

The Evolution of Indonesian Art

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Visualize a society where spirituality and art form the cornerstones for the foundation of life. In Indonesia, evidence of spiritual art can be traced back to 1500 B.C, during which time such artifacts as beaded bracelets of stone, and intricately carved, wood sculptures were found. These very first artifacts, which are connected to afterlife worship mark the beginning of a rich history of Indonesian Art. Early Indonesian art combined spiritual expression with a respect for aesthetics. These two elements along with Hinduism provided the underlying basis for the entrance of Indonesian court art, around the 7th century A.D. The court artist produced art not only to please the gods, but also to glorify the status of the court rulers. Indonesian artist, Dewa Batu comments on the important elements of spiritual art found in the traditional court arts of Indonesia:

"Art is thought as expressed by the hands. The essentials are form and life. With masks, for instance, the soul must be in the eyes. It is very hard to accomplish this, and sometimes only one out of fifty masks will have a soul. Peace of mind is necessary for successful work." (Ramseyer, 14)

The power of spiritual expression as found in early Indonesian court art remained strong against the influence of foreign cultures and religions. By the beginning of the 17th century, the Dutch government gained a political hold on Indonesia. Although the court arts continued to employ the techniques of their ancestors, a new, more westernized art began to develop. The westernization of Indonesian art emerged in the early 18th century with a small group of artists that travelled abroad to study European realism. Through the 18th and 19th centuries, this original group of artists grew in size. They began integrating a variety of European art styles,

with their own individual expression of spirituality. Today, Indonesia illustrates a pluralistic art culture where both the traditional court arts and the modern arts of painting and sculpture are pursued in harmony. Although each art approaches the classical themes of spirituality from a different point of view, they both work towards a national Indonesian art in which the "soul" of the artist is prevalent. Gusti Putu Raka, who is the former director of the Art Center in Denpasar remarks on the synthesis of spirituality and aesthetics in Indonesian art:

"I consider everything, whether static or dynamic, to be art which distinguishes itself by good design and which is able to touch the hearts of men by expressing greatness, sublimity or sensitivity. In other words, for me art is those things that reveal a relationship between man and God. Seen from another perspective, art is the mirror of religious thought." (Ramseyer, 13)

In order to clearly understand the significance of spirituality in Indonesian contemporary art, the elements of early traditional Indonesian art must be addressed. As with many cultures, archaeological remains provide clues to the development of spiritual art in early Indonesia. The artistic roots of Indonesian Art can be traced back to the Neolithic Age, between 2500 and 1500 B.C., during which time a large emigration of people from Yunan or South China to Indonesia occurred. Woodworking is found to be a major art form during the Neolithic period as Frits Wagner, the author of Indonesia points out:

"...Indonesians of the Neolithic period must have been fairly skilled in the working of wood, as is shown by the finds of small *adzes* which can only have been employed for wood working of a more delicate kind." (Wagner, 15)

The Megalithic period (1500 B.C. - 500 B.C.), is marked by the building of Megalithic



Fig. 1

monuments in which the concept of an afterlife was upheld through worship and religious rituals. Remains of this period are found all over Indonesia. In Java, stone coffins can be found, decorated in relief with geometric patterns. Many of these coffins were carved in the shape of a boat, illustrating the belief that the dead souls travel by water to the afterlife, in a boat (see fig 1). In Bali, stone chairs carved for the spirits can be found at the edge of curbs, and garden walls.

At the beginning of the Bronze Age (500 B.C.), the Dong-son people, who emigrated to Indonesia from South China, brought with them decorative bronze drums. Used during funerary rites, these drums are highly ornamented with frogs, flying birds, or warriors which illustrate their animistic beliefs (Wagner, 1959).

Indonesia became very susceptible to outside religious and cultural influences at the onset of its trading years, c. 600 A.D. The development of Hinduism in Indonesia was a result of "a conscious import of Indian priests and monks... in the 7th century A.D." (Ramseyer, 37) These monks served as spiritual and administrative court advisors to local rulers. In this way, local rulers themselves became manifested in Siwa, their almighty god (see fig. 2). Many of the temples built to honor these rulers still stand in Indonesia today. Candi Loro Jonggrang, a Hindu temple in Central Java, represents a place called Mount Meru which in Indian mythology symbolizes the center of the universe and home to all gods (see fig. 3). The use of stone in the creation of these great temples signified the great strength and divine power of the gods.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

By the 8th century, the Indonesian royal courts became the center for Hindu ritual and art:

"The role of the courts in the continuity of Indonesian culture is most visible in the arts. The need for the ruler to impress his subjects with his might and magnificence, are outward signs of his royal capabilities and the prosperous state of his realm.." (Jessup, 137).

