

I Gusti Nyoman Lempad

I Gusti Nyoman Lempad is a remarkable figure from the advent of what is now known as Modern Balinese Art. He lived a very long life. He was born in Bedulu in Central Bali around 1862 and he died in 1978 in Ubud, at the astonishing age of 116 years. During his lifetime, Bali changed from a feudal island ruled by 9 kings, to a small part of the Dutch colonial empire, to finally a small province of the Republic of Indonesia. Not only that, from a predominantly rural and agrarian island it changed into what is popularly called a resort, attracting millions of tourists and other visitors each year. Bali was lost to itself; an intricate web of myths, stories and downright lies increasingly came to change a once vibrant living culture into a living museum, all the while obscuring the real life and needs of a large part of its indigenous population. Although many Balinese reap the fruits of modern developments, it is astonishing that most Balinese, who do not live in paradisiacal conditions – what with poverty, unending traffic jams and horrendous pollution – have not loudly protested against this resort fantasy.

Reviewer: Dick van der Meij



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Lempad of Bali. The illuminating Line,

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THE ACCEPTED PICTURE is that when Bali found itself under Dutch colonial rule, the role of the ruling classes changed dramatically, causing a gradual decline in palace arts. In the late 1920s and 1930s Balinese traditional sacred and feudal art changed into tourist junk, but also into some of the most exciting pieces of painting art to come out of the vast Indonesian archipelago. Time and again three foreign painters are mentioned in connection with this important change: the Dutch painter Rudolf Bonnet, the Russian-born German painter Walter Spies and, in the later period, Arie Smit. Much has been written about these three in the recent past, each having been awarded virtual hagiographic works and by so doing turning them into the almost untouchable patrons of Balinese art.

So, where were the Balinese in all this? They were the makers of the paintings, but not necessarily the main beneficiaries of their own labors, especially now when early works make fortunes on the international art market. The painters were criticized for their lack of skill and knowledge of traditional, mainly European painting traditions and perspective (by Bonnet), adored fellow artists to be left to their own devices (Spies) or as painters to be just coached to do what they like best (Smit). One of the most extraordinary Balinese artists in this configuration is I Gusti Nyoman Lempad. He was initially a sculptor, who adorned Balinese temples in the Ubud area of Bali with the necessary gods, demons and story reliefs, and a carver of wooden masks and cremation sarcophagi. Later he also turned to painting with astonishing success. Foreigners liked his work because it was different, highly decorative and at times downright pornographic and thus naughty and liked for that reason as well. Another reason that he was admired is that he allowed his fantasy to run wild, and by doing so he was able to transform traditional ways of depiction into something completely novel.

Six international authors on Balinese art have been given the opportunity to write short introductory essays for the catalogue of Lempad's work: John Darling, Hedi Hinzler, Kaja McGowan, Soemantri Widagdo, Bruce Carpenter, and Adrian Vickers. If anything, they show that Balinese art is still a puzzle and that much scholarly work remains to be undertaken to do the paintings and Lempad's technique the honor they probably deserve. As it stands, like with so many works on Balinese art, the essays navigate between the anecdotic and the obscure, and many of them present the same information. The editing of the book has not paid tribute to the authors of the articles and that is a pity. However, since they only concern the first 70 of the 424 pages of the book this is not a serious problem. It is indeed the first time that so many of his paintings and drawings are presented in one volume and thus now available for scholarly exploration. The book's main interest lies undeniably in the catalogue part, which shows much more than paintings inspired by narrative. Many paintings depict scenes of daily life and thus give great insights.

As a traditional Balinese lower aristocrat he was versed in indigenous Balinese stories and in the Hindu epics of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, and he drew heavily on them for his pictorial art. The extent to which he used these stories can expertly be seen in the present book where the narrative paintings are discussed and the stories they depict explained.

It would be, as in many other cases as well, incorrect to think that Lempad made all his drawings and paintings on his own accord. From the book it becomes clear that many foreigners commissioned his work and, sometimes, even had their own ideas of what he should make. Helene Potjewijd ordered 25 drawings of stories as early as the 1930s, as did Margaret Mead in 1938. Spies ordered a series of drawings of the Balinese story Brayut – of the husband and wife with countless unruly sons and daughters – Christiaan Hooykaas and his wife commissioned drawings that illustrated folktales, which is interesting because it might mean that the artist himself was probably not



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The first *catalogue raisonné* of Balinese painting

Fig. 1 (top left): Garuda Devours the Tortoise and Elephant. Lois Bateson Collection. Ex-collection Bateson and Mead. Ink, cinnabar and gold leaf on paper, 35 x 26.5 cm, dated 1936, p. 125.

Fig. 2 (below left): Ni Bawang Decorated by Birds of the Forest. Vienna World Museum. Ex-collection Helene Potjewyd. Ink, cinnabar and gold leaf on paper, 28 x 21 cm, 1930s, p. 233.

Fig. 3 (top right): Kecak Dance. Ganesha Collection, USA. Ink, cinnabar and gold leaf on paper, 35 x 35 cm, 1930s, p. 404.

Fig. 4 (below right): Dancer Emerging from Trance. Dance Museum of Sweden, Stockholm. Ex-collection Rolf de Maré. Ink, cinnabar and gold leaf on paper, 28.9 x 37.5 cm, dated 1937, p. 384.



inclined to do so himself. The relationship between the Hindu epics and so-called 'folktales' has never been properly explored but textual relationships, or absence thereof, may in fact be reflected in narrative painting art as well. For example, illustrated palm leaf manuscripts almost invariably depict stories from the Hindu epics of the Mahabharata and Ramayana or texts directly based on them, rather than folktales. The difference between the depiction of the epic heroes, which is standardized throughout the arts, be they painting or sculpture, and the depiction of folktales characters, may be illuminating, especially since the latter tend towards standardization as well, but still offer the artist all the opportunities he needs to use his imagination.

Perhaps this juncture is the most interesting one. Not only was Lempad a painter who 'made to order' and who was thus inspired by foreign ideas of what to depict, he also had to find out how to do it. The astonishing difference in quality and craftsmanship between the makers of traditional sculpture and painting and those who started to make more naturalistic works of art is often overlooked in art history on the island. Perhaps by looking closely at how Lempad managed to bridge the gap, much may be learned from what really happened in the Balinese arts, in the 1930 up to now.

The book presents a 'catalogue raisonné', yet not all of Lempad's works are reproduced in the book. Balinese social dynamics have gotten in the way. More comprehensive works on Indonesian painters must be published, to ensure that the study of the Indonesian painting traditions and modern paintings are paid their dues. As it stands, with the increasing international attention for and sales of Indonesian painting art it would perhaps be an idea to move them from museums of ethnology to art museums, also in the West?

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