

Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin

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Worlds of *Wayang*: The Dr. Walter Angst and Sir Henry Angst Collection of Indonesian Puppets

MATTHEW ISAAC COHEN

Puppets (*wayang*) in the traditional societies of western Indonesia have a special status.¹ They are both media for entertainment, enjoyed by young and old alike, and vehicles for communication with and about spirits, ancestors, and the unseen world. Puppets are often considered *pusaka*, or sacred heirloom objects, carefully crafted and dutifully stored tightly in wooden boxes, and taken out for performances or maintenance rituals at least once a month. Puppets are generally transmitted from one generation to the next in lineages of professional puppeteers, but wealthy patrons also sometimes possess very fine sets and collections.

In 2017 the largest collection of Indonesian puppet arts ever amassed, with representative sets of figures from all the major traditions and a broad sampling of modern and contemporary puppets, along with many associated artifacts, arrived at the Yale University Art Gallery. This collection was accumulated by the Swiss zoologist Walter Angst over four decades, with the support of his brother, the London-based banker Sir Henry Angst. Angst believed he was in a race against time to preserve the diversity of the genera and species of Indonesian puppetry and protect it from the predations of antique dealers, neglect of local traditions, standardization, and Islamization. Informed by biological models, Angst understood sets of puppets to be mini-ecosystems made up

of animals, clowns, foliage, gods, heroes, magical weapons, ogres, props, sages, and spirits that were transported and stored in wooden boxes. One of his major aims was to construct a phylogenetic tree so that the evolution of wayang could be traced and the individual variants related one to another. He was also interested in the variety of puppets within different regional traditions as expressions of local genius. Wayang is generally taken as a deeply conservative art that has changed little over the centuries. This collection offers a portrait of how wayang responds to its time and circumstances, while simultaneously being rooted in the past.²

Approximately 80 percent of the collection's twenty thousand puppets are *wayang kulit*, or shadow puppets carved from raw-hide, filigreed and painted on both sides, and attached to one or more control rods. Most puppets are jointed at the elbows and shoulders. This articulation allows for expressive arm gestures during dialogues and exciting fighting movements for battles. Puppets are pressed against a taut white cotton screen, and audiences, particularly on the island of Java, can watch performances from either the shadow side or puppet side of the screen. The latter allows them to see the puppets, puppeteer, and accompanying gamelan musicians in action.³ Repertoire varies from island to island. In Java and Bali, most performances are based on episodes of the *Mahabharata* and



less frequently the *Ramayana*, the core epics of Hinduism, which were introduced to the Indonesian archipelago in the first millennium C.E., along with wet rice cultivation, Sanskrit, and Indian concepts of governance. While Hinduism is no longer common in Indonesia outside of Bali, the religion's heroes and gods are still represented theatrically, albeit with less reverence than in India.

One exceptional puppet in Angst's collection depicts Bathara Guru, the Heavenly Teacher (fig. 1). Known in India as Shiva, he

Fig. 1. *Shadow Puppet (Bajang Kole) of Bathara Guru*, Indonesia, Madura, ca. 19th–early 20th century. Water buffalo hide and horn, with pigment, cotton, and gold leaf, with control rod: 31⁷/₈ x 14¹/₄ in. (81 x 36.2 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, The Dr. Walter Angst and Sir Henry Angst Collection

is the chief god of the pantheon of gods who feature in plays derived from the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. All that is visible of him is his head, topped by an ornate golden crown, his long neck, and his slender shoulders. His body dissolves into a field of blue-and-white clouds and golden stars, depicting his oneness with the universe. Arching through the figure's center is a rainbow, topped by a pair of deer heads and sweeping through two *makara* (sea-creature) heads. The *makara* and deer heads are signs of power. Furthermore, in the interpretation of noted wayang designer Bambang Suwarno, the deer are lapping up the condensed water of the clouds—thus showing the cyclical quality of nature, as solid becomes vapor, then liquid, and then solid again.⁴ Below Bathara Guru is the bull Andini. Scrunched up and cross-eyed, he seems to be experiencing some difficulty in bearing Bathara Guru's weight. A tale in the *Paramayoga* by the Javanese court poet R. Ng. Ranggawarsita relates that Andini was once a rival god to Bathara Guru. The Heavenly Teacher coaxed Andini into becoming his mount, as he promised that each time someone bowed to Bathara Guru they would be bowing to Andini.⁵ It is clear from his distress here that Andini got the worst of the bargain. At the base of the figure is a double-headed *naga* (serpent spirit). Similar sorts of dragon-like bases are found in shadow puppets in Malaysia and Thailand, and indicate divine stature. Though the puppet lacks moving parts, its internal framing and tiered base grant it a statuesque majesty—the still center of a moving world. Wayang plots often begin with an attack on Bathara Guru, or are instigated by him taking on a disguise to meddle in human affairs.

