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Walter Spies and Pitamaha: Innovators Who Inspired the Development of Painting in Bali

Anak Agung Inten Asmariati[1*], Sri Lestari[2]
[1,2]History Study Program, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Udayana University
Email: inten_asmariati@unud.ac.id

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Abstract. The history of Balinese painting has undergone a long process of evolution, beginning with traditional wayang paintings used for ritualistic and palace decorations before transitioning into modern Balinese painting in the 1930s. Balinese painters hold a significant social status, as their works are deeply embedded in religious and cultural traditions. One of the key milestones in Balinese painting history was the establishment of the Pita Maha group, which played a crucial role in shaping artistic identity by fostering dialogue between local painters and foreign artists such as Rudolf Bonnet and Walter Spies. These interactions led to the emergence of a distinct aesthetic movement that combined traditional elements with new artistic expressions. This study examines the historical development of Balinese painting, emphasizing the impact of external influences such as colonialism, globalization, and modernization. Despite periods of disruption, Balinese painting has demonstrated remarkable continuity in its decorative aspects, themes, and use of traditional colors. The research also explores the transformation of Balinese painting from serving ritual functions to becoming a commercial art form due to the influence of tourism and Western artistic interventions. Using a qualitative descriptive narrative method, this research analyzes historical records, literature, and artworks to understand the evolution of Balinese painting. The study applies historical and social change theories to trace shifts in painting styles and their implications for Balinese cultural identity. Data collection includes primary sources such as historical texts and secondary sources including scholarly analyses of Balinese art. Findings indicate that while Balinese painting has retained core traditional elements, it has also adapted to external influences, particularly through the Pita Maha movement. The study highlights how Balinese artists navigate between preserving cultural heritage and adapting to modern artistic trends. Ultimately, this research underscores the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation in Balinese painting, reflecting broader cultural transformations within Indonesian visual arts.

Keywords: Maha Ribbon, Classical Art, Modern Art

INTRODUCTION

The history of Balinese painting has evolved over a long period, beginning with wayang painting, which served ritual and palace decoration functions, and later transitioning into modern Balinese painting in the 1930s. Balinese society places painters in a highly significant social position, as they are integral to traditional and religious activities. This social system allows the inheritance of painting traditions across generations. One of the key milestones in the development of Balinese painting was the establishment of the *Pita Maha* group, which provided a platform for painters and the artistic community of the time. By the late 1920s, painters around Ubud had engaged in constructive dialogue with foreign artists such as Rudolf Bonnet and Walter Spies. These interactions gave rise to the *Pita Maha* aesthetic movement, characterized by distinct styles and personal creativity among artists while maintaining a shared artistic spirit and aesthetic understanding.

The historical development of visual arts in Indonesia has not always been continuous. Several studies indicate disruptions or discontinuities in Indonesian art development, primarily influenced by foreign colonization during both Dutch and Japanese rule. Colonialism affected not only politics and economics but also culture, including the arts. In her book *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change*, Claire Holt categorizes Indonesian art history into three periods: past heritage, surviving traditions, and new discoveries influenced by foreign cultures. Thus, Indonesian visual art history is shaped by a dynamic interplay of continuity and change.

Balinese painting demonstrates continuity in its decorative aspects, the use of traditional elements in color, composition, and themes. It follows a distinctive pattern in which traces of past artistic traditions remain visible in modern Balinese painting, even as modernization exerts its influence. Balinese culture itself was shaped by the fusion of Javanese Hindu culture, which declined after the fall of the Majapahit Kingdom and migrated to Bali. Balinese visual arts inherit an agrarian Hindu-Buddhist cultural ideology that has developed since the 10th century, influenced by the spread of Hinduism from India as well as interactions with the Majapahit Kingdom and Chinese traders.

Initially, Balinese visual arts served primarily religious and social functions. This can be seen in *ider-ider*, long cloths decorated with paintings depicting deities or wayang stories such as Panji, the Mahabharata, and the Ramayana, which are commonly found in the Kamasan painting style. The arrival of foreign artists such as Walter Spies and Rudolf Bonnet in the early 1930s brought significant changes, not only in painting techniques but also in artistic concepts. Before their arrival, the term "artist" did not exist in Balinese society; creators of artworks were known as *ngayah*, meaning those who created art for the palace or religious rituals. However, with the presence of foreigners and Dutch colonization, Balinese visual arts began shifting from a ritual function to an economic one, as paintings started to be sold as commodities for tourists.

