

Wayang Kulit!

Javanese Shadow Puppets

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Meet the artists: Javanese shadow puppetry of Indonesia involves distinctive puppets that are art works in themselves. To create these puppets are teams of specialized **wayang artists**, considered craftsmen, who work together in groups to do the careful and precise hand work that can take several weeks for a single puppet.

Meet the subject: Wayang comes from the Indonesian word for ‘shadow’ (bayang) and kulit refers to the use of buffalo hide to make the flat puppet figures with movable joints, animated by hand, using rods connected to their appendages. Indonesian Shadow Puppet Theater, originating in 800 A.D. and considered the oldest freestanding puppet form.

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Javanese Shadow Puppets (continued)



Javanese Shadow Puppet

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Javanese Shadow Puppets (continued)



The dalang, a performance artist and spiritual leader, uses puppets created by the wayang artists.

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Javanese Shadow Puppets (continued)



Protagonists 'meet' in the middle of the shadow screen

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Javanese Shadow Puppets (continued)



A single performer arrives from the left side of the stage.

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Javanese Shadow Puppets (continued)

Meet the artists:

Javanese shadow puppetry of Indonesia involves distinctive puppets that are art works in themselves. To create these puppets are teams of specialized wayang artists, considered craftsmen, who work together in groups to do the careful and precise hand work that can take several weeks for a single puppet. The wayang kulit puppet characters are two-dimensional puppets chiseled by hand from buffalo or goat parchment (treated skin), they are like paper dolls, but with arms that are hinged and swivel. The puppets created are intricately designed, down to the most minute detail of costume and color, to help the audience distinguish between the different characters.

Meet the performer:

The dalang, a performance artist and spiritual leader, uses puppets created by the wayang artists. Today this form of theater is both the most ancient and the most popular form of puppet theatre in the world. Hundreds of people will stay up all night long to watch the superstar performers, dalang, who command extravagant fees and are international celebrities. The dalang is the key to all shadow play — the music conductor, the epic storyteller, the comic, philosopher and political pundit.

Meet the subject:

Wayang comes from the Indonesian word for 'shadow'(bayang) and kulit refers to the use of buffalo hide to make the flat puppet figures with movable joints, animated by hand, using rods connected to their appendages. Indonesian Shadow Puppet Theater, originating in 800 A.D. and considered the oldest freestanding puppet form, tells stories of heroic ancestors of Javanese Kings, quests, battles, ogres and scenes of romantic love, often derived from the two great Indian epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata. Both epics have been with the Javanese since the influence of India was first arrived in the first century A.D. Traditionally, a wayang is played out in a ritualized midnight-to-dawn show by the dalang, the performance artist and spiritual leader; people watch the show from both sides of the screen.

UNESCO designated wayang kulit, the shadow puppet, as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2003. It is a significant historical art form in Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos.

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Javanese Shadow Puppets (continued)

Curious fact:

While the dalang puppeteers become performance superstars, the puppets used are created by artists who seldom make a living wage.

More info-bites:

- The Dalang (puppeteer / narrator / musician) is seated and performs cross-legged for six to nine successive hours. He is not allowed to sleep, nor can he get up from his seat until six o'clock the next morning.
- All puppets are organized by virtue or vice: on the right-hand side are the good characters, on the left-hand side the bad. The open space between them, about two meters wide, represents the stage of life.

How the artists did it:

A wayang kulit puppet is a stylized exaggeration of a human shape. The puppets, crafted from buffalo hide, are mounted on bamboo sticks. When held up behind a piece of white cloth, with an electric bulb or an oil lamp as the light source, shadows are cast on the screen. The leather construction of the puppets entails carefully chiseled forms made with fine tools, supported with carefully shaped buffalo horn handles and control rods, and painted in beautiful hues, including gold. Traditional puppet designs have changed little in the last 300 years.

The artists start from templates (traditional character motifs unchanged for centuries) which are traced out onto skin or parchment, providing the figures with an outline and with indications of any holes that will need to be cut (such as for the mouth or eyes). The figures are then smoothed, usually with a glass bottle, and primed. The structure is inspected and eventually the details are worked through. A further smoothing follows before individual painting, which is undertaken by yet another craftsman. Finally, the movable parts (upper arms, lower arms with hands and the associated sticks for manipulation) are mounted on the body, which has a central staff by which it is held. A crew will make up to ten figures at a time, typically completing that number over the course of a week.

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Want to hear and see more?

Visit YouTube and see both performances and how-to information:

Asia Society: Wayang Kulit: Indonesia's Extraordinary Shadow Puppetry Tradition (4 minutes)

Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=75&v=Fls6BIMn-XA&feature=emb_logo

Introducing Indonesian culture through shadow puppets - featured by ABC (2 minutes)

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HqiTX9VnAx0>

Immerse yourself in the experience – which may be quite a culture shock

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jDWfs1QIYME>

Finally, how to make your own Javanese Shadow Puppet – a modern version (using cardboard, not buffalo skin) in an assembly process (3 ½ minutes)

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M1PM9le-KTk>