A Brief History of Indonesian Modern Art

Jim Supangkat

Regarded as Indonesia’s foremost curatorial voice of the late twentieth century, Jim Supangkat was born in Makassar, Sulawesi (see Map 1), and later studied aesthetics and philosophy at university in Bandung (Institute Teknologi Bandung). He was a founder of the Gerakan Seni Rupa Baru (Indonesian New Art Movement) in 1975 and was a highly influential artist before concentrating on curating because of what he saw as the lack of curators in Indonesia at that time. Supangkat has played a key role in both Indonesian contemporary exhibitions and in taking Indonesian art to international audiences. This essay, originally published in English in 1993, is reproduced here as a significant primary document. The essay was written for an international audience at a time when Indonesian art was connecting with global contemporary art to introduce those audiences to the history of Indonesian art.

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1 Editors’ note: text in the captions to illustrations in this essay has been provided by the institutions and the editors, not the author.
Since modern art is believed to be a universal phenomenon, modern art in developing countries has been expected to develop in the same way as it has in Paris or New York. But the fact is, it has not. Lack of communication, lack of information, the influence of local conditions, the distortion of perception all mean that modern art in developing countries has taken different directions.

It is understandable then that modern art in developing countries became a confusing phenomenon for critics and art theorists in the international art circle and has never been taken seriously. The unanswered question is: how far could modern art principles be interpreted so as to have different implications and meaning in another context? Modern art, which is based on Western art, particularly the tradition of high art established in the sixteenth century, has a frame of reference which resists interpretation. Modern art is in some sense ambiguous. It strongly believes in searching for new international values but, on the other hand, is also still connected to the tradition of Western art. The implication is that modern art has only one possibility to achieve: that is an achievement based on a Western frame of reference. The logical outcome is a monolinear development as seen mostly in Europe and America.

In many developing countries, including Indonesia, modern art grew out of Western art as it was adapted, sometimes over a very long period of time, during the colonial period. This is an important point to understand. Conditions changed after independence and in developing countries modern art frequently became anti-Western. This led to an emphasis on theoretical cultural debate, a confrontation between Eastern and Western values, and a focus on a search for national or Eastern identity. The fact that modern art in developing countries could deny its Western roots was a difficult phenomenon for most critics in the international circle to accept, especially as internationalism has worked against a reliance on national identity.

The national identity issue was no doubt the main reason for the distance that emerged between modern art in developing countries and the international circle. The introduction of the concept of pluralism in the 1970s and 1980s offered the possibility of an accommodation and greater understanding, since pluralism denies internationalism’s absolutism and accepts national boundaries as a basis for a differentiated achievement. Thus modern art in developing countries could be seen to have both an international and a national context.
While pluralism is still not widely accepted in the international critical circle, and although information on the concept is still limited in developing countries, theoretically the evolution of modern art in developing countries can only be understood through this principle.

**The Western Influence on Indonesian Modern Art**

Western culture, including Western art, entered Indonesia in colonial times. Indonesia was a Dutch colony for 350 years, but the Western way of life influenced only a limited number of people—the upper level of society, mostly feudal families or plantation owners. They adopted Western culture through education and close contact with Western society, especially the Dutch colonial government whose policies created a feudal atmosphere by using this upper level of society to control the lower classes. In contrast, most of the common people still lived in a traditional way, and virtually without education. Western art, in colonial times, thus became known only within a select group and there were few Indonesian artists.

Despite this, the art activities of the upper level of society at the beginning of the nineteenth century were the basis of Indonesian modern art. Indonesian modern art grew out of Western culture. It was not a continuation and development of traditional arts, which have a different frame of reference. If Indonesian expression showed in the works, it was a result of the artist's cultural background, not the result of traditional art principles.

Since there were so few Indonesian artists in colonial times it is difficult to point to a particular Indonesian art. But the work of Dutch artists who lived in Indonesia, some of them born in Indonesia, showed differences when compared with Dutch artists working in the Netherlands. One could draw the conclusion, although purely hypothetical, that art development in colonial times already had specific local characteristics. These Dutch artists should also, therefore, be acknowledged as pioneers of Indonesian modern art.
One Indonesian artist who, despite the obstacles, became well known at home and abroad in the nineteenth century, was a Javanese prince named Raden Saleh (1807–1880). He and some early Dutch artists marked the beginning of modern art in Indonesia if we accept the theory that modern art began with neoclassicism and romanticism. Paintings and drawings made by Dutch artists before Raden Saleh were not meant as works of art, since they merely purported to function as a documentation of Indonesian rural life, landscapes, wildlife, and architecture.

