

BECOMING A MUSLIM CITIZEN AND ARTIST



“Pirous, I’ve got a question for you.” It was a September morning in 1995, and we were finishing up breakfast in the dining room of one of Jakarta’s boutique hotels before driving over to the Istiqlal Mosque to meet with festival planners. I knew Pirous was going to have a busy day ahead of him. This was not a good time to distract him with an interview. But fleeting moments of conversation often told me much about his work or his ideas. “Tell me. Were you born Muslim or did you become Muslim?”

Pirous put down his cup of tea and gave me an astonished look, the kind someone does when a matter seems so obvious that questions about it come across as mindless. He shook off his perplexed surprise, and said, “Born Muslim.”

People who wish to become Muslim do so by uttering the *syahadat* (“profession of faith”), saying in Arabic, “*asyhadu an la ilaha illa Allah, wa asyhadu anna Muhammadan rasulullah*” (“I affirm there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is His messenger”). Surrender of oneself to Allah, the very core of what it means to be Muslim, begins with these words, and finds daily expression in them because they are repeated as part of obligatory ritual prayers (*salat*). On that morning in Jakarta, I was wondering what it means to say one is “born Muslim.” Being Muslim involves – as a matter of obligation – uttering the *syahadat*, performing *salat* and reciting the Qur’an in Arabic, fasting (*puasa*) during the month of Ramadhan, giving alms (*zakat*), and, if capable, going on the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*). No one is born doing (or having done) these things, or any of the things we associate with Islamic faith and culture. So for someone to say that she or he is “born Muslim” seems to me more like a statement about one’s social and religious destiny, a conviction that one was *destined* to be *raised* (and thereby *become*) Muslim. It is a way of saying that fate has thrown one into a Muslim lifeworld.



Figure 1.1 Maps of Aceh and Indonesia. Drawn by Jennifer H. Munger.

Declarations about religion, in many countries, are declarations of ethnicity and ethnic belonging. Pirous was born in Aceh, a region located on the northern tip of Sumatra, and long known as Serambi Mekah, “Mecca’s Veranda” (see the maps in Figure 1.1). It was in and around Aceh that Islam first put down roots in the Indonesian archipelago roughly 900 years ago. Maritime commerce with India, Persia, Arab principalities, and the Ottoman Empire brought Muslim teachers, traders, and migrants to Aceh’s ports. As the Acehnese grew in political stature over the centuries, they developed a fervent attachment to Islam too. Even today, the Acehnese are known throughout Indonesia for their intense religiosity. Like most Indonesian Muslims, they do not speak Arabic as their native language or as a language of everyday communication. But they do devote themselves to mastering the language for Qur’anic recitation, and many Acehnese have become leading scholars of Islamic thought and Arabic-language manuscripts over the centuries.

Telling me that he was “born Muslim” doesn’t have much to do with Pirous’s being a good Muslim or being a good Indonesian. Telling me that he was “born Muslim,” however, is a good Acehnese reply to my question, and perhaps the only reply a good Acehnese properly should give. Members of other ethnic groups in Indonesia might have answered my question in the same way – Bugis and Makassans from Sulawesi, or perhaps the Madurese. Like other Indonesians, then, telling me that he was “born Muslim” is, for Pirous, a declaration about an unquestioned religious destiny and ethnic belonging. It is a declaration of identity.

Although he was destined to become one of Indonesia’s most distinguished painters, my friend was not “born Indonesian.” Rather, he was born in 1932 in the coastal town of Meulaboh, Aceh, as a colonial subject of the Netherlands East Indies. European powers had sailed Aceh’s waters for almost 400 years, and the Dutch East India Company – the world’s first multinational corporation – had held sway throughout the Indies archipelago through treaties, monopolies, colonial settlements, and armed conquest. Aceh managed to stay independent, but once the Netherlands took over administrative and then direct rule of the company’s territories in the nineteenth century, Aceh came under intense pressure from the colonizers. Throughout the nineteenth century, indigenous groups in Sumatra and Java led prolonged revolts against the Dutch under the banner of Islam. Armed Acehnese resistance (1873–1914) was exceptionally fierce and never wholly quelled. The Dutch prevailed, and though they were to begin a more progressive period of so-called “ethical” colonial dominion (1901–41), they kept a watchful eye on Islamic affairs and discouraged the use of Arabic script for writing local languages.

The Japanese occupation of the Indies during World War II (1942–45) dislodged the Dutch from their colony for a few years. With the war’s end, nationalist groups seized the moment and began their struggle for independence. So, it was on August 17, 1945, when Sukarno and Hatta declared the colony as a free and autonomous new nation, that an Indonesian identity was thrust upon Pirous. He embraced it, just as he has embraced the religious and ethnic identities that were his heritage. As we will see, managing and exploring these identities, coming to understand them, and bringing them to bear on his art have been a significant part of his life’s work.

When I arrived in Bandung in late February 1994, I did not know all that much about Pirous's upbringing. Settling in with Pirous and his family as their house-guest, I hesitated about starting up the life history interviews I had planned. The time did not seem right: the rhythms of the fasting month of Ramadhan were in full sway, and getting Serambi Pirous in shape for its opening preoccupied us much of the time. The holy celebrations of Idul Fitri (also known as Lebaran) came right on the heels of the gallery opening, bringing the fasting month to an end, and ushering in three days of family visitations and endless meals, as relatives and friends ask each other for forgiveness for any conduct – in thought or deed – that might have caused offense.

The household quieted as soon as Idul Fitri came to a close. With the fast and the Lebaran holidays behind us, Pirous and I found that evenings were the best part of the day for our conversations about his life and career. We took our time, lingering over stories and questions. Sometimes Erna, or their daughters or son would listen in, hearing stories from him for the first time. Erna (b. 1941) had been born and raised in a Sundanese family in Kuningan, West Java, and had spent most of her school years around Bandung. Though she had been to the city of Banda Aceh, she had little firsthand knowledge of small-town life in northern Sumatra. Unlike their Acehnese father and Sundanese mother, the Pirous children, Mida, Iwan, and Rihan, grew up quite Indonesian and urbane. All in their early twenties, Aceh was for them a rather distant place which none had visited. Though very aware of their Acehnese roots on their father's side, they seemed more familiar with the Sundanese ambience of Bandung, and would even switch out of Indonesian from time to time to speak in Sundanese with Erna or her mother, Masjoeti Daeng Soetigna.

