

BOOK REVIEW



FIVE CENTURIES OF INDONESIAN TEXTILES

Five Centuries of Indonesian Textiles, edited by Ruth Barnes and Mary Hunt Kahlenberg, published by Prestel Publishing Ltd, London, 2010. Essays by Ruth Barnes, Traude Gavin, Roy W. Hamilton, Rens Heringa, Mary Hunt Kahlenberg, Marie-Louise Nabholz-Kartaschoff and Toos Van Dijk. Photography by Bruce White. 408 pages, 300 colour illustrations. 30.5 x 25.5 cm. ISBN 978-3-7913-5071-4. £65 (hardback with slipcase). Website: www.prestel.com.

SOMETIMES you can judge a book by its cover!

Five Centuries of Indonesian Textiles, the recently released scholarly tome edited by Ruth Barnes and Mary Hunt Kahlenberg, is an art book that is a work of art in its own right. It comes in a beautiful indigo and white slipcase covered with pleasing fine-line drawing of birds and other exotic creatures in gold gilt, taken from a rare Javanese *alas alas* wedding costume of the Solo court. Pulling out the book from its cover, we encounter a volume

of substance and quality, hard bound in a cloth of deep yellow, again decorated with the same zoomorphic gilt line drawings as found on the slipcase. This “gold on gold” offers an immediate sense of sumptuousness, which is carried forward with the touch and feel that comes from having been printed with the highest quality inks on sewn-in pages of the finest of ecological paper, a good example of what constitutes fully “state of the art” publishing. And all this, before we even consider its contributors and content. But I knew immediately I was holding an exceptional book in my hands.

Upon cracking the volume open (which takes a little muscle as it has some real “heft”, being over four hundred pages), there were revealed many exceptionally beautiful and compelling Indonesian weavings (1), including some of the rarest and earliest—in sum among the most important known. All are from Mary Hunt Kahlenberg’s long

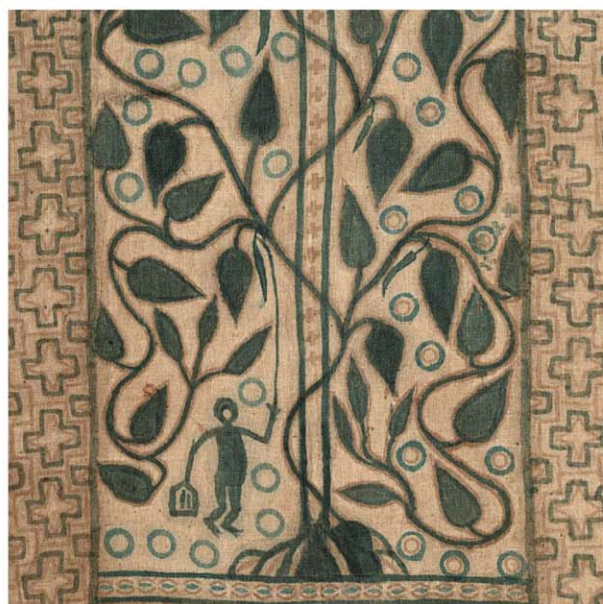


1 *Geringsing* cloth woven on an ancient form of body-tension loom with a circular warp, Tenganan Pageringsingan, Karangasem, Bali, 1972–1973

held private collection, thirty plus years in the making. In the introduction, she describes the wonder that she felt when she saw her first Indonesian textiles as captured in photos sent from Holland to her for consideration to purchase in her then capacity as a curator at the Textile Museum. And although none were actually acquired, she nonetheless had experienced a brush with destiny, her fate after that sealed. From that almost chance first encounter did grow one of the world’s finest Indonesian textiles collections, public or private, formed on the ground, in the mountainous jungles, boots splattered with mud. Who knows what the future might have been

had she not opened that envelope? But she did and I am now sitting here writing a review of one of the best books on Indonesian textiles of the last century.

