
This lavishly illustrated coffee-table book edited by Natasha Reichle is intended as a catalogue accompanying the homonymous exhibition—reportedly the first major event on the arts of Bali presented in the United States—on view at San Francisco’s Asian Art Museum from February to September 2011. The exhibition focused on objects of ritual importance in the specific, as well as Balinese art, culture, and religion at large. Many of the 130 artworks on display were borrowed from Dutch collections, both public and private, and mostly originate from pre-World War II Bali. Besides the catalogue entries by Brinkgreve, Reichle, and Stuart-Fox (pp. 133–364), the book contains five essays (pp. 9–131) by Reichle, Stuart-Fox, Brinkgreve, Kam, and Brinkgreve respectively. These reflect the objects presented in the exhibition, but also aim at filling some gaps in material not covered by it.

The first introductory essay ‘Bali: Art, Ritual, Performance’ by Reichle outlines the scope, and main focus, of the exhibition-cum-book-project, namely ‘performance’ and its intersection with art and ritual—in Bali most forms of art and ritual are largely ‘performative’ indeed as they may include puppetry, gamelan performances, masked dances, processions, and so forth. Reichle (p. 11) rightly claims the impossibility of doing justice to such a culturally diverse place as Bali through a scholarly work of limited scope, let alone a museum exhibition. She further points out that the domain of the book is limited, and understandably so, to the art produced by the ‘Hindu’ Balinese, forming the majority on the island, and leaves out of the picture the ‘original’ animistic Balinese, the Bali Aga, as well as the Christian and Muslim communities. Reichle then introduces the reader to Balinese history, culture, and arts. She concludes her essay with a brief ‘story’ of the first resident Westerners in Bali, which amounts to ‘what they saw and what they took’. She relates the idyllic image of tropical paradise that Bali has evoked for nearly a century, the attraction and fascination it exerted on Western artists, performers, and scholars alike. In fact, the words ‘what they gave’ could have been added to the subtitle: as hinted at by Reichle, several forms of art and performance (both profane and sacred) that are marketed as ‘traditional’ in contemporary Bali actually originate from the 1930s, as a
result of the interaction between local and foreign artists. Yet, Reichle (p. 9) affirms that ‘many of the objects displayed in this exhibition are still used today in much the same manner as they may have been one hundred years ago’, and that contemporary temple ceremonies or performances ‘match descriptions recorded by ethnologists in the 1930s’. I for one believe that this is still the case; however, I am also aware that such statements can be easily criticized, so it is a pity that Reichle does not provide any evidence in support of her statement.

Stuart-Fox’s essay ‘Ritual Arts and Implements of Balinese Priests’ sketches the main features of ‘Balinese Hinduism’, characterizes its priestly types, and explains some relevant ritual paraphernalia, such as the funerary sash kajang, magic drawings (rerajahan), implements, and offerings.

Brinkgreve’s essay’s ‘Palm Leaf and Silkscreen: Balinese Lamak in Transition’, stemming from the author’s doctoral research project, focuses on the ritual decorations in the form of rectangular-shaped hanging that are so peculiar to the Balinese (ritual) landscape. Brinkgreve describes the features of the several varieties of lamak, their symbolism, their historical development, and the contexts in which they are produced.

Kam’s essay ‘Offerings in Bali: Ritual Requests, Redemption, and Rewards’ explores the ephemeral aspect of Balinese ritual, that is the multifarious variety of its temporary offerings, from the simplest canang to the most grandiose—and beautiful—sarad.

The concluding essay by Brinkgreve ‘W.O.J. Nieuwenkamp and His Royal Lion Offering-Box’ traces the history of an outstanding object collected by a similarly outstanding collector—the Dutch painter or ‘artistic centipede’ who tied much of his life to Bali in the early twentieth century, and who in turn tied so much Balinese art to himself.

I found one shortcoming of the book to be the treatment of ‘Balinese Hinduism’, and especially the work by Stuart-Fox. Although this experienced scholar provides the reader with a useful guide to the living ritual traditions and their socio-cultural contexts, his description of ‘Balinese Hinduism’ is quite superficial, and largely reflects the limited (and to my mind, stereotypical) views put forward by recent anthropological scholarship—above all, the perception of ‘Balinese Hinduism’ as a religion of orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy. In accordance with this—mainly synchronic—approach, Stuart-Fox claims that ‘there is no word in Balinese for religion, and the concept of religion as being separate from traditions or culture is a foreign one’