

## MODERN INTERPRETATIONS OF TRADITIONAL WAX BATIK TECHNIQUE IN TEXTILE ARTS: A LOCAL CASE STUDY IN TURKEY

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**Abstract.** Batik is one of the oldest resist dyeing techniques used in coloring the fabric surface. Batik art, dating back to 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C., have reflected the feelings of societies, their artistic tastes and cultural features in different geographies where it flourished. It has come to be dealt with again through contemporary interpretations by textile artists and designers thanks to showing interest in traditional arts these days. Therefore, traditional methods about to disappear have been updated and sustained by producing authentic textile design objects. The objective of this study is to examine how the traditional batik technique is shaped in experimental studies of a local artist. In the study, the findings obtained the analysis of personal interviews and visual samples as well as literature review are evaluated and suggestions are presented in the conclusion part.

**Keywords:** block printing, crafts, Eskiiz Design Studio, resist dyeing, textile art, wax batik.

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**Manuscript received:** 11 January 2018

### 1. Introduction

Batik known for centuries as the art of fabric dyeing, has been widely used by societies living in different geographies in the world and has continued its existence up to now. The materials and resist agents used in batik dyeing method in which each society reflects its own culture differs according to the geography they are implemented in. People's hand-producing all materials needed for this their daily life by Industrial Revolution is a traditional way of production just as it is in Batik. Batik, having lost the interest due to the effect of industrialization and globalization has still kept its place in the cultures of underdeveloped and developing countries. Yet, this perception has recently turned reverse; the longing for the past, and the wish to make difference and to feature local-national identity have lead today's designers to traditional arts. Ethnic and local production objects we often see in the works of local designers in Asian and Eastern countries are frequently encountered when we visit any country of the West. These objects have been converted into contemporary design products by designers with an understanding combining traditional knowledge and creativity. This inclination to the past has also reflected on the works of local designers in Turkey, where traditional arts are carried out by a small number of artisans mostly in rural areas.

However, batik technique has not been paid enough attention among this inclination; this technique is today carried out by a small number of batik artists. Even though there are current studies about traditional textile design in our country, the insufficiency of academic studies focusing on Batik is a matter of discussion. Thus, our

study is thought to introduce the artists making productions with batik technique and to contribute to the researchers who will make studies on batik in the future. In this context, batik art is a topic worth being studied because it has a cultural value dating from the past. The basic topic of the study is composed of current batik implementations designed by Serdar Yörük with an authentic identity, who makes productions with wax batik technique inspired by traditional Turkish motifs in Eskiiz Design Studio in Izmir, Turkey. While traditional factors specific to Turkish art are observed to be dominant in the first samples of this handicraft he produced with traditional techniques and materials, inclination to contemporary figurative painting attracts attention in his late works. How the artist reflects traditional and modern factors on his designs with a contemporary perspective by combining them with aesthetics and functionality, the problem of change and transformation observed in his journey to produce an authentic textile product are scrutinized in this field study which we conducted with an understanding having art and design focus. The questions compose the focus of our study such as how can the traditional batik art be updated through the knowledge of modern art and design today? or, how can it be included in our daily life as an object of design by taking it from exhibition halls or galleries.?

In this study, a qualitative research method is used by conducting a comprehensive literature scan. In respect of being a general typology, 10 batik works were chosen in which old and recent works are included among two hundred works produced by the sample case, and the content of the samples were cited through the interviews with the artist. The findings obtained in the content of the questions aimed to be researched were supported with visual materials provided from the archive of the artist and descriptive analysis was used as data analysis technique. The quotations made from scientific sources were correlated with the data obtained from the interview with the artist. In the conclusions suggestion for the problems are presented by interpreting the findings.

## 2. A Brief History of Batik

Batik is a resist dyeing method made by implementing the covered process on the fabric surface with natural substances. The aim in this method is to prevent the parts not wanted to take paint from taking it by covering resisting agents of wax, paraffin and resin (Ercivan, 2017). “Etymologically, batik has a meaning of the suffix *"tik"*, which in the Javanese language it is called *"mbatik"*. It is derived from the word drip or trickle, also called *"writing"* or writing with wax. *"Mbatik"* is writing or drawing in a complex (small) way” (Legino, 2012; Oparinde, 2012). In other words, “batik is a piece of *wastra*, which is a piece of cloth that is made traditionally with certain decorative motifs of batik. The making uses a resist dyeing technique with batik wax as the color barrier material” (Doellah, 2002).

