

Sukarno's art collection

Sukarno, the first President of the Republic of Indonesia, was an art connoisseur and lover. Following the proclamation of the Republic of Indonesia in August 1945, the President purchased art works on a large scale, either personally or via an intermediary. He bought works by Indonesian artists, and also European painters such as Rudolf Bonnet, Willem Hofker, Roland Strasser, Theo Meier and the aristocratic Belgian artist Adrien Jean Le Mayeur de Merprès, who had settled on Bali and who was also known as the 'Paul Gauguin of Bali'. He mostly painted half-naked dancers such as his Balinese wife Ni Pollok. The Dutchman Willem Hofker also painted charming bare-breasted Balinese women. Other favourite subjects for these painters included tropical landscapes, *sawas* (rice paddies), temples and village scenes: 'Beautiful Indies romance'. So, how did Sukarno's extensive art collection become established and what happened to it after his death in June 1970?

Louis Zweers¹



Bali

Sukarno had a country house in Tampaksiring, about ten kilometres from the artists' village Ubud, on Bali. Since the early 1950s he had maintained personal contact with a number of artists, including the Dutch painter Rudolf Bonnet, who lived and worked in Ubud for many years. Sukarno – according to Bonnet, with whom he had friendly relations – sometimes commissioned him to do paintings, such as *De rijstooft* [*The rice harvest*]. This prominent work, measuring two by one metres, would later hang in the dining room of his palace in Bogor (Buitenzorg). During a visit to Bonnet's atelier, Sukarno expressed an interest in a large canvas from 1952 with the Italian title *Famiglia d'Anticoli*. Bonnet was asking a reasonable amount for it. Sukarno tried to bargain but the artist would not budge. In the end, Sukarno bought the work, but the price he paid is unknown. Incidentally, Sukarno had stipulated that he should be the first to receive photographs of and precise information about Bonnet's completed paintings. Thus, almost all of the large pieces produced by Bonnet on Bali in the 1950s ended up in Sukarno's collection. Indeed, a total of 14 paintings by Bonnet were to be found in his art collection. However, in 1957, Bonnet refused to sell an oil painting of his permanent model to Sukarno. The artist wanted to keep this double portrait in his possession. He offered the president a work of another model in the same pose. But Sukarno rejected this. He sent an envoy to the painter with the task of acquiring the coveted portrait and, in the end, the sublime work *Dua orang gadis* [*Two young women*] was included in Sukarno's art collection.² (image 1) Allegedly, during another atelier visit, this time to the painter Antonio Blanco in Ubud, Sukarno made it clear he wanted a particular work. Blanco remarked, however, that it was not finished. When Sukarno returned some time later, he was told that the painting was still not ready. In this way, Blanco was able to keep the work out of the president's hands. But six other oil paintings by Blanco did find their way into Sukarno's art collection.

Cock fighting

From 1935 until 1945, the Austrian painter Roland Strasser lived in the village of Kintamani, situated on the slopes of the Batoer volcano on Bali. Strasser painted many dancers, but also tough-looking men and scenes of cock fighting, which was popular on Bali. There are a number of canvases in the Sukarno collection that depict cock fighting, such as a large oil painting of a Balinese man with a white fighting cock prominent in the image. (image 2)



The Dutch ex-KNIL (Royal Netherlands East Indies Army) major Henry Schmidt (who died in 1971) claimed that this work had come into Sukarno's possession unlawfully. After Indonesian independence, Schmidt left service and worked as an estate agent in Bandung. He owned the canvas with the fighting cock and, in 1950, wanted to sell it. The Indies painter Ernest Dezentjé, a good friend of Sukarno, mediated the transaction. He showed the painting to the president who wanted it very much. But they could not agree on a price. Schmidt remained firm and, a few days later, the canvas was returned to him unsold.

In December 1953 Schmidt was arrested. He was suspected of being an accomplice of captain Raymond Westerling who, in 1946/1947, had been responsible for horrific purges on South Celebes. After a failed coup by Westerling in January 1950 against the young Indonesian Republic, Schmidt was thought to have worked for the Dutch-Indies Guerrilla Organisation (NIGO) on West Java. Poncke Princen, Indies-deserter and subsequent fighter for human rights in Indonesia, states in his autobiography, *Een kwestie van kiezen [A Question of Choice]*, that these accusations were fabrications.³ But the remarkable book, *Villa Maarheeze*, about the Dutch Foreign Intelligence Service (IDB) again raises questions about his innocence regarding espionage.⁴ Schmidt was found guilty by the Indonesian courts and sentenced to 15 years in prison. Later, this sentence was reviewed and he was freed in 1959. He wrote about his years in captivity in the book *In de greep van Soekarno [In the grip of Sukarno]*.

