

A painting depicting a man in a conical hat and two oxen plowing a field. The scene is set in a lush, tropical environment with palm trees and dense foliage. The man is walking in the water, guiding the oxen as they pull a wooden plow. The background features a large, curved structure that resembles a waterfall or a large, curved wall. The overall style is that of a traditional painting, possibly a reproduction of a work by Walter Spies.

WALTER SPIES

A LIFE IN ART



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; 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.

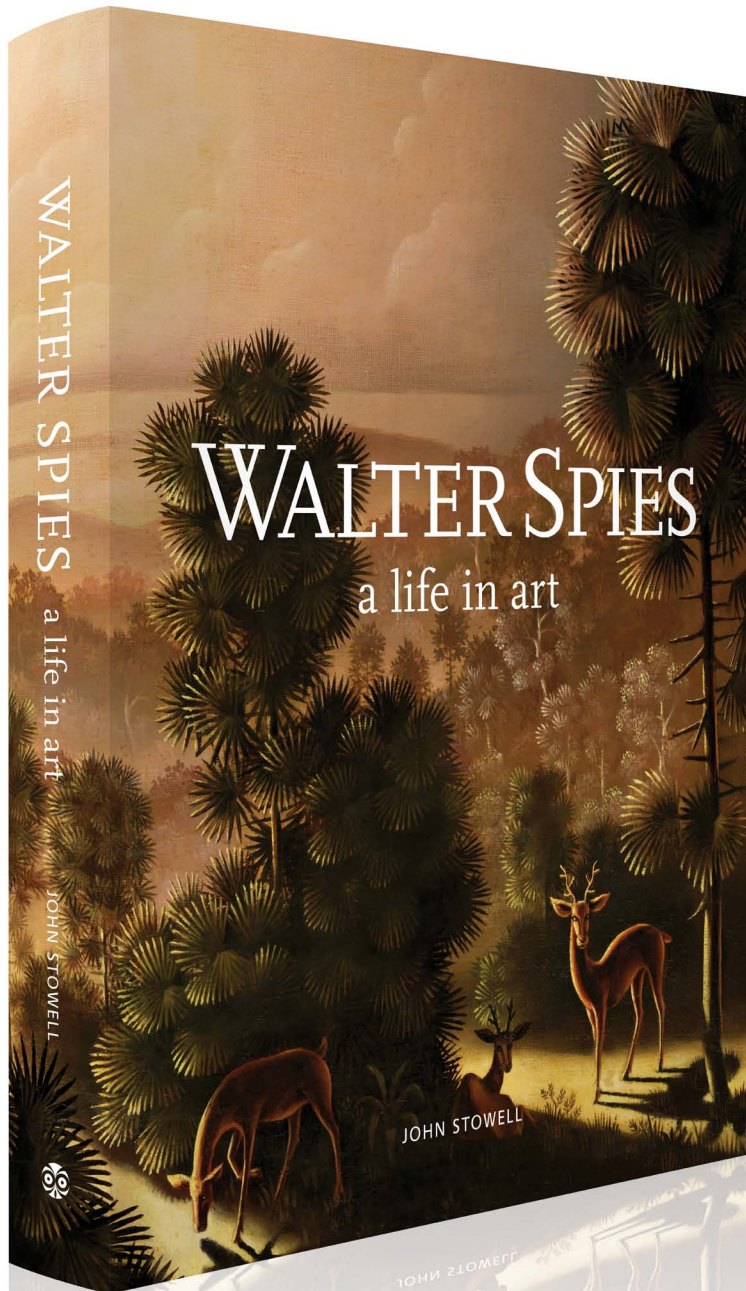
Spies's works have always been prized by their owners and in the main they have remained in private hands. This means they were for a long time not generally well known and it has proved hard to bring them together for exhibition. However, larger exhibitions were held in the Netherlands in 1964 and 1980.

In 2008, 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 344-page "*Walter Spies: A Life in Art*", which at 24 x 32cm (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.

