

A MYSTERIOUS MASTERPIECE

BY SELINE HOFKER

ZEEUWS VEILINGHUIS  
ZEELAND AUCTIONEERS

W.G. Hofker  
Bali  
Dec. 1940



## *A Mysterious Masterpiece*

By Seline Hofker

Willem Gerard Hofker (1902-1981) was born in the Netherlands in the city of The Hague. From an early age, his painting talent was noticed and influenced by some of his father's close friends, such as the well-known Dutch painters Isaac Israëls (1865-1934) and Willem Witsen (1860-1923). Israëls called Hofker *'unmistakably a gifted genius'*. And Witsen thought his use of colour surpassed that of Hendrik Johannes Haverman (1857-1928), a widely respected Dutch artist of the time. Willem started his education at the Art Academy in The Hague when he was fifteen and later continued it at the National Academy of Art in Amsterdam, which he left when he was twenty-two. He started working as an independent artist in Amsterdam in 1925. In 1928 he met Maria, the eldest daughter of his former teacher at the National Academy of Art, Georg Rueter (1875-1966). They married in 1930. Due to Hofker's wide range of talents he became a successful artist. He was an excellent painter, etcher and draftsman, depicting cityscapes, rural scenes, nudes and portraits. The couple was very happy together and they lived and worked in Amsterdam, and from mid-1938 till the end of 1943 in Bali.

Captivated by the people of Bali and their culture the artist selected his models by observing them in their natural environment. He would develop his talent and skills still further, also by the interaction with fellow artists living nearby, but would remain true to his own realistic and academic style.

Eleven months from the one and a half year long 'study trip' of Willem and Maria Hofker in the former Dutch East Indies had passed when Willem wrote about the atmosphere surrounding them on Bali. They intensely enjoyed the beauty of the country and the uninhibited character of its population. They met almost all other European artists who lived on the island or had come to visit it from Java or elsewhere. The many letters the couple wrote to Holland expressed a great respect for the work of these other artists.

*'Our cottage here is in full glory'*, the painter Willem Hofker added, full of energy and satisfaction, to a letter his wife Maria wrote to Eveline Jas on January 22, 1939 from Denpasar Bali. *'Everything goes well. Frida Holleman staying with us and is gleeful. The painter Rezelman (Piet Rezelman, 1887-1964) with Mrs. Rezelman arrived here yesterday in the Satrya hotel, and today he also painted the Legong girls, a true scene as if in the (Académie de la) Grand Chaumière-Ateliers in Paris. Maria meanwhile is busy leading the staff, while skillfully drawing amusing watercolours. This is how a house full of artists looks like, full of cheerful chatting.'*



The letters. © Hofker archive, S. Hofker.

One of the artists Hofker admired was Roland Strasser, who lived in the mountain village of Kintamani, located west of the volcano Gunung Batur, and another was Rudolf Bonnet from Ubud, which nowadays is celebrated as the cultural center of Bali, but in Hofker's time was known only as an artists' village.

The Hofkers had already become superficially acquainted with this latter artist in the Netherlands through the intervention of sculptor Frits van Hall (1899-1945), Willem's best friend at the National Academy in Amsterdam. But it was in Bali where they got to know each other better and struck up a friendship which would last for forty years.

In relation to these friendships, Hofker once remarked: *'Great admiration for Bonnet, who really appears to do much good for the population in Oeboed. We visited the excellent Austrian painter Strasser in Kintamani. Splendid work, a coarse Isaac Israëls. His work is unknown in Holland but sells very well in America. (...) Strasser makes compositions of several figures, should I ever get that far here?'*

Willem Hofker wrote his letters in a stenographic manner. While previous letters, dating from his first study trips in France (1918-1919 and 1920), contained very detailed and extensive descriptions, these first letters from Indonesia were a concatenation of volatile written words, probably to convey as much as possible without losing a lot of time.

But when the couple enjoyed a holiday in the mountains of Kintamani, Willem wrote a letter that, so many years later, provides insight into the way this great artist observed and how that had been expressed in his paintings.

November 1, 1938. *'Finally there is time to write a bit: we took a week's holiday in Kintamani, which is about 1450 meters high (...). Where the slopes are steep and there, located at the bottom, the all enclosing Sanctuary of Bali: the Temple of Besaki. Magnificently tightly engineered, as if (André) Le Notre, the Garden Architect of Versailles and St. Cloud, had been schooled here. Huge gates, squares, stairs (terrace temples) and decorated banisters, as if they originated from Assyria. Impressive as such a construction shows, it is small and fine compared to the towering triangle in silhouette at the background: the Holy Mountain, Goenoeng Agoeng.'*



Kintamani. © Photo Hofker archive, S. Hofker.

