

# Friday

DECEMBER 25-31, 2009

## Snow belles

Ring in the season with style 56



## CRAFT

**Evelyn Brey**, "Silk painting using both batik and gutta techniques helps me relax my mind."



ASGHAR KHAN/ANM

# Wax works

**B**ATIK, THE ART of creating flamboyant patterns on cloth using wax, is no longer an Oriental tradition. Preethi Janice D'Sa profiles two women who prove how it is fast gaining international hues.

Think of Batik, and the psychedelic seventies come to mind: the Flower Power era, when blooms were as much a hair accessory as they were a garden delight. The young and free certainly made life colourful: bright shades and dyed tees were on display as far as the eye could see.

A traditional and time-honoured art in many countries in south-east Asia, it was for centuries a ubiquitous pattern in an ethnic lifestyle – till it bloomed in global consciousness as a mere fad. But the beauty and charm of this deceptively simple art of fabric colouring has shaken off its

faddisms roots with quiet dignity and reclaimed its original charm.

The art of batik is flourishing and this simple but beautiful way of dressing up plain fabric is winning over more enthusiasts by the day. From Dubai to Florence, *Friday* finds batik enthusiasts who are hoping that this lovely art will take centre stage once again.

### **Evelyn Brey**

Evelyn Brey is not new to silk painting in either the batik or the gutta technique. This Austrian osteopath and naturopath has been

living in Dubai on and off for the last 24 years. She arrived in Dubai at a time when it was still a small place, the kind long-timers today recall fondly as a place where everybody knew everyone else. She spent a lot of her school holidays in Dubai, where her father was based.

"I started silk painting more than ten years ago at the Dubai International Art Centre and enjoy it now just as much as I did then. I started with the gutta technique (see sidebar), which is one of the more common techniques used, and in subsequent courses we were

taught other techniques like using salt or sugar, watercolour techniques, freestyle designs and batik. It's exciting to start off with a pristine white piece of silk cloth and watch the wondrous transformations it undergoes. Silk is a fantastic fabric to work with because of its softness and shimmer. It is also a very forgiving medium to work with. I find silk painting extremely relaxing and love the shine the colours develop. I also can't stop being [amazed] each time an application of colour changes the whole picture. I like to create abstracts because it leaves the image open to interpretation for the person who sees it."

Though her love for batik has taken deep root in her soul, her first love – being a therapist – takes priority. "However, as soon as I've got enough free time, I return to concentrating on my silk paintings. Silk painting using both batik and gutta techniques helps me relax my mind and train my mind to focus on the job at the same time. It's a bit like a mini meditation, I suppose."

She looks to the weather to get her going with her batik creations. "I only work on the silk when the sun shines, not on cloudy days. The sunshine on the silk brings out colours at their best. Every colour you add changes the complete picture and can make a huge difference and you see the change immediately."

Evelyn says she loves to paint purely for her own pleasure. In the past her family and friends have received most of her pieces. However, now that she sells at the Artisans of the Emirates Souq (ARTE), it gives her exposure to a wide variety of people of all ages and nationalities.

"The interest from customers is great because of the batik technique I use on silk. I prefer to paint big pieces – that is to say as big as I can possibly fit them into my self-made steaming pot, which is about 1m x 1m. I also like to make scarves, which of course are used by women from many different cultures. I think a woman with a scarf looks very smart, à la Audrey Hepburn."

You can contact Evelyn on [icebear@emirates.net.ae](mailto:icebear@emirates.net.ae)

## Illaria Cavalca

Illaria Cavalca lives in Prato, on the outskirts of Florence, Italy, but she

certainly has set her sights on Dubai. Through a series of email interviews, we came to learn that this artist is in love with the batik technique. She verges on the poetic when describing its beauty.

Her childhood had a lot to do with her love for all things artistic, influences from foreign lands and languages. She believes she may have inherited her artistic talent from her father who was not only a painter, but also a wood and metal sculptor.

"When I first heard the word batik, I thought it was something to eat. At the time I was having dinner with a old friend of mine who was describing this technique. She was an art teacher who in the 1970s used to run a shop in Prato city centre where she made batik paintings, batik covers for cushions and so on. She is

### WHERE DID IT ALL BEGIN?

It is difficult to pin point the exact origins of batik. Evidence of batik work has been found in the ancient worlds of Asia, India, the Middle East, and Africa. Whether this technique developed independently across these continents or due to trade exchanges is not clear. However, it is in Java, Indonesia that batik has reached its peak.

In fact the word is derived from the Javanese word *amba* (to write) and *titik* (for dot or point). The basic understanding is that a line or a patch is drawn on cloth with wax, so that the surface is protected from the dye that will be used. On thicker materials, the wax is applied on both sides of the cloth to ensure that the colour does not leak into unwanted areas.

The wax resists the colour and therefore the cloth surface is divided into dyed and un-dyed areas. After the last dyeing, the material is dried and placed between two layers of absorbent paper.

The wax is then ironed out of the material into the paper to reveal the pattern

the pioneer for the batik technique in Prato. Once I showed interest in knowing more about the technique, she welcomed me to her shop and I attended my first lessons there.

"Whenever my friend described this technique, it would move me and that led me to spend time in her shop. She went on to introduce me to another batik artist in Prato and the rest, as they say, is history."

Living in a country that has a formidable artistic heritage, Illaria had a vast range of artistic mediums she could have chosen to pursue. From Murano glass to ceramics from Montelupo Fiorentino, the riches Italy has given the world of art and crafts are innumerable. Sitting in this kind of an artistic crucible, why did batik beckon her before all others? "Though I tried my hand at oil paintings once,



or picture that's been dyed into the cloth.

