



MUSEUM DE LAKENHAL PRESENTS

GLOBAL IMAGINATIONS

DE MEELFABRIEK LEIDEN | 27.06.15 - 04.10.15 | GLOBALIMAGINATIONS.COM

SAMPLE CHART OF THE ENTIRE WORLD

Jori Zijlmans

INTRODUCTION. THE LEIDEN COLLECTION

The world wide web and increasing aviation options have made people in today's world more closely connected than ever thought possible. For centuries, the only available knowledge about distant countries came the stories of a small group of travellers and the objects they brought home. The Leiden Collection is representative of these earliest collectors; since its foundation in 1575, the University has played a leading role in the collecting and exhibiting of new knowledge and strange objects. The recently acquired objects and the often spectacular stories attached to them were presented as a sample chart of all the strange marvels of the world. They were viewed as a source of knowledge made available to both the scholarly world and the rest of the public.

Throughout the nineteenth century this holistic collection was increasingly partitioned into a number of separate collections, which were exhibited in independent (national) museums. These artistic, cultural and natural treasures from all over the world and from all periods in history were also systematically studied, catalogued and documented by Leiden's scholars. While national collections in other countries are typically all found in the nation's capital, this Dutch approach to museum collections – which has its roots in local identities – has resulted in a decentralized appearance and is spread out over various cities.

This essay focuses on the earliest history of the Leiden Collection and describes it as a single entity. Worthy of note is that this used to be a single collection of 'extraordinary objects' described as 'curiosities' by its contemporaries. The collection wouldn't be divided into a number of categories until the nineteenth century, when each section grew into separate archaeological, natural or anthropological museums in their own right. This scientific phenomenon mirrored similar developments throughout the western world. Finally, at the end of the essay, we will discuss the possibility of overcoming the boundaries between the separate specialisms. In other words, how would a unified Leiden Collection function and what could it mean for researchers, artists and visitors?

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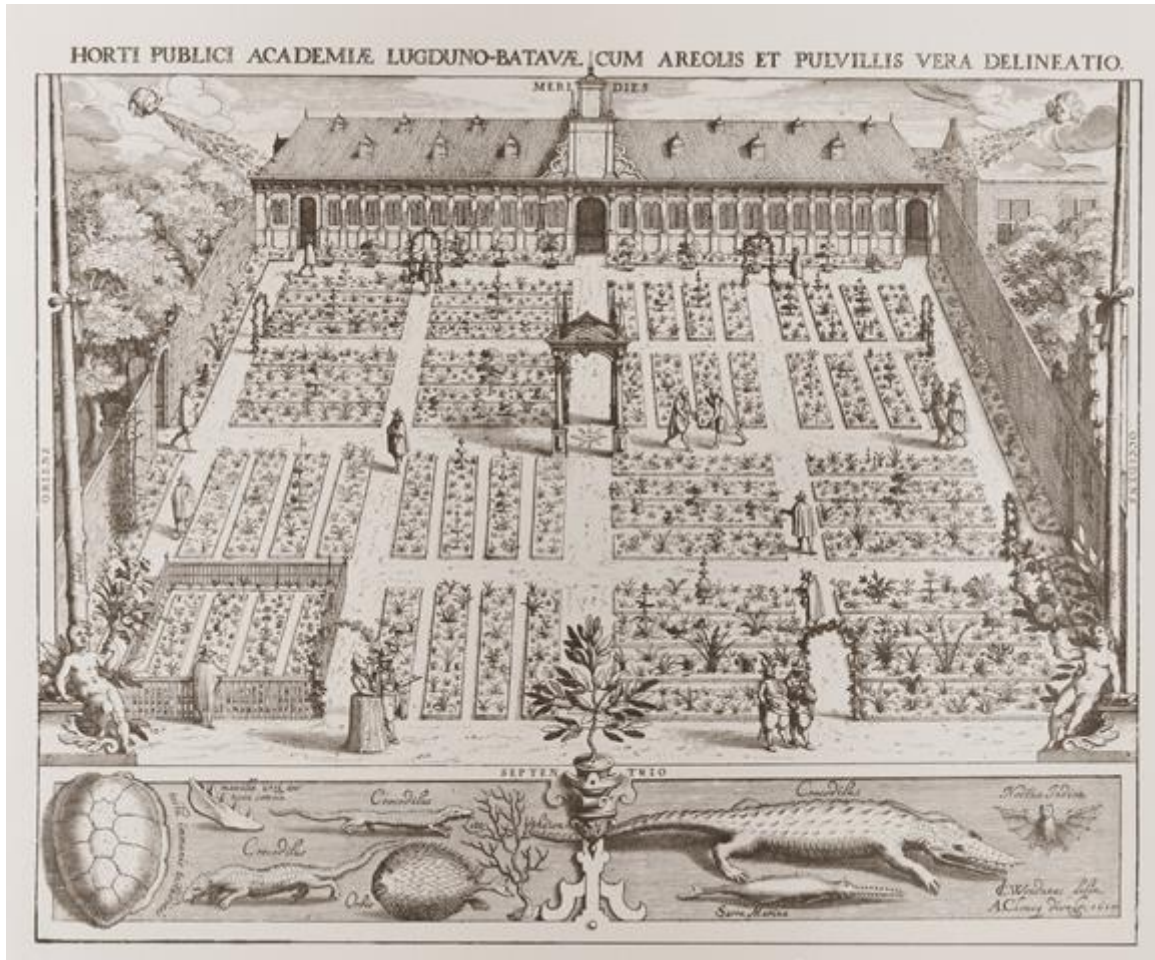




