

Inside the Puppet Box

A Performance Collection
of Wayang Kulit
at the Museum of
International Folk Art

Felicia Katz-Harris

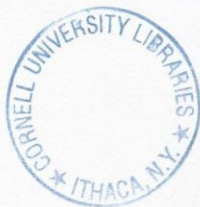


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The photographs of the wayang figures in this catalog are not necessarily intended as true contextual representations, but rather their poses are artistic interpretations of the characters that are presented.

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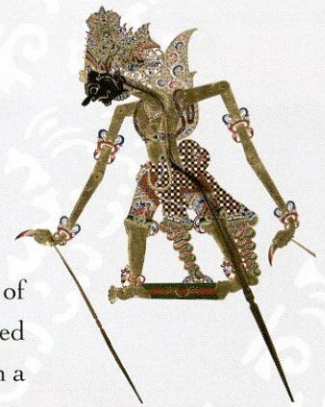
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Wayang Kulit at the Museum of International Folk Art



Wayang kulit performances lie close to the heart of Javanese culture, and are one of the greatest storytelling traditions in the world. Wayang kulit figures are elaborately painted and intricately punched and carved flat rawhide puppets that cast dramatic shadows through a cotton screen during a performance. The stories are based on classical literature, but every performance also draws on contemporary themes, and teaches important moral, ethical, and philosophical ideas while entertaining the audience at times with roaring humor and special action-packed scenes. Traditional performances, which are always accompanied by a *gamelan* (a traditional Indonesian musical ensemble), last all night long, beginning in the evening and ending at dawn.¹ Abbreviated performances, however, may be geared toward tourists and also to younger Indonesians, who may prefer television and movies to this deep-rooted tradition.

As opposed to common Western notions of puppetry as children's entertainment, wayang kulit is considered one of the highest forms of art in Indonesia and is a world-renowned representation of Javanese cultural heritage. It is a highly sophisticated art form that has been performed in villages, cities, and royal courts for hundreds of years. Performances commonly celebrate or commemorate personal accomplishments, rites-of-passage, holidays and national events—but performances may also be arranged simply for entertainment.

Wayang kulit is generally understood to mean “leather shadow puppet” in the national Indonesian language (*Bahasa Indonesia*). There are various theories about the specific meaning and origin of the word *wayang* itself. *Wayang* can be used in two senses. It can mean “puppet,” or it can mean a type of performance (usually the performance of the associated *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* epics, or the performance of other Javanese stories as described

further below). As the root word for the Javanese terms *wewayangan* and *wewayanganing urip*, the word *wayang* also connotes the shadow of human life.² Originally, audiences mostly viewed not the physical form of the wayang (that is, the puppet), but the shadow that penetrated the screen. The word *kulit* literally means “skin” and is also typically translated as “leather.” Although wayang kulit are commonly presented as leather shadow puppets, in reality the material used to make the figures is rawhide (from water buffalo skin). This book uses the words *wayang* and *wayang kulit* to refer to both physical puppets and to the performance art, depending on the context.

There are numerous regional and stylistic variations of wayang performance, even within the wayang kulit tradition. This book focuses on the contemporary court-based Surakarta, or Solo, style that has become (in modern times) the most widely recognized and widely performed form of wayang within and outside Indonesia.³ The more local, regional styles of Yogyakarta, East Java, Banyumas, Bali, and elsewhere are less represented outside of Java. To some extent, the Solo style of wayang kulit performance adapts or incorporates elements of other regional styles, and it has become the favored style of performance for audiences and performers outside of Solo. In fact, the Solo style has come to be the main-stream style of performance in Indonesia, serving as a reference point for other wayang kulit styles.⁴ Historically, Solo’s cultural traditions have strongly influenced traditions (including wayang kulit) of other nearby regions, probably due to the widespread cultural influence of Solo’s *kraton* (royal palace). Perhaps the most significant reason for the popularity of Solo-style wayang kulit and performances is that this form is flexible: through techniques of dramatization, and through its humor and philosophy, this form can be adapted to cater to the audience in each community.⁵

Wayang kulit is an extraordinarily complex art form, which can take a lifetime to truly understand. Indeed, each aspect of the art form is a multifaceted topic, and each is worthy of a book in its own right. To explore all the equally important components of wayang kulit is well beyond the scope of this book, which instead provides a brief overview of some of the main aspects of wayang kulit and its performance, such as: how wayang kulit are made; *wanda* (mood and form of the wayang), *simpingan* (the arrangement of the wayang); various aspects of performance; the remarkable skills of the *dhalang* (shadow master and puppeteer); and the history and literary repertoire of wayang kulit. This book also offers an extensive visual reference that catalogs a particular performance set.

It is hoped that this introduction and visual reference for wayang kulit will offer the reader points of departure for further research. This overview is based on published sources, and on information that was collected through formal interviews, informal conversations, observations and correspondence with numerous wayang kulit experts—scholars, puppeteers, and artisans. Following this introduction, the catalog presents images of wayang kulit from a special collection of the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico. This collection, a full performance set of Solo-style wayang kulit, was acquired for the Museum’s award winning exhibition, *Dancing Shadows, Epic Tales: Wayang Kulit of Indonesia* (March 2009–March 2010) primarily from Ki Purbo Asmoro, a prominent dhalang based in Solo who is also a Professor of Puppeteering and Wayang at Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI) in Surakarta (the Arts Institute of Indonesia). Some additional pieces were acquired from the collection of Ki Enthus Susmono, a famous dhalang based in Tegal. The catalog presents provenance history for each item in the collection and basic information regarding the specific characters that are included in the set; information provided mostly by Ki Purbo Asmoro.

