

# Contemporary Painting Based on The Philosophical Meaning of Surakarta Classical Batik

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## ABSTRACT

This article is a result of a study to create contemporary paintings that have a local identity and character. The ideas of paintings creation are based on the philosophical meaning of Surakarta classical batiks, such as Sidoasih, Sidomukti and Sidoluhur which teach noble guidance about the life expectancy, existence, establishment, behavior and glory. Material related to forms and philosophical meanings is developed and linked to life today. The method of painting creation uses development research with steps that are namely: (1) information collecting, (2) development of the preliminary product, (3) preliminary product testing, (4) main product revision and (5) main field testing. The results of the study are contemporary paintings with a symbolic approach created using block, brushstroke and drip techniques on mixed media. The ideas behind paintings produced are representatives of the philosophical meanings of classical batik of Surakarta that are adapted to current life.

**Keywords:** *Philosophical Meaning, Classical Batik, Painting, Contemporary*

## INTRODUCTION

Globalization has had an impact on the development of paintings in Surakarta City which has a wealth of Javanese traditional culture. The advancement of information technology has grown the genre of contemporary painting that is not bound by previous rules but has developed according to the present times. Although it is seemingly new, in practice it is difficult to find contemporary paintings with local identity values in them. In this condition, an artist needs good control when determining the direction and developing the creation of his or her artworks. For that, artists in Surakarta need to explore the richness of traditional or classical art to find philosophical meanings in it so that these meanings can be used as a source of ideas for creating contemporary paintings that have strong identities and characters.

The Surakarta classical batik contain values of the philosophy of local wisdom that teach ideals, life expectancy, existence, establishment, behavior, glory and teachings of life. Until now, the existence of classical batik is still preserved by the people of Surakarta, which is actualized as clothing in traditional ceremonies and important events in everyday life.

The area of contemporary art is very open to local ideas, therefore the philosophical meaning in Surakarta classic batik can be used as a source of inspiration and ideas for the creation of contemporary paintings. The philosophical and aesthetic meanings contained therein can be developed and connected with life today. Thus, the values of local wisdom can be implemented into ideas, themes,

forms, technical and painting media that follow the souls of the times. Visual ideas are not only built from personal understanding but involve common understanding through extracting data from current public perceptions. Thus, the new visual idioms generated will be absorbed and understood globally and openly. Based on the thought above, the research problem can be formulated as follows: (1) How is the creation of contemporary paintings whose ideas originate from the philosophical meaning of classical batik? and (2) What is the shape and meaning of the paintings produced?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Classical Batik of Surakarta

Batik is a cultural product of intangible which has broad understanding; from technical aspects, processes, implementation, history, cultural influences, the development of visual forms even their symbolic and philosophical meanings. During the heyday of the Surakarta Hadiningrat Palace, several types of batik ornaments were created which were later claimed to be classical batik. Batik, in the beginning, was the term for the type of clothing used by ancient Javanese society. Made with special techniques to display certain ornaments, batik was generally used by royal nobility. Its use is also accompanied by strict rules of tradition based on certain social strata (Wulandari, 2011). The word 'batik' in Javanese is a form of adaptation of the word 'ambatik', which is a combination of the words 'emba' (perfecting) and 'taritik' (dots), which means making or perfecting images of dots on sheets of cloth (Lu, 1984). In semantics, the word 'batik' has the meaning of 'mbabaring atitik' (self-actualization) and has a philosophical meaning as a process of "embodiment of a will".

Some types of batik are considered classical besides being designed for ceremonies in the palace as well as the meaning and symbols in them having the conception and ideology of Javanese socio-cultural life (Achjadi, 1999). The conceptual form, meaning and function of classical batik cannot be separated from the Javanese minds, especially in understanding the harmonious and balanced context of the universe. This enhances the symbolic expressions in visual forms that tend to be subtle and static but magical in ornamental and color patterns. The aesthetics of Surakarta classical batik are not merely a visual appearance that has a psycho-aesthetic effect but rather a presentation of instinctive expressions of nature that can build a certain image. The essence is not a beautiful value as the highest achievement of a sense of beauty based on the abstraction of beautiful forms, but by majesty (*perbawa*) that can only be felt inwardly based on the process of inspiration about images that emanate from the abstraction of visual forms. As stated by Mangkunegoro IV (1969), "*dadi wruh ya dudu*" which means "the one having form is not the real thing".

