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Wax and Wonder: Batik as a World Art

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Batik is a textile art form in which wax or another resist material is applied to cloth to prevent dye from penetrating specific areas of the fabric. In Java, where the tradition reached its highest refinement, there are two types of batik: *batik tulis*, the older and more painstaking technique, in which the wax is hand-drawn onto the cloth using a pen-like tool called a *canting*; and *batik cap*, developed in the mid-nineteenth century, in which a copper stamp is used to apply the wax to allow faster, more repetitive production.

In this talk we will explore the story of batik and its remarkable reach and influence across the world. We begin with an examination of early resist-dyeing cultures, including those in China, India, and along the Silk Road, to place Javanese batik within a broader global context. From there, we follow the tradition's development in Java itself, tracing examples from the earliest surviving physical evidence in the thirteenth century through to the early twentieth century. We close by considering batik's global impact during the colonial period (roughly from the early nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century), when the wider world began to take notice of batik: copying it for commercial gain, exporting its aesthetics to new markets in West Africa, and drawing on its visual language to fuel artistic movements that left lasting marks on design and decorative art in Europe.

Background Readings

Books

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Articles

Barnes, Ruth. "Indian Ocean Textile Trade: India to South-East Asia." In *Indian Block-Printed Textiles in Egypt: The Newberry Collection in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford*. Ashmolean Museum, 1997. World. <https://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/7/10236/10334>.

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Sardjono, Sandra, and Christopher Buckley. "A 700-Years Old Batik from Indonesia." *Fiber, Loom and Technique*, 2022, 64–78. <https://fltjournal.libraryhost.com/index.php/flt/article/view/7>

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