The collection and these two performers will be discussed in further detail in the last section of this introductory essay, which will also explain how the organization of the catalog reflects the placement of the wayang during a performance.

How Wayang Kulit Are Made

The intricate art of wayang kulit is an example of the high level of artistry found in Indonesia. Different methods for creating wayang kulit may be employed in various regions, but this section describes the typical process as it is executed in Central Java.

The shadow puppets are made from water buffalo hide, cut and punctured by hand, one hole at a time. Then they are painted in layers of water-based paints, heavily decorated with extraordinarily fine details, and often finished with gold and/or bronze leaf. The sticks attached to the base and the articulated limbs of the wayang kulit are made from water buffalo horn, wood, or both. The artists who create wayang kulit often learn their craft from family members and then apprentice with a master; but some have also studied in an arts program at the *kraton* (royal palace). Several artists are usually involved in the process of making wayang kulit—the artists who prepare the water buffalo skin, artists who carve and puncture the hide, the painters, and the horn carvers. Each artist might have the knowledge needed to create a puppet from start to finish; however, it is common for artists to work together and develop a specialization for a particular aspect of the process.

Fig.1
Family members Tri Suwarno, Sukardi, and Riyadi Dwi Susanto (left to right) work together to create wayang kulit. Photograph by the author, Sewon, Bantul, 2007.



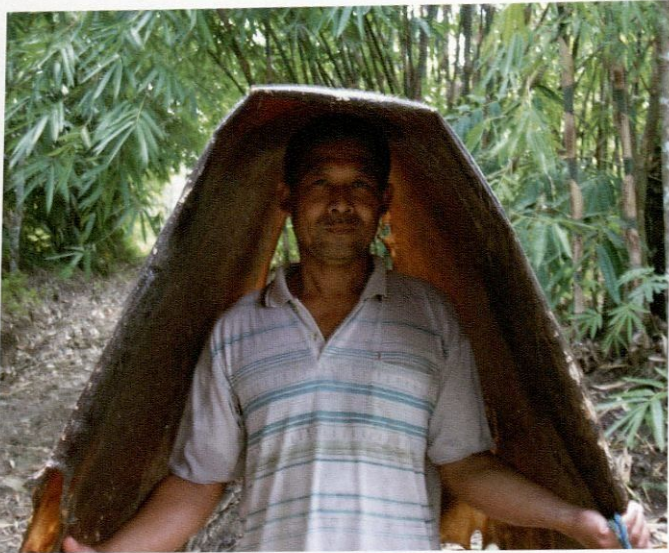


Fig.2



Fig.3

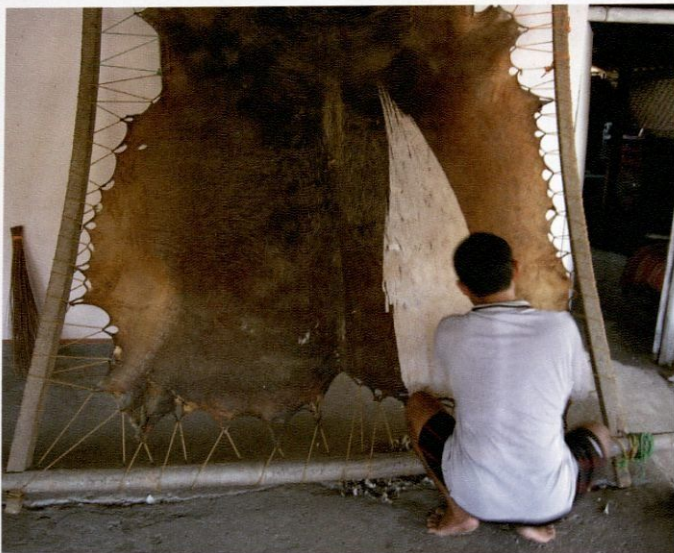


Fig.4



Fig.5

Fig.2

Suyoto is a trained carver of *wayang kulit*, but chose as his profession the preparation of rawhide (for handicrafts such as *wayang kulit*) because the job market is less competitive. He supplies many *wayang kulit* artists in the Yogyakarta area with prepared hide. Photograph by the author, Kasihan, Bantul, 2007.

Fig. 3

Suyoto washes and softens water buffalo hide in a local pond. Photograph by the author, Kasihan, Bantul, 2007.

Fig. 4

Suyoto begins scraping the first layer of skin from the hide. Photograph by the author, Kasihan, Bantul, 2007.

Fig. 5

Suyoto (right) and *wayang* carving artist, Sarjo (left) display a hide that is ready for making *wayang kulit*. Photograph by the author, Kasihan, Bantul, 2007.

Rawhide Preparation

The creation of the shadow puppets begins with the preparation of skin. Hide from young Sulawesi water buffalo is most desirable for wayang kulit.⁶ Cultural groups in Sulawesi, such as the Toraja, slaughter water buffalos for ceremonial feasts. When the animal is slaughtered and skinned, the hide is washed, stretched on a frame, and left in the sun to dry for a number of weeks: this process helps decrease any unpleasant odors. The hide is otherwise left intact.

