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The trade in objects from a colonial context

# Abstract

The trade in objects from colonised regions played a central role in the circulation of these objects in Europe. Many (ethnographic) museums constructed their collections with objects bought from trading companies.

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## Description

Trade in colonial objects and goods was at the heart of the formation of collections in the Netherlands from the late 18th and throughout the 19th century. Trade and sales played a central role in the circulation of these objects in Europe. By the early 20th century the colonial art trade had developed into a thriving business in the Netherlands. Dutch museums regularly bought from dealers and auction houses, not only in the Netherlands, but also in other European colonising countries, particularly Germany, Belgium, France and Great Britain. These same dealers and auction houses were sources for private collections, from where objects later sometimes made their way into museum collections.

Well-known dealers who sold colonial goods to museums and individuals were the firms Van Lier (1927-1996), Aalderink (1930-2023) and Lemaire (1933-present) and the Amsterdam auction houses Frederik Muller & Co. (1876-1961) and Mak van Waay (1918-1974). In The Hague, the stores Groote Koninklijke Bazar (1841-1927) and Boeatan (1903-1949) specialised in Asian applied art.

Another connection with trade was the trade in colonial products and raw materials, such as rubber, ivory, cotton and tobacco, with wholesale firms being established to promote this trade. In the course of their work the employees of these trading houses collected art and other objects on the side. An example is the Nieuwe Afrikaansche Handels-Vennootschap N.V. (NAHV, 1880-1982), a trading company that operated in Central Africa. A large number of African objects, especially from Congo, were donated to Dutch museums by individuals associated with this company.

While little research has been done into the Dutch colonial art trade, more is known about the influence of trade on art production in the colonised territories. Throughout the colonial period, artists and artisans from countries of origin responded to the demand for objects from Europe. These artists began working both for their own market and for the purpose of selling to foreigners. Transactions involving this type of objects, formerly known as tourist art, also come under colonial collecting practices.

Trade in colonial objects continues to this day. In some cases provenance research may therefore also include dealers who began operations after the colonial period or auctions that took place recently.

## Provenance research

Compared to the trade in western art, the archives of dealers in ethnographic and non-western objects are less often preserved in archival institutions. Where dealers traded in both genres of art, sometimes only archives relating to Western art appear to have been preserved. Where business records do survive, they are usually in the archives of the municipality where the company was located. The RKD (Netherlands Institute for Art History) and the National Archives also hold some archives of dealers in colonial art.

Due to privacy legislation auction houses do not disclose the names of consignors to auctions that took place within the last 50 years. Still, it is worth making an inquiry, if only to get a rough description of the consignor. International auction houses such as Christie's and Sotheby's have specialist staff who provide information for provenance research. An important source are catalogues for auctions of non-western objects. The two largest libraries in this field, those of the RKD and the Rijksmuseum, also have annotated catalogues, which sometimes contain notes on the objects, buyers and sellers.

The libraries of the RKD (Netherlands Institute for Art History) and the Rijksmuseum have extensive collections of catalogues of auctions held in the Netherlands, including auctions of non-western objects. The RKD's digitialised auction catalogues are available through the Art Sales Catalogues Online database. This database can be consulted for free onsite at the Rijksmuseum Research Library and the RKD.

Many of the catalogues at the RKD and the Rijksmuseum Research Library are not yet accessible online and cannot be found in the library catalogue. However, it is possible to contact both libraries, stating the date and name of the auction house, and the staff will see if the relevant catalogue is available.

The French portal AGORHA also contains information on individuals and institutions involved in the trade of art and archaeological objects.

# Related Aids

\_broader: Sources\_  
\_broader: Select and delineate\_  
\_see also: Civil servants in colonised territories\_  
\_see also: Army and navy personnel in colonised territories\_  
\_see also: Groote Koninklijke Bazar\_  
\_see also: Kunsthandel Van Lier\_  
\_see also: Royal Asian Art Society in the Netherlands\_  
\_see also: Wereldmuseum Leiden\_  
\_see also: Royal Cabinet of Curiosities\_  
\_see also: Artis Ethnograpic Museum\_  
\_see also: Wereldmuseum Amsterdam\_  
\_see also: Wereldmuseum Rotterdam\_  
\_see also: Rijksmuseum Amsterdam\_  
\_see also: Rijksmuseum van Oudheden\_  
\_see also: International Colonial and Export Exhibition 1883\_

# Primary sources

Database:

Database:

# Secondary sources

Book:

Book:

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# Relevant Data

Tags:  
 Activity:

Art trade, Ethnographic objects, Decorative arts, Auction houses  
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 Type of objects:

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 Geographical:

China, Congo, Indonesia, Japan