



‘The Nuancing of the Eternal’: Herman Visser and the Arts from Asia, 1918-1928

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On 29 June 1918, Herman Visser (1890-1965) (fig. 1), together with a number of like-minded enthusiasts, founded the Vereeniging van Vrienden der Aziatische Kunst (vvak, Society of Friends of Asiatic Art, now Royal Asian Art Society in the Netherlands).¹ All were similarly impressed by sculpture, painting and works of applied art from Asia. Based on a sentiment not yet clearly articulated among themselves, all were convinced that certain objects originating from the various cultural regions across Asia were deserving of special status. These objects were to be distinguished from the widely known, mass-produced porcelain from China and Japan and other examples of applied art, as well as the troves of ethnographic objects represented in the Netherlands resulting from the country’s longstanding trade and colonial ties with Asia. In the view of the society’s members, they belonged in their own category, seen as works of art, equivalent to those held in the collections of European art museums. This was in line with the standpoint then propagated by the Rijkscommissie voor het Museumwezen (National Advisory Committee for the Museum Sector), an organization engaged in reviewing the state of the Dutch museum sector at this precise time.² In the United States (Boston, New York) and the most important capital cities of

< Fig. 1
Herman Visser,
portrait by Betsy
Westendorp-Osieck,
c. 1938.
Oil on canvas,
61.5 x 52 cm,
private collection.

Europe, notions about what was considered Asian art – and what was not – already existed. In the Netherlands, by contrast, Asian art was yet unexplored territory. In its desire to change this situation, the vvak sought to bring together kindred spirits, organize exhibitions and disseminate knowledge through lectures and publications.³ Moreover, from 1928 on the society began building its own collection – one that would eventually form the basis of the collection of Asian art in the Rijksmuseum.⁴

Various people have written about the early history of the vvak, with emphasis invariably placed on how the society opted for a distinct, one-sided aesthetic approach when it came to the question of what was to be considered art.⁵ As the critics rightly pointed out, it essentially came down to the experience of the beholder, with no regard for an object’s meaning with respect to the culture in which it was created. This critique is indeed understandable: why focus on the European viewer and not the Asian object and its context? To better comprehend the motivation behind the early members of the vvak’s decision to take this path, a closer examination of what precisely this aesthetic approach entailed and how it came about can be deemed worthwhile. In exploring the roots of this approach, one must consider the

background of Herman Visser and those with whom he collaborated at the VVAK. On the basis of early publications and notes made by Visser and other VVAK members, one can ascertain what ideas they had – prior to their engagement with Asian art – about art and its role in the world, and in what way they subsequently applied these ideas to what they viewed as Asian art.⁶ Visser's life, work and publications before 1918 have never been addressed. Going one step further in time, the present article follows Visser from his predilection for a highly personal experience of an artwork to a connoisseurship based on comparing works of art and the opinions of like-minded individuals regarding those works.

Remarkably, Visser was initially more concerned with forming a vision of art (albeit based on objects originating from Asia) than a vision of Asian cultures. Developed in the nineteen tens and twenties, his notions regarding art were aligned with and coloured by views prevalent in the Netherlands and Europe during those years. At this time, the Netherlands was engaged in expanding its power by use of force into the outermost reaches of the Dutch East Indies. The ambition to dominate the colony was accompanied by a desire to better understand its culture, which led to an interest in and admiration for the ancient Hindu-Javanese civilization – the Dutch East Indies government commissioned the conservation of monuments – as well



Fig. 2
Herman Karel
Westendorp,
photograph by the
J. Merkelbach studio,
c. 1930. Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum, inv. no.
NG-1972-30-140.



Fig. 4

Taco Roorda,
photograph in
*Maandblad voor
Beeldende Kunst* 15
(1938).



< Fig. 3

*Visser and
Westendorp in Japan*,
photograph by
Betsy Westendorp-
Osieck from a
photo album of
the acquisition
trip to Asia, 1930.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. AK-MAK-1775,
on loan from the
Royal Asian Art
Society in the
Netherlands, gift of
M.D. Osieck-Ybes,
2018.

as contemporary handicrafts made by the local population. One recognizes in this interest the way in which a non-European civilization was viewed from what was deemed to be a superior European perspective.⁷ During these years, those who focused on Asian culture and arts – in essence, outsiders – felt unimpeded in developing a vision of their own. For many, a work of art, regardless of its place of manufacture, was thought to offer a glimpse of a deeper, underlying reality or a reality transcending the object itself. This distinguished it from applied art or luxury goods, i.e. utilitarian objects, which even if sometimes lavishly crafted and decorated, offered no sight of an immutable eternity. Such general ideas regarding both art and Asia gave Visser considerable freedom. After all, it was accepted to make far-reaching statements about Asian cultures, just as it was widely accepted that art, the recognition and acknowledgement of a work of art, was a deeply personal matter. Art is ‘what is felt as art’ as Visser once remarked – as will be addressed below. A good benchmark for gauging the development of Visser’s

approach and working methodology is a celebratory speech delivered on the occasion of the vvak’s tenth anniversary by its chairman Herman Karel Westendorp (1868-1941) (figs. 2, 3). In one frequently cited passage, Westendorp expressed his views regarding the way in which Asian art was to be collected, appreciated and studied.

That, initially, it is exclusively the object’s *aesthetic* value that must determine the choice – about that there can be no difference of opinion – but this does not mean that, once the object is acquired for its beauty, the determination thereof does not give equal pleasure. ... When in the long run, during discussions of a cherished object, if one speaks in nothing but terms of ‘atmosphere’ and ‘mood’, then the enthusiasm deteriorates into phraseology. The situating of the object in the framework of its time, the knowledge of form, ornamentation, material; all this will contribute to retaining the interest on a lasting basis.⁸

This sounds like a programme: the choice of the object is made on aesthetic grounds, but the object subsequently obtains meaning by situating it in its context. Yet, as I perceive it, Westendorp’s words also betray a call to action, as if the final point – contextualization – warrants greater attention. In the vvak, two people were chiefly responsible for the substantive work: Herman Visser and Taco Roorda (1874-1938) (fig. 4), the latter being a fellow board member of the society and deputy curator for East Asia at the Ethnografisch Museum in Leiden (now the Wereldmuseum Leiden). Westendorp’s words, and the findings put forth in the present article, can accordingly be read as an evaluation of the work of these two men.

Visser and Contemporary European Art

By circa 1915, Herman Visser had already established a career as an international-oriented art connoisseur, critic and intellectual.⁹ Born in Amsterdam in 1890, Herman was only three when his father died. In 1902, his mother married Philip van Nierop (1854-1920), a close friend of Frederik van Eeden (1860-1932), a renowned Dutch writer, idealist and general do-gooder.¹⁰ Having left home at the age of sixteen to complete his secondary education in Zurich, Visser studied mechanical engineering in Munich, followed by an internship in England. From 1908 to 1912 and again from 1914 to 1915, he lived in Munich, the cultural capital of Germany, where a high-profile group of artists drew creative minds from across Europe (Marianne von Werefkin, Wassily Kandinsky, Alexei von Jawlensky, Franz Marc). Expressionism flourished in the city, where these artists endeavoured to develop and visualize a new perspective on life in every aspect. In a two-part series on Franz Marc in *De Nieuwe Amsterdammer*¹¹ and a later piece on Alfred Kubin, Visser wrote about the inspiring environment he encountered in Munich ('one had to experience the unique people, circles and ideals ... to grasp the atmosphere there').¹²

In addition to painting, Visser was interested in applied art from the Dutch East Indies, in the Netherlands then referred to as 'Indian art' (*Indische kunst*). By his own account, during his second sojourn in Munich he spent much of his time in the university library studying the arts of that region, mainly applied art and the architectural ornamentation of historical, monumental buildings.¹³ In his pursuit of knowledge he was assisted and advised by Lucian Scherman (1864-1946), professor of Sanskrit and Indian culture and history and director of the *Königlich Ethnographisches Museum*.¹⁴ In the intervening period between his two sojourns in



