

February 19, 2018

Interview

## Bincang Noesa #02 with Peter ten Hoopen

*“Collect the culture, not the piece” is the philosophy of Peter ten Hoopen, a well-known Dutch collector of Indonesian ikat who had begun his collecting vocation in 1976. We talked to Peter at his apartment in Amsterdam on January 24, 2018. It did not take long to realize that Peter’s interest in textiles comes out from his appreciation of the indigenous culture, a value that he shares with the public through his PUSAKA Collection online: [www.ikat.us](http://www.ikat.us).*

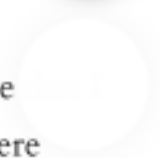
*We are very intrigued by his approach in collecting.*

— Interview conducted by Sandra Sardjono



### Why do you choose to collect textiles and why Indonesian ikat in particular?

It was not a choice, really. Many years ago, in the mid 1970s, a friend of mine came back from Indonesia with a few batiks, quite familiar of course for someone like me who grew up in the Netherlands, and one cloth of a type had never seen before. A Sumba *hinggi*, I now know it was. Its patterns were



strangely unsteady, shimmering; suggestive of a tenuous grip on reality and familiarity with the world of dreams, of visions.

This aspect appealed to me immensely. Then when she told me how ikat is made I realized how immensely time-consuming it was, what enormous investment of energy a cloth like the one she brought represented — and how unlikely it was that such cloths would continue to be made in the modernizing world where the time expended on a piece of material culture is no longer a matter of love and prestige, but of money, yield, and economic survival. A matter of school clothes and medicine, new appliances, motor vehicles. In other words, that such outstanding examples of labour-intensive material culture must be getting scarcer and scarcer over time.

Then when I looked at them a little deeper I discovered that many were also highly meaningful in a spiritual context, as they spoke of connections with gods, ancestors, the spirit world. This resonated with me on a deep level, as, since my younger years travelling through the Middle East to connect with Sufis and Hindu mystics in India, journeys of discovery described in the last two volumes of my trilogy on the sixties, I have been fascinated by the intensity with which certain peoples experience their spirituality, and how forcefully they express it in their art, the products of their artisans. So that first confrontation — yes, it was a jolt to the solar plexus.





*Hong Kong University Museum and Art Gallery's exhibition 'Fibres of Life' (15 September–26 November 2017). Image courtesy of Peter ten Hoopen.*

### What is your philosophy of collecting?

Collect the culture, not the piece. Interesting to me is not that one spectacular example of a culture, but a view of the culture—painted, in pointillistic fashion, by a larger number of examples from a wide range of levels of sophistication, local worth, and immediate visual gratification. I did not know this when I set out collecting, but at heart I am an ethnographer. I am interested in the people. What meaning did these cloths have for them? What different uses did specific cloths have? What was attributed to them? What values do they or did they represent?

So I am as keen to find something simple but very unusual, as I am to find something great but more common. Palembang *limar* with their fine silk ikat and gold brocade borders are immediately recognizable as treasure, but I can't find one any day of the week. I am more fascinated by an ikat that I can place in a general area — the Indonesian archipelago, perhaps even one specific island, like Flores — but certainly cannot place in a specific region with any degree of confidence. When I find something like that I go to great lengths to find out,



bothering all my contacts who I think might have a clue. But I guess this is what sets me apart. This is not your normal collecting — don't try this at home.

Related to this is my 'age before condition' approach, honed over the years with my *consigliere* Gary Nathan Gartenberg. Collecting older pieces allows you to look deeper back into time. See how it was *back then*. What you see, very often, is finer quality, more loving and more able construction. Tighter binding, better adjustment, more intricate patterns; and at the same time a sympathetic looseness, as seen for instance in wildly irregular yarns or creative virtuosity in the patterning, a surpassing of tradition, of any canon, a daring to *create*.



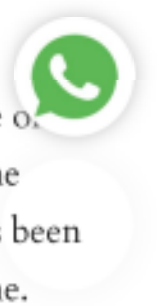
**“For disappearing cultures documentation is the heart of conservation.”**



**We really appreciate your website of the Pusaka Collection. Please tell us what you find important to include in your documentation.**

I give place of origin, as specific as possible; sizes of course; estimated age; when I know them the names of motifs and their meaning; and various observations that help place the cloth in its social context or provide some technical insight. I also give the weight and — I don't think this is done elsewhere on any scale — calculate the specific weight, which is the resultant of yarn gauge and degree of tightness versus looseness of weaving. If you couple that with microscopic inspection you can 'get into' the texture of a cloth very deeply.

