

# Lost paradise

Bali has always been popular with European artists; at the beginning of the previous century they were already enjoying the island's ancient culture, breathtaking nature and friendly population. In 1932, the aristocratic Belgian, Jean Le Mayeur (1880-1958), made a home for himself in the tropical paradise; he mainly painted near-nude female dancers and was thus known as the 'Paul Gauguin of Bali'. His colourful impressionist paintings and pastels were sold to American tourists for two or three hundred dollars, which was a substantial amount at that time. These days, his works are sold for small fortunes through the international auction houses.

Louis Zweers



1 (above): German painter König with a young Balinese model. He worked with various models. ca. 1950. B/W photo. National Archive.

2 (right): Arthur Jo König, *Sitting Balinese Girl*. Bali, July 1952. Watercolour and gouache, 38 x 32 cm. In original frame. Signed and dated Art. Jo König 7.52. Author's collection.

DUTCH ARTIST, WILLEM GERARD HOFKER (1902-1981), was also found painting in pre-war Bali; he too painted lovely barely-dressed Balinese women. His fellow countryman, Rudolf Bonnet (1895-1978) produced large drawings, mostly character portraits, in a style resembling Jan Toorop. Walter Spies (1895-1942), a German artist who had moved permanently to Bali in 1925, became known for his mystical and exotic representations of Balinese landscapes. It is clear that the European painters were mainly fascinated by the young Balinese beauties, who would pose candidly, and normally bare from the waist up. But other facets of the island were also appreciated for their beauty, and artists were inspired by tropical landscapes, sawas (rice fields), temples, village scenes and dancers. The Western image of Bali was dominated by the idealisation of its women, landscape and exotic nature.

#### Arie Smit and Ubud

I visited the Neka Art Museum in the village Ubud, which is a bubbling hub of Balinese art and culture. In one of the rooms I admired the oil paintings by the Dutch painter Arie Smit (b.1916). He had moved to Indonesia in 1938 as a soldier in the Dutch colonial army, for which he was deployed to the topographical service. During the Japanese occupation he was forced to labour on the notorious Burma railway, also known as the 'Railway of Death'. He later decided to become an Indonesian citizen, which meant that when the Dutch (including Dutch-Indonesians) left Indonesia after independence (at least 300.000 between 1946-1968), he was allowed to stay. The guard at the museum proudly stated about Smit, "He was the best".

Down the road from the museum I came to the gate of the villa 'Saing', which is surrounded by a high wall. A Balinese young boy, with a batik scarf wrapped around his head, opened the door for me. I asked whether Arie Smit was home. Without so much of a word, but with a nod of the head, the boy led me through the spacious inner courtyard, copiously filled with well-nurtured tropical trees, plants and flowers. Through an arch in one of the plastered walls surrounding the courtyard we came to a squat building, upon which the boy called out excitedly that a visitor from Holland had arrived. I approached the old artist, standing in his full creative glory, and after apologising for my unannounced visit I told him I was interested in knowing more about the tragic life of the German artist Arthur Johann (Jo) König (1910-1953), who had lived and worked on Bali. Smit took a look at a number of old photographs of the artist that I had brought with me and said, "I knew him personally. He was a quiet man and lived outside Ubud".<sup>1</sup>



**Arthur Johann (Jo) König**

The young German left to Java in the early 1930s; he had completed his degree at the art academies of Dresden and Leipzig. He was only planning on staying for a few months, yet he never again left the tropics. König, already a talented painter, went to work as a draughtsman at the printer De Unie, in the centre of Batavia (present-day Jakarta).

In October 1937 there was an exhibition of his oil paintings, depicting tropical landscapes and graceful young women, at the Hotel des Indes in Batavia. An art critic from the Dutch East Indies newspaper *De Javabode*, was full of praise for his work. A second showing of his work took place during an exhibition in 1939, organised by the Bataviasche Kunstkring.<sup>2</sup> His career was then interrupted by the Second World War.

When the German army invaded the Netherlands in 1940, all Germans in the Dutch East Indies were confined to internment camps. König was interned in northern Sumatra. Later, due to the encroaching threat of the Japanese forces, all prisoners were moved to British-India. The Brits took a much milder approach to internship, and eventually the Indian Maharaja of Bundi in Rajasthan argued for the release of the talented artist; König went on to produce a number of enormous murals for the Maharaja's palace. Afterwards he was free to roam British-India as he pleased; which he gladly did, whilst sketching exotic landscapes and scenes of rural life.