In this book, Schmidt states that when he was arrested his painting *Balinese man met vechthaan [Balinese man with fighting cock]* was seized by the Bandung police and that, subsequently, the canvas was given to the president as a gift. Indeed, this painting, according to Schmidt, was included in the extensive catalogue of Sukarno's collection in 1956.⁵ However, all this remains uncertain, because Strasser had produced a number of almost identical oil paintings featuring a Balinese man with a fighting cock.

Exodus

Many of the European artists on Bali whose works were collected by Sukarno departed during the 1950s, when the political situation became increasingly difficult. The painter Rudolf Bonnet, prominent in Sukarno's collection, had to leave the country at the end of 1957 following the worsening conflict over New Guinea; he arrived back in the Netherlands disillusioned. He had previously been attacked by *rampokkers* (looters); his house was ransacked, but he remained unharmed, so his biographer Dr de Roever-Bonnet was prompted to tell me.⁶ The Belgian painter Le Mayer did not get off so lightly. He was attacked in his home at Sanur on South Bali and received a large stab wound to his shoulder.

In Sukarno's collection there is a portrait in oils, of a young Balinese woman; the paint is showing signs of cracking, and it is possible that this work was subsequently restored. This small painting was created by the German artist Arthur Jo König who, in the summer of 1947, went to live in the cool and elevated artists' village Ubud. This idyllic location inspired him and he fell under the spell of the mystical Balinese community. His paintings of young beauties, gamelan players and processions show Bali as a harmonious community, but this exotic image is misleading. The atmosphere on Bali changed as a result of the troubled political situation. A shock went through the small European community on Bali when König was killed in his home in Ubud in 1953. The majority of his Balinese paintings were destroyed or damaged.⁷

1. Rudolf Bonnet, *Dua orang gadis*, 1955. Oil on canvas, 129 x 84 cm, Collection of President Sukarno.
2. Roland Strasser, *Balinese man met vechthaan*, signed but undated. Oil on canvas, 102 x 83 cm, Collection of President Sukarno. (Kunstcollectie Sukarno, 1956, deel I, nr. 84)
3. Sukarno, *Portret van Indonesische vrouw Rini*, 1958. Oil on canvas, 70 x 89 cm, Collection of President Sukarno.
4. Vice-President Mohammad Hatta giving a press conference in Batavia on 19 October 1945. In the background a painting by Basuki Abdullah (1915-1992) can be seen: *'De kust van het eiland Flores'* (middle). This work was later included in the art collection of Sukarno. Image produced by Netherlands Indies Government Information Service (NIGIS); copyright NIMH (Nederlands Instituut voor Militaire Historie [Dutch Institute of Military History]).



Luxury albums

Sukarno was proud of his art collection, which suggests a preference for nationalistic, romantic paintings, giving an idealised image of the Indonesian revolution, the landscape and women. The painting collection of ex-president Sukarno is sometimes spoken of rather facetiously as it is, apparently, the largest collection of naked women in Southeast Asia. In the Calvinist Netherlands of the 1950s, Sukarno's artistic preference was almost considered pornographic. But similar paintings by the same artists would later collect impressive sums in the auction houses of Sotheby's and Christie's in Amsterdam, London and Singapore.

In 1964 five large-size luxury volumes with the title *Paintings and statues from the collection of President Sukarno of the Republic of Indonesia* were published. The first four volumes each contain one hundred colour reproductions of paintings, half of which were by the European artists who had worked for many years on the island of Bali. The last volume concerns his collection of sculptures and porcelain; the curator of this collection was the Chinese-Indonesian artist Lee Man Fong, advisor to and official painter at the presidential court. The 5 volumes are a significant documentation of Sukarno's art treasures. Previously, in 1956, two major books had also been published and three years later another two volumes appeared relating to his paintings, edited by the Indonesian painter Dullah.

