LESSON 4: ENCOUNTERS OF IDEAS, TIME, AND PLACE  Textiles of Southeast Asia

Fig. 1.9
Train for royal palanquin, Singaraja, north Bali, Indonesia. Late 19th or early 20th century. Silk, metallic-wrapped yarns. L: 546 cm.
Fowler Museum at UCLA. The Katharane Mershon Collection of Indonesian Art. X61.61.
Lesson Summary and Objectives

A study of Southeast Asian textiles affords students opportunities to examine Pacific migration, the effects such movements have on family and community traditions, and the roles played by certain norms and beliefs. Activities encourage students’ exploration of simple weaving techniques and patterning and design options. This lesson introduces the notion that works of art themselves can reflect cultural dynamism, transaction, interaction, and change. Forms are constantly updated and reinvented to meet changing social circumstances, accommodate new media and technologies, and reflect the vitality of arts and cultures throughout the world. Students will

- Understand through discussion that works of art reflect a multitude of influences and encounters.
- Explore fabrics—both familiar and unfamiliar—and research the materials, their sources, and new uses for textiles in contemporary industrial or scientific contexts.
- Consider “objects of encounter” that reveal the interplay of external influences and tradition-based artistic practice.
- Analyze patterning in the material culture around them and experiment with creating patterns by simple weaving techniques.
- Weave with words in a word-search game.

Background Information

Throughout Southeast Asia, handmade textiles constitute one of the most important forms of artistic expression. Almost always the work of women, cloth represents a primary marker of female skill and status.

Textiles appear at ceremonies in the form of special dress for the participants or as hangings, covers, or other items of display. The association between handmade textiles and ritual is so strong that textiles are often regarded as a part of customary law or “tradition” (known as adat in Indonesia). By dressing in such textiles, or displaying them in ceremonial contexts, Southeast Asians reinforce the culturally sanctioned practices and behaviors they inherited from their ancestors.

In royal contexts richly embellished textiles were just one element in a grand visual show with the raja at its center. The long silk train (fig 1.9) was one of two cloths attached to the litter of the raja, or king, of Buleleng, a realm in north Bali. They were held aloft by his attendants when he was carried in state processions. The exuberant use of colored silk and metallic thread added to the grandeur of the event.
The video shown in the Art and Action section of Intersections: World Arts, Local Lives (and featured on the Intersections website) introduces Sisilia Sii and her daughter Grasiana Wani, weavers on the Indonesian island of Flores. On that and other Southeast Asian islands (as is true of so many other parts of the world) women are the weavers. They pass their skills on to their daughters and they share patterns with other women in their matrilineal line.

1. Threads of Encounter

The area of Southeast Asia is made of two geographic regions: the Asian mainland—Cambodia, Laos, Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, and Vietnam—and island nations including, among others, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore. A shared ancestry (the Austronesian-based language is a major indication of common origins) is evidenced in many facets of their lives, and can be particularly noted in textile traditions. Historically, weaving and decorating cloth has been the responsibility of women (fig. 1.10). In Indonesia, textiles symbolize the female (as metalwork represents the male) and the process of weaving represents creation as a whole, and human birth in particular.

For over a thousand years the wealth of the “Indies” drew many people to the islands. New religious influences—Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity—came with immigrants and other visitors. Trade was the impetus for the Chinese, Arabs, Portuguese, and Dutch. European colonialism and nationalism influenced lifestyles. In varying ways all affected the cultural groups of Indonesia and their arts. The consequences of this interaction resulted in a remarkable process of adaptation, assimilation, and rejection. According to Joseph Fischer (1980, 339) the traditional cultures of Indonesia still maintained their identity (fig 1.11) even with new influences. Foreign ideas and elements were incorporated in distinctive ways, and filtered by local traditions to create extraordinary cultural and aesthetic links across the barriers of language and geography.

Fig. 1.10 (left) Sisilia Sii at her loom. Onelako, Flores, Indonesia, 1991. Photograph by Roy W. Hamilton.

Fig. 1.11 (right) Three elders in Riung hamlet. Ngada regency, Indonesia, 1991. Photograph by Roy W. Hamilton.
Today Indonesian textiles, produced by a range of techniques, are well known throughout the world. Shoppers and collectors seek many examples: *ikat* cloth made by artists who tie and dye the thread before weaving, batik made by covering patterns with wax to resist subsequent dying, pieces handwoven of silver and gold threads, and intricately patterned silks and cottons (figs. 1.12 and 1.13). Changes today are brought about by new encounters, now with tourists and world markets. For these markets the producers of textiles adapt their traditional work for successful sales, and women are weaving to earn a living rather than to support ritual celebrations. “When the creation of cloth and cloth patterning becomes solely an aspect of a commercial transaction, much of the power of cloth diminishes” (Gittinger 2005, 17).

