

1. Introduction

In Europe, most museums housing ethnographic collections¹ were established from the second half of the nineteenth century.² Especially around the turn of the century, such museums were founded with close connections to colonial policies. But it was not only here that non-Western objects were collected, researched and exhibited. In Asia, European colonial powers instigated the development of museums in the late eighteenth century (Shelton 2006:64-70). Objects that were collected in the colonies have made up large parts of collections in many museums around the world up till today. *The way* these collections were assembled was long disregarded. Studies of museum collections hardly considered collectors, collecting contexts or the political frame, but rather implicitly assumed that the objects presented “a neutral image of a society” waiting to be interpreted by scholars (Sedyawati and Keurs 2006:22).

Although both museums and individual collectors alike were involved in the bringing together of collections, they were often said to be acting from opposite bases. Criteria used to contrast

¹ The term “ethnographic” museum and collection is not without problems. Until anthropology became recognised as an academic discipline, it was seen as “a sideshow of other ‘more serious’ activities” (Keurs 2007:9). However, what would then be called ethnographic objects had already been collected before and had been included in scientific activities since the early nineteenth century (Keurs 2007:9). Today, ethnographic museums in Europe, America and the global South struggle with their colonial history and “the challenge to find ways to get beyond the institutional format and find new relevance in society” (Voogt and Kitungulu 2008:6). It is for these reasons that ethnographic museums are currently undergoing a change. Examples are the *Världskulturmuseet* in Gothenburg that no longer bases its exhibitions on its collections, the *Musée du Quai Branly* in Paris that applied a colonial model and the *Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum – Kulturen der Welt* in Cologne with its comparative approach.

² With the exception of the *Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde* (National Museum of Ethnology) in Leiden which was founded in 1836 (Shelton 2006:64-65).

Displaying the Colonial

museums and individual collections were “scientific rationalism and individual predilection, objectivity and subjectivity as well as the institutionally sanctioned representation of knowledge and the subject’s individual expression of his or her world” (Shelton 2001:14). These criteria stem from the rational element of the Enlightenment with scientific criteria replacing curiosity. As a result, collectors who contributed to museum collections were long ruled out from exhibitions in favour of scholarly objectivity. Once in the museum, objects were subjected to a system of sorting, storing and presenting that detached them from their background as a distinct collection assembled by an individual (Shelton 2001:14-20). They were converted from “*individual pieces*” to “*examples of categories, that gradually turned into art-historical or ethnographic genres, together with comparable pieces from other times or places*” (Legêne 2007:225, *emphasis in original*). In doing so, aspects like the collecting context or a collector’s individual background and motivation were ignored. It also means that the collector’s encounter with local people, who had made and/or owned the objects as well as informed him about their significance, disappeared. In exhibitions, local people were displayed as wax figures but they were not introduced as individual makers and/or owners of objects or as informants about the items’ significance. Together with objects, these figures rather were presented as “the essential markers of their cultures” (Legêne 2007:226).

It was in the 1980s that research on collecting began, increasing in the 1990s so that an extensive literature is now available on the topic³ (Keurs 2007:12; Shelton 2001:17; Macdonald 2006:81). However,

³ This literature discusses the history of collecting (including collectors’ biographies and publications on specific collections) and delves into anthropological, psychological and sociological aspects of museums and collecting (Macdonald 2006:81). For publications on collecting from an anthropological perspective see Pearce (1995), Thomas (1991), Shelton (2001), Gosden and Knowles (2001), Schefold and Vermeulen (2002), Hardiati and Keurs (2006a), among others. The last three publications focus on New Guinea and Indonesia.

the question can be asked – apart from the literature, does this research trend find an expression in the permanent exhibitions of museums? How collecting in colonial times is addressed in the current permanent exhibitions of the *Museum Nasional Indonesia* in Jakarta and the *Tropenmuseum* in Amsterdam is the topic of this book. These museums are located in the capital cities of two countries that are connected by a common colonial history.

The *Museum Nasional Indonesia* (MNI) in Jakarta, formerly the museum of the Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences, and the *Tropenmuseum* (TM) in Amsterdam, formerly the Colonial Museum in Haarlem, were both established during colonial times and the majority of Indonesian objects in their present collections dates back to that era. Initially the Batavian Society and the Colonial Museum were founded as an outcome of the economic interests of the Dutch in the colony. Over time, both institutions widened their focus and developed into ‘information centres’ on the colony with an advisory role to the colonial government. After Indonesia’s independence, the Batavian Society developed into Indonesia’s *Museum Nasional Indonesia* with the vision to being “a cultural and touristic information centre which is able to enlighten the life of the people, to increase civilization and pride of the national culture, as well as strengthen the national unity and international friendship” (Museum Nasional Indonesia, *Sejarah Singkat*; own translation). The Colonial Museum became the *Tropenmuseum* in Amsterdam concerned with “knowledge of and interaction with other cultures” (Tropenmuseum, *Mission Statement*).

