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**INDONESIAN
ODYSSEY**
**THE ART OF
JEROEN
HENNEMAN**
**ALBERT HEIJN
TALKS SHOP**
**THE BRAINS
BEHIND
BOMMEL**

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Assistant Editor Sue Teddern
Feature Writer Terri James-Kester
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Head office (Editorial and Advertising): Noordhollandstraat 71, 1081 AS Amsterdam, The Netherlands, (PO Box 71160, 1008 BD Amsterdam).
Phone: (020) 42 57 88. Telex: 11636.

Advertising representatives:
United States: East/West Network Inc, 34 East 51st Street, New York, New York 10022.
Phone: (212) 888-5900. Telex: 971738.
Canada: Airmedia, 212 King Street West, Suite 210, Toronto, Ont. M5H 1K5, Phone: (416)591 1551, Telex: 065-27372.

Britain: Admedia UK, 1st Floor South, Brettenham House, Lancaster Place, London WC2E 7EN.
Phone: (01)836 0158. Telex: 21901.

Japan: Intermart/Europress Ltd, Akasaka Residential Hotel, Room 718 1-7 Akasaka 9-chome, Minato-ku, Tokyo 107. Phone: (3)403 4917. Cables: Publihiro. Telex: 29216 imepxj.

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Phone: (541) 720 58(9).

Scandinavia: Bratt Marketing AB, Grev Turegatan 60, S-114 38 Stockholm.
Phone: (08)670315.

Italy: Antonio Sambrotta, 55 via della Mercede, 00187 Roma. Phone: (6)67 93 437. Telex: RDS 610161.

France: M.A.R.C., 90 rue Baudin, BP 322, 92306 Levallois Cedex.
Phone: (1)731.1154.
Telex: 61 3669 medireg.

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COMIC STRIP ARTIST MARTEN TOONDER ON LIFE WITH A LITERARY CARTOON

by Terri James-Kester



When the feature-length cartoon *Als je begrijpt wat ik bedoel* (If you see what I mean) hits the screens of 70 cinemas all over the Netherlands on February 3, its heroes, Olivier B. Bommel and Tom Poes, will be 42 and 45 years old respectively. Marten Toonder, their spiritual father, made his first rudimentary drawing of Tom Poes, a woolly white cat who was later joined by Bommel, a rotund, none-too-clever bear, in 1938. A few years later *De Telegraaf* selected Tom Poes as successor to Mickey Mouse, and today there are few Dutch newspapers which haven't featured the duo's adventures at some time or other.

From a boastful, conspicuous American oil baron, Bommel has gradually become 'a gentleman of substance', prevented from creating too much havoc by his enterprising friend Tom Poes. Essentially Bommel looks upon his adventures as disturbances of his comfortable life at Bommelstein Castle, but he invariably ends up at the centre of a hazardous conflict from which only the common sense and resourcefulness of Tom Poes can disentangle him. Like their Gallic cousins Asterix and Obelix, Bommel and Tom Poes always celebrate the end of an adventure with 'a palatable and nutritious dinner', an expression which has become a byword for Bommel addicts. The relationship between the two characters has long been the subject of heated discussion. Some detect homosexual overtones, while others have compared it to the friendships between other

famous couples in literature — Mr Pickwick and Sam Weller, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. In 1954 the literary merit of Toonder's work was acknowledged when he was elected a member of the Dutch Society of Literature. Over the years his unique idiom has added quite a few words to the Dutch language, though their origin has in some cases been forgotten.

Toonder's fascination with comics was first awakened back in the late 1920s when his father, a Rotterdam sea captain, brought home strip cartoons from America. First published in the Forties, the adventures of Kappie, a tugboat captain, included some of Toonder's early work and are a reminder of his nautical origins. Olivier B. Bommel, abbreviated to OBB and to Ollie by his friends, wasn't the first bear Toonder created. That distinction goes to Thijs IJs, a Dutch successor to Rupert Bear. Panda, a Toonder character who first appeared in the English *Evening News*, was a children's strip, while the satirical *Koning Halewijn* (King Talley-Ho) stories had more literary pretensions. In the mid-1950s 13 strips were produced daily at Toonder Studios.

In 1965 Toonder delegated his responsibilities in Holland and emigrated to the Republic of Ireland, where he devotes himself entirely to the vicissitudes of Heer Bommel and Tom Poes. His new home, his characters and the Bommel film (a Rob Houwer production) were the main subjects I discussed with him at Amsterdam's Hotel de l'Europe. A tall,

impeccably dressed septuagenarian with bright blue eyes under bushy eyebrows, Toonder answered some of my questions in Dutch, others in English.

Who were your own comic strip heroes when you were a boy?

I used to love *Bringing up father*. It was published for decades, until a few years ago when McManus, the artist, died. Unfortunately the best strip artists are dead now. Walt Kelly, who created *Pogo*, for example, and Al Capp, who made *Li'l Abner* famous. They were terrific. In America strip cartoons are considered literature for adults as well as children. There are statues of the characters and streets named after them. The kind of stories that are associated with strips in Holland and England are very childish. I grew out of them long ago.

As a Dutch resident of an English-speaking country, how do you compare the two languages?

I used to be convinced that English was a much richer language than Dutch, but when I tried to translate my own work into English I discovered I was wrong. There are too many clichés and standard expressions in English. Dutch is much more fun to play around with.

Aren't you worried that, as an expatriate, you may lose your grip on the Dutch language?

There is a danger of that, but I always speak Dutch at home and read lots of Dutch newspapers. I also visit Holland at least once every two months. While we were

working on the film I came back even more frequently. To be frank, though, I feel as if I'm in a vacuum in Holland. I don't really belong here any more. I don't entirely belong in Ireland either, but on balance I prefer to be there. The Irish are very friendly. They're old-fashioned in the most positive sense of the word. They have a natural courteousness which the Dutch have lost. But I love both countries, and in a way I'm caught in midstream. I believe that it broadens the mind to live abroad. After all you can't have everything.

What made you decide to emigrate?

In Holland I felt restricted in more than one way. The responsibility of my studios had become a burden to me.

Do you think Ireland is a positive influence on your creativity?

Nature is stonger than humanity in Ireland. You need iron discipline and a strict timetable to get anything done. I start work on the stroke of ten every morning and go on working until ten pm, with some breaks to eat of course, and some of that time I spend reading. But it's still a struggle. I've seen a number of writers settle along the west coast of the island. Almost invariably they leave again after a few months because they don't get anything done. The Irish countryside is mysterious and overwhelming, and it takes a lot of willpower to get down to work.

On the other hand the country nourishes your creativity. Every Irishman is a born storyteller. Conversations are

turned into stories in a matter of minutes. It's not surprising that the Irish dominate English literature. They have a wonderful way with words and come up with all kinds of metaphors quite naturally.

Is the development in Tom Poes and Heer Bommel a reflection of a change in yourself?

