

gallery

Ancient tools

Text and
Photographs
by Linda Kaun

for modern



Canting, somewhat similar to a fountain pen, have a small copper reservoir to hold the liquid wax.

Copper caps are used to apply repeating patterns on the fabric.



Ancient Tools for Modern Times

Story and Photos by
Linda Kaun

We all take so much for granted in our daily lives. I often find myself wondering about the simplest of tools; scissors, or a pencil or a paintbrush, thinking about who made this particular object. For years now as a batik painter I've been fascinated by the *cap* (chop), the beautiful, intricately patterned copper stamps used to make batik cloth and the simpler *canting*, (chan'ting) the small, wooden handled, copper-spouted cup I use to draw the hot wax across the cloth. The specialized craftsmen creating these tools get little mention and yet are artisans in their own right.

Batik *Canting*

Batik refers to both a process and the finished cloth. A batik is made by applying melted wax to cloth with the *canting* or *cap* tool, then dyeing the cloth. The wax resists the dye, maintaining the original color of the cloth underneath. Layers of wax and dye are built up, eventually boiling off the wax to remove it. Though no one can say with certainty how the batik process first began in Indonesia, it is believed that resist dyeing techniques came by way of southern India as far back as 400A.D. via traders to Java. An early canting-like tool is mentioned by the French Jesuit priest Coeurdoux in 1742 which gradually developed into the tool we know today. The Javanese *canting*, highly prized for the extremely fine lines it can produce, is only one of several styles used around the world.

My quest to see the process of making this simple instrument led me to a father-son team in Yogyakarta, Pak (Mr.) Sukiyanto and his son Arifin. I arrived at their home one morning, deep inside the narrow alleyways of their kampung or neighborhood to meet them. While Arifin began to demonstrate each step I learned more about his father.

In 1955 Pak Sukiyanto was invited to learn how to make *cantings* for a gallery in Jakarta. Starting in 1969, he became the canting maker for the gallery of Bambang Oetoro, one of the early 'pioneers' of batik paintings in Yogyakarta. Surrounded by batik all his life, through his parents who worked in a batik factory and his neighborhood behind the palace, it seemed a natural progression for him to take up this craft.

With the sounds of birds singing in the background, Arifin began to make a *canting* using the same tools his father had for nearly 50 years; from the old wood tree stump 'workbench' to a foot-powered bellows for soldering the metal. The first step is to make the copper cup or bowl by tracing a pattern onto a sheet of copper, cutting it out with tin snips and softly hammering it into a bowl shape.

A special tool his father 'borrowed' from the silversmiths is used to make the spouts. A thin strip of copper is fed through one of several different sized holes and pulled out with a pliers producing a perfectly formed tube of copper. This helps the wax to flow smoothly and prevents leaks from the spout.

Arifin continued the process, seamlessly soldering the sides of the bowl, hammering and filing rough edges, and fitting the spout in the base of one side of the bowl. The handle of the traditional *canting* is often said to be bamboo, *but* is in fact a woody-stemmed grass called *glagah*. In Pak Sukiyanto's studio, the handles are made with stronger *waru* or *melinjo* woods.

After the bowl is fitted to the handle, a bath in hydrochloric acid shines and cleans the metal. A bit of cable wire wrapped around the spout and the handle to steady the bowl is the finishing touch.

Usually the *canting* tool is made quickly and cheaply and the batik maker buys several to replace the easily damaged instruments. As far back as 1971, Pak Sukiyanto began experimenting and improving on the traditional design and materials creating stronger, longer lasting tools. I came away from his studio with a new-found respect for his craftsmanship. The carefully smoothed surface of the bowl, the perfectly formed spout, and harder woods he chooses for the handles make each of these *cantings* a special work of art.

CAP

While the *canting* has been a part of the hand-drawn batik process for centuries, the *cap* is considered a 'modern' development. Based on ancient wood blocks, the copper *cap* came into use around 1850. By stamping the cloth with the *cap*, thus creating the intricately detailed batik motifs immediately, a cloth which might take three months to batik with the *canting* could be finished in a day.

I'd heard that *cap* making is a skill now belonging to only a few older men in the Yogyakarta area. My first stop was meeting 95 year old Pak Soemodihardjo who, after 60 years as a free-lance *tukang cap* (*cap* maker), has worked at Batik Winotosastro for the past 10 years.

The twinkle in his eye and depth to his laugh as his words were translated from Javanese told me he is still very much enjoying his work. When I asked him if he thought of his creations as art, a huge smile spread across his face as he exclaimed, "Oh yes!"

Cap making is a slow, careful process. Strips of copper, about 2 cm wide, are bent, curved or angled with complete accuracy to match a pattern drawing. These pieces are notched to fit into each other like an interlocking puzzle. Each of the joints will later be soldered in place, the *cap* design fitted onto a base and given a handle.

Pak Soemodihardjo started to make *caps* when he was 25, learning with large shapes and easy designs, gradually moving to more and more detail. It took two years to become proficient. Seventy years later, he is still going to work with a smile on his face.

With utmost respect for this lively man, I took my leave and visited the home and workshop of another *tukang cap*, Pak Hadi Wiyono. He too was quick to laugh and obviously loved making *caps*, his career since 1960. In his *kampung*, there used to be 15 *tukang cap*, but all have since passed away. Pak Hadi and his two workers are the only ones left. He reminisced about the days when "there was a lot of competition between the batik factories, each one wanting something newer and better than the others. Since the economic recession it's much simpler, they use maybe one color with the *cap*, so you don't need as many *caps* to complete the design."

Eager to talk, Pak Hadi explained that a small *cap* would take about 3 days to make, the big ones 2 weeks and an especially difficult one, one month. He took me to the work table where Pak Tugiman, his helper of 40 years, was applying borax and solder to the joints of a *cap*. A very hot fire is then built around the *cap* to set the solder. At this point the *cap* design is stabilized. Next the copper-grid base or *andang* is made, the iron handle or *tangke* fitted on and the base and *cap* soldered together in the fire.

A *cap* is part of a repeating pattern when stamped on the cloth. Now Mas Triyanto, Pak Hadi's son, takes a tweezers to the large *cap* to show me the slow 5-day process of aligning each and every dot, line, and curlicue into the correct position so the repeat is accurate.

The stamp must also be completely level so the imprint is even across the cloth. Once the *cap* is aligned, it is encased in melted *gondorukem*, a pine tree resin so it can be ground down evenly. A

final scouring with *arang*, charcoal, brings out the shine. Lastly the cap is again put in the fire to melt the *gondo*.

"You see, I'm an artist," Pak Hadi states with pride. "If I have an order or not, I still make *caps* morning, afternoon, and night! Then when people come I always have something to show them!" It is this pride in their work that was so evident in all of the men I visited. What might appear tedious to some is a deep and satisfying rhythm for each of these men continuing to create for the modern marketplace but from an ancient tradition. ~

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