

PICTURESQUE MODERNITIES

ARCHITECTURAL REGIONALISM AS A GLOBAL PROCESS (1890-1950)

International Conference
(Paris, 30 November – 2 December 2016)

German Center for Art History Paris
Cluster of Excellence "Asia and Europe in a Global Context", Heidelberg University
Centre André Chastel (University Paris-Sorbonne)
CRIHAM (University of Poitiers)
Association française des Historiens de l'Architecture (A.H.A.)

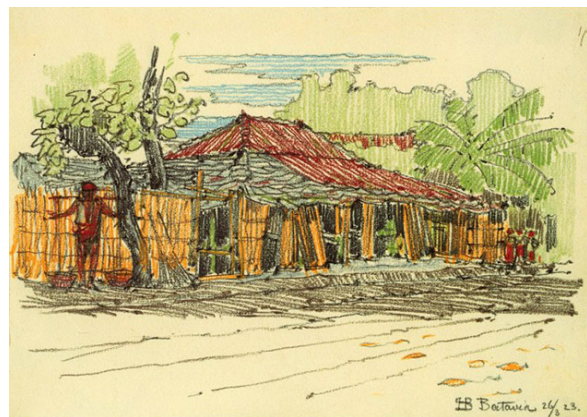
'The centre cannot hold.' Dutch architectural culture and the Dutch Indies around 1923

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Abstract

Point of departure of this contribution is the trip that the famous Dutch architect H.P. Berlage made to the Dutch Indies in 1923. In the colony he had already built two projects in the colony which he had never seen in person before but in his account he does not talk about these. His trip has a different importance. He is more interested in the local culture and especially the various temple complexes in the country. Special attention is therefore given to the way that he reads and absorbs this foreign culture through media like writing, drawing and photographs and how he engages with the divergent opinions of other western architects in the colony.

Due to his international fame he was well respected and met almost all main protagonists. He became familiar with their views and their work but chose not to take a position for either the one or the other. As always he tends to strive for a compromise. With his perceptive eye he notices that modernization is unavoidable but is also aware of the danger that 'westernization' embodies for the local cultures. The account of his trip, that he was able to publish in 1931 with the subtitle 'Thoughts on Culture and Art' is beyond any doubt an important for understanding the complexity of a different colonial culture. The trip had a special impact on the ideas of Berlage on the use of ornament, an issue that was highly debated in his homeland. He would clearly favour the expressionism of the Amsterdam School, instead of the functionalism of the more radical modernists. For this reason he was criticised by the members of the heroic avant-garde. Not that Berlage started working in the manner of the Amsterdam School but he did dedicate more attention to the texture of the facades and the changing relationship between the structure and the cladding.



Above: H.P. Berlage, Drawing of a house in Batavia (1923);
Below: H.P. Berlage, De Nederlanden van 1845 (The Hague, 1924/1927)