

## *Word and Image in Miguel Covarrubias's Island of Bali*

### *Palabra e imagen en La isla de Bali de Miguel Covarrubias*

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**Resumen** *La isla de Bali* de Miguel Covarrubias se ha mantenido como uno de los tratamientos más consolidados acerca del tema, desde su publicación original en 1937. La facilidad que tiene el libro con las palabras se iguala con la elegancia del dibujo. El libro se hizo en un contexto colonial, escrito por un mexicano que a su vez era parte de un grupo euroamericano de intelectuales y artistas cosmopolitas. A Miguel Covarrubias se le ha criticado por “orientalista” y se le ha elogiado como un visionario transpacífico. El encuentro de Covarrubias con Bali fue especialmente un encuentro con el arte balinés, en específico con una nueva forma de modernismo que emergió en los años treinta. El interés de Covarrubias por la magia coincidió con las preocupaciones balinesas por las fuerzas espirituales, algo que Covarrubias buscó con su estudio de los textos balineses. Para Covarrubias, el arte era un vehículo para lograr una liberación. A pesar de haber tenido una fuerte intervención editorial externa, *La isla de Bali* adelantó una visión global de las conexiones entre sociedades a través del arte.

**Palabras clave** Bali; orientalismo; pintura; modernismo; isla de Bali.

**Abstract** *The Island of Bali*, by Miguel Covarrubias, has remained one of the definitive treatments of the subject since its original publication in 1937. The book's facility with words is matched by elegance of drawing. The book was also composed in a colonial context, written by a Mexican who was part of a Euro-American group of cosmopolitan intellectuals and artists. Miguel Covarrubias has been attacked as

an orientalist, and praised as a trans-Pacific visionary. His encounter with Bali was especially an encounter with Balinese art, especially the new form of modernism emerging in the 1930s. Covarrubias's interests in magic coincided with Balinese preoccupations with spiritual forces, something he pursued with his study of Balinese texts. For Covarrubias, art was a vehicle for achieving liberation. Despite heavy outside editorial intervention, *Island of Bali* advances a global view of connections between societies through art.

**Keywords** Bali; Orientalism; painting; modernism; *Island of Bali*.

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## *Word and Image in Miguel Covarrubias's Island of Bali*

**T**he *Island of Bali*, by Miguel Covarrubias, has remained one of the definitive treatments of the subject since its original publication in 1937. The book is a work of romance and instant nostalgia, in which facility with words is matched by elegance of drawing. The book was also composed in a colonial context, written by a Mexican who was part of a Euro-American group of cosmopolitan intellectuals and artists. In other contexts, Miguel Covarrubias has been accused of being part of an attempt to water down Mexican nationalist art for audiences in the United States,<sup>1</sup> and praised for his cosmopolitan vision of the trans-Pacific as a form of geography alternative to others focused on an Anglo-Saxon-dominated Euro-America.<sup>2</sup> He has been attacked as an Orientalist, and praised as a trans-Pacific visionary.

The book explores topics close to the author's heart but does so in a way that advances a global view of connections between societies, connections that ultimately have spiritual roots. Miguel Covarrubias may not have practiced his friend Diego Rivera's assertive politics of art, but his Mexican origins did make a difference to how he wrote about and visualized Balinese culture. For Covarrubias, art was a vehicle for achieving liberation. I will return to the dif-

1. Charity Mewburn, "Oil, Art, and Politics: The Feminization of Mexico," *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* XX, no. 72 (1998): 73-133.

2. Nancy C. Lutkehaus, "Miguel Covarrubias and the Pageant of the Pacific: The Golden Gate International Exposition and the Idea of the Transpacific, 1939-1940," in Janet Hoskins and Viet Thanh Nguyen, eds., *Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emerging Field* (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press 2014), 109-133.

difficult question of what “liberation” might have meant at the time, but it is important to remember the general circulation of leftist thought in the 1930s, and Covarrubias’s origins in a country that had direct experience of revolution.

*Island of Bali* readily slipped into the colonial commonplaces of the author’s time. As I have observed elsewhere, the book reads like “a summary of all the elements of the Bali experience as it had evolved by the 1930s.”<sup>3</sup> Covarrubias presented Balinese society as harmonious, and essentially egalitarian, with an overlay of caste on top of the purity of the society of the “original Balinese” or *Bali Aga*. “Like a continual under-sea ballet, the pulse of life in Bali moves with a measured rhythm.” “[N]o other race gives the impression of living in such close touch with nature, creates such a complete feeling of harmony between the people and their surroundings.”<sup>4</sup> He thus focused on agrarian symbols as the basis of Balinese life, notably as the rice goddess figure or *cili*, which featured in one of his later Pacific maps as an emblem of the island. Much of Covarrubias’s imagery is shared with the standard contemporary tourist literature and posters. Such timeless imagery distracted attention from the impacts of Dutch colonial rule on the island.

Covarrubias, unlike his contemporaries, did dwell on a range of aspects of Balinese experience of social change. He painted the introduction and experience of Dutch colonialism in a negative light. This included what he described as the poverty that had developed by his second trip to Bali in 1933, and the growth of exploitative sex industries on the island.<sup>5</sup> The elite international group that lived on Bali in the 1930s included many artists who were living the ideal of the South Seas, although some of the circle in which Covarrubias moved treated Balinese as objects of art rather than as interlocutors. Others in this group came from a background in anthropology and were genuinely interested in some kind of engagement. American Jane Belo, whom Covarrubias knew from the New York circle of the Harlem Renaissance, was one of the most involved in Balinese life. Covarrubias and his associates made it clear that they were no fans of Dutch attitudes and policies.

In her attack on one of those associates, the famous anthropologist Margaret Mead, Dutch journalist Tessell Pollmann discussed *Island of Bali* as an Orien-

3. Adrian Vickers, *Bali: A Paradise Created*, revised edition (Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle, 2012), 163, citing Miguel Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*. See also my introduction to the republication: *Island of Bali* (Singapore: Tuttle, 2014).

4. Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, 165, also discussed in *Paradise Created*.

5. Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, 164–165.

talist work. Pollmann focused particularly on Covarrubias's depiction of "harmonious" Bali, and how it fitted both with Mead's representation of Bali, and with the tourist image of the island. She singled out his illustration of a woman displaying her pudenda while bathing as emblematic of a colonial mentality: "This drawing of Covarrubias, a plain dishonesty to his text and the Balinese, is the type of illustration that in the prudish 1930s does sell well and attracts sex-starved Westerners to exotic isles."<sup>6</sup> She further accused him of misunderstanding Bali. While noting that Covarrubias talked about colonial Dutch as "pompous asses," she also noted that he praised Dutch colonialism for preserving Bali's culture and way of life.<sup>7</sup> Covarrubias's Bali paintings also repeated images of naked women, dancing and idealized agrarianism (figs. 1 & 2).

Such a view accords with Charity Mewburn's charge that in the 1940 Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art co-curated by Covarrubias, the threatening politics of artists like Diego Rivera was neutralized through the selection of exploitative images of women. This contributed, says Mewburn, to the image of Mexico being softened or feminized into something non-threatening to U.S. audiences, in a very similar form to the way Orientalism worked to present "the East" as feminine and amenable to masculine Western conquest.<sup>8</sup> Should we join Pollmann's sarcastic dismissal of Covarrubias as a patsy of colonialism, or is there more to him?

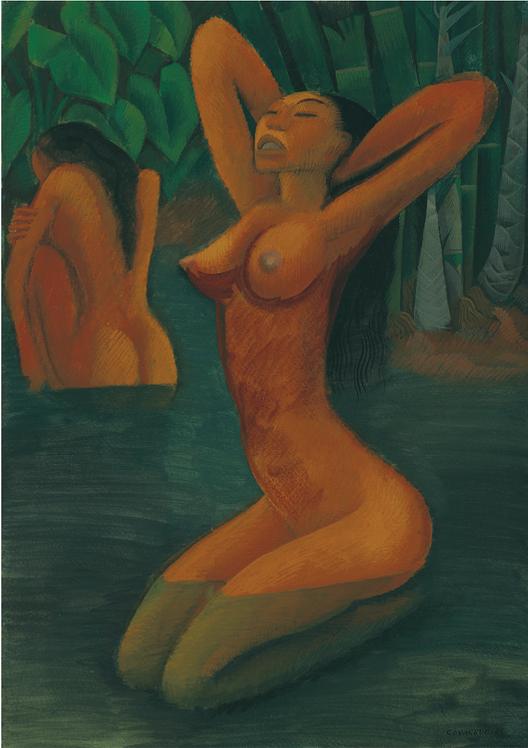
### *Viewing Balinese Art*

While Covarrubias's work comes out of a framework of Orientalism, his views of Bali have implications for understanding the context of Dutch colonialism on the island, the position of expatriates in the colonial hierarchy, and Balinese emergent forms of modernity. These are all more complicated than the standard Orientalist narratives of a glorious past being let down by a degenerate present. Consider his discussion of modern art:

6. Tessel Pollmann, "Margaret Mead's Balinese: The Fitting Symbols of the American Dream," *Indonesia* 49 (Apr. 1990): 1-35, 19.

7. Pollmann, "Margaret Mead's Balinese."

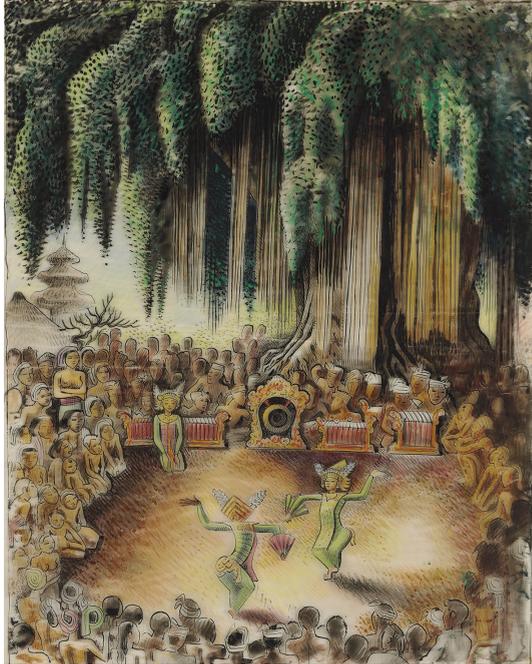
8. Mewburn, "Oil, Art, and Politics," although the discussion of Rivera's *Kneeling Dancer*, 113, emphasizes its very masculine exploitation, not exactly a "feminizing" trait.



1. Miguel Covarrubias, *Two Girls Bathing*, oil on canvas, 67 × 52 cm, Museum Pasifika, Bali.

Together with sculpture, painting underwent a liberating revolution after boys from around Ubud started to paint pictures in a “new” style. These were curious scenes from daily life on backgrounds of Balinese landscapes and village scenes, a mixture of realism and of the formal stylistic [sic], with naïve figures of ordinary Balinese...

This developed rapidly into a more mature, naturalistic style, producing a new crop of fine artists, each with a definite individual mark, such as I [Anak Agung] Sobrat, Madé Griya, and Gusti Nyoman [Lempad] from Ubud, Ida Bagus Anom from Mas, and the group of young painters from Batuan who draw fantastic forests and strange figures in half-tone against solid black backgrounds. These artists were encouraged by [Walter] Spies and the Dutch painter [Rudolf] Bonnet, who bought their pictures and provided them with materials; being careful, however, to keep



2. Miguel Covarrubias, *Legong Performance under a Banyan Tree*, gouache on paper, 48.2 × 38.1 cm, Museum Pasifika, Bali.

undesirable influences from them, and helping them to sell their work in the museum of Den Pasar, a clearing-house where only pictures of high quality are exhibited.<sup>9</sup>

He further added: “the birth of individualism rescued Balinese painting from its latent state and placed it on the same level as the emancipated sculpture.”<sup>10</sup> Thus Covarrubias describes the emergent forms of a modern art in Bali, later illustrated in his book by showing one of the early paintings by Sobrat (1912 or 1917-1992), whose full correct name was Anak Agung or I Dewa Gede Sobrat<sup>11</sup> (fig. 3). The sense of a “liberating revolution” means both modernity’s promise of freedom from traditional constraints, and the broader idea of art as expanding human consciousness and capabilities.

9. Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, 194.

10. Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, 195.

11. Who might not have been impressed that Covarrubias left the lower-ranking aristocratic title from his name, although this may have just been a publication error.

