

Exhibition on New Amsterdam from an Indigenous perspective

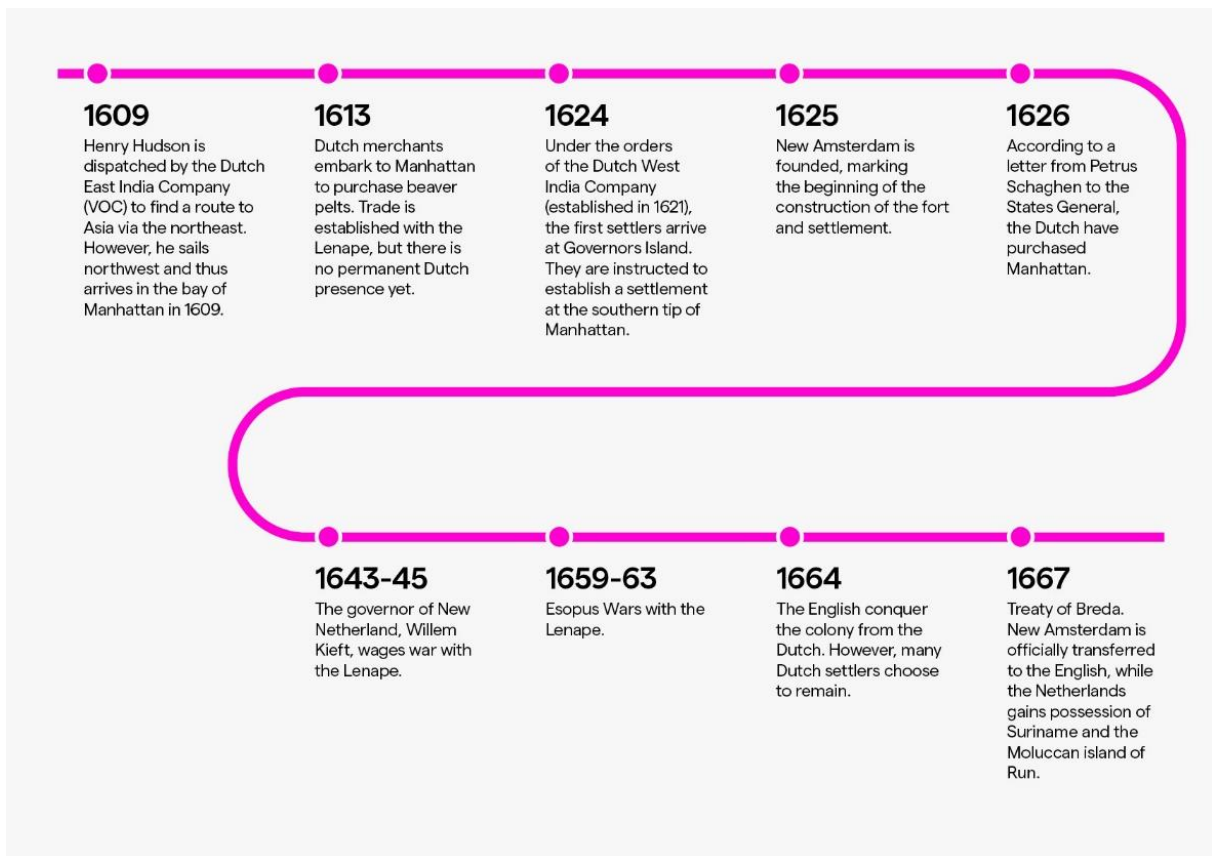
Amsterdam Museum and the Museum of the City of New York collaborate with original inhabitants of New York

Four hundred years ago the first Dutch colonists arrived in the area known today as New York. Their mission given by the Dutch West India Company was to establish the colony of New Netherlands, with New Amsterdam as its capital, at the southern tip of what is today the island of Manhattan. The Amsterdam Museum has joined with the Museum of the City of New York and representatives of the Lenape —original inhabitants of this area of the United States— in creating an exhibition about this shared history. The exhibition *Manahahtáanung or New Amsterdam? The Indigenous Story Behind New York* will be on view at the Amsterdam Museum on the Amstel from May 16 through November 10, 2024. Looking from an Indigenous perspective, the exhibition examines the decades-long period of Dutch colonization in the area, as well as its consequences for the Indigenous residents and their struggles. A follow-up exhibition will be presented at the Museum of the City of New York from Fall 2025.

