

VISUAL ART IN INDONESIA

Introduction

The influence of the colonisers and the West on the emergence and development of modern Indonesian art is today still the subject of discussion among local historians and critics. Sanento Yuliman, the painter and art critic (1941–1992), often emphasised in his works that Indonesian painting was born from the encounter and intercultural relations between Indonesia and Europe. European painting was brought to Nusantara together with the arrival of Dutch colonisers in the early seventeenth century. Among the employees of the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie – VOC) were also painters who were primarily engaged in transferring landscapes and scenes of everyday life to canvas. Their paintings, offered mainly up as gifts to the local rulers, were probably the first examples of European painting to reach Indonesia¹. A similar position is taken by another critic Kusnadi (1921–1997), who emphasises that the encounter of local art with the art of colonisers was not a collision of two attitudes, but rather resembled the slow process of assimilation lasting from the arrival of the Dutch until the independence of Indonesia in 1945².

The most important painter of this period and the first modern painter was Raden Saleh, who lived in the years 1807 (1811) – 1880. Coming from a noble Javanese family, in his childhood he began to study painting under the guidance of the Belgian teacher Antoine Auguste Joseph Payen (1792–1853). He not only taught him the use of Western painting techniques such as, among others, the use of oil paints, but also took him on a tour of Java, dur-

¹) Sanento Yuliman (2001: 55–57).

²) Kusnadi (1990).

ing which the young Raden Salah painted local people and the places they passed through. Payen, who was impressed by the skills of his disciple, requested permission for his departure to the Netherlands, where he was to continue his education. Raden Saleh arrived in Europe in 1829 and he studied, among others, painting portraits under the tutorship of Cornelis Kruseman (1797–1857) while later he became the pupil of Andreas Schelfhout (1787–1870), under whom he developed the characteristic style of an Indonesian painter – a combination of European romanticism and Javanese tradition. In the 1930s, Raden Saleh made several trips around Europe, and the emerging fascination with the paintings of Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863) in his portraits and landscapes, which were becoming more and more popular, can be seen. However, the most famous work of Raden Saleh was painted in 1857 and represents the arrest of Prince Diponegoro, the leader of the first anti-Dutch uprising on Java in the years 1825–1830. *Pangeran Diponegoro Penangkapan (Capture of Prince Diponegoro)* shows the moment of capture when the prince, unaware of the ambush planned by the Dutch, was paying a visit to General Hendrik Merkus De Kock. Saleh portrayed the colonisers with disproportionately large heads, making them look disturbingly inhuman and monstrous. Diponegoro himself is presented with his head raised and his glance expresses steadfastness and a will to fight. The painting was originally a gift to King William III of the Netherlands and came back to Indonesia over a hundred years after being painted, in 1978. Today the picture of Saleh is often interpreted as evidence of emerging Indonesian nationalism in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Indonesians' awakening that led to independence in 1945.

After the death of Raden Saleh in 1880 one had to wait for the appearance of his followers for nearly half a century. The artists creating in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and the first decades of the twentieth century initiated a movement called Mooi India (Beautiful India). Their paintings presented Orient-like image of Nusantara, calm, peaceful places, filled with a romantic spirit, in which happy and smiling inhabitants work, obediently following the orders of the colonial overseers. Idyllic scenery of mountains, rice fields, beaches, palm trees corresponded with the popular Western conception of the East. However, not only Dutch artists and foreign citizens, coming to Java or Bali, were among the representatives of Mooi India. A large and important group of painters were also Indonesians such as Mas Pirngadie (1875–1936), award-winning for his watercolours, both during exhibitions in Indonesia and international Exhibitions, Wakidi (1889–1979), painting mainly landscapes of

West Sumatra where he came from³⁾ or Abdullah Suriosubroto (1879–1941), who was educated, like Raden Saleh, in the Netherlands⁴⁾.

