

*Drawing as Ethnographic Practice:
Miguel Covarrubias's Balinese Drawings & Sketches as Visual
Anthropology*

*El dibujo como una práctica etnográfica:
Los dibujos y bocetos balineses de Miguel Covarrubias como antropología
visual*

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Nancy C. Lutkehaus Departamento de Antropología, University of Southern California; lutkehau@usc.edu; <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5015-4487>.

Líneas de investigación Género y organización social en Melanesia; antropología política y económica; antropología religiosa y simbólica, arte y antropología.

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Publicación más relevante *Margaret Mead: The Making of an American Icon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

Resumen En años recientes el uso y significado del dibujo como un método de estudio para registrar información etnográfica ha sido sometido a un renovado análisis por antropólogos. Sus intereses han variado, desde un enfoque del estatus epistemológico de la línea hasta las dimensiones dialógicas del dibujo como una práctica social. Mientras que los historiadores del arte han celebrado el trabajo de Covarrubias en términos del “dibujo de una línea cosmopolita” y los arqueólogos han reconocido la importancia de sus dibujos sobre los olmecas para la arqueología mesoamericana, los antropólogos culturales han pasado por alto su papel como antropólogo visual. Sus dibujos en *La isla de Bali* (1937), así como sus bocetos en el archivo, son una importante contribución a los registros etnográficos de la cultura balinesa, en un momento significativo de la transformación de su sociedad. En particular, sus bocetos ofrecen un rico corpus de información cultural en torno a la vida cotidiana en Bali a principios de los años treinta; así como información etnográfica acerca de la dimensión no verbal de los balineses, que com-

plementa los análisis de otros antropólogos sobre la cultura balinesa. En contraste con otras imágenes mucho más orientalistas que realizó para murales, mapas y pinturas, los dibujos y bocetos de Covarrubias aseguran una nueva apreciación como documentos etnográficos y antropología visual.

Palabras clave Miguel Covarrubias; antropología visual; dibujo; Bali; etnografía.

Abstract In recent years the use and significance of drawing as a research method for recording ethnographic information has undergone renewed analysis by anthropologists. Their interests have ranged from a focus on the epistemological status of the line to the dialogical dimension of drawing as social practice. While art historians have celebrated Covarrubias's work in terms of his "drawing a cosmopolitan line" and archaeologists have acknowledged the importance of his Olmec drawings to Meso-American archaeology, cultural anthropologists have overlooked Covarrubias as a visual anthropologist. His drawings in *Island of Bali* (1937) as well as his archived sketches are important contributions to the ethnographic record of Balinese culture at a significant moment in the transformation of Balinese society. His sketches, in particular, offer a rich corpus of cultural information on everyday life in Bali in the early 1930s, as well as ethnographic information about non-verbal dimensions of the Balinese that complements other anthropologists' analyses of Balinese culture. In contrast to the more Orientalist images he produced for murals, maps, and paintings, Covarrubias's drawings and sketches warrant new appreciation as ethnographic documents and visual anthropology.

Keywords Miguel Covarrubias; visual anthropology; drawing; Bali; ethnography.

NANCY C. LUTKEHAUS
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Drawing as Ethnographic Practice: Miguel Covarrubias's Balinese Drawings & Sketches as Visual Anthropology

The anthropologists Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson are often considered to be the founders of visual anthropology¹ because of their extensive use of film and photography in their Balinese research published in *Balinese Character*² and in a series of edited films based on footage shot during field work in Bali between 1936-1939. In considering the rich corpus of drawings and sketches the artist and author Miguel Covarrubias produced as part of the ethnographic research he conducted in Bali between 1930-1933 for his book *Island of Bali* (1937), this article suggests that Covarrubias is another foundational figure in the field of visual anthropology.

Scholars of Balinese culture have often pointed out that Covarrubias's book reiterated—albeit very eloquently and compellingly—what they have called “the anthropological romance of Bali,”³ a set of Orientalist ideas Westerners developed and perpetuated in the twentieth century about Bali as an artistic, exotic, visual and sensual “paradise.”⁴ It is precisely in part because of *Island of Bali's* engaging

1. Karl Heider, *Ethnographic Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976).

2. Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead, *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis* (New York: Academy of Sciences, 1942).

3. James A. Boon, *The Anthropological Romance of Bali: 1597-1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Adrian Vickers, *Bali: A Paradise Created* (Hong Kong: Periplus Editions, 1989).

4. Some critics such as Tessel Pollmann in “Margaret Mead's Balinese: The Fitting Symbols of the American Dream,” *Indonesia*, vol. 49, no. 1 (April, 1990): 1-35, have gone much further in their critiques of Mead and Bateson as well as Covarrubias's work on Bali, considering it not only Orientalist but imperialist if not overtly in its intent, implicitly in its effects.

images that Covarrubias's book has, as Vickers points out, "outlasted all other travel books to become the key descriptive work on Bali, known practically to all visitors to the island."⁵ From both an anthropological as well as an art historical perspective, there is more to *Island of Bali* and Covarrubias's drawings and sketches than just a visually engaging Orientalist look at Bali during the golden years of the 1930s, when Bali was the hot spot for Western cosmopolitan intellectuals, artists, and tourists.⁶ This statement is based on the fact that Covarrubias did not limit himself to just one style of drawing in *Island of Bali* or more broadly in his ethnographic sketches as a whole, but rather utilized a variety of different styles and types of drawing to gain and convey knowledge about Balinese culture not readily accessible through conversation or written text.

It might seem obvious, since Covarrubias was an artist, that he would employ drawing in his ethnographic research. Indeed, it was precisely because he was an artist interested in studying the topic of art and artists in Bali that the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation awarded him a fellowship to return to Bali a second time in 1933-1934. Although Covarrubias worked in several visual media (including oil paint, ink and gouache, water color, and pencil) during and after his residence in Bali, it is the sketches he made in his notebooks—the most immediate and thus unmediated transfer of what he observed to how he recorded it—and, secondarily, the drawings he reproduced in *Island of Bali* based on these sketches, that are of most interest ethnographically. Using an analytic framework based on the "graphic turn" in anthropology—that is, on a new appreciation of the practice of drawing as a visual research strategy and as a method that began to be articulated by anthropologists in recent decades⁷

5. Adrian Vickers, *Bali: A Paradise Created*, 114.

6. See, also Vickers, this volume. For more about these cosmopolitan expatriates see James Boon, *The Anthropological Romance of Bali: 1597-1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), Matthew Cohen, *Inventing the Performing Arts: Modernity and Tradition in Colonial Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016). Michel Picard, "'Cultural Tourism' in Bali: Cultural Performances as Tourist Attraction," *Indonesia* 1, no. 49 (April 1990): 37-74, and, for a novelist's treatment of this period, Nigel Barley's *Island of Demons* (Singapore: Monsoon Books, 2009). (Interestingly, Barley was trained as an anthropologist and initially worked in Indonesia as an ethnographer.)