Within early Indonesian court art, the artists remained anonymous, concerned only with the religious expression surrounding Hinduism. This religious nationalism resulted from strict instruction by the court rulers in which the classical motifs used in decoration were taught.

The basic principles behind the Hindu religion revolve around the concept of the afterlife and ancestor worship. Indonesians believed and feared in the power of their ancestors to control the good and evil powers of the world. This belief, along with the importance of status among local rulers, provided the basis for creation of traditional art. Indonesians believed that they must appease and pay homage to their gods and ancestors through artistic offerings. Within Hinduism, man exists in a dualistic world of good and evil powers, female and male symbols:

"On one side there are the powers of fertility and life operating from above: the sun, considered male, the mountains and the upper courses of rivers, which fertilize the fields; from below, the receptive female earth, in which growth and decay meet, and the sea, which washes illness and death on to the coast." (Ramseyer, 95).

As an archipelago, Indonesia is made up of thousands of islands. This geographical fragmentation promoted a large variety of court arts. The daily routine of a traditional

Indonesian included a variety of spiritual art activities. Artistically designed offerings of food and flowers, were placed in the temples to worship the gods (see fig 4). From the moment of conception, the Indonesian was anointed with dance, music, and shadow puppet plays. This same Indonesian was buried as the gamelan orchestra played in the background. Women danced in brightly colored and ornamented dress as the local priest performed sacrificial rites (see fig. 5). The traditional dress for women participating in court dances often included the elaborate dance headdresses of gold and diamonds. Many court dances performed throughout Indonesia during the 8th and 9th century utilized masks, as in the *topeng* dances (see fig. 6). During these dances, the masks "provided anonymity so that the performer became a more believable, less individual vessel for the personification of an ancestor, a god or a demon." (Jessup, 164)

The 9th Century A.D. denotes a turning point in Indonesian Art when the *wayang kulit* or shadow play puppet is introduced as a powerful art form. During the shadow play puppet show, each leather puppet and its shadow has a role to play in developing a period of religious meditation for the viewers. The puppet figure is called a *gunungan* symbolizing a volcanic mountain where all the elements of life, death, and rebirth exist (see fig. 7). The gamelan orchestra, made up of bamboo and percussion instruments provided accompaniment for the puppet show (see fig. 8). The *wayang* is one of the most powerful symbols in all of Indonesian art, and can be seen represented in a variety of traditional art forms including dance, music and the visual arts. The significance of the wayang puppets is evident in the work of many contemporary artists who still employ mysticism and meditation. The shadow puppet play is one component of classical Indonesian art which remained constant throughout numerous religious



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

and political changes.

Between the 10th and 15th centuries, the effects of commerce were felt as the Hindu religion was challenged with the entrance of a new religion, Islam. The traditional foundation for art in Indonesia was unshaken by the commencement of Islam, although its effects are evident in the adherence to certain civil and religious laws.

By the end of the 17th century, the westernization of Indonesian art played a vital part in the development of numerous contemporary Indonesian art revolutions. During the early 1700's, the inception of Dutch rule and European influence had a powerful impact on the Indonesian art. Some of the changes which took place as a result of Dutch rule were not all positive. For example, the concept of currency alone changed Indonesia art, as the community artist was forced to consider what the foreigner demanded rather than what his or her own religion demanded. The production of intricate handcrafts decreased somewhat as the inexpensive European goods became available to the Indonesian.

