

REPORT FROM INDONESIA

On Their Own Terms

In a pluralistic society scattered across 3,000 miles of ocean, Indonesians are melding traditional arts, group identity, nationhood and international modernism.

BY CLAIRE WOLF KRANTZ

Nowhere are the tensions between artistic spheres and cultural identities more evident than in Indonesia, a country whose flourishing contemporary art addresses these differences. An agglomeration of islands with widely varying histories, geographies and traditions, Indonesia is culturally pluralistic and multifaceted. While the country's contemporary art is of course influenced by the West, outsiders find it difficult to interpret what Western images and ideas actually mean to Indonesians and how they are used to further Indonesian concerns. Visitors must constantly remember that local factors mold imported styles into art works which only tangentially refer to their sources.

Understanding of these factors grew during the six months in which I lived in the ancient Javanese city of Yogyakarta and traveled extensively out Java and Bali researching Indonesian art. I spoke to artists, academicians, gallery and museum directors and journalists, as well as to art historians, anthropologists and USAID personnel who provided introductions and reading materials and suggested interpretations for an often confusing welter of impressions and information.

This Southeast Asian nation of more than 3,000 islands stretches for 3,000 miles along the equator. The population of 190 million includes some 300 ethnic groups. Indonesia is an intensely spiritual country in which present-day beliefs and traditions stem from loose layerings of indigenous animism, plus Hinduism and Buddhism imported from India, along with the late arrivals Islam and Christianity. Islam predominates in most places, including Java, the political and commercial center. These complex religious circumstances plus shifting regional political definitions and trading alliances mix with the more recent Asian and Western influences.

Indonesia's 350-year history as a Dutch colony and its hard-won independence since 1949 shape its peoples' self-images and their ideas about art. Dutch

influence lingers in the Indonesian language as well as in engineering projects such as flood control and architecture. (For example, the roofs of many middle-class houses sport terra-cotta tiles similar to those found in Holland, although the rooflines still have the shape of village thatch roofs.) The country was virtually closed to external influences from 1950 to 1965, when Sukarno's government, in its drive towards nationalism and self-determination, championed the non-aligned-nations movement. Use of English and Dutch languages and reading matter were curtailed, limiting many artists' access to international art currents and hindering their understanding of Western ideas. On the other hand, because visual information was generally available, Indonesian artists integrated the "look" of many Western styles into their own idioms, just as Picasso borrowed the look of African masks but not their meaning. Today, young Indonesian artists and critics are more familiar with Western theories and thinking about art, although they often question the relevance of these imports.

Jakarta is the commercial hub for art in Indonesia. There, government-sponsored exhibition and performance spaces such as Taman Ismail Marzuki (TIM) have showcased Indonesian artists since the 1970s in exhibitions aimed at local and international audiences, and have more recently stimulated the development of additional nonprofit and commercial galleries. However, Yogyakarta in Central Java, Bandung in West Java and the island of Bali are Indonesia's three centers for artistic and theoretical development, each with a small number of dedicated contemporary galleries as well as government-sponsored cultural centers, art schools, art festivals and competitions which both stimulate and control the exhibition of art. Artists and critics in these centers have developed distinct philosophies regarding what constitutes the Indonesian character and its expression via artistic styles and subjects.



Widayat painting from 1993.

The contemporary style the Indonesians call "traditional" or "decorative" originated in traditional Hindu story paintings, created for ritual, didactic and expressive purposes, in which line drawings are colored with muted plant and mineral pigments and organized in flat, crowded compositions where all available spaces are filled. The traditional versions are still found on Balinese temple and palace walls, in fabric designs, in books and calendars. The contemporary works are esthetic objects which, to initiate, carry symbolic meanings and magical potency. Subjects are identified by status, family and geography. These works supplement the ancient stories and rituals with secular subjects such as landscape and village scenes, foliage and wildlife, and depictions of dance, musical events and puppet theater. Because of its esthetic appeal, the "traditional/decorative" style is prevalent in tourist art, yet it remains an important source for serious Indonesian painting as well.

Naturalistic painting is another ubiquitous Indonesian style. It was adopted first in Bali during the late 19th century by artists who admired and identified with the Dutch. Their recording of village life, usually in an idyllic and nostalgic manner, became the basis for a type of realism that they believed expressed Indonesian identity, and that style continues to be a strong force in all Indonesian art.

Contemporary Javanese art is syncretic. Artists are interested in dealing with international as well as local or nationalistic issues and using multiple sources for their work. They have consistently integrated modern subjects and techniques into their mixed traditions. Belief in the efficacy and symbolic value of gods and spirits coexists with Muslim tenets. The esthetic result of all this is a wide

Affandi: Solar Eclipse, 1983, oil on canvas, 54 by 77 inches.

