The archive of faces and the archive of plaster; Reading anthropological facial plaster-casts taken from living individuals from the former Netherlands East Indies

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The archive of faces and the archive of plaster

Reading anthropological facial plaster-casts taken from living individuals from the former Netherlands East Indies

LAETITIA LAI

Abstract
This article introduces two interconnected approaches to provenance research on anthropological facial plaster-casts taken from living individuals. It focuses on three series of facial casts taken by Dutch anthropologist Johannes Pieter Kleiweg de Zwaan (1875-1971) in the Netherlands East Indies in 1907 and 1910. It suggests that “reading” the facial casts as an archive of faces and an archive of plaster has the potential to reveal information systematically left out in their object biographies. Through this reading process, the colonial networks of control and power asymmetries which made the plaster-casting possible are examined. It seeks out additional information to bring the object closer to the person whose face was appropriated for various colonial ends. This epistemological experiment explores the first steps which can be taken to create a decolonial view of the large anthropological plaster-cast collections in European museums which have been left anonymous for decades.

Keywords
Plaster-casts, physical anthropology, provenance research, archive.
INTRODUCTION

Anthropological facial plaster-casts taken from the bodies of living individuals produced and reproduced within the context of colonial scientific research are often found in European museum collections. While the making of plaster-casts was a popular method among physical anthropologists from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, little documentation is available to us today to find out more about the people whose bodies were instrumentalized to construct and perpetuate a US-Eurocentric racial discourse. They were originally used as three-dimensional examples of assumed racial features intended for representative and scientific purposes in anatomical institutions and ethnographic museums in Europe. The casts have been largely tucked away in depots after invasive anthropometric research practices were dismissed over the course of the twentieth century.\(^1\) Alongside countless anthropometric photographs, skin, and eye colour examinations and measurements of every part of the colonized body, plaster-casts make up a significant portion of the material produced in a colonial scientific machinery dependent on continued imperial expansion and control. Casting the faces, hands, and feet of the colonized was a preferred technique to capture assumed racial markers based on the anthropological perception that these body parts were “most distinctively human”.\(^2\) The casts served as proof of the direct encounters between European researchers and the people who lived in regions which were occupied by force. Their object biographies were shaped by individual lived experiences, but also by the highly systematized practices of European physical anthropology. When conducting provenance research on plaster-casts, the usual approach to tracing histories of ownership with the goal of identifying a maker and an affiliated community is obscured. The objects in question – as they are found in the depots today – are often the result of complex techniques of moulding and casting undertaken by multiple people and institutions in various locations.

The systematic production process of the casts on location and their later reproduction process in dedicated workshops were rarely documented in much detail, increasing the disconnect between the individual and the life-cast. This was also the case with the 188 facial plaster-casts initially taken by Dutch anthropologist Johannes Pieter Kleiweg de Zwaan (1875-1971) during his colonial expeditions in the Netherlands East Indies in 1907 and 1910. Approximately 433 versions of these 188 faces are currently spread over three museums in the Netherlands.\(^3\) In general, provenance research should include the identification of the maker and the object’s acquisition history to clarify the circumstances of ownership. In practice, this is a very complex task since there is no consensus on who would be classified as the maker of anthropological plaster-casts in the case of reproductions, and there is no existing framework

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1 David van Duuren, Mischa ten Kate, and Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen (2007: 17).
3 Additional reproductions were also donated to German museums, but they have not yet been found.
on the dispossession of someone’s facial features through plaster. In addition, the casts are often categorized as highly sensitive, occupying a sphere adjacent to human (ancestral) remains but they are rarely discussed or included in guidelines on the treatment of such collections. Institutional care takers approach life-casts with increased caution due to their lifelike appearance and proximity to the human body.

Nevertheless, methodologies in provenance research have been expanding over the last few decades to include more than simple data sets and ownership records in order to accommodate the complexities of the socio-cultural and political environments in which objects were transferred to their current locations. Encouraged by the increased accessibility of digitized records and archival sources elements such as conservation and exhibition history among others are incorporated to offer a broader picture of an object’s biography. The choice to move away from the narrow structures of common provenance records is highly relevant to objects and collections which were produced or taken in a violent colonial context. Provenance research is increasingly viewed as a tool to identify ownership and verify authenticity, but rather as an essential first step in a critical investigation into the current framework in which objects are situated. For anthropological plaster-cast collections, this broadened approach offers the opportunity to investigate the dynamics of production and reproduction in more detail to create a better understanding of the circumstances which led to the systematic appropriation of individuals’ bodies for racialized imperial ideologies. Furthermore, uncovering the many hidden trajectories which led to the existence of the cast collections supports the examination of colonial structures which made the casting process possible and contributed to their commodification and distribution beyond the person who produced the first imprints.

This article discusses an approach to provenance research in which a close reading of anthropological plaster-casts serves as an alternative archival source to reveal information historically framed as unworthy to be recorded. It attempts to explore the “archival potential of materials” by viewing plaster-casting as an archiving technique. This shift in perspective aims to destabilize the historical perception of “objective” mechanical reproduction based on the argument that individual interventions materialized in each copy are detectable when read from a de-colonial rather than a colonial perspective. This view does not focus on the limited understanding of the casts as colonial typologies but critically reflects on the layers in their object biographies which were intentionally kept hidden to preserve colonial scientific integrity. For this purpose, facial plaster-cast collections are analysed as an archive of faces as well as an archive of plaster. Both framings are interconnected and are meant

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4 In the most recent publication of guidelines for the care of human remains in German museum collections, plaster-casts were intentionally excluded see Wiebke Ahrndt, Thomas Schnalke, and Anne Wesche (2021: 63).


