INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BEB-19

Waxing Eloquent

Jalan Seno IV/5
Tebet Barat
Jakarta Selatan
Indonesia

19 August 1983

Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover NH 03755

Dear Peter,

Trihono was not always a batik artist.

When he came to the court town of Yogyakarta from Semarang in the early 1960's it was to live in his late father's house. Located in Yogya's palace district, off Ngasem Road, Trihono's new abode presented a deceptively modest face to the world, a wall of weathered brown planks, little different from those of the decrepit shop-houses on either side. Behind this worn exterior lay a rambling, somewhat ramshackle complex of bamboo-weave and tile pavilions, criss-crossed by muddy alleys, sun-drenched atriums, dank nooks, crannies and mossy paths. Most of the compound had long been rented to tenants, save for a single bare room, Trihono's room, at the back.

From here, Trihono worked as a book-seller for Penerbit Tarate, a Bandung educational publisher, peddling primary and secondary school texts in a territory that stretched from Yogya in central Java, to Semarang in the north, to the neighboring island of Bali in the east. For pleasure, and occasional profit, he raised song birds, burung perketut, kept in cages under the eaves or hoisted high above the roof on long bamboo poles, like those of his neighbors. For a time Trihono prospered, until the Sukarno regime fell in 1965 and with it the fortunes of Penerbit Tarate. Stocked with books ideologically out of step with the changing times, the firm found itself bereft of customers. The new Suharto government had turned elsewhere for contract publishers.Trihono, with stacks of unsold books for company (they are with him still) turned elsewhere for sustenance. He turned to art. He turned to batik.

Batik is one of the most ancient of the Indonesian textile arts, a process that employs melted wax (or less commonly, flour or peanut paste) to pattern areas of cloth. When dyed, the waxed, "resisted," areas stay uncolored. When boiled or scraped, the cloth is freed of the resist; the pattern remains, often with a charecteristic network of fine, threadlike lines, the result of cracks in the wax.

Whether batik evolved and spread from a single source or developed independently in several places is uncertain. Historically, the art has been practiced at one time or another in Europe, Asia and Africa and is currently found in China, Japan, West Africa, the Indian sub-continent and Southeast Asia. Batik

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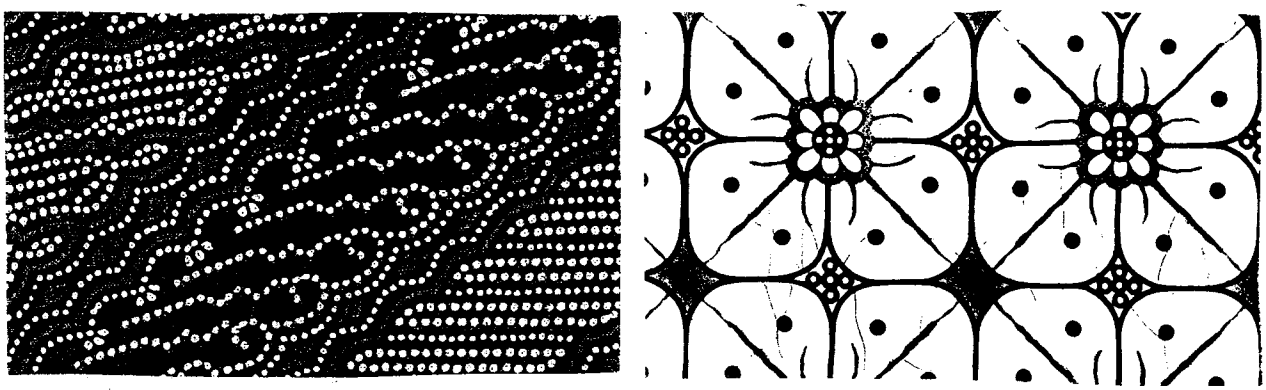
techniques have been exported from these regions to Europe, North and South America and Australia.

The best known Indonesian batik is from Java, whose earliest recorded examples date from the sixteenth century. Developed over many hundreds of years, Javanese batik became an integral component of that island's stratified, syncretic, Indic-Islamic culture, incorporating a rich, convoluted vocabulary of color and design, heavy with meaning. Certain batik designs were used to ensure fertility. Others were employed in marriage and birth rituals. Still others became the appanage of royalty; symbols and sources of divine power. Production was considered a spiritual discipline,requiring meditative concentration for proper results.

Batik blossomed with the introduction of European milled cloth in the seventeenth century, reaching unprecedented heights of aesthetic and technical sophistication in the central Javanese courts of Yogya and Solo. There, batik production became the exclusive preserve of the court women, who labored for months at a time with a spouted, copper crucible, the pen-like canting, to produce a single tulis ("writing") cloth. Their designs were remarkable for their intricacy and fine detail. Some work was farmed out to peasant women in the surrounding villages, who may have also produced less onerous designs for their own use.

