

Colonial Legacies and Postcolonial Transformations: Traces of Colonial Museums in Indonesia's Historical and Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

Museums in Indonesia play a pivotal role in preserving the nation's history and culture, including those dedicated to the colonial era. Colonial-era museums not only house artifacts and collections that reflect societal life during the period of occupation but also illustrate the social, political, and economic interactions between colonizers and the Indonesian populace. This study aims to explore the role of colonial museums in shaping perceptions of history and national identity in Indonesia, as well as their significance in the nation's collective memory. Employing historical research methods, this article examines the early history of museums in Indonesia, the establishment of scientific institutions underpinning colonial museums, and the functions of key colonial-era museums—such as the National Museum, Aceh Museum, and Zoological Museum—within the context of Dutch colonial governance. The findings reveal that these museums were initially established to serve the scientific research interests of the colonizing powers and to exert control over the natural and cultural resources of the colonized territories. While colonial museums made significant contributions to the advancement of knowledge, they also reflected biased colonial perspectives that reinforced Western dominance. Nevertheless, the legacy of these colonial museums forms the foundation for modern Indonesian museums, which are now more inclusive, educational, and community-engaged in preserving history and culture.

Keywords:

Colonial museums, historical preservation, cultural heritage, national identity

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Introduction

Museums serve as essential institutions for preserving a nation's history and culture. In Indonesia, they function not only as repositories for historical

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artifacts but also as educational platforms and sources of information on socio-cultural developments across eras. One particularly compelling category warranting further investigation is museums focused on the colonial period. Indonesia's colonial era left profound historical imprints with far-reaching impacts on the nation's social, economic, and cultural evolution.¹

Colonial-era museums, which store and exhibit collections from this period, fulfill a dual role: representing past histories while encouraging public reflection on the ramifications of colonization in Indonesia. Their holdings often include documents, artifacts, and dioramas that depict social interactions, political tensions, and the dynamics of daily life under Dutch rule. Through these museums, visitors can not only observe but also contemplate the historical trajectories that have shaped contemporary Indonesian national identity²

Museums represent a vital component of Indonesia's cultural assets. According to data from the Center for Education and Cultural Data and Statistics (2019), there were 435 museums distributed across 34 provinces in Indonesia as of 2018, with the majority located on the island of Java. These museums are managed by both government and private entities, comprising 74 under central government ministries/institutions, 36 under the Indonesian National Armed Forces/Police (TNI/POLRI), 54 under provincial governments, 124 under district/municipal governments, and 147 under private ownership.

Colonial-era museums in Indonesia hold a crucial position in the nation's collective memory, acting as silent witnesses to a history replete with dynamism. As part of the cultural heritage, these institutions preserve not only significant artifacts mirroring societal life during that time but also portray the social, political, and economic relationships between colonizers and the Indonesian people. Their existence provides a window for both domestic and international audiences to gain deeper insights into the challenging and resistance-filled colonial period.

Museums established during the colonial era extend beyond mere storage of historical artifacts or objects; they encapsulate the perspectives and ideologies of colonialism that dominated historical narratives at the time. Many were founded to advance colonial interests, such as immortalizing knowledge about Indonesia's nature, culture, and society through a colonial lens. Today, however, these museums constitute an integral part of Indonesia's rich and complex

¹ Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Direktorat Jenderal Kebudayaan Direktorat Permuseuman, *Museum di Indonesia* (Jakarta: Depdikbud, 1997).

² Moh. Amir Sutaarga, *Pedoman Penyelenggaraan dan Pengelola Museum* (Jakarta: Direktorat Permuseuman Direktorat Jenderal Kebudayaan, Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2016).

historical identity, offering glimpses into how colonial powers viewed and influenced local societies.