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LEIDEN'S HORTUS BOTANICUS ANNO 1610 (WOUDANUS)

ORIGINS OF THE COLLECTION

Leiden's entire museum collection can be traced back to the last decades of the sixteenth century and is the oldest in the Netherlands. It is currently kept and exhibited in The National Museum Of Antiquities, the Hortus Botanicus, Museum Volkenkunde, the Naturalis Biodiversity Center, Museum Bourhaave, the Special Collections of the University Library Leiden, the Sieboldhuis and Museum De Lakenhal.

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De diversity of this collection is closely related to the foundation and goals set by the first university in the Northern Netherlands in 1575. The revolt against Spain necessitated the foundation of a Dutch university, because the traditional universities attended by Dutch students (Orléans, Paris, Louvain) were located in hostile areas loyal to the Roman Catholic Church. The Protestant character of this new Dutch university enabled it to become the antithesis to the traditional university in Louvain, which had been the intellectual capital of the Low Countries for more than a century and half. Leiden, in contrast, was relatively tolerant, open-minded and emphasized the practical sciences. The experimental education popularized in Leiden was facilitated by a botanical garden, a university library, an anatomical theatre and an engineering college. These innovating institutes began assembling very diverse and unusual collections 'to serve a general purpose'. They were thus not just studied and admired by curious students, but also by interested burgers and tourists. The Hortus Botanicus and the Theatrum Anatomicum, located in the chapel of the Faliede Begijnhof on the Rapenburg, were home to a large number of curiosities, including: Egyptian mummies, Roman statues, dried human hides, animal skeletons, skulls from Java, puppets from Japan and a large number of chirurgical instruments. As trade networks continued to expand all over the world, more and more of these 'naturalia, ethnographica, and antiquities' were brought to the university. Researchers, students and tourists from all over Europe travelled to Leiden to marvel over these collections. The Leiden Collection introduced them to hitherto unknown and faraway worlds.

