

The northern coast of Java – an area commonly known as Pasisir – became home not only to the local Sundanese and Javanese people, but also to migrants from China, the Middle East, India and Europe. Each of these communities used the Javanese cloth as a medium to express their ethnic and regional identity, and the iconography of these fabrics became a visual witness of these diverse cultural encounters.

Nearly all batiks produced on Java are square or rectangular in shape, destined to be parts of apparel – skirts, headscarfs, breast-covers, shawls and baby carriers. For the best quality fabrics known as *batik tulis* ('written batik'), the wax is applied by hand with a small copper tool known as a *canting*. For mass-produced fabrics, the wax resist is applied with a copper stamp known as a *cap*.

While the simplest examples of batik are monochrome fabrics where the wax has been applied just once and the fabrics were dyed in one colour only, in the most complex examples up to ten colours can be found. Use of the wax-resist technique means that the dye bath has to be cold or lukewarm, and has significantly restricted the number of natural dyes suitable for this process.

Once made, batik cloth cannot be altered. The technique requires a lot of imagination, precision and patience, but even in the best planned process there is the possibility of the unforeseen and unexpected.

The oldest known examples of Pasisir batiks are blue-and-red fabrics which were dyed in indigo and *mengkudu*, a dye matter obtained from the roots of the *pace* tree *Morinda citrifolia* (which also grows in the tropical parts of Australia). *Mengkudu* dyeing was a very complex and labour-intensive process, which sometimes required one month of preparatory work prior to the actual dyeing. The results however, are quite stunning: the depth and the intensity of the natural red can never be replicated by synthetic dyes (il.1).

The designs of the oldest Pasisir batiks used to feature elements of the local environment, frequently representing marine creatures and sea plants. Today this style is still popular in the area of the Indramayu towns, where wives of local fishermen produce a very spontaneous and expressive rendition of this theme, featuring enlarged figures of fish and lobsters swimming among sea-weeds (il.2).

Unlike fabrics from other parts of Java, where local batiks are executed with great accuracy and control, the Indramayu fabrics care little for this precision and detail and can be recognised as a popular, folk version of these fabrics.



While the Pekalongan area of Pasisir was famous for elaborate floral batiks made in the workshops run by Eurasian women and Chinese families, Cirebon was the only Pasisir town to have a dynasty of Sultans. As a busy port, Cirebon was for centuries engaged in maritime trade with China, India and the Middle East, and the diversity of traditions which shaped its cultural identity has been reflected in the local decorative style.

The leitmotif of Cirebon art became the dramatic *megamendung* (drifting cloud) design, believed to be introduced by the Chinese wife of one of the Sultans (il. 3). The edges of the clouds feature seven shades of the colour blue, which means that the wax

had to be applied seven times, each time covering the most recently dyed area of the pattern. ▶▶▶

Opposite page: Far left: (il 1) Skirt cloth with sea-weed design (*ganggeng*); Lasem, early 20th century; cotton, natural dyes, hand-applied wax resist (*batik tulis*); 108 x 223 cm. Opp page right: (il. 2) Skirt cloth with sea-creatures design; Paoman village near Indramayu, 2000; cotton, synthetic dyes; hand-applied wax resist (*batik tulis*); 104.5 x 252 cm. **This page:** (il 3) Skirt cloth with drifting cloud design (*megamendung*) Cirebon, 1940-50s; cotton, synthetic dyes; hand-applied wax resist (*batik tulis*); 103 x 275 cm. All works from the Greg Roberts & Ian Reed collection. Photography: Mick Richard.