**Activity**

Individuals, like the cultural communities and nations to which they belong, are all products of many influences. Have students cooperatively brainstorm some possible influences in their own lives. Certainly their parents and other relatives will come to mind. So might friends, religion, school, television and movies, hobbies, travel experiences, etc. Let each construct a web with him- or herself at the center (name, photo, or simple stick figure) and threads radiating from that center, each labeled with an influence he/she recognizes as important. From each of those threads could come additional lines naming the results of those influencing factors (i.e., love of dancing, specific kinds of clothing, desire to pursue a certain career).

If your class is studying a specific place in the world or time in history, the same investigation could center about that, or they could embark on further study of those factors in Indonesia’s history. Consider changes that come with time and outside influences, and the impact they have on maintaining traditions.
Activity
Study fabrics familiar to the students (cotton, silk, rayon, linen, velvet, wool, etc.). Have students list products for which the named textiles are used (clothing, upholstery, rugs, bed coverings, works of art, towels and related household linens) and find examples for these textiles. Can they evaluate why one fiber is used instead of another? You may choose to explore the materials and their sources. News accounts today frequently address ecological implications of growing certain crops used for cloth production.

Activity
Encounters with university and museum researchers bring new influences. Some of these are enumerated by Roy W. Hamilton in the preface of his book *Gift of the Cotton Maiden* (1994, 12-13). Let students discuss potential positive and negative outcomes resulting from encounters with academia. As Hamilton writes, “Surely on the whole, the promulgation of knowledge is a good thing. The textile traditions...can be lifted from obscurity and made part of a broader human heritage of cultural and artistic achievement. Weavers can gain new options about how to pursue their art and their livelihood. Large numbers of textiles can enter museum collections, where they will be studied, preserved, and used as vehicles of public education. But there is undeniably a darker side to this process as well. Weavers may remain anonymous and often desperately poor, while large profits are made bringing their work to the outside world. The pressure to produce quickly for cash income may force compromises in quality. In extreme cases communities can be stripped of their own artistic heritage, interfering with their ability to carry on cherished cultural institutions.”

Activity
Today’s textiles, worldwide, are no longer just for the clothing, rugs, and furniture coverings with which we’re familiar. With research (particularly documented in Matilda McQuaid’s book *Extreme Textiles: Designing for High Performance*, 2005), students will find new uses for textiles in architecture, space exploration, medicine and more. They can investigate these and propose new, unnamed uses.
2. People Of The Adat

Even with changes brought about by the encounters discussed above, many Southeast Asians have retained basic philosophies that work to balance the cosmic forces, ancestors, spirits, and their lives today. Each community has its own adat that comprise the rules of village life with its own particular traditions. Adat spells out rules for living: for preserving the environment, observing the religious and legal practices of marriage, ritual, and political succession, and to guide the creative expressions of the arts. Textiles are an important element of adat. They help people control the conditions of their daily lives and their environment. They are typically the visual representation of group membership and status and are a component of important life events.

Activity

Although no one aspect such as adat plays in our lives, there are always many elements that influence us. Students can think about those important elements, how they affect lives, how they are changing, and how they may differ for different people. For instance, students should consider the laws or traditions that determine their practices toward the environment. How do these differ from those of friends or neighbors? Have they changed over time? Consider religious practices in the same way. How does our society accommodate different cultural values and traditions? Have students seen manifestations of conflicting traditions in their own world?
3. Dreaming the Cloth: Weaving and Patterns

When asked, “How did you feel when you finished making your first skirt?” Sisilia Sii responded, “You could be proud! ‘Aku tau mbae oro,’ in our local language. That was what we’d say to our friends. ‘I know how to do it! My mother taught me! I know how to weave! I know how to tie ikat patterns!’ Look at the result—I am wearing it!”

Sisilia Sii is a weaver on the island of Flores in Indonesia. In the video shown at the museum and on the Intersections website, she and a narrator describe her work at the loom and the long processes of tying cotton yarns for ikat patterns, dying the yarn, and weaving the three panels needed to make one skirt. Learning the most intricate patterns offered difficulties:

“My mother had died before I learned to make the nggaja or semba patterns. It was different then. In those days, women who didn’t have senior standing in the community couldn’t make those two patterns. My mother wouldn’t let me.

“One night I had a dream about my mother. A dream! Mama came and said, ‘Sii, make a semba pattern. The way to do it is like this, and this, and this…OK, now make a nggaja pattern, like this, and like this….You must complete one full pattern before you stop.’ That was the first time I tied those two patterns.

“The next day, aduh! My dear mother had come in a dream to teach me how to tie those patterns! ‘Mama, I don’t know how! How can I do it? ‘You do know,’ she said. ‘I will teach you. You have to know. Tomorrow arrange the threads on the warping frame, follow me as I do it. Memorize, this is how many groups of yarn you need for each part of the pattern.’ She taught me that night.

“I followed my mother. My dear mother! My tears were falling! My dear mother! My dear mother taught me in my sleep.”

Weaving skills and patterns are passed from mothers to daughters. Motifs on cloths tie women to their female ancestors. When a woman modifies a pattern the modification is regarded as an inheritance from that woman.

