This is a level 2 Research Aid
first edited by Wiebe Reints as original_author on 2025-01-13
last edited by Wiebe Reints as original_author on 2025-06-23

Museums and collection holding institutions

Abstract

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Ethnographic collections in the Netherlands

In order to provide a good overview of ethnographic museums in the Netherlands, it is important to first briefly consider what exactly is meant by such a museum. The first official ethnographic museums were established in the Netherlands in the 19th century. As in other European countries, royal cabinets of curiosities were transformed into public museums at that time while specialised museums were also established. These specialised museums focused purely on a single discipline. For example, the Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie (State Museum of Natural History) and in 1837 the Rijks Etnographisch Museum (State Ethnographic Museum), both in the city of Leiden.

Philip Franz von Siebold, one of the founders of the ethnographic museum in Leiden, described the purpose of an ethnographic museum in 1837 as follows in a letter to the then King Willem I:

'By an ethnographic museum, we mean a scientifically arranged collection of objects from different countries – here mainly non-European – which, both individually and in context, give us a better understanding of the peoples to whom they belong; which show us their religion, customs and traditions, and give us a clear idea of the state of their arts and sciences, their agriculture, their handicrafts, and their trade.'

With the growing scientific interest in the cultures, religions and customs of the inhabitants of European colonies, large ethnographic collections were established in the Netherlands and the rest of Europe. In addition to the Rijks Etnographisch Museum, the Koloniaal Museum (Colonial Museum) was founded in Haarlem in 1864 and the Museum voor Land- en Volkenkunde (Museum of Ethnography) opened in Rotterdam in 1885. The arrival of objects from colonised areas in the Netherlands continued throughout the twentieth century. These objects were often brought back by soldiers, civil servants or missionaries from their time in colonised areas. The period after the Second World War, which was marked worldwide by decolonisation, saw a sharp decline in this flow of objects to Dutch museums.

In recent years, in line with the growing focus on the restitution of colonial collections, several ethnographic museums across Europe have changed their names to more general

terms such as 'museum of world cultures' or 'world museum'. The reason for this is the colonial connotation of the words 'ethnology' or 'ethnography', which are often seen as part of the broad spectrum of colonial violence.

An artificial division

Although an increasing number of museums specialising in specific fields emerged in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century, it is important to be aware that this specialisation also was an artificial division of collections. Various collectors, such as Philip Franz von Siebold, mentioned above, donated objects to both the Ethnographic Museum and the National Museum of Natural History. As a result, you will often come across the same names in the archives of Dutch museums.

There are also several museums in the Netherlands that have specialised for other reasons and have therefore built up different types of collections. Examples include the museum of military training facility in Kampen, which compiled a collection to support the training of KNIL officers. Or collections that missionaries brought back to the Netherlands, such as in the case of Missiemuseum Steyl. These collections were often a combination of ethnographic objects, natural history objects and other types of artefacts. As a result, while the largest collection of ethnographic objects is housed at the Wereldmuseum, there are many other (smaller) museums that also manage ethnographic collections.

The nature of the museum often indicates how objects arrived in the Netherlands. Therefore, we created a division into these five themes across the research aid website:

- Civil servants in colonised territories
- The trade in objects form a colonial context
- Arm and navy personnel in colonised territories
- Scientific research in colonised territories
- Christian missionaries in colonised territories

Although this thematic subdivision provides a good overview of the ways in which objects from former colonised areas ended up in Dutch museums, it is not exhaustive. It is, for instance, possible that a civil servant who was active in the former Dutch East Indies first sold various objects to a merchant, who then sold them to a Dutch museum.

Related Aids

see also: Koninklijk Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen
see also: Museum Bronbeek
see also: Artis Ethnographic Museum
see also: Volkenkundig Museum 'Gerardus van der Leeuw'
see also: Hoofdcursus Kampen
see also: Volkenkundig Museum Justinus van Nassau
see also: Royal Cabinet of Curiosities
see also: Museum Nusantara
see also: Missiemuseum Steyl
see also: Museon-Omniversum
see also: Naturalis Biodiversity Center
see also: Rijksmuseum van Oudheden
see also: Rijksmuseum Amsterdam
see also: Wereldmuseum Amsterdam

see also: Wereldmuseum Berg en Dal
see also: Wereldmuseum Leiden
see also: Wereldmuseum Rotterdam
see also: Natuurhistorisch en Volkenkundig Museum Oudenbosch

Primary Sources

Secondary sources

Relevant Data