

Conference Paper

Composing the East: Depictions of the Yogyakarta Court in the 18th Century

Sietske Rijpkema

Royal Holloway, University of London, London, United Kingdom

ORCID:

Sietske Rijpkema: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2138-3632>

Abstract

The earliest depictions of the Yogyakarta court consist of drawings from the 18th century, between 1771-83, drawn by the Danish artist Johannes Rach and his assistant A. De Nelly. Although both drawings appear realistic and have been used as a reference of the history of the court, they cannot be assumed to have (tried) to document the site in a neutral manner. Rach and De Nelly worked on commission and composed elements in views or landscapes to fit into prescribed composition, where perspective, deep space and dramatic plays of light dictate results. Missing buildings and unidentified structures could therefore be explained as adaptations the artists made to adhere to a specific composition. Visual analysis of De Nelly's and Rach's drawings show that their work is quite consistent with the visual idiom of European drawn landscapes. In addition, missing buildings, unidentified structures as well as odd activities of courtiers can be explained as added elements. Their purpose was to arrange the composition in three equal layers (foreground, main motif, background) supported by shading, axes to guide the gazer's view, a central axis and mirroring elements to create a balance, and use perspective and overlaps to create an illusion of a three dimensional space.

Keywords: Yogyakarta, court, architecture, 18th century

Corresponding Author:

Sietske Rijpkema

Sietske.Rijpkema.2018@live

.rhul.ac.uk

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The royal court of Yogyakarta was founded in 1755 and its palace complex was under construction for several decades. One of the earliest depictions of the Yogyakarta court is attributed to artist A. De Nelly in 1771, an assistant of the more famous artist Johannes Rach who created a similar drawing after A. De Nelly's work. The drawing depicts the outer court and the Northern palace square, as seen from behind the double palace gates on the north side of the square. Although drawings can be used as sources, they should be viewed critically and supported by other evidence. These drawings were not created to function as precise documentation of a historical site; they were drawn by artists schooled in a specific medium and artistic tradition to be sold to a particular audience. This paper aims to examine to what extent these early drawings are based on the actual historical site and how the expected audience informed these drawings.

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1. Drawing the East: Composition and Visual Language

The earliest depictions of “the East” in the 17th century accompanied accounts of missionaries or explorers, such as the famous accounts written by Olfert Dapper and Philippus Baldaeus. The illustrating artists did not travel to Asia themselves and had to resort to the written text to inspire their depictions. This practice had several consequences for the produced prints. Firstly, in many cases the artists were not familiar with the visual language of the region they were depicting. Instead, they adapted the described topics to the prevailing visual language in their western medium. The arrangement of elements used in common compositions of the 17th century fine arts, consisted mainly of creating perspective using several axes and dramatic shading. Secondly, the artists had limited exposure to depictions of local architecture, crafts and regional art styles. As a result, many pictures feature classical Greek pillars and arches. Hindu deities such as Ganesha were depicted with the proportions and body type of Greek gods. Few artists might have been familiar with depictions of Asian architecture such as the Chinese pagoda, of which elements were pasted into depictions of South-and South-East Asia.



Figure 1: A. De Nelly, Palace of the Sultan, Yogyakarta, 1771. Brushdrawing in ink, 32.7cm x 49.5cm. Caption: “De kraton te Djocjakarta Het d’Alam van de sultan Zu Mataran”. Collection: Rijksmuseum nr NG-400-B

From the 18th century onwards, artists started to travel and live in Asia, creating pictures that looked significantly more ‘realistic’ than drawings from the 17th century and therefore considered more valuable for historical research. Among these was the

Danish painter Johannes Rach (1720-83), who came to Java while pursuing a career in the military. Most of his works contain portrayals of Batavia (current Jakarta) and Bogor. Johannes Rach was specialized in brush drawing houses, street views and pastoral views, often with people acting in humorous or otherwise familiar situations. Although these drawings appeared realistic, they were often not meant as documentation. Artists made work that was made on commission or sold to European elites. The work of Johannes Rach appeared to have been quite popular, which is why he hired assistants such as De Nelly to cope with the commissions. [1] even mentions that Rach seemed to have created a standard production with standard views which “could be adapted, with decorations or colors, according to the wishes of the person who ordered them”. Consequently, there are two depictions of the royal court of Yogyakarta: the first one was part of a set of drawings attributed to Johannes Rach, but was signed by A. de Nelly in 1771. Although [2] did not find the name of the man appear in archives, it is believed he might have been an assistant of Rach. De Nelly then seemed to have created the original view, which was later followed by another brush drawing by Rach between 1771-1783.