The 1930s brought changes. Already by the beginning of the new century Indonesia was increasingly opening up to the West. Indonesian ports, such as Surabaya, became not only places for exchanging goods but also for people to bring new political, philosophical, religious thoughts or new moral norms. Books, newspapers, magazines, telegraph began to bring the latest news from around the world. Twentieth century brought not only information but wider access to education as well. Dutch schools and universities opened their doors to Indonesian students. The number of Indonesians who had access to Western or Dutch primary and secondary education grew. Women also began to acquire education and Kartini⁵⁾ fought for equal rights for women. After her death, as a continuation of her work and fulfilment of her last will left in her letters and other writings, a whole network of schools for girls, named after the originator was created on Java. Young Indonesians, educated in Western-style Dutch schools, in Kartini schools and universities created the new intelligentsia of Dutch East India, the new elite, critical to existing traditions and value systems.

Contemporary art, after a long break after the death of Raden Saleh, began a revival in the early twentieth century in discussion clubs on Java or Sumatra, where representatives of the Indonesian elite became acquainted with foreign art and literature⁶⁾. In the twenties, nationalist groups came increasingly to the fore, fighting for the establishment of an independent Indonesia. At a time when Kuomintang grew and came to power in China and while on the neighbouring Philippines the Americans assumed control of the country, replacing the colonial rule of the Spaniards, Indonesia founded the first political party Indische Partij, calling for liberation from the colonial power of the Dutch. The whole region seemed to seethe with unrest. In the 1920s the term Indonesia appeared, and Sukarno founded the Indonesian National Party (Indonesian: Partai Nasional Indonesia). In 1928 the Youth Congress declared: one country – Indonesia, one nation – Indonesians, one language – Indonesian. The Youth Congress participants coming from the new elite played the key role in the

³⁾ @rsip IVAA (Wakidi).

⁴⁾ @rsip IVAA (Abdullah Suriosubroto).

⁵⁾ Kartini (1879–1904), came from a noble Javanese family. Posthumously a collection of her letters *From the Darkness into the Light* was published. It was a reflection of her ideas.

⁶⁾ Forshee (2006: 81).

proclamation of independence of Indonesia in 1945, implementing the ideas of the modern nation aspiring to be a part of the international community.

A nationalist mood, present in other areas of life, began to penetrate the world of art. In the circle of Indonesian painters, the awakening came with the Sindoedarsono Soedjojono (1913–1985) and the organisation Persatoean Ahli-Ahli Gambar Indonesia (PERSAGI, Indonesian Association of Artists) established by him in 1938 in Batavia (now Jakarta). Soedjojono was the first to point out that the artists creating in the style of Mooi India did not depict the truth about the reality that surrounded them, and only showed the idea of the West on how the Orient should look like. The “authentic East” presented by them, as emphasised Soedjojono, was in fact created by the colonisers. Instead of smiling workers, artists should therefore show without unnecessary beautification the residents of Nusantara, the sugar factory in which they worked, the changes taking place in the countryside or in newly built cities. Instead of painting “the idea of the East”, creators should start to present the East, and the new Indonesian art should be “art that does not anymore search for the past’s beauty”.

Soedjojono summed up his ideas in the book *Seni Loekis, Kesenian, dan Seniman (Painting, Art and Artist)* published in 1946. In the same year he founded in Madiun on East Java the association Seniman Indonesia Moeda (SIM, Indonesian Young Artists), which together with PERSAGI played an important role in the formation and development of Indonesian painting. Soedjojono himself was named the “Father of Modern Indonesian Painting” by the writer and art critic Trisno Sumardjo. In his works he remained faithful to proclaimed ideas and tried to show the daily lives of ordinary people. The first years of his career coincided with the time of the Second World War and the struggle of Indonesians for independence, and these were the themes which predominated in his works. In time, he began to create the images that spoke about the heroes of Indonesia, including, as Raden Saleh, the experiences of uprising under the leadership of Prince Diponegoro. In 1979 he painted a work entitled *Pasukan Kita Yang Dipimpin Pangeran Diponegoro (Our Soldiers Led Under Prince Diponegoro)*, which depicts the victorious struggle of Indonesian troops led by Prince Diponegoro. Unlike Saleh’s canvas, who showed Diponegoro at a time of disaster, Soedjojono decided to portrayed the Duke full glory, at his moment of triumph. At the time, in which the painting of Soedjojono was created, Indonesia was experiencing a deep crisis of identity, so that his work can be also read as a commentary on

