

Indigo: Layers of Paint, History, and Art

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Indigo: Fading into the Background

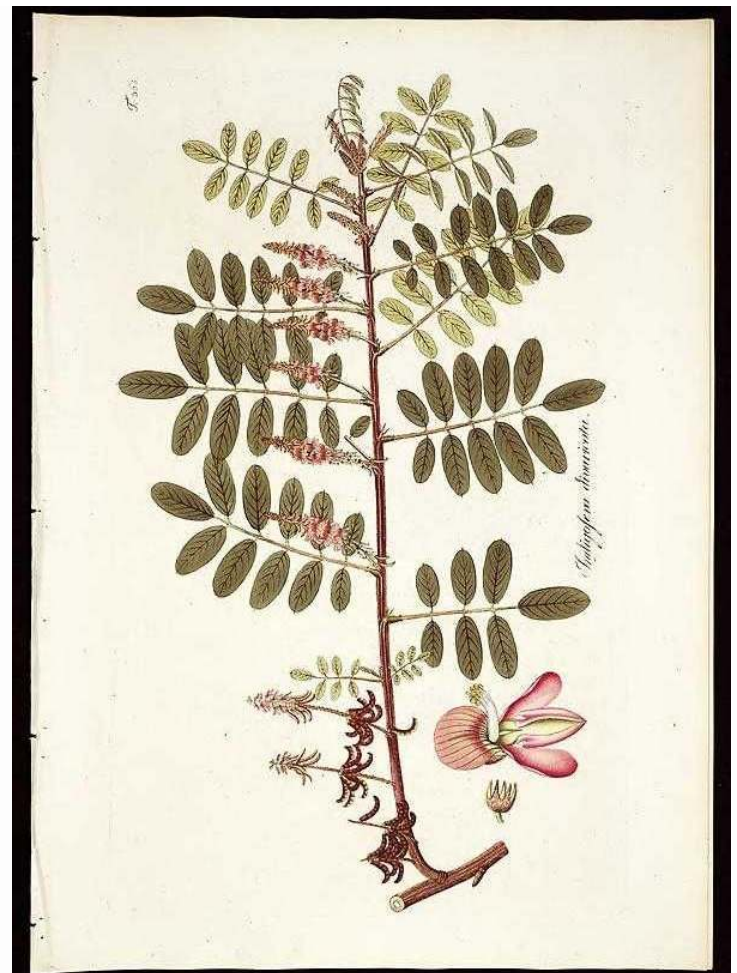
Upon first glance, the background of Johannes Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (c. 1665) appears black, especially when viewed against the light blue of the girl's turban. Thanks to the passage of four centuries, the original indigo pigment used to paint the background has faded, rendering it hardly noticeable to a modern audience primarily interested in the subject's identity. The indigo pigment is not the only aspect of the painting that has faded as the result of time: the often violent and exploitative context in which indigo was obtained and used during the colonial period has been largely overlooked for a dye whose widespread popularity has endured for millennia. The pigment Vermeer used was exported from the Americas to the Netherlands and therefore was most likely produced using enslaved labor.¹ This is only one example of the many links between indigo and colonialism that have stained indigo's history with patterns of exploitation. At the same time, paying attention to all layers of indigo's legacy reveals overlooked art forms that reach beyond and add nuance to indigo's violent past.



⋮ Girl with a Pearl Earring



More than 750 species belong to the *Indigofera* L. genus, and its native range spans Africa, Asia, the Southwest Pacific, the central and southern United States, and the tropics.² The genus belongs to the bean family (Fabaceae), and, as a legume, indigo “can fix nitrogen in the soil, and therefore, it’s used as a rotation crop in agriculture to improve soil quality.”³ Perhaps the most well-known of its species is *Indigofera tinctoria*, known as “true indigo,” which is the dominant species in the Indian subcontinent.⁴ Another well-known indigo species, *Indigofera suffruticosa*, is dominant in Central and South America.⁵ While many indigo plants produce beautiful flowers of blue or pink, its dye comes from its distinctive round leaves. Through a process of fermentation, the leaves are “soaked in water and churned until they release a navy blue froth,” which is then filtered for impurities and turned into a powder or paste.⁶ In most cases, the powder or paste is used to create pigment for paint and a dye for clothing and textiles.

