



MUSÉES ROYAUX
D'ART ET D'HISTOIRE

Research Guide for Colonial Archives in the RMAH

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The colonial connections of the Royal Museums of Art and History (RMAH)

The RMAH was officially founded in 1835. The museum moved to its current location at the Cinquantenaire in Brussels in 1889, only four years after Congo became a colony of the Belgian king Leopold II at the Berlin Conference of 1885. Throughout its history, the RMAH had a strong ethnography department. This department wanted to collect objects from ‘non-European civilisations’ with the purpose of understanding and classifying cultures and showing them to the Belgian public. For this purpose, the RMAH also collected objects from Belgium’s colony Congo, both during and after the colonisation period. These objects were taken from their communities in Congo and brought to Europe by different colonial actors such as members of the military, explorers or colonial government officials. The Congolese objects were often subsequently donated to the museum, but the RMAH also specifically bought such objects from antiquity dealers. Even after the Royal Museum for Central Africa opened in Tervuren in 1897, with the express purpose of collecting objects from the colony, the RMAH continued to acquire Congolese objects. Eventually, the colonial collection of the RMAH was transferred in multiple phases to the museum in Tervuren. However, the archives that were created when colonial objects entered the RMAH often did not travel with the objects to Tervuren and still remain in the museum archive of the RMAH.

An important warning: harmful colonial terminology and knowledge systems in the archive

Many national museums, such as the RMAH, have their origin in the 19th century. Museums then had the purpose of displaying the strength and global impact of a country to its inhabitants (Aronsson & Elgenius, 2015). This also included showing off objects taken from the colonies, displayed and organised according to a Western understanding of the different cultures. In this way, museums aimed to show European superiority. These colonial ways of thinking and understanding the world also made their way into the museum archive that was created in the museum.

The RMAH acknowledge that as a result, the archival documents contain terminology that we today consider to be outdated and harmful since it does not conform with current societal and ethical standards. The use of this terminology is today experienced as hurtful or discriminating. The documents were written from a Eurocentric perspective in which other cultures were seen as ‘exotic others’ and the objects in the museum were judged according to

Western standards and purposes: are they beautiful, special, rare, ...? In this way, the people who originally made and possessed the objects and their voices are in these historical documents pushed to the background and replaced by the voices of European ethnographers. The original function and significance of the objects is in addition largely ignored in favour of its uses in a European context. The documents in the museum archive therefore normalise the presence of the objects in the museum and hide the fact that these objects were often acquired by force or generally in a context of unequal power relations.

The RMAH archivists cannot change the contents of the archival documents, as these are historical documents which serve as evidence of the ways of thinking in the past. However, we acknowledge that the ways of thinking inherent in the archives are harmful and that we have a responsibility towards our users and the larger community to avoid the reproduction of colonial violence beyond the documents themselves, for example in the tools that we create to allow access to the documents. This approach is based on new insights concerning decolonisation in the discipline of archival studies (Caswell & Cifor, 2016; Agostinho, 2019; Lowry, 2019). If you want to read more about these insights and the avoidance of the reproduction of violence, we refer you to the further reading list at the end of this guide.

In summary, please be aware when consulting these archives that they are not only a source of information on the provenance of the objects that they refer to, but that behind the veil of the 'objective' or 'scientific' description of objects and cultures lie racist and dehumanising colonial world views and knowledge systems.

How to find information on Congolese objects and traces of colonialism in the museum archive:

Below, we give an overview of the different types of documents that you can use to find information on Congolese objects which were once at the museum or on the colonial ways of thinking that were prevalent at the time.

Acquisition dossiers

The acquisition dossiers are divided into three big groups: dossiers on the purchase of objects, dossiers on the donation of objects to the museum and dossiers on the exchange of objects with other museums or private collectors. In the museum archive, there are around 70 dossiers that definitely contain information on objects from Belgium's former colony Congo. Some dossiers which cover 'African' objects might also refer to objects from Congo, and there are also some additional dossiers on objects from what is then called 'French Congo'. Most of these dossiers are concerned with purchases, followed by donations and only a few exchanges. The oldest dossier dates from 1891 and the most recent one is from 1970, but the bulk of the dossiers dates from the first half of the 20th century. Most dossiers are concerned with more than one object purchased or received in a lot. Such lots are often 'ethnographic collections', which consist of objects originating in different regions and time periods.

A typical acquisition dossier consists of correspondence between different involved parties, such as an antiques dealer or donator, staff of the museum and government officials. Often the description of the objects from Congo that come into the museum is quite limited. Some dossiers do not contain any description of the specific objects in a lot that is sold or donated to the museum. In most dossiers, some kind of list of the objects is included, which usually lists the types of objects (e.g. bracelet, statue, ...) and the material (copper, iron, wood, ...). On occasion, dossiers contain a more extensive description of the objects, especially in more recent dossiers. Very rarely do dossiers contain a drawing or other kind of image of the objects. This can make it very difficult to match dossiers to objects currently in the museum in Tervuren.

The acquisition dossiers can be useful for research on:

- (1) The provenance of specific objects (for example those in the museum in Tervuren that were transferred there from the RMAH)
- (2) The history of collecting objects from Congo, e.g. in which periods most objects were acquired, which actors brought the objects into the museum, ...
- (3) The motivations of different actors for acquiring objects (both the motivations for first acquiring the object as collector, explorer etc. and the motivations of museum staff)
- (4) The network of Belgian antiques dealers selling ethnographic objects
- (5) The history and colonial underpinnings of ethnography and its role within museums, e.g. how certain peoples are described in the documents
- (6) ...