*How wonderful all this is being balanced; the Balinese are stage builders: they know how to stage scenery. And their sculptures are real art constructions! In this environment we enjoy the coolness. It takes such effort to always fight against the heat. And it is also pleasant to see gray fog again and to recognize something of the fine colours of Holland.*

*This noble gray as a background touch, on which the colours come true, one misses in the plain (Denpasar). There all is colourful and there is no united "colourlessness" like in our own beautiful country (Holland). That is an advantage of this resort (Kintamani), and it can be found in the work of the painter Strasser!'*



Puri Besaki. © Photo Hofker archive, S. Hofker.



'Tjawan, legong Dancer gives weaving lesson to little sister Ketoet',  
March 1939, 73x101.5 cm.  
Photo Hofker archive, S. Hofker. © Pictoright Amsterdam.

With the painter Frida Holleman (1908-1999), who had already met the Hofkers in their first month during a dinner in Buitenzorg on Java, a close friendship had immediately blossomed, and once the Hofkers had settled in Bali, it was agreed that Frida would come to stay.

Many times, for many months, she was a beloved house guest of the Hofkers. She had a similar attitude and shared Willem's dry humor, which caused a lot of fun in the studio when they worked together and shared a model.

*'Frida's stay has been pleasant in all respects. We hope that she will come back in May, June. We are having a cheerful and cozy time together (...). And if they (Willem and Frida) are sharing a few girls in the studio, I always hear laughter and jokes.'*  
(Maria on the 11th of February 1939)

In the meantime, Willem Hofker continued working unwearingly. He started to add typical Balinese attributes to his paintings, such as musical instruments and offerings. Large braided baskets, which Maria found for him on the market, were placed on the heads of his models or carried under the arm, so that his paintings were not just portraits, but also told a story. In this way he placed his charming model Ni Tjawan behind a loom, with a detail of a spinning wheel in front of it and a younger girl watching. He also added long descriptive titles to emphasize the scene, such as here: 'Tjawan, Legong Dancer, gives weaving lesson to little sister Ketoet.'



*'See how witty Willem looks out of his studio when Frida poses with her painter's palette and with my hat, as the self-portrait of Madame Vigée-Le Brun (Marie Louise Elisabeth Vigée-Le Brun 1755-1842)',*  
© Photo Frida Holleman Foundation.

The Hofkers did not bother at all about their return to The Netherlands. But in July 1939, when the planned departure date drew closer, the messages from Europe caused great anxiety. There was a threat of war. Yet life in Bali also went on.

On July 29, 1939, Maria wrote from Denpasar how their life on Bali looked like: *'Willem, together with Boeg (our houseboy Gliboeg) has just opened the box with the paintings made in the Netherlands. They look so strange to us now. They are such completely different worlds.'*

*'We had many visits this week. Frida Holleman's brother dined with us one evening, very cozy. He is now back to Buitenzorg and said that we can expect Frida in the coming week. We look forward to that.'*

*'Then Bonnet came to us one afternoon and stayed for dinner. It was beautiful with a clear moon, and we sat at the front of our house gazing about. One morning we cycled to Sanoer, where the painter Pol (Willem Jilt Pol, 1905-1988) and his wife lived, in a dream of a house by the sea. They are young people who have traveled a lot. She, Adine Mees (Adine Pol-Mees, 1908-1948), is drawing excellently, very skilled. If you then think about the Italian Emilio Ambron (1905-1996), who lives in a completely empty, uncomfortable cottage, but feels very pleasant there, and Anatole Shister (1884-1961), a somewhat older Russian painter with his elderly English wife, you see that our acquaintances here are of all various types. With them we have a better understanding than the majority of the inhabitants of Denpasar, who have no feeling for art.'*

Willem himself added to the letter how the visit to Rudolf Bonnet had been: *'He will hold an exhibition in September, in Batavia, of his large paintings. And his colleagues; Roland Strasser (Austrian), Willem Jilt Pol and Adine Pol-Mees, Theo Meijer (Swiss), Walter Spies (German) and Jane Foster (American). Everyone will provide around six works. I as well, what was very kind of him. And then I am still worrying whether it is sensible to go back to The Netherlands. (...) I really don't know any satisfactory solution, and just postpone any decision. We experience a sad time. Fortunately my work and one hundred other things still give a continuous feeling of satisfaction about the many good things we still experience! (...) The stay in Bali was, for me at least, as a memory – wonderful – despite small worries: luckily they don't leave any memory behind! To forget is also a blessing!'*

It is August 1939 now and the case with five paintings and six drawings is ready to be sent to Batavia for the exhibition. A decision to go back to Holland still has not been made. In case they should not return to Holland by September, the submitted paintings will also come along with the exhibition in Bandoeng and Soerabaja.

