

The background is a rich, atmospheric painting of a tropical valley. In the foreground, a farmer wearing a conical hat stands in a shallow stream, guiding two brown oxen that are pulling a wooden water-lifting device. The water is rippled around the oxen. The middle ground is dominated by a series of terraced rice fields, their curved edges creating a rhythmic pattern that recedes into the distance. The fields are filled with water, reflecting the soft light of the sky. The background is a dense forest of palm trees and other tropical vegetation, with a range of misty mountains visible in the far distance under a pale, hazy sky. The overall color palette is warm and naturalistic, with earthy browns, greens, and soft blues.

# WALTER SPIES

COLLECTORS EDITION



afterhours books

When he died 70 years ago, the artist Walter Spies was known to only a few close friends. Now he is prized as one of the finest painters of the tropical landscape. This was one of many gifts that he made available to the people of Bali in the years between 1927, when he first settled there, and 1940 when he was interned as an enemy alien.

In the turmoil of war and the turbulence of the post-war years, his fate remained for a time unknown and his life and deeds in Bali gradually took on mythic proportions. He was remembered almost as a founding figure, one who had taken the arts of Bali to unprecedented heights.

There was some truth in this hyperbole; he had indeed made a massive contribution to the reputation of the island as a centre of special artistic excellence during the 1930s. He was not alone in this endeavour. Together with the Dutch painter Rudolf Bonnet and Cokorda Gede Agung Sukawati he gave the initial impetus to the flowering of the visual arts in Ubud and district. His films and recordings brought his friends the Mexican painter Miguel Covarrubias and the Canadian composer Colin McPhee to Bali. The Covarrubias cultural guidebook, *The Island of Bali*, has accompanied generations of tourist visitors for the past seventy years, while McPhee joined Spies in stimulating the growth of musical culture in the Regency of Gianyar and furthered it in the West with his own compositions. The reputation of Ubud as a hub of cultural tourism continues to the present day. Its status is accepted by the Indonesian Government for its contribution to the island economy.

What remains of Walter Spies, the lasting documents of his achievement, are a mere handful of works, if we compare them with the prodigious output of many painters. In the years between 1920 and 1940 he completed no more than 80 major paintings, of which only about 40 are known to still exist. He usually painted very slowly, using a technique learned early with Otto Dix in Dresden following the practice of the Old Masters, first laying down a ground and then building up the painting with layers of pigments and glazes.

This technique was increasingly refined so that in his best paintings there is an intensity of hue and a subtlety of tone resulting in outstanding works that the camera finds hard to reproduce.

Spies's works have always been prized by their owners and in the main they have remained in private hands. This means they were for a long time not generally well known and it has proved hard to bring them together for exhibition. However, larger exhibitions were held in the Netherlands in 1964 and again in 1980, with many works in the latter exhibition also shown in Germany.

These exhibitions were accompanied by two publications. In 1964, Hans Rhodius, a Dutch collector and patron of the arts, published *Schönheit und Reichtum des Lebens, Walter Spies, Maler und Musiker auf Bali (1895–1942)*, Boucher, den Haag. This was essentially a collection of the artist's letters to his mother, along with some to other people, a number of memoirs by friends who held him in high esteem and a series of connecting texts by Rhodius.

Since the letters were mostly written in German, it made sense to publish the work in German, keeping a few in their original English. This monumental 600-page work (long out of print) contained 17 tipped-in colour plates and almost 100 pages of documentary photographs including black and white reproductions of many works.

In 1980 a much smaller volume in English, written by Hans Rhodius and John Darling, *Walter Spies and Balinese Art*, Terra, Zutphen, provided an outline biography of Spies, with some new material not included in the earlier volume, and a survey of work by the Balinese artists of the 1930s who had contact with him and had been influenced in their work by this contact. There were only eight colour plates in this 96-page book.

These exhibitions and publications drew attention to the painter as never before. During the 1990s, works that had remained with the original purchasers gradually came on the market and were eagerly acquired by discriminating collectors in Southeast Asia who had been alerted to the quality of Spies's paintings and the historical context in which they were made.

