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## ***Textiles of Timor, Island in the Woven Sea*** **Open Sept 7 at the Fowler Museum**



Laran, Malaka Regency, West Timor, Indonesia, 2011. © Roy W. Hamilton.

Public awareness of Southeast Asia's textile arts expanded rapidly in the late-twentieth century. As distant corners of Southeast Asia garnered attention from art historians and museum curators and became popular tourist destinations, once-foreign terms like *batik* and *ikat* entered the vocabulary of art-lovers, fashionistas, and museum-goers.

One major island in the Southeast Asian archipelago, however, remained unfamiliar to most outsiders—even locked down. Because of Indonesia's disputed annexation of the former Portuguese colony of East Timor in 1975, the entire island of Timor was considered a sensitive zone by the Indonesian government. Travel by foreigners was restricted and permits were not issued for research. Although it was recognized that weavers in Timor produced a wealth of textiles, many of these works remained largely unknown.

In fact, the women of Timor weave some of the most colorful and varied textiles in all of Southeast Asia. These cloths are primary vehicles of cultural expression, and they continue to be made, used, and exchanged in ways that reveal deep social, religious, historical, and political meanings. *Textiles of Timor, Island in the Woven Sea*—on display at the Fowler Museum from Sept. 7, 2014–Jan. 4, 2015—is the first major exhibition to focus on Timor's rich textile arts. The exhibition and the book

that accompanies it present the stories and works of many individual artists who practice weaving and dyeing in villages throughout Timor.

Fifty beautifully dyed and intricately patterned cloths, including many from the Fowler Museum—which maintains one of the world’s most complete and best-documented collections of Timorese textiles—will be on display. Included are flat, fringed cloths that men wrap around their hips or shoulders, tubular skirts worn by women, funeral shrouds, horse blankets, and an altar cloth. The textiles in the exhibition range from one of the earliest known from Timor, radiocarbon dated to the mid-17<sup>th</sup> to late-18<sup>th</sup> century, to vibrant contemporary examples.

One rare cloth from Moro, in Timor-Leste (or East Timor), mixes bold figures of animals significant in local culture, such as water buffalo, with imagery taken from imported Portuguese pattern books (including squirrels facing off in heraldic style). Reptilian motifs animate the borders of a woman’s tube skirt from Nurobo, West Timor—a cloth borrowed from the Dallas Art Museum that helped the exhibition co-curators trace the movements of peoples and patterns from one area to another. Another skirt, borrowed from Honolulu Museum of Art, shows the exuberant, colorful patterning that developed in conjunction with social changes in the 1950s.

An origin story of the Tetun peoples of Timor, recorded by anthropologist David Hicks, demonstrates how intimately the weaving of cloth is linked to the cultural history of the Timorese. A sacred queen works at her loom weaving the sea, with her children nearby. When one child misbehaves and the Queen throws her shuttle in anger, it tears into the woven “sea,” creating the island of Timor. The subtitle of this exhibition, *Island in the Woven Sea*, is inspired by this story.

Handwoven cotton garments—often bearing intricate patterns linked to specific families or clans—provide clothing, serve as markers of identity, and nurture social relationships when they are exchanged. This exhibition demonstrates that women in Timor weave an impressive variety of cloth, routinely combining more weaving techniques than in any other region of Southeast Asia. This technical prowess and diversity of design make weaving the most important form of artistic expression in Timor. While most people in Timor now wear Western styles of clothing on an everyday basis, locally woven garments are still required for the most important occasions, including marriage rites and wakes for the dead.

### **History of the Region**

Timor’s 2.8 million people belong to some twenty different indigenous ethno-linguistic groups. Today Timor is a divided island, with the western half constituting a part of Indonesia and the eastern half comprising the independent Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste. This division grew out of competition between two colonial empires from the 17th century onward, with the Dutch gaining control in the west and the Portuguese in the east. An international boundary separating the two territories was drawn up in Europe in 1859.

When Indonesia’s struggle for independence from the Netherlands culminated in 1949, West Timor became part of the new Republic of Indonesia. East Timor remained a colony of Portugal until a revolution toppled the Portuguese dictatorship in 1974, and Lisbon abandoned its remaining colonies. Stoked by the tensions of the Cold War era, competing factions in East Timor brought the colony to the brink of civil war. In December 1975 Indonesia invaded East Timor with the tacit support of the United States government.

From 1975 to 1999, according to United Nations estimates, Indonesia’s occupation resulted in the deaths of 102,800 East Timorese civilians. The collapse of the Suharto regime in Indonesia in 1998 paved the way for a United Nations–supervised referendum in 1999. Nearly 80 percent of the East Timorese people voted for an independent nation, which was formally established in 2002.

Though this tragic history has promoted separate political identities for the two halves of the island, this exhibition integrates material from West Timor and East Timor and demonstrates the underlying cultural unity that can best be seen through the island’s cloth. Drawing on new field

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research made possible by the return of relative peace to Timor since 2002, it highlights shared themes that are important in the lives of people from all of the diverse cultural groups on both sides of the border.

#### **Additional Information**

*Textiles of Timor, Island in the Woven Sea* is organized by the Fowler Museum at UCLA and co-curated by Roy W. Hamilton, Senior Curator of Asian and Pacific Collections, Fowler Museum, and Joanna Barrkman, an independent curator recently contracted to the National Gallery of Australia. This fall the Fowler will publish the book *Textiles of Timor, Island in the Woven Sea* (12" x 9", paper, ISBN 978-0-9847550-8-0), distributed by the University of Washington Press and edited by the co-curators.

Major funding for the exhibition and accompanying publication is provided by the R. L. Shep Endowment Fund at the Fowler Museum and the Henry Luce Foundation. Generous support is provided by the UC Pacific Rim Research Program, the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, and The Ahmanson Foundation, on the recommendation of Foundation Trustee Emeritus, Lloyd E. Cotsen (publication only). Additional support comes from the Stella Krieger Memorial Fund, Avrum and Martha Bluming, Carolyn and Charles Knobler, the Fowler Museum Textile Council, The UCLA Foundation in memory of Anne Summerfield, and Manus, the support group of the Fowler Museum (*as of July 22, 2014*).

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 \$12 in Lot 4. For more information, the public may call 310/825-4361 or visit [fowler.ucla.edu](http://fowler.ucla.edu).

#### **Opening Day Events**

Sun., Sept. 7, 2014

##### **An Afternoon of Global Textiles**

Celebrate the opening of three textile exhibitions:

*Textiles of Timor, Island in the Woven Sea* (Lucas Family Gallery)

*Yards of Style, African-Print Cloths of Ghana* (Fowler in Focus Gallery)

*Bearing Witness: Embroidery as History in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Goldenberg Galleria)

12:30–2:30 pm **Kids in the Courtyard: Now that's a Wrap!**

Learn techniques for making and embellishing textiles

3–4 pm **Fowler OutSpoken** opening day talks by Roy Hamilton and Joanna Barrkman, co-curators of *Textiles of Timor, Island in the Woven Sea*

4–5 pm Enjoy light refreshments with the curators in the Fowler's Davis Courtyard.

Additional programs are announced online at [fowler.ucla.edu](http://fowler.ucla.edu)

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