

**Exhibition Review, with a Gallery of Selected Images.** *Dutch New York Between East and West: The World of Margrieta van Varick*. Bard Graduate Center Gallery, 18 West 86<sup>th</sup> Street, NY, NY. 18 September 2009 - 24 January 2010. Organized by The Bard Graduate Center in collaboration with the New-York Historical Society. Curators: Marybeth De Filippis and Deborah L. Krohn. Exhibition Designer, Chief Preparator, Photographer: Ian Sullivan. Exhibition catalogue: *Dutch New York Between East and West: The World of Margrieta van Varick*, eds. Deborah L. Krohn and Peter N. Miller, with Marybeth De Filippis (NY & New Haven, CT: Bard Graduate Center, New-York Historical Society, and Yale University Press, 2009; cloth, jacket, xxi + 399 pp, 8 ½" x 11 ¼," ills., index; printer/binder, Conti Tipocolor SpA, Italy). 171 exhibits (global lenders). Review by MAUREEN E. MULVIHILL, PRINCETON RESEARCH FORUM, NJ.



*Installation View: Luxury Products from the Overseas Network*

Upmarket commodities from the East which Dutch merchants, like Van Varick, would have brought back to the West as sale items or souvenirs. We know from her estate inventory (NY, 1696), that Van Varick's stock in Brooklyn, NY, included exotic goods from artisanal manufacturers and suppliers in the East Indies, the Netherlands, Persia, and England. In this wing of the installation, visitors viewed a Chinese gold silk dressing-gown; two contemporary Dutch portraits of men depicted in these popular wraps; and, in the large display case, a porcelain sweetmeat set (China); a lacquer plate (Japan); a silver bowl with cover and underplate (Indonesia); and an ivory box (Ceylon) (exhibits 30, 26, 23, 25). This gallery view also illustrates the variety of the show's spatial planning and installation art. See Gallery of Images, below, pp 82-89. Exhibition design and photography: Ian Sullivan.

After years of dedicated work and research, a collaborative team of New York City curators, academics, Dutch global trade specialists, and graduate students has restored to the historical record a remarkable global traveler and businesswoman of the seventeenth-century: Margrieta van Varick *née* Visboom (Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam, 1649—Flatbush, Breuckelen [Brooklyn], 1695).

Van Varick was an established merchant of luxury commodities, mostly textile products, imported from the East Indies, Persia, and Asia. The priciest of her stock included sumptuous carpets, wall hangings, tapestries, bed covers, fine dressing-gowns and wraps, and other costly items. Some of these were imported to her shop in Brooklyn; others were brought by her to New York from her earlier (adopted) home in Malacca (Malaysia). As many ambitious Dutch of her century, Van Varick and her kin were of the mercantile class; her uncle was a high-level merchant with the Dutch East India Company. Objects very similar to Van Varick's stock have survived. We value them for their beauty and craft, and as objects of seventeenth-century material culture. The popularity and value of these objects are also a reliable gauge of consumer tastes, economic health, and market demand for particular kinds of high-end products.

With the discovery in 2004 of Van Varick's 1696 estate inventory—and the dazzling potential that document held for historians and curators—an ambitious project began to build. By 2009, with the Van Varick inventory serving as project compass, a feat of remarkable assemblage and imagination had evolved: a public exhibition on Van Varick at The Bard Graduate Center Gallery, New York City, a show which invoked both the world and the trade of a prosperous Amsterdam businesswoman relocated to the Dutch enclave of seventeenth-century Flatbush, Brooklyn, New York. Working with genuine period artifacts, each similar in kind to those listed in the Van Varick inventory, the curatorial team drew its 171 exhibits from some thirty-five major public and private collections. One third of the objects came from the New-York Historical Society's own collections; lenders included the Peabody Essex Museum, Yale University Art Gallery, The Brooklyn

Museum of Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The American Museum of Natural History, The Museum of the City of New York, the J. Paul Getty Museum, and in the Netherlands, the Rijksmuseum and the Amsterdams Historisch Museum.

