

A GLANCE AT *FURNITUR BERTUTUR*: A TEMPORARY EXHIBITION AT JAKARTA HISTORY MUSEUM

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Abstract

The *Furnitur Bertutur* exhibition, held at the Jakarta History Museum from October 2024 to January 2025, presents an overview of Dutch East Indies or Indies style furniture as a manifestation of material encounters and hybridity between European and Nusantara societies in colonial Jakarta/Batavia. This exhibition showcases various types of historical furniture mostly from the *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC) period, such as chairs, tables, and cabinets, highlighting craftsmanship and cross-cultural influences mirroring the multi-layered history of Jakarta. This paper aims to inquire the exhibition practice while providing constructive criticism regarding its substance from critical museology, art history and interior architecture perspectives. The method used is a comparative architectural criticism, involving direct observation towards the exhibition's presentation, an analysis of its narrative and displayed information, spatial layout, and curatorial approach, then compare them with relevant historical and theoretical references. The exhibition manages to display the richness of Indies furniture in an attractive and engaging setting. The integration of digital catalogue as explanatory medium is effective and the catalogue itself is well designed. There are however notable shortcomings. In the display space, several items seemed to be out of scope thematically and chronologically, while reconstructed rooms show anachronistic elements that may misled casual observers. In its narrative, some of the omitted information obscure the exhibition's scope, as well as crucial aspects of Batavian live which could have enhanced understanding of the displayed pieces. Some statements seem to contradict referenced sources and are not sufficiently discussed, giving the negative impression of a didactic revision. Nevertheless, this exhibition deserves appreciation for reigniting interests in Indies furniture as a complex historical heritage. Some of its significant elements have the potential to be preserved as part of the museum's permanent exhibition.

Keywords: Batavia, *Furnitur Bertutur*, Indies furniture, Jakarta History Museum, temporary exhibition

INTRODUCTION

In the 17th century, colonial cities designed by Europeans began to emerge as a new type of built environment in the Nusantara archipelago. Batavia, now Jakarta, serves as a prime example of this development. Established by the Dutch-based company *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC) in 1619 atop the earlier Jayakarta settlement

in which they had razed, the port city boasted European-styled infrastructures catering the needs of its Dutch elites: moats, walls, perpendicular streets and canals, warehouses, churches, town hall, castle, and so on. But despite these European trappings, Dutch residents only formed a fraction of the population compared to majority Javanese, Chinese, Malay, Indian, and other non-European nationalities cohabitating within the same city (Eliëns 2002: 14, Kehoe 2015: 18) and forming a distinct Eurasian social identity despite the Dutch's segregating efforts (cf. Cowherd 2021, Taylor 2009).

A similar relationship can be seen in the buildings of early Batavia. While they took an unmistakable European outer form, their interior are hosts to distinctive hybrid furnishings in the so-called "Indies style." As the VOC headquarter for its Asian operations, the city saw the influx of Dutch and other European elites who desired the latest fashionable furniture for their homes, and the Indies style predominated. A plethora of furniture ranging from chairs, tables, cabinets, desks, to other domestic embellishments categorized in this style is not only an accomplished work of applied art, but also a testament to the complex material encounters and cultural hybridity that emerged in the newly globalized world at the time. It is therefore unfortunate that Indies furniture is often met with a great deal of indifference from both the Netherlands and Indonesia (Van Gompel, Hoving, & Klusener 2013 10), partly due to their confused legacy of shared heritage in the post-colonial world (Perdana, Abdulhadi, & Simatupang 2024: 304 citing Bloembergen & Eickhoff 2012, Drieënhuizen 2014).

Following a previous study on 18th-century furnishing in Batavia Castle (Perdana, Abdulhadi, & Simatupang, 2024), the authors were considering the idea of studying extant Indies furniture in Jakarta public collections. A number of these furniture are now scattered in places like Jakarta History Museum (Museum Sejarah Jakarta, colloquially known as Museum Fatahillah), Museum Nasional, and Gereja Protestan Indonesia Barat (GPIB) Jemaat Sion—a 17th-century church formerly known as *Portugese Buitenkerk* (see Groll 1993). While some pieces have been intermittently mentioned in past literatures (e.g. Carpenter, Backus, & Adnyana 2009, De Haan 1923, Nediari 2010, Veenendaal 1985), finding detailed information of their provenance and stylistic appraisal is generally difficult due to lack of comprehensive public catalogue and research focusing on the scope.

It was to the authors' surprise then, during an initial query in September 2024 with representative of the GPIB Jemaat Sion, that an exhibition focusing on Indies furniture was going to open. The authors later learned this to be *Furnitur Bertutur*. Given the hitherto little interest to Indies furnishings and the exhibition's stated goals, *Furnitur Bertutur* is a welcome event which could spark wider interest to Indies furniture and provide the authors with the opportunity to study its curative direction. This paper presents the authors' reflections following several visits to the *Furnitur Bertutur* temporary exhibition at the Jakarta History Museum in October 2024. Authors viewed and retrospectively examine its exhibition practices by providing scholarly perspectives of museology, art history, and interior/architectural design.

Furnitur Bertutur exhibition demonstrated noteworthy excellence, but there are also several aspects in which the exhibition fell short. In this article, we attempt to deliver an impartial review, addressing both its successes and shortcomings. In doing so, we attempt to counter the prevailing trend within Indonesia's hierarchical museum system, where open and substantive criticism is rare (Kreps 2019: 174), with reviews typically defaulting to predominantly courteous and similar praises – *basa-basi* in Indonesian – even when exhibitions warrant more critical assessment.