Although the main source of Batik technique is known as the Java islands, it reads in the sources that batik fabrics exist in pharaohs' tombs in Egypt and caves. When these fabrics are examined, the thesis that resists printing technique had existed before dyeing technique is confirmed. In those years, simple objects were used as resist block such as animal and plant shells, on the other hand, patterned fabrics were colored with natural paints obtained from the essences of flowers and some trees. After the discovery of synthetic paint, batik artists of the time painted the fabric by knotting, sewing, knitting or crinkling certain parts of the fabric. Such fabrics are encountered in the souvenir fabrics of merchants of Silk Road in the sixth and seventh centuries.

Batik technique was first brought to Europe from Java by the German merchants who brought goods to Netherlands in the mid -7<sup>th</sup> century. However, this method said to date back to 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. was also applied by the Turks and there are claims that its first samples were used in 700- 750 A.D. in the Central Asia. Some researchers have also claimed that this art was spread over Malesia and India by the Turks (Yayan & Ertürk, 2012). Art historian Jaccqres Coeny states in his article published in the periodical named “*Viendenkring kunst houtland/Torhor*” that the origin of the word Batik belongs to Java (Kelageiçi, 1987). Academician Yüksel Şahin says that it is not known for certain since when this technique has been used. According to him, it has been widely used in many countries from Central Asia to China, from Indonesia to India from there to Africa and Europe (1978: 119). In contrast to the opinions above, Roman writer Pilinus (1<sup>st</sup> Century B.C.) in his twenty-seven volume work named “*Historia Naturalist*” wrote that Egyptians first patterned the fabric with wax then dyed it (Amanjani, 2006). Batik fabrics taken from caves and pyramids in museums of many countries support the opinion that Batik was applied in ancient Egypt. Another opinion is about the fact that the first archaeological findings about batik was found in Kansu region, Eastern Turkic steps and even it was spread through migrations and commerce in Chinese Tang Dynasty in 618-906 B.C. (Harris,1993). In general Batik has been used as a traditional textile product for centuries in very wide geographies such as West Africa, China, India, Malaysia, Turkmenistan, Far East, Indonesia, Java, Peru, South America. Batik has independently evolved in these regions and found different way of expression in each region in the consequence of cultural interaction among countries (Ercivan, 2017). Wax applications known as *Wax Painting* have been mostly implemented in Asia, West and Central Africa and Mediterranean Coastal Regions (Perivoliotis, 2006). In Turkey, it has been traditionally produced with batik varieties named *Bervanik Baskıcılığı (Bervanik Printing)*, *Mumlu Bez (Wax cloth)*, *Mavi Bez (Blue Cloth)*, *Mavi Öncek*. Batik, applied in the cities of Malatya especially in Adıyaman, has been used from past till present as a culture transforming product in social life, special days and in daily life (Amanjani, 2012). Batik, focus of attention in ancient times because of its pattern features, colors, appearance, and sometimes dimensioned fabric textures, today creates new life styles and new fashion movements by getting away from its traditional usages (ceremonial cloths or folkloric costumes etc. having symbolic, mystic meanings of the culture it is applied). Nowadays, batik is displayed in textile art exhibitions with two and three dimension arrangements with tie-dye, tritik, clamp, wax-batik, shibori and ikat techniques by combining it with facilities provided by high technology. Also, it has been the means of expression of designers in wearable art fields and of textile fiber artists in their works (Ercivan, 2017). One of the artists who prefer batik technique as a means of expression in Turkey is Serdar Yörük, whose experimental works we will present under the title below.