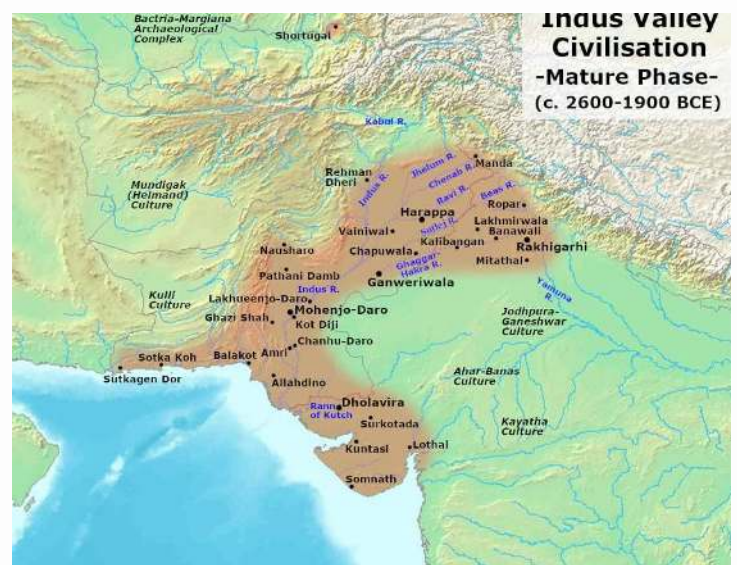


⋮ Early Modern *Indigofera Suffruticosa*



Ancient and Indigenous Uses of Indigo

The earliest documented use of indigo can be found from 4000 B.C.E., in what is now Peru.⁷ Throughout the Americas in ancient and premodern times, *Indigofera suffruticosa* was used to make dyes for textiles, body paint, sculptures, pottery, and murals. A millennium later, around 3000 B.C.E., indigo from *Indigofera tinctoria* was cultivated in the Indus Valley. This is the location from which indigo entered the European market, and it became known throughout the Roman Empire as *indicium*.⁸ As a consequence of both trade and Indigenous cultivation, indigo was also used as a dye in the ancient regions and civilizations of West Africa, East Asia, and Mesopotamia.



⋮ Map of the Indus Valley, c. 2600-1900 BCE



Beautiful but Banned

Though indigo had a rich history in the Indus Valley, its initial reception in Europe in the sixteenth century was mixed. Some were astonished by the dyeing power of this new plant and were eager to adopt it for profit or personal use. Others had invested all their capital in the woad plant, which had been commonly used to make blue dye since before the Romans conquered Britain. Although it was not as effective as indigo at creating vivid blues, woad had brought middle-class merchants great wealth that they parlayed into substantial influence by sponsoring the creation of churches, towns, and universities. After indigo arrived, suppliers of woad, heavily invested in the plant, fought their potential obsolescence to keep their profits secure. In 1577, indigo was banned in Germany, where it was known colloquially as the “devil's dye.”⁹ In 1609, France enacted a death penalty law for using indigo. England declared indigo a poisonous substance and banned it until 1660. Most dyers throughout Europe, however, ignored anti-indigo laws and mixed indigo with woad to produce vats of stronger dye.¹⁰ The East India Company (EIC), founded in 1600, happily supplied the illegal plant to dyers from India.¹¹ France was the first to change its laws in 1737, making it the only legal source of indigo. As a result, France had a head start in the competition for indigo profits that would continue over the next several hundred years.¹²



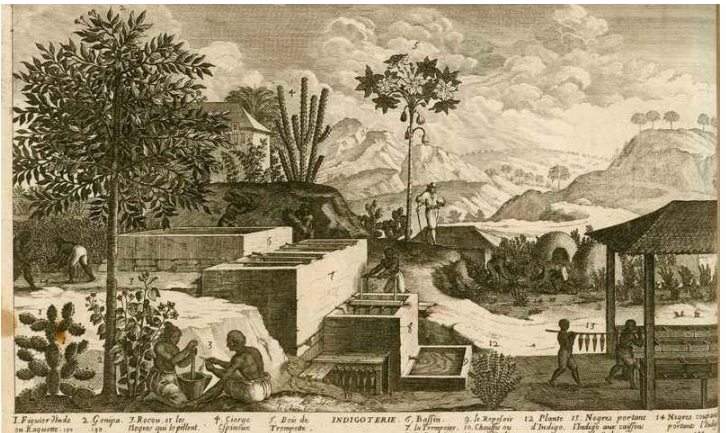
⋮ Napoleon's military uniforms, depicted on the right... ⋮

Exploitation in the Caribbean

In the race for profit, European countries found that they could plant indigo cheaply in the Caribbean. Caribbean indigo production began in the seventeenth century, born out of economic competition between the Spanish, French, and British, as well as the necessity for indigo to be grown in a tropical climate. The first European indigo plantations in the Caribbean emerged in the 1630s. Jamaica, Martinique, and Haiti became prominent indigo producers, with Haiti producing the most indigo throughout the remainder of the seventeenth century and into the early eighteenth century.¹³ By 1790, the year before the onset of the Haitian Revolution, the island housed 3,160 indigo plantations.¹⁴



