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| PERSAGI is the acronym for *Persatuan Ahli-Ahli Gambar Indonesia* (Union of Indonesian Painters, or to be more precise, Union of Indonesian Drawers). Founded by S. Sudjojono (1913-1986) and Agus Djaja (1913-1994) in October 1938, PERSAGI is widely understood to have played a major role in the development of modernism in Indonesian art. While there was no binding style linking the individual artists, they were all in search of a new art that was both distinctively national and intensely individual. Sudjojono’s influence as critic and as well as artist was profound, and served to define a modernist – as well as nationalist tenor – in Indonesian art of the 1940s and beyond. In terms of its importance to Indonesian modernism, it is significant that PERSAGI was formed a decade after Bahasa Indonesia was declared the national language. It was in 1928 that young nationalists in the then Dutch East Indies led by Sukarno issued the Youth Declaration, proclaiming a unified nation with one motherland, one people and one language. The artists of PERSAGI saw themselves as cultural workers within this nascent nation-state, as part of a broad socialist-nationalist front aimed at the creation of a new national consciousness out of the inheritance of a colonial past, and the deeper histories that divided this archipelago-country with its vast geography and a variety of ethnic, religious, and linguistic differences.  The group had twenty members, including (among others) Agus Djaja (chairman), S. Sudjojono (secretary), L. Setiyoso, Rameli, Abdul Salam, S. Sudiardjo, Saptarita Latif, Herbet Hutagalung, S. Tutur, Sindusisworo, T.B. Ateng Rus`an, S. Sastradiwirdja, Sukirno, Emiria Soenassa (the only woman artist in the group), and Suromo. Sudjojono was the chief ideologue and spokesman for the group. Emiria Soenasa is considered the first female artist of note in this period of Indonesian modernism. A Vision for a New National Art Calling for a renewal of Indonesian art, Sudjojono placed great emphasis on the individuality of the artist, honest expression, and reflection of a national consciousness. He was critical of the romantic-academic *Mooi Indië* [the Sweet Indies] works by artists such as Basuki Abdullah (1915-1993), who were accepted and valorised within establishment circles at the time. *Mooi Indië* artworks were characterised by paintings with landscapes and pastoral scenes, and an attention to the picturesque in village life and folklore, including titillating renditions of the female body and legendary scenes. Sudjojono and his PERSAGI colleagues found these to be divorced from reality, in addition to being elitist, exploitative, and non-confrontational in the context of continuing colonial domination. For the artists of PERSAGI, a shared feeling of community with common folk under colonial rule was markedly absent in these artworks. Instead, the vision Sudjojono articulated was one of revolutionary sentiment, resulting in a shift of subject matter to guerrilla fighters, farmers, local people, and working women, all rendered in modernist styles ranging from Impressionism to Expressionism. In some ways, these artists were responding to Baudelaire’s espousal of the modern as being fleeting, ephemeral, and contingent, in the sense of requiring modern art to be responsive to the present circumstance and not subservient to inherited notions of aesthetic experience. |
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