7. Chris Ballard, "The Return of the Past: On Drawing and Dialogic History," *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2013.769119>; Haidy Geismar, "Drawing it Out," *Visual Anthropology Review* 30, no. 2 (Fall, 2014): 97-113, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/var12041>; Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000); Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (London & New York: Routledge Classics, 2016); Michael Taussig, *I Saw it with My Own Eyes* (Chicago:

—this article looks anew at the different uses Covarrubias made ethnographically of drawing in his Balinese research.⁸

Covarrubias included 90 drawings as well as 114 photographs (most of which were taken by his wife, Rosa) and five full-color paintings in *Island of Bali*. Many of the different types of drawings and sketches Covarrubias made in Bali, are included in his book. The variety itself, as seen in the list below, speaks to the importance of visual images in general, and drawings in particular, as important sources of ethnographic information:

1. Diagrams and maps;
2. Material culture, such as objects of everyday life;
3. Portraits;
4. Drawings and sketches of women bathing, carrying offerings, etc.;
5. Caricatures;
6. Drawings of dancers and dance movements;
7. Copies of text and images from *lontar*, or sacred palm leaf manuscripts;
8. Scenes of everyday activities and village life.

The “Graphic Turn” in Anthropology

Anthropologists have long been aware of the usefulness of drawing in fieldwork. The bible of ethnographic fieldwork, *Notes and Queries on Anthropology*, first published by the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland in 1874, lists “maps, plans, diagrams, drawings, and photographs” as one of four essential types of anthropological documentation necessary for a comparative study of human culture and society.⁹ However, beginning around

University of Chicago Press, 2011); Michael Taussig, “What Do Drawings Want?,” *Culture, Theory & Critique* 50 (2009): 263–274.

8. Theoretically, this new interest in drawing as a research strategy is related to earlier developments in anthropology regarding the concept of the body, such as embodiment and embodied ways of knowing. While initially, this concept was applied to the subjects of anthropological inquiry and was focused on the embodied experience of individuals—more recently it has also been applied to understanding different ways of knowing accessible to the researcher as well.

9. The other three types of documentation include (1) descriptive notes and records of investigation; (2) texts, etc. and (3) genealogical and census data. *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954), 45.

2000 anthropologists began to re-evaluate drawing both as a research method and as a form of human activity. The so-called “graphic turn” in anthropology has offered, among other things, a renewed focus on drawing as a corporeal and dialogical practice.¹⁰

British anthropologist Tim Ingold initiated a project he called an “anthropological archaeology of the line” and has written about the importance of lines—especially the drawn line—in the evolution of human behavior.¹¹ He and other anthropologists have also elaborated on the significance of drawing as a corporeal practice—a physical or embodied activity that relates the observer more intimately with what is observed than either writing or photography and that therefore offers a different phenomenological means of understanding and communicating knowledge about other cultures.¹² Another dimension of the graphic turn has been an interdisciplinary interest among anthropologists, artists, and architects in reflecting upon how alternative forms of description and notation apart from the textual afford new ways of knowing about the world such that “learning is understanding in practice: exploring the interrelations between perception, creativity and skill.”¹³

Although these anthropologists do not specifically engage with the work of art historians in their ruminations about drawing, some of their insights resonate with the earlier work of the French art historian, Henri Focillon, whose 1934 treatise *Vie des formes* was translated into English as *The Life of Forms* by the eminent Mesoamerican art historian George Kubler and published in

10. See Andrew Causey, *Drawing as Ethnographic Method* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017); Rudi Colloredo-Mansfield, “Space, Line and Story in the Invention of an Andean Aesthetic,” *Journal of Material Culture* 16, no. 1 (2011): 3–23; Geismar, “Drawing it Out”; Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*; Carol Hendrickson, “Visual Field Notes: Drawing Insights in the Yucatan,” *Visual Anthropology Review*, no. 24 (2008): 117–132; Taussig, “What Do Drawings Want?”; Taussig, *I Saw It With My Own Eyes*.

11. Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History*.

12. Although this point about drawing versus photography is a contentious one, because there is a lengthy tradition in anthropology, beginning in the 19th century, that argues for the value of photography as a scientific method for ethnographic research (Elizabeth Edwards, *Anthropology and Photography* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992]), the recent focus on the value of drawing as a source of ethnographic knowledge lends support to a reappraisal of Covarrubias’s drawings as a research tool. Both Covarrubias and his wife Rosa also valued photographs as a source of visual information and an important form of recording data.

13. Wendy Gunn, ed., *Fieldnotes and Sketchbooks: Challenging Boundaries between Descriptions and Processes of Describing* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009), 1.

1989.¹⁴ In his introduction to the English edition the French semiotician, Jean Molino, asserts the affinities between Focillon's argument about the vitality of form as shaped by the hands of the artist and anthropological insights into aesthetics.¹⁵ Most relevant to an understanding of the practice of the plastic arts, such as drawing, is Focillon's emphasis on the effect of what he calls "the quadruple alliance"—form, matter, tool and hand.¹⁶ According to Focillon the term that best describes the vigor of this "quadruple alliance" is a term he borrows from the language of painting—"namely the touch."¹⁷ In other words, through his particular "touch"—manifested in the instantaneous impact of an alliance of form, matter, tool and hand—an artist has the ability to give vitality or life to the form he representing.

Finally, there has been interest in the dialogical nature of drawing; that is, the way in which the process of drawing, and drawings themselves, can facilitate interaction and dialogue between individuals.¹⁸

*"The Cultural Eye": Ethnographic Conventions or Sketches as Stylized
Representational Forms*

Adhering to a fundamental ethnographic convention regarding the importance of maps, plans, and diagrams Covarrubias included drawings of typical

14. Kubler, who was familiar with Covarrubias's work on the Olmec (*The Art and Architecture of Ancient American: the Mexican, Maya and Andean Peoples* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1962), was assisted in his translation of Focillon's book by his colleague Charles Beecher Hogan. I would like to acknowledge the comment of an anonymous reader of this article for bringing Focillon's work to my attention. There is much more that could be said about the relationship between Focillon's work on form, the anthropology of art, and Covarrubias as both an anthropologist and an artist than there is space to develop here.

