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Indonesian modern art historiography: national and transnational perspectives

Siregar, A.T.H.

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Summary

In 1976, President Suharto called for a history of Indonesian art to be written. Two years later, the Indonesian government, through the Ministry of Education and Culture, published *Sejarah Seni Rupa Indonesia* (History of Indonesian Art). The book, published in 1979, is an essential reference for teaching Indonesian art history. Compared to other publications on the same subjects, this book is the first and only publication to use the word 'history' in its title. The Indonesian government stated that the reason for publishing *Sejarah Seni Rupa Indonesia* was the scarcity of publications on Indonesian art by Indonesian scholars. It was also noted that foreign authors generally wrote various publications on Indonesian art, usually in foreign languages, making it difficult for Indonesian people to read them. The Indonesian government also believed that books on Indonesian art written by foreign authors did not accurately represent national aspirations.

The book *Sejarah Seni Rupa Indonesia* is divided into four mega-chapters, each representing one of the historical periods: "Pra-Sejarah (Pre-history)," "Seni Rupa Zaman Klasik di Indonesia (Classical Art Period in Indonesia)," "Seni Rupa Indonesia-Islam (Indonesian Islamic Art)," and "Kedudukan Seni Rupa Baru (Position of New/Modern Art)." The last chapter, which is the subject of this research, is further divided into six sub-periods: "Masa Perintis Seni Rupa Kontemporer Indonesia (The Pioneering Period of Indonesian Contemporary Art)," "Periode Seni Lukis Hindia Molek (The Period of Mooi Indië Painting)," "Berdirinya PERSAGI (The Birth of PERSAGI)," "Seni Lukis Indonesia pada Masa Pendudukan Jepang, 1942-1945 (Indonesian Painting in the Japanese Occupation Period, 1942-1945)," "Periode Pendirian Sanggar-Sanggar Antara Tahun 1945-1950 (The Studio Period, 1945-1950)," "Perkembangan Seni Rupa Modern di Indonesia dari Pengamatan Sesudah 1950 (The Development of Modern Art in Indonesia after 1950)," and "Seni Patung Baru Indonesia (The New Indonesian Sculpture)." To date, the comprehensive sequence and nomenclature of this period has achieved canonical status within the historiography of Indonesian modern art. By proposing a simplified structure into three main periods: "The Dutch Colonial Period," "The Japanese Occupation Period," and "The

Revolutionary Period," this study found three factors that determine how each period is written, both in the book History of Indonesian Fine Arts and similar publications, whether written by Indonesian or non-Indonesian historians. The three factors are the use of "historical sources," the dynamics of "continuity and discontinuity," and the "nation-centered paradigm."

This study highlights the challenges of locating historical sources, which include various artworks, documents, and publications. The scarcity and availability of these sources create limitations for historiographers in narrating the history of modern Indonesian art. These narrative limitations pose problems of 'continuity and discontinuity' in historical events. The analysis of both underlines the importance of placing an event in its historical context by uncovering historical sources. Furthermore, the canon of modern Indonesian art history tends to ignore international interactions and relations. This study concludes that writing history with a "nation-centered paradigm" is too dominant, tending to marginalize non-Indonesian influences and historicizing only nationalist artists as heroes.

This research argues that we can no longer rely on the products of modern Indonesian art history that are currently available, such as the book *Sejarah Seni Rupa Indonesia*, to name one example. Another argument is that if art history is written only from a nationalist perspective, the historical product will limit the historiography or not acknowledge the complexity of the exchange of artistic ideas across national boundaries. Therefore, this dissertation suggests that a nationalist approach should be combined with a transnational approach focusing on cultural transfer, connections, circulation, exchange of ideas, influence, cross-border collaboration, and interrelated or shared histories. Thus, writing art history with national and transnational approaches also involves finding and revealing historical sources deliberately hidden or never used by art historians. Revealing national and transnational historical sources is crucial because it sharpens the historical context and links between individuals (artists, critics, historians) and institutions. Three brief examples by Noto Soeroto, S. Sudjojono, and Raden Saleh will illustrate the above argument.

