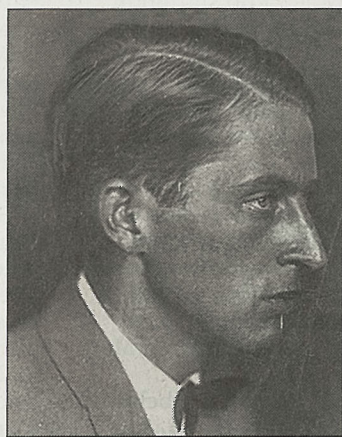


Walter Spies

The legacy of a banished demon

In creating the image of Balinese idyll, the influence of German painter, photographer and musician Walter Spies (1895-1942), who was banished by the Dutch from his adopted home, is still visible and tangible today.



WALTER SPIES

has been "missing" since 1942.

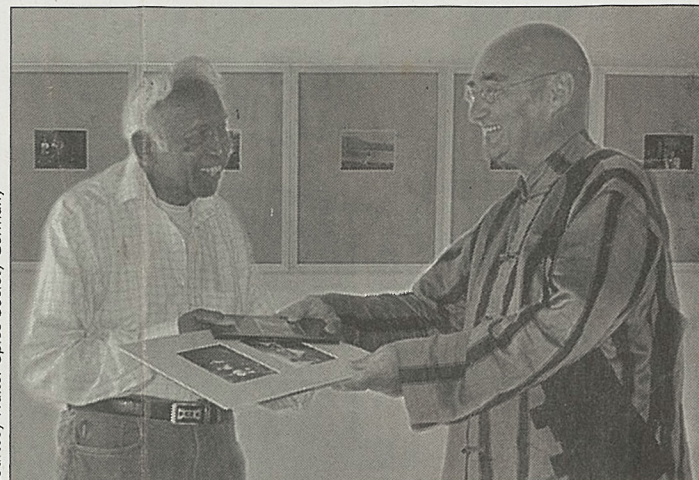
The gala anniversary event also featured the screening of Baron von Plessen's thriller, *Island of Demons*.

Saluted as an exceptional film event of 1932 Germany, *Island of Demons* is perhaps the only feature film of the 20th century to really showcase the details of daily Balinese life, hence providing the West with a glimpse of Bali packaged as a dramatic thriller. Filmmakers Baron von Plessen and Friedrich Dahlseim came to the island with no script, only a brief list of what to feature: agriculture, harvest, religion, cock-fighting, the *Rangda* and *Barong*.

Balinese amateur actors were chosen from the village of Bedaulu, and the script developed in-situ. As art director of the film, Spies explored the darker side of Bali through a reinterpretation of *Calon Arang*, the widow-witch and her beautiful daughter.

Some scholars blame Spies for the simplification of the *Rangda* as *Calon Arang*. Of over 30 versions of her story, many of which were lessons of *dharma*, or of charity and redemption, he elected one that denied her humanity. For the European audience, perhaps, the witch had to become an embodiment of evil that must be defeated.

For *Island of Demons*, Spies also supervised the choreography of what would become the modern *ketjak* dance popular to tourists, with its now



Fre Pattipilohy, former "Queen of the Amstel" (left), comes home to Indonesia from Amsterdam to see *Walter Spies 111* and receives photos of his Jakarta predecessor, Professor van Wuelfften-Palthe, from exhibition curator Walter Spies Society Germany president Horst Jordt.

familiar syncopated chanting.

Though he credits this combination of classic dance forms to a local dancer, Wayan Limbak, it was Spies who made the form famous by requesting the performance of the dance for the likes of comedian Charlie Chaplin, Woolworth heiress Barbara Hutton, as well as anthropologists and writers such as Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson and Vicki Baum. Variations of the dance are still performed for tourists today.

It was around this man that the image of Bali became crystallized during the golden age of Bali tourism, the late 1920s to 1930s. Hosting the European and American glitterati, scholars and even Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore at his Campuhan home, Spies presented his version of "real Bali" as a rich culture based on an authentic folk tradition.

In terms of the world's perception of Bali, Spies' greatest influence can be seen through his Mexican visitor, writer and painter Miguel Covarrubias, whose book, *Island of Bali*, has outlasted all other travel books to become the key descriptive work on Bali.

Spies also researched the arts in great depth. With Beryl de Zoete of Britain he co-authored *Dance and Drama in Bali*, while he shared his musical interests with Canadian musician and composer Colin McPhee, author of *Music in Bali*.

