



# Report on Colonial Collections in the Caribbean Part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands (Final DRAFT 2-6-25)

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***Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today,  
and what we pass on to future generations. Our cultural  
and natural heritage are both irreplaceable sources  
of life and inspiration.***

The 1972 Convention concerning the Protection of World Culture and Natural Heritage

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## 1. Introduction

The Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, hereafter referred to as OCW, commissioned a reconnaissance of collections in public institutions on the six islands of the Caribbean part of the Dutch Kingdom, with a specific focus on colonial collections. The general goal of this task is to provide insight into the wishes, necessities and sensitivities of relevant stakeholders on the islands, regarding these collections and the collaboration between museums.

The survey was to be executed both on-site and through the consultation of stakeholders and a final report would include a description of the most important institutions, prioritize the necessities of museums and heritage professionals on the islands and advise on potential collaborative projects between the islands and within the Kingdom.

It was agreed by OCW and the contracting party *Camia*, the heritage focused enterprise based in Aruba, that the scope of works would be limited to those collections in museums and related institutions.

### **An overview of collecting in the Dutch Caribbean**

The first major museum collection practice of the Dutch Caribbean islands should most probably be attributed to A. van Koolwijk. He worked on the ABC islands in the late nineteenth century as a Dutch Roman Catholic priest but had a particular interest in the Amerindian culture of the islands and in their native populations. He excavated at some sites and collected and bought archaeological, ethnographic and natural historic objects from locals. He was remarkably methodical in describing and registering all his finds and acquired artifacts. These he sent to museums in the Netherlands accompanied by letters, which are considered valuable descriptions of life on the islands during that period. His collection is housed in at least seven museums in the Netherlands nowadays. Most scholars recognize van Koolwijk as being the ‘first archaeologist’ of the ABC island for his research and documentation. Nevertheless, his work went beyond the academic good practices of

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archaeology, he was the first European to recognize the global importance of the archaeology and ethnography of the ABC islands at that time. He identified the material culture of his contemporary communities and their ancestors as pieces which needed to be studied, presented and safeguarded by a global audience. The fact that parts of his collections were exhibited at the World Exposition of 1883 in Amsterdam supports this view. Pieces of his collection were also traded amongst European museums at that time, based on their unique qualities.

Scholars, mainly Dutch, did research on all six islands in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Although their main goals may not have been to collect, their excavation and other research practices yielded significant material on all the islands, most of which were taken to the Netherlands for study.

The *Curaçao Museum*, opened in 1948, is generally considered to be the first museum in the Dutch Caribbean. Individuals on most islands had collected privately by then, placing the start of non-institutionalized collecting practices with a vision to illustrate and preserve private and local narratives, before the establishment of the museum. The early exhibitions of the *Curçao Museum* included many furniture pieces, archaeological artifacts and natural historical specimens. Museums on the other islands did not open until the after 1970's, the *Sint Eustatius Historical Museum Foundation* and the *Archaeological Museum of Aruba* are examples hereof. Both managed collections which were initiated decades before the establishment of a museum. These island-based collection practices were most probably further influenced by the establishment of the *Archaeological Anthropological Institute of the Netherlands Antilles (AAINA)* in 1967. In Aruba it's known that farmers started collecting archaeological artifacts from their lands, after contact with the AAINA researchers.

Public institutions on the six islands which manage heritage collections all have a combination of donations from private collections and material excavated and collected during scientific research. This material represents both the natural and cultural history of the islands therefore reflecting the islands geological, ecological and pre-history as well as

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the contact period between indigenous populations and Europeans, slavery, communities after the abolishment, industry and the World Wars.

## 2. Definitions and methods

Defining colonial collections for the purpose of this survey was imperative at the inception of the works. What are colonial collections or more accurately what would be considered colonial collections for the purpose of this report?

A description of colonial collections by the *Dutch Colonial Collections Consortium* reads as follows:

*From the seventeenth century onwards, the Netherlands had colonies and trading posts in several continents. Dutch soldiers, colonists and traders made their mark on local societies. This history has been characterized by violence, exploitation, oppression, racism and inequality, also regarding ownership of and access to cultural heritage. In the context of unequal power relations during the colonial period, cultural objects were often looted or otherwise taken against the will of the owners. These objects can now often be found in the Netherlands; in museums, universities and other institutions administering collections or in private collections. There are collections with objects from colonial contexts in all shapes and sizes, including art objects, religious objects, historical objects, jewelry, natural history objects and everyday objects.*

Although this description includes many key concepts generally considered as characteristic for colonial collections, it stands to reason that several are missing or not applicable in the context of this report about colonial collections in public institutions of the Caribbean islands of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Most of the stakeholders interviewed for this report were eager to discuss the definition of colonial collections and favored one more applicable to the historical context of these collections in the Dutch Caribbean.

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The six islands of the Dutch Caribbean are still constitutionally linked to the (European part of) the Netherlands and have been so since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Defining colonial collections in the Dutch Caribbean as being primarily from a particular historical period, is therefore a narrow approach which yield a limited overview of the heritage collections from a colonial context on the islands. Such a narrow approach also limits the wider scope of this report on promoting collaborative efforts in increasing the knowledge about these collections, their preservation and their accessibility to their communities and a wider audience. The essence of the definition of colonial collections for this report is the collection history and future, rather than to which historical period the objects were originally ascribed to.

