

Kartono Yudhokusumo's Landscapes and his influence in Modern Indonesian Art

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ABSTRACT

Kartono Yudhokusumo is a Modern artist recognized as one of the first decorative artists in Indonesia. This research aims to study Kartono's influences in his style and how he influenced Indonesian Modern Art. Also what motivated Kartono to represent natural landscapes as his main theme. The methodology applied in this research was literature review. Art history and art criticism schemes were used to analyze the topic. From the literature review it was possible to understand his relationship with other important artists of his time, like Sudjojono or Subidjo, and to observe the differences and similarities with other decorative artists. Although Kartono supported Indonesia's independence as a country, he preferred to paint an "ideal world" instead of social issues, unlike artists of his time in Yogyakarta. He also went against the trend when he moved to Bandung and opened his *Sanggar Seniman*, being one of the only decorative artists in Bandung at the time. Originality, naivety, spontaneity are characteristics of Kartono's work that differentiate him from commercial landscape painters or *Mooi Indie* artists. Decorativism is a movement that started with Kartono and some of his contemporaries while searching for a style of their own, and later as a response to connect Indonesian art to its traditional roots.

Keywords: *Kartono Yudhokusumo, Indonesian Modern Art, Decorativism, Nature art*

1. INTRODUCTION

Kartono Yudhokusumo is an Indonesian artist that lived through many important political changes. Being born during Dutch rule, he was influenced by the Western aesthetics of his time: traditional landscape painting and academic aesthetics. Nevertheless, he was also part of the fight for Indonesian independence and national identity, living through the Japanese occupation, he had the opportunity of having different kinds of influence and art education in his lifetime. His artwork being classified as decorative art, exists in between the border of the old colonial era's expectations and the fight for Indonesian identity to become stronger.

1.1. Problem formulation

- What are the characteristics of Kartono's artwork?
- Why did Kartono Yudhokusumo paint Indonesian nature?
- What external influences defined his style and subject of his artwork?

1.2. Scope of problem

- Analysis of Kartono Yudhokusumo's artwork related to Indonesian nature.
- Artists that influenced him and artists that he influenced later.

1.3. Research methods

The methodology applied in this research was qualitative. Feldman's model of art criticism was used to analyse the topic. Discussing the subject with docents experienced in Modern Indonesian art, also played an important role in giving structure to the research.

The data collected was through literature review. Through a compilation of Kartono's artwork images, the themes and aesthetic changes of his paintings were matched with the historical context.

2. ARTIST: KARTONO YUDHOKUSUMO

Although Kartono Yudhokusumo had a very short artistic career (he died at 33), he had many important accomplishments in Indonesia and other countries. He was born in Lubuk Pakan, North Sumatra, on December 18, 1924. His mother gave English lessons

and his father, Marsudi Yudhokusumo, was an art teacher in Yogyakarta and led a *Kethoprak* performance group, where he wrote plays and painted scenography, an environment that was very supportive of his son's talents. Since the age of seven he showed talent for landscape painting. [1]

In the 30's they lived in Jakarta where he graduated from high school, one of his teachers was Syafei Sumardja. Other important modern artists, Sudjojono and Affandi, lived with him and his family for around 5 years.

He studied and was influenced by different artists like C. Yazaki, WFM. Bossardt, B.J.A. Rutgers, T. Akatsuka, E. Dezentje, Ch. Sayers, Rudolf Bonnet and Maria Ehnborg during her time in Bandung.

He was an active participant in POETERA (Poesat Tenaga Rakyat or People's activity center) with which he made his first solo art show in 1943. During the Japanese occupation he also participated in the art show "Kemenangan Peperangan Asia Raya" in 1942, where he won the first prize. During this period Kartono could develop his own style.

After the Japanese occupation was finished, he joined SIM (Seniman Indonesia Muda) in 1947, with the purpose of defending Indonesia's national identity.

In 1945 Kartono moved to Yogyakarta, where he married Nurnaningsih, a beautiful and talented film star who also painted. They had a daughter, Karti Yudaningsih, and divorced in 1952. While in Yogyakarta he passed some hard times, where he worked in trading wood and charcoal, leaving little time for painting. Then he moved to Madiun for a while, and in this place, he became the first leader of Tunas Muda, an association in which Sudibio also participated.