This surge in awareness underlined the view that a new extensive publication in English was needed to do justice to the painter, his life and his art. John Stowell, author of the present biography, had started work thirty years ago on this project together with Hans Rhodius, drawing on wider sources than had previously been available and giving a fuller picture of the artist's life in Europe, Java and Bali than had been possible before.

When Rhodius died suddenly, the work lay fallow for some years, only taken up again on an approach by a film producer wanting an option to make a feature film on the basis of the manuscript. This came to nothing, but the manuscript was ready when Lans Brahmantyo of Afterhours Books came forward with a serious proposal to make a definitive publication to recognize the achievement of this fascinating painter and his remarkable and talent-rich life.

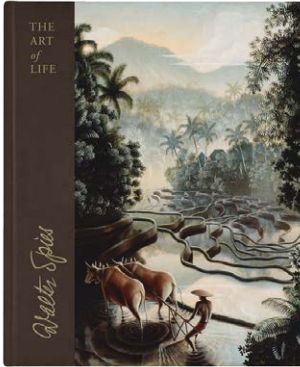
The result of our efforts is now presented in this Collectors Edition, a package limited to 150 sets. Each of these 40-kg sets consists of two books, one reproduction print on canvas and a DVD of a film made for Dutch television in 1983 documenting the artist's life and work, all encased in a handsome wooden box.



*The Art of Life: Walter Spies Collectors Package* was selected as the winner of The Premier Print Awards for 2012 Best of Category. The Premier Print Award Competition recognizes the highest quality printed pieces in various categories from around the world. Each year, only the most worthy pieces receive Awards of Recognition, Certificates of Merit, and the highest honor—the Benny statue. The Benny has become a universally recognized symbol for excellence in the printing industry.

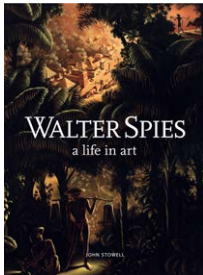
The Collectors Package consists of:

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### *The Art of Life, Walter Spies*

- **Length** 428 pages
  - **Page Size** 40 × 50 cm (portrait)
  - **Weight** 12 kg
  - **Presentation**
    - Hard-bound silk book cloth cover.
    - A certificate of authenticity, numbered and signed by the author, bound within the book.
    - A 12,500 word text, visually accompanied by high-quality reproductions of related artworks.
    - Over 300 images individually varnished.
- 



### *Walter Spies, A Life in Art*

- **Length** 344 pages
  - **Page Size** 24 × 32 cm (portrait)
  - **Weight** 2.1 kg
  - **Presentation**
    - Hard cover with gloss-varnished dust jacket.
    - Comprehensive 80,000-word text, visually accompanied by high-quality reproductions of all of the artist's works, and photographs collected from archives around the world.
    - 300 images individually varnished.
- 

