

# Re-Collecting Father Viegen's Asmat Objects

By Karel Weener

It's the end of April 2014 and it's unseasonably warm. I'm driving over a small road surrounded by pasture and orchards. Through the open car window, the warm wind brings in the smell of freshly cut grass. Every now and then I have to steer my car onto the shoulder of the road, so as to make way for the big agricultural vehicles loaded with hay. After passing through the village of Sint Agatha,<sup>1</sup> I drive down a road lined with trees and turn into the parking area of the Kruisherenklooster (Monastery of the Crosiers). This is the oldest monastery in the Netherlands and the Crosiers have been living here since 1371. Since 2006, the old walls have also harbored the Erfgoedcentrum voor Nederlands Kloosterleven (Center for the Heritage of Dutch Religious Life).<sup>2</sup> The goal of this foundation is to preserve the heritage of Dutch monastic life within the Netherlands and to make it publicly accessible. So far, around 100 Dutch monastic communities have housed their archives, books, and objects here.

I am here to do research in the archives of the Missionarii Sacratissimi Cordis Jesu (Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, hereafter MSC) and for the last few days have been frantically looking for three photographs showing a group of Asmat shields collected by an early Dutch missionary. I know that years ago the photographs were in the monastery in Tilburg, which is no longer in use. Part of their archive was brought here to the Kruisherenklooster, but did it include the original pictures of the Asmat shields?

It's quite cool in the reading room. On top of a little four-wheeled cart there are about a dozen boxes with photo albums waiting for me. The archivist is called away somewhere else, and I open the first cardboard box. It contains firm, velvety, black-greyish pages with photographs glued onto them. Black-and-white photographs, beautiful images, but I am too restless to look at them attentively. Most of them are related to the MSC mission post in Merauke, southwestern New Guinea. The second

Below left to right

FIG. 1: Shields 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9.

Reproduced with the kind permission of the MSC de Tilburg.

FIG. 2: Shields 10, 11, 12, 13, 14.

Reproduced with the kind permission of the MSC de Tilburg.

FIG. 3: Shields 15, 16, 17, 18, 19.

Reproduced with the kind permission of the MSC de Tilburg.



box, Marind-Anim: splendidly dressed men, taken heads, bashful-looking women, portraits of some missionaries, the mission post in Merauke ... and shields!<sup>3</sup> Got them! (figs. 1–3)

I jump out of my chair, then regain my composure and sit down again. The photographs are of a larger format than the other ones in this box and the sepia tone is surprising. Different format, different color ... could it be that these pictures weren't taken by the missionaries themselves? If not, by whom? The photographs are glued tightly to the paper, so looking at the back is not an option. Always new questions. But I should get writing—about Father Joseph Viegen, who participated in a military exploration of Asmat territory in 1912 and built up a collection of anthropological objects during the expedition. It was a collection consisting mainly of Asmat shields and some of the wooden anthropomorphic figures with slender bodies and bent limbs that are so characteristic of Asmat sculpture. The story I am about to write concerns this collection and how it was dispersed over the globe.<sup>4</sup> It is a chronological history based on still-extant primary source material, although this is rather haphazard.

The personal file for Father Joseph Viegen at the Kruissherenklooster is in a thin folder containing a preprinted form with his biographical details and work for the MSC filled out in black ink. An entire life, told more with dates and years than words. He was born in Maastricht on October 24, 1871. He was ordained in



FIG. 4: Father Joseph Viegen, c. 1905.

Reproduced with the kind permission of the MSC de Tilburg.

1897, and then left for New Pomerania (now New Britain). From 1904 to 1909 he was a prior at Langgoer, Kei Islands. In 1909 he arrived in Merauke and worked among the Marind-Anim. In 1915 he returned to the Kei Islands. Written after the years 1915–1919 are the words “*Kei, infirm.*” In December 1919 he travelled back to the Netherlands, where he died on November 11, 1936. A separate envelope contains some pictures of him and his “In Memoriam” card. I line them up on the table. The first one shows a young Father Viegen, perhaps freshly ordained? That would have made him twenty-five years old. Narrow shoulders, parted hair, a moustache, the beginnings of a goatee, and small oval glasses (fig. 4). In 1905, Viegen came to the Netherlands on leave and I suspect that the next photo must have been made at that time. So there he must have been thirty-four or thereabouts. The remaining pictures show a significantly older Viegen and were probably all made after his final return to the Netherlands. The last picture shows Father Viegen dead in his coffin. Beneath his head there is a pillow with the words “*Rust in vrede*” (rest in peace) embroidered onto it. Around his head, some flowers.

There's another box with notes and correspondence from Father Viegen, but virtually all the notes are about the Marind-Anim and I learn nothing about his participation in the 1912 expedition. They are all written in small, neat handwriting and illustrated with detailed drawings. Viegen dedicated a lot of attention to his re-





FIG. 5 (left): Captain Idisbald Le Cocq d'Armandville (seated, third from the left) in 1917. Le Cocq took command of the detachment responsible for the exploration of southern New Guinea in late May 1911. In January 1912, the detachment was transferred to the Northwest River.

Reproduced with the kind permission of the Nederlands Instituut voor Militaire Historie. Object no. 2155\_075563. Special thanks to O. Groot.



FIG. 6 (left): Naval officer Chaillet. Inscribed on the back: "J.-L. Chaillet, septembre 1912, S.S. Valk."

Reproduced with the kind permission of his heirs.