There must be some kind of parallel. My early work looks terribly amateurish to me now. Bommel's character has become more defined over the years – I hope the change is for the better. In my opinion it's wrong to stick to a rigid formula, as some American comics do. Unfortunately my development entails getting older, whereas Heer Bommel and Tom Poes possess eternal youth.

Which qualities are important for a successful comic strip artist?

It's essential that you love the job. That condition can only be fulfilled if you have malleable characters. In the course of my career I created about 20 characters which didn't have enough flexibility, so I had to drop them after a while. Some have been resurrected by others, because they were commercially viable even though I'd lost interest in them. In someone else's hands a character gradually changes. In a way the artist pulls it towards him.

Bommel is very different from an ordinary strip cartoon.

Why do you place so much emphasis on the text?

Some people don't like the literary pretensions of Bommel. They feel that a strip should be a picture sequence with a few words added to it. I disagree. Strips are not by definition for children, either. For me the pictures are a concession, an extrapolation of the text. They have to be kept simple. But although the text is more important, the pictures take up most of my time. They tell their own story and have their own atmosphere, so certain things can remain unsaid. If you only read the text, you wouldn't even know

I was talking about animals.

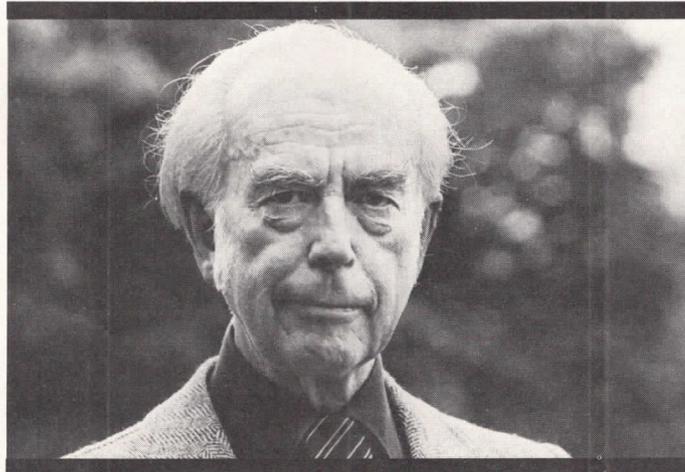
Have you any idea who your readers are?

The majority are probably students. There's a strong intellectual interest in Bommel, which is partly explained by the fact that it's published in *NRC Handelsblad*, a newspaper read by many intellectuals. I occasionally receive learned treatises about Bommel. I hate it when that happens, it's like being hit on the head with a hammer. These people take the whole thing so dreadfully seriously. Every word has to be analysed. 'The function of irony' is one of their favourite subjects. "At this point," they'll say, "I detect a hint of sarcasm." Perhaps I should consider it a compliment that my strips

collectors' items. *Tom Puss tales*, the first English edition, now changes hands for £1,000. Ridiculous, if you ask me.

Do you still enjoy drawing the same figures after all these years?

Yes, but in a different way. I've become much more critical. I spend more time on details than I used to, which makes the drawings more time-consuming. From a commercial point of view that's bad, of course. I keep telling myself it's not worth being too picky. Sometimes I think I should make individual drawings to illustrate a story. I would enjoy that. Working for a newspaper requires a strict routine. I have to turn out a strip every day. The only way



are treated with so much reverence, but unfortunately it only disturbs me, to the point where I'm unable to write for a while.

There have been reports in the press about plagiarism. Is that a big problem?

It is. A while ago things got so bad that bootleg editions of my stories appeared the moment I finished them. Some sold 60,000 copies, without any copyright being paid. To make matters worse, the judge who dealt with the case decided not to take any action. Finally we decided to publish new editions of early Bommel stories legally. I didn't really want them to be redistributed, but it was the only way I was able to hit back.

The earliest editions are now

I can get a break is to take a few weeks off between stories.

How did you go about making the film? Did you have to take on much extra staff?

Harrie Geelen made the first rough outline for the film and also wrote the text and music for the songs. We had to get 140,000 drawings made – 24 per film second. The only way you can get that volume of work done in a relatively short time is to use a lot of people. My permanent staff have been very busy of course, but we also had to engage people specially for the film. The drawings were made by 120 people. Bjørn Jensen, a Danish artist, took care of the basic artwork, together with Bob Maxfield, a Disney man.

Are you also producing the film with an English soundtrack?

Initially it'll only be released in Dutch, but the lip movements were synchronised to fit the English soundtrack too. It wasn't easy to find the right voices. Bommel's voice, for example, isn't as deep as you'd imagine. It has to be shrill with excitement sometimes.

It would be nice to get the film released in Sweden, because Bommel is so popular there.

Are you satisfied with the film now that it's finished?

Yes, but I should add that I'm a very bad judge. After working on it for nearly three years I can no longer criticise it objectively.

I admire the people who worked on it. After all they had to copy figures created by someone else. In my drawings, movement is expressed in a single picture, but for the film it had to be built up by a sequence, taking account of perspective. Some people might find that a boring job, but fortunately there are also those who feel that creating movement like that is what drawing is all about. It's very exciting to bring a figure to life. The background drawings are especially good. They provide the right atmosphere for identification of the film with my strips.

Als je begrijpt wat ik bedoel was a very expensive project, but we're sure that after all these years nearly everyone in Holland will want to see what Bommel is really like – in the flesh, so to speak. Rob Houwer is very confident of its success.

Do you want someone else to take over when you stop making Bommel strips yourself, so that your creation lives on?

No I don't, to be honest. Heer Bommel and Tom Poes are too much a part of me. I once allowed someone else to draw them when I was ill, but it really hurt, though objectively the drawings were perhaps no worse than my own. I don't want Bommel to continue without me. □

SURREALISATIONS

In our series on contemporary Dutch artists, Hansmaarten Tromp interviews
Jeroen Henneman.

Portrait: Eddy Posthuma de Boer.

Jeroen Henneman is an artist who doesn't like art – at least not when it's too complicated or difficult, or if a lot of fuss is made about it. Art, he feels, is for looking at, not interpreting. As soon as a work needs explaining by the artist or critic it becomes a literary message instead of a visual thing. His own work illustrates this view. He only wants to use his own fantasy, where the most ordinary objects have a soul and a unique story. His drawings, lithos and objects illustrate a visual thought process. He may draw a piece of paper that blows out of the window, begins a nocturnal journey through an almost deserted city and strikes a solitary passer-by a deadly blow in the breast.

Henneman once described what goes on in his head while he works: "I usually go and mess about at my table and a process gradually begins, with all kinds of thoughts starting to cross one another. I keep linking them together until I am left with two or three lines of thought. In cases where they cross very strongly I start looking for a definite theme and, above all, a definite mood. A very important criterion is that it must be something I'd very much like to see in reality, something that would be very beautiful if it really existed. My work shows a reality desired by me."

Jeroen Henneman was born 40 years ago in Haarlem and studied art at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam.

He was interested in the subject at an early age, but had already decided to become a civil engineer and build big bridges between England and the Netherlands – until he realised that he would be unable to do it alone. And he did want to be his own master, to be able to indulge every caprice. So he considered the possibility of realising his dreams of large structures on a small scale. And art was the obvious solution.