Covarrubias's description of what he observed going on around him was quite nuanced, more so than many of the retrospective accounts which turn Covarrubias' friend, German painter Walter Spies, into the inventor of modern Balinese art. Covarrubias is very specific in his observation that Balinese modernism was not a derivative form of art. In 1938, Covarrubias wrote the introduction for an exhibition of works by Balinese artists at the McDonald Gallery in New York, which also included photographs by Rose Covarrubias and two of the illustrations from *Island of Bali*, "Cockfight" and Ida Bagus Made Togog's "The Balinese Cosmos."<sup>12</sup> Covarrubias observed that the sudden development of modernism in Balinese art was a "revitalising revolution," and one that was "inexplicable." He saw the impetus for new art as coming from the fact that "the new artists were quick to grasp the possibilities of the new materials," in combination with "their inherent fantasy, love for the decorative and eagerness for technical perfection."<sup>13</sup> In *Island of Bali*, he dismissed the idea that modern Balinese art developed in imitation of the West by noting, for example, that Balinese depictions of "jungles [...] have wrongly been compared with those of the douanier Rousseau" (195). The group of expatriates on Bali that congregated around the charismatic Spies produced a consensus on the island that fitted well with the new tourist image being cultivated by colonial authorities. While being part of that group, Covarrubias nevertheless had his own independent position, something which may have come from his experience as a Mexican participant in autonomous developments in his country's art. From his Mexican stand-point, he could see that contrasts between stereotypical Eastern unchanging tradition and Western dynamism were not useful ways to examine what was actually happening on Bali.

Covarrubias included this example of Sobrat's work in his book, along with a work from the village of Batuan which may have been made by Ida Bagus Made Togog. Early in the book he included what is described as a cosmic

12. Edward Alden Jewell, "Exhibition Offers New Art of Bali," *New York Times*, 5th February 1938. Thanks to Siobhan Campbell for tracking down the newspaper references; *Catalogue of an Exhibit through February 1938 of water-color drawings by Artists of Bali, with an introduction by Miguel Covarrubias*, McDonald's Gallery, New York. My thanks to the Frick Library in New York, where I was able to find a copy of this little catalogue. Only one work, a Batuan painting, is reproduced there, and it is not clear whether Covarrubias owned any of the works on show besides the two illustrated in his book.

13. *Catalogue*; also partially cited in Williams and Chong (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2005), *Covarrubias in Bali*, 42.



3. I Dewa Gede Sobrat (b. 1912 or 1917 - d. 1992), *Calon Arang*, c. 1937, ink and paint on wood, 65.1 × 95.9 cm, Fowler Museum at UCLA; X74.L375, Anonymous donor. ©Photo courtesy of the Fowler Museum at UCLA.

image by the same artist, and later there is a depiction of a shadow play performance by Ida Bagus Made Nadera.<sup>14</sup> Some of Covarrubias's other illustrations were copies of drawings from Balinese paintings or palm-leaf manuscripts, including the offending naked woman mentioned by Pollmann.<sup>15</sup>

The work by Sobrat belonged to the writer and is now in the Fowler Museum at the University of California, Los Angeles. It was done early in Sobrat's career, painted on board, and currently is in need of conservation, with flaking of some parts (fig. 3). It is a strong work, not as finely detailed as later paintings on paper by him, but it is an atmospheric depiction of a dance known as *janger*, in which groups sit in a square and sing as part of a performance of a mythological narrative. In this case, the story is of the *Calon Arang/Rangda* or widow-witch of *Dirah*, shown here as the standing demonic figure towering over the female dancers. The structure at the left is *Rangda's* dwelling, and tradition-

14. Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, respectively, between 202—203, 6, 237.

15. Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, 117, but used as the cover of the original edition (under the dust-jacket).

ally the witch makes her appearance at midnight, hence the use of lighting in this work.<sup>16</sup> Covarrubias also depicted dancing, but more frequently the *legong*, a performance by young girls. There is one sketch by him of a Calon Arang dance similar to that shown by Sobrat, and other separate depictions of Rangda.

The relationship between Spies and Sobrat that Covarrubias refers to is a complex one. Spies was a modernist, with links both to artists such as Marc Chagall and Egon Schiele, and also to the German expressionists, including the film-maker Frederick Murnau, and the sources of his art lie in Europe. Nevertheless, there is one work, apparently by Spies, that bears some compositional similarities to the Sobrat work. The elongated figures that are a feature of Spies' Bali work, plus the square composition and the content matter of the former painting, have much in common with Sobrat's art. Since I only know the Spies painting through a very small photograph, it is difficult to say more, except that it offers a tantalizing glimpse of a possible collaboration between the two that goes beyond the stereotype of Western tutelage of Balinese artists.<sup>17</sup> The interaction between Westerners and Balinese may have been a two-way street, not simply a binary relationship.

Similarly, Sobrat recalled for Adriana Williams that he and Covarrubias talked about art together, and he regarded the Mexican as a friend, presumably because he was a fellow artist.<sup>18</sup> One might, therefore, jump to the conclusion that Covarrubias influenced Balinese artists. Williams and Chong considered the evidence for this to be slim, and specifically rejected the claim that he influenced Balinese sculpture towards elongated forms, considering this element was already present in the art.<sup>19</sup> The only noticeable influence was retrospective: in the 1950s the entrepreneur John Coast suggested to I Ketut Rudin of Renon village that he should look to Covarrubias as a model for what he might depict in his art.<sup>20</sup>

16. For more background on Sobrat, and Balinese painting in general, see Adrian Vickers, *Balinese Art: Paintings and Drawings of Bali, 1800—2010* (Singapore: Tuttle, 2012).

17. John Stowell, *Walter Spies: A Life in Art* (Jakarta: Afterhours Books, 2011), 313. The *Life* Magazine report on the forthcoming *Island of Bali*, "Mexican Covarrubias in Dutch Bali," 27th September 1937, reproduces the Sobrat under the heading "I Sobrat, a modern Balinese, après Walter Spies."

18. Adriana Williams and Yu-Chee Chong, *Covarrubias in Bali* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2005), 31.

19. Williams and Chong, *Covarrubias in Bali*, 58.

20. Williams and Chong, *Covarrubias in Bali*, 58; Adrian Vickers and I Nyoman Darma Putra, interview with I Ketut Rudin, 11st December 1996.

