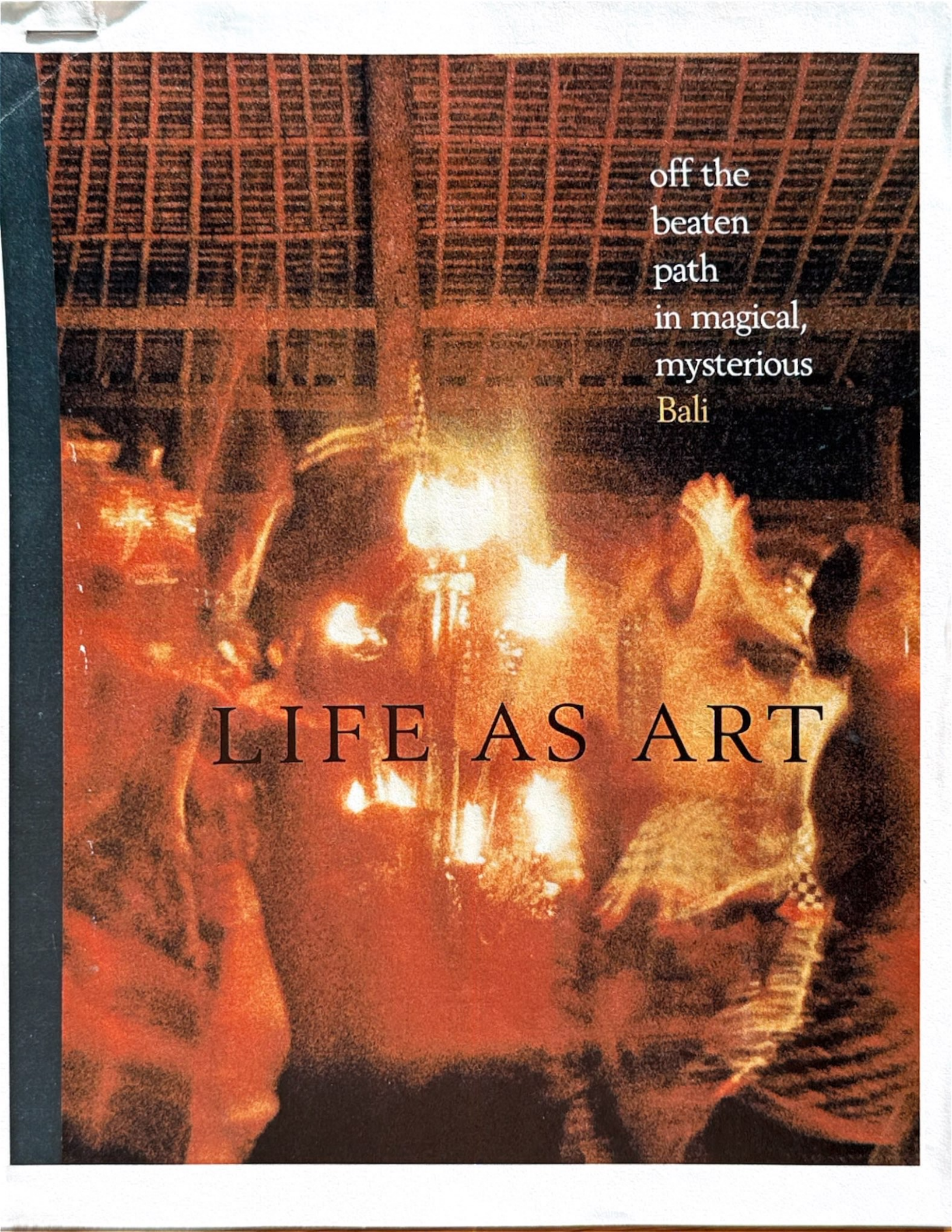




off the
beaten
path
in magical,
mysterious
Bali

LIFE AS ART



OPPOSITE PAGE: Traditional Balinese dance celebrations take on mystical qualities. LEFT: *Sri Poddah, The Rice Goddess* by master carver I Nyoman Subrata. BELOW: An integral part of everyday life, serene Hindu temples such as this blanket the Balinese landscape. Market colors.

BY CATHERINE RYAN

GENTLE LAUGHTER ECHOED across the valley early this morning – like the tiniest bells tinkling in the distance. Eyes still closed, I could visualize the Begawan villagers padding barefoot down the mountain to their ancient, sacred spring. There, they would offer their ritual daily flowers, incense, and tropical fruits to the Hindu gods.