This puppet of Bathara Guru comes from a large chest of 211 puppets that was formerly housed in a Buddhist temple in the town of Pamekasan, on the Indonesian island of Madura. Shadow puppet theater in the neighboring islands of Java and Bali remains vital, but the Madurese tradition has died out (the last published ethnographic report dates

from the 1980s). This puppet and others in the collection testify that the island once possessed a distinctive and highly refined shadow puppet theater—known locally as *bajang kole*. The location of a full set of Madurese shadow puppets in a temple primarily for the local Chinese population might seem anomalous, but from at least the start of the nineteenth century Indonesians of Chinese descent were devoted patrons, and occasionally practitioners, of wayang and gamelan. Through the 1990s, one Confucian temple in Java sponsored a full month of shadow puppet theater, performed all day and night, on an annual basis. This was an act of devotion to Chinese-Indonesian ancestors, who apparently remained shadow puppet devotees in the afterlife. The set in Angst's collection was purchased by the Pamekasan community in 1958, but many of the puppets in it are considerably older. The Bathara Guru dates to the early twentieth century, if not earlier. The presence in the set of two other Bathara Guru puppets with different compositions shows the centrality of the character to this shadow puppet tradition.

The puppet form known alternately as *wayang klithik* or *wayang krucil* once was practiced throughout much of Java but today is limited to small pockets of Central and East Java. Unlike wayang kulit, which is practiced both in the countryside and in the environs of the royal courts and arts conservatories, wayang krucil is basically a folk art. Puppets are carved from flat wood, with either wooden or rawhide arms, but are otherwise fairly similar in iconography to shadow puppets. However, no screen is used; the puppeteer works in full view of the audience. Sometimes a play out of the *Mahabharata* or *Ramayana* is enacted, but more often plays are derived from episodes of Javanese history. The most important repertoire items are from the *Damarwulan* story cycle. These plays concern the eponymous stable boy and grass cutter who rises in the ranks of the eastern Javanese kingdom of Majapahit due to his military prowess,



and eventually marries the princess and is crowned king.

One wayang krucil puppet in Angst's collection is of Damarwulan (fig. 2, at right). He is in an impassive pose, looking down, his arms freely dangling at his sides. With his aquiline nose, almond eyes, and thin lips, he is the epitome of *alus* (refined) courtly style. His white face signifies his youth, and his bare chest and the lack of ornaments on his wrists and arms demonstrate his lack of pretension. The gold ornamentation of his headdress, the ivory-white hilt of his *keris* (dagger) tucked behind his back, and the sweeping fishlike ornament above his bustle show he is now a man of distinction and taste—though he once occupied a low status. Opposite him is his archnemesis Menak Jingga, the powerful monarch of the east Javanese kingdom of Blambangan. His back arm is on his hip, an aggressive posture, and he stares menacingly at Damarwulan. Menak Jingga's face is more three-dimensional than those of other wayang krucil figures, and it has a doglike quality to it, with an extended snout. His mane of hair and the gold chain dangling from his neck

Fig. 2. *Shadow Puppets (Wayang Krucil) of Damarwulan and Menak Jingga*, Indonesia, East Java, early 19th century. Wood and water buffalo hide with pigment, cotton, gold leaf, and metal chain, Damarwulan, with control rod: 20½ x 9¾ in. (52.1 x 24.8 cm); Menak Jingga, with control rod: 17⅞ x 9¼ in. (44.3 x 23.5 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, The Dr. Walter Angst and Sir Henry Angst Collection

emphasize his animalism. His back is stooped, and he has a potbelly and clubfoot, making him also slightly comical. Both of his arms are jointed from the same point on his back shoulder, a characteristic shared by some of the more ridiculous wayang krucil characters.

Both of these puppets were purchased by Angst from the German anthropologist and collector Friedrich Seltmann, who had purchased them in Java in the 1960s. They likely date from the early nineteenth century and are some of the most ornately carved and colored wayang krucil puppets to be found. The details of the carving and the quality of the gold leaf liberally applied on both figures—as well as the fact that they remain

in immaculate condition—suggest that these were the property not of a humble village puppeteer but rather of an elite patron of the arts. Courtiers took an active interest in folk arts in the nineteenth century, and in fact an elaborate courtly dance-opera form called *langendriyan* developed in central Java's royal houses in the mid-nineteenth century based largely on the plays of wayang krucil.

