Select and delineate

Abstract

In this research aid you find information on how to select objects and how to subsequently delineate your (provenance) research.

How to recognise objects from a colonial context

Many museum and other collections in the Netherlands contain objects acquired in a colonial context. Some of these are not traceable because the registration does not mention a place or culture of manufacture. This may be due to objects having been registered using general terms such as 'oriental' or 'African', which do not provide sufficient information about the specific cultural origin, or because objects have ended up in more general collections of, for example, 'swords' or ones belonging to a particular art collector.

The first step in provenance research is to identify the place of manufacture. This may require specific expertise. If you have a general question about colonial collections or your institution wants to contact experts in countries of origin, or if you are a researcher who would like to get in touch with institutions in the Netherlands, then please contact the consortium bureau. They can help you with information and possible contacts. If you would like to know what from a particular place or culture is present in Dutch collections, then please use the DataHub.

Two moments are of particular importance in provenance research into colonial collections: the moment the object came into European hands and the moment it was exported from the country of origin to Europe. In the case of objects that entered the collection during the colonial period it is usually safe to assume that these were also exported from the area of origin while it was under colonial rule. Other objects, however, may initially have been acquired in a colonial context and have only entered the collection many years later.

How to select objects with a problematic provenance

If your purpose is to identify objects that were looted or otherwise involuntarily surrendered you probably want to know if there are certain characteristics by which to recognise such objects. Provenance research will be required to obtain any clarity on this. In some cases basic research will suffice to reveal a problematic provenance but often extensive research will be necessary.

There are various categories of objects that could be prioritised in this context:

- Objects and collections that are the subject of an application for restitution;
- Human remains or objects suspected of containing human remains;
- Objects that are to be exhibited;
- Objects originating from areas known to have been subject to extensive war looting (for example the Kingdom of Benin, Sudan, Aceh or Lombok);
- Statues and other decorations from buildings and monuments (for example, shrines, temples, mosques, mausoleums or cemeteries);
- Objects from excavations, especially any undocumented findings.

If the object is from a private collection, it is worth first finding out whether it is known who brought the object to the Netherlands and what that person's profession was. Professions directly linked to the colonial system, such as the military and civil servants, may provide grounds for further research into the object's provenance.

How to select objects when you want to share information

If the goal is to provide transparent information to your institution's audience, the priority may lie with objects on display. In that case it is important that the communities of origin are consulted and that their perspectives and interests are part of the research and the exhibition. Where large numbers of objects are to be published in an online database the aim is to at least carry out basic research and to make the resulting data as publicly accessible as possible.

How to select objects when preparing an application for restitution

Sometimes priority at museums is driven by external parties, for example in the case of an application for restitution or a public debate surrounding certain objects. If you yourself wish to submit an application for restitution it may also be useful to first research the provenance of the relevant object, for example to determine whether it was acquired in a colonial context.

Provenance research can also be undertaken proactively, for example if the custodian expects an application for restitution to be made. In that case, priority may be given to objects known to be of great historical, cultural or spiritual value to communities of origin. Ideally, prioritisation of provenance research should take place on the recommendation of, or in consultation with, communities of origin and local experts.

Related Aids

- Doing research
- Introduction to conducting provenance research
- Army and navy personnel in colonised territories
- Civil servants in colonised territories
- The trade in objects from a colonial context
- Christian missionaries in colonised territories
- Scientific research in colonised territories

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