Pirous was of course a very practiced interviewee and storyteller from years of meeting with magazine, newspaper, and television reporters. No doubt I worked at a slower pace than reporters, however, and to different ends. As the lifeworld of a young artist came into view for me, Pirous himself was surprised by the depth and span of his reawakened memories. "You know," he confessed after a few evenings, "I didn't realize I knew or could remember this much."

Beginnings

Being born "Acehnese," one is pushed forward, out of one's family, thus out of one's ancestry, to find a place elsewhere. (James T. Siegel, *The Rope of God*)

People in Aceh would say that Pirous got off to an auspicious start. He was born at noon on Friday, March 11, 1932. The Friday noon hour is of course the time set aside for weekly worship in the *ummat*, a time when Muslims gather together to make their obligatory midday prayers at the mosque or prayer-room and to listen to sermons. His father, Mouna "Piroes" Noor Muhammad, asked the religious



Figure 1.2 “Boss Piroes.” Mouna Piroes Noor Muhammad (wearing a white jacket and holding a rifle) at his rubber plantation outside of Meulaboh, Aceh, 1921. Photograph courtesy of Yayasan Serambi Pirous.

teacher who boarded with the family, Fakhir Nuridin, to name his infant son. And so young Piroes came into the world bearing the name Abdul Djilil Syaifuddin.

Mouna Noor Muhammad was the grandson of a Gujarati trader from India, and was given the nickname “Piroes” because of the unusual turquoise (*pirus*) birthmark on his left arm, a mark many saw as a sign of spiritual significance and potency (*pirus* also means “triumphant” in Persian and “fearless” in Arabic). Raised elsewhere on the northwest coast of Sumatra, “Piroes” was a newcomer in Aceh, and, indeed, his natal family maintained their ties to their other homeland in India. He ultimately settled in Meulaboh, took a much younger Acehnese woman as his wife, and began work, first as a manager of a German-Dutch provisioning store and then as owner of a thriving rubber estate and rubber export business.

Marrying a young woman from Meulaboh was surely crucial to Mouna Noor Muhammad’s prospects in the town. It was customary in Aceh for a woman’s parent’s to give her a house at marriage – usually near or next door to those belonging to the bride’s parents, her married sisters, and her mother’s sisters – and newlywed husbands were in practice expected to move in with their spouse. Moving in with his wife and near his wife’s kin, Mouna Noor Muhammad gained a home and started a family, and relied on his wife’s broader family to help raise the children. Like all Acehnese, these children would trace their descent through both their

mother and father, but would have different expectations in life: Acehese girls tended to live out their lives in these tightly bound mother-sister-daughter groups, while Acehese boys at adolescence would begin to gravitate to the *meunasah* – the local meeting hall and male dormitory – ultimately to marry into and take residence with other families.

By the time Djalil, the fifth of six children, was born, the family was quite comfortable and well-to-do. Mouna Noor Muhammad himself was known locally as *Tauke Piroes* – “Boss Piroes.” His social origins – in the eyes of Acehese neighbors and local colonial administrators – marked him as an outsider, a trader from *Asia Muka* (the “Face of Asia” – today’s India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh). Undaunted, he took advantage of his outsiderhood and served as head of Meulaboh’s *Asia Muka* community (several of whom were siblings or cousins). The family’s rising commercial and social fortunes placed them among the dominant class elite, and made it possible for Djalil’s father to invest some of his wealth and reputation in religious work. As Piroes recalls it, his father was not drawn to the mystical Islamic *tarékat* (or “Sufi brotherhoods,” such as Khalwatiyyah or Naksyabandiyah), nor did he make the pilgrimage. He instead used his wealth and position to promote Muslim institutions in Meulaboh itself: He built a prayer-room (*surau*) for public worship, funded a *madrasah* (religious school), and brought several religious teachers, or *ulama*, to town.

Mouna Noor Muhammad’s ethnic background, prosperity, and civic-religious work distinguish him from those Acehese who affiliated with the resistance movement that had struggled tenaciously against the Dutch since 1873. Yet, given his familial ties to India and the political-economic atmosphere of the late colonial period in Aceh, Djalil’s father was surely familiar with reformist Islam and the call to religious struggle, or *jihad*, in resisting colonial domination. Secret recitations of the banned epic poem, *Hikayat Prang Sabil* (*The Chronicle of the Holy War*), which celebrated acts of Acehese martyrdom, would have had special allure to many in and around Meulaboh (Siegel 1979). Although currents of anti-colonial feeling were astir, Piroes himself recalls the hometown of his childhood as “very peaceful, very clean, and very Muslim.” At the same time, young Piroes’s imaginative horizons stretched well beyond Meulaboh and Aceh. His father’s storied ties to India gave Piroes an imagined but unvisited homeland and family abroad. Around 1939, he began to frequent the town’s movie-house, where Gene Autry and Flash Gordon films (subtitled in Dutch) sparked a lifelong interest in foreign cinema. By this time Piroes was already enrolled in Meulaboh’s elite, Dutch-run elementary school and had begun religious instruction in reciting the Qur’an and writing Arabic. He was an avid reader, and, as he approached his teens, he devoured translations of Western books in the school library – among them, *The Count of Monte Christo* by Alexander Dumas, and Karl Friedrich May’s novels about the American West and his fictional Apache hero, Winnetou.

As Piroes tells it, it was his Acehese mother, Hamidah, and his older brother, Zainal Arifin, who led him to the arts. Hamidah was from Meulaboh and did not trace her descent beyond her natal town. She was no less religious than her husband,



Figure 1.3 Hamidah, Pirous’s mother, early 1950s. Photograph courtesy of Yayasan Serambi Pirous.



Figure 1.4 “Mopizar.” Mouna Piroes Zainal Arifin, Medan, Sumatra, early 1950s. Photograph courtesy of Yayasan Serambi Pirous.

but, unlike him, Hamidah was drawn toward mystical spiritual practices. She pursued *dzikir*, or mindfulness of God, through special meditation and chants – such as reciting the twenty exalted qualities of God, or the ninety-nine “beautiful names” of God (*Asma Ul Husna*). Hamidah and her husband also had very different views about art. Mouna Noor Muhammad was the more austere of the two

and frowned on art as something that conflicted with Islam. Art was a distraction from more important things. Hamidah saw it as a part of everyday life. As Pirous told me: “My mother was truly an artist. My father didn’t have a drop of artistic blood, but my mother had it strong and my older brother Arifin, too. They were the ones who stirred my ambitions.” Hamidah was adept in several of the Islamic arts. She was especially skilled in Qur’anic recitation and in storytelling, and made a practice of writing down Acehnese and Malay-language stories in Arabic script. She also enjoyed a reputation for making sumptuous, gold-embroidered velvets, felts, and silks for ceremonial occasions such as weddings and circumcisions. Among these are the *kasab*, the geometric patterns which Pirous would later appropriate as icons of his ethnic roots. Making a *kasab* could take a year or two of labor, sometimes more, and Hamidah was assisted by her children in preparing patterns, stretching fabric, and so on. It often fell to Pirous to mix inks and prepare varnishes, and, to this day, Pirous can detail every step and technique in preparing the *kasab*.

