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Two Fowler Exhibitions Showcase Women's Textile Traditions of Southeast Asia

Weavers' Stories from Island Southeast Asia

August 1–December 5, 2010

Nini Towok's Spinning Wheel: Cloth and the Cycle of Life in Kerek, Java

August 1–December 5, 2010

In the Southeast Asian archipelago, making cloth is regarded as the archetypal form of women's work and creativity. Traditionally, women learned the textile arts—typically weaving or making *batik*—before they were eligible for marriage. Later in life, excelling in making cloth, and especially in mastering complex natural-dye processes, was regarded as the highest measure of a woman's achievement. This summer, the Fowler Museum will present two exhibitions— *Weavers' Stories from Island Southeast Asia* and *Nini Towok's Spinning Wheel: Cloth and the Cycle of Life in Kerek, Java*—which offer visitors a chance to delve into these fascinating and longstanding traditions like never before.

Weavers' Stories from Island Southeast Asia



In *Weavers' Stories from Island Southeast Asia*, weavers and batik artists speak for themselves in videos produced in eight sites in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and East Timor. What motivates women to create new patterns? How do they adjust to changing social and economic situations?

A panoply of human emotions and experiences—determination, longing, dream inspiration, theft, war, and more—emerge from the stories of these remarkable women. In one video, for example, a weaver in Tutuala, at the far eastern tip of Timor, describes how she designed a cloth pattern by copying the skin of a snake. She recounts that this “snake cloth,” now served by the snake spirit, became an object of such power that when one was stolen during a militia rampage in 1999, the snake destroyed all the coconut trees in Baucau in revenge. Another weaver tells of learning weaving patterns from her deceased mother, and expert weaver, when she visits during her dreams.

These 7-10 minute oral histories include interesting footage of daily life with extended families and the interplay of generations, detailed looks at weaving and dyeing techniques, and some unique celebrations, such as a wedding in a sultan's palace. Textiles created by the featured weavers and *batik* makers accompany each video.

Nini Towok's Spinning Wheel: Cloth and the Cycle of Life in Kerek, Java



Nini Towok's Spinning Wheel provides a focused look at the community of Kerek, the last place in Java where *batik* is produced on hand-woven cotton cloth and where a full range of hand-woven textiles still provides the foundation for a remarkable system of interrelated beliefs and practices. Named after Nini Towok, the Javanese goddess who cultivates cotton in the heavens and sends her yarn to Earth in the form of moonbeams, this exhibition explores the multiple meanings of Kerek's rustic but beautiful textiles.

Each type of cloth made for use in Kerek is created for a specific purpose—to be worn by a person of a particular gender, age, social, or residential group; to serve in life-cycle events such as marriages or funerals; or to act as a focal point in agricultural ceremonies or curing rites. The functions, techniques, patterning, and especially the color combinations of the cloth all form part of a highly structured and elaborate system of knowledge that is remarkably integrated with the community's social organization, mythology, and ritual practices. Such integrated systems once existed in many parts of Java, but by the late twentieth century could be observed only in Kerek.

Among the techniques weavers of Kerek employ are *batik* (a wax resist dyeing process) and *ikat* (patterning created on the yarns before dyeing and weaving). These often-complicated techniques are used singly or in combination as dictated by the wearer and context in which the cloths will be used.

The exhibition concludes with a stunning, circular array of seventeen ensembles, each made to be worn by a particular type of individual and arranged according to the cardinal directions and their associated colors.

The book *Nini Towok's Spinning Wheel: Cloth and the Cycle of Life in Kerek, Java* (paper, ISBN 978-0-9778344-2-6) by Rens Heringa will be published this summer by the Fowler Museum and distributed by the University of Washington Press.

Additional Information

Weavers' Stories from Island Southeast Asia is curated by Roy Hamilton, the Fowler Museum's curator of Asian and Pacific collections. Major support is provided by the Henry Luce Foundation and the R.L. Shep Endowment Fund. Additional support is provided by the Asian Cultural Council, the Fowler Textile Council and NCCA (National Commission for Culture and the Arts, Republic of the Philippines).

Nini Towok's Spinning Wheel is guest curated by Dutch textile scholar Rens Heringa. Major support is provided by the R.L. Shep Endowment Fund and the Fowler Textile Council. Additional support for the publication is provided by the Cotsen Foundation for Academic Research. The accompanying programs for both exhibitions are made possible through the Yvonne Lenart Public Programs Fund and Manus, the support group for the Fowler Museum.

The Fowler Museum at UCLA is one of the country's most respected institutions devoted to exploring the arts and cultures of Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and the Americas. The Fowler is open Wednesdays through Sundays, from noon to 5 p.m.; and on Thursdays, from noon until 8 p.m. The museum is closed Mondays and Tuesdays. The Fowler Museum, part of UCLA Arts, is located in the north part of the UCLA campus. Admission is free. Parking is available for a maximum of \$10 in Lot 4. For more information, the public may call 310/825-4361 or visit fowler.ucla.edu.