



Axel Becker indigo blue dyer

TEXT: TINA IGNELL PHOTO: BENGT ARNE IGNELL

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– That went well. Very well.

WHEN I CONTACTED BECKER, the blue-print dyer at Old Helset Farm, to make the appointment to visit his workshop and see some indigo dyeing, he made it clear that it might very possibly not work. An indigo bath has a life of its own and one lot of dyeing is never like another. But we were very welcome, provided we just took things as they came.

The end of October, which it was, perhaps was a bit late for indigo dyeing. Becker stops dyeing in October, as a rule, and takes a break up to May.

The trip over to the peninsula where Becker and his wife, Ingrid, live took half an hour on the car ferry from Trondheim. The landscape around us was amazing. The fjord, which we later learned is over 600 metres deep, splashed its cold grey-blue water tenderly over the prow of the ferry. The mountains framing the scene reflected the blue-lilac light of the sky. It was just after two and there were only a few hours before dusk, bringing on the blue hour.

” *An indigo dyebath is alive. Each bath is an organism of its own, affected by temperature, air pressure, the phase of the moon and chemical composition.*”

THE FARM WHERE BECKER RUNS his enterprise dates back to the 18th century and was previously a sheep farm. It had stood empty a long time, and fallen into decay. Becker, who had worked in the museum world and knew something about houses, saw it and was smitten. Many hours of work, massive interest and plenty of expertise have all been sunk into the property over the seventeen years that Becker and his wife have lived here, lovingly renovating one building after another on the farm. The grass is now back on the roofs and the houses have been adapted for craft practice and three children, who have now grown up and moved on.

A BLUE SIGN ON THE DOOR of the workshop announces “feeling blue”. We go in. The white lime-washed walls are hung with lengths of resist printed cloths in every shade of indigo, from the light turquoise green to the saturated dark bluey-red. The same bath but with different amounts of dipping.

By then it was three and the best time for taking the photos, so there was no time to lose. Becker opened the door into the dyehouse and we stepped onto the blue painted floor. The lid on the dyebath was lifted off. Becker had earlier in the day stirred the bath and checked it looked alright. The flower on the surface was removed with a few light movements. Then he sniffed it.

– This one might be good. It smells like it will.

He dipped his finger in and showed that under the flower the bath was clear, moving towards green. A litmus paper test established this was a strong basic bath.

For this bath he had used a mixture of synthetic and Indian



Top from the left, dried indigo. Block used for the fabric we saw being dipped (see overleaf).
Below left Indigo bath before lifting the flower. With the flower off, Becker shows how clear the liquid is.
Right The paste is dissolved in a weak acid bath, revealing the pattern.

indigo. On his trip to India (read more in the article following) he had been able to buy genuine, new Indian indigo. This he uses solely to renew the bath.

WITH THE HELP OF AN ELECTRICALLY POWERED WINCH, similar to those used by dyers in Europe, the wound fabrics were slowly lowered into the dyebath. The cloth on the inside had already been dipped and would now have another dip. The outermost length was white. The resist printed design is applied in white, on white. After the first dips the white markings start gleaming. With a few more dips they also turn blue and become the same shade as the fabric. The design hides and only when the paste is removed later does the pattern come out.

The apparatus with the fabric was submerged in the bath for half an hour. Only after would we know if this had been a good dyeing day.

BECKER'S INTEREST IN INDIGO DYEING began after he had seen some wonderful indigo blue-prints from Japan, which is where his sister-in-law comes from. That was in the early 1990s. He trained as an illustrator and teacher with a textile specialism. His work involved silkscreen printing; both the dyes and the chemicals were not that environmentally friendly. The natural process of indigo dyeing presented him with an alternative, and he made contact with Gösta Sandberg, the Swedish doyen in this area.

– He has been one of my main teachers when it comes to dyeing. The recipe in his book is perfect, and can be confidently followed for a good vat, said Becker.