Besides having visual beauty, Surakarta's classic batik also contains philosophical meaning from the teachings of life that is still relevant today. The classic batik of Sidoasih, Sidomulyo and Sidodrajat have main ornaments in the form of fruits in a basket and supporting elements namely; large pistil flowers, large petal flowers, houses and thrones that are placed inside the affirming ornament that is the shape of a rope or *dhadhung*. Fruits symbolizes life expectancy (Fraser Lu, 1985). Based on the Karma Yoga teaching (Hinduism), fruits are the symbol of obedience, in which every action is a responsibility. Meanwhile, construction/temple means a sustainable living place and showered by prosperity (Torwesten, 1991). Fruits and flowers in '*wadah*' mean love based on holiness and filled with prosperity. The crossed and bent lines (*dhadhung*) that border each pattern mean a strong and strengthening formation, interrelated and inseparable, understanding each other yet still flexible (Budi, 2017).

### Contemporary Art in Indonesia

Globalization has made a variety of values, models and western parameter easy to spread, trendy, and tempting. Information technology has also helped artists in eastern to know and understand the latest discourse of western art. Contemporary art discourse and its parameter that is created by western art can easily come into the fabrics of life in Indonesia. Nevertheless, the disappearing borders as the result of global interaction have also brought art toward the multicultural character. Nowadays, the art world is very open to various 'aesthetic' scheme in local culture (Sugiharto, 2016). Due to its

multicultural attribute, art plays a significant role in developing social sensitivity, implementing awareness toward differences and cultural diversity and ability to appreciate so that the values within can be inspirational (Sustiawati, 2009).

By observing the openness of the contemporary art field, it is possible to be used as a 'political' area to bring the rooting local cultural identity. Contemporary art can also be used as 'struggle' and 'emancipation' tools for the local marginalized art group. Therefore, 'identity politics' becomes important in contemporary art discourse or practice to not cause doubt (Naime, 1999).

In the era of globalization, a piece of art is not enough if it only meets international standards, it also needs to have a local character. It will be useful to preserve traditional artworks while developing contemporary artworks that have a strong identity and character that are ready to compete at the international level (Wahida, 2018: 14).

At present, there have been significant developments from the world's art connoisseurs towards the existence of Indonesian artists, which is shown by the increasing enthusiasm of world's stakeholders in exhibiting Indonesian contemporary artworks. The development of information technology that makes the world without borders geography and national, forming fast discourse exchanges so that artworks have a global content that is easily understood universally even though they use traditional symbols (Munaf, 2017).

Looking at some of the thoughts above, the philosophical meanings in Surakarta classical batik are still relevant to today's life thus having the potential to be integrated and developed into the creation of contemporary paintings. Matters relating to philosophical meanings can be used as a basis in determining the idea of painting creation. Meanwhile, matters relating to the aesthetics of symbols, techniques and materials can be used as a basis or integrated into the process of embodying paintings.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The results from the research with the method of development use steps from Borg and Gall (2003) such as (1) information collecting, (2) development of preliminary product, (3) preliminary product testing, (4) main product revision and (5) main field testing. The collection of information was achieved through: (1) collecting the data consisting of idea, visual form and philosophical meaning of Surakarta classical batik, (2) analyzing documents from classical batik pattern, (3) validating the data through triangulation, peer debriefing, recheck and (4) analyzing the data using interactive model of analysis. The preliminary product development was carried out by testing the sketch into the painting using painting on mixed media approach. After that, the painting was criticized and validated by an expert, senior artist and curator. The main product revision can be done by revising the artwork as proposed by the experts, especially in symbol and idiom visualization that is related to the creative concept. The main field testing was carried out by testing the painting with an open exhibition for the public to get the appreciations, critiques and constructive suggestions from the appreciators, painting commentator or local and international art critics.