Dyeing, mostly by men, required weeks and months of repeated immersion in vats of natural colorants to produce the rich indigo blues, soga browns and creamy whites that became the hallmarks of central Javanese batik. Along the north coast of Java, a related, but different style of batik developed, reflective of that region's more cosmopolitan coastal mixture of Javanese, Chinese,Arab and Malay. Here were indigo and soga, and the flowing parang and kawung patterns of central Java, but also greens, yellows and brilliant reds, birds, trees, flowers and people, a polychrome phantasmagoria of flora and fauna. Cirebon, Semarang, Pekalongan, even Jakarta, became known for their batik styles.

In the nineteenth century, batik underwent a series of minor revolutions. Although stamped resist-cloth, produced with wooden

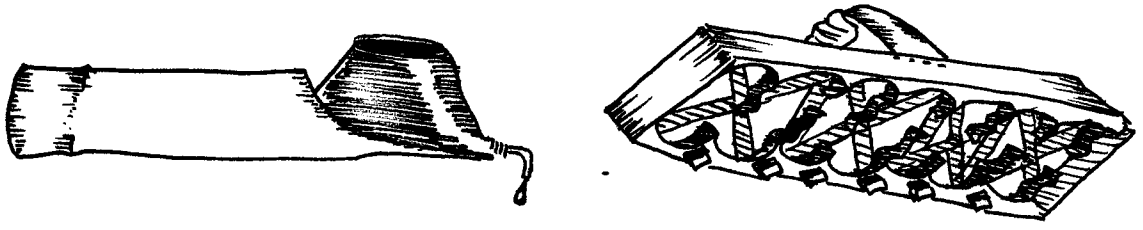


1. Javanese batik patterns, parang and kawung.

blocks in southern Sumatera and parts of Java, had existed contemporaneously with tulis, little headway was made with the stamp technique until the introduction of the copper cap in the 1840's. Soldered from strips of sheet copper and bits of wire, caps were dipped into shallow pans of hot wax and from there stamped onto one or both sides of the cloth to produce the design. Repetitive monochrome patterns could be made with a single cap, more complex polychrome designs required as many as thirty caps. Waxing time was reduced from weeks to hours. The introduction of aniline dyes from Europe at the end of the century wrought further changes, enlarging the color vocabulary and reducing the dyeing time, again from weeks to hours. To take advantage of the new technology, batik "factories" were set up, often under Chinese ownership, staffed primarily by young Javanese men. Cap waxed and artificially dyed batik soon became the major form of batik. Tulis waxing and natural dyeing, though still popular among the aesthetic cogniscenti, were, for most, expensive anachronisms.

Up until this time, batik had suffered little from imported competition. Though Java had extensive commerce with foreign textile traders, their fabrics had never proved a serious challenge to the local product. The introduction of cheap Japanese cotton textiles in the 1930's and 1940's, however, was a different story. Like Indian chintz before it, batik could not offer much competition to a cheaper fabric with a similar look to that segment of the population whose concern was not authenticity, but price. In the years before and during World War Two, that segment included just about everyone on Java. The batik industry collapsed, recovering only slowly after the war.

By the late 1960's, when Trihono entered the scene, the Javanese batik industry had come to be dominated by a few large marketing combines - Batik Keris, Batik Semar and others - heirs to the little batik factories of yore. The factories remained (Yogya still has about 900), but had not the capital or the connections for large-scale marketing. The batik giants had no such limitations: supplied by their own workshops and independent producers, these juggernauts aggressively and successfully purveyed their labels at outlets throughout the archipelago and abroad. Their wares included batik sarongs, slendangs (scarfs), and other traditional wear, but also batik kaftans, shirts, swimsuits,



2. A canting and a cap.

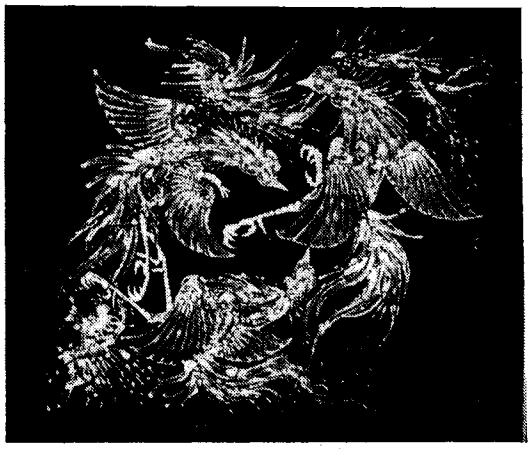
curtains, bedspreads and yardage. Though most batik factories produced some expensive, high-quality tulis, the bulk of the produce was cap. The emphasis was on volume turnover, a struggle against the plethora of printed batik imitations that each year copied the original more closely, more convincingly, cracks and all. For the cheapest batik, it was a losing battle: much of the audience for this down-market product could no longer distinguish real batik from batik imitations. The one sure-fire method, checking the back of the cloth to see whether the pattern had been printed on the front surface or had been dyed through, became obsolete when an Indonesian textile factory, Delapan Satu, introduced imitation batik cloth printed with "soak-through" Procion dyes. This product looked, to most, like tulis but sold for the price of cap. Mass-produced batik was vanquished, though the death throes continue still.