FIG. 7 (above): This photo showing the *Ketti* was also published in the *Annals* to illustrate Viegen's "letter." It was taken by a Mr. Coenen and the caption says: "S.S. *Ketti*, on which Fr. Viegen made part of his journey."

Reproduced with the kind permission of the MSC de Tilburg.



FIG. 8 (left): Map showing the Noordwest River as well as other rivers in the western part of southern New Guinea. It was made by Luitenant-ter-zee 2nd class J.-L. Chailliet following surveys made in April and June 1912.

*Tijdschrift van het Kon. Ned. Aardrijksk. Genootschap*, 1913. Kaart II: Rivieren, Zuid Nieuw-Guinea.



FIG. 9 (above): MSC display created by Brother Hamers in the pavillon de l'éducation of the exposition internationale à Tilburg in 1913. This is probably the first photo taken of the figurative sculptures collected by Viegen. For my research, I have identified each with a letter (left to right): A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L. Sculptures E, H, I, K, and L have not yet been located.

itary journal of this particular expedition; however, I did find an extract from one journal, running from April 5 through May 3, 1912,<sup>6</sup> which includes the part Viegen participated in. A description of Viegen's journey was also published in the *MSC Annals* between October 1912 and December 1913:

search on the Marind-Anim, and was even able to attend rituals of several secret societies. His colleagues called him “the anthropologist” in jest and had some reservations about the expedience of his research. In any case, his interest in and study of the Marind-Anim undoubtedly led Mr. Coenen, the acting assistant-resident of southern New Guinea and the highest-ranking Dutch official in the area, to invite him to join an official expedition up the Noordwest River.<sup>5</sup>

The Dutch had started systematically exploring southern New Guinea in 1907. Although these expeditions were carried out by the military, the assistant-resident maintained oversight and, in some cases, personally went along on the expeditions. I haven't been able to find anything about Mr. Coenen in the archives, not even a report of the 1912 expedition, which he would certainly have written. Similarly, I was unable to find the full mil-

“Een tocht naar de Noord-West-Rivier,” (“A Journey to the North-West River) with the subtitle “Brief van den WelEerw. Pater Jos Viegen uit Maastricht, missionaris te Merauke (Ned. Nieuw-Guinea)” (“Letter from the Reverend Father Jos Viegen from Maastricht, Missionary in Merauke (Dutch New-Guinea)”)<sup>7</sup> This summary of his experiences, combined with the military journal and a bit of imagination, allows us to get a sense of what took place during this expedition.

### EXPLORATION

Once a month, after the arrival of the mail, the government steamer *SS Valk* made a journey from Merauke to the Noordwest River. At the time, the reconnaissance troops charged with the exploration of the interior were encamped there a few kilometers upstream. In addition to fresh troops, the *Valk* also brought supplies. When

FIG. 10 (left): Part of the mission museum in the MSC mission house in Tilburg after 1916. The Asmat objects collected by Father Viegen were kept in this museum for many years.

Reproduced with the kind permission of the MSC de Tilburg.

Viegen was offered the opportunity to participate in this journey up to the camp, he hesitated at first, according to his letters. Could he abandon his mission post for such a long time? The assistant-resident, however, pointed out that the area along the river was densely populated and promised him that they would stop at the various villages so that he could acquaint himself with these new tribes. Viegen was enthusiastic at the prospect because, as he wrote, as a missionary his main interest was in people. He eagerly accepted Coenen's offer. In the early morning of the first Sunday after Easter and at the onset of the monsoon season, Viegen departed for the Noordwest River on the *Valk*. On Tuesday afternoon, the *Valk* glided into Flamingo Bay. The flat, sparsely forested land was filled with branching rivers, deltas, and backwaters. Around two o'clock in the afternoon, they steamed onto the Noordwest River and after some time observed that a number of canoes were being launched from along the banks. At one point they counted 113 boats around the ship.

Because they couldn't reach the exploration detachment before nightfall, they decided to anchor for the night. The anchor was hardly dropped, Viegen recorded, before trade activity with the Asmat exploded. Pigs, a cassowary, fish, parakeets, arrow bundles, shields—anything they wanted was lifted up from the canoes, all of it in exchange for *si* (iron), the only accepted currency. There was no interest whatsoever in pieces of cotton, and the little dolls in red and blue dresses that Viegen had brought were not even deemed worth looking at. The people here were headhunters too, Viegen noted with an air of resignation. The men in the canoes offered him strings of skulls in return for just one iron nail. Viegen noted that this was a clear indication that the people here saw nothing bad in this horrifying practice, and he wrote immediately after that he had no doubt “that these people can be turned into good Christians.”

During this trading frenzy at the mouth of the river, Viegen collected some shields but mentions the transaction in his account so tersely that it could easily be overlooked. No details, no numbers, no descriptions. He did write about a man who had made a “miniature axe” out of two pieces of wood to show what he wanted in return for his goods. Viegen loved this and gave him a knife as a gift. Viegen had no idea what the Asmat actually did with all those nails. What could they possibly use them for? Three weeks later, when he received a sculpted human figure, he would note that it had a bonnet made out of braided fiber held in place by a nail, “which shows they had well understood the purpose of nails.” During

this brief stopover, Viegen tried to obtain some information about the language, but it proved impossible to question anyone: “[T]hey were entirely absorbed by the trade, which was what they had their sights set on. They had no attention for anything but iron and more iron.”