## FINDINGS

The process of creating contemporary paintings began with information collecting and studying the subject matter about the philosophical meanings of Surakarta classical batik, namely *Sidoasih*, *Sidomukti* and *Sidoluhur*. Classical batik type is traced to its aesthetic values, both related to the form of ornament and philosophical meaning. Through the information collecting stage, various ideas, themes, patterns, visual elements, main ornaments, supporting ornaments and reinforcing ornaments in Surakarta classical batik are found. The aspects of form are analyzed and the philosophical meanings are interpreted.

## The Analysis of Batik Pattern of *Sidoasih*, *Sidomukti*, *Sidoluhur*

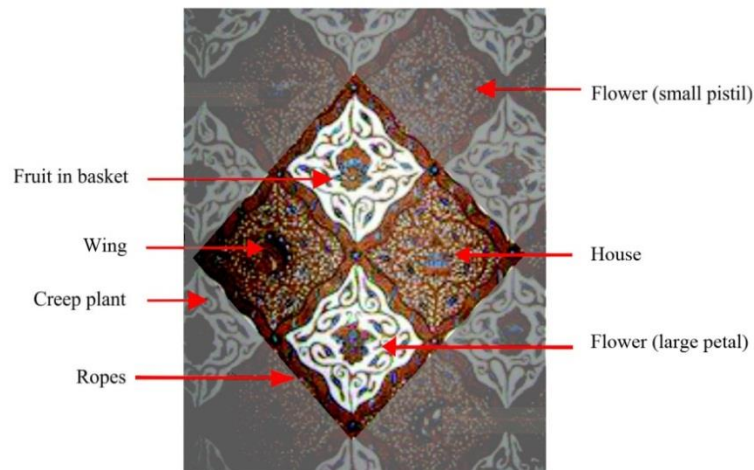


Figure 1 Ornament identification in *Sidoasih* batik pattern

Visual elements of *Sidoasih* batik pattern are one big rhombus shape consisting of nine smaller rhombi. Each rhombus pattern is filled with different ornaments; those are fruits in a basket, flower petal, flower pistil, bird's wing and construction or house. In the bigger rhombus pattern, there is one main pattern, four supporting patterns, four proponent patterns and one confirming ornament.

The main pattern is filled with fruits in a basket with a white background and '*isen-isen*' or filler of '*lung-lungan*' or creep plant. The supporting patterns are filled with different ornaments, such as flower with the small pistil, single wing, the flower with large petals and construction or house. Each of those ornaments is placed in the middle of the rhombus with brown-soil background and full of '*kembang pari*' or rice flower ornament. The four-proponent patterns have the ornaments in the form of a flower with large petals and fruits in a basket inside the rhombus with a white background and filled with creeping plants (ornament). The confirming ornament in the form of '*dhadhung*' or twisted rope in brown color acts as the border that forms the rhombus.

*Sidomukti* batik pattern has several main ornaments, namely: butterflies, butterfly wings, throne building, *meru* or mountain and flowers. While supporting ornaments, namely: *sawut* or soft lines, *cecekan* or small dots, *ukel* or spiral circle, *cecek pitu* or small dots totaling seven that form a circle.

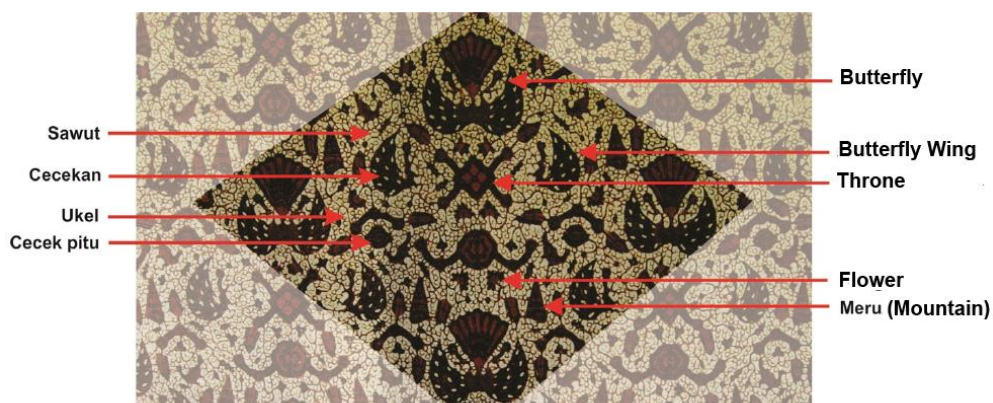


Figure 2 Ornament identification in *Sidomukti* batik pattern

The main ornament of a butterfly is a symbol of beautiful and high hope. Butterflies are animals that are beautiful in shape and color and can fly high as a symbol of hope. The main ornament in the form of butterfly wings has the meaning of flying high which represents the world above and wind. In the teaching of the four elements of life, the wind is a symbol of a just and compassionate nature