Using *Furnitur Bertutur* as a starting point, this review also considers the broader context of museum curation in Indonesia. Despite evidence that some Indonesian public museums are capable of participating in international-level exhibitions (Bennett 2025), scholars have frequently observed the ongoing challenges in creating engaging exhibition spaces and nuanced narratives that goes beyond didactic paradigms (Akbar 2019: 370-1, Arainikasih 2024, Bennett 2025: 18, Estudiantin 2024: 119, Fajri 2023, Kreps 2008: 24-6, Kreps 2019, Perkasa & Arainikasih 2023, Prianti & Suyadnya 2022: 240, Sastramidjaja 2014: 452, Taylor 1971, Zilberg 2010).¹ While these observations have largely focused on permanent exhibitions, temporary exhibitions, a crucial element of museum programming, also deserve scholarly attention. They reveal a museum's capacity to engage with current issues, experiment with display designs (which may later be integrated into the permanent format), and attract timely public interest. Consequently, an examination of *Furnitur Bertutur* offers a relevant opportunity to assess how Jakarta History Museum navigates the common challenges faced by Indonesian museums. The following analysis, while including critical observations regarding the above issues, is not intended as a disparagement of the exhibition or its curatorial team but rather as a contribution in identifying potential avenues for future improvement.

METHOD

To better analyse the exhibition space and its narrative, the authors adopt several theoretical frameworks from the field of critical museology. These are especially relevant in circumventing the didactic tendencies of Indonesian museums, which authors trace to at least two contributing factors. The first factor is the problematic ideology of modernism, which have been occurring since the second half of the 20th century. Mainly through the fields of architecture and built environment, the triumph of the International Style with its popular rationalist aphorisms such as “form follow function,” “less is more,” and “ornament is a crime” (Forty 2004: 178, 249, 253) brought about homogenised built space, which also extended to museums and influenced the way collections were exhibited. Museums became inert, overly neutral space as they were viewed as mere boxes to contain “frozen” cultural objects (Bennett 2025: 18 citing Rendra 1979: 57, Kreps 1998: 9-10, Lorente 2022: 43). The second factor is colonialism. Museum was institutionally introduced to Indonesian cultural realms by the Dutch to serve colonial

¹ Additionally, in regard to history museums, it is no secret among scholars that Indonesian governmental bodies (which include most museums in the country) are susceptible in presenting sophisticated historical artefacts with “unsophisticated level of historical analysis” (Griffiths 2021: 21. See also Ricklefs 2021: xiii, Sulistyowati & Foe 2021).

interests and its Eurocentric gaze towards non-Western cultures. After the Indonesian independence, it was then reappropriated by the postcolonial nation-state intellectuals to construct their national identity (Kreps 2019: 154). However, by adopting a homogenized concept of nationhood intertwined with modernist urge of standardization, Indonesian museums risked sustaining the legacy of colonial domination by overlooking the complexities of diverse cultures and histories in archipelago (Fajri 2023: 444 citing Mignolo & Walsh 2018: 24).

In countering these perennial factors, authors adopt the view of museum space as dialogic. In this view, display elements such as general layout, positioning of artefacts, arrangement of text and media are not detached from the artefacts; space and artefacts influence each other as parts of an exhibition's dialogue with the visitors, shaping perceived meaning and overall viewing experience (Desvallées & Nash 2011, Prianti & Suyadnya 2022: 235, Smith & Foote 2016: 2). Consequently, attentions must be given not only to what museums show but also to how they do it according to their own curatorial strategies (Lorente 2022: 65). As visitors, the authors take on the role of active agent seeking to foreground dialogues embedded in the space, while scrutinizing the congruency between the display spaces and selected artefacts with the stated—and unstated—intents of the exhibition. Authors also adopt a decolonial view that museum narratives should not be oversimplified in single or fixed linear forms, but heterogenous and inclusive in representing history and cultural heritage. Equally important to the narratives presented in the exhibition are those that have been left out, a situation prevalent in temporary exhibitions that showcase only selected items from the museum's extensive collection that functionally fit the specific theme. By comparing with scholarly sources and the exhibition's own bibliography, authors are interested in identifying these omissions and assess their impact on the overall narrative.

The study also employs a comparative architectural criticism approach by incorporating direct observations and experiences of the exhibition's presentation, an analysis of its narrative and displayed information, spatial layout and curatorial approach review, and comparisons with relevant historical accounts, including insights from the authors' previous research. This type of inquiry falls within the qualitative research, which assumes a subjective reality and views the research process as an interactive engagement with the subject of inquiry (Wang & Groat 2013: 71). It may be noted that authors engage with the exhibition primarily from an academic point of view. Viewing Indonesian museums from the shoes of 'ordinary Indonesians' (Zillberg 2010: 260, cf. Kreps 2019: 175) or aggregating various professional perspectives may reveal distinct insights that are also important to consider. However, due to authors' limitations, such views are unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Overview & First Impressions

Furnitur Bertutur, roughly ‘speaking furniture,’² is a temporary exhibition first opened in Jakarta History Museum on 14 October 2024, running initially to 27 December 2024 then extended to 19 January 2025. It was free of charge for its first opening week to commemorate the earlier National Museum Day on 12 October. The exhibition credits various collaborators including Southeast Asia Museum Services (SEAMS), Indonesia Heritage Agency (IHA), Unit Pengelola Museum Kebaharian Jakarta, Rumah Kartini, Museum Sonobudoyo, GPIB Jemaat Sion, Living Museum Roemah Toegoe, and Rumah Kayu Goen. Through selected pieces in the museum, added by few others from collaborators’ collections, the exhibition intent to explore how Indies furniture can “tell the story of Jakarta’s multi-layered history” (Museum Sejarah Jakarta 2024: 5) and surface lesser-known narratives to the public consciousness (Rachmadita 2024).



