

Beautiful Batik

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Batik has been an ancient art form in Sri Lanka dating back to the era of kings. Beautiful designs of abstract, nature and daily life were created in vibrant colors using various techniques. The Batik industry saw a revival in the mid 1960s, 70s and 80s, where it boomed to become a significant export segment of the country. In the subsequent years, the Batik industry declined to various reasons and only a very few had the strength to persevere. Explore Sri Lanka continued to promote the Batik industry as depicted by the articles featured in December 1987, November 1989 and July 1991. Today, the Government envisages a revival of the Batik industry under its vision 'Saubagyaye Dekma.'

Words Udeshi Amarasinghe.



Batik in Sri Lanka came into being in the early 60s as an experimental cottage industry. With the unprecedented boom in the tourist industry in the 1970s, batiks catapulted into a roaring export trade, creating an entire new breed of batik craftsmen and flourishing batik entrepreneurs. Young girls in large numbers sought permanent employment in the large scale industry in the cities and suburbs. Sri Lanka was a world leader in the design of Batiks. Galleries and factories lined the major roads while every tourism destination and hotel offered Batik items for sale. Buddhi Keerthisena, Eric Suriyasena and Yolanda Aluwihare have been dedicated to art of Batik since the 1960s and 1970s and have ensured that this craft has survived within Sri Lanka in their various forms of creations be it fashion or art. They each have their unique niche ranging from clothing, high fashion and interiors. Speaking about the early days Buddhi Keerthisena said, "I organized myself to do Batiks commercially in 1970. My wife had wanted to get a Batik shirt done for me, but she was not able to get it done from any manufacturer. After that I decided to start my own business. We started with six girls and we gathered many ideas.

Artists such as Soma Udabage studied the craft and techniques of Batik at the Shanthi Nikethana in India and thereafter much interest was created in the

industry.” He added further, “I started the manufacturing of Batik in a very difficult way. At the beginning I did not have enough money to pay salaries. Gradually the industry developed and tourist buses started coming to our workshop. At times there would be more than seven buses. My workshop was in Koswadiya, Mahawewa. We had top fashion designers, to name such as – Prasad Abu Bakr, Mangala Samaraweera and many others contributing to us. They were my colleagues but I was the decision maker. We discussed and had a common program. It was a collective effort. The workshop atmosphere was pleasant and conducive for creative thinking. We were very free. You need to be mentally and physically free to be creative.” While most endeavored on Batik as an art, Buddhi Keerthisena decided to venture into the fashion industry, introducing Batik in clothing and swimwear including bikinis. “Seventy-five percent of my Batik creations were in the fashion line. Every week there was a fashion show in the hotels in Negombo and also at the Colombo Intercontinental. Many top models such as Otara, Swarna Mallawarachchi, and many others modeled for my fashion shows every week.” For any industry to grow the support of the political leadership is essential. As Buddhi Keerthisena explains, “George Rajapaksa supported me because I was working in the Ministry. He was very interested in batik. He advised me to exhibit our work overseas and we displayed our creations to a global audience in our small way. Even though we went abroad we did not have any business. But we managed. Tourism started booming in the mid and late 70s. We were able to develop our creations and start exporting.

Minister Lalith Athulathmudali was very supportive and he promoted the industry. They supported to promote the industry, and did not assist me personally. They saw the potential in this industry, therefore they supported the industry. Politicians have to sponsor if not how can we develop the industry? All heads of state have supported us. I have done work for Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, President Premadasa, President Wijetunga, President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, and President Mahinda Rajapaksa,” He further added, “I used to export Batik to Germany, Austria, Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden and many other European countries.” Eric Suriyasena entered the Batik industry in 1964. He was more interested in capturing the world from behind a camera lens under the tutelage of the world-renowned wildlife photographer the late Nihal Fernando, who was a relative. After his schooldays at St Benedict’s College and St Sebastian’s College, Eric Suriyasena attended the School of Fine Arts in Sri Lanka and then to London. The foray into batik was ‘sort of accidental’. During his studies he had met a few Indonesian students, where he had learnt the basic of Batiks. Thereafter his love of travel landed him in Southeast Asia, or more specifically, Indonesia.