This is not Mary Hunt Kahlenberg’s first contribution to literature. Long before producing this, the most *au courant* volume on the subject, she is to be credited for creating the first Indonesian textile exhibition and catalogue of the modern era, way back in 1977. I refer to, *Textile Traditions of Indonesia*, her seminal contribution which is still widely used as a reference book. It was held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) as the culmination of her work as curator for the pre-



3 Sacred cloth (detail), *maa' or mawa'*, Tana Toraja, Sulawesi, Sa'dan Toraja people, 19th century, painted and stamped hand spun plain weave cotton, 200 x 63 cm



2 Ceremonial headcloth, *mbesa tali tau batu*, North Luwu, Rongkong, traded to Sa'dan Toraja, Sulawesi, 16th or 17th century, cotton, 339 x 25 cm

vious ten years, following her migration west from the Textile Museum. Feeling that she had completed a life cycle in academia, she departed LACMA later that year to begin a business career as a private dealer, a writer of books and a world traveller, with interests in Navajo, Pre-Columbian, African, East Indian, Japanese and European textiles but always with a special love and advocacy for the ritual cloth of Indonesia, a place she has visited almost every year since.

And while always selling textile art at the museum quality level, she managed to put away a piece here and a piece there, building a very select collection making choices based on aesthetics, intuition and a keen perception of antiquity. By her choices we know that she has wrestled with the big questions: "How beautiful can it get? How fine the craftsmanship? And how old might they really be?"

The book *Five Centuries of Indonesian Textiles* is part of a larger vision that included the 2008 exhibition and symposium at LACMA titled by the same name that attempted to answer those questions and much more.

In this pursuit, Mary Hunt Kahlenberg has reached out to others to enrich the text, tapping on expertise from all over the world. During her professional career both as a curator and a dealer, Mary Hunt Kahlenberg built up a great deal of goodwill with fellow scholars and when she proposed that her old friends give papers at a symposium to coincide with her historic return to LACMA after a thirty-year absence, come they did. Serving as a guest curator for her own collection, this was nothing less than a "life's work project" coming to fruition and everyone wanted to be part of it. From that extremely well-received program, the speakers were invited to extend their talks or contribute all new essays for this *magnum opus*, which although not ready at the time of the LACMA exhibit, like a fine wine, has only benefited from the wait.

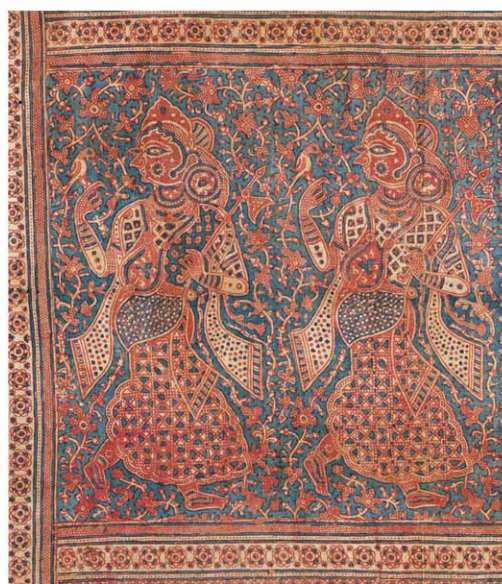
And how about those contributors? The list reads like a "who's who" of Indonesian textile academic royalty, with many of the greatest names in the field present and accounted for, offering original essays and insightful captions. Included among them, co-editor Ruth Barnes, formerly

at Oxford and now at Yale, wrote on the important topic of early textiles and their dating. She reminds us that C-14 test results are only part of what we must consider in attempting to determine the age of a cloth; she offers a listing of the other necessary approaches that must come together before any result of high veracity can be arrived at—stylistic analysis for example. Dr Barnes also wrote captions for the Toraja textiles (2), an important job by any definition as that section is one of the strongest in the book.

