

What is Batik?

QUESTION:

A customer has called and said she will be bringing a batik in to be framed next week. I know it is a work on fabric but I would like to know more about this type of textile before the customer comes in. What is a batik?

ANSWER:

Batik is a fabric on which a pattern is drawn; sections are then dyed according to the plan of the artist. For best results, natural fibers like silk or cotton are used. The tools used in the process are relatively simple. Hot wax is poured on the cloth through a small metal spout or metal stamp to block out portions of the design, much the same way crayons are used to block parts of a stone lithograph from the printing inks.

To begin, the areas that will remain the original color of the cloth are covered with hot wax, which makes those areas dye-resistant. The fabric is then placed in a tub of dye. When removed from the dye the fabric is rinsed and dried. Then the areas that are to remain this color are covered with more wax. If the next color is to be applied to any of the previously waxed areas, that wax will have to be removed. (When the artist wants an area previously covered with wax to be exposed so he can dye it, the wax is heated, scraped off and then sponged with hot water.) The cloth is then dipped into the next dye.

The wax and dye process is repeated for each color in the batik. To prevent the wax from cracking, the fabric is kept flat – unless the artist wants cracks to form as a part of the design. Cracks in the wax will allow some of the dye to seep through resulting in the characteristic marbled pattern.

When a batik is finished, it is placed in boiling water and the wax is skimmed off the surface of the water as it comes off the fabric. The batik is then placed in cold water and rubbed to help remove any remaining wax. Finally, it is hung out to dry.

These questions and answers are compiled by PPFA Technical Coordinator Diane Day, CPE, from HelpLine questions.

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