

Eva Besnyö Pictures the Dutch

Modernism and Mass Culture at Sea in the Interwar Period

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In 1938, the Hungarian-Dutch photographer Eva Besnyö contributed with a stylish photo wall to the interior decoration of the passenger ship *Nieuw Amsterdam*. Besnyö's photography was part of a unique collaboration between the shipping company and more than sixty artists. In mass media and manifestations the ocean liner was presented as one huge floating signifier of national grandeur and tradition. The photo wall fitted perfectly in this narrative but this was precisely why Besnyö had her doubts. In this article I seek to find out how the photographer managed to produce the wall working within the limits of her penchant for modernism and the demands of the assignment. I argue that the poetic quality of the composition lies in the way in which the photographer as *bricoleur* from the debris of available images created a visualised myth of the nation, as expounded by Claude Lévi-Strauss. Both the photo wall and the ship's interior as *Gesamtkunstwerk* can be understood as utopian attempts to reconcile modernism and mass culture.

In 1938 verzorgde de Hongaars-Nederlandse fotograaf Eva Besnyö een fotowand voor het interieur van het nieuwe passagiersschip van de Holland-Amerika Lijn. De wand maakte deel uit van een unieke samenwerking tussen de reder en meer dan zestig kunstenaars. In de media en bij manifestaties fungeerde het passagiersschip als groots drijvend symbool van de natie. De wand werd bejubeld, maar Besnyö behield haar twijfels. In dit artikel onderzoek ik de visuele poëzie van de wand en betoog dat haar werkwijze, schipperend tussen fotografisch modernisme en de eisen van de opdrachtgever, overeenkomsten vertoont met die van de bricoleur zoals uiteengezet door Claude Lévi-Strauss. Dit resulteerde in een associatieve visuele mythe die aansloot bij het scheepsinterieur als *Gesamtkunstwerk* waarin een utopische boodschap lag besloten over de rol van de kunstenaar in de moderne tijd.

'In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up.'

Michel Foucault

On 10 May 1938, at five minutes past midnight, the s.s. Nieuw Amsterdam left the port of Rotterdam on its maiden voyage to New York.¹ Among the 600 passengers was the young photographer Eva Besnyö (1910-2003), who held a ticket for passage on assignment for the Holland-America Line. The photographs by Besnyö follow this voyage of the passenger ship, as well as the preparations for the trip, from painting the hull to the trial run. Besnyö faithfully conveyed the elegant interiors, such as the third-class bar – 'never excessive [...] pure and civilised', according to a reviewer.² In addition to depicting the shipbuilding process, Besnyö contributed ten photographs to the elaborate interior decoration, displayed on a nine-meter wall in the third-class L-shaped smoking salon. Passengers reclining in the low green armchairs could admire Besnyö's photo wall featuring landscapes and portraits reflecting the range of motifs in representations of the Netherlands during the Interbellum. The series invited passengers – compatriots and foreigners alike – to imagine and remember the nation while sailing the Atlantic. The photo collage served as mnemonic and as a utopian promise.

The photo wall by Eva Besnyö serves in this article as a foundation for exploring photographic representations of the country and people of the Netherlands in the 1930s. The visual poetics are perhaps comparable to 'Remembrance of Holland' (1936), Hendrik Marsman's poem ('Thinking of Holland/I see wide rivers/slowly traversing through/unending lowland'), which was written during the same pre-war years. The photo wall was one of three that Besnyö, rightly considered a pioneer of modernist New Photography, assembled in the late 1930s. All three walls (none remain to this day) present the Netherlands through the eyes of this Budapest-born photographer. Individual photos from these projects resurfaced, occasionally with local stories and poems, in numerous photo books, magazines and journals. Addressing the topic of visual nationalism, in this article I aim to investigate the mythopoetic quality of the wall.³

In the interwar years a sense of national belonging was promulgated as part of an expanding and diversifying visual economy. Commercial shipping

- 1 I am deeply grateful to Mrs Iara Brusse for taking the time to talk about Eva Besnyö's oeuvre in the spring of 2014 and again in the fall of 2017.
- 2 A.M. Hammacher, 'Het schip en zijn versierde ruimten', *Elsevier's Maandtijdschrift* xcv, 5 (1938) 323-331, 327.
- 3 On myth, photography and nationalism: Roland Barthes, 'Le mythe, aujourd'hui', in: Roland Barthes

(ed.), *Mythologiques* (Paris 1957) 180-211 and on 'le caractère mythopoétique': Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*, (Paris 1962) 26; on visual nationalism: Michael R. Orwicz, 'Nationalism and Representation, in Theory', in: June Hargrove and Neill McWilliam (eds.) *Nationalism and French Visual Culture, 1870-1914* (New Haven, London 2005) 17-35.

was among the settings used to project the national imagination in Europe. In addition to being attributes of national pride, transatlantic liners were vehicles for promoting national art.⁴ This symbolic use of ships to manifest art resonated in popular culture, as evidenced by the public spectacles surrounding the launch of the New Amsterdam.

An ocean liner may seem an unusual vehicle for expressing nationalism. During the heyday of passenger service on the Atlantic, however, these vessels offered 'a sense of security in an uncertain world'.⁵ Drawing on notes by Michel Foucault, art historian Anne Wealleans contends that in a world 'challenged by the forces of modernity', the 'perfect and privileged space of the ship interior, this heterotopia of the high seas, symbolises society and nations as they would like to see themselves'.⁶ The concept of heterotopia denotes the spatial and temporal otherness of the ship, as well as the opportunities it offers for utopian projections. National identity, class and gender appear to converge in the lay-out and interior design of these vessels.

Based on the structuralist guidelines of Claude Lévi-Strauss, I will navigate the particulars of the visual arts and popular culture to underpin these arguments.⁷ The boundaries between the two categories are porous. Thus, as Fredric Jameson argues in his political reading of structuralism, both art and popular culture serve ideological purposes, in that all forms of *modern* artistic creativity function as vectors of 'utopian models' or 'optical illusions of social harmony'.⁸ The question I ask is how the New Amsterdam, including Besnyö's images, offered a suitable space of such an (optical) illusion.

The photographer as an artist

Educated in Budapest and Berlin, Eva Besnyö fled to the Netherlands in the early 1930s, 'to stay ahead of the Nazis'.⁹ In Holland she joined a progressive art scene that revolved around the family of John Fernhout (the photographer and cameraman with whom she later had a 'sailor's marriage').¹⁰ John's mother, the

4 Mark A. Russell, 'Picturing the Emperor: Passenger Shipping as Art and National Symbol in the German Empire', *Central European History* 44 (2011) 227-256.

5 The heyday of multi-purpose passenger shipping differs from the postwar emergence of holiday cruise ships. See for the latter: Peter Quartermaine and Bruce Peter, *Cruise: Identity, Design and Culture* (New York 2006).

6 Anne Wealleans, *Designing Liners. A History of Interior Design Afloat* (London 2006) 1-2; Michel Foucault, 'Of other spaces, Heterotopias',

Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité 5 (1984) 46-49.