This definition of colonial collections in the Dutch Caribbean islands for this report includes but is not limited to elements such as:

- Collections containing objects and specimens that were retrieved or used on the islands.
- Collections that were only interpreted from a European perspective, lacking the inclusion of indigenous and local knowledge.
- Collections of which the registration and management has not been compliant with minimal conservation and preservation standards.
- Collections that were researched and interpreted without a multinational and/or transdisciplinary approach.

It was agreed with the OCW that collections for this report would not include archival material as management by public institutions such as the National Archives in Curaçao and Aruba. After the first site visits and interviews it was evident that for the purpose of this report the term collections should include sites and oral history documentation pertaining to both sites and objects.

Archaeological, ethnographical and natural history collections are relevant to this report. Although an intrinsic part of collections this survey didn't generally include specific focus on the intangible aspect of collections with some exceptions noted in the island reports.

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The definition of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) was used to determine those public institutions to be visited for the aims of this report:

*“A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.”*

Institutions such as parks, oral history repository and heritage management centers fall within the ICOM definition and were therefore also approached to participate in this consultation.

The data for this report was gathered through site visits, interviews and a questionnaire for stakeholders. This latter was primarily a guideline, interviews were generally more extensive and covered topics specifically relevant for each island and institution.

After a preliminary literature consultation, it was decided to initiate the site visits on Sint Eustatius. This because although the history of the island was of universal interest, the documentation on their heritage and collections were remarkable scarce.

***Oh, you come to see the museums? I just made my first visit since living here, I really liked them.***

Customs officer in the Windward islands, December 2024  
(translated from Dutch)

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## 3. Island Reports

### Sint Eustatius

#### Consultations on Sint Eustatius

The site visits on St. Eustatius, colloquially referred to as Statia, took place on Sunday, December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024. These visits were coordinated and led by the Heritage Inspector of Statia, Raimie Richardson.

The strategy of initiating site visits for this project in Statia was discussed earlier in this report as part of the methods and definitions section.

#### **Estacia, Santa Anastacia, Statia: a brief historical overview of Sint Eustatius**

The first recording of Sint Eustatius, which lies in the northeast Caribbean was by Francis Drake in 1593. The island changed hands more often than any other in the Dutch Caribbean. First inhabited by Amerindian groups it was Spanish, French, Dutch and English through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1636 Statia became the island owned by the *Chamber of Zeeland* of the *Dutch West India Company*.

Known as the Golden Rock for its strategic location and haven trading place for those ignoring restrictions on trade in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century its population thrived and its' leaders gained enough sense of auto sufficiency in 1776, to make the first military salute to the flag of what would become the United States of America.

The island was home to an important settlement of Jewish settlers which left their mark on the architecture and material heritage of the island. Trans-Atlantic slaves were brought to the island by the Dutch, they revolted in 1848.

With changes in trading routes and other global development the economy on Statia dwindled in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As of 2010 it's a special municipality of the Netherlands as are Saba and Bonaire.

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## Institutions

### *Statia Heritage Center (SCH)*

The Heritage Center in Statia has as main goal safeguarding the islands' cultural heritage for future generations. Currently housed in a former mortuary, the institution was created in 2023 and is led by the cultural heritage inspector of the island, Raimie Richardson. The main facility of the SHC houses a small exhibition area, storage and conservation facilities and a working area for the heritage inspector and intern from the *Reinwardt Academy* in the Netherlands, Matthé Nat. All areas of the facility are clearly defined, despite the obvious lack in appropriate space. The exhibit is attractive and informative and will be moved, redesigned and reopened soon in a historic dwelling in Oranjestad.

The collections stored and managed by the SCH are inventoried in a simple but proper manner. Both in paper files and computer databases. The use of specialized museum software to store and manage the inventory is currently being considered by the heritage inspector. The area where the material is stored is of simple but proper standards and special attention and safeguarding has been taken for the storage of human remains.

Although the SHC has just recently been established it strives to follow international standards for heritage centers and museums. The collections stored in the main facility originate from many field surveys and research by various, mostly European, institutions. Experience with the collection of material in the field has been for salvage purposes and has been according to professional guidelines of handling, research, documentation and conservation.

The SHC stores, manages and conserves material from the Prehistory up until the Historical Period of human inhabitation of the island. The occupation by native groups from the region has yielded the largest part of material to the collection of the SCH. Most of this Prehistorical collection derives from research initiated and executed by Dutch or other European

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knowledge institutions. Interpretation of the material retrieved through excavations or other field survey methods were interpreted almost exclusively from European scholars' perspectives, without much attention given to local or regional perspectives, knowledge or input. Within the scope and definition developed for this report, these collections therefore are also identified as being colonial.

#### *Sint Eustatius Historical Foundation Museum*

The Sint Eustatius Historical Foundation (SEHF) Museum is housed in the historical Doncker's House in Oranjestad and is run by the foundation which was established in 1974. The main goal of the foundation is to promote the rich history and culture of Statia.

The SEHF museum has many objects of the Historical period on display. Their storage facilities were not accessible during the site visit but nevertheless the objects in their permanent exhibit are a valuable rendition of the rich history of Statia. The collection on display underscores and reinforces an initial assumption that Statian history is still much visible in the material culture of the island. The intangible part of this heritage, although outside the scope of this report, is very well conveyed by the volunteer(s) at the museum.

#### **Opportunities and challenges**

The rich and diverse heritage of Statia may have only, until recently, been known to its community, some international scholars and history buffs. Increased interest for the island from a political and economic (tourism) perspective has rapidly widened this perception.