In the early morning the ship was once again brought under steam and around 11 a.m. the *Valk* was moored along the “bivouac ship” *Zwallow*.<sup>8</sup> The people stationed here were busy working up the measurements they had taken and charting the mouth of the Noordwest River. Promptly, the commander of the exploration detachment, Captain Le Cocq d'Armandville (fig. 5),<sup>9</sup> along with Lieutenant-ter-zee J.-L. Chaillet (fig. 6)<sup>10</sup> came on board. Father Viegen and Captain Le Cocq turned out to know each other, and Viegen wrote, “It was pleasant to meet them in this loneliness and eternal wilderness. The circumstance that the leader happened to be an old fellow townsman of mine added to the pleasure in no small amount.” The pleasure was brief, however, and the captain informed them that several of his men had been afflicted by an “evil disease of the bowels.” Six men had already died and the remaining twelve would have to be evacuated as soon as possible. Among the sick was the health officer, for whose life they feared, so the detachment was currently without a doctor. It was decided that the sick would be transported to the hospital in Ambon aboard the *Valk*. Viegen could therefore not go back to Merauke—at least not for the moment. What to do? Captain Le Cocq had a solution: Why did Viegen not join in the expedition? A fourteen-day journey had been planned with the goal of exploring the waterways west of the Noordwest River, and making further surveys of the mountain range. Now that there was no longer a doctor on board, they could certainly use a pastor. The extract of the military journal notes, “On the invitation of the detachment commander, Father Viegen takes part in this expedition, so as to be able to test with the tribes living here the theories that his far-advanced studies of the customs and habits of the populace have brought him.”<sup>11</sup> In the early morning of April 19, Viegen boarded the exploration ship *Ketti*. “At the stroke of half past six, the signal sounded and promptly the fleet got into motion. It consisted of the *Ketti*, a decent little steamer of about twenty-five tons (fig. 7), two sloops, and six canoes.” The expedition personnel consisted of seventy-six men, not counting thirty-seven forced laborers. Soon, the *Ketti* was steaming up the Antassan River, which connected the Noordwest River to the Hellwig River (fig. 8). The entire day, Viegen saw nothing but woods and wetlands. It rained incessantly and the river was filled with driftwood.

FIG. 12: MSC installation at the missionary exhibition in 's-Hertogenbosch, June 26–30, 1920. Shields nos. 20 and 21 are included. Next to the posts are four figures (see fig. 9: E, A, J, and H).

Reproduced with the kind permission of the Capucins of Tilburg.

FIG. 13: “A stand that has attracted particular attention” at the missionary conference held in Maastricht, July 12–14, 1921. On the wall are two shields (from left to right: 20 and 1) and two sculptures (fig. 9: C and A).

FIG. 11: MSC booth during the first missionary exhibition in the Netherlands in Breda in 1919. From left to right are shields 11, 19, and 14 and the two Asmat sculptures recognizable in this photo were also shown side by side in Tilburg in 1913 (see fig. 9: G and F).



They didn't meet a soul and that night they anchored at a place where there apparently had once been a village on the bank. Viegen wrote, "A great sculpture with some decomposing woodwork and roof-mats were all that remained. The captain and I took the sloop to have a closer look at the sculpture. It was a nice piece of work, entirely covered with symbolic marks. We would have loved to take it with us, but even if the village had been abandoned, it could still be 'sacred' to the people. We would similarly not like to see a Zulu coming to desecrate our statues. ..."

The next morning they steamed further up the Hellwig River, but it became so narrow that they had to continue the expedition with the canoes. After a short while, even these threatened to get stuck in the mud, and they returned to the *Ketti*. The next morning (April 20) they steamed back down the Hellwig and, the mouth of the river in sight, tried a different branch. Although at several places they saw fish traps and abandoned settlements, no people showed themselves. The river was unknown terrain, narrow and shallow at some places, and should the *Ketti* run aground here, the crew would be in big trouble. The tension was tangible. Everyone anxiously listened to the pilot boy calling out the soundings he had taken. Viegen observed that the pilot boy apparently had no trouble with his nerves. "Whether he measures three or four fathoms or four or five feet, he is completely indifferent to it. So if he measures four feet, then it is only the speed of the ship which gets us through the mud. My nerves were rattled. We could run aground at any moment." Rather abruptly the river once again became deeper, and then they steamed into a wide channel. The relief was enormous but brief. It was decided to first go downriver again and survey the river mouth. Was this a "new" river, or might they be on the Bloemen River? The



FIG. 14: Ancestor figure A. Acquired by the "Dutch Ethnological Missionary Museum" in Tilburg in 1937. This sculpture can be seen in figs. 9, 12, and 13.

Ethnographic collection of Gand University.

Photo: Benn Deceuninck.



*Ketti* frequently got stuck in the mud while charting the delta. After Chaillet had painstakingly triangulated some landmarks along the river mouth, they continued upstream on April 22. The river became broader and low swamp shrubs gave way to bamboo, rattans, and breadfruit trees. They passed a settlement but no people showed themselves. The broken-off tree trunks in the water became so dense that they decided to continue using the canoes. Viegen noted that the trip was as monotonous as that of the day before, but then, “[S]uddenly the men lowered their paddles [...] they made clear that I should keep quiet and whispered, ‘A crocodile, right there! Don’t you see it, floating on the water?’ Yes I saw it, what a giant animal! Moments later, however, we recognized that the crocodile was in fact the dead body of a man, knees drawn, floating down the river.”

