

---

# JAVA'S "FIRST PEOPLE'S THEATER": THOMAS KARSTEN AND SEMARANG'S SOBOKARTTI

Joost Coté

On Saturday, October 10, 1931, Java's first *volkschouwburg*—a people's theater—was officially opened. That, at least, was the term employed by the many East Indies and Dutch newspapers that reported the event. By all accounts the opening was a gala occasion attended by the governor of Central Java and the Resident of Semarang, and occasioned “great interest on both European and Native sides.”<sup>1</sup> The designation “*volkschouwburg*” referenced a relatively recent European phenomenon in theater arts, namely, the provision of public funding for theaters so designated with the specific objective of educating the public—the *volk*—through the staging of popular but wholesome and uplifting theater-based entertainment.<sup>2</sup> By the time of the theater's

---

Joost Coté is a Senior Research Fellow at Monash University, Australia. In addition to his publications noted in this article, he co-edited (with Freek Colombijn) *The Modernisation of the Indonesian City 1920–1960* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

<sup>1</sup> The Dutch *Algemeene Handelsblad* of October 13, 1931, reported in the same words the report of the *De Sumatra Post* of the previous day. In fact, there would also have been a significant Chinese attendance, given their membership and previous reported attendance.

<sup>2</sup> After initial calls for government support of “theater for the people” in the 1890s, specific central government, regional, and municipal funding did not begin in the Netherlands until 1919; see Emanuel Boekman, *Overheid en kunst in Nederland* (Amsterdam Boekmanstichting/Van Gennep, 1939, 1989), 76–79, 124–36. The concept of “people's theater” came to be well-developed in Belgium and particularly in Germany, where the Berlin-based *Freie Volksbühne* actively developed the concept as a specific socialist intervention in class politics; see Andrew Bonnell, *The People's Stage in Imperial Germany* (London and New York: Taurus Academic Studies, 2005). More recently, Geoffrey Ginn has examined the cultural agenda, including theater arts, within the context of a middle-class philanthropy directed at London's poor; see Geoffrey A. C. Ginn, *Culture, Philanthropy, and the Poor in Late-Victorian London* (London: Routledge, 2017).

opening, a decade after the concept had been first proposed, its organizing committee, the Vereeniging Sobokarti (Sobokartti Association),<sup>3</sup> could justly claim to have built up broad-based local community support. By 1931, after a decade of successful and popular theatrical seasons drawing on the rich heritage of Javanese literary, dance, and musical arts, it had gathered together a versatile company of performers, dancers, and instrumentalists, and a regular and enthusiastic audience. Now, at last, it also had a permanent, modern, purpose-built theater building.

The idea of founding a purpose-built building for staging performances of Javanese theater in the midst of a burgeoning modern colonial city was first mooted by Herman Thomas Karsten (1884–1945) soon after he arrived in the colonial city of Semarang in September 1914.<sup>4</sup> Karsten, a Dutch architect, had come to Java from Berlin at the outbreak of the Great War to take up a partnership in a successful Semarang architectural firm established by a friend from his student days, the Batavia-born Henri MacLaine Pont.<sup>5</sup> In 1919, Karsten had presented a model for such a theater building to colleagues at an architectural conference in Semarang. Two years later he published an article in which he set out a detailed rationale for such a project, accompanied by the scale drawings, design plans, and a photograph of the model he had previously presented to colleagues.<sup>6</sup> His was the lead article in the first edition of a new cultural journal, *Djawa*, published by a newly established Javanese cultural organization, the Java Instituut, of which he was one of several founding European members. His article spoke directly to the journal's aim of presenting a modern rearticulation of Javanese cultural heritage.<sup>7</sup> In it, Karsten highlighted what he saw as the points of similarity between contemporary *avant-garde* European theater (in terms of content and performance as well as building) and what he reasoned could become an ideal form of modern urban Javanese theater. In architectural terms, the building project represented an early example of Karsten's broader architectural philosophy for contributing to the cultural renovation of an urbanized Javanese society.<sup>8</sup>

### Sobokartti's Origins

Karsten had first broached the idea of a Javanese theater in 1916 during a meeting of the Semarang Kunstkring (lit: arts circle), the local European arts society, which he had joined soon after arriving in the city. As someone who had immersed himself in the heady cultural world of prewar Berlin, Semarang's European cultural circle must have seemed rather pedestrian; nevertheless, he soon became an active participant,

<sup>3</sup> The name of the theater is variously spelled in contemporary sources. For cited references and with regard to the name of the founding association, *Vereeniging Sobokarti*, I use the original forms as published; otherwise, the current spelling, *Sobokartti*, is employed.

<sup>4</sup> Hugh O'Neill, "Thomas Karsten: A Biography," in Coté and O'Neill, *The Life and Work of Thomas Karsten*, 23–66.

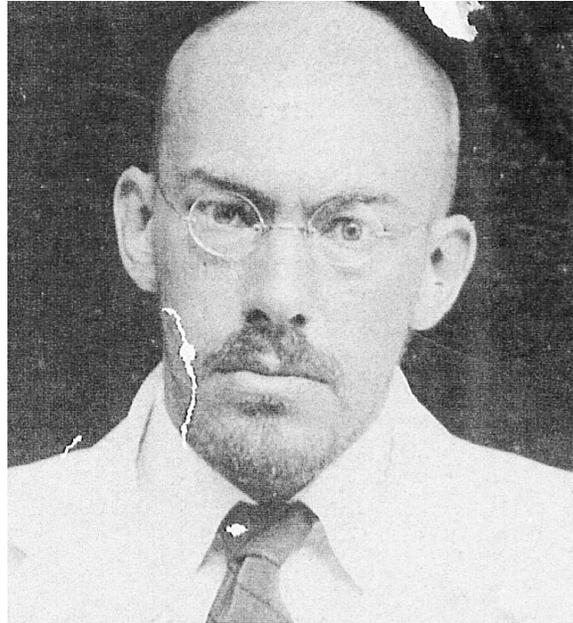
<sup>5</sup> Joost Coté, "Education and Inspiration," in Coté and O'Neill, *The Life and Work of Thomas Karsten*, 67–83.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Karsten, "Van Pendopo naar Volksschuwburg" [From *pendopo* to people's theater], *Djawa* 1, 1 (1921): 21–29.

<sup>7</sup> Joost Coté, "Thomas Karsten's Indonesia: Modernity and the End of Europe, 1914–1945," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 170 (2014): 70–74.

<sup>8</sup> Helen Jessup, "Four Dutch Buildings in Indonesia II: Thomas Karsten's Folk Theatre, Semarang," *Orientalia* 13, 10 (1982): 24–32.

and then an executive member.<sup>9</sup> Established in 1912 by members of the city's growing European professional class, the Semarang Kunstkring was typical of cultural societies that could be found in most of the colony's main cities by the second decade of the twentieth century modeled on similar organizations common in cities throughout the Netherlands. The aim of these colonial societies was the same as those in the Netherlands: to educate, entertain, and stimulate interest in the arts, and, more generally, to raise the level of cultural awareness.<sup>10</sup>



Thomas Karsten, c. 1930 (passport photo)

For Europeans at least, Semarang in the early twentieth century was a prosperous city offering a wide range of entertainment and recreational activities. At this time, as a perusal of notices in the city's local newspaper, *De Locomotief*, indicates, options ranged from theatrical and musical performances to art exhibitions and tennis. Increasing numbers of well-known Dutch and European performers included Semarang on their colonial itinerary, presenting operetta, stage, and declamatory performances. Intended for the colony's well-to-do European community, by the opening years of the twentieth century, such theater performances were also occasionally being attended by well-positioned Javanese.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, throughout

<sup>9</sup> Karsten became Semarang Kunstkring's treasurer and was instrumental in founding Bond van Indische Kunstrkingen, the association of Indies arts societies. He also regularly contributed "cultural notes" on European cultural events in the journal *De Taak*.

<sup>10</sup> The moral condition, especially of the poor Eurasian urban community, was of great concern. See Joost Coté, "Sins of Their Fathers': Culturally At-risk Children and the Colonial State in Asia," *Paedagogica Historica* 45, 1 & 2 (2009): 129–42.

<sup>11</sup> Raden Ajeng Kartini describes her attendance at one of these occasions in the company of the resident of Semarang and, later that year, of receiving free tickets from touring Dutch actor Willem Rooijaards to see his performance. See letters January 3, 1902, and October 4, 1902, in Joost Coté, ed. and trans., *Kartini, the Complete Writings, 1898–1904* (Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2014).

urban Java, mixed audiences of European, Javanese, and Chinese enjoyed the more popular *komedi stamboel* and *wayang wong* dance-drama shows provided by traveling Chinese troupes, and the romance of *kroncong* music performed by Eurasian musicians.<sup>12</sup> The novelty of *bioscoop* (cinema) had also begun to make its appearance in urban Java, including Semarang, adding a further modern alternative to the available entertainment.<sup>13</sup>

At the time Karsten arrived in Semarang, the city's modernness was on display at an international colonial exhibition. Here visitors were invited to admire international exhibits presented by the Chinese, Japanese, and Australian governments, alongside displays of *Inlandsche kunstnijverheid* (native arts and crafts); learn from instructive exhibits of the latest technologies and experimental plots demonstrating innovative agricultural methods; and be amazed by the latest American automobiles. As they wandered through the extensive grounds, visitors,<sup>14</sup> who may have arrived via an ultra modern electrified tramway from the port or city center, were also entertained by the colony's first Luna park fair, with Ferris wheel, spectacular nighttime electric illumination, and the nightly attraction of a *pasar malam* (night market) that had become so much a part of urban social life in the colony.<sup>15</sup> Also in line with what had become an expected part of any colonial exhibition mounted in Europe, spectators were treated to daily performances of Javanese *wayang* and *gamelan*.<sup>16</sup>

Although Karsten may well have witnessed Javanese *wayang* performances in the Netherlands as a student, it was through his contact with the royal Mangkunegara court in Surakarta, brought there in his role as architectural adviser, that he had the opportunity to develop an informed interest in Javanese *gamelan* music and *wayang* performances. By 1916, this interest expressed itself in a suggestion to the Semarang Kunstkring that it might sponsor Javanese theater in the city. As Karsten later confided to the Prangwedono, head of the Mangkunegara royal house, this had, however, found little support amongst its members at the time and "discussions here [about a theater proposal] came to nothing."<sup>17</sup> The economic repercussions of the war in Europe may well have been the cause, but later history suggests it was an idea whose time had not yet come.

<sup>12</sup> See: Matthew Cohen, *The Komedi Stamboel: Popular Theatre in Colonial Indonesia* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006); and Matthew Cohen, *Inventing the Performing Arts: Modernity and Tradition in Colonial Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Dafna Ruppin, *The Komedi Bioscoop: The Emergence of Movie-going in Colonial Indonesia 1896–1914* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> Coinciding with the outbreak of the war, participation by international exhibitors and attendance by both local and overseas visitors did not meet expectations. See Joost Coté, "Staging Modernity: The Semarang International Colonial Exhibition, 1914," *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 49, 1 (2006): 1–44.

<sup>15</sup> Yulia Lukito, "Colonial Exhibition and a Laboratory of Modernity: Hybrid Architecture at Batavia's Pasar Gambir," *Indonesia* 100 (October 2015): 77–103. The *pasar malam* had already become an obligatory feature in early Indonesian and colonial storytelling. See Joost Coté, "Tirto Adhi Soerjo and the Narration of Indonesian Modernity," *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 32, 2 (1998): 1–41.

<sup>16</sup> See M.G. van Heel, ed., *Gedenkboek van de Koloniale Tentoonstelling Semarang 20 Augustus–22 November 1914* (Batavia: Mercurius, 1916).

<sup>17</sup> Correspondence, Karsten to Mangkunegara VII, May 1919. The correspondence between Karsten and the Prangwedono is held at the Mangkunegara Palace Library and Archive, Surakarta, and were kindly made available to the author.