6 Carolyn Hamilton and Grant McNulty (2022: 133).
to serve as gateways in provenance research to seek out more information. By introducing this epistemological experiment, pre-conceived categories which were imposed on the individuals are challenged and the implication of European collecting institutions is investigated with the goal of reducing the distance between the individual and the object despite the lack of conventional sources. To illustrate this approach to provenance research, facial plaster-casts of people from the Netherlands East Indies commissioned by Dutch anthropologist Johannes Pieter Kleiweg de Zwaan will serve as a practical example.

**Methodology**

The notion of “reading” anthropological plaster-cast collections as archives in provenance research is based on various bodies of theory which demand to look beyond the idea of the archive as a “mainstream repository”, such as Ann Laura Stoler’s *Along the archival grain; Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense* (2009) and Jacques Derrida’s “Archive fever; A Freudian impression” (1995). For the conceptualization of the *archive of faces* and the *archive of plaster*, Achille Mbembe’s critical investigation of the archive in “The power of the archive and its limits” (2002) provided the groundwork. This particular article was chosen because of the important set of factors Mbembe describes regarding the power and limitations of the archive:

> [...] it is enough to state that however we define archives, they have no meaning outside of the subjective experience of those individuals who, at a given moment, come to use them. It is this subjective experience that places limits on the supposed power of the archives, revealing their uselessness and their residual and superfluous nature. Several factors are involved in this subjective experience of the archives: who owns them; on whose authority they depend; the political context in which they are visited; the conditions under which they are accessed; the distance between what is sought and what is found; the manner in which they are decoded and how what is found there is presented and made public.

Questions of ownership, authority, presentation, and more are highly relevant to provenance research and, by viewing plaster-cast collections as archives, these factors can be identified and critically examined to create an understanding of the power and limitations of facial plaster-cast collections in museum depots. The *archive of faces* and the *archive of plaster* are co-dependent, but the first involves contextual research, while the latter focuses on object and material-based research. The main goal of combining these approaches is to explore new ways to reconstruct object biographies of plaster collections which are not accompanied by enough documentation to offer a complete picture. It

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7 This article was made possible by the scholarly work of Fenneke Sysling, Britta Lange, Margit Berner, Anette Hoffmann, and Veronika Tocha, whose contributions are vital to provenance research on anthropological plaster-casts.


is meant to aid researchers in approaching large plaster-cast collections which contain little or no background information to create an initial overview and understanding of their existence. This epistemological experiment is applied to three collections of facial plaster-casts commissioned by Dutch anthropologist Johannes Pieter Kleiweg de Zwaan, partially in collaboration with his colleague and fellow anthropologist, Alfred Maaß (1863-1931). It is based on the most recent registration and inventory process of these specific collections in three Dutch museums in 2022 and 2023 during which this method was applied. The **archive of faces** and the **archive of plaster** are divided and defined in the following manner:

**Archive of faces**
The **archive of faces** refers to the totality of all facial casts one anthropologist captured in plaster and their respective reproductions. It is constructed on contextual research, including the historical circumstances in which they were produced, their historical reception, and presentation as well as their present location and interpretation.

**Archive of plaster**
The **archive of plaster** refers to the totality of all facial casts one anthropologist captured in plaster and their respective reproductions with a focus on specific markers embedded in or visible on the material of the casts. In addition, it includes the moulds used to reproduce the casts as well as cast fragments.

In this work the **archive of faces** has been constructed with the help of relevant historical publications, letters, and newspaper articles as well as secondary source material on physical anthropology in the Netherlands East Indies, the history of Dutch anatomy, and scholarly work on plaster-cast collections in Germany. The **archive of faces** aims to identify and question the circumstances in which facial plaster-casts were made and which colonial ideologies they represented and perpetuated over time. The **archive of plaster** is meant to challenge the limitations of the **archive of faces** by altering the way in which facial plaster-casts are decoded. The latter involves individual examples of material and object-based evidence found during the inventory process. These examples are meant to resituate the plaster-casts in an alternate framing in which the additional factors of authority and accessibility, which also shaped the subjective experience of the facial plaster-casts as archives, are introduced.

**The archive of faces**

**Historical circumstances**
To introduce the framework of the archive to facial plaster-casts, it is important to understand who set the archiving process in motion and in what context. Johannes Pieter Kleiweg de Zwaan had been a medical student at the University of Amsterdam and worked as a ship’s doctor travelling to the Netherlands West Indies and North America prior to his first colonial
ethnographic and anthropological collecting assignment. In 1906, a German farmer turned anthropologist named Alfred Maaß reached out to the Rijks Ethnographisch Museum (National Museum of Ethnology) in Leiden in search of a medically trained colleague for his colonial expedition to parts of Central Sumatra supported by the Berlin Society for Anthropology, Ethnography, and Prehistory.\textsuperscript{10} The museum established a connection to Kleiweg de Zwaan who agreed to join him. Shortly afterwards, the young doctor was sent to Berlin for further training in anthropological research and collecting practices.\textsuperscript{11} Over the course of several months in 1907, the two researchers made their way in Sumatra from the harbour in Padang to Siak, accompanied by a team of local assistants and Dutch colonial military representatives.\textsuperscript{12} Like the countless expeditions to European colonies in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, Maaß and Kleiweg de Zwaan sent back a large number of objects, including zoological and botanical specimens as well as textiles, ancestor figures, and other Sumatran material heritage, which were in high demand with the German and Dutch museums.\textsuperscript{13} Parallel to the accumulation of cultural goods from countries, regions, and people who were foreign to the researchers and the European institutions which funded these colonial ventures, anthropological research was a key element pursued and supported by museums and universities alike.\textsuperscript{14} Fuelled by the rapidly developing field of physical anthropology, which was deeply intertwined with emerging racial theories, Kleiweg de Zwaan followed suit and conducted extensive anthropometric research on 573 indigenous people during his time in Central Sumatra, with a focus on the Minangkabau people. The results provided the material for his dissertation entitled \textit{Bijdrage tot de anthropologie der Menangkabau Malaiers} (Contribution to the Anthropology of the Minangkabau Malays) in 1908.\textsuperscript{15} While this piece of writing was included in the second volume of Maaß’ report on their colonial expedition entitled \textit{Durch Zentral-Sumatra} (1912), the materialized legacy of his research was sent to museums in Germany and the Netherlands in the form of facial plaster-casts taken from fifty-seven living individuals who were under colonial control in the various locations on their itinerary between Padang and Siak.\textsuperscript{16} The Rijks Ethnographisch Museum in Leiden actively collected anthropological plaster-casts and had already possessed various examples prior to Kleiweg de Zwaan’s donation of the fifty-seven faces cast in plaster in 1908.\textsuperscript{17} He received training