15. Jean Molino, "Introduction," in Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms* (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 17. See also Molino's reference to the work of anthropologist Steven Feld on the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea and their aesthetic judgments in his work *Sound and Sentiment* (Molino, "Introduction," 12-13).

16. Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, trans. by Charles B. Hogan and George Kubler (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 109. (Originally published as *Vie des formes* [Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1934].)

17. Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*.

18. See Ballard "The Return of the Past", Aaron Glass, "Drawing on Museums: Early Visual Fieldnotes by Franz Boas and the Indian Recuperation of the Archive," *American Anthropologist*, nd.

household compounds¹⁹ and the ground plan of a typical Balinese temple²⁰ in *Island of Bali*. He also drew maps that located the island within the Malay Archipelago,²¹ as well as a more painterly, less geographically representational, map that gave details about the location of places and geographical features of the island that he included inside the front and back cover of the book.²² Perhaps not surprisingly, Covarrubias began his career working for the Mexican government's Department of Communication as a map draftsman or cartographer.²³ Later in his career he would become famous for his visually arresting maps and murals, a genre he began with his pictorial maps of Bali.²⁴

Commenting on the anthropological drawings of Bernard Deacon, Geismar notes that "sketching or drawing in the field was itself a visual convention that had become a part of anthropology as much as it was a part of the fieldworker's personal experience."²⁵ Similarly, some of the more prosaic drawings Covarrubias included in *Island of Bali* can be seen to replicate this earlier ethnographic tradition and thus are part of a culture of drawing and representation based on a long history of Western ethnographic representations of non-Western objects and people. They reflect a specific "cultural eye" that was mediated by a tradition of ethnographic illustration that goes back to the earliest European voyages of discovery of the Pacific. It is a tradition that was first analyzed by the late Australian art historian Bernard Smith in his works, *Euro-*

19. Miguel Covarrubias, *Island of Bali* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1972), 90-91. Originally published by Alfred Knopf, 1937.

20. Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, 265.

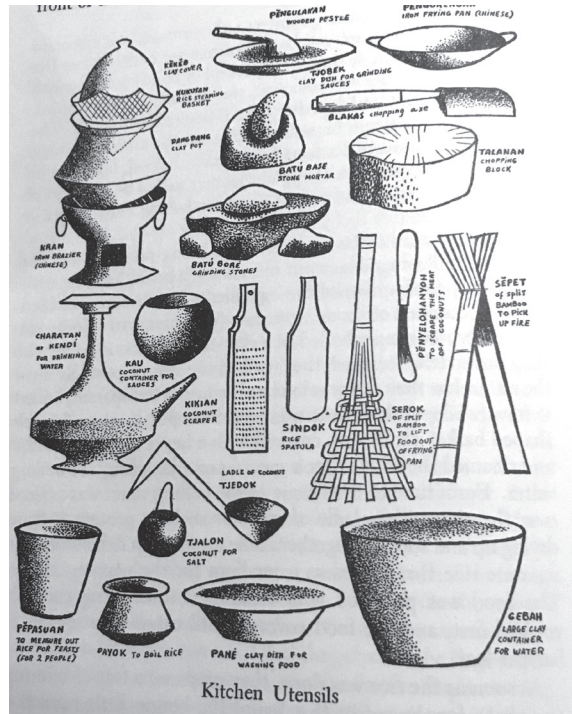
21. Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, 3.

22. Different editions of the book include different maps. For example, the 1972 paperback edition has a duotone map inside both the front and back covers, while later paperback editions include a different map reproduced in color titled "Tanah Bali," a translation from the Malay language of "The Land of Bali."

23. Adriana Williams and Yu-Chee Chong, *Covarrubias in Bali* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2005).

24. See Alicia Inez Guzmán, "Miguel Covarrubias's World: Remaking Global Space at the 1930 Golden Gate Exposition," in *Miguel Covarrubias: Drawing a Cosmopolitan Line*, Carolyn Kastner, ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 19-48; Nancy Lutkehaus, "Miguel Covarrubias and the Pageant of the Pacific: The Golden Gate International Exposition and the Ideas of the Transpacific, 1939-1940," in *Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emerging Field*, Janet Hoskins and Viet Thanh Nguyen, eds. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014), 109-133; and Tomás Ybarro-Fausto, "Miguel Covarrubias: cartógrafo," in *Miguel Covarrubias: homenaje*, Lucía García-Noriega y Nieto, ed. (Mexico City: Fundación Cultural Televisa, 1987), 119-128.

25. Geismar, "Drawing it Out": 107.

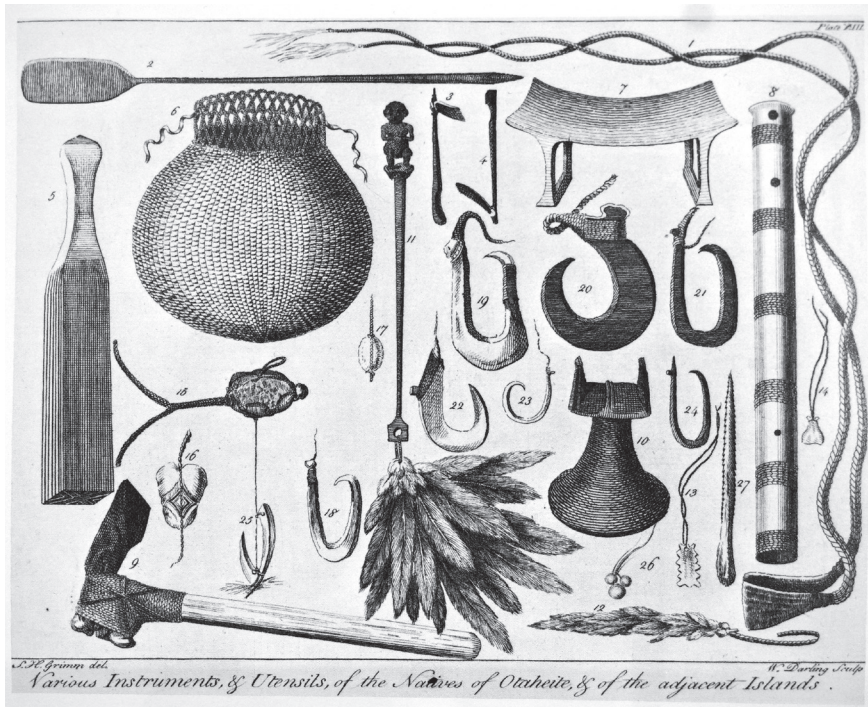


i. Miguel Covarrubias, *Kitchen Utensils*, pen and ink drawing, *Island of Bali* (1972 Oxford in Asia edition), 98.

pean Vision and the South Pacific, 1768-1850 (1960) and *Imagining the Pacific: In the Wake of the Cook Voyages* (1992).