Three years later, however, the idea of a permanent theater building for the regular performance of Javanese *gamelan* and *wayang* in the city did elicit support, partly, no doubt, because by this time times had changed, but also because Karsten had become much better known both locally and throughout the colony. He had become Semarang city council's key adviser on urban development;<sup>18</sup> was a founding editor of and contributor to *De Taak*;<sup>19</sup> and was now widely recognized in the colony's professional town planning and architectural circles for his progressive ideas.<sup>20</sup> It was at its annual meeting in 1919 that the Semarang Kunstkring agreed to initiate a gathering of "representatives of the leading native organizations" in the city to discuss Karsten's proposal at the home of its chairman, M. G. van Heel.<sup>21</sup> Van Heel, head engineer of the Netherlands-Indies Railways headquartered in Semarang, was a key member of what had become known as Semarang's "progressive caucus." A decade earlier this cluster of civic-conscious professionals who were keen to modernize the city had been behind the municipal council's drive to address the city's severe morbidity problem and high mortality rates,<sup>22</sup> and had been the initiators of the International Colonial Exhibition.

Conforming to the image that this exhibition had intended to project, by that time Semarang was, indeed, a fast-growing<sup>23</sup> and increasingly prosperous city.<sup>24</sup> Alongside an active Chamber of Commerce representing European and Chinese business interests,<sup>25</sup> the Semarang Municipal Council, instituted in 1906, had energetically addressed the city's health, sanitation, and housing deficiencies. Because of its active program of *kampong* improvement and urban expansion, activities with which Karsten was directly professionally involved, Semarang had gained the reputation of being a

<sup>18</sup> See Pauline van Roosmalen, "Modern Indisch townplanning," in Coté and O'Neil, *The Life and Work of Thomas Karsten*, 274–78.

<sup>19</sup> See Hugh O'Neill, "The Architect at Work," in Coté and O'Neil, *The Life and Work of Thomas Karsten*, 175–77.

<sup>20</sup> Karsten was a member of the colonial branch of Sociaal-Technische Vereeniging voor Democratische Ingenieurs en Architecten (STV, Social-Technical Association for Democratic Engineers and Architects) and the influential colonial Vereeniging voor Locale Belangen (lit. Association for Local Interests), founded in Semarang in 1912, which brought together all professionals related to urban-planning issues. At some point he resigned from the SDAP, the Dutch Social Democratic Workers' Party (Sociaal Democratische Arbeiders Partij) that he had joined as a student, although socialist themes continue to be found in his writing.

<sup>21</sup> "Sobo Karti: Onstaan en oprichting," *Djawa* 3 (1923): 49–52.

<sup>22</sup> Joost Coté, "Towards an Architecture of Association: H. F. Tillema, Semarang, and the Construction of Colonial Modernity," in *The Indonesian Town Revisited*, ed. Peter Nas (Singapore: ISEAS/Lit Verlag, 2002), 319–47.

<sup>23</sup> According to the 1920 census, the permanent population within the formal city boundaries was 158,036, of whom 126,625 were Indonesian, 19,729 Chinese, and 10,151 European. See B. Brommer et al, *Semarang: Beeld van een stad* (Pumerend: Asia Major, 1995), 23. See also H. Kasmudi and Wiyono, *Sejarah social kota Semarang (1900–1950)* (Jakarta: Dept. Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 1985).

<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, a council-initiated survey of the European population revealed that many belonged to a "pauper class," while other surveys indicated a wide disparity between the majority poor and the few extremely rich within the Chinese community, many of whom were of mixed "*peranakan*" heritage. See Joost Coté, "Sins of Their Fathers," 129–42.

<sup>25</sup> Semarang was home to Chinese businessman Oen Tiong Ham, founder of what was later to become Southeast Asia's "first business empire." He had provided the grounds for the 1914 international exhibition; see Kunio Yoshihara, *Oei Tiong Ham Concern: The First Business Empire of Southeast Asia* (Kyoto: Kyoto University Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, 1989). The Chinese community also had its own political, cultural, and educational organizations; see Donald Wilmott, *The Chinese of Semarang: A Changing Minority Community in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970).

“progressive city.”<sup>26</sup> Indicative of this and the impact of economic development were signs of the disintegration of the legacy of the nineteenth-century government-imposed so-called “*kampen stelsel*” (lit: camp system), which had strictly segregated ethnic communities.

In particular, what had impressed Karsten about the city was the prominence of what he termed its Javanese middle class. It comprised a growing number of households headed by Western-educated men, many employed in local, municipal, and central-government department offices, as well as in private European enterprises, with children attending Dutch-language elementary schools. They were represented on the city’s municipal council and the advisory council of the central colonial government, the *Volksraad*, as well as in the membership of a number of proto-nationalist organizations. Karsten envisaged this community as the core of what would one day become a modern Indonesia. In the meantime, the emerging middle class would be the engine of its cultural and psychological modernization.<sup>27</sup>

But it was also the center of politically activity. Here was located the headquarters of what after 1917 had become the most politically outspoken Indonesian proto-nationalist organization of the day, the radical wing of Sarekat Islam, led by a charismatic Marxist, Semaun.<sup>28</sup> European socialists, notably the former Dutch unionist and Marxist Henk Sneevliet, were also residing here.<sup>29</sup> It was in Semarang that the first Indonesian labor strikes took place, organized by its first trade union, the Rail and Tramways Union.<sup>30</sup> From Sneevliet’s radical *Indische Sociaal-Democratische Vereeniging* (ISDV, Indies Social Democratic Association), was to emerge the world’s largest communist party, the *Partai Komunis Indonesia*, founded here in 1921.

Semarang, indeed, appeared to provide a lively, politically charged urban setting for a new theater project. From the outset, therefore, van Heel and Karsten were conscious of the need to assemble a representative group of the city’s diverse Javanese civil society to avoid any appearance, in spite of the theater project’s origins, of being a purely European venture. Besides van Heel and Karsten as initiators, the original meeting included Karsten’s close associate and fellow editor on *De Taak*, the socialist Sam Koperberg, formally representing Semarang *Kunstkring*; <sup>31</sup> Dr. Radjiman

<sup>26</sup> Semarang led other municipal councils in addressing severe health problems through *kampong* improvement programs, including imposing building regulations, establishing clean water and public ablution blocks, and planning new residential districts. See: Joost Coté, “Towards an Architecture of Association,” in Nas, ed., *The Indonesian Town Revisited*, 319–47; James Cobban, “Uncontrolled Urban Settlement: The Kampong Question in Semarang (1905–1940),” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 130, 4 (1979): 403–27; and H. F. Tillema, *Van Wonen en Bewonen, Van Bouwen, Huis en Erf* (Semarang: Tjandi-Semarang, 1913).

<sup>27</sup> See Coté, “Thomas Karsten’s Indonesia.”

<sup>28</sup> See F. Tichelman, *Socialisme in Indonesië: De Indische Sociaal-democratische Vereeniging 1897–1917* (Dordrecht: Foris Publications 1985), 384–86.

<sup>29</sup> See: Tichelman, *Socialisme in Indonesië, passim*.

<sup>30</sup> John Ingelson, *In Search of Justice: Workers and Unions in Colonial Java, 1908–1926* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>31</sup> “Sobo Karti: Onstaan,” 49. Koperburg, who arrived in Semarang in 1916, was closely involved with Karsten on *De Taak* and later at the Java Instituut. He was also an influential member of the Indies branch of the Social Democratic Workers’ Party, for which he prepared a statement of goals that concluded with the words: “For the immediate future, the only means for them [Javanese] to loose their unfortunate [*nadelig*] character: intensive development of the native population so that in their development they will

Wedyodiningrat, the Dutch-educated recent past chairman of the Jogjakarta-based Budi Utomo, physician to the Royal Mangkunegara court of Surakarta, and confidant of the recently elevated Prangwedono;<sup>32</sup> Raden Ng Sosrohadikoesoemo, Javanese municipal councilor and chairman of the Javanese government employees association;<sup>33</sup> Raden Mohamad Joesoef, chairman of the local Semarang branch of Budi Utomo;<sup>34</sup> and representatives of Sarekat Islam and the Eurasian Nederlandsch-Indisch Partij (NIP).<sup>35</sup>

Topping off this high-powered Javanese representation was the presence of the Mangkunegara prince himself, KPA Prangwedono. Recently returned from four years in the Netherlands,<sup>36</sup> he had been in correspondence with Karsten in his capacity as architect to advise on palace renovations.<sup>37</sup> These discussions had extended to broader topics concerning the state of Javanese culture, the topic of a conference the prince had sponsored in July 1918 in Surakarta,<sup>38</sup> and it had been in that context that Karsten had mentioned his interest in designing a suitable building for a Javanese *schouwburg*:

I hit on the idea of how one could construct a Javanese theater [*schouwburg*]: a space where a Javanese, in a manner with which he is comfortable, where a large Javanese community can listen to a *gamelan* orchestra and can see *wayang* [in the comfort of] protected seating, with good views, with a "stage," not in a European style but along Javanese lines.<sup>39</sup>

---

gradually begin to become part of [*steeds gaat naderen*] the European colonial society." See Tichelman, *Socialisme*, 353.

<sup>32</sup> K. R. T. Radjiman Wediodiningrat (1879–1952), an early graduate of the "Doctor Djawa" school for training indigenous doctors, had spent some time in the Netherlands and became a leading figure in the Javanese cultural revival movement. He often shared a podium with Karsten at cultural conferences. For an analysis of the diversity of cultural and political positions in late colonial Java, see Merle Ricklefs, *Polarising Javanese Society: Islamic and Other Visions, c. 1830–1930* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007).

<sup>33</sup> R. M. Sosrohadikoesoemo, the first Javanese to occupy a European-designated civil service position, headed the Javanese civil servants' association, Mangoen Hardjo, and was appointed to the Semarang municipal council and later the Volksraad. A close associate of the then-recently deceased colonial reform politician Conrad van Deventer, in 1917, he joined Karsten on the editorial board of *De Taak*. He was married to Soematri, a younger sister of R. A. Kartini; see Joost J. Coté, *Realizing the Dream of R. A. Kartini: Her Sisters' Letters from Colonial Java* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008) 238–41.

<sup>34</sup> Joesoef was a clerk with the Semarang-Joana Stoomtram Company and vice chairman of the Semarang branch of Sarekat Islam from 1913 until 1917, when he was pushed aside by Semaun. He was also a member of the ISDV; see Tichelman, *Socialisme*, 171, fn. 5.

<sup>35</sup> The Eurasian political party, NIP (Nationaal Indische Partij–Sarekat Hindia, National Indies Party Association of the Indies), established in Semarang in 1919, had grown out of the Indische Partij banned in 1913. With 23,000 members, it described itself as "a revolutionary party [...] working along democratic lines [with the aim to] accelerate development [*ontwikeling te versnellen*]" in pursuit of the ideal of "national unity [*ationale eenheidsidee*]." See Ulbe Bosma, *Journalist en Strijder voor de Indo* (Leiden: KITLV Uitgever, 1997), 299–300.

<sup>36</sup> Madelon Djajadiningrat, *Vorst Tussen Twee Werelden: Biografie van de Javaanse Vorst Mangkoenogoro VII (185–1944)* (Schoorl: Conserve, 2006).

<sup>37</sup> Helen Jessup, "H. H. Mangkunegoro VIII and the Search for a Modern Javanese Architecture," in Coté and O'Neill, *The Life and Work of Thomas Karsten*, 221–64.

<sup>38</sup> Laurie Sears, *Shadows of Empire: Colonial Discourse and Javanese Tales* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 144–46.

<sup>39</sup> Correspondence, Karsten to Mangkunegara, May 1919 (Mangkunegara Palace Library and Archive, Surakarta).

