

Programmes

Curator Tours

Thursdays
24 April, 31 July, and 27 November
7.30 to 8.30pm
\$25 (booking essential)

Straits Family Sunday – *Supersized!*

Sundays
8 June, 10 August, 12 October,
14 December
1 to 5pm
Free with museum admission

NIGHT FESTIVAL at Peranakan Museum

Friday and Saturday,
22 & 23 and 29 & 30 August
Free admission from 6pm to 2am
Activities from 7 to 11pm



Stellar God of Longevity, Shou, aboard his stork.

Further Reading

Inge McCabe Elliot. *Batik: Fabled Cloth of Java*. Hong Kong, 2010.

Fiona Kerlogue and Fulvio Zanettini. *Batik: Design, Style & History*. London, 2004.

Itie van Hout. *Batik Drawn in Wax: 200 years of Batik Art from Indonesia in the Tropenmuseum Collection*. Amsterdam, 2001.

Rens Heringa and Harmen C. Veldhuisen. *Fabric of Enchantment: Batik from the North Coast of Java*. Los Angeles, 1996.

John E. Vollmer. *Silks for Thrones and Altars: Chinese Costumes and Textiles*. Paris, 2004.

image above:

Altar cloth: deity on a crane. Java, mid-20th century, Cotton (drawn batik), 100.5 x 101 cm. Gift of Matthew and Alice Yapp

front cover:

Altar cloth: phoenixes, dragons, and letters. Java, mid-20th century. Cotton (drawn batik), 106 x 103 cm. Gift of Matthew and Alice Yapp

peranakan MUSEUM

39 Armenian Street, Singapore 179941

www.peranakanmuseum.org.sg • Hours: Daily 10am to 7pm • Friday 10am to 9pm

peranakan
MUSEUM

Auspicious Designs

BATIK FOR PERANAKAN ALTARS



Auspicious Designs

BATIK FOR PERANAKAN ALTARS

Colourful and imaginative, batik altar cloths blend several traditions and influences. Altar cloths – called *tok wi* by Peranakans – decorate the fronts of altars during important ceremonies, and reflect the strong ritual elements of Chinese Peranakan life in Southeast Asia. Families traditionally used embroidered cloths made in southern China, but in the early 20th century, some in Indonesia began using cloths of local batik.

Batik is resist-dyed cloth, originally made in India and then taken up in Java by many ethnic groups. Made on the north coast of Java, the batik altar cloths in this exhibition show traditional Chinese symbols as well as designs from Europe and Southeast Asia. They are an example of how art evolves according to local traditions. The exhibition focuses on a group of batik altar cloths generously donated to the Peranakan Museum by Matthew and Alice Yapp.

The exhibition runs through 28 December.

The altar cloth in context

Altar cloths are brought out for Chinese New Year and other special occasions, and hung on the household deity altar. They are part of the sumptuous textile decoration of the reception hall. Paired hangings adorn doorways leading into the rest of the house, and the seats and backs of the chairs flanking the altar table are covered with embroideries. The textiles demarcate sacred space and signify an important event.



Altar cloth

Java, mid-20th century
Cotton (drawn batik), 104.8 x 104 cm
Gift of Matthew and Alice Yapp

On this cloth, the Three Stellar Gods, Fu, Lu, and Shou, stand on floor tiles like the ones found in Peranakan homes throughout Southeast Asia. This blending of the domestic with the divine is highly unusual on altar cloths. The upper panel features the Daoist Eight Immortals.

Early origins – embroidered cloths from China

The first textiles Peranakans used to drape altars were probably silks made in China. The auspicious symbols from nature, folk beliefs, Buddhism, and Daoism that decorated them were part of a pictorial language understood by everyone. This shared visual culture, deeply rooted in China's long history, made its way to Southeast Asia through the movement of objects and people, and undoubtedly informed Southeast Asian textile designs.



Altar cloth: Three Stellar Gods

China, early or mid-20th century
Silk with gold embroidery
98.2 x 112 cm

The figures on this cloth are padded and protrude several centimetres. The Eight Immortals at the top ride marine creatures, suggesting this is the story in which they cross the sea. The theme may have been appealing to overseas Chinese communities or to Chinese preparing to emigrate to places like Southeast Asia. The use of so much gold thread suggests that this was a special commission.

Altar cloth: pair of dragons

Java, mid-20th century
Cotton, 136 x 103 cm
Gift of Matthew and Alice Yapp

The dragons here resemble the Hindu-Buddhist *naga*, a serpent-like mythical creature seen in much Southeast Asian art. "Naga" in Bahasa Indonesia translates loosely to "dragon", and they may have been a reference for the Indonesian batik makers.

Dragons

The dragon is the most powerful creature in Chinese mythology, and was famously used as a symbol of the emperor. But motifs could convey multiple meanings: a dragon could be the emperor, a symbol of the East, a bridegroom, the yang principle, or all of them at once, depending on context. The creature takes many forms on batik altar cloths.



Altar cloth: front-facing dragon

Java, mid-20th century
Cotton, cotton embroidery, 107.3 x 103 cm
Gift of Matthew and Alice Yapp

This front-facing dragon above an abstract wave pattern recalls the decorations on imperial robes from the Qing dynasty.



Altar cloth: dragon and confronting phoenixes

Java, mid-20th century
Cotton, 96 x 91 cm
Gift of Matthew and Alice Yapp

Other creatures



Altar cloth: Chinese characters, a qilin, and phoenixes

Java, mid-20th century
Cotton (drawn batik), 105.5 x 102.5 cm
Signature: Oeij Kie Hoat, Kedungwuni
Gift of Matthew and Alice Yapp

The *qilin* is a composite creature with the body of a horse, scales of a fish, and the head of a dragon, although the features often vary. In Chinese symbolism, the *qilin* represents virtues such as benevolence, longevity, and illustrious offspring.



Altar cloth: lions

Java, mid-20th century
Cotton (drawn batik), 89 x 108 cm
Gift of Matthew and Alice Yapp

The lion denotes strength, and is a symbol of protection in Buddhism. The character-like designs in the borders of this cloth are possibly based on ancient Chinese seal script. They are hard to read, but might be the character 壽 (*shou*), for longevity. They resemble the key fret pattern, a common border element, used to frame the upper panel of the cloth.

Ritual use

Colours and designs of altar cloths were sometimes specific to an occasion. For a funeral, traditional mourning colours of green and blue would be used. During the Lunar New Year and for a wedding, paired cloths would decorate the front and back of the Sam Kai altar, which was used only during these two occasions.



Altar cloth: bouquets and phoenixes

Java, mid-20th century
Cotton (screen printed), 105.8 x 109.5 cm
Gift of Matthew and Alice Yapp

This cloth displays floral elements reminiscent of designs popular on batik sarongs. The blue and white colour scheme suggests that it was used on an ancestral altar or during a funeral. The border has more flowers, possibly peonies or chrysanthemums – also associated with mourning.