

Batik

Traces through time

Batik Collections
in the National Museum
– Náprstek Museum

Fiona Kerlogue

With contributions by Dagmar Pospíšilová



**NATIONAL
MUSEUM**

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EDITIO MONOGRAPHICA
MUSEI NATIONALIS PRAGAE

NUM. 27





Studio photograph of a young woman from Java, with the handwritten date 1906 on the reverse. She may have been a dancer. Although she is wearing batik, the garment is not typical (Náprstek Museum Library, Collection of Historical Photographs, 183.86).

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This publication was financially supported by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic (DKRVO 2019–2023/19.I.c, National Museum, 00023272)

Reviewed by
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ISBN 978-80-7036-673-8 (print)
ISBN 978-80-7036-679-0 (pdf)

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Acknowledgements

Genevieve Duggan
Akram Dweikat
Annabel Gallop
Abdul Hamid
Ivana Lhotová
Ahmed Wahid Mansour
Stefanus Sandi
Martin Sobotka
Adriana Stříbrná
Azmiah Edi Sunarto
Hani Winotosastro
Maria Wronska-Friend

Introduction

The batik of Indonesia is rightly world famous. In Java the craft reached the pinnacle of accomplishment, and the batik of the court was imbued with a spiritual significance unparalleled in the world of surface-decorated textiles. These highly prized cloths are found in museum collections all over the world.

The batik collection in the Náprstek Museum comprises more than 175 items. Many were acquired as donations; others were sold to the Museum by individuals. A few came from an antique shop, and some were transferred from other institutions. While not everything offered was accepted, it is fair to say that there was for the most part no systematic rationale behind the development of the collection. It grew over the years not with the idea of assembling a representative selection of batiks from the various regions of Java or of different designs or types, but rather of accepting those items which were available and interesting. As with many other museums, there is a degree of serendipity about what was gathered, and much depended on the choices made by the original collectors. In this respect, the Náprstek has been lucky; the collectors' tastes and what took the fancy of each individual varied widely, with the result that the collection gives a good sense of the range of batiks made in Java in the late 19th and the 20th century.

As well as completed cloths, there are samples showing the stages in the making of batik, indicating that visitors to Indonesia were often captivated as much by the process itself as by the finished products. The knowledge and skill required to make these wonderful works of artistry cannot be overstated, but the makers are seldom given credit and their names are rarely, if ever, recorded. Not until the last quarter of the 19th century did Indo-European makers begin to sign their works, and even then, the names inscribed on batiks were generally those of the workshop rather than the actual maker.

Making batik is a complex process. First, the base cloth must be soaked in starch, beaten smooth and dried in the sun before it is ready to be waxed. The act of drawing on the wax by hand requires concentration, balance, calm, and a total synchronisation of the body with the materials. The craftswoman must adjust her position and movements to the flow of wax without thinking. The temperature must be exactly right; if too hot the wax will spill over the cloth, if too cold it will not flow at all. She may need to adjust the flame of the stove or blow into the spout of the *canting* to ensure that the wax falls in precisely the right quantity in precisely the right place. Her posture must also be right; if it is not, or if she loses concentration, the wax will spill. It is not surprising that the waxing of batik has been likened to the act of meditation, when all distractions recede.

Different mixtures of wax are used for different parts of the process. All sorts of resins and animal fats in various proportions were once included with beeswax; makers often kept their recipes secret. Usually the broad outlines of the design are drawn first, then the filling patterns, first within the motifs (*isen pola*), then in the background (*isen latar*). An expert batik artist needs no pencil lines to follow on the cloth but can draw the wax onto the surface of the cloth in perfect straight lines, perfect circles, in zig-zags or any manner of curve at will.

Dyeing with natural materials is an equally complex art, using ingredients that were once gathered in the countryside, grown in the nearby fields, or bought in the market. Unless she had access to these materials and knew how to balance the quantities of each ingredient in the mordant or dye mixture and the method and length of time needed at each stage of the process, a maker was dependent on the workshop owner, who had access to both the knowledge and the ingredients required.

