

A Preliminary Conservation Study for Art and Culture in Indonesia

Case Study of Margasatwa dan Puspita Indonesia Panel Painting at Hotel Indonesia Jakarta

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ABSTRACT

Research on the commission work, especially from Lee Man Fong as one of the court painters in the Soekarno era, usually has little discourse and discussion in the context of the history of modern Indonesian art. Historically he made a giant panel painting of Margasatwa dan Puspita Indonesia (Flora and Fauna of Indonesia) sized 4 m height to 10.85 m wide as a commission work representing the significant habitat of flora and fauna of Indonesia at the Grand Hotel Indonesia in 1962. His ideas, techniques, and triptych curve form of painting were different from conventional paintings placement. The concept and process of its implementation have portrayed an influence of the patron's ideological role that encourages to accommodate new public space within the framework of formation of identity, tradition, and collective knowledge of national consciousness. The present research focuses on analyzing the relationship between motives, space, and identity formation through interviews, tracing primary-secondary sources, observation, and interpretation of artworks. The results of this study indicate that there are impacts of socio-historical, cultural, and national fusion changes during the development of the guided democracy period in Indonesia which have a strong influence on artists, patronages, site locations, and art production. The original idea of commission work was initiated by Soekarno who decided the subject (title) of the artwork and size (had to be the biggest painting of all Indonesia), then the idea was produced as a panel painting by Lee Man Fong himself who also supported by four assistants for the operational organization. An artistic visualization and space construction of this panel painting represent the life of tropical flora and fauna from the perspective of Chinese-Indonesian diaspora painters to beautify the Hotel Indonesia building as a city landmark and celebrate international sports events of the 4th Asian Games in 1964.

Keywords: Lee Man Fong, commission, panel painting, flora and fauna, identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Discussions of modernization discourse and the development of modern art in Indonesia in the early 1960s were historically influenced greatly by the country's experience in entering the Guided Democracy Era as one of the extensive phases of the privilege of President Soekarno's leadership (1945-1967). At that time, the Indonesian government had implemented a special policy for the city of Jakarta, including evaluating the concept of the heritage of old buildings and introducing the atmosphere as the nation's capital that represents national interests to the world [1]. Among the monumental foreign policies were represented or communicated in the form of building complexes, especially under the Nusantara Project scheme (1960-1965). Focusing on Jakarta as "an exemplary center," as the performance stage, Soekarno intended the projects to convey to the public a patriotic message as a 'symbol of national unity and a 'new emerging world political power' [2]. Some studies on the impact of Soekarno's policies and attitudes in the scheme have inspired a critical understanding which has come to be known as the idea of the Indonesian Mercusuar Project (Grand Project) [3] as a manifestation of the nation's progress images [4] which marks Indonesia's new identity [5]. In this case, political and cultural policies in the 1960s could not be separated from the awareness of building national identity and even trying to represent national pride through the process of extracting superior values of national culture aimed at the international community [6]. Many academicians studying cultural identity in art practice often define artworks within the framework of symbolic creation as individual ideas generated based on patronage relationships between artists and government or private institutions. As a case study, Indonesian artist such as Lee Man Fong (1913-1988) who had close social contacts with the president began to receive commissions works that represent a populist theme [7].

Meanwhile, the awareness of Indonesian identity in the Soekarno era also allows a political motive bypass behind his position as national patron to collect Indonesian modern art genre, where realism tendency in mainstream painting styles attached to revalue national identity and personality [8] such as the presidential palace collections. During the 1950s and 60s, the president was also seen as a modernist patron who had a vision that Indonesian identity was inseparable from the context of the ongoing development of spatial planning. Placement of artworks in a big city must consider the collective

meaning of the continuation of awareness of Indonesian cultural traditions as a sign of the monumental vision of a space or building that is a representation of Indonesia [9].

