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To cite this article: Remco Ensel (2017): Knitting at the beach: tourism and the photography of Dutch fabculture, Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change, DOI: 10.1080/14766825.2017.1335733

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2017.1335733

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Published online: 13 Jun 2017.

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Knitting at the beach: tourism and the photography of Dutch fabrculture

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ABSTRACT
This article considers the picturesque spectacle of knitting women dressed in attire, set against the background of the dunes in the Dutch province of Zeeland. Images of the knitting women at the beach were incorporated in the current visual repertory of the tourist press, including picture postcards. Taking its cue from a picture on knitters at the beach by the well-known modernist photographer Eva Besnyö, this article aims to show a pictorial tradition in which nationalist and tourist representations are linked to convey a Dutch Heimat idyll.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 13 July 2016
Accepted 23 May 2017

KEYWORDS
Beach culture; attire; construction of place; photography; representations; fabriculture

Standing out from the unrelated sports news surrounding the photo – ‘No Decision Reached in National Title’ – the editors of the national newspaper The Fatherland printed in 1940, a ‘domestic scene at the beach’ by the eminent Hungarian-Dutch photographer Eva Besnyö (1910–2003) (Figure 1). The photographer’s ‘camera lens and artistic eye’ had immortalized three women of the peninsula of Walcheren in the Dutch province of Zeeland who were knitting, as well as a toddler who accompanied them. Besnyö probably had no say in the caption. The image certainly belongs to her oeuvre, though. Or, as quoted in a newspaper six months earlier: ‘I have a special affection for Walcheren. Because of the kind of people who live there. I like the Walcheren peasant very much.’ Besnyö engaged in a great deal of photography on Walcheren, hardly surprising for someone with in-laws (the artistic Toorop-Fernhout Family) who had been visiting the villages of Domburg and Westkapelle every summer for years. In multiple photo books, the photographer, who had fled from Berlin to Amsterdam in the early 1930s and continued living in the Netherlands, captured striking images of Walcheren: of beaches and dunes, and of women in traditional attire, sometimes indoors, but mostly in the open air (Beckers & Moortgat, 2012; Besnyö, De Vries, & Louwerse, 1990).

Following Johnston’s observation that ‘the identification of the indigenous woman with nature is one of the most enduring themes in high art’ (2002, p. 205), this article deals with the visualization of the beach and knitting women in traditional dress, not just as a subject of ‘high art’, but as an idyllic theme, an ‘optical illusion of social harmony’ of art and popular culture (Jameson, 1992). In the early years of the twentieth century, the local
fabriculture of knitting came to symbolize a kind of premodern Dutch Utopia (Bratich & Brush, 2011; Stott & Lübbren, 2010). Numerous painters and photographers set out to capture the ‘picturesque spectacle’ of women from the province of Zeeland dressed in attire, set against the backdrop of the seas and the dunes. Knitting seems to have been the single activity that impressed foreign and domestic visitors alike as a representation of authentic native culture. Images of the knitting women of Zeeland were incorporated in the current visual repertory of the tourist press, including picture postcards.

The emergence of Walcheren and its coastal villages as a ‘vacationscape’ (Löfgren, 1999) resembles the history of other European seaside resorts. There are also striking similarities with the rise of a global beach culture. In this particular case, it is not so much the sensuous woman, the ‘Hula Girl’ of Hawaii as captured by Edward Steichen (Johnston, 2002, pp. 213–214), but rather Besnyö’s fully dressed Zeeland woman who nonetheless equally embodies the cultural reproduction of the nation. Addressing familiar topics in tourism studies – particularly staging authenticity and the commodification of regional cultures – the thrust of this article consists of the unfolding of Besnyö’s iconic image of Dutch female ‘bodies on the beach’ in light of better known counterparts in the Mediterranean and the Tropics (Corbin, 1994; Johnston, 2002; Löfgren, 1999, pp. 224–227; Metusela & Waitt, 2012; Thompson, 2006). Following the approach by Roland Barthes (1957) and

Figure 1. Eva Besnyö, ‘Knitters at the beach of Westkapelle’ (EB W 31, Maria Austria Instituut), published in Het Vaderland, 12 August 1940.
like-minded semioticians, this article aims to demonstrate how the pictorial tradition of ‘knitting at the beach’ relates to widely held yearnings for authenticity and a sense of (national) belonging. I distinguish three recurring signifiers – place (dune- and seascape), the dressed body (women in attire) and fabriculture (knitting). The juxtaposition communicates an idyllic tale, a myth in the Barthesian sense, about the people, the region and the nation. In the following, I will first examine how the emergence of Walcheren as a locality and a temporality leads to the depiction of the isle as a cultural reserve for attire and folklore, next I shall consider how the imageries of knitting fit into these processes.