\textsuperscript{10} Both Alfred Maaß and Johannes Pieter Kleiweg de Zwaan were members of the Berlin Society of Anthropology, Ethnography, and Prehistory (Berliner Gesellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte) (Ministerie van Binnenlandsche Zaken 1907: 58).

\textsuperscript{11} Ministerie van Binnenlandsche Zaken (1908: 48).

\textsuperscript{12} Alfred Maaß (1909: 143-144).

\textsuperscript{13} Maaß (1909: 165).

\textsuperscript{14} For further reading on the developments of physical anthropology in Germany and the Netherlands at the turn of the nineteenth century see Zimmerman (2001) and Laurens de Rooy (2011).

\textsuperscript{15} Johannes Pieter Kleiweg de Zwaan (1908).

\textsuperscript{16} Maaß (1912).

\textsuperscript{17} See, for example, the facial plaster-cast collection donated to the museum in 1888 by German
in anthropological plaster-casting in Germany from the Austrian doctor Felix von Luschan (1854-1924) and the casting process is briefly discussed by Alfred Maaß in *Durch Zentral-Sumatra*.

In a second colonial expedition to the Netherlands East Indies in 1910, this time supported by the Royal Dutch Geographical Society, Kleiweg de Zwaan cast another 131 individuals in plaster from people he encountered on the Island of Nias and in the Glodok Jail in Batavia. Lists of the people, excluding the prisoners, were published in the second volumes of *Durch Zentral Sumatra* and *Die Insel Nias bei Sumatra* (1914). Fifty-seven casts were categorized as “Minangkabau”, sixty-four casts as “Nias”, and the remaining sixty-seven were divided into eleven geo-cultural sub-sections such as “Javanese”, “Balinese”, and “Papuan”.\(^19\)

At this time, it was not unusual to produce plaster-casts of people who were objectified for colonial anthropological research. According to historian Andy Zimmerman, “[anthropological collections] strengthened the connection of anthropology to colonial rule by further embroiling the discipline in the agonistic politics of taking, and giving meaning to, the possessions and the bodies of the colonized”.\(^20\) To uphold the standards deemed necessary for a successful result, anthropologists were specifically trained in plaster-casting. On location, people were hand-picked with the support of colonial military or missionaries and convinced to undergo the procedure by an array of methods. Kleiweg de Zwaan claims that, “only with the influence and persuasion of the officials and missionaries was it possible for me to conduct research on these people”.\(^21\) Besides the help of these officials, he offered gifts, money, or medical treatment in exchange for an imprint of the unique properties of their bodies.\(^22\) While every researcher employed slightly different techniques, several elements can be considered standardized practice during their most active period, such as the covering of the face with wet plaster for facial casts which severely reduced the person’s ability to breathe. In a voice recording of Petrus Goliath, whose face was cast in Namibia by Hans Lichtenecker (1891-1988) in 1931, he describes the pain and unbearable heat the plaster caused, triggering deep fear of suffocation.\(^23\) Once dried, the plaster was lifted from the skin causing more painful sensations, often pulling out hair during the process. These initial, yet severely invasive and potentially traumatizing steps, are deeply ingrained in the casts, transferred from reproduction to reproduction, and in some cases are strikingly visible in the form of pained

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\(^18\) Maaß (1912: 128).

\(^19\) For the list of individuals see Maaß (1912: 127-129) and Kleiweg de Zwaan (1914: 224-225). For the geo-cultural subsections see Ministerie van Binnenlandsche Zaken (1913: 13).

\(^20\) Zimmerman (2001: 171).

\(^21\) Kleiweg de Zwaan (1913: 4).

\(^22\) The situation of people who were imprisoned either as prisoners-of-war or criminalized by the colonial regime as captives with few or no rights was especially taken advantage of.

\(^23\) This recording was part of Anette Hoffman’s extensive research project on Hans Lichtenecker’s collection of anthropometric materials, including plaster-casts produced in Namibia in 1931. See Annette Hoffmann (2011).
facial expressions. While general reports on this part of the process are present, they are predominantly from the perspective of the European anthropologist. Witness accounts such as the audio recording of Petrus Goliath are unique exceptions. Undergoing this procedure was not a choice willingly made, although forms of compensation are mentioned in reports. The people Kleiweg de Zwaan chose were subjected to a violent colonial regime which shaped their social structures, often leaving little option for refusal. He took advantage of the power asymmetries produced and maintained by Dutch forces and predominantly researched men from a lower hierarchical standing, such as forced labourers and convicts in prisons, who were particularly vulnerable in the colony. Deeply personal elements, including the faces of the colonized and their lived experiences, were dehumanized by introducing the casts to a systemized production process which resulted in the ostentation of their bodies beyond their control.

