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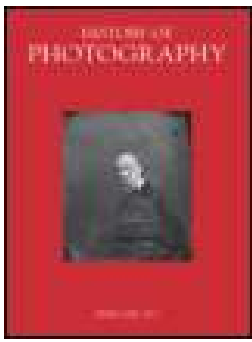
2021-04-30

Citation:

Maxwell, E. A. (2021). Thilly Weissenborn: Photographer of the Netherlands East Indies. *History of Photography*, 44 (2-3), pp.128-150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2021.1900682>.

Persistent Link:

<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/334262>



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To cite this article: Anne Maxwell (2021): Thilly Weissenborn: Photographer of the Netherlands East Indies, History of Photography, DOI: [10.1080/03087298.2021.1900682](https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2021.1900682)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03087298.2021.1900682>



Published online: 30 Apr 2021.



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Thilly Weissenborn: Photographer of the Netherlands East Indies

Anne Maxwell 

Thilly Weissenborn (1883–1964) was one of Indonesia's first woman photographers of significance. She was born in Java but schooled, like most Netherlands colonials, in The Hague. At the age of eighteen, Thilly returned to Java where she trained in the famous Atelier Kurkdjian before opening her own studio in the province of Preanger. For more than two decades, she supplied the colonial government's tourist bureau with photographs featuring Java's exotic-looking scenery and Balinese temples and dancers. She also supplied Dutch dignitaries, colonial officials and wealthy Dutch families with souvenir albums featuring scenic photographs and Bali's governors and royalty. I argue that although her growing obsession with light was a feature shared by many contemporary American photographers, her photographs differed from theirs by dint of their connection to Netherlands colonialism. I further argue that this is most evident in their focus on the beauty of the landscape and the seeming tranquillity of life under colonial rule, but also their strong allusions to the Mooi Indië style of paintings popular among Dutch settlers. In the twenty-year period leading up to Japan's invasion of Indonesia, Weissenborn's images were widely sought after and reproduced by the Dutch East Indies Tourist Bureau; however, their strong connection to Netherlands colonialism means that they are today not just regarded ambivalently by photographic historians, but are frequently overlooked.

Keywords: *Margarete Mathilde (Thilly) Weissenborn (1883–1964), Else Weissenborn (1877–1950), women's photography, tourist photography, Dutch East Indies, colonialism, Java, Atelier Kurkdjian, Ohannes Kurkdjian (1851–1903), Kassian Cephas (1845–1912), Mooi Indië style, Balinese dancers, Hindu temples*

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1 – Robert Cribb, 'International Tourism in Java, 1900–1930', *South East Asia Research*, 3:2 (1995), 195, fn 7. For a detailed account of the military subjugation of the Bali provinces of Lombok and Karangasem by the Netherlands government, see Willard Hanna, *A Brief History of Bali. Piracy, Slavery, Opium, and Guns: The Story of an Island Paradise*, Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing 2016, 97–104.

The early years of the twentieth century saw the European nations' ascendancy in the Pacific begin to weaken and American influences begin to slowly build, as new routes of trade and commerce formed across the region. Several Pacific locations were opened up to large-scale tourism for the first time. Among these was the island of Java, the most densely populated of the territories comprising what was then known as the Dutch East Indies. Java was opened in 1908, followed closely by Bali in 1914.¹ Java came under Netherlands rule in 1816 after the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC) (United East India Company) was dissolved and its possessions nationalised. The Dutch East India Company had been in Indonesia since 1603, and in 1621 it united with the West India Company to form the VOC. However, not all of Indonesia's main provinces came under colonial rule at the same time as Java. Aceh, Bali, Lombok and Borneo remained independent longer but all were subjugated by the end of the nineteenth century.

Despite the Dutch colonial government having placed tight restrictions on tourism throughout the nineteenth century, some western tourists had been allowed to visit Java in the period before large-scale tourism began. One of these



was Eliza Scidmore, who was widely known at the time as the grand dame of American travel writers. In her book *Java: Garden of the East*, Scidmore described Java as ‘the peerless gem in that magnificent empire of the Insul-Inde which winds about the equator like a garland of emeralds’.² She went on to say that it ‘is the ideal tropical island, the greenest, the most beautiful and the most exquisitely cultivated spot in the East, the most picturesque and satisfactory bit of tropics anywhere near the world’s great routes of travel’.³

Scidmore’s book no doubt alerted Western readers to Java’s attractions. However, the colonial government continued to maintain tight restrictions on Western tourism for at least another decade, and only relented when it realised that tourism was the colony’s sole industry turning a profit. In his 1995 article on the history of tourism in Java, Robert Cribb notes that the loosening of controls on tourism that occurred around this time was seen by the government as compatible with the so-called Ethical Policy that it introduced in 1901. According to Willard Hanna, this policy was aimed partially at pacifying Bali’s rebellious provinces through the protection of their traditional cultures.⁴ However, it simultaneously ‘emphasized the role of the colonial government in uplifting its subject peoples’ and, according to Cribb, also ‘diminished the reason for the colonial authorities to hide conditions in the Indies from foreign tourists’.⁵ To formalise the gains to be had from expanding this industry, the government founded a bureau of tourism (Officiële Vereeniging voor Touristenverkeer), whose remit included promoting Java internationally as a destination using magazines, newspaper advertisements, hotel posters and displays at international exhibitions.⁶

When Scidmore had travelled to Java, one of her destinations was the small town of Garut in the mountainous region of West Java. The town had long been a favourite holiday haunt of the country’s Dutch settlers because of its relatively cool climate and beautiful natural scenery. In addition to waterfalls, rivers and lakes, it boasted an impressive array of volcanic sights, including the magnificent Mount Cikurai, which at 2,821 metres was one of the highest mountains in Indonesia. It also had a hotel that catered to Western palates. All of these features made it an ideal spot for local and international tourism. At the time of Scidmore’s visit, the town had no photographic studios and it would be more than two decades before the first was established. This was ‘Lux Studio’, whose proprietor, Thilly Weissenborn, managed it successfully for more than twenty-five years, beginning in late 1916.⁷

Weissenborn’s photographic career appears somewhat anomalous when compared to most other professional women photographers of her generation working in and around the Pacific. This was because she was held prisoner by the Japanese during World War Two and, when the rejection of Dutch colonial rule finally came in 1945, the accompanying violence caused the destruction of her studio and much of her work. Furthermore, her technical training and her stylistic influences were mainly from the Netherlands, whereas the majority of Pacific-based women photographers of her generation were influenced by developments in Britain and North America. At the same time, like many other Pacific-based photographers, she benefited from the introduction of the halftone process that enabled photographic works made in Pacific domains to circulate widely, including in Europe. Indeed, she belonged to the generation that benefited from the adaptation of art photography to commercial magazine illustration and advertising, a generation that included photographers such as Anton Bruehl, who was trained specifically for advertising and magazine work at the Clarence White School in New York.⁸

Weissenborn developed a unique style of studio-based, commercial photography that satisfied her own standards of artistry while also appealing to tourists, art lovers and private individuals. If her work appealed to Dutch colonialists and many in the West it was not only because of its emphasis on romantic effects, but also because it was heavily inflected by nostalgia for the colonial way of life. It can

2 – Eliza Scidmore, *Java: The Garden of the East*, 2nd edn, New York: The Century Co. 1899, 344.

3 – Ibid.

4 – Hanna, *Brief History of Bali*, 115.

5 – Cribb, ‘International Tourism in Java’, 195.

6 – ‘Officiële Vereeniging voor Touristenverkeer’ translates literally as Official Association for Tourist Traffic, or Official Tourist Bureau.

7 – Weissenborn was the first major professional woman photographer known to have worked in the Netherlands East Indies, and to have owned and operated a studio. See Adrian Vickers, ‘Thilly Weissenborn: The Romance of the Indies’, available at <http://www.asia-pacific-photography.com/towardindependence/Weissenborn/index.htm> (accessed 15 July 2019).

8 – Gael Newton, ‘In the Spotlight: Anton Bruehl – Photographs 1920–1950’, *National Gallery of Australia Newsletter*, available at <https://nga.gov.au/exhibition/bruehl/default.cfm?MNUID=6> (accessed 15 July 2019).

be argued that Weissenborn was complicit with Dutch colonialism, but she also at times seems to break with the male tradition of photography that sexualised native women. Furthermore, her photographs were one of the major channels through which an inquisitive world first became aware of Indonesia's beautiful natural scenery, the great antiquity of its many temples, customs and religions and the natural grace and cultural vibrancy of its many peoples.

