

BALI ARTS AND CULTURE NEWS 38

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BACN is an international interdisciplinary medium of communication for those seriously interested in the study of Bali. It is also the official newsletter of the Society for Balinese Studies. Since its foundation in 1981, the Society for Balinese Studies has held regular conferences in Bali each summer. In addition, three international interdisciplinary conferences have been held in Leiden (1986), Princeton (1991) and Sydney (1995). 38 issues of this informal newsletter have now been circulated to a readership on 4 continents, numbering more than 200 people and 15 libraries.

REVIEWS

Haks & Maris, Pre-War Balinese Modernists, 1928-1942: A Dealers' Visual Survey. CD-ROM Software developed by MCL Information Technology, 1998. For IBM Compatible PCs. Cost: US\$29.50.

The new technologies, especially Multi-media/Hyper-media are finally starting to deliver on their academic promise. This important presentation by the Amsterdam-based art dealers Leo Haks and Guus Maris demonstrates that there are many things you cannot do with a book. This CD-ROM is essentially a catalogue of over 400 Balinese paintings, but one which can be searched through a variety of means, allowing the user to display paintings next to each other and create informative connections and groupings of works.

The commercial origins of this CD-ROM-the presentation of a dealers' collection-would probably have been better served by the glossy booklets published by the auction houses. Here we have more the type of database of art which researchers should be creating, and which they will find essential. Perhaps we in the academy should feel a little embarrassed that we have not done anything similar for Indonesian art. In the conception and presentation of the database Haks and Maris evidence a deep passion for the art they have spent so long collecting, a passion which belies what one might expect from the subtitle "A Dealers' Visual Survey".

The collection itself is probably the most important and well-documented one put together since parts of the former Pita Maha collection were brought together to make up the Museum Puri Lukisan in Ubud. The Ubud collection, like the other major historical collections in Bali such as that at the Agung Rai Museum of Art, does not have the focus of the Haks and Maris collection, since the Puri Lukisan surveys Ubud-related art after World War II and, likewise, the ARMA collection is a more general survey of Balinese painting as well as paintings of Bali. The important pre-War collections still on Bali are those now in the Pusat Dokumentasi Bali (the former Gedong Kirtya collection) and the Museum Bali. In other parts of Indonesia, only the Sana Budaya collection in Yogyakarta is as important, but it has been closed to scholars for many years. All three came from collections put together or supplemented by the art dealership of the Neuhaus brothers of Sanur, otherwise known as Tuan Bé.

The only other major well-documented collection covering the period 1928-1942 is that put together by Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead as part of their anthropological work on Bali in the late 1930s. This too had connections to the work of the Neuhauses, although it was mainly concerned with Batuan, where the pair did most of their fieldwork. The non-Batuan parts of the collection have now been sold, and some have found their way into the Haks and Maris collection, particularly key Sanur works and a number of important Ubud pieces. The rest of the Haks and Maris collection has been assembled in the Netherlands, mainly from auctions and the private collections of old colonial hands. It is noteworthy amongst other things because it does not include pieces taken out of Indonesia since the 1940s. This is especially important given the damage unscrupulous dealers working out of Southeast Asia are doing to the national heritage of countries such as Indonesia (admittedly aided at times by corruption in the very public bodies meant to protect cultural heritage).

The Haks and Maris database allows access to individual works from their collection via a wide range of index choices, from artist's name, to village, to content descriptions. Haks and Maris and their team have avoided speculation on the content of many of the pictures, a caution which avoids the kind of misnaming which would be a fatal error for this kind of database. The beauty of the technology is that as academics (such as myself and Hildred Geertz) are consulted as to the identifications of stories, cultural details or the content of explanations in Balinese, such new information can be added. The actual costs of cutting CDs makes this feasible, whereas the costs of republishing a book do not. Ultimately it is to be hoped that this kind of database can be put into a website or presented in an even more easily changed form. One important element which needs further updating is the precise content of the inscriptions in Malay and Balinese written on the backs of many works.

The format of the work allows us to bring together individual paintings for stylistic comparison, something which is downright awkward to do in a book. The images are extremely beautiful in themselves, although here the quality of one's computer is important in terms of viewing of the images - I found my neighbour's PC (I'm a Macintosh user) could not do justice to the colours and did not have the RAM for the kind of quick access and movement other machines can provide (Haks and Maris recommend a Pentium processor and monitor resolution of 1024x768). One of the few limiting aspects of the digital technology is that you can only magnify the images so far before the pixels take over, but even so this is one of the first times that we have been provided with a tool for detailed stylistic analysis of modern Balinese paintings.

It is to be hoped that ultimately this CD-ROM could become the basis for a much larger database of Balinese paintings of the period, and we owe a great debt of thanks to Haks and Maris for setting us on that path, as well as for sharing the beauty of the paintings. Of course, technology can only do so much - you don't have to be Walter Benjamin to know that in the end there is no comparison between a reproduced image and an original work.

Adrian Vickers
University of Wollongong.

This extract from BACN 38 was contributed by *Dr Adrian Vickers, associate professor at the Department of History and Politics at the University of Wollongong, Australia.*

Dr. Vickers has written extensively on Bali and his book, 'Bali, a Paradise Created', Penguin 1989, ranks among the most authoritative post-war general histories of Bali. His new book, with the working title 'Balinese Painting, Mementoes, Diversions, Masterworks, 1928 - 1942', is due to be released in the Fall of 1998.