

Return to Japan-Rijksmuseum, or: why these two temple guards need to return to their gates

Jikke van Loon became fascinated by two Japanese gatekeepers in the Rijksmuseum in 2013. She sympathises with the displaced statues, and ends up at the temple complex where they came from. She wants to return the guards. But do the people want that?

Karolien Knols 24 maart 2024, 20:00



Jikke van Loon in her studio at the sketches of one of the Japanese temple guards.

Photo Erik Smits

On a Sunday afternoon in March, a club of people gather around visual artist Jikke van Loon in the Asian Pavilion of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. While the mob walks by to see the exhibition on Frans Hals, the group prepares for a meet-and-greet with two 14th-century Japanese temple guards.

Jikke van Loon has a special bond with the guards, to put it mildly. The first time she came face-to-face with them, she tells her listeners, it was 2013. The Rijksmuseum has finally reopened after a 10-year

renovation, and she is curious to see the new pavilion of Asian art. There, she sees the more than man-sized sculptures standing against a wall.

About the author Karolien Knols is art editor of *de Volkskrant* and writes about photography and visual arts.

They intrigue her. Not only because the sculptures, by size and material, are reminiscent of the sculpture of freedom fighter Anton de Kom she made a few years earlier, the prototype of which was acquired by the Rijksmuseum, but also because she doesn't quite understand some things.

For instance, how can the creamy, soft, vulnerable neck of one of the guardsmen be reconciled with its aggressive appearance?

Temple guard, anonymous, from the 14th or 15th century. Image Rijksmuseum



In the hall text, she reads about the origin and significance of the guards. Japanese temple guards (Nio-zo) usually stand in a gate at the entrance to a temple area. One has his mouth open and shouts "Aaa! The other has his mouth firmly closed and makes the sound 'Un!' The sounds 'a' and 'un' are the first and last syllables of the Siddham scripture and together they represent all sounds and thus all knowledge, wisdom and compassion. Anyone who walks among the temple guards will have access to them.

She has been someone since childhood for whom 'things' are as alive as people and now she can only think: how pathetic you are. Nobody can walk between you anymore. You are just standing here looking pretty.

'It is,' she says, 'just like when I am in the Tropenmuseum and look at an Indonesian kris. Then I also think: ah, what are you lying here for.'

In 2015, she flies to Kyoto, in Japan, for an artist residency. In her luggage are two drawings she made of the guards and a letter. From Menno Fitski, the curator of the Asian Pavilion, she got tips on how to get from Kyoto to Yokota. That village, population five thousand, is a day's westward train ride from Kyoto, and close to the Buddhist Iwayaji temple where the guards come from.



Jikke van Loon reads her letter at the temple gate. Image Jikke van Loon

You cannot just go there, the hotel owner in Yokota warns her, there are 'bad spirits', she should inform an official of her visit. Since none is present, she goes on her own. The temple complex is in the middle of the forest, ten minutes' cycling from the village. She sees frogs 'as big as dogs' there, begins her climb up the hill to the gate where the guards have stood for centuries.

There she takes out the letter and begins to read: 'Dear gate, how are you?'

'What was very peculiar: suddenly there was a man next to me who wanted to know what I was doing there. The official, it turned out later. In poor English, he said that the gate could not understand me, that he would translate the letter into Japanese. Moments later, they walked back down the mountain together. 'I could almost see the man hopping with happiness: he had seen that the gate was shining all over again.'

A month before the meet-and-greet at the Rijks, Jikke van Loon is preparing in her Amsterdam studio for another trip to Yokota, the tenth already since 2015. A ritual dismantling of the old gate will take place in April. It will then be restored by students of the Kyoto College of Architecture. Crowdfunding for this is in full swing.

The restoration is one of the latest steps in an art project that has, as Van Loon puts it, 'completely gone beyond its banks'. What began almost a decade ago with the reading of the letter, is now a project involving hundreds of people, in Japan and in the Netherlands, a project that aims to bring the sentinels 'home', back to the gate.

It is also a project that has led to a fraught purchase. But now we are getting ahead of ourselves.

