Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

JAVA - WAYANG PUPPET G145



Java is an island that is part of Indonesia. It was once the site of a kingdom that spread through southeast Asia. Javanese writers created wonderful stories, called epics, mixing their Hindu religion with these tales. Islam is now the most popular religion in Java but its culture remains influenced by the Hindu past.

Wayang Kulit



Have you ever used your hands to make shadow puppets on the wall?

Wayang means theatre and kulit translates as skin. This name tells us a great deal about the object. Theatres are places for exciting public performances. This colourful doll is a character used in a shadow play, Java's earliest form of theatre. Stories using wayang kulits have been told in Java for over 1,000 years.

The puppet is made from leather usually buffalo skin. A stencil lets the maker draw the image onto the hide, this way the eyes and mouth can also be marked out. Sharp tools are used to cut out the puppet and their details. Colour is added to decorate the characters.



Above: A wayang kulit puppet performance

Projecting the shadows helps illustrate stories told in Javanese villages and palaces. In the beginning the audience would have seen the puppets. Their bright colours would tell the watchers who each character was. As Islam spread through Java, people were discouraged from displaying images of people. The performers had to find a way of solving this problem. Their answer was to have the shadows of the characters tell the story.

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In Java a performer is called a Dalang. They are the conductor, puppeteer, storyteller and singer throughout the story. It takes a great deal of experience to become a Dalang. They sit behind a cotton screen with a lamp above them. This allows the shadow of the puppet to be shown on the screen. The Dalang can spend up to nine hours doing a show with a large cast of puppets. Beside the Dalang is a wooden chest. This is hit with a hammer to signal when one of the characters is talking. It also directs the gamelan, which is a group of musicians that play the music during the show.



Above: A Dalang and his wayang kulit

This puppet represents a Princess called Sita. In Javan culture she is a character in the important and famous epic, *Ramayaba*. Sita is usually shown with black hair and wearing an orange dress. This wayang kulit also has the Princess with her crown.



Above: Sita is on the right and her husband Rama on the left.

The *Ramayaba* story

In the city of Ayodhya, capital of the Kosala kingdom, ruled King Dasaratha. He had four sons by his three wives. They were Rama, Lakshmana, Shatrughna and Bharata. Rama, the oldest son, was a popular Prince who married the Princess Sita after impressing her by winning an archery competition. The King wanted to make Rama his successor but one of his wives reminded him that she once saved his life. He had promised her two wishes. She demanded her son, Bharata is made the next king and Rama be banished to the forest for fourteen years. Rama leaves with his brother Lakshmana and wife Sita for the forest as the King falls ill and dies. Bharata is crowned but finds out what his mother did. Desperately he travels to the forest to find Rama and ask him to rule. Rama refuses as this would go against his father's final wishes.

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In the forest Rama, Sita and Lakshmana learn to survive and live a simple life. They have to fight off evil demons that attack them. One, called Ravana, wants Sita to be his wife and kidnaps her. The brothers travel to another kingdom and get help from an army of monkeys. Together they fight Ravana, destroying his army and releasing Sita. Rama's fourteen years in exile is completed and he returns to Ayodhya to rule the kingdom with Sita. Being a good and just King his period became known as the Golden Age.



Above: Rama and the monkey army fighting Ravana.