The aerial landscape view of Bundaran Hotel Indonesia (HI) as the center of the capitalism and historical monument during the guided democracy period is often interpreted by various parties who fill the space with various objects, buildings, stories, representation [10], where meaning is formed along with perceptions, experiences and social actions in the context of government policies regarding the form and physical space of buildings that can show a complex relationship between the presence of public space, identity formation and collective memory [11]. In this study, we present the placement of artworks around the HI space integrated with the implementation of the new nation concept in its preparation and promotion of the Indonesian nation through IV Asian Games in 1962 [12]. Among these ideas, there are public monuments placed in the capital city, including the construction of hotels and shopping centers to fulfill the basic needs and face the challenges of social, political, cultural, and global complexity.

In this case, the construction of Hotel Indonesia was a strategic choice of the state to build a collective identity of iconic modern buildings sponsored by the country in Soekarno's era and patronage of the commission's works [13]. This commission has been boosted by the factor of leadership performance to help foster new cultural strategies through the manifestation of creativity and artistic innovation that reflects the spirit of nationalism [14] based on awareness to accommodate the diversity of values; social, cultural, and natural resources owned by the Indonesian nation. In addition, Jakarta as the capital referring to Presidential Decree no. 2 in 1961 has led to the entire arrangement of public and ideal mass with several new monuments and buildings. There are at least 10 works of architectural design in Soekarno's Mercusuar Project which are decorated with Indonesian ornaments and are still preserved until today, for example Hotel Indonesia building [15]. Here, Hotel Indonesia as one of the first international standards luxury hotels in Indonesia has become a magnet for the activities of the upper classes of the capital city of the Republic of Indonesia. It also has a unique design form and artistic spatial planning concept that can trigger economic growth and the tourism industry since it involves the participation of the artist's ideas in it. In other words, close communication between Soekarno and the artists has

created opportunities as well as new artistic experiences to place commission works, especially from Indonesian artists, including the painter Lee Man Fong to create a panel painting *Margasatwa dan Puspita Indonesia* which was then placed in one of the rooms of Hotel Indonesia.

2. METHOD AND PURPOSE

The study of *Margasatwa dan Puspita Indonesia* panel painting by Lee Man Fong from Hotel Indonesia collections uses interviews, archival reading of primary sources, observation of museum collections, and visual analysis as methods of analysis. The main purpose of this study is to explore the social and historical context and the relationship between the painter's idea and space for placing a panel painting by a Chinese-Indonesian diaspora painter in the case of Hotel Indonesia construction in Jakarta as one of the city landmarks prepared for the international sports event IV Asian Games in 1962.

3. RESULT

3.1. Hotel Indonesia and the Commission's Work Ideas

Historically, the construction of Hotel Indonesia was realized through political and economic negotiations between the Indonesian and Japanese governments since the Negotiation War Compensation Tokyo in 1951 and San Francisco Peace Treaty in 1952 [16]. One of the compensation funds was used to build the Hotel Indonesia. The Government of the Republic of Indonesia at that time acted as the main buyer, Abel Sorensen and Wendy Sorensen worked as the hotel designer, and a Japanese company, Taisei Kensetsu company and Kinoshita Shoten became carrying out the implementation of the design into a physical building [17]. This company previously opened in September 1959 and completed the construction of an international hotel as a Jakarta landmark in August 1962 [18]. The hotel building concept consists of two main buildings forming a T-shaped composition as high as 14 floors with a one-floor basement with a building area of 48,442 m² on an area of 59,235 m² (Figure 1(A-B)). Since it was first built, the HI building consists of four main buildings, namely the Ramayana Wing on the 14th floor with 188 rooms in west-east direction; Ganesha Wing, hotel building on the 8th floor with 192 rooms in a north-south direction; Ramayana Restaurant with a circular dome-shaped building blends with the hotel's main kitchen where a panel painting by LMF - Lee Man Fong is placed on one wall of the room, and Bali Rooms; the oval-shaped room functions as a

conference and performing arts venue that can accommodate up to more than 1000 visitors. The placement of this room is at the back of the Ganesha Wing building which is separated from the other buildings.



Figure 1(A-B) The top view of the Ramayana Wing building (a) and Ganesha Wing (b) form T-shaped after being completed around 1962 (A). Behind the Ramayana Wing building is the Ramayana Terrace (c) and Bali Room behind the Ganesha Wing (d). Photo (B) shows the location of the emergency exit of the Bali Room Foyer (e) which becomes the site location of *Margasatwa dan Puspita Indonesia* paintings after the renovation until now. Photo: Hotel Indonesia Kempinski.

