

Leonardus Joseph (Leo) Eland, painter of 'Mooi Indie'¹

The Dutch East Indies painter Leo Eland (1884-1952) was a successful artist in the first half of the twentieth century, initially in the former Dutch East Indies and later in the Netherlands. He is featured in seminal works such as *Indië omlijst* (Indies framed) and *Beyond the Dutch*, but relatively little is known about him.²

Louis Zweers

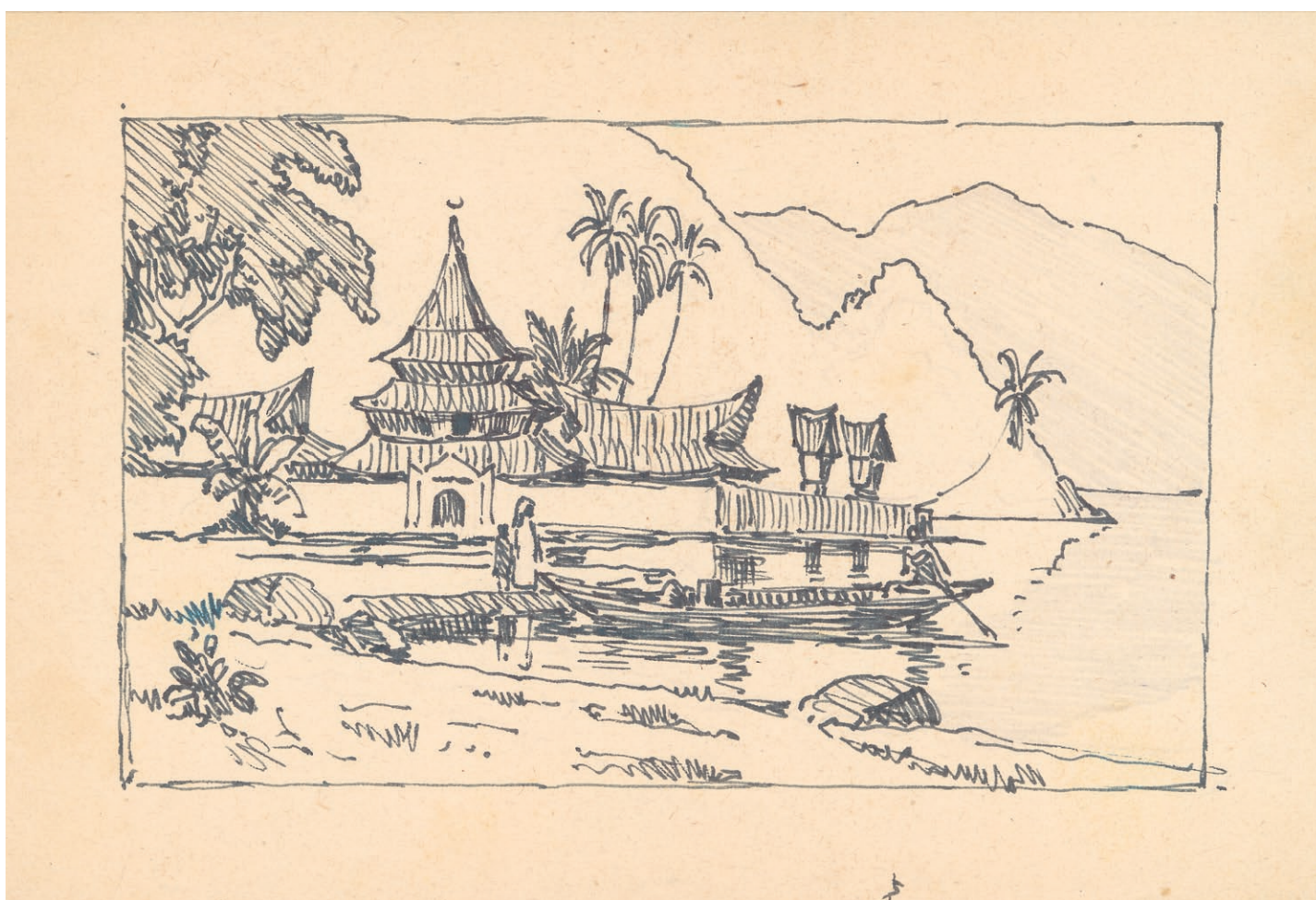
LEO ELAND WAS BORN in Salatiga on Central Java, the son of a Royal Netherlands East Indies Army (KNIL) officer. His father was a Quartermaster and the family mostly lived in remote outposts. As a young man Leo worked for the Topographic Service in Weltevreden, a suburb of Batavia. He became inspired by his friend, the well-known Indonesian painter Carel Dake junior (1886-1946), son of a professor at the Rijksacademie in Amsterdam (Royal Academy of Visual Arts). Despite there being no formal art education in the Dutch East Indies, Eland soon developed a talent for drawing and painting. He visited many places in the archipelago to sketch the Indonesian landscape and nature, to draw with pen and ink, sometimes using watercolours. Later, back in his atelier, he would produce oil paintings by expanding on these often detailed ink drawings. Indeed, his preliminary sketches show many similarities with the final artworks. Eland held his first solo exhibition at the *Bataviasche Kunstkring* (Batavian Art Group) and he participated in touring exhibitions, sponsored by art associations of other large cities on Java and Sumatra, aimed at the upper echelons of colonial society.³