After 1951, Kartono Yudhokusumo lived and worked in Bandung, taught painting, and directed Sanggar Seniman, a studio he founded in 1952 with assistance from the Cultural Bureau, Ministry of Education. In 1955 he remarried and adopted a child.

He received a scholarship from the Ford Foundation to study in the United States but unfortunately died suddenly in Bandung on July 11, 1957, in a motorcycle accident. After Kartono's death, the Sanggar Seniman was taken over by But Muchtar and other members of the Sekolah Bandung who made it a free school in honor of Kartono.

Some of Kartono's artworks are part of the collection of President Sukarno's palace, some others are the collections of the National Gallery in Jakarta, and other paintings belong to Scandinavian, Swedish,

Yugoslavian, Japanese, Dutch and Western European countries collections or private collectors. [2]

2.1. Kartono Yodhokusumo's Artwork

Kartono Yodhokusomo is considered a pioneer artist of the *Decorative art* movement in Indonesian Modern painting. Starting from a realist style of painting, and the free use of color, his style slowly evolved. His bright colorful palette and free shapes allowed him to portray an *ideal world*. He also used an aerial perspective for the plane to be wider and the landscape to look more impressive. Saturated colors, a complex composition and detailed elements are characteristic of his work, depicting landscapes of Indonesian life. [3]

He used oil paints as a medium, although he also has some watercolor sketches with strong black lines. Through nature related themes he created a decorative interpretation of Indonesian people and landscapes.

2.2. Changes in Kartono's style

There was an important change between his earlier landscape and portrait painting and his later work where he became more contemplative and further from his early impressionistic style, he started using darker hues and thick contours.

The change in his style can be clearly tracked in relation with his life events in the middle of the transition from Dutch East Indies to Independent Indonesia. During the Japanese occupation we can see some of his sketches in watercolor and ink. Besides landscape painting, which he had been doing since he was seven years old, he explored other topics like human figure.



Figure 1 *Jajanan Bocah*, (1945) watercolor on paper, 28 x 20 cm. [4].

After the Japanese occupation was over, Kartono passed through economic difficulties in Yogyakarta. From 1945 to 1949 Indonesia was still fighting to remain Independent from the Dutch and therefore there was still a lot of instability. During this period, he also joined *Seniman Indonesia Muda* (SIM), and portrayed in his artwork battle scenes as many other artists in the nationalist art groups documented the events. Claire Holt commented about the dark color palette of these times that, although it fitted the revolutionary atmosphere, one artist commented that the reason for this general change in color was they couldn't find lead white paint easily at the time. [5]



Figure 2 . *Pertempuran di Pengok* (1949) Oil paint on canvas, 180x 130 cm.[1]

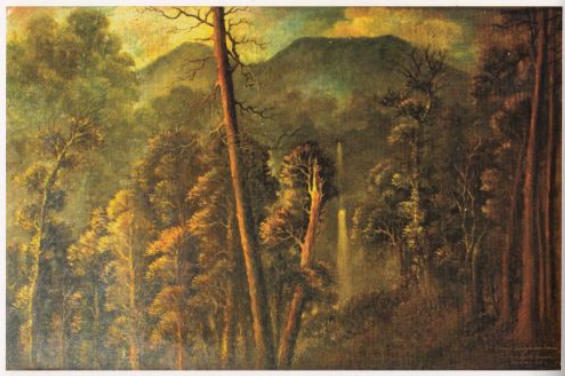


Figure 3 . *Goenoeng Tangkoeban Perahu (1950) Oil paint on canvas, 76x 117 cm. [1]*

In 1951 he moved to Bandung, as a director of a *Sanggar Seniman*, supported by the Ministry of Education. From this time until his death, Kartono returned to landscape painting, his style becomes more decorative and less naturalist. Some of his paintings have bright, colorful palettes, and others have dry trees and dark tones. He plays freely with color and makes harmonic compositions.

Compared to other commercial landscape painters, Kartono's artwork stands out, he presents certain naivety and freshness in his painting that make his creations more authentic.

