

**HIDDEN TREASURE:
THE REDISCOVERY OF A ROYAL BATIK COLLECTION**

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During the course of establishing the Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles, the authors and their colleagues were privileged to be taken into the Inner Court in the heart of Bangkok's Grand Palace. Among the fascinating collection of historic court textiles, Western accessories, and royal accoutrements dating from the reign of King Rama V (r. 1868-1910) were a large number of Indonesian batiks (a wax-resist patterning technique for which Java was, and is, renowned). The only information given at the time of our visit was that the batiks had been collected by the king on one or more trips to Java during his long reign. Placed in storage upon His Majesty's death in 1910, they have been virtually unknown except to a very few Thai scholars close to the court. They have never been exhibited publicly and to our knowledge no outsiders have seen them.² A recent count has placed the number of extant pieces at 304. This article contains the first published photographs of examples from this important royal collection.

Recognizing the importance of these well-preserved textiles to the history of Indonesian batik as well as their special provenance, an exhibition and publication are being organized in order to make this remarkable collection known to both textile scholars and the general public. That exhibition will open at the QSMT in August 2015 to commemorate the 83rd birthday cycle of Her Majesty Queen Sirikit. Although there is still much research to

¹ The authors wish to thank Melissa Leventon for her helpful review of this article. Any errors, however, are solely our own.

² Even the highly respected Southeast Asian textile authority, Dr. Mattiebelle Gittinger, who was told about the collection in the late 1980s, never actually saw it (personal email communication, 9 January 2014).

be done on the batiks themselves, the museum would like to share this extraordinary find with *Arts of Asia* readers by presenting the following information about the formation of this collection and highlighting some key discoveries made to date.

THE ROYAL TRIPS TO JAVA

An Official Visit—1871

On 1 October 1868, Crown Prince Chulalongkorn became the fifth monarch of Thailand's Chakri Dynasty. The new King Rama V was only 15 years old; for the next five years the country was headed by a regent, Si Suriyawongse (1808-1883). At the age of 18, the young king realized he needed to prepare himself to modernize a country surrounded by British, Dutch and French colonial states. At the same time, to keep his country's independence, he had to represent the authority and credibility of Siam (as Thailand was then known) to Asia's European colonizers.³ To aid in accomplishing these goals, the young king initially proposed a visit to Europe; the Regent, however, felt that somewhere closer would be more appropriate for the first trip outside the country's borders by a Siamese monarch in peacetime. Therefore, His Majesty would make an official visit to Singapore and Java to observe the British and Dutch colonial governments, respectively.⁴ This brief trip, from 9 March to 11 April 1871, was the first of three visits to Java His Majesty was to make during his reign—and the only official one. It also marks the beginning of the king's interest in, and acquisition of, Javanese batik.

The king and a large retinue arrived in Batavia (Jakarta) from Singapore on 26 March 1871. He was greeted by Pieter Mijer, the Governor-General of the East Indies, and many dignitaries. After

³ Imtip Pattajoti Suharto, *Journeys to Java by a Siamese King*, Thailand: 2001, p. 4.

⁴ Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, *Memoirs of Prince Damrong*, Bangkok: 1966, pp. 163-164 (in Thai; authors' translation).

five days of official events and a fancy dress ball held in his honor, His Majesty departed for Semarang, a wealthy trading center with a large Dutch population. The first railway system in Java had been established there in 1867; it was of great interest to the king, as he planned to build one for Siam. Apparently, His Majesty was also fascinated by his introduction to the art of batik. On 3 April, after visiting a gunpowder factory, a hospital for the mentally ill and an orphanage, the king visited the home of the Regent of Semarang, where he “witnessed the dyeing and printing of sarongs. He benevolently accepted a finished sarong.”⁵ Two days later he returned to Bangkok via Singapore. To show his gratitude for the warm hospitality he and his party had received from British, Dutch and Javanese officials, the king sent a large bronze elephant to Singapore and Batavia. In the latter city the statue was placed in front of the National Museum, where it remains to this day.⁶

