

The Volkenkunde Museum, Leiden

By Anne Pinto-Rodrigues

In the ancient Dutch town of Leiden, an imposing eight-metre-tall *Kwakwaka'wakw* totem pole guards the Volkenkunde Museum. While it may seem out of place in the Leiden landscape, it is interesting to note that the totem pole was hand-carved specially for the museum by *Kwakwaka'wakw* artisans from British Columbia, Canada. And as the only totem pole in the Netherlands, it couldn't have been placed in a better location than the Volkenkunde, the National Museum of Ethnology.

The Volkenkunde has its roots in the extensive Japanese collection of Philipp Franz Balthasar von Siebold, a German doctor based at the Dutch embassy on the island of Dejima (off Nagasaki), between 1823 and 1829. This was the time of Japan's strict, self-imposed seclusion from the world – Dejima being the only exception to this policy. Following Siebold's expulsion from Japan in 1829, he returned to Europe with a collection of over 5,000 Japanese objects and made Leiden his home. The Museum Japonicum was born from this collection in 1837 and over time evolved into the Volkenkunde Museum. As the first ethnographic museum in Europe, it paved the way for a better understanding of Japanese culture and later, other world cultures as well. In 1935, the Volkenkunde moved into its existing premises on the scenic Singel Canal, a striking 19th century building that once served as an academic hospital.

The Volkenkunde's already stellar collection received a tremendous boost in 2010 when renowned Dutch collector and furniture curator, Frits Liefkes, bequeathed his entire collection of nearly 1,000 Indonesian objects to the museum. This fascinating collection was based around a few key themes: 'man as art' and 'the cycle of life', among others. Yet it covered a wide range of Indonesian material culture, including some exceptional pieces of batik textiles, intricate gold jewellery and furniture. Exquisite ceremonial and ritual textiles, numbering over 400 pieces, formed the majority of the donation. Over a period of 40 years, Liefkes had purchased almost all of the objects in the Netherlands from private sales, art dealers, exhibitions and auctions.

The pieces in the Liefkes collection demonstrate a very high level of artistry and were made by craftsmen from all over the Indonesian archipelago, from the western islands of Sumatra and Java, to as far as Papua province in the east. However, several of these objects also exhibit cultural influences from foreign lands. Given Indonesia's location on the ancient maritime trade route connecting China in the east to the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East and



The imposing Kwakwaka'wakw totem pole in the garden of the Volkenkunde Museum

Europe in the west, this is hardly surprising. The Liefkes donation forms only a small part of the 60,000 strong Indonesian objects collection at the Volkenkunde, but it filled some important gaps in the museum's portfolio.

Today, the Volkenkunde's collection from eight different cultural regions of the world tells stories of our shared humanity. Together with the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, the Africa Museum on the outskirts of Nijmegen, and the Wereldmuseum in Rotterdam, it forms an integral part of the Dutch initiative, *Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen* (National Museum of World Cultures [NMvW]), which focuses on cultural diversity around universal themes. The belief that our commonalities transcend our differences no matter where people are in the world, embodies the spirit of the Volkenkunde and the NMvW.

Heartfelt thanks to Ms Francine Brinkgreve, Curator Insular Southeast Asia, at the Volkenkunde Museum, for sharing her expertise and time.



A book on the highlights of the Frits Liefkes Collection, featuring a 20th century gold crown from South Nias (Sumatra) on the cover



The peaceful environs of the Buddha Room at the Volkenkunde. Centuries-old, bronze Buddha statues from Japan are on display here

Anne Pinto-Rodrigues, an Amsterdam-based writer and photographer, recently visited the Volkenkunde Museum. She chronicles her experiences of interesting people and places on her blog *No Roads Barred* at <https://noroadbarred.wordpress.com>

All photos by the author