His decision was finally confirmed at a catch-wrestling contest in Antwerp. "I enjoy the colourful entourage and theatricality of events like that," he explains. "It was dark inside, and a big light shone above the ring. A lot of people were smoking and it was very beautiful. That column of light created a

sort of volume above the light itself, as if it was a real object. I drew it when I got home."

Henneman sees his influences as Titian, Miro and Magritte, as well as the astonishing imagery of Jean Cocteau's films, especially his *Le testament d'Orphée*.

"One scene in the film shows a square surrounded by a covered gallery where Picasso and his friends are celebrating. Then Orpheus comes in with a horse's head and walks towards the camera. But behind him you see Picasso grabbing a spear and throwing it at him. The spear comes out through his chest, then the camera zooms through the nice round hole made by the spear to where Picasso and his friends are roaring with laughter. I've always aimed for such a perfect sequence of ideas."

Henneman has done more than that. His work is a sequence of ideas and discoveries, all of which are more than anecdotal. The most interesting aspect of his work is what becomes visible behind the joke. His work, his drawings especially, shows a world that has something mysterious about it, despite its apparent clarity.

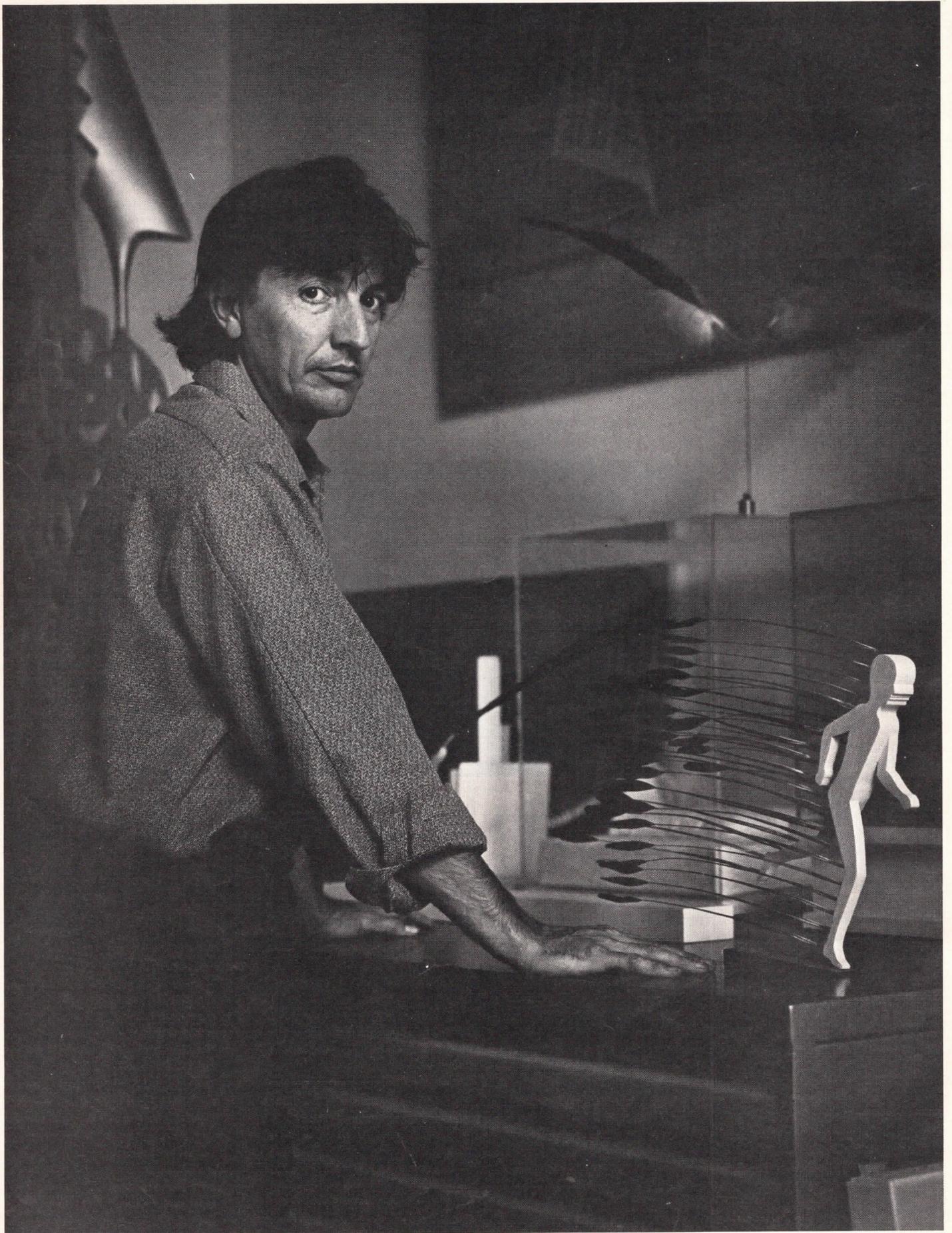
"I once analysed my work and discovered I was crazy about things that float, apparently unaffected by gravity," he says. "A ray of light, rising when the sun shines through a crack in a door or window, also floats. And once my interest in something like that is roused I start wondering what I can do with it. Then a link is gradually made between different things which can suddenly be combined. Usually the result is an image which is not so unreal, but just that bit different from everyday reality. That's a characteristic of my work – it must surprise, it must not be a direct representation of something."

In his latest work, real feathers represent the floating element. He explains: "A few years ago my wife, who designs stage costumes, took me to an Amsterdam warehouse which was completely stuffed with feathers. I was specially interested in vulture feathers – vultures are the best gliders. Then I bought some feathers and tried to think of a way of using them in my work.

For instance, I painted a cloudy sky and stuck some feathers on the top edge, on the frame, so it looked as if the whole painting was floating away."

The game with gravity can also be seen in a piece called *Jump?!*, shown on the following page. Different coloured stripes of paint look as if they are being sucked up out of the floor by a black surface as big as a large painting. "I use a glass palette," he says, "and I noticed that I could lift the paint off with a knife when it was dried up and thick. So I took whole strips of flexible paint off my palette. Then I stuck pieces of lead on the back, and the idea for *Jump?!* came to me."

Henneman's oeuvre, surreal but always lucid, is usually conceived on a scribbling pad. Like *The kiss*, a 22-metre-high sculpture with a surface area of 100 square metres. The 16,000 kilo steel construction looks like several different sculptures – from abstract to figurative – depending on the angle from which it is seen. *The kiss* stands in the Bijlmer, an Amsterdam suburb, and was commissioned by a Dutch chain store. The idea for the sculpture had been jotted down in Henneman's scribbling pad long ago – a pencil line in the shape of a woman's profile kisses the upright page of a sketchbook shaped like the profile of a man. The present sculpture is an attempt to give form to this idea. Its two lines, the two profiles of a man and woman whose lips barely touch and whose necks disappear gracefully into the ground, have all the flow of Henneman's original pencil lines. From scribbling pad to sculpture, from fantasy to reality, it seems to be a continually flowing line in Henneman's work which is achieved without too much effort. Jeroen Henneman is not an artist who suffers at his work table. "I can name a string of artists who produced masterpieces without visibly having suffered at all," he once said in an interview. "For instance, Monet, Delacroix and Magritte." The same Magritte, by the way, who about 20 years ago went up to Henneman at one of his first exhibitions and whispered to the artist that he found his work "incredibly beautiful".



