

Batuan's Living Treasures

Of all the creative expressions a culture produces art, via its rational structures and codes offers unique opportunities to bridge cross-cultural divides. It becomes a means of connectivity between people who cannot yet communicate by the spoken or written word.

One of world's most recognizable art forms belongs to Indonesia – Balinese modern traditional art. How this style came about may be traced back to early last century and the revolutionary impact of globalization.

Balinese Wayang or Classical paintings had developed over hundreds of years of royal patronage until 1908 when the Dutch colonialists exerted rule over the island, marking the end of the Balinese kingdoms with their aesthetic displays of ritual power.

In the mid-1930's Balinese art was to be rejuvenated due to the interaction between local and foreign artists. The most important foreign figures were Walter Spies and Rudolf Bonnet who helped the Balinese artists adopt their existing art forms into new formats that would be more accessible to the increasing number of tourists visiting the island.

The phenomenal creativity that followed forever altered the dynamics of Balinese art. During this period three "Schools" of art came to the fore – the Ubud, Sanur and Batuan Schools.

The most celebrated style of this new art - Balinese modern traditional art is from Batuan, a cluster of villages in central Gianyar. Batuan paintings can be found in museums and private collections throughout the world.

It was the foreign artists who requested that the locals depict scenes from daily life and not from their spiritual and mythological traditions. Paintings went from sacred communally made images to personal visions to be sold and taken out of Bali.

What began some eighty years ago was in some ways as radical and tradition breaking as the major avant-garde art movements of the 20th century Western art. Batuan paintings are a window into who the Balinese are and how they see the world.

Post WWII and the decline in tourism witnessed an ebb in Balinese painting. In the 1970's began the revival. Nowadays a visitor to Bali may easily become anesthetized by the enormous quantities of commercial art lining the streets, shops and galleries. To acquire knowledge one must visit the prominent art museums to help identify and decipher some of the icons of Balinese art.

Concurrently on exhibition are two exhibitions highlighting the finest examples of Batuan paintings. The Kebiar Seni XIV Modern Traditional Balinese Painting exhibition at Museum Puri Lukisan, Ubud , 3 August – 30 September and The World Harmony – I Wayan Bendi at Rudana Museum Peliatan, Ubud , 3 August – 3 September.

Kebiar Seni XIV features the recent works by 46 artists of the Baturulangan collective, male and female ranging in age from 16 to 73 years. While some of the artists stick to convention others, notably Made Griyawan, Ketut Sadia and Ni Wayan Merti are more contemporary, brilliantly depicting the changing world.

Wayan Bendi is the maestro of the Batuan miniaturist style of painting. His imaginative compositions are highly sophisticated with universal narratives that emphasize his technical mastery and sense humor.

In recent years there has been revitalization in Batuan. The formation of the Baturulangan artist's collective to stimulate future development along with the release of the landmark book, *Inventing Art – The Paintings of Batuan Bali*. American author, illustrator and ex Batuan resident Bruce Granquist ventures beyond meticulous appraisal to communicate from an artist's perspective.

In the midst of modernity Balinese culture is on the decline. It is reassuring to know, however that there are people dedicated to keeping traditions alive.