The collections in heritage institutions and *in situ* in Statia will undoubtedly be impacted by this (re)-new(ed) interest. Negative consequences like the destruction of heritage sites or imminent threats to these due construction on the island is the most visible. Nevertheless, the threat to collections stored and managed by institutions is equally significant. The factors contributing to these like the lack of funding, personnel, adequate space, continuing capacity building, development and enforcement of legislation are well known.

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Opportunities to safeguard collections for future study, research and presentation are to be found in the same factors endangering this part of the Statian heritage. The position of Statia within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, its strategic and historical geographic location and the increasing interest of the tourism sector offers the opportunity of collaborative efforts in inventorying these collections, as an initial step towards their preservation. The registration and description of all (colonial) collections, stored in a reliable database, will make not only those professionally responsible for these, but also the local, regional and international community, aware of the value of these collections. This latter through websites, datahubs etc. and other collaborative initiatives.

A comprehensive overview of these collections on Statia will also allow for the planning of adequate space to store and present these on the island and inspire new (digital) forms of presentation.

The awareness of the challenges related to climate change are widely known and discussed in the heritage sector in Statia. Stronger and more frequent storms are not only a threat to collections of artifacts but also cause irreversible damage to sites. The loss of information caused by this damage is evident but the demoralizing effect on heritage professionals has an equal negative, often overlooked, effect.

## Saba

### **Consultations on Saba**

The site visits on Saba took place on Monday, December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2024. The institutions that were visited were the Saba Archaeological Center Foundation (SABARC), led by Sharifa Balfour, and the Harry L. Johnson Museum.

Following these site visits, Ryan Espersen, PhD., former director of the SABARC, was consulted regarding his recent publication on his research conducted on Saba.

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## **A brief historical overview of Saba**

Saba is a 13 km<sup>2</sup> island, situated south of Sint Maarten and north of Statia in the East Caribbean. Its geographic location, on trade routes, influenced its culture from the Pre-history on. Two main indigenous groups occupied Saba before the arrival of the Europeans in Saba in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. During the following centuries the island was claimed by the Spanish and French and governed by both the English and the Dutch until the latter took complete control in 1816.

The indigenous populations of Saba relied first on hunting and gathering and later agriculture. Those who practiced agriculture settled in villages on the island and were in close contact with the neighboring islands. The population of Saba after the arrival of the Europeans lived of the indigo, rum and sugar industries. Piracy was common and enslaved persons from the African continent were brought by the Dutch to work on the plantations in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

With the collapse of the plantation system most heads of families in the Saban community in the 19<sup>th</sup> century worked as seamen leaving women and children behind. The women, influenced by artisanship from Venezuela, set up a lace production and export practice, which became coveted in the region.

Most of the population of Saba continued to be challenged to secure economic prosperity at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With the new status of Saba as a special municipality of the Netherlands since 2010 new opportunities have arisen, also in the field of heritage preservation.

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## Institutions

### *Saba Archaeological Center Foundation*

This institution was established in 2012 and manages and manages mainly artifacts retrieved during the archaeological field research activities by the *University of Leiden*. The material recovered from various archaeological sites during research excavations is predominantly stored, managed and presented in the SABARC facilities, named the *Saba Heritage Center*, on the Windward Side. The material consists of artifacts of cultural groups which inhabited Saba before the arrival of the Europeans, of material imported by Europeans and used both by them and the indigenous populations and artifacts related to the slavery past of Saba. Artifacts from the indigenous groups reflect the geographic position of Saba as a trade route with many examples of material exotic to the island. A main publication about the Pre-history of Saba documents the work of the Dutch archaeologists and gives an accurate description of artifacts and finds, while more recent publication documents research on sites related to among other topics, slavery. Like Statia and the other Dutch Caribbean islands, the interpretation of the archeological heritage is mainly from a European academic perspective, with little local or regional narratives.

A recent publication on research of sites and artefacts related to the African slave communities and their descendants gives an insight on the importance of this part of the Saban heritage.

The data on the collection managed by the SABARC is not yet stored in a digital registration system although a written inventory exist. Artifacts are stored in a specific area of the facilities or are presented in an exhibition on the Pre-history and early colonial history of the island. Current priorities of the institution focus on education programs for schools, the youth and the public and on an oral history project.

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### *Harry L. Johnson Museum & Major Osmar R. Simmons Museum*

Although both are private museums with private collections, these two institutions exhibit collections of value to the Pre-history and history of Saba. A private record is kept by the institutions with little about their collections accessible online.

### **Opportunities and challenges**

Much like in Statia, the heritage collections managed by local institutions are a valuable reflection of the Pre-history and history of not only the island but also of the region and the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Most of the collections may have been catalogued in the past but these records are not accessible or private. The research and presentation of these collections through physical and digital means would add much new knowledge to local, regional, diasporic and international communities.

The relatively young heritage professionals on the island and abroad seem to ensure a better succession scenario than in Statia or other Dutch Caribbean islands.

## **Sint Maarten**

### **Consultations on Sint Maarten**

The site visits on Sint Maarten took place on Tuesday, December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2024. A visit was made to the Sint Maarten Heritage Foundation (SMHF), under the leadership of Amaris Richardson, followed by an online discussion with Dr. Jay Havisser, founder and director of the Sint Maarten Archaeological Center (SIMARC) on a later date.

### **A brief historical overview of Soualiga – Sint Maarten**

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Sint Maarten is a 34 km<sup>2</sup> island, part of the Lesser Antilles in the northeastern Caribbean. Inhabited by Amerindians as far back as 2000 B.C., the island was known by them as Soualiga, the island of salt. With the arrival of European in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the island traded hands between the Spanish, Dutch and French until finally being divided between the latter two in 1648.