HISTORY OF THE CITY

But the university wasn't the only one who began collecting in the sixteenth century: the city of Leiden itself did the same. However, the burgomasters were not interested in scientific research or public demonstrations, but in works of art or objects significant to Leiden's own history. The Last Judgement (1526-1527) by Lucas of Leyden and the two triptychs by Cornelis Engebrechtsz. already interested a lot of people when they were used as altar pieces in the Pieterskerk and the Mariënpoel monastery before the Reformation. All were removed in 1566 to protect them from the wave of iconoclasm known as the Beeldenstorm, which raged throughout the Low Countries that year. Some years later, they were given a place of honour in the city hall on the Breestraat, alongside an exhibition about the relief of the Siege of Leiden on 3 October 1574. These carefully exhibited secular relics were intended to remind visitors and tourists of the

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city's heroic resistance against an army of Spanish besiegers. This municipal collection grew remarkably throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, spurring the establishment of Leiden's own municipal museum in 1874, following the example of Dordrecht, Haarlem and Utrecht. The Lakenhal, a seventeenth-century urban palace, was chosen to house the collection.

LOST WORLDS

In 1622 the university added a collection of rare antiquities from Egypt to their anatomical theatre. Prize of the collection was a mummy in a sarcophagus, complete with an extensive text on the medicinal feats of the ancient Egyptians. Leiden's archaeological collection was later further extended with a legate of Greek and Roman sculptures exhibited of the orangery in the Hortus Botanicus. After 1818, these rarities and sculptures were moved to the 'Archeological Cabinet of the College' – which would later become The National Museum Of Antiquities – led by professor C. J. Ch. Reuvens. He endeavoured to systematically organize King William I's tremendous collection mania, and in doing so created an academic collection of international standing. Despite this ongoing specialization, the exhibitions were still very messy by today's standards. After moving from one place to another throughout Leiden, the museum moved to the location where it was started in 1920: the Hof van Zessen, a former monastery complex on the Rapenburg and the Houtstraat. There, the collection would continue to expand and specialize thanks to scientific research and archaeological digs throughout the world. Eventually, plaster casts, coins, medals and ethnographic objects were removed from the collection and incorporated into other museums.

DISTANT WORLDS

In the seventeenth century, visitors of the anatomical theatre would also come across curiosities that we today would label as ethnographic or anthropological. Unfortunately, these objects have not – for as far as we know – survived. The basis for the current collection was made by army physician Ph. F. B. von Siebold, who began assembling a large collection of functional and artistic objects during his stay in Deshima (Nagasaki), Japan, from 1823 to 1830. Upon returning to Leiden, he transformed his home on the Rapenburg into a museum – the current Museum Het Sieboldhuis. Not wanting to limit himself to Japan, he strived to establish a large museum where ethnographic objects from all corners of the overseas empire could be exhibited. This would

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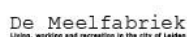
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enable the study of 'man in his many developments in distant realms'. This ambition was finally realized in 1883, when the Koninklijk Kabinet van Zeldzaamheden (the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities) in The Hague was closed and its collection moved to the Rijks Ethnografisch Museum (National Ethnographic Museum) on the Breestraat in Leiden. Over the decades that followed, its collection continued to expand. Expeditions in Indonesia, for example, brought numerous objects and more knowledge back to Leiden, while collection policy also shifted its focus towards the Pacific, Africa, America and regions such as Tibet and Siberia. The increasing size of the collection necessitated a larger museum, and in 1933 the former Academic Hospital on the Steenstraat was repurposed to house it. Two years later, its name officially changed to Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, which in turn became Museum Volkenkunde in 2007. In 2013, it joined forces with the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam and the Africa Museum in Berg en Dal to become the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen (National Museum of World Cultures). Together, the three museums house 400,000 objects and collaborate on areas such as research, public policy and education. Thanks to the fusion, the museum has become part of the international top of its field.

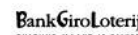
Alongside the objects from different cultures, the university has also been collecting 'natural history from distant lands' since its foundation. These were exhibited in the buildings alongside the Hortus Botanicus, a collection that was regularly expanded by donations from private collections. In the early nineteenth century, the famous naturalia collection of stadtholder William V was also incorporated into the Leiden Collection. Following the collection of antiquities, the entire natural history collection was moved to the former monastery on the Rapenburg where it was separately exhibited. 'In the service of science and the nation', king William I provided the immense sum of 13,000 guilders to develop this new National Museum of Natural History. As the collection continued to expand and specialize, a special structure was built on the Raamsteeg between 1903 and 1910 to house it. In 1878, the geological and mineralogical sections were transferred to their own national museum on the Garenmarkt. Over a century later, the natural historical, geological and mineralogical collections were again brought together in the Naturalis Biodiversity center. The original scientific goals have been maintained alongside new educational purposes.

