

Women painters still fail to be recognized

Ask people to name the greatest Indonesian painters in history and they will mention Raden Saleh, Affandi or Basoeki Abdullah.

Missing something?

Indeed. They're all men's names and not a single woman painter's name comes up on the list.

It doesn't mean that Indonesia had no women painters in the past. The country used to have Emirria Soenasa, a member of the Ternate royal family in North Maluku, back in the 1940s. She traveled around

Europe with her painting exhibitions.

The emergence of women painters — namely Roeliyati, Kustiyah, Maria Tjui and Kartika — began after the opening

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of the Indonesian Academy of Arts (ASRI) in 1950 in Yogyakarta, the first formal school of arts. But their names

have never been recorded as an important part of the history of painting here.

"It was difficult for great women painters to establish themselves as they operated under several limitations compared with their male counterparts. Take this example: What husband would allow his wife to stay outside the house until late at night, especially if it were purely for the sake of art?" asked Merwan Yusuf, curator of the National Gallery, during a recent discussion on women painters and the problems

they face.

The root of the problem, he said, was in the difficulties, due to social restrictions, that women face in using the privileges given by society to artists (painters) in the form of total freedom and individualism.

Merwan said the privileges were in such a form that people tended to be tolerant when artists had a bohemian way of life, as when artists had an unconventional appearance or did things that might be frowned upon by others, such as creating artwork that displayed nudity.

But the privileges they received were also followed by demands that their work ought to have individuality and originality, "so that their work was not like the renovation of historic buildings," Merwan said.

Societal expectations, such as the common belief that the primary role of women is to protect, nurture and fulfill the reproductive function, would influence the work of women painters. Such a situation has obliged women to be a role model for their children so that, for example, leading a bohemian way of life was considered to be undesirable.

The limitation was acknowledged by woman painter Titik Sunarti, who was also present at the discussion.

"Due to their role as housewives who are expected to do all the domestic chores, many women painters have little time for activities such as reading books to broaden their knowledge," she said.

However, Merwan said it was unfair to put high expect-

tations on women painters because their presence in the world of painting was still relatively new.

Even in Europe, before the 20th century, painting was male-dominated domain.

But well-known painter Astari Rasjid said now is not the time to discuss the gender of painters.

"There is no gender when it comes to painting, as the most important thing is the quality of an artist's work, whether it touches upon humanity; there are works of women painters that show this quality.

"I think the most important thing is that you have to do your best," said Astari, many of whose paintings are about women.

Moreover, she said now is not the time to evaluate works of art from the perspective of the greatness of the painter.

"It's a megalomaniac way of thinking. There are many unpopular painters, but their work is so touching."

Regarding critics of women painters, who still see things from the male point of view, such as the exploration of women's bodies, Astari said that critics should understand the psychology behind the paintings.

"When women portray their bodies it is not a mere display of sensuality as male painters usually show. It's more about questioning themselves or about things they don't like ... For instance, one of my paintings questions my role as a Javanese little girl who always had to smile and look good," she said, "but those who can't understand the work will say I'm being narcissistic."



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Maja Dusikova's 1996 illustrations of Rapunzel are soft watercolors that accompany the Brothers Grimm version of the children's fairy tale. Dusikova's original illustrations are on display through January 2002 at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington.