



Kamasan Painting at the Australian Museum, and beyond

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The Australian Museum in Sydney houses one of the world's best collections of Balinese art, known as the Forge Collection. Although this collection is a unique document of Balinese visual art, it remains relatively obscure largely because the paintings have remained out of public view since the last major exhibition of the collection in 1978.

Anthony Forge (1929-1991) worked with a community of traditional artists in the village of Kamasan, East Bali during the early 1970s.¹ Although by no means the first foreigner to visit or collect work from Kamasan village, Forge can be credited with the first comprehensive study of traditional art not overshadowed by artistic developments taking place in other parts of the island. While countless observers during the 20th century saw Kamasan as a tradition on the brink of extinction, Forge sought to investigate innovation in traditional art and as such the Forge Collection provides specific insights into the ways that artists innovate while continuing to work within narrative and stylistic traditions.

Assembling the Forge Collection was the main focus of a year's fieldwork and stemmed from a questioning of how the categories of non-Western and traditional art were defined and understood. By combining historical and contemporary works, the

Collection obscures the distinctions between ethnographic artefact and fine art which were keenly felt when the Australian Museum acquired the paintings in 1976. Almost forty years later these paintings continue to offer a novel approach to talking and thinking about art which challenges the way traditional art is conceptualised.

Although the oldest Balinese works in existence date from the 18th century, the traditional art of Bali has roots in the *wayang* (shadow puppet theatre) and in the art of the East Javanese Majapahit kingdom.² However, the category of traditional art in Bali today encompasses a lot more than this narrative painting style. Paradoxically, what is more commonly known as traditional painting is the art which developed around the villages of Ubud, Batuan and Sanur in the 1930s.³ The narrative painting associated with Kamasan village is now often referred to as classical or *wayang* painting. While Kamasan remains the centre of classical painting, the style was practised throughout the island and several villages still boast small numbers of active artists.⁴

The most impressive and permanent display of traditional painting is at the Kerta Gosa in Klungkung, seat of the highest ruler of the Balinese kingdoms until Dutch colonisation of the island in



1908. The panels adorning the ceilings of two pavilions were produced by several generations of artists from nearby Kamasan who served as artisans to the court. They depict a selection of the narratives used in Kamasan painting including scenes from the *Mahabharata* epic, the Buddhist *Sutasoma*, the *tantri* or animal fables, the family saga of *Pan and Men Brayut*, the *plindon* earthquake calendar, and the *pelintangan* showing a combination of the five- and seven-day Balinese weeks. Although the Kerta Gosa panels are painted on board, paintings were usually produced on cloth in a variety of formats and hung within temples or pavilions within courtly homes. Particular narratives were related to the functions of individual temples or parts of temples, such as the story of the black magic witch Calon Arang which is displayed in the *pura dalem*, the temple used to perform rituals associated with death.

Old paintings are rare because when not outdoors and susceptible to the effects of tropical weather, paintings folded in storage are vulnerable to insects which devour the rice paste mixture used to prime the cloths. Once paintings were damaged beyond repair temple communities would replace them with new ones. When Anthony Forge arrived in Kamasan in 1972 to spend a year studying art in the village he actively sought these old paintings. The flags in particular, which are hung on bamboo poles in temples, gateways and compound entrances, bear witness to the ravages of their previous life.

The old works were intended as a record of the ongoing transformations in artistic practice but also to contest the idea of the anonymous or unknown artist. Identifying and recording the names of individual artists was a key element in the collecting project. Despite consultation with several living artists the producers of many older works remain nameless even though they can be recognised by their distinctive styles, like the *Smaradabana*, or *Burning of the God of Love*, which is widely regarded as a superb example of Kamasan work dating from the 1920s.

Artist Mangku Mura (1920-1999) was Forge's main informant. His work demonstrates how working within the range of traditional narrative subjects enables the artist to offer unusual, often humorous, versions of well-known stories. In *The Story of Kala*, Mangku Mura relates a local set of circumstances to Kala, the destructive son of the god Siwa, who, in conventional accounts of the story is allowed to consume humans born on the Balinese calendar day *wuku wayang*. The painted narrative relates the reasons for holding the *Sapuh Leger* shadow puppet performance as a purification ritual to counter the inauspicious traits associated with people born on this day. In the Mangku Mura painting, Siwa tells his son that he may consume the children of the sage Wraspati because they are male and female twins. This references the birth of opposite sex twins to parents of low caste which is considered to make a whole village impure. Around the time that he painted this work, several pairs of twins had been born in the



ritual area around Kamasan which resulted in considerable obstructions to the ritual life of community. In addition to his amusing renditions of the more conventional stories, Mangku Mura explored new narratives and completed a major work dealing with the origins of the Muslim religion inspired by a popular drama performance of the same subject.

Talking to and observing artists at work was not the only means through which Forge explored the criteria that artists used to identify and value the paintings he was collecting. The process of acquisition was itself a means of investigating how Balinese appraised a work of art. It is hardly surprising that once Forge became known in the village as a potential purchaser his home became a veritable trading ground as villagers appeared on the doorstep with old works sourced from temples in the area. Although many collectors shy away from discussing this aspect of their collecting practice, Forge showed a great deal of reflexivity in noting the tenor of these interactions. His notes reflect both the excitement of the avid collector as well as resignation when many of the outstanding old works he saw were not available for sale. Although there is no doubt that his money had clout during difficult economic times, these interactions reveal the Balinese as intermediaries and agents who not only granted access to their temples and homes for the purpose of viewing and photographing art, but who decided which paintings were to be offered for sale.

Many people in Kamasan who were involved in this process reflect positively on their part in the sale and collection of



the temple paintings. It is likely that the time elapsed has also made Forge a more favourable figure in comparison to a number of more recent Balinese art dealers whose unscrupulous behaviour is a repeated subject of commentary in the village. Forge's standing as a collector is also tempered by several recent instances of temple desecration around the island in which *pratima* (small statues) and other objects have been stolen, reportedly for sale on the international art market.⁵ Although local press has tended to emphasise the role of foreigners in these looting operations, opinion in Kamasan weighed much more heavily against the Balinese who were responsible for removing the objects from temples in the first place.

The high value of old paintings and the cost of commissioning replacements is part of the reason that most temples around Bali no longer use traditional paintings. Most temples have replaced them with cheaper and brighter screenprinted satin cloths which one Kamasan artist reasoned appealed more to a Balinese aesthetic preference for the shiny and new. Temples in the Kamasan area continue to commission new paintings but this accounts for only part of the work being produced in the village. The production of souvenir items to service the tourist trade is also significant resulting in innovations such as smaller paintings in single-scene formats which make the paintings easier to explain to a foreigner audience.

Kamasan artists also receive commissions from all over Bali to produce large-scale painted panels on cloth for display in hotel lobbies, university campuses, government offices and private

residences, many of which rival the painted ceilings of the Kerta Gosa in grandeur and scale. The narrative depicted on these large cloths is customised to suit both the display context and the person commissioning the work. Nyoman Mandra (1946 -), the most revered living artist in Kamasan, oversees the most prestigious commissions by employing an extended network of family and former students. The largest works may have up to a dozen people, mainly women, working on them at any time. While women are widely recognised for their work as colourists, in a painting process best described as communal and broken down into stages, defining their contribution as a collective can obscure the spectrum of their practice.

Several prominent female artists work in Kamasan and produce their own work with little or no involvement of male family members. Mangku Muriati (1966 -) makes thought-provoking statements about contemporary Balinese life by exploring the uncharted territory of traditional narratives. While Balinese literature and performing arts are an ongoing source of inspiration, Muriati is a huge fan of Indian films starring actor Amitabh Bachchan and the martial arts of Jackie Chan.

Muriati's work as a temple priest is an important consideration in the painting *Kanda Mpat*, the four 'siblings' born with each person and present at birth in the placenta, amniotic fluid, blood and navel cord. Throughout a person's life they serve as protectors and guardians but they can also bring harm if they are not given the appropriate offerings in daily life and at important rites of passage. In the painting they are depicted in the

manifestations they adopt outside the human body including the demon and animal forms which correlate with the cardinal directions. Although the orientations of the gods and their associated directions and weapons are common in Kamasan ceiling paintings, this is a novel version informed by the religious texts Muriati was required to study before her consecration as a temple priest. These guardians are important in Muriati's life given her decision to carry on the legacy of her late father, Mangku Mura, as both artist and temple priest, both contested roles for a woman within the extended family and village environment. This question of destiny is important to Muriati and she returns to it in other works like *Bhavadat Gita* which depicts a scene from the *Mahabharata* as Arjuna expresses his misgivings about the wisdom of engaging in war with his cousins and is advised by Kresna in his divine form as the god Wisnu.

