

Indonesian Stories and Art

Primary Education Resource



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INDONESIAN STORIES

The art of Indonesian textiles and puppet theatre has traditionally depicted episodes from the ancient Hindu epic poems the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

Mahabharata

The *Mahabharata* is a story about the struggle for power between two groups of cousins, the Kaurava and the Pandawa. In the story, the Kaurava succeed in tricking their cousins into betting their kingdom in a game of dice. The Pandawa lose and are sent into exile for thirteen years, but on their return, the Pandawa are determined to win back their kingdom and they wage war against the Kaurava. The conflict carries on for so long and causes so much death and destruction that, although the Pandawa eventually win the war, the victory only brings sadness.

The *Mahabharata* is the longest known epic poem in the world and is a detailed and complex tale of some 100,000 verses, existing in its current form since around 400 CE. Therefore, in works of art and puppet theatre performances, shorter episodes from the story are generally selected as a focus. For example, a particularly exciting episode in the *Mahabharata* is the story of

Babat Wana Marta:

When Bima and his brothers (the Pandawa) are tricked by their cousins (the Kaurava) during a dice game and sent into exile, Bima decides to establish his own kingdom in the forest of Marta. Unfortunately Marta is inhabited by frightening spirits and ogres, ruled by a powerful king. Bima's brother, Arjuna, follows him into the forest to protect him. Bima begins felling trees in the forest but as one tree falls another rises in its place.

The powerful King of Ogres consumes human flesh and finds great joy in human sorrow. He sends his army of ogres into the forest to attack Bima, and a magical fog is used to weaken and subdue him. In his distress he calls out for help, and promises he will become the brother of a male rescuer and the husband of a female rescuer. Arimbi, a female ogre, has been watching Bima and hears his promises. Having fallen in love with him, she releases him from the fog and provides him with a powerful spell to protect himself. Bima however breaks his promise and rejects Arimbi as she is an ogre. Arjuna and his servant intervene and transform Arimbi into a beautiful woman (though to Bima's eyes only). Bima relents in his earlier rejection of her.

Ramayana

The *Ramayana* is a tale of love, loyalty, betrayal and the victory of good over evil. The best-known form of the story is attributed to a text by Valmiki, a poet of the fourth century BCE, but the *Ramayana* has as many versions as it does narrators.

The *Ramayana* takes its name from the hero Rama, a prince and ideal man, admired for his honour, valour and compassion. Rama is an avatar of the great Hindu god Vishnu, preserver of peace, who takes an earthly form when he is needed to restore balance to the world.

According to legend, Vishnu was resting atop Shesha, king of the serpent gods, in his heavenly home when woken by 3333 gods calling him to Earth to vanquish Ravana, the destructive demon king of Lanka. At the same time, King Dasaratha of Ayodhya was making a sacrifice in the hope of being granted a son. He was astounded when Vishnu, in the form of a beautiful young man holding a bow and arrow, emerged from a burst of flames and introduced himself as Rama, eldest son of Dasaratha.

Good, handsome and extremely strong, Rama won the hand of the virtuous Sinta (known as Sita in the Indic tradition) in a contest of strength and skill. Rama easily lifted and shot an arrow from the bow of the god Shiva,

accurately hitting a tiny, moving target. The weapon had proved impossible for the other suitors to even budge. Among them was the demon king Ravana, who swore revenge after learning of Sinta's amusement at his failed attempt.

Afraid that Rama would become king ahead of her son Bharata, Kaikeyi, one of King Dasaratha's three wives, convinced him to send Rama away for fourteen years and to make Bharata heir to the throne. Rama dutifully went to live in a forest with his wife Sinta and younger brother Lakshmana. While in exile, Sinta was enchanted by a golden deer and asked Rama to catch it for her as a companion. As the elusive deer (Ravana's evil uncle Maricha in disguise) led Rama further and further away, Sinta was kidnapped by Ravana.

With the help of the monkey general Hanuman and his army, Rama and Lakshmana searched and fought for Sinta. The clash, involving the monkey army and the demon forces fighting alongside the hero and villain, was lively and gruesome. Multi-headed Ravana's heads regrew each time that they were cut off.

