

## Far Away and Close at Hand Photography in the National Museum of Ethnology

by  
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‘Distance’, at various levels and in different senses, is the word around which photography in the ethnographical context revolves in this essay: the mental and physical distance between photographer and subject and the distance between the viewer and the subject of the photograph, which varies per person and in time. From scientific anthropometrical photography to multimedia installations by cosmopolitan artists with new perspectives. The ethnology museum, as a collector, researcher and intermediary of the view of the Other, lies at the centre of this.

On 11 December 1899, the German gynaecologist Prof. Dr. Carl Stratz gave a lecture with slides entitled ‘On Women’s Clothes’ in the Diligentia hall in The Hague. In his introduction he thanked his friend and compatriot J. Schmeltz, the director of the National Ethnographical Museum, the forerunner of the present National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden, who had permitted him to view and use ‘a large number of the rich – unfortunately so deeply hidden – treasures’ of the museum. The essence of his argument was that women’s clothing developed in all cultures according to a gradual process subject to the laws of nature. He thus came to the surprising conclusion that women’s clothing emerged from the need to decorate their body rather than from the sense of shame as written in the biblical book of Genesis. Photographs of scantily-dressed or naked women from all over the world underpinned his story.

His lecture was published in a series about the human body, in which photographs played a major role, many of which Stratz was able to find in the steadily growing collection of the Leiden museum. Not only did he become a bestselling author of books of popular science published in large editions and in various languages, but he also won appreciation in scientific circles. J. Ranke, in the authoritative *Archiv für Anthropologie*, praised the ‘Stratz books’ because of the good old familiar photographs, the many new ones and the quality of the printing. ‘Here nature itself appears before us!’, he rejoiced, which suggests how photography was experienced at that time – as a reliable, objective substitute for reality.

Stratz’s prose is a breezy mixture of nineteenth century racial biology, theories of cultural evolution, a loathing of feminist radicalism, an unashamed admiration of the female body, and all this seen from the male view of the woman as a physically weak yet potentially lovely being, by definition mentally subservient to the man. As a gynaecologist he was interested in the characteristics and development of the female body. Anthropological photographs supplied him with the visual material to support his theories. In *Rassenschönheit des Weibes* (1901) he once again used photographs to point out the position occupied by women from all corners of the world in the hierarchy of beauty on the basis of their bodily forms, measurements and proportions. He personally took the measurements of twenty Dutch women and found that women in Zeeland and Friesland had managed to retain their original racial characteristics despite the many foreigners who had inundated the Netherlands over the course of the centuries. This was a topical theme at a time when scientists were worried about an advancing degeneration of the North European race through cross-breeding. Up until the 1940’s, long after Stratz’s death in 1924, there were 22 editions of the bestseller. The number of photographs doubled, many of them coming from the Leiden collection.<sup>1</sup>

This example illustrates how photographs from the collection of the National Museum of

Ethnology came to be seen by hundreds of thousands of Europeans via such books, at a time when pornography was forbidden and Christian morality declared photographs showing white people with exposed parts of the body taboo. The books gave a popular-scientific basis to existing ideas about the superiority of the white man's civilisation, legitimising colonial politics and feeding the growing fear of their own race being 'contaminated'. Photography was deployed here as a relatively new, technologically highly-developed instrument that faithfully reproduces observations and as a scientific resource far superior to the subjectivity of earlier artistic interpretations by painters and draughtsmen.<sup>2</sup> (6.1)

### **Photography and anthropology**

Around 1850 ethnology or anthropology was a repository of disciplines. Doctors, zoologists, archaeologists, geologists, linguists and ethnologists studied peoples from the present and the past from different angles. The rise of ethnology is inextricably connected with the nineteenth century colonial expansion of European countries that wanted to extend or consolidate their administrative authority in overseas territories. The first museums of ethnology were founded in order to manage the shiploads of objects arriving in the Netherlands from the colonies and to make them available for research into the human species and its civilisation. That research would play an important role around the turn of the century in the photographic representation of other cultures. Darwin's biological evolutionism (*On the Origin of Species*, 1858) was transformed by nineteenth century anthropologists into a hierarchical system in which every people, culture or sub-culture had to be given a place.

