

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.

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 digitalised 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

- [Sources](#)
- [Select and delineate](#)
- [Civil servants in colonised territories](#)
- [Army and navy personnel in colonised territories](#)
- [Groote Koninklijke Bazar](#)
- [Kunsthandel Van Lier](#)
- [Royal Asian Art Society in the Netherlands](#)
- [Wereldmuseum Leiden](#)
- [Royal Cabinet of Curiosities](#)
- [Artis Ethnographic Museum](#)
- [Wereldmuseum Amsterdam](#)
- [Wereldmuseum Rotterdam](#)
- [Rijksmuseum Amsterdam](#)
- [Rijksmuseum van Oudheden](#)
- [International Colonial and Export Exhibition 1883](#)

Primary sources

Database:

Art Sales Catalogues Online

This database is based on the 'Répertoire des Catalogues de Ventes Publiques' by Frits Lugt. The digitalised auction catalogues of the RKD can also be accessed via this database.

<https://primarysources.brillonline.com/browse/art-sales-catalogues-online>

Database: AGHORA

Database of the French National Institute of Art History (INHA). Contains information on individuals and institutions involved in the trade in art and archaeological objects.

<https://agorha.inha.fr>

Secondary sources

Book:

Corbey, Raymond. Tribal Art Traffic: A Chronicle of Taste, Trade and Desire in Colonial and Post-Colonial Times. Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute, 2000. Book describing the trade in various ethnographic objects, with a focus on the Low Countries.

<https://search.worldcat.org/title/906982001>, [ISBN 9789068321975](https://www.worldcat.org/ISBN/9789068321975), [WorldCat 906982001](https://www.worldcat.org/title/906982001)

Book: Willink, Joost. 'De bewogen verzamelgeschiedenis van de West-Centraal-Afrikaanse collecties in Nederland (1856-1889)'. Dissertation Leiden University, 2006.

Dissertation by Joost Willink on the collection history of West Central African collections in the Netherlands.

<https://scholarlypublications.universiteitleiden.nl/handle/1887/4344>, [WorldCat 71681153](https://www.worldcat.org/title/71681153)

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