



Change and continuity

Diane Gaffney offers some thoughts on the future for handmade textiles

MAYBE YOU KNOW someone who has tried to make a living from textiles – maybe you’ve given it a go yourself. If so, you will know how tough it is to pay yourself for the hours of work you have to put in. Many end up doing it for love, as a hobby, or get some sort of subsidy – a partner perhaps with a decent job, or support from a charity or foundation like the Crafts Council. Some people manage to turn it into a business. Making fine textiles takes practice, skill and patience.

A changing world

My husband Jim and I first started buying and selling textiles from Asia back in the 1980s. Many of the villages we visited had no electricity, no TV, no phones, and sometimes no transport. Lives had changed over time, but to us they seemed timeless. Men and women farmed the land and the women made textiles. In Turkey they fitted weaving into the annual pattern of raising sheep, shearing the wool and spinning. In Thailand,

when they weren’t needed in the rice fields, they wove silk. In the mountains, hilltribe women and girls embroidered in every spare moment to make the fabulous costumes they all wore. Women were usually making textiles for their homes and family. The raw materials – wool, hemp, silk, cotton, dyes – came from the land, the loom was handmade, and their time was seemingly infinite. The hours spent were not counted.

These days – only 30 or so years later – things have changed. Yes, there are still those scenes of picturesque industry, women laughing and working together. But if you look more closely it’s a different picture. The village now has a road, a school and electricity. Now the women need money to pay the bills – for the TV, the fridge, the pick-up, the motorbike, the smartphone, the school fees.

Television, and now the internet, provide a window onto the rest of the world, where people seem to have a better life. Children go to school and have opportunities which their mothers



From the top: Making ikat is a painstaking and labour-intensive skill

brocades are woven to decorate skirt borders, but without Royal patronage, skills like this will be lost

In Thailand and Laos, intricate silk

Diane in Indonesia





Above, from the left:
Ancient indigo dye pots
in Phrae, Thailand...

... now being used for
shibori and tie dye
workshops.

Left:
This photo says it all:
H'mong hilltribe women
in northern Thailand
make their traditional
indigo batik – but the
pick-up, the mobile phone
and the satellite TV will
have to be paid for

Bottom:
In Guizhou, China, women
in traditional wooden
houses still make their
burnished indigo cloth



didn't. Perhaps they won't want to learn the skills and spend the hours it takes to make a hand-knotted carpet, or a piece of silk ikat or a traditional skirt which involves spinning and weaving hemp, batik, indigo dyeing, appliqué, embroidery, starching and pleating... These changes are happening all over the world, but below are snapshots from just a few places we have visited over these past 30 years.

Flores

Flores is one of the thousands of islands of Indonesia. Making and wearing ikat cloth is a strong tradition here, as it is on many islands in this part of the world. There is a saying that a boy is old

enough to marry when he can grow enough to feed a family, and a girl when she can weave enough to clothe them.

To make ikat you need cotton and dyes, a handmade wooden loom and some strips of palm to bind the threads. In Flores everything literally does grow on trees – food, drink, medicine, materials for making houses and clothes. Time costs nothing and the women use it to make exquisite textiles.

Ikat textiles have an important spiritual and cultural function: they are offered at rites of passage such as weddings and funerals, and are needed at clan or village ceremonies of blessings, purifications and founding a house. The amount of textiles given demonstrates the wealth of the family – it shows how long the women can spend on making textiles rather than working the land.

We visited Flores in 2015. Some villages are still very difficult to get to, cut off when the rain washes the road away, and the houses are traditionally built around the graves of the grandparents. But even in the most isolated places there are schools, phones and motorbikes. Now the women have real pressure to find the money they need to keep their children in school. There is still a local need for ikat for ceremonies and everyday wear, but they also need to sell it, and this leads to corner-cutting – synthetic dyes are used instead of the slower work of collecting, making and using natural dyes, and designs are simpler, less intricate.

One bright hope in Flores is the involvement of the charity

Threads of Life (www.threadsoflife.com) which has helped set up co-operatives, encourages the continuation of natural dyes, and markets fine textiles through its shop in Bali.

Northern Thailand

Silk

Isaan is the poorest and driest part of Thailand, too dry to grow cotton. Here, silk fabrics (often brocaded or patterned with incredibly intricate ikat) have traditionally been produced and used as everyday wear. Its elevation to the amazing and luxurious 'Thai silk' made today is a great story.

Thanks to Jim Thompson, an American living in Bangkok, who marketed Thai silk to America after the Second World War, and to the Queen of Thailand, who wore Thai silk outfits whenever she went on state visits and who founded a skills training scheme at the Chitralada Palace, Thai silk weaving has changed from a dying art into a huge commercial success. There will always be plenty of Thai ladies who need a fancy outfit for a special occasion, as well as a huge export market to ensure the continuation of fine silk weaving.