Figure 1. 2024 *Furnitur Bertutur* event promotions. (Source: Jakarta History Museum Instagram, 2024)

The exhibition covers a relatively small area but quite dense in the number of displayed pieces. The overall space is well lit, professionally arranged, and visually attractive. Given the exhibition’s venue, the Dutch colonial town hall (*stadhuis*) built in 1710, the exhibition goes a long way in countering the unfortunate public image of Indonesian museums as “old, dark, and creepy outdated colonial building” (Prianti & Suyadnya 2022: 235). Exhibition space is limited to three halls in the entrance wing of the Jakarta History Museum (Figure 2). The first hall contains several chairs displayed in podiums backed against the wall, representing distinct furniture styles that came and went in Batavia (Figure 3). Several other chairs, a cabinet, and miscellaneous items like

² *Tutur* in Indonesian means ‘speech’ or ‘narrate.’ The prefix *ber-* denotes action verb or adjective. *Bertutur* could mean ‘speaking’ or ‘containing speeches.’ Considering the authors’ dialogic point of view and the exhibition’s goal to foreground embedded voices in these furniture pieces, ‘speaking’ is perhaps a better translation.

ceramic works are also displayed in a similar manner on the opposite wall. General information regarding the styles, origins, and makers of these pieces are presented through both static information panels and interactive digital touch boards. The boards are linked to the exhibition's website and digital catalogue (<https://furniturbertutur.com>), containing supplemental information, archival depictions, and similar pieces found overseas. For example, chairs identical to one of the museum's collections (collection no. MSJ/KLN/PRB/1038) are still preserved in Wolvendaal Church, Colombo, Sri Lanka (Museum Sejarah Jakarta 2024: 12-3). Some spots in the room also feature audio recordings that complement the visual exhibits.

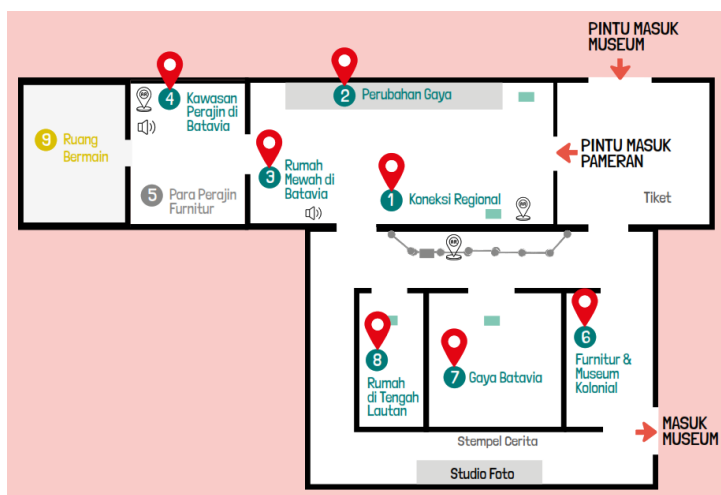


Figure 2. General layout map of *Furnitur Bertutur* exhibition from one of the event's digital booklets.



Figure 3. The first hall of *Furnitur Bertutur* exhibition. The second hall is visible beyond the door on the far wall. The third hall is accessed through the door on the left (Source: Authors, 2024)

Going straight from the first hall entrance is the second hall. An intricately carved ebony-coloured cradle (collection no. MSJ/KLN/PRB/0731) is displayed in the room's

central podium. The cradle was probably made by craftsmen of Coromandel coast and was brought to Batavia around the 17th century (Museum Sejarah Jakarta, 2024: 68-9). On the walls next to it are wood carving tools and a digital screen playing reels of interviews with contemporary craftsmen (Chinese descent and Javanese from Jepara), suggesting a continuity of the craftsmanship since the VOC period to present times. On the opposite walls, another display features account of Batavia's craft district, furniture craftsmen, along with some photographs and illustrations. Further along is a children's activity corner, thoughtfully equipped with thematically relevant activity sheets and interactive pieces, allowing younger visitors to engage more meaningfully with the exhibition.

Tracking back to the first hall, one could turn to the third hall. This section perhaps contains the most interesting display space of the exhibition for authors. The hall contains two enclosed galleries reconstructing historic rooms referenced from the watercolour sketches of Jan Brandes (1743-1808), a Dutch Lutheran minister working in Batavia between 1790 and 1795 (see de Bruijn & Raben 2004). The first room is a ship cabin (*Rumah di Tengah Lautan*, in Figure 2). Beside the entrance to the room, Brandes' sketch of a cabin aboard *de Stavenisse* ship is prominently hung. Entering the room, one finds that similar looking furniture from the period has been arranged to mimic Brandes' sketch. A digital board at the end wall plays looping video of seascape, while another board at front gave access to the digital catalogue.

