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Indonesian modern art historiography: national and transnational perspectives

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B E T A W I

Persagi. Pada tanggal 23 Oct. j.b.l. diseboeah sekolah dikota ini oléh beberapa ahli menggambar di Betawi dan Bogor diadakan pertemoean oentoek membentoek perkoempoelan diantara meréka dengan nama *Persatoean ahli-ahli gambar Indonesia* atau dengan singkat *Persagi*. Boeat sementara jang doedoek dalam pengeroes ialah toean² S. Soedjojono, Rameli dan Damsik. Maksoed Persagi itoe ialah: memperdalam kesenian menggambar dalam faham jang seloeas-loeasnja, baik dengan djalan toelis me-noelis maoepoen dengan mengadakan pedato. Orang akan ber-oesaha mendirikan tjabang ditempat lain.

FIGURE 4.1.

Pandji Poestaka magazine announced a week after the forming of PERSAGI in Jakarta, *Pandji Poestaka*, 1 November 1938.

Collection of Leiden University Library
Photo by Aminudin TH Siregar

Chapter Four

On PERSAGI

On 11 October 1977, the Jakarta Arts Council invited S. Sudjojono to present his thoughts on the identity of Indonesian art. Sudjojono intentionally chose "Indonesian Painting" as the title (or topic) for his paper instead of "Painting in Indonesia" to emphasize that Indonesia already has the art of painting. According to him, the latter term refers to the concept of Western painting as understood and practiced in Indonesia. That evening, Sudjojono endeavored to demonstrate the extensive historical lineage of painting in Indonesia, from classical to modern Indonesian times.

The presentation by Sudjojono, one of PERSAGI's founders, was an exceptional opportunity for those interested in discussing issues in art historiography. Baharudin Marasutan, a painter and art historian, wanted to make the most of the opportunity. During the question-and-answer session, Marasutan raised inquiries regarding the correlation between the exhibitions of the Regnault collection and the establishment of PERSAGI. Before inquiring, Marasutan revealed that Sudjojono frequently attended displays showcasing the Regnault collection at the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring*. Additionally, Marasutan conveyed Sudjojono's specific fascination with the artworks of Vincent van Gogh. Marasutan then asked: "Was the impetus for the founding of PERSAGI due to the exhibition of Regnault's collection or was it its national aspirations?"

Those who attended the lecture that night or listen to it today via the audio archive may have been disappointed. Sudjojono responded to Marasutan's question briefly. He answered that exhibitions of Regnault's collection were only part of the impetus for the founding of PERSAGI. It is just that, he continued, "the character of the painters in Regnault's collection coincidentally has similarities with the character of young, modern Indonesian painters."¹ With the phrases "coincidentally they have similarities" and "young modern Indonesian painters," Sudjojono seems to

¹ The Jakarta Arts Council's audio archive of Sudjojono's lecture can be heard at <http://archive.ivaa-online.org/khazanahs/detail/532>.

want to construct a perception that the quality of Indonesian painters is on a par with European painters and developed independently. Apart from that, the modernity of Indonesian painters was achieved due to hard work, not because of encouragement, inspiration, or a helping hand from anyone. In other words, he wanted to emphasize that nationalism was the main factor behind the founding of PERSAGI.

Sudjojono's view of the influence of the Regnault collection exhibition that evening was quite different from what he had conveyed twenty years earlier. In Seminar 1956, he related Regnault's contribution and the significance of his collection to the growth of modern Indonesian art by saying: "Brothers and sisters, Regnault is a millionaire. He has helped a lot in the development of new Indonesian painting with a series of exhibitions of his collections." Sudjojono even appealed to those writing the history of Indonesian art to remember Regnault's meritorious exhibitions.²

Marasutan knew the significance of PERSAGI's clarity in historiographical writing. That evening, he wanted a thorough explanation of the historical obscurity or deliberate concealment surrounding the intricate triangular relationship between PERSAGI, *Bataviaasche Kunstkring*, and the Regnault collection exhibition. However, Sudjojono's answer to Marasutan's question was not satisfactory.

It is of the utmost importance to emphasize that during Sudjojono's lecture in the 1970s, the existing literature offered only a limited number of references that clarified the relationships between the three entities. Furthermore, these references were still general, such as in De Loos-Haaxman's book *Verlaat Rapport Indie* (1968) or Claire Holt's *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Changes* (1967). In her book, De Loos-Haaxman primarily highlights the significant impact of the Regnault collection exhibition on fostering a deeper understanding of Western modern art within the context of the Dutch East Indies.³ Holt's assessment of the effects of the Regnault collection exhibition could have been more extensive.

However, she only wrote, "It is to be assumed that at least some of the Indonesian painters gained access to these exhibitions, for by 1938 the

² See "Sedjarah Seni Rupa Indonesia" in Panitia Seminar Ilmu dan Kebudayaan, *Laporan Seminar Ilmu dan Kebudayaan Sidang ke II: Sedjarah Seni Rupa Indonesia*, 26 Juni 1956, Jogjakarta: Universitas Gadjah Mada, 1956, pp.71-72. "Sdr2, Regnault adalah seorang miljuner, dia banyak membantu perkembangan seni lukis Indonesia baru jang sekarang sebab ia membuat eksposisi-eksposisi jang banyak sekali."

³ See J. de Loos-Haxmaan, *Verlaat Rapport Indië: Drie eeuwen westerse schilders, tekenaars, grafici, zilversmeden en kunstnijveren in Nederlandsch Indië*, (Den Haag: uitg. Mouton & Co, 1968), pp. 87-92.

Kunstskring began admitting Indonesian artists to its events."⁴ In addition to the absence of explicit information, it is noteworthy that the distribution of these two books within Indonesia is minimal, even within the realm of art academies.

Empirical facts hold significant importance in art history, as they serve as tangible evidence substantiating various interpretations and assertions. Art historians are compelled to rely solely on conjecture and subjective viewpoints without empirical evidence, if these are lacking, and there is a potential for perpetuating myths, misconceptions, and biases. Regrettably, such elements are inherent in the study of PERSAGI, a circumstance that Marasutan, on that particular evening, sought to elucidate to ascertain the true motivations underlying the establishment of the association.

PERSAGI, or *Persatuan Ahli-ahli Gambar Indonesia* (The Association of Indonesian Drawing Masters), is renowned as the pioneering association of nationalist artists in Indonesia. Predictably, this group holds a higher status in all publications discussing the history of modern Indonesian art compared to the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* and the Regnault Collection exhibitions. The issue arose when the glorification of PERSAGI was established without sufficient empirical evidence to substantiate its claims. The prevailing discourse surrounding the significance of PERSAGI is the result of the limited perspectives adopted by historians, who aim to construct a nationalistic narrative.

The *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism*, for example, offers the heroic role of PERSAGI as follows:

The artists of PERSAGI saw themselves as cultural workers within this nascent nation-state, making them part of a broad socialist-nationalist front aimed at the creation of a new national consciousness out of the inheritance of a colonial past. They also sought divergence from the deeper history that divided this archipelagic country with its vast geography and a variety of ethnic, religious, and linguistic differences.⁵

⁴ Claire Holt, *Art Indonesia: Continuities and Change*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 198.

⁵See Chaitanya Sambrani "PERSAGI (Persatuan Ahli-Ahli Gambar Indonesia)" in <https://www.rem.routledge.com/articles/persagi-persatuan-ahli-ahli-gambar-indonesia>, accessed 15 September 2023.

The following statement by M Agus Burhan illustrates that PERSAGI was perceived as a progressive artists' movement: "PERSAGI is a nationalist arts association that was successful in carrying out a movement against the hegemony of Western colonial art."⁶

Meanwhile, in the following quote, PERSAGI's heroic role is increasingly dramatized: "PERSAGI refuses elements of foreign painting. Apart from that, PERSAGI also raises attitudes to reject the hegemony of foreign tourist tastes."⁷ PERSAGI's heroism and patriotism are also glorified in these lines: "In 1937 PERSAGI (Persatoean Ahli-Ahli Gambar Indonesia) artists raised their voice in nationalistic spirit against feudalism and imperialism."⁸

The resistance of PERSAGI to "aesthetic colonialism" appears to have become the romantic fantasy of numerous historians. The following quotation demonstrates the author's imagination regarding PERSAGI. For example, art academic Imam Boechori Zainuddin stated:

PERSAGI has opposed the colonial-era falsehoods. Especially in artistic expressions, it has resisted the romanticism that appears to have lulled certain segments of Indonesian society.⁹

In this fantasy, PERSAGI is also acknowledged as "an organization that can be considered an early turning point in the burgeoning contact between art and politics, when art (painting) collided with social issues, nationalism, and even internationalism."¹⁰

In the canonical narrative, PERSAGI is also established as a period that is presumed to have lasted from the founding of this association in 1938 to the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies in 1942. The title of M.

⁶ M. Agus Burhan, *Perkembangan Seni Lukis Mooi Indie sampai PERSAGI di Batavia 1900-1942*, (Jakarta: Galeri Nasional Indonesia, 2014). "PERSAGI adalah perkumpulan seni nasionalis yang sukses dalam melakukan gerakan melawan hegemoni kesenian kolonial Barat."

⁷ Agus Dermawan T and Mikke Susanto, *Maestro Seni Rupa Modern Indonesia*, (Jakarta: Kementerian Pariwisata dan Ekonomi Kreatif, 2012), p. 22. "PERSAGI melakukan penolakan terhadap unsur-unsur seni lukis asing. Selain itu PERSAGI juga melakukan penggalangan sikap untuk menolak hegemoni selera turis asing."

⁸ Setianingsih Purnomo, "Kelahiran Seni Rupa Indonesia Baru" in Amir Sidharta (ed.), *From Mooi Indie to PERSAGI*, (Jakarta: Museum Universitas Pelita Harapan, 1997-1998), p. 8.

⁹ Imam Boechori Zainuddin, *Latar Belakang Sejarah dan Pembinaan Seni Lukis Indonesia Modern (1935 - 1950)*, Skripsi, Bagian Seni Rupa, Departemen Perencanaan Seni Rupa Institut Teknologi Bandung, 1966, p. 21.

¹⁰ Suwarno Wisetrotomo, "PERSAGI: Perlawanan Terhadap Eksotisme Beku" in Amir Sidharta (ed.), 1997-1998), p. 58.

Agus Burhan's book mentioned above indicates that "the continuation of the Mooi Indië period was PERSAGI.¹¹ The pinnacle of the exaltation of PERSAGI is not solely based on its association with attributes such as nationalism and anti-imperialism¹² but also on the recommendation of this group, often misconstrued with Sudjojono's involvement, as the "vanguard of contemporary Indonesian painting" or "innovator of Indonesian modern art."¹³

It appears that Trisno Sumardjo is responsible for overestimating PERSAGI's role. He, among others, penned that modern painting emerged with the founding of PERSAGI, which aimed to fill the spiritual void in culture. Sumardjo formulated his reasons. Firstly, he claimed that PERSAGI's role in feudalistic colonial society lay in the group's ability to break down elitism. With the support of the colonial government, the elite always received special privileges, both in education and economics, as well as in social status. The progress of the "nation" at that time, according to Sumardjo, seemed the prerogative of this group of elites:

In the hands of these elites, art and culture were then interpreted as merely ancient items or mere legacies of the past. Indonesian art and culture are considered to be at a dead end because they cannot give birth to new forms.¹⁴

Sumardjo then criticized the results of the elite's research on Indonesia's cultural heritage, which was deliberately not broadcast to the public and was limited only to themselves. "Regarding modern art," stated Sumardjo, "their attitude is limited to a few people such as Raden Saleh and Noto Soeroto.

¹¹ See M. Agus Burhan, *Perkembangan Seni Lukis Mooi Indie sampai PERSAGI di Batavia 1900-1942*, (Jakarta: Galeri Nasional Indonesia, 2014). See also, Bambang Suwondo (ed.), *Sejarah Seni Rupa Indonesia*, (Jakarta: Proyek Penelitian dan Pencatatan Kebudayaan Daerah - Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, Tahun Anggaran 1976/1977), p. 157.

¹² See for instance, Sudarmadji, *Dari Saleh Sampai Aming: Seni Lukis Indonesia Baru dalam Sejarah dan Apresiasi*, (Yogyakarta: STSRI-ASRI, 1974-1975), p. 8. See also M. Agus Burhan, *Seni Lukis Indonesia Masa Jepang sampai Lekra*, (Surakarta: UNS Press, 2013), p. 3.

¹³ PERSAGI is widely regarded as the vanguard of contemporary Indonesian painting, as numerous claims posit. Several sources provide information on the subject, including Popo Iskandar, "Pelukis-pelukis Pra PERSAGI" in *Berkala Seni Rupa*, No. 1, June 1984, (Jakarta: Dewan Kesenian Jakarta), p. 24; Imam Boechori Zainuddin, 1966, p. 20; and Jim Supangkat, "Sudjojono Sang Perintis" in *Tempo*, 10 January 2000.

¹⁴ Trisno Sumardjo, 1957, p. 122. See also Trisno Sumardjo, "The Tendencies in Indonesian Art: Folks Traditions and Western Influence" in Faubion Bowers (ed.), *Perspectives of Indonesia - An Atlantic Supplement*, The Atlantic Monthly, New York, 1956, p. 127.

Regarding folk arts (carving, playing, etc.), they only try to conserve something based on classical art, without paving the way for creation for the future."¹⁵ Sumardjo acknowledges that PERSAGI represents ordinary people who independently exercise their artistic abilities. The emergence of PERSAGI from the lower classes has broken the establishment of the elite.

Second, according to Sumardjo, after breaking through the colonial cultural establishment, PERSAGI's next fundamental step was to establish a new personality to fill a new, healthier Indonesian culture. This personality, continued Sumardjo, is vital as a critical attitude towards old cultural heritage that no longer needs to be continued. Sumardjo emphasized, "We didn't have the understanding of modern art until created by PERSAGI's painters, so they pioneered a new tradition, even though it had not been completed at that time."¹⁶

As concerns the third, final step, Sumardjo emphasized: "The characteristic of PERSAGI is the placement of individualism in artistic expression, by releasing the influences of existing traditions. The first thing that is thrown out is the spirit of collectivism caused by religion, philosophy and the state structure of the feudal and colonial era. It turns out that collectivism has killed individual ideals and talents, because it forces them to adhere to a system of order, morals and education that is required by the ruling minority."¹⁷ Ultimately, he proposed a historical periodization system based on PERSAGI, as follows: "the PERSAGI era starting in 1937", "the era after PERSAGI starting in 1946", and "the era after 1946."¹⁸

The myths surrounding PERSAGI, characterized as a force that disrupted the established colonial painting order, has gained widespread

¹⁵ Trisno Sumardjo, 1956, p. 119. "“Terhadap kesenian yang lebih modern sikap mereka terbatas pada beberapa gelintir manusia seperti Raden Saleh dan Noto Suroto. Terhadap kesenian rakyat (seni ukir, sandiwara, dll.) mereka hanya berusaha mengkonserver sesuatu yang berdasarkan seni kuno, tiada membuka jalan mencipta bagi masa yang akan datang.”

¹⁶ Trisno Sumardjo, 1956, p. 125. "“Ruang hidup atau tradisi seperti inilah tadinya belum ada pada kita mengenai seni rupa modern dan barulah tercipta oleh orang-orang PERSAGI, sehingga telah mereka pelopori suatu tradisi baru, meskipun belum diselesaikan ketika itu.”

