

***Five Centuries of Indonesian Textiles.* Mary Hunt Kahlenberg and Ruth Barnes, eds. New York: Prestel, 2010. 402 pp.\***

Reviewed by Jennifer Santos Esperanza

To document five hundred years of production, trade, and usage of textiles in the Indonesian archipelago would be a formidable task, yet Mary Hunt Kahlenberg and Ruth Barnes have readily accepted the challenge. Their edited volume, *Five Centuries of Indonesian Textiles* is a testament to their careers as distinguished scholars, curators, and private collectors of Indonesian textiles. Five additional scholars also lend their expertise in textile arts and cultures to produce a comprehensive reference work on Indonesian textiles.

*Five Centuries of Indonesian Textiles* is a substantial volume (weighing in at nearly seven and a half pounds, excluding its decorated protective sleeve) and it showcases selected textiles from the Mary Hunt Kahlenberg Collection. While the featured textiles originate from a single collection, they are impressively diverse in scope, time period, and style (a woman's blouse made of dyed bark cloth from Sulawesi; a ritual cloth from turn-of-the-century Bali and Torajan priestly garments from the 1970s, just to name a few). Kahlenberg is a leading scholar in historic textiles with a distinguished career: first as the head of the Costume and Textile Department at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), as curator for the Textile Museum in Washington DC, and currently as co-owner of TAI Gallery/Textile Arts in Santa Fe, NM. Her introductory comments in "Close Observations and Priceless Memories" recount her experiences working with Indonesian textile traditions over the decades. She also devotes a few pages introducing novices to the art of deciphering aesthetic attributes such as colors, stripes, and the use of materials such as gold. What might appear to the untrained eye as a random aesthetic flourish may actually be a deliberately chosen feature meant to communicate social identities such as gender, marital status, occupation, or clan affiliation. Ruth Barnes—a curator of Indo-Pacific art at Yale University—also contributes to the Introduction. Here, Barnes gives a history of Western scholarship on Indonesian textiles (as well as its future), in addition to the impact of radio-carbon (C-14) dating/analysis on textile studies.

The subsequent chapters are divided geographically: focusing on selected textiles from the provinces of Sumatra, Java, Bali, Borneo, Sulawesi, Nusa Tenggara and MalukuTenggara. Each chapter begins with an essay written by one the five contributing scholars. While the essays give attention to each region's unique textile traditions, each contributor also discusses aspects of these traditions that are of importance to their own scholarship/professional expertise (e.g. recurring motifs and symbols; the fate of local techniques in the face of modernizing processes). Roy Hamilton's essay on the relationship between dress and social identity in Nusa Tenggara (Eastern Indonesia), for example, discusses state-governed copyright rules over centuries-old aesthetics, while Marie-Louise Nabholz-Kartaschoff's introduction to the textiles of Bali explores the important relationship between technique and symbolic meaning in ritual cloths.

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The plates featured throughout the book are beautifully photographed by Bruce White, displaying the complex semiotics and intricate detail of the textiles. I was particularly astonished at how closely White's photographs were able to capture the delicate stitches of the warp *ikat* fabrics from Sulawesi—to behold such precision evokes a sense of respect and awe for the weavers. Ethnographic photos are also included throughout the book—giving readers a sense of how certain textiles were worn/used in their local contexts; how they might have looked during the colonial period, and how these textiles are used in present day Indonesia.

The Republic of Indonesia is a relatively new nation; comprised of some 13,000 islands, populated by over 200 million people, and with a vast array of different aesthetic, cultural and religious traditions. Can one find a cohesive national narrative of textile traditions? *Should* one try to find a cohesive national narrative about Indonesian textiles? *Five Centuries of Indonesian Textiles* does not attempt to do either of these things, but does acknowledge a shared tradition of cloth making that requires painstaking precision, detail and an intimate knowledge of the semiotics that make textiles meaningful in their local contexts. *Five Centuries of Indonesian Textiles* is a valuable reference not only for collectors and scholars of textiles from this part of the world, but for museums, universities and art galleries.

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