Today, Weissenborn's name is little known and seldom appears in books on photographic history. Only a few of the travel books that include her works were published in English and the fact that the reproductions of her photographs did not always carry credits has contributed to her eclipse. The only book in English to feature her work extensively was J. Z. Van Dyck's bilingual three hundred-page *Garut en Omstreken. Zwerftocchetten door de Preanger (Garut and Surroundings. Rambles through Preanger)*.⁹ Another reason for her eclipse, however, would seem to be her strong connection to Dutch Colonialism. As a member of the settler class, not only was she herself a beneficiary of this oppressive regime, but she actively contributed to it by highlighting the physical beauty of the landscape and the people while ignoring completely the brutal and coercive aspects of life in the colony. Finally, there is the destruction of most of her works to consider, her only surviving images being the photographs made for clients in earlier times, a small album of stock photographs and the few glass plates and rolls of film negatives rescued from her wrecked studio that she kept in her possession until the 1950s.

Margarete Mathilde (Thilly) Weissenborn (figure 1) was born in Kediri, East Java, in 1889. She was the youngest of six children born to Hermann Weissenborn and Paula Rossner. Her parents were of German birth but had become Dutch citizens before emigrating in the 1850s to Kediri, where Hermann became a coffee planter.

9 – J. Z. Van Dyck, *Garut en Omstreken. Zwerftocchetten door de Preanger*, Kolf & Co, Jakarta 1922. Some of the books in which Weissenborn's photographs featured include: *Netherlands Indies Album on the Occasion of the Government Jubilee of Queen Wilhelmina* (1923); *The Indies in Word and Image* (1924); *Atlas of the Netherlands Indies* (1926); *Cultural History of Java in Pictures* (1926); *Batavia Year Book* (1927); *Eastern Beauty* by Jan Poortenaar (1923); *Under Palms and Banyan Trees*; and *Bali* (1933) by Marie van Zeggelen. See Ernst Drissen, *Vastgelegd voor later: Indische foto's (1917-1942) van Thilly Weissenborn*, Amsterdam: Sijthoff 1983.

Figure 1. Photographer unknown, *Portrait of Thilly Weissenborn*, ca. 1913. Album 1978/023, Tropenmuseum. TM600053998.



For many years, the Weissenborns and their children led a privileged life on a large coffee plantation;¹⁰ however, in 1892, when Thilly was only three years old, this came to an end due to a severe downturn in the colony's economy, an event that prompted the family to return to The Hague. Several years later, her father and her oldest brother left to manage another coffee plantation in Tanganyika. Thilly and her sisters remained in The Hague with their mother, who sent them to learn photography while they were still at school. Thilly's eldest sister Else showed an early talent and went on to study photography in Paris before returning to The Hague in 1903 and opening a professional studio. It was here that Thilly learnt many of the skills that enabled her to later embark on a full-time career as a professional photographer.

In 1913, Thilly left her sister's studio and moved back to Java with her brother Theo, who had secured work there as an engineer. After a short stay in Bandung with another brother, Oscar, who had already moved to Java,¹¹ Thilly and Theo moved to Surabaya in East Java. Under the Dutch colonial government, Surabaya had become the largest city in the Dutch East Indies, its natural harbour serving as a military base and centre for Java's plantation and sugar economy. In 1913, Thilly obtained work, first as a photographic retoucher and then as a trainee photographer, in the famous Atelier Kurkdjian situated in Surabaya.

The Kurkdjian studio was known for the high quality of its productions, a feature that was in no small measure due to the talent of its founder, Ohannes Kurkdjian, who had enjoyed considerable success as a professional photographer in his homeland of Armenia and had already published a book of stereoscopic views before being forced to leave the country because of his radical political activities. He arrived in Surabaya in 1886 and wasted no time in setting up the largest and most successful studio in the colony.¹² The studio specialised in portraits of Europeans in and around Surabaya, but Kurkdjian also photographed Javanese women, the exotic tropical rain forests and the volcanoes of East Java.

Stylistically, Kurkdjian's work was indistinguishable from that of the other professional photographers who were beginning to open studios in Surabaya and the capital Jakarta, except for its larger format, greater clarity and finer finish. His portraits were typically printed on textured matte papers, and the papers used for his landscape photographs were frequently ferrotyped. This technique involved pressing a metal surface against a gelatine emulsion to make it take on the characteristics of a metal surface. In size, talent and prestige, the Kurkdjian studio rivalled some of the best in Europe. It was modelled on Ottoman-Armenian photographic studios such as Lekegian and Co. and Abudullah Frères. When Thilly worked there, she was one of thirty employees, only two of whom were women.

Although Kurkdjian himself died a decade before Weissenborn began working at the studio, she was constantly exposed to his images and consequently influenced by them. According to Vigen Galstyan, Kurkdjian's style was coloured by a penchant for asceticism and the sublime. His 1901 images of the Semeru and Bromo volcanoes, for example, emphasised the barrenness and hyperreal qualities of the scene, conveying a sense of anxiety quite unlike the armchair romanticism that characterises so many images of foreign scenes from that era. As Galstyan has noted, Weissenborn's works would evince a similar tendency to reach after the mythic or iconographic qualities of her subjects.¹³

Because of its standing, the studio attracted many talented international employees. Among them was the Englishman George P. Lewis, who managed the studio from 1897.¹⁴ Lewis's work helped acquaint Weissenborn with the style of imagery known as Mooi Indië, the name given to images of the Indies that were bathed in a romantic atmosphere. The term itself translates literally as 'Beautiful Indies', and was originally coined to describe a group of eleven reproductions of Du Chattel's watercolour paintings of East Indies scenes published in Amsterdam in 1930. The term, however, became a

10 – Coffee growing was introduced into Java in the early eighteenth century by the Dutch East India Company. See Bernard H. M. Vlekke, *The Story of the Dutch East Indies*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1945, 113.

11 – A family photograph taken in West Java about 1920 shows Thilly and three of her siblings (Oscar, Theo and Marie Da Paula and friends) gathered around a table enjoying a meal. See Unknown Photographer, ca 1910-1920, Tropenmuseum photograph TM60054000.

12 – Vigen Galstyan, 'Ohannes Kurkdjian's Duality', in *Garden of the East: Photography in Indonesia 1850s–1940s*, ed. Gael Newton, Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2014, 71. According to Galstyan, the book Kurkdjian published in Armenia coincided with the revolutionary uprising of 1878–82 organised by the Armenian Independence Movement, of which he was a supporter. The uprising failed, and its participants were subjected to repression by the Tsarist government.

13 – Galstyan, 'Ohannes Kurkdjian's Duality', 71.

14 – After Kurkdjian died in 1903, Lewis managed the studio, which was sold in 1915 to the pharmaceutical import company Mieling and Co, also based in Surabaya. See Drissen, *Vastgelegd voor later*, 12.

15 – Jane Llewellyn, 'Mooi Indië Exhibition', *Adelaide Review* (11 September 2014), available at <https://www.adelaidereview.com.au/arts/mooi-indie/> (accessed 15 July 2019).

16 – Susie Protschky, 'George Lewis and Mooi Indië Art', in *Garden of the East*, ed. Newton, 75. See also Rob Jongmans and Janneke Van Dijk, 'Photography from the Netherlands East Indies: Changing Perspectives, Different Views', in *Photographs of the Netherlands East Indies at the Tropenmuseum*, ed. Janneke van Dijk, Rob Jonmans, Anouk Mansfeld, Steven Vink and Pim Westerkamp, Amsterdam: Kit Publishers 2012, 27.

17 – For details of some of the more notable Mooi Indië painters of European origin, see Claire Holt, *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1967. Painters include F. J. du Chattel, Manus Bauer, Wijnand Otto Jan Nieuwkamp, Isaac Israel, P. A. J. Moojen, Carel Dake and Romualdo Locatelli. However, there were also some Chinese and Indonesian Mooi Indië painters, for example Raden Saleh.

18 – Sophie Junge, 'Groet uit Java: Picture Postcards and the Transnational Making of the Colony around 1900', *History of Photography*, 42:2 (2018), 171.

19 – Cribb, 'International Tourism', 203.

