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**Traditions in Central-Javanese Contemporary Painting**

Wayang in the Painting of Surakarta and Yogyakarta

DLA-Dissertation

**Theses**

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I spent a longer period in the central part of the island of Java, Indonesia, three times. On the first two occasions I lived in Surakarta, and the third time in Yogyakarta. These two towns, parts of a kingdom in days gone by, are each other's rivals as the most important centres of the living traditions of Central Java today. For me, the smaller and less developed Surakarta represents the authentic tradition, where craftsmanship and performing art are flourishing in symbiosis. I was influenced to the greatest extent by the overall art production, the shadow theatre performance (*wayang kulit* in Indonesian) which spiritual communal programme makes use of the achievements of literature, music and applied arts, exploiting the potentials of performing art. This is the reason why I had written my thesis in this field of research at the Faculty of Art, the University of Pécs. Then I further elaborated on my thesis, which was published in book form entitled *Javanese Shadows* in 2009.

In the contemporary painting of Central Java the content elements of *wayang kulit*, the formal aspects of its puppets and their ornamentation frequently emerge, at the same time contemporary painters prefer to stage novel shadow puppet plays. After acquiring knowledge in the field of Javanese shadow theatre and painting, as candidate of the Doctoral School of the Art Faculty of the University of Pécs, I saw the outline of a research subject for my DLA-dissertation which offered a potential follow-up of my former achievements and efforts. As far as I know, up to the present no printed material in Hungarian has been available on Indonesian contemporary painting and especially on its connection with *wayang*. Research on the world of *wayang* in the contemporary painting of Surakarta and Yogyakarta is a rather new subject in Hungary.

I started research mapping contemporary Indonesian painting as early as 2007 in Surakarta, where I taught as visiting lecturer at the Faculty of Fine Art, Universitas Sebelas Maret as student of the Doctoral School of the Faculty of Fine Art, the University of Pécs. In 2009, on my next Indonesian visit, my destination was Yogyakarta, the Indonesian centre of fine art. Next to the capital, Yogyakarta has the most thriving life in the field of fine art, while pure folk traditions are difficult to come across. I could implement my research project there with the support of the Hungarian Eötvös State Fellowship.

My dissertation consists of nine chapters, the first four deal with the traditions, the next four focus on the *oeuvre* of some contemporary painters and art galleries, while the last chapter is a summary description of my own creative work. In Chapter One, the cultural history of Indonesia in nutshell, I am greatly indebted to Tibor Bodrogi's book entitled *The Art of Indonesia*. In this part I give an outline of the evolution of *wayang* through the

description of earlier relics and monuments of cultural history and art which had an overall influence on the development of the character of Indonesian modern painting.

The next chapter introduces wayang which embraces the Javanese shadow puppet show and forms of performing art, giving definitions of its technical terms. In the writing of the third chapter the above-mentioned book published in 1971 by Tibor Bodrogi as well as writings by Zsuzsanna Renner and Béla Kelényi which were printed in exhibition catalogues and certain issues of *Új Művészet (New Art)* in the 1990s served as a point of departure. From the great amount of foreign technical literature the chapter on wayang in Claire Holt's book *Art in Indonesia, Continuities and Change* (1967) was of great help among others. On the basis of my personal experience I make mention of some dalangs, theatre groups and contemporary artists on account of their outstanding achievements in the renewal of wayang.

As a consequence of the spread of the Islam, traditional painting in Java was pushed to the background, while it kept flourishing on the island of Bali with its Hindu religion; what is more, it became the fostering soil of modern Balinese painting. Due to the common roots of the Javanese and Balinese cultural background and the influence of the nobility and craftsmen fleeing from the Islam there are numerous similarities in the traditional painting of the two islands. In writing the subchapter on Balinese traditional painting, the wayang Kamasan, I relied mainly on Urs Ramseyer's book *The Art and Culture of Bali*, notwithstanding the fact that I also had the opportunity to visit the retrospective exhibition of painter I Nyoman Mandra (still alive) in Sankring Art Space in Yogyakarta and read the related catalogue. In discussing this topic I got further advice and instructions from the Balinese painter I Wayan Karja, lecturer of the Indonesian Institute of Art in Denpasar.

In the elaboration of the subchapter on Javanese traditional painting, the 'Wayang beber' besides the use of technical literature published in English and Indonesian, consultations and interviews with local experts, such as aesthete Bagyo Suharyono, freelance painter Dani Iswardana, painters I Nengah Gusti Nurata and Soengeng Toekio, who also teach at the Indonesian Institute of Art in Solo, were extremely helpful. In this part I differentiated the so-called conservative and contemporary painter. Still in this part of my work I gave a brief introduction to the art of some conservative painters.