### **3. The Visibility of Traditional Batik Technique in Modern Textiles: Serdar Yörük's Works**

Serdar Yörük (b.1978, Aydın/Turkey), using traditional Turkish motifs and symbols specific to Anatolia caring for today’s aesthetic perception, completed his education in the department of Traditional Turkish Arts, Faculty of fine Arts in Dokuz Eylül University in 2005. The artist having designed batik bags for a while for private orders after his graduation started his personal batik works in Eskiiz Design Studio,

which he established at Izmir/Turkey in 2010. The artist having emphasized the reason for his interest in batik technique as the random textures that occur on the fabric surface says that he had great difficulty when he started his works at first but he improved himself through trial and error. He associates the reason for this difficulty to the fact that the education he had at university was very controlled and the used paints and other materials were rarely provided for them. Yörük thinks that traditional arts are not concrete and stable as supposed; in contrast, they are in continual interaction and change. He reflects this change and transformation on his works with a different perspective without deforming Turkish motifs. The artist having preferred to use traditional motives in his early works continued his technical experiences up to 2016, then his ideas changed in the later period and turned to modern art.

Artist first transforms the patterns he has prepared on white cotton fabric with a pencil through the help of light table in the process of batik art application. In the wax batik technique, wax resist, and paraffin by ½ rate are used as resisting agent. He increases the rate of paraffin if he wants there to be breaking effect and marble appearance on the fabric surface. These resisting agents are added into a tjap and melted through a heater. The pattern of the fabric on which the technique will be applied is dyed starting with the lightest color and by covering the parts not wanted to take dye with resisting agent. This covering procedure is repeated for each color in the pattern. After dyeing procedure, resisting agents applied for each color are removed from the fabric. The removal procedure is performed with iron by putting newspaper on the fabric. Artist uses brush (made of bristle) instead of Tjanting preferred by many batik artists in applying resisting agent. On the surfaces where he makes block printing, he prefers lineloum instead of ready-made metallic block or woodblock printing (Serdar Yörük, 4.5.2017, İzmir). The most important feature of batik is the fact that the paint leaking from the cracks after the fracture of covering substance in dipping into paint bath composes a marble-like appearance on colors. Even though the composition and colors are the same, it is impossible for the fracture to be the same (Yağan, 1978). Therefore, this feature shows that each work is of original value as is Yörük's works.



**Image 1.** Honeycomb Series .2014. 150x150cm



**1-a:** Ammonite Series 2015. 90x130cm

When we look through Yörük's artistic works, his presenting his first batik samples using mixed techniques such as waxed batik, block printing and brush with original metallic or wooden frameworks that are his own design catches attention. In his exhibition named "Honeycomb" he opened in 2013, he was inspired by the figures on the door handles of Kubad-abad Palace (1236) of Anatolian Seljuk Period, adornments and tiles of Seljuk architecture. In the works in (image1-1a), stylized figures of Seljuk period, animal motives such as double-wing eagle and dragon are used in geometric grifts. Geometric grifts in the patterns express the love of Allah and infinity. Turquoise, white, yellow, brown tones that reflect Anatolian Seljuk art and culture have been preferred among colors. Artist dyed the animal figures on the surface of white cotton fabric with block printing and fine details and ground with brush and waxed batik technique. He hand carved the fabric to give the fracture effect.

In a similar work (image 2), he mounted batik fabrics on seven pieced Dakota cut in hexagonal honeycomb form and preferred in the patterns commonly used motives of Turkish hand-painted kerchiefs. He dyed remaining loyal to colors specific to Seljuk culture; tried to create a water color effect with brush and block printing in figures. Similar effects with the same color and composition are seen in image 2a, his another work prepared with metallic and wooden frameworks.



**Image 2.** Honeycomb Series. 2013. 100x170



**2a:** Stones. 2012. 90x150cm

In his work dated 2014, he placed commonly-encountered Seljuk dragon symbol on the center of a big circular form put on square metallic forms, and abstract textural effects resembling to starfish are seen around it (image 3). He gives this textural effect mostly with orange shades, brown shades on the ground and within them turquoise color match. In his another work seen in image 3a, Çintemani and Tiger Stripe motives, used on kaftans of sultans in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman Empire and in tile of mosques, were applied on the fabric without being deformed and were mounted on spiral formed metallic frameworks for decorative purposes.



