

# Appropriation and appreciation of Austrian and Indonesian puppetry

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## Abstract

Austria contributed to the most important development of rod puppetry in Europe since Richard Teschner initiated to development of his rod puppet inspired by Indonesian *Wayang Golek*. He modified the Javanese rod puppet technology and fashioned his own exotic and rare marionette figures. Through his *Nawang Wulan* puppet version, Teschner tried to represent the original story of *Nawang Wulan*, with his appropriation and appreciation for the artistic object. His representation of other cultures can be regarded as a form of cultural appropriation. Through this research, the secular and religious aspects of cultural appropriation can be discussed. Teschner's puppets can become a good example that shows cultural appropriation is not something that should be avoided in making art, instead it can inspire artists to make new creations and still represent the artistic entity.

## Author keywords

Cultural appropriation; puppets; aesthetic; *wayang golek*

## Introduction

Historically, puppetry seems to have existed in most civilizations since it represents one of the most primitive instincts of humanity. It may certainly be said that puppet theatre has everywhere antedated written drama and writing of any kind (Speaight, 2017). Puppetry is essentially folk art, and its origins are generally thought to lie mainly in the East. Asia is the source of many of the ideas and techniques of the puppetry of the West since it was highly sophisticated at a very early date (Currell, 1974). In many traditions, puppets are articulated objects, engineered to receive and express motion. It also acts as an existential mirror, reflecting the precariousness of our condition as living subjects (Guy, 2013).

## Austrian Puppetry and Indonesian Javanese Influence

In many parts of Europe, puppetry was well established by the thirteenth century, and free exchange between the countries there has produced similar trends and styles in puppetry. Austria contributed to the most important development of rod puppetry in Europe since Richard Teschner, an accomplished puppeteer and stage designer, initiated to development of his own very intricate type of rod puppet, often with a complicated system of control strings inside the supporting rod.

Whereas, in Indonesia, people always refer to *wayang* theater when they think about traditional puppetry. *Wayang* is a classical Indonesian Javanese puppet theatre that uses the shadows thrown by puppets manipulated by rods against a translucent screen lit from behind (Britannica T. E., 2018). It has roots dating back over one thousand years and holds a significant meaning to Indonesian society. The term '*wayang*' means 'shadow' in Javanese, although it also means 'imagination' and indicates 'spirit' (Widyokusumo, Darmawan, & Wijaya, 2012). Unlike *wayang kulit* which is a two-dimensional figure, *wayang golek*, is a three-dimensional wooden figure which originated from Sunda, West Java (Suryana, 2002). The term '*golek*' means 'wooden doll' in Sundanese (Panitia Lembaga Basa dan Sastra Sunda, 1981). However, other Javanese pundits say that the term '*golek*' means 'look' or 'search' since *wayang golek* puppet facilitates the search for meaning by spectators in a way that shadow puppet cannot (Cohen, 2007).

Inspired by *wayang golek* brought by Dutch explorers from Java in the 1920s, Teschner opened an artistic small rod-puppet theatre called *Figurenspiegel* (Magic Mirror) later in Vienna (Currell, 1974; Britannica T. E., 2021). He modified the Javanese rod puppet technology and fashioned his own exotic and rare marionette figures. Although, in contrast with *wayang* theatrical form that traditionally very discursive, Teschner presented his dreamworlds of puppet theatre with mute figures since he was adamant that puppets be made from wood and should not speak. He designed his stages that allowed for the most intricate changes in lighting and back projection (Cohen, 2007; Joseph, 1920). Teschner's work influenced leaders of the 20th-century puppet theatres throughout Europe and the United States (Britannica T. E., 2021). The work has also been compiled on videos and revivals can be seen at the Theatre Museum in Austria today.

## Appropriation and Appreciation

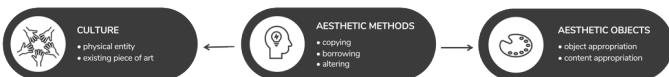
Puppetry has carried on the essential characteristic of the country that produces it, reflecting the national temperament and psychology of its society (Currell, 1974). Through this research, I tried to analyze visual forms of Austrian rod puppets and how far Indonesian *wayang* had influenced them. Moreover, I would like to find the depth of understanding between two cultures and how this aspect can be shown in the visual form of the puppets.





