In recent years, much has been written on the subject of art collections stolen during the German occupation of Holland during World War Two and the return of these artworks to the original owners or their heirs (such as the well-known collection of the Dutch art dealer Jacques Goudstikker). In occupied Europe works of art stolen by the Nazi’s and bought at bargain prices were transported to Germany. But what of the art collections in the former Netherlands Indies during the Japanese occupation? Louis Zweers reveals their fate.

Louis Zweers

There was no museum for modern art in the former Dutch colony in the Far East. However, there were a few private and public collections, one of which was the National Collection of Paintings in Batavia. The collection was housed in the Batavia Huis on the main street of Batavia, now the Presidentenweg. From the 17th to the early 20th century, many oil paintings of high governmental officials; among them paintings of the governors-general drawings, 1940, black chalk and red chalk on paper, 27.5 x 20 cm by expertly made portraits, figure studies and landscapes. His house was – as so many of the European houses in the Dutch Indies – emptied by the Japanese. His valuable possessions and art collection were housed in a warehouse in Denpasar. A couple of unknown drawings ended up in the hands of Japanese officers, including a charcoal drawing from 1940 of two young Balinese farmers on their way to the rice fields with a padiya (a small scythe). One of the farmers wears cotton headgear and the other one a scarf. In the background are the mountains, volcanoes, paddy fields and palm trees of tropical Bali. On the reverse of a photograph of this work Balinese men with cleavers Bonnet has written ‘in the war’.

Following the Japanese capitulation, Rudolf Bonnet was released in August 1945. He chose to stay on in Celebes (Sulawesi). He returned to Bali in April 1947 to find that much of his work had been lost. His art collection, however, which the Japanese had stored in a warehouse in Denpasar, had survived the war relatively well. During the chaotic post-war period (Autumn 1945) this warehouse, full of treasures belonging to Europeans, was Item 110,000 at Sotheby’s in Singapore. Also missing are his carefully selected art collection of Tibetan paintings, old Chinese costumes and many art objects from Indonesia. Bonnet never – as far as he could recollect – submitted a claim for his stolen art works and he never spoke again about the loss of his art collection. He died in 1978.

As a result of negligence and indifference by the Japanese occupier confiscated paintings, drawings and gouaches have disappeared or have been heavily damaged. ‘If the Japanese army had taken measures to protect the valuable Van Gogh during the war period then that would still have been world news today’, said a journalist of a Japanese weekly. It seems, however, that the Japanese occupier was more interested in Far Eastern art objects such as jade and ceremonial scissors (a dagger with a wavy double-edged blade) and traditional Balinese paint-}