Kleiweg de Zwaan’s research objective was not supported solely by European organizations such as the Royal Dutch Geographical Society but also by numerous colonial representatives on location in established positions of power. Botanist and colonial collector Melchior Treub (1851-1910) equipped him with local labourers, while Governor-General J.B. van Heutsz (1851-1924) provided military support and transport. In addition, the president of the Javasche Bank, Gerard Vissering (1865-1937), ensured consistent access to the colonial expedition funds throughout Kleiweg de Zwaan’s itinerary. The researcher was able to take advantage of a fixed network of control which welcomed his work. Nevertheless, moments of resistance were impactful enough to be mentioned both by Maaß and Kleiweg de Zwaan. The latter was even boycotted in his quarters by the local people during their colonial expedition in 1907.

For a long time, the story of the facial casts was told with an emphasis on the presumed scientific achievements they represented, in which local resistance was framed as an “obstacle” which could be overcome with the help of powerful allies and modes of persuasion. Unravelling the circumstances in which the casts were produced from a de-colonial rather than a colonial perspective emphasizes these small moments of resistance which offer insights into the lived experiences of the many people whose faces went on display for the sake of a colonial narrative created for them but not by them.

**Historical reception and presentation**

The first negatives taken by Kleiweg de Zwaan on location were sent back to European replica or plaster workshops for reproduction. They were divided into two series, often entitled “Minangkabau series” and “Nias series”, based on Kleiweg de Zwaan’s own categorization. From Maaß’ reports it is known that the first fifty-seven casts taken in 1907 were sent to a replica workshop

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24 Maaß (1912: 4-15).
25 Maaß (1908: 621).
26 The first imprint of the face or other body part taken on location is a negative mould which needs to be processed to create a positive version.
in Berlin, but no information has been found indicating where the Nias and Glodok series were reproduced.27 Versions were donated to the Ontleedkundig Museum te Amsterdam (Anatomy Museum Amsterdam), Rijksethnographisch Museum Leiden (National Museum of Ethnology Leiden), and the Anatomisch Instituut der Rijksuniversiteit Utrecht (Anatomy Institute of the National University Utrecht) between 1908 and 1915. The casts were divided and registered based on the Dutch anthropologist’s two colonial expeditions, with no clear distinction between the casts from people on Nias and in Glodok Jail taken in 1910. The facial plaster-casts were praised by colleagues when Kleiweg de Zwaan presented them in various settings. In a report to the 195th assembly of the Royal Dutch Geographical Society in 1912, physical anthropologist A.J.P. van den Broek (1877-1961) writes the following:

If one studies a mask, of which the image is included here; it is striking how Kleiweg de Zwaan succeeded in producing casts which reach behind the ears achieving a fully formed face. 

[...]

One is no longer satisfied with the knowledge from skulls and skull fragments; one aims to create a whole out of these remains. A skull fragment turns into an entire skull, a skull turns into a head.28

Upon the arrival of the facial casts in their respective institutions, they were considered an “exceptional” collection of faces, representing the varying “racial types” found in the locations which Kleiweg de Zwaan visited.29 Although additional information to contextualize and individualize their lives was present, the casts were often reduced to a generalized category and placed on display alongside other objects or human ancestral remains from the Netherlands East Indies (Figure 1).30 Descriptions such as “Man from Flores” or “Man from Nias” were commonly applied to create a broad connection to the characteristics meant to be conveyed. It was very likely that Kleiweg de Zwaan conducted additional research on all the people whose faces were cast in plaster, possibly resulting in photographs, fingerprints, footprints, and hair samples. Nevertheless, the dimensional quality of the casts and the recognizability of a human face was the ultimate communication tool, encapsulating his anthropological research in a manner which spoke to people beyond his academic field. The faces were absorbed by the vast number of objects streaming into the museums and the racial markers provided by the Dutch anthropologist were the key element according to which they were stored and subsequently displayed. Kleiweg de Zwaan contributed to an archive of faces, deeply ingrained with ideas of hierarchization and subjugation, intentionally made visible to display presumed imperial scientific progress.

27 Maaß (1908: 621).
28 A.J.P van den Broek (1912).
29 “Wetenschappen”. De Nieuwe Courant (‘s-Gravenhage), 5-11-1912.
30 See, for example, the exhibition held on the occasion of the 15th Dutch Natural History and Medical Congress as described in Max Weber (1915: 83).
The unique features of each individual were appropriated by the anthropologist to serve as visualizing tools, but his scientific interpretations were hardly in the spotlight when the casts were discussed by himself and his contemporaries. Instead, the complexities of accessing the targeted face and the hardships of producing anthropological plaster-casts in a foreign environment on people unfamiliar with the technique and its masters was emphasized. Despite the praise for their scientific value to physical anthropology, there is hardly any evidence of them being instrumentalized for anatomical studies or as reference material in anthropometric research after they were reproduced and donated. In a detailed account of the developments in Dutch anatomy between 1860 and 1940, no further scientific significance was attributed to the facial plaster-casts other than the initial positive feedback they received. Kleiweg de Zwaan himself did not connect the casts with the main body of his anthropological research and their distance to any further information which he gathered on the individuals exemplifies the non-narrative approach, in which the objects’ perceived authenticity and dimensional quality was meant to speak for themselves.