For example, in the chapter in *Island of Bali* titled “Everyday Life in Bali” (itself a conventional ethnographic category), Covarrubias includes a drawing of typical kitchen utensils (fig. 1). In reproducing the layout of these objects, Covarrubias, either intentionally or unconsciously, replicated the decontextualized format used by the artists and draftsmen such as Sydney Parkinson who accompanied Captain James Cook on his three voyages to the South Pacific between 1768 and 1779 (fig. 2). During the eighteenth century objects thus displayed were labeled “artificial”—as opposed to natural—“curiosities.”²⁶ As anthropologist Nicholas Thomas has pointed out in his discussion of Oceanic artifacts, this style of representation, where objects are shown in a decontextu-

26. Nicholas Thomas, *In Oceania: Visions, Artifacts, Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 106.



2. Sydney Parkinson, "Artifacts from the Society Islands," from *A Journal of a Voyage to the South Seas, in his Majesty's Ship, the Endeavour. Faithfully Transcribed from the Papers of the late Sydney Parkinson, Draughtsman to Joseph Banks, Esq. on his late Expedition, with Dr. Solander, round the world* (London: Richardson and Urquhart, 1773).

alized, dehumanized, abstract fashion derived from eighteenth-century conventions of natural history illustration that aimed at scientific principles of objective representation.²⁷ Whether Covarrubias was simply having fun imitating this conventional genre, or faithfully replicating the format in order to produce an “authentic” ethnographic document, we do not know—perhaps he wanted to do both. Given his sly sense of humor, he may have been having fun with these cultural conventions, sometimes adding his own artistic signature, as he did with other illustrations in the book such as that of a rice granary, while also adhering to an ethnographic genre of description.²⁸

27. Thomas, *In Oceania: Visions, Artifacts, Histories*, III.

28. Covarrubias accurately compared the style of a Balinese rice granary with that of a Mela-

Although we think of sketching as a spontaneous activity and as an immediate, thus unmediated, translation of the artist's direct experience of his or her environment, it is also highly conventionalized and influenced by the larger visual culture of the artist's time, conventions that for Covarrubias were based on an anthropological tradition that despite its scientific aims was nonetheless "suffused with enlightenment idealism and romanticism about the tropical climes of Pacific and its peoples."²⁹ while still inflected with aspects of Covarrubias's own personal modernist style. We see this combination even more clearly with his portraits of individual Balinese. Although many of the portraits of individuals that Covarrubias included in *Island of Bali* clearly display his own artistic style—and sometimes, as with the portrait of a pouting Balinese woman named Pusung Gondjer, verge on caricature (the genre he was best known for)—³⁰ they also adhere to earlier ethnographic conventions regarding how to depict non-Western people, including such characteristics as lack of landscape or background, profile views, head shots, and use of defining costumes or adornment³¹ (figs. 3 and 4).

Covarrubias's Orientalist Images

We know that Rosa and Miguel Covarrubias had been enticed to visit Bali on their honeymoon in 1930 in part by photographs of Balinese islanders that they had seen in a book by the German photographer, Gregor Krause. Published in 1920, Krause's book was filled with exotic images of Balinese dancers as well as erotic Orientalist photographs of Balinese women bathing and in other suggestive poses.³² There is no doubt that some of Covarrubias's drawings, and the paintings he made later based on them, were directly influenced by Krause's voyeuristic Orientalist-view of Bali—in particular Covarrubias's own drawings of women bathing (albeit, more demurely portrayed in his "Bath-

nesian (in this case, a Trobriand Island) yam house, which he may have seen photographs of in the work of anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1922). See Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, 80.

29. Bateson and Mead, *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis*, 107.

30. Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, 114.

31. Bernard Smith, *Imagining the Pacific: In the Wake of the Cook Voyages* (Melbourne: University of Melbourne Press, 1992), 77; Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, 113.

32. Vickers, *Bali: A Paradise Created*, 99.



3. Miguel Covarrubias, *Sketch of Balinese Woman*, Miguel Covarrubias Papers, Manuscript Division. Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

ing Sketches”).³³ In this respect, he was a man of his times who perpetuated a decidedly Western image of the Balinese female as an exotic Other.³⁴ As significant as Krause’s photographs of Bali were for Covarrubias’s drawings, an even more influential source seems to have been the extensive pen and ink drawings and sketches of Balinese temples and architectural details, rituals and dances, and Balinese men and women made by the Dutch artist W.O.J. Nieuwenkamp who resided on Bali between 1904 and 1914. Covarrubias cites three of Nieuwenkamp’s books in his bibliography in *Island of Bali* and many of the subjects that he sketched, or included drawings of, in his book are similar to those that Nieuwenkamp depicted.³⁵

33. Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, 117–118.

34. Two of these images are the subject of a particularly excoriating critique by Tessel Pollman (“Margaret Mead’s Balinese”: 18–19) who condemns Covarrubias for his voyeuristic exoticization and exploitation of Balinese women, and Balinese sexuality in general, in drawings such as these two reproduced in *Island of Bali* (117 and 118). I am not arguing that these particular drawings by Covarrubias are not Orientalist images, but suggest that they are but one type of drawing Covarrubias made and thus not representative of the entire corpus of his Balinese drawings.

