

Journey through the archipelago

The original black and white travel pictures from the photographer and film director Alphons Hustinx (1900-1972) give us an impression of his many travels through Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and the Middle East in the 1930s and 50s. Hustinx left his negatives, films, letters and diaries, full of notes, to his family. Through these egocentric documents and images, the world of this Limburg bachelor is brought back to life. In this article, his biographer, Louis Zweers, presents a snapshot of Hustinx's visit to the former Dutch East Indies in 1938.

Louis Zweers



ABOVE: Dutch family in the garden city of Menteng. Batavia (Jakarta), West Java, Dutch East Indies, 1938.

RIGHT: Sand storm on the dry plane of the sand sea at the Bromo volcano, Tengger Mountains, East Java, Dutch East Indies, 1938.

BELOW: Wayang Wong dancer. Surakarta (Solo), Java, Dutch East Indies, 1938.



HUSTINX BECAME FAMOUS for his documentary films about non-western countries. He was a self taught photographer and film director – something that was not uncommon at that time – who became a versatile professional. In the 1930s and 50s big clients such as the *Stoomvaart Maatschappij Nederland* (Dutch Steamship Company), KLM, Shell and BPM bought his pictures, but his reputation was limited to a small circle of experts. Hustinx's black and white travel pictures show us that he had a gifted compositional eye and much interest for other cultures.

In July 1938 Alphons Hustinx started on a journey to the Dutch East Indies. He had received an assignment from the *Stoomvaart Maatschappij Nederland* (Dutch Steamship Company) to make a promotional film (in colour) about a journey to the East. He shot ten thousand metres of 16mm film, both in colour and in black and white, with a total duration of about 20 hours. This material was edited by Hustinx and



resulted in the film *Kleur en Glorie Onzer Tropen* (Colour and Splendour of the East – 1939). This film starts with a journey on the luxury passenger ship *Johan van Oldenbarnevelt* and continues with a journey by car through Sumatra, Java, Madura and Bali. With this film *Stoomvaart Maatschappij Nederland* wanted to promote tourism to the tropical archipelago. The two hour feature, one of Holland's first colour films, was screened with much success by Hustinx himself in the Netherlands.

Early one morning in August 1938 Hustinx arrived in Tandjong Priok. The townscape pictures he made of Batavia (Jakarta) show grand government buildings, renowned hotels and beautiful white plastered villas beside well-maintained roads, American cars and white men in lightweight suits. Some buildings of pre-war Batavia can still be admired today. But the park-like atmosphere and tranquility that was once there has gone forever. From Bandung he made various trips to the volcanoes that lie south of Garut, a popular vacation resort. In one picture he is standing in front of the wooded hillside of the Papandajan in the Preanger highlands. On a wooden plank it says: 'Smoking in the crater is prohibited'. From the top of the mountain, at a height of more than 2600 metres, he focused his camera on the white clouds of smoke and the bubbling lava in the imposing crater. Hustinx shows us tranquil landscapes, mountain lakes and volcanoes in the Preanger.

Freezing in the tropics

In order to escape the tropical heat, he stayed at the Grand Hotel at the Tosari hill station, located at about 2000 metres in the Tengger mountains of East Java. This location boasted a panoramic view of a magnificent landscape with wooded mountainsides, deep ravines and active volcanoes. During clear weather one could also see the flat lands near Surabaya and the sea. From Tosari one could make trips to the Bromo volcano with its sand sea. During his daytrips to Bromo, Hustinx hired powerfully-built Tenggers to carry his photo and film equipment. Various photos were made of Hustinx wearing winter clothes, surrounded by a guide and several carriers, the latter barefooted but heavily clothed against the cold and the wind. Hustinx wrote about this journey in the cold early morning: 'The wind is blowing terribly hard.

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Photographs of the former Dutch East Indies

I am completely frozen. The carriers are also shivering with cold... Finally we arrive at the sand sea. It is as if we are entering the hell of Dante.' In spite of the storm, Hustinx managed to make some photo and film shots. In one picture we see the Tengger carriers standing in the desolate and windy landscape of the sand sea. However freezing it may be, it is still unmistakably a tropical picture.

