



## **Expressing the Essence of Classical Gambuh Dance Drama through Batuan Traditional Painting**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This independent study project explores how the essence of Gambuh, Bali's oldest and most sacred dance-drama, can be interpreted through the lens of traditional Batuan painting. Motivated by a desire to preserve and reinterpret cultural heritage, this project focuses on visualizing six main characters, Putri Rangkesari, Panji, Condong, Prabhu Lasem, Kade-Kadean, and Arya, each rendered with deep attention to gesture, costume, and symbolic presence. The research employs a method rooted in artistic creation, combining aesthetic approaches such as heuristic, hermeneutic, and symbolic exploration with field observations and traditional mentorship. The creative process followed three key stages: exploration through direct observation of Gambuh performances and Batuan traditional painting studios; improvisation through sketching and experimenting with visual composition; and forming, where the final works were developed using Chinese ink and watercolor on watercolour paper and canvas in the Batuan style. The artworks produced do not merely document the characters, but reinterpret them as reflections of emotional and philosophical dimensions relevant to today's social reality. This project concludes that Batuan painting offers a powerful visual medium to convey the layered narratives of Gambuh, enabling the audience to engage with classical themes of love, power, longing, and moral conflict through a contemplative visual experience.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Bali is a cultural landscape in which art and daily life are inseparable, functioning not merely as aesthetic production but as a social and spiritual practice embedded within communal identity. Artistic traditions in Bali serve simultaneously as cultural transmission, spiritual



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discipline, and collective memory, reflecting a worldview in which visual and performative arts are integral to lived experience.[1] One significant manifestation of this tradition is Batuan painting, which developed in Batuan Village, Gianyar, in the early twentieth century and is recognized for its dense compositions, intricate ornamentation, fine cross-hatching, layered spatial organization, and monochromatic gradation. Drawing upon epic narratives such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata as well as local stories that explore the relationship between *sekala* (the visible) and *niskala* (the invisible), Batuan painting demonstrates a strong narrative orientation rooted in Balinese cosmology. While originating from earlier visual traditions like Kamasan Style, Batuan painting evolved into a more expressive and personal visual language through cultural encounters and institutional support, notably during the Pita Maha movement of the 1930s [2]. This evolution illustrates the adaptive nature of Balinese art, in which tradition is not static but continuously reinterpreted in response to social and cultural shifts. Despite its strong narrative capacity, Batuan painting has been more frequently associated with epic and mythological storytelling than with the visualization of classical performing arts, leaving opportunities for further exploration across disciplines.

Balinese performing arts, particularly classical dance-drama forms, constitute another central pillar of Balinese cultural expression. Among these, Gambuh holds a foundational position as one of the oldest and most complex theatrical traditions in Bali. Originating from Majapahit-era court traditions and later flourishing in Bali, Gambuh unites literature, dance, music, and spoken dialogue within a sacred performance structure [4][5]. Integrating literature, music, dance, dialogue, and ritual within a sacred performance structure, Gambuh embodies a refined system of character types, gestures, costumes, and symbolic meanings. Beyond its narrative function, Gambuh performance conveys *taksu*, a spiritual vitality believed to animate artistic expression and reflect deeper philosophical values. However, in contemporary contexts, Gambuh faces challenges related to regeneration, limited performers, and irregular staging, placing its continuity at risk.

Within this context, this study proposes a visual reinterpretation of Gambuh through the medium of traditional Batuan painting. Conducted in Batuan Village where Gambuh historically developed within the Puri Batuan environment this research engages directly with living artistic traditions and seeks to bridge performative and visual narratives. The dense compositional structure, detailed hatching techniques, and monochromatic tonality of Batuan painting provide a visual framework well suited to translating the expressive gestures, symbolic costumes, and narrative complexity of Gambuh characters into static imagery. This research focuses on the visualization of six main characters of the Gambuh dance-drama Condong, Raja Putri, Kakang-Kakang, Panji with Arya, and Prabangsa Prabhu with Kade-Kadean through traditional Batuan painting techniques. Emphasis is placed on capturing each character's expression, posture, costume, and symbolic role, while also exploring how Gambuh's narrative structure can be effectively communicated through visual composition. By translating performative narratives into visual form, this study aims to expand the thematic possibilities of Batuan painting while contributing to the preservation and reinterpretation of Gambuh for contemporary audiences.

