

## **Art Mystery or Art History?**

Since the opening of the OHD Museum in Magelang (5 April 2012) many reactions circulated in the Indonesian art world. These reactions led to the Fine Art Round Table Discussion in Jakarta (24 May 2012). As an art historian and long time researcher in the field of modern and contemporary Indonesian art I would like to contribute to this discussion by sharing my opinion with you.

For me it was a great joy to attend the opening of the third department of the OHD museum in Magelang. Since I could stay several days I had a good opportunity to visit the museum and study the paintings of the five maestros': Affandi, Sudjojono, Hendra, Widayat and Soedibio.

The unexpected high quality and unique content of many paintings that I saw for the first time blew my mind. What a feast for the eye and the soul. These works complemented the knowledge I already had with new information. The exhibition gives new meaning to the important role these painters played in the history of Indonesian art.

The day before the opening Dr. Oei guided a group of journalists through his collection. With his usual inspiring enthusiasm he informed the group about the individual backgrounds of the painters and their works. The opening the next day was festive and crowded. Finally we could see the result of many years of preparation. Besides the rich content of the exhibition in the museum much attention has been paid to the exterior of the building. Several artists were asked to make art works that enhance the image that the building wants to evoke: a museum promoting modern and contemporary Indonesian art. Huge sculptural relief's in front and several art works at the entrance function as an introduction for the visitor. The floor of the courtyard that gives entrance to the museum is divided in small squares, each square created by a different artist. These art works demonstrate a close cooperation between the artists and Dr. Oei.

The day after the opening a discussion took place in Magelang. The topics of the discussion were divided in two sessions. Session 1: Pitching Indonesian art to collections of international museums: issues, pitfalls, strategies. (Panelists: Kwok Kian Chow, Pearl Lam, Oei Hong Djien and Helena Spanjaard, moderator Patricia Chen). Session 2: Charting Indonesian art for growth in the international marketplace: issues, pitfalls and strategies. (Panelists: Pearl Lam, Magnus Renfrew and Lorenzo Rudolf, moderator Patricia Chen).

During the first session, several topics were mentioned that according to the panelists were hindrances for the promotion of Indonesian art outside Indonesia: The lack of representative public museums in Indonesia, the lack of regular exhibitions abroad, lack of publications and training in art history, and the lack of Indonesian artists living abroad.

In the second session the infrastructure of galleries/auction houses/ art dealers was discussed. Panelists stressed the fact that the prices of art works should be "real" in the sense that an artist has to earn his/her place in the art market by a gradual process, protected by the marketing of established galleries. For me the discussion was something special, because it seldom happens in Indonesia that foreign art experts ventilate their opinion. Their criticism was deliberately meant to help promoting modern Indonesian art abroad, as the moderator of the event stated clearly in her introduction.

This short overview of the opening of the OHD Museum in Magelang is my introduction to the subject of this letter (Art Mystery or Art History?), and I will come back to the conclusions of the discussion panel in Magelang at the end of this letter.

### **The issue of authenticity and the role of art history**

Shortly after the opening of the OHD Museum questions were raised about the authenticity of some of the art works in the exhibition. Originally these questions were ventilated anonymous, later the initiator revealed his identity. Since I was still in Indonesia I had a chance to follow the course of events, that resulted in the "Fine Art Round Table Discussion: Indonesian Modern Paintings", organized by Sarasvati Art Management on May 24<sup>th</sup> 2012.

On that date I was already back in The Netherlands, but a resume of the discussion was forwarded to me, so that I could read the conclusions so far.

One of the things that strike me is the mere fact that in this whole discussion (a meaningful initiative of Dr. Oei and the other participants of the panel) few people seem to be aware of an important missing link in Indonesia: the absence of a faculty of art history at university level. As a professional art historian I would like to comment on this incongruous situation. First I would like to quote some sentences from Goenawan Mohammed that can be read in the resume from Sarasvati:

“Regardless of uproar on the issue of fake paintings, in the discussions emerged a number of important ideas for building the future of Indonesian art. Prominent writer, Goenawan Mohammed states that the chaos created by an authenticity issue arises because the Indonesian art world does not have a healthy critique institution. *‘There are also not enough journals to accommodate criticism’* he said. *‘If the two things existed, then critiques will not be at random, but more systematic’*.

Allow me now to give a short analysis of the Indonesian art world compared to the international (and especially the Dutch) art world. Anyone (in Indonesia or internationally) who wants to prove that a painting is fake needs to have certain **standard criteria** that constitute the basis of research into the matter. In Europe this basis is first of all provided by a substantial body of **museums** supported by the government. In these museums art works of different periods of art history are presented. They are presented in such a way that they form a **‘canon’** (a selection of the most valuable art works, made by specialists, **most valuable in a cultural sense**, not because of their financial value!) for the general public. The art works in museums have several functions: they give an insight in the national and local history of the country, they are meant to be a part of the collective background that people share, and in the case of art works from other cultures and times: these art works broaden the horizon of the visitor to learn about other cultures and different periods. The most important function of the museums is **educative**, but the art works displayed also provide a **standard criterion**, by which art historians can start their research.

The art world in Europe is divided in several sections, public and private. Besides the established public museums there are many private museums and art galleries that display art for a general public. Several internationally respected auction houses provide a place where art is sold. Private collectors do exist, and become more and more important in these times of economical crisis, but they don’t play a dominant role in the art world.