Dutch colonial policies that opened Bali to tourism also contributed to this artistic transformation. A new market emerged, demanding artworks as souvenirs for foreign visitors. Consequently, painting themes changed, with many artists beginning to depict everyday activities such as cockfighting, religious ceremonies, and cremation processions—subjects that had no direct connection to ritualistic functions. The intervention of Western artists in the late 1920s and early 1930s became a unique phenomenon that shaped a new character in Balinese rural painting, eventually leading to the *Pita Maha* movement.

Several previous studies have examined the development of Balinese painting from historical, social, and cultural perspectives: (1) Kun Adnyana (2014) highlighted how interactions between local painters and foreign artists such as Walter Spies and Rudolf Bonnet shaped a new aesthetic identity in Balinese painting, (2) Claire Holt (1999) in *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change* discussed continuity and transformation in Indonesian visual arts, including how foreign cultures influenced local art, (3) Sucitra (2015) investigated the influence of Hindu iconography in Balinese visual arts, focusing on philosophical concepts such as *Rwa Bhineda*, which reflects the balance of life, and (4) Bagus Wirawan (2013) examined the history of cultural fusion in Balinese visual arts, including the impact of colonialism and interactions with foreign traders.

Although many studies have addressed the continuity and transformation of Balinese painting, several gaps remain unexplored: (1) Limited research on the impact of globalization on contemporary Balinese painting. Previous studies have primarily focused on colonial influences and foreign artists in the early 20th century, but little research has examined how globalization and digitalization contribute to changes in Balinese painting aesthetics today, (2) Minimal studies on cultural resistance within Balinese painting. Most research has explored how foreign cultures influenced Balinese painting, yet few studies have investigated how Balinese artists actively resist and preserve their cultural identity amidst modernization, (3) Lack of exploration into the role of women in Balinese painting**.** Most studies focus on male artists, while the contributions of female painters to the evolution of Balinese painting remain underrepresented.

Based on the identified research gaps, this study aims to: (1) Examine how globalization and digitalization influence the aesthetics of contemporary Balinese painting, (2) Analyze forms of cultural resistance adopted by Balinese artists in preserving their local identity, (3) Explore the role of women in the development of Balinese painting in terms of creativity, aesthetics, and tradition preservation. By addressing these objectives, this research seeks to provide a broader understanding of the dynamic evolution and continuity of Balinese painting and how it adapts to contemporary challenges while maintaining its cultural roots

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative descriptive narrative method to analyze the development of Balinese painting from the classical period to the post-Pita Maha era. The qualitative approach is chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of cultural and historical changes within the context of Balinese art. The research involves collecting and interpreting data from various historical and artistic sources to understand the continuity and transformation in Balinese painting, with a particular focus on the influence of Western artists like Walter Spies and Rudolf Bonnet.

The method follows these steps:

1. Data Collection: The primary data sources include historical documents, literature on the history of Balinese art, and works by artists associated with the Pita Maha movement. These sources are complemented by secondary data, such as books, articles, and previous studies, which provide broader context on the impact of Western colonialism and the subsequent transformation in Balinese art. The research also examines the visual art produced during the classical period and the changes in painting styles post-Pita Maha.
2. Historical Analysis: The research employs a historical theory framework to analyze the development of painting in Bali. This involves tracing the origins and changes in Balinese art, focusing on the shifts from religious and ritualistic functions to more commercialized art during the colonial period. The introduction of Western artistic perspectives, such as the use of new materials like canvas, perspective, and lighting techniques, will be explored.
3. Social Change Theory: In addition to historical theory, social change theory is applied to understand how cultural exchanges and external influences, such as the arrival of foreign artists and the growth of tourism, reshaped Balinese art. The study explores the relationship between Balinese society and its evolving art, highlighting how changes in society, economy, and politics influenced the production of art and the reception of new artistic concepts.
4. Data Analysis: The analysis is carried out through a narrative method that contextualizes the findings within the historical framework of Balinese art. This includes examining the ways in which the Pita Maha movement contributed to the modernization of painting techniques while maintaining elements of traditional Balinese art. The continuity and changes in themes, techniques, and cultural values expressed through art are analyzed to understand the evolution of Balinese painting.