HI was first opened for public on August 5, 1962 by Soekarno as a magnificent international standard hotel reflecting national pride and the front porch of Indonesian tourism [19] and displaying the beauty of the archipelago and cultural diversity [20]. As a new hotel that has a friendly atmosphere with tropical climate, it looks strategic in the city center when viewed from various perspectives. The exterior and interior concepts of the building reflect a touch of modern artistic style and tradition so that each room has a functional-symbolic meaning through the placement of commission works with variations in scale, size, shape, and theme. For example, the interior space of 430 rooms is identified with the name Ramayana Terrace (now converted into an executive lounge), and Ganesha Bar on the first floor, Nirwana Super Club and Indonesian Cuisine Restaurant on the top floor, Oriental Restaurant, dan Java Coffee Shop.

3.2. *Margasatwa dan Puspita Indonesia* Panel Painting and Painter

Historically, Lee Man Fong has been widely known as a painter among the Cantonese (Kwangtung) diaspora community of Chinese descent in Indonesia, especially after he studied European painting and decided to pursue a career in Jakarta. His activities have opened opportunities to develop communication, organization, and exhibition groups among Chinese painters so that his works are widely recognized by the upper class during the

Soekarno era. The fame and success in each of his exhibitions fascinated the upper-class society so that it triggered the context of an official meeting in an exhibition opened by the President [21] which then changed his future as a painter and curator of the Presidential Palace art collection from 1961 to 1965. Thus, it can be understood that Lee Man Fong could accept a direct offer from the President to add an artistic image to the Hotel Indonesia in Jakarta through the creation of panels painting commission project. He received commission work through an agreement with the Pembangunan Perumahan company (PP) [22] and completed it for approximately six months until it was installed as a background wall part of the Ramayana Terrace room. Some Indonesian art literatures mention that this painting was made from 1961 to 1962 and was done directly by Lee Man Fong, who was assisted by 4 assistant painters such as Lim Wa Sim (1929-2004), Tjio Soen Djie, Siauw Swie Ching (1931-1999), and Lee Rern (Lee Man Fong's son) as the text caption of the painting written on the metal plate attached to the lower right corner of the painting and the interview statement of Lee Rern [23] and Tion Sumiskun [24]. The process of making this work took six months in a special building located opposite Hotel Indonesia that functions as a place to produce works. At that time, if the work were not completed on time, there was a consequence that commission work painters had to accept, LMF would be charged a daily late fee by Pembangunan Perumahan that handles hotel construction projects [25]. Although there is a text caption that lists all his assistants, our search results show that there is no strong indication of their direct role on the canvas during the process of painting.

3.2.1 Sketch Identification

Based on observations, the process of making this panels painting has a reference to two sketches by LMF in 1961-1962; namely one sketch measuring 53 cm x 147 cm (each panel measuring 53 cm x 49 cm) using watercolor on paper and is stored neatly as a collection of the State Secretariat at the Cipanas Presidential Palace (Figure 3(AC)), while the second sketch is owned by a collector Tossin Himawan in Jakarta [26]. However, until now there have not been many studies, research, and further reviews, especially those that try to analyze the authenticity of the two sketches or compare the transformation process of master sketches and panel painting. All of this requires a more in-depth testing process on the structure and paint materials used by the painter to objectify sketches and panel painting.



Figure 2 (A-C) The sketch and detail of Margasatwa dan Puspita Indonesia painting motifs measuring 53 cm x 147 cm (each panel measuring 53cmx49cm), watercolor technique on paper collection of the State Secretariat at the Cipanas Presidential Palace, West Java (A). This sketch represents realistic flora and fauna motifs from the tropics with high accuracy objects and color intensity in the foreground layer (B). The background layer in the center works depicted underwater panorama using deep colors and shading nuances (C). Photo: Cipanas Presidential Palace Museum.