Pirous’s enchanted reverence for the artistry his mother brought to stories and fabric found its most explicit expression in a 1982 serigraph called *Sura Isra II: Homage to Mother (Sura Isra II: Penghormatan buat Ibunda)*. Look at Plate 4. It features brightly colored vertical borders patterned directly after Acehnese ceremonial curtains called *tabir*; an image of the winged *bouraq*, the Prophet Muhammad’s legendary mount; and a two-dimensional reproduction of a red and gold *kasab* made by Hamidah herself (Plate 5), but inscribed with the Qur’anic verse traditionally associated with the Prophet’s night journey and ascension to Heaven on the *bouraq* (QS 17 *Bani Isra’il*: 1) in place of the arabesque embroidered in his mother’s work. Pirous’s eyes gleamed as he talked about making the serigraph:

This is something taken directly from the craft treasures of Aceh. It is from a piece of embroidery that my mother prepared from gold thread and scarlet velvet. This image of the *bouraq* makes visual the story, the sura, about the Prophet Muhammad’s night journey from this world to heaven, from the Haram Mosque [in Mecca] to the Al-Aksa Mosque in Jerusalem and to the sky above. My mother always told me stories about how fast [that *bouraq*] could fly. In one jump it could leap as far as you could see. It was like lightning! So all of this is to make a fantastic story very visual and concrete. This was a story from my mother. That’s why I made it. All of this is a homage, a homage to my mother.

When speaking to curators, art journalists, and scholars, Pirous generally points to his mother Hamidah as a driving force and inspiration in his becoming an artist. Yet in our unhurried evening talks, the painter told me many affectionate and admiring stories about his brother, Zainal Arifin. Arifin made use of his drawing and storytelling skills at the local movie-house, where he would sketch cartoon stories on glass plates and use a lantern to project the cartoons onto the screen. The kids in town, including the young Djalil, were delighted. As Pirous reminisced for me one evening:

Arifin was really good at drawing and it got so that he was well known for it. And as his little brother, I was very proud. I wished that I could paint and draw like that too. I later heard him when he asked my father whether he could go to the Kayutanam art school in West Sumatra. He was very disappointed. My father didn't consent because his outlook was extremely conventional and very tied to his religion. It was like saying that working as a painter was wrong. In fact, my father proposed that he enter the school for religious studies in Medan. But that didn't suit him. He had an artist's soul.

If Pirous learned something about the eye and hand from his mother as they prepared her *kasab* together at home, he learned from Arifin and Arifin's drawings what the eye and hand could be good for in public: connecting with people through art. Hamidah's hand and eye probably nurtured in Pirous an appreciation for pattern, color, and design. Arifin's drawings, on the other hand, showed Pirous that art could bring him friends, camaraderie, and reputation not unlike that which his father enjoyed in trade and religious good works.

Judging by the stories that he shared with me over the course of several evenings, the cultural world of his Acehese boyhood was neither narrow nor impoverished, but was instead rich with embroidered fabrics, their inks, their bands of color, and their geometric patterns; with Qur'anic recitations and elaborate calligraphies; with tales of the Prophet and stories of the tigers that prowled near his father's plantation; with curries and Indian cottons; with glimpses of Flash Gordon's Mars and Karl May's American West; with cartoons, libraries, movie-houses, mosques, and *madrasah*; with intermingling streams of Acehese, Malay, Dutch, Arabic, and Gujarati; with verses from the *Hikayat Prang Sabil* and strains of jazz; with sandals, sarongs, shoes, and trousers. The Acehese he knew did not stand alone in the world, but also shared their homeland with Javanese plantation workers, European merchants, Chinese shop owners, Arab teachers, and Gujarati traders.

Although Islam was already the "religious tradition" in Meulaboh in the 1930s, there was nothing un-modern about it. In fact, we need to think of it as a modernizing force during those years in the Aceh. One of the best descriptions of the era is from James Siegel (2000). As he explains, reformist Islam posed significant change for Acehese thought and social relations, and by 1930 had met with popular acceptance. Modernist *ulama* seeking moral and ethical reform put stress on religious obligations (*ibadah*), prayer, and reason (*akal*) as the mechanisms for perfecting interior experience and achieving self-possession. Religious teaching advocated the unity and harmony of men regardless of the groups to which they belonged. Modernist ideas about human nature and the self thus came to prominence in interpreting social roles, surpassing the attachments of kinship or local village society. The new way of thinking about self and society also meant that Acehese Muslims had new ways of thinking about their place in the world.

Reformist ideas did not have their origin in Aceh, but in late nineteenth-century Cairo and Mecca, centers of learning for students and pilgrims from throughout the Muslim world. European imperialism was at its peak and Muslims in Asia,

Africa, and the Middle East were acutely aware of their status as second-class colonial citizens. Reformist Islam went hand-in-glove with anti-colonial sentiments and nationalist struggle, and stressed the unity and common cause of Muslims everywhere. Those in Cairo and Mecca knew full well about the Dutch annexation of Aceh in 1873. Michael Laffan (2007: 691) tells us that Muslims there saw this as one more episode in “a series of showdowns between an aggressive West and a victimized, largely Muslim East,” and feared that Aceh and Southeast Asia more generally would be “another Andalusia” lost to the West. However, the idea of Islamic unity and the experience of colonial subordination did not diminish the sense among Southeast Asian students and pilgrims that they were set apart culturally and ethnically from Arabs. Teachers, students, and pilgrims who returned to Aceh from the Middle East no doubt saw religious and moral reform first and foremost as a path toward Acehnese independence.

Growing up in the “very Muslim” atmosphere of 1930s Meulaboh meant that Pirous knew a lifeworld that included both modernist and mystical strains of religious practice. It is too simple to insist that his father was a self-possessed, *madrasah*-founding reformist and his mother a sensual Sufi mystic. Yet the affectionate memories of their son make clear that the colorful stories and embroidered fabrics with which Hamidah enriched their home touched Pirous no less powerfully than the civic and ethical energies of “Boss Piroes” who frowned on art as pursuit that distracted one from prayer, religious duty, and reason. What these dual – and maybe dueling – influences may have augured for Pirous’s art is a matter I will come back to later. Key here is seeing in the push and pull of parental nurture a domestic stage for the play of ideas about religion and art.

