

Paul Poiret and the 'Battick' haute couture

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Abstract

In 1911, Paul Poiret—the leading Parisian couturier, launched a collection of opulent evening gowns decorated with the Javanese technique of wax-resist dyeing, known as batik. The colours and motifs of the fabrics of those gowns echoed the textile art of Java and were executed by Erica von Scheel, a German artist living in Paris. Although the later fate of these gowns is unknown, they were documented in photographs by Edward Steichen and Henri Manuel and in drawings by Georges Lepape and Georges Barbier. Poiret's interest in the batik decoration was short-lived but it was vital for drawing the attention of other French designers to the potential of the Javanese technique in creating fashionable clothing. A decade later, in Paris dozens of workshops produced a range of textiles decorated with the batik technique, of which the best known was 'Le Batik Française' studio run by Marguerite Pangon.

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Orientalism in the fashion of Paul Poiret

Paul Poiret (1879–1944) is remembered as one of the most extravagant and influential Parisian couturiers at the beginning of the twentieth century. His innovative style, in which simplified, fluid lines of garments replaced stiff corsets and close-fitting dresses, was frequently inspired by real or imagined traditions of the Orient and antiquity. In 1905, Poiret launched the opulent 'Confucius' evening wrap, inspired by the construction of the Japanese kimono (Grossiord n.d.). Eastern garments became an even stronger source of Poiret's inspirations in the following years, seen in a series of

Fig. 1. Paul Poiret, c. 1913. Creative Commons.



ladies' costumes with bouffant, harem-style trousers, tunics, and evening coats of simple cut and boldly patterned textiles accompanied by accessories such as painted fans, turbans and aigrettes studded with precious stones. These luxurious and extravagant garments, so revolutionary at that time, stemmed from the free interpretation of costumes and textile traditions of Persia, Turkey, Japan, China, and North Africa. Frequently combined to create improbable fusions of style and sartorial taste, they gave the Parisian elite the illusion of life in a dream-like world of 'Oriental' fantasy and opulence.

Poiret's elevation of the Orient reached its apogee in June 1911, when an extravagant costume party with the theme *The Thousand and Second Night* was held in the grounds of his couture house at avenue d'Antin. The host dressed as a Turkish sultan, while the guests—his friends and most treasured customers—wore a variety of costumes inspired by diverse traditions of Middle Eastern countries (Delandres 1987, 50-55; Troy 2002, 125). The event was documented by Parisian photographer Henri Manuel, and the images of this lavish fête were published in several French journals.

The same year Poiret turned his attention to another source of Eastern inspiration, launching a collection of evening garments decorated with the Indonesian batik technique. This new series of silk evening gowns featuring bold, hand-drawn patterns executed with the technique, was a befitting way to reinforce Poiret's phantasmagory of the mythical Orient. Although the technique was already known in Paris, Poiret elevated the status of batik to new heights by pioneering the introduction of the Indonesian method of textile decoration into the French tradition of *haute couture*.