The larger second room is a reconstruction of a guest room (*Gaya Batavia*, in Figure 2, Figure 4). Brandes' sketch, hung at the entrance as well, shows a scene that may have been typical for upper class Batavians (Figure 5). Two women in a well-furnished guest room are depicted sitting and conversing over tea with a *guéridon* table between them (Perdana, Abdulhadi, & Simatupang 2024: 312), with servants carrying betel chewing³ implements and food tray at either side of them. One then enters the reconstructed guest room, with teacups and ornate betel box (MSJ/KLN/PRL/0692) left on the table and spittoon (collection no. MSJ/ETG/PRL/0114) on the floor, as if those women and their servants in the sketch are stepping out and might return at any moment. As was the cabin room, digital catalogue board is also provided.

³ On betel chewing in Indonesia, see Reid (1985).



Figure 4. Reconstructed guest room referencing Jan Brandes' sketch.
(Source: Authors, 2024)



Figure 5. *Theevisite in een Europees huis in Batavia* (between 1779-85), by Jan Brandes (1743-1808). The same picture is printed and hung beside the entrance of reconstructed guest room.
(Source: Rijksmuseum, the Netherlands, collection no. NG-1985-7-2-15. Public domain)

Outside of both reconstructed rooms, there is a section recounting 20th century displays of Indies furniture, specifically the 1907 VOC Room located at *Museum van Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen* (now Museum Nasional). The exhibition noted how the VOC Room was used to romanticize Dutch history of colonialism in Indonesia, evident by its lack of Asian decor, which should have been present in a historically accurate VOC era interior (Museum Sejarah Jakarta 2024: 56-7, see also Drieënhuizen 2014, Eliëns 2002: 21, North 2014, Veenendaal 2014). From this display point, one then passes a comment wall where the visitors might write their

impressions and decorate it with provided stamps. A customary photo spot (*Studio Foto*, in Figure 2) with chair and backdrop is also provided. One then finally exits the entrance wing and may enter the *stadhuis*, containing Jakarta History Museum proper and its permanent exhibition rooms.

The exhibition is an admirable introduction to the intricacies of Indies furniture. The selected furniture pieces are impressive works of art, and they were displayed in such ways that allow their elaborate details (something that is still difficult to capture in existing publications) to be examined closely and appreciated more deeply. The exhibition also succeeds in integrating digital catalogue as explanatory medium to exhibited pieces, avoiding the common curatorial problem of having excessively long physical label that detracts from visitor experience (for example Akeyla, Dartanto, & Kirana 2024: 26, Wardani 2024, cf. Rand 2016). By making the catalogue accessible through the internet and in-exhibition panels, visitors are provided with the opportunity to peruse extra contextual information inside and outside the exhibition. The bilingual catalogue itself is well made overall; concisely written, respectably designed, equipped with high resolution photos of relevant items and a bibliography.⁴ It may serve as a good template for a publicly accessible catalogue that encompass all the museum's furniture holdings in the future.⁵ The reconstructed historical rooms of the third hall are commendable effort in reconnecting the pieces to the original circumstances in which they were used and arranged. During authors' visit, the museum was packed with visitors of all ages who seems enthusiastic and engaged by the exhibition space; looking closely at furniture details, listening to the audio clips, watching provided reels, swiping at the digital boards, taking photos at various spots of the pieces and themselves. Everyone seemed to be having a good time. In this regard, the exhibition has excelled above many history museums in Indonesia and should be commended for the achievement. Hopefully, this could also contribute to a more positive public image of Indonesian museums in general.

The exhibition narrates Indies furniture as a transregional and multicultural phenomenon. The raw materials and finished products went through a complicated web of trade covering diverse regions, such as Coromandel coast, Maluku, Sri Lanka, and Taiwan, before arriving in Batavia. The commissioners and makers were similarly diverse; Bengalis, Chinese Hokkiens, Europeans such as Portuguese and Dutch, Javanese, *Mardijkers*⁶ and *Mestizo* (mixed descents), Tamils, and Singhalese were all involved in some way or another. This diverse cultural background help explain Asian details in pieces that, at first glance, seems to be European. This can be seen, for example, in the 18th century Indies Council (*Raad van Indië*) chairs (collection no. MSJ/KLN/PRB/1448).

⁴ Having a bibliography is an achievement in itself when national level museums in Indonesia still produce a reference-less catalogue (showing "embarrassing lack of scholarly research or accuracy" in the word of one expert reviewer who shall remain anonymous) for a 2023 exhibition of repatriated objects from the Netherlands.

⁵ Museum Sejarah Jakarta (2024: 77) listed several furniture catalogues, the latest dated from 2013, but these seem to be internal documents or otherwise not directly accessible by the public.

⁶ Mostly Christians former slaves and their descendants who spoke Portuguese creole, many of whom originally hailed from South Asian regions such as Bengal and Malabar. On *Mardijkers*, see Choudhury (2014), Kwisthout (2018), Perret (2011: 167-71).

While the overall template is French Baroque, they have unmistakable Chinese traces in the red coloring and gilding techniques (Figure 6, Museum Sejarah Jakarta 2024: 22-3). However, one must not give too much credit to this diversity, as it operated within an exploitative colonial hierarchy (Cowherd 2021, Kehoe 2015). The exhibition acknowledges this by noting the involvement of slaves and colonial exploitation in Batavian society.