Munich, Visser worked in the draughting department of 't Modelhuis, an Amsterdam furniture manufacturer owned by Napoleon le Grand (1857-1952). Upon permanently returning from Munich to the Netherlands, Visser worked as a draughtsman for Joseph Limburg (1864-1945), a Hague architect. Accordingly, early on Visser began to develop in three areas that would later prove important in his working life: designing furniture and interior spaces (later important for designing and installing exhibitions); studying contemporary art; and familiarizing himself with one specific facet of Asian art, namely the applied art of the Dutch East Indies. As is conveyed by the large number of articles Visser managed to publish in respected

Fig. 5
FRANZ MARC,
Jumping Horses, 1912.
Woodcut, 13,2 x 9 cm.
Amsterdam,
Stedelijk Museum,
inv. no. A 8874.
Image Visser included
in his 1916 article on
Marc (see note 11).

journals between 1916 and 1918, Visser's true passion during those years nevertheless lay primarily in the area of art criticism. In 1916, he wrote the aforementioned article on Franz Marc, published in *De Nieuwe Amsterdammer* (figs. 5, 6). In 1917, he wrote extensively about Van Gogh in *De Beweging*. And in 1918, he penned multiple pieces on a variety of subjects: an anonymous sixteenth-century portrait in *Oude Kunst*; contemporary furniture in *Wendingen*; modern Dutch painters in *Das Kunstblatt*; Alfred Kubin in *De Nieuwe Amsterdammer*; and Floris Verster in *De Groene Week*.¹⁵

In the nineteen tens, art criticism in the Netherlands was vibrant and highly diverse; French and German modern art was exhibited and discussed.¹⁶

These discussions often centred on a straightforward analysis of what one saw on the canvas, whereby formal aspects such as line, colour and composition were the main emphasis. A classic example of this approach is that of the painter Willem Steenhoff (1863-1932), also deputy director of the Rijksmuseum and an advocate and reviewer of Van Gogh's and Cézanne's work.¹⁷ Visser was familiar with Steenhoff's work and frequently quoted him in his lengthy article on Van Gogh. Contrary to Steenhoff's more matter-of-fact approach, others – including Visser – were also interested in an artist's 'mental state of mind' and 'philosophy of life'.¹⁸ One example among those who favoured this latter approach – by no means the exception –



Fig. 6

FRANZ MARC,
Blue Horse I, 1910/11.
Oil on canvas,
112 x 84.5 cm.
Munich, Städtische
Galerie im
Lenbachhaus und
Kunstbau München,
Bernhard und Elly
Koehler Stiftung 1965,
inv. no. G 13 324.
Image Visser included
in his 1916 article on
Marc (see note 11).

was Henk Bremmer (1871-1956), an art critic but above all an educator and art dealer.¹⁹ Bremmer has been characterized as a mystic seeking the 'Higher' and the 'Absolute' behind art.²⁰ In his own discussions, Visser also focussed on an artist's ability to help viewers come to terms with the world in which they lived. In his article on Marc, he worded this as follows: 'to pursue resonance with the finest of our time'. Conveying his approval, he quoted Marc's statement in the magazine *Der Blaue Reiter* that it was his goal to 'create symbols that belong to the coming Religion, as a counter-balance to technological achievements'.²¹ Visser's interest and approach reflect the seminal theme at the turn of the century, circa 1900, when, as confidence in progress based on reason and technology waned, the European intellectual vanguard saw itself as lost, left with no choice but to find new ways to lead one's life meaningfully, in good conscience.²² Art as a beacon

in an existential struggle, the artist as an ethical guide – this is the ostensible vision of art and artistry that emerges in Visser's articles.

Visser's Study of Asian Art

Only in passing is 'Asia' mentioned in Visser's writings. In his articles on contemporary European painters, he sometimes drew comparisons with Asian artworks, to clarify what mood and emotion a painting might evoke. In one example, he compares a 'delicate, dreamy element' in a painting by Van Gogh to the radiance of a Buddha statue.²³ Such incidental comparisons were always an attempt to convey how painters succeeded in creating a certain mood or emotion. The manner in which Ferdinand Hodler approached a landscape painting appealing to Visser, as he saw it, could also be found in East Asian painting.²⁴ He furthermore observed a fundamental agreement between Marc's many painted animal figures and Japanese sculpture, includ-

Fig. 7

Spread from Visser's 1918 article on modern Dutch painting (see note 15), combining a contemporary drawing by Matthieu Wiegman and a sculpted Javanese head from the tenth century.



MATTHIEU WIEGMAN: TOTER MANN. ZEICHNUNG.

(Fig. 7, brendelmeier 1)

zu lokale Bedeutung hinauskommen wird, hat mir neben der Arbeit Castels das, was die Wiegmann schon geleistet haben, vor Augen gestanden. Beide Maler sind universell in dem Sinne, daß sie sowohl in den Studien nach der Figur, im Stillleben sowie in der Landschaft recht glücklich gewesen sind; nicht zum mindesten auch in der singulären Verbindung des Tieres mit der Landschaft (Matthieu), des Menschen mit dem Stillleben (Piet).

Piet Wiegman hat mich bisher am tiefsten gerührt. In seinen neuesten Aquarellen trifft er ein herrliches, abgeklärtes Kolorit von klingendem Rot und schönem Kobalt, das so die Aquarelle Cézannes gemacht. Ein Gemälde mit ständem Besser (im Städtischen Museum in Amsterdam) zeigt die latente Energie, die dramatische Spannung von Vincent van Gogh, dem auch die in schwarzer Farbe gehaltenen Zeichnungen der beiden Brüder (siehe die Abbildungen S. 321 und 322) vorwärts sind.

Von den Wiegmann sollte noch späteres in diesem Blatte gebracht werden. Es wäre abdann ein kleines Stillleben mit Kruzifix vom jüngeren Wiegman zu reproduzieren, eine Arbeit, die im tiefsten Sinne religiös genannt werden kann (nicht wegen des Kruzifixes!) wie kaum etwas hier Gedachtene nach van Gogh. Dieses kleine Stillleben gilt mir als ein Anzeichen dafür, daß ein tieferer Klang auch in Holland wieder eingeläutet wird.

Haag.

Herman F. E. Visser.



KOPF. STEINPLASTIK. HINDU-JAVANISCH.

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ing the figuratively carved belt knots called netsuke.²⁵ At no point does Visser go into greater depth about these Asian examples, which he had perhaps seen in an ethnographic museum.²⁶ These works represented a mood or technical mastery that he believed to be widely known and accepted, therefore requiring no further explanation. A Javanese sculpted head from the tenth century juxtaposed with a drawing by Matthieu Wiegman in an article in *Das Kunstblatt* – two works of art that incited the same emotion for Visser – likewise went without additional elucidation (figs. 7, 8).²⁷

In the early years of the twentieth century, a combined interest in contemporary and non-European art was by no means uncommon. As early as 1906, French post-impressionist painters were intrigued by African masks and sculptures.²⁸ For artists such

as Picasso and Emil Nolde, as for Visser, it was about their own perception of these objects and not about becoming acquainted with the products of any one specific culture.²⁹ Both Bremmer and Westheim also focussed on Asian and European art simultaneously, as did the foremost connoisseur and critic in England, Roger Fry.³⁰ Fry was a generation older than Visser and an influential figure. In *The Burlington Magazine*, of which he was the editor, Fry called for the abandonment of the art historical canon (the one-sided focus on the Greco-Roman tradition and the sustainment thereof) and propagated that attention also be given to the Middle Ages, early Italian painters, early Asian art, works of art from Africa and South America (the Aztecs), and children's drawings.³¹ We can assume that Fry and Visser were in contact, given that from 1919 onwards the latter contributed to the magazine

Fig. 8
Head, Java,
tenth century.
Stone, 19.5 x 15.5 cm.
Leeuwarden,
Keramiekmuseum
Princessehof, Anne
Tjibbes van der
Meulen collection
(acquired 1910),
inv. no. GAM 0667.



