

Royal Cabinet of Curiosities

Abstract

The Royal Cabinet of Curiosities (Koninklijk Kabinet van Zeldzaamheden, KKZ) was founded in 1816 by King Willem I. The collection contained various objects from among others the Dutch colonies. In 1883, the KKZ was closed down, after which its collection was divided amongst Dutch museums, such as the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and today's Wereldmuseum Leiden.

History of the collection

The Royal Cabinet of Curiosities was a museum in The Hague, founded in 1816 by [King Willem I](#). The museum took the form of a cabinet of curiosities and its collection comprised a wide array of objects, including many from Dutch and other powers' colonies. Ultimately, it housed all sorts: objects related to Dutch history, Asian [applied arts](#), [ethnographic objects](#), and [naturalia](#).

The basis of the collection was formed by Chinese and Japanese objects collected by [Jean Theodore Royer](#), a preacher and lawyer with a fascination for Chinese language and literature who amassed a large collection of prints, paintings and documents, [Jan Cock Blomhoff](#), among other things a warehouse manager at the Dutch trading post on the Japanese peninsula [Dejima](#), and [Johan van Overmeer Fisscher](#), who also worked on Dejima. [King Willem I](#) subsequently contributed the stadtholders' collections. In the course of its existence the museum also received various donations and made acquisitions. Eventually the collection comprised significant collections of Japanese and Chinese objects and numerous items – many of which were diplomatic gifts from the stadholders' collections – from Southeast Asia and the West African Gold Coast as well as from North America and Oceania. The museum was dissolved in 1883 and its collection distributed among several museums. The majority went to the Rijks Etnografisch Museum (now [Wereldmuseum Leiden](#) and the [Nederlandsch Museum voor Geschiedenis en Kunst](#) (subsumed into the Rijksmuseum). Small numbers of objects were transferred to the [National Museum of Antiquities](#), the [Koninklijk Kabinet van Munten, Penningen en Gesneden Stenen](#), the [Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie](#), the [Rijksmuseum van Geologie en Mineralogie](#) and the [Rijksherbarium](#).

Provenance research

The original records of the collection, created by the first director [Reinier van de Kastele](#), disappeared after his son [Abraham van de Kastele](#) succeeded him in 1840. Many objects also went missing or were lost during this time. The third and final director [David van der Kellen](#), who took office in 1876, had to put things in order. As can be read in Rudolf Effert's book (Volkenkundig Verzamelen, pp. 213-216), in 1876-1879 Van der Kellen drew up a new inventory of objects, in which he attempted to link remaining documentation to objects in the extensive collection. Mistakes were made in this process.

The archive of the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities is held in the [Noord-Hollands Archief](#) as part of the Rijksmuseum archive. It includes correspondence regarding donations and acquisitions. The appendices include additional access with convenient overviews of this correspondence. Please note that the KKZ's correspondence also relates to items that were offered to the collection but were ultimately not acquired.

In addition, archival documents are held at the [National Archives of the Netherlands](#), written by officials of the Ministry of the Interior. These relate to acquisitions, as well as the dissolution of the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities and the distribution of the collection among the various museums. The letter archive of the Ministry of the Interior contains notes verbales and letters regarding submitted donations and sales. These can be traced using the indices in the notes verbales.

Related Aids

- [Civil servants in colonised territories](#)
- [Army and navy personnel in colonised territories](#)
- [The trade in objects from a colonial context](#)
- [Groote Koninklijke Bazar](#)
- [Wereldmuseum Leiden](#)
- [Artis Ethnographic Museum](#)
- [Wereldmuseum Amsterdam](#)
- [Rijksmuseum Amsterdam](#)
- [Rijksmuseum van Oudheden](#)

Primary sources

Archive:

NL-HlmNHA 476 5 The inventory access of the archive of the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities within the archive of the Rijksmuseum and its legal predecessors.
<https://hdl.handle.net/21.12102/2422AD00C789442FAE99779C81E66552>

Archive:

NL-HaNA 2.04.13 2.2.4.1.2.06 Archive access within the archives of the Ministry of the Interior containing documents from the years 1875-1887 relating to the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities. <https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/archief/2.04.13/invnr/%402.%20~2.2~2.2.4~2.2.4.1~2.2.4.1.2~2.2.4.1.2.06>

Archive:

NL-HaNA 2.04.01 4925-4954 Concerns indices of the department of Arts and Science of the Ministry of the Interior from 1824 to 1848. Correspondence concerning acquisitions can be traced via an index. The indices can be accessed online. <https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/archief/2.04.01/invnr/%40P~4925-4954>

Archive:

NL-HaNA 2.04.01 4030 Outgoing letters from the king's secretary, concerning donations and other matters. From the period 1815-1818, accessible online.
[https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/archief/2.04.01/invnr/4030/file/NL-HaNA 2.04.01 4030 0001](https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/archief/2.04.01/invnr/4030/file/NL-HaNA_2.04.01_4030_0001)

Archival document:

NL-HlmNHA 476 11.1 Access from the archives of the Rijksmuseum containing a wide range of documents relating to the acquisition, loan and restoration of objects.

