

# Introduction to conducting provenance research

## Abstract

General information about conducting provenance research.

## Research aides

In the research aides on this website, we explain how to conduct research into the provenance of [objects from a colonial context](#). Among other things, we show you where and how to look for relevant sources, how to prioritize objects, and how to report on your research.

### **Would you like to know more about which colonial collections are held in the Netherlands?**

Through the [data hub](#) you can look for objects from a colonial context in Dutch museum collections and for persons and institutions associated with the acquisition of these objects.

### **Would you like to know more about the restitution policy in the Netherlands?**

The bureau of the [Colonial Collections Consortium](#) is the first point of contact for potential claimants and for museums and other collection managers with questions about the Dutch restitution policy, the procedure for submitting restitution applications and conducting provenance research. Researchers can also ask the bureau to provide advice on conducting provenance research. More information can be found on the website of the Consortium.

## What is provenance research?

Provenance research examines the circumstances of an object's ownership and management from its inception to the present. The goal is to create a historical record of the various individuals and/or communities that have owned the object, the places where it was located, and the ways in which it was used or managed. In provenance research on objects from a colonial context, how and when the object passed into European hands is also of great importance. Considerations on the content of provenance research on objects from a colonial context are discussed in Chapter 1 of [Clues](#).

## What are colonial objects?

The research aides on this website were created for research into objects acquired in areas that were under European colonial rule and which are now in Dutch museum collections. These areas include not only Dutch colonial territories, but also other regions colonized by Europeans. It often concerns objects manufactured in these areas, naturalia or human remains. For a concise description of 'objects from a colonial context' we refer to the [working criteria](#) used on within the data hub.

The colonial era spans several centuries, but it varies from region to region when colonial

rule began and ended. An overview of the areas and time periods is provided in the guide [Care of Collections from Colonial Contexts](#) from the German museum bond and the Dutch report [Koloniale collecties en erkenning van onrecht](#). Provenance research will primarily concern objects and naturalia collected from these areas and in these time periods. However, there may also be good reasons to examine objects from other areas or periods, for example if they were acquired under unequal power relations.

Moreover, the term colonial heritage may have a broader meaning and could also refer to objects manufactured in Europe that have an (in)direct relationship with colonialism, for example through what is depicted on the object, because of the object's function, or because it was acquired with the profits from colonial exploitation. Additionally, many collections contain objects made in Europe from material originating from the colonies. For dealing with colonial collections in this broader sense, the Cultural Heritage Agency has produced this guide: [Onderzoek naar sporen van slavernij en het koloniale verleden in de collectieregistratie](#)

## Starting your provenance research

When getting started with provenance research into colonial collections, it is important to first determine what you want to achieve. For example, would you like to:

### **Get clarity on the provenance of objects in your organization's collection?**

On this website, provenance research into objects from a colonial context is divided into two levels: basic research and extensive research. Each collecting institution's situation is different and may lead to different choices regarding the research. For example, it may be necessary to first complete the basic research into all objects from a colonial context and then investigate one or more objects more extensively. In other cases, it may be necessary to [prioritize](#) certain objects for extended research.

### **Tracing heritage that may be eligible for restitution?**

If you wish to request a restitution, you might consider first investigating whether and in what way the object was acquired in a colonial context. If a request is made for restitution, the custodian of the object will need to conduct provenance research, focusing on how the object was dispossessed. This will require extensive research in most cases.

### **Get more information about the object itself?**

Provenance research can be a way to learn more about the object itself, its origin and the purpose for which it was made. For objects whose maker is unknown, it is an important way to get a more precise dating. Provenance research can also provide insight into the changes of the object's meaning over time.

### **Be able to provide information about the provenance of objects?**

Many museums and other institutions with colonial collections want to be open about what objects they manage so that communities of origin are well informed about the collections that concern them. This means sharing information about the provenance of objects and how they were acquired. Provenance research is often a necessary step in obtaining that information. Next, provenance information can be shared in exhibition texts or online, through collection websites.

## Related Aids

- [Select and delineate](#)
- [Doing research](#)

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