Today the two museums have diametrically opposed views on their common history namely that of the former colonised – Indonesia – and that of the former colonial ruler – the Netherlands. Therefore the question arises – do these differing perspectives also mean that the museums address collecting in colonial times in different ways?

In order to be able to put the information on colonial collecting that is given in the museums’ exhibitions into an overall context, a range of background information is in the first instance necessary. Thus,

Displaying the Colonial

Chapters Two, Three and Four present the historical and theoretical framework from which Chapter Five has to be viewed.

Chapter Two first gives an overview of the political context that lays down the framework for the contact of European collectors and Indonesian makers and/or owners of objects in colonial times. In a second step, it outlines how the assembling of collections fuelled science as well as the notion of systematic collecting and how this development was often not far removed from the colonial government, political and economic interests. Furthermore, it shows that collectors' and object makers' backgrounds and motivations were important regarding which items were collected and how much information was available on their local significance. These aspects had long been ignored in museums.

Against this general background, Chapter Three deals with the two museums under discussion in this book. Their histories are outlined to give an overview of their collections and how these were assembled, including the relevance of individual interests and commitment as well as the museums' embedding into the colonial context. To show how both museums responded to Indonesia's independence, I will also summarise their development up to now. It is against this backdrop that the current permanent exhibitions and how they address colonial collecting should be seen.

Chapter Four serves as an orientation within the museums. It provides the reader with an understanding of the current permanent exhibitions' layout, the subjects addressed and the display elements used such as graphics or audio-visuals.

All of the above forms the basis for the detailed analysis in Chapter Five. For an understanding of the significance that is attributed to colonial collecting, it is necessary to know how the two museums address it in their exhibitions. It is for this reason that in Chapters 5.1 and 5.2 the information provided on the topic and the way this information is imparted are described for each museum's exhibitions. This is followed by a discussion of the findings in Chapter 5.3. The starting point for the analysis is what can be extracted from the exhibitions, that is to say the sources available to any visitor. This includes

the guide books and the audio guide in the case of the *Tropenmuseum*. Furthermore, the discussion also draws on information from related literature and identifies the perspective that the museums take on their collections.

In conclusion, Chapter Six summarises the findings and touches on the potential that the topic of colonial collecting could have for the development of future exhibitions.

This publication is the result of research that I conducted in 2012 for my Master's thesis (*Magisterarbeit*) to graduate from the Department of Cultural and Social Anthropology at the University of Cologne, Germany. It included two separate six-week stints of fieldwork in both the *Museum Nasional Indonesia* and the *Tropenmuseum*. The original idea was to analyse and compare the development process of the current permanent exhibitions and how far the museums' colonial roots were of relevance to this. Different influences on the development process – from availability of space and objects to the background of the people involved in creating the exhibitions – were to be taken into account on the basis of interviews conducted with museum staff. During fieldwork this proved to be difficult, especially due to the size of the *Museum Nasional Indonesia* as well as the differing levels of information relating to some parts of the exhibitions in both museums. It is for this reason that I chose to place a stronger focus on the information that can be directly extracted from the exhibitions as well as from related literature. Being on site in both museums gave me the opportunity to examine the exhibitions and to discuss my views and perceptions with museum staff. It also helped me to access literature dealing with the museums, their collections and exhibitions that would have been difficult, if not impossible, to access from outside the Netherlands and Indonesia.

During the evaluation of the information that I collected, I decided to focus on the colonial background of the two museums and their collections. It proved that colonial collecting is addressed in both exhibitions and that recent literature on the topic is avail-

Displaying the Colonial

able for both museums. Apart from the exhibitions themselves, it is especially the following publications that helped to develop my thesis: *The Netherlands East Indies at the Tropenmuseum* (Legêne and Dijk, 2011a), *Oceania at the Tropenmuseum* (Duuren, 2011), *Indonesia: The Discovery of the Past* (Hardiati and Keurs, 2006a), *Colonial Collections Revisited* (Keurs, 2007).⁴ These volumes provide information on collecting in the colony with special reference to the history of each museum and its collections. In the first two volumes information on two of the *Tropenmuseum's* exhibitions is also included.

It should be noted that since the writing of my thesis, major changes have been announced for both museums. What these changes will mean for the current exhibitions remains to be seen. I will come back to this in Chapter Six.

⁴ Susan Legêne is a historian who was head of the curatorial department of the *Tropenmuseum*. Janneke van Dijk is a photograph researcher who was curator of the photography collection. David van Duuren is an anthropologist who was curator for the Oceania and historical collections. Endang Sri Hardiati was director of the *Museum Nasional Indonesia*. Pieter ter Keurs is an anthropologist who was curator at the *Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde* in Leiden. The museums in Jakarta and Leiden carried out a joint project under the title of *Shared Cultural Heritage*. This project was concerned with those parts of the collections that came from the same source and were divided between the two museums in colonial times.