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Technology has allowed the printing of 3D flower motifs on fabric and these designs sell well.

WHEN Mohd Suhaimi Embong, 44, took over his father's batik business in 1974, the outlook was bleak. He had just finished secondary school and was entrusted to handle the family enterprise, which was not in good financial standing.

He was given RM4,000 by his father, Embong Su, to jumpstart the business, headquartered in Kampung Pulau Rusa, Kuala Terengganu, and put it in the black.

Like all other batik businesses, he went through the conventional batik manufacturing techniques — block batik, where the patterns are stamped on the fabrics, and batik tulis, where patterns are hand drawn on fabrics.

But it wasn't until 2007 that Desa Murni Batik did something radically different, a move that has expanded this small, local company by leaps and bounds.

Mohd Suhaimi made the bold move of building a new factory and buying machines from Italy to emulate the Italian textile manufacturing in batik production. "If high-end fabrics like Italian silk are produced that way, why can't the same be done with batik?"

So the company went digital for batik printing, using Swiss ink on fabrics and raising them to Italian fabric manufacturing standards.

"I think digital printing is the way to go for batik. It opens up a lot more possibilities, with a massive range of patterns and colours which are not possible with hand-drawn batik before.

"We want to give our fabrics the same treatment as how high-end brands like Chanel and Dior give their materials."

For example, to soften fabrics, traditional batik makers put them in boiling wax. To lock the colours, the fabrics are steamed. Both are laborious processes with inconsistent results.

Now, Mohd Suhaimi uses machines to both soften fabrics like crepe, and also, to lock colours in. So when users hand-wash their baju kurung or jubah, the colours won't run.



"I think digital printing is the way to go for batik patterns and colours." Mohd Suhaimi Embong

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

Mohd Suhaimi was in the city recently to witness the opening of Desa Murni Batik's second Klang Valley home in Shah Alam. Its first city store in is Wangsa Walk, Wangsa Maju. He travels

most of the time, sourcing fabrics, looking at new technologies and going to trade fairs to find ways to up his game.

At the new store, colourful fabrics graced the shelves and there are pieces with digital printing on them.

Orchids and flowers are printed on 3D, giving them the depth and shading previously unseen on batik. "When we started 3D and digital printing, we didn't get good response from customers because it was something very unfamiliar to them,

"It wasn't the design they would associate with batik. It was too modern, they said."

But Mohd Suhaimi's perseverance has paid off; customers are noting the contemporary touches he puts on his products. Now, he has shops in Kuala Terengganu, Kemaman and Temerloh in Pahang. His customers even come to Terengganu from Singapore and Brunei to get a piece of Desa Murni Batik.

"The tastes in batik here, Brunei and Singapore are similar. But Indonesians prefer something closer to batik Indonesia," he says.

CASUAL DRESSER

Dressed in satin batik shirt with pants and a pair of loafers, Mohd Suhaimi says he is a simple dresser. He only has 30 batik shirts. "Satin looks best on men," he says. "It makes them look classy and dignified,"

Desa Murni Batik also uses the services of local designer Wan Khuzairy to help place the motifs on its fabrics.

Positioning the motifs on a 4-metre piece of cloth is important so that when tailors cut them to make baju kurung, kebaya or jubah, the patterns appear on the front and back.

Since 2011, the company has also engaged Erra Fazira to promote Desa Murni Batik. The actress also has opportunities to design for and travel with the company to learn about batik production.



Boutique manager Sasaliza Mohd Sirin shows a ready-made jubah at her store.

YOUNG TEAM

The backbone of the company is a team of 30 designers who come up with a variety of designs for the different ranges of batik the company produces. Headed by Rafidah Abdul Rahim, a design technology graduate from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, the team, she says, does research on designs and put them on fabrics.

"In the traditional scheme, we are the batik artists. But in the digital age, a company works with designers to come up with new designs," she says. "With a computer, design possibilities are unlimited and that makes this field exciting. Whatever we can conceive, we can put them on fabrics,"

Her team is made up of local university graduates, including those from Universiti Teknologi Mara and Limkokwing University.

She says a lot of the designs consist of 3D flower motifs and 2D abstract patterns but she says no one design is more popular than another. "They both sell well, depending where they are sold at," she says.

Customers in Kuala Lumpur and Shah Alam, she says, like abstract motifs in pastel shades while those in Terengganu, Kedah and Penang want bold colours like red, yellow and striking blue. "I don't know why but that's the trend. As designers, we have to design what customers want, not just what we like,

"But it's important to be ahead of the curve and give customers the possibilities of what can be done. That's how you get ahead in this business," she says.

As he excuses himself to welcome Erra Fazira for the ribbon-cutting ceremony, Mohd Suhaimi says he is really blessed with how things have turned out.

"It was not something I had foreseen when I took over the business and my siblings and I are thankful,"

MOTHERS KNOW BEST

IT was my mother who first told me about Desa Murni Batik. Earlier this year, she asked me to find its store in the city to get fabric to make jubah.

Tailoring is her hobby, which makes her my official seamstress. And considering rising tailoring costs, her hobby has saved me a huge sum of money.

We decided on fabric barter trade, since she says she didn't need the money. It was an arrangement we happily accept because she is always excited to see new fabrics.

"Where is Desa Murni?" I asked. "Wangsa Maju," she says. She lives in Teluk Intan, Perak. She doesn't know where Wangsa Maju is in the city but she knows her daughter is street-savvy, having lived here for over a decade.

"I saw the opening on TV," she says. "They have good fabrics. I bought a few from my friend who got it from Terengganu,"

So my best friend and I went there. The Craft Complex in Jalan Conlay was having its annual Craft Week and Desa Murni Batik was part of it so naturally, the stocks went there.

So off we went to Jalan Conlay on a scorching hot weekend and found fabrics for my mom and ourselves.

The colours were striking and the crepe silk fabric, soft.

The booth was packed with visitors, proof of its popularity.

Prices are comparative with other batik producers but the designs make the brand stand out.



Its 2D batik pieces with graphic and abstract motifs are also doing well.

Source: New Straits Times