Based on this framework, the research is guided by the following questions:

1. How can traditional Batuan painting techniques be applied to visualize the Gambuh dance-drama in visual artworks?
2. How can the six main characters of the Gambuh dance-drama be represented in Batuan painting through their expressions, gestures, and costumes?
3. How can the narrative of the Gambuh dance-drama be effectively and communicatively translated into the medium of Batuan painting?

Through this interdisciplinary approach, the study positions Batuan painting as a visual medium capable of preserving, reinterpreting, and communicating the narrative richness of Balinese performing arts, while maintaining fidelity to traditional techniques and responding to contemporary cultural contexts.

## **2. METHODS**

This study employed a practice-based artistic research methodology combining studio practice, field observation, and reflective analysis. The research was conducted over one academic semester through regular studio work in Batuan Village and field visits to Sanggar Tri Pusaka Sakti, focusing on the visual and performative dimensions of the Gambuh dance-drama. Data sources included direct observation, visual documentation, sketch studies, field notes, and relevant literature. The creative process was guided by a staged methodology adapted from Hawkins (as cited in Soedarsono, 2001) and Hadi (2003), consisting of exploration, experimentation/improvisation, and forming. This framework was complemented by aesthetic idea-generation approaches outlined by Made Bendi Yudha (2022), including heuristic, semantic, symbolic, thematic, and hermeneutic methods.

### **2.1. Observation & Exploration**

The exploration stage functioned as the foundational phase of the creative process, aimed at understanding Gambuh as both a visual performance and a carrier of cultural and philosophical meaning. Exploration was conducted through two primary learning contexts. First, traditional Batuan painting techniques were studied through direct studio practice under the guidance of a senior Batuan artist, focusing on sketch construction, *ngabur* shading, ornamental composition, and classical aesthetic principles. Second, field observations of Gambuh performances were carried out at Sanggar Tri Pusaka Sakti, including ceremonial performances during the Odalan ceremony at Pura Dalem Belega, Blahbatuh, Gianyar (May 2025), to document costumes, gestures, facial expressions, and stage dynamics.



**Figure 1.** Gambuh Performance by Sanggar Tri Pusaka Cakti at Pura Dalem Belega, Blahbatuh  
[Source: Author's Documentation Ashlesha Barde [1], 2025]

During this stage, particular attention was given to how character identity is communicated through posture, hand gestures, facial expression, and interaction between performers. These observations were translated into preliminary character sketches on A3 paper, serving as visual studies for form, ornament, and character differentiation. Supporting literature on Gambuh narrative structure and character typology informed the conceptual grounding of the visual exploration.

## 2.2. Experimentation



**Figure 2.** Visual Experimentation by Sketching  
[Source: Author's Documentation Ashlesha Barde [2], 2025]

Following exploration, an experimentation phase was undertaken to develop compositional and visual possibilities for the six selected Gambuh characters: Condong, Putri, Panji, Prabhu Lasem, Kade-Kadean, and Arya. This stage involved iterative sketching that integrated fine hatching, monochromatic gradation, and ornamental detailing characteristic of Batuan painting. Visual elements such as body posture, gaze direction, hand gestures (mudra), hairstyle, and costume ornamentation were systematically explored to express psychological traits and narrative roles. Experimentation emphasized the translation of performative qualities into static visual form, with multiple sketch variations produced and evaluated before selection. This process allowed refinement of character presence and compositional balance prior to further development.