A Private Visit—1896

King Chulalongkorn’s second visit to Java was much longer than the first, lasting from 9 May to 12 August 1896. Like the previous one, it began and ended with brief stays in Singapore. In contrast to the official diplomatic purpose of the first visit, this trip was an unofficial one made for the king’s health, and His Majesty wished to avoid too many exhausting formal events. As previously, there were several reasons why Java was chosen. First, it has the highest mountains and natural hot springs closest to Thailand, providing greater relief from tropical heat and humidity and rejuvenating therapeutic spas. In addition, His Majesty expressed an interest in seeing more of Java, including Borobudur and Prambanan. Also, he had positive memories of

⁵ Kannikar Sartrapronong, *A True Hero: King Chulalongkorn of Siam’s Visit to Java in 1871*, IAS No. 63, Bangkok: N.D. (c. 2007), p. 84. Unfortunately we do not know if that sarong survived in the collection as none of the extant pieces are so identified.

⁶ The statue sent to Singapore today stands in front of Parliament House.

the warm hospitality he had received from both the Dutch and the Javanese. And, finally, although this was a time of escalating tensions with France, there were no hostilities between the Dutch and the Thais. Praya Cholayuth (Commodore Andreas du Plessis de Richelieu) was sent to make the arrangements in Singapore (see article by QSMT/Julia Brennan this issue).

Arriving at Batavia on 25 May 1896, His Majesty was greeted by Carel van Wijck, the Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies and other dignitaries. This time the king was accompanied by Queen Sri Bajarindra (1864-1919), several of his sons and daughters, his brother Prince Damrong and a large entourage. Along with train rides, visits to spas, and entertainment by local rulers in Semarang, Djogjakarta and Surakarta, the king also found time to build his batik collection. In fact, the day after he arrived in Batavia, King Chulalongkorn went shopping.⁷ Whether he bought batiks is not recorded; however, he did comment that he now understood how the Dutch survived the heat: “During the day Dutch women wore sarongs with short white blouses [*kebaya*] while the men wore pajama-like pants made from sarong material [*celana*] with thin white cloth shirts. They wore Western clothing when they went out after 4 p.m.”⁸

On 8 June when returning from the spa at Cipanas, the king stopped in Garut at the Raden Adipati’s residence and “saw the sarong production process and *tried his hand at it* [authors’ italics].”⁹ Apparently, the king was fascinated by Javanese batik to the point of wishing to fully understand the process. It is also clear from our initial survey of the collection that the king wanted to acquire a comparatively broad representation stylistically and geographically, including examples characteristic of different tiers of society, from “ordinary” people to courtiers. Interestingly, His

⁷ Suharto, op cit. p. 30.

⁸ Ibid, p. 33.

⁹ H.M. King Chulalongkorn, *A Journey of Over Two Months in Java*, Bangkok: Prachan Publishing, 1973, p. 90 (in Thai; authors’ translation); also mentioned in Suharto, op. cit., p. 43.

Majesty's diaries of this and the final trip (in 1901) indicate that he desired nothing more than to wander through shops and markets "anonymously," an almost impossible activity given security, a large entourage, and the requirements of royal protocol.¹⁰ Under these circumstances, it is surprising he amassed as many batik examples as he did. Moreover, with the exception of batiks he received as gifts, the king seems to have been directly involved in most of the acquisitions.

His Majesty visited Garut again on 24 June and, accompanied by the Resident, went to a bi-weekly market. There, according to the king's diary, he found "sarongs, head cloths for sale and waist wrappers, *sabo or sabu* in Malay."¹¹ That evening, the king invited the Resident, the Assistant Resident (both Dutch officials), the Javanese Regent and their wives to a Thai dinner. According to a tag associated with the collection, the Assistant Resident brought His Majesty a selection of shoulder cloths, turbans and sarongs in Central Javanese patterns as a gift. Research is ongoing to determine which pieces in the collection these may be. Apparently, he did not have to stay long in a town to add to his collection. For example, on 25 June on his way to Yogyakarta in central Java, the king arrived at Manonjaya at 2 pm for a two-hour layover between trains. There is no mention of shopping, let alone of purchasing batik, but two tags with the collection say "Kain, bought at Manoendjaya [Manonjaya, near Tasikmalaya]."