## “Rescuing” Javanese Culture

What, then, was it that, in Karsten’s eyes at least, would constitute a building in which the Javanese would feel “comfortable”? For such a theater to be “along Javanese lines,” architecturally, he argued, the traditional Javanese *pendopo* structure “would need to be our starting point.” This was a logical first premise, since it was where *wayang* was traditionally presented, but it was not Karsten’s main point. Underpinning his theater concept was what he had come to see as being the main cause of the cultural breakdown of contemporary urban Javanese society. It was a theme that had already been widely canvassed in progressive colonial circles since the early years of the century, and which Karsten had specifically addressed in a 1918 article in *De Taak*.<sup>40</sup> In it, Karsten cited as the main cause of this breakdown colonialism’s destruction of the economic foundations of the traditional Javanese society in which Javanese culture was embedded. This specifically manifested itself in an expanding urban modernity that was rendering the traditional forms of cultural heritage meaningless. Karsten broadly saw this as a positive development, but, he told his European and Javanese readers, it followed that to fail to address the loss of traditional culture in this rapidly changing world would not only be “an unforgivable culture-historical neglect,” but would be psychologically deleterious for Javanese people.<sup>41</sup>

In that 1918 article, Karsten was particularly concerned with what he saw as the potential loss of both traditional Javanese music—by which he meant *gamelan* music—and what he termed Javanese “theater”—by which he implied *wayang wong* performances—in the new modern urban context.<sup>42</sup> He had proposed as one practical step toward remedying this situation that the Semarang municipality financially support the establishment of a public theater for the performance of Javanese arts in the city, perhaps in this referencing recent European practice.

## Envisaging a Javanese People’s Theater

### *European Influences*

As in all his extant work, Karsten provides almost no acknowledgement of the influences or sources that inspired him. It is safe to assume, however, that in conceiving of the idea of a *volkstheater*, both as building and in terms of performance, Karsten drew on his observations and experience of theater that had attracted him

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Karsten, “Praktische Zorg voor Javaansche Kunst” [Practical support for Javanese arts], *De Taak* 48 (1918): 272–74. The question of the decline of Javanese “*kunstnijvrheid*,” arts and crafts, and the need for its “*verheffing*,” revitalization, had been regularly raised since the beginning of the century and was a central theme of adherents of the “ethical policy.” See, for instance: Eduard Cuypers, “De Verheffing van de Inlandsche Kunstnijverheid in Nederlandsch-Indië,” *Het Huis Oud en Nieuw* (1910): 293–333; and Conrad van Deventer, “Insulinde te Brussel,” *De Gids* 74 (1910): 240–56. It was a major motive for the establishment of the Java Instituut, of which Karsten was a founding member.

<sup>41</sup> Karsten, “Praktische Zorg voor Javaansche Kunst,” 272–74.

<sup>42</sup> Later, in the context of comments on differences between European and Asian personality characteristics, Karsten noted in a 1931 diary entry that Javanese music and *wayang* were the most important elements of Javanese culture because “they best represent the Javanese unconscious in a way that no other existing art can, the music speaks directly to the unconscious” (Thomas Karsten, Notebook-diary, c. April 1931, Karsten family archive).

during the years he spent living in Berlin (1911–14). A clue to this can be gained from his several brief references to Berlin theater. In particular, Karsten mentioned “der Meininger,” the home of innovative new German theater, and the theater impresario Max Reinhardt.

Pre-war Berlin theater saw what David Kuhns defines as the emergence of “Theatre Expressionism” in the development of which Rheinhardt and the Meininger theater were major influences.<sup>43</sup> The Expressionist break with classical European theater centred on the prominence given to the performance of “ideas” pertaining to the “human spiritual condition rather than [attempting to present] a mimetic image which exemplified that condition” by using the various elements of theater production to artificially represent reality.<sup>44</sup> Its broader mission was the renovation of the culture of modern society. Ensemble work rather than individual performance was emphasized, and the incorporation of dance and music and other arts, including “emblematic scenery,” were encouraged as elements through which this aim could be enhanced.<sup>45</sup> Reinhardt’s innovations introduced these elements in every aspect of theater—acting, scenery, drama content, as well as staging and building design<sup>46</sup>—and any Berliner who prided himself in being “modern,” as Karsten undoubtedly did, could not have failed to take notice of these developments. These key principles are clearly reflected in Karsten’s relatively brief but succinct published statements on a “new” Javanese theater.

Another exponent of the new directions in modern European theater just prior to and after WWI briefly referenced by Karsten, and whose work he would have witnessed, was the outspoken Dutch playwright and socialist Herman Heijermans, who moved to Berlin in 1907.<sup>47</sup> Heijermans, under his pseudonym Heinz Sperber, had been involved in a drawn-out and heated public debate about the role of the arts in a socialist agenda during Karsten’s first year in Berlin.<sup>48</sup> He had criticized the tendency of the socialist-inspired people’s theater, the Freie Volksbühne, reconstituted in 1897, to stage “bourgeois art ” for Berlin’s working classes. He argued that art for the

<sup>43</sup> See: David Kuhns, *German Expressionist Theatre: The Actor and the Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 110; and F. Washburn-Freund, “The Evolution of Reinhart,” in *Max Reinhardt and His Theatre*, ed. Oliver Saylor (New York and London: Benjamin Blom, 1924, 1968), 46–48.

<sup>44</sup> Kuhns, *German Expressionist Theatre*, 173–74.

<sup>45</sup> Kuhns, *German Expressionist Theatre*, 174, 175.

<sup>46</sup> Kuhns identifies Reinhardt’s 1911 production of Strindberg in Berlin—when Karsten had just arrived in the city—as crucially influential in the development of German Expressionist theater, and Karsten mentioned Reinhardt in his first published article, “Berlijnse Indrukken” [Berlin impressions], *Bouwkundig Weekblad*, 1911 (47): 558–60, in which he reports on the new arts in Berlin. Reinhardt’s international success, with productions in London and New York, was celebrated in a hagiographic German language publication, published in English translation in 1924 as *Max Reinhardt and his Theatre*, ed. O. M. Sayer (New York: Brentano, 1924, 1968).

<sup>47</sup> See: Rob van der Zalm and Rudolf Valkhoff, “Netherlands,” in *The Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre*, ed. Colin Chambers (London and New York, Continuum, 2002), 535–36; and Andrew Bonnell, *The People’s Stage in Imperial Germany* (London and New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2005), 191–94. Also mentioned is leading Dutch actor Willem Cornelis Roijaards, alias Willem Rooyaards (1867–1929); see “Roijaards, Willem Cornelis,” on-line Biografische Woordenboek van Nederland 1880–2000, <http://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/bwn1880-2000/lemmata/bwn1/roijaards>, accessed April 20, 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Summarized in Bonnell, *The People’s Stage*, 191–92, it has been referred to as the “Tendenzkunst-Debatte” and was undertaken in several journals between 1910 and 1912.

“proletariat” should be in harmony with proletariat principles and avoid the “mystification of ‘bourgeois’ art” produced by a “class instinct [that] rules the world, tyrannizes the book market [and] theatres [and] has degraded art and artists to [the level of] instruments, [and] the manufacture of ‘artistic products’ to a commodity.”<sup>49</sup> Karsten, himself a paid-up member of the Dutch Socialist Workers Party during his student days, was clearly attuned to this debate.

More generally, in reviewing Karsten’s discussion of Javanese performing arts and architecture, dance, music, batik, and literature, it is possible to see parallels with the cultural principles articulated by adherents of the contemporary and socially oriented Dutch art movement, *De Stijl*.<sup>50</sup> Key to its agenda was an insistence on the integral connection of all arts “into a syntactical indivisible, non-hierarchical whole” and its rejection of “the individual”; its attempt to find a “new balance between the universal and the individual”; and its emphasis on participation of the arts in the “everyday life” of the modern urban citizen rather than an aesthetic withdrawal from it.<sup>51</sup>

Without further explicit references, pinpointing other possible influences on Karsten’s broader theater philosophy becomes problematic. However, in broad terms, it is evident that much of his writing on culture, architecture, and town planning over two decades reflects his absorption of this European avant-garde critique of post-WWI European society and culture transposed to the situation in Java.<sup>52</sup>

#### *Karsten’s Philosophy of Theater Arts*

The central tenet of Karsten’s belief in the significance of theater and the various theater arts associated with it, was his belief that these were “spiritual manifestations which are closely associated with social life” and largely determined by its “material social circumstances and relationships.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, whatever form theater and its attendant arts might take, these could “only be first understood and appreciated by seeing them in the first place as an element of the social life.”<sup>54</sup> Theater consequently had the potential to play a crucial role in presenting ideas that were culturally uplifting and socially “meaningful,” allowing it to contribute to the amelioration of the contemporary socio-cultural condition and redirect it towards positive evolution.

It was because Karsten saw theater as embodying this essential relationship between the socio-economic circumstances of a community and cultural arts in their widest form and, as such, was able to directly reflect changing social conditions and needs, that he saw the founding of a contemporary Javanese theater as an important intervention in urban Javanese cultural life. His urban theater project related directly to addressing what he saw as the main cause for the present state of Javanese culture: its imprisonment within a disintegrating aristocratic environment. As the most public and engaging of art forms, theater could attract to it and educate this growing

<sup>49</sup> Heinze Sperber, 1911, cited in Bonnell, *The People’s Theatre*, 193.

<sup>50</sup> Michael White, *De Stijl and Dutch Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 45–76.

<sup>51</sup> Yve-Alain Bois, cited in White, *De Stijl and Dutch Modernism*, 3.

<sup>52</sup> See Coté, “Thomas Karsten’s Indonesia.”

<sup>53</sup> Karsten, “Van Pendopo naar Volksshouwburg,” 21.

<sup>54</sup> Karsten, “Van Pendopo naar Volksshouwburg,” 21.

Javanese urban population, and, in the face of those forces that were leading to fragmentation and alienation, could bind its audiences together in support of the development of its cultural heritage.<sup>55</sup>

### *The Architecture of a People's Theater*

As an architect and planner, Karsten argued in his article "From Pendopo to People's Theater" that his projected theater building would, in the first place, be a practical addition to the urban landscape. The city, with its huge Javanese population, needed a public building for festive or other community events—a need "currently exploited," he emphasized, by European *bioscoop* and other theater entrepreneurs. Secondly, as for any object, "good form" related to function, and in this instance a "good theatre" needed to be appropriate to the nature of the performance to be enacted within it, and to be able to enhance an audience's experience of it. Central to this, as Reinhardt had demonstrated, was the performance space in conveying the meaning of the performance.<sup>56</sup> A stylized form of the traditional Javanese *pendopo* would be an ideal basis for the design of such a building, he argued, not only because of its historic association with Javanese theatrical and musical performances and this inherent meaningfulness for Javanese audiences, but also in terms of its modern staging potential.

In designating the traditional Javanese *pendopo* as a starting point for a modern Javanese theater, Karsten drew attention to the ways design referenced some of the most important recent developments in European theater. Making one of his rare direct references to European precedent—Berlin's recently opened Rheinhardt theater, which exploited a former circus building to provide a "theatre-in-the-round experience for mass audiences"<sup>57</sup>—he pointed to the relevance of the contemporary European *avant-garde* theater's move away from stage presentations to "open theatre."