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CURRENT LOCATION AND INTERPRETATION

The majority of the 433 facial casts have not been accessible to the wider public for several decades. Some more recent exceptions, such as the display of forty-two casts of individuals from Nias in the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (Figure 2) and thirty-nine casts from both Nias people and convicts in Glodok Jail at the NEMO Science Museum Amsterdam have contributed to a limited perception of the actual number of casts which make up Kleiweg de Zwaan’s archive of faces.34

Figure 2. Display of 42 facial casts of people from Kleiweg de Zwaan’s Nias series on display at the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, on loan from the Utrecht University Museum between 2013 and 2021.35

These moments of public display were criticized which further encouraged this in-depth research approach.36 Upon closer inspection, it is revealed that the collections of the institutions which received the casts in the early-twentieth century have continued to exist in the Wereldmuseum Leiden, the Utrecht University Museum, and the Museum Vrolik respectively.37 Not all versions

34 For the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam display see “Facial Mask of Hono-Hono and 41 Other Nias Islanders”, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam. [Retrieved from: http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.514388; accessed on: 7-7-2023.] For the list of casts on display at NEMO Science Museum see Janneke van Esch (2006).
36 See Andrea Lagrutta (2017).
37 Rijksethnographisch Museum Leiden was renamed Wereldmuseum Leiden in 2023, while the collection of the Ontleedkundig Museum Amsterdam was absorbed into the Museum Vrolik Amsterdam and the Utrecht University Museum incorporated Kleiweg de Zwaan’s cast collection from the Huizinga Institute for Bioanthropology.
of the facial casts have survived over a century of storage and display, but the most recent research and registration process recorded 160 versions in Leiden, 131 in Utrecht, and 142 in Amsterdam. A more detailed breakdown of their presence is shown in the Table 1.38

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Series</th>
<th>Original number</th>
<th>Collection Wereldmuseum Leiden (RMV)</th>
<th>Collection Utrecht University Museum (UMU)*</th>
<th>Collection Museum Vrolik (MV)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nias</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glodok</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minangkabau</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unidentified</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duplicates**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (all, per institution)</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total all</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>433</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Presence of facial plaster-casts attached to Kleiweg de Zwaan’s name in Dutch institutions.

* No records have proved that a set of the Minangkabau series was donated to an institution in Utrecht.
** Duplicates refer to multiple versions of one person’s face in one collection.

In this research and registration project, the “series” refers to the collection of faces which were taken in one geographical region based on Kleiweg de Zwaan’s categorization, while the “collection” refers to the totality of the casts from different series present in one institution. The numbers in the second column indicate the original number of people who were cast in plaster. For example, the Wereldmuseum Leiden collection still holds fifty-one reproductions of the Nias series, fifty-four of the Glodok series, and fifty-four of the Minangkabau series. One cast has not been allocated to either of the three series yet. Based on the museum’s annual reports, complete series were originally donated which means some reproductions have been either lost or destroyed over time.39 Although viewing these numbers might appear convoluted and complex to grasp, each version is anchored in the lived experiences of a colonized person, casting an invisible web over three collections in the Netherlands alone. The interplay between the anthropologist, collecting institution, and replica workshop encouraged by colonial structures of control determined the distribution of faces in places far away from the

38 It is important to note that these data were subject to change because of the ongoing research process which aims to identify fragmented casts for a more complete picture.
39 Ministerie van Binnenlandsche Zaken (1913).
people to whom they belonged. In this approach to provenance research, the archive does not refer to a static accumulation of documents but to Mbembe’s notion of the archive as a status which is continuously renegotiated in a dynamic process between archive, subject, and state. While each collection is intertwined with the histories of the institution in which it is housed and the encounters with the people who engaged with them, framing the totality of the casts as an archive of faces is relevant to creating an understanding of how their biographies intertwine. The most recent moments in which a selected number were placed on display emphasize how Kleiweg de Zwaan’s archive of faces continues to be deployed for interpretative processes internally and externally by museums, but there is little awareness of the larger picture.

Anthropological plaster-cast collections are increasingly described as “sensitive” material, supported by a growing critical discourse in countries which pursued these forms of collections such as Germany and Austria. Research projects which gathered witness statements, audio recordings, and photographic evidence of plaster-casting on Jewish prisoners, colonized people, and prisoners-of-war unearthed information on the countless layers of violence which were part of the practice for decades. The most important shift in discourse in the Netherlands was introduced by historian Fenneke Sysling who contributed significant research on plaster-casting and Dutch physical anthropology in relation to the Netherlands East Indies in her book Racial science and human diversity in colonial Indonesia (2016). Sysling approached the practices applied in historical anthropometric research from various angles and most significantly contextualized the existence of Kleiweg de Zwaan’s plaster-casts by relating them to Daston and Galison’s concept of “mechanical objectivity”, which describes the European researchers’ attempts to achieve ‘ideal scientific representation’ by mechanical means. The plaster-casts were tools to communicate the anthropologists’ mode of vision using technology, withdrawing their subjective perspective to be replaced by a seemingly objective process of production with as little individual intervention as possible. Sysling refers to Kleiweg de Zwaan’s collection of plaster-casts as a “three-dimensional imperial archive”, leaning on Tim Barringer’s discussion of museum collections as imperial archives in “Re-presenting the imperial archive; South Kensington and its museums” (1998). Sysling’s observations serve as a point of departure for this approach to provenance research in which the archive of faces and the archive of plaster are used to question the object

41 The display in the NEMO Science Museum, for example, did not clarify that its selection of 39 casts was comprised of faces from people beyond Nias. For a closer examination of the display in the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam see Lagrutta (2017).
42 For plaster-casting of Jewish prisoners see Margit Berner (2011). For a critical reflection on sensitive collections in German museums see Britta Lange (2013).
43 Sysling (2016).
biographies which are entangled with practices of mechanical reproduction and colonial anthropological modes of vision.

