

UNPICKING INHERITANCE

An archive created in order to unearth
the stories of my inheritance.

By Mauk van Emmerik



To my grandfather, I dedicate this archive, who after the death of my grandmother devoted his life to travelling and admiring cultures from around the globe.

Lieve opa, hopelijk maak ik je trots.



According to philosopher Thomas Kelly, “we”, civilizations of modernity, often take for granted what we have, and desire for the things that we do not. We busy our entire lives with deciding who we are and who we want to become. In this process, we create our own norms and values, which we then pass on to the next generation. Aiming to be better than our parents, who presumably tried to be better than their parents.

In that process it can be of critical importance to know where you come from, not just what city or country, but know how your predecessors lived, what they’ve experienced in the time they had on this planet. What obstacles they faced and overcame, what their ideologies and desires were. By learning what history you’ve inherited you allow yourself to critically review the stories you carry with you, and can then decide which ones you want to carry forward.

What happens then when you take a critical look at the things you’ve been given in your life? If we start examining the foundation from which our norms and values have originated, do you know what you’ll uncover? And what do you do with that information? What is your mentality towards your personal heritage?

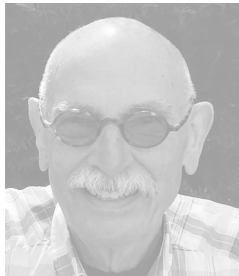


This archive is the result of me trying to understand the meaning of the cultural pieces that I've been given through the inheritance of my grandfather. With it, I aim to understand the context in which these objects were acquired. In doing so I shine light on the importance of caring for our inherited cultural history, to show that this means caring for our future as well.





April 3rd, 2003



September 23rd, 2020

“Inheritance

Something that is or may be inherited;

*Property passing at the owner's death to the heir
or those entitled to succeed; legacy”*

*“Inheritance”
Dictionary.com,
www.dictionary.com/browse/inheritance.*



Inheriting is often a painful process as you're forced to work with the physical remnants of an entire life lived, the materialization of a person's interests, obstacles, norms, and values. It can then be quite the task to take on the process of dividing it between heirs, filtering what you would like to have and what you don't.



Part of what it means to inherit is to go through everything that has been left to you. For me, that meant that I had to go through a small coin collection that I'd found in a deteriorated plastic bag, in my grandfather's home. Many of the coins are from the countries he's visited. I assume that they are leftover currencies from when he got back from his travels and that he possibly kept them as mementos. However, as I was organizing this collection based on currency and stamp date, one coin stood out to me. It was a copper coin dating back to 1858 and it was from the Dutch East Indies colony (Nederlands Indië). At first, I was impressed by the age of the coin as it's 163 years old. However, I later discovered that slavery in the Dutch East Indies wasn't abolished until 1860. That meant that the coin I'd inherited could in theory have been used to buy slaves.

Why did my grandfather have an object that was the literal embodiment of colonial oppression? Could he have also inherited it from his predecessors? What did that mean for my great grandparents or even my great-great-grandparents? And why did he hold on to it?

I started to wonder what history I'd just inherited. The ideologies with which this coin was created seemed so alien to me. I'd always thought of the colonial period to have been a long time ago, but due to this coin, it became very tangible and seemed fairly recent. I became curious about what other tangible remnants of coloniality are still visible in our current society.

It was around this time that I came across an advisory document by the Dutch Council for Culture, in which they advise the minister of Culture, Ingrid van Engelshoven, to repatriate all



looted colonial artifacts unconditionally. (October 7th, 2021)

Due to this news report, I became aware that the country I grew up in had looted countless cultural artifacts during the occupation of other countries. I felt a sense of guilt and responsibility due to the history of that coin, and the possibility of my family being involved with those practices. I wanted nothing more than to exclude my family from this dark narrative but at the same time, I knew that looking the other way would not contribute to the dismantling of these ideologies.

Additionally, even if my family wasn't involved, my country still was, and its previous generations have provided for the safety of this coin in order for it to survive this long. Why was this coin then so worshipped? Due to its age, its history, or perhaps the ideologies that it originated from? Whatever it may be, it's worth mentioning that the issue is larger than my family's potential involvement. It's the attitude we have towards history, what does it mean if I carry this item forward? To become one of the people who allowed for this symbol of oppression to continue a life in our modern society. How then do I handle this object? By discarding it, you deny it ever happened, but by holding onto it you care for a symbol of those colonists' ideologies. It's something that I currently do not have an answer to and I imagine that it has possibly been the same for my grandfather. Regardless, it is now in my possession so I will eventually have to find a way to handle this object with consideration.

