

## A celebration of 5 Decades as a Batik Artist – A Personal Reflection Noel Dyrenforth

### European Batik

Javanese Batik displayed in the Dutch Ethnographical Museums, provided an important stimulus in the Arts and Crafts movement of the 1890s. Artists, who were attracted to the exotic and decorative technique, researched and practised the traditional technique at the Colonial Museum in Haarlem.

Javanese Batik was demonstrated at the 1900 World Exhibition in Paris and met with widespread public interest, particularly from artists working in fashion and design. It was introduced into the schools curriculum and spread throughout Europe and the US.

Batik as a practice remained in vogue into the 1930s, when its handcrafted and decorous style lost favour to machine printed textiles.

### My introduction to Batik

I was first introduced to batik in the early 1960s, a time of countercultural activity and social change. The devastation caused by the World War was a stimulant for the younger aspiring generation to fill the cultural void. Artists like myself intuitively challenged the established and discredited order by testing new materials and techniques to advance their ideas. Exploration for its own sake was the mantra of the moment.

Paradoxically I stumbled upon Batik, which I found to be from another culture and with a history going back over 2000 years. This was my Eureka moment. I was captivated by the unique combination of hot wax and cold dye colour, its immediacy and fluid nature. To this day Batik is still as refreshing and challenging as it was five decades ago.

Whilst many artists in those spirited times were resolute in innovating through new techniques and materials, I found my aesthetic through the ancient craft of Batik. I found that it had little recognition in the West as a medium for Fine Art – which added to the challenge. I was so engrossed in the process of learning skills, that this divisive argument about the art/craft dichotomy was not relevant.

I saw textiles to be central to human culture with the capacity to convey social and cultural convention. Through exhibiting my work I was beginning to gain public recognition and appreciation.

At this stage in my development I needed to reflect more upon the traditional practice and history of Batik. I had been self-taught and consequently led by my

own instincts, preferring not to be inhibited by convention or led by a teacher. The few available books were very elementary and totally uninspiring.

### **First Breakthrough 1967**

Working as a fully-fledged Batik artist made me value my independence and gave me confidence to express my vision with clarity. I sustained my creative focus, embraced the spirit of the medium, which I thought had endless potential. For a few years I would juxtapose selling one-off batik silk dresses and scarves to exclusive fashion shops for income whilst being free to exhibiting my Batik work. My first success was in London at the Commonwealth Institute Art Gallery in 1967. The exhibition came to the notice of the Victoria and Albert Museum, which bought 10 works on cotton.

### **'Batik by Noel Dyrenforth', 1975**

This book, written by John Houston, was the first opportunity I had of explaining my personal approach to technique and content: fully illustrated with step-by-step processes. It had immediate success and was re-printed in four languages.

Rudolf Smend called the book 'a liberation for the world of Batik, a revelation for artists'.

As a result of the book's success I was able to establish a regular programme of workshops/lectures in art colleges and educational institutes in the UK. This was followed by invitations to visit Europe and the US. Teaching became a creative interplay between the creative potential of the student and my own facilitating aspirations. Teaching occupied a valuable, albeit not a major part of my working time.

### **Australia 1978**

Arts Victoria selected 6 international artists for a six-month residency. I was privileged to be invited by the Australian government, which was especially generous and respectful of the value of arts in education. During my residency I was lifted with enthusiasm and energy. I was described as 'a whirlwind of an artist, albeit disciplined, as a whirlwind is held within its own parameters'.

Besides creating new work for four exhibitions in Melbourne, I organised nine 2-day Batik workshops around the country, some in remote areas of the bush.

The stark, dry landscapes became the focus for all my work. I tried to capture the resilience of nature in these parched areas to survive, deprived of nourishment and rain.

I had an open studio for 2 months for visiting groups of primary and secondary students, art advisors and artists to take part in discussions and demonstrations.

## **Java 1978**

On my return route to the UK I stopped over for my first visit to Indonesia. It was illuminating, full of welcoming smiles, enticing flavours and enriching moments. It was a poignant and passionate experience. I was simply in awe witnessing the meditative and highly dexterous skills of the Batik workers. I became conscious of how much I still had to learn.

## **The 80s**

During the 80s decade I constantly reminded myself not to be complacent. I explored technique and materials for my own intuitive creative ends. It meant I integrated its methods, concepts and challenges. Rules were broken, redefined, risks were taken.

My first visit to Japan with a solo-exhibition in the Tohindo Gallery in 1982 brought me into contact with a textile culture that was to have a lasting influence on my work. Two artists in particular, Shigeki Fukumoto and Shoukoh Kobayashi, were a revelation to me with their refinement of concept and technical prowess. Their work revealed a distinctive and subtle aesthetic using traditional brush resist dyed processes.

In 1985 the British Council sponsored a solo-exhibition at the Indonesia Institute of the Arts in Yogyakarta, which brought me under the critical spotlight. The resulting reviews of my work were enlightening. As a consequence I met many artists, who I collaborated with in future exhibitions. I met Affandi, Amri Yahya, Ardiyanto, Tulus Warsito amongst many others.

Responding to an increasing need to establish a formal organisation, I founded The Batik Guild in 1986 with my students.

## **The 90s**

The 1990s began with a big exhibition in Guizhou University, China. The initiative was taken by Professor Chen, whom I met during his visit to the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford a few years earlier. We arranged to have a combined exhibition of 5 British Batik artists with a representation of work by the indigenous Miao tribe.

Rosi Robinson and myself transported and organised the set-up of 50 works.

It was enthusiastically received and featured on main China TV. On the strength of its success, a follow-up international exhibition and conference was organised in Guizhou in 1997.

In a busy decade of exhibitions, workshops and travels to the US, China, Indonesia, Japan and Europe, I was continually grateful for the generous support of Rudolf Smend, who championed many Batik artists throughout the world. Besides his gallery, his collection of antique Batiks and publishing of books contributed enormously to the appreciation and value of Batik.

In 1996 I had one of many exhibitions at Galerie Smend in Cologne, called 'Anticipation'. The recurring theme of my work - living in an increasingly fractured society, whose system is encroaching upon our liberties and whose less than benign constitution undermines our democracy. To protect our human rights we need to be increasingly vigilant. The theme was encapsulated in the work titled 'Anticipation', full of dark foreboding but with a luminous centre of optimism.

## **2000 and onward**

Being in my 5<sup>th</sup> decade as a practising artist has given me a chance for reassessment. The 2006 retrospective exhibition at the Galerie Smend and at the Douza Gallery in Krakow, Poland in 2007 reassured me of the strength and continuity of the work.

My accumulated experience is further documented in my third book 'Batik – Modern Concepts and Techniques' (2003) and my contribution to the book 'Art Textiles of the World' (2006).

Batik has been an intrinsic part of my life and I owe a great debt to the traditional methods. I consider batik as much a medium for artistic expression as a message – the encrypted language of wax and dye in ever changing form.

It has enabled me to convey my ideas, which relate, I hope, sincerely to the human experience.