From 26 June to 5 July Their Majesties visited Yogyakarta, using it as a base to explore several historic monuments in the vicinity including Prambanan and Borobudur. While waiting for the train at a station near Candi Sewu on 28 June, "Some Chinese

¹⁰ Suharto, *ibid.*, p. 124, sheds some light on this dilemma. In describing His Majesty's visit to Bandung during the 1896 trip: "After lunch the King went shopping at some stores near the hotel. There were many men assigned round the clock at the hotel ready with a golden umbrella, which made it difficult for the King to go out privately without being disguised." And this was a "private" visit!

¹¹ H.M. King Chulalongkorn, *op. cit.*, p. 143 (authors' translation).

came by, offering their goods, and His Majesty bought some *keris* and sarongs with exclusive designs for royalty.”¹² According to one source, on 4 July in Yogyakarta, His Majesty “went to a Dutchwoman’s house to see the process of *kain* [authors’ italics] making. . . They used white material from Europe. There were about 100 workers who drew the designs, boiled and dyed the material. They were paid per piece. The finished articles were sold for 25 guilders each.”¹³ The king’s personal diary adds that “at the Dutchwoman’s house she gave him a pillow.”¹⁴ The authors believe they have identified the woman and some of the pieces His Majesty purchased from her (see below).

Two other encounters with batik took place on 7 July while His Majesty was visiting Surakarta (Solo). The king says the Susuhunan (ruler) gave him a valuable sword and a special *kris* with three scabbards—gold, diamonds and painted, respectively, while “he gave Her Majesty four gold painted batiks and six plain *kain panjang* [ie: not gilded].”¹⁵ Later the same day the king was “shown around the Raden Adipati’s workshops for various handicrafts including *kain* making. One room was arranged like an exhibition hall with products on display. His Majesty bought many items and also placed an order for more.”¹⁶ And on 26 July in Semarang his diary records that everything he ordered on 7 July was delivered, including many kinds of batik in different qualities.¹⁷ This range of quality is reflected in the surviving examples and their tags where prices mentioned range from 4 to 30 guilders or more. As a final note on this trip, the Susuhunan of Surakarta “gave his majesty five hip wrappers and three head

¹² Suharto, op. cit., p. 67.

¹³ Ibid, p. 77.

¹⁴ H.M. King Chulalongkorn, op. cit., p. 254 (authors’ translation).

¹⁵ H.M. King Chulalongkorn, ibid., p. 285 (authors’ translation); unfortunately none of these batiks are in the king’s collection, probably because they became the personal property of Queen Sri Bajarindra (Saovabha Phongsri).

¹⁶ Suharto, op. cit., p. 83.

¹⁷ H.M. King Chulalongkorn, op. cit., p. 362 (authors’ translation).

cloths.”¹⁸ We have not yet, however, determined if these have survived in the collection.

For the King’s Health—1901

King Rama V’s last visit to Java took place from 5 May to 24 July 1901. Like the second trip, this one was unofficial, allowing the king to recuperate from the pressures of state. Again he was accompanied by Queen Sri Bajarindra and various members of the royal family, including his sons Prince Asdang and Prince Rabi. Both sons fell ill, but it was Prince Asdang, seriously ill in Bandung, who forced His Majesty to curtail his own activities for a period of time. On a rainy 12 June the king requested that a batik seller from Pekalongan show him his goods.¹⁹ A group of signed sarongs in the collection are perhaps purchases from this itinerant merchant (see below). This highlights the fact that there was a regular trade in batiks between this major production center on the North Coast and cities like Bandung and Semarang that had large Dutch and Indo-European populations.

The entry for 6 July 1901 in the King’s diary mentions that he once again visited a Dutch sarong “factory” in Yogyakarta:

Stopped at a batik workshop, the manager is Dutch and I saw the entire process, beginning with washing the white fabric (which is then pounded to get the washing powder out). Then they start to draw with the wax, some batik artists use a pattern below the white fabric and other do not use a pattern—rather, they draw freehand. When it is waxed it is dyed blue after which they wash it with hot water to get rid of the wax. Then they dye it to turn it purple (or violet) or any color they want. Price for the finished fabric is 15-30 guilders.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 362 (authors’ translation).