represented by white color. A throne ornament depicts a position and high degree. The throne is a symbol of hope for status and high degree, noble and respected by many people as well as a leader or king. The main ornamentation of *meru* or mountain is a symbol of grandeur, majesty like a big mountain and manly even though it looks from a distance. Derived from the teachings of the four elements of life called “*sangkan paraning dumadi*” or the origin of life, besides fire, water and air. In the Javanese Hindu culture, *meru* is used to describe a high mountain peak where the gods live. *Meru* that is represented by the black color has the meaning that if uncontrolled it will bring out anger, but if controlled it becomes the nature of eternal prosperity. The main ornament is in the form of a flower as a symbol of beauty. The form of flowers is found in almost every element used in traditional ceremonies because it has good meaning. Flowers are plants that stick in the ground or the earth as a foothold; can be interpreted as something beautiful, has a strong foundation and is capable of handling his or her life just as well as flowers, remains beautiful and strong because the roots stick tightly, even though they are exposed to the wind or other forces that can destroy.

The definition of *Sidomukti* comes from the Javanese words *Sido* which means to be or continuously, and *Mukti* which means noble and prosperous. Thus, the meaning of *Sidomukti* batik is to be noble and prosperous; hoping to achieve physical and spiritual happiness.

The visual elements contained in this *Sidoluhur* batik are the main ornaments of the throne building, *Garuda/Lar* or eagle wing, birds, *Baito* or ship, flowers, butterflies and plants. On the other hand, the supporting ornaments are *Dadhung* or rope and *Cecek* or small dots. Ornamentation of the throne depicts a high position and degree. The throne is a symbol of hope for high status and rank, noble and respected by many people. Ornament of *Garuda/Lar* is depicted in the form of a one-wing eagle as a picture from the side, with a closed wing shape which symbolizes the character of *Surya Brata*, namely the nature of fortitude. Ornaments of bird are depicted in a simple peacock shape. This ornamentation symbolizes the world above or air, symbolizing the nature of *Bayu Brata* or *Anila Brata*, which is a noble character that is not protruded.

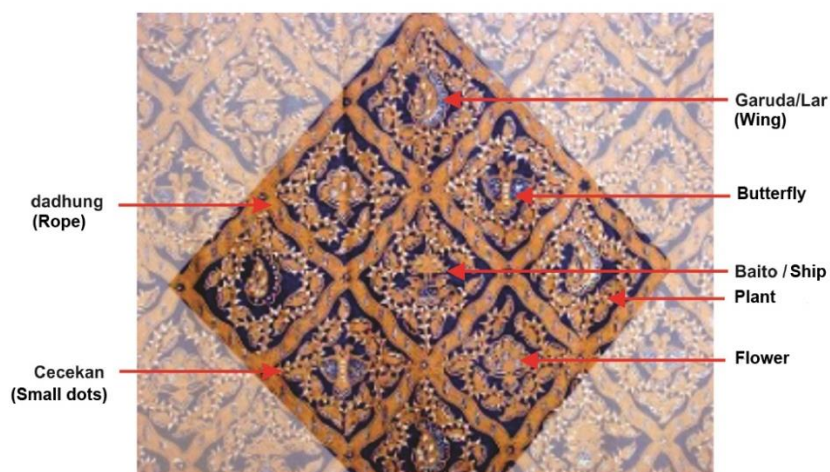


Figure 3 Ornament identification in *Sidoluhur* batik pattern

Ornaments of *Baito* or ship are items that move in the sea, are considered as a symbol of water or *Banyu* which has a meaning of spaciousness and calmness. The main ornament has a butterfly as a symbol of beautiful and high hope. Butterflies are animals that are beautifully shaped and beautifully colored and can fly high as a symbol of hope that flies high. Butterflies, like birds, can fly high representing the upper world and the wind, in the teachings of the four elements of life, the wind is a symbol of the just and human nature represented by white.

