

Ghana

Abstract

Dutch museum collections contain ethnographic objects, art objects and natural history specimens originating from what is now Ghana. Most of these objects were collected in the period up to 1872, when the Netherlands was present as a colonial power on what was then known as the Gold Coast.

Description

From the last decade of the sixteenth century onwards, sailors from the Netherlands, following in the footsteps of the Portuguese, traded on the West African coast. In order to protect Dutch traders there, the States General decided in 1612 to build a fort near the town of Moree in Asebu on the Gold Coast, for which an agreement was concluded with the local ruler. In 1637, Elmina Castle was captured from the Portuguese by the West India Company (WIC), with the Portuguese eventually being driven out of the Gold Coast altogether in 1642. In the mid-seventeenth century, the WIC faced competition from Swedish, Brandenburg-Prussian, Danish and English trading companies, of which only the latter two remained a century later. Denmark and the Netherlands sold their possessions on the Gold Coast to the United Kingdom in 1850 and 1872 respectively, which incorporated both possessions into its crown colony of the Gold Coast. This British crown colony became independent in 1957 as the Republic of Ghana.

In the seventeenth century, gold and ivory were the main commodities traded on the Gold Coast, but from the eighteenth century onwards, the trade in African slaves became increasingly dominant. Of the more than 550,000 slaves transported across the Atlantic by Dutch slave traders, approximately 126,000 came from the Gold Coast. In 1792, Denmark passed a law prohibiting the slave trade from 1803 onwards. The United Kingdom followed suit in 1807 and the Netherlands finally did so in 1814. From 1808 onwards, the West Africa Squadron of the British Royal Navy enforced this ban off the West African coast.

Collections originating from the Gold Coast

[image] *This adinkra cloth, sent to the Netherlands in 1825, is considered the second oldest known adinkra cloth in the world* ([Wereldmuseum](#))

In addition to trade goods, art objects, ethnographic artefacts and natural history objects were also shipped to Europe from the very beginning. The collection of ethnographic objects from Africa originated in the art and curiosity cabinets of the late sixteenth century. The collection of ethnographic objects that the Enkhuizen physician [Bernardus Paludanus](#) exhibited in his home from 1580 onwards is a well-known example of this. Paludanus' collection was sold after his death and eventually ended up in Denmark, where [parts](#) of it are still housed in the National Museum in Copenhagen. Of another early collection of West African artefacts, namely that of the Leiden Anatomical Theatre, only the current location of the foot of a salt vessel, probably originating from present-day Sierra Leone, is known. This object, with [inventory number RV-1131-1](#), is now in the collection of the Wereldmuseum Leiden.

From the nineteenth century onwards, colonial officials on the Gold Coast were encouraged

to collect items for Dutch national museums. Shortly before Herman Willem Daendels left for the Gold Coast as governor in 1815, the director of the [Royal Cabinet of Curiosities](#) asked him to collect objects for his museum. When the ship that had transported Daendels returned to the Netherlands, it was indeed found to contain a collection of “rarities”, consisting of both live animals and natural history and ethnographic objects. A [ceremonial walking stick made of buffalo horn](#) that had been donated by Daendels' predecessor ended up in the collection of the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam after the Cabinet was dissolved.

Governors Last and Nagtglas sent collections of objects to the Cabinet of Curiosities in 1825 and 1860 respectively. The gifts from Asantehene (King of Asante) Kwaku Dua I Panyin to King William I, including a golden pipe, were also presented by the latter to the Cabinet of Curiosities in 1837. Former health officer J.S.G. Gramberg, who had established a cotton plantation on the Gold Coast and published the book *Schetsen van Afrika's Westkust* (Sketches of Africa's West Coast) in the Netherlands, donated a collection of objects from West Africa to the cabinet in 1860. Finally, in 1874, the Ministry of Colonies donated a number of objects that, when the possessions were transferred to the United Kingdom, were considered “less suitable for passing into foreign hands”. These included the [ivory command staff](#) of the director-general of the WIC in Elmina.

Governor Nagtglas also left a collection of objects to the [Royal Zeeland Society of Sciences](#).

Natural history collections

Colonial officials on the Gold Coast also collected items for the [National Museum of Natural History](#), which was founded in 1820. In 1822, founder and director Coenraad Jacob Temminck persuaded the Minister of Colonies to appoint a taxidermist from his museum, Andreas Joseph Baierlein, as health officer on the Gold Coast, with the additional task of preparing natural history specimens and sending them to the Netherlands. However, Baierlein died almost immediately after his arrival. In 1840, Temminck made a new attempt by sending taxidermist Hendrik Severinus Pel. Pel would send ten shipments to the museum between 1840 and 1855.