Figure 6. *Portret van jonkheer Bonifacius Cornelis de Jonge* (between 1931-1950), by Jan Frank (1885-1945). The Governor-General De Jonge (1875-1958, in office 1931-36) is painted sitting on one of the Indies Council chairs. By his time, the chair has already been considered antique. (Source: Rijksmuseum, the Netherlands, collection no. SK-A-3819. Public domain)

Some Critical Inputs

Production quality wise, there are a few rough edges which is especially apparent in the historic reconstructions of the third hall. While they are quite informative for brief viewing, further inspection of the details often reveal anachronism that diminished their authenticity—a recurring criticism for cultural and historical themed museums in Jakarta (cf. Cobban 1985: 316, Lukito 2016: 135, 163, Lukito 2023, Sastramidjaja 2014: 452). For example, the floor of the reconstructed guest room is covered by oriental carpet (Figure 4). While seemingly innocuous to modern society today, this would be quite startling for 18th century European homeowners. While carpets are comparatively humble item in societies where they are originally weaved, they often become highly prestigious objects in the hands of European owners who can only import them at steep prices (Armstrong 2025). They were used primarily as display pieces to impress guests, even diplomatic gifts on occasions (Viallé 2014: 293), and consequently considered too precious to be laid on floors. Dutch owners too, with few exceptions until after the 18th century, regularly repurposed oriental carpets for tablecloths as seen in many historical paintings (Figure 7, see also Perdana, Abdulhadi, & Simatupang 2024: 312-3, citing Gloag 1991: 183, Mack 2002: 73). Incidentally, Brandes' sketch hung just outside the room for reference also show bare wood floor with no carpets (Figure 5). Thus, one

wonders whether the inclusion and placement of the carpet went through any vetting process.



Figure 7. *A Young Woman Playing a Theorbo to Two Men* (between 1667-8), by Gerard ter Borch (1617-81). Note the bare floor and oriental carpet used as tablecloth. (Source: National Gallery, United Kingdom, collection no. NG864, via wikimedia.org. Public domain)

A faux painting hung on the same room is clearly an image of Japanese folding screen (屏風 or *byōbu*) with the seams between each leaf visible.⁷ It has been digitally resized, printed, and framed as if conventional landscape painting. The addition of this element is perhaps to address the flaw of 1907 VOC room, as mentioned in Museum Sejarah Jakarta (2024: 56-7). However, the wide gap between the original artwork and the image, unproportionally altered to mimic framed paintings, lends an inconsolable air of artifice. A more fitting decor is perhaps Chinese export paintings, that indeed may be mounted in the walls of Batavian households (Krauss 2005: 73, Van der Poel 2016: 15, Van der Poel 2017). The presence of Chinese painters in Batavia is already attested since the mid-1600s and by the late 1700s Chinese artists dominated the city's painting market. In 1782, Josua van Jpern mention one of them by name: Hokki (Krauss 2005: 66-70, Van der Poel 2016: 77-8). If a Japanese screen wants to be displayed in the room instead, then recreation (assuming genuine piece is unavailable for display) should be made in the appropriate size and material. It is understandable that complete faithfulness to historic accuracy is impossible, and artistic license is inevitable in any reconstruction, but there are many of these anachronistic details which may misled casual observers.⁸ Since many domestic visitors of Jakarta Old Town where the museum is situated already hold some underlying beliefs in the historical authenticity of the surrounding environment (Maulina et al 2024: 143), despite contrary expert evaluations (ICOMOS 2018: 94, 99-100,

⁷ Upon further inspection, the source of the screen image seems to be a private collector's website which were then posted to Pinterest. The original website no longer hosts image of the screen as of writing.

⁸ Another disappointing and potentially misleading detail is the backdrop of the *Studio Foto*, which seems to use Artificial Intelligence (AI) image generator. Upon closer inspection, the detail of the candles, tables, and mirror frames shows incoherent garbles in lieu of carvings which is characteristic of AI image generator. Since the organizers already has access to genuine antique furniture and can photograph them at high resolution, resorting to AI for photo spot background seems unnecessary.

Nugteren 2020: 843),⁹ it would be the museum's educational responsibility to build upon that believe with accountable reconstruction. For this reason, the exhibition may benefit from more collaboration with scholars specializing in architecture, interior, and material culture of the period.¹⁰

Other than production qualities, the authors also question the exhibition's overall positioning and narrative. The exhibition does not really lay out what is currently known or unknown (i.e. the state of art) regarding Indies furniture before thrusting visitors into their collection, so the set narrative seems to have little regards to a larger discourse. The most recent literature mentioned in the exhibition's bibliography (Museum Sejarah Jakarta, 2024: 76-7), such as Bloembergen & Eickhoff (2012), Van Gompel, Hoving, & Klusner (2013), and Drieënhuizen (2014) all took post-colonial or decolonial views in their furniture narratives, which necessitated reflections on how the remnants of colonial paradigms, not just its artefacts, still affect us today. Unfortunately, such narrative is still difficult to situate for general Indonesian visitors (cf. Fajri 2023: 464). As such, it is perhaps understandable for the sake of accessibility that the exhibition focuses more on the familiar 'cultural diversity' narrative, which adheres quite closely to parts of Van Gompel, Hoving, & Klusner (2013) and other cited literature.