Sinta, once rescued, underwent a trial by fire and emerged from the flames unharmed, proving that she had been faithful to Rama even when they were apart. The return of the heroes to the ancient Indian city of Ayodhya was celebrated with great joy and the city shone with the light of oil lamps.

Further links:

An illustrated version of the *Ramayana* can be found on the NGA website accompanying our previous exhibition [The story of Rama: Indian miniatures from the National Museum, New Delhi](http://www.nga.gov.au/exhibitions/ramayana/).

Short performance outlines for **wayang golek** performances of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*: http://education.asianart.org/sites/asianart.org/files/resource-downloads/Ramayana_Mahabharata_Performance_Outlines_0.pdf

An extended synopsis of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*: <http://education.asianart.org/sites/asianart.org/files/resource-downloads/Synopsis%20of%20Hindu%20Epics.pdf>

Balinese people *Sinta's ordeal, an episode from the Ramayana valance for a temple or royal pavilion [ider-ider]* late 19th century, cotton, silk, dyes, sequins, tinsel; cotton, silk, dyes, sequins, tinsel; embroidery, appliqué, 42.4 h x 278.0 w cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, gift of Mary and Michael Abbott 1987.



RELEVANT WORKS OF ART

Indonesian Textiles

Balinese people *Sinta's ordeal*, an episode from the *Ramayana* valance for a temple or royal pavilion [ider-ider] late 19th century (detail), cotton, silk, dyes, sequins, tinsel; cotton, silk, dyes, sequins, tinsel; embroidery, appliqué, 42.4 h x 278.0 w cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, gift of Mary and Michael Abbott 1987.

Sinta, (known as Sita in the Indic tradition) is the heroine of the great Hindu epic *Ramayana*. The classic story is centred on Sinta's husband Rama, who willingly goes into exile for fourteen years to comply with his father's wish that his brother take the throne. Sinta dutifully accompanies him, but is later captured and held hostage for several years at the palace of Ravana, the evil ten-headed demon king of Lanka. Eventually Rama and his brother Lakshmana, assisted by Hanuman and his army of monkeys, defeat Ravana and rescue Sinta.

Rama is reluctantly forced to reject Sinta as his queen because she had dwelt in the house of another man. Shown in this valance is the moment Sinta protests her innocence and asks that her funerary pyre be prepared. Courageously she enters the flames. Protected by Agni, god of fire, Sinta emerges unharmed, a miracle that confirms her purity.



This **batik**, produced during the Japanese occupation of the Indonesian archipelago during the Second World War, displays some of the legendary heroes of the **Mahabharata** traditional tale. It also features the **Panakawan**, or servant-clowns, who appear in popular Javanese theatrical performances of these tales: the

rotund figure of Semar, for example, parachutes onto the battlefield. Can you spot Arjuna, a master archer?

The heroes from the legend are presented in the flat two-dimensional style of **wayang kulit** shadow puppets, with traditional costumes and distinctive facial features.

In this wartime scene, the warrior figures from the **Mahabharata** are depicted driving tanks and armoured cars, battling against the Japanese whose flags flutter from the opposing vehicles.



Javanese people Skirt cloth [*kain panjang*] 1942–45, cotton, natural dyes; hand-drawn batik, 106.0 h x 240.0 w cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1984.



Javanese people Skirt cloth [*kain panjang*] 1942–45, (detail) cotton, natural dyes; hand-drawn batik, 106.0 h x 240.0 w cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1984.

In this rare **batik** scenes are arranged in rows to tell a story. The textile depicts an episode from the Hindu epic ***Mahabharata***, possibly the *bale sigala-gala*, *The House of Lacquer*. In this story Duryodhana, eldest son of the Kauravas and the chief antagonist of the epic, plots to kill the Pandawa brothers and their mother. Duryodhana arranges for the architect Purochana to build the Pandawa brothers a palace in the forest made from

highly flammable lacquer, intending to set the building on fire and burn the heroes alive. Meanwhile, a miner digs a secret underground passage from the centre of the house to an opening near the river Ganges through which the heroes safely escape.

The garments of the various characters depicted on this batik are an indication of the type of costume worn

in Javanese courts. These include jackets and coats of different cut and sleeve length, long and short pants for male figures, and skirtcloths of various fabrics and patterns. Bima, the strongest of the Pandawa brothers, is shown wearing the sacred black and white checkered loincloth and carrying a *kris*—a ceremonial dagger.