Anthropology branched out into several directions. Ethnologists studied the material culture and customs of living, primitive peoples, while physical anthropologists concerned themselves with their physical characteristics. Races were classified according to measurements in an attempt at fathoming human evolution and civilisation. The assumption was that physical characteristics were related to mental and cultural ones. At the top of the ladder of civilisations stood their own, the norm for all others, the Indo-German (also called Aryan or Caucasian) being the highest developed race. Through studying the primitive races at the bottom of the ladder, such as the Hottentots (Khoi), Bushmen (San), Aborigines, Papuas and Tierra del Fuego Indians, it was thought possible to find out how one's own distant ancestors had lived. Like time capsules from the Stone Age, they inhabited – as long as the situation would last – the remotest corners of various continents, scantily or not at all clothed, living in primitive huts, lacking in what the West saw as high-quality technology, without writing and ignorant of the Bible, God and Christ. It was therefore nothing less than a duty to help these peoples develop, if necessary by force.

This early anthropology was mainly conducted from the study. Travelling to other continents was expensive, dangerous and time-consuming, the tropical conditions unhealthy and too uncomfortable for these scholars. They themselves felt no need at all to travel the world. After all, the objects and photographs were in the museums and this also made it easier to make comparisons between cultures.

How much value scholars attached to photography as a source of information is evident from the collection that the National Ethnographical Museum began to assemble in the 1860s. The first photographs were registered in 1867: a series of ten photographs made in July 1865 just after an earthquake on Java. They were donated by the Ministry of Colonies, as were a series of 45 'photograms' made by the Danish photographer Kristin Feilberg, who in 1870 had accompanied J. de Haan, the inspector for the 'Internal Administration', on an expedition to the Batak lands on East Sumatra. (6.2) The first purchases were made in 1881, when the museum acquired 255 photographs from the Oceania collection of the firm of Godeffroy in Hamburg. The photographs were made by photographer-researchers travelling around the Pacific Ocean in the

firm's pay and included such well-known names as Richard Parkinson, Amalie Dietrich and Johann Stanislaus Kubary. The above-mentioned director of the museum, J. Schmeltz, was still a curator at the time and had put together the catalogue of photographs, which could be ordered in any desired format.

Other important platforms were the world fairs held in Europe from 1851. These were mega events on which millions of visitors descended in order to be impressed by the latest inventions, newest products and advances in the fields of science and culture. Life and activities in the colonies were also presented. On the grounds of the International Colonial and Export Trade Exhibition in Amsterdam in 1883 stood a tent in which groups of Creoles, Hindus, Marrons and Indians from Dutch Guiana could be inspected. A little further away was a group of Indonesians who, in a copy of a native village, performed Dutch songs specially set to the music of a gamelan orchestra. Anthropologists, such as the Frenchman Prince Roland Bonaparte, took full advantage of this possibility of photographing natives at such close quarters and offered their photographs to the museums. Apart from living people, there were also photo series of distant peoples on show.<sup>3</sup> The photographs were displayed next to objects and products and offered for sale. The museum purchased hundreds of photographs at the world fairs in Paris (1878, 1889), Amsterdam (1883) and London (1886). After the International Exhibition in Antwerp in 1894, the 'Independent State of the Congo' donated a series of photographs to the museum. In the race to possess colonies the Belgian king Leopold II had seized the Congo Basin in Africa and declared it his private domain. It was a region rich in valuable raw materials and the native workers were set to work with a hard hand. Around 1890 there were photographs circulating of Congolese rubber workers displaying their own severed limbs for the camera. The photographs were made by amateurs who – probably with the new, handy Kodak camera – wanted to tell the whole world about the planters' atrocities. These were not among the photographs acquired by the National Ethnographical Museum. The donation consisted of 33 photographs depicting the tranquil life of the region's inhabitants, their splendid hairstyles and scanty clothing, as well as the construction of a bridge and a school. The series may be regarded as a photographic offensive against the shocking images coming from the rubber plantations. One of them became one of Stratz's favourites, which he included in his lecture and publications about women's clothing and which also figured in *Rassenschönheit des Weibes* right through to the last edition. (6.3)

