Bringing Indigo Batik PATTERNS to Clay

by Shana Angela Salaff

Wooden batik stamps stored on the courtyard wall at the Tjok Agung Batik workshop. These stamps also make great tools in the pottery studio.

In the summer of 2012, I travelled to Bali, Indonesia, for a residency at the Gaya Ceramic Art Center (CAC) (www.gayaceramic.com), which is located in Ubud, one of the cultural hubs of the province. Alongside my ceramic studio work, I was given many opportunities to participate in ceremonies and events. To my eyes, these seemed extraordinary and exotic, while to local Balinese they were commonplace. In fact, for the Balinese, who are Hindu, religion is completely integrated into daily life. Each day begins with the *Ibu* (woman) of the household offering blessings to the household sun shrine, and extending that blessing to the dwelling, work areas, and important tools in these areas. Our kilns were blessed daily, and larger ceremonies blessing all the tools were held every six months.

The Gaya CAC studio was a blend of Balinese and Western sensibilities. In the general workspace, I found a number of texture molds and stamps available for use. One of these was a beautifully made 10-inch-square stamp with a raised pattern and wooden strap handle on the back. When I asked where it had come from, Hillary Kane, the CAC director and a ceramic artist with a textile background, explained that students from a recent Gaya workshop exploring ceramics and textiles had visited a local batik shop that used traditional batik and indigo dying techniques. The proprietor, Tjok Agung, had sold some of his handmade stamps to the students and this one was left behind for future students to use (*figure 1*).

Batik is a process where a pattern is painted (or stamped) onto fabric using melted wax, and the fabric is then dyed. The wax acts as a resist, so when the wax is removed with heat, the original fabric color shows in these areas (similar to the process of wax-resist glazing). This process can be repeated with layers of dye, starting with lighter colors and ending with darker ones.

I made good friends with the batik stamp at Gaya CAC, and joked that it was going to end up in my suitcase when I went home. I used it on slabs of clay that became the bottoms of trays for the cruets I was making. I visited Agung's workshop in Pejeng, near Ubud, as soon as I could, and I found it to be an overwhelming experience; one that inspired me throughout my stay. The fabrics I purchased there are a continuing resource.

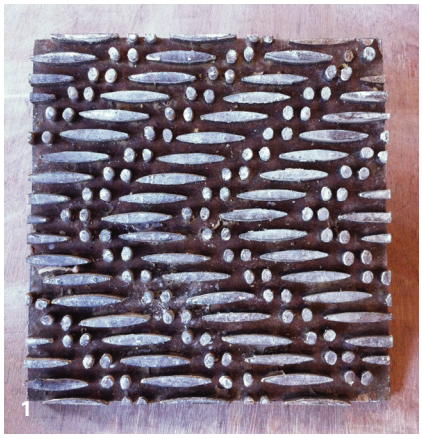
Batik itself is not native to Bali, and indigo dying is not native to Pejeng village, although the Ikat weavers in the Balinese villages of Sidemen and Tenganan use it. When Agung (a relative of the Ubud royal family) decided to develop a batik studio as a cottage industry for Pejeng, he researched the techniques of batik and dying. He eventually imported indigo seeds from Thailand and Sumatra, and donated fields to grow indigo in Pejeng. For the batik and indigo dying techniques, he turned to Java.

Batik Process From Start to Finish

During this visit to the Tjok Agung Indigo studio, Agung's wife (and head salesperson) showed me around the workshop, explaining through an interpreter the various techniques in use. Amazingly, in the same visit, I was able to see the stamps used to make the patterns, the process, and the finished, printed fabrics.

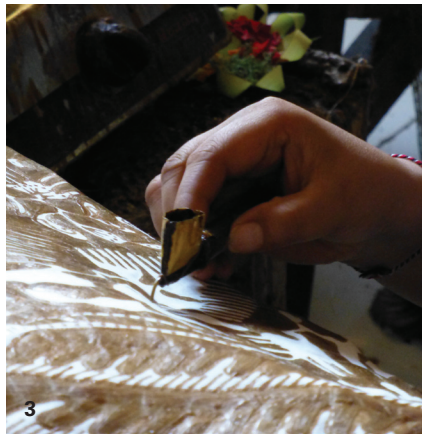
In one room, a group of about ten women applied hot beeswax to sections of fabric stretched out on wooden supports. Some were using brushes to apply the hot wax in geometric patterns (*figure 2*), while others were using a tjanting tool (spelled canting in Bahasa Indonesian) (*figure 3*) to create flowing line work that included an intricate phoenix design (*figure 4*). Traditionally, the women do the handwork using the tjanting, while men work with the stamps, called *cap* (pronounced chap).

Wax-decorated fabric hung on racks to cool along the side of the room (*figure 5*). In another area, finished fabric was ironed to



Wooden batik stamp that was part of the studio tool collection at Gaya CAC.

A worker painting wax onto fabric at Tjok Agung Studio.



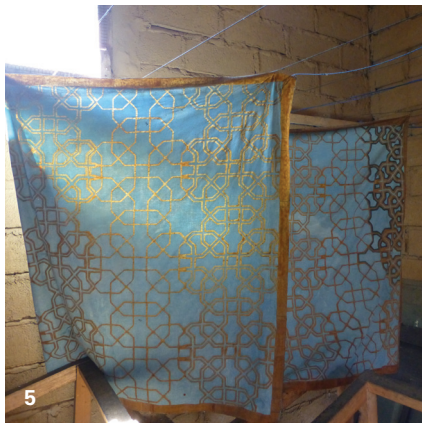
Wax being applied to fabric using a tjanting to create a phoenix pattern.

remove the wax. There were several small showrooms near this work area that contained racks extending from wall to wall that were covered with patterned fabric in a range of materials including cotton, linen, and silk (*figures 6–7*).

