
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