

Publikation: Jakarta Globe
Datum: 17.09.2015

JakartaGlobe
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Cultural Worlds Exhibition: A Journey Back in Time

By Jaime Adams



The exhibition celebrates history and culture through the ages. (Photo courtesy of Goethe-Institut Indonesien/ Ramos Pane)

Jakarta. Cultural heritage is made up of many things and is preserved through books, artifacts, objects, art and photographs. But we can also see it in certain buildings, cityscapes and archaeological remains.

The exhibition "Cultural Worlds," which officially opened at Kunstkring Gallery in Central Jakarta on Wednesday night, invites visitors to plunge into different countries, cultures and eras, as it presents 13 projects which are part of the Cultural Preservation Program of the German Federal Foreign Office.

"If you look around, you will find thirteen examples of the many cultural sites whose conservation has been supported by the Federal Republic of Germany as part of the Federal Foreign Office Cultural Preservation Program," Dr. Georg Witschel, the German ambassador to Indonesia, said during the opening.

"We do that because we believe that conserving cultural heritage helps to foster national identity and cultural dialogue. Therefore, Germany has been realizing this preservation program for 24 years now. We have supported projects in 144 countries with 63 million Euros [\$71 million]."

The exhibition gives insight to these selected projects, and Witschel quickly reminded the visitors that the painstaking efforts of restoration and preservation often have a serious background.

"Many sites of cultural heritage are threatened by war, by terrorism, by weather, by natural disasters, by conflicts, or even by simple neglect," he said. "You all have seen the recent pictures of the temple of Bel in Palmyra, being destroyed by ISIS [Islamic State] – it was not the first and won't be the last site of cultural heritage being destroyed."

He added that cultural property was a valuable asset to each country as it conveyed a sense of belonging and security.

"It's the basis for social and religious cohesion. We need these samples of history in order for us to define our place and get our bearings in the world today," Witschel said.

"That means that whoever destroys sites of cultural heritage also destroys identities, the soul and tradition of people. Rightly so, the destruction of cultural sites has been declared a war crime."

Among the projects that are highlighted in the exhibition is the Buddhist temple and world cultural heritage site Borobudur. Over the past years, the Federal Republic of Germany has been funding restoration projects at Borobudur with more than 500,000 euros (\$567,000).

"Borobudur dates from the ninth century and it has gone through a very eventful history. Today, the Borobudur compounds are a real showcase for traditional art, religious beliefs and Javanese history, attracting millions of visitors from all over the world," Witschel explained.

"That still doesn't mean that Borobudur does not face any threats. This time, it doesn't come in the form of a war, but in the form of Merapi, the volcano."

In 2010, the nearby Mount Merapi erupted and covered Borobudur in ashes containing sulfur.

"Consequently, the Cultural Preservation Program of our Foreign Office has been funding Unesco's stone conservation project which is being carried out in cooperation with the Borobudur Conservation Office and the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture," Witschel said.

"Besides the stone conservation project, there are other projects at Borobudur that not only conserve but also restore the temple's original states. One of these projects is the hunt for the heads of the around 250 decapitated Buddha statues at Borobudur and the attempt to match them with the around 50 originals which have been found so far. That may sound easy but it isn't because the heads' edges have often been straightened, and you also need to apply sophisticated methods to analyze and compare the different stone sizes in order to really, properly match them."

Other highlighted projects the preservation of manuscripts featuring ancient handwriting in Timbuktu, Mali, or the restoration of the old bazaar of Erbil in Iraq.

"Cultural Worlds" is part of the German Season, an initiative of the Federal Foreign Office in Germany and organized by the Goethe-Institut Indonesien, the German Embassy Jakarta and EKONID.

"The German Season is the biggest German-Indonesian festival we ever held, covering of course cultural affairs, but also business perspectives, new technologies – we will soon

open a science exhibition at Museum Nasional – as well as education and sports,” Witschel explained.

“With this German Season, we wish to celebrate the ongoing friendship between our two countries and foster sustainable creative exchange between Indonesia and Germany.”

As part of the German Season, the exhibition “Cultural Worlds” will not only be shown in Jakarta, but will also move on to Borobudur and Surabaya

this exhibition tonight will not only be shown in Jakarta, but move on to Borobudur from October 12 to November 1 as well as Surabaya where it will be opened on November 9 and run for a fortnight.

“We simply want to allow as many people as possible to see this exhibition,” Witschel said. “We want them to understand what ‘Cultural Worlds’ really means.”

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“Cultural Worlds” Through Sept. 25 Tugu Kunstkring Paleis Jalan Teuku Umar No. 1, Menteng Central Jakarta