On April 24 they passed a small settlement, where they saw people for the first time. They counted twenty men and, after much calling, some of them came alongside in a canoe. After receiving some gifts, the men quickly returned to the river bank. The next morning the expedition reached a point where the river branched around several islands. The weather had now cleared up, and for the first time, Viegen could see the mountain range. Le Cocq’s journal notes, “We made camp on one of the islands [...] to be able to take measurements of the mountains from there. We made an observation point in a high tree.” Viegen had a fine view of the mountains from his tent. During the night the rain poured down and the next day the sky was overcast so that the mountains remained hidden behind the clouds. Viegen wrote, “Man may make plans, but God decides.” Fortunately, people showed up. At first there were only men. In the journal we read that they wore hardly any decoration, except sporadically a penis shell or a nose ornament. “Generally speaking, however, these men are completely naked [...] some of them had smeared their upper body with a yellow substance, into which figures had been drawn with their fingers.” Here, too, they are asked for *si* and gestured that Viegen should come and join them in the canoe. Although Viegen was curious what the men intended to do, he wasn’t willing to take the risk. “Unfortunately I only have one head, which is too dear to me to risk it in the name of scholarship.”

Subsequent contacts were difficult. When Viegen approached the men, they retreated, but when he walked away, they followed him. Viegen noted how the men kept pointing in the direction of the sea, then toward the water, and then at their eyes. Might this be connected to the body of the old man they had come across in the

water earlier? “When I adopted the posture of the dead man, a general cheer went up. With gestures they made clear that the body had come from them [...] some men were covered in yellow clay from head to toe, presumably as a sign of mourning.” The contact improved steadily and cheering went up when Captain Le Cocq took a drag from a cigar rolled from green leaves offered to him. On April 29 the journal reads, “In the course of the day the population of the nearby settlements visited us three times. In total, thirty-five able-bodied men appear at the same time. Some ethnographic objects are traded.”<sup>12</sup> In the meantime, Chaillet had succeeded in making some sketches of the mountain range from the tree and had taken the necessary measurements.

On April 30, the expedition broke camp and returned to the *Ketti*. Soon they were once again at the spot where they had entered the river. They decided to use their remaining time for further exploration and charting of the mouth of the river. It soon became clear to them that this river between the Hellwig and the Bloemen River had never been navigated before. In memory of a missionary who had drowned at the South Coast in 1896, they decided to call it the Pater Le Cocq d’Armandville River.<sup>13</sup> Viegen wrote, “The leader of this expedition, who is a nephew of this celebrated missionary, could certainly not crown his heavy work in any better way than by honoring his uncle.” On May 2 they steamed back to the bivouac ship *Zwaluw*, where Viegen would have to await the return of the *Valk*. It didn’t return for another week and Viegen used his time by reading all available books about New Guinea and “from time to time the natives came on board to trade.” Soon after arriving, the *Valk* steamed back down the Noordwest River with Viegen on board. He noted, “We were sent off by a heavy rain, so that we passed by the villages without even seeing them. However, we were going to call at the last village.” When the ship anchored there, canoes crowded around the ship once more and the call for iron went up. Viegen had a package of nails and observed, “Very soon, the trade became extremely lively. My shop was entirely sold out. I was working this way for hours on end, trading every little trinket for a nail.” While Viegen was busy trading, Captain Le Cocq was the subject of some sort of ritual. He suddenly appeared before Viegen with his forehead entirely smeared with lime: “You missed that, pastor!”

Exactly what Viegen collected is not clear, but the published summarized journal of this expedition leaves no doubt that most of the objects were collected along the Noordwest River. Considering his detailed reports and drawings of his research among the Marind-Anim, it is

FIG. 15 (right): Ancestor figure B, accompanied by a document typed by the collector indicating: "Female Figure. Wide open mouth with tongue. Hands and legs bent. Missing legs below the knee. Hands touching the lower jaw. H. 70 cm. Hardwood and heavy, slightly colored. Originally entirely covered with white chalk. Incised lines painted red. Purchased at the MSC missionary house in 1950. Collected by Father Viegen ... Noordwest River. See P. Viegen in the *Annals*, 1912-1913."

Private collection. Photo: Jan van Esch.

FIG. 16 (below): Ancestor figure C, included in the MSC display at Maastricht in 1921 and visible in figs. 9 and 13.

Private collection. Photo: Jan van Esch.





unlikely that he didn't record anything about the shields and sculptures he collected, but it's not in this account. Viegen concludes his journal by writing, "I could add many things to this, but where would I end if I wanted to tell everything that aroused my interest? And many of these curiosities would hardly be interesting to the readers of the *Annals*. I hope to come back to them elsewhere." I am convinced that Father Viegen would have loved to do that but perhaps he never got around to it. And thus ends the journey of the first Catholic missionary to venture deep into Asmat territory. Shortly hereafter, the exploration detachment was moved in the direction of the Digul River, which brought an abrupt end to military activity in this area. It wouldn't be until 1941 that these people saw a missionary again.<sup>14</sup>

The *Valk* steamed back to Merauke, with a sizeable collection of ethnographic objects on board. Among them were at least twenty-one Asmat shields and twelve wooden anthropomorphic figures that, upon leaving the Noordwest River, were about to embark on a long journey around the world—a journey that is still not at an end for some of them.