Although the art of Kamasan village remains firmly and proudly located within Hindu Balinese tradition its circulation as fine art and as part of the island's tourist trade has expanded the potential for artists to explore new themes and ways of working. While this reflects the realities of contemporary Bali it has also ensured that Balinese art history continues to espouse the names of foreign artists associated with the island. The fact that foreigners are so synonymous with the birth of modern art in Bali has meant that its own classical painting tradition is often overlooked as expatriates take centre-stage not only in written accounts of Balinese art but in collections and exhibitions of Balinese art in Indonesia and around the world. Australia is fortunate to have an exceptional collection which challenges this view of the island's art history and tells a different story about exchange in visual art. 🌿

1. Anthony Forge, *Balinese Traditional Paintings: A Selection from the Forge Collection of the Australian Museum*, Australian Museum, Sydney, 1978.
2. Ann R. Kinney with Marijke J. Klokke and Lydia Kieven, *Worshipping Siva and Buddha: the temple art of East Java*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2003.
3. Adrian Vickers, *Bali, a paradise created*, Penguin, Ringwood, Victoria, 1989.
4. Thomas L. Cooper, *Sacred Painting in Bali: tradition in transition*, Orchid Press, Bangkok, 2005.
5. Made Arya Kencana, 'Dozens of Stolen Artifacts Recovered in Bali', *The Jakarta Globe*, 8 September 2010.

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P51: Artist unknown, *Smaradahana*, c. 1925, natural pigment on cotton cloth. 166 x 132cm. Collection: The Forge Collection, Australian Museum. Photograph by Emma Furno.

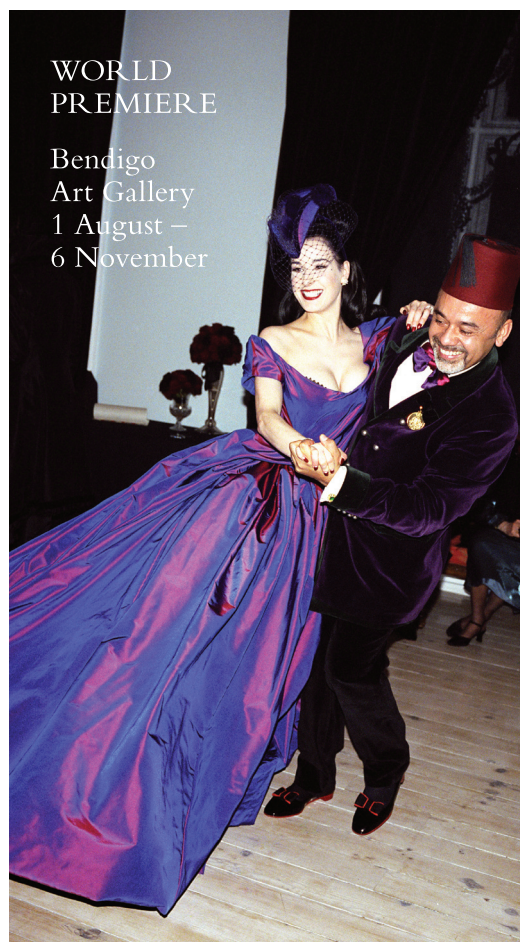
P52: 1/ Nyoman Dogol (1875-1963), detail from the *Calon Arang*, c. 1900, natural pigment on Balinese cotton cloth, 78 x 25cm. Collection: The Forge Collection, Australian Museum. Photograph by Emma Furno.

2/ Artist Unknown, *Rahwana*, c. 1900, natural pigment applied to both sides of cotton cloth, 53 x 49cm. Collection: The Forge Collection, Australian Museum. Photograph by Emma Furno.

P53: 1/ The artist Mangku Muriati, 2011. Photograph by Ida Bagus Putra Adnyana.

2/ The panels of the Kerta Gosa depicting the *Bima Swarga* narrative from the *Mahabharata*, Klungkung District, Bali, 2011. Photograph by Ida Bagus Putra Adnyana.

3/ The artist Mangku Mura, 1973. Photograph by Anthony Forge.



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