Javanese people Ceremonial cloth [*kain batik*] [or possibly a nobleman's skirt cloth] late 19th century, cotton, natural dyes; hand-drawn batik, 106.5 h x 260.0 w cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1984.



Javanese people Ceremonial cloth [*kain batik*] [or possibly a nobleman's skirt cloth] late 19th century (detail), cotton, natural dyes; hand-drawn batik, 106.5 h x 260.0 w cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1984.

Batik Technique



Kassian Céphas *not titled [two women creating batik fabric]* c.1880, gelatin silver photograph, 9.4 h x 13.6 w cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 2007.

Batik textiles are created by applying molten wax to the smooth surface of finely woven cotton cloth before it is dyed. On setting, the wax prevents the cold dyes from entering areas of the design to which it has been applied. The wax is then scraped and boiled off. To create a complex batik pattern the process of waxing and dyeing may be applied a number of times. On the finest and most valuable batik textiles, the molten wax is applied with a fine pen-like instrument known as a *canting*. In the mid-nineteenth century the development of a metal stamp known as the *cap* allowed for a faster though less flexible waxing of designs. The most refined batiks are waxed equally on both sides of the fabric making them completely reversible. Hand-drawn batik is largely the art of women, while it is only men who create the commercial batik *cap*.

In Indonesia today, batik is exclusively carried out on the island of Java, and it has long been exported to other parts of the Indonesian archipelago where it is much admired. The colour and designs vary from one batik region of Java to another.

Related links:

See **batik** being made in this informative [video](#) by the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco.

A glossary of Indonesian textile techniques can be found on the NGA's [Indonesian Textiles website](#).

Explore textiles from different regions of Indonesia through the NGA's [Indonesian textiles website](#).

Wayang puppets

Puppet theatre is a very popular form of entertainment in Indonesia. Puppetry was performed at court in Indonesia from at least the eleventh century, and there are several types of puppet play—**wayang kulit** (using flat leather puppets), **wayang klitik** (using flat wooden puppets), and **wayang golek** (using three-dimensional puppets).

