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Re-imagining Museum Space between Cultural Containment

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ABSTRACT

I approach the rumah gambar; those Malay picture-houses of the late nineteenth century, The rumah gambar; a travelling Malay picture-house discussed by Simon Soon (2018), provides the hinge of the argument. More than a studio, it operated as an embryonic, community-run museum: a porous room where photographs, maps, and panoramas were shown, discussed, and occasionally re-labelled by local viewers. Tracing Lambert's print from this egalitarian setting into rigid colonial vitrines, then into the speculative circuits of today's art market, reveals an institutional relay in which intimate portraiture is repeatedly recast as public memory. Each metamorphosis leaves fissures where counter-narratives can germinate. This paper traces the rumah gambar's curatorial logic through its later incarnations: colonial museums that fixed the once-fluid images behind glass; national archives that indexed them; contemporary art fairs that circulate them anew. The itinerary reveals containment not as a static enclosure but as a rhythm of pause and release. Images settle, accumulate meaning, then travel on. Understanding that rhythm, I argue, helps us rethink present debates over the museum's social role; debates crystallised in the triadic theme Tutur-Bhuwana-Tuwuh. Tutur describes the picture-house's first utterance: a luminous tale told through cloth and light. Bhuwana marks the worldly journey of those tales across ports, plantations, and catalogues, where they gather new valuations and frictions. Tuwuh names the work still ahead: to revive the pavilion's permeability in contemporary practice; inviting audiences to annotate, to disagree, to share custodianship; while acknowledging the colonial scaffolding that once framed the same images. Grounded in archival research, site visit, and small-scale re-enactments, this study proposes the rumah gambar as a model of flexible stewardship: a museum space light enough to travel, strong enough to hold memory, and open enough to let new voices re-compose its glow.

KEYWORDS

Rumah Gambar, museum space, cultural containment, flexible stewardship, public memory

Introduction

I arrive at ARMA just after first light, when the mists still coil low between the ravines of Ubud. The museum reveals itself gradually, not as a grand façade but as a sequence of thresholds: stone steps mossed by humidity; a carved candi bentar that parts like joined palms; a silent court where frangipani fall onto black-volcanic paving. Before I have met a single canvas, the land has begun its quiet indoctrination, as though saying: everything you are about to see was first born in this damp breath of earth.

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Inside, the first gallery opens onto contemporary prints of Ubud's natural spaces Cameon Komatsu's spare ink lines; figures tuned to the same recessive greys as the morning haze I have just walked through. The walls breathe daylight onto the artworks; the paper in turn seems to exhale back into the garden. Here ARMA rehearses a choreography of permeability: what is outside drifts inward as light, humidity, birdsong; what is inside drifts outward as dream, contour, myth. The museum, in this moment, is neither container nor open field but a membrane, flexing.

Moving deeper, I cross a narrow bridge over koi ponds flecked with bougainvillea petals. The fish flare and vanish like sudden pigments against stone. Above them hang works from Bali's 1930s Modernist encounter; Spies, Bonnet, Snel, paintings that once translated Balinese ritual into oils for European salons. Encountering them here, suspended above living earth and within distance of a temple, I sense the curatorial argument: the foreign gaze is welcomed not as dominance but as echo; it is allowed to hover, then sink, then feed the surface with colour. Display becomes an act of karmic rebalancing.

In the main pavilion, the great arts had epics that unrolled across the room: churning seas of devas and asuras, borders dense with stylised flame. I stand before one panel and feel its orchestration of storytelling as Tutur, the first utterance in the triad that guides my current research. The myth is not inert illustration; it speaks in layered golds, reciting genealogies of duty and desire. Yet as I step backward, my reflection slides faintly across the protective glass, suturing my modern silhouette to the ancient pigment; viewer and motif fold into each other. In that fold, I feel Bhuwana; the worldly plane where images meet new eyes, acquire new tensions.

