

Borobudur In Ruins: Representations of Antiquity in Visual Media.

The changing representations of the 8-9th century Buddhist temple Borobudur in Central Java have been described in relation to the political implementations of antiquity by the colonial state and in the post-independence phase of Indonesia, by successive aspiring totalitarianisms of the Soekarno and Suharto governments both obsessed with establishing programmatic representational style in their own eras. By looking at several moments in which individuals working in unison or independent of state-power produced these representations, changes in the governing aesthetics and investments in temple for these stake-holders come into focus. Aesthetics, more so than colonial and postcolonial politics, has determined the representational order of Borobudur in the modern period. If there is a primary politics of representation, it is in aesthetics and the struggle between the Enlightenment scientific impulse toward mimetic fidelity to the object and the Romantic abreaction. This struggle directly results in the varieties of treatments of the temple: preservation, restoration, or reconstruction. These responses, though usually assigned to the state in the critical discourse on nationalism and antiquities in Southeast Asia, are primarily aesthetic and internal to the act of representation of the object. Early efforts at producing images of Borobudur confronted the choice between showing the site as it appeared, or, as the artist and scholar imagined it was before decline. For the draughtsman, this was an apparently simpler choice than for the photographer, who, in many of the early cases, was required to play archaeologist and excavator too. Photography seemingly banishes the representational choices the artist has open, as the former process captures the scene as it appears, and, at the same time, requires from the object that it be made to appear in reality before

it can appear in representation. This separates the medium from that of the image created by the hand of an artist which first appears in the imagination for his genius to make subsequent representations. Though it has been proposed that a colonial impulse towards total mastery propelled the increased mimeticism in representational strategy, this impulse has its genesis in the conflict within the nascent discipline of art history which was purging from its rhetoric its Romantic inheritance in favor of scientific methodology and historicism, as it dealt with the legacy of Greek and Roman antiquity in Western aesthetics.

Within this contestation, photography took to the field late, but the debate was no less partisan for the passing of time, and photography was seized by the colonial state as a corrective to the earlier artistry of the draughtsman and the lithographer. Scientific method confronted aesthetic perception among the ruins of Borobudur, and photography was made the amanuensis of the scientist and the destroyer of the sentimentality and romanticism of the earlier period. By visiting the moments in which the visual representation of Borobudur was undertaken, in the early, middle, and late 19th century, and during the preservation projects of the 20th century, the changes in representation immanent in the selected images will be analyzed in the context of aesthetic debates within art history and the status of Borobudur as a representative site of Javanese antiquity.

Keywords: Borobudur, Java, Photography; Aesthetics; Ruins; Restoration; Preservation; Reconstruction; Romanticism; Science; Raffles; Adolph Schaefer; F.C. Wilsen; Isidore van Kinsbergen; Theo van Erp; Soekmono; UNESCO.

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