The experience of beach tourism

Beginning in 1830, ‘the lure of the sea’ (Corbin, 1994) had driven the residents of Zeeland to the beaches for recreation. Due to the limited infrastructure tourism was still entirely dependent on residents from the Zeeland capital Middelburg. The village of Domburg took the lead in luring tourists from abroad. Modelled after the beach tourism of Scheveningen near The Hague, the early start of tourism in the village was when the first bathing machine was put into service. A new impetus was given by the Dutch ‘physiotherapist’ Dr Johann Georg Mezger (1838–1909) when he began to send his patients from a hotel in Amsterdam to the Badhotel of Domburg to profit from the beneficial effects of seawater. With royal support, the village transformed into an elite seaside resort. Tourism increased from several hundred to several thousand visitors each year. The middle class followed the trend of sea bathing by diverting to the less fancy village of Zoutelande and the lower class to Koudekerke (Verburg, 1996, pp. 158–159). At the end of the century, foreigners began to arrive.

Along the entire North Sea coast, similar developments raised similar arrangements. In Zeeland, a series of infrastructural interventions were required to make the influx of tourists possible. It was the steamboat, and especially the train from the province of Brabant to Middelburg that connected the island of Walcheren to the mainland. As in many other parts of Europe, the train has been decisive in the emergence of beach tourism in the Netherlands. The construction of a dense network of trams and trains was part of a nationwide undertaking in opening up the rural areas of the country. In Zeeland, two dams were constructed to facilitate the extension of the railway line from the mainland to Walcheren. This turned the isle into a peninsula and reduced the travel time from Utrecht to Middelburg, a distance of 150 km, from an average of 5 hours to 2.5 hours. Flushing with its Grand Hotel des Bains, it came to serve as the port for the ferry of the Zeeland Steamship Company to England. The British, who travelled from overseas, such as National Geographic photographer Donald McLeish after the First World War, could thus make use of a direct connection.³ On Walcheren, the steam-operated streetcar brought the traveller from Flushing inland to Domburg. Together, these innovations encouraged the rise of recreational bathing and launched the routine of day trips.

The discovery of the sea as a site for recreation was accompanied by a change in the function and meaning of the beach. The position of the beach as an interstitial zone and meeting place was strengthened. New was the focus on the beach as an ambiguous site for both manual work and leisure: fishmongers, collecting seashells, horse riding or paddling. In addition to work vs. leisure, a second binary opposition was put to the test. Embodied by the bathing machine which was used to create a private realm in a public
place, the discovery of the beach led to a rearrangement of the boundaries between public and private sphere. As shown below, this is the structure in which the topos of knitting at the beach could thrive.

In 1892, the recently founded tourist information service ‘by fifteen gentlemen from Flushing’ printed its first travel guide in Dutch, English and French. On postcards and in travelogues, travellers began to report on their ‘tourist experiences’ (Sharpley & Stone, 2012), that is, their journey and their sightseeing and encounters with the locals. These were the products of the modern print media that generated the expectations that would become such an inseparable part of the tourist experience. The trend in beach tourism and the specific tourist experience visitors could enjoy, redefined Walcheren and its socio-economic activities. Here, I concentrate on the formation of a system of visual signs that turned the coastal village, its people and activities into a tourist spectacle of regional distinctiveness.

The first step was the reinvention of Walcheren in time and space. The locality of Walcheren was discursively produced as a distinctive place inhabited by people living in a different dimension of space and time. Train speed and timetables secured and narrowed the temporal distance, whereas the use of temporal rhetoric increased the symbolic distance between centre and periphery (Fabian, 1983/2014). ‘After having passed many monotonous swamps and moist farmland; after having crossed bridges, the lonely train stops at Goes and subsequently at Middelburg, the capital of the island of Walcheren’ (Hamon, 1906). Thus, the tourist arrives at the terminus and seemingly lonely spot in the beginning of the twentieth century. The quote shows how tourists had brought along their thoughts and fantasies about an isolated island community. Sensitive to the alleged ‘traditional’ pace of time, a zealous rambler, ‘pen and pencil’ in hand, commented, on the time saved by transitioning from boat, to steamboat or train: ‘That was no slight gain. It was a gain in time, hardly indifferent to a race that calls time “money”’ (Nagtglas, 1894). A third traveller was more pronounced: ‘More and more, I hate this nasty vehicle that pushes its way forward and changes the entire world into itself: practical, but ugly and tedious’ (Tsoe-Meiren, 1894, p. 489).