The final gallery is a dim space showing fragile paintings of pre- tourists of Bali: mud-floored markets, masked dancers caught mid-gesture, ridge-top fields before the first yoga retreat supplanted rice. These images, more than any canvas, recall the travelling rumah gambar pavilions that once toured such scenes from village to village. Their presence here, in a permanent archive, performs a gesture of Tuwuh: a re-growth that seals vulnerability without denying movement. The paintings rest, but do not sleep; they retain the latent potential to be re-projected, re-captioned, re-imagined.

Exiting back into the garden I notice how the rooflines of the galleries mimic the upturned eaves of surrounding pura; architecture joins liturgy. Curation, here, is not the imposition of order but the tuning of resonance: canvases, trees, volcanic stone, and passing bodies vibrate on shared frequencies. The space persuades me that any museum worthy of Bali's psychic terrain must stage this dialogue between enclosure and release, containment and circulation; it must be, in Merleau-Ponty's sense, a "flesh" where inside and outside continually exchange skins.

Walking the shaded colonnade toward the gate, I understand why ARMA unsettles my own thinking about museological practice. It translates visual culture into spatial poetry without surrendering to spectacle; it safeguards while letting air pass through. In doing so, it sketches a blueprint for the future museum I have been theorising: a flexible pavilion of borrowed light, rooted in place yet hospitable to drift. ARMA does not solve the tensions of cultural containment; it embraces them, lets them breathe like mists across a ravine, and in that breathing teaches the visitor to dwell; however briefly, in the luminous third space between seeing and being seen.

The gallery now dims; lights do flare against the canvas, its fragile emulsion granular yet insistent; and in that instant the triadic compass of the 2025 B-GAAD theme: Tutur; Bhuwana; Tuwuh. All aligns itself with the companion axis Myths; World; Memory. My paper follows the life of one such slide, a late-nineteenth- century portrait of two women first printed in spending their lives mislabelled.

By tracing the object's mythic aura, worldly mobility, and mnemonic after-images, I argue that the rumah gambar was never merely a colonial sideshow; it was, and remains, a cosmological machine whose sputtering light still unsettles the disciplinary boundaries of art history and conservation science.

The mythic charge of early projection culture in Southeast Asia has often been overshadowed by Eurocentric accounts of technological progress. Yet what one's testimony records the screen as kain berjiwa: "cloth endowed with soul"; and the camera itself as a thief of semangat, the vital spirit (Wessing, 1993, p. 27). In such stories the slide is not an inert index but a volatile avatar; its abrupt apparition in the darkness echoes the epiphanic logic of shadow-puppet cosmogenesis, where form precipitates from undifferentiated glow. Roland Barthes's notion of the punctum, the wound that "bruises" the spectator (Barthes, 1981, p. 27; that finds an indigenous analogue here: the lantern picture does not merely show a world; it pierces it, opening a mythopoetic interval in which ancestral and spectral bodies briefly co-inhabit the present. This conjuncture grounds the first vector of the paper: Tutur, as an utterance whose ontology is inseparable from local cosmologies of light.

From that primal flash the slide begins its worldly itinerary. Shipping manifests carried such images along the plantation littoral; museum registers re-captioned them in ethnographic vernacular; auction catalogues commodified their exotic patina.

Each stop recalibrated the object's epistemic status, and together they expose what Rosalind Krauss calls the "optical unconscious", the structuring blindness that accompanies every regime of seeing (Krauss, 1993, p. 24). By compressing this global circuitry into a punctuated biography; the essay materialises Bhuwana as more than

rhetorical drift; it becomes a cartography of logistical, linguistic, and fiscal infrastructures.

Here I enlist multispectral diagnostics as historiographic evidence: false-colour IR composites isolate fugitive 'retouching' that betray hurried over-painting for export markets (Cosentino & Stout, 2014, pp. 94– 95); earlier image-derived IRFC protocols confirm pentimenti along the sitter's headdress (Moon, Schilling, & Thirkettle, 1992, pp. 44–47). Conservation imaging thus anchors world-system theory in the literal materiality of the artefact.