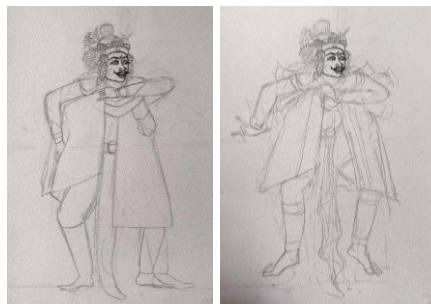
### 2.3. Improvisation

The improvisation stage focused on deepening visual interpretation through controlled imaginative exploration grounded in traditional principles. This phase applied heuristic and synectic approaches, allowing imaginative experimentation while remaining grounded in traditional values acquired through observation and guidance from a Batuan painting mentor. The improvisation was therefore not entirely free, but rooted in established visual and cultural principles. In this stage, black-white gradation, an essential technique in Batuan painting, was explored alongside selective use of color to convey dramatic tension and stage atmosphere. For instance, red orange tones were applied to Putri's costume to express inner vitality and spirituality, while variations in kamen motifs were used to signify differences in social status and character. This approach draws on the semantic and symbolic methods of Made Bendi Yudha, where form and color function as carriers of narrative meaning rather than decoration.



**Figure 3.** Visual Character experimentation of Character Condong  
[Source: Author's Documentation Ashlesha Barde [3], 2025]

Many experimental sketches were set aside because they did not yet capture the inner essence of the characters. However, this iterative process strengthened my understanding of character presence, movement quality, and ornamental logic. This reflective phase, referred to as *ngorten*, functioned as a process of visual contemplation, allowing meaning to mature before final realization. An example is the development of Kade Kadean (Figure 4), where repeated trials moved from a stiff pose toward a form that more convincingly embodied the character's authority.



**Figure 4.** Visual Character experimentation of Character Kade Kadean  
[Source: Author's Documentation Ashlesha Barde [4], 2025]

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After the A3 sketches were selected, the process proceeded to *Nyawawi*, namely reinforcing and defining the sketch using Chinese ink. *Nyawawi* functions to clarify contours, strengthen the structural composition, and fix proportional decisions, ensuring line direction and detail remain consistent before entering *ngabur* (gradation) and subsequent coloring stages.



**Figure 5.** *Nyawawi* of 6 Main Characters in Gambuh, From Condong, Putri, Panji, Prabhu Lasem  
[Source: Author's Documentation Ashlesha Barde [5], 2025]

### 2.4. Forming

The forming stage translated the results of exploration and improvisation into finalized artworks through the direct application of Batuan painting techniques. This phase emphasized *ngabur* shading and chiaroscuro gradation to build depth, dramatic atmosphere, and expressive character presence within dense compositions. The works were executed on canvas and paper using Chinese ink and watercolor, guided by the principles of unity, complexity, and intensity (Figure 6). Following this, the process entered *nguwap*, the application of a thin base layer of color to establish lighting direction and initial atmosphere. Yellow was used as the foundational tone to suggest brightness and sacredness, while transparent watercolor layers, particularly red, were added selectively to strengthen emotional expression in key character areas. Other colors such as blue, green, and brown were applied sparingly to enrich costumes and symbolic elements without obscuring earlier details (Figure 7).



**Figure 6.** *Ngabur* of 6 Main Characters in Gambuh, From Condong, Putri, Panji, Prabhu Lasem  
[Source: Author's Documentation Ashlesha Barde [6], 2025]



**Figure 7.** *Nguwap* Colouring Process of Character Condong  
[Source: Author's Documentation Ashlesha Barde [7], 2025]

The final stage, *manyunin* or *sigar mangsi*, involved strengthening tonal gradation from light to dark to accentuate form and ornament. At this stage, *nyawi* and *ngabur* were often revisited to refine anatomy and detail. Black pen was used selectively to sharpen fine elements such as ornaments, facial expressions, and costume folds. The process culminated in unifying all characters within a single composition, arranged in visual interaction to convey narrative harmony and the intended cultural values.

## 2.5. Evaluation

The final stage involved visual evaluation and refinement to assess narrative clarity, character expression, and compositional effectiveness. Revisions were made through adjustments in hatching density, tonal balance, and ornament detail. Feedback from the artist mentor informed further refinement to ensure both symbolic accuracy and communicative clarity. This stage was essential to ensure that the works were not only symbolically accurate but also communicative for contemporary audiences. The finalized works were then documented and prepared for exhibition as both artistic outcomes and research documentation. Overall, these methods functioned not only to produce artworks but also as a learning process that integrated field experience, traditional techniques, and the development of a visual language relevant to the present context.

