

BATIK: EVOLUTION OF IDENTITIES

A TRAVELLING EXHIBITION



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Curated by:
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University of Malaya Art Gallery
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
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CURATORIAL NOTES

BATIK – A CENTURIES-OLD TRADITION, A JOURNEY OF EVOLUTION

The history; we can say that the roots of batik are ancient and difficult to trace, with many countries claiming to be the pioneer of this art but lets us stay positive. We can always claim that the batik identity of each countries different from one another. But, the term 'batik' is still used in Malaysia as well as Indonesia and Singapore. From a small personal holding in the East Coast states of Malaya started in the 1930s, our batik has achieved and went through so much. The ups and down of the industry, this centuries-old tradition has developed its own evolution from design perspectives to its techniques of its making as well as fashion viewpoints. Batik; it is not just about culture and heritage – it's about identity as well. Batik is not only about its design, but about how artistic and versatility the batik can be. It has become a fine art to certain artists, which grace many homes and offices, and for designers; they sort for new identity in their design; which not only for clothe the consumer body but its use in interior and household accessories.

The evolution happens for a reason. Each designer comes up with different motif and characteristic that they apply in their creations. There are stories behind each motif that related to their origin and signifies their family history. Motif of flora and fauna remained constant and significant to some designer and some change dramatically towards modernization. Methods of producing have altered in parallel to technology, equipment, idea and expertise. Their work evolves with technology but still maintaining a fundamental humanistic in their creations. The more recent advances in mobile and social has moved designers and artists to a different level.

The evolution of batik did not come easily but it is a natural result from determination, perspiration and inspiration of an artist as well as designer. In 1955, Datuk Chuah Thean Teng starts his journey in 'batik painting'. Sullivan (1968), states that;

'Time and again, he tried and was on the verge of giving up hope. Then he decided to work out his idea once again in a small self-portrait executed in pointilliste technique using red, green, yellow and black dyes on white cloth.'

This key experiments by Teng was a success and from that day onwards Teng has never looked back. It was an evolution in batik as not in making alone but from the technique, idea, and constants experimentation. His themes opened up new vistas of Malayan life; from faces and people, human activities and everyday subjects. According to Sullivan (1968), his 'cheanta' (the wax pen), brush, pencil, sketch book and paintings will be travelling Malaysia in his journey absorbing fresh inspiration in capturing life. It turns out well where he became the pioneer in batik painting in Malaysia.

From history and philosophy; colours and motifs; evolution and innovation; Malaysian Batik is not only about buying and selling; beauty and outstanding. It is about how form and function work harmoniously together and provides tangible value to the end user. It is about identity that has been tremendously influenced by our culture, heritage and history. Malaysia batik must stay relevant to society. It does not belong to Malay community, or Chinese; or Indian. It belongs to Malaysian. We instil our identity and no matter how modern and different; this centuries-old tradition must remain significant for our next generation to enjoy

An excerpt from Chuah Thean Teng best sum up this exhibition;

'There is grace and beauty all around you if you only have the eyes to see. As an artist I must try and put down all the fascination of God's creature's and nature's mood while I can, for life is too short, there is not a moment to spare.'

ABDULLAH JONES

While I was growing up, I used to see this guy driving passed our house. He looked so cool in his Mini Moke. His beard would fly with the wind and he is always smoking his pipe while driving. I was star-struck, to say the least. I later found out that he was the legendary batik painter, Ramli Malik.

Encountering him piqued my interest and from then on I made a decision to become a batik painter. From an awestruck youngster, I developed a love for batik and by studying Ramli Malik's works I found out that he uses batik in a way no other batik artists ever did. Batik for him is just a medium to express his art. To me, Ramli Malik revolutionised and mainstreamed Malaysia's batik art.

Following his footsteps, I employed batik technique only as a medium for my works. By doing that, I can be independent of the ideas and approaches of traditional batik. When decided to become a full time painter, I found out that producing batik involves series of elaborated, repeated and tiring processes, thus migrated to using acrylic as a medium. From then on almost all my works is acrylic-based, but traces of my batik beginning can still be found in my works; the colourfulness of batik and the layering of it.

Ramli Malik drowned trying to save a friend who fell in the water on a fishing trip in 1982. I was fortunate enough to be featured in an exhibition titled Love Me In My Batik recently at Gallery Ilham together with my hero and several other top Malaysian batik painters.

May Allah has mercy on his soul.

