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# Master craftsman

Indonesian fashion designer who was 33 before he could speak has talents and achievements rivaled only by his humility

By **ARUNA HARJANI** in Jakarta  
For *China Daily Asia Weekly*

**T**railblazing Indonesian fashion designer Harry Darsono is a multifaceted genius. He is a passionate painter, musician, sculptor, architect, academic, philanthropist and businessman — all rolled into a larger-than-life but affable personality.

He makes light of all his achievements with characteristic humility. He is generous in acknowledging his “tribute to Indonesian design, art and high fashion” from which he continues to draw inspiration.

Last year, Darsono won much acclaim when he showcased his “looks” in Jakarta in October. The show also featured elegant costumes that he made for various theatrical performances, including for *The Phantom of the Opera*.

At one point, Darsono was hand-stitching all the embroidery for the artists’ costumes, which he said was “a form of therapy”.

When he unveiled his “musical couture” last year, Darsono noted that he had personally hand-painted the designs on handwoven silks made in Garut, West Java. The event was part of the Harry Darsono Foundation’s effort to raise money to help people with special needs.

Reflecting the fine meld of traditional and contemporary inspirations that underpin his work, the Jakarta show featured a dance performance by a native Borneo tribe, as well as ballerinas from the South Korean capital Seoul. There was also a performance featuring a piano designed exclusively by Darsono.

Over the years, connoisseurs of the master designer’s works have ensured many sold-out fashion shows in Asian locations such as Beijing, Shanghai, Seoul and Kyoto. Darsono has also showcased works that he personally hand-painted on handwoven pure silk.

His events offer a different experience from regular fashion shows, due to the stimulative mix of visuals, music and color themes. In Darsono’s view, the rich harmonies are much like that of the harp — the first instrument he played.

Darsono’s flair is evident in the “art-to-wear” designs that he began crafting from his early 20s. They combine his love for travel and the arts, and his fascination for Indonesia’s traditional music.

Many attribute the success of Darsono’s works to the fact that his haute couture is not about blindly

following trends — he ensures his creations remain innovative and contemporary at the same time.

One of eight children, Darsono was born prematurely. In his early years, the acclaimed designer was seen as a “problem child” with “aggressive and destructive tendencies”.

This was because he had Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, or ADHD. He was diagnosed when he was 6 years old.

Darsono recalled: “I was sent to different schools in Surabaya (province) and I have been expelled many times. I was very aggressive and I couldn’t focus on the blackboard.”

Since Darsono could not speak, he had to be homeschooled for a while — before being sent to a school for the deaf and mute.

“There I learned how to communicate with sign language and read people’s faces. So when I wanted to eat cakes and pastries, I had to sketch them very fast and show it.” Soon, his sketches improved.

But he got a lucky break when his uncle, who was the director of the mental hospital in Surabaya, went to Europe to do his doctorate at Sorbonne University.

Darsono’s mother, who also wanted to study psychiatry to help her ADHD-afflicted son, went to Europe with her brother. Eventually she became a lecturer in psychiatry at England’s University of Sussex. Darsono’s father, HS Soedarsono, a successful businessman who owned a clove cigarettes manufacturer, died at just 35.

Darsono was initially placed in a hostel. “I couldn’t sleep, so every night I played an instrument. I played the *gamelan*, which of course disturbed the sleep of the other kids... I was asked to leave the school once again.”

His mother then decided to rent a house on the outskirts of Paris where the houses were a good distance from each other, “so that whenever I would scream nobody would be disturbed”.

During the week, however, the young Darsono had the company of seven other children who had the same problems. Under the same roof were seven therapists, two psychologists, two psychiatrists, his uncle and housekeepers.

“Music was used as one of the therapies. I played the cello, harp and piano,” Darsono recalled.

The therapies involved carving, and as part of this, Darsono’s parents hired carpenters to teach him. “One day the therapists wrapped a silk cocoon on my palm. For three min-



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utes I was hypnotized by the feel of it.”

From then on, Darsono learned to spin the yarn. “It was my grand entrance to becoming a textile artist.” He also learned how to dye the yarn.