## 2.6. Medium & Media

In this creative process, the choice of medium played a crucial role in shaping the visual character of the works. The primary painting bases were Baohong 300gsm rough watercolor paper and unbleached canvas (*blacu*), selected for their capacity to support fine detailing and subtle gradations characteristic of Batuan painting. The use of canvas also ensured durability and suitability for exhibition display (Figures 8–9). Chinese ink was used as the main drawing medium, in accordance with traditional Batuan techniques, particularly for achieving black and white (*chiaroscuro*) gradations and visual depth. Van Gogh watercolors were applied selectively to support atmospheric and emotional expression within the Gambuh narrative. Supporting tools included pencils for initial sketches, fine brushes for detailed shading, and black pens to reinforce primary contours.



**Figure 8.** Medium Blacu Canvas  
[Source: Author's Documentation Ashlesha Barde [8], 2025]



**Figure 9.** Medium Watercolour Paper Baohong  
300gsm Rough  
[Source: Author's Documentation Ashlesha Barde [9], 2025]



**Figure 10.** Medium Chinese Ink V-Tec 100ml  
[Source: Authors documentation Ashlesha Barde [10], 2025]



**Figure 11.** Van Gogh Watercolour Tubes  
[Source: Author's Documentation Ashlesha Barde [11], 2025]

The works were presented through two media formats, physical display in a conventional exhibition setting, allowing direct engagement with texture and detail, and digital documentation for broader dissemination and educational purposes. Overall, the exploration of medium and media was not merely technical, but integral to conveying visual meaning and philosophical values embedded in the artworks.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Concept

The main concept I adopted in creating this work is **“Visualizing the Narrative and Characters of the Gambuh Dance-Drama in Traditional Batuan Painting.”** This idea was born out of a longing to unite two forms of Balinese traditional arts, dance-drama and visual art, into a single visual space that not only records but also reflects the cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic values inherited through Gambuh. Beyond its sacred and historical significance, Gambuh contains layered narratives, symbolic characters, and inner conflicts that remain relevant to contemporary human experience. Traditional Batuan painting is

positioned as an appropriate medium to translate these elements, due to its symbolic visual language, meditative black-and-white gradations, refined shading techniques, and dense yet ordered compositions. The characters visualized in this work include Condong as the bearer of messages and emotional tone; Princess Rangkesari as the center of narrative tension and feminine steadfastness; the Kakang-Kakang as supporting figures that shape collective rhythm; Prabhu Lasem and Arya as representations of power and ego; and Panji and Kade-Kadean as figures embodying inner conflict and the search for identity. Each character is treated not merely as a theatrical role, but as an archetype of human experience, interpreted through gesture, expression, and costume. Rather than replicating Gambuh performances, this visualization process distills their essential meanings and rearticulates them through the visual language of Batuan painting. The culmination of this exploration is a large compositional work that unites all characters into a single visual narrative, representing the harmony of Gambuh's story and the cultural values that interconnect its figures. This final work functions both as a synthesis of the creative process and as an effort to sustain the living presence of tradition within a contemporary visual context.

### 3.1. Results



**Figure 12.** Character study of Condong  
[Source: Ashlesha Barde [12], 2025]

Title: *Condong*

Size: A3 Watercolor Paper

Medium: Chinese Ink and Watercolor on 300gsm Paper

Condong was visualized as the opening figure of the Gambuh performance, emphasizing her liminal role between the sacred and profane realms. The figure is depicted in a slightly forward-leaning posture with restrained hand gestures, reflecting readiness, devotion, and narrative initiation. A palette dominated by red, orange, blue, and gold highlights vitality and nobility, while dense ornamental detailing reflects the visual complexity characteristic of Batuan painting. Facial expression and body orientation were designed to convey humility and alertness, positioning Condong not merely as a supporting figure but as a symbolic initiator of taksu within the Gambuh performance structure.