The linearity of Balinese art would clearly have been attractive to Covarrubias, given his own background in graphic art and caricature. Therefore, it may be better to reverse the question, and ask whether Balinese art influenced Covarrubias? There seems little direct evidence for this latter case, given that the fluidity of line and dynamism in depiction of bodies was already there in his style, his enthusiastic copying and adaptation of Balinese drawings notwithstanding. Yu-Chee Chong, in her section of the joint study carried out with Adriana Williams, specifically argued that Covarrubias's style, particularly the monumentalism of his art, was very Mexican.<sup>21</sup> In her PhD thesis that is one of the few complex studies of Covarrubias's style and subject matter, Susan Masuoka, however, argues that his Bali period pushed him more towards modernism. She writes that the time in Bali was spent making detailed observations, but after leaving Bali, these observations were pushed into stylized and elongated figures, featuring compositions with soft edges.<sup>22</sup> This argument could be taken further. Prior to his period in Bali, Covarrubias was chiefly a caricaturist. After Bali, he worked more as a serious artist, even though still maintaining his career as an illustrator. This suggests not only a strong connection with artists like Spies, but also that Covarrubias's experience of seeing how young Balinese were creating a new alternative kind of modern art made him reconsider his own position as an artist.

In 1932, Covarrubias held a major exhibition of his first Bali work at the Valentine Gallery in New York. In the foreword to the exhibition, Diego Rivera casts the work in a regional and historical progression:

In the world of art, Miguel Covarrubias is one of the foremost American contemporaries. The rapid development of the seed in his nature came early and took place in Mexico. With the ingenious courage of children he transplanted the sprouting tree to this country. The tall proud city regarded in wonder and tenderness the valor of this child and the novelty of the budding flowers he offered.

Bali, of all lands perhaps the least mechanized and the most civilized, held him for months in its marvelous web. Now he has returned, bringing with him admirable

21. Williams and Chong, *Covarrubias in Bali*, 60.

22. Susan Naomi Masuoka, "Crossing Borders: Miguel Covarrubias and the Re-presentation of the Other", Ph. D dissertation (Los Angeles, University of California, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1996), 274.

objects, the works of artists of earlier civilizations. They form a background for his own work, yet he sees them with the vision of America, transforming them into a beauty of their own.<sup>23</sup>

Further, Rivera claimed Covarrubias and Balinese art as part of a mutual past, “Our past is dispersed over many lands and places. Covarrubias has rediscovered it and grafted it onto a tree rooted in our own land and time, so that it may grow and give new flowers and new fruits.”<sup>24</sup> Rivera is clearly talking about a common history for humanity that Covarrubias was awakened to in Bali, and one in which the West was not necessarily prime. I will return to these points later in this paper, but first, it is worth considering how the art relates to the total message of the book.

### *Word and Image*

Covarrubias was looking for something in Balinese art that also spoke of the culture as a whole, which was why he was as interested in words and stories as he was in images. In his own work, he shifted seamlessly between the two, reworking Balinese motifs and copying the wayang or shadow-puppet style of depicting figures. He was cautiously sympathetic to the basis of this mode of representation: “The Balinese obtain their artistic standards of beauty from ancient Java, and for centuries there has been only one way to treat a beautiful face; which they have, curiously enough, come to identify with themselves” (p. 165). His attention to the relationship between words and images resonated with his Balinese sources.

Covarrubias’s notebooks from Bali say more about this interest. Many years ago a Balinese host, Anak Agung Kompiang Gede, had described to me how, when he was a young man, he had met some of the Westerners living in Bali in the 1930s. Agung Kompiang used to go down to the beach at Sanur, to view the fishes in the aquarium owned by two Germans, the Neuhaus brothers, and to learn to play tennis nearby with Katharine and Jack Mershon, from California. Agung Kompiang also told me that he went to Klungkung, the oldest and most important of the Balinese kingdoms, in order to find lontar or palm

23. Williams and Chong, *Covarrubias in Bali*, 27.

24. Williams and Chong, *Covarrubias in Bali*, 27.

leaf manuscripts for Covarrubias. Amongst those he found one that included a mantra or sacred incantation to the powerful goddess Durga, and he had copied that text for himself, since it provided protection against harm.

When I read Adriana Williams's study of Covarrubias's notebooks, I found validation of this story, since in her book with Yu-Chee Chong she reproduced a set of texts and drawings from the Library of Congress's Covarrubias files.<sup>25</sup> These were books of spells that also contain magical drawings, *rerajaan*. They were on paper, and most likely copied from palm leaf onto paper for Covarrubias. In the Library of Congress I examined these sets of texts and drawings, along with other notebooks collected by him at the time, including one lengthy mythological history of Bali, and a set of words that were part of Covarrubias's language lessons. All indications from these lessons and from talking to Balinese, were that he had mastered Balinese for everyday communication, and something of the archaic Javanese-influenced language of the texts. This is despite the fact that learning Balinese also requires correct use of the levels of speech, where one has to speak high language to people of higher status (who then speak low language to you). His lesson book had the same phrases in low and high language, plus other related notes, although the spelling was inconsistent, and sometimes the Balinese was mixed up with Malay.

Covarrubias initially came to Bali in 1930, and on his return for an eighteen-month stay in 1933, he lived for much of his time in the area of Denpasar city called Belaluan. His host, Gusti Alit Oka, from the same clan as my friend Agung Kompiang, was an important cultural guide. An emerging cultural broker from Belaluan, I Made Tantra, was the one who helped Covarrubias obtain texts, and who provided the language lessons recorded in the notebooks.<sup>26</sup>

The notes included a list of all the puppet figures that would belong in a set of wayang or shadow puppets, and other lists such as names of sung poetic measures, *tembang gending*. There were sketches showing costumes of the legong dances that Covarrubias so often depicted, along with documentation of other dance forms and costumes, lists of major literary works, summaries of folk-stories, and cards that provided a kind of mini-encyclopedia of Bali. Covarrubias studied many of the narrative texts and no doubt listened to stories from his Balinese language teacher and others with whom he and Rosa

25. Williams and Chong, *Covarrubias in Bali*; Library of Congress MSS56515, Miguel Covarrubias Papers.

26. Williams and Chong, *Covarrubias in Bali*, 31.

resided. His book seamlessly interwove many different narratives, historical and mythical, although he disguised his deep knowledge of Balinese stories with a light and witty touch.