The exhibition manages to streamline the dense literature into a concise and understandable retelling. Simplification, truncation, or omission from referenced literature is understandable due to limited exhibition space and concerns of overwhelming visitors. Some of the omissions however seem to obscure the exhibition's scope, as well as aspects of Batavian life which could have enhanced visitor understanding of the displayed pieces. The basic five Ws questions (what, where, when, who, why) may be used here to identify essential information in the narrative (Akihary, Purwestri, & Van Roosmalen 2017: 12-5). Regrettably, key questions remain underexplored in both the exhibition's design and its catalogue, resulting in a fragmented narrative that undermines the audience's engagement by the closing section. Authors will consider some of these below:

What

What is considered to be furniture? While many would likely accept chairs and cabinets as furniture, the general visitors might wonder whether prominently displayed soy sauce bottle (collection no. MSJ/KLN/BTL/063), bell (MSJ/KLN/PRL/1058), and flintlock (MSJ/KLN/SJT/1217) can be considered furniture as well. From the hundreds of items in the museum's collections, why choose such items in a furniture themed exhibition? How could one justify their role in exhibiting the spatial nuances of the past? Without providing any definition of "furniture," some of the exhibited objects seem rather questionable. One could perhaps use the definition used by Postell (2012: 5), which

⁹ In the conclusion of 2015-2018 bid to inscribe Jakarta Old Town as a world heritage site, ICOMOS ultimately do not recommend inscription due to several issues, including the area's 'lack of authenticity.' The encroachment of commercial tourist traps in the area (Alexander et al 2024) since then seems to only exacerbate this issue.

¹⁰ From the credited names in the catalogue, authors are unsure whether such scholars were consulted.

considers furniture as any object that “contributes to the ambiance and style of interior space,” and “provides people with desired items and necessary equipment that complement and complete interior space.” Using this broad definition, it is somewhat more acceptable to see some exhibited pieces as necessary equipment or decorative furniture. But even operating within this definition, one would still perhaps be confused with a dedicated listening spot of *keroncong* music.¹¹ Indeed the music’s Portuguese influence may add to the multi-layered history of Jakarta which the exhibition is interested in telling. But since the exhibition’s main scope is furniture and relation between *keroncong* music with furniture is difficult to discern, the spot seems out of place.

Rather than stretching the limits of the terminology, perhaps the exhibition would benefit more from extending its display space to the main *stadhuis* building where there are many pieces which better fit the general understanding of “furniture,” and are also impressive in their own rights. One of such pieces is the early 18th century baroque teakwood screen (collection no. 2/SKT/MSJ, Figure 8). Called *schutsel* in contemporaneous inventories, this opulently carved piece of VOC regalia once adorned the Indies Council room of Batavia Castle, along with the aforementioned Indies Council chairs. Although currently occupying a relatively unremarkable spot in the museum, the screen has been exhibited overseas and praised in the 2009 *Baroque: Style in the Age of Magnificence* exhibition held in the Victoria & Albert Museum, United Kingdom (Bloembergen & Eickhoff 2012: 30, Hulsman 2009, Snodin & Llewellyn 2009: 114-5, 329-30). According to that exhibition, the Baroque style was one of the first truly global art phenomenon, and this screen, with its European heraldry, Chinese lion foot, and other mixtures, is a masterpiece of that “world Baroque.” Such prestige not only informs visitors to the global reach of these pieces –something that is never mentioned in any Indonesian sources to the authors’ knowledge– but may also serve as powerful highlight of the exhibition. It was indeed a missed opportunity not to incorporate the screen into the exhibition, along with many other pieces in the *stadhuis*.

¹¹ The only explanation given is that the *keroncong* relates to Mardijker community who preserved some aspects of Portuguese culture since the 17th century. But since distinct Mardijker identity has faded since the early 1800s (Eliëns 2002: 14, Perret 2011: 167) due to assimilation with natives, and recorded *keroncong* music would only been possible decades afterwards at the latest, the recording is not representative of music chronologically congruent with most exhibited pieces (see *When* discussion).



Figure 8. Teakwood room-screen (Museum Sejarah Jakarta, collection no. 2/SKT/MSJ), unfortunately unincorporated with the exhibition. (Source: Authors, 2024)

When

When did Indies furniture emerged and evolved? As admitted by Van Gompel, Hoving, & Klusener (2013: 42-6, 56-9), dating Indies furniture pieces can be difficult. While many furniture items can be grouped into time periods, the exact dating effort is often hampered by lack of information, later modifications, and even forgeries. Sidestepping this issue, the exhibition seems to use a rather vague and stretchy “colonial time” frame which homogenizes several distinct periods.¹² Most exhibited pieces, however, can be identified as belonging to the period of VOC’s rule around the 1600s to their bankruptcy in 1799. These include coastal ebony and Baroque Louis XIV style furniture. Had the exhibition limited itself to this period, the fascinating socio-cultural hybridity that emerged in this period could be told in more detail. By doing so, the exhibition could have made roadways in introducing the Indonesian public to more nuanced understanding of historical periods.