**Figure 13.** Character study of Panji  
[Source: Ashlesha Barde [13], 2025]

Title: *Panji*

Size: A3 Watercolor Paper

Medium: Chinese Ink and Watercolor on 300gsm Paper

Panji is represented as the central protagonist of the Gambuh dance drama, characterized by composure, refinement, and moral integrity. An upright posture and controlled hand gestures emphasize inner balance and self-restraint. The color palette of green, red, and gold references traditional Gambuh costume conventions while symbolizing harmony, emotional depth, and nobility. Dense ornamentation and fine *ngabur* shading were employed to maintain visual continuity with Batuan painting techniques. Through these formal choices, Panji is articulated as an archetypal figure of ideal leadership and emotional steadiness within the narrative.



**Figure 14.** Character study of Prabhu Lasem  
[Source: Ashlesha Barde [14] or Research Team, 2025]

Title: *Prabhu Lasem*

Size: A3 Watercolor Paper

Medium: Chinese Ink and Watercolor on 300gsm Paper

Prabhu Lasem is depicted as a dominant and confrontational figure, emphasizing aggression and ambition through posture, facial expression, and gesture. Arched eyebrows, wide eyes, and a tense body stance communicate volatility and strategic intent. Ornamentation is rendered densely to signify royal status, yet appears visually heavier and less restrained than Panji's, reinforcing narrative contrast. The intended palette of black, symbolizes authority and power while contributing to a darker dramatic aura. This visualization presents Prabhu Lasem as a complex antagonist whose charisma intensifies narrative tension.



**Figure 15.** Character study of Putri Rangkesari  
[Source: Ashlesha Barde [15] or Research Team, 2025]

Title: *Putri Rangkesari*  
Size: A3 Watercolor Paper  
Medium: Chinese Ink and Watercolor on 300gsm Paper

Putri Rangkesari is visualized as the emotional and moral center of the Gambuh narrative. The figure is depicted in a composed and controlled stance, with facial expression emphasizing restraint, gentleness, and inner resolve. The color scheme of red, green, and gold symbolizes nobility, fertility, and spiritual resilience. Line quality and fine tonal gradation were prioritized to convey emotional depth rather than physical action. Through selective ornamentation and balanced composition, this work emphasizes Putri Rangkesari's role as a figure of integrity and quiet strength within the dramatic structure.



**Figure 16.** Character study of Arya  
[Source: Ashlesha Barde [16] or Research Team, 2025]

Title: Arya  
Size: A3 Watercolor Paper  
Medium: Chinese Ink and Watercolor on 300gsm Paper

Arya is presented as a courtly warrior-advisor associated with authority and discipline. Rendered monochromatically, the figure emphasizes structure, posture, and gesture without reliance on color symbolism. Fine black white gradation highlights compositional solidity and controlled movement. Facial features and hand gestures suggest vigilance and restrained command, distinguishing Arya from both kings and protagonists. Repetitive geometric and floral ornamentation reinforces his high court status. This work demonstrates how authority and loyalty in Gambuh characters can be effectively articulated through line and tonal contrast alone.



**Figure 17.** Character study of Kade Kadean  
[Source: Ashlesha Barde [17] or Research Team, 2025]

Title: Kade Kadean  
Size: A3 Watercolor Paper  
Medium: Chinese Ink and Watercolor on 300gsm Paper

Kade-Kadean is depicted as a kakang-kakang figure whose role mediates between royal authority and the surrounding environment. The monochromatic approach emphasizes gesture, gaze, and bodily orientation, directing attention to choreographic meaning. The selected pose and sideways glance reflect vigilance and responsiveness, consistent with observed Gambuh performance practices. Costume and headdress details are rendered with restraint to support clarity of movement. This visualization positions Kade-Kadean as an active narrative agent rather than a peripheral attendant.