At that gate, did you immediately know: this is where I am going to make new work?

'No. I did know for sure: I will come back here to explore what I can do with it. In 2017, I went to Yokota again and got to know the people. I had organised a viewing in a small theatre, with fragments from the film Oeke Hoogendijk had made about the renovation of the Rijksmuseum. That also featured the guards.

There were, what will it be, twenty-five people in attendance, mostly elderly people. As they sat looking at the statues and started talking animatedly to each other, I suddenly realised what it means to a community when statues like these disappear. That I could go and look at them every week, and they couldn't anymore.'

Did residents miss them?

'That was not literally said at the time. The statues were bought by the Rijksmuseum in 2007, but they hadn't been there since the early 1990s. But of course they have been part of their daily lives, of their identity, they represent a piece of their soul. Just as church statues do in our culture, or at least have done for many people for a long time. I was keen to fill that gap.'

Did you think the statues should be returned?

'I am not that militant. The guards were bought by the Rijksmuseum from a dealer in Kyoto, with the permission of the Japanese government. No, I wanted to make work that dealt with the question: what gives someone the right to buy statues just for the beauty of it, at the expense of a community that has had a centuries-long relationship with it?'



So far, **540 tiles** have been painted, in the **Netherlands** and in **Japan**. Image Jikke van Loon

In 2018, with a grant from the Mondriaan Fund and others, she started a project called *Issho-ni/ Tomo-ni* , with the subtitle: making new wisdom together.

You chose to work with a group of people in Yokota and in the Netherlands on two new sentinels. These became tile tableaux in Delftware. Why did you choose that material?

'It was mainly practical: because the work was to be about the relationship between image and man, about attention and care, I wanted it to be a community project. By all painting their own tile, you are immediately part of it.

'I also met a Buddhist monk restoring temple statues in a temple complex near Kyoto at one point. Look, here.' She shows a picture of a statue, it seems shiny new. 'So this statue is as old as the temple guards, also from the 14th century. While it still looks like it was bought at the Xenos.'



Renovation of statues from a temple complex near Kyoto. Image Jikke van Loon

'That monk had restored that statue using ancient techniques. To him, it is still seven hundred years old, even though almost all the original wood has been replaced over the centuries. And then I thought: so it's more about the idea of a sculpture, the concept, than the material. And then I could also make the move to Delftware.'

'In 2018, I made one tableau in Yokota, together with a group of locals, as a trial, the front of one of the guards. That struck a chord. In the end, we painted 540 tiles in Yokota and in the Netherlands.'

What motivated people in the Netherlands to participate?

'To a large extent it was: we have appropriated stuff from all over the world for centuries, it's time for a movement in the other direction. In Japan, it was more about bringing stories to the surface, while painting. And thus restoring the broken relationship.'

What did people in Yokota think of the result? It seems like a leap from wooden sculptures to Delft blue.

'They love the tableaux. Most people are happy that the old statues are safe in the Rijksmuseum. For what I only found out a few years later: the temple complex had been taboo in Yokota for decades. So that's why the hotel owner had warned me that first time. No one wanted to go there anymore.'



Four tableaux have been made so far, two fronts and two backs. The sides will be painted this autumn. Image Jikke van Loon

Shimane prefecture, where Yokota is located, is an almost extinct rural area, as there are more of them in ageing Japan. Once, much money was made here from iron mining. Japan's most famous, and hardest, swords were made in this region. Farmers around cultivated rice, which was also iron-rich because of the soil. They paid rent to the Iwayaji temple.

Monks were trained there until the early 19th century. But during the 20th century, when Buddhism lost significance in Japan and the tenancy system also came to an end, the temple became impoverished.

In Yokota, says Van Loon, the story circulates that the last temple guard was no good, and that the whole community therefore turned away from him, and from the complex.

Were they keen for you to dig up that history?

