

Blue – Saturday 10 March – Sunday 22 April

This exhibition celebrates a long relationship between makers and users, a plant and a mineral: indigo, the most widely used plant dye in the world and cobalt¹, the compounds of which have been used for centuries to impart distinctive blues to glass, paint and ceramics.

Who doesn't have a piece of blue and white ceramic or a pair of blue jeans somewhere in their life? Items that we might associate with the homely and everyday (cheap), or with luxurious porcelain and silk, (expensive). In other words, blue is ubiquitous. Cobalt and indigo have coloured everything in our wardrobes and cabinets since we started caring about appearance as well as function.



Jingdezhen porcelain, c.1335

Chinese porcelain, painted with cobalt blue, began to arrive in Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries. The quality of oriental porcelain was immediately apparent. Europe had nothing comparable and it would be another hundred and fifty years before the secrets of porcelain were unlocked in the West. Meanwhile, *copying* imported wares was the best we could do and the potters of the day went to great lengths to emulate both the clay body and the blue painting. Tin glazed earthenware, although much less durable, had a charm of its own and was produced in huge quantities, particularly in Delft, while other manufactories in France, Germany and Italy produced 'artificial' porcelain or 'soft-paste.'²

Cobalt oxide pigment painted onto unfired or biscuit fired ware, with the glaze then applied on top, is described as 'underglaze' or 'in-glaze' blue painting or, in the case of transfer prints, 'printed underglaze blue'. By the 1760s, the Worcester porcelain factory was experimenting with transfer prints, in blue, on soft-paste porcelain. A few years later the process for transfer printing onto earthenware was perfected. Transfer printing onto ceramic was done, at this time, by producing a design on paper (or taking one from an existing object), tracing the design onto thin tissue and then, with the use of carbon paper, reproducing it on a sheet of copper. The outline was then engraved, using a V-profile groove, while the details and areas of shading were done with lines initially and then, as the technique evolved, dots. The deeper the engraving, the thicker the deposit of colour with the 'right' thickness found by trial and experience and, as engravers improved their skills, different tonal qualities could be achieved. The copper plate would then go to

¹ Cobalt is a chemical element; symbol Co with an atomic number of 27. It is only found naturally in chemically combined form. The pure element, a hard, lustrous silver-grey metal, can only be produced by reductive smelting.

² Soft-paste porcelain was made by mixing glassy substances with the clay body. Fired to a lower temperature than 'hard-paste', it was a tricky substance to manufacture.

the printing shop and the process would be completed by a team of three, the transferrer, the apprentice and the cutter.

In 1784 the tax on tea was reduced from 119% to 12.5% which hugely stimulated demand for tea *and* tea sets. Either by serendipity or the rule of supply and demand, manufacturing processes were now in place to meet the demand. Mass-produced, modestly priced blue and white ware had become widely available.

Because of its Chinese origins, blue and white was inevitably linked with Chinese themed decoration. However, the original Chinese imports, whether treating natural or contrived subjects, followed Chinese conventions and, ultimately, rules of calligraphy. British versions of Chinese patterns were often gentle misinterpretations and one pattern in particular, known as *Mandarin*, led to the creation of the Willow pattern.



The tragic, star-crossed lovers' story behind the pattern is said to have been made up, either by Thomas Minton or Josiah Spode, to add a 'human interest' angle and thereby greatly increasing sales of the ware. Whatever the truth behind the pattern, it describes a full-scale cultural adoption³ in that something so wholly Chinese became held in such affection by its new 'owners' that the willow pattern is frequently described as quintessentially British. Rather like tea.

In this show six exhibitors make clear reference to European blue and white ceramics of the 18th and 19th centuries. By using parts or patterns of 'blue-and-white' and giving them a contemporary twist or, in the case of Rebecca Wilson, moving away from ceramic tradition and using 'throwaway paper' with the ceramic allusions added back in, this familiar product is given new meaning and purpose. Paul Scott's work gives us an eloquent reminder that our green and pleasant, blue and white, Chinese/English landscape is a fiction. And he may or may not be commenting on the fact that the Staffordshire potteries, which gave us

³ Moving from the confines of ceramic ware, the Willow Pattern story (star-crossed lovers' version) was the subject of a comic opera (1901) and a silent film (1914).

such vast quantities of blue and white ceramics, made a significant contribution to the rapid rise of the industrialisation of Britain.

