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Nationalism and Modernity: Artistic Transformations in Indonesia from Colonial to Contemporary Periods

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CITATION

Zhang YY. Nationalism and Modernity: Artistic Transformations in Indonesia from Colonial to Contemporary Periods. *Multidimensional Culture & Arts*. 2025; 1(3): 175.

<https://doi.org/10.63808/mca.v1i3.175>

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 24 July 2025

Accepted: 5 August 2025

Available online: 15 October 2025

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Abstract: Colonialism and subsequent decolonization drove Southeast Asia into modernization, reshaping its politics, economy, culture, and art. Indonesia, with a history spanning ancient Buddhist and Hindu kingdoms, Islamization, and European colonial rule, gained independence in 1945. Despite rapid economic growth, it faces ongoing challenges like inequality and corruption. As a multi-ethnic, multi-religious nation valuing “unity in diversity,” its modern and contemporary art reflects national independence, challenges dominant discourses, protests injustice, and embraces avant-garde aesthetics. This article examines Indonesian art’s evolution from colonial times to the present, highlighting its nationalist roots and historical significance in art history.

Keywords: Southeast Asian Modernization, Colonization and Decolonization, Indonesian Historical Evolution, Multiculturalism and National Identity, Economic Development and Development Challenges, Nationalist Art, Indonesian Modern Art, Avant-garde Aesthetics and Cultural Protest, Social Innovation and Artistic Practice



1. Introduction

Colonialism and the subsequent process of decolonization profoundly influenced Southeast Asia's modern transformation, transforming the region's political, economic, cultural, and artistic landscapes. From the 19th century to the end of World War II, Southeast Asia entered the colonial period. The impact of foreign civilizations and cultures fueled social change, enriched diversity, and increased the complexity of development. Within these complex historical conditions, each country sought its own path to modernization.

Take Indonesia, for example. Its history stems from ancient Buddhist and Hindu kingdoms, transitioning through Islamic culture and European colonial rule before declaring independence in 1945. Despite rapid economic development in recent years, Indonesia continues to face challenges such as income inequality, corruption, and natural disasters. As a multi-ethnic, multilingual, multi-religious, and multicultural nation, Indonesia upholds the principle of "seeking common ground while reserving differences" to maintain social diversity and inclusion.

Indonesian modern and contemporary art not only embodies the spirit of national independence but also challenges dominant discourses, protests social injustice, incorporates avant-garde aesthetics, and promotes social innovation and progress. This article explores the development of Indonesian art from the colonial period to the present day and its significance in art history from a nationalist perspective.

2. The Impact of Colonialism on Southeast Asian Art and the Regional Responses

Colonialism profoundly shaped Southeast Asia's history and culture. It involved military, political, and economic domination by capitalist powers over vulnerable nations, ethnic groups, and underdeveloped regions. Colonialism was not only a system of control but also a continuous site of resistance and conflict. Historically, the term "colonialism" is closely associated with Western Europe, as European powers led the most extensive colonial expansions in the modern era.



European colonialism spread worldwide, and in Southeast Asia, it began in the early 16th century with the Portuguese conquest of the Malacca Sultanate, marking the region's long colonial history. During this period, Western culture and ideas flowed in, creating a complex environment for the rise of Southeast Asian art.

Two key reasons explain the development of Southeast Asian art's similarity to Western art history. First, most Southeast Asian countries experienced Western colonization, except Thailand, which, while never formally colonized, was still heavily influenced by Western culture. Thus, colonial history and cultural exchange are evident in much of the region's art. Second, colonial wars and conflicts gave many Southeast Asian artists chances to study in the West and engage deeply with Western artistic traditions.

At the same time, Southeast Asian artists confronted their own national and cultural challenges during this era. They possessed a growing awareness of national identity but also encountered the powerful influence of Western art and culture. In this interaction, Duka and Wei Wei [1] used Western artistic language to express the unique aesthetics, history, and culture of Southeast Asia, thereby forming a unique form of Southeast Asian art, integrating local cultural elements with Western techniques and concepts to form a unique regional artistic identity.

3. The paradox of nationalism

In the field of art, nationalist thought first manifested itself as a reflection on and emphasis on the traditional art of the nation, thereby resisting the influence of European academic art. Although the previous analysis (Xi Jingzhi, 2003) shows that nationalist thought and independence movements can be seen as a way to adjust the schizophrenia of the colonisers, nationalism itself, like colonial education, contains inherent contradictions and complexities[2].