If myth confers aura and world enacts circulation, memory adjudicates their collision in the present. When the rejuvenated slide was projected during my Borrowed Light installation in Gianyar last year, an elder recognised the batik motif as Johorean, not Batavian, effectively puncturing the colonial caption; such audience inscriptions illustrate Marianne Hirsch's "postmemory", whereby descendants graft personal affect onto archival fissures (Hirsch, 2012, p. 35).

Pierre Nora's lieux de mémoire frame the lantern show as a site where private reminiscence confronts state heritage (Nora, 1989, pp. 8–9); Aleida Assmann's distinction between "storage" and "functional" memory elucidates how digitisation flips dormant cellulose nitrate into active civic discourse (Assmann, 2011, p. 123). Infra-red imaging spectroscopy sharpens this point: Delaney et al. demonstrate how co-registered visible/IR cubes expose preparatory charcoal beneath the veneer (Delaney et al., 2016, pp. 2–3); the glowing substratum literalises the mnemonic palimpsest, allowing the public to see forgetting occur and thereby participate in its redress.

Then, the idea of Tuwuh gesture therefore exceeds curatorial revival; it choreographs a co-authored mnemonic negotiation, aligning with Emilie Sitzia's call for an "ignorant art museum" that privileges participatory knowledge over didactic closure (Sitzia, 2017, p. 80).

Rumah Gambar

The rumah gambar; literally "picture house", emerged in late nineteenth-century Malaya as a hybrid venue that was neither merely a commercial studio nor a formal museum. Dr. Simon Soon (2018, pp. 34-35) describes these structures as itinerant salons of looking; timber pavilions where photographs, lantern slides, painted panoramas, and chromolithographs were hung side by side; inviting audiences to move, almost liturgically, from frame to frame. In such spaces the colonial photograph found a second life; it was no longer the private commodity acquired by one patron but a shared spectacle that folded cosmopolitan curiosity into local sociality.

In Sekolah Gambar, Dr Simon Soon gently unravels the complex tensions between the museological urge to contain and categorise, and the living, breathing realities of cultural memory. Through the evocative recounting of the 1921 discovery of the Ganesha statue in Sarawak, he reveals how objects, once domesticated within the walls of museums, are often stripped of their original ritual life and reframed within Eurocentric taxonomies of knowledge (Soon, 2021, 00:03:21–00:04:20). Yet, as Soon notes, these transformations are never absolute; the local community's continued reverence, placing offerings and requesting copies of the image; subtly unsettles the sterile narratives imposed by museum structures.

This tension, between the living and the archived, resonates deeply with the way images in Southeast Asia have always carried multiple, sometimes contradictory, lives; they are not fixed but unfold across time, space, and belief systems. Soon's conceptualisation of the Rumah Gambar, the "house of images," proposes an alternative framework where the museum becomes not a mausoleum of frozen meanings but a relational dwelling: one that invites entanglements, dialogues, and embodied participation rather than passive observation (Soon, 2021, 00:08:00–00:10:50).

What draws me to Soon's notion of Rumah Gambar is its profound alignment with the poetics of the in- between, a space I, too, often inhabit in my own practice; where images are not solely viewed but lived through. His reflections offer a timely decolonial gesture: a call to reclaim the act of looking from the grip of institutionalised authority and to restore it to the rhythms of everyday life, to the tactile, to the memory- laden and the affective. In my own explorations of image, place, and history; whether through performance, installation, or archival excavation, I find echoes of Rumah Gambar in the way images not only frame but also unsettle narratives, allowing for the return of forgotten voices and gestures that have long lingered in the shadows. Just as Soon resists the flattening of meaning, I too seek to create spaces where multiplicity thrives; where the image is not an end but an opening, a threshold into something far less containable.

The rumah gambar thus enacted a proto-museological impulse: it collected, classified, and captioned, but it did so without the permanent authority of marble floors and vitrines. Its partitions were rattan; its archives nomadic; its curators ad-hoc entrepreneurs who brokered between European image-makers and indigenous viewers. Yet it is precisely this porousness that situates the rumah gambar within what Homi Bhabha terms the "third space"; neither wholly colonial nor wholly vernacular; a site where meanings are improvised, resisted, and re-negotiated (Bhabha, 1994, p. 38).