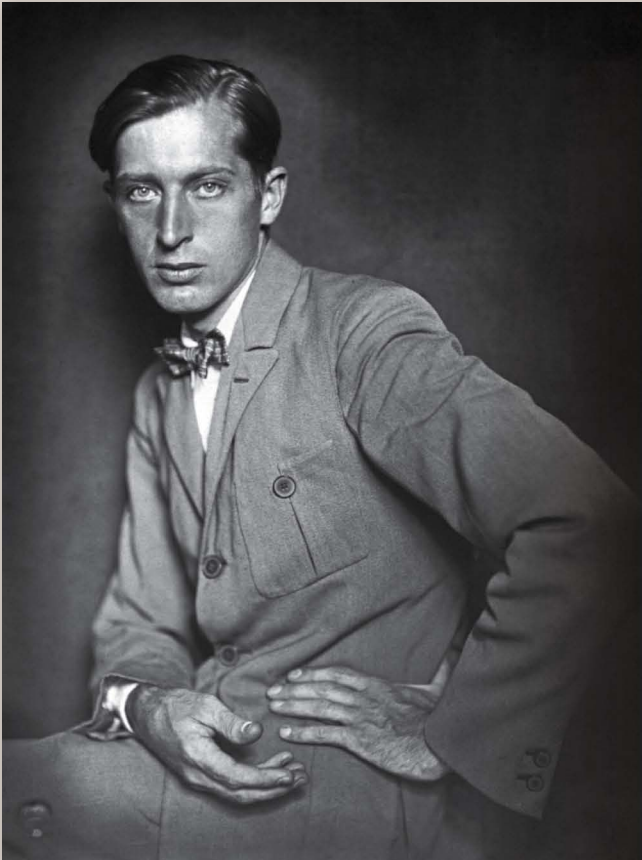
The biography traces the remarkable life of an exceptional individual whose career touched at many points the challenging issues of the first half of the twentieth century.





Book Specification

- **Length** 344 pages
- **Page Size** 24 x 32 cm (portrait)
- **Weight** 2.1 kg
- **Presentation**
 - Hard cover with gloss-varnished dust jacket
 - 80,000-word text, visually accompanied by related works.
 - Over 300 images, each individually spot varnished.



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 1920,
photographed by
Hugo Erfurth.

WALTER SPIES a life in art



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

opposite
Isih in *Early Morning Light*, 1938. A comparison with the photos reveals how Spies compresses 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 *Deusa Yadnya-Maligä*—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 50 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."²⁹ While observing the self-irony of this juxtaposition, we may still appreciate the esteem accorded to "Jaan 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 Isih* (*View from the Window in Isih*), a small watercolour from the smallest room in the house. Two photographic views also show the beauty of the region.

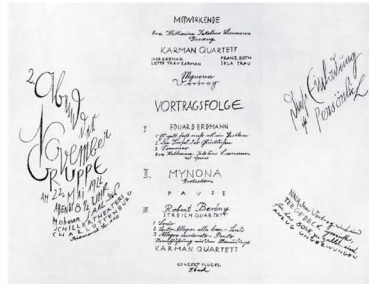
The writing was mainly a resumption of correspondence. Stutterheim had sent him the draft of an article which was a rebuttal of the theories of Rassers on the origin and significance of the *kekayon* or *gunungan*, the central tree motif which opens performances of the *Wayang Kulit* (shadow plays). 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



²⁹ In 1933, Spies, 30, 301. A review of the 1938 edition was included in the right further text, allowing letters 299, 304 and 300 to be joined.

7. DANCE AND DRAMA (1936–1938)





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

1877
Imitation 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.¹⁸

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.

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These ideas are covered in a series of letters, beginning 27.12.19 and running through to early September. The letters cannot be precisely dated (see note 10, p. 10).



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 Miguel and Rose Covarrubias, camping out at Gilmanuk to record marine life became a favourite pastime for all three.

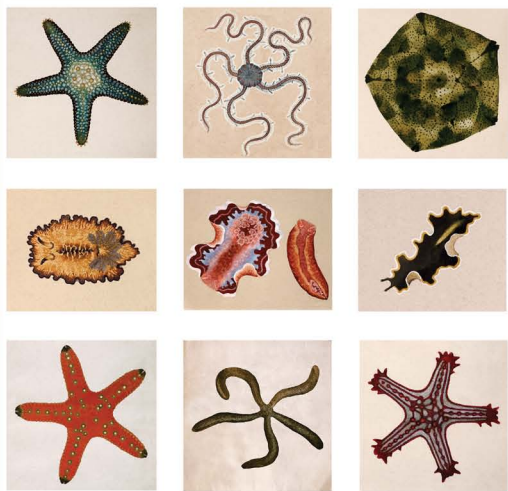
In September/October Stutterheim and Claire Holt visited to gather material on neoglyphic remains, on dancing, on new developments in the plastic arts, and to assist with publicity for the museum. Jane,

