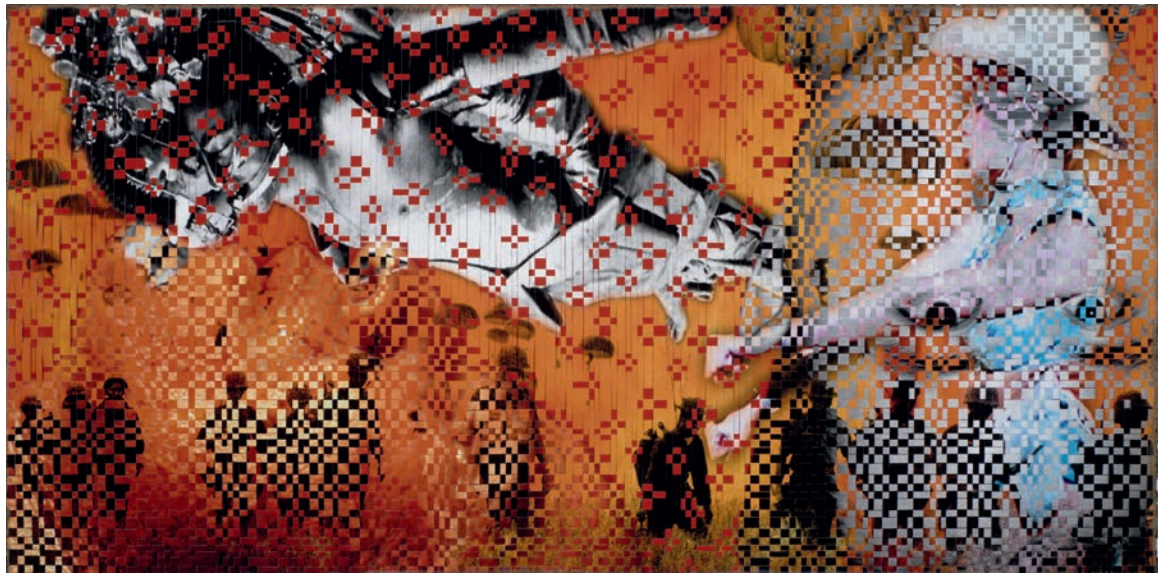


Connecting Threads and Woven Stories



A **SPACE** *for* **DIALOGUE** 115

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART, DARTMOUTH



Unique textile traditions are the heart of the cultural identities of Southeast Asia. Through different techniques and materials, artisans can convey stories and important cultural values. They rely heavily on intergenerational knowledge and visual languages that are distinct to local peoples. The works in this exhibition, *Connecting Threads and Woven Stories*, include a *piña* cloth from the Philippines, traditional Indonesian *tapis*, *batik* and batik tools, a photo-weaving work by a Vietnam War refugee, and a contemporary Thai textile. The textiles span from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century, reflecting both the long history of textile practices and recent advancements.

The Indonesian *tapis*, from the Lampung province of South Sumatra, are examples of the most traditional function of textiles: a woven fabric that could serve as clothing or decoration. One distinct characteristic of the *tapis* is the inclusion of gold or silver-wrapped thread as embellishment. Indonesia was, and continues to be, a prominent source for gold mining. Textiles ornamented with gold and other precious metals held significant economic value and provided higher social status to those who could afford them.¹ In addition to the incorporation of gold or silver threads, these textiles often include colorful geometric patterns and elaborate iconography. *The Tapis Raj Medal*, made from silk floss, golden thread, and cotton, features men riding ships that represent the *naga*, mythical serpent-dragons prevalent in many Southeast Asian cultures. The *cumi-cumi*, or cuttlefish, seen on the *Tapis Inuh*