¹⁷ Trisno Sumardjo, 1956, p. 122. "Karakteristik bagi PERSAGI ialah penempatan tenaga perseorangan dalam pernyataan seni, dengan melepaskan pengaruh-pengaruh tradisi yang telah ada. Pertama-tama yang dilemparkan ialah jiwa kolektivisme yang disebabkan oleh agama, filsafat dan susunan tata negara dari zaman feodal maupun kolonial. Kolektivisme itu ternyata telah mematikan cita-cita serta bakat perseorangan, karena memaksanya menganut sistim tata tertib, tata susila dan pendidikan yang diperlukan oleh minoritet yang berkuasa.”

¹⁸ Trisno Sumardjo in Kusnadi "Ceramah Sejarah Seni Rupa Indonesia" in *Budaya*, 4-5 April-May 1960. Th. Ke-IX, p. 200.

recognition as a national conviction. However, are the roles of PERSAGI in modern Indonesian art history listed above accurate? Was PERSAGI a revolutionary art movement that steadfastly opposed colonialism in painting, as represented by the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring*? Then, what is the objective historical position of PERSAGI? Between 1935 and 1940, did Regnault's collection exhibitions play a direct or indirect role in forming PERSAGI? Is it possible that the significance of PERSAGI's contribution to history has been confused with that of Sudjojono?

This chapter challenges PERSAGI's established position in the history of modern Indonesian art based on the factors mentioned above. This chapter comprises three subchapters: *Dismantling PERSAGI*, *The PERSAGI Exhibitions*, and *PERSAGI and Sudjojono*. The first sub-chapter consists of several parts, including an exploration of the origins of this association and multiple versions of its founding year. *The PERSAGI Exhibitions* explores the group exhibition, which is never discussed in the canonical narrative. I will also explain *PERSAGI and S. Sudjojono* as explained in the subchapter with that heading to emphasize the different roles between PERSAGI as a group and Sudjojono as an individual.

Dismantling PERSAGI

Art has been a powerful form of cultural expression throughout history, often intertwined with mythologies that represent and support national identities. The field of art history has played a vital role in shaping narratives that promote a sense of national heroism. In Indonesia, authoritarian regimes have used art history to spread their ideologies and promote national heroism, perpetuating specific nationalistic stories and maintaining the focus on heroes - as seen in the narratives of PERSAGI. This group's story was often romanticized for its heroism rather than analyzed in its proper historical context. This section will thoroughly examine the myths surrounding PERSAGI in the context of nationalistic art history.

Was PERSAGI Formed in a Revolutionary Way?

We know very little about PERSAGI, including about the archives, to reveal its activities, works, and the reasons behind it. I found a piece of news

published in a 1938 *Pandji Poestaka* magazine a week after the formation of PERSAGI in Jakarta (Fig.4.1):

On October 23, at a school in this city, several drawing experts in Betawi and Bogor met to form an association between them under the Association of Indonesian Drawing Experts or, in short, PERSAGI. Messrs. S. Soedjojono, Rameli, and Damsik are currently in the management. The purpose of PERSAGI is to deepen the art of drawing in the broadest possible sense, both by writing and giving speeches. People will try to set up branches in other places.¹⁹

According to the news, the purpose of establishing PERSAGI was to develop drawing or painting skills in the broadest sense. Aside from that, this organization aimed to promote writing activities and host art-related lectures. According to Sudjojono, the most significant activity of PERSAGI was "to gather, consult, and practice at least once per month by drawing a dressed or undressed model."²⁰ This demonstrates that PERSAGI's founding objective did not contain any revolutionary expression. This organization neither resisted colonialism nor participated in practical politics.

Sudjojono even admitted that the idea behind PERSAGI was mundane. In an interview in the 1980s, he asserted:

Actually, the person who founded PERSAGI was Mr. Yudhokusumo together with me. Mr. Yudo liked painting, and I happened to be studying painting with Mr. Pirngadie and Mr. Hendradi. So, every day, there were often discussions on the art of painting. Then, among them, Agus Djaya Suminta, a teacher from a school at that time who taught art, also enjoyed painting. So, we all brainstormed and had an idea, and then an

¹⁹ "Kroniek" in *Pandji Poestaka*, 1 November 1938, p.1668. "Pada tanggal 23 October j.b.l. diseboeah sekolah dikota ini oleh beberapa ahli menggambar di Betawi dan Bogor diadakan pertemoean oentoek membentoek perkoempoelan diantara mereka dengan nama Persatoean Ahli-ahli Gambar Indonesia atau dengan singkat PERSAGI. Boeat sementara jang doedoek dalam pengerooes ialah toean2 S. Soedjojono, Rameli dan Damsik. Maksoed PERSAGI itu ialah: memperdalam kesenian menggambar dalam faham jang seloeas-loeasnja, baik dengan djalan toelis menoeis maoepoen dengan mengadakan pedato. Orang akan beroesaha mendirikan tjabang ditempat lain."

²⁰ See S. Sudjojono, *Cerita Tentang Saya dan Orang-orang Sekitar Saya (Stories About Me, and People Around Me)*, (Jakarta: KPG Gramedia dan S. Sudjojono Center, 2017), p. 57.

agreement was reached: let us establish a painting arts association, which is further known as PERSAGI, that's all.²¹

Sudjojono then emphasized an important point: "With this association so that they can gather, the aim is not to soar into the sky; that's not the case. It's just that we wanted to paint together, and please note that at that time we didn't have a budget; because the real intention is just to get together with a mutual agreement to gather."²²

An additional impetus for the establishment of PERSAGI was to tap into the painting art market in the Dutch East Indies. On a separate occasion, Sudjojono acknowledged this fact. According to his statement, it is indisputable that painters require financial resources to sustain their livelihood through their artistic endeavors. According to his perspective, selling artistic creations is not considered socially unacceptable.²³ The statement made by Sudjojono is substantiated by the presence of supporting evidence found in the PERSAGI exhibition catalogue of 1941, specifically within the confines of the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring*. This catalogue provides a comprehensive list of the selling prices of various paintings (Fig. 4.2).

None of the PERSAGI members have an arts academy background. Their ability to paint relies on natural talent and reflects limitations in understanding art and creating works of art.²⁴ The main activity in the first

²¹ Mustika, *Percakapan Dari Hati Ke Hati Pelukis Indonesia*, (Jakarta: Penerbit Sanggar Krida, 1983), p. 156. "Sebenarnya (yang mendirikan PERSAGI adalah) Pak Yudhokusumo bersama saya. Pak Yudo yang senang pada seni lukis dan saya yang kebetulan sedang belajar melukis bersama Pak Pirngadie dan Pak Hendradi. Jadi, setiap harinya sering rembukan tentang seni lukis. Kemudian di antaranya Agus Djaya Suminta sebagai guru dari suatu sekolah pada waktu itu yang mengajar seni lukis, ia juga senang melukis. Nah, kami semua merembug dan punya ide, terus terjadilah kesepakatan: marilah kita mendirikan perkumpulan seni lukis yang lebih lanjut dikenal sebagai PERSAGI, cuma begitu saja."

²² Mustika, 1983, p. 156.

²³ See *Budaya*, No. 4-5 April-May 1960, p. 203. "Persagi berdiri sebab apa dan latar belakangnya apa. Latar belakang ini ialah kemarin. Dan kemarin ini berpengaruh pada yang akan datang. Bahwa latar belakangnya adalah kerohanian dan kebatinan saya setuju. Dan kalau ini juga dipengaruhi oleh penjajahan, saya setuju. Tetapi jangan lupa bahwa ini tidak lain terutama dipengaruhi oleh penghidupan materi. Mengatakan bahwa ini tidak penting dalam kesenian, saya bertanya, janganlah menangis kalau nasi kita terlalu mahal. Sebab mahal itu ada sebabnya. Tidak jatuh dari begitu saja dari langit. Dan ini terang berpengaruh kepada perut, apa boleh buat si seniman juga punya perut, dan perut ini terang berpengaruh juga, disamping hidup materi, kepada pikiran kita."

²⁴ Suromo, *Timbul dan Tumbuhnya Seni Lukis Indonesia (I)*, *Mimbar Indonesia*, 2 Juli 1949, p.19. "Lain-lain kawan belum bisa mengerjakan pekerjaan sebagai pekerjaan seni. Pengertian seni masih terlalu samar dan teknik masih jauh amat dari tangan. Umumnya pekerjaannya bersifat coba mencoba saja, atau meraba-raba kebetulan dalam gelap – mencari udang di balik batu – yang dapat dianggap sebagai penjelmaan pikiran, perasaan atau angan-angannya. Diputarnya otak untuk tahu, apa arti lukis-melukis, apa arti kebudayaan, apa manusia itu."

28. Citra (zangeres uit Sidharta's Hof)	f 300.—
29. Meisje met viool	" 50.—
30. Boom	" 25.—
31. De kleine Waschmeid	" 50.—
32. Gebeente	" 30.—
33. De Rooker	" 30.—

HERBERT HOETAGALOENG.

34. Eenzaam bamboevlot	" 55.—
35. Kampong aan de Tjiliwoeng	" 85.—

ITON LASMANA.

36. Terug van de weide	" 75.—
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SJOEAIB SASTRADIWIRJA. geb. 1894 te Baros (Bantam), autodidact.

Deelgenomen aan Tentoonstelling Indisch Werk 1939.

37. Oebroeg	" 75.—
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RADEN SOEDIARDJO. geb. 28 November 1914 te Den Pasar (Bali).

In 1939 deelgenomen aan de Vrije Tentoonstelling van Indische Schilders in de Bat. K.K.

38. Bede om zielenheil	" 100.—
39. Kunstenaar en Critici	" 100.—
40. Javaansche verbazing. (Europeaan)	" 50.—
41. Javaansche indruk. (Europeesche schoone)	" 50.—

S. SOEDJOJONO,

kreeg schilderlessen van Mas Pirngadi en van Chiayi (Yazaki), met welken schilder hij een reis door Java maakte. Deelgenomen aan tent. Indisch Werk 1938, Vrije Tent. Ind. Schilders 1939 en tent. Ind. Schilders Weerbaar 1940.

42. Depan kelamboe terboek (Voor de open klamboe) ..	" 300.—
43. Portret Td. Dp.	n. t. k.
44. Mainan. (Spelende kinderen)	" 100.—

FIGURE 4.2.
Price list of PERSAGI's painters in the exhibition catalogue.

Collection of Leiden University Library
Photo by Aminudin TH Siregar

year of PERSAGI therefore involves practicing painting techniques. On the sidelines of this activity, they discussed the world of painting. So, to overcome this gap, they studied the various reviews or reproductions published in newspapers and magazines.²⁵ One of the popular magazines because it intensively spread the understanding of modern European art - is *The Studio*, which was available at the G. Kolff & Co. bookstore in Batavia.²⁶

PERSAGI members were thus familiar with European artists such as Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Edvard

²⁵ Suromo, 1949, p.19. About newspapers in the early 20th century that preach modern art, see Tom van den Berge, *Picasso in the Tropics: European Modern Painting in Indonesia, 1920-1957* in Susie Protschky & Tom van den Berge (ed.), *Modern Times in Southeast Asia 1920s-1970s*, (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp. 88-102.

²⁶ In addition to *The Studio*, magazines circulating in the Dutch East Indies such as *d'Orient*, *Woord en Beeld* and *Het Indische Leven* also several times featured writings on modern European painting and exhibition reviews, especially at *Bataviaasche Kunstkring*. The influence of essays on art in *De Taak's* journal - though not pictorial - is also worthy of consideration. Research notes in the Special Collection Room, Leiden University Library, November 2019. However, I cannot be sure how deeply Indonesian painters studied these magazines and shaped their art.

Munch, Salvador Dali, Paul Cézanne, Marc Chagall, Käthe Kollwitz, George Grosz, and Otto Dix.²⁷ PERSAGI invited painter Jan Frank, Henry van Velthuysen, and J. De Loos-Haaxman to lecture on the modern development of European painting. PERSAGI also invited Indonesian intellectuals such as Sanoesi Pane and Ki Hadjar Dewantara as a counterweight.²⁸ Therefore, from its founding, PERSAGI opened itself to anyone as long as their membership benefitted the development of the association.

PERSAGI's Founding Year and Membership

Art history is a meticulous discipline that necessitates close attention to detail. The importance of the exact years and contributions of the exponents is a critical aspect of this field. Inaccuracies in writing art history can have serious consequences, resulting in misinterpretations, a distorted historical narrative, and a barrier to academic progress. Art history preserves artists' legacies and establishes their rightful place in the canon. When art historical writings contain inaccuracies, deserving artists may be overlooked or misrepresented, resulting in an imbalance in the appreciation of their contributions. Inaccurate narratives also risk perpetuating biases, underrepresenting marginalized artists, and stifling diverse perspectives in art historical discourse. The case of PERSAGI's founding year and membership, written in several versions as discussed below, demonstrates the inaccuracy of long-term art historical study in Indonesia.

Differences in the founding years of PERSAGI are found in various publications on the history of modern Indonesian art, for example, 1935, 1937, 1938, and 1939. However, the years that are most frequently written about are 1937 and 1938. Claire Holt, Trisno Sumardjo, Sanento Yuliman, Kusnadi, and Jim Supangkat represent those who mention 1937.²⁹ Meanwhile, Helena Spanjaard, M. Agus Burhan, Sudarmadji, and Imam

²⁷ Suromo, 1949, p.19.

²⁸ See S. Sudjojono, "Seni Lukis di Indonesia" in *Budaja Djaja*, III/28, September 1970. See also Sanento Yuliman, 1980, KKS. I think Sanoesi Pane's lecture occurred when PERSAGI celebrated one year of its founding. See Antara "Malam Perajaan PERSAGI" in *Kebangoenan*, 26 October 1940, p. 3.

²⁹ See Claire Holt, *Art in Indonesia: Continuities and Change*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 197. Sanento Yuliman, *Seni Lukis Indonesia Baru: Sebuah Pengantar*, 1976, p. 11; Jim Supangkat, *Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond*, 2000, Jakarta: Yayasan Seni Rupa Indonesia (YSRI), 33; Kusnadi, "Sejarah Seni Lukis Di Jakarta (1945-1983)" in *Berkala Seni Rupa* No. 5, Maret 1984, (Jakarta: Komite Dewan Kesenian Jakarta), p. 82. See also Trisno Sumardjo, "Kedudukan Seni Rupa Kita" in Zaini (ed.), *Almanak Seni 1957*, (Jakarta: BMKN, 1956), p.122 and Trisno Sumardjo, "Dokumentasi Lukisan" in *Indonesia*, No. 4, TH.II April 1951, p. 9.

Boechori Zainuddin specified the founding date of PERSAGI as 23 October 1938.³⁰ Spanjaard claimed that Agus Djaya had written to her to clarify the year of PERSAGI's founding.³¹ The role of Agus Djaya's letter is significant because it becomes a node that connects references between scholars of art history. In his book, Agus Burhan, for example, mentions Sudarmadji, who previously obtained confirmation of the date, month, and year of PERSAGI's founding based on Agus Djaya's letter.

Sudarmadji explained the reason behind Agus Djaya's letter. In a letter dated 3 January 1977, Agus Djaya protested against Sudarmadji and Kusnadi when both mistakenly wrote the year of PERSAGI's founding in the catalogue of the exhibition *A Century of Indonesian Art's* exhibition. They wrote that PERSAGI had been founded in 1937.³² Agus Djaya, in his letter, emphasized that the founding of PERSAGI was not 1937, but "According to group files, even I, who helped establish it and even acted as PERSAGI's chairman, stressed that it should be 1938, 23 October 1938."³³ Before sending the letter to Sudarmadji, Agus Djaya had launched his protest to the exhibition committee on the eve of the grand exhibition's opening. He regretted the exhibition committee's carelessness in writing the year of PERSAGI's founding incorrectly - considering that the show raised issues about essential milestones in the history of modern Indonesian art. Agus Djaya's complaint that night was not taken seriously by the exhibition committee on the pretext that: "preparation time is very limited so mistakes are normal."³⁴ This disappointment explains why Agus Djaya then took the initiative to write letters to some parties, including Sudarmadji - the exhibition curator. Because he felt he had made a fatal mistake, Sudarmadji finally revised the confusion regarding the year of PERSAGI's founding in the mass media.³⁵

³⁰ See Helena Spanjaard, *Het Ideaal van een Moderne Indonesische Schilderkunst 1900-1995: De Creatie van een Nationale Culturele Identiteit*, Ph.D. Thesis, Leiden University, 1998, Sudarmadji "PERSAGI" in Mochtar Kusumaatmadja, dkk., 1990-1991, p. 78 and Imam Buchori, *Latar Belakang Sejarah Pembinaan dan Perkembangan Seni Lukis Indonesia Modern (1935-1950)*, Skripsi, 1966, Bagian Seni Rupa-ITB, p. 23.