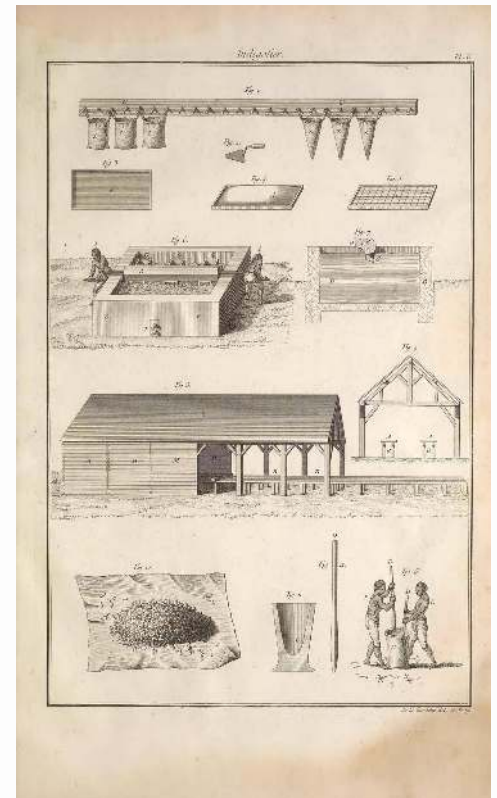
Early accounts of the process of indigo production in the Caribbean highlight its labor-intensive nature. In 1687, Hans Sloane traveled to Jamaica to serve as personal physician to the British governor. In his *Voyage to...Jamaica*, which documents the island's flora, Sloane describes how indigo was processed in the Caribbean: "Some of the Seeds...are put into Holes at [a] Foot's distance...[it is] ready to cut in 3 Months..." After harvesting, the indigo plant is then mixed with water, and, after fermenting, it is "let...out of the *Trempoire* to the *Batterie*, where 'tis beat till it granulates."¹⁵ The *trempoire* and *batterie* refer to the sophisticated steepers and presses devised to maximize productivity. After the indigo is granulated, it is mixed with more water and placed in sacks where oil is beaten into it. As a result of the beating process, a paste forms that is settled, dried, and pressed into dye cakes. Sloane briefly mentions the enslaved laborers who would have carried out this process when writing that "Some Negroes and French have been kill'd by its ill Savour," drawing attention to the potential dangers of the plant even to those who are knowledgeable about it.¹⁶ An intensive and sometimes life-threatening process, indigo production by enslaved laborers marked their bodies with its legacy, whether via ailments or death.



⋮ Indigo Production, French West Indies, 1667



Unlike Sloane, French clergyman and botanist Jean-Baptiste Labat elided the dangers of indigo production that sometimes led to the deaths of enslaved laborers. He traveled to Martinique in 1694 for missionary work and recounted his experiences there and in other parts of the Caribbean in his *Nouveau voyage aux isles de l'Amérique*, which provides its own description of the technology of indigo production in the Caribbean. According to Labat, indigo is produced in three vats that form a cascade from top to bottom. The vats are the steeper, the batterie, and the devilling. The steeper is where the indigo is fermented, the batterie is where the indigo is beaten, and the devilling is where the indigo begins turning into a dye.¹⁷ Although Labat briefly notes that enslaved laborers were responsible for planting indigo, he does not mention them in his account of indigo processing. He also omits the fact that he himself owned enslaved laborers. These holes in Labat's account speaks to a pattern of separating the enslaved from the history of indigo production.