“I also learned stitching. I didn’t have a difficult time inserting the thread into the needle, which the other children in the house couldn’t do so easily. I stitched in diagonal lines.”

As Darsono became a teenager, it was a frustrating period as he still could not speak.

“My brain was working out (the words) and I needed to speak out but I couldn’t. I wanted to tell everyone a lot of things, but everything was running too fast in my brain. I tried to kill myself four times because I couldn’t express myself,” he said.

During this time, he used music to calm his mind. “I made pianos. I also made a lot of sketches and this museum was one of them.” The Harry Darsono Museum in Jakarta displays many of his creations.

Darsono also continued his studies in art and design in Paris. “I took four majors, sculpture, painting, carving, jewelry and textile in six years, including a doctorate degree.”

Not content with that, Darsono managed to attend internships in six fashion houses. “During the 1970s, the fashion houses never sold ready-to-wear, everything was made to measure. I met women who were well-known celebrities.”

Darsono would embroider the names of the owner of the outfits, along with his own initials, inside the pockets. “I didn’t know that 41 years later I could trace the dresses. Later I hired agents to find them.”

Today, he has some of the dresses displayed in his museum.

When he was 21, Darsono met a Chinese woman who was an artist and modeled for his painting in Shanghai. They fell in love, with Darsono using sign language to woo her before eventually marrying her.

Until the age of 33 — while Darsono was studying for his doctorate in psychology and philosophy at Christ Church college, Oxford University — he could not speak.

One of his brothers, a lecturer at the Royal Academy of Music in the United Kingdom, advised him to start singing so he could eventually start talking.

After two years of practice, Darsono could finally speak — and in seven languages.

He put his studies into practice by writing 70 books on philosophy and history in French.

“I taught at the London College of Fashion. I finally had to go back to Indonesia to introduce myself. The governor asked me to introduce the word ‘couture.’”

Thus began Darsono’s journey in the Indonesian fashion scene.

It was the then Indonesian president, Megawati Sukarnoputri, who suggested that Darsono set up a museum for his works. When he wanted to establish the museum, he needed an insurance company but could not immediately find one.

“Prince Andrew, who visited my place, wanted me to promote higher education in the UK. I told him I needed help to insure my pieces in the museum — and he helped me hire an insurance company.”

## BIO

### Harry Darsono

Head, Harry Darsono Foundation, Museum Harry Darsono

#### Career milestones:

Present: Head, Harry Darsono Foundation, Museum Harry Darsono

1982: Second PhD, Christ Church, Oxford University

1968-73: Four majors, first PhD, Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Paris, France

1959-67: Homeschooling, Paris

1959: The School for Deaf and Mute, Surabaya, Indonesia

#### Quick takes:

**How did you deal with your intent to end your life at a young age?**

By the time I was 32, I had tried to end my life four times, because I couldn’t speak. My parents had friends, an English couple, who lived in New Delhi. They gave me a ticket to go there, took me to a small village in the Himalayas, and gave me a canvas to paint. I painted for a year.

**What is your advice to the younger generation?**

Learn from your mistakes and reform. Every day is a new day. You are what you say. The sharpest element in your body is your tongue.

**What is your notion of art?**

A human being is a living piece of art. Without women, fashion is considered nothing.

**What pets do you own?**

Tigers. I started with a cub and now there are 22 of them.

**Besides textiles, what else do you design?**

Hand phones, dresses, stages, calendars, trains and cutlery.

**Date of birth:** March 15, 1950

Darsono gives a personal guided tour for the visitors to his three-story museum in Jakarta.

The museum holds collections that have been in his family for generations and gifts from different celebrities across the world. These gifts are not surprising, considering that he has dressed celebrities as varied as Britain’s Princess Diana and Thailand’s Queen Sirikit.

Unlike other museums, Darsono allows his guests to “touch and feel” his collections. The museum also showcases paintings, carvings and stitch works created by Darsono from the age of 13.

He donates all profits from the museum to the Harry Darsono Foundation, which was established in 1979 and helps to run 16 care centers at the moment.

Darsono has a simple explanation for his creative success: “I don’t deal with religion, politics or race, I just deal with humanity.”