Trihono's first batik endeavor was a dismal failure: his low-volume, high-quality batik cap proved uncompetitive. After a brief production run, his small batik factory languished. The caps, like their antecedents, the school texts, were stored in one of his many back room cupboards, a home for ageing companions from the past.

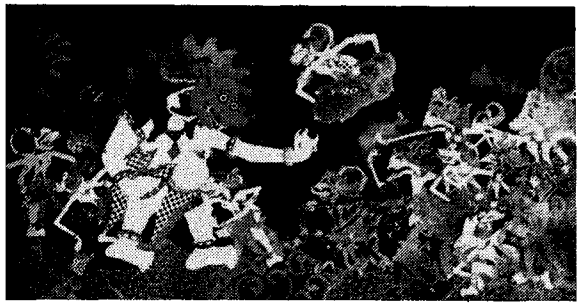
Chagrined, but not beaten, Trihono turned to the one batik avenue left, tulis, then undergoing a rennaissance of sorts in the fledgling art of batik painting. Here, finally, was a pictorial batik form, an ideal medium for Trihono's refined sense of color and two-dimensional design and his love of the Ramayana. In time it also provided an outlet for his sense of humor and social conscience. It was also profitable. By the end of the 1960's, after a series of on-consignment displays in friends' galleries, Trihono had gathered enough cash to open his own studio. The tenants moved out, and he was able to turn his entire home over to the production and sale of batik. For a name he turned to his former employer, the book publisher. He christened his home Studio Tarate: the Lotus Studio.

Batik painting, though still a young art form, had already produced a bevy of internationally-recognized artists. Bambang Oetero was the acknowledged Javanese progenitor; his first experiments in batik painting dated from 1951, when he was working at Yogyakarta's Batik Research Institute. His work centered on the traditional triad of soga, indigo and white, and employed both canting and brush to produce a fluid, organic style that was to batik painting what Goudi was to architecture. Painting and teaching, combined with income from contract building, supported Oetero's family handsomely in the south Yogya village of Babadan. Exhibitions had taken his work to the United States, Australia, South Africa, New Zealand, Canada, Japan, Syria, Holland, Belgium and Sweden. Bambang himself had traveled to the United States, Australia and New Zealand to lecture at universities and art institutes. He was Yogya's best-known batik artist.

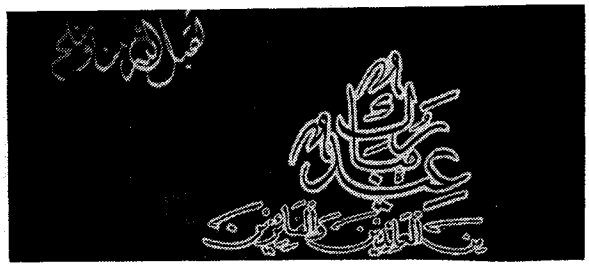
Following Bambang's lead. other artists had taken up the batik painting medium. Kuswadji, a lecturer at ASRI, the Yogyakarta fine art academy, began batik painting in 1957. Unlike Bambang, who did mostly



3. A cockfight by Bambang Oetero.



4. A Ramayana scene by Kuswadji. Here, Hanuman, Rama, Lesmana and their armies fight Kumbakarna and the other denizens of Alengka.



5. A Kufic batik by Amri Yahya.

genre scenes of cockfights, ox-carts, padi fields and villages, plus an occasional abstract, Kuswadji concentrated on scenes from the Ramayana and Mahabaratha, the two epic Hindu poems that have provided the basis for most of Java's Indic literature, dance, drama and monumental architecture. Kuswadji worked in the wayang kulit shadow-puppet theater style of abstracted figurative representation, using traditional colors. He later expanded his chromatic repertoire, using splashed Indigosol dyes to produce a rather garish blending of greens, violets, crimsons and yellows. And he trained his entire family in the wayang technique and its derivatives. Sons, daughters, nephews, cousins and the occasional outsider, all showed their work in Kuswadji's gallery. Like Bambang, he also exhibited extensively overseas.

Amri Yahya was, monetarily, the most successful of the batik painting pioneers. He was also the youngest. Born in 1939, he graduated from ASRI in 1963 and quickly established himself as Yogya's premier batik "abstract expressionist," if such a term can be applied to such a controlled and procedurally rigid medium. Vibrant, kinetic, colossal, his paintings sold for as much as two thousand dollars each during the 1960's, five to ten times as much as those of his competitors. Most of his work, oddly enough, was titled lebak, "swamp," said to be a reference to Amri's rural childhood. Much of Amri's work proved particularly popular in the Middle East, where, because of Islamic prohibitions, figurative representation was still frowned upon. Though advertised as expressions of Islamic piety, his recent series of Kufic batiks, Koranic writing on a field of non-representational color, were no doubt also canny thrusts at this profitable Muslim market. Like many of his competitors, Amri also designed batik yardage that was executed by canting-equipped assistants; such fabric was some of the first "designer batik", abstract and non-representational patterns for the kaftan-and-pillowcase market.