35. Covarrubias lists three books by Nieuwenkamp, *Bali en Lombok* (1910), *Bouskumst van Bali*



4. Sydney Parkinson,
*Portrait of a New Zealand
Man*, pen and wash, 1769.
British Library, London
(Add. MS23920, f. 54a).
CC01.0

Drawing as Dialogic Practice: The “Ideal” versus the “Real” Balinese

However, Covarrubias’s drawings of Balinese women and men were not simply objectifying Orientalist images made for Western consumption alone. Sometimes for Covarrubias drawing portraits of individuals was also a way for him to engage dialogically with individual Balinese. In contrast to the more mechanical and impersonal activity of taking a photograph, the process of drawing encourages interaction and conversation.³⁶ Beginning in the

(1926), and *Beeldouwkunst van Bali* (1928) in his bibliography for *Island of Bali*. Covarrubias may also have seen some of Nieuwenkamp’s Balinese art at an exhibition in Paris in 1927 at the Musée des Art Décoratifs (see Bruce W. Carpenter, *W.O.J. Nieuwenkamp: First European Artist in Bali* [Hong Kong: Periplus Editions, 1997], 201.)

36. Ballard, *The Return of the Past*.”

1980s anthropologists became interested in the notion of “dialogism” as elaborated by Mikhail Bakhtin in his analysis of the novel. Anthropologists saw the concept of dialogism as a means of understanding and developing a more openly collaborative and co-constitutive form of ethnographic inquiry.³⁷ Drawing as a form of dialogism, anthropologist Michael Taussig has suggested, offers a three-way conversation, between the drawer, the thing drawn, and the (hypothetical) viewers.³⁸ In *Island of Bali*, Covarrubias presents us with a literal example of exactly such a three-way conversation based on drawing in his account of his dialogue with the Regent of Karangasem on the topic of “the facial characteristics of various races.”³⁹ The regent, a man of high status and very knowledgeable about Balinese culture, asked Covarrubias to draw a typical Balinese.

“He disagreed,” Covarrubias wrote, “with my conception and proceeded to draw one himself, a face from the classic paintings and a type that could not be found on the whole island.”⁴⁰ The point Covarrubias wanted to make with this anecdote was one about the conventions of Balinese art. There is another point one can make here about the dialogue that Covarrubias’s drawing initiated between him, the regent, and his drawing, as it was Covarrubias’s drawing that elicited cultural information about Balinese notions of their own identity that Covarrubias might not otherwise have learned simply by talking with the regent. While Covarrubias saw the typical Balinese as looking one way, the regent chose to see the typical Balinese as looking another way, no matter that it was not “realistic,” in Western terms of representing an actual Balinese rather than a culturally idealized image of one.

*Drawing of / as Performative Activity:
Covarrubias’s Dancers and Dance Movements*

Like his cohort of cosmopolitan expatriates in Bali in the 1930s, and his own research interest in Balinese arts, Covarrubias focused much of his attention in *Island of Bali*—and in his drawings in general—on the arena of Balinese

37. Dennis Tedlock, *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

38. See Taussig, *I Saw It With My Own Eyes*.

39. Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, 265.

40. Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, 265.

dance and ritual. As Judith Bosnak shows us in detail in this volume, Balinese dance, in particular that of the Barong, was a Balinese art form that was singled out for development as a type of cultural performance by the Dutch government under its rubric of “Balinization,” the preservation of what were considered to be “unique” aspects of Balinese culture that should be shielded from outside influence and change. As Bosnak and others suggest, Balinese dance was reinforced as a cultural icon by Covarrubias and his expatriate set who considered it to be a quintessential aspect of Balinese culture.⁴¹ In the chapter of *Island of Bali* titled “The Drama,” we see many of Covarrubias’s drawings of dancers⁴² and there are many more sketches of dancers in his archives. Although there is no doubt that Covarrubias’s description of Balinese dance in *Island of Bali* contributed to the perpetuation of a Western Orientalist discourse about Balinese dance, the images themselves are not simply reifications of an exotic Other; they are also the product of a skillful eye and deft hand interested in depicting the complex movements of a culturally-specific form. It is difficult to describe movement, especially dance movements, either verbally or in drawing; nonetheless, Covarrubias’s drawings of dancers capture something essential about Balinese dance that film and photographs do not. It is with his drawings of dancers that we most clearly see that drawing itself—like music and dance—is a performative activity that involves the bodily movements of the person drawing as well as that of the dancer being depicted. Covarrubias’s drawings of Balinese dancers also demonstrate that his prior experience—we might call it his ethnographic training as a participant-observer—drawing dancers and musicians in Harlem,⁴³ designing sets for musical reviews in New York City in the 1920s, and for Josephine Baker and “La Revue Nègre” in Paris in 1925, as well as his intimate relationship with his wife Rosa, herself a dancer, provided him with an apprenticeship that allowed him to hone his observational and representational skills in capturing dancers and dance movements.

41. See also Matthew Cohen, *Inventing the Performing Arts: Modernity and Tradition in Colonial Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2016), 125–138. See also Pollmann, “Margaret Mead’s Balinese”.

42. Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, 225–226, 228–230.

43. See Covarrubias, *Negro Drawings* (New York: Knopf, 1927); Heinzelman, *The Covarrubias Circle: Nickolas Muray’s Collection of Twentieth-Century Mexican Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 138–139; Sylvia Navarrete, *Miguel Covarrubias: retorno a los orígenes* (Puebla: Universidad de las Américas, 2004).

Whether we are admiring his sketches of the exceptional male dancer Mario, who created an entirely new form of Balinese dance, the *Kebiyar*,⁴⁴ or his more technical drawings of a series of dance movements,⁴⁵ one is struck by the fact that these drawings—with their ability to isolate and capture individual dance movements and gestures—first freeze them in time and space and then depict them unfolding in a series, visually communicate a sense of movement in a more comprehensible and compelling way than a series of photographs do.⁴⁶ On the one hand, we can say that this is what makes them “art,” or gives them their artistic value—their ability to express something about the emotional tenor of the dancer, the elegance of the shape of the body as it executes a particular movement, or the tension, and focus, and grace of the two *legong* dancers as they mirror one another’s movements. From another perspective, ethnographically-speaking, they are visual evidence that a drawing can reveal essential aspects of an activity that a photograph cannot. As art critic John Berger has noted, a photograph stops a moment in time, whereas a drawing encompasses it.⁴⁷

