

Batik: Creating Timeless Fashion

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With a history of over 2,000 years, batik is one of the oldest forms of art that exist in the world, and has a global appeal due to its diversity and creative designs. In Sri Lanka, the art has been absorbed into the country's culture and has evolved with the changing seasons of her colourful past.

By Nizla Naizer



Although the term 'batik' originates from Indonesia, historical evidence suggests that batik was also an established form of art in many countries in Central Asia, Middle East and ancient Africa. Historians believe that the art of batik travelled through the popular caravan and trade routes in the ancient world, reaching as far as China through the famed Silk Route. The conquering Europeans of the time took a fancy to the art themselves, and took back some artisans from Asia with them to Europe so that the finest patterns could be made for the royals of the time. Batik reached the shores of Sri Lanka through the Dutch traders. Traditional batik patterns revolve around intricate little designs and dots, hence, the term 'batik', derived from an Indonesian word '*ambatik*' meaning 'a cloth with little dots'. However, in Sri Lanka, batik is an art that goes beyond this. Batik in Sri Lanka provides a wide scope of artistic freedom and creativity. It involves a lot of skill and effort and remains the only country where batik continues to be largely handmade.



Long ago, Batik was considered an elitist form of art fit only for the nobles to adorn and was the last cartel on the garments of Sri Lankan kings. The elaborate

tapestries and banners of the Kandyan court were adorned with batik and it is characterized with the Kandyan kingdom even today. Contemporary Sri Lankan batik designers are keen to introduce batik in chicer batik designs. They have found new and innovative ways to incorporate traditional batik designs into various crafts and fabrics. Batik is used on swimsuits to saris, wall hangers to lamp-shades, and even on bed linen and tableware. The beauty of batik lies in its versatility and the fabrics adhere to that, from the traditional cottons and linens, designers are creating batik on various silks and textured cottons. The use of vibrant colours and the range of batik creations available can suit even the more fastidious tastes. Traditional batiks are done in vivid colours such as sapphire blue, poppy red, earthy green and orange that matches the sunset over the Indian Ocean. However, designers also work with more subtle colours of cream, cappuccino, light mango, olives and strawberry that are more popular currently. Creating batik involves great patience and skill. It is a form of reverse painting where the design is first drawn on the fabric and then a mixture of hot wax is poured over the area that should not be dyed. Then it is dipped in barrels of dye so that the wax-free area absorbs the colour. The more colourful the design, the more times it is subjected to this procedure of waxing, dying and dewaxing.

Historically, a wooden pen, which could be filled with wax called a 'canting' or 'tjanting' was used to draw the patterns on the cloth. Later, large copper stamps or 'caps' that allowed a large-scale application of wax were developed. Nonetheless, till date, wax is applied by hand for intricacy in unique designs, using the 'canting' or paintbrush to create the design on the fabric. The characteristic lines or 'veins' on batik appear when the dye seeps through inevitable cracks on the wax.

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The dyed fabric is first left to dry and then boiled in barrels of a specially made solvent to remove the wax and also to ensure that the material is cleaned. The wax is generally a mix of paraffin wax, beeswax and resin. The beeswax holds on to the fabric while the paraffin wax creates the cracks. Most batik craftsmen are talented artists who draw their own designs on the fabric while some enlist the assistance of professional designers but for those who prefer more sophistication, computer aided designs can also be found with more complex and beautiful patterns. These modern

techniques have helped artisans move from traditional clothing to different hued paintings of landscapes and figures.



Batik is renowned the world over for its unique patterns and in Sri Lanka the cone or mango pattern (derived from the traditional Indian mango) is an extremely popular design. Traditional artisans use their local folklore or '*Jataka katas*', to create designs that now adorn wall hangings, curtains, bedspreads and cushion covers. Batik wall hangings of the world famous Sigiri damsels are a very popular souvenir among tourists. However batik does not always limit itself to the traditional, modern abstract designs, large flowers, even imprints of bicycles and buses have been turned into batik on the clothing. Although modern designers have inserted chic into this traditional art form, batik still remains predominantly a small cottage craft and has had its own share of internal troubles. Many manufacturers are finding it difficult to retain their traditionally talented artisans as they look for more lucrative forms of employment. Nevertheless, Batik has withstood the test of time in Sri Lanka and still holds a sacred part in the hearts of Sri Lankans. The craft is versatile and accessible and is sure to thrive in its newfound popularity.

Photos courtesy of: Sanathana Batiks sanathanabatiks@yahoo.com