7 Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*, 3-47.

8 Fredric Jameson, 'Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture', in: Fredric Jameson (ed.), *Signatures of the visible* (New York 1992) 9-34, 25-26 and on structuralism, *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca 1982).

9 'Schaven aan alles', *Het Parool* ps, 20 November 1999, 18-21.

10 Willem Diepraam, *Een beeld van Eva Besnyö* (Amsterdam, 1993) (pages not numbered).



The painting of the hull of the ss Nieuw Amsterdam, 1938.
Maria Austria Instituut (Amsterdam), Collection Eva Besnyö,
R114.

painter Charley Toorop, had close ties with several artists, architects and writers, such as Joris Ivens, Piet Mondrian and Gerrit Rietveld. Working with her Rolleiflex, Besnyö soon established a reputation as a pioneering and dedicated photographer. Contributing to the illustrated socialist journal *Wij. Ons werk, ons leven* (We. Our work – our life), she remained involved in social photography emerging from Berlin. *Wij* also published a photo collage about the construction and furnishing of the Nieuw Amsterdam by ‘artists of name and fame’.¹¹ During the war, Besnyö initially remained active as a photographer, then went into hiding, and eventually reappeared with false papers.¹² After the war, she started a family while continuing to take photographs of architecture and artist portraits. In the late 1960s, Besnyö emerged as a street photographer of the second feminist movement, this time using a Leica camera.

The illustrious pre-war career of Besnyö has led her photography to be viewed and valued almost exclusively in the context of museums and exhibition catalogues.¹³ Monographs on photography generally focus on individual prints, considered out of their proper context. In the 1930s, however, Besnyö’s pictures were usually reproduced, possibly with captions, in popular periodicals, in series or as part of a collage on a photo wall. Some images did not exist (as valuable authentic original prints) outside the collage or *montage* in which they figured. To understand their purpose and connotation, the pictures need to be restored to their material and ideological contexts, which require considering their artistic quality and market value. Photographers did not ordinarily have regular employment and therefore subsisted from assignments. Besnyö ‘had to work very hard to earn a living, producing all sorts of images for newspapers and press agencies, but earning very little through such work’.¹⁴ With this in mind, the art project is likely to have been a welcome source of income, even if Besnyö remained reluctant to commoditise aspects of her art.

The photo wall was commissioned by Frits Spanjaard, who was responsible for the third-class public areas in the passenger ship.¹⁵ The exact

11 ‘Nederlands vlaggeschip de “Nieuw Amsterdam”’, *Wij. Ons werk, ons leven* 4, 11 (15 April 1938) 12-14.

12 Eva’s sister Magda had departed on the last voyage of the Holland-America Line (Diepraam, *Een beeld van Eva Besnyö*). During the war the ship was used as a military freighter.

13 Flip Bool and Kees Broos (eds.), *Fotografie in Nederland: 1920-1940* (Den Haag 1979) and Tineke de Ruiter, *Eva Besnyö* (Amsterdam 2007). Marion Beckers and Elisabeth Moortgat label the photo wall as controversial and appear to support Besnyö’s renunciation. In the picture in their

monograph the wall is only partially visible: *Eva Besnyö: Photographer, 1910-2003, Budapest-Berlin-Amsterdam* (Berlin 2011). See also Remco Ensel, *De Nederlander in beeld. Fotografie en nationalisme tussen 1920 en 1940* (Amsterdam 2014).

14 ‘Schaven aan alles.’

15 Rkd: 0104, Archive Frits Spanjaard, 30 (draft letter Spanjaard to Besnyö, 22 April, 1974, and photo album); Ramses Van Bragt, “‘Een cineac van beeldende kunsten.’” Frits Spanjaard, *Eva Besnyö en het s.s. Nieuw Amsterdam*, *Rkd-168-bulletin* (2012) 10-13.



Photo wall by Eva Besnyö on the ss Nieuw Amsterdam, 1938.
Maria Austria Instituut (Amsterdam), Collection Eva Besnyö,
A740.

wording of the assignment remains unknown but is certain to have been courageous, since I know of only one previous case of a photo collage at sea.¹⁶ The template of the photo wall was intended to simulate a visual encounter with the Netherlands.

More than just a job to be done, Besnyö took on the assignment as a new career move. Montages had become one of the new formats for public photography exhibitions, possibly in combination with typography. As a modernist photographer, Besnyö was fully aware of the dangers and took no chances: 'A photo of a landscape can easily become kitsch, a wall with pictures would be a horror. That's why I kept it very abstract, restricted to the most basic lines and motifs, as I have done.' A 'wall with pictures' would have been 'Old Photography'.¹⁷ Strictly speaking, Besnyö was referring here to pictorialism, the photographic paradigm that preceded modernism. In effect, however, she discredited a whole series of photographic practices against which new photographers aimed to establish their authority: going for emotionally appealing images, retouching photos and drawing from the repertoire of iconic images circulating in the mass media. Besnyö choose to showcase graphic aspects of the photographic surface to position herself as an artist and move away from the so-called kitschy popular visual media.¹⁸

The photo wall as a work of art

Besnyö later mentioned that getting the arrangement right was quite a challenge, as becomes clear from observing the wall in greater detail. The photo wall is a successive array featuring an Amsterdam quay with an iron bridge, the port of Rotterdam, cheese carriers, a sand dune, a woman and child in folkloric garb, blooming tulips, a row of windmills, a man and child

16 In 1974, Spanjaard thought that Besnyö's photo wall was the first of its kind, although Ceri Richards' photo *montage* of the voyage to Australia in the tourist class bar of the British Orion (1935) is more likely to have first introduced photography on board. See the appendix of Abraham Cornelis, *Dromen tussen Europa en de v.s.: een cultuurhistorische studie van 100 jaar luxe-vervoer aan boord van de transatlantische passagiersschepen (1840-1940)* (PhD thesis, Rijksuniversiteit Leiden 1993). See also Weallans, *Designing Liners*, 113. In 1946, Henry H. Trivick made a photo composition for the ss *Queen Elizabeth*.

17 Tineke de Ruiter and Carry de Swaan, *Eva Besnyö. 'n Halve eeuw werk* (Amsterdam 1982).

18 In retrospect, however, Besnyö discredited the wall as 'a series of kitschy postcards': Beckers and Moortgat, *Eva Besnyö*, 159. The concept of kitsch became widespread in the late 1920s, when it was described by Walter Benjamin as an object that offers immediate physical gratification without an intervening intellectual effort: 'Dream Kitsch. Gloss on Surrealism' and 'Some Remarks on Folk Art', in: Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings. Volume II, 1927-1934*. Eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge 1999) 3-5 and 278-280.



