

Beth Swords - Singapore and Indonesia, Summer 2014

The main academic reason for the trip was to gain understanding of how different cultures approach consumption and part of that, the birth of consumerism – I am researching whether a process like the Renaissance was something unique to Europe or part of an international trend. The way in which I intended to research this was through assessing the development of personal identity in relationship to objects whilst away in Indonesia and Singapore.

Ubud

Just outside of Ubud is the Temple of Besakih, by Mount Agung. This is a complex of temples built in the fourteenth century and came closest to what I considered to be ‘Renaissance’ in the way this was art and religion very much entwined. Tirta Gangga is a palace similarly in Eastern Bali. Although this is not centuries old and was only built in 1948, it still showed the need for decadence in a cultural, religious hub as in Western culture. The site was punctuated by extensive water fountains and was spread across several levels.

Nusa Lembongan

Here we looked at the smaller coconut plantations. It was remarked that throughout history coconuts had been at the heart of this area’s livelihoods – they used them for building materials, cloth, food, music etc. The families said how very little exploration was done into other islands to find replacement materials for coconuts because this was not needed. Where in the Renaissance times, progress made in the Arts was so conditioned by the discovery of new materials and their different properties, it seemed in Nusa, change in ‘culture’ and art was not conditioned by what was around them but what the conditions dictated of the people.

Lombok

We visited the Tetabatu village in which we met locals who told us they were still using the same agricultural techniques in rice paddies and tobacco fields as generations before them. They spoke of how this was of cultural value as well in that it dictated the tools they used. In turns, these tools had become items that they used to decorate their houses.

Singapore

Singapore, when looking at globalisation, really showed the importance of trade in forming a city. Where in the Renaissance times it was the exchange of the goods (particularly from the Ottoman Empire) that created an enriching and development of culture, Singapore provides a modern day equivalent. The authorities replicated the London Eye, Paris’ Eiffel Tower, Venice’s canals and New York’s Empire State almost exactly. This was done to attract tourism – the logic being London has tourists, London has the London Eye, we must have the London Eye. This shows how globalisation almost sets a cultural precedent and shows how a drive for profit commercialises culture (i.e. how culture is shaped to help accrue profit from tourists), rather than it being an organic phenomenon.