In Java, when the preparer receives a hide, he soaks it overnight in water (usually a pond or river) to soften and clean it. The leather is again stretched on a frame, and left to dry in the sun for twenty-four hours. Loose dirt is brushed from the hide. The first layer of skin is peeled with a scraper, thus removing all hairs from the hide. Shavings of this first layer are used by farmers in their fields to protect crops from pests. The hide is again set in the sun to dry. Next, the second layer of skin is scraped, and the shavings of this layer are fried and eaten as a snack called *krecek*, or used in tasty dishes such as *nasi gudeg*, a specialty of Yogyanese and Solonese cuisine. The skin is dried once again in the sun and the leather rawhide is then ready to be formed into shadow puppets or other crafts that utilize water buffalo hide.

One hide can typically accommodate fifteen small wayang characters or eight large-sized characters. Thicker pieces of hide are saved for larger wayang characters, such as the giants, whereas thinner cuts are used for female characters and for delicately framed, small wayang characters. During the dry season, the process of preparing the hide may take two to three days. In wetter seasons, the process may take longer.⁷

Creating Horn Puppet Sticks

Often overlooked are the artists who make the stick handles for the shadow puppet. Water buffalo horn is the most valued material, with white horn preferred over black horn. Wood may be used for purposes of economy, although many dhalang today prefer to use white water buffalo horn for the base handle and wood for the articulated limbs. This is because wood is sturdier for performance purposes, particularly for robust, aggressive performance techniques where the wayang are thrown up in the air and physically smashed against each other or twirled and held by these puppet sticks, as is typical in battle scenes.

Many horn artists make a variety of handicrafts from horn, but not all horn artists make wayang sticks. In fact, there are only a few artists in Central Java who supply wayang kulit makers with horn sticks.⁸ The process of making the handles from water buffalo horn is quite involved and intriguing to watch. First, with a simple saw, the raw material (a whole water buffalo horn) is split length-wise into two pieces; next, these two pieces are split in half. Each quartered piece is cut down the middle, but not severed. The quartered, partially sliced horn is heated until it is pliable. Using iron tongs, the horn is gently pulled apart forming a V-shaped piece. With an adze, the rough outer layer of the horn is hacked away and filed down to remove the coarse edges. The horn is soaked in water to help it cool and harden for the next step.

The V-shaped piece of horn is sliced down the middle with the simple saw, following the angle or curve of the "V" shape, but the piece is not severed. The horn is heated again and the angles are straightened with the tongs; this action lengthens the horn into a long, straight stick, partially split down the middle. In the end, this piece becomes the base handle: the segment that holds the hide figure, which is inserted into the split stick. The process of firing, cutting, filing, and soaking will be repeated until the wayang handle is ready for the final stages, when it is smoothed, polished with leaves and natural chalk, and finished with carved decorative touches.⁹



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

Fig. 6

Hadi Siswanto, a water buffalo horn carver, quarters water buffalo horn (one of the beginning steps to making puppet sticks) outside his home and workshop. Photograph by the author, Polanharjo, Klaten, 2007.

Fig. 7

Rejo Sumarto, Hadi Siswanto's father, heats the sliced water buffalo horn in order to create a long stick. Photograph by the author, Polanharjo, Klaten, 2007.

Fig. 8

Rejo Sumarto hacks away at the rough outer layer of the water buffalo horn. This begins the process of cleaning and smoothing the sticks, which ultimately become shiny and slick. Photograph by the author, Polanharjo, Klaten, 2007.

Fig. 9

Hadi Siswanto uses a metal file to smooth the horn. Photograph by the author, Polanharjo, Klaten, 2007.



Fig.10



Fig.11



Fig.12



Fig.13

Fig. 10
Hadi Siswanto slices through the horn again, following the angle to create long thin sticks with slits where the *wayang* figure will eventually be inserted. Photograph by the author, Polanharjo, Klaten, 2007.

Fig. 11
Giyarno, Hadi Siswanto's brother, uses tongs to straighten out the bend in the horn over the flame. Photograph by the author, Polanharjo, Klaten, 2007.

Fig. 12
Giyarno finishes straightening the horn stick by heating it over a flame. Photograph by the author, Polanharjo, Klaten, 2007

Fig. 13
Hadi Siswanto finishes off a *wayang* base handle by polishing it with leaves and natural chalk powder. Photograph by the author, Polanharjo, Klaten 2007

Punching

The *penatah*, the artists who carve and puncture the leather, begin their work by scratching the outline of the wayang figure and the specific details of the character onto the hide. This drawing must be carefully executed, since the outline and the precise characteristics, especially the figure's posture, greatly influence the portrayal of the figure's personality, which is one of the most important marks of high quality wayang kulit. Subsequent carving and punching of the hide is guided by this sketch.¹⁰

The basic tools used to carve the rawhide include a *gandin* (mallet) and *tatah* (thin carving tools, similar to a nail or chisel with specially shaped points). Generally, the artists create the great variety of cutout shapes with only two kinds of *tatah*. They are *tatah datar* (flat) and *tatah lengkung* (curved), terms which refer to the tool's cutting edge. The mallet is used with these tools to tap the *tatah* and punch through the rawhide, in the same manner a sculptor might use a hammer and chisel, or an awl. Though the point of the *tatah* only comes in two basic shapes, the tools do come in various sizes. No matter the size, most punches require several turns of the *tatah* to achieve the desired detail in a single hole. This stage is the most time-consuming of the wayang making process, and is considered the most important to achieve accurate character portrayal.

