

COOPER, THOMAS L. *Sacred Painting in Bali: Tradition in Transition*. Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2005. viii + 184 pages. Maps, color plates, glossary, bibliography, index. Hardcover US\$45.00/£24.99; ISBN 974-524-034-6.

This is the first well-documented book on the sacred paintings decorating Balinese temple and house structures. As the book's brief notes on the author tell us, he "bought a strange and wonderful painting at a San Francisco auction in the 1970s, [which] turned out to be a Balinese temple painting." The piece "ignited" his interest in Balinese traditional painting, and after retiring from an industrial career, he enrolled in the graduate program of the University of California at Berkeley in 1990 to study and conduct field research on it. The results of his research were presented in his dissertation. The book under review presents the essence of his dissertation and introduces the unique character of Balinese sacred painting with the help of nearly a hundred full-colored pictures of the important pieces found in Bali.

Although the unique style of Balinese painting was sporadically mentioned in the articles by colonial investigators or anthropologists, and while the fascinating works of Balinese painters continue to attract many tourists and art collectors, we have only a few books that fully analyze the techniques, genres, subjects, and apprenticeship of the Balinese painting tradition. The brief outline of the history of Balinese painting found in these books tells us that in pre-colonial times the paintings were used to decorate the houses of nobles and also temples. We also learn that these works were mainly produced by court painters patronized by the Balinese kings and lords, including the Kamasan village painters who were the most famous among them. When Western artists, such as Walter Spies and Rudolf Bonnet, came to live in Bali in the 1930s, they inspired the Balinese painters to paint in the Western style. Since then, the modern style of Balinese painting arose and flourished in order to meet the demand of tourists and art collectors who bought the paintings as souvenirs or pieces of fine art. In the course of this development of Balinese painting, the old-style paintings came to attract much less attention than the modern ones, and they tended to be viewed as the remnants of a Balinese pre-colonial tradition, although these works continued to be produced and used in many parts of Bali. Cooper's book certainly fills the gap in the documentation and study of traditional Balinese painting.

The book contains seven chapters and ninety-six full-colored pictures of painters and their works taken by the author himself. The first chapter introduces the subject matter and the research method of his study. After an outline of Balinese culture and painting tradition, the author defines the scope of his study, namely traditional Balinese painting as having the following characteristics: it derives its subject matter from a communal body of narrative; it manifests a communal vision of the unseen world; its purpose is religious; it is regarded as sacred; its style is related to that of shadow puppets; and it is regarded as an article made for a defined use, not an *objet d'art*, and its maker is regarded as a craftsman, not as an artist.

The second chapter reviews the existing literature since colonial times. It covers colonial reports, academic articles, museum exhibition pamphlets, a newspaper article, and local university reports, and concludes that most of the literature "is restricted in scope to the pre-World War II paintings of a single village: Kamasan" (18).

The third chapter examines the history and extension of traditional painting before World War II by presenting and analyzing several existing works originating from Kamasan (southeast Bali), Buleleng (north Bali), the Kerambitan area (southwest Bali), and the Ubud and Batuan areas (south central Bali) respectively. The comparison of these works

leads the author to find that the “earliest sacred paintings I have found in the course of my research in the various parts of Bali clearly show local or regional styles that were already well established and easily distinguishable from the Kamasan style,” and that “in addition to painters patronized by the courts, there were villagers producing paintings for the family and community temples of their own and nearby villages in many parts of Bali” (48).

The fourth chapter depicts the course of development taken by traditional painting after World War II by introducing eminent painters of each region and their works. The photographs of these works, including reverse paintings on glass found in north Bali, clearly demonstrate the wide variety of styles and techniques, not only according to regions but also according to the ideas and skills of the painters.

The fifth chapter introduces several village painters active outside the court tradition. Not only do their works show far more varieties of style, their stories, in which they speak of their work and lives, decisively enrich our knowledge on Balinese painting.

The sixth chapter presents the work of some other painters to supplement the variety of traditional painting spread throughout the island of Bali, and the final chapter comments on the future prospect of Balinese traditional painting. The sacred paintings decorating houses and temples are easily destroyed by the region’s weather conditions, so that much of the painters’ job is created by the demand of villagers to continuously decorate houses and temples with these paintings. While the author shows reluctance to support government intervention in the preservation of this tradition, he calls for wider attention from the Balinese people themselves and from the foreign visitors in order to support this unique painting tradition.

The author utilizes a combination of documentary and field survey research methods. He collects the available information from the literature on Balinese traditional painting, and visits the owners of the pieces to trace the fate of the paintings. He walks around Balinese villages to seek information, track down paintings and decorated buildings, takes pictures, and talks with painters about their works and lives. The result is a very vivid style of description, which transmits to us the “living atmosphere” of Balinese traditional painting and painters. This sense of a living tradition was definitely lacking in the existing literature on Balinese traditional painting, which tended to see it as a dying tradition. The lively description, combined with the author’s first-hand information about painters and their works, especially those of village painters, is doubtlessly the most precious contribution of this book to our understanding of Balinese traditional painting.

I must, however, admit to my dissatisfaction with the author’s analysis of the meaning these paintings have for the Balinese people. The author seems to refrain from adding his own interpretation about the meaning these paintings contain and convey, and thinks it sufficient to explain them as “sacred” and as a “decoration” of religious structures. This kind of explanation does not provide a satisfying answer to further questions, such as, for example, why Balinese people think it necessary to decorate religious structures with paintings of gods and goddesses, and not with natural scenery instead, and what differences are there between temple offerings and these paintings? On this point, we must wait for future studies by the author and his successors.

It was a great pleasure for me, an anthropologist studying Balinese culture and also a lover of painting, to follow the author’s experiences, to enjoy beautiful pictures, and to feel as if I myself was in Bali talking with Balinese painters. I have no doubt that this book will offer other readers with a similarly pleasant experience.

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