UNESCO listing

In 2009, Indonesian batik was inscribed on the UNESCO 'Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity'. The nomination papers emphasised that the knowledge of batik-making has been passed down the generations, that patterns and motifs possess deep symbolism, and that batik is practised across eighteen provinces of Indonesia. Each of these ideas is open to some debate. Quite how long-standing the batik tradition is in Indonesia will probably never be known, and though carbon dating suggests that examples may survive from as early as the 15th century, exactly where they were made remains uncertain. An examination of the more solid evidence is presented in this volume, along with a discussion of how and why the quality of batik reached such heights in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The symbolism of batik patterns and motifs has been quite widely assumed, though some interpretations emanating from western commentators should be treated with caution. As batik spread to new areas and over time, some meanings have changed, and much contemporary batik is purely commercial. The establishment of batik production across Indonesia by the government is a relatively recent phenomenon.

In 2011 the World Batik Summit was held in Jakarta from 28 September to 2 October, a huge event with a trade fair, an international conference, receptions and a fashion show, as well as tours of museums for participants. Indonesia takes her batik seriously, both in terms of national identity (supported, for example, by an annual official 'batik day') and, perhaps more importantly, in terms of its potential contribution to the creative economy. An associated publication by the then president's wife celebrated the role batik had played in her life and presented areas where hand-made batik was still being produced (Yudhoyono 2010). In some of these places, however, working practices and conditions still leave much to be desired, while in others the continuation of the practice still seems to hang by a thread. Competition from cheap machine-produced imitation batik puts enormous pressure on producers of the genuine article. And in the 21st century the role of batik is being challenged by a plethora of ideas, imagery, styles and lifestyles from the rest of the world. Fashion and textiles from overseas will always hold a fascination, with their evocation of other worlds, exciting and attractive precisely because they are different. The strength of batik lies in its adaptability, proved over the centuries: it can respond to and draw on those outside influences and make them its own.

A note on orthography

The standard way of spelling Indonesian words has changed several times. In 1901 the Dutch introduced a standardised system of spelling. In 1947, following the end of the Dutch colonial period, changes were introduced by the new Indonesian republic. In 1972 further changes were made. In this volume modern spelling has been followed for the most part, except when quoting from historical documents and publications, in which case the spellings recognised at the time are used.

Technique and types

The term 'batik' refers to the patterning of cloth using a wax resist, applied when the wax is hot. When the wax cools it forms a barrier which prevents the dye from penetrating the cloth. Since the 19th century, visitors to Java from Europe and America have been fascinated by this method of producing patterns on cloth, in their eyes novel and exotic and sometimes 'unique'. Joza Šrogl, who between 1900 and 1920 created one of the largest batik collections in the Náprstek Museum, observed the process, studied the available literature on the subject, and described it in a letter he wrote to his sister in January 1901:

The Javanese women who are employed in batik-making use a small tool, called a canting, to execute the wax drawings. It consists of a vessel similar to a little boat that narrows into a thin curved spout, through which the heated and liquid wax is able to gradually flow. The brass vessel is attached to a short wooden handle. It is of course necessary to draw the pattern with a pencil beforehand, and this is then traced precisely on the other side, with the fabric held against the light. Only then does the batik process start.

The woman making the batik fills the canting with hot wax and uses it to cover all those parts of the material that are not to be affected by the first dyeing. To do this she uses cantings with different-sized spouts; for thin lines it is best to use a vessel with a narrow spout, while to cover large surfaces she uses either a canting with a wide spout or she exchanges it for a brush dipped in wax. In order to create several parallel lines, cantings with two or three spouts are used.



Figure 1
Women at work in a corner of a batik workshop. A wax stove can be seen on the left, and the batiks being waxed are draped over bamboo frames, *gawangan*. Souvenir photograph bought in Java by Josef Kořenský in 1900 (Náprstek Museum Library, Collection of Historical photographs, 193.312).

