
Academic studies on paintings, prints, drawings, and photographs made by artists in the Netherlands Indies often tend to regard these images simply as mirroring the colonial world or as framings of specific events, and reduce them as such to historical sources. Other publications focus on their origins and provenance or relate them to the biographies of particular artists or photographers involved, in other words, follow the art historical methods. Images of the tropics by Susie Protschky offers an innovative analysis of the same corpus of images. The author studies representations of nature and landscape in colonial Indonesia made from the start of the nineteenth century until the end of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia. In the book she uses these images as a means to reconstruct how Europeans during this period understood the tropics and their own place there, by adopting, as the title of the book announces, the approach of visual culture studies. In consequence, the chosen time frame is much broader as she also has to include how earlier modes of representing Indonesian landscapes from the VOC era were integrated in nineteenth century depictions of the Dutch East Indies.

Protschky’s book builds strongly on Denis Cosgrove’s notion of ‘tropicality’ in order to connect colonial representations of landscape with colonial mentalities, attitudes, and experiences. From the awareness of the fact that Europe possessed more than one concept of ‘otherness’, this notion aims to be both a variety and specification of the discourse of orientalism. In her use of the term, Protschky refers to such European notions of the tropics as a geographically distinct entity whose social and cultural forms were constrained and determined by the tropical uniqueness in climate and topography. Protschky argues that images of tropical landscapes should be regarded as essential parts of the social, political, and economic modes of Dutch imperialism.

In the chronological order of the book, this argument is examined by means of two related questions. How are colonial claims for territorial and political sovereignty represented in colonial images of Indies landscapes of the first half of the nineteenth century? And, why did the naturalistic and realistic style of painting peaceful tropical landscapes, developed in the
early nineteenth century, dominate colonial visual culture until the very end of Dutch colonial presence in Indonesia? Protschky concludes that from the beginning of the nineteenth century, images of Indonesian landscapes evoked cartographic and aesthetic traditions of the ‘Golden Age’, thereby formulating and expressing historical claims to the Indies territory. Furthermore, views of fertile and tranquil landscapes untouched by colonialism literally rejected the imagination of any anti-colonial resistance. When dealing with the so-called ‘Mooi Indië’-paintings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the author claims that there is more at stake than a simple aesthetic preference within colonial visual culture. These peaceful landscapes provide a glimpse of the ideals and anxieties of colonial society during the acceleration of Dutch expansion. For many colonists, these images must have directed their attention away from colonial conquest, conflict, violence, exploitation, and coercion that took place on a daily basis in these very landscapes. The same can be supposed with regard to the preference for landscapes with pre-Islamic antiquities in Java and Hindu practice in Bali. According to Protschky, these reveal a ‘gaze’ based on ideals of a peaceful colonial world and not on unwanted realities like the Islamic resistance to the politics of violent imperial expansion.

Protschky convincingly shows that images of landscape and nature of colonial Indonesia not only contain factual information and meaning, but also function within a broader context of colonial mentalities and attitudes. However, the adopted focus on a certain discourse and the resulting neglect of production, dissemination, and consumption/reception of images, decontextualizes these same images to a certain extent. As Protschky’s style of writing furthermore mainly consists of statements, her book lacks a historical foundation in colonial society. The chapter on ‘Seduction in the Tropics’ that deals with the fear of European cultural values being eroded by Indies nature is an exception to this focus and style, as in this case of colonial literature included in the analysis. This combination of visual and literary sources leads to a more differentiated historical view that opens up contemporary moral and social concerns in the colony. If this approach had been broadly implemented, the book might have been richer and even more rewarding.

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