'IKE@? Soooooo lower middle class la you'



Makcik Bawang #2
Mixed Media on Paper
56cm x 79cm
2019

'Hatta Dolmat? Yang main biola tu?'



Makcik Bawang #3
Mixed Media on Paper
56cm x 79cm
2019

'J@kel? Eeeuuwww!'



Makcik Bawang #3
Mixed Media on Paper
56cm x 79cm
2019

‘Kalau bukan Jimmy Choo’s, I rela kaki ayam Datin Seri’



Makcik Bawang #5
Mixed Media on Paper
56cm x 79cm
2019

'You pakai Boni@ je? Co@ch takde?'



Makcik Bawang #6
Mixed Media on Paper
56cm x 79cm
2019

MOHD ASRI MAT YAMAN

Almost all creatures from humans to animals manifest the same formula for facial composition. Faces are usually the first thing we notice in other people and it tells more about a person than any physical attributes of human being. Asri Mat Yaman evokes our senses with his creation of faces; faces with unusual shapes that tell stories. From lines, dots and shapes, Asri bring out the beauty of faces from his own perspectives. He expertly choreograph his canting to get the end product that clearly retains the traditional colour palates used by earlier batik designer. By complimenting both techniques in batik creation (block and canting), he created an images that brings out the beauty of each faces.

Asri identity in batik painting evolve tremendously through time. From a day-to-day scenery to a close-up of human faces, he captures it all beautifully. Emotion shows on each faces stimulate different feeling from others. It might look strange, but it holds the artistic testimony. Asri believes that every faces is important. It defines who we are and what we represent in life.



Siri Topeng Pahlawan Berani
106cm X 106cm
Batik
2017



Siri Topeng Kehidupan II

106cm x 84cm

Batik

2017



Siri Topeng Kehidupan II
106cm x 84cm
Batik
2017



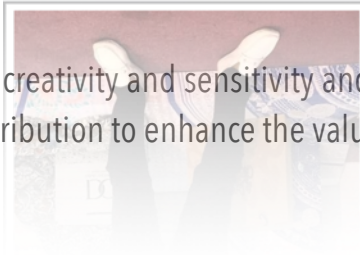
Mask One in Brown
106cm X 117cm
Batik
2015



Mask Two in Green
106cm X 117cm
Batik
2015

MUNIR YAHYA

Ever wondered what it's like to live a day in the life of a Batik Designer? Is it exciting and fun or is it stressful and challenging? Well... their life is like the life of others. Their life is as complicated as ours but Munir Yahya life I could never day is a different day for him with Everything that he touches create communicate on a visual, Munir and Malay traditional He did not wear it but took the idea into his design. Malay hair pins or 'pending' are among the type of Pending is a jewellery worn on the decorated with a variety of motifs ceremonial attire while 'cucuk hair bun. The hairpins are long and three, five, six, seven or nine in Traditional brooch also fascinates diamond shapes motif on his earlier his wing and turns it into his identity manifestation was an expression of his creativity and sensitivity and it can be seen in his batik design. In a bigger picture, Munir design is his contribution to enhance the value of our heritage.

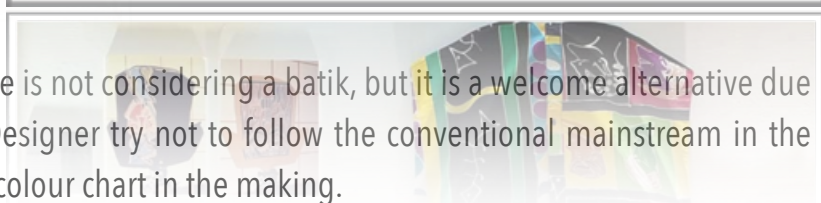
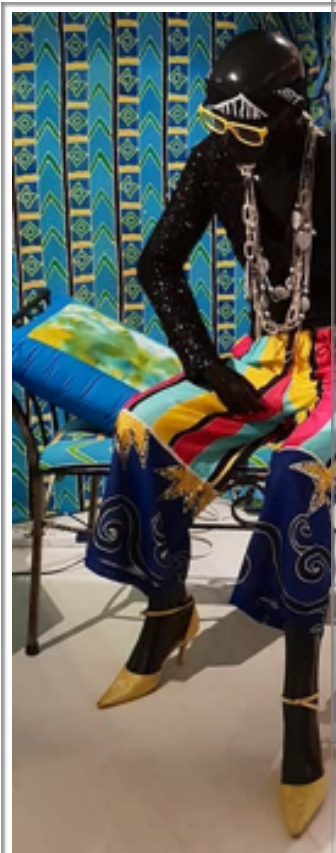