Fig.14

Among a pile of *tatah*, the outline of this wayang figure has already been cut. The sketch of what will later become the carving details is seen on the rawhide surface. Photograph by the author, Eromoko, Wonogiri, 2007.





Fig. 15
A set of *tatah* (carving tools) belonging to the artist, Riyadi Dwi Susanto. Photograph by the author, Cabeyan, Bantul, 2007.

Despite the seemingly infinite number of these punch shapes, only nine curved tatah and six flat tatah are used to create twelve distinct punch-patterns.¹¹ Each punch-pattern has a specific function. Combinations of curved and flat punches represent details such as clothing style, hairstyle, and personal ornamentation. For example, a pattern of short, straight lines (like dashes) might be used for the edging of a female character's *kain* (a general term for cloth, and the specific term for a skirt cloth). Or, in another example, rounded spirals represent hair.

Another type of carving detail is not achieved through punching, but by using the tools to push the hide surface into textured patterns that represent body or facial hair. Only select

Fig.16 & 17
Thoyib, an artist (who is also a farmer) from Cemangkah Kidul, Wonogiri District, is an exceptional *wayang* carver. This series shows the artist punching the designs of a *wayang* figure. The leather is punched one hole at a time with the *tatah* (carving tool) and a mallet. Because of the intricacy of the carving, even small sections of high quality work like Thoyib's can take many hours to finish. Large shadow puppets can take several months to complete. Photographs by the author, Eromoko, Wonogiri, 2007.



Fig.16



Fig.17



Fig. 18a
Wayang artists use specific patterns to create punch details of wayang figures (FA.2007.40.47).
Photograph by Blair Clark.

Fig. 18b
Detail of spiral punches that are used to represent hair.

Fig. 18c
Detail of straight line dashes that outline the edge of a character's kain (skirt cloth)

characters have this feature (see fig. 26). In deciding on the particular shapes, patterns, and details to use for a specific wayang character, artists must follow traditional rules and written guidelines for creating and decorating wayang kulit. Existing wayang figures, usually from kraton collections, serve as models; an artist can consult these older pieces, or standard drawings of these pieces, for carving and painting reference.

Painting

When the carving and punching are complete, painting is the next stage in the process of creating and decorating wayang kulit. The carved and punched wayang figure is smoothed with sandpaper: this prepares the skin for the first layer of color. The foundation color is usually white (in some locations yellow might be the base color of choice). This first layer of color evens out the hide's color tone and allows the overlays of color to adhere well and to be shown at their best. This foundation coat covers the entire piece and is allowed to dry before it is burnished with a seashell and the second color is added.

Rarely do contemporary artists make and use natural pigments.¹² Today, the preferred paints are water-based colors, such as acrylics. Paints are mixed with an adhesive such as *ancur*, which in theory is a type of glue made from fish bones. In reality, however, the substance varies from artist to artist: sometimes it is a merely a carpenters' glue. Other types of paints are sometimes used (such as latex house paints or oil-based paints), much to the detriment of the wayang figures—for these paints are not durable and often peel off the hide. Water-based paints are the ideal medium because they are more easily absorbed by hide and their colors last longer than those of other paints.¹³

Colors are generally added in layers: color is first applied to the larger areas in a particular order, and then gold or bronze leaf is applied. Additional colors are painted on after the gilding process, and fine details, such as thin lines and tiny dots, are painted or stippled onto the design in the later stages.¹⁴ Egg white is applied very carefully to the painted area, around the gold or bronze leaf (the metal leaf is not coated with egg white). *Sungging* refers to the process of coloring wayang, specifically to adding gradations of color. (At least three to five color gradients—light to dark—are needed for each hue, depending on the size of the wayang figure.)

Painters generally follow tradition, using standard colors and decorative patterns for specific attributes of specific characters. Artists do have some leeway in terms of individual

Fig. 19 & 20
Wayang painter, Tri Suwarno, sands an already carved and punched figure and prepares the hide for the first layer of paint. Photographs by the author, Sewon, Bantul, 2007.



Fig.19



Fig.20

Fig. 21-24

Wayang artist, Marino of Manyaran, paints details on a wayang figure in color gradients. Marino is a full time wayang artist, whose specialty is painting. Fellow painter Suyanto looks on (in Fig.21). Photographs by the author, Eromoko, Wonogiri, 2007.