Dr Traude Gavin offers insights on how scholarship can accumulate "received wisdom" about the meaning of motifs that may have come from an initial faulty premise, translation or research interpretation emphasis; indeed she calls into question our very pursuit of symbolic meaning as being something of Western conceit, triggered by our bias to want to "read" the elemental bits of motifs that originally may well have been intended only to be understood holistically. By way of example, she explores the milieu of previous scholarship on the *tumpal*, an isosceles triangle decorative de-

vice often found on the border of Indonesian textiles. Known already from the Bronze Age and in continuous use through at least the beginning of the 20th century, Dr Gavin demonstrates how it relates to another icon, the Tree of Life (3). In so doing, she shines the light of critical reasoning to the subject, and thereby offers a model for greater rigour in textile motif analysis. She also contributed some very fine captions to worthy textiles in the Borneo section.

I have long puzzled over a topic first taken up by Drs Gavin and Barnes together in an outside academic journal but considered again here. I refer to the likely influence of the so-called "dancing ladies" Indian trade cloth motifs (4), i.e. women in a row facing sideways on block-printed cotton cloths of sari length that date to the 16th/17th centuries and their relation to the most rare and esoteric of Iban Dayak textiles from Borneo, the "dancing figure" *pua sungkit* (5). That geometric patterned Indian trade cloth known as *patola* had an influence was never in doubt because of the clear connection to the design



4 Ceremonial cloth (detail) Gujarat, India, traded to Sulawesi, 16th/17th century, cotton, 540 x 110 cm. Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore. Ex Roger Hollander Collection



5 Ritual cloth (detail), *pua sungkit*, Sarawak, Borneo, Malaysia, Iban people, 19th century, hand-spun cotton, 193 x 57 cm



6 Belt or sash, probably Timor, radiocarbon-dated 1480–1560, cotton, silk, 306 x 7 cm



7 Ritual cloth for rites of passage, Bali or West Lombok, Balinese people, 19th century, cotton, metal thread, 65 x 49 cm



8 Hip cloth, *kamben*, probably Buleleng, North Bali, late 19th or early 20th century, cotton, metal thread, 180 x 103 cm



9 Balinese woman using a foot-operated treadle loom for weaving a narrow band with supplementary warp patterns, 1925

that shows up in some Iban ritual textiles, but it took a greater imagination to achieve the breakthrough insight that there would be a common source for the mysterious dancing figures on *pua sungkits*. Well done, bravo and thank you Drs Barnes and Gavin for returning to the subject in this book.

The luminary Roy W. Hamilton of the Fowler Museum of UCLA, a gifted scholar with an anthropologist's perspective, is interested in the social mechanisms of ritual cloth production and use in the outer Eastern Islands, moving from the smallest and most obscure, Palue, to the largest and somewhat better known, Timor, noting the similarities and the differences along the way (6). Dr Marie-Louise Nabholz-Kartaschoff condenses and updates the textile research she and her Swiss colleagues performed on Bali for more than twenty years, and we love her for it (7, 8). Her writing is

very clear on this topic and I learned a lot from it.

Rens Heringa brings her tremendous insight and breadth of experience to develop the sequencing of batik on a structural and iconographic basis, with a look at certain early batiks with a handspun ground, termed proto-batik. This is an important and evolving subject and we eagerly await further developments. Toos van Dijk, an anthropologist I first admired beginning twenty-five years ago for her work on *tampans* from South Sumatra, is the last but not least of the primary contributors. This time she has taken up the topic of connections and distinctions in the textile patterns of the Maluku islands. She helps us to understand that the dots and dashes that decorate traditional outer island ritual cloths are a code from which we may tease out relationships between the micro-cultures that created them. There are many others

who participated in making this book a great success including the photographer Bruce White who did a magnificent job of capturing the magic of the cloths. And while we are at it, let us not forget the early photographers whose hundred-year-old images contribute greatly to the ambiance of the book (9). Although space does not permit me to include all the names of all the others who contributed, Mary Hunt Kahlenberg did not forget their aid and acknowledged in print everyone who had anything to do with this fine book. It is a pleasure to encounter this generosity of spirit.