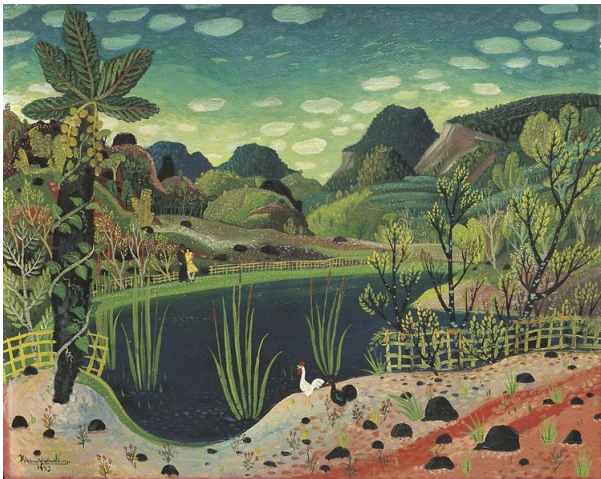


Figure 4 . . *Landscape (1953) 48 x 60 cm, Oil paint on canvas. [4]*



Figure 5 . *Fantasy Landscape (1957) Oil paint on canvas, 80 x 106 cm. [1]*

2.1. Critics on his work

During the decolonization process, many of the isolated intellectuals in the colonies reacted to their country's production as foreigners. This alienation gave place to Indonesian critics classifying many of Indonesian artworks as "low quality". [8]

Trisno Sumardjo and Soewarjono criticized Indonesian art students as not having enough quality in their work, they suggested their technique was weak. At the same time, they gave positive critics to Kartono and Widayat's decorative works, which were also more reliable works. In Soewarjono's opinion Widayat has "keberanian berbicara sendiri" (the courage to speak for himself).

In an almost contradictory way, Sumardjo admired the spontaneity and honesty of children's artworks but wish they were not influenced by Western education. This was a trait that he also found and admired from

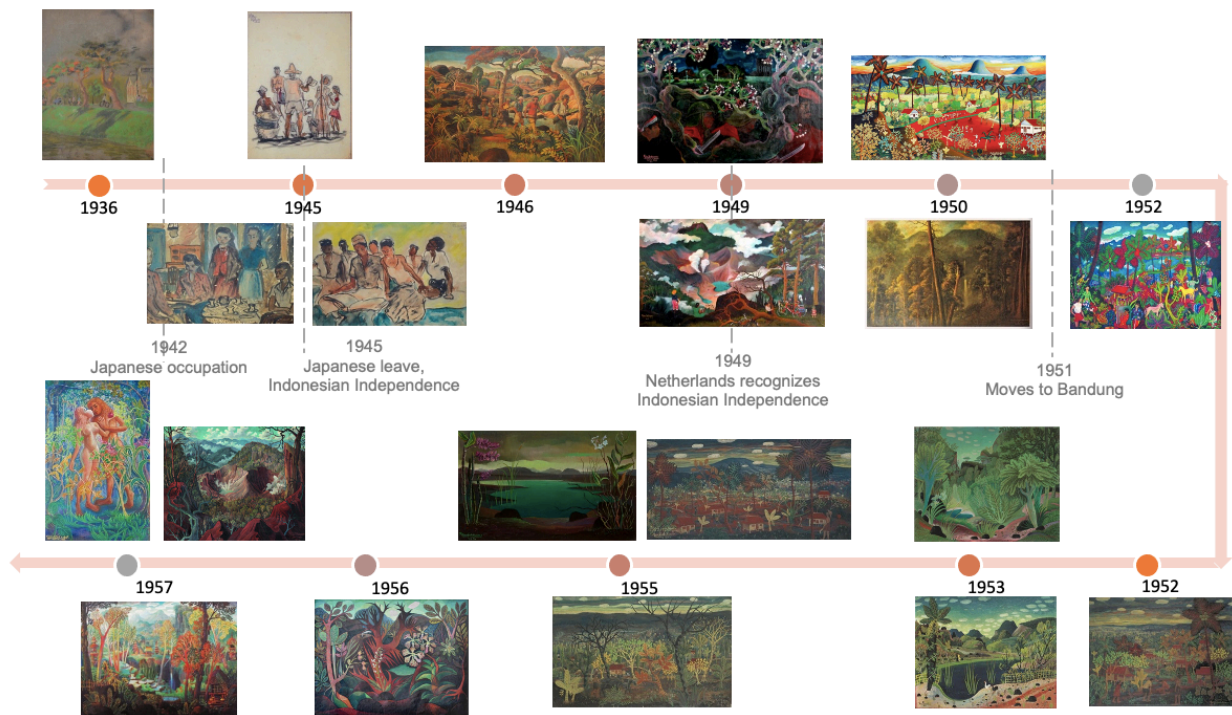


Figure 6 . Artwork timeline

Kartono's work, but still warned him not to overuse decorative elements.