Fig.21

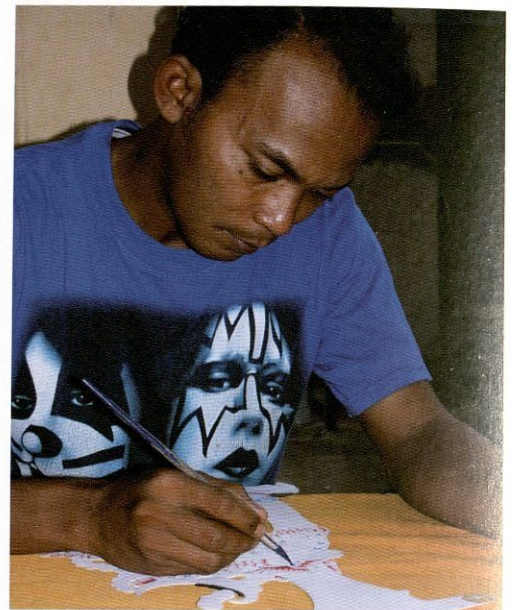


Fig.22

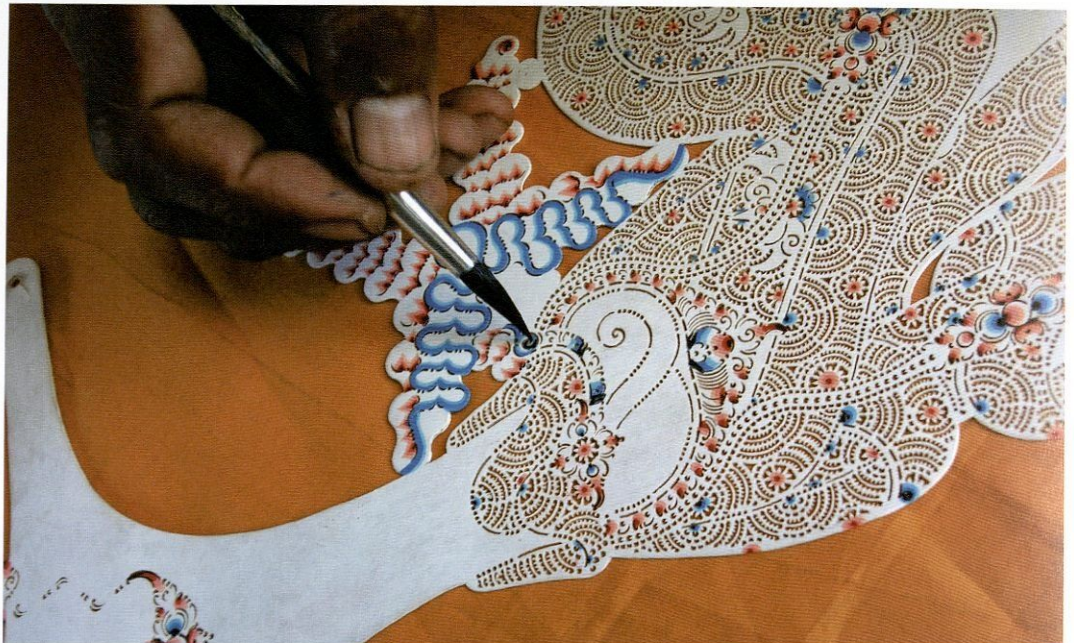


Fig.23



Fig.24



Fig. 25

Fig. 25
Garudha's face from a detail of a figure's hair ornament. Following tradition, this garudha glances to the side, has a blue face and white fangs (FA.2007.40.66). Photograph by Blair Clark.



Fig. 26

Fig. 26
Gathutkaca has a black face and gold teeth, conforming to standard color schemes. Textured patterns represent facial hair, as do the spiral punches under the figure's chin. (FA.2007.40.16). Photograph by Blair Clark.

preferences and creativity, but for the most part, they must adhere to the traditional guidelines and choose colors suitable for the character they are creating.¹⁵

The following examples demonstrate a few of the many rules included in these artistic guidelines for making wayang. The *garudha* (a mythical bird) image is found in the hair ornaments and/or clothing of many characters and the image must be created with its eyes casting a somewhat sideways glance. The garudha's adornments should be gold, the teeth or fangs must be white, and the face of the bird should include gradients of red or of blue, or sometimes a shade of dark yellow.¹⁶

Another example is the color of the wayang figure's teeth. Wayang figures with black faces can only have teeth that are gold or red. Gold-faced characters will have black teeth, unless the character is a *raksasa* (demon-giant), in which case it will have white teeth. *Raksasa* with a red or blue face must have gold teeth.¹⁷ These guidelines can be quite specific, and for non-specialists they may seem overly esoteric. In fact, not all wayang-makers (not even all dhalang) know the exact reasons for the rules; they only know that these rules exist. One wayang expert suggested that these explicit formulas (for patterning the punches and combining and/or juxtaposing particular colors) all help create an impressive visual impact.¹⁸



Fig.27

Fig. 27 & 28
Marino demonstrates the application of gold leaf, and examines his work at his home.
Photographs by the author, Manyaran, Wonogiri, 2007.



Fig.28

On the other hand, sometimes the color of a figure's body and face can be a straightforward representation of personality or mood. Facial color is the strongest identifier, with the most common colors (at least for human characters) being gold, black, white, and red. A gold face signifies dignity and calmness; black can represent a strong character, or age; red symbolizes an intense, sometimes violent anger, or one who is easily upset or offended; and a white face indicates a person's youth, innocence, or honesty.¹⁹ These are only a few of many such examples of the rich and complex iconography that exists in wayang kulit from the Solo tradition; and many other illustrations may be found in other regional wayang forms.²⁰

Twenty-two karat gold or bronze leaf is used for finer pieces. The leaf is very delicate; it is prepared and applied with great care. Ancur is often mixed with gold colored paint to soften the gold leaf so it adheres smoothly. Certain colors are added after the gilding process, and fine details such as thin lines and tiny dots are then painted or stippled into the design. After fixing the articulated limbs to the figure's body with bone or metal fasteners (*gegel*), the final step in creating a wayang kulit figure is to attach the horn sticks. The horn sticks are heated over a small flame to mold the horn and to custom fit the stick around each individual shadow puppet's form. Finally, the wayang kulit is inserted into the handle and secured with a needle and thread. In the past, and still in some regions today, thread-like strips of rattan have been used to tie the sticks to the form.

