

Batik: Design, Style and History

Fiona Kerlogue

Thames and Hudson 2004

A book review by [Danny Yee](http://dannyreviews.com/) © 2007 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

Batik: Design, Style and History offers an introduction to Indonesian *batik* styles and their history. There are chapters on the origins and early history of batik, different regional traditions, motifs and their meanings, modern history and influences, batik as costume, and batik in art. The text takes up only thirty pages, however, with most of the space devoted to illustrative photographs.

The survey of regions and motifs touches on Madura and Sumatra and centres across Java, and looks at some common Javanese, Chinese and Malay motifs.

"In the Kerek district near Tuban in northeastern Java, some batik production continues much as it must have done in previous centuries. Batik is drawn on cloth woven in the village using thread handspun from locally grown cotton. The dyeing is normally undertaken only by women of mature years who have inherited the specialist knowledge required. The designs of Kerek batik are produced using two main colours, traditionally made from indigo (for blue), which is still grown locally, and *mengkudu* (for red), the latter purchased in the market. Nowadays aniline dyes are used for much of the dyeing, though the use of natural dyes is being revived."

The extensive array of photographs of batik pieces and details from batik pieces does a great job illustrating this survey.

A brief historical account places batik in the broader context of Indonesian history, covering Dutch and Japanese influences, notable Eurasian designers, the national Batik Indonesia style, and so forth. There's no treatment of the batik production process as such, but Kerlogue touches on supply problems, the role of cooperatives and Chinese capital, and other economic issues.

"During World War II the supply of raw materials such as cambric was again disrupted. The period of Japanese

occupation from 1942 to 1945 adversely affected both the market for, and the production of, European-style batik. Anti-European feelings were encouraged and many Indo-European were interned, including a number of families which had run batik manufactories on the north coast. Although this marked the end of the Indo-European batik enterprises, the styles which these families had pioneered were taken over by Chinese entrepreneurs. This period also saw the emergence of the so-called '*batik Jawa Hokokai*', an extremely intricate ornamental style of batik, with new colour combinations inspired by Japanese taste and commissioned by wealthy Japanese connoisseurs of batik."

The chapter on batik as costume describes the traditional forms — sarung, kain panjang, selendang, dodot — and their role in marking status, touching briefly on modern developments. The chapter on batik in art focuses on 'batik painting', a modern form which took off in the 1970s.

Most of the photographs are of items from the "Rudolf G. Smend" collection, but some other collections are drawn on as well. The captions are brief but offer broader information and not just item descriptions.

"Patterns of flowers arranged asymmetrically over the ground are common in batiks from Sumatra or intended for the Sumatran market. The design is known as '*bunga jatuh*' or '*bunga bertabur*' (fallen or scattered flowers). Flowers are used in a variety of purification ceremonies in Malay Sumatra, for example when a bride is bathed in an infusion of flower petals the night before her marriage. The use of floral motifs is associated with the evanescent power of the perfume. *Tulis*, cotton. 92 x 218 cm. (Kerlogue collection)"

As well as a bibliography and index, there's a glossary and a list of museums with significant batik collections.

Batik: Design, Style and History is a nicely put together volume, with a good balance between text and photographs. It should work well for anyone wanting an introduction to Indonesian batik, from tourists to students of textiles.

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