As described, the antiquity and natural history collections left the Hortus in the early nineteenth

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century, but these were quickly replaced with a remarkable collection more befitting of the new scientific policies adopted in Leiden at the time. This was the National Herbarium, which had been founded in Brussels in 1829 by King William I. In 1999, the herbaria of Leiden, Utrecht and Wageningen were merged into a single National Herbarium, which has been part of Naturalis since 2010. In that same year, the Zoological Museum Amsterdam was also merged with the Naturalis Biodiversity Center, creating a natural history museum featuring more than 37 million objects. The importance and size of this tremendous collection places Naturalis in the top five of most important natural history museums in the world.

NEARBY WORLDS

The skeletons and chirurgical instruments exhibited in the seventeenth-century anatomical theatre were used during public demonstrations and dissections of executed criminals. These experiments enabled Leiden's visitors to gain a better understanding of man and its Creator, but unfortunately the collection was largely lost in the gunpowder explosion of 1807. Some of the surviving anatomical objects are now exhibited in the Anatomical Museum, housed in the main building of the Leiden University Medical Centre. A reconstruction of the dissection table, complete with stands for students and curious onlookers, can be seen in Museum Boerhaave. This museum opened its doors in 1931 as the Dutch Historical Natural Sciences Museum. The scientific and medical collection itself traces its roots to the Leiden Physics Cabinet, which was founded adjacent to the Hortus in 1675. Scientific demonstrations were given here for both students and interested visitors. In the middle of the eighteenth century, the cabinet grew explosively when the largest collection of scientific instruments – belonging to professor Willem Jacob's Gravensande – was purchased. More instruments were added in the twentieth century, including objects from the Physics Laboratory of Noble Prize winner Heike Kamerlingh Onnes who gained fame for turning his lab into the coldest place on earth.

LOST AND CONNECTED WORLDS

In today's globalizing world it has become very normal to share or criticize knowledge, convictions, feelings and habits in all shapes and forms. Knowledge itself is also becoming increasingly specialized and more scientific. That trend can be traced back to the eighteenth century, when more and more scientific disciplines developed, each operating separately to gain a better

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understanding of the world around them. Scholars increasingly recognized separate entities that needed to be studied individually. Over time, we have begun to accept and think in theoretical and systematic scientific patterns. This also strongly influenced the Leiden Collection in the nineteenth century, which was increasingly cut up into separate blocks and organized to match new scientific convictions.

It is an interesting thought experiment to think about what would happen if we reinstated the centuries-old links between all those modern disciplines, which were so common in those Cabinets of Curiosity. Is it possible to restore the unity of the complete tangible world a sixteenth-century collector had in his cabinet? For one thing, it would definitely make it easier to see, emphasize and study the similarities between those different worlds, ages and cultures. All those different museums and scientific disciplines could bring all that knowledge and all those objects together into a single primordial source. This would enable us to capture a glimpse of the enchantment and wonder felt by the earliest collectors and scholars when confronted with all those peoples, animals and phenomena. Visitors of museums could become familiar with the vastness of the knowledge and objects available in today's world, enabling them to find order and meaning in a new, strange environment that needs to be studied again. Forgetting scientific classifications, they would be able to make new connections and share their experiences. After all, experimental multidisciplinary presentations encourage us to freely find meaningful, considered responses to the familiar and unfamiliar around and inside of us. This, too, is one of the purposes of the Global Imaginations exhibition. One of these 'total exhibitions' would help us to openly and inclusively look at the changes, problems, conflicts and challenges that globalization has created.

FURTHER READING

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