

Batik 'art' losing fight

By DAVID A.
ANDELMAN
New York Times

JAKARTA — Ten years ago driven by hunger and a vanishing demand for the ancient batik craft she learned from her mother — who learned from her mother before her — Napsiah left her Indonesian village in central Java, and moved to the capital of Jakarta.

Today, she works 12 hours a day with more than 100 other people in a stifling bamboo shack with earth floors, carefully stenciling intricate designs in hot wax onto the fine cotton cloth that will become batik.

She is one of a shrinking number of women who remember the art. Her children have never taken the trouble to learn it.

Napsiah's eyesight is failing from the long hours of finely detailed work under the dim light that cuts through the wax fumes as she squats on the hard floor. And business being what it is these days, her boss does not know how much longer she will be able to employ Napsiah or any of her co-workers.

There are new batik designers today, people such as Iwan Tirta, who works with such international names in fashion as Oscar de la Renta and Mary McFadden. But even they are fighting a losing battle; they are convinced their experiments with new fabrics and new techniques are the only things keeping the industry alive.

The basic technique of hand-drawn batik is the same as it was centuries ago. A small pipe-like bamboo stylus filled with molten wax and tapering to a fine metal point is still used to trace designs on bare cloth. The cloth is then dipped in the vat of dye; where the wax has been

traced, the color is omitted. The wax is then removed and the next color stencil is traced on.

For each color, an entirely new series of wax tracings is necessary. It is a tedious and lengthy process for detailed patterns. In years gone by, it could take some craftsmen six months or even a year to complete a piece of cloth 3½ by 7½ feet.

The problem facing the industry began about five years ago when a group of Chinese entrepreneurs brought screen printing to Indonesia, setting up batik factories that can turn out 2,000 pieces of cotton in a day with 10 laborers instead of the 200 pieces that the 150 workers can produce in Dida Mukti factory where Napsiah labors.

These new batik mills spread the fame of batik across Hong Kong and Japan to Europe and the United States. As its popularity grew, it soon became obvious that few but the most educated connoisseurs could tell the difference between Napsiah's skilled work and the cheap imitations that the huge textile mills of Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan began knocking off.

But a very real difference there is. Batik came to Indonesia more than 1,000 years ago — probably from India or

southern China and the craftsmen in the hills of Central Java immediately began to refine it.

The designs gradually acquired their own intricate meanings:

The Parang patterns, reserved for the royal courts of Jogjakarta and Surakarta, indicated the precise rank of the wearer; the Sidukuti design, worn by the bridal couple on the wedding night, symbolized good wishes and fortune; the gold batiks of Kumudaretna, with their closely entwined designs of plants and leaves, told of wealth.

In the copies from abroad, much of the detail work is lost. The screen printed cloth is printed only on one side instead of the double-

sided matched pattern of true batik. As a result, the color and density are far less vivid and, while each piece is more uniform, it loses some of the intensity of the handmade variety.

In the hand-drawn batik no two pieces are identical. There are no regular repeats of the patterns, they repeat only as the mind and eye of the artist dictate.

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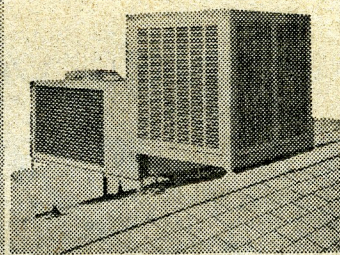
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