Becoming an Artist-Citizen

As World War II came to a close in 1945, the Dutch planned to resume control of their former Asian colony. Nationalist leaders Sukarno and Hatta declared Indonesia a new sovereign nation, and called for unsparing support for the revolution that would bring the country independence. Pirous remembers his family’s evacuation into the hill country above town, and watching Meulaboh burn as nationalist forces struggled to resist the return of the Dutch. Having seen everything he had built burned down, the aged and ailing Mouna Noor Muhammad remarked despairingly to his son, “I don’t know what *merdeka* (independence) means.” The words may strike us as odd given the resentment most Acehnese felt toward the Dutch. Yet we need to keep in mind that “Boss Piroes” had found a way to prosper during a lifetime of Dutch rule. The promise of independence was probably little comfort to an old man watching the work of a lifetime swallowed up in the chaos of revolution. Young Pirous had a different view of things but even he recalled that Aceh’s place in a sovereign Indonesian nation was by no means clear at the start of the Revolution:

What did independence truly mean? The only thing we knew was that we had been ruled by the Dutch, then ruled by the Japanese, and now we wanted to have our own government. One day a plane suddenly appeared overhead dropping leaflets and I picked one up and there was the text of the declaration (by Sukarno and Hatta): “Our independence.” “So that the people live as one.” And so on. I still didn’t understand what it really meant, though in time I did. If we talked about independence we talked about Indonesian independence, not independence for the Acehnese.

Dropping a people’s identity papers on them from an airplane may not be the most effective way to recruit citizens, but that was how things started for Pirous: writing from the sky. Although he continued his schooling in Meulaboh, Pirous was swept up in the fervor and romance of the Indonesian Revolution. Modernist Islamic youth groups under the leadership of Daud Beureuëh urged everyone in Aceh to join the struggle for national independence. At age sixteen Pirous joined the Indonesian Student Army (Tentara Pelajar Indonesia) and served in a local after-dark propaganda unit making silkscreened posters, handbills, and leaflets that promoted the nationalist campaign. This was the first time Pirous would use his art skills in public for public ends. It was through art, *Bahasa Indonesia* (the official national language, based on Malay), and anti-colonial struggle that Pirous began shaping himself, and understanding himself, as an Indonesian citizen.

Indonesia cemented its sovereignty in 1949. In 1950, at the age of eighteen, Pirous left Aceh for the North Sumatran city of Medan to join his older brothers Arifin and Idris, and to continue his studies at that city’s first-rate middle schools and high schools. Already married, Arifin was now working in theater and illustration under the name “Mopizar” (for *Mouna Piroes Zainal Arifin*), publishing cartoons and painting movie posters, in addition to selling custom portraits, decorative paintings, and Lebaran (Idul Fitri) cards. Idris took up framing, and Pirous put his own hand and eye to work to earn money while in school. “I did souvenir drawings, decorated certificates, ornaments, and I made portraits of leaders like Sukarno, Gandhi, Haji Agus Salim, Nehru, and Kartini.” Thus Pirous left Aceh just as Indonesia found recognition as an independent nation. Born Acehnese, he was now Indonesian and taking part in the social and cultural energies of an urban post-colonial world. He would never again live in Aceh.

In Medan his artwork brought him friends, and they would ask him to illustrate their books of poems or stories. It also gave him a reputation: he took part in North Sumatra’s student art competition and submitted three pictures – one of an old ruined boat, one of a large bucket, and one of a landscape. He won first, second, and third prizes. His middle-school art teacher, Hasan Siregar – himself a self-taught painter – urged him to consider art school. As he worked in watercolor, tempera, charcoal, pencil, ink, and oil paints, his pictures remained “naturalistic,” copied from nature or photographs. Then, in 1952, about the time he was twenty, an exhibition featuring contemporary work by Zaini, Mardian, Handrio, Nashar, Widayat, and Sudjojono – modernist painters from Jakarta, Yogyakarta, and the Revolution – came to Medan. The exhibition gave Pirous a glimpse of an art world unlike the one in which he was honing his skills, and sharpened his desire for formal



Figure 1.5 Pirus with his Uncle Ahmad on the eve of leaving Meulaboh for Bandung, 1955. Photograph courtesy of Yayasan Serambi Pirus.

art training. There were a few works that really perplexed him. Trading on his knowledge of Steven Spielberg movies he quipped to me, “It was a close encounter of the third kind. It really took me by surprise compared to what I had been doing. This was something that was beyond my imagination, and I just knew that I had to go further.” Shortly after that exhibition, he followed the example of his brother Arifin and adopted a name with the panache befitting an artist: “A. D. Piroes.” Three years of high-school art classes followed, and, as his graduation neared, Pirus applied to the rival art academies at Bandung and Yogyakarta. He left for Bandung, West Java, in 1955 to start his studies at the Academy of Art at the Bandung Institute of Technology (or ITB) under the supervision of Dutch cubist, Ries Mulder. It was the same year that Indonesia and the city hosted the Asian-African Conference of newly independent and largely “non-aligned” nations that had emerged from colonial rule after World War II.

Indonesia, of course, was still a fledgling nation. Comprising thousands of islands, hundreds of ethnic groups, hundreds of ethnic languages, dozens of political parties (including the largest Communist party in Asia outside of China), four major world religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam) and a vast range of indigenous or syncretic religions, Indonesia nonetheless wished to place itself on the world stage as a modern, secular, and self-governing political community with a unique social and cultural identity. To the frustration of some Muslims, Indonesia did not become an Islamic state. The very question of how the Constitution would reflect and accommodate Islamic principles came in for sharp debate, and sparked revolts. Separatist rebellions aimed at establishing an “Indonesian Islamic State” began as early as 1949 in West Java, Sulawesi, and

Sumatra. In North Sumatra, Daud Beureuëh broke with the national government in 1953 and attempted to establish Aceh as an independent Islamic state that would conform to *syari'ah* law. These rebellions simmered into the early 1960s, as did “regional” uprisings aimed against the overwhelming dominance of Java and the Javanese in Indonesian affairs.

