



The colonial legacy

of Dutch natural history
collections

Artis Library

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Utrecht University

ARTIS

Open Universiteit
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Workshop

The colonial legacy of Dutch natural history institutions

Dutch natural history institutions hold large collections of specimens that represent the world's natural environment. At the same time, several of them are part of Europe's colonial heritage. At first glance, butterflies, precious stones or dinosaurs may seem to have little to do with the colonial past but a closer look reveals many connections. Natural history collections were acquired thanks to Europe's colonizing activities, and the research activities and exhibition practices of these institutions were entangled with colonial ideals. However, natural history objects were (and still are) often displayed as apolitical things, and framed in a narrative of objective and universal scientific progress.

Dutch ethnographic museums were the first to acknowledge their colonial past. The Museum of World Cultures for example has welcomed discussions about how to deal with this past and about how to become a more transparent and inclusive museum. From the ethnographic museums, the debate has moved to include art institutions, like the Witte de With Contemporary Art Center, the Rijksmuseum and Van Abbe Museum. Until today however, natural history institutions have been under the radar in this debate, and these institutions have just started to reflect on their colonial histories.

This one-day workshop aims to foster this debate and to bring museum professionals, academics and other stakeholders together. In the workshop we explore questions around natural history museums and their colonial legacy. Which natural history institutions in the Netherlands have colonial collections and connections? How did institutions build, understand and exhibit their collections from the colonies? How is certain knowledge legitimized and sanctioned and other knowledge discarded or even repressed? And what would a more decolonial museum look like? How can we include the voices of people that were (deliberately) forgotten?

Keynote speakers

Tinde van Andel (Naturalis/University of Leiden/Wageningen University)
Nick Shepherd (Aarhus University)

Guided tour

The program includes a guided tour of ARTIS with a focus on its colonial heritage.

Registration

Admission is free but seating is limited so please register for the workshop by sending an email to caroline.drieenhuizen@ou.nl

Organizers

The workshop is organized by Fenneke Sysling (Utrecht University/Descartes Centre for the History and Philosophy of the Sciences and the Humanities) and Caroline Drieënhuizen (Open University), in collaboration with ARTIS Amsterdam Royal Zoo.