

Dynamics of natural dyeing in fashion. Two cases

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to juxtapose and analyse two cases of using natural dyeing in contemporary fashion and hereby contribute to the research on nature and environment related 'low tech', slow fashion. The study high-lights two different strategies and designers in two specific contexts, that of labels Alice Fine (Sweden) and Tezomeya (Japan), both using natural dyeing.

The significance of using colours derived from plants, animals and naturally occurring mordants and modifiers for fabric dyeing cannot be overestimated. Localism and global trade is at the core of this practice. Use of natural dyes is confirmed in archeological finds going back to around 6200 years ago (indigo-dyed fabric scraps, Huaca Prieta, Peru), continuing up until the 1850s when chemist Mr William Perkin accidentally produced purple dye derived from coal tar. This was the start of what can be called the colour revolution, the paradigm of synthetic dyes we still experience very much and that affects health and our environment globally.

May contemporary natural dyeing be a new paradigm or is it a return to the old? How does these designers relate to the issues of continuation and innovation as well as sustainability? Natural dyeing has strong roots in both Sweden and Japan, if and how does these two cases relate to the roots? This paper high-lights products from the labels Alice Fine and Tezomeya demonstrating their different points of departure and challenges. Both labels use time consuming techniques and a craftsmanship- and small-scale production-based design strategy.

The methodology I use is examining the objects (objects-based) and interviewing the designers in Stockholm (2018) and Kyoto (2017). My starting point is both relating to contemporary environmental issues and cultural history-based research but also personal, as I am educated in natural dyeing myself.

Swedish label Alice Fine creates unique handcrafted exclusive pieces of ready to wear silk garments in the shape of kimonos dyed with local food and flower waste and components such as rust.

Japanese label Tezomeya creates unpretentious, 'normal'-looking (Western style) basic cotton garments using local and imported dye-stuffs and offers to re-dye them for free as natural dyes fade over time.

To conclude, natural dyeing today offers possible design strategies for small-scale production for both standardized and unique garments.

This study aims to contribute to research on contemporary fashion using technology from nature via the human hand.

Keywords: Natural dyeing, design, environment, craftsmanship

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