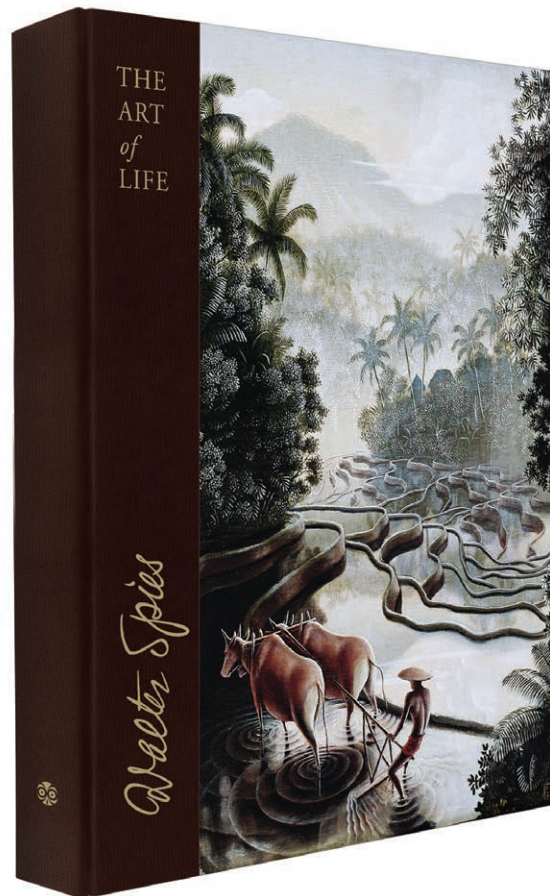


### *A canvas print reproduction of a Walter Spies artwork*



### *Beauty and Riches*

A short film on Spies's life in Indonesia by Hans Hulscher (© NPS-TV).



## THE ART OF LIFE, WALTER SPIES

The larger book, XXL size, 40x50 cm (portrait), contains in its 400 pages high-quality reproductions of all of Spies's known paintings in colour, except for the lost works for which black and white versions exist. The paintings are arranged according to themes within the three distinct periods of his life, in Europe, in Java and in Bali. A separate section brings a collection of many of the surviving drawings, with pages from early sketchbooks, caricatures and wildlife illustrations.

The 8,500-word text in this volume aims to place Spies within the context of the European art world and the very different context of his life in Java and Bali. An extensive photo gallery gives a visual impression of various phases of the artist's life.

*Among The Weimar  
Avant-Garde*

Dresden, Hellerau!

At last being myself in the open.  
Playing music with Yurik and finding what?  
Friendship? Love?

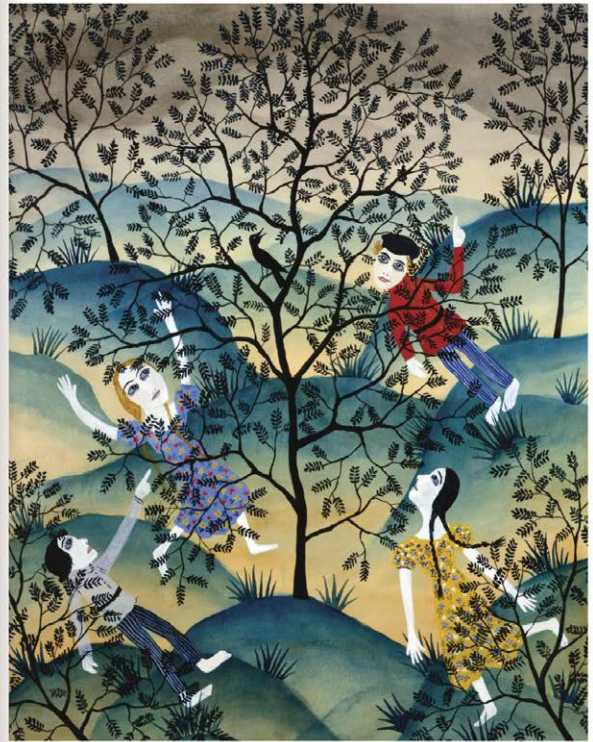
Weren't we outrageous parading arm in arm  
down Dresden's Pragerstrasse.



