

Amri Yahya

Exponent of Indonesian Contemporary

Batik Painting

by Bertoldo J. Manta

If the beauty and proliferation of remarkable textiles are any measure of civilization, then the countries of Southeast Asia have attained a high order of cultural achievement. Notwithstanding the remarkable wax and dye textile printing, *batik* is a significant traditional craft in the lives of the Indonesian.

Today this ancient craftsmanship has survived the complexity of modern technology and has evolved in various experimentation. Several Indonesian

batik artists have enormously researched on the possibility of employing other media and various techniques to propagate this aged handicraft.

A number of Indonesian Batik artists have been known for their expertise in this craft. Prominent artist, Amri Yahya from Palembang, comes first. The significance of Amri Yahya in Indonesia lies not just in the value of his art but also in his role in contributing to the development of batik painting in his country. A sensitive artist but with strong

personality, Amri never considered art to be anything outside the domain of ordinary life. To him, art is an expression of life and its purpose is to make human society beautiful. The establishment of beauty in society must be overcome by strong determination in exploring new ideas and knowledge in one's profession.

Throughout his artistic career, Amri had made relentless efforts in the development of his techniques and explorations, making possible the unrestrained pursuit of his own significant arts. His art has always served the common people, from whom he himself had come, by faithfully depicting their land, their life, their hopes and aspirations. The scenic rural landscape and the nature of Palembang are his favourite subjects for two-dimensional compositions.

Amri Yahya's artistic work has been inspired by the natural surrounding he has been moving around, since his childhood days. He learned to love the brilliant hues of the stream and the bamboos that enclose the bluish river in his dwellings. He states that nature's majestic landscape keeps him feeling fresh. Like bamboos with their boughs pointing upward, some bows with their clustered emerald leaves represent human aspirations.

Amri Yahya was born in 1939, in a lower middle class Muslim family from Palembang, Indonesia. He is the third child among the six children of an illiterate farmer parent. When he was 12 years old, his father died. He became the head of the family by helping his mother in farming. He was raised in the most idyllic and romantic rivers, swamps, grassy fields, and the heat of the sun of Palembang. Nature's grandeur was the only affluence he had known in his childhood, and for many years beyond.

Nature worked in the development of Amri's artistic temperament. On nature's beauty surrounding him, he says, "Many a times it has been my greatest teacher". He had shown his talents quite early during school days in Palembang. But Amri was not satisfied until he could go to far away Yogyakarta, where he embarked on a long and arduous career in art.

He attended his art courses at STSRI Sekolah Tinggi Seni Rupa Indonesia), or in English, the Indonesian Institute of Higher Learning in Visual Art, and at the ASRI/ISI (Akademi Seni Rupa Institute of Seni Indonesia in Yogyakarta. He graduated with the highest award in painting. Deeply impressed by nature during his childhood days, Amri turned into a fine painter of the rural landscape. He was trained to paint in both the traditional way and the western techniques. Even within the limited time of his academic studies, Amri had made many memorable sketches and paintings in various media.

In 1963 Amri graduated from STSRI and ASRI/ISI (in English, the Academy of Arts/Indonesia Institute of Arts-1, 11). After graduating from the Teacher Training Institute, IKIP (Institut Keguruan Ilmu Pendidikan) in Yogyakarta, he joined the Arts and Languages Department as a full time lecturer. He also now teaches art and appreciation at various universities in Yogyakarta, such as at the Indonesian Islamic University.

Amri's profession as an artist has earned him a good reputation in Yogyakarta. Responding to the needs of the local artists and owing to his exceptional abilities in organizing art activities, Amri took upon himself the onerous task of organizing various arts association in Yogyakarta. He founded the Sanggar Muslim (Moslem Arts Associations) by involving the young artists.

Feeling that his artworks need to be extended beyond his studio and his classroom, Amri organized various art galleries. In 1964 he established an Art Gallery in Yogyakarta, and then in 1967 the Art and Craft Centre in Jakarta. Later on he set up various art galleries in nearby Yogyakarta and Denpasar Bali. His galleries have been popular because of the demand for his major artworks, frequented by art collectors. In fact, this has led him to establish his representative galleries in San Francisco, Hawaii, Denmark and Netherlands.

