

Art collections in wartime in the Netherlands East Indies 1942-1945

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 so-called *Landsverzameling Schilderijen*. From the 17th to the early 20th century, many oil portraits were made of high governmental officials; among them paintings of all the Governors-General, from Pieter Both to Lord Dirk de Graeff, by well-known portrait painters such as Raden Saleh and Hendrik Paulides.

During the war these valuable paintings were stored in wooden crates in a sugarcane factory in Klaten (Java). They were discovered by the Japanese and returned to Batavia. The collection's curator, Jan Frank, was temporarily released from an internment camp so that he could advise the Japanese about the paintings. Following the capitulation by the Japanese, the torn and water damaged portraits of governmental officials with broken frames were found in a storage space belonging to the Kodak film company in the centre of Batavia. Today, these paintings have been restored and are currently in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

The Dutch industrialist Pierre Alexander Regnault owned a couple of paint factories on Java. He organised exhibitions of works from his own private collection supplemented by works on loan and recent work by artists in the Batavian Art Gallery (*Bataviasche Kunstkring*). Regnault had a mission to introduce international modern art to the European colonials. Towards the end of 1939 the fifth Regnault collection was shipped to the tropical archipelago (in total 61 works). All contact with the Netherlands Indies ceased in May 1940 when the Germans occupied Holland. The Regnault collection stayed behind in Java. Friends took the care of the artworks, taking valuable top pieces such as six small oil paintings by Vincent van Gogh, including the *Strosnijdende boerin* and *Doodskopvlinder op een aronskelk*, under their wings. Van Gogh painted these last two paintings during his voluntary stay in 1889 in the psychiatric unit in Saint-Remy close to the French town of Arles. These paintings were the personal property of V.W. van Gogh, the nephew of Vincent van Gogh. There were other important modern works in the collection, such as *Rabbi with a scroll*, a gouache by the Russian-Jewish artist Marc Chagall and paintings by Massimo Campigli, Constant Permeke, Wassily Kandinsky and Maurice Utrillo. Because of the war threat the paintings were taken from their frames and stretchers and stored in wooden crates. The crated works of art were taken to the secure vault of the Javanese Bank in Batavia, the largest bank in the Dutch Indies.

Following the Dutch capitulation the Japanese took possession of and searched through the building of the Javanese Bank in Batavia. They found the crate with the paintings in the vaults and opened them. The canvasses were left alone for now. The six paintings by van Gogh with a pre-war estimated value of 30,000 guilders were also left untouched. Nearly half a century later Christies, the London fine art auction house, sold Van Gogh's canvas *Sunflowers* (1889) by public auction for the then record sum of 75 million guilders. The new owner is the Japanese insurance company Yasuda in Tokyo. However, in 1942 the Japanese were not interested in similar works of art. They were fixated by the 'lost gold' of the Javanese Bank.

After the war had finished, the Regnault collection was discovered in the Javanese Bank. The traced works of art, without glass or frames, had been substantially damaged by the tropical humidity. It took until March 1949 for the painting collection to arrive back in the Netherlands on the passenger-ship 'Sibajak'. The canvasses were returned after eight years.

Regnault wrote to V.W. van Gogh about the returned works: 'The condition of the shipment is heavily disappointing (...). Fourty works have suffered badly. This is not the case with your six canvasses, they are completely intact.' Other owners complained to Regnault about the serious damage to the returned



Above: Van Gogh, *Strosnijdende boerin*, 1889, oils, Saint Remy (40.5 x 26.5 cm) and *Doodskopvlinder op een aronskelk*, 1889, oils, Saint Remy (33 x 24 cm)

paintings. Some works were in a 'heavy state of decay' and 'in several places the paint had disappeared completely' Regnault had the canvasses restored and compensated the owners and art dealers. Through the negligence and disinterest of the Japanese occupiers many paintings were damaged; the six van Goghs, however, had survived the war relatively well. They were later donated to the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.

As mentioned earlier, it is difficult to find documentation about the Japanese confiscated private and public art collections. In the 1930s, the Dutch artist Rudolf Bonnet was one of Bali's most important painters and fine art collectors. He lived and worked for ten years in the small town of Ubud in Bali. During the night of the 18 February 1942 the Japanese troops landed. The island was taken without any real resistance. The Japanese soldiers took Bonnet and other Europeans quite quickly. Bonnet was imprisoned in Denpasar, the capital of Bali, along with the Dutch artist Willem Hofker and his wife and some governmental officials. After a few months, much to the artists' surprise, the Japanese marine commander of Bali released them with the remark: 'The Imperial Japanese Marine Force does not detain artists'.

In fact, the art loving Japanese commander payed a monthly contribution of 15 guilders in exchange for paintings of a tropical landscape or a portrait of a gracious Balinese woman. Other Japanese officers were also interested in the work of the detained Western artists. Only once or twice did they try to take drawings without due payment. For the rest, the artists were left in peace and allowed to work undisturbed. Their movements were restricted, however, to the area around Ubud. This relative freedom under the Japanese rule lasted for nearly two years.

However, their privileged position was lost at the end of 1943 with the appointment of another Japanese commander to Bali. Just before Christmas in that year both Bonnet and the Hofkers were seized from their homes by Japanese soldiers and detained in a Japanese internment camp in Paré-Paré (South-Celebes). Bonnet just had time to roll up and hide 20 drawings in an old

bedspread but he had to leave behind the majority of his artworks; 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 *patjol* (a soil cleaver). One of the farmers wears rattan 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 'Lost 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 *bersiap* period (Autumn 1945) this warehouse, full of treasures belonging to Europeans, was ransacked and robbed by the Japanese military. During my visit ten years ago to Bonnet's niece and biographer, Dr de Roever-Bonnet (who is in charge of his legacy), she showed me a piece of paper, handwritten by Rudolf Bonnet, with an incomplete inventory of his missing art works. The original list, dating from May 1947, had the heading 'Art collection of R. Bonnet taken and destroyed by the Japanese commandoes at Denpasar' and gave a short description of the pre-war value of each stolen artwork. The most important missing works of art are the six drawings by Bonnet, one of which is the previously mentioned charcoal drawing *Balinese men with cleaver*, two red chalk drawings with the title *Old man* and *Head of a man from Bali*, a landscape study and three figure studies from Rome. To give an indication of the value of these works, in October 2005 a Bonnet pastel drawing from 1949, *Two Balinese men*, raised US\$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 his niece 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 Goghs 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 statues and ceremonial creeses (a dagger with a wavy double-edged blade) and traditional Balinese paintings rather than modern paintings and drawings by European artists. On the whole, these works of art were left undisturbed. You could even say that they had ostracised Western art.

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Right: Rudolf Bonnet, *Balinese men with cleavers*, black chalk drawing, 1940, author's photo collection.