13.
COLONIAL OBJECTS IN TRADE AND IN PRIVATE OWNERSHIP

Private owners of collections from colonial areas and dealers can be found in all continents, and also in former colonies. Africa, Asia, Latin America and other places outside the traditional art market countries in Europe and North America have their own big collectors and dealers. This chapter focuses, however, on auction houses, dealers and private owners in the Netherlands and Belgium. They range from family members with a few colonial objects and hucksters in garages to chic dealers and the royal houses of the two countries. They often operate in silence. What they have ranges from tourist art to masterpieces. Masterpieces in trade and private ownership almost always remain out of sight. Do dealers and private owners ever return objects? Finding an answer to this question turns out to be more difficult than searching for information on the return of public museum collections.

CONTACT WITH DEALERS

From the moment I started to investigate the illicit trade from the relatively poor Global South to the richer North in the early 1990s, I sought contact with dealers and collectors. I spoke to them at TEFAF and other art fairs, the Zavel in Brussels, the Spiegelkwartier in Amsterdam, in the port of Rotterdam, at Schiphol airport and other places, and to some in Northeast and West Africa and South and Southeast Asia. Critical questions about the origin of their merchandise were rarely appreciated, so I learned to wait until they broached the topic themselves and thus learnt they had smuggled in objects from Ghana, Nigeria, Cambodia, Thailand, Afghanistan or Italy. I then searched

for information with which to ascertain whether it was a tall tale or a true one.

My conversation in late 1995 in Rotterdam harbour with the Dutch antiques dealer, discussing the arrival of celestial nymphs from the Angkor region in Cambodia and Buddha heads from Ayutthaya in Thailand, was short and difficult, as he felt that customs did not believe him. A dealer in Antwerp was more generous with information. He explained how to make a fake Tang horse look old (by gluing a leg of a genuine old statue to it and only letting authenticators test the age of this leg). In Mali, a man showed how he faked old statues (by leaving newly made ones lying around for two years in all weathers). A British dealer and his Swiss colleague tried to win me over to their views in a penetrating (white wine-fuelled) way. They valued their own insights over those of museum experts, because 'they knew how the art world really worked'. They disliked treaties, laws and regulations that restricted their trade and were sceptical about the ability of countries of origin to preserve objects. A few dealers displayed something from their private collections in their homes or in the backrooms of their businesses. Sometimes I felt a bit dizzy but did not dare ask how they had acquired it. I would throw out the bait, but they wouldn't bite.

EARLY SPOILS OF WAR AND GRAVE ROBBERY

From the end of the sixteenth century, stories have circulated about trading and exchanging special objects and manuscripts between private parties. The Republic was not ruled by a monarch, but by well-to-do families: powerful administrators, wealthy merchants, prominent physicians and others. They had colonial 'exotica' in their collections, though they were less than the paintings, sculptures, coins, manuscripts and miniatures by European artists.

One of the first major 'exotica' collectors was the Enkhuizen-based physician Bernardus Paludanus (1550–1633). Besides dried plants, stuffed animals and dried fish, he had weapons, clothing and decorative objects from colonial regions. How the seafarers and explorers who supplied them to him acquired them is unknown.

Thanks to an old pen-and-ink drawing, we know about some acquisitions made by the prominent Amsterdammer Nicolaes Witsen (1641–1717). The exhibition *Asia > Amsterdam – Luxury in the Golden Age* (October 2016–January 2017) in Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, showed a

picture of the Hindu god Ganesha: 'From 1716 […] artist unknown […] from the collection of Nicolaes Witsen', it said. The man owned many Asiatics – according to a contemporary, perhaps the most important collection in Northern Europe. His house was a 'museum' (literally, a temple of the muses) full of statues of gods, relics, miniatures, drawings, prints, jewellery, ceramics, maps and books. So said the catalogue of the 1992 exhibition *The World within Reach* in the Amsterdam Museum. The pen-and-ink drawing also hung there.