Both the Dutch and French brought people from Africa to work as slaves in the cotton, tobacco and sugarcane plantation in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. With the abolishment of slavery, the former slaves made Sint Maarten and the French territory their home. The native population had practically disappeared due mainly to European diseases.

With the establishment of Sint Maarten as a duty-free port in 1941, the islands' economy took off in a remarkable way developing a highly successful tourism industry. This had major consequences for the increase in population and therefore on archaeological and other heritage sites at that time still rich in artifacts and information on the islands past.

## **Institutions**

### *Sint Maarten Heritage Foundation (SMHF)*

This institution was established in 1993 and manages the *Sint Maarten Heritage Museum*. This museum has an enviable location in the tourism area of Philipsburg, which although way too small in space for their collections and activities, allows their exhibitions to be accessible for those interested in knowing about the islands' heritage. The collection on display and that small part which is in storage is not properly registered, but the artifacts and their labels give a clear indication of the diverse material which forms the collections of the Foundation. Pre-historical, Dutch and French artifacts are part the exhibited collection. The exhibition, while in need of renovations, are still informative and reflect possible collections stored elsewhere or still in the sites on the island.

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Director Amaris Richardson has a small staff with whom she keeps the museum open to the public. A young intern is currently assisting in making the collection more accessible by starting an inventory and making this available online through a new website.

A recent publication on research of sites and artefacts related to the African slave communities and their descendants gives an insight on the importance of this part of the Sint Maarten heritage.

### *Sint Maarten Research Center (SIMARC)*

This institution was established in 2005 by archaeologist, Dr. Jay Havisser and designated by the government of Sint Maarten as the official repository for archaeological artifacts in 2011. Hurricane Irma did significant damage to this repository in 2017. Sources mention that 75% of the repository survived the hurricane containing pre-Columbian artifacts and objects related to the European and slavery period. A comprehensive inventory of the repository is not accessible, but the Director supports collaborative initiatives to establish a registration of all artifacts and making these accessible to digital channels on short term. SIMARC has partnered with other local non-government organizations to create a more sustainable bond with the Sint Maarten community, especially the youth.

### **Opportunities and challenges**

Heritage collections in Sint Maarten, both stored and in situ face challenges ranging from climate change phenomena to explosive economic development. Although the latter should provide funding for the research, presentation and preservation of the heritage in Sint Maarten, it's not clear how the economic prosperity contributes to presenting and preserving Sint Maarten's heritage to its community.

The valuable collection has not been registered properly. The opportunity to execute a comprehensive cataloguing while archaeologist Jay Havisser is active, and Amaris Richardson focuses on new venues and methods of making the collection more accessible and on succession is imperative.

The eminent challenges are the threat of stronger and more frequent hurricanes because of climate change.

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***I apologize if I am a bit difficult but our experience with sharing information with the (European) Netherlands about our collections is not the best one.***

Senior museum professional on the ABC islands, January 2025,  
(translated from Papiamentu/u)

## Bonaire

### Consultations on Bonaire

The site visits on Bonaire took place on Tuesday, January 21st, 2025. The visited institutions were *Museo di Boneiru* at SKAL, *Fundacion Histórico Kultural di Boneriano* (FuHiKuBo) and *Terramar Museum*.

### A brief historical overview of Boynay- Buen aire - Bonaire

Bonaire is the most eastern island of the ABC (Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao) island arc, adjacent to the Venezuelan coast and has a surface area of 288 km<sup>2</sup>. Amerindians from the mainland traveled to Bonaire probably as far back as 2000 B.C. The first mention of the island by Europeans was in 1499, in the travelogue of Amerigo Vespucci, a Spanish companion to Alonso de Ojeda. Bonaire, like Curaçao and Aruba, was deemed as being a useless island by the Spanish and the native population was deported around 1513 to Hispaniola, to work as slaves in the mines. The Spanish established the village of Rincon, one of few, Spanish heritage sites on the ABC islands. The island became Dutch territory under de jurisdiction of the West Indian Company (WIC) in 1636 and was English and French also for some periods of time.

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People from Africa were brought in by the Dutch to work as slaves in the saltpans and plantations in the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. By the time of the abolishment of slavery many slaves had bought their freedom and had tended their own crops in *kunukus*, small patches of land where agriculture and nature intertwined.

The establishment of an internment camp in Bonaire during the Second World War is up until recently a little known but important part of the history of the island

### **Institutions**

#### *Museo di Boneiru at Sekshon di Kultura Arte i Literatura (SKAL)*

This museum is run as part of the Government of Bonaire's cultural section. A Master planner, Alfrida Martis has been recently assigned to (re) organize not only the museum but to advise on the development of entities and policies regarding the general safeguarding and promotion of the cultural heritage of Bonaire.

The Bonaire Museum displays an impressive collection of artifacts from cultural groups in the Pre-history, the European occupation and the slavery past. Like most museums in the Dutch Caribbean, it also displays an important natural collection.

The Master planner shared her plans, to develop a national repository for the cultural heritage of Bonaire with partners from among other institutions, the Bonaire Archives. This heritage professional and her project partners have identified the urgency of the physical safeguarding of collections and have started planning towards the addressing this issue, a remarkable best-practice example noted during this consultation. Like she pointed out, the need to safeguard the integrity of collections is prioritized on short to mid-term. The registration of collections is necessary to plan such facilities accordingly, but the main priority is to store collections in an appropriate manner as soon as possible.

