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Architects in the Eye of the Storm:

Reflections on Teaching Southeast Asian Art in a University Museum

KAJA M. MCGOWAN

Abstract

Cornell University began collecting Asian art in the 1950s. Today the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art (HFJM) contains more than 10,000 works acquired through the generosity of alumni, faculty, parents and friends. As a professor at Cornell, I have the great pleasure to work with Ellen Avril, the Johnson's chief curator and curator of Asian art, to build certain areas of the collection, particularly masks, puppets, textiles and story cloths. The high point of my teaching experience at Cornell has been introducing these objects in my seminars, especially "Shadow Play: Asian Art and Performance" (ARTH 4852/6852, ASIAN 4442/6646), now in its third iteration. With funding from the Cornell Council of the Arts, I was able to invite guest artist Dr Gusti Putu Sudarta, musician, composer, puppeteer and dancer with deep roots in traditional Balinese forms. With Dr Sudarta, I had the students experiment with making their own shadow puppets. My essay, which follows, was inspired by this seminar and by recent gifts to the HFJM.

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A giant eye, wide open and fully dilated, is projected dramatically on the ceiling of the sculpture court at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art (HFJM) in Ithaca, New York (Figure 1). Visible night and day, not only on campus, but also from the city of Ithaca, this seemingly calm moment caught on camera in what can only be called a storm of light-emitting diodes (LEDs), is taken from a site-specific installation by artist Leo Villareal. Entitled *Cosmos*, it is an homage to Cornell astronomy professor Carl Sagan (1934–66). Villareal, an internationally renowned pioneer in computer-driven imagery, began planning for the installation in 2010 in tandem with project architect Walter Smith. This continuous play of light and shadow on the exterior ceiling of I.M. Pei's now classic 1973 building affords students a visceral engagement with the exterior spaces of this dynamic museum as classroom, and an invitation, both performative and participatory, to the interior riches of the museum's permanent collections within.

Like that proverbial eye of calm found at the centre of a tropical storm, museums can provide a haven, a space for contemplation, but they have also long been sites of controversy. It was Sagan who argued forcefully in his 1980 popular science publication entitled *Cosmos*—the inspiration for Villareal—that of all the world's great faiths, it is the Hindu religion alone that is committed to the idea that the cosmos experiences an infinite number of births and deaths. Sagan maintains that it is the only religion in which these cycles of time appear, perhaps accidentally, to correspond with those of modern scientific cosmology. Accidental or not, vivid examples of these longer time cycles of birth and death can be found reflected in objects held in the Asian collections at the HFJM and in the Hindu-inspired texts that are their source of inspiration. One such text is the Mahabharata, to which I will return shortly.

Comparing as a method of discovery is a staple of art historical analysis. Villareal's site-specific ceiling installation serves as a powerful point of contact with the Balinese embroidered ceiling canopy (*leluhur*, meaning 'ancestors') used in Hindu ceremonies (Figure 2). The sacred script in the centre of a double *vajra* thunderbolt points to the invisible presence of the god Siwa, who wields the weapon. With his female consort, he is that powerful eye of the storm where birth and death, creation and destruction are eternally at play. In the corners, four holy men stand, each clasping a flower and one a *bajra* (sacred bell), used in meditation and prayer. It is the fringed mirrors beneath their feet that allow a play of light and shadow in line with Villareal's cosmic installation. Each reflective surface exercises a formative influence over that which is expressed through it. Displayed ritually on the ceiling of an ancestral shrine, these mirrors beg the question of who or what will bear witness? Each pool of light projecting in a sacred cardinal direction is not necessarily



FIGURE 1: Leo Villareal, *Cosmos*, 2012. White LEDs, custom software, and electrical hardware; approximately 45 x 68 feet. Site specific installation at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University (Photo: James Ewing). Photograph courtesy of the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University.