The exhibition was organized and co-curated by Marybeth De Filippis, Assistant Curator of American Art, New-York Historical Society, who valuably discovered an early photostat of the Van Varick inventory in 2004 in the library of the New-York Historical Society (talk about a scholar hitting the jackpot!); and Deborah L. Krohn, Associate Professor, Coordinator for History and Theory of Museums, Bard Graduate Center, New York. The show's impressive [catalogue](#) (399 pages), an essential reference source for a broad range of researchers, was co-edited by Deborah L. Krohn and Peter N. Miller (Project Historian and Dean & Chair, Academic Programs, Bard Graduate Center), with Marybeth De Filippis. In addition to its many excellent images (most, provided by the show's lenders), the catalogue includes closely-documented essays on various aspects of Van Varick's world by Joyce D. Goodfriend, Jaap Jacobs, Els Kloek, Ruth Piwonka, David William Voorhees, Kees Zandvliet, and De Filippis. Of special importance in the catalogue is a detailed, first-ever chronology of the life and times of Margieta Van Varick assembled by Marybeth De Filippis and Margriet De Roever (xviii-xxi). The overall production and printing of the catalogue, on high-quality glossy stock, by Conti Tipocolor SpA (Calenzano, Italy), is impressive. To Ian Sullivan, working with co-curator Deborah Krohn, we give the laurels for exhibition design and installation photography, about which more below. The show's many funders included the Consulate General of the Netherlands in New York; Peter Krueger Foundation; Collegiate Church Corp.; New York Council for the Humanities, Netherlands-America Foundation; Robert G. Goelet; The Saint Nicholas Society of the City of New York; Furthermore: a program of the J. M. Kaplan Fund; and the New York State Council on the Arts, a state agency. The Van Varick show was a considerable investment of talent, money, and physical labor. The show's original run was nearly four months (18<sup>th</sup> September 2009 to 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2010), but owing to its popularity, especially among students and teachers, the run was extended to

24<sup>th</sup> January 2010.

The curatorial team did not merely hang a show of period objects: they crafted a small parallel world of Van Varick's own experience. The exhibits they displayed — textiles, fine clothing, furniture, silverware, books, maps, paintings, silver miniatures, household affects, even a miniature candle snuffer — document the travels and business of Van Varick as she acquired and built her stock of luxury commodities from suppliers in the East, Middle-East, and in the West. But the show achieved something more: Using surviving artifacts from the material culture of Van Varick's own time, the exhibition physically documented a diaspora of vogues and tastes amongst the principal owners of these goods, such as upwardly-mobile consumers in Colonial America.

Margrieta van Varick was determinedly Dutch by birth and breeding, and as the daughter of a merchant (Dirck Jansz Visboom), she spent many years traveling; we imagine she breathed the air of shops from childhood. Researchers into her life can say that her formative years and early adulthood were spent in the extremes of the Dutch world, especially Malacca, Malaysia; the final chapter of her life (1686-1695) was spent in that New Amsterdam across the sea: New Netherlands or colonial New York. Her first husband was a merchant in Bengal, India, participating in the trade between India and Malacca. Her second husband was a man of the cloth: Rudolphus van Varick, a Dutch Reformed minister. In 1686, in her late 30s, Van Varick and her husband and children relocated to the Dutch enclave of Breuckelen (Brooklyn) where he advanced his ambitions in the Dutch Reformed ministry; she set up a business in textiles. Her textile shop in the area of Flatbush, Brooklyn (the Van Varicks' new residence) introduced locals to a remarkable collection of goods from the Far East and Europe, glorious objects New Yorkers had seldom seen. Her shop goods, along with her household furnishings, were meticulously recorded in an estate inventory made after her death in 1695. This fascinating document, which records a lifetime of business activity, as well as Van Varick's personal possessions, is valuably published in the show's catalogue (folios 1-19; pp 343-361), along with helpful

endnotes and scholarly commentary by Ruth Piwonka. (So central was the inventory to the conceptualization of this show that selected folios were chosen for the catalogue's endpapers; the original manuscript folios were displayed at the exhibition; see Gallery of Images, below.)

"Important for material culture scholars," said Marybeth De Filippis of the show's curatorial team, "our contextual exploration of Margrieta van Varick's inventory illuminated a possible relationship between the first-hand travel experiences of some of New York's earliest residents, and also the thread of Islamic art and architectural motifs woven throughout the decorative arts of colonial New York." Alice Browne, a cataloguer in the New-York Historical Society's library, offered some good background on inventories of Van Varick's time: "If the Van Varick inventory provides a window into seventeenth-century material culture, the story of the collection in which the copy resides is equally important as a vivid reminder of the materiality and contingency of archival documents. Historically, these have been vulnerable records, at best. Some New York estate inventories, for example, were discarded by the New York City record office — consigned to the ragman, as it were. But after being rescued by dealers, these old inventories became part of a collection of New York estate inventories donated to the New-York Historical Society by James Wilbur. Documents are also historical objects for study: if museums make objects available for thought, libraries preserve the material housing of information. This is a long chain of integrated responsibility and preservation; in this case, the chain led to a remarkable exhibition."

