

Kartini's unique contribution to the arts



Astari's file

Repossessing Attributes by Astari Rasjid

The concepts of gender and human rights have existed since the dawn of human history, but their emergence as issues is a phenomenon of modern times. If we talk about gender and human rights, it is actually women's rights as human beings that we mean.

In the Indonesian scene, it is particularly the Javanese cultural tradition that is prominent in this field, particularly in the Javanese aristocracy. The outstanding writings of Raden Adjeng Kartini (1879-1904), published after her untimely death at the age of 25, are marked by the impact of a feudal tradition

exacerbated by Dutch colonialism on a system that discriminated against women.

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As she struggled against the stream and strove to achieve universal education for girls, she also set out her all-encompassing vision, which eventually came to fruition in the five state pillars of Pancasila with a special focus on tolerance, justice and gender equality.

Analysts consider Kartini the precursor of national awakening, while author Pramoedya Ananta Toer sees her as the first modern Indonesian thinker, researcher Cora Vreede de Stuers gives her credit for some of the wording of the Youth Pledge, and the Young Indische Vereniging based their association's guidelines on her ideas.

Polygamy was a major problem in Kartini's life. Not only did her natural mother, a commoner, fall in status to the second wife after her father married an aristocrat, Kartini herself ultimately had to go against her own life principles when she was married to a man who had already a number of *selir* or concubines.

In contemporary visual arts, the works of Astari Rasjid and Ninditiyo Adipurnomo, both born and raised in the Javanese tradition, have opened up the cultural guise of harmony, bringing to light the repressive rules in the Javanese tradition that were particularly denigrating toward women. Taking issues to the level of universal standards of human dignity, the artists' metaphors are representative elements of the Javanese attire, made national under the Soeharto regime and particularly represented by the *konde*, the traditional chignon hairstyle, and the *stagen*, a long belt that Javanese women wrap around their waist to keep their sarong in place, and look beautiful as is

prescribed in the Javanese cultural tradition.

Astari Rasjid's oeuvre, over more than a decade, describe the situation of women of the Javanese elite, while subtly and poignantly indicating that change is bound to happen.

Symbols abound as exemplified in the stirring *Loro Blonyo*, featuring a closed antique Javanese door, a woman wearing a white mask sitting in front of it, and a leather *wayang* (puppet) or the *cinde* wedding cloth with sandals at each end in the installation *Resurrected Core*.

Her three-dimensional *Pretified Cage* (1998), featuring the hardships of wearing the Javanese *kebaya* or traditional costume is made of fine stainless steel and refers to the suffering underneath the facade of beauty and harmony. In the sculpture *Abandoning Virility* (2001), parts of the body embellishing the stainless-steel *kebaya* are set against a Javanese cloth featuring a vagina, and reflects upon a woman's life and death, and the fallacy of make-believe.

Like Kartini, Astari also suggests the changes needed, but unlike Kartini, the artist does it the Javanese way, subtly — yet no less poignant. This is evident in *Temple of Efflorescence* (1996), a self-portrait in which her body is held in an untraditional, upright position, her arms straight, gaze firm, and her hands loose. Her international award-winning piece *No U-*

Turn (1999) uses Javanese symbolism as a metaphor for persisting feudal practices and the emerging forces of change and equality, as visualized in the woman's straight gaze, in the identical position and height of a man and a woman at opposite sides of a door, and the lotus flower expressing the wish for new life or rebirth.

For Ninditiyo Adipurnomo, the *konde* has become his constant muse. Whether round or oval, it is intriguing, just like Javanese culture. And what is more, the *konde* raises one's curiosity as to what might lie within the beautifully shaped arrangement. He observed his mother, his grandmother and other relatives sporting the style,

then grew his hair and eventually found the *konde* to be heavy, hot and a strain on the neck.

The *konde* thus became his metaphor for women's burden and their subordination to more powerful forces, as well as a symbol of repression and repressive relationships in society.