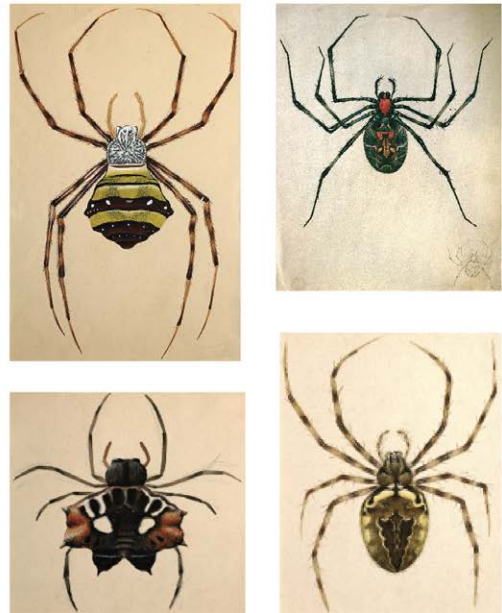
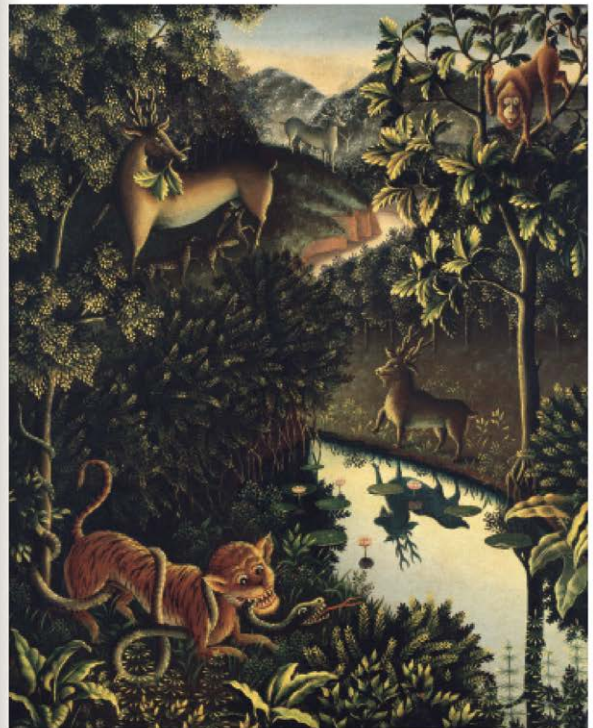


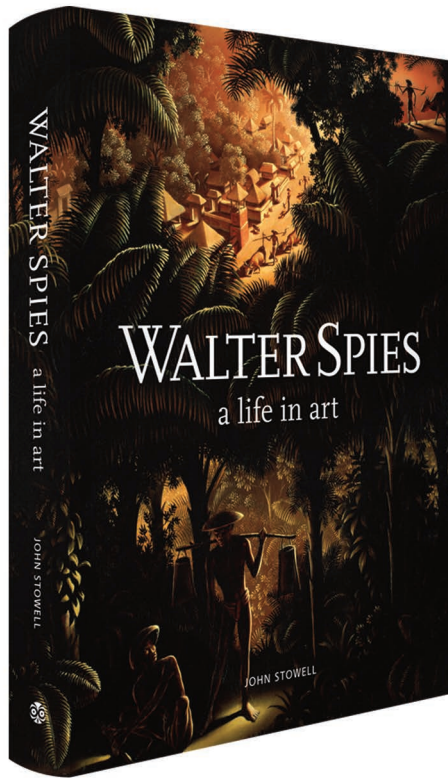
The Blackbird (*Die Amsel*), 1920  
Tempera on paper, mounted on card, 50 x 45 cm

OVERLEAF  
The Merry-Go-Round (*Das Karussell*), 1922  
Oil on canvas, 80 x 109 cm



Animal Fable (*Tierfabel*), 1928  
Oil on canvas, 89 × 65 cm





## WALTER SPIES, A LIFE IN ART

The 344 pages of the smaller book, 24×32 cm (portrait), present a fully documented biography in an 80,000-word text. It places the works and related documents in chronological order and supplies a catalogue of all the known works, including mention of those that have been lost, and an analytical index. The author's aim has been to provide a readable text consistent with the ascertainable facts, making frequent use of the artist's own words in translation.

The biography, which is also available as a separate volume, traces the remarkable life of an exceptional individual whose career touched at many points the challenging issues of the first half of the twentieth century.



CHAPTER 1  
INTRODUCTION



he impertinence of writing the life of another human being, even one who has been dead for 70 years, is justified if the story is worth the telling. The story of the life of Walter Spies, who was an artist and a musician and much more besides, often seems to bear the shape of fiction with its surprising twists and ironies. It also has much to tell us about how the island of Bali came to gain its reputation as the smart place to visit in the 1930s.

opposite  
Walter Spies in 1930,  
photographed by  
Hugo Erfurth.

