

CINNAMON & ELEPHANTS

SRI LANKA AND THE NETHERLANDS FROM 1600

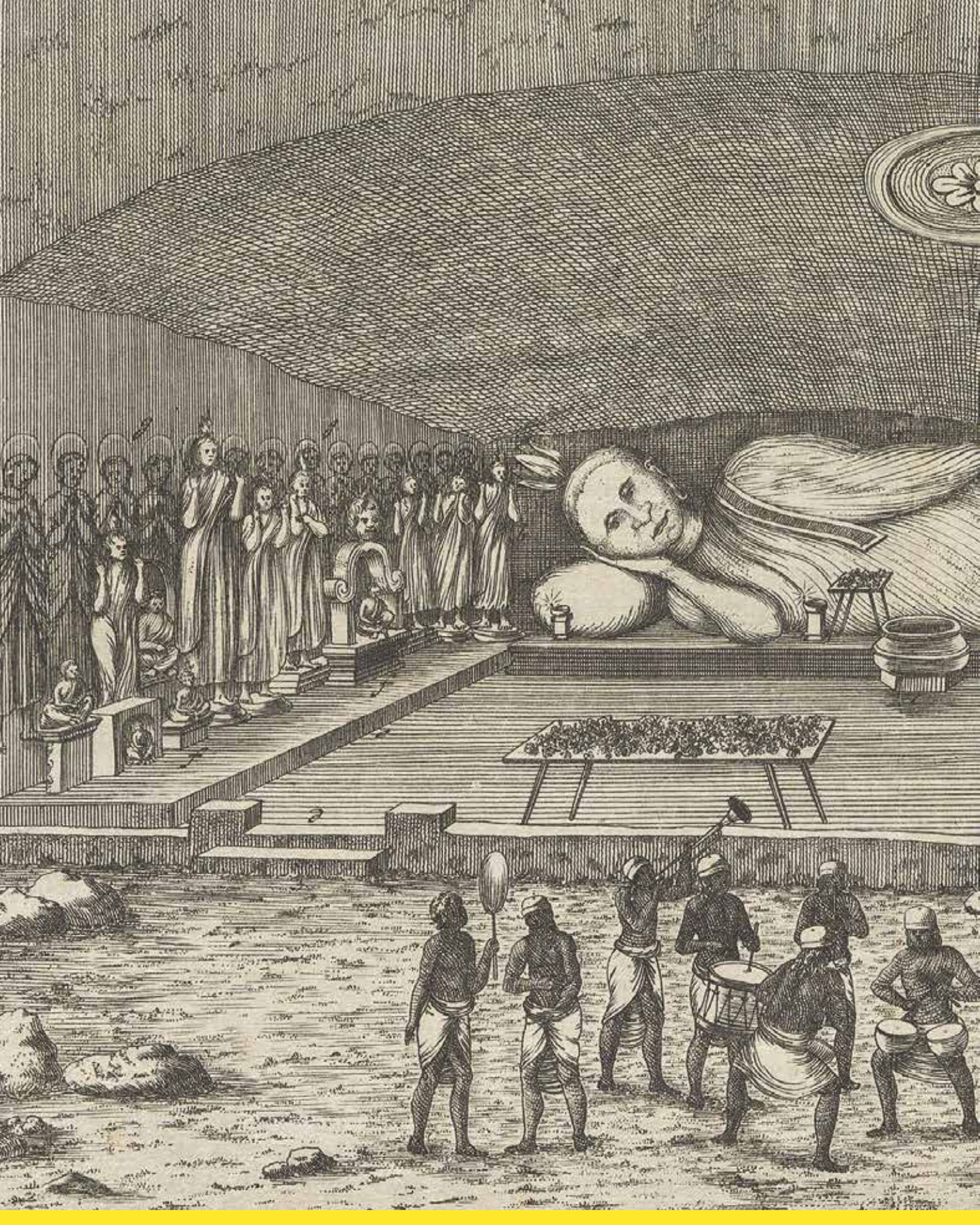
LODEWIJK WAGENAAR

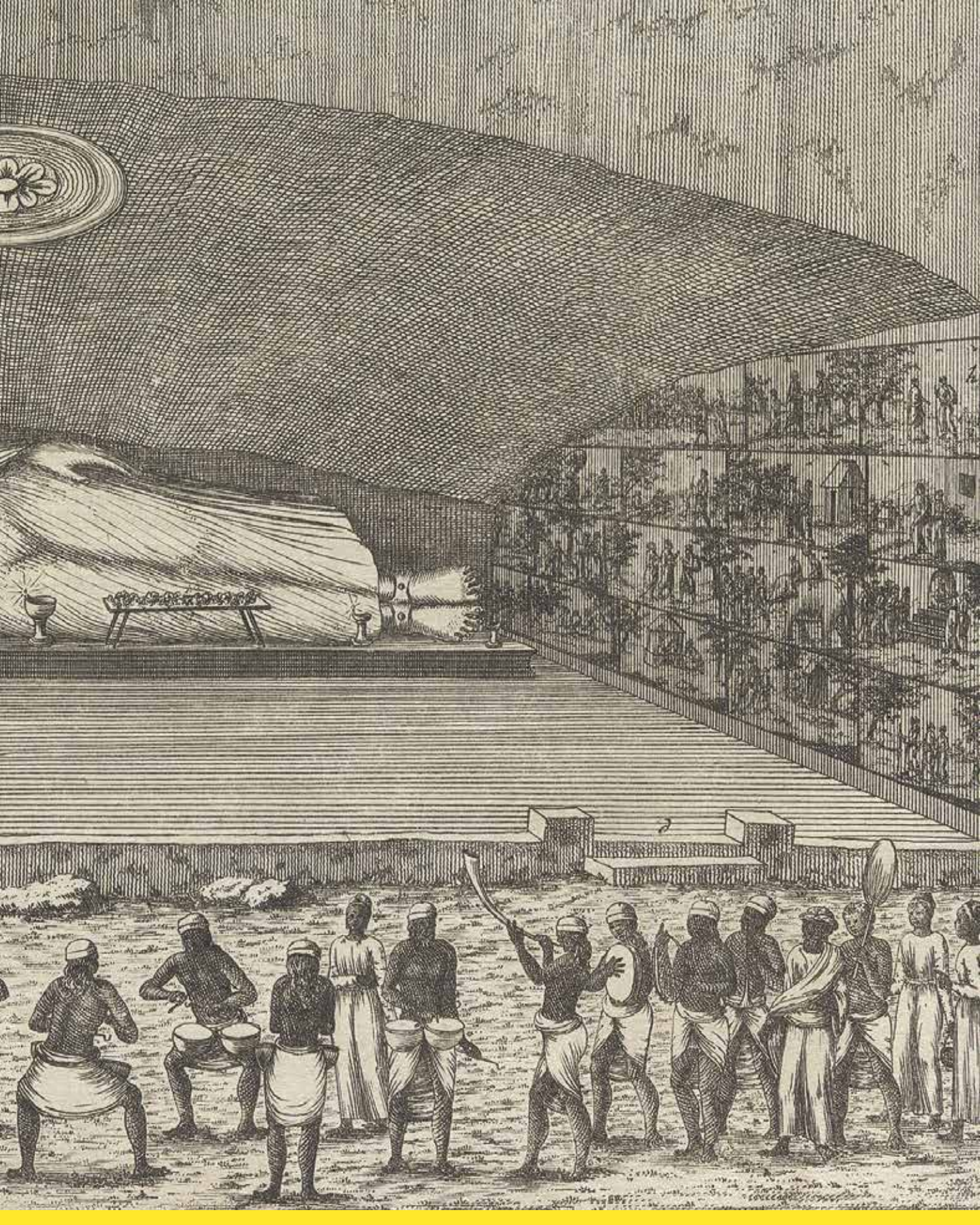












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SRI LANKA AND THE NETHERLANDS
FROM 1600

LODEWIJK WAGENAAR

COVER
Hansken the elephant (detail)
Anonymous
1641 of 1642
Engraving, 295 x 383 mm
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam
Inv.no. RP-P-0B-77795

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0.1A
View of pepper plantation
in the Baygam area
c. 1750

FOREWORD

This attractive book that charts relations between Sri Lanka and the Netherlands since 1600 through objects and artefacts, visual representations and an array of written sources is an invitation to reflect on contrasting ways in which peoples produce their past in former colonised and colonizing states. While postcolonial Sri Lanka moved from indifference to voracious consumption of its colonial past, Dutch society seems to remain rooted in denial. Words such as race or colonial violence are seldom heard in public discourse and the academy.