The installation of the show was a principal challenge. Ian Sullivan, working within the spatial constraints for such an event at the Bard Graduate Center Gallery, did an excellent and imaginative job of spatial planning. This show of 171 objects was not a large exhibition, by any means, but its demands were large since many of the exhibits were of considerable size and weight, such as ceiling-to-floor wall hangings, seven-foot Dutch *kasten* (large cupboards), and elaborate ebony furniture. The show was not set up horizontally in one large gallery or in two adjoining galleries (the ideal arrangement), but rather

vertically over three floors: Floor 1 situated the show's subject in time and space with objects (maps, books) related to the pre-eminence of the Dutch global trade of Van Varick's century, as well as all eighteen folios of the inventory. Floor 2 (landing) displayed objects associated with Van Varick's connections in the East (Malacca and Batavia). Floor 2 (north gallery) displayed objects associated with the Dutch overseas network (trade locations). Floor 2 (south gallery) displayed objects associated with Dutch New York and the Van Varicks' Brooklyn circle (her business associates and customers; her husband's church and ministry). Floor 3 (landing) displayed representative objects suggesting those listed in the Van Varick inventory, a permanent and reliable record of her 'world of goods'. Floor 3 (north gallery) displayed selected textiles, silverware, and finely-crafted silver miniatures (from spinning wheels to oil lamps and bedwarmers). Floor 3 (south gallery) displayed items associated with Van Varick's legacy (e.g., a portrait of a prominent descendant, Mayor Richard Varick of New York City). For some exhibit selections, see the Gallery of Images, below.

Integral to the entire Van Varick project was the organizers' uses of the electronic medium to promote and explain the show. A handsome [Web site](#) was constructed with as many as 6 dedicated links (Exhibition, Highlights, Interpretation, Education, Catalogue, Online Features). The site also includes a kinetic sequence of selected images from the show (a moving narrative of images). Of particular interest on the site is the show's [20-minute online film](#), being an interview with distinguished cultural historian Natalie Zemon Davis, conducted by Peter Miller, project historian of the show's team. Zemon Davis considers the various challenges confronting historians who use inventories for research purposes, as well as the role of women in the seventeenth century, one of her special interests. She speaks of historical methodologies in reconstructing a 'lost' life, and she reminds her host that even if historians have yet to recover an image of Van Varick's face, or her personal papers (letters, a diary, notes & jottings), researchers actually have a promising foundation for continuing research into this elusive figure based on the surviving inventory of her shop goods and personal effects. While we cannot capture her "affect" (her sensibility) from the inventory, said Zemon Davis, we are given a

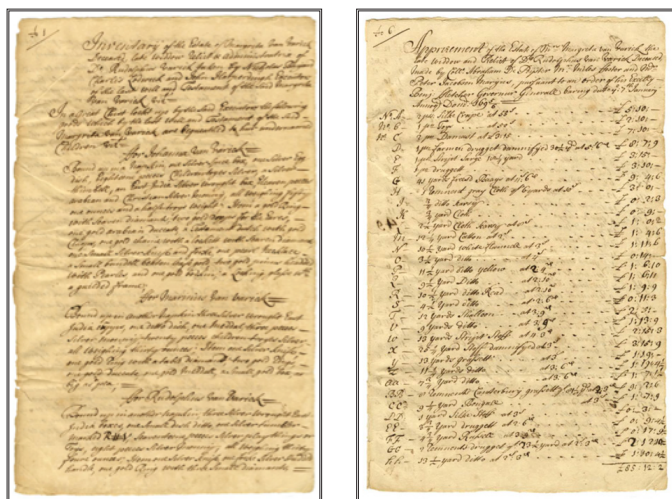
glimpse of her tastes and her choices. “[Cultural historians] build on what they have,” Zemon Davis emphasized. A material object invites a process of “empathy” and connection; a unique personal story exists behind all material evidence. In the case of Van Varick, her inventory and some of the large textile objects in the show do suggest a picture; we imagine Van Varick at work in her Brooklyn shop, directing customers to her stock and ‘pitching the product’, hoping for a sale; or she is chatting up some pricey item to a foreign merchant, with an eye to placing a big order with an overseas supplier.

The Bard Graduate Center and the New York Historical Society also integrated into the show a set of public programs for the community, such as scheduled talks by curators to visiting groups, walking tours to ‘Nieuw Amsterdam,’ music of Van Varick’s world, and a special talk on the role of silver goods in the trade of Van Varick’s century. An educational interface of this nature between academics and the public is commendable.

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The Van Varick show at the Bard Graduate Center Gallery in New York City, 2009-2010, in collaboration with the New-York Historical Society, was an immersive and absorbing experience, and its subject is certain to draw serious interest from cultural historians, feminist scholars, and researchers in diaspora studies. It was an unusual and memorable show; and for those who did not view it, the catalogue is an available resource of long-term value. (A Gallery of Images follows.)