¹⁹Ibid., p.74 (authors’ translation).

Local people do not use these cloths, they are too expensive. After looking around, I bought some batik.²⁰

This passage implies that this is not the same workshop as that of the Dutch woman His Majesty visited on the 1896 trip. It should be noted that washing in hot water to remove the wax is typical of the batik process in Yogyakarta, whereas in Surakarta the wax is scraped off each time. Although there are no other references to visits to batik workshops or purchases, it is highly likely that there were many additions to the collection made during this three-month trip. There is no indication in the records of the collection that any pieces were added after 1901.

Highlights of the Batik Collection of King Rama V

There are batiks of all qualities in the collection, and from as many areas as the king could acquire examples, but primarily Central and North Java. The overwhelming majority of them, however, are hand-drawn (*tulis*); many are naturally dyed. Accompanying the batiks are paper or cardboard tags written in Thai and English, and, occasionally, Dutch. They provide the name of the design, the name of place where the piece was purchased, the price paid and in some cases, the status of who was permitted to wear a particular pattern. However, at some time in the past the tags were removed from the textiles and stored separately. Good for the textiles (the acidic paper tags would eventually stain the cloth), but a problem for the researcher. Many tags are linked to specific batiks, but determining if these assignments are correct is another research challenge. A systematic analysis is underway; some correlations between tag and textile have been confirmed and are reflected in this article. Unfortunately, several pieces are without tags and it is not possible to determine if they originally had one or not. Our

²⁰ Prince Damrong, Archive of 3 Journey's to Java by King Rama V, Bangkok: 1920, pp. 145-146 (in Thai; authors' translation).

preliminary observation is that pieces purchased on the 1871 visit were not tagged; thus it is possible that this identification system did not come about until during or after the 1896 trip, when the volume of acquisitions increased considerably. This point requires further research. Of course, we also have no idea who created the tags. Given all of the above, we can nevertheless present some batiks from each of His Majesty's trips that we are confident have been correctly identified.

Several batiks in the collection may have been purchased on the king's first trip to Java, brief as it was. These pieces are so similar stylistically and technically that they must have been from the same workshop, most likely that of Catharina van Oosterom (1816-1877), an Indo-European woman who established a workshop in Semarang but moved to Banyumas about 1855. She would have continued, however, to sell her expensive batiks to wealthy clients (mainly European and Indo-European) in Semarang, where the king likely purchased them. She was known for using deep red, blue and black on cream and decorating her batiks with exotic animals, bunches of grapes and Christian subjects (which also could be interpreted in accordance with local Javanese and Chinese beliefs).²¹

Among the original cardboard tags are a number of slips of paper in a European hand with the name, "W. van Lawick van Pabst" and a price, 25 guilders. This is the same price as the batiks produced by the "Dutch woman" in Yogyakarta visited by His Majesty on 4 July 1896 mentioned above.²² The batiks associated with these paper tags in the king's collection are in the

²¹ For Mrs. Van Oosterom's biography see Harmen Veldhuisen, *Batik Belanda, 1840-1940, Dutch Influences on Batik from Java, History and Stories*, Jakarta: 1993, pp. 48-54.

²² Prior to the commencement of the practice of signing batiks in wax (see paragraph on Mrs. Jans below), European and Indo-European batik makers wrote their names on pieces of paper they pinned or sewed onto the finished cloths from their workshops. This included Mrs. Van Oosterom. See Veldhuisen, op. cit., p. 50.

colors favored by the court in Yogyakarta: *soga* brown and indigo blue on white.