As a child growing up in Paris, my family visits to Sri Lanka began with cultural trips to the ancient cities of the Rajarata and often ended in the South of Lanka to enjoy a walk along the ramparts of Galle close to my father's own 'gama' (village) in the interior. The southern city was then sleepy and provincial and the Dutch fort crumbling. In those years, a Dutch past was there in filigree, in a very understated way. Later as an adult I visited the Ridi Vihara (Silver temple), an ancient temple in Kurunegala that houses a recumbent Buddha resting on a platform decorated with blue and white porcelain tiles depicting Biblical scenes, gifted by a Dutch envoy to the King of Kandy, Kirti Sri Raja Sinha. The irony and incongruity of this sight left me wondering about the nature of colonial encounters. In my eagerness to be outraged was I missing something?

After the end of the civil war in Sri Lanka a new turn in the production of the past could be discerned with a near obsession on the part of state urban planners and independent designers with very specific aspects of the Dutch heritage. Today it seems as though Dutch rule exemplifies the 'colonial' and that in a canny reversal of situations it is now the 'colonial' that is the object of gaze and exploitation by market forces. While Portuguese and British colonialism are fading away the Dutch past pops up revived, in multiple incarnations. Dutch forts are revamped and have become up-market destinations for the newly rich. Dutch hospitals in the Colombo and Galle forts have been transformed into tropical modern centers for exclusive shopping and dining experiences. Old Dutch houses become boutique hotels for upper end foreign tourists in search of colonial nostalgia. Dutchness is a palimpsest, an allegory of a colonial past stripped of its often controversial and violent content. All that remains is a spectacle, an object for people with disposable income to consume voraciously. Dutch heritagizing goes hand in hand with the neo-liberal gentrification of urban spaces and for me – the daunting prospect of Colombo becoming a megapolis.

In that sense new forms of consumption are making people of Lanka oblivious to the nuances and complexities of the century-long Dutch presence in the

maritime provinces of the island. In a similar fashion, the surprise and innocence of my students at Leiden University when they hear that Sri Lankans still today eat 'broeder' and have in their midst a local community called Burghers never ceases to enchant me. For the teacher, a sense of curiosity often helps to trump despair!

If as Burke suggests the social role of the historian is to remind people of what they would like to forget should we not be endeavouring to reverse the amnesia of a new generation of Dutch citizens about the deeds and misdeeds of the Company in the cinnamon island four centuries ago? Is it not important that they know the connection between cinnamon extracted from a distant land conquered by a trade company and the prosperity of the Golden Age? As this book reminds us, Colombo was a major maritime transshipment base where VOC traders brought in slaves counted as cargo in shipping lists. Hailing from all parts of the Indian Ocean world they were then despatched to other destinations such as the Cape or remained in Lanka as domestics or labourers in the urban centres, or, as happened in the first years of the Company's presence in Sri Lanka, to labour in the rice fields in the Southwest. The sketches of Jan Brandes and Esaias Boursse testify to this trade in humans, a horrific practise that was not exclusively European but in which the Dutch partook with zeal.

By re-centering the beautiful objects of the Rijksmuseum that support the story recounted in this book, a story of mutual ignorance and incomprehension, of colonial violence, predation and wars, of complicity and rare friendly cross-cultural encounters we can strive to contribute to something necessary and urgent for postcolonial Dutch society. How best to defamiliarize young people's experience of their own present in a postcolonial Europe and re-capture the values of empathy for the future than by allowing objects and pictures to speak out without fear? For these reasons, this book deserves to be widely disseminated and discussed. It will hopefully help lift the discomfort about untold pasts.