Photo wall by Eva Besnyö on the oil tanker Pendrecht 2, 1939.
Maria Austria Instituut (Amsterdam), Collection Eva Besnyö,
A606.

on a bicycle, cows grazing and a fisherman in traditional attire with sails in the background. The composition on the wall was carefully considered and well-balanced. In her photo project, Besnyö struck a delicate balance between artistic ambition and assignment. She had to observe the restrictions that apply to a freelance photographer but also aimed to present an old theme from an innovative perspective. ‘I spent six months taking photographs of all kinds of landscapes. I had never done such a focused study.’ In the first half of 1937, she travelled to gather visual material for the photo wall. She took one segment of the pictures with her Rolleiflex and another with a 9×12 Linhof Large Format Technika camera (bridge, tulips, and windmills).¹⁹ Besnyö took many of the photographs (of the dunes, the cheese carriers, the row of windmills and the cows grazing) near Bergen, North Holland, which is relatively close to Amsterdam and was the home of her in-laws, who were regularly visited there by fellow members of the Dutch cultural elite.

The pictures on two other photo walls that Besnyö composed in these years match the scenic subjects on the Nieuw Amsterdam. The oil tanker *Pendrecht 2* (1939) contained, on a semi-circular wall between the portholes, twelve Dutch landscape scenes combined with portraits of rural dwellers: a row of trees, a field of flowers, farming machinery with a close-up of cornstalks, a high horizon, a meadow diagonally bisected by a ditch, greenhouses, a row of Amsterdam gables, a fishing port, two Marken portraits, and a group portrait of anglers. The modern AVRO radio broadcasting studio premises (1936), designed by architect Ben Merkelbach, featured a row of three similar pictures.²⁰

There are several sources for the wall, as it was positioned on the Nieuw Amsterdam. The wall is probably lost, the individual prints have been preserved. One leporello, kept in the Eva Besnyö Archive at the Maria Austria Institute in Amsterdam, comprises eleven prints pasted on yellow cardboard. A second scale model, consisting of two rows of five pictures, numbered and visibly pasted on cardboard, appears in the collection of the Amsterdam Museum. Besnyö’s art on the ship may be identified based on a sketch of the interior found in the shipping company’s catalogue. In addition, there is Besnyö’s picture of the wall in the smoking salon, as well as footage of the launch, in which the wall briefly features.²¹

The various projections of the photo wall do not fully match. The first leporello contains two copies of the flower bulbs side by side at the centre of the wall. In the catalogue drawing, the windmills and the flower bulbs were

19 NAI: Archive Van Ravesteyn, RAVED82: flyer *New Amsterdam, Facts and Figures* (Haarlem 1938).

20 Two special issues of the avant-garde journal *De 8 en Opbouw* discuss the studio (including pictures by Besnyö) and the oil tanker: no. 13-14 (4 July 1936) and Ir. J.B. van Loghem, ‘Het

motortankschip “Pendrecht”’, *De 8 en Opbouw*, (1939) 119-126, 126.

21 Newsreels: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vDQGQhammuY> and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9w4vhhg_nY (photo wall at 60 s.).



Scale model of the photo wall on the ss Nieuw Amsterdam.
Collection Amsterdam Museum.



Scale model of the photo wall on the ss Nieuw Amsterdam.
Collection Amsterdam Museum.

reversed and situated at the far left of the wall.²² A more precise comparison indicates that the two-part model in the Amsterdam Museum is the later version, but minor differences remain with respect to the final frames on the ship's wall. The main difference concerns the reproduction of the cheese carriers. Only after learning about the two-part scale model (images pp. 62 and 63) did I become aware of the dissimilarities between the reproductions of the cheese carriers on the leporello and the final one on the wall (as in the image on p. 58). The two-part scale model and the final version both present the carriers from head to toe. Most surprising, the cheese carriers are standing on a red surface, a feature I have never seen mentioned in references to the wall. Nor did I think of this option, even though adding colour to part of a photo montage was becoming common in modern graphic design; this was especially the case for red, as a signal hue. Paul Schuitema had coloured several pictures for his booklet, *Waar Nederland trotsch op is. Hoe we tegen het water vochten en wat we er mee deden* [What the Netherlands is proud of. How we fought the water and what we did with it] (Leiden, 1940). This jubilant nationalistic picture book includes several pictures by Besnyö, two of which are part of the wall: the image that serves as the background for the fisherman and the port. The final wall did indeed contain a large darkened surface, but with only monochrome source material available, we cannot be certain about the original colour.

The photographer as *bricoleur*

Using the collection of photographs she had taken, Besnyö compiled the photo wall with 'whatever is at hand'.²³ Most of her photographs were of country landscapes: dunes and meadows, polder land. The cityscapes of Rotterdam (the harbour and the docks) and Amsterdam (the bridge on the Brouwersgracht) look familiar but differ from her more street-oriented social photography from Berlin. The radiant tulips invoke the waving cornstalks of Russian contemporary cinematography, and the two photos of villagers in traditional garb (the Volendam fisherman and the woman and child from the isle of Marken) were widespread. Finally, her mother-in-law Charley Toorop had previously depicted similar Alkmaar cheese carriers on canvas (and Besnyö had in turn captured her painting them).²⁴

While I am reluctant to reach sweeping conclusions, indications suggest that Besnyö had teamed up with her future husband graphic designer

22 William Seabrook, *Nieuw Amsterdam, 1626-1938* (Haarlem 1938).

23 Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*, 27 ('avec les "moyens du bord"'). See Barthes, 'Le myth aujourd'hui', 183: Mythical speech is made of a

material which has *already* been worked on (*d'une matière déjà travaillée*) so as to make it suitable for communication.

24 On Toorop and Besnyö: Tineke de Ruiter, *Besnyö in Bergen* (Antwerp 2000).

Wim Brusse on this assignment. I learned about this idea from Iara Brusse, who has extensive knowledge about her parents' practices.²⁵ Besnyö and Brusse did in fact work together on various projects in these years. After the war, both were credited with the issue of children's postage stamps of portraits taken by Besnyö during the war, as well as various book covers. In anticipation of the topic of the ship's interior architecture as a collaborative project that I shall discuss below, it might be called a *Gesamtkunstwerk* within the close relationship between two artists. Perhaps the fabulous colourful modernist patch was the graphic designer's signature on the wall.

I assume that Eva Besnyö was in charge. She created the wall as a well-constructed composition, a poetic whole with cross-references, attentive not only to the subject matter but also to the visual effects of light and lines. A series of only ten selected images offers 3,628,800 possible permutations, which are increased exponentially by adding new images, for example by photo montage. For aesthetic reasons the photographer might have started with certain pictures but would ultimately include images because of the overall structure of the wall.

Most individual photos contain a diagonal, revealing Besnyö's hand as a modernist 'New Photographer'. The original woman-and-child and cheese carrier pictures were mirrored on the photo wall. By changing the direction of the diagonal, Besnyö presented spectators with a balanced series of images. On six pictures the diagonal is from top left to bottom right. The sequence of alternating left and right is highlighted by having the portraits – woman, fisherman and cheese carrier – all face right. This conscious intervention was made possible through the use of three montages. The dune and meadow landscapes with their vanishing point in the top right offset the sequence of diagonals.

Besnyö needed to balance the anecdote of a single picture with the structural totality of the wall. In any case, not a wall with pictures! In her art project she may have been attempting to reconcile modernist photography with the predicament of artistic mimesis and kitsch. Part of its utopian dimensions may figure in Besnyö's endeavour to locate meaning in the formal structure of ten interconnected photographs.

