

Visual Traces of Majapahit: The Transformation of Artifacts into Contemporary Batik

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to trace and reinterpret the visual heritage of Majapahit through a visual anthropology approach that focuses on analyzing artifacts as cultural texts. Majapahit artifacts, such as reliefs, pottery, and architectural ornaments, should not merely be viewed as archaeological objects, but as symbolic representations that record the value systems, cosmology, and aesthetics of bygone societies. Through stages of documenting visual artifacts, selecting shapes and textures, performing iconographic analysis, as well as developing sketches and stylizing motifs, this research shows how the visual narrative of Majapahit can be transformed into brand new visual elements in contemporary batik design. The results of this research shows that the transformation of Majapahit artifacts into contemporary batik not only enriches aesthetic innovation but also serves as a medium for dialogue between the past and the present. Thus, the resulting batik pieces serve as a living cultural space that revives the visual memory of Majapahit while strengthening the creative identity of the current generation through an intimate visual understanding of historical heritage and design practices rooted to cultural artifacts.

Keywords: Artifact, Cultural Reinterpretation, Majapahit, Contemporary Batik, Visual Anthropology

INTRODUCTION

Majapahit culture is one of the pinnacles of Nusantara civilization, leaving behind a rich material and symbolic legacy. Its visual heritage, preserved in the form of artifacts such as temple reliefs, pottery, and architectural ornaments, not only reflects the artistic skill of bygone societies, but also embodies the cosmological, social, and spiritual values that shaped Javanese cultural identity at that period. Local studies and museum collection reports show that Majapahit artifacts are often presented in a museal and educational context, while their communicative and aesthetic potential for contemporary design practices continues to be explored.

In the modern context, these artifacts are often confined within the realm of archaeology and museums, viewed as inanimate objects separated from the daily lives of ordinary communities. In fact, the visual anthropology approach positions material objects as living cultural texts, namely artifacts that



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embody historical memories, symbolic meanings, as well as cultural values that can be revisited and revivified into new creative practices and visual contexts. Thus, artifacts can be revisited to open up possibilities for reinterpreting their meanings and regenerating their symbols in contemporary creative practices (Sudarmawan, 2017). A similar phenomenon can be seen in local research in Mojokerto and Trowulan (Anisaroh, 2021; Ningsih, 2018), which confirms that Majapahit artifacts possess a wealth of forms and symbols that have the potential to be repackaged into batik motifs with distinctive regional characteristics. The methodological literature on visual ethnography and sensory ethnography emphasizes the importance of multisensory, participatory, and practice-based readings when connecting these material objects of the past with contemporary design practices. The ever-changing times and current of globalization have brought new challenges to the preservation of local culture. Batik, which has gained international recognition as a cultural heritage, now faces the need to innovate while maintaining its cultural roots. Recent studies on contemporary batik have highlighted how modern batik design practices (including brush-stroke techniques, digital printing, and the adaptation of local motifs) act as a medium for rejuvenating traditional symbols and creating a dialogue between tradition and modernity (Fardhani, 2024). Empirical findings in contemporary studies in Indonesia have shown the strong potential for Majapahit motifs to be mobilized as design inspiration relevant to today's demographics (Nurcahyo, 2020).

The visual anthropology approach applied in this research aims to read Majapahit artifacts not merely as aesthetic objects, but rather as forms of visual knowledge that contain symbolic systems and worldviews (Pink, 2021). The research process includes visual documentation of artifacts, an analysis of form and texture, and some experimental design processes to transform these visual elements into contemporary batik motifs. This approach is in line with literature that addresses heritage remaking and reinterpretation of heritage through contemporary design, which is a practice that not only imitates an ancient form but also translates its historical values into the aesthetic and social context of the present (Moscatelli, 2023).

This research stems from the assumption that artifacts are not merely material relics, but a medium of cross-temporal communication. The relief forms, ornaments, and flora-fauna motifs that are preserved in Majapahit artifacts have the potential to become a new visual vocabulary when integrated into contemporary batik practices. By combining visual analysis, ethnographic reflection on the design process, along with motif creation practices, this research aims to answer the main question: how can Majapahit artifacts be reinterpreted and transformed into conceptual and visual sources for the development of contemporary batik motifs that remain relevant to today's generation? Furthermore, this research seeks to demonstrate that the practice of visual reinterpretation could both strengthen a cultural identity as well as broadening the understanding of the link between material heritage and modern creative expression.