Secondly, the visual experience of the beach gained significance: being seen, concealing yourself and gazing around became part of the beach experience. The first elite travelers were mostly interested in the sea, their health and each other – facilitated by the weekly publication of an arrival list. Their tourist experience differed from middle-class travellers for whom a visit to the beach was never just a dip in the water. The visual experience of the surrounding landscape and the people became part of their journey. The Dutch coast occupies a special place in this generic process. Thus, as Corbin has argued,

In the West, travel to Holland paved the way for the rising admiration of the sight of the ocean and the desire to stroll along its shores. For tourists of the classical age, this country was closely identified with the sea. (1994, pp. 32–33)

Responsible for this were the famous Dutch sea paintings as well as the early discovery of the seaside. From the neighbouring court of The Hague, aristocratic guests began to ‘cut across the dunes’ to visit the beach of Scheveningen. Halfway the seventeenth century, Corbin notices a shift of the sea to the beach: ‘The pictorial value of the beach is going to be emphasized to the detriment of the sea.’ This is the pictorial tradition the Dutch painters of the Hague School, contemporaries of Vincent van Gogh, at the end of the
nineteenth century tried to emulate and exploit, echoing the *plein air* painters of the French Barbizon School. They began to capture the mix of work and leisure activities at the beach.

The representation of the Dutch beach went beyond the rationale of tourism. From a national as well as an international perspective, dune and beach developed into the designated identity markers of the Netherlands like the green undulating hills and the cottages of England, the *Wald* of Germany and the ‘emptiness’ of the American Midwest. The paintings, drawings and pictures were never only intended for tourists. Tourist images were part of a growing popular nationalistic perception of the world, a *National Geographic* writ large (cf. Lutz & Collins, 1993). In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, competing Dutch elites, each with their own religious or ideological backgrounds, sought a conciliatory view of Dutch national identity. New print media offered opportunities for distributing non-adversarial forms of nationalism, such as ‘a cult of the simple, the genuine and the natural’, centred on nature, that is beach-cum-dune vs. meadow. The dune landscape was the eternal (divinely created) land, which exemplified original nature, while the meadow represented land shaped by human hands. The nationalization of the sublime and the picturesque, as Löfgren (1999, p. 35) put it, entered books, poems, illustrated journalism and political vocabulary.

**The spectacle of authentic attire**

In addition to changing perspectives on time and space, authenticity is the third key element of the tourist spectacle. The Walcheren coast came to represent the authentic heart of the nation. In this respect, the Zeeland villages had an advantage over some of the other seaside resorts. Not only the landscape but also the native population was appreciated as real Dutch in physical appearance and attitude, which incidentally positioned these same locals in a spatial and temporal enclave. Walcheren was constructed as an imaginary space, a stage for the performance of *Heimat* fantasies, with the beach as one of the preferred locations (cf. Thompson, 2006, pp. 225, 285). The American connection deserves a special mention. After the American Civil War, Americans looking for the authentic roots of their country embraced their alleged rural Dutch origins. At first, all attention of visitors went out to the moorland village of Laren and the coastal villages of Egmond and Zandvoort (Stott & Lübbren, 2010). After the First World War, attention was reallocated to Zeeland as a traditional rural idyll. The shift towards the south may have had to do with the people as an additional attractive aspect of Walcheren. Initially, tourists visited the island for the scenic seascape and rugged dunes, but these same visitors already had begun to praise the entrance to Zeeland, ‘as the island of Walcheren retains more of the old costumes and the original types of paesantry [sic], than perhaps any of the provinces’ (Wharton Edwards, 1919, p. 13). Zeeland, in particular the Walcheren peninsula, became an attraction because of its traditions and local folk culture.

‘A sort of animated museum with antiquated costumes,’ thus wrote James Howard Gore about the peninsula in his *National Geographic* article of 1923. It was exactly this aspect that prompted much debate. The fascination with the Zeeland costume gained momentum after the First World War when the Netherlands was going through a cultural crisis. Intellectuals thought the true nature of the country was vanishing from sight, and the invocation of the Dutch landscape and rural folk culture was believed to be a way to
find unity and renewal of the national spirit. A wave of folkloric initiatives flooded the postwar period.

The true nature of ‘us all’, that which had remained unchanged in the turmoil of modernization, was contained in ‘the people’ that could be found in specific enclaves. The ‘people’, with its ‘people’s strength’ [volkskracht], found its antithesis in the ‘masses’, a threatening, superficial and amorphous figure related to modernization and ‘mass culture’. Walcheren’s folk culture could be the imaginative antidote for the loss of social harmony. Within the polarity containing ‘the masses’ on one end and ‘the people’ on the other, Walcheren represented the people in whom those looking for the Dutch authentic nation were primarily interested.

Here is no uprooted colourless–grey mass, robbed of all connection and spiritual foundation; here is a people, the Zeeland people, who, within the borders of its bondage, has found ample room to shape its life and its expressions, and to live accordingly. (Van Lier, 1938; italics added)

In the preceding decades, the tourist time and again had been encouraged not only to visit the beach but also to pay attention to the locals, their tradition and particular attire. The picturesque costumes of the women, with their queer headdresses and flashing gold and silver cap ornaments (Hoofdijzers), show to great advantage and impress the tourist with the strange antiquity of the people’, as one folklorist put it (Van Lier, 1938, p. 169). A ‘rambler’s guide’ from 1928 featured the following tip for tourists: ‘on Sunday, visit the Zoutelande church (best reached by bus), where you can see beautiful traditional attire’ (Walcheren, 1928). The well-known painter Jan Toorop (1858–1928) had left some traces here: ‘Bronzed men in Zeeland attire, whose faces recall Toorop’s paintings, filled up the side benches’ (Wharton Edwards, 1919, p. 85). This is a nice example of the triple interaction between an imaginary visual image bank, an actual visit to observe the locals first hand and the making of tourist photos in the construction of a classic picturesque site, the Church of Zoutelande. The ‘tourist gaze’ (Urry, 1990) as a social mechanism was active on several fronts simultaneously. Attire set against the background of side-walks, market places and dunes was turned into a spectacle to be observed, captured, consumed and reproduced in art and mass media.