A soft breeze blew through the open windows. I luxuriated in the silk-canopied bed a while longer before gazing out at the jungle treetops, mountain peaks, and flaming ginger, savoring my last morning here. A dramatic sunrise enveloped my tree-house bungalow, perched on stilts above the greenery. In the steep canyon far below, a series of waterfalls cascaded into the raging Ayung River, the sounds of pounding water filtering up as barely a whisper at this awesome height.

Ten days in paradise were coming to a close. Before falling back asleep, my mind drifted. I contemplated staying indefinitely.

Some of the world's finest resorts, surfing beaches, and coastline can be found in Bali. Yet I have been lured back again and





again by the island's lesser-known interior and its peaceful, artistic culture. In Bali, life centers around the arts, performed in the spirit of a gentle, joyful, Balinese version of Hinduism. The Balinese have nurtured a distinct culture of kindness and openness that embraces outsiders while maintaining a steadfast reverence for its own rich and ancient traditions. Despite Indonesia's various crises, Bali remains a steadfast oasis of sanity and calm.

Perhaps the Balinese remain at peace because they live life in a constant state of revelry. On any given day, visitors are swept up in massive parades, as entire villages flood out into the streets – dressed in sarongs of shimmering silk and gold, carrying generous pyramids of fruit, roast pig, and other offerings balanced on hundreds of dancing heads. Invariably, raucous gamelan orchestras follow the entourage in close step – a cacophony of sound that makes sense only here. The parades slowly make their way to elaborate temple ceremonies, funeral pyre parties, shadow-puppet performances, tooth-filing events, weddings, births, and child-naming dinners that are the central events of the community.

Visitors who show an interest in Balinese culture are greatly appreciated by the locals, and are typically treated as guests of honor. During this latest visit, I participated in a constant stream of celebrations, the first held over dinner at the home of master wood carver I Nyoman Subrata.



The evening was magical. We enjoyed a sumptuous feast, dining with our fingers, local-style. Subrata's daughters and their friends, dressed in their finest red and gold silk, performed a series of traditional dance stories with fiery passion and grace. We were transported to what in any other place would have been another era; but in Bali, this is daily life, where dramatic displays of traditional culture are not reserved solely for tourists, but remain integral to the community.

MY QUESTIONS ABOUT THE dancers' dramatic costumes led to a series of adventures that filled the days to follow. I drove from village to village, welcomed into the homes of one gracious family after another, meeting costumers, dance-crown makers, and the internationally renowned dance mask maker, I Nyoman Setiawan.

At Setiawan's home, I parked on an unmarked, winding country lane – finally sure I'd found the right place when I spotted ancient, lichen-covered masks carved into a high stone wall. Newer wooden masks hung from the rafters of palm-thatched workrooms just inside the gate.

The mask maker introduced himself and his family, and with the dramatic flair of a great actor, ushered me into his simple workshop, transforming it with little more than a few gestures into a grand performance studio.

Setiawan offered to demonstrate several of Bali's traditional dance sagas. I didn't know then that Setiawan is a preeminent dancer in the region, carrying on a family tradition that has endured for generations. While a full performance would include a dance troop and orchestra, for this private demonstration Setiawan would make do with just a few musician neighbors.

After hanging a glittering curtain in front of a dusty storage shelf, Setiawan sat on a stool and pulled the

THIS PAGE: I Wayan Mardika Bhuwana, master shadow puppeteer, putting the finishing touches on new shadow puppets. Young village girls perform at the home of master carver I Nyoman Subrata. **OPPOSITE:** One of many ambrosial offerings to the gods.





CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT: Preparation for dance ceremony. Sign for I Nyoman Setiawan, master mask maker, who performs wearing one of his artworks. Detail of I Wayan Mardika Bhuwana, master shadow puppeteer, at work.

curtain closed in front of him. A few minutes sped by while he changed into costume. His feet, peeking out from below the curtain, soon began to tap in time with the building beat of the instruments.

Fists clenching the curtain closed, Setiawan's angry hands gradually began to part the silk, finally revealing a hideous face and a magnificent costume that slowly rose with the increasing drama of the music. A lengthy pantomime of pain, sadness, and comedy built into a frenzy before slowing down again as the masked man retired to his stool. Gradually, he pulled the curtain closed.

