

# Travels in the Past: Photos by Alphons Hustinx

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General

Alphons Hustinx (1900-1972) was a Dutch photographer and journalist who, in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, was commissioned by the Rotterdam shipping company P&O Nedlloyd, and other large companies, to photograph Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and the Middle East. He often travelled great distances by car into remote areas in order to photograph the landscape, local people, and the local architecture. He also filmed documentaries to be shown in cinemas. A semi-scientific entertainer before the advent of television, Hustinx's beautiful pictures of native people gave expression to their presumed simple and natural lives.

By Louis Zweers

Alphons Hustinx, earned his living through travel, journalism, and lecturing (with his diapositives and films of exotic countries used as supporting material). His love for travelling was ignited during his student years, when in 1928, with his friend, Theo Regout, who had a similar upper class upbringing, he travelled to Poland by car. The adventures continued in 1932, when they made another trip to far off Afghanistan in a Ford Cabriolet two-seater. By 1934, Hustinx was capturing the sights of South Africa and British Rhodesia on film, paying great attention to the different aspects of the countries he was photographing.

The advent of the Second World War greatly restricted the possibilities to travel. Hustinx remained in the Netherlands and chose to photograph the German occupation, using colour film in his Leica camera, until 1944, when he was forced to flee to freedom, in the dead of night, across the river Meuse. After the war, Hustinx resumed his world travels. In 1946, he returned to his photographic work with the Royal Dutch Airlines (KLM) to promote travel in Asia, particularly to the Dutch East Indies. The Dutch oil company Shell also commissioned Hustinx to travel to the Netherlands Antilles and Venezuela to photograph and film the oil production and geological expeditions in the inlands. In Venezuela, he took the opportunity to travel to the desolate south eastern area of Venezuela to visit the Pemon Indians. In the 1950s, he turned his thoughts eastward, travelling



Jodhpur, India, 1950, Elephant in the bridal entourage of princess Rajendru

All photo's: Collection Zweers, Rijswijk

through Southeast Asia from Karachi to Colombo. In 1950, he visited the newly independent countries of India and Pakistan, remaining six months in the region to photograph and chronicle his experiences. Hustinx spent his first three months in Pakistan, travelling by car and train to photograph historical architecture, such as old mosques and buildings, as well as modern constructions, such as the large irrigation project in the Indus valley. From Pakistan, Hustinx moved on to the India, travelling by train to Agra to visit the Taj Mahal and the Pearl Mosque (Moti Masjid). His beautiful photographs of that Islamic temple – the largest marble mosque in the world – were reminiscent of the work of Samuel Bourne, one of the most important photographers of nineteenth-century British India. He was also able to capture the fairy-tale-like atmosphere of the wedding of Princess Rajendra in the town of Jodhpur in Rajasthan. Hustinx wrote enthusiastically in his diary about the historical architecture of India, as well as the exotic dress and way of life of the local people.

Hustinx's next journey took him to Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka) in 1954. He took the opportunity to photograph the Dutch colonial buildings of the VOC in the southern town of Galle, but was also impressed by the surrounding mountainous landscape. With his usual attention to detail, he photographed the famous Dalada Maligawa temple in Kandy, as well as the Buddhist stupas and sculptures of the Gal-Vihare temple in Polonnaruwa. Hustinx's final overseas voyage was to Ghana in 1959, but he continued to travel throughout Europe in his later years.

Hustinx was truly a gifted photographer: his black and white photographs

revealed a mysterious Eastern world as seen through Western eyes. He was, however, also a talented film-maker and was commissioned to film the voyage of the luxury steamer *Johan van Oldenbarnevelt* to the Dutch East Indies and the journey, by car, through the territory. He made both black and white and Technicolor films, and his first Technicolor film, *Kleur en Glorie onzer tropen*, was released in 1938 to enthusiastic audiences.

Hustinx's documentaries were, in his time, released for public viewing, but have been destroyed over time through

general wear and tear. Many of his travel stories were published in newspapers, but, surprisingly, he never published his photographs. It was not until after his death in 1972 that his family discovered his colour photographs from the Second World War. These were finally published for the first time in 1985 in *Nederland 1940-1945, de gekleurde werkelijkheid*. Thirty years after Hustinx's death, the Dutch art and photo historian Louis Zweers began to research the background of his travels and photographic works. The result, *Voorbije Reizen: Foto's van Alphons Hustinx*, was published earlier this year. It is fortunate that so much of Hustinx's photo collection remains in excellent condition and is available for display to the public. His photographs of architecture, exotic peoples, and tropical landscapes still speak to our imagination, even in the twenty-first century. <

#### Reference

- Louis Zweers, *Voorbije Reizen. Foto's van Alphons Hustinx*, Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2002, pp136, ISBN 90-5730-148-2



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#### More info >

The exhibition of the photographs and films of Alphons Hustinx, *Voorbije reizen, foto's van Alphons Hustinx, 1930-1950*, is showing at the *Wereldmuseum* in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, from 6 July to 17 November 2002. The collection of photographs taken on behalf of P&O Nedlloyd also remains on permanent loan at the *Wereldmuseum*.

Anuradhapura, Ceylon, 1954. Temple guard at a temple ruin



Polonnaruwa, Ceylon, 1954. 7 metre sitting Buddha carved from a rock at the Gal-Vihare temple.