In the sphere of democratic parliamentary politics, Islamic modernists – especially those from places other than Java – rallied to the party known as Masyumi, but failed to find a secure place in coalition governments after the party’s disappointing showing in the 1955 elections, Indonesia’s first. The outcome of the elections, the turmoil of the rebellions, and growing ties to China led President Sukarno to abolish Western-style parliamentary democracy. In its place he established “Guided Democracy.” Resting on an ideological blend of nationalism, Islam, and communism, Sukarno’s new government sought to appease military factions, Islamic groups, and communists. Masyumi and other Muslim parties opposed Sukarno’s plan but got nowhere. By 1959, Masyumi was banned. Those wanting an Islamic state or a strongly Islamic constitution had been effectively thwarted.

In a sense, nearly everyone was a nationalist in 1950s Indonesia. The country’s political leadership and intellectual elite had long encouraged nationalist thinking, so that people would frame their understandings and aspirations in terms of belonging to the new Indonesian nation. Just as modernist Islam offered new ways of thinking about self and society, so too did nationalism. National citizenship and national culture were to trump attachments to family, ethnicity, language, and region, and come center stage as the most crucial terms for personal allegiance, collective solidarity, reckoning cultural pasts (i.e., tradition, heritage), and working toward cultural and political futures. But essences and the true nature of things are elusive and illusory, more fabrication than “fact.” No one could really say what lay at the heart of the nation. The nation was up for grabs. The time was one of struggle – struggle to invent the ideological, cultural, and religious foundations of the nation.

Questions about the cultural foundations for Indonesia go back to the debates and polemics of the 1930s. Some, like Sutan Takdir Alisjahbana, argued that there was nothing “Indonesian” about the past, and that no ethnic culture should be imposed on the national whole. Indonesian culture needed to be created, went the argument, and should draw from both Asian and Western societies if it was to assert its modernity and compatibility with international culture. Other public intellectuals saw in Javanese, Malay, and island ethnic traditions the very cultural resources and values the nation needed to become “Indonesian.” An embrace of Western culture was unnecessary, and perhaps dangerous; it should be avoided. The Revolution-era writer Chairil Anwar, whose poetry was well known to Pirous, offered yet another approach. He brought together a group of intellectuals who were interested in “world culture” and its universalist associations. Frowning on East–West dichotomies, they declared that “We are the true inheritors of world culture, and we shall develop this culture in our own way. ... The important thing is for us to find man” (Kratz 2000: 182, trans. mine).

Artists, among others, were caught up in the polemics, and stridently so, during the 1950s and 1960s. It was a time of manifestos, and unbending moral and proprietary claims to the nation. The declaration of Anwar's group, which came to be associated with "universal humanism" and the bourgeois orientation of the West, was met by the manifesto of the leftist Institute for People's Culture (LEKRA), which called on artists and writers to resist imperialism and to serve the cultural needs of the Indonesian people. For LEKRA, "universal humanism" and "art for art's sake" did not offer a progressive political stand on art and culture (as "socialist realism" appeared to do), and would only lead to subjectivism and a "politics of the unpolitical" conducive to Western domination. The 1950s and 1960s also saw the brief rise of Islamic cultural organizations. Most, like the Indonesian Institute for Muslim Artists and Cultural Experts (LESBUMI) and the Institute for Islamic Literature (LEKIS), catered to writers, rather than to those working in the visual arts. A couple of manifestos are of interest, however. A key Muslim student organization (Indonesian Islamic Students, PII) declared in 1956 that: "Islam does not ban the arts, it even encourages them and fills them with meaning. Islamic art is art that 'breathes' [i.e., is inspired by] Islam. ... National art is the field of growth for Islamic art. The art of the Indonesian nation has to at least try to be in accordance with Islamic art. For Islamic art to come into being, Muslims who wish to make art must perfect themselves as true Muslims" (Kratz 1986: 71). Several years later, in 1962, the reformist Council of Islamic Art and Culture (MASBI) stated that Islamic culture should be based on *tauhid* (God's unity). To be Islamic, art should reflect devotion to God, cultivate ethical conduct in line with Islamic teachings, and benefit the inner and outer welfare of human beings. In spirit, these Muslim declarations were much in accord with the views of universal humanists, the difference being that these Muslim organizations saw Islam and Islamic civilization – rather than the secular or subjectivist pursuit of the human – as the source of universal values. In contrast to the socialist realist stance of LEKRA and the bourgeois modernist outlook of the universal humanists, the views of these Islamic organizations failed to generate much of a following or to resolve theological debates about art and religion. Despite the official call from the Minister for Religious Affairs in 1956 for Muslims to bring order to "the jungle of Islamic art and culture" (Kratz 1986: 72), the groups found no way to "overcome the fragmentation and uncertainty within the Muslim community" (Maier 1987: 11).

No surprise then that when Pirous arrived in Bandung in 1955, he found himself stepping into sharp ideological debates over the direction of the Indonesian art world. Unlike some other academies, the Bandung school was staffed by Dutch and Dutch-trained artists and was very international in outlook. Just the year before, it had been pilloried as "the Slave of the Western Laboratory" for producing "bloodless, formal, self-absorbed, and bourgeois art" (Soemardjo 1954). Pirous appeared unfazed and adapted quite quickly to the international and universal humanist approaches. We can find telltale signs of a subjectivist and universalist sensibility in the small details of his life. Just as he started his formal art training, Indonesian orthography (or spelling) was officially revised so that the vocal sound once ren-

dered as “oe” would be written as “u.” The young painter, however, did not like the “look” of “Pirus,” or so he told me years later. To suit his graphic tastes, he wrote his name as “Pirous.” Had the nation not intervened, he still might be signing his name as “Piroes.” What, then, should we make of the superfluous “o” in “Pirous”? (A graphic sign that for years led me to mispronounce my friend’s name.) Is there anything behind it? A signature, of course, is intimate *and* public – part touch, part expressivity, part legibility, part adornment. The habit of seeing an “o” in his signature might have been tough to overcome. Perhaps the “o” lingers as a reminder of his father. Why would the “look” of a signature matter anywhere except on the surface of an artwork, where it plays a part in the authenticity and reputation of painterly touch? Considering its life on the surface of hundreds of paintings, I think of the superfluous “o” as an orthographic ornament that embellishes and internationalizes the name, giving it a French or (a Romanized) Persian “look.” In this sense, the painter’s signature and artistic subjectivity go beyond the limits of the nation, orthographically.