However, even with the onslaught of Dutch rule, many courts were able to maintain their status. Because the traditional court arts were so deeply rooted in the spirits of the Indonesian people, the production of traditional court arts continued to remain strong well into the 20th century. For example, weaving is still produced in honor of the traditional high courts. The process of weaving itself appears rich in Hindu beliefs, combining the female and male roles, along with symbols of creation:

"The significance of weaving, an art representing the female portion in Indonesian clan symbols, is related to the crossing of the threads of the warp by the weft to make the fabric of the cosmos. The colors are also symbolic, the brown of earth and the blue of heaven being placed in the white of the air. The female act of weaving received its male complement in the process of dyeing, usually done by men in secret rituals where outsiders were forbidden." (Jessup, 144)

Many contemporary weavings, made of silk threads, are associated with the princes of the court (see fig. 9). Elaborate swords of gold and jewelry produced in contemporary Indonesia also revolve around the rituals of the court. For example, when guests are received at the courts for a marriage, they are treated to edible delicacies prepared in front of them. One ritual includes the serving of *sirih*, made of nuts wrapped in a betel vine. *Sirih*, once it is chewed, produces a mild narcotic effect and "its symbolism is said to encompass sexuality." The ingredients of *sirih* are often presented in exquisite gold bowls covered with diamonds (see fig. 10).

While the court arts survived the political and social changes of the new Dutch rule, the onset of modern Indonesian art occurred under this European influence, c. 1700. In traditional Indonesia, the process of painting was utilized only in the decoration of the *wayang* puppets, masks, batik, and in illustrations. However, by the 1700's, the process of painting began to receive new attention. At this time, with the influence of Dutch realism, some Indonesian artists decided to study painting abroad at art schools and then return home in order to instruct others (Geslton, 96). One artist in particular, Raden Saleh, illustrates the synthesis of European realism with traditional Indonesian themes:

"Raden Saleh trained within a strong colonial tradition...In the painting *Between Life and Death*, the theme of a bull fighting several tigers, he seemed to have