20 – Drissen, *Vastgelegd voor later*, 11–12.

focus of controversy in 1939 when the anti-colonialist critic Sindoesoedarsono Sudjojono used it to criticise painters who created picturesque views of the Indies to cater for the Western tourist market.¹⁵

But Mooi Indië had been around much earlier than Du Chattel in substance if not in name. It was a colonial genre with a long genealogy among European painters of hill stations in colonial Indonesia. According to Susie Protschky, Mooi Indië scenes typically contained mountains, palm trees and shimmering water,¹⁶ but Lewis and Weissenborn extended the subject matter to include other landscapes and scenes of local life.¹⁷ Sophie Junge has demonstrated the extent to which, around the turn of the century, postcards showing the same type of scenery were used by the East Indies government to help extol its own colonial policies and activities. As she puts it, such postcards 'produced an image first and foremost rendering a European claim to power comprehensible to metropolitan audiences as well as creating a positive political message of colonial annexation by nation states such as the Netherlands'.¹⁸ According to Robert Cribb, in the 1920s and 1930s the colonial government's tourist bureau employed many 'blijvers' photographers (the term for the Dutch who stayed), many of whom like Weissenborn and Lewis were advocates of the Mooi Indië style because of its compatibility with Dutch colonialism.¹⁹ The blijvers only numbered approximately 210,000 in 1920, as against thirty-six million Javanese. Nevertheless, they were wealthy and powerful enough to be a significant cultural force and it was their voices that the tourist bureau listened to.

If both Weissenborn and Lewis courted the taste for Mooi Indië, it was no doubt partly because it was financially rewarding. It appealed to the Western visitors who came to the country during the boom years of Javanese tourism and served to justify the colonial project to both the settlers themselves and the people back home in The Hague. Despite their shared passion for this genre, however, the mood of Weissenborn's photographs differed notably from Lewis's. Where he was prone to create dramatic images, she sought calmer, more tranquil effects. For example, he took many photographs of the various volcanic cones in Java as they were erupting, rather than capturing them in their quieter moments, which was Weissenborn's tendency. He also frequently placed his camera closer to the action and in more dangerous positions than she. His photograph of the Tangkoeran Prahoe volcano in West Java (figure 2) is a case in point. It was taken from a position just above the erupting crater with its noxious plumes of gas rising high above the camera into the bright evening sky. The sharp downward tilt of the camera creates the impression of plunging into the seething cauldron below, an effect arguably in keeping with the adventure tourist idea. By contrast, Weissenborn's photograph of Mount Bromo, a small but active cinder cone in East Java, is taken from several miles away and shows just a small trace of smoke visible in the distance, an effect more in keeping with the idea of Java as a place of calm and picturesque tranquillity, an approach consonant with the preferred colonialist view of the country by tourists and Dutch government alike (figure 3). As a woman relying on the income for her work, Weissenborn's photographs had to please her market.

Weissenborn's career took a propitious turn in late 1916, when she was appointed to manage a photographic studio in Garut – propitious because just over three years later, she was not just managing the studio but had also become its owner.²⁰ The story of how she came into possession of the studio reflects the close-knit nature of the European community in Java, and also the close connection between Weissenborn's photography and the peripheral enterprises that were springing up in tandem with the landscape-oriented tourism that was flourishing in the Garut region. The key peripheral enterprise that prompted the building of the photographic studio and Weissenborn's appointment to the position of manager was the large health resort in the form of a grand hotel that was built near Garut between 1913 and 1920. Resorts and spas



Figure 2. George Lewis, 'Eruption of the Tangkoeran Prahoe volcano, Java', ca. 1910. Silver gelatine print. Leo Haks Collection, National Gallery of Australia. NGA 191399.

in volcanic areas were enjoying a burst of popularity right across the Pacific because their hot mineral waters were thought to have healing properties, and Garut had these in abundance.

The person who built this health resort was an enterprising physician from Utrecht named Denis Gerard Mulder. Mulder came in 1912 to take advantage of the town's growing reputation as a tourist destination and potential health centre primarily for wealthy foreigners. A year later, he began building the hotel that was also a recreational complex and recovery centre for his patients. The Sanatorium Garut, as the joint hotel and health complex became known, was on Ngamplang hill, about four kilometres from Garut, and specialised in treating diseases using sunlight and ultraviolet lamps, a practice Mulder called 'total light therapy'. He believed that the tropical sunlight around Garut contained particularly strong

21 – Denis Mulder, 'Malaria', *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 97:6 (8 August 1931), 413. See also Denis Mulder, *The Leper's Cross*, Bandoeng: Maks and Van der Klits 1930, which contains an account of his campaign against leprosy in Java. On Mulder's later career, see Lewis Pyenson, *Empire of Reason: Exact Sciences in Indonesia, 1840–1940*, Leiden, E. J. Brill 1989, 172.



Figure 3. 'Photo Lux' (Thilly Weissenborn), 'Mount Bromo', 1920. Silver gelatin print. Album 271, Tropenmuseum. TM 60002556.

22 – According to Drissen, Mulder met Weissenborn through his sisters and, recognising her talent, he brought her to Garut because he saw a future for her as a photographer. See Drissen, *Vastgelegd voor later*, 12.

23 – It is not known whether Mulder sold the studio to Weissenborn or gifted it to her as there appear to be no surviving records relating to the change of ownership.

24 – Drissen, *Vastgelegd voor later*, 9 and 12. Drissen refers to Weissenborn as his aunt, but in fact she and his parents were simply close friends.

25 – Jongmans and Van Dijk, 'Photography from the Netherlands East Indies', 27.

ultraviolet rays that could be used to treat malaria. He also used radium and ultraviolet lamps to treat leprosy.²¹

In 1915, the sanatorium opened to the public, with Dr Mulder acting as both director and physician. As part of his enterprise, he also built a large shop in Garut, with a pharmacy downstairs and a photography studio on the top floor, aiming to capitalise on the growing numbers of tourists flocking to the area. He called it Mulder's NV Garutsche Apotheek en Handelonderneming [Garut Pharmacy and Trading Company Ltd] and employed Weissenborn to manage the upstairs studio.²² This relationship lasted from late 1916 until 1920, when Mulder was appointed to the prestigious position of Minister for the Arts for West Java. The ministerial headquarters was located in Bandung, so Mulder was obliged to sell his sanatorium and vacate the pharmacy. When he left Garut, ownership of the studio passed to Weissenborn, who immediately renamed it 'Photo Lux'.²³ According to Hans Drissen, the name reflected her own fast-growing obsession with light in her works.²⁴

That Weissenborn should develop a fixation with light is not so surprising given that the Kurkdjian Studio under the management of Lewis regularly used light effects to project a view of the Netherlands East Indies as a serene tropical Paradise.²⁵ In Europe and North America, light had come to form the basis of the fashionable radium treatments being offered by many health experts, including her colleague Dr Mulder. Even more significantly, it had recently become a major international focus of landscape painting, a development that had been brought to the fore by Impressionism. Also, light was integral to photography. As Nicola

Teffer has pointed out, much photography at that time was premised on the idea of light's 'magical transferring' of what was real into a representation. She adds that the emphasis that many people placed on the indexicality of the photograph, as part of the push to highlight the medium's unique properties, actually harboured 'a desire for a material, haptic contact' with the real,²⁶ an experience that was widely thought to be exclusive to visual media. While the desire for haptic contact had been important to photography since its beginnings, what was new was the way that a minority of early twentieth-century photographers like Weissenborn were using light's haptic qualities to attain the sort of beatific effects beneficial to the growth of tourism and colonialism.

Drissen refers to Weissenborn as a 'calligrapher with light'.²⁷ According to him, she knew how to obtain luminous effects by working tonal contrasts into her subjects and overexposing parts of the negative.²⁸ In landscape photography especially, the emphasis was on creating tiny dots of light that appeared to glow when seen next to grey tones. Specialist papers had recently come on to the market for this purpose, but such was Weissenborn's skill that she was often able to achieve luminous effects using bright backlighting of her subjects only.

Weissenborn's special skill with light is evident in all of her portraits, including her photographs of Balinese temple dancers, but it is arguably at its most intense in the landscapes she produced of West Java, especially those featuring the beaches, lakes, waterfalls and mist-covered mountains. An example is Weissenborn's photograph of the beach at Cikelet (figure 4). She has framed the bay from an elevated position to capture the graceful curve of the coastline as it

26 – Nicola Teffer, 'Touching Images: Photography and Medical Images and the Incarnation of Light', *Photographies*, 5:2 (2012), 121–33.