The photo wall was intended to be viewed as a whole. The repetitive coherence of elements and visual motifs in the representation of the Netherlands induced those viewing Besnyö's photo wall to interpret the photos as a logical series. In this respect, Frits Spanjaard was pleased with Besnyö's 'very suggestive photo wall'.²⁶ The visual motifs were carefully considered. The gaze would shift from one cityscape to another; from cheese carriers to a dune; from a mother and child, via tulips and windmills, to a father and child; from a meadow to a fisherman. Landscapes and portraits alternated at the same

25 Email Ms Iara Brusse, 12 September, 2017.

26 RKD: 0104, 30: Archive Spanjaard, draft letter Spanjaard to Besnyö.

Eetzaal 3e klasse, Ir. S. VAN RAVESTEIJN. Uitvoering Firma F. W. ZONNEVELD.

Rooksalon 3e klasse, F. SPANJAARD. Uitvoering N.V. BREEDVELD.

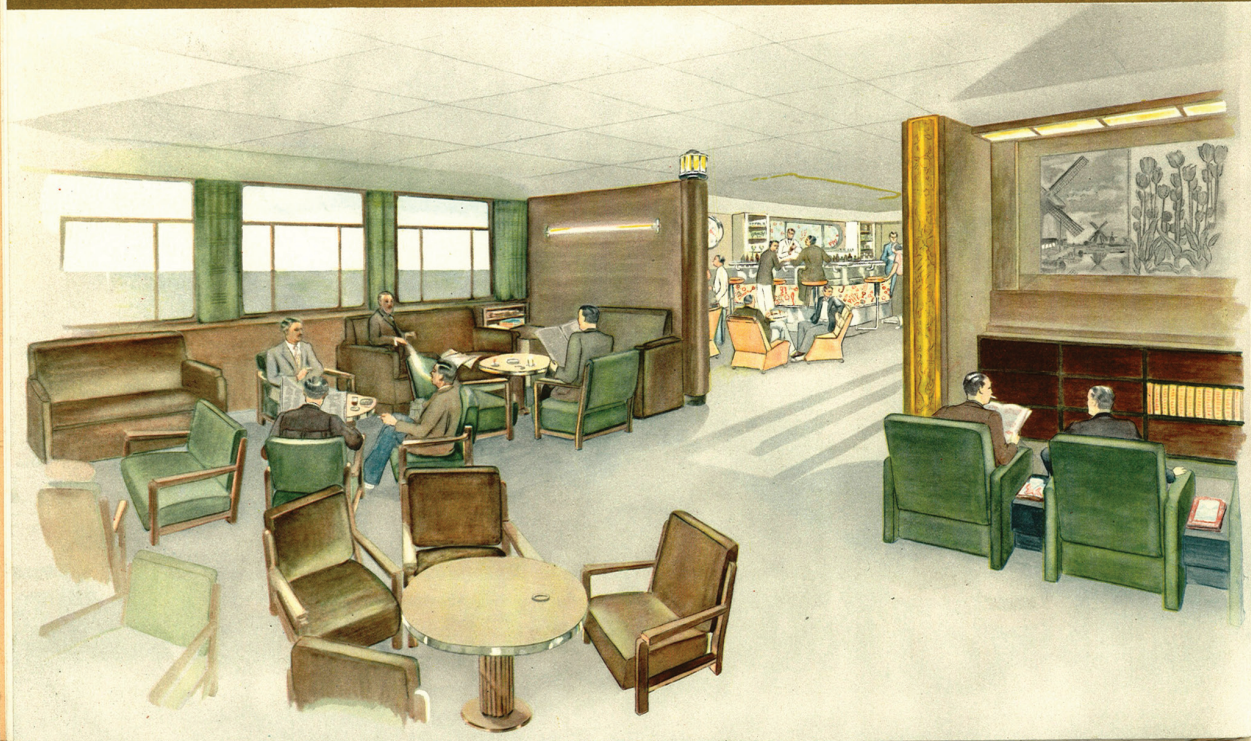


Illustration of the third class smoking salon from the shipping company's catalogue.

time that a series of complementary pairs became visible: from tradition to modernity, from dune to meadow, from mother to father, from city to country, from agriculture to fishing. To spectators, the series consisted of elements that belonged together naturally: the countryside, the agricultural cycle and the water with fishermen, dikes and bridges. Men on the land and women in folkloric garb, sometimes holding a child, complement this iconic series.

Down with 'conventional trickery', as Gerrit Rietveld noted in the first Dutch review of Besnyö's work.²⁷ The photograph series reflects a distinctive convergence between people and landscapes to convey a common message about the space of the nation and its inhabitants. The models had been placed in the landscape. These photos were not studio portraits but had all been taken in outdoor settings. Interestingly, the montage deprives the woman and child of an outdoor backdrop, while the montage of the fisherman explicitly situates him in the open air, reinforcing the female/male and private/public opposition. The rural ambience and so-called folklore were recurring *topoi* of popular nationalism during the Interbellum. The photos also feature the nation's infrastructure: mills, a bridge over the water, the port of Rotterdam.

The series of images contains an underlying structure: it can be viewed as a two-part series, of which the elements are simultaneously mutual counterparts and complements. The photo wall conveys complementary series, presenting arbitrary combinations as natural. The landscape and the photographic models positioned there form a natural unit, without any friction. The imagery refers to a selection of uninhabited cultivated nature, scenes from Dutch home life, parenthood, traces of tradition, and familiar modernity. I perceive an attempt to reconcile current conceptions of tradition and modernity.

The dimensions of the wall reinforce the naturalising effects of the series. The efficacy of photo enlargements in the ship's hold is obvious, but the opposite (i.e. artistic reduction) is at least as important. Part of the strength of Besnyö's photo wall lies in what Lévi-Strauss considers to be one of the most effective rhetorical mechanisms of the arts, i.e., scale reduction.²⁸ Thanks to the size and the two-dimensional plane, passengers could assess the discrete elements of the photo wall at a glance and appreciate its binary logic. Scale reduction therefore offers, aside from aesthetic pleasure, a sensory and rational outlook on a meaningful infrastructure. After all, scale reduction brings order. The selection of works by the artist is already a simplified rendition of the complex and confusing outside world. The artist limits the possibilities by processing the material to highlight one or more distinctive features. Only through the imagination of the visual arts can we grasp the Netherlands as a whole.

The artistic miniature serves to get closer to 'the essential nature of things' but, as pointed out by cultural anthropologist Henk Driessen,

27 'Rietveld over Eva Besnyö', *De Tijd*, 27 November

1933.

28 Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*, 34-36.

miniaturists need not operate according to a set procedure. There is always room for improvisation.²⁹ The photographer switches back and forth between image and structure, arranging her material to her satisfaction. In her effort to be ‘original’ and ‘innovative’, she is necessarily restrained by her limitations and the preferences of the client and prospective audience.