By no means all peoples subjected themselves to the new authorities just like that. Some were known to be dangerous because they had already murdered several missionaries – usually the first white people in remote regions. There was a need for information about the nature and customs of these peoples, and anthropologists were able to supply this. Military and scientific expeditions were organised on behalf of the state to remote corners of Dutch colonial possessions in the East Indies (Indonesia), New Guinea (West Papua) and the interior of Surinam that had not yet been charted and brought under Dutch rule. During these expeditions, specialists collected soil samples, plants and animals, and old and new implements. Linguists studied the languages and physical anthropologists carried out their skull and other measurements. They collected samples of hair, skulls and other human remains for research and photographs were taken. The material was shipped to the Netherlands and added to natural history, archaeological or ethnology collections.

The sharpshooter and photographer Jean Demmeni was hired by the Topographical Service in Bandoeng to accompany the medical researcher A.W. Nieuwenhuis between 1893 and 1899 on an Indonesian Government sponsored journey to Central Borneo (Kalimantan), a region rumoured to be inhabited by the dangerous Kajans and Dajaks. Nieuwenhuis was supposed to study the people, their language and their culture, while Demmeni would take photographs on his

instructions. Nieuwenhuis had little affinity with physical anthropology, but nevertheless he carried out a lot of measurements which he recorded in long lists according to the method of Serrurier, until 1895 director of the National Ethnographical Museum in Leiden. Demmeni took the corresponding anthropometric photographs of Dajaks and Kajans posing beside a measuring rod in front of a stretched sheet. They stayed in the region for two periods of a year, slowly but surely gaining the trust of the inhabitants, and this can be seen in the photographs. The distance between photographer and subject seems smaller here, both literally and figuratively, than in most anthropological photography during that period. Despite the limited photographic possibilities at the time, the photographs that Nieuwenhuis donated to the museum provide a lively picture of the population and its culture. Even in the anthropometric photographs we see amiably smiling Kajans and Dajaks apparently enjoying the ritual. (6.4) Nieuwenhuis put his measurements and photographs at the disposal of Stratz, who included five of them in his new book *Naturgeschichte des Menschen* as an example of a people whose isolated habitat and primitive culture 'offers the greatest potential for pure forms of anthropology'. Nieuwenhuis's *In Centraal Borneo. Reis van Pontiak naar Samarinde*, illustrated mainly with Demmeni's contextual photographs, appeared in 1900.

Objects and people photographed in isolation, the most typical genre being anthropometrical photography, were later superseded by a less distanced, more dynamic and contextual approach. This type of anthropological photography began to distinguish itself more and more from commercial photography. Professional photographers had studios in the major cities of Europe where they sold photographs of native inhabitants posing in supposedly 'authentic' attire and with 'authentic' attributes in front of an artificial decor suggesting an exotic environment. They took liberties and were not particularly fussy about the trustworthiness of the depiction and some had never even set foot outside Europe. In 1887, for example, the museum in Leiden purchased a series of four photographs originating from Johannes Baer's studio in Rotterdam, in which we see a mixture of anthropometrical photography (the two African men are naked and photographed full-length 'en face' and 'en profil') and commercial studio photography (a decor instead of bedsheets and measuring rod). The photographer has decked the men out in exotic-looking clothing and attributes that they had probably never set eyes upon before. (6.5a, 6.5b) On the other hand, studio photographers in foreign parts also ventured out of the studio to photograph the native population. This resulted in the so-called 'types and scenes' photographs, in which scenes of daily life and the landscape were depicted in a charming and idealised manner. The work of the Armenian-Russian photographer Onnes Kurkdjian, settled on Java since 1884, is an excellent example of this. His photographs were used for various purposes in many publications, were bought by lots of travellers and pasted into albums, thereby determining the image that generations of Dutch people had of life in the Dutch East Indies.

As far as the museum was concerned it made little difference how, by whom and with what intentions the photographs had been made. The hunger for photographic images was considerable and nobody thought too much about the photographer's subjective gaze and intentions.

### **From research source to documentation**

In 1910 the National Ethnographical Museum administered approximately 5,000 photographs of native peoples from all over the world, every one of them catalogued. But after the death of J. Schmeltz and his replacement as director by J.J. Juynboll a new age dawned. During the next decades an end came to the purchases and careful registration. Only major donations like the Tillema collection (1938) were still mentioned.