27 – Drissen, *Vastgelegd voor later*, 9.

28 – *Ibid.*, 9.



Figure 4. 'Photo Lux' (Thilly Weissenborn), 'Beach at Cikelet, Java', 1921. Silver gelatine print. Leo Haks Collection, National Gallery of Australia. NGA 177125.

sweeps towards the mist-shrouded distance, its perfect symmetry broken only by the dark line of a pier jutting out into the shimmering carpet of water. The photograph has been taken in the soft, silvery light of evening, and the scene is one of tranquillity. The tide is out, and three tiny figures stand on the smooth, wet sand far below, emphasising the immense size of the beach, while the pencil-thin line of white surf is so iridescent that even in the very far distance its brilliance remains undiminished.

Light is equally central in Weissenborn's photograph of a waterfall near Garut (figure 5). Gazing at the small human figure at the focal point of the image, the eye is caught by the bright shards of light cast up by the plunging water and the smaller flecks of light that seem to dance over the lush vegetation. The image highlights the vastness of Bali's rain forests, but Weissenborn's main focus is the intensity of the region's natural light as it dances off every small leaf and drop of water. Similarly, Weissenborn's photograph of a lake captures the reflections of dark tree branches overhanging the lake's smooth, mirror like surface (figure 6).

Figure 5. 'Photo Lux' (Thilly Weissenborn), 'Waterfall in Bali', 1925. Silver gelatine print. Leo Haks Collection, National Gallery of Australia. NGA 177099.





Figure 6. 'Photo Lux' (Thilly Weissenborn), 'Lake scene', 1921. Silver gelatine print. Album 270, Tropenmuseum. TM 60002578.

Finally, in her photograph of the flooded paddy fields of Tjisoeroepan (figure 7), we see the gently sloping plain with its hundreds of water-filled steps receding into the distance and the young stalks of rice appearing like small stipples on the water's bright surface. In all three images, it is as if Weissenborn's subject is as much the light as the water bringing life to the plain and food to the people of Preanger province.

A different approach to light is evident in an aerial photograph, held at the Tropenmuseum, showing Java's highest mountain peaks poking through clouds, possibly taken when Weissenborn was departing the country by aeroplane in 1956. What is striking is the way she has captured the iridescent glow of the light as it touches the clouds below. On the reverse side is written the simple phrase 'Tropisch Liché', suggesting that she was not just interested in showing that photography was an art of light, but also wanted to capture the special quality of the light that was distinctive to that part of the world.²⁹

While working with Mulder, Weissenborn had attracted private commissions, many of them for portraits of Bali's royal families, and as a sideline she had created a large body of landscape photographs in the Mooi Indië tradition, mostly of the

29 – Tropenmuseum, album no. 1978, 65. The golden light of the tropics was frequently mentioned in nineteenth and early twentieth-century travel literature, for example: 'The sea was calm as a lake, and the glorious sun of the tropics threw a flood of golden light over all'. Alfred Russel Wallace, *The Malay Archipelago*, London: Macmillan & Co. 1869, 317.

Figure 7. 'Photo Lux' (Thilly Weissenborn), 'View of the high plateau of Garut and the Tikoeraj, on the way to Kamodan', 1910–25. Silver gelatine print. Tropenmuseum. TM 60002520.



picturesque scenery around Garut. After Lux Studio opened for business in 1920, these photographs attracted the attention of the Officieel Toeristenbureau voor Nederlandsch-Indië, who believed that Weissenborn's landscape imagery would appeal to the Western demand for far-away, exotic places where the modernisation that had accompanied the industrial revolution had not yet taken hold, but would also serve to convince the people back home in the Netherlands that the colonial authorities were managing to keep outbreaks of rebellion under control while simultaneously converting the colony into a desirable tourist destination. Consequently, the next decade saw Weissenborn working as an agent for the bureau while also fulfilling a wide range of private commissions.³⁰

When Scidmore came to Garut in the 1890s, travelling by boat as a tourist was still something only the wealthy could afford.³¹ Among the famous people who visited Garut in the early 1900s were Charlie Chaplin and King Leopold of Belgium. After 1918, places like Java gained added cachet as offering refuge from the devastation of World War One. Costs had also moderated, and rumours about the region's natural beauty had leaked out with the result that the numbers of tourists swelled. By 1920, cruise ships full of tourists began arriving in Java regularly from the west coast of the USA, travelling via Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore; other ships came north from Sydney or made the long voyage east from Europe, especially England, Holland and Germany.

There was also a massive expansion of photographic opportunities. The first modern tourist guidebooks containing photographs of the region appeared in 1913, but by the immediate postwar years, a large amount of government-sponsored promotional material was being sent to Europe, much of it in the form of printed books, magazines and pamphlets featuring photographs. Taking charge of Lux Studio in 1916, Weissenborn had been well positioned to benefit from the resulting boom in government-sponsored tourist photography.

Between 1916 and the mid 1920s, Weissenborn's favourite photographic haunts were around Garut, but she also photographed many other places in Java, including Sukabumi, Tasikmalaya, Bogor and Pameungpeuk on Java's south-west coast. Among the many iconic landscapes she photographed was the Cimanuk River, which runs like a silver ribbon over the wide plain surrounding

30 – An example of the colonial government's tourist publicity was a booklet called *Come to Java Batavia*, printed in 1923 by G. Kolff. A copy is held in the Cornell University Library, The Carl A. Kroch Library Rare and Manuscript Collections, DS646.18.V48, 1923?

31 – Adrian Vickers, *Bali: A Paradise Created*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1989, 95.

the smoking volcano of Papandayan. Another favourite subject was a broad central plain in East Java known as the 'sea of sand', which featured Mount Bromo. Other landscape views were made in Pasuruan, Bandung and Cianjur,³² featuring native dwellings and villagers going about their business in the midst of lush rain forest settings and fertile plains and valleys. As well as supplying the government with images for publication in travel pamphlets, she produced more than two hundred postcards for the Netherlands Indies Hotel Association, and folders of large-format photographs that were printed as photogravures accompanied by Dutch and English text for various travel magazines and books.³³

Weissenborn also received private commissions to take photographs of the important personages, events and buildings associated with the Dutch East Indies colonial government. For instance, she photographed Governor-General Fock's visit to Garut, producing an album that is now held in the Tropenmuseum collection, while Governor-General van Limburg Stirum asked her to photograph Buitenzorg Palace and the Cipanas estate near Sindanglaya.³⁴ She additionally compiled albums with selections from her own works for various statesmen and imperial visitors, as well as for private individuals who were leaving Garut for the homeland and wanted them as souvenirs.³⁵

Weissenborn's landscape photographs may have proved a boon to the colonial government's tourist bureau in the early 1920s, but by the late 1920s the bureau's focus had shifted to Bali's princes, temples and dancing girls. As Cribb explains, the emphasis in tourist photography was now on culture rather than landscape: 'Bare breasts, barbaric rituals, and mysterious temples displaced rolling hills, bubbling pools, and lofty volcanoes in the tourist iconography of the Indies'.³⁶ The tourists' interest had also shifted from Java to Bali. Cribb adds, 'The grail of this new tourist focus was authenticity, and the idea of Bali as an unspoilt relic of earlier times began to take hold'.³⁷ To the extent that authenticity meant the incorporation of traditional indigenous elements of Indonesian culture, this shift was in keeping with the Ethical Policy and its goal of appeasement; however, it also had to do with the growing numbers of American tourists and visitors to the region. American influence in the region was especially strong in the 1930s as a result of many wealthy Americans seeking to escape the dismal realities of the economic depression that followed the share market crash of 1929. High-profile Americans who visited Bali at this time included the anthropologist Margaret Mead, who came with Gregory Bateson in 1936 to undertake anthropological work on Balinese dance forms; the millionaires Barbara Hutton and Robert and Louise Kote, who established the Kuta Beach Hotel in 1936; and Mexican artist and journalist Miguel Covarrubias, who helped put Bali on the US map when he wrote and published the book *Island of Bali* (1937) and produced a painting of a beautiful-looking young Balinese woman for the cover of the August 1936 issue of *Vanity Fair*. Increasing numbers of American photographers also came to Bali in the 1930s and 1940s, most of them connected to the increasingly global tourist industry, and it seems likely that Weissenborn extended her repertoire of subjects and techniques as a result of exposure to their works as well as the tourist bureau's emphasis on culture. The group includes Rosa Covarrubias, James Belo, Andre Roosevelt, Canadian photographer Colin McPhee and Franklin P. Knott, who produced over twenty colour photographs of Bali, including of young Balinese temple dancers, for the March 1928 issue of *National Geographic Magazine*. But this was not the first time that Weissenborn had been exposed to American developments in photography. The Eastman Kodak Company, for example, was active in the Dutch East Indies before World War One, appointing Atelier Kurkdjian its sole agent in East Java. Kodak had also provided developing, printing and enlarging services for many of the Kurkdjian studio's customers.³⁸

Many of the photographs that Weissenborn had produced in the 1920s turned out to be suited to the new emphasis on 'culture', and were consequently still being

32 – Jojoer Ria Sitompul, 'Visual and Textual Images of Women: 1930s Representations of Colonial Bali as Produced by Men and Women Travellers', PhD dissertation, University of Warwick 2008, 108.

