



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Indonesian modern art historiography: national and transnational perspectives

Siregar, A.T.H.

Citation

Siregar, A. T. H. (2025, February 5). *Indonesian modern art historiography: national and transnational perspectives*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4178957>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4178957>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Conclusion

This thesis has shown that art history in Indonesia helped provide arguments for constructing national identities. Since President Soeharto mandated the writing of art history, followed by the publication of *Sejarah Seni Rupa Indonesia* (History of Indonesian Art, 1979) by the Ministry of Education and Culture of Indonesia, the Indonesia-centric approach has occupied the central perspective. This nationalistic art history outcome celebrates the myth that modern Indonesian art was born as a result of resistance to the domination of Western art. The content of this historiography prioritizes the role of national artists rather than artists from foreign countries or those who are considered unpatriotic.

Inevitably, using the term "modern art" in these historical products is ambivalent. The limits of modernity are, for example, less comprehensively explained. For example, it is difficult to answer whether modern Indonesian art is a critical reaction to "classical Indonesian art," or is nothing more than a "legacy of experience" from Western art practices in colonial Indonesia. Or, is modern art narrated in the *Sejarah Seni Rupa Indonesia* a combination of the whole inherited?

What is clear is that the book, which acts as the official state publication, creates the impression of discontinuity by, for example, starting the chapter on "Modern Art" (or *Seni Rupa Kontemporer*/Contemporary Art in the book version) with Raden Saleh. Whether or not Indonesia has modern art—a separate study is needed to decide on this—this "art historical canon" contains many problems. These include fundamental issues such as the shortage of historical sources and the narrow narrative, which also determines aspects of continuity and discontinuity.

This thesis has demonstrated that the narrative can be expanded using transnational sources. To this day, this "art historical canon" is being gradually "modified" and "updated" by Indonesian and international scholars, art critics, and curators. However, the existing scholarship does not add new insights or perspectives. This leads to stagnation in Indonesian

modern art historiography, meaning no new history has been written, and old stories have been recycled.

By taking cases from the Dutch colonial (with three chapters: Raden Saleh, Mooi Indië, and PERSAGI), Japanese occupation, and Revolution periods, this thesis has shown that various publications on Indonesian modern art history, written by Indonesians and non-Indonesians alike, need to be revised and supplemented. This thesis has therefore broadened the narrative by expanding the links and sharpening the context using sources that had been overlooked. This research has also shown that adopting a transnational perspective would help us understand the complex relationship between historical sources from Indonesia and, especially, Dutch sources. Moreover, each chapter in this thesis has presented a compilation of overlooked sources, including significant texts and images that have never been included in standard art history.

A nationalistic perspective has become dominant in post-colonial Indonesian modern art historiography. This research has shown that writing about art history from a nationalistic perspective contains various shortcomings. Firstly, it can lead to a narrow and limited understanding of the art of the period, as it tends to focus only on the art produced within a specific country or region without considering the broader cultural and historical context. This approach may ignore the global influences and interactions that have shaped the development of art in that region. Secondly, a nationalistic perspective can sometimes reinforce stereotypes and prejudices about other cultures, leading to a distorted understanding of art and its creators.

The Mooi Indië case, as discussed in Chapter 3, has shown how stereotypes and prejudices have been perpetuated as stigma in Indonesian modern art history. A nationalistic perspective can also lead to a tendency to view the influence of art from different countries and cultures as a threat or form of pressure rather than recognizing its intrinsic worth and contribution to the broader realm of art. Ultimately, a nationalistic viewpoint can hinder our understanding of the intricate and interconnected histories of diverse nations and cultures, leading to a simplistic and inaccurate understanding of their art and its cultural significance.

Adopting a transnational perspective not only helps address nationalistic constraints but also has the potential to transform our understanding of art history. Moreover, a transnational approach is needed since this approach may broaden the links and networks in the writing of

Indonesian art history. Situating art in a worldwide context enables a more refined and all-encompassing comprehension of its historical and cultural importance. With a transnational perspective, Indonesian modern art can be perceived as a global, interconnected system of cultural interchange rather than a sequence of separate regional advancements. This approach enhances our comprehension of the historical and cultural circumstances that mold art and inspires hope for a future where artistic traditions have impacted and engaged with each other throughout history.

