

Javanese art

see DVD for additional material

istilah bahasa asing: teater
tiater
theatre

raja
raja
king

setan
sétan
demon

The work illustrated here and the related works on the DVD were made in Java, Indonesia. They illustrate the *wayang kulit* style of Indonesian puppet theatre and painting, which is seen particularly in Java and Bali. The term *wayang* is first mentioned in the 10th century AD, when the Indian Hindu epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, were established in Indonesian literature, following the introduction of Hinduism to Indonesia with traders and missionaries in the first century AD. *Wayang kulit* style is characterised by figures shown as flattened forms, their faces in profile, with broad shoulders, long thin arms and necks, and a stock repertoire of facial shapes, hairstyles, costume, jewellery and colouring. For an Indonesian audience, the moral issues, character types and visual characteristics of *wayang* theatre were once as familiar as those of contemporary television drama, and *wayang* style continues to influence contemporary art forms, providing a vehicle that makes art accessible to a broad audience.

The term *wayang* can refer to the many varieties of Indonesian puppet theatre, to the puppets themselves, and to the painting style incorporating *wayang* figures. Its origin is unknown but the theatre style probably developed out of an indigenous oral storytelling tradition. The narrative framework, characters and philosophy of *wayang* theatre reflect a blend of Hindu epics and folk narratives with Buddhist, animist and Islamic beliefs. *Wayang* style is adapted in contemporary art because it provides a narrative framework for discussions of contemporary politics and social issues.

Most Asian countries have their own puppetry tradition, and flat painted parchment puppets are also found in Thailand, Cambodia and southern India as well as Java and Bali.

Wayang kulit puppets are usually made from buffalo parchment with buffalo horn rods attached to the arms and body. They are traditionally painted with tempera, then gilded and varnished. Performances take place at all levels of society, from royal courts to villages. They are held at night and may last many hours. The *dalang*, or puppet master, not only controls the puppets (which may number up to 150 in more elaborate productions), but also narrates the story and directs the *gamelan* orchestra accompanying the performance. The audience views the show either from the front of a cloth screen, where only the shadows of the puppets are visible, or from the back of the screen, where they can see the *dalang*, the orchestra, and the puppets.

The puppet *Prabu Suyudana* seen here is one of the main figures in the *Mahabharata*, one of the Hindu epics frequently adapted in *wayang kulit* performances. The story centres around the conflict between the Pandawa and Korawa clans, which serves as a metaphor for man's continual struggle between good and evil inherent in his own nature. *Prabu Suyudana* is the eldest of the 100 Korawa brothers and the chief enemy of the Pandawas.

In *wayang* theatre, painting and dance characters are clearly distinguished with respect to personality type. Refined characters who play gods, nobles and heroes are referred to in Javanese as *alus*, and are contrasted with evil, demonic or wild characters who are called *kras* (rough) or *kasar* (coarse). Each type has indicative facial features, colouration and costume. Those of noble character are indicated by slim physique and refined features, in contrast to demons who are portrayed with fangs; round, protruding eyes; bulbous noses and corpulent bodies. Some characters, who are wild and fierce but also possess a noble side to their character, may at first appear as *kasar* but identified as noble by their costume and colouration.

Prabu Suyudana is such a character. His costume indicates he is a ruling prince, as he wears a triple diadem (*makuta*) and a backwing (*praba*, the decoration behind his shoulders), and the royal *dodot* textile, *bokongan*. However, the bulbous shape of his nose and general lack of delicacy in his features reveal the demonic aspects of his character.

JAVANESE
Prabu Suyudana
early 20th century, Java, Indonesia
opaque watercolour and gold paint
on buffalo hide, buffalo horn, metal,
cotton thread
97.0 x 53.0 x 2.5 cm
Purchased, 1972 (AS2-1972)