#### OBJECTS ON THE MOVE: MERAUKE

Viegen wrote to his Father Superior on June 1, 1912, "Having embarked upon a journey on the 14th of April, I have only returned to Merauke on the 22nd of May."<sup>15</sup> In this letter he reported he was badly sick with stomach cramps just after his return and very busy. "This is the reason why I am still not writing about my journey and have to finish my correspondence in a hurry." However, his later letters do not return to the subject of this journey. In a letter dated October 11, 1912, Viegen wrote, "I don't know whether I had already informed you that we have taken a sick gentleman, who arrived here with blackwater fever, into our house. His name is Lewis<sup>16</sup> and he is from New York. He has been travelling in the tropics for three years, visited New Pomerania and German New Guinea, etc., to collect ethnographic objects for the museum of his city. He wants to conclude his voyage with Merauke. However, he arrived there extremely sick [...] his plans to travel around here will probably come to nothing. In any case, I advised strongly against it [...] but I don't know what he will do [...] the American [...] simply does as he pleases [...] apart from his American peculiarities, he is a cheerful man [...] he said that he was not too worried about his disease. He would charge us with caring for the collection. Money was not an issue for him. He had quite a sum with him [...]"<sup>17</sup> More than a month later, Viegen wrote about him again: "Lewis is



about to leave. We will cherish good memories of that simply agreeable and good-natured man [...] In addition he has written me a check of 700 guilders for building up a collection for the Field Museum in Chicago [...] so we will not have a lack of money for quite a while.”<sup>18</sup>

I have been unable to trace when the collection put together by the missionaries arrived in Chicago, but it didn't consist solely of objects from Merauke and its surroundings. In his book *An American Anthropologist in Melanesia: A. B. Lewis and the Joseph N. Field South Pacific Expedition 1900–1913*, Robert Welsch writes, “A. B. Lewis [...] arranged with the missionaries to put together a collection to represent the Merauke area; these pieces included many objects from Merauke as well as from communities in the interior and other areas along the coast as far as the Asmat.”<sup>19</sup> Four out of the nineteen shields appearing in the three photographs from the MSC Archives ended up in the collection of the Field Museum. These are numbers 8, 9, 12 and 18.<sup>20</sup>

The photo in which shield number 18 is depicted (fig. 3) was published in 1914 in the MSC's mission periodical.<sup>21</sup> Although I suspect that the three photographs of the shields were made shortly after Father Viegen had returned from his journey into Asmat territory in 1912, I have not been able to discover who took the photographs and when. What I do know is that a large part of the Asmat collection put together by Viegen had been taken to the Netherlands later in 1912 by Brother Hamers. It is this Brother, by the way, to whom Lewis probably owed his life. Lewis refers to him in his field diaries: “Stayed at Erauke. For the first month was hardly able to get out of bed. Bro. Hamers of the mission took care of me. After about five weeks was able to get out a little, and take a short walk with Father Viegen.”<sup>22</sup> Hamers brought the collection to the mission museum in the MSC Mission House in Tilburg. Part of the Asmat collection put together by Viegen was presented to the Dutch public in this city as early as 1913.

#### OBJECTS ON THE MOVE: EXHIBITIONS

Tilburg organized an international exhibition as part of the 100-year anniversary of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, which was held from June 18 to August 18, 1913. The exhibition grounds of the *Internationale Tentoonstelling 1913* included pavilions dedicated to industry, art, trade, and education, among other themes. The MSC was given a prominent place in the education pavilion. In a local newspaper in Tilburg, a journalist wrote, “Among the different departments [...] the education pavilion takes a special place. [...] In the front

FIG. 17 (facing page): Ancestor figure D, accompanied by a document typed by the collector indicating: “Male figure. Hands clasped tightly under the chin, also with both feet. Arms and legs bent. H: 77 cm. Soft wood and light, originally fully painted with lime. Red incised lines. Purchased at the MSC missionary house in 1950. Collected by Father Viegen ... Noordwest River. See P. Viegen in the *Annals 1912–1913*.” In the course of my research, this sculpture was found in four pieces in a drawer, but it has been beautifully restored for this article by the conservator Nefertari Tadema.

Private collection.  
Photo: Jan van Esch.

FIG. 18 (left): Ancestor figure J, accompanied by a document typed by the collector indicating: “Female Figure. Left hand on knee. Missing right arm. Legs straight down. H: 87 cm. Soft wood and light. Originally painted with lime. Incised lines painted red; navel also painted, bands around the legs and painted lizard figure on back. Purchased at the MSC missionary house in 1950. Collected by Father Viegen ... Noordwest River. See P. Viegen in the *Annals, 1912–1913*.” This figure is visible in figs. 9 and 12.

Private collection.  
Photo: Jan van Esch.

area the Apostolic Missionary school of the Sacred Heart will put together a splendid zoological and botanical museum [...]”<sup>23</sup> A Rotterdam newspaper dedicated a full article to the education pavilion, which under no circumstance was to be skipped by the visitors, as Her Majesty Queen Wilhelmina had made known that she intended to visit this specific pavilion. The paper was full of praise about this part of the exhibition, albeit with some exceptions: “the entrance of the pavilion houses a contribution by the Apostolic School of the Mission House [...] of the Sacred Heart, from the lands they send their missionaries out to, New Guinea in particular [...] one can see various objects and stuffed birds. Especially a group of sculptures on the left side, originating from the Gambas, a people living along the Noordwest River of Dutch New Guinea, stands out by its extreme ugliness.”<sup>24</sup> I have not been able to find anything else in newspapers about the MSC installation in this exhibition, but this brief aside raises an important question: Who told this journalist that these sculptures had been collected along the Noordwest River? Most likely Brother Hamers. *De Katholieke Illustratie* (*The Catholic Illustrated*), the largest Dutch Catholic weekly magazine of its time, also devoted some attention to the MSC with relation to this exhibition. They did not write anything about the content of the installation but did print a photograph of it (fig. 8). The caption reads, “Of the most interesting and important *Internationale Tentoonstelling* 1913 in Tilburg, the contribution of the Mission of the Sacred Heart [...] with products and objects from the mission countries. The Reverend Brother Hamers, who was stationed in Merauke for more than eight years, poses in front of the display.”<sup>25</sup> The meager text in the newspapers and the only surviving photograph of this exhibit form a nicely rounded whole (although probably not every taxidermist or ornithologist will agree with me).