**Figure 18.** Gambuh PraRambh: Citta Putri Rangkesari  
[Source: Ashlesha Barde [18] or Research Team, 2025]

Title: *Gambuh Pra Rambh: Citta Putri Rangkesari*

Size: 70 x 60 cm

Medium: Chinese Ink and Watercolor on Canvas

This painting depicts the opening moment (prarambh) of a Gambuh performance taken from the play *Peran Undur-Undur*, focusing on the appearance of Putri Rangkesari within a sacred temple courtyard during an *odalan* ceremony. Accompanied by Condong and the Kakang-Kakang, the scene unfolds before the central conflict of the narrative begins, emphasizing the princess's inner state rather than external action. Putri Rangkesari is portrayed through restrained and measured gestures that suggest silence, longing, and latent inner tension. Condong functions as a liminal figure, bridging the princess's inner world with the surrounding ceremonial space, while the Kakang-Kakang sit in calm yet alert postures, reinforcing their role as companions and emotional extensions of the main character. Together, these figures form a visual structure that mirrors the psychological atmosphere of the opening scene. Executed in the Batuan painting style, the work employs dense composition, layered perspective, and strong ink contrasts to create narrative depth. Selective use of color highlights the central character, while background elements offerings, ceremonial space, and implied soundscape evoke the sacred atmosphere of a Balinese religious performance. Rather than merely illustrating a scene, this work conveys the philosophical idea that the Gambuh narrative begins in inner stillness. As such, the painting serves both as a visual interpretation and an act of cultural preservation, allowing the contemplative and expressive power of Gambuh to be rearticulated through visual language.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Throughout this independent study, I have realized that revisiting the Gambuh dance-drama is not merely about studying a classical performance form, but also about touching the deepest layers of Bali's cultural heritage and spirituality. Based on the exploration and creation process in this independent study, it can be concluded that the research objectives have been achieved:

- The traditional Batuan painting technique can be effectively applied to visualize the Gambuh dance-drama through the use of fine shading (*ngabur*), dense ornamental compositions, and chiaroscuro emphasis to build depth of atmosphere and emotion. This technique provides room to express narrative and character symbolically, without losing its traditional roots.
- The representation of six main characters in Gambuh, Panji, Princess Rangkesari, Condong, Prabhu Lasem, Arya, and Kade-Kadean, can be achieved through direct observation of gestures, facial expressions, body postures, and distinctive costumes. In the paintings, these characters are presented not only visually but also through inner nuance and relational dynamics. Colors are applied selectively to highlight the dramatic center, while supporting characters are visualized in monochrome, creating an emotional hierarchy within a single narrative frame.
- The narrative of Gambuh can be translated into the medium of fine art through thematic and symbolic approaches, taking into account the dramatic structure, philosophical values, and contemporary relevance of the story. Each artwork becomes a reflective medium to discuss modern human issues such as power, love, integrity, and the search for identity, making the paintings not merely documentation, but a new interpretation of cultural heritage.

Although these works have undergone a deep and carefully considered process, I also recognize the limitations in translating the complexity of Gambuh's narrative and performance nuances into the medium of painting. Not all details of dance and stage expression can be fully conveyed within two-dimensional visuals. Yet it is precisely from these limitations that I have learned that art is a continuous process, one that opens space to keep exploring, learning, and evolving. Through this process, I have come to realize that painting is not only a means of visual expression, but also a spiritual bridge between the past and the present. This project is not an attempt to fully revive Gambuh, but rather a personal effort to preserve its essence, to re-voice the noble values embedded in this classical performance so that they may continue to breathe within new spaces and times.

#### 3.1. Suggestions

Through this process, I have come to realize that approaching traditional arts such as Gambuh requires a safe space for exploration, the courage to reinterpret old narratives, and the freedom to translate them through a personal visual language. Therefore, I hope that in the future there will be more learning spaces and platforms that provide opportunities for younger generations to engage with artistic heritage, not only as passive preservers, but as active creators capable of enlivening tradition in a contemporary

context. Support from educational institutions, guidance from master artists, and access to performance documentation are all crucial for ensuring that this creative process continues to grow and develop.

For myself, this work serves as a reminder that the artistic journey does not conclude in a single project, but continues as part of an ongoing dialogue between the past, present, and future. May this process inspire more artists to courageously revisit their cultural roots and embrace them as an inner resource for creating works that are honest, meaningful, and alive.

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