Interpretation of Results: The study concludes by discussing the lasting impact of Pita Maha and Western influences on contemporary Balinese art. It also considers how the preservation of traditional Balinese painting is intertwined with the broader process of social and cultural change in Bali, examining the balance between modernity and tradition in the context of a globalized art market.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Balinese Fine Art in the Classical Period

Before discussing the process of change that occurred in fine art in Bali after the arrival of artists from abroad, the traces of fine art that already existed in Bali will be explained. This aims to see how the process of change occurred. Before colonialism entered the island of Bali, the fine art in Bali was used for religious purposes, namely Hinduism, and for decorating temples or houses of the nobility and other high castes. These painters worked to serve what is called "ngayah". These works of art are manifested in the form of figures of gods, heroes, epics, and legendary figures who appear dressed in elaborately decorated clothes, and use stylized coils and head coverings. The wayang figures are depicted in profile, but with two eyes in front, thin arms at right angles, and decorated with patterns of trees, mountains, ponds, and clouds (Holt, 1967 in Kun Adnyana, 2014).

In pre-colonial times, painting was part of the needs of religious rituals, so its manifestation was greatly influenced by the religious values of Hinduism, such as the use of dominant red, black, white, and golden yellow colors (Kun Adnyana, 2014:102). These colors reflect the symbols of beliefs that live in Balinese society. The red color symbolizes the God Brahma, the white color symbolizes the God Vishnu, the black color symbolizes the God Shiva. In addition to the use of color, there is also a striped motif, namely a black and white square box, which symbolizes the concept of a mandala that sees the relationship and characteristics of humans with nature and its creator in relation to the four cardinal directions.

Traditional Balinese painting can be seen in the forms of artwork including: (1) prasi or illustrations in manuscripts on palm leaves or lontar leaves called palmyra.; (2) parba or paintings on rectangular cloths or wooden panels located at the back of the bed placed in a traditional Balinese house called bale, functioning

as a backdrop. These panels are decorated with paintings with mythological or calendar themes, called palalintangan; (3) tabing or paintings on cloth or wood containing stories about life after death are used to decorate equipment for cremation; (4) palalintangan or a square calendar with pictures on cloth containing pictures of good days with themes of daily life such as fishermen, people harvesting rice, and so on; (5) langse or paintings on cloth used as curtains to cover or decorate temples or mrajan; (6) ider-ider or paintings on long cloth with a width of 1 to 1.5 feet which above them are paintings with wayang stories divided into several scenes, each scene separated by a motif of flames, a motif of clouds, and a motif of mountains. These long rolls of cloth are hung along the eaves of the roof of temple buildings or bales during ritual celebrations; (7) Ulon or white cloth painted to represent the God Indra to cover the deceased; (8) Kober is also called lelontek or umbul-umbul flag which represents a certain mythology; (9) lamak or rectangular panels for offerings made of young coconut leaves decorated with stylized tree motifs and stylized female figures called cili and believed to be symbols of fertility and good luck

(Couteau, 1999, in Kun Adnyana, 2014:25); (10) rerajahan. Rerajahan is a writing or inscription and signs in the form of pictures used as a talisman to ward off disaster or cause disease (Putra Negara, 1987:43). Spiritually, rerajahan functions as a means of ritual, to ward off disaster, magic, and self-protective power. In the context of magic practice, rajah is a mystical art depicting the Gods of nature in their function as protectors of humans or depictions of the gods of death who function in negative, destructive, and disastrous ways. In its depiction, rajah is often associated with modre, which is Balinese calligraphy; sacred script (Kun Adnyana, 2014:65).

Traditional paintings have common characteristics, namely originating from the character of the classical wayang style with story themes from the Mahabharata, Ramayana, Panji stories, and Balinese mythologies. The themes that are often used are: Arjuna Wiwaha, which tells the story of Arjuna's determination and strong will to meditate in order to win the help of the gods in defeating his enemies. Likewise, Suthasoma, which tells the story of Suthasoma's obedience in sacrificing himself to be eaten by a tiger that has disturbed the village. The values of determination and strong will in undergoing asceticism to achieve a goal, selfless loyalty to parents, and loyalty and sacrifice for the good of society are values that are highly valued by the Balinese. These works are in the form of scrolls that can be viewed at any time and become a kind of educational media for the wider community as well as being a source of reference for ethics and aesthetics.