In 1691, while fighting a ruler of Malabar in southern India, VOC soldiers took sixteen Hindu statues from a temple. A few years earlier they had unearthed five other idols and a jar of silver coins near a fort in the same area. Witsen acquired them all. Although he had never been to Asia, he wanted to know a lot about it and published his knowledge. He had his publications decorated with drawings, such as the one of the Ganesha statue. They are kept in the library of the University of Amsterdam. The library also has a print of Witsen's most precious gem: an old Chinese mirror from a grave in Siberia. It was broken, because Witsen had dropped it once. After his death, everything was auctioned. A copy of the auction catalogue has survived, but all traces of the statues and the mirror have disappeared.

Witsen's Hindu statues were spoils of war; the mirror was grave robbery. Of course, not all objects from colonial areas were acquired in a dubious manner. Sometimes exotica were there for the taking, sometimes they were traded, but the number of 'conquests, raids and hijackings' that yielded 'all possible goods' from that early period should not be underestimated. (Noordegraaf and Wijsenbeek-Olthuis, 'De wereld ontsloten', 1992, p. 46)

THE ROLE OF ELITE FAMILIES

Historian Liesbet Nys of the Catholic University of Leuven ('Private Property in the Museum Age', 2005) has conducted research on private colonial collections in Belgium after 1850. The first collectors of Congo pieces were aristocrats, members of the *haute bourgeoisie* and scientists and military personnel with ties to the colonial regime. They kept what they collected at home and, when King Leopold II appointed a central location for everything they collected, they also started donating objects to what would become the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren. Yet much remained in private hands – no one knows *how* much.

After 1920, a group of middle-class collectors emerged, alongside artists and others, some with and many without direct links to Belgian Congo. When independence was declared in 1960, some colonials returned with many pieces in their luggage. According to the Brussels expert and dealer Marc Leo Felix ('Kunst uit Mayombe', 2010, p. 65), these included little of value and were often 'indigenous art made by natives on the instructions of the missionaries'.

DR Congo was certainly not the only hunting ground for Belgian collectors. China was another. Although Belgium was not part of the eight-country alliance that defeated the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, it did do business with the Chinese government. Its representative in Peking, Maurice Joostens (1862–1910), 'saved' objects during the rebellion. In 1902, he donated two of them to Museum Plantin-Moretus in Antwerp – logs with Chinese texts. In 2016, historian Gert Huskens had already written about this 'rescue action' (see *Maurice Joosten*, 2016, p. 32). When, in June 2021, I asked the museum for further information (had the 'saving' perhaps been 'looting'?), it reported that it had begun 'internally reviewing' how to proceed with these objects with 'possibly contested provenance'.

Stadsmuseum Ghent (STAM) once received over 2,000 Chinese objects and coins from Adolphe Spruyt (1871–1956). Like the logs, they have amputated biographies. Early in the twentieth century, Spruyt worked as a doctor among Belgian and other foreign technicians in China who built the Pien-Lo railway in Ho-Nan province. Many pieces in his collection were from the nineteenth century but he also had older ones, and so far no research has been done into how he acquired them, STAM let me know. The book *A Belgian Passage to China (1870–1930)* (2020), about the construction of tram and railway lines, also pays attention to Spruyt's collection but not to its provenance.

Dutch diplomats and soldiers were also active in China, and some collected. One famous object is an antique vase, bought by Captain Haro baron van Hemert tot Dingshof after the Boxer Rebellion from 'Chinese who sold their art treasures out of necessity'. At an auction in 2008, this blue and white ornament fetched its descendants EUR 23 million (Mostert and Van Campen, *Silk Thread*, 2015, pp. 213, 217). The buyer? A Chinese collector.

Yet in the Netherlands, it is colonial elite families and their collections from the Dutch East Indies who attract most attention. Thanks

to a high-ranking post in the administration, the army or the companies, some were able to afford a large canal-side or country house and managed to acquire valuable pieces. According to researcher Caroline Drieënhuizen, whom I asked about this, these families 'kept some of it themselves, as a reminder of their own life in the colony or that of their family. This means that there are still objects in the families' homes: displayed on windowsills and highlighted in showcases, but sometimes also tucked away deep in old, dark ships' chests or forgotten between old furniture in dusty attics.'

