

Designer Iwan takes off with line of tableware



J.P.P.J. Leo

Batik designer Iwan Tirta with his new collection of dinnerware. The collection bears the voluptuous motifs characteristic of coastal batik, which, in a curious historical twist, was first influenced by Chinese ceramics traded through the port towns of Java.

Batik designer Iwan Tirta holds up a copy of last Saturday's edition of this newspaper, his attention focused on a profile of Clint Eastwood.

It's not the American's acting prowess that has won his admiration, but his ability to develop his craft and also seek new artistic forums.

"This is what I mean about always moving forward," said the 68 year old at his studio in his home in Central Jakarta.

While Eastwood went from "spaghetti" westerns to the days of "Dirty Harry" and eventually made his mark as an Oscar-award winning director, Iwan has undergone his own transformation in holding to his life motto of "reinventing" himself to face new challenges and keep his mind active.

"For me, being a designer has been a logical process —

here think about the need to do that."

A graduate in law from Yale University who spent several years at the United Nations in New York City, he entered into batik

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you start with one thing, then you move on to related fields.



design in the 1970s, leading to world-wide recognition of his talent as well as appreciation for the ancient art of batik-making.

It's not just to create, but also to market oneself, like Madonna has done. Unfortunately, very few designers

With a keen intelligence and sharp wit, he has been a jack of many trades and a master of most of them, from the author of a definitive exploration of batik to amateur body-builder. A famed raconteur, he is equipped with the essential info on pop culture icons, such as the aforementioned Mrs.

Ritchie, but can also wickedly cut down to size some of the country's leading figures for their failings.

It has not been an entirely smooth road, however, and he has faced a couple of personal setbacks in recent years, including a financial wrangle that nearly led to him losing his beloved house.

Now that the matter has been settled, he is bouncing back. As well as the ongoing process of documenting his designs so that generations to come can learn from his legacy, he introduced a line of tableware this week, featuring batik motifs on ceramics.

In blue and white, the voluptuous motifs characteristic of coastal batik — very different from the more staid designs of Central Java's *keraton*, or royal court — are featured on a range of porcelain, including plates, tureens, cups, salt and pepper shakers and coffee pots.

The ceramic ware is themed "The Flight of the Phoenix", and it's impossible not to see the tale of the mythical bird rising from the ashes as an apt metaphor for the designer's own reversal of fortune in recent years.

Of course, it's not lost on Iwan ("the phoenix somewhat mirrors my own life experience"). But he also points to the historical "full circle" that is shown by the creation of the tableware.

"In a way, it's a logical progression, because batik motifs, which were so influenced by Chinese porcelain brought in through coastal towns, are now being featured on my tableware," he said.

There are plans to eventually introduce a line of the tableware in red and white, and perhaps to expand the designs to include ikat and other woven fabric motifs.

Iwan said his cooperation with the Kedaung Group was also intended to wean well-heeled Indonesians off their "West is best" view.

"We never stop to think how really rich we are as a



JP/P.J. Leo

he is representative of our citizens who have consistently strived for the highest achievements,

and in doing so motivated others to bring positive recognition of the country around the world," said the bank's

the problems that come with taking those initial steps into the great unknown, Iwan is magnanimous about his role.

"I'm happy that a lot of people will follow me. The trailblazer doesn't become rich, it's the followers who get that. But it brings its own personal satisfaction in being the first."



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The mythical phoenix figures prominently in Iwan's collection, such as on the coffee pot and plate (photos left and below), a fitting symbol of the designer's own reversal of fortune in recent years. The delicate peony decorates a gravy boat (photo below left).

business development division vice president, Ferial Fahmi.

Although his designs have been worn by dignitaries and celebrities, and he has received his share of international awards, Iwan said it was recognition from home that counted most.

"The greatest recognition is that which comes from one's own people. If we're not respected by our compatriots, well, what is there to say."

With the new line of tableware, as in his fashion design days, Iwan is once again setting the path for others to follow. While it's a mostly thankless job, with those who follow freed from

culture. We are kind of blinkered to foreign products. Yes, quality has always been a problem (for local products), but this tableware can go anywhere, and be served with anything," he said.

The debut of the tableware coincided with Iwan receiving the Putra Bangsa 2003 award from Bank Bumiputera. Given to "native" sons and daughters who have excelled in their field, past winners include musician Elfa Secioria, fashion designer Carmanita and choreographer Bagong Kussudiardjo.

"We selected Iwan Tirta because

An open house of the tableware, sold at discounted prices, is being held at Iwan Tirta's studio, Jl. Panarukan No. 25, Menteng, Central Jakarta, on Sunday.