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### *Fundacion Histórico Kultural Boneriano (FuHiKuBo)*

This foundation, established in 1998, is the life's work of Franklin Dominico (Bòì) Antoine, a cultural heritage icon in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom. The institution collects data on mainly intangible heritage of Bonaire but significantly also from Aruba and Curaçao and highlights the bonds between the communities of the six islands. Their collection consists of an extensive library of books, periodicals and reports as well as pictures, audio and audiovisual material. Registration of all material is meticulously kept.

FuHiKuBo is a good example of a grass root organization which has made cultural heritage and expressions more accessible to a wide audience in the Dutch Caribbean islands. Their value for the safeguard and promotion of heritage collections is that they research, safeguard and promote the intangible heritage intrinsically linked to these collections. This latter makes the heritage collections relevant for contemporary and future generations.

While other institutions are challenged by ensuring succession in their organization, FuHiKuBo has a small but diverse staff of a seasoned heritage professional and young counterparts.

### *Terramar Museum*

This museum is housed in a very attractive building downtown. Although it doesn't manage heritage collections its experience of community engagement through exhibitions and youth programs is of value for future promotion of the heritage collections of Bonaire.

The museum is a showcase for local based artist and includes a shop for visitors. Many of these visitors find their way easily from the cruise harbor to the museum.

### **Opportunities and challenges**

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Bonaire's heritage collections are remarkable in quantity and diversity. The collections on display are still a good representation the diversity of the natural and cultural histories of the island. Except for the *National Archaeological and Anthropological Memory Management* (NAAM) in Curaçao, it's the only island currently structurally planning on the physical safeguarding of collections. This puts them in a position of sharing their experiences with other parts of the Kingdom and the region.

Most of the heritage collections in Bonaire are not completely registered or digitized. These collections are not only in institutions but also in archaeological sites around the island. A recently published survey project regarding the mapping of archaeological sites has been initiated by the local organization Bonaire Archaeological Institute (BONAI). A follow up to this report should include an update on this project.

Like most of the six islands Bonaire is only now gearing up to develop safeguarding mechanisms for its heritage collections. Funding and attracting and keeping heritage professionals are common challenges.

## Curaçao

### Consultations in Curaçao

The site visits on Curaçao took place on Tuesday and Wednesday, January 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2025. Visits were conducted at several institutions, including the National Archaeological and Anthropological Memory Institute (NAAM), where discussions took place with Director Dimitri Cloose. At Museo Tula, located at Landhuis Knip, a meeting was held with Dr. Jeanne Henriquez. The Jewish Cultural Historical Museum was also visited, with discussions held with Director Michele Russel-Capriles and her staff. Additional visits included the Maritime Museum, and the final interview for this report was conducted with Erik Houtepen of The Caribbean Research and Management of Biodiversity (CARMABI).

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## **A brief historical overview of Curazao - Curaçao**

Curaçao is the largest island of the Caribbean part of the Kingdom and lies north of Bonaire, 56 kilometers from the Venezuelan coast. First inhabited by Amerindians from the mainland, the Spanish sailor Alonso de Ojeda chronicled his visit to the island in 1499. Like Bonaire and Aruba, the Spanish deported most of the local indigenous population of the island to Hispaniola around 1515, where they were used as slaves to work in the mines.

The Dutch took possession of the island in 1634 and later in that center established what would be one of the largest African slavery centers of the Caribbean. People from Africa were not only traded with other European settlers of the region but were also enslaved on the plantations in Curaçao. The island was also briefly occupied by the British briefly and developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century as a regional commercial hub.

The revolt of the enslaved population, led by Tula Rigaud in 1795 and the abolishment of slavery by the Dutch in 1863 influenced not only the community of the island but was of regional and global significance.

The community was composed from the 17<sup>th</sup> century on of Jewish settlers who developed a successful commercial sector on the island. The vicinity of Curaçao to Venezuela was of great influence on the island community from Pre-history through modern times.

### **Institutions**

*The National Archaeological and Anthropological Memory Management (NAAM)*

The NAAM stores and manages archaeological and ethnographical material from the six islands of the Dutch Caribbean. The institution has its origins as the *Institute for Archaeology and Anthropology of the Netherlands Antilles (AINA)*. The collection history, artifacts, reports, audio and audiovisual material of NAAM is key to understanding heritage collections

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in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom. For many years its staff led and conducted research and collected on all six islands.

Currently NAAM occupies an administration, library and storage facility in Willemstad and has another storage facility outside the capital. The director and staff of NAAM although focusing nowadays on the heritage of Curaçao, are very aware of the origins of the origins of their collections. Therefore, a major project aimed at inventorying and digitizing their collections has been initiated.

By making the heritage collections of the other island accessible through digital means, they hope to promote research and knowledge of these collections benefitting the communities of origin and other stakeholders.

On a local level their project to map the cultural landscape of Afro-Curaçaoans, titled *Where we thrived*, is an innovative approach on owning narratives of the slavery past in the Dutch Caribbean. Their experience with the execution of this project will potentially result in valuable practices to share with partners and stakeholders from the other islands.

#### *Museo Tula Foundation*

This institution manages three museums amongst which the *Museo Tula at Landhuis Kenepa (Knip)* and the *Museo Kas di Pal'i Mashi*. The collections of the museum at *Landhuis Knip* dedicated to slavery and the people of African descent vary from pre-historical material to contemporary art, related to this theme. The former plantation site, in its entirety, is a most valuable part of this institution. The area was already inhabited by Amerindian groups in pre-history and research and collection from this site have yielded important information and artifacts from that period.

