Visual History
_A Neglected Resource for the Longue Durée_

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Felipe Fernández-Armesto enjoins historians to study creative works of the past. Here, he writes, is a precious source of images and sentiments that informed thought and behaviour of peoples long gone (Fernández-Armesto 2002:152). Art and literature, he continues, help historians interpret documents and other material evidence, which are the stuff of historical research. Peter Burke (2001:13) reminds us that artworks, like any other of the historian’s sources (which he calls ‘traces of the past in the present’), must be studied within their social context. By this he means the cultural, political and material setting, artistic conventions of the day, the circumstances in which an image was commissioned, its intended function, and the physical location in which a work was originally seen. Svetlana Alpers (1983) characterises Dutch painting as ‘the art of describing’. Burke links this value for observation of detail with urban culture, and notes that the inventor of the microscope was Dutch.1 But painters do not see with an ‘innocent eye’. Portraits, scenes of small groups, rural and city views are, in Burke’s words, ‘painted opinion’.2

Fernand Braudel’s methodology of the long time-span in historical studies of society fosters asking of visual records if there are constants in topics and themes, if there are changes in perspective (Braudel 1980:25–54). In the case of Dutch images of Indonesia and Indonesians, a long time span allows charting of visual experience, impact, adjustment and perspective. It yields a more subtle understanding of what we may already know from written records.

Dutch artists produced a corpus of visual imagery in three centuries of interaction with peoples and places in the Indonesian archipelago. These images formed and reflected sensibilities of artists and audiences in the Netherlands and in communities across ‘voc Asia’ and the Netherlands Indies.3 These latter included the multi-ethnic inhabitants of private households – immigrants,

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1 Burke (2001:84). This was Cornelis Drebbel (1572–1633).
2 Burke (2001:13, 122). He adds that ‘photographs are no exception to this rule’, and this holds true of the so-called ‘candid camera’ shot as well as the posed or staged photograph.
3 voc are the Dutch initials for the United East Indies Company (1602–1799). VOC Asia was a string of trading posts in Asian ports and across the Indonesian archipelago, headquartered in Batavia (present-day Jakarta).
locally born, Indigenous – as well as purchasers of artworks, apprentices and artisans in wood- and metal-working, assistants in ateliers and photographic studios, and local artists who came into contact with Dutch artists or their work.

The body of Dutch art in and on Indonesia sprang from an increasingly urban, prosperous society in Holland where, in the seventeenth century, a growing proportion of the population could afford works of art. Art ceased to be constrained by patronage in the Netherlands Golden Age. Alongside small numbers of artists working on commissions for the nobility, guild artists now produced for a mass of anonymous buyers. Art markets and auctions circulated artworks, generated and responded to public demand. In every year of the seventeenth century, 63,000–70,000 pictures were painted for a population numbering approximately 1.85 million (North 2010:90). Inventories of well-to-do villagers and townspeople record ownership of paintings and establish changes in the function of art, popular values and taste. Religious art, which had assisted the private devotions of Roman Catholics, gave way to Protestant preference for morally instructive, mundane scenes. By the 1650s, the Dutch buying public wanted sea- and landscapes, and the well-to-do commissioned portraits of themselves.

This visual culture, with its secular subject matter and love for ‘the look of things’ (Berger 1974), travelled to Indonesia's islands. Batavia, founded in 1619, already had an art market by 1627. In that year, Gillis Vinant’s art collection was auctioned. This Dutch merchant had amassed 28 paintings in all. His collection included nine landscapes and seven Chinese paintings.4

Surveying three centuries of production, we find sketches, oil- and watercolours, portraits, sea- and landscapes. Alongside work of the hand, we find mechanically produced images from the earliest days of lithography in the 1840s to photographs and, from around 1912, moving pictures.5 This creative work catered for a Dutch public avid for images of the Indies. The crowds visiting colonial halls of the great international exhibitions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries attest to the instructive and aesthetic appeal of the image.

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4 North (2010:94). Some of Vinant’s paintings are identified in the inventory by size and frame rather than subject matter.

5 Many of the paintings and photographs I discuss here are located in the digital image collections of the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV), the Tropenmuseum (TM) of the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) and the Rijksmuseum (RM) in Amsterdam. Text citations include archive initials with catalogue number. Websites are: www.kitlv.nl; www.tropenmuseum.nl; and www.rijksmuseum.nl/collection.