Thinking about how I will deal with this coin created another question; if the coin dates back to the colonial period, what other cultural pieces of my inheritances had the same background?

This archive is the result of me trying to unearth the lost stories of my grandfather's inheritance, with which I hope to explain the origin of the pieces I've inherited. And possibly, if necessary, allow for the reconstitution of those objects.





Dutch East Indies colonial currency 1858, 2.5 gulden cents

It was the second oldest coin in the collection.

The coin was stamped in Utrecht in 1858, in total there were 40.989.866 stamped under King Willem III, after which they were shipped to what we now call Indonesia, but at the time was a Dutch colony.

<https://www.verzamelaarsmarkt.nl/munten/29410-48400-nederlands-indie-2halve-cent-1858.html>



*Fig. I & II, Google Maps, Indonesia. Dutch Royal Mint, Utrecht.
January 23rd 2021.*

To unearth the stories of these objects I had to learn to listen to materials. I often started with researching what material an object was composed of, what country that originated from, and what properties the cultures of that country ascribed to them. I've relied on online archives of museums since due to the Covid-19 pandemic museums have been closed. I also relied heavily on the expertise of cultural anthropologists I've been in contact with through different forums. Lastly, I've asked my family for advice on objects that I was stuck on. All of this has been condensed into this archive. The following pages are a result of that research and consist of all the knowledge I've been able to acquire on my inheritance.





Ganesha figure

Hindu God of Wisdom and Knowledge

Artist: Unknown

Material: Wax cast bronze

Origin: Indonesian island Bali | Jalan Raya Ubud

Ganesha figure

Hindu God of Wisdom and Knowledge

While there are numerous stories surrounding Lord Ganesha, the most widespread and accepted story tells us that Ganesha is the son of Shiva. According to Kimbrell Art Museum in Texas, U.S., he is much loved by Hindu followers and widely worshiped as the remover of obstacles and the bestower of good fortune, prosperity, and health. He is also the patron of arts and writing in the Hindu culture.

Hindu deities are often depicted with multiple arms to symbolize a multiplicity of superhuman powers. In his upper right hand, he holds an axe, which is a symbol to cut off all bonds to materialistic attachment. In his lower right hand, he holds a broken tusk. This refers to the Hindu legend where Ganesha broke his tusk off in order to continue writing the Indian, Mahabharata, (a religious and philosophical book) after his quill broke. In his upper left hand, he holds a rosary, which suggests that the pursuit of knowledge should be continuous. Lastly, in his lower left hand, he holds a bowl of sweets, in which he sniffs with his trunk, as a reward for working hard.

<https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/four-armed-ganesha%C2%A0/xwlyBjHYguDaLA>

This particular figure has a demon face on the back of his head. This is unusual in modern Ganesha depictions, it is unknown what this symbolizes. The green tarnish on the bronze material indicates that this figure may be antique but could also be an artistic choice made by the artist, much like the holes created by the wax casting technique.



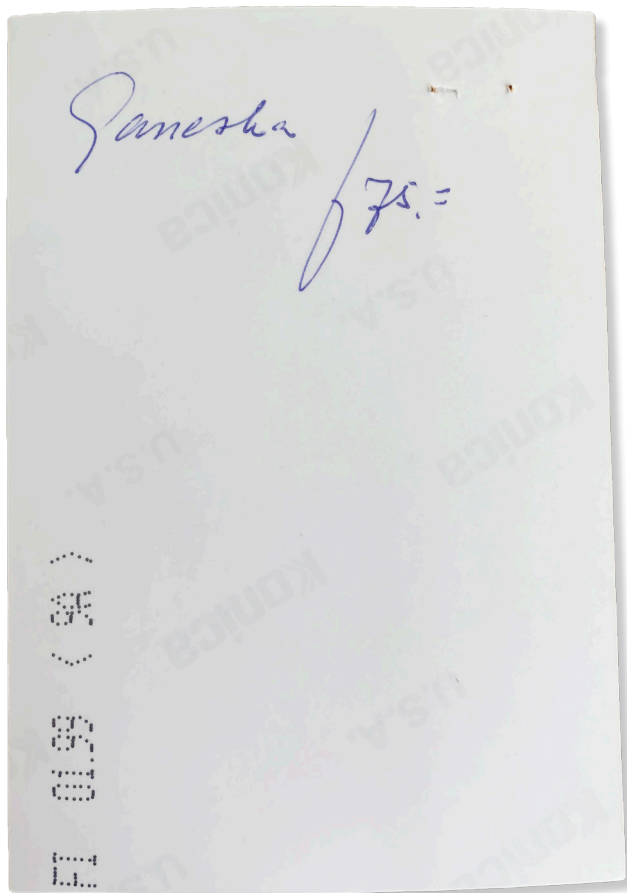
Fig. 1 & 2, Google Maps, Indonesia's island Bali, January 23rd 2021.