Previous research has highlighted the dynamics of museums and colonial memory in Indonesia. Amanda Rath discusses how museums are used to shape national identity through a process of "museumization" that often marginalizes local traditions,³ while Cynthia Scott emphasizes the heritage process in its relationship to the tangible and intangible heritage of Dutch colonialism.⁴ Prianti and Suyadnya outline the need to decolonize museum practices in Java from the perspective of the colonized;⁵ Arainikasih and Hafnidar's study of the Aceh Museum demonstrates the importance of local narratives in challenging colonial legacies.⁶ Nusi Lisabilla highlights the long and unfinished process of decolonizing the Indonesian National Museum,⁷ while Zilberg questions the relevance of museums in Indonesia as colonial relics, while also highlighting the potential of new museums as community centers.⁸ Kate McGregor and Ana Dragojlovic emphasize the complexity of decolonizing memory in Indonesia and the Netherlands through museums, art, and film,⁹ while Ristawati et al. add a legal perspective on cultural heritage protection and the importance of regulation in ensuring colonial collections become not merely relics but living sources of knowledge.¹⁰

³ Amanda Rath, "Cultural Sublimation: The Museumizing of Indonesia," *Southeast Asian Studies: A Journal of the Southeast Asian Studies Student Association* 1, no. 1 (1997), <https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/b9675a27-3a3b-484e-a0c7-4bac3011bc52/content>.

⁴ Cynthia Scott, "Sharing the Divisions of the Colonial Past: An Assessment of the Netherlands-Indonesia Shared Cultural Heritage Project, 2003–2006," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 20, no. 2 (2014): 181–195, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2012.738239>.

⁵ Desi Dwi Prianti and Suyadnya, I Wayan, "Decolonising Museum Practice in a Postcolonial Nation: Museum's Visual Order as the Work of Representation in Constructing Colonial Memory," *Open Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2022): 228-242, <https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2022-0157>.

⁶ Arainikasih, Ajeng, and Hafnidar, "Decolonising the Aceh Museum: Objects, Histories and their Narratives," *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review* 133, no. 2 2018): 105-20, <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.10554>.

⁷ Nusi Lisabilla, "Transformasi Menjadi Museum Nasional Indonesia: Sebuah Dekolonisasi Tanpa Akhir," ICOFOM Study Series (2024): 114-123, <https://doi.org/10.4000/11zlx>.

⁸ Jonathan Zilberg, "Is the Museum in Indonesia an Irrelevant Colonial Relic?" Prepared for the conference Museum of Our Own: In Search of a Local Museology for Asia, Museology Education in Southeast Asia, November 18-20, 2014, https://www.academia.edu/10823483/Is_the_Museum_in_Indonesia_an_Irrelevant_Colonial_Relic.

⁹ Kate McGregor and Ana Dragojlovic, "Decolonising Memory," *Inside Indonesia* 155 (January–March 2024), <https://www.insideindonesia.org/editions/edition-155-jan-mar-2024/decolonising-memory>.

¹⁰ Rosa Ristawati et al., "Constitutional Protection of Cultural Heritage in Indonesia: The Role of Museums in Preserving National Identity and Public Welfare," *Sriwijaya Law Review* 9, no. 1 (2025): 49-70, <https://doi.org/10.28946/slrev.Vol9.Iss1.3348.pp49-70>.

However, these studies have focused more on decolonizing narratives, the relevance of colonial museums, or ethical responsibilities in managing collections, but have not comprehensively addressed how colonial museums in Indonesia function as a collective memory of the nation, shaping national identity while simultaneously harboring colonial biases. Therefore, this article demonstrates that colonial museums served not only as centers for research and exploitation of natural and cultural resources during the colonial period, but also as a foundation for the development of modern museology in Indonesia. A research gap that emerges is the lack of studies linking the museum's colonial function as an instrument of power with its transformation in the post-independence context, particularly how society now reinterprets colonial collections as part of an inclusive and educational cultural heritage.

Furthermore, there is limited research examining the shifting paradigm of museology from a local perspective—namely, how communities surrounding colonial museums participate in the process of historical reinterpretation and cultural preservation. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by emphasizing the importance of viewing colonial museums not merely as relics of the past, but also as spaces for critical dialogue that can enrich historical understanding, strengthen the nation's cultural identity, and encourage the development of more diverse historical narratives. This article explores the role of colonial-era museums in Indonesia in shaping historical perceptions and national identity. It encompasses the background of their establishment and their functions. Understanding these colonial museums is essential for appreciating how a legacy laden with colonial agendas can now contribute to inclusive, critical efforts in historical preservation, thereby enriching societal insights into the nation's historical journey.