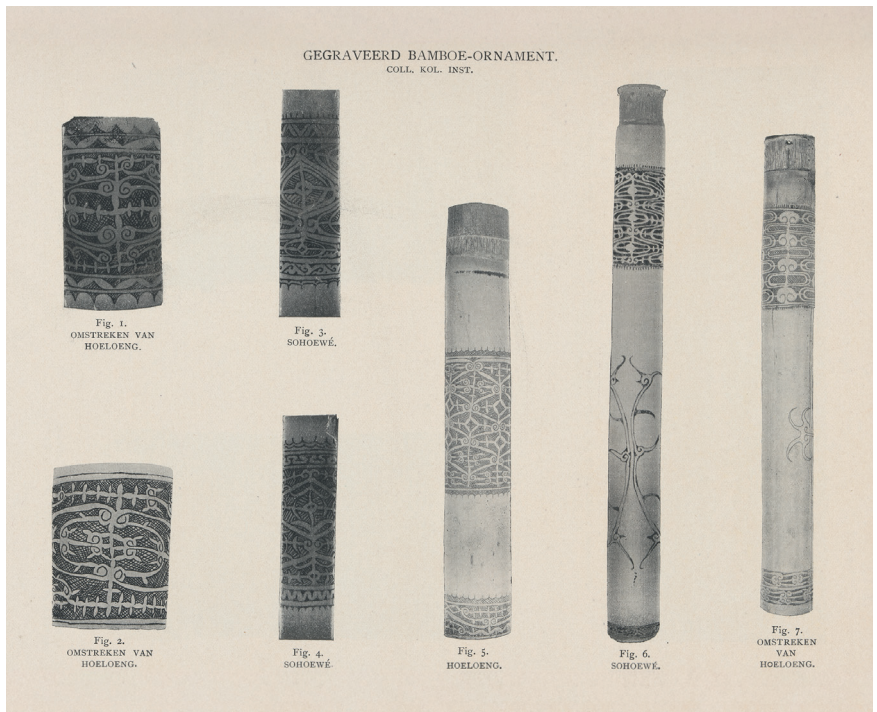
Fig. 1. ORNAMENT VAN SAWELI. Verdiept fond.
Schaal 1 à 5.



Fig. 2. ORNAMENT VAN SAWELI. Verdiept fond.
Schaal 1 à 5.

Fig. 9
Carved and coloured
wooden planks
from Saweli, on the
northern coast of
Seram. Illustration
from Visser's 1917
article on ornamental
art from Seram
(see note 38), based
on watercolours
by Visser.

Fig. 10
Examples of
engraved bamboo
ornamentation.
Illustration from
Visser's 1917 article
on ornamental
art from Seram
(see note 38).



on a regular basis. In his aspirations, the novice Visser would surely have felt supported by the ideas of his well-established English counterpart.

As noted above, during this period Visser immersed himself in works of applied art from the Dutch East Indies. As he himself recalled, his first encounter with copperware and textiles occurred at the store Boeatan in The Hague.³² As early as the late nineteenth century, a general interest in Dutch East Indies textiles had already received an impulse from the work of Dutch applied artists experimenting with the batik technique. From circa 1900 on, Dutch craftspeople drew their inspiration from shapes and motifs originating from the colony.³³ The appreciation for East Indies applied arts was also linked to the continued existence of handicrafts, practiced at a high level within small communities of craftspeople, qualities largely lost in Europe due to industrialization. As a draughtsman at 't Modelhuis, Visser was essentially part of this world of high-end interior design and applied arts, inspired by East Indian handicrafts.

In 1916 and 1917, Visser worked on the installation of the Indisch Museum in Het Prinsessehof in Leeuwarden³⁴ and on preparations for an exhibition on Indian textiles at the Koloniaal Instituut voor de Tropen (KIT), later called the Tropenmuseum and today the Wereldmuseum Amsterdam.³⁵ The exhibition itself was ultimately cancelled due to the First World War, but the (unfinished) manuscript for the accompanying museum guide is now preserved in the Leiden University Library.³⁶ In compiling the guide, Visser appears to have assimilated the literature on this subject to its fullest extent, including anthropologists' and missionaries' reports made during expeditions to various parts of the Dutch East Indies. He provides substantial, detailed information regarding the motifs, colours, technical aspects and regional variations.³⁷ Visser further-

more complemented the literature with his personal observations of works held in Dutch museums.

Visser's article on the ornamentation of the Moluccan island Seram, likewise published in 1917, is of a different order altogether (figs. 9, 10).³⁸ In it, he described works from Seram as if they were contemporary European works of art. Averse to a 'solely scientific consideration of ethnographica', Visser took an approach quite unlike his work for the guide accompanying the exhibition at the Koloniaal Instituut. Here the focus lay on what he described as 'decorative art [my italics]'. In his view, drawing a distinction between ornamental and fine art was undesirable, both for works from Asia and contemporary works in Europe, because in every case, it was the creators' goal to 'express their feelings'. In the best examples, this expression turned out to be of eternal value, and was 'another nuancing of the eternal'.³⁹ Just as the work of Dutch artists Piet Mondrian and Johan Thorn

Fig. 11

PIET MONDRIAN,
Painting No. 3:
Composition in
Oval with Trees, 1913.
Oil on canvas,
119 x 101.5 cm.
Amsterdam,
Stedelijk Museum,
inv. no. A 6043
In the years 1913-15,
this painting was
shown at various
exhibitions in the
Netherlands and given
to the Rijksmuseum
as a long-term loan
by the owner, H.P.
Bremmer, in 1917.





Fig. 12

JOHAN THORN
PRIKKER,
Fish, 1903.
Colour graphite
and watercolour on
paper, 85 x 132.5 cm.
Kunstmuseum
Krefeld, inv. no.
GS1904/1464a.
Photo: Kunstmuseum
Krefeld. Volker
Döhne – ARTOTHEK

Prikker, Visser maintained, the Seramese motifs were not representations of (simplified) tangible images but rather nature-impressions and moods (figs. 11–13): ‘The artistic expressions of Seram are intense, rhythmic and yet austere, often heightened to the utmost tension; yet here and there, an almost lyrical mood is achieved, whereby, however, the base tone remains sharp and tense, and there is no trace of moderation.’⁴⁰ Visser believed the Dutch and Moluccan expressions were equal. The ethnographer, he wrote, proceeds to make an inventory of the motifs and then compares them to those from other centres (Visser himself also chose the same approach for his exhibition manuscript); the art lover, by contrast, can only look. For Visser, actively copying (these) motifs was essential. He himself painted the watercolours used to illustrate the article.

With Asian objects, Visser therefore applied the same approach as he did when it came to contemporary European art – as a critic. He endeavoured to convince the reader that an artist, regardless of where he or she was active in the world, could express the observed reality as a

‘nuancing of the eternal’. Art, therefore, offered the viewer an opportunity to connect with this eternal. Looking (and subsequently experiencing) was, according to Visser, the only ‘method’ to recognize and appreciate art, and accordingly, to establish this connection. Every element of Visser’s work in the early years of the vvak is already present in his early writings.