Batik technique in Europe

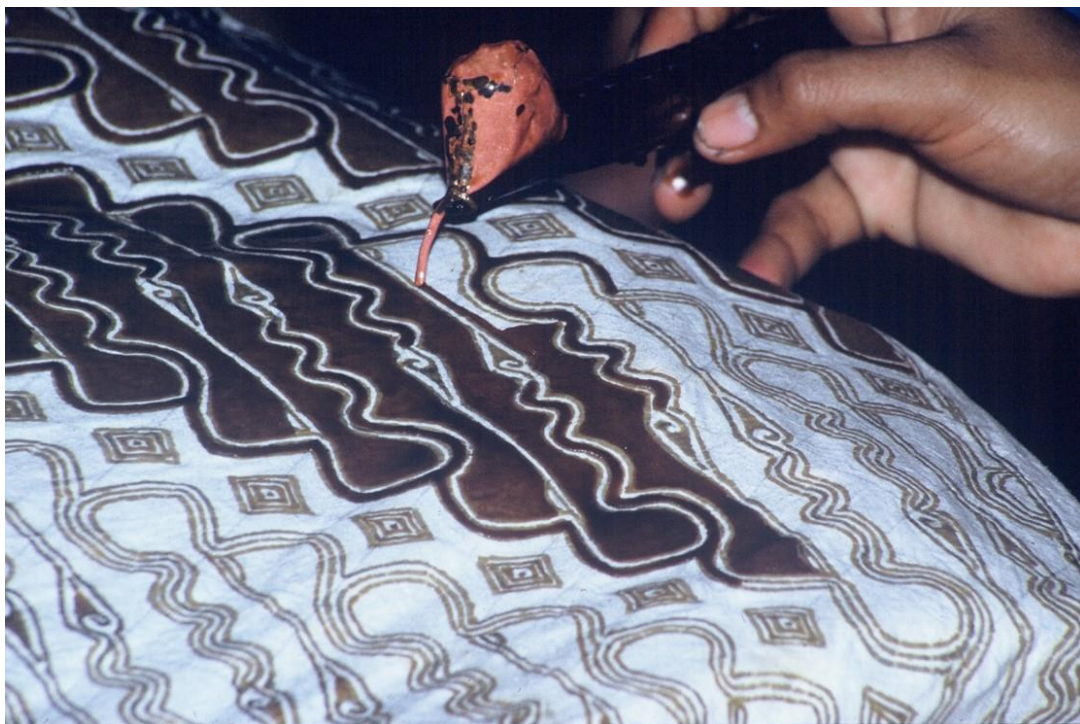


Fig. 2. Batik technique of Java: molten wax applied to the surface of a cloth to draw patterns. Photo: Maria Wronska-Friend.

Batik is the technique of patterning cloth through a repeated process of drawing patterns with molten wax which acts as a resist, and cold-temperature dyeing. As the motifs are drawn by hand with a small pen-like tool called a *canting*, each piece of cloth receives a unique character, and the range of ornaments that can be applied is almost limitless. Although wax-resist dyeing has been practised for thousands of years in several parts of the world, it was on the Indonesian island of Java that this technique of textile decoration was brought to the highest development. Batik is applied to the decoration of men's and women's garments worn as everyday and festive dress in all parts of Java, and at times also on other islands (**Fig. 2**).

The technique of batik was introduced into European arts in the early 1890s after a group of Dutch artists, inspired by a collection of Indonesian textiles in an Amsterdam Museum, initiated first experiments with hand-applied wax resist. In Europe, unlike Java, batik was first employed to decorate textiles used in interior decoration, such as furniture upholstery, curtains, or wall coverings. Only several years later did Agatha Wegerif-Gravestein—who opened the first batik atelier in Europe in Apeldoorn—apply the technique to the decoration of exquisite ladies' garments (Wronska-Friend 2001, 106-09).

Within a few years, Dutch textiles decorated with the Javanese technique became popular outside the Netherlands. In Paris, from 1899 they were sold at the fashionable art gallery 'La Maison Moderne' owned by the art critic Jules Meier-Graefe. A year later, they were presented with great success in the Dutch Pavilion at the 1900 World Exhibition in Paris (Wronska-Friend 2014, 373). At the beginning of the twentieth century batik went on to be practised by hundreds, if not thousands of craftsmen and artists all over Europe, in particular in Germany, Austria, France, Poland and Great Britain. The applications of this technique varied greatly in style of decoration, standards of technical accomplishment, the types of tools and dyes used, the technology of dyeing, and so on. While some European batik artists used to refer to the textile traditions of Java, for most of them batik became a new medium that reflected the decorative styles that dominated the European arts of the day: at the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century it was Art Nouveau, while after the First World War it was the style of Art Deco.

'Battick' collection of Paul Poiret

Although the Javanese technique was practised in France already by the beginning of the twentieth century, it was Paul Poiret who introduced batik into Parisian haute couture, giving it special recognition. In 1911, Poiret launched a collection of evening garments that featured several opulent robes called 'Battick'. These were long, sumptuous coats made of draped silk fabrics with collar and cuffs trimmed with a blue fox fur. The fabrics were decorated with purpose-made large, dramatic motifs in the batik technique.

