Sarong to Sari: Batik as Form, Performance, and Asian Consciousness

Symposium Concept

Sarong to Sari: Batik as Form, Performance, and Asian Consciousness is conceived as a performative symposium that moves beyond the conventional academic conference model to create an immersive space where scholarship, embodiment, sound, textile, theatre, and performance coexist as equal modes of knowledge production. Taking as its point of departure the centenary of Rabindranath Tagore's 1927 journey to Java, the symposium revisits the intellectual and artistic encounter between Santiniketan and Indonesia not as a closed historical moment, but as a continuing conversation on Asian cosmopolitanism, translation, and cultural exchange. The symposium foregrounds batik not merely as textile or decorative surface, but as a living archive carrying histories of movement, pedagogy, resistance, ritual, labour, and performance across geographies. Through lectures, readings, musical interventions, demonstrations, exhibitions of process, fashion presentations, staged conversations, and performative acts, the symposium seeks to reactivate the idea of "the East gathering again in Santiniketan," as envisioned by Tagore, through contemporary forms of dialogue and collaboration.

The symposium explores how Javanese court dance and gamelan traditions entered the visual and performative vocabulary of Rabindra Nritya Natya, transforming costume, stagecraft, gesture, and rhythm within Santiniketan's aesthetic imagination. It examines batik as evidence of cultural exchange and translation, where the movement from sarong to sari reflects not imitation, but reinterpretation through new bodies, climates, pedagogies, and philosophies of making. The programme further engages questions of drape, fluidity of form, and the politics of measure and meaning within orientalist frameworks, asking how textiles resist rigid categorisation through movement, tactility, and embodied experience. Central to the symposium is the methodology of object biography and community archiving, where cloth is understood as a carrier of memory and social life, connecting artisans, performers, museums, collectors, and communities. Alongside this runs a sustained reflection on internationalism and Asian consciousness through practices of correspondence, travel, pedagogy, and artistic exchange, culminating in the idea of "writing letters to the world" as a metaphor for cultural dialogue across borders, languages, and material forms.

Speakers/Performers/Demonstrators

This is a proposed list; all speakers are yet to be confirmed

1. Sugata Bose, Gardiner Professor of Oceanic History and Affairs, Harvard University, USA
2. R. Siva Kumar, Professor of History of Art, Kala Bhavana, Visva-Bharati
3. James Bennett, Emeritus Curator of Southeast Asian Art and Material Culture, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Australia and Adjunct Curator, West Nusa Tenggara State Museum, Mataram NTB, INDONESIA
4. Muchammadun, Lecturer, UIN Mataram, Indonesia
5. Soumik Nandy Majumdar, Professor of History of Art, Kala Bhavana, Visva-Bharati
6. Nia Filiam and Agus Ismoyo, Batik Practitioners, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
7. Sumita Mukherjee, Independent Researcher, UK
8. Sabine Bolk, Batik Artist and Scholar, The Netherlands
9. Maria Wronska-Friend, Former Adjunct Senior Research Fellow, James Cook University, Australia
10. Sushobhan Adhikary, Former Curator, Nandan Museum, Visva-Bharati
11. Swati Ghosh, Independent Researcher, Santiniketan
12. Peter Lee, Curator, Collector, and Historian, Singapore
13. Oroon Das, Multidisciplinary Artist, Performer, Scenographer and Designer, India
14. Subham China, PHD Research Scholar, Department of International Relations, Jadavpur University
15. Supriya Roy, Former Series Editor, Tagore Travelogues, Visva-Bharati
16. Sruti Bandyopadhyay, Principal, Dance Department, Visva-Bharati
17. Michael Abbott, Collector and Author, Australia
18. Fiona Kerlogue, Keeper, Horniman Museum, London, UK
19. Carmanita, Batik Designer, Indonesia
20. Pulak Datta, Author, Santiniketan
21. Rudolf Smend (online), Batik Collector, Germany
22. Krishnendu Bag, Former Professor, Kala Bhavana, Visva-Bharati
23. Kartik Manna, Batik Practitioner, West Bengal
24. Soujit Das, Former Research Fellow, GBF Foundation, Museum Rietberg
25. Umang Hutheesing, Collector and Historian, India
26. Arup Daripa, Senior Lecturer, Birbeck, University of London, UK
27. Benny Adrianto, Batik Practitioner, Indonesia
28. Darshan Shah, Founder-Trustee, Weavers Studio Resource Centre, Kolkata, India
29. Monica Shah, Founder, JADE

30. Komaruddin Kudiya, Batik Artist & Entrepreneur, Bandung, Indonesia
31. Debashish Banerjee, Professor, California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, USA
32. Samit Das, Artist and Scholar, New Delhi, India
33. Swati Bhattacharya, Former Faculty, History of Art and Aesthetics, GCAC Kolkata
34. Kaberi Chatterjee, Dancer and Scholar, UK

Symposium Outline

Day I - 22 January 2027

Form, Performance, and the Eastward Imagination

9:00 – 10:00 am

Registration & Tea

10:00 – 10:05 am

Welcome Address

Darshan Shah

10:05 – 10:20 am

Opening Invocation | Sounding the East

A Dance enacted from the Letters from Java - transforming Javanese court dance into Rabindra Nritya Natya forms, Conceptualised and Narrated by Dr. Kaberi Chatterjee

10:20 – 11:30 am

Looking Eastward: Tagore, Java, and Asian Consciousness

Concept

How did Tagore imagine Asia? This opening conversation revisits his 1927 journey to Java as a catalyst for artistic exchange, cultural diplomacy, and alternative visions of modernity.

