

Modern Balinese Arts: Painting

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Balinese arts are the visual expression of the culture of the island of Bali, one of the thousand islands of Indonesia. Even if the Balinese culture is extremely artistic, Balinese have no words for ‘art’ and ‘artist’ because traditionally, art has never been regarded as something to be treasured for its own sake.

The Modern Balinese Painting started during the 1920s of the 20th century. The pre-War modernization of Balinese art emanated from three villages: Ubud, Sanur, and Batuan.

Ubud artists made more use of open spaces and emphasized human figures. Sanur paintings often featured erotic scenes and animals, and work from Batuan was less colorful but tended to be busier.⁽¹⁾

In the 1920s, with the arrival of many western artists, Bali became an artist enclave, as Tahiti was for Paul Gauguin, for avant-garde artists such as Walter Spies (German), Rudolf Bonnet (Dutch), Adrien-Jean Le Mayeur (Belgian), Arie Smit (Dutch), and Donald Friend (Australian) in more recent years. Most of these western artists had very little influence on the Balinese until the post-World War Two period.

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(1) Claire Holt: “Art in Indonesia: continuities and change”, Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell. University Press, 1967.



“Baris Dance” by Anak Agung Gede Soberat (1912/17-1992), acrylic on canvas, 128x75cm, Modern Balinese Painting Style of Ubud, Bali, Indonesia. 1990s. Source internet.

Western artists living in Bali at the time helped to promote the art to the newly-arrived tourists, and provided insights into the techniques of the West. One of these artists, Dutch Rudolf Bonnet, played a key role in helping set up the Museum Bali in Denpasar, then organizing exhibitions of Balinese art in Java, and most importantly setting up an artists’ association for painters and sculptors, the famous but short-lived Pita Maha organization.

Despite the adoption of modern western painting traditions by many Balinese and Indonesian painters, "modern traditional Balinese painting" is still thriving and continues by descendants/students of the artists of the Pre-War

Modernist Era (1928-1942). The schools of Modern Traditional Balinese Painting include: Ubud, Batuan, Sanur, Young Artist and Keliki schools of painting.

Ubud has been the center of art for centuries, with the surrounding royal houses and temples as the main patrons. Prior to the 1920s, traditional *wayang* style paintings dominated the subject matters, although the French writer Jean Couteau, in his Catalogue of the Museum Puri Lukisan, 1999, Ratna Wartha Foundation (i.e. the Museum Puri Lukisan), believes that “both secular and religious theme paintings have long been co-existing in the form of the expression of the unity of opposites (*Rwabhinna* in Balinese belief system)”. Under the patronage of the Ubud royal family, especially the king Tjokorda Gde Agung Sukawati, and with Rudolf Bonnet as a chief consultant, the Pita Maha Art Guild Art Association was founded in 1936 as a way to professionalize Balinese painting. Its mission was to preserve the quality of Balinese Art in the rush of tourism to Bali. The board members of Pita Maha met regularly to select paintings submitted by its members, and to conduct exhibitions throughout Indonesia and abroad. Pita Maha was active until the beginning of the Second World War in 1942. Ubud became the centre to which other artists came between the 1950s and the 1970s. Today the Ubud style is the dominant mode of art associated with the image of Bali, predominantly idyllic scenes of rice-fields, temple festivals and the style of Balinese life now rapidly disappearing with urbanization and the intensity of tourism. Artists such as Anak Agung Gede Soberat and I Gusti Nyoman Lempad are the major artists of the “Ubud style”.

