The Magic of Batik

Posted on

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If you wish to capture memorable moments of an idyllic holiday on a tropical isle and place it in the permanency of your living room-a wall hanging would be an ideal memento of your trip to the tropic : Sri Lanka’s renowned natural beauty and rich ancient culture printed in panoramic effect on fabric. An ancient craft of the East, in its characteristic kaleidoscopic colour, has proven to be an exotic, irresistible novelty to visitors to our country. Your fit to exposure to the wonder and enchantment of batik would perhaps be the majestic 30- foot frieze which adorns Air Lanka’s first class lounge at the Colombo International Airport (Katunayake). Even if you do miss that first glimpse, no visitor to Sri Lanka and place it in the permanency of your living room-a wall hanging would be an ideal memento of your trip to the tropic : Sri Lanka’s renowned natural beauty and rich ancient culture printed in panoramic effect on fabric. An ancient craft of the East, in its characteristic kaleidoscopic colour, has proven to be an exotic, irresistible novel to visitors to our country. Your first exposure to the wonder and enchantment of batik would perhaps be the majestic 30- foot frieze which adorns Air Lanka’s first class lounge at the Colombo International Airport (Katunayake). Even if you do miss that first glimpse, no visitor to Sri Lanka leaves without realising that batik has become an integral part of our culture.

On the drive to Colombo from the airport the first encounter with batik culture may appear in the simple form of batik clothes – a dress, a shirt, a skirt or even a sarong or sari (the latter two being items of native garb). In Colombo and other big cities batik is everywhere. From the sophistication of star-class hotels tO tiny wayside cafes, in government and private establishments, in shop windows, at fashion shows, on the beach and in our homes. Even Colombo’s parliament building in Sri Jayawardenepura Kotte has 6000 feet of the interior of its massive structure decorated with murals depicting traditional art in batik print.

Batik is a craft indigenous to the western coastal belt of our island. On a drive down south to the popular tourist resorts of Bentota and Hikkaduwa or up north towards Chilaw, evidence of this once cottage industry now turned lucrative t0urist trade could be seen dotting the winding coastal roads with its colourful presence. In rough makeshift bamboo boutiques which possess the charm of simplicity hang an assortment of batik garments in vivid colour and bold, imaginative design.

The variety of dresses, shirts, shorts, etc, among them predominantly beachwear and summer cotton wear, look much the same at a casual glance. Closer scrutiny however reveals the varying designs of traditional and contemporary motifs and the use of different colour combinations. Yes, in actual fact no two batik designs could

ever be the same in Sri Lanka – a fact affirmed by any batik craftsman or entrepreneur in the country. The reason is that, unlike in many other Asian countries where batik is mass produced by machines, Sri Lankan batiks are without exception all handcrafted and thus each item has an individuality and identity of its own.

> A shirt at a downtown batik shop may cost anything from Rs. 500 up, but a large wall hanging could cost up to Rs. 25,000.

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 seventies batiks catapulted into a roaring export trade, creating an entire new breed of batik craft men and flourishing batik entrepreneurs, while it lured timid village girls in their numbers to permanent employment in the now large-scale industry in the cities and suburbs. Sri Lanka was represented at major trade fairs all over the world, where her version of the unique Asian craft of batik was snapped up by dealers. Large orders from all over the world for Sri Lankan batik garments came flooding in. Many works of art of typically Sri Lankan batik craft grace the interiors of famous buildings the world over, among them the World Bank, the ILO headquarters, the FAO headquarters, the University of Maryland; USA, the Smithsonian Museum and the textile galleries of New York and South Africa. The craft of batik is however not just a mere 30 years old. It dates back centuries to the time of the Sinhala kings. Batik was then the prerogative of royalty and clergy, and was used to brighten the homes of princes and courtiers, and as wall hangings and murals on temple walls. The renaissance of the ancient craft is to the credit of a handful of pioneers whose names are now not merely well known in the industry but are synonymous with it - Sybil- Wettesinghe, Soma Udabage, Vipula Dharmawardhena, Ena de Silva and Buddhi Kirthisena to mention some. Batik printing was experimented in by just three people in 1962. By 1964 there were 24 artists dabbling with the craft and bY. 1970 there were more than 2400 craftsmen involved in the craft, fast reaching industrial proportions.

Batik, largely considered to be a South East Asian craft, is said to have its origins in Java, Indonesia. The earliest mention of batik in the history of civilisation is by the historian Pliny who referred to a fabric akin to batik near the Caspian sea in 500 – 600 BC in his archaeological observations. The modern usage of the word batik is said to be derived from Tik Tik and Nik Tik meaning dots and to make dots respectively. Although the craft’s origins may remain clouded in the mystery of

time, batik has evolved into being a distinctive, exotic craft of the east today.



