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Historic Dutch-Indonesian Collection Seeks New Home

Some 12,000 objects of shared colonial heritage from the Dutch Museum Nusantara seek a new destination after Jakarta halted repatriation efforts to Indonesia.

THE letter dated March 31 from the Indonesian director-general for culture, Hilmar Farid, “took us completely by surprise,” recalled Delft Heritage curator Marga Schoemaker. Indonesia, the letter said, has decided not to accept a large donation of objects that belonged to Delft’s Museum Nusantara.

This, Schoemaker says in September, was a ‘very disappointing’ culmination of a process that started three years ago, after the century-old museum permanently closed its doors. The process of finding a proper destination for the collection has involved officials and museum professionals from both the Netherlands and Indonesia.

Museum Nusantara originated from a 19th-century training facility in Delft for Dutch civil servants about to be sent to its colony: the Dutch East Indies. At the beginning of the 20th century, the educational institution was moved to Leiden, and the artifacts accumulated until then formed the basis of a collection for the Ethnographic Museum, which in the course of the years changed its name to Museum Nusantara. Some of the original objects, Delft Heritage director Patrick van Mil explained, were

brought back from Indonesia by returning civil servants as educational or display objects.

A 2014 report by Delft Heritage points out, “Most important among (the museum’s) collection are its textiles and clothing, *wayang* puppets and Indonesian art, particularly from the period between 1920-1950. Its library is one of the most important and specialized museum libraries on Indonesia.”

A financial crisis in the Delft municipality forced the Museum Nusantara—the only Dutch museum devoted solely to Indonesia—to close in January 2013. This decision was criticized by many in the academic and museum circles who also worried about the future of the museum’s collection.

Delft Heritage, representing the city municipality, had to find a proper destination for the collection. With the participation of parties such as the Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency and the National Museum of World Cultures, it came up with a plan to repatriate the bulk of the collection to its place of origin: Indonesia.

This, Patrick van Mil says, was no easy task as Dutch museums are held by strict rules about the disposal of objects. Usual-

ly when a museum closes, he explains, the collection is inventoried and digitized, and then other Dutch museums could select objects that suit their collections. Finally, the remaining objects would be put up for auction. “We believed it was important that the majority of the collection should go to Indonesia, so we asked for a dispensation of the rule: We first offered the collection to Indonesia.”

Van Mil points out that early on there were already “signs that Indonesia would be interested in the collection.” Education and Cultural Attaché Bambang Hari Wibisono of the Indonesian embassy in The Hague confirmed that he knew about the plans some three years ago.

The dispensation, however, came with a few conditions: A Dutch team of museum specialists and the city of Delft—the official owner of the collection—should first select some objects “which are essential to our heritage collection.” Marga Schoemaker underlined that the team “was very selective in the process, and took out only those items of essential importance that are lacking in the national heritage collection. The decisions were never based on financial considerations.”

From the 18,000 objects, some 4,000 were selected to remain in the Netherlands, “And some 2,000 were deemed qualitatively not up to museum standard,” Van Mil said. Thus, 12,000 objects were then of-



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1. Museum Nusantara.
2. Gamelan Kjai Paridjata, around 1850, Surakarta.
3. Piu Poang, first half of the 20th century, Central Sulawesi.

ferred for repatriation to Indonesia. “Another condition was that Indonesia had to take the whole collection, as the aim of the repatriation was for the objects to remain together as much as possible in the public domain.”

While the selection process was ongoing, Delft Heritage already had official contact with the Indonesian culture ministry and the Museum Nasional. “This started around May 2015,” Van Mil recalled.

In October, Van Mil continues, Kacung Marijan—then Indonesia’s director-general of culture—was on a visit to the Netherlands and took time to speak with Delft Heritage and the Museum of World Cultures. “We discussed everything, and we basically shook hands on it. The director-general seemed to be willing to accept the collection, and we made an oral agreement to send the collection around April 2016,” he said.

In a *Jakarta Post* article dated October 19, 2015, Kacung Marijan spoke of the repa-

triation offer, and said that once it arrived it would be stored in a one-hectare warehouse being built at the Taman Mini Indonesia Indah in Jakarta. “The historical objects will become the collection of the National Museum, Jakarta,” Kacung was quoted as saying in the article.

In late November, a six-person delegation from Jakarta went to the Netherlands to view the collection, then already put in an art storage in The Hague. “We assisted them as much as we could, and the exchange between us was very constructive and amicable,” Marga said.

Then, Van Mil continued, it was agreed upon that a memorandum of understanding (MOU) should be signed soon so that plans and funding for shipping and handling could be taken care of. “We sent a concept of the MOU in December, and what followed was a long silence from Jakarta,” he said.

Around the same time, Kacung Marijan was replaced by a new director-general, Hilmar Farid. “The reply to our inquiries as to why we hadn’t heard back about the MOU was that the changing of the guard had caused some delay,” he said. Delft Heritage became increasingly anxious as time was running out. They only had enough funding to store the collection until the middle of this year.

On March 5, Hilmar Farid told the *Antara* news agency that Indonesia wanted to make a selection of the Nusantara objects rather than accept the whole collection. “We don’t want to take home junk. We want articles that have significance here... We will select as needed,” Hilmar was quoted as saying. “Don’t think that all those objects are important and valuable.”

On March 23, Van Mil heard through a museum colleague, who had communicated with the Museum Nasional in Jakarta, that the repatriation would most likely not take place. Van Mil said, “And on March 31, we got the letter from the director-general. It did not give much details for turning down the offer, except some referral to ‘procedural points’ that had not been carried out.” In June, he wrote a letter to the Indonesian ambassador in The Hague that he would still be open to further suggestions, but to no avail. “Unfortunately, the repatriation route is now closed,” Van Mil lamented, adding that the collection will follow the usual path and offered to Dutch museums.

Hari Bambang Wibisono said Indonesia already had some reservations about taking the whole collection. “When the investigative team came here late last year to view the collection, it was concluded that it would not have been possible to take it as a whole,” Wibisono said, adding that some objects in the collection “are already available in Indonesia.”

A significant deterrent, Wibisono continued, was the high costs linked to the process: Indonesia would be on the hook for the shipping and handling. “But that’s not all: The proper storage and maintenance costs for these objects will also be high.”

A source involved in the negotiations offered the following explanation for the stalemate: “The Dutch may have sent mixed signals, especially in the starting phase where on the one hand it required Indonesia to take the whole collection, and on the other hand the Dutch selected objects for themselves.”

“The Indonesian side, in turn, may have said ‘yes’ too soon to a collection that may not be top of the bill. The expected storage area is also still far from being finished. And then came a new director-general that probably has different priorities from his predecessor,” the source added.

The source further said that there were “a number of rich private parties in Indonesia interested in the artefacts, but all sides agreed this should remain in the public realm.”

Not everyone is crestfallen about the current situation, such as former Leiden Assistant Professor Hedi Hinzler, an Indonesia specialist who was involved in the Museum Nusantara project for years. “I was against the idea of repatriation from the very beginning. It is a very important collection from a historic-ethnographic point of view, and there is much more expertise here for the collection to be used for future research. At this point, Indonesia has little use for more batik cloths and wayang puppets,” said Hedi. She sharply criticized the team that carried out Nusantara’s post-closure plan, who, she said, “have limited expertise about Indonesia.”

Hari Bambang Wibisono, however, still hopes that not all doors are shut for good. “If the Dutch would open the possibility for us to select some objects from the collection, we certainly are still open for suggestions,” he said.

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