

Origin of Batik

Although experts disagree as to the precise origins of batik, samples of dye-resistant patterns on cloth can be traced back 1,500 years to Egypt and the Middle East. Samples have also been found in Turkey, India, China, Japan and West Africa from past centuries. Although in these countries people were using the technique of dye-resistant decoration on textile, only batik-makers on the island of Java in Indonesia have developed it to the highly intricate present day art form.

Although there is mention of 'fabrics highly decorated' in Dutch transcripts from the 17th century, most scholars believe that the intricate Javanese batik designs would only have been possible after the importation of finely woven imported cloth, which was first imported to Indonesia from India around the 1800s and afterwards from Europe beginning in 1815. Textile patterns can be seen on stone statues that are carved on the walls of ancient Javanese temples such as Prambanan (AD 800), however there is no conclusive evidence that the cloth is batik. It could possibly be a pattern that was produced with weaving techniques and not dyeing. What is clear is that in the 19th century batik became highly developed and was well ingrained in Javanese cultural life.

Some experts feel that batik was originally reserved as an art form for Javanese royalty. Certainly its royal nature was clear as certain patterns were reserved to be worn only by royalty from the Sultan's palace. Princesses and noblewomen may have provided the inspiration for the highly refined design sense evident in traditional patterns. It is highly unlikely though that they would be involved in any more than the first wax application. Most likely, the messy work of dyeing and subsequent waxings was left to court artisans who would work under their supervision.

Javanese royalty were known to be great patrons of the arts and provided the support necessary to develop many art forms, such as silver ornamentation, *wayang kulit* (leather puppets) and *gamelan* orchestras. In some cases the art forms overlap. The Javanese *dalang* (puppeteer) not only was responsible for the wayang puppets but was also an important source of batik patterns. Wayang puppets are usually made of goat skin, which is then perforated and painted to create the illusion of clothing on the puppet. Used puppets were often sold to eager ladies who used the puppets as guides for their batik patterns. They would blow charcoal through the holes that define the patterns of clothing on the puppets, in order to copy the intricate designs onto the cloth.

Today, the batik industry is very much alive, growing fast, and continues to fill the growing demand both nationally and internationally.