

Temminck and Early Dutch Collectors

The beginning of RMNH

The first half of the 19th century was a vital and transformative era to the Kingdom of the Netherlands following its establishment under King William I in 1815. As the kingdom moved towards economic reforms and modernisation, the quest for knowledge grew ever more pressing. This period saw the Netherlands increasingly involved in the broader European trend of geographic exploration, spurred by the Enlightenment's emphasis on empirical observation and scientific inquiry. Naturalists, during their explorations, became crucial figures in documenting new species and mapping unknown territories. The natural world was, in many respects, an extension of the colonial frontier, with new resources being unlocked through these expeditions.

In this aspect, 1820 was a particularly important year. On 29 April, the *Natuurkundige Commissie voor Nederlandsch-Indië* (Natural History Commission for the Netherlands Indies, later known as "Indies Commission") was formed. Tasked to make collections in Dutch East Indies (today Indonesia), to further scientific knowledge, the Indies Commission created the groundwork for natural history research in the region. Founded by royal decree on 9 August of the same year, the Rijkmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie (RMNH) in Leiden was to house the zoological collections made by the Indies Commission.



Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie building on the Rapenburg, Leiden (ca. 1880)¹.

Who was C. J. Temminck?

On 31 March 1778, a young boy was born to the wealthy and prominent Temminck family in Amsterdam. Inspired by his father's extensive collection of exotic birds, mammals, fossils and other natural specimens, he developed an interest in ornithology and mammalogy, and later devoted much of his youth to the study of these fields. Today, his name is almost synonymous with RMNH.



Portrait of Coenraad Jacob Temminck by Jan Adam Kruseman, 1836².

At the turn of the century, that young boy, Coenraad Jacob Temminck (31 March 1778–30 January 1858), had inherited his father's collection. Within five years, he had doubled the number of specimens in his care, amassing a total of 839 specimens. This increment was brought about through his efforts at exchanging and purchasing from naturalists and collectors within his own network—a skill that would prove extremely useful to his later career³.

Originally employed as a General Auctioneer in the Dutch East India Company, Temminck had resolved to pursue natural history as a profession. However, this was no easy feat due to his lack of academic qualifications on the matter. In order to maintain access to materials (such as books and specimens) and information, Temminck continued to expand his extensive network of like-minded naturalists across Europe³. The founding of RMNH presented a fresh opportunity for Temminck. In exchange for incorporating Temminck's invaluable collection into the museum, he was offered the role of its first director—a position he kept for the next 40 years.

Under Temminck's directorship, the museum's collection expanded significantly, placing RMNH under the international spotlight. The primary sources of specimens came from the Indies Commission and Temminck's personal network of collectors, museums, dealers and civil servants, many of whom he had personally encouraged to contribute.

Temminck's network: a seafaring legacy

From early on, Temminck had sought to expand the museum's collection as quickly and efficiently as possible. In his fervour for pursuit of materials from all parts of the world, he even requested that the government instruct civil servants abroad to collect for the museum. These personnel, often moving through distant regions, were ideal for Temminck's cause. Like Temminck himself, these men were often not trained in the natural science but harboured an interest in the curiosities of nature. To ensure the quality of the donated specimens, he wrote a short guide on taxidermy and preservation in 1825, titled *Voorschrift, hoedanig te handelen met voorwerpen van natuurlijke historie, ten einde dezelve behoorlijk te verzenden en voor bederf te bewaren: Ten gebuike van het 's Rijks Museum van Natuurlijke Historie te Leyden* ('Instructions on How to Handle Natural History Objects, to Send them and Preserve them from Decay: For the Benefit of "S Rijks Museum van Natuurlijke Historie in Leiden"')³.

Temminck's network of collectors at his disposal included individuals from various walks of life—merchants, medical doctors, surgeons, sailors and consuls, just to name a few. Examples of such individuals who collected specimens in Singapore and that were deposited in RMNH include Jacques Fabrice Herman Clifford Cocq van Breugel (21 September 1799–16 June 1867) and Caspar Josephus Bottemanne (27 November 1829–20 May 1906).

This practice of receiving donated specimens from Dutch officials stationed worldwide persisted under successive directors following Temminck. In the years that followed, Pieter Buitendijk (1870–1932), a ship-surgeon serving with the *Stoomvaart-Maatschappij Nederland* (Netherlands Steamship Company) also contributed a considerable number of specimens from Singapore waters. His numerous voyages brought him across the Dutch East Indies, where he developed and nurtured his fascination for ichthyology. Then, he amassed a substantial collection of fish specimens, among other animals, all of which were generously donated to RMNH in 1903. Buitendijk's passion for zoology became a family legacy; his daughter, Alida Margaretha Buitendijk (1 April 1903–12 September 1950), inspired by her father's dedication to zoology, eventually assumed the role of curator of RMNH's arthropod department in 1940⁴.



Schrenck's Bittern (*Ixobrychus eurhythmus*) specimen collected on 12 November 1923 and donated by Pieter Buitendijk. (Naturalis Biodiversity Centre, RMNH.AVES.253058). Imaged by [SIGNIFY](#).



Striped horse fly (*Tabanus dissimilis*) specimen collected in 1910 and donated by Pieter Buitendijk. (Naturalis Biodiversity Centre, RMNH.INS.1487443). Imaged by [SIGNIFY](#).

Overlooked in the annals of history, these individuals have created a legacy through their contributions to RMNH, enriching modern understanding on Singapore's rich ecological past. Despite originating from very different backgrounds, professions, and socio-economic circles, these individuals share a common interest in natural history, fostered under Temminck, who is now firmly established in the history of natural history.



Temminck's Tragopan (*Ceriornis temminckii*) lithograph by Joseph Smit (1872). The species was named in honour of Temminck⁵.

References

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