

# BISA Batik Studio

The most treasured memento from my first trip to Bali in the mid 1980's was an Indonesian batik shirt. Made from assorted pieces of cotton adorned with exotic motifs in vibrant colours, it was sewn together like a patchwork quilt. I wore it relentlessly. It was light and comfortable, and of course, eye catching. At first the attraction was purely aesthetic, yet as I learned about Indonesia my appreciation and passion for batik's unique cultural significance increased.

Batik is the art of decorating cloth using wax and dye that has been practiced for centuries in Java. While experts cannot agree on the precise origins, traces being found 1,500 years ago in Egypt and the Middle East, Turkey, India, China, Japan and West Africa, what is true, however is that the most highly developed and intricate batik is found in Indonesia.

The word batik is thought to be derived from 'ambatik' that means 'a cloth with little dots', yet the combination of patterns and symbols, along with colors, have evolved to reveal stories that define regions and distinctive cultures, while containing sacred significance. The batik making process first involves sketching designs upon cloth, selected areas are then blocked out by brushing or drawing hot wax over them and the cloth is then dyed. The parts covered in wax resist the dye and remain the original color. This process of waxing and dyeing can be repeated to create more elaborate and colorful designs. After the final dyeing the wax is removed by boiling the cloth in water and then it is ready for wearing or showing.

It is believed that batik was originally reserved as an art form for Javanese royalty. During the 19th century the technique became highly developed, aided by the introduction of fine cloth from China, and it became widely practiced, as well being ingrained in Javanese cultural life. Batik is an icon of Indonesian identity that is today enjoying a revival in popularity as Indonesian fashion designers, young and old are embracing hand woven fabrics with fresh modern designs produced with solely organic materials. Following the defeat of the East Javanese Majapahit Hindu kingdom in the late 15th, early 16th century, many of the Javanese aristocracy fled to Bali and the here traditions were continued, establishing batik on the island of Bali.

In 2009, UNESCO designated Indonesian batik as a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, affirming its value as a unique testimony of living cultural tradition and identity, and highlighting its human creative genius. In January I visited the workshop of the renowned local batik producer, Tjokorda Agung Pemyun's BISA batik studio located in the ground's of his family's royal compound in the heart of Pejeng.

After the 2002 Kuta bombings, and the resulting slump in tourism, Tjok Agung's response to the dire economic situation that confronted Bali was to leave Denpasar, where he was living with his wife Agung Antik and return to his village in Gianyar. He was determined to create a new village based enterprise that was sustainable and environmentally based, far removed from the volatility of the tourism industry and without money from the bank. He decided upon creating a small batik workshop in 2003 specializing in hand-blocked and hand-drawn batiks colored with indigo and natural dyes.

Aware of the environmental hazards of modern synthetic dyes Tjok Agung's initiative is to maintain traditional Indonesian batik production methods and work only with natural indigo dyes. Perhaps the oldest dye known to man indigo blue motifs have decorated Chinese porcelain many centuries ago. In the 1950's blue denim jeans became a symbol of rebellion being worn by the starring actor James Dean in the movie "Rebel Without a Cause". From the 1960's onwards the Levi Strauss brand (Levi began in the 1870's with his partner making his jeans with natural indigo) became an icon and covered the most fashion conscious backsides in the western world.

"The process of creating natural indigo dyes is incredibly time consuming and labor intensive," says Agung Antik, who assists her husband in his numerous chores, such as dealing directly with clients, oversees all design work, along with managing the 20 women and 10 men who are his local staff. "Hot and arid locations, near the beaches of Bali and the eastern regions of Indonesia are ideal locations to source the indigo leaves," she continues. "After the small leaves are collected they are pounded and placed in a large earthen ware pot to which water is added, it is then left from 3-10 days occasionally stirring while the process of oxidation occurs."

Indigo is obtained from plants in the genus *Indigofera*, ten kg of leaves makes one kg of thick indigo paste, the end result of a lengthy extraction process. "As many as 30 immersions may be required to produce the characteristic blue colour saturation in one batik sarong. It is a very long process that accounts for the expensive of our high quality products," she adds.

In the workshop a small group of women engage in light banter while diligently work away, brushing wax upon cloth in preparation before dyeing. Hanging from the walls are an array of plywood templates that are used for the repetition of applying design motifs upon fabrics. Numerous projects are in process and multitudes of fabrics are strewn throughout the space. The hand made wood block design stamps, made by local wood carvers in Pejeng, and the brass stamps made to order in Central Java are an interesting feature of the technical process. Incredible precision is required by the craftsman to make the stamps that are then simply dipped into hot wax and pressed down upon the fabric applying wax to the appropriate areas.

Entering the dying workshop reveals large concrete vats containing dye, machinery and electrical winches for lower the fabrics during the immersion process; an industrial landscape. Daylight filters down from skylights flooding the sales showroom with natural light where Tjok Agung and Agung Antik proudly display their sought after and beautiful indigo batik fabrics. The motif designs come from throughout Indonesia along with modern and western designs. One of the keys to their success, Agung Antik reveals, has been their willingness to experiment and keep learning.