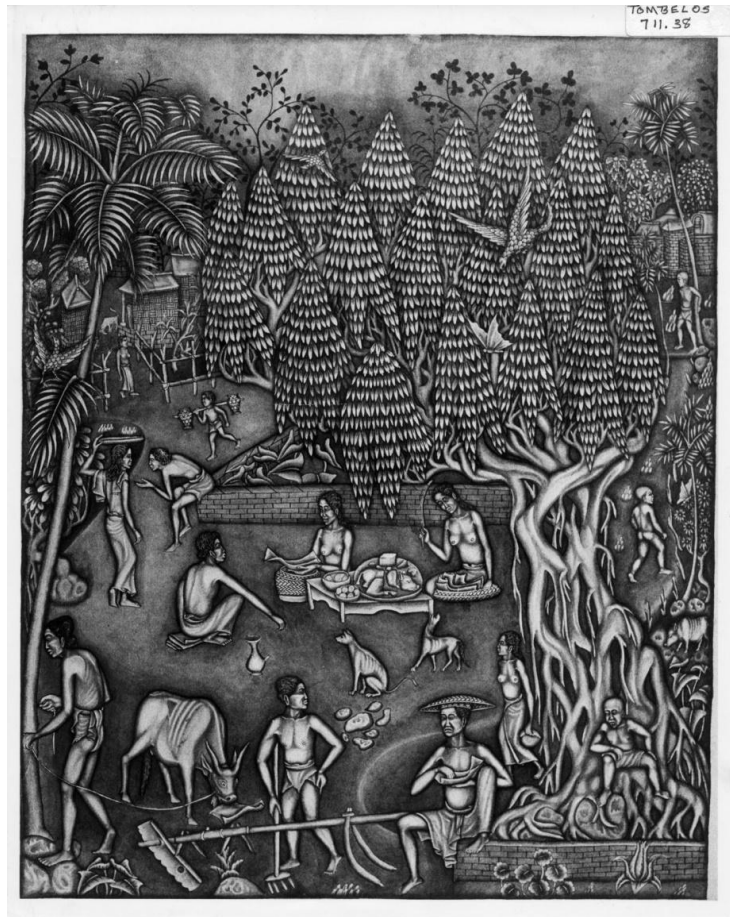
Another of the Balinese key centres of art was the village of Batuan, which is situated 10 km to the south of Ubud. The western influence in Batuan did not reach the intensity it had in Ubud. According to Claire Holt: “the Batuan paintings were often dark, crowded representations of either legendary

scenes or themes from daily life, but they portrayed above all fearsome nocturnal moments when grotesque spooks, freakish animal monsters, and witches accosted people".⁽²⁾ This is particularly true for paintings collected by the famous anthropologists Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson during their field studies in Bali in 1936 to 1939. Gradations of black to white ink washes laid over most of the surface, so as to create an atmosphere of darkness and gloom. In the later years, the designs covered the entire space, which often contributed to the crowded nature of these paintings. Leading artists of the 1930s included the painter I Nyoman Ngendon, and a number of members of leading Brahman families, including the sculptor Ida Bagus Made Togog. Because Batuan was such a centre of the arts, the famous anthropologists Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson spent much time there in the late 1930s, building up a huge collection with Batuan works at its heart, but also leaving us with extensive documentation of all the artists of the period. As well as working very closely with Ida Bagus Togog, Bateson and Mead also collected many works by artists such as Ida Bagus Bala and Ida Bagus Jatasura. Subsequent generations in Batuan have continued what these pioneers started, while other villages lost their vibrancy, this was not the case in Batuan. They follow the lead of older artists such as I Made Budi, who began to depict humorous scenes of tourist-Balinese interactions in the 1970s. The younger artists show a Bali overrun by tourism, alongside visions of rural life and the connection with the gods. Tourists and deities occupy the same space of the island.

Unlike Ubud and Batuan which are located in the inland of Bali, Sanur is a beach resort. Sanur was the home of the well-known Belgian artist Le Mayeur de Mepres, who lived with a

(2) Claire Holt: *"Art in Indonesia: continuities and change"*, Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press, 1967.

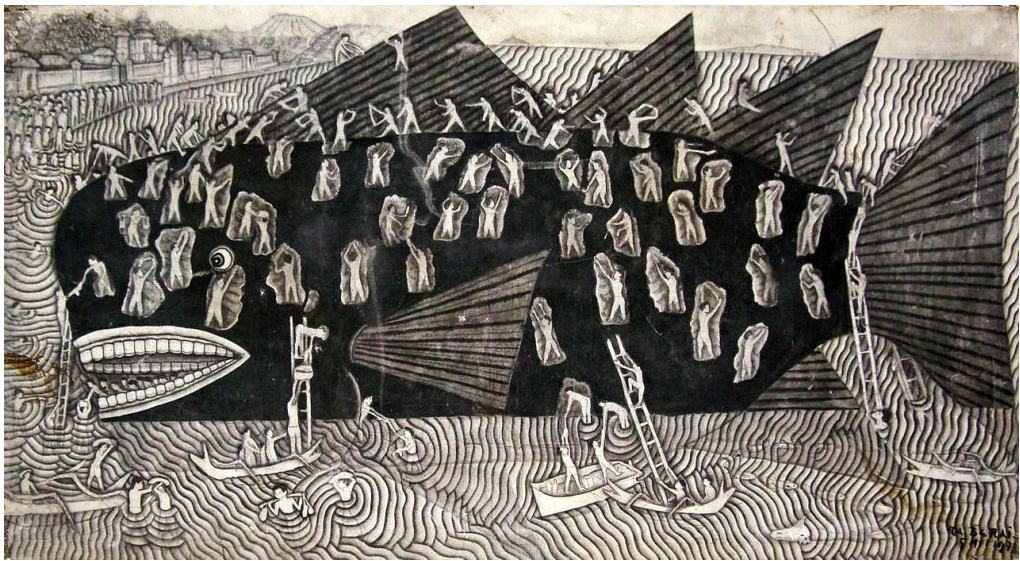
Balinese wife (Ni Polok) and had a beach house in Sanur beach.