It is impossible for me to cover all of the important ideas discussed by these authors but their thoughts are well conceived and expressed. The book has been well edited. One may read through it as on a binge as I did, not unlike a mystery novel you cannot put down. Using that analogy, the authors have pro-

duced a great deal of scholarly detective work, where questions are posed and from the evidence answers teased out, considering origins and influences, techniques and materials, cultures and rituals, all this and more. This makes for an exceptionally sophisticated "who done it" where the Austronesians, Indians, Chinese, Arabs and Europeans are all suspects. Alternatively, the book has a "personality" that invites browsing through each of the different sections, letting one's eye be caught up by a particularly appealing work of art or captured by an engaging turn of phrase. Following our literary analogy, this approach is more like Scheherazade's tale of *A Thousand and One Nights*, where the reader's curiosity is ever whetted for more. Both these approaches I have taken with *Five Centuries of Indonesian Textiles* and done so with great satisfaction.

A book on textiles with poor



10
Ritual weaving, *tapis pasisir*,
Paminggir region, Lampung, Sumatra,
19th century, cotton, 66 x 63 cm



11 Ceremonial garment, *tapis*, Liwa, Lampung, or Komering
Ulu, South Sumatra, Paminggir Belalau or Komering
people, 19th century, cotton, silk, 116 x 133 cm



12 Ceremonial garment (above and detail), *tapis*, Liwa area,
Lampung, Sumatra, Paminggir Belalau people,
18th–19th century, cotton, silk, 116 x 127 cm

photography of good pieces or great photography of bad pieces can never be a significant contribution to the field, because an art book must first and foremost serve as a visual reference—image reproduction is crucial. This book manages to have important pieces well printed. That the images appear on “matte” rather than shiny paper may take some getting used to, but offers a more “organic” sensibility. Only the most informed eye might recognise a single textile in the spread, an important *pua sungkit* from Borneo, seems possibly off in the colour reproduction of the indigo threads; otherwise, I would say virtually all other pieces come in well within range of their actual colour. Another minor complaint is that a Balinese *anteng* ritual cloth was printed slightly out of focus, but all other illustrations appear sharp. Very few books can make that claim. What is achieved is that the textiles presented here

can communicate directly with the viewer on a visual basis alone.

Mary Hunt Kahlenberg has put together a book that could serve as a menu from which I would like to order. Presented are exceptionally fine pieces within every category, with certain cloths being off the charts of desirability, enough to please the most informed curator or discriminating collector. The highlights are simply too numerous to list, however one must state at the outset the Lampung, Sumatra group is just nothing less than stunning with outstanding “ship” cloths, both *tapis pasisir* (10) and *palepai* presented.

Allow me to compliment the sophistication of the red *tapis* with a single band of embroidery through the centre (11), one of the “holy grails” of Indonesian textile collecting. And please permit a tip of the hat to Don Longuevan for his line

drawing revealing a possible wedding procession represented in the ikat zone of the *tapis*. Like the “telephone game”, any attempt to interpret iconography that has been transformed over time through the repetition of motifs generation after generation is fraught with peril and must be approached with appropriate scholarly caution, as the authors have duly noted in this case. But while some would ask if teasing out mysteries and looking for meaning in textile patterns is a worthy pursuit (“Why bother probing the unknowable?”), I am reminded of the famous George Mallory quote about the reason he wanted to climb Mount Everest: “Because it is there!” Why, indeed! I appreciate as well the classical *tapis cumi-cumi* (squid pattern woman’s garment from Sumatra) that shows an especially finely drawn *cumi* but with some silk floss erosion (12), demonstrating that for this collector,

art quality has trumped condition, which is the way it should be: Art first! Of Kahlenberg’s *bidak* group, all from the same south Sumatran region, we may say they represent a “collection within a collection”; pieces of this rarity virtually never come on the market. But I love especially the *bidak* from the 15th century (13) on pages 50 and 51, one of the oldest of known Indonesian textiles and my personal favourite in the whole collection.