the contemporary situation in the country and the artist's steadfast belief in the power of ordinary people who are able to determine the fate of the entire country.

Affandi (1907–1990), who is considered by many critics to be one of the greatest in the history of Indonesian paintings and whose works have inspired the next generations of artists till this day, began his career parallel to Soedjojono. In times of struggle for independence, Affandi, who was already enjoying popularity, designed propaganda posters encouraging Indonesians to resist the colonisers. One of his most famous works from this period is a poster made at Sukarno's behest, the first president of independent Indonesia, imagining a young man freeing from the chains that restrained him and carrying the red-white flag of Indonesia. There is an inscription at the bottom "Boeng, Ajo Boeng" ("Come on Brother"), which was invented by the young poet Chairil Anwar (1922–1949). The poster, printed in several thousand copies, has become one of the most famous examples of propaganda art from the period of the Indonesian National Revolution (1945–1949).

Affandi visited India and Europe in the fifties, where he met with the works of the greatest painters of the West for the first time. At that time Indonesia still remained on the margins of the art world, the only larger Western art presentations took place in the thirties in Batavia (now Jakarta), when the works of painters such as Gauguin, Kandinsky and Picasso were exhibited. With some delay, new trends in art, such as Impressionism and Abstract Expressionism reached Indonesia. Affandi, after returning to Indonesia in the early sixties till the end of his life, explored the technique of painting with paint squeezed onto the canvas directly from the tube, without the use of brushes or tools other than hands. An anecdote says that he discovered the technique by accident when he broke one of his brushes and, not wanting to stop work, squeezed paint directly on the canvas and then when he tried to spread it he began to paint with the back of his hand. The resulting work seemed to him to be more "alive", wild, better expressing his feelings. His "new technique" even today has its imitators and followers.

In the same period there was some discussion in Indonesia on the establishment of a museum of art, which should collect the works of contemporary Indonesian artists. The main initiator of the creation of the museum was Trisno Sumardjo, who emphasised: "the establishment of the museum was important to increase the knowledge of the public of modern art. Without it, the results of modern art – which he clearly differentiates from traditional art – will experi-

ence a disfunction in society. And in the midst of the era's poverty, art would only be understood as something arbitrary and uncertain"⁷⁾.

In the fifties, an association Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat (Lekra, Institute of People's Culture), associated with Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI, Communist Party of Indonesia) started operating. In 1956, Lekra released its second manifesto entitled *Mukamidah (Introduction)*, in which it called for proceeding according to the doctrine of socialist realism "[...] art should reflect social realities and promote social progress rather than simply explore the human personality. In particular, it promoted the idea of "People-ness" (*kerakyatan*) in art and urged artists to move downward (*turun ke bawah*) to draw inspiration from the mass of the people. Lekra was rather more successful in recruiting in the visual arts than in literature; well-known painters such as Affandi, Henk Ngantung, and Hendra Gunawan applied Lekra ideas to their work with success [...]"⁸⁾.