**A Gallery of Selected Images**  
 Van Varick Exhibition, New York City (2009-2010)



*Exhibit 1. Estate Inventory & Appraisal: Margrieta Van Varick's World of Goods.*  
 Folios 1 and 6

The document which inspired the Van Varick exhibition: "Inventory of the Estate of Margrieta Van Varick Deceased, late widow relict & administratrix of Do. Rudolphus Varick taken by Nicholas Bayard, Charlis Lodwick and John Harperdingh Executors of the last will and Testament of the said Margrieta Van Varick." Appraisers appointed January 7, 1696; inventory registered January 19, 1697. Pen and ink on laid paper. Single leaf, 13" x 8 1/4" (33 x 21 cm); five double leaves, each 13 1/8" x 16 1/2" (33.3 x 41.9 cm). New York State Archives, a program of the State Education Department, Series J0301-82 NYS Probate Court Records, Inventories and Accounts, 1666-1822. This inventory is published with bibliographical notes, commentary, and images in the exhibition catalogue, pp 342-362.





*Exhibit 113. Luxurious Medallion Ushak Carpet (Turkey)*  
*Ushak, Turkey, 17th or early 18th century,*  
*wool and cotton, 144" × 92" (366 × 234 cm)*  
The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

Van Varick's inventory lists her stock of "turky work carpets," three of which she bequeathed to her children, thus signaling their high market (and sentimental) value to the owner. Judged too rare and precious to be walked upon, these knotted-piled carpets covered tables rather than floors.



*Exhibit 117. Palampore Wall Hanging or Bedcover (India) Southeast India, Coromandel Coast (present-day Andhra Pradesh), ca. 1720-40 Cotton, painted and mordant-dyed. 78 1/2" x 52 1/2" (199.4 x 133.4 cm)*  
 New York Historical Society (Object dating, courtesy Rosemary Crill, Victoria & Albert Museum, London).

This item shows “the craze for calico” (or chintz) during Van Varick’s time. These elaborately-patterned Indian cottons were hand-painted textiles, such as this specimen, and highly prized by merchants and upmarket consumers.



*Exhibit 21. Man's Dressing-Gown, 58" long. (China; Persia)  
Cora Ginsburg LLC.*

Lo! A popular style of fantastical and colorful man's gown, often worn as an outer garment wrap, reflecting multi-cultural / diasporic influences: Original design, in external layer of gold silk damask, likely Chinese. Lining, red brocaded silk, likely Persian. Collar and cuffs, red silk damask, English; wool padding L. (center back). 58" (147.3 cm).



*Exhibit 112. Armchair (ebony furniture). (Southeast India)  
Probably Coromandel Coast, India, ca. 1680-1720  
Ebony, ebonized hardwood, ivory, ebonized  
walnut inner-seat frame with cane  
42" x 24" x 19 1/2" (106.7 x 61 x 49.4 cm).  
J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.*

The heavy traffic in ebony furniture, popular with various East India Company merchants, dates to the Coromandel Coast, southeast India, mid-seventeenth century. Ebony chairs and tables were durable and resilient, and also admired for their botanical motifs carved in relief.



*Exhibit 105. Silver Water Bowl, with Eight-lobes and Cover. (Batavia [Indonesia])*  
Batavia (present-day Jakarta, Indonesia), first quarter of the 18th century.  
Silver, 4  $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 8  $\frac{1}{4}$ " including handles. Marks: none.  
Collection: Gemeentemuseum, The Hague.

The inventory of Van Varick's personal effects and shop goods includes "three silver wrought East India cupps" which very likely may have resembled Exhibit 105, above.



*Exhibit 110. Kast. Dutch Republic, 1675-1690. (Netherlands)  
Walnut, Elm, Oak. 87" x 88 1/2" x 29." New-York Historical Society.*

*Kasten* were a formidable style of high-end cupboard and storage furnishing, common in the well-stocked homes of the Dutch burgher class; they also signaled social class, thus a popular import item amongst wealthy New York Dutch. Van Varick's household in Brooklyn (as documented in her estate inventory) included a *kast*.



*Exhibit 170. Richard Varick by Ralph Earl, 1787. (New York)*  
 Oil on canvas, 31 5/8" x 27 1/4."  
 Albany Institute of History & Art, NY.

A descendant of Margrieta Van Varick, Richard Varick was a notable military and political figure in New York during the Revolutionary War. In addition to serving as the first transcriber of Washington's papers, he was Mayor of New York City, 1789-1801. Varick Street in Manhattan commemorates the contribution of the extended Van Varick family to New York's early history and political landscape.

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