*'It's a difficult case, our future!'*, Willem wrote on August 20th 1939 to Eveline Jas, *'and in my mind I am also half in Holland, and it will be a disappointment in a certain way to have to postpone it, but as you say: half a year is passing fast! It is not necessary to go back now. Nothing will happen in Europe, I believe. I am relaxed here and have plenty of work to do. I can still wait and see which way the wind blows. Why not? As you work, you'll get through everything, and we have a wonderfully healthy home and plenty of fresh air from the South Pole, directly across the sea. But to see Holland again, and the snug atmosphere, we will miss that! To be caught between two opinions is a difficult job!'* Maria also wrote that they lived in a terrible indecisive time. The more they thought about it, the more unclear it all became. *'If you push it aside, you're not done with it yet, you still have to do something with it. In the meantime, we just keep going. Willem does his work with great pleasure, he never thinks of stopping.'*

Willem was in the progress of working on three paintings at that time. Working hard was all he did, besides visiting a friend or taking a long walk. A shopping list with the necessary painting materials could still be dispatched to the Netherlands and it arrived at Hofker's father-in-law, the painter Georg Rueter (1875-1966). He noted down in the cashbook that a mail package with a supply of oil paint, painting canvas, short and long brushes, pastels and paper from Van Beek's art supply shop in Amsterdam was sent to The Dutch East Indies. Consequently, the intention was to postpone the return journey by half a year. The exhibition of the 'European artists' in Batavia started and Frida Holleman came to stay again. Bonnet visited the Hofkers regularly and the painter Emilio Ambron participated in their joint meals every now and then.



Frida with Maria and the Singha on the background.  
© Photo Hofker archive, S. Hofker.

It is in the same letter of 20 August 1939 that Maria wrote: *'Ambron, the Italian painter, came to stay for dinner. He is a nice, modest man who has seen a lot. His family lives in Florence and during wintertime in Alexandria. Frida had brought a few magazines from Italy in which he recognized all kinds of nature spots (...). She also had a few booklets with pictures of Cezanne and Lautrec, and a real painters discussion developed. The previous day Willem had seen a beautiful painting of a large composition by Ambron, which he greatly admired and which was extensively discussed.'*

We can notice that Willem Hofker, who had been inspired by the work of his art brothers, was increasingly thinking of greater works, perhaps considering a composition of multiple people. But it would take a while before he dared to try his hand at it.



The exhibition catalogue of the 'European artists' in Batavia.  
© Photo Hofker archive, S. Hofker.

'On the island of Bali, an art center has gradually emerged', the daily newspaper Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad wrote in a headline on September 12, 1939, about the exhibition at the Art Circle of the 'European painters in Bali'. The submitted work by Hofker, which was mentioned last, received a good review. *'Willem Hofker shows us paintings and drawings, of which we can best appreciate the latter. With an unspeakable patience this painter must have looked at things around him and his skilled hand tells us what we all see. This very interesting exhibition certainly deserves much attention.'* The exhibition, which was held in Jakarta until 2 October and then went on in Bandung and Surabaya, was a success for Hofker.

Maria made an interim balance when the Bandung exhibition was past. On November 23, 1939, she wrote in her 100th letter from The Dutch East Indies, with great satisfaction, to Eveline Jas in Amsterdam: *'This morning came the gratifying message that Willem has again sold a painting in Bandoeng: a woman's head and two drawings, both of a temple entrance with large monster sculptures. Very pleasant! It is a wonderful feeling that there is still interest in it, although he had purposely kept the prices very low. On the whole, four works were sold, I am thinking with all the expenses of frames, percentages and transport, a profit of 250,- guilders. This makes him really satisfied.'*

Once the decision was made to postpone their return trip to The Netherlands, this gave Hofker more opportunity to work. In his painted oeuvre of that time a development can clearly be seen. Hofker continuously experiments with various accessories and setups. He has more eye for detail and goes to the market himself to buy attributes, such as a white 'payung' (umbrella). He uses larger canvasses and becomes more dynamic to display life in Bali. In the painting in which Hofker's models Ni Dablig and Ni Gemblong are painted with a child, he uses the entire assortment of attributes. Maria wrote about this on October 12, 1939: 'Willem paints and struggles with the composition of Dablig and Gemblong, now that a little boy at the gamalan is added the ensemble has become beautiful.'

At that time Hofker struggled, not only with his composition, but also with the feeling of the decision they had taken not to go back to the Netherlands. He wrote: 'Maybe it was wrong not to leave Bali. It is all like a game of roulette with an uncertain result.' Despite these contradictory feelings, Hofker also used the opportunity to alter his place of working. Now that he had successfully completed a large composition painting, the thought of working with new models and in a different environment became tempting.