However, the exhibition prominently included a few pieces that are anachronistic with most other pieces, particularly the Neoclassical style Raffles chairs from the British Interregnum (1811-1816),¹³ and Raden Saleh’s (1811-1880) Neo-Gothic style chair (collection no. MSJ/KLN/PRB/1062) from the colonial Dutch East Indies government era (1861-1945). These pieces emerged in a cultural and societal background that has become distinct from preceding the VOC era (see Taylor 2009: 78-114), and do not quite fit the multicultural Indies narratives voiced by other pieces. They may serve as contrastive pieces, but the exhibition does not arrange them as such. They are arranged in linear fashion with the other VOC era chairs in the first hall without regards to their

¹² A tendency that can be found in some popular historical writings such as Soekiman (2014) but contrast with Taylor (2009) and Van Gompel, Hoving, and Klussener (2013: 103). It is worth pondering whether such temporal homogenization contributed to the romanticized *tempo doeloe* view of colonialism (Sastramidjaja 2014: 445-9, cf. Fajri 2023: 455-6).

¹³ One full size chair (collection no. MSJ/KLN/PRB/1051) and one miniature (MSJ/KLN/PRB/086). The miniature chair is glossed as children’s chair, although curiously Brandes’ sketch used in the exhibition show European children sitting on the floor. There seems to be little evidence of children ever using these alleged children chair. Van Gompel, Hoving, and Klussener (2013: 103) only mention that children use is only one possible use of similar piece, which is otherwise inconclusive. They could have been easily used as a reference model by a workshop workers and potential clients.

chronological sequences, thus enforcing the exhibition's vague colonial time portrayal. In the authors' view, these non-VOC pieces could have been taken out and presented with other chronologically related pieces on their own instead, providing the museum with a potential series of exhibitions in the near future.

Who

Who made and used Indies furniture? These are two related aspects that could shed more light on the furniture themselves. As noted previously, the exhibition has emphasized multicultural actors of ethnic groups involved in the making of the furniture, but there are at least two aspects that lack adequate elaboration.

First, the exhibition seemed to make few remarks on who used furniture in Batavia. The exhibition took for granted the fact that most urban Indonesians today use furniture, when this was not the norm until quite recently in the 20th century (Waterson 1990: 31). In fact, the pieces exhibited were the exclusive necessities of European society when they were made. For example, instead of sitting on chairs, most indigenous people in historic Indonesia would be more comfortable sitting on mats or raised floors in their day-to-day activities—and this is still true in many rural areas today. There are accounts of native rulers using furniture, but only in very limited circumstances using pieces that are quite different from what is considered today as conventional furniture (Carpenter, Backus, and Adnyana 2009: 29-30, Van Gompel, Hoving, & Klusener 2013: 21-4). Furniture was simply not used in many indigenous domestic settings (Arlianti, Junaidy, & Kaner 2025: 29). Consequently, while indigenous woodworkers can be very skilled in making decorative embellishments in things like betel boxes, gamelan frames, iconographic panels, *keris* handles, and low seats, there were little to no traditions in constructional furniture like high chairs, tables, and cabinets when Europeans arrived to the archipelago. The exception to this is perhaps bedsteads, which attestation in Java can be traced to Hindu-Buddhist sources (Jákl 2023).

Second, the exhibition wordings often only make casual remarks on the various ethnic groups' involvement, such as “made by Chinese Hokkiens” or “with Javanese contribution,” without specifying their role and why it fell to them. The exhibition also imply that Javanese craftsmen were able to work as principle *pengrajin* (craftsmen) in Batavia and fulfilled much furniture demand from the moment Europeans arrived (Museum Sejarah Jakarta 2024: 65). This statement, however, contradicts Carpenter, Backus, and Adnyana (2009), Eliëns (2002), as well as Van Gompel, Hoving, & Klusener (2013) which the exhibition has referenced. These sources noted that throughout the VOC period, Europeans usually employed non-indigenous furniture maker, and the most likely groups involved in full-time furniture making were the Chinese. In addition to their commercial importance in Batavian economy, Chinese community are known as furniture users, and so their craftsmen had their own tradition and knowledge of constructional woodwork that were satisfactory for the Dutch. The Chinese was especially sought for their ability to copy the few European samples shipped to Batavia and adding their own

Asian flair (Carpenter, Backus, & Adnyana 2009: 29-30, 35, Eliëns 2002: 19, Van Gompel, Hoving, & Klusener 2013: 60-3).

On the other hand, Javanese woodcrafters were harshly judged by the Dutch for their perceived inability to make “proper” furniture. There were also differing mindsets for quality assessments; Javanese woodcarvers prioritized fine carving and finishes, while Dutch clients prioritized material selection and sturdiness of the furniture’s joinery. In effect, the Dutch was often exasperated by Javanese woodworker’s habit of working with any wood, even those with splits and other physical flaws (Perdana, Abdulhadi, & Simatupang 2024: 311 citing Van Gompel, Hoving, & Klusener 2013: 63). Therefore, any involvement of Javanese craftsmen in VOC period furniture would be limited. They were perhaps only involved as decorative embellishers under supervision of Chinese or European head crafters. Javanese craftsmen were only able to establish their own vibrant furniture making practice in places like Jepara after the VOC period (Carpenter, Backus, & Adnyana 2009: 29-30, 35, Van Gompel, Hoving, & Klusener 2013: 60-3).