In one fantastic drama after another, I witnessed a procession of faces and folklore woven into a masterful performance that should have been enjoyed by a thousand enraptured fans.

His face dripping with sweat, Setiawan removed his final mask. Relaxing against the wall of his studio, he explained that he blesses each mask in a special temple ceremony before using it for the first time.

"I offer gifts and my own secret words to the gods as part of the ceremony. More I cannot tell you," he explained. "For the words I use each time must remain between me and my gods."

A rooster crowed and Setiawan's five-year-old son walked tentatively into the workshop to show me a basket of just-hatched, fluffy chicks. Setiawan's children are learning to dance; they, too, will proudly carry on their family's ancient tradition.

Having satisfied my curiosity about the wildly ornate traditional dance costumes, I arrived that evening in

Ubud, Bali's central artists' colony, hoping to attend the town's popular shadow puppet performance. Alas I arrived too late to catch the show, so my local guide offered instead to drive me the following day to the home of shadow puppet maker I Wayan Mardika Bhuwana. That way, he said, I could meet a master puppeteer first-hand, and perhaps enjoy a private performance.

BHUWANA WAS WORKING WHEN we arrived, sketching a puppet figure onto rice paper. He showed me how he places a translucent sheet of rawhide over the finished sketch, then cuts into the rawhide, tracing the ornate images showing through from the rice paper. I watched a chiseled figure emerge from the rawhide. Next, he painted it with brilliant colors – intricate artistry generally overlooked by tourists who only watch the puppets' shadows through the stage screen. Here in Bali, Bhuwana explained, spectators are welcome to visit backstage during the performance, to get a closer look at the puppets' fantastic craftsmanship and the puppeteers' masterful theatrics.

Bhuwana said he prays to the god Iswara and places offerings of egg, coconut, and rice in his local temple and on stage before and after each show, to ensure a great performance and to offer thanks.

"It is told that Iswara performed a puppet show in heaven, and the gods watched him," Bhuwana explained. "That is why he is the god of the puppeteers."

Bhuwana explained that a complete, three-hour puppet show includes 100 characters, an orchestra, and

many assistants. Most tourists watch an abbreviated show, while Balinese audiences sit enraptured through a full performance – without breaks.

With a twinkle in his eye, Bhuwana asked which version I would like to see, then laughed before I answered. He would perform the abbreviated version, managing 20 characters, 20 voices, and the traditional story lines with the help of just a few assistants.

Bhuwana's neighbors began to join us. A grandmother carried over a basket of exotic rambutan fruit for all to share. Others brought drinks and traditional sweets – sticky rice blended with coconut sugar, baked in banana leaves.

We waited for night to fall. Then Bhuwana lit a torch to cast the shadows against the screen – and the puppets came to life. I didn't understand the puppets' language (the characters spoke in an ancient version of Balinese that few locals still speak), but that didn't matter; instead, the masterful theatrics were enough to draw me deep into the epic tale. Bhuwana spiced up his performance with occasional splashes of sly English humor – in a delightful attempt, I presumed, to pull me yet further into the story.

I watched enchanted forests of talking trees, fearful adventurers, and wild animals as life played out on the flickering screen. Characters were transformed into undersea creatures, only to emerge from beneath oceans to fly away as birds – while the gamelan musicians played frenetically to keep pace.

By the time the evening ended and the Balinese moon had moved far across the sky, I felt I knew well yet another side of this fascinating culture.

Bali is a land of endless discovery, perhaps best approached without an extensive agenda. The adventures here inevitably unfold in front of you.

Earlier in the week, driving along winding one-lane roads past towering volcanoes and picturesque rice

Sumatra, a private butler at Begawan Giri. Roadside temple.



OWNING A RAMONA

THIS ARTIST DOESN'T PAINT FOR PEANUTS

Her abstract expressionist art sells for thousands of dollars at international exhibits and charity auctions. Some say she paints à la Jackson Pollock; others claim she has the flair of Franz Kline.

There is one thing, however, on which all of her patrons will agree: Ramona, a 2,000-pound painting elephant, is beyond compare.

