

# Trading Hands & Trade Secrets

## A BATIK COLLABORATION

by Leesa Hubbell

Over 3,000 hand-dyed fabrics for quilters—dip-dyed mandalas, pole-wrapped shibori, potato dextrin crackle, heliographic sun-prints, marbled and air-brushed textures—were available on Lunn Fabrics Web site between 1996 and 2004. Debra Lunn and Michael Mrowka dyed several hundred thousand yards of inventory themselves, and their hands (and bodies) were feeling it.

So when Robert Kaufman Fabrics suggested that they revisit an old design partnership, they agreed. But this time, instead of designing printed fabric from the Lunn creative center in Lancaster, Ohio, they would be using all the dyeing skills they had acquired over 30 years to collaborate with Javanese batik artisans—in the Republic of Indonesia.

A former client had sent them to the city of Solo in central Java in 2003 to upgrade their line of batik fabrics, so the Lunnns (as they are known) were already familiar with Javanese batik and mass production methods. When they first arrived, neither had done any batik—a wax resist process—since high school, but the complex layers of stamped wax pattern and mottled color were easily deconstructed by this couple who thoroughly understand the concept of resists and who think in dyes.

Already acclimated to the high humidity and the intensely polite social manner of the Solonese—and with plenty of talented Javanese asking to work with them—the Lunnns were perfectly poised to jumpstart *Artisan Batiks* for Robert Kaufman.

But first some batik background. Americans working alongside Indonesians to create batik for Western markets is not news. Inger McCabe Elliot, founder of China Seas, Inc., fabrics for interior design, started working in Java in the late 1960s, just as word was spreading that Bali was the fantasy island paradise at the end of the hippie trail. Other entrepreneurial travelers soon started making clothing from available “traditional” batik and selling it at home to finance their return to Bali’s beaches.

What fans of the contemporary batik nicknamed *Balis* may not know is that the copper stamp (called a *cap* and pronounced “chop”) process and its skilled practitioners come from Java.



SPIRAL CELEBRATION, 59" x 59", by Debra Lunn. RIGHT: Finished wavy-stripe batik cloth.

Batik-making migrated one island east to Bali in the 1980s when Javanese artisans set up workshops around Denpasar, the capital city, to meet the demand for batik *pareo* (fringed rayon beach wraps) that were being exported by the container load to Brazil, South Africa, and North America.

It was in these workshops—where thermometers and precise instruments for measuring dyestuff were rarely used—that the free-form Bali batik style emerged. Surfers and other innocents who had naively begun to manufacture clothing to support a tropical lifestyle soon found out how difficult it was to achieve consistent color in the fluctuating humidity and sunlight of the monsoon season, with or without careful measurements. As literal truckloads of batik clothing were rejected due to irregularities, some began collaborating with the Javanese dyers to invent techniques and dye effects that were one-of-a-kind and inconsistent by design—and marketed as such. Bali batik was born.

Bali Fabrications may have been the first to offer this batik at quilt shows in the mid-1980s when interest in specialty fabric for quilters started to gather momentum. Hoffman California International Fabrics has been creating the most consistently spectacular stamped batik and hand paints specifically for quilters since the early 1990s. As both quilting supply store owners and their customers know, a long list of companies now features a dizzying array of batik fabrics of varying quality and aesthetic appeal. They are produced in Bali and Java as well as India, China, the Philippines, and Malaysia. There are even remarkable fakes printed in Korea.

What the Lunns bring to the already crowded table at this banquet of batik is their ongoing mission to identify and produce what is not available for quilters—and their intense appetite for innovation. Debra Lunn started dyeing solid gradations of color in her kitchen sink and was the first vendor to offer them at quilt shows. When larger companies (or other quilters) start producing the same thing, the Lunns move on to another bright idea. “Quiltmakers are painting with fabric so they need a huge range of visual effects,” Michael explains. “We look to produce what is missing in a palette for quilters. Our business has always been based on that goal.”

Thus they went to Solo with unusual skills, both artistic and interpersonal. There they encountered interesting problems like how to train their Javanese collaborators to see what they see and to think critically about quality. They asked everyone from *cap* and dye workers to managers and sales staff what they needed to know and how they would like to receive instructions. Then they began solving problems by developing specialized diagrams for each color application and for the finished look, helping all involved visualize the goal of consistent, high quality batik fabric. To strengthen the partnership with their Indonesian colleagues, both Debra and Michael are rapidly learning the common language of the Indonesian archipelago (Bahasa Indonesia), as well as some Javanese, the extremely complex and hierarchical local language.