Roorda and Visser and the Early Years of the Society

Given all we know about Visser, less is unfortunately known about the other driving force in the vvak during its early years, Taco Roorda.⁴¹ From 1915 to 1917, Roorda was assistant curator East Asia at the Ethnografisch Museum in Leiden. In his succeeding role as acting curator in the same department, a position he held up until 1925, he also sat on the committee charged with advising the government on the museum sector, established in 1919. Roorda called for a museum of art that held masterpieces in every field, including the arts from Asia.⁴² Later on, he too wrote about contemporary Dutch art, though less frequently than Visser.⁴³ Roorda was part of the religious-humanist

movement emerging during this period. He was a board member of De Nieuwe Gedachte, a humanitarian-idealist society founded in 1916 that published the magazine *Het Nieuwe Leven* and organized well-attended Sunday gatherings.⁴⁴ An organization like this reflected the international climate that prevailed in the first two decades of the twentieth century, marked by a need for a new moral compass, now that reason and technology had proved inadequate. This gave rise to alternative movements, including the religious-humanists and the theosophists, which thrived alongside the traditional churches.⁴⁵ Theosophists, as their movement's name implied, sought to acquire insight into the divine, with no adherence to any one religion.⁴⁶ Theosophical artists wished to understand the founding principles of divine creation and to create artworks based on those principles. Mondrian is a key example; so too the architect Karel de Bazel (1869-1923), one of the very first board members of the vvak. In a publication of the Nederlandsche Vereeniging voor Ambachts- & Nijverheidskunst (Dutch Society of Handicrafts and

Applied Arts), Roorda commemorated De Bazel as builder for the 'supra-individual, timeless Personality'.⁴⁷ Betsy Osieck (1880-1968), herself an artist and the wife of vvak chairman Westendorp, took classes (practical and theoretical art education) from De Bazel and his friend and colleague Matthieu Lauweriks (1864-1932) at the Vahâna Lodge, founded by De Bazel and Lauweriks as part of the theosophical society. Theosophy had a strong presence among members of the Dutch cultural vanguard; its principles would not have gone unnoticed by Visser and Roorda.

At the time of the vvak's founding in 1918, both Roorda and Visser therefore brought with them the conviction that art, as an expression of the cosmic order, was capable of penetrating to the essence of life. In their view, this was most certainly true of the arts from Asia. Roorda expressed as much in a speech given at the society's founding meeting: Asian art was the product of a divine inspiration, and it was this that distinguished it from Western art, which, as he stated, centred on the merit of the individual artist.⁴⁸ While acknowledging the principle of divine

Fig. 13
JOHAN THORN
PRIKKER,
Animal Motif,
c. 1899.
Batik on silk,
106 x 195 cm.
Collection
Wereldmuseum,
inv. no. TM-H-3312.



inspiration in other art forms, such as the art of the early Middle Ages, in Roorda and Visser's view nowhere was the 'deeper spiritual life' more readily identifiable than in Asian art. At its core lay their own personal experience, whereas the object that evoked this powerful experience or the culture it represented received no more than scant attention.⁴⁹

The first opportunity for Roorda and Visser to put these ideas into practice was the organization of an exhibition of East Asian artworks from the collections of Dutch museums and private individuals (figs. 14-17). As noted above, the Dutch ethnographic museums certainly held Asian art objects of interest – the challenge was to recognize them given the vastness of their collections. Already for several decades, the art of Japan and China had been of great interest to international collectors; accordingly, objects could also be found in the art dealing world and in private collections. In a certain sense, the exhibition was a litmus test, as one would now have to determine which objects were to be considered important works of art and which ones not. As is evident from both Visser's and Roorda's publications and lectures, and as a logical extension of the above, this involved the sentiment of the beholder, and likewise the recognition of a divine spark that had inspired the object's Asian creator. 'Only that which is perceived as art may fall within the scope of our organization', wrote Roorda and Visser in the *vvak*'s statement of founding principles.⁵⁰ Moreover, only someone who was an artist himself was qualified to comment on this matter – a view quite commonly held in Dutch art criticism during this period.⁵¹ The 'reality that shines through the coincidental form [is] visible only to the spiritual eye of the observing artist'. As men who considered themselves artists, Roorda



and Visser believed they were qualified to act both as arbiter and interpreter. They now referred to 'the reality shining through the coincidental form' as 'the deeper spiritual life'.⁵²

In a 1924 article published in the *Ostasiatische Zeitschrift*, Roorda and Visser's vision was further articulated. Here Roorda explained that, in *art history*, objects acquired meaning by placing them in context, but that was precisely what one had to avoid with *art experience*.⁵³ A work of art offered the possibility of 'Gemütsvertiefung', i.e. a deepening of mood/feeling/

Figs. 14, 15
The first exhibition of the Vereeniging van Vrienden der Aziatische Kunst in the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, from 14 September to 15 October 1919. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, documentation department Asian art.



atmosphere, and that – as Roorda asserted, likewise befitting the intellectual discourse of the moment – was of great importance in a mechanized world brimming with intellectualism. He continued by describing the work of art as a world unto itself, with a soul that only revealed itself to someone who, with loving attention, was capable of surrendering to the enchantment that emanated from it. The spiritual enrichment that arose from this was of such great importance that setting such a work apart from all others was justified. Roorda moreover dismissed the notion that only someone with a knowledge of the Asian cultural context could attain this surrendering, viewing it as as a misconception. On the contrary, he argued, though a background knowledge could produce a substantive appreciation, it would actually impede the primary aim: ‘the spiritual and emotional aesthetic effect’.⁵⁴ Roorda’s standpoint, in hindsight, was radical: a cultural-historical knowledge of an object was not only unnecessary, it was even undesirable.⁵⁵ The notion that Asian art, above all other art forms, presented an opportunity for this spiritual enrichment was also evident in an article Visser wrote in 1919, published in *The Burlington Magazine*:

What our Western art never could give us in a clear and powerful way – the quintessence of visual art – is revealed to us by the great masters of Asia. It is not a hobby, not as a matter of fashion or by a capricious feeling, that we are drawn towards their works; it is rather an imperious impulse in those men who arrived at the insight that art is not identical with imitation, psychological research, or telling stories.⁵⁶

Visser was still unable to formulate in words what precisely made these Asian objects so ‘strong’. Reflecting on a Thai head of a Buddha preserved in the Ethnografisch Museum in Leiden (fig. 18), he wrote: ‘It is too noble a piece to be subject of long aesthetic appreciations. It speaks for itself and that is sufficient’.⁵⁷

The great appreciation for the beauty of Asian art shared by Roorda, Visser and other contemporaries and their strong accent on one’s personal experience without consideration of the object’s cultural context is a form of appropriation⁵⁸ that, in principle, ostensibly does little harm. Even so, the practice of interpreting objects with no regard for the people to whose culture they belong does raise questions.⁵⁹ The actual building of a collection – physically taking possession of objects

Fig. 16
Ritual Pitcher (*yi*),
China, Zhou
dynasty (c. 800 BC).
Bronze, 19.8 x 41.8 cm.
Collection
Wereldmuseum,
inv. no. RV-1653-7.
Shown at the 1919
exhibition and
acquired by dealer
H. Senger in 1908.
At this time, the
organizers stated
that it was the only
known archaic
Chinese bronze vessel
in the Netherlands.

Fig. 17
Vase, China,
Han dynasty
(200 BC- 200 AD).
Earthenware with
green glaze, height
45.6 cm, diam. 36 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
inv. no. AK-MAK-502,
on loan from the
Royal Asian Art
Society in the
Netherlands
(Gerrit-Jan Verburgt
bequest, 1969).
Shown at the 1919
exhibition.



Fig. 18
Head of Buddha
 Statue, Thailand,
 fifteenth century.
 Stone, 22 x 17 cm.
 Collection
 Wereldmuseum,
 inv. no. RV-973-1.
 Described by Visser
 in his 1919 article
 on East Asian art
 (see note 56)
 and shown at
 the exhibition in
 that same year.