After the war König eagerly returned to the Indonesian archipelago, which had always fascinated him tremendously. In 1945 he moved back to the badly damaged and unsettled Batavia, where he met a young Dutch woman, whom he married shortly thereafter. He became the head of the advertising firm, *Unie Studios*, and in October 1947 his oil paintings were once again on display at the Hotel des Indes. The Dutch East Indies daily newspaper, *Het Dagblad*, praised his work with the words "Arthur Jo König is a man of impeccable taste with a distinct gift for expressing harmony, in both form and in colour".<sup>3</sup>

After the first of the *politieonele acties* in August 1947 (Dutch military action during the Indonesian National Revolution, 1945-1949), the Dutch-German couple established a new home in the cool highlands of the artists' village Ubud, on Bali. Ubud was considered to be the painters' paradise, and life was simple and cheap. König built himself a small studio on stilts and with a thatched roof; he had beautiful views of endless rice fields and the 3000-metre elevated volcano Gunung Agung standing proud on the horizon.

Every evening, in the nearby village of Pliatan, young girls danced to the light of oil lamps and to the beautifully smooth music of the gamelan ensemble. The married couple would walk home after the performances, through the dark woods, with no sounds other than the squeals of the monkeys in the background. König's paintings of exotic young women, gamelan musicians and local processions, displayed the island as a harmonious society. However, the image was rather deceiving; all the while the Balinese guerrillas continued their struggle against the Dutch military.

After the Dutch conceded independence for Indonesia in 1949, the chaos nevertheless endured. Armed youths terrorised the island; their attacks were mostly politically motivated. Their victims included Balinese village heads, Chinese businessmen, and former soldiers of the Dutch colonial army. Most Dutch people left, and took their families with them. Dutch schools and society buildings were abandoned. The remaining Europeans, including teachers, doctors, missionaries and representatives of KPM (the Dutch shipping company), were left alone, for the meantime.

König continued his work, but the Indonesian Nationalists made it known to all that the Balinese women were no longer to be painted by European artists showing their bare breasts. Tourists arriving at Denpasar airport were similarly warned that it was illegal to take any photos of half naked Balinese women. This would be judged as an insult to the Balinese women and the Indonesian postcolonial nation. This prohibition was later withdrawn again.<sup>4</sup>

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Shock waves rippled through the small European community still living on Bali in 1951, when Belgian artist Jean Le Mayeur was attacked in his home in Sanur. His Balinese wife Ni Pollock had managed to warn the staff, and together they were able to chase away the intruders. Le Mayeur was left with a serious knife wound to his shoulder. And then in 1953, König's wife took their daughter to see a doctor on Java; they were gone for a few days. Upon their return she found her husband's dead body. The house and everything in it had been completely destroyed, yet nothing had been taken. This had not been a common robbery-homicide.



3 (right): Arthur Jo König, Portrait of young Balinese woman. Bali, ca. 1950. Oil paint, with small cracks. Signed Arth. Jo König. Collection of President Sukarno.

4 (below): Arthur Jo König, Woman in sunlit street. Bali, December 1947. Oil on canvas, 52 x 42 cm. Signed and dated A. Jo König 12.47. Author's collection.



As we sit in his garden, Arie Smit concluded his story, "König was having an affair with his young Balinese model. His Dutch wife was aware of this". Rumours had it, that the white married artist had been killed by the infuriated family of his young and beautiful, Balinese model and lover. The case has never been solved. From the shade of the trees near his studio, we look out over the dense thicket of the valley, and we continue for some time to talk about Bali's history and culture. Then Smit says, in a near whisper, "That German artist lived too short a life. He left just a small oeuvre. I would leave the König-case be".<sup>5</sup>

The Neka Art Museum doesn't have any pieces of work by König, and only very occasionally does one of his pieces come up for auction. Sukarno's collection contains one portrait by König, of a young Balinese woman; its paint is badly distressed. Could this be his Balinese mistress?

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**Notes**

- 1 Conversation between author and artist Arie Smit, in Ubud, Bali, 13 October 2003. For more information about this artist: Spruit, R. 1995. *Artists on Bali*, Amsterdam/Kuala Lumpur: The Pepin Press, 108-127
- 2 *Javabode*, 5 October 1937, 2; *De Ochtend Post*, 7 October 1937.
- 3 *Het Dagblad*, October 1947; *Oriëntatie*, 22 November 1947 (2), 44.
- 4 Last, J. 1955. *Bali in de kentering*, Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 45-46.
- 5 For more information about Jo König: Haks, L. & G. Maris. 1995. *Lexicon of foreign artists who visualized Indonesia*. Utrecht: Uitgever Bestebreurtje, 152 and 504; Van Donk, R. 1996. *Paradise Framed, A guide to Indonesian paintings, drawings, water-colors, lithographs and woodcut*, 123-124; Zweers, L. 1998. *Indië voorbij*. Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 110-117.