The earliest sample of “A. D. Pirous” that I know is tucked in a book. While browsing in Pirous’s library in early 2002, I came across a 1957 paperback copy of Henri Pirenne’s *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (in English). The bastard page is inscribed in ink and is in Pirous’s hand. It reads, “States are as men, they grow out of the character of men – Plato.” On the title page that follows, Pirous has placed his signature in brown pencil and beneath that the date, “4/58.” The inscription reads as aphorism and lesson to the artist himself, for who else other than Pirous would likely peruse this very volume, kept in his private library? I perhaps make too much of the passage, yet I think it gives us an revealing glimpse into Pirous’s thinking when he, his nation, his art, and his new signature were very young. In April 1958, Indonesia was thirteen years old. Pirous had just turned twenty-six a month earlier, and was working hard to master modernist styles of painting. In quoting or paraphrasing Plato, Pirous seems to be talking to himself, not only about the Prophet or Charlemagne, but about the young Indonesian nation-state and his place in it. The inscription is not accidental; it is deliberate and ideological “reported speech,” a quote he has written down in anticipation of returning to it for further reflection (cf., Foucault 1997: 211, 273). Whether he means to admonish or inspire, his choice of aphorism – “States are as men, they grow out of the character of men” – ties the welfare of the nation-state to the conduct and thought of those individuals who are its citizens. It is a draft sentence for the constitution of the postcolonial artist-citizen. With it, Pirous is fashioning himself, giving himself purpose and shape, not only for his own well-being, but for the welfare of his companions, too, in the shared, civic venture of being Indonesian.

These telltale signs of subjectivity – these signs of being a who and a what – no doubt reflect, too, the aesthetic modernism that Pirous had begun to absorb in his training with Dutch and Dutch-trained painters at the art academy. Anxieties about art modernisms were extremely significant in the cultural debates of the 1950s, and have continued to inform critical art historical assessments of Indonesian art right up through the present. “Modernism” has never been a unified set of ideas and

practices, nor has it been always centered in the West; it has always been plural in terms of its debates, contradictions, and proponents. As in other parts of Asia, modernism and modern art became part of the late and lingering colonial art world in the Netherlands East Indies, and then endured as an arena of decolonizing struggle and tense debate with respect to cultural nationalism and fears of Western imperialism after Indonesian independence. In many important respects, then, the first fifty years of Indonesian art could be described as an attempt to inhabit and domesticate – that is, make “Indonesian” – the modernist legacy. Debate, plurality, and internal contradictions notwithstanding, modernism was predicated – as Frederic Jameson (1983: 114) has put it – “on the invention of a personal, private style, as unmistakable as your fingerprint, as incomparable as your own body,” and in this way was “linked to the conception of a unique self and private identity ... which could be expected to generate its own vision of the world.” Modernism brought with it, too, a preoccupation with aesthetic standards and originality that not only played a part in distinguishing high art from traditional and mass art, but also in subjecting an artist to the demands of self-expression. Indeed, abstract, formal, and non-objective images were thought to reveal the artist’s inner being, and painting, in particular, enjoyed a privileged status as the most direct inscription of artistic subjectivity.

Modernism appeared in Indonesia as a set of local dilemmas rather than as a set of globalized certainties. Writing about India, Geeta Kapur (1996) has argued that the mingling of nationalism and modernism in the early postcolonial period recruited artist-citizens for contradictory pursuits. On the one hand, the painter-citizen aspired to a unique and innovative artistic individuality and subjectivity. The modern and singular artistic self had a desire and an obligation to become visible in expression. On the other hand, the painter-citizen sought an identity as a representative of a people and a nation. Indeed, to be modern, the country aspiring to nationhood needed modern artists whose work would be emblematic of the nation. This was surely true of Indonesian artists of the time as well. Commitment to a nation, to a self, and to an “idealized notion of the artist immersed in an undivided community” were key (Kapur 1996: 60).

Arriving in Bandung, Pirous brought with him years of practice in religious iconography and lettering, a strong graphic sense, a capacity to imitate or copy with precision (which Pirous sometimes describes as “naturalistic”), and a familiarity with commercial and decorative arts. He also had considerable experience in using his skills for group or public endeavors. What the twenty-three year old encountered was a program aimed at inspiring students with modernist and international approaches to art, most notably cubist and abstract styles and the ideologies that went along with them. As the painters at Bandung saw it, there was a universal “visual language” that transcended the borders of parochialized national art worlds. If they could master it, it promised them the means to develop a singular form of expression in the international sphere. If liberal international styles and values could find root in Indonesia, the reasoning went, they would in turn take on an Indonesian

character. Thus the Bandung painters favored icons of the self rendered in abstraction (a style seen as an icon of “the modern”). Indonesian-ness, per se, was not a problem. As Pirous put it in one of our evening talks:

We were always Indonesians. We all live in the same world with this language of visual communication. This was the extraordinary strength of the Euro-American mainstream. If we wanted to enter that stream, we used the language. If you didn’t use the language, you were out of the mainstream. You were marginalized. It is clear the Bandung School was more international than national. But we weren’t Americans, we weren’t Dutch. We had a culture rooted in this country.

I hear in Pirous’s recollections a proud refusal to be a second-class citizen in a world of modern international art, and a readiness to engage that realm on its own terms, however dominated it might be by Western values, ideologies, and institutions. I also hear in Pirous’s account the voice of the talented Acehese youth whose alert fascination with foreign films and books inclined him to take interest in a world lying beyond the borders of Aceh and Indonesia. This is the same youth whose father was part of the *Asia Muka* community in Meulaboh, and so something of an outsider to Acehese society. It is also the same youth whose class background brought him more closely in touch with bourgeois tastes and outlook than some of his Acehese peers. In short, I hear the words of someone already long-



Figure 1.6 Ries Mulder teaching his course on “Art Appreciation,” Bandung, 1955. Pirous sits furthest to the right. Photograph courtesy of Yayasan Serambi Pirous.

accustomed to thinking about his place in the world beyond regional and national borders.

For Pirous, finding a unique painterly self meant breaking way from the “naturalist” or “realist” habit of copying the world around him. It also had to do with colonial subjection and anti-colonial struggle. In Medan, he had no worries about personal vision and style. That changed as he began his formal studies with his Dutch teacher, Ries Mulder. There is, of course, considerable political and cultural irony (and strain!) in a postcolonial art student trying to find a unique painterly self under the tutelage of a former colonial master. Ries Mulder could be arrogant and cruel. If his lessons about cubist geometries, colors, abstraction, and vision for a time eluded Pirous, his demeaning insults did not. The condescending Mulder knew no Indonesian and so wounded his student in English or in Dutch – “This is shit! Shit!” or “Hey Pirous, not bad, perhaps you could find work with Disney.” Several years of these stinging insults led Pirous to withdraw to the solitude of his home and to the nurturing and informal atmosphere of a local art collective, Sanggar Seniman (“The Artists’ Studio”). There he began an intense struggle with materials and textures, sometimes scorching and scratching his canvases:

Mulder was too hard on me. ... It was always “this is bad, this is bad” to the point I got furious. So I left it all behind. I locked myself up at home and painted for months. Forget all those theories. I took a painting, spilled paint all over it, rubbed it, everything. I burned it. Rrgrrrrrrg. I looked at it burning, then I put it out and scratched it. ... Suddenly I found something, a way to get at a special richness in using colors, and the form was beginning to be abstract. I was startled! I painted on a large piece of jute. It was good! A picture of chickens. Very wild, very abstract, but still figurative.