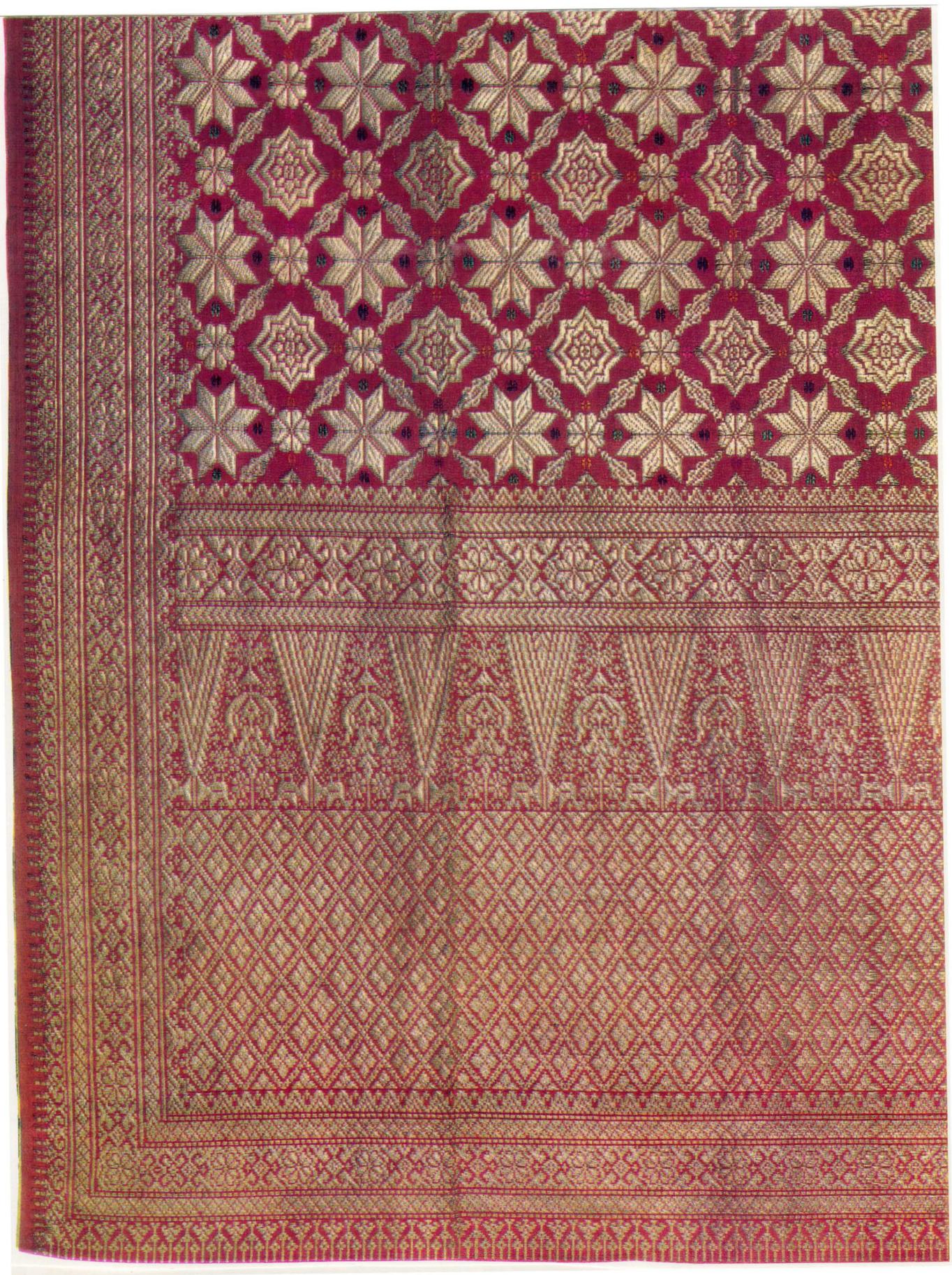


Fig. 9



Fig. 10

worked on the idea of gunung (like a mountain, the centerpiece of shadow puppet theater) by portraying the bull as representing the good such as it appears in wayang (puppet) stories." (Fischer,44)

Artists like Saleh benefitted from promotions by the Dutch government in which "the first modern art exhibitions in Indonesia were held between 1916 and 1924." As this new sect of artists became more interested in their own individualized expression, they lost their anonymity and began to gain recognition. This new order of artists combined a respect for classical religion and aesthetic discipline combined with individual expression.

During World War II, 1942-45, Indonesia remained under Japanese control. During this time, the influence of Japanese art is found in the work of the Indonesian artist Affandi. He utilized fluid watercolor brushstrokes to produce expressive portraits such as the "Bali Flutist" (see fig. 11). Claire Holt comments on the "lack of greater Japanese influence" which may be explained by:

"the probability that the Japanese painters who accompanied the occupation forces to supervise its pictorial propaganda program had already been affected by Western ideas at the time. They did not carry the traditional Japanese art styles to Indonesia" (Holt, 199).

By 1945, after the Japanese occupation in World War II, Indonesia gained its independence under the democratic rule of president Sukarno. At this time, many artists displayed their own form of nationalism by reaching out to their Indonesian communities:

"Whenever possible, our artists' association, which has twenty members, places its



Fig. 12

creative energy at the disposal of the whole village. Thus twenty-five days before cremation, we begin to work on a tower or a bull. One of us makes the head, another the feet, and a third something else again. During this time, we stop doing our own work altogether" (Ramseyer, 15).

One of the most profound transformations within contemporary Indonesian art came as a result of these nationalistic views. In 1945, the establishment of the *persagi*, a group of artists lead by a well-known artist, Soedjojono, were determined to form a new movement in Indonesian art, later known as the *Sanggar* period, 1945-50. This new movement rejoiced in national spirit and concerned itself with the contemporary issues of political freedom. During the *Sanggar* period, the *persagi* were influenced by the works of Van Gogh, Cezanne, Gauguin, and Picasso **see fig. 12**). It is intriguing that these very artists were all heavily influenced by eastern religion and ideals. Followers of the *persagi*, although influenced by the European Expressionists, painted with their own individualistic styles, depicting the people of Indonesia in a realistic manner.

The development of a national art education system contributed to Indonesian nationalism as well as providing aesthetics standards for art students to learn by. Although 20th century Indonesian art schools provide their own brand of art instruction, they each maintain the importance of studying classical Indonesian art:

"The opening in 1950 of the Jogjakarta Academy of Fine Arts with departments of painting, sculpture, industrial art, graphic art, art education and so on, marked the most important step in the advancement of modern Indonesian art and in the further development of the handcrafts" (Bodrogi,106).