⋮ L'art de l'indigotier, pg 135



South Carolina Enters the Indigo Market

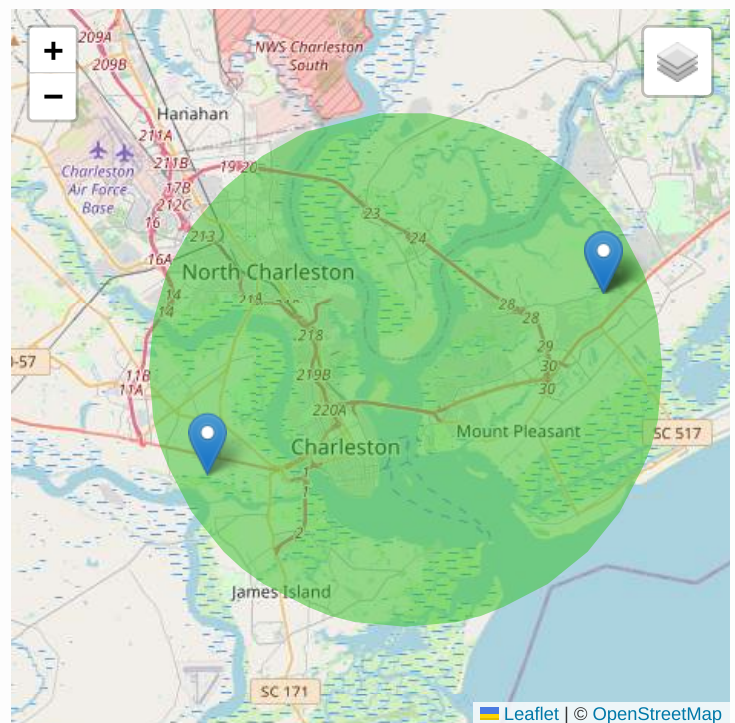
In spite of the promise of indigo in the Caribbean, near the end of the seventeenth century, the British Parliament imposed an export duty on Jamaican indigo as a means of compelling planters to enter sugar cultivation.¹⁸ Around the same time, early settlers in South Carolina were experimenting with planting indigo.¹⁹ Due to the War of Jenkins' Ear, British ports were closed to goods from France and Spain from 1739 to 1743, and England officially turned to the American colonies for its indigo supply. The plant's popularity as a cash crop made South Carolina the wealthiest British North American colony throughout the eighteenth century.²⁰ This success is in large measure attributed to the agricultural

innovations and experiments of Eliza Lucas Pinckney, who lived in the Lowcountry and managed Wappoo Hall, the colony's most well-known indigo plantation. She planted her first indigo in 1740, when she was just eighteen years old. While the indigo business started to take off, South Carolina still relied on the labor and expertise of Caribbean planters and workers. Pinckney learned how to cultivate indigo with the guidance of Nicholas Cromwell, a white contract laborer from Montserrat whom her father had hired to teach her how to make indigo dye cakes.²¹

While studying Pinckney's family records, historian Andrea Feaser discovered that Wappoo Hall's indigo operations also relied on the labor of twenty enslaved people.²² While most details of their lives remain unknown, Feaser uncovered the role of one enslaved man named Quash (later known as John Williams), a skilled carpenter.²³ In 1744, Pinckney wrote in a letter to her husband, Charles Pinckney, that she no longer trusted Cromwell and "therefore [desired] Quashy may be put immediately, to make an indigo work of the same dimensions."²⁴ Williams' labor, both direct and indirect, was a key component to the success of Pinckney's business. Feaser also uncovered documents revealing that Williams was manumitted in 1750 and that Pinckney witnessed and signed the documents, which praised him for "good faithfull service."²⁵ As Feaser notes, the document demonstrates Pinckney's esteem for Williams.²⁶ Moreover, it reveals how crucial his labor and knowledge were to Pinckney's enterprise and to indigo production in South Carolina. Of course, Williams was just one of thousands of enslaved workers who made the indigo industry successful.



Pinckney's Snee Farm, another site of indigo...



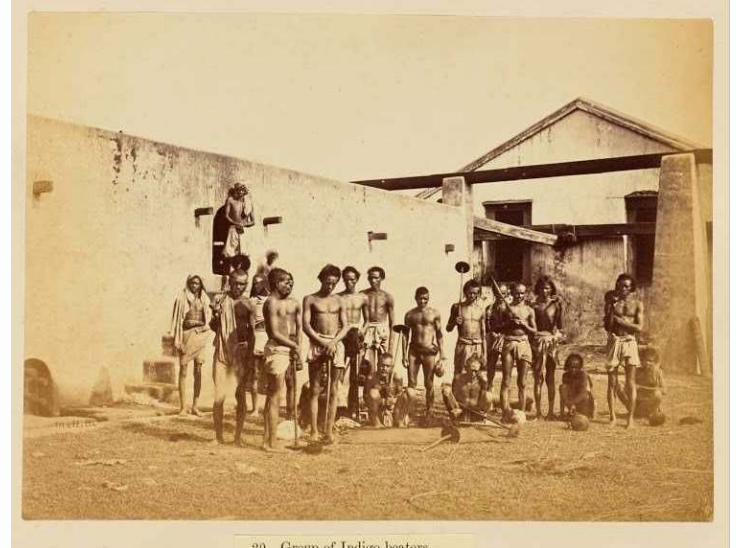
Charleston, South Carolina



Imperialism in India and the Indigo Revolt

Decades later in 1860, Plowden Weston, Lieutenant Governor of South Carolina, stated that of all the state's youths, "not one... remembers the cultivation of indigo."²⁷ Indeed, following the American Revolution in 1776, England turned to India for its indigo supply due to political tensions with the newly formed United States. Many English planters coerced Bengali farmers into growing indigo through lawful and criminal means. One notorious planter, George Meares, burned to the ground the homes of uncooperative farmers and successfully petitioned the government to forbid the growing of rice on land used for indigo.²⁸ In response to this poor treatment, the Indigo Revolt (also known as the "Blue Mutiny") occurred in 1859, and prisons were flooded past