FIGURE 2: Balinese ceiling canopy (*leluhur*) with a design of holy men and lotus surrounding the symbol of Siwa. Silk embroidery on cotton, with mirror glass, scrap cloth triangles and nylon fringe. 2007.031.008. Acquired through the George and Mary Rockwell Fund. Photograph courtesy of the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University.

intended for one's own recognition of self, but for a whole community of beings seen and unseen. Harnessing this canopy's compositional complexities to a cyclical story—a spatial practice of continual renewal—not only connects students with Southeast Asian, specifically Hindu Balinese sensibilities, but also encourages them in the process to linger over this ceiling cloth with its richly embroidered and reflective surfaces, while being urged to consider a series of cross-culturally engaged assignments using mirrors.

Rarely do museums employ mirrors as a kind of interpretive strategy to transform an exhibit experience. Amid the riot of colour, noise and bustle that constitutes a typical Hindu temple festival, however, reflective surfaces abound. This Balinese cover for ritual offerings (*sahab*), made from teak-dyed



FIGURE 3: Antique beaded Balinese ritual cover (*sahab*) made from teak-dyed pandanus leaves stitched to a rattan frame, with one mirror perched on a painted offering stand (*dulang*). D 10 5/8" (27 cm.) Photograph courtesy of the author.

pandanus leaves stitched to a rattan frame and encrusted with white seed beads is a case in point (Figure 3). When poised on a ritual stand (*dulang*), this lid with its clouded single mirror in the centre allows the devotee a glimpse not only of a distorted shadow of the self, but also the eyes of the deities from an inverted position. Such unbounded fellow feeling is quite distinct from Jacques Lacan's so-called mirror stage, where the looking glass



FIGURE 4: Balinese shadow puppeteer (*dalang*), Dr I Gusti Putu Sudarta, poses with his puppet Sutasoma. Photograph taken by Chen-ni Ma, 2016. Photograph courtesy of Chen-ni Ma and Gusti Sudarta.

persuades the child to accept a specific image of him or herself. Holding a puppet of Sutasoma in his hand, guest performer Dr I Gusti Putu Sudarta recently described for students in my seminar entitled “Shadow Play: Asian Art and Performance” how a shadow puppeteer (*dalang*) must look into the eye of the puppet to see the self as Other, mirrored (*mencerminkan*) back (Figure 4). The point is to allow the Other—in this case the character of Sutasoma—the possibility of seeing himself, and then for Sudarta to see himself in the mirror of the Other. The etymology of the word ‘mirror’ in Balinese is informative: *Cerma* is the more refined word for mirror, while *meka* is used in ordinary parlance, a word with the dual connotations of ‘mirror’ and ‘eye’.¹

Shadow play is a superb medium for storytelling. As with many performing arts in Asia, neither the highly stylized images of puppets, nor its musical

or linguistic complexity detract from its wide popularity. Why does such an apparently obscure art form exercise such broad appeal? The seminar explores the playful and politically adept fluctuations of light and shadow across screens throughout Asia. In each of the countries where shadow theatre exists, it has acquired its own repertory and a distinct technique and style of its own. This aesthetic has translated locally into ink drawings, paintings, sculpture, architecture, cinema, and modern and contemporary installation art. A shadow on a screen occupies a three-dimensional space, but this is usually not visible until it projects onto a reflective surface. In the eyes of a *dalang* like Sudarta, such reflective surfaces achieved by puppets being held at various angles from the screen create both an inverted and an elongated view of figures fluctuating at the centre, while seemingly embraced by the contours of peripheral puppets and landscape elements at relative stasis to right and left. A recent gift to the HFJM evokes this dreamlike distortion inspired by the shadow screen: an ink drawing on paper entitled *The Dream of Dharmawangsa* (Figure 5) by the acclaimed father of Balinese modern art, I Gusti Nyoman Lempad (1862–1978).

A hauntingly beautiful woman stands centre stage, adorned from head to toe with living creatures of the forest. She towers over two Pandawa brothers from the Mahabharata—Arjuna on her left wielding a bow, and his older brother, King Dharmawangsa (also known as Yudisthira) on her right, whose right arm is raised as if in awe of (or possibly fending off?) the gaze of an animated winged serpent (naga) that encircles the elongated waist and neck of this mystery woman. A 1957 version of this drawing, very likely its prototype, hangs in the Puri Lukisan Museum in Ubud, Bali, where I first stood in awe before its compositional qualities in 1981. In 1999, a museum catalogue published by the Ratna Wartha Foundation featured the drawing, providing a dubious interpretation of the work.² In the intervening decades, with each visit to Indonesia, I have made it a kind of pilgrimage to visit this enigmatic and emotionally nuanced composition, recently selected to join the Virtual Collection of Masterpieces (VCM), a web-based innovative project launched in 2007 by the Asia Europe Museum Network (ASEMUS).

