

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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MUSEUM OF MODERN ART OPENS EXHIBITION OF BALI, BACKGROUND FOR WAR

The forward march of the Allies brings with it problems of reoccupation, not the least of which is the necessity for understanding in some degree the culture, the habits of thought and behavior of peoples in lands re-taken from the enemy. As an example of one method of approach to this problem the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, will open to the public Wednesday, August 11, Bali: Background for War, The Human Problem of Reoccupation. The material for the exhibition has been selected from native sculpture, paintings and idols collected by Gregory Bateson, distinguished anthropologist, during a two-year expedition on the Island of Bali, and from more than 25,000 photographs which he took there as the basis for a book, Balinese Character, on which he collaborated with his wife, Margaret Mead. The exhibition, with installation designed by Xanti Schawinsky, will remain on view through September 19, after which it will be sent on a tour throughout the country.

Mr. Bateson, whose field of anthropology has been chiefly in New Guinea and Bali, has since 1940 been engaged in work concerned with international problems arising from the cultural differences between nations and peoples. For the past year he has been analyzing films for the Museum of Modern Art Film Library and has been teaching Melanesian Pidgin English to naval classes in the School of International Administration, Columbia University.

He comments on the exhibition as follows:

"There is one common ground between the scientific world of the anthropologist and the world of art: the idea that in some sense the artist expresses himself. The exhibition is based on that idea which, in time of war, may become as grim as a mathematical equation in ballistics. Thousands of Americans--men and women, military and civilian--will be going to other parts of the world for the serious purposes of invasion, reoccupation, reconstruction and so on.

"They need to know about these other peoples of the world. They must be able to deal with and get on with these other 'selves' that are scattered all over the world. We cannot produce for them here in New York a living Balinese; still less a whole Balinese village; or a Balinese Rajah with his court. Yet, by means of this exhibition we can produce characteristic specimens of the native art and use them to show what sort of people these Balinese are, what sort of 'selves' they express.

"It might be desirable to do this for all the peoples of the world, to dissect in the form of an exhibition the characteristics of the Germans, the English, the Greeks, even the Americans. Here we can present only one sample

to show how the man or woman going to a foreign region may in some degree acquaint himself in advance with the differing customs of that land. Customs, habits of thought and behavior--in a word, the culture of a people--cannot adequately be expressed in words. Actually to convey the feeling of a people it is necessary to resort to their works of art and to photographs of their daily life. This is what we have done in this exhibition." 123

As shown in the exhibition, Balinese culture in many of its aspects is almost the direct antithesis of American and European. The five sections of the exhibition, with some indication of these differences, are as follows:

1. Caste. Instead of a patriarchal god the Balinese worship child gods; the baby is something of a god and the god is something of a child. Bali has a Hindu caste system, the highest position in which is held by the child as a god and the god as a child.

In the Balinese world both high and low are equally necessary. High does not mean "good" but rather polished and sharp and fine-drawn. Princes and high deities are characterized in Balinese art by narrow slit eyes, sharp noses and slight but very strong limbs. Low similarly means rough and blunt. Servants are characterized in the Balinese theatre as strong, thickset, and with bulging round eyes.

Another characteristic of the "high" is aloofness, and the highest deities are represented as withdrawn - rapt in their own brightness; whereas the "low" are caricatured as people who smile too much. They are so responsive that they even smile at strangers, as shown in two carvings in the exhibition, one of which is sheer fantasy while the other is a very realistic representation of the village idiot.

Position is literally everything in life to a Balinese. It extends even to parts of the body. Respect people's heads: do not reach over anyone's head; be ready to move aside so that no one will have to reach over your head. Be careful not to sit too low or you will force other people on to the ground.

2. Social Life. Even to the humblest Balinese, life is like a minuet, with innumerable small conventions within which they are perfectly relaxed and happy, but without which they are disturbed, uneasy, and frightened. A host of etiquette points must be watched for things that can be learned easily by recipe: not to receive a gift with your left hand; not to reach over somebody's head.