At the recommendation of Rudolf Bonnet the Hofkers moved to a house in Ubud. They both felt comfortable to enter into a new environment and challenge. In November 1939 Maria wrote the following about this event: 'Next week we are going to Oeboed, for a few weeks, I think. It will be a bit dependent on how it will turn out. Here, the house in Denpasar remains as it was. It will only be closed and Willem's work will be kept in deposit by the doctor. Our houseboy Gliboeg remains in the yard as a guard and will sometimes ventilate the premises.'



The house Abangan.  
© Photo Hofker archive, S. Hofker.

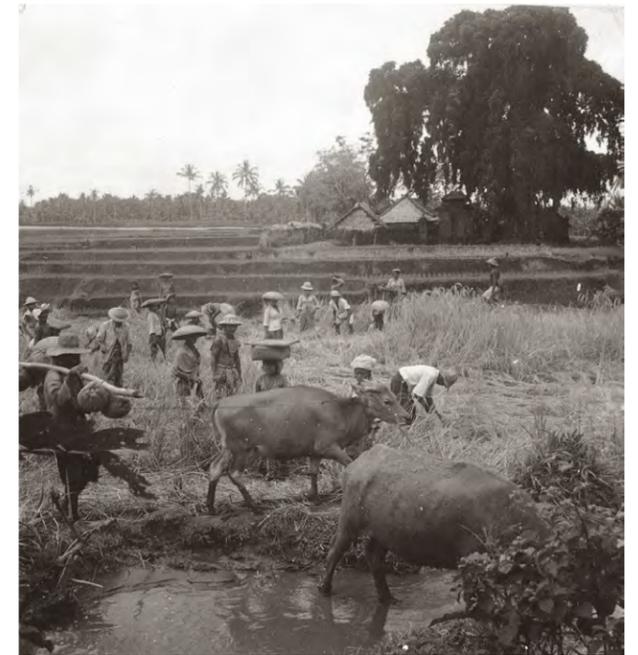


'Melis, composition of Dablig and Gemblong with child.'  
Oktober 1939. 76,5 x 52.5 cm.  
Photo Hofker archive, S. Hofker.  
© Pictoright Amsterdam.

Yesterday Tjokorda Agoeng of Oeboed came (Tjokorda Gde Agoeng Soekawati), a prince from an old royal family, a nice civilized young man, who even speaks Dutch, and he is a friend of Bonnet. He owns the house where we will settle. He now arrived to inform us about some specifics. He offered to take care of servants and then invited us to come over for dinner the first day. The whole affair will be a new experiment, and a nice variation. Also the change to another environment. We are in mountainous area there, and that makes for a completely different landscape.'

Soon Willem and Maria felt at home in that wide open landscape of Ubud. Their temporary accommodation stood on the edge of sawahs overlooking the Pura Dalam temple. There too the Hofkers received a lot of visitors and various European artists living in the area, such as the Swiss artist Willy Quidot (1898-1978), the sculptor Louis van der Noordaa (1894-1945) and his wife, the German painter Walter Spies (1895-1942), who lived on the left side of the ravine, in Campuhan, and Rudolf Bonnet, who lived closer to the village center. Along with this cottage, the Hofkers had a small guesthouse in the yard where many guests were accommodated. Soon the niece of musicologist Jaap Kunst, artist Anne Maria Blaupot ten Cate (1902-2002), came by and stayed. Willem Hofker knew her from his time at the National Academy. According to Maria, she had 'fantastic ideas about the cheap way of life in Bali'. After some time in Ubud the idea arose to spend the remaining time there, and not go back to the warmer Denpasar.

'Oh, that splendid view, those sawah's, the harvesting of the rice. We always look again, it's always new. But the most beautiful view is completely right, straight to the West, over a deep canyon, far beyond the dessa (village), under a huge banyan tree, the Pura Dalam, the temple for the dead, mighty in its tranquility. The temple gate arc is built from deep red bricks and decorated with the natural stone in light purple gray. Rich and grand at sunrise and sunset. We always see this, and just keep on looking. How fortunate we are with such a view, and with the palm trees on the front yard as well.'  
(One of Maria's handwritten memories about their home 'Ruhmah Abang'.)



View on the sawah and the Pura Dalam temple.  
© Photo Hofker archive, S. Hofker.