The first dyebath he made was in a 4.5 metre deep container holding 6000 litres. It proved to be far too big and unwieldy. The bath in the dye room on the farm is ca 1.5 metres deep and he can dip fabrics up to 75 cm wide.

Resist dyeing with block prints came about with its own story.

About the same time as he got into indigo dyeing, he found over 2000 printing blocks stashed away and forgotten in one of the old buildings in Trøndelags Folk Museum.

– It transpired that during the 18th and 19th centuries dyeing and printing workshops were quite widespread in these parts. Though nothing remains of them today. Not one little fragment of fabric, he said.

Many of these blocks were used to print dye onto cloth, as block prints, but some were clearly used for resist prints. More than 200 blocks have the white paste residue showing on their bases.

The blocks now in Becker's workshop have been made afresh, based on the old ones. Finding a blockmaker to do them was a real challenge and one of those bits of the puzzle that made what we saw in front of us even more astounding. After much hunting, Becker finally found a man who could make these often incredibly detailed blocks. He lives outside Erfurt in former East Germany. Becker showed several examples of this man's skill. When the designs get too fine to be carved in wood, he uses really fine bits of brass; small, precise round dots would be impossible to make accurately in wood. The finest block he has made to date holds 8,000 bits of brass.

FOR THE FIRST FOUR YEARS, Becker only printed traditional patterns to build up the technical know-how and see how things worked. Gradually his own patterns evolved: now he makes new designs.