³¹ See Helena Spanjaard, 1998, p. 91.

³² See Kusnadi and Sudarmadji, *Seabad Seni Rupa Indonesia dalam Seabad Seni Rupa Indonesia (1876-1976)*, Balai Seni Rupa Jakarta, Katalogus, (Jakarta: Pemerintah Daerah Khusus Ibukota Jakarta, 1976), no page.

³³ Sudarmadji's letters, *PERSAGI dan Kelompok Lima Bandung*, Desember 1988. Archives of Sanggar Luhur Sudjana Kerton, Bandung. "Menurut berkas kami yang notabene turut mendirikan, bahkan ketuanya, seharusnya 1938. Teganya, 23 Oktober 1938."

³⁴ "Satu Abad Satu Balai" in *Tempo*, 11 September 1976, p. 11.

³⁵ See Sudarmadji, "Peranan Aspirasi PERSAGI di Masa Penjajahan" in *Sinar Harapan*, 26 Maret 1977.

In contrast to Spanjaard and Sudarmadji, who obtained PERSAGI's founding year through Agus Djaya, Imam Boechori stated that he obtained PERSAGI's founding year from literary critic H.B. Jassin.³⁶ H.B. Jassin, as a librarian who meticulously archived Indonesian arts and culture documents such as artists' correspondence, magazines, and newspapers, is likely to have kept his notes from this PERSAGI year. As a keen observer and literary critic, on the other hand, he quickly learned about PERSAGI from writings in the literary magazine *Poedjangga Baroe*. The article "Pertoendjoekan Loekisan-Loekisan Indonesia di Kunstkring Djakarta" (Indonesian Paintings Show at Kunstkring Jakarta) in the magazine, which was published in 1941, reviewed the PERSAGI exhibition at *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* as well as confirming the date, month, and year of its founding - which followed Agus Djaya's document.³⁷ Ultimately, the year of PERSAGI's founding can therefore be determined using these sources.

Apart from the differences in years, there are also several versions indicating differences in terms of membership. Sudarmadji, for example, mentioned the names L. Setijoso, Rameli, Abdul Salam, S. Toetoer, Sindusisworo, T.B. Ateng Rus'yan, Syoeaib Sastradiwirdja, Sukirno, and Suromo.³⁸ According to Sudarmadji, they are members who live in Jakarta. Meanwhile, painters Wakidi and Hendrojasgoro are registered as members from outside Jakarta. Writer Ajip Rosidi gives another version by mentioning S. Toetoer, Abdul Salam, Soetijoso, Surono, and Otto Djaya as members of PERSAGI.³⁹ Meanwhile, Claire Holt did not record in detail who the painters were. However, according to her, PERSAGI already had 20 members when it was founded.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, Mustika recorded the names of the members of the association as follows: S. Toetoer, Otto Djaya, Rameli, Soerono, Herbert Hoetagoeng, Toebagus Syoeaib, Soekirno, Mugni, and Abdul Salam.⁴¹ On the other hand, Sanento Yuliman issued a list including Agus Djaya, S. Sudjojono, Abdul Salam, Soemitro, Soedibio, Soekirno,

³⁶ Imam Boechori Zainuddin, 1966, p. 23.

³⁷ See S., "Pertoendjoekan Loekisan-Loekisan Indonesia di Kunstkring Djakarta" in *Poedjangga Baroe*, No.11, Mei 1941, p. 315.

³⁸ Sudarmadji in Mochtar Kusuma Atmadja, 1990-1991, p. 78.

³⁹ Ajip Rosidi, *Pelukis S. Sudjojono*, (Jakarta: Pustaka Jaya, 1977), p. 16.

⁴⁰ Claire Holt, 1967, p.197.

⁴¹ Mustika, *Percakapan Dari Hati Ke Hati Pelukis Indonesia*, (Jakarta: Penerbit Sanggar Krida, 1983), p. 449.

Soeromo, Soerono, Setijoso, Herbert Hoetagaloeng, Toebagoes Syoeaib and Emiria Soenassa.⁴²

In his book *Seni Lukis Indonesia Baru: Sebuah Pengantar* (Indonesian New Painting: An Introduction), published in 1976, Sanento Yuliman added: "Affandi was born in approximately 1910 in Cirebon. He started as an image maker for cinema advertisements in Bandung in around 1933. In 1938 he joined the PERSAGI association."⁴³ But in his dissertation in 1981, Yuliman later corrected the list by saying that Affandi, Soeromo, Soemitro, and Emiria Soenassa were not members but were artists who sympathized with and participated in PERSAGI activities. Sanento obtained this information through an interview with Sudjojono.⁴⁴ Before Sanento, Popo Iskandar - who wrote Affandi's biography - had confirmed that Affandi was not a member of PERSAGI.⁴⁵

The potential implications arising from variations in the writings of PERSAGI members may not significantly hinder the field of historiography. Nonetheless, this phenomenon engenders historical perplexity, thereby diminishing the recognition of each constituent's distinctiveness and individual contributions. Apart from that, as has been mentioned, the case of differences in PERSAGI members shows the carelessness of Indonesian art history writers.

On the Myths of Rejection

As discussed in Chapter One, the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* played a pivotal role in the cultural development of Indonesia by organizing frequent art exhibitions that contributed to the enrichment of the local art scene (Fig.4.3). The shows presented various artistic styles, encompassing traditional Indonesian batik and European avant-garde paintings. With these exhibitions, the institution facilitated the introduction of Indonesians to diverse artistic movements while promoting the amalgamation of indigenous art traditions with global influences. However, in the canon narratives,

⁴² Sanento Yuliman, *Seni Lukis Indonesia Baru-Sebuah Pengantar*, (Jakarta: Dewan Kesenian Jakarta, 1976), p. 11.

⁴³ Sanento Yuliman, 1976, p. 13.

⁴⁴ Sanento Yuliman, *Genese de la Peinture Indonesienne Contemporaine : le Role de S. Sudjojono*, Ph.D. thesis, Ecole Des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1981, p. 102.

⁴⁵ See Popo Iskandar, *Affandi: Suatu Jalan Baru dalam Ekspresionisme*, (Jakarta: Akademi Jakarta dan Dewan Kesenian Jakarta, 1977), 26. See also Ajip Rosidi, "Beberapa Catatan tentang Pameran Seabad Seni Rupa Indonesia (1876-1976)" in *Budaya Jaya*, No.101.Th.IX, Oktober 1976, p. 580.

Bataviaasche Kunstkring is often associated with colonialism in art. Moreover, this institution was also accused of practicing discriminatory politics against Indonesian painters, as can be read in this line: "PERSAGI had to fight against prejudices and the exclusivism of Kunstkring, a body in Indonesia founded in 1901 to assist and promote art, but not for Indonesian artists."⁴⁶



FIGURE 4.3.

The *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* building in Batavia.

(Source: *Gedenkboek uitgegeven bij gelegenheid van het 25-jarig bestaan van de Vereeniging de Ned.-Indische Kunstkring te Batavia, 1902-1927*)

Collection of Leiden University Library
Repro by Aminudin TH Siregar

Negative perceptions of the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* arose because this institution reportedly rejected the PERSAGI exhibition proposal for reasons that insulted the feelings of Indonesian painters. As stated above, following the establishment of PERSAGI, its members actively honed their painting skills. Thus, their works still indicate that the study process needs to be

⁴⁶ The Indonesian National Committee for Expo 1970, *Modern Indonesian Art*, catalog of Indonesian Pavilion, 1970, p. 9. The author is unknown. Note the misspelling of 1901 for the founding of the *Kunstkring*.

improved. Of course, it would be too difficult to assess objectively, considering that only a few of PERSAGI's paintings can be seen in the state or private collections. Interestingly, during the process, between 1938 and 1939, PERSAGI dared to send an exhibition proposal to one of the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* board members, J. de Loos-Haaxman. Sudarmadji believed that PERSAGI's portfolio was rejected by De Loos-Haaxman because "Indonesians are only suitable to be farmers."⁴⁷ In Sudjojono's version, De Loos-Haaxman rejected the proposal without first seeing the painters' work because the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* only exhibited works by famous painters. At that time, recalled Sudjojono, De Loos-Haaxman stated: "We will only make stories about people who already have a name."⁴⁸

In this section, I will dismantle the rejection by De Loos-Haaxman (or *Kunstkring* as an institution), which some historiographers used as an excuse that the colonial authorities had discriminated against Indonesian painters. The valid sources surrounding "the rejection of PERSAGI" still need to be explored, considering its significant myth in the historiography of modern Indonesian art.

In his biography, I found that Sudjojono mentioned the requirements the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* imposed on those who wished to exhibit their works. Among other things, he reiterated that at that time, *Kunstkring* did not want to rent out its space for exhibitions to anyone before "they knew that the paintings to be exhibited were really considered by them to be of good quality." This statement is crucial to underline and discuss first because it has uncovered the veil, proving that, as an institution, the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* has the privilege of determining or selecting artists and works for the exhibition program. While there may be concerns about bias or exclusion in the selection process of prestigious art galleries, it is essential to recognize its role in maintaining high standards and promoting artistic growth. The selection process in a prestigious institution such as *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* is crucial in determining the quality and reputation of the artworks displayed. It would therefore be inaccurate to say that the rejection of the PERSAGI exhibition proposal was purely a discriminatory act. However, implementing a strict selection process by a prestigious and well-established art institution

⁴⁷ Sudarmadji, "PERSAGI" in Mochtar Kusuma Atmadja, dkk., *Perjalanan Seni Rupa Indonesia Dari Zaman Prasejarah Hingga Masa Kini*, (Jakarta: Panitia Pameran KIAS, 1990-1991), p. 77.

⁴⁸ "Informatie dalam Seni Lukis" in *Brochure Kesenian*, Kementerian Penerangan Republik Indonesia, 1949, p.20. "Kita akan membuat tentoonstelling hanya dari orang-orang yang sudah mempunyai nama."

such as the *Kunstkring* would sooner or later draw a critical response from the Indies artists' communities.

Kunstkring, for example, was criticized by *Vereeniging van Beeldende Kunstenaars* (VBK) - an artists' association in Bandung chaired by Wolff Schoemaker, a leading architect in the colonial period. In 1936, as reported by several newspapers, VBK protested that the criteria of the *Kunstkring* for selecting artists were too subjective, biased, and arbitrary. This institution was also accused of not helping promote Indië's artists' potential in art.⁴⁹ The protest also targeted the discrimination shown by the *Kunstkring*. It was thought to want to dominate the understanding of modern art, with a focus only on changes and strangeness of form and color while regarding realist paintings as something from the past. *Kunstkring* was therefore accused of using its authority to spread antagonism towards realist art.⁵⁰

For VBK, *Kunstkring* demonstrated an exclusive artistic standard in determining artists representing the art of the Indies to the Netherlands. It is also conveyed that the *Kunstkring* ignored the meaning of "truly *Indische*" painters who had been working for many years and were generally well-known.⁵¹ This fact is essential because PERSAGI never launched a protest against *Kunstkring* indicating it would like to be included in the canon of art historiography. Besides, the protests from VBK show that the *Kunstkring* was establishing its authority over anyone and was not explicitly aiming at Indonesian artists.

Still related to the VBK protests, I will use the three illustrations of the exhibition program below to emphasize that the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* has acted inclusively. Furthermore, one of the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* programs on the theme of *De Indische Bondscollectie*, which had produced and exhibited paintings by several Indonesian painters, including Sudjojono, had indirectly stimulated the birth of PERSAGI.

⁴⁹ "Het Uitverkoren Vijftal. Een brief aan het bestuur van den Kunstkringen-Bond" in *De locomotief*, 19 May 1936, p. 3. "Welk een subjectiviteit spreekt uit deze uitsluiting, welk een vooringenomenheid met een bepaalde manier van weergave was hier het criterium voor de kunstwaarde!" See also "Critiek op de Kunstkringen" in *Deli courant*, 17 August 1936, p. 3.

⁵⁰ "Moderne Schilderkunst in Indie: Reactionnaire beeldende kunstenaars" in *De Indische courant*, 13 August 1936, p. 13.

⁵¹ "Kunstenaars zijn gegriefd: Het uitverkoren vijftal" in *De Indische courant*, 18 May 1936, p. 17. "Tot het uitverkoren vijftal schilders, waarvan werk op bedoelde nationale tentoonstellingen is ingezonden, behooren geen van de hier jarenlang werkzame en algemeen bekende o.z.t.z. "echt Indische" schilders."

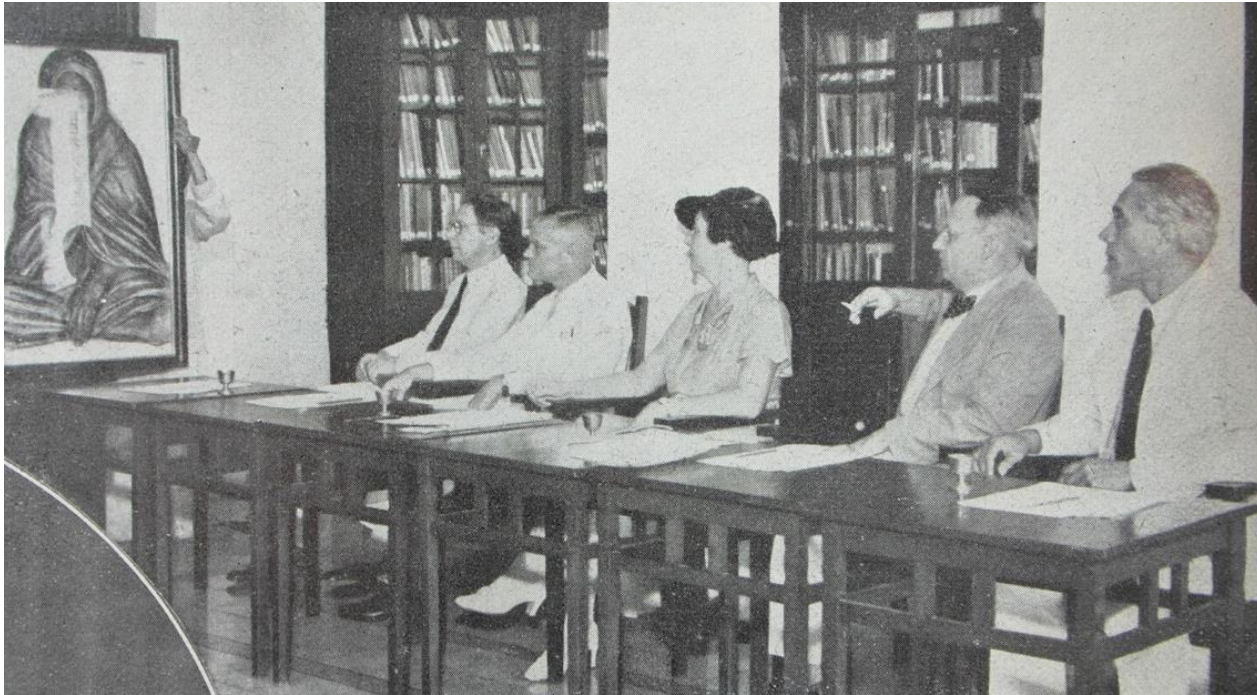


FIGURE 4.4.
Jurying painting at the *Kunstkring*. From left: P. Ouborg, N.E. Burhoven Jaspers, J. de Loos-Haaxman, P.H.W. Sitsen, and Jan Frank.
(Source: *Actueel Wereldnieuws – En Sport in Beeld*, 1 May 1937)

Repro by Aminudin TH Siregar

Since 1936, every May, the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* held a prestigious annual program entitled the *Indische Bondscollectie*, an art exhibition aimed at providing an overview of the state of art in the Indies by compiling a collection of paintings, drawings, graphic works, and sculptures by artists of every kind and nationality residing in the Indies. J. de Loos-Haaxman, P.H.W. Sitsen, M.P. Callenfels-Carsten, Jan Frank, P. Ouborg, and N.E. Burhoven Jaspers were judges and would continue to play a role in the following programs (Fig. 4.4).⁵² Around 24 artists took part in the first *Indische Bondscollectie* program. As for the second program, in 1937, the exhibition featured the works of 20 artists, including three prominent Chinese-Indonesian painters, Siau Tiek Wie, Lee Man Fong, and Kho Wan Gie.⁵³

However, critical reactions began to emerge after the second *Indische Bondscollectie* program, which included questioning the jury's motivations in determining selection criteria and the representation of Indies painters. The newspaper *De Indische Courant* wrote, among other things: "That this exhibition, disregarding the quality of the work, could only be moderately satisfying. The first thing that is striking is, as we have already pointed out,

⁵² "De Bondscollectie - De Jury" in *De Indische courant*, 3 April 1936, p.14 and "Derde Bondscollectie Te Batavia in Mei" in *Het nieuws van den dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 6 January 1938, p. 7.