The painting techniques used include: nyawi, namely emphasizing the sketch with Chinese ink, then ngabur, namely giving the impression of dark and light, nguap, namely giving transparent colors evenly, nyenter, namely giving lighting with white or yellow, manyunan, namely making details and ornaments in the completion of giving details and some additional colors, ngucek, or making the painting more dimensional and brighter (Picard 2000). The materials used in traditional Balinese paintings are obtained from locally made paints. These colors include yellow, brown obtained from a type of sulfur stone, natural materials such as taum leaves to produce green or blue, red obtained from vermilion red Chinese powder lipstick, for gray and white obtained from pork bones, pens from bamboo, cloth from palm leaf fibers called palmyra, and ancur used as a color adhesive (Couteau, 1999, in Kun Adnyana, 2014).

Pita Maha and Modern Paining in Bali

The modernist wave in Balinese art is a product of the transfer of knowledge, also called the transfer of knowledge. Not only in the field of technique and certain stylistic approaches in works of art, the process of transferring knowledge also changes the way Balinese artists view and treat works of art (Couteau, 1999 in Kun Adnyana, 2014). The forms of aesthetics in the development of modern Indonesian art are adaptations of various modern styles and schools originating from the West. The adaptation process reflects the metamorphosis and synthesis of Western art aesthetic forms that have been adapted to Indonesian culture (Burhan, 2003).

Through a long historical process, the values of modern art contained in the works produced by the Pita Maha group of artists can be traced from the works and art patterns. The evolution of Balinese art began in Buleleng (North Bali), although it involved secondary aspects such as the introduction of modern materials such as paper. Images were made in one scene only and not a complete narrative like in classical wayang paintings. Several images already show the beginning of spatial structuring and have begun to move towards new thematic elements. These things have shown the infiltration of new elements into the Balinese art order. In the 18th to 19th centuries, several prominent paintings took place in Bali with works that can

still be enjoyed today. The presence of the palace as a patronage that provided space for artists to produce paintings. In addition, at the end of the 19th century, there was a collaborative relationship between European scientists (scholars) and painters from North Bali (Buleleng) and painters from Denpasar (Kun Adnyana, 2014:80).

At the beginning of the 20th century, Ubud painting grew with the movement of Kamasan painting creation with the theme of wayang. The arrival of two foreign artists, Walter Spies, followed by Rudolf Bonnet, contributed to the form, theme, and style of Ubud painting. The arrival of the two foreign artists was at the invitation of the leader of the Ubud Palace, Tjokorda Gede Raka Soekawati. Pita Maha was founded on January 29, 1936, on the initiative of Walter Spies, Rudolf Bonnet, and Tjokorde Agung Soekawati. Pita Maha comes from the Kawi language, which means "grand ancestors". Rudolf Bonnet said that Pita Maha is an art workers' union in Bali. Its first goal is to stimulate art and, secondly, to provide interest in material facilities to its members. Walter Spies and Bonnet lived in the midst of the Ubud community under the auspices of the Ubud Palace. Wanting Bali not to change is not a simple matter because the Balinese people were born with social capital that tends to be open to all forms of renewal and adaptation. With Bali as a tourism area, it is possible that art will also experience a shift. Art is often read as just a beautiful object to make money, so that what is prioritized is often the performance of art production (Kun Adnyana, 2014:107).

Since the emergence of souvenir demand, it has also influenced the life of the painter profession in Bali. Paintings that are upheld in value then also become part of souvenir commodities for tourism consumption. Unlike craft products in general, the painting community has general souvenir values. Pita Maha became important because one of its roles was in controlling the quality of painting. The involvement of Rodulf Bonnet and Walter Spies as curators influenced the publication of aesthetic values and the prestige of Balinese painting in the eyes of the market at that time.

The establishment of the Bali Museum in Denpasar in 1925 was also a direct result of concerns about the destruction of valuables (Kun Adnyana, 2014:110). In 1932, the Bali Museum Association was established, which was tasked with handling museum collections and aimed to revive Balinese cultural expressions. The effort to regulate the trade pattern of Balinese painting works is clearly aimed at stating to the tourism market that Balinese painting is created by Balinese artists with an artistic weight that is not the same as various souvenir works. Tourism, in addition to having implications for negative artistic behavior, is indeed in some ways also worth noting positively, namely the creation of a wider socialization space in Bali and increasing the plurality of the treasury of socialization and artistic expression. Balinese artists in the 1930s, in addition to dealing with art souvenirs, faced international relations that provided opportunities for progress, as those who must grow, learn, and live life choices in a multicultural community.