Amri has chaired important art activities and headed outstanding art projects, both locally and in the international scene. He became a chairman of BKKNI DIY (Badan Koordinator Kesenian Nasional Indonesia Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta) and the Indonesian Artist Association, which is HSRI (Hipunan Seni Rupa Indonesia) and DIY (Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta), a member of the International Artist Association (IAA) in



UNESCO, Paris, a member of the Executive Committee of the National Calligraphy Exhibition I, the head of the Indonesian Artist Council and Exhibition in Yogyakarta and the coordinator of the Calligraphy Exhibition at the World's Islamic Mass Media Conference.

Through exhibitions, since 1957 Amri has been very active in promoting his newly explored technique in Batik painting. He has attended numerous major group exhibitions and has organized his own countless one-man exhibitions. His exhibitions, held abroad, have received enormous praises from prominent artists and scholars. They have thus contributed to the introduction of the new batik painting to the western world.

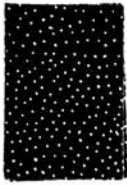
To Amri, the contemporary acceptance of new media for creating art forms is widening the potential for the acceptance of traditional Indonesian art from into the new fine art context. He states that his stature,



Amri Yahya's Arabic calligraphy in batik.

Left : Amri Yahya demonstrating his new artistic techniques in contemporary batik painting to students of Suansu-nandha Teachers' College in Bangkok.

**Various batik motifs used in ornamentation and now widely used
by Indonesian artists in contemporary batik painting**



Cecek



Uwer



Anggur



Gringseng



Crackle

Meaning of Motifs

Cecek.....means points or dots; batik ornament in the form of tiny dots.

Uwer.....a kind of scroll or curling motif.

Anggur.....means "grape" ornamental design in the form of a stylized shape or grapes.

Gringseng.....ornamental designs resembling tortoise shell forms.

Crackle.....a motif which is the result of the cracking or molten wax on the surface of the cloth, allowing the wax to crack.

as a recognized artist in batik painting, is the fruit of his arduous experimentation with well known Indonesian batik artists. He points out that his identity in the Indonesia batik painting is attributed to discipline and self-reliance. His new medium is the result of his interaction with prominent Indonesian batik artists.

His new technique is free and expresses more ideas, says Amri. The usage of traditional pattern is still there, to retain its identity. But techniques are set free to create new dimensions in the use of other media. As such, he says the base of his response to his commitment in art, towards the present demands, is in self-reliance, placing individual freedom in the continuous search for the new or in looking deeper at earlier findings. It is this degree of self-reliance which usually determines the quality of art work connected with the approach to ideas, techniques, media theme or the message to pass on.

The Indonesian batik art, which has existed for many generations, is a common traditional art of the people. Batik art is a handicraft intended to produce clothing material. Batik is made by decorating woven cloth with designs using a wax compound to cover those parts of the cloth to make them resistant to a particular colour during the dyeing process.

The word batik is thought to be derived from the Indonesian word *ambatik* meaning "a cloth with little dots". The suffix *tic* means little dot, drop or point. But it can also denote a ticking or tapping sound.

While the process of decorating woven cloth through the batik resist process is not unique to Indonesia, it has reached a degree of perfection in that country which is unequaled elsewhere. It is said that batik, started as a hobby of the Keraton Princess (Yogyakarta-Surakarta). And then this spread to the nearby towns and to the northern coastal towns of Pekalongan.

Due to the strategic location of Pekalongan, batik from this place was greatly influenced by other art works, like the Chinese ceramics motifs. These influences could be seen on the new motifs and the color of their batik.

Traditional batik still prospers in the various towns of Indonesia, for instance, in Yogyakarta, Surakarta, Banyumas, Pekalongan, Cirebon, Jakarta and also in the island of Madura. These places still practice the traditional method of producing batik and also use the old motifs. It was in only 1963 that new forms and designs have replaced the old and ancient method.

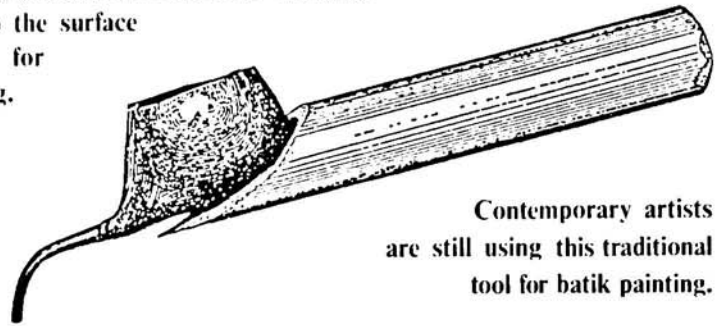
Mr Soelardjo, a proprietor of a batik business in Yogyakarta initiated experimental changes in traditional batik patterns. He invited a prominent batik artist, Kusawadji Kawindrasusanta, to collaborate with him in his experimentation. Two years later they launched an exhibition displaying the result of their explored artworks. It proved to be successful. But it was observed then that the patterns were still influenced by traditional designs. It was at this moment that the new creation was given the new name, "*Gendala Giri*". Meantime, Mr Soelardjo went on developing his experiments.