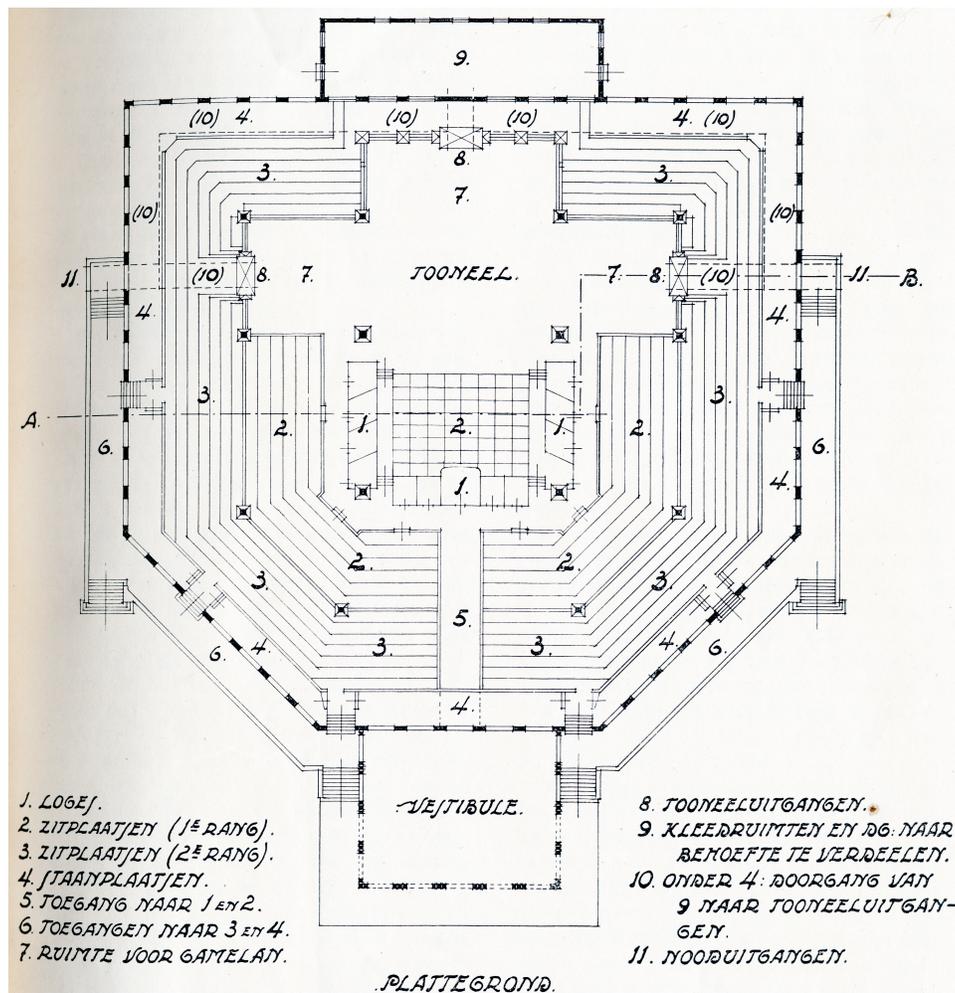
Modern European theater, Karsten argued, aimed to break down the separation between stage and audience, between imagination and reality, between performance and the real world. The days when theater attempted to recreate "a reality" on an elevated stage isolated from an audience—when individual members of the audience were seated silently in the dark, alienated from their fellow viewers, to be left temporally enthralled in their individual make-believe reality before returning to the real world after a brief interlude of applause—were coming to an end.<sup>58</sup> The new

<sup>55</sup> Karsten, "Van Pendopo naar Volksshouwburg," 21.

<sup>56</sup> This was the same argument he later employed in defining the principles for designing the modern urban Indonesia house; see Thomas Karsten, *De woning: Preadvies over de technisch-architectonische zijde van het volkshuisvestingsvraagstuk voor het Volkshuisvestingscongres* s [The home: Position paper on the technical-architectural aspects of the question of public housing for the Public Housing Congress] (Semarang: Sociaal-Technische Vereeniging, 1922). See also Coté and O'Neill, *The Life and Work of Thomas Karsten*, 338–50 (Appendix 2).

<sup>57</sup> Karsten, though, was critical of the mass scale of Rheinhardt's staging, his use of an assortment of special effects and staging "tricks," and, more broadly, the direction towards "reality drama" introduced to Berlin with his staging of plays by Henrich Ibsen. As a result, the comparison went no further. In his 1911 article, "Berlijns Indrukken," Karsten had referred more favorably to Reinhardt's staging.

<sup>58</sup> Karsten, "Van Pendopo naar Volksshouwburg," 24.



Proposed plan for Karsten's "People's Theater"; image from  
 "Van Pendopo naar Volksschouwburg," *Djawa* 1, 1 (1921)

Legend: 1. Private boxes/enclosures; 2. Seating (first grade); 3. Seating (second grade); 4. Standing room; 5. Entry to first- and second-grade seating; 6. Entry to areas 3 and 4; 7. Space for *gamelan*; 8. Stage exits; 9. Dressing room, etc., to be divided as required; 10. Throughway under standing room for dressing room access to exits; and 11. Emergency exits. *Toneel* = stage; *Vestibule* = foyer; and *Plattegrond* = plan.

conception of theater, in part achieved through the content of the drama, but also in terms of performance and production, finally depended on changes in theater architecture.<sup>59</sup>

The relationship between these two different characteristic types of arrangement of performance and audience in West Europe and Java and the

<sup>59</sup> Reinhardt was noted for his ability to exploit different theater architecture to produce different kinds of drama and different dramatic effects. For an overview of contemporary critical acclaim see "An International Symposium on Reinhardt," in Sayer, *Max Reinhardt*, 327–39 (Appendix 2).

building styles [in which these take place] should now be evident. As soon as, as is the case in the Western theater, the stage is elevated into a separate space, imagination and reality are also separated and placed in opposition to each other, the necessary consequence of which is that on the stage a new reality [...] is constructed. Conversely, where a performance takes place in an open space, without a realistic décor, imagination and the real world remain united, and the performance becomes part of the real world.<sup>60</sup>

This was a statement of modern theater principle—but applied specifically to Java. The *pendopo* structure, in which Javanese theater had traditionally been performed, provided such an open space, without realistic décor, in which scenes from an imagined past in which Javanese culture was encapsulated were abstractly performed while accompanied by music and sparse scenery. For Javanese viewers, the ideas embodied in the drama formed part of their daily life reality, and therefore such performances could only enrich their lives—in contrast to “realistic” European theater, which aimed at distracting audiences from their daily reality by attempting to create new, false realities. That this was so, he pontificated, was because

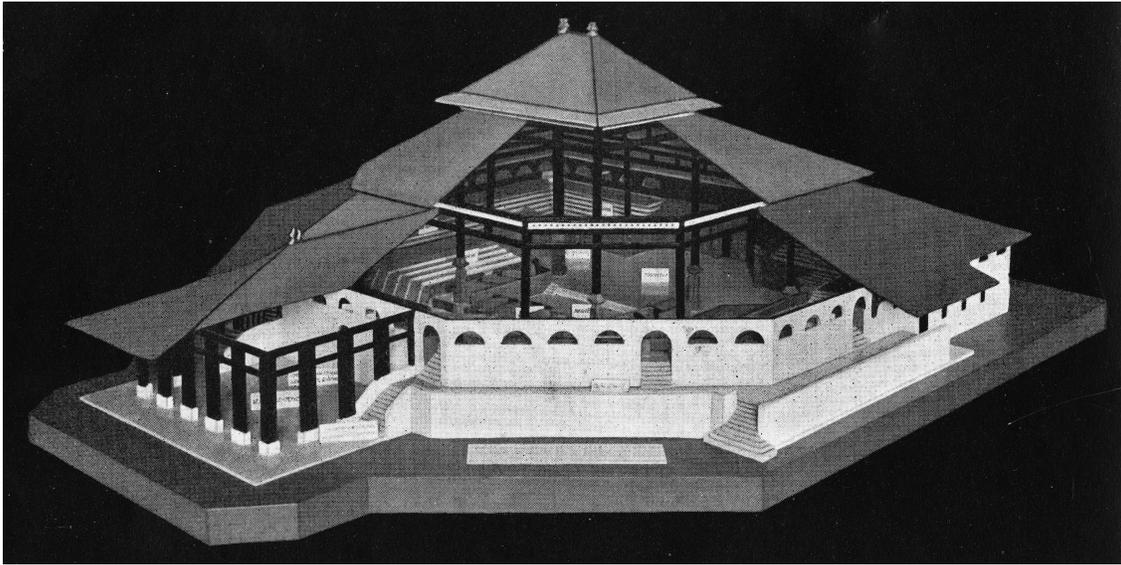
... the Easterner and certainly the Javanese does not perceive the factual and logical, but rather the intangible and the imagined as that which is most important in his life—and for him the unseen and the unseeable, but is therefore also no less real than the seen; the evidence of which mentality [...] can be seen in numerous cruder and more refined manifestations of that people even outside the performing arts.<sup>61</sup>

Fundamentally, then, the traditional Javanese stage—primarily that prescribed by four central pillars, or *saka guru*—defined by the *pendopo* structure made possible an amphitheater-like setting in which actor and audience were not isolated from each other. Moreover, Karsten suggested, the *pendopo*'s lack of a backstage—other than a batik or similar evocative cloth on the back wall—ensured that (as in modern contemporary European theater) all aspects of staging were accessible to the audience, preventing any opportunity for the elaborate fabrication of a “false reality.”

Nevertheless, the *pendopo* had its limitations. The most obvious was insufficient protection from the elements and a flat floor that limited audience viewing. These deficiencies Karsten's design would rectify in his modification of the *pendopo* model by introducing walls and tiered seating. It would further have a public entrance flanked by ticket offices, since, being no longer the recipient of royal patronage, the modern urban theater would need to introduce a system of financing through ticket sales and paid membership. As to size and capacity, Karsten argued that a theater seating more than one thousand people was neither desirable (since it would mean part of the audience would be too far removed from the stage) nor economically viable (since it would require the construction of balconies and would always be dependent on large audiences or high ticket prices to cover construction costs and overhead).

<sup>60</sup> Karsten, “Van Pendopo naar Volksshouwburg,” 25.

<sup>61</sup> Karsten, “Van Pendopo naar Volksshouwburg,” 25.



Model of Karsten's proposed "People's Theater"; image from  
 "Van Pendopo naar Volksschouwburg," *Djawa* 1, 1 (1921)

### *The Drama*

The question of what constituted indigenous theater and what might be best suited for a modern Javanese urban audience was to become a topic much discussed by European and Javanese intellectuals in the coming years. For Karsten, it was *wayang wong* that best suited the kind of theater building he had in mind—and, in fact, defined the kind of building he envisaged. He tended to refer to it intentionally as *mensen-toneelkunst*, or people-based theater, to accentuate its human dimensions. Not only did *wayang wong*-style theater lend itself to being viewed by a larger audience than *wayang purwo*, or puppet theater, it was also a cultural manifestation, he argued, that was already emancipating itself from an "economic dependence on the aristocracy" and emerging naturally as a popular modern form. Moreover, he suggested, *wayang wong* had the full imprimatur of Java's hereditary rulers, since it was also being promoted in *kraton* performances.

In focusing on urban *toneel* rather than puppet theater, Karsten was anticipating the academic debate then emerging between Javanese intellectuals and European "experts," and pursued in the cultural journal *Djawa* and elsewhere.<sup>62</sup> Deeply involved in the question of origins and the authenticity of texts, as Laurie Sears suggests, this discourse succeeded in "inventing" a culturally elitist "*kraton* tradition" of Javanese cultural arts in which *wayang wong*, if commented on at all, was seen as less authentic than *wayang purwo*, or puppet theater, and as derivative and unhistorical. It also

<sup>62</sup> Laurie Sears, *Shadows of Empire: Colonial Discourses and Javanese Tales* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 118. Also at this time, a book by the European secretary of the Java Institute, J. Kats, *Het Javaansche Toneel Vol. 1: De wayang Poerwa* [Javanese theater: The puppet wayang] (Weltevreden, 1923; republished in 1984), published as part of the colonial government's *volkslectuur* (popular literature) program, was intended to popularize a (European) understanding of Javanese theater.

ignored (as indeed did Karsten) the people's existing, lively, and contemporary "village *wayang*" tradition.<sup>63</sup>

By the end of the twenties this debate had confirmed many of the assertions Kartsen had made a decade earlier. W. H. Rassers, the Leiden museum curator and Javanist who many considered at the time of the opening of the Sobokartti building as most authoritative on the history of Javanese theater,<sup>64</sup> can perhaps be interpreted as supporting Karsten's view about the suitability of *wayang wong* for a modern urban audience.<sup>65</sup> Unlike *wayang purwo*, the viewing of which, Rassers argued, inherently involved considerations of traditional social and cultural divisions and lingering religious significance,<sup>66</sup> the "democratic" and secular form of *wayang* enabled actors to be directly observed—and enjoyed—by the entire audience.