– is a more far-reaching form of appropriation that can certainly be problematic. One example is the trade in Chinese art objects. Large-scale trade between China and Europe, including art objects, arose as early as the sixteenth century. Well into the nineteenth century, the two trading partners were considered equal. Even in Roorda and Visser's time, a fair, international art trade may still have existed to some extent. Nevertheless, thanks to the geopolitical reality of Europe's domination over China, which had begun in the nineteenth century, the latter was so weakened that effective government control was lacking, with works of art easily excavated and sold. The excavation and the export of artworks was stimulated by the high demand for ancient Chinese art in the United States and Europe, which, though perhaps beneficial to a few Chinese art dealers and intermediaries, was not in the country's best interest as a whole. In other words, a correlation existed between the seemingly harmless love of Asian art in Europe and the United

States and the undesirable exodus of artworks from China. Moreover, there existed colonial structures and institutions that facilitated the forming of collections. For instance, in 1931 the VVAK acquired sculptures from the Dutch East Indies and Cambodia through the colonial archaeological services established in those countries.⁶⁰ Based on careful consideration and expertise, sculptures were chosen that were thought to have no functional relevance to the historical monuments undergoing conservation at the time. Archaeologists active in the Dutch East Indies and Cambodia, though not so much interested in the personal emotion that an artwork might evoke, did possess ample knowledge of the objects and the culture that had produced them. The VVAK was only able to acquire these objects because of the French and Dutch colonial presence in Asia. Although incidents of looting or stealing were rare, in retrospect many of these acquisitions now give cause for greater discussion and reflection.⁶¹

Towards an Art History of Asia

Given the position taken by Roorda and Visser, the concerns Westendorp voiced in his 1928 celebratory address regarding an overly one-sided focus on the 'atmosphere' of an object and getting lost in 'phraseology' are understandable. Nevertheless, Roorda and Visser were not the only voices in the VVAK. Archaeologists (working in the Dutch East Indies) and ethnographers also had a say in the society. In their studies and publications, they did look at Asian artworks in the context of their origin and usage. Among them was Nicolaas Johannes Krom (1883-1945), head of the Oudheidkundige Dienst (archaeological service) in the Dutch East Indies and a board member of the society from its inception. Writing in a 1923 issue of the magazine *Nederlandsch-Indië Oud & Nieuw*, Krom stated that, while there were those who derived pleasure from an

isolated work of art, free of any context, he expected that, when that same object was situated in its own era, when forms and motifs were explained from within the cultural context, one's appreciation (understanding and enjoyment) would be greater.⁶² It therefore comes as no surprise that, one year later, Roorda penned a review of one of Krom's books, expressing his disappointment.⁶³

The same discussion was conducted not just in the Netherlands but also in the international sphere. Telling in this regard is a letter to the editor published in the 27 May 1925 edition of the *Algemeen Handelsblad*, submitted by Alfred Salmony (1890-1958), the then deputy director of the Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst in Cologne.⁶⁴ After emigrating to the United States in 1934, Salmony was to become an undisputed international authority on Chinese art in his position as professor at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York. Roorda had criticized his work in Cologne, prompting Salmony to question Roorda's stature and what – other than several book reviews – his publications were. A man of the future like Salmony clearly had no interest in Roorda, who by 1925 was evidently a man of the past.

Even prior to Westendorp's urging, however, Visser was already busy further developing his approach. He did so along two lines: by travelling, viewing numerous works of art and consulting with experts, and by seeking out the interrelationships between works of art as well as developments in art. In 1920, Visser embarked on an extended trip to London, where he viewed collections, visited libraries and met with like-minded individuals. Reflecting on this period in 1955, he writes that he was yet unaware that, particularly in Berlin, serious study of the Asian arts was already underway.⁶⁵ Upon returning from London, Visser began preparing for a much longer journey: a one-year trip to the United States and Asia.



Fig. 19
Standing Vishnu,
twelfth century,
in the Metropolitan
Museum New York,
photo belonging
to documentation
material purchased
by Visser in 1921.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
documentation
department Asian art.

In the development of the Western appreciation for Asian art, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York were the leading institutions at this time (figs. 19, 20). After visiting the United States, Visser travelled extensively throughout Japan, followed by brief visits to China and Korea and stays of longer

Fig. 20
Gallery of the
Metropolitan
Museum, Wing E,
Gallery 13, with the
Standing Vishnu
(fig. 19), situation
in 1921. New York,
Metropolitan
Museum.
Photo: Metropolitan
Museum of Art,
New York



duration in the Dutch and British East Indies. Visser published travel letters in the Dutch newspaper *Algemeen Handelsblad*, in which he described what he saw and what his thoughts were on such matters.⁶⁶ The trip was significant because it gave Visser the opportunity to test his highly personal opinions against those of others. When considering what determined a good work of art, one had only one's own intuition to rely upon. A more sagacious choice, however, was to consider those works of art recognized and appreciated as important by (preferably a larger number of) dedicated enthusiasts (preferably over an extended period of time). During these years, the collective expert eye of numerous connoisseurs from Europe, the United States and occasionally Asia (especially Japan) contributed to an ever-growing consensus about what constituted important works of art and with respect to a certain hierarchy within that group. Formal aspects like shape, line, technical perfection played a role in this, but one's knowledge of the cultural regions also grew, ensuring that objects could be better understood when viewed from the perspective of their place of manufacture. This is essentially nothing other than classic connoisseurship, together with its known merits and limitations. In his final travel letter, Visser called it 'style criticism, systematic-selective treatment, methodical art history (knowledge of quality and style)', which, as he rightly noted, was self-evident for classical European art history but yet in development when it came to Asian art.⁶⁷ For Roorda, art history was still a dirty word, whereas Visser understood that this was where the future lay.

This corpus of Asian artworks, which thanks to these various journeys grew in Visser's mind, enabled him to get a sense of their order, while also searching for the mutual ties existing between them. In two of his publica-

tions, he discussed the connection between the art of India and that of East Asia.⁶⁸ By comparing artworks, he attempted to trace the introduction of Buddhism in China and Japan, by sea from the south and by land from the north. Although information at this time was sparse, these articles clearly show that Visser's knowledge of the many areas of Asian culture that had a role in this matter was profound, as was his familiarity with the then existing literature and viewpoints. Based on these visions and observations, Visser took his own path. Nevertheless, he hastened to caution that this was not about random formal commonalities but rather similarities 'of a really artistic nature'. For Visser, the identification of important artworks in which the artistic aspect could be studied – unlike in the remainder of the material production of a cultural region – obviously remained paramount.

In a 1927 article on Chinese bronzes, Visser provided a programme of what in his view was the ideal approach to their study: 1) acquiring a knowledge of forms, styles, ornamentation and symbolism; 2) developing the capacity to differentiate based on an aesthetic sensitivity; 3) linguistics and ethnography; 4) inscriptions; 5) alloys.⁶⁹ He admitted that this was too much work for just one person. Yet the programme indicates that Visser regarded what was in 'point 2' – the capacity to differentiate based on an aesthetic sensitivity – as part of a larger whole, and not as what was sometimes supposed, the society's sole aim. For him, it was a starting point. At times, the remaining programme points were also difficult to implement for practical reasons. In an earlier article on Chinese art, Visser had already observed that, though objects were being excavated in China in large numbers, archaeological data was scarce and was not being supplied with the objects.⁷⁰ In China, ancient works of art were being actively sought,

those circulating and those still in the ground, with the intention of selling them to Western dealers' agents. In conducting these transactions, archaeological information was seen as irrelevant. Once these objects were being kept in the West, Visser argued, all one could do was organize them, assess them with a connoisseur's eye and to subsequently incorporate them into the already existing overviews.