'Jump?!

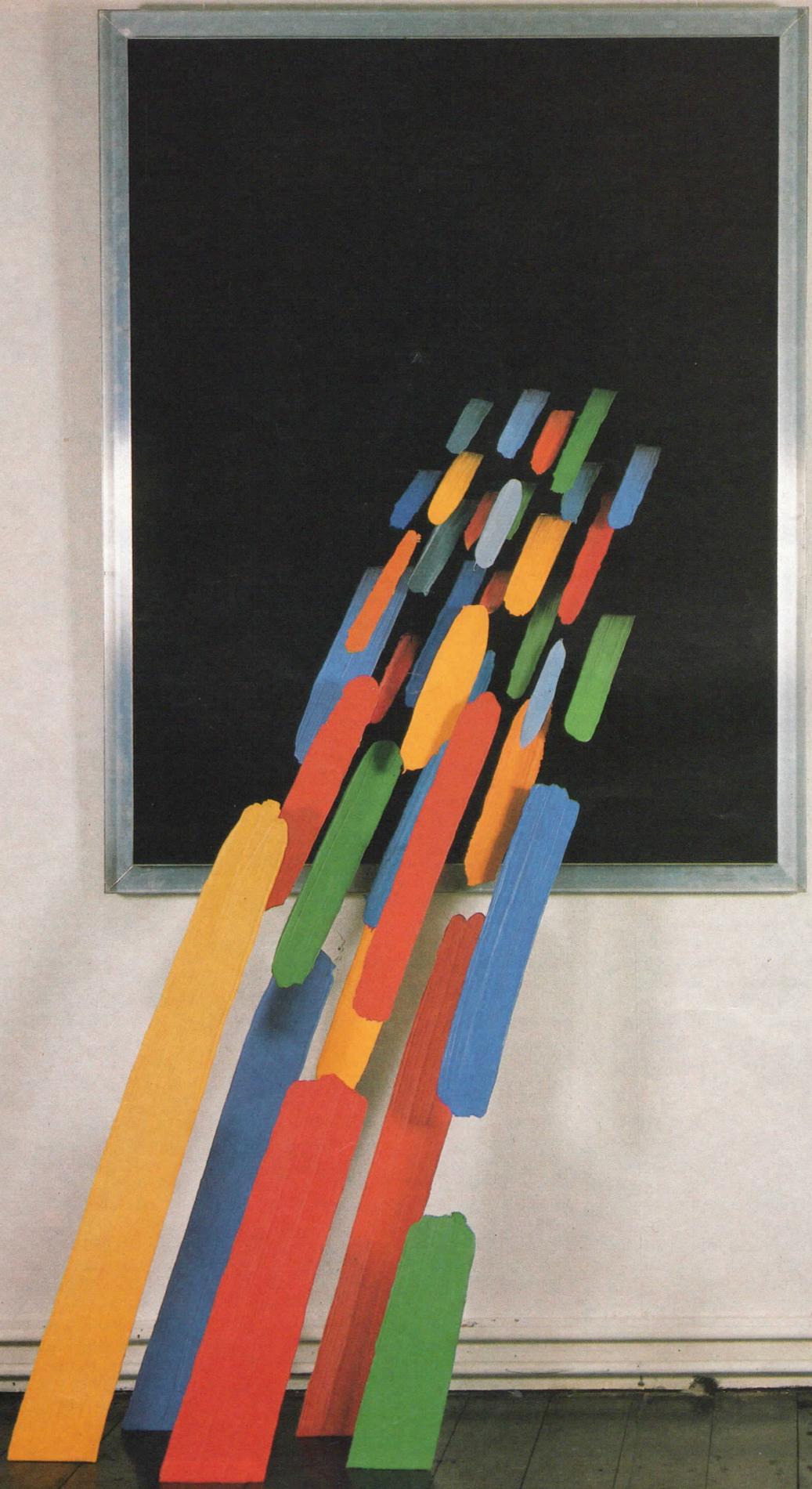
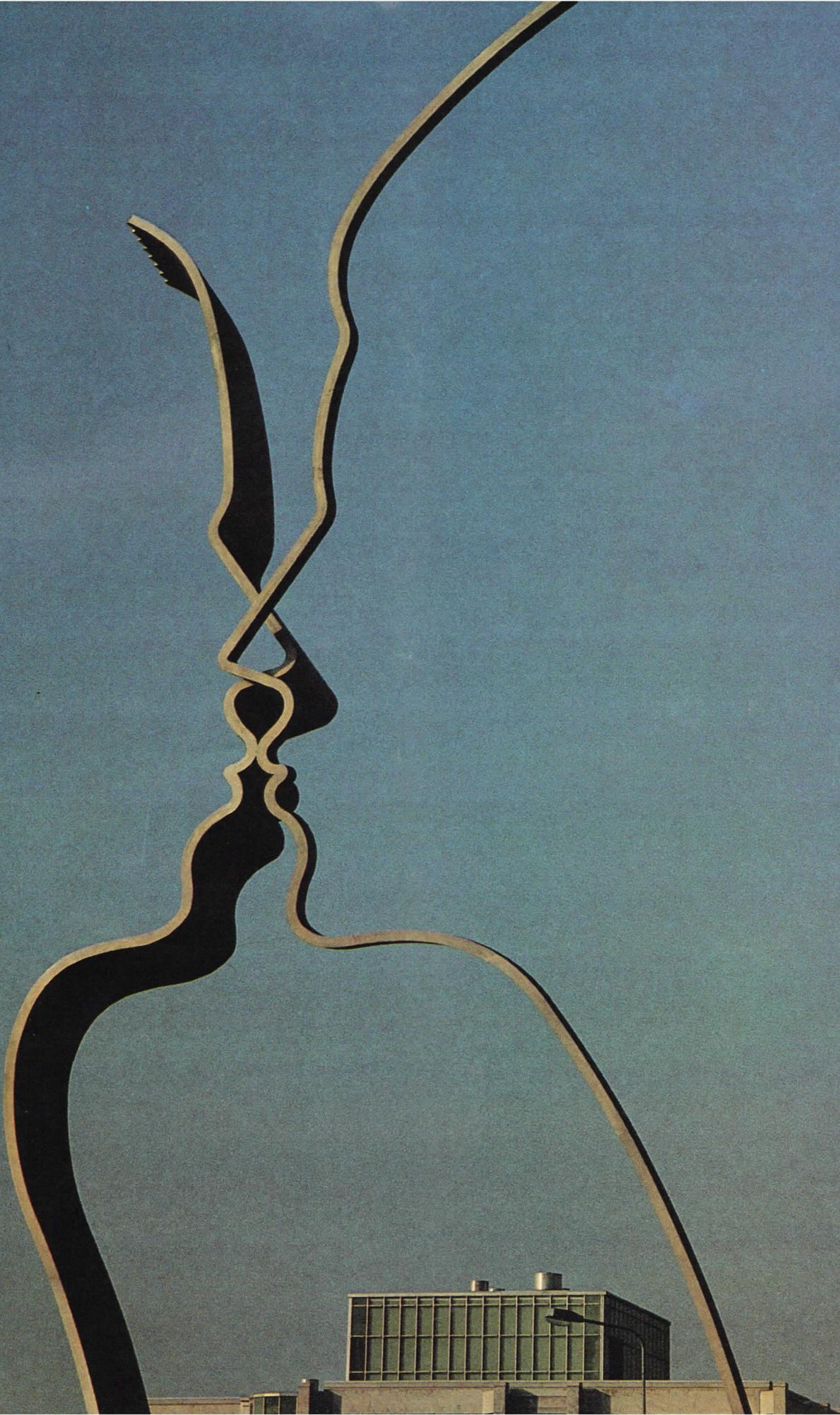


