

International Colonial and Export Exhibition 1883

Abstract

The International Colonial and Export Exhibition, also known as the World (or Universal) Exhibition, was held on what is now Museumplein in Amsterdam from 1 May until 1 October 1883. In addition to a Dutch colonial pavilion displaying many objects from eastern and western colonies, exhibitions were also held by other countries and companies.

History

The International Colonial and Export Trade Exhibition, better known as the Amsterdam World Exhibition, was held from 1 May to 31 October 1883 on the vacant ground behind the [Rijksmuseum](#), which was under construction at the time. Although there was initially little enthusiasm for organising a universal exhibition in the Netherlands, French entrepreneur Edouard Agostini gained backing from foreign investors and managed to persuade the Dutch government. After exhibitions in Vienna, London, Philadelphia and Paris, the Frenchman felt the time was right to showcase the colonial trade in Amsterdam.

The main entrance to the exhibition, located directly behind the [Rijksmuseum](#), consisted of two towers of imitation marble, decorated with Hindu ornamentation and supported by plaster-cast elephants. Behind the main entrance was the so-called industry hall, where participating countries displayed their colonial goods and industrial products. To the left of this hall was the Dutch colonial pavilion, the most important part of the exhibition. The pavilion, designed in a distinctive Moorish-Arabic style, was flanked by two statues: one of Jan Pieterszoon Coen (former Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies) and one of the goddess Victoria, which served as an allegory for the Dutch 'victory' in the Aceh War. Next to this 'Aceh monument' was the so-called East Indies village which displayed eight wooden and bamboo houses from different Indonesian regions, along with their inhabitants. These people, Sumatrans, Sundanese and Javanese amongst others, were forced to display their crafts during the exhibition, in addition to which a daily gamelan performance was held. Elsewhere in the grounds stood a Surinamese village, where Surinamese houses and their inhabitants were similarly exhibited to the audience.

The design and layout of the Dutch colonial pavilion was the work of the Dutch geographer and ethnologist [Pieter Johannes Veth](#), who also wrote the scientific catalogue after the exhibition had ended. To compile the objects for the Dutch pavilion, Veth enlisted the help of various Dutch curators, such as [Lindor Serrurier](#) from the [Rijks Etnographisch Museum](#) (now the Wereldmuseum Leiden) and Fredericus Anna Jentink from the [Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie](#) (now Naturalis), also located in Leiden. P.J. Veth's son, [Daniël Veth](#), was responsible for collecting objects in the Dutch East Indies and it was he who came up with the idea for the East Indies village. The exhibition layout devised by P.J. Veth consisted of three main groups, divided into 38 subclasses. Group I concerned 'The territory of the colonised and ruled regions', group II 'The native population of those regions' and group III 'The Europeans in those regions and their relations with the natives'. While this way of ordering built on outdated perceptions, it also legitimised the modern Dutch colonial enterprise: the natural wealth and surpluses (group I) and the exotic primitivism of the native population (group II) called for the modernising and civilising entrepreneurship of the

Dutch government and private individuals (group III). Decorative material displayed in the pavilion included a number of maps of the Dutch East Indies and various trophies of weapons and flags, which came from the [Bronbeek](#) home for disabled veterans. More information about what other countries exhibited during the World Exhibition in Amsterdam can be found in Marieke Bloembergen's book [*Colonial spectacles: the Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies at the world exhibitions, 1880-1931.*](#)

[image] Drawing of the 1883 World's Fair grounds near the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam ([J.C. Greive Jr. / Rijksmuseum Amsterdam](#))

Provenance research

After the World Exhibition, the objects that had been exhibited in the Dutch colonial pavilion were distributed among various Dutch ethnographic museums. Some ended up at the museum of the Indische Instelling (the predecessor of [Museum Nusantara](#)), the Colonial Museum in Haarlem (a precursor to the [Wereldmuseum Amsterdam](#) and the [Artis Ethnographic Museum](#)). The majority went to the [Rijks Etnografisch Museum](#) in Leiden. In addition, during the World Exhibition the Leiden museum acquired a collection of Japanese Buddha statues, which still form an important part of the Wereldmuseum's collection in Leiden.

The catalogue written by P.J. Veth to support his ordering is [available online](#) via Leiden University. The three volumes cover the three groups of objects described above. There is also a [catalogue by Lindor Serrurier](#) that covers ethnographic objects that were displayed outside the Dutch colonial pavilion, including the collection of the British Lieutenant-General Pitt-Rivers. Photographer Friedrich Carel Hisgen and the French geographer Roland Bonaparte took various photographs of the Surinamese families who were exhibited in the Surinamese village. In 1894 the photographs were published in [*Les Habitants de Suriname; notes recueillies à l'exposition coloniale d'Amsterdam en 1883*](#), which is also available through Leiden University. The photo collection of the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, which is housed at the Nederlands Fotomuseum, contains a [large number of photos from the World Exhibition in 1883](#). Please note: these photographs also show the people from the former Dutch East Indies and Suriname who were put on display.

