

A brush with the past

In a small Bali village, a group of artists are keeping an old tradition alive



Victoria Finlay

UBUD IN BALI is overflowing with art. There is art in the museums, of course, in the hotels, in the clothes shops and even sometimes in the hardware shops. Galleries of various qualities are on every street corner: when tourist dollars are flowing to pay for pictures of tropical idylls everyone it seems is an artist.

Too many paint to a formula, defined by European artists who lived in Bali in the 1930s, and most use modern materials on modern canvases. Even some of the so-called "classical" paintings are carried out with chemical paints, and then burnished to look old.

But in a small town called Kamasan, several kilometres from Ubud, there is a handful of artists still holding out against the onslaught of acrylics, and still using the old methods and natural paints.

And yet one of these traditionalists, 68-year-old Ni Made Suciarmi, has paradoxically broken every rule: she might use the old paints and tell the old Hindu stories, but she is a woman artist in a society where women of her generation could never be artists.

Today, if Indonesia followed the Japanese tradition of acknowledging "living national treasures" she would, fans say, certainly be one, for her lively portrayal of Ramayana and other legends in styles of painting that India forgot two centuries ago, and which on the sub-continent exist only in museums.

I visited her recently at her home-studio in the small village where she was born. In the middle of the rush mat floor were neatly set out the tools of Suciarmi's trade. Small stones of different colours were placed carefully in boxes; yellow and red powders were in brightly stained bowls; there was charcoal made of twigs and cotton; a couple of cowrie shells: the only nods to modernity were a couple of HB pencils.

The process begins with the cowrie shell, and a cotton canvas made with rice powder dried in the sun, she explained.

Her sister, who is 70, takes me into the "artists' kitchen" to show how the canvas is polished. The room has a rafter with a hole worn into it. She attaches a long stick to a cowrie shell so there is resistance, and begins to rub the shell against the canvas — after a few heaves of the cowrie the material is shiny. It takes hours to do properly.

The next stage is the cream paint



TIMELESS ART: Ni Made Suciarmi in her studio. Photograph by Victoria Finlay

which is the base for every Kamasan painting and complicated calendar. It comes, Suciarmi explains poetically, from huge stones carried across the sea many years ago by Bugis fishermen-pirates from Sulawesi. "They used it as ballast and when they got to Serangan Island in the south of Bali they dumped it in the water. Now it is one of the most valuable things I own," she says.

For years her family had gone regularly to Serangan, borrowing kayaks to find the stones, and seeing the rare turtles that used to live there. But 15 years ago the municipal authorities built a causeway to the temple on Serangan and these soft stones — as well as the turtle breeding grounds — were lost in the construction.

"I just pray I have enough to last the rest of my life," she said. The stones are hidden in her locked shed. "I used to be afraid of people stealing them and I buried them in the garden, but then I couldn't remember where I'd left them."

She mixes the powdered stone with calcium, and then adds a glue that, rather

incredibly, is made with flaked yak skin brought for centuries down from the Tibetan Himalayas to Jakarta for that purpose, as well as to be used for wayan kulit puppets.

"Lots of traditions in this house," Suciarmi says with an approving nod.

She started when she was a child, scratching pictures in the dust. "All the older people were angry. Art was always about old stories. 'How can you paint the story when you are too young to know it?' they asked me."

But she was adamant that she could. "I painted an angel onto the ground and then I slept next to it, it was so beautiful."

Her father was one of the artists employed to paint the ceiling of the Palace of Justice in Klung-Klung under the Dutch colonialists in 1938 when she was six.

The first few times she went along she was only allowed to serve the food. Later her uncle taught her how to mix the colours: red from Chinese cinnabar (which today is prohibitively expensive at

around HK\$600 for "two fingers" worth) and blue, rather bizarrely, from laundry blue. Mixing was fine, like cooking, but when it came to her painting there was more resistance: this was not girls' territory. "But I painted in silence in my room. And when I was nine years old I was ready. The first painting I did was an Arjuna meditation, the second was of eight monks, and I showed them to my teacher and he liked them."

There were arguments: why couldn't she weave like the other women. "But I didn't like to weave I liked to sketch. I only liked the mens' jobs. I was like a boy, always fighting."

And she was also always fighting for her right to paint, and eventually wore the resistance down and was accepted.

"After my brother died there was only me and three sisters; I was supposed to be a boy, and eventually they accepted that I could do boys' things."

As a teenager she began to learn the traditional stories with an obsessive interest. "My father, my grandfather and my uncle were puppet players, and they showed me: I also learned to dance." She was the only one in her generation to be interested, and so they forgave the fact that she was female, and passed the secrets on.

Still, 60 years later, she is the only woman to have learned this whole process — from the ironing, drawing, painting, putting in the letters and then finishing off the piece. "For most people it is like an industry: one does the cotton, another does the sketching, another the colours. But that isn't good."

Since then the technological possibilities have changed radically: has she tried acrylics? "I tried, but I wasn't satisfied. I didn't like them at all."

Even her posture for sketching and painting is traditional. "I was invited to Jakarta to an exhibition and they gave me a table to work on. I didn't like it, I prefer to sit on the floor."

Suciarmi sometimes teaches students — mostly foreigners. "They are Japanese, American, German, Australian and Chilean, but in Bali I only teach my daughter."

Indeed, her daughter, Ni Ketut Manik, has her own stories: a kung fu expert she is a policewoman in Denpasar, coming home to paint in her spare time. "All my children paint, but only my daughter is an artist. So I pass on the family tradition to her." She suddenly adopts a rather naughtily sly expression.

"I told you a lot today about my craft," she says. "But there are some things I didn't tell you: I kept some secrets to myself."

Ni Made Suciarmi exhibits through the Seniwati Gallery for Women in Ubud. Call (0361) 975485 or seniwati@dps.mega.net.id