

# THE ASSOCIATION OF BALINESE ARTISTS PITA MAHA (BALI, INDONESIA) IN THE 1930-S :BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

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**Abstract** - The current article considers the aspects of development of the Balinese pictorial art under the influence of the educational and creative activity of Walter Spies as an example of synthesis of a traditional pictorial art canon and elements of western world perception. The originality of Balinese fine art shaped under the influence of Indo-Buddhist conglomerate of cultures, which were reassessed in the boundaries of a specific complex of local beliefs «bali aga». By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century pictorial canon of Bali was homogeneous, its iconography remained stable from 16<sup>th</sup> century. The starting point of the contemporary development of the Balinese art is traditionally associated with the arrival of Walter Spies to the island who in January of 1936 became the founder of the association of local artists Pita Maha («The Great light»), created to join efforts in order to improve painting techniques. Spies helped their students to go beyond the boundaries of the traditional Balinese mythological frameworks and address the scenes from everyday life. The activity of the Pita Maha association engulfed various regions of Bali which resulted in the evolution of new traits of the traditional Balinese pictorial art under the influence of western artists. The end result of Pita Maha association in Bali in 1930-s is a new type of image, new method of visual communication, which turned out to be the first step on the way to the new schools of art. These days preserving the continuity of art development and its historic links, modern artists of pictorial school in Bali on the basis of pictorial peculiarities shaped in the 1930-s, find new original combinations of ancient and other artistic forms.

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**Index terms** - Walter Spies - Traditional Balinese fine art – Artistic styles of Bali – Intercultural processes

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The current article considers the aspects of development of the Balinese pictorial art under the influence of the educational and creative activity of Walter Spies as an example of synthesis of a traditional pictorial art canon and elements of western world perception. The significance of current research lies in the unique nature of «the Bali phenomenon» in the light of the problem of interaction of cultures of the East and West essential for understanding of cross-cultural processes. Among the researchers of the Balinese culture and art of the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century whose works were used in the writing of this article the following authors should be mentioned in the first place: M. Covarrubias, G. Bateson, M. Mead, C. Holt, W. E. Stutterheim. The later research of culture and art of Bali belongs to such authors of different times as L.M. Demina, N.P. Chukina, I.F. Murian.

Besides the study of specialized literature the author of current article analysed pictorial and decorative art materials in museums of fine arts of the Bali island: «Puri Lukisan» (the Ubud village); «Neka art museum» (the Ubud village); «Agung Rai» (the Ubud village), «Pacifica» (museum of fine arts of the Pacific region, Nusa Dua district); in the gallery of art paintings «Batuan painting» under the guidance of E. Alberte (the Batuan village), in the gallery of the memorial house of the artist Gusti Gede Ngurah Pemecutan (Denpasar city), in the «Monkey forest» gallery (the Ubud village); some other private picture-galleries of the Bali island were visited as well. The material crucial for this research was obtained while familiarizing with expositions of historic mu-

seums of the Bali island: «Taman Gili» (the Klungkung village), «Museum of Bali» (Denpasar city).

## II. TRADITIONAL PICTORIAL ART OF BALI

Despite having features identical with the Indonesian artistic world perception, the culture of the Bali Island has its unique development paths, which is also true for the system of the pictorial art. The Balinese culture is a complex phenomenon with several hundred years of history; its dynamics had a significant impact on many aspects of the pictorial art. Specifically, the distinctive character of the Balinese art is developed under the influence of an original complex of Balinese and Hindu beliefs of Hindu Bali, transformed and reconsidered in the light of the local Bali Aga religion and traditional art. While interacting with external influences, the Balinese culture did not lose its innate native features. New ideas were borrowed, transformed and combined with the traditional pictorial art. «Bali always passionately fought for the integration of Hinduism with its own culture and achieved success in this respect» [1]. By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the existing pictorial art principle of Bali was represented by a combination of the most comprehensive Indo-Javanese borrowings as well as Chinese elements and images of archaic beliefs. The researcher Claire Holt conditionally denotes 4 periods of shaping of the Balinese pictorial art: «A thousand years of prehistory, a thousand years of stylistic changes, hundreds of years of the pictorial form alterations, decades of contemporary development» [2]. The iconography of the traditional Balinese pictorial art developed on the basis of the Wayang shadow play transferring laws and traditions of a

theater performance into art. Figures are usually pictured in a half-turn and a three quarter position, half face paintings are very rare; the most significant characters are shown through scaling, the color choice is symbolic and close to the color symbolism of the Wayangs shadow play in its meaning. The description of a pictured character is achieved with the help of a certain pose, gesture, place in the composition, weapon, and headwear. The ornament around the pictures was prone to archaic patterns with Javanese and Indian borrowings and could be incorporated into the structure of the pictorial narration with the aim of embellishment and in order to distinguish subjects typical at different times. The subjects of the traditional Balinese pictorial art were mainly borrowed from the Indian epos and local legends. The iconography of the Balinese pictorial art almost did not see any changes from about the 16th century (period often called "the Golden age of Bali") until the first quarter of the 20th century.

