

# Fabricating Power with Balinese Textiles

February 23–July 8, 2018



Bard  
Graduate  
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Gallery

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Western scholars and artists converged on the tropical island of Bali, Indonesia, in the first half of the twentieth century, attracted by its unique culture and vibrant artistic practices. *Fabricating Power with Balinese Textiles*, a Bard Graduate Center Focus Project, on view from February 23 through July 8, 2018, considers the making and use of textiles as ceremonial objects that operate within a unique Balinese Hindu cosmology and explores the role of textiles as symbols of cultural resilience and continuity.

Displayed will be exquisite and rare pieces assembled from collections in the United States, including examples from the American Museum of Natural History that were collected by anthropologists Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson during their fieldwork in Bali. These textiles, which derive their aesthetic and ritual powers from techniques of fabrication and use in various life cycle ceremonies, also serve as records of an important period in Balinese history.



Cagcag (backstrap loom), comprising frame, yoke, shuttle, blade/beater, reed, lease bar, string heddle, and loom cloth Ngurah Hendrawan and Ni Gede Diari, makers. Nusa Penida, Bali, Indonesia. 2017. Wood, bamboo, cotton. Bard Graduate Center Study Collection.

## Background

In the 1930s, a group of Western expatriates, including Margaret Mead (1901–1978) and Gregory Bateson (1904–1980) converged on Bali to document artistic practices and ceremonies, motivated by the concern that these would soon be lost to Western influence and modernity. Assisted by their polyglot Balinese secretary I Made Kaler, the anthropologists conducted research in Bali between 1936 and 1938 on the aesthetics of actions, including everyday gestures, dances, and rituals such as trance. Bali is the only predominantly Hindu island in the Indonesian archipelago. Situated along ancient sea trade routes that connected India and China, Bali adapted diverse influences over the centuries to create a unique culture.

The seminal research by Mead and Bateson on Balinese culture made extensive use of photography and film and was later published as *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis*, a pioneering work of visual anthropology. Although textiles were not a focus of their research, their field notes describe the use of cloth in various ceremonies and indicate that weaving was an ongoing activity that was highly ritualized. Some of the textiles and objects they collected are housed at the American Museum of Natural History and are on loan for this exhibition.

## The Exhibition

Organized in three sections—Beliefs, Offerings, and Life Ceremonies—*Fabricating Power with Balinese Textiles* offers insights into weaving traditions, aesthetics, and ritual practices and encourages visitors to consider the powerful role of textiles as documented in the 1930s and as made and used today.

## Balinese Beliefs and Weaving

To fully understand the centrality of weaving in Balinese culture, one must pay attention to both materials and techniques, as well as to the beliefs of the makers. The spiritual value that the Balinese place on cloth reinforces the importance of weaving as an act that generates power. The selection of materials, technique, and design are all related to Balinese Hindu and Animist practices. Some fabrics are even believed to have magical powers that mediate invisible forces. Weavers and dyers not only rely on their skill, which incorporates cosmological ideas of tying and binding from South East Asian beliefs and



Painting, Kala Rau swallowing Dewi Ratih, goddess of the moon. Kamasan, Bali, Indonesia. Late 20th century. Cotton, pigment; machine-woven. Fowler Museum at UCLA, Museum Purchase, X94.24.5

Balinese Hindu conceptions of the world, but they also invoke the aid of higher invisible powers in the process of creation. Weavers make daily offerings and worship such deities as Dewi Ratih, the lunar goddess, who is believed to have given the knowledge of weaving to humanity.

## Offerings

Offerings of various types are presented to the gods at birth and development rites, at death and deification rites, and as supplication to demons. Indeed, most cultural practices in Bali may be considered an offering of some kind. Wrapped in fabric, the Balinese are themselves inserted into the ritual context. Containing the body of the wearer, textiles become a second skin and shape the form and appearance of the ritual participant. In a ceremonial context, the striking wrappers worn by the Balinese enchant others as attractive temple hangings invite the gods into the human realm. As ritually powerful textiles and paraphernalia are used in religious ceremonies, they become animated and can be considered ceremonial participants.