⁵³ See *Indische Bondscollectie 1937 - schilderijen, teekeningen en prenten, Tentoongesteld in de Theosophische Loge 5 Juni 1937*, catalogue Bataviaasche Kunstkring.

that several painters in the Indies are not represented at this exhibition. This may be due to these painters themselves because they kept aloof for one reason or another, but the cause may also lie with the Federal Board and the Jury. Some painters think that the Jury is too strict in its judgment and orients itself too exclusively in a modern direction. Anyone who sees this latest Federal collection will certainly not be able to support this last view.”⁵⁴

In the *Javabode* newspaper, the writings of Henry van Velthuysen, a Bandung painter who at this time was also active as secretary of the VBK and produced many paintings of natural landscapes, were full of suspicion, questioning the representation of the Indies painters in this second *Indische Bondscollectie* exhibition. According to Van Velthuysen, the collection did not represent the Indies painters because it did not include several of them. He should have mentioned which other Indies painters he was referring to. In any case, he seems to suspect that, whether oriented toward modern painting or not, painters seem to refrain from sending their works to the *Kunstkring*. He blamed the jury selection process. He wrote that many painters in the Indies were dissatisfied with the jury's decision regarding the artists and their works for the second *Indische Bondscollectie* exhibition. In deciding the selection, writes Van Velthuysen, the jury seemed to be ambivalent: on the one hand, applying the selection strictly, while on the other hand, trying to be flexible. In Van Velthuysen's eyes, a selection system like this is problematic because the jury could entirely reject six paintings by a famous painter, and yet the *Kunstkring* accepted a piece of work from an amateur who had only studied oil painting for three months.

According to Van Velthuysen, many painters in the Indies complained because the *Kunstkring* chose only one of the five paintings they submitted, even though most of the painters had worked all year to prepare their work. The painters in this group - Van Velthuysen did not say who they were - regretted that the *Kunstkring* jury's assessment parameters were too harsh. As a result, the painters withdrew all their work from the judging

⁵⁴ Van onzen redacteur te Batavia, "Bevordering der Schilderkunst - Het Bondsheleid. — Aandeel der jury. — Ruimer doelstelling noodzakelijk" in *De Indische courant*, 19 May 1937, p. 12. "Dat deze expositie, de kwaliteit van het werk buiten beschouwing latend, slechts matig kon bevredigen... 't Eerste wat opvalt is, we wezen er reeds op, dat verscheidene Indische schilders niet vertegenwoordigd zijn op deze expositie; dat kan aan deze schilders zelf liggen, omdat zij zich om een of andere reden afzijdig houden, maar de oorzaak kan ook te vinden zijn bij het Bondsbestuur en bij de jury. Er zijn schilders, die van meening zijn, dat de Jury te streng is in haar oordeel en zich te exclusivistisch oriënteert in moderne richting. Wie deze jongste Bondscollectie ziet, zal dit laatste zeker niet kunnen toegeven."

process, significantly affecting their careers and the Indies art scene. Van Velthuysen believes this judging problem has been a rumor since the first *Indische Bondscollectie* program. He reported: "We heard grumbling everywhere. It is a fact that many painters who already have a reputation in the Indies, distanced themselves, because they refused to comply with the judgment of this modern-oriented jury doing harm rather than good to their name." Due to this unfavorable situation, Van Velthuysen appealed to the *Kunstkring* to establish good relations with the painters. However, the *Kunstkring* unfortunately acted as if painters needed this institution more than the *Kunstkring* needed the painters.⁵⁵

Still related to the *Indische Bondscollectie* program, in the *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, Van Velthuysen seems dissatisfied and continued his criticism. Among other things, he wrote: "It is a fact that there are many painters who, although invited by the Association, do not want to submit, because they know that the existing jury is not unbiased towards some *Indische* painters and painting movements and they do not want to expose themselves to a refusal. This is a sober, indisputable fact [...]"⁵⁶

Van Velthuysen's disappointment with the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* received sympathy from the painter Gerard Pieter Adolfs, who diligently painted themes of natural beauty and the *Indische* society. In his letter to the *Indische Courant* newspaper, Adolfs even satirized the arrogance of the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* fine arts committee, which seemed to have authority and control over the development of fine arts in the Indies. He wrote:

For several years now, the visual arts department of the *Bataviaaschen Kunstkring* has been striving for complete control over art. This interference is not only limited to an attempt to only and exclusively import, adore, and encourage 'modern art'; this interference even goes so far that the artist, whose only

⁵⁵ Vn. "Bevordering van de Schilderkunst" in *De Java Bode*, 21 May 1937, p. 2. "Zoo hoorden wij overal mopperen. Een feit is dat vele schilders, die in Indië reeds naam hebben, zich afzijdig hebben gehouden, omdat ze weigeren zich te onderwerpen aan de uitspraak van deze, modern georiënteerde, jury, waarbij hun naam eer kwaad dan goed zou worden gedaan."

⁵⁶ Henry van Van Velthuysen, "Men Schrijft Ons: Booze Schilders" in *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 3 June 1937, p.3. "Het is een feit, dat er vele schilders zijn die, ofschoon door den Bond uitgenoodigd, niet willen inzenden, omdat zij weten dat de bestaande jury niet onbevooroordeeld is jegens enkele Indische schilders en schildersrichtingen en zij zich niet aan een weigering wenschen bloot te stellen. Dit is een nuchter, onomstootelijk feit dat door geen ingezonden stuk of naschrift kan worden ontkend."

salvation is the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring*⁵⁷, sees himself deprived of the luxury of having his own personal expression, conviction and feeling. Another point is: What right does the art circle have to dare to prescribe a "direction" to an audience necessary to support art? The *Kunstkring* does not have to be a store where you can get everything - even "cheap junk" - but nor does it certainly have to be a monopolistic company serving modern art enthusiasts. Thirdly, those who work here in the Indies can learn a lot from what older people have created before us - but the first necessary thing is a basis for our own artistic views. Should we now unthinkingly regard everything from Europe and exhibited by the art circle as the only salvation?"⁵⁷

Dolf Breetvelt, a Delft-born painter who came to Java in the 1920s and was one of the foremost modern painters in the Netherlands Indies, sent a letter to the same newspaper in response to Van Velthuysen and Adolfs, who protested at the *Kunstkring*'s the lack of representation of the Indies painter in the *Indies Bondscollectie* exhibition. In his letter, Breetvelt, among other things, questioned the true meaning of "Indies paintings/painters." He disagrees if the term is only understood as paintings depicting beautiful natural scenes and those selling well on the market. Breetvelt, I assume, wanted to be ironic because he knew that Van Velthuysen and Adolfs were famous for their paintings depicting the natural beauty of the Indies. In his letter, he, for instance, called the lovers of beauty "flamboyant-voluptuous" (*flamboyant-wellustelingen*) painters. Besides, they were very productive painters in the Indies. Even with this, Breetvelt wondered whether the

⁵⁷"Letter of G.P. Adolfs - De Schilderkunst" in *Indische courant*, 26-05-1937, p.6. "Er is sinds eenige jaren door de afdeeling beeldende kunst van den Bataviaaschen Kunstkring gestreefd naar een algeheele zeggenschap inzake kunst. Die inmenging bepaalt zich niet alleen tot een streven om alleen en uitsluitend „moderne kunst" te importeeren, te adoreren en aan te moedigen; die inmenging gaat zelfs zoover, dat den kunstenaar wiens eenig heil is de Bataviaasche Kunstkring', zich de weelde van een eigen uiting-overtuiging en gevoel ziet ontnomen worden. Een ander punt is: Met welk recht durft de kunstkring een publiek, dat toch noodig is om de kunst te steunen, een „richting" voor te schrijven. De kunstkring heeft niet te zijn een toko, waar alles te krijgen is — tot „goedkoope rommel" toe — maar ze behoeft allerminst te zijn een monopoolbedrijf ten dienste van moderne Kunstwellustigen. En ten derde dit: Zij, die hier in Indië werken, kunnen veel leeren van hetgeen ouderen vóór ons gecreëerd hebben — maar het allereerst noodige is een fundament voor onze eigen kunstopvattingen. Moeten wij nu voetstoots alles wat uit Europa komt en door den kunstkring geëxposeerd als het eenig zaligmakende beschouwen?"

artistic achievements and productivity were primarily eligible to be brought to the attention of the art-loving public by the *Kunstkring's* Board.⁵⁸

Regarding Adolfs's insinuation that all things from Europe exhibited by the *Kunstkring* are the only salvation, Breetvelt denies this. Instead, Breetvelt wanted to suggest that the painters of the Indies open their minds through the European art shown in the *Kunstkring* by encouraging a critical evaluation rather than accepting them unquestioningly. Breetvelt then defended that exhibitions of European paintings in the Indies had significant value, especially for the people in the Dutch East Indies, who were isolated from cultural centers in Europe, especially for getting to know new art movements, even though the interest in benefiting from them was relatively small. Nevertheless, it is crucial for Indies painters always to be aware of what has been achieved in Europe in various fields, he suggested.

Breetvelt noted that Adolfs' letters not only expressed desperation but also contained cruel accusations against *Kunstkring*, which had exerted great effort to introduce European painting to the Netherlands-Indies public. Breetvelt continues with a scathing satire on Adolfs and the painters who only beautified the Indies with the following sentence: "The Bondsbestuur (of the *Kunstkring*) should not have done this [exhibit European painting] because, as a result, the public woke up from a peaceful slumber and became aware of painterly views that turned out to be wholly opposed to the sweet, self-satisfied, and business-oriented painting that has flourished here for many years and which has set it as its task to produce pleasant souvenirs from the Indies."⁵⁹

Even though protests haunted it, the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* continued its *Indische Bondscollectie* program. In the third program, the jury selected two paintings by Sudjojono, *Kinderen en een Kat* and *De Djogjanees*, to be exhibited. Also, the painting *Kinderen en een Kat* makes an honorable appearance on the front cover of the exhibition catalogue

⁵⁸ Dolf Breetvelt, "Een antwoord van Breetvelt" in *Indische courant*, 29 May 1937, p. 2. "Zou ik willen vragen wat de heer Adolfs denkt van zovele Indische schilders die we met recht "flamboyant-wellustelingen" zouden willen noemen. Dit vooral met het oog op de enorme productiviteit van bedoelde schilders in dit gangbare artikel. Komen deze soort schilderijen wellicht in de eerste plaats in aanmerking om door Kunstkringbestuur onder de aandacht van het kunstminnend publiek gebracht te worden?"

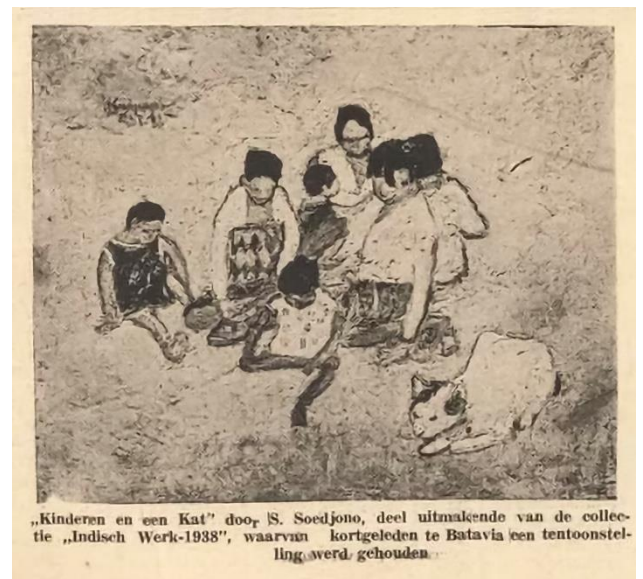
⁵⁹ Dolf Breetvelt, 1937, p. 2. "Dit nu had het Bondsbestuur niet moeten doen, want hierdoor is het publiek uit een rustigen dommel ontwaakt en kreeg kennis van schilderkunstige opvattingen die volkomen tegengesteld bleken met de zoetelijke, zelfgenoegzame en zakelijk ingestelde schilderkunst zoo als die hier lange jaren van bloei gekend heeft en welke zich tot taak gesteld had, het fabriceren van aangename souvenirs uit Indië."

Figure 4.5.
Kinderen en een Kat in as a cover of the
Indische Bonds Collectie catalogue exhibition.

Collection of Leiden University Library
 Photo by Aminudin TH Siregar



Figure 4.6.
 S. Sudjojono, *Kinderen en een Kat* in *Algemeen
 handelsblad voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 14 May 1938.



(Fig.4.5). This painting was also published in the newspapers *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* and *Algemeen handelsblad voor Nederlandsch-Indië* (Fig.4.6).⁶⁰

Apart from Sudjojono, paintings by several other artists such as Henk Ngantoeng, Lee Man Fong, Siau Tik Kwie, Dolf Breetvet, Rudolf Bonnet, Frida Holleman, and Otto Cramer appeared in the exhibition. This exhibition also received positive reviews in the newspaper *De Indische Courant*. The editor acknowledged, among other things, that Sudjojono's painting *Kinderen en een Kat* is worthy of attention even though it is still influenced by the Japanese painter Chioyi Yazaki. The newspaper editor also suggested that Sudjojono could find his own style.⁶¹ Praise for Sudjojono also came from A., a reviewer in *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* who called *Kinderen en een Kat* a painting "which has a special charm due to the strongly central grouping and the fine coloring." Sudjojono's other work, *De Djogjanees*, was considered brilliant, although it was a shame that he was careless in using the medium. Because it is made from cardboard, the paint warps and peels off.⁶²

With such compliments, as a young painter who had just entered the Indies painting scene, in his biography, Sudjojono admitted that the *Indische Bondscollectie* exhibition had raised his confidence. He confessed he first read the open call for a show in the Java Bode newspaper and took the initiative to send his paintings to the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring*. Unexpectedly, the image passed the selection of the jury - who, according to Sudjojono, were authoritative people. "My self-confidence as an Indonesian started to become stronger; I felt like I had risen from the position of "inlander," recalled Sudjojono.⁶³ In addition, apart from being proud of being selected and exhibited, as reported in a newspaper, Sudjojono's painting *Kinderen en een Kat* was sold during the show.⁶⁴ Another critical point to note from

⁶⁰ See *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 3 May 1938, p. 13 and *Algemeen handelsblad voor Nederlandsch-Indië* 14 May 1938, p.3. In other newspapers, the painting *Kinderen en een Kat* was reported to have been sold. See *Het nieuws van den dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 12 May 1938, p. 7.

