

Chapter 3

First Indonesian period 1928-1940

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Nias and Bali

For Bonnet the idea of going to the Dutch East Indies was certainly not just a decision made on the spur of the moment. He had been toying with the idea for years, prompted by others who were familiar with that country. As early as 1924 Charles Eyck mentioned Bali in a letter to Bonnet. Nieuwenkamp too, whom he had met in Rome in December 1922,²⁷ drew his attention to this island and invited him to go there. In 1926 De Boer wrote that Bonnet had told him that he had seen photos of Bali and wanted to go to the East.²⁸ It was not all that strange for him, since one of his sisters and one of his brothers were working in the Dutch East Indies as doctors. He must certainly have heard much about this country from them.

In 1928 he finally set out. With the s.s. Jan Pieterszoon Coen he departed for the East. His parents went at around the same time, but on another ship. On arrival in Batavia, they and his sister waited for him and they all travelled together to her home in Semarang.

But Bonnet wanted to go to Bali and arrived there at the end of January 1929. Immediately after his arrival he caught a cold, which probably was the reason why his first impression of the island was disappointing. He found its beauty not as overwhelming as that of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and North Africa. He also had difficulties in finding cheap accommodation. But two weeks later his mood changed. By then he had seen Balinese dancing and was enraptured by it. He had also found accommodation with the manager of an ice factory in Kedaton near Denpasar, with whom he had shared a cabin on the ship.²⁹

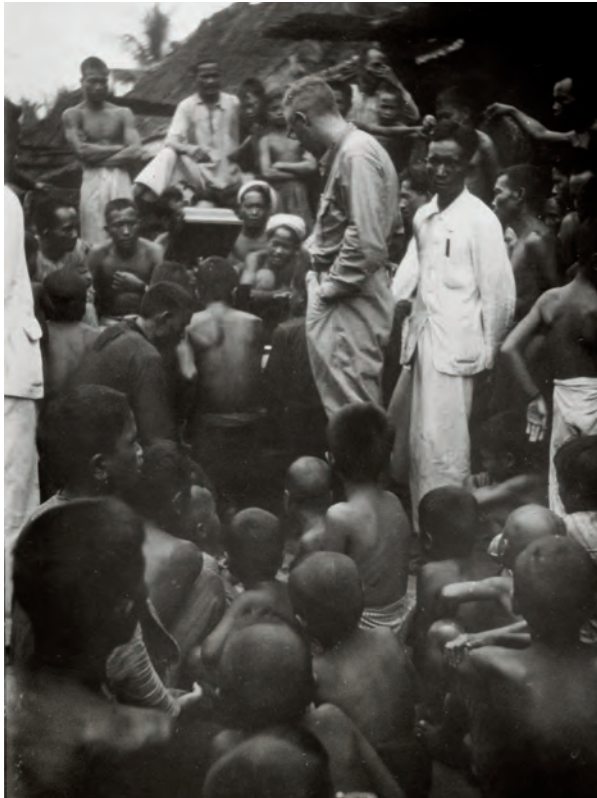
In April he was living in Tampaksiring, and two months later in Peliatan, where the *punggawa* (a district governor), had made a pavilion available to him. His parents and his



Bonnet with his parents, Bali, August 1929. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, TM-ALB-0647_01.



Priesterzoon (Son of a Priest), Tampaksiring, Bali, 1929, pastel on paper, 58 x 63 cm.



Jaap Kunst recording music, Nias, 1930. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, TM-60006845.



Tribal dance, Nias, 1930. Photo by Chr. Bonnet (sister of Rudolf) during a visit. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, TM-ALB-0644_33.

sister stayed here as well when they visited him. They took this opportunity to explore the island by car (ill. p. 46). His mother noticed that her son seemed to know a lot of people already. And here, too he was working hard.³⁰ One of the first people Bonnet met with after his arrival was Walter Spies, who had been living in Bali since the end of 1927. Bonnet's arrival came as no surprise to him, because Jaap Kunst had already written to him about the artist.³¹ They later met again in Ubud, when he and his parents and sister took tea with Spies.

Bonnet had not yet definitely settled in Bali, and visited the small island of Nias with Kunst. They left on 26 March 1930. Kunst, who was working for the Dutch government, went there to study the folk music. Bonnet started to draw straight away. But together they also took a lot of photos. Kunst and his wife were close friends of Bonnet throughout his life, and dedicated his book on the music of Nias, which appeared in 1939, to Bonnet.