While Majapahit artifacts and the development of batik motifs have been extensively studied, existing research still reveals significant gaps: most studies of Majapahit artifacts tend to focus on the archaeological and museological domains, positioning the artifacts as static objects, whereas contemporary batik studies often emphasize strictly on stylization and visual innovation without a methodological framework that deeply examines the artifacts as a system of symbols and visual knowledge. Furthermore, the application of visual anthropology and visual ethnography as practice-based research approaches to transform archaeological artifacts into contemporary batik motifs in Indonesia is still very limited. Therefore, this research fulfills this gap by offering a visual anthropology approach that integrates visual analysis, an ethnographic reflection upon the design process, and a creative practice, with the aim of reinterpreting Majapahit artifacts as a relevant conceptual and visual source for the development of contemporary batik.

METHODS

This research uses a visual-interpretive qualitative approach, with an emphasis on exploring the form, meaning, and transformation of Majapahit artifacts into contemporary batik designs. The goal is not only to create new motifs, but also to develop a design methodology that is rooted in traditional values yet opens up to modern expression.

More specifically, this research employs visual anthropology methods by analyzing visual artifacts not only as representations, but also as active elements that shapes visual experiences and mediates meaningful connections between researchers, objects, and their social contexts. In the context of heritage-based design, this approach allows artifacts to be read not only as static objects but also as entities that interact with contemporary imagination and interpretation (Pink, 2021). In addition to Pink, a similar approach is also supported by material culture studies theory, such as those developed by Miller (2017) and Tilley (2019), which view material objects as extensions of culture, concrete expressions of value systems and collective experiences. Thus, Majapahit artifacts can be read as a form of visual memory that connects the past with contemporary artistic creation.

The research also uses an autoethnographic approach that positions the researcher as part of the experience itself, exploring the meaning of direct involvement in a particular social and cultural context (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). In the context of Majapahit Batik designs, autoethnography allows researchers and designers to record, analyze, and interpret their own creative experiences as an epistemic process rooted in the Majapahit tradition. Autoethnography opens up space for designers to not merely ‘recycle old motifs’, but to relive the values embedded within the symbols, colors, and narratives of past artifacts. Thus, autoethnography becomes a tool to reconstruct meanings, not as a romanticization of the past, but as an active process of building relevancy of traditions in the present context. Through this method, researchers and designers are not only artisans of forms, but also storytellers and preservers of heritage.

Data Collection Methods: (1) **Artifact Study:** Data collection was carried out through visual documentation of Majapahit artifacts, both directly at archaeological sites (the Majapahit temple site in Trowulan) and from museum catalogs and literature studies. The observation focuses on flora and fauna ornaments, mythological figures, and geometric patterns. (2) **Design Experiment.** The research team reinterprets the artifacts visually into modern batik motif prototypes. This process involves manual sketching, digitizing shapes, exploring colors, and testing the compositions on fabric. (3) **Visual Perception Test.** To understand the resonance of the motifs with the target audience, semi-structured interviews and visual preference tests were conducted with respondents aged 18–30 years old. This age group was chosen because these individuals are the main target of this research in the context of regenerating the visual meaning of Majapahit through contemporary batik. Respondents were then requested to comment on several motif variations based on aesthetics, meaning, and potential use in day-to-day life.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Until now, the visual arts heritage of Majapahit has not been widely used as a main source of inspiration in batik design development, despite its unique and valuable visual richness. Majapahit aesthetics demonstrate a powerful artistic differentiation that not only marks the maturity of visual civilization but also forms the basis of what is known as Javanese “local genius” (Kieven, 2014). Through art forms born out of a creative response to the previous dominance of Indian influence, Majapahit artists have succeeded in articulating an aesthetic identity based on their own cultural experiences (Holt, 2000). Thus, Majapahit art can be interpreted as a process of visual emancipation, an effort to carve out a more independent visual language rooted in local cosmology, as seen in reliefs and terracotta depicting stylized figures and natural motifs with proportions and gestural expressions typical of Majapahit, distinguishing them from classical Indian representations.