Speakers

- Sugata Bose — *Tagore's Asian Internationalism and the Eastward Imagination*
- R. Siva Kumar — *Santiniketan, Java, and the Making of an Asian Artistic Consciousness*

11:30 - 12 Noon

Coffee Break

12 Noon – 1:30 pm

Courts, Commerce, and Cultural Modernity

Concept

From royal courts to Eurasian markets and colonial industries, this session explores how patronage, trade, technology, and enterprise shaped batik across centuries.

Speakers

- James Bennett — *The Earliest Surviving Indonesian Batiks and the Origins of Batik*
- Peter Lee - Influence of Central Javanese Court Design on Batik Makers of Java
- Maria Wronska-Friend — Javanese Batiks in the World - A Global Circulation

1:30 – 2:30 pm

Lunch

2:30 – 4:00 pm

The Santiniketan Atelier: Translating Java

Concept

A performative session exploring how batik was reimagined in Santiniketan through pedagogy, experimentation, and artistic translation.

Speakers

- Subham China — Batik as an Object Biography- A Methodological Approach
- Soujit Das — *Ajanta and the Visual Language of Santiniketan Batik*
- Swati Bhattacharya - Batik aṣ a Pedagogical Model in the Institutional Spaces: Kala Bhavana, Shilpa Sadana, Sriniketan and Government Art College, Kolkata

4:00 – 4:30 pm

Tea Break

4:30 – 6:00 pm

Reimagining Tradition: Motifs, Memory, and Making

Concept

Ajanta murals, alpona, and Santiniketan artists created a distinctive visual language through batik. This illustrated session examines the movement of motifs across media and generations.

Speakers

- Sumita Mukherjee & Arup Daripa — *Gouri Bhanja and the Expansion of Batik Practice in Santiniketan*
- Sushobhan Adhikary — *Jamuna Sen and Innovation in Santiniketan Batik*
- Swati Ghosh — *Nanigopal Ghosh and the Pedagogy of Batik at Kala Bhavana*

6:30 – 7:30 pm

Three Women

Day II - 23 January 2027

Archive, Community and Futures

9:00 – 10:00 am

Registration & Tea

10:00 – 10:15 am

Summation of Day I

Soujit Das & Subham China

10:15 – 12 Noon

Making Modernity: Enterprise, Practice, and Living Traditions

Concept

From indigenous enterprise to contemporary workshops, batik survives through innovation, practice, and community.

Speakers

- Michael Abbott — *Firma Haji Bilal: Enterprise, Innovation, and Indigenous Modernity*
- Sabine Bolk — *Demystifying Batik Belanda*
- Umang Hutheesing — *Batik as a Medium of Cultural Modernity and Transnational Geo-politics*

12 Noon - 12:30 pm

Coffee Break

12:30 – 1:30 pm

Batik Practitioners: Making as Knowledge

Concept

Knowledge resides in the workshop. Artists discuss process, experimentation, sustainability, and the transmission of skills through making.

Speakers

- Agus Ismoyo & Nia Filiam
- Krishnendu Bag in conversation with Esha Mukherjee

1:30 – 2:30 pm

Lunch

2:30 – 3:30 pm

Collectors' Perspectives: Objects, Journeys, and Connoisseurship

Concept

Collectors, museums, and scholars reflect on the biographies of textiles, the ethics of collecting, and the role of private collections in shaping batik scholarship.

Panelists

- Bruce Carpenter — *A Lifetime of Collecting Indonesian Batik*
- Rudolf Smend — *Collecting Indonesian Textiles: Connoisseurship and Global Appreciation*
- Fiona Kerlogue — *Museums, Collections, and the Biography of Batik Objects*

3:30 – 4:30 pm

Batik as a Collective Practice: Community, Creativity, and Cultural Transmission

Concept

Women have been at the heart of batik traditions as makers, teachers, innovators, and custodians of cultural memory. Bringing together perspectives from Java and Santiniketan, this session examines how women's creative labour has shaped the transmission of batik across communities, institutions, and generations. It highlights batik not only as a craft but also as a medium of artistic agency, collective identity, resilience, and social transformation.

Speakers

- **Muchammadun** — *Women's Batik, Community Resilience, and Cultural Identity in Rembang, Central Java*
- **Pulak Datta** — *Karu Sangha: Women, Collective Practice, and the Reinvention of Batik in Santiniketan*
- Voice of the Maker - **Kalyani Chakraborty** in conversation with **Soumik Nandy Majumdar**

4:30 – 5:30 pm

Fashioning Batik: Performance, Sustainability, and Futures

Concept

A roundtable bringing together designers, practitioners, curators, and scholars to discuss the future of batik in museums, fashion, education, and contemporary artistic practice.

Panelists

- Carmanita
- Benny Adrianto
- Kartik Manna
- Darshan Shah
- Monica Shah
- Komaruddin Kudiya

5:30 – 6:00 pm

Fashion Walk

Presented by ***various***

6:00 – 6:20 pm

Book Launch of Michael Abbott's publication titled, "Two Islands; One Thread: The Textiles of Lombok and Bali in the Michael Abbott Collection"

6:20 - 6:30 pm

Vote of Thanks by Darshan Shah