Gallery Gustaf in Malmo, Sweden exhibiting Buddhi Batiks. Buddhi Keerthisena speaking with the gallery owner.



Buddhi Keerthisena introduced many firsts to the Batik industry.



Buddhi Keerthisena with his daughter Dharshi, the new generation in Batik.

He was entranced by the intricate workings behind the creation of batik. He started to create batiks to send to his pen pal friends all around the world; and the interest showed by his friends toward his beautiful designs led him to further study the art of batik in Indonesia and Malaysia. He studied the importance of dye in Germany and Switzerland. The culmination of all these experiences led him to become the first batik artist in Sri Lanka to exhibit his work around the world. "I wanted to combine my love of photography and the art of Batik," said Eric Suriyasena. Thus, initially the Batik workshop was started as a hobby employing about five girls to manufacture batiks. "It was in the 1960s. Slowly tourism started during the tenure of J R Jayewardene as the Minister of Tourism. Mr Ananda Tissa De Alwis was the Secretary. At that time tourism was developing in Negombo, especially near the airport. As tourism developed I too decided to expand by business. My small workshop was developed to employ more than 390 people. We had nearly 13 shops in Colombo, Hikkaduwa and all other tourism hotspots in Sri Lanka, in hotels as well as outside. Tourists were buying not only clothing but as souvenirs too," he further explained. "I received the Export Award at the first Export Awards Ceremony when Lalith Athulathmudali was the Minister of Trade."



Leonie and Eric Suriyasena welcoming guests to their exhibition.



Eric Suriyasena believes that Batik is a beautiful art that is not only for fashion but interiors as well.



Eric Suriyasena at his exhibition at the Dr Glas Gallery, Stockholm, Sweden in 1974.

Eric Suriyasena had his first international art exhibition in Paris and then later in London and Rome. The art work he shared with the world led to an interest in the international community to visit our small island nation. “During Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike tenure in the 1970s, she wanted to develop the Batik industry together with Dr Sivali Ratwatte. They established the Export Development Board and provided the opportunity for designers and manufacturers to exhibit Batiks at the fairs in Frankfurt, Berlin, Milan, Japan and all over the world”, Eric Suriyasena further elaborated. The flagship batik factory and gallery was established in Marawila. He later opened factories and showrooms in Kalagedehane in the early 1980s and during the height of the problems in 1988-1989, he opened a Batik factory in Matale. Eric Suriyasena provided employment for the local communities as he further developed the art of batik.

More than 500 were employed. He started batik (art and craft) training centers all over the island at the requests of respective governments. Famous artists and designers – Senaka De Silva and Mangala Samaraweera have worked with Eric Suriyasena. Famous names such as Otara modeled for Eric Suriyasena and participated in fashion shows held in Korea and many other destinations. “I have had 99 exhibitions in 65 cities all over the world,” he commented with pride. Eric Suriyasena explained, “As Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike did not want to import any garments I created her batik sarees for both the opening and closing ceremonies of the Non Aligned Conference in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, I also designed a saree for Prime Minister Indira Gandhi as well.” As a designer, Eric Suriyasena created beautiful batiks for luxurious sarees and fashionable casual wear as well as for interior design.



Yolanda Aluwihare has received many accolades that have brought pride to her label and the country.



Yolanda won the Asian Top Fashionable Selling Brand of the Year at the 2011 Asian Awards held in China.

