

Affandi,  
*Burong Hitam,*  
*Matahari,*  
*Manusia*  
(Black Bird,  
Sun, Man)

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**Figure 1.** Affandi, *Burung Hitam, Matahari, Manusia* (*Black Bird, Sun, Man*), 1950, oil on canvas, 169.5 x 84.5 cm, Collection of National Gallery Singapore, © Affandi Foundation

Affandi (1907–1990) was one of many Southeast Asian artists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century who explored different techniques and subject matters in search of their own forms of artistic expression. In the years following World War II, the push towards decolonisation and growing nationalist sentiments led to the emergence of nation-states across Southeast Asia. The development of modern art in the region was thus linked to these broader contexts in many instances. Some artists made art which reflected or responded to the social and political conditions during this time. For instance, in the years leading up to and beyond the Indonesian proclamation of independence in 1945, Affandi designed posters in support of nationalism.

From the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Affandi came to prominence internationally through his participation in various art exhibitions. A self-taught artist, Affandi's distinctive style came to be seen as a representation of the modern Indonesian identity in art.

*Burong Hitam, Matahari, Manusia* (Black Bird, Sun, Man) represents a time in the artist's life when he travelled abroad to further his artistic career. He created works along this journey and participated in exhibitions. Between 1949 and 1951, Affandi and his family were in India, where Affandi had received a two-year scholarship to study at the art academy at Santiniketan, a centre of learning established by Rabindranath Tagore (K. Affandi and Soetriyono 2007, 202). Upon Affandi's arrival at Santiniketan, he was recognised as a professional artist. Instead of training at the art academy, he was given his scholarship funds to travel throughout India (Bujono 2007, 12). Through his travels, Affandi would create sketches and make notes based on his observations, some of which would later inform his paintings.

This painting is part of a body of works in Affandi's oeuvre which depict the lives of the destitute and the marginalised in society. Affandi's poignant representations suggest a sympathy for the challenges and harsh realities of everyday life.

In this painting, Affandi depicts a thin, old man carrying a musical instrument. There are more details on the man's face compared to the rest of the figure, bringing our attention to his expression. His wrinkled forehead is a sign of his old age. His eyes are closed serenely, while his mouth is fully open showing his teeth, bar a missing few. It is an enigmatic expression, perhaps a grimace, or a grin – as if the man is weary, yet still full of life and determined to carry on. He is wearing simple clothing and carrying a motley of belongings. Is he a down-on-his-luck musician, wandering around the streets searching for a living? Could this painting be a reflection on humanity's struggles? At the same time, Affandi's depiction of the figure gives him a certain dignity and an aura of strength. The lively strokes and textured surface in *Burong Hitam, Matahari, Manusia* (Black Bird, Sun, Man) are typical of Affandi's style – a result of his application of paint directly from the tube. Rather than use a brush, Affandi refined a technique of using his fingers to create lines on the canvas. This technique was also faster and more intimate, and enabled Affandi to relay his emotions directly onto canvas. Affandi once remarked: "I work as I feel and leave everything to the critics. I try to stir up my emotions, shutting out my brain, and painting by instincts. As I do this I sweat profusely." (*The Straits Times*, 1975). This suggests the act of painting was a highly energetic gesture by the artist.

Affandi often included the motif of a sun in his works, which he saw as a source of energy. In this painting, the sun features prominently in the upper left corner, radiating vibrant blue rays

across a canvas suffused with warm colours. A drawing from 1984 would bear an inscription that expressed his philosophy: “*Matahari hidup saya, dengan tangan saya bekerja, dengan kaki saya maju.*” (Bahasa Indonesia: “The sun is my life, with my hands I work, with my feet I move forward”).

Affandi’s evocative artworks found resonance across the globe, drawing the attention of art critics. *Burong Hitam, Matahari, Manusia* (Black Bird, Sun, Man) appeared in a positive review of Affandi’s 1952 exhibition in the Netherlands (Spanjaard 2007, 21). British art historian and critic Herbert Read deemed Affandi’s art “a new expressionism”, a term the artist would subsequently reflect upon (Bujono 2007, 10). In his own way, Affandi played a significant cultural role through his art, contributing to growing international recognition of Indonesia as a modern independent nation. From 1951 to 1954, Affandi exhibited in India, Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. He also began to represent Indonesia at various international platforms, from the 1953 Sao Paulo exhibition in Brazil, and the 1954 Venice Biennale, to the 1970 Exposition in Osaka (K. Affandi and Soetriyono 2007, 203-205).

Affandi’s artistic career was characterised by several significant moments in Singapore. Affandi exhibited in the Singapore Art Society’s *Art of Indonesia Today* exhibition in 1955. Hon. Mr. David Marshall (1908-1995), Singapore’s first Chief Minister, noted it as the “first officially-sponsored exhibition held by any country in Singapore”, as well as the “first representative show of Indonesia’s modern art” (Marshall 1955). In 1974, Affandi was one of several artists who represented Indonesia in the first mobile ASEAN art and photography exhibition organised by the

ASEAN Permanent Committee on Socio-Cultural Activities. This exhibition aimed to highlight the richness of modern art and photography in the region, and to promote common values through art. It opened in Kuala Lumpur, and subsequently travelled to Singapore, Jakarta, Manila and Bangkok. In the same year, Affandi also became the first Indonesian artist to be conferred the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters from the University of Singapore, for his contributions to art. In 1975, the National Museum of Singapore held an exhibition of Affandi’s works. While in Singapore, the artist painted a self-portrait which he subsequently presented as a gift, and it is now part of Singapore’s National Collection.

Affandi is one of several modern Indonesian artists who are represented in Singapore’s National Collection, reflecting connections between Singapore and Indonesia that have manifested through artistic exchanges and exhibitions over the years. The story behind this painting is a unique one – it was painted by an Indonesian artist, probably inspired by his travels in India, and exhibited in the Netherlands. This painting is, in some ways, a reflection of the mobility of modern Southeast Asian artists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It also hints at connections that remain to be discovered among art centres in Southeast Asia and the rest of the world. □



**Figure 2.** Affandi, *Self-portrait*, 1975, oil on canvas, 130 x 100.5 cm. Gift of the artist, Collection of National Gallery Singapore, © Affandi Foundation.

*Burong Hitam, Matahari, Manusia (Black Bird, Sun, Man)* is currently on display in *Between Declarations and Dreams: Art of Southeast Asia since the 19<sup>th</sup> century*, UOB Southeast Asia Gallery 6, National Gallery Singapore.

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