

# University collections

## Abstract

Several Dutch universities manage collections from a colonial context. These were often assembled by scientists conducting research for example in the fields of ethnography or geology in areas colonised by the Netherlands. This research aid provides an overview of relevant university collections in the Netherlands.

## Colonial university collections

The growing [scientific interest](<https://app.colonialcollections.nl/en/research-aids/> https%3A%2F%2Fn2t%252Enet%2Fark%3A%2F27023%2Feb4ff2b6b993f02054ba064a6389f39e) into areas colonised by the Netherlands during the nineteenth century led to an accumulation of objects from a colonial context at Dutch universities. These types of objects, such as maps, natural history specimens and other scientific objects, are often referred to by Dutch universities as their “special collections”. Several universities in the Netherlands have also set up museums to display these collections.

Although university collections contain a wide range of objects, including mostly measuring instruments for scientific research, it is worthwhile to include these collections in your research into museum collections from a colonial context. Below you find a brief description of the various collections held by Dutch universities. Four collections, those of the University Library in Leiden, [Wageningen University & Research](<https://app.colonialcollections.nl/en/research-guide/> https%3A%2F%2Fn2t%252Enet%2Fark%3A%2F27023%2F2c7a29ba107a49a29f1251631db1cf11), the Nijmegen Ethnographic Museum and the former [Gerardus van der Leeuw Ethnographic Museum](<https://app.colonialcollections.nl/en/research-guide/> https%3A%2F%2Fn2t%252Enet%2Fark%3A%2F27023%2Fd40d1b8cb736d6f4e8b697af45a628 which was part of the University of Groningen, are discussed in more detail in separate search aids. Universities not listed below do not manage significant collections from a colonial context.

### *Erasmus University Rotterdam*

Erasmus University in the Zuid-Holland city of Rotterdam has existed in its current form since 1973, but its direct predecessor was the Netherlands School of Commerce, founded in 1913. Due to its focus on economic education and the relatively late expansion of its curriculum, Erasmus University does not have any large relevant colonial collections. Nevertheless, there are a few, mainly book collections, that are worth mentioning:

The [Rotterdamsch Leeskabinet](#) (Rotterdam Reading Room), which opened in 1859, was completely destroyed by the bombing of the city of Rotterdam in 1940. After the war, Dr Elie van Rijckevorsel's book collection formed the basis for the continuation of the Reading Room, which has been part of Erasmus University since 1971. In 1883, Van Rijckevorsel was one of the driving forces behind the establishment of the [Museum voor Land- en Volkenkunde](<https://app.colonialcollections.nl/nl/research-guide/> https%3A%2F%2Fn2t%252Enet%2Fark%3A%2F27023%2Fe2859af90871cee23d48d1467336b1 now known as the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam. Many of the books collected by Rijckevorsel relate to his trading activities in West Africa, the East Indies and the Caribbean and may therefore be relevant to research into colonial collections in the Netherlands.

Another relevant collection is the collection of Surinamese poetry acquired by the Rotterdamsch Leeskabinet in 2021. Although the collection, which consists largely of poems written in Sranantongo, mainly contains volumes from the 1960s to the present day, it is a relevant collection that has a connection with the Dutch colonial past. In addition to Sranantongo, other Surinamese languages are also represented. The collection includes works by well-known Surinamese poets such as Dobru, Edgar Cairo, Michaël Slory and Albert Helman.

The archives of Erasmus University and its predecessors are managed by the [City Archives of Rotterdam](#).

### *Radboud University Nijmegen*

The Radboud University in the Gelderland city of Nijmegen was founded in 1923 as a Catholic university. This history is also reflected in the collections that the university currently manages, or managed in the past. Until 2005, the Nijmegen Ethnographic Museum was part of Radboud University. For more information about this museum, see the relevant search help (this is still under development). After the museum closed, the collection was sold off and ended up at various other institutions, including [Museum Bronbeek](<https://app.colonialcollections.nl/en/research-guide/>  
[https%3A%2F%2Fn2t%252Enet%2Fark%3A%2F27023%2F3443ee68039071c8125b16cf2f813f](https://app.colonialcollections.nl/en/research-guide/)) and Ghent University.