In 1857, the museum received a shipment from Governor Van den Bossche and between 1859 and 1862 four shipments from Governor Nagtglas.

Provenance research

Commissioned by the National Archives, the archive guide [Sources for the Mutual history of Ghana and the Netherlands](#) by Michel Doortmont and Jinna Smit was published in 2007. This guide provides an exhaustive overview of the archives relating to the Dutch colonial presence on the Gold Coast. Of great value is the extensive [archive of the Dutch Possessions on the Coast of Guinea, 1658-1872](#), which has been fully digitised.

For research into the collections of the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities, the recommendations in the museum's search guide (<https://app.colonialcollections.nl/en/research-aids/> <https%3A%2F%2Fn2t%252Enet%2Fark%3A%2F27023%2Fcc7609accb9857dc8ca777ff1d6d4af>) should be followed. The [Naturalis archive website](#) contains documents relating to the collection of naturalia on the Gold Coast, including correspondence between the museum's management and collectors Baierlein, Pel, Van den Bossche, Nagtglas, Hens and Elias.

Related Aids

- [Wereldmuseum Leiden](#)

- [Koninklijk Kabinet van Zeldzaamheden](#)
- [Etnografisch Museum Artis](#)
- [Wereldmuseum Amsterdam](#)
- [Wereldmuseum Rotterdam](#)
- [Naturalis Biodiversity Center](#)

Primary sources

Secondary sources

Boek:

Bassani, Ezio. African art and artefacts in European collections: 1400-1800. London: British Museum, 2000. An overview of African art objects and ethnographic items from the period 1400-1800 in European collections, including Dutch ones.

<https://archive.org/details/africanartartefa0000bass>, ISBN 978-0-7141-2547-3, [WorldCat 1391179213](#)

Artikel in een tijdschrift:

van der Doe, Erik. De collectie C.J.M. Nagtglas. Etnografica en nog meer uit West-Afrika. Tijdschrift Zeeland, 30.3 (2021), 121-130.

<https://tijdschriftenbankzeeland.nl/issue/zld/2021-09-01/edition/null/page/31>

Archiefgids:

Doortmont, Michel and Jinna Smit. Sources for the Mutual history of Ghana and the Netherlands. Leiden: Brill, 2007. Archive guide with a comprehensive overview of archives relating to the colonial history of the Netherlands in Ghana.

<https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/archief/2.14.97/invnr/9ED/file>, ISBN 978-90-04-15850-4, [WorldCat 150348506](#)

Dissertatie:

Effert, Rudolf. Volkenkundig verzamelen: het Koninklijk Kabinet van Zeldzaamheden en het Rijks Etnografisch Museum: 1816-1883. Proefschrift Universiteit Leiden, 2003. Dissertation on the history of the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities and the National Ethnographic Museum.

<https://search.worldcat.org/title/163275947?oclcNum=163275947>, [WorldCat 163275947](#)

Boek:

van der Ham, Gijs. Dof goud: Nederland en Ghana, 1593-1872. Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2013. Publication about objects from Ghana in the Rijksmuseum collection.

[WorldCat 864752646](#), ISBN 978-94-6004-157-0

Wetenschappelijke publicatie:

Holthuis, Lipke. Biografische notities betreffende verzamelaars voor het Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie te Leiden. I. Hendrik Severinus Pel (1818-1876). Leiden: Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie, 1968 Outline of the activities of natural history collector and taxidermist Hendrik Severinus Pel on the Gold Coast.

<https://repository.naturalis.nl/pub/317263>

Wetenschappelijk artikel:

Mac Lean, J. 'Collecting natural history specimens in Ghana for 's-Rijks Museum at Leyden', Janus 63 (1976), 289-301. Outline of activities of natural history collectors on the Gold Coast.

Publicatie:

Schmidt, Annette. Collectieprofiel Cultuurgebied Afrika. In: Verzamelde collectieprofielen Museum Volkenkunde, Leiden. Leiden: Museum Volkenkunde, 2008. Chapter on the African collection of the Wereldmuseum Leiden in a publication on collection profiles.

<https://www.yumpu.com/nl/document/view/20123476/open-het-profiel-als-pdf-museum-volkenkunde>

Hoofdstuk in een catalogus:

Schmidt, Annette. De Afrikaanse bijdrage van kommandeur Last. In: Het verdwenen museum : Koninklijk Kabinet van Zeldzaamheden in het Mauritshuis. Zwolle: Waanders, 2024. Chapter on Governor Last's 1825 shipment to the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities, included in the catalogue of the exhibition "The Lost Museum", which was on display at the Mauritshuis in 2024-2025.

[ISBN 9789462625709](#), [WorldCat 1501397052](#)

Relevant Data

TO BE FILLED

last edited by Maarten van der Bent as original author on 2025-09-01