

# Isidore van Kinsbergen: photographs of Java and Bali, 1855-1880

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The early negative-based, photographic imaging of Java and Bali continues to intrigue: topographic views, vernacular and court scenes, 'types', photos of antiquities and landscapes recall a past world. After decennia of photographic publications, the stream of new visual material has not yet dried up. One of the greatest contributors was Isidore van Kinsbergen.

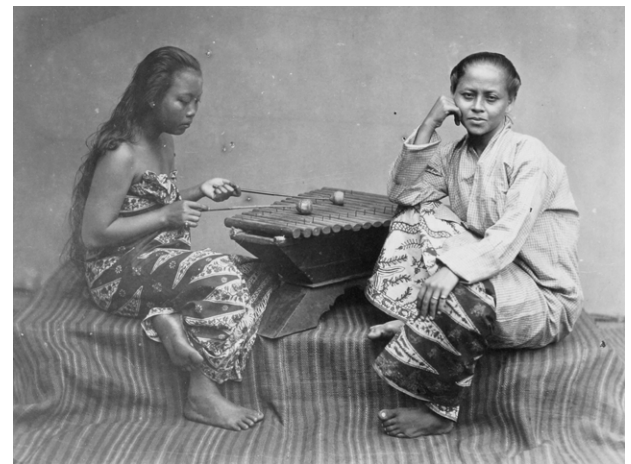
Isidore van Kinsbergen (Bruges 1821-Batavia 1905) was a Dutch-Belgian engraver, who after an educational period in Bruges and Gent discovered the artistic wealth of the theatre. In Batavia (Jakarta) he proved to be a real all-rounder, combining decoration painting with singing, acting and management. In 1855, Van Kinsbergen also took up photography. He was invited to photograph 'all peculiarities' on the Dutch mission to Bangkok in 1862 and took part in two inspection tours covering Java, Madura and Bali (1862 and 1865). Between 1863 and 1867 and again in 1873 he was contracted by the Government of the Netherlands-Indies to photograph Java's antiquities. Two series, together holding over 375 photos, constitute his art and archaeology legacy.

There is a less or even 'unknown' Van Kinsbergen as well, who commercially operated from a professional studio in Batavia. Thanks to research, more than 200 anonymous or wrongly attributed photos can now be assigned to him. How to recognize Van Kinsbergen in portraits, landscapes, views and 'types'? After all, making a portrait or casting a 'type' is quite different from photographing monuments. Are characteristics found within his art and archaeology series evident in his so-called commercial work? Yes, but not in one stereotypical way. Besides a general artistic rendering of items and the careful use of light, his style is direct, full of contrast, academic and theatrical at the same time. <



Malay children in Batavia. Albumen print, early 1870s. This was one of Kinsbergen's best-selling photos. Apparently he knew from the theatre how the public favoured these theatrical 'tableaux vivants' where they could let their imaginations roam. The renowned Dutch scientist P.J. Veth lovingly goes into every detail when he reviews an engraving after this photo in the journal *Eigen Haard*. He praises the well-chosen order within the group, but critically remarks: 'Possibly our artist – for who can photograph like this is that qualification worthy – aimed more at a nice order than at the correct presentation of the life of the people'. In my opinion, the handful of overdone photos, of which this is an example, were taken with a wink from the photographer, as if saying: I know what you like....

courtesy of Geoff Edwards, private collection



Portrait of the *gambang* player. Albumen print, ca. 1870. The title refers to the girl on the left playing or pretending to play the xylophone. Although she is the main character, the viewer's attention goes to the face of the woman on the right. She has a reflective, somewhat tired look with permanent evocative qualities. She also moves the viewer away from her deformed right foot. For Van Kinsbergen there was no need to stress the fact, or to hide it. This shot carefully creates a functional mise-en-scène in which the poses and positions of the heads are controlled. The expression of character and personality is one of Van Kinsbergen's distinguishing trademarks.

courtesy of Geoff Edwards, private collection

The IIAS early photography seminar focusing on Isidore van Kinsbergen and his colleagues, Jacob Anthonie Meessen and Hendrik Veen, held in Leiden 14-15 October 2004, showed that there are many more 'sleeping beauties'. More of Van Kinsbergen's work will be revealed in December 2005 at the exhibition in Huis Marseille, Foundation for Photography in Amsterdam.

Son of the regent of Bandoeng dressed as a bridegroom. Albumen print, mid 1860s. Van Kinsbergen was invited by the regent Adipati Wiranatakusuma IV to document this event. His photographs of the occasion include a portrait of the bride, some of the guests, a group of *bedoyo* dancers and the *gamelan* orchestra. Although he had to deal with long shutter speed, which forced the poser to 'freeze', Van Kinsbergen succeeded in evoking an easy mood. The photo is sharp in the centre, allowing a study of the textile and jewelry details of Radhen Karta Ning Ngrat's festive outfit. The chosen three-quarter profile hampers the viewer from constructing the bridegroom's full face, leaving us curious. Then, there is the question of the piece of cloth or paper on the floor. Was it just the carelessness of the photographer or is there some meaning in it?

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