The priority of these artists was adherence to certain compositions and styles in order to arrange the drawing into an aesthetically pleasing picture, a practice that might have compromised the integrity of the historical site. Many artists in the 18th century still tried to recreate the style of the 17th century masters. The compositions have a strong internal order of landscape in these works created a deeper space, by adding a foreground, main scene and a background. Within the scene, several figures were arranged for compositional purposes; they guided the gaze of the viewer further into the painting, or to arouse the viewer’s interest by acting out interesting behavior. The works of Rach and De Nelly, often consist of a three layered composition to create a sense of perspective and order. In the foreground, usually in the corner, a person (or group of people) is depicted from behind, facing the landscape, leading the eye of the viewer into the landscape. In many of their works these figures are holding long objects such as muskets, umbrellas or spears in a vertical direction to emphasize the main axes of the drawing and to create the illusion of depth through overlapping figures and perspective. Additionally, depth was created by depicting the foreground in a darker shade than the main motif and the background. The main motif is the central scene, which might be a country house, shipyard or a street view. Vertically, the composition was usually organized around a central axis, with the main structure in the center as a focal point and other elements creating symmetry or balance. The background often

contains a landscape or man-made structures against a clouded sky, usually in a lighter color.

2. Drawings of the Yogyakarta Court

As aforementioned, De Nelly is believed to have created the original drawing while Johannes Rach, has recreated the same subject after this drawing. Both drawings are alike in their composition. A small banner at the top states its subject; the court of the Sultan of Mataram as seen from the north-eastern side. Some inconsistency of writing in the captions has to be noted; Rach spelled it as Sultan Sumatran and De Nelly as Sultan zu (at?) Mataran. This square was not a public square, but is an essential part of the court, which is indicated by its inclusion in the palace area behind palace walls. The square belongs to the outer court, where it functions as a semi-public space where courtly ceremonies were held. Especially in the 18th century the outer court and the square served as the administrative center of the sovereign state. The inner court was inaccessible for outsiders until the end of the 19th century. The internal composition can horizontally be divided in three layers; the foreground consists of the entrance gates, the main motif includes the square and outer court, and lastly the background portrays a landscape. Vertically, the composition is arranged around the central axis; several axes creating perspective are directed to its main focus, the High Place (*Siti Hinggil*). On each side of this axis, elements are arranged symmetrically.

The first impression is that the drawing resembles the outer court of the current Kraton due to its inclusion of many well-known prominent architecture and terrain, as well as the depictions of activities corresponding to its setting. The foreground portrays the central entrance styled as a double gate, a distinctive feature of the Yogyakarta court. In this illustration the gates are still wooden, which corresponds to written accounts that date the current white brick at least 20 years later. Behind the gates, forming the main motif of the drawing, lays the central square (*alun-alun*) which at the time was filled with fine sand. The square itself is encircled by 64 sacred *waringan* trees and several pavillions (*Pekapalan*) that were used as resting places by visiting officials, of which some are depicted in the drawings. At the center of the square stand two widely known sacred trees (*waringan kurung*) enclosed by a small wooden fence. The other side of the square borders on the outer court, which is at least in other depictions separation from the square proper with a fence. However, in the depictions of Rach and De Nelly, the end of the square and beginning of the Kraton complex are not clearly marked. Across the square at the southern side, or perhaps the outer court, both Rach and

De Nelly depicted several groupings of courtiers (*Abdi Dalem*), seemingly holding an audience of some sort.

