**Widayat, Haji (1919–2002)**

A prolific and influential Javanese artist, Haji Widayat is recognised for his ‘dekora-magis’ (magical-decorative) contribution to Indonesian art. Throughout his five-decade artistic career he experimented widely, working in an array of themes, styles and media. Greatly admired for his extraordinary versatility and imagination, Widayat freely appropriated and adapted imagery from various cultural sources creating his own distinctive modern expression. He is best known for paintings of enchanted, fantastical worlds inspired by nature, myths and folklore, religious literatures, and primordial states; his work featured Javanese legends, Judeo-Christian narratives of genesis and creation, and Papuan statues. Widayat often portrayed dense forests, deep-sea fish, birds in trees, primitive objects and events around him rendered through a rhythmic repetition of flat meticulous motifs that densely filled the entire field. Alongside these stylistic investigations, he regularly explored abstraction and other modernist tropes. Although he predominantly produced oil and acrylic on canvas and watercolour on paper, he practised etching and dry-point printing and painting on ceramics, and at times sculpture. Widayat was also an inspirational art educator: he lectured for over thirty years at the Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia (ASRI - Indonesian Academy of Fine Arts) in Yogjakarta.

Born in Kutoarjo, Central Java, Widayat first learnt painting from the amateur souvenir street painter, Mulyono, in Bandung. He moved to South Sumatera in 1939 to take up a position as a rubber plantation surveyor and later, during the Japanese occupation, worked as a cartographer. In 1945 Widayat joined the nationalist army to fight for Indonesian independence against the returning Dutch colonial forces, and produced posters and graphics for the cause. The dense forests, flora and fauna of South Sumatra remained a recurring inspiration throughout his career.

In 1950, at the age of 31, Widayat moved to Yogyakarta seeking formal painting training and was one of the first students at the newly established Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia. In the early 1960s he continued his studies, moving to Nagoya, Japan for two years to concentrate on Japanese traditional arts: ukiyo-e style woodcut prints, ceramics, landscape gardening and *ikebana.* Yet Widayat’s interest in these traditional expressions was chiefly in transforming them for his own articulations. The time in Japan was particularly significant as it exposed Widayat to modern art in addition to leaving a lasting impression on his content: long after his return to Indonesia cherry blossoms, deep sea fish, female nudes and striptease imagery repeatedly appear in his work. He recognised dekora-magis painter Kartono Yudhokusomo and modernist Hendra Gunawan as mentors, while also acknowledging naïve artist Henri Rousseau as a major influence.

Widayat’s simplified, two-dimensional representational style made a unique and important contribution to Indonesian art. With his seemingly boundless creative energy and imagination, even in his final years he continued to create a great number of diverse works. In 1994 his long-held dream of opening a museum was realised with the Museum of H. Widayat at Mungkid Magelang near the Borobudur Temple, which houses a major collection of the artist’s work and that of his mentors, contemporaries and students.

**References and Further Reading**

Lee, J. (2007) *Widayat between worlds: A retrospective*, Singapore: Singapore Art Museum

Spanjaarad, H. (1998) *Widayat, the magical mysticism of a modern Indonesian artist*, Magelang: H. Widayat

**Image:** *Birds in the trees*(1989), Collection of Dr Oei Hong Djien. Request image from Dr Hong Djien:

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