

he said, she said

The Silk Prince

Interview by Hanna Rodian



Hanna Rodian journeys to Yogyakarta to visit Prince Daud, the designer and philanthropist whose unique creations are being snapped up by wealthy silk aficionados from all over the world.

In a quiet, high-walled courtyard of an old colonial house just outside Yogyakarta in Central Java, Prince Daud greets me. We are standing in a corridor, the walls of which are covered in photographs of him together with international politicians, movie stars, and show business celebrities. We then climbed the narrow wooden stairs up to his office, past a room full of shy, giggling Javanese women carefully drawing on pieces of silk with fine batik pens in much the same way that their ancestors have done for hundreds of years.

The atmosphere in the office was rather different; modernity was everywhere, *Fashion TV* blared in the corner, and Daud called to his staff to find all the samples, photos and drawings he wanted to show me. Soon, his large table was piled high with beautiful jewel-coloured silk batiks, his original sketches, and some recent magazine fashion shoots. He told me that although it can take him only five minutes to sketch an initial idea, to complete one of his special pieces is a significant process that can take up to a year. His collection of more than 2000 unique pieces (once a design has been completed, it is never repeated) retail at between USD 1,000 and USD 5,000 each.

At first glance, some of Daud's plain and intricately-patterned jacquard silk batiks do not belie their political or social content. On taking a closer look however, tears and silent screams, abject misery, guns, grenades and syringes abound. Stories unfold about the war in Iraq, portraits of Aids victims. Minutely-detailed drawings portray the destruction of reefs and forests. The subject matter is even more terrible as the drawings have been so painstakingly drawn on such a beautiful medium - hand woven silk.

In 1997, Daud, supported by family members from all four *Keraton*s (Javanese Palaces), founded a non-profit organisation to open and support a batik and cultural heritage museum, the *Ullen Sentalu Foundation* in the hills outside Yogyakarta. His extended family all gave generously; donating treasured photographs, documents, paintings, and most importantly, family batiks that had never been viewed before by the general public. With the help of donations and museum entrance fees, the four Royal Families hoped to be able to preserve their vast antique batik collections, and give people an insight into the traditional life of the palaces, especially the closed *keputrens* (women's quarters).

Daud is also a member of a committee that is trying to preserve the heritage of the Betawi people, an indigenous,

Left: Some of Prince Daud's batiks reveal striking and provocative images

closed community who have always lived in and around Jakarta. This community has its own music, costumes, language and cuisine that all reflect the roots and original identity of the city, which itself has always been a melting pot of cultures, and an important trading post since the 5th century. Daud's contribution was to create 20 batiks for the Anniversary of Jakarta celebrations on 22nd June of this year; portraying Betawi traditions and depicting their use of Malay, Indian, Arabic, Japanese, Chinese, and European motifs and influences.

A Prince in his own right, Daud sports the royal blood of Solo and Yogyakarta's royal houses. A sensitive man in his early 40's, he works for the good of the community, helping more than 550 villagers earn a living by producing a more economical range of inexpensive, commercial batiks. But Daud is not your typical businessman. As he explains: "Basically, I am an idealist and a designer. Through my work, I have become an unwilling salesman. I consider having to work commercially a necessary evil to support my charitable work."

The Prince's designs have been snapped up by such famous fashion names as Kenzo, Versace and Armani. Jennifer Lopez even wore the piece that she had sent her manager to buy in a music video. Agents all over the world sell his batiks to appreciative customers, and his beautifully designed shop in Yogyakarta sells his two ranges of batiks, as well as exclusive traditional Javanese *kebayas* (long fitted cotton blouses) using local lace. 🌿



Above: Javanese women hard at work hand-painting Prince Daud's



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Prince Daud's designs are available at his boutiques at the **Novotel**, **Ibis** and **Mercure** hotels in Yogyakarta, and from **Dream Weaves**, 18 Cross Street #BI-7, China Square, Central, Singapore



Javanese Culture & Arts Museum Ullen Sentalu, Kaliurang

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Opening hours: Tuesday-Sunday, 9am to 3pm
Off the beaten tourist track, a visit to this private, quirky museum with its lovely gardens and well-run café is well worth a visit for anyone interested in historical fabrics.

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www.well-keptsecrets.com