He left for the Netherlands at the beginning of the 1920s. There he bought a simple houseboat with an atelier, *de Scarabee* (the Scarab), and he travelled along the Amstel, the Vliet and the Rhine, mooring at exceptional locations to paint the river landscape. The flamboyant artist with his striking face and long hair was quite a sight to behold. In the spring of 1927 he made a tour of North Africa, in particular Morocco. He was struck by the unique light, the warm pastel colours and the Islamic architecture and culture.

Eland's sketchbooks reveal his preference for landscapes and eye-catching figures in pencil, sometimes coloured in with pastels or watercolours. A great deal of study material remains from this trip.⁴ His later oil paintings are dominated by dilapidated city walls, gatehouses, kasbahs and mosques with minarets. The street scene depicts traditionally veiled women and men dressed in *djellabas* on donkeys. Other works show nomads in a vast desert landscape. Eland felt strongly attracted to this fairytale, Eastern world. In this respect, he had much in common with Dutch Orientalists and painters such as Philippe Zilcken (1857-1930) and Marius Bauer (1867-1932).

At the end of the 1920s, he temporarily went back to the Dutch East Indies. There he painted the forested slopes of volcanoes, the deep blue mountain lakes and the misty mountain landscapes of Java and Sumatra. His oil paintings and dioramas, three-dimensional and detailed views of tea and rubber plantations, the pepper cultivation on Sumatra and the paddy fields on Java, were exhibited at the large Colonial Exposition in the Bois de Vincennes in Paris (1931). Here, the Dutch East Indies was held up as a model colony. At the official opening, Queen Wilhelmina witnessed a great admiration for Eland's impressive dioramas and paintings. Unfortunately, the Dutch pavilion burned down on 28 June 1931 and the exhibited works of the Indonesian painter Leo Eland, as well as those of Hendrik Paulides (1892-1967) and Charles Sayers (1901-1943) were lost.⁵