Though other Yogyakarta artists tried their hand at batik painting in the years following Bambang Oetero's initial experiments, it was he, with Kuswadji and Amri, that saw the most obvious success and thus structured the route for those that followed. With their expensive homes, fancy studios, well-attended classes and far-flung reputations, these three artists were the obvious models for the hordes of cut-rate imitators that began to appear in Yogya's Taman Sari district in the late 1960's and 1970's. This was the era of Yogya's waxing popularity as a tourist destination, particularly among young drifter-travelers, the "nomads from affluence" that brought in their wake rock music, relaxed moral standards, guacamole and smoothees, cheap cotton clothing, and a passion for hashhish, psilocybin mushrooms and low-cost souvenirs.

Inexpensive, atmospheric and culturally sophisticated, Yogyakarta was the ideal Exotic Town, a tropical Kathmandu chock-full of dusty lanes, crumbling palace walls, aqueducts, padi fields, markets and picturesque views of smoking Mount Merapi, a nearby volcano. Yogya had a functioning court, the kraton, gamelan, shadow play, dance troupes and of course batik. An hour's drive from the famed Borobudur, a Buddhist monument, Yogya was also near Prambanam, a Hindu temple complex that was the backdrop for the Sendratari Ramayana, a four-night,open-air dance-drama designed to bring the Ramayana reliefs of Candi Loro Jonggrang (the main temple) "to life." Held during each of the five months of the dry season, this theatrical extravaganza required over 600 dancers, two gamelans, prodigious amounts of electricity for spot-lighting and sound, plus plenty of wood and kerosene, the pyrotechnic trim. The show, begun in 1961,packed Yogya's hotels and losmens (hostels) each season. Every evening visitors would head east on buses and colts (mini-buses) to Prambanam; each day they would hit the streets of Yogya, in search of souvenirs.

To service this latter pursuit, souvenir shops and vendors sprang up throughout the city like toadstools, choking the sidewalks with their fecundity. Leather-goods, a Yogya specialty, were popular among the foreigners. So were mass produced wayang kulit puppets. So were tee shirts. So was batik.

By the 1970's the Taman Sari batik painting community was almost 1000 strong. The tourist income was spread thin: each artist scraped by with an occasional sale, each looked to the sales of his peers to determine what was safe and sure-fire. Few Indonesians ever purchased the work. The artists were serviced by a mafia of becak* drivers and "guides" that led tourists from one shop to another ("my sister's shop"), exacting upon the artist a ten percent commission for each painting sold. Even unaccompanied tourists were often closely followed by these parasites to ensure that all spoils were properly divided. For the recalcitrant, revenge was swift and terrible: the artist was black-listed by the guides and his studio trashed with grafitti and excrement.

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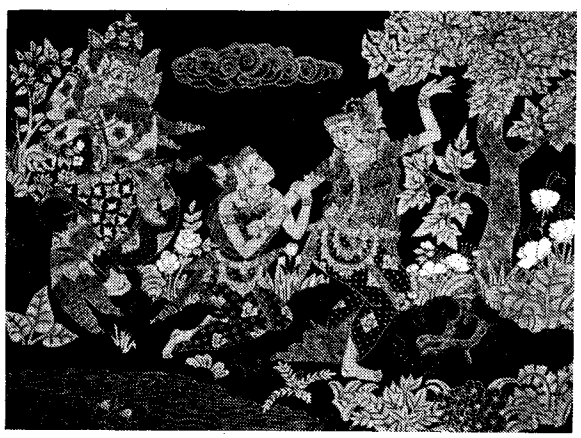
* a type of three-wheeled pedi-cab, ubiquitous in Southeast Asia.

The tourists came, en masse. The Taman Sari artists were ready, en masse, with their Kuswadji Ramayana wayang scenes, their Bambang Oetero bullock carts, their Amri Yahya abstracts, some complete with signatures. The original artists protested such flagrant plagiarism and forgery, to no avail: Indonesia recognizes no copyright laws. News of one artist's hot-selling theme, color-scheme or design quickly spread through the Taman Sari; yesterday's one of a kind batik original became today's bargain special and tomorrow's factory reject. Some "artists" (by now a rather loose term) sped this process along with hastily created batik caps of best sellers, enabling them to stamp out and sell hundreds of "original" paintings at a time, a technique more akin to saturation bombing than art.