She also notes that private individuals donated objects to museums and that some of the objects 'had clearly been acquired without the consent of the owners at the time. When villages and towns were taken by Dutch troops, the local population would sometimes offer the military objects as a gesture of reconciliation (how voluntary was that, by the way?), but more often than not the military would take objects as spoils of war without asking.' An example was the noble officer Henri Quarles van Ufford (1822–1868), who appropriated a painting and some beautiful textiles from the ruined palace of Singaraja during the war against Bali in June 1848. In 1971, his family donated them to Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden.

In letters from yet another collector, Drieënhuizen discovered 'that there was a lively trade in objects looted during the many acts of war in the Indonesian archipelago. At the 1878 World Fair in Paris, one of the "sugar lords" of the Van den Broek d'Obrenan family exhibited wooden figurines and textiles from Bali. They came from the destroyed palace of the Sultan of Buleleng in 1848: according to the story, they had been hanging around the Sultan's bed. How the sugar lord in question got hold of them is (still) unclear.'

TWO COLLECTORS' ASSOCIATIONS

The fact that the Netherlands never had long-standing colonial possessions in Africa and almost no elite families had lived there is reflected in private Africa collections in the Netherlands. Several dealers I spoke to about Africana emphasised that Dutch collectors are frugal and do not want to spend much money on them. Most collectors avoid pieces with an extensive pedigree and lots of documentation, because they are considered more expensive.

This was confirmed at the exhibition *Van Verre Volken Thuis, Kunst in de Kamer* (At home with faraway peoples: Art in the room) (Octo-

ber 2008–January 2009) in the Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal. There, members of the Association of Friends of Ethnography (VVE, founded in 1983) showed objects. There were dozens of items, but the standard of the objects was moderate. Perhaps the very first sentence in the catalogue, written by the museum's director Ineke Eisenburger and VVE chair Siebe Rossel, was typical: 'The morning paper lies on an Ashanti stool, the television is crowned with statuettes, large iron coins adorn the windowsill and on the cupboard masks adorn the walls as if they were meant to be castles' (in Rossel and Wentholt, *Tribal Treasures*, 2008, p. 9).

Such a sentence is hard to imagine in the circles of the much older association of Asiatics collectors in the Netherlands, the Koninklijke Vereniging van Vrienden van de Aziatische Kunst (Royal Association of Friends of Asian Art; hereafter, KVVAK). The association, founded in 1918, attracted colonial officials and entrepreneurs in the Dutch East Indies at first, and later other people as well. Thanks to wealthy donors, the KVVAK has been purchasing objects and building up its own collection since 1928. The approximately 1,850 objects of the collection, I learn from the association's website, are explicitly not 'ethnographic utensils', but 'works of art made for their own culture in the countries of origin'. So they are neither exported art nor utensils, but 'unique works of art that are also regarded as being of the highest standard in Asia itself'. From 1952 onwards, the KVVAK has been lending its collection to the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, where a selection can be seen in the Asian Pavilion.

QUESTION MARKS OVER A BUDDHA'S HEAD

I want to dwell on one particular KVVAK statue: the Buddha's head, inventory number AK-MAK-239, which according to the museum website 'probably comes from one of the 504 Buddha statues' in the Borobudur temple complex on Java. Together with other Buddha heads from Borobudur present in the Netherlands, currently housed in the nearby Tropenmuseum among other places, it was on the wish list of objects that Indonesia had drawn up for the restitution negotiations with the Netherlands in 1975. In the *Joint Recommendations* of 1975, the Netherlands had promised to help find the current owners. Had smuggling actually taken place here? And what does a museum do when there is such a suspicion?