The woman who wrote these tags was Wilhelmina Frederika van Lawick van Pabst, born in Pasuruan, Java in 1856. She was the daughter of Carel Nicholaas Herbert van Lawick van Pabst (1814-1878), who held several colonial positions before becoming a notary in Yogyakarta. In the 1890s (perhaps commencing a decade or so earlier) she owned a well-known batik workshop in Yogyakarta that produced very high-quality batik *kain panjang* (hip wrappers with a single overall design) for members of the sultan's family and aristocrats as well as *sarong* (hip wrappers with two design fields) for wealthy Dutch and Indo-European residents. About 1899 Wilhelmina was asked to produce samples of Central Javanese batik patterns, particularly "forbidden" or royal ones, for the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900. Sixty-eight samples and other examples of her work are now in the collection of the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam.²³ Several of the batiks in the royal collection, some of which still have van Lawick van Pabst's signature paper associated with them, are almost identical to her sample patterns sent to Paris.²⁴

Another highlight of the collection is a group of very beautiful, finely executed batiks probably acquired during the 1896 trip. Their designs adhere closely to a well-known composition that is generally believed to be inspired by one style of imported Indian mordant-painted cotton *palempore* (hangings): a flowering tree, often rising from a small hillock or showing roots, with elaborately patterned flowers, over-scaled foliage and birds.²⁵ The royal collection is fortunate to have such outstanding

²³ Information on van Lawick van Pabst comes from Marjan Groot, *Women in Design in the Netherlands 1880-1940*, Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2007, pg.278, note 82 citing as her source: *Ook Zwaardemaker-Visscher*, 1898, p.248 and Ittie van Hout, ed., *Batik—Drawn in Wax*, Amsterdam, 2001, pp. 15, 24, 147 and 170-171. See also Veldhuisen, op. cit., p. 98, who quotes a passage mentioning a batik sarong from Miss W.F. van Lawick van Pabst from Yogyakarta in blue and brown presented at the 1906 Yaarmarkt (Year Market) in Surabaya where many batik entrepreneurs showed their latest work.

²⁴ Ittie van Hout, op. cit., p. 24.

²⁵ Robyn Maxwell, *Textiles of Southeast Asia*, Melbourne, 1990, pp. 340-349.

examples of this style, once a specialty of the town of Lasem on the North Coast.

Lastly, a large group of batiks signed “J. Jans” purchased during the 1901 visit from the batik seller from Pekalongan. King Rama V was known for buying multiple examples of things that interested him—whether it was woven bamboo hats (from a French-owned factory in Java where he ordered 200 as gifts²⁶) or all the batiks by the workshop of Mrs. Jans that the itinerant merchant had with him. There are 8 sarongs in the collection signed by J. Jans, all of which are in predominately white, blue and red and all have their original glazing (polishing with egg white and a shell or stone); evidence they were purchased new. These sarongs also are to Indo-European and European taste showing lacey borders, love birds, cupids, European flower baskets, and ribbon bows. It is obvious from seeing this group that her workshop would produce a number of sarongs at a time by mixing combinations of field and border patterns.

A.F.J. Veenstra (J. Jans) was born on Java of Dutch parents. She married a young Dutch solicitor, Theodor J. Jans and settled in Pekalongan. After her husband died in 1885, she began to sign her batiks “Wed. J. Jans” (the Dutch abbreviation of *weduwe* or widow). Around 1900 she returned to signing her batiks J. Jans.²⁷ Stylistically, these batiks date from around the turn of the century and they have Mrs. Jans’ post-1900 signature; thus they could only have been bought on His Majesty’s last trip. Based on the entry in the king’s diary, vendors would distribute batiks with their distinctively colorful style from towns like Lasem

²⁶ Suharto, op. cit., p. 122.

²⁷ Harmen Veldhuisen in Rens Heringa and Harmen Veldhuisen, *Fabric of Enchantment: Batik from the North Coast of Java*, Los Angeles: 1996, p.72-73.

and Pekalongan on the coast to cities with large and affluent Dutch and Indo-European populations such as Semarang and Bandung.

Much research remains to be done on this long-hidden royal collection before it can be presented to the public. It is hoped that through the research by the staff of the Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles, new information and insight about batik during this important period will be gained and King Chulalongkorn's "hidden" collection will once again be put to its original purpose—to educate, compare and enjoy.