Only a year after Viegen had collected the figurative sculptures, they stood on top of a display cabinet in Tilburg looking down upon the visitors shuffling by, Queen Wilhelmina being one of them. The grainy reproduction in the magazine makes it difficult to identify the figures on top of the display as the surviving sculptures, but it is possible. To do this, it is important to consider the proportions and the positions of the limbs and extremities. But should the original photograph ever surface, I would probably first zoom in on the face of the small bearded man standing in front of the display. Brother Hamers had been the carpenter in Merauke and had personally built many of the buildings at the mission post. He had been through hard times and during the last few

FIG. 19: Ancestor figure F, obtained from the MSC missionary house in Tilburg in 1928. It is visible in figs. 9 and 11.

Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, inv. 436-1.



months of his stay he had also taken responsibility for caring for A. B. Lewis. Just back in the Netherlands, he made an appearance at the international exhibition in Tilburg. This photograph of Hamers in front of the display case, surrounded by objects of the Marind-Anim, is probably the last picture ever taken of him. Shortly after the exhibition he died unexpectedly at age forty-one.

The display cabinet used in the *Internationale Tentoonstelling* 1913 came straight from the mission museum of the MSC in Tilburg, as is clearly visible in an undated photograph showing part of this museum (fig. 9). This vaguely shows the contours of some of the sculptures, but they are not arranged next to each other. This was not the case in 1916, as evidenced by an article in the *Tilburgsche Courant*: “such a museum is of course one-sided by nature. It only contains collections from the mission stations [...] In the displays there are light wooden sculptures standing elbow to elbow covered in white lime, their knees bent. They are singular human figures. Such a splendid series of such figures, all of the same type, doesn’t exist anywhere else. They are ancestral figures of the Gambas, a tribe to the west of the Noordwest River on the southern coast of New Guinea; Father Viegen was there; every house has one or more of these [...]”<sup>26</sup> A month later, the same newspaper returned to the subject in a short article called “Wood Sculptures from New Guinea”: “Writing about the museum in the Mission House in Tilburg, we reported to you about some singular wooden sculptures exhibited there [...] it might be an idea to incite Father Viegen to confess what he knows about these sculptures. As we wrote: he brought them from a tribe living along the banks of the Noordwest River, who were called Gambas, at least by the exploration detachment, as the inhabitants only dared to approach when the members of the detachment called out ‘gambas,’ which means friend. It is with some justification that the collector, when sending his collection over, warned that they should be kept together until he had found a chance at a later time to write about them, making use of his notes. Father Viegen should write about his curious finds, and not at a later time, but very soon. He wrote down the promise to return to the many curiosities he saw. But this promise has remained unfulfilled in the years since.”<sup>27</sup>

This is the only source informing us that Father Viegen really did keep notes about the sculptures he collected among the Asmat and that he intended to write about them. There is every appearance that Viegen never got around to working up his notes. One thing is certain: When in 1919 he once again set foot on Dutch soil, “his”

statues were no longer together on top of the cabinet in the museum. In 1913 they had all been attached to a wooden frame, undoubtedly made by Brother Hamers, but just before Viegen's return, they had been removed from it again. This was because of the MSC's participation in the first missionary exhibition in the Netherlands.

Missionary exhibitions were among the most successful of the many activities set up in the Netherlands to support the Catholic missionaries overseas. Thousands of ethnographic objects were sent to the Netherlands, and from these, collections and small missionary museums were formed. These ethnographic objects were used mainly for missionary propaganda, but many of them were also sold in order to raise money and thus found their way to private collectors, benefactors, and museums. Numerous activities related to mission and missionary work were organized during so-called "mission weeks," which were held in cities all over the Netherlands. People could see processions, movies, and mission plays, but the center of such a week was usually a missionary exhibition. The first Catholic missionary exhibition in the Netherlands was held in Breda in August 1919, and in the following year seven missionary exhibitions were organized. Visitors entering these exhibitions felt transported to foreign lands and were able to absorb something of the atmosphere of life there.

These exhibitions were extremely successful until the 1950s and the MSC participated in them from the very beginning. The catalog of the 1919 Breda mission exhibition<sup>28</sup> indicates that the MSC was one of a total of six participants. A photograph, published in the *Katholieke Illustratie* shows part of the installation that the MSC put together (fig. 11). The objects collected by Viegen were prominently present. Among others, the catalog mentions "Two sculptures from New Guinea's interior, originating from the Gambas, an entirely wild tribe" and "four shields from New Guinea's interior."<sup>29</sup> All the Asmat shields in these photographs are also to be found in the sepia photographs of Viegen's objects taken in Merauke. A year later, ten congregations partook in a mission exhibition in 's-Hertogenbosch. In a photograph of the MSC installation (fig. 12), four Asmat sculptures and two shields are visible. They are hung quite high and are partly in shadow. Although not found in the sepia pictures, they were also collected by Viegen in 1912. These shields are now in a private collection and were bought from the MSC Mission House in Tilburg in 1950. At the time, the collector was told that Father Viegen had collected these shields, and reference was made to the account of his "Journey to the North West River" in the



FIG. 20: Ancestor figure G, visible in figs. 9 and 11.