While I was in conversation with one of my aunts I asked her if she knew anything about this particular object. She mentioned the following:

“He bought it in august of 1997. I think it was on the island of Bali, at an art gallery on the Main Street of Ubud. He thought it was too expensive but eventually changed his mind and went back to buy it. Bargaining is very common in Indonesia, however, he did not succeed in this case because the owner of the gallery was very stubborn.”



Photograph found among invoices of my grandfather's antique furniture pieces.



*The back of the photograph reads:
"Ganesha f75,- / 01.99 (January 1999)"*

Adjusted to inflation f75,- in 1999 would be €48,29 in 2021.

*Inflation calculation based on the Central Bureau of
Statistics calculator at www.CBS.nl*





African Fertility Figurine

Believed to increase fertility in the room of placement

Artist: Unknown

Material: Carved out of a single piece of wood

Origin: Continent of Africa, country unknown

African Fertility Figurine

Carved out of a single piece of wood

This figurine supposedly originates from Nigeria, according to anthropologist and Reddit user Katie Louise (katieeelouiseee).
https://www.reddit.com/r/CulturalAnthro/comments/1229sg/what_can_you_tell_me_about_these_cultural_pieces/

According to tribal legend, to ensure a couple's fertility the statue is to be placed on either side of a doorway leading into a bedroom. If you or your partner touches the figure it will increase the chance of becoming pregnant.
<https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11840/528506>

Many African countries have their own subcultures which all depict fertility figures differently. This statue, with the slanted neck and hanging belly, does indeed point towards the Igbo tribe of Nigeria. However, it seems to be derived from different West-African cultures and therefore not an original. This points toward the possibility of it being a souvenir, which fertility statues are known for.

I wonder then how my grandfather got possession of this object. Surely it wasn't an act of desperation to get pregnant since his hunger for travel only started after the death of my grandmother. This had to be a souvenir of one of his travels. Though I cannot definitively say which country as I don't remember him ever going to Africa at all. I imagine it can also be a gift from perhaps one of his travel friends. I'm afraid it's questions like these that I will not get an answer to anymore.



Fig. 3 & 4, Google Maps, Nigeria, January 23rd 2021.





Unknown Figurine

Depicted with a frog on its head.

Artist: Unknown

Material: Sculpted out of a single piece of Connemara marble

Origin: Unknown

Unknown figurine

Depicted with a frog on its head.

While I was unable to find any information on the origin and meaning of this object I did manage to find what material had been used. The material is referred to as 'Irish Marble' Although it also goes by the name of Connemara marble. It is a rare type of marble, found exclusively along Ireland's rugged wild Atlantic coast.

According to Ciaran Vipond, an Irish jeweler, Connemara marble was formed from sediment deposited in a shallow primal sea over 600 million years ago. These sediments were transformed by formidable forces generated in the formation of the mountains of the West of Ireland and Scotland over 390 million years ago.

<https://www.myirishjeweler.com/blog/what-is-connemara-marble/>

Since this is the only place Connemara marble is found the Irish have been exporting the stone as a way to generate income. Due to this export, I cannot definitively say that the figurine is from Ireland. Even though the material itself does originate from there.

As far as I'm aware the marble has no religious purposes but is often used as a gemstone for jewelry or used in architecture.

The figurine has a frog on its head, on top of the frog is another entity, but it is not detailed enough to be able to identify. This stacking of characters reminds me of a totem-pole, although the material and shape suggest otherwise. The figurine doesn't seem old as it's completely intact and



Fig. 5

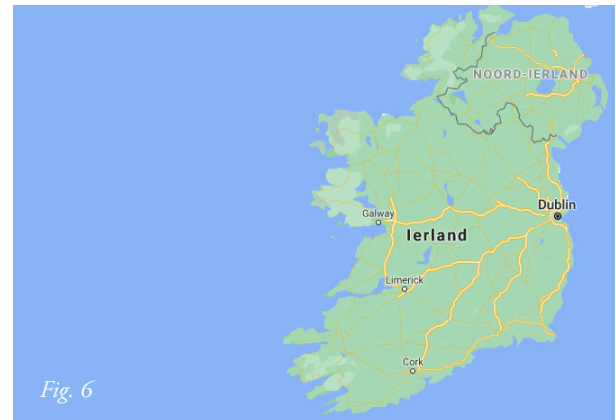


Fig. 6

*Fig. 5 & 6, Google Maps, Ireland, Atlantic coast
January 23rd 2021.*

has a nice shine to it. This object leaves a lot of questions unanswered, and I wonder why my grandfather sought after this particular object.