In 1965, a purge began across the country after a failed coup d'état carried out by the Gerakan 30 September (30 September Movement), which killed six generals, and for which the PKI was blamed. From October to the end of 1966 more than half a million people accused of being communists and their supporters or alleged supporters were probably killed. Further hundreds of thousands were separated from their families for many years, either remaining in prison or abroad by prior deprivation of citizenship. In 1967, after 22 years in power, the first president of independent Indonesia, Sukarno was overthrown, and was succeeded by Suharto and the period of Orde Baru (New Order) began in the country's history. Lekra was banned, outlawed and some of the artists associated with it, such as Hendra Gunawan (1918–1983) went to prison for many years. After years Joebaar Ajoeb, the secretary of Lekra recalled: "Indonesian modern art post 1965 was art that was moving towards an eclipse. The dialogue with the actual situation in Indonesia that gave it life became difficult to see. The white becomes blurry in the eclipse's twilight; the red becomes black. Although floating and vagrant, it sprouts in between the cause and effect of development. Art remained silent of its sorrow when the Proclamator, the first President of this Republic, Soekarno, which had long been a blood brother, passed away. Art looked away when the country went through big tragedies.

⁷⁾ Seeing Paintings: Conversations Before the End of History (2013: 22).

⁸⁾ Cribb, Kahin (2004: 242).

Indonesian modern art had eclipsed, even though it remained conscious of the reality and history of where it lived"⁹).

After 1965 it was necessary to redefine the understanding of such terms as identity and national character. Also young generation of artists slowly began to express their opinion. In 1974 an exhibition of Indonesian art connected with the competition was held in Jakarta, the result of which was to select the best picture. After the announcement of the results a group of young artists dissatisfied with the verdict sent a letter containing condolences on the death of painting in Indonesia, and later, in December of the same year, a statement entitled *Surat Pernyataan 1974 Desember Hitam (The Black December 1974 Statement)*. "The letter, among other things, argued the importance of variety in Indonesian painting, called for spiritual values based on human values with an orientation on social, cultural, political and economic life; asked for clarification of the identity and existence of Indonesian painting; criticised all issues that slowed the growth of Indonesian painting with obsolete concepts still followed by the establishment, art dealers and established artists; and therefore, for the salvation of Indonesian painting, it is time to pay respect to the establishment, as pensioners of culture"¹⁰). One of the signatories of the letter was FX. Harsono, born in 1949, whose recent works focus primarily on the autobiographical threads connected with problems of the Chinese minority living in Indonesia. During the presidency of Suharto, FX. Harsono made primarily works of an interventional nature, intended to be a commentary on the current socio-political situation in the country. In 1994 he created an installation called *The Voices Controlled by the Powers*, in which he used wooden masks used in *wayang topeng* theatre and dance. The lower half of the mask was cut off and placed inside the installation, the upper half remained outside, facing towards the centre. The work of FX. Harsono was created in response to attempts to censor one of the most influential magazines distributed in Indonesia. After the fall of the Suharto regime, the artist began to develop in his works, topics related to everyday discrimination suffered by the members of China's ethnic minority living in Indonesia. The artist often indicates the disadvantaged position of this group in Indonesian society, the political repression that it faces and problems of identity. The constantly recurring question about the role and duty of the artist to society also emerges in his paintings, installations and video projections. One of his recent projects, initiated in 2011, refers to converting Chinese

⁹) Seeing Paintings: Conversations Before the End of History (2013: 38).

¹⁰) Seeing Paintings: Conversations Before the End of History (2013: 44).

names into Indonesian and the Chinese erasure of identity. It is based on the direct experiences of the artist who was also forced to change his Chinese name during the rule of Suharto. FX. Harsono conducting research on the presence and role of the Chinese in building an independent Indonesia shows how often they are absent in the official version of history taught at schools and promoted by some political parties. In his works, the artist often uses Chinese calligraphy, which is prohibited in the public sphere (Fig. 1).