In the end, wayang kulit are incredibly ornate works of art. Many people wonder why shadow puppets are so elaborately decorated when their purpose is to produce shadows. For one, people do see the physical puppet when they watch a performance from the dhalang's side of the screen. Furthermore, wayang kulit are important objects that represent important characters. It could be for the sake of the puppet that the figures are so beautiful. Most likely, the



Fig 29
Each figure has incredible detail, such as tiny dots and fine lines [FA.2007.38.10]. Photograph by Blair Clark.

Fig.29

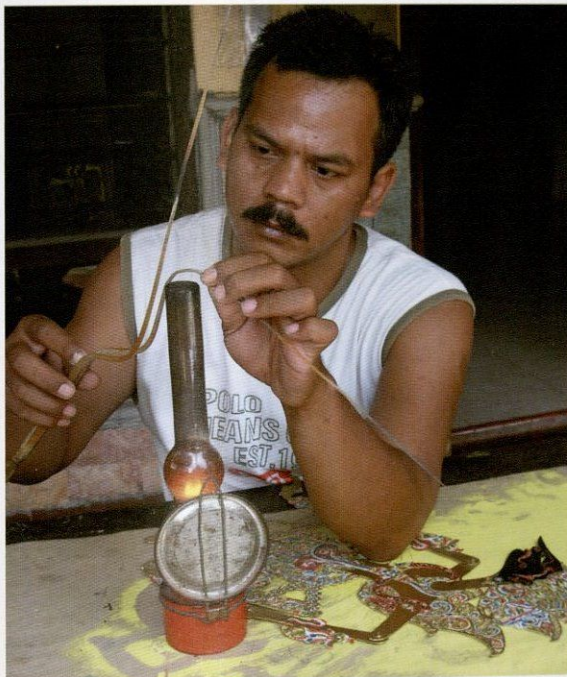


Fig.30



Fig.31

reason is that a dhalang desires an admirable set of wayang in the same way that a musician might desire a beautiful instrument. Not all dhalang can afford the best wayang collection; therefore, a high quality, gold (or even bronze) leafed set is indicative of the status, popularity and overall success of a particular dhalang.

Wanda: mood and form of the wayang characters

Wanda refers to the “inner mood” of certain wayang characters in different circumstances.²¹ *Wanda* also refers to the physical manifestation or expression of that mood, as seen in a figure’s face and posture.²² So, several shadow puppets may be used in a performance to portray a single character. These various wayang figures are used to portray (or emphasize) the different personality traits of one character, and to express that character’s emotional state as the performance progresses.

Fig. 30 & 31
Wayang artist, Riyadi Dwi Susanto, heats a puppet stick (made from water buffalo horn) to fit a wayang figure. He thus creates a perfectly balanced wayang for a dhalang’s use. After the figure is inserted into the pronged horn stick, Riyadi secures everything in place with a needle and thread. Photographs by the author, Sewon, Bantul, 2007.

Physical features indicate the particular wanda of a character that is being portrayed, and the wanda, therefore, is dependent on the carving and painting of the wayang kulit. For example, the figure Kresna has several wanda. In a *jejer* scene, Kresna's demeanor would be respectful, formal, and humble.²³ These characteristics are best portrayed through his wanda Rondhon (Kresna with a black face and body of gold) and this is the version of Kresna that usually appears in such scenes (see plate 30 in the Simpingan Kanan section of the catalog).

→ The physical characteristics that vary by wanda include face and/or body coloring; clothing; ornaments; hair style; position of the face or head (whether bent downward or held high); the size, shape, and position of the eye and the direction of its glare; the size and general posture of the body; the way in which the neck is positioned; the posture and balance of the shoulders; and the shape of the character's stomach.²⁴ Changes in such features can signal subtle or dramatic differences in a character's personality or mood, and these differences can be very important to the dhalang. For example, when dhalang Ki Enthus Susmono talks about different wanda, his whole body reacts and his facial expression changes: he gets a glint in his eyes; his jaw tightens; he straightens his posture. These are the types of facial or body expressions that represent emotions associated with various wanda.

In general, spectators who have a basic knowledge of wayang kulit and are familiar with wayang figures may recognize the different wanda of a single character in a performance, or at least particularly common wanda such as Kresna's wanda, Rondhon, as discussed above. Nevertheless, differences between a character's wanda are oftentimes so slight, that only the most astute observer can distinguish between them. In such instances, most audience members cannot tell the difference between the wanda, even if the viewers are seated only a few feet away from the stage. For example, it is very difficult for an audience to perceive the precise direction of a figure's glare, or whether a figure's head is bent a few millimeters lower than in another wanda representation. These subtle differences exist for the dhalang, the artists, and the experts—although even they cannot always distinguish between the various wanda, even when they view the pieces up close. Ki Purbo Asmoro notes that sometimes, dhalang cannot recognize the differences but may choose a particular wanda based on personal preference: for example, based on the perceived comfort in handling the figure, or whether the hide structure is flexible enough for use in battle scenes. Still, wanda also exist for the sake of the puppet and the story: wanda can illuminate the character's various moods and personality aspects; and a particular wanda may be necessary for the story according to the way it is interpreted by the dhalang.²⁵

