

# University collections

## Abstract

Several Dutch universities manage collections from a colonial context. Many of these were assembled by scientists conducting research in fields such as ethnography or geology in areas colonised by the Netherlands. This research aid provides an overview of relevant university collections in the Netherlands.

## Colonial university collections

The growing [scientific interest](#) during the 19th century into areas colonised by the Netherlands led to an accumulation of objects from a colonial context at Dutch universities. These objects, such as maps, natural history specimens and other scientific objects, are often referred to by Dutch universities as their 'special collections' and several universities have set up museums to display these collections.

Although university collections contain a wide range of objects, many of them measuring instruments for scientific research, it is worthwhile to include these collections in your research into museum collections from a colonial context. Below you will find a brief description of the various collections held by Dutch universities. Four collections – those of the University Library in Leiden, [Wageningen University & Research](#), the Nijmegen Ethnographic Museum and the former [Gerardus van der Leeuw Ethnographic Museum] (<https://app.colonialcollections.nl/en/research-aids/https%3A%2F%2Fn2t%252Enet%2Fark%3A%2F27023%2Fd40d1b8cb736d6f4e8b697af45a628> which was part of the University of Groningen – are discussed in more detail in separate research aids. Universities not listed below do not manage significant collections from a colonial context.

### Erasmus University Rotterdam

Erasmus University in Rotterdam (province of Zuid-Holland) has existed in its current form since 1973. Its direct predecessor was the Netherlands School of Commerce, founded in 1913. Given its focus on economic education and the relatively late evolution of its curriculum, Erasmus University does not have any large relevant colonial collections. However, there are a few – mainly book collections – which are worth mentioning:

The [Rotterdamsch Leeskabinet](#) (Rotterdam Reading Room), which opened in 1859, was completely destroyed in the bombing of the city of Rotterdam in 1940. After the war, Dr Elie van Rijckevorsel's book collection formed the basis for the continuation of the Reading Room. In 1883 Van Rijckevorsel was one of the driving forces behind the establishment of the [Museum voor Land- en Volkenkunde] (<https://app.colonialcollections.nl/en/research-aids/https%3A%2F%2Fn2t%252Enet%2Fark%3A%2F27023%2Fe2859af90871cee23d48d1467336b1> now known as the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam. Many of the books collected by Van Rijckevorsel relate to his trading activities in West Africa, the East Indies and the Caribbean and may therefore be relevant to research into colonial collections in the Netherlands.

Another relevant collection is the collection of Surinamese poetry acquired by the Rotterdamsch Leeskabinet in 2021. Although the collection, which consists largely of poems

written in Sranantongo, mainly contains volumes from the 1960s to the present day, it is relevant in that it is connected to the Dutch colonial past. In addition to Sranantongo, other Surinamese languages are also represented. The collection includes works by well-known Surinamese poets such as Dobru, Edgar Cairo, Michaël Slory and Albert Helman.

The archives of Erasmus University and its predecessors are managed by the [Rotterdam City Archive](#).

## **Radboud University Nijmegen**

Radboud University was founded in Nijmegen (province of Gelderland) in 1923 as a Catholic university. This history is also reflected in the collections managed by the university both now and in the past. The Nijmegen Ethnographic Museum was part of Radboud University until 2005. For more information about this museum please consult the relevant research aid. After the museum closed the collection was sold off and ended up at various other institutions, including [Museum Bronbeek](#) and Ghent University.

An important collection that may be relevant to research into objects from a colonial context is the [Katholiek Documentatie Centrum](#) (Catholic Documentation Centre, KDC). It is part of the Radboud University library and manages a collection that relates to Catholic life in the Netherlands. As such, the KDC also holds a great deal of material about the Catholic mission in former Dutch colonies. The KDC manages a selection of [archival material](#) (which is classified by theme), [visual material](#), [documentation](#) and [audio clips](#). Within the latter collection, the Project KomMissieMemoires is particularly interesting. It is a collection of interviews from the 1970s with Dutch missionaries who were active in places including former Dutch colonies. The collections are easily searchable via the [KDC website](#).

The KDC website also provides [practical information](#) about requesting and viewing materials. The archives of Radboud University itself are not publically available but they are accessible. If you wish to view them, please send an email to the [archivist](#).

## **University of Groningen**

The University Museum of the University of Groningen was founded in 1932. In terms of collections from a colonial context, the main collection is that of the [Gerardus van der Leeuw Museum of Ethnology](#) (please consult the relevant research aid). Until 2003 this collection formed a separate museum within the University of Groningen but since then has largely been stored in the University Museum's depot, with parts of the collection occasionally being exhibited.

The University of Groningen has a [manual](#) for consulting its archives. Archival material is stored in various locations; historical material can mainly be found at the [Groningen Archives](#).