This time he worked closely with Amri Yahya and Bagong Kussudiardjo. Researching new designs by using ordinary painting instruments, like brushes, spoons, the stem of a banana leaf, a *siwur* (a dipper) and also a *canting* (a device used for applying wax). Amri noted that the use of these instruments produce a painting result similar to the application of oil colours or other kinds of painting media.

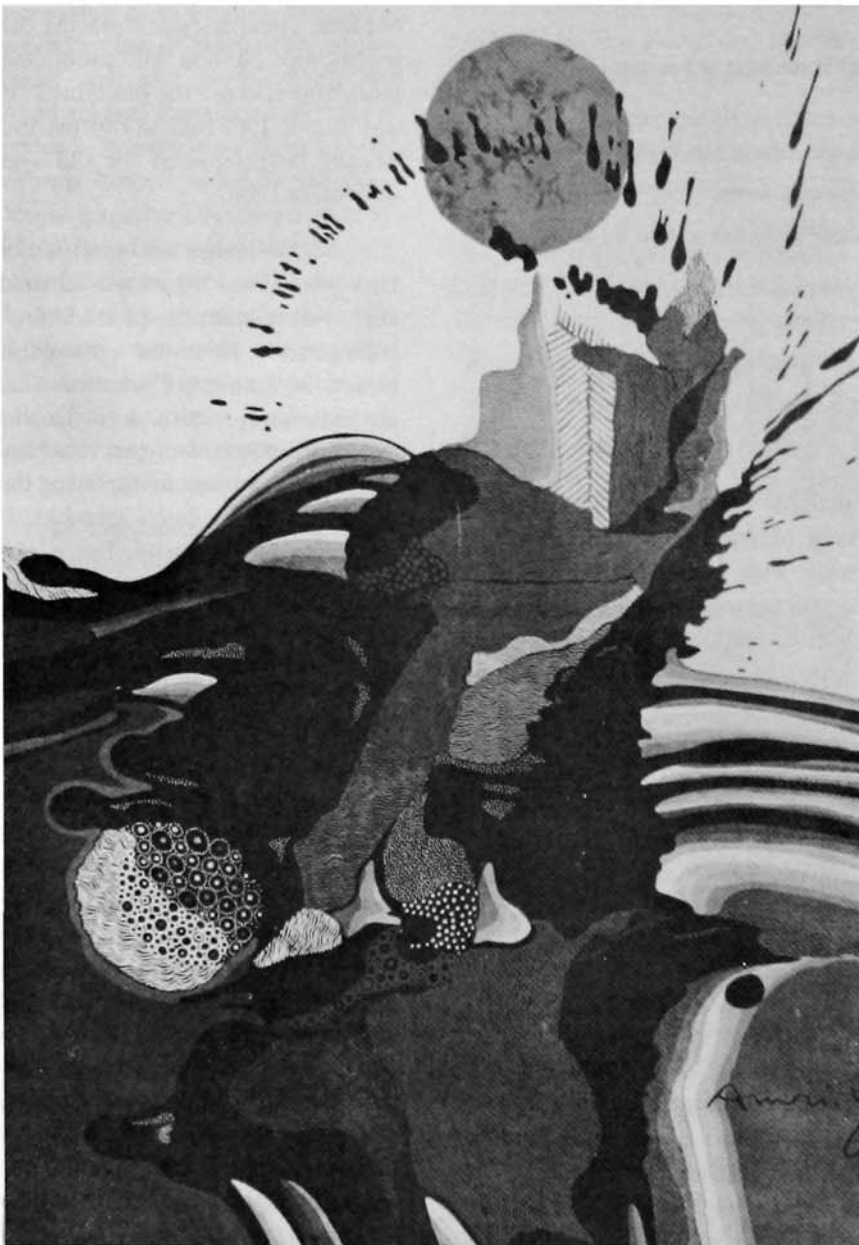
Armi Yahya not only pioneered the development of modern batik

painting in Indonesia, he has also proved conscientiously active in his explorations. His experimentations were successfully shown in various exhibitions within the big cities of Indonesia and abroad. His painstaking efforts, to create his identity in this new found media, have earned him more honours. He has also gained more collectors for his artworks. The

Right: Canting, an instrument used for applying molten wax to the surface of the cloth for batik painting.