The magic books were of particular interest, as he had a number of copies and transcriptions made, and adapted sections for his final book, including his own version of some of the drawings. One of the things about the magic books is that word and image coexist; one is not supplementary to the other. The sets of incantations can be powerful on their own, as likewise can be the images. Words in Balinese are sets of letters that have symbolic power in themselves, as each letter (actually representing a syllable) can be sounded or inscribed to certain effects. These letters and the *rerajahan* must be given “life”, *urip*, to be efficacious, and I presume that Covarrubias would have been given “dead” texts and images, since it would be extremely dangerous to have live ones if one had not undergone levels of initiation.

One of the texts with drawings that Covarrubias had translated describes itself as directly about the power of images:

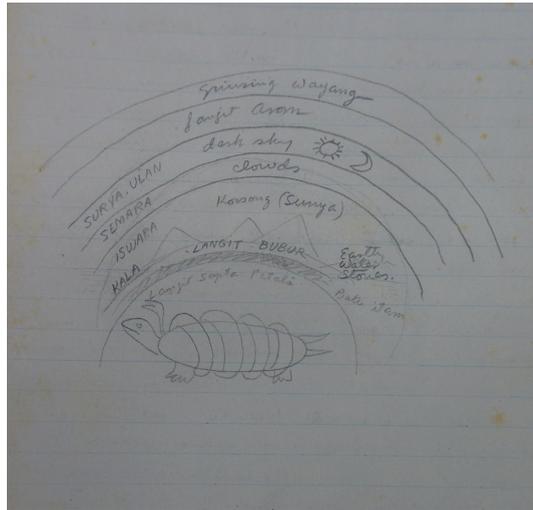
This is the *Pengiwa* [Left-hand or Tantric path] of thirty sorts and of all kinds. This *Pengiwa* will bring luck and success as it has no rival in effectiveness and power. If it cannot be used thoroughly (because of unpreparedness), it is possible to use it to protect the house. (With it) there is no *Leyak* [shape-changing sorcerer or witch] that will dare to enter the house. (The pictures [gambarane] are the weapons of the *Nawa Sanga* [the Nine Protective Deities of the Directions]).<sup>27</sup>

The next part of the text included an incantation involving magic letters: letters of the alphabet with ‘Ong’ inscribed above them. This gives instructions on how to make someone ill using the figure of *I Jaran Guyang* [Shaky Horse] and by making certain offerings and performing chants.

Amongst the notes was also a cosmological drawing. In the book itself, he reproduced a drawing by the *Batuan* artist *Ida Bagus Made Togog* showing the world turtle surmounted by serpents, *naga*, and with the ineffable deity *Atintya* above them. This was presented as a cosmological drawing, although it was specifically a drawing for the death shroud of a member of the *Brahmana* or priestly caste.<sup>28</sup> A very different picture was sketched in Covarrubias’s

27. Library of Congress, Miguel Covarrubias Papers, MSS56515, Box 1.

28. Hildred Geertz and *Ida Bagus Made Togog*, *Tales from a Charmed Life: A Balinese Painter Reminisces* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005), 213.



4. *Cosmic Diagram*. Photograph.  
Retrieved from the Library of  
Congress, Washington, D.C.

note books, showing the earth and sky as a set of layers. At the base was the world turtle as the underlying level. Above it the sky (*langit*) of the Seven Hells/ Underworlds or *Sapta Patala*, then the Black Stone (*Batu Item*), and the earth as the “Porridge Sky” (*Langit Bubur*), then emptiness, then clouds, dark sky, the Young Sky (*Langit Anom*) and the highest layer was called *Gringsing Wayang*, which is usually the name given to a special type of cloth, a double ikat depicting figures from the shadow theatre. It seems likely that this sketch was provided by Made Tantra (fig. 4).

The interest in magic and religion was key in Covarrubias’s research, even if that was balanced out by other elements in the final form of the book. For Covarrubias, magic provided access to a higher reality. Magic was a topic of strong interest amongst the expatriates on Bali, and more generally was part of a preoccupation with dark spirituality in the West in the 1930s. We can see this also in Spies’s links to the German Expressionists, and the popularity of Surrealism amongst some of the Bali set’s associates in Paris points to the idea of magic as a way into human subconsciousness. But it was also a preoccupation of Balinese, as the young modernists of the 1930s focused on depictions of the actions of sorcerers and the workings of forces beyond the senses, particularly in the black-and-white works of the school that developed in the village of Batuan. Covarrubias’s depictions of magic, such as his image

of Rangda, owed much to the sense of her immanence that he got from Balinese. He conveyed this too in his vivid description of a trance séance involving a medium donning the mask of Rangda,

a monstrous mask with enormous fangs [...]. The stillness of the night the incense, and the dim light of the petrol lamp, all aided the feeling that the spirit of the dreaded witch was really there [...] The mask was placed on his head and the priest listened with intense interest to the incoherent groans, muffled by the mask, which he translated in a monotonous voice as the words of Rangda, now in the body of the medium (fig. 5).<sup>29</sup>

Going through his notes, there was an almost continuous move from this approach in Covarrubias's Bali materials to the work he later did in Mexico. The Bali note-books were interleaved with the Zapotec ones, and what is striking is that in both, Covarrubias seeks out words related to magic as constituting the world-view of the people under study. Reading these notes and looking at *Island of Bali* next to the later *Mexico South*, it is easy to see how the former provided the model and template for the latter, with even similar scenes of crafts such as weaving, and very similar structure.<sup>30</sup> Intriguingly, that structure was not solely the work of Covarrubias, some of the more descriptive parts of it were the result of editorial intervention.

### *Status of the book*

*Island of Bali* was subject to critical review, and this review represents an intervention that shifted the final shape of the book away from its original form, possibly diluting some of Covarrubias's own interests, and leading to changes in wording. In the notes in the Library of Congress is an appraisal of the book for Alfred A. Knopf. The reviewer expresses strong support for the book being published: "I think that if the kind of book this ought to be is actually created, it will be of permanent value and immediate public

29. Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, 326.

30. Miguel Covarrubias, *Mexico South: The Isthmus of Tehuantepec* (London: Cassell and Co. Ltd., 1947).



5. Miguel Covarrubias, *Rangda*, 1937, graphite, charcoal and ink on paper, 38 × 25 cm, Museum Pasifika, Bali.

interest and should have a quite large and continuous sale.” This prediction was very accurate.