'They have gone very far with it over the years. It is really incredible what has taken off there. There are volunteer groups that clean the paths to the mountain on which the temple stands. Who organise walks on the mountain. Every year we do an 'ojisosan hunt' with the youth, to track down Buddhist statues, many of which have been knocked out of place. Those young people really like that, they tell their parents about it again, and so they too get involved. And not only the o



Image Jikke van Loon

Does it ever chafe you, when an artist from the West comes to tell you how important it is for them to preserve their cultural heritage?

'I have to tell you honestly: I'm not into that at all. For me, the sculptures are the motivation for this project. That those go back to their place.'

When you were chosen in 2007 to create the Anton de Kom sculpture, destined for Bijlmerplein in Amsterdam, there was controversy about it.'

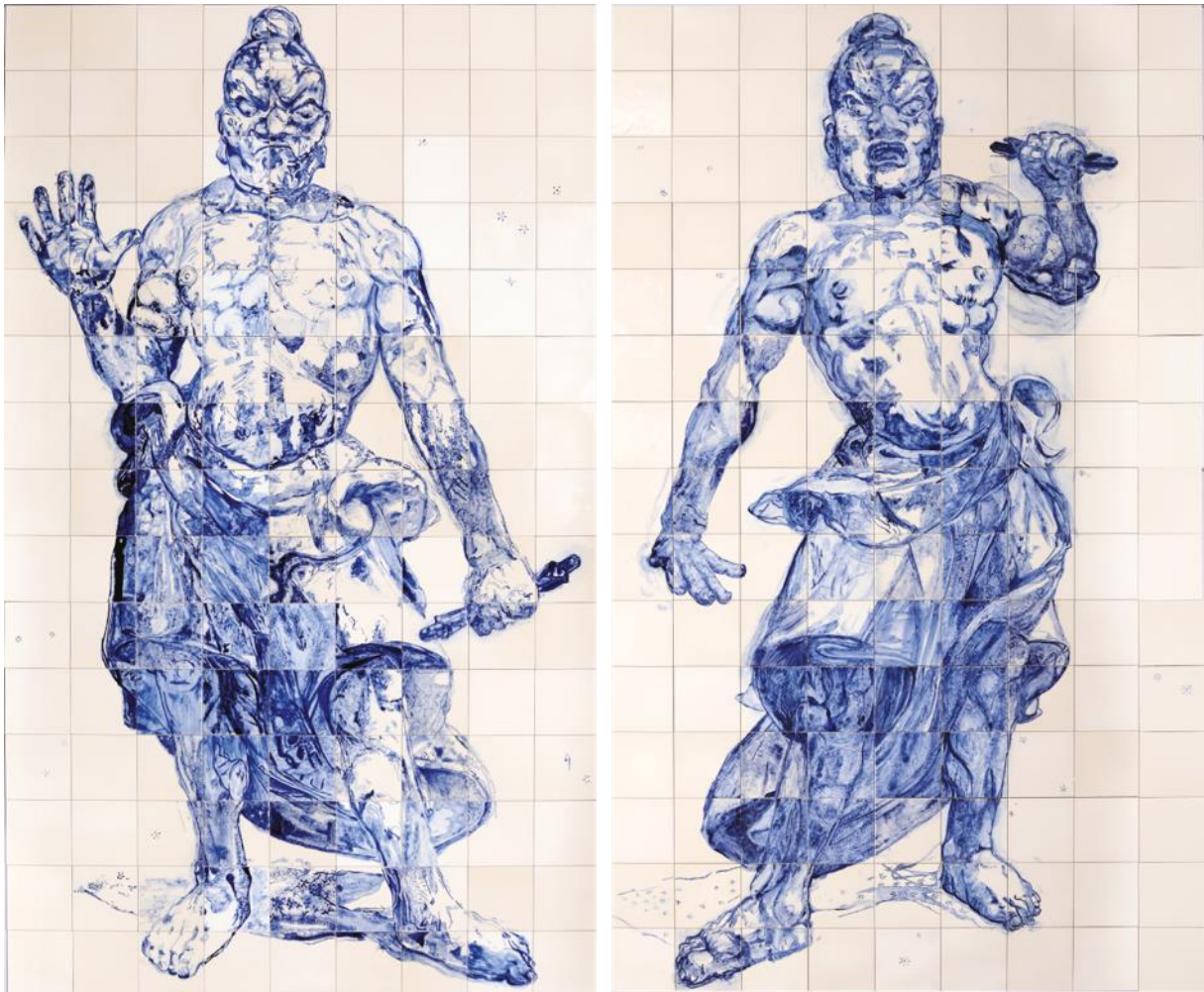
'Still is.'