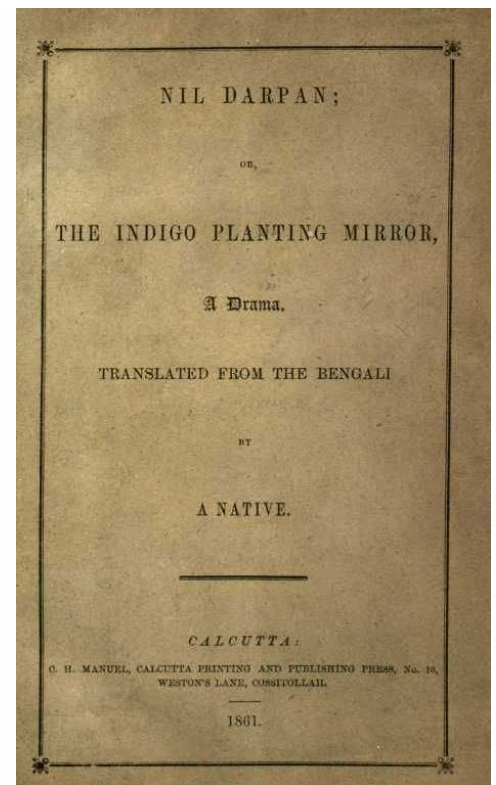
capacity with arrested protestors who refused to sow indigo for English planters.²⁹ The years leading up to the revolt had seen the beginnings of a national sentiment in Calcutta stemming from "a political struggle against the British mercantile community," as well as "the rise of new social classes in rural Bengal."³⁰ With a newly heightened political consciousness, the Bengali farmers' continued taking collective action for more than a year.³¹



⋮ Group of Indigo beaters in India, 1877



In 1860, the Indigo Revolt inspired a new work of art, not of cloth or dye, but of revolutionary theater.³² The play *Nil Darpan; or, The Indigo Planting Mirror* gives us insight into this time. Playwright Dinabandhu Mitra, a postal worker and student of literature, observed the strife surrounding indigo plantations, which offered him a poignant example of how plant-human relationships are inscribed onto the body. While indigo often fades as a dye or a pigment, the plant stains the hands of the workers that process it into a dye, leaving their palms a shade of dark blue. This prompted Mitra to write a play that would hold a mirror up to the “stain of selfishness” that marked the British indigo planters.³³ *Nil Darpan* depicts the ways in which English planters coerced farmers into growing indigo and the cruel treatment farmers endured. They were often forced to “take out loans and sell the crop to planters at fixed (low) prices, forcing them into a cycle of debt and economic dependence that was often enforced with violence,” ultimately leaving the farmers little recourse to improve their conditions.³⁴ In the drama’s first act, the protagonist Ray Churn vocalizes the ryots’ [farmers’] concerns when he cries out, “What shall we eat now, and what shall our children take? This large family may die without food...What has the Indigo of this white man done?”³⁵ Throughout the play, the violence and oppression committed by British planters leads to “either the madness or death of almost every one of the principal Indian characters,” and “Not only do the planters ruin the ryots, but they also corrupt the judicial officers of the government.”³⁶