At this stage of research, none of Poiret's batik coats have yet been identified in private or museum collections. However, this new embodiment of Eastern taste has been documented in photographs and drawings by Henri Manuel, Edward Steichen, Georges Lepape and Georges Barbier, published in French and German fashion journals and albums in 1911 and 1912.



Fig. 3. Batik evening coat by Paul Poiret.
Photo by Henri Manuel, published in *Deutsche Moden-Zeitung* in 1911.

In addition to the photographs taken by the Parisian photographer Henri Manuel (1874–1947), who had collaborated with Poiret in previous years, a special session was organised for the American photographer Edward Steichen (1879–1973), who in the following years was to be recognised as the pioneer of fashion photography. One of the batik gowns photographed by both Manuel and Steichen provides a good illustration of the contrasting approaches taken by the two photographers.

Henri Manuel, in his sharply focused, detailed images published in the *Deutsche Moden-Zeitung*, simply documents the dress and the pattern of wide, diagonal bands filled with large dots and long dashes (Alfen 1911). Edward Steichen's interpretation of the same dress was published in the magazine *Art et Décoration*, to illustrate the essay 'L'Art de la robe' (Cornu 1911). Shooting with soft lenses and hazy lighting, Steichen decided not just to document the batik coat but transformed it into an artwork in its own right, supporting Poiret's vision that he was a dress artist rather than a mere couturier (Troy 2002, 128-29). This was the first fashion shoot for Steichen who in following years was to become the chief photographer for *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*.

Another batik coat from Poiret's collection was illustrated in one of the drawings by Georges Lepape (1887–1971), published in February 1911 in the exclusive, limited-edition album *Les Choses de Paul Poiret vue par Georges Lepape*. The third plate of this album features three models and the one on the left wears an evening batik coat. The dress has been decorated with a horizontal row of elongated, yellow triangles filled with blue dots and set against a white background.



Fig. 4. 'Chez Poiret' by Georges Barbier, used as a cover illustration of 'Les Modes' journal, Paris 1912. The coat on the right is from the Paul Poiret batik collection.

A third example features in the drawing by Georges Barbier (1882–1932), published in 1912 on the cover of the journal *Les Modes* (Barbier 1912) (Fig. 4). The pose of the model on the right is similar to the one in the photograph by Steichen. The motifs of her batik gown seem to be a fusion of the decoration of the first dress, photographed by Manuel and Steichen, and the second one, drawn by Lepape. The main part of the garment has been covered with diagonal rows of large dots while the upper part of the dress features a row of triangles—

which in Lepape's drawing were the focal motif of the garment. The head of the model has been wrapped with a turban-like cover, topped with an aigrette.

The motifs of those batik gowns were the work of Erica von Scheel (1881–1966), a German painter and designer and one of the most gifted students of Henry van de Velde at the Kunstgewerbliches Seminar in Weimar. She learned the batik technique at a training course at the School of Applied Arts in Weimar in 1908. She moved to Paris in 1909 and the following year started collaboration with Paul Poiret on creating batik haute couture. She returned to Germany in 1912 and the same year married painter Ivo Hauptmann (Wronska-Friend 2014, 386-88).

Javanese inspirations

Not only the technique but also the motifs and colours of the 'Battick' gowns point to their Javanese inspirations. However, their source may not be immediately obvious because the motifs have not been directly copied from Indonesian textiles but have instead undergone a significant degree of transposition. For example, the patterns composed of diagonal rows filled with dashes and large dots depicted in the Manuel and Steichen photographs can be traced, with high probability, to the curved diagonal lines of the prominent *parang rusak* design, which traditionally was restricted to the use of the rulers and their families at the courts of Surakarta and Yogyakarta (Wronska-Friend 2014).



Fig. 5. Sarong skirt in blue-brown colours with two rows of elongated triangles known as *tumpal* motif. Java, late 19th – early 20th century, Rudolf Smend collection, Cologne.

Undoubtedly, the art of Indonesian textiles also informs the line of elongated triangles that decorate the gowns in the Lepape and Barbier drawings. This motif is known in Java as *tumpal* and is presented as two rows of triangles placed in a vertical arrangement, usually in the central part of Javanese sarongs. However, in Poiret's 'Battick' collection, this motif has been presented as a single, horizontal line of triangles that runs across the whole width of the garment.

