Side Streets of History: A Dutchman's stereoscopic views of colonial Vietnam

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A Dutchman’s stereoscopic views of colonial Vietnam

Jan George Mulder, a salesman from Haarlem, left a legacy of over 2000 stereo photographs, more than half originating from his time in French colonial Indochina. Yet not one of them contains a caption or even a hint about the contents.

What’s more, Mulder’s life in Vietnam remains something of a mystery. John Kleinien immersed himself in this unique collection, determined to learn more about the images and the man behind them.
Mulder and a colleague in a nodon chair carried to the beach and surrounded by the ‘Porteuses de De Saô’.

Harbour estuary with river sampans on the foreground. The steamship belonged to the fleet of Chargeurs Réunis.

Vietnamese housekeeper clad in brown silk tunic (quần áo nham) and white tunic (quần áo ban than). A silver necklace adorned with dragon motives complete the dress.

Stereoscopic photograph of Vietnamese babysitter (amak) in traditional dress with hair turban (hộp điệp) and white tunic (quần áo ban than).

as well as those of local postcard producers, who also distributed prints of scantily clad fisherwomen. The Porteuses looked like singers of popular chansons (qua hô or ca tro) and were dressed in brightly coloured gauze tunics in rich purples and deep reds with multi-coloured ribbons and flattened round hats. The atmosphere of the photographs evokes a Vietnamese version of Manet’s Le Déjeuner sur L’Herbe.

Life in the Tropics

Haiphong’s community of non-French Europeans was small. At the turn of the century, the city counted just 100 ‘aliens’. Mulder’s colleagues were mainly Germans working for Speidel & Co. Mulder was a bachelor but a Vietnamese housekeeper ran his household, and posed proudly for the camera on the house’s doorstep. Her long-tailed silk robe and silver hanger indicate her important household position. The stereoscopic views give only a superficial glimpse of colonial life. The names of the many men and women that figure in these photographs are unknown. But there is indeed a sense that ‘tropical time’ - slower than European time - ticked languidly away in the images. The degree of slowness is embodied in the relaxed way these people posed for the camera in white suits and their festive outfits, while they are drinking, eating or enjoying an activity, the precise nature of which is unclear to the viewer. The extended act of remembrance is taken over by nostalgia.

Mulder showed a clear interest in his native personnel, represented by the amah, seated next to a European baby, his housekeeper and a number of Vietnamese domestic staff. Their Tonkinese clothes signify that they were part of a rich European household. Outside, there is the gardener, and in front of the gate the cyclo driver. They belonged to the underclass, pejoratively called vhà quê (humpkin or peasant).

When Mulder returned home from Haiphong in 1908, he left a place where the modern history of Vietnam had started to take shape. In that year, the first of a series of nationalist activities started a string of anti-colonialist revolts. The backdrop was provided by the emerging modernisation of Vietnamese culture and influenced by the stunning Japanese victory over Russia in May 1905. Patriotic scholars organised schools free of colonial supervision, such as the Free School of Tonkin (Dâng Khinh Nghi Thu), and organised cooperatives and places of work where a new generation of Vietnamese could be prepared for a peaceful independence.

The colonial administration’s tolerance for modernisation movement was short lived and promptly vanished after uprisings in central Vietnam and attempts to poison the garrison of Hanoi in June 1908. Mulder, who must have witnessed or at least known about these events, returned to Europe and married. He had earned a fortune at Speidel’s firm, which enabled him to emigrate to the US in 1910. He founded a farming community in Virginia inspired by the Dutch socialist, writer and psychiatrist Frederik van Eeden, who, inspired by Henry David Thoreau’s Walden, established a communal cooperative in Bussum, North Holland. This idea, similar to one adopted by reformist scholars in Vietnam, was that residents would be self-sufficient, sharing everything in common. Like Van Eeden’s experiments and the ill-fated cooperatives of the Vietnamese, Mulder’s plans failed. After his return to the Netherlands, he invested in Imperial Russian Railways and was eventually left bankrupt. He died in 1942. His memories embodied in his photographs are presumed here, but we cannot know with certainty what he perceived or projected. As Roland Barthes has said, “whether or not it is triggered, it is an addition: it is what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there”. Not being remembered at all: that is the fate of most of the people in Mulder’s images. The memorialisation of Mulder’s Haiphong years is not a way of revising the past, but facing a future in which that very past is forgotten.

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Stereo photographs of Vietnamese babies. (amak) in traditional dress with hair turban (hộp điệp) and white tunic (quần áo ban than). A silver necklace adorned with dragon motives complete the dress.

European quarter of Haiphong with the Hôtel de Manville and the Hôtel de l’Europe (today the Hau Nghi Hotel) in the background.