LEFT: *The heads of many Buddhas from the Borobudur temple complex have disappeared and only the torsos have been preserved. © Jos van Beurden;* RIGHT: *In 1975 Indonesia asked the Netherlands for help in returning Buddha heads from the Borobudur. This sculpture is in the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam and owned by the KVVAK. © Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (AK-MAK-239)*

Asked for more information about the origins of the eighth- or ninth-century Buddha's head, the KVVAK board says that the earliest knowledge about it dates back to the early 1920s. Back then it was in the possession of banker and music historian D.F. Scheurling. There is still a photograph of the statue on the chimney at his home in The Hague. He had probably bought it in the Netherlands. A year after his death in 1927, his son sold it to banker Willy van der Mandele. The latter then lent it to the KVVAK and in 1948 converted that loan into a gift. In 1972, the society gave the statue on long-term loan to the Rijksmuseum.

At the request of the KVVAK board, Rijksmuseum historian William Southworth looked into my information request. According to him, a Buddha's head was sometimes deliberately removed from the torso. Sometimes it had broken off by itself and had been lying on the ground somewhere and someone had taken it away. Because so many heads have disappeared and the accompanying torsos have been flattened by years of erosion, it is very hard to determine which torso such a head comes from. This had already been proven by an experiment in 1977. So much for the KVVAK's explanation.

Southworth added a list of consulted sources to his report. Strikingly enough, the list does not include the lecture delivered by art historian Jan Fontein at the KVVAK's New Year's meeting in 2005 ('De vroege jaren', 2005). Fontein worked for the KVVAK for a long time and later for the museum. Shortly after joining the association, he had told his audience in this speech, he had to 'go to the Vermeer & Co. bankers' office', the bank of KVVAK president Willy van der Mandele, to pick up 'a stone head' that Mr. and Mrs. Van der Mandele wanted to donate to the KVVAK. Van der Mandele had told him that he had recently received a visitor who had offered him the head for a remarkably low price. The visitor had claimed that he had bought it from someone who had gone bankrupt and, moreover, that 'the head was under a curse'.

Van der Mandele took the head home to surprise his wife, Alida van der Mandele-Vermeer, but she had reacted immediately and did not want it in her house under any circumstances. Fontein did not mention it, but perhaps her reaction had something to do with Alida's background – she had an Indonesian grandmother and might have been sensitive to such a curse. The head immediately went back into the boot of the car and the decision to donate it to the association was quickly made. When I submitted Fountein's text to Southworth, he disputed that Van der Mandele bought the statue from an anonymous seller. He writes that he is certain it was the son of D.F. Scheurling. He has no knowledge of a curse on the head.

It is striking that neither the KVVAK, nor Jan Fontein, nor the Rijksmuseum mentioned the wish Indonesia expressed in 1975 to recover the Borobudur Buddha head, let alone that the Netherlands has failed to honour the international agreement to search for it.

What makes this case even more charged is that the Rijksmuseum is not the owner of the Buddha's head; the KVVAK is. Private collectors and associations of friends sometimes have an influence on the policy of 'their' museum that is invisible to the outside world. Their importance is shown in a survey carried out for the Dutch Council for Culture (Raad voor Cultuur, *Advies over de omgang met koloniale collecties*, 2020, p. 132): three out of five museums with colonial collections depend to some degree on private collectors. Associations of friends, lenders and donors demonstrate a museum's support in society. They can help with the acquisition of new objects, and some members have ties to big funds and municipal or national politicians.

THE FUTURE OF THE CHRISTOFFEL COLLECTION

The MAS in Antwerp also houses a private collection that raises questions. It was brought together by someone considered the 'most highly decorated army officer' in the Netherlands, but who in the Dutch East Indies was called a 'bloodhound': Hans Christoffel, a soldier of Swiss descent. According to former MAS researcher and co-curator of the display of the Christoffel collection, Willy Durinx ('De havik wordt een duif', 2019, p. 473), Christoffel joined the Royal Dutch East Indies Army in 1886 aged twenty. Soon he was put in charge of the notorious Tiger Unit, which tracked down anti-colonial fighters. During his work, he collected war flags – some still bearing traces of blood – swords, rifles, krisses and other trophies. He also appropriated objects from houses that villagers, in fear of his arrival, had abandoned.