Asmat, Manu village, Unir River, Coastal New Guinea.

H: 125.7 cm.

Ex Th. P. P. van Emden, administrator of Dutch New Guinea.

Metropolitan Museum of Art, Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Donated by Nelson A. Rockefeller in 1979, 1979.206.1589.

MSC *Annals*. The shield on the left was once again exhibited during a missionary conference held in Maastricht in July 1921. The commemorative volume of the conference contains a photograph of the MSC stand (fig. 13).<sup>30</sup> It shows a man, in all probability Father Nollen, surrounded by objects from the Marind-Anim. Nollen had just returned from New Guinea and got right to work in Maastricht, just like Brother Hamers in 1913. A photograph of this installation (without Nollen) was also published in the *Katholieke Illustratie* with the caption, “A stand that caught particular attention.”<sup>31</sup> Father Viegen contributed to the composition of the display and, in addition to the shields, it also shows two of “his” sculptures. Judging by the commemorative volume, the conference was a resounding success: “And the exhibition! The center of the whole mission week [...] twenty-one orders or congregations active in the mission gave an engaging overview such as no museum here nor abroad can offer of the religious and cultural condition of the various peoples on this earth where our missionaries are active.”<sup>32</sup>

The MSC might have had high expectations of the then as yet unopened Asmat territories, but after 1921 the visible traces of the Asmat objects collected by Viegen promptly decline to the point where they literally disap-

FIG. 21 (right and detail far right): Shield no. 4, which arrived at Wereldmuseum Rotterdam in 1916 as Private loan. It was probably purchased by the museum later the same year.

Wereldmuseum, Rotterdam, inv. 23400.

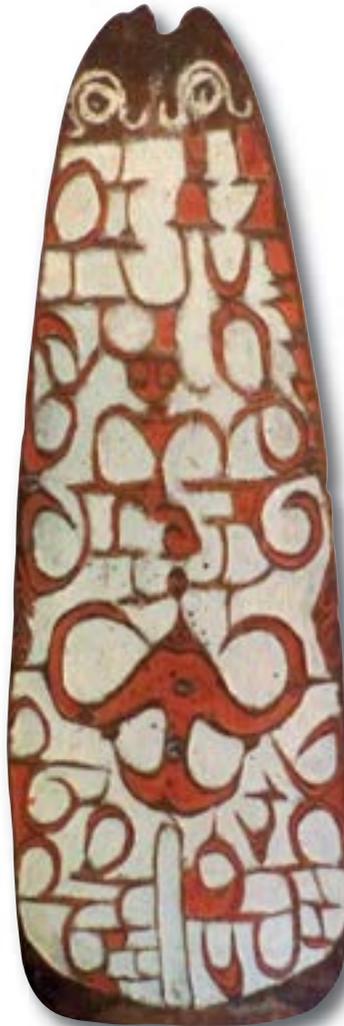


FIG. 22 (middle right):  
Shield no. 19.  
Ex MSC, Tilburg.  
Private collection.



FIG. 23 (right): Shield no. 16, acquired by Paul Wirz in 1920. In its file, Wirz wrote (in nearly illegible writing): “Shield made of wood, tapering downward, height 1 m 45, greatest width 42 cm, with ornamental figures indentations, where [?] painted white, at the middle a human figure, even with the decoration [...] back with [...] Existing handle cut.” It is not clear how Wirz acquired this shield in 1920 after it had been published in 1914 in the MSC periodical.

Museum der Kulturen, Basel,  
inv. Vb 5012.

FIG. 24 (right): Shield no. 10, sold at Sotheby’s, New York, November 18, 2000, lot 14. Catalog description: “Rare and remarkable Asmat shield, flat and oblong with three holes around the edge, the center carved in low relief with a flying fox pattern at the bottom and at the top crescent-shaped patterns representing a bird, *worot*, surrounded by other zigzag patterns; the top panel comprises two circles incised and a sculpted handle on the opposite side; beautiful patina with white, red ocher, and traces of black pigment. H. 132 cm.

Private collection. Image courtesy of Sotheby’s.





FIG. 25 (right):  
Shield no. 15.

Michel Thieme Collection,  
Amsterdam. Photo: Jan van Esch.

FIG. 26 (facing page left):  
Shield no. 20, accompanied  
by a document typed by  
the collector indicating:

"Shield with rhomboid  
decorations. Length: 133  
cm. Greatest width: 28.5  
cm. Whitewash with dark  
brown. Purchased from the  
MSC mission house in  
1950. Collected by Father  
Viegen ... Noordwest  
River?" It is visible in figs.  
12 and 13.

Private collection.  
Photo: Jan van Esch.

FIG. 27 (facing page right):  
Shield no. 21, accompanied  
by a document typed by  
the collector indicating:

"Shield with arrow-shaped  
decorations. Originally  
covered with white chalk  
and decorations painted in  
red (dark brown).  
Purchased at the MSC  
mission house in 1950.  
Collected by Father Viegen  
... Noordwest River? H: 118  
cm, greatest width: 30 cm."  
It is visible in fig. 12.