The economy of the picturesque

Referring to the tourist gaze and to culture-as-spectacle suggests a perspective that focuses on how economic resources and relations may lead to the commodification of nature and culture. This happens when aspects of daily life – dress, body and labour – become appreciated for their sign-value and get deployed in visual spectacles (Baudrillard, 1993/2007). This is indeed how this article tries to account for the changing perception of Walcheren and its fabriculture. The distribution of imageries of local culture was closely tied up with economic strategies and political choices. This was, however, not just a place marketing strategy launched from above, but one that required the close involvement of the so-called locals. Tourist consumption became a revenue model for the coastal villages.

In the early modern era, the maritime southern province of Zeeland was closely involved in the emerging global economy. In the seventeenth century, the province
was with Holland the engine of overseas expansion. Flushing and Middelburg, both on the southernmost Walcheren peninsula, were two of the flourishing provincial towns. In the early twentieth century, the overseas trading companies were long gone and the regional rural economy was stalled, wedged as it were, between the economic centres of Rotterdam and nearby Flanders including Antwerp. The rural economy consisted of the cultivation of potatoes, beets and flax. Real wages were below the national average. It was customary for children and women to complement the daily wages through farm labour and odd jobs. Labour migration was another household strategy.

Local politics saw in the emerging tourism an ideal opportunity to jumpstart the economy and counter the depopulation of the isles. Needed then were a ‘well thought-out policy’ and a politics of ‘propaganda’ focusing on the dual attractions of the ‘restless and yet so calming sea’ and ‘the characteristic, well-balanced population’. Several local and regional committees were established to implement this strategy (Roosenburg and de Ranitz, 1939). It was considered important to incorporate the people in the story because they could demonstrate to be the ‘good stewards of all the beauty that God has given us [on Walcheren]’. This included maintaining the attire of the rural men and women.  

During the Interbellum, the assumed decline of traditional attire became a subject of discussion exactly because of these efforts of the local elite to maintain attire as an economic resource and marker of provincial identity. Most weight lay on the shoulders of the women. It was their private sphere that was at stake in public debate. Actually already at the end of the nineteenth century, the preoccupation with traditional attire had led to the commodification of the ‘Zeeland girl’ (Zeeuws Meisje), when a margarine brand was launched with as trade mark a picture of a girl in traditional costume (De Jong, 2007). This was followed by the circulation of a 10-guilder banknote with a picture of a Zeeland woman in attire after the First World War (Figure 2). In the 1930s, the well-known folklorist P.J. Meertens, born in the Zeeland capital Middelburg, clashed with the local élite over the use and necessity of engaging in a rescue operation concerning Zeeland attire. Meertens was aware of the danger the villages would turn into ‘deadly tourist extravaganzas’, but this did not mean that he was convinced it was worthwhile to ‘save’ the Zeeland attire. How ‘traditional’ were these costumes actually?

Meertens denied the efficacy of a conscious, officially coordinated pressure on the locals to maintain their mode of dress. ‘A campaign like this will only succeed if it is conducted by people who actually wear the peasant costumes.’ According to Meertens, most so-called local campaigners had actually been born abroad and emphatically mentioned tourism as an important incentive: ‘So what they do not understand is that it’s exactly on those market days when sometimes up to a thousand tourists meet the locals, peasants come to understand that they have become a museum piece’ (Figure 3). The only solution was to combat ‘the curse of tourism’. This advice ran counter to the call for tourists among both the élite and the general public.

In the interwar period, the growth of tourism had intensified the contacts between visitors and local residents, particularly when it came down to taking pictures. This trend was evident in many ‘picturesque villages’ in the region around Amsterdam. In Volendam, according to one observer, ‘traditional attire … degenerated … into a gawking game’. ‘Volendam business’ became a concept and a spectre. On Marken, the intrusiveness of
its natives was unbearable, or so another foreign traveller reported in his travelogue (Rodenburg, 2000, p. 177).