In Closing

Upon consideration, Visser's approach was already in line with what Westendorp had advocated in 1928. The selection of an object was still a subjective, aesthetic choice – though this choice was better founded because of Visser's exposure to a greater number of works and the ever-growing availability of comparative material in the form of reproductions. The choice regarding which objects were to be identified as true works of art had already been made prior to and independent of study. During this study, less attention was given to verbalizing and explaining the experience of an object's beauty than before, with greater interest placed on situating that work in its proper cultural-historical context and explaining the iconography and decorative motifs, its relation to other objects and the technical aspects

of its production. Yet all these considerations came only after the object – based on a feeling and with an expert eye – was recognized as an important artwork; at this stage, they did not yet form the criteria for making such a determination. Accordingly, Visser had discovered a working methodology on which he would continue to rely up until his retirement in 1956. In continuing his work, his international contacts would remain crucial. The field of Asian art expertise evolved, with Visser playing a role in it, thus ensuring that Amsterdam was embedded in this international development. However, his highly developed primal sense never abandoned him. In Visser's obituary, Jan Fontein remembered his predecessor Visser as a man with a fantastic eye and a great intuitive sense: 'His "emotion devant les objets", as [Visser] himself always called it, excluded all possibilities other than great admiration or total indifference.'⁷¹

ABSTRACT

The work of Herman Visser (1890-1965) and Taco Roorda (1874-1938) during the first ten years of the *Vereeniging van Vrienden der Aziatische Kunst* (VVAK, now the Royal Asian Art Society in the Netherlands, 1918-present) was instrumental to establishing a field of expertise in the Netherlands, to introduce the notion that important works of art were created in Asia. The selection of objects was primarily based on their own sense of aesthetic experience. It was a sense that arose from interacting with contemporary European art, above all focussed on the cosmic order, the spiritual foundations of reality – or rather, the nuancing of the eternal. During this process, objects were entirely isolated from their context and viewed more as contemporary works of autonomous art than as important products of an Asian culture. Yet the knowledge of Asian art grew and art history evolved in the direction of connoisseurship, an evolution in which Visser, contrary to Roorda, participated from the start. Visser's involvement marked the onset of a methodological approach to Asian art history in the Netherlands.

NOTES

- * I am grateful to Pauline Lunsingh Scheurleer, Marijke de Groot and Freek Heijbroek for their insights and advice after reading an earlier version of the present article.
- 1 On 22 June 2018, the predicate 'Koninklijk' (Royal) was bestowed on the society: Koninklijke Vereniging van Vrienden der Aziatische Kunst (KVAK).
 - 2 Debora J. Meijers, 'De democratisering van schoonheid: Plannen voor museum vernieuwingen in Nederland 1918-1921', *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 28 (1977), pp. 55-104. The committee (Taco Roorda was a member) was established in 1919; the report followed in 1921.
 - 3 Pauline Lunsingh Scheurleer, 'Aziatische Kunst in het Rijksmuseum', in *Aziatische Kunst*, Amsterdam 2014, pp. 8-23 and the older literature cited there.
 - 4 In 1952, the VVAK began to exhibit its collection in the building of the Rijksmuseum; from 1972 on, the collection has been held on the basis of a long-term loan in the Rijksmuseum's department of Asian art.
 - 5 Karel G. Boon, 'Herman Visser en het tot stand komen van het Museum van Aziatische Kunst', *Aziatische Kunst* 15 (1985), no. 4, pp. 17-21; Rudolf Effert, 'J.P.B. de Josselin de Jong – Etnologie versus schoonheidsbeleving', *Aziatische Kunst* 46 (2016), no. 1, pp. 3-10; Frederieke van Wijk, 'Erfgoed of kunst? De esthetische bril van de KVAK', *Aziatische Kunst* 53 (2023), no. 1, pp. 3-17.
 - 6 The direct motivation for the present article is the transfer of the documentation on Herman Visser and the interest in Asian art at the onset of the twentieth century in the Netherlands and Europe in general by Pauline Lunsingh Scheurleer. From 1975 to 2008, Lunsingh Scheurleer worked in the Rijksmuseum's department of Asian Art, from 1985 on as its head. See Pauline Lunsingh Scheurleer: 'H.F.E. Visser en de Aziatische Kunst', *125 Jaar Vereniging Rembrandt*, Zwolle/The Hague 2008, pp. 42-45; 'Gemeinsame Ziele. Herman F.E. Visser in Amsterdam und Otto Kummel in Berlin', *Ostasiatische Zeitschrift Neue Serie* 21 (2011), pp. 41-48; and her article from 2014 (note 3). This documentation, assembled over a period of many years, forms the basis of the present article. It can now be consulted in Join, the documentation system of the Rijksmuseum. Archief Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, Collectiedocumentatie Herman Visser. At the present time, it can only be consulted internally but Join will be made public in the near future.
 - 7 See Marieke Bloembergen, *De koloniale vertoning: Nederland en Indië op de wereldtentoonstellingen (1880-1931)*, Amsterdam 2002.
 - 8 'Dat het in eerste instantie uitsluitend de *aesthetische* waarde van het voorwerp is die de keus moet bepalen, daarover kan geen verschil van gevoelen bestaan, maar dat neemt niet weg, dat als het voorwerp eenmaal om zijn schoonheid is verworven, het determineren ervan evenzeer genot geeft. ... Als men bij een geliefd voorwerp op den duur van niets anders weet te praten, dan van "atmosfeer" en "stemming", dan onttaardt het enthousiasme in phraseologie. Het plaatsen van het voorwerp in het kader van zijn tijd, de kennis van vorm, ornament, materiaal, dit alles zal er toe bijdragen de belangstelling blijvend vast te houden.' *Rede uitgesproken door Mr. H.K. Westendorp ... op zaterdag 3 maart 1928*, pp. ix-x, printed and distributed by the VVAK.
 - 9 For this, as well as the remaining biographical data, see the documentation in Join (note 6).
 - 10 In 1907, Van Nierop commissioned the building of the Heydezeate villa around the corner from Van Eeden's Walden site. See Frederik van Eeden, *Dagboek 1878-1923* (eds. H.W. van Tricht and Hans van Eeden), part 4, Culemborg 1972, New Year's Day and 2 January 1921; Amsterdam, University Library, Van Eeden Collection, Letter xxiv c 61.
 - 11 Herman F.E. Visser, 'Franz Marc. Naar aanleiding van de Gedächtnis-Ausstellung te München (September-October 1916)', *De Nieuwe Amsterdammer* 25 November 1916, p. 8; 9 December 1916, p. 8.
 - 12 'de zonderlinge mensen, kringen en idealen moet men beleefd hebben ... om er de atmosfeer van te kunnen beseffen'. Herman F.E. Visser, 'Alfred Kubin', *De Nieuwe Amsterdammer* 201 (2 November 1918), p. 4.
 - 13 Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Archief KVAK, inv. no. 9, Herman F.E. Visser, 'Geschiedenis der Vereeniging...', typescript from 1955.
 - 14 Friedrich Wilhelm, 'Scherman, Lucian', *Neue deutsche Biographie* 22 (2005), pp. 699-700 (see <https://www.deutsche-biographie.de/sfz111765.html#ndbcontent>, consulted 4 September 2025).
 - 15 Visser 1916 (note 11); Herman F.E. Visser, 'De literatuur over Vincent van Gogh', *De Beweging* 13 (1917), no. 1, pp. 322-40, 378-401; 'Ferdinand Hodler (1853-1918)', *De Nieuwe Amsterdammer* 15 June 1918, p. 6; 'Neuere Holländische Malerei', *Das Kunstblatt* 2, no. 10 (okt. 1918), pp. 314-23; 'Een zestiende-eeuwsch portret van een onbekend meester', *Oude Kunst* 3 (1917/18), p. 16; 'Over meubelkunst',