Contemporary artists are still using this traditional tool for batik painting.



Fajar Menyingsing 1986 (Batik, 80 cm × 80 cm) by Amri Yahya.

many harmonious and peaceful colours of his paintings, the subtlety of his brushwork, the multi-formity of his ideas, and the expression of his temperament in life marked with sympathy and plainness have drawn more appreciation to his paintings.

Batik painting produced by Amri is an interesting combination of old and new motifs. As a result of the long years of exploration, his batik paintings have acquired a new identity. Both the motifs and the techniques employed in his paintings reflect the assimilation of historical developments and contemporary attitudes. They are reflected in his foliated arabesques and repeated floral designs, consistent in the Indonesian heritage displayed in the older art forms of wood carving, embroidery, temple motifs and metal works. The contemporary new designs used by Amri incorporates a traditional aesthetic in a modern mode.

Amri usually works in multi-chromatic colour schemes which play with the nature of dyes and colour combinations. More recently he became known for his oil painting with forms and shapes in dynamic motion. His flat colours emerge from the ground surface, reflecting an evolution of colour understanding on batik processes. Amri has discovered these techniques, enabling him to sustain the roles of traditional textile designers and artisans. Under the



Tanah Airku (1985 Batik, 80 cm × 80 cm) by Amri Yahya.

circumstances of modern society this is a considerable accomplishment.

A number of artists or schools of batik are searching for their proper identity in the contemporary Indonesian batik art. They are doing this by reconsidering the heritage left by their Indonesian ancestors in the field of batik art. Realizing the birth of a new movement trend in Indonesian batik art, Amri believes that his new process in batik painting has resulted to two functions. They are used as batik clothing material and also as a medium of one's expression in painting.

Amri Yahya's attitude is manifested in his ways of working, which he calls *idealistic* and *non-idealistic*. He says that idealistic painting is really expressed in an unrestricted manner. This feeling is the inner life of an individual neglecting the

opinion and the feelings of others in his surroundings. Amri Yahya realizes that it would be impossible for him to keep carrying out absolutely his idealistic painting without financial support. In batik painting monetary support is required. That is why he produces non-idealistic paintings in order to cover the expenses for continuing his idealistic painting.

Today, this new batik art activity has been going on not only in Yogyakarta, where Amri is based, but also throughout Indonesia. His batik activity is not only known as a cultural activity, but also serves as a livelihood and has been tempting many businessmen looking for sources of income.

The personal style of Amri has earned a good reputation. This is due not only to his pioneering work but also to the finesse of his artworks. Although a number of artists have

followed and imitated Amri's style, art collectors still want to have the original works of Amri. Amri believes that in the changing times everyone has the right to earn a livelihood. But as painters and artists, people ought to show their own creativity and develop their own identity. Anyway, he says what is being sought by art collectors are genuine artworks, which will always be known and cannot be hidden.

In the search for the development of a national culture, a variety of objects, activities, events and attitudes are emphasized by artists to perpetuate Indonesia's unique identity, traditional arts and Southeast Asian values. The creative efforts of both traditional and modern artists contribute to the concrete manifestation of the national culture of the Indonesian identity.

Creative artists express their own perceptions and interpretations on what it is to be Indonesian. Their arts express their individual orientations toward modern Indonesia. By expressing their concerns and gaining recognition for that expression, artists legitimize their existence. At another level, artisans who create objects to sell for other people's use also legitimize their existence. The artifacts they create reflect a current existence; they also formulate a future through the process of creating, responding and recreating.

The virtuosity of Amri's batik art will always appear in the cultural identity of Indonesia. As in all systems, the hallmarks of a culture and traditional art is continuity and change. Indonesian batik has developed into a unique art form which is very different from any other batik art in Southeast Asia. The future of this new batik art depends on the continued ability to adapt new needs and contexts and the willingness of the artists to accept new ideas. ■