From the establishment of art institutes in Indonesia came the development of two major schools

the Yogyakarta School was concerned with Expressionism, Realism, and Surrealism. The Bandung School received critical review in its first exhibition in 1945. One article in particular, titled "*Bandung is the Slave of the Western Laboratory*," addressed the lack of "Indonesian Soul" in the works of students graduating from Bandung. However, it is evident in the work of these students that they reflected not only upon western teachings, but also upon their own cultural and religious background. For example, in the work of *Sudarsono*, a strong connection to his traditional roots is felt (see fig. 13). His description of the word "beauty" follows:

"...I will quote an old Javanese maxim 'Beauty in ethics and aesthetics serves the good of the world.' Art is beauty for me in the ethical and aesthetic sense; it serves the creation of good art and not destruction, but as creation. That is why, for example, I do not accept some trends in contemporary art which aim at destruction. In spite of all, I am a traditionalist..." (Spanjaard,60).

Soedjono continues his art leadership in alignment with the "Peoples Art Institution," as the promoter of a "social realism." (see fig. 14) This period marks the entrance of the Communist party into Indonesia until 1965 when other painting styles, such as Surrealism and Expressionism, became popular. Indonesian Surrealism reflects a spiritual connection to mysticism (see fig. 15).

In the 1970's, several new political and cultural trends occurred. First, the emergence of Islamic art promoted yet another movement which is centered around the exploration and expression of each artists individual Islamic roots (see fig. 16). The establishment of a "post-Communist government" played a role in the financial neglect of the contemporary arts while continuing to support the traditional arts. The Indonesian New Art Movement provided exposure



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



PLATE 3: Ivan Sagito, *World and Wayang or World and Mask (Manusia dan Wayang atau Manusia dan Topeng)*, 1989, oil on canvas, 100 × 140 cm.



PLATE 4: Ivan Sagito, *Imagining within a Dialogue and Stillness II*, 1988, oil on canvas, 72 × 90 cm.

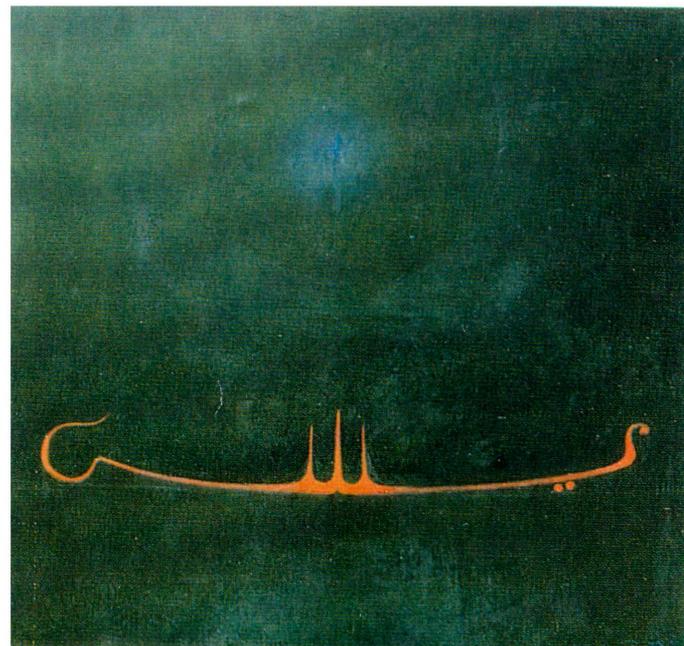


Fig. 16

for several new mediums including fiber art (Gelston, 1991). Although weaving holds a rich tradition in Indonesian art, it has evolved into its own art utilizing traditional textile techniques.

Sculpture moved into the 20th century with a new look as many Indonesian artists continued to explore religious themes while addressing aesthetic issues (see fig. 17).

In the last ten years, the modern art movement of Indonesia, much like western art of the last ten years, radiates an atmosphere of pluralism as each artist develops his or her own unique style while paying reverence to classical art. Nyoman Mandra is a well-known contemporary artist who feels compelled to work primarily in a traditional vein, using the Balinese religious themes as the basis for his work:

"The paintings, done on cloth canvases, use natural pigments made from plants, roots, bricks. The only modern elements used in the paintings are brushes and Chinese black ink." (Fischer, 49)

In his town of *Sangging*, the process of painting is completed using traditional methods, involving the entire family. Each family member holds a separate responsibility; one may wash the canvas, while another mixes the paints, and yet another might draw the initial sketch, while Mandra actually completes the painting (Fischer, 1990).