Yolanda Aluwihare created a name for her label and the country with her high fashion designs in Batik. Having started in the early 1970's, Yolanda had initially started by joining a Batik class on an invitation of a friend to assist her with her work. Thereafter Yolanda started creating her own wall hangings and cushion covers. Following her move to Colombo, the owner of 'Hamers' saw her wall hangings and invited her to sell them in his shop. Thereafter her business grew enabling her to employ an assistant. "The next important landmark was opening of my shop at Hotel Lanka Oberoi", said Yolanda. Determined and courageous to move forward, Yolanda employed three more girls and ventured into producing garments and fashion designs. A pivotal moment in young Yolanda's career was the Non Aligned Conference in 1975. "I was able to arrange a fashion show during the conference in which top models such as Angela Seneviratne and Kushla modeled for me. I sold my outfits to VIPs such as the Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda's wife," she said. Furthermore, "I secured my first contacts with the world of international fashion, which resulted in my being invited to attend the Frankfurt International Trade Fair in 1979," Yolanda elaborated. She participated in many trade fairs through the Export Development Board Sri Lanka and attended many seminars and training programs all over the world. "When we opened our stalls, we were completely different from the rest. I had used different materials and displayed our heritage and culture. I always ensured that I too represented the label by being beautifully dressed," explained Yolanda. She was exposed to some of the world's top lecturers in designing, such as Prof Martin Shobane from the USA. The wealth of knowledge enabled her to use a multitude of techniques when creating her designs. The design is first conceived as an inspiration that Yolanda has drawn from nature. The five elements, formation of the clouds or various colors and shapes of coral beneath the ocean are some of the sources that have inspired her. The designs are abstract and are first drawn freehand on paper and then traced on to the fabric. "I use completely different techniques. I primarily use silk for my work. Initially I had a problem of marketing my silk creations because there were small knots. I used to

write the story saying that the small knots are natural for handloom materials,” she explained. In 1992, Yolanda attended a seminar on Product and Market Development for Silk in France, followed by a visit to the Asian International Silk Fair held in Dusseldorf, Germany, which further enhanced her knowledge of the specific international requirements for silk garments. Yolanda was successful in Japan, where she worked with a famous Japanese designer and held many fashion shows thus, creating a name in the Japanese market. “My journey has not been easy but I never gave up,” she explained. “I do not have the word ‘NO’ in my vocabulary. It is a journey of hard work, strong passion and team work that brought my label to the top of the fashion world.”

Some of the international accolades won by Yolanda include the 2011 Asian Awards held in China, where she received the award for the ‘Asian Top Fashionable Selling Brand of the Year’; She was the only Sri Lankan designer at the Bridal Asia show in India; the Yolanda Collection was selected to be showcased at the Indian designer store ‘Kaaya’, where she had to compete with renowned designers such as Ritu Kumar of India and Libas Collection Pakistan. These are just a few of her many achievements. With a distinguished clientele, Yolanda has done many creations for successive First Ladies and Prime Ministers wives. A lively and vibrant Batik industry declined with the internal conflict that raged for 30 years and the insurgency of 1988-89.

“With the insecurity and instability that was created, the entire tourism industry came to a halt,” explained Buddhi Keerthisena. Tourism was a major source of income, where visitors purchased Batiks upon arrival to the country, and Batik was also a major export commodity. “In the garment sector Batik used to be the largest segment for export. Prior to the 1980s, we did not have a major garment industry except for Batik.

The tourism industry was severely affected. Tourist flights were stopped and those who were in the country were immediately sent back to their own countries. Thereafter the entire Batik industry collapsed. Not only that, there was negative publicity on the country as well, which at times were true and in most instances false. Thus, foreign countries would not purchase our products. It was a very difficult time for us,” he explained. “I obtained a loan and developed the industry and created a local market. Vijaya Kumaratunga, Lucky Dias, Malini Fonseka, Sanath Gunatilake, Sabeetha Perera, Sriyani Amarasena and others all did my advertisements free of charge. They supported the industry to be revived again. Because of that support, the market boomed. The demand increased and there was

not sufficient supply for the demand. Thereafter prices reduced significantly like in the Pettah market. Quality dropped and the industry declined again,” explained Buddhi Keerthisena. Eric Suriyasena explained that while tourism declined due to the conflict and internal insurgency, he diverted his attention to create his own hotels, where all the interior work, which included Batik designs were done by him. The Eric Suriyasena Batiks Home collection started to make strides in the field of Interior Design and using the batik medium to add style and elegance to any space. Thus, he acquired interior design assignments overseas as well, such as in the Maldives and Japan.

“I was invited to develop the design for the Sri Lankan Expo Pavilion. It was 100sqm all decorated with Batiks and Sri Lankan motifs. It was the longest Perahera, about 125ft long,” he explained. His batik creations have adorned the pavilion of the International EXPO representing Sri Lanka art achievements for the past 15 years.

