

Narrative Adventures

Telling Bali Stories with Pictures

Introduction

The reason I am here today is because I just published a book, called “Inventing Art, the paintings of Batuan Bali”. It is a big, heavy, semi-scholarly book about the painting tradition from a village located about 1 hour south of here. Given this rather distant credential it might seem that I am only tangentially prepared to speak at a conference like this, admittedly it has taken a bit of imagination to have me up here talking to you today. But I do feel there is a link between my book which details the paintings of the village of Batuan, and this conference which celebrates the traditions of both children’s published literature and storytelling traditions throughout the world. That link is the importance of not what you say, but how you communicate the narrative; either through direct performance, through printed word, or in this case through the images of paintings. My presentation today is about telling stories with images, specifically from Batuan village, let’s start by looking at some examples.



Cak 5000, Ketut Sadia, 2005



Everyday Life in Bali, Ida Bagus Putu Padma, 2009

Two examples of recent paintings. To the left is a painting that shows an entirely fictive bombastic performance staged in Bali, a comment on the modern situation on the island that is sometimes megalomaniacal and without a sense of proportion. The painting below is equally exuberant, but is without irony, it is a celebration of modern life in Bali that is full of color and activity. This is a detail of 1 painting that is joined with 2 others to form a wall sized triptych. Both these examples are fairly representative of the Batuan style- densely packed with carefully rendered forms.

Batuan, cultural life

Batuan has long been a village of culture (notable even in this island of many cultural places). In the 1930's Batuan captured the attention of the famous anthropologists Maraget Mead and Gregory Bateson, who happened to visit Bali during their honeymoon and were steered to the village in 1936 for a visit. They ended up staying 2 years and purchased over 800 paintings while they were in residence. Following them was another equally famous and equally married anthropologist team, Clifford and Hollered Geertz who did field work on this village for decades. Dr Mildred Geertz is currently working on her 4th book about the folktale traditions of Batuan, which she hopes will..” give pleasure to the general audience, especially children” In recent years there has been a steady stream of visitors to Batuan, to visit the magnificent central village temple and to see some of the village’s cultural richness, including the unique Batuan style of painting. To understand how these paintings have become so popular- to both young and old- it would be helpful to see when these paintings started in the first place, and what their purpose was.

Origins of Batuan Painting

When talking about the origins of a tradition it usually necessary to speak in fuzzy generalities about indistinct places in the distant past. But the tradition of Batuan painting is quite different; it began between 1932 and 1939 by about 24 artists working in collaboration with 5 foreign visitors (this was well documented by Mead and Bateson). The motivation for this experiment was to produce souvenir art to be purchased by the growing number of visitors coming to Bali at that time. But to call these first paintings ‘souvenirs’ is a bit misleading because the artists who participated in this aesthetic experiment were highly skilled and produced some fine art. The paintings produced during this period that still survive are eagerly sought after by collectors and museums and sell for extremely high prices at art auctions throughout the world.



Kecak Dance at Goa Gajah, Anonymous, 1930's

Untitled, Ketut Ngendon, 1930's

Two of the early masters. Both of these are incompletely labeled, this is because the records for the first paintings are quite often sketchy. Many of the first paintings were also done as collaborative works, and it is not certain which of the artists might have worked together on the same piece.

Batuan paintings, how to tell stories

The aspect of these paintings that should interest us here is their emphasis on storytelling. The artists were trying very hard to portray a good story through their paintings, as vivid and richly layered as possible. Remember this was not an experiment about art for art's sake; these paintings were made to be sold to outsiders who visited Bali. The artists did not want to miss this economic opportunity and they created their paintings as full as possible with dynamic stories and scenarios. There is considerable debate among scholars if the worlds that were depicted in the paintings can be evaluated as examples of authentic Balinese culture, or if the artists had subtly altered the images to make them more attractive to the potential audience, in effect self-editing. For our purposes it doesn't matter. We are only concerned here with how well the story is told through the paintings, how coherent the constructed world is how strongly we feel about what we see.