Of course, nationalistic approaches still play a significant role today, especially in particular historical periods. In the case of Indonesia, this perspective began to emerge at the end of 1949 and reached its peak in the mid-1950s. A nationalistic perspective in history at that time was needed to create a foundation for the further development of historiography. In addition, this nationalistic art history was an approach to the study of art that emphasized art's role in shaping a nation's identity and culture. This approach is critical in countries with a history of colonization or political upheaval, where art has often been used as a tool for asserting national identity and resistance against external influences. As discussed in Chapters 4 and 7, the identity of Indonesianness in Indonesian art, especially painting, gave rise to controversy.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the significance of the national perspective in writing art history is inevitable. This national perspective allows us to understand how art reflects a particular nation's cultural and social values. It makes it possible to gain insight into the historical, political, and economic factors that influence art creation. The national perspective also helps us recognize the unique qualities of different art movements and styles and their impact on developing the country's artistic traditions. However, it limits our understanding of "our national art," as it does not consider the transnational influences and interconnectedness of artistic movements across borders. Therefore, a balanced approach combining national and transnational perspectives is necessary for a comprehensive understanding of art history, which this dissertation has revealed.

Noto Soeroto's case serves as a poignant example of how the exclusion of those accused of being non-nationalists has turned into a significant loss for art historiography. His works have been overlooked for years and have never been read by art historians, as is proven by the absence of his name from the canon narratives, let alone quotations on his thoughts about art. As this research shows, Soeroto's writings about Iko and Raden

Saleh are essential and ground-breaking texts. His review of Iko in 1910 stands as the earliest historical Indonesian art text written by a non-Western scholar. Taking Noto Soeroto as a case, it is proven that the historical stage becomes more expansive, offering a unique opportunity to reveal transnational relations in art history - as this research intended.

The other case relates to the activities of the Djaya brothers during their time in the Netherlands, which promoted modern Indonesian painting and significantly enriched the public's understanding. However, their activities had almost no meaning in the art historical canon. As discussed above, contemporary sources (*Brochure Kesenian/Arts Brochure*, 1949) even revealed Sudjojono's accusation that Agus Djaya was a "national traitor." The *Brochure* quoted Sudjojono stating that he read Agus Djaya's writings in a Dutch art magazine, which expressed Djaya's desire for the West to lead Indonesian art. This thesis has investigated the magazine Sudjojono referred to and found that the accusations against Agus Djaya were inaccurate.

These cases caused us to become entangled in a national-not-nationalist discourse, which also happened in the case of Raden Saleh, as discussed in Chapter Two. After so many years of relying on art history products with a nationalistic perspective, the most urgent requirement is to escape such an entanglement. Learning from the instances of Iko, Agus Djaya, and Raden Saleh, it becomes apparent that a transnational perspective is beneficial and crucial for writing a new, inclusive history of modern Indonesian art.

Towards an Inclusive Art History

This thesis proposes a rewriting of the existing history of modern Indonesian art, which was subjected to a myopic nationalism once the country achieved its independence. The existing publications are no longer adequate to support the progressive development of art history. Rewriting art history means reducing the dominance of nationalistic perspectives and becoming as open as possible to external factors that have been neglected.

Opening up to the world is a challenge that requires a sincere attitude because it will counter many myths that have been believed for years, such as that Sudjojono is the "Father of Modern Indonesian Painting." As a result, there will no longer be one central figure who plays a role in determining the direction of the discourse. Apart from that, the Indonesian national heroes of the arts will share their roles with so-called "non-Indonesian" artists. As this

thesis has shown, the exhibition of the Regnault collection was not just a possibility but a necessity for the birth of PERSAGI and the emergence of Sudjojono. The significance of Regnault's collection cannot be overstated, as it has left an indelible mark on Indonesian art history.

Another aspect for further research to expand new historical writing is the study of the impact of style in art from one artist to another. Artists bring a unique perspective and technique to their work, influencing their contemporaries and future generations. In Sudjojono's case, for example, given his interest in modern European art as demonstrated by his attending exhibitions of the Regnaut collection and other European painters provided by the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring*, I found that his famous painting entitled *Cap Go Meh* (1940)¹ cleverly combines images from Johan Jacob Voskuil,² James Ensor³, and Piet Ouborg⁴, particularly the presence of the "mask" or "clown" persona (Fig.8.1). Sudjojono must have seen the paintings of the three artists firsthand in the *Kunstkring* building—or at least through the reproductions circulating in Batavia.

