

IN THE STUDIO

Different Shades of Red: From Historical Sources to Contemporary Practice

by *Monika Auch*

Throughout the ages the quality of materials has been an important issue for artists. Pigments for coloring had to be pure, lightfast, readily available, easily reproducible and not too expensive. The reputation of painters and textile artists depended (and still does) partly on the quality of their source materials. In the Netherlands, research on natural colorants is currently conducted both in a contemporary designer's studio and by scientists in the “**Ateliergebouw**” of the Rijksmuseum. Located within 10 minutes cycling distance through the centre of Amsterdam, the “Ateliergebouw” and **Leentje van Hengel's** studio host workshops focussing on the color red.

Madder in Commerce

In the Lowlands the color red has a long standing history. In the province of Zeeland and Holland the Dutch cultivated and traded madder for several hundred years prior to the rise of synthetic pigments in 1860.¹ An oil painting from 1764 depicts three traders standing around a barrel of madder, assessing the quality of the ware. They have bored a hole into the vat and extracted samples, chewing to determine the amount of contaminating sand and enjoying the social aspects of trading, bantering until the sale is closed.²

Dutch Treasures

The “Ateliergebouw” hosts conservation laboratories for several institutions and has a long tradition in research with historically informed materials and techniques. Entering the building is a high-security procedure; here, the treasures of the nation are under the care of specialists. Scientists and restorers re-enact artisanal working processes in order to understand the making of art pieces. In the laboratories, recipes and materials are analyzed and reconstructed. An expert workshop discusses the case of a discolored Japanese housecoat of **Prince William III** (c. 1675–1702). Chemical analyses show the presence of a redwood dyestuff, indicating the original color of the gown could have ranged from deep red to purple. The participants worked with recipes from historical sources for dyeing silk with



Het keuren van meekrap (Inspection of Madder) 1764, oil painting, wooden panel. Courtesy of Museum of Middelburg, Zeeuws Museum.



Housecoat c. 1675–1702, robe or Japanese gown of Prince William III, 60" in length.



Dyeing with Printing Paste workshop at Tinctoria, Amsterdam.

eight different natural sources of red dye: brazilwood, madder, safflower, annatto, lac dye, American cochineal and kermes. They produced samples which were then artificially aged to gain a better understanding of discoloration processes in textiles, the dyeing techniques and the influence of light, and other fiber degradation. The aim is to gain information for museums to properly conserve and, if so desired, restore textiles. **Dr. Marieke Hendriksen**, an art historian who specializes in the material culture of the eighteenth-century, writes about the sources of pigments for artists: “Recipe collections and how-to books before the eighteenth century were often a mixture of medicinal and artisanal recipes and instructions at the boundaries between medicine and chemistry. The preparation and application of artist’s materials were often so fluid as to be almost non-existent.” These artists typically purchased pigments from traveling traders, apothecaries and specialized dye stores.^{3,4}

Tinctoria

Leentje van Hengel’s studio, **Tinctoria**,⁵ is an artist’s space filled with materials, books, and stacks of samples—all dominated by a long printing table and equipment needed for hand-dyeing and hand-printing. Leentje has conducted her investigations into natural pigments for twenty-five years while working on commissions for well-known designers including **Claudy Jongstra** and **Christien Meindertsma**.

Leentje received her education in textile design in Great-Britain. During a visit to Venice and the 19th century Italian artist Fortuny’s studio, “I was struck by the colors and beauty of his textile designs. I wanted to know how to achieve this. This epiphany coincided with the advent of non-toxic dye procedures



Woollen and linen samples, dyed with indigo, pre-treated with soy, washed and steamed at different temperatures at Tinctoria Workshop. Photo: Monika Auch.

and a growing consciousness about toxicity in textile production and pollution. I set up my studio with the aim of developing and producing brilliantly colored textiles with natural dyes without harming the environment.” Leentje is an advocate of using sufficient natural mordants as this step determines the quality and lightfastness of the textile. “There is no extra benefit gained from saving on natural mordants,” she states. What makes the aesthetic qualities of natural dyes? She says, “Natural dyes



Tinctoria Eye 2018, wool, madder, dyersweed, cochineal, iron galnuts, discharge paste. Photo: Tinctoria.



