



A MASTERPIECE REVEALED

BY SELINE HOFKER

ZEEUWS VEILINGHUIS
ZEELAND AUCTIONEERS



Introduction

Willem Gerard Hofker (1902-1981), educated on the Royal Academy of Arts in Amsterdam, is well appreciated for his portraits and cityscapes. Especially his Balinese oeuvre, which he created on the island from June 1938 till December 23rd of 1943, made him much appreciated worldwide.

He was born in The Netherlands in the city of The Hague. At a young age Willem grew up as an artist definitely influenced by some of his father's close friends, such as the well-known Dutch impressionist painters Isaac Israëls (1865-1934) and Willem Witsen (1860-1923), the last of whom became his godfather. At the age of fourteen he had already created his first serious oil painting on panel. When this result was shown to Isaac Israëls, he stated that Hofker unmistakably was a gifted genius. Witsen, who provided the young boy with the panel, reacted with astonishment, saying that Hendrik Johannes Haverman (1857-1928), a widely respected artist in that era, would have been very happy if he could produce a comparable palette of colors!

Willem completed his studies in the early 1920s, completed his compulsory military service and traveled through the Netherlands and other European countries drawing and painting, after which he settled as an independent artist in Amsterdam. In 1928, during a concert break in the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, he met Maria, the eldest daughter of his former teacher at the Royal Academy of Art, Georg Rueter (1875-1966). They married in 1930. Due to his wide range of talents Hofker became a successful artist. He was an excellent painter, etcher and draftsman, depicting cityscapes, rural scenes, nudes and portraits.

In the year of his marriage, at the age of 28, Willem Gerard Hofker was commissioned by one of the directors of the shipping company Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij (KPM) in the Netherlands, Jhr. I.H.A. 'Eyk' Backer, to paint a portrait of his wife Lilian. Once finished, it was a great success and more important commissions came, such as the portraits of the children Boissevain (family of one of the KPM founders). Eventually the KPM asked him to paint the State Portrait of Queen Wilhelmina for her upcoming 40 year reigning jubilee in 1938. And so Willem Hofker got to work on this prestigious assignment that would definitely determine the course of his life.

At the same time, KPM was expanding its fleet of passenger carrying ships with three large liners which would be named after their founders, like the m.s. Boissevain. On that brand new liner Willem and Maria embarked on January 5, 1938, and sailed to the former Dutch East Indies, as they were asked to deliver the State Portrait personally in Batavia (Jakarta), where it was intended to be displayed at the head office of the KPM, located at Koningsplein.

Hofker was also commissioned to make a selection of drawings of Java and Bali for the KPM, according to his own interpretation. Those drawings would be used by the company for promotional purposes. After a period of acclimatization and orientation, he found out, much to his frustration, that it was almost impossible to get the Javanese to pose for him. After four months they decided, earlier than previously planned, to travel to Bali.



*Willem and Maria on their wedding day, 30 Sept. 1930,
Coll. Hofker archive, S. Hofker.*

Bali

The boat trip took three days from the port of Tanjung Priok. Quoting Maria: 'It's great to be on board again. We sail so close to the coast that there is a lot to see.' On June 12, 1938 Willem and Maria arrived in Bali, as noted in her dairy. 'The coast of Bali is in sight and at nine o'clock we disembarked on a proa to go ashore in Boeileleng. With a car on to Singaradja, where we see the first temple gate of red brick with gray sculpted pieces of natural stone. Sat in a Pasanggrahan overlooking a lake, and further the 112 km to Denpasar.' The first month in Bali the couple will stay at a guesthouse owned by J.A. Houbolt, called Dangin Poeri. 'Our pavilion is beautifully situated with a wide view over the rice fields. We look out at all the temple gates and the clay walls around the compound, covered from above with atap and a palm leaf. Then the sturdy, cheerful population. A wondrous world this is.'