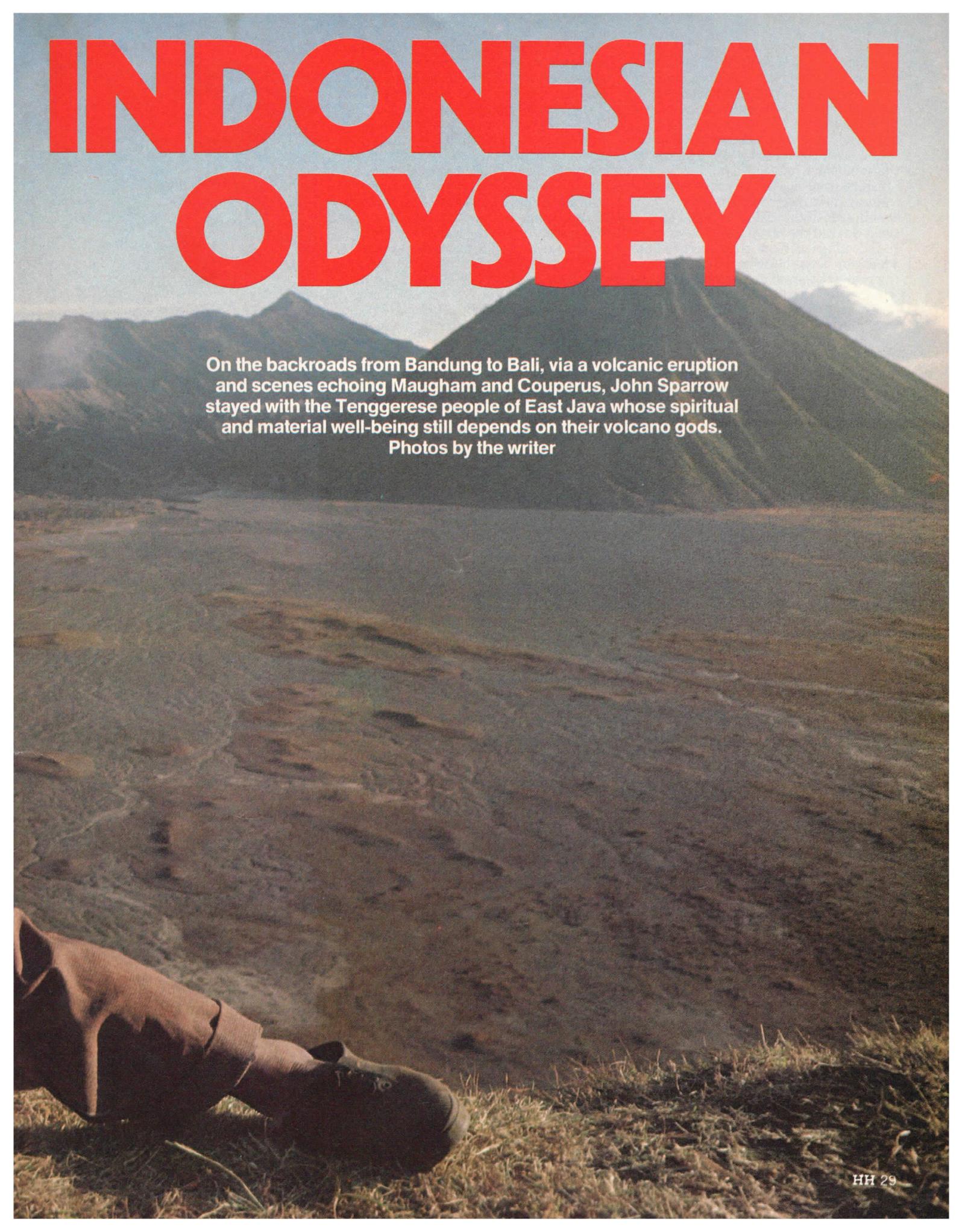
PHOTO: HEIN DE BOUTER

PHOTO: EDDY POSTHUMA DE BOER



'The Kiss'

INDONESIAN ODYSSEY



On the backroads from Bandung to Bali, via a volcanic eruption and scenes echoing Maugham and Couperus, John Sparrow stayed with the Tenggerese people of East Java whose spiritual and material well-being still depends on their volcano gods.

Photos by the writer

The day began to die in the Tenggerese highlands of East Java. As the 2,000-metre Anjasmara swallowed the sun, the last villagers trekked home, backs bent under produce from the garden terraces that cling impossibly to the mountainsides. Under the eaves of tin-roofed wooden homes in the kampongs, men lolled in conspiratorial clusters, sarongs wrapped tight against the growing cold of evening, until the last light faded and cloud cloaked the mountain valleys.

In the village of Wonokitri, perched like a halfway house between the plains and the peaks of the encircling volcanoes, the wind stirred and moaned through the pines. A storm was in the offing and the headman ordered more wood for the chimneyless hearth around which we huddled.

Since temperatures in these highlands eight degrees south of the equator can fall to freezing, his offer of shelter had been welcome. Java, an island the size of Greece may harbour 80 million people and struggle under a population density double that of the Netherlands, but in the countryside where 85 per cent of the Javanese live, hospitality is still a common courtesy.

"You'll always find an open door among the Tenggerese," the headman said, a smile revealing brown teeth. "Our custom is to treat a stranger like a brother, if he respects our ways." The smile became a chuckle. "Listen. What you hear out there is Batara Maruta, our irritable old god of wind welcoming you from Mount Bromo. You should be very pleased it isn't the god of fire." A ripple of laughter ran round the hearth. Sacred Mount Bromo, in and around which the Tenggerese deities reside, is an active volcano. The last time fire god Sang Hyang Batara Brahma spoke, was in 1980 when the mountain erupted.