Langse (curtain), *Semara Is Asked by the Gods to Awaken the Meditating Siwa*. Probably Kamasan, Bali, Indonesia. Before 1940. Cotton cloth, natural pigments, Chinese coins. Collection of David Irons.

## Life Ceremonies

Textiles help demarcate time and space, accentuate the ritual calendar, and aid the passage of an individual through various life stages. Infancy, youth, and death are rituals that involve the entire community, and complex beliefs shape the use of textiles in life ceremonies,

culminating in the transformation of the human soul into an ancestral spirit. Although there are variations in the opulence of the celebrations, fabrics manifest their power at these events as intimacy, protection, and continuity, and they also act as symbols of cosmological unity and human kinship.

*Fabricating Power with Balinese Textiles* is curated by Urmila Mohan, Bard Graduate Center/American Museum of Natural History Postdoctoral Fellow in Museum Anthropology. The accompanying book, which will be available in the Gallery and the Store, reveals how the “power” of Balinese textiles depends upon the efficacies attributed to these objects as they journey from fabrication and ritual use in their native context to curation and display in the West.



Wrapper for a baby's three-month or Nelubulanin ceremony. Bali, Indonesia, 1936–38. Cotton. Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, 70.0/8279. Donated by Margaret Mead.

## About Bard Graduate Center Focus Projects

Focus Projects are part of an innovative program organized and led by faculty members or postdoctoral fellows through seminars and workshops that culminate in small-scale, academically rigorous exhibitions and publications. Students, assisted by the Center's

professional staff of curators, designers, and media specialists, are closely involved from genesis through execution and contribute to each project's form and content. The Focus Project promotes experimentation in display, interpretation, and the use of digital media, reflecting the Center's commitment to exhibitions as integral to scholarly activity.

## About Bard Graduate Center Gallery

The Gallery organizes pioneering exhibitions on decorative arts, design history, and material culture with leading scholars, curators, and institutions worldwide. We provide opportunities for faculty and students to gain experience in exhibition making. Our projects and publications break down traditional barriers between academic and curatorial forms of inquiry.



I.B. Adji Boen and I.B.P. Soentoelamn. Carving, the stage of spinning yarn or *ngantih*. Batuan, Bali, 1938. Wood. Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, 70.0/8426. Donated by Margaret Mead.

## Gallery Programs

Lectures, gallery talks, and conversations are offered in conjunction with the exhibition. For more information, please call 212.501.3011 or e-mail [public.programs@bgc.bard.edu](mailto:public.programs@bgc.bard.edu).

## Exhibition Tours

Group exhibition tours are offered Tuesday through Friday between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. and Thursday until 7 p.m. Reservations are required for all groups. To schedule a tour, please call 212.501.3013 or e-mail [tours@bgc.bard.edu](mailto:tours@bgc.bard.edu).

Bard Graduate Center Gallery is located in New York City at 18 West 86th Street, between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue. Gallery hours are Tuesday and Friday through Sunday 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Wednesday and Thursday 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Suggested admission is \$7 general, \$5 seniors and students.

For information about Bard Graduate Center and upcoming exhibitions, please visit [bgc.bard.edu/gallery](http://bgc.bard.edu/gallery).

For press information and images, please e-mail Communications Manager Hollis Barnhart at [hollis.barnhart@bgc.bard.edu](mailto:hollis.barnhart@bgc.bard.edu) or call 212-501-3074.

## Support

Support for *Fabricating Power with Balinese Textiles* is generously provided by The Coby Foundation, LTD.



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Front Page: *Gedogan* or *wangsul* (tubular continuous warp cloth). Ida Ayu Ngurah Puniari, weaver. Ida Ayu Pidada, dyer. Batuan, Bali, Indonesia. 2017. Cotton, natural dyes; handwoven plain weave, continuous warp, warp uncut. Private collection.