Just a few days later, on June 17, after Willem has his first female model posing, behind a loom, they went to see the evening dance on stage in front of the Bali Hotel. Hofker characterized this 'dance-opera' as something of aesthetic quality accompanied by two divine figures that does represent Bali well: dazzling beauty and humor united. 'The Lègong dancers are orientally refined, a real tropical opulence, completely in brocade' (Willem in a letter of 15 June 1938).



*Maria Hofker 1938.
Coll. Hofker archive, S. Hofker.*



Ni Sadri and Ni Cawan dancing the Lègong. Postcard, coll. Hofker archive, S. Hofker.

The following quote from Maria Hofker, from a letter dated June 26, 1938, gives an impression of how the couple experienced their new environment:

'The KPM has its hotel here and organizes every Friday evening dance performances for its guests on the terrace by the very best dancers in the old Adat costumes. They also dance on Saturday mornings, but then in front of a temple court, preceded by the hairdressing and rigging of the dancers, eight or ten years old' (Maria wrote later about this in 1996: 'as we thought at the time. There was no registration! Age and time did not matter then.'). (...) 'We go there quite often and it's beautiful to see, and for Wim it is a wonderful opportunity to choose models, which immediately goes well. But of course the dances are even more beautiful when you see them in their own environment. One evening we were in a village where a gamelan was set up in a clearing in a palm grove with sparse petroleum lighting and people danced wonderfully. It was a feast of color and gold brocade, strong purple, bright green and headdresses of various flowers on gold leather, decorated with gemstones and mirrors. All movements have been studied with a grace and nimble management, on the basis of their musicality. But also their color sense is real. No matter how colorful their headscarves or sarong and loincloths are together, in combination with their brown upper body, black hair and black shiny children's eyes, it is always civilized and rich. Maybe it is the tropical sun that helps too.'

Willem notices that he is increasingly able to adapt to this new environment, as he continues in the same letter (that Maria had started): 'I'm starting to get into shape and I'm quickly learning to work in dubious 'studios' at the premises of the Balinese people. But unimaginably in such a lighting, sitting on the floor in a dark shed – the natives themselves sit so characteristically – flat on the floor – and then you have to do it yourself too – otherwise you can only see them from above! Good, it's definitely an adventure for my work and painting style! It's good that I took on this task. I hope to come back like an Isaac Israëls.'

Within a month after his arrival on the island of Bali, Hofker was in need of more space and his own studio. On the 4th of July the couple relocated to Klandis Kedaton, where they rented the two spare rooms from fellow artist René Gockinga. The house was situated under the palm trees along the road to Sanur, opposite of the temple Pura Kedaton. 'Immediately we install the bedroom and the sitting room, our studio. It is beneficial, we are more at home here. It is nice to see the Balinese pass by on the road under the palm trees. It's all a nice traffic. The rear view at the poera (temple) is also beautiful with the silvery, jagged Cambodia (plumeria frangipani) trees. We now really felt being in Bali, with a bilik house, petroleum light and in the mandi (bathroom) where the water flows through a bamboo pipe.'



*Travel brochure clipping of Cawan and Sadri
with the handwriting of Willem Hofker.
Coll. Hofker archive, S. Hofker.*

Soon they made plans for the painting studio, because heavy rain often prevented Willem from painting in the courtyards of the Balinese. It was to be made of woven mats and would be placed next to the house in the garden, so Willem would not completely occupy the living room and Maria could receive acquaintances and friends in a tidy house. It was the beginning of August 1938 when Mr. Willem F. Einthoven (chief engineer of the State Company of Postal, Telegraphy and Telephony in Bandung and dear friend of the family) came for a short visit. They drank tea on the nearby beach in Kuta, known for its beautiful view, and dinner was taken at home, after which Hofker had arranged a dance performance with the famous I Rindi, Ni Cawan and Ni Sadri. They danced for them, accompanied by the music of the gamelan orchestra, under the Banyan tree next to the temple gate. In this way they showed something very beautiful of Bali, as Maria wrote in an extensive letter about the visit.