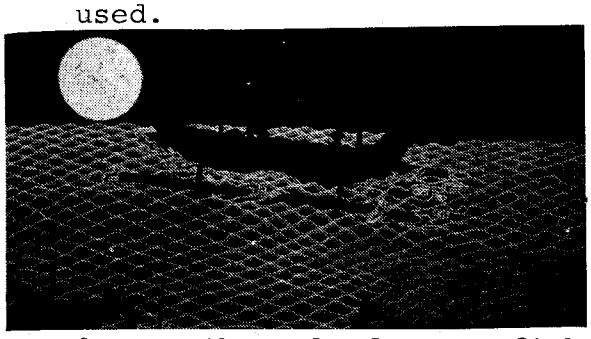
Trihono was not one of the elite triad of Yogya's Batik Brahmins, neither was he kin to the Sudras of the Taman Sari. A latecomer to the batik painting scene, he soon developed a style admirably suited to the batik medium; flat and intricate. He was partial to Ramayana scenes, only partially because of their marketability. These were painted with iconographic exactitude and made stylisitic reference to both wayang kulit and the Prambanam reliefs. Trihono also produced an occasional genre scene: a Yogya market, a bird-singing contest or simple,elegant landscapes. His style proved popular with visitors and was soon widely imitated, signature and all. Though such flattery was entree enough into Yogya's batik elite, Trihono did not purchase the requisite studio and marble-jacketed home. He did exhibit, however, in the Netherlands, in Germanay, in the USA, Jakarta and Kalimantan. He attracted a coterie of, oddly, Balinese artists that lived with him at Studio Tarate: Puspa, Made, Agung and Dewo, each spending a few years learning and painting before heading off to independent careers in art and other fields. More transient were the foreign tourists, at first a trickle, then a flood, that visited the studio for a week to three months to learn the secrets of the art. Trihono's gentle manner, patient instruction and insistence on only a few students at a time made him a popular teacher. The foreign stream eventually eventually brought Trihono the batik community's most profitable, if not most coveted, accolade: mention in a late 1970's tourist guide as one of "the" batik studios to visit. Trihono's name was secure.

Trihono's style, like that of all batik artists, is closely related to his technique, an updated version of the traditional dark-to-light method of dyeing and scraped method of wax removal. In the old days (and in some contemporary batik factories), all areas of cloth that would eventually be either white or brown were waxed; the cloth was then dyed indigo blue. Subsequently, areas to become brown were scraped free of wax and the cloth dyed again. The still waxed area retained the original white (or cream) color. Areas of both brown and blue dye turned a rich, velvety black. Trihono's method uses the same colors in the same order, but employs two types of resist, <u>hard wax</u> and <u>soft wax</u> that are differently affected by a mild solution of



6. A Trihono Ramayana scene: Rawana, Trijata and Shinta in Rawana's kingdom, Alengka; the mottled technique has been used.

7. A Trihono Ramayana scene: Rawana and Rama fight in the skies over Alengka; the mottled technique has been used.



8. A Trihono landscape: fishing boats at sea; an example of the dye-and-bleach technique.

caustic soda. Trihono's soft wax, applied to areas that will eventually be brown, dissolves in the caustic soda and can be rubbed off with a tooth brush. His hard wax, on the other hand, is impervious to the solution; this resist is applied to areas that will remain white. To be doubly sure that no dye can reach these areas, wax is applied to both sides of the cloth. After waxing, dyeing and resist removal, the cloth displays flat areas of white, blue and black, but mottled regions of golden-brown. This soft, mottled effect is achieved by repeated treatments with caustic soda interspersed with red-brown and golden-brown dye baths. This mottled brown, though similar to the technique used by Bambang Oetero, has become a Trihono trademark.

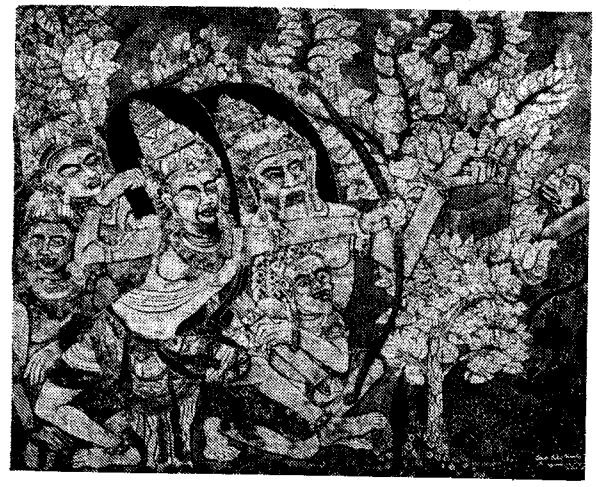
Trihono also makes use of other batik techniques. One method, developed by Trihono for the Balinese artist Madé, employs hard and soft wax applied, pointillist style, with layer upon layer of fine dots. As the waxing progresses the cloth is dyed in baths of successively darker colors: first yellow, then green, red, blue, brown, black, and so on. The end result looks rather like the work of Serat, though Madé's subject matter tends towards Balinese market scenes and dance masks. Madé has now left Studio Tarate, but the pointillist technique has been carried on by Dewo, an ASRI student. He uses this method to create batik reproductions of the Prambanam Ramayana reliefs. His references Xerox reproductions of Western art-book photos.

Yet a third Trihono method involves immersing an un-resisted cloth in dye, then drawing the outlines in wax, then bleaching the cloth white. The resisted areas remain colored, a batik line drawing. The cloth can be left as is, or waxed and dyed with either of the other technique

9. Lesmana shoots the golden deer, the kijang, for Shinta, Rama's wife. Dewo used Balinese-style figures and iconography and Trihono's mottled technique to produce this batik.