⁶¹ See Editor, "Kunst de Indische Bondscollectie" - De tentoonstelling in Batavia's Kunstkring in *De Indische courant*, 4 May 1938, p. 13. "Opmerkelijk is het werk van Soedjojono, die naar de catalogus ons inlicht schilderlessen kreeg van Mas Pringadi en van Chiayi Yasaki; de Japansche invloed van den laatsten is maar al te duidelijk; vooral in "Kinderen en een kat." Soedjojono zal zich zijn weg naar een eigen stijl nog moeten zoeken."

⁶² Bd., "De Indische Bondscollectie Kunst In den Soerabaiaschen Kunstkring" in *Soerabaijasch handelsblad*, 19 September 1938, p.6. "Soedjojono exposeert een studie van een Djokjanees; geschilderd op karton is dit stuk kromgetrokken, en d verlaag dientengevolge gescheurd. Zijn werk lijkt ons te goed voor zooveel onverschilligheid ten opzichte van technische details."

⁶³ S. Sudjojono, 2017, 55.

⁶⁴ See the news in short article "Bondscollectie Indisch Werk" in *Het nieuws van den dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 12 May 1938, p.7.

Sudjojono's confession is how this feeling of self-confidence then gave rise to the idea of forming PERSAGI.⁶⁵

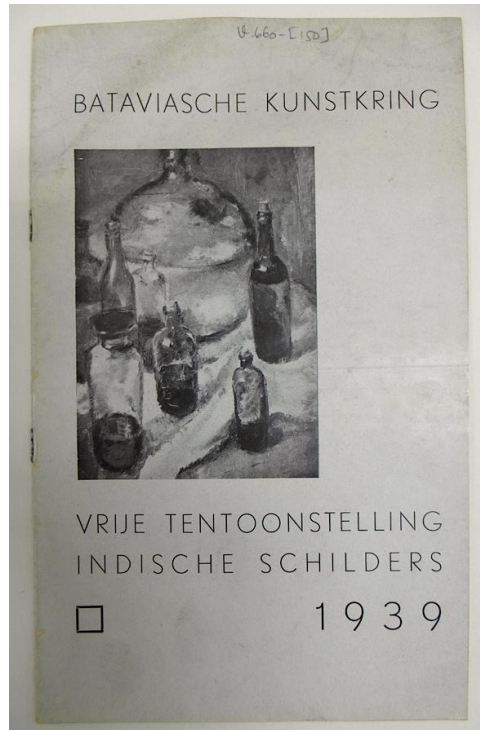


FIGURE 4.7.
The catalogue of *Vrije Tentoonstelling Indische Schilders*.

Collection of National Library of Indonesia
Photo by Aminudin TH Siregar

The opportunity to exhibit Indonesian painters at the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* is not only within the *Indische Bondscollectie* program. Another program entitled *Vrije Tentoonstelling Indische Schilders* (Free Exhibition of Indies Painters) also opened up vast possibilities for all painters (Fig.4.7), because, unlike the previous *Indische Bondscollectie*, for the *Vrije Tentoonstelling* program, this time the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* did not conduct a selection process. In a press release at the end of 1938, this institution planned to invite around eighty painters, each of whom could submit three paintings or drawings. Two hundred and fifty works were expected to be displayed in all rooms of the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* building. The exhibition was planned to be held in early 1939.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ S. Sudjojono, 2017, 56.

⁶⁶ "Schilderijen-Tentoonstelling - Werk van Indische Schilders" in *Het nieuws van den dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 13 October 1938, p. 11.

Bataviaasche Kunstkring created this program in response to previous protests. This is implicitly reflected in the introduction to the exhibition, which says: "In response to the many requests from interested parties, painters, and the press, the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* decided to organize a so-called *Vrije Tentoonstelling*, whereby the submitted works would, therefore, not be selected nor subjected to the judgment of a jury. There was complete freedom in the choice of the subject and the nature of the material, and the only restriction that the Board had to impose on the painters in connection with the available exhibition space was that no more than three canvases could be exhibited from each entrant. In this way, the Board believed it could put together a representative exhibition that, in addition to work by the most famous Indies painters, would include paintings by less prominent and even wholly unknown artists. This would make it possible to obtain a good overview of the current state of Indies painting.

Fifty painters were involved in the *Vrije Tentoonstelling*. This is a major exhibition showing the diversity of painting styles and techniques. Several names with a reputation in the Dutch East Indies, like Jan Frank, Charles Sayers, and Piet Ouborg, joined the show. The Indonesian painters were represented by Henk Ngantoeng, Soemardjo Notodiningrat, Soehargo, Sudjojono, Soedihardjo, Sjoea'ib, and G.A. Soekirno – the last four were PERSAGI members. Apart from them, painters who appeared in the *Kunstkring* program several times, such as Lee Man Fong and Siauw Tik Kwie, also participated. The exhibition took place from 24 February to 5 March 1939, just a few months after the formation of PERSAGI. This exhibition depicted the brotherhood between painters in the Dutch East Indies and, in particular, the flexibility of the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* in operating their exhibition programs. The newspaper *De Indische Courant* welcomed this exhibition, which was said to be of "an international scale." The editor wrote: "In our opinion, this exhibition derives its importance precisely from the fact that it also shows how modern trends are already having an impact here, regardless of how far this work has been successful. The contemporary work gives this exhibition a character of expressive power and a particular degree of interest."⁶⁷

⁶⁷ "De vrije schilders-tentoonstelling" in *De Indische courant*, 25 February 1939, p. 14. "Deze tentoonstelling ontleent o.i. juist haar belang hieraan, dat zij tevens laat zien, dat en hoe moderne richtingen ook hier reeds doorwerken; daargelaten nu in hoever dit werk geslaagd is. Wel kan in het algemeen dit worden gezegd, dat het moderne werk aan deze tentoonstelling een karakter van expressieve kracht en haar een bijzondere mate van belang-" wekkendheid geeft."



FIGURE 4.8. Circular of *Indische Schilders Weerbaar* exhibition.
(Source: *Soerabaijasch handelsblad*, 13 August 1940.)

The Nazi invasion of the Netherlands in May 1940 prompted a reaction in the colony, with a strong desire to show support for the fatherland. This led to the organization of a patriotic exhibition titled *Indische Schilders Weerbaar* (Indies Painters Resilient) (Fig.4.8) by the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring*.⁶⁸ The involvement of painters such as Ida Bagus Kembang, Sudjojono, Agoes Djaya, Lee Man Fong, Rudolf Bonnet, Jan Frank, and Ernest Dezentje in this program politically shows the broad support of painters from various ethnic backgrounds for the Dutch East Indies government. According to reports, the collection was intended to be exhibited in Jakarta and Surabaya. Additionally, *Indische Schilders Weerbaar*

⁶⁸ "Da Bataviaasche Kunstkring herinnert" in *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 16 August 1940, p. 6.

aimed to generate funds to bolster the national defense of the Dutch East Indies (*Weerbaarheidsfonds*) in light of external invasions.⁶⁹ In his speech on the opening night, the chairman of the *Kunstkring*, Van Hasselt, stated: "Indies painters also want to contribute to the great campaign for the revival of the Netherlands. Painters may not have money, but they have art."⁷⁰

Indonesian painters' participation in three *Kunstkring* programs—*Indische Bonds Collectie*, *Vrije Tentoonstelling Indische Schilders*, and *Indische Schilders Weerbaar*—proved that the institution was not discriminatory. On the other hand, it is essential to ensure that, as an official institution, the *Kunstkring* had the authority and internal policy to select works of art by exercising judgement. Of course, the jury's assessment criteria are were not free from criticism. However, as has been explained, if there was any criticism, this came from VBK, not the PERSAGI painters. Thus, it can be stated that the myth about *Kunstkring's* arrogance and discrimination towards Indonesian painters is unfounded. It also indicates that the heroism of PERSAGI against colonial power associated with the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* is more of a nationalism-based myth than a historical fact.

Regarding the Father-in-Law Contribution

Apart from dismantling the myth about the rejection of the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring*, the explanation above also reveals another historical veil related to "father-in-law's help" in Sudjojono's career, which was then connected to PERSAGI's opportunity to exhibit at the *Kunstkring*. It has been previously stated that his debut in the *Indische Bondscollectie* exhibition paved the way for Sudjojono's career. Apart from that, through Baharudin Marasutan's testimony above, it is clear that Sudjojono was used to watching shows of the Regnault collection at the *Kunstkring* building. In short, Sudjojono's name was well known and networked in the Dutch East Indies art field and among the *Kunstkring's* people. However, as discussed below, several Dutch writers tried to construct the impression that Sudjojono's connection to the *Kunstkring* was due to family factors through his father-in-law.

In *Verlaat Rapport Indie*, when giving information about the figure of Sudjojono, De Loos-Haaxman wrote the following: "Sudjojono was the son-

⁶⁹ See "Indische Schildes Weerbaar" in *Soerabaijasch handelsblad*, 13 August 1940, p.6.; "Opening Weerbaarheids-tentoonstelling" in *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 17 August 1940, p.3.

⁷⁰ *De Indische courant*, 30 November 1940.

in-law of Raden Sasmojo, our concierge. He will not have missed a single painting in the *Kunstkring*, especially the Regnault collection."⁷¹ De Loos-Haaxman did not explain how Sudjojono could enter the exhibition space due to their "familial relationship." For example, did Raden Sasmojo open the building door outside visiting hours or through the back entrance?

However, with reference to De Loos-Haaxman, Helena Spanjaard referred to and developed this familial relationship in another context. Spanjaard wrote, "Sudjojono's father-in-law, Sasmojo, worked as a janitor for the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring*. This allowed the young painter to see modern art with his own eyes."⁷² With this assertion, Spanjaard wants to generate a perception among readers that Sudjojono is a fortunate person because, as Sasmojo's son-in-law, he can visit the exhibition in the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* building. Because "The opportunity to see an exhibition of the Regnault collection is a privilege limited only to members of the *Kunstkring* and Europeans."⁷³ With this sentence, Spanjaard also wanted to suggest that there was discrimination from the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* towards Indonesian painters.

Furthermore, Spanjaard imagined that there had been tension between the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* and PERSAGI by saying: "There was generally a significant divide between the *Kunstkring* and PERSAGI members. This distance cannot be explained only from an artistic viewpoint but should instead be considered as a consequence of the tense colonial situation of the time. Sharper contradictions are mirrored in Sudjojono's articles."⁷⁴ Spanjaard did not mention which of Sudjojono's articles expressed tensions with the *Kunstkring*. Apparently, there is no evidence for this

⁷¹ See J.de Loos-Haaxman, 1968, p. 127." Sudjojono was de schoonzoon van Raden Sas Mojo, onze concierge. Hem zal geen enkel schilderij in de Kunstkring, zeker niet uit de Coll. Regnault ontgaan zijn."

⁷² As noted in the "footnotes," Helena Spanjaard referred to the book *Verlaat Rapport Indie*. See Helena Spanjaard, 1998, p. 95. "'De schoonvader van Sudjojono, Sasmojo, werkte immers als concierge voor de Bataviaasche Kunstkring. Daardoor kreeg de nog jonge schilder een optimale kans de moderne kunst met eigen ogen te aanschouwen.'" In another section, Spanjaard also believed that the situation experienced by Sudjojono at that time (because of his father-in-law) made it possible for him to study the Regnault collection. See Helena Spanjaard, 1998, p. 63.

⁷³ See Helena Spanjaard, 1998, p. 96.

⁷⁴ See Helena Spanjaard, 1998, p. 96. "In het algemeen bestond er een grote afstand tussen de Kunstkring en de leden van Persagi. Deze afstand laat zich niet alleen vanuit een artistiek oogpunt verklaren, maar was veel meer een gevolg van de toenmalige gespannen koloniale situatie. De verscherpte tegenstellingen komen naar voren in de teksten van Sudjojono." Spanjaard's remark about "the divide between Kunstkring and Persagi" is a little perplexing. Meanwhile, she did not explain the "tensions," and the "Sudjojono article" demonstrated the contrast referred to. Aside from that, if the "difference in artistic perspectives" Spanjaard referred to was Sudjojono's criticism of Mooi Indië landscape paintings, the argument is moot because Sudjojono's complaint has a different context.

statement. As discussed in the next section, I did not find evidence in Sudjojono's texts indicating the pressures alleged by Spanjaard.

From De Loos-Haaxman (1968), which was later expanded by Spanjaard (1998), Tom van den Berge in *Picasso in the Tropics* (2018) helped perpetuate *Bataviaasche Kunstkring's* perception of discrimination against PERSAGI and also about Sudjojono's opportunity to see the exhibition there only because of his father-in-law's role. Referring to De Loos-Haaxman and Spanjaard, Van den Berge continued that this family relationship had given "Sudjojono the opportunity to see the Regnault collection, even though the majority of visitors to the exhibition at that time were Dutch." Van den Berge also quotes Spanjaard about "the split between the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* and the PERSAGI members." From this point onwards, Van de Berge added a new impression that the "split" or tension between the two caused PERSAGI to be prohibited from exhibiting at the *Kunstkring*. He wrote: "Generally, there was a distance between the Batavia Art Society and the members of PERSAGI. Initially, the Society forbade Sudjojono and PERSAGI members from displaying their paintings in the museum. Still, in May 1941, the Indonesian painters had their first exhibition in the Indies' most prestigious venue for modern art."⁷⁵

I have several arguments to challenge the confusion in the Sasmojo-Sudjojono-*Kunstkring* relationship. First, as already mentioned, Sudjojono's name was already well known at least since the third *Indische Bondscollectie* exhibition in 1938, and, of course, had been connected with the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* several years before he became Raden Sasmojo's son-in-law. It should be noted here that the marriage between Sudjojono and Mia Bustam (Raden Sasmojo's daughter) only took place on 20 April 1943. The two met at the beginning of the Japanese occupation⁷⁶ when exhibition activities at the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* began to decline.⁷⁷ Apart from that, the indication that there is tension between *Kunstkring* and PERSAGI needs to be proven, considering that several PERSAGI members had previously participated in exhibition programs at that institution.

⁷⁵ See Tom van den Berge, 2018, p. 88.

⁷⁶ Interview with Tedjabayu, 4 June 2020 via WhatsApp messenger. Tedjabayu is Sudjojono's eldest son. To read a depiction of the relationship between Sudjojono, Raden Sasmojo, and Mia Bustam, see Mia Bustam, *Sudjojono dan Aku*, (Jakarta: Pustaka Utan Kayu, 2006), pp. 4-36.

⁷⁷ The Regnault collection exhibition was last held in October 1941. See *De Indische courant*, 24 October 1941.