## The *cap*-making process



A master *cap* maker sculpts individual copper motif elements and secures them onto a copper grid.



The copper motif elements, stamped across the cloth, must conform to a desired pattern sketch.



A sampling of finished *caps* showcases the *cap* maker's skill and artistry.

# The batik-making process



1. Yardage is dyed with base color, then smocked by hand before color effects are created with brushes, squeeze bottles, or sponges.



5. Master dyer Bambang Widodo inspects fabric for consistent quality of motif and color.



2. A *cap* artisan stamps mottled yardage with hot wax motifs.



6. After re-smocking and adding another layer of mottled color, an artisan applies soda ash to enhance the texture.



3. Close-up of *cap* process with wax stamped foreground and unstamped background



7. Wax is removed by submerging yardage in boiling water.



4. The dark mottled background is bleached out but preserved under waxed areas.



8. Debra Lunn and Michael Mrowka pose in front of finished batik yardage created for Robert Kaufman fabrics.

The Lunnns are sharing their signature techniques for making marbled, tie-dyed and dip-dyed yardage, and one-of-a-kind mandalas so that Javanese hands can replace their own. Dyers and *cap* stampers are usually men, but women are learning to do the tying. These wax-free processes help solve the problem of what to do during the rainy season when humidity and lack of sunlight skew quality. Less successful pieces are stamped with wax motifs and over-dyed in the ongoing spirit of experimentation and discovery.

The giving goes both ways. The Lunnns have been thoroughly schooled in how the copper stamps are made. With the weight of copper limiting the size and the flow of hot wax limiting design intricacy, they had to learn how to design motifs in the size and repeat structure that will yield the pattern they want. Since expert *cap* makers are not being replaced by the next generation, Michael is researching new materials and modes of *cap* production—such as laser or computer-aided devices—that will retain the handmade quality, withstand the hot wax, and cut down on the repeated-motion shoulder injuries that *cap* men suffer.

Everyone from Evie Ashworth, the design director at Robert Kaufman, to Bambang Widodo, a Javanese master dyer, contributes ideas for motifs, colors, and themes so that new *Artisan Batik* fabrics are ready for market five times a year. The Lunnns and Widodo are constantly on the lookout for ways to crossbreed surface design techniques and new dye effects with secret Javanese wax recipes and expertise. The result is a multi-process, labor-intensive artisanal textile, available to quilters at about the same price as machine-printed fabric.

The Lunnns' presence in Solo is perceived as "fertile ground" for new growth and prosperity in Java, where unemployment hovers around 30 percent. Three different production factories for *Artisan Batiks* are now up and running, and

150 batik-related positions have been either sustained or created. As orders pour in, that capacity needs to double. The House of Batik Danar Hadi, established in Solo in 1967, has granted them access to private resources like historical *cap* and design archives.

The Lunnns bring gas masks, gloves, digital scales, thermometers, and soap to improve health and accuracy issues, but the biggest challenge continues to be effective communication across cultures. "How do we encourage the awareness that excellent work today means more orders tomorrow?" Michael wonders. "Did the artisan 'get it' or is his head just nodding out of politeness? We have to work against cultural conditioning that discourages asking questions and speaking up. And we have to learn how to ask for things in a Javanese way. To calmly request, not impatiently demand. Many Javanese have gotten the impression from television that all Americans are angry, violent, and carry guns." The opportunity for rethinking cultural stereotypes flows in both directions.

"Collaborating with Robert Kaufman and the Javanese," continues Michael, "is the most natural next step in our evolution. We are now working with hundreds of pairs of hands. We are sharing what we know with people who can really benefit from the information."

"We are so pleased that this engagement with batik has become so rich on so many levels, because for us there is too much suffering on the planet to just spend our time making art. And quilters will have handmade fabric choices for less than what they paid when we made it ourselves. We hope to bring some really fine work to the United States and find new markets for it, because batik is an art form that is not fully appreciated."

Those with a deeper interest in the process and its history can read Inger McCabe Elliot's *Batik: Fabled Cloth of Java* and then take a tour of the batik cities of Java: Pekalongan, Cirebon, Yogyakarta, and Solo. Batik is the national costume and treasure. Yogya has a batik research center and Danar Hadi offers batik courses at its flagship gallery in Solo.

Once there, and while bargaining for vintage batik in the Pasar Klewer market, think of the Lunnns. They may be there too, creating fabric quilters will want to use in their next project—before most even know it themselves. ♦

SPIRAL INTERSECTION, 52" x 40",  
by Debra Lunn.