All the colors were the subtle tones of natural dyes. I learned that the dark blue came from traditional indigo plant dye. Creating indigo from plant sources involves an extensive fermentation process to create a paste from the raw *Indigofera tinctoria* leaves. Using the indigo plant dye on fabrics requires repeatedly dipping the cloth into the dye vat to achieve the desired intensity. Because of its labor-intensiveness, indigo and other traditional plant dyes result in fabric too expensive for the local population to purchase. However, there is a small movement now in Bali of re-establishing the use of these natural materials (like indigo, persimmon for a golden yellow, and tree barks), which don't pollute the way chemical dyes do.

The workshop's outdoor courtyard is where the dye vats (*figure 8*) as well as the many stamps are stored and used (see image on page 14). In the Indonesian tradition of batik, these stamps are made of copper, and Agung uses many of these (*figure 9*), but he also has quite a few made out of pressboard or Masonite. This is where the men worked, dipping the stamp into the hot melted wax, and applying the stamp to the undyed fabric. Any mistakes such as thin wax or missed areas are filled in by hand afterward. When I returned later in the summer to purchase stamps, it was the wooden ones that Tjok Agung offered me, as these could be easily remade.

Finished fabric showing a detail of the phoenix pattern from figure 3.



Wax-decorated fabrics showcasing a geometric pattern hanging up to cool.

Tjok Agung's Patterns

What I love about Agung's patterns is that there are such a huge variety of influences evident. Some patterns have a local Indonesian feel, while others are distinctly European in style. I was told that Agung researches pattern sources on the Internet. What a great example of contemporary artistic practice—local materials employed with regional technology, using designs sourced globally with contemporary technology!

Although I used the stamp I found in the Gaya CAC workshop many times in Bali, I have not used the ones I brought home. I find them to be beautiful artworks in their own right and enjoy having them as visual reminders of my trip.

For ceramic artists interested in patterns from Batik stamps, sources abound. Fragments or full examples of traditional Indonesian stamps are now widely available on eBay, as well as many more from other Eastern cultures such as Thailand and Cambodia. Most prevalent are the carved, wooden, textile printing stamps from India. Import shops sometimes have small wooden stamps created just for resale that are fairly inexpensive (*figure 10*). Larger stamps can sometimes be found in such shops, but the truly antique ones that have actually been in use and are complete, are expensive. The stamp fragments are the cheapest, as they can't be used for their intended purpose and are smaller and easier to ship.

Using Batik Stamps on Clay

Working on soft clay slabs with batik stamps is fairly easy as long as the clay surface isn't sticky. Be sure to rub off any clay attached to the stamp each time you make an impression, as intricate stamps tend to clog up quickly. Metal stamps tend to stick more than wooden ones; either use slightly firmer clay or apply a thin layer of cornstarch to the clay first. With larger stamps, use a gentle rocking motion to release the stamp upward without tearing the slab. If the stamp is small, you can press it into the clay from above. For larger stamps,

Wooden stamp used to create the batik pattern on the fabric in image 7.

Finished batik patterned fabrics hanging in the Tjok Agung Indigo showroom.

The courtyard at the workshop showing drying fabric and the indigo dye vats.

try rolling the clay over the stamp instead. Fragmented stamps can also be used on wheel-thrown work when it is still soft but not sticky. The type of mark made depends upon the thickness of the raised areas of the stamp. When not in use, keep stamps clean and protected with a soft cloth.

Other decorating techniques can be combined with the impressed patterns. Slip or underglaze can be inlaid into the pattern or can be brushed across to highlight it. After bisque firing, thin underglaze or stain can be brushed over the whole surface and then wiped away from raised areas to accentuate the patterns.

Other suggestions: use the stamps as actual stamps. Brush color over the pattern and apply it as a monoprint to flat slabs of clay. You could also try using a stamp for its original purpose: to apply wax resist.

Think of batik stamps as texture tools that have a history, a culture, and an artistic heritage attached to them. The character of the stamp will be transferred to your work, but the more you add on to it, the further it will get from its culture of origin. By doing a little research into the textiles made in the same area your stamp came from, you'll be sure to find some other great patterns!

Resources

Tjok Agung Indigo: tjokagung-indigo.com.

Threads of Life: (threadsoflife.com) a store showcasing Indonesian craft textiles, including Tjok Agung's work.

Shana Salaff, a frequent contributor to Pottery Making Illustrated, *is an artist and instructor living in Fort Collins, Colorado. To see more of her work, visit www.shanasalaff.com.*

One of Tjok Agung's copper batik stamps with an intricate floral design.

Small Indian batik stamps created just for resale that are available at import shops.

Blackie Cruet and Tray, oxidation-fired cone 10 stoneware. The inside bottom of the tray was textured using the stamp shown in figure 1. When the thrown components were still wet, the studio dog, Blackie, jumped up upon the table and got his claws into them. Instead of trying to remove the claw-marks, I continued them around the rim to create the impressed pattern. I then congratulated Blackie on his excellent suggestion!