Although a great many publications on contemporary Indonesian painting are available these days, after all it is the artists themselves who can offer authentic information which has not been elaborated yet by an outsider. Following this principle in the second part of my dissertation I laid great emphasis on discussing visits to studios and conversations with painters in addition to elaborating relevant secondary materials.

One of the most significant works giving an in-depth analysis of modern and contemporary fine art, entitled *Soul, Spirit and Mountain, Preoccupations of Contemporary Indonesian Painters* (1994), is related to the name of Astri Wright. In it she is exploring the appearance of traditions within contemporary visual arts, unlike me, concentrating not only on the wayang tradition. Since the 1990s many publications and articles have been published on Indonesian contemporary art, and exhibitions are inconceivable without the release of high quality catalogues. In 1993 a catalogue analysing the formal aspects of wayang in the art of painting was published and edited by Wiyoso Yudoseputro and M. Sulebar Soekarman in Indonesia, entitled *Rupa Wayang dalam Seni Rupa Kontemporer Indonesia*, which deals mainly with conservative painters.

It is of great value that Indonesian traditional culture has been maintained up to now by assimilating the influences reaching it from the outside; at the same time it is unfortunate that fewer and fewer Javanese deal with the study and fostering of their own culture. For this reason some of the Javanese artists are struggling for the survival of the cultural traditions by using all the tools at their disposal. In my research project I focused on contemporary Javanese painters who respect the traditions and have a progressive approach, introducing three artists of different character. .

Dani Iswardana is a young contemporary wayang beber painter, who refills the traditional form with modern content. He is intent on popularising moral values in his art. The chapter on him is based on personal conversations with him. Nasirun is a middle-aged and already very successful artist who gives contemporary form to the spiritual precepts of the wayang world and Sufism by using modern painting techniques. The essays and interviews in the catalogue accompanying his large-scale exhibition in 2009 were of great help in interpreting his art. Kartika Affandi, representative of the older generation, realized her talent mainly by making use of the paternal spiritual heritage. Her personal and intimate pictures tell the naked truth about the difficulties of female existence. In the analysis of her oeuvre, which is intertwined with her private life, the presentation of her own pictures by herself and a volume published on Indonesian female artists in Jakarta in 2007 were very useful.

The Indonesian trade in works of art has strengthened rapidly since the 1990s, and as a result, recently the prices of Indonesian works of art have skyrocketed on the Southeast-Asian market. Some Indonesian artists have become immensely rich, and being regarded as role models more and more people have chosen art as a career. In comparison with the needs of the art communities centred in Yogyakarta a great many contemporary art galleries have

mushroomed. For this reason, in Chapter Eight I briefly introduce the major art galleries of Yogyakarta. In preparing this chapter I was inspired by Michelle Chin's and Christina Schott's articles.

The first time--in order to get familiar with the Indonesian way of seeing things and visual art--to some extent I acquired techniques of some traditional branches of art and also made painted sketches of the world surrounding me. During my next visits I paid greater attention to my painting in addition to continuing research. Since the time spent in Indonesia shaped me imperceptibly day by day, it is difficult to put into words the changes I went through, nevertheless I am trying to do so in the chapter 'My Creative Work'. In elaborating this chapter I made use of texts written for the opening of my exhibitions by Andrea Máthé and Vera Brittig. I support the conception prevailing in my creative work up to now from my series *Factor* to the series *Intro* with the thoughts of Elemér Hankiss.

My dissertation is a summary of the immense knowledge and material that I obtained from the sources referred to below during the two years spent in Indonesia. The collected, arranged and presented material will hopefully contribute to getting rid of thinking in stereotypes of the East here in Central Europe, far away from Indonesia, and raising awareness of the dynamic diversity of the art world of Asia in our reception. Namely, by drawing on the bottomless resources of their ancient traditions, but making use of the western techniques as well and reinterpreting spirituality Indonesian artists have produced achievements in recent decades which are inseparable from universal art history

Besides the contemporary painters dealt with here, there are still some in whose works one can come across the presence of the formal and content elements of wayang. It would be worthwhile to dwell upon their paintings too, but for limitations of length it could not be done in this dissertation. I am referring here to the *oeuvre* of painters such as Heri Dono and Eko Nugroho as well as to the art of Entang Wiharso and Laksmi Shitaresmi briefly mentioned in the chapter 'Spaces of Exhibition in Yogyakarta'.

As it is apparent from my dissertation it is impossible to regard wayang merely as a traditional branch of art. The traditional forms of applied arts, batik and keris in particular, are closely intertwined with each other, the local body of beliefs and religion (kejawen and Sufism). I think that exploring other traditions of art or the presence of a religious trend in contemporary Indonesian art might be a subject of further research.

At last, but not least, it might be of interest to track the possible changes of artists from the west that they go through in an entirely different, for example, Indonesian cultural milieu.

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