



## the long journey of batik

by Doug Field

**W**hen we think of Batik, most of us think of a decorative craft originating in the Far East. In fact, Indonesia is the best-known source of batik, and is eagerly bought by tourists visiting that part of the world. But Wikipedia and Oakville artist David Kibuuka will tell you that batik has its origins in ancient Egypt or Sumeria (in what is now Iraq), the latter the earliest known human civilization. Use of the technique can be traced back more than a millennium, and perhaps closer to two thousand years.

Over time, batik migrated to West Africa, particularly Nigeria, Cameroon and Mali. Given what we now know about ancient trading routes, it's not surprising that it crossed the ocean and caught on in India, Sri Lanka, Iran, Thailand and Indonesia.

Despite its popularity in so many parts of the world, it is having a hard time being accepted as a serious art form and is usually dismissed by the 'fine arts' establishment as a craft, folk art or, at best, 'decorative art', as if that is somehow a lesser art form.

It is this put-down that has given David Kibuuka his life's mission. Born in Uganda, he moved to Kenya as a young man, where he became dissatisfied with turning out souvenirs with typical African motifs for the tourists and began to work with batik as a flexible medium for serious art. He came to Canada in 1983 and, since then, has taught the technique to thousands of students. Whereas mainstream art uses oils, water colors or techniques such as tempura and acrylics applied directly to a surface – paper, canvas or board – batik is created using fabric, with molten wax as the fixing agent for the dyes which give the image its color.

David was greatly influenced by his late older brother, Henry Lutalo Lumu, who was steeped in the European masters and brought those sensitivities to his own work as a batik artist. Although masks and other African-inspired themes are present in David's output, he shows the versatility of batik by using Figurative Impressionism in works such as *Baganda Dancers*. Though *Hypnotize* (top right) might appear, at first glance, to be a work of stark contrasts, upon closer scrutiny it is an incredibly subtle piece and rewards a viewer who spends time with it.

David Kibuuka's students, most of whom lack his African origins, see batik as just another, but very malleable, tool to express their own creativity. And, says David, the very act of working with batik somehow releases the creativity in people who thought previously that they didn't have any. He says there is something about sketching an outline and applying the molten wax and dyes to the fabric that releases dormant creative juices. People who have shown no artistic bent previously find themselves anxious and able to express themselves visually.

David Kibuuka is under no illusion that batik will be adorning the walls of our great galleries any time soon, but he is demonstrating that artists and art experts who approach batik with an open mind, can find in it a flexible medium more than capable of taking its place in the so-called mainstream of art.

*For more information on David Kibuuka and examples of his and other batik art, go to [www.kibuuka.com](http://www.kibuuka.com).*

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Photograph by Peter McCusker