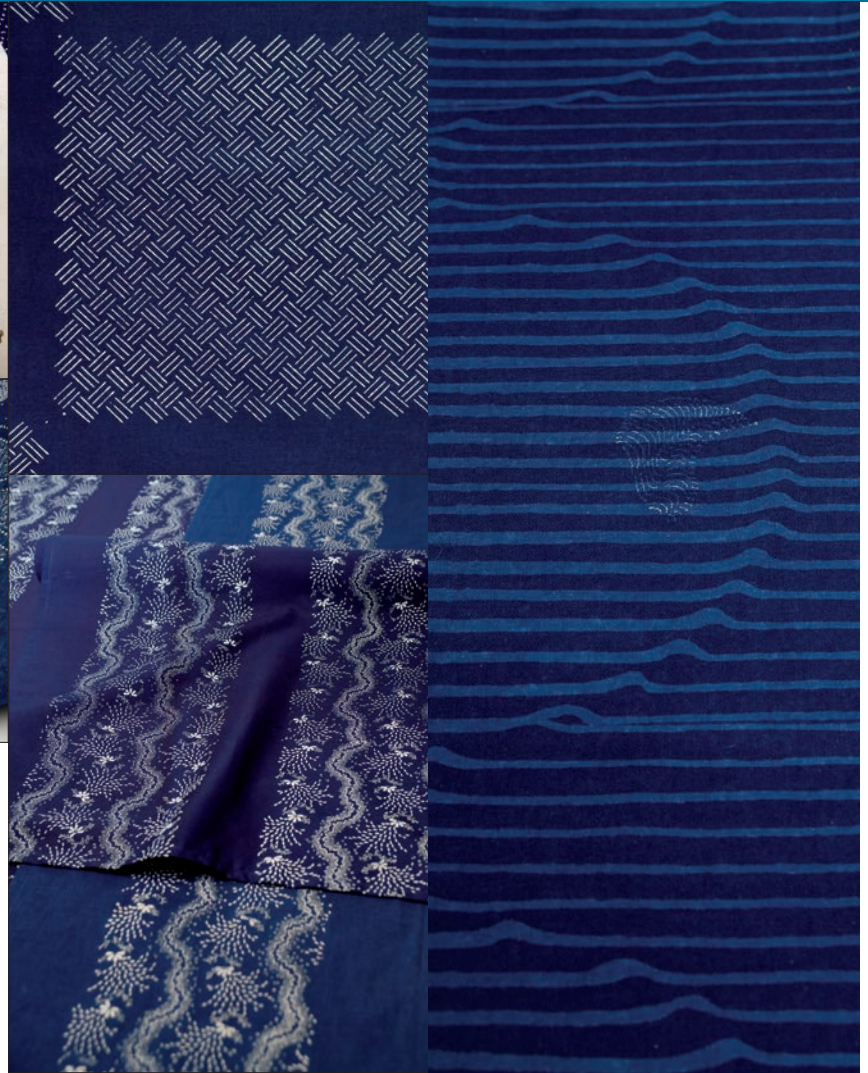


Left Within minutes of lifting out, the cloth starts turning into the characteristic indigo colour.

Bottom left The cloth after another dip.

Above Becker carved some blocks himself in universal type patterns. One big square holds four fields of horizontal and vertical lines. Each of the 4 blocks is like a progressive zoom of the design. To be used separately or together.

Above and right Selected textiles, Becker.



While we were waiting to see the results of the first dip, he demonstrated how he does the printing. The square printing blocks, each weighing around 1 kilo, are 20-22 cm from side to side.

HE HAS A WOODEN DRAWER construction with water in the lower compartment to counterbalance the pressure, and the white “secret” paste spread out in the top compartment. With the utmost control he presses the block against the paste, which attaches. Then he turns and positions himself fully focused before the white cloth. Breathes in. Places the block on the cloth with purposeful pressure and knocks it three times with the side of his fist on the block. Breathes out and lifts it. The white paste is now stuck to the fabric.

– You have to tackle this with the utmost intent, there is only one chance to get it right.

It was a dyer who had worked in East Germany who gave him the recipe for the paste. Initially Becker received an outright “no” when he asked about what it contained and how it was made. But in time, when he had persisted, the dyer saw that Becker’s plans to build up a print workshop were serious and the dyer allowed Becker to share his knowledge. For his part Becker promised never to reveal his recipe unless it actually passed into the hands of a practising professional.

The paste is unique for several reasons. Its particular blend includes a copper oxide, which bleaches the fabric considerably, revealing the pattern more strongly as it shines out of the indigo blue cloth once the paste has been fully removed.

The printed cloths have to rest for three weeks before dyeing commences. Only then has the paste hardened off. Becker has attempted to reduce the drying time, only to have the paste running off in the dyeing process.

WE RETURNED REVERENTLY TO THE DYE ROOM. Our enthusiasm and questions had drawn out the time: what should have been 30 minutes and turned into a good 40. Slowly, the fabrics were raised out of the bath; the magic had begun. The pale green coloured cloth gradually became, with the help of the oxygen in the air, a pretty light blue, deepening in stages while the innermost, previously dyed section of cloth turned an even deeper shade of blue. Axel Becker looked contented.

– That went well. Very well.

Becker described meeting top indigo dyers in Japan and India: although it might be hard to understand each other’s language, they can communicate.

– We could sit by an indigo bath, and with our facial expressions, tasting and sniffing the bath, share the mystery of the dyeing process with each other.

– Because how it actually happens is hard to explain. And maybe we don’t need answers to everything. ■

Axel Becker’s home page: www.axelbecker.info

Indigo from India

TEXT AND PHOTO: AXEL BECKER

SOMEONE TRAVELLING TO INDIA for the first time can get a shock – so stark are the impressions. Smells are strong, the colours indescribably intense and the people beautiful. Body and soul become imprinted with the experiences, which are quite challenging for many Europeans.

At the airport check-in, the SAS employee attending to me did not know where Hyderabad was. Neither did I, prior to receiving the invite to the UNESCO symposium on “Natural Dyes” in India. I had the task of giving a talk to the 600 delegates and demonstrate in workshops what “the remaining indigo dyer in Scandinavia” is doing.

The number of indigo-blue dyers in Europe has diminished. The work is too time-consuming and unprofitable. Yet I can't but be fascinated each time my cotton or linen cloths emerge out of the dyebath.