However, most important to me is to *facilitate further research*. I do this by providing multiple references to literature and museum collections where cognates are held, or where further information can be acquired. I describe what counts the piece in my collection is similar or dissimilar to those in the other collections. This linking to the literature and museum collections has been very time-consuming and is probably the most important thing I have done.



It certainly is the main reason why Dr. Florian Knothe, Director of the University Museum and Art Gallery, Hong Kong University, decided to partner with me in setting up the 'Fibres of Life' exhibition and preparing the publication of *Ikat Textiles of the Indonesian Archipelago*. We shared the conviction that for disappearing cultures documentation is the heart of conservation. It is great to have hi-tech vaults for your textiles, but if you don't know how they relate to other examples from the same period, or other periods, you conserve just matter, not culture. Still good, keep doing it — but it can't hurt using this forum to call for more detailed study of the old collections, as that would be greatly enriching for the nations that have put themselves in a position as guardians of these old pieces, and for the countries of origin.



*Hong Kong University Museum and Art Gallery's exhibition 'Fibres of Life' (15 September–26 November 2017). Image courtesy of Peter ten Hoopen.*

We are very interested in your microscopic detail photos. What is your objective with such images?

One day, some four years ago, a fellow-collector challenged my assessment that a certain cloth was made with hand-spun yarn. He maintained that in that



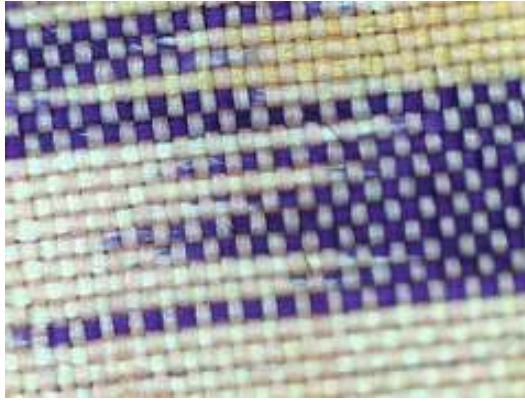
particular region all weavers had switched to machine made thread early in the 20th c., and that I was just deluding myself. This annoyed me no end. I went on-line and bought a digital microscope, of course immediately letting it loose on the contested textile — and found that I was right. Since then I have micro-photographed some 70% of the collection, each piece fifteen to thirty times, shifting the lens over various parts of the surface.

By now I have taken thousands of micro-photos. Studying them is a delight. Because apart from a rare few ambiguous cases, they cut right through the vaunting of opinion. One of the unsuspected discoveries I made was that the older the ikat, the greater the chance that the yarn would be wildly irregular. And I mean *wildly*: a factor four or five-gauge difference in a single shot, i.e. over a distance of mere millimetres. Old yarn often is so irregular that it looks like an organic growth. Beautiful to watch. Like the tree roots and lianas on a jungle floor.

So my objective is to take out the guesswork, introduce an empirical methodology. A gratifying, but also very surprising result was that I only twice or thrice had to move an assessment from ‘hand-spun’ to ‘machine-made’, but that dozens of cloths suspected to have been made with machine thread were actually done in extremely fine, tightly twined hand-spun — in one case, an old Sumba men’s wrap, *lighter* per square meter than similar cloths made with machine-made tread. On Tanimbar, too, women can outspin machines in terms of fineness. Seeing such classy yarn fills me with admiration for these women, far back in time, who managed to run their lives under often hard circumstances, in only a few areas without occasional or frequent hunger, and make such pieces of art on the side, beginning with raw home-grown cotton.

Another discovery is that in remote places weavers occasionally do strange things, like twining two yarns together not in contrary direction, but going the same way. This you are not likely to observe with just a magnifying glass.





*Image courtesy of Peter ten Hoopen.*

**In 2015 you had an exhibition ‘Woven Languages’, at the Museu do Oriente in Lisbon and recently in 2017 'Fibres of Life' at the Hong Kong University Museum and Art Gallery.**

Both were inspired by the same concept, to cover the entire archipelago with emblematic pieces, but there was a significant growth. The exhibition at Museu do Oriente was a world first, and as such unrepeatable. I am still very grateful to the Oriente for having done this, and done it so well. But Hong Kong was two years down the road; two years in which the collection grew by a hundred pieces, many of them rare, while also ageing a little through the divestment of some younger and acquisition of older pieces. What the University Museum and Art Gallery is doing with the catalogue is of entirely different level of ambition: to create the first work of reference on *Ikat Textiles of the Indonesian Archipelago*.