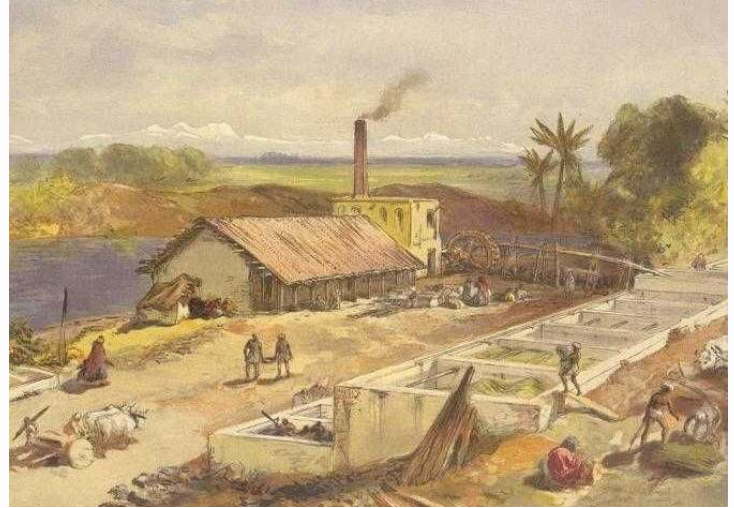


⋮ Nil Darpan; or, the Indigo... ⌂

Nil Darpan was the first commercially staged play at Calcutta's National Theatre and became one of the most popular Indian dramas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.³⁷ In 1861, the play was translated into English by Michael Madhusudan Dutt and published by missionary Reverend James Long, who was arrested for sedition despite having "omitted," "expunged [and] softened" a "great deal" of the play.³⁸ In a statement following his arrest, Long writes that he published the translation as a warning to the British of the "volcano . . . forming beneath [the ryots'] feet."³⁹ Indeed, Long's English edition ensured that *Nil Darpan* became well known, adding a negative hue to the public's perception of British indigo planters once the details came to light. Following the Indigo Revolt, the English investigated the injustices being perpetrated on farmers by indigo plantation owners, leading to an 1861 report of the Indigo Commission. The report quotes EWL Tower, the magistrate of Faridpur, that "not a chest of indigo reached England without being stained with human blood."⁴⁰

Gandhi's Peaceful Revolution and Champaran Satyagraha

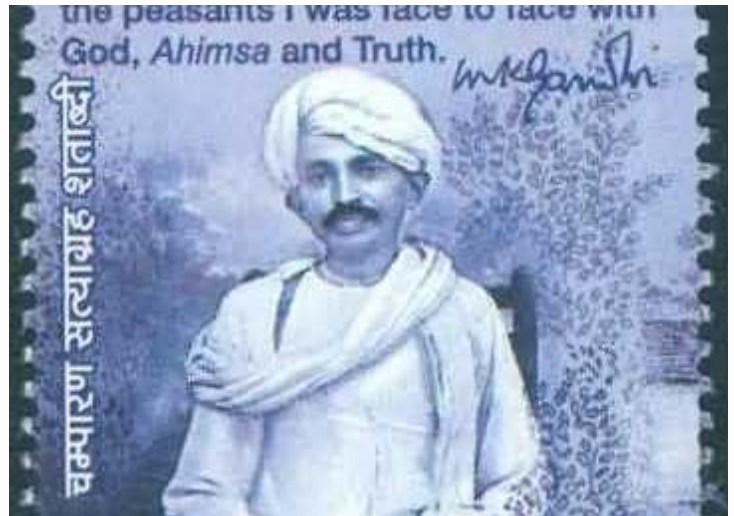
The revolt, the play, and the Indigo Commission resulted in reform for workers in Bengal, but they did not end the injustices in North Bihar. The outbreak of World War I in 1914 fueled new demand for natural indigo, as European supplies of synthetic indigo dye, which manufacturers began using at the turn of the twentieth century, were disrupted. British planters continued to exploit the labor of India's indigo farmers well into the twentieth century. As a result, indigo became an important factor in India's independence movement. After developing his political ideas of peaceful resistance in South Africa, Mahatma Gandhi returned to India, and his first protests against British rule were about the working conditions of indigo farmers in the Champaran district of Bihar.⁴¹



Indigo dye factory in Bengal, 1867



Due to his reputation as an activist, Gandhi was asked at a Lucknow Congress meeting in 1916 to witness the plight of indigo farmers for himself. During his visit to the district of Motihari on April 15, 1917, he was served notice of criminal procedures being enacted against him. The District Magistrate of Champaran was threatened by Gandhi's presence and asked him to leave immediately, but Gandhi refused until he had completed his mission. Rumors spread among the Motihari that the magistrate had been forced to apologize. Gandhi sent the Government of Bihar thousands of accounts from indigo workers he had collected during interviews. As a result, officials appointed an enquiry committee that made "drastic recommendations in its report to improve the state of affairs in the district," recommendations that were then mostly implemented by the government.⁴² Gandhi's agitation on behalf of the Champaran growers became known as the Champaran Satyagraha. Satyagraha, the term Gandhi coined to describe his methods of peaceful resistance, derived from the Sanskrit words *satya* (truth) and *agraha* (firmness or force).⁴³ His successful protests against the oppression and exploitation of the indigo farmers became "the first laboratory of experiment...for his political ideas" and were an important origin point for his peaceful resistance to British rule in India.⁴⁴



Blue stamp commemorating the 100th anniversar...

The Impact of Synthetic Dyes

Though the Champaran Satyagraha was an important step both for India's independence and a more ethical indigo farming industry, health and labor issues for factory workers continue today, even though the use of natural indigo dye has declined significantly due to the rise of synthetic indigo dye.

