

## Soemantri Widagdo

Some of the first foreign tourists to arrive in Ubud in the 1930's were intellectuals - writers and artists. The artists were especially captured by the quality of the light adorning the rich scenery, and the abundance of exotic subject matter - cultural icons and the gracious Balinese. It was the timely meeting of western techniques and ideas with the local traditional art practices, however that merged to play an important historical and cultural role.

Balinese traditional art – painting and woodcarving - was revolutionized to feed a market for Balinese souvenirs for the growing tourist sector. In 1936 the King of Ubud, Tjokorda Gde Agung Sukawati with some senior local artists and two influential foreign artists formed the Pita Maha artists collective to over see the development of this new genre, dubbed Balinese modern traditional art. Local farmers became painters and localized “schools” of art evolved finding new and large national and international audiences, and promoting Bali on the global stage. The idea of Ubud’s first art museum was conceived then as well.

Museum Puri Lukisan (Palace of Paintings) was opened in the center of Ubud in 1956 and has since played a major role in the development of Balinese art, while being at the heart of enormous community of local artists. “I first visited Puri Lukisan in 1994,” says Soemantri Widagdo, “and became a devoted student and patron of Balinese art, returning to Ubud regularly ever since.” For the past decade Soemantri has volunteered his expertise to the museum as its Chief Curator, International Liaison and the Museum Development Officer. “During my art education I was blessed to meet and learn from many talented artists, including Ida Bagus Made Poleng (1915-1999), arguably the most famous Balinese painter of the 20th century. He taught me how to truly appreciate Balinese aesthetics, where harmony and balance are at the core. As they are central to the Balinese way of life.”

Understanding and appreciating the virtues of the Balinese Hindu narratives along with the aesthetic principals of Balinese art helped shape Soemantri’s philosophies and his gracious disposition towards life. “In our pursuit of happiness we have to become masters of a balancing act. Understanding that we are constantly shifting between two polarities, that of positive and negative, helps me to except my reality in any given moment, and to manage my expectations of life.” Dedicated to building community, via his commitment to Puri Lukisan, Soemantri’s museum experience has ventured into not-for-profit management, management and development, fund raising, exhibition design and catalogs, and art conservation. Numerous other accomplishments are worthy of mention, however, his contributions have helped position it from being the least, to the most visited museum in Ubud in 10 years.

“Illuminating Line: Master Drawings of I Gusti Nyoman Lempad”, the first-ever international retrospective exhibition of Bali’s most important traditional architect and artist in 2014 has been Soemantri’s most ambitious project to date. It featured the return of 70 drawings of the 1930’s-50’s period to the museum Lempad (1862-1978) helped design and build, and coincided with *Lempad of Bali*, a beautiful 400 plus page album, Soemantri co-authored. “Beginning in 2008, the project evolved like a detective story revealing many surprises and involving investigations into archives in museums and private collections all over the world. It was exhilarating and time-consuming to find surviving work across four continents,” he says.

“Lempad witnessed Bali’s history from pre- colonial times to the beginning of mass tourism, a period of more than 100 years. His work is still so modern that it carries important lessons about the future of Balinese art and the depth of its cultural roots. Almost all of his early drawings left Bali in the 1930’s and three generations of Balinese had yet to see them.” Soemantri believes Balinese art has yet to reach its full potential, especially on the international stage. The three aspects that combine to create an exceptional traditional Balinese artist, according to Soemantri are, “their knowledge of their tradition - the myths and narratives - their technical ability, and their personal expressive flair.”

Art is a people business, connecting and building relationships locally and internationally and has helped transform the once small village of Ubud into a thriving tourist mecca. The current (old paradigm) art business model however, has resulted in the artists and the buyers being disadvantaged, and the middleman being the major beneficiary. A future orientated, and strategic thinker, the evolution of the museum and gallery models is a subject that is never far from Soemantri's mind. "The art world is undergoing great change, so in my endeavor to develop a new museum model I have shifted from a framework based on capitalism to one based on the emergence of a global co-operative platform."

"The capitalism free market concept is based on the scarcity and the norms of supply and demand, yet in the modern world the idea of scarcity has been replaced by abundance. The post capitalism model is based on the abundance of information and cyberspace allows new freedoms increasingly moving the economic framework to a community-working model. Free information provided in real time by IT (internet technology) is a global agent that cannot be stopped or controlled. What could be the benefits to the art world?"

Born in 1956 in Central Java, Soemantri has a Ph. D in Chemical Engineering and has forged a successful international career in the field. A self-described agent of change, "I am just catalyst for some thing to happen," he humbly says. "Balinese traditional art is currently enjoying a revival, and will continue to grow, however, what the future museum and gallery models will look like, I do not know."

There is now a powerful disconnection between the old and the new ways of viewing art and this is impacting on museums and galleries. The revolution of communication and information technology allows the art sector to be reshaped around new values and behaviours and the virtual world with social media is playing an essential role. And says Soemantri, "developing an environment where trust and goodwill can thrive is the optimum goal."

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