In an influential 1929 article on the *wayang purwo* versus *wayang wong* debate, Theodore Pigeaud (1899–1988), a linguist and colonial government employee and Jogjakarta resident, also appeared to concur with Kartsen's view regarding *wayang wong*. Pigeaud noted that *wayang wong*, while only recently widely recognized as a result of celebrated performances in the context of the cultural congresses, was, in fact, a genuine form of "indigenous theater" that had deep roots in the long history of courtly culture. As a historically "authentic" form of theater, whose form and musical accompaniment had hardly undergone any significant change despite significant material changes in society at large, Pigeaud agreed that it would most readily transfer to a popular modern urban setting.<sup>67</sup> In two later articles on the subject, his accounts of *wayang wong* unintentionally underscored Karsten's argument regarding its appropriateness for a modern theater.<sup>68</sup> Pigeaud's insistence that *wayang wong* performers actually did little more than fulfill the role of puppets and enact established *lakon* (stories) prescribed by a traditional *wayang* repertoire, implied that

<sup>63</sup> Sears, *Shadows of Empire*, 98, 139–69. Possibly the most famous statement on *wayang purwo*, in part because of his pivotal role in the "kraton Javanology," was that published a little later by the Mangkunegara VII, "Over de wajang-koelit (poerwa) in het algemeen en over de daarin voorkomende symbolische en mystieke elementen" [On the wayang kulit in general and its symbolic and mystical elements], *Djawa* 13 (1933): 70–97. Karsten does not reflect on the symbolism and mysticism to which the Mangkunegara here referred. On *wayang wong*, see also Soedarsono, "Javanese Dance: History and Characterization," *Ethnomusicology* 13, 3 (1969): 504.

<sup>64</sup> Epskamp describes Rassers as "one of the first theatre anthropologists," but dismisses his belief that *wayang* was a "totemic" expression of Javanese culture; see Kees P. Epskamp, "Rassers's Comparison of the *Panji Tales* to *The Tempest*: An Early Case of an Anthropology of the Performing Arts," in *Performance in Java and Bali: Studies of Narrative, Theatre, Music and Dance*, ed. B. Arps (London: SOAS, 1993: 219–135).

<sup>65</sup> W. H. Rassers, "Over den Oorsprong van het Javaansche Toneel," *Bijdragen* 88 (1931): 317–450. See Rassers's English translation, "On the Origins of the Javanese Theatre," in Rassers, *Panji, the Culture Hero* (Dordrecht: KITLV, 1959); and his earlier "Over den Zin van het Javaansche Drama" [On the meaning of Javanese drama], *Bijdragen* 81 (1925): 311–81.

<sup>66</sup> Rassers identified the historical significance of the *wayang* screen (in fact, the space behind the screen) in emphasizing a division between those "initiated" (males) into its symbolism who could observe the *dalang* at work, and the "uninitiated" (females), who saw only images on the reverse side of the screen; see Rassers, "On the Origins of the Javanese Theatre," 126–27, 139–40, 152–53. Unlike Karsten, Rassers was also concerned to emphasize the "mysteries" of that form that continued to intrigue European viewers of *wayang purwo*.

<sup>67</sup> Th. Pigeaud, "Wayang Wong," *Djawa* 9 (1929): 7–13.

<sup>68</sup> See: Th. Pigeaud, "Over den Huidigen Stand van de Toneel- en Danskunst en Muziekbeoefening op Java" [On the contemporary state of theatrical and dance arts and musical performance in Java], *Djawa* 12 (1932): 155–65; and Th. Pigeaud, *Javaanse Volksvertoningen: Bijdragen tot de Beschrijving van Land en Volk* [Manifestations of Javanese folk arts: Contributions to a description of land and people] (Batavia: Volkslectuur, 1938).

he saw little evidence of real acting. This seemed to support Karsten's view that *wayang wong* perfectly captured the spirit of the stylized performances of Expressionist theater that he had in mind.



*Wayang wong* performers—untitled photograph, attributed to Tasslo Adam, c. 1923–26; courtesy of the Australian National Gallery, Asia Pacific Photographic Collection, Canberra, Australia (photograph 196960, 2007–2696)

Pigeaud, like many European observers, including Karsten, lamented how “a practical interest in and knowledge of the artistic forms of expression, such as the *wayang kulit*, is declining amongst the masses of the population, especially in the cities.”<sup>69</sup> He identified the same causes for the current precarious situation of Java’s cultural heritage as Karsten had earlier pinpointed: its cost; the “regular working hours, at least in cities,” which prevented attendance at all night performances; and especially the “changing social circumstances which has tended to shift the focus of attention in other directions.”<sup>70</sup> This, he believed, was particularly the case with “those who are intellectually most developed because of the Western education and viewpoint, [who were] if not alienated from Javanese arts, [...] apparently incapable of

<sup>69</sup> Pigeaud, “Over den Huidigen Stand,” 159.

<sup>70</sup> Pigeaud, “Over den Huidigen Stand,” 161.

leading it in new directions.”<sup>71</sup> Whereas Karsten saw this “middle class” as providing the engine for the way forward, Pigeaud doubted that “the upcoming small middle class [would] find the energy [...] to renew the arts,” and would be able to achieve little more than to “protect the beloved tradition from influence of the modern times.”<sup>72</sup>

In this context, Pigeaud noted the existence of various “dance or music societies, whose members belong to the middle classes of government officials and clerical staff, which can be regarded as an expression of the new organizational forms of modern existence, and of the new national cultural consciousness that is emerging.”<sup>73</sup> In describing such “new organizational forms,” although not mentioning it by name, he perfectly summed up the activities of the Vereenigenen Sobo Karti:

[They] usually presented [...] forms of dance, battle scenes between men in pairs, accompanied by *gamelan* in imitation of the courtly forms of dances or *wayang wong*. Sometimes entire *lakons* of *wayang wong* are performed [...] These performances, rarely more than several times a year, are open to non-members for an entry fee, the money received then going to some charity or social purpose [*darama*].<sup>74</sup>

#### *Institutional Support for “Native Arts” in Contemporary Java*

As Karsten was aware, and Pigeaud confirmed, by the second decade of the century there were a number of attempts to support the revitalization of traditional Javanese performing arts. This was most obviously exemplified by the establishment of the Java Instituut in 1919, of which Karsten himself was a founding member (as was his close associate Sam Koperburg, who became the institute’s founding secretary). The institute was the initiative of a group of Javanese intellectuals and like-minded Europeans assembled at the court of the newly appointed head of the royal house of Mangkunegara in Surakarta, with whom Karsten was closely associated.<sup>75</sup> The institute saw itself as the coordinating body for new initiatives in the promotion of Javanese cultural heritage, and its journal, *Djawa*, as noted above, became a key record of the debates concerning the conservation and promotion of Javanese cultural heritage and the review of events and activities promoting it. Its annual cultural conferences provided opportunities for European “culture experts” and “cultural activists” and Javanese intellectuals to interact in debates on the origins, meanings, significance, and future of Javanese cultural forms.

The most widely reported on cultural organization specifically devoted to revitalizing the practice of Central Javanese dance and music traditions at the time Karsten was offering his views on a *volkschouwburg* was the Krido Bekso Wiromo (Krida Beksa Wirama). Established in 1918 in Jogjakarta under the patronage of prince Soerjodingrat, half brother of the Sultan of Jogjakarta,<sup>76</sup> its aim was to

<sup>71</sup> Pigeaud, “Over den Huidigen Stand,” 165.

<sup>72</sup> Pigeaud, “Over den Huidigen Stand,” 165.

<sup>73</sup> Pigeaud, “Over den Huidigen Stand,” 161.

<sup>74</sup> Pigeaud, “Over den Huidigen Stand,” 161.

<sup>75</sup> Jessup, “H. H. Mangkunegara.” See also Sears, *Shadows of Empire*, 143–47.

<sup>76</sup> Prince Soerjodingrat, who became a major in the general staff of the colonial army and a *controleur* with the department of agriculture, was known for his “zeal for the welfare of the common people.” Later he

popularize the appreciation and practice of Jogjakarta court-based dance and *gamelan* by training dancers in the art of traditional dance (*djoged*) and *gamelan*, and in sponsoring performances for the general public.<sup>77</sup> While Krido Bekso Wiromo was still largely under the protective wing of Javanese royalty (unlike Karsten's proposal presented a year later), performers had begun to reach out to an urban public.<sup>78</sup>

By 1920, with some European involvement, other cultural organizations were also emerging outside the traditional elite centers of Javanese society aiming both to "educate" and engage new generations of urban Javanese and Sundanese. Bandung saw the creation of the Javaansche Kunstvereniging, very similar to that proposed by Karsten. In Weltevreden, members of a new Javanese political organization, Jong Java, claimed the initiative for the establishment in 1922 of Krida Jatmaka (also referred to as "Krido-Jatmoko" and "Krida Jatma"), an arts organization with similar aims. Although both the Javaansche Kunstvereniging and Krida Jatmaka evolved without the direct patronage of central Javanese royalty, both had the support of local aristocrats and prominent Europeans.<sup>79</sup>

These cultural initiatives, focusing on traditional performing arts, can be distinguished from a parallel interest in the "museumization" of traditional culture (e.g., static displays and temporary exhibitions of native arts and crafts). Long popular in the Netherlands,<sup>80</sup> museums of native arts and crafts had also become common in the colony since the turn of the century. Such passive cultural exhibits were primarily designed to be "educational," as, for example, were the Balinese museums, Singaraja's Gedong Kirtya and Denpasar's Badung Museum,<sup>81</sup> and Surabaya's antiquities museum, but were also intended to present and preserve models of best practice as a guide for

---

became chairman of the influential political movement, Pakempalan Kuwolo Ngajogyakarta, founded in 1930; see G. Larson, *Prelude to Revolution: Palaces and Politics in Surakarta, 1912–1942* (Dordrecht: Foris Publications, 1987), 155–57.

<sup>77</sup> Soetopo, "Uit de Javaansche Cultuur-beweging: Een Dansdemonstratie" [From the Javanese culture movement: A dance demonstration], *Djawa* 2 (1922): 89. Sears lists three other court-linked *dhalang* schools: "Padhasuka" in Surakarta, 1923; "Habiranda" in Yogyakarta, 1925; and "Psainon Dhalang ing Mangkunagaran" in Surakarta, 1931. Their purpose was specifically to train non-court-linked puppeteers in the "correct" tradition. See Sears, *Shadows of Empire*, 147–49.

<sup>78</sup> This organization gained more attention than Sobo Karti, primarily because of its close association with Yogyakarta royalty and its ability to engage palace dancers and musicians directly. It aimed to teach court dance and music to the "common people," but also admitted European children to its dance school; see Soetopo, "Uit de Javaansche Cultuur-beweging." See also "Twintig jaar cultuurarbied van Krida-Beksa Wirama" [Twenty years of culture work by Krida-Beksa Wirama], *Djawa* 18 (1938) 332–37. The school's first public performance, in June 1922, was opened by H. J. van Mook, who was the chairman of the local Jogjakarta branch of the Java Institute and former member of the Sobo Karti Vereeniging. See also Tom van den Berge, *H. J. van Mook: Een vrij en gelukkig Indonesië* [H. J. van Mook: A free and fortunate Indonesia] (Bussem: Uitgever Thoth, 2014), 65–68.

<sup>79</sup> The Krida Jatmaka obtained a *gamelan* set from the Pangwedono of Mangkunegara, presumably the same one that had first been offered to Sobokartti. In Weltevreden, prominent Javanese aristocrats provided support; and in Bandung, the regent was a patron of the Bandung Kunstvereniging. In 1924, Krida Jatmaka had seventy-two members. See: "Uit de Javaansche Cultuur-beweging: Krido-Jatmoko," *Djawa* 3 (1923): 45–47; and "Javaansche Kunstvereniging: Krido Jatmoko: Jaarverslag over 1924," *Djawa* 5 (1925): 267–72.

<sup>80</sup> For a new take on nineteenth-century Dutch ethnographic museums, see Donna Mehos, "Colonial Commerce and Anthropological Knowledge: Dutch Ethnographic Museums in the European Context," in *A New History of Anthropology*, ed. Henrika Kuklick (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 173–90.