Brought face to face with the elusive source of inspiration for Lempad's *Dream of Dharmawangsa* in the HFJM, students are encouraged to become detectives. It was Erwin Panofsky who promoted the idea of art history as detective work. He characterized the art historian as an “intuitive” acrobat of sorts, making iconographic leaps beyond the evidence. When that iconography is obscure or treated in an unusual way, art historians try to understand it by studying the historical context in which the image was made, typically through comparison with texts and other imagery from the time.



FIGURE 5: I Gusti Nyoman Lempad, Balinese (1862?–1978). *The Dream of Dharmawangsa*. Ink on paper. TR 10161. Gift of Georgina Marrero. Photograph courtesy of the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University.

Establishing how the selected theme might contain a biographical reference to the life of the artist is also a revealing strategy. For many complex or enigmatic works, the meanings of the subject matter continue to be debated and reinterpreted today. Museums can become a transformative site where such sleuth-work transpires. I will conclude by offering a new reading of *The Dream of Dharmawangsa*, one in which Lempad is the quintessential, albeit invisible, “architect in the eye of the storm”. But first, by way of comparison, a glance at the 1999 iconographic interpretation is warranted, a reading that, to my knowledge, has not been contested up until now:

This story is said to originate from the epic cycle of the Mahabharata, but it is probably an extrapolation based on the puppet show theater. Arjuna is known as a Don Juan among the Pandawas. He aims at the girls with his bow and arrow, a symbol of his attraction. As for the girl of giant dimensions, she is ensnared by sexual desire, represented here by the *naga* (dragon). The two trees have the same root, whose middle part grows in the shape of a vagina; and they are dry and leafless. The story and drawing may therefore be construed as a modern metaphor on the theme of sexual desire and a warning against it.³

Where is King Dharmawangsa in this visual analysis, and how, if at all, does his ‘dream’ engage with the ‘playboy’ antics of his younger brother Arjuna? What are we expected to make of the description of the ensnared giantess whose moral and sexual plight is perceived through the encircling desiccation of a vaginal landscape?

It is in fact the leafless trees that provide clues to Dharmawangsa’s ‘dream’, but not as described by Couteau. A look at Lempad’s drawings from the 1930s through the 1960s reveals a knowledge of trees and their distinctive leaves that flourish on the margins of his compositions. Lempad was descended from Arya Pengalasan, ‘the ones of the forest’, whose origins can be traced to East Java, perhaps near the Kingdom of Kediri. As a consummate traditional architect (*undagi*), woodcarver and maker of masks, Lempad had a unique knowledge of the affordances of different kinds of woods and their spirit emanations. So why then is this landscape in *The Dream of Dharmawangsa* so distinct from his oeuvre? A closer reading of a historically situated version of the Mahabharata is required for students, in tandem with a succinct look at Lempad’s life and his work. As will be discerned, textual and biographical strands entwine through the cosmically ordained relationship between divinely trained architects, princes and the palaces that they co-create.

In the Mahabharata, it is King Dharmawangsa who rules over Amarta (Indraprastha, in the Sanskrit version), a mythical kingdom with floating palaces conceived and built by the demon Mayasura on the charred remains of the Khandawa forest. Wildfires are a natural part of many forest ecosystems, but this instance described in the epic reveals what must have been an ecocide on a grand scale. The Sanskrit Mahabharata was translated into Old Javanese and abbreviated into eight sections (*parwa*), during the glorious reign of a historical king with the same name, Dharmawangsa of Medang or Mataram (990–1006), who likewise needed forests cleared for his palace. It is the Sabha Parwa 2:3 that contains a devastating description of the conflagration of the forest. This is followed by the building of a grand city constructed by Mayasura, who in gratitude for being saved from the flames by Kresna, promises a dream palace for Dharmawangsa replete with floors so shiny that they are mistaken for reflective pools of clear water. Like Mayasura, Lempad's father, Gusti Sedahan, was a traditional architect and shadow puppeteer who, with his family, had sought asylum in Ubud, Bali. Both he and his gifted son were responsible in the 1920s for designing and building palaces and temples to the degree that modern courtly Ubud today is largely of their making.

