

Museums and collections

Abstract

This research aid provides an overview of the various museums in the Netherlands that manage ethnographic collections and offers a concise insight into the history of these collections.

Ethnographic collections in the Netherlands

In order to provide a good overview of ethnographic museums in the Netherlands, it is important to look briefly at what exactly is meant by a museum of this type. The first official ethnographic museums were established in the Netherlands in the first half of the nineteenth century when, as in other European countries, royal cabinets of curiosities were being transformed into public museums. The same period saw the emergence of specialised museums, which focused exclusively on a single discipline. Examples include the establishment of the [Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie](#) (National Museum of Natural History) in 1820 and the [Rijks Etnographisch Museum](#) (National Ethnographic Museum) in 1837, both in the city of Leiden.

Philip Franz von Siebold, one of the founders of the ethnographic museum in Leiden, wrote a letter to King Willem I in 1837 in which he described the purpose of an ethnographic museum as follows :

'By an ethnographic museum we mean a scientifically organised collection of objects from different countries – here mainly non-European – which, both individually and in context, give us a better understanding of the peoples to whom they belong; which show us their religion, customs and traditions, and give us a clear idea of the state of their arts and sciences, their agriculture, their handicrafts, and their trade.'

The growing scientific interest in the cultures, religions and customs of the inhabitants of European colonies led to the creation of large ethnographic collections in the Netherlands and the rest of Europe. The Rijks Etnographisch Museum was joined by the [Koloniaal Museum](#) (Colonial Museum) in Haarlem in 1864 and the [Museum voor Land- en Volkenkunde](#) (Museum of Geography and Ethnology) in Rotterdam in 1885. Objects from colonised territories continued to arrive in the Netherlands throughout the twentieth century, with many being brought back by [soldiers](#), [civil servants](#) or [missionaries](#). The period of worldwide decolonisation after the Second World War saw a sharp decline in this flow of objects to Dutch museums.

In tandem with the growing focus on the restitution of colonial collections in recent years several ethnographic museums across Europe have changed their names to more general terms such as 'museum of world cultures' or 'world museum'. The reason for this is the colonial connotation of the words 'ethnology' and 'ethnography', which are often seen as part of an outdated colonial view of 'other' peoples.

An artificial division

Despite the emergence in the Netherlands of an increasing number of museums specialising in specific fields during the nineteenth century it is important to realise that the division of

collections was an artificial one. Various collectors, such as the aforementioned Philip Franz von Siebold, donated objects to both the Ethnographic Museum and the National Museum of Natural History. As a result you will often find the same names cropping up in the archives of Dutch museums. Collections were also frequently moved between museums to what was considered the most suitable location at the time. We see this, for example, in the donation of a large group of 'Javanese antiquities' from the [National Museum of Antiquities](#) to the [National Ethnographic Museum](#) in 1903.

There are also various museums in the Netherlands that collected with a specific goal in mind. Examples include the museum of the officer training school in [Kampen](#), which compiled a collection to support the training of KNIL officers, as well as collections brought back to the Netherlands by missionaries, such as in the case of [Missiemuseum Steyl](#). These collections were often a combination of ethnographic objects, natural history objects and other types of artefacts. As a result, while the largest collection of ethnographic objects can be found at the Wereldmuseum, there are many other, smaller, museums that also manage ethnographic collections.

The nature of the museum is often an indication of the route by which objects arrived in the Netherlands. The research aids on this website have been grouped into five themes accordingly:

- [Civil servants in colonised territories](#)
- [The trade in objects from a colonial context](#)
- [Arm and navy personnel in colonised territories](#)
- [Scientific research in colonised territories](#)
- [Christian missionaries in colonised territories](#)

Whilst this thematic subdivision provides a good overview of the ways in which objects from former colonised territories ended up in Dutch museums it is not exhaustive. It is, for instance, possible that a civil servant who was active in the former Dutch East Indies first sold various objects to a merchant, who then sold them on to a Dutch museum.

Related Aids

- [Koninklijk Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen](#)
- [Museum Bronbeek](#)
- [Artis Ethnographic Museum](#)
- [Volkenkundig Museum 'Gerardus van der Leeuw'](#)
- [Hoofdcursus Kampen](#)
- [Volkenkundig Museum Justinus van Nassau](#)
- [Royal Cabinet of Curiosities](#)
- [Museum Nusantara](#)
- [Missiemuseum Steyl](#)
- [Museon-Omniversum](#)
- [Naturalis Biodiversity Center](#)
- [Rijksmuseum van Oudheden](#)
- [Rijksmuseum Amsterdam](#)
- [Wereldmuseum Amsterdam](#)
- [Wereldmuseum Berg en Dal](#)
- [Wereldmuseum Leiden](#)
- [Wereldmuseum Rotterdam](#)
- [Natuurhistorisch en Volkenkundig Museum Oudenbosch](#)

Primary Sources

Secondary sources

Relevant Data

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