The *bricoleur*, as made famous by Lévi-Strauss, acts as a craftsman who draws from whatever is conveniently at hand. By juxtaposing different and contrasting elements, she reconciles opposites. According to Lévi-Strauss, the artist moves between the two poles of craftsman and engineer. She works with bits and pieces and instrumentalises existing sources but seems more interested in delivering a new point of view.³⁰ The artist is in any case much less the uniquely autonomous artist, avoiding imitation and kitsch (mother and child!), as cherished in reviews of modern arts.

Besnyö’s photo wall aligned with the wealth of photography books in the late 1930s, where pictures of land and people in traditional attire featured opposite each other: e.g. the photography monograph series *De schoonheid van ons land* [The Beauty of Our Country] published by Contact (invoking Marsman’s ‘Remembrance of Holland’) and several books published by Kok, Callenbach and Zomer & Keuning. All propagate a nationalist style that eulogises the binary structure of people and landscape. The iconographies in the book resonate the nationalistic promise that traditional scenes of people and landscapes safeguard national heritage. Notwithstanding modernisation, an immutable core – the foundation of national identity – has been preserved. Borrowing from this image archive, Besnyö sought out her own visual impressions.

The photo montage aptly illustrates the bricoleur approach by the artist. While composing the two photo walls between 1937 and 1939, Besnyö frequently applied this practice so prominent in New Photography and modernist Graphic Design. The term was introduced by László Moholy-Nagy in his *Malerei, Photographie, Film* (1925),³¹ and Hannah Höch was one of the pioneers in modernism’s primary visual arts technique in post-war Germany. Inspired by Dada and Surrealism, Höch created critical and disturbing images, reflecting her ‘social anxieties and concerns’, for which she became increasingly renowned during the 1920s. The *monteur* could process self-made photos or reuse existing reproductions. The montage could be used to reverse the status quo – for example by presenting well-known images in a new context. Assembling them as a *world-upside-down* could disclose a utopian

29 Henk Driessen, ‘Een passie voor de miniatuur’, in: Henk Driessen and Huub de Jonge (eds.), *Miniature Etnografiche* (Nijmegen 2000) 145-149; Ton Lemaire, *Claude Lévi-Strauss. Tussen mythe en muziek* (Amsterdam, 2008) 100-108.

30 Lévi-Strauss (*La pensée sauvage*, 26) speaks of ‘le caractère mythopoétique du bricolage’.

31 Flip Bool, Paul Schuitema (1897-1973) ‘Een poging tot ordening van zijn werk voor de Tweede Wereldoorlog’. (MA thesis, History of Art, University of Amsterdam 1974:3).

vision. To Höch, this ideal was the vision of the New Liberated Woman; to John Heartfield, the classless society. In the early years, montage was the technique *par excellence* for expressing a 'loud-mouthed, rowdy contempt of traditional bourgeois art and aesthetics'.³²

The montage visually disrupted the unity of the work of art, as well as the idea of the object as a representation of reality. It disturbed expectations among spectators and had an alienating effect. Moreover, the montage offered the opportunity for the photographer to present as an *artist*, regardless of the print he had or had not generated. The artistic moment lay not in the photographic process but in the resulting montage. The Dutch artist César Domela used the term *composition unitaire* applied equally throughout the photo wall.

While avant-garde photographers reused images from illustrated journals, the montage became part of the visual tradition of mass culture and a design tool, 'connected with consumerism and modernity'.³³ Paul Schuitema was one of the pioneers in this field, using montages of photos and graphics for journals and corporate advertising. Besnyő trained as a commercial and advertising photographer in Hungary, Wim Brusse was a student of Schuitema. Although these developments may not have stripped the montage of its political significance (John Heartfield's anti-Nazi montages were intensely political and replete with 'ideological antinomies'), it did lose its authentic subversive power.

The photo wall may be construed as one huge montage but also comprises three distinctive photo montages. The fisherman, the woman and child, and the cheese carriers were cut out and superimposed on a new background. In the montage, the cheese carriers walked out of the market and into a geometric landscape. The selection yielded three images, in which the model had become central without an interfering background. Besnyő's montages on the photo walls lacked the original unsettling effect that such a composition could bring to mind. Instead of fragmentation and alienation, Besnyő combined the images in a familiar representation of the nation that denotes a future invigorated by the past: instead of deconstruction (of the – national – body), reconstruction.

The ship as a Gesamtkunstwerk

After analysing the photo wall in isolation, the next step is to reposition it in the public facility of the third class smoking salon. The photo (image p. 58)

32 Kristin Makholm, 'Strange Beauty: Hannah Höch and the Photomontage', *MoMA* 24 (1997) 19-23; Anthony Coles, *John Heartfield: A Political Life* (Chicago 2016).

33 Maud Lavin, 'Androgyny, Spectatorship, and the Weimar Photomontages of Hannah Höch', *New German Critique* 51 (1990) 62-86, 67-69.

and the catalogue drawing convey how passengers might have observed the photo wall. The pictures were placed at eye level and could be viewed from a distance. Thanks to the low ceiling, the photo series filled almost the entire wall. On the one hand, the wall was only a small feature in a much larger public space. On the other hand, this space was designed to encourage passengers to take a seat and observe the photo wall. Passengers reclining in the armchairs had a good view of the images at the bottom left (bridge, mother, mills, and fisherman), while the dune horizon and meadow led them to gaze upwards. The photo wall corresponded with the large, smooth glass ornament, offering an impression of fishing boats, by Heinrich Campendonk in the nearby third-class lounge.³⁴ Campendonk's maritime imagery may be seen as an analogy of Besnyö's artwork that visualises the home country. Both appeal to communal desire. The third-class passenger in transit moves between the two works of art. In his letter to Besnyö, Spanjaard recalls that the photo wall was exceedingly attractive to passengers aboard the vessel.

Lecturing about space as the great fixation of the twentieth century, Michel Foucault described the ship as 'the heterotopia par excellence'. A vessel is a 'floating piece of space', a point of departure, to be embarked on with permission, after which a rupture with everyday time occurs. Once aboard, the members of the temporary community remain in transit for a definite period. These are the ideal conditions for producing 'a space of illusion [...] as perfect and meticulous, as well arranged as our world is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled'.³⁵ Organising the space and the interior architecture may enhance this illusion.

The New Amsterdam was a heterotopia affected by utopian imagery. Artistic interaction figured prominently in the imaginative attributes of the decoration. The concept of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* presupposes cooperation between different artists from distinct disciplines, not only for practical or aesthetic reasons but also on ideological grounds. In this regard, the Commodity Exchange Building (De Beurs) by Hendrik Berlage (1903) continues to symbolise a successful *gemeenschapswerk*. This collaboration between those who designed their art unconditionally for all separate classes instrumentalised democratic civic awareness.

Most reviews of the Nieuw Amsterdam highlighted the collaboration between the artists, stressing this unprecedented step compared to the more common approach of commissioning furniture factories.³⁶ Here, the initiative lay with a group of individual designers. The shipping company's catalogue reflected the same enthusiasm. While individual artists did the

34 Paul Citroen had designed a similar glass decoration of a cityscape featuring canals and bridges, displayed in the cabin class smoking salon.