→ Like many aspects of wayang as an art form, the concept of wanda is open to interpretation, and a continuing discourse exists among dhalang and scholars that is part of a broader discussion about the nature of wayang kulit. Some dhalang claim that only certain characters may have numerous wanda, but other performers explain that if the dhalang believes it is necessary, he should be free to create a new wanda for any character. For example, Ki Enthus Susmono explains that if a character dies, the dhalang can create a *wanda mati* (that is, a wanda that expresses death). Innovation, such as creating new wanda, seems to be a popular trend in the wayang kulit tradition. Ki Enthus believes that a dhalang's personal interest, point of view, or interpretation of a story may also be expressed through wanda, which can amuse the spectators and strengthen the story, but he also notes these are his own ideas regarding wanda (perhaps on the progressive side) and that other performers may have different ideas.²⁶

Dhalang, who lean toward the classicist end of the spectrum believe that such innovations are entertaining and creative but that with few exceptions, these trends do not generally

last more than ten or twenty years. Therefore, traditionalists maintain that the newer, “invented” forms of wanda may be considered unique and unusual examples of wayang kulit, but are not actually a new “wanda.” Ki Purbo Asmoro noted that the norms for using wanda are more relaxed today than in the past, particularly in performances by younger dhalang. But, as in the past, the most important use of wanda is still in *jejer* scenes (the beginning scene where there is a meeting with a king), in which the character is expected to behave in a particularly respectful and humble manner, and for most dhalang, only certain wanda will best portray those behaviors.²⁷

Simpingan

During a performance, the wayang kulit are arranged in a relatively standard way on the *gedebog* (banana log).²⁸ This arrangement is referred to as the *simpingan*. At every wayang kulit performance, wayang figures are lined up to the right (*simpingan kanan*) and left (*simpingan kiri*) of the screen, and are set firmly into the gedebog, in ascending size order (with the smallest figures set closest to the dhalang who sits at the midpoint of the screen), and the figures face outward, away from the screen. The arrangement is viewed from the dhalang’s side of the screen. A third group of wayang is kept apart by the dhalang; the *dhudhahan* group. The dhudhahan group is not placed on the banana log.

The line of wayang on the gedebog is visually compelling, with overlapping pieces flanking the screen to the right and left, all lined up in order of size, and forming a diagonal line that brings the audience’s focus to the center of the screen—the central performance space. The number of wayang “on the log” can range from fewer than fifty to more than two hundred, depending on the dhalang’s artistic vision and collection, the sizes of the gedebog and the screen, the occasion of the performance, the performance space, and the sponsor of the event.

Simpingan Kanan-Kiri (Arrangement to the Right and Left of the Screen)

As mentioned above, the physical arrangement of wayang on the log for a performance is relatively standard. Placing specific characters on one side or another depends on aesthetics and tradition as well as the dhalang’s interpretation and personal preferences.

A popular misconception about simpingan is that the placement of the characters on the gedebog is based primarily on the characters’ moral fiber: that is, that characters with a generally good, polite, and refined disposition (*halus*) would be placed to the right (*simpingan kanan*) and those with a generally bad, rude, or coarse disposition (*kasar*) would be placed to the left (*simpingan kiri*). Characteristics such as halus and kasar are said to epitomize Javanese world view, at least in terms of ideal behaviors.²⁹ However, there is more to the arrangement of the wayang than good and bad qualities, or polite and rude traits.

Most wayang characters (like most human beings) are not simply “good” or “bad.” Good characters may do bad things, may be loud and coarse-mannered, or may have obligations that lead to allegiances with the antagonists. Likewise, some characters are polite, loyal, and diplomatic, but are at the same time immoral or make poor decisions. Arguably, there are no purely good or bad characters in wayang, only shades of grey. For example, if any character might be conceived as completely bad, Rahwana (a villain from the *Ramayana*) would be the one. However, Rahwana believed that possessing Sinta (a reincarnation of a goddess) would make him great: that is, Rahwana sought to better himself through his own actions

Fig. 32
Wayang kulit flank the screen to the right and left in an arrangement referred to as *simpingan*. Performance by Dhalang Ki Enthus Susmono. Photograph by Tadashi Kumagai, Central Java, July 2008.