Lontar: Accessing the Spiritual through Drawings

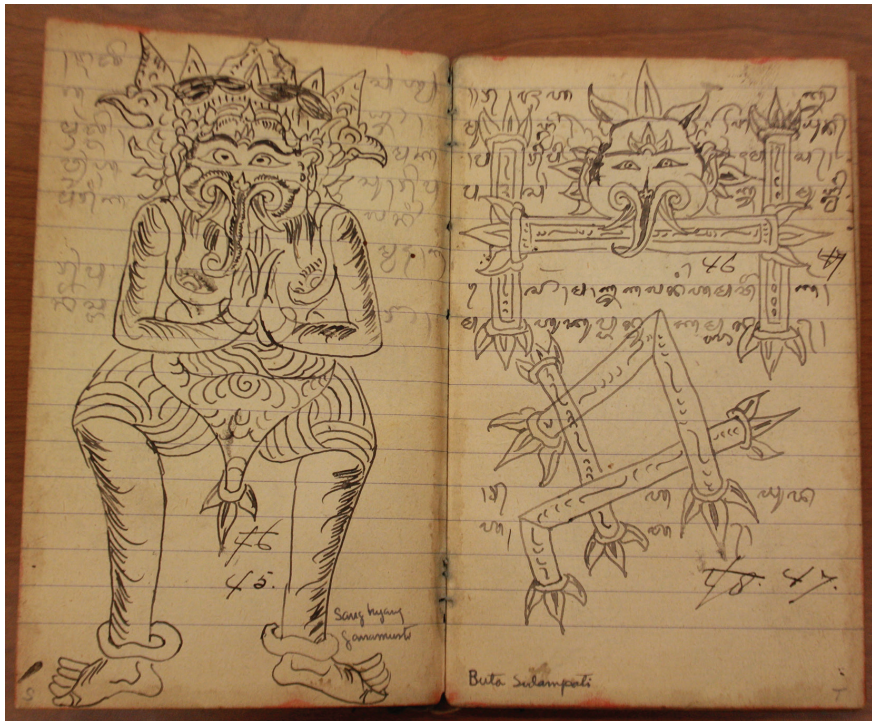
As previously noted, dialogue—that is, engaged conversation—is an essential feature of the ethnographic method of participant-observation. Covarrubias was particularly interested in talking with priests because he wanted to know more about Balinese religious beliefs and Balinese ideas about magic and supernatural spirits. One means of learning more about these aspects of Balinese culture was via objects the Balinese call *lontar*, or palm leaf manuscripts. *Lontar* manuscripts are a combination of text and image, of both writing and drawing. In Covarrubias’s field notebooks there are many pen and ink copies of the texts and images from these often very old and sacred Balinese

44. Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, 233.

45. Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, 226.

46. Although it is not possible to compare Covarrubias’s drawings of the *legong* dance movements with an exactly similar series of photographs of the *legong* dance, it is possible to get some sense of the difference between drawings and photographs of Balinese dance by comparing Covarrubias’s drawings in *Island of Bali* with series of photographs of Balinese dancers in Mead and Bateson’s *Balinese Character*.

47. Quoted in Taussig, “What Do Drawings Want?,” 265.



5. Pages copied by hand from sacred Hindu-Balinese *lontar* (palm leaf) manuscripts, Miguel Covarrubias Papers, Manuscript Division. Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

documents. *Lontar*, Covarrubias wrote, “are masterpieces of the art of illustration, with miniature pictures incised with an iron style on blades of the *lontar* palm, the scratch filled in with a mixture of soot and oil. These manuscripts are in the form of books... with the leaves bound together by a cord that passes through a hole in the center of each leaf.”⁴⁸ They are illustrated with images of ancient Hindu gods, monsters, and other supernatural creatures⁴⁹ (fig. 5).

48. Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, 193.

49. Covarrubias clearly visited the Kirtya Liefrinck van der Tuuk, the colonial library of manuscripts in northern Bali that housed a collection of famous old *lontars* from various Balinese palaces. As Adrian Vickers has pointed out Covarrubias hired Balinese artists to make copies of the *lontar* for him (Adrian Vickers, personal communication).

Although Covarrubias most likely did not make copies of the *lontar* himself, he used these copies as a focus of his relationships with the priests. In order to understand the meaning of the ancient Javanese Kawi, the language that the sacred texts were written in and the significance of the images with which the texts were illustrated, Covarrubias needed to talk with knowledgeable Balinese who could translate both the words and the images for him. The manuscripts were not just of antiquarian interest to the Balinese; they are texts that many Balinese still live by today as they inscribe useful information about correct ritual procedures, the appropriate offering for specific needs, etc. Through his discussion of the texts and drawings with Balinese priests, Covarrubias would have been able to access an abundance of information about Balinese religious beliefs and practices and the vast spiritual world that animated so much of Balinese behavior, from mundane everyday activities to rituals and artistic productions in the realm of drama, dance, and painting.

Some drawings have in and of themselves what Sir James Frazer, in his opus on comparative religion, *The Golden Bough*, described as “sympathetic magic.” This quality of a drawing, Taussig explains in “What Do Drawings Want?,”⁵⁰ is its ineffable ability to take on the power of what it represents. Balinese magic is of two kinds: good or “right” magic (*penengen*) and “left” or evil magic. Some of the images and text on *lontar* were concerned with what Covarrubias called “black magic”—secret knowledge that was dangerous to the knower. Covarrubias wrote that when he first became interested in magic, “my Balinese friends tried to dissuade me, claiming that unending calamities would befall me if I persisted.”⁵¹ When someone brought him a manuscript for sale, “probably stolen,” he surmised, “obviously belonging to the magic lore. The very sight of it frightened them, and it was with difficulty that I induced my usually skeptical teacher of Balinese to help me translate the text.”⁵² Here is a striking example of the power of particular kinds of Balinese drawings to evoke very strong emotional reactions in Balinese viewers, who were clearly fearful of the *lontar* itself, not just the information it contained.

Covarrubias’s access to such *lontar* gave him an *entrée* into discussions with Balinese about dangerous topics and secret information. Through his conversations about the *lontar* and the magical knowledge they contained—both

50. Taussig, “What Do Drawings Want?,” 263.

51. Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, 341.

52. Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, 341.

good and bad—Covarrubias gained an understanding of a radically different universe that the Balinese inhabited than his own and that of his fellow expatriates living in Bali. Although these were topics tinged with a Western Orientalist fascination with the exotic world of magic and the supernatural, these topics were also of fundamental importance to the Balinese as well.

The drawings, examples of which Covarrubias reproduced in *Island of Bali*, helped him comprehend and then translate for the readers of his book the Balinese world of invisible spirits that inhabited their dramas, dances, rituals, and everyday lives—and thus, allowed him to better understand how the Balinese themselves make the invisible visible.