The enduring demand for blue dye in the textile industry has placed synthetic indigo production on a large-scale industrial level: every year, about 80,000 tons of chemically produced indigo are created using non-renewable petrochemicals, generating toxic compounds. Moreover, at least four hundred tons of aniline (a toxic carcinogen) are released each year from synthetic indigo production. Two-thirds of this compound are either diffused into surrounding air and wastewater or unintentionally absorbed by plant workers. One-third of the compound remains in the denim that consumers buy and wear. This type of

large-scale chemical production creates additional issues with disposal, and, because wastewater treatments are expensive, "many facilities dump the spent dyestuff directly into rivers, contributing to environmental pollution."⁴⁵ While just seventeen production sites are responsible for most of the world's synthetic indigo dye, only one follows any type of wastewater restrictions. Low-income communities are disproportionately affected by the harmful effects of synthetic indigo production. About 87 percent of synthetic production today is "located in low-wage and lower-income countries," which means workers and local inhabitants are exposed to toxic environments, and workers receive little to no pay.⁴⁶ Although it would be hoped that poor treatment of people in the name of indigo profits would be an issue of the past, unethical practices impacting workers, consumers, and communities remain.



⋮ Present day denim factory in Bangladesh



South Carolina Today: A Return to Non-Synthetic Dyes

Julie Dash's 1991 film, *Daughters of the Dust*, uses indigo to reveal the lasting impact of slavery in twentieth-century South Carolina. In the film, Dash uses the indigo-stained hands of formerly enslaved people as a symbol of bodily subjection and generational trauma, the same issues that Mitra had focused on in *Nil Darpan* over one hundred years ago. In Dash's film, the Peazant family lives on Igbo Landing, where their enslaved ancestors were forced to work on indigo plantations. Though the family is no longer enslaved, the stained hands of the eldest generation serve as a reminder of a painful past. In her commentary on the film, Tiffany Lethabo King quotes Gullah expert Margaret Washington Creel to note that although indigo stains are not permanent, indigo left indelible "scars" in the psyche.⁴⁷ Yet while indigo stains here represent trauma, they simultaneously illustrate the durability of the family's Gullah culture and language. King considers the image of "porous indigo-stained hands" in the film as a manifestation of what she calls "black fungibility": a way of conceptualizing "Blackness as an open state of possibility with the capacity to transform conditions of subjection."⁴⁸ As such, the deep blue of indigo, which also dyes the Peazant women's clothing and floods beautiful shots of the landing's ocean scenery, becomes a stand-in for the family's boundlessness, resiliency, and inter-generational bond.



⋮ On the set of *Daughters of the Dust*



Today, natural indigo dye is starting to reemerge in South Carolina's Lowcountry despite the global dominance of harmful chemical dyes (with England's turn to India for indigo and the modern popularity of synthetic dyes, indigo production largely disappeared from South Carolina in the nineteenth century). Some farmers and textile artists, however, have recently returned to the centuries-old methods of processing indigo dye in efforts to move away from environmentally harmful petroleum-based dyes. For example, on a half-acre plot in Adams Run, farmer and entrepreneur Sheena Myers continues her family's tradition of harvesting indigo. For Myers, the plant's revival provides both an eco-friendly alternative to chemical dyes and a way to get local communities "back to the land."⁴⁹ Indigo's potential to build community and restore connection to the land is also important to Leigh "Madame" Magar, who offers workshops and dye classes on a former indigo plantation on Johns Island near Charleston.⁵⁰ Magar is a textile artist whose "seed to stitch" vision explores the "rich yet tangled past" of the plant.⁵¹ Through her work with indigo, she aims to "face the pain of South Carolina," noting that she "can't continue to work with it and deny that pain, especially as a white woman."⁵² Thanks to farmers, educators, and artists like Myers and Magar (others include [Arianne King Comer](#), [Caroline Harper](#), and [Leanne Coulter and Rhonda Davis](#)), today's indigo production and use in South Carolina have become means of reconnecting with the past and honoring the enslaved laborers who were essential to the crop's success in the eighteenth century.⁵³