I was about 150 kilometres south of Surabaya in a region of raw natural beauty, uncompromising country in which the sentiment of scientists who found Java Man and surmised the island was the original location of Eden, can be understood. But I hadn't come to indulge in 19th-century romanticism. I was fascinated by the Tengger massif for more tangible reasons, the 300,000 Hindus who subsist here as frugal mountain farmers.

In the amazing spectrum of Indonesia's human geography, the Tenggerese are minuscule, one of the smallest of more than 350 ethnic and cultural groups. Still, they occupy a special place, a reputedly peaceful, honest, contented people idealised somewhat by their countrymen. They are, in fact, an anachronism, a last glimpse, in some respects, of rural life as it may have been in the Middle Ages when Marco Polo foolishly passed by without stopping. Clinging steadfastly

to ancient beliefs and customs traceable to the great Majapahit empire, they are the descendants of Hindus who survived the tidal wave of Islam which swept Java in the 15th century.

The precise origins of these gentle highlanders is vague, but as we ate a fine meal of fish and chicken cooked in huge iron pots over a long, low wood-burning range, the headman told me his story:

"Our ancestors came to the slopes of holy Mount Bromo in the early days of Majapahit. It was the last of the great Hindu Javanese kingdoms and spread from Sumatra and Malaya to Borneo and the Moluccas. When it fell and fighting broke out with Islamic districts on the coast, most of the nobles, priests and artisans escaped to Bali and created the island of a million temples all you foreigners seem to know. But many of the ordinary people sought refuge here. Among them was the princess Roro Anteng and her husband Joko Seger. From them we acquired our name."

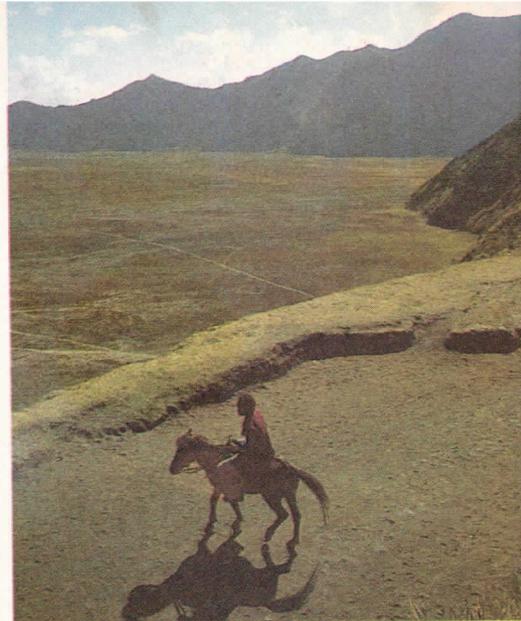
In the flickering light of his high-roofed home, I listened for hours. With legend came stories of religious rites and *karo*, a fertility festival that celebrates the miracle of life. He spoke of sexual symbolism in its dance and bamboo phalli filled with seed, of ancestor worship and soul dolls, of extravagant funeral feasts costing small fortunes. But most of all he spoke of Bromo, the god of fire, and the great *Kesada* festival in January when thousands of Hindu pilgrims climb to the crater's rim to make offerings to the gods.

It would seem wise to placate them. The headman has survived two eruptions and I asked him if the Tenggerese were ever nervous of living in Bromo's shadow. "Nervous?" he replied, a puzzled look on his face. "But you don't understand. When you live so close to the gods and in harmony with them, they become your guardians."

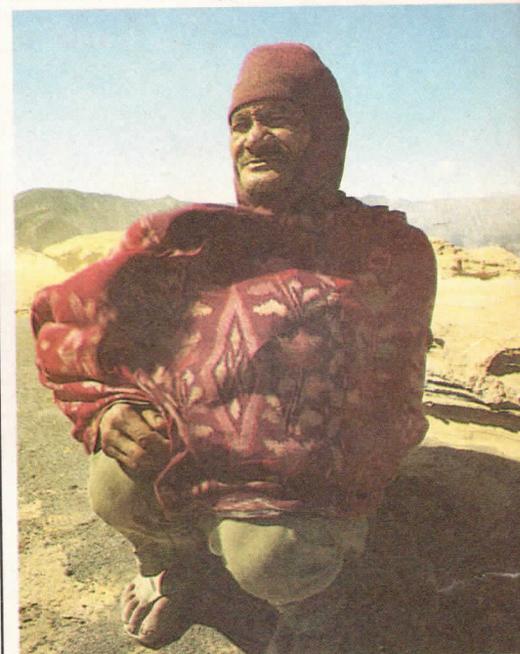
He then related an incredible tale, one the authorities in Surabaya later confirmed. In 1980, volcanologists warned the local population well in advance of the eruptions, and advised their evacuation. But the Tenggerese would have none of it. The god of fire would look after them, they said, and when the rumbling began they donned plastic helmets, hired trucks and headed for the crater as though it were a fireworks display.

"They went at night," he said, hilarity spreading round the fire once more as he recalled the official consternation. "The view was more spectacular then. But no one was hurt. The fierce eruptions feared by scientists, never came. We'd told them the holy mountain would never harm us."

Next morning I left to see Bromo for myself. It was an hour before dawn and the first fires of a new day were breaking the darkness of the kampongs.



Above and below: Tenggerese by Mount Bromo



Children in ash rain of Mount Galunggung





A puff of smoke from Semeru as dawn breaks over the home of the Tenggerese gods. Below: Volcanic soil provides a rich harvest – at a price



Progress up the forested mountainside was slow, the jeep stopping now and then while we cleared the track of trees felled by the previous night's storm. But by the time the sky lightened we were looking down on Bromo from 2,700-metre Mount Penanjakan.

I'm addicted to the dawn, not for the light photographers relish, but for some intangible sense of optimism it brings, an uplifting at freshness and beauty the day has yet to spoil.

The silence was absolute, as if the cloud way below was muffling humanity. I might have been one of those handsome but ham Italian actors who played dubbed Olympian gods in early Sixties movies. I could see what was going on down there but I couldn't hear.

Bromo lay sullen and smouldering under the yellowing sky, the light now revealing the contours of a scarred surface. In front of her, in the flat iron-grey expanse of what is known as the Sand Sea, was Mount Batok, an extinct cone of neat seams, perfection marred by a decapitated summit. And behind, towering haughtily over all, stood Semeru (or Mahameru), at 3,676 metres Java's highest mountain.

The sun slipped over the Tengger massif and a puff of smoke rose from Semeru to climb like a weary atomic mushroom to invisibility. In Wonokitri, the headman had told me the gods brought this mountain from the Himalayas to provide them with a suitable home.

Unfortunately it had fallen over in the process and large chunks had broken off to form half a dozen other craters in the vicinity. For some reason he forgot to tell me that Semeru was one of seven Javanese volcanoes so lethal it has constant attention from volcanologists. But then he probably thought that irrelevant.