*Hong Kong University Museum and Art Gallery's exhibition 'Fibres of Life' (15 September - 26 November 2017). Image courtesy of Peter ten Hoopen.*



**Please tell us which ones are your favourite pieces in the collection.**



Let me give you three. The first is one that I cannot even identify with complete certainty: PC [209](#) on my website. I know of only one similar piece, also privately held. Same colours, same style and technique of drawing. On the ground of comparison of motifs I believe it to be an old sarong from Palu'e, a small island off Flores, but I may yet be proven wrong. Why I love it so much, is that it forces me to occupy myself with it, to engage with it deeply, as with a lover. I will not rest till I know who was its mother.

The second is a Tenganan double ikat, PC [059](#), that I found on a Dutch fleemarket, on the Queen's birthday, some twenty-five years ago. On a stall some fifteen meters away lay a pile of shawls and sundry other cloths, all in a jumble, and in that jumble in the distance I saw a fragment that I instantly recognized as Tenganan, hence rare, desirable. I immediately dialed down my expectations: 'Probably just a print with a Tenganan pattern'. But no, it was the real thing, and dirt cheap. It proved the truth of an insight that Gary Gartenberg once shared with me: 'Collecting is a meritocracy.' Which boils down to: 'The rewards go to those who do their homework.' You can only make such a 'lucky' find if patterns are engraved on your mind so deeply that you recognize them from far away or in an instant.' I have had several such felicitous finds, even on auctions followed by several fellow-collectors, who clearly did not realize what actually was on offer. I am sure that I have similarly missed pieces the rarity of which I did not recognize and that consequently they acquired for a song. Live and learn.

The third, is.... So hard to say! I have a different favourite every day. Go to my site at [www.ikat.us](http://www.ikat.us) and in the menu bar on top click on 'RANDOM'. You will be paired with one of my ikats, the choice determined by your stars, your aura, or 'what you need' at this moment.





*This is our result by choosing 'Random' An old sarong from Ambenu, Timor-Leste. Image courtesy of the Pusaka Collection ©Peter ten Hoopen. [https://ikat.us/ikat\\_002.php](https://ikat.us/ikat_002.php)*

## How do you store your collection and what are the challenges of storing historical textiles?

I cannot afford a climate-controlled vault so I make do with the next best thing: camphor wood chests. My best is an antique, a remnant of Dutch colonial days. Some 150 years old, but amazingly, it appears that camphor wood never loses its protective qualities. Some of the most delicate pieces live alone in stackable plastic boxes; not airtight, but insect-proof. This is not ideal, and I envy institutions like the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt and the Rautenstrauch-Joest in Cologne that are able to create environments so protective that even fragile pieces can easily be seen surviving another thousand years. The main technical challenges are climatic, but these are not dramatic. Ikats from the Indonesian archipelago accept a fairly wide humidity range, say between 40 and 80%, with the ideal probably being around 60% humidity. Below 40% the cotton gets brittle and then it is advisable to not fold and unfold them frequently. Above and perhaps even at 80% they may require scheduled airing — i.e. a joyful day of pulling stuff out and looking at it again. When you do that, which is a way of consummating your marriage with your collection, check for things you overlooked the last few times you saw them. Often cloths turn out to have more in them than becomes immediately apparent. In that



respect I learned a lot from [collector, dealer, author] Steven Alpert who spotted things in some of my pieces that I, who had seen these cloths numerous of times, had never noticed.

### What legacy would you like to leave behind with your collecting?

I would like to be seen as the guy who *shared* his collection, who changed the paradigm; the first private collector who systematically shared not just imagery of a fair number of examples but also their full documentation; who continually updated the information as the collection grew in order to let the collection serve as a core knowledgebase, fed by links to the literature, including primary sources, and occasional contributions from website visitors; the guy who pulled off a large project with wonderful partners and substantial help from a lot of people.



*Hong Kong University Museum and Art Gallery's exhibition 'Fibres of Life' (15 September–7 November 2017). Image courtesy of Peter ten Hoopen.*



Any advice you would want to give young collectors?



Follow your passion. Buy what gives you gooseflesh — but before you pay let your head do its thing. If you are serious, focus on one area, one technique, one whatever, but focus.

### What is your view on Indonesian ikat textiles in 5 or 10 years from now?

A cottage industry that through participation in international textile shows and online sales portals gradually merges into industry. There will be branches on the cultural tree where ikat is still meaningful, but these are condemned to shrink and wither. Ikat textiles will become a commodity like any other kind of fabric, in some areas with a chic, conservative connotation, though perhaps vaguely backward. The best will still be a joy to make, a feast for the eyes and a joy to display or wear, and worth serious money.



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