious faiths. Research however proved that the problems mentioned before are not relevant (yet) to for example Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam or Evangelic churches. Another important aspect was the attention we paid to the significance of ensembles in churches. Additional criteria were drawn up to assess the significance of so-called top-ensembles. We have also developed a communication strategy of which a brochure, an instruction film and a website were important ingredients.

Unique tool

The Guideline is a unique tool. Not only in the Netherlands but worldwide. It is the first guideline that has been developed especially for religious objects, an endangered part of our cultural heritage. The making of was a combined effort between religious organizations and heritage institutions. This way we were able to translated scholarly views into an understandable and relatively easy-to-use guideline. Another advantage was that the close cooperation made sure that distribution of the Guideline is being done by the several religious organizations themselves. This way we can guarantee that the Guideline is available (for free) when needed.



European context

Religious landscape is not only changing in the Netherlands, but in almost every European country. Therefore we were in close contact with several European heritage institutions and professionals during the project. Without exception they were all very much interested in the Guideline and advised to translate the Guideline in several European languages and to assist in developing similar guidelines throughout Europe. We think that the project team could be of great help to call forth their experience in developing such a guidelines.

Project team and boards

Project team

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Detailed description

Religious life

Religious life in the Netherlands is changing dramatically. As in every European country traditional Christianity is decreasing. This is mostly due to the secularization of society, in some areas combined with demographic changes. The changing of traditional religious life has major consequences for our religious heritage. First of all, for our religious buildings. The expectation is that every week two churches will have to close their doors. Plans for re-using these religious buildings have to be developed. This is a challenge due to the high number of redundant churches, and their typical architecture. On top of that religious communities need to find a solution for their religious objects inside their churches and monasteries. This is a major burden as well: we expect that in due time around 150.000 religious artefacts will no longer be used. These objects are important as they illustrate religious life in the Netherlands and therefore are a relevant part of the Dutch identity. Dutch society has always been a multi-religious society and this is well-illustrated by the variety of objects that religious communities use.

Pressure on religious communities

The large amount of redundant religious objects is not the only problem. Several circumstances put great pressure on religious communities in dealing with their heritage. First of all the separation of Church from State is very strict in the Netherlands and the Dutch government has no involvement in church life whatsoever. Religious organizations carry full responsibility for their religious heritage. Secondly, legal protection for (religious) objects, interiors or ensembles hardly exists. But perhaps most difficult is that the financial situation of religious communities has deteriorated seriously over the years, and that at the same time the church population is ageing and decreasing.

Guideline for religious objects

As Museum Catharijneconvent feels responsible for the Dutch Religious Collection as a whole, we decided to take the initiative to develop the *Handreiking roerend religieus erfgoed*, the **Guideline for Religious Objects**. This initiative was a direct result of 2008 Year of Religious Heritage in the Netherlands. During this year attention was drawn to the problems religious organizations are facing. Important was the development of the Strategic Plan for Religious Heritage which focused on both religious buildings and religious objects. The Guideline was developed together with the *SKKN*, the Foundation for Ecclesiastical Art & Artefacts in the Netherlands, the main religious organizations in the Netherlands and national heritage institutions. This close cooperation was the critical success factor of the Guideline project.

Two tools: Significance guide and Roadmap

Because of the challenges religious organizations are facing we knew that the Guideline had to be a relatively easy-to-use and practical tool that can assist owners and heritage professionals to deal with the conservation but also with the deaccessioning or disposing of religious heritage. We had two aims: firstly, to take care of important religious artefacts and to find a good place for them in case a church has to close its doors. And secondly to dispose of the lesser important objects, in a relatively fast but transparent way. These two aims were translated in two tools: a **Guide to assessing the significance of religious objects and collections** and a **Roadmap to re-using or deaccessioning religious objects**.

Close cooperation

The Guideline was developed by the project team, the senior project board and the ecclesiastical project board (for a list of board members see page 4-5). The project was supervised by the supervising board. The project team consisted of staff members and co-workers of Museum Catharijneconvent and the SKKN. The senior project board combined scholarly and practical knowledge from religious organizations and heritage institutions. The members of the ecclesiastical board were representatives of the seven dioceses, four protestant churches and the Old Catholic Church. The supervising board consisted of representatives of religious museums, governmental institutions and institutions with a Jewish and Muslim background.

The project took off with a round-table conference with around thirty participants with different backgrounds. The conference was organized by consulting firm *Berenschot*. The main objective was to find out what was needed for and what the final result should consist of. The report of this conference is available (in Dutch).

Significance guide

In the **Significance guide** we have determined criteria that are most relevant to religious heritage. We have divided the criteria into three parts: the actual significance, primary, historic significance and comparative criteria. The actual significance focuses on the present function of an object: is it of particular value to the community, and why? The primary, historic criteria are: church historical significance, historical significance and art historical significance. The comparative criteria are: rarity, the condition of an object, ensemble value, display value and documentation value. We developed an easy-to-use significance form on which the owner and the heritage professional can score the objects. This form has been developed and tested by the project team and the senior project board, together with external experts.