After six weeks Kunst returned to Batavia, but Bonnet was so taken by the practically unspoiled life in the south of the island that he stayed there till the end of May. But even then he could not say goodbye, and returned in July 1930. He moved into an empty missionary building in Bowo Saua near Telok Dalem in the extreme south of the island. A native of Nias became his servant.

The island continued to be a source of inspiration for him. There he drew the people, men and women in their various capacities, but also their surroundings. A drawing of the interior of a large Nias house was reproduced in the third edition of *De Kunst in Nood* of 1933.³² This meant that in the Netherlands he was seen as an established artist.

However, he was extremely indignant about the missionaries, who had a negative impact on the original culture of Nias. He resolved to write a book about this, titled *Dying Beauty*



Man from Nias, 1930, charcoal on paper, 32 x 25 cm.

in Nias. I do not think he really accomplished this, as I have not been able to find a trace of it anywhere. He did, however, in the *Koloniaal Weekblad (Colonial Weekly)* of 6 August 1931, write an essay about this culture and the missionaries, which according to Kunst attracted much interest.³³ He described how the existing culture could be embedded in Christian culture. Bonnet sent an offprint of his essay to the governor general of the Dutch East Indies.

At the beginning of January 1931 Bonnet was back in Bali and settled definitively in Ubud. He went to live in the house which had just been vacated by Spies, because the latter had built a bigger house for himself in Campuan. It was a rather small building, surrounded by water, opposite the *puri* (palace). It was the property of the Prince of Ubud, Cokorda Gde Agung Sukawati. It was called The Water Palace. Now that he had found a permanent home he could involve himself completely with the village community, which Spies had also done.

Houbolt, a journalist of the newspaper *De Locomotief*, described his way of life. Houbolt had contracted malaria in Bali and spent a month recovering with Bonnet in his Water Palace. His account goes as follows. 'In the morning until half past seven Bonnet held a sort of clinic for the people (at that time there was no health care in Ubud). Thanks to, or probably in spite of Bonnet's therapy, the patients got better. He refused to accept their thanks, usually expressed in material gifts, but if someone offered to be his model, he enthusiastically accepted the offer, because models were difficult to find in Bali at the time. Female models in particular were scarce. After half past seven he got to work and did not want to be disturbed. After this, to the horror of the people, he went for a walk with his monkeys, which did not always behave themselves.'



The Water Palace, 1930s. Photo by Bonnet. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, TM-60048350.