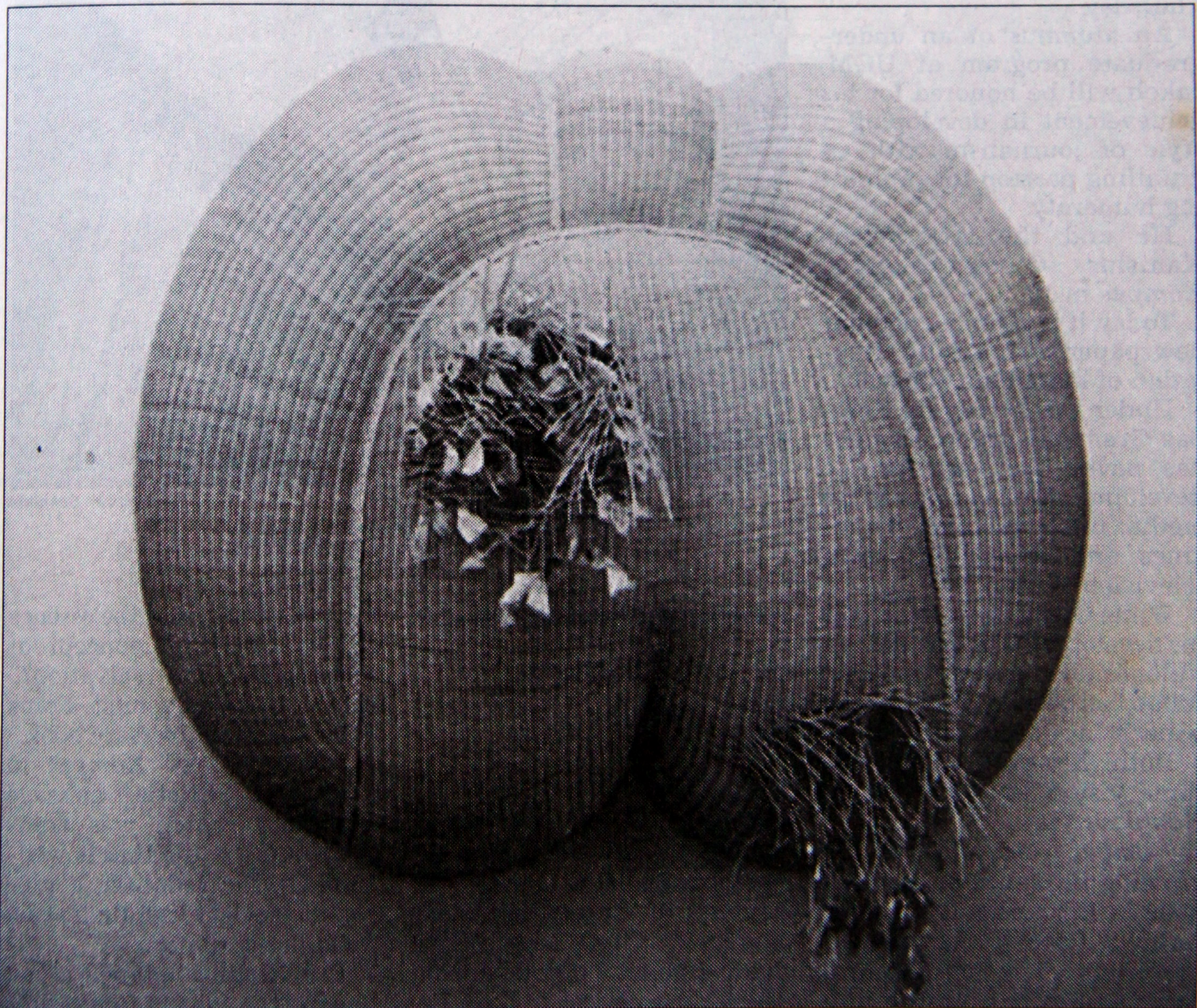
One of his earliest works is titled *Beban Eksotika Jawa* (Javanese Exotic Burden, 1993), while *Introversion April 21st* (1996) shows his interpretation of the *konde* in relation to Kartini.

In his installation *I am not that kind of particular Javanese* (2002), Ninditiyo arranges a rattan chest filled with objects that is usually put into a book chest, and 20

paintings featuring men as well as 20 *konde* made of stone and rattan.

The traditional chignons, revealed in a variety of shapes and formed out of different media fill his installations, explores his culture and his visions for change, including the egalitarian relationship between the artist and his craftsmen, who help create his work. In works made with the assistance of his artisans, Ninditiyo usually credits their names alongside his.

While Kartini practiced similar concepts over a century ago — she had encouraged the creativity of Jepara artisans as a friend, and helped them export their products to Holland — Ninditiyo's concept is fairly new in the world art.



Courtesy of Ninditiyo Adipurnomo