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BATIK: A WEARABLE ART

TODAY, THE CARIBBEAN ISLANDS OF ST KITTS, ST LUCIA AND GRENADA
MAKE SOME OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL FABRICS IN THE WORLD.

By Antony Bolante



Left: Carlos Hernandez/Westend61/Corbis Images Right: SuperStock



Swaths of colour billow and wave, animated by the steady breeze. Tethered side-by-side like enormous Buddhist prayer flags, the brilliant fabrics rise and gently descend, rise and descend. "It might be the most photographed clothesline in the world," reckons Maurice Widdowson. The fabrics are the latest creations from his boutique, Caribelle Batik in St Kitts. You'll find a similar clothesline at Caribelle's namesake shop in St Lucia, and yet another stretched across the courtyard of Art Fabrik in Grenada. Indeed, from its ancient origins half a world away, the art of batik has found distinctive expression here in the islands of the Caribbean.

Batik is an ancient method of decorating fabric, most closely associated with the island of Java in Indonesia. In fact, the word "batik" comes from the Javanese *amba*, "to write", and *tiktik*, meaning "dot" — references to how batik designs are traditionally rendered by hand. In batik, the design is drawn onto fabric using wax. The wax acts as a "resist" — that is, it prevents dye from penetrating the fabric. After dye is applied, the fabric is boiled to melt and remove the wax. This way, the design retains the fabric's colour before dyeing. To achieve more complex

effects, batik artists repeat the waxing, dyeing, and boiling sequence. The process typically takes several days. However, an elaborate piece could take weeks to complete.

To apply the wax, batik artists use a specialised tool called a *tjanting*. A *tjanting* consists of a wooden handle and a spouted reservoir, usually made of copper to retain heat and keep the wax in a liquid state. In the hands of a skilled batik craftsman, the *tjanting* yields smooth lines and fine detail. To apply the wax in broader strokes or to fill large areas, brushes may be employed. Alternately, wax can be applied via a stamp fashioned from copper wire, called a *tjapp*. Though introduced back in the 1920s, *tjapps* are a relatively recent innovation for this age-old art form, one known for its characteristically organic, freehand aesthetic.

"It's totally labour-intensive," observes Widdowson. And it's fascinating to see firsthand. "I have a large demonstration area, where I have batik artists demonstrating and explaining to everybody who visits exactly what goes into what they're about to see." Like Caribelle, Art Fabrik in Grenada also produces their batik in the traditional fashion, on-site and by

*In the hands of a skilled batik craftsman,
the tjanting yields smooth lines and fine detail.*



A second dyeing



Left: Owen Franken/Corbis Right top: SuperStock Right bottom: Bill Bachmann/eStock Photo

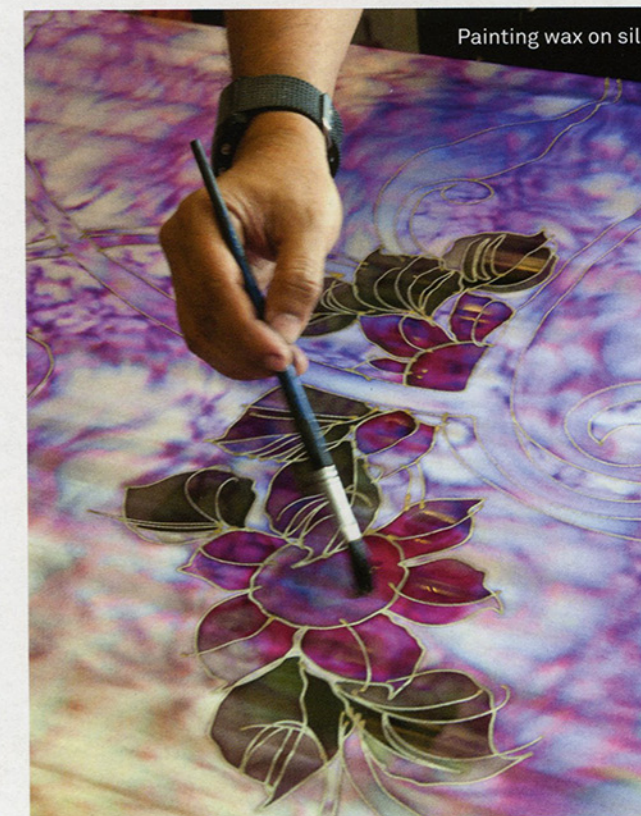
local artisans. Although Art Fabrik doesn't conduct regular demonstrations, visitors need only ask to be invited upstairs to witness the artists at work. As Caribelle's Widdowson explains, "Once the people have seen the demonstration and had their questions answered, there's a complete appreciation of the complex product that they're about to see. And indeed, that when we advertise that no two pieces can ever be alike, it's a fact."