Of course Hustinx also visited the world renowned Buddhist structure the Borobudur and the old Hindu temples on the Dieng plateau. He wrote in his notebook: 'There are several very beautiful Buddha statues here... The light is good and I am making good shots. The weather is terribly warm and oppressive.' Hustinx meticulously captured images of the big stupas on top of the temple complex, the unique wall reliefs portraying the life of Buddha and the elegant Buddha statues. Beautiful because of its simplicity and directness is the portrait of a young Javanese man next to a sculpted head of Buddha. Tirelessly Hustinx also filmed and photographed temples, decorated temple gates, sculptures, processions and dance performances in Bali. Later on, much to his dismay, he discovered that parts of the film he shot in Bali were a failure.

The last month of his journey to the Dutch East Indies was spent in Sumatra. Hustinx was interested in the culture and people of Minangkabau, with their colourful traditional dresses and beautiful houses with pointed roofs and artistic decorations. He visited Fort de Kock (*Bukittinggi*) and the calm mountain lakes of Maninjau and Singarak in the Padang highlands of West Sumatra. Later on, in Painan, a coastal town about 30 kilometres south of Padang, he rented a small boat to take him to Tjenko island. Hustinx: 'A beautiful small island à la Robinson Crusoe, where one wishes one could stay for the rest of one's life.'

Of interest to the western eye

Only things that were interesting to the western eye were photographed, like the beautifully dressed Minangkabau women from West Sumatra and the Batak women in the surrounding area of the Toba Lake. On New Year's Eve of 1938 Hustinx started his journey back to Europe by boarding a ship at the Belawan Harbour in Medan. In his notebook he wrote: 'Five months in the Dutch East Indies, it felt like it was only five weeks. Time went by like in a dream.' Hustinx more or less lived in his own world and only saw the exotic beauty of the Indonesian archipelago. He showed little interest for the social and political situation in the East. This doesn't mean that he idealised the colonial period. His travel pictures and films were produced for the sole purpose of promoting tourism in the Western market.

The Limburg photographer and film maker Alphons Hustinx started travelling through the Middle East, South East Asia and Africa in the 1930s. He didn't work for press agencies or press photo bureaus but went at his own expense or on assignment for big companies. The groomed bachelor stayed at reputable hotels or with friends who were businessmen or diplomats. In remote areas Hustinx, a devout catholic, also stayed at missionary posts. He captured images of foreign cultures and people with an aesthetic and almost ethnographic eye. His photos are not just a reflection of a far-away foreign world, they also create a longing towards it.

He often used his visual material when giving lectures in the Netherlands about far-away countries and foreign ethnicities. These lectures with slides and films were generally well-attended, at a time when there was no television yet. The courteous Hustinx was very popular among the curious public. Even during the war years he was a much requested speaker with his slides and films.

In the early 1960s, when television became more and more available, he stopped definitively with his lectures. His photos and film images, however, remain an impressive witness of a world that has disappeared.

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Art and photohistorian Louis Zweers is the author of the catalogue and curator of the exhibition 'Travels of the Past'. The exhibition held in the Dutch Cultural Centre Erasmushuis in Jakarta (June-July 2009) and the French Cultural Centre in Surabaya (August 2009) consists of a selection of travel photographs, made by Alphons Hustinx in the 1930s and 1950s.

Catalogue: Louis Zweers, *Travels of the Past, photographs by Alphons Hustinx*, Erasmushuis, Jakarta, 2009 (English and Bahasa Indonesia).
Dutch publication: *Voorbije Reizen, Foto's van Alphons Hustinx*, Zutphen, Walburg Pers, 2002.



ABOVE: Decorated racing bulls. Madura, East Java, Dutch East Indies, 1938.

BELOW LEFT: Women on bamboo rafts doing laundry. Batavia (Jakarta), West Java, Dutch East Indies, 1938.

BELOW RIGHT: Restaurant-car of the South Sumatra Railway Company. South Sumatra, Dutch East Indies, 1938.



All photographs from the Vintageprints collection, Louis Zweers, Rijswijk.