Nira Wickramasinghe
Chair/Professor of Modern South Asian Studies
Leiden University



0.1B
Trees with pepper vines
Detail of 0.1A

INTRODUCTION

[FIG 1.01] Anyone wanting to take a trip into the maritime and colonial history of the Netherlands would do well to start their journey in the Rijksmuseum. Three of the museum's galleries – with the concise and intriguing collective title 'The Netherlands Overseas' – transport museumgoers to those far-off places whose history is connected in one way or another with the Netherlands. One of these places is Sri Lanka. For many people this shared history will be unknown, perhaps in part because until 1972 this country went by another name: Ceylon. For some visitors the words 'Sri Lanka' may spark thoughts of some remote tropical holiday island with beautiful beaches, because on occasion travel brochures do contain images of such things. But the former existence of a Dutch colony there will be news to many – as will the fact that the Dutch East India Company (VOC) fought a lengthy war with the Portuguese from 1638 to 1658 to get its hands on the precious cinnamon produced in Ceylon's coastal region.

The subject of war occupies a significant portion of the history of the VOC. For example, take a look at the small cannon in the eighteenth century gallery for 'The Netherlands Overseas'. It does not look all that dangerous, and the information on the label confirms that first impression. This is a ceremonial weapon that was used to fire salutes, and the VOC captured it in 1765 during its war with the Ceylonese kingdom of Kandy. Anyone with a rose-tinted view of Dutch history will likely be shocked to discover that the VOC won Ceylon through violent conflict, and that more than a century later, between 1761 and 1765, it again fought ferociously to avoid losing its cinnamon-rich colony.

In hindsight, the period of Dutch presence on the island is a most remarkable affair. The story of their arrival in 1638 seemed quite innocent, because the king of Kandy had actually invited the VOC, or 'Company', to help expel the Portuguese. But there was soon a twist to this tale. To summarize and rather overstate the matter, the VOC's position was this: 'We are here to help you, Sire, but we will not leave until you have reimbursed the costs we incurred by waging war for you. In the meantime, we will take as much from the island as we can sell elsewhere – that seems like a fair deal to us.' The king would never be in a position to repay such debts, and this meant that the Dutch would never leave. The Company was convinced of its right to exploit the island's coastal regions and make good profits for itself in the process. The king of Kandy had to face facts, and the population in the Company territories could do little else than obey the new rulers, just as they had their previous lords and masters the Portuguese.

The VOC was proud of its trading empire. Anyone privileged enough to visit the meeting hall at the

former East India House (Oost-Indisch Huis) in Amsterdam would have seen that pride expressed through the paintings on the wall depicting the trading posts and colonies overseas. Curiously, Ceylon did not feature in these paintings, despite the island being a major contributor to the Company's coffers. Although it is possible that this was perceived as an oversight at the time, it was not rectified in the many years that passed before the dissolution of the VOC, when the paintings were taken to the Rijksmuseum – unfortunately still without a painting of Ceylon. Later on, this hiatus was more than amply filled; otherwise this book *Cinnamon & Elephants* would never have seen the light of day. The aim of the Rijksmuseum Country Series is to show what the museum collection has to offer that relates to 'the overseas', and in the case of Ceylon/Sri Lanka that is a sizeable amount. Nonetheless, the nature of the materials used for many of the objects means they are very susceptible to light damage and cannot be part of the museum's permanent display, and its overseas collection must therefore make do without the drawings, watercolours and prints that appear in this book. Most of these images date back to the eighteenth century, when the VOC had been running the colony of Ceylon for so long that there was no reason to think anything would change. We now know, however, the Dutch colonial period would end: the British took over the island's coastal areas in 1796 and the Company had to leave. Gradually, memories of this colonial episode faded, and the Netherlands' connection with Ceylon was reflected in just a few illustrated books on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; collections of other pictures were held privately, so very few people had access to them. This situation changed around the dawn of the twentieth century, when in 1902 the Rijksprentenkabinet (now the Rijksmuseum's Print Room) acquired a dozen or so watercolours by Cornelis Steiger, who worked in Ceylon around 1710. Several works by Carel Frederik Reimer who was in Ceylon around 1775 joined them two years later. The Netherlands of the early twentieth century witnessed a resurgence of interest in its overseas history. One expression of this was the establishment in 1908 of the Linschoten Society, which set about publishing old travel journals with great zeal. In the introductions to these works and in other historical studies, we encounter an attitude that now comes across as terribly outdated, couched in phrases such as 'great deeds were done here'. The 'great deeds' done in the name of, and on the orders of, the trading companies (the VOC and the Dutch West India Company, WIC) were not subjected to criticism of any note. Quite the reverse, in fact, because many municipalities had streets named after the governors-general of the VOC and the islands of the former Dutch East

Indies. Individual buildings also highlighted this positive interest in the country's colonial past, an example being the sculptural work on the Shipping House (Scheepvaarthus) on the Prins Hendrikkade in Amsterdam. The Dutch thought very differently about their colonial history than they do today – that much is clear.

