*... from the field*

# A Serendipitous Sojourn

Research > Southeast Asia

**My only disappointment during my recent three months in Leiden was that I was unable to parlay my reading knowledge of Dutch into an ability to converse. I lay the blame for that failure squarely at the feet of my Dutch colleagues: it would have been ludicrous for me to bog down our conversations with my tongue-tied attempts to speak their language, because they all spoke such excellent English. So I was at first surprised when they did not understand the word "serendipity," until I remembered that it was a fad word in America a couple of generations ago and had gone out of fashion long before my Dutch colleagues, being much younger than I, had begun to learn English.**

*By Thomas Cooper*

But it's still a nice word, occasionally useful to describe a happy and unexpected discovery made by a prepared mind. The event that first recalled this word to my mind in Leiden occurred almost 100 years ago, when W.O.J. Nieuwenkamp, the Dutch artist, travel writer, and art dealer, discovered the identity of a gifted North Bali artist who had made a number paintings for the Dutch language specialist, H. N. van der Tuuk, a generation before Nieuwenkamp's first visit to Bali. Before leaving the Netherlands for Bali in 1906, Nieuwenkamp studied the collection of paintings which had been commissioned by Van der Tuuk in the 1880s and were now kept in the library of Leiden University. He had copied many of them in order to "master the style," and later used those copies to illustrate his articles and books. He also commissioned I Ketut Gedé (and other painters) to produce paintings which he sold in the Netherlands.

While visiting a household temple in Singaraja (north Bali), Nieuwenkamp saw a painting very much like one of those he had copied in the library at Leiden, and asked to meet the artist. He was introduced to an old man named I Ketut Gedé, who was amazed when Nieuwenkamp told him he knew he had made many paintings for "Toean Pandertuuk". The encounter was a serendipitous discovery with some importance for the history of Balinese painting, since Van der Tuuk did not record the names of the artists he commissioned, and few of them signed their work. Even today, paintings in Balinese household and village temples are almost never signed: they are made by men who consider themselves craftsmen, like the sculptors and woodcarvers who also contribute their skills to adorn the temples. Thanks to Nieuwenkamp's prepared mind, we know the name of the man – I Ketut Gedé – to whom we can attribute, on stylistic evidence, a large number of the paintings in the Van der Tuuk collection.

The great majority of the traditional Balinese paintings preserved in public and private collections come from a single village in south Bali: Kamasan. For centuries the painters of this village were patronized by the court of Klungkung, the most prestigious and powerful of the various kingdoms in Bali. In the course of my research in old Balinese paintings I had become especially interested in the relatively few works that did not exhibit the characteristic Kamasan style, and I had come to Leiden to search for non-Kamasan works among the old Balinese paintings in Dutch museum collections.

The paintings in the Van der Tuuk collection were described and illustrated in a publication by Professor Hedi Hinzler in 1986, but in my previous studies I had ignored them because they were not "traditional" - they had been commissioned by a foreigner and executed using paper and paints furnished by him. But in Leiden, I had a chance to examine them at first hand, just as Nieuwenkamp had done almost 100 years before, and I realized their special significance for my work. Hinzler distinguishes the work of fourteen different painters in the collection, from different parts of Bali, and *not one of them worked in the Kamasan style*. Hinzler recounts Nieuwenkamp's encounter with I Ketut Gedé and, on the basis of stylistic evidence, identifies another example of his work: a handsome painting on wood in the collection of the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde in Leiden, dated 1901 and acquired by the museum from Nieuwenkamp.

As I expected, the great majority of the old Balinese paintings in the Dutch museum collections were from Kamasan, but I found a gratifying number of non-Kamasan paintings to enrich my database, perhaps 5 per cent of the total. Most of them were in the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, in Leiden; the Tropenmuseum, in Amsterdam; and the Wereldmuseum, in Rotterdam. I take this opportunity to thank the curators and staff members of these museums especially for their patience and courtesy in allowing me to see and photograph their paintings, and for providing copies of the pertinent documentation from their files.

