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## The Colour of Women's Culture: Natural Dyeing as Self-Expression in America, Japan, Norway and Australia

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**The Colour of Women's Culture: Natural Dyeing as Self-Expression  
in America, Japan, Norway and Australia**

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**Figure 1. THE 'CANADA' NATURAL DYE CONNECTION**

*Front row, left to right: Mette Biering (Norway), Karen Diadick Casselman (Canada), Di MacPherson (Tasmania);  
back row, Takako Terada, and Sara J. Kadolph. Photo credit: Chris Cowles, Tasmania.*

Natural dyes are currently undergoing a revival in craft and academic circles. The resurgence of attention is due to several factors. One is the popularity of natural dyes among European textile historians, dye chemists, and archaeologists, all of whom rely on natural dyes as an academic and educational tool.<sup>1</sup> Scholars worldwide have developed a rigorous cultural context for natural dyes that embraces disparate fields such as clothing and textiles, religion and philosophy, nineteenth-century medicine, and as curious as it may seem, eighth-century Irish law.<sup>2</sup> Other prominent themes in natural dyeing today are contemporary aspects of gender, ecology, and ethics. Art history and aesthetics are also timely issues in academic circles; it is not uncommon for masters' theses and doctoral dissertations to feature natural dyes as the central theme. Moreover, natural dyes appear to have surmounted (and *survived*) the art/craft debate as the

<sup>1</sup> One example is the publication, *Dyes in History and Archaeology* (London: Archetype) which is also a conference held yearly in various European countries (DHA 2007, Austria; DHA 2008, Turkey; DHA 2009, Poland).

<sup>2</sup> These are investigated in K.D. Casselman, 'Praxis and Paradox', *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture* (Vol. 7/1, 2009; in press).

creation of colour from plants, animals, and other organisms is more widely referenced now in general history, material culture, fashion and clothing, consumerism, cultural tourism, and also in women's studies.<sup>3</sup> The four women whose work is presented as part of this organized session reflect, both individually and collectively, many of these aspects of natural dyeing. They are also visual artists, farmers, professors, writers, marketers, entrepreneurs, designers, and business managers. Yet it is colour that unites them: all practise natural dyeing and all share a passion for making colour with their own two hands. It has also been my privilege to have 'taught' each of them; I use the emphasis because this process has been a two-way exchange where I learned as much as I gave. Moreover, their work has reached an international audience which speaks to the validity of natural dyes as a career choice for women in art, craft, cultural history, gender studies, and education.

Aside from a one-day workshop in the 1970s, I had no one to teach me how to make natural dyes. As an autodidactic student, I took another path; one by one, I located the leading practitioners of natural dyeing in Canada, the USA, Britain, Scandinavia, and Australia. I wrote letters. Some wanted to meet, so I applied for grants in Canada and I also received funding from my home province of Nova Scotia. Then, after the publication of *Craft of the Dyer* in 1980 (the so-called second revival of craft dyeing), it was my time to pursue professional natural dyeing as a life choice.<sup>4</sup> My first task was to learn from the 'masters' whatever they were prepared to share, and then, to make certain their assistance was acknowledged and their contribution celebrated. A case in point was Eileen Bolton who died three weeks before I reached north-central Wales.<sup>5</sup> Yet I have fond memories of all that I learned from Rita Adrosko, Fred Gerber, Jim Liles, Winifred Shand, and Gösta Sandberg.<sup>6</sup> There was also a memorable visit with Mary Frances Davidson, and closer to home, frequent long visits with Dorothy Burnham. I also corresponded with two illustrious British dyers, Violetha Thurston, and Elsie Davenport.<sup>7</sup> There was one visit with Seonaid Robertson, and I was invited later to consult on a book by Jenny Dean.<sup>8</sup>

By the mid-1990s, all of this writing and teaching had to be accommodated within a rigorous academic schedule undertaken at an age when some people retire. In hindsight I am glad I persisted attending conferences and accepting offers to teach abroad, for otherwise, I would not have had the opportunity to meet the four women whose work is the *raison d'être* for this organized session. One person is the key to all of it. Laurann Gilbertson is Textiles Curator at Vesterheim Norwegian American Museum in Decorah, Iowa, which is where we first met. In 1996 Laurann invited me to examine some Norwegian coverlets and give an opinion on the dyes used, and during that visit, she also spoke enthusiastically of her masters' thesis supervisor,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> 1st.ed. Toronto; 2nd. Edition, New York, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> E. Bolton, *Lichens for Vegetable Dyeing* (London: 1960); 2<sup>nd</sup>. Edition, Julia Bolton Holloway and K. D. Casselman, Eds, McMinnville, Or: 1991; 'Searching for Eileen Bolton', *Journal Weavers, Spinners and Dyers*, Issue 162, June, 1992, pp. 21-24; 'Tribute: Eileen Bolton 1903-1981', *Heddle*, 8/3, 1992, pp. 7-10. [Both articles were accompanied by colour covers of Bolton's dye work.]

<sup>6</sup> Their contributions are discussed in my master's thesis, *Lichen Dyes and Dyeing: an Annotated Bibliography* (Halifax, Canada: St. Mary's University, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Robertson, *Dyes from Plants* (New York: 1973); Dean, *Wild Colour* (London: 1999).

Dr. Sara Kadolph. A few years later, Sara accompanied Laurann to a natural dye seminar I taught annually, throughout the 1990s, at the Humboldt Field Research Institute in Maine. It was there Sara first identified the need: an international conference on natural dyes was the best way to gather together practitioners and specialists from every discipline. Under her guidance, 'Colour Congress 2002' drew participants from twenty-four countries.<sup>9</sup> Di MacPherson and Takako Terada also attended this event.

It was not the first time Di and I had met. She was in my TAFTA workshop at Geelong, Australia, in 2000, and we stayed in touch. We met again through the next few years at natural dye events in Japan and India, and Di also came to Nova Scotia on a visit. We began to discuss collaborative dyeing: that is, creating art pieces both of us would work on. We purchased metres of fabric in Nova Scotia, for our first efforts. We next worked on these pieces together in Okinawa, where, on the floor of a small hotel room, our newly-acquired Japanese natural dye techniques were put to use. Earlier, however, Di had attended 'Colour Congress 2002' and to this day she sees that event (and the contacts she made there) as seminal in her career. CC2002 was also an opportunity for Di to meet Sara, and Takako.

Takako and I became friends via the European event known as 'DHA'.<sup>10</sup> At DHA Bern, in 2003, tragedy struck when I learned that my husband of forty years was killed in a car accident back home in Nova Scotia. The next year Takako came to visit me, and we began to merge our mutual interests in purple dyes. Takako has developed innovative techniques for murex (a shellfish dye), and I have worked on ethical and non-exploitive lichen dyes that require no mordants and very little water