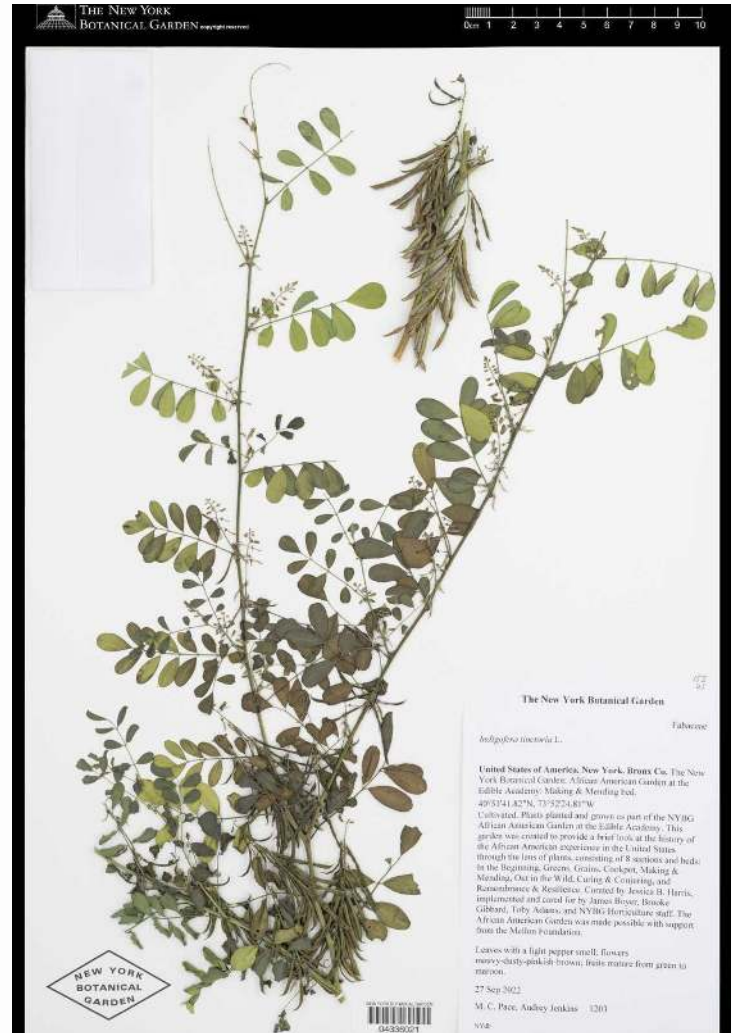
⋮ Indigo textile art



"Making and Mending" Indigo: The New York Botanical Garden and

SOMArts

Two recent creative projects highlight the importance of bringing overlooked perspectives on indigo to the fore. In 2022, the New York Botanical Garden (NYBG) planted a new African American Garden at its Edible Academy. Historically, institutes that have upheld and practiced colonial botany, including the NYBG, have initiated projects like the African American Garden to address past inequities.⁵⁴ This garden was created to highlight plants that were and continue to be integral to the African American experience. Two varieties of indigo, one that comes from Ossabaw Island in Georgia, were included in a plot called “Making & Mending,” referring to the usefulness of certain plants, including indigo.⁵⁵ In 2023, the African American Garden re-opened with a focus on “The Caribbean Experience.” Indigo was once again included in this iteration, in a plot entitled “Creativity/Creatividad/Kreyativite,” highlighting the linguistic diversity of the Caribbean.⁵⁶ When discussing the significance of the exhibition in relation to the legacy of slavery in the Caribbean, poet Dante Micheaux wrote, “The contribution of Caribbean peoples to the survival of the African Diaspora cannot be overstated and is the example of liberty and self-determination — the demonstration that Black people could dismantle the global power of morally bankrupt enslavers and build a nation in the colonized world.”⁵⁷ This quote highlights indigo’s creative possibilities and its potential for reclamation from the legacy of slavery through artistic pursuits and projects.



NYBG Indigo Specimen



Botanical projects are not the only way to mend and reclaim the history of indigo. In 2022, the SOMArts Cultural Center in San Francisco opened the exhibition “[The Indigo Project](#),” created by priestess Bushmama Africa and artist Isha Rosemond. Displaying textiles, photographs, dolls, and other types of art, the exhibit aimed to highlight the connection between Black culture and the production of indigo-based art. The exhibition pointed to, in Africa’s words, “Africa before colonization,” in which “all the dynasties wore indigo and they had their own print that signified each dynasty.”⁵⁸ Certainly, the

location of the exhibit in the Americas and its emphasis on precolonial Africa made a connection between the two inevitable and reminded viewers of indigo’s significance to the history of enslavement in America. By locating indigo-based art across two continents with an interconnected history and legacy of slavery, “The Indigo Project” sought to highlight the similarities and the differences between the two: indigo in Africa as distinct from America in the precolonial era and indigo in America as indebted to African artistic traditions.



⋮ African indigo-dyed cotton



Bringing Beauty to the Forefront

Indigo requires attentive care to create a successful dye, and objects coated in it must meet the air before the remarkable blue slowly begins to appear. Similarly, the history of indigo covers a wide geographic and cultural landscape, forming a sweeping narrative that can only unfold through careful attention. Only once a nuanced and complex story is told can the true beauty of indigo be revealed, one that surpasses the monetary value placed upon indigo by colonialism and reclaims stories of Indigenous tradition and peaceful revolution through art and community. Though the dark history of indigo may have faded into the background over time, just as it did in Vermeer’s *Girl*

with a Pearl Earring, it still has important lessons to teach us. While its history contains a grim warning of the destructive nature of greed, it also shows the beauty plant life supplies when these resources are used artistically and without exploitation.



⋮ Indigo Dye



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