**Archive of plaster**

**Traces of hair**

Reading the *archive of plaster* maps information which was considered less relevant to the historical interpretation and presentation of facial plaster-casts based on traces of evidence found in or on the material itself. Hardly visible in photographs, but noticeable when examined in person, eyelash, eyebrow, and other facial hair were found on the facial plaster-casts in varying degrees of intensity during the inventory process at Museum Vrolik, Utrecht University Museum and Wereldmuseum Leiden. One example is the cast of Djannil, a man around twenty years old born in Padang according to the information provided by Kleiweg de Zwaan and Maaß.

In Djannil’s left ear and surrounding area, hair is embedded in both versions found in the collections of the Wereldmuseum Leiden and the Museum Vrolik (Figure 3).

![Figure 3. Close-up of Djannil's facial cast with hair in left ear (source: Museum Vrolik collection, object number 8795 (photograph by Laetitia Lai).](image)

While the registration and inventory process was meant to create a general overview, these traces of human material have raised various questions regarding the production process and origin of the casts. No information on the place of production or the plasterer who reproduced them is attached to the objects. When Kleiweg de Zwaan chose the individuals whom he wanted to cast, he set an archiving process in motion which manifested itself in ways

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47 Maaß (1912: 129).
48 Djannil, Kleiweg de Zwaan registration number 54. Object number Museum Vrolik (8795) and object number Wereldmuseum Leiden (RV-5733-54).
reaching beyond the cataloguing of assumed racial typologies. According to Mbembe, based on processes of despoilment and dispossession, the archived document ceases to belong to its author “in order to become property of society at large, if only because from the moment it is archived, anyone can claim to access the content”. The moment at which the person’s face became archivable material, hence the moment of dispossession, can be traced back to the creation of the first imprint made on location. Cultural historian Britta Lange argues for the notion of the casts as hybrid specimens, because the plaster once touched human bodies, and possibly still carries traces of a person’s DNA. Nevertheless, it is important to clarify that the plaster which makes up the facial cast collections found in Dutch depots today is not the same material Kleiweg de Zwaan used in the Netherlands East Indies. This notion risks being perpetuated if the casts are not seen in the context of their sibling versions in other collections and their history of production. Historical accounts of anthropological plaster-casting emphasize the complexity of reproducing plaster-casts, particularly of so-called “life casts” of human faces. The material which directly touched the peoples’ bodies was very likely not preserved because of the intricate process of mould making. The negative mould produced by Kleiweg de Zwaan with a plaster mixture he made on location was needed to create a first positive version named a “model cast”. During this initial step, the negative mould, the plaster which touched the face, was destroyed; referred to in specialized terminology as the “lost mould”. The Dutch anthropologist had no means to create the first models on location so the negatives were sent to plasterers in Europe instead. Recognizing this step in the production process is relevant to provenance research since it questions the positioning of Kleiweg de Zwaan as the sole maker of the facial casts and links the objects to other people and institutions who are often not mentioned in the object records. The “lost mould” held the closest proximity to the person whose face was cast and was the only product which was directly produced by Kleiweg de Zwaan on location.

Reading the archive of plaster in place of the archive of faces offers more insights into the steps which were taken between the first imprint to the final reproduction. As Lange has correctly pointed out, despite the actual material not touching the face the plaster often transferred macroscopic, and possibly microscopic, human material from the person to the cast. These traces can be interpreted in two ways: (1) if traces of hair are present, this offers an indication of closer proximity to the first negative and therefore to the individual; (2) traces of hair support Lange’s argument that plaster-casts are hybrid specimens. A similar finding of human hair in body casts which were part of a museum diorama in the South African Museum in Cape Town played a role in the decision to recategorize them as human remains and as

50 Lange (2011: 34).
52 Christina Haak, Miguel Helfrich, and Veronika Tocha (2021: 66).
“un-ethically acquired”. This is a path which has not yet been fully explored in Europe. Reading the *archive of plaster* requires a close examination of each object. The hair embedded in plaster represents material evidence of the lived experience of the person whose face was cast and whose hair was extracted and subsequently transported to Europe where it was transferred from reproduction to reproduction. In this process, the macroscopic and microscopic human bodily tissue of one person can be found in multiple museum collections today. While the presence of hair did lead to a more detailed enquiry into the cast production in the inventory process, it also challenged the boundaries of what is possible to achieve in provenance research. In this experiment of reading the *archive of plaster*, the interpretation of human hair in the material does not go beyond its role as a marker in a chain of production and as further proof of the discomfort the plaster-casting caused. At this stage of the research process, traces of human hair are found only incidentally, which means that identifying further bodily remnants would require research on a microscopic level and additional expertise. Human material in anthropological plaster-casts problematizes their existence, but it also risks a new form of hierarchization between objects with and without the said material. Whether hair was extracted and transferred or not does not change the fact that people had to undergo an invasive procedure for their faces to be cast. The goal of the *archive of plaster* is to connect all reproductions and adjacent material to the person whose face was used, without ranking them according to their completeness, current condition, or amount of human material present. If an affiliated community or a descendent is identified, it is important to have an idea of all the material which was originally sourced from the person’s body and to avoid imposing an external value system on these remnants without consultation.