The reviewer seems to have been an anthropologist, although the signature, “B. Smith”, is most likely a pseudonym (probably of Ruth Benedict, but possibly also of Margaret Mead).<sup>31</sup> The criticisms are definitely along anthropological lines: “My first impression is one of astonishment—even though I had been promised much in advance—that an amateur like Covarrubias could produce so much valid anthropological data.” This opening comes with a caveat two paragraphs later:

31. The reviewer’s interests in sex, psychology and social order is very reminiscent of Benedict, but also of Mead. I have discussed this with Nancy Lutkehaus (personal communication), who considered that there was evidence for either to have been the author. Benedict wrote a review of Covarrubias’s book in the *New Republic*, 8th December 1937.

The first condition of such a book, however, would be a realization on the part of the author that he is *not* an anthropologist, but an amateur with anthropological interests. . . . By this I mean that he should make of this book an expository narrative. That would necessitate altering the textual nature of some of his minutely analytical passages [emphasis in the original].

There was more criticism. The reviewer then went on to denigrate the writing style—"It is clearly a foreigner's style"—in a way that would indicate the fluent work we have is the result of heavy editorial intervention. Further, she (or he) adds, the structure needed better logic and "flow." The reviewer suggested a chapter reorganization, that material be moved out of footnotes into the main text, and that the appendices be rearranged, noting that "the author uses too many Balinese words and terms." Another criticism was of the inclusion of too many "picturesque" photographs that did not provide "data." The reviewer, however, did see the writing on art as an achievement:

I want to point out that by far the most authoritative, the clearest, and the most interesting yet most informative section of the book is that on art and culture. Here Covarrubias speaks like a man who knows what he is talking about. He has such a wealth of background and understanding that he knows how to eliminate trivia and present with beautiful simplicity a visualization of an art form. . . . He must attempt to do the same thing for the anthropological data.

"B. Smith" concluded by saying that "Less terminology for its own sake, and more psychological investigation, as well as economic and social reflection, would make this book what it ought to be." Despite the obvious gate-keeping by someone who wanted to enforce the idea of anthropology as a science, the criticisms actually helped to make the book more accessible for a general audience.

The report is dated 27th December 1935, so clearly Covarrubias did much to take on board the detailed comments provided before the 1937 publication of the book. The current organization of the book is almost identical to that suggested by the reviewer, except that the reviewer's interest in "The Sexual Life of the Balinese" as a chapter has been toned down to one on "The Family." The editorial intervention made the book more "scientific," in line with a Western view of how others should be known. In the acknowledgements to the book, Covarrubias thanked Harlem Renaissance theatre writer Edith J. R. Isaacs,

“who so patiently and sympathetically criticized and edited the manuscript.”<sup>32</sup> Her task seems to have been underestimated by writers on Covarrubias. The publisher did leave Rose Covarrubias’s album of photographs in the final version, indicating that Covarrubias obviously pushed back against some of the reviewer’s criticisms. The book became an instant classic, no doubt helped by Covarrubias’s contacts in the New York publishing world and has retained an authoritative status over eighty years.<sup>33</sup>

### *Colonial contexts*

The reviewer’s positive response to *Island of Bali*’s account of art was acknowledgment of Covarrubias’s devotion to the topic. In his note cards he observed that Balinese art was “not a great art in the sense of Greek, Chinese and Egyptian,” but further that it was not a “peasant art” because it is too refined, and not “primitive art motivated by ritual forces, they paint [...] scenes that tell a story.” He further described the limits of representation in painting as meaning that there was no attempt to present “the optical illusion of the real”, even in what he called the last era of five, the era of modern Balinese art, explaining why perspective was not a feature of the art. Likewise in his preface to the 1938 exhibition of Balinese works, he described, “An art exuberant and delicate, with a refinement not generally associated with the simplicity of the tropical primitive.”<sup>34</sup> In these comments, he showed how he was interested in the dynamics of artistic development and how to put those dynamics in a global context. Furthermore, he demonstrated that existing typologies of art, particularly the category “primitive,” were not adequate to locate the sophistication and modernity of Balinese art.

In the passage quoted at the beginning of this paper, and in later discussion of sculpture, Covarrubias continued to talk about art in terms of “liberation,” “emancipation,” and even “revolution.” The terminology, however, could not

32. Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, v. See also Edith J. R. Isaacs, *The Negro in the American Theater* (New York: Theater Arts, 1947).

33. As well as the Benedict review mentioned above (n. 29), the book was reviewed by Ralph Linton, an anthropologist for whose later book on Pacific art Covarrubias provided illustrations, in *The Nation*, 11th December 1937; and in *The Saturday Review*, 31st December 1937, [www.unz.com/print/CovarrubiasMiguel-1937/](http://www.unz.com/print/CovarrubiasMiguel-1937/).

34. Cited in Williams and Chong, *Covarrubias in Bali*, 42.

have been casual, given that he was a child and teenager during the Mexican Revolution, and his Mexican associates were advocates for international revolution. Covarrubias was amongst those in Rivera and Kahlo's circle who later received Trotsky in exile. Given the lack of explicit challenge to the colonial order, these terms were constrained by a liberal discourse, rather than being conceived of in their more politically radical versions. This was the mental liberation of the avant garde, with whom Miguel, Rosa and their expatriate associates in Bali aligned themselves. Such "liberation" first involved freedom from the "shackles" of tradition (to quote to the title of a famous Indonesian novel by Armin Pane, *Belenggu*, written in the late 1930s). However, the freedom from mental shackles also implied freedom from oppressive forms of government, William Blake's "mind-forged manacles." Liberation of the self had a logical consequence in political liberation.

Coincidentally or not, Made Tantra, who was Miguel's guide for obtaining many texts and for other cultural activities, later went on to have a revolutionary career of sorts. Tantra is mentioned in the famous but unreliable *A House in Bali*, by Colin McPhee, another of the expatriate set that congregated around Walter Spies. Tantra met McPhee via his uncle, Nyoman Kaler, who was head of the ward or banjar of Kedaton in Denpasar, where McPhee lived (and presumably so did his then wife, Jane Belo, who is invisible in the book). McPhee and Belo introduced Tantra to Covarrubias when the latter was beginning his second period on Bali.<sup>35</sup>

Kedaton and Belaluan are close together, and it is no surprise that McPhee and Covarrubias shared Balinese guides and informants. Through Made Tantra and Nyoman Kaler they met many of the major musicians and dancers of the time, such as Ni Nyoman Pollok, the premier Legong dancer of her day, who had formerly been in love with the handsome Tantra before, as a teenager, she married the Belgian artist Adrien Le Mayeur, fifty-one years old at the time.<sup>36</sup> Tantra also spent time in the foothills of Bali at Sayan, where McPhee and Belo built a house, and where he worked for the Australian widow-adventurer, Teresa Pattinson.