**Image 3.** Dragon. 2013. 120x120cm



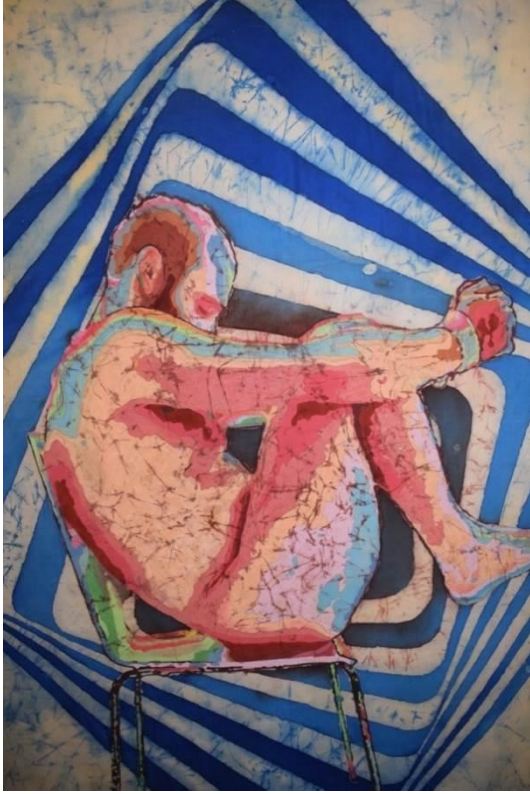
**3a:** Loop. 2012. 140x140 cm

Yörük, saying that he follows current works for not doing similar works with other batik artists in Turkey, states that it is important in finding his own language. Artist adds that there are the richest sources in the process of creating the designs of other disciplines of art such as sculpture, ceramics, painting, architecture and photography. Yet, his getting away from traditional arts moving forward to modern arts attracts attention in Yörük's works in the batik exhibition named "I AM" that he opened in 2016 by emphasizing that the thinking step is a quite hard process. The formulation process of this exhibition developed by the fact that a poem he read by John Clare named "I am", from which he was greatly influenced, came across him again in a TV series he was watching. Yörük, who thought that this coincidence is a sign, made searches about the poet at the initial phase of his works, read the poet's life story and whole works and even examined physical features. Artist having stated that this poem tells his story uses live male model in his all works. The reason for this is that women are constantly complaining about their being commoditized and to form a contrast to the general opinion that only woman body is of aesthetic value. Model's being naked explains individual's discarding all identities from him/her. He benefits from photographs he shot from different angles in transferring the figure on the fabrics. The effect of helplessness and pessimism in the hand tied man figure seen in image 4-4a is actually caused by our not knowing who we are, that is, our not knowing ourselves exactly. Artist saying that we can base this situation upon external factors, political system, our fears or our family highlights that all these factors prevent us from finding/knowing ourselves. He explains this situation as "there are so many interventions in our lives, everything is under control, it is always imposed on us what we have to do, sometime later these rules become out taboos and we involve in a system that we ourselves have formed" (Serdar Yörük, 4.5.2017, İzmir).

Yörük says the following in an interview with him about the content of his exhibition "I am":

*I tried to offer some sections from journey of man for his/her self-existence and self-realization. Of course, this is a journey undertaking alone. Although the system we live in puts individuality forward in an attempt to rejection and marginalization. Given identities stick on you and you cannot find your real*

*identity after a while. It is quite difficult to leave from the system while you are in it. You need to find answer to questions-who I am, what I am?- and you need to isolate yourself from others. Actually, there is no answers, it is a journey which will last until the end of life (Koşak, 2016).*



**Image 4.** I AM Series.No1.107x220cm



**4a:** I AM Series.No2. 107x220cm

Considering the batik samples in the exhibition, he technically used waxed batik and brush as in his first works. He used softer colors to lighten the nudeness of the figure and he did not want it to be perceived as sexuality. After having dyed the figures with brush, he used waxed batik technique on the whole surface of the fabric to create the textural effect he wanted. He preferred hot colors where the light reflected and cold colors in other places. The posture of the figure explains the loneliness of the person with hope rather than the hopelessness in the sense that we know (Image 5-5a). According to Yörük, figure is not so much important here; what is important is the message wished to be given. While there are Ammonoidea pattern on the ground and neon colors in the figure of his work seen in the Image 4a, optical illusions attract attention on the ground of Image 4 and 5a, and chiaras curosin the colors come to his forefront.