Raden Saleh and a Dutch artist named Jan Daniels Beynon were the best-known Indonesian artists of their time. Like their counterparts in Europe, they were professionals who usually undertook portraiture commissions

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3 Editors’ note: in his important book, Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond, Supangkat described Raden Saleh’s painting The Arrest of Prince Diponegoro (see discussion Chapter 1 and Figure 1.4) as setting forth ‘the spirit of freedom’ and as taking a stance sympathetic to the prince in his ‘struggle’ against the Dutch. See Jim Supangkat, Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond (Jakarta: The Indonesian Fine Arts Foundation, 1997), 24. See also Figure 3.1 for a further example of Raden Saleh’s painting.

4 Editors’ note: the date of 1811 for Raden Saleh’s birth is now the generally accepted date but 1807 is retained here because this is a primary source.
of important people. Both were influenced by the romantic movement. Saleh and Beynon regularly visited Europe and spent some time in Paris. In their paintings, the principles of European romanticism could be clearly seen (such as in studies of violence among wild animals, attacks on humans and the latter’s terrified expressions).

It is difficult to draw definitive conclusions about Raden Saleh since there are few sources and publications on him and not many of his works survive. But in Indonesian art history, Raden Saleh is credited with being the pioneer of Indonesian modern art. Most of his best works are now the property of the Indonesian presidential palace. Among his other important works are The Fight (a scene of a lion attacking a horse rider) and The Bull Hunters (hunters in traditional costumes fighting a group of wounded bulls). A reproduction of his masterpiece A Matter of Life and Death (two lions attacking a bull) is now in the collection of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam—the original painting disappeared in Paris in 1931.

The Spring of Indonesian Modern Art

Indonesian modern art really came into existence between 1930 and 1940. At that time there were two groups of artists who differed from each other in style and principles. The birth of Indonesian modern art was signalled by the confrontation of these two groups. One group, under the influence of two senior painters, Abdullah Soeriosoebroto (1878–1941) and Mas Pirngadi\(^5\) (1865–1936), continued to make representational paintings, in the tradition that had developed since the days of Saleh. Their paintings followed the orderly principles and techniques referred to as academic. Nearly all the group had studied in the Netherlands. Like earlier Indonesian painters, these artists were members of the upper level of colonial society. Their works were realistic-ideal depictions of beautiful landscapes, and sometimes also flattering individual portraits.

The other group was led by a rebel painter named Sudjojono (1914–1986)\(^6\) who had once been one of Abdullah Soeriosoebroto’s followers. Sudjojono could not accept Abdullah’s strict academic painting methods.

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\(^5\) Editors’ note: see Figure 3.2.
\(^6\) Editors’ note: the date now most often used for Sudjojono’s birth is 1913 but 1914 is retained here as this is a primary source.
His rebellion was also related to the fact that Sudjojono was a member of a political group that fought for Indonesian independence. Abdullah, in Sudjojono’s opinion, was a collaborator who worked too closely with Dutch colonial society.

At the same time, a group of art lovers in the colonial society of the 1930s organised exhibitions of original European modern paintings, such as works by Vincent van Gogh, Braque, Cezanne, Gauguin, Max Ernst and Modigliani.

No doubt Sudjojono was influenced by those works, technically and spiritually. He identified himself as a modernist and judged Abdullah’s academic paintings as tending towards classicism. These paintings, he stated, were merely expressing a notion of an ideal and peaceful life—‘The Beautiful Indies’. He accused the artists of being members of colonial society and not Indonesian. For decades Sudjojono’s overly nationalistic point of view influenced Indonesian critics and art historians, who denied Abdullah Soeriosoebroto’s role in the development of Indonesian modern art.

The group of artists organised by Sudjojono were mostly uneducated painters such as poster painters, comic strip artists, advertisement designers and others who had never been acknowledged as artists. Because of their involvement with the nationalist movement, they identified themselves as ‘Indonesian’ artists. Apart from Sudjojono, two of the best-known and most influential of these artists were Affandi (1907–1990) and Hendra Gunawan (1918–1983).

The works of all three painters were expressionistic in style, and highly emotional in content. Their themes and subjects, which could be called a kind of social realism, were drawn from the struggle for independence, poverty, injustice, war and the life of people at the grass roots level. Their social realism in an expressionistic style, painted in heavy brushstrokes, fitted the conditions of that time, dominated by the spirit of the struggle for independence.7

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7 Editors’ note: for a fine example of Hendra Gunawan’s work, see the National Gallery Singapore, accessed 4 October 2021, collections.nationalgallery.sg/#/search?Search=hendra%20gunawan&Search Type=b, especially his painting War and Peace, related to the independence war.
Sudjojono, Affandi, and Hendra Gunawan became the most influential artists in Indonesia after independence and the expressionistic style they introduced influenced Indonesian modern art for a long time (1940–70).

