

The painter Willem Imandt revisited¹

The so-called *Mooi Indië* (Beautiful Indies) genre of painting has been both wrongfully neglected and scorned. The paintings were mostly dismissed as the inadequate products of artists lacking in classical training. Willem Imandt (1882-1967), about whom little was known until recently, was one of the artists unjustly relegated to this poorly defined and unappreciated genre, which was most unfortunate as only a few years of his artistic development could in fact be categorised as Beautiful Indies. Just a small handful of his paintings found their way into museums, yet many of his pieces have fortunately been preserved in private collections.

Paul van der Velde

Increasing interest

The number of publications on Dutch East Indies' art² reflects the increased interest in foreign painters working in Indonesia. This interest comes mostly from well-to-do Indonesians who have started to appreciate the colonial period paintings by western artists. Add to that number the more than half-a-million strong 'Indo' population of Dutch-Indonesians who fled Indonesia after it became independent in 1949. Auction houses took notice and now conduct auctions for 'Indonesian' art, whilst galleries in the Malay world organise exhibitions of colonial paintings on a regular basis. Dutch museums also became actively involved; their approaches noticeably changed from 'colonial' to 'mutually culturally influential'. The contours of this shift towards a mutual appreciation started appearing at the beginning of the 1960s.

Renewed appreciation

Said appreciation became clear in the monumental five-volume *Paintings and Statues from the Collection of President Sukarno of the Republic of Indonesia* (1964) edited by one of the most famous Indies painters, Lee Man Fong. The focus of the book is on the work of Indonesian painters, but western artists are very much present. With five paintings Imandt is well-represented. This publication is likely the reason for the reevaluation of paintings made in/of Indonesia, and the increased interest in them.

In 1967, J.H. Maronier published *Pictures of the Tropics*, which mainly deals with pictorial art in the Dutch Indies. One year later the groundbreaking work by J. de Loos-Haaxman, *Verlaet Rapport Indie*, appeared. She was a curator of the Batavische Kunstkring (Batavian Art Group) and knew Imandt personally. Imandt sits at the top of her list of Dutch artists in Indonesia because his contemporaries considered him to be the most famous artist on Java in the 1920s.



J. Bastin and B. Brommer published their classic, *Nineteenth century prints and illustrated books of Indonesia*, in 1979. Then in 1995, the art dealers L. Haks and G. Maris published the quite handy *Lexicon of foreign artists who visualized Indonesia* (1600-1950), which lists more than 3000 foreign artists active in Indonesia during that period, and holds about 600 illustrations. The publication gives a varied impression of 350 years of painting and illustrating in the archipelago.

The canon

Three years thereafter *Indië omljst* (1998) appeared, containing an inventory of the 400-plus oil paintings in the Tropenmuseum (Museum of the Tropics, Amsterdam). In the past twenty years a number of monographs, of varying quality, have been published about artists active in The Indies. None of them were Beautiful Indies painters. All subjects belong to the group of classically trained artists, who in the course of time were considered by art historians to belong to the canon; these included Walter Spies, Rudolf Bonnet, Adolf Breetvelt, Pieter Ouburg, Charles Sayers and Isaac Israëls. According to the art historian

Koos van Brakel "[...] they transcended the general conservatism in East Indies painting."³ Jokingly I refer to them as the 'Not Beautiful Indies painters', to differentiate from the 'Beautiful Indies painters'. Belonging to this latter group – according to Van Brakel – were Ernest Dezentjé, Carel Dake and Leonard Eland.⁴ He made no mention of Imandt at that time, nor did he question whether these painters were aware of developments in the European art world, but he suggested they were not.

Cursed Beautiful Indies

The art critic J. Tielrooy wrote an article in 1930 that is still quoted from today: *The Indies in the art of drawing and painting*. He aimed his venomous arrow at the painter Dezentjé: "Who would not know Dezentjé? [...] He paints paddy-fields, the water is silvery, the little dikes are green and in the background he paints mountains which invariably have a dark blue hue. The coconut tree is omnipresent and on the horizon yearning yellows melt together with poetic reds."⁵ Tielrooy's acerbic criticism on the Beautiful Indies painters influences art historians to this very day.

