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.”

With these words, Victor Ido characterized the Dutch artist teiodore 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.

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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 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. Van Kinsbergen used up so many cliches on the reliefs of the Panatanal complex that he was unable to head for the Borobudur (res. Kedaton) as intended.

Kinsbergen’s task to photograph “all Southeast Asia” was to be an impressive task, not only by government orders, but also in the context of the archaeological tour for the Society to select and reproduce all wet plates (clichés) of Java. In April 1873, Van Kinsbergen set off. Cleaning, digging, and technical difficulties (his mission was half technical) took so much time that the photographic could only start in August. Van Kinsbergen selected the best preserved and prettiest statues and reliefs for photographing. In December, the wet West Monsoon made it impossible to proceed, leaving the series at forty-three photographs, although reproducing the entire monument (which would have taken 1,400 clichés) was out of the question. Van Kinsbergen was a perfectionist. The Society was disappointed with the result, but satisfied with the quality. As for the cast experiments, they failed. The volcanic stone was too weathered to give good mouldings and the relics were far more ‘bunt’ 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 by Brumund’s (who had died) a water-trouble in March 1865) pre-selection of topics, he did feel free enough to choose his own way of “imagining” sites and objects.

Photographic prints at the Kern Institute, Leiden

Two panels on the main wall of the first gallery of the Kern Institute, Leiden, Borobudur showing the Buddha’s First Encounter (top) and the story of the virtuous Siti Khing (below). Negative 1873. Print 1874-1875. (image no. 2205)

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1 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!

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