<sup>81</sup> Its history is described in detail in Th. A. Resink, "Het Bali Museum," *Djawa* 18 (1938): 71–80.

young contemporary artisans.<sup>82</sup> Annual exhibitions mounted by the Vereeniging de Nederlandsch-Indisch Kunstkring, under the guidance of architect P. A. J. "Piet" Moojen,<sup>83</sup> catering primarily to European interests, took their inspiration from the success achieved by exhibitions of native arts and crafts at international exhibitions in the West. By contrast, Karsten, who was also involved in designing a museum—the Sono Budoyo museum in Jogjakarta, built in 1938 for the Java Instituut—pointedly emphasized that his museum, unlike the passive display of the typical museum, was to be a dynamic educational institution for urban Javanese.<sup>84</sup>

### A Theatrical Interlude: Bandung 1921

At the time the Vereeniging Sobokartti was about to launch its first season in Semarang, Karsten witnessed and extensively reported on a theater performance presented during Java Instituut's Cultural Congress held in Bandung in June 1921.<sup>85</sup> His published account of this event reveals an enthusiastically engaged Karsten evidently witnessing a performance that appeared to accord precisely with how he envisaged the direction of modern theater in Java might evolve. As there is no equivalent account by him of any Sobokartti performances, his response to the 1921 Bandung Congress performance is worth examining in some detail before turning to the history of Sobokartti.

The Bandung performance that he watched of *Loetoeng Kasaroeng* (*Lutung Kasarung*; lit: the lost ape), an episode from classical Sundanese literature, demonstrated for Karsten how a modern theatrical performance could contribute to revitalizing and democratizing court-bound artistic traditions. The event, he emphasized, was the outcome of local enthusiasm, not aristocratic patronage (although it was under the patronage of the regent of Bandung and the influential regent of Serang and member of the Java Institute, Achmad Djajdiningrat), and was a genuine rediscovery of the past, not mere imitation or repetition. While recognizing—and applauding—that it drew inspiration from European forms—including “the influence of cinema [...] because there was no other form than the European style of theater available”<sup>86</sup>—he emphasized his belief that the story, as well as the music, choreography, costumes, and staging, had essentially remained true to its Sundanese origins. Karsten was moved to exclaim, “in the seeds present in the elements that have been brought

<sup>82</sup> This had been recommended by various inquiries into “Inlandsche kunstnijerheid” (Native arts and crafts) in the first decade of the twentieth century.

<sup>83</sup> Moojen had established the colony's first *kunstkring* in Batavia in 1902 with the support of “Inlandsche kunst” (Native arts) as a key foundational aim. See “Het ontstaan van den Kunstkring” in *Gedenkboek, Uitegeven bij Gelegenheid van de 25 Jaar Bestaan van de Vereeniging de Nederlandsch-Indisch Kunstkring te Batavia 1902–1927* (Batavia: Nederlandsch Indisch Kunstkring, 1927), 4. Karsten was closely involved with Moojen in the establishment in 1916 of Bond van Nederlandsch-Indisch Kunstkringen (Association of Dutch East Indies Art Societies).

<sup>84</sup> See O'Neill, “Architecture,” 210–15.

<sup>85</sup> Karsten, “Over het cultuurcongres te Bandoeng” [On the culture conference in Bandung], *Djawa* 1, 3 (1921): 305–12 (appendix).

<sup>86</sup> Karsten, “Over het cultuurcongres te Bandoeng,” 305–6.

together and combined exist the possibilities for further development which could form the basis for the flowering of a new culture.”<sup>87</sup>

Having at this time already articulated his ideas about an urban people’s theater, one feels that here Karsten found confirmation of his ideas. Although the performance had been recreated in an urban environment, the presentation of the stage characters, down to the detail of each item of clothing, represented “ordinary people,” its producers reaching back into Sundanese history, drawing on fragments of traditional musical forms and depictions of everyday life found in ancient temple reliefs.

A journalist from the Sundanese-language journal *Majalah Sri Poestaka*, reporting on the same production, saw another face of modernity.<sup>88</sup> He also described the same features of staging, scenery, and the significance of this revival of “Sundanese folklore,” but what most impressed him was the extent to which the staging appropriated new Western technology, namely, electric spotlights: “large and luminous lamps, [by which] at one time the part where people were on a throne, or were in a forest or mountain, can be illuminated [...] while other places are left dark.”<sup>89</sup>

This reviewer also drew his readers’ attention to the dramatic incursion modernity made into the meaning of the saga that had been performed. Describing the moment in the performance “when the gods descended [amongst them] as the people were carrying on with their daily activities, such as [...] gathering rice, [...] kneeling, and worshipping,” he explained how the Sundanese audience “tasted discomfort in their marrow, stopped breathing and [experienced] heartache.”<sup>90</sup> Why this was, the journalist made clear, was that the modern performance had breached deeply held spiritual sensitivities. The *lakon* was still “considered sacred” by Sundanese, so much so that ...

... people who know about the story rarely dare to engage [in it], for fear of being struck by the *daulat marhum* [fate]. [...] ordinary people, even poets, rarely dare to tell the play.<sup>91</sup>

In the comparison of these two reviews, Karsten’s misreading of Javanese (and Sundanese) theater, like that of contemporary European opinion, is clearly revealed. Although in his 1921 article on Javanese theater he had emphasized that, in contrast to a European theater audience, a *wayang* performance represented a spiritual reality for a Javanese audience, he had failed to consider—or possibly intentionally ignored—the possibility of its deeper religious meaning. A self-declared atheist and critic of Theosophy (a concept which many in the Javanese Institute held to), Karsten seems to have assumed that *wayang wong* could only survive in a modern urban setting as a secular art form.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>87</sup> Karsten, “Over het cultuurcongress te Bandoeng,” 305.

<sup>88</sup> Nunus Supardi, *Kongres Kebudayaan (1918–2003)* [Culture congresses 1918–2003] (Yogyakarta: Ombak, 2007), 84–89.

<sup>89</sup> *Majalah Sri Poesaka* (1921), 187–89, cited in Supardi, *Kongres Kebudayaan*, 86.

<sup>90</sup> Supardi, *Kongres Kebudayaan*, 86.

<sup>91</sup> Supardi, *Kongres Kebudayaan*, 85–86.

<sup>92</sup> Karsten makes this clear in his private notebook (Karsten family archive).

While impressed by the experience of an open air performance that allowed for a wide stage and seating for a large and enthusiastic local audience—an *openluchttheater* that “one could equally imagine seeing in one of Europe’s big cities, [but which nevertheless] appeared to be perfectly suited to the Sundanese performance”<sup>93</sup>—in the end he saw that his Sobokartti theater building remained preferable. Although his design imposed greater restrictions on both performers and audience, it was not subject to the vagaries of the weather and provided a comfortable urban—and Westernized—theater environment.

### Sobokartti, 1920–31

#### *Establishing the Vereeniging Sobo Karti*

In introducing Karsten’s theater proposal at the initial meeting of community representatives held in June 1919, the representatives of Semarang Kunstkring—or more likely Karsten himself—made clear that the *kunstkring* wanted to promote the advancement of indigenous arts, a goal that it believed was urgent. Furthermore, it recognized that the interest and involvement of Javanese people themselves in the revival of traditional arts was essential, since European intervention would inevitably result in deleterious Western influences. It was also emphasized that the royal courts were gradually losing their influence, so that urban communities had to take the initiative.<sup>94</sup> These fundamental premises effectively summarized arguments that Karsten had previously rehearsed in a number of articles in *De Taak*, strongly suggesting Karsten’s authorship of their formulation within the *kunstkring*.<sup>95</sup>

The city’s Javanese community representatives at that initial meeting had agreed with this analysis. The Budi Utomo representative, Joesoef, insisted that “in mounting specifically indigenous people’s concerts [*volksconcerten*] with *gamelan* [...] it was essential that in the first place discussions should be held with people knowledgeable about and practitioners of *gamelan*.”<sup>96</sup> Others, however, pointed out that *gamelan* performances alone would not attract sufficient interest—and thus would not effectively contribute to the aim of educating the population about traditional culture. What was wanted as well, the community representatives stressed, was “popular theater,” by which they meant the staging of *wayang wong* performances.

Those at this meeting agreed to appoint a representative working party, consisting of Joesoef, chairman (Budi Utomo); Karsten (Semarang Kunstkring); Mohammad Poespahadikoesoema (Tjahja-Hardja); Raden Soekarna (Mangoenhardjo); and Vorborth (NIP). Notably absent was a representative from Sarekat Islam, which withdrew from further participation in the project after its participation in the first meeting in 1919.<sup>97</sup> The working group drew up the statutes necessary for the formal

<sup>93</sup> Karsten, “Over het cultuurcongres te Bandoeng,” 306.

<sup>94</sup> “Sobo Karti: Onstaan,” 49.

<sup>95</sup> See Coté, “Defining a Cultural Blueprint,” in Coté and O’Neill, *The Life and Work of Thomas Karsten*, 85–122.

<sup>96</sup> “Sobo Karti: Onstaan,” 49.

<sup>97</sup> Under the chairmanship of its radical leader, Semaun, since 1917, the Semarang branch of Sarekat Islam was actively involved in a range of political and labor campaigns against colonial interests at this time.

registration of a community organization to oversee the theater project and investigated possible funding sources, physical locations, and other associated practicalities.

The subsequent first official meeting of the new community organization was held at Karsten's architectural and planning bureau on March 5, 1920. The project had evidently gained further useful political support and publicity since the initial meeting of the working party. In attendance this time were the European mayor of Semarang; the (Javanese) regent of Semarang; European (and possibly Chinese) members of the Semarang Municipal Council; representatives of the press; and the same political party representatives as before (minus Regentenbond<sup>98</sup> and, as explained, Sarekat Islam). Significantly, it was also attended by the well-known political activist and recently returned exile R. M. Soewardi Soerjaningrat, soon to become better known as the educator and Javanese cultural advocate Ki Hajar Dewantoro.<sup>99</sup> Soewardi had insisted, in line with his then-political outlook, that the wording of the organization's mission statement be changed from promoting "Javanese culture" to promoting "Indonesian culture." Evidently, moderate voices prevailed. After some discussion, the minutes finally recorded the new organization's aim as supporting "*Inheemsch Kunst*" (indigenous arts).

The proposed (European) name of the organization was also challenged. Initially to be called the "Volkskunstvereniging" (the association for the promotion of folk arts), on the suggestion of K. P. M. Koesoemajoeda, the son of Surakarta sultan Pakubuwana X, a "more appropriate Javanese term, '*Saba Karti*' [sic], was proposed, to which the wider membership gave its approval at a subsequent members' meeting on October 17, 1920."<sup>100</sup> As a result, the Semarang theater organization came to be known as Vereeniging Sobo-Karti.<sup>101</sup> Karsten was appointed to its executive committee as treasurer, the same role that he was occupying in the Semarang Kunstkring.

The new Vereeniging Sobo Karti thus became one of several projects emerging at this time, the result of the combined efforts of European and Javanese initiatives with the aim of generating local urban support for Javanese performing arts. The theater project had seemingly emerged from "the people," since, although it also had its influential aristocratic patrons, as well as the support of prominent European officials,

<sup>98</sup> The Regentenbond, founded in 1913, was an association of colonial government-appointed regents (*bupati*) that saw itself as offering a counterweight to Budi Utomo and Sarekat Islam. It appears to have been represented at an earlier meeting, perhaps in response to the urgings of Sam Koperburg, who was also its secretary.

<sup>99</sup> "Sobo Karti: Onstaan," *Djawa*, 49. Soewardi, initially a founding member of the Budi Utomo, joined the Indische Partij in 1913, the first political party calling for Indonesian independence. Exiled to the Netherlands in 1913 for publishing what was regarded as a politically provocative article—"Als ik een Nederlander was" [If I were a Dutchman]—he had only just returned to Java in 1919. In 1922, after having studied progressive education ideas while in the Netherlands, he founded the Taman Siswa School in Jogjakarta dedicated to the development of Javanese cultural education.

<sup>100</sup> The name Sobokartti is derived from old Javanese words: "*sabha*" (place, hall, palace) and "*kirti*" (deed, monument, foundation). Information kindly provided by Tjahjono Rahardjo.

<sup>101</sup> The name was presented in a wide variety of forms and spellings. Dutch-language press reports continued to refer to it as the "Javaansche kunstvereniging," and the later building as the "Javaansche volkschouwburg."

it effectively was the creation of the new institutions of modern urban civil society.<sup>102</sup> In this, it fully met the aims of Karsten, who, in the meantime, as we have seen, employed his expertise as architect to define the physical environment for his cultural vision.

