



UTS
ePRESS

PORTAL Journal of
Multidisciplinary
International Studies

Vol. 13, No. 2
July 2016

Designing Futures in
Indonesia, Curated Works
Special Issue, Curated by
Alexandra Crosby.



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Citation: Dunn, J. L. 2016.
Batik of Batang—A Design
Story. *PORTAL Journal of
Multidisciplinary International
Studies*, 13:2, 1-7. [http://dx.doi.
org/10.5130/portal.v13i2.5064](http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/portal.v13i2.5064)

ISSN 1449-2490 | Published
by UTS ePRESS | [http://portal.
e
press.lib.uts.edu.au](http://portal.e
press.lib.uts.edu.au)

CURATED WORK

Batik of Batang—A Design Story

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/portal.v13i2.5064>

Article History: Received 20/06/2016; Revised 27/06/2016; Accepted 11/07/2016;
Published 09/08/2016

Abstract

During my time living in Central Java, Indonesia, I stayed in the family home of one of my Indonesian friends on multiple occasions. In my friend's village, located in the district of Batang, along the north coast of Java, west of Semarang city, almost every woman has the ability to produce exquisitely detailed hand-drawn batik fabric. A walk up a lane or a peep into a neighbour's house will often reveal a solo entrepreneur contributing their wares to a dynamic cottage industry. However, the lifestyle is hard and the reward almost not enough to justify the patience and hours required to produce fine batik cloth.

Keywords

Indonesia; batik; social design; textile design; cottage industry; craft

During my time living in Central Java, Indonesia, I stayed in the family home of one of my Indonesian friends on multiple occasions. In my friend's village, located in the district of Batang, on the north coast of Java west of Semarang city, almost every woman has the ability to produce exquisitely detailed hand-drawn batik fabric. A walk up a lane or a peep into a neighbour's house will often reveal a solo entrepreneur contributing their wares to a dynamic cottage industry. However, the lifestyle is hard and the reward almost not enough to justify the patience and hours required to produce fine batik cloth.



Figure 1 Mbak Otik crouches on a small stool next to her compost stove. She works by the light of an open doorway in her family home. © Jessica Lea Dunn [7 December 2007]

I have heard it said that because of the personal qualities required of a batik artisan, that batik is an 'honest' cloth:

Batik [is] the most honest of all fabrics. It truly reveals the condition of the person making it. One cannot make a batik cloth if angry or emotional, because the quality of the line work changes, and it can be seen. There is no wrong or right side to good batik cloth, both sides are the same, so that once a mistake is made it cannot be covered up, because the wax and dyes soak through. Therefore batik is honest.¹

A unique design feature of batik originating from Batang region is the range of extraordinarily abstract flora and bird forms that emerge from a busy background pattern. Only when we take the time to look at the detail do we see birds with decapitated heads and eccentric bird-forms with no head at all blooming from vines. We can see butterflies that almost look like flowers, and vice versa, and delicate motifs that could be either feathers or ferns depending on how you interpret the form. One may even find an entire bird growing like a pineapple from a cluster of leaves, the leaves becoming the tail feathers. This abstraction of bird and plant forms in the batik designs of Batang reveals the influence of Islam. The philosophy asserts that every creature Allah has created is perfect in its form and thus we should not imitate Him in trying to reproduce such forms in their entirety.²

1 Staff member of Yogyakarta Batik Museum. 2007, pers. comm., September.

2 Rully W. K. 2007, pers. comm., 31 July.



Figure 2 This bizarre headless creature is probably supposed to be a cross between a butterfly and a small bird. Two wings are visible, as well as a series of 'tail feathers,' and the strange black shape separate from the main body may be a representation of a head or beak. © Jessica Lea Dunn [3 December 2007]



Figure 3 Amongst a busy background of *batu pecah* (broken rock pattern) within the body of a sarong made by Ibu Baruyah, a headless bird-like form grows from a cluster of blue vines that morph into tail feathers. A wing, body and feet are clearly visible. © Jessica Lea Dunn [7 December 2007]



Figure 4 Within the body of this sarong made by Ibu Munawaro, a bird that looks more like a pineapple grows from a plant, the wings and tail feathers more closely resembling leaves. © Jessica Lea Dunn [7 December 2007]

When asked, the women of Batang were quick to point out the clear differences in colour and design between batik from Batang, and the more renowned batik of the adjoining city Pekalongan.

Pekalongan is already famous for its batik. Batang also has batik, the only difference is that it is not well known. Batik from Pekalongan is famous for using silk cloth but batik here uses a base cloth of cotton. Other than that, batik from Pekalongan follows fashion trends and is very influenced by Chinese design whilst we make batik that originates from Batang; the motifs have been passed down from our grandmothers. You can see clearly by comparing our traditional motifs with, say, this batik here from Pekalongan that uses a dragon motif. You can also see the differences in colour scheme. Pekalongan batik uses the colours pink, light green, sky blue, mauve and black, whereas batik makers in Batang prefer using brown, indigo and red, for example.³

From birth, when a newborn is swaddled in cloth, until the twilight years, life is ‘wrapped’ in batik in Java: ‘We wear *batik tulis* if there is an invitation, wedding reception or ceremonial meal. The men wear *batik tulis* when they go to the mosque for Friday prayers or if there is a sermon. Many wear *batik tulis* on the holiday of Idul Fitri as well.’⁴

It is true that any one piece of batik cloth may constitute the tangible first sentence in a conversation that reveals a story. Such a story starts from the meaning that batik retains within everyday village life and community rituals, being passed down from grandmother to mother to daughter, batik as a secondary occupation, a source of pride and a lesson in patience, symbolising more than what first meets the eye.

³ Mbak Zumrotun. 2007, pers. comm., 7 December.

⁴ Mbak Triya. 2007, pers. comm., 2 November.



Figure 5 A typical example of traditional *tiga negeri* (three regions) batik with a colour scheme of *soga* (brown), indigo and red that many women in Batang prefer to make. This one was made by Ibu Sunariya. © Jessica Lea Dunn [3 December 2007]



Figure 6 Mbak Izah caresses her 14-day-old baby wrapped in batik.
© Jessica Lea Dunn [9 December 2007]



Figure 7 A local grandmother enjoys a snack on the front porch of her home.
© Jessica Lea Dunn [9 December 2007]