The old process of batik does not allow the artist to apply many colours in one go. Traditionally, after waxing, the material is dipped in a dye bath and the first colour was the lightest tone to be used. However, modern techniques allow the artist to apply many colours in one go. In order to retain the first colour, the cloth is once again covered with wax.

The most exciting part of this process is that one can never be sure of the perfect separation of colours, and the patterns are different everytime. The characteristic of the batik process is the cracks in the design due to wax. The wax, being brittle, cracks and the dye penetrates the

waxed area. This results in the beautiful spider web design wherever the wax has been applied. That's why creativity is at its max when it comes to painting in the batik technique. All you need is a pure form of fabric, typically pure cotton or pure silk, block areas with wax, and then pick up your brush and let your creativity flow.

Once the basics of batik are understood, many artists start to delve in the gutta technique. The difference is that gutta, instead of wax, is applied as a divider and then the fabric is steam fixed so that the colours don't run. You can be brave and combine both the batik and gutta in one painting: do the small details with gutta and the background with the crackling of wax.

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**Illaria Cavalca.** "The most interesting part of batik is choosing the colours for dyeing."

my heart was not in it. Whereas when I took up batik, I never stopped learning and experimenting. The most interesting part of batik is definitely the stage when I choose the colours for dyeing. You see, the range of available colours is limited. If a colour I want to use doesn't exist, then I need to create it. So many variants influence the result, such as the temperature of the water, amount of colour added to the water, and so on.

"So I don't always get the colour I want. But that is what makes things so challenging and exciting. There is no limit to one's creativity."

But she does not approach her art with predetermined ideas. She likes to borrow ideas from nature and she attributes that to the fact she lives in front of the Galceti natural park in Prato north.

"The park area is one of the most beautiful parts of the city. Imagine a green park surrounded by even more greenery with the hills.

"I am lucky to be connected to the Prato city centre and to the Galceti park where I can enjoy my painting in peace."

The ideation process for Illaria

happens with no particular predictability. "It is usually an idea that I have in mind or a specific sensation that I pick up on or how I am feeling at the moment and that gets reflected in my work and the fibres embody it.

"Sometimes it can be a memory of a perfume that triggers more memories associated with it. And the past sets me free to capture it in the present."

Apart from the actual technique of batik, Illaria knows a lot about fabric, thanks to her husband Gianluca Zanobini, who owns a textile manufacturing company in Prato, called Estrema SRL. "Due to his education and experience, I can trust his suggestions about buying the best fabric according to the subject of my paintings. To get a good end result for the painting, quality of the fabric is important as well, regardless of if you paint it on cotton, silk or satin."

Illaria doesn't only want to paint and sell her work, she wants to demonstrate to the young generation the beauty of old, traditional arts and crafts. So passionate is she about batik, you almost end up wanting to

### GO FOR GUTTA

Gutta is what gives the outline to shapes that is so common with silk painting. Gutta is a liquid rubber or vegetable gum, depending on the brand.

When applied to silk, the gutta acts as a barrier or resist and stops the dyes from flowing into each other. There is water-based and solvent-base gutta.

The correct application of gutta is the most important

part of this technique. The gutta line must penetrate the fibres of the silk on both sides to create a waterproof barrier. Gutta lines can also be used purely as decoration.

Once the gutta has been applied and thoroughly dried, it is time to colour in. The colours spread very easily over the silk and the colours can be controlled by putting salt or sugar on them, to create intricate designs. It's fun to

make up your own colours by mixing and matching and experimenting with different combinations. It makes each piece unique.

Once the design has been coloured, the silk needs to dry. For the colours to hold, the dyes need to be fixed once the painting is finished. The fixing depends on which dye has been used and is then done either by ironing the silk hot or by steaming it for up to an hour.

## CRAFT

take lessons from her. "I am fearful that batik will become a lost craft. It is so unfortunate that there are not many people my age interested in this technique. People remain indifferent to it or not interested in it, because they perceive it to be a laborious technique. I am going to join the UK-based Batik Guild ([www.batikguild.org.uk](http://www.batikguild.org.uk)) in order to meet new artists," she says.

The relaxing effects of a hobby, of creating something with the help of your imagination, of seeing the fruit of your labour grow sweet and heavy on the branch of time... these are all experiences on the wane, say Illaria. "We need to take a step back in time and find pleasure in the little and simple, rare things of life.

"The advance in technology has corralled an entire generation of children into seeking pleasure in virtual things. Where have creativity and imagination gone? Creativity should be our daily bread. We need to strengthen this way of thinking if we



"I am fearful that batik will become a lost craft," says Illaria Cavalca

care to maintain a balance between our mental and physical wellness. That's why I feel so good while painting and I am certain that I am not the only one who feels this way.

"Unfortunately, in Italy too, craftsmen are a dying breed."

Illaria has yet to set foot in the UAE, but in her heart she knows one day she will. She would like to be a part of the movement when home-made crafts reclaim their former glory and people take pride in owning things that are hand-crafted rather than mass-produced.

"It would be so helpful to take a

step back, to appreciate hand-made crafts again, and understand the love and passion that goes into each piece and admire the passion, dedication and skill of the artisans who are now almost a forgotten lot.

"I would like to focus my efforts on Dubai where I feel people are more open-minded and there is a higher consideration for artisans and craftsmen. That is why I've always been attracted to the Middle East."

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-Preethi Janice D'Sa is a Dubai-based freelancer

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