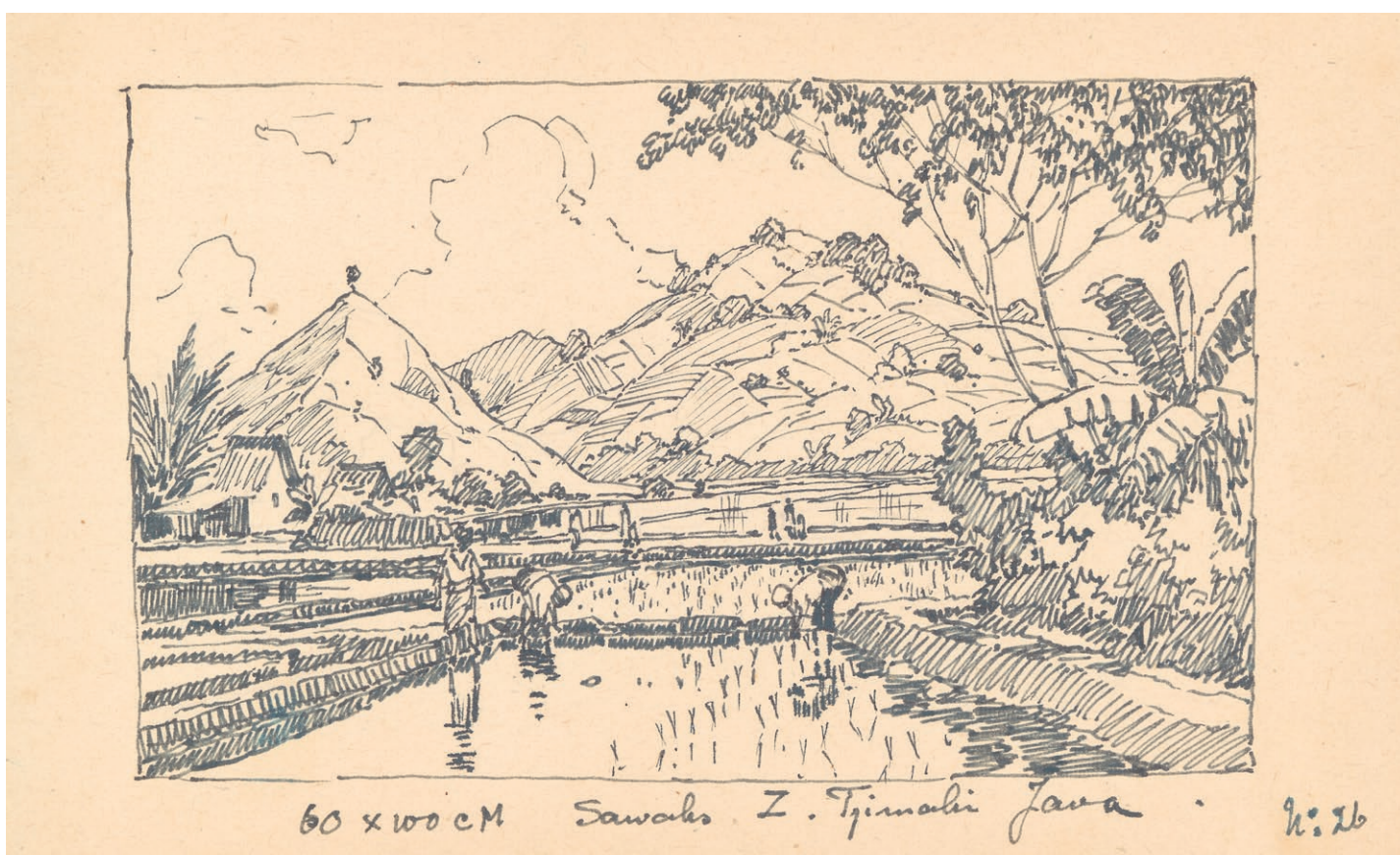
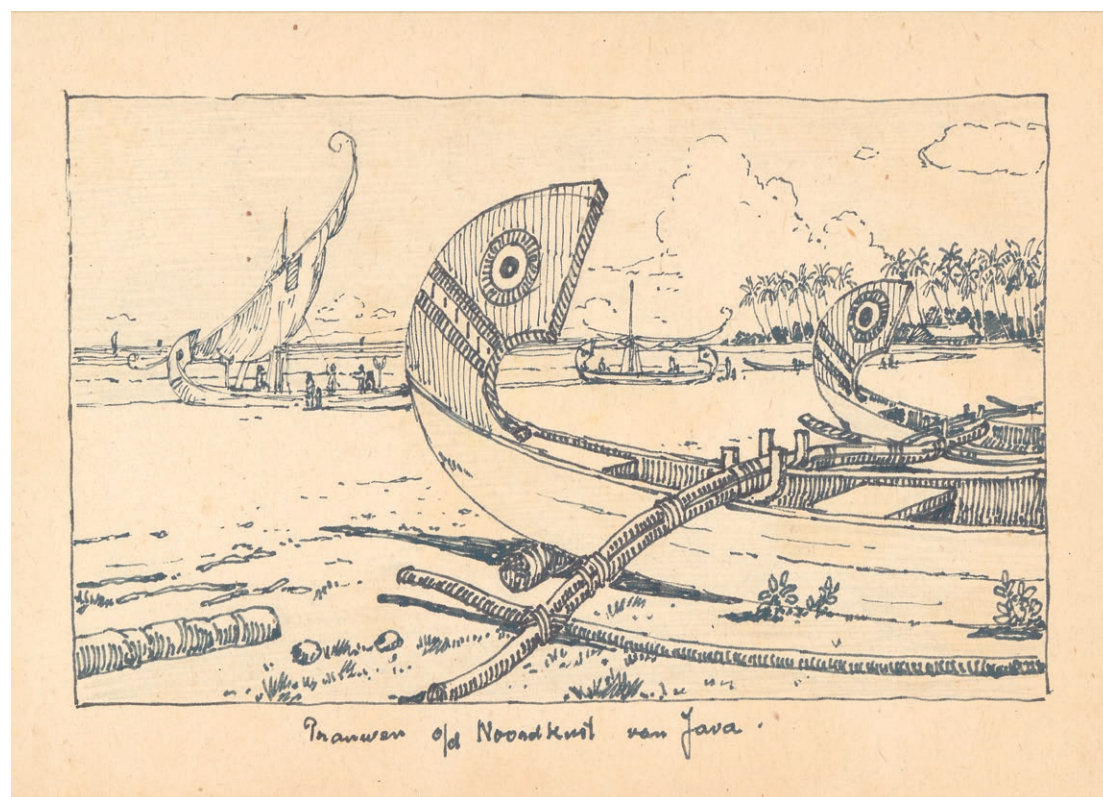
In a short time a new pavilion was built and other Indies artworks installed. A year later, Eland produced an enormous diorama (600m²) for the *Indische Koloniale Tentoonstelling* (Colonial Indies Exhibition) in the Westbroekpark in The Hague. It depicted the famous Harau Gorge at Pajakumbuh on West Sumatra with its waterfalls, *sawas* (fields) and *kampongs* (villages). This exhibition was opened in May 1932 by Princess Juliana and attracted almost half a million visitors.⁶ In the 1930s his star rose quickly. Indeed, Eland caused quite a stir at the international exhibitions in Brussels, Antwerp, Paris, Milan, Leipzig, and Dresden, as well as at the World Exposition in New York and the *Golden Gate* exhibition in San Francisco (1939).