In the eighties and nineties, the dominant position in the art world was won by the Indonesian artists associated with Yogyakarta city in Central Java, which has attracted artists for a long time. In Yogyakarta, where Affandi founded his museum, there is also the Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia (ASRI, Indonesian Academy of Arts, now ISI). In 1988 Cemeti Gallery was founded by the artists Mella Jaarsma and Nindityo Adipurnomo. The Gallery has promoted young Indonesian artists whose works began to gain more and more recognition abroad. In 1997 a “boom” took place in the Indonesian art market. In those days an economic crisis hit Indonesia, but the Indonesian and foreign art collectors helped to push prices to unprecedented levels. New artists such as Nasirun, Heri Dono or Putu Sutawijaya and many more gained popularity.

Over the years, the majority of Indonesian artists was looking for topics of their works (according to what Soedjojono said in the thirties) in the daily lives of ordinary people or in traditional arts such as *wayang kulit*, shadow theatre. This theatre is considered to be one of the oldest arts of telling stories in the world, which has lasted continuously for over a thousand years, and it has become an inexhaustible source of inspiration for Nasirun who was born in 1965. Even as a child he began to watch all-night shadow theatre performances, admiring the figures appearing in them, stories and, above all, the intricately made puppets. The word *kulit* means ‘leather’ and refers to the material of which the puppets are made. Water buffalo hide, from which the remnants of meat, fat, hair and other impurities are removed in a long cleaning process, is the best. The end result is a thin and translucent parchment-like leather, onto which the outline of the puppet is transferred and the process of cutting out the elaborated ornaments may begin. The apertures are cut with incredible precision, as the patterns are usually rather dense and the smallest error may destroy the whole work. More than thirty patterns of cuts and motifs can be used in the making of a puppet. The final element to be made is the puppet’s face: nose, mouth and eyes. Of all the parts of a puppet, it is the eye that is its most crucial feature of expression. Not only its position on the face is important, the shape or the degree to which the lid is open, but also the character, the

nature which the eye imparts to the entire figure. Hence the eye is cut with precision and care at the very end of the production process, and its finishing is symbolic of the puppet coming to life.

Wayang appears on both the paintings as well as sculptures and installations of Nasirun (Fig. 2). He used dozens of miniature shadow puppets placed in glass bottles in one of his last works *Between Worlds* presented at the Singapore Biennale in 2013. The characters designed by the artist are not found in the traditional repertoire of *wayang kulit*, but represent a characteristic for this type of theatrical character and evoke local mythical beliefs that Nasirun often combines in his works with references to Islam, the dominant religion in Indonesia. Art critics writing about *Between Worlds* also stressed that the closure of the form of *wayang* in glass bottles made them look identical to scientific preparations used in laboratories. “This point of view suggests that these figures and the ancient myths, spiritual philosophies and belief systems they represent are now seen as relics of our time. Yet their lively appearance and unique individual expressions and gestures seem to deny this fate of being disregarded or seen as something that is no longer relevant. This raises the question of whether there is still a place for these unique local traditions and values today, or have they been replaced by something else, such as perhaps a more homogenised, global popular culture”¹¹). Nasirun’s paintings created with the impasto technique are of special note. The artist calligraphs phrases recorded in the Javanese alphabet, now less frequently used, in a thick layers of oil paint. The text is interspersed with images of characters from *wayang*, the *Mahabharata*, and the heroes of local myths.

Wayang has also become an inspiration for Heri Dono, born in 1960, an artist who was the first to introduce kinetic art to Indonesia. Characters of *wayang* are usually presented in his paintings, sculptures and installations as the heroes of popular art, commenting on the current political situation in the country in a humorous way. Punakawan are his favourite characters. But in *wayang* the profound significance of the Punakawan appearance is attributed. Many researchers believe that they are the original Javanese characters added to the *wayang purwa*¹²). Semar, the Father is treated as an incarnation of the god

¹¹) Singapore Biennale 2013: *If the World Changed* (Nasirun).

¹²) *wayang purwa* – *purwa* in Javanese language means “ancient”, but it can also be derived from the Sanskrit word *parwa* meaning chapter, into which great epic is divided. *Wayang purwa* term is used to describe the four cycles of traditional Javanese drama: *Java Dewa*, *Arjuna Sasrabahu*, *the Ramayana* and *the Mahabharata*.