The focal point of both drawings seems to be a highly elevated hall, directly behind a large group of seated courtiers. Because of the lack of fences or other obstacles demarcated the outer court, it is hard to judge if this group is seated on the square or in the area before the high ground (*Pagelaran*). Behind the *Pagelaran* area, is the high ground (*Siti Hinggil*) located, which is normally marked by a fence and guard houses at its bottom. Stairs are leading to the elevated area, enclosed by another fence, where three separate structures in a succession; first the *Tarub Agung*, followed by the *Bangsai Witana* and the smaller and more important *Manguntur Tangkil* at the end. Both De Nelly and Rach do not seem to depict these separate structures. De Nelly's interpretation features possibly a *Pagelaran* hall, not followed by fences. The *Siti Hinggil* only reveals one small octagonal building on top, probably the *Manguntur Tangkil*, although traditional Javanese architecture at court usually would not have this shape. Likewise, Rach does not depict the fences and other two structures on the *Siti Hinggil*, what is more, the ground in his interpretation does not seem to depict any elevation at all.

The *Siti Hinggil* and *Pagelaran* are flanked by several other small buildings. On its left twin pavilions are drawn, which could possibly depict the *Bangsai Pangrawit*. A similar structure unidentified structure appears on the right. Further to the back on the right, a small enclosed building has been depicted with a crescent moon on top. This would indicate that this buildings was meant to be a mosque, although crescent moons on top of Javanese style buildings do not seem to have been common. In front of this small building, two fences are depicted shielding off another small structure. Both the mosque and fences are mirrored on the left side of the *Siti Hinggil*. Another addition on the left sides is a small fenced structure, which might have indicated the tiger cage that was built on the corner of the square (*alun-alun*). The background consists of a wall and another gate, but it's not clear of this is supposed to depict the wall to the inner court (*kedhaton*) or the wall closing of the palace complex.

3. Artistic License and Composition

As aforementioned, Rach, and in extension De Nelly, have applied composition techniques and spatially order in their other works, with the purpose of creating a balanced drawing. Especially Rach did take more liberty with the arrangement of space. In the former paragraphs, I discussed several missing structures, as well as some unidentified

structures. Common explanations of this given are that these missing structures were not there at the time or that some buildings were misinterpreted because De Nelly had no access the court and could not observe the many separate structures on *Siti Hinggil*. However, if it is known that both artists did in fact change elements in their drawings as part of a commissions, and adhered to predetermined idiom of western fine arts to begin with, should it not be considered that both artists purposefully removed structures and altered areas to fit in this framework?

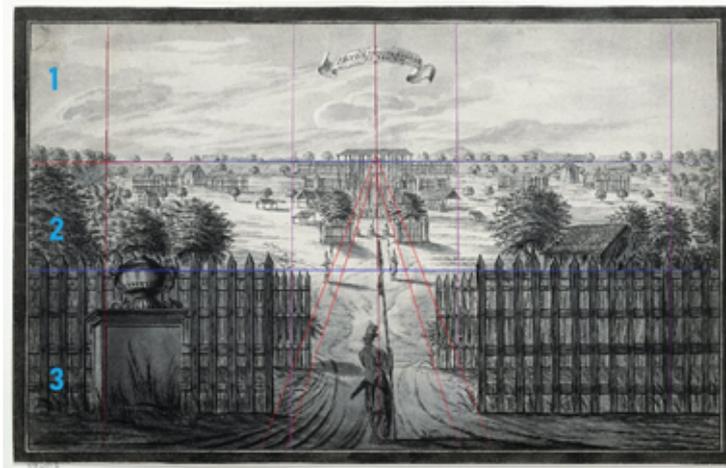


Figure 2: A. De Nelly, Palace of the Sultan, Yogyakarta, 1771. Brushdrawing in ink, 32.7cm x 49.5cm. Caption: "De kraton te DjocjakartaHet d'Alam van de sultan Zu Mataran". Collection: Rijksmuseum nr NG-400-B