Methods

This study employs historical research methods with a library research approach. The historical method was selected because the investigation aims to reconstruct, comprehend, and analyze the development of colonial-era museums in Indonesia, along with the underlying social, political, and ideological contexts. The historical research process in this study encompasses four primary stages: first, heuristics, involving the collection of relevant written sources, including both primary and secondary materials. Primary sources include colonial archives, reports from scientific institutions during the Dutch East Indies era, museum establishment documents, and official colonial government publications. Se-

secondary sources comprise books, journal articles, prior research findings, and historiographical works addressing museum history, colonialism, and cultural policies in Indonesia. Second, source criticism, conducted to evaluate authenticity (external criticism) and content credibility (internal criticism). In this phase, the researcher scrutinizes the authors' backgrounds, colonial interests surrounding source production, and potential ideological biases, particularly in colonial-era materials. Third, interpretation, entailing the analysis of verified historical facts. This process adopts a critical historical perspective to understand museums as institutions of scientific knowledge and instruments of colonial power, as well as how museum-constructed narratives contribute to shaping historical perceptions and the nation's collective memory. Fourth, historiography involves the systematic and analytical narration of research findings. At this stage, the writing not only describes the evolution of colonial museums but also examines their transformation from the colonial period to the post-independence era, as part of the dynamics that shaped Indonesia's national identity.

The Early History of Museums in Indonesia

Before 1945, Indonesia was under Dutch colonial rule, during which the archipelago's abundant natural resources and cultural diversity profoundly influenced colonial policies. These policies were intrinsically linked to efforts to exploit such resources and maintain control over the territory. To facilitate this, colonial authorities conducted extensive research into the natural environment and various aspects of societal life, necessitating the development of infrastructure such as experimental stations and museums.

The emergence of museums in Indonesia can be traced to the late 18th century, coinciding with the rapid advancement of scientific knowledge in Europe. During this period, numerous scientific societies were established across the continent. One notable example is the founding in 1752 of the "De Hollandsche Maatschappij der Wetenschappen" (Holland Society of Sciences) in Haarlem, the Netherlands, which established branches in various Dutch cities. To support scientific progress, these societies created museums and research stations tailored to their respective fields of study.¹¹

This society planned to establish a branch in Batavia (present-day Jakarta). However, scientists supported by key figures in the colonial administration opted to form an independent organization separate from its Dutch counterpart. Consequently, on April 24, 1778, the "Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en

¹¹ R. Tjahjopurnomo, *Sejarah Permuseuman di Indonesia* (Direktorat Jendral Kebudayaan, 2011), 122.

"Wetenschappen" (Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences) was founded in Batavia, with the motto "Ten Nutte van het Algemeen" (For the Public Interest). This semi-official body was led by a directorate comprising several prominent officials from the colonial government. Funding was sourced from member dues, private sector support, and government subsidies.¹²

The institution's objectives were broad, encompassing the advancement of research in various fields, including biology, natural sciences, archaeology, literature, ethnology, history, and the arts, as well as the publication of research findings. A key figure in its establishment was J.C.M. Radermacher, who donated a building on Kali Besar (a historic trading district in old Jakarta) along with scientific equipment, including collections of rocks, mining artifacts, musical instruments, and books. These contributions formed the initial core of the museum's holdings. As the institution grew rapidly, its expanding collection of research objects soon outgrew the Kali Besar building.¹³

In the early 19th century, amid European geopolitical shifts, Dutch colonial governance in Indonesia was briefly supplanted by British rule (1811–1816). Lieutenant Governor-General Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, who also served as the society's directorate chair, constructed a new building at Jalan Majapahit No. 3 in Jakarta, located west of the Merdeka Palace and the State Palace, near Wisma Nusantara. Under British administration, the institution was renamed the "Literary Society."¹⁴ Today, both historic structures have been demolished to make way for road expansions. Although the British interregnum was short-lived, it yielded significant achievements, including the publication of Raffles' *History of Java*, the establishment of the Bogor Botanical Gardens as a center for tropical botany research, and the construction of Fort Marlborough in Bengkulu.