Wax-resist dyeing methods and batik in particular were developed at least 2,000 years ago. And although Indonesia may be the most renowned batik producer, it may not be where the craft originated. Historians conjecture that batik may have arisen concurrently in different regions of Asia, or spread via trade routes to Malay and the Middle East. While the batik technique remains essentially the same over time and geographic boundaries, region and current technology does determine the kind of waxes, fabrics and dyes used. And of course, culture inflects the aesthetic. Native Indonesian batik may feature symbolic patterns that indicate social status or attract good luck. Phoenixes or dragons figure into Chinese designs, while peacocks and elephants appear

in Indian and Persian batik. And whereas Hindu and Buddhist cultures may depict various gods in their batik, the Islamic prohibition against idolatry leads to beautiful calligraphic designs.

Likewise, Caribbean batik artists find inspiration in their unique culture and surroundings. "What inspires us are the fish that surround us, the birds that surround us, the fruit that surround us, and the trees that surround us," reflects Widdowson. In contrast to batik found elsewhere, "what separates us is our own vision and our own imagination". Along with native motifs, Art Fabrik's co-owner and chief designer Lilo Nido often infuses her designs with an individual artist's point of view. Her batik wall hangings have been exhibited in museums, and her batik garments worn on fashion runways. One needn't think of batik as high art or *haute couture*, "but it can be," says Art Fabrik's founder Chris Mast.

In addition to the legacy of batik, Caribelle inherits a history indigenous to St Kitts. The boutique is housed in the historic Romney Manor. The structure is named for a former owner of the estate, the Earl of Romney, notable for defying the British Parliament by freeing his slaves in 1834. Established in 1976, Caribelle has become a venerable institution in its own right. Widdowson knew that once he restored the property to its former glory, it would make a picturesque home to his little batik "factory". To the south, visitors can glimpse Basseterre



Painting wax on silk

Bay; to the northwest, the peak of Mount Liamuiga rises in the distance. Over the years, Widdowson developed the already scenic estate into a full-fledged botanical garden that includes a 350-year-old saman tree. For a time, he operated batik outlets on several islands. But as St Kitts and Nevis developed and tourism increased, Widdowson was able to consolidate his business in St Kitts. A business partner took on his shop in St Lucia, which keeps the Caribelle name and maintains its standards of high-quality batik, albeit at a smaller scale.

For its part, Art Fabrik has become a part of Grenada's idyllic environment, as well as its history. Visitors to Art Fabrik enter a 300-year-old building, whose fish-scale tile roof befits its original purpose as the site of a fishmonger's shop. Formally trained artist Chris Mast founded Art Fabrik in 1986. Soon after, she joined forces with Lilo Nido, who until then had been an intrepid photographer and visual artist. It didn't take long for Nido to fall in love with batik — not to mention Grenada — and she and Mast have been in business ever since.

The longevity of batik shops like Art Fabrik and Caribelle Batik attest to their proprietors' passion for their craft, and moreover, their love for their respective homes in the Caribbean. "It was destiny," Mast says, that brought her and Nido to Grenada, but it was the island's wonderful people and natural beauty that kept them there. When Widdowson arrived in St Kitts and Nevis, his dream was to create not just first-rate batik, but also a wonderful destination for visitors to experience the art, nature and history of St Kitts and the Caribbean. "I'm pleased to say we've achieved that."

Learn more about batik and the shops mentioned in this article:

CARIBELLE BATIK IN ST KITTS AND NEVIS

www.caribellebatikstkitts.com

CARIBELLE BATIK IN ST LUCIA

caribellebatikstlucia.com

ART FABRIK IN GRENADA

www.artfabrikgrenada.com

Peter Guttman/Corbis



Batik dries on St. Kitts