After that visit, the construction of the studio was quickly undertaken and Hofker started to use it before it was completely ready. It is on August 13, 1938 when that news is written home to their parents. 'The studio has been put into use and now we must have all kinds of models. And because we live in such a nice rural area, they come easily, sometimes also taking a family member with them for fun.' From that time on the Hofker's were in the studio every day and they had the tea served there, making it feel like they actually lived in it. As Willem writes: 'Now we are sitting comfortably on our sloping meadow, planted with high coconut palms, drinking tea in a soft evening sun with our backs against the studio that is being whitened by a woman (painting, bricklaying and carrying stones is a women's work here). We hope to turn it into a sort of bungalow of our own. You need that in the long run. And then get to work with painting from model. To the left of the house is the temple, the temple of the Lègong girls, to the right the Djanger (dance) assembly point. Then all you only have to do is choose!'



*Willem and Maria in front of the studio, Denpasar Bali.
Coll. Hofker archive, S. Hofker.*



*A dance performance with I Rindi,
Ni Cawan and Ni Sadri.
Coll. Hofker archive, S. Hofker.*

Right away, Willem has one of the charming Djanger girls to pose for him. The rumor then spreads quickly that there is a painter living nearby who is in search for models. 'Of course they like to earn money for it, but they also pose excellently and do their best to do it right. Early in the morning one day, a man with a girl came over and offered to sell some sarong, a mask or a kris. It wasn't anything special he had with him, but he himself looked so personable with his graceful head scarf and little black goatee that Wim took him to the studio. He posed exemplary for three hours and was very grateful when Wim gave him a guilder afterwards. He bowed to both of us, all in the beautiful old-fashioned way' (letter no. 34 of 4 September 1938).

Ni Sadri

Ni Sadri is one of the two most famous and charming girls of the Lègong dance that the island of Bali spawned in the late 1930s. Ni Sadri and her 'twin' dance partner Ni Cawan were the stars of the dance group from Klandis Kedaton in Denpasar, and figureheads of pre-war Bali due to their enchanting beauty and gifted dancing. They were admired and coveted by the expat artists and many tourists from all over the world. Many photos of them both, all in black and white, adorn the pages of travel brochures, postcards, family photo albums and books about the so-called island of the gods, carefully preserved as a souvenir, a memento of a magical dance that cannot be conveyed if you have not seen it by yourself.

Especially the postcards were in great demand and sent all over the world, often with the message that these girls were even more beautiful in real! Their fame rose and reached a climax in 1938 with the construction of a large bale pendopo (stage) in front of the prestigious Bali Hotel in Denpasar, where they performed every Friday evening. Willem and Maria Hofker attended these events regularly, but eventually preferred to see the dance in its authentic surroundings, under the huge Banyan tree in front of the temple.



*Ni Sadri in the Lègong-costume.
This postcard was sent by Maria to her sister Freya
on the 8th of November 1938.
Coll. Hofker archive, S. Hofker.*

By the intervention of the general manager of the Bali Hotel, Mr. J.J. Edelman, Hofker managed the most desired Lègong dancer Ni Sadri to pose for him. She was enchantedly beautiful and came to the studio fully dressed in the costume of the dance. The headdress was allowed to leave the temple for this occasion on condition that an extra 15 cent offering was made to the gods.

It is September 18 of 1938 when Maria writes to her youngest sister that Ni Sadri will pose. She describes her appearance of something beyond every dream:

'This is Sadri, one of the two Lègong dancers. She's all in gold. Gold leaf on her silk sleeves and sarong and rigged with gilded carabao leather, similar from the wayang dolls, for the headdress and collar. She is now a few years older than on this card, and sometimes reminds me of you at that age. Wim has drawn her a few times but is currently painting the dancer in the rich golden dance costume and golden headdress, decorated with fragrant white flowers. There are iron wires and spiral wires on the hood for this, so that the flowers vibrate with every movement. Oh that is so beautiful. It's the young girl we sent you the postcard about, Sadri.'

The painting

Looking at this masterfully painted portrait, with this angelic appearance, we are confronted with the exotic beauty that Bali represents.