It was 1960, and Mulder already had been asked to return home to the Netherlands the year before. Pirous put this work, *Cocks in the Garden (Ayam di Kebun)*, on show in an exhibit run by Sanggar Seniman in Bandung. A Canadian collector who worked for UNESCO spotted it and purchased it for about \$30. Pirous was thrilled. He had sold his first painting, and for a good price.

Disciplined training in a “new visual language” at Bandung was for Pirous a process of forgetting and denial as well. Much of the art that he had worked on earlier in life – his mother’s *kasab*, the portraits of nationalist leaders, the illuminated birth certificates – were no longer talked about as such; it was merely craft or kitsch in light of the philosophy and styles at the center of the Bandung program. As Pirous pursued a unique painterly style and identity, he moved more and more deeply into an art world shaped by the values, tastes, and prerogatives of Western critics, museums, and collectors. Most collectors of high-end art in Indonesia at this time were foreigners associated with embassies. Pirous recalls his being invited to the home of Jozias Leaö, the Chargé d’Affaires for Brazil: “For the first time in my life I saw international paintings, in his home in Jakarta! Paintings by Georges Bracques, Picasso, young painters from Europe, that’s what I saw at his house! Paintings that I had seen in books. And when he went home, he took a very valuable

collection of Indonesian paintings with him!” In Bandung’s circles, making it as an Indonesian artist was about succeeding with these elite, and largely foreign, collectors. Indeed, “making it” was perhaps best captured in a remark made by Affandi – a self-trained artist and the best-known Indonesian painter of the era. Invited to Bandung to address the artists-in-training, he offered students a gustatory analogy of success: “If you are a beginning painter,” Pirous remembers him saying, “you probably will live on rice wrapped up in banana leaves. But if you become a famous painter, you can eat *rijstafel*.” The unknown eats simple local fare, but the successful painter eats the European version of an Indonesian feast. As we saw above, it was only upon selling an abstract painting for the first time – to a Canadian collector – that Pirous felt he had arrived at a singular personal style. Pirous threw himself into painting and activities at Sanggar Seniman for the next two years, becoming one of its leaders and helping organize its first-ever open-air exhibition. That exhibit, too, was a critical and commercial success, bringing Pirous steady sales among foreign collectors.

I have condensed here a much more complex and nuanced story about artistic influence in the early postcolonial period. What I want to stress is that Pirous’s formal training at Bandung shows one way in which a colonizing modernism – in terms of its discourses and institutional structures – was occupied and domesticated. Though subjected to aesthetic modernism, Pirous was able to find within it a place for the self-defining work that afforded him a sense of independence from his Dutch teacher. It was the source of his humiliation and subsequent emancipation. For Pirous, then, aesthetic modernism and its peculiar discourses of painterly subjectivity became a way to be an Indonesian artist in a global world of art.

The Darkening Sky

Sanento Yuliman (Buchari and Yuliman 1985) has described in considerable detail the style and direction of Pirous’s earliest paintings (1959–65). The young painter worked almost exclusively in oils, and from sketches. The work tended toward “lyric expression” – thematic or symbolic representations of nature, landscapes, everyday people, and everyday objects. Experimenting in color, line, strokes, and texture, he produced paintings that give the impression of shallow space and reflect a preference for order and dynamism. For a few years the paintings did quite well; they sold, and a couple even made it into officially arranged shows in Hanoi and Rio de Janeiro.

Pirous became a staff-assistant at the academy in 1960, but, absorbed in his own painting, he did not make progress toward his degree. None of our conversations suggest that he took special note of the manifestos on Islamic art. Yet he did not, or could not, ignore changes in the country’s political climate. As Sukarno moved the nation further to the communist left and against the neo-colonialism of the West in the early 1960s, LEKRA’s confidence and influence grew. So did its strident



Figure 1.7 Pirous with wife and painter Erna Garnasih Pirous, Bandung, 1968. Photograph courtesy of Yayasan Serambi Pirous.

rhetoric and its capacity to intimidate. On Independence Day, August 17, 1963, twenty-one writers and artists seeking a more open ideological climate for their work signed and made public what is known as the “Cultural Manifesto” (Manifesto Kebudayaan, or Manikebu). Arguing that art should not be sacrificed for political ends, the authors took exception to principles of socialist realism (and so to LEKRA’s policy). The manifesto circulated in Bandung, where several of the younger artists added their signatures on January 28, 1964. Pirous was the second to sign. The ninth signatory was student-painter Erna Garnasih, who would later become Pirous’s wife, in 1966. Not long afterward, Sukarno banned the manifesto, making it plain that there were considerable political risks in adopting a pro-Manikebu outlook or in painting in styles that LEKRA deemed imperialistic, neo-colonial, or bourgeois. Threatened by growing ideological pressures to conform to socialist realism, Pirous retreated from public exhibition and just painted at home. “I was afraid,” he confessed to me.

Whether by coincidence, or in a calculated effort to protect Pirous at a time of intense political scrutiny, the chair of Fine Arts and Design at ITB insisted that Pirous finish his undergraduate thesis if he wished to keep working at the academy. Abandoning an earlier line of study on children’s art, Pirous instead interviewed painters who had used their talents for the Indonesian Revolution – as he once did – and compared their past work to art works created in Indonesia’s ongoing “confrontation” with neo-colonialism. Six months of oral historical research and photographic study yielded *Poster Art as a Tool of Propaganda in National Struggle* (*Seni Pariwara Sebagai Alat Propaganda Perdjoangan*), submitted in late 1964. Pirous subsequently joined the academy as a permanent member of the faculty.

