

UNIVERSAL QUALITIES

Arizonan Katalin Ehling, known for her batiks of the contemporary Indian lifestyle, finds similarities in the peasants of her homeland, Hungary.

By Steven Scott



Katalin Ehling has been recognized for several years as the person who turned the ancient craft of batik into an art form in the Southwest. Her colorful scenes of Indian pueblos and Indian women doing their daily chores have caught the attention of art collectors and inspired several other artists to follow in her footsteps. After enjoying artistic success for 15 years, Ehling has now pushed off in new directions, expanding her repertoire to watercolors and monotypes in a series on Hungarian folk life, inspired by a recent visit to her homeland, her first trip back since leaving as a child of 3.

To Ehling, the depiction of Hungarian peasant life is a natural extension of her ongoing works of Native Americans. "There are many similarities between Native Americans and the Hungarian peasants," she says. "People who live close to

*"SZENTENDRE SHOPS," watercolor, 14 by 21 inches.
Photo courtesy El Taller Gallery, Taos.*

the land have universal qualities. They are close to nature and at peace with the land and their surroundings. It forms a certain type of individual. I was particularly struck by the fact that the women of both cultures are heftier and work with their hands, not only in doing their everyday work but in making pottery and embroidering or weaving. The Hungarian peasants also live in adobe homes, as many of the Indians do."

While the richness of colors she can obtain in batik is ideal for capturing the colors of the Southwest, Ehling concluded that watercolors offer a better medium for the softer hues of the Hungarian countryside. She was also eager to use a more

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spontaneous medium to crystallize her impressions of the Hungarian experience. Watercolors, which she had used extensively before discovering batik, seemed the best solution. Her series, however, also includes batiks and monotypes.

She sees her expansion into other media as a natural evolution. "I've always sketched and done watercolors. In fact, each batik is the product of countless drawings. Often I hold a sketch up to a mirror. That's when the inconsistencies and imbalances become obvious."

Both batik and watercolors have tactile qualities that she likes. The same quality in monotypes intrigues her, but it has been encouragement and suggestions from long-time friend and fellow artist Amado Pena that has caused her to venture into that medium. "Oh, I love doing monotypes," she says enthusiastically. "There's a tremendous element of chance and substantial risk of failure involved. That makes the process fascinating to me."

Unlike the lengthy process of batik, monotypes are made rather quickly and cannot be altered. The artist paints on a copper or acrylic plate, which is then put on an etching press. Wet paper is run through the press, giving a single impression. (Ehling is also fascinated by the results of pulling a second print, known as a ghost, from the same plate.)

Left: "VILLAGE POTTERS," batik, 26 by 42 inches, photo courtesy Suzanne Brown Gallery, Scottsdale; Above: "THATCHED ROOFS," monotype, 12 by 16 inches, photo courtesy Marcus Gallery, Santa Fe.



"BALATON HARVEST," batik, 19 by 24 inches. Photo courtesy Suzanne Brown Gallery, Scottsdale.

Ehling has no intention of abandoning the medium that has established her reputation. "I'll always do batiks, but change is a natural part of any artist's life," she says. "Your work is always changing, even when you're not aware of it. It's a personal thing, this need within to work more with watercolors and monotypes."

Although batik is an ancient technique that originated in Southeast Asia, it was unknown in the rest of the world until Dutch importers introduced it to Europe in the Nineteenth Century. It became a common craft in the United States when hippies began using it and the related tie-dyeing for clothes and decorative art. But it was Ehling who adopted it as an art form, after discovering it by accident on a 1973 trip to San Francisco, and used it to capture the rich colors and traditions of the Southwest.

A characteristic that marks Ehling's batiks is the minimal amount of crackling in her pieces. These lines, often purposely added by batik craftspeople to give evidence of the medium, result from cracks in the wax before the fabric is dyed. Ehling, however, believes that excessive crackling detracts from the composition, and composition is of utmost importance to her.

Simply put, batik is the application of wax and dyes to fabric. Ehling begins her pieces by sketching a scene in charcoal on natural white pima cloth. She then applies hot paraffin and

shaping wax to the fabric with brushes and a tjanting (a container with a small spout). The waxed areas remain unaffected by a 20-minute immersion in a vat of dye. After the cloth dries in the Arizona sunshine Ehling repeats the waxing and dyeing process for each color, often as many as 18 per piece.

While almost anyone can follow the rather simple batik process, it requires skill and patience to avoid the common "bleeding" effects. Ehling's finished works demonstrate that she has mastered the process. Much of her achievement can be attributed to her academic training, which included studying at the American Academy of Art in Chicago and spending a year learning fashion design in Paris, but one suspects that her infinite patience is equally as important. Soft spoken and methodical, she seems perfectly at ease in the Arizona desert, where she lives and works.

With the Hungarian experience now expressed on paper and cloth, Ehling has again turned her attention to the culture and landscape of the Southwest. Once again she is planning trips to the reservations and pueblos of New Mexico and Arizona where she can view her source material firsthand. "When you visit the pueblos you see the women climbing ladders with baskets of laundry on their heads or standing at the ovens baking bread," she says. "There is a gentleness about them that I enjoy drawing."

Ehling also plans to continue making serigraphs and lithographs, print making techniques that she thoroughly enjoys. □