Archive of the direction

The archive of the direction contains a number of series which refer to objects from Belgium's former colony Congo. Not all types of document have been preserved for the entirety of the museum's history. Depending on the period that you are interested in, it might be useful to either focus on the correspondence (for the early period) or on the quarterly reports (from the start of WWI onwards).

The archives of the direction can be especially useful for research into the motivations of museum staff, the history of collecting objects from Congo and the history of ethnography as a discipline within museums.

Correspondence between the chief curator and the ministry

Since the minister was responsible for the general management of the museum, the chief curator often corresponded with him on all kinds of matters, such as collection management. Specifically, the chief curator had to obtain the minister's permission before objects could be acquired. This correspondence therefore contains references to the objects from Congo which were brought into the museum and can give insights into the motivations for acquiring certain objects.

Unfortunately, not all of the correspondence has been preserved. Specifically, the museum archive contains the correspondence for the years 1868-1871, 1895-1905 (with some months of the year 1897 missing) and 1920-1950. Mostly likely, the oldest correspondence will not contain references to Congo as it only became the personal colony of king Leopold II in 1885 and Belgium's colony in 1908.

General correspondence of the chief curator

If the correspondence between the chief curator and the ministry does not contain the information that you are looking for, you could consult the general correspondence of the chief curator. This correspondence, however, contains letters to many different correspondents on a variety of topics and it seems therefore only useful to consult these if the other options listed here do not contain the information that you want to find.

This correspondence has been preserved for the years 1835-1879, 1891-1898 and 1921-1942.

Correspondence of the direction commission and proceedings of their monthly meetings

The direction commission gives permission for the acquisition of objects. In their correspondence similar information is given as that in the correspondence of the chief curator

(see above), albeit more limited. The proceedings of their meetings can also contain information on the decision process concerning the acquisition of some objects, also from Congo.

The correspondence for the years 1859-1895 has been preserved in the archive. The meeting proceedings are available for the years 1859-1861, 1878-1890, 1894, 1914, 1916 and 1923. On occasion, the meeting proceedings are still kept in the dossiers of correspondence rather than in separate dossiers (especially for the earlier years).

Quarterly reports of the heads of the different departments within the museum

The quarterly reports of the department of ethnography can shed light on the activities and acquisitions of this department. For every three-month period covered in the report, the head of the department lists the acquisitions in that period (usually consisting of a short description of the lots of objects which were acquired) and also has a section on the contacts of the museum abroad, who can for example ship objects to the museum. The reports are therefore useful for an analysis of the acquisitions but also the different actors involved in collection formation.

The reports have been preserved for the period 1913-1914 and 1926-1964.

Other dossiers

The direction archive also contains some dossiers which are similar in content to the acquisition dossiers (see above). These are dossier 11/18 on the transfer of a collection of Congolese objects to Tervuren in 1912, 72/4 and 72/9 by Jules Bommer, curator ethnography (reports from 1908 and 1914 and correspondence from 1900-1906, respectively), 77/47 on the donation of a collection of Congolese objects in 1935 (a very limited dossier), 77/57 on a donation from 1942 and 126/7 which contains correspondence of the ethnography department for the period 1942-1954, with limited references to Congo.

Inventories (catalogues of incoming museum objects)

The museum archive possesses a number of inventories of museum objects. In these inventories, all new acquisitions were written down, with a short description of the object, the region of origin and the seller or donator. The archive contains both general inventories and inventories of specific departments, such as ethnography. It is recommended to start research into Congolese objects with the specific inventories of the ethnography section (nr. 9, 28, 29, 39, 40, 41) which all together cover the period 1835-1937 and the inventory which was made

before the transfer of a large group of objects to Tervuren in 1968 (nr. 42). If information is needed on the period around WWII or after 1968 (the last acquisitions of Congolese objects seem to be in the 1970s), then the general inventories can also be consulted.

The inventories give a quick overview of the acquisitions, the regions of origin and the involved actors on a year-by-year basis. These documents can therefore be especially useful for research that is not focused on individual objects but on the networks of colonial actors involved in their acquisition or for research into collection formation in specific years or periods.

Other dossiers

As said before, the RMAH has been situated in its current location since 1889. Its previous location, the Halle Gate museum, became a satellite of the now much expanded museum institution, and became responsible for the weapons collection. Because some collectors, especially military personnel, also donated Congolese weapons to the museum, the archive of Georges Macoir, curator of the Halle Gate museum, can be useful for research specifically into weapons collections from the colony. An example is dossier 15/132 on the donation of Congolese weapons by lieutenant-general Van Vinkeroy. On this same donation, there is also an acquisition dossier (7107). It is therefore recommended to consider both the Macoir archival fonds and the other archival series listed above.

The objects collected from Congo were transferred in multiple phases to the museum in Tervuren. Next to the aforementioned dossier in the direction archive and the inventory made before the transfer of 1968, there is a separate dossier (18/3) on a transfer in 1912 in the series ‘transfers’.

Further reading

Sources on the colonial history of (national) museums:

- Barnaby Phillips (2020). *Loot: Britain and the Benin Bronzes*. [Book]
- Peter Aronsson and Gabriella Elgenius (2015). *National Museums and nation-building in Europe 1750-2010*. [Book]
- Alice Procter (2020). *The whole picture: The colonial story of the art in our museums & why we need to talk about it*. [Book]

Sources on the decolonisation of colonial archives and the responsibilities of the archivist:

- Daniela Agostinho (2019). *Archival encounters: rethinking access and care in digital colonial archives*. *Archival Science*. [Journal article]
- Michelle Caswell & Marika Cifor (2016). *From human rights to feminist ethics: Radical empathy in the archives*. *Archivaria*. [Journal article]
- James Lowry (2019). *Radical empathy, the imaginary and affect in (post)colonial records: How to break out of international stalemates on displaced archives*. *Archival Science*. [Journal article]