WALTER SPIES a life in art



Two 1933 photographs by Pauline Spies of the view from Walter's mountain retreat at Iseh.

opposite  
Iseh in Early Morning Light, 1938. A comparison with the photos reveals how Spies composes the elements of the composition, emphasizing the verticals to enhance the romantic effect.

which were necessary for the practice, but embarrassingly not then available in Bali. Through the ceremony, the soul of the deceased former Raja of Karangasem was to be released from all earthly bonds and deified, and only then would the sovereign power to bind and release on earth be transferred to his nephew and heir, I Gusti Bagus Djlan-tik. Without this ceremony, any agreements about autonomy between the regencies and the colonial government and Karangasem would not have been legally binding. Spies described the coming event as follows:

"Next week there are to be some really big festivities at the Court of the Prince of Karangasem. The soul of his uncle, the former Prince, who was cremated all of thirty years ago, is to receive a very special rite of purification by means of fabulous ceremonies, and must be united with the divinity. The rite is known as *Deau Yadnya-Malgia*—one of the grandest and most rarely performed rites in Bali—and will cost the Prince a fortune! There will be hundreds of performers and about 100 different gamelan orchestras will be playing and participating." Everyone needed to be there and to demonstrate their presence. The letter continues: "Last week was the ceremony for the dedication of my little mountain-house. It was great fun, and I had to

feed the whole village so to speak—about 250 people—and four different gamelans played and dances were performed until late into the night. These were all 'gift-offerings' from various villages."<sup>29</sup> While observing the solemnity of this juxtaposition, we may still appreciate the esteem accorded to "Jian Spies" by the villagers of this remote area where he was able to get away for periods of concentration on writing and painting. Eight works were painted in 1938, among them *Blick aus dem Fenster in Iseh* (*View from the Window in Iseh*), a small watercolour from the smallest room in the house. Two photographic views also show the beauty of the region.

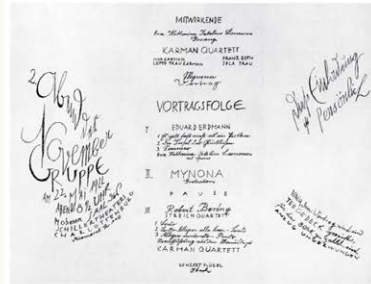
The writing was mainly a resumption of correspondence. Stutterheim had sent him the draft of an article which was a rebuttal of the theories of Ransets on the origin and significance of the *kalajay or gamungan*, the central tree motif which opens performances of the *Wayang Kuli* (shadow plays). After first berating his friend for adopting an unnecessarily aggressive stance in the debate, Spies drew on his wide knowledge of the theme to supply even more supporting arguments and speculations. In this area they met as equals. In mid-November the English edition of Vicki Baum's *A Tale of Bali* and Miguel Covarrubias's



<sup>29</sup> 26, 1933, vol. 213. A review of the MS before text thought to be right further text, allowing letters 200, 201 and 202 to be joined.

7. DANCE AND DRAMA (1936–1938)





OPPOSITE  
Quick Change, 1920-21, inspired by a scene in a Maxine Elliott, journey into the Night. Spies combines a scrupulous view of orchestra and performer with a growing habit of overall patterning.

LEFT  
Invitation and programme for a social evening of the Novembergruppe in Berlin 22.5.1922 with W. Spies (left) as accompanist.

the isolation which gave him the opportunity to concentrate on painting once again. He was taking the same advice he had given to Daisy to go back to Dresden and learn from Kokoschka how to look at the world, and discover with Mary Wigman (a former pupil at the Dalcroze Institute) how to translate these insights into dance terms. Daisy rejected the implied criticism of what she was already doing, which provoked Walter into a long discussion about the need to shape a dance as something with a life of its own. He advised her to try the exercise of dancing a table set for tea, to dance the 'soul' of the tea table.<sup>30</sup>

