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Rijksmuseum van Oudheden

# Abstract

The Rijksmuseum van Oudheden (National Museum of Antiquities, RMO) was founded in 1818 in Leiden from the antiquities collection of the University of Leiden. Until the beginning of the 20th century, the collection of the RMO included Indonesian antiquities. These were transferred in 1904 to what today is Wereldmuseum Leiden.

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## Description

The founding year of the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden (RMO) (National Museum of Antiquities) is generally given as 1818. This is the year in which Caspar Reuvens was appointed professor of archaeology at Leiden University, thus also becoming director of the university's archaeological cabinet. The objects from this cabinet were initially exhibited in a building on Houtstraat in Leiden but since 1918 the collection has been displayed in the building on Rapenburg, where the museum is still located today.

King Willem I played an important role in the expansion of the Museum van Oudheden, as it was initially called. The RMO can thus be seen in the same category as the National Museum of Natural History (now Naturalis) and the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities. All these museums played an important role in the professionalisation of museums in the Netherlands and the expansion of museum collections in the nineteenth century.

Interestingly, the museum collection was more broadly oriented than the present-day collection that focuses on Egypt, Classical Antiquity, the Near East and archaeology in the Netherlands. This was because the first director, Caspar Reuvens, held a broader definition of antiquities, meaning that Hindu-Buddhist statues originating from the Singhasari temple in East Java were also added to the collection. Only later, in the early 20th century, was it decided to narrow the museum's focus to the present-day delineations. This should be seen in the context of a general specialisation of the museum sector in the Netherlands during that period. The collection of Asian and American antiquities was thus transferred in 1904 to what was then ‘s Rijks Ethnographisch Museum (now Wereldmuseum Leiden). In 2023 and 2024 several of the Singhasari statues originating from the former RMO collection were returned to Indonesia.

The RMO collection is also interesting in the broader context of archaeological collections from southern Europe, Egypt and the Middle East. Although relations were different from those in areas colonised by the Netherlands, in the nineteenth century archaeological collections were excavated and collected in ways that contravene current norms. Well-known examples of archaeological objects collected under these unequal power relations in the nineteenth century are the Parthenon friezes, the Rosetta Stone (both in the British Museum) and the Bust of Nefertiti (owned by the Neues Museum in Berlin). It is therefore important to also consider archaeological collections such as that of the RMO in the context of the colonial past.

## Provenance research

The website of the National Museum of Antiquities contains a lot of useful information about the museum, its history and collection. The museum archive is also available through the website. The archive can be searched in three ways:

* Via the category tiles, such as the letter and photo archive;
* Via the ‘Museum Archive’ field, which shows all underlying archives;
* Via the search bar

Specific questions about the RMO archive can be emailed to the archivist, whose contact details are available on the website.

Other museums also hold archival material relating to the RMO collection. Of interest here are the archives of the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities and the archives of the Wereldmuseum Leiden. The archive of the KKZ, which is part of the Rijksmuseum archive, is managed by the North Holland Archives in Haarlem. The Wereldmuseum Leiden archive includes an inventory of objects transferred to what was then ‘s Rijks Ethnographisch Museum in 1904 under inventory number NL-LdnRMV\_A03\_018. This archive is only available on request by emailing collectieinfo@wereldmuseum.nl.

Archives of correspondence between various institutions or donors such as C.G.C. Reinwardt and Nicolaus Engelhard may also contain information on the provenance history of the RMO collection. Provenance reports produced in the context of an application by Indonesia for restitution of the Singhasari sculptures provide a good insight into relevant archives. These reports and further secondary literature can also be found below.

# Related Aids

\_see also: Sources\_  
\_see also: Scientific research in colonised territories\_  
\_see also: The trade in objects from a colonial context\_  
\_see also: Koninklijk Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen\_  
\_see also: Royal Cabinet of Curiosities\_  
\_see also: Wereldmuseum Leiden\_  
\_see also: Rijksmuseum Amsterdam\_  
\_see also: C.G.C. Reinwardt\_

# Primary sources

Website:

Archive:

Archive:

# Secondary sources

Restitution recommendation and provenance report:

Restitution recommendation and provenance report:

Restitution recommendation and provenance report:

Restitution recommendation and provenance report:

Dissertation:

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# Relevant Data

Identifiers:

http://www.wikidata.org/entity/Q1860378  
,  
 Name variations:

Museum van Oudheden, RMO  
,  
 Tags:  
 Activity:

National museum, Historical museum  
,  
 Type of objects:

Antiquities  
,  
 Geographical:

Indonesia  
,  
 Period of activity:  
 Year of start:  
 1818,  
 Year of end:

,  
 Collections:  
 General remarks:  
 content:  
 "The collection of the National Museum of Antiquities is not included in the Datahub. The objects transferred to the Ethnographic Museum in Leiden in 1904 are marked with the inventory number RV-1403"  
,  
 content-type:  
 text/markdown,  
 Within the Data Hub:  
 https://app.colonialcollections.nl/en/objects?query=oudheden&publishers=Wereldmuseum