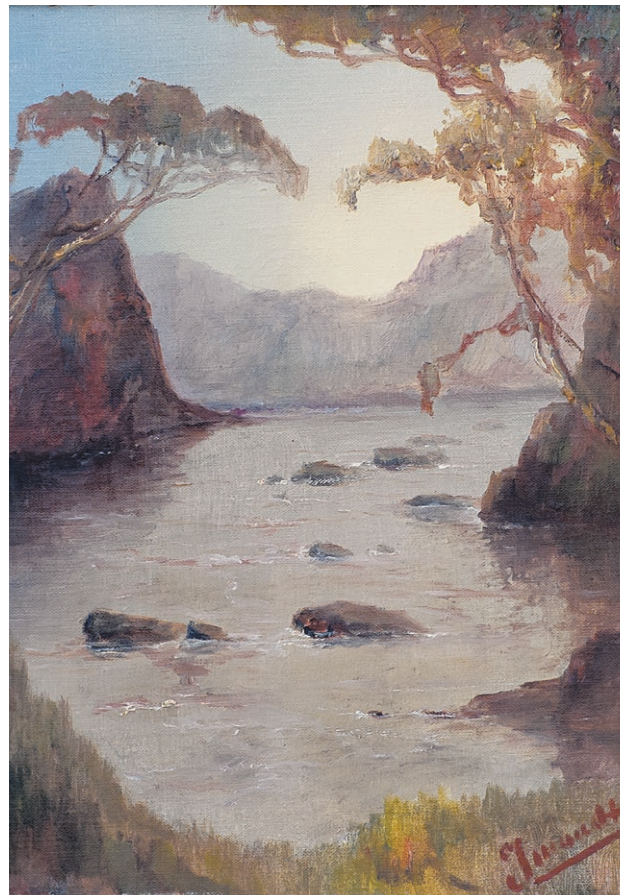
However, that criticism did not diminish the demand for the Beautiful Indies paintings. On the contrary; tourists, expats, wealthy Javanese and Chinese bought their work in vast quantities. In contrast to the academic painters, who only briefly stayed in the Indies, Beautiful Indies painters were much more rooted in the country, either by birth (Eland and Dezentjé) or through their work, such as Imandt. It seems as if the 'Not Beautiful Indies painters' remained in a western frame of mind, painting their cubist or surrealist paintings in The Indies, while the Beautiful Indies painters worked with an Indies frame of mind, taking pleasure from the Javanese subject matter.

Subject matter

Mostly they painted locals, in particular Javanese and Balinese women with bare breasts, or scantily dressed males. During the first half of the twentieth century nudity was considered 'not done' in bourgeois circles, except when it was set against an exotic background; this namby-pamby kitsch adorned many a Dutch sitting room!

Imandt's paintings are completely devoted to the Indonesian landscape. This landscape fascinated not only the Europeans; both in Buddhism and Hinduism, mountains are considered to be spiritual places enabling contact between the world of the gods and men, mediating between this world and the heavens. Perhaps the Beautiful Indies painters (un)intentionally reflected their spiritual ties with Indonesia in their illustrations.

Imandt made it perfectly clear that he produced the ridiculed paintings purely for practical reasons, although he also admittedly liked to produce works that did not conform to public taste. He was the only painter in Indonesia to ever write a short treatise on painting in Indonesia: "An Indies painting should have paddy-fields and coconut trees.' How we are reproached if we do not include them!! I for my part prefer to paint one giant tree instead of all those coconut trees and paddy-fields. For sure, I have painted a tremendous amount of paddy-fields and coconut trees because a painter has to earn money in order to support one's family."⁶



Above: Willem Imandt, *Lake*, oil on canvas, 30x28cm, c.1918.

Left: Willem Imandt, *Paddy fields in the Preanger, Java*, oil on canvas, 50x70cm, c.1920.

Below: Willem Imandt, *Mountains, Java*, oil on canvas, 40x50cm, c.1920.