Traditional patterns persist even as weavers explore innovations. The variety is great—stylized, floral, abstract, striped, geometric, organic and inorganic, formal and informal, figurative and nonfigurative all coming into play. Some textiles feature a large main motif along with bands of smaller repeated patterns.
Activity
There are many ways for students to explore weaving techniques, from simple paper strip weaving (which itself can be more complex if they incorporate irregular widths of paper or add ribbons, yarns, feathers, etc. to the project) to weaving on simple looms (of chip board, Styrofoam meat trays, box lids or similar items to provide support for the warp threads), to having looms available in the classroom. For intriguing wefts provide and have students collect a variety of yarns, ribbons, raffia, sticks, strips of variously textured and patterned papers, grasses, dryer lint, folded fabric, pliable metals, etc. The library has many craft books with instructions and new approaches to weaving that are suitable for classrooms. The Internet offers additional resources.

Activity
Call students’ attention to patterns in their own clothing. (If time permits, a worthwhile introduction would have students looking for patterns in nature and in their homes and neighborhoods.) Can they make categories for these patterns? Add to the list of descriptors above (i.e., formal and informal) and then classify their patterns into those categories.

4. Surplus of Stripes and Bands
In some Southeast Asian communities bands and stripes of varied sorts predominate the cloth patterns. These may be wide and narrow bands of geometric shapes—intricate and complex or simple bands of simple dots and slashes—or they may consist of figurative and floral motifs. The latter demonstrate foreign influences, including trade cloths with stylized patterns from India and flower and scenic motifs from European missionary embroidery.
Activity

Begin some pattern exercises with lines. Have students draw on the board all the types of lines they can think of (i.e., thin, thick, straight, wavy, zigzag, spiraling, dotted). Let them build upon the lines, drawing combinations that they can then assemble into patterns. Perhaps they can, as part of the striped pattern or as a separate motif bordered by the pattern, add elements that represent an influence in their lives. (Possibilities include countries of their familial origins, a group or team they belong to, a hobby, an interest, a song, etc.) See figures 1.14–1.16 for images of textiles with banding and stripes.

Fig. 1.14 (left)
Fowler Museum at UCLA. Museum Purchase, Manus Fund. X70.125.

Fig. 1.15 (middle)
Man’s cloth. Mbay region, Flores, Indonesia. L: 141 cm.
Fowler Museum at UCLA. Museum Purchase, Manus Fund. X91.1620.

Fig. 1.16 (right)
Woman’s cloth. Ende region, Flores, Indonesia. L: 156 cm.
Fowler Museum at UCLA. Museum Purchase, Manus Fund. X88.1257.
5. Woven Words

The patterns in woven textiles become apparent as warp and weft threads intertwine. A weaver begins by threading the loom with the warp threads, which run the length of the cloth to be woven.

Activity

In the following activity (Handout WOVEN WORDS) students will weave together words, rather than threads. They should begin by using the words from the word bank in the left margin of the page to fill in the blanks of the sentences, then use the “warp words” to form the “warp” of the four vertical lines of the crossword diagram.

The other thread-words (the “weft words”) will intersect the warp at the shaded squares to form the weft of our weaving. Complete the “word weaving” with these weft words.

When the squares are all filled in, if done correctly, the letters in the shaded squares can be arranged to complete the line at the bottom of the worksheet, announcing the name of the exhibition where wonderful examples of weavings can be seen.

A selected glossary of textile terms (Handout LANGUAGE OF THE LOOM) is included in this lesson.

Useful Readings

Fischer, Joseph

Gittinger, Mattiebelle

Gittinger, Mattiebelle (ed.)
Useful Readings

Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.

McQuaid, Matilda 2005    Extreme Textiles: Designing for High Performance.

Richter, Anne 1993    Arts and Crafts of Indonesia.
London: Thames and Hudson Ltd.

Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.

Note to Teachers:

This lesson is part of the curricular materials developed to accompany the exhibition Intersections: World Arts, Local Lives. Although this and companion lessons are self-contained, each will be enhanced when used in conjunction with others in this resource. Addressing several lessons within each unit will facilitate the incorporation of the study of world arts and cultures into your curriculum.

The lesson is based on works in the first section of the exhibition called Art and Action. In this gallery works are introduced that served to make things happen. See “Unit One—Art and Action” for an introductory statement on the unit, along with some provocative “Questions for Thought,” and suggestions that will inspire the students to relate the unit to their own lives.

Images of objects to be shown to students may be printed as handouts (from within each lesson), viewed online at the Intersections web link http://collections.fowler.ucla.edu, or downloaded from the curriculum page on our website.

In this unit the topics and lessons are

Lesson 1: The Role of the Artist: Crown for Yoruba Initiation by Jose Rodriguez, U.S.
Lesson 2: Efficacy and Action: Nkisi Nkondi: A Power Figure of Central Africa
Lesson 3: Beauty and Purpose: Capturing Beauty: Ikebana Baskets, Japan
Lesson 4: Encounters of Ideas, Time, and Place: Textiles of Southeast Asia