In the 80s and 90s, Munir starts his journey with fashion in his mind. Following what the mainstream and the industry is doing during that time is safe. Block technique abstract motifs play with complimentary colours from bright and outstanding modern contemporary look is what he that he selected those days to the way out the beauty of his creation. In 1991,

canting with block technique with larger like fuji rayon used during bright and creation . But, enough for starts his and keep he is still different and of culture. His with various types of tribal masks and the motif decorates his creation. Due to recession on the economy in the late 90s,

Batik industry also facing the impact. Batik designer can only produce what the consumer wants. Experimentation on design stop immediately due to budget limitation. Once again, the tie-dye product making a comeback. Even though the tie-dye is not considering a batik, but it is a welcome alternative due to its cheaper price and easy production. Designer try not to follow the conventional mainstream in the design department but combining his own colour chart in the making.

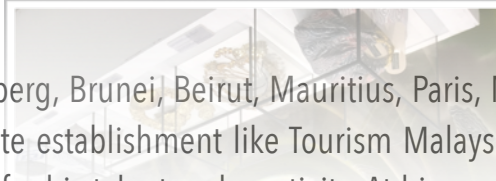
palate to create the did. From the material the batik will look bring he starts to apply batik abstract shapes. Material and cotton voile were this time. Like before, bold colours adorned his the former creation is not Munir. In mid 90s, he experimentation period looking for his 'identity'. looking for something new but with the touch first experiment starts





His new experimentation creates and interest of the Queen.
What else you can ask for?

Since tie-dye is one of the fastest growing fashion search keywords of the year so far, the designer in his still-experimenting-mode started his journey with a new technique. Shiboritik; a combination of batik block and tie-dye application. His colour combination are more earthy and using different material to create different effect. In 2014, Munir proudly introducing his latest creation and new identity in design. He starts his new traditional Malay by Royalties and the traditional wedding attire many people accessory to the look. 'Pending' Munir batik his most recent After 5 years being Munir and his are inseparable. like 'love at the create a great they will continue future. In fact, Munir is starting his experiment. This time around, batik be so much fun. He starts to experiment material such as cotton sheer sucker, poly-others. It will be another fantastic idea on 'Pending' motif. After 21 years living and Exhibition Designer at the Institute Gallery in London, Munir decides join his partner a local-based French Didier Leleu. Due to their passion in Batik their journey together; a journey from one has made forays into Cape Town, Johannesburg, Brunei, Beirut, Mauritius, Paris, Milan, Shanghai, Taiwan, Manila, Sao Paolo and Vancouver. Corporate establishment like Tourism Malaysia, Malaysia Airlines and Kraftangan Malaysia also commission him for his talent and creativity. At his age, he keep producing and experimenting. For Munir, age is just a number. What's count is passion and inner satisfaction towards his love for more great creation.



design after after falling in love with the 'Pending', the belt buckles worn in past years noble people. At present it has become part of M a l a y and not choose this complete motif in design in collection. together, 'Pending'

Their relationship is first sight' and they story together and to do more in the journey in another making supposed to on a non-batik silk, silk opal and batik making with working as an Commonwealth to return home to textile designer, Mr. Design, they starts country to another. He



Munir new creations. 'Pending' motif beautifully adorns the fabric.



'Experimenting' period with non-batik material. Simple yet artistic; artworks and curtain with 'Pending' motif creates different look on interior design. Combination of fabrics for fashion brings out the confident in his creation.

JALUDIN ZAINI

He flew all the way to Kuala Lumpur, leaving behind his family and friends, leaving behind a place that he called 'home' in searching for his identity in design. He brings along the one thing that he loves most; his heritage. Being a Sarawakian, Jaludin or Udyn always proud of his culture and heritage. The one design that can always relate him with Sarawak was Pua Kumbu. Pua was define as blanket while kumbu means to cover; where it has a prominent role in Iban rituals and is used for many purposes; to protect, to create a barrier or to decorate a space (Jehom, 2016).

Udyn starts his journey with Pua Kumbu with lots of experimentation and determination. From woven textiles, he develops another method in producing his 'own' Pua Kumbu. Batik is the answer and her never looked back from the day onwards. He captures the symbol from original Pua Kumbu and creates his very own batik block. Udyn shows that the arts across time and place reveal and share the timeless beauty and truth of all cultures and may facilitate in understanding and empathy for ourselves and others. His creation will be his identity and this identity borne out of the love of being a Sarawakian.