The high priest leaned forward in his easy chair and offered me a cookie from a glass jar. He wasn't what I'd expected of a *kapala dukun*. Rather than a wispy-bearded old mystic with flowing robes and lowered eyelids, I'd found a genial man in his mid-forties who wore an open-necked shirt and natty black jacket above his sarong. The environment was unusual, too. No Hindu temple dedicated to Siva and with carved panels depicting Ramayana episodes. Instead, a sparsely furnished living-room dominated by a stereo system and a shiny Japanese motor cycle by an iron-framed bed.

His name was Soedjai and I met him in a fly-filled house on a dusty, pot-holed road in the village of Ngadisari. A comfortable little community to the north-east of Bromo, it sits securely below hills resembling a vast market garden. Plot after plot, terrace upon terrace, provide the industrious Tenggerese with staple products like

corn, cabbage, carrots, potatoes and onions.

Thirty-eight villages are spread through the massif, the spiritual needs of each cared for by a *dukun*. Soedjai is the dukun of dukuns, the holy man my friend in Wonokitri had sent me to see.

I wanted to know more about the *Kesada* festival when Hindus (and an increasing number of Javanese of other religions) come to Bromo like Moslems to Mecca. The dukun obliged with legend. The prince and princess who sought refuge in the highlands had been childless and began to pray and meditate on the volcano in the hope of a supernatural answer. At last Bromo erupted and from the crater a voice told them they would be granted children on the condition that the youngest would be sacrificed on reaching adulthood.

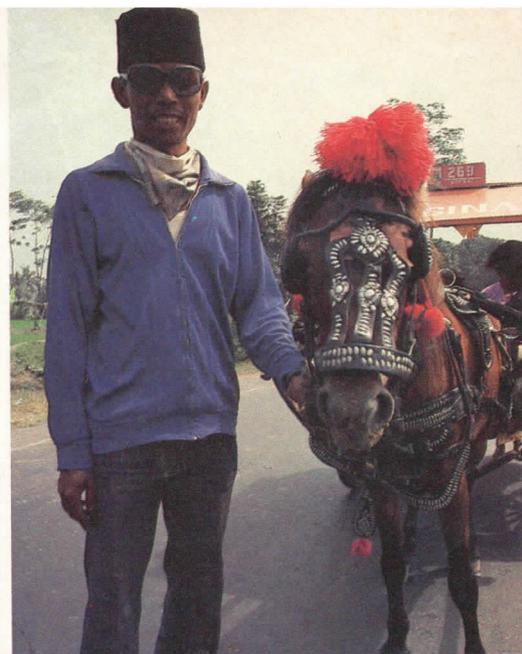
Joko Anteng and Roro Seger subsequently had many children, the youngest, Kusuma, growing up strong and handsome. But even in his adolescence periodic eruptions reminded his parents of their promise. Unwilling to honour it, they finally fled, moving their family to a remote corner of the mountains. Angry, the gods pursued them with lava and fire until, with no place left to hide, Kusuma was taken. When calm returned, the parents heard their son's voice coming from the volcano. He chided them for their infidelity and urged all Tenggerese to make offerings to Bromo every year on the night of the full moon in the month of Kesada. His advice has been heeded to this day.

It has been speculated that the legend reveals a past practice of human sacrifice in this once isolated region. But on January 31, while mantras are recited, it will be mainly crops, chickens and money that Soedjai will bless before they are thrown from the crater wall.

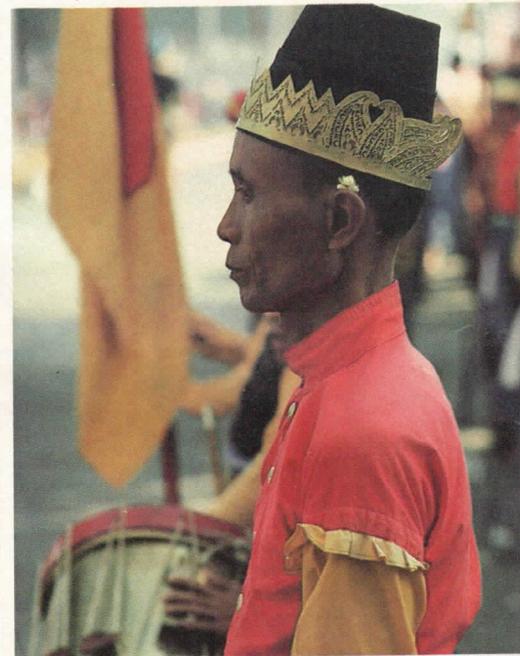
He is used to speculation about his religion. In the scant literature I could find in Jakarta about the Tenggerese, I had learned it contained traces of Islam. One source even described it as Buddhist Dharma.

Soedjai sought solace in the cookie jar once more. "We are Hindus, nothing more," he said between munches. Since he was the high priest I was convinced, but he wasn't finished. "Hinduism in these mountains is even older than on Bali. Quite recently Balinese scholars confirmed this with the transcription of ancient scratchings found on *lontar* palm leaves.

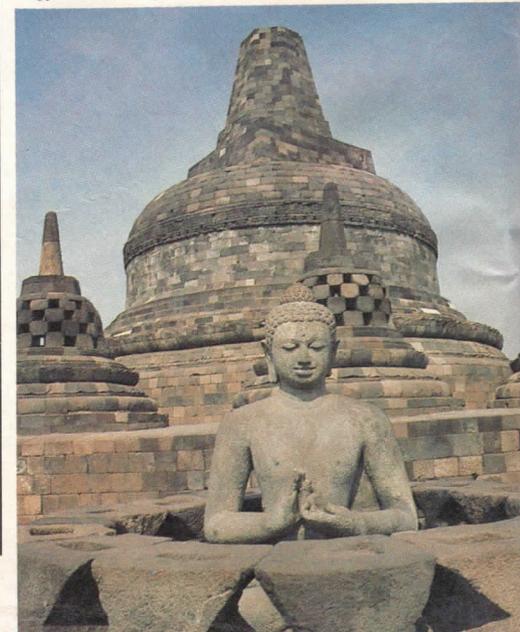
"There are perhaps some idiosyncracies. The Balinese cremate their dead, we return ours to Ibu Pertiwi, the goddess of the earth, and burn effigies. We revere our women more. When a man marries, he follows the woman to *her* home. The eldest daughter inherits, not the eldest son and so on. But we believe in the same supreme god, the same holy



Pride of a Garut taxi driver



Jogja ceremony and (below) Borobudur





Madurese at cattle market. Below: Central Javanese in kampong



Below: Dentist's surgery in Jogja – enough to make the teeth chatter



book, the same holy trinity. Only our customs differ. You must understand that before tourism we were very isolated, outside influence was negligible.”

Tourism. A new god has joined the ancients on Bromo. Although most inhabitants of Ngadisari are farmers, the mainstay of the economy is tourism. It is small scale, large enough to improve the Tenggerese lot but insufficient to alter their lifestyle. Accommodation is primitive and most visitors who venture across the Sand Sea on foot or on horseback are bussed in from comfortable hotels in the nearby resort of Tretes, to climb the crater at dawn. Up in Wonokitri, the headman looks down on Ngadisari with envy. Few come to Bromo through his village, it's the long way round. The road isn't on most maps and the only way to make it is by jeep or on the back of a vegetable lorry. “We want the tourist, very much,” he said.