Walter Spies chose Ubud as his residence in Bali because he found a peaceful world for his artistic soul in Ubud. Spies blended with the environment around Ubud, mingling with the local community (Kun Adnyana, 2014:120). Together with Rudolf Bonnet, the patronage of Puri Ubud, namely Tjokorda Raka Soekawati and Tjokorda Agung Soekawati, senior Balinese painters Gusti Nyoman Lempad, Ida Bagus Kembeng, and painters from around Ubud, he moved an art practice called Pita Maha.

Walter Spies was involved in intellectual work with several Western writers who came to visit and research Bali. Together with Beryl de Zoete, he wrote about Balinese performing arts in dance and drama in Bali. He also became a kind of guide for pilgrims to Bali, such as welcoming American writer Vicky Baum, Mexican researcher and painter Miguel Covarrubias, film actor Charlie Chaplin, anthropologist Margaret Mead, and the great Indian writer Rabindranath Tagore (Kun Adnyana, 2014:220). Spies intensively introduced Balinese culture to these important guests when they visited Bali. Here Spies played a big role in introducing Balinese culture and art so that this influenced the development of art in Bali to grow rapidly and Balinese cultures became increasingly known abroad. Meanwhile, Rudolf Bonnet (1895-1978) received information about Bali from Nieuwenkamp when they met in Rome in 1923 (Bonnet, 1993:20 in Kun Adnyana, 2014). Bonnet was known as a sharp critic and collector of Balinese painting. Bonnet also helped artists obtain materials and taught certain skills. When Spies chose to live in Iseh, Karangasem, Bonnet intensively visited the houses of painters in Ubud. Bonnet, who was born from the academic art world in Amsterdam, produced more academic works than Spies. They both tried carefully not to influence the style of Balinese painters directly. This can be seen in the work of I Gusti Nyoman Lempad, whose artistic character is still strong.

In 1950, Bonnet together with painters of the Pita Maha generation intended to revive painting activities in Ubud by establishing the Ubud Painters Association, at which time AA Sobrat was appointed as chairman and the daily chairman was Anak Agung Raka Pudja, son of Anak Agung Meregeg (interview with

Wayan Suteja, manager of the Ubud Painting Palace Museum, June 28, 2024). The arrival of Spies and Bonnet and the role of the Ubud Palace and the intensity of painting activities carried out by young painters around Ubud made painting a profession, as well as from anonymous painters to painters with names as personal achievements.

CONCLUSIONS

The presence of Walter Spies, Rudolf Bonnet, Tjokorda Raka Soekawati, Tjokorda Agung Soekawati, and Pita Maha can be called agents of change, marking a number of changes in the Balinese art scene, including: (1) Technical aspects of painting, introduction of paper media, plywood, canvas, color enrichment, and the use of factory-made paint. From here, artists have begun to use perspective and color gradation to create the impression of spatial dimensions in paintings, so that paintings are not flat like wayang paintings, (2) In terms of theme; namely the secularization of the representation of works of art that were previously religious magical in nature originating from the Mahabharata epic, Ramayana then became diverse according to market demand, (3) There was a pattern of change in artistic practice, which was originally intended for religious interests, shifting to economic interests, (4) Works of art are no longer anonymous, collective, and communal works, and appreciation for individuals has begun to be recognized, (5) The king as patronage shifted to the bureaucratic elite and as a tourism business. Although there were changes in painting after Pita Maha, the characteristics of Balinese art in the classical period can still be traced, which are still neatly stored in art museums in Bali such as: the Gunarsa Museum, the Puri Lukisan Ubud Museum, the Neka Museum, the Arma Museum, and for religious interests as well as for market demand. For market demand, you can find art supermarkets such as Sukawati market, Krisna souvenirs, or in Erlangga. Modern Balinese art after Pita Maha is closely related to local values which then become a source of inspiration in the creation of paintings. Modern Balinese art has different characteristics from modern art from the West. Local identity remains an inspiration for Balinese painters in producing their paintings.

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