Imara Limon, curator at the Amsterdam Museum:

“Colonialism in Suriname, the Caribbean, and Asia is getting an increasing amount of attention in the Netherlands and at the Amsterdam Museum. Yet, due to colonial activities in North America, Amsterdam has also left indelible traces. I was surprised how little most Amsterdammers and New Yorkers know about New Amsterdam and the Lenape. Even while the name Amsterdam was used by the Dutch to lay claim to the area. We are honored to work with representatives of the Lenape and the Museum of the City of New York to uncover this underexposed piece of Dutch colonial history.”

The impetus for this collaboration and the exhibition is that 2024 marks 400 years since the Dutch arrived in America to establish a colony at the mouth of the Hudson River. After the colony was conquered by the English in 1664, the following centuries saw the settlement grow into the city of New York. The Dutch invasion and decades-long colonization of the area in the 17th century had tremendous consequences for the Indigenous people who lived in the region, and on the island which they called *Manahahtáanung*. Not only did they lose their land, they were victims of disease, war, and the disappearance of their own livelihoods. The colonists deliberately made it impossible for Indigenous people to maintain their way of life and culture. Despite this, Indigenous communities have consistently resisted these changes, even up until the present moment.



What will be shown?

In a video at the start of the exhibition *Manahahtáanung or New Amsterdam?* at the Amsterdam Museum, Chief Urie Ridgeway, leader of the Nanticoke Lenape Nation, welcomes visitors. He speaks of what he knows from oral tradition about the colonization, which was accompanied by violence, exploitation, and the cultural erasure of his people. He also discusses their continuous resistance in the face of this, and the way of life, spirituality, and culture the Lenape have nevertheless managed to maintain. It is a moving story that for many visitors will be a first introduction to (this perspective on) the colonial history of the Netherlands in the United States.

Following this introduction is a presentation dedicated to the Lenape, who they are, and how they lived in the area prior to Dutch colonization. Here, visitors can examine maps, listen to music, and more. In another video, Brent Stonefish, spiritual leader of the Delaware Nation, tells the origin story of the Lenape, the “woman who fell from the sky.” Most Indigenous knowledge has been passed down through oral traditions. It is therefore appropriate that these stories be presented in spoken form in the exhibition as well.



A map of ye mighty Hudson River (1958), Coulton Waugh, collection Amsterdam Museum



Brent Stonefish. Picture: Brent Stonefish

In his pastel drawing *The Place Where the Hickories Will Grow* (2022, reproduction), artist Myles Jackson Lynch of the Delaware Nation, depicts the hope that hickory trees (genus *Carya*) will again

return to the area. These nut-producing trees are important for the Lenape and, according to them, should proliferate throughout the region. A big contrast with buildings and asphalt roads. Furthermore, this room focuses on the rise of the lucrative trade in beaver pelts. These valuable pelts provided incentive for the European colonization of the area and its invasion by the Dutch.



The Place Where the Hickories Will Grow (2022), Myles Jackson Lynch

In the next room, objects from museum collections in the Netherlands are displayed. The presentation of these prints, documents, and a model ship shows how the heritage preserved in the Netherlands shows just one, European, perspective on the arrival of the Dutch in Manhattan. Colonial seafaring is represented by the model of the *Halve Maan*, the ship on which Henry Hudson sailed into the bay where New York is today. The European perception of foreigners is reflected in a 17th-century print entitled *Portrait of a Man from Tsenacommacah (Virginia), America, at the age of 23* (1645) by Wenseclaus Hollar. The print depicts an Indigenous person (probably Lenape) in the Netherlands. The violence, including the killing and expulsion from their native lands of countless Indigenous people, as well as the plundering of raw materials, remains practically invisible in the heritage—an underexposed part of Dutch history.

In audio and video clips the Lenape respond to these objects of Dutch heritage and add perspectives to the dominant narrative. Moreover, the Lenape raise questions for further research in the run-up to the New York exhibition in 2025, including concerning the aforementioned print. Is there information available about Lenape who were in Amsterdam centuries ago? Why were they here?