I imagine he had to have a reason to buy this object and since I know so little about it, it makes me even more curious. Whatever it is, he will have had a reason and it might be too late to ever find out what that may have been. A large part of unearthing the stories of these objects is accepting that you'll find more questions as you go. Unfortunately, some of those questions will not be answered.





Meso-American Jade Vessel

Created based on grave findings of the Maya and Olmec peoples

Artist: Unknown
Material: Jade tile, Engraved
Origin: Mexico



Meso-American Jade Vessel

Created based on grave findings of the Maya and Olmec peoples

This jade vessel originates from Mexico and is created as a souvenir for tourists. It is based on grave findings near the graves of Olmec and Maya civilizations.

Anthropologist enthusiast and Reddit user Jessica-Swanlake commented the following on a post I'd made asking what this object is: "I'm actually thinking it's a Meso-American jade vessel (probably replica). The handles and the shape of it matches some of the pots from a variety of different cultures (the handles specifically don't match Chinese jade vessels and those are usually carved out of a solid piece of jade.)

The face carved into it gives me vaguely Olmec "were-jaguar" vibes, but as far as I know the Olmec jades were also typically single pieces and had more detailed carving and polish. The Maya do have examples of tiled jade like this, but not any vessels as far as I can find and it's a bit different than their pottery styles. This leads me to think that this is a replica (also the odds of having an intact vessel from either group at this point is very low)

As far as what they were originally used for, we don't really know. Most jade objects were found as grave goods (probably because unlike earthenware they are less easily destroyed) and there is some evidence they were used in rituals.

https://www.reddit.com/r/History_Mysteries/comments/k083pb/inheritance_mystery/

Another Reddit user, AncientArch, wrote: "The figures look like modern pseudo-Olmec reproductions made for tourists in Mexico/Mesoamerica. Jade mosaics are widespread among ancient Olmec, Maya, and Mesoamerican cultures. However,

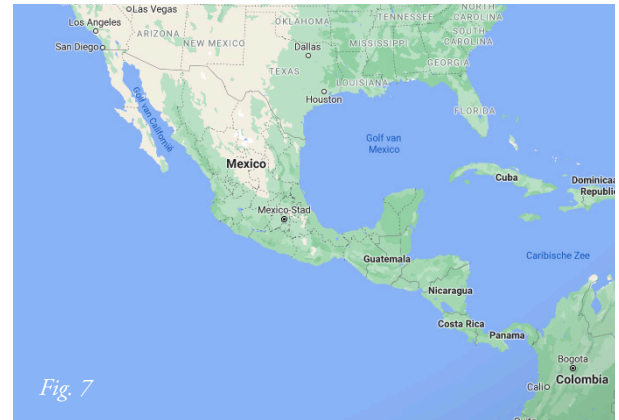


Fig. 7



Fig. 8 / Meso-American Region

Fig. 7 & 8, Google Maps, Meso-American Region, including Central Mexico, Guatemala and Belize / January 23rd 2021.

I've never seen an ancient mosaic with this shape, which supports the modern origin. I also guess that the sticker on the bottom is a price tag... although it may be an inventory number. As far as I know these figures are not taken directly from ancient art, more "inspired by" sort of thing, so they don't represent particular individuals. The seated figure theme is prevalent throughout Olmec art. I don't think it is of any significant cultural value, but it is still an interesting piece of art and craftsmanship :)"

https://www.reddit.com/r/CulturalAnthro/comments/k07zsl/who_can_tell_me_what_this_is/

Assuming that the sticker on the bottom is indeed a pricetag and the origin of the vase is Mexico this would mean that the vase cost my grandfather \$1100,- Mexican Peso, which translates to roughly €45,-

This research made sense to me, as I remember my grandfather travel to Mexico when I was a little kid.