At the tender age of seven, Ramona arguably has become one of Bali's most famous painters. At her tropical outdoor residence, Ramona appears genuinely inspired. Delicately wrapping the tip of her trunk around a brush, she paints effusively yet methodically, pausing to look at her canvas in progress before choosing each new color. She seems to enjoy her work immensely. And work, after all, is what Asian elephants need these days.

The Asian elephant is an endangered species; in all of Indonesia, for example, fewer than 2,800 survive.

Ramona's paintings have helped raise awareness about the plight of the species, and her earnings have helped to feed and care for other endangered elephants.

Yanie Mason and her husband, Nigel, have provided sanctuary to Ramona and 17 other elephants by building the Elephant Safari Park, a beautiful compound nestled between rice fields and forest near Taro, Bali. There, visitors can commission a Ramona painting, request a private ride through the countryside, or even plan a wedding – complete with lavishly attired elephants.

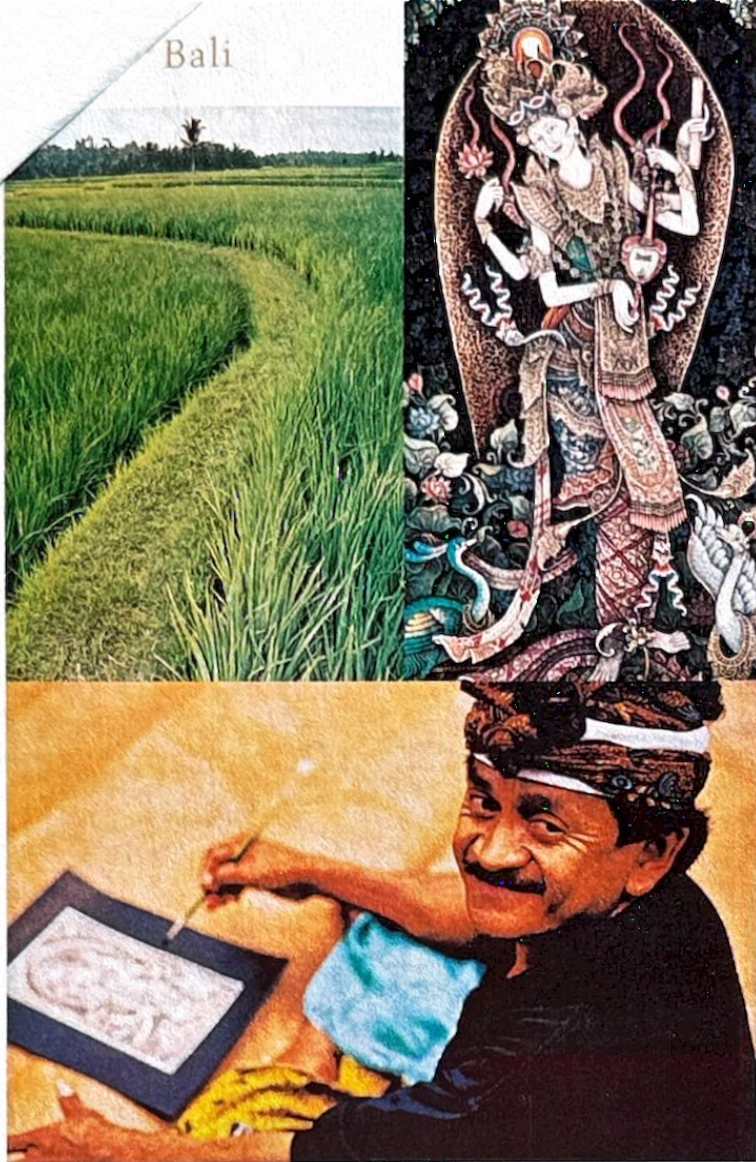
On a purely esthetic note, some say Ramona's art is beautiful; others question whether elephant paintings can really be considered art at all. I would critique Ramona's work as youthful, exuberant, and lacking polish. Dare I say, I'd give her work a thumbs-up as being every bit as fun, artistic, and collectible as the abstract art by some of our more renowned homo sapiens. As for home décor, the paintings certainly make for great dinner-party conversation.

"Ramona is an artist, with a true artistic temperament," her caretakers contend. "She paints only when she is inspired. When she lacks inspiration, not even Jumadi, her handler, can coax her to the canvas." If Ramona could realize how her efforts are helping to provide for her kin, I doubt there'd be any end to the creative efforts of this pachydermic Picasso.