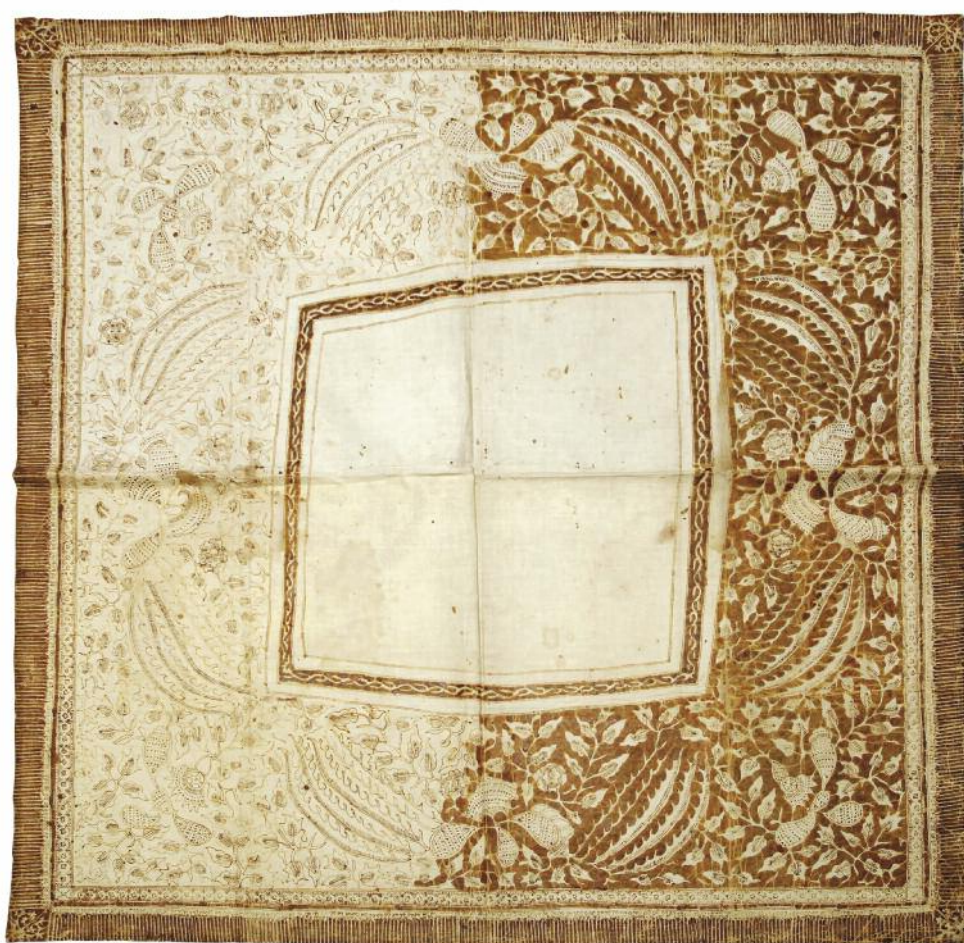


Figure 2

Partly worked batik headcloth, *iket kepala*, showing the early stages of the process. On the left the fine lines of the pattern have been drawn in wax; on the right the background has next been filled with wax to protect the cloth from the dye (A 11334).

Once the fabric has been covered with wax on both sides, the dyeing takes place. The dominant colour is blue, from indigo, red, from *mangkudu* (*Morinda citrifolia*)¹ and brown, from *soga* (*Peltophorum ferrugineum*).² After the first dyeing, the layer of wax is removed by soaking the fabric in hot water, which reveals the as yet undyed white area of the fabric. This is then subjected in the same way to another dye; by mixing them it is possible to obtain a more complex degree of colouration, so by overlaying indigo on *mangkudu* a black colour is achieved and so on.³

Several examples in the Náprstek collections illustrate stages in the manufacture of batik. In one (Figure 2) the first waxings have been carried out on a headcloth; one side shows the initial drawing of fine lines, while the other shows the additional *tembok* process, in which the

1 *Mengkudu* or *mangkudu* is *Morinda citrifolia* or *Morinda tinctoria* Roxb., a form of Rubiaceae, which grows wild and is also cultivated in Indonesia. The bark of the root contains two colouring agents: the yellow morindin and the red morindone, though it is the latter for which it is chiefly used. For dyeing red, the chopped bark is mixed with *jirek*, from the shrub *Symplocos fasciculata* Zoll., which is found in the mountains of West Java. *Jirek* bark contains aluminum compounds and can act as a mordant in the same way as alum (Jasper and Pirngadie 1916: 39).