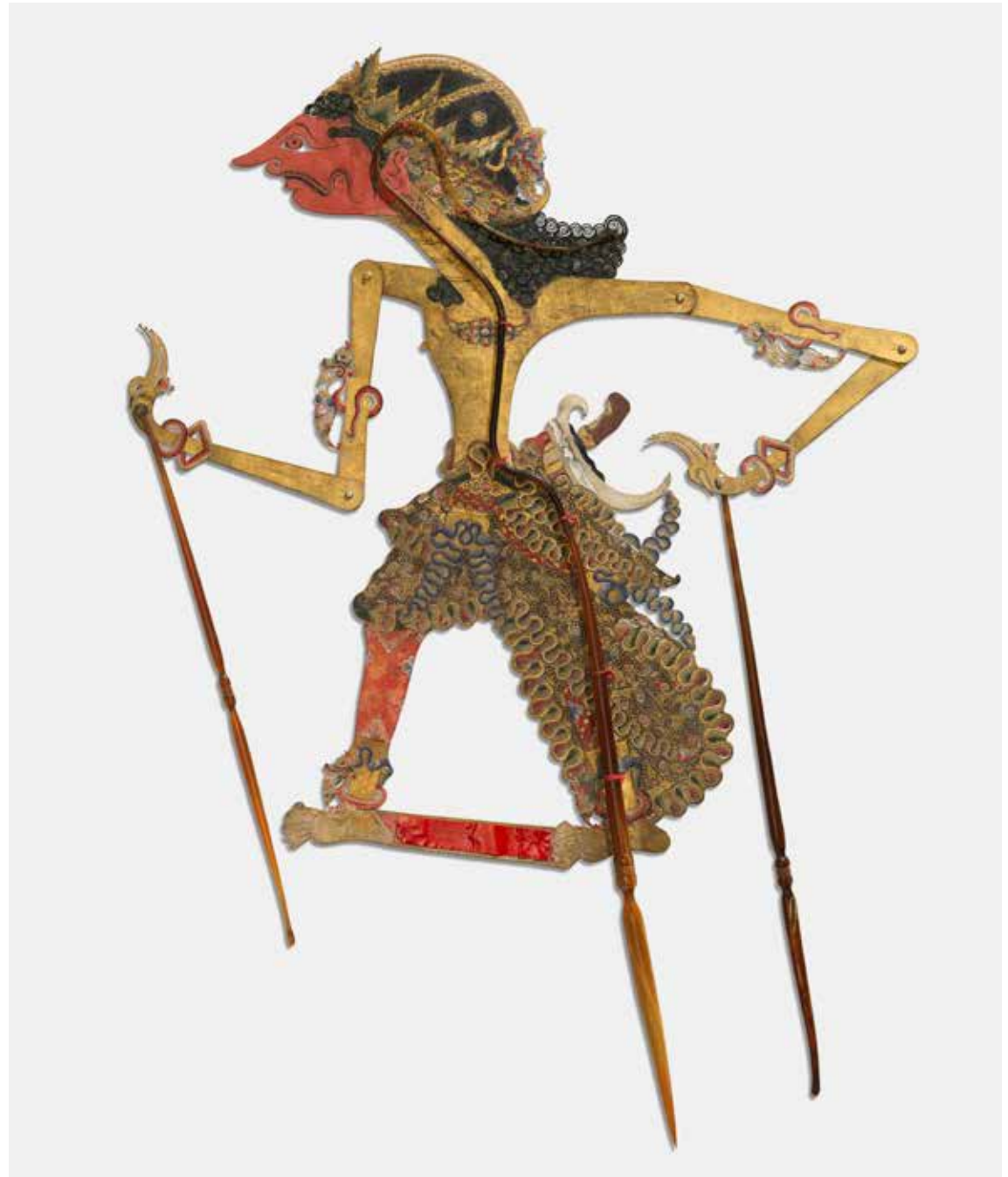
Wayang kulit is the most popular form of puppetry. **Wayang** literally means shadow or imagination in Javanese, while **kulit** means skin, or parchment. In a **wayang kulit** performance, the puppeteer or **dalang** manipulates the puppets from behind a white cotton screen lit with a lamp and the puppets' shadows create a magical illusionary effect.

Related links:

See wayang puppet theatre being performed and learn more in this [video](#) by UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage.