The Indonesian paintings in Sukarno's collection, for the most part, originate from three 'court painters': Basuki Abdullah, Dullah and Lee Man Fong. They champion the figurative, romantic style. But there are also works by other modern Indonesian painters, such as Sudjojono, who captured heroic scenes from independence on canvas. For Sukarno, his art collection was of national importance, and he personally gave Western diplomats and journalists tours of his paintings. The Dutch-American reporter Sam Waagenaar, who was in Indonesia in 1957, visited Sukarno in his palace in Jakarta. Waagenaar told me just before his death in 1997: "It was relaxed conversation in Dutch. Sukarno even showed me his private collection of paintings. He ended the conversation with the confidential remark that he very much wanted to go to the Netherlands to meet the Queen."⁸

During another audience, Sukarno asked the journalist Hans Beynon if perhaps he could purchase an artwork by his uncle, the landscape and portrait painter Jan Daniël Beynon, who had an atelier on the Molenvliet in Batavia at the end of the nineteenth century. Beynon responded that these works were not for sale.⁹

Amateur painter

Sukarno not only collected paintings, but was also a talented amateur painter of realistic portraits. Thus, the volumes *'Paintings and statues ...'* (mentioned above) also reproduced his oil painting of the Indonesian woman *Rini* from 1958. (image 3) According to Sukmawati Sukarnoputri, the youngest daughter of the former-President, this work was never passed on to the family.¹⁰

In February 1965, Sukarno told the *Newsweek* correspondent Bernard Krisher: "I have an artist's easel and palette and paints ready and if I do not like something in one of my purchased paintings, then I improve it a little." Krisher called this admission the ultimate proof of his vanity.¹¹

After Suharto seized power in 1965 the majority of Sukarno's paintings remained hanging in the palace at Bogor. In his book, *Een Mors Huis* [lit: A Dead House], Joop van den Berg says: "The dozens of paintings in the large rooms formed a sort of erotic Panorama Mesdag. Women everywhere, wherever you looked.



Incidentally, President Suharto, a devout Muslim, had had the most offensive canvasses removed.¹²

Sukarno had great plans for his art collection. In 1965 he told his biographer, the American journalist Cindy Adams, that he would leave his paintings to the Indonesian people, and they were to be housed in a yet to be established National Museum. That museum never came to fruition. A number of paintings from Sukarno's collection still hang in the stately corridors, receiving rooms and the offices of the presidential palace in Jakarta. That is to say, the more neutral landscapes and portraits; the whereabouts of the more erotic paintings from his collection are unknown.

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Notes

- 1 This text is based on my article 'Een erotisch Panorama Mesdag, Sukarno's kunstverzameling', in *NRC Handelsblad, Cultural Supplement*, 15 October 1999, p.31. This is a reworked and translated version.
- 2 de Roever-Bonnet, H. 1991. *Rudolf Bonnet. Een zondagskind, zijn leven en zijn Werk*, Amsterdam: Picture Publishers, pp.61-62
- 3 van Feneman, J. 1995. *Poncke Princen. Een kwestie van kiezen*, Den Haag: Bzztoh, pp.161-162
- 4 de Graaff, B. & Wiebes, C. 1998. *Villa Maarheeze. De geschiedenis van de inlichtingendienst buitenland*, Den Haag: Sdu Uitgevers, pp.123-124
- 5 Schmidt, H. 1961. *In de greep van Soekarno*, Leiden: Sijthoff, pp.72-74; Giebels, H. 2001. *Sukarno. President. Een biografie 1950-1970*, Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, pp.94-95
- 6 Interview by author with Dr. H. de Roever-Bonnet about the biography of Rudolf Bonnet on 1 December 1998, in Amstelveen (NL).
- 7 See my article about Arthur Jo König 'Lost Paradise' in *The Newsletter* issue #61, Autumn 2012, pp.6-7
- 8 Interview by author with the Dutch-American journalist and photographer Sam Waagenaar on 11 February 1997, two months before his death, in the Rosa Spierhuis in Laren (NL).
- 9 Telephone call with the former *De Volkskrant* journalist, Hans Beynon, Amstelveen (NL), 23 October 1998.
- 10 Giebels, H. 1999. *Sukarno, Nederlandsch onderdaan. Een biografie 1901-1950*, Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, p.11
- 11 Krisher, B., 'Sukarno: Headman to a Nation', in *Newsweek*, 15 February 1965, p.29
- 12 van den Berg, J. 1991. *Een Mors Huis*, Schoorl: Conserve, pp.109-110