

Photographic prints at the Kern Institute, Leiden

Java through the Eyes of Van Kinsbergen

“As a painter he produced the most, as an opera singer he moved many a heart, as a photographer he earned the most, and as an impresario he provided most with delight.”

Research >
Southeast Asia

With these words, Victor Ido characterized the Dutch artist Isidore Van Kinsbergen (1821-1905), who was the soul of colonial artistic life in Batavia in the second half of the 19th century. As the photographer of the famous archaeological series “Antiquities of Java” and “Borobudur”, both available at the Kern Institute, Van Kinsbergen contributed impressively to the “revealing” and appreciating of classical Indonesian art.



Four-armed Visnu from the Dieng Plateau, kept in Wonosobo and brought over to Museum Nasional in Jakarta. Negative 1865. Print ca. 1876. (image no. 2094)

Courtesy of the Kern Institute, Leiden.

By Gerda Theuns-de Boer

Van Kinsbergen was born in 1821 in Brugge, at that time part of the Southern Netherlands. After his training in Paris as a singer and decoration painter, he came to Batavia in 1851 as a member of a French opera group. The group left Batavia, but Van Kinsbergen was there to stay for ever. Besides being engaged in the performing arts, he got interested in the new medium photography. According to Ido, Van Kinsbergen was the first to apply the albumen print process in Batavia.

Government Commissions

Van Kinsbergen's first government job came in February 1862, when he was invited to accompany the General Secretary of the East Indies, Mr. Alexis Loudon, on his mission to Siam (Thailand). Loudon's directive was to give substance to the 1860-Treaty of Friendship, Trade and Navigation between the Netherlands and Siam, and it was Van Kinsbergen's task to photograph “all curiosities of the country”. The 1914 list

of prints identifies thirteen images of “temples, etc.”

Meanwhile, the Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences, to which archaeological research and conservation were directed at that time, became interested in the promising new medium. The gift of some excellent prints of the statues and reliefs of ‘Boro Boeddho’ and antiquities at ‘Brambanan’ by the Governor-General of the East Indies, Sloet van de Beele, inspired the Society to decide to draw up an agreement with Van Kinsbergen in December 1862. They felt that the outer world should meet with the variety of Javanese culture as expressed in ancient inscriptions, architecture, sculpture, and handwork, and this could be accomplished with a series of about 300 prints. All wet-plates (clichés) were to be taken according to the directions of J.F.G. Brumund, Reverend of the Batavian Evangelic Community and specialist on Javanese antiquities, who, at that very moment, was on an archaeological tour for the Society to select and describe antiquities. Van Kinsbergen's

prints were meant to illustrate Brumund's publication. Van Kinsbergen was contracted to make the clichés in three years and to deliver six prints of each. All clichés would become government property and extra printing was allowed only by government order.¹

Antiquities of Java

In May 1863, Van Kinsbergen left for West Java. About four years later – instead of the agreed three years - the “curtain fell” quite abruptly, as he ran out of chemicals when photographing the Panataran Hindu temple complex in East Java. The Society, anxious about more delays, did not allow him to return to Batavia for new supplies. In fact, Van Kinsbergen used up so many clichés on the reliefs of the Panataran complex that he was unable to head for the Borobudur (res. Kadoe) as intended.

Van Kinsbergen's reputation was not affected by the delay. On the contrary, the work he was able to deliver met with great approval with the Society's board. His photographs were shown at the annual meetings and Van Kinsbergen was bestowed the title “the Society's Photographer” in 1864. His efforts on the Dieng Plateau to restore the water management in order to photograph the oldest group of Javanese Hindu temples properly were avidly praised. In 1865, the board decided that Van Kinsbergen was no longer obliged to follow Brumund's directions, but should photograph according to his own vision. Later that year, Van Kinsbergen accompanied the Governor-General of the East Indies, Sloet van de Beele, on his trip to Madura and Bali.

It is clear from the minutes of the Batavian Society that European experiments in lithography were eagerly followed, as the Society sought the technology to have Van Kinsbergen's prints reproduced. In October 1864, Mr. Weitzel, a member of the Society in the Netherlands, visited the Dutch lawyer E.J. Asser, known for his articles and experiments on photography and photolithography, and three clichés had been sent from Batavia for experimentation. Asser was impressed by the work of Van Kinsbergen; however, the Society was not satisfied with Asser and Tooveij's (Brussels) results and, in the end, decided to publish Brumund's archaeological work together with a photographic album by Van Kinsbergen. Brumund's work was published by 1868, but it wasn't until four years later, in February 1872, that Van Kinsbergen's first installment of the series was ready! Despite its lateness, the board of the Society spoke “with one voice” to express its admiration of the quality. It



Two panels on the main wall of the first gallery of Candi Borobudur showing the Buddha's First Encounter (top) and the story of the virtuous Sibi King (below). Negative 1873. Print 1874-1890. (image no. 2203)

Courtesy of the Kern Institute, Leiden.

was then decided to arrange the prints into five portfolios furnished with a lithography designed by Van Kinsbergen and accompanied by a small printed catalogue. Six complete sets were agreed upon, and they were ready for transport in November 1872. After that, separate images could be ordered for two guilders each, later for three.

