**Sukarno’s art collection**

Sukarno, the first President of the Republic of Indonesia, was an art connoisseur and lover. Following the proclamation of the Republic of Indonesia in August 1945, the President purchased art works on a large scale, either personally or via an intermediary. He bought works by Indonesian artists, and also European painters such as Rudolf Bonnet, Willem Hofker, Roland Strasser, Theo Meier and the aristocratic Belgian artist Adrien Jean Le Mayeur de Merprés, who had settled on Bali and who was also known as the ‘Paul Gauguin of Bali’. He mostly painted half-naked dancers such as his Balinese wife Ni Pollok. The Dutchman Willem Hofker also painted charming bare-breasted Balinese women. Other favourite subjects for these painters included tropical landscapes, sawas (rice paddies), temples and village scenes: ‘Beautiful Indies romance’. So, how did Sukarno’s extensive art collection become established and what happened to it after his death in June 1970?

Louis Zweers* 1

Bali

Sukarno had a country house in Tampaksiring, about ten kilometres from the artists’ village Ubud, on Bali. Since the early 1950s he had maintained personal contact with a number of artists, including the Dutch painter Rudolf Bonnet, who lived and worked in Ubud for many years. Sukarno — according to Bonnet, with whom he had friendly relations — sometimes commissioned him to do paintings, such as De rijstooog [The rice harvest]. This prominent work, measuring two by one metres, would later hang in the dining room of his palace in Bogor (Buitenzorg). During a visit to Bonnet’s atelier, Sukarno expressed an interest in a large canvas from 1952 with the Italian title Famiglia d’Anticoli. Bonnet was asking a reasonable amount for it. Sukarno tried to bargain but the artist would not budge. In the end, Sukarno bought the work, but the price he paid is unknown. Incidentally, Sukarno had stipulated that he should be the first to receive photographs of and precise information about Bonnet’s completed paintings. Thus, almost all of the large pieces produced by Bonnet on Bali in the 1950s ended up in Sukarno’s collection. Indeed, a total of 14 paintings by Bonnet were to be found in his art collection. However, in 1957, Bonnet refused to sell an oil painting of his permanent model to Sukarno. The artist wanted to keep this double portrait in his possession. He offered the president a work of another model in the same pose. But Sukarno rejected this. He sent an envoy to the painter with the task of acquiring the coveted portrait and, in the end, the sublime work Dua orang gadis [Two young women] was included in Sukarno’s art collection. (image 1) Allegedly, during another atelier visit, this time to the painter Antonio Blanco in Ubud, Sukarno made it clear he wanted a particular work. Blanco remarked, however, that it was not finished. When Sukarno returned some time later, he was told that the painting was still not ready. In this way, Blanco was able to keep the work out of the president’s hands. But six other oil paintings by Blanco did find their way into Sukarno’s art collection.

Cock fighting

From 1935 until 1945, the Austrian painter Roland Strasser lived in the village of Kintamani, situated on the slopes of the Batur volcano on Bali. Strasser painted many dancers, but also tough-looking men and scenes of cock fighting, which was popular on Bali. There are a number of canvases in the Sukarno collection that depict cock fighting, such as a large oil painting of a Balinese man with a white fighting cock prominent in the image. (image 2)
Luxury albums

Sukarno was proud of his art collection, which suggests a preference for nationalistic, romantic paintings, giving an idealised image of the Indonesian revolution, the landscape and women. The painting collection of ex-President Sukarno is sometimes spoken of rather facetiously as it is, apparently, the largest collection of naked women in Southeast Asia. In the Calvanist Netherlands of the 1950s, Sukarno’s artistic preference was almost considered pornographic. But similar paintings by the same artists would later collect impressive sums in the auction houses of Sotheby’s and Christie’s in Amsterdam, London and Singapore.

In 1964 five large-size luxury volumes with the title Paintings and statues from the collection of President Sukarno of the Republic of Indonesia were published. The first four volumes each contain one hundred colour reproductions of paintings, half of which were by the European artists who had worked for many years on the island of Bali. The last volume concerns his collection of sculptures and porcelain; the curator of this collection was the Chinese-Indonesian artist Lee Man Fong, advisor to and official painter at the presidential court. The 5 volumes are a significant documentation of Sukarno’s art treasures. Previously, in 1956, two major books had also been published and three years later another two volumes appeared relating to his paintings, edited by the Indonesian painter Dullah. The Indonesian paintings in Sukarno’s collection, for the most part, originate from three ‘court painters’. Basuki Abdullah, Dullah and Lee Man Fong. They champion the figurative, romantic style. But there are also works by other modern Indonesian painters, such as Subjiono, who captured heroic scenes from independence on canvas. For Sukarno, his art collection was of national importance, and he personally gave Western diplomats and journalists tours of his paintings. The Dutch-American reporter Sam Waagenaar, who was in Indonesia in 1975, visited Sukarno in his palace in Jakarta. Waagenaar told me just before his death in 1997: “It was relaxed conversation in Dutch. Sukarno even showed me his private collection of paintings. He ended the conversation with the confident remark that he very much wanted to go to the Netherlands to meet the Queen.”

Incidentally, President Suharto, a devout Muslim, had had the most offensive canvases removed.12 Sukarno had great plans for his art collection. In 1965 he told his biographer, the American journalist Cindy Adams, that he would leave his paintings to the Indonesian people, and they were to be housed in a yet to be established National Museum. That museum never came to fruition. A number of paintings from Sukarno’s collection still hang in the stately residences, receiving rooms and the offices of the presidential palace in Jakarta. That is to say, the more neutral landscapes and portraits, whereas the more exotic paintings from his collection are unknown.

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Notes

1 This text is based on my article ‘Een etschist Panorama. Sukarno’s kunstverzameling’, in NRC Handelsblad, Culturel Supplement, 15 October 1999, pp. 1-3. This is researched and translated version.
6 Interview by author with Dr. H. de Roo-Bonnet about the biography of Rudolf Bonnet on 1 December 1998, in Amsterdam (NL).
7 See my article about Arthur Jo König ‘Lust Paradise’ in The newsletter issue #61, Autumn 2012, pp. 6-7.
8 Interview by author with the Dutch-American journalist and photographer Sam Waagenaar on 11 February 1997, two months before his death, in the Rosa Spierhus in Laren (NL).
9 Telephone call with the former De Volkskrant journalist, Hans Beynon, Amsterdam (NL), 23 October 1998.