The locals, in traditional dress, will have felt under siege of the new portable cameras at times. Countermeasures were provided for. When on a Sunday morning in 1937 in the small village of Staphorst at the other side of the former Zuiderzee, two tourists took out their cameras, the local youth protested. ‘Without the benefit of due process’ ‘a number of Staphorst youths grabbed them and threw them in a ditch’. In defence of the perpetrators, the newspaper mentioned that the village community, belonging to an orthodox congregation of the Reformed Church, ‘when emerging from Sunday morning worship’ found itself besieged by ‘at least fifty and mostly more tourist photographers’. On Walcheren, the Sunday service was a popular subject as well. In Staphorst, it was the reason for the town council to include a regulation in the bye-law ‘that it is forbidden to photograph anyone close on the public road.’ On Walcheren, Donald McLeish photographed the congregation down in the pews for National Geographic without being tarred and feathered. The Staphorst incident mainly confirmed the need for safe contact zones where residents and visitors could meet each other (Ensel, 2014; Pratt, 1991), exactly because residents, if only they wanted, could benefit from the tourist interest. Middelburg’s Thursday Market was such a safe area where tourists and locals could meet.

Due to poverty and encouraged by the organized excursions of day visitors, traditional dress became a revenue model. The women and children from the highly impoverished fishing village of Arnemuiden were notorious for their persistent approach.

The women tried to make a little extra on Thursdays when there were many tourists, going to town with their beautifully decked out children, to have them photographed for money. This was veiled mendicancy and therefore prohibited, but it happened on a large scale. People called this going for ‘monnie’. (De Bree and Van Ham, 1975)
The city council even considered introducing a licensing system for posing in exchange for money. One might establish that beyond the economic objectives of the political élite, the ‘natives’ had set up their own informal tourism economy to supplement their family income. In 1932, well-known Dutch author Menno ter Braak received a postcard from Walcheren: ‘The trip was best. The train 2nd class, hotel is prime, the weather is good.’

Figure 3. Postcard ‘Peasant women from Walcheren’, dated 14 August 1922, London address (collection: author). The verso text makes it clear the writer was on an excursion to the Middelburg Market from the Belgian sea resort Ostend.
Zoutelande, where we stayed yesterday. A funny village (3 August, 1932). All these kids in Zeeland attire.’ Less charming was the ‘photo fever’ mentioned in a second card (6 August 1932):

I nearly threw my camera at the merry-go-round, simply disgusting. The children grab your clothes. There were hordes of them sitting on the sidewalk, waiting to be ‘captured’. (Ter Braak & and Faber, 2011)

This famous Dutch writer got no further than a postcard, but Walcheren’s opening up also brought artists and commercial photographers to the area who were responsible for a huge cultural production. Fine arts and popular leisure were closely matched. Following in the footsteps of the elitist beach tourists, Jan Toorop was one of the first painters who settled on Walcheren in Domburg where his daughter Charley Toorop-Fernhout (1891–1955), mother-in-law of Eva Besnyö, was born. In 1907, Jan Toorop made a pointillist painting of two girls in the dunes of Zoutelande. A few years later, Hart Nibbrig (1866–1915) moved to Zoutelande where he came up with almost the same type of painting. A close friend of Toorop, De Stijl painter Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), painted the Domburg dunes and beach, the lighthouse near Westkapelle, the Church of Zoutelande and a young girl in Walcheren attire. Photographer’s son and founder of De Stijl, Theo van Doesburg (1883–1931), would make a sketch of a knitting woman by the sea for a stained glass window (Figure 4).

It was not long before the camera took over the brush. Willem van Malsen (1893–1985) (Figure 5), Cas Oorthuys (1908–1975), Eva Besnyö and W.F. Van Heemskerck Düker (1910–1988; Ensel, 2013) were a few of the Dutch photographers who went to Zeeland to capture the local women at home, on the beach and in the dunes, occasionally busy knitting (Figure 7).

To avoid frustration and hassle, the contact zone in which travellers met the locals got organized. In the decades before and after the turn of the century, hospitable villages emerged, places where meetings between photographers and inhabitants were regular and sometimes even routine (Figure 7). Artists settled for prolonged periods in some of these villages (Lübbren, 2001). On Walcheren, Domburg and the villages of Westkapelle and Zoutelande enjoyed fluctuating popularity. Artists shunned villages and other locations that gave them more trouble. Thus, in the 1920s, the earlier-mentioned National Geographic photographer McLeish visited all the villages that had become accessible enclaves and regular international hubs of folk culture and the standard locations for taking photographs. Two articles from National Geographic include three knitting pictures taken by McLeish (Figure 6). Besnyö followed the example of her in-laws. Several consecutive summers she visited Westkapelle to relax and work. In multiple photo books, Besnyö captured striking images of Westkapelle: of beaches and dunes and of women in traditional attire, sometimes indoors, but mostly in the open air. She contributed regularly pictures for newspaper and tourism magazines. In August 1939, she photographed at least one more woman knitting, this time on the sidewalk in front of her house in Westkapelle.