“At the Lanka Oberoi, the first set of large Batik flags in the atrium were done Ms Ena De Silva, the second done was done by me and third was done by Vipula Dharmawardena,” he explained. Further elaborating, “The Batik work of all the Tourist Board offices and embassies were done by me. Even at some of the UN, World Bank, and ADB offices the interior wall hangings have been done by me.” I am the first person from not only Sri Lanka but Asia to take Batiks to the world. I am so proud of that. I want to develop it further,” he explained. Eric Suriyasena also explained that the Batik industry declined not only because of the insecurity and instability in the country but also because not a single government gave prominence to this industry. “During President Premadasa’s time with Mrs Siva Obeysekera, we tried to revive it with the National Crafts Council as I was the Deputy Chairman. During President Mahinda Rajapaksa’s Government, I worked with Minister Basil Rajapaksa, and I opened many centres in different electorates and districts. From Matale, Gampaha and Kandy, all over and Puttalam, Kurunegala and the South. I also worked with Mrs Pushpa Rajapaksa on developing Laksala”, he explained. With President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his Government giving prominence to the Batik and Handloom Industry, with State Minister Dayasiri Jayasekera being the subject Minister, there is much expectation and positivity in the industry. Buddhi Keerthisena, Eric Suriyasena and Yolanda Aluwihare discuss the various areas that need to be focused on as the industry gears up for revival.

As Yolanda explains, “You have to build your foundation strong. Take one day at a time. You should not copy and do the same thing that another person does, be unique in your approach.” She adds further, “I am so happy that we are finally

receiving the recognition for our Batiks.” Buddhi Keerthisena explained that it is essential to prevent Batik prints, which are not original Batik craft from entering the country. Such garments with prints are brought from India, China and Malaysia and are of a very low quality. “We have to stop these prints coming in. Batiks do not come into Sri Lanka. This is an important area that the Government should look into”, he explained.

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his Government have given prominence to the Batik and Handloom Industry...Batik as art (courtesy Buddhi Batiks), July 1991.



“We are very happy that the Government is trying to uplift the industry. If you expand your business, you will have a say in the decision making process. It is always good to have competition so that we develop the industry further,” Buddhi Keerthisena further stated.

Buddhi Keerthisena also stressed on the need for research. “A Batik research center is a must. We need to develop new techniques and have powerful designing line. This is an important area I have mentioned to the Minister as well.” Eric Suriyasena explains, “Batik is an art. In my line of work, I have traveled to Indonesia, Malaysia and Germany to experiment with natural colors because we want to be environmentally-friendly, which is important when we consider reviving the industry. I am working with natural colors and less chemicals, so that it is not harmful to the nature or to the people.” “For more than 40 years, I have been asking the Government to have a Ministry and a Minister dedicated to Batik and Handlooms. In Indonesia and Malaysia, five industries are involved, and everything is tax-free. In these two countries Batik is a multi-dollar industry because the governments have invested in it. In Malaysia, two days of the week they have to wear Batik to work, and also if you want to go for a special occasion, you have to wear either a full suit or a long sleeved Batik shirt. That is how they have developed this industry. We are backward in that sense.” Eric Suriyasena further explained, “We are fortunate to have a Ministry and a Minister dedicated to Batiks. The

Minister is energetic and dynamic. Though he does not have a background in this field, he is eager to learn from the industry.” Eric Suriysena also stressed the need for the industry to use new techniques and innovative designs so that all do not produce the same style on mass scale. “We have to continuously develop Batiks”, he said. Currently there is only one dye importer who holds a monopoly, and has increased prices with a massive margin. Eric Suriyasena explained that during Prime Minister Bandaranaike’s time. It was Salu Sala that imported all the material and clothing, and dyes and other chemicals were imported through the Ministry of Industries. Such a mechanism could be introduced again, where pure silk material too is made available through Salu Sala so that exorbitant prices would not be charged. “In the Batik industry, there is an environmental hazard where the dyes when released to the nature, pollutes the water table. You cannot have a water well in close proximity to the Batik factories. We need to have a water treatment plant in Batik manufacturing areas so that the water is purified before it is released,” explained Eric Suriyasena. Batik is a wonderful art and there are many benefits to the country by developing the industry. As those who have decades of experience explain, proper planning is essential to ensure that Sri Lanka successfully revives its past glory in Batiks and Handlooms.