The exhibition also seems interested in showing continuities between VOC era furniture making (when Javanese were supposedly much involved) with current craft practices in Jepara. This is most apparent in the second hall. It displays traditional woodcarving tools from Jepara (of unclear age but most likely postdating the VOC period), and digital screens playing video interviews with contemporary craftsmen, interspersed with old prints under the heading of *Kawasan Perajin dan Kota Tua* ‘Craft District and the Old City.’ These displays then surround an intricately carved 17th century cradle, serving as the centrepiece of the room. Their intentional placement together suggests some relational continuity, but this became untenable when the room’s historic materials are scrutinized.

The cradle, as mentioned explicitly in the catalogue, is attributed to Coromandel crafter. The printed scenery (Museum Sejarah Jakarta 2024: 70) put under the heading “Craft District” does not really show the Batavian craft district (known to the Dutch as *ambachtskwartier*), it is a residential area outside of the city walls near the *Portugese Buitenkerk*. There is no surviving sketch of the *ambachtskwartier* to the author’s knowledge, but there is a map published in 1744 (Figure 9, Heydt 1744: 94). The exhibition then says that Mardijkers was one of the district’s main group of workers, which glossed over a rather confusing states of affair: the *ambachtskwartier* was mainly populated by enslaved artisans (Kehoe 2015: 19) while Mardijkers were freedman. The source of confusion here is perhaps due to some later sources mistakenly glossing Mardijkers as slaves, not former slaves (e.g. Novita & Mahmud 1999: 78, 92).¹⁴ Some 17th century sources do mention Mardijkers working as furniture makers and their sons apprenticing to furniture makers (Eliëns 2002: 19, Perret 2011: 176), while according to Eliëns (2002: 19) furniture makers in 17th century *ambachtskwartier* consist of Bengalis, Chinese, Dutchmen, Mardijkers, and Tamils. Mardijkers may be involved in furniture

¹⁴ The name Mardijkers came from Malay/Indonesian *merdeka* ‘independent/free,’ itself from Sanskrit *maharddhika* (Choudhury 2014: 901). If one’s social status is still a slave, it seems highly unlikely they would be designated as a Mardijkers. This formal distinction was very important in VOC social hierarchy.

Sastramidjaja 2014: 463), and what numerous scholars have urged Indonesian museums to move away from (Arainikasih, 2024; Fajri, 2023; Perkasa & Arainikasih, 2023; Prianti & Suyadnya, 2022: 240).

Why

Why did Dutch Batavians seek such lavish furniture? While this can be attributed to simple vanity, several historians have pointed to larger socio-political motives that the exhibition unfortunately did not touch upon. When the VOC first arrived in the archipelago, the company struggled in finding a position within the Asian diplomatic order. As a company of merchants from the then newly established Dutch Republic, they lack a royal figurehead which Asian emperors, kings, and sultans can acknowledge in serious negotiations. To overcome this barrier, Governor General and senior VOC officials the Company relied on the systematic deployment of what is labelled in VOC sources as *pracht en praal*, ‘pomp and circumstance’ or ‘splendor and display.’ Essentially, VOC officials made sumptuous displays of material wealth an important feature of their office, as they were surrounded by indigenous kingdoms that made wealth display an essential feature to garner power and prestige (Bennett, 2005: 50). This display transformed them from mere merchants into quasi-royalties that could effectively engage with surrounding power centers (Clulow 2019: 299-300, 309-9).

Furnishings in the residences of VOC officials became an important part of this display and they became increasingly elaborate prestige pieces (*pronkstukken*) as time passed. Even when lavish furniture spendings drew criticism from the VOC headquarter in the Netherlands, officials in Batavia continued the practice and defended it as necessary (Perdana, Abdulhadi, & Simatupang 2024: 310 citing Carpenter, Backus, & Adnyana 2009: 32, Van Gompel, Hoving, & Klusener 2013: 33-5). This can be an interesting narrative that flips the conventional characterization of VOC. Rather than representing the uncontested power of the VOC over indigenous kingdoms, Indies furniture is an attempt to adhere with established practices of indigenous kingdoms to which VOC are beholden.

CONCLUSIONS

Considering the hitherto little interest to Indies furniture in Indonesia, the *Furnitur Bertutur* exhibition held by Jakarta History Museum is a welcome entry into the subject. Other than bringing Indies furniture to public attention, the exhibition gives us a timely glimpse on the museum’s curating approach, especially in terms of display space and narrative. The success of the exhibition is noteworthy. The exhibition manages to showcase the richness of Indies furniture in an attractive and engaging setting that many visitors seem to have enjoyed. This could contribute to a more positive public image of Indonesian museums in general. The integration of digital catalogue as explanatory medium is effective and the catalogue itself is well designed. There are however notable shortcomings. In the display space, several items seemed to be out of scope thematically and chronologically, while reconstructed rooms show anachronistic elements that may

misled casual observers. In its narrative, the exhibition manages to streamline the dense literature into a concise retelling. However, some of the omitted information obscure the exhibition's scope, as well as aspects of Batavian life which could have enhanced visitor understanding of the displayed pieces. Some statements seem to contradict referenced sources and are not sufficiently discussed, giving the negative impression of a didactic revision. Despite its shortcomings, *Furnitur Bertutur* demonstrated noteworthy excellence for introducing Indies furniture as complex multicultural heritage and should be commended for its success in creating an engaging exhibition space. The authors hope that some of the temporary exhibition's elements could be part of the permanent exhibition in the Jakarta History Museum, and improved accordingly so that interests to these historical objects could be nurtured continually.

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