### III WALTER SPIES (1895-1941)

In the first quarter of the 20th century scholars and archaeologists start to arrive to Bali in order to study the legacy of the island. Lev Demin: "Quite soon the Dutch authorities started treating Bali as some sort of a profitable ethnographic reserve; in order to attract tourists the Dutch begin to maintain Balinese exotic objects in their natural state" [3]. This period is considered to be the starting point of the contemporary development of the Balinese art and associated with the arrival of the European artists like Walter Spies and Rudolf Bonnet to the island.

Walter Spies was born in Moscow into a family of German diplomat. In 1915 Spies as a German national was interned from Moscow to the Urals, to Bashkiriya. Subsequently, he recalled this period of his life as a benchmark that urged him to search for the earthly paradise. John Stowell, Walter Spies' biographer: «Here, among the common folk of the Urals, Spies revealed his own identity. Spies could work without any constraint, so he moved from the fashionable advanced painting styles that he saw in Dresden to simpler subjects and methods» [4]. He returned to Moscow at the end of 1918. Afterwards Walter goes to Dresden, then to Berlin. In Berlin he got acquainted with quite a number of prominent figures from art and cultural community, such as Paul Hindemith, Artur Schnabel and such artists as Oskar Koschka and Otto Dix. It should be noted that the works of Spies were significantly influenced by the painters from the Bridge art group that he was good friends with. In the early 1920-s of the 20th century Spies decides to set off on a journey to the Java island in an attempt to escape "the world of problems and depression", as he described the state of affairs in Europe at the time. In 1927 he moves to Djokjakarta in Bali. This is the place where he was destined to

stay for good in both literal and metaphorical sense; Ubud is the exact place where he was honored with a title of "the reformer of the Balinese art". Spies proved himself as a zoologist, botanist, music expert, photographer and linguist. In 1929 the Dutch painter Rudolph Bonnet (1895-1972) joined Spies.

### IV. PITA MAHA ASSOCIATION IN BALI IN THE 1930-S: FROM TRADITIONAL PICTORIAL ART TO NEW MODERN WAYS OF DEVELOPMENT OF BALINESE ART

Pita Maha ("The Great light") is an association of local artists founded by Spies and Bonnet in Ubud in January of 1936 in collaboration with local painters Gusti Nyoman Lempad, Made Nadera and others. Gusti Nyoman Lempad was a royal architect, brilliant artist, sculptor and wood carver. The important role of a patron in the association belonged to rajah Raja Ubud Agung Sukawati. The goal of the association was to improve the painting techniques in joined efforts as well as to introduce a notion of fair trade and the recognition of a talent of each singularly taken artist. The association numbered around 150 painters from various regions of Bali. They had meetings once a week on Saturdays in the Spies' house where artists could bring their own paintings for discussion or take lessons from Spies, Bonnet or other painters from the association.

Spies and Bonnet introduced the western practice of the pictorial art, as well as notions of anatomy, perspective and the vanishing point to the Balinese circle of artists. The Bali artists adopted the linear planning in their own specific way: «Basically, if we use the terms customary to western people, it is the presence of two and more vanishing points in one picture. In a certain sense it is similar to the endeavors of the beginning of cubism made by the European artists» [5]. The use of gradation of light and shade allowed artists to fill the painting with new shapes, which in its turn created margins (areas) with various visual rhythms; images often have a clearly outlined contour (njavi). Pictures of anthropomorphic images with regard to anatomy of a human body as well as light-and-dark transitions emerge in the paintings of Balinese artists. Spies helped their students to go beyond the boundaries of the traditional Balinese mythological frameworks and address the scenes from everyday life. The novelties are also reflected in the materials: the use of the factory-made paint, Indian ink and canvas stretched on a frame that has to be primed before the application of painting itself. It is crucial that artists turn to genre art and in some schools even to portrait art treating them as independent types of art. The paintings now bear the author's signature confirming that what is pictured does not so much follow the canons as it endorses the distinctive author's view. The fact that the painting is created to be sold in the future strengthens the bond between the author and every-

day life. The teaching process was carried out with a use of an artel method: the apprentice would attempt to reproduce the work of his master.. The teaching process proceeded on the level of technique rather than on the level of perceiving. This was related to certain world view attitudes of the Balinese people. It is crucial to take into account the peculiarities of cultural perception in Eastern Asia and specifically Bali. «Research of cultural centrism in cultures of eastern Asia shows that matrix of culture is relative. In its core it's a thinking of cyclic process, its changes. The whole and element are dynamic, mutually stipulating each other. (...) Cultural centrism is defined through dichotomy, from horizontal dichotomy we can define polarities— masculine-feminine, night-day». [6] «In correspondence with the Balinese point of view, all fighting powers are dual, fulfill each other, and are equally necessary for human well-being. A human, however, can influence this ambivalence on its favor by mans of aspiring behave correctly in relation to both polarities – in a needed place and time. Here lies a vital key to understanding of Balinese religious beliefs» [7]. The religious component is the core of perception which is reflected in all spheres of life. In the art of Bali dichotomic link between real and extramundane worlds turns out to be crucial. «Art-work is perceived here (in Bali) as an instrument the mission of which is to create a bridge between people and inhabitants of other worlds: deities, ancestors and spirits» [8]. As acquisition of new artistic experience happens through traditional dual understanding of the world as moral and aesthetic imperative by Balinese artists, which in many respects explains the specifics of their understanding of western pictorial art techniques.