**Numbers and Labels**

Kleiweg de Zwaan assigned numbers to each person he cast in plaster. These were either carved on their respective cast’s necks or written on the back in ink, pencil, or with a blue crayon-like pen. In most cases, these numbers could be easily matched with the lists published in *Durch Zentral Sumatra* and *Die Insel Nias bei Sumatra*, further linking each version to the contextual information gathered in the *archive of faces* and providing a better overview of the number of versions each institution holds. However, occasionally no number was carved or written on the material. Djannil’s cast in the Museum Vrolik collection lacked any identifier assigned by Kleiweg de Zwaan, but a different numbering system is visible on the back of the casts in the Museum Vrolik collection of the Minangkabau series to which Djannil’s cast belonged (Figure 4). According to the museum staff these numbers were not given by the Museum Vrolik when registering them. Alongside their exhibition “Near life; The Gipsformerei – 200 years of casting plaster”, an extensive catalogue was published by the Gipsformerei Berlin.

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53 Katharina Schramm (2016: 133).
54 Lange (2011: 34).
Figure 4. Number on Djannil’s facial cast in the Museum Vrolik collection, object number 8795, corresponding with the sales catalogue of the Gipsformerei Berlin (photograph by Laetitia Lai).

It was generally known that the replica workshop had produced and kept the moulds of the Minangkabau series but, for the first time, archival records and a more detailed discussion about their existence were made public. In an excerpt from its sales catalogue, the numbers used for registration correspond to the numbers printed in black ink on Djannil’s cast. Each sequence on the backs of the Minangkabau series matched the sales catalogue and provided proof of their connection to the site of production in Berlin. This sales catalogue entry made it possible to find Djannil in Kleiweg de Zwaan’s list and identify him as Number 54 out of 57. Alongside the details of each person whose cast was made, a price was listed in the sales catalogue. For 6 German Mark a person or institution could order a plaster version of Djannil’s face. This evidence of commodification highlights that casts were not solely instrumentalized as representations of racialized typologies and scientific progress, but also used for financial gain. Zimmerman describes this aspect as follows:

Like the political-economic system that transferred the possessions of colonized people to anthropologists in Berlin, the system bringing pieces and representations of their bodies was, despite some difficulties, enormously successful.

This increased accessibility complicates the biographies of facial plaster-casts, since their entry into economic circulation heightens the possibility of a continuously growing archive of plaster and archive of faces. The replica workshop in Berlin views its anthropological plaster-cast collection critically

and the reproduction of sensitive life casts is no longer pursued. How many reproductions of the Minangkabau series were sold to other people or museums has not yet been established. At this stage of the research process, several examples of the Minangkabau series have been identified in their depot but represent the only other reproductions outside of the Netherlands.

A key aspect which was also missing in the sales catalogue and from the original list of people who were cast in the locations from Padang to Siak in 1907 were the names of the individuals. Although it is now possible to refer to cast Number 54 of the Minangkabau series as “Djannil”, Maaß initially emphasized that it was impossible to include names, because people refused to reveal their identity. The names which were eventually mentioned might have been disclosed by the people only with great reluctance and were likely not entirely correct. Kleiweg de Zwaan was a total stranger who disregarded personal boundaries, and the refusal to reveal a name which would tie them to his work could also have been a protective measure to evade the colonial registration system. While the Minangkabau series in the Museum Vrolik shows a direct connection to the workshop in which they were produced, closer inspection of the versions in the Wereldmuseum Leiden has revealed small labels attached to their backs. These labels have the same information published by the anthropologists, but also includes the names originally claimed to have been left out (Figure 5).

![Figure 5. Label on Djannil's facial cast in the collection of the Wereldmuseum Leiden, object number RV-5733-54 (photograph by Laetitia Lai).](image)

It is questionable whether these were their true names, and there is no clear indication of the source on which they were based. The Nias, Glodok, and Minangkabau series in Leiden all show signs of these labels with slight

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58 Maaß (1912: 48).
variations in content. Names are important aspects in contextualizing the facial casts, and the act of inclusion and exclusion tells us more about the relationship the anthropologists and their supporters had with people like Djannil.

In general, the countless people Kleiweg de Zwaan researched were kept anonymous, and Maaß referred to them as “Leutematerial”, which roughly translates as “people material”. They were largely viewed as sources to satiate the need for bodily material to send back to Europe. In Kleiweg de Zwaan’s second attempt to categorize individuals from the Netherlands East Indies in 1910, he was able to include names of the people from Nias, which he probably compiled with the help of missionaries and military representatives. As part of the inventory process, preliminary names have now been registered for 115 of the 188 faces which were cast in plaster. The sixty-seven convicts who were cast in the Glodok Jail remain anonymous, but the labels, which also include Kleiweg de Zwaan’s object numbers, have supported the identification and registration process significantly. Lange argues that an effort to identify the anonymized individuals gives an opportunity to remove the casts from their context as “racial types” and resituates them as lives manifested in plaster worthy of being memorialized. For provenance research this is relevant information which can support the search for descendant communities. Although the examination of the totality of all the casts Kleiweg de Zwaan commissioned and subsequently donated remains a complex task, a comparative approach through a close inspection of every cast in the different locations increases the understanding of their object trajectories and creates points for further investigation. Each version shows unique features embedded in the material which tell a different story, in this example, they are manifested in replica workshop numbers or labels attached to their backs.