- Wendingen* 1 (1918), no. 7, pp. 5-10; 'Floris Verster en de extra-modernen', *De Groene Week* 1 (2 December 1918), p. 5; Visser 1918 (note 12). The majority of these were important magazines. *Das Kunstblatt* was a leading German magazine run by Paul Westheim (1886-1963) that devoted attention to modern art in Europe and allocated space to contributions by known critics from in and outside Germany. *Wendingen* was the showpiece publication of the Amsterdam School artists. *De Beweging*, overseen by the writer Albert Verweij (1865-1937), was the magazine of the 'Tachtigers', the most important cultural innovators from the generation before Visser.
- 16 Jan de Vries and Marijke de Groot, *Van sintels vuurwerk maken: Kunstkritiek en moderne kunst 1905-1925*, Rotterdam 2015.
 - 17 For Steenhoff, see De Vries and De Groot 2015 (note 16); H.F. Heijbroek with Herbert Henkels, 'Het Rijksmuseum voor Moderne Kunst van Willem Steenhoff. Werkelijkheid of utopie?', *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 39 (1991), no. 2, pp. 163-249.
 - 18 Peter de Ruiter (ed. and intr.), *Wegwijzers in oude en moderne kunst: Kunstkritiek van Niehaus, Hammacher, De Gruyter en Engelman 1918-1965*, Rotterdam 2017, pp. 13-52. For the distinction between 'geestgesteldheid' (mental state of mind) and 'levensbeschouwing' (philosophy of life), see p. 13.
 - 19 Jan de Vries, *Gemeenschap en wereld-ik, geheel op de wijze der kunst: Nederlandse kunstkritiek en moderne kunst, circa 1900-1920*; Albert Verwey, Albert Plasschaert, *Just Havelaar, Theo van Doesburg*, Amsterdam 1990.
 - 20 Hildelies Balk, *De Kunstpaus H.P. Bremmer*, Bussum 2006, chapter 3.
 - 21 'in resonantie geraken met het fijnste van onze tijd'; 'symbolen [te] scheppen die tot de komende Religie behoren, als tegenwicht tegen de technische verworvenheden'. Visser 1916 (note 11).
 - 22 Cor Hermans, *De uitgewiste horizon: Europa's obsessie met cultureel verval 1835-1914*, Amsterdam 2023.
 - 23 'fijn droomerig element'. Visser 1917 (note 15), p. 383.
 - 24 Visser 1918 (Hodler, note 15).
 - 25 Visser 1916 (note 11), p. 8. On a side note, Visser also did so vice versa. In an article from 1920, he wrote about Asian art and tried to explain what he meant by comparing Asian objects with the work of Van Gogh and Seghers. See Herman F.E. Visser, 'Some parallels between Western and Far-Eastern art', *The Burlington Magazine* 36 (1920), pp. 157-64.
 - 26 There were certainly Asian sculptures and paintings in the Netherlands, likewise in the possession of dealers and private collectors. In the ensuing years, it was Visser and the vvak's aim to be able to recognize the important works out of this large group of objects.
 - 27 Visser became familiar with the sculpture during his work on the installation of the exhibition 'Verzameling Indonesische & Chineesche Kunst' in the Prinsessehof in Leeuwarden (opening 31 August 1917).
 - 28 Adam Kuper, *The Museum of Other People*, London 2023, chapter 12 ('But is it Art?'), pp. 251-89.
 - 29 The interest of these painters is referred to by the term 'primitivism', thus distinguishing it from the interest in primitive art.
 - 30 Christopher Green, *Art Made Modern: Roger Fry's Vision of Art*, London 1999. Visser mentioned Fry and his pupil Clive Bell in 'The Exhibition of far Eastern Art at Amsterdam', *The Burlington Magazine* 35 (October 1919), pp. 143-50.
 - 31 Green 1999 (note 30), p. 127.
 - 32 See Visser 1955 (note 13).
 - 33 J.M. Joosten, 'De batik en de vernieuwing van de nijverheidskunst in Nederland 1892-1905', *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 23 (1972), pp. 407-29. Regarding the significance of the Dutch East Indies for the applied arts in the Netherlands, see Mienke Simon Thomas, *De Leer van het Ornament: Versieren volgens voorschrift 1850-1930*, Amsterdam 1996, chapter 4 ('Ex Oriente Lux'), pp. 121-68.
 - 34 Antoon Ott, *Verzameldrift: Biografie van Nanne Ottema (1874-1955)*, Gorredijk 2022, pp. 169-71.
 - 35 The Koloniaal Instituut was a continuation of the Koloniaal Museum in Haarlem, with a museum in Amsterdam from 1910 onwards. From 1926 on, the museum was housed in the known building on the Mauritskade in Amsterdam.
 - 36 This concerns a version typewritten in 1932 by P. Enserinck. Leiden, University Libraries, G 97-115, Herman F.E. Visser, 'De weef- en ikat-kunst in Nederlandsch-Indië'. In the foreword, Enserinck wrote that he typed out Visser's manuscript virtually without modification (though slightly shortened). Furthermore, Visser wrote an extensive article on the exhibition of fabrics in the Van Kerckhoff collection: 'Tentoonstelling der Oost-Indische weefsel-collectie Van Kerckhoff in het Museum voor Land- en Volkenkunde te Rotterdam (eind maart tot half juni 1918)', *Nederlandsch-Indië Oud & Nieuw* 3 (1918), no. 1, pp. 17-37.

