

katalin ehling



hooked on batik

Text by Roberta Landman

At first glance, an electric frying pan looks curiously out of place among paint brushes and art in progress at Katalin Ehling's home art studio. But the Cave Creek artist quickly puts things into logical focus. "The pan is used for melting wax," essential to the ancient art of batik, she says.

Born in Hungary and raised in the Midwest, Ehling has long been recognized as

"the premier batik artist of the Southwest." Her stylized and color-rich paintings depicting Native Americans have won her accolades nationwide and in Europe.

For the last few years, journeys to France and Italy with artist friends have sparked new themes in her batik work. Vibrantly hued, the art born of the European experience captures the lush fields,

Above: Artist Katalin Ehling stands before Umbrella Walk, a work she created using the batik technique.



The artist uses a tjanting, a wax-holding pen, to block off areas of a work she wants to keep free of dye.

rustic buildings with tiled roofs, interiors of charming cafes, and other elements found in Tuscany and Provence. And, taking a cue from her European artist counterparts, whom she meets at international batik conferences, Ehling has begun adding abstract designs to her repertoire.

Whatever the theme, how she does her artwork remains essentially the same: Once her drawing is completed on Pima cotton, she uses either a brush or a special wax-holding pen called a *tjanting* to "paint" melted wax into areas that she does not want to absorb color. The cloth is then dipped into a bath of dye, and the wax is removed by boiling the fabric in water.

These steps are repeated over and

over as more hues are applied and the work is completed. "It's a very tedious, lengthy process," Ehling admits, as a smile registers her satisfaction with the mauve-dyed mountains of a newly begun work.

The artist also has adapted her batik technique to watercolor images on paper, brushing on melted wax to "resist" unwanted colors. In this case, heat from a hot iron is used to remove the wax.

Whichever form of batik she employs, Ehling notes, "You need a lot of patience for this. Not a lot of artists want to do it."

She began experimenting with batik in 1971. Curiosity had led her to take a workshop in the art technique, which has been practiced for thousands of



South Mountain Japanese Gardens, watercolor with batik, 24" x 28"



Umbrella Day, batik, 30" x 36"

years in Indonesia and other locales. In the early '70s, however, the art form was associated more with the hippies of the 1960s than with serious art, she recalls. Of her own first attempts, she laughingly says, "I was doing batik paintings of my two children, flowers and cutesy subject matter."

A visit to the former Suzanne Brown Gallery in Scottsdale about 30 years ago changed all that. It was Brown who suggested that the artist's work take a more Southwestern view, and incorporate Indian women and children, Ehling remembers. "I went home and did a series that was hung at Suzanne Brown's. It just immediately flew off the walls," Ehling says.

Her interest in Native Americans and her admiration for them grew as Ehling read about their history and culture, and also visited Indian reservations. "I went up to a Navajo reservation in northern Arizona, and I also spent lots of time in the New Mexico pueblos, both photographing and sketching," she says. "Since many Native Americans don't like to be studied or observed, I tried never

to be intrusive with either my camera or my sketching, asking permission each time. Along the way, I've had many Indian artist friends, and they all thought what I was doing was cool, since I was presenting their people in a warm way."

A few years ago, Ehling was contacted by Northland Publishing and

asked to provide artwork for a children's story by Colorado author Linda Theresa Raczek. Titled *The Night the Grandfathers Danced*, the book about children and elders of the Ute tribe is illustrated with Ehling's charming batik paintings of tribal members. "When the children's book came out, it was extremely well-received by the

Utes of Colorado, not only for its wonderful story, but also for the illustrations," says the artist. The book received several awards, including the Western Heritage Award from the National Cowboy Hall of Fame.

The tale of how Ehling wound up an artist in Arizona is as fascinating as many of her paintings. As a 3-year-old during World War II, she and other family members fled their native Hungary as the Russians were about to wrest it from German control. In an odd twist of fate, they found safety in Germany. "Hungary and Germany were allies at the time," she explains, shrugging her shoulders at the vagaries of history.

When she was 9, the family left



Spur Cacti Wonderland, batik, 20" x 24"



Provence Garden, watercolor with batik, 20" x 24"

Germany and immigrated to the United States, settling in Waukesha, Wis. "It was a typical American Midwest town," she says with a smile. "And it was a wonderful way to become Americanized."

Then, in the mid-1950s, her family relocated to Chicago. There, the artistic Ehling took classes at that city's famed Art Institute, and later graduated from the American Academy of Art, where she had studied commercial art and fashion illustration. A subsequent yearlong study trip to Paris did not result in her entering the world of fashion illustration, though she did come close. While in France, the then 22-year-old had the opportunity to try her hand at sketching runway models for the famed Christian Dior design house. About a week later, she received a letter from Dior stating that she would have been hired had she not been from another country—that foreign land being America. It is not this memory of the Parisian experience but rather Sundays spent at the Louvre among the art of the masters that brings a special light to Ehling's eyes. Those interludes kindled her love of fine art.

Not long after returning to Chicago, she met Helmut "Joe" Ehling, her husband of 36 years and today a retired Motorola engineer. In 1968, the two moved to Arizona, where she continued art study at Phoenix College, raised her now-adult children, and went on to build her reputation as the foremost batik artist of the Southwest. These days, after sketching and painting trips abroad with her artist buddies, and travels with her husband, she has gone back to her European roots for inspiration.

At her studio, small sketchbooks are chock-full of her pen-and-ink drawings of the scenery and sculpture of Italy and France. Many of these will inspire batik paintings, Ehling hopes. One, a drawing on cotton, depicts a tiny cafe she and Joe had eaten at in Provence. "The floor will be black and white tiles," says Ehling, pointing out details. "It's going to have very colorful plates, and there will be croissants. And that chandelier," she continues with a look of excitement in her eyes: "I'm going to make it look brass. I haven't done brass in batik before." 🍷

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