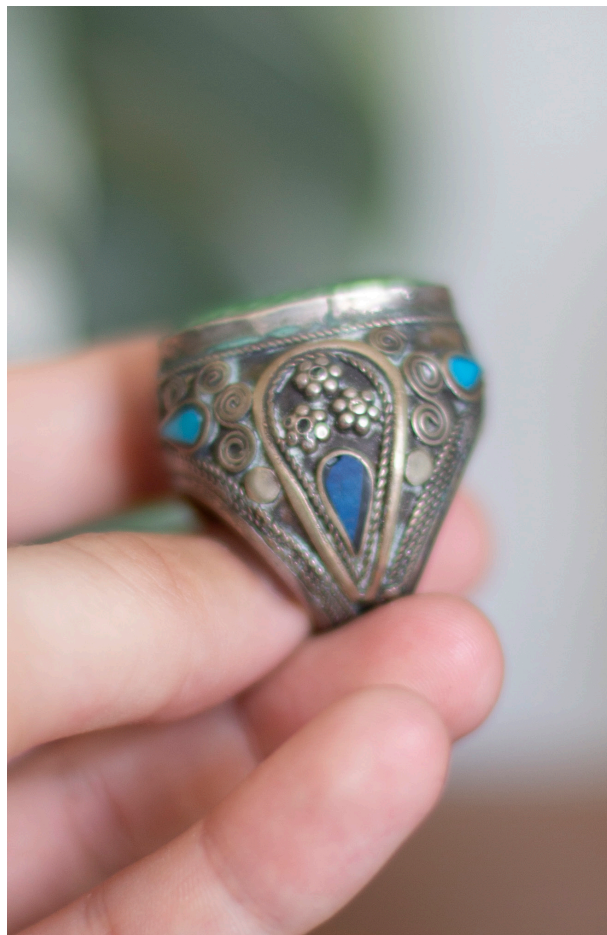
The Olmec peoples used jade not only because it was beautiful and precious, it was also a material embodiment of wind and the vitalizing breath soul. Because of its close relationship to the breath spirit, jade was an important component of funerary rites and the ritual conjuring of gods and ancestors. This is the reason so many jade artifacts were found among gravesites.

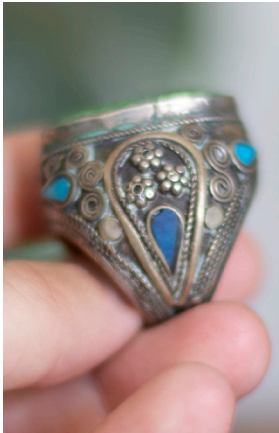
Ancient Mesoamerica , Volume 16 , Issue 1 , January 2005 , pp. 23 - 50

During my research, I came across another piece similar to mine on an American antique's website. It was branded as a 'Pre Colombian Jade Mosaic Vessel' and sold for \$305,- U.S. Dollars. In comparison to their vessel, mine has a bluer tone. It's possible the American antique's website sold this piece as an original even though it is also a replica since an original vessel like this would sell for much more than the price that was paid.

<https://www.antiquesnavigator.com/d-2568017/pre-columbian-olmec-jade-mosaic-vessel.html>







Men's Kochi Tribal Ring
With unidentified engravings

Artist: Unknown
Material: Steel ring, minerals consist of engraved rough malachite, lapis lazuli and turquoise.
Origin: Afghanistan.

Men's Kochi Tribal Ring

With unidentified engravings

This ring design originates from Afghanistan and is created by the Kochi/Kuchi people, a nomadic tribe native to Afghanistan.

The stones on the ring are lapis lazuli, turquoise, and rough malachite, the Kochi people believed these stones to carry healing properties. The engravings are undecipherable since they're written in calligraphy.

<https://www.crystalvaults.com/crystal-encyclopedia/malachite>

While the Kuchi are of the Pashtun tribe originating from southeastern Afghanistan near the border of Pakistan, they are nomadic, accustomed to moving semi-annually with their herds between summer pastures in Afghanistan and winter pastures in Pakistan. "Kuchi" is a Baluchistan word meaning "nomadic" or "wandering".