**Figure 1.** Nawang Wulan puppet by Richard Teschner (1912) **Figure 2.** Wayang golek puppet

During my primary visual observation, there are some interesting findings regarding the form of Teschner's puppet with the original Javanese *wayang golek* puppet. Through his *Nawang Wulan* puppet version, Figure 1, Teschner tried to reconstruct the original *wayang golek* puppet from Java, Figure 2, and modified it with advanced technology to make a more complex movement. Although, he kept the anatomy of Javanese puppets as his *core* influence i.e., the thin, flexible limbs of the puppets that still gave the feeling of the original forms of *wayang*. Most puppeteers believe that Teschner's appropriation of *wayang golek* is in many ways authoritative (Cohen, 2007). Furthermore, after my interview with Angela Sixt, the curator from Theater Museum Vienna, researcher got some interesting points that led her to the importance of cultural appropriation between Austria and Indonesia. Like most Western puppeteers, Teschner mainly referred to the naturalist style for visual forms and facial expressions in his puppets, which imitated or depicted human features. However, the bone structures and head proportions of his puppets were still following Javanese *wayang golek*. Based on Sixt's information, Teschner found the 'unique' anatomy of *wayang golek* fascinating. With the obvious 'caricature' size of the head and thin arms, he thought it was an exotic and rare visual figure, which was acceptable since it was a puppet. Based on Teschner's understanding, puppets can be designed based on imagination and fantasy (Sixt, 2022). Therefore, in his puppet version, *Nawang Wulan* was a puppet with a unique head and body proportion with better and more beautiful facial features. The original artwork opens up new perspectives. It excites the imagination in new ways. (Young, 2006). The representation of other cultures is often regarded as a form of cultural appropriation (Young, 2008).



**Figure 3.** Artistic Appropriation (Wijaya, 2023)

Referring to Teschner's understanding of visual forms, I define his approach as part of artistic appropriation. He tried to represent the original story of *Nawang Wulan* with his appropriation and appreciation for the artistic object. Artistic appropriation, Figure 3, like found object art, is defined as "the purposeful copying, borrowing, and altering of previous imagery, objects, and concepts as an aesthetic method (Art in Context, 2022). In this case, Teschner was an *outsider*, a non-member individual (Young, 2008) of Indonesian culture, who tried to do artistic appropriation by borrowing and altering the cultural object.

As an *insider*, a member of Indonesian culture, I understand Teschner's secular perspective of artistic appropriation. While Teschner, as an *outsider* and as a Westerner, was fascinated by the rare and unique proportion of the puppet, Indonesian *wayang* puppet artists do not focus on the 'ideal' proportion, instead, they deliberately create 'distortion' figures, such as larger head size and smaller body proportion. The aesthetic value of *wayang* relied on its symbolic meaning and must be created by following '*pakem*' or Javanese-specific rules (Suryana, 2002). Furthermore, the main reason why Indonesian puppet artists/makers focus on 'distortion' is based on a religious perspective. *Wayang* puppets were used as the best medium to disseminate the religious ideas of Islam in the ancient Javanese kingdom and society. Islamic resistance to the representation of living beings ultimately stems from the belief that the creation of living forms is unique to God (Department of Islamic Art, 2001). Since it is forbidden to depict human form for Muslims, the *wayang* puppets must be created in a certain way, to show that it represents human but does not look like a human (Widyokusumo, 2021).

Artists can appropriate culture i.e., tangible (object) appropriation and intangible content and subject appropriation (stories, styles, motifs, design; subject matter) (Young, 2008). Through his work, Richard Teschner had shown a sample of tangible (object) appropriation, although he did not appropriate the subject matter, which in this case, the story and religious perspective since he had no knowledge about these matters as an outsider of Indonesian culture. I cannot say Teschner produced existentially authentic puppets, but I believe that he did an aesthetic success with his creation. As Young stated, artists represent their own experiences in their work. In representing their experience, artists represent what is already theirs. They do not represent the experience of anyone else (Young, 2006).

## Conclusion

Through this preliminary research about the connection of Austrian and Indonesian puppetry from a cultural appropriation perspective, I, as an *insider*, acknowledged that Teschner, as an *outsider*, had produced a great work aesthetically. He enhanced the technology of his puppets, which made them unique and had more possibilities for dynamic movement. Although he did not essentially know about the religious subject matter, he managed to appropriate his puppets without offending Indonesian culture. He kept the most essential aspect i.e., the proportion of the original *wayang golek* puppets. Teschner's creation can become an example that cultural appropriation is not something that should be avoided in making art, instead, it can inspire us to make new creations and still represent our entity. Thus, I will conclude with Young's statement, "Personal authenticity is an aesthetic merit. All things being equal, a work of art is an original expression of an artist's genius is more valuable than a derivative one (Young, 2006).

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