Something rarely seen with colonial ex-soldiers happened in Christoffel's case: after his return to Europe in 1909, the decorated bloodhound renounced his violent past. He burned his archive and his family could barely prevent him from throwing five battle flags from Aceh and the Batak region into the fire as well. In order to find peace, he gave his collection, then numbering twelve hundred objects on loan to the city of Antwerp, where he lived. In 1958, the city bought the entire collection. It has remained the owner ever since.

The municipal MAS, which manages the Christoffel collection on behalf of the city of Antwerp, knows that several objects were acquired in a disreputable manner. When weighing up the situation, it opts for 'a cautious ethics', not initiating restitution itself, but remaining open to 'possible questions from partners in the areas of origin'. For some people, that does not go far enough. Researcher Paul Catteeuw wonders whether the museum could not think more proactively about returning those battle flags, as a sign of goodwill. All five flags are war booty. Can't the museum just give them back, if the city of Antwerp agrees?

Catteeuw asks another question – the difficult question of, in the event of a return, to whom the flags should go. If Museum Nasional in Jakarta wants them, that might lead to irritation in Aceh and the Batak region. But, he wonders, do these regions have museums that can preserve such old and fragile pieces (Catteeuw, 'Teruggave mogelijk?', 2019, p. 489)? Another question arises, perhaps an odd one: what would Hans Christopher think about restitution nowadays? Would the pigeon-turned-hawk like to talk to those involved in Indonesia? With the descendants of his victims?

Battle flag, captured around 1900 in Indonesia, Christoffel collection. © Collectie Stad Antwerpen – MAS, picture by Michel Wuyts and Bart Huysman (AE.1996.0012.0001)

SUCCESSFUL RETURN BY A PRIVATE INDIVIDUAL

Erica Baud and Michel Baud are fifth-generation descendants of Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies Jean Chrétien Baud (1789–1859). In 2014, they decided it was time to part with some objects from their ancestor's collection, which were in Erica's attic. J.C. Baud was the administrator who had received lances from local princes during an inspection trip after the Java War in the early nineteenth century. These are now in Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

The Bauds approached Harm Stevens, curator of history at the Rijksmuseum, to investigate the provenance and possible return of the lances. Stevens soon established that the most important object was a pilgrim's staff – 1.4 metres long, with silver fittings and a wrought-iron disc-shaped blade – which had once belonged to none other than Prince Diponegoro, the hero of the Java War. In 1834, another prince, once Diponegoro's fellow combatant but later a defector to the colonial administration, had turned the staff over to the Governor-General. His servant is said to have found it. So it was not 'loot', but a 'gift' from a defector, and this, as Stevens added, was from the final phase of the terrible Java War, 'when the colonial troops were on Diponegoro's heels' (*Bitter Spice*, 2015, p. 161).

At the opening of the exhibition *A Prince for All Seasons: Diponegoro in the Memory of*

Nation, from Raden Saleh to the Present in Jakarta, on 5 February 2015, Baud's descendants handed over the staff to the Indonesian authorities. It was a solemn moment. The images of an emotional Minister Anies Baswedan of Education and Culture touched viewers as much as the argument which motivated Michel Baud to make the transfer: 'As heirs of J.C. Baud, who played such an important role in what was then a Dutch colony in a very different historical era, we realised the importance of this find and the responsibility it gave us. We discussed its significance and the context in which it was given to our ancestor. The possibility soon arose of returning the staff to the Indonesian people. The decision was made and this exhibition seemed the most appropriate time to hand over the heirloom.' The Bauds simply felt that the staff belonged there rather than in a museum in the Netherlands, let alone in a private attic.