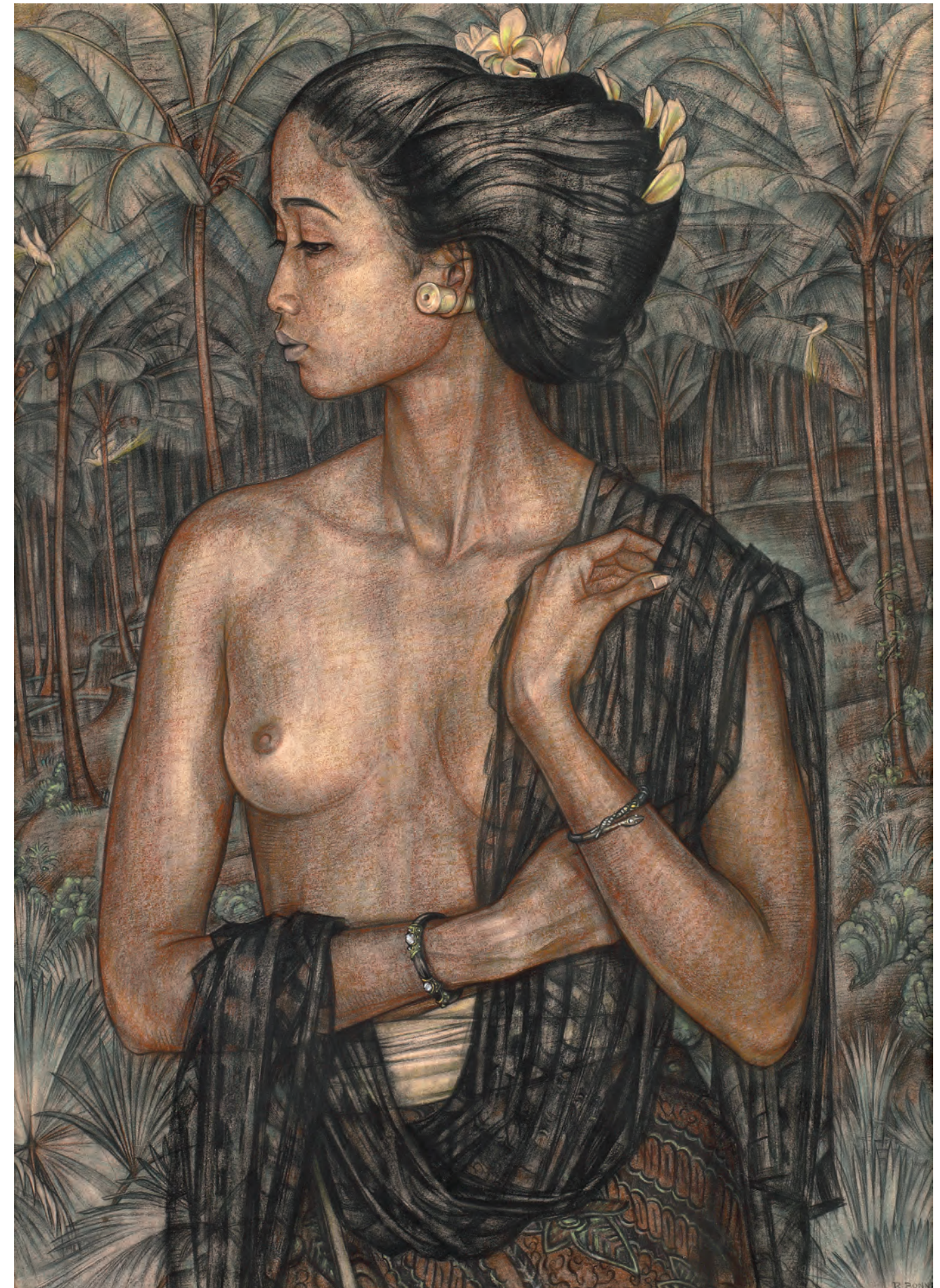
View from the Water Palace, 1930s. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, TM-60026303.

He became increasingly involved in the work of the village communities, who organised all kinds of affairs concerning the people. The first to call on him for help was Kunst. There were plans to build the local council buildings in concrete instead of in the Balinese style, as was the custom. Kunst asked Bonnet to talk to the resident (governor) about this. But Bonnet did not want to do this, as he thought that it would be more appropriate to do so for J.R. Goris, official at the Department of Antiquities, or Walter Spies, who was curator of the Bali Museum.³⁴ Bonnet himself, however, took the initiative in changing the clothing regulations of the *Hollandsche Indische Scholen* or HIS (Dutch East Indies Schools). What bothered him was that these boys were forbidden to come to school

in traditional dress (the *kain*, a piece of cloth wound round the waist and falling to above the knees, and naked torso). He asked Kunst, who by now was working at the Ministry of Education in Batavia, to try to do something about this, a request to which Kunst reacted positively.



De Balische Offerande (The Balinese Offerings), 1935, pastel on paper, 118,5 x 76 cm.



Balinese Lady, 1936, pastel on paper, 116,5 x 84 cm.



Bonnet with one of his monkeys, probably at the Water Palace, September 1935.



Cokorda Gde Agung Sukawati and his wife, 1930s. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, TM-60026307.

In 1933 Bonnet was a member of a jury which had to judge the drawings of pupils of the HIS in Klungkung. He had already been irritated by the education given to Balinese children, because this was completely along Dutch lines. But now he found the teaching really objectionable. The teaching of drawing was based on a booklet *Gauw en Goed* (*Quick and Good*), which was absolutely unsuited for Balinese children.

He sent Kunst an impassioned plea on behalf of the artistic talents of the Balinese, which they all possessed but which had nothing in common with western qualities. He wrote: 'Bali, which with its important and living art occupies such a special place in our East, can and should perhaps be specially treated in its education, too.' It must have been a source of satisfaction to him that Kunst did manage to introduce the desired changes.

A close comradeship grew between Spies and Bonnet. But not only with Spies. He also developed good relations with the Balinese, such as the Prince of Ubud, Cokorda Gde Agung Sukawati, and with Balinese artists like I Gusti Nyoman Lempad, all of whom would play an active role in the coming changes in Balinese art.

Before we go deeper into the role played by Bonnet and others in this process, it would be better to give an overview of what had already taken place in this field.