An important collection that may be relevant to research into objects from a colonial context is the [Katholiek Documentatie Centrum](#) (Catholic Documentation Centre, KDC). It is part of the Radboud University library and manages a collection that relates to Catholic life in the Netherlands. As such, the KDC also possesses a great deal of material about the Catholic mission in former Dutch colonies. The KDC manages a selection of [archival material](#) (which is classified by theme), [visual material](#), [documentation](#) and [audio clips](#). Within the latter collection, the Project KomMissieMemoires is particularly interesting. This is a collection of interviews from the 1970s with Dutch missionaries who were active in, among other places, former Dutch colonies. The collections can be easily searched via the [KDC website](#).

The KDC website also provides [practical information](#) about requesting and viewing materials. The archives of Radboud University itself are not publically available, but they are accessible. To view them, please send an email to [marianne.waldekker@ru.nl](mailto:marianne.waldekker@ru.nl).

### *University of Groningen*

The University Museum of the University of Groningen was founded in 1932. With regard to collections from a colonial context, the main collection is that of the [Gerardus van der Leeuw Museum of Ethnology](<https://app.colonialcollections.nl/en/research-guide/>  
[https%3A%2F%2Fn2t%252Enet%2Fark%3A%2F27023%2Fd40d1b8cb736d6f4e8b697af45a628](https://app.colonialcollections.nl/en/research-guide/)) (see the relevant research aid). Until 2003, this collection formed a separate museum within the University of Groningen, but has since then been largely stored in the University Museum's depot, with parts of the collection occasionally being exhibited.

The University of Groningen has a [manual](#) for consulting its archives. Archival material is stored in various locations; historical material can mainly be found at the [Groninger Archives](#).

### *Leiden University*

Leiden University Library (UBL) manages a large collection of material relevant to research into collections from a colonial context, mainly originating from the [Royal Netherlands

Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies](<https://app.colonialcollections.nl/en/research-guide/>  
<https://app.colonialcollections.nl/en/research-guide/>)%2Fnet%2Fark%3A%2F27023%2F62191a1bbcd9b315db786f20374171 (KITLV). Detailed information about the UBL's collections can be found in the relevant search aid (it is still under development).

The [Anatomical Museum](#), which is part of Leiden University Medical Centre (LUMC), also contains (human) remains from a colonial context. Among other things, the skull of the Ghanaian king [Badu Bonsu II](#), which was returned in 2009, was part of the collection of the Leiden Anatomical Museum. The museum is used exclusively to support medical education at Leiden University. The Anatomical Museum is only open to the general public twice a year: during National Museum Week in April and on Science Day in October.

### *Utrecht University*

The [special collections](#) of Utrecht University are divided into four sections: [manuscripts](#), [old and special prints](<https://www.uu.nl/special-collections/collections/old-and-special-prints>), [maps and atlases](#) and [private collections](#). These collections contain material relevant to research into the Dutch colonial past. The website about Utrecht University's special collections provides information on how to find, request and view the collections.

In addition to its special collections, Utrecht University also has a university museum (UMU) (<https://umu.nl/>), which was founded in 1918 by physicist P.H. van Cittert. The collection is broad and covers the entire range of scientific research areas, but also includes relevant objects from a colonial context. Noteworthy examples include this [Pustaha](#) from the island of Sumatra and the collection of [plaster casts](<https://umu.nl/news/research-into-nias-masks/>) made during the colonial period for the research of physical anthropologist Johannes Pieter Kleiweg de Zwaan ([https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johannes\\_Pieter\\_Kleiweg\\_de\\_Zwaan](https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johannes_Pieter_Kleiweg_de_Zwaan)) of various inhabitants of the Indonesian island of Nias. The entire collection is [accessible online](#).