The deadly political maneuvering that took place on the night of September 30, 1965, brought the Sukarno years to their close. Military factions under the command of Major General Soeharto assumed control of Jakarta and began a campaign to inflame smoldering class and religious tensions. The Indonesian left was purged in a terrible fury of mass violence and arrests during the course of the next six months. Hundreds of thousands were murdered, and hundreds of thousands were jailed. As Soeharto fashioned his regime, the leftist cultural institute, LEKRA, was outlawed, and many of the painters it supported were killed, imprisoned, or left without prospects for exhibiting their work. No longer in risk of censure, the international and humanist painters associated with the Bandung academy mounted a major comeback show under government sponsorship at Jakarta's Balai Budaya ("Cultural Pavilion") in December, 1966. Called simply "Eleven Bandung Artists" (*Sebelas Seniman Bandung*), it included seven paintings by Pirous. He quickly became a rising star in the Bandung and Jakarta art circles.

Like most of the other artists and writers who signed the "Cultural Manifesto", Pirous did not foresee the authoritarian future that was in store for Indonesia with Soeharto's rise to power. The immediate political changes in the country were for Pirous and many of his colleagues very liberating. He began to paint furiously. Climbing into public view, he began, too, a furious refashioning of self. For example, the brochure for a 1967 show in Bangkok had this to say about the artist:

A. D. Pirous, without a doubt a modern artist, could sometimes be termed an impressionist. Then again, when expressionism takes over there are signs of abstraction. ... Although Pirous moves in many fields of artistic expression, it is not possible to compare his style with an existing mannerism. Pirous is unaffected by the examples of past creations; he relies on his own self for true and individualistic expression.

The passage strikes me as overreaching, and strained, though fully in line with modernist emphases on finding a unique subjectivity. It paints a romantic picture: an artist uninfluenced by precursors, peers, or a cultural milieu as sources of inspiration. Nothing less than pure and incomparable, self-conscious expression.

Pirous had his first "solo" show at Jakarta's Balai Budaya in October 1968. He completed fifty-four paintings that year, and in them we can discern a confident shift in his work. He paints without sketches; improvisation has taken over. Lyric self-expression is all. Figuration matters less, and imagined landscapes preoccupy him. Shallow space flattens further onto the surface of the painting. He experiments with textures by dripping, splashing, and brushing thin mixtures of oil paint and turpentine onto canvas. He goes for a kind of playfulness and tension between materials and the eye, trying to create thick visual texture with thin paint, sometimes in contrast with ridges of impasto. I have long been drawn to the moody palette, drips, and thinned paints of the horizonless landscapes in *An Isolated Place (Daerah Terpencil)* and *The Night Landscape I (Pemandangan Malam I)*. But the bright hopes vested in the boundless panorama of planes, spills, and impasto smears



Figure 1.8 “Without a doubt, a modern artist.” Pirous with his paintings in a publicity shot taken for his first “solo” show in Jakarta, October, 1968. Photograph courtesy of Yayasan Serambi Pirous.

in *The Sun after September 1965* (*Mentari Setelah September 1965*) deserve comment (see Figure 1.9).

The Sun after September 1965 was especially significant for Pirous at the time, and he positioned it as the visual focus of the exhibition space at his 1968 Jakarta show. Talking to me in 1994, he said:

This one was a primadonna on the walls. This was the centerpoint of all my paintings, my focus. All these paintings were there as an expression of thankfulness about the situation [made] possible after ‘65, okay? *September* here, was the focus of the room,



Figure 1.9 *The Sun after September 1965*. 1968. 135 × 150 cm, oil on canvas. Photograph courtesy of Yayasan Serambi Pirous.

the biggest painting in that space. It's a commemoration of this, this sun that is carrying happiness after '65.

The title of the painting alludes, of course, to the sudden end of Indonesia's embrace with the communist left. Yet the painted image and Pirous's remarks about it appear to me oblivious to the terrifying, deadly violence in the months after September, 1965. They turn away from the tragedy and suffering and point instead to the horizonless possibilities for a "self"-pursuing modern artist who has begun to taste the fruits of critical and commercial success. Here, the "sun" (whether it is the disc-like form to the upper left of the canvas, or the light distributed throughout the image) is placed as a deliberate and self-conscious icon of personal happiness and grateful relief.

Some who know this painting see it as propaganda for the regime that had begun to coalesce as Indonesia's authoritarian "New Order." Others have seen it as protest against the same regime (George 1997). No surprise. After all, how could a painting achieve a timeless, privileged, and singular meaning? Paintings, like all works of art, have social and historical lives, gathering up sometimes very divergent stories and

interpretations along the way. This painting invites people to take sides, so long as we know its title. I keep coming back to the painting – in catalogues, in the dark storage room at Serambi Pirous, in the nook of a museum show – and the story Pirous has told me about it. I would not call the painting or his story propaganda, but rather, the residue of a time when Pirous shared with others a buoyant set of hopes and expectations in the aftermath of a violent social upheaval, an upheaval that also extinguished the light and lives of those who saw things differently. To borrow from Raymond Williams (1977), we might say the painting and Pirous's story describe an emergent "structure of feeling" – the lived and felt paths of experience for a cohort of urban Muslim artists passing together through a particular moment of social and aesthetic transformation. The political storm of 1965–66 gave his art fresh public chances. Modernist abstraction and universal humanism had come into favor, and set down conditions in which he could strive for maximal self-expression and self-promotion.

For early postcolonial artists like Pirous, the realization of a signature modern style served as proof of their nation's sovereignty and progress, just as it proved their personal maturation as artists. The artist and the nation were making it on the global stage, asserting their distinctiveness and their parity with others in the world. Recognition depended on those others, of course. Pirous never found recognition from Mulder, but gained it in having his work purchased by collectors belonging to foreign diplomatic circles in Jakarta, figures, I should point out, whose very job in Jakarta was to "recognize" Indonesia's status as a sovereign state in the family of nations. All the works for sale at his solo show were snapped up, and cultural officers from the Danish, Dutch, and US embassies offered fellowships to study abroad. Those gestures of recognition from foreign collectors gave Pirous purchase on his own expressivity and artistic identity.

For Pirous, as for most any modernist, to paint was to show oneself, to put oneself into view, before others of course, but also to oneself. That his works of self-expression brought pleasure to others reaffirmed his mastery of modernist orthodoxy and his stature as an artist whose work appealed to connoisseurs from abroad. Borrowing a page from Michel Foucault (1997), we may think of painting and its public display as an ethical path, a means through which someone becomes a who and a what, finding relationships with oneself and others, with self-reflection, and with the painted images that objectify and refract one's subjectivity. It is a way of deciphering and achieving a way of being, though not without risk or vulnerability. By the end of 1968, at age thirty-six, Pirous had found for the moment a place of happiness and confidence within the seemingly universal and decidedly secularist visual language of aesthetic modernism. Islam may have offered him happiness and purpose in other pursuits, but not visibly so in his art.