The various museums that subsequently received objects have archive material about objects from the World Exhibition. The National Archives in The Hague has the [documentation](#) on the purchase and distribution of the collections from the World Exhibition. The archive mainly consists of correspondence with various museums after the distribution had already been made. The archive does not contain a clear list of the distribution of the collection.

Related Aids

- [Civil servants in colonised territories](#)
- [Scientific research in colonised territories](#)
- [The trade in objects from a colonial context](#)
- [Artis Ethnographic Museum](#)
- [Wereldmuseum Amsterdam](#)
- [Wereldmuseum Leiden](#)
- [Wereldmuseum Rotterdam](#)
- [Rijksmuseum Amsterdam](#)
- [Museum Nusantara](#)
- [Naturalis Biodiversity Center](#)
- [Museum Bronbeek](#)

Primary sources

Archive:

Dutch National Archives, The Hague, Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken: Afdeling Kunsten en Wetenschappen, access number 2.04.13, inventory number 1617 - Stukken betreffende de verdeling van door het Rijk aangekochte en overgenomen voorwerpen op de Wereldtentoonstelling (Internationale Koloniale en Uitvoer Tentoonstelling) in Amsterdam Archive at the Department of Arts and Sciences of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Mainly contains correspondence about the distribution of objects after the World Exhibition.

<https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/archief/2.04.13/invnr/%402.%22~2.2.4~2.2.4.1~2.2.4.1.1~2.2.4.1.1.02~1617>

Archive:

City archives, Amsterdam, access number 30576 Collectie Stadsarchief Amsterdam: tentoonstellingen, inventory number 43-70 Internationale Koloniale en Algemene Uitvoerhandel Tentoonstelling, Amsterdam, mei - oktober 1883. General archive of the 1883 World Exhibition held at the Amsterdam City Archives. Includes the regulations, opening speech and publicity material.

<https://archief.amsterdam/inventarissen/file/49d013d5-0786-db08-da7f-085c767ce025>

Secondary sources

Catalogue:

Veth, P.J, G.A Wilken, en H.C Klinkert. Catalogus der afdeeling Nederlandsche Koloniën van de internationale koloniale en uitvoerhandel tentoonstelling (van 1 Mei tot ultimo October 1883) te Amsterdam (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1883). Catalogue of the Dutch colonial exhibition at the World Exhibition, compiled by P.J. Veth. The catalogue consists of three parts, each describing one of the three groups of objects: 'The territory of the colonised and ruled regions', 'The native population of those regions' and Group III 'The Europeans in those regions and their relations with the natives'.

<http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:129051>, WorldCat 680228146

Catalogue:

Serrurier, Lindor. Catalogus der ethnographische afdeeling van de Internationale Koloniale en Uitvoerhandel Tentoonstelling (van 1 Mei tot ult°. October 1883) te Amsterdam (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1883). Catalogue of the other ethnographic collections, outside those of the Dutch colonial pavilion, displayed at the World Exhibition. Compiled by Lindor Serrurier, then director of the Rijks Ethnographic Museum in Leiden (today's Wereldmuseum). Includes a description of the collection of Lieutenant-General Pitt-Rivers that was on display.

<https://books.google.nl/books?id=twNWAAAACAAJ>, WorldCat 1463298534,
DOI: 10.1163/9789004589124

Book:

Bonaparte, Roland. Les habitants de Suriname : notes recueillies à l'exposition coloniale d'Amsterdam en 1883 (Paris: Quantin, 1884). Book containing a collection of photographs of Surinamese people who were put on display during the World Exhibition.

<http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:972422>, [WorldCat 906298688](#)

Dissertation:

Bloembergen, Marieke. Colonial Spectacles : The Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies at the World Exhibitions, 1880-1931 (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006). Dissertation from 2001 by Marieke Bloembergen, translated into English in 2006. It examines the various ways in which the former Dutch East Indies were represented at various world exhibitions. The second chapter provides detailed information about the 1883 World Exhibition in Amsterdam.

<https://search.worldcat.org/title/70176990>, [ISBN 9789971693305](#), [WorldCat 70176990](#)

Article:

Alberdingk Thijm, J.A., 'De waereldtentoonstelling van 1883.' De Gids 47, no. 3 (1883): 292–310. Article by J.A. Alberdink Thijm in the magazine De Gids from 1883 about that year's Universal Exhibition in Amsterdam (in Dutch).

https://www.dbl.nl/tekst/_gid001188301_01/_gid001188301_01_0084.php

Relevant Data

TO BE FILLED

*first edited by Wiebe Reints as original_author on 2025-06-02
last edited by Wiebe Reints as original_author on 2025-12-23*