### *Sobokartti Theater, 1921–30*

Lacking as yet its own building, the Vereeniging Sobokartti's first event on August 22, 1920, was held in a temporary accommodation erected on the grounds of the official residence of Semarang's regent. The program consisted of a *wayang wong* performance of *Modara-Asmara*, performed by dancers provided by Vereeniging Sobo Karti's honorary member and patron K. P. A. Koesoemajoeda. The event "enjoyed an extraordinary interest from hundreds of spectators, including the city mayor, the assistant resident, and numerous other prominent European and Indigenous authorities."<sup>103</sup> It was followed by a series of thirteen Sunday evening performances, held between 7:00 and 11:00, which were all considered reasonably well attended "despite the weather."<sup>104</sup>

In line with recent developments in the Netherlands, these first performances were subsidized by the local government to the tune of forty guilders per performance and a one-off subsidy of one thousand guilders. For the long term, however, it had to find its own ongoing financial support from the community. This was achieved via annual membership fees and ticket sales that, for nonmembers of the association, were ten cents for tickets providing "access to benches outside," or three guilders for "a limited number of special armchair seats reserved for interested nonmembers."<sup>105</sup>

Karsten, apparently the only experienced businessman on the association's executive committee, remained its treasurer, and the detailed annual reports of the young organization's finances in *Djawa* presumably originated from him.<sup>106</sup> These indicate that the association was burdened by a significant regular expenditure for maintaining and remodeling its temporary building, and for hiring *gamelan* and costumes. Although partly balanced by a greater-than-expected income from ticket sales, production expenses necessitated ongoing and increased subsidies from the city council. There was, too, a constant search for extra sources of income, primarily through increased membership, and, of course, ticket sales, which inevitably had an

<sup>102</sup> An article in the Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf*, in 1921, reporting on the development of Sobokartti, informed its readers that it had been an initiative of the Semarang Kunstkring, which intended to "maintain relations with the centres of Javanese-Native music, that of the Vorstenlanden (Solo and Jogjakarta), who will send students for its performances." See "Onderzoekingen in Javaansch Muziek," *De Telegraaf*, September 22, 1921.

<sup>103</sup> "Sobo Karti," *Djawa* 2 (1922): 50. These appear to have been dancers from the Krida Beksa Wirama dance school; personal communication, Tjahjono Rahardjo.

<sup>104</sup> Performances were discontinued after December 9, 1920, because of the weather, and replaced by talks on aspects of "Javanese theatre," including presentations on "Beksa" and "wayang" by the patron, KPA Koesoemadiningtat, on December 19. "Sobo Karti," *Djawa* 2, 50.

<sup>105</sup> "Sobo Karti," *Djawa* 2, 50.

<sup>106</sup> Public accounting may have been mandatory given the Vereeniging's receipt of public funds, but such reports are discontinued in *Djawa* after the first two years.

impact on the choice and staging of productions.<sup>107</sup> In this context, Karsten, as Vereeniging Sobokartti's treasurer, found it necessary in November 1921 to write to the Prangwedono, who was a constant source of advice and help, to decline the prince's offer of the opportunity to purchase a *gamelan* set from the Mangkunegara palace:

I have to inform you that the executive committee of Sobo Karti [sic], on the advice of our production committee, has decided not to proceed with the purchase of your *gamelan* [...] the key reason for this is that our financial situation is such that it will only allow us to purchase one tonal set of instruments, in regard to which the committee decided that the Salendro would be the most appropriate. Be assured, however, that we were honoured by your offer and would have loved to have been in a position to accept it.<sup>108</sup>

In the meantime the association had been lent a "beautiful *gamelan*" by another patron identified only as "C. F. A. Joseph of Semarang."<sup>109</sup>

The association's report on its activities in its second year remained cautiously optimistic. Membership had reached 410, with 349 indigenous members, fifty-four Europeans, and seven Chinese, but it still had insufficient funds to fully achieve its increasingly ambitious aims. These included supporting and encouraging the participation of other *gamelan* and dance groups, and the possibility of involving schools in Sobokartti's activities. The report noted it was still without its own building and continued to be dependent on the *paseban*, the temporary building made available by Semarang's regent. A detailed "treasurer's report," presumably by Karsten, noted that careful scrutiny of expenses had indicated that, without the association owning its own *gamelan*, clothing, and building, annual costs for hire and maintenance would continue to outstrip income. Although attendance was comparable to the previous year, income from ticket sales was down proportionate to the increase in membership. Apart from the cost of repairs to its temporary building, continuing to press heavily on the accounts was the cost of electric lighting (even though outside lighting had been kept to a minimum) and unavoidable extra expenses related to the attendance of Governor General Dirk Fock.<sup>110</sup> Meanwhile, the performers themselves were not paid, and appeared to have been mainly volunteers recruited from the city.

Despite these material hardships, the Vereeniging Sobo Karti (as its name was consistently recorded at the time) could pride itself on a second successful season of performances that opened on June 26, 1921. On opening night it staged a performance of "*Wayang Orang Poerwo*, an episode from the battle between Prabu Romo and the

<sup>107</sup> The prominence of the two ticket booths in Karsten's building points, perhaps, to the importance of this financial consideration.

<sup>108</sup> Correspondence, Karsten to Mangkunegara, November 17, 1921, Mangkunegara Palace Library and Archive, Surakarta. Karsten added a personal note: "Since I had personally approached you in relation to this question, I must offer you my apologies that your generous intentions and intervention have ended in this way."

<sup>109</sup> To date, no information has been located regarding this person.

<sup>110</sup> In 1927, another governor general, A. C. D. de Graeff, also visited Sobokartti during a round of visits to Javanese cities. On that occasion, after "a tour of the richly decorated city centre and a visit to the Chinese camp," he met with, and was addressed by, the then-Sobokartti chairman, Heer Slamet. See "De Landvoegd in Semarang," *De Sumatra Post*, May 27, 1927. No further information has been found regarding Slamet.

cruel ruler of Ngalengko, Prabu Dosomuko," a continuation of the last performance of the previous year (presumably held over because of the weather). The report in *De Locomotief* the following day declared rather flatly that it had been a "*geslaagde openingsavond*,"<sup>111</sup> a successful opening night. This was more evident from the association's own report, which noted later that turnout from the Javanese community was too great for the available chairs and benches, "so that many had to be turned away."

Reporting on the opening night in a letter to the Prangwedono on June 18, 1922, Karsten wrote:

Alongside the message of gratitude which the Committee of the Sobo Karti [*sic*] sent you for your generous support at the opening presentation [...] I feel obliged, as the original intermediary, to express thanks for your great support and contribution. The presentation was a marvelous opening of our theatre season and was most successful. Including members and supporters, there were around 1,000 spectators all together! The performance was watched with great interest, including for the fact that men's roles were performed by girls, which, of course, gave rise to much discussion! Also, everyone noticed the great difference in how the *gamelan* was played by your *nijogo*. So we thank you for the marvelous opening evening.<sup>112</sup>

Opening night was followed by twenty-two further performances, including one consisting of two consecutive evenings (September 14–15) in the presence of the governor general. Most evenings featured *wayang orang* performances of well-known scenes from classical literature, but some featured dance exhibitions and others were *gamelan* performances.

Vereeniging Sobokartti's published annual report for 1922, noting the increase in attendance across the season (as well as a slight decline in membership to 358), proudly announced the fact that, aside from the opening night, most performances were now undertaken by *dilettanten*, enthusiastic amateurs. Moreover, it congratulated itself by noting that the theater was beginning to have an influence "in increasing the interest in Javanese culture in a variety of [community] circles."<sup>113</sup> The association had now also established a separate dance school, following the example of Krido Bekso Wiromo, and its members regularly performed on stage. Even more important was the fact that

Apart from the ordinary *wayang-wong* and *wiren* performances, the Vereeniging could present two Native stage pieces (*twee Inlandsche toneelstukken*) from "The Rise of the Kingdom of Mataram," based on the history written by Mr. Tirtosoegondo. Besides warmly engaging our own members, and the ordinary public, the productions also provoked the interest of wider circles as being an important attempt to form new elements into Javanese theater without thereby endangering tradition.<sup>114</sup>

<sup>111</sup> "Geslaagde openingsavond," *De Locomotief*, June 27, 1921.

<sup>112</sup> Correspondence, Karsten to Prangwedono, June 18, 1922, Mangkunegara Palace Library and Archive, Surakarta. The published report also recorded the fact that the prince had provided several of the dancers.

<sup>113</sup> "Verslag van de Volksvereeniging 'Sobo-Krati' [*sic*] over 1922," *Djawa* 3 (1923): 158.

<sup>114</sup> "Verslag van de Volksvereeniging 'Sobo-Krati' over 1922," 158. This was listed later in the report as episodes from "Babad Tanah Djawi." The writer was "secretary of the performance committee." The

This seemed to reflect the development that Karsten had noted with approval in his report on the Bandung Congress Bandung performance the previous year: the development of contemporary stagings by a new generation of dramatists of traditional stories. Now he was seeing the same elements emerge in the city of Semarang.

In 1923, Vereeniging Sobokartti, still chaired by Joesoef, with Karsten continuing as treasurer and van Heel continuing to represent the Semarang Kuntskring, could congratulate itself again on gradually having an impact “on the native world ... both in the somewhat better situated circles that our members come from, as those from which our 10-cent theater-goers come.”<sup>115</sup> The report, however, which again has all the hallmarks of Karsten’s authorship, continued to note the increasing impact of the economic downturn:

The pressures of financial hard times—apart from its direct economic impact—also had important indirect consequences. For instance, public concern for and interest in the arts and culture waned. Yet this diminution of interest was, to an extent, beyond that which could be explained merely by individuals’ financial uncertainties. Apparently some common people refused, under tough economic conditions, to pay attention to life’s higher values as represented by the arts. Some have even suggested it was a dereliction of civic duty to direct attention and activities toward matters other than political and economic issues—whereas, surely, the development of a people’s own spiritual development remains crucial to a national interest.<sup>116</sup>

Ongoing economic conditions meant that in 1923 membership had declined to 270, “mostly as a result of failure to pay membership fees,”<sup>117</sup> including a halving of European members to twenty-three, but a significant increase in Chinese membership to twenty-four. Nevertheless, about this time the Vereeniging finally succeeded in obtaining “at a very low price” a complete *gamelan* “consisting of Pelok, Slendro, and Barang” worthy of being considered a *poesaka* (heirloom) since it had earlier served in a demonstration of Javanese music at the 1900 Paris Exhibition.<sup>118</sup> The Vereeniging also reported that it was looking forward to working more closely with the Java Instituut, of which Karsten also continued to be listed as a member.

After 1923, annual accounts no longer appeared in *Djawa*, but further reports were irregularly published in *De Locomotief*. In June 1924, the Mangkunegara Prince commented in a letter to Karsten on a report in *De Locomotief* regarding the significant support Sobokartti had received from the Chinese community:

---

performances opened and closed the season, which ended on November 25. Performances were consistently described as *wayang orang*. Specific directors and producers of the productions were also named for the first time, suggesting increasing sophistication and differentiation of tasks within the society. Singing to accompany gamelan *langen sworo* was also attempted for the first time.

<sup>115</sup> “Verslag van de Volkskunstvereniging ‘Soebokarti’ [sic] over 1923,” *Djawa* 4 (1924): 161.

<sup>116</sup> “Verslag van de Volkskunstvereniging ‘Soebokarti’ over 1923,” 162. This appears to point to the influence of the increasingly radical Semarang branch of Sarekat Islam under Semaun and its links with union direct action, and its apparent rejection of this European-sponsored theater project (given Sarekat Islam’s early withdrawal from discussions).

<sup>117</sup> “Verslag van de Volkskunstvereniging ‘Soebokarti’ over 1923,” 163

<sup>118</sup> “Verslag van de Volkskunstvereniging ‘Soebokarti’ over 1923,” 163.