Plant ornaments are described as a form of *Lung-Lungan* that fills the rhombus field and surrounds main ornaments. Supporting ornaments in the form of *Dadhung* or ropes cross that forming a rhombus that limits each main ornament. *Cecekan* is small dots of meeting and gap that fill the main ornament field.

In general, batik of *Sidoluhur* has a philosophical meaning about nobleness. For Javanese people, living life is a process of looking for material and non-material nobility. The nobleness of material means fulfilling all physical needs by working hard following the position, rank, degree and profession. Whereas nobility, speech and actions are forms of non-material nobility. The Javanese people hope that their lives will be able to achieve a life filled with noble values. *Sidoluhur* batik pattern also means hoping to achieve a high position and can be a role model for the community. Besides, there is also a deeper philosophical meaning, namely perfecting yourself into a virtuous human being who always prays, remembers and thanks God.

### The Process of Realizing The Painting

After collecting information about the philosophical meanings of classical batik of *Sidoasih*, *Sidomukti* and *Sidoluhur*, preliminary form of product' activity was then carried out by developing contemporary painting creation ideas through sketch experiments and visual symbol selection based on its creative ideas. Some netted ideas began to be concrete by sketching, determining the type of technique, material and the format of the painting to be created. Here are some of the sketches chosen to be developed into paintings.



Figure 4 Several sketches whose ideas come from the philosophical meaning of classical batik

Preliminary Product Testing is carried out by testing sketches to be developed in a painting on mix media. In general, the creation of this painting is made with a symbolic approach using the main object, namely human figures. The visual embodiment is made by utilizing optical illusions such as perspective, light darkness and chiaroscuro. The perspective intends to describe an object or space in a real way on a flat plane of the painting. Through perspective, an object will carry volume and spatial impression. The use of chiaroscuro intends to clarify the objects in the painting to make them more dramatic. Chiaroscuro is also characterized in the application of light to a painting object which gives a three-dimensional impression due to the highlights and shadows. The application of illusions through dark-light aims to distinguish the form of an object from other objects in a painting. In applying brushstrokes with dark-light colors, it is necessary to consider intrinsic values on the surface of the object. The intrinsic values intended are related to the darkness or brightness of the actual surface color of the object. However, the values of dark and light on the object are affected by the effects of light; parts of the object that are not exposed to light, and shadow. The contrasting intensity of dark-light colors implies the way light and shadow form objects. The effects of light on an object cannot occur without the intensity of contrast between the parts affected by light and the shadow produced by the object. Light reflected by parts of the object can give rise to bright fields, shade and shadow and provide the three-dimensional quality.

The techniques used in the process of creating this painting include; techniques of block, brushstroke, blur and drip. Block technique is used to make flat colors flat on objects with three levels, namely: tint, tone, and shade. The tint for the brightest part of the object's color or that exposed to direct

light made with colored paint mixed using white paint. The tone for the object color that is not exposed to direct light made with the original color of the object mixed with gray. The shade is used for parts of objects that are not exposed to light; made with the object colors mixed with black. The brushstroke technique is used to make basic color blocks or give the impression of darkness and light on a wide field. The blurring technique is used to blur colors, lines or shapes that are too firm. In the condition that the paint is still wet, the white pigment is applied to the part exposed to direct light and blended with a sweep of the object's color. This blurring technique is directed to the brightest part by adding white pigment. Gradation of color in this blurring technique if done carefully will produce a tone or level or color transfer that is very smooth. Meanwhile, the drip technique that utilizes the dilution of paint is used in certain parts to give an expressive impression.