Ismay, protecting the whole of Java. He is grotesque, but his inner wisdom and spirituality is what is really important in life. What is more, he and his three sons Bagong, Petruk and Gareng are also a source of wisdom for their masters. This illustrates the obvious principle for Javanese of democratic relations between master and servant, leader and subject. Without one another they cannot exist¹³. In the works of Heri Dono, as well as in *wayang* performances, the Punakawan comment on the reality surrounding them, without avoiding jokes and malice, but also pointing out the way out of the critical situation (Fig. 3).

As in the nineties, the leading gallery promoting young artists was Cemeti (operating until today), so currently the most important gallery in Yogyakarta is Sangkring, founded in 2007. Its creator is the artist Putu Sutawijaya, a native of Bali, born in 1971. His “paintings explore dynamic movement through a collection of figures in a trance, dancing in an apparent meditative state. He also observes the essence of the body as a rich medium to reflect thoughts of life. His spontaneous brushstrokes make use of earthy colors to build a strong dramatic narrative, which brings the viewer into the painter’s deepest spaces. Putu has painted a number of epics he referred from classic Chinese sagas and from other cultures”¹⁴ (Fig. 4).

A group of young artists born in the late seventies and early eighties is associated with Sangkring Gallery. One of them is Robet Kan (born in 1979), whose early works are associated with a group of Hitam Manis, bringing together five artists, who made collective sculptures from recycled materials. An important role in the recent works of Robet is played by his night meditations *tapa kungkum*, during which he remains submerged in water, for a few minutes or a few hours, in a spring, under a waterfall or in a river. These rituals are associated with *kejawen*, complex of practices, beliefs and traditions that have developed on Java, where over the centuries they have been connected with each other and have penetrated animism, shamanism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. *Kejawen* is not a religion (faith) in the strict sense of the term, but rather a set of ethical and spiritual values derived from the Javanese tradition. During meditation, while in the water, the artist opens up to the surrounding sounds, smells, movements, which he later recreates in his paintings and sculptures. The characters, who appear in his works, are accompanied by animals, such as owls and bats, whose voices resound during the hours spent at night in water, as well as chickens and cats, whose voices herald the approaching morning, the end

¹³) Ness (1980: 53–54).

¹⁴) Seeing Paintings: Conversations Before the End of History (2013: 78).

of meditation time. In accordance with the syncretism of *kejawen*, Robet Kan combines symbols from different religions and cultures, painting for example Ganesha with a forehead decorated with the calligraphed name of Allah (the painting of *Ganesha* from 2013) or carving the figure of Buddha, whose body is covered with tattoos recounting his gangster past (*Ketidak Tahuanku Adalah Sumber Ilmu Pengetahuanku. After* from 2014). His works are an attempt to find an answer what role in today's world plays traditions which have formed Javanese identity for centuries (Fig. 5).

These few remarks about artists, the most important events in the history of art of the last century, an attempt to describe the language spoken by Indonesian artist, are only the beginning, a kind of introduction to create a complete picture of the Indonesian art during the twentieth and twenty-first century, which grew out of a meeting of the East and the West, but today is still too little known and understood in the West.

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Fig. 1. FX. Harsono. Writing in the rain. Installation. 2011, photo M. Lis



Fig. 2. Nasirun. Bajaj Pasti Berlalu. Silver&Gold. 2009–2010, photo M. Lis



Fig. 3. Heri Dono. The Three Donoraurus. Installation. 2013, photo M. Lis



Fig. 4. Putu Sutawijaya.
Bright Silent in Candi
Bangkal. 150 x 200 cm.
Mix Media on Canvas.
2010, photo Wahyu Tantra



Fig. 5. Robet Kan. *Melihat Dengan Pendengaran*. 140 x 150 cm Acrylic on Canvas. 2014, photo M. Lis