It was a great pleasure for me to read in *De Locomotief* that the number of Chinese members of the Vereeniging has currently significantly increased. In my view this is a very pleasing development given that this also brings with it a strengthening of the financial situation. I hope that the interest from the Chinese community will not just be confined to membership [of] the association but will grow to the same extent as here in Solo, where several days ago a *gamelan* performance was presented consisting entirely of Chinese players performing *lakan* (episode) as described in the accompanying program. Reports of this performance have been generally positive, or at least very few annoying mistakes were made which certainly gives evidence of their good intentions. I wish Sobo Karti [*sic*] every success.<sup>119</sup>

Chinese interests were indeed to play a significant role in the future of Sobokartti after the war, but not in the way Karsten could have ever imagined.

### *The Building*

It was not till towards the end of 1929 that the Vereeniging Sobo Karti announced its decision to finally proceed with the construction of a theater building based on the design Karsten had circulated almost a decade earlier. The previous year it had been allocated government funding via a new lottery, which raised the majority of the approximately 30,000 guilders required to build it.<sup>120</sup> Supplementing the lottery allocation, in May 1929 Vereeniging Sobo Karti held a successful "Fancy Fair" on Semarang's public square. Once Semarang's *alun-alun*, the traditional space for the people to communicate with their ruler, it was now temporarily transformed into a village of bamboo structures and stalls displaying local arts and crafts and "the cordon bleu of the native cuisine." The fair's purpose, announced Raden Slamet, Javanese representative on the city council and chairman of the fair committee, was to raise money "to revive Javanese arts of all kinds" and specifically to "build a Javanese theatre" (*schouwburg*).<sup>121</sup>

Informing its readers in the Netherlands and quoting a colonial paper, the Dutch *Limburger Koerier* in October that year reported:

The initial plans for the building have been drawn up by Ir. Thomas Karsten, who conceived of the idea of a Javanese theater in the form of a *pendopo* theater, with the sides raised, in other words, a kind of amphitheater. The building will probably measure twenty by twenty-four meters and have room for five hundred to six hundred spectators. [...] When the building is completed, the idea is to hand it over to a trust yet to be formed which will have

<sup>119</sup> Correspondence, Prangwedono to Karsten, June 19, 1924, Mangkunegara Palace Library and Archive, Surakarta.

<sup>120</sup> A report in the *Indische Courant*, December 15, 1928, announced the launch of a new government lottery that aimed to raise money for twenty educational and charitable institutions, amongst which the only two cultural institutions to be included were the Javaansche Kunstvereniging Sobo Karti (The Javanese arts society, Sobo Karti) and Lontar Bibliotheek (Lontar library).

<sup>121</sup> "Semarangsche Causerieën" [Semarang events], *De Indische Courant*, May 2, 1929.

representation from the different sister organizations of Sobo Karti as well as its own representatives. The use of the building will then be left to this trust.<sup>122</sup>

In January 1931, Vereeniging Sobo Karti was ready to engage the building firm Bang A. Hoo, which had submitted the cheapest quotation, at 29,400 guilders, to construct the building under the supervision of “engineers” Soetedjo and Koreman.<sup>123</sup> Ten months later, on Saturday, October 10, a ceremony was held to open the building. Again widely reported, even in the Netherlands, it was heralded as “the first Javanese theatre” (*volksshuwburg*) and established by what it described as the “Javanese Society for Community Arts [*Volkskunst*], Sobokartti.”<sup>124</sup>

### Progressive Project with Colonial Roots

The Sobokartti theater project represented another example of what Matthew Cohen has concluded about Indonesia’s performing arts: that “much of the creative invention of the period involved the hybridizing of old and new, foreign and local, [which] ... arguably has always been characteristic of Indonesian arts.”<sup>125</sup> Both for the instigator and architect, Karsten, and for the representatives of Java’s modern professional and cultural leadership who supported it, the concept embodied a vision for a future modern urban Java: namely, a reengagement with Java’s cultural heritage in the context of a universalizing modernity. It represented a considered intervention in what Karsten saw as an emerging modern civil society that he believed was evolving from what were already the ruins of a feudal past. In this sense, Karsten saw himself as nurturing “genuine” emerging cultural preferences and practices that, as he had suggested when outlining the purpose for founding the cultural journal *De Taak* two years previously, should be the duty of “Westerners” in Java.<sup>126</sup>

A perusal of Karsten’s practical involvement in the Sobokartti project, seen in the light of the later history of the Indonesian nationalist movement, clearly reveals Karsten’s exclusive interaction with the politically conservative side of the emerging modern Indonesian civil society. But his intensive engagement in the activities of the Java Instituut, and his wider activities as architect, planner, and writer, demonstrate that the “cultural discourse” he was engaged in was not the mere dilettantism of a colonial intellectual. Rather, it reflected and formed an integral element of a systematic and logical working through of the philosophical position that underpinned his professional work as a whole and his commitment to Indonesia’s future as he saw it. It was a progressive project that had the support of sections of Java’s cultural leadership at the time. And while undoubtedly “colonial” and European in concept, what differentiated it was that it was tempered by the critical assumptions and innovative tendencies of the European new-arts movement that Karsten had imbibed prior to arriving in Java. His modernity shared that movement’s elitist social

<sup>122</sup> “Javaansche Schouwburg te Semarang” [Javanese theater in Semarang], *Limburger Koerir*, October 30, 1929. The opening also coincided with the return of its designer, Thomas Karsten, from a twelve-month furlough that took him to Europe as well as the United States, Japan, and the Philippines.

<sup>123</sup> *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, January 20, 1931.

<sup>124</sup> “Indische Telegrammen: Volksschouwburg Geopend,” *Algemeen Handelsblad*, October 13, 1931.

<sup>125</sup> Matthew Cohen, *Inventing the Performing Arts: Modernity and Tradition in Colonial Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2016): xix.

<sup>126</sup> Cited in Coté, “Defining a Cultural Blueprint,” 91–92.

positioning and confidence in its ability to enunciate principles for a new civilization. For Karsten, this was predicated on a vision of a "post-imperial," inclusive world,<sup>127</sup> but he always recognized that he spoke as a *Westerling*, a Westerner, and that his interjections in Javanese culture and society were always those of an outsider.

Although Vereeniging Sobo Karti was not the only association devoted to the revival and performance of Javanese performing arts and music, it was in its day a rare example of a cultural organization born of a modern, urban community. As a building and as performance repertoire, it explicitly drew on Javanese cultural traditions; in its performativity, it was reflective of its rapidly changing urban environment. As a cultural concept, and in terms of the cultural ideas that informed Karsten's thinking, it clearly reflected contemporary developments in Europe. As an early product of his professional *oeuvre*, Karsten's theater project represented a translation of the European *avant-garde*, as he interpreted it from his experience in Berlin, into a colonial and specifically Javanese cultural context. In these terms, Karsten's theater project can be regarded as one of his greatest successes and reflects his ultimate vision of a future Indonesia as a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural society.

### Postscript

Further information on the history of Sobokartti is sparse. Sporadic reports during the thirties nevertheless confirmed and justified at least one of its initial aims: to provide a building for the community's civic functions. Until the Japanese occupation in 1942, the theater was hired out at least once a year for public meetings, ranging from those of conservative political groups, such as Parindra (Partij Indonesia Radja) in September 1936,<sup>128</sup> to "radical" gatherings, such as the one-thousand strong public meeting of the 'Al-Islam Comité in September 1937 to protest government attempts to regulate Islamic marriages<sup>129</sup> and the July 1939 Rail and Tramway Workers Union meeting to protest the proposed abolition of city trams.<sup>130</sup> During this period the building was also hired out from time to time for arts and crafts exhibitions, such as during a Decentralization Conference in May 1933,<sup>131</sup> and for receptions, such as during civic occasions for visiting regiments, when their other ranks (most likely Indonesian) were entertained in Sobokartti while its (European) officers were received in the European Harmonie building.<sup>132</sup>

After the war the building once again became a center of community activity, from mid-1947 into the 1950s, as the location of weekly church services for the Sing Ling Kauw Hwee Chinese Pentecostal Church.<sup>133</sup> But as a modern cultural center in post-

<sup>127</sup> Considered at length in Coté, "Architect of an Idealist World," in Coté and O'Neill, *The Life and Work of Thomas Karsten*, 305–21.

<sup>128</sup> "De nieuwe koers: Samenwerking met de Overheid" [The new direction: cooperating with the government], *De Sumatra Post*, November 5, 1936.

<sup>129</sup> "Bezwaren van de 'Al Islam' Tegen ontwerp-huwelijks-ordonnantie" [Concerns of Al Islam about the draft marriage ordination], *Soerabaijasch handelsblad*, September, 18, 1937.

<sup>130</sup> "Opheffing van de Stadstram," *Het Nieuws van den Dag voor Nederlandsch-Indië*, July 24, 1939.

<sup>131</sup> "Het Decentralisatie-congress," *De Indische Courant*, May 4, 1933.

<sup>132</sup> "Zaterdag," *De Indische Courant*, June 18, 1938.

<sup>133</sup> Listing of Sunday church-service times for this denomination appear from mid 1947 and continue into the 1950s.

war Semarang, the venue's auditorium proved too small and its stage unsuitable for commercial purposes. For example, the famous postwar *wayang wong* company Ngesti Pandow found Sobokartti inadequate and opted, when in Semarang, to perform in a bigger, Western-style proscenium theater where it could accommodate large audiences from the now rapidly expanding city.<sup>134</sup>

In the latter years of the twentieth century the Sobokartti theater building increasingly fell into disuse, its grounds occupied by squatters and the building itself used by vendors.<sup>135</sup> A report published in 2002 noted that although the building continued to host some children's art programs, the theater as a community arts education center had lost its way. Nevertheless, in the new century, almost phoenix-like, Sobokartti recovered its presence and purpose. As its website demonstrates, today it is again a hub of community cultural activity.<sup>136</sup> Like the history of its founding years, the recent revival of the Sobokartti theater building as an arts center was the outcome of concerted and persistent community effort. Today the building is used by a diverse group of community cultural interests committed to the revival of local and Javanese arts and crafts, thus once again restoring the building's organic links to a wide cross section of the community. This renewed interest has breathed life into the original concept, and with active community support, the building was entirely restored under the auspices of the Central Java Archaeological Bureau, which has returned the building to its former beauty and functionality.<sup>137</sup>

As the Sobokartti "Volksschouwburg" was originally, so too, today, it is a space for showcasing Javanese performing arts in the midst of a bustling city. In addition, it is an educational space for introducing new urban generations to a wide spectrum of Central Java's cultural heritage in the midst of a bustling city. In many ways it is the existence of the building—if not the design, then certainly the history attached to it—that has made this revival possible. In this sense, it could be said that Karsten is once more exercising his influence in the city where he arrived a little over one hundred years ago. But more importantly, the revival represents the resilience of the community and its cultural traditions—the traditions upon which Sobo Karti Vereeniging had been founded.

In 2013, local Semarang folk celebrated the eighty-second anniversary of the building's opening. It was, in a sense, the building's rededication following its extensive restoration. For this writer, honored to be asked to bring a message from the architect's descendents for the occasion, it provided a further insight into the vision of its author, still palpably evident.

<sup>134</sup> Personal communication with Tjahjono Rahardjo, December 2013.

<sup>135</sup> A heritage report on what was then an almost derelict property, undertaken by researchers at Diponegoro University, entitled "Sobo-Kartti sebagai Asset Budaya Kota Semarang: Kajian atas perkembangan pada periode 1988–2000" [Sobo Kartti as a Semarang city cultural asset: Report on its activities in the period 1988-2000].

<sup>136</sup> Today, the building Sobokartti is registered as a protected monument. See also the dedicated Sobokartti website, <http://sobokartti.wordpress.com/tentangkami/>

<sup>137</sup> The building was fully restored under the auspices of the Balai Pelestarian Peninggalan Purbakala Jawa Tengah (Center for the Preservation of Archaeological Heritage); see *Laporan Teknis Arkeologis Gereja GPIB Immanuel dan Gedung Kesenian Sobokartti Semarang* [Technical archaeological report on the GPIB Immanuel Church and the Sobo Kartti cultural building] (Klaten: Balai Pelestarian Peninggalan Purbakala Jawa Tengah, 2010).