Along with that a selection of works subsequently displayed for sale to European buyers was made. Bonnet and Spies planned to display paintings of the Balinese artists at exhibitions outside Bali, which was fulfilled within the framework of touring exhibitions in Java. In 1934 works of the Balinese artists were presented at the international exhibition in Paris. Two of these artists - Ida Bagus Kembeng (1897-1954) from Ubud and Ida Bagus Gelgel (1900-1937) from Klungkung received silver medals.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> World War and the death of Spies in 1941 did not let all many plans to be fulfilled. . However, the impetus given at that time was approached from a new angle and developed by artists of Bali in later periods.

## V. SIMULATIONS AND EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

The activity of the Pita Maha association engulfed almost all regions of the island. The significance of traditional pictorial art canon in the Balinese art was still major but it ceased to be a dogma or a mandatory

ideology: in the 1930-s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the emergence of various artistic styles in Bali take place. «Influenced by organizational or conditional union of masters on the basis of common creative, theoretical or educational program, artistic style is formed» [9]. Artists living in Ubud – the center of Pita Maha – or neighboring villages were more influenced by the European school of the pictorial art than those living in remote regions. «The further away from Ubud, the heart of Pita Maha, the greater is the dominance of local traditions. The presence of talented people and regional differences in the sociopolitical conditions in various areas had a significant impact on the dynamics and establishing of art schools in the region» [9]. Moreover, artistic borrowings took place in a different extent and proportions.

A certain number of artistic centers, for example, Klungkung, practically were not exposed to the influence of the western European school of art, although artists maintained communication with the European artists living in Bali and local artists from other areas. Marine and coastal life subjects become characteristic of the Sanur art school; paintings often contain playful humor and are executed in pastel shades. The main representatives are Ida Bagus Nyoman Rai, I Rudin and others. In the village of Batuan artists adhere to monochrome portrayal marked by expression and vibrancy. «[Paintings] hold a very unique dark power over the viewer. Artists often use an “accidental perspective” as if the author intended to divide its art work by an inlay comprised by various images which are executed from different angles. [...] This type of work can potentially produce an alarming effect on the viewer, even if it pictures an everyday life scene and not a kingdom of strange and sinister creatures..» [10]. In the Batuan artistic style traditional figures of the Wayang painting were reflected: small detailing, conventionality of the scene, the dense fullness of the painting with the picture; as well as such borrowings from the western art school as the perspective spatial planning, portrayal of the anthropomorphic characters with due regard to the anatomy of the human's body, light and shade transitions. The main artists are I Nyoman Patera, I Nyoman Ngendon, Ida Bagus Made Togog. Thus, an acquaintance with new views on the pictorial art under the influence of creative activity of Spies and Bonnet manifested itself not only in the change of space perception but also in the forming of «a new type of artist» as an independent personality. The commercial character of the new artistic market played an important role in the shaping of artistic styles of Bali. The painting art gains more independence in terms of ideas, means and methods.

## CONCLUSION

Current article covers the most significant constituent elements of the traditional Balinese art as well as the

ways in which the western pictorial art tradition finds its reflection in the culture of a different formation. Nowadays a distinctive art system incorporating mythological conception of the world and elements of the western culture is being formed. As acquisition of new artistic experience happens through traditional dual understanding of the world as moral and aesthetic imperative by Balinese artists, which in many respects explains the specifics of their understanding of western pictorial art techniques «The Balinese pictorial art evolved completely unique qualities under the influence of western works» [11]. The Dutch ethnologist J. Katz says: «The question may arise whether this process [a break with the past] is connected with the influence of western artists and western culture in general or it is a result of the natural development based on the unique artistic sensitivity. Apparently, it is a result of both influences. It is evident that only imitation is not able to produce a work of art of any scale...hardly anyone can refute a great contribution of the Balinese sculptors and artists. The western culture, introduced by the European artists, was an incentive that inspired the Balinese artists to add a new essence to their art» [12]. The significance of the traditional pictorial art canon in the Balinese art was still major but it ceased to be a dogma or a mandatory ideology: in the 1930-s the emergence of various artistic styles in Bali take place. The art work gains more independence in terms of ideas, means and methods. The processes that took place in Bali in the 1930-s had both regional and global meaning: «the Bali phenomenon» in regard to the problem of

interaction of cultures of the East and West is significant for a modern understanding of the cross-cultural processes. The Balinese traditional culture, focused on the mythological type of thinking, offers a unique opportunity to explore an original system of world perception, the laws of which are relevant for contemporary western art.

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