Traces of this visual richness can be found in various monumental artifacts such as temples, burial sites, baths, and dwellings from the 14th to 15th centuries (Miksic, 2014). Archaeological findings in the form of pottery, terracotta, and small sculptures offer strong indications of a visual tradition that may be entwined with the early practice of batik artisanry (Sedyawati, 2006). Majapahit terracotta, with its realistic, expressive, and often asymmetrical visual character, serves as a kind of visual archive that captures the dynamics of its society. Through their forms, which are sometimes realistic and other times caricatural (Rahardjo, 2011), these terracotta pieces reveal the aesthetic sensibility of the Majapahit community, which was both intimate with realities while also open to imagination and humor.

The human figures depicted in the terracotta represent bodies full of vitality: fashionable men wearing hats, necklaces, belts, and bracelets; elegant women wearing shawls, stagen, earrings, and intricate hairstyles (Nurhadi, 2001). The style of clothing and jewelry recorded on these artifacts not

only displays visual luxury, but also reveals how the Majapahit society interpreted the body and beauty as part of the celebration of life, as reflected in the terracotta figures with their dynamic postures, expansive gestures, as well as prominent clothing and jewelry details that emphasized their bodies as the main visual elements.

The richness of Majapahit's artistry is also present in the variety of ornaments and decorative motifs that adorn its artifacts. During this period, various geometric and floral motifs flourished, demonstrating refinement in form and complexity in visual processing. These motifs were not limited to architectural decor, but were also adapted to other media such as batik cloth. In this context, the influence of organic forms and Hindu-Buddhist symbols combined with local sensibilities resulting in decorative motifs that served as a bridge between spiritualism, aesthetics, and day-to-day life (Holt, 2000).

The abundance of Majapahit heritage artifacts of high artistic quality has not been fully utilized as a source of contemporary visual creation, especially in the realm of hand-drawn batik. The aesthetic and symbolic potential contained in these artifacts is still waiting to be reexplored as a source of inspiration that is capable of bridging the past and the present. In this context, the Majapahit visual arts heritage holds the power to be reinterpreted, explored, and developed into visual products that are relevant to the current zeitgeist without losing sight of its historical and cultural roots. One artifact that has great potential to be developed as a source of visual ideas is the relief of Menak Jinggo Temple (Figure 1), which records the complexity of life and the symbolic system of Majapahit society.



Figure 1. The relief of Menak Jinggo Temple depicting adult and child figures, landscapes, and vegetation of Majapahit.

Based on findings and observations of the relief's visuals, the concept of developing Majapahit Batik design is oriented towards utilizing the visual elements of the Menak Jinggo Temple as an ideological and aesthetic starting point, particularly the stylization of figures, depictions of flora and fauna, and the ornamental patterns of the Menak Jinggo Temple relief. The reliefs serve as a visual matrix that opens up space for exploration of Majapahit's forms, rhythms, as well as symbolic narratives. Design development is not only intended as formal innovation, but also as an effort to establish a bridge between the artistic values of the past and the contemporary visualities. Thus, the batik design should not be seen merely as the result of ornamental processing, but rather as a form of cross-temporal dialogue between tradition and modernity.

Within this framework, the creative process of batik development would not just end at technical aspects or aesthetic and economic considerations. Furthermore, the batik design will serve as a medium of cultural representation that conveys the historical values and visual identity of Majapahit through its motifs and compositional structure. Each motif is expected to contain a narrative, both in symbolic and visual terms, that distinguishes Majapahit Batik from other regional batiks. This differentiation is not intended merely to strengthen product competitiveness, but rather as a cultural strategy to maintain the continuity of meanings amid visual homogenization due to globalization (Kartiwa, 2019).

The globalization phenomenon has driven the transformation of batik into an industrial commodity that emphasizes on its economic aspects over its sacred and cultural values. In this trend, many batik traditions have lost its original meaning; batik has been reduced to a mere decorative product devoid of any spiritual awareness or historical context. The effort to develop designs based on the Majapahit heritage stems from the desire to restore the symbolic meaning of batik as a medium of cultural expression, particularly in terms of its cosmological meaning, the relationship between humans and nature, along with the values of harmony and sustainability reflected in the flora, fauna, and figures in Majapahit visuals, while also actualizing it in a modern visual context.