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The area of Knip where the museum is situated is amongst the most important sites for the history of trans-Atlantic slavery in the Caribbean. It's linked to the life and revolt of Tula and is a landscape of regional and global historical value.

Like in Statia, the collections managed by Museo Tula are not only in the exhibition and storage but consist of the site, the historical dwellings and the remnants hereof. The Foundation is very much aware of that and focuses on underscoring the importance of safeguarding the entire natural and cultural landscape as its collection.

At the time of this consultation a priority was to safeguard the site as part of the islands' official monuments registry.

#### *Jewish Cultural Historical Museum*

Established in the 1970's this is one of the oldest museums in the Dutch Caribbean. The collections of the *Jewish Historical Museum* are owned by the Jewish congregation and represent more than three centuries of the Jewish community on Curaçao. Their collections are amongst the most valuable representation of Jewish history and community in the region. The exhibitions and storage of the museum are housed within the walls of the Jewish Synagogue, the oldest functioning synagogue in the Americas.

Operating with a minimum paid staff but valuably supported by volunteers, the museum has added heritage collections of the World War II most recently, to those accessible to the public. It's one of the only museums of which (part of) the collection is accessible online. Their experience with the registration and digitization of their collection is of importance to other heritage institutions in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom planning to initiate registration and digitization.

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The museum is currently executing a major refurbishing and expansion project, which includes new facilities for collections and the public. An important part of the current focus is involving a new staff member to ensure succession and outreach to local heritage partners.

### *The Caribbean Research and Management of Biodiversity (Carmabi)*

Carmabi is for natural history heritage what NAAM is for cultural heritage in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom. One of the oldest research centers in the Caribbean, it was established in 1955 in Curaçao as the *Caribbean Marine Institute*. The name Carmabi was adopted in 1996 after a merger with the *National Parks Foundation of the Netherlands Antilles (Stinapa)*.

Although not founded as a collection management institute, Carmabi has a large and valuable collection of natural heritage specimens and related documentation about the six islands of the Dutch Caribbean and beyond. Their library collection will be undergoing a reorganization and digitization process in the coming months. The information selected for conservation and digitization will be made accessible on their website.

A large part of the natural heritage collection of Carmabi, especially those of Statia, Saba, Sint Maarten, Bonaire and Aruba, is not registered and therefore not accessible for stakeholders outside the center. Most of the specimens of their collections are also present in the collection of the *Naturalis Museum* in the European Netherlands which has developed a website dedicated to Dutch Caribbean species.

Carmabi also manages the *Savonet* museum in Curaçao where exhibition spaces are dedicated to both the natural and cultural history of the island.

Throughout the six islands of the Dutch Caribbean, although almost all the institution visited for this report manage both natural and cultural heritage, little of the material part of natural collection is interpreted and presented to the communities on the island. The knowledge at Carmabi about this heritage and the collections they manage, could be directed to the

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purpose of presenting and educating the communities on all the islands about their own environments.

### **Opportunities and challenges**

Curaçao has a dynamic museum association and could export their experience with this platform to its sister islands. Also, their experience with developing and executing legislation for safeguarding heritage and the specialist knowledge of *Carmabi* on the natural history of the islands are potential exchange services.

Challenges to Curaçao heritage management institutions are generally like those on the other islands, discussed in the general section on opportunities and challenges

## ***What a beautiful task they gave you Arminda!***

Senior heritage professional from the ABC islands, January 2025  
(translated from Dutch)

## **Aruba**

### **Consultations in Aruba**

On March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2025 The Historical Museum of Aruba was visited and a meeting was held with Renwick Heronimo, curator of the Fundacion Museo Arubano (FMA). The National Archaeological Museum of Aruba (NAMA) was visited on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2025, where a discussion took place with Deputy Director Pancho Geerman.

### **Oruba, Aruba: a short overview of the history of Aruba**

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The island of Aruba is the closest to the mainland (Venezuela) of all Dutch Caribbean islands. On its 190 km<sup>2</sup> surface a xerophytic vegetation dominates and although in modern times it's considered the most arid island of the ABC, it's the one with more recorded sites of pre-historical occupation. This suggests a past landscape with different hydrological and agricultural conditions than nowadays.

Like the other islands in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom, Aruba was first inhabited by indigenous groups from the mainland. Unlike Bonaire and Curaçao, no specific mention of the island is made by Spanish sailor Alonso de Ojeda in the chronicles of his travels in 1499. The island is first named on a map of 1502.

After Aruba is deemed part of the useless islands by the Spanish, its native population is deported in 1515. The island becomes Dutch territory in 1636, briefly being occupied by the English and French in the following decades.

The Dutch established a ban on European colonists establishing on the island until the mid-18th century. After that the island was a supplier of small-scale agricultural crops and a horse ranch to sustain the economically thriving community on Curaçao. Enslaved people from Africa, Amerindians and the descendent from these groups were put to work as domestic workers and on small patches of land rather than on plantations.

Life on the island changed drastically with the establishment of the Lago oil company in 1924 and later in the 1980's with the explosive boom of tourism.

## **Institutions**

### *Fundacion Museo Arubano (FMA)*

This foundation manages the collections of two museums, the *Historical Museum of Aruba*, the *Museum of Industry* and an exhibition hall dedicated to the Aruban Carnival, named *Carnival Euphoria*.