Noto Soeroto is recognized as the first Indonesian art historian; whose writings were influential yet often overlooked because of nationalist bias. Nationalist critics like Trisno Sumardjo labeled him a colonial stooge, while another critic, Bakri Siregar, criticized him for being excessively Westernized. Another significant figure in modern Indonesian art is Sudjojono, who is often referred to as the Father of Modern Indonesian

Painting. He played a crucial role in the founding of PERSAGI (the Indonesian Drawing Experts Association) in 1938. However, there are other important aspects of Sudjojono's involvement and the significance of PERSAGI in the art scene of colonial Indonesia that are rarely discussed. One such aspect is the *Nederlandsch-Indische Kunstkring*, an institution founded in Batavia in 1902, which later evolved into the *Bataviaasche Kunstkring*. This center for modern art embraced various forms of expression, including dance, theater, and music, and made substantial contributions to the Indies art community.

In January 1935, the *Kunstkring* organized the first exhibition of modern European painting, curated from the collection of Pierre Alexander Regnault. This exhibition presented Regnault's collection in five separate programs. The Regnault collection exhibitions aimed to introduce international art to local artists, bridging the gap between the Dutch East Indies and Western modern painting. Regnault was a collector and entrepreneur, with a paint factory in Java. He also published the magazine *Verf en Kunst*, which became a medium for promoting his paint products and featured articles on modern European painting. Art historian J. de Loos-Haaxman made a significant contribution to the curation of Regnault's collections. Through *Kunstkring*, she facilitated the relationship between Indonesian artists and modern European painters. *Kunstkring* also exhibited the works of Indonesian painters through various programs. In 1940, Sudjojono reviewed the fifth exhibition of Regnault's collection. He praised the artistic quality displayed and encouraged local painters to participate in the modernist movement. Overall, it can be assumed that all the exhibition programs by Kunstkring profoundly impacted the art world in the Dutch East Indies and fostered a new appreciation for modernism among Indonesian painters.

Raden Saleh, also recognized as a pioneer of modern Indonesian painting, shows the influence of European art networks on Indonesian painters. During his two decades in Europe, he established relationships with Dutch and German artists, officials, and aristocrats, which helped him develop an artistic identity that bridged Eastern and Western cultures. Through Raden Saleh, we see the importance of international collaboration and creative exchange during the colonial era.

Therefore, Noto Soeroto, Sudjojono, and Raden Saleh show how ideas, texts, and artworks circulated in cosmopolitan urban centers during the colonial era, demonstrating that modern painting was not confined to

isolated environments. Interactions took place through the movement and relocation of people and objects and through transport and mobility that transcended territorial boundaries. In writing the history of modern art, therefore, it is crucial to move beyond the national by expanding its transnational framework.

As illustrated above, Noto Soeroto, Sudjojono and Raden Saleh represent only a simple picture of the intent and purpose of this research. In addition, this research expands into a broader scope. As mentioned above, it analyses how Indonesian modern art historians have written about three significant periods: the "Dutch Colonial Period," the "Japanese Occupation Period," and the "Revolutionary Period."

The discussion of the Dutch colonial period is divided into three cases: Raden Saleh, Mooi Indië, and PERSAGI; each is analyzed according to the characteristics of its themes, followed by an examination of the Japanese occupation period. The Revolutionary Period is divided into two themes: the call for revolution and the debate on Indonesianness in art.

The chapter on Raden Saleh explores the debate over his identity, asking whether he was a nationalist or a painter loyal to the colonial government. It argues that writing history from a nationalist perspective tends to focus solely on this dichotomy rather than examining his artistic work in depth. The chapter also discusses the so-called 'empty period' in Indonesian art history after Raden Saleh died in 1880. The aim is to trace the influences of those considered to be Raden Saleh's students, as well as other artists outside his immediate circle. In addition, this section aims to create a more comprehensive narrative by gathering insights from various, partly hitherto unused, sources.

The chapter on Mooi Indië explores the origins of Mooi Indië through two prominent painters, Fredericus Jacobus van Rossum du Chattel and Sudjojono, each representing a different perspective on Indonesia. Du Chattel's works, dating from 1913, celebrate lush landscapes and idyllic scenes of rural life, capturing an idealized vision of the archipelago. In contrast, Sudjojono highlights the country's struggles and transformations by depicting themes of poverty and industrialization. His famous critique of landscape painting contributed to the stigma surrounding the term Mooi Indië in the historiography of modern Indonesian art. Sudjojono was not the first to create this stigma; the critic Johannes Tielrooy had done so before him. The rise of landscape painting was closely linked to the arrival of

European artists in the Dutch East Indies, so this chapter also explores their motivations for coming.