The representation of knitting

The linkage between the spectacle of knitting women and the tourism industry in Zeeland is apparent from the production of picture postcards. The provincial archive
of Zeeland holds 304 postcards tagged with ‘attire’ and 50 different postcards tagged with ‘knitting’. The earliest knitting postcard is from 1890 (seven years after the publication of the first Dutch picture postcard), eight are from ‘before 1909’, 27 are from Walcheren. With one exception, all women and girls knit in the open air. In several cards, the background is formed by the sea and the dunes (Figures 8–10). There also circulated postcards with the motif of knitting women from other villages in the Netherlands, especially Volendam. Obviously lacking in those images were the visual motives of dunes and sea.

The postcards convey the ‘tourist experience’ the senders must have enjoyed. In 1922, a British family sent a postcard home with the following inscription: ‘Today is market day for the Dutch … It is very pretty to see the Dutch peasant’s costume. We had a lovely day with glorious sunshine’ (Figure 3). The postcard shows how the Middelburg Market succeeded in presenting a spectacle in at least two ways: for this family, the market was the main reason for travelling to Middelburg from the Belgian seaside resort Ostend on a group
excursion. Maybe they even posed with the women in attire. Secondly, the postcard puts the market spectacle on view to the people at home.

Apart from the picture postcards, the earliest reference to knitting as a native spectacle on Walcheren is likely to be found in the twin travel magazines *Le Tour du Monde* (1905) and *De aarde en haar volkeren* ['The Earth and its Peoples']. Already in 1874, the French illustrated magazine published a travelogue by the well-known Flemish writer Charles De Coster (1874, 1875) on Zeeland that one year later was followed by a Dutch translation. The same publishing strategy was followed when the French artist and photographer Ludovic-Georges Hamon (1875–1942) visited the peninsula in 1906.

Entering a billiard room in a small village, Hamon sees two young girls, who are ‘knitting with dry tics of their needles’. He immediately falls for one of the pair, named Reneetje Korstanje, because of ‘the whiteness of her complexion, the suppleness of her bare arms, nicely set off by the black velvet of the short sleeves’. He cannot keep his eyes off her.

Reneetje is still busy knitting. In Holland, one does not knit with the fingertips, as in France. In their belt, the knitters have a sheath of carved wood; they put the needle in it and the wool is processed into knit stitches at an amazing speed, accompanied by a constant buzzing … Reneetje knits. I sketch her portrait. Now and then, she stops to rest her fingers, and looks, with an open gaze devoid of any timidity or impertinence, at the French gentleman, whose beard impresses her greatly. (Hamon, 1906)

This is the picture: traveller and native stare amazed at each other’s body. Reneetje knits, as do all the women Hamon spots on his journey across Zeeland: ‘The women knit and share

![Figure 5. Willem Van Malsen, ‘Two knitters at the beach of Zoutelande’ (Dutch Photo Archive, WM 76–18 BAF-r), published in a chapter on Zeeland in the volume, ‘The Dutch Folk Characters’ edited by A. de Vries and P.J. Meertens (1938).](image)
their secrets with one another’ (cf. Kohn, 2002). This time the traveller draws a portrait, more often he ‘passes through the street … camera in hand … rudely intruding’ everywhere he sees an opportunity. ‘I swung my camera like a tomahawk, gave a yell and jumped onto the dike … They … ran behind walls, hid, appeared again, and I could imagine being a wolf chasing sheep. Click, click.’ As Hamon had previously captured Brittany, the French picturesque counterpart of Walcheren (cf. Young, 2012), he now journeyed across a collection of villages that could underpin his argument that the Netherlands were ‘currently the most picturesque country in Europe’. Apparently, Hammon’s encounter with Dutch culture could at this point in time only be realized by insistently harassing young women.

Figure 6. Donald Mc Leish, ‘She knits his socks while she waits for her jack at Flushing.’ Original caption of the page in National Geographic, 1923 (collection: Mc Leish, dmc 1372). I thank the McLeish Family for their permission to reproduce the photo.
After Hamon, Eva Besnyö was neither the first nor the last photographer who travelled to Walcheren to capture the traces of true ‘Dutchness’. It appears that upon their arrival, various photographers went in search of the same images, motifs and stagings made familiar to them through their predecessors. Photographs by tourists, for commercial or artistic purposes, seemed very similar. All could make use of an available infrastructure, an intermedial transmission, and a repertory of images that was more pervasive than the artist’s individual creative input.

Knitting had indeed long been a common theme among painters; photographers picked this up. The aforementioned Hart Nibbrig painted the pointillist ‘A knitting girl
from Zoutelande’, of a girl posing on the dike, with the Church in the background. Knitting provided a theme for Nibbrig even before he arrived in Zeeland. His portrait of a ‘Knitter’, straddling a fence in the painters’ village of Laren, provided a complement to the German Max Liebermann’s portrayal of a Laren girl (‘Mädchen aus Laren’), knitting while standing up. In the Gooi, southeast of Amsterdam, knitting was connected to sheep farming on the
moors, a connection Anton Mauve and like-minded painters of the Hague School had depicted. Knitting featured as a theme in paintings depicting the daily life of farmers and craftsmen. Especially popular were the ‘knitting lessons’ of mother and child in which motherhood and the oral transmission of local knowledge are prominent motifs, the best known of which is Jean François Millet’s The Knitting Lesson (1869).