The collections managed by the FMA are as varied as the museums they run suggest. Pre-historical -, historical -, natural history collections and others related to the industry and World War periods, modern and contemporary art are included.

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A small fraction of the historical collection is currently on display in the *Historical Museum*, housed in the Fort Zoutman, in Oranjestad. The artifacts are mostly ethnographic, portraying life on the island in the early 19th and 20th century. This museum is the only one currently consistently open to the public.

The *Museum of Industry*, housed in a monumental water facility in San Nicolas contains artifacts from mostly private collections donated or on loan. The exhibition has received many praises for its design and location but is currently not regularly accessible.

A registration of the collection of the FMA I, according to their own wishes, long overdue and has been hampered by funding and organizational challenges.

### *National Archaeological Museum of Aruba (NAMA)*

According to A. van Koolwijk, Aruba is the island with the most Amerindian heritage of the ABC islands. This is evident in the NAMA, where significant collections from the 109 plus archaeological sites of the islands are researched, presented and stored.

As the museum is housed in the home of Boy Ecury, the Aruban WWII war hero, the museum has initiated a collection related to him and his family in recent years. These, mainly furniture pieces, are currently on display in the permanent exhibition.

The NAMA also holds a valuable archive with documents related to the history of collecting, and of museums on the island and a small but valuable library of scientific publications about the island and the Caribbean region.

Most part of the collection of the NAMA is inventoried on paper with some data on (old) computer software and some artifacts digitized. Nevertheless, no comprehensive inventory exists, and registration practices are not structured.

### **Opportunities and challenges**

Aruba is very similar to Statia in that its collections are not only stored in institutions but are still in numerous sites throughout the island. While the sites have been registered and documented by the NAMA, information on all collections remain largely inaccessible to the community, researchers and other stakeholders because of the lack of a (digital) inventory.

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Making the information on collections accessible would be beneficial for researchers and other stakeholders e.g. for the Aruba tourism industry.

A lack of legislation establishing ownership, safeguarding collections and sites is a serious threat to Aruba's heritage. Heritage institutions need organizational support to develop and operate according to international standards. Like most of its sister islands Aruba's heritage institutions also lack succession planning.

## 4. Main findings

### *Registration of collections*

Adequate inventories and structural registration practices are essential to the safeguarding of museum collections in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom, for heritage professionals, communities, regional and global stakeholders.

### *Physical safeguarding of collections*

The urgency of suitable storage for collections and the protection of sites are enhanced by climate change threats to the islands. The planning and development of proper island-based storage facilities and heritage contingency plans should go hand in hand with registration and digitization approaches.

### *Heritage diversity*

The natural history, pre-history and cultural history of the islands are reflected in their museum collections and sites. Although with general similarities, this heritage is also very diverse. The value of this diversity exceeds the local context, it's of regional and in many instances of global value. Developing and executing legislation and policies towards preserving this diversity is essential.

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### *An issue of trust*

Heritage professionals are eager for a Kingdom-wide platform where knowledge, experience and skills about management and preservation of collections can be shared, given that practices, governing this exchange instrument, are equitable. Most institutions consulted brought forward their grievances around past experiences with heritage policy makers or heritage entities in the European part of the Kingdom. Future collaboration initiatives on collections should be guided by a decolonial approach.

### *Ownership of collections*

For most institutions it's unclear who is the legal owner of their collection or by which legislation, if any, their authority to manage these collections is governed. This necessity of establishing clear ownership and management agreements is not only imperative for the institutions but also for the communities whom these collections ultimately belong to.

### *The need for instruments for funding*

There is an urgent need on the islands to safeguard the integrity of collections in the Caribbean Part of the Kingdom. To effectively address this urgency, structural funding is required.

### *Digitization of collection inventories*

Digitizing those parts of collections which have been catalogued would make these more accessible to communities and other stakeholders and promote further registration of the collection.

*Revision of terminology* The term *colonial collections* should be revised, renamed and/or defined specifically in the context of the heritage collections in the Dutch Caribbean islands.

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## 5. General opportunities and challenges

Heritage institutions in the Dutch Caribbean are in general open and eager for collaborative projects. Platforms for these practices like the *Dutch Caribbean Heritage platform*, the success of the online initiative *coleccion.aw*, Wikipedia and the creation of a *Dutch Caribbean Digital Network* are some examples in this area.

An initial idea presented to all stakeholders of collaborating on the documentation of the collection history and future of their own institutions, was received with much enthusiasm by most stakeholders. This concept to engage and incentivize Dutch Caribbean heritage professional to write their own narratives, as a follow up to this report, is an opportunity to have a collective documentation to increase accessibility for communities, promote further research and planning.

Experiences of heritage collection managing institution in the Caribbean parts of the Kingdom and their European counterpart varies. Most are approached to collaborate after projects have been initiated and limiting the value of these projects for exchange and professional growth. The knowledge of heritage professionals about their collections and their experiences and successes with engaging their communities with limited means, is an asset to be considered and valued when developing future collaborative projects within the Kingdom. A more equal partnership when initiating, developing and executing projects will benefit all partners.

Most islands in the Dutch Caribbean lack adequate legislation on heritage collections or the enforcement hereof. A collaboration with the European part of the Netherlands to collectively have base-line registration in place and executed to safeguard collections, would be beneficial to all parties. This legislation is namely not only of local interest but also essential for nominations of sites and collections on international heritage lists. The Kingdom of the Netherlands could develop into a leader of nominating sites and collections of shared history within the framework of e.g. UNESCO. Such sites containing, forts, related to the

transatlantic slave trade and historic documents could be earmarked. Also shared heritage of a group of islands e.g. the indigenous pictographs and petroglyphs on the ABC islands, could be considered.