Private collection.  
Photo: Jan van Esch.

pear. I suspect that opening up the Asmat territory didn't become the priority that was once envisioned. In the 1920s, there was a serious lack of funds for their existing missions. Do the installations in 's-Hertogenbosch and Maastricht testify most greatly to the fact that Father Viegen helped put them together? At any rate, the MSC seems to have had few qualms about selling off their Asmat objects.

Finding these shields and sculptures in a private collection is always something special. They hang in the living room or the stairwell or, every once in a while, have been put away in a drawer. They have become family heirlooms: "I don't know how they got it, but as long as I can remember this shield was on the living room wall of my grandparents." Almost without exception these private owners show a real devotion to their objects and never tire of looking at them. The owner of shield number 15, for example, told me this: "I like to listen to Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps* when looking at my shield. There is a certain movement in the patterns, from the top left, down and toward the middle. Sometimes you can almost see the notes of the music whirling down along the same pattern. Some of the smaller ornaments have some similarities to notes on sheet music. [...] Somehow, these very early motifs are more inspired. They were made at a time when the meanings of the motives were still close to the culture and the people. Head-hunting was still at the center of their lives."

A few years ago, I was discussing one of the Asmat shields collected by Viegen with a collector. At the time, I didn't know much about their provenance, but I underlined (as I tend to do) the importance of documentation







FIG. 28: Shield no. 11, donated by Le Coq d'Armandville in 1929 to the MRAH in Brussels, then acquired by exchange by the Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale in Tervuren in 1979.

MRAC inv. #EO.1979.1.1255.

of ethnographic objects and collections; how, I argued, can we evaluate these objects if we do not know when, by whom, and under what circumstances they were collected? The story behind an object gives it depth and texture, a historical patina. I don't remember his exact words, but the gist was this: He had no interest whatsoever in the historical background of his objects and preferred it if they didn't have any documentation at all. To leave no misunderstanding, he stated that for him, the best provenance imaginable for an old Asmat shield was that it had washed up on a beach somewhere. Who had made or collected the shield or when and how it had ended up on the beach, were things best left to the imagination. His statement baffles me still.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe a debt of gratitude to Wil Roebroeks and Michel Thieme, who helped me trace the various objects and photographs. Without them I wouldn't have been able to document and write this history. I would also like to thank the families who, without exception, warmly received me and provided access to their "Viegen ethnographics." In addition, I'd like to sincerely thank Otto Lankhorst, Caspar van den Berg, and Gaby Kamps of the Center for the Heritage of Dutch Religious Life for their aid and suggestions during my search in this great archive, and Tristan Mostert for reading the final drafts of this article and aiding in its translation into English.

FIG. 29: Shield no. 7.  
Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam. inv. 6424-2.

#### NOTES

1. Situated in the Dutch province of Noord-Brabant.
2. [www.erfgoedkloosterleven.nl](http://www.erfgoedkloosterleven.nl).
3. Erfgoedcentrum Nederlands Kloosterleven, Archief Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart: AR-P027: 3938(c).
4. Whereabouts of shields numbered 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 13, 14, and 17 are unknown.
5. Nowadays called the Pomatsj River. See map for the various rivers and streams mentioned.
6. Nationaal Archief, The Hague. Catalog reference number: 2.20.34. Inventory number: 135.
7. *Annalen van Onze Lieve Vrouw van het Heilig Hart*, 1912–1913, nos. 19–24.
8. In Dutch, bivakship *Zwaluw*.
9. Jean Henri Idisbald Le Cocq d' Armandville (1873–1942).
10. Jean Louis Chaillet (1889–1958).
11. Extract journal of Captain Le Cocq, p. 4.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
13. After Cornelis J. F. le Cocq d'Armandville (1846–1896).
14. "In 1941 the MSC opened a station in the Asmat area, which, however, was evacuated again a year later (1942). [...] It was only in 1953 that the Asmat territory was opened up again by Fathers G. Zegwaard and G. Welling..." From *Pater en Papoea*. Cornelissen 1988: 95.
15. Erfgoedcentrum Nederlands Kloosterleven, Archief Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart: AR-P027: 139a.
16. A. B. Lewis, ethnological researcher for Chicago's Field Museum. Lewis visited these missionaries between Sept. 18–Nov. 14, 1912.
17. Archief Missionarissen van het Heilig Hart: AR-P027: 139a.
18. *Ibid.* Letter from from November 14, 1912.
19. Welsch, Robert L. 1998: 511.
20. Chicago Field Museum catalog numbers 143210, 143211, 143212, and 143213.
21. *Annalen van Onze Lieve Vrouw van het Heilig Hart*, 15 maart 1914, No. 6, 32nd jaargang, p. 87.
22. Welsch, Robert L. 1998: 522.
23. *Tilburgsche Courant*, 6/14/1913.
24. *Rotterdams Nieuwsblad*, 7/14/1913.
25. *De Katholieke Illustratie*. June 28, 1913. Vol. 47, No. 38: p. 600.
26. *Tilburgsche Courant*, 5/10/1916.
27. "Houtsnijwerk van Nieuw-Guinea", *Tilburgsche Courant*, 08-06-1916.
28. "Officiële catalogus der Missie-Tentoonstelling te Breda ... 1919."
29. *Ibid.*, Page 8.
30. *Gedenkboek Eerste Nederlandsche Missiecongres*. 12–14 July Gehouden te Maastricht. Leiden 1921: 146.
31. *De Katholieke Illustratie*, 1921. No. 43: p. 515.
32. *Gedenkboek* 1912: 142–143.