33 – Drissen, *Vastgelegd voor later*, 15.

34 – Johann Paul Van Limbourg was Governor General of the Dutch East Indies from 1916 to 1921. Dirk Fock held the same office from 1921 to 1926. Buitenzorg Palace was the Governor General's official residence, while Cipanas Palace served as a resort for the colony's successive Governor Generals.

35 – See Tropenmuseum website, available at <http://collectie.tropenmuseum.nl/default.aspx?ccid=406074&lang=> (accessed 20 February 2018).

36 – Cribb, 'International Tourism', 204.

37 – Ibid. According to Cribb, the tourist market for places like Garut that specialised in volcanic activity and landscape scenes did not benefit as much as Bali from the boom that began in the 1920s, partly because the large cruise ships that starting calling at this time did not allow for trips to inland areas, and partly because Garut's volcanic fields and its landscape views could not compete with those in other parts of the Pacific.

38 – Hedi Hinzler, 'Onnes Kurkdjian. Viewmaker and Entrepreneur', available at <http://www.asia-pacific-photography.com/towardindependence/Kurkdjian/index.htm> (last accessed 19 February 2018).

used by the East Indies Tourist Bureau well into the 1930s. In 1920 she had travelled to Bali and Bogor, to Pasuran in 1925 and to Flores in 1927. On these expeditions, she had made numerous portraits, including images of Indonesian Royalty, and recorded temples and religious ceremonies. She had also photographed the young Balinese women dancers who performed in local festivals. Weissenborn paid careful attention to their lavish costumes, jewellery, delicate facial features and graceful body movements. An example is her image of a young dancer wearing a richly beaded costume and spectacular headdress, her small, dainty hands caught in the ritual gesture known as Nyempurit, where the thumb comes to touch the middle finger (figure 8).

One can contrast this and other similar images by Weissenborn with the sexualised photographs of young Balinese women produced by male photographers. An example is the 1920 book *Bali* by the German writer Gregor Krause, which was reprinted in many languages and abounds with stereotypical images of bare-breasted Balinese women. According to Vickers, Krause's book 'had everything needed to entice those dreaming of an Eden outside the despoiled decadent Europe which they knew'.³⁹ In contrast, he says, Weissenborn 'avoided the prurience given to images of Bali's bare-breasted women and was concerned with showing the women's dignity and self-possession'.⁴⁰ This argument justifiably

39 – Vickers, *Bali*, 99.

40 – Vickers, 'Thilly Weissenborn'.

Figure 8. 'Photo Lux' (Thilly Weissenborn), 'Temple dancer', 1920s. Cropped photogravure. Leo Haks Collection, National Gallery of Australia. NGA 182482.



applies to Weissenborn's photograph of the young dancer just referred to – the look she casts at the camera is one of immense reserve – but it does not apply to all of the photographs of Balinese women she produced in the 1920s since there were some that echoed Krause's in featuring naked breasts. Take, for example, her image of two women walking along a roadside (figure 9). The tallest one is carrying an enormous earthenware pot on her head and holding her sarong in a way that suggests that she has been asked to lower it to expose her breasts. The other woman is shorter and one of her breasts is visible above her sarong, the other hidden by her dangling headscarf. The almost protective gesture formed by her lifted hand and the scowl she directs at the camera surely point to her discomfort at being photographed thus, as does the proud stance and contemptuous facial expression of her companion. No less problematic is Vicker's claim concerning the symbolic significance of the young Balinese temple dancer. He observes that, seen through Weissenborn's camera, the dancer's charm and reserve is no longer that of a specific person but of a whole nation:

She does not look directly into the camera. Her eyes turn mysteriously, as if she has the inscrutability of the whole of Asia under her gorgeously carved and elaborate head-dress [...] her charm comes partly from the sexual distance implied by her youth, as if she not only held the promise of hidden

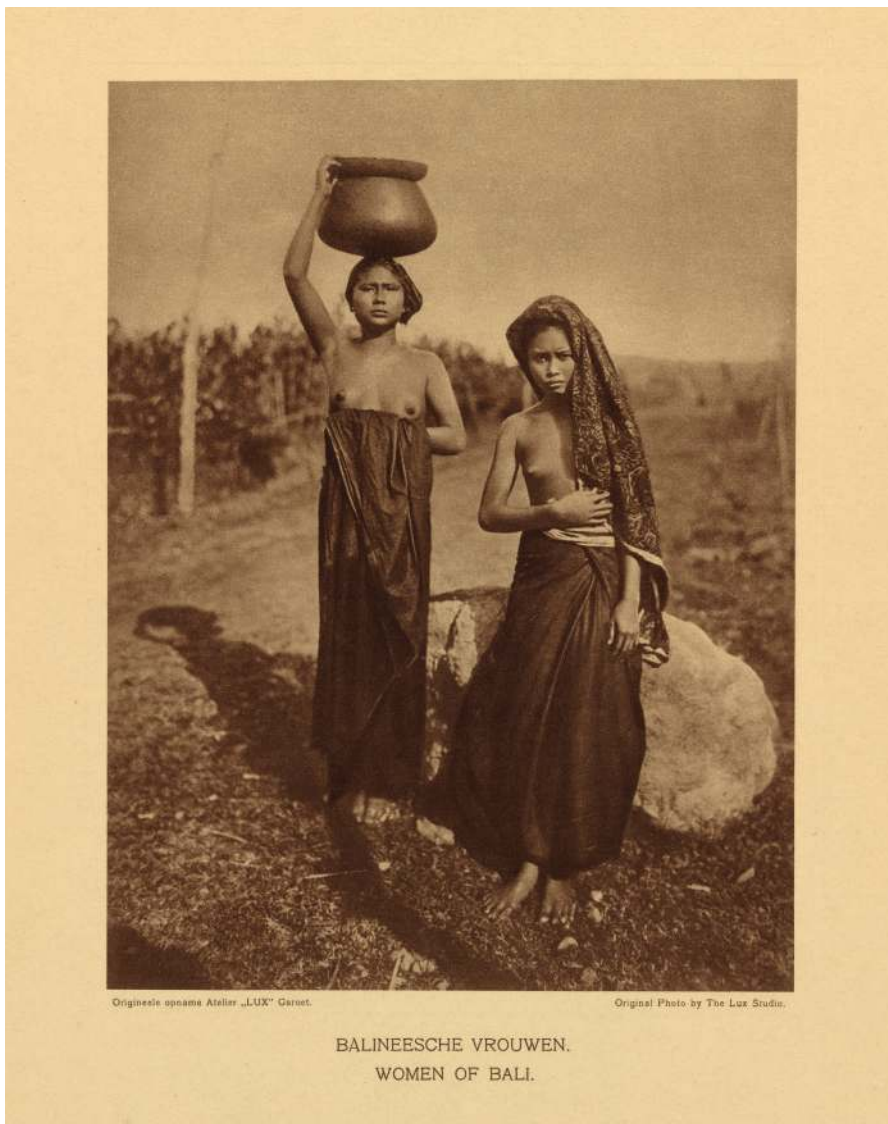


Figure 9. 'Photo Lux' (Thilly Weissenborn), 'Two women', 1920s. Cropped photogravure. National Gallery of Australia. NGA 182489. Original in the Tropenmuseum.

41 – Vickers, *Bali*, 103.

pleasures and fecundity, but maintained the remoteness of an ancient yet young civilization. The flower she holds, like the gold flowers in her head-dress, speak of the natural lushness of the island, and the decoration of her dress implies that this natural lushness is closely linked to cultural riches.⁴¹

42 – Jojo Ria Sitompul, 'Visual and Textual Images of Women', 115.