The title reveals that she is the fascinating Ni Sadri, in the costume of the heavenly nymph from the Lègong dance. She is a real personality, radiant with a refined physical and inner beauty. Her entire appearance shows a great inner peace and harmony. The lifelike nuances of her facial expression and posture are painted so realistically that the viewer, with a little imagination, can hear the Gamelan music in the background and then hear it swell spontaneously. And when the floating tunes come out of the tubes of the *gender* instrument, she will rise and start her dance.

It is obvious that Hofker paid great attention to every detail to capture such a true picture. The heavily ornamented and decorated costume parts from gold-gilded dried leather are applied in light, accurate touches, sometimes also softly feathered and smeared to achieve maximum effect of atmosphere and depth. The costume is worn over the *sabuk*. This *sabuk* is an eight meter long silk sash wound from the chest to the hips as tightly as the dancer can endure. The bright colors of orange, green and blue, repeated by Hofker in horizontal and spiral layers, are accentuated with deep ochreous to emphasize the gold pattern of the *prada*, a technique of creating a pattern by applying gold leaf to fabric. Her long and slender arms are tucked into a Baju (dress sleeve) of green silk with *prada*, fastened to a light undershirt on her shoulder. They are painted in the most beautiful shades of green which Hofker's palette has produced in Bali. The cuff of bright pink and blue that brings out the skin tone of her hand so beautifully is highlighted by Hofker with an impasto of bright white. As Ni Sadri rests her hand on her leg (shaded by the hanging chest piece, the *lamak*), on the blue silk and *kain prada* sarong, she shows just enough of her waist to see the *ampok ampok* (belt) with the hanging leather ornaments on either side of her hips and her back. The one on the back is just visible, here with a small piece of the flaming red inner lining, below her elbow. Of course, the most astounding piece of this elaborated Lègong costume, beside the shoulder and collar piece, is the golden headdress (*gelungan*), sumptuously decorated with the double crown of fragrant, yellow and white *tjempaka* and frangipani flowers. The mirrored gold rosettes named *prakapat* on either side of her face, similar in shape to a Taraxacum flower, are adorned with a gemstone in the center. Attached to them are a few strands of gold beads ending in teardrop shaped plates of gold and silver. They dangle at the ends to give a stunning effect with every move she makes. All of these are brought together by the artist's hand, in all its beauty, through a multitude of streaks like sunbeams and a few rows of playful dots in a varied palette of yellow paint. Behind the strings of beads, Sadri wears the traditional golden *subeng* (earplugs), which gleam in the tropical light that flooded into Hofker's studio. With that same light, he brought Ni Sadri's eyes to life. But it is the fine indigo blue additions that Willem Hofker applied to her dark pupils that revealed her true soul.

On November 27 of 1938 Maria reveals that this exquisite painting is brought to completion. 'Wim is surprisingly well on his way with his painting. This week he finished the detailed painting of the Lègong dancer. The girl from your picture postcard.'

Willem Hofker left a historic and monumental portrait that was painted with the greatest accuracy and dedication. A painting that was painted 83 years ago and until today didn't lose any of its brilliance and expressiveness. It still succeeds to touch the viewer deeply. Hofker brought it from Bali to Amsterdam in 1946, where it was admired, cherished and carefully preserved as a reminder of a time when he lived in a paradise filled with happiness where he heard the music of the gamelan orchestra daily and the Lègong dance was performed by the intriguing, famous Ni Sadri.



History and details

Willem Gerard Hofker (1902-1981)

‘Ni Sadri, Lègong Klandis’, Bali 1938

Oil on canvas. 92 x 66.5 cm.

Signed and dated upper right W.G. Hofker, 1938.

Titled upper left Sadri, Lègong Klandes, Bali.

Signed and titled on the reverse of the original canvas (can only be seen by backlight) with ‘Lègong dancer, Bali, W.G. Hofker, fec.’

Exhibited:

At Hoogovens, restaurant Walserij-Oost, Velsen-Noord, May 1961.

Provenance:

Acquired directly from the artist at the Hoogovens exhibit, May 1961.