At this time he began several paintings which were later shown in the Berlin exhibitions of the Novembergruppe. The name is revolutionary, since it derives from the uprising of November 1918, and as Walter rightly observed, it was a little incongruous

that he should find himself in this politically radical company. In March 1920, when damage was caused to paintings in the Dresden Art Gallery through street fighting connected with the Kapp-Putsch, Oskar Kokoschka had publicly appealed to the combatants to put art above politics and keep clear of the area. For this unrevolutionary stance he was censured by the Novembergruppe, but staunchly defended by Spies for whom art remained a more important activity than anything else. By 1922, however, the group included a large number of artists who could simply be regarded as belonging to the avant-garde, and so it is not surprising to find Walter Spies as the pianist for an evening concert sponsored by the group which included songs by Eduard Erdmann, a reading by Mynona of some of his surrealist prose pieces and a string quartet by Robert Berény.

30  
These ideas were expressed in a series of letters, beginning 23.1.21 and running through to 1923, September. The letters cannot be precisely dated (see book, 46-52).



Hunting for marine specimens on the reef, 1935.

A chance meeting with an Australian scientist led to an arrangement with the Australian Museum in Sydney whereby Spies sent specimens in jars and made detailed watercolours of them. A correspondence developed with Joyce Allen, herself an artist-scientist and expert in nudibranchs, since it transpired that Spies was reporting many specimens previously unknown. In the days before colour photography, the drawing of marine animals fresh from the sea had considerable scientific value, since the creatures quickly lost their colours once out of the water. When the 13-volume edition of Brehm's *Tierleben*, the standard work of the German naturalist, arrived in December almost simultaneously with Miguol and Rose Covarrubias, camping out at Gilmanuk to record marine life became a favourite pastime for all three.

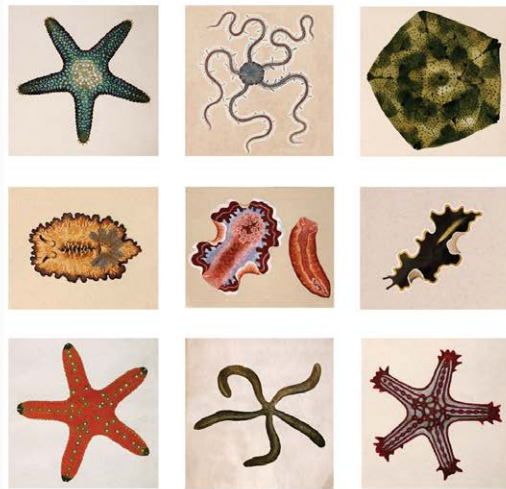
In September/October Stutterheim and Claire Holt visited to gather material on megalythic remains, on dancing, on new developments in the plastic arts, and to assist with publicity for the museum. Jane,

Claire and Walter made an exploratory trip to the island of Nusa Penida which was still practically unknown. They returned with intriguing stories of what they had found, and Claire's series of articles for a Surabaya newspaper were later reprinted in the special number of *Djâwa* devoted to Bali.<sup>31</sup> Their observations on religious practices and monuments also gave Stutterheim material for an article. In the following year Spies returned several times with different government officers to assist in recording a variety of aspects of life on that small offshore island which formed part of the Regency of Klungkung.

Although his article on Trunyan was printed late in the year, the Royal Batavian Society had apparently decided against publication of Spies's lamak drawings, since Jane McPhee took them to America when the McPhees left the island after an 18-month stay (the longest time they spent there together) at the end of 1933. Attempts to find a publisher led her to renew acquaintance with Margaret Mead, whom she had met ten years earlier at Barnard College, when she was a freshman and Margaret Mead a graduate student. Although they were unable to raise the \$500. Scribners required to finance the publication, with the result that the lamak went back to Bali, eventually leading to the Bateson-Mead study trip of 1936-39. According to Jane Belo, the lamak designs were eventually sent to Germany and lost, but photocopies of some 50 of them later came to light among the papers of Marianne van Woussen, and there are a further 42, including two drawings of almost complete lamaks in the collections of the Völkerkunde Museum, Vienna.<sup>32</sup>

31  
Brendt Holm, a short expedition to Nusa Penida (see book, 103-104). First appeared in Dutch translation in the *Overzee* (November 1933), but never, 1931-34.