It was already December 1939 when Maria informed the family in the Netherlands: 'We really think about staying here some more months. Right now it is the hot season and Willem can choose to work here with different models. The region is much less densely populated and poorer, which results in much less sculpture decorated temples here or less richly decorated entrance gates and male and female dancers in golden dress. Both regions are important and interesting to us. So far we have enjoyed the Europeans who live here very much. Rudolf Bonnet is very distinguished, a finely civilized artist. Marianne van Wessem, who has a bungalow at the premises of Walter Spies and who has done a lot for Balinese modern art, is also a very welcome friend. Then there are Mr. and Mrs. van der Noordaa, a sculptor and his Danish wife. Somewhat different people, very nice and cordial, but unfortunately they do not harmonize very well with Bonnet and Marianne. Moreover, Van der Noordaa is very deaf, which is both tiring and difficult. But here in the Indies, with all kinds of people, you learn to get along with all of them and look for each other's good sides. Many are lonely and miss a lot. One can sometimes really need each other. Past our large yard is a rippling brook. At the end of the garden on the edge of the sawahs is a big so-called Baleh, a big thatched roof on stilts. That's our living room. It is wonderfully airy and protects against the sun, with a beautiful view all around.'



The Baleh of Abangan.  
© Photo Hofker archive, S. Hofker.

*'All day long people come and go to the sawah's. A stretch of the pathway runs through the stream. Much in the Indies is like that, even the brooklet is being used as a path. That stream is just very shallow, only knee-deep, and right next to us it splashes on a few stones like a little waterfall. The landscape is beautiful. An elevated plateau with large valleys and gorges across, from where sawah terraces descend to the left and to the right. And then prominently the mountain range behind it.'*

Life in Ubud was primitive for Willem and Maria. As an accomplished hostess, Maria cared for the ever-changing guests, who stayed in the guest house in the yard. She went on long walking tours with Marianne van Wessem and others as Willem tirelessly continued to work. The new environment provided him with many new models, who were also searched for in villages further away with the assistance of Tjokorda Gde Agoeng Soekawati.



Tenganan, Redjang. © Photo Hofker archive, S. Hofker.

*'Enjoyment on Bali as a painter is enormous! So many subjects are available and how much willingness there is to pose! It's self-evident. After all one can end a day filled with hard work with a joyful ceremony in a temple. The island is full of it!'* (Willem Hofker to Jaap Kunst, May 1939)



Temple Procession. © Photo Hofker archive, S. Hofker.

Maria on 7 October 1939: *'In the afternoon, Willem sees a wonderful procession with about 200 women, some of whom are as incredibly rich and distinguishably dressed as you rarely see. "Then you're again happy to stay in Bali", Willem said when he came home.'*

When at the beginning of 1940 Hofker received word from the Netherlands that during the first weeks of the exhibition 'Onze kunst van heden' ('Our art of today') in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam all four of his etches had been purchased, he was pleasantly surprised.

At the same time he heard about the sales exhibition of the 'European painters from Bali' on Java, where he turned out to be the bestseller. He was the only artist who had sold seven of the eleven submitted pieces. This gave him the needed encouragement and self-confidence to continue and exhibit more work. He now was familiar with the tropical light and added more striking colours to his paintings. He paid more attention to the fabric and in particular the woven patterns in it. Also the accessories and props were more and more present. He created a specific atmosphere by decorating the background. Consequently, the paintings left his studio in Bali for exhibitions in good numbers.

These exhibitions were held at the various art circles ('Kunstkring') in Javanese cities such as Batavia (Jakarta), Buitenzorg (Bogor), Bandung, Blitar, Semarang and Surabaya. The newspaper critics didn't always praise the pieces submitted by Hofker, but his Balinese work sold very well.



Temple Procession.  
© Photo Hofker archive, S. Hofker.

The openings were almost always attended by Maria, while Willem stayed in Ubud to continue working in peace. The quote *'A talent is formed in stillness'* by J.W. von Goethe, which Hofker often used, became a motto for his life.