Model of the ship De Halve Maan (nineteenth century), maker unknown. Collection Amsterdam Museum

Following this historic introduction, the exhibition offers space to reflect on healing. In a special room, Lenape share their spiritual experience of the museum and the collaboration. This includes the display of a unique object: an unfinished wampum belt, which is made from shell beads. Wampum was used as a means of monetary exchange and often served to validate an agreement or negotiation. For the exhibition, through traditional Indigenous consultation methods, the participating Lenape nations and leaders have given their consent to continue this collaboration. The Lenape will therefore likely add wampum to the belt in the coming months—after the exhibition's opening and when an agreement is reached regarding work on the follow-up exhibition in 2025. The wampum belt symbolizes the beginning of a unique collaboration between the Lenape and the city museums of Amsterdam and New York.

The purchase and exchange of Manahahtáanung

In the next room, which is about how *Manahahtáanung* came into Dutch possession and was named New Amsterdam, the perspective of the Lenape is foremost. What is their view of this supposed

purchase of *Manahahtáanung*? After all, according to the Lenape, territory has no owner. And what do they think of the shift in power when the English took possession of the area in 1664? This occurrence ultimately led to the exchange of Manhattan for Suriname and the Moluccan island of Run, among others. The English renamed the area New England and made New York its capital, after the Duke of York.



Vlag van de stad New York (1970-1977), Bertram Kalisch. Collectie Amsterdam Museum

Glimpse into New Amsterdam

The exhibition then offers visitors a glimpse into life in New Amsterdam. What did the settlement look like? Who lived and labored there? What were the dynamics of power? Around this time the Dutch introduced the Transatlantic Slave Trade: as early as 1627, the first enslaved people from the African continent were brought to the colony. They were property of the Dutch West India Company (WIC), a chartered company with a monopoly on trade and colonization of areas that included a part of the American coast, and worked the land, built roads (including Broadway), and constructed Fort Amsterdam and the wall where Wall Street is today. They also fought in wars against the Lenape.

Self-reflection

As part of the exhibition, the Amsterdam Museum also critically examines itself. The Amsterdam Museum was established in 1926 as the Amsterdam Historical Museum; its mission was to illuminate the history of the city through the collection of the city of Amsterdam. That history was long limited to what occurred within the city, from a white, almost always male perspective. After the museum opened in the former orphanage in 1975, different views on that past began to gain attention, including topics such as migrants, Amsterdam's role in the colonies, poverty and women. In 1983 an exhibition on New Amsterdam, *From New Amsterdam to New York, 1624-1664*, was held, a collaboration involving the Amsterdam City Archives and the New York Historical Society. At the time, it emphasized how Amsterdammers and the WIC were active in the area, conducting trade and laying the foundations of what would later become New York City. Indigenous people were treated almost exclusively as trading partners. The topics of disease, war, and the loss of land and livelihood that accompanied colonization were not addressed. Since then, the views of both our society and the Amsterdam Museum have evolved. The commemoration of 400 years since the colonization of New Amsterdam offers an appropriate moment to re-examine this history while ensuring the involvement of Indigenous perspectives and with particular attention to the contemporary Indigenous struggle against the adverse effects of Dutch colonialism in the area.



Campaign poster for the exhibition 'Van Nieuw-Amsterdam tot New York 1624 - 1664' (1983), Harry Veltman. Collection Amsterdam Museum

Contemporary art

In preparation for the exhibition, makers, most of them from Lenape nations, were commissioned to create new work or asked to show recent works. And not just in terms of visual art forms, such as the pastel drawing by Myles Jackson Lynch. Art in this context is closely related to craft and spirituality as well, such as the wampum belt, and other objects contributed by Lenape artists. Examples include a decorated knife holder by artist Stephen Conaway of the Nanticoke Lenape Nation, and a carved gourd by Denise Dunkley, master artisan and educator of Nanticoke Lenape culture. The Amsterdam Museum will display twelve of these objects in a single room—twelve being a significant number for the Lenape.

In addition, two Dutch artists also received commissions. patricia kaersenhout is creating a new installation of mixed media in collaboration with artist Leonard Harmon of the Delaware Nation and the Nanticoke Lenape Nation, *A Phantasmagorical Manhatta Island* (working title). On the one hand the work shows a world as it could have been and the other hand offers an option to acknowledge this violent history. Chihiro Geuzebroek, with her new installation *Quechua Demonstration* (working title) and the art project *Indigenous Dreams* (2022), connects the exhibition's narrative with contestation of modern forms of cultural appropriation and identity theft of Indigenous peoples by corporations and dreaming yourself back into collective existence, cultural memory and revitalization as Indigenous diaspora living in the Netherlands and worldwide.