The PERSAGI Exhibitions

Two significant PERSAGI exhibitions took place, the first in 1940 at the Kolff & Co. bookstore and the second in 1941 at the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* - which toured several cities on Java. PERSAGI's works in these two shows received critical responses. Most reviewers regretted the solid Western influence of technique and style in PERSAGI's paintings instead of exploring classical Indonesian art to strengthen painters' personalities. This section will argue that it is essential to stress these assessments, considering that PERSAGI has been mystified as "a nationalist arts association that was successful in carrying out movements against the hegemony of Western colonial art," – as previously discussed. If this is the case, how can PERSAGI counter the West if their artistic aesthetics have been Westernised? In the meantime, it is interesting that Sudjojono did not deny the Westernised tendencies of PERSAGI's paintings. He even doubted the appearance of the "Indonesian style" in PERSAGI's artworks. The PERSAGI exhibition is also essential to investigate since it has never been discussed in canon historiography.

Let us commence from this point. Following the rejection of PERSAGI's proposal by De Loos-Haaxman, a unanimous decision was reached by all members to unite their efforts. Subsequently, the funds were utilized to secure the rental of an exhibition venue.⁷⁸ The inaugural presentation of PERSAGI's significant exhibition was held in March 1940 at the Kolff & Co. bookstore in Batavia. It is crucial to underscore that the exhibition venue should not be misconstrued as "an emergency space," as Sudarmadji may imply.⁷⁹ Instead, it is a distinguished gallery that frequently hosts numerous European and Indonesian painters.⁸⁰

In the newspaper *Het nieuws van den dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, a reviewer welcomed PERSAGI's debut. He affirmed this exhibition had given rise to young painters with extraordinary talents who were also seen as knowing how to express their vision in paintings. According to the author,

⁷⁸ *Brochure Kesenian*, 1949, p.20.

⁷⁹ Sudarmadji, for example, wrote that the exhibition took place "on the terrace of the bookstore" to dramatize that the Persagi exhibition was not well accommodated. See Sudarmadji, 1981, p. 129.

⁸⁰ The exhibition space opened with an exhibition of works by Jan Frank and Rudolf Bonnet on 2 September 1933. The Batavia mayor Voorneman carried out the inauguration. See "Kunstaal Kolff en Co. Burgemeester Voorneman spreekt een openingswoord" in *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 4 September 1933, p. 3.

the PERSAGI painters accepted Western influences without conflicting with their Eastern ones. "Some are still complete naturalists, and others have taken expressionism's direction under Western art's influence. I already expressed that this exhibition was a surprise because it shows us that effects and movements are also at work among Indigenous painters, which promise to evolve in this latest branch of Western-oriented art by Easterners."⁸¹ The reviewer suggested that painters should be selective in choosing works to exhibit.

The *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* newspaper also welcomed PERSAGI's debut by saying that the exhibition represented the latest developments of indigenous painters and emphasized that all painters were inspired by Western painting. PERSAGI painters learned oil painting techniques and drew in Western ways. Among other painters, Soediardjo, whose images offer flat and decorativeness, is an exception. The reviewer considered his paintings to have personality and strength - having an Eastern nuance. Apart from that, the reviewer also praised Sudjojono's paintings, which were conveyed to have surpassed the artistic achievements of other painters. The *Djoengkatan* by Sudjojono is a painting that stands out for its electrifying subtlety of color and its pure placement of image components. The reviewer was impressed by the artistic achievements of Agoes Djajasoeminta's watercolors and Saptarita Latif's painting because her harmonious color scheme is soft and sensitive. As the reviewer advises, painters must carefully select the works before exhibiting them to demonstrate their strengths.⁸²

Sudjojono was the only PERSAGI member who responded to the debut of the PERSAGI exhibition. With the title "Menoedjoe Ke Tjorak Seni Loekis Indonesia Baroe" (Towards an Indonesian New Painting Style), Sudjojono's writing did not express a defense. Instead, he confirmed that Indonesian painters painted using Western painting rules in terms of "feel"

⁸¹ W. "Inheemsche Schilders - Een onrecht goedge maakt" in *Het nieuws van den dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 8 March 1940, p. 7. "Duidelijk treden reeds enkele grootere talenten op den voorgrond. Als wij de korte notities met bijzonderheden omtrent vooropleiding in den catalogus lezen, dan zien wij daaruit, dat verscheidenen der inzenders gewerkt hebben onder leiding van Indische schilders. De meesten zijn nog jong, zeer jong zelfs, en enkelen weten reeds een eigen visie tot uitdrukking te brengen. Er zijn er die nog volkomen naturalist zijn, anderen die onder den invloed der Westersche kunst de richting van het expressionisme zijn ingeslagen. Daarom zeide ik reeds dat deze tentoonstelling een verrassing was, omdat zij ons doet zien dat ook bij de Inheemsche schilders, invloeden en stroomingen werkzaam zijn, die een evolutie in dezen jongsten tak van Westersch georiënteerde kunst van Oosterlingen beloven teweeg te brengen."

⁸² A. "Schilderijtentoonstelling van Inheemsche schilders" in *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 8 March 1940, p.3.

and "color." Sudjojono even firmly stated that the PERSAGI painters had not discovered "the style of Indonesian painting." He writes "Indonesian painting styles" are not "Javanese and Balinese painting styles." The style of Indonesian painting is still transforming because Western culture is still strong. It is unsurprising, according to Sudjojono, for "we have no way to create a pattern that suits the feeling of Indonesian unity. We do not have a mark that suits our *zelfbewustzijn* (self-awareness)."⁸³

Furthermore, continues Sudjojono, Indonesian culture was moving without direction, "One person follows Java-ness, another follows ancient-ness and the other the new-ness of Java and yet another follows Western-ness with all its good and bad. But new Indonesia-ness which is suitable for this era does not exist." Sudjojono then evaluated PERSAGI's achievement at the shows: "All of you have seen the paintings of the PERSAGI exhibition at Kolff, Jakarta. Can we already say that the show was an exhibition of Eastern and Indonesian paintings? No! The subject matter and themes that they used may be subjects, landscapes, and topics from Indonesia. But, the brush characteristics and the sense of colours used are still the characters and colours of the West and their creation method is that of the West."⁸⁴

Sudjojono did not deflect indictments of Westernism as expressed by newspaper reviewers. Likewise, his writing did not attack the "West" frontally or harshly. What he wanted was to get out of this tension of West-East discourse. Western painting, emphasized Sudjojono, should be studied. He even imagined the possibility of creating "something new" from the ongoing Westernization process, which he later imagined as "new styles of Indonesian painting." Sudjojono stated the importance of learning Western painting techniques, and combining "our indigenous and foreign sense." He continued: "This does not mean that we must discard Western influences; no, not at all. We must study their great techniques; currently, we even need to

⁸³ See SS.10 "Menoedjoe Ke Tjorak Seni Loekis Persatoean Indonesia Baroe" in *Keboedajaan dan Masjarakat*, No.5. Th.II, September 1940, 104. "Kita tidak bisa mempoenjai soeatoe tjara mewoedjoedkan (*uitdrukkingwijze*) jang tjotjok dengan perasaan persatoean Indonesia. Kita tidak mempoenjai tjorak jang tjotjok dengan *zelfbewustzijn* (*self-awareness*)."

⁸⁴ SS. 101, September 1940, p. 104. "Yang satoe ke ke-Djawaan, jang satoe ke-koeno-an dan jang satoe ke ke-baroean Djawa dan jang satoe lagi ke-Baratan dengan baik dan boeroeknja. Tetapi ke-Indonesiaan baroe jang tjotjok dengan djamannja ini tidak ada." And "Toeian lihat sadja stéléng loekisan-loekisan "PERSAGI" (Persatoean Ahli-ahli Gambar Indonesia) jang telah diadakan di Kolff, Djakarta. Soedahkah kita bisa mengatakan bahwa stéléng tadi stéléng loekis-loekisan ke Timoeran dan stéléng loekis-loekisan ke-Indonesiaan? Tidak! Barang-barang dan thema-thema jang mereka boeat barangkali barang-barang, pemandangan-pemandangan dan thema-thema dari Indonesia, akan tetapi tjorak-kwas (*penseelvoering*) dan rasa warna mereka masih tjorak dan rasa warna Barat, dan tjara mewoedjoedkan mereka masih tjara mewoedjoedkan Barat."

turn to the West to go to the East. And we must open our souls to include the influence of foreign feelings in life, provided that we do not cripple our original emotions. So, cultivate our authentic taste and that foreign taste so that we will gain a new Indonesian taste that suits our era."⁸⁵

In response to reviewers' suggestions saying that PERSAGI painters must return to their authenticity by exploring Indonesian classic art, Sudjojono disagreed. According to him, Indonesian classical art is an inanimate object stored in the Jakarta Museum.⁸⁶ Sudjojono appealed to Indonesian painters: "You must remember that you will not find much success in studying the art museum, as the soul of the art there smells of incense, covered in mildew, buried in the eras of Majapahit, Mataram, Sri Widjaja and the magnificent Indragiri. It no longer lives. See its greatness of soul as a charm and spirit, which can only remind us of our old creation-process, but with no connection to our lives today."⁸⁷

At this point, I want to briefly discuss the quote above, which clearly shows Sudjojono's attitude towards the new Indonesian art, which is disconnected from its past values. Sudjojono had no desire to "regenerate" Indonesian classical art. Regarding this matter, critic Trisno Sumardjo's view in interpreting Sudjojono's spirit is reasonably correct. Sumardjo once affirmed that through Sudjojono, Indonesian art did not experience a Renaissance, but rather a "réveil" –because it formed something that did not initially exist.⁸⁸ In contrast to Sumardjo's view, Helena Spanjaard – who reminds me of the reviewers of the PERSAGI exhibition in the newspapers – is inaccurate when interpreting the context of Sudjojono's writing as quoted above. According to Spanjaard, Sudjojono, at that time, advised painters to look at art from the past as a source of inspiration for the search for new

⁸⁵ SS. 101, September 1940, p. 106. "Ini tidak berarti bahwa kita haroes memboeang pengaroehnja rasa Barat itoe, tidak, sama sekali tidak. Kita malah haroes mempeladjar tehnik mereka jang bagoes itoe dan kita malah pada waktoe ini terpaksa ke Barat dahoele oentoek ke Timoer. Dan kita haroes memboeka djiwa kita akan memasoekkan pengaroeh rasa asing oentoek hidoep, akan tetapi kita ta' boleh meloempoeahkan rasa aseli kita sendiri. Olahlah rasa aseli kita dan rasa asing tadi, dan kita akan mendapat rasa Indonesia baroe jang tjotjok dengan djaman kita."

⁸⁶ The Jakarta Museum that Sudjojono referred to at that time is now the National Museum of Indonesia.

⁸⁷ SS. 101, September 1940, p. 105. "Anda ta' akan berhasil banjak mempeladjar kesenian Museum itoe, sebab djiwa kesenian disitoe soedah berbae kemenjan, berontjom, terbenam di djaman Madjapahit, Mataram, Sri Widjaja dan kebesaran Indragiri. Dia ta' hidoep lagi. Lihatlah kebagoesan djiwa itoe sebagai djimat dan unicum sadja, jang hanja bisa memperingatkan kita akan tjara-mewoedjoedkan kita dahoele, tetapi tidak memberi kita pertalian langsoeng dengan hidoep kita sekarang."

⁸⁸ Trisno Sumardjo, 1957, p. 127.

Indonesian paintings.⁸⁹ As previously stated, however, Sudjojono wished for the new Indonesian art to be untethered from its past, allowing him and other Indonesian painters to explore uncharted territory and challenge accepted norms. Abandoning historical influences had (in his view) become synonymous with innovation, creativity, and pushing the boundaries of artistic expression.



FIGURE 4.9.
PERSAGI's exhibition catalog, 1941.

Collection of Leiden University Library
Photo by Aminudin TH Siregar

⁸⁹ Spanjaard, 1998, p. 101.



FIGURE 4.10.
PERSAGI exhibition press release in newspapers.
(Source: "De Bataviaasche: Schilderijtentoonstelling" in
Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad, 7 May 1941)

I will go back to the PERSAGI exhibition. According to Sudjojono, De Loos-Haaxman showed her interest in the debut of the PERSAGI exhibition. She attended more than once, indicating she saw the potential in PERSAGI's artworks.⁹⁰ However, apart from that, I did not find any archives that provide detailed reasons for organizing the PERSAGI exhibition at the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* a year after its debut at Kolff & Co. In the exhibition catalog, there is also no information explaining the ins and outs of holding the exhibition (Fig.4.9). What is apparent is that PERSAGI's second exhibition in the *Kunstkring* building was opened from 7 to 30 May 1941, featuring around 60 works by Abdulsalam, Raden Agoes Djajasoeminta, Herbert Hoetagoeng, Iton Lasmana, Sjoaib Sastradiwirja, Raden Soediardjo, S. Soedjojono, G.A. Soekirno, Raden Mas Soemitro, Raden Mas Soeromo, Raden Mas Soerono, Rameli, S. Toetoer, and Emiria Soenassa Wama'na Poetri Al'alam (Fig.4.10).⁹¹ In the following month, as reported in some newspapers, this PERSAGI exhibition traveled to the *Soerabaiaschen Kunstkring* in Surabaya.⁹²

⁹⁰ Sudjojono claimed that De Loos-Haxmaan came to the exhibition seven times. See S. Sudjojono, 2017, p. 63. From other sources, Sudjojono provided information that Loos-Haaxman came three times. See *Brochure Kesenian*, 1949, p. 20.

⁹¹ "De Batavische Kunstkring: Schilderijtentoonstelling" in *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 7 May 1941, p.3.

⁹² *Soerabaijasch handelsblad*, 25 June 1941.

PERTOENDJOEKAN LOEKISAN-LOEKISAN INDONESIA
DI KUNSTKRING DJAKARTA.

(7 sampai 30 Mei 1941).

14 pelokis bangsa Indonesia, antaranja 13 orang jang terkemoea dari perkoempoelan „Persagi“ *) (Persatoean Ahli Gambar Indonesia) di Djakarta, memertoendjoekkan boeah tangannja digedoeng Kunstkring di Djakarta. Dari 60 loekisan jang diperlihatkan, ada 30 dari tangan pelokis Agoes Djajasominta. Pelokis-pelokis lain hanja memperlihatkan 2 atau 3 loekisan sadja.

Agoes Djajasominta: soenggoeh seorang pelokis jang radjin benar, penoeh nafsoe melokis, terboekti pada banjaknja loekisan jang dikirimkan ke Kunstkring.

A. gemar sekali menggambar figuren. Pada loekisannja jang ditjari garis-garis jang permol. Warna koerang diperhatikan: demikian djoega dengan watak benda jang dilokis. Gerak badan jang banjal: ditjiptakannja tidak selaloe dapat memperlihatkan apa jang dikehendaki oleh pelokis. Figureur jang digambarnya universeel, artinja tidak memihak bangsa.



Cliché Balai Poentaka.
Agoes Djajasominta.

*) Persatoean Ahli Gambar Indonesia didirikan tanggal 23 October 1938 di Djakarta. Boelan April 1940 mengadakan pertendoendjoekan jang pertama di gedoeng Kolff. Pertoendjoekan ini ialah pertendoendjoekan jang kedoes dan diika dibandingkan dengan jang pertama sangat banjak madioenja tentang kwaliteit. Sekr. Red. P. Baroe.

FIGURE 4.11.

A review of PERSAGI's exhibition in the *Poedjangga Baroe* magazine by S.

Collection of Leiden University Library
Photo by Aminudin TH Siregar

The second PERSAGI exhibition elicited a more substantial response than the previous one. A review in the *Poedjangga Baroe* magazine (Fig.4.11) by S. stated that the works of the PERSAGI painters have character or personality, although he still needs to determine whether the artworks have an Indonesian style. I believe the review aims to discuss that painting has long been regarded as a powerful form of expression, capable of capturing the essence of a character or national personality. Through the artist's brushstrokes and choice of subject matter, a profound visual narrative emerges, shaped by cultural influences, historical context, and personal experiences. The writer S. seems to want to explore how painters can imbue their works with character and national identity and how their artistic endeavors provide an intelligent and comprehensive reflection of the world around them. Nevertheless, he scrutinized Agoes Djaya, who showcased 30 paintings featuring diverse styles, which proved that Agus had yet to discover a style that resonated with his inner being. S. then recommended that Agoes Djaya prioritize his originality.⁹³ Conversely, S. commended Sudjojono's accomplishments, emphasizing more character on canvas.⁹⁴ S.