35. Williams and Chong, *Covarrubias in Bali*, 31; Colin McPhee, *A House in Bali* (London: Gollancz, 1947; Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1979), 27 and 72.

36. Ni Pollok, *Ni Pollok: Model dari Desa Kelandis*, as told to Yati Maryati Wiharja (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1976), 36.

Tessel Pollmann interviewed Tantra late in his life, in 1986, when he owned an art shop in Denpasar which, after his death, passed onto his daughter, the mother of one of my friends, who also talked about her father's interaction with Pattinson, or *Nyonya Mokoh*, "Mrs Fat One," as she was known in Bali (where being fat is a sign of prosperity and well-being). He recalled warning her about putting anti-Dutch sentiments in her diary and leaving it open, even a mild comment such as "the Dutch can't sit forever on their golden eggs."<sup>37</sup> Such was the scrutiny of the Dutch police and their spies, that it was impossible to engage in even the mildest form of politics.

Tantra, like some of the others who mixed in the circles to which Covarrubias belonged, did later directly engage in politics. He joined the Indonesian Revolution, and later, as a leading figure in local politics and culture, organized the 1948 Bali Art Congress.<sup>38</sup> According to his daughter, he led the famous Gong Belauan or Gamelan on cultural missions to China and the USSR. Tantra's comments make it clear that he avoided expressing any political views with the 1930s expatriates, because he was aware of the dangers of that. However, it was in his interaction with them that his politics was formed, since they showed him that there were alternatives to the Dutch colonial system, and made him aware of the different kinds of democratic politics practiced in the countries from which they came. While Covarrubias was not engaged in radicalizing his Balinese friends in any direct manner, the idea of freedom that he and his friends embodied still had some impact. It is worth remembering that Covarrubias was at least radical enough to be banned from entry to the United States during the McCarthy era.

### *From Bali to Mexico*

In the foreword to *Mexico South*, politics is present, and Covarrubias describes the Zapotec as "yearning for social justice and reform" as part of their participation in the Mexican Revolution.<sup>39</sup> It is clear from the agenda of the book

37. Pollmann, "Margaret Mead's Balinese," 21. Thanks to Siobhan Campbell for research on Mrs. Pattinson, which revealed that she weighed a formidable eighteen stone.

38. Edward Herbst, *Bali 1928: Volume III, Lotring dan Sumber-Sumber Tradisi Gamelan*. <http://bali1928.net/wp-content/uploads/Bali-1928-Vol-III-Lotring-dan-Sumber-Sumber-Tradisi-Gamelan.pdf> accessed 15/08/2017; interview AV with Ni Made Mertih, Sutji Art Shop, 24th September 1996.

39. Covarrubias, *Mexico South*, xxvi.

that there were three related aims in both it and *Island of Bali*: a consideration of the respective peoples, Zapotec and Balinese; recognition of the importance of their cultures as the basis of historical development, and recognition of the importance of their cultures in terms of world cultures. The parallel structures of the two books indicate a comparative and connective project. Covarrubias's maps of the Pacific further demonstrate his identification of commonalities across the region.

On the second and third points, despite the same kind of patronizing tone that shaped the Orientalist elements of *Island of Bali*, Covarrubias wrote:

It was discovered that the Indian groups, in spite of poverty and ignorance, still preserved simple cultures containing valuable artistic and ethical elements susceptible of encouragement and development. Gradual change in the art tastes of the Western world, freeing itself from the stifling academism of the nineteenth century, revealed new aesthetic values in traditional and contemporary Indian art and was a powerful stimulus to a renaissance in Mexican artistic expression.<sup>40</sup>

As with the artistic developments he witnessed in Bali, here he saw the same kind of modernist interaction that Rivera was commenting on in his preface to Covarrubias's 1932 exhibition. Covarrubias made the point about how "New universal and eternal art values are now recognized in our Indian cultures, and they have been placed on a relative level of importance with the Egyptian, Greek, Chinese, and East Indian cultures as a part of our world art heritage."<sup>41</sup> Intriguingly, the status of Southeast Asian ("East Indian") art has moved up from his earlier appraisal of Balinese painting's role in global art hierarchies.

It would be easy to dismiss this as a kind of primitivism, appropriating other cultures for a superior, hegemonic Euro-U.S. culture. There is, however, a clear nationalist message in the view of Mexican art, one that Rivera felt. So too did Indonesian artists. S. Sudjojono, Indonesia's most important nationalist artist of the late 1930s onwards, saw the same thing when he wrote to his younger contemporaries:

Young Indonesian artists!... Look for a way to manifest ourselves so that the signs of our Indonesian-ness are apparent. Let us seek together. Use your own individual

40. Covarrubias, *Mexico South*, xxvi.

41. Covarrubias, *Mexico South*, xxviii.

approaches to obtain nationalism in our art... If you seek, there is no fault in studying the art of the West from the Renaissance's Leonardo da Vinci to the Realism of De La Croix to the modern art of Picasso. Not just in their technical expression, but also in their art's philosophical expression, the causes of their streams of art, this too must we study. From this we can ourselves study the art, which the Europeans call the origins of art: primitive [art] (of Africa, America, India, China, Japan and Indonesia). And when you study primitive Western art, then you will be amazed and fall in love with the spirit and the patterns of our ancient art: Bali, Batak, Minangkabau, Dayak, Papua, Java, and the other.<sup>42</sup>

This was part of Sudjojono's general theory of a "Visible Soul" or *Jiwa Ketok* that manifested in art. Sudjojono himself explored that in his art through depictions of "folk" practices, but most of all through portraits and landscapes. Sudjojono conceived of modernism in art in anti-colonial terms. His attention to specific individuals was different to the de-individualized nature of most of Covarrubias's work, although it has more in common with Rivera's painting. Sudjojono was, for a while, a member of the Communist Party of Indonesia, and his agenda was a radical one. As a side-point, Rivera's work was known in Indonesia, indeed one of his paintings (from 1955) is in the Presidential collection, alongside Covarrubias's work. The Mexican muralists inspired revolutionary artists of the 1950s and 1960s, particularly those linked to the Institute of People's Culture (LEKRA-Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat), which was associated with the Communist Party of Indonesia.