Five other ceramic artists in the exhibition, Henk Wolvers, Fuku Fukumoto, Kaori Tatebayashi, Felicity Aylieff and Kap Sun Hwang might be loosely grouped as making work which has a closer relationship with the great ceramic traditions of China, Korea and Japan. Henk Wolvers might contest this but admits that his work is wholly tied to the astonishing qualities of porcelain as a material. His work is not figurative *or* conceptual; it is rooted in the possibilities of the perfection of his chosen material.

But whichever way the ceramic artists have used blue in this exhibition, as delicate, precise lines or luscious blue blobs, abstracted or figurative, sculptural or domestic, with historical reference or entirely contemporary, they have done it in their own individual and considered way.



Indigofera tinctoria is the name of the plant which gives the strongest colour-fast, deep blue dye as well as a blue pigment for paint and ink. It doesn't grow in Europe but woad, *Isatis tinctoria*, does. Woad contains the same pigment but in a much lower concentration. Woad, as a dye, reigned supreme in Europe until world trade increased to the point where it was uneconomical. The last commercial crop of woad was harvested in Europe in 1887.⁴

Linen with fine, indigo dyed borders has been found in Egyptian tombs dating from 2400 BC. The Old Testament makes reference to blue cloth being traded by the merchants of Sheba⁵.

It was Isaac Newton who added indigo as a colour to the optical spectrum in 1672 and indigo is accordingly counted as one of the seven colours of the rainbow.

Although plant based indigo dye has largely been replaced with synthetic indigo, the 'real' thing is still cultivated and used particularly in craft industries and, in keeping with the current interest in 'natural' products, is undergoing a renaissance as an up-market, fashionable dye. But the fortunes of indigo, tied firmly to textile history, have been circular. Jenny Balfour-Paul⁶ uses Chinese history to illustrate this.

'In early imperial days blue was reserved for princes and nobles, but by the time of the communist revolution its use was widespread among the poor. In 1929 an official ruling

⁴ Small quantities of woad were grown in Lincolnshire until WW2. It was used to dye the uniforms of the RN, RAF & police.

⁵ Now Yemen

⁶ Author of *Indigo, Egyptian Mummies to Blue Jeans*. A comprehensive history of Indigo dyeing (with gorgeous pictures). The British Museum Press, 1998, p.177

that everyone should wear the kind of modest clothing already worn by the peasantry gave birth to the uniform indigo-blue 'Mao-suit' which became a symbol of the communist movement's 'popular' base.'

All natural fibres dye well with indigo. Natural fibres fall into two categories: protein and cellulose. Protein fibres come from animals (silk, wool etc), cellulose fibres come from plants (cotton, linen etc). Different fibres absorb different amounts of dye resulting in a variety of hues. Most of us probably think of 'indigo-blue' as mid to dark blue but eighteenth- century European dyers describe thirteen separate shades, partly resulting from the number of immersions in the dye vats. These are 'milk-blue, pearl-blue, pale-blue, flat-blue, middling-blue, sky-blue, queen's-blue, Turkish-blue, watchet-blue, garter-blue, mazareen-blue, deep-blue, and infernal- or navy-blue.'⁷ You may like to decide for yourselves what shade of indigo the textile exhibitors, Fiona Rutherford, Louise Renae Anderson and Åsa Pärson have used in their work. Louise Renae Anderson describes her colours as 'quiet' and although this description may not fit the entire indigo array, it's true that indigo blues are never strident.

Indigo, as with many widely used commodities, has a turbulent history. Competition for the potential wealth associated with it has, at times, been intense and exploitative.

Cultivated in many places including India, Central and South America, the West Indies, Indonesia, North America, Egypt and Africa the skills and processes used to colour silk, cotton and linen and other textiles are many and varied.



This image shows a piece of Chinese cloth hand-printed with a stencil and a paste made up of lime and soya bean flour. The paste is applied, with a blade, over the stencil. The cloth is then put into the indigo dye for a fixed time and then hung out to oxidise. This process is repeated several times until the intensity of colour is correct. After the final drying, the paste is scraped off to reveal the undyed white cloth.

This exhibition is not a homage to past traditions, craft history or the colour blue. The exhibitors are all artists who *happen* to use blue in their work. They may, or may not, make reference to the past

but each and every one of them is giving us a fresh expression of the long and passionate love affair that we humans have with the beautiful, expressive and emotional colour – blue.

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⁷ Also from *Indigo, Egyptian Mummies to Blue Jeans*. p. 178