Spies' stay in Bali ended in 1939 when he was taken to court and jailed for homosexuality during a morality-driven witch hunt by the Dutch government. While imprisoned in Surabaya, he painted his best work, hailed as magical realism, depicting changes in feelings and subconscious

attitudes: *The Landscape and its Children*.

The work shows the painter's longing for Bali and the tricks the mind plays as a place once called home fades into distant memory. In 2002, this painting sold for over US\$1 million through Christie's Singapore.

His *Scherzo for Brass Instruments*, reputedly painted in a half-trance state, contains many incarnations of the artist as he explores an inner landscape from various points of view.

In a letter to Carl Gotsch, Spies describes the process of painting *Scherzo* as a spiritual and sacred purification of the soul akin to rebirth: "The funny thing is, I really feel as if this is my very first painting. I really feel as if I am beginning a new life."

Dedicated to Leopold Stokowski, then the conductor of Chicago's Philharmonic Orchestra, *Scherzo* was



Calonarang, c. 1930, oil on canvas, 56 x 46 cm

shipped from Surabaya to America, but never reached its destination. Today's reproductions are from photographs taken by Spies in prison.

In his fatherland, this German artist is probably better known as the art advisor to several movies such as Friedrich Murnau's version of the Dracula story, *Nosferatu*. Yet despite living only a fraction of his life in Germany, Spies' citizenship twice caused him to be interned during war.

Born in Moscow and raised mostly in Russia, he was interned in the Ural Mountains during the first World War. He was also interned by the Dutch in Ngawi, East Java and Kotatjane, Sumatra during the second World War.

Along with other prisoners of war, Spies drowned in 1942 when the ship *Van Imhof* was bombed en route to Sri Lanka

by the Japanese and was sunk close to the coast of Nias, off West Sumatra.

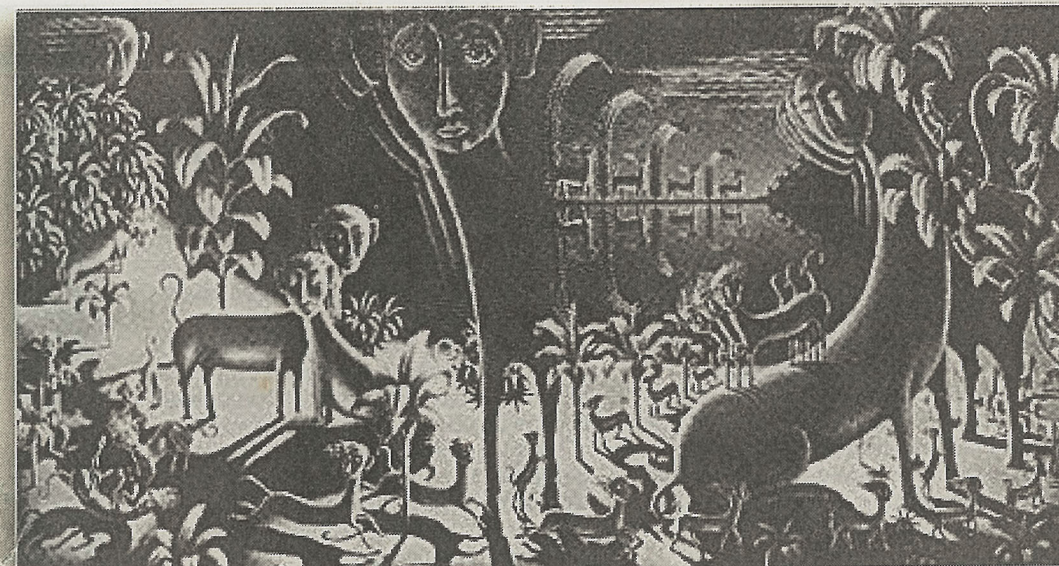
While his body has gone to a watery grave, Spies' legacy lives on: His paintings, photographs and writing continue to be published, the *ketjak* has evolved into many incarnations, and modern art is flourishing in Bali, fast attaining international acclaim.

His life and times in Bali continue to be celebrated at the ARMA and at the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum in Cologne, home to the Spies Archive of the Walter Spies Society Germany.

Walter Spies 111 runs until Aug. 8 at the Agung Rai Museum of Art (ARMA), Jl. Bima, Pengosekan, Ubud, Bali 80571. Tel: (0361) 975742, 976659; Fax: (0361) 975332. www.armamuseum.com



The Landscape and its Children, 1939



Scherzo for Brass Instruments, 1939, oil on board