Visual analysis of De Nelly's drawing show that several elements are quite consistent with the visual idiom of European drawn landscapes, namely arranging the composition in three equal layers (foreground, main motif, background) supported by shading, axes to guide the gazers view, a central axis and mirroring elements to create a balance and using perspective and overlaps to create an illusion of three dimensional space. Firstly, the drawing of the Nelly was composed in three equal layers, supported by shading. Firstly, the composition is clearly divided in three horizontal equal layers (indicated by the blue lines and numbers 1-3), supported by prominent horizontal lines and use of shades progressing from a darker foreground and a light background. Adherence to this division causes the palace complex from the *alun-alun* to the rear gate to be included in one layer. While at the actual court, there might have been a fence dividing the square from the *Pagelaran*, and the *Pagelaran* from the *Siti Hinggil*, including these fences in this drawing could have been undesirable. It would create several other horizontal lines that would discompose the three layers and thus could have been left out intentionally.

Secondly, the horizontal lines have a vertical counterpart, which serves to arrange the composition around a central axis and to direct the gaze of the viewer 'upwards'. The presence of these lines is not only enforced by removing elements that would

create horizontal lines, but also by merging the architecture of *Pagelaran* with *Sitihinggil* to create one object that appears to be standing on excessively elongated pillars. Additionally, the many figures holding a spear serve this same purpose and composition could therefore explain the presence of the spears in the audience scene. From an etiquette point of view, it would be unlikely that courtiers would attend an audience without parasols but with drawn out weapons. Mirroring elements support a visual balance as well and many aspects of the outer court lend itself for this technique because the court itself is arranged around a central axis. From the entrance gates, the viewer can see the *Siti Hinggil* unhindered, it is even framed by the presence of the two sacred trees. However, the demand for symmetry and balance might have resulted in duplicating certain elements that were only depicted at one side. An example could be the aforementioned mosque which has a counterpart on the left side, as well as the *Bangsai Pangrawit* and a visual counterpart at the right. Several other unidentified objects such as small pavilions and fences that do not seem to enclose anything, could have served this same purpose.

Thirdly, the use of perspective lines (in red) and overlapping elements reinforces the illusion of space. Overlaps in the foreground can be perceived at the pikes at the entrance gate as well as the spear carried by the guard that reaches to the sacred trees. In the main motif, the roof of the *Pagelaran/Siti Hinggil* structure overlaps the background. The placement of figures consisting of the same courtier wearing a *kutuk* headgear, a jacket with a wrapped *jarik* carrying a spear is repeated in smaller sizes to support this illusion. Additionally, the figure is repeated in strategic places in the drawing; two facing each in the northern part of the square, three seated figures facing the High Place, visible through the two enclosed sacred trees, as well as three groupings of sitting courtiers. Some of these groups are placed diagonally, as are some very small unidentified pavilions. As diagonal placed structures are not common at the court and placing courtiers at an audience this far apart will not facilitate clear communication, it is likely these groups were inserted for compositional purposes.

4. Conclusion

Rach and De Nelly were artists working on commission, who arranged elements in views or landscape to fit into prescribed composition, where perspective, deep space and dramatic plays of light dictate results. Missing buildings, unidentified structures, could therefore not only be regarded as structures that were there at the time nor misinterpretations of the artists, but have to interrogate the possibility of adaptations to

adhere to a specific composition. Visual analysis of De Nelly's and Rach's drawing show that their work is quite consistent with the visual idiom of European drawn landscapes. In addition, missing buildings, unidentified structures as well as odd activities of courtiers can be explained as added elements. Their purpose was to arrange the composition in three equal areas of a certain shade (foreground, main motif, background), axes to guide the gazers view, a central axis and mirroring elements to create a balance and using perspective and overlaps to create an illusion of three dimensional space. Therefore, it appears that many aspects of the court have been changed by the artists to fit into their composition. The artists are biased; they create images for a specific audience while following the conventions and style of their medium. For this reason, these drawings can't be regarded to be a trustworthy presentation of the court, but should always be compared with floor plans and other written sources to decide the extent of their validity as a source.

References

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