

PRESS RELEASE

FUNDAÇÃO ORIENTE MUSEU

Woven Languages / Linguagens Tecidas

Indonesian Ikat Textiles from the Peter ten Hoopen Collection

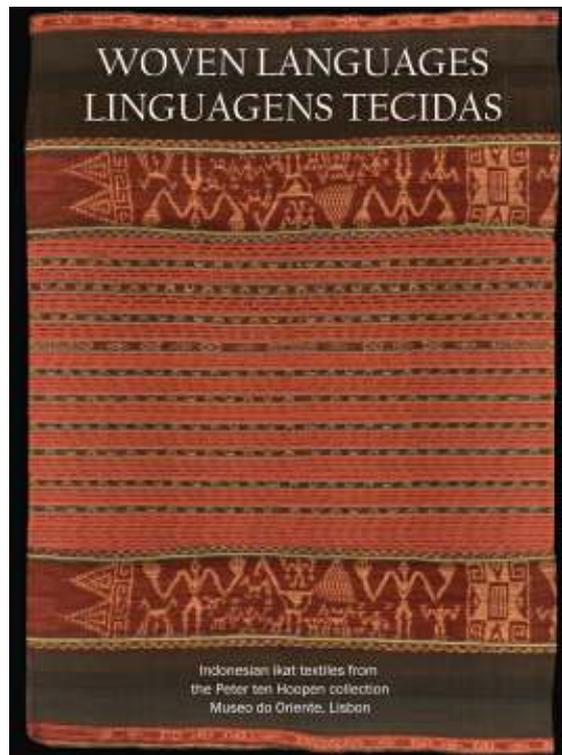
at the Museo do Oriente in Lisbon

From 23 October 2014 until 25 January 2015 the Museo do Oriente in Lisbon will hold an historic exhibition of traditional Indonesian *ikat* textiles entitled 'Woven Languages'. It is the first exhibition in the world dedicated exclusively to the fabulous profusion of Indonesian *ikat* weaving traditions in a comprehensive fashion. Ikats are fascinating textiles – extremely hard to make, hauntingly beautiful, and surrounded by mystery.

The exhibition, on 500+ m², presents the weaving arts of the entire Indonesian archipelago, from Sumatra and Borneo to East-Timor and beyond, including early 20th C. examples from very remote, tiny islands. **'Woven Languages'** includes several of the world's rarest specimens, offering a unique opportunity to see these fragile masterpieces of an ancient art form that is fast dying out.

Of special interest are the Sumatran silk *ikat* shawls with gold brocade, the sacred Balinese 'double ikats' from Tenganan, colonial period sarongs from the Moluccas, and refined *ikat* textiles from Los Palos in East Timor, of which less than ten are known to be extant. Perhaps the most spectacular piece is a 4.5m long 'elephant patola' made in India for Indonesian rajas, one of the best preserved of a dozen known pieces in the world.

A few cloths are on loan from other museums but the core of the exhibition is formed by the renowned 'Pusaka Collection' of Peter ten Hoopen, author and long-time Portugal resident, who began his passionate collecting while travelling in Indonesia in the 1970's. The collection is enriched by scholarly documentation that brings to life the people, notably the women, who made these fascinating textiles.



A mysterious process, surrounded by taboos

The *ikat* process, a resist technique, involves tying off bundles of yarn that must be prevented from receiving colour in one or more of a series of dye baths. It requires both highly developed skills and great artistry, and it takes many months, often *several years*, to produce a single cloth. The practice of weaving is surrounded by mystery and in many areas protected by powerful taboos, different from one region to the next. Some typical examples of the practices and prohibitionist attending to the weavers' art: men may not witness the preparation of the dyes; roots for a pigment may only be dug up at full moon; only mature women may make certain patterns; other patterns are reserved for the nobility and 'stealing' them is punishable by death.

In the majority of the traditions on view in this exhibition weaving, and especially dyeing, were seen as dangerous, as failure to observe certain rules might anger the spirits and bring illness or death upon the weaver. Many weavers had patterns revealed to them in dreams or felt their hands guided by the spirits of ancestors. The cloths produced were often considered sacred, and imbued with magical powers, such as the power to protect the wearer from illness or misfortune, to heal the sick, or protect souls on their journey to the afterlife. On many islands a woman's ability to weave a masterpiece was the chief requirement for finding a bridegroom of high social status, a feat that was seen as a parallel to the men's prowess as a headhunter. Some of the cloths show this legacy by depicting skeletal figures or 'skull-trees', denuded trees that were used to display a family's treasure trove of skulls.