## **Leiden University**

Leiden University Library (UBL) manages a large collection of material relevant to research into collections from a colonial context, mainly originating from the [Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies](#) (KITLV). Detailed information about the UBL's collections can be found in the relevant research. The [Anatomical Museum](#), which is part of Leiden University Medical Centre (LUMC), contains human and other remains from a colonial context. The skull of the Ghanaian king [Badu Bonsu II](#), which was returned to Ghana in 2009, was part of the collection of the Leiden Anatomical Museum. The museum is used exclusively to support medical education at Leiden University. The Anatomical Museum is only open to the general public twice a year: during National Museum Week in April and on

Science Day in October.

## Utrecht University

The [special collections](#) of Utrecht University are divided into four sections: [manuscripts](#), [old and special prints](#), [maps and atlases](#), and [private collections](#). These collections contain material relevant to research into the Dutch colonial past. The website for Utrecht University's special collections provides information on how to find, request and view the collections.

In addition to these special collections Utrecht University has a [university museum](#) (UMU), which was founded in 1918 by physicist P.H. van Cittert. The broad collection covers the entire range of scientific research areas and includes relevant objects from a colonial context. Noteworthy examples include this Pustaha from the island of Sumatra and the collection of [plaster casts](#) made during the colonial period of inhabitants of the Indonesian island of Nias for the research of physical anthropologist [Johannes Pieter Kleiweg de Zwaan](#). The entire collection is [accessible online](#).

The institutional archives of Utrecht University are kept at the [Utrecht Archives](#).

## University of Amsterdam

The [Allard Pierson](#) museum manages the collections of the University of Amsterdam (UvA). Named after the first professor of art history and modern languages at the UvA, the museum has existed in its current form since 1924, when the university acquired the collection of banker C.W. Lunsingh-Scheurleer. Like many other university museums, the Allard Pierson manages a wide range of objects, from archaeological artefacts to theatre costumes. The [Surinamica collection](#) and the [Artis Library](#) are of particular interest in the context of research into the Dutch colonial past. The archives managed by the Allard Pierson are [digitally accessible](#).

Although now part of Amsterdam UMC (the medical centre of both the University of Amsterdam and Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam), the collection of [Museum Vrolik](#) has been managed by the UvA since 1859. The collection was largely assembled by [Gerard Vrolik](#) (1775-1859) and his son Willem (1801-1863). Until Gerard's death, the collection was housed in the canal house where he and his son lived. A number of the successive professors of anatomy who contributed to the Museum Vrolik collection were also involved in racial research in the context of physical anthropology. This research was often carried out using human remains that largely originated from former Dutch colonies, particularly the Dutch East Indies. The human remains from a colonial context form a relatively small part of the Museum Vrolik collection and consist of 330 skulls, 24 skeletons and other skeletal remains, 157 plaster casts and models, and 33 fetuses and other specimens preserved in formaldehyde.

The institutional archives of the University of Amsterdam are kept at the [Amsterdam City Archives](#).

## Vrije Universiteit (VU) Amsterdam

Apart from an extensive [map collection](#), which includes maps of the former Dutch East Indies, Africa and South America, VU Amsterdam does not manage any significant collections of objects from a colonial context. However, the VU does manage the historical documentation centre [HDC | Protestants Erfgoed](#). Within this archive collection you will find a large number of archives relating to Protestant missionaries who were active in areas colonised by the Netherlands.

Between 2020 and 2024 the archives of the [Vrije Universiteit](#) were processed and catalogued. The institutional archives can be consulted at the [Amsterdam City Archives](#).

## Wageningen University & Research

From the early 20th century the [Agricultural College in Wageningen](#) (now Wageningen University & Research, please consult the relevant research aid) had a museum display mainly featuring objects from the former Dutch East Indies. Around 1960 almost the entire collection was loaned to the Stedelijk Gymnasium Schiedam, and from 1962 the collection was divided between the Gymnasium in Schiedam and the Ethnographic Museum in Delft (later [Museum Nusantara](#)).

The archives of the Agricultural College up to 1959 are held at the Gelderland Archives (<https://www.geldersarchief.nl/bronnen/archieven?mizig=210&miadt=37&miaet=1&micode=0740&minr=26166310&miview=inv2>). The archives of the Agricultural College from 1959 are still held by the university and are managed by the OS Document Management and Logistics department of Wageningen University & Research.

## Related Aids

- [Doing research](#)
- [Sources](#)
- [Museums and collections](#)
- [Scientific research in colonised territories](#)
- [Nijmeegs Volkenkundig Museum](#)
- [Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies \(KITLV\)](#)
- [Volkenkundig Museum 'Gerardus van der Leeuw'](#)
- [Wageningen University & Research](#)

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## Relevant Data

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