Vicker's emphasis on the 'mysterious' quality of the dancer's gaze is arguably yet another example of colonial racism and sexism, repeating as it does the Orientalist cliché in which the colonised bodies of Asian women function for western spectators as prized gateways to the mysterious East while also displaying sexism towards the photographer herself. Against this, Jojo Ria Sitompul sees the dancer's look as one of oppression, the implication being that because the camera is being operated by a member of the colonising class, the dancer has no way of stopping the act of being photographed or even changing the manner in which she is being recorded. Sitompul also points out that the dancer's left hand is holding a flower and her right hand is positioned on her chest, signalling that her breasts are covered.⁴² For Sitompul, Weissenborn's highlighting of this gesture is significant since it suggests that she was attempting to effect a major change in the way the tourist industry as a whole was approaching the portrayal of the nation's indigenous women. As Sitompul herself notes, 'As opposed to her counterparts, such as Krause, who frequently showed Bali in the context of a benevolent colonialism and the erotic and exotic Balinese women, Weissenborn introduced an elemental transformation in the European way of seeing the region' that 'ha[d] to do with the female bosom'.⁴³ She notes, for example, that compared to the male photographers, Weissenborn photographed fewer bathing scenes, topless women and bare-breasted men. She further notes that to the extent that Weissenborn's idea of the seated dancing girl whose breasts were covered was a new variation on the dancing girl image – one that lent respectability to Indonesian women – it helped bring about a transformation of the way Bali's women were represented in subsequent tourist publications: 'The barebreasted women seem to disappear to be replaced by the dancing girl. From this time onward, a range of magazines, books and pamphlets produced by tourist authorities and travel writers were designed to attract travellers to the East Indies by showing the exotic but civilized Bali'.⁴⁴ Because bare-breasted native women had long come to be seen by the West as synonymous with oppression and lack of agency, this in turn would have had implications for how the outside world came to view the Indies and how the native population regarded itself.

43 – *Ibid.*, 109.

44 – *Ibid.*, 116.

Another example of Weissenborn's work at this time, albeit one that was less radical, is her 1923 portrait of Gusti Bagus Jelantik (1887–1968), the king of the Karangasem province of Bali (figure 10). The young king was the adopted son of the old ruler of Karangasem, whose line had ruled the kingdom since the sixteenth century but who had ceded his sovereignty to the Netherlands in the late nineteenth century. Jelantik came to the throne at the age of twenty-one in 1908, when the traditional kings had lost most of their power. Most Balinese rulers, including Jelantik, became part of the colonial bureaucratic elite, entrenching themselves within the Netherlands system and growing wealthy from it, just as the princes of Java had done during the earlier phase of Dutch colonial rule. Indeed, according to Willard Hanna, Jelantik's father Gusti Gede Jelantik, who had ruled before him, had profited handsomely from land taxes and the trade in opium. Gustus Bagus Jelantik was in fact the last Raja of Karangasem, and the beginning of his rule coincided with the colonial government's formal introduction of those aspects of the ethical policy aimed at appeasing the people from the rebellious provinces. However, as Hanna has explained, the ethical policy may have allowed him to reintroduce traditional elements of the culture, but only as long as these 'did not interfere with the proper functioning of the new Dutch Residency programs'.⁴⁵ Although he was a favourite of the Dutch, his loyalties lay no less with Bali's indigenous people. A man of strong intellect, he worked to preserve the local culture, including the traditional caste

45 – Hanna, *Brief History of Bali*, 188.



Figure 10. 'Photo Lux' (Thilly Weissenborn), 'Gustus Bagus Jelantik', 1920s. Silver gelatine print. Tropenmuseum. TM 60022917.

system, and to revitalise Balinese religion. He built the famous water palace known as Taman Ujung, which combined Balinese, Dutch and Chinese architectural features, and he helped restore Bali's temples, recovering many of the Muslim elements that had formerly added beauty and richness to their designs.⁴⁶ Hence, Hanna's observation that Jelantik was required to play 'the dual role of Raja and Regent, the rather subtle distinctions being at times lost upon the incumbent and his subjects'.⁴⁷ Weissenborn's photograph captures his youthful appearance. His facial features are strongly highlighted, adding to his air of glamour and authority as he directs a confident gaze back at the camera. Weissenborn also makes a display of his costume, which was cleverly contrived to appease both the indigenous Balinese community and the colonial authorities with whom he was constantly obliged to compromise. In the photograph he wears a widely folded headcloth with a decorative gold flower at one side and a lavishly brocaded breastcloth, while underneath is a European-style coat with Balinese gold edging. Even his chair seems to play a bipartisan role with its sheer extravagance of style. The fact that Weissenborn allowed her portrait of Jelantik to be used by the Dutch East Indies government as proof of their systematic and ongoing co-option of Balinese royalty demonstrates her willingness to participate in the colonial process.

46 – See H. G. C. Schutte Nordholte, *The Spell of Power: A History of Balinese Politics*, Leiden: KITLV Press, 1996, 163 and 166.

47 – Hanna, *Brief History of Bali*, 188.

One of the many temples that Weissenborn photographed while in Bali was the Sangsit temple, with its ornately carved gateway (figure 11). Built at the time of the Majapahit empire in the fifteenth century as a place to worship Dewi Sri, the goddess who protects rice and irrigation, it had since become Sangsit's main village temple. In photographing it, Weissenborn set her camera back among the surrounding trees to capture the temple's picturesque qualities. By framing the temple with tree fronds, she also conveyed the idea of nature merging with culture, which was the temple's original theme, with its colourful painted carvings mostly portraying rambling plants and floral motifs. Other temples she photographed were the Soebak Temple in northern Bali, Temple bij Bangli, Temple te Bilabadjang and De Borobudur Temple, which were all consonant with the ethical policy's concept of 'authenticity'.

At the height of her career, Weissenborn was receiving commissions from the Dutch East Indies colonial government including its tourist bureau, but also from scientists, private individuals, businesses, book publishers and magazines. Many of the landscapes and outdoor scenes she made earlier in her career ended up in important travel books.⁴⁸ Because her work was well known to travellers through these promotional publications, she had little need for art salon promotion. To keep up with the heavy demand for her work, she employed a small team of Sundanese women, all of whom she trained herself as photographic assistants.⁴⁹

There is no firm information about the labour conditions of the women Weissenborn employed, but there was certainly a distinct social hierarchy based largely on race between these women and Weissenborn as their employer, with very different levels of education and standards of living also dividing them.⁵⁰ Elsbeth Locher-Scholten has noted that the class divide between Dutch settler women and the indigenous women was such that each group even had its own women's movement.⁵¹ Unlike Dutch women living in the East Indies, Indonesian women during the colonial period had to work for a living. This need to work was exacerbated by the Javanese traditional customs of adat, unwritten laws which prevented women from inheriting land or obtaining rights over marital property in divorce.⁵² Given this strong class and racial divide, it is unlikely that Weissenborn's employees viewed working in a photography studio as connoting liberated womanhood as was the case in Europe and the USA. On the other hand, the female assistants under Weissenborn's employ probably enjoyed less arduous work conditions than the large numbers of Javanese women who laboured on plantations and in factories.⁵³

48 – These included the travel guide *Come to Java*, issued regularly in the 1920s by the travel bureau at World Peace. Photographs by Weissenborn also featured in the *Illustrated Weekly Magazine for the Netherlands* and the three hundred-page *Rambles through Preanger* (1922 edition). See Drissen, *Vastgelegd voor later*, 15.

49 – Drissen, *Vastgelegd voor later*, 7.

50 – Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, *Women and the Colonial State: Essays on Gender and Modernity in the Netherlands Indies 1900–1942*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2000, 49.

51 – *Ibid.*, 21–22.

52 – Leslie Dwyer, 'Building a Monument: Intimate Politics of "Reconciliation" in Post-1965 Bali', in *Transitional Justice: Global Mechanisms and Local Realities After Genocide and Mass Violence*, ed. Alexander Laban Hinton, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers 2010, 238.

53 – Locher-Scholten, *Women and the Colonial State*, 50.

Figure 11. 'Photo Lux' (Thilly Weissenborn), 'Sangsit temple', 1920s. Silver gelatine print. Tropenmuseum. TM60002500.