Top row (painting & sketch):
Leo Eland, Minangkabau village
by lake Toba, West Sumatra, 1920.
Oil painting on canvas, 60 x 90
cm, Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam.
Ibid., undated. Ink drawing,
16 x 10 cm, author's collection.

Middle row (painting & sketch):
Leo Eland, Beach with fishing
boats, North coast of Java, 1920.
Oil painting on canvas, 50 x 100
cm, Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam.
Ibid., undated. Ink drawing,
16.5 x 10.5 cm, author's collection.

Bottom row (painting & sketch):
Leo Eland, Planting rice in the
sawas, Tjimahi (Cimahi),
West-Java, 1920. Oil painting
on canvas, 60 x 100 cm,
Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam.
Ibid., undated. Ink drawing,
16 x 10 cm, author's collection.





From the 1930s, Eland was permanently based in The Hague. He owned a gallery with a studio at number 11 Heulstraat where he continued to paint romantic Indies landscapes. Many former Indies expats, civil servants, farmers and people on leave from the colony used to go and eat a *rijsttafel* at the nearby Indonesian Boeatan restaurant, later the famous Garoeda. Afterwards, many would visit Leo Eland's gallery to see, or sometimes to buy, his idyllic *Mooi Indie* (Beautiful Indies) landscapes in oil and watercolours. His artworks were also painted to order.