Wayang golek is a three-dimensional rod puppet form that likewise developed outside of the royal courts. It seems to have developed from wayang krucil in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century in eastern Java and spread to the rest of the island, likely facilitated by the construction of the Great Post Road in 1808. Heads are attached to a central control rod that is inserted through a hollow torso, allowing the head to swivel. Arms are jointed to shoulders. Figures are dressed in costumes that drape over and mask the hand of the puppeteer, who grasps the central control rod. Movement tends to be more realistic and less stylized than other Indonesian puppet arts, testifying to a rising nineteenth-century interest in mimetic arts. In much of Java, plays enact the chronicles of Javanese kingdoms or the struggle of Islam against the infidels in the Middle East. In the Sundanese highlands of West Java, however, where wayang golek took off after 1850, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* repertoires are dominant. Many wayang golek carvers in West Java also carve masks for the *topeng* mask-dance, and this older art has influenced the iconography, movement, costuming, and ornamentation of puppets.

One wayang golek shows Rahwana, the antagonist of the *Ramayana* story cycle, in a typical dance pose (fig. 3). He has bulging green eyes, a protruding and upturned nose, and a prominent overbite with fanglike molars, symbolizing his uncouth character. His red face and wild mustache, beard, and loose hair indicate he is quick to anger. But this is no ordinary thug: his diadem with its towering *garuda mungkur* (backward-looking giant bird) ornament are signs of royalty.

This same character type in topeng (masked dance-theater) is known as Klana, an aggressive overseas king who invades Java. The puppet's costuming—long cape, gold fringe, sequins, and patterned embroidery—shows the maker's intimate familiarity with Klana in the mask-dance tradition. Indeed, the puppet moves gracefully and its jointed wooden arms easily assume topeng positions, testifying to the fact that it was made for and used by a puppeteer with topeng experience.

This puppet is one of a group of eleven puppets purchased in 1987 by Angst from the Jakarta-based dealer Tizar Purbaya, who was himself a puppeteer and leading expert in wayang golek. Tizar informed Angst that the artist was a man named Makmur from the Tenjo subdistrict of West Java, and he dated this figure and others from Makmur to about 1965. Angst abjured the collecting of individual figures—mostly preferring to acquire full sets—but the lively theatricality of Makmur's puppets makes them especially appealing.

Another exceptional group of puppets were acquired from the puppeteer, politician, and Islamic preacher Ki Enthus Susmono (1966–2018) from Tegal, Central Java.⁶ Enthus was Java's most popular puppeteer up until his death, and he designed most of his own puppets, which were executed by a team of craftspeople under his supervision. Appearing frequently on television, he was keen to introduce new puppets and new variants of established characters to communicate to contemporary audiences. Angst frequently visited Enthus during his last decade of collecting and obtained from him a sampling of ninety-eight puppets (ninety-four wayang kulit and four wayang golek) that Enthus designed and had used in

Fig. 3. Makmur, *Rod Puppet (Wayang Golek) of Rahwana*, Indonesia, West Java, ca. 1965. Wood with pigment, textile, cotton, polypropylene raffia, glass beads, metal, and hair, with control rod: 30 x 7 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. (76.2 x 20 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, The Dr. Walter Angst and Sir Henry Angst Collection





Fig. 4. Enthus Susmono, *Shadow Puppets (Wayang Kulit) of Clown-Servants Semar, Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong as Teletubbies*, Indonesia, Central Java, 2001. Water buffalo hide and horn, with wood, pigment, cotton, brass, and polypropylene raffia, Semar, with control rod: 26¾ x 11¼ in. (68 x 28.6 cm); Gareng, with control rod: 23⅜ x 6¼ in. (58.7 x 15.9 cm); Petruk, with control rod: 34¼ x 7¾ in. (87 x 19.7 cm); Bagong, with control rod: 26⅞ x 8¾ in. (66.4 x 22.2 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, The Dr. Walter Angst and Sir Henry Angst Collection

his performances starting in the late 1980s. These include a dinosaur from *Jurassic Park*, spacemen and aliens, Batman, Osama bin Laden and George W. Bush, military vehicles, boxers, a sumo wrestler, a motorcycle, a brass band, and a self-portrait of the puppeteer in the dress of the wayang hero Bima.

Four wayang kulit puppets designed by Enthus in 2001 represent the *punakawan* (clown-servants) of Central Java—Semar, Gareng, Petruk, and Bagong—dressed as the

main characters from the preschool television series *Teletubbies* (fig. 4).⁷ *Teletubbies* originated in the United Kingdom but aired in Indonesia on the private television channel Indosiar in the early 2000s. The clown-servants who accompany wayang's main figures are favorite characters for audiences in all Indonesian puppet traditions. They inject humor and topicality into performances, and they speak in a way that is much closer to everyday language than to the lofty and literary language of the main characters. They are ludic figures of fun and metamorphosis. In addition to the *punakawan*-as-Teletubbies, the Angst collection contains *punakawan* dressed as kings and gods, transformed into snails, in the hybrid Javanese-European garb of blue-collar workers in the late colonial period, and cross-dressed as women.