The 2007 Piala Seri Endon Batik Design Competition was Udyn or Jaludin Zaini fir move in Batik industry. The third winner of the competition has made forays into Europe, Paris, Italy, Brazil, Vietnam, Manila and Singapore with his Borneo motifs. Udyn keep telling himself the same old tales of his culture and heritage that has become his identity competition of Piala Seri journey with Pua Kumbu and block. Instead of using producing Pua Kumbu, Udyn chiffon silk, satin silk, cotton He is using block technique dipping. Creative people are inspiration from nature. Udyn these timeless elements have incorporated into modern Motifs like flora and fauna the one that adorned the his only fascination. His idea blanket of Pua Kumbu hit a starts to call it as his 'identity'. experimentation are created never looked back. From to shibori (a Japanese tie-dye remazol and with naphthol (a compound) at the same time previous year. By become more daring on his colours of the land of Borneo beautifully applies on the fabric like chiffon silk, jacquard silk, cotton, and other fabrics. He's getting bold and daring and starts applying the same pattern to pashmina and shawl. A 'different' Udyn has been born over the year of wide range projects, abundant experimentation and of course more research and development in the process.



in his design. After the Endon, Udyn started his Orang Ulu motif in his batik traditional dye used in applies remazol dye on and pashmina in his creation. along with wax and colour often known to seek explores the ways with which been re-interpreted and branding and design work. from his homeland especially original Pua Kumbu has been and creation from the sacred jackpot when in 2010 he More exploration and during those years and he has normal techniques, he shifts technique). Again he is using fluorescent organic on the same materials like experimenting, Udyn has colour choices. Mysterious



Udyn earlier creations inspired by nature from his
hometown of Borneo



Different look and style comes from the same idea





Udyn and his evolving idea. Bit and pieces of batik fabric of his design beautifully adorned these dolls.

BABA CEDRIC TAN

Baba Cedric Tan is a sixth generation Malaccan Peranakan who is actively involved in the promotion of Baba Nyonya culture through Baba Nyonya Culture Promotions troupe. He is the current President of the Persatuan Peranakan Baba Nyonya Kuala Lumpur & Selangor and was the Youth Leader in the Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka. His hobbies include conducting research and presenting papers on various aspects of the Peranakan traditional practices, fashion, consultant for various including cataloguing the Mahmood's kebaya collection Director for the Opening Peranakan Exhibition in He has promoted the revival wedding in Melaka and culture via mock wedding exhibition and various and Singapore. Amongst the he has helmed included wedding bed and artefacts Peranakan Museum, invited to share his aspects of the Peranakan volunteers for the Malaysia Malaysian tour guide Group members and Phuket regularly featured in special and television. He also for The Peranakan quarterly magazine 'The Peranakan'. Besides acting in local Malay telemovies and dramas, he helmed the lead actor role as Robert in the Peranakan play "Dah Secupak Tak Bolay Jadi Segantang" and as the Joget singer in the musical "Cheng Lock". The highlight of his career was to be invited to sing the Dondang Sayang at the Opening Ceremony of the 29th SEA Games in Kuala Lumpur. Through the singing group MOD, he performed local folk songs all over Malaysia and to Thailand, Singapore and Sri Lanka.



THE BABAS AND NYONYAS OF MALACCA, MALAYSIA

The first wave of Chinese to Malacca port was recorded during the naval expedition by the famed Ming Dynasty admiral Zheng He from the year 1404 till 1433. Chinese trading junks driven by the northeast monsoon winds arrived in Malacca yearly and by the early 1500s, the Chinese formed a sizable mercantile colony alongside the Indians, Gujaratis, Javanese and Luzonese. Malacca was then an important port of call and conduit for Far East and West Asia trade with the Malay language widely used as the lingua franca in the ports around this region.

These traders were mostly from Quanzhou district, Fujian who either stayed permanently or set up their second home here and married Malay-speaking local women of Javanese, Batak or Balinese stock. The community that arose from this intermarriage spoke a creolized version of the Malay language interspersed with Fujian dialect and adopted local customs and tradition alongside the main Chinese religious festivals and ancestral worship. In the later years, they are known as Babas and Nyonyas: Baba is honorific title derived from Indian language for gentleman whereas Nyonya, which originated from the word Dona (Portuguese) and later Nona (Javanese), refer to the ladies. They also consciously identified themselves as 'Peranakan' i.e. local-born to set the community apart from the newly arrived Chinese or sinkeh. The creolized language or patois was further enriched with loan words from the Portuguese, Dutch as well as English as a result of these European superpowers' colonization activities from 1511 till 1957.