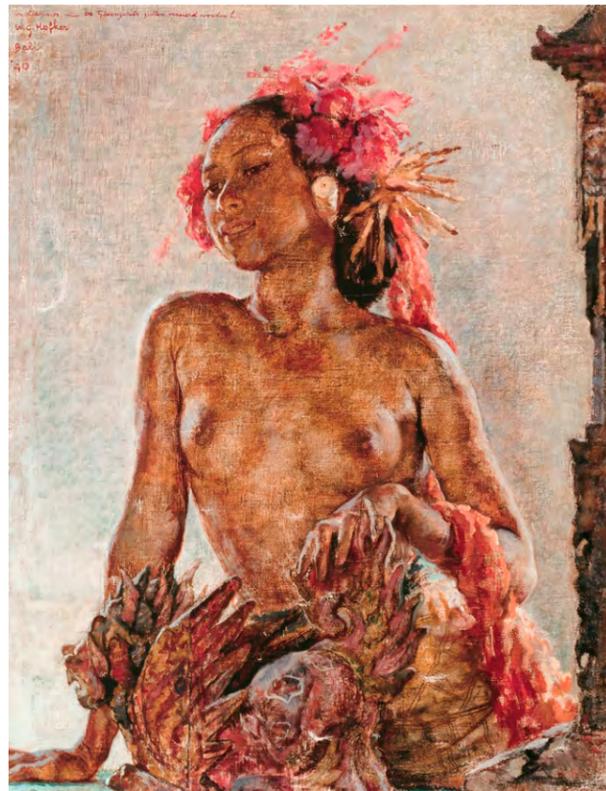
With the occupation of the Netherlands in May 1940 it became impossible to travel there. The Hofkers then decided to remain on Abangan in Ubud for an indefinite time. Their thoughts were often in the Netherlands and the family there. *'... silently and calmly the days pass here. How would it be in the Netherlands, how would it be in Europe?'*

Nevertheless, Maria regularly traveled to Java to check the work of her husband at the Art Circle. With the pieces she brought with her, she quickly filled in the empty spots caused by a sale. In this way she arranged a constant supply of new works and thus a varied collection for exhibition. At that time traveling was a challenge, but Maria enjoyed it to the fullest, as her notes show. She visited their friends and stayed with them.

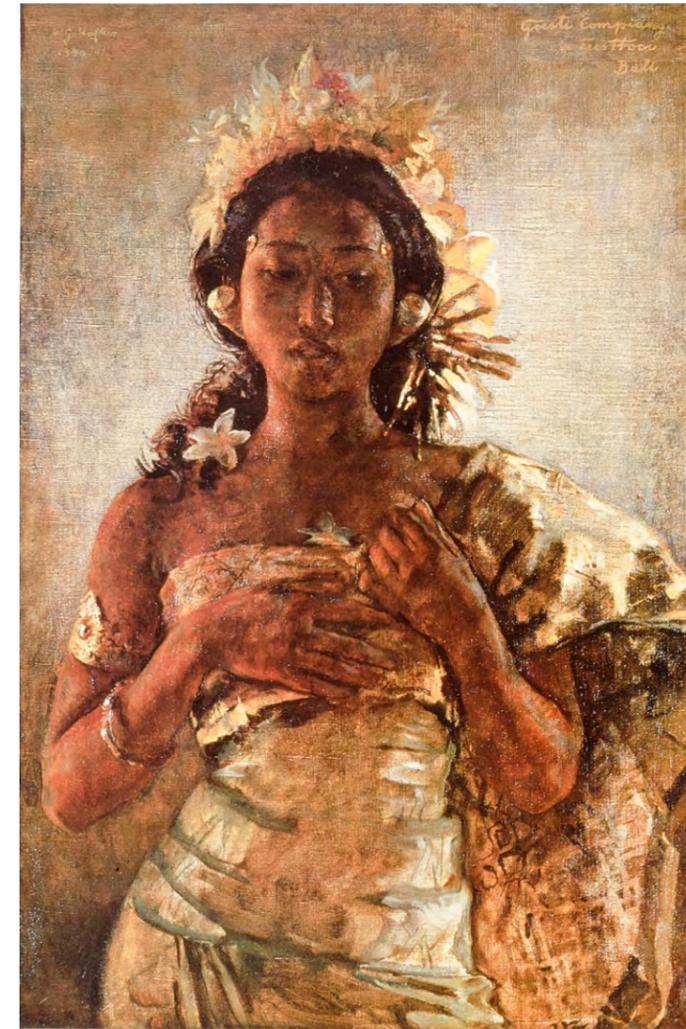
In June 1940, when Maria had just arrived in Bandung, she received a telegram with the message that Willem was in the hospital in Denpasar. He had broken his wrist. Maria hurried back to Bali immediately. This was a difficult period for Hofker himself. Maria wrote that he stayed in bed frequently, often with high fever. Being unable to work was unbearable for him. Once the plaster and the bandage were taken from the wrist, Hofker immediately commenced painting from models again.

On July 23, 1940, *'Willem has his model Rindit posing again for the first time since the broken wrist. The hand hardly hurts, but is still stiff of course.'* It was clear that Hofker was full of energy. He took a large canvas for this first piece after his broken wrist and painted the girl Ni Rindit with the god seat, 'the Winged Singha' (Lion). Her long fingers are entwined in the flaming tail of the lion, so that it becomes an extension of her. The red cloth, holding the hair of the model in a bun, falls like a rain of fire from the hibiscus crown along her back, then around her elegant arm, after which it is lushly draped along the hip. She was one of the first girls he painted in Ubud.