It was in the storage facility of Rotterdam's Wereldmuseum that I made my own serendipitous discovery: two large and beautiful paintings on cloth, which I immediately identified as the work of I Ketut Gedé, based on their distinctive style, which was quite different from the styles used by other traditional Balinese artists, and familiar to me from I Ketut Gedé's works in the Van der Tuuk collection.

W.O.J. Nieuwenkamp, "Schetsen van Bali", Nederlandsch-Indië Oud & Nieuw, July 1929.

Original painting by I Ketut Gede >

**< Nieuwenkamp's copy of I Ketut Gede's painting in the Van der Tuuk collection.**

Courtesy of the Van der Tuuk Collection, Library, Leiden University.

These are large, colorful, well executed paintings on cloth, in excellent condition. They came to the museum in 1928 from the estate of the Dutch scholar, G. P. Rouffaer, unaccompanied by any information except that they were from Bali. Like most large traditional Balinese paintings, each of them depicts various episodes from a single traditional narrative. These narratives - myths and legends in the archaic Kawi language, also called Old Javanese - are set down in palm-leaf manuscripts (*lontar*), but they are familiar to the Balinese populace not from those manuscripts, but rather from performance in the shadow-puppet (*wayang*) theater. Traditional painting is called *wayang* painting by the Balinese; the figures in the paintings are immediately recognizable to the intended (Balinese) viewer by their close resemblance to the corresponding shadow puppets.

One of these two paintings illustrates scenes from a poem called Smaradahana ("The Burning of Smara"). In this tale, Heaven is threatened by a demon called Nilarudraka, so powerful that the gods themselves fear him. Indra sends for Siwa to do battle with him, but Siwa is deep in ascetic meditation. Indra directs Smara, the god of love, to arouse Siwa with thoughts of his beautiful consort Uma, and Smara does so, shooting the meditating Siwa with his love arrows. Siwa, enraged at the interruption, sees Smara drawing yet another love arrow with his bow and incinerates him in a ball of fire. But inspired by passion he seeks out Uma. She conceives their son Gana (Ganesha), who is born with an elephant's head because Uma, while pregnant, was startled by the elephant steed of Indra. In the end Nilarudraka is killed through the power of the mature Gana.

The other painting illustrates scenes from an episode in the Adiparwa, a Kawi prose text based on the first book of the Mahabharata. In this episode, Garuda, the mythical bird, struggles to secure *amerta*, the elixir of immortality, from the gods and deliver it to the *nagas* (serpents) in order to ransom his mother, Winata, from bondage to her co-wife, Kadru, mother of the *nagas*.

Courtesy of the Wereldmuseum, Rotterdam.

**Ratih ("Batari Rattih") and Smara ("Batara Smara"), detail of painting by I Ketut Gede illustrating episodes from the story Smaradahana.**

Like Nieuwenkamp almost a century ago, I, too, had the good fortune to study the paintings in the Van der Tuuk collection at Leiden University, and so was able to recognize I Ketut Gedé's style in both these paintings, not only in the figures but in his unique way of depicting rocks, and in the motifs he uses to fill empty space. Serendipity at work! <

Courtesy of the Wereldmuseum, Rotterdam.

**Siwa and Uma ("Batari Giriputri"), detail of painting by I Ketut Gede illustrating episodes from the story Smaradahana.**

***Dr Thomas Cooper's*** *research interest is Indonesian culture, focusing on Balinese painting. He is a Research Fellow at the University of California, Berkeley, and was an affiliated fellow at the IIAS (20 April 2001 – 18 July 2001)*
*E-mail: tcoop@uclink4.berkeley.edu*

**"If any fool this high samootch explore**
**Know Charles Masson has been here before"**
**.... Read about The Masson Project in this issue's theme section, p. 8.**