

Portrait of Life – Jean Demenni, (1866-1939) Moves and Works, a Collective Memory of the Past

Photography was first introduced into the colony of the Netherland East Indies (known as Indonesia after 1945) in the 1840's and by the 1850's photos were commonly used by the Dutch colonial government that ruled over the archipelago from 1800 until 1942. Photography quickly became popular with Europeans living in the colony and local aristocrats and images taken by commercial photographers were later printed as postcards, used for advertising and attracting tourists from Europe. Military and scientific research expeditions employed photographers to record activities and Jean Demenni, born in 1866 in Sumatra, of French heritage, was one of those photographers.

Portrait of Life, Jean Demenni (1866-1939), Moves and Works, a collective memory of the past is a rare collection of 70 black & white photographic images that went on display 26 May at the Rumah Topeng & Wayang Setiadharmas in Mas. This is only the second occasion that part of this collection, numbering in total 150, has been shown in the country.

The images, purposely selected to represent life and works during the colonial era not only serve as a reminder of past times, yet also function to revitalize things that the modern development of Indonesia is neglecting, such as the agriculture and public transport sectors, the country's irrigation system, along with the beauty and sovereignty of the natural environment.

Curated by historian Mona Lohanda, the exhibition is thoughtfully arranged into seven divisions of images under the themes, *The Sites* – scenery, landscapes, cities, villages, streets and gardens, *The Moves* - the mobility of people and water, *The Artisans* - the craftsmanship of the people, *The Schools* – the education systems, *The Aristocrats & Colonial Bureaucracy* - the colonial government along with its administration systems, and *The People & Faith* - ethnic groups and places of worship.

Demenni was trained as an engineer in the Netherlands and upon his return to Indonesia in 1888 he joined the army serving in the topography section. During this period he developed his skills as a photographer and in 1894 was officially appointed as photographer joining a scientific expedition into Borneo. Many of Demenni's images were published in cultural journals and books on tourism in the Netherlands.

Most of Demenni's works from 1900 until WWII were lost, perished or are untraceable, however the series of 150 images is the only one that remains and is now owned by the Kartini Collection in Jakarta. The series was used as an educational aid about the Netherlands Indies particularly during the Indonesian War of Independence after 1945.

This remarkable, as well as fascinating collection of images, printed on paper, size 50 x 60 cm and in near perfect condition boasts images of extraordinary quality and detail. While observing some of this collection the dimension of time becomes blurred, as the photos appear as fresh and clear as if taken only yesterday.

Most importantly, "Portrait of Life" allows the observer to venture back into a long gone era of life that has helped characterize Indonesia, yet unfortunately has become a forgotten part of the country's history and identity. This collection is especially important for Indonesians to educate them about the virtues of the past and will soon appear in a book dedicated to the work of Jean Demenni.

Portrait of Life continues through until 26 June at Rumah Topeng & Wayang Setiadharmas, Kubu Bingin Cultural Village, Tungkulak, Mas.