Literature:

Carpenter, B.; Willem Hofker; Painter of Bali, Pictures Publishers, 1993, black and white photo on page 39, as ‘Ni Sadri, Lègong Kesiman’, 1938 oil on canvas, dimensions unknown.

Mentioned on page 209 as no. 876: Ni Sadri, Lègong girl, Bali. 1938, drawing.*

* Hofker lists this painting in 1961 in his original ‘Delivered work’ as no. 876 LÈGONG-meisje (girl) Bali (NI SADRI), 1938, without any indication of sizes or material use, but mentions the name of the buyer. After intensive research into this family name and other clues, which took about a year and a half, this painting was located and identified in 2011 by Seline Hofker and correctly documented.

Hofker S., and Orsini G.: Willem Gerard Hofker (1902-1981), Uitgeverij de Kunst, 2013, full page illustration, including the frame on p. 159 and on p. 232 (plate 367). And on page 15 in a black and white photo dated 1953, with Willem Gerard Hofker in his studio in Amsterdam (see inside cover).



The Hofker exhibit at Hoogovens

On Saturday, May 13, 1961, the Haarlem newspaper writes: 'W. Hofker exhibits at Hoogovens' (Koninklijke Nederlandse Hoogovens en Staalfabrieken, currently known as Tata Steel). A strange place for art, one could think, but it was no coincidence that Hofker exhibited there.

In the life-changing and successful year 1930, Willem and Maria Hofker obtained a duo assignment from a member of the Kessler family. Geldolph Adriaan Kessler, Dutch director of De Nederlandsche Bank (Central Bank of the Netherlands) and Extraordinary Professor of Monetary Economics at the University of Amsterdam, son of the president-director of Koninklijke Hoogovens Dolph Kessler (born in Batavia), celebrated with his wife Nicolette their 12.5 year wedding anniversary in 1930. For the occasion, Maria (educated at the Applied Arts School in Amsterdam) made and decorated a memento box of which Willem embellished the interior. Under the leadership of Dolph Kessler, the generally sober office spaces and canteens of Hoogovens were provided with art, which later formed the basis for the Hoogovens Art Collection. From 1952 onwards artists were also invited to exhibit and it was Willem Hofker who came to adorn the walls with his Balinese art in 1961.

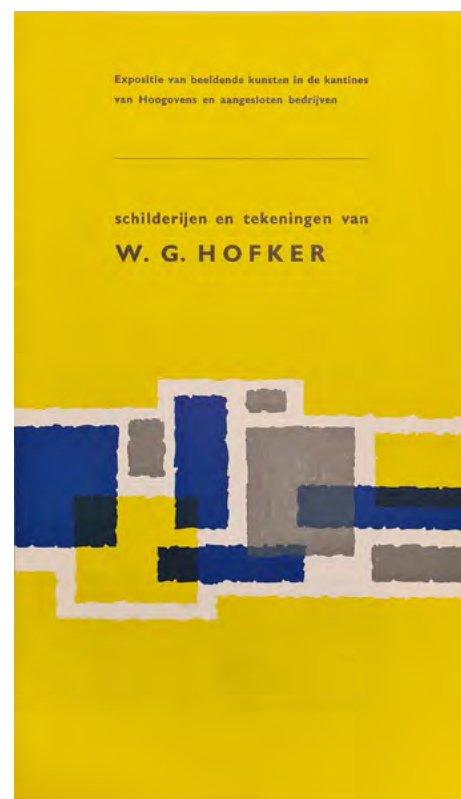


Exhibit announcement of Hoogovens.
Coll. M. Hofker archive, RKD.



Press release Haarlems Dagblad,
13 may 1961 Exhibit.
Coll. Hofker archive, S. Hofker.

The painting with the beautiful Ni Sadri as Lègong-dancer in 1938 was noticed by one of the executive secretaries. She told her father she was so impressed by the painting that he absolutely had to visit the exhibition and see it. Without any Indonesian background or predilection for Bali beforehand, the father bought this masterfully painted portrait, which at the time was one of the last remaining Balinese paintings in Hofker's studio, and found a Dutch home for it where it has been in full admiration ever since.