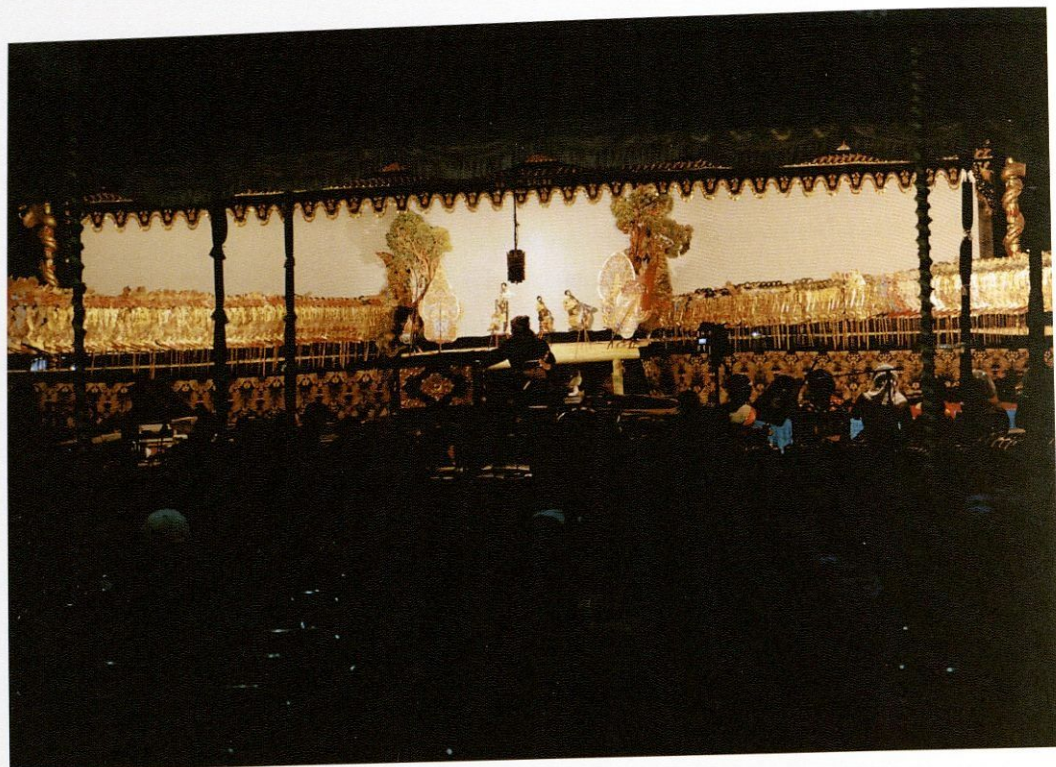


Fig. 33
 Detail from *simpingan kanan*, the right side. Photograph by Dr. Widya Nayati, Bantul, 2007.



Fig.33

based on principles that he believed. Thus, even though there are many negative aspects to Rahwana's character, it can be argued that even this famous villain nevertheless has some positive traits and good intentions.³⁰ So the good-bad dichotomy does not completely define the wayang characters, and therefore (although a character's temperament may play a role) the good-bad divide does not alone influence how they are arranged on the banana log.

The arrangement of the wayang on the gedebog depends primarily on aesthetic balance and proportionality.³¹ That is, the size and form of the characters set up to the right and to the left of the screen should be well balanced: the smallest characters should closely flank (or overlap) the screen on the right and left; and characters should gradually increase in size



Fig. 34
View of the *simpingan kiri*,
the left side of the screen at a
performance by dhalang Ki Anom
Dwijono Kangko. Photograph by the
author, Jebres, Solo, June 15,
2009.

as they extend out on the banana log, with the largest characters at the end of the lines. Gender also plays a role in the arrangement of wayang figures: female characters are displayed on the right side. Facial features and facial color are important factors in the arrangement of the wayang as well. For example, according to Ki Purbo, black and gold or yellow-faced wayang figures are placed on the right, and red and blue-faced wayang are placed on the left. Although facial color may indicate temperament, personality, or mood, the wayang are placed on a particular side based on how they look and groups of wayang with same-colored faces, of similar size, are usually placed together.³²

The placement of the individual figures in the *simpingan* is also determined by regional style or the aesthetics of a particular region, which is probably related to the color of the wayang figures. For instance, in Solo and Klaten, the antagonistic character Duryudana (a figure with a black face) is often placed in the *simpingan kanan* (to the right), where many dhalang feel the character looks best aesthetically in the lineup. (Duryudana's facial features, facial color, and expression are close to those of his cousin, Bima—a figure usually placed on the right; see plates 4–7 and 11–12 in the *Simpingan Kanan* section of the catalog.)³³ However, in places like Pacitan, Duryudana is normally placed in the *simpingan kiri* (to the left of the dhalang).³⁴

In summary, the exact placement of specific figures is not fixed, however, under normal circumstances, it is the overall look of the space—the visual balance—that is the major determinant of wayang placement, and that balance can be expected from show to show. In the end, the arrangement of the wayang on the *gedebog* is ultimately up to the dhalang.

Dhudhahan (Wayang Left Off the Gedebog)

Excluded from the *simpingan kanan* (right) and *simpingan kiri* (left) categories of characters are the wayang figures that fall into the *dhudhahan* group—meaning, “taken-out.”³⁵ These are shadow puppets that remain in the dhalang's *kothak* (puppet box) or are kept within arms' reach at the dhalang's side.³⁶

Wayang figures may be left off the gedebog (categorized as the dhudhahan group) if they are minor wayang figures (such as animals, ghosts, vehicles, armies, and weapons) and wayang figures that in some way confound or disrupt the aesthetic balance of the performance setting.³⁷ For example, if a character's physical form is too small, too big, or too fat they will not harmonize with the other figures displayed on the gedebog and may spoil the aesthetic balance in the simpingan arrangement. Such figures are therefore left out of the gedebog's right-left arrangement.

Also in the dhudhahan group are the puppeteer's most frequently used figures and the characters that appear in a given performance. Characters used in an evening's performance are not anchored to the log because retrieving a particular shadow puppet in mid-performance would be very disruptive.³⁸ The characters used in the evening's performance will be kept close to the dhalang's side, stacked on *eblek* (trays) in a very particular order. The trays are placed on top of the kothak, on the puppeteer's left (as he faces the screen) and on the lid of the box, to the puppeteer's right, where the dhalang has easy access to the pieces. The characters included in this scenario would depend on the particular story to be performed.