

Doing research

Abstract

In this research aid you find information on the steps you can follow during your (provenance) research and how you collect relevant information for your research.

What steps can you follow?

Provenance research can be approached in various ways. Depending on the purpose of your research you will go through one or more of the steps below. In practice, these steps often overlap and can be carried out simultaneously. Many possible research steps are described in detail in the report [*Clues; Research into provenance history and significance of cultural objects and collections acquired in colonial situations*](#) and the publication [*Provenance research into collections from a colonial context. A guide*](#) by the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands. Other relevant reference works are listed at the end of this research aid.

Step 1: Collection research

For collection managers:

- Which parts of the collection and periods of collecting are relevant for further research?
- What information can be added for multiple objects within the collection?

For researchers:

- Which collections are of particular interest and where did the objects you researched typically tend to end up?
- Which individuals or institutions played a role in this?

For more information about this step, please consult the research aid [*Select and delineate*](#).

Step 2: Basic research

- Examining the object itself. This may include provenance information on the object in the form of traces of use, serial numbers and identification stickers as well as identifying its function and geographical and cultural origin.
- Consulting the collection documentation available, both digitally and on paper.
- Identifying when, how and from whom the current owner acquired the object.
- Conducting research into the individual from whom the object was acquired with the aim of establishing their identity, such as their full name, year of birth and death, profession and place of residence.
- Conducting research into the history of the museum.

Step 2: Further research

In most cases basic research will not lead to information about how the object was acquired in its region of origin. This will require further research.

The basic research may reveal one or more individuals or organisations connected to the acquisition of the object. One common method is to continue the investigation by firstly

researching these individuals or organisations and then working back in time using the sources that emerge. Another method takes as its starting point the object itself and the knowledge that exists about it among communities of origin, and works forward in time from there. Both methods may include one or more of the following steps:

- Research into previous owners and custodians;
- Research into the means of acquisition in the colonial context and the broader context in which this took place;
- Research into the how the object was used;
- Consultation with communities of origin and other experts.

Research into the origin of individual objects can be time consuming. The process may go faster if multiple objects were acquired at the same time, especially where multiple objects are mentioned in the available source material.

How do you obtain information?

Provenance research into objects acquired in a colonial context involves using a very diverse range of sources. In the past, information about the provenance and former owners of objects was considered of little or no importance. Also, many such objects tend to have low unique identification values. The available information accompanying the object is often brief and not focused on the origin of the object. The scope of the research should therefore be broader than documents containing information about ownership such as wills, inventories and auction catalogues. In addition to archives, oral sources such as experts from inside and outside the communities of origin may also be valuable.

The most obvious course of action is to consult the archives of all the institutions and individuals who have owned or managed the object over time. Sources that provide an insight into the historical context in which the acquisition took place may also be of interest. Tips for searching Dutch archives can be found on the YouTube channel of the [Kennisnetwerk Informatie en Archief](#) (in Dutch). The research aid [How do I conduct archival research?](#) (Dutch only) was created specifically for the National Archives of the Netherlands.

Possible sources include:

- Documentation within the managing institution and previous institutions that held possession of the object for some time;
- Personal archives and egodocuments;
- Archives of institutions and governments;
- Newspapers, books and magazines;
- Visual material (for example photographs and drawings);
- Maps and plans;
- Communities in the areas of origin;
- Experts with knowledge of the object or the colonial past.

The research aid [Sources](#) provides information on where to find these sources. Backgrounds on individuals, colonial institutions and events can be found using the digital research guides within the Datahub or sources such as Wikipedia. Please note that various Wikipedia pages contain information taken unfiltered from sources with a colonial perspective. It is therefore advisable to always consult the version in the language of the area of origin as well.

A number of the Dutch-language sources for provenance research into colonial collections have been digitalised, greatly facilitating the research. As digital databases are constantly being supplemented it may be worth repeating a previously unsuccessful query at a later

date.

Literature on conducting provenance research

- Mooren, Jona, Stutje, Klaas. [Clues: Research into provenance history and significance of cultural objects and collections acquired in colonial situations](#) (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 2022).
- Pennock, Hanna, Renate Meijer. [Provenance research into collections from a colonial context. A guide](#) (Amersfoort: Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed, 2025).
- Yeide, Nancy, Akinsha, Konstantin and Walsh, Amy L. [AAM Guide to Provenance Research](#) (Washington D.C. 2001).
- Lang, Sabine (ed.), [Guidelines for German Museums. Care of Collections from Colonial Contexts](#). 2nd Edition (German Museums Association, 2019).
- Deterts, Dorothea (ed.), [Recommendations for the Care of Human Remains in Museums and Collections](#) (German Museums Association, 2013).
- Tips on researching Dutch archives can be found on the YouTube channel of the Kennisnetwerk Informatie en Archief [Knowledge Network Information and Archives](#).
- Specifically for conducting research in the National Archives of the Netherlands there is the research aid [How do I conduct research in archives?](#) (Dutch only).

Related Aids

- [Reporting](#)
- [Sources](#)
- [Select and delineate](#)
- [University collections](#)

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