

## Petrified books: an eternal library

by Tijs Goldschmidt

Anyone who steps into the Artis Library on the Plantage Middenlaan in Amsterdam enters a different world. The twentieth century has yet to begin here. Apart from the occasional visitor with a laptop, there is nothing contemporary. Almost nothing, that is, because between two wall-sized bookcases in this enormous space sits a bronze bust of Dick Hillenius, a late twentieth-century Dutch cultural hero. Nineteenth-century furniture, display cabinets and cupboards. Housing many thousands of books, with red, blue, green, yellow and brown covers, carefully arranged by size, subject and date of publication. Books bound in inferior sheepskin leather, but also in fine calfskin vellum, stingray leather or cardboard. The room is replete with eighteenth-century works like *Mammifères* by anatomists Buffon and Cuvier, and early editions of volumes by nineteenth-century naturalists like Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace. It smells alluringly of books and beeswax, and, most importantly, it is silent. 'This is it, this is where I want to be' has been the predominant feeling I've had every time I've entered this room over the last decades. A place where an hour is still an uninterrupted hour without you even realising it. Because if you're deeply engrossed in reading or writing, time fades away. No mobile phones ring here and conversations are whispered.

Here and there among the spines of the old books, a few light up – a strange snowy white. Something unusual is happening here. These same white books have equally white pieces of papers protruding from the top, normally a sign that a specimen is about to be restored. Why do these books have white covers? Or do they? As you draw closer, you quickly see they're made of stone, carved out of white alabaster. That relatively soft, slightly transparent stone, a mixture of gypsum and salt. Petrified books, like fossils, placed ingeniously at eye level, dispersed throughout the giant bookcases. Some of the petrified books stand alone, others stand side by side in rows. When you remove one from the shelf, you discover the whole book has been carved, not just the spine and top like the fake books in shop windows. These are books with a head, a tail and a spine with ribs. They're almost musically arranged, some thirty in total. Unobtrusive, like the spacing in a text, only slowly revealing themselves to the unsuspecting visitor. Is this the way insect-eating birds feel when they detect a camouflaged caterpillar or butterfly on a leaf or tree trunk?

Book covers are letter shells, in some ways comparable to snail shells. And this is how the maker, Lynne Leege, conceived them. Letter shells – protecting stories, offering refuge to finely painted creatures and their descriptive renderings. A letter shell as a thing, an image, not so much the content of the book itself.

Once you have a 'search image' – might there be more alabaster mimicry in this room? – the room turns out to be alive with it. On the table lies a folded sheet of paper, a letter, which from a short distance works like a perfect *trompe l'oeil*, but, like a book that lies open not far away, is carved out of alabaster. The same applies to the stone imprint of a goose feather with which nothing will ever be written again. And suddenly you realise what Leegte is seeking. Nothing less than the impossible: a petrified library. Thousands of petrified books that will stand eternally side by side, never perishing. A snow-white library, homage to the printed and carefully crafted book that is increasingly under threat from digitisation. As a child, Leegte said, she was already fascinated by a piece of petrified wood that her father had brought home. Wood ... petrified? How was that possible? Or by the floor strewn with vividly coloured oranges that turned mouldy within a few weeks, then white. And though she certainly didn't express it this way at the time, what preoccupied her was undoubtedly changes in colour with retention of shape. Until these oranges, which unlike the petrified books were not made of stone, started to decay and lost their roundness. The differences between the individual petrified books reveal how earnestly Leegte takes that homage: serious play. Books that have been held, read, damaged. Books that have lived, with spent covers or restored corners bearing lasting scars. Each of these sculpted books contains a biography that has marked it. Books with bruised ribs, bent corners or frail joints. Books that are sometimes as alive as the voluptuous stone books in Bernini's sculptures. Leegte has sculpted alabaster books into characters, like the bottles in Morandi's still lifes.

The library, an exhibition by Lynne Leegte in the Artis Library  
November 2013 – January 2014

Thirty books sculpted life-size in alabaster, letters,  
an opened book and warped treated books.

Artis Library, *Special Collections of the University of Amsterdam*  
Plantage Middenlaan 45, 1018 DC Amsterdam

*photography* Lynne Leegte *text* Tijs Goldschmidt  
*translation* Sherry Macdonald *design* Monica Schokkenbroek

*cover* Dali, Blumarino 285 grams *paper* 150 grams Munken Pure Rough *font* New Baskerville ITC  
*binding* Hennink *printing* SSP & Cliteur

ISBN/EAN:978-90-820848-0-1 © Lynne Leegte 2013 [www.lynneleegte.com](http://www.lynneleegte.com)

Many thanks to the Artis Library and R&R Reuten Gallery Amsterdam.

This exhibition was made possible with support from the Amsterdam Fund for the Arts (AFK).