<https://www.animadesigns-shop.com/hand-carved-tribal-malachite-kuchi-ring-in-size-11.html>

Reddit user Jessica-Swanlake helped me again with her comment on one of my posts asking about the ring. She told me: "The stones on the ring are lapis lazuli, turquoise, and the top stone is almost certainly rough-polished carved malachite. While I don't speak any vaguely related languages, this looks to be an example of "Kuchi" or "Kochi" jewelry either made by them or a replica based on similar rings worn by the nomadic peoples they are named after. If you search for images of Kuchi rings you will see that the style and choice of stones are familiar. There are even other examples of carved malachite rings, although none I found had prayers carved into them, which leads me to think this might have been an example made for visitors/tourists or even bespoke."

https://www.reddit.com/r/History_Mysteries/comments/iz34y4/inherited_ring/



*Fig. 9 & 10, Google Maps, Afghanistan. Kochi, India.
January 23rd 2021.*

Another Reddit user, Liberteraha, wrote me: “Hey I’m pretty sure it’s Arabic (I’m Persian myself so I’m pretty sure this is not Farsi) but I can’t really read them because it’s not normal writing, people usually use this for writing prayers so I’m pretty certain it’s a prayer or something which relates to religion.”

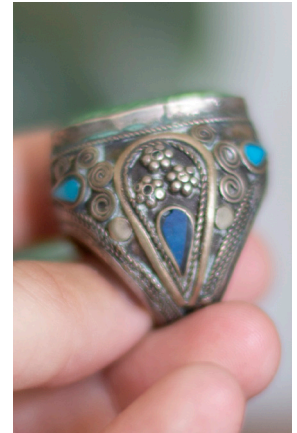
https://www.reddit.com/r/History_Mysteries/comments/iz34y4/inherited_ring/

It seemed unlikely to me that my grandfather had visited Afghanistan and after having asked my family about it they also concluded that he’d never been there. That means that my grandfather got it from somewhere else, which also indicates that it is most likely a replica. It’s impossible to say where he got it, but during my research, I found a city called ‘Kochi’ located in India. Although they’re unrelated to the Afghan tribe it was interesting to me since I know that he did visit India at one point.

Concluding this research I started to question if my grandfather himself even knew what was carved into the malachite. Since I have all these modern tools available to me to decipher what this ring says and I’m not able to, I might need to accept that my grandfather was just as oblivious as to what this says as I am. Whatever it says, I am almost certain that this ring is a replica or a souvenir based on the Kochi people’s culture.



Replica Kochi Ring sold on Etsy.



The inherited ring.

Conclusion

By listening to the properties of these inherited objects I've been able to uncover some of their histories. It is through uncovering these stories that I feel closer to my grandfather, finding out what attracted him to these objects and why he had the desire to materialize his adventures. Retracing his steps in a way. Having worked on this project for a long time allowed me to cover each piece with care and consideration. Though it created new questions that became even harder to answer. Questions about his motives, the 'why' in most cases.

The inability to answer some of the questions that arose was a painful reminder that he's no longer here and that I cannot ask him anything anymore. Still, I felt like I have come to know him better since beginning this search. My grandfather may have bought these objects to embody his adventures, but the objects he left have also created a new adventure, for me.

Nevertheless, I struggled with losing him. The inheritance that stood in my home was a constant affirmation of his death. In the beginning, I felt like I was just holding onto his objects for a limited time, but through learning its histories they started to feel less strange and I started to accept them as my own. Feeling a sense of pride in being allowed to possess some of the materializations of his adventures.

What then does it mean to inherit? For me, it means integrating your heritage into your own life but being critical of what that consists of. I had a hard time accepting the cultural pieces after having found the colonial coin. It made me want to explore the origin of each object in order to ensure it was ethically obtained. By researching the stories of these objects I gave myself the

opportunity to know what it was that I was inheriting, which allowed me to distance myself from the colonial coin but embrace the other cultural pieces.

I want to acknowledge that integrating your inheritance into your life isn't something that is done quickly, it's a process that takes time. I am still working on figuring out what to do with the coin as I don't want it to cause harm. This archive has been the first step in unpicking my inheritance in order to understand it and care for it. To eventually help me decide what I want to carry forward and how to do that.

Additionally, in my research, I noticed that most of these objects were souvenirs and that they were based on original cultural artifacts. This is a good example of countries benefitting from their ancestry and heritage, by making replicas of original cultural artifacts, in order to sell them as souvenirs to tourists. I think then that it's worth mentioning that not every country has the luxury of presiding over its own cultural heritage. Since many countries were looted of their heritages by former European colonial powers. Having held an object from that colonial period made me feel responsible to work on healing those colonial wrongdoings. If I can inherit a coin with a colonial past, then there must be others who can also inherit stuff with a colonial history. I hope that this archive will serve as an inspiration for you to dig up your family's history and critically reflect on what it is that you'll find.

Because if you don't, it will trickle down your family tree and you'll burden a next generation with the wrongdoings of our predecessors.



By
Mauk van Emmerik