Lempad's composition draws on a localized moment in the Mahabharata as seen through the shadow theater repertoire. Known as "The Burning of the Khandawa Forest" (*Babad Wana Khendawa* in Java and *Babad Alas Wanamarta* in Bali), this shadow-play story was adapted to the wayang screen by the famous *dalang*, R. Ng. Wignyasutarno in Solo, Java, after reading Soetarta Harjawahana's Theosophist rendering of the Mahabharata, first published in 1939, and then due to its popular demand, republished in 1956. This suggests a plausible chronology for the emergence of Lempad's 1957 prototype of the HFJM composition.⁴ Proof that Lempad knew the wayang story can be traced to a sketch gifted to the Puri Lukisan Museum, entitled *The Burning of the Khandawa Forest*, where the demon architect Mayasura can be seen praying to Kresna to be spared from the conflagration, while surrounding animals of every stripe succumb in anguish before Agni, the god of fire.⁵ Here, too, many of the trees in the forest are depicted without leaves.

In his later years, Lempad produced hundreds of innovative drawings inspired from the shadow play repertoire and from local folktales. Lempad was also instrumental in the development of the Pita Maha artists' collective that was formed in 1936 by the king of Ubud, Tjokorda Gede Agung Sukawati, and foreign artists Rudolf Bonnet and Walter Spies. Not only was Lempad responsible for a new style that featured elongated and distorted figures, he wielded the seemingly empty areas of white paper in innovative ways similar to the magical properties afforded by the shadow screen. Lempad was also responsible in large part for designing and building the Museum Puri Lukisan,

Ubud's oldest museum, from 1953 to 1955. Indeed, his initial composition of *The Dream of Dharmawangsa* may very well have been a gift in honour of the museum's official opening in 1957.

What follows is a summary of the burning of the Khandawa forest, culminating in the dramatic moment depicted by Lempad (Figure 5). For many years, King Dharmawangsa ruled the Kingdom of Amarta (or Indraprastha), once the site of a dense forest called Khandawa. One day, a sick brahmin, who turns out to be Agni, the god of fire, approaches Arjuna and Kresna. Agni explains his need for medicinal oil for a stomach ailment. This oil can only be procured from the conflagration of the forest of Khandawa, and he promises to provide Arjuna and Kresna with the necessary tools to successfully carry out the deed. Although this horrific portion of the Mahabharata is relatively brief, it plays an important part in the entire epic because Arjuna asks, as his part of the bargain in helping Agni, to be given an unbeatable bow, Gandiva, and an inexhaustible quiver of arrows, both of which are essential in the coming Bharatayudha war. The outcome of the great war is established in part through this initial incident in the Adiparwa. Meanwhile, Arjuna's father, Indra, senses that a fire is raging in the forest of Khandawa, where his friend Takshaka, king of the flying naga has his home. Arjuna aims Gandiva at the sky, creating a canopy of arrows. Indra summons the rain to penetrate the canopy but to no avail.

As fortune would have it, Takshaka is not in the Khandawa forest at the time of the burning, but his wife and son Aswasena are not as lucky. It is in fact Aswasena, Takshaka's beloved son, who is wrapped lovingly around his mother's waist in Lempad's drawing. The heroic maternal instincts of his naga mother, towering above the Pandawa, is caught poignantly here in the instant before she takes flight to save her son. What has been construed as her seductive wiles, on closer look, reveals a protective mother who looks back at Arjuna, enemy of every living thing in the Khandawa forest. Torqueing her body away from her foe so as to protect her young son from Arjuna's arrows, she uses her left hand to gently caress her son's tail coiled around her neck. Amid the burning chaos, this naga queen, as depicted by Lempad, embodies those perfect physical qualities of Siwa in his pose as Lord of the Dance. She is frozen in the moment before her dance of flight within the cosmic circle of fire that is the simultaneous and continuous creation and destruction of the universe. The ring of fire here suggested by the surrounding leafless trees, appears to encapsulate that endless cycle of annihilation and regeneration in its most cosmic form. Even her right arm mirrors Siwa's, as it stretches diagonally across her chest with her palm facing down, a mudra that signifies spiritual grace and fulfillment through meditation and mastery over one's