- 37 The manuscript, 59 folios, is divided into regions/cultural areas: 1. Atjeh; 2. Batak territories; 3. Padangsche Bovenlanden; 4. South Sumatra; 5. The Malaysian territory; 6. Java; 7. Borneo; 8. Celebes.
- 38 Herman F.E. Visser, 'Over ornamentkunst van Seram', *Koloniaal Instituut te Amsterdam. Mededeeling No. VIII, Afdeling Volkenkunde No. 3, Volkenkundige Opstellen 1*, Amsterdam 1917, pp. 91-104.
- 39 'uitsluitend wetenschappelijke beschouwing van ethnographica'; 'ornamentkunst [my italics]'; 'uiting [te] geven van hun gevoelens'; 'een andere nuancering van het eeuwige'. Visser 1917 (note 38), p. 94. On this topic, see also a slightly later, extensive article by Jos. W. de Gruyter, 'Archaische en modern archaïseerende kunst', *Elseviers Geïllustreerd Maandschrift* 42 (1932), no. 1, pp. 11-184.
- 40 'De kunstuizingen van Seram zijn fel, rythmisch en toch sober, zijn veelal tot uiterste spanning opgevoerd; toch wordt hier en daar een bijna lyrische stemming bereikt, waarbij de grondtoon echter vlijmend en gespannen blijft, en van matigheid is geen sprake.' Visser 1917 (note 38), p. 101.
- 41 Taco Roorda's 'In Memoriam' appeared in the *Maandblad van Beeldende Kunsten* 15 (1938), p. 93. He was the son of the painter Gerrit Tacoszn Roorda (1835-1898) and grandson of Taco Roorda (1801-1874), professor of the Javanese language. In 1901, Roorda married Anna Elsabé Dijkmeester (1870-1928) in The Hague, who loaned out art to VVAK exhibitions under her own name.
- 42 The Hague, Nationaal Archief, Ministerie van Onderwijs, Kunsten en Wetenschappen, afdeling Kunsten en Wetenschappen (acc. no. 2.14.45), inv. nos. 697, 698.
- 43 Roorda wrote the book *Dr. J. Mendes da Costa*, Amsterdam 1928 (*Nieuwe Beeldhouwkunst in Nederland*, vol. 4), and an introduction to A. van der Boom, *S. Jessurun de Mesquita*, Wassenaar 1928.
- 44 I was unable to find any articles contributed by Roorda in the first volumes of *Het Nieuwe Leven*. See Marjet Brolsma, *Het humanitaire moment: Nederlandse intellectuelen. De Eerste Wereldoorlog en het verlangen naar een regeneratie van de Europese cultuur*, Hilversum 2016, chapter 1.
- 45 Brolsma 2016 (note 44), chapter 4.
- 46 Marty Bax, *Het web der schepping: Theosofie en kunst in Nederland, van Lauweriks tot Mondriaan*, Amsterdam 2006.
- 47 'boven individueelen tijdlozen Persoonlijkheid'. Taco B. Roorda, *Karel Petrus Cornelis de Bazel XIV Febr. MDCCCLXIX – XXVII Nov. MCMXXIII*, s.l.e.a. [1923].
- 48 Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, Archief KVVAK, inv. no. 1, minutes first board meeting, 19 June 1918.
- 49 Precisely because they still paid so little attention to Asia at this early stage (the remark about the 'goddelijk vonk' (divine spark) was a fairly loose platitude), any pronouncement regarding whether or to what extent stereotyping was involved here is of little interest.
- 50 'Slechts wat als kunst wordt gevoeld, mag binnen bereik onzer organisatie vallen'. Herman F.E. Visser, 'De "Vereeniging van Vrienden der Aziatische Kunst"', *De Nieuwe Amsterdammer* 199 (19 October 1918), p. 4. In this article, Visser quotes from the VVAK's statement of founding principles. For this statement, see Rijksmuseum library J0254 (Annual Reports VVAK). With many thanks to Marit Feld for this reference.
- 51 Balk 2006 (note 20), chapter 3.
- 52 'door de toevallige vorm heen schijnende werkelijkheid [was] slechts zichtbaar voor het geestelijk oog van den schouwenden kunstenaar'; 'het diepere geestesleven'. Taco B. Roorda, 'Algemene Inleiding', *Catalogus der tentoonstelling van Oost-Aziatische kunst*, Amsterdam 1919, p. 14.
- 53 Taco B. Roorda, 'Miszellen. Indische Plastik im musealen Zusammenhange', *Ost-asiatische Zeitschrift NF 1* (1924), pp. 153-56. Roorda himself actually possessed ample knowledge of the culture, history and the place of art in the cultures of the countries in East Asia. He wrote the lemmas for Chinese and Japanese in the second edition of *Oosthoek's Geïllustreerde Encyclopaedie*, Utrecht 1925-32.
- 54 'Gemütsvertiefung'; 'die geistig-emotionelle ästhetische Wirkung'. Roorda 1924 (note 53), p. 156.
- 55 Roorda outlined what the formal characteristics of an artwork were, that caused all of this, in a beautifully printed version of a lecture given at the Amsterdam Rijksacademie in 1922: *De betekenis van de Aziatische kunst. Voordracht ter opening van een cursus aan de Rijksacademie van Beeldende Kunsten te Amsterdam*, s.l. [Amsterdam] 1922, p. 30: 'het rythme en de levende spanning van de ... samenstellende vlakken en lijnen'.
- 56 Herman F.E. Visser, 'The Exhibition of far Eastern Art at Amsterdam', *The Burlington Magazine* 35 (October 1919), p. 143.
- 57 Visser 1919 (note 56), p. 149. The object in question was almost certainly the Buddha head shown by Roorda and Visser at the 1919 exhibition; see fig. 18 in the present article.
- 58 For this principle, a similarity to the nineteenth-century journals of European travellers in

- Africa, in which the beauty of nature is aestheticized and subsequently appropriated, has been pointed out. The beauty is so great, was the thinking, that it evidently belongs to the Western traveller-writer, and that its care can only be entrusted to Europeans. Shortly after these descriptions and reflections, Africa was divided up and colonized by Western countries. See Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel writing and transculturation*, London/New York 1992; Rick Honings and Peter van Zonneveld (eds.), *Een tint van het Indische Oosten: Reizen in Insulinde 1800-1950*, Hilversum 2015.
- 59 Marieke Bloembergen, 'The Politics of "Greater India", A Moral Geography: Moveable Antiquities and Charmed Knowledge Networks between Indonesia, India and the West', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 63 (2021), no. 1, pp. 170-211; James O. Young, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*, Malden 2008.
 - 60 William A. Southworth, 'The Provenance of Four Sandstone Sculptures from Cambodia', *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin* 61 (2013), no. 2, pp. 141-71; *ibid.*, 'Twelve Stone Sculptures from Java', *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin* 65 (2017), no. 3, pp. 245-74.
 - 61 In Japan, for example, the government, heritage institutions and international art market functioned without complication.
 - 62 Nicolaas J. Krom, 'De waardering der Hindoe-Javaansche kunst', *Nederlandsch-Indië Oud & Nieuw* 8 (1923), no. 5, pp. 171-73.
 - 63 Taco B. Roorda, 'Neuere Literatur über die hindu-javanische Kunst', *Ostasiatische Zeitschrift NF 1* (1924), pp. 304-05.
 - 64 *Algemeen Handelsblad – Avondblad, Derde Blad*, 27 May 1925.
 - 65 Visser 1955 (note 13).
 - 66 Pauline Lunsingh Scheurleer discovered and transcribed the letters years ago. They are now available, supplemented with annotations and illustrations, via Join (Rijksmuseum Archive, Collectiedocumentatie Herman Visser, 5c Reisbrieven over Aziatische kunst) and on the website of the KVVAK, <https://www.kvak.nl/nieuws/reisbrieven/>. The architect Jan de Bie Leuveling Tjeenk (1885-1940), one of the very first members of the VVAK and a board member in the nineteen twenties, embarked on a similar trip as early as 1912-13; See Mieke Wiedemann, Kasper van Ommen and Heino van Rijnberk, *Jan de Bie Leuveling Tjeenk: Architect en bestuurder/bestuurder en architect*, Hilversum 2024.
 - 67 'stijlcratie, systematisch-schiftende behandelings, methodische kunstgeschiedenis (qualiteit- en stijl-kennis)'. Herman F.E. Visser, 'Slotbeschouwingen. Reisbrieven over Aziatische kunst', *Algemeen Handelsblad – Avondblad, Vierde blad*, 23 December 1922, p. 14.
 - 68 Herman F.E. Visser, 'Indian Influence on Far eastern Art', *Rupam* 15/16 (July-December 1923), pp. 48-58; 'Indian Influence on far Eastern Art', in *The Influences of Indian Art - Archeological Survey of India*, London 1925.
 - 69 Herman F.E. Visser, 'Literatuur over vroege Chineesche bronzen', *China. Driemaandelijksch Tijdschrift* 2 (1926-1927), pp. 1-5.
 - 70 Herman F.E. Visser, 'Chineesche kunst', *China. Driemaandelijksch Tijdschrift* 1 (1925-26), pp. 95-112, esp. p. 97.
 - 71 'Zijn *émotion* devant les objets zoals hij het zelf altijd noemde, sloot andere mogelijkheden dan grote bewondering of complete onverschilligheid uit.' Jan Fontein, 'In memoriam H.F.E. Visser', *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 13 (1965), no. 2, pp. 39-40, esp. p. 40. Visser's successors – Jan Fontein (1927-2017), Kok Wie Lim (1921-1982) and Pauline Lunsingh Scheurleer (1943) – were different than him in that they had specialized in the language and culture of one of Asia's cultural regions by means of schooling, whereas Visser was a self-made man who, at least initially, saw himself more as an artist than a researcher. In Asia, the United States and Europe, the further development of the art history of the various Asian cultural regions necessitated specializations. These days, art historical knowledge is evolving per cultural region, often thanks to the work of experts in Asia, whereby choice of subject and approach vary per region. All this allows the current curators of the Asian collection in the Rijksmuseum, who are part of this development, to determine what an artwork of importance is (seen from the specific cultural-historical context), without having to rely on a subjective intuition as in the early days of the VVAK. In the current presentation in the museum, however, the visualization of this principle (the selection and study of the objects from the specific cultural-historical context) proves difficult. The space in the Asian Pavilion is limited and the artworks are diverse. To create cohesion, a unifying element has been sought, which, even today, is what is 'perceived as beautiful in the Netherlands'. For the time being, it appears the days of Herman Visser are not quite over yet.