Imandt signs up for the East

Imandt was born the eldest son of a primary school headmaster in the catholic village St. Jansteen, which was notorious for its malaria-infested wetlands and woods. His father played an important role in the budding cultural and sportive life of the village. He was founder of the theatre and brass band, and the ice skating and bicycle societies. At an early age Willem was already showing artistic talents, but it was after his uncle returned from The Indies (where he had been employed as a carpenter), full of stories about 'the Netherlands beyond the horizon', that Willem must have started to dream about volcanoes, mountains and banyan trees, which he would later depict in his paintings.

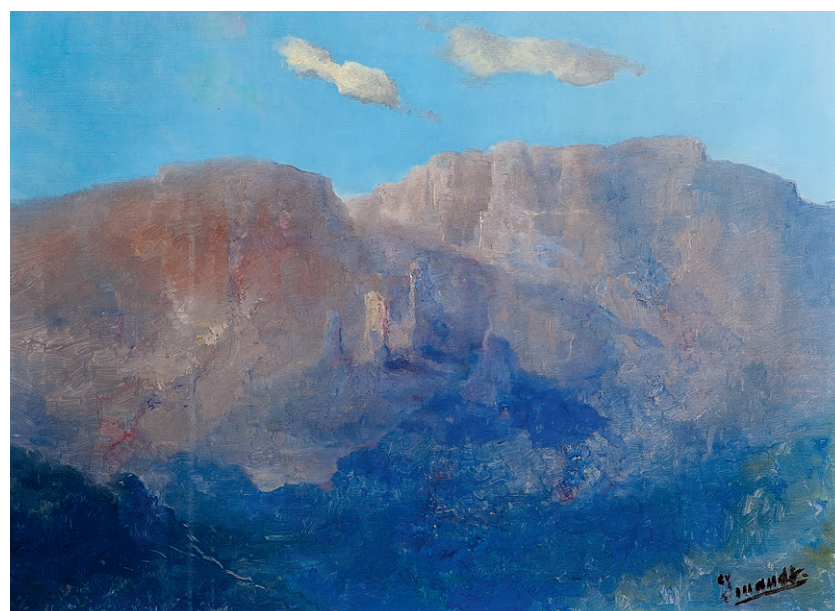
In 1901 he moved to Amsterdam where he fulfilled his military service, and followed lessons at the Municipal College of Education. He moved in artistic circles, influenced by the so-called Amsterdam School of painting, with famous representatives such as Willem Breitner. In 1904 he returned home and taught at various primary schools, whilst in his spare time managing to obtain his drawing diploma at

the State College of Education in The Hague. At this time he painted his first oil paintings of lakes and woods, which were influenced by the so-called The Hague school – an influence that is evident in his first Indies paintings. After falling in love with singer Eliza Robijns he returned to Amsterdam. In 1908 he applied for a job as primary school teacher for the colonial services, and after getting married, he and Eliza soon departed to the Indies on an ocean liner. The colony provided a favourable economic climate, which offered artists increasing possibilities, further facilitated by an expanding network of art circles.⁷

De Reflector as Beautiful Indies platform

Imandt started painting his first Indies work during his first appointment in the colony (at a public primary school in Sulawesi). Their eldest of five children was born in Makassar in 1910; in the same year he was appointed to the Dutch-Chinese school in Yogyakarta on Java. He left the colonial service in 1916 and from then until he was pensioned in 1929 (aged 47), he was headmaster and drawing teacher at several catholic schools on Java.

In 1916 his paintings depicting lakes, mountains, volcanoes, gorges and ancient structures such as the Borobudur, were on view at the Yogyakarta Art Circle. His working method involved making sketches *in situ*, which he later developed



into paintings in his atelier. At that time his paintings lacked both mastery of composition and colouring; the first review (1917) I was able to trace was by no means laudatory: "The painter Imandt, notorious because of his evening airs and mountains, can be ignored."⁸ In 1919 an article was published in the popular magazine *De Reflector*, in its series *Mooi Indië*.⁹ From it we cannot only conclude that his work had ripened, but also that he had become a talked-about painter. He was labelled a hard and talented worker who had thoroughly studied the Indies landscape. Imandt himself later confirmed that it indeed required intensive study before one could portray an Indies landscape: "If you want to paint The Indies, you have to live there for a long time."¹⁰