Tinctoria Rosa 2017, curtain material, linen-dyed, printed with madder, discharge. Photo: Iris Duvekot.

seem to have more depth and richness for our visual perception and a slight unevenness in colors make them real eye-catchers. I would like museums to place information about the pigments next to each art work.”

Red Treasures

In 2016 a team of archaeological divers found a spectacular, well-preserved 17th century woman’s silk wardrobe in a shipwreck off the coast of the island of Texel. The most exciting discovery is that sixteen of the twenty six items are red. Scientists are conducting research into this textile treasure down to a molecular level. A publication on the findings including weaving patterns and technical details will soon be published.⁵

¹ J. Kirby, M.van Bommel, A. Verhecken, Natural colorings and Lake pigments, Archetype publications, 2014. This is a highly recommended book with historical information and easily modified and reproducible recipes for teaching or scientific work.

² Esther van Gelder et al. (eds.), Dingen die ergens toe dienen. Verhalen over materiële cultuur van wetenschap, Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2017.

³ recipes.hypotheses.org/10141

⁴ For procedures of this workshop: textiles-trade-taste.net/author/editorialteam/

⁵ Tinctoria is the Latin collective noun for plant material used for dyestuff.

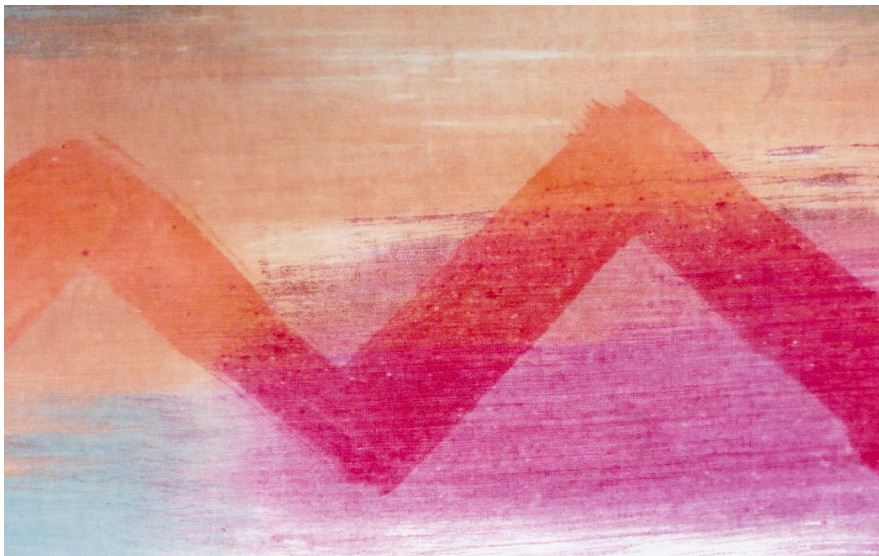
⁶ van Bommel, M. R. (2017). De textielcollectie BZN17 chemisch ontsloten, het eerste onderzoek naar de gebruikte materialen in het textiel. In De archeologische kroniek van Noord-Holland 2016 (blz. 177-) Although the article is in Dutch, the images are very interesting.

tinctoria.nl

—Monika Auch has a background in medicine and textile design with a focus on weaving. A hybrid of science and art, she set up Weeflab in Amsterdam to investigate ‘The intelligence of the hand’: weeflab.com | monikaauch.nl | stitchyourbrain.com



Restoration specialist **Marijke de Bruijne** and student **Hanneke Kramer** working on a red silk cape found in the shipwreck off the coast of Holland. Photo: Provincie Noord-Holland.



Tinctoria Thunder 2017, wool, madder, cochineal, woad, discharge paste, 19" x 19". Photo: Iris Duvekot.



Tinctoria Spirit 2017, curtain material, wool printed, madder. Photo: Iris Duvekot.