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Lim Wasim, Sukarno's forgotten palace artist

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When everything related to Indonesia's first president Sukarno was virtually banished from public view, palace artist Lim Wasim also seemed to disappear from memory.

Installed as palace artist in 1961, Lim served in his post for seven years. Preceding him were Dullah and Lee Man-fong.

Just like other employees of the palace, Lim had to work daily and keep regular office hours. As an artist, he felt tortured by the bureaucracy. However, as he felt like he was helping the country, he made the necessary sacrifices.

"I was proud to work as the palace artist at such a young age. I wanted to gain experience," said Lim, who was born in Bandung in 1929 as the second of seven siblings.

Before becoming a palace artist, Lim had become acquainted with Sukarno while working as an assistant to Lee on the mural *Puspita dan Margasatwa* (Flowers and Animals) in the Hotel Indonesia's Ramayana Restaurant.

The mural still graces the restaurant today. Lee and Lim only had six months to complete the 11-by-4 meter mural in honor of the 1962 Asian Games, the first Games to be staged in Jakarta.

Lim's mother was Hong Keng Sing and his father Lim Tjie, who owned the Hoa Sang restaurant in Bandung.

When Japan occupied Indonesia in 1942, Lim had to leave school, and it was during this time he began to teach himself how to paint. His first art teacher was Kok Tekkang. After independence was declared on Aug. 17, 1945, he began to study painting with Sudjana Kerton, as well as taking lessons from Mochtar Apin and Abedy, all in Bandung. Later he studied at the Central Fine Art Institute in Beijing. He used all this knowledge and skill to become a palace artist.

However, he sometimes found it difficult to please Sukarno.

"He had a lot of wishes and had very good taste in art," he said. The former president was a graduate of the Bandung Institute of Technology and had a great deal of appreciation for art. If he found a painting not to his liking, he would ask Lim to

tinker with it and make changes. This was a first for Lim, having to redo paintings to suit the tastes of such a demanding critic.

As the palace artist, Lim constantly had to be ready to receive instructions from the president. His main job was to look after Sukarno's collection of paintings, some of which were in bad shape with peeling paint or insect-damaged frames.

"Sukarno did not like to see paintings in that condition. The frames had to be quickly replaced," he said.

Sukarno also asked Lim to paint portraits from photographs, including one of the president's mother, Idayu Nyoman Rai. Lim had to study the black-and-white photographs and then produce a color portrait.

One of his other jobs was to select and hang paintings in each room of the palace. Of course, Sukarno was also involved in this process. He also had to create paintings that Sukarno would give as gifts when he traveled abroad. All of this can be found in *Lim Wasim a Palace Artist*, a biography by Agus Dermawan T.

During Sukarno's reign, the president collected about 1,000 paintings. Some were hung in the different palaces and others in his own workshop, also located in the palace. In the workshop, the paintings were arranged neatly on shelves for the president's enjoyment. Some of the paintings were part of Sukarno's private collection while others belonged to the state. Some were gifts from home and abroad. Paintings that the president did not like were kept in the palace warehouse.

"Sukarno liked realist-naturalist paintings and did not like contemporary paintings. His favorite works were by Basuki Abdullah, who was very fond of painting beautiful women and beautiful scenery. He also liked Lee Man-fong, Dullah and the theme of struggle in S. Sudjojono's works," said Lim, who has two children, Agus Budiman and Rina Budiman.

Sukarno's workshop at the palace was completely fitted out with all the amenities. If the president wanted to watch Lim work, he would ask Lim to paint in this workshop. Of course, Lim had his own workshop at the palace with all the necessary equipment.

Lim had to arrive at the palace before 8 a.m. If he came late, he could not see Bung Karno and would not know what he had to do that particular day. The president always gave instructions to palace employees before 8 a.m., before he began receiving his guests.

Lim worked from Monday to Saturday from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. and received Rp 4,000 a month. At that time, the president earned Rp 20,000 a month. Lim also got 30 kilograms of rice, a tin of butter and two kilograms of granulated sugar.

As inflation worsened, his monthly salary was soon just enough to pay for a *becak* (pedicab) to take him back and forth between his home in Cideng and the palace.

At home, Lim would create naturalist paintings which he sold to supplement his palace income. He could make two or three paintings a week. His wife, Alisma Sudja, whom he married in 1967, was a baker.

When there was a lot of work at the palace, Sukarno would order the employees to stay until 4 p.m. Sometimes, after Lim had already arrived back at home, a presidential aide would show up at his house and ask him to return to the palace as some work was waiting for him there.

When *Bung Karno* left the palace in 1967, there was nobody to give him directions. Between 1967 and 1968, Lim showed up at the palace and read the newspaper all day.

"By early 1967, Sukarno was already isolated," he said. Then the state secretary summoned him and asked him about his activities. As he was no longer needed, he was dismissed without compensation. He still has all the letters relating to his dismissal.

Lim remains fond of Sukarno for his great passion for art. He regrets that the president's dream of building a Fine Arts Museum -- on the area stretching from the Pasar Baru post office to Jl. Gunung Sahari in Central Jakarta -- has never been realized.

Sukarno always said Indonesia produced wonderful fine art but had no fine art museum. Dewi Sukarno was scheduled to implement this project but the twists of history ended the dream.

But Lim is still positive that fine art is flourishing in Indonesia today thanks to the great influence of Sukarno.

— JP

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