



The Journey to an Artful Indonesia

Art We Getting Closer?

In over 20 years in Jakarta, I have seen periodic starts and stops by the government to preserve our artistic heritage and to showcase modern and contemporary art. In 1995, the government sponsored an exhibition opened by then-president Soeharto titled “International Contemporary Art: Unity in Diversity,” run by the organisation Contemporary Art of the Non-Aligned Countries, Jakarta. This exhibition was the main stimulus for the renovation of the National Gallery, which remains the premiere institution for showcasing art in Indonesia.

At the National Gallery, with its active programming in collaboration with the private sector, one can view excellently curated exhibitions of both modern and contemporary art. The opening of “1771: The Brushstrokes of The Struggle for Independence” in August, showcasing 28 artworks from Sukarno’s legendary art collection, was a milestone in the opening up of the Indonesian government’s art collection to the public.

It is well known that Sukarno was an art

connoisseur, and amassed one of the largest collections of Indonesian and Southeast Asian art during his lifetime. Even during World War II and the Independence War, artists such as Hendra Gunawan and S. Sudjojono were encouraged to paint images of the fight for freedom. After the proclamation of the Republic of Indonesia in August 1945, Sukarno purchased artworks by notable Indonesian artists on a massive scale. Sukarno also formed close relationships with artists. Basuki Abdullah, Dullah and Lee Man



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Fong were the unofficial “court painters” and advisors of the presidential collection. Sukarno would often visit the artists’ studios (together with his ministers) to select his artworks personally and encourage those in his inner circle to collect as well. Sukarno was very proud of his vast collection, and envisioned the establishment of a national gallery. His collection of 2,800 artworks were published in a five-volume book titled *Paintings and Statues from the Collection of President Sukarno of the Republic of Indonesia*. Sadly, these artworks have been locked in the confines of the Presidential Palace for over 40 years, to benefit a privileged few. In August 2016, President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo finally opened an exhibition of 24 paintings from the Presidential Collection. Inspired by his decision to live and work in the Bogor Presidential Palace, and surrounded by the masterpieces; Jokowi has stated that in the future we will see more exhibits from the Presidential Collections with different themes and ideas.

In the early 1970s, the Mitra Museum Jakarta Foundation (YMMJ) was founded by Pertamina, then-Jakarta-governor Ali Sadikin, Basuki Abdullah and Herawati Diah, among others. The aim of the foundation was (again) to establish a national gallery of art, this time at the Museum of Art and Ceramics in Jakarta’s Kota Tua, or Old Town. The YMMJ was able to collect paintings by what are now our modern Indonesian masters such as S. Sudjojono, Srihadi Soedarsono, and Hendra Gunawan. These paintings have been displayed over the years at the Museum of Art and Ceramics, but in very poor conditions.

There are currently two initiatives underway to bring together the collective interests of the foundation and the Jakarta Old Town Revitalisation Corporation. The foundation has been re-established with many of the principal players in the art world and the private sector (this author included), with a vision to rebuild and revitalise the Jakarta museums with the support of the Jakarta



01 A visitor looking at Henk Ngantung’s damaged *Memanah* in the glass box

02 Museum Keramik dan Seni Rupa at Jati Diri Opening Night

03 But Mochtar’s *Tribute to a Friend*

administration. The Jakarta Old Town Revitalisation Corporation is a consortium of conglomerates who joined together to revitalise the old buildings in Kota Tua and address infrastructure and building renovations.

On Oct. 12, National Museum Day was observed by the opening of “Jati Diri: A Periscope of Indonesian Art” at the Museum of Fine Arts and Ceramics. Showcasing paintings from the museum’s permanent collection, it included paintings that have not been seen in public for the past 40 years, such as “High Profile 1975” by S. Sudjojono. Rose Sudjojono, the wife of the artist said on the opening evening that Sudjojono created the work as a “parody” of the

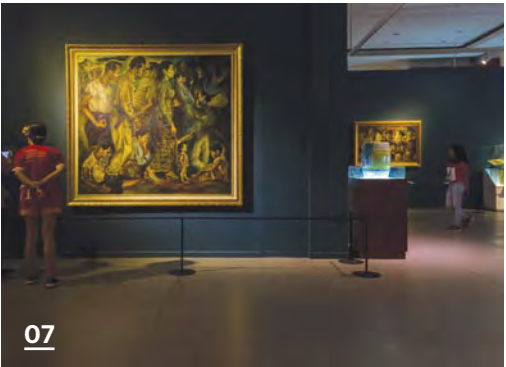
art world, where you have a well-heeled collector examining a sculpture created by a contemporary artist (Mochtar, perhaps?) with Sudjojono quietly watching the interaction. On the far right of the canvas, you have a sophisticated woman with a face of a wayang leather puppet holding a cigarette—perhaps mocking the scene, perhaps showing she understands the sophistication of high art? This work is a very artful commentary on the development of contemporary art in Indonesia.

Viewing modern Indonesian art has always challenging, and outside of the auction exhibitions, it's not easy to see works by Indonesian masters. Recognising this trend, ISA Art Advisory at Bazaar Art Jakarta showcased paintings by Indonesian modern masters such as Affandi, Srihadi Soedarsono, Le Mayeur,



Arie Smit and But Mochtar. *Tribute to a Friend* by But Mochtar was one of the highlights, showing Indonesia's slow response to modernise, in both industry and culture. Mochtar visited Japan in the 1970s and observed that while Japan after the Second World War became a completely industrialised nation, producing cars, motorcycles and cameras; at the same time, the nation maintained its traditional heritage, with the geisha and the salaryman looking on. Indonesia, in contrast was still struggling to build a national identity. A museum-worthy piece, it shows there are still very important works in private hands that could be loaned to museum exhibitions to complete the story on our cultural heritage. Indonesian modern art from the 1940s onwards reflects many artists' commentaries on Indonesia moving to an industrialised and contemporary society.

Jakarta now has all the right elements to create a museum that could be a learning environment for the Indonesian public, to document our nation's history and encourage millennials to appreciate, enjoy and most importantly to support the development of museums in Jakarta. We all need to support the private– public partnership to preserve our cultural heritage. ¹⁰



- 04 Basuki Tjahaja admiring Henk Ngantung's sketches at the Jati Diri Exhibition
- 05 ISA Art Advisory's booth at Bazaar Art Jakarta 2016
- 06 The Yayasan Mitra Museum team at the opening of Jati Diri Exhibition
- 07 The interior of 1771: Goresan Juang Kemerdekaan Exhibition at Galeri Nasional
- 08 The display view at Yayasan Mitra Museum's Jati Diri Exhibition