The institutional archives of Utrecht University are kept at the [Utrecht Archives](#).

### *University of Amsterdam*

The [Allard Pierson](#) is the museum that manages the collections of the University of Amsterdam (UvA). The museum, named after the first professor of art history and modern languages at the UvA, has existed in its current form since 1924, when the collection of banker C.W. Lunsingh-Scheurleer was acquired by the university. Like many other university museums, the Allard Pierson manages a wide range of objects: from archaeological artefacts to theatre costumes. In the context of research into the Dutch colonial past, the Surinamica collection (<https://www.allardpierson.nl/blog/onzichtbare-bladzijden-de-surinamica-collectie-en-de-stem-van-sapali>) and the Artis Library (<https://www.allardpierson.nl/artis-bibliotheek>) are particularly interesting. The archives managed by the Allard Pierson are [digitally accessible](#).

Although now part of Amsterdam UMC (the medical centre of both the University of Amsterdam and VU University Amsterdam), the UvA has also managed the collection of [Museum Vrolik](#) since 1859. The collection was largely assembled by father Gerard Vrolik ([https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gerardus\\_Vrolik](https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gerardus_Vrolik)) (1775-1859) and son Willem (1801-1863). Until Gerard's death, the collection was housed in the canal-house where father and son lived. A number of the successive professors of anatomy who contributed to the Museum Vrolik collection were also involved in racial research in the context of physical anthropology. This research was often carried out using human remains that largely

originated from former Dutch colonies, particularly the Dutch East Indies. The human remains from a colonial context form a relatively small part of the Museum Vrolik collection and consist of 330 skulls, 24 skeletons and other skeletal remains, 157 plaster casts and models, and 33 foetuses and other specimens preserved in formaldehyde.

The institutional archives of the University of Amsterdam are kept at the [Amsterdam City Archives](#).

### *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*

Apart from an extensive [map collection](#), which also includes maps of the former Dutch East Indies, Africa and South America, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam does not manage any significant collections of objects from a colonial context. However, the VU does manage the [HDC | Protestants Erfgoed](#). Within this archive collection, you will find a large number of archives relating to Protestant missionaries who were active in areas colonised by the Netherlands.

Between 2020 and 2024, the archives of the [Vrije Universiteit](#) were processed and catalogued. The institutional archives can be consulted at the [Amsterdam City Archives](#).

### *Wageningen University & Research*

The [Agricultural College in Wageningen](<https://app.colonialcollections.nl/nl/research-guide/>) (now Wageningen University & Research, see relevant search help) managed a museum exhibition from the beginning of the twentieth century, mainly featuring objects from the former Dutch East Indies. Around 1960, almost the entire collection was loaned to the Stedelijk Gymnasium Schiedam, and from 1962 onwards, the collection was divided between the Gymnasium in Schiedam and the Ethnographic Museum in Delft (later [Museum Nusantara](<https://app.colonialcollections.nl/en/research-guide/>)) (<https://app.colonialcollections.nl/en/research-guide/?https%3A%2F%2Fn2t%252Enet%2Fark%3A%2F27023%2F2c7a29ba107a49a29f1251631db1cf11>)

The archives of the Agricultural College up to 1959 are held at the Gelderland Archives (<https://www.geldersarchief.nl/bronnen/archieven?mizig=210&miadt=37&miaet=1&micode=0740&minr=26166310&miview=inv2>). The archives of the Agricultural College from 1959 onwards are still held by the university and are managed by the OS Document Management and Logistics department of Wageningen University & Research.

## Related Aids

- [Doing research](#)
- [Sources](#)
- [Museums and collections](#)
- [Scientific research in colonised territories](#)
- [Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies \(KITLV\)](#)
- [Volkenkundig Museum 'Gerardus van der Leeuw'](#)
- [Wageningen University & Research](#)

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