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Buying a batik in Sri Lanka could vary from the casual ease of purchasing a souvenir from a curios shop to the careful consideration of buying an object d'art at a handicraft emporium under professional guidance. A batik shirt at a downtown shop in the city or at a boutique down the west coast may cost anything from Rs. 500 upwards. It may even come cheaper. But a wall hanging of 10′ X 5′ (considered large) would be in the range of Rs. 25,000. As in most other crafts, quality counts in batik. But unlike in most other crafts quality is easily deceptive in the craft of batik. As a yardstick of assessing a quality, genuine product, professionals refer to a batik fabric which looks the same on both sides of the fabric. Experienced craftsmen also say that a characteristic of the genuine product is the spidery crack marks of colour which seep through cracks in the wax onto the fabric. A good batik print is said to have a stained glass effect.

To a casual visitor to Sri Lanka, a tourist who only wants a souvenir of an ancient Asian craft, who however would not take kindly to being cheated on quality, looking for such distinctive or telltale signs is just too much of a bother. Here the Sri Lankan government has stepped in to ensure that the average tourist would get his money's worth in whatever local craft he purchases. The government-based handicraft centres in the big cities of Sri Lanka sell quality batik products of a wide

and varied range. Laksala with its network of outlets throughout the island is the major local handicraft emporium. The Department of Small Industries' handicraft emporiums in and around the city of Colombo like Vilasitha Nivasa and Viskam Nivasa are other such state backed outlets. There are also the private manufacturers of repute, some of whom have won international acclaim. Among them are Buddhi Kirithi Sena whose sales outlets named Buddhi Batiks are seen in Colombo and Marawila, Vipula Dharmawardene who operates in Colombo.

A leisurely visit to some of these outlets in the capital (not too far from each other) is recommended for genuine batik lovers and collectors of batik products.

The range of batik products is simply overwhelming for a product that is solely handcrafted. From bedspreads to curtains to tablecloths with matching napkins, a whole range of household linen is available in batik printed fabric of cotton or silk. There are also lampshades, parasols, and even greeting cards in batik print for sale in many of these emporiums. On the fashion scene in Sri Lanka as with most other thing- batik makes its presence felt in a every bold and daring manner. The kaftan or the ankle-length dress in cotton or silk is to the mature woman of the affluent class what blue jeans to her teenage offspring. The traditional eastern grace of the sari is repeatedly sacrificed by women for the casual comfort of an ankle length dress ,which, however, has a flamboyance of its own, given it by its bold powerful designs and rich blend of colours. The batik version of the Indian kurtha is another hot favourite among visitors to our country. Definitely. design and colour are the two ingredients most important in the making of that exotic glamour that is batik.

From traditional, religious and cultural motifs, batiks have progressed to the depiction of the natural beauties of our land. The sunny, sandy beaches typical of the tropics 0n which waves break in gentle motion from the aquamarine ocean, the green carpet of the hill country, our 'tea' land, the game sanctuaries of Yala and Wil-pattu where wild beasts roam in the proximity of your holiday bungalow. the gushing brooks and cascading waterfalls are all subjects of this poetry in print on fabric.

Decorated elephants carrying caskets, following a procession of barebodied sarong-clad dancers and drummers has the unmistakable stamp of Sri Lanka and its cele-brated Kandy (Esala) Perahera scene – a winner of many international awards. Sri Lanka is a Buddhist country. The calm and tranquility of a full moon seeping through the protective branches of an old bo tree to bathe the ivory dagoba nestling beneath, must have been experienced by many local craftsmen who have depicted

this scene of peace in masterful technique. Design in batik printing has exhausted everything from the religious to the erotic. Eroticism in batik printing (perhaps not on bold display, however) exists in the style of the world famous Khajuraho erotic sculptures and the traditional Indian erotic postures of ancient classics like the Kama Sutra. Biblical depictions are not uncommon in local batik printing, the most popular among them being the ‘Last Supper’. Today, abstract design in batik print is also being experimented with. Here the use of colour is without censure and depends on the individual craftsman’s personal preferences. In a land famed for a people of a bright, sunny disposition, the use of a number of bright primary colours all fighting each other for survival and prominence is characteristic. To the conventional eye, used to muted shades and a gentle, pleasing mixture of colours, this bold brilliance may appear as a rude shock. To others the vibrance of a colourful batik is incomparable to any other wall hanging. Batik is, however, also done in soft blend of colours LO suit the tastes of the less ad,·enturous. Yet the magic of batik lies in its brilliance of colour as much as in its exotic design. All visitors to our land are not connoisseurs of eastern art and so the true beauty of batik may only lightly touch them before passing them by. However if you do happen to pass by a batik boutique just step in -even the most fastidious shopper would not come away empty handed. Indeed all over the island of Sri Lanka visitors are seen in various modes of batik attire – a fitting tribute to the magic of batik.



Exquisite batiks – a good buy. (Suresh de Silva)



A batik showroom.