10. A market scene by Madé, using Trihono's pointillist technique.

11. Shinta and Hanuman, as painted by Puspa using Balinese-style figures and iconography.

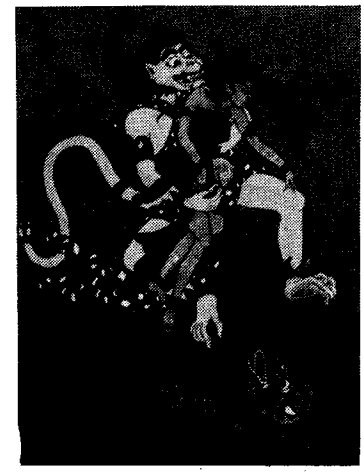


12. Rama, Lesmana and other Ramayana characters as depicted in Dewo's rendition of a Pranbanam relief, using the pointillist technique.

Such continual experimentation has made Trihono a master of *waxing* and dyeing technique; he is now much sought after for technical instruction by Indonesian and foreign artists and art teachers. Local artists, however, shun Studio Tarate; not one of the Taman Sari painters has attended Trihono's relatively inexpensive courses (at US$20 per week, less than a tenth of the price asked by the Batik Research Institute for their technical batik course), though many have attempted to duplicate Trihono's methods. Perhaps they fear Trihono's fate: his continual exposure to exotic dye formulas has sensitized his skin. Only small amounts of some dyes now produce allergic hives and rashs.Or perhaps the other artists dislike Trihono's refusal to pay the guides their customary ten percent (his studio has been vandalized more than once in retaliation). To avoid the extorters, he now works mostly by commission; gallery sales are made in the back rooms of the studio, away from prying eyes.

In recent years, Trihono's social conscience has begun to assert itself. He still does his Ramayana scenes, his genre paintings, his landscapes; They are, after all, the bulk of his art sales. Now, however, he also does an occasional bit of batik social commentary. Such paintings sell rarely but are some of Trihono's most satisfying work, a far-cry from the mass-produced decorations of his neighbors. Only Amri Yahya's abstracted reactions to Israel's invasion of Lebanon and other big-ticket news items come close Trihono's thoughtful social critiques.But, whereas Amri's social abstracts are still essentially decorative, Trihono's commentaries are, like good political cartoons, topical and poignant.

13. Trihono's rendition of Hanuman, the monkey-god, fighting the Pasa Naga, the arrow of Rawana.



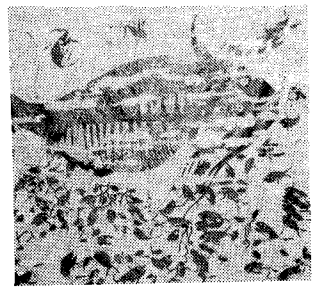
14. This batik depicts a peculiarly Javanese Ramayana-related tale: Hanuman, lusting for Shinta's attendant, Trijata, whisks her from Alengka. While flying across the sea, however, his hormones get the better of him and he ejaculates. The semen falls into the sea where it is swallowed by a fish; her subsequent children are monsters, the ika triangga, half monkey, half fish.

15. The bird market is one of Trihono's latest efforts. Commissioned by a German tourist, the piece has thus far reached only the waxing stage. Here, Trihono has chosen to depict a typical Javanese event, heightening the contrast between tradition and modernity: most of the haggling males wear dress now seen only rarely outside of the courts and marriage ceremonies. The children wear modrn shorts; one is bare-chested, the other sports a Total Solar Eclipse tee shirt, detailed below.

Much of Trihono's social commentary is subliminated within hardly noticeable juxtapositions of modernity and tradition, the present and the past, the urban sophisticate and country bumpkin. In his as-yet-unfinished batik, The Bird Market, for example, he has filled the scene with decorative figures in traditional Javanese dress. Here is a peasant, in straw hat, kerchief and shorts. Next to him stands a bakul, a Javanese female petty entrepeneur, selling jamu, traditional health potions. Men, dressed like kraton courtiers, haggle over birds. Above their heads hangs a lozenge of rattan and metal bird cages, some festooned with decorative covers. A typical Javanese desa (village) home, some palms and vegetation complete the cheery, festive scene. Almost. Also in the crowd are two boys, one in shorts and tee shirt, the other bare-chested. The tee shirt reads Total Solar Eclipse 1983, and is typical of the shirts, posters and other Eclipse paraphernalia that were produced for the June Event over Java and Sulawesi. The tee shirt itself is not remarkable. That it is found in a batik painting, however, is revolutionary. Trihono has taken the typical fantasy batik, crowded with decorative local color, and, with a single tee shirt, transported the scene to present day Java, Enter Reality. Such juxtapositions are everyday Javanese occurences; only Trihono has dared commit them to wax.