Knitting as a visual motif may take on different meanings in the fine arts as in real life. In the photography of the journals, the ads and folklore books, knitting was seen as a symbol of Zeeland, and for some, therefore, of the Dutch nation as well. The nationalization of the knitter was already uniquely evident in etchings and texts featuring the tricoteuses, the elder women who accompanied the bloodshed radicalization of the French Revolution with the clicking of their knitting needles (Elsner Hunt, 1994). While the late eighteenth-century Paris knitter participated in the public sphere, outside the home, the Zeeland knitter seems to devote herself, even in the open air, to the maintenance of the apolitical, domestic sphere. Indeed, since the nineteenth century, domesticity was the preferred symbolic setting for the Dutch woman (Kloek, 2009). Thus, to judge from the caption in the newspaper, which mentions a domestic scene, Besnyö’s beach photo corresponded to genre works of rural interiors and craftwork done within the family. Domesticity was transferred to the open air. The result was the association of traditionally clad Zeeland women with knitting and the coast. If knitting in public is ‘out of place’, as Bratich and Brush (2011) have argued with regard to the revival of knitting as a gendered pursuit, this also applies to the knitting women in the dunes of Zeeland. Knitting, as a domestic and private activity, is situated outdoors and in public. On the pictures, however, the participants pose as if they are among each other (e.g. ‘The women knit and share their secrets with one another’). The images suggest the beach and dunes are neither

Figure 10. Postcard ‘Westkapelle, sea dike’ (collection: author). The knitters are the second group from the left.
exclusively spaces of work or leisure. This leads to a second observation. The iconic image puts the dichotomy of work and leisure to test. Knitting does not appear to be paid labour, but even so, it supports the family and the wider community. Knitting is a small yet regular contribution to a small *Gemeinschaft*, a slow craft executed in a slow setting.

This connotation is linked to a second order of signification, or myth, as coined in Roland Barthes’ semiotics. Knitting as a repetitive, sometimes motherly performance that takes place within the landscape, endures changes in society, the advent of modernity and the idea of wage work. It refers to durability and the ongoing regeneration of the nation. See for the latter aspect how visualizations of knitting and motherhood – for example, in Besnyö’s picture, are mutually reinforcing. The Dutch *Heimat* as a utopian promise of unity and solidarity is summoned by the gendered space and activity on the beach.

Although the representation of outdoor knitting appears to have lost any notion of labour, knitting – sometimes in combination with crocheting – was an everyday activity for women and girls. Both the visible and more hidden parts of Zeeland attire contained several knit items. First, there were the different types of socks, including the (blue or grey) knee socks, for both men and women. Then, there were children’s caps, short vests and, by now famous, fishermen’s jerseys (from Arnemuiden). A special item was the knitted muff, used as a means of meeting the requirement that women keep their arms covered in church.

The interpretation of knitting, either as a traditional symbol of Zeeland domesticity or as a leisure activity, obscures the fact that knitting and weaving were economic occupations, reserved for girls, the poor and the lower class. Institutional knitting was an established practice. Since the 1850s, in Zeeland and the rest of the Netherlands, knitting and crocheting schools functioned as nurseries for poor and ‘impecunious’ infants. Private parties and local authorities funded schools for spinning, weaving and knitting as a way of providing relief to the poor – and orphans with care. After school, children on Walcheren attended knitting lessons for an hour or two every day. In a booklet describing the way in which early twentieth-century youth in Westkapelle spent their spare time, the author states that he restricts himself to boys. ‘For the girls had little spare time after their school years. After leaving school, play time was over for the girls and they were put to work.’ The only illustration in this treatise on playing in the open air is a picture of two knitting girls (Gabriëlse, 1986, pp. 155–157). Knitting may have been a symbol for the reproduction of the family life and the nation, it was at the same time part of domestic labour and economic production – which was even strengthened by the introduction of knitting machines for home knitting.12

Even so, the recent revival of knitting, illustrated by some wonderful blogs and communal initiatives, suggests knitting did indeed contribute to the social fabric of local communities as well as provide a source of pride and identity (cf. Bratich & Brush, 2011; Hackney, 2006).

**Conclusions**

The iconic image of knitting women on the beach has a long history with different institutions, media and technologies of representation fulfilling key roles. Showing the readers of the daily *The Fatherland* that one picture of Eva Besnyö required a whole infrastructure consisting of an accessible village with accommodation, a population that was willing to
be portrayed, and a setting in which photography was translated into an economic trans-
action. On top of that, it took a media network of picture magazines, journals, photo books,
postcards and sometimes films and exhibitions to distribute the imageries of Walcheren
and transform these into conventional and familiar symbols of the region. Picture
editors, art dealers, painters and photographers were among the trading agents of the
icon of the traditionally dressed ‘native peasant woman’ of Walcheren. In the midst of
the media coverage of the costumed knitter as stock figure, a magazine for Zeelanders
who had migrated to the north of the country published a picture of girls and women
on the beach dressed in modern bathing costumes. The ironic caption demonstrates a
keen sense of the pictorial tradition.

