



Silk kebaya and a hand-drawn batik sarong with natural dyes and tamabalan or patchwork design by L. Metzelaar for a European or Eurasian lady. Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) c. 1900.



Kebaya panjang or baju panjang with a hand-drawn pattern on chintz. From the Coromandel Coast, India for the Sumatran market 18th century



Kebaya with machine-stitched embroidery and a batik kain panjang (long skirt cloth) by Oey Soe Tjoen, Kedungwuni, Java, for a Peranakan Chinese lady c. 1935-1940

Tracing the Lineage of Peranakan Fashion

The new special exhibition at TPM shows just how international the sarong kebaya was

By Ingeborg Hartgerink-Grandia

When talking about the Peranakan *sarong kebaya*, most people will think of the clothes worn in the *Little Nonya* series: the colourfully embroidered, tailored *kebaya*s combined with batik *sarongs*, which used daring colour combinations and an array of Chinese symbolic decorations. Often this Peranakan *sarong kebaya* combination is seen as, and said to be, a traditional Malay mode of dress with Chinese influences.

What the exciting new, year-long exhibition at the Peranakan Museum (TPM) will show, however, is that the *sarong kebaya* as we know it today, is a multi-cultural hybrid, the result of a 500-year-long international, maritime globalisation trend. Trade, whether by land or sea, brought opportunities not only for the exchange of material goods, but also for an exchange of ideas and

innovations. Peranakan fashion is one development that demonstrates this.

To reveal this development of the Peranakan *sarong kebaya*, TPM curator Jackie Yoong together with external curator Peter Lee, show off the 'best of the best'. The exhibition, *Sarong Kebaya: Peranakan Fashion and its International Sources*, showcases the collection of prototype attire and the antique *sarongs* and *kebaya*s which Peter Lee's parents, Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee, have collected over the years and donated or loaned to the National Heritage Board. Also on display are some wonderful examples of the *sarong kebaya* ensemble worn by 'Indo-European' women in Indonesia, from the collections of the Dutch Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden and the Gemeente Museum Den Haag.

International sources for Sarong Kebaya

The exhibition traces the stylistic and historical lineage and the evolution of the Peranakan *sarong kebaya* in four parts over two floors. The first floor of the exhibition explains the Indian and Middle Eastern influences, which were the foundation of the *sarong* and *kebaya* costume.

Indian textile expertise

In the 17th and 18th centuries, Indian trade cloths were seen worldwide as the very best quality clothing material available. Throughout the world, Indian chintzes, with their special weaves and prints, were sought after and worn by those who could afford them. The Indian manufacturers of these cloths were very good at weaving the best cottons and

knew special methods of colourfast dyeing, combining mordant-dyeing with resist-dyeing.

Mordant dyeing involves using a chemical, usually a metal solution, applied to a cloth in the desired pattern, then dyeing the cloth, either by submerging it in dye, or painting dye onto it. The mordant makes the cloth more absorbent for the dye, strengthens the colour and binds the dye to the fabric. Parts without applied mordant will be very lightly coloured and can be bleached or washed out.

Resist dyeing uses wax, organic matter or animal fats to draw a pattern; the cloth is unable to absorb the dye where the wax is applied. After painting the dye onto the cloth or submerging it in the dye, the wax is removed by boiling. New layers of dye require a repetition of the process.

Both methods have been an Indian trademark since time immemorial. Indian trade cloths were used as state presents and also as barter products for trade. Many spices used in India originated in Indonesia, so Indian textiles reached the Indonesian islands early on and that is how Indian dyeing techniques and the Indian way of decorating cloths were introduced there. These new techniques and patterns were then adapted by Indonesian *batik*-makers.

Middle Eastern tailoring

In Southeast Asia the traditional way of using cloth lengths as clothing was to wrap them around one's body, probably a remnant of much earlier Indian influences. With the arrival of Arab traders came the notion that cloths could be sewn instead of wrapped.

Originally, Indian textiles in the Middle East and the Byzantine Empire were used to make beautiful dressing-gown-like overcoats for men, the very best chintz specimens being used as royal presents to suzerains. The original Arab overcoat-like blouses were tailored without a shoulder seam, with extra side panels for the width of the coats and the overlay, and with a triangular gusset under the arms. It's from this basic form that the *baju* (blouse) and the *kebaya* were also developed for women. Both *baju* and *kebaya* are words derived from Arabic. *Baju panjang* (long blouse) and *baju kurong* (more a tunic than a blouse) developed into part of female attire in Java and Sumatra, for example.

There is an excellent example of a very early chintz *baju panjang* in the exhibition.

The second floor of the exhibition reveals how the shape of these blouses in Indonesia evolved within the 'Indo-European' society of the Indonesian islands and how *batik* patterns, colours and decorations changed, ending as the well-known Peranakan *sarong kebaya* combination of the 1950s/1960s.

European lace and synthetic dyes

How did the *baju* form evolve into the *kebaya*? From early on, Portuguese and Dutch settlers had formed and formalised relationships with women from the Indonesian islands. The earliest pictures of 'Indo-European' families, in what were then called the Dutch East Indies, show the wives of the Dutch colonial settlers wearing white, hip-length, untailed blouses with *sarongs* instead of European-style clothing. These were probably much more practical and comfortable in a tropical climate. These kinds of blouses were called

kebaya belanda (Dutch *kebaya*). They were originally quite simple with perhaps a little lace around the edges.

The *kebaya belanda* were first worn with traditional Javanese *batik sarongs*, in natural colours and with mostly geometrical patterns. However, some 'Indo-European' women such as Eliza van Zuylen and Lien Metzelaar started to design *sarongs* with floral designs in their workshops in North Java. With the development and availability of chemical dyes from Europe their designs later became more creative and colourful. This *batik* became quite successful and was known as *batik belanda* and had its peak between 1890-1910.

Chinese motifs

The new colourful style of *batik* appealed to more groups and within two decades, another *batik* style began to develop in the Chinese-Indonesian community in North Java. The *Batik Cina* used not only the whole range of colours in the new and daring combinations for floral patterns, but also traditional and symbolic Chinese decorations in the *batik* patterns.

Through travelling traders, tailors and *kebaya* makers, these *batiks* and the *kebaya belanda* became known and fashionable within the Peranakan communities elsewhere. Over time, more and more lace was used to adorn the *kebaya*, which were then known as *kebaya renda* (*renda* comes from the Portuguese word for lace). This was followed by the use of other materials for the *kebaya*, using colour, embroidery and the tailoring of the *kebayas*. This tailoring meant the *kebaya* became more figure-hugging, a trend which was developing all over the western world as well, when women began liberating themselves from corsets and hoops.

This fascinating exhibition will be featured at TPM through 26 February 2012. There will be a major artefact switch in October 2011 to protect some of the rare and delicate artefacts from wear and tear through exposure and to show even more examples of beautiful antique cloths, *sarongs* and *kebayas*.

Ingeborg Hartgerink-Grandia is on her second stay in Singapore. The TPM Museum Coordinator until March 2011 and now FOM Council Representative for Museums, she received her first *sarong* from her grandmother when she was 10.

Readers who enjoyed this article might also enjoy *The Peranakan and their Jewellery* (PASSAGE, July/August 2009, pp. 14-15). This can be downloaded from www.fom.sg/about_archive.html

Photos courtesy of the Peranakan Museum

Detail of a hand-drawn cotton batik kain panjang (long skirt cloth) by Lie Boen In, Kudus, Java c. 1930