The status of photography in the context of the ethnographic museum plummeted, but the

extent of the collection grew exponentially. Both were a direct result of new developments within anthropology and photography. The average nineteenth century anthropologist based his research on photographs taken by others and on objects that other people had collected. He was able to deal with this material scientifically without having to leave his own territory. But in the meantime travelling to distant continents had become faster, more comfortable and cheaper. The issue of armchair anthropology came up for discussion. The German-American anthropologist Franz Boas dismissed thinking in terms of superiority and classifying peoples and races from a distance on the basis of measurements and assumed universal laws. In his eyes, every people and culture developed in its own way, partly determined by social and natural circumstances. The aim of the anthropologist should therefore be to view these specific characteristics with his own eyes. Modern anthropology, which would develop further in the course of the twentieth century, was concentrating more and more on different cultural symptoms, such as social and familial bonds, power structures, language and myths. These are abstract features that are not directly visible and are thus difficult to photograph. The function of photography within anthropological research changed radically. Anthropometric photographs had become useless and commercial photographs were rejected as unreliable and too artistic. Photography was no longer a resource for research but documentation for its own sake. But there was no decline in the number of photographs taken in foreign parts, On the contrary, with the advent of cameras that were even more easy to use, it became possible for everyone to take photographs in the tropics and no traveller, settler or researcher set off without a camera. They came home with thousands of photographs.

The museum's collection of photographs became unmanageable and inaccessible. There was no longer evidence of an active policy on collecting. New acquisitions consisted almost entirely of arbitrary donations, although many people preferred to donate to less venerable institutions such as the Colonial Institute in Amsterdam, the Museum for Geography and Ethnology in Rotterdam or the Royal Institute for Languages, Geography and Ethnology in Leiden, whose collection was better organised than the old National Ethnographical Museum which, in anticipation of better accommodation, was storing its collections under lousy conditions in the cellars of various buildings in Leiden. The biggest increase in photographs now came from researchers who were directly or indirectly connected with the museum and who made thousands of photographs with their 35-mm cameras during their research and collecting travels and 'fieldwork'. These photographs were intended for personal use, as documentation and reminders, and we encounter them again in their publications as no more than poor reproductions. The period of the ethnographic album with prominently printed photographs was over. The majority of the collection of post-1920 anthropological photographs was indeed directly related to the collection of objects, but it had little to do with the image that was formed of other cultures. That image had long been appropriated by photo-journalism, which was reaching a wide audience via illustrated magazines.

Two important exceptions should be mentioned here: the posthumous publication in 1950 of the three-volume (including a collection of prints) *De Bergpapoea's van Nieuw-Guinea en hun woongebied* by C. Le Roux, director from 1943 till 1947 of the National Museum of Ethnology. Containing many photographs, including large-format panoramas, and meticulously printed, this edition is an isolated milestone in anthropological photography between the two wars. The anthropologist and professor Adrian Gerbrands, curator of the National Museum of Ethnology since 1947, also regarded photography (and film) as an indispensable part of his studies into the woodcarvings of the Asmat people. The photographs he took in the 1960s were new because of the emphasis on the individuality and artistry of the woodcarvers. He made dozens of portraits showing different facial expressions, in addition to a film, of his woodcarver

friend Matjemosj. (6.6) Anthropologists before him had seldom come so close.

But these were incidental cases. Photographic collections in ethnological institutions led a moribund existence until the 1980s. The tide started to turn in America and England. Books and exhibitions based on these collections appeared, in which the photographs were viewed with different eyes. Photographs that had been collected in the past as a source for research into other cultures now became themselves the subject of research into the way in which Westerners had viewed these cultures in the past. The Museum for Geography and Ethnology, now the World Museum in Rotterdam, was the first in the Netherlands to publish a series of books with photographs from its own collection. The National Museum of Ethnology only came forward in 2002 with an exhibition and a book focussing on the photography collection itself.<sup>4</sup> The photographs were presented in their original context as series, displayed for all to see in showcases, without frames or passe-partout, like museum objects with a history of their own – warped, scratched and well-thumbed, with damp spots, traces of adhesive tape and glue and interesting comments by generations of researchers, next to examples of how the photographs were reproduced and disseminated in books and other publications. (6.7)