32  
Jane Belo, *Native in Bali*, New York, 1962, introduction. The archive of Marianne van Woussen is held in the Special Collections of the University Library, Leiden.



A selection of the large number of watercolours of echinoderms and nudibranchs painted by Spies for scientist friends, including Joyce Allen of the Australian Museum, Sydney, and for display in the aquarium at Senar.



Photographs of Ketut Marya (Mario) dancing the *Kidyar* and the *Laguna* dancer with her fan have become instant icons to identify Bali.

As photographs of the dance, they fall naturally into several groups according to the dances portrayed, but these groups also rather neatly illustrate the subjects, themes or concerns that moved Spies, both as a visual artist and as a musician. It is in dancing above all that patterns of space and time come together.

We can here discern the straight descriptive element of the portrait, whether of Ketut Marya (Mario) of Tabanan, creator of the seated *Kidyar* flirtation dance, which apparently defies gravity in its folds and angles, or of the classical *Laguna* dancer, whose curve echoes curves.

Another group of photographs involves dancers in formation, such as in the *Baris* (warrior) dances or in the *Rejang* temple dances. Repetitive patterning held a great fascination for Spies throughout his life, whether in music or the visual arts. For him there was a natural underlying unity connecting the music of Bach and of the gamelan, the wing of a dragonfly and the growth patterns of foliage.

A third group of photographs depicts figures in a landscape, often dramatically backlit, such as the *Rangda* performers from the *Barong* performances or emerging spot-lit from the background dark, as in the electrifying shots of the *Kecak*.

The photographs of *Dance and Drama in Bali* preserve a fine record of the state of the art of Balinese dance in 1936, but each of these images is also a composition in its own right. Spies was above all a picture maker.



The chorus line of the *rejang* expresses rhythm. The drama of lamp-lit 'smoking' in *induh trance* captures mystery.



*Village Life in the age of Berohulu, 1930.* The second history painting for W.F. Stutterheim.

For two generations the Spies family had enjoyed wealth and status in Imperial Russia as successful business entrepreneurs and diplomats before World War I and Revolution stripped them of their wealth and forced their return to Germany.

Rusticated as an enemy alien to Sterlitamak in the southern Ural Mountains region, the 20-year-old Walter Spies used his linguistic and pianistic skills to befriend the local tribespeople and appreciate their music and their nomadic way of life. In the aftermath of the Revolution he made his way back to Moscow and briefly enjoyed the post-revolutionary outburst of cultural freedom before friends advised of the dangers to Germans in Russia.

United with the family again in the defunct utopian garden colony of Hellerau outside Dresden, he started painting in earnest with some guidance from Otto Dix and in association with the breakaway artists of the Sezession. Ideas brought from Russia helped him in designing avant-garde sets for the newly democratised State Theatre.

Less than a year later, he was in Berlin at the centre of the stimulating artistic scene there, exhibiting with the cutting-edge Novembergruppe, consorting with the most advanced musicians and taking lessons himself from the celebrated pianist Artur Schnabel. For a time he was artistic adviser and partner of Friedrich Murnau, master of the silent cinema. Techniques of camera angles and montage are clearly seen in Spies's compositions.

But in 1923, despairing of the social anarchy in Weimar Germany, he set out for the East in search of a more authentic life. He had seen attractive images of Bali in a book by Gregor Krause and was armed with letters of introduction to contacts in Java when he left Hamburg on a collier, pretending to be a Russian sailor with a poor grasp of German to cover up the fact that he had no idea about life on a ship.

