

Ghana

Abstract

Dutch museum collections contain ethnographic objects, art objects and natural history specimens originating from what is now Ghana. Most of these objects were collected in the period up to 1872, when the Netherlands was present as a colonial power in what was then known as the Gold Coast.

Description

From the last decade of the sixteenth century onwards, sailors from the Netherlands traded in the West African coast, following in the footsteps of the Portuguese. In order to protect Dutch traders there, the States General decided in 1612 to build a fort near the town of Moree in the Asebu chiefdom in the Gold Coast, for which an agreement was concluded with the local ruler. In 1637 Elmina Castle was captured from the Portuguese by the Dutch West India Company (WIC), with the Portuguese eventually being driven out of the Gold Coast altogether in 1642. In the mid-seventeenth century the WIC faced competition from Swedish, Brandenburg-Prussian, Danish and English trading companies; a century later, only the latter two remained. Denmark and the Netherlands sold their possessions in the Gold Coast to the United Kingdom in 1850 and 1872 respectively, with the latter incorporating both possessions into its Gold Coast crown colony. This British crown colony gained its independence in 1957 as the Republic of Ghana.

In the seventeenth century, gold and ivory were the main commodities traded in the Gold Coast but from the eighteenth century onwards, the trade in African slaves became increasingly dominant. Of the more than 550,000 enslaved people transported across the Atlantic by Dutch slave traders, approximately 126,000 came from the Gold Coast. In 1792 Denmark passed a law prohibiting the slave trade from 1803 onwards. The United Kingdom followed suit in 1807 and the Netherlands finally did likewise in 1814. The West Africa Squadron of the British Royal Navy enforced this ban off the West African coast from 1808 onwards.

Collections originating from the Gold Coast

[image] *This adinkra cloth, sent to the Netherlands in 1825, is considered the second oldest known adinkra cloth in the world* ([Wereldmuseum](#))

In addition to trade goods, art objects, ethnographic artefacts and natural history objects were also shipped to Europe from the very beginning. Collecting of ethnographic objects from Africa originated with the art and curiosity cabinets that emerged in Europe in the late sixteenth century. The collection of ethnographic objects exhibited in the home of the Enkhuizen physician [Bernardus Paludanus](#) from 1580 onwards, which included objects from the West African coast, is a well-known example of this. After he died Paludanus' collection was sold and eventually ended up in Denmark, where [parts](#) of it are still housed in the National Museum in Copenhagen. Another early collection of West African artefacts was that of the Leiden Anatomical Theatre. The only item in this collection whose current location is known is the foot of a salt vessel, probably originating from what is now Sierra Leone. This object, with [inventory number RV-1131-1](#), is now in the collection of Wereldmuseum Leiden.

From the nineteenth century, colonial officials in the Gold Coast were encouraged to collect items for Dutch national museums. Shortly before Herman Willem Daendels was due to leave for the Gold Coast as governor in 1815, the director of the [Royal Cabinet of Curiosities](#) asked him to collect objects for his museum. When the ship on which Daendels travelled out returned to the Netherlands, it was indeed found to contain a collection of “curiosities”, consisting of both live animals and natural history and ethnographic objects. After the Cabinet was dissolved in 1883 [ceremonial walking stick made of buffalo horn](#) that had been donated by Daendels' predecessor ended up in the collection of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

Governors Friedrich Last and Cornelis Nagtglas sent collections of objects to the Cabinet of Curiosities in 1825 and 1860 respectively. The gifts from *Asantehene* (King of Asante) Kwaku Dua I Panyin to King William I, including a golden pipe, were also presented by the latter to the Cabinet of Curiosities in 1837. Former health officer Jan Gramberg, who had established a cotton plantation in the Gold Coast and published the book *Schetsen van Afrika's Westkust* (Impressions of Africa's West Coast) in the Netherlands, donated a collection of objects from West Africa to the cabinet in 1860. Finally, when the possessions were handed over to the United Kingdom in 1874, the Ministry of Colonies donated a number of objects that were considered 'less suitable for passing into foreign hands'. These included the [ivory command staff](#) of the director-general of the WIC in Elmina.

Governor Nagtglas also left a [collection of objects](#) to the [Royal Zeeland Society of Sciences](#).

Natural history collections

Colonial officials in the Gold Coast also collected items for the [National Museum of Natural History](#), which was founded in 1820. In 1822 the museum's founder and director Coenraad Jacob Temminck persuaded the Minister of Colonies to appoint a taxidermist from his museum, Andreas Joseph Baierlein, as health officer in the Gold Coast, with the additional task of preparing natural history specimens and sending them to the Netherlands. However, Baierlein died almost immediately after his arrival. In 1840 Temminck made a new attempt by sending out taxidermist Hendrik Severinus Pel, who was to send ten shipments to the museum between 1840 and 1855.

The museum received a shipment from Governor Jules van den Bossche in 1857 and four shipments from Governor Nagtglas between 1859 and 1862.

Provenance research

Commissioned by the National Archives of the Netherlands, the archive guide [Sources for the Mutual history of Ghana and the Netherlands](#) by Michel Doortmont and Jinna Smit was published in 2007. The guide provides an exhaustive overview of the archives relating to the Dutch colonial presence in the Gold Coast. A very valuable resource is the extensive [archive of the Dutch Possessions on the Coast of Guinea, 1658-1872](#), which has been fully digitised.

For research into the shipments to the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities please follow the recommendations in the [research aid relating to that museum](#). The [Naturalis archive website](#) contains documents relating to the collection of natural history objects in the Gold Coast, including correspondence between the museum's management and the collectors Messrs. Baierlein, Pel, Van den Bossche, Nagtglas, Hens and Elias.

Related Aids

- [Wereldmuseum Leiden](#)
- [Royal Zeeland Scientific Society](#)
- [Koninklijk Kabinet van Zeldzaamheden](#)
- [Etnografisch Museum Artis](#)
- [Wereldmuseum Amsterdam](#)
- [Wereldmuseum Rotterdam](#)
- [Naturalis Biodiversity Center](#)

Primary sources

Secondary sources

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Mac Lean, J. 'Collecting natural history specimens in Ghana for 's-Rijks Museum at Leyden', Janus 63 (1976), 289-301. Outline of activities of natural history collectors in the Gold Coast.

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Schmidt, Annette. De Afrikaanse bijdrage van kommandeur Last. In: Het verdwenen museum : Koninklijk Kabinet van Zeldzaamheden in het Mauritshuis. Zwolle: Waanders, 2024. Chapter on Governor Last's 1825 shipment to the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities, included in the catalogue of the exhibition "The Lost Museum", which was on display at the Mauritshuis in 2024-2025.

[ISBN 9789462625709](#), [WorldCat 1501397052](#)

Relevant Data

TO BE FILLED

first edited by Maarten van der Bent as original author on 2025-09-01

last edited by Abacus as translator on 2025-10-20