Following the restoration of Dutch authority, the mid-19th century saw increasing specialization in scientific disciplines, particularly in cultural studies and natural sciences. The society reverted to its original name, "Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen," shifting its primary focus to cultural sciences, including linguistics, social sciences, ethnology, archaeology,

¹² Endang Sri Hardiati and Pieter ter Keurs (eds.), *Indonesia: Discovery of the Past* (Amsterdam: Kit Publisher, 2006).

¹³ Bachchan Kumar, "Jakarta as a Cultural City: Challenges and Scope of Development," *Proceedings of the International Seminar Jak_A2014: Jakarta as a City and Dream Architecture_Design_Art + Engineers*, December 1, 2014, <https://teknik.univpancasila.ac.id/arsitektur/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Proceeding-Seminar-Internasional.pdf>.

¹⁴ Agung Jatmiko, "Menilik Sejarah Museum Nasional, Berdiri Sejak Era Kolonial," Katadata, September 17, 2023, <https://katadata.co.id/ekonopedia/sejarah-ekonomi/65066c7d8b550/menilik-sejarah-museum-nasional-berdiri-sejak-era-kolonial>.

and history. Meanwhile, advancements in natural sciences prompted the creation of specialized institutions.

In Batavia, membership grew steadily, interest in cultural fields intensified, and collections expanded significantly, rendering the Majapahit Street building inadequate. In 1862, the Dutch colonial government decided to erect a new structure, completed in 1868 at Jalan Merdeka Barat No. 12. Recognizing its substantial contributions to scientific research, the institution was bestowed the title "Koninklijk Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen" (Royal Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences, or KBGS). The new building transformed it into a significant cultural museum equipped with a comprehensive library.¹⁵ Concurrently, natural science experts founded specialized scientific societies.

Beyond Batavia, the Bogor Botanical Gardens continued to flourish. In 1894, J.C. Koningsberger established the Zoological Museum in Bogor, while Controller Bukit Barisan J.J. Mandeler founded a zoological institution in Bukittinggi. Additionally, on October 28, 1890, a scientific and cultural institution named Radya Pustaka was established in Surakarta, also known as Solo. By 1926, in Batavia, the KBGS's foundational charter underwent revisions, dividing the institution into specialized departments, each with its own leadership.¹⁶ These included linguistics, geography, ethnology, customary law, prehistory, classical archaeology, fine arts, ceramics, and history. Outside Batavia, numerous cultural and natural science associations established museums as hubs for their activities. On May 16, 1929, the Dutch colonial government founded the Geological Museum in Bandung. In Yogyakarta, the Java Instituut was established in 1919, focusing on research into Javanese, Madurese, and Balinese cultures. To accommodate research activities, collections, references, and publications, the Sonobudoyo Museum was built and inaugurated in 1935.¹⁷ In 1918, Mangkunegoro VII founded the Mangkunegoro Museum in Solo. In 1920, architect Ir. H. Maclaine Pont collected prehistoric artifacts and housed them in a building that became the Trowulan Archaeological Museum. Since 1912, various prehistoric finds have been gathered and stored at the Mojokerto

¹⁵ Marasutan Pulungan, "Koninklijk Bataviaasch Genootschap Van Kunsten En Wetenschappen 1923-1942" (Undergraduate Theses, Universitas Sumatera Utara, 2023), <https://repositori.usu.ac.id/handle/123456789/32004>.

¹⁶ Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia, *Inventaris Arsip Koninklijk Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen (KBG), 1778-1962* (Jakarta: ANRI, 2023), <https://anri.go.id/download/inventaris-arsip-koninklijk-bataviaasch-genootschap-van-kunsten-en-wetenschappen-kbg-17781962-1676515353>

¹⁷ Hervina Nurullita, "Belajar di Museum: Koleksi Masa Prasejarah dan Masa Kolonial Museum Blambangan," *Jurnal Dharmabakti Nagri* 1, no. 2 (2023): 65-70, <https://doi.org/10.58776/jdn.v1i2.28>.