⁹³ S., "Pertoendjoekan Loekisan-Loekisan Indonesia di Kunstkring Djakarta" in *Poedjangga Baroe*, No.11, Mei 1941, p.316.

⁹⁴ S., 1941, p.317.

also praised Soeromo's themes, which he described as actively seeking "oriental aesthetics."⁹⁵

De Loos-Haaxman also commented on the PERSAGI exhibition with a brief review in *De Fakkel* magazine. Her writing highlights areas for improvement in painting techniques which she considered below standard compared to European painters and European painters working in the Indies. De Loos-Haaxman compared the achievements of PERSAGI painters with the works of Raden Saleh, which she evaluated as artistically more successful.⁹⁶ De Loos-Haaxman also regrets that PERSAGI's orientation moved too far to the West rather than exploring artistic results from closer regions, such as Balinese art. She criticized this orientation by writing, "all these young painters are oriented towards the West though Indonesia has enchanting painting art like that found in Bali. However, it seems that the PERSAGI painters feel closer to Europe than to the Balinese people."⁹⁷

De Loos-Haaxman was quite cynical when she stated that the paintings of Abdoel Salam, Herbert Hoetagaloeng, Soemitro, Soerono, and S. Toetoe followed the epigones of Impressionism in the Indies, such as Van Velthuysen, Dezentje, and Adolfs. She also questioned Agus Djaya's weak technique in drawing, even though his paintings had the strength of lines. However, Rameli's two paintings were praised for presenting simple compositions and carefully capturing objects. Meanwhile, Soediardjo was advised to return to his hometown in Bali and open himself to the influence of Balinese art.

The painting entitled *Mainan* (Fig. 12) from Sudjojono, a painter who, according to De Loos-Haaxman, was familiar with the *Kunstkring* environment, received praise for his flexibility in painting the objects. Among other painters, De Loos-Haaxman, in her writings, paid attention to and hoped for the artistic achievements of Emiria Soenassa, who had traveled to Papua and Kalimantan. Although appearing quite odd, Sunassa's efforts to combine the beautiful patterns and colors of Dayak and Papuan art, De Loos-

⁹⁵ S., 1941, p.318.

⁹⁶ J.d.L., "Indonesische Schilders" in *De Fakkel*, 1 Juni 1941, pp. 686-687. "Moet gezegd worden dat dit eerste resultaat nog ver beneden peil is, niet alleen in verhouding tot wat in Europa en door de Europese schilders in Indië gemaakt wordt, maar ook in vergelijking tot de 19e-eeuwse Javaanse schilder Raden Saleh, die ofschoon wel hopeloos vereuropeest en zonder enige originaliteit en vol 19e-eeuws formalisme, een voortreffelijk vakmanschap had, wat zijn 20e-eeuwse opvolgers ten enemale ontbreekt."

⁹⁷ J.d. L., 1941, p. 677. "Al deze jonge schilders richten zich naar het Westen, en niet zoals men verwachten zou van Indonesiërs, die vlak bij huis, op Bali, een vitale en boeiende schilderkunst hebben, waaraan zij zich bepaald meer verwant moeten voelen dan aan Europa, naar de Baliërs."



FIGURE 4.12. S. Sudjojono, *Mainan*, 1938.

Postcard – Private Collection
 Repro by Aminudin TH Siregar

Haaxman wrote, still show an authentic personality. De Loos-Haaxman concluded her review by saying she wanted to wait for the next surprises from Emiria Soenassa.⁹⁸

A review in *Indische Courant* by M. presents a different assessment. The author appreciates Soeromo's artistic achievements "that are finished work, stylish, simple and powerful in expression." Meanwhile, the works of Soerono and S. Toetoer are considered very promising. Then, several of Agoes Djaya's paintings were considered attractive and encouraged people to visit the exhibition to see them again. Apart from praise or criticism on technical aspects, the exciting part, in my opinion, is how the author indicates the epigonism to the West through the following statement: "There is the influence of the West on the inspiration of the artists represented here; the

⁹⁸ J.d. L., 1941, p. 688. "Van deze kunstenaar met zijn lange naam zou ik graag meer zien en vooral illustraties van volksverhalen van zijn hand moeten boeiend zijn."

mastery of the material; the fashion/trend specifically; the desire to imitate, which in many cases has led to pernicious imitation, which has led to so much incapability/inability in our contemporary art-poor art."⁹⁹

Nevertheless, the reviewer admitted that he or she did not understand modern art, the indications of which they saw in the PERSAGI exhibition: "the absence of beauty because it was covered by lumpy paint colors, disharmonious composition, deliberate distortion of perspective, and speculative arrogance."¹⁰⁰ Because of this, using "a boat" as a metaphor for a vehicle to find a direction, the reviewer regretted that the PERSAGI painters chose "a boat that is not suitable and does not give hope." The choice towards modern art was dangerous. M., the reviewer, closes the article with a challenging sentence: "There is strength in Indonesian painters, but who will lead them?"¹⁰¹ At this point, Indonesian artist leaders such as Sudjojono are essential. He proved this when responding to criticism of PERSAGI's debut exhibition (see above). His response to the criticism shows that he possessed a unique intelligence allowing him to navigate the complexities of the art world and create safe spaces for dialogue, where different perspectives could be shared, valued, and incorporated into a more collective understanding. Sudjojono hoped that all Indonesian painters would create without paying attention to technique because only through this strategy would the new Indonesian painters be able to develop.

Like De Loos-Haaxman, the editor of the *Indische Courant*, who extensively analyzed the PERSAGI exhibition, expressed disappointment about the significant impact of Western modern painting, ranging from Impressionism to other modern art movements. The newspaper editor found these facts remarkably astonishing. The editor questioned why the PERSAGI painters preferred not to associate their artwork with classical Indonesian art. The editor noticed that only a few paintings exhibit remnants

⁹⁹ M., "Indonesische Schilders" in *Indische courant*, 20 June 1941, p. 13. "Daar is dan de invloed van het Westen op de inspiratie van de hier vertegenwoordigde beeldende kunstenaars; de beheersing der materie; de mode vooral; de zucht tot navolging, welke in vele gevallen heeft geleid tot verderfelijk nadoen, van wat in onze hedendaagsche kunstarme kunst, heeft geleid tot zooveel onmacht."

¹⁰⁰ M., 1941, p. 13. "Hoe kan dat ook anders. Wij, nuchtere wandelaars door de zalen onzer hedendaagsche kunstproducten, begrijpen over het algemeen de hier ten toon gestelde Westersche kunst al lang niet meer! Wij weten wel, dat de natuur een bedriegster is en dat onze moderne schilders pogen de natuur weer te geven, ontdaan van haar schoonen schijn, maar zij zijn helaas nimmer geslaagd in de zinnelijke kern van het geschapene iets schooners te vinden en de pogingen zijn te vaak uitgelopen op bonte klodders verf, onharmonische compositie, opzettelijke vertekeningen van perspectief en speculaties op snobisme."

¹⁰¹ M., 1941, p. 13. "Er schuilen krachten in de Indonesische schilders. Maar wie zal ze leiden?"

of past Indonesia, such as a preference for exaggerated forms, an absence of perspective, and elements of fantasy, which establish a connection between viewers and Indonesia's classical art. The editor believes that the paintings created by PERSAGI painters generally conform to Western modernism. Nevertheless, the editor asserted that aspects of past Indonesia are not unequivocal prerequisites.¹⁰²

To illustrate the imitation of masters of Western painting, the editor gives the examples of Soediarjo, who painted flower arrangements like Vincent van Gogh and the smile of the female figure in Agoes Djaya's image, which is reminiscent of *La Gioconda* (Monalisa). The female figure in Sudjojono's painting, *Di Depan Kelamboe Terboeka* (In Front of an Open Mosquito Net), contains strong suggestiveness. The reviewer also mentioned Emiria Soenassa's achievements with the sentence "still very close to the expression of primitive painting, but has strong characteristics."¹⁰³

The reviewer then divided the tendencies into two groups. Most painters have a strong desire to express themselves through their paintings. Meanwhile, the images of another group tend towards a Western meditative atmosphere. The first group of painters reflected more on searching for a strong Indonesian personality; the other group adapted to Western artistic styles - especially impressionism.¹⁰⁴

Various criticisms that appeared in the media in the context of the PERSAGI exhibition showed dynamics in the Batavian art field at that time in shaping the perceptions and understanding of modern painting. Even though PERSAGI's second exhibition, with the support of the *Bataviaasche*

¹⁰² Editor, 1941, p. 6. "Opmerkelijk is, dat deze schilders in zeer belangrijke mate den invloed van de Westersche schilderkunst hebben ondergaan, van het Impressionisme af tot allerlei moderne richtingen. Van een bewuste poging om aansluiting te zoeken bij de oude Inheemsche kunst, voorzoover nog aanwezig, is geen sprake. Dit zegt natuurlijk niet, dat zich geen sporen van oude inheemsche kunst invloeden doen gelden, men vindt die nog het duidelijkste terug in het karikaturale genre en waar de fantasie, toch ook meest met een karikatuurachtigen inslag, zich kon uitleven. Of het gemis aan perspectief, door zich tot twee afmetingen te bepalen, ook door oude Inheemsche kunsttradities moet worden verklaard, is nog de vraag, veeleer schijnen hier modernistische opvattingen gevolgd."

¹⁰³ Editor, "Indonesische Schilders-Hun werk ten toon gesteld" in *Indische Courant*, 16 June 1941, p. 6. "Een afzonderlijke plaats neemt in het werk van Emiria Soenassa Wama'na Poetri Al'Alam, uit Tanawangko (Noord-Celebes), dat nog zeer dicht bij primitiever uitingen van schilderkunst staat en niettemin een eigen sterke karakteristiek heeft."

¹⁰⁴ Editor, 1941, p. 6 "Bij nadere beschouwing van het geëxposeerde werk blijkt wel, dat de meeste van deze schilders over een sterken uitingsdrang beschikken, terwijl in ander werk een bijna volkomen Westersche meditatieve stemming tot uiting komt. Eerstbedoelden getuigen van een krachtiger persoonlijkheid; de anderen hebben zich bij de Westersche kunststijl — en dan voornamelijk het impressionisme — aangepast."

Kunstkring, was criticized, Sudjojono responded wisely. His essay entitled "Criticus and Peloeikis" (Art Critic and Painter) was a response to reviews of the PERSAGI exhibition, which also represented the voices of Indonesian artists from that time.

Interestingly, Sudjojono's writing does not show his defense of the PERSAGI painters, nor does he defend the critics. Instead, he tried to observe the criticism of these critics more openly - although later, he was somewhat sarcastic about the Dutch critics in Jakarta who did not understand painting in depth. In his writing, Sudjojono initially explained the normative position of critics who stand between artists and the public. According to him, the role of critics is significant. Therefore, it would be wrong, wrote Sudjojono, if some artists claimed they did not need criticism just because the artist's work did not receive praise.

In his writing, Sudjojono sets conditions for an art critic to be objective and able to analyze the psychological dimensions of the painter he/she will be discussing. Unfortunately, in the Dutch East Indies, there were not many ideal art critics according to Sudjojono's criteria. Sudjojono wrote: "Art critics must be able to feel the soul in the picture or painting created by the artist. Because without this skill, they only confuse the public and hinder the development of true art. And it's a shame that many Dutch critics in Jakarta, who are suggested to have a lot of knowledge in this matter, don't understand this obligation at all. Instead, they only confuse the public, especially our public here who still lack basic knowledge to be easily guided in the right direction."¹⁰⁵ Sudjojono also advised artists not to reply to critics even if the criticism tends to be derogatory: "Don't reply or make criticisms of a critic's criticism, even if the criticism is nonconstructive."¹⁰⁶

The PERSAGI exhibition was transferred from the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* to the *Soerabaiaschen Kunstkring* and raised attention. A reviewer in the *Soerabaijasch Handelsblad* with the initial Bd. re-emphasized the significant impact of Western painting. The article begins with the author's

¹⁰⁵ S. Sudjojono "Criticus dan Peloeikis" in S. Sudjojono, *Seni Loekis, Kesenian, dan Seniman*, (Jogjakarta: Penerbit Indonesia Sekarang, 1946), pp. 29-30. "Dia haroes bisa meraba djiwa dalam gambar atau loekisan jang diboeat oleh si seniman. Sebab sonder ketjakapan ini dia akan hanja membingoeng-kan poeblik sadja, dan menghambat kembangnja kesenian jang sedjati. Dan sajang sekali banjak criticus-criticus Belanda di Djakarta, jang katanja djaoeh pengetahoeannja hal ini, ta'mengerti sama sekali akan kewadajiban ini. Mereka membingoengkan poeblik kata saja tadi, apalagi poeblik kita disini jang masih koerang sekali pondamennja oentoek bisa moedah dipimpin kedjoeroesan jang benar."

¹⁰⁶ S. Sudjojono, 1946, p. 31. "Djangan membalas atau memboeat kritik terhadap kritik seorang criticus, meskipoen kritik criticus tadi *afbrekend* sekalipoen."

admission of being perplexed despite multiple visits to the exhibition. Confusion arises because the author does not find the proper criteria to evaluate PERSAGI paintings: “Because most of their works imitate Western views, Western visions, Western technology. Moreover, it is also evident that this imitation - due to the inevitable ambiguity - fails to produce works of high quality.”¹⁰⁷



FIGURE 4.13. To illustrate, the photo portrays the atmosphere of the exhibition opening at *Soerabaiaschen Kunstkring*.

(Source: *Ons Kringnieuws*, Jaargang 1, Nummer 21, 1929)

Collection of Leiden University Library
Photo by Aminudin TH Siregar

The PERSAGI exhibition extended to the *Soerabaiaschen Kunstkring* in Surabaya during June (Fig.4.13).¹⁰⁸ After a month, the exhibition continued at the Blitar Societeit in the town of Blitar.¹⁰⁹ Subsequently, in late August, the PERSAGI exhibition took place at the *Kedirische Kunstkring* in Kediri.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Bd., “Indonesische schilders In den Soerabaiaschen Kunstkring” in *Soerabaijasch handelsblad*, 25 June 1941, p. 2. “Want in hoofdzaak is hun werk: imitatie van Westersche opvattingen, Westersche visie, Westersche techniek. Het ligt bovendien voor de hand, dat deze imitatie door onvermijdelijke tweeslachtigheid niet van hoog gehalte is.”

¹⁰⁸ *Soerabaijasch handelsblad*, 25 June 1941.

¹⁰⁹ *Soerabaijasch handelsblad*, 11 July 1941.

¹¹⁰ *De Indische courant*, 9 July 1941; *De Indische courant*, 27 August 1941.

After the exhibition in Kediri, I found no sources reporting PERSAGI activities. However, in one of his writings, Sudjojono once mentioned the PERSAGI exhibition held in September 1941 in the context of the Kongres Pendidikan Taman Siswa (Taman Siswa Education Congress) in Batavia.¹¹¹ This exhibition appears to be PERSAGI's last exhibition before Japan occupied Indonesia in March 1942.

After examining various reviews of the PERSAGI exhibition, I observed that the reviewers such as De Loos-Haaxman, Bd., M., and some newspaper editors, as mentioned above, predominantly highlighted Indonesian paintings that were influenced by Western art or displayed Western inspirations. They may have expressed this critical perspective to communicate their disappointment with the chosen direction of the PERSAGI painters instead of exploring the traditional origins of their art. However, they also raised a valid concern: the potential risk of perpetuating Eurocentric narratives by adopting modern Western art by painters from colonized nations. This highlights the need for a thoughtful and balanced approach to artistic influences and narratives.