Borobudur

Meanwhile, the Batavian Society drew up a new agreement with Van Kinsbergen to photograph the Borobudur monument and to make mouldings for casts.² All sorts of problems (drainage at the Dieng Plateau, digging and cleaning at Panataran and Papoh) prohibited Borobudur from inclusion in the first trip for Antiquities of Java series. Although drawings were available, it was the prevailing opinion of the board that they were imperfect representations rendered obsolete by the realism felt to be inherent in images produced by photography. In April 1873, Van Kinsbergen set off. Cleaning, digging, and technical difficulties (his mission was half archeological) took so much time that the photographing could only start in August. Van Kinsbergen selected the best preserved and prettiest statues and panels for photographing. In December, the wet West Monsoon made it impossible to proceed, leaving the series at forty-three photographs, although photographing the entire monument (which would have taken 1,400 clichés) was out of the question. The Society was disappointed with the resulting amount, but satisfied with the quality. As for the cast experiments, they failed. The volcanic stone was too weathered to give good mouldings and the reliefs were far more ‘haut’ than ‘bas’ and, for that reason, difficult to copy.

The “imagining”

How can one describe Van Kinsbergen's archaeological corpus that officially amounted to 375 prints? Van Kinsbergen was a perfectionist. Although his artistic freedom was hampered by the supervision of a special commission of Society board members and the Brumund's (who had died of a liver-trouble in March 1863) pre-selection of topics, he did feel free enough to choose his own way of “imagining” sites and objects.

Van Kinsbergen preferred a non-frontal angle, which better showed the depth of the relief and the skills of the maker. Van Kinsbergen stressed the timeless beauty of each piece of art by regularly skipping the original background not by holding up black curtains, but by blocking the negative. If we look at the photo of the four-armed Hindu god Visnu it is hard to believe that the stele, which came from the Dieng Plateau, actually stood at one side of the drive to the residency of the Assistant Resident of Wonosobo, while at the opposite side was an image of Siva in the same style.

The Society was fully satisfied with the prints, but there was always space for criticism. It's true that the series is not fully representative of ancient Indonesian art, it is not really balanced, misses details in the darker parts, is without indication of measurements, is not properly described, and is not archaeological in essence. But his prints are of a superb quality; the beauty of the classical art is perfectly shown, stone figures come to life by a touch of light. They were shown to the public at both the 1873 International Exhibition of Vienna and the World Exhibition in Paris in 1878, inspired other artists (e.g. Gauguin), and...yes, he finally won a medal for his photographic work. Attention for Van Kinsbergen's work is once again on the rise. Prints have been shown in Dallas, San Francisco, Bilbao, and most recently, in the National Museum in Amsterdam. But what remains starkly absent is a good biography and bibliography! <

References

- Ido, Victor, *Indie in den Goeden Ouden Tijd*. Bandoeng (1936).
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- Groeneveld, A., in *Toekang Potret: 100 Years of Photography in the Dutch Indies 1839-1939*. Amsterdam (1989).

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Erratum >

In the article by Gerda Theuns-de Boer entitled “Photographic Prints at the Kern Institute: The Boar as an Image of Creation”, published in IAS Newsletter 26, p. 22, the photo captions should be switched (please see IAS website for correct captions), and the sentence which reads “With his tusks, he took the form of Varaha in order to lift the earth from the waters” should read as “He took the form of Varaha in order to lift the earth with his tusks from the waters”. We apologize for the errors.

Notes >

The total costs were 37,500 guilders, even for today an amazing amount, which can only be explained by the high government salaries up to 1888, the appreciating of the new medium as such, and the high costs of equipment, transport and sojourn. Van Kinsbergen's personal salary was 1,000 guilders a month; for that same amount thirty workers would clear, clean, and dig at the Dieng Plateau during four months!

Making casts was a popular technique at that time for displaying antiquities back in Europe and had already been successfully accomplished with Egyptian and Assyrian reliefs.