Indigo

Thung Hong is a village in northern Thailand which I visit every year. It's famous for providing much of the indigo-blue workwear that farmers wore throughout the region. It's tough and hardwearing and the deep indigo blue lasts for decades. But things are changing here too. Alongside the old ladies still making and selling the traditional garments there are now boutiques with customers from Bangkok and Tokyo. At my homestay, the huge, ancient indigo vats are now used for tie-dye workshops for young urban Thais. Down the road there are a couple of guys designing and making indigo clothes.

The wonderful institution called OTOP (One Tambon (sub-district) One Product: www.thaiembassy.sg/friends-of-thailand/p/what-is-otop) has helped preserve and develop all sorts of Thai handicrafts by providing a market throughout

From the top:
The Miao women have all manner of fantastic traditional textile skills in embroidery, appliqué, hemp weaving, braid making, dyeing and batik

At a Miao New Year Festival in Guizhou, China the costumes are spectacular, but when you look more closely, most are machine embroidered

...and the batik is printed



Thailand and abroad and has been a big part of this revival. My friend Panee, who incorporates batik into her indigo, now sells most of her stock to the OTOP shop in Bangkok Airport. Indigo dyeing is alive and well and still providing a living for many people.

The Golden Triangle

All over this region, the traditions of making textiles lie deep. Costume is a way of proclaiming cultural identity among groups of people who do not have a country. Once you recognise the clues you can identify the ethnic group and the area the wearer comes from. The Maio people are especially skilful, colourful and exuberant in their costume, and as every member of the family needs a whole new outfit each New Year, every woman and girl seems to spend most of her time making textiles.

They are a savvy people who have always ducked and dived and adapted to new circumstances – moving to better land, migrating across borders, buying and selling horses, crops, and opium. Things are changing fast though, and as ever the pressure to make money is intense.

The Maio (or H'mong in Thai) are numerous and economically powerful enough to set up businesses to support their textile traditions and invent machines that replicate the embroidered panels,





and print the 'batik' needed for their costumes. They are a pragmatic bunch – if it looks good enough, it's ok.

In Chiang Mai's H'mong Market, piles of costumes arrive regularly, collected from across the region, from south-west China to Vietnam and Laos. They are picked over by dealers from Thailand and from all over the world. Nowadays H'mong women themselves make them into jackets, bags and cushions. They have become the mistresses of recycling their own materials, and I really admire them for it.

We may regret that the machine is taking over from handwork, but in many ways it frees up women to be more creative – and most of them still stitch at every opportunity.

In 2009 UNESCO added Indonesian batik to its list of items of 'intangible cultural heritage', which has given a huge boost to batik. Innovations are encouraged and batik has moved from being a dying art made and worn by one's grandmother, to being 'cool'. The future for batik in Java looks good, with support from both the government and the commercial market.

So it's a mixed picture and by no means all bad news. There is government and charitable support for quality handmade textiles in many parts of the world, there is adaptation and recycling. There is a worldwide market, and locally both from the educated middle classes and where there is a need for fine textiles in rites of passage. These things won't change.

In the UK too, the future is hopeful: the guilds are burgeoning, shows attract huge crowds and people are still prepared to pay for things made with love and skill. One of the biggest differences between makers here and in Asia is that there people work in groups, very few producing a textile from start to finish. Working together shares skills and costs as well as profits. Perhaps it shows a way forward that we could learn from?

© Diane Gaffney 2017

Java

Batik making in Java is an ancient skill, with its origins in the Royal Courts as well as the villages. It has an important place in Javanese philosophy and culture. However, it has had to adapt many times in its long history. The copper stamp was developed in the 19th century to speed up production, batik pictures were developed in the 1970s, and more recently artists have been making bespoke work for haute couture fashion collections.



From the top:
The H'mong market in Chiang Mai where textiles from all over the region, from south-west China to Vietnam and Laos, are bought, sold, cut up and recycled

In Java, traditional batik skills are still very much in evidence, although they may be used for haute couture

A batik fashion show in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Textile Traders: Diane and Jim Gaffney run Textile Traders, a shop in Bishop's Castle, Shropshire, and a stand at several shows. Find out more at: www.textiletraders.co.uk

World Textile Days 2017

Diane and Jim also help to organise World Textile Day (WTD) events, which take place across the UK. Visitors have a chance to see, handle and buy textiles from around the globe, sourced by specialist traders. There are also morning and afternoon presentations: the theme for 2017 is 'Colour'.

- 25 March: WTD Wales, Minerva Arts Centre, Llanidloes SY18 6BY
- 6 May: WTD South, Wickham Centre, Mill Lane, Wickham, Hampshire PO17 5AL
- 3 June: WTD Central, King's Sutton Memorial Hall, Banbury, Oxfordshire OX17 3PG
- 17 June: WTD Scotland, Bridge of Allan Parish Church of Scotland, Bridge of Allan FK9 4NW
- 9 September: WTD East, Mundford Village Hall, Mundford, Norfolk IP26 5DW
- 23 September: WTD North, Frodsham Community Centre, Frodsham, Cheshire WA6 7QN
- 30 September: WTD West, Saltford Hall, Saltford, Bristol BS31 3BY

For more information visit: www.worldtextileday.co.uk