“Village Life” by I Ketut Tomblos, (1917–2010), washed pen and ink. Modern Balinese Painting Style of Batuan. Dated 25 Feb 1939. Private Collection, Los Angeles Photo by the Princeton Photographer.

Tourists in the 1930s came to Bali on cruise ships docked in Sanur and made side trips to Ubud and neighboring tourist sites. Its prime location provided the Sanur artist with ready-access to Western tourists who frequented the shop of the German businessmen, Hans and Rolf Neuhaus, who sold Balinese souvenirs and tropical fishes. Neuhaus brothers became the major art dealer of Sanur paintings, since they opened their shop in 1935. There were some 60 artists in this

village, and they too benefitted from Western patronage and interaction. The beach around Sanur, full of outriggers and open horizon, provided local artists with a visual environment different from the Ubud and Batuan, which are located in the hinterland. The playful atmosphere pervades the Sanur paintings, and it is not dictated by the religious iconography.



“Beached Whale” by Ida Bagus Nyoman Rai (1915-2000), black ink on canvas. Modern Balinese Painting Style of Sanur. Neka Museum Ubud, Bali, Indonesia. 1970s. Online Australian Museum of Art.

It is lighter and airy than those of Batuan and Ubud with sea creatures, erotic scenery and wild animals drawn in rhythmic patterns; often in an Escher-like manner. Most early works were black and white ink wash on paper worked in Chinese inks, but at the request of Neuhaus, latter works were adorned with light pastel colors often added by other artists specializing in coloring black and white drawings. Their name code is often found at the margin. Bateson and Mead acquired works through the Neuhaus brothers. A number of Western artists lived in Sanur, notably the eccentric Swiss painter Theo Meier, who invited local artists into his studio

and provide materials and opportunities to interact. Of the Sanur artists only a very few kept producing in the post-War period. The Sanur School of painting remains the most stylized and decorative among all modern Balinese Art. The most famous artist of Sanur was Ida Bagus Nyoman Rai.



“Forest” by I Wayan Pugur (1945 -), acrylics on canvas. Modern Balinese Painting Style of Young Artist. 1960s. Source Wikipedia.

The development of the Young Artist School of painting is attributed to the Dutch artist Arie Smit, a Dutch soldier who served during the 2nd World War and decided to stay in Bali. In the early 1960s, he came across children in the village of Penestanan near Ubud, and near Tjampuhan drawing on the sand. He encouraged these children to paint by providing them with paper and paints. This “Young Artist” style moved towards a decorative abstraction that was to prefigure the Contemporary art of the next generation; their paintings are characterized by "child-like" drawings that lack details and bright colors drawn with oil paint on canvas. By the 1970s, it attracted around three hundred peasant painters to produce paintings for tourists. In 1983, the National Gallery of Malaysia held a major exhibition on the Young Artist

paintings from the collection of Malaysian Datuk Lim Chong Kit, now in the National Art Gallery of Kuala Lumpur since 1983.

Major artists from the Young Artist School are I Nyoman Gunarsa, I Wayan Pugur, I Ketut Soki, I Ngurah KK, I Nyoman Londo, I Ketut Tagen, M D Djaga, I Nyoman Cakra, Ni Ketut Gampil, I Nyoman Mundik, I Wayan Regug, Mangku Putra and many others.



“Temple Ceremony” by I Ketut Sana(1952-), ink and watercolor on paper, 6x8cm. Modern Balinese Painting Style of Young Artist. 1980s, Source Wikipedia.

In the 1970s, the area of Keliki, on the fringes of Ubud, produced a new style identified with the name of that village. It is a miniature style of painting, led by a local farmer I Ketut Sana. The sizes range of the paintings goes from as small as 6x8cm to as large as 26x38cm. Every centimeter of the space is covered with minute details of Balinese village life and legends drawn in ink and colored with watercolor.

The outcome is a marriage between the youthfulness of the Ubud School and the details of the Batuan School. The Keliki artists are proud with their patience to paint minute details of every object meticulously that occupies the drawing space of the painting.

Some of the major artists from the Keliki School are I Ketut Sana, I Wayan Surana, and I Lunga.

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