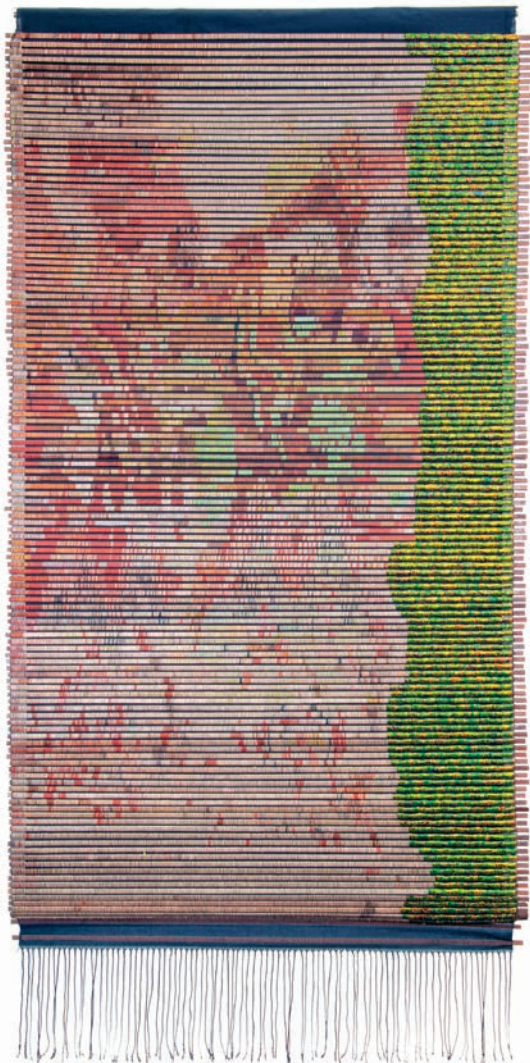
is another important symbol found in textiles of the period.² The *naga* and *cumi-cumi* symbols were further brought to life when worn for ceremonial dances by noblewomen and ritual dancers. By integrating these icons of wealth, royalty, and mythological significance into their textiles, Indonesians preserve cultural elements through tangible and practical mediums.

Originating from Java, Indonesia, *batik* is a wax-resist dye technique for decorating fabrics, including cotton, silk, and hemp. The *canting*, a pen-like tool, and the *cap*, a metal stamp or printing block, are instruments used to apply the wax to the cloth. Artisans used a *canting* to apply their own elaborate designs by hand. The *cap*, in turn, allowed makers to quickly repeat patterns and produce *batik* on a large-scale.³ Some of the earliest ancient *batik* patterns, often floral and nature motifs, were reserved for the nobility and bore messages of wealth and distinction.⁴ The manual process of repeatedly applying the wax and dyeing the fabric is a testament to the artisans' care, labor, and time and represents the values held by their communities.

The Filipino *piña* cloth, made from pineapple fibers, highlights how local populations utilize their surrounding environment to produce textiles. Artisans first pick young pineapple fruits when their leaves are at their greatest length. Because the fibers are extremely delicate, these makers must first carefully scrape the pineapple leaves with a plate before using a broken coconut shell

to separate the fine and coarse fibers. After washing, the fibers are dried and knotted, ready for textile-making.⁵ *Piña* cloth makes material cross-cultural interactions between South America—where the pineapple plant is native—and Asia by way of the European trade network. The needlework technique used to embroider this *piña* cloth, which features repeated patterns of simple red flowers, was first introduced by the Spanish and demonstrates not only the influences from other countries on Filipino craft production but also these makers' ability to develop a tradition unique to their own geography.⁶

Contemporary textiles and their production methods continue to evolve and change. Dinh Q. Lê, a Vietnam War refugee, used grass mat weaving techniques passed down from his aunt



to weave together photos and media images of the war in *Untitled*. By applying historic textile processes to a new medium, Lê seamlessly brings together elements of Vietnamese textile tradition and contemporary art. Similarly, Thai weaver Fa Wuthigrai Siriphon finds innovative ways to preserve culturally significant textile foundations. In *Gleaming Decay No. 3*, Wuthigrai Siriphon incorporates locally sourced jewel beetle wings. Through the combination of dark natural-colored thread wrapped around bamboo reeds and insect wings, Wuthigrai Siriphon challenges societal conceptions of decay by presenting natural elements as symbols of beauty, hope, and new beginnings. Such works find new cultural relevance for contemporary audiences through the combination of ancient traditions with current subject matter.