<https://hdl.handle.net/21.12102/87E110A9A147458AB8E59021D9186701>

Archival document:

NL-HlmNHA 476 874-875 Contains the draft inventories of the collections of Royer, Cock Blomhoff and Van Overmeer Fisscher. Accessible online. <https://hdl.handle.net/21.12102/21D672ACA1794CFC9DAABE5F116BC5BC>

Archival document:

NL-HlmNHA 476 1076 Documents concerning the handling of the distribution of objects from the former Royal Cabinet of Curiosities between the Rijks Ethnografisch Museum in Leiden and the Nederlandsch Museum van Geschiedenis en Kunst, 1885-1888. <https://hdl.handle.net/21.12102/2472CF6620004E9E878802D9406CE688>

Secondary Sources

Book:

Effert, Rudolf. *Royal Cabinets and Auxiliary Branches: Origins of the National Museum of Ethnology 1816-1883*. Leiden: CNWS, 2008. Dissertation by Rudolf Effert from 2003 about the history of the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities and the Rijks Ethnografisch Museum (now Wereldmuseum Leiden). <https://search.worldcat.org/title/244247206>, ISBN 9789057891595

Catalogue:

Kastele, Reinier Pieter van de. *Handleiding tot de bezigtiging van het Koninklijk Kabinet van Zeldzaamheden op Mauritshuis, in 's-Gravenhage*. 's Gravenhage, 1823. 1823 visitors guide to the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities by the director at the time, Reinier Pieter van de Kastele. [WorldCat 63800039](https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=-p1RAAAAcAAJ), <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=-p1RAAAAcAAJ>

Catalogue:

Kastele, Abraham Anne van de. *Korte handleiding ter bezigtiging der verzameling van zeldzaamheden in het Koninklijk Kabinet op het Mauritshuis in 's Gravenhage*. 's Gravenhage: A.H. Bakhuijzen, 1860. 1860 visitors guide to the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities by the director at the time, Abraham Anne van de Kastele. <http://archive.org/details/kortehandleiding00kast>, [WorldCat 899016583](https://www.worldcat.org/title/899016583)

Book chapter:

*Shatanawi, Mirjam. "Museum Narratives of Islam Between Art, Archaeology and Ethnology: A Structural Injustice Approach." In *Islam and Heritage in Europe: Pasts, Presents and Future Possibilities*, edited by Katarzyna Puzon, Sharon Macdonald, and Mirjam Shatanawi, 163–82. London; New York: Routledge, 2021. * Book chapter covering the distribution of the objects from the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities in 1883. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003044789>

Publication:

Mooren, Jona, Stutje, Klaas and Vree, Frank van. *Clues; Research into provenance history and significance of cultural objects and collections acquired in colonial*

situations (Amsterdam: NIOD, 2022). Ten KKZ objects from Wereldmuseum Leiden were researched as part of the Pilot Project Provenance Research on Objects of the Colonial Era (PPOCE). The extensive provenance reports are available online and contain many useful insights. [https://d3mb4k8bvt6xe4.cloudfront.net/2023-03/ME Lijst %20herkomstverslagenwebsite 01.pdf](https://d3mb4k8bvt6xe4.cloudfront.net/2023-03/ME_Lijst%20herkomstverslagenwebsite_01.pdf)

Catalogue:

Mauritshuis (The Hague, Netherlands). 2024. The Lost Museum : Royal Cabinet of Rarities in the Mauritshuis. Edited by Rinnooy Kan, Justine, Reda, Sheila and Gosselink, Martine (The Hague, Zwolle: Mauritshuis ; Waanders Publishers, 2024). Catalogue of the 2024 exhibition at the Mauritshuis about the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities. [https://search.worldcat.org/title/1463743743?](https://search.worldcat.org/title/1463743743?oclcNum=1463743743) [oclcNum=1463743743](https://search.worldcat.org/title/1463743743?oclcNum=1463743743), [WorldCat 1463743743](https://search.worldcat.org/title/1463743743?oclcNum=1463743743), [ISBN 9789462625709](https://search.worldcat.org/title/1463743743?oclcNum=1463743743)

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