

Indonesia

Abstract

This research aid provides information about the most common ways in which cultural objects found their way from Indonesia to the Netherlands during the colonial era, and where relevant Indonesian museum collections can be found in the Netherlands.

Introduction

This research aid provides information about the most common ways in which objects were collected in Indonesia by the Dutch during the colonial era, and where relevant Indonesian museum collections can be found in the Netherlands. At the bottom of the page you will find various tips for conducting provenance research on Indonesian museum collections. It is important to bear in mind that the Dutch colonial presence in the Indonesian archipelago spanned a period of more than 350 years and that objects were brought to the Netherlands via multiple routes. This research aid discusses a few of these routes in more detail, but this overview is by no means exhaustive.

Collecting in Indonesia

From the very beginning of their colonial presence in the Indonesian archipelago, the Dutch brought objects back home with them. Private and institutional collecting were intertwined and many museum collections in the Netherlands started out as private collections. See Caroline Drieënhuizen's dissertation [*Koloniale collecties, Nederlands aanzien*](#) for more information on this subject.

Below you will mainly find information about object collections assembled by institutions, for example to establish a museum or support education. More is generally known about these institutional collections because they often had a public function, kept archives and compiled catalogues. At the same time it is important to remember that there are also large private collections of Indonesian cultural objects in the Netherlands about which we know little.

Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen

The [Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen](#) (Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences) is of great importance for provenance research. Founded in Batavia (now Jakarta) in 1778, the society was tasked with promoting the arts and sciences in what was then the Dutch East Indies. War booty was generally first sent to the Bataviaasch Genootschap, where a selection was made. Most of the objects remained in Batavia, eventually forming the core of the collection of what now is Museum Nasional Indonesia. However, often a selection was also sent to the Netherlands, specifically to the Rijks Ethnografisch Museum (now the [Wereldmuseum Leiden](#)). The minutes of the society provide a meticulous record of which collections were received and how they were divided between the museum in Batavia and museums in the Netherlands. The minutes from 1862 to 1921 are [digitally available via Leiden University](#). For more detailed information and sources relating to the Bataviaasch Genootschap, see [the relevant research aid](<https://app.colonialcollections.nl/nl/research-aids/https%3A%2F%2Fn2t%252Enet%2Fark%3A%2F27023%2F879aa24d509fdae582d9cbd6cc6016>

Army and navy personnel

The Dutch authorities in the former Dutch East Indies relied heavily on the [Royal Dutch East Indies Army](#) (KNIL). The KNIL was made up of officers of Dutch or other European nationality and mostly locally recruited soldiers. Only a small number of objects in Dutch museums are official war booty, sent to the Netherlands on the orders of the KNIL. A well-known example is the so-called [Lombok treasure](#), which was returned to Indonesia in 1977 and 2023. Many more objects in Dutch museums were brought back to the Netherlands by individual soldiers on private initiative. An important museum that acquired many Indonesian objects through donations from individual soldiers is [Museum Bronbeek](#). For more information about researching individual soldiers and objects they brought back to the Netherlands please consult the relevant [research aid](#).

Christian missionaries

During the colonial era [Protestant](#) and [Catholic](#) missionaries were sent out from the Netherlands and other European countries on missionary work in the Indonesian archipelago. The missionaries brought back objects from the areas where they worked, sometimes at the request of the organisations that dispatched them. The objects were displayed during information sessions about the work of the organisation or for the purpose of raising funds. When the organisations disposed of the objects, they ended up in other collections, for example those of ethnographic museums. Individual missionaries also donated and sold objects to such museums while objects from the mission also ended up in trade and private collections. The collecting practices of missionary organisations have long been known to have been aimed at eradicating what they considered to be pagan practices. Cultural heritage objects were destroyed or taken to Europe so that they could no longer be used in religious rituals. An important museum that acquired objects through the mission in Indonesia is the [Mission Museum in Steyl](#). For more information about missionaries, consult the relevant [research aid](#).

Science

The former Dutch East Indies and its nature, culture and population formed an important source for scientific research by scholars from the Netherlands and other countries. Scientists often had interests which extended beyond their own field of expertise. For example, a geologist might also have collected ethnographic or archaeological objects and subsequently donated them to a Dutch museum. Various associations and societies were established to support and promote science in the former Dutch East Indies, including the [Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen](#) and the [Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies \(KITLV\)](#) (KITLV). Through such organisations the findings of scientific research were published in journals and books. The objects, documents and photographs collected during the research often found their way into the collections of the institutions to which the researchers were affiliated. For more information about scientific research in Indonesia and related object collections please consult the relevant [research aid](#).

Trade

The trade in cultural objects from Indonesia formed the basis for the creation of many collections in the Netherlands at the end of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century. Museums regularly purchased items from dealers and auction houses, not only in the Netherlands but also in other European colonising countries, particularly France, Great Britain, Germany and Belgium. The same dealers and auction houses were also sources for private collections, objects from which sometimes later ended up in museum collections. Dealers often acquired their collections through contacts with colonial officials, military personnel or missionaries. It is thus clear that the distribution of objects across Dutch museum collections took place via a broad network of individuals and organisations. For

more information about the role of dealers please consult the relevant [research aid](#).

A significant proportion of the military personnel, scientists, missionaries and traders came from other European countries such as Germany, Switzerland and Scandinavia. After their time in the Dutch East Indies, these people often returned to their regions of birth. As a result, Indonesian collections also ended up in various European countries.

Research into Indonesian collections in the Netherlands

Museum collections

During the 350 years of Dutch colonial presence in Indonesia extensive collections of objects were shipped to the Netherlands. These include objects of great cultural value as well as everyday utilitarian objects and natural history specimens. It is likely that practically every Dutch museum collection contains objects originating from Indonesia or objects related to Dutch colonial history in the archipelago. You can use region-specific search terms in the Datahub to find out which museums have regional collections. The most important Dutch museums with collections acquired in a colonial context are described in the various research aids on this website. For a general overview of the various museums, please visit the [Museums and collections research aid](#).

The most extensive Indonesian collections can be found in the following museums:

- the [Wereldmuseum in Amsterdam](#), [Leiden](#) and [Rotterdam](#)
- the [Rijksmuseum Amsterdam](#)
- [Museum Bronbeek](#).

Archives In addition to objects, the above museums also manage large archive collections and the institutions act as experts in provenance research. For any questions about provenance research or to get in touch with a museum please contact the [Colonial Collections Consortium](#), who will be able to help you further.

Besides the museums several other institutions in the Netherlands manage interesting archives relating to cultural objects from Indonesia. Which archives are relevant depends on the collection and the specific provenance history of an object. For more information and tips on conducting provenance research please consult the research aids on [Doing research](#) and [Sources](#). These research aids provide a handy overview of relevant archives and a detailed step-by-step plan for conducting provenance research.

Related Aids

- [Select and delineate](#)
- [Civil servants in colonised territories](#)
- [Army and navy personnel in colonised territories](#)
- [Scientific research in colonised territories](#)
- [Christian missionaries in colonised territories](#)
- [Koninklijk Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen](#)
- [Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies \(KITLV\)](#)
- [Museum Bronbeek](#)
- [Rijksmuseum Amsterdam](#)
- [Wereldmuseum Amsterdam](#)
- [Wereldmuseum Leiden](#)
- [Wereldmuseum Rotterdam](#)

THIS RA HAS NO SOURCES

Relevant Data

TO BE FILLED

first edited by Wiebe Reints as original_author on 2025-12-03

last edited by Wiebe Reints as original_author on 2026-01-06