Museum. Furthermore, in 1941, the colonial government established the Herbarium Museum in Bogor.

Outside Java, at the initiative of W.F.Y. Kroon, Assistant Resident of Bali, and with support from kings, architectural figures, artists, and community leaders, plans commenced in 1915 to establish an institute-like association complete with a museum. It was completed and inaugurated on December 8, 1932, as the Bali Museum. In 1915, the Dutch military government also founded the Rumoh Aceh Museum. In Bukittinggi, the Rumah Adat Baanjuang Museum was established in 1933. Meanwhile, in North Sumatra, at the initiative of the Simalungun Raja, the Musi Malungun Museum was founded in 1938.

Upon closer examination, the establishment of these institutions and museums—whether in cultural or scientific domains—reveals a deep interconnection with colonial governance. Cultural museums and their research arms served as tools for a deeper understanding of the cultures of colonized peoples, facilitating control. Scientific museums, conversely, were closely tied to the exploitation of natural resources in colonial territories. This approach was part of a broader colonial strategy to sustain dominance, as authorities recognized that comprehending a nation's culture enabled insights into its thought patterns. Critically, this reflects a Eurocentric paradigm where museums functioned not merely as repositories of knowledge but as instruments of imperial power, perpetuating biased narratives that justified colonial exploitation and cultural hegemony. Such institutions, while advancing scientific inquiry, often marginalized indigenous perspectives, underscoring the need for postcolonial reevaluation in contemporary museology.

Major Museums during the Colonial Era

National Museum of Indonesia

The National Museum of Indonesia originated from the establishment of an organization known as the Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences, founded by the Dutch government on April 24, 1778. At that time, Europe was undergoing an intellectual revolution during the Enlightenment era, where societies increasingly emphasized scientific thought and knowledge production. In 1752, the De Hollandsche Maatschappij der Wetenschappen (Dutch Society of Sciences) was established in Haarlem, the Netherlands, inspiring Dutch individuals in Batavia (present-day Indonesia) to form a similar entity.

The Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen (BG) operated as an independent institution dedicated to advancing research in the arts

and sciences, particularly in biology, physics, archaeology, literature, ethnology, and history, while also publishing the results of its research. The institution adopted the motto "Ten Nutte van het Algemeen" (For the Public Interest), reflecting its purported commitment to broader societal benefits—though, critically, this often aligned with colonial imperatives to catalog and control indigenous knowledge systems for imperial exploitation.

Wayang Museum

The Wayang Museum was first established in 1640 at Jalan Pintu Besar Utara No. 27, West Jakarta. The museum's building boasts unique and captivating architecture, having undergone multiple renovations. Known initially as De Oude Hollandsche Kerk or the "Old Dutch Church," it was renovated in 1732 and renamed "De Nieuwe Hollandsche Kerk" or the "New Dutch Church." This name persisted until 1808, when the structure collapsed due to an earthquake.

On the site of these ruins, the Wayang Museum was later constructed and officially opened on August 13, 1975. Today, it houses approximately 5,147 wayang (puppet) collections from various regions in Indonesia, including Sunda, Java, Bali, Lombok, and Sumatra, as well as international wayang artifacts from countries such as Malaysia, Suriname, France, Cambodia, India, the United States, the United Kingdom, Thailand, and Vietnam. These collections exhibit a remarkable diversity in form and style, underscoring the transcultural exchanges facilitated—and often appropriated—under colonial frameworks, where such artifacts were frequently collected to reinforce ethnographic narratives of "exotic" Eastern cultures.

Mulawarman Museum

The Mulawarman Museum, which incorporates traditional Dayak architecture from the Kutai region, is located in Tenggarong, approximately 45 km from Samarinda and 110 km from Balikpapan. It was inaugurated on November 25, 1971, by the Governor of East Kalimantan, HA Wahab Syahranie, and subsequently transferred to the Department of Education and Culture on February 18, 1976. The name "Mulawarman" honors a renowned, wise, and just king from the Kutai Martadipura kingdom. As the Provincial State Museum of East Kalimantan, "Mulawarman" serves as a cultural tourism site rich in scientific knowledge and the history of the Kutai Kartanegara kingdom. Situated in central Tenggarong, it is accessible from Balikpapan via land or river routes, with a travel time of about one hour.