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 *Djawa* devoted to Bali.¹⁵ 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 Marijane van Wassen, and there are a further 42, including two drawings of almost complete lamaks in the collections of the Völkerkunde Museum, Vienna.¹⁶

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"Barchin Island, a short excursion to the island of Nusa Penida in October 1931, 1936, 1937-38. First appeared in Dutch translation in *Indische Weekblad* (November 1933). See *Indische Weekblad*, 1933-34.

16
See Jane Belo, *Research in Bali*, New York, 1962, introduction. The photos of Marijane van Wassen in *Indische Weekblad* are in the Special Collections of the University of London.



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.

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.

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.



Photographs of I Ketut Marya (Mario) dancing the *Balpas* and the *Legung* 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 I Marya (Mario) of Tabanan, creator of the sealed *Kajar* flirtation dance, which apparently defies gravity in its folds and angles, or of the classical *Legung* dancer, whose curve echoes curve.

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 to induce trance captures mystery.



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



Gela Archipenko and Walter posing for the camera in 1930.

Work was now proceeding at a furious rate on five different subjects for the history paintings and a vigorous correspondence flew to and fro between Solo and Ubud as the details and problems of each drawing were thrashed out. It emerges from these letters that in many cases the knowledge Spies had absorbed and reproduced in visual form about the material culture of ancient Java was superior to Stutterheim's conceptual erudition. Spies was no longer "just a *marid* (pupil) carrying out his set task", as he had claimed when the school commissioners were proving difficult; he was demonstrating clearly to Stutterheim the very real value of providing these imaginative reconstructions.

Money from Berlin and Semarang arrived just in time to mollify the creditors and enable him to greet two unexpected but welcome visitors. An acquaintance from Dresden days, Gela Archipenko, had moved to America with her sculptor husband Al-

exander and had arranged to tour Asia with Claire Holt. In New York they had heard the Odeon records of Balinese music and decided they might drop in on Walter when they learned they would pass close to Bali. Gela was a distant cousin and Claire, who was born in Riga, had studied in Moscow before moving to New York and starting a career in journalism, so they brought memories of various former homes. Work was set aside while they were shown around, but they helped with the soft furnishings of the house which was still bare and incomplete. They occupied the water palace while Walter shared his house with his favourite monkeys. Because he had been busy and the Balinese thought keeping animals in captivity displayed a strange power complex, Walter had disposed of his extensive menagerie to the Surabaya zoo. But he couldn't be separated from the monkeys, who roamed free, creating a hazard for all. In an unpublished memoir, Gela described how she and Claire



Walter Spies, Claire Holt and Wilhelm Stutterheim visit Borobudur.

BELOW
Gela Archipenko and Walter bathing in the river at Campuan. 'Naturalist' was fashionable in Germany in the 1920s before the Nazis came to power.



had made themselves voluminous oil-cloth aprons for car trips until a special travelling box for the monkeys was constructed and strapped on behind. Claire told of Walter's affection for his pets in the following terms: "Once, after attending a social evening in South Bali's tourist hotel, we returned to Walter's car, where his monkeys awaited him, and he said with great relief: 'At last something human!'"¹⁷

In spite of a busier social life, work continued on the various posters and Stutterheim visited in June to give further advice.

Just then news came of the imminent arrival of Walter's younger cousin, Conrad Spies, who had left a dreary office job in Germany to seek his fortune in the colonies. The ladies agreed to pay the expenses of a motor tour through Java to collect Conrad in Bandung and see the sights of Central Java with the benefit of Stutterheim as a guide. Claire stayed behind in Solo to make a study of the Javanese dance with Stutterheim's help, while the others returned to Bali, arriving back on the same ship as Miguel and Rose Covarrubias. They were bearing a letter of introduction from André Roosevelt who had returned to America to have his film processed and presented. One week later disaster again struck the wall poster project. This time the monkeys tore up the painting when it was almost complete. Walter repainted it in five weeks, while Conrad became his secretary and zookeeper. At the end of September, Stutterheim and Claire Holt visited to collect her things as they had decided to share their lives,



Conrad Spies (1904-1934), Walter's cousin.