Ni Sadri in the 21st century

In every photo with Sadri we see her dreamy look. Her face appealed to the imagination and was captured by expat artists and tourists during those heydays in the 1930's. This sight fascinated many and is still highly valued in the 21st century. Some of the more rare photos of her, for example taken by the Swiss photographer Gotthard Schuh in 1938, became the epitome of an exhibition announcement dedicated to this photographer in Venice in 2013. The same photo was placed on the cover of the reissue of his 1941 book Eilanden der Goden, which accompanied the exhibition. More natural photos of Sadri as a model (made by the Hungarian photographer and sculptor Arthur Fleischmann) adorn the pages of the 2007 publication Bali in the 1930's, written by Paul de Bont and Dominique Fleischmann.



Sadri as a model, photo by Arthur Fleischmann,
Bali in the 1930's, page 64.



Exhibit announcement of 'L'ISOLA DEGLI DEI' -
'Island of the Gods', Bali 1938 by photographer Gotthard Schuh,
at the Swiss consulate in Venice 2013.



Sadri Lègong dancer, photo by Gotthard Schuh in 1938.
© Gotthard Schuh / Fotostiftung Schweiz.

The Hofker archive

In the early 1990's, Seline Hofker, grandniece of the painter W.G. Hofker, was invited for the first time by her great-aunt Maria Hofker-Rueter (1902-1999) to escort her to the viewing day of an auction. There she listened with great interest to the memories Maria told her when she saw a painting of her husband again. A photo of that painting, with this memory written on it, was kept in a folder. This folder, which grew over the years with more memories and photos, became the foundation for Seline's 'Hofker archive'. Until now she has tracked down, photographed and documented more than a thousand works of art by Hofker, from his notebook of delivered work and beyond, resulting in an image bank in chronological order. Together with the handwritten notes she collected from both Willem and Maria (in the form of letters, diaries and photos with notes, but also the memories their friends, acquaintances and those portrayed recounted about them), these form a very accurately documented artist's life. Seline aims to make the 'Hofker archive' as complete as possible so that it can be used, today and in the future, as a source from which the right information can be achieved for anyone interested in the life and art of Willem and Maria Hofker.



In search of Ni Sadri. Seline at Banjar Kedaton, Sumerta, Bali 2011.

The auction

This painting will be auctioned by
Zeeuws Veilinghuis - Zeeland Auctioneers.

Auction:

Tuesday 23rd of November 2021,
3 PM (9 PM Jakarta time).

Bidding starts at € 250.000.

Inquiries:

René de Visser
Tel. + 31 118 - 650 680
rene@zeeuwsveilinghuis.nl
www.zeeuwsveilinghuis.nl

Location:

Kleverskerkseweg 53C
4338 PB Middelburg
The Netherlands



*Ni Sadri, photo card, issued by SMN – 'Stoomvaart Maatschappij Nederland'.
Coll. P. de Bont.*

Acknowledgement

I am forever grateful to Pak Muning (c.1930-2021) and Dewa Paritadana for helping me find traces of Hofker's life on Bali so that I could follow his footsteps to see and learn.

Special thanks with regard to this text go to Jouke Schotel for his ever thoughtful advice and patient guidance. Hedi Hinzler, Paul de Bont, and Soemantri Widagdo for their help with the terminology of the Lègong costume. Dominique Fleischmann for granting me to show the photo 'Ni Sadri, the model'. Catharina Hanreich, on G. Schuh, Fotostiftung Schweiz.

And Zeeland Auctioneers, for their interest in Hofker and the opportunity given here to give stage to his art.



Ni Sadri. Coll. P. de Bont.

Dedicated to a highly respected man and friend,
much appreciated for his knowledge of Indonesian art:

Paul de Bont (1948 - 2021)



Photo back cover:

Seline Hofker with the painting.
Photo by Ralph Kämena.



ZEEUWS VEILINGHUIS
ZEELAND AUCTIONEERS

MIDDELBURG - AMSTERDAM
WWW.ZEEUWSVEILINGHUIS.NL