2 *Soga* is *Peltophorum pterocarpum*, a tree also referred to as *soga djambal*. The bark was used for brown. Many other ingredients were used in producing the range of browns and yellows used in Java.

3 National Museum – Náprstek Museum, Archive, ar. J. Šrogl, box 1, Letter from Joza Šrogl to Růžena Lhotová, Surabaya, 12 January 1901.



Figure 3

Partly worked batik *sarung* after the waxing of the design and background. The backgrounds of alternate *tumpal* triangles in the *kepala* (head) have been waxed. The *badan* (body) has a diagonal *lereng* design (A 11335).

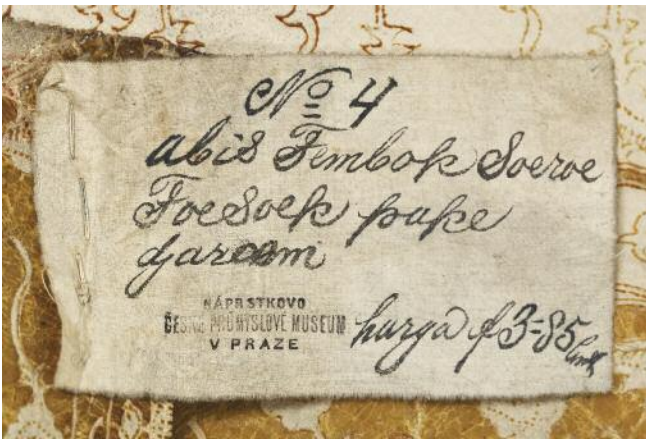


Figure 4

Label indicating that after waxing the background holes are pricked in the wax, which will produce dark dots in the finished work where the dye has penetrated (A 11335).

background has been filled with additional wax so that eventually the pattern will be set against a white ground. A second example (Figure 3) is of a *sarung*, or skirt cloth, showing both the fine lines of the drawing and the darker parts where the larger areas to be reserved from the dye have been covered with wax. This sample carries a label reading 'No. 4 *Abis tembok soeroe Toesoek pake djaroen*', which can be translated as 'After being covered with wax, it is to be pierced with a needle' (Figure 4). This piercing of the wax layer protecting the cloth from the dye would result in dark stipples in the background in the places where the dye had been allowed to penetrate, a technique usually, but not exclusively, associated with Cirebon and Indramayu on the north coast of Java (Abdurahman 1987: 6). The label indicates a price of 3.85 florins.



Figure 5

Partly worked batik *sarung* after the waxing of the design and background and the first immersion, which was in this case in an indigo dyebath. Cracks in the wax show where the cloth has been folded (A 11336).



Figure 6

Label indicating that after the indigo dyebath those parts which are to remain blue are covered with wax. The cloth was probably then to be immersed in a brown *soga* dyebath (A 11336).

A third sample cloth (Figure 5) shows a similar *sarung* after its first, indigo blue dye bath. The cloth appears to have been folded, probably so that it could be immersed in the dye bath, resulting in cracks in the wax. The attached label reads: 'No 11 *abis tjelup boeat biroe di tembok toetoepl lagi yang buat biroe*', or 'After the blue dyeing, the parts to be blue are again covered with wax' (Figure 6). The price is 5 florins 60 cents. These three examples probably date from the late 19th or very early 20th century.

Šrogl was also aware of batiks in which the wax patterning was printed onto the cloth (Figure 7). In a letter to his sister, he explained that the difference could be seen in the irregularity of



Figure 7
A metal stamp, *canting cap*, of the *truntum* design, resting on a cloth with the same stamped design. The wax would have been applied to both faces of the cloth (Private collection).



