

The Art of Batik: Part I

by Diane Day, CPF

The precise origins of the batik process are lost to history. Through the centuries, people have used not only wax but rice paste and even mud to make these dye-resistant patterns on cloth.

Evidence of early examples have been found from the Far East up through Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. It is most likely that the craft spread along the caravan route. The origin of the craft may be in doubt, but the word “batik” is of Indonesian origin, where the batik process developed into a great art form.

First, a rectangular piece of cotton or silk is selected. A pattern is drawn on the fabric. The areas that will remain the original color of the cloth are then covered with hot liquid wax. The wax seeps into the cloth, making it dye-resistant.

The cloth is then placed in a tub of dye. When the cloth is removed from the dye, it is air dried. Each area that is to remain this dye color is covered with more wax and the cloth is then dipped in the next dye.

The wax and dye process is repeated for each color in the batik. Complex designs can take days to complete. Different parts of the world practice their own distinct variations for making batiks.

For best results, natural fibers like silk or cotton are used because they absorb the wax used in this dye resist process. The best fabrics have a tight weave with a high

thread count that allows intricate designs to be achieved. Before beginning the process, the fabric is washed several times to remove all traces of sizings or other impurities.

Today’s batik industry standards rate fabrics from the best



Batik art courtesy of Robin Paris

Vibrant colors and designs are created with batik.

(including Primissima and Prima) to lesser quality cloth, like Blaco. Cloth quality may be printed on the edge of the design.

The tools used in the batik process are relatively simple. Hot wax is poured on the cloth from a “canting” or “tjanting.” There are many styles but this is basically a metal reservoir with a small spout and a wooden handle. For production work on the “cap” or “jap” (pronounced chop), a copper stamp was developed that greatly reduced the time needed to apply wax to a length of the cloth.

A cap is a block that makes up a design unit. They vary in size and shape depending on the design needed. It is made up of small strips of copper bent into the shape of a design and then sol-

dered to a handle. Brushes are also used to apply both waxes and dyes.

The degree of dye resistance depends on the type of wax used. Beeswax and paraffin are commonly used and different combinations of these waxes give different results. Using varying colors of wax allow the artisans to know what areas of the pattern are blocked through the various stages of drying.

Wax has to be kept at the right temperature for proper application. If it is too cool, it will clog up the spout of the pouring tool. If it is too hot and liquefied, it will be difficult to control.

In Indonesia, colors were traditionally made of natural ingredients. Commonly used colors were beige, blue, brown, and black. Many variations of these basic colors were achieved by mixing different colors together. With the introduction of chemical dyes during the 19th century, craftspeople could produce brighter and more varied colors.

Washing batiks with harsh detergents, drying them in a dryer, or hanging them in the sun to dry should be avoided because these practices promote fading of the batik. Next month, I will give more detailed information on the basic process for making a batik.

To view more, you can visit www.batikguild.freemove.co.uk. ■

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