The Greedy Priest, Dewa Kompiang Kandel Ruka, 1930's

Ahmad and the Flying Horse, Ida Bagus Made Togog, 1930's

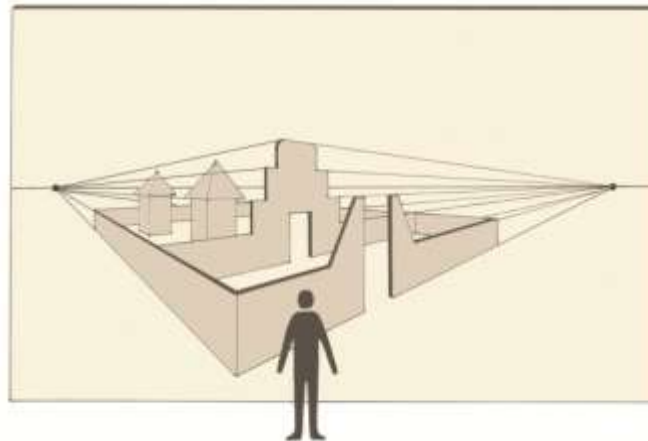
It is easy to see how much effort these two artists put into making these paintings as impressive as possible, they clearly wanted to catch the viewer's eye. Togog's painting is very carefully constructed to make the entire picture bend and sway, like the viewer was being buffeted back and forth through the image. Kandel Ruka has gone into completely new territory with his painting showing a village where the walls seem to be made of rubber. I enjoy imagining the reaction of foreign visitors when they first saw these pieces!

1. Organizing the image

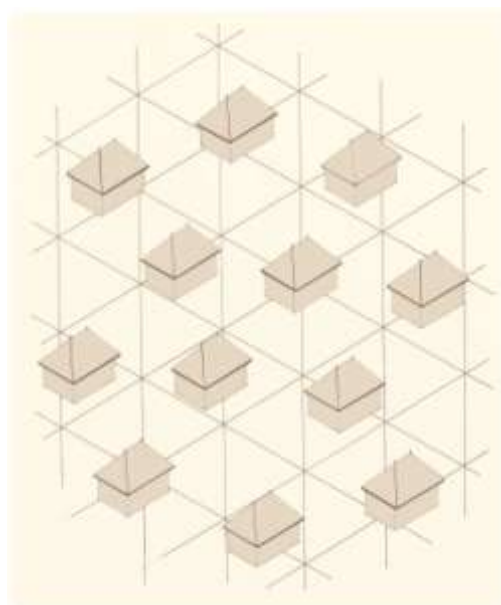
For us to understand how the Batuan artists were so successful in telling their stories, we need to talk shop for awhile, look more closely at some tricks of their trade. Here are 5 of the most important.

The first aspect is perhaps the most essential, it might seem a bit oblique at first but it really is not that difficult, I ask your patience while I briefly explain. It concerns the organization of the objects in the painting and how the Batuan method is completely different from the classical western method. When a western artist begins to organize a painting or drawing he or she starts by setting up a perspective grid.

Most of you are familiar with these lines that vector off to a horizon line, you might have had to make one of these drawings during your schooling (I did). What we all probably didn't realize at the time was that this entire system depends on a single point called the station point. This is where the imaginary viewer would need to stand to look at the painting that was about to be created. After this point was established, all the objects in the painting could be worked out and set up within the area of the perspective grid. When done correctly this type of perspective system can produce compelling images with a very strong illusion of space.



The Batuan system is completely different, and uses a different way of organizing space. We call their method axiometric perspective and it uses a grid something like this diagram below. In this method objects can be drawn anywhere on the image, they do not get bigger or larger when they approach the vanishing points, in fact there are no vanishing points. There is also no station point where you must look at the painting from. You can look from wherever you wish, it's up to you. Any place you look from is Ok. These types of images allow the viewer's eye to roam freely and just soak in as many scenarios as he or she wishes, it is a slice of life, not a single episode of it.





Melasti Procession, Ketut Parwita Balik, 2000



Everyday Life in Bali, Ida Bagus Putu Padma, 2008

Here are two examples of Batuan paintings using the axiometric grid. Neither of these examples has a single viewpoint but allows the viewer to wander and he or she pleases through all the robust activities portrayed. Each time the painting is viewed the viewer's pathway through will probably be different, and the story told by the painting would also be slightly different and fresh.