This painting, with the title 'Ni Rindit posing with Singha', shown here, is dated July 1940 and subtitled by Hofker with: 'In Sanoer the god seats are decorated.' And the painting Hofker actually produced afterwards became clear only recently, with the discovery of the painting offered here and now: 'Balinese sisters at the Temple Feast' of December 1940. It remained hidden for connoisseurs ever since its creation, eighty-two years ago. But now we know it and can admire it, it shows us a creation of full perfection. 'The magic of Hofker and his Bali'.



*'Ni Rindit posing with Singha, July 1940.'*  
Photo Hofker archive, S. Hofker.  
© Pictoright Amsterdam.



*'Gusti Compiang in ceremonial dress, 1940-1941.'*  
Photo Hofker archive, S. Hofker.  
© Pictoright Amsterdam.

Willem used his biggest canvas for this painting. After all, he was full of energy and on track again. Of the 71 paintings so far known within Willem Hofker's oeuvre which have been created on Bali from June 1938 to December 1943, this newly discovered canvas belongs to the largest he created, together with the 'Weaving lesson of Ni Tjawan' of 1939 and the imposing painting with 'Goesti Kompiang in ceremonial dress 1940-1941' from the Sukarno collection.

According to the dates, Hofker painted 'Balinese sisters at the Temple Feast' just before 'Goesti Kompiang in ceremonial dress'. It is also possible that he worked at both paintings at the same time, because it was just typical for him to work on several paintings simultaneously.

In the course of the years, a number of models from Ubud have been immortalized by Hofker several times in his work, such as Ni Gusti Compiang Mawar and Ni Nyoman Rindit. Less known are the models that he has painted in the early start of the Ubud period, because until now just a few painted pieces had reached publicity. One of these rare pieces is the excellent painted piece known as 'Ni Noneh', Oeboed, Bali from May 1940. It was shown to Maria Hofker in Amsterdam in November 1988, as a miracle from a distant past. The owner, who had read the interview with Maria in the weekend supplement of the Telegraaf of 26 November 1988, in which she indicated that so much of their work had been lost during the war, informed her that at least this painting had survived.

An interview by journalist Thea Detiger in honour of the publication of Maria's book *Schatten van mijn tuin* (J.H. Gottmer/H.J.W. Becht, 1988) and an exposition in the Teylers museum in Haarlem.



'Ni Noneh brings a sacrifice on the holiday of Kadjeng Kliwon', Ubud, Bali, May 1940. Photo Hofker archive, S. Hofker.  
© Pictoright Amsterdam.

The painting with Ni Noneh, May 1940, was purchased by the first owner during a sales exhibition of Hofkers work in Surabaya. On April 16, 1941, the Soerabajasch Handelsblad article announced that the next day a sales exhibition would be held in the upstairs room of the Art Circle with works by the painter W.G. Hofker, exhibiting 25 paintings and 15 drawings.

The next day, their correspondent, who signed the article with BD, wrote a more extensive article, where we read: *'... that the paintings have long, explanatory titles that actually seem more like captions'*. This is something Hofker used to do in that early Ubud period. Furthermore, the article is full of fierce criticism, and unfortunately the correspondent refrained from describing individual pieces.

As far as we have been able to figure out, this exhibition would travel to Batavia and Surabaya in November 1941 and be terminated in the Society of Blitar.

In the Bataviaasche Nieuwsblad of June 6, 1941, where correspondent Z. described a number of pieces of Hofker, we read: 'Young Lady of high Kast in ceremonial dress, Goesti Compiang', as no 15. This is the large impressive painting that ended up in the collection of Soekarno after the war! That there is also an indication of a painted piece with the title 'Ni Noneh brings a sacrifice on the holiday of Kadjeng Kliwon', like No. 14, surprises us. 'Kadjeng Kliwon' is known as a ceremony where special sacrifices are made, the way Hofker had shown in the painting with Ni Noneh from May 1940! The 'long title', which, just like that of the 'Balinese sisters at the Temple Feast', will probably have been written on the back of the canvas, was never registered later on and thus remained unknown. It is clear that Hofker had brought his best work for this overview exhibition: a collection with forty art pieces, of which twenty-five in oil paint.



Original exhibit invite of 1941, back and front, cutout glued by Hofker and saved in a picture album. Hofker archive, S. Hofker.

## ‘Balinese sisters at the temple feast’

Taking all that history into consideration and looking at this spectacular painting offered here, titled ‘Balinese sisters at the temple feast’, we can only conclude that this painting can be seen as one of the best Hofker has produced on Bali.