3.2.2 Identification of Ramayana Terrace Room

The project of creating a panel painting and selecting the title Margasatwa dan Puspita Indonesia which was placed as screen (folded) painting on one of the walls of the Ramayana Terrace Hotel Indonesia started with an idea given by President Soekarno as commission work. One of the reasons for choosing the painter was based on consideration of Lee Man Fong's achievements, work ethic, and discipline after being appointed and replaced Dullah as one of the painters of the Presidential Palace in 1960 who previously worked since 1950 [27].



Figure 3 (A-B) The interior of Ramayana Terrace functions as a meeting room and a restaurant, there is a panel painting by Lee Man Fong (red circle) placed on the left side of the stage by Gregorius Sidharta (yellow circle). Two decorative murals on a curved column flank the right and left of stage (A). The atmosphere of activity and the distance of visitors with panel painting (B). Photo: Hotel Indonesia Kempinski, Jakarta.

This work was originally designed and placed as an artistic element that will later decorate one of the

walls of the restaurant room inside Ramayana Terrace so that guests from abroad can enjoy it. In front of the room is the main stage square dome void, and on the left side of the stage was Margasatwa dan Puspita Indonesia painting site. Here, the panel painting display technique shows a panel painting more as a room background that allows it to be moved at any time. Observations show that the placement of this exceptionally large work was close to all the activities of visitors who enjoy the atmosphere of the restaurant space. So that it is very vulnerable to greasy air circulation, humidity, and cigarette smoke pollution, the visitors at that time slowly, indirectly, and naturally can cause changes to the physical condition of the painting surface.

3.2.3 Panel Painting and Bali Room Foyer after Hotel Renovation

In this room, the *Margasatwa dan Puspita Indonesia* panels painting is placed on the wall of the Bali room foyer measuring 12.8 m wide x 19.5 m long x 3.2 m high, where the work remains permanently installed until now. The panel painting itself measures 3,998 m (399.8 cm) high x 10,853 m (1085.3 cm) long which is about 6.65 m from the front door of the Ganesha Wing building lobby directly opposite Bundaran Hotel Indonesia landmark [28] by calculating the vantage at a height of 2.46 m from the floor surface. The dividing wall of this lobby space uses several transparent glass windows so that visitors can still clearly see the location of the panel painting in the room. The entire area of the Bali Room Foyer is generally walled in warm tropical human skin color granite, surrounded by a room atmosphere in the architectural style of the first exclusive modern hotel in Indonesia. Inside this room, there are two vertical columns as support for the panel painting structure whose painting area limits reach a maximum height of 6.45 m from the floor, while the painting panel itself uses an MDF (Medium Density Fiberboard) layer that sticks solidly to a smooth plaster layer, and the walls permanent wall of the room.

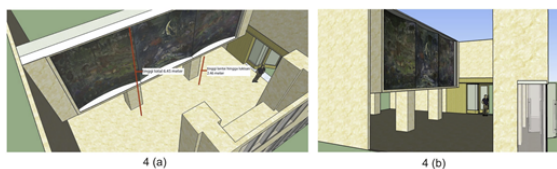


Figure 4 (A-B) The cross-section perspective of the existing room condition on site research after renovation process in 2009 (A). The painting is supported by two pillars of the Bali Room Foyer in lobby room (B). Photo: Hotel Indonesia Kempinski

Physically, the painting is composed of a combination of three curved panels in a horizontal plane that almost covers the width of the Bali Room. The concept of this curve shape is Lee Man Fong's original idea in which he uses the panel bending technique through a process of immersion in water for 1-2 weeks before the panel is ready to be installed and used as a painting base [29]. This painting does not have a full-frame, except for the addition of a thin gold frame on the two vertical borders on the right and left sides. In general, the structure of the painting curve still looks intact as the original, the conjunctions between the panels were invisible, in other words, although the authors wish to know more about the construction of each layer of the painting behind the panels, this effort did not get permission from the building management authority. So, the authors will focus on the visual surface analysis of the panel painting.

3.3. Subject Matter, Technique and Style

3.3.1. Subject Matter

Panel one depicts flower arrangements, tropical fruits in the foreground and birds, tame and wild mammals adorning the horizons of tropical nature. See Figure 5 (A-C). The composition of the objects of animals, plants and fruits that cover widely among the landscape's vegetation ranges has almost the same construction as the third panel. The background of panels one and three used by the painter shows a clear perspective view of the horizon that combines every living thing with the changing reflections of the contrasting and strong tropical sunlight.