Also significant was the position of Bali amongst regional nationalist artists. After independence, leading left-wing nationalist modernists from Indonesia such as Sudjojono, Hendra Gunawan, Affandi and Henk Ngantung spent

42. "Peloekis-peloekis Indonesia moeda!... Tjarilah tjara mewedjoedkan kita itoe agar bisa tjorak Indonesia itoe terlihat. Marilah kita bersama-sama mentjari. Pakailah tjara saudara sendiri-sendiri oentoe mendapat nasionalisme seni loekis kita itoe. 'Kalau saudara mentjari, ta' ada salahnja saudara mempeladjar seni loekis Barat dari Renaissance Leonardo da Vinci sampai realisme De La Croix keseni loekis baroe Picasso. Tidak diarti tehnik mereka sadja, tetapi diarti filafat seni tadi, jang mendjadi sebab-sebab aliran-aliran seni loekis itoe, djoega haroes kita peladjar. Dari sini kita dengan sendirinja akan mempeladjar seni loekis, jang orang Eropah katakan moelamoela seni loekis, primitif (Afika, Amerika, India, Tiongkok, Djepang dan Indonesia). Dan pada waktoe saudara mempeladjar seni loekis Barat jang primitief tadi maka saudara akan terharoe djatoeh tjinta pada djiwa, dan tjorak kesenian kita koeno: Bali, Batak, Menangkabau, Dajak, Papoea, Djawa dan lain-lainja," S. Sudjojono, *Seni Lukis, Kesenian Dan Seniman* (Yogyakarta: Indonesian Sekarang, 1946), 13.

long periods of time in Bali, and painted scenes of peasants—especially women, temples and rice-fields that bear much in common with the works of colonial artists such as Walter Spies or his Dutch colleagues.

Further, in the history of regional art, Bali was also a prime locale for other groups, notably the Singapore artists generally referred to as the Nanyang School. This was a group of artists of Chinese descent, whose 1952 expedition to Bali is considered by local historians as the taking-off point for a style distinctive to Singapore, although this last point is the subject of debate.<sup>43</sup>

Although Sudjojono and Covarrubias never met (as far as I know), they shared an interest in relationship between aesthetics and ethics. Sudjojono was very critical of Orientalist art, which he referred to as “Beautiful Indies” painting, meant to conceal the realities of life under colonial rule. Sudjojono’s use of the category “primitive” locates it as a resource that provides access to something deeper within the Indonesian people, which was itself a category in formation, rather than an essential entity already in existence. “The primitive” provided access to something that could embody a people’s culture.

In the famous Surrealist Map of the World, the category of “primitive” art was used to overturn the hierarchies of form centered on Europe and Anglo-Saxon America; scale was determined by richness of imagination, rather than physical or economic size.<sup>44</sup> The Surrealist Map of the World found direct echoes in Covarrubias’s important Pacific maps. Bali was represented in these by the *cili* or rice goddess figure, the elongated form of which was so congruent with Covarrubias’s own search for form. Java’s emblem was the wayang or shadow puppet of the Indian hero Arjuna, and the other Indonesian arts shown are an ancestor figure from Nias, an ornamental face from the Batak highlands of Sumatra, and a Dayak shield from central Borneo. In the cultural version of these maps, esthetic geography meets cultural politics.<sup>45</sup> The congruence with the Surrealist maps shows that in its

43. Kwok Kian Chow, “The Bali Field Trip, Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen His and Cheong Soo Pieng,” *The Literature, Culture, and Society of Singapore*, May, 2000, <<http://www.postcolonialweb.org/singapore/arts/painters/channel/12.html>>, accessed 18th August 2017.

44. Apparently dating to 1929, where it appeared in a magazine called *Variétés*, although the authorship is unclear, but most likely it comes from Paul Éluard: Dee Morris and Stephen Voyce, *Counter Map Collection*, <<http://jacket2.org/commentary/avant-garde-ii-surrealist-map-world>>, accessed 30th October, 2017.

45. Lutkehaus, “Miguel Covarrubias and the Pageant of the Pacific.”

contemporary usages, “the primitive” also embodied an avant-garde, liberatory potential.

As Covarrubias’s note-card quoted above shows, he located “the primitive” as a category specifically relating to ritual instrumentality. He did not consider it an adequate category to explain Balinese art, and nor could he see that art as “peasant” or folk art. Nevertheless, the same interest in forms of representation that were a primal part of humanity that motivated primitivism in modern art also forms part of Covarrubias’s search for a useable past in art. This past for Rivera or antiquity for Sudjojono was something onto which international forms could be grafted. These forms belonged to a quest to come to terms with modern life. They provided a basis for nationalism that challenged colonialism, but such a nationalism was defined by the mutual interests of colonized and formerly colonized peoples. It was also internationalist.

How then should we respond to the criticisms of Mewborn and Pollmann, that Covarrubias reproduced hegemonic imagery both in the cases of Bali and Mexico? Both Mewborn and Pollmann based their criticisms on isolated examples: Mewborn focused principally on one work by Rivera; and the drawing Pollmann criticized was actually a copy by Covarrubias of a detail of an old Balinese painting. This is not to say that their interpretations are not valid, but rather, like their evidence, they are limited.

In *Island of Bali* and his other work, Covarrubias was engaged in imagining and re-imagining the world. He was working within existing frameworks of thought about global art and its potential but challenged them. He sought to reorganize, and perhaps even flatten, hierarchies of art that put the West above “the rest.” He showed how to consider forms of art in their own terms, rather than judging them against normative standards that claimed universality. His presentation of art history shows that processes were not linear, and development from “traditional” to “modern” not straightforward. He also connected the verbal and the visual in a way that advanced a multi-lingual understanding of Bali—despite his manuscript reviewer’s complaints about having too much Balinese language in the text. Ahead of his time, the upending of art history he advanced is something that has only been taken seriously in recent years. Personally, and in his art and writing, Covarrubias challenged the kinds of binaries that are still posed as constituting global politics: East/West, North/South, First/Third World. While

he may have been more of a reformer than a revolutionary, Covarrubias still provided alternatives to colonialism, and prepared the ground for post-colonial ideas to follow. ♣

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