Even today some major artists still work in this expressionistic style. There are artists who still believe in social realism, painting the poor, and who even sometimes still work with revolutionary themes. Among these are Sudjana Kerton and Djoko Pekik. Poverty is still a reality for many in Indonesia. Both Kerton and Pekik often paint the everyday life of the common people and the struggles of the poor.

Others who still practice an expressionistic style have developed it in a very individual way. Srihadi Soedarsono, for example, the most acclaimed painter in present-day Indonesia, has developed a very original individual style of expression.
Srihadi was influenced first by the social realism of the 1940s, then by action painting which he studied in the United States in the 1960s. In this period he produced abstract expressionist paintings, although this phase of his art was brief. Srihadi never totally became a nonfigurative painter. There has always been subject matter in his paintings, although it is not always clearly seen.

His landscapes, townscapes and seascapes utilise very expressive brushstrokes across the canvas which divide the space into two sections by a horizon line. Then, with some highly emotional strokes, he paints objects not far from the horizon and leaves the rest of the canvas nearly empty, covered only with a thin bright colour.

In his latest paintings Srihadi, who lives in Bandung in Java, has been working in his studio on Bali Island. Much of his recent work is filled with the atmosphere of Bali—landscapes, everyday life, dancers, traditional feasts, and so on. He has a special interest in painting the movement of Balinese dancers. With expressive lines and brushstrokes he evokes the dynamic movement of the dancers and the rhythm and sensuality of the dance.
Srihadi believes that the traditional atmosphere in Bali, where many people still live in a traditional way, has a creative spirit which stimulates and inspires him. Srihadi has consciously tried to adapt traditional arts to express his emotions and ideas. This is a common tendency in Indonesian modern art.

Another artist who has tried to combine modernism and traditionalism in the search for national identity is Gregorius Sidharta Soegiyo. This Dutch-educated artist attempted to apply traditional decorative patterns to the concepts of synthetic cubism in the 1960s. In the 1980s, inspired by mythological themes, he worked on contemporary sculptures using handicraft techniques. His experience in the domain of modern art and his knowledge of traditional arts (he grew up within a traditional Javanese family) has enabled Sidharta to understand the characteristic elements of both forms of art. His sculptures, paintings and prints represent a new expression—a modern art with Indonesian images.

Srihadi and Sidharta are both professors at Bandung Institute of Technology. This art academy is known as the centre of modernism in Indonesia. The teachers here work with modern art styles by adapting abstract expressionism, minimalism, neoplasticism, geometricism, etc., in some ways only adjusting attitude with changes in the international constellation (but this is modernisation, isn’t it?). Not many of them, then, have ever achieved a completely individual expression in their styles.

Works by professors of the academy have a reputation for being difficult to understand. Because very few people could appreciate their work, the modernistic styles practised here, though based on a correct Western aesthetic, have only minimum recognition. Their influence in Indonesian modern art development then was also limited.

These realities are important in understanding modern art’s evolution in developing countries. Because of a lack of information, exploration of new styles, expression and values are not understood by most of the people. This limitation has forced the development of modern art to take a specific course.

Indonesian modern art’s development has been dominated by the art of painting and in paintings the decorative style is predominant. Nearly 80 per cent of Indonesian artists are painters, and nearly half of them work in the decorative style. This style is characteristic of another art academy,
the Indonesian Institute of the Arts in Yogyakarta. Major artists who could be said to be founders of this style are Widayat, Handrio and Soenarto Pr, who in the 1960s founded a very influential artists’ workshop, Sanggar Bambu (Bamboo Workshop).

At first glance, decorative painting could be criticised as only expressing superficial beauty, or a craft aesthetic. This is not the case. The decorative style in Indonesia has been explored in various ways and produced many individual styles.

It can be argued that this decorative style in modern times is a sign of an Indonesian traditional arts influence. Traditional arts in Indonesia are not based on one form of aesthetic. It is nearly impossible to generalise about Indonesian traditional arts, since there are more than 300 ethnic groups and each tribe has its own tradition and, of course, specific art expression.

But behind the diversity there is a similarity in decorative expression. This is not just a surface beauty. The decorative expression usually has a symbolic meaning. Ornaments, for example, had communication purposes, such as revealing the hierarchy in society, or were used for status or because of a belief in their magical power.

