

# Batik: Spectacular Textiles of Java

In 2009 UNESCO named Indonesian batik a masterpiece of the 'Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity'. This designation reflects UNESCO's efforts to move beyond the protection of ancient monuments and encourage living artistic traditions that have been passed down for generations. UNESCO's guidelines emphasize that promoting intangible cultural heritage is "an important factor in maintaining cultural diversity in the face of growing globalization."

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INDONESIAN BATIK is an interesting subject to explore in this context, because the richness of the art form is precisely a result of a type of globalization. Java was long a crossroads for many cultures – from the early Hindu and Buddhist kingdoms of Central Java to the later Muslim sultanates across the island, from communities of Chinese emigrants to colonial European residents. The art of batik is thus not a 'pure product', but the result of the meetings of different groups and the mingling of ideas, motifs, and symbols.

The exhibition *Batik: Spectacular Textiles of Java*, at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, features a number of exceptional textiles. The batiks, drawn from the collection of Joan and M. Glenn Vinson, Jr., give a glimpse of the remarkable stylistic diversity and hybrid nature of batik production on Java. Examples from the Central Javanese cities of Yogyakarta and Surakarta are colored with natural brown and blue dyes and display the abstracted patterns typical of the region. In contrast, textiles produced along the north coast often have a broader palette of both natural and chemical dyes and bear patterns echoing inspiration from a wide range of cultures.

No one knows when or where people first began ornamenting textiles by using wax to resist the penetration of dyes. The method was practiced in ancient Egypt and many parts of Asia. But it is on the island of Java that the technique has reached the highest level of complexity. The origins of batik in Indonesia are obscure. Textual references from the 12th to the 14th centuries describe colored and patterned cloths, but we cannot be certain if the wax resist technique was used to produce them. One theory suggests that the practice of hand drawn, natural dyed batik textiles – like those still made today – developed during the early 17th century in the courts of Central Java. From there the tradition spread to the north coast, where European, Indo-European, Chinese and Arab communities eventually became involved in the manufacture of textiles.

An alternate theory is suggested by the scholar Rens Heringa, who posits that batik may have initially developed along the north coast, and then spread to the courts of Central Java and coastal urban trading centers. She has proposed that the hand woven and batik patterned cloths of the Kerek region of East Java are a direct descendant of this earliest north coast style of batik production.

One remarkable textile in the Vinson collection seems to confirm Heringa's theories about the early roots of north coast batik. It is a large hand woven cotton cloth, patterned with wax resist, dyed with indigo, and embellished with gold (fig. 1). Carbon dating reveals a date of approximately 1675-1750, making it one of the earliest surviving examples of Indonesian batik. The textile was collected on the southeast coast of Sumatra, but scholars believe it may have been produced along the north coast of Java, perhaps in the city of Cirebon. The textile's motifs suggest that it was exported to Sumatra for a Chinese patron.

Many aspects of the cloth are unusual: its size, the fact that the wax resist was only applied to one side of the textile, and the combination of motifs. The textile's unusually large dimensions (approx. 1.7 x 2.7 meters) suggest that it was not used as a garment, but instead displayed in a ceremonial context. Rows of squares divided diagonally into smaller triangles stretch across the entire cloth. Within the triangles are dozens of motifs. Among the easily recognizable designs are Chinese decorative motifs like butterflies, bats, bags of money, and flowers, as well as abstract patterns such as those used in Central Javanese batik.



Fig. 1: Ceremonial cloth (detail), approx. 1675-1750. Indonesia; probably Java. Cotton with gold. Lent by Joan and M. Glenn Vinson, Jr.  
Fig. 2: Sarong, approx. 1920, by Nyonya Oey Kok Sing (1896-1966) Indonesia; Pekalongan, Java. Cotton. Lent by Joan and M. Glenn Vinson, Jr.  
Fig. 3: (Kain panjang) Lower garment, early 1900s. Indonesia; Lasem, Kudus, and Surakarta, Java. Cotton. Lent by Joan and M. Glenn Vinson, Jr.

The other textiles in the exhibition date to a later period, from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. They also display an interesting hybridity and reflect the active borrowing of patterns between different regions of Java, and in some cases between competing batik workshops.

A sarong made in the 1920s is decorated with peacocks (fig. 2). The designs are dyed in green, light blue, and red against a white background. One bird stands under dangling wisteria blossoms, while the other perches upon the plant's woody vine. More than one sarong showing a close variation on this pattern is known. The earliest example was signed by Eliza van Zuylen, a woman of mixed Indonesian-Dutch heritage, who established one of the most successful batik workshops in Pekalongan. Batik designers of European heritage were among the first artists to sign their names to textiles, in part to try to prevent their designs from being copied. This evidently did not always succeed, as the peacock batik in the Vinson collection, remarkably similar to the van Zuylen example, bears the signature of an Indonesian Chinese entrepreneur, Oey Kok Sing.

Scholars have described the peacock pattern of this batik as being inspired by the Art Nouveau movement, and in particular by the illustrations of the British artist Aubrey Beardsley. Both peacocks and wisteria were widespread motifs in European and American art in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Whistler's Peacock Room (Freer Gallery of Art) or Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer's Wisteria Dining Room (Metropolitan Museum of Art) are indications of the use of these subjects in large-scale architectural contexts.

The design of this peacock sarong does have similarities to Art Nouveau illustrations, especially the emphasis on sinuous line. But it also bears resemblance to Japanese woodblock prints and bird-and-flower paintings, from which artists like Beardsley were drawing inspiration. Thus the Vinson peacock batik is most likely the result of a Chinese batik maker copying a pattern from an Indo-European batik designer who may have been looking at the work of European artists, who in turn were inspired by Japanese prints and paintings.

A third batik in the Vinson collection is a textile of the type known as a *tiga negeri* or 'three-cities' batik (fig. 3). It is thus named because the cloth was waxed and dyed in three locations, each famous for the production of a certain color of dye. Red lotus plants and parrots seem to float on the surface of the cloth. The lotus is an auspicious symbol in Indic religious contexts, as well as in Chinese iconography. Here the twisting, asymmetrical plants seem to echo the forms of 'trees-of-life' found on South Asian *palampore* textiles, which were once traded to Indonesia.



The lotuses on this *tiga negeri* batik are depicted against a dense background pattern of zigzagging chevrons (a design similar to certain Ottoman textiles). Five different patterns fill the diagonal bands, all dyed in the deep brown associated with the Central Javanese city of Surakarta and the indigo of the north coast city of Kudus. Some bands are filled with floral motifs, but others show variations on the *parang* or knife pattern, well known in Central Java.

The batiks of Java represent a remarkable artistic tradition, one that emerged from a melting pot of cultures. These textiles are the result of individuals of different regional and ethnic backgrounds creating art for a wide range of clientele. While these textiles can be admired as artworks of extraordinary artistic skill, they can also be appreciated as hybrid cultural products and signs of global interconnectivity.

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