In December 1941, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour signalled the outbreak of war in the Pacific. Within a month, Japanese troops were landing on the beaches of Java. Along with other Dutch colonists, Weissenborn was rounded up and interned in a Japanese prisoner of war camp, making it impossible for her to continue to work. She was imprisoned until 1945, when Japan surrendered, and the prisoners were released. It was her intention to return to Garut and resume her business, but this was not to be.

The Japanese surrender had left a power vacuum, with various Indonesian political factions fighting for control, and two days later, on 17 August 1945, the Indonesian Nationalist Party proclaimed independence. The Allied powers resisted, ushering in a period of violence that became known as *Bersiap*, with protests and uprisings against the restoration of Dutch colonial rule. Although small, the town of Garut was not spared this violence. In the latter part of 1945, buildings associated with Dutch colonialism were set alight across the town. The fires destroyed the Lux Studio and with it most of Weissenborn's formidable archive of negatives and photographs.⁵⁴ Any dreams she might have had of returning to her studio were crushed in 1949, when the Netherlands government finally recognised Indonesian independence and agreed to vacate the territory.⁵⁵

The colonisers' way of life had come to an end. The local people's discontent with colonial rule had been building for the previous twenty years, and the Japanese invasion had accelerated the drive to independence. Looked at this way, the work produced by Studio Lux portrayed a lost and unreal world — lost because it now belonged to the past, and unreal because it only ever existed in the minds of Westerners who were largely oblivious to the views of the nationalists and indigenous Indonesians. As noted by Robert Elson, few Westerners were aware that local intellectuals had been developing the concept of Indonesia as a nation-state for many years prior to 1945, setting the stage for the triumph of the independence movement.⁵⁶ Or, if they knew, they chose to ignore what this would mean for the privileged lifestyle to which they had grown accustomed. When the violent events of 1945–46 unfolded and independence came at last in 1949, it was a shock from which many of the country's settlers never recovered.

The Netherlands soldier and amateur photographer W. Viallé rescued forty-eight of Weissenborn's glass plate negatives from the fire that devastated her Garut studio, and these are now held in the Tropenmuseum collection.⁵⁷ The same museum holds a scrapbook of family photographs, including the formal portrait of young Thilly reproduced here. Also held by the Tropenmuseum is an album received from her estate after her death. Album 271, as it is now called, is generally understood to be an album of the studio's stock photographs, which clients and publishers probably browsed before placing orders.⁵⁸ Its value lies in the fact that it is probably the only album to showcase the full range of work she produced over the twenty-five years that Studio Lux was operating.

The Tropenmuseum also holds numerous family albums of picture postcards that both document settlers' lives in the Indies before independence and reflect their romantic affection for Mooi Indië. Leafing through these albums, one is struck by the opulence of the colonial homes and the comfort in which most Dutch households lived. Nowhere in the photographs or in Lux Studio productions is there a sign of the poverty, suffering and disease that existed on these islands, or of the repressive nature of Dutch rule.⁵⁹ Nor is there any sign of the political tensions that eventually resulted in the overthrow of the Netherlands colonial regime. Indeed, very few local indigenous people are to be seen although all of these households had vast armies of servants and the colony's whole economy depended on indigenous labour. As one commentator has remarked,

54 – See Annouck Mansfeld, 'Thilly Weissenborn (1889–1964)', in *Photographs of the Netherlands East Indies*, ed. Van Dijk et al., 28.

55 – See Timothy Lindsay, *The Romance of K'tut Tantri and Indonesia: Texts and Scripts*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press 1997, 169–70.

56 – Robert Elson, *The Idea of Indonesia: A History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008, 1–12.

57 – See Jongmans and Van Dijk, 'Photography from the Netherlands East Indies', 28.

58 – *Ibid.*

59 – Digitised copies of some of these albums and the photographs to be found on their pages can be found on the Tropenmuseum website, available at <http://www.fotozoektfamilie.nl/gallery/> (accessed 25 April 2020).

60 – See Janneke Van Dijk, 'Official and Social Life', in *Photographs of the Netherlands East Indies*, ed. Van Dijk et al., 69.

such photographs, far from recording the negative side of Dutch colonialism, have helped to bathe it in a halcyon glow.⁶⁰

Weissenborn seems to have had warm relations with many of the local people in and around Garut, as is suggested by her informal portrait of a smiling young woman from West Java's Sundanese community (figure 12). Yet there is no escaping the fact that most of her photographs present an extraordinarily selective picture of the islands as they were under Netherlands rule. For example, almost without exception her landscape photographs conformed to colonialist ideology in projecting an atmosphere of rural peace, interrupted by the occasional reassuring sign of modernity (figure 13), while her photographs of local people either captured them performing traditional rituals or labouring seemingly contentedly in the rice fields and tea and coffee plantations (figure 14). Still, there is the occasional image among her collection that suggests that not all was well between the Indonesian people and their rulers, as in the photograph of the two women walking along the roadside previously discussed. Another is of three young women attending what appears to be a

Figure 12. 'Photo Lux' (Thilly Weissenborn), 'Young Sundanese girl sheep worker', 1920s or 1930s. Silver gelatine print. Album 270, Tropenmuseum. TM-60002510.