Common challenges to safeguarding of heritage collections include the destruction of sites by climate change phenomena and economic development. Creating and maintaining inventories, digitizing these, building adequate storage, planning for research and protection of endangered sites have been discussed as measures to address these challenges. A collective approach would allow for experience exchange and lessen the costs.

The institutions on most islands have the challenge of succession within their organization. Too often, professionals leave without having the opportunity to transfer their work and knowledge to successors. It's not uncommon for this to lead to the closing of institutions or in many cases to the improper management of the collections these institutions managed. This challenge has been identified by the *Museum Association of the Caribbean* (MAC) as being one of the most significant threats to regional heritage management and safeguarding. A collective approach with regional organizations and counterparts in the European part of the Netherlands should be prioritized.

## 6. Proposal for follow up priorities

Both stakeholders and the Ministry emphasized their interest in integrating priorities in to follow-up steps to this consultation.

Activity	Short term (1-2 yrs)	Mid-term (2-4)	Long-term (4-8 years)
1. Follow up meeting and workshop			

2. Collective publication by institutions			
3. Creation of funding instrument			
4. Pilots and start digitization			
5. Legislation			
6. Registration and digitization			

1. A follow up meeting combined with a workshop with those stakeholders consulted during this survey and additional ones, should reiterate the need for registration to be a priority. This meeting should result in a draft work plan for each institution on how to start registration of their collections according to their own needs and realities. These work plans would be the base for the pilots in phase 4 and the needed budget to execute these.

2. The research and documentation of the collection history of each institution is essential for the initial plans for registration. Institutions and their professionals should be encouraged and engaged to document the collection history of their institutions, using their own narratives. A collective publication of these narratives would be of added value to the institutions, the professionals and the new generation of those interested in researching and presenting the collections.

3. The creation of a funding instrument for all the activities related to the safeguarding of collections, according to this consultation is a priority.

4. All institutions agreed that the registration and digitization of their collections should start with a pilot. This approach would allow institutions to collaborate on short term projects and present the results to their communities and to regional and global stakeholders in a near future, to promote support and further funding for the registration process.

***Yeah, I know you think this is nice, but I believe they could have done better preserving and integrating the site.***

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## Acknowledgements

Where to start to voice gratitude? Definitely by stating this in my native language: *Masha danki!*

To those at the *Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap*, who entrusted this incredible assignment to me, led by Nazari Clarinda-Ignacio, advised by Robert Verhoogt and supported by Gilia Croes. I learned from and was inspired by you.

The stakeholders I met and spoke with to formulate this report, are the heroes of my experience with this task. From my first visit, I was not only wholeheartedly received but also challenged with diverse points of views and humbled by professional experiences shared.

At the conception of the idea to tackle the issues in this report, various Dutch Caribbean colleagues pointed in my direction, as someone who could execute the works. To you I say: *Mi ta aprecia masha.*

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## About Camia

My grandfather was captain of *Camia*, a commercial sailing vessel which navigated from *La Vela de Coro* in Venezuela to Curaçao and Aruba in the 1930's.

This tenure allowed him, the second generation of a freed enslaved woman, to provide for his family and thrive in the communities of Aruba and Curaçao.

Me, naming my sole proprietor enterprise established in 2023, as this ship, is an ode to the heritage of many of us in the island communities in whom love for island, gratitude for opportunities and discipline were poured throughout our upbringing.

Camia stands for connection, exchange, prosperity and sustainability.



## ANNEX

### A reconnaissance of public collections, with specific attention to colonial collections in the Dutch Caribbean

DRAFT 16-4-2025

Visits and consultations

<b>Bonaire</b>		
Institution	Visit	Conversation (incl. online)
SKAL	✓	✓
Magasina di Rei	X	X
Terramar Museum	✓	
FuhiKuBo	✓	✓
Bonai		X
Dr. Delno Tromp		X
Dr. Oliver Antczak		X
<b>Sint Maarten</b>		
Sint Maarten Museum & Heritage Foundation	✓	✓
Department of Culture		X
Dr. Jay Haviser		✓
<b>Saba</b>		
Saba Heritage Foundation	✓	✓
Will Johnson Museum	✓	✓
Saba Lace Museum	x	
Sea and Learn Foundation		X

Ryan Espersen PhD		✓
<b>Statia</b>		
Sint Eustatius Historical Foundation Museum	✓	✓ x
Statia Heritage Center	✓	
Honen Dalim Jewish Synagogue	✓	✓
Stenapa		X
<b>Curaçao</b>		
NAAM	✓	✓
Curacao Museum	x	
Savonet Museum	x	
Kura Hulanda	✓	X
Kas di Pal'i Maishi	x	✓
Tula Museum	✓	✓
Archeologie Groep		X
Carmabi		✓
Maritiem Museum	✓	X
Jewish Cultural Historical Museum	✓	✓
<b>Aruba</b>		
Historical Museum Foundation	✓	✓
Antiquities Museum	x	
National Archaeological Museum	✓	✓
Aruba Conservation Foundation	✓	X
<b>Netherlands</b>		

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Dr. Aad Versteeg		✓
Dr. Andre van Proosdij		X
Library of the Wereldmuseum		X
KITLV		X
Museum van Oudheden		X

