

Kartini an inspiration

for women artists

Once again we commemorate today the birth of Indonesia's national heroine, Raden Kartini.

Born into nobility in Java, she has been primarily remembered as a champion of women's emancipation. And it must not be forgotten that issues like polygamy, women's subordination and lack of education were subjects that Kartini linked to a greater vision of development for women.

Her vision of the position of women in the national struggle and the larger map of the world is the first to be seen in Indonesian modern history. Sitisoesmandari, in her excellent biography of Kartini, calls Kartini the beginning of the national awakening, emerging before Boedi Oetomo came into existence.

Stretching it further, Soedjono Ananta Toer in his stirring thoughts on Kartini titled *Panggil Aku Kartini Saja* (Just Call Me Kartini) says Kartini is the beginning of modern Indonesian history. The beginning of modern Indonesian history was she that stirred imaginations of advancement in Demak, Kudus and Jepara in Central Java, during the second half of the 19th century, contends.

Indeed, Indonesian students gathered in the *Indische Vereeniging* in Holland, known as *Perhimpunan Indonesia*, and made Kartini's visions the guidelines for their organization. Its members later played an important role in the birth of the Indonesian Republic. It is said that her thinking inspired Pancasila, the pillars of state ideology, as well as the wording of *Sumpah Pemuda* (Youth Pledge).

Her letters to Dutch friends, written in Dutch, and leading articles she wrote in Dutch newspapers and petitions to the government

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of the Netherlands, were first published seven years after her untimely death in 1904.

Since then, numerous reprints and translations in various western and eastern languages have spread her vision all over the world.

As Kartini's conceptual visions encompassed virtually all aspects of development, it should not be surprising that she was also the first in modern Indonesian history to see the role of art in education to cultivate the finer senses of the human character, a vision that educators of today have yet to fulfill.

Kartini never got the chance to have a formal education except for basic education, nor could her talented sister pursue art studies.

Girls of noble birth had to stay at home after their 12th birthday, and appearing in public was a no-no, a situation that did not change for a long time.

It was, however, different for North Sulawesi-born painter Emiria Soenassa (b.1894), a member of the national-oriented painters association, Persagi.

She participated in several exhibitions and even obtained various art awards. Soedjojo called her a genius. History of Art literature, however, paid scant attention to her.

Women remained a separate, unaccounted part in society, with gender disparities continuing throughout the ages.

In the following years, however, women artists did break through the glass ceiling, though most went unrecorded. Kartika Affandi (b.1934), for instance, shattered all cultural taboos when she blandly painted

her genitalia.

Foremost ceramist, Hilda Soemantri (b.1945), introduced installation art in the early 1970s, when even her male peers had yet to become aware of the term "installation art".

She became the first Indonesian art historian to be awarded a postgraduate degree and was founder of the ceramic division of the Jakarta Fine Arts Institute. Her oeuvre lifted pottery from craft to fine art.

Noted abstract expressionist painter Nunung WS (b.1948) made her engagement with professional art a priority, making it a condition of Sulebar's marriage proposal.

Renowned sculptor Dolorosa Sinaga (b.1952) ventured into working with bronze for her stirring images of women's strength in the face of violence, suffering and grief.

Astari Rasjid (b. 1953) stands out for bringing a new kind of Classic style while, redressing Javanese traditional values in a manner that retains the subtlety of her culture, but is poignant in its universal and contemporary significance.

Marida Nasution (b.1956) defies her peers who switched to commercial art, consistently keeping to graphic art, even integrating it in her powerful installation art. Lucia Hartini (b.1959), left behind by her artist spouse, invented a new kind of surrealist art, and gained international recognition.

Arahmaiani (b. 1961) initiated public art and happening art at a time when the terms did not yet exist. I GAK Murniasih (b. 1966), a virtual autodidact, boldly challenged traditional Balinese culture with her voluptuous, often humorous fantasies based on the sexual organs of the body.

Erica Hestu Wahyuni (b. 1971) seized the art

market making her shortcomings an asset with naive images likened to endearing fairy tales.

Women artists have gone a long way since the 1970s when they needed to join hands in order to have a chance of exhibiting their work. They associated themselves in Group Sembilan, Ikatan Pelukis Wanita Indonesia (IPWI) and Nuansa Indonesia.

Today, such needs still exist, as is evident in Makassar, South Sulawesi, where women artists join in the Women's Arts Association (IPPS) and in Ubud, Bali, where Mary Northmore's Seniwati Gallery accommodates Balinese women artists.