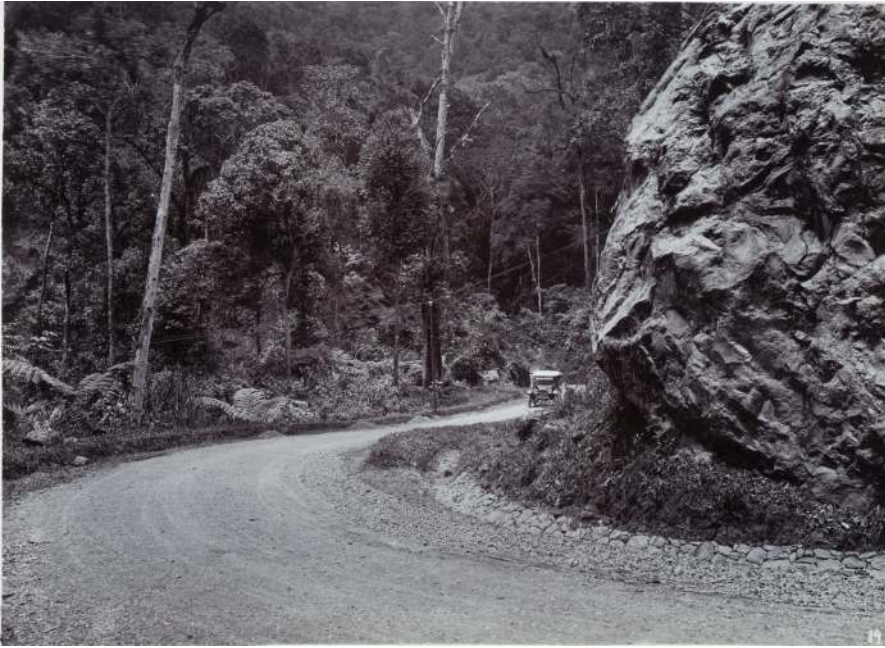


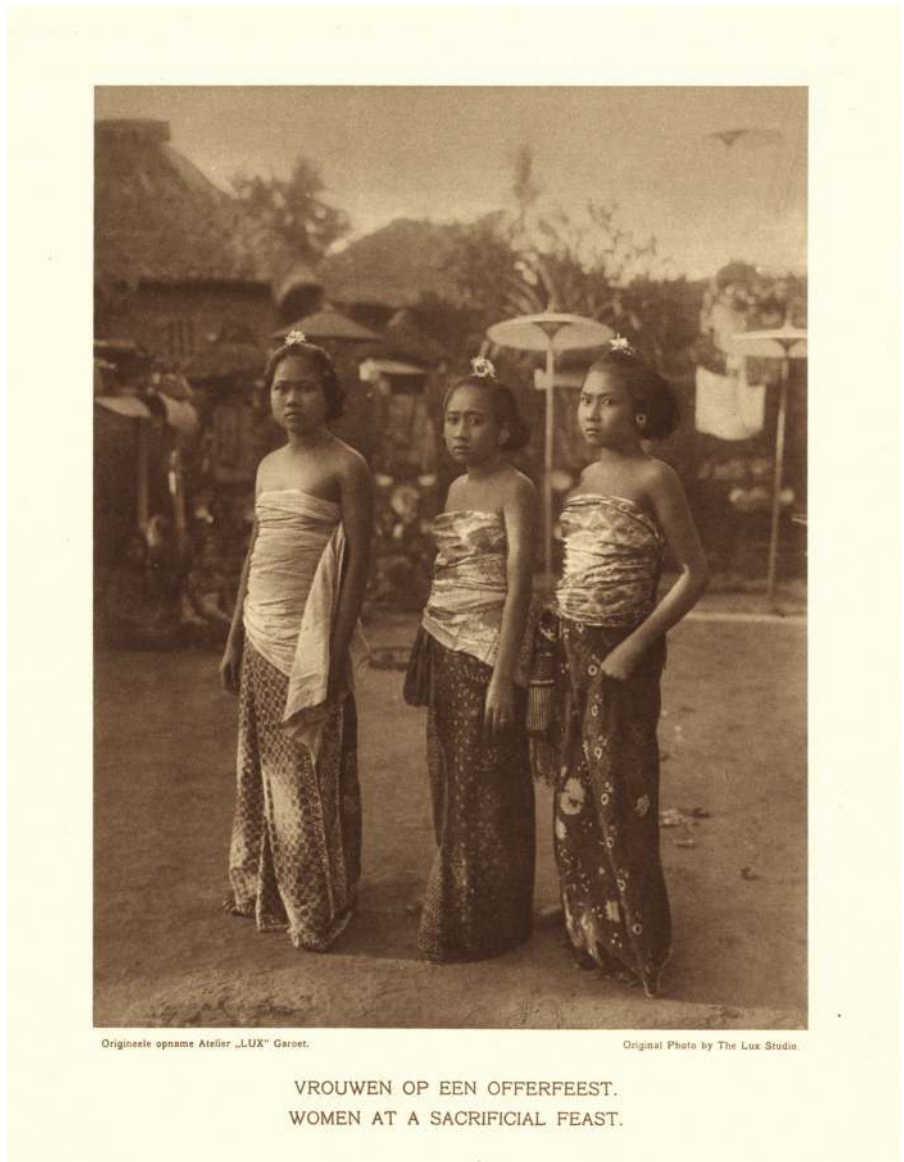
Figure 13. 'Photo Lux' (Thilly Weissenborn), 'Road to the south, Preanger Province, West Java', 1920s. Silver gelatine print. Album 270, Tropenmuseum. TM-60002450.



Figure 14. 'Photo Lux' (Thilly Weissenborn), 'Tea pickers', 1920s. Reproduction from repronegative. Tropenmuseum. TM 10011963.

festival or ceremony. Walking amidst the crowd they have suddenly turned and can be seen casting acutely cautious, if not antagonistic glances, in the direction of Weissenborn and her camera (figure 15). Furthermore, the fact that Weissenborn's studio was no less the target of the Indonesian people's violence than other Dutch settler's properties and the colonial government's buildings suggests that any warmth she felt towards the local people, including her employees, may not have been reciprocated. Indeed, there is no reason to believe that Weissenborn would have been regarded any differently to any other Dutch settler by her female employees; as noted by Coterall, almost without exception the Dutch in Java treated the indigenous Indonesians as

Figure 15. 'Photo Lux' (Thilly Weissenborn), 'Women at a sacrificial feast', 1920s. Cropped Photogravure. Leo Haks Collection, National Gallery of Australia. NGA 182483.



their inferiors from the time of their arrival in the late sixteenth century right up to the moment of independence. He also cites the example of a Dutch soldier who expressed surprise at the level of hatred he and his fellow countrymen excited, saying he had no idea of how deep the people's hatred was until the period of the *Bersiap*.⁶¹

It is significant that even as Weissenborn was producing her images of an idealised East Indies, an alternative tradition of photography was emerging in Indonesia, one that would form the basis of the photography of the newly independent postcolonial nation, which was dominated by indigenous Indonesians. As Karen Strassler shows, photography in early twentieth-century Java was 'for the most part, a technology to which only the upper echelons of colonial society – European, wealthy ethnic Chinese and native aristocrats [...] had access'.⁶² There were, however, exceptions. One was Kassian Cephas, a Javanese photographer who was attached to the court of the Yogyakarta Sultanate. Cephas produced mainly portraits, but he was also employed by the Archaeological Union and the Royal Batavian Society of Arts and Sciences to photograph the ancient temples and monuments of the Hindu Javanese

61 – Arthur Cotterell, *Western Power in Asia: Its Slow Rise and Swift Fall 1415–1999*, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley and Sons 1999, 246, fn 42.

62 – Karen Strassler, *Refracted Visions: Popular Photography and National Modernity in Java*, Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2010, 6.

civilisation. Cephas did not head up a school of indigenous photographers, but his sharply focused imagery and his scrupulous eye for detail later served as inspiration to the indigenous photographers who emerged around the time of independence.⁶³

Strassler singles out the photography of the ethnic Chinese community as most influencing the photography that assisted the growth of national modernity in Java. One strand of this was the Chinese salon photography tradition, which was dominated by the work of Tan Gwat Bing, a young Chinese amateur who belonged to the elite class known as *peranakan* (descended from the first waves of southern Chinese immigrants) and who produced portraits and landscape photographs in the Pictorialist style.⁶⁴ The other much more dominant strand came from the street photographers, whose works were cheap enough for most Indonesians to afford. As Strassler observes, they provided 'ways of seeing and displaying modern subjects, sociality and domestic life that became available for emulation and adaptation by subjects of the Indies more widely'.⁶⁵ Another strand was in the style of the photographs taken post independence by the studios using 'Sokaraja' backdrop paintings, which 'sought to merge the beauty of Indonesian landscapes with signs of modernity and affluence'.⁶⁶ All three traditions contrasted with the *Mooi Indië* tradition, which conjured a premodern rural idyll. However, all three also highlight the extent to which post-independence photography remained an almost exclusively male profession, with indigenous women only being permitted to work as assistants right up until the 1950s.

In 1947, Weissenborn married Nico Wijnmalen, a long-time friend and tennis partner. She was fifty-eight years old and he was sixty-two. It was a late marriage but a successful one.⁶⁷ After the war, the couple lived for seven years in Bandung, where they both found work with the Netherland Commissariat, the Pelita Foundation and the authority in charge of repatriating allied prisoners of war and internees. In 1956, however, they made the difficult decision to return to Europe, settling in Baarn, a small town in Holland, having lived in England for a while. Weissenborn died there in 1964 after a short illness, aged seventy-five.⁶⁸

To conclude, there is little doubt that the present-day obscurity of Weissenborn's photographic activities stems from an Anglophone bias among photographic historians from the English-speaking world, but also the growing emphasis on critiques of the Netherlands colonial past as distinct from the mode of remembering it as '*tempo doeloe*' – 'the good old days' – which Paul Bijl associates with an intense longing for everyday European life in the Dutch East Indies.⁶⁹ It is in this sense that we can say that Weissenborn's reputation has likely suffered as a result of the role she played in creating images that were successful partly because of their consonance with the settler colonial system she was born into and in which she herself worked as a photographer. She was working at a time when it was already difficult enough to be a woman photographer making a living from her profession, so it is not surprising that her work was immersed in the discourses and representations that occluded the reality of Dutch violence. Some of her images, however, did provide a visual alternative to the well-established practice of sexualising images of Bali's women. As a photographer, she had a technical command of her medium combined with an unerring ability to create beautiful images – qualities which explain why she was more successful than most of her contemporaries in attracting a steady stream of private clients and government commissions. Finally, as demonstrated by her published works, she needs to be recognised as one of the photographers to make the most of the new print technologies that underpinned the publication of

63 – Matt Cox, 'Kassian Cephas: A Self-Made Man', in *Garden of the East*, ed. Newton, 65–67.

64 – Karen Strassler, 'Modelling Modernity: Ethnic Chinese Photography in the Ethical Era', in *Photography, Modernity and the Governed in Late-Colonial Indonesia*, ed. Susie Protschky, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2015, 49.

65 – *Ibid.* 195.

66 – *Ibid.* 92–93.

67 – Drissen, *Vastgelegd voor later*, 10.

68 – She was survived by her husband, who died six years later. Both are buried in the local cemetery at Baarn. *Ibid.*, 16.

69 – Paul Bijl, 'Colonial Memory and Forgetting in the Netherlands and Indonesia', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 1:3–4 (2012), 445.

illustrated tourist literature, which in turn facilitated new forms of communication, travel and exchange between Southeast Asia and other parts of the world in the early twentieth century.

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