35 Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', 8.

36 's.s. "Nieuw Amsterdam"', *Elzevier's Maandtijdschrift* xcv, 5 (1938) with articles by J.G. van Gelder, C. van Traa and A.M. Hammacher.

work, the outcome was a joint effort through which ‘a symphonic whole has been achieved’: ‘The result is comparable to the finished performance of an assembled choir with all its constituent parts in proper relation to the whole. Its character is simultaneous, for it emanates from a common impulse, unencumbered by a diversity of treatments and borrowed styles with which contemporary schools often endeavour to express themselves.’ The interior design ‘breathes the spirit of a nation’.³⁷

Notwithstanding the impression of a ‘symphonic whole’, the design arose in part from an unfortunate incident. In the same year that the keel was laid (1936), the intended architect died unexpectedly. Construction of the Holland-America Line (HAL) immediately switched course. One of the directors quickly assembled a small team of designers, each one authorised to contract specific artists. Such a measure was unusual in the history of interior design of ocean liners, although artists had been involved individually on previous occasions.

By the turn of the century, major shipping companies, such as Cunard, P & O and White Star in Great Britain, as well as HAPAG and the Norddeutsche Lloyd in Germany, began investing in the interior of their passenger ships for competitive reasons.³⁸ First, interior design served to conceal the technology of the ship by simulating the ambience of luxury hotels. When third-class cabins were introduced, similar arrangements had to be made for the cheapest accommodations. Purported international aristocratic taste prescribed the use of various historical revival styles. Critics scorned the designer’s ‘art of deception’, and gradually contemporary styles – Art Nouveau and Art Deco – were considered. The introduction of bourgeois conventions coincided with nationalisation of design styles.

On the eve of the First World War, Germany took the lead in recruiting modernist decorators, when the Norddeutsche Lloyd contracted Bruno Paul, and the HAPAG (Hamburg-America Line) consulted the celebrated art historian Aby Warburg. During the Interbellum the modernist trend continued, gradually culminating in the construction of the French and British counterparts of the Nieuw Amsterdam: the acclaimed Orion (1935) and ss Normandie (1935), as well as the critically assessed ss Queen Mary (1936).

The HAL opted for a younger but known generation of designers, ignoring for example Lion Cachet, the leading Dutch interior designer of that day (who in 1938 completed a long series of assignments). In hindsight, the list of the sixty participating artists reads like a Who’s Who of internationally prominent artists in 1938: John Raedecker, Johan Polet, Dirk Bus, Nel Klaassen, Paul Citroen, H. Th. Wijdeveld, J. J. P. Oud, Ben Merkelbach, F. A. Eschauzier,

37 Seabrook, *Nieuw Amsterdam*. Even the critical architect and designer Mart Stam felt ‘a sense of pride’ on visiting the vessel: ‘Het passagierschip De “Nieuw Amsterdam”’, *De 8 en Opbouw* 12-13

(25 June 1938) 119-128 (with pictures of the first crossing by Eva Besnyó).

38 Russell, ‘Picturing the Emperor’, 233.

and Sybold van Ravesteyn. All these artists had proven their merits as painters, sculptors or architects in Dutch society and by succeeding those before them ventured into new territory with this ship's interior. J.F. Semey was the only prominent decorator with experience at sea.³⁹ Besnyö was also exceptional among the over sixty artists. In addition to providing a fragment of the Gesamtkunstwerk, as a photographer of the building process, she conveyed a comprehensive impression. A hint of a recursive image, or 'Droste effect', appears in the inclusion of Besnyö's picture of the New Amsterdam at the Rotterdam shipyard.

In her study *Designing Liners*, Anne Wealleans argues that ultimately none of the true leading European artisans of modernism helped design ocean liners. The Nieuw Amsterdam leads this view to be qualified. H. Th. Wijdeveld, architect of the art deco pavilion at the 1930 World Exhibition in Antwerp, and J.J.P. Oud, architect of the Rotterdam Café de Unie (1925), in the tradition of De Stijl, were prominent in the global modernist movement. Wijdeveld had also worked on all kinds of utopian urban planning projects. Many more artists adopted the style conventions and artistic ideals of modernism. Perhaps the decoration program derived from the location of the shipping company in Rotterdam (the capital of Dutch modernism).⁴⁰

Still, the design was not as radically modernist as aficionados of either Functionalism, *Neue Sachlichkeit* or *Nieuwe Bouwen* would have liked. In the mid-1930s, many artists had mitigated their radicalism, and the intensive consultation with HAL director De Monchy may have smoothed remaining rough edges. The rejection of Gerrit Rietveld's elaborate design of one cabin and of W.H. Gispen's attenuated furniture design of another illustrate this point. Several reviewers mentioned the mismatch between design and structure. Bauhaus collaborator Johan Niegeman even derided both the muddled plan and the aesthetic façade: one common room after another filled with 'glass, etchings, textiles, sculptures, paintings, several nude women and fish', a medley of 'deceit' and 'empty pathos', i.e. kitsch.⁴¹ This was

39 Semey had contributed to the 'ms Bloemfontijn' of the Holland-Afrika Lijn that was put into service by the United Netherlands Steamship Co Ltd (VNSM): *Schip en Werf* 1 (20 October 1934). S. Van Ravesteyn published an overview focusing on the work of Cachet, *De sierkunst op Nederlandsche passagiersschepen* (Rotterdam 1924). See also Ida Falkenberg-Lieftrinck, 'Over inrichten en vormgeven van schepen', *De 8 en Opbouw* 12-13 (June 25 1938) 112-118.

40 Marlite Halbertsma and Patricia van Ulzen (eds.), *Interbellum Rotterdam: Kunst en cultuur 1918-1940*

(Rotterdam 2001). The original architect Leendert van der Vlugt and architecture firm Brinkman & Van der Vlugt designed, in conjunction with Mart Stam, the Van Nelle Factory (1930), now on the World Heritage List.

41 J. Nieman, 'De Nieuw-Amsterdam', *De Acht en Opbouw* 12-13 (25 June 1938), 128-129. Nieman was the nephew of Wijdeveld via his sister. He worked in Dessau (Bauhaus) and was also involved in the AVRO building in which Besnyö contributed a photo wall.

disappointing because, as another reviewer noted, a cautious effort had been made to discard the aura of snobbery that tended to permeate the interiors of passenger ships, reducing the ‘pompous and ostentatiousness appearance’ that had been standard in previous ship interiors.⁴² The interior design exemplifies the transition from *transnational* neo-aristocracy to a *national* bourgeois style, largely ignoring the international style of modernism.

The ship’s heterotopia contains fragments of illusions, dreams and desires. Reviewers projected their own utopian illusions onto the interior. Modernist architecture should enable mankind to live in ‘harmony with the universe’. *Panta rhei*, insisted a critic, imitating an artwork aboard. At sea, travellers experienced the spatial and temporary infinity, the vanity of mankind, while floating in a technically sophisticated buzzing beehive.⁴³ Crossing the Atlantic offered passengers seven days to embrace the temporality of the journey (i.e. the transitory nature of life). The artists were tasked with elucidating and mediating the contrast between nature and man-made culture or between temporality, demarcation and infinity. But the ideals of harmonisation, fulfilment and transcendence would not be achieved, if contrasts remained concealed, rather than openly exposed.