Another unfinished Trihono batik flirts with allegory. Called Ikan Memberontak ("The Revolt of the Fishes"), the piece

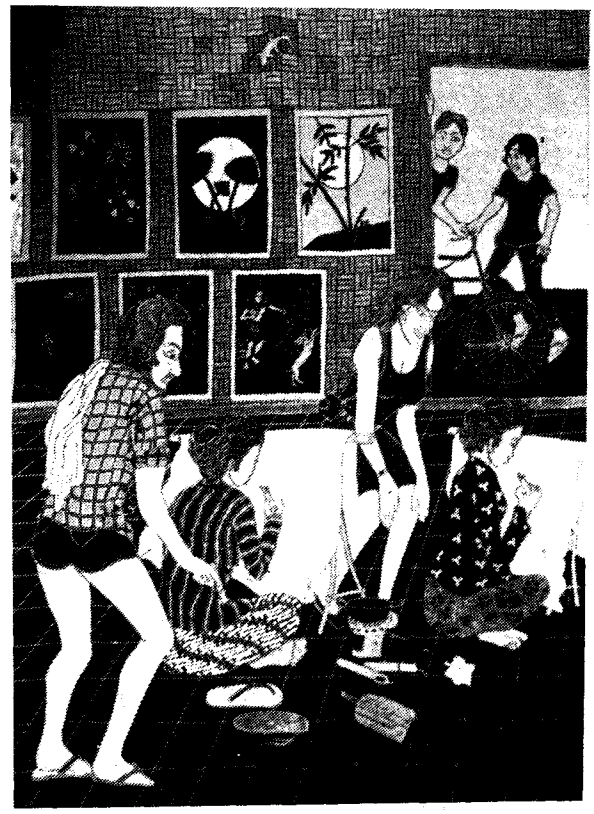
is dominated by a huge, bloated fish, stomach bulging, its single eye wide and staring, like a wayang demon. Its teeth are pointed, cruel and parted, awaiting their next meal. Below this monster is a small army of small fishes. Some nibble at the giant grouper's fins, other chew the scales, a mob of little Davids, helpless alone, but in concert capable of besting this aquatic Goliath.



16. Ikan memberontak

This painting has been at the waxing stage for quite some time. Trihono fears that, once completed, this work could give local officials the wrong idea. "They might think I'm talking about Indonesia." He smiles. "But of course, it's only a story." He knows that the Indonesian government, like most Southeast Asian governments, does not take lightly talk of revolt, even allegorical revolt.* In Indonesia, the political conscience must be tempered with caution.

Trihono had no qualms about completing Mr. Ten Percent, his most important batik statement to date; a commentary on the Taman Sari itself. In this piece, Trihono has depicted his own studio, complete down to the split bamboo walls, the paintings that grace them and the cicaks, ubiquitous lizards of the tropics. A tourist couple has entered, and occupies center stage. Perhaps Australian, perhaps European, possibly American, the two bule (albinos) stand in sandals and shorts, big-nosed, pink-skinned, sandy-haired. The woman, braless, wears a See Bali tank top and camera, her bearded male companion, a checkered shirt and Walkman. The objects of their interest, Trihono's two diminutive female waxing assistants, sit demurely on the floor, busy with cantings, wax and cloth. They wear conventional Javanese dress, the long-sleeved kebaya and sarung. Chaste, subdued and traditional, they provide



17. Mr. Ten Percent

*In monarchal Thailand, the government is not about to let artists incite the masses to riot: Shakespeare's Hamlet, with its royal assasination has been banned.

18. Mr. Ten Percent, detail.

19. Mr. Ten Percent, detail.

didactic contrast to the semi-nude giants towering above. Outside, framed by the studio doorway, are two Javanese boys. One holds a bicycle; the other wears a tee shirt, identifying him as Mr. Ten Percent, a calo (derogative Indonesian for the tout-scalper-guide breed). The duet stare wide-eyed, demon-like, ravenous, insatiable. They await a sale as do vultures carrion.

Trihono is the first to admit that this painting is aesthetically flawed. Unlike most of his work, Mr. Ten Percent is neither graceful nor flat. The figures are stiff, almost clumsy, the perspective skewed. Yet this apparent, if unintentional naivete, detracts little from the story. Rather, Trihono's caricaturizations make the piece work. It is a masterful encapsulation of the symbiotic tourist-artist-guide relationship.

Trihono has received scant reward for such critical thinking, save for the occasional chuckle or two by passing tourists. Mr. Ten Percent has yet to be sold. Painted almost two years ago, the

piece is the Studio's ugly duckling, moving from hook to nail to hallway niche, filling gaps in the gallery as other paintings are finished and sold. Foreign visitors inevitably stop and look at this batik reflection but, just as inevitably, they pass over harsh critique for idealization and myth. Trihono's landscapes, genre scenes and Ramayana vignettes are the universal preferences; scenes where no tourist sets foot. Dreamlike, timeless, decorative, they subsume content within form,as they must to catch the tourist eye. Their Java is an idyll of demons and gods, monkeys and flowers, bird markets and padi fields as yet unsoiled by the tourists' leprous Midas touch. Decorations, not statements, such works are created and bought as ideal souvenirs.