With its series *Mooi Indië* the editors of *De Reflector* wanted to increase interest for art produced in The Indies itself. The series can be viewed both as a platform and name-giver of the Beautiful Indies painters such as Dake, Dezentjé, Eland, and Imandt, whose works were frequently published in the volumes appearing between 1916 and 1920. Their work showed many resemblances; and though they did not form a school, they were linked through the readers of *De Reflector*. Unfortunately, the positive appreciation of the Beautiful Indies did not last for very long, as mentioned earlier. In the literature these artists are always haphazardly grouped and negatively valued. Seemingly, any painter who did not fit the 'criteria' of the canon were muddled together onto the Beautiful Indies heap. Yet, his early work that already saw him labelled, turned out to be just the start of Imandt's rich development.



*'If you want to paint
The Indies, you must live
there for a long time'*

Willem Imandt



Imandt the Great Painter here!

A week after the above quoted article appeared in *De Reflector* the art critic who had written the first traceable review of Imandt completely readjusted his opinion about the artist: "Imandt, whose work I reviewed earlier, has tremendously improved. Before his paintings were devoid of strength and pluck, which is now completely the opposite."¹¹ From this we can conclude that in a very short period he had become an esteemed artist. The height of recognition for an Indies painter was to be invited to the yearly August exhibition of the Art Circle of Batavia, which was founded in 1902. Imandt made his debut at the 1920 exhibition, at which 20 artists exhibited. In addition, his paintings were sold for impressive amounts – a small painting went for 150 guilders and the bigger formats for as much as 450 guilders (a labourer's year income at that time).

In 1922 Imandt met and frequently socialised with famous Dutch impressionist Isaac Israëls, who visited The Indies on and off. In a letter to the painter Willem Witsen, written by Israëls, it was clear that the interactions could occasionally be too much: "Otherwise nobody is here. Sometimes you long to see someone else than 'Imandt the Great Painter here!'"¹² Besides the playful pun (Imandt sounds like the word 'somebody' in Dutch), Israëls' remark also lays bare a certain occupational jealousy; in contrast to Imandt he was a nobody in The Indies.

Top: Willem Imandt, *Borobudur at dusk*, oil on canvas, 60x80cm, c.1925.

Above: Willem Imandt, *Waringin in Solo, Java*, oil on canvas, 85x105cm, 1923.

Imandt was at the height of his fame. The brother-in-law of Queen Wilhelmina, the Duke of Mecklenburg and the Captain of the Chinese in Surabaya, Han, paid a visit to his atelier in 1923 and all commissioned paintings. "We had the opportunity to view and appreciate his highly artistic and colourful work depicting the beautiful nature of the Preanger and elsewhere."¹³ In the respected art gallery H. Bos in The Hague, Imandt found an outlet for his work in Europe. Upon his return to patria in 1929, Bos organised a solo exhibition of his work; the show lasted four months and was sold out.¹⁴ By the time Imandt settled with his family in Sint-Gillis-Waas – near his birthplace – he was considered a nabob and one of the most famous painters of The Indies.

Final years

He could now fully concentrate on his painterly work. The Indies remained his most preferred topic, but following his later travels around the Mediterranean his work took on an Orientalist aspect. When not travelling he led a secluded life, working on his oeuvre in his glass-domed atelier. Here he reached full maturity and the works he painted during this period are considered his best. He sold his paintings mostly to relatives, but after being 'discovered' by a local journalist, he started selling outside his closest circle of acquaintances. His paintings at this time depicted mostly seascapes of the Mediterranean Sea or the North Sea. These works are overpowering because of their sheer size, but also because of the solitude emanating from them, reminiscent of Casper David Friedrich.

With the impending threat of a new world war, and with his sons already working in The Indies, Imandt decided to return in 1938. He continued to paint and his works still sold, but not at the rate he was used to. The new found idyll was rudely disturbed by the Japanese invasion in 1942. He was interned in a Japanese camp, where he could not work, while his archive of sketches and notes was destroyed. He returned to the Netherlands in 1946, a penniless man. He kept on painting, but interest in Indies paintings had almost completely dried up.