### **‘Images of Ethnology’**

With the new millennium a new period has dawned for photography in the National Museum of Ethnology. Apart from its traditional role in documenting other cultures as part of the collection of objects and its more recent role as a resource in studying the formation of the image of ‘the Other’, photography is acquiring yet another function. The museum, saddled with a collection of objects accumulated partly in a politically incorrect fashion, has to demonstrate that it is not an anachronism in these post-colonial times. The most remote regions can be reached with organised travel and more images of other cultures are available via the media and the Internet than the museum could ever keep pace with. Multiculturalism is first embraced and then criticised and globalisation is swallowing up all local cultures like a gradually advancing catastrophe. ‘The Other’ is no longer the old familiar ‘other’. He no longer lives at a safe distance from us, but around the corner and for many city dwellers his way of life seems, on closer acquaintance, to be more an anathema than a piece of information. The museum is having to orientate itself anew. Renovation plans and a new layout have to mesh with a new vision regrading the position of the ethnology museum in a society that has gone through so many changes.

In the Netherlands, when public buildings are renovated, one per cent of the building costs is supposed to be devoted to commissioned art. Determining the nature of the commissions, the selection of artists and the way their work is presented force new ideas to be developed regarding the identity of the museum and its relationship with anthropology and art. The *Images of Ethnology* project consists of semi-permanent multimedia installations within and outside the museum building.<sup>5</sup>

The installation *Rood Katoen/Red Calico* by the Dutch artist Roy Villevoe has been displayed in the museum’s Oceania gallery since 2001. (6.8) Red Calico consists of a row of black mannequins (the sort that lack a head or limbs), dressed in frayed and torn T-shirts. The mannequins are standing in front of a series of large-format colour prints of Asmat people wearing the same T-shirts. The parade of mannequins with photographs is confusing to say the least in this context of edifying Asmat art. Villevoe confronts the visitor with images of Papuans who, at first sight, do not conform to the accepted, positive image of ‘primitive’ peoples. Villevoe invited the anthropologist Gosewijn van Beek to respond to these objects and photographs with an article about Papuan clothing.<sup>6</sup> Doctor Stratz was able to manage with a comparable article in 1899, but, judging by his text, Van Beek felt uncomfortable in this position

of a typical nineteenth century armchair anthropologist. He had to base his story on photographs and objects, not having been there in person. Van Beek contends that the T-shirts have nothing to do with poverty or the sort of clothing that so many people loathe but is foisted upon them by the West. The Asmat people actually incorporated the T-shirts into their own culture by adapting them and wearing them as bodily adornments. This is what Villevoeye conveys, consciously or unconsciously, with his installation, without any explanation or justification. An observation that happens to correspond with Stratz's conclusions in 1899 about the origin of women's clothing. Villevoeye's installation turned out to be an eye-opener for those who are capable of temporarily distancing themselves from their ingrained way of seeing and interpreting. This is an encouraging development. Photography in an ethnological context, made by photographers and artists, opens up perspectives in a plural society in which sympathy for different cultures is perhaps a way of controlling explosive forces. (6.9)

#### NOTES

1 See C.H. Stratz, *De schoonheid der vrouw*, Amsterdam 1900 and C. H. Stratz, *De kleeding van de vrouw*, Amsterdam (Scheltema, Holkema's boekhandel) [1901]. These are just a few of Stratz' many books which were translated into several languages.

2 Cf. Theye 1989 and Edwards 1992. Much of the work of the photographers mentioned in these books can also be found in Dutch ethnographic collections.

3 Cf. Dujardin 2007.

4 Roodenburg 2002.

5 An extensive account of the 'Images of Ethnology' project can be found in Drosterij/Ooms/Vos 2004.

6 Roy Villevoeye's installation with Dutch/English commentary by Gosewijn van Beek was published under the title *Rood Katoen/Red Calico*, Leiden (Roy Villevoeye in collaboration with the Government Buildings Agency/National Museum of Ethnology, 2001).

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