Every cloth speaks its own unique language

While *ikat* has been produced in many cultures, from Patagonia to Japan, it is in the Indonesian islands that the technique reached its most expressive form – and greatest cultural significance. Every community has developed its own style, immediately identifiable, which sets it apart from others. Each cloth therefore speaks its own language, articulating its provenance, the status of the wearer, and local belief systems such as the veneration of crocodiles or other totem animals and symbols. Unfortunately, nowadays most of these complexes of signs and symbols are dead languages. While *ikat* continues to be made in several Indonesian communities, in most the ancient knowledge of their significance has faded from the collective memory. The new generations may continue to use traditional patterns, but in most cases no longer know what they stand for. This reduces the value of these contemporary weavings in the eyes of the population – and in the eyes of collectors, as one senses that the magic element, the intense power that used to be imparted to them by the makers, is irretrievably lost.

Older Indonesian *ikat* is rare because, unlike batik, its unique beauty and cultural value only started to attract serious attention from experts and collectors in the mid 1970's, so that many old pieces simply rotted away in the tropical climate. Others were burned by missionaries, often in large pyres, in their aim to destroy what they saw as manifestations of paganism. Still others were intended as shrouds, and thus buried with the dead.

Most of the old Indonesian *ikat* textiles that survive were made as attire for ceremonial occasions, or used in bridal exchanges, and passed on as heirlooms, *pusaka*, from one generation to the next. Some of the best were collected in the 19th and early 20th century by culturally aware colonial administrators and missionaries, to be bequeathed to ethnological museums, or to be relegated to attics from which they are now slowly beginning to appear, speaking to us in their secret tongues, challenging us to understand their meaning.

Works of genius

As we examine the often staggering complexity of the patterns, we realize the creative genius required to imagine, and the demanding technical skills required to produce them. All of these pieces were made by women without any formal schooling, living far from the centres of global civilization, often in harsh conditions where hunger and debilitating illnesses were common. It is almost impossible to see how in their daily struggles to survive in their remote island communities, they found the time and the energy to produce these amazing artworks. We cannot fail to be in awe of these anonymous artists, whose creations have only recently come to be appreciated by a global audience.

‘Woven Languages’ will be preserved for posterity in book form. The lavishly illustrated catalogue will depict all of the textiles shown in the exhibition, and provide information on the *ikat* technique, the culture of the thirty island regions whose marvellous artefacts are represented, and the ways of life of the brilliant women who made them. It will also help us to develop at least a rudimentary understanding of the woven languages that once were at the heart of their culture.

Peter ten Hoopen is the author of a dozen published works of fiction and non-fiction, and in the last decade worked all over the world as a consultant in the field of cross-cultural effectiveness – the ability to work effectively with people from other cultures. He has travelled to over sixty countries and has developed a special affinity for Indonesia where he has travelled widely, and with Portugal, his home since 1997.

The Pusaka Collection, one of the finest private collections of Indonesian *ikat* in Europe, and probably the best documented in the world, consists of 175 pieces, all antique or vintage. Its aim is not just to collect, but also to instruct: to share knowledge about this magical disappearing art form. From its inception therefore, the aim, ninety percent realized at this time, was to create a collection that was *geographically complete*, including every single island community where *ikat* was and/or is made, so that it might serve as a source of information on the textiles of the various island communities.

This scholarly approach, and the authoritative documentation based on the owner's research, have earned the Pusaka Collection's website at www.ikat.us a consistent Google top-5 ranking in searches for 'indonesian ikat' and more general searches like 'antique indonesian textiles'. Curators of ethnological museums and private collectors use the site to help them research their collections. The long term aim is to find this precious collection a permanent home in a public institution, somewhere in the world, where continued curatorial care and sharing with the world will be ensured.

Woven Languages / Linguagens Tecidas

Indonesian Ikat Textiles from the Peter ten Hoopen Collection

Museo do Oriente, Avenida de Brasília, Doca de Alcântara (Norte), 1350-352 Lisbon

23 October 2014 - 25 January, 2015. Open Tuesday through Sunday from 10:00-17:00.

Phone: 213 585 200, E-mail: info@foriente.pt