

# Balinese Women and Art?

Let's consider some stereotypes of Balinese women.

Images of young Balinese woman (circa 1930's) clad in sarongs, exposing naked breasts reached Europe at a time when knowledge of this small tropical isle in remote East Indies was practically non-existent. The women's casual mannerisms along with the alluring breasts were misconceived, suggesting a culture of liberal sexual morality. The Balinese regard the breast as a symbol of fertility and of the abundance of Ibu Pertiwi (mother earth).

The Balinese woman is industrious, either at home caring for the family, in the village attending to chores and customs, or working in the fields. Spare a thought for the small armies of women who lug enormous quantities of materials upon their heads all day, from the roads to the many construction sites around Bali.

Women spend countless hours meticulously creating the Balinese Hindu offerings. Their fingers delicately weave flowers and leaves into ubiquitous ceremonial masterpieces.

The most exploited image of Balinese femininity, immortalized by the tourism juggernaut is that of the beautiful young lady in magnificent traditional costumes, poised gracefully while dancing.

The famous traditional expressions of Balinese painting and sculpture are by and large patriarchal. There are, however many talented female Balinese artists who complete their academic art training. Yet rarely does one continue on to become a successful artist, much less one with an international profile. Ni Nyoman Sani (b. Sanur 1975) has achieved this distinction.

Sani had to prove she had the talent and dedication to succeed and then eventually she gained the trust and confidence of her parents. She now raises two children along with devoting time to her cultural duties and career. Sani is a gifted painter, photographer and fashion designer and her expressions reflect the sovereignty and liberation of women.

The Seniwati Gallery of Art is women's only collective established 1991 in reaction to the invisibility of women artists in the galleries and museums of Bali. A long time member, Sani has recently become the new director and is a driving force behind Seniwati.

*Women of Two Continents*, 1993 by Cokorda Isteri Mas Astiti is an icon of contemporary art by Balinese woman. In the paintings foreground - a beach scene - she depicts Balinese women in traditional costumes holding offerings, while in the background three foreign women, two dressed in bikinis and one taking a photograph observe. This is a remarkable composition of contrasts and cross-cultural dialogue.

Indonesia's most important female artist was the petite Balinese painter Ni Gusti Ayu Kadek Murniasih (1966-2006). Murni rose from the life as a child of a farmer, poor and uneducated to the ranks of artistic distinction. Her father sexually abused her at the age of nine.

Murni's compositions often explored gender politics in her minimalist, naïve figurative style with powerful coloration. A dedicated member of Seniwati, her first solo exhibition was held at the Seniwati Gallery in 1995. Via the courage to confront her darkest emotions Murni's intuition was instrumental in forging new thematic grounds in Balinese art.

A notable work by Murni depicts a woman holding aloft a huge dripping penis. Her unique art was derived from a nurturing source that initiated her healing process while also seeking to set her free.

Balinese tradition encourages figurative expressions of naked and sexual content. According to Hindu cultural practices artworks are in no way meant to be offensive, rather their intent is to educate and communicate about the essence of life and existence.