By 1990, tourism had become the major industry in Indonesia. The natives of Indonesia have a love-hate relationship with tourists. Tourism generates some financial stability for the economy. However, there are some Indonesians that fear the "the negative impact that the

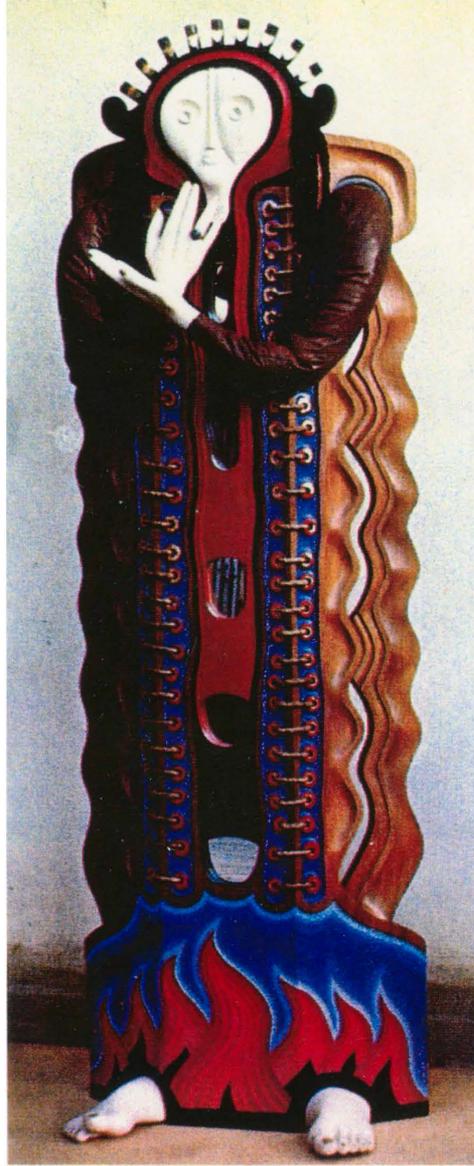


Fig. 17

anticipated tourist boom would have on the fragile balance of Indonesian society" (Wallis,90). In the last two years, Indonesia embarked on a major effort to increase national spirit while continuing to build the tourism market. This effort was part of a campaign called "The Year of Indonesia, 1990-91," which focused on primitive Indonesian art. The "Sculpture of Indonesia" toured the United States exhibiting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This collection is comprised of traditional objects including stone statues, architectural forms meant to exist as part of the temples, and bronze ceremonial objects. Some art historians believe that primitive Indonesian art will "in the not too distant future, take its deserved place alongside all the other types of primitive art and that, finally, it will receive the acclaim, the attention, and the respect it so richly deserves" (Hersey, 103). In 1990, the "Festival of Indonesia" promoted the exhibition of "Modern Indonesian Art: Three Generations of Tradition and Change, 1945 - 1990" at several sites within the United States, including Washington, California, Texas and Hawaii. This exhibition, and others smaller in scale, have opened the pathways for Indonesia to become recognized among it's peers as a viable contributor to the modern art world. The positive exposure received from this exhibition may continue to promote harmony between the traditional and contemporary arts of Indonesia. Due to this increased publicity, collectors of primitive and contemporary art are showing renewed interest in Indonesian art. These "nationalistic promotions..present an opportunity for nations to circulate their treasures in a move towards business developments" (Wallis,90). In a world where competing militaries and economies have reigned, it is heartening to watch the importance of culturalism increase.

In modern Indonesia, spirituality is prevalent in both the traditional court artists' work as

well as the contemporary artist. As a result of recent travelling exhibitions, the fullness of Indonesian art has become evident. The spirituality which is found in traditional art remains a vital part of contemporary art in Indonesia. As Umar Kayam of Modern Indonesian Art states:

"It is not so much a difference between rural art and urban art. It is the difference in the position that the artist takes towards his outer world and inner world. It is the difference of how far and how adventurously one artist travels in his personal and cultural journeys" (Fischer, 53).

20th Century Indonesian Art illustrates the marriage of heterogeneous cultures, religions and art forms, yet still remains largely spiritual in content. "Present-day Indonesian modern art demonstrates that local characteristics, indigenous traditions and the outside world of abstraction and science are all valid attributes of both national and international contemporary art." (Supangkat, 162).

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