Details from *A phantasmagorical history of Manhatta Island* (2024, work in progress) patricia Kaersenhout, production AGALAB.

Education

Teaching materials for students in upper primary and lower secondary schools to accompany this exhibition have been developed by the Amsterdam Museum. Through a preparatory lesson, comic book and guided tour, students are made aware that history can be told from multiple perspectives.

Symposium

Prior to the opening of the exhibition, a symposium will take place on Wednesday, May 15. Speakers will include representatives of the Lenape, artists and exhibition makers of the Amsterdam Museum and the Museum of the City of New York.

Unique and challenging collaboration

For this exhibition, the Amsterdam Museum is partnering with the Museum of the City of New York and representatives of the Lenape, the original inhabitants of the area that is now Manhattan. Cooperating with the Lenape, represented by people from various nations, makes this exhibition unique and requires flexibility from all parties as they engage in new approaches to work together. The leadership of the four Lenape nations—the Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape Tribal Nation, the Ramapough Lenape Indian Nation, the Munsee-Delaware Nation and Eelunaapeewi-Lahkeewiit (Delaware Nation)—selected a number of individuals to formulate the exhibition jointly with the two museums. These representatives are Chief Urie Ridgeway, leader of the Nanticoke Lenape Nation, Cory Ridgeway of the Nanticoke Nation, Brent Stonefish of the Delaware Nation, George Stonefish of the Delaware Nation, Lesley Snake of the Delaware Nation, Sherry Huff of the Delaware Nation, Denise Dunkley of the Nanticoke Lenape Nation, and Steven D. Smith, representative of the Ramapough Nation.

The Lenape rely on an Indigenous system of governance, which involves mutual decision-making

and hierarchy. Crucial in this respect is alignment within the community and consultations with ancestors and community leaders.

Imara Limon:

“Cooperation between the parties is a really sensitive matter. With such a fraught history of unchecked violence and ongoing consequences for the Lenape, it’s not surprising that the institutional partners must earn trust gradually. I respect the Lenape who are willing to share their knowledge and experiences with us. The extensive decision-making process takes some getting used to. In addition, we will have the halls of the Amsterdam Museum spiritually cleansed and consecrated for the first time.”



In preparation for the exhibition Lenape representatives and the Museum of the City of New York traveled to Amsterdam and visited the Collection Center of the Amsterdam Museum on October 30, 2023. Pictures: Amsterdam Museum, Françoise Bolechowski

A follow-up exhibition is slated to be presented by the Museum of the City of New York in Fall 2025, will share the results of the ongoing cooperation and research. Besides the underrepresented history of the Lenape, the presentation in New York will emphasize contemporary initiatives by the Lenape to redefine their culture and homeland. The Museum of the City of New York will organize a kick-off weekend on May 4 and 5, 2024 to celebrate Lenape culture, including talks and cultural activities.

The exhibition Manahahtáanung or New Amsterdam? The Indigenous Story Behind New York will be held at the Amsterdam Museum from May 16 through November 10, 2024. The exhibition is made possible by the Mondriaan Fund, DutchCultureUSA, and the Netherlands Consulate General in New York. The exhibition will be on view in New York in 2025. The Amsterdam Museum is generously supported by the Municipality of Amsterdam, VriendenLoterij, and the ELJA Foundation.

Note to editors, not for publication

This press release is published on behalf of the Amsterdam Museum, the Museum of the City of New York, and representatives of the Lenape.

Please direct any inquiries or remarks to Kim Koopman, Amsterdam Museum, at k.koopman@amsterdammuseum.nl or +31 (0)6 22 92 77 29. Museum of the City of New York: Meryl Cooper, mwcooper@mcny.org.

Prior to the exhibition opening, we will hold a press preview on May 14. If you would like to receive an invitation, please send a request to pr@amsterdammuseum.nl.

Images of the exhibition are available for download via this link: <https://we.tl/t-hvgMLXoESy>.