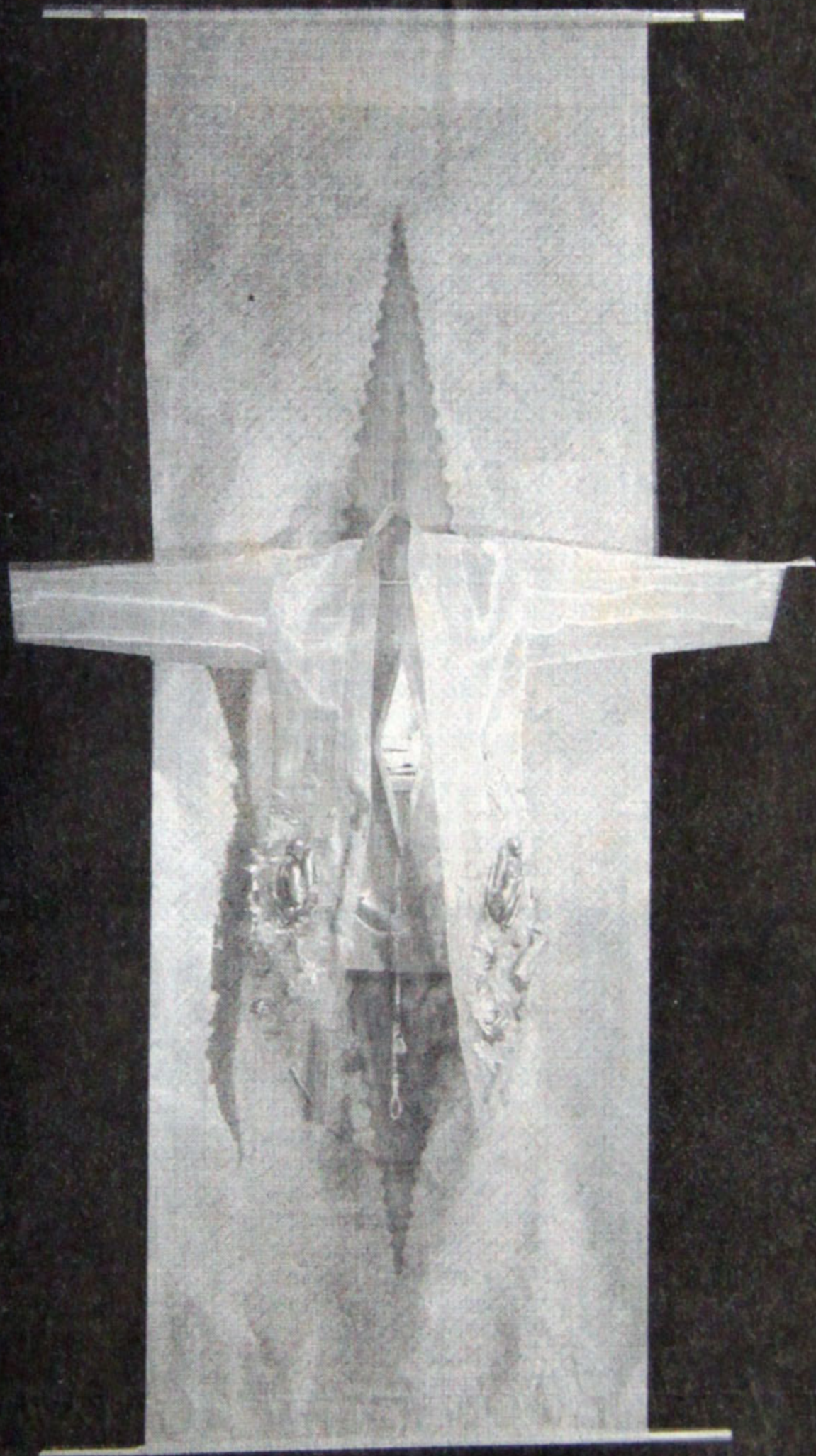
In Jakarta, Group Sembilan and IPWI continue their activities, while other loose associations are formed as the need arises.

Nuansa Indonesia, however, broke up as their members found their own way as professionals in their own right.

Basic issues of gender, tradition and violence have hardly changed from Kartini's time and traumatic shadows of the past continue to find substance in the ongoing spats of violence. Yet Indonesian women today enjoy a freedom that Kartini could only dream of. Young artists have emerged everywhere, exhibiting their works in many places.

As Kartini remained convinced that "the course of destiny cannot be turned aside" and "the triumph has been foreordained", she also knew she would not live to see her visions come true. Helping break the path that leads to it was important enough. It was "a glorious privilege", she said.

May we continue to be inspired by the incredible strength of Raden Adjeng Kartini, who came from behind the walls of tradition over a century ago.



JP/Carla Bianpoen

Astari Rasjid's *Abandoning Virility* (2002) portrays a *kebaya* (traditional Javanese blouse) made of steel, a metaphor for repressive culture with its make-belief outer harmony and the futility of fallacy. The sculpture is part of a joint-exhibition at the gallery of PC Artspace in Washington D.C., from April 19 to May 19.