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Javanese folk furniture bridges East and West cultures

Rita A. Widiadana , The Jakarta Post , Denpasar | Thu, 04/08/2010 8:38 AM | Art and Design



Javanese antique and folk furniture are examples of artworks that bridge past and future, East and West, avid art lover David B. Smith says after years of meticulous study.

For decades, Smith roamed every corner of Java to find the beauty and mystery of Javanese folk arts.

While most people on the island viewed the works as bits and pieces, Smith valued them as precious examples of cultural heritage from the old agricultural society of Java.

His love of Javanese folk art and antique furniture had grown deeply since the early 1970s when he first visited a village in Ponorogo, East Java.

“The first time I saw examples of the remarkable cabinets and chests from Ponorogo, East Java, I felt their power in a very physical way,” Smith recalls.

He was lucky to be friends with art collector and “mentor” James Tirtoprodjo who accompanied him on a “never-ending-journey” to remote Javanese villages, many of which were isolated from urban

influences.

“I never knew what I would find on my travels with James Tirtoprodjo — my colleague, and frequent guide — and I came upon an intriguing example from the hands of yet another unknown 19th-century craftsman. It was a shock to me that such expressive workmanship could be so hidden away.”

Smith’s enthusiasm for handmade furniture was spontaneous and already evident when he was still 11 years old, when, with no encouragement from his parents, he bought a Pennsylvania Dutch dry sink in New England and spent months refinishing it.

For more than 30 years, Smith has searched for and collected the rarest pieces of Javanese furniture and folk arts that no other people or institutions encompassed.

Smith explored galleries, museums in Indonesia and overseas. He discovered that virtually none possessed any of the examples he had in his unique and rare collection.

Smith’s vast collection ranges from wooden cabinets and chests to chairs, four-poster

beds, boxes, sturdy tables, room dividers, statues, puppets and ritual objects.

“David’s collection of Javanese folk arts and furniture is a very rare reflection of the golden age of furniture making in the late 18th and the early 20th centuries,” commented author and art observer Bruce W. Carpenter, who accompanied Smith one afternoon at his office compound in the Sanur area.

Together with Carpenter, Smith researched the origins and history of each piece in his collection, and put the information together in a 350-page book titled *Javanese Antique Furniture and Folk Art*, published by Singapore-based Edition Didier Millet.

Smith says the book aims to honor a generally unknown folk art and furniture tradition by depicting some of the most impressive examples of Javanese antique and folk furniture.

Now, for a bit of history...

The history of Javanese furniture, Carpenter writes, dates back to the arrival of the Portuguese and Dutch between the early 15th and 16th centuries.

“Inhabitants of the Nusantara archipelago recognized no furniture traditions,” he notes.

Indigenous furniture (comprising a variety of chests of various sizes used for storage, low pedestal tables (dulang) and large platters of wood and metal that also served as tables) was present, but used in limited ways.



Europeans — the Portuguese and the Dutch, brought furniture to Java for two reasons: because they “found no suitable furnishings in the East” (Terwen-de Loos, 1985, 11), and because they wanted to delight the local populace with lavish and grand styles. The early introduction of furniture was also necessary because the Dutch colonialists refused or were unable to sit upon the floor like their hosts across the Asia-Pacific at that time.

Europeans brought with them lavish furnishings such as Baroque armoires, Spanish chairs, armchairs, daybeds, four-poster beds, room dividers, candelabras, large chests and sturdy tables.

The needs of the colonial elite and administration were so great and the supply from Europe so impractical.

To meet the increasing demand for furniture, a number of notable Dutch officials and wealthy merchants established local ateliers employing local artisans in Batavia (the capital of the Dutch Indies colonial government) in 1619.

Founded in 1619, Batavia (today’s Jakarta), the first completely planned modern city in the East and capital of the Dutch East Indies, quickly developed into a furniture-making center.

The major patrons were the officials of the Dutch East India Company (also known by its Dutch acronym, VOC) and wealthy merchants who commissioned work for both personal and official use, such as to give as gifts to indigenous princes.

The first recorded example of this practice was when a chair was given to the Sultan of Mataram in 1651.

From Batavia, furniture manufacturers also shifted to other regions including Cirebon in

West Java, Tegal and Jepara in Central Java, Surabaya in East Java and Madura Island. Furniture production also emerged in Palembang, South Sumatra.

The growth of local ateliers enriched the production of furniture items with influences from the West (Baroque, Art Nouveau, Art Deco, Georgian styles, etc), Java (Indonesia), China (Ming Dynasty), India (Hindu and Buddhist artistic elements) and Middle East.

This furniture is a rich part of the Indonesian people's warisan (heritage).

Java was one of the great civilizations of the ancient world, and the finest Javanese art is second to none. Nevertheless, Javanese antiques and folk furniture must be one of the last "unknown" art forms to be documented by the Western world.

Carpenter says many experts previously thought Javanese folk arts were similar to any other folk arts, with "bright, bold colors, naïve forms and compositions, anonymous of origins.

"[Javanese folk furniture] was regarded as products of forthright workmanship, unfettered by intellectualism.

"[Javanese] furniture could be described by some as little more than an amusing footnote to a far greater European tradition," he said.

A closer analysis will reveal that both of these facile conclusions are erroneous. Javanese furniture is the offspring of an ancient sophisticated culture, renowned for its ability to incorporate outside influences into existing traditions without impairing the integrity of the original.

Another scholar, Joseph Campbell, also said the introduction of foreign furniture should be viewed as catalyst that resulted in the creation of a new art form that was completely Javanese in spite of its origins.

In addition to cabinetries, Javanese antique furniture includes beds, tables, chairs and benches, which according to the Javanese perception of the universe all share a common but important characteristic — elevation.

Unlike most Javanese furniture, clearly based on European and Chinese precedents, chests, boxes and storage containers have been made and used in Java since time immemorial.

Boxes and chests were made from a wide variety of materials including bamboo, rattan, woven grasses, bark, terracotta and stone. The production of boxes and chests may date back to the Bronze and Iron ages. During these periods, stone boxes and chests were used as ossuaries or sarcophagi for the storage of ancestral remains.

The influence of Hindu and Buddhist elements were also obvious (between the seventh and 15th Centuries).

Boxes and chests were used to store family heirlooms, jewelry, rare textiles and even rice and agricultural harvests.

"One day, I talked to some children living near my house in Jepara, Central Java, and showed them my collection of Javanese furniture. None of the children knew these were the arts of their ancestors," Smith recalled.

These children and the majority of Javanese people may have no idea or knowledge of their own precious art legacies.

The collections of David B. Smith and James Tirtoprodjo may shed some light on the history and mysteries surrounding ancient Javanese antique and folk furniture.



Inspired by India: The bold composition of vividly painted, stylized lotus flower seen on the façade of this 19th century large chest (grobog) from East Java is directly inspired by the Patola, a much-prized, rare double ikat textile patterns from India, which entered Java Island in the early 16th century. Courtesy Editions Didier Millet