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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.

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:

> Archives of the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden
> https://archieven.rmo.nl/
> *Website providing access to the archives of the RMO. The archive can be accessed via the 'tiles', the 'Museum Archive' field, or by using the search field.*

Archive:

> NL-LdnRMV_A03_018 - Inventaris van het RMO
>
> *Archive access in the Wereldmuseum Leiden archives containing the inventory of the RMO. In 1904, the collections of Asian and American objects were transferred*

to the 's Rijks Ethnographisch Museum, the present Wereldmuseum Leiden.

Archive:

NL-LdnRMV_Seriedossier RV-1403

Series file linked to the RV-1403 collection, which consists of the objects transferred from the RMO to what was then the 's Rijks Ethnographisch Museum in 1904.

Secondary sources

Restitution recommendation and provenance report:

I-2023-3 Advies Singasari
https://committee.kolonialecollecties.nl/documents/2023/05/12/indonesia
Restitution recommendation regarding four statues from the Singasari temple complex: Durga (RV-1403-1622), Mbakala (RV-1403-1623), Nandicwara (RV-1403-1624) and Ganesha (RV-1403-1681). The provenance report is similar to that of the 2024 Singasari recommendation (ID-2023-6 Singasari recommendation). The report lists several archives that may be relevant for further research into objects that ended up at the Wereldmuseum via the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden.

Restitution recommendation and provenance report:

ID-2023-6 Advies Singasari
https://committee.kolonialecollecties.nl/documents/2024/08/28/indonesia
Restitution recommendation regarding two statues from the Singasari temple complex: Bhairava (RV-1403-1680) and Nandi (RV-1403-1682). The provenance report is similar to that of the 2023 Singasari recommendation (I-2023-3 Singasari recommendation). The report lists several archives that may be relevant for further research into objects that ended up at the Wereldmuseum via the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden.

Restitution recommendation and provenance report:

ID-2023-8 Advies Brahma
https://committee.kolonialecollecties.nl/documents/2024/08/28/indonesia"
Restitution recommendation regarding statue of Brahma from the Singasari temple complex (RV-1403-1582). The report lists several archives and other sources that may be relevant for further research into objects that ended up at the Wereldmuseum via the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden.

Restitution recommendation and provenance report:

ID-2023-9 Advies Ganesha
https://committee.kolonialecollecties.nl/documents/2024/08/28/indonesia"
Restitution recommendation regarding a statue of Ganesha (RV-1403-1759). The report lists several archives and other sources that may be relevant for further research into objects that ended up at the Wereldmuseum via the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden.

Dissertation:

Hoijtink, Mirjam. Exhibiting the Past: Caspar Reuvens and the Museums of Antiquities in Europe, 1800-1840. Turnhout: Brepols, 2012.
WorldCat 779255199, ISBN 9782503541525
Dissertation by Mirjam Hoijtink from 2012 that examines the work and life of Caspar Reuvens, the first director of the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden. The book also looks at why Reuvens initially included antiquities from the Dutch East Indies and other non-'classical' antiquities in the museum's collection and places these ideas in the context of the developments of scholarship and the museum sector in the nineteenth century.

Relevant Data

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