Enthus's *punakawan*-as-Teletubbies retain the clear identity of the original clown servants of Central Javanese wayang while at the same time being unmistakably based on a British television product. Their faces

are unmasked, their grotesque bodies undisguised. Semar, on the right, retains his rotundity and prominent buttocks even in a green bodysuit, though his trademark forelock has been transformed into an antenna. His three sons—from left to right, Bagong, Petruk, and Gareng—similarly are instantly identifiable from their anatomies and facial features, even if Petruk's topknot is now a twisted antenna and Bagong's long thumbnail is concealed by a glove. Each of the figures sports a sun pendant (likely alluding to the infectiously giggling baby Sun that opens and closes episodes of *Teletubbies*) and a colored square on the midriff that represents the television monitor built into the abdomen of each of the Teletubbies. No underlayer is painted onto the rawhide of the monitors, which means that they glow in color when seen from the shadow side of the screen in performance. The introduction of such "colored shadows" to wayang is attributed to the modern wayang artist Sigit Sukasman, who has been an innovator in shadow puppet theater since 1976, after a period of work and study in New York and the Netherlands.⁸

In sum, the Angst collection bears witness to the variation in wayang as a modern theatrical tradition, referencing other expressive forms and synthesizing ideas and techniques. It spans both the modest performing equipment of humble village puppeteers and the intricate refinements puppetry underwent in royal court circles. Furthermore, with puppets dating from the eighteenth century to the 2010s, it charts changes in popular culture, world view, religious beliefs and practices, economic circumstances, understandings of diversity, visions of the past, forms of governance, and technology. It provides, to an extent unmatched by any other public collection, a way in to understanding and experiencing the history of a diverse and ever-changing theatrical art. The collection provides rare glimpses into different theatrical worlds, past and present, and the cosmologies and mythologies underlying them.

1. The scholarly literature on wayang is vast. Recent English-language books of note include: Andrew N. Weintraub, *Power Plays: Wayang Golek Puppet Theater of West Java* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004); René T. A. Lysloff, *Srikandhi Dances Lènggèr: A Performance of Music and Shadow Theater in Central Java* (Leiden, Netherlands: KITLV, 2009); Felicia Katz-Harris, *Inside the Puppet Box: A Performance Collection of Wayang Kulit at the Museum of International Folk Art* (Santa Fe: Museum of International Folk Art, 2010); Jennifer Goodlander, *Women in the Shadows: Gender, Puppets, and the Power of Tradition in Bali* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016); and Bernard Arps, *Tall Tree, Nest of the Wind: The Javanese Shadow-Play Dewa Ruci Performed by Ki Anom Soeroto—A Study in Performance Philology* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2016).

2. For an overview of the collection, see Walter Angst, *Wayang Indonesia: The Fantastic World of Indonesian Puppet Theatre* (Konstanz, Germany: Stadler, 2007).

3. Gamelan is a traditional musical ensemble, generally made up of four to fifty musicians, who mostly play gong-chime instruments. It is found predominantly in Java, Bali, and neighboring islands of Indonesia.

4. Suwarno, cited in Angst, *Wayang Indonesia*, 146.

5. R. Ng. Ranggawarsita, *Serat Paramayoga: Anyariyosakeen Lalampahanipun Kangjeng Nabi Adam sarta Tenah-Tumerahipun para Dewa ingkang Akahyangan ing Tanah Hindhustan* (Yogyakarta, Indonesia: Yayasan Centhini, 1992).

6. On Enthus, see Sadiah Boonstra, "Changing Wayang Scenes: Heritage Formation and Wayang Performance Practice in Colonial and Postcolonial Indonesia" (Ph.D. diss., Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2014), 191–218; and Matthew Isaac Cohen, "Wayang in Museums: The Reverse Repatriation of Javanese Puppets," *Theatre Journal* 69, no. 3 (2017): 361–81.

7. Enthus exhibited slightly different renditions of these puppets in a solo exhibition in Solo, Central Java, in 2002 and includes them in his exhibition catalogue. See Sugeng Nugroho, ed., *Wayang Rohku Pakeliran Duniaku: Pameran Wayang Karya & Koleksi Ki Enthus Susmono*, exh. cat. (Tegal, Indonesia: Sanggar Seni Satria Laras, 2002), 25.

8. On Sukasman's contributions to wayang, see Hardja Susilo, "The Personalization of Tradition: The Case of Sukasman's Wayang Ukur," in *Puppet Theater in Contemporary Indonesia: New Approaches to Performance Events*, ed. Jan Mrázek (Ann Arbor: Centers for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 2002), 179–85. Yale's collection contains fourteen figures by Sukasman.