Visual Exploration: The Menak Jinggo Temple Relief as a Source of Creation

The visualization of the design departs from a visual study of the reliefs of Menak Jinggo Temple, which contain representations of human figures, both adults and children, as well as various forms of animals, plants, landscapes, and buildings. These elements reflect the worldview of the Majapahit people, which unites humans, nature, and myths into a single symbolic unity. As noted by Muller (1978), animal figures in Majapahit artifacts, both real (tigers, buffalo, monkeys, horses, birds) and mythological (dragons, gajahmina), exhibit an authentic local power without the influence of foreign stylistics. This characteristic shows how Majapahit developed its own visual idiom, a distinctive and deeply rooted local articulation of form.

In the process of composing batik designs, these visual reliefs are processed through stylization and simplification into outlines that are adapted to the characteristics of the hand-drawn batik technique.

This simplification does not eliminate the figurative characteristics of the relief, but rather transforms them into a more fluid visual structure that is adaptable to the fabric medium while retaining its historical essence. The lines created by applying liquid wax become a kind of gestural line, traces of the artist's hand which simultaneously record the dynamics of tradition and personal expression.

Two directions of design exploration were then developed: first, designs that feature landscapes or scenery by adapting the visual composition of reliefs; second, designs that highlight certain elements such as vegetation and non-figurative ornaments as the main motifs. Both approaches were developed through a freer and variative color exploration, going beyond the conventional colors of classic batik, while still maintaining a visual harmony that reflects the warmth of the terracotta palette characteristic of Majapahit artifacts.

Despite this new exploration, its design remains grounded in the traditional principles of batik composition, which emphasize balance, repetition of motifs, and a steady visual rhythm. Traditional composition is maintained to convey a sense of order and stability, which is then layered with new meaning through the dynamics of lines and colors from the visual experiments. This way, batik design becomes a space for dialectics between order and freedom, between tradition and experimentation.

The hand-drawn batik technique was chosen for its personal and expressive nature. The unique strokes of the canting make each piece of fabric a singular work that cannot be exactly replicated. This uniqueness presents an authentic visual richness, a form of visual individuality that affirms batik's position as a work of art, not a mere industrial product.

Another notable innovation is the use of the remukan batik technique as a background element, which is a traditional technique in batik making to produce an irregular texture effect. The patterns of cracks that appear spontaneously produce an unexpected visual effect, as if presenting the texture of time on the surface of the fabric. These cracks and overlapping colors can be interpreted as a metaphor of how history, tradition, and modernity intertwine on a single cultural surface.

In terms of coloring, synthetic dyes such as Napthol, Indigosol, and Remazol are used to achieve a broader and more experimental color spectrum. The resulting color palette leans towards terracotta shades combined with contrasting colors, presenting a lively yet historical impression. Each color represents a dialogue between the land of Majapahit and the aesthetic horizon of today.

The Transformation of Artifacts into Contemporary Batik

The transformation of artifacts into batik motifs is carried out in three main stages: (1) Visual Deconstruction: This stage involves breaking down the basic elements of the artifact, such as lines, curves, textures, and compositional rhythms. (2) Motif Reconstruction: The visual elements from the deconstruction are then rearranged according to batik design principles that emphasize repetition, balance, and harmony. This process also takes the distinct "breathing space" of batik into considerations, which is the spacing between motifs that creates visual rhythm (Rustan, 2019). (3) Contextual Reinterpretation: In this stage, the visual and symbolic meanings of the artifacts are then

transformed into something that reflects contemporary values. With this foundation, the transformation of Majapahit artifacts into contemporary batik can be interpreted as a practice of cultural continuity, namely symbolic continuity that remains alive through creative and participatory processes (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2020; Smith, 2020).

Based on the described transformations of the artifact, particularly in the stage of contextual reinterpretation, we formulated two main approaches for developing the Majapahit Batik design in this research. First, designs that highlight the theme of landscape or natural scenery, which display the harmonious relationship between humans, animals, plants, and the landscape in a single visual composition. This approach seeks to represent the dynamics of daily life in Majapahit society in its ecological context, while also emphasizing the Majapahit worldview that unites humanity with the universe. Second, designs that highlight the unique visual characteristics of the Menak Jinggo Temple reliefs, particularly the unidentified vegetative forms, which are then processed into the main motifs. These motifs are then paired with typical batik patterns, resulting in visual elaborations that combines the complexity of tradition with new aesthetic interpretations.