When Lambert's studio portrait entered a rumah gambar in Singapore or Penang, it ceased to be a discrete token of royal femininity; it became one panel in a moving

tableau of empire's breadth. Viewers encountered it not as a document of their own community but as one node in an expanding cartography of difference: Siamese courts; Ceylonese tea estates; Cantonese merchants; all arrayed beneath the same thatched roof.

Here, myth operated quietly; the photograph whispered an origin story in which the colonial camera alone could stabilise Asia's bewildering multiplicity into legible types. Yet even as the image naturalised imperial hierarchy, the rumah gambar's very informality allowed viewers to bend interpretation. Oral anecdotes, gossip, and local humour circulated within the gallery; spectators might recognise a familiar textile pattern, question a sitter's posture, or mock the stiffness of western staging. In those murmurs lay the seeds of counter-reading; the realisation that however authoritative the image claimed to be, it remained vulnerable to vernacular talk.

The institutional stakes sharpened when such pictures migrated from rumah gambar to colonial museums. In 1908 the Federated Malay States Museums adopted photography as classificatory evidence; laminating prints onto cards, pencilling accession numbers, storing them in steel cabinets whose solidity opposed the rattan walls they replaced. Intimacy was evacuated; the portrait became an ethnographic datum, interfiled with beetles, kris, and textiles; proof of the empire's taxonomic reach.

Myth hardened into discipline; artworks now no longer be the interlocutors but specimens, tethered to didactic labels that froze their identities. Yet the museum's boast of permanence masked its own instabilities. As Benedict Anderson (1991, p. 179) reminds us, colonial museums were always haunted by what they excluded; their very orderliness called forth the possibility of re-ordering.

Commodification exposed the painting's contingency; its value now floated on speculative narratives of provenance; narratives that could be amended, contested, or debunked. Sitzia's proposal of the "ignorant art museum" sharpens the stakes of that prod. Drawing on Rancière, she argues that emancipatory practice emerges when museums relinquish their unidirectional lecture and allow visitors to "verify" knowledge for themselves (Sitzia, 2017, p. 3). The gallery becomes a third-space studio: visitors not only consume the palimpsest; they write into it. Their annotations, sometimes scholarly, sometimes anecdotal; are then fed into the next iteration of the installation, troubling any fantasy of curatorial finality.

Such manoeuvres answer Mairesse's call to reconsider what we actually mean by "museum." The term, he shows, has been redefined at least nine times in ICOM's history, each revision nudged by new social pressures (Mairesse, 2019, pp. 154-155). Where earlier definitions stressed permanence and the authority of collections, the 1974 Copenhagen wording inserted a decisive clause: the museum is "in the service of

society and its development." In doing so, it foregrounds what Wayan Kun Adnyana has recently described as Bali's post-pandemic "ritual imaging", wherein screens, digital or lantern, mediate communal resilience (Adnyana, 2024, p. 14).

That opening is precisely where the study of imageries of cultural identifiers in paintings became an intervention. In the 1970s, amid the neighbouring countries search for post-colonial identity, many would have had adopting pop-art strategies, the nominal artists of the time neither dismissed nor revered the colonial source; they bracketed it, letting repetition and colour block anaesthetise the image's ethnographic authority.

Their work reframed myth yet again: the sitters seen now served as emblems of a modernising nation negotiating its own Orientalist inheritances. Viewers who recognised such a template could glimpse the palimpsest; those who did not could still sense an uncanny déjà vu; the memories of the past to be the spectral residue. Thus a counter-narrative breached the museum wall: the possibility that national identity is built atop, not beyond, colonial optics.

In the twenty-first century that breach widens. Digitisation, online archives, and practice-based research have dislodged the portrait from exclusive institutional custody. My experience in re-prints the original negative on handmade rice paper; installs it in site-responsive projections; and invites audiences to annotate margins with their own familial myths. The installation travels; the physical works displayed; online VR walkthroughs; each venue layering new commentaries atop old surfaces.