There are some traditional arts in Indonesia which developed into a sophisticated art, such as Javanese court art. Though it still has a decorative tendency, Javanese art has a descriptive and written aesthetic related to Javanese philosophy. Some of the aesthetic principles were similar to high art concepts.

Another indicator that supports the argument that the decorative arts achievement is not-just-surface-beauty is the development in Bali Island. Though this island is part of Indonesia, it is difficult to include Bali’s art in Indonesian modern art development. Based on its strong tradition, Balinese art has a clearer empirical development when compared to the rest of Indonesia. In its development, Bali’s art has adapted many foreign influences, in the past those of individual Dutch artists and today modern and contemporary art ideas. Yet despite these influences, Balinese identity can still clearly be seen. In Bali, as elsewhere in Indonesia, many traditional arts still exist and develop. There is no doubt that these traditional arts are part of the reality of life for Indonesian modern artists. Whether they like it or not, it is difficult to avoid the influence of traditional arts.
The decorative style has a strong tendency to be just high craftsmanship and could easily be degraded to a meaningless expression. Many Indonesian decorative paintings faced this reality. After decades without development, there was a move towards the degradation of decorative paintings in the 1980s together with a move towards highly commercialised styles. Along with this, private galleries flowered in the same years. There was a sudden and fast-growing art market in the 1980s, described by Indonesian art historian Dr Sanento Yuliman as a ‘boom of decorative paintings’.

Following the rise in prices at American auction houses, prices of paintings in Indonesia rose to unbelievable levels. But the art business, of course, was not based on a real knowledge of investment. High prices launched speculatively by art dealers, not based on a market mechanism, were understandably very unstable.

As a result of the sudden interest, exhibitions and art activities grew rapidly in big cities. Art, especially the art of painting, was widely recognised to a degree never seen before in Indonesian history. But this surge of activity cannot be said to have brought real progress in art. The appreciation of art in general is still poor. There has been almost no achievement in nonpainting art expression since nearly all of the galleries tend to exhibit commercial decorative paintings. This phenomenon of art sociology shows once again how modern art could be adapted with a very biased perception in developing countries. But the conclusion is not that modern art does not exist. Though modern art began as a universal phenomenon, and existed in all nations as a modern way of expression, this does not mean that it should have a universal standardised development.

**Indonesian Contemporary Art**

The word ‘contemporary’ was first used in Indonesia in 1973 at an exhibition of sculpture in Jakarta organised by Gregorius Sidharta Soegiyo. Soegiyo used the word ‘contemporary’ to explain the exhibition because, in his opinion, some of the sculptures exhibited could no longer be categorised as modern.

Most of them used constructed and welded techniques. By contrast, before this exhibition, the art of sculpture in Indonesia, which had made very little progress, employed almost solely wooden and marble sculpting and bronze casting techniques. The conception behind the works was a strong belief in the artist’s touch and formal measurement.
Figure 6.4: Dede Eri Supria (b. 1956), Labyrinth (from ‘Labyrinth’ series), 1987–88.


But the use of the term ‘contemporary’ was not followed by further discussion or debate within an art circle dominated by modern-oriented principles. The word ‘contemporary’ faded away. So it is difficult to draw a clear line between modern and contemporary art in Indonesia.

Contemporary principles re-emerged in 1975. In this year a group of young artists organised a movement, later known as the Indonesian New Art Movement. In the very beginning the movement was a rebellion within the two main art academies, the Bandung Institute of Technology and the Indonesian Institute of the Arts in Yogyakarta. The rebellion was merely academic, a debate on modernist principles and new points of views related to contemporary art. The young artists who took part were against the international style, universalism and the dominance of the art of painting in Indonesian modern art.
6. A BRIEF HISTORY OF INDONESIAN MODERN ART

Figure 6.5: Nindityo Adipurnomo (b. 1961), Indonesia, *Introversion (April the Twenty-First)*, 1995–96.

Carved wooden objects, photographs, mirrors, cast resin, found objects, gauze curtain, paper, glass, hair, nylon and fibreglass, 390 x 616 cm (diam.) (installed), 21 parts: 75 x 45 x 15 cm (each, approx.), curtain: 390 x 2520 cm. Collection: Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art. Purchased 1996 (1996.206a-v.). Queensland Art Gallery Foundation. Image courtesy QAGOMA. Permission: the artist. The work refers to Kartini (Raden Ajeng Kartini) (1879–1904), the nineteenth-century Javanese female aristocrat who wrote and published a ‘Handschrift’ (Manuscript) on artisans especially women artisans and who is honoured for her work and advocacy for women’s education every year on her birthday: 21 April, Kartini Day.