In India, the trend of nationalism in art first appeared in the form of "Bengal Renaissance" [3]. The characteristics of this school of painting are extensive imitation of ancient Indian murals, learning their styles and techniques and creating their own works. The "Bengali Renaissance" emerged in the early 20th century, at the time when the Indian Independence movement was winning victory. Initially, this school of painting was full of vitality, opening new worlds for Indian artists who had been oppressed by the stagnant Indo-European academies, and showing people the vast



prospects of “true Indian art”. However, soon after, the over-reliance on traditional art created new problems. According to (Tahmina S, 2018), many of the works of the Bengali school of painting became mediocre imitations of ancient murals, and became increasingly “academic”, hindering the progress of young artists. It gradually became a new dogma and constraint. This pushed young artists towards new art forms, and for many young artists, Western modernist art became a new stimulus [4].

Extreme nationalism often led to rigidity, pushing artists back to the familiar “European style” for comfort, creating a vicious cycle. However, this is only a stage, not the core issue. Since the 1980s, many former colonial artists have matured, reconciling nationalism and European influences into a unified artistic goal. Yet, contemporary non-Western artists still face challenges in art production and distribution. These difficulties stem not just from artistic choices like technique or style, but from deeper, inherent contradictions within the global art system itself, reflecting ongoing tensions between local identities and global expectations[5].

How to define an artist who holds a “nationalist” stance? On the one hand, he may be a great artist who adheres to national traditions and fights against mainstream culture; but on the other hand, he may also become a person who caters to the rulers and creates exotic images. This contradiction is not only the inherent dilemma of extreme nationalist artists during the independence movement, but also reflects the complex situation faced by contemporary non-Western artists every day.

Colonial art education produced local academic artists who, while trained in European techniques, mainly portrayed local landscapes, daily life, history, and mythology to meet Western demand for “exotic wonders.” With nationalism’s rise, two artistic trends appeared: reviving ancient styles through archaeology (e.g., India) and using European influences to depict local people’s lives and struggles (e.g., Indonesia). However, Western audiences often viewed these works with curiosity, categorizing them as anthropological or “spectacular” rather than valuing them purely as art—a perception rooted more in the independence movement’s revolutionary history than the art’s intrinsic merit.

4. Awakening of national consciousness

In the 16th century, the Netherlands began to colonies Indonesia via the East India Company of the Netherlands. Following the Dutch East India Company’s

dissolution in 1799, the Dutch government took direct control of the province, which they called the “Dutch East Indies.” With the development of transportation and the relevant policies of the colonial government, Indonesian artists gradually had the opportunity to come into contact with Western art. Based on (Zhong Yunrong, 2001), the racial segregation and oppression policies implemented by the colonial government inspired artists to criticize and reflect on colonial rule and express their resistance to unjust rule through art [6]. Indonesian art began to have the ideological color of national independence and democratic liberation. “Resisting colonial rule and striving for national independence” has become one of the main lines of Indonesian modern and contemporary art development[7]. In the 19th century, Indonesian national consciousness began to rise, with Raden Saleh Sjarif Boestaman emerging as a leading artist and Indonesia’s first “modern” painter. Born in Semarang, Java, he spent years in the Netherlands, Germany, and France, mastering European techniques and serving as a royal painter for the Dutch monarchy. Influenced by Realism and Romanticism, his role shifted by the mid-20th century from court painter to national hero. His works blend realistic detail with romantic imagination, heralding Indonesia’s nationalist awakening.

Though initially aiming to please European aristocrats, Raden Saleh avoided Orientalist exoticism, portraying Javanese society and nature from a local perspective. His art was both realistic and emotionally expressive. In a time when the East Indies had limited discourse power, his skill attracted European attention, allowing him to convey his emotions and identity within constrained expressive space [8].

Figure 1

Raden Saleh Syarif Bustaman, Penangkapan Pangeran Diponegoro (The Arrest of Prince Diponegoro), 1857, oil on canvas, 112 x 179 cm



Raden Saleh's famous work *Pangeran Diponegoro* (Figure 1) recreates a major event in Javanese history: the end of the Javanese War and the beginning of Dutch colonial rule, namely the betrayal of the rebel leader, Prince Diponegoro, by the colonial government [9]. In this painting, Raden Saleh deliberately depicted the Dutch officers in the picture as having large heads and small bodies, with funny expressions, to weaken their authority and even make them look ridiculous, while the Javanese characters are depicted in a proportional way, highlighting their solemnity and dignity.