baser appetites. This is the dramatic moment leading to her ultimate sacrifice, when she shelters her son in her mouth, and makes a final flight up out of the charred forest and into the canopy of arrows where she spits Aswasena to safety. In that moment, Indra saves Aswasena by sending a fresh burst of wind and rain. Arjuna falls momentarily unconscious in that onslaught and Aswasena manages to escape.

Lempad spares us from witnessing the moment that follows, when Arjuna shoots an arrow and severs the head of Aswasena's mother. The son seeks revenge for his mother's death during the final war, the Bharatayudha. In the final stages of the war, when Arjuna fights his half-brother Karna, Aswasena hides in Karna's bow as one of his arrows and attempts to kill Arjuna. Kresna, the clairvoyant, tips the chariot so that Aswasena only manages to burn Arjuna's crown. Though relentless in carrying out revenge against his mother's demise, Aswasena ultimately perishes at the hands of Arjuna.

Apart from Aswasena and the architect Mayasura, the only other creatures that escape the fire are four young birds. The reason for their survival has to do with a separate story of the great sage Mandapala, who assumes the form of a bird to produce progeny. As the forest burns, the baby birds cry out: "Mother, we cannot fly; save yourself." She does so, and as the young birds feel the fire approaching, they start praying to Agni, who ultimately spares their lives. Lempad's innovation here is to expand the compassion of Aswasena's mother to include the salvation of these birds who are drawn delicately clinging to her hair, and serve as additional wings to aid her in her flight. Other creatures also can be seen to seek shelter on her arms and wrists. Lempad's sensitive treatment of this tale elevates the ultimate sacrifice of mothers—not only for their own children, but for all the children of the forest. Her body serves as a reflective canopy protecting the forest, much in contrast to Arjuna's canopy of arrows that ensure total annihilation. Here Lempad, as the architect in the eye of the storm, mirrors his forebear, Mayasura, described as the divine carpenter and woodworker, the second son of Sri Viswakarma. Known in Hindu cosmology as the divine architect of the universe, Viswakarma is the very personification of the creative power that wields heaven and earth. His five sons constitute the clans of Vedic craftsmen: blacksmiths, carpenters, metalworkers, stonemasons and goldsmiths. Lempad's role as the designer and creator of the palaces of Ubud can be seen like Mayasura's to linger in the shadows of *The Dream of Dharmawangsa*, revealing a sacred covenant in which one's work, like that of Leo Villareal who introduced this essay, must be a reflection of the cosmos itself. The Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art becomes the ideal space where such site-specific reflections can flourish.

BIOGRAPHY

Kaja M. McGowan is Associate Professor of History of Art and Visual Studies at Cornell University. Her areas of expertise involve South and Southeast Asia, with emphasis on Indonesia, particularly Java and Bali (both historically Indic in orientation) studied in relation to the subcontinent. Her scholarly interests encourage studying the reciprocal relationships between neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia. Her research explores the flow of ideas and artefacts along this highway—architecture, bronzes, textiles, ceramics, performance traditions and visualizations of texts like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata—artefacts that move and those that are locally produced. This accounts for the shaping of ideas and the development of styles across vast geographical and historical distances.

NOTES

- ¹ Charles Clyde Barber, *A Balinese-English Dictionary* (University of Aberdeen, 1979), p. 410.
- ² Jean Couteau, *Museum Puri Lukisan Catalogue* (Ratna Wartha Foundation, 1999), p. 69.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Laurie J. Sears, *Shadows of Empire: Colonial Discourse and Javanese Tales* (Duke University Press, 1996), p. 198.
- ⁵ Bruce Carpenter et al., *Lempad of Bali: The Illuminating Line*, 1st edition (Editions Didier Millet, 2014), p. 136.

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