The smell of indigo, though first and foremost the visual metamorphosis from the yellow-green into a clear indigo blue, so typical of indigo dyeing, stir me deeply. In fact, I get a kind of aesthetic boost – each time. And that deep-deep blue which comes after 12 dips in the bath – that has to be the most beautiful of all to me. The most beautiful of all colours.

Fifteen years ago, when I stopped using chemical fabric dyes as an artist-maker, I decided to only use indigo. And that at some point I would travel to India to learn more about indigo production there.

The UNESCO symposium in Hyderabad was truly fantastic. So many specialists from all over the world in one spot, giving me new momentum, acquaintances and contacts. But the most important one for me was a Spaniard called “Jesus”, who lives outside Auroville in the south east of India. He has a small indigo dyeworks and a factory manufacturing cotton garments. Auroville, one of the world's oldest eco-villages, is 5 hours by bus south of Hyderabad: I could have written reams about it and the bus journey. You arrive in Tamil Nadu, an area where some of the world's best indigo is produced. This region has a warm and humid climate, perfect for indigo cultivation.

Jesus had organized a visit to one of the largest indigo producers in the area, K.M.A. Exports. The driver for Mr. M Anbalagan, the proprietor, took me to the production site on a hot November morning. Tamil Nadu has a long history of indigo production. Several big black-blue vats for the indigo solids and dilapidated buildings bear witness to this as well as to the type of low-tech production here.

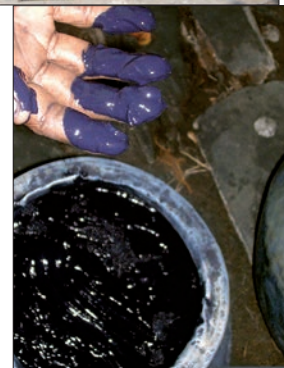
There were 3 big pools, like tanks, and ca 4 men standing in each of them. They were up to their knees in the indigo water. The plant matter had been removed and the men, gripping the side of the tank, had now started to kick backwards with one leg in time with each other. Just as people used to kick back home on a kick-sled in winter. After standing there and kicking for about an hour, there was a 20 cm thick layer of flower on top of the bath.



Top The men kick splashing the bath for two hours to bring the indigo solids down to the bottom.

Right Small cakes of indigo lying out to dry.

Below Indigo prepared as a thick mass, ready for use.



To begin with, I ran around taking loads of photos. It was incredible to be experiencing this. And the men went on kicking. After 2 hours the flower had altered in texture and appearance. The men by that time were completely finished.

Labour is almost free in India, and whether you accept it or not, many employers take advantage of this. Why use machines when there are enough people to get the job done cheaper? This phenomenon is pretty tough for a spoilt northern European to behold after a while. I was very strongly affected within, seeing people so utterly worn out. So there is a kind of paradoxical experience in seeing how indigo is produced: it is fantastic and fascinating, but at the same time somewhat disquieting with the men so worn out after several hours. Frequently the oldest and most experienced worker determines when the process is complete. This person gives the signal to stop – only he knows when the indigo bath is ready, once the flower has spread over the surface and the thin layer has settled at the bottom of the tank. The bluey green water is carefully drained and the tank emptied.

The approximately 2 cm thin layer of indigo mass left on the bottom is now scraped off and transported to a room where the water is pressed out. The result is similar to a big brownie bake, which is then divided up into smaller brownies. Thousands of them lie out to dry on the roof of the workshop. It is in that small cake form that the high quality Tamil Nadu indigo is sold.

Contra to all business codes, I bought several kilos of indigo right there for cash. Several weeks after returning home, I did actually take delivery of several boxes of the world's best indigo. On opening the first box, the typical smell enveloped me and I just had to get going. I was to be making a new, strong indigo stock the day after, at full moon, as all proper indigo dyers do, but this time it was with genuine, natural *Indigofera Tinctoria* from Tamil Nadu. ■