CATHERINE RYAN

NOTE: Ramona's paintings can now be viewed online at Novica.com.





TOP: Rice paddies. *Sri Puddah, The Rice Goddess* by I Wayan Rana. ABOVE: Rana at work. BELOW: On any given day in Bali, villagers can be found making their way to the local temple for a festive ceremony.

paddies, I saw a small, open-air painting studio, so I pulled over and parked. I Wayan Rana, one of the finest traditional painters on the island, was hard at work on his latest masterpiece when I arrived, painting a complex festival scene. He squinted to point out the central characters, miniscule images scattered amid a multitude of revelers. Rana's daughter arrived with refreshments – fresh, young coconuts brimming with sweet, cool nectar.

Rana laughingly recalled his first attempt to sell a painting, when he was still a teenager. Without money for a motorbike or taxi, he carried his prize painting many miles to town, where a gallery owner had promised to sell his work. Nearly at his destination, Rana tripped and fell, exhausted. The painting fell, too, face down in the mud.

"I washed the painting in the stream, then laid it out flat in a rice field," he relates. "I sat there until late in

the afternoon, waiting for the painting to dry. At the end of the day it looked new again, so I finally took it into the gallery to sell. The owner saw the painting and exclaimed over its beauty; but then he noticed a tear that I had overlooked. Nearly two months of work gone. I couldn't forget the disaster for some time."

I noticed a few finely regaled villagers striding past the painter's studio, headed into town, carrying silver offering bowls and burning incense. I asked Rana if my chance visit was keeping him from village activities. He laughed and said that my arrival would likely coincide with a festivity no matter what day I chose. Then, as the Balinese do, he asked if I'd like to participate.

Rana's wife and daughter busied themselves dressing me in traditional temple clothes while he explained the details of what we were about to witness: an official coming-of-age "tooth-filing" ceremony that would last well into the night. The 2,000-year-old tradition would involve feasting, intense chanting, and purification ceremonies, performed by one of Bali's highest Brahmin priestesses. The priestess would also file smooth the rough edges on the teeth of two local villagers – a teenage boy and girl – with particular attention given to smoothing their canine teeth.

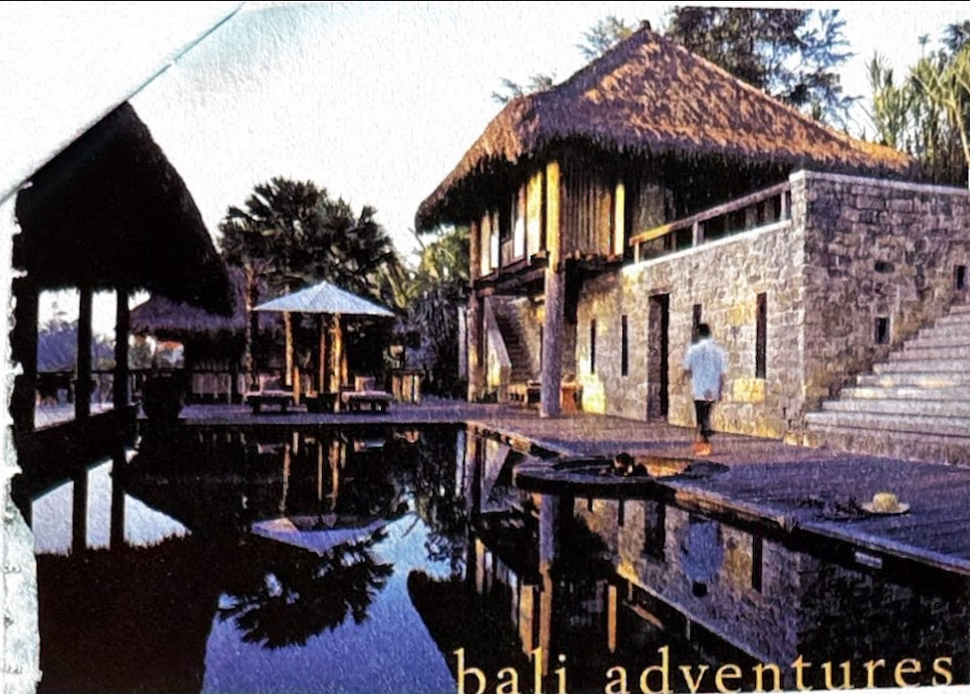
(For the Balinese, teeth symbolize anger, lust, greed, and jealousy. It is their belief that smoothing the teeth dispels the forces of evil and purifies the subject of animal-like features and behavior, adding to the physical and spiritual beauty of young Balinese as they transition from adolescence into adulthood.)

