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Ida Bagus Nyoman Rai: painter of history

The Balinese painter Ida Bagus Nyoman Rai died in 2000, leaving behind one of the few depictions of the Japanese occupation of Bali, an enigmatic work that has only now come to public attention. A 'history painting' that tells us much about Balinese art and its development during the modernist period, it also shows how art that appears to represent history ambiguously can actually enhance our understanding of it.

Adrian Vickers and Leo Haks

Ida Bagus Nyoman Rai (who also used the last name Tengkeng or Klingking) was born into a poor *brahmana*, or Brahman, family between 1907 and 1920 in Sanur and began painting as a teenager. During the 1930s Sanur, like many Balinese villages, produced a great number of artists; most were very young and new to art. Inspired by Bali's aesthetic qualities, they created for new audiences, including western newcomers who, using their economic and artistic influence, favoured images of a romanticized and timeless Bali like those produced by western artists. Dozens of highly original Balinese artists rejected this romanticisation and instead portrayed the modern reality in which they found themselves. Foremost amongst them were leading artists from the village of Sanur, including I.B. Rai who, at the time of his death, was among the last of the school's first generation. Though second and third generations persisted, the school's influence weakened after the second world war, making I.B. Rai an important link to the school's birth and trademark style of strong lines against background depictions of local sites.

Leo Haks, a collector of Balinese paintings of the pre-war or 'modernist' period,¹ had long known about the collection of Theo Meier (1908-1982), a Swiss artist who lived on Bali during the 1930s and 1940s. Meier had married a Thai woman and moved to Chiang Mai, where upon his death in 1982 his wife honoured him by locking the door to his collection. She did not open it for 20 years, after she decided to back a dealer writing her husband's biography. The dealer bought all the paintings and, in 2003, Haks himself got his first look at an extraordinary record of works that depart from the standard images of Balinese painting. Amongst the collection are a number of works that provide new understanding of Balinese modes of depicting history, including the remarkable work of I.B. Rai depicting the Japanese on Bali. Rai's painting captures the viewer's attention instantly because of its dramatic composition and subject matter.

Art imitating life?

Set on a northern stretch of Sanur beach known as Padang Galak (Wild Fields), the painting's foreground depicts Japanese soldiers supervising labourers sinking piles just offshore. In the background the beach is a battlefield that curves like a rainbow from the painting's lower left-hand corner to its upper right-hand corner, where it meets a line of volcanoes known to mark the centre of Bali. As soldiers standing on the beach shoot their rifles, six planes fly overhead; a seventh has crashed into the sea near a sunken ship and three swimmers. Finally, passing by two small sailboats, two ships approach from the painting's upper right-hand corner. The soldiers on shore appear to be firing at



Ida Bagus Nyoman Rai, 'The Battle of Bali', 1942. Washed pen and ink on paper, 49 x 55 cm. courtesy of Leo Haks

the swimmers and approaching ships. The painting begs the question: What battle is this?

Leo Haks tried to find out. Historian Geoffrey Robinson suggested that the painting could depict the Allied landing on Bali of 2 March 1946, although he conceded that 'the landing occurred without a single shot fired by either side. Nor, to our knowledge, did the Allies employ air support during the landing'.² Frank Morgan, an occasional Bali resident, told Haks that his step-father had served in the Yogyakarta-based Seventh Bomber Group until January 1942 and had bombed Japanese troop transports unloading 'on the beach just at the north end of the Sanur reef'.³ Morgan's information was promising, especially since Bali-based Researcher Fred B. Eisman's data on Bali's Allied air defence confirmed it.⁴ But was it definitive?

Haks continued to dig. He met Wayan Gedar (b. 1924), a Sanur hero of the Revolution and one of the Pemuda who had resisted the Dutch. Gedar remembers the Japanese ordering the building of a bridge, which he and other locals used, across the river mouth north of Sanur, and an American air attack on Sanur at the beginning of the Japanese occupation, although he could not specify a year. During a morning battle that lasted from four to ten o'clock, he witnessed the downing of an American plane; two injured crewmen helped ashore

by Balinese 'disappeared' soon after and were believed to have been rescued by the Americans.⁵

Gedar's memories match several accounts of Allied engagements during the 'The Battle of Bali' (also known as 'The Battle of Badung Strait'): the initial attempt to defend Bali from Japanese air attacks on 5 February, in which one Allied plane was shot down and another crash landed; the downing of Japanese bombers over Java and Bali on 18 February; attacks on Japanese ships on 19-20 February that cost two Allied planes over Bali and Java; and later raids that destroyed up to ten Japanese planes at the cost of a number (sources vary as to the total) of Allied casualties.⁶ However, none of these accounts, including Gedar's, specifically mentions the painting's depiction of a sunken ship. Could the sinking also have taken place during 'The Battle of Bali'?

What do other sources say?

We know the Japanese landed on Bali on 18 February 1942, with only four Japanese destroyers and two transport ships nearby. According to one source, the U.S. countered with 'thirteen B-17 high altitude bombers and seven A-24 dive bombers, without any escort of fighter planes'.⁷ The source mentions neither downed planes nor sunken ships. Regarding other Allied air forces, a more contemporary source states only that 'the Dutch Air Force lost many planes in attacks and efforts to reconnoitre'.⁸ The

Allies also responded by sea: a first wave consisted of two light cruisers, two destroyers, and two 'fourstackers' that departed Surabaya late on 18 February to engage the Japanese at night; while darkness afforded the advantage of surprise, the Americans did not calculate that it also put the moon behind them, which illuminated their position to the Japanese.

Nevertheless, Allied forces claimed success,⁹ though accounts differ. According to a Dutch naval source, only one ship was sunk and it was Dutch: the destroyer *Piet Hein*, whose crew members the Japanese fired on as they tried to swim to safety. This could have inspired the painting's scene of Japanese soldiers shooting at swimmers, even though the ship had sunk at night and thus ship and swimmers might not have been visible unless illuminated by moonlight. The same source states that islanders helped ship survivors who reached shore escape to Surabaya.

A second wave of the Allied naval response, comprised of four American ships, followed the next day but only damaged Japanese ships before withdrawing when the Dutch light cruiser *Tromp* and the U.S. destroyer *Stewart* were damaged. Dutch and U.S. sources claimed subsequent Allied bomber raids sunk perhaps 20 Japanese ships off Bali,¹⁰ but later accounts revealed this was an exaggeration. Only one Japanese ship, the *Michishio*, sustained damage, while a U.S. claim to have sunk a Japa-

nese vessel (the *Sasago Maru*) was false. The battle's net effect was a weakening of Allied forces prior to the larger Battle of the Java Sea.

Painting history

Rai's painting certainly reflects some elements of the above historical accounts and likely does depict the Battle of Bali. But it also includes events that did not necessarily happen during that battle, such as what is most likely the 5 February air raid in which an Allied plane was shot down, and Japan's building of local infrastructure – the sinking of piles – using forced labour. Thus neither I.B. Rai's nor similar Balinese paintings that treat historical events is a 'photographic' record. Rai's painting captures at least three separate moments in order to represent what the Japanese arrival in Bali meant to the artist; strictly speaking, it presents a parochial, and not Balinese, history. It does not record actual events but how the Balinese perceived those events and main actors: the Japanese as authoritarian, the Allies as distant and indistinguishable, the Balinese as the slaves or supporters of either. The painting demonstrates how representational works can enrich the construction of historical accounts by providing unique points of view that can both inform and be informed by other sources. <

Notes

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