Textiles play an important role in our everyday lives, from the clothes we wear to the furnishings in our home. However, many of the clothes we wear today are products of fast fashion; quick to respond to trends, yet environmentally unsustainable. The textiles of Southeast Asia act as reminders of the lasting and historical value that these objects provide. They continue to serve as powerful carriers of cultural heritage, connecting threads and weaving stories of the care, love, skill, and dedication of those that created them.

Caitlyn King '24
Class of 1954 Intern

NOTES

1. Mary-Louise Totten, *Wearing Wealth and Styling Identity: Tapis from Lampung, South Sumatra, Indonesia* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, 2009), 37.
2. Totten, *Wearing Wealth*, 154-155.
3. Philip Kitley, "Ornamentation and Originality: Involution in Javanese Batik," *Indonesia*, no. 53 (April 1992): 10-13, accessed November 17, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3351111>.
4. Robyn J. Maxwell, *Textiles of Southeast Asia: Tradition, Trade, and Transformation*, rev. ed. (Hong Kong: Periplus Editions Ltd, 2003), 236.
5. Luis Mendonça de Carvalho, Francisca Maria Fernandes, and Stephanie Zabel, "The Collection of Pineapple Fibers—*Ananas Comosus* (Bromeliaceae)—at the Harvard University Herbaria," *Harvard Papers in Botany* 14, no. 2 (December 2009): 106.
6. de Carvalho, Fernandes, and Zabel, "Pineapple Fibers," 108.

CHECKLIST

Dinh Q. Lê, Vietnamese, born 1968. *Untitled*, 2004, chromogenic color print and linen tape. Anonymous gift; 2019.85.4

Unknown Sumatran. *Tapis Inuh*, mid-20th century, silk and cotton with silk floss and gold thread. Gift of Stephen A. Lister, Class of 1963; 2009.98.38

Unknown Sumatran. *Tapis Raja Medal*, 19th century, silk and cotton with silk floss and gold thread. Gift of Stephen A. Lister, Class of 1963; 2009.98.23

Unknown Javanese. *Batik Sarong with Roosters and Vegetal Motif*, about 1900, dyed cotton. Gift of Jacqueline C. Harris, M.D., in memory of Jerome S. Harris, M.D., Class of 1929; 2009.68.1

Unknown Javanese. *Print Block for Batik Printing*, before 1969, iron, copper, and wire. Gift of Clifford J. Groen, Class of 1968; 169.42.24718

Unknown Balinese. *Print Block for Batik Printing*, after 1942, steel, tin, and copper. Gift of Adrian Walsler, Class of 1932; 174.11.25546

Unknown Balinese. *Print Block for Batik Painting*, after 1942, steel, tin, and copper. Gift of Adrian Walsler, Class of 1932; 174.11.25547

Unknown Balinese. *Canting (Batik Pen)*, before 1974, copper and bamboo. Gift of Adrian Walsler, Class of 1932; 174.11.25543

Unknown Filipino. *Piña Cloth (Pineapple Fiber)*, collected 1950, pineapple fiber. Gift of Sarah H. and Charles E. Griffith, Class of 1915; 157.3.13755

Fa Wuthigrai Siriphon, Thai, born 1988. *Gleaming Decay No. 3*, 2021, bamboo, jewel beetle wings, polyester yarn, and metallic threads. Credit line forthcoming.

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The exhibition *Connecting Threads and Woven Stories*, part of the museum's student-curated *A Space for Dialogue* series, is on view at the Hood Museum of Art, October 21–December 16, 2023.

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Cover image: Unknown Javanese, *Batik Sarong with Roosters and Vegetal Motif* (detail), about 1900.

Inside left: Dinh Q. Lê, *Untitled*, 2004. © Dinh Q. Lê. Courtesy of Dinh Q. Lê and P·P·O·W, New York.

Inside right: Fa Wuthigrai Siriphon, *Gleaming Decay No. 3*, 2021 © Wuthigrai Siriphon / Photographed by Yannawit Watthanasin.

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