The need to use low-temperature dyeing limits the range of natural dyes that can be used in batik. Three colours—blue, brown and yellow—dominated textile decoration of Central Java, where until the end of the nineteenth century only natural dyes were used (Wronska-Friend 2001). Depending upon the technology of dyeing, indigo—the most common natural dye in Indonesia—can produce a range of blue tones, from light blue to dark navy, while the over dyeing of dark blue and brown results in black. Interestingly, the colours of the garments in Lepape and Barbier's drawings—blue, yellowish-brown and dark navy—suggest that in decorating Poiret's batik gowns, Erica von Scheel was guided by the colours of Central-Javanese batiks. It is doubtful, however, that in Paris she was able to use the Indonesian natural dyes; most probably they were synthetic dyes reflecting the Javanese range of colours.

It is difficult to determine whose idea it was, the couturier's or the artist's, to decorate the gowns with motifs and colours that echoed the textile traditions of Indonesia. There are no indications of Paul Poiret's knowledge of or engagement with Indonesian textiles, and his encounter with batik was short-lived; he used the technique only in his 1911 collection. On the other hand, Erica von Scheel, who before coming to Paris spent several years at Weimar, had a very good knowledge of the iconography of the Javanese textiles. Henry van de Velde, her teacher and one of the most prominent European designers in the first half of the twentieth century, had been fascinated by Indonesian textile art for several decades. Recent research into van de Velde's textile design reveals that in a number of interior decoration projects he used replicas of Javanese batiks, printed in the Netherlands. There is no doubt that Erica von Scheel, who assisted van de Velde in the execution of several of his projects, knew this group of textiles quite well. For example, her bedroom at Weimar was decorated with a cloth that featured the Javanese pattern *garis miring* (Wronska-Friend 2014, 381). It is probable that in accordance with the Orientalist trope of his *haute couture*, Poiret might have suggested that the 'Battick' collection of evening coats should be decorated with Javanese motifs. However, in all likelihood it was Erica von Scheel, the artist who executed these patterns, who was also the author of the Javanese-inspired decoration.

French batik after Poiret

'Battick', the new embodiment of the Eastern fantasy, complemented Poiret's other garments that had been inspired by Orientalist traditions, such as 'Confucius', 'Ispahan', 'La Perse', 'Minaret', 'Sorbet' and several others. The batik technique imbued each piece of cloth with individuality and originality, and as such, closely paralleled Poiret's approach to fashion where each garment was a unique, distinctive creation. And yet, Poiret's encounter with batik was quite brief: only the 1911 collection featured gowns decorated with the wax-resist technique. The reasons for this one-off encounter are unknown but might be due to Erica von Scheel leaving Paris in early 1912.

However, Poiret's idea of opulent evening gowns decorated with the batik technique found followers among other fashion designers in Paris in the following years. For example, another outstanding couturier, Gabrielle 'Coco' Chanel, in 1923 launched a collection of fur-trimmed gowns "in the colours of autumn and suitable for a visit to a theatre," decorated with the batik technique (d'Avrily 1923, 24).



Fig. 6. Evening batik coat of silk velvet. Marguerite Pangon batik atelier, Paris ca. 1925. Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.

Batik reached the peak of its Parisian popularity in the 1920s with dozens of small-scale studios operating in several parts of the city. There is no doubt the doyenne of Parisian batik was Marguerite Pangon, who ran 'Le Batik Française' atelier at 64 rue La Boétie for more than a decade. Although Pangon learned the batik technique at the Koloniaal Laboratorium at Haarlem where the teachers and students closely adhered to the technique and aesthetics of Central-Javanese batik, her studio in Paris specialised in the mass-production of highly commoditised apparel that contradicted the ideals of the complex and value-laden cultural expressions of Java (Wronska-Friend 2001, 121). The singular collection of exclusive batik garments created by Paul Poiret in 1911 reflected more closely not only the

aesthetics of Javanese textiles but also the philosophy of classical Javanese batik, with its underlying principles of uniqueness and creativity.

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