Within this piece I would like to point further evidence for a possible iconographic connection between the small deer with raised haunches, as seen in the *bidak* detail on page 48, and the exceptionally rare Toraja cloth (14) of pages 252–253. The idea of a shared deer “iconographic ancestor” common to the textile traditions of early Komering *bidaks* of south Sumatra and the ritual cloths of the Toraja of Sulawesi was first presented by Robert Holmgren and Anita



13 Heirloom ceremonial cloth (detail left), *bidak* (probably one-half), possible origin Java, collected Komering River area, North Lampung, South Sumatra, 15th century, silk warp, cotton weft, 279 x 94 cm



14 Toraja fragment, possibly from a ceremonial hanging, Central Sulawesi, 15th century, cotton, 171 x 85 cm



15 Man's ceremonial dress cloth, *kain gringsing* (detail), north coast of Java, collected in Pare-Pare, Sulawesi, possibly early 19th century, hand-woven cotton, natural dyes, 266 x 97 cm

Spertus in their landmark Metropolitan Museum catalogue, *Early Indonesian Textiles from Three Island Cultures*. In it they demonstrated the persistence of the “raised haunch deer motif” by comparing a detail from a *bidak* of the same family as the piece illustrated here and a 19th century Toraja textile.

At the time that similarity seemed too great for mere coincidence, but we have had to wait until now for further confirming evidence, as witnessed in this remarkable Mary Hung Kahlenberg's Toraja piece. Not only does it offer a very clear example of a “deer with raised haunch” motif that Robert Holmgren and Anita Spertus described, but also both pieces share a C-14 confirmed 15th century date. Now that both the *bidak* and the Toraja cloth have been shown to be five hundred years old, and hence the title of this book, we have proof that the motif was in use at the same time during the Majaphait

Kingdom. The source for this commonality may be attributed to a possible Indian trade cloth design pattern, as yet not found, that could have been popular in both places and in circulation during the 15th century. This would make it akin to the *hamsa* goose pattern cloth now at the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford and described by Ruth Barnes in an article elsewhere in this issue and its relation to *hamsa* textile fragments found in Egypt. When two similar patterns appear at great distance from each other, this does not excluded their possible relation, but rather suggests a shared link which is often based on trade. Many such “threads” of art history permeate this book, inviting the readers to follow them up.

The Toraja chapter excels beyond all measure, again with some of the earliest dated pieces known. I recommend everyone read this section very carefully; there is much to learn. The batik group sets a standard few can

approach, including examples of the elusive proto-batik with a *kain gringsing* geometric pattern (15). I could go on but suffice it to say with a curator's eye and a collector's passion Mary Hunt Kahlenberg has proven her case for the beauty and wonder of five hundred years of Indonesian textiles and for this we are most grateful.

When I saw the Kahlenberg Collection on view two years ago, and again when I looked carefully through the book, it was like recognising someone who shares the same religion. Our core values are the same. We want to know the answer to the final mystery, “What did the earliest cloth woven by the first grandmother look like?” This effort is the first in a generation to take up that quest. Mary Hunt Kahlenberg has risen to the occasion.

When I was young, on the school yard it was commonly understood that thick books were for smart people. That really

has not changed. There are two kinds of knowledge, that which you carry in your head and that which you can look up in a book. Smart people will make good use of this fine thick book to achieve both ends; either way it is worth its weight in gold.

Note of thanks and appreciation to Sylvie Reynolds PhD, for her encouragement and skilled editing of this review.

Thomas Murray

Thomas Murray is a private dealer of Asian and Tribal art with an emphasis on Indonesian sculpture and textiles, as well as animistic art from other varied cultures. He is a contributing editor for Hali, the carpet and textile magazine out of London, with some fifty publications to his name, and has lectured internationally on many subjects within his areas of specialisation. Professionally he has placed works of art in the collections of over thirty museums on four continents. For more information, please visit www.tmmurrayarts.com.