Attitudes change with time. The commissioners of the Rijksmuseum's 1963 jubilee exhibition *150 jaar Koninkrijk*, commemorating one hundred and fifty years of the Dutch Empire, felt a sense of shame about the colonial past – or a sense of discomfort, at least. They therefore chose not to devote any attention at all to the former colonial territories. The dramatic events in New Guinea discussed in *Bitter Spice* (the Rijksmuseum Country Series volume focusing on the Netherlands and Indonesia) were undoubtedly at the root of this ban. The subject of the all-but forgotten colony of Ceylon was far less sensitive, which meant that in 1956 – when relations between Indonesia and the Netherlands were abysmal – it was not considered in the least controversial that the Rijksmuseum's Dutch History Department acquired several of Jan Brandes's watercolours of Ceylon. The museum's collection of his work grew substantially in 1985, when it bought two important sketchbooks focusing mainly on Brandes's short stay in Ceylon in 1795. This acquisition and Esaias Boursse's sketchbook, purchased in 1996, offer the beholder an intense and direct experience of a country that up to this point had only been described in travel journals and historical studies.

The admirers of the 'great deeds' were children of their times – as are, by extension, modern detractors – and we can take it for granted that the opinions of those serving with the Company were also riddled with the ideas of the society in which they lived. The past is another planet: people thought differently and lived differently, and we should bear that in mind when viewing and interpreting images from another era. With this in our thoughts, it would perhaps be worthwhile to offer one example.

A watercolour painted by an unknown artist around 1775 and showing a view of a pepper plantation in the south of Sri Lanka is immediate and pragmatic in the way it gets to the essence of the Dutch colonial presence in Ceylon. The first ships had come to Ceylon simply to explore the possibilities for trade, but this project ended fifty years later with the occupation of the coastal area. The initial aim was only to export cinnamon, but the VOC moved on swiftly to open up the entire territory for financial gain. In the watercolour we see three well-to-do men looking out at trees that have been planted on land where rice was once cultivated. The trees themselves are of little interest

to them, but they are very interested in the pepper plants creeping up the trunks of the trees. One detail of the watercolour shows clearly how the man on the left is pointing out to the two others that the pepper crop is proceeding well.

The three gentlemen's attire reflects eighteenth-century fashion for a prosperous Dutchman: each of them is wearing closed shoes; knee-breeches with silk stockings; a blouse with long, puffed sleeves; and, over that, a frock coat with a long row of buttons. They are also all wearing a tricorne hat and carrying a stick – a useful aid when ascending Peperberg Hill. This elevated spot offers a beautiful view. In the right background we can see Dondra Bay, the furthest point to the south-east of the Company territory of Ceylon. In long-gone days this area was part of the Ceylonese royal *dispense*, a fertile rice-growing region where farmers handed over most of their yield to the court. The Portuguese held sway here in the sixteenth century but the Dutch took over from them in 1640, and the radiant expression of the man on the left reflects this.

How should we characterize the attitude of these men? Smug, perhaps? We can only judge properly once the context is known. What did the men themselves think of the situation – and what about the Ceylonese people around them? Life for the population at large was very different from that of the 'indigenous headmen', who continued to rule over their subjects much as they had done previously. Now, however, they were no longer doing so in the name of their own king or on the authority of the Portuguese rulers. Tellingly, in 1757 a local inhabitant complained that the 'white men' and their local administrators were colluding and treating rural dwellers unfairly. Of course, the person who expressed this complaint was framed by his social position and that influenced his perspective – and the same applies to the figures in the painting. How were they seen; how did they see themselves? Looking at the watercolour with questions such as these in mind constitutes an attempt to redraw the picture and to colour it in. In this way, the scene repeatedly gains new meaning, because each observer creates a new image. In twenty years' time, observers may interpret the watercolour in their own way, and they may see very different people standing on Peperberg Hill.