Though some doubt Raden Saleh's nationalism, his Dutch colonial context gave him access to European art training and elite acceptance. Importantly, he used European artistic language to subtly critique colonialism, creating a visual "counter-narration" that paved the way for modern Indonesian art and national consciousness. His work embodies Western Romanticism, with clearly depicted figures breaking traditional hierarchies. The painting's dramatic light-dark contrasts and carefully arranged elements—like mountains and vegetation—feature a spotlight-like beam from the southeast, reflecting Rembrandt's influence in using light and shadow to create drama.

5. The manifestation of nationalism in Indonesian contemporary art

Since Indonesia's independence in 1945, modern art has developed rapidly and has become an important part of Indonesian urban culture and has been deeply influenced by Indonesia's cultural exchanges with the West. The rise of modern art itself is part of the nationalist project. The Republic of Indonesia is composed of a diverse ethnic group, and people are looking forward to the birth of a new culture and a new art form [10]. By the 1930s and 1940s, nationalist ideas were widely spread in Indonesian society, and contemporary artists expressed their national ideas through art. Affandi, as a typical representative at the time, not only achieved important achievements in art but also profoundly influenced a group of young Indonesian artists. One of the most representative painters in Indonesian contemporary art is Affandi (1907–1990), who can almost be regarded as a model figure of Indonesian modern art [11]. Through Affandi's artistic creation, we can trace the development trajectory and evolution of Indonesian contemporary art. Due to the profound

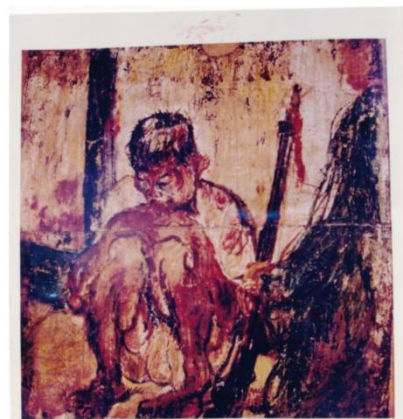
influence of nationalist thought, Affandi actively participated in the creation of political propaganda paintings in the 1940s and 1950s, before and after Indonesia declared independence, and contributed to the national independence movement.

These works reflect not only Affandi's artistic vision but also his deep engagement with national culture and identity. He intertwined personal emotions with social history, embedding his concern and passion for the nation's fate into his paintings. As a result, Affandi's art had wide influence and became a key force driving stylistic transformation among Indonesian artists. During this period, Indonesian art gradually moved away from strict realism toward greater emphasis on individual expression and national identity.

Take his important work "A Captured Spy" as an example (Figure 2) , which not only shows strong drama and humanistic care but also reflects his concept of using art as a tool for social and political expression. This painting style with strong emotions and political appeals has also become an important symbol of Indonesian contemporary art.

Figure 2

A CAPTURED SPY (1947). Affandi. 103,5 x 97 cm, Oil on Canvas.



This work was created against the backdrop of rising Indonesian nationalism, aiming to inspire the Indonesian people to rise up against Dutch colonial rule and join the armed struggle to win national independence.[12] The strong emotional tension and dramatic treatment in the work clearly bear the shadow of expressionism. Affandi was deeply influenced by Van Gogh in his artistic style. He emphasised the direct expression of emotions and the release of individual inner emotions.

Although Affandi and Van Gogh share some expressive techniques, their styles differ significantly. Van Gogh conveys personal emotions through inner spiritual



struggles, while Affandi channels his feelings into reflections on social reality. His works express not only individual emotions but also respond to the nation's fate, struggles, and collective trauma. Thus, Affandi's expressionism blends social and political meaning, creating a unique visual language—an "Indonesian expressionism" with distinct national characteristics.

The artist abandoned the traditional palette and brushes and instead used his fingertips to apply paint directly to the canvas, forming a unique creative technique and establishing his personal style. This direct and expressive approach effectively enhanced the emotional catharsis and became what later generations called abstract expressionism. At the beginning of World War I, young Indonesian artists were influenced by modern Western painting and were deeply inspired by nationalism, using painting to express their national consciousness. By the 1960s, abstract expressionism and Islamic art gradually gained recognition in the Indonesian art world, and artists integrated local cultural elements to promote the localization of art. At the same time, (Bao Yuheng, 2010) pointed that a group of artists who paid attention to the reality of Indonesian society emerged, using a realistic and documentary style, focusing on social issues such as wealth inequality, environmental pollution and deforestation, reflecting the deepening and confirmation of Indonesian national consciousness[13].