In contrast to the representation of the second panel which describes the diversity of beautiful underwater biota adorning coral reefs in tropical sea waters. See Figure 5(B). Through such visualization, the painter seems to want to depict the perspective of the inhabitants of the universe from the surface to below the horizon.



3.3.2 Collinear Curves Panel Technique

This visualization technique of the Margasatwa dan Puspita Indonesia painting is composed of three collinear curves in the form of negative concaves which are aligned horizontally. The formation of this

shape gives the panels of the painting area a sense of depth. The wide expanse of the painting creates a three-dimensional curvature effect so that the painting area can accommodate various variants of painting objects. If the painting is viewed from the frontal direction, it will show three panels of the same size that stick through the boundaries of the vertical lines. Each panel has both upper and lower curvatures that appear symmetrical so that the upper and lower boundaries of this painting form parallel curved edges. Comparing figure 4 (A-C) with 5 (A-C), the material installation technique for each panel uses a type of adhesive to glue the fabric to the ground surface of the MDF sheet. MDF is attached to a metal grid, probably using screws (can see some screws on the front of the painting) and cement. During the process, LMF must soak the MDF in water for 1-2 weeks to strengthen the durability of the material in anticipation of the tropical and humidity factor of room temperature.

3.3.3 Style and Characteristics of the Oil Painting

Observations on this painting clearly leave variations of brilliant thick-thin oil paintbrush strokes and a soft to rough palette of polychromatic colors to shape an object through distinctive strokes of quasi-realistic and impressionistic images and also tone values. Lee Man Fong used oil paints on MDF [30] and authors discovered a spot trait of sinopia with oil colors that were initially sketched on the panels to outline figurative forms. This emphasizes his early method that has rarely been disclosed in his previous works period since he applied European techniques into a modern Chinese-style painting after 1945s [31]. It can be said that the use of oil paints and techniques on MDF material reflects the ability in adapting techniques, styles, and methods of traditional Chinese and European painting to depict the diversity of motifs of human figures, landscapes, animals, and plants in tropical islands region [32] representing the complexity of symbolic vision on genre panel painting. In other words, the representation of tropical beauty in this painting can be interpreted as beyond the tendency for harvest painting motifs which usually function as aesthetic elements to decorate hotels.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The *Margasatwa dan Puspita Indonesia* is the original title for Flora and Fauna of Indonesia paintings with the size of 3,998 m (399.8 cm) high x 10,853 m (1085.3 cm) long and has been collected by Hotel Indonesia Jakarta since 1962 until now. This

monumental painting has two watercolor sketches; the first is owned by the Cipanas Presidential Palace in West Java and the second is owned by a private institutions collection in Jakarta. The painting was one of the commissions works in screen (folded) painting as mentioned on title caption and functioned as panel decoration at Ramayana Terrace restaurant made by Lee Man Fong assisted by 4 assistant painters, namely Lim Wa Sim, Tjio Soen Djie, Siau Swie Ching, and Lee Rern. They painted on MDF sheets in a composition of three collinear curves in the form of negative concaves which are aligned horizontally. The painting subject in this three curves panel composition was represent a diversity life atmosphere and enjoyment of the tropical nature inhabitants which extended with reflections of contrasting colors and strong tropical light. The choice of motifs, techniques, and themes of this kind of visualization also marks a form of representation of a figurative painting that is different and unique from a diaspora painter like Lee Man Fong. The placement of large paintings inside the Ramayana Terrace restaurant makes the paint surface very susceptible to discoloration caused by indoor oily air pollution, lighting, human factors, and humidity of the tropical climate. Therefore, after renovation of the hotel building then the painting was relocated to the Bali Room Lobby, which was followed by changing the placement on the room wall so that it was quite far from the viewer considering the safety factors of temperature, lighting, and humidity. In this research, it can be concluded that Hotel Indonesia's efforts to maintaining and preserving Lee Man Fong's works were one of the conservation activities from a private perspective, and there is still a possibility of collaborating with government agencies, universities, and professionals to preserve them for the future.

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