As discussed earlier, this research focuses on three mega periods, from the 19th century, represented by Raden Saleh, considered the earliest point in historiography, the Japanese occupation, to the revolution when Indonesia was proclaimed a nation and state. It raises the question of whether there were any historical publications before Raden Saleh and whether Indonesians knew art or painting before him and the existence of artists or painters. These questions are challenging to answer, and even the official state history book in 1979 (*Sejarah Seni Rupa Indonesia*/History of Indonesian Art) still grapples

¹ I owe these preliminary observations to John Clark. We discussed these things informally in 2011 in Canberra, Australia, and I then explored and sharpened them for this thesis by using *Cap Go Meh* as a case.

² I am still looking for exactly which Voskuil painting Sudjojono saw in the Regnault Collection exhibition 1940. However, the "clown" image is a hint that amazed Sudjojono.

³ James Ensor's painting "Carnaval" was displayed at Batavia Kunstkring in the 3rd Regnaut collection exhibition in 1937, and its reproductions appeared in some Dutch East Indies newspapers, indicating that the painting was quite popular at its time. See *De locomotief*, 9 June 1937, p. 3., *Algemeen handelsblad voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, 22 May 1937, p. 2., *De Indische courant*, 22 May 1937, p. II., *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 24 May 1937, p. 11., *De Sumatra post*, 10 August 1937, p. 11, and *Soerabaijasch handelsblad*, 27 May 1937, p. II.

⁴ In Batavia, the painter Piet Ouborg was famous for his interest in old Indonesian masks. He was involved in the activities in *Bataviaasche Kunstkring*. He advised on exhibitions and served on juries. He showed good judgment as to the work of others, which becomes apparent from, among other things, the fact that he recognized the talent at Sudjojono at a very early stage. See Leonie ten Duis & Annelies Haase, *Ouborg: schilder*, ('s-Gravenhage: SDU; Amsterdam: Openbaar Kunstbezit, 1990), p. 17.



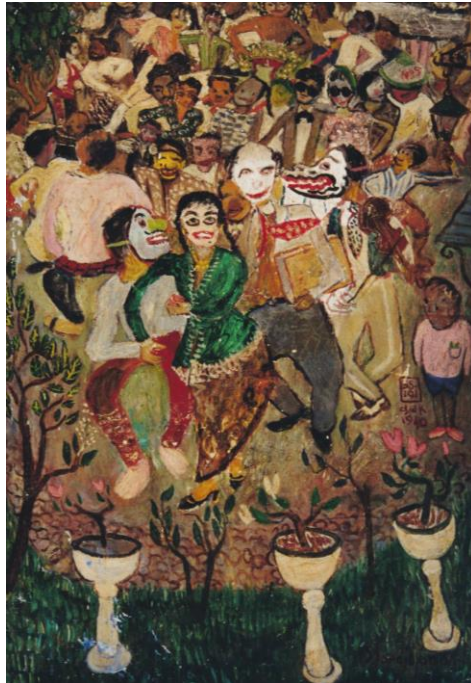
Johan Jacob Voskuil, *Clown*, ca.1940

(<https://rkd.nl/en/explore/images/193268>)



James Ensor, *Carnival in Flanders*, 1929.

(<https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/collection/1419-james-ensor-carnaval-en-flandre>)



S. Sudjojono, *Cap Go Meh*, 1940.

Collection of National Gallery of Indonesia



Piet Ouborg, *Wit Masker*, 1925/1926.

Peter Berger, *Piet Ouborg: van hobbyist tot gewijde*, Den Haag: Gallerie Nouvelles Images, 1979, p.11.



Piet Ouborg, *Two Masks*, 1929.

Leonie ten Duis & Annelies Haase, *Ouborg: schilder*, ('s-Gravenhage: SDU; Amsterdam: Openbaar Kunstbezit, 1990), p. 23.

with this issue. The book jumps from the art of the Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic periods to modern art represented by Raden Saleh, leaving behind an 'unwritten period' before the painter's appearance.