On the contrary, their perspectives might indicate a colonial bias by undervaluing the skills of PERSAGI painters who achieved proficiency in imitating Western art's visual style and traditions. From this standpoint, critics tend to idealize and romanticize Indonesian classical art by emphasizing its innocence or simplicity of form, such as in its decorative styles. It is crucial to note that the colonial art critics of that era categorized and classified Indonesian classical art in a manner that reflected their cultural biases and prejudices. This approach disregarded the unique artistic expression of the PERSAGI painters, underestimated the breadth and depth of art, and undermined the autonomy and identity of the colonized individuals.

I consider that the reviewers provided valuable information to today's readers about the PERSAGI painters' experience absorbing modern Western painting, mainly influenced by Regnault's collection exhibition in Batavia. I can imagine how the PERSAGI painters faced a significant challenge in

¹¹¹ S. Sudjojono, "Herbert Hoetaloeng (1917-1942)" in *Pandji Poestaka*, 24 Oktober 1942, p. 1033. Other sources worth considering to complete this information are the newspapers *Soerabaijasch handelsblad* (24 September 1941) and *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad* (23 September 1941). Both newspapers included congress events, including an arts evening (*kunstavond*). It was reported that various art associations, one of which was probably PERSAGI, enlivened this event.

reconciling the values of Western and Eastern painting and looked for artistic potentiality that would serve their advantage. Specifically, they attempted to master Western techniques such as color usage, composition, perspective, and brushwork. I guess the tension of cultural identity arose due to the desire to integrate Western techniques while they wanted to maintain traditional Indonesian symbols, motifs, and narratives. This was not just an attempt to balance tradition and innovation but a bold attempt to offer a new perspective on their cultural heritage by blending Western elements into their art, showcasing cultural resilience and adaptability.

Due to the unavailability of collections of paintings by PERSAGI members from that time, including reproductions, it is not feasible to thoroughly examine and interpret their artistic accomplishments. Nevertheless, relying solely on exhibition reviews, we can gain insights into how PERSAGI members skillfully employed Western techniques to reinforce and rejuvenate ancestral narratives, symbols, and traditions, thereby preserving cultural customs in an increasingly uniform global context. The outcomes may be perplexing or incongruous with anticipated results - as explicated by the reviewer in *Soerabaijasch handelsblad*. This critical commentary of the reviewer invited an interpretation that what was presented in the PERSAGI exhibition was perhaps an "aesthetic experiment" from "the results of imitating the West."¹¹²

At times, imitation has served as a means of cultural exchange and growth, leading to the development of new artistic styles. However, it has a reason that a reviewer also raised questions about authenticity, cultural appropriation, and the loss of indigenous artistic traditions. But, with a critical lens, it becomes evident that the outcomes of imitating the West in painting are complex and multifaceted.

The PERSAGI exhibition, mainly supported by the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring* network, provides an opportunity to explore the complex dynamics of power, acquisition, opposition, and fusion in the colonial setting. Therefore, it would be unjust to evaluate PERSAGI's historical role solely based on nationalist sentiment, as many art scholars have done. However, it is undeniable that PERSAGI has shown the ability to adapt to the constantly changing circumstances brought about by colonial influence. I argue that its members have offered a unique perspective, expanded cultural horizons, and nurtured a more diverse and comprehensive art community within the

¹¹² See footnote 107.

colonial art scene from its founding in 1938 until its dissolution in 1942.

PERSAGI and Sudjojono

The relationship between Sudjojono and PERSAGI needs to be explained proportionally. The two are frequently viewed as inseparable, or, as Baharudin Marasutan stated, "Sudjojono is synonymous with PERSAGI."¹¹³ Several authors often conflate Sudjojono with the ideology of the association. Sudarmadji, for instance, referred to Sudjojono's ideas when discussing PERSAGI's profile and constructing arguments regarding the association's role in art history.¹¹⁴ Moreover, some art writers assumed Sudjojono was the "spokesman for PERSAGI."¹¹⁵ Sanento Yuliman argues further that Sudjojono's well-known 1939 publication, "Kesenian Meloekis Indonesia: Sekarang dan Jang Akan Datang" (Indonesian Art Painting: Now and Then), is the "PERSAGI Manifesto." Yuliman wrote the following:

The article *Kesenian Meloekis Indonesia: Sekarang dan Jang Akan Datang* published in the periodical 'Keboedajaan dan Masjarakat' in 1939 (republished with the title slightly changed, as the first article in *Seni Loekis, Kesenian, dan Seniman* 1946) took the form of a passionate manifesto. At first, the essay described in a mocking tone the art of painting, which was practiced at that time and which, in his opinion, only served the needs of foreigners. Then, a new generation of painters was announced with joy and enthusiasm. What is meant is the young painters who gathered in PERSAGI, an association formed in early 1938. Then, their ideals and goals are described. The essay ends with a passionate appeal to 'Indonesian painters.' Even though it is not stated explicitly, this is the 'PERSAGI Manifesto.'¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Baharudin Marasutan's statement when responding to Sudjojono's lecture at the Jakarta Arts Council 1977.

¹¹⁴ See Sudarmadji, 1974-1975, pp. 21 - 25.

¹¹⁵ See Jim Supangkat, *Sudjojono Sang Perintis*, Tempo, 10 Januari 2000 and Spanjaard, 1998, 92. See also Suwarno Wisetrotomo in Amir Sidharta (ed.), 1997-1998, p. 59.

¹¹⁶ Sanento Yuliman "Estetika Jiwa Besar" in *Kompas*, 25 Maret 1987. "Artikel 'Kesenian Meloekis Indonesia: Sekarang dan Jang Akan Datang', disiarkan dalam berkala 'Keboedajaan dan Masjarakat' pada tahun 1939 (dimuat kembali dengan judul diubah sedikit, sebagai karangan pertama dalam Seni Loekis, Kesenian, dan Seniman 1946) berbentuk sebuah manifesto yang bersemangat. Mula-mula dalam karangan itu digambarkan dengan nada mengejek seni lukis yang dipraktikkan masa itu dan yang

Regarding Yuliman's opinion, Helena Spanjaard tends to believe that Sudjojono's article was a PERSAGI manifesto.¹¹⁷

This needs to be explained. PERSAGI never printed pamphlets that were announced or distributed as a group manifesto. No recorded documents explain the political motives of art, which reveal their motivations, strategic plans, and ideal artistic views, which are then deliberately aimed to achieve specific revolutionary effects. As discussed previously, PERSAGI was formed with all modesty. The following brief review offers another argument for why Sudjojono and PERSAGI should be examined separately or differentiated.

The progressive thoughts regarding the new art of Indonesian painting, which appeared in the late 1930s to early 1940s, came entirely from S. Sudjojono personally, not on behalf of PERSAGI. In an interview in 1949, Sudjojono once stated, "I, Surono, Sudibio, Agus Djaya, and other friends worked in the Dutch colonial times. I coincidentally wanted to write, but my friends didn't want to."¹¹⁸

In another interview in the 1980s, Sudjojono re-emphasized: "I like writing. If someone says that Persagi has an idea, that is not true. The writings are my ideas. I wrote it. There was never an instruction from the leader of Persagi: 'Hey, Sudjojono you must write!', No. I write because of my intention because of my awareness."¹¹⁹

It is essential to underline the point that Sudjojono emphasized there, that the ideas for his writing did not come from "PERSAGI as orders from its leader" - which in this case was Agus Djaya. Thus, it is clear that Sudjojono wants to differentiate his role from "PERSAGI and Agus Djaya." At this point, I want to correlate the context of Sudjojono's statement with

menurut pikirannya, hanya memenuhi kebutuhan orang asing. Lalu dengan suka-cita dan bersemangat dinyatakan munculnya pelukis-pelukis angkatan baru. Yang dimaksud tentunya ialah para pelukis muda yang berhimpun dalam PERSAGI, perkumpulan yang terbentuk pada awal 1938. Kemudian diuraikan cita-cita dan tujuan mereka. Karangan itu diakhiri dengan seruan berapi-api kepada 'pelukis-pelukis Indonesia'. Meskipun tidak dinyatakan secara tersurat, inilah agaknya 'Manifesto PERSAGI'."

¹¹⁷ See Spanjaard, 1998, p. 91.

¹¹⁸ See Huyung "Informatie dalam Seni Lukis" in *Brochure Kesenian*, Kementerian Penerangan Republik Indonesia, 1949, p. 18. "Pada zaman Belanda, saya, Surono, Sudibio, Agus Djaya, dan kawan-kawan lainnya bekerja. Saya kebetulan mau menulis, tapi kawan-kawan tidak mau."

¹¹⁹ Mustika, *Percakapan Dari Hati Ke Hati Pelukis Indonesia*, (Jakarta: Penerbit Sanggar Krida, 1983), p. 155. "Saya suka dan bisa menulis dan tersebar di zaman Belanda. Kalau ada orang bilang bahwa PERSAGI yang punya ide, itu tidak benar demikian. Tulisan-tulisan itu adalah ide saya sendiri. Saya yang menulis. Tidak pernah ada instruksi dari pimpinan: 'Hei, Sudjojono harus menulis!', tidak. Saya menulis karena niat saya sendiri, karena kesadaran sendiri."

an article by journalist Sides Sudyarto in 1976 that contained Agus Djaya's snide comments regarding awarding the Indonesian Government Arts Award (Anugerah Seni Pemerintah Indonesia)¹²⁰ to Sudjojono. By reading this article, I concluded that a hidden rivalry had occurred between these two PERSAGI figures. This feud also clarifies the meaning of Sudjojono's statement above.

In his article, Sudyarto raises the issue of versions of PERSAGI's leadership in art history writing. In the first version, it was believed that the chairman of PERSAGI was Sudjojono; in the other version, it was Agus Djaya. Sudyarto then speculated that the government might give Sudjojono an arts award based on the first version. However, Sudyarto's arrangements regarding PERSAGI's leadership need to be questioned. Almost no reference mentions Sudjojono as chairman of PERSAGI – except, perhaps, only unjustified rumors. Instead, in the historiography of modern Indonesian art, Agus Djaya's name is always listed as chairman of PERSAGI.

What is clear is that these different versions provoked Agus Djaya's emotions, especially when Sudyarto asked for a response regarding the honor given to Sudjojono. Agus Djaya strongly opposed it, accusing the honor of being an ahistorical act. To Sudyarto, Agus Djaya even admitted that he had sent a letter of protest to Syarif Thayeb, the Minister of Education and Culture of Indonesia, "so that the award was reviewed." For Agus Djaya, the criteria behind the award were unreasonable – if not, it could be stated, "history has been distorted." Because he declared, "Sudjojono is my secretary. The chairman of PERSAGI is myself."¹²¹ In other words, the distinction should be given to Agus Djaya, the former chairman of PERSAGI.

Nonetheless, history says otherwise. Even though he was once chairman of a prestigious association in art history, seen from various angles, Agus Djaya's prestige is not as bright as Sudjojono's as an artist or prolific art critic. For example, Sudjojono's article "Kesenian Meloekis Indonesia: Sekarang dan Jang Akan Datang" in 1939 has become a fundamental reference because it contains Sudjojono's famous criticism of Mooi Indië's paintings. Apart from this writing, while still active at PERSAGI, Sudjojono also produced other groundbreaking essays such as "Basoeki Abdullah dan

¹²⁰ Sudjojono was awarded by the Government in 1970.

¹²¹ Sides Sudyarto, "Ada Pembengkokkan Sejarah PERSAGI: Pembicaraan Kecil dengan Pelukis Agus Djaya" in *Kompas*, 20 April 1976.

Kesenian Meloekis” (Basoeki Abdullah and the Art of Painting),¹²² “Menoedjoe Ke Tjorak Seni Loekis Persatoean Indonesia Baroe” (Towards a New Indonesian Unity Style of Painting),¹²³ and “Seorang Seniman Dengan Sendirinya Haroes Seorang Nasionalis” (An Artist Must Naturally Be a Nationalist).¹²⁴

Sudjojono wrote all his articles not on behalf of PERSAGI, so not on the orders of Agus Djaya. Sudjojono was also not a "spokesperson for PERSAGI," as many art historians writers believe, who would only place him as a subordinate of the chairman or association. The roles of Sudjojono and PERSAGI have to be separated - even though his articles later respired a spirit of nationalism into the association.

Conclusion

This chapter has illuminated how PERSAGI, often framed within the context of nationalism, has unique contributions that have been overlooked. The intricate subtleties, multifaceted interpretations, and interconnections about PERSAGI, crucial to understanding this group's historical context, have been disregarded. The nationalist framework, while it can romanticize and perpetuate preconceived notions, has led to a limited comprehension of PERSAGI. For instance, the canon narrative fails to recognize the significant contributions made by artists and other institutions. In summary, the historiography of PERSAGI has been marred by inaccuracy, prejudice, and excessive glorification.

This chapter has refuted the assertions made by specific individuals who characterized PERSAGI as an adversary of colonial painting or as a collective that purportedly achieved the feat of subverting the dominance of Dutch painters and the discriminatory practices of the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring*. Such views certainly lack a strong foundation. In addition, it is worth noting that several artists affiliated with the PERSAGI movement actively participated in a fundraising exhibition aimed at bolstering the defense capabilities of the Dutch East Indies in anticipation of the imminent

¹²² SS.101., “Basoeki Abdullah dan Kesenian Meloekis” in *Majalah Keboedajaan dan Masjarakat*, No.1. Th.II, Mei 1940, pp. 10-13.

¹²³ SS.101., “Menoedjoe Ke Tjorak Seni Loekis Persatoean Indonesia Baroe” in *Majalah Keboedajaan dan Masjarakat*, No.5. Th.II, September 1940, pp.103-106.

¹²⁴ SS.101., “Seorang Seniman Dengan Sendirinya Haroes Seorang Nasionalis” in *Majalah Keboedajaan dan Masjarakat*, No.8. Th.II, 10 Desember 1940, pp. 182-184.

Japanese invasion. In addition to this particular exhibition, several PERSAGI painters also availed themselves of the opportunity to engage in the exhibition programs organized by the Bataviaasche Kunstkring, among others. It is imperative to emphasize that Sudjojono's artistic trajectory experienced significant advancement through his participation in one of the programs organized by the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring: De Indische Bonds Collectie*.

Sudjojono's success in the aforementioned exhibition was a catalyst for his self-assurance, leading to the establishment of PERSAGI. While Sudjojono's role and contributions to the spirit of PERSAGI are significant, it is important to note that, as previously mentioned, Sudjojono and PERSAGI are not interchangeable entities. Sudjojono's thoughts on modern Indonesian painting were his own, not presented under the auspices of PERSAGI.

This chapter has critically examined the myth surrounding the Bataviaasche Kunstkring's alleged rejection of the PERSAGI exhibition proposal. The prevailing narrative in traditional art historiography suggests that this rejection manifested Dutch discriminatory practices towards Indonesian painters. However, this narrative should be evaluated in light of the piece's artistic merit, considering Kunstkring's discernment process facilitated by a panel of selectors. From this perspective, rejecting fine art is not uncommon in contemporary galleries, museums, and art establishments, challenging the notion of discrimination.

Ultimately, the canonization of PERSAGI in historiography has bestowed upon it a heroic status, often overshadowing alternative viewpoints. This canonization, however, poses the risk of distorting art history writing, promoting exclusion, and preserving biased narratives. Such practices hinder the analysis of the cross-pollination of ideas and the inclusiveness of national art history, calling for a more balanced and comprehensive approach.