49999777
Dierhant, 1934. The death of Conrad from a shark attack affected Spies deeply. This painting may be seen as a meditation on bereavement.

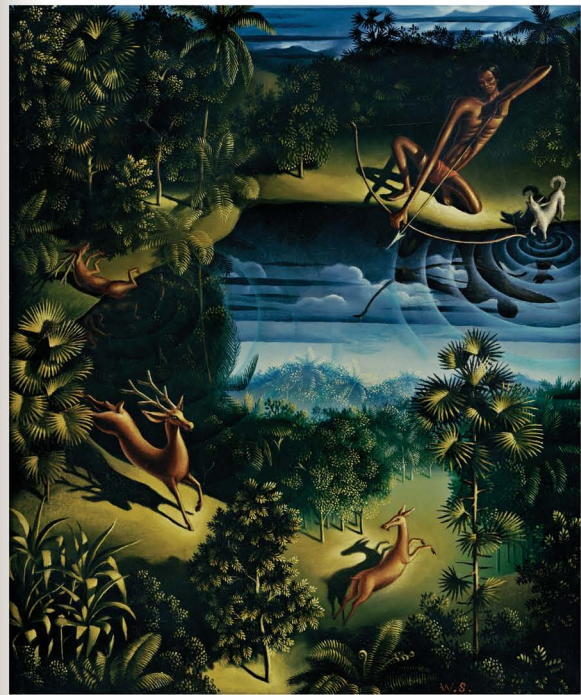
One month later, Conrad Spies was dead. A shark had taken his leg off at the knee and stripped all the flesh from the thigh, so that he died from loss of blood shortly after admission to hospital. There were strange circumstances surrounding this shattering event. It seems Conrad had had a premonition of his death several months before, while driving past a European cemetery in Bandung with his friend Tom Resink. They had then consulted a Balinese astrological calendar which said Conrad was to die young, eaten by a mythical monster, Kala Rau. He had written to Jane Belo to send him books on parapsychology and his conversation and letters adopted something of an exalted tone. On the day of his death Conrad had uncharacteristically insisted that they swim before lunch in the sea at Lebah, although it was low tide and the water turbid. Just as they were about to leave the water he had answered a question from Elly Beinhorn (who had arrived that morning on her solo round the world flight) by splashing about and joking about the enormous sharks they were always meeting.¹⁷

Walter was deeply affected by this loss. He had come to depend on Conrad, not only as secretary, undemanding companion and a link with home and family. Reading between the lines of letters to family and friends, one can see that in many subtle ways he had become Conrad's teacher, moulding and grooming him to play a role in the magic world of Campuan, and he felt cheated by a cruel fate.

Feeling the need to lash out in some way, he wrote to Stutterheim, stressing Conrad's

saint-like qualities of purity and simplicity and expressing longing for a world based on struggle and opposition. He then delivered a stinging attack on his friend for the way in which the first three history paintings had been botched in preparation and printing and declared he would have nothing further to do with the project. Stutterheim sent a finely sympathetic reply, asserting that in his opinion Walter was attempting to build his life on an illusion, but conceding that he might even succeed in doing so, as a special case. He expressed his gratitude that Walter was prepared to share the pain with him, regretted being so far away and hoped they could later talk the whole matter out. He entirely understood why Walter had now destroyed all the preliminary work on the remaining wall posters and had no intention of proceeding further, but he insisted that what they had accomplished together was of great value and better than anything else attempted in that line. The three years of involvement with this project had given Spies a thorough understanding of the prehistory and history of Java, and its links with Bali.¹⁸

Walter had taken refuge from the pain of loss in painting and throughout April painted hard at his memorial for Conrad, *Rehjägel* (*Deerhunt*), 1932. H.K. Jacobs, the *Controleur* of Gianyar, 30 years later recalled seeing the striking painting, in particular the attenuated figure stretched out beneath the waters at the centre of the painting. In the final version that figure had been painted out.¹⁹



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CONTACTS

Lans Brahmantyo

tel. +62 8118 007 007

email. 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

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