During the Japanese occupation, Kartono's work was also cherished, and even though Sudjojono criticized sharply the work of the Mooi Indie painters, he always approved of Kartono's style.

3. INTEREST IN INDONESIAN NATURE

It is undeniable that Kartono's first interest in landscape painting came with the European Naturalist trend, he was influenced and taught by Dutch artists and some of Indonesia's most important naturalist painters. But nature kept being representative of his artwork even after many of his colleagues had changed to different movements in Indonesian Modern Art.

Kartono experienced a period of hardships and poverty while living in Yogyakarta after the Japanese left Indonesia, while the Dutch were trying to regain Indonesian territory. He was part of SIM and represented some battle scenes, but never felt identified by Yogyakarta's social realism trend of that time.

After he established his studio in Bandung, he kept painting idealistic landscapes and nature related art.

Claire Holt even describes Kartono disliking the path that Sudjojono was following, he respected and

admired the landscape painters with commercial approach, his character was not arrogant towards other painters, he considered them as honest and skilled craftsmen. About Sudjojono Holt cites Kartono saying:

"Saya selalu berharap ia akan menjadi orang besar, sukarlah untuk menerima apa yang telah terjadi pada dirinya kita tak dapat menjadi teman lebih lama"

"I always hoped he will become a great person. It's hard to accept what he has become; we can't be friends for much longer" [5]

Instead of social oriented content, we can find in his artwork a similarity with some Balinese artists artworks, sharing their freshness and naivety, distancing himself from Western art. He wanted to express the happiness of being alive and he also had a deep love and passion for nature, he would go outdoors to make nature studies.

Kartono's naivety and originality that distinguished his work from other landscape painters, also matches features in the work of other decorative Indonesian artists. Inspired by a personal vision, Indonesian artists choose to portrait women, children, goddesses as well as village life as abundantly harmonious and fertile.

4. KARTONO YODHOKUSUMO'S INFLUENCES

“Decorative style is a representational approach in which figures or subjects are rendered in a stylized manner with repetition of motives. The juxtaposition of figures, themes of natures, ancient patterns, colors and forms which may range from very large to miniature on one canvas, controlled so as to avoid overcrowding”

(By Sudarmadji in *Yogyakarta: Painting, Decorativism, Visual Arts*)

Kartono had a clear influence from the European landscape painting of the time, even though he was self-taught, later he was in contact with many European teachers and colleges. More specifically he was greatly influenced by the work from Henri Rousseau.

Although maybe he didn't directly influence the next generation of decorative painters, he did share common experiences with other artists that would be later classified as the greatest representatives of Indonesian Decorativism. Other painters that received support by POETERA and later by the Japanese Government programs like *Keimin Bunka Sheidoso* were Emiria Sunassa, Hendra Gunawan, Baharudin, Mochtar Apin, Zaini, Harijadi, Kusnadi, and Trubus.

He admired and was greatly influenced by Sudibio, he followed his clarity and originality. Sudibio also was part of PERSAGI and SIM, but his artwork covers a wide range of styles, and he is known as a representative of surrealism in Indonesia.

Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia gave place to many of the Decorative Indonesian artists. ASRI was founded in Yogyakarta in 1950 seeking to promote representative art of the country's traditional culture, valuing spirituality and aesthetics that differ from the Western style trends. During the beginning of ASRI, the nationalist and social realism content was very strong, something that Kartono wasn't so keen of. Many of the self-taught modern artists like Hendra Gunawan and Trubus became teachers at ASRI and taught the future decorative artists.