The chapter on PERSAGI discusses the myths surrounding this association in the historiography of modern Indonesian art. PERSAGI is the first nationalist artists' association in Indonesia and enjoys a prominent status in discussions of modern Indonesian art. However, this chapter critically analyses the characterisation of PERSAGI as an association that, for example, aggressively opposed colonialism. The study concludes that such views are presented without empirical evidence and are voiced by art historians with a national-centred approach.

The chapter on the Japanese occupation discusses the significant influence of Japan during its control of the Dutch East Indies from 1942 to 1945. This chapter highlights the lack of detailed documentation of critical historical events during some three years. The historiography of the modern Indonesian art canon tends to ignore this period. Japan contributed to developing Indonesian art by providing facilities such as studios, training, art materials, and exhibition opportunities. In 1942, the Japanese military established the *Sendenbu*, a propaganda corps. Through it, Indonesian artists were encouraged to strengthen their national identity in connection with Asian culture.

The chapter on the Call of Revolution presents a revised narrative of the importance of Indonesia's national revolution (1945-1950) for the development of modern art, drawing on neglected sources such as magazines, newspapers, and memoirs. The chapter notes that leading historians of modern Indonesian art, including Claire Holt, Sanento Yuliman, Jim Supangkat, Helena Spanjaard, and M. Agus Burhan, have often neglected chronological context in their accounts. For example, Holt's section on the revolutionary period briefly glimpses events from late 1945 to early 1947, mentioning only the formation of artists' collectives. Similarly, Yuliman and Supangkat simplify the narrative of an artists' migration to Yogyakarta, focusing on the government's relocation of the capital without delving into its implications. Burhan, a newer researcher in the field, also emphasizes the migration of artists but fails to provide a detailed chronology, resulting in a fragmented narrative. Although he lists several artist collectives that formed during this period, his work lacks a clear timeline and context. This chapter argues that the revolutionary period should be explored from multiple perspectives, including artistic production, movements, exhibitions, and artist networks, to provide a more nuanced understanding of the era.

The chapter on Indonesianness explores the debates about the identity of modern Indonesian art during the revolutionary period, which are underrepresented in canonical historiography. The debates about Indonesianness in Indonesian art involved both Indonesian artists and critics, as well as Dutch ones. After the Declaration of Independence, Indonesian artists actively defined their national cultural identity in painting, emphasizing "Indonesianness in art." This was part of a broader desire for self-determination and artistic preservation. The discourse of Indonesian identity in art was complicated by historical influences, particularly colonial legacies, and interactions with Western art. During the revolution, between 1945 and 1950, artists and critics debated the merits of returning to pre-colonial roots or developing a hybrid culture incorporating Indonesian and Western influences. This period was marked by fundamental debates, particularly through exhibitions reviewed in the Dutch-language magazine *Uitzicht*, which sparked a range of opinions among critics such as J.M. Hopman and Simon Admiraal about the authenticity of modern Indonesian art. This chapter also discusses and enriches the context of the debate between Trisno Sumardjo, Soemarno Soetoesoendoro, and Sudjojono, and its impact.

The final chapter offers some research conclusions. At the request of President Soeharto, Indonesia had its first publication of Indonesian art history. However, as the research shows, there are problems with this and other publications that are not straightforward. This concluding chapter also reaffirms the research argument that the birth of modern Indonesian art did not occur in isolation but was developed through a network involving various non-Indonesian individuals and institutions. The canonization of art history has been done through a nation-centered perspective without complete historical sources, thus limiting the scope and impoverishing the narrative. Although scholars and curators are now continuously modifying the history of modern Indonesian art, the resulting publications tend to recycle old ideas, indicating a stagnation in historiography. This research has shown that broadening the narrative with transnational sources and moving away from the national-centric perspective can provide new, broader insights that pave the way for a new, more inclusive Indonesian art history.