The Dutch and the following English colonial masters preferred the industrious Baba Nyonya community in regard to administrative and commercial matters. The period 1800s till 1930s marked the golden era for the community as many were successful businessmen and community leaders. Their material culture and language prospered. They were among the first to embrace the English language and were fiercely known as "the King's Chinese". Eventually, they set up the Straits Chinese British Association in the 1900 to represent their political and business interest dealings with English Government. To certain extent, the Baba Nyonya community did lean towards a Western way-of-life, but it was not fully assimilated culturally.

The local born ladies continued wearing traditional attire and but quickly adopted new fabric and evolving fashion cuts and design. From the early natural dye toned baggy *baju panjang* (long blouse), the Nyonyas copied their Javanese sisters and started donning the *kebaya* around the end of the first quarter of the 20th century. The local Nyonyas cleverly attached broad Western laces to the hems of the *kebaya* which the precursor was to what was to be the initial simple wave-like bordered *kebaya* and blossomed into heavily embroidered masterpieces after 1950s.

With the addition of innovative artistry by the local-born Dutch and Chinese ancestry designers, the Javanese sarong industry, especially from the northern coastal towns of the island, developed fluid and colourful designs with the usage of commercially available synthetic pigments at the turn of the 20th century. Good quality hand painted sarongs were much sought after by the upper echelon Nyonyas but many did not survive up to today as these lovely pieces were interned into the coffin together with the owners. Up to the 1960s, the sarong was the highlight of the attire worn by the Nyonyas; hence the full attire was referred to as *sarong kebaya* with prominence attached to the sarong. The *kebaya* was made to match the design and colours drawn on the sarong. A Nyonya will own a number of sets of *sarongs kebaya* with complementary accessories for various events. Important pieces are reserved for grand celebration while blue, green, black and white ones are assigned for wakes and mourning period. The typical Nyonya wore her sarongs with the head folded to the front and not at the back or pleated by her side. More affordable Malaysian made block and screen-printed sarongs were commercially available after 1960s and later formed an important part of the Nyonya's wardrobe especially amongst Nyonyas from the working-class families. Without royal patronages, early *batek* producers from Terengganu, Kelantan and Penang mimicked Javanese *buketan* and butterfly designs to cater to the Nyonya niche segment. *Bateks* today veered toward to flora-based designs only reflecting strong Islamic influence in the East Coast of Peninsula Malaysia with colour combination less exciting as their Javanese Pesisir counterparts.

The diversity of cultures and colours found on these art objects reflect the pinnacle of a culture that evolved naturally within the Baba Nyonya community in Malacca. Due to the cosmopolitan nature of the Malacca as an entreport and unbounded from the shackles of aristocracy, there is a continuous in-flow of foreign influences that helped to re-shape this local-born community's outlook and practices. It is seen as a successful example how a migrant community can easily adapt and adopt the local culture seamlessly without losing their original Chinese identities. They may have lost the command of the Chinese language but are known for their fierceness in retaining quaint Chinese traditions such as the traditional wedding and funerary practices besides maintaining regular ancestor worship and various festivals with much gusto as compared to the mainstream Chinese community in Malaysia. They are very much at ease with the local Malay community speaking the local language fluently and enjoying spicy meals with their fingers. Hence, they are seen as Malay in form but Chinese in spirit.

This exhibition celebrates the *bateks* as worn by the common traditional Nyonya folks who personally kept the culture alive in their homes via oral transmission but also supported the local *batek* industry by purchasing reasonably priced *bateks* to match their scalloped kebayas. When they cannot afford to flaunt the intricateness of a richly embroidered kebayas or handpainted sarongs, they made it up via dressing immaculately in simplicity while making it a point to practice the culture with gusto and churning fine handiwork with love. It is in these Nyonyas, the soul of the Baba Nyonya culture survives up to today.

By Cedric Tan,
President, Persatuan Peranakan Baba Nyonya Kuala Lumpur & Selangor
Founder, Baba Nyonya Culture Promotions



Beautiful Babas and Nyonyas costume; from stay at home costume to the glammers and mourner.



From jewellery to porcelain...



Don't forget the footwear...



and... the Picture Perfect...