A distinctive feature of the Mulawarman Museum is the front courtyard, which displays a replica of the Lembu Suana—a symbol of the Kutai Kartanegara kingdom—and a dragon-shaped pond representing life's journey and the guardian of the universe, elements deeply embedded in Kutai mythology.¹⁸ From a critical perspective, such museums, established in the post-colonial era but drawing on colonial legacies, highlight the ongoing tension between preserving indigenous heritage and reframing it through state-sanctioned narratives, often sidelining subaltern voices in favor of nationalistic historiography.

Rumoh Aceh Museum

The Aceh Museum was founded during the Dutch East Indies administration and inaugurated on July 31, 1915, by the Civil and Military Governor of Aceh, General H.N.A. Swart. Initially, it took the form of a traditional Acehnese house (Rumoh Aceh) derived from the Aceh Pavilion, previously exhibited at the Colonial Exhibition (De Koloniale Tentoonstelling) in Semarang from August 13 to November 15, 1914.

During the Semarang exhibition, the Aceh Pavilion showcased various collections, mainly from the personal holdings of F.W. Stammeshaus, who later became the museum's first curator in 1915. The pavilion's artifacts included heirlooms from Acehnese nobles, making it the most comprehensive display at the event. It won four gold medals, eleven silver medals, three bronze medals, and certificates of merit for the best pavilion, as well as awards for performances, Acehnese dolls, ethnography, currency, photographs, and household items. Capitalizing on this success, Stammeshaus proposed to Governor Swart that the pavilion be repatriated to Aceh and converted into a museum. The proposal was accepted, and on July 31, 1915, the Aceh Museum was officially opened in Kutaraja (now Banda Aceh), with Stammeshaus as its inaugural curator.¹⁹

Following Indonesia's independence, the museum was managed by the Aceh Regional Government. In 1969, at the initiative of T. Hamzah Bendahara, it was relocated from Blang Padang to Jalan Sultan Alaidin Mahmudsyah on a 10,800 m² site. Post-relocation, management was assumed by the Central Iskandar Muda Development Board (BAPERIS). Aligning with cultural development programs, the museum began receiving funds from the Pelita

¹⁸ Rae Larasati, Jamil Jamil, and Marwiah Johansyah, "Museum Mulawarman Sebagai Pusat Konservasi Warisan Budaya," *Yupa: Historical Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (2019): 93–102, <https://doi.org/10.30872/yupa.v1i1.94>.

¹⁹ Afrizal, "Pemanfaatan Museum Aceh Sebagai Lembaga Edukasi bagi Mahasiswa" (Tesis, Fakultas Adab dan Humaniora UIN ar-Raniry Banda Aceh, 2023).

Project in 1974 for building rehabilitation, expansion, and the acquisition of its collection. New facilities, including a permanent exhibition hall, a meeting building, a temporary exhibition space, a library, a laboratory, and staff residences, were constructed.

On September 2, 1975, a joint decree was approved, transferring the Aceh Museum to the Department of Education and Culture as a Provincial State Museum. This was formalized on May 28, 1979, when its status was established as the Aceh Provincial State Museum by a decree from the Minister of Education and Culture. The new status was inaugurated a year later, on September 1, 1980, by Minister Daoed Yoesoef. Under Government Regulation No. 25 of 2000 on provincial authority, management falls under the Level I Regional Government of Aceh Province (formerly Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam Province). The museum's collections encompass jewelry from the Kutai kingdom, ceramics from ancient Hindu and Islamic periods, spears, gamelan sets, thrones, cannons, and items from Sultans Bulungan, Pasir, Sambaliung, and Gunung Tabur. Critically, this institution exemplifies how colonial-era exhibitions commodified indigenous artifacts, transforming them into tools of cultural diplomacy that perpetuated power imbalances, a legacy that postcolonial management seeks to interrogate through inclusive curation practices.