Here the museum is no longer a terminal repository but a node in a distributed network; an interface where users toggle between catalogue record, auction history, and personal memory. Myth splinters into plural tellings; public memory becomes a chorus of micro-histories, each half-illuminated by borrowed light.

If the museum serves society, what forms of "development" are implied when a colonial print is digitised, enlarged, and sold as a limited-edition pigment print? By staging the work in venues that range from provincial art spaces to national galleries, I attempt to keep these questions live, refusing a single stabilising frame.

Yet the palimpsest remains ethically discomforting. Am I, in re-animating or within this case, re- appropriating images, complicit in re-inscribing its colonial gaze; or am I revealing the seams of its making so that alternative gazes may flourish? The answer depends less on authorial intention than on institutional context. In a national museum, the work might be catalogued as a patriotic reclamation; in a community hall, it might ignite debate on class and gender; in an auction preview it risks sliding back into commodified exoticism. Such volatility confirms Bhabha's assertion that the third space is not a stable middle ground but a "moment of enunciation" where meaning is always contingent; always negotiated (Bhabha, 1994, p. 55).

Yet the itinerary from rumah gambar to contemporary gallery does more than illustrate institutional elasticity; it reveals the ethical ambivalence of my own craft. As a photographer, I recognise the seductive potency of the lens; its knack for "stretching a moment into eternity" as Crowley and Matthews put it (2006, p. 265).

Therefore the task before us is not to rescue the image into a final, rightful home; rather, it is to keep the portrait in motion, to stage its institutional metamorphoses as pedagogical theatre. Each reframing: rumah gambar, museum, market, gallery, digital cloud; which exposes new apertures for myth-making and un- making.

By foregrounding those apertures we convert an intimate portrait of unnamed women into a polyphonic public memory; one that acknowledges violence yet resists closure; one that invites counter-narratives to germinate in the cracks of official display. Such labour; at once archival, curatorial, and artistic; enacts the spirit of Tutur-Bhuwana-Tuwuh: it listens to inherited stories; locates them within worldly circuits; and tends their regenerative growth toward futures not yet surveyed.

Museums today openly wrestle with such friction. Brown and Mairesse (2018, p. 1) note that the once- central authority of the collection now competes with demands for social inclusion and participatory interpretation; the museum's "purpose and values have been largely transformed". As a practitioner, I experience this transformation most sharply when a print leaves the darkroom and enters the white cube: the work no longer belongs solely to my hand; it is re-authored by wall text, lighting, and curatorial sequencing.

This institutional metamorphosis is precisely what I seek to expose. By tracing image through the regional auction circuit, and finally the digital projection in my own installation, I track how intimate portraiture congeals into public myth and; if prodded, cracks open to counter-narrative. These traces rendered the images simultaneously more fragile and more valuable, demonstrating Bennett's (1995, p. 6) argument that museums regulate culture by choreographing its movements as much as its meanings.

Sitzia's proposal of the "ignorant art museum" sharpens the stakes of that prod. Drawing on Rancière, she argues that emancipatory practice emerges when museums relinquish their unidirectional lecture and allow visitors to "verify" knowledge for themselves (Sitzia, 2017, p. 3). In practical terms, I translate that philosophy by hanging a facsimile by withholding the usual didactic panel. Instead, the usual; narrative must invite viewers to record questions, associations, memories. The gallery becomes a third-space studio: visitors not only consume the palimpsest; they write into it. Their annotation; sometimes scholarly, sometimes anecdotal, are then fed into the next iteration of the installation, troubling any fantasy of curatorial finality.

Such manoeuvres answer Mairesse's call to reconsider what we actually mean by "museum." The term, he shows, has been redefined at least nine times in the International Councils of Museum's (ICOM) history, each revision nudged by new social pressures (Mairesse, 2019, pp. 154-155). Where earlier definitions stressed permanence and the authority of collections, the 1974 Copenhagen wording inserted a decisive clause: the museum is "in the service of society and its development."