The significance guide contains the latest heritage views, such as the direct input of the so-called heritage community. Or the view that national heritage is not necessarily more important than local or regional heritage. We succeeded in translating these scholarly views into an understandable and easy-to-use guide.

Roadmap

The **Roadmap** to re-using or deaccessioning religious objects consists of steps to guarantee a transparent deaccessioning process. It was important that the roadmap concurred with ecclesiastical laws and guidelines. We have given several options for re-using or disposing religious objects, such as donating to another religious community in The Netherlands or abroad, donating to a museum, selling at a public auction or to private buyers. The final option is the most difficult one: to destroy objects (of little or no significance). Unnecessary to say but destruction should always be the last option. Then again we should realize that we cannot keep everything forever. The Guideline for Religious Objects is the first guideline that has dared to tackle the issue of destroying heritage.

Additional projects

Besides the making of the Guideline we initiated four additional projects.

Other denominations and religions

We wished for the Guideline to be used for multi-religious purposes. We therefore asked *Kaski*, the research centre for religion and society of the Radboud University Nijmegen, to look into the situation of Christian (protestant/evangelic) organizations, Eastern Orthodox Church, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and migrant churches. Two questions were relevant: is the population of these religious organizations stable, decreasing or increasing? And how is religious heritage perceived by these communities? It proved that decreasing populations were not relevant (yet) to most of these (younger) religious communities. This applied to the way religious heritage is perceived as well. In most cases religious objects were not as 'heritage'. The *Kaski* report is available (in Dutch).

Ensemble value

Another project dealt with the significance of ensembles in churches. Research proved that around 70% of the churches have significant ensembles. With so many churches closing their doors it would be impossible to keep all these ensembles in tact. We therefore had a researcher draw up additional criteria (to be used by heritage professionals) to determine which ensembles are truly significant. We hope this way we have contributed to help safeguard important Dutch church ensembles. The report is available (in Dutch).

Condition of religious heritage

The third project was a survey into the condition of religious heritage in Dutch churches. All communities of the Protestant Church of the Netherlands and Roman Catholic parishes were addressed. The most relevant

conclusion is that on average the condition of this religious heritage is reasonable. The survey and report by Blauw Research is available (in Dutch).

European context

The fourth project was to establish a relevant network in Europe. The aims were to learn from similar initiatives and to gain insight in the (religious) situation in other European countries. We came to the conclusion that the Guideline is a unique tool in Europe (and even worldwide). It is the first guideline that has been developed especially for religious objects and in close cooperation with religious organizations. We think it would be very helpful to have the Guideline translated in several European languages.

Congress

On April 29, 2011 the Guideline was presented at a successful congress to the leaders of seven religious organizations. Amongst them the head of the Protestant Church and a Roman Catholic bishop. At this moment we have reached the stage of implementing the Guideline. As the Protestant Church is differently organized than the Roman Catholic Church this calls for specific approaches. The close cooperation made that distribution of the Guideline is being done by the several religious organizations themselves. This way we can guarantee that the Guideline is available when a church has to close its doors.

Communication

To stimulate the use of the Guideline we developed a communication strategy. As religious communities are responsible for their heritage themselves it is very important that they see the advantages of using the Guideline. We have therefore made a brochure, an instruction film and a website (www.hrre.nl). At the moment we are setting up a 'road show' to bring the Guideline to the attention of local communities. We are also in close contact with several religious organizations to supervise the implementation. In two years we shall meet with the project boards to discuss the use of the Guideline and to see if improvements are needed.

Guideline in the news

The Guideline has had a lot of media attention. Several national newspapers wrote about it. Among them the *Volkskrant*, *NRC Handelsblad*, *Trouw* and various protestant newspapers. An item on the Guideline was broadcasted by *Nieuwsuur*, the national evening TV news show. Several radio shows have paid attention to the Guideline as well. Among them *Radio 1*, the national news channel, *Radio Netherlands Worldwide* and the *WDR* on German radio.

Distribution

We have printed 3500 copies of the Guideline which are available to religious organizations and heritage institutions. We have distributed the Guideline widely around the Netherlands. The seven Roman Catholic dioceses received 1150 copies, the Protestant Church of the Netherlands 1000 copies. We have sent the Guideline to heritage institutions and governmental bodies (heritage civil servants of the municipalities for example). We decided to send the Guideline not only to religious organizations but to heritage institutions and governmental bodies as well. This way we made sure that all parties involved in the process of closing a church and deaccessioning its objects are familiar with the Guideline.

As almost every order and congregation has to close its monastery within a short period of time we decided to send them the Guideline all at once.

We have sent a brochure with information on the Guideline to all protestant communities and Roman Catholic parishes in the Netherlands. Please find the brochure enclosed. To bring the Guideline to the attention of parishioners and protestant community members we have published various articles in ecclesiastical magazines and news letters.

After careful consideration we decided to ask the religious organizations to distribute the Guideline. If it is decided to close church the Guideline is presented by somebody of the diocese or a regional institution within the Protestant church. The main advantage is that during the process of merging of parishes and the dismantling of a church, a solution is being offered to dealing with the religious objects in this church. This way it is guaranteed that the Guideline is present when needed.