This 'unwritten period' holds significant importance and warrants further research. Writing about the pre-Raden Saleh period has obstacles, such as the lack of original painting collections dating from the 18th century or earlier in Indonesian museums – compared to European museums. Another issue is the problems of authorship related to the many works of art created without their creators' names. Another matter is associated with the equivalence of the term "Seni (Art)" in the perspective of Western Art with the Indonesian context, considering that Indonesia has several terms that refer to art-making. Researchers such as Claire Holt and Samuel Kalff also faced this obstacle in their attempts to discover artistic traces that could be relied upon to answer these questions.

Claire Holt, for instance, posited that creating art was a well-established and recognized endeavor among the Indonesian populace during the pre-colonial era. She refuted the prevailing belief that painting in particular was introduced to non-European cultures solely through colonialism. Subsequently, Holt referenced authoritative sources such as the *Encyclopaedia of the Dutch East Indies* and scholarly texts authored by C.C. Berg. In her account, the article *Kidung Sunda: Inleiding, Text, Vertaling, en Antekeningen* by Berg is referenced, which discusses a portrait painter hailing from the Majapahit kingdom.

Samuel Kalff challenged Thomas Stanford Raffles' observations. In his epic volume *The History of Java*, Raffles contributed one historical source to view Java. He observes that the Javanese already understood proportion and perspective, although improving their drawing and painting skills is needed. After all, contrary to previously stated stories, Raffles declared there were no previous indications that the Javanese had mastered the painting skill. But unfortunately, Raffles did not mention the names of the drafters or painters from that time.⁵ Kalff stated in a lengthy essay for the *Djawa* magazine titled *De Javaansche Schilderkunst* that people in Java already have art-making traditions passed down from generation to generation. However, with the prohibition of Muslims, this tradition faded. Kalff continued his proof by mentioning an ancient Hindu holy book of *Raja Kapa-Kapa*.

⁵ Thomas Stanford Raffles, *The History of Java Vol. I*, (London, 1817), p. 472-743. See also Holt, 1976, p.192.

According to this book, the nobility was familiar with *nyungging* - to paint. Paintings that develop in Bali are another source of evidence. Kalff expanded on the evidence-based Chinese travel reports dating to 1416. People had created an artwork known as *Wayang Beber* - the oldest puppet show played by revealing or unfolding a cloth or paper as an image. Another account came from the Portuguese conquest of Malacca in 1511.

Among the tributes paid to the Portuguese by princes of the Majapahit kingdom at the time was a painting made of *beirami*, a type of linen. The images shown are battle-themed and are said to be realistically painted. Other evidence comes from a report by Frank van der Does, who took part in the first Dutch voyage to Banten, West Java, in 1596. Kalff also added that even though Raffles was not aware of these informations, he at least acknowledged that the Javanese had strong talents.⁶ Kalff added, in the Javanese language, there is evidence that painting was commonplace for people with words such as *ranggajiwa*, *citrakara* (painter), and *citraleka* (to draw or paint).⁷

We can expand on this by imagining that every tribe in Indonesia probably has its own term to describe paintings, drawings, or any skills associated with art. The Bataknese, for example, know the word "Gorga," which has a broad meaning. The term can mean decoration, ornament, pattern, painting, drawing, or statue. Some dictionaries confirm that the *Panggorga* – with the root word “Gorga” – means painter or sculptor.⁸ It is very likely that other tribes, of which there are hundreds in Indonesia, have the same way of giving names to creative work that relies on individual artistic abilities.

The heterogeneity of Indonesia—linguistic, ethnic, and geographic—requires a new conceptualization that no longer relies on the nationalization of the arts formalized and practiced in (mostly) Java. This new conceptualization opens up another area for exploration and is proposed as a site of transnational exchange. Writing this new history of art underscores the importance of sources from various locations, each offering unique and diverse perspectives. Writing new history means targeting the activities of artists, communities, and their work in their transnational networks,

⁶ See S. Kalff, “De Javaansch Schilderkunst” in *Djawa-Tijdschrift van het Java-Instituut*, Vierde Jaargang, 1924, p. 123.

⁷ S. Kalff, 1924, p. 123-124.

⁸ See M.A. Marbun and I.M.T. Hutapea, *Kamus Budaya Batak Toba*, (Jakarta: Balai Pustaka, 1987), p. 48-50. See also Richard Sinaga, *Kamus Bahasa Batak Toba-Indonesia*, (Jakarta: Dian Utama, 1995), p. 129.

institutions, and identities, enriching the discourses around nationalism across geopolitical borders. This also means the need to re-map a transnational Indonesian art history.