

#6



provenance

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Contents

- 5 Foreword**
Mirjam Hoijtink
- 7 Introduction**
Karolien Nédée, Daantje van de Linde, Erdogan Aykaç
- 13 Tracing the mission in the museum: Papuan collections from the Utrechtse Zendingsvereniging in the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam**
Amélie Roussillon
- 29 In between movements and meanings: Nkisi Mabiala Mandembe's trajectory into the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam**
Daantje van de Linde
- 47 World War II-Era provenance research at the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam**
Karwin Cheung and Anna Koopstra
- 65 Life beyond the grave: Qutb al Aqtab Rashid ed Din's steles at the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam**
Karolien Nédée

**81 Tides and currents: Different meanings, shifting values, and
changing objects**

Erdogan Aykaç

**99 Documentary photographer Yara Jimmink: Ways of
understanding my family history**

Marjolein van Asdonck

Introduction

Karolien Nédée, Daantje van de Linde,
Erdogan Aykaç

This sixth edition of *Provenance* is dedicated to 140 years of the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam (WMR). In 1885, the museum opened its doors at the Willemskade as the *Museum voor Land- en Volkenkunde*.¹ The foundation of this ethnographic museum can be seen as part of a wider development visible at the local, regional and national level. At the local level, the museum was in some way a continuation of the Royal Yacht Club (1846-1882), which was housed in the same building. The collections of the members of this Yacht Club, who were part of the economic elite, were mainly formed through a colonial framework of trade and so-called scientific and military expeditions. These collections were later transformed into the core of the museums' collections. At the regional level, the second half of the 19th century marked the development and growth of various ethnographic museums among European

¹ Since, the museum has undergone two name changes: *Museum voor Volkenkunde* (1986) and *Wereldmuseum Rotterdam* (2000).

colonial powers. On a national level, this was visible with the emergence of the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam and Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden, but also across Europe, like the British Museum in London and the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. Ever since the founding of the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, its collections have been expanding continuously and currently comprise roughly 80,000 objects. The circumstances under which these objects have been collected and subsequently taken care of by the museum, however, have changed incessantly in the course of time.

One shift that is important to mention happened in 2017, when the museum became a partner of the National Museum of World Cultures (NMVW, *Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen*), comprising the Wereldmuseum Leiden and the Wereldmuseum Amsterdam. Within this umbrella organisation, provenance research has advanced into an important aspect of the care for collections, both the national (Amsterdam and Leiden) and municipal (Rotterdam) ones. Provenance research lays the groundwork for a better understanding of collections and their histories. As Henrietta Lidchi wrote in 2022, provenance research 'means a consistent attention to the documentation and contextualisation of collections' (Provenance #3 2022: 11). Such consistency in research is

especially important to challenge colonial practices, histories and legacies at the institutional and national level. Additionally, the interrupted institutional histories of the museum left large parts of the collections undocumented, and archives dispersed across multiple locations.

As mentioned in the preface, WMR actively supports and contributes to debates and policies regarding restitution, which recently resulted in the return of collections to their rightful owners. Firstly, two Singa palace statues from Lombok and sixty-six objects from South Bali were returned to Indonesia, in 2024. Secondly, in February 2025 the restitution of six Benin objects to Nigeria was formalised. A lot of work remains to be done, however. This volume does so by enhancing further efforts to document, understand, and communicate about the collections under the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam's care. Through six contributions, it adds new layers of knowledge to objects and collections, with particular attention to the histories of injustice they remain part of.

The first article, by Amélie Roussillon, results from postdoctoral research on missionary collections as part of the NWO-funded project *Pressing Matter*. Its offers new understandings of the impact of missionary practices on the WMR collection, by looking at the presence of the *Utrechtse Zendingsvereeniging* in Northwestern

New Guinea. It shows that the influence of the Protestant missionaries on the WMR collection was significantly larger than previously assumed. Nearly a thousand items reached the museum at different points in time, all going through UZV missionaries (active between 1859 and 1951), who were able to function as collectors as well as gatekeepers in broader collecting networks. Methodologically, the article demonstrates how meticulous research into individual collectors' profiles is crucial in the process of identifying broader collection structures.