These words also apply to the structure of the photo wall. The New Photography to which Besnyö had committed aligned with the drive to innovate in ‘new’ architecture and typography. After her education in Hungary, Besnyö had perfected the style formats of the New Photography in 1930s Berlin: ‘I weighed anchor there.’⁴⁴ She had travelled the same road as her compatriots László Moholy-Nagy and György Kepes. Life in Berlin was intense and rich in artistic and social utopian vistas. As Besnyö recalls: ‘At the time we all shared the fantasy of a different and better way of life’.⁴⁵ The New Photographer felt challenged by the velocity of traffic, geometry of modern architecture, and the bustle of the *Großstadt*. Embraced by the modern age, it is striking that in the picture wall (a concept Besnyö rightfully described as ‘an innovation’) she used familiar themes in representations of the Netherlands, largely avoiding the modernist line-up of buildings, stations and bridges that she had emulated successfully from the German photographer Albert Renger-Patzsch. Instead, the photo wall features Dutch tradition and social stereotypes. ‘Landscapes and robust women,’ was how architect Han van Loghem described the wall on the Pendrecht oil tanker, with a hint of derision.⁴⁶

The heterotopia of an ocean liner in the era of passenger transport was an opportunity to devise an ideal world, albeit a gradually changing one.

42 A. M. Hammacher, ‘Het schip’, 325.

43 J.G. van Gelder, ‘s.s. “Nieuw Amsterdam”, 1938’.
‘Inleiding’. *Elzevier’s Maandtijdschrift* xcv, 5 (1938)
302-309: 302.

44 Diepraam, *Een beeld van Eva Besnyö*.

45 Ibidem.

46 Van Loghem, ‘Het motortankschip “Pendrecht”’,
126.

Social imagery at sea coincided with an increase in transatlantic crossings and refinement of class-based passenger policy. In equipping ships for passenger transport, tourists and wealthy travellers were the first consideration. Ordinary migrants undertook the crossing in dreadful steerage conditions. In this respect, the White Star Titanic disaster in 1912 firmly embedded social distinctions at sea in our collective memory. Around the turn of the century, third-class cabin accommodations became more common and led spatial conventions to be rearranged.

On the one hand, an ocean liner was a perfect closed space for bringing about and maintaining social differences; on the other hand, even the well-to-do passengers faced challenges in avoiding unwanted social contact. Etiquette books offered some solace, but imposed segregation was in some respects a more successful strategy. This also holds true for the less-noted gender segregation. Besnyö's photo wall was situated in the third class smoking salon: a common area where men ordinarily went to smoke and to seek out social interaction.⁴⁷ Devising this male domain, emulating the social club ashore, met the need for temporary separation of men and women aboard. Lounges, social halls, drawing-rooms, boudoirs, music rooms and smoking salons: all met the perceived need for class and gender-based seclusion. After the First World War, Victorian etiquette became a nuisance and even led the public to object to using the smoking room as an exclusively male domain. The structural rigor of gender segregation ('this room is for gentlemen only') subsided. Still, the idealised drawing in the ship's catalogue reveals only men in the third class smoking salon aboard the *Nieuw Amsterdam*. Only in the adjacent bar do we glimpse a female figure.

Visualisations of the nation through class and gender differences appears to have been taken as an attractive social illusion of civic society. As recapturing the sensation of actual passengers entering the smoking room obviously remains difficult, other aspects to take into account are probably the movement of people, the sound and rhythm of the engines, and the smells of the ship. Nevertheless, as they drifted across the boundless ocean, the solid foundation of Besnyö's vivid Dutch images must have been comforting to the passengers. The leftist author Maurits Dekker has conveyed the prevailing ambience in a novel. Sailing from New York to Rotterdam on the eve of war, the main character is overwhelmed by the opulence on board: 'And this is only tourist class. Crazy! In the past he would have reviled the idle rich for whom these floating palaces were built, while now, in front of a stranger, he was proud of a ship on which he did not possess even one rivet.' They then sail

47 Douglas Hart, 'Sociability and "separate spheres" on the North Atlantic; the interior architecture of British Atlantic liners, 1840-1930', *Journal of Social History* 44, 1 (2010) 189-212.

through the canal that connects Rotterdam to the sea. There lies ‘the land with flat, gentle green meadows, dotted with red and brown stains of rooftops and, deeper into the countryside, a church steeple and some mills. Countryside as spacious as the sea, a world of silence and peace’. Finally, when the ship enters the port, soldiers on the quay start singing the national anthem.⁴⁸

A national spectacle

The vessel ultimately functioned as one huge floating signifier of tradition-based technical ingenuity, national grandeur and tradition. As a symbol of the reconstruction of the nation, the ship was found to be an incentive for public events where the standard repertoire of banal nationalism could be deployed.⁴⁹

In 1934-1935 financing shipbuilding was a frequent topic of parliamentary debate. A second passenger ship, in addition to the *Statendam*, would allow the Holland-America Line to secure regular ten-day service between Rotterdam and New York. The Dutch government, however, refused to provide the necessary extra funding. Members of Parliament emphasised that the project would enhance the competitive edge of the Dutch shipping and shipbuilding industry in Rotterdam. In their speeches, MPs invoked nationalist rhetoric. State support, as one MP claimed, was approved by the entire Dutch nation. The “Dutch flag” was indispensable [on the high seas]; and, as a second MP stated, ‘building the ship in a German shipyard would be foolish’ (which in fact was not at all unusual).⁵⁰ Eventually, the government agreed to issue a loan to finance building the ship. The interior architects were selected through this political intervention, because the government wished to express their support for the arts in times of crisis.

For three years, newspapers reported on the construction of the *Nieuw Amsterdam*, condemning the gaudiness aboard and noting the simple interior decoration by some of ‘the most skilful Dutch artists’.⁵¹ Pictures of the ship at sea were printed on postcards and in illustrated books and, as noted above, Besnyö was assigned to capture the shipbuilding in photos. One caption read: ‘The Netherlands has shown that it is still courageous. When the ship sails, every Dutch person can take pride in this magnificent work.’ The magazine

48 Maurits Dekker, *De laars in de nek* (Amsterdam 1945) 118, 138.

49 Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London 1995) and with regard to the Netherlands: Susie Protschky, ‘Photography and the Making of a Popular, Colonial Monarchy in the Netherlands East Indies during Queen Wilhelmina’s Reign

(1898-1948)’, *BMGN-Low Countries Historical Review* 130:4 (2015) 3-29. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.10140>.

50 One MP remarked on the ‘*nationalen toon*’. *Minutes of the Parliamentary Proceedings*, 22 November 1934 and 6 March, 1935.