The presentation of Zeeland leaves much to be desired. Clay soils, farmers in regional
costume, and dikes. This is how all too often others observe Zeeland from afar. Would “the
American” not be surprised if we present him this photo?\(^{13}\)

Unfortunately for the writer, the migrant’s magazine rolled off the same printing press (G.
den Boer, Middelburg) as the postcards with pictures of knitting and attire that were sent
all over the world.\(^ {14}\)

The strength of the images of knitting at the seaside lies in the manner in which knitting
oscillates between work and leisure, and between private and public sphere. These are
exactly the lines along which the local beach transformed into a meaningful place for
modern leisure (cf. Metusela & Waitt, 2012). Recoding the private into the public sphere is
part of the myth in which female space and activities become signifiers of nationalist
and tourist utopias (cf. Spivak, 2015). At the time knitting became a regional and national
symbol in the Netherlands, Hawaiian weaving, especially known for the wreath of flowers
or lei, was foregrounded as the centrepiece of the visual economy. Historians and anthro-
pologists have registered comparable processes of commodification and commercializa-
tion for quilting, embroidery and other fabricultures worldwide (cf. Ballengee-Morris,

With its role in supplying one type of bodily ornamentation, knitting plays a part in the
fascination with Zeeland attire as a key symbol of a Dutch Heimat. More generally, open-air
knitting ties in with the specific Dutch iconography of landscapes as the background for
the portrayal of domesticity and intimacy. George Hitchcock wrote in his jubilant 1889
essay on picturesque Holland how the interiors, ‘tell of the sea in every corner’. Therefore,
it may conversely be argued the staged photography of open-air knitting impressed upon
the (aspirant) tourist the sensation of gaining entrance to the backstage of Dutch indigen-
ous culture by way of the front door of the sea dunes.

Notes

1. ‘Zeeuwsche vrouwen’, Het Vaderland, 12 August 1940; the reference to the interview in the
N.R.C. comes from Vlissingsche Courant, 4 November 1940.
2. Fabriculture refers to ‘a whole range of gendered practices usually defined as the “domestic
arts”: knitting, crocheting, scrapbooking, quilting, embroidery, sewing, doll-making’ (Bratich
3. Donald McLeish (1879–1950) was a professional photographer before, during and after the
First World War and regularly visited the Netherlands. He handled the photography for
several articles in National Geographic.
4. In German, the word Heimat refers to the affective bond with one’s homeland and place of origin (Blickle, 2002). Heimat is a specific construct of locality and temporality, a familiar fantasy in an alien world, a recognizable and reassuring imagination in which time, place and authenticity coalesce.

5. A particular note can be found in the communist newspaper De Tribune (6 June 1932). As a comment on a picture of people in attire at the Middelburg Market, the caption states that ‘the bourgeois press advertises with Zeeland attire to attract foreigners’ but fails to add that ‘these precious costumes of the Kulaks have been paid through the awful misery of the agricultural labourers’ (my emphasis).


8. ‘The Congregation Leaving the Church’ was an even more familiar theme among painters and photographers, most notably, Vincent van Gogh, ‘Congregation leaving the Reformed Church in Nuenen’ (1884–1885).

9. Algemeen Dagblad, 9 March 1938. An attached photo of three girls from Arnemuiden states in the caption that they ‘are always willing to pose in the right posture and with their brightest smile for the tourist photographers, but … not for nothing’. The journalist notes that they even knew how to curse in English if a photographer refuses to pay.

10. An ‘Idyll on Walcheren’ appeared in a newspaper in 1940 and ‘A hymn to the harvest on Walcheren’ was another caption in a tourist magazine. Provinciale Noordbrabantsche en’s Hertogenbosche Courant, 19 September 1940 and 26 October 1940.

11. The only explicit ‘political readings’ of knitting were the public appeals for knitting on behalf of the soldiers who were mobilized in the run-up to participation in the First and Second World Wars.

12. See the following newspaper ad of the ‘Company for knitted goods as domestic labour with knitting machines’: ‘Home Knitting: Knitting as domestic labour now is a rewarding job … We guarantee a fixed and regular income’ (De Zeeuw. Christelijk historisch nieuwsblad voor Zeeland, 17 November 1928).


14. Another counternarrative lies in the fact that the local population took up the camera, like Neeltje Flipse-Roelse did from 1936 onwards, delivering images, for example, of men and women who pause together between their agricultural work: http://lupineke.blogspot.nl/search/label/fotografie.

**Acknowledgements**

I thank Han van der Vegt for translating a first version of this article. All remaining faults are mine.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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