Arrived in Tanjung Priok, the port of Batavia, now Jakarta, he jumped ship and soon found himself a post as the Director of the Western orchestra of the Sultan of Yogyakarta. This gave him an entrée to the highest level of the tradition of gamelan music. In typical fashion, he learned to play all its

instruments, successfully developed a system of notation and adapted the music so it could be played on several pianos. Recordings he arranged in Java and later in Bali helped to spread awareness of this sophisticated form of music throughout musical circles in the wider world.

To some extent, painting took second place to music in the three years Spies spent in Java, since he was obliged to act as accompanist to touring celebrity musicians and give piano lessons to eke out his minimal salary in the Keraton. But by the time he moved to Bali at the invitation of the Sukawati family of Ubud, he had become so familiar with the world of tropical nature and so in tune with life in the court and the kampung, that he could deploy it confidently in the work he exhibited on a number of occasions in Java.

Once established in Bali under the patronage of the royal house of Ubud, he found happiness and fulfilment. He travelled all over the island, making friends and contacts wherever he went and learning the local language. He became expert in all facets of Balinese arts and customs, recording and collecting traditional ways, archaeological remains and artefacts, helping to establish a museum as its curator, stimulating the development of musical talent, encouraging young artists to explore new avenues of expression such as might appeal to tourist visitors and giving advice and support to administrators, anthropologists and other scholars who came in ever-increasing numbers as the 1930s progressed.

As a scientific fieldworker, he recorded new species of marine creatures, spiders and dragonflies, making accurate and elegant watercolours of them before the days of colour photography. He even funded an aquarium so visitors could share in his delight at the myriad forms and colours.

His brilliance as a photographer and experience in the world of film was put to good use in the collaboration in 1931 with Baron Victor von Plessen in making *Insel der Dämonen* (Black Magic), a film that drew the attention of Europe and the USA to the then remote corner of Southeast Asia and starting the craze for the famous kecak, or monkey dance, that has now become a sort of iconic marker for Bali. This talent also found full employment in the images he took for what is still the standard work: *Dance and Drama in Bali*, which he wrote together with the dance expert Beryl de Zoete in 1936.



By 1937 these manifold interests had become a burden and Spies found it necessary to spend time at a mountain retreat near Sidemen in northeast Bali to make some time to paint. Over the next two years, armed with advice from visiting painter guests on technical matters and given the increased focus on his work, he produced a number of paintings on which his reputation now rests, jewelled landscapes exhibiting a chiaroscuro of light and dark, a balance of primeval jungle and the shaping hand of human habitation and the resonances this contrast implies.

Spies's progress as a painter was abruptly cut short by the advent of World War II. He was once again interned as a German enemy alien in May 1940. In detention he kept up his music and painting as best he could, but lost his life when a ship taking civil internees to safety was sunk by a bomb from a 'friendly' reconnaissance plane. There were reports that Spies was heard playing the piano as the ship went down.

The drama of Spies's life and the quality of his paintings are captured in the two publications of the Collectors Edition. It is a matter for regret that he was not spared to paint on into his full maturity. Even in internment in Sumatra he was writing of a new beginning and turning to biblical allegory, producing a *Vision of the Prophet Ezekiel*, a painting that has not survived. But it is a matter for gratitude that so many of his works have survived to document his splendid vision of the Bali that existed between the wars.

John Stowell (Author)

25 June, 2012

John Stowell has been engaged in research into the life and work of Walter Spies since 1980, when he edited the book *Walter Spies and Balinese Art* by Hans Rhodius and John Darling. He first came to the subject through his work as Senior Lecturer in German at the University of Newcastle, NSW, Australia, with an interest in the involvement of German artists and scholars in the intellectual life of South East Asia.

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CONTACTS

**Lans Brahmantyo**

tel. +62 8118 007 007

email. [Brahm@AfterhoursBooks.com](mailto:Brahm@AfterhoursBooks.com)

**Afterhours Books**

Jalan Merpati 45, Menteng Dalam

Tebet, Jakarta 12870 Indonesia

tel: +62 21 830 6819 fax: +62 21 829 0612

email: [Info@AfterhoursBooks.com](mailto:Info@AfterhoursBooks.com)

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