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WAYANG GOLEK FIGURE G134

The puppet theatre traditions of Indonesia are famous around the world. There are two main kinds - the Wayang Kulit and the Wayang Golek. Wayang is an Indonesian word for theatre. The Wayang Kulit are two dimensional leather puppets often referred to as shadow puppets (see photograph below, right). These are more popular in the areas of Bali. The Wayang Golek are three dimensional wooden puppets and come from western Java (marked with a red arrow on the map of Indonesia below).



In the early twenty-first century Java had a population of 124 million people, of whom 90% were Muslim. However, the Hindu religion, which was widespread there before the coming of Islam in the eleventh century, has continued to have an influence on both the practice of Islam and the performance of puppet theatre. The most frequently performed stories derive from the Hindu epic stories of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Each performance tells only a small part of the whole epic. In Indonesia, people are familiar with the different characters appearing in the stories, which can be recognised by the size, shape, colour and angle of their eyes and nose and the way they walk, talk, sing, dance and fight.





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Wayang Golek puppets are operated from below by rods connected to the hands and a central control rod that runs through the body to the head. Like many other crafts in Indonesia, making these puppets is a skill that is often handed down through families. The master puppet-maker usually makes the head because it expresses the personality of the puppet (right). Ceremonies are performed before beginning to carve a deity or a demon. A piece of light, local softwood, which is easy to carve and not too heavy to hold up during a performance, is sawed or chopped down to the right size, and the main features are roughly chiselled. After sanding, fine decorations such as the parts of a crown are carved in with more care and sanded. The smooth surface receives a coat of glue-based paint, which will enable subsequent coats to adhere well. Lips, flowers and some bits of jewellery are painted red, as are the irises of angry characters. Fine black lines are painted for eyes, eyebrows, moustaches and wisps of hair. Bodies are often made by younger members of the family, and arms are attached at the elbow and shoulders with string so that they move easily. Costumes are usually made by wives.

Puppet body types range from the extremely refined to the extremely rough and crude. Refined, virtuous characters have small dainty bodies, slitted oval eyes with pupils shaped like rice grains, pointed noses and a modest downward gaze. Vigorous or turbulent characters have a more direct and confrontational stare. As the personality of the puppet becomes less refined, there is an increase in size; the nose becomes heavier and blunter; eyes and pupils become larger and rounder and the gaze more aggressive; teeth and gums may be exposed in a snarl or a foolish sneer. The shapes of hands also express character and role - those of nobles stretch out gracefully, but servants and commoners have large open palms. The largest puppets are used for those whose greatest attribute is physical strength.



It is not known whom the puppet in this box is meant to represent. It has a refined face, but if you swivel the head around you can see a smaller fierce face, with its jaw wide open and a long gold tongue. This does not mean that the character is evil, but that he has magical powers, which can come in useful in dangerous situations! The photograph on the right shows Rama - the great hero - with a similar scary head at the back of his more usual handsome face.

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A Wayang Golek performance (above) usually start at dusk and runs to the early morning hours. The Wayang Golek puppet masters are called Dalang's. These shows might be given to appease the gods, to offer thanks or ask protection for a harvest, or to exorcise evil spirits. They also continue to be performed at circumcision or wedding parties, or at events such as the anniversaries of large businesses. The Wayang Golek performance becomes a social event around which there may be many stalls selling refreshments and other small items. The audience comes and goes as it pleases, watching or listening from all sides.



Unlike the better-known leather shadow puppets (Wayang Kulit) which are found in the rest of Java and Bali, the wooden Wayang Golek puppets do not use a screen. The puppeteer (right) sits on the floor behind a low table on which the puppets perform. The shows are accompanied by gamelan music (below), with speech and singing to tell the story. This music is unlike the traditional court music and contains much banter and sound effects. A drummer guides the musicians. He in turn is guided by signals that the *dalang* gives whenever there is a change of mood or pace required.

