
Balinese art, and especially Balinese paintings cannot complain of not having received much attention in the past or today. Books and articles on Balinese paintings, both those produced in Bali and abroad give us sometimes a clear and insightful picture of what this art is about whereas many others continue the dreamlike notions of the unspoiled Balinese who are all artists and paint in a way that take us away from reality to a utopian otherworld. Illustrations of Balinese paintings are, of course, to be found in books on this kind of art and especially nowadays for modern paintings and old paintings alike in the many auction catalogues ranging from Christies and Sotheby’s to Borobudur and Siddharta’s Affordable Art Auctions in Jakarta. Balinese paintings, regardless when they were made may make huge prices in the international art market and have thus now entered a completely new world. From predominantly having been housed in museums of ethnography and in private collections of connoisseurs, they now more and more enter the international commercial art market.

Few authors are brave enough to measure Balinese art for what it really is: 90 per cent, and probably more, is produced for ignorant tourists who want to buy something affordable they can easily take home. They want to buy something recognizably Balinese and thus tourist paintings portray ceremonies, naked female torsos and depictions of the Balinese landscape. This is not only the reality of today but was very much so the reality in the past. Interestingly, most of the paintings we now call modern classics were among the tourist stuff of the 1930s to 1950s.

The above means that we should be concerned with the 10 per cent that was and is perhaps produced for other than bleak commercial reasons. Among this percentage is, of course, the Balinese painting art produced before the Dutch took over the island as part of their colonial empire: the traditional art of Kamasan in the Klungkung area of East Bali and its smaller counterparts from Kerambitan in the Tabanan area in the west, Amlapura in the north in Karangasem, Bangli in Central East Bali and Gianyar, Central Bali. The last three areas finally receive in this book the attention they deserve although my curiosity has not yet been satisfied with what has been said here. Vickers deals with traditional paintings extensively in the
introduction and in the rather long chapter 2 of 44 pages (pp. 66-110) which is therefore one of the longer essays to deal with this art to have appeared for a while. Different from other writers on this traditional aspect of Balinese paintings, Vickers sets the tone in the very first sentence: Traditional painting in Bali is a living art (p. 68). Indeed it is. For one, it lingers on to this very day although it has lost much but certainly not all of its traditional usage. As with so many ‘traditions’ in Indonesia, it has never ended. We see in this country, and also in Bali, that traditions and modern currents happily exist side by side.

Vickers provides his readers with striking insights into Balinese paintings. Moreover, he is able to discuss works of the ‘traditional’ Kamasan School and those of Bali’s most remarkable modern painter I Nyoman Masriadi as belonging to the same tradition. In both he detects the predominantly narrative nature of Balinese paintings and the contemporization of old epic story material into ‘traditional’ and modern works of art. Balinese paintings more or less need to be ‘read’ in order to be understood. Vickers thus provides a new window into the world of these paintings and he—finally?—gives the artists an individuality seldom seen in discussions of these paintings and painters.

In the book, a more definitive distinction between ‘art’ and ‘tourist art’ might have been in place but this might have caused the danger of distracting the readers from the main issues that determine both. Vickers’ discussion of national ‘Indonesian’ contemporary art and the Balinese young painters’ concern with modern global art begs for more. The political and commercial aspects of this divide are worthwhile to be studied in more depth. The last chapter, Bali and Indonesian Art for me basically shows that there is no such thing as Balinese painting. This term would lead us to think of a uniform body of art whereas the actual situation is much more diversified. We thus talk of an uninteresting painting of 100 dollars in an ‘art shop’ but also of I Nyoman Masriadi’s contemporary paintings that make huge prices, according to Vickers up to 1 million US dollars. I think the price he mentions on page 210 should be in Hong Kong dollars as the auction was held in Hong Kong and 1 million Hong Kong dollars would indeed make more sense. Needless to say, these paintings deliver messages that go far beyond the next sawah and vulcano in the distance. Another insightful piece of information crucial to our understanding of Balinese art is that Masriadi does not want to be labelled a ‘Balinese artist’ (p. 210). He is a
contemporary artist born in Bali, trained in Yogyakarta and now part of the international contemporary art scene.

Vickers divides Balinese painting art into three categories: traditional, modern and contemporary and he quite rightfully notes that “there is no single process of development from local ‘tradition’ to national ‘modernism’ and international ‘contemporary’.” (p. 210). Modern and contemporary Balinese painters are at the same time part of the modern global world they work in and the Balinese world they come from and thus cannot but be part of both.

Vickers’ remark that because galleries, museums and collectors, and the venues they operate in are mostly responsible for publications on Balinese art and therefore responsible for the way this art is defined (p. 213) is to the point. We are not sufficiently aware that our taste for Balinese art is largely determined by commercial reasons too, but also scholarship has its own way of determining Balinese art and the perception of its quality and the way it is perceived. For me, the general study of Balinese art is still too little concerned with the artistic aspects of this form of art in whatever way using whatever theories. It seems to me that other aspects of Balinese paintings and their artists are still looked at from the angles of tourism, development and other studies and often shockingly anecdotical. This may be because the world is still amazed by the fact that this tiny island has managed to produce art in such an overwhelming variety over such a relatively long period of time under such different social and economic conditions that it is still impossible to separate one from the other. Luckily, this book is a serious start in the right direction.

It is a pity that the final editing has not been able to remove errors which could easily have been avoided. For instance, Jaratkaru does not marry Nagini but Jaratkaru, the daughter of the same name of the serpent king Basuki (p. 36), Wrespati is not a God but a divine sage (p. 38), Karna is not the stepbrother of the Pandawas but their half-brother, Nakula and Sadewa are not Kunti’s sons, but the sons of Dewi Madrim (both page 40) and some more which hopefully can be addressed in a future reprint.

Conclusion

This book is a must for anyone seriously interested in Balinese paintings. The title of the book, Balinese Art is a bit misleading as other arts do not feature
but the subtitle largely amends this. Why a book about Balinese art should have a cover picture of a painting by the Javanese artist Srihadi Sudarsono is a puzzle to me but this painting may have been chosen for commercial rather than other reasons. I would think that there is enough choice among the Balinese paintings to choose from. The book contains many illustrations of paintings not seen before which is refreshing. The role of foreign painters and their influence on Balinese paintings has been downgraded which is also refreshing (‘the myth that modern Balinese painting is a product of Western influence’ p. 215). Indeed, I have always wondered about the true nature of the influence of Bonnet and Spies and Meier and all the others on Balinese paintings. The fact that this ‘influence’ as in almost all other aspects of Balinese culture virtually denies the Balinese their own character and creativity has always annoyed me to no end. Adrian’s bold statement: ‘After all, most of the Western artists who lived on Bali were second- and third-rate painters at home, more famous for following Gaugain’s lead and seeking a Pacific idyll than for their ability with the brush’ is yet another fresh wind in Balinese painting studies. It is to be hoped that Adrian’s book on the painting of Sanur village, which he mentions as being unpublished on page 9 will also find its way to Tuttle or another publishing house and will be in the bookshops soon.

Dick van der Meij
Center for the Study of Religion and Culture, UIN Jakarta
dickvdm2005@yahoo.com