

Rijksmuseum laments Dutch failure to return stolen colonial art

Amsterdam gallery in talks with Sri Lanka and Indonesia about returning artefacts

Daniel Boffey *in Brussels*

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The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Photograph: Carolyn Eaton/Moment Editorial/Getty Images

One of the Netherlands' most venerated institutions, the Rijksmuseum, has described the country's failure to return artefacts stolen from former colonies as a "disgrace" as it opened talks with Sri Lanka and Indonesia.

The museum in Amsterdam is discussing the return of around 10 objects to their place of origin but there are thought to be about 1,000 stolen pieces in its collection.

The pioneering move comes amid a debate in museums and galleries across Europe about the provenance of its exhibits.

The Dutch National Museum of World Cultures (NMWC) published guidelines last month for countries who wish to make a claim on stolen art or an artefact of significant cultural significance.

"It's a disgrace that the Netherlands is only now turning its attention to the return of the colonial heritage," Taco Dibbets, the Rijksmuseum's director, told the Dutch newspaper *De Trouw*. "We should have done it earlier and there is no excuse."

The objects likely to be returned to Indonesia and Sri Lanka include a Banjarmasin diamond thought to have been the property of Sultan Panembahan Adam of Banjarmasin, now South Borneo, colonised by the Dutch in 1856, and a ruby-encrusted cannon taken following a military campaign in 1765.

Dibbets said he was starting by sending his head of history, Martine Gosselink, to Sri Lanka to discuss the provenance of some of the 4,000 colonial objects exhibited at the Rijksmuseum.

He said: "It is not possible to arrange matters from the Netherlands. You have to sit down with the people there, see it on a case-by-case basis. Gosselink is also going to Indonesia later this spring. Different factors play a role in every country, with each country is different."

The NMWC guidelines have been criticised for failing to force museums into take preparatory steps ahead of the issuing of claims by former colonial countries.

Jos van Beurden, a researcher at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, said: "The NMWC uses a typical Dutch approach. Even before negotiations have started, conditions are already on the table."

In France, Belgium, Germany and the UK, the debate over colonial artefacts has raged in recent months with varying levels of engagement by implicated museums.

A 108-page report published last November by the French academics Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr on the restitution of African cultural heritage prompted the French president, Emmanuel Macron, to commit to their return.

The Africa museum in Brussels, a former colonial institution, is in talks with the Congolese government about returning objects to be put on display in a new institution being built with funding from the South Korean government.

In Berlin and London, the debate is seemingly less advanced but Monika Grütters, Germany's minister of state for culture, signalled a shift in policy this January.

"Just waiting passively for someone to want something back is not the way to reconcile our colonial past," she said. "We should actively approach the descendants ourselves."

Last October, the British Museum in London launched an initiative intended to tackle the perception that its collections derive solely from looted treasures.

The monthly Collected Histories talks offered information on how artefacts entered the collection. The museum has been criticised for refusing to return a range of looted treasures, including the Parthenon Marbles, Rosetta Stone, and the Gweagal shield.