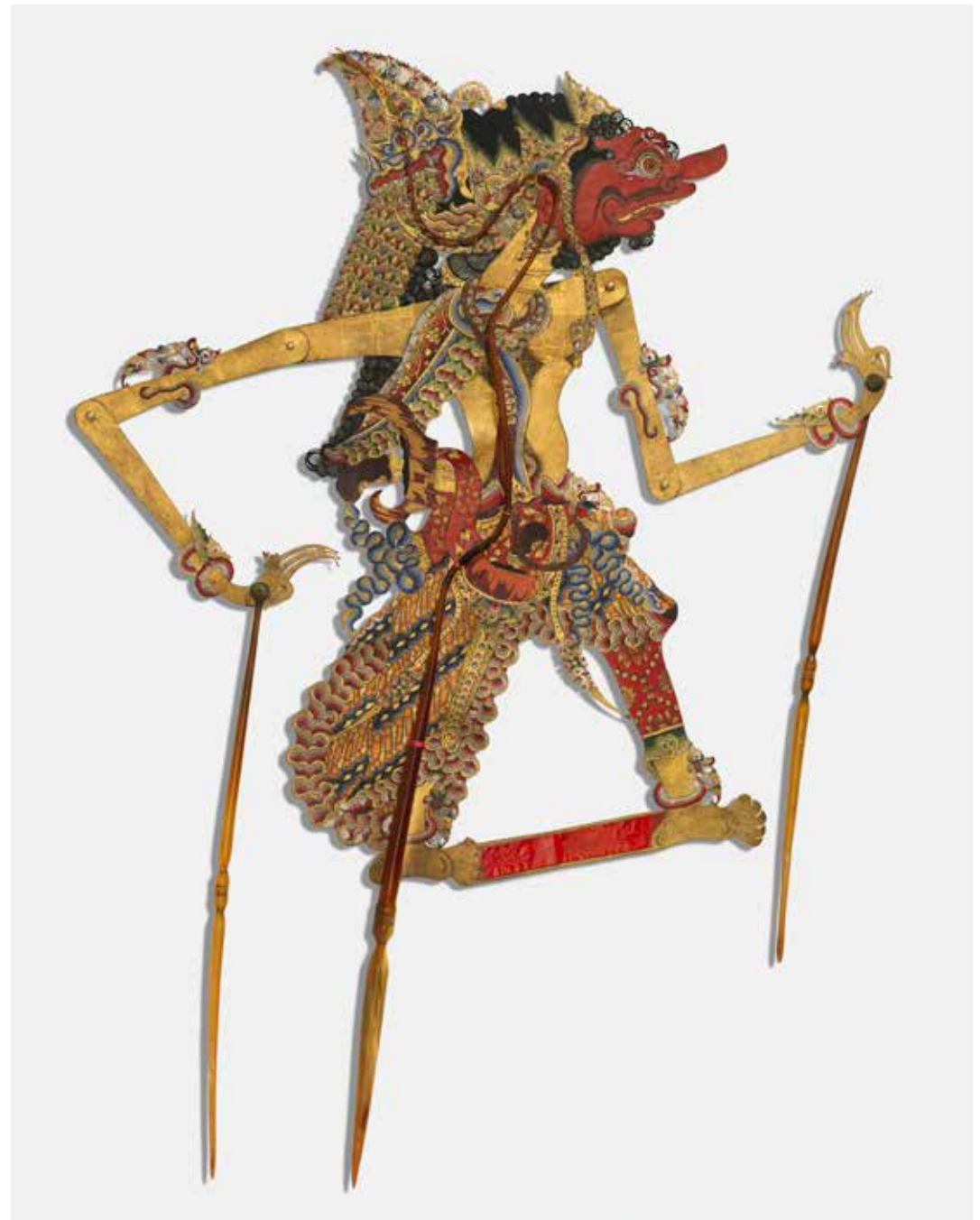
Asia Education Foundation Visual Arts and Drama [teaching resource](#) on wayang puppet plays.

Javanese people Shadow puppet [wayang gedog] late 19th century, leather, gold, paint, turtle shell, buffalo horn, 74.0 h x 32.0 w cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1973



Initially it was the stories from the great Hindu epics ***Mahabharata*** and ***Ramayana*** that formed the main repertoire for wayang performances. However, during the fifteenth century when Muslim traders came to Java, Islamic influences began to appear in wayang performances. The sixteenth century Islamic saint Sunan Giri is credited with creating a new form of shadow puppet known as ***wayang gedog*** to enact the *Tale of Panji*. There is much overlap between the facial and decorative features of the characters found in ***wayang gedog*** and those of the original Indic tales. This ***wayang gedog*** puppet for example, depicts a character from the *Tale of Panji* but strongly resembles Durshasana (Dursasana), one of the antagonists from the ***Mahabharata***.

The *Tale of Panji* was very popular during the Majapahit period (1294–1520) and developed out of an oral tradition resulting in many variants of the story. Adaptations of the Panji stories are told in drama, dance, poetry and wayang theatre. The main story recounts the adventures of the legendary prince Raden Panji from East Java whose bride was kidnapped on the eve of their wedding day. Panji goes in search of his future wife and the couple are eventually reunited.



Javanese people Shadow puppet [*wayang gedog*] late 19th century, leather, gold, paint, turtle shell, buffalo horn, 77.0 h x 40.0 w cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1973

Indieguerillas

This is Dyatmiko "Miko" Bawono and Santi Ariestyowanti, contemporary artists from Yogyakarta. Together they are the [Indieguerillas](#). Their interactive [NGA Play](#) exhibition (Dec 2017 – May 2018) was created for kids and families and was inspired by their home in Indonesia as well as the Indonesian textiles and wayang puppets that they saw when they visited the National Gallery of Australia.

The Indieguerillas created their own puppets and made a video to help tell the story of their exhibition. Take a look at the [video](#) to learn more about their art and ideas. Be aware that the characters in the video are speaking Javanese, which is different from Indonesian. Javanese is one of hundreds of languages spoken in Indonesia. <https://nga.gov.au/ngaplay/indieguerillas.cfm>



