

Laura Cohn: Batik Painting

The Art, Culture, People and Landscapes of Bali

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Laura Cohn is an artist and long-time AGTS volunteer living and teaching in Bala Cynwyd, PA. A painter by nature and in practice, she also earned a degree in Human Ecology. Laura spent 1988-1991 working in that capacity in Bali. There she fell in love with the Indonesian people, its culture and its great abundance of art. In Laura's experience, it seemed the extraordinary sculpture, masks, fabrics and religious symbols (just to name a few) were less hailed by its people as 'fine art', but rather were considered an ever-present feature of their everyday lives.

With a painterly eye, Laura appreciated the opportunities she had in Indonesia to see firsthand the beauty of their artisanship, particularly of those who worked in batik. After moving to Java ('91-94), she began to learn and practice the art of batik, finding it to be a complement to and expansion of the oil painting she had always enjoyed. In batik, she found the transparency of color inherent in the process as well as the interaction of colors as they were layered upon the fabric provided an inspiration and a freedom unachievable with oils on canvas alone.

These days, Laura spends on average two months a year traveling throughout Indonesia in an effort to support and encourage the local artists who live there and to expose their work to a wider, appreciative audience. For the past seventeen years she has gathered art pieces (statuary, fabrics, masks, bowls, etc...) to bring back to PA, for the fair-trade show she started entitled, *From Bali to Bala*. She loves sharing the artistry and culture of Indonesia with others. This annual show allows Laura to keep in touch with her artisan friends, and affords her the opportunity to return often to the land and people she has come to admire so much. A portion of the sales from her show, *From Bali to Bala*, go to support various Indonesian non-profits in need.

The majority of her presentation focused on Laura's many travels in Bali, and several other of the over 17,000 islands that make up the country of Indonesia. Of these, Bali is the last remaining Hindu-dominant culture; literally an island of Hinduism amongst the largest population of Muslims in the world. Buddhism is another influential religion among the Balinese, walking hand in hand with Hinduism and Animism. Animism might be described as a religion imbuing both humans and nonhumans with a spiritual presence. Animism often features animal spirits, with hints of black magic, superstition and a focus on high [goodly] and low [evil-tending] spirits. This belief is evidenced everywhere from dress, to sacred roadside offerings, to a reluctance to swim in the ocean (where many "low" sprits are purported to live.)

We must be careful of feeling wary or condescending toward the link between religion, superstition and life choices within Balinese culture. Sometimes this is just our "first-world" or Western bias. The

Balinese *superstitions* have actually contributed greatly to their conscious preservation of culture, religion and place. For example, even in these days of increasing tourism and new growth, no building – except religious temples - may be constructed taller than a coconut tree. This regulation came about after construction of a bulking new hotel began in the 1960's. In 1963, a terrible volcanic eruption shook the island, destroying the hotel as well as many local homes and businesses, taking thousands of lives and causing mass devastation. The Balinese widely believed the High Spirits, unhappy with the ugliness and height of the new construction which they found offensive, had caused the mass destruction. As a result of the new regulation, the character of the Island remains intact – much to the pleasure of the people who appreciate its natural state and hopefully to the appeasement of those High Spirits as well.

Along similar lines, the concept of *serasi* is critical to the everyday lives of the Balinese. *Serasi* is just one of their many words for “balance.” It is important to balance both the high and low spirits even within one's own body. A belief evidenced by the tradition that no person may enter a temple without a sash worn at the waist. The sash is intended to separate the two halves of the body – the lowly, physical parts, from the higher, more spiritual/intellectual parts. To quote Laura, a scarf or sash worn at the waist “separates the sacred from the profane.”

And like Catholics who go through Confirmation or Jews who celebrate Bar & Bat Mitzvahs, Balinese, too, experience a variety of coming of age ceremonies, such as the *Potong Gigi* or Tooth Filing. Designed to balance their animal natures, young adults experience this ceremony, during which the points of their canine teeth are ritualistically filed flat. It is intended to make a person's teeth less animal-like, and is typically performed before a rite of passage, such as marriage. As an aside, many Balinese masks of dragons and devils carry exaggeratedly long and sharp teeth to graphically represent their animal-natures as belonging to the low (what we in the West might, somewhat superficially, classify “evil”) spirits.

Clothing, from the aforementioned sash to the sarong typically worn by both men and women, is both everyday and artistic, and also a symbol of spiritual balance and of self-expression. A sarong is, on its most basic level, a two yard length of dyed cloth. Within those two yards you might find a world of colors, patterns and motifs. Made by hand, these amazing everyday art pieces are characteristically Indonesian and are beautiful examples of the art and craft of batik. Of the Indonesian islands, Java is most noted for the quality of its batiks.

Batik is a wax-resist and dye process. Hot wax is applied on fabric via a *canting* (pronounce chanting). The fabric is dyed, working from light to dark colors; waxed and dyed again in a layered process until the desired pattern is complete. The areas that are covered with the wax hold onto the original dyed (or undyed) color. The whole piece of cloth is boiled off several times during the process, which removes the wax and exposes the cloth to the possibility of more applications of wax and/or dye. In some designs, where a pattern is large and repeated, another tool called a *cap* (pronounced chop) is used. A *cap* resembles a large copper printing plate. It allows wax to be applied to a larger section of fabric at one time. In Java, you often see a division of labor with men doing the heavy *cap* work and women working with the *canting* which are much lighter and are handled more like a pen.



At her studio in Pennsylvania, Laura might utilize a *canting* when creating her more intricate designs; but more often than not, is just as inclined to use whatever is at hand for the effect she'd like to create- e.g. brushes of varying widths dipped into electric skillets of molten wax. Even the type of wax used affects the final outcome of the piece. Laura shared that paraffin wax will leave a distinctive crackle; whereas bee's wax does not. A great deal of skill is involved in handling the *canting* itself which must be angled "just so" to control the flow of the wax from the tip. Batik artists must possess and hone skills that are both artistic and practical. Once mastered, the results are stunning. In spite of her intimate knowledge of color theory, one of Laura's favorite aspects of batik is the surprise once all the wax is boiled off, and

the final piece is revealed! She takes great pleasure in the transparent nature of the colors; and the overall effect of the interactions amongst the colors and patterns in the finished piece.

Laura has donated a print of her work, “Fields di Mimpi (Fields of My Dreams)” to the AGTS portfolio. It is a gorgeous batik landscape in blues, greens, yellows, browns and oranges. Strikingly similar to the colors of a photo she had taken of a volcanic pool on one of the Indonesian islands; this batik is actually an imagined “aerial landscape” of her native Iowa. I wish you could have seen the original cotton textile, and its hand-carved frame – as well as several other samples of both Laura’s own work and some of the Indonesian examples she brought to share. These pieces are really extraordinary.



I am so pleased that I made the trip to see Laura Cohn and to learn about not only the process of Batik but also the beauty of Bali, its people, heritage and culture. I also look forward to the year this print becomes part of our own portfolio collection, so we can share this ancient art form in a contemporary context with the children. To view additional reproductions of Laura’s work or to learn more about her annual show and sale, you can visit her website at www.frombalitobala.com .

– Carrie Damiani (Owen J Roberts), May 2014