The question was, and is: why should yet another white woman make a statue of a black freedom fighter?

'Every artist in the Netherlands at the moment has to deal with the question: can I say something, can I make something, can I do something, with a culture that is not mine. Everyone is enormously aware of that.'

'At the same time, I think it is important that everyone can have their voice heard. There is no doubt that we have been a dominant voice for far too long. But it is precisely because I never felt at home in Dutch society that I have always sought to broaden my perspective. It would be a great pity if we could no longer make something about something that does not concern ourselves. Because precisely being able, and wanting, to put yourself in the other person's shoes is important. How else can we come together?'

In 2020, corona puts the whole project on hold. Since travel is not possible, Van Loon devises an 'intervention' in the Rijksmuseum. She asks the oldest inhabitants of Yokota to write down their memories of the two guards. Di



The gatekeepers are at the village hall in Yokota.

In that first corona year, she also writes the plan for a follow-up project, *Nio-Mon, a gate, a home*. For the two blue sentinels, as Van Loon now calls them, may have been placed in the village hall in Yokota during a festive moment, but for her that is an interim stop. Eventually, they should have their place in the old gate. Locals, on the other hand, prefer to keep them in the village hall, where they are placed against a wall. 'Terrible,' says van Loon. 'Now you can't even walk between them.'

It is the resistance of the population that finally makes her realise that there is a reason why her plan to put them back in the gate is always waved away with a 'we'll see about that'.

She tracks down the owner of the temple complex, a carpenter who bought the area in the early 1990s. 'The temple had long ceased to function by then and the guards were no longer there either.' She invites him to a

meeting with the locals, maybe that will break the ice. But in Yokota, they don't want to see him.

And then she makes a decision she herself never thought possible: she sets up a foundation, uses it to borrow 30 thousand euros, and buys the entire temple complex, gate and all.

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Why did you do that?

'In Yokota, people trust me, I thought: maybe I will manage to take the taboo off the area.'

Have you ever been told: with this buy you are crossing a border?

'In Japan, they did say: you shouldn't do this. But for very different reasons: the population is shrinking, so there will soon be fewer and fewer people to maintain the temple complex. And recently, when I told her about the purchase, a Japanese woman living in the Netherlands said: now you are doing the very same thing you are questioning with your art project: what gives someone with money the right to buy up statues, thus disrupting the relationship with the original community? She is of course quite right about that.'



The gate of temple complex Iwayaji.Image Jikke van Loon

Were you able to answer that question for yourself?

'There are two reasons why I dared. One is the group of enthusiasts in Yokota who think it is important to restore the temple complex, as a cultural heritage and spiritual place. And my meeting with a young Japanese woman who had graduated in revitalising rural areas. She wanted to do that in the region around Yokota through art, and asked if she could be the Japanese counterpart to this project.'

Now there is a new and, as far as Van Loon is concerned, final dot on the horizon: in 2025, the restored temple gate is to be returned, with the blue guards inside. Ideally, the temple complex would eventually be handed over to, and managed by, the community, financially supported by a wealthy company or family. 'There are plenty of those in Japan.'

Do you still find the temple guards pathetic?

'Not anymore. In Yokota someone once said: look how hard our guards in the Netherlands are working. He thought the whole project was their doing.'

MENNO FITSKI ON JIKKE VAN LOON

'Jikke is a force of nature. With all her enthusiasm and energy, she has not only added a whole new layer to the sculptures in our museum, her project has also connected us to the place where the sentinels come from. I had not realised this so much with the purchase. The realisation has come through the bridge Jikke has built, confirming the friendship between two countries.'

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