Figure 8
Detail of a headcloth, *iket kepala*, in which the pattern has been achieved by stamping a pattern in wax before the blue dye bath. Where the wax from two imprints meets there is irregularity and overlap in the design (A27210).

the pattern, suggesting that evidence of the process could be seen best where the lines did not match up during printing. 'Follow one of the long lines,' he wrote, 'and you'll see it straight away.'⁴ With some cloths the pattern was achieved entirely using printing stamps, whereas with others there was a combination of stamping and hand-drawn batik. The use of printing stamps is particularly evident where the lines overlap at places where border patterns meet (Figure 8).

Joza Šrogl also wrote about the styles of clothing made using batik:

Batik made in this way are generally used on Java and serve locals of both sexes as clothing. Both men and women dress the lower halves of their bodies with a long piece of fabric known as a *kain pandjang* and a sarong; men use a *kain kapala* to cover their heads, while women from the Javanese interior cover their breasts in a *kemben* and also wear a *slendang*, similar to a shawl.⁵

The collection in the Náprstek Museum includes examples of all these types of batik garment used in Java in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Headcloths

In the early 20th century, the man's headcloth, commonly called *iket kepala* or *udeng*, was everywhere to be seen. Harriet Ponder, writing in the 1930s, remarked on 'the batik headdress, which the Javanese wears so constantly that he probably forgets it does not grow on his head' (1990 [1942]: 36). These headcloths are more or less a metre square. The size was determined by the width of the cloth normally sold in the market for batik work; this was usually one *katju* wide, that is, between 105 and 110 centimetres. The cloth was measured by folding it diagonally across the width and then tearing it across the grain from selvedge to selvedge to form a square (Figure 9). Folding these cloths into a headdress to be worn is not easy, and in the early 20th century most country districts had a shop or showroom where customers could choose from a range of designs on display. The chosen piece would then be made up by a milliner into a turban-like cap, folded and formed on a stiff muslin base, in the style requested by the customer. Often, especially in Madura, they were made of half the cloth, cut across diagonally from one corner to another, with the resulting headdress being smaller and more tight-fitting than previous models. In the towns and markets, headcloths could be bought ready-wrapped and lined; this was known as a *blangkon* (ibid.: 79).

In the centrefield of many headcloths is a square, or *tengahan*, sometimes of one colour, such as blue, green or red, sometimes undyed (Figure 10). These cloths are known as *iket tengahan*. Along the inner edges of the *tengahan* there are often decorative motifs, *cemukiran*, projecting into the space at a slant, often hooked or curved at the end. All the headcloths in the Náprstek collection have such a square at the centre, either with its sides parallel to the edges of the cloth, or turned on its side diagonally. A headcloth without a *tengahan*, in which the design covers the whole of the centrefield, is referred to as *iket byur*. Such cloths were popular in Yogyakarta, especially with older men. Headcloths with a white *tengahan* were worn by both old and young; those with a coloured centre were often worn by young men. In Surakarta, a city also referred to as Solo, boys who had just been circumcised often wore a headcloth with a yellow centre (Figure 11). The surrounding border is called a *pengada* or *kemada*.

4 National Museum – Náprstek Museum, Archive, ar. J. Šrogl, box 1, Letter from Joza Šrogl to Karel Šrogl, Weltevreden, 5 May 1923.

5 National Museum – Náprstek Museum, Archive, ar. J. Šrogl, box 1, Letter from Joza Šrogl to Karel Šrogl, Surabaya, 12 January 1901.



Figure 9
 Postcard showing a young Javanese man binding his headcloth, a process which was clearly sufficiently fascinating to foreign visitors for a postcard to be produced. Circa 1920 (Private collection).



Figure 10
 In this man's headcloth, *iket kepala*, the central square *tengahan* is placed at an angle to the sides of the cloth. The *badan* is dominated by *soga* brown, with motifs of two-footed creatures in the main field and rows of rudimentary *cemukiran* around the inner edge of the *tengahan* (A11317).