The argument of Baud's descendants is similar to that of Adrian Mark Walker, who brought Benin objects back to the Oba in 2014 and in 2019. His grandfather, Captain Herbert Walker, had pocketed them in 1897 – 'busy packing loot', he had noted in his diary (Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, 2020, p. 142). In the weeks leading up to the 2014 handover, television stations and posters in the centre of Benin City and near the palace

Director Intian Mardiana of Museum Nasional in Jakarta and Michel Baud and Erica Baud sign for the handing over of Prince Diponegoro's pilgrim's staff. © Erasmus House, Jakarta

Prince Diponegoro's pilgrim's staff, from the private collection of the descendants of Governor-General J.C. Baud. © Erasmus Huis, Jakarta

had announced it. As a result, Walker's grandson Adrian Mark had felt even more 'that it was the right thing to do', Peju Layiwola recorded at the time.

The privately owned Buddha head from the Borobudur temple and Diponegoro's pilgrim's staff raise the question of whether there are other objects held by private individuals that may be of more value to the country of origin than to their current owners. Are the governments of Belgium and the Netherlands prepared to call on those owners to act?

THE BELL OF THE JAFFNA FORT

Compared to London, Paris and Brussels, the art market in Amsterdam is modest in size. Yet the Spiegelkwartier is popular with lovers of art, antiquities and curiosities. At twenty-nine, Dickie Zebregs is perhaps the youngest art dealer there. In a conversation I have with him, he sees himself as 'standing between two generations: that of the old baby boomers and that of the Gen-Z youth, born between 1996 and 2015'. As a millennial, he feels called 'to educate people about contemporary and institutional racism and thus also about colonial (looted) art'. He does this through social media and other modern platforms: 'I am a dealer but I

Should this bronze bell be in the old VOC fort at Jaffna in Sri Lanka or in the Netherlands? © Zebregs&Röell, Amsterdam, https://www.zebregsroell.com/

also actively look for buyers in the countries where the objects come from.' According to Zebregs, 'in colonised countries there is a growing interest in this shared history', and here he references the restoration of the Batavia fort in Indonesia and the fort in Jaffna in Sri Lanka. In his shop are colonial Dutch cabinets and other pieces that were made for Europeans.

An object that clearly comes from an old colony is a bell whose rim is engraved with the text: 'JAFFNAPATNAM Aº 1747 VOC'. The bell, which hangs from a metal stand over half a metre high, probably served to call people to work or as an alarm bell. Zebregs says it was 'acquired at an auction in England. It is from the family estate of the Scottish Stewart family and originally came from the fort in Jaffna. 1747 must be the year it was cast in what was then Ceylon. It probably came into the possession of Captain James Stewart. He died in Colombo in 1843 and it is possible that his children took the bell with them to England.'

Is the bell Dutch or Sri Lankan heritage? There is something to be said for both arguments, says Zebregs. Nevertheless, he wants to do his utmost to get the bell back into the Jaffna fort. 'As a dealer, I am in a quandary. If a buyer comes here and pays full price, that's fine, but if someone from Sri Lanka buys it for Jaffna, they get a discount. And then I will bring it myself.' So far, however, no interested party from either Sri Lanka or the Netherlands has come forward.

PAINTINGS FROM ROYAL PROPERTY

European royal courts have always been collectors of colonial collections, including spoils of war. The French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte took numerous cultural and historical objects with him from his campaigns in Egypt and Syria (1798–1801). After his defeat, he had to surrender some of them to Great Britain. The British royal family has countless objects that were taken after defeating opponents in China, Ethiopia, Ghana, the Kingdom of Benin in Nigeria or Tibet (Sanghera, *Empireland*, 2021, chapter 4). To date, the family has not complied with requests to return any of them.

The situation is somewhat different for the royal families in the Netherlands and Belgium. In the archives of the Belgian royal family, I was told by the State Archives of Belgium, hardly anything can be found about colonial collections from Central Africa. Given the collecting habits of King Leopold II, you might expect that, but his collection is in the museum in Tervuren. Prince Albert, who succeeded Leopold, was offered a mother-and-child sculpture during a Congo trip in 1909. The woodcarvers had done their best to make it conform to European taste and given it a wooden pedestal fitted with a glass bell jar (Felix, 'Kunst uit Mayombe', 2010, p. 63).