Daantje van de Linde, provenance researcher for the Africa collection at the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, focuses on the physical and discursive journey of nkisi Mabiala Mandembe, a power figure on display in the permanent exhibition *Rotterdam Crossroads*. The article looks into what Van de Linde calls the physical and intangible abduction of this nkisi from the Loango people in Central Africa, and identifies the subsequent chain of European possessors until its arrival at the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam. By examining each actor's motivations and the meanings they projected onto this nkisi, the article offers broader insights into colonial collecting, revealing how stripping objects of their context disrupted societal systems and how the statue's display and interpretation reinforced a colonial mindset in the Netherlands.

In their article, Karwin Cheung, senior provenance researcher with *Pressing Matter*, and Anna Koopstra, former WWII provenance researcher at the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, investigate purchases at the WMR from just before, during and immediately after the Second World War. Their work provides an overview of wartime acquisitions and qualifies them as (semi-) problematic, while addressing the financial constructions that enabled these acquisitions at the time. The article gives insight into the – often complex – intersection between problematic acquisitions dating to the WWII and the provenances of 'ethnographic objects' collected in colonial contexts. The article demonstrates how these histories may come together in the story of a single object, through provenance research into two large Chinese statues purchased by the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam in 1943.

Karolien Nédée, provenance researcher at the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, delves into the provenance of a pair of grave steles purchased around the 1970s and traces them back to a mausoleum in Bidvaz, Iran. The article demonstrates that, in spite of absent archival documentation, the use of alternative research methods such as object analyses can lead to a known provenance too. Such research can counter narratives in which objects are used to support generic

'ethnographic' ideas instead of being valued for their historical, genealogical and religious particularity. This article also argues that, although art market objects bought around and after the UNESCO 1970 Convention are not necessarily marked by direct ties to colonial agents, their provenance may indicate the continuation of unequal power relationships between nations and regions after formal colonisation.

Erdogan Aykaç, curator of Collections, Migration and the City, discusses a series of carved panels and statues copied from reliefs in Angkor Wat, currently dispersed across the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, the Wereldmuseum Amsterdam and the Hoogovens Museum in IJmuiden. He traces the panels to the interior of a ship, which served various purposes across time: a tourism ship between France and its colonies in East Asia, a WWII battleship, and eventually a place to house guestworkers at a steel factory in the Netherlands. Ultimately, the ship was dismantled upon which the woodcarvings ended up in the three museum collections. Using the paradox of *the Ship of Theseus*, Aykaç raises fundamental questions of provenance research by looking at the multidirectional histories of the objects and questions the extent to which objects remain the same after

they undergo multiple material and immaterial adaptations through time.

With the last article, this volume projects the future of the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam while thinking through the past. Marjolein van Asdonck, curator of Southeast Asia, explores the role of contemporary art in the exhibition *Colonialism and Rotterdam* (December 2023 - November 2024), which examined the city's colonial history and the ways in which it has left traces to this day. In her article, Van Asdonck invites artist Yara Jimmink to talk about her contribution to the exhibition, called *You Can't Eat It Without Breaking The Shell*. In this work, Jimmink brings together family histories, sculpture and photography as a means to work against the grain of existing colonial images and discourse, and to address the absence of diaspora voices in public archives leaving many stories untold.

We are pleased that the authors in this volume have identified both collection (Roussillon, Cheung & Koopstra) and object histories and stories (van de Linde, Nédée, Aykaç,

Van Asdonck) from various regions and acquisition periods. These narratives reveal the museum's historical ties to the world and how it has navigated these relationships over time. The museum started off as a showcase for colonialism, and cultural and racial hierarchisation (Van de Linde). While varying levels of unequal power relations in colonial collecting practices were integral to its initial years (Roussillon), the museum continued to prioritise enlarging the collection over ethical considerations at later stages as well (Cheung & Koopstra, Nédée). While the current museum still bears the walled-in traces of recent fondness of colonial aesthetics (Aykaç), it is now working to become more self-reflective and builds new ways forward, strengthening resilience and new imaginaries (Van Asdonck).

