

BATIK FOR THE MODERN MASSES

Entrepreneur breathes a new and vibrant life into the venerated tradition of batik

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A 30-YEAR-OLD woman is setting Penang's fashion market ablaze with her trendy and edgy batik blouses.

Kang Pei Shern's love for batik began at an early age and was influenced by her mother, an avid batik collector.

"She had a horde of batik sarongs and every time she travelled, she would pick up more. I used to admire and covet her collection," she told the *New Straits Times*.

Kang said during a bout of spring cleaning last year, her mother gave her a personal collection of batik sarongs.

"She kept a few of her prized batik and gave me the rest, and told me I could do anything I wanted with them."

While she loved the material, she could not see herself wearing it in the traditional way, such as with a *kebaya*, which is usually donned for formal events.

She then decided to turn the batik material into blouses which she could wear on a daily basis.

To achieve her goal, Kang turned to her mother-in-law, who taught her how to cut the material according to patterns and sew them together.

Kang said when her mother saw the finished pieces, she was so impressed that she emptied out her entire batik stash to convert into similar blouses.

After receiving positive feedback from her siblings and friends over her pieces, Kang decided to sell the extra blouse pieces at a pop-up market at the Hin Bus Depot here.

"The reception I got on my first Sunday at the market was overwhelmingly positive. I sold out my stock of batik blouses. That inspired me to try selling the blouses online," she said.

Kang then set up an Instagram account under the handle @betterthanblouses early this year.

"I put up a material sample on Mondays and take pre-orders. I am expanding my online reach further by setting up a website, www.betterthanblouses.com."



Kang Pei Shern, the creative force behind 'Better Than Blouses', posing with her modern-inspired batik creations in George Town, Penang, recently. PIX BY DANIAL SAAD

Kang believed the success of her blouse business stemmed from its versatility and modern look.

"People associate batik with being traditional or old-fashioned, but I think the way I cut the material and put it together makes it more modern and suitable for all occasions, be it for weddings or for work, going to the market or to the beach.

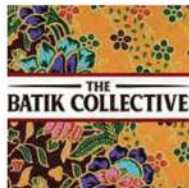
"When I model my blouses on Instagram, I try to match it in a way to make it look versatile and modern, instead of traditional or ethnic," she said, adding that she wore her batik blouses everywhere she went.

Kang selects her fabrics based on what is aesthetically pleasing and the quality of the material.

She doesn't focus too much on the origins of the batik, preferring to use all types, as each has its own unique feature.

"Batik making was brought to Malaysia by traders from the east coast who travelled to Pekalongan, Indonesia, back in 1921, to learn the block batik technique.

"Kelantan and Terengganu are known for their unique batik designs, while Kedah batik is known for its different shades of a single colour.



Kang Pei Shern working on one of her creations.

"Malaysian batik has more vibrant colours with floral or abstract motifs compared with Indonesian batik, which employs more human or animal motifs."

Kang said many batik styles were developed to meet customers' demands and were the result of the creativity of batik manufacturers who wanted to explore new designs.

In Sabah and Sarawak, the designs tended to incorporate animal motifs."

Kang, a graduate from International Medical University, said she planned to introduce more modern designs to her collection, but for now, preferred to stick to making blouses.

On her brand's name, Kang said it was derived from an old adage, "Jack of all trades, master of

none", which she often said to herself.

"It does not sound flattering because it means that I was average in everything I did.

"It was only after I met my husband that I learnt there was another line to the saying, which was 'a jack of all trades is a master

of none, but oftentimes better than a master of one'.

"It was a life-changing thing for me and made me realise it is okay to be a generalist.

"So when it came to naming my brand, I couldn't think of anything more apt than 'better than blouses'."