**Moulds**

One important aspect of the archive of plaster is the moulds, which were briefly discussed in the section on the transfer of human material. There are multiple ways in which facial plaster-casts can be reproduced and, if there is the intention to make a continued reproduction, a semi-permanent or permanent casting mould is created. Through the previously established connection to the replica workshop in Berlin, further details on the possible casting process of at least one series of the three which are part of Kleiweg de Zwaan’s archive of plaster were gathered. The replica workshop divided the moulds into three categories: (1) gelatine moulds; (2) plaster piece moulds; and (3) silicone moulds. Relevant to the time frame in which the 433 facial casts in the Netherlands were produced, are the categories (1) gelatine moulds and (2) plaster-piece moulds. The moulds connected to the Minangkabau series in the Museum Vrolik via their catalogue numbers are considered plaster-piece moulds. They are said to be precise, durable, and the most common form of mould used prior to the

59 Maaß (1912: 128).
60 Lange (2013: 61).
Second World War. If well maintained, plaster-piece moulds can be reused almost indefinitely. As the name suggests, plaster piece moulds consist of the multiple pieces needed to reproduce the many details of a person’s face accurately. Casting seams often reveal the locations at which two or multiple pieces came together. On anthropological plaster-casts, to preserve the perceived authenticity for which researchers were striving, these seams were not removed in a retouching process.62

One way a cast can be matched to its respective mould is by closely examining the surface of the material. The Minangkabau series in the Wereldmuseum Leiden does not show any signs of numbering from a replica workshop, but lines crossing the faces and along the ears indicate the presence of casting seams. By comparing the individual moulds and their pieces with the lines detectable on the casts, it is possible to create a connection. If these lines are not present, they have either been retouched or not produced in a plaster piece but possibly in a gelatine mould. This form of mould is less permanent and uses a glue-like substance made from animal gelatine.63 It does not leave behind protuberant seams, but is only reusable for several days after it was first created. Both of Djannil’s casts in the Museum Vrolik and in the Wereldmuseum Leiden show the same horizontal and vertical lines, indicating that they were made from the same mould, which is registered under number 5296 in the Gipsformerei Berlin (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Possible casting seam on Djannil’s facial cast in Museum Vrolik collection, object number 8795 (photograph by Laetitia Lai).

The technique used to reproduce the Nias and Glodok series remains unknown, but with the support of additional expertise it might be possible to determine this in the future. In the image of the exhibition space in 1915 (Figure 1), some casts are shown mounted on a base used for gelatine moulds. If these casts can be identified, this would provide more information on the place of production and the production method.

Through this continuous process of comparing between collections, casts, and moulds, a broader picture of the extent of Kleiweg de Zwaan’s *archive of plaster* is slowly but steadily revealed. Identifying the moment of transition from the first negative created by the anthropologist to a permanent or temporary mould, which empowers a second party to reproduce the casts beyond the control of the person whose face was used and even beyond the control of Kleiweg de Zwaan himself, is an important element to be explored further. The Dutch anthropologist not only created an *archive of faces*, he also provided the tools to create an *archive of plaster* which helped maintain the production of facial casts for the purpose of racializing the people he encountered in the Netherlands East Indies. The techniques the plasterer used and the colonial network of people and institutions the replica workshop serviced are some of the many factors which contributed to the object biographies of the casts.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

The epistemological experiment of “reading” anthropological facial plaster-casts as archives was introduced by the necessity to make sense of what Kleiweg de Zwaan left behind in these three Dutch collections and beyond. When the cast collections in Utrecht, Leiden, and Amsterdam were read as an *archive of plaster*, information such as possible names of the people and the tools which were used to produce them was revealed. Several additional aspects support a more in-depth reading of the material including colouration, attached installation devices, traces of reinforcement, and more. This research has supported an increased understanding of the vast colonial network and power structures on which Kleiweg de Zwaan relied, and of the ways in which traces of the people remain detectable in and on the material itself. However, part of the initial inventory and registration process on which this article is based included a close examination of each cast, creating intimate encounters without the permission of the people who were cast. It takes advantage of the increased accessibility made possible by physical anthropologists like Kleiweg de Zwaan, which was based on power asymmetries which have kept the casts in their respective locations in museums to this day. As was discussed in the *archive of plaster*, the first models, hence the first positive versions of the casts, were often not produced on location. Therefore, the people whose faces were cast had no opportunity to engage with the objects and create their own meanings around these materialized versions of themselves. Unfortunately, registration processes are often necessary to establish a first overview and connections to the person behind the cast and their descendants. It is highly recommended that this research be continued in close collaboration with
descendant communities once they have been identified and are willing to engage with the casts; ideally also with external experts and plasterers. Furthermore, full access to all versions of the person’s face, including the moulds and plaster fragments, should be given to affiliated communities.

The archive is treated here as a tool to introduce new gateways to interpreting the cast collection’s presence, but the information gathered will always be based on the subjective experience of the person who is engaging with them. Introducing two modes of reading the facial plaster-casts as an *archive of faces* and an *archive of plaster* contributes to a better understanding of the factors which made their production possible and how they were perceived in Europe. Both interpretations of the archive are connected in a dynamic process in which findings in each framing inform the other and vice-versa. They are not static categories and there are many more ways to read the facial plaster-casts as archives or to challenge the archives which were initially conceptualized, including the ones addressed in this article. Findings such as traces of human hair or the tools which were used for continued reproduction like the plaster-piece moulds are elements which can contribute to a discussion on the treatment of these collections in the future. This includes new debates on incorporating them in the realm of human ancestral remains, the connection with descendant communities or as a platform on which to discuss colonial legacies and the power imbalances they maintain. There is a multiplicity of ways with which they can be engaged in a productive manner, but the work will have to continue as a case-by-case basis in close contact with the people who are affiliated with the casts, hence the people who have been left out of the conversation so far. Regarding the facial plaster-casts commissioned by Kleiweg de Zwaan, based on the findings uncovered in the Netherlands, the first possible descendants have been reached through a collaborative project between the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Utrecht University Museum, Museum Pusaka Nias, and the Universitas Nias Raya on Nias. Compiling information by reading the facial plaster-casts as an *archive of faces* and an *archive of plaster* is just a first step towards helping to remove them from the state of paralysis and anonymity which they have occupied in museum depots for decades.

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