But behind these there are more general themes which consciously or unconsciously you must understand. In Bali you must be very correct in your behavior and yet at ease in that correctness. The Balinese are not Germans. For them correctness and stiffness do not go hand in hand. They will be embarrassed if you brush aside all the delicate nuances of correct behavior. But they will be equally embarrassed if you introduce a stiffness which is foreign both to them and to you.

The social life of the Balinese village is a strict democracy in which the citizens must share. They are fined if they shirk their duties or if they refuse their privileges. The community as a whole is referred to as "I Desa" or "Mr. Village," who is a very important god.

A great part of Balinese life is organized in "sharing clubs." The Village, the orchestras, the theatrical troupes, the irrigation of the terraced rice fields and the harvesting--all these are performed by "clubs." A man who offends against the Village or the Club is met, not with anger, but with the quiet formality of a fine. If he does not pay, the fine is sharply raised again and again, and the ultimate sanction is loss of membership in the safe and familiar community.

3. Fear and Security. The Balinese have a sort of claustrophilia,

the antithesis of the American and European tendency toward claustrophobia. Americans and Europeans teach their children to be competitive and to feel moral guilt. Both guilt and competitiveness are negligible in Bali.

The occidental baby learns from his play-pen--and from a thousand other details of life--that rules are a restriction, a barrier between him and the freedom which is somewhere in the outside world. The Balinese baby learns the opposite. He learns to balance himself by holding to a bamboo bar, set up for him in the courtyard by his father. The outside world is a dangerous place where he is always liable to make a misstep and lose his balance. The familiar rules and conventions are a reassurance, a slender bannister to which he can hold.

The Balinese is afraid that his body or his family--his social personality--may lack or lose some piece. A broken ear-lobe or a lost finger-nail which does not grow again after a wound will disqualify him for full citizenship. To retain citizenship in the stricter villages he must have had at least one male and one female child. And, in any case, he must finally retire when his youngest child marries.

4. War and Violence. Bali is one of the most peaceful areas of the world. When the Balinese are angry with each other they simply withdraw **into** themselves. When the children have tantrums the mother laughs at them. Do not try to galvanize them into activity by violence, shouting, or even oratory--they will only respond with limpness.

But Balinese life has its special forms of violence. There is the very violent and noisy "kris dance" in which young men in trance, possessed by minor demons, turn their daggers on themselves--usually without effect. Sometimes a man wounds himself but this is regarded as "showing off" and is disapproved of. And then there are substitutes for violence which fit in with the Balinese distaste for personal involvement. In cock-fighting or cricket-fighting the man himself stays out of the conflict while he sends in his cock or his cricket as a sort of extension of his own personality. Small boys very rarely fight in Bali, though they spend hours in a sort of kicking game--kicking toward each other but never actually touching the opponent.

In the presence of death or impurity the Balinese put on a show of aggression which is directed not against the impurity, but against each other. This rioting leads often to the elimination of the unclean object. The corpse may be torn or broken, or the new grave may be flattened by the feet of the rioters.

It is important that their normal outlets for violence remain as safety valves--the cock-fighting, the rioting over the dead, the kris-dancing, etc. It is possible that any occidental administrator who was shocked at these practices and forbade them effectively might seriously upset the Balinese balance between violence and passivity.

5. Learning and Skill. A Balinese learns through his muscles and his eyes. He cannot learn through verbal instructions. He exemplifies Emerson's advice to "learn to do by doing." Much of Balinese teaching is done by holding the pupil firmly and pushing and pulling his hands through the required motions until in the end his muscles rather than his mind learn to play their part automatically.

If possible, get another Balinese to do the teaching for you. The fact that one Balinese knows how to perform some European skill will be proof to them that they are not taking initiative in attempting something which "no Balinese can do." Especially they will learn all skills involving bodily balance and coordination. They are excellent drivers and could learn other similar skills. When they can work automatically, perhaps on industrialized tasks, they will be almost free from fatigue.