It would be incorrect to say that such decorative works are vapid or empty. They are extensions of the traditional Javanese artistic concern with intricate detail and abstracted, floristic design. Like the Ramayana, such concerns permeate the culture, and it is natural that the Taman Sari artists should choose such forms for their frameable batiks. Unlike their traditional work, however, their batik sarungs, kratons, sculptures and wood carving, batik paintings do not serve any ceremonial religious or metaphysical purpose; nor are many ever bought for decoration by Javanese or other Indonesians. Thus, batik paintings are not really under Javanese artistic control.

Like the sidewalk painters of Sacre Coeur in Paris, the batik painters of Yogyakarta are at the mercy of their market. Their buyers are mostly foreign, mostly tourists, with but superficial knowledge of local culture, history and politics. For members of this select audience, a batik painting is a memento and proof of the Java they have come to experience: the dances, the shadow-plays, the psilocybin mushrooms, the pageantry, the landscape, pictorial evidence for the folks back home. These are the pictures they look for; these are the pictures they demand.

The batik artists have little recourse but to produce. For painters operating on margins that would give even a penurious New York garret artist pause, a painting that might not sell is a painting that cannot be made. Bereft of any longstanding traditions, lacking any corpus of aesthetic criteria other than that borrowed from batik tulis, the Taman Sari artists must be adept at interpreting foreign desires, foreign stereotypes, foreign prejudices, and then be able to give them form in their work. The most successful are the best guessers.

It follows that prestige is also determined externally: by the number of paintings sold, by the number of foreign exhibitions held and, for the lucky few, foreign lectureships accepted. The unconventional batik artist gets few accolades, little money, less prestige. Little wonder that the Taman Sari has produced no Kathe Kollowitz, no Goya, no Picasso, not even a Marshall Arisman or a Judy Chicago. Little wonder that the Taman Sari has produced but one Trihono.

The Western "star system" of fine artist discovery, investment, promotion and success rewards a few unconventional artists with fame and huge financial prizes. The Yogyakarta "star system" does just the reverse, penalizing the unconventional with penury and anonymity, and awarding the plums to those whose work best fits the Western notion of "good Javanese art." Only those few that succeed here can afford to go on to work that feeds both the stomach and the spirit. Trihono is one of those few, having the combination of time, money and inclination to pro-

duce batik paintings, not just batik souvenirs. Even Trihono's occasional blossoms will wilt, however,without nourishment, without encouragement. To dare the unconventional, to think as well as paint, requires support, perhaps a few aesthetically knowledgeable patrons or a batik museum, like Bali's Puri Lukisan, that could purchase the very best examples of current work at acceptable prices, as rewards to the present crop of artists, and standards for their successors. ASRI, Yogyakarta's fine art academy, could fill that role. So could the Batik Research Institute. Such an instituion would have the advantage of keeping the best work in Yogya. It would have the disadvantage, however, of acting like a Salon, with standards of "good" and "bad" that could easily be as rigid and arbitrary and stifling as the current touristic measure. Trihono might find his revolting fishes and wide-eyed calo's as unwelcome in such an environment as they are today. Or he might not. The standards would at least be indigenous; a measure of aesthetic control would at least be in local hands. Batik could be Javanese once more.

Sincerely,

Bryn Barnard

20. Trihono, Dewo and student, dyeing cloth at Studio Tarate.

List of Illustrations

1. Javanese batik patterns. The parang pattern is from a set of cloth-covered cardboard desk files; the kawung pattern is from a piece of wrapping paper.

2. A canting and a cap. BEB

3. A cockfight by Bambang Oetero. Home of the late artist (Bambang died in 1981), Babadan village, Yogyakarta.

4. A Ramayana scene by Kuswadji. Gallery of the artist, Alun-Alun, Yogyakarta.

5. A Kufic batik by Amri Yahya. Gallery of the artist, Yogyakarta.

6. A Trihono Ramayana scene; Studio Tarate, Yogyakarta.

7. A Trihono Ramayana scene; Studio Tarate, Yogyakarta.

8. A Trihono landscape; Studio Tarate, Yogykarta.

9. Lesmana shoots the golden deer, Dewo; Studio Tarate, Yogykarta.

10. Market scene, Made; Studio Tarate, Yogyakarta.

11. Shinta and Hanuman, Puspa; Studio Tarate, Yogykakarta.

12. Rama and Lesmana, Dewo; Studio Tarate, Yogyakarta.

13. Hanuman and Naga, Trihono; Studio Tarate, Yogyakarta.

14. Hanuman and Trijata, Trihono; Studio Tarate, Yogyakarta.

15. The Bird Market, Trihono; Studio Tarate, Yogyakarta.

16. Ikan memberontak, Trihono; Studio Tarate, Yogyakarta.

17. Mr. Ten Percent, Trihono; Studio Tarate, Yogyakarta.

18. Mr. Ten Percent, detail, Trihono; Studio Tarate, Yogyakarta.

19. Mr. Ten Percent, detail, Trihono; Studio Tarate, Yogyakarta.

20. Trihono, Dewo and student; Studio Tarate, Yogyakarta.

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