According to Yörük, *anytime when we can not stand by poor or rightful, or when we can not be free in our intellectual or physical preferences, it is the proof of the insignificance of our existence. For that reason, he found meaningful and appreciates the effort for being/staying yourself rather than the effort for being accepted by the society. Even if this fight pushes the man to loneliness... even if this fight pushes the man to loneliness (Gençoğlu, 2016:3).*



**Image 5.** I AM Series. No 3. 110x220cm

**5a:** I AM Series. No 4.110x220cm

Curator Işık Gençoğlu states her opinions on the works of the artist about this exhibition as:

*Yörük's works fling the state of humankind tied hand and foot somewhere in between existence and non-existent in our face without acquiring him by seeing him as a victim waiting to be understood and can not change what happened yesterday. Rather he let us face with the pure pain of not being direct, unadorned, forenamed with all our nakedness. What he depicts in his Works belongs to man but all the rights like 'the right to act with free will' or "the right of rejection/chang" are taken from the man's hand with his acceptances (2016:6).*

Artist having gained the appreciation of the audience with his recent works has said that he achieved technical resolutions he wanted in his exhibition *I am* and he will focus on three dimensioned works in the future.

#### **4. Conclusion**

One of the most important factors in the development of a country is to search for and to introduce countries' material and nonmaterial culture, and depending on this to sustain their traditional arts. It is not possible that a country not giving importance to cultural values and preserving them adequately and also not providing opportunity for new generations to know and learn them should survive in an international competitive



environment based on the richness “cultural heritage” which is gradually gaining more and more importance these days. In our study supporting this opinion, a local artist’s experimental art and design activities with which he is going ahead individually in his design studio in Alsancak /İzmir in 21<sup>st</sup> century Turkey have been examined. The question “How and why traditional understanding changes in the course of time” has been scrutinized with the artist having produced his early works with batik technique using traditional Turkish motifs tending to modern figurative painting seen in his late works. The most pronounced tendencies in cultural works are the experiences in experimental works, written and oral expressions and implementations. As the result of the observations and interviews made in this work in which we set out depending on an experience, the insufficiency of the education given in arts and design departments of universities underlies the troubles encountered in this process by Yörük, who started his artistic productions with trial and error method. The improvement of traditional techniques like Batik, have slowed down through traditional arts’ not getting enough attention added to expressing the same knowledge without and update for years. Considering the early batik samples of the artist, the effects of traditional –not depending on interpretation- arts education he received are understood, on the other hand, his transforming his productions into design objects with metal frameworks shows that he is in different quest. Yörük, being in an effort to rid himself of ready information and techniques with his wish to be different, has centered on modern arts in his late works and technically achieved the resolutions he wished. This transformation shows that he has come to the conclusion of finding/knowing himself he wanted to tell in his works. Batik implementations he created with trial and error he applied in his artistic search can be encouraging in creating new design objects for decorative purposes by enlarging their usage aim today. Although Yörük does not want to transform his works into commercial objects, communication and marketing in having a market in the international design world have become compulsory in introducing and sustaining cultural values. This study has put forward that designers, artists, scientists and artisans working on traditional textile arts should closely follow the sociological changes, review again traditional techniques, patters and forms according to the appreciation of the society and upgrade them. For this reason, it is suggested that textile arts such as batik should be dealt with more widely in academic fields within the content of experimental, artistic and cultural works and design searches and deeper contributions should be made in arts and design departments of universities by developing projects with innovative approaches. In brief, although arts is not valued in our country and consciousness of design has not yet been formed in the society, the fact that young artists like Serdar Yörük, whom we dealt with in this study, protect our cultural heritage is encouraging for the future and development of arts and design in Turkey.

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