

The Art of Batik: Part II

by Diane Day, CPF

Last month I introduced the textile art of batik. Generally, traditional batik designs are either geometric or based on free flowing forms from nature. While certain designs were reserved for special events or ceremonies, modern designs are often influenced more by the creativity of the designer than by the dictates of tradition. As such, figurative designs like the one seen in the photo are increasingly created by some artists.

The first step is to draw a design on a fabric such as silk or cotton that has been washed several times to remove sizings and impurities that may hinder the dyes. Designs are often traced from stencils or patterns.

The next step is to apply the wax. It is heated until it is liquid

enough to penetrate the fabric, yet thick enough to be controlled. A small copper container with a narrow spout, specific to batik, is filled with some of the hot wax.



The wax and dye process of batik is used to create abstract designs, as well as figurative designs like the one seen here.

Batik art courtesy of Rosti Robinson

The artist holds the container just above the cloth and angles it so the wax pours through the spout onto the areas of the fabric to remain uncolored. If a copper

stamp is used to apply a design form, it is dipped into the hot wax and then pressed into the fabric.

The two methods can be used in combination on the same piece of fabric. Once the first waxing has been completed on both sides, the piece is put aside to allow the wax to cool and harden.

The temperature of the wax and its application are very important. If the coating of the wax is too thin, it may not resist the dye. If the wax is too cool and thick, it will clog the narrow spout of the container. If wax is spilled on areas that were not supposed to be waxed, the artist can try to remove some of it by sponging the area with hot water. However, the wax cannot be completely removed.

The next step in the process may be easier, but still, mistakes cannot be removed. After the initial wax has been applied, the cloth is placed in the first color dye bath (which will be the lightest). The longer the fabric is left in the dye, the darker the result.

Dyes will not penetrate the areas covered with wax. In order to prevent the wax from cracking, the fabric should be kept flat, unless the artist wants cracks to form. Cracks allow some of the dye to seep through resulting in the characteristic marbled pattern.

After removing the fabric from the dye, the artist puts it into cold water to rinse out any excess dye. Then the piece is air dried. The

areas of the fabric that are to remain the color of the dye most previously used are then covered with wax that is a different color than the wax that was previously applied.

Using different colors helps in distinguishing one waxed area of the design from another. The cloth is then placed into another bath containing the next darker color. This process is repeated for each change in color.

When the artist wants an area previously covered with wax to be exposed, the wax is heated, scraped

off, and then sponged with hot water. When the artisan wants to remove all the wax, the fabric is rinsed in a soap and water solution (soap helps to lift the wax).

The cloth is then placed in boiling water and the wax is skimmed off the surface of the water. The batik is then dunked in cold water and rubbed to help remove more of the wax. It is then hung out to dry.

With the development of chemical dyes, batik artists can achieve virtually endless color variations. The number of colors in a

batik show the number of times the fabric has been put in a dye bath and the number of times wax was applied and removed.

In the past, batik cloth was sold in lengths to be used for traditional dress (a sarong for example). Today, batik cloth has a much broader range of uses, including wall hangings. In addition to the intricate, handmade batiks, less expensive mass-produced pieces are also available. Framing a batik to display can open your customers' eyes to this age-old art. ■