Stories about the Dutch royal family and colonial collections are abundant. Most are about receiving gifts, but only a few about giving back an object. They offer a mix of noble deeds and painful fuss and begin with a Javanese painting talent. Raden Syarif Bustaman Saleh arrived in the Netherlands in 1829 (Wassing-Visser, *Koninklijke Geschenken*, 1995, pp. 86–93; Ardiyansyah, 'Restitution and national Heritage', 2021, p. 164). Thanks to a grant from the Dutch crown and other royal courts in Europe, he studied and worked in the Netherlands and other European countries for several decades and became one of Indonesia's best-known painters. In gratitude for this scholarship, he gave away twelve large

paintings to the kings William I, II and III. They became part of the private collection of the Dutch royal family.

In 1970, Queen Juliana donated two of them to President Suharto during his state visit to the Netherlands: *Buffalo Hunting on Java* from the Huis ten Bosch castle, and *Fight with a Lion* from the Noordeinde Palace, both in The Hague. Suharto had asked for them, just as Queen Juliana had indicated that she would like to receive a golden evening bag from him and Prince Bernard a smoking set in Yogya silver. In 1977, the Queen donated another painting by Raden Saleh: the canvas *Capture of Diponegoro on 28 March 1830*. It was obviously important for Indonesia. It had hung in the Royal Palace in Amsterdam and in Museum Bronbeek.

One of the other canvases, *Life and Death – Fight between a Lion, a Lioness and a Buffalo*, was destroyed by fire when it was shown at the Colonial Exhibition in Paris in 1931. Over the years, several others were auctioned. The last time one was auctioned, in 2014, caused quite a stir. The 12 square metre canvas *Boschbrand* (Forest Fire) had been rolled up in the attic of Palace Het Loo in Apeldoorn for decades. In 2006, thanks to the detective work of art historian Marie-Odette Scalliet of Leiden University, it was discovered. The painting was badly damaged and took years to restore. In 2014, the royal family sold the canvas to the highest bidder, the National Gallery in Singapore, where it became a showpiece. According to the Rijksvoorlichtingsdienst (National Information Service), the royal house was free to sell this once-gifted canvas. But museums and the media in the Netherlands thought differently: it was part of our history with Indonesia and should therefore have stayed here. There was also interest in it in Indonesia, but the necessary amount could not be raised there.

This state of affairs raises the question of whether members of the royal house have a moral duty to decide otherwise. The donated works of art are legally part of their private property, no doubt. But in the event that they wish to dispose of one, should they perhaps think less about money and more about the public interest and foreign sensitivities? This question arose again in 2019, when Princess Christina had a drawing by Peter-Paul Rubens auctioned at Sotheby's in New York. Once again, there was a commotion and once again, Dutch museums missed out. This prompted the government to ask the Council for Culture for advice on how to better protect privately owned cultural goods.

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As in most other countries in the Global North, private owners of colonial collections in the Netherlands and Belgium come in all shapes and sizes. Most show little interest in the subject of restitution. At this point in time, countries of origin that want to receive something cannot expect too much from them. The self-interest of the owners and their (pre) judgements about the museum infrastructure of the source countries weigh heavily. The private lenders and donors of objects in Museum Nusantara offered an example. They, too, wanted nothing to do with returns.

The relationship between dealers and collectors on the one hand and museums on the other is complicated. The descendants of some collectors donated collections to museums, but often without documentation. This remained in the private archives or was lost. Provenance research, aimed at the possibility of restitution, then becomes difficult. Museums in Belgium and the Netherlands that depend heavily on collectors have an interest in keeping them on board. Asking difficult questions thus becomes difficult. Still, the restitution debate about colonial collections that is currently taking place in the museum world, the media and public debate does not leave the private art sector unaffected.