The process of transforming visual ideas from reliefs into batik motifs is an integral stage in the creation of this design. This stage emphasizes the role of the designer as a visual translator who processes archaeological symbols into contemporary forms. Visualization becomes an arena for dialectics between conceptual ideas and tangible forms, a process of transference from ideas to visuals that are embodied via initial sketches in two-dimensional media. Through this process, ideas that were originally abstract are articulated into forms that can be seen, read, and felt visually.

The first step in visualization is done through character sketching. These sketches serve as an adaptation of three-dimensional relief forms into two-dimensional representations on batik cloth. The form is simplified using an outlining technique, which not only maintains the legibility of the figurative relief but also preserves the rich decorative stylings typical of Majapahit art. Despite the stylization, the visual characters still reflect the complexity and detail that are the hallmarks of Majapahit aesthetics, a style that combines technical precision with spiritual sensitivity. These character sketches then serve as the conceptual basis for the formation of more complex batik motifs in the next stage.

In terms of color, exploration was carried out by expanding the coloring palette beyond the conventional classical batik. The colors used not only function as fillers, but also as expressive elements that create visual depth. The uniqueness of this approach lies in the courage to allow colors to “slip” beyond the boundaries of its field, creating a dynamic and spontaneous impression that enriches the characteristics of the design. This strategy requires a layered batik process involving several stages of canting and dyeing so that each final result is unique and cannot be duplicated.

Canting strokes that are left open or dyed produces a more diverse visual texture, revealing the artist's hand gestures as part of their creative expression. In this context, batik is not only a medium for reproducing patterns, but also a performative space where manual processes and personal expression

combine. The visual character that emerges from the interplay of colors and lines allows the Batik Majapahit designs developed in this project to appear distinctive compared to other batik designs, a form of continuity of tradition that also opens up new possibilities for contemporary batik aesthetics.



Figure 2. The result of transforming the relief artifact of Menak Jinggo Temple into Contemporary Batik.

This research provides a scientific contribution by formulating an operational model for transforming archaeological artifacts into contemporary batik designs through a practice-based visual anthropology approach. By integrating artifactual visual analysis, stylization based on hand-drawn batik techniques, autoethnographic reflection, and visual perception testing, this research study positions batik as a medium for visual knowledge production into a contemporary Batik seen in Figure 2, as opposed to a mere decorative product. The main contribution of this research lies in the development of a replicable methodological framework for processing other visual heritage across Nusantara, while simultaneously expanding the discussion surrounding design as a way to both reinterpret culture and to communicate across time.

CONCLUSIONS

The transformation of Majapahit artifacts into contemporary batik confirms that traditions does not remain static, but rather that it is dynamic and open to reinterpretation and to the creation of new meanings in contemporary creative practices. Through this creative process, artifacts from the past serve as a “living archive” that continues to negotiate with current social and aesthetic values (Appadurai, 2015; Miksic, & Goh, G. Y. 2020). Reinterpreted batik not only functions as a design

product, but also as an anthropological visual medium that connects historical memories with contemporary cultural practices. An example of this is the transformation of the vegetation and fauna elements from the reliefs of Menak Jinggo Temple, which were originally tied to the symbolic narrative of Majapahit, into modular batik motifs. This shift in connotation transforms them from historical-ritual signifiers into a contemporary visual language that can be interpreted as a symbol of cultural vitality and continuity.

Thus, the development of Majapahit Batik designs based on the reliefs of Menak Jinggo Temple is not only an aesthetic endeavor but also serves as a cultural action to revitalize the visual heritage of Nusantara. Batik design becomes a medium for reflection as well as a space for cultural dialogue where the past can be brought back, not as nostalgia, but as a source of creative energy for the future. The practice of transforming Majapahit artifacts into contemporary batik can be conceived as an aesthetic and anthropological strategy to strengthen cultural continuity. It is not merely an act of preservation, but also the creation of new meaning through a reflective, creative, and contextual process of reinterpretation. In this process, the batik has been transformed from a mere decorative cloth into a visual medium that bridges history, identity, and artistic exploration of Indonesia's creative landscape today.

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