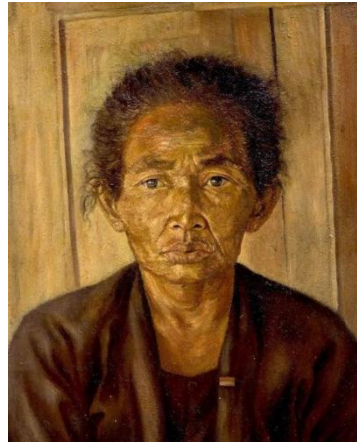
From the 1920s to 1940s, Indonesian nationalism surged, marking a decline of the earlier romantic art phase, which was seen as less authentically "native." Artists shifted their focus to nature and everyday life, signaling a growing cultural self-awareness.

Between 1938 and 1942, the Indonesian Painters Association (PERSAGI) was founded, becoming a pivotal force in modern Indonesian art. PERSAGI promoted art as a reflection of the artist's personal perspective and an expression of national cultural identity, emphasizing its social and political significance as a link between individual and nation.

At the same time, Indonesian nationalist painter Trubus Soedarsono was also active on the art stage during this period. His work "Ipoiko" (Figure 3) depicts a portrait of his mother, conveying a sensitive and sad mood through delicate brushstrokes and low tones. This work was created after Japan surrendered in 1946, and contains a deep reflection on the trauma of war, national destiny and family emotions [14].

Figure 3

Ipoiko(1946), Trubus Soedarsono, oil on board, 50,5×36 cm



In the context of Indonesian art, the image of “mother” is often associated with the concept of “motherland”, especially during the colonial period, the War of Independence (1945-1949) and the early days of the new republic. This image gradually became one of the core symbols for artists to express national identity. Mother not only symbolizes the spiritual core of the family, but is also endowed with the meaning of belonging, faith and country, representing a spiritual home that needs to be protected [15].

Artwork from this period not only depicts the struggle for national independence but also carries the visual symbols of the Republic and nationalism. Portraiture draws on the tradition of Western realism, featuring complete compositions, precise features, and penetrating gazes. The use of light and dark contrasts enhances the sense of three-dimensionality. Artists meticulously depict the figures’ appearance, posture, clothing, and fleeting expressions, conveying emotions, thoughts, character, and inner spirit within the limited canvas.

6. Conclusion

Nationalist art’s development is deeply linked to colonial cultural influence, reflecting a tension between accepting and resisting it. This dynamic drives local art to redefine identity and shape a nation’s artistic language, making national visual expression key to modern art’s growth. Indonesian art, enriched rather than destroyed by foreign influences, uniquely reflects its history and national spirit. As part of global art evolution, it shares traits with other postcolonial nations. Political and economic



progress supports its growth, with artists adapting Western influences to fit local and international contexts rather than simply imitating them.

Author contributions(CRediT taxonomy): The author was responsible for all stages of the research, including conceptualization, methodology, data collection, data analysis, interpretation, and manuscript preparation. The work was conducted entirely by the author without external contribution.

Conceptualization – Yiyang Zhang;

Methodology –Yiyang Zhang;

Formal analysis – Yiyang Zhang;

Investigation – Yiyang Zhang;

Resources – Yiyang Zhang;

Data curation – Yiyang Zhang;

Writing – original draft –Yiyang Zhang;

Writing – review & editing – Yiyang Zhang;

Visualization – Yiyang Zhang;

Supervision –Yiyang Zhang;

Project administration – Yiyang Zhang.

Acknowledgment: The authors would like to express their gratitude to the administrative and library staff who assisted in accessing archival materials on Indonesian art history, as well as to colleagues who provided valuable insights on Southeast Asian cultural studies. The authors also appreciate the institutional support that facilitated the completion of this research.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding this study on the evolution of Indonesian modern and contemporary art. The research was conducted independently, without any financial, institutional, or personal relationships that could be perceived as influencing the interpretation of historical, political, or cultural developments discussed in the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.



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