It is a tribute to the Balinese women in their ceremonial costumes. We see that Willem Hofker has given all he had. He filled the background with different layers of that ‘noble gray’ as a base, which elevates the overwhelming colour explosion with which he painted his models. Here you can detect the fresh and humid tropical air that Hofker so admired in Kintamani. He then went on and manipulated the still wet paint with a dry hard brush, so that the sizzling air appears as it can be seen in Ubud during the wet season. How beautiful this all is assembled around the sisters. You also see the contours of the sculptured temple gate or place of sacrifice, where even the Singha is present in the lower right corner to balance the decor. But the models take center stage.

If we read the notes of the Hofkers from the time in which this beautiful painting was made, we find a remarkable line written by Maria in one of her diaries. Apparently, when Willem Hofker wanted a pink flower that grew in Campuhan for his young model, Maria went out to find one for him, as she noted on September 30, 1940. As such this is nothing remarkable, but usually it is the red hibiscus flower that she had been sent out for by Willem. In this entry it is a pink one, which may have been the flower that can be seen on the head of the youngest sister. At that moment Willem works on this masterpiece that shows the beauty of the Balinese women and their rich costume for temple ceremonies. And abundant flowers like these are customary. The crown of red hibiscus flowers in the hair of the elder sister, whom we recognize as Ni Noneh, is decorated with the ceremonial golden flower, the *Bunga Emas*, a hair decoration of curled gold foil that women wear at weddings and temple festivals. A rosette adorns her temple like an ornament. It is heart throbes a red gemstone caught by that shiny gold. Both girls carry the traditional ear jewelry *subang*, bracelets and ring.

The fabric draped over Ni Noneh’s shoulder has been applied by Hofker with light yellow in rich *impasto* against the dark ocher to enhance the light reflection on all that gold, very subtly revealing the weaving patterns in it. Hofker managed to enliven the sisters in a phenomenal way with the fascinating mix of colour in their skin. It shows everything from light and shadow, from warmth to coolness and from luster to matted. The painter has fully dedicated himself to this work of art; the sisters have been painted exuberantly. They are positioned closely together. The arm of Ni Noneh is put protectively around the little sister, showing a salvaged atmosphere, reinforced by her left hand resting on the forearm. But it’s that one finger of her other hand that just touches the little sister which makes it very revealing and disarming, as captured in the facial expression of the youngest girl. As a spectator you will be attracted by it immediately. She is fascinating. She appeals to your emotion and raises great curiosity. What does she see? What does she think? Only a few portraits in Hofker’s Balinese oeuvre show such a captivating look.

With this rare discovery, Willem Gerard Hofker has given us a painting of outstanding quality. It shows his unparalleled painting talent and the magic of his Bali in 1940 in a monumental way, that in our time, the 21st century, is still much admired and appreciated.

Seline Hofker, April 2022.

### Sources:

Photos, newspapers, letters and diaries. Voice recordings of Maria Hofker-Rueter and the many handwritten memories by Maria’s hand from 1996-1999. ©Hofker archive, S.Hofker.

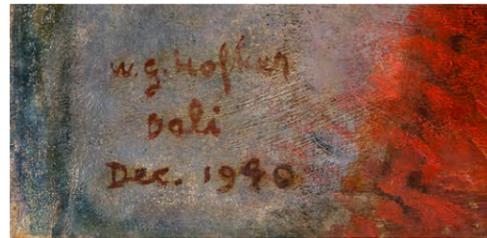


## Details

Willem Gerard Hofker (1902-1981)

'Balische zusjes op 't tempelfeest'  
(Balinese sisters at the temple feast)

Signed and dated 'Bali Dec. 1940'  
lower left, oil on canvas.  
H. 100 cm. W. 75 cm.



Signed and dated 'Bali Dec. 1940'

### Provenance:

A Dutch family with a Dutch East Indies background.



Verso: titled 'Balische zusjes op 't tempelfeest'  
and signed W.G. Hofker'.



## The Hofker archive

In the early 1990s, Seline Hofker, grandniece of the painter W.G. Hofker, was first invited 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, in addition to her work and family life, Seline 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.



*Seline Hofker with the Hofker model known as Ni Nyoman Danti, and her son Ida Rsi Bujanngga Waisnawa. Despite many attempts, Seline was unfortunately unable to find any trace of either Ni Noneh or her little sister.*

© Photo Hofker archive, S. Hofker.

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 traveled to Bali several times to single-handedly track down and find former models of Hofker, and did so with great success. With all this she 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.



*Willem Hofker in 1972, behind the easel in his Amsterdam studio where the wood carved Bali Singha, seen in the top right corner, still remained a part of his life.*

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