After going through a series of formation processes by applying various techniques and optical illusions, the next stage is the Main Product Revision, namely the process of revising artwork based on suggestions from experts to fit the concept of creation. The painting was criticized and validated by experts, senior painters and curators. In this case, some criticisms or suggestions from experts and curators, especially those relating to the visualization aspects of symbols and idioms are needed to achieve maximum quality. The Main Field Testing is done to test the quality of the painting produced widely through paintings exhibition at the *Taman Budaya Jawa Tengah* or Central Java Cultural Park Gallery and the Shah Alam Gallery, Malaysia. The results of the exhibition show that viewers can appreciate the artworks well and provide constructive suggestions for further progress.

### The Appreciation

The idea of a painting titled '*Kadung Janji*' is based on the philosophical meaning of *Sidoasih* batik pattern. The visual form consists of two main figures, namely male and female, as well as complementary objects, namely a vase containing two white roses. The composition of the two main figures is arranged standing and back to each other. The male figure carries a flower vase in his left hand, and his right hand is clenched, while the position of the female figure is displayed with her right hand lifting the cloth of the dress and the scarf that is hanging on her hand.



Figure 5 Painting titled '*Kadung Janji*', 140 x 120 cm, Acrylic on Canvas, 2018

The visualization of the male and female as the main object represents a pair of lovers who are committed to having a love affair despite the distance separating them. The position of these subjects means that the distance of space and time that seems to separate can actually be brought closer through openness and mutual commitment. The position of the subject of the male figure with his right hand

clenched and the left hand carrying a vase implies determination and enthusiasm to fulfill his responsibilities in maintaining love, wherever he is. On the other hand, the position of the female object who lifts a cloth and draws a scarf in her right hand implies the attitude of willingness and loyalty to her lover in various circumstances.

Based on the formal description and interpretation of the visual icons in the painting, it can be concluded that the hope of growing love throughout time will be a necessity if a couple has a strong commitment to looking after each other. Thus it can be concluded that the *Sidoasih* batik pattern which means hope about love can conceptually be used as a life guide because it is still relevant to the conditions of present-day development.

The idea of creating a painting titled "*Be on One's Guard*" is based on the *Sidoluhur* batik pattern. The form of this painting consists of the main object of a female figure holding a *keris* weapon in a ready position. The position of the main object becomes a symbol of the importance of alertness, guarding, restraining and protecting oneself from various passions which can harm a human life. On the background, there are complementary objects namely leaves and a bunch of bananas that looks as if it is being carried. The object of the banana is a symbol of prosperity, as a symbol of fruit in general. In addition to the main objects and complementary objects, there are also other visual elements, namely the embodiment of gradations in red, pink, brown and gray and dark brown blocks. The embodiment of gradations of red and brown becomes a symbol of the atmosphere of the morning or evening, which has a meaning as a cycle of the journey of human life from birth to growing up and maturing.



**Figure 6 Painting Titled '*Be on One's Guard*' 140 x 120 cm, Acrylic on Canvas, 2018**

Based on formal analysis of visual elements and interpretation of symbols from the main object, it can be interpreted that this painting contains a message of teaching behavior that must be done and how to do it to become a human who has a respectable degree in his or her social environment. For this reason, the ability to manage all goodness in the community is needed. Through work, a person can protect and raise his or her children with a good place to live.





**Figure 7** Painting Titled ‘Secret Agent’, 140 x 120 cm, Acrylic on Canvas, 2018

This painting titled ‘Secret Agent’ is based on the *Sidomukti* batik pattern. The main object in this painting is a woman in a standing position while holding a fan made of fur. The position of her face is slightly lowered with sharp eyes as if she is staring at something important. On the back of the hair are two large white roses. A flower-shaped object is a symbol of beauty that is firm and strong as the foundation and handle of her life, just as flowers remain beautiful and strong because their roots stick tightly, even if they are exposed to wind or other forces that can destroy.

Another complementary object can be seen in the background which is an old European-style house with the doors and windows being visible. The object of the house describes a high position as a symbol of hope for a high degree, glory and being respected by many people.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the process of paintings creation mentioned above, it can be concluded that the philosophical meaning of the *Surakarta* classical batik has a very high potential to be used as a source of ideas for the creation of contemporary paintings. In general, the meaning contained in the batik pattern of *Sidoasih*, *Sidomukti* and *Sidoluhur* is still relevant to the current situation. Thus, the new visual idioms that developed still have local characters and identity that can be adapted in today’s context.

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