My project reads that clause through the lens of post-colonial image circulation. If the museum serves society, whose society does it serve when the forms of "development" are implied when a colonial print is digitised, enlarged, and sold as a limited-edition pigment print? By staging the work in venues that range from provincial art spaces to national galleries, I attempt to keep these questions live, refusing a single stabilising frame.

Yet the itinerary from rumah gambar to contemporary gallery does more than illustrate institutional elasticity; it reveals the ethical ambivalence of my own craft. As a photographer, I recognise the seductive potency of the lens; its knack for "stretching a moment into eternity" as Crowley & Matthews (2006, p. 265) put it. To remediate Lambert's negative is therefore to risk reviving its colonial seduction.

The solution, Sitzia suggests, lies in designing exhibitions as experiments rather than verdicts. In this spirit, the Borrowed Light installation incorporates a light-table where visitors can rearrange contact sheets, literally re-editing the archive. Their tactile choices echo Jacotot's principle that "all intelligences are equal"; a radical stance that, as Sitzia (2017, p. 5) argues, can transform the gallery into an "ignorant museum" where expertise circulates horizontally.

Brown and Mairesse caution, however, that the global race to redefine museums often glosses over linguistic and regional asymmetries; notions of social role differ sharply between Europe and Latin America (2018, p. 2).

Final Mark

Crucially, preservation, exhibition, and creative re-making emerged not as a tidy sequence but as overlapping negotiations. As Sitzia (2017) insists, museums that aspire to social relevance must move "beyond meaning-making" (p. 2) toward shared authorship; the rumah gambar demonstrates that this co-production of knowledge is hardly a twenty-first-century invention but a historical practice awaiting critical revival. In situating Tutur, Bhuwana, and Tuwuh within a single, breathing ecology of display, the pavilion offers a template for contemporary institutions: contain culture lightly, let it travel, and allow each pause in that journey to become a site of collective insight rather than curatorial finality.

Returning to ARMA for follow-up observation, I paid closer attention to the ponds beneath the bridge linking the two pavilions. Petals drifted on the water's surface while, overhead, canvases by Spies and Bonnet; European artists of the 1930s who translated Balinese ritual into Western oil; hung in dim light. The juxtaposition was not accidental: living water under colonial translation formed a visual synecdoche of exchange. The fish flare and vanish like pigment strokes, reminding me that even captured bodies keep moving. Curatorially, ARMA lets motion survive containment, a curatorial sympathy rare in the marble entombments Crowley and Matthews (2006) critique in their study of apartheid memorials.

Throughout this journey I have confronted my own complicity as both image-maker and researcher. When I enlarge a fragile glass-plate negative on handmade rice paper, am I decolonising the gaze or merely polishing it?

Brown and Mairesse (2018) warn that museums often re-brand participation while leaving structural hierarchies intact. To mitigate this risk, I adopt what I call "light stewardship": share custodianship of interpretation, disclose conservation choices, and accept ephemerality as inevitable. Light stewardship does not abdicate care; it diffuses authority so that conservation ethics emerge through dialogue rather than decree.

The philosophical horizon of this essay is thus twofold. First, containment and permeability are not antagonists but co-dependent movements; museums should design for rhythmic breathing rather than static walls. Second, Southeast Asia's rumah gambar offers a historically grounded model of such breathing. Its lightweight architecture, commercial yet communally negotiable, showed that images can be both protected and shared without monumental fixation. By reviving this ethos, contemporary institutions; be they national galleries or village archives, can align with Balinese principles of ecological balance and fraternal exchange.

In closing, I return to the early morning mist of Ubud. As the sun rose, the coils dispersed, revealing rice terraces that had been invisible moments before. The scene felt like a visual metaphor for the essay's central claim: memory requires a measure of obscurity, a containment that lets forms gestate; yet illumination must eventually disperse the veil. A museum worthy of such a landscape shelters that gestation yet remains porous enough for light; and critique, to drift through its doors. In that calibrated respiration, cultural containment and communal illumination become the same gesture.

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