

Balinese Wayang Art



Balinese Wayang or Kamasan paintings take their roots from the Wayang shadow puppet theater which may be traced back over 1000 years to the Indian traders who settled in Indonesia bringing with them their culture and Hindu religion.

These paintings, originally the work of artisan from the Javanese Majapahit Empire, tell stories from the sacred Hindu scriptures, the Ramayana and Mahabharata epics, along with other Javanese folk or Panji tales. This style of painting expanded into Bali late in the 13th century from the East Java and from the 16th - 20th centuries, the village of Kamasan, Klungkung (East Bali), was the center of classical Balinese art.

From a foreigners perspective what is immediately apparent when observing Wayang paintings is the completely different notion of space within the compositions. Western paintings are generally concentrated on one central focal subject and normally the theme may be grasped right away. The surface of the canvas of the Wayang painting is full with visual information to the extent that nothing stands out, and the works are strictly 2 dimensional, without any depth of field.

On closer inspection the painting reveals tight, generalized, often repetitive patterning and these combinations of graphic patterns and sub patterns are distributed all across the paintings surface leaving little or no blank surfaces. There are some general rules that control the depiction of forms, for example there are three or four types of eyes, five or six different postures and headdresses. The position of the hands, for example, indicates question and answer; command and obedience. One characteristic in the representation of figures that is consistent, they are always displayed on a three quarter side profile with both the eyes being visible.

The coloring is limited to available natural dyes: red, ochre, black, etc. The social status and moral stance of each figure depicted are clearly determined by the color used to paint them: the noble characters are white, pinkish-beige and light ochre; the rough and demonic characters are red, dark brown, hairy, and with big round eyes.

Generally there are 3 levels within the composition of these paintings. The upper level is the realm of the Gods and the benevolent deity spirits, the middle level occupied by kings and the aristocracy, and the lower third belongs to humans and demonic manifestations.

The original manner of creating these works onto cloth wall hangings, flags, paper, canvas and wooden panels, used in temples, palaces and the houses of the aristocracy was by a collective of artists. A few artists would sketch the composition, others would fill in the colors, and different artists would finish the work with a graphic outline all forms in black Chinese ink. Therefore these works were never signed by an individual artist and considered, along with music and performance as a collective expression of communal values and gratitude from the community to the Gods.

Wayang paintings are religious and folk narratives with high moral standards and serve with the function of expressing honorable human virtues to society with the intent to encourage peace and harmony.