I had nightmarish visions of modern hotels and fast highways decimating those untouched mountains.

“Where would they stay?” I asked diplomatically.

He looked at me across the dying embers.

“With the villagers, and here, in my house. Homestays I think you call it. Do you think the tourists would like that?”

“Yes,” I thought, “if they are content with paradise.”

Java would be nowhere without its volcanoes. While their craters shelter the supernatural, the residue of their eruptions provides the Javanese with some of the most fertile land in the world.

Along the island's rugged spine of almost 700 miles are more than a hundred volcanic outlets, a good third of them active. And, in the spectacular border country between West and Central Java, I had been reminded that before they can enrich, their outpourings must first ravage.

The winding road that runs from Bandung, the West Javanese capital, up through Garut and Tasikmalaya, offers quintessential landscape. We'd looked down on valleys of ripening *padi* and multifarious greens, on ploughing oxen and flooded terraces where women bent to plant by hand and small boys flew their kites. Side roads led to craters and hot springs and in between came lethargic little towns with neat white houses, brightly-coloured *becak* pedicabs, shiny carriages and high-stepping ponies with jangling silver adornments and scarlet pompons.

The sky had darkened imperceptibly, or perhaps I was too preoccupied by the clichés to notice. But suddenly it was raining ash.

Sodikin, the ‘wild taxi’ driver from

Jakarta whose temperamental little Toyota we'd chartered, began muttering and slamming his fist on the steering wheel.

"Galunggung mister! No good!"

I guess that was the understatement of the year. Before long the lush countryside had turned from green to grey and the ricefields, the forests, the bananas, the palm trees and the local population began to choke on the dust from a volcanic eruption.

Galunggung was the first of three slumbering volcanoes to awaken in the Indonesian archipelago last year, not an event the world's press made much of because the force of the explosions presented no direct threat to civilisation. The evacuation of 80,000 people from this densely populated area was thought to be temporary, for no one foresaw months of eruptions and the ruination of agriculture and fishery. The Red Cross, though, was soon appealing for funds to face a national disaster and the threat of widespread starvation.

Before it erupted on April 5, Galunggung had been dormant since 1894. In the subsequent six months it made up for its drowsiness by erupting sometimes twice a week, spewing ash in a 100-kilometre radius.

Back in August the population was still taking it philosophically. In a roadside eatery, the owner dusted her bottles and shrugged. "One day the padi will benefit, I suppose. Our land is rich because the *gunung* feeds it."

Outside, drifts of the fine, pervasive dust formed in the streets, as if in a snowstorm seen through a grey filter.

Women and children scurried hither and thither under umbrellas, *becak* riders ploughed on stoically, plastic bags over their heads, and on the corner a trader made hay before the sun shined and the demand for his face masks lessened.

As we drove out of it, a phrenetic clearing up had begun in village and kampong. Trees and plants were being shaken, ash swept from roof and road.

I wonder how long the determination lasted. By mid-October Garut and Tasikmalaya were under a 20-centimetre coating, and, on the slopes of Galunggung where 35,000 people once lived, the ash was metres deep.

The fear as the rainy season began was that monstrous lava mudslides would force some 300,000 people to leave their homes.

The price of padi is high in West Java.

Perhaps the most famous of West Java's volcanoes (at least among foreign visitors) is Tangkuban Parahu, the "Upturned Boat" mountain 30 kilometres north of Bandung, where the bubbling floor and steaming moonscape of the main crater reveals it is dormant but far from dead.

Bandung is a bustling city, 610 metres

above sea level. Established as a Dutch garrison town in the 19th century, it underwent a great expansion in the 1920s and 30s, and, if rundown in parts today, still retains something of a colonial air.

I was tempted to stay at the Savoy Homann Hotel, where Dutch 'pilgrims' wallow in the nostalgia of what is said to be the finest monument to Art Deco in Asia. Instead, I listened to Sodikin (who was appalled by the price of the Savoy's tea) and made tracks for Grand Hotel Lembang in the nearby hills, where the colonial air is even rarer.

Before the Second World War, this was where many a colonial administrator found a cool, weekend retreat. It was the 'in' place on the social scene, one dressed for dinner, gentlemen in black tie, ladies in elegant gowns, and there were grands balls for the grand hotel. Today Lembang suggests decaying grandeur and faded glory.

We were shown to our quarters in the old wing by a room boy in his seventies, wearing a white uniform and black Moslem fez. As he shuffled through the garden with our bags, he told me he'd been at the Grand Hotel since 1920.

I asked if he preferred the old days. He looked my jeans and sweatshirt up and down. "We had a certain class of gentleman then," he said politely. "Of course, the hours were long, but the tips were better."

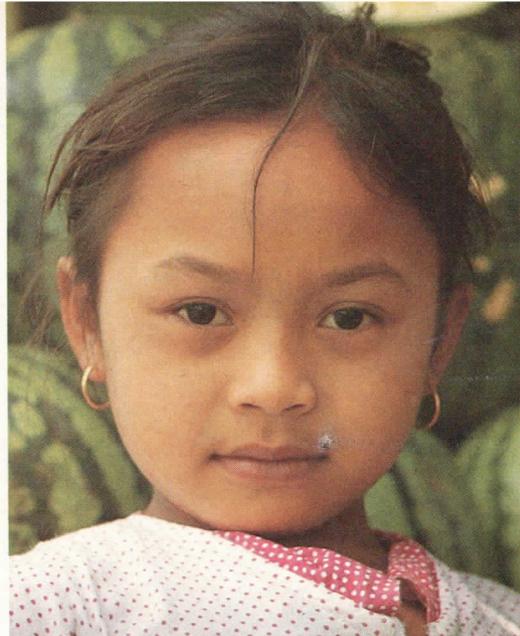
We'd reached our suite, two bedrooms, bathroom and living-room for \$25 a day including breakfast. I suspect that in the hotel's heyday they would have been quite splendid rooms with their high ceilings, tiled floors and spaciousness, decadent enough for Somerset Maugham's aesthetes or Louis Couperus, the masterful Dutch writer whose novels set in the East Indies breathe with a colonial self-indulgence.

The present-day reality was Spartan, though. The cream paint was peeling and I couldn't see Maugham using a desk quite so impoverished as the wooden one in the living-room. Even if the lamp had worked. The remainder of the furniture was of a similar vintage.

For all that, I loved the place, probably because I'm an incurable romantic. I took a *mandi* (a cold refreshing bath whereby one ladles water over oneself from a receptacle) and settled in the living-room along with the cockroaches who were shuffling about behind the chest-of-drawers.

There was a knock at the door and the ancient reappeared with a silverish tray bearing a china service.

"Tea, *meneer*," he said in a monotone, and placed it on the rickety table before me. I hadn't ordered any but at Grand Hotel Lembang some things are taken for granted. One always has drunk tea at four in the afternoon and presumably one always will. Now that's a real hotel.



East Javanese child at market



Village mosque and (below) ricefield worker

