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Christian missionaries in colonised territories

# Abstract

Protestant and Catholic missionaries contributed to the collection of cultural objects during the colonial era. Various societies maintained their own collections for the purpose of training new missionaries. These collections were later often donated to Dutch museums.

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## Description

During the colonial era the Netherlands undertook Protestant and Catholic missionary work. Both Christian groups focused on the Dutch colonies, particularly Suriname and the Dutch East Indies, but missionaries were also active in places such as China, the United States and Congo. Missionary organisations, both Catholic and Protestant, had mutually defined regions in which they were active although there were no official agreements.

The missionaries brought back objects from the areas where they were working, sometimes at the request of the organisations that sent them out. The objects were used to educate novice missionaries and for fundraising purposes. Objects disposed of by the missionary organisations ended up in other collections, for example at ethnographic museums. Individual missionaries also donated and sold objects to such museums while other objects from the mission ended up in trade and private collections.

The collecting practices of missionary organisations were long known as having been focused on erasing what were – in their eyes – pagan practices. Cultural heritage was destroyed or objects were taken to Europe to prevent their continued use in non-Christian religious rituals. Recent research, however, has nuanced this picture.

The objects the missionaries brought back from the colonies were regularly displayed in buildings of the organisations where they worked. Some organisations set up their own museums, for example, the Mission Museum in Steyl (established in 1931). The collection of African objects of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit was on display at the Wereldmuseum Berg en Dal (formerly the Afrika Museum, established in 1954) until the end of November 2024. The Nederlandsch Zendeling Genootschap, a missionary society that operated in Java and Sulawesi, was also very active in collecting. Most of the objects it collected can be found in the collection of the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, although some are held in other museums.

## Provenance research

Information from individual missionary workers can often be found in literature on and archives of the organisations they worked for. A first step in your research thus can be is to determine which organisation was involved in the acquirement of the object. The portal of the Repertorium van Nederlandse zendings- en missiearchieven 1800-1960 (Repertorium of Dutch Protestant and Catholic missionary archives, ca. 1800-1960) contains lists of names of missionary workers (under the heading Annexes) and information on individual organisations. From there it is possible to extend the search in the relevant archives. Some missionary organisations had widespread international networks, in which case relevant information may also be located in other European countries. For Germany, such information can be found via the portals Proveana and Archivführer zur deutschen Kolonialgeschichte.

Sometimes missionary workers worked specific jobs, for example as a doctor, nurse or teacher, and are described under these roles in the sources. They can then be identified as missionaries by looking at the organisation they worked for.

Archives of missionary organisations are scattered. Substantial archival collections are located at the Utrechts Archief, Archives and Documentation Center of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, HDC|Protestants Erfgoed at the Vrije Universiteit, Catholic Documentation Center, and the Erfgoedcentrum Nederlands Kloosterleven. Archives can also often still be found in the countries where the mission organisations were active; many of these are held by the organisations themselves.

# Related Aids

\_see also: Sources\_  
\_see also: Select and delineate\_  
\_see also: Scientific research in colonised territories\_  
\_see also: Nederlandsch Zendeling Genootschap\_  
\_see also: Scientific research in colonised territories\_  
\_see also: Missiemuseum Steyl\_  
\_see also: Natuurhistorisch en Volkenkundig Museum Oudenbosch\_

# Primary sources

Map:

Web portal:

# Secondary sources

Article:

Article:

Book:

Article:

Book chapter:

Book chapter:

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# Relevant Data

Tags:  
 Activity:

Brother, Friar, Missionary, Father, Protestant missionary, Sister  
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 Type of objects:

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 Geographical:

China, Congo, Indonesia, Suriname