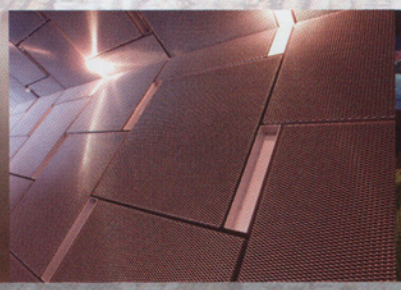

The Middelburg Abbey, tranquil sanctuary in the city centre. Breathe in age-old history, mixed with today's liveliness. Close your eyes and watch the Norbertine monks walk the Abbey corridors. Then return to reality and watch people relaxing on a bench, reading a book or enjoying the monumental atmosphere. Occasionally, you will see a public servant cross the square – after all, this is the seat of the provincial government. Underneath the leafy trees, you will spot a fashionable outdoor café. Visitors are enjoying local food and drinks. They have just visited the Zeeuws Museum and are having a lively chat about it. Talk about the combination of old and new...

The Zeeuws Museum is often called the treasure-house of Zeeland history. Next to the Zeeland Provincial States, it is accommodated in the stately Abbey of Middelburg. An environment once dominated by prayer and study. An atmosphere that still lingers. Amidst surprisingly modern elements: glass, natural stone, steel. Multimedia. The grave atmosphere of old has been replaced by a happier one, albeit quite spiritual at times. There's interaction between collection and building, between old and new, between aesthetic lighting and artistic presentation. A combination that is as impressive as the one of study and prayer. 'Which was exactly our intention. Feast your eyes', says Yvette Lardinois, head of Marketing and Communication of the Zeeuws Museum. 'The images are here to impress and surprise visitors. And should they want more, they are welcome to use the touch screens or the PDA's filled of stories, and watch informative passages, pictures and moving images.'

For seven years, the museum was closed. 'But we have been very busy during that time.' After a period of political squabbles about the future of the museum followed a long wait for approval of the architect's design. 'For example, we wanted the entrance on the Abdijplein's side. However, the various committees of historic buildings and monuments were wary of this. Any buildings on and around the Abbey were not open to discussion. However, on a photograph from 1880, we discovered small houses in what is now 'our' place. And what to think of the Provincial Executive wing from the nineteen fifties? Such wonderful synergy! Does not every period have its own architecture?'

When, in 2005, the renovation plans were finally approved, the contractors were able to get started. 'And so did we, with a brand-new future philosophy. Although a number of things were already known. Our collection was beautiful, but lacked structure. The presentation had to be raised to a higher plane: we intended to return life to the Abdijplein.'

The museum management and staff started off to find inspiration. In other museums, from specialists, both in the Netherlands and abroad. Even museum guru Julian Spalding was approached. In addition, debates were organised with various groups from the Zeeland and other communities. Lardinois explains that the museum was set upon maintaining contact with the field: 'With our collection, we created a new artistic product. In the temporary annexe, which was open during that time, we field-tested a number of things. These were

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called wonder rooms, show-boxes, or treasure rooms. Apart from using different shapes and materials, we also tried out different layouts, setups, lighting concepts, and, of course, different ways of presenting information. Each of these experiences led to our new philosophy: to present the collection in an artistic and surprising manner.'

And that is how 'feasting your eyes' became the core concept and 'fashion, history, and wonder rooms' the three pillars.

In the first room, all senses are stimulated. Luxuriant fabrics, intensive colours, stylish designs, flashy moving images, rhythmic music. Fashion of old besides modern-day fashion. 'Because that is what period costumes represent', says Lardinois, 'clothes that used to be fashionable.' Originally, the Zeeland traditional costumes were especially colourful. After all, for centuries, the Zeeland ships from the Dutch East India Company brought back the most wonderful fabrics from the East. It wasn't until the mid eighteenth century, when religious beliefs became more strict, that traditional costume became more sober.'