Starting from the nineteenth century universities established **departments of art history**. In these academic faculties art works are studied and described in books and specialist magazines. These publications can be found in university-, museum- and public libraries. Some art historians devote their whole life to academic research, besides their basic activity: teaching. Curators of museums, exhibitions or international art fairs usually have an academic degree in art history, and this is the same for art critics who write in newspapers or magazines.

If questions arise about the authenticity of an art work art historians are asked to give their opinion, based on **independent research**. Independent means that the art historian involved is not in any way related to the person or institution that asks for the expertise. The art historian implements the proper art historical **methodology** that he has learned, and if that is not enough other expertises can be added such as **laboratory research**, or a second opinion from another specialist in the field, for example a restorer, etc, etc.

Now we return to the Indonesian art world. A national Museum of Modern Art that shows a permanent historical selection of the best works of the best artists has not yet been established. This being the case there is no **standard measure** to compare other paintings with. The best examples of Indonesian art are hidden from the public eye since they belong to private collections. Therefore any private initiative to open the door for the general public is extremely valuable.

The Indonesian art world is just like in Europe divided into public and private sectors, but with some important differences. Public art institutes still need to be developed (museums, faculty of art history, documentation center). Therefore the private sector dominates the public sector. Auction houses and galleries fill the space that lacks in the public sector. Concerning the academic study of modern art the situation is out of balance. Most writers about art are artists, or journalists. There is nothing against artists or journalists writing about art, if there would be a certain amount of publications by academically trained art historians as well. But this is not the case. Since there is no faculty of art history in Indonesia I cannot blame anyone for this situation, and I certainly respect Indonesian art critics who have gone abroad to study there.

### What is the result of this situation?

In Indonesia there are hundreds of artists, supported by private collectors. Buying paintings very often takes place through the medium of auction houses, even when artists are still alive. The amount of internationally known art galleries is restricted. Curators of exhibitions (usually also the writers of the catalogues) are often connected to private sponsors, since there is no public support.

How could you expect an **objective judgment** of art works in such a situation?

To develop an independent opinion there needs to be a third pillar next to the world of buying and selling. In Europe this pillar is provided by art historians whose role is basically to do research and teach. The documentation of art works in specialized institutes is based on their **knowledge (expertise, not criticism!)**. Art historical research is most times not a hilarious job; it is a part of historical research in which literary sources play an important role. It costs a lot of time and patience to visit museums, libraries, archives, family of the painter, etc. In Europe the infrastructure of the art world is **essentially** based on this research, a research that is meant for the general public, to open up the world of art for anyone who is interested. Art is still believed to give humanity something extra, something **beyond the financial value** of an art work.

The lack of proper standard criteria in Indonesia, (a public museum where you can see the best examples of important painters, a documentation center at academic level) creates a dangerous vacuum in which the production of fake paintings fits perfectly well. Who can decide what is fake and what is real when there is no measure to be taken?

### Conclusion

During the art discussion in Magelang (6 April 2012) members of the panel ventilated some clear hindrances for the promotion of Indonesian art outside Indonesia: Lack of museums, lack of exhibitions abroad, lack of professional publications and training in art history. Their opinion mirrors my own experience as a long time researcher of modern and contemporary Indonesian art.

Perhaps it is time for the Indonesian art world to reflect on the gaps in the infrastructure. The Indonesian art world is too much obsessed with buying and selling. Where is the **educational** aspect? Why spend a fortune on the buying of paintings and **not invest** in the documentation, preservation and research of art works? If Indonesia wants to promote its rich treasure of modern and contemporary art abroad it will need to be done according to certain international standards. One of these standards is a proper institute of research and documentation, an institute that can also function as a bridge to the international art world.

So let us be positive about any initiative that opens up the mostly invisible Indonesian art to a general public (including tourists). Dr. Oei has given a great example that deserves to be followed by others. Concerning the issue of fake and real: it is a problem that has been created by the gaps in the Indonesian art world itself, and it needs to be solved in a professional way. That will take time and the willingness to admit that some essential ingredients for a healthy art climate are missing.

Without proper **research** and **knowledge** modern Indonesian art will stay a **Mystery** to most people, instead of one of the highlights of Indonesia's **Art History**.

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### About the author

Dr. Helena Spanjaard (1951) is a Dutch art historian based in Amsterdam. Since 1980 she has been active in the field of modern and contemporary Indonesian painting as a writer, researcher, and curator of several exhibitions (*Indonesian Modern Art since 1945*, De Oude Kerk, Amsterdam, 1993), (*Reformasi Indonesia!*, Museum Nusantara, Delft, 2000). Her dissertation, *The ideal of modern Indonesian painting: the creation of a national cultural identity, 1900-1995*, was published in 1998 by Leiden University.

Besides numerous articles her publications include the monograph *Widayat, the Magical Mysticism of a Modern Indonesian Artist* (Museum H. Widayat, 1998), *Modern Indonesian Painting* (Sotheby's, 2003), *Exploring Modern Indonesian Art; the Collection of Dr. Oei Hong Djien* (Singapore: SNP International, 2004), *Pioneers of Balinese Painting: The Rudolf Bonnet Collection* (KIT Publishers, Amsterdam, 2007), *Indonesian Odyssey* (Equinox, 2008) and *The Dono Code* (Catalogue Exhibition KIT Publishers, Amsterdam, 2009).