51 Quotation in *Delftsche Courant*, 8 April 1937.



Parade with a model of the ss Nieuw Amsterdam, picture postcard.
Collection author.

title *Wij. Ons werk, ons leven* indeed took on a double meaning, as socialism and international solidarity no longer excluded national pride by the 1930s.

In several spectacles the ship came to symbolise modern Dutch industrial engineering. In April 1937 the *Nieuw Amsterdam* was launched with much flag-waving and, as the name of the ship indicates, many references to the voyage of Captain Hudson, who sailed to America for the Dutch East India Company. Alas, the flag hoisted was not the seventeenth-century ‘oranje-blanje-bleu’ (orange-white-blue) but the current red-white-and-blue one. Once the flag was flying at the mast of the ‘proud fortress of the sea’, those present, Queen Wilhelmina and Prime Minister Colijn sang the *Wilhelmus*, which had become the national anthem five years earlier. ‘All bared their heads in deference.’ Also aboard the *Nieuw Amsterdam* was a model of the *Halve Maen* (half moon), the first European ship that sailed the Hudson River in the seventeenth century: ‘A proud and mighty ship,/which, through its lofty name, “New Amsterdam” recounts/Holland’s ancient fame.’⁵² The Polygoon newsreel featured the launch. The department store *De Bijenkorf* sold *Nieuw Amsterdam* biscuits. Architect and lead designer Hendrik Wijdeveld had a special axe designed to launch the ship. Twenty-five thousand grandstand tickets were available, and many thousands more crowded the quays to watch the spectacle.⁵³ Upon the completion of the interior decoration one year later, another public viewing was scheduled. Again, interest surpassed expectations. That same year, at the celebration of Queen Wilhelmina’s fortieth anniversary as sovereign, a replica of the *HAL* vessel was built and paraded through Rotterdam, inserted between the steam engine and horse-drawn tram: ‘Illuminated at night, it was a festive sight.’⁵⁴ The ship, this time full size, even became part of a tour of Rotterdam. Size, whether miniature or full scale, did matter for the appreciation of the ship.

Coda: Remythologisation

The most striking feature of Dutch nationalism is said to have been the lack of general deep devotion to one’s own country in favour of zealous support for an international orientation and even cosmopolitanism or, as Hans Blom writes, ‘mature satisfaction’ with one’s abilities.⁵⁵ This article

52 ‘Zeegat uit’, *Het Utrechts Nieuwsblad*, 10 May 1938 (on details of the ship’s launch) and ‘De driekleur geheschen op de “Nieuw-Amsterdam”’, *Het Utrechts Nieuwsblad*, 9 May 1938 and 25 May 1938 (poem by Hippo Kreen).

53 *Algemeen Dagblad*, 11 April 1937; ‘Wijdeveld’ in *De Grondwet*, 12 April 1937.

54 *De Maasbode*, 9 August 1938. See Protschky, ‘Photography’.

55 J.C.H. Blom, ‘Nederland sinds 1813’, in: J.C.H. Blom and E. Lamberts (eds.), *Geschiedenis van de Nederlanden* (Rijswijk 1993) 419-496, 467.

reflects on this widespread notion, recently termed Dutch anti-nationalist nationalism.⁵⁶ This discourse of implicit nationalism, which according to Kešić and Duyvendak still resonates with the progressive and liberal left, may have originated in the early decades of the twentieth century. In any event, by the 1930s nationalist ideology became more widespread, precisely along these implicit routes. The rise of fascism in Europe corroded the unity of the international avant-garde and led to a reorientation of ‘traditional values and national identity’. In Literary Studies, where the relationship between modernism and nationalism is a longstanding theme, it has been argued that ‘a complex sense of national subjectivity is understood to be at the very root of the work [of modernists]’.⁵⁷ The work of writers, illustrators, graphic designers and photographers became part of a more widespread nationalism that brought together intellectuals and artists across a broad spectrum comprising Johan Huizinga, Hendrik Marsman and Eva Besnyö.⁵⁸ The book production on folklore, nature and landscape brings to mind a remythologisation of the nation, in which the complex of Besnyö’s photographic structure, the ship’s technology and interior and the public events serve as a case study.⁵⁹

This case study shows how modernism came to be defined by rethinking how photography and the photographer related to art, popular taste and mass culture. Besnyö’s photo wall, featuring characteristic Dutch portraits and landscapes, was commissioned and produced in the very years that popular ideas on folklore and nature were innovated in a wave of publications about the people (especially the denizens of the countryside and the coast – as the core of the nation).⁶⁰ While avant-garde artists could be receptive to nationalist sentiments, Besnyö, as a Hungarian with Berlin experience, had a more international outlook on life and visual aesthetics despite having to deal with the commercial aspects of art and the artist.

56 Joseph Kešić and Jan Willem Duyvendak, ‘Anti-nationalist nationalism: the paradox of Dutch national identity’, *Nations and Nationalism* 22, 3 (2016) 581-597. DOI: 10.1111/nana.12187.

57 Flip Bool, ‘Tussen vernieuwing en traditie, 1925-1945’, in: Flip Bool et al. (eds.), *Dutch Eyes. Nieuwe geschiedenis van de fotografie in Nederland* (Zwolle 2007) 147-189; Sarah Cole, ‘Nationalism and Modernism’, *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 48, 2 (2002) 453-460.

58 Rob van Ginkel has charted the discussions in *Op zoek naar eigenheid. Denkbeelden en discussies over cultuur en identiteit in Nederland* (The Hague, 1999).

59 On national myth and technology: Remco Ensel, ‘Nation-Building Behind the Dike. Dutch Nationalism and the Visual Culture of Hydraulic Engineering’, *Dutch Crossing. Journal of Low Countries Studies* (2017) 1-22, DOI: 10.1080/03096564.2017.1305236.

60 Remco Ensel, ‘Going Native: Besnyö’s Zeelandish Girl and the Contact Zone of Dutch Photography’, *In Depth of Field* 4 (2014): <http://journaldepthoffield.eu/volo4/nro1/a2/en> and Remco Ensel, ‘Knitting at the beach. Tourism and the Photography of Dutch Fabriculture’, *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* (2017) 1-21, doi: 10.1080/14766825.2017.1335733.

Jameson's observation that 'only for modernism, the commodity form signals the vocation *not* to be a commodity' (a double bind, or what Benjamin understood as the desperate trajectory of art) may apply to Besnyö. The photographer explicitly refused to accommodate kitsch and cheap romance but was unable to avert the nationalist practices of her time.⁶¹ Her attitude, deviating from middle-class convention and kitsch, was in fact a prevailing trope of modernism. By starting with aesthetic and ideological binary oppositions (kitsch versus art), the photo wall was Besnyö's utopian endeavour to attain transcendence. Horrified by a wall with pictures, abstraction proved to be one of Besnyö's solutions. For the New Photographer, staying on course between the Scylla of modern abstraction and the Charybdis of specific cliché was important. The photo wall was part of both the current discourse on the nation and the new strategies of visual storytelling.

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61 Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 32; Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin. A Critical Life* (Cambridge, MA, 2014) 291.