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Politics

For the First Time in Its History, the Netherlands Is Returning an Enormous Trove of Artifacts to Its Former Colonial Territory of Indonesia

The objects, some of which date back to 5000 B.C., will go on view at the National Museum of Indonesia this June.

Taylor Dafoe, January 8, 2020



The National Museum in Jakarta. Photo: Sam Mellish/In Pictures via Getty Images. The government of the Netherlands has repatriated 1,500 historical artifacts to Indonesia, a former Dutch colony.

The objects come from the Nusantara Museum, a 100-year-old institution in Delft dedicated to art from Indonesia, which closed in 2013 due to financial difficulties. After the museum shuttered, the objects were transferred to the nearby Prinsenhof Museum.

“This is the first time in Indonesian history that Indonesian cultural objects or artifacts that were taken [to the Netherlands] are returned,” Indonesia’s education and culture ministry director-general, Hilmar Farid, said in a press conference last week. “Hopefully, this will pave the way for the return of other museum objects in Europe.”

The two countries agreed to the return back in November 2016, according to Tempo.co, but the process was delayed due to diplomatic and legal hangups. Although the Netherlands initially offered to return around 12,000 objects, Indonesia’s culture ministry decided to accept only 1,500.

Since then, the Indonesian government organized a special team of researchers to study the objects in question. They found the collection to be wildly diverse, ranging from ancient weapons to ceramics. The oldest of the bunch date back to 5000 B.C., while the youngest were traced to the 1940s. Altogether, the objects are valued at an estimated €1.1 million.

They are set to go on display at the National Museum of Indonesia this June. After that, they will be dispersed to regional museums in the areas from which they originally hail.

This is the latest in a long line of restitution efforts in Europe over the last several years as the continent continues to grapple with its colonial past. France has pledged to repatriate objects to African countries following a specially commissioned report urging them to do so, while Germany has announced its own broad plans to return colonial-era objects.