Sketches of Everyday Life

Some of the many sketches Covarrubias made of scenes of everyday life and people he encountered in the *banyar*, or community, where he and Rosa lived, such as the images of the ubiquitous, emaciated Balinese dogs that scavenged the area, verge on caricature, the genre of image-making that Covarrubias is perhaps best-known for, since it was as a caricaturist that he first made a name for himself in Mexico⁵³ and the United States.⁵⁴ While often denigrated as an art form, caricature has also been acknowledged for the skill a good caricaturist exhibits in capturing the essence of his subject. Thus, famous caricaturists, such as the Mexican printmaker José Guadalupe Posada or the French artist Honoré Daumier, are recognized for the political content and social commentary expressed by their caricatures.⁵⁵ The connection between the keen powers of observation necessary for someone to be a skillful caricaturist and those necessary for a good ethnographer has been noted with regard to Covarrubias.⁵⁶ His colleague, the renowned Mexican archaeologist Alfonso Caso, with whom

53. Jeffrey Belnap, “Caricaturing the Gringo Tourist: ‘Diego Rivera’s ‘Folkloric and Touristic Mexico’” and Miguel Covarrubias’s “Afternoon in Xochimilco,” in *Seeing High & Low: Representing Social Conflict in American Visual Culture*, Patricia Johnson, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 266–279.

54. Wendy Wick Reaves, *Celebrity Caricature in America* (New Haven & London: National Portrait Gallery/Smithsonian Institution in association with Yale University Press, 1998).

55. Victor S. Navsky, *The Art of Controversy: Political Cartoons and Their Enduring Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013).

56. Navarrete, *Miguel Covarrubias: retorno a los orígenes*, 35.

he collaborated on two volumes, noted with admiration that Covarrubias's skill as a caricaturist was based on a particular sensibility that allowed him to see the humor in a person, or animal or thing, thus revealing in his caricatures an essential element of that person, animal, or thing that other individuals may have perceived but could not articulate verbally or express visually.⁵⁷ However, in *Island of Bali* Covarrubias refrained from publishing those sketches that were most caricaturist in style—with the exception, perhaps, of his treatment of non-human subjects, for example, a sketch that accompanies his description of the typical Balinese pig, “an untamed descendant of the wild hog [that has] an absurd sagging back and a fat stomach that drags on the ground like a heavy bag suspended loosely from its bony hips and shoulders.”⁵⁸ His most biting caricature, that of a local Balinese *raja*, drawn, like the pig, in an exaggerated, unflattering (and decidedly humorous) style that emphasized his capacious girth, remained hidden away among his unpublished sketches (fig. 6). Other sketches of everyday life, such as sheaves of rice or stands of bamboo, not only represent individual studies that an artist might make of details that might later be included in a pen and ink drawing or painting, but were also sometimes accompanied with written comments and thus also function as illustrated field notes.

Finally, there are numerous sketches of men and women of various ages, wearing different headdresses or exhibiting different facial expressions and poses—seated, standing, bending down, or interacting with one another—a mother and child, young men and women, etc., that in their spontaneity capture and reveal telling non-verbal aspects of Balinese culture such as gesture and affect.

Island of Bali: An Ethnography Modernity and Artistic Change

The anthropological study of tourism and tourist art in Bali has become a sub-genre of Balinese ethnography.⁵⁹ By chance, because Covarrubias was able to make two trips to Bali separated by three years, he was able to observe changes

57. Alfonso Caso quoted in Elena Poniatowska, *Miguel Covarrubias: vida y mundos* (Mexico City: Biblioteca Era, 2004), 103-104.

58. Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, 41-42.

59. See Phil McKean, “Towards a Theoretical Analysis of Tourism: Economic Dualism and Cultural Involvement in Bali,” in *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism*, Valene Smith, ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 119-138; Picard, “Cultural Tourism”;



6. Miguel Covarrubias, *Sketch of Balinese raja*, Archivo Miguel Covarrubias. Sala de Archivos y Colecciones Especiales, Dirección de Bibliotecas, Universidad de las Américas, Puebla.

that were going on in Balinese society as a result of modernity and colonization. One of the lasting contributions of *Island of Bali*, as Vickers (2008) and art historian Yu-Chee Chong (2014) remind us,⁶⁰ is its importance as a record of a moment in Balinese history when the patronage for Balinese arts was shifting from the traditional Balinese royalty, who had engaged artists to decorate their temple complexes and palaces, to tourists, with their differing aesthetics and demands for more portable forms of art. Thus, it is also a study of the rise of the Balinese artist as hero rather than the artist as uncelebrated craftsman. However, it was also a highly ambivalent moment in the transformation of the arts themselves, as Covarrubias observed using the example of wood-carving:

Sinji Yamashita, *Bali Beyond: Explorations in the Anthropology of Tourism* (Oxford & New York: Bergham Books, 2003).

60. Adrian Vickers, "Foreword," in Miguel Covarrubias, *Island of Bali* (Hong Kong: Periplus Editions, 2015), i-xiv; Yu-Chee Chong, "Covarrubias and the Art of Bali," in *Covarrubias in Bali*. Adriana Williams and Yu-Chee Chong, eds. (Singapore & Paris: Editions Didier Millet, 2005), 50-61.

The art of wood-carving has suffered a curious transformation since our first visit to Bali in 1930. Then the majority of the objects carved in wood were made for utilitarian purposes: from carved doors and beams for houses [...] to little statues of deities and other ritual accessories [...] Travelers had started to buy Balinese carvings, however, and on our return to Bali three years later, the Balinese sculptors were turning out mass-production “objets d’art” for tourists.⁶¹

Covarrubias’s insights into this transformation are more than simply an elitist Western expression of “colonial nostalgia” for a by-gone art. He grounds his evaluation in a description of specific artists and the impact of the changes on their work that he observed between his first and second visits to Bali, as this description of the changes in the work of Gusti Ngurah Gedé, one of the best sculptors of South Bali, reveals:

“[Gusti Ngurah Gedé] could carve the most delicate motifs in hard wood with a precision and sureness envied by the younger sculptors. [Three years later] [h]e had started to make realistic statues of nude girls, bathing, combing their hair, or in the process of undressing, masterfully carved out of fine-grained white wood, figures that found ready sale among travellers.”⁶²

No doubt Gusti Gedé welcomed what was probably much needed cash from the sale of his sculptures, as the Balinese, too, had been affected by the Depression.

