Connecting Threads and Woven Stories
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. 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. 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. Some of the earliest ancient batik patterns, often floral and nature motifs, were reserved for the nobility and bore messages of wealth and distinction. 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

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 Painting, after 1942, steel, tin, and copper. Gift of Adrian Walser, Class of 1932; 174.11.25546

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

Unknown Balinese. Canting (Batik Pen), before 1974, copper and bamboo. Gift of Adrian Walser, 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


BIBLIOGRAPHY


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


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