Zoological Museum, Bogor

The Zoological Museum stands as one of Southeast Asia's largest fauna museums. It was established on August 23, 1894, under the name Landbouw Zoologisch Laboratorium by J.C. Koningsberger, a Dutch botanist. Initially, it functioned as a small research laboratory within the Bogor Botanical Gardens, formerly known as Lands Plantentuin. Following the 1898 visit to Sri Lanka, Koningsberger collected animal specimens accompanied by his assistant, Melchior Treub, another Dutch botanist. By August 1901, the Zoological Museum was formally operational, retaining its original name, Landbouw Zoologisch Laboratorium. The origins of this museum highlight the colonial emphasis on natural history as a means of resource inventory, often disregarding ecological impacts and indigenous knowledge, thereby reinforcing a scientific worldview that prioritized extraction over sustainability.

The Role of Museums during the Colonial Era

In the 19th century, exhibiting ethnographic collections became a common practice in Europe. A prominent event was the World's Fair, which displayed

ethnographic materials from societies in European colonial territories.²⁰ Recognized as the largest and most elaborate exhibitions, these featured complex programs. Beyond serving as centers for anthropological fieldwork and depictions of "primitive" cultures, they also functioned as architectural laboratories, drivers of consumerism, nationalism, and platforms for envisioning futures from a colonial perspective.

As social and cultural institutions, museums played a pivotal role in constructing knowledge through exhibitions. They collected objects, defined topics, and shaped discourses through displays, positioning themselves not merely as stages for culture but as authoritative entities in the production of scientific knowledge. Consequently, museums influenced societal ideologies and beliefs about truth through their presentations.²¹ Museums played a significant role in building and disseminating colonial power cultures in 19th-century societies. During the colonial period, they symbolized authority and control over colonized regions by appropriating artifacts of historical and spiritual significance to local communities. These museums served as instruments of colonial cultural and scientific influence, introducing Western epistemologies in managing knowledge and studying colonial territories.²² From a critical historical lens, this role reveals museums as sites of epistemic violence, where narratives were curated to legitimize domination and marginalize the voices of subjugated groups; this dynamic demands rigorous decolonial analysis in contemporary scholarship to uncover suppressed histories and foster equitable heritage preservation.

The Impact of Colonial Museums on Modern Museology in Indonesia

Colonial museums have imparted a multifaceted legacy to the evolution of modern museology in Indonesia. At the same time, numerous facets of this colonial heritage require critical reevaluation—particularly in terms of entrenched power dynamics and epistemic biases—their positive contributions in fostering collection development, paradigm shifts, and enriched historical narratives underscore the potential of museums as instruments for education and cultural reconciliation. This duality necessitates a postcolonial lens to interrogate

²⁰ Curtis M. Hinsley, "The World as Marketplace: Commodification of the Exotic at the World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1991).

²¹ W. Dai Rong, "Cultural Hegemony in the Museum World," Retrieved May 12th, 2014, from Intercom Conference Website, <http://www.intercom.museum/documents/2-5wu.pdf>.

²² Artono and Agus Tri Laksana, *Geohistory Masa Kolonial di Indonesia* (Surabaya: Unesa University Press, 2020).

how inherited structures can be repurposed for equitable knowledge production, aligning with global decolonization discourses in museum studies.

Museums established during the colonial era, such as those in the Dutch East Indies, preserved diverse collections exhibited within colonial frameworks. These holdings not only mirrored local cultures but also encapsulated colonial gazes upon them, often exoticizing or subordinating indigenous epistemologies. This foundation has informed the development of contemporary exhibitions that strive for greater inclusivity and diversity, transforming static displays into dynamic dialogues that challenge hegemonic narratives and incorporate the voices of marginalized individuals.

