

Dancing Shadows, Epic Tales



Aurelia Gomez

Wayang kulit (shadow puppet) performance of Indonesia is among the oldest and greatest storytelling traditions in the world and lies close to the heart of Javanese culture. *Wayang kulit* are flat, leather puppets elaborately decorated and perforated, casting intricate and dramatic shadows when performed.

This is a highly refined art form that commemorates important life cycle ceremonies and a variety of social events. Performances are usually based on classical literature such as the Indian epics, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* with contemporary issues incorporated into particular scenes. Performances are always accompanied by a gamelan orchestra and traditionally begin in the evening and last until dawn. The tradition of wayang kulit has been performed in villages, cities, and royal courts for hundreds of years and is very much alive today.

Wayang Kulit Performance

In village settings, hundreds of people gather to watch. Performances can commemorate an important event such as a birth or marriage, kick off a political campaign, or simply entertain. The shadow puppets and the *dhalang* (puppeteer) are thought to be

charmed by protective spirits, so performances can also take place at times of crisis to provide a community with protection and well-being.

Wayang kulit performances are elaborate affairs. The ability to sponsor an event usually reflects a high social status, but village performances are characteristically open to the public. Regardless of sponsorship and venue, wayang kulit remains very much an art of and for the people.

How Wayang Kulit are Made

The art of creating wayang kulit is incredibly detailed. Several artists are usually involved in the different stages required to make a single puppet. These artists often learn the art from family members and apprentice with a master.

Wayang kulit are made from water buffalo hide, cut and punctured by hand, one hole at a time. Once the hole-punching is complete, the puppets are painted in layers of water-based paints, heavily decorated with extraordinarily fine details, and often finished with gold or bronze leaf. The sticks attached to the base and articulated limbs of the wayang kulit are made from water buffalo horn and/or wood. A large character may take five months or more to produce.

Classical wayang kulit artists follow very specific traditional guidelines when creating the puppets. They have some leeway in terms of individual preferences and creativity, but for the most part, they carve design patterns and choose colors that are suitable to particular characters, based on designs from previous generations.

Puncturing the Leather

This is the most time consuming stage of the art-making process. The artists who carve and puncture the water buffalo hide begin by scratching the outline and details of the wayang figure onto the leather. The carving and punching



of the leather, which is most responsible for the characters' portrayal and the shadows that are cast, are guided by this sketch.

Painting

The carved and punched wayang figure is smoothed with sandpaper. This prepares the hide for paint, which is added in layers. Water-based paints, such as acrylics, are preferred and they are mixed with *ancur*, a natural adhesive often made from fish bones.

The foundation coat, usually white or yellow, covers the entire piece to even out the leather's tone. The piece is burnished with a seashell and subsequent colors are added when each layer is dry. Gold or bronze leaf is used on finer pieces. The leaf is very delicate, prepared and applied with great care. *Ancur* is mixed with paint to soften the gold so it adheres more smoothly. Certain colors are added after the gilding process, and fine details such as thin lines and tiny dots are painted or stippled into the design.

Facial Features

There are a fixed number of shapes used to depict physical characteristics. Eye shape is one of the principal identifying features for understanding a figure's personality. The most *halus* (refined and gracious) characters will have thin, downward cast eyes, whereas *kasar* (uncouth and poor mannered) characters would have big, round eyes with large pupils.

Standard colors are also used to portray personality traits and moods. For example, the most common facial colors (at least for human characters) are gold, black, white, and red. A gold face signifies dignity and calmness. Black can represent strength or anger. Red symbolizes a more intense, violent anger and usually a rather callous and nasty personality. A white face indicates a person's youthful age and/or innocence.

Specific features such as these, combined with other features (such as the shape of the nose, body type, teeth, etc.) indicate "who's who" and provide clues to their dispositions.

Punch Shapes

Combinations of curved and flat punches create details such as clothing style, hairstyle, and ornamentation, each relevant to specific characters. For example, a pattern of straight line-dashes might be used for the edging of *kain* (skirt cloth), whereas rounded spirals are used to represent hair.

Find much more information online at moifa.org/exhibitions/dancingshadows.html and a lesson plan for making shadow puppets at schoolart-online.com.

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Resources

Katz-Harris, Felicia. *Inside the Puppet Box: A Performance Collection of Wayang Kulit at the Museum of International Folk Art*. Santa Fe, NM: The Museum of International Folk Art in association with the University of Washington Press, 2010.

WEB LINK

online.InternationalFolkArt.org/DancingShadows

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