Other artists from Kartono's generation that were part of *Sanggar Pelukis Rakyat* in the 60's or studied in ASRI were: Batara Lubis, Widayat, Fadjar Sidik, Abas Alibasyah, Mulyadi, Irsam, among others. Passing through figurative art and abstract art they also produced artwork that can be identified as decorative or later *abstract decorative* while attempting to reconnect with traditional Indonesian concepts and artforms. [6]

Astri Wright positions decorative artists in between the romantic realist and the abstract artists that were emerging at the time. Inspired by personal vision, they had a decorative approach to sweet, familiar themes who appealed to Indonesian art lovers and Japanese. Besides the artists already mentioned, many female artists joined this style. She describes as characteristics of Decorativism the following:

“Various degrees of representation are attained through a repetition of formal elements, contours, or patterns, usually composed of discrete, recognizable forms such as masks, human figures, animals, or traditional symbols derived from Indic, Islamic or indigenous iconographies.”

Widayat is one of the most important artists described as *magic-decorative*. Just like Kartono, nature was an important theme in his artwork, he used trees, forest, and gardens as common elements in his paintings. He would connect nature with spirituality.

Widayat was also a self-taught artist that started as a commercial landscape painter in Bandung. In the 50's he joined ASRI and *Pelukis Indonesia Muda*. His nature-inspired work is a result of his exposure to living in the Sumatran jungles and native art. [7]

Decorativism, as a result of the reconnection with Indonesian roots, has patterns and elements found in traditional Indonesian crafts, batik among them. Related to native art, Decorativism also possess a load of magical and spiritual elements.

During Indonesia's participation in the Second Biennale in Sao Paulo, Brazil in 1954, Kusnadi wrote that in comparison with other countries, Indonesia presented few abstract works because:

“Kita di Indonesia tidak mencari keabstrakan yang terdiri dari bentuk-bentuk patah (kubisme), oleh karena kita dalam hal ini menyenangi untuk melukiskan kekayaan dekoratif dan jiwa alam dan berbagai benda yang berada di sekitar kita ”

"We in Indonesia are not looking for an abstractness consisting of broken forms (cubism), because in this case we like to paint richly decorative and nature's soul and various objects around us". [8]

Kartono's artwork was in the cover of the magazine *Budaya*, where Kusnadi wrote this review.

At the time Kartono moved to Bandung, he was an exception to the Western tradition greatly influenced by Bandung's *Sekolah Seni Rupa*, taught by many Dutch teachers like Ries Mulder. He became for a long time the only decorative artist in Bandung until the 70's when symbolic art wanted to reconnect with

traditional art. Through is *Sanggar Seniman* he must have taught young artists that are not registered, but after his death his school was taken by artists following ITB's Sekolah Seni Rupa style.

Another important event that influenced the development of Decorativism as a strong trend in Indonesia was that during the *New Order* period, artists making social content were silenced and Decorativism was favored.

5. CONCLUSIONS

During Indonesia's period of Modern art, as Claire Holt puts it in her own words, Indonesian artists went from the statement "I am" to the question "Who am I?" [5]. Kartono, living in this period of transition from Dutch East Indies to Japanese Occupation to Independent Indonesia, shows us in his artwork a clear example of this change.

Kartono went from Naturalism to the emergence of his own style, which was identified as Decorativism. Through colonialist influences Indonesian artists learned the technique but slowly created their own style and representation, choosing over other subjects like mysticism, spiritualism and including symbols and elements from traditional arts.

While making this research there was a constant dialogue between the concepts of Western Art and Indonesian Art. A dialogue influenced by the inconformity of Indonesians being colonized, always fighting the "Western influence" but still nurtured by it.

Kartono's artwork is a result of all these ideas and historical events, becoming one of Indonesia's *maestros*. His artwork is one of the many responses to the formation of Indonesia as a nation.

We find in Kartono the image of an artist with a clear objective in his artwork. Described as original, spontaneous, and naïve, he had a stubborn personal voice. Not feeling identified with other artists in his time in Yogyakarta and going against the current in Bandung, he always followed his own pace, while benefiting from the opportunities that were offered to him because of his great talent.

To conclude I would say that Kartono's artwork was a response to the dilemma between Western and Indonesian art that was followed many years later by other artists while they were looking for a path to reconnect with traditional art. Therefore, he is known as the father of Decorativism in Indonesia.

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