The movement promoted social criticism, political art and new art forms (installation, ready-mades, found objects, collaborative work). The movement also introduced a new definition of art and the concept of the principle of pluralism. From 1975, the movement arranged several exhibitions in Jakarta and Bandung, to strong reactions from critics, artists and scholars. Exhibitions organised by the movement were never accepted as a serious art phenomenon, mostly because the idioms used were not understood. In 20 years the movement has had a very limited influence. The boom in decorative paintings in the 1980s was a clear example. The dominance of the art of painting in Indonesia was stronger than it had been 10 years before.

The movement showed renewed influence at the beginning of the 1990s. A new development in Indonesian contemporary art has emerged, along with contemporary art developments internationally. Many artists have begun to realise the importance of becoming international. In a sense the debate on national and international contexts of modern or contemporary art has ended.
In the last few years, this can clearly be seen in the development of installations as an idiom. Dadang Christanto, Nyoman Erawan, Heri Dono (Figure 6.6) and Harsono are among the artists who usually exhibit installations. In the art of painting there have been several tendencies: photorealism, surrealistic images, social criticism, symbolism and works expressing women's dilemmas. Some artists already established within these styles are Ivan Sagito and Agus Kamal (surrealists), Dede Eri Supria (Figure 6.4), Sudarisman (social criticism), and Lucia Hartini (expressing women's dilemmas).

Meanwhile, interest in modern and contemporary art in developing countries has grown in the international circle. Slowly but surely, the pluralism principle has gained in influence. Japan and Australia should be mentioned in particular as countries that facilitate the growth of developing countries’ contemporary art, especially in the Asia Pacific region, which should be seen as a growing centre of world contemporary art. For Indonesian contemporary art this presents, without doubt, a new horizon for growth.

**Figure 6.6: Heri Dono (b. 1960), Indonesia, *Makan Pelor* (Eating Bullets), 1992.**

Figure 6.7: Mella Jaarsma, *The Healer*, 2003.

Costume made of Chinese and Indonesian traditional medicines, medical drinks and DVDs. Image and permission courtesy the artist. Costume worn by Elly Kent in exhibition in association with The Australian National University Art and Human Rights project; component curated by Christine Clark at Canberra Contemporary Art Space, 2003. *The Healer* is part of three costumes, the others being *The Feeder* and *The Hunter*, the latter made from military uniforms. It is also connected to a series of costume works such as Jaarsma’s work for the Third Asia Pacific Triennial in 1999, *Hi Inlander*, and other works on the subject of cross-cultural encounters, cultural identities and, later on, refugees. It consists of plants and ingredients for Chinese and Indonesian traditional medicine (including seahorses), some of which hang into a wok and are
cooked to create the Indonesian medicinal drink *jamu*. Jaarsma has stated: ‘A military mission is not only about sending troops to war but also about food and medicine’. The work was produced during the beginning of the Iraq war. At the same time, the Indonesian military entered the province of Aceh to end the independence movement. ‘It represents humankind’s inevitable connection with killing, healing and feeding.’

![Figure 6.8: Marintan Sirait, Long Distance Call from Home, 2012.](image)

Documentation of performance at ‘Undisclosed Territory’, Surakarta, 2012. Photograph by Arief Budianto. Image courtesy the artist and Arief Budianto. Supangkat illustrated an earlier performance by the artist from 1995 in his important book *Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond*. Marintan Sirait has been involved as a performance artist and with social projects since the late 1980s when she was a student in the group Sumber Waras experimenting with movement and sound. She is a transdisciplinary artist who has participated in a number of international biennales and, as Christine Clark notes, has been an instrumental figure in enabling cross artform dialogue and experimentation through various initiatives.\(^9\)

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9 Clark notes that with husband Andar Manik, she has created Dalemwangi Art Space, an artist-musician family compound. Sirait has recently established Kalyana Learning Centre (2020) and is also the founder of Jendela Ide Indonesia Foundation (1995–ongoing), a culture centre for youth, and Rumpun Indonesia Foundation, a women’s media centre for social change. Sirait articulates that Dalemwangi Art Space (2018–ongoing) ‘is a space similar to a laboratory where we try and let art grow … we seek … collaborations across art forms and develop shared experience and new awareness across collaborators, participants and audiences’. Interview with Christine Clark, 15 November 2019, Bandung; Christine Clark’s communication with the editors, 29 October 2021. See also essay by Enin Suprianto, ‘Marintan Sirait’, *Catalogue of the Second Asia-Pacific Triennial* (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 1996), 101.
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