Awareness

One of the most important consequences of the Guideline is the awareness towards religious heritage in general and towards religious objects specifically. In the Roman Catholic keepers of religious objects are often aware of the sacred character of the objects. The historical significance is not always recognised however. The process of assessing the significance often creates a sense of urgency towards dealing with these objects.

In protestant churches creating awareness was even more important. It is evident to protestants that the Guideline is made for them as well. 'Protestant language' is spoken and many of the examples or steps are specifically protestant. Involving protestant organizations was one of the key success factors of the project. Often dealing with redundant religious objects is seen as a Roman Catholic problem. But this is most certainly not true. The Roman Catholic faith was long forbidden in the Netherlands. It was not until 1853 that the Episcopal hierarchy was re-established. From the Reformation onwards the Dutch Reformed Church (since 2004 Protestant Church of the Netherlands) was the established church. As a consequence important 17th and 18th century (national) religious heritage is kept in Reformed medieval churches. The Guideline and the involvement of the protestant churches have already created awareness in many cases. An often heard response in protestant communities on the Guideline is: "This does indeed concern us!"

The closing of a church is always a difficult and emotional process. Three things are important: first of all, the people that go to church. They have to merge with another parish and are suddenly 'guest' in another church. Secondly, the church building. What to do with it? The options are often re-using, selling or demolishing the church. And finally, the disposing of religious objects. This latter aspect always comes last because of the two other challenges that need attention. On top of that church population is ageing and financial means are decreasing. The Guideline can bring some relieve. It is still a process that needs close attention, but the Significance guide and the Roadmap, both very practical and easy-to-use tools, can be of great help. Help that is often longed for.



inventory (for which we developed a tool in the Guideline as well), assessing the significance and finding new destinations for their religious objects can be a positive experience in difficult times. A ('clean church') project team that works together harmoniously and feels responsible for their religious heritage is more likely to be successful. The Guideline thus offers ready-to-use steps and creates awareness and responsibility at the same time.

Follow-up

We are in close contact with Roman Catholic dioceses and the Protestant Church of the Netherlands to monitor the distribution of the Guideline. The Guideline has been launched only a few months ago, but reactions so far are very positive.

During the project of developing the Guideline we were able to expand our network within religious organizations and heritage institutions. This network was very relevant to the Guideline project. Without working together so closely with religious organizations and heritage institutions it could not have been done. The network still is relevant in the process of monitoring the use of the Guideline.

In two years we will start up a project to monitor the Guideline and the use of it. This is an initiative of Museum Catharijneconvent and the *Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed* (Dutch National Heritage) and shall be a close cooperation with religious organizations and heritage institutions once more. We are considering an external evaluative survey prior to the start of this project.

At the museum we will host several exhibitions that are closely related to the changing of the religious landscape in the Netherlands. We organized an exhibition about the Guideline that runs until April 2012. The exhibition is a cooperation between Museum Catharijneconvent, a protestant church near Rotterdam and the dioceses of Rotterdam and Den Bosch. In this show the museum (for once) has a unique role: we are involved in seeking a new destination for protestant and catholic heritage. For example we are looking for a new owner of a redundant 18th century panel with the names of clergymen. With the help of the Guideline and significance form we came to the conclusion that panel is protestant heritage of national significance. However a few months before the church decided to destroy the panel. Very exceptionally we decided to try to save this important panel by finding a new owner. Another example is that during the show we will hold a competition for artists to make a new work of art out of religious plate that will be destroyed. This is one of the recommendations in the Guideline.

At the congress at which the Guideline was launched we were able to inform the managerial level of the religious organizations, heritage institutions and governmental bodies. At the moment we are setting up a so-called 'roadshow' with local meetings. This is perhaps the most important follow-up. The idea is that at these meetings parishioners and protestant community members that are involved in the closing of a church are being informed about the Guideline and learn how the tool is able to assist. Besides an explanation of the Guideline there will be plenty of room to discuss the problems they are faced with. The roadshow will be a close cooperation between Museum Catharijneconvent and the religious organizations.

European context

We have looked into the religious situation of several European countries. In the time given it was impossible to do so for every European country. We therefore focused on Germany, England, France and Belgium. All countries with a decreasing churchgoing population due to secularization and demographic changes (people leaving the countryside for cities). In a report drawn up by project team member Sebastiaan van der Lans several aspects were surveyed. The report is the result of study of literature and talks with European experts on religious heritage. The report is available (in Dutch).

The report starts with a chapter on ecclesiastical laws on religious heritage in a European context. For each country the relationship between Church and State is described. This is often crucial to dealing with religious heritage. Then demographic data concerning religion and religious buildings are described. And finally heritage institutions that deal with religious heritage are summed up. The report gives a good insight at the situation in these four countries.

It is evident from the report: religious landscape is changing dramatically in (Western) Europe. Challenges towards re-using church buildings, and deaccessioning of religious objects are increasing. Every expert we consulted was very much interested in the Guideline, since no such Guideline exists in these countries. At the moment we are looking for possibilities to have the Guideline translated in several European languages and to assist in developing similar guidelines throughout Europe. We think that the Guideline project team could be of great help to call forth their experience in developing similar guidelines.