



*Working with a female model*

# FOM Study Tour

## Bali Painting Trip 2011

*By Alphonse Falcone*

*The March 2011 trip to Ubud, Bali had all the time-tested elements of a Friends of the Museums study tour: preparatory meetings, an itinerary focused on art and culture, and access to resources not available to the casual traveller. In addition, there was the unique hands-on aspect whereby all participants agreed to spend three hours a day creating art.*

We had a wellspring of guidance. The daily art sessions were facilitated by Joan Marie Kelly, Assistant Professor of Art at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), and an internationally exhibited American painter. Paul Khoo, who is pursuing an advanced degree in Art History at LaSalle College of Arts, was the group organiser and art history guide. Giving an insider's view on the local art scene was long-time Bali resident Mary Northmore, founder of the Seniwati Gallery of Art by Women in Ubud, and author of a biography of her late husband, renowned artist Abdul Aziz.



*Working with a male model*

The study portion of our trip began with an early morning visit to the historical Klungkung Palace of Justice in Semarapura. We toured the 18<sup>th</sup> century *Kertha Gosa* (Hall of Justice) Pavilion where we studied the ceiling paintings depicting, in ascending planes, the Dante-esque punishments doled out for various crimes, scenes of daily life and depictions of heavenly bliss. Later that day we visited the home-studio of revered master of *Kamasan* painting, Ni Made Suciarmi, who gave us a memorable demonstration of the traditional techniques she uses.

At these sites and during our visits to Mary's gallery in Ubud and the Puri Lukisan and Nekka Museums, Paul pointed out the defining elements found in traditional Balinese painting – black outlined figures drawn mostly in silhouette, with both eyes showing; thin arms drawn in angles reminiscent of shadow puppets; no attempt at perspective; size connoting relative importance; Hindu epic themes; several planes of related figurative narrative; and background foliage portrayed in abstract, repetitive forms. Paul also pointed out the influences that came in the 1930s with the arrival of European artists such as Walter Spies and Rudolf Bonnet, who influenced local artists to explore mono-thematic, centrally composed non-narrative landscape and portraiture while experimenting with perspective, realism, colour and monochrome. Many of these elements are evident in the

Balinese art scene of today. Mary gave a personal face to the facts by regaling us with stories of her first-hand experience with leaders of the local art scene and artists whose work is shown in the museums and galleries.

What made this trip stand apart from all other study tours was the daily art class. Some of us had no background in painting, while others had years of experience. On the first day as we sketched on site at the Hall of Justice, Joan helped us select a part of the landscape that would be appropriate for our skill level, suggested how to hold the pad and pencils and was there to help us as we explored the artistic process. We had to look carefully at the complex scene before us, see what we wanted to portray and design a mark to represent each element we drew on the blank paper before us. In order to set the relative position of objects, Joan suggested we roughly sketch out the entire scene first, and then go back to add detail. Such useful tips, gained through experience, solved problems or avoided pitfalls. However, Joan also reminded us that owing to the personal nature of the creative experience, there was no right or wrong and we were in complete control



Detail from the 18<sup>th</sup> century Kertha Gosa (Hall of Justice) Pavilion

of our choices. As we worked, we fell into silent concentration, searching for solutions to the challenges we set ourselves. Tourists gawked at our work as they passed by, but we were too intent to notice. If we newcomers weren't 'hooked on art' by the first session, at least our fear of the unknown was gone. When our allotted time for each art session was over, we looked forward to our session the next day.

Each morning a model came to the hotel wearing traditional sarong. Joan would place the model in the hotel grounds (our group occupied all 12 bungalows), strategically framed by the backdrop of the lush jungle in the valley below. The model did a series of 1-minute poses to 'loosen our hands', followed by a series of 5 and 10-minute poses and a long pose at the end. For inspiration, Joan showed us examples of drawings by famous painters. Our intense concentration had the healing effect of meditation. The experience was simultaneously calming and invigorating.

The artistic, laid-back town of Ubud was the perfect setting for the contemplative art sessions. Everywhere



A local sacred spring

you went, at each of the many statues, at each doorway, around the sacred spring and at other significant spots, your eye was treated to the subtle flash of color or the delicate reminder of the spiritual nature of Bali and its people. Art, nature and spirituality are not separated in Bali. Artists transform natural elements like stone and wood into artistic representations of their gods and spirits which people place in their open-air living spaces and gardens. Mosses and lichens quickly colonise the artworks, rendering them ageless and organic.

Our mornings and most afternoons were committed to creating and studying art, but we had our evenings and one afternoon to explore town and the myriad restaurants, shops and cultural attractions. Sitting next to the tourists, we felt quite special because of the extras we were enjoying: our morning artistic retreats and our growing behind-the-scenes knowledge of the art scene. It was my first trip to Bali and I could not imagine a better way of experiencing it.

We came away from this trip with a portfolio of artwork, a dozen new friends and a new perspective on Bali and ourselves. Could this have been the perfect trip?



The artist Ni Made Suciarmi at work

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All photos courtesy of the author