In 1954, aged 72, Imandt was honoured with an exhibition, in the rooms of Hoogovens (a blast-furnace company, presently Tata Steel) in the city of IJmuiden. The main part of the exhibition was devoted to his Indies paintings, and as a painter of volcanoes he could not have wished for a better décor. The reviewer wrote: "It is difficult not to wax poetic when seeing this part of the world, as Imandt depicted it. The typical atmosphere of the tropics and the bright light that brings out a special depth in all colours: the deep blue of the tropical skies, the lively green of the sea. Imandt painted it with great mastery. The East comes alive when we see it through the painterly eyes of Imandt."¹⁵

Revaluation

Imandt died in 1967, when appreciation for paintings originating in the former colony was at its lowest. But the revaluation of those paintings has again shown a spectacular rise in the past twenty years. That unfortunately does not necessarily apply to the Beautiful Indies painters, or those relegated to the miscellaneous heap of leftovers, constructed by art historians. Surprisingly though, van Brakel in his article on Beautiful Indies painting (in the catalogue of the exhibition 'Beyond the Dutch' in the Central Museum in Utrecht) writes: "The Indies art of painting has been neglected for a long time and when something was written about it, it was primarily in a negative way. The Indies art of painting deserves, as part of the colonial history and as shared cultural heritage of the Netherlands and Indonesia, a place in the art of painting in both countries."¹⁶

But perhaps Indies painting deserves even more than that. As Imandt pointed out: "The Indies palette derives its own cachet from shades and shifts in colour, which simply do not exist in the West."¹⁷ In a future monograph I hope to show how Imandt developed from a Beautiful Indies painter into one with a recognisable signature, not only unsurpassed in the rendering of the magic nature and landscape of Indonesia, but also as a seascape painter in the best Dutch tradition.

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Notes

- 1 This text is based on my 2012 article 'Imandt en Mooi Indië voorbij', *Aziatische Kunst* 42(1):2-14. I thank the editors of *Aziatische Kunst* for their permission to publish this translated and adapted article.
- 2 The term 'The Indies' in this article refers to 'The Dutch East Indies'
- 3 Van Brakel, K. 2004. *Charles Sayers 1901-1943. Pioneer painter in the Dutch East Indies*, Amsterdam: KIT Publications
- 4 See the article about Leonard Eland, written by Louis Zweers, on pages 8-9 of this issue of *The Newsletter*
- 5 [translation by author] Tielrooy, J. 1930. 'Indië in de schilder- en teekenkunst', *Elseviers Geïllustreerd Maandblad* 80, pp.1-10.
- 6 [translation by author] Imandt, W. 1926. 'Schilderen in Indië', *Maandblad voor Beeldende Kunsten* 3:338-9.
- 7 Van der Velde, P. 2010. 'Een Steense meester in wording (deel 1). De jeugdijaren, 1882-1901', *Bulletin van de Oudheidkundige Kring "De Vier Ambachten"* 29(1):1-4-17; Van der Velde, P. 2009. 'Een Steense meester in wording (deel 2). Imandt tekent voor de Oost, 1901-1908', *Bulletin van de Oudheidkundige Kring "De Vier Ambachten"* 28(3):7-10.
- 8 *De Taak*, 8 December 1917.
- 9 *De Reflector* 4 (1919) 38:754
- 10 Imandt, *ibid.*
- 11 *Weekblad voor Indië* 16 (1919).
- 12 Koninklijke Bibliotheek. Correspondence W. Witsen, 75C51.
- 13 *Javabode*, 12 April 1923
- 14 *Het Vaderland*, 1 June 1929
- 15 Anonymus. Accompanying text at exhibition.
- 16 van Brakel, K. 2009. 'Mooi Indië -kunst: een koloniaal medium?' in Meta Knol, Remco Raben and Kitty Zijlmans (eds.) *Beyond the Dutch. Indonesie, Nederland en de beeldende kunsten van 1900 tot nu*. Amsterdam and Utrecht: KIT Publishers and Centraal Museum, pp. 50-59.
- 17 Imandt, *ibid.*