



WALL-HANGINGS BY JOHAN COETSEE  
Reminiscent of medieval tapestries

## Boom in Batiks

**Rx:** Take one enthusiastic teacher; add a sprinkling of receptive students; introduce an ancient craft of unique visual appeal, and await results.

This simple formula has had the effect of stimulating a new public appetite for an old art-form. It was devised in Pretoria, where Technical College art-instructor Maxie Steytler makes a practice of demonstrating the Batik process to her second and third year students. Fired by her enthusiasm, and fascinated by the colour and textural effects of the medium, an increasing number of newly-fledged artists have given their attention to the craft. As a result, South Africa is experiencing today an unprecedented boom in Batiks.

Originally employed in the East for dyeing clothing fabrics, its present popular application is in the form of wall-hangings, and a more beguiling adornment for stark modern interiors would be hard to find. The artists responsible for the growing public interest in Batik share a common sensitivity to the decorative requirements of the craft, but their success lies largely in the charm of the technique itself.

**Dyeing by stages.** Simply described, Batik is a method of printing onto cloth by dipping it into successive dyes. The requisite colour-areas are

retained by stopping them out with melted wax before immersing the fabric in the next dye-bath. The artist is, in fact, drawing with wax, and he uses either a soft brush or, following traditional method, pours the wax from a *tjanting*—an instrument resembling a tea-pot with a long, thin spout. As he works through from his lightest to his darkest dyes, he needs a sure understanding of the effects of colour-mixing. Mistakes mean starting afresh; thus the technique calls for considerable discipline and a necessary ability to envisage the final effect. For artistic appeal the work must not become laboured or finicky, therefore a steady hand and confident drawing are essential. On completion of the dyeing process, the wax is removed by ironing or by washing the fabric in petrol, or both. The result, ideally, is a subtly toned, appealingly textured design, in which colour-areas are both fluidly blended and crisply defined.

**Old craft, new appeal.** The origins of the craft are lost in ancient Eastern tradition. It was introduced to Europe by Dutch East India Company explorers, who brought back samples of Batik-dyed cloth from Java. Its use as an art-form is fairly recent; in South Africa it was treated only as a variation in textile-decoration before Maxie Steytler's enlightened efforts revealed its fascinating potential.

Earliest among her students to devote himself to this craft was Louis Steyn, who chose the fauna of South Africa as his theme. More recently, impressive work has come from 22 year-old Johan Coetsee. This young artist has found entirely different expression through the medium; using human subjects in richly historical mood, he has imbued his wall-hangings with a spirit evocative of medieval and Renaissance tapestries. His recent exhibitions have been enhanced by delightful and unusual depictions of antique music-makers, and his almost total sell-outs are justified by the quality of the work.

**Good buy.** Another good reason for public interest in Batiks is price. These hangings occupy a fairly large wall-space and do much for the atmosphere of the rooms that they adorn, yet they are usually far more accessible in price to the average home-owner than a good painting of similar proportions. Dealers have been quick to recognise the sales-appeal of Batiks, and for them at the moment the work of Steyn and Coetsee, Carol Hamilton and Lenore Nott are highly marketable commodities. Dyeing today is a lively business.

## Shock treatment for Artists

The janitor paused in his cleaning, stared entranced, then, mop and pail forgotten, quietly joined the class. He was not a solitary convert: the blacksmith, who had come to lend a pair of pliers, and the mechanic, who returned a serviced car, had also fallen victim to the spell. The age-old magic of making pictures was working once again—this time among a group of untutored amateurs, equipped with the simplest and cheapest of materials, and cloistered in the Mbari (Creation) Club in Ibadan, Nigeria. Wielding the wand was an inspired and inspiring sorcerer, South African architect, Julian Beinart. It was July 1961, and Beinart was in Nigeria at the invitation of art authority Ulli Beier to repeat an exciting experiment in stimulating creative art. The proto-type had taken shape earlier last year in Lourenco Marques, when Beinart and Mozambique architect Amancio Guedes had exposed a group of students to a short dramatic programme of creative activity, with outstanding effect.

**Basic design and bottle-tops.** Beinart found ten voluntary students awaiting him on his arrival in Ibadan, and the class expanded spontaneously as the week of intensive work proceeded. In his approach, art was stripped of all considerations except basic design and the demands of the few simple materials provided. On the first day,

working with charcoal, the class concentrated on creating a patterned surface on a sheet of paper, using lines and marks alone. This was followed by a day of discovering the relationship of mass and void by breaking down the sheet into large free shapes with black and white paint. Later they were allowed to employ a colour, and still later students could introduce pieces of paper, sand, bottle-tops, beans or any other available material, which would create new textures and stimulate further development of the two-dimensional surface. Up to this point, the class had been discouraged from using images in their pictures, but in the last two days they were permitted to develop whatever concept they wished. Says Beinart: "The dynamic intensity

schools travelled for six hours down the river by canoe to find out for himself what it was all about; two nuns, clad all in white, threw cleanly caution to the winds and smeared enamels with their fingers. The rest of the class comprised mainly art-teachers, black and white, from all over Nigeria, gathered there to benefit both themselves and their pupils from this adventure in aesthetic fundamentals. Organization was far less haphazard than in 1961; West Indian painter-writer Denis Williams had been invited to assist, and he and Beinart added evening lectures to their programme. At the end, Williams claimed to have witnessed more genuine creativity during that week than he had produced in his life. With the added numbers, results were commensurately more thrilling. What



TEACHERS BEINART, STEYTLER AND STUDENTS  
*Basic design and Batik design*

of the course acted like shock-treatment, dramatically penetrating the thin layer of urban inhibition which covers natural Nigerian aesthetic sensitivity." The students were forced to produce an original, elemental reaction to the material, and were thus freed of the need for technical virtuosity or reproduction of the visual scene. So exciting were the results, and so enthusiastic the class—legitimates and gate-crashers—that Beinart was asked to lecture on the experiment at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. He was also committed to a return visit this year.

**Janitor engages assistants.** The second Nigerian Summer School in Creative Art has just taken place. This time there were 45 enrolments. The club-janitor engaged two assistants to see to the cleaning while he gave his full attention to art; an inspector of

remains to be seen, is how much of this achievement carries over to other artistic effort when the impact of the week has passed; also whether the method is as effective in stimulating truly communicative artistic form as it is in releasing innate feeling for pure design. Only time can answer, and busy University lecturer Julian Beinart cannot be blamed for a certain impatience to return to Nigeria next year. The summer school is to become an annual event, enabling him to work again with his "graduates" while he initiates further batches of beginners.

**Southafrican sequel.** Meanwhile, he will not be losing touch. He plans to run a similar week for Johannesburg members of the Bantu Union Artists in September. It is not unlikely that he will have white art-enthusiasts requesting inclusion.