Shifts in perspectives toward museums and their collections have profoundly influenced Indonesian museology. There has been a transition from traditional, colonial-oriented approaches—characterized by object-centric, authoritative curation—to more modern, participatory models. This is evident in initiatives that reposition museums not merely as repositories of artifacts but as vibrant spaces for education and social interaction, fostering community-driven interpretations and ethical stewardship.²³

Colonial museums frequently presented biased historical narratives that favored imperial interests, perpetuating asymmetries in representation. However, the emergence of new institutions, such as the Multatuli Museum with its emphasis on anti-colonial histories, signals efforts to revise and diversify these accounts. Such endeavors enable societies to apprehend their pasts through fairer, multifaceted lenses, countering monolithic colonial historiography with polyvocal reconstructions.

Institutions like the Multatuli Museum serve as conduits for anti-colonial historical information, proffering viewpoints divergent from dominant colonial-era discourses. Beyond artifact preservation, they play a pivotal role in educating the public on resistance struggles against colonialism, exemplifying how modern Indonesian museums endeavor to amplify previously sidelined narratives and promote restorative justice in heritage practices.²⁴

Furthermore, modern museological concepts in Indonesia are increasingly incorporating innovative elements that respond to current socio-cultural contexts. These encompass technological integrations in exhibitions, the development of

²³ Ariani Ariani, "Perubahan Fungsi pada Museum Fatahillah: Ditinjau dari Teori Postkolonial," *Humaniora* 6, no. 4 (2015): 492, <https://doi.org/10.21512/humaniora.v6i4.3377>.

²⁴ Tessina L. Nurtanio and Yunita Teresia Ginting, "Hubungan Daya Tarik Wisata dengan Minat Ber-kunjung Wisatawan Ke Museum Multatuli, Banten," *Pesona Hospitality* 15, no. 1 (2022), <https://jurnal.pertiwi.ac.id/index.php/pesonahospitality/article/view/23>.

interactive educational programs, and collaborations with local communities to create more relevant experiences, thereby democratizing access and enhancing relevance in a globalized era. The architecture of colonial museums—often grandiose and imposing—continues to shape modern designs. Contemporary venues frequently incorporate colonial-inspired elements while infusing them with modernist adaptations that reflect local identities, thus creating hybrid spaces that function not only as storage sites but as public fora inviting social engagement and cultural reflexivity.

Another significant impact of colonial museums is the increased societal awareness of the importance of cultural and historical preservation. Modern Indonesian museums now prioritize community involvement in collection management and development, integrating stakeholders into museological processes to ensure sustainability and cultural sovereignty.

Conclusion

The history of museums in Indonesia dates back to the Dutch colonial period, during which institutions were established to promote scientific inquiry and the exploitation of natural and cultural resources in colonized territories. By the late 18th century, the establishment of scientific societies in Europe inspired Dutch colonials to create analogous bodies in Batavia, notably the "Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen" in 1778. This entity functioned to advance knowledge production and document diverse cultural and natural facets of Indonesia. Its growth and expanding collections precipitated the construction of new museums and research stations, such as the National Museum and the Bogor Zoological Museum, which specialized in cultural and natural sciences.

Other principal museums erected during the colonial era across various Indonesian regions, including the Wayang Museum in Jakarta, the Mulawarman Museum in Kalimantan, and the Rumah Aceh Museum, also served as mechanisms for understanding local cultures. Nonetheless, these venues often embodied biased colonial perspectives, wherein collections and exhibition narratives were instrumentalized to fortify imperial authority and propagate Western scientific paradigms.

Despite their ideological roots in colonialism, these museums exert substantial influence on contemporary Indonesian museology. Their opulent collections and architectures provide foundational scaffolds for today's more inclusive and participatory institutions. A paradigm shift is underway, with an increasing

number of museums elevating anti-colonial narratives and diverse histories, exemplified by the Multatuli Museum. Modern museums have evolved beyond mere artifact displays, becoming arenas for education, interaction, and societal reflection. Colonial legacies have further informed a heightened public consciousness of historical and cultural preservation, wherein communities are now more actively engaged in museum governance and development, rendering them integral to educational and cultural reconciliation efforts.

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All authors discussed the results and contributed to the preparation of the final manuscript. All authors agree to be accountable for all aspects of this work.

Statement of Interest

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