2. Density- so much to say!

One of the most immediate impressions of the paintings is their density. Much speculation has been offered as to why these paintings are so full of objects with no apparent empty spaces. Some people say it is because that paper in Bali in the 1930's was a rare and valuable commodity, the artists wanted to fit in as much as possible, this is probably at least part of the reason. But life itself in Bali is very dense; Batuan is particularly so given its rich ritual and cultural life. It would seem natural that the first painters filled up their paper with as much as possible. This must have been how life felt to them, and it was the message they wanted to convey to their audience.



Balinese Culture, Wayan Warti, 1999



Monkey Cak, Made Jata, 1990

Each of these two crowded images contains a main scenario (indicated by the title) with lots of side-plots. Careful viewing would reveal all sorts of hidden action, usually humorous and occasionally naughty. Jata's painting organizes the scene by repeating the monkey motifs throughout the center of the image, creating an island of rhythm.

3. Care and attention to detail

Each object seen in a Batuan painting is carefully drawn; they are clear and crisp and invite closer attention. Gregory Bateson was especially taken with this care and the skill required to create all this detail and ascribed much significance to it. To him it sent out the message that the artist really cared enough about doing this painting to have invested much time building up the skills and experience to create this type of image. The viewer will pick up on this.



Aquarium, Wayan Naka, 1998



Tantri Story, Ida Bagus Made Bata, 1930's (detail)

Both of these are notable for their clean crisp lines and smooth gradations. It is a pleasure to see all this playful activity expressed by these well considered and skillfully rendered forms.

4. An audience of all ages

The telling of a story in a Batuan painting was not aimed exclusively at adults or children, but could comfortably be told to an 'all ages' audience. I can remember the many times I have had the privilege of attending Balinese performances. Whether dance drama or shadow puppet, the audience always contains a wide range of ages, from the youngest and oldest who were able to attend. And they all seemed to be in

rapt attention, especially during the exciting parts of the story. Batuan paintings as well seem to have this inclusiveness, they can tell their stories to all ages, without intimidating or patronizing.



Bali Zoo Park, Wayan Eka Mahardika, 2007

The Sinking of the Van Imhof, Gede Widyantara, 2008

This modern view of the Zoo Park seems straightforward, but contains several scenes from traditional Balinese storytelling that are considerably darker and macabre. The second painting is an historical reconstruction of an incident from WW2, intended as a memorial for all ages.

5. Mixture of what we can see and what we can imagine

Batuan paintings are full of images, as we have seen. But there are two distinct types of images found in these paintings, those we can see in the world around us, and those we can only 'see' in our imaginations. This is a reflection of Balinese life, where there is no clear line drawn between the empirical world of everyday life, and the spirit world that is inhabited by amazing and sometimes grotesquely frightening beings. The paintings simply shown them all together in the same place doing the things that are most appropriate to each. It is the unique ability of art to be able to synthesize these two different types of worlds together into a single image, and make it so believable. This is the essence of surrealism.



Struggle, Wayan Diana, 2006

This does not seem too surreal at first, a dragon boat race through a Balinese environment. The problem is that there are no traversable rivers in Bali and there have never been dragon boat races here either! The artist told me that he didn't really care, that his job was to assemble these disparate images from his imagination and let the viewer figure it out, each according to his or her own interpretation. This artistic licence to put whatever happens to emerge from an artist's imagination, whether empirical, spiritual, true or false, is a strong characteristic of the Batuan style.

Conclusion

The purpose of this presentation is to show the importance of how a story is told, not just the narrative of the story itself. We have looked at some examples of Batuan paintings and the impressions they convey. How different the message would be if a Batuan painting was organized using a 1 single point of view and didn't allow for the viewer's eye to wander freely through it? Or if there were only 3 objects featured in the painting instead of 500? Or if the image was built up quickly with various scribbled lines instead of built up slowly in a series of carefully drawn transparent gradations? Or if the painters were more concerned with factual accuracy and did not allow their imaginations free reign over the truth?

Each of these choices fundamentally effect how the story is told and how the viewer will be affected by it. We need to be sensitive about the form we put our stories into (a process we might take for granted) before we tell our own stores and create our own worlds.

Thank you