Nonetheless, Covarrubias’s concluding paragraph reveals an additional understanding of what was artistically at stake—and what was at risk of being lost—in this transformation:

This was perhaps the beginning of a new art in which the sculptor began working for a new public: tourists who had little appreciation of the technical perfection demanded by the Balinese, or foreign artists who preferred line and form to intricate ornamentation.⁶³

Within this account of the wood-carver, Covarrubias includes a detailed description of the technical acumen of Gusti Gedé, underscoring his understand-

61. Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, 187.

62. Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, 187.

63. Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, 187.

ing of the wood-carver's skill, as well as an appreciation of what was lost in the production of pieces for tourists.⁶⁴ The fact that Covarrubias was himself an artist afforded him an additional source of empathy and understanding of such changes that he conveyed to his readers.⁶⁵

Covarrubias as Visual Anthropologist

When the *Island of Bali* was published in 1937 the anthropologist Ruth Benedict—a colleague and close friend of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson—wrote an ambivalent review of the book. On the one hand, she said it was a “highly factual account of traditional forms of life in Bali [that] discusses cooking and cremation, lists the various dance forms, sets forth the calendar”—in other words, offered a detailed ethnographic description of Balinese culture—but, she says, it did not [analyze] the “effects of these institutions on human lives and it is not a study of individual Balinese.”⁶⁶ She concluded her review by saying “Perhaps now that he has described these necessary external formalities of its life, Covarrubias will write another volume on the individual conduct of life in Bali. I hope so, for he knows Bali.” A champion of women, she then adds, “And in that book, too, we can look forward to another collection of Rose Covarrubias’s photos, which are so precious and vivid a part of the narrative.”⁶⁷

As we know, Covarrubias never returned to Bali, nor did he write a second volume about the life of Balinese individuals. Nonetheless, his legacy as a visual anthropologist should be based on the rich and varied corpus of written and visual materials he and Rosa Covarrubias collected during his research in Bali, including Miguel’s extensive collection of sketches of individual Balinese men, women, children—and even dogs—that he produced during the 20 months he and Rosa lived in Bali as well as almost 90 minutes of black and white film that they never edited.⁶⁸ His drawings express more than just the

64. Covarrubias, *Island of Bali*, 188.

65. As Vickers (this volume) reminds us, Covarrubias himself was also affected by what he observed going on with the Balinese artists and his own work was subsequently different after he left Bali for the second time.

66. Ruth Benedict, “Earthly Paradise,” *The New Republic* (December 8, 1937): 139.

67. Benedict, “Earthly Paradise.”

68. The footage includes scenes of dance performances and rituals as well as scenes of everyday

external formalities of Balinese life. They not only visually record many non-verbal aspects of individual Balinese—how women carry baskets and offerings on their head (movements that Covarrubias drew with as much careful attention to posture and position as he did the movements of dancers), how mother's held their babies, the variety of facial hair and head-gear worn by men etc, but also a range of emotions Balinese expressed in different contexts—young men interacting with young women, Balinese performers during and after performing dances and rituals, while at rest, etc. These drawings exude what the art historian Focillon referred to in *The Life of Forms in Art* as the “living quality” of a work of art.⁶⁹

As anthropologist Anna Grimshaw persuasively argues, vision and visual methodologies have been central to the discipline of anthropology since its inception.⁷⁰ Many anthropologists in the United States today do not know Covarrubias's name or, if they do, they do not associate him with the field of cultural anthropology. However, that was not the case during his lifetime. During the 1930s and '40s the field of anthropology was much smaller and many anthropologists in the United States knew of his book *Island of Bali*, his maps for the Pageant of the Pacific at the Golden Gate International Exposition, and his work on Mesoamerican archaeology and anthropology. Covarrubias also made a lasting mark—quite literally—on the field of anthropology, when the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research asked Covarrubias to design its “Viking Fund” medal, a design that also served for many years as the logo for the New York-based foundation.⁷¹

There is no doubt, given anthropology's postcolonial critique of the type of “Primitivist” or “Orientalist” discourse expressed by Covarrubias, that many present-day anthropologists, art historians, and others find his images—espe-

life, including people planting and harvesting rice, women selling snacks, etc. As they did not edit this footage themselves during their lifetime, I have not included a discussion of it as part of Covarrubias's corpus of visual material even though this ethnographic film represents what we usually think of as “visual anthropology.” The footage was released in 1998 as “La isla de Bali,” directed by Miguel Covarrubias and edited by José Benítez Muro and César Parra.

69. Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, 110.

70. Anna Grimshaw, *The Ethnographer's Eye: Ways of Seeing in Modern Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

71. At the time the foundation was called the Viking Fund and was directed by Paul Fejos (John W. Dodds, *The Several Lives of Paul Fejos: A Hungarian-American Odyssey* [New York: The Wenner-Gren Foundation, 1973]). For information about Covarrubias and the Viking Fund medal see: <http://www.wennergren.org/history/other-programs/viking-fund-medal>.

cially his paintings and caricatures—either patronizing or stereotyping of non-Western people⁷² while other anthropologists might not appreciate his modernist style, thinking that it lacks ethnographic, i.e., realist, rigor. However, others of a more postmodernist bent might feel just the opposite, appreciating Covarrubias's synthesis of personal style and ethnographic insight, aware of the intellectual as well as artistic tension that exists between Covarrubias's experience as a modern artist to capture the “soul” of the Balinese people as he saw and felt it with his desire to accurately represent and record Balinese culture and society.⁷³

At the very least, Covarrubias's Balinese drawings, and in particular his sketches, deserve a second look—not simply for their artistic merits or stylistic influences, but also for the moments of Balinese everyday life that they encompass and the capacity they had to generate social interactions that lead to new understandings of Balinese culture. Although today we might wish that Covarrubias had not ignored the evidence of Western influence in his drawings and sketches of Balinese and Balinese culture—influences that he notes in passing in *Island of Bali*, such as the increasing presence of Western clothes, etc.—nonetheless, his corpus of drawings and sketches remains a valuable visual contribution to our understanding of Balinese culture at a moment when it was experiencing a transition to modernity; a transition that Covarrubias was able to record not only in words, but as importantly, in his drawings. ♣

72. Guzmán, “Miguel Covarrubias's World,” 19–48.

73. As Vickers points out, in Mexico today Covarrubias's reputation continues to elicit a wide range of opinions, from negative (Charity Mewburn, “Oil, Art and Politics: The Feminization of Mexico,” *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* xx, no. 72 [1998]: 73–133; Pollmann, 1990) to positive (Belnap, “Caricaturing the Gringo Tourist”).