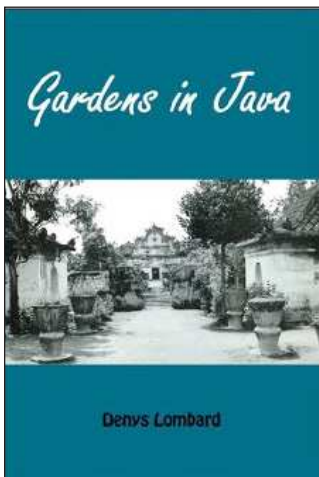


## BOOK REVIEWS

Denys Lombard, *Gardens in Java*. Translated by John M. Miksik. Jakarta: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 2010, 86 pp. [Originally published as *Jardins à Java*, Paris: Maisonneuve, 1969.] ISBN 978-285-5394-81-7 (soft cover).



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*Gardens in Java* is an important study. The original text, *Jardins à Java*, was written in French by Denys Lombard (1938-1998), and first appeared in 1969 in *Arts Asiatiques*. Although meanwhile more than forty years old, the text is still of singular relevance for the present-day reader. The English translation by archaeologist John Miksik closely follows the French text. In this new edition, published by the *École française d'Extrême-Orient* in Jakarta, the

original illustrations are maintained, whereas five sketches are added, taken from Jacques Dumarçay's *Histoire de l'architecture de Java* (EFEO Paris 1993).

*Gardens in Java* can in the first place function as a guide, especially in the context of the emerging branch of garden tourism. It provides visitors with an introduction to the interesting and complex tradition of garden architecture in Java, and makes clear that the ancient gardens of Java are not just natural spaces domesticated for the purpose of providing comfort and beauty, but they represent highly meaningful retreats where a king could meditate and display his divine nature. For professionals studying Javanese culture, the text could be regarded as an early example of the recent so-called "spatial turn" in cultural studies. This turn leads to a special focus on the spatial dimension of culture; the construction of spaces and places is regarded an integral part of the formation of social order including value systems and religious and historical imaginations. With regard to Java, much research has been done on the symbolic organization of space; but the garden, except for this booklet, has not yet become an object of serious study.

In order to introduce the reader to the object of his studies, Lombard lists a number of gardens in Java, Bali and Lombok, or, in his own words, "from one end to the other end of the 'Javanised area' which reaches from

Banten to Lombok". The more detailed discussion that follows, concentrates on two gardens: that of Sunyaragi in Cirebon and Taman Sari in Yogyakarta. In order to understand the meaning of these gardens he uses diverse sources to reconstruct their original shape: contemporary site observations (including interviews with local people); descriptions in Javanese manuscripts (mostly from the nineteenth century) or Dutch colonial sources. The original function of the gardens is reconstructed with the help of bas-reliefs from the Borobudur and Prambanan temples, ancient Javanese literature (like the *Rangga Lawe* or *Sudamala*) and *wayang kulit* (the author identifies three *lakon* where the action takes place in a garden).

Lombard concludes on the basis of this material that in Java, like in other regions of Asia, there was a tradition of garden architecture, to which the Javanese gave their own interpretation. The Javanese garden was not a public space; it was indeed the opposite, as it functioned as a heavenly oasis where the king comes to live his life as a god. Many garden parks juxtaposed the symbols of sea and mountain, which according to Lombard is related to the "apprehension of the ancient sovereign, anxious to anchor the world around him and to fix in one spot, by the erection of a *meru*, the 'center' which made him a *cakrawartin*".

It is indeed, as Lombard notes, too often assumed that Javanese art confined itself to the minor domains - metal, weaving, dyeing - after the arrival of Islam. One of the merits of *Gardens in Java* is that an extremely meaningful aspect of Javanese (court) culture is recognized as such. But reconstructing a typical Javanese garden tradition dating from pre-Islamic times, as is done by Lombard, inevitably also results in a static and isolated view on this tradition. Lombard only mentions in passing the influence of Chinese artists at Sunyaragi and, in a footnote, the activities of French engineers in gardens in Thailand. Was there a complete lack of European or Islamic influence in Javanese gardens? But most of all, one wonders what would have been the outcome if comparisons would have been made with gardens in Persia and India on the one hand and China and Japan on the other hand. *Gardens in Java* can be regarded as an important and stimulating first step in an almost unexplored field of research, but the book also makes clear that for a better understanding of Javanese gardens, a perspective is needed that incorporates the cultural dynamics of exchange within and beyond the Asian continent.

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