Over the course of the day, Rana and his family introduced me to their fellow villagers; many went out of their way to explain the intricacies of the unfolding events. This evening-long spectacle capped an extraordinary ten days – on an enchanted island where unexpected adventures await around every bend.

Catherine Ryan is the editor of Novica.com, a world arts Web marketplace affiliated with the National Geographic Society. Some of the artists and artisans mentioned in this article are among the more than 1,700 whose biographies and artworks are featured at www.Novica.com.



PHOTOS Catherine Ryan



HOW TO GET THERE

Australia & Indonesia Join fellow Voyager Club members for a full-day adventure in Bali on this Sydney-to-Singapore cruise aboard Holland America's newest flagship, *Prinsendam*. You also will pay visits to Brisbane, Whitsunday Island, Cairns, Darwin, Broome, and Semarang.

The details: 18 days; depart February 24, 2003. Our fares from \$3,357.

Voyager Club Exclusives: Enjoy a full-day island sightseeing tour in Bali, including a traditional Balinese lunch.

WHERE TO STAY

Four Seasons Resort Bali at Jimbaran Bay Despite Bali's many exotic allures, you may be tempted to spend most of your time within the moss-covered stone walls of this exotic resort – a beautiful, rustic property, patterned after a traditional Balinese village. The earthy, secluded bungalows – each more than 2,100 square feet in size, with indoor and outdoor bath facilities, private orchid gardens, and plunge pools – are worlds unto themselves, requiring no further exploration. The staff is likewise phenomenal. A particularly great place to arrive with nothing in mind but romance and relaxation.

The details: Our clients receive an exclusive, locally handcrafted artifact. One-bedroom villas from US\$575; two-bedroom, from US\$1,300 (prices per night, per room).



Four Seasons Resort Bali at Sayan With its lavish private bungalows scattered through rice fields and forest on a quiet hillside near the artistic mecca of Ubud, the Four Seasons at Sayan combines architectural modernity with environmental serenity. Visitors enjoy breathtaking views above a beautiful

river, private pools, a traditional spa, and a dreamy new day spa (open to visitors not staying at the resort) amid lily ponds and hundreds of fragrant plumeria trees. Be sure to request a "Rice & Spice" therapeutic massage soon after arrival, to wash away the rigors of the outside world. Gentle hands and warm, muddy rice flour may help you find nirvana here.

The details: Our clients receive an exclusive, locally handcrafted artifact. Suites from US\$450; villas from US\$575 (prices per night, per room).

Begawan Giri Estate A private, 20-acre resort carefully blended into the countryside ten miles from Ubud, Begawan Giri features luxurious, open-air spas, secluded restaurants, and five extraordinary villas, or "living compounds," some with servants' quarters. Each features a unique design and décor. Guests are appointed a private butler in addition to an abundance of traditional staff. The gardens and pools are fed by a mountain spring, venerated for centuries by locals as a place of healing. A central aviary of starlings and free-range peacocks, and an aura of extreme exclusivity enhance the Begawan Giri experience.

The details: Our clients receive a champagne welcome; a Bath of the Night, fully prepared and presented by The Source Spa; a 30-minute Bali Taksu massage at The Source Spa, or in your suite; and daily afternoon teas presented at your residence. Suites from US\$495; residences from US\$2,550 (prices per night, per room).

Silver Odyssey Visit Bali's scenic Padang Bay and overnight in Benoa during Silversea's epic Odyssey of Oceania voyage. Beginning with a stay in bustling Hong Kong, you'll board Silver Wind to experience all of the South Pacific's many splendors, with extended stays – eight days in Vietnam, nine in French Polynesia, 12 in New Zealand, 13 in Australia – to fully engulf yourself in the warm, inviting cultures.

The details: 85 days; depart August 24, 2003. Includes round-trip air and one-night, pre-cruise stay in Hong Kong. Seven segments, ranging from 8 to 31 days in length, also available. Call us for Virtuoso prices.

Voyager Club Exclusives: Voyager Club joins you onboard Silver Wind throughout its Silver Odyssey across the South Pacific. Please call us for event details.