The bohemian Eland had a rakish charm and was popular with his clientele in the Hague art world. His canvases show not the daily lives of the colonial administrators or the KNIL military, but especial panoramic mountain landscapes with rising volcanoes streaked with sunlight, rushing waterfalls, gurgling mountain streams and indigo-blue crater lakes with steep cliffs. The natives are often miniscule figures in the dominant landscape. His works are usually recognisable topographic renderings of, for example, the Karo Plateau and Toba Lake in North Sumatra; the *Karbouwengat* (Ngarai Sianok Canyon) in the Padang Highlands of Sumatra's West coast; the Preanger region and the Tangkuban Prahua volcano at Bandung on West Java; and the Batur Lake and the Gunung Agung on Bali. In addition, there are many atmospheric sunrises and sunsets and silvery moonlit lakes and sea views. Other subjects are limited mostly to *kampongs*, *pasars* (markets), tea plantations with pickers, vast paddy fields with toiling natives, market goers and trucks laden with *gerobaks* (buffalos) on the narrow mountain passes. In the background there are often misty blue mountains.

His work reveals his particular admiration for the Indies landscape and its inhabitants. In his gallery, always busy with visitors, he hung a permanent exhibition of picturesque, almost paradise-like landscapes. His artwork was a response to the prevailing, sometimes rather conservative, tastes of his buyers and clients. He fits in the tradition of his peers and *Mooi Indie* artists, such as Hal Wichers (1893-1968), Ernest Dezentjé (1885-1972) and Carel Dake junior. They used comparable themes and styles.



His oil paintings, along with the sketchbooks, ink drawings, preliminary works and correspondence, give an intriguing image of the method of the artist. He spent the first half of his life in the tropics, and subsequently spent twenty years working on his *Mooi-Indië* paintings in his atelier in The Hague. His impressive oeuvre, now lodged in museum collections and with private collectors, has, in our global age, become a silent witness to a partially vanished world.⁷

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Notes

- 1 All of Eland's sketches and ink drawings shown here are part of the author's collection, unless otherwise specified.
- 2 Van Brakel, K., Scalliet, M.O., Van Duuren, D. & J. ten Kate. 1998. *Indië omlijst. Vier eeuwen schilderkunst in Nederlands-Indië*. Amsterdam: KIT/Tropenmuseum; Wijk en Aalburg: Pictures Publishers; pp.114,122-123,147-148,156-157. Knol, M., R. Raben & K. Zijlmans. 2009. *Beyond the Dutch. Indonesië, Nederland en de beeldende kunsten van 1900 tot nu*. Amsterdam: KIT Publishers; Utrecht: Centraal Museum; pp.51,59,76.
- 3 Eland had contact with the architect & painter Piet Moojen (1879-1955), a central figure in the Indies cultural life and director of the *Bataviasche Kunstkring*. In addition, he knew Henri van Velthuysen (1881-1954), artist and founder of the *Vereniging van Beeldende Kunstenaars* (Association of Visual Artists) in the Dutch East Indies.
- 4 The sketchbooks with their many pencil drawings, sometimes coloured in, and preliminary works that he made during his 1927 journey through North Africa, are in the author's collection.
- 5 *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 6 March 1931, 'De koloniale wereld-expositie'; *De Telegraaf*, 8 May 1931, 'Opening van Nederlands paviljoen te Vincennes'; *De Telegraaf*, 29 June 1931, 'Nederlands paviljoen te Parijs door brand vernield'.
- 6 *Het Vaderland*, 14 May 1932, 'De Indische tentoonstelling. Plechtige opening door Prinses Juliana'; *De Telegraaf*, 14 May 1932, 'Prinses Juliana opent Indische expositie'; *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 15 May 1932, 'De Indische tentoonstelling in de Nederlandse residentie'; *Het Koloniaal Weekblad*, 9 June 1932 (nr. 23), 'De Indische tentoonstelling in Den Haag'.
- 7 Eland's oil paintings (45) can be found in important museum collections, such as the Tropenmuseum (Amsterdam), former Museum Nusantara (Delft) and Museum (The Hague). *Paradise Framed* (1996), a guide to Indonesian paintings and watercolours sold by auction houses such as Christies, Sotheby's, and Glerum, includes 120 works by Leo Eland. The author is currently producing an inventory and research on this oeuvre of Leo Eland, painter of the Dutch East Indies landscape. Private owners of Eland's work are also being approached by the author.

