

Lantern wizard going strong at 100

The popular and much sought-after artworks, *damarkurung* or unique painted lanterns of East Java, overshadow the meticulous artist behind the creations, Masmundari, a grandmother now a centenarian.

A very modest woman, she lives in a simple house located in a narrow alleyway on Jl. Gubernur Suryo VII/41B, Gresik, East Java, with her only daughter and three grandchildren. None of the lanterns made from her paintings adorn her home.

As she was seated on the damp floor, painting on a sitting-room table, Masmundari was not aware of the presence of a stranger until a tap on the shoulder startled her and made her laugh.

"You must be a journalist. You've got a big bag, so you want to take my pictures," she said in Javanese. Still laughing, she took out newspaper clippings from a locker in the sitting room, containing articles about her, and photo albums showing her pictures with top officials, including former presidents Soeharto and Abdurrahman "Gus Dur" Wahid.

Masmundari looked healthy at 100, though her hearing was impaired, requiring one to speak very loudly when communicating with her. As her pronunciation was not so clear either, her grandson Nur Samaji, 27, acted as interpreter for her guests.

Besides painting, she keeps doing the household chores: washing and cooking. "She gets angry if we ask her to rest. Nobody can stop her particularly when she is absorbed in her art," said Nur Samaji.

She spends the best part of her days painting on canvases and more frequently on paper. After making sketches on paper sheets, she paints with slender bamboo sticks dipped in oil paint. It is these pictures that will adorn *damarkurung*,



Damarkurung lantern artist Masmundari still goes strong at 100.

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Gresik's coastal styled lanterns.

The traditional lamps are made of bamboo frames with Masmundari's paper paintings on four sides. By tradition, Gresik lanterns are only sold on the eve of Ramadhan (Muslim fasting month). People usually hang the lamps on their porches and light them moments before the drums in the mosque are beaten to mark twilight prayers.

In 1970, only 10 *damarkurung* (literally meaning cased lamps) painters remained. Today Masmundari is the very last one. Who will succeed her? Or, will such lanterns soon disappear from East Java as no one else is as yet seriously interested in this traditional art?

While 10 years ago Masmundari was capable of producing pictures for 300

lanterns a year, now with her advancing age she can at the most turn out 30 lamps for the fasting month, which sell at less than Rp 50,000 per unit. More luxury lanterns using mica sheets, normally made on order, may cost hundreds of thousands of rupiah. Her canvas paintings though are more expensive.

Born in a family of artists, Masmundari is the eldest of four. Her father, Sinom, was a famous lantern painter and *wayang* (leather puppet) master in Gresik, and her mother was Mak Ijah. All her three siblings learned the art of *damarkurung* handed down through eight generations, but the others have already passed on.

Claiming to have had no formal schooling, she had only been taught to recite the Holy Koran and transcribe Javanese into locally styled Arabic characters. Though she is well versed in lantern painting, originally she had no instruction. Her father even taught her to sing. "No women did the

work. Lantern making was seen as men's job," she was quoted by Nur Samaji.

As a young girl in the Dutch colonial period, however, Masmundari led a hard life by selling goods or working as a porter, carrying salt from the harbor to a factory.

"When I was very tired, many young men would help me. They were mostly after me because I was quite pretty," she said, bursting into tearful laughter.

This village star finally married. But she went through several marriages until her fourth and last marriage, from which she had a daughter, Rokayah, now 56 with three children. While she was silent on her first three husbands, she beamed when asked about the fourth: "He was Gondorukman, a top *ludruk* (folk drama) artist."

Sadly, he left without a word early on in her pregnancy. "He never returned, probably he was too ill or caught by the colonizers," she reasoned.

As a consolation, Mas-

mundari started painting with the equipment left behind by her late father, imitating his basic style. When she sold her works, they were more in demand than the products of other lantern artists of that time. People said Masmundari's paintings were more refined.

Eventually, Masmundari established herself as a *damarkurung* painter. An artist from Gresik, Imang AW, was later attracted by her pictures. He then introduced her to more modern materials and instruments. And it was Imang who took her to Jakarta's Bentara Budaya exhibition center for a successful display.

Thereafter, she began to be recognized not only in Gresik but also across the country, with more and more exhibitions ahead. Masmundari's works have now become part of the collections of art enthusiasts both here and abroad.

Masmundari's lanterns have their own characteristics. She has had the courage to depart from standard themes. Normally, *damarkurung* patterns are related to Gresik's history, the legend of *Anglingdharma* and *wayang* episodes. Her pictures, while retaining some classic designs, have included current events like wedding parties, busy roads and funfairs.

Masmundari has also created imaginary figures, namely *Mbok Omah* and *Nyonya Muluk*. The former has a dozen kids, making her movements very cumbersome, and the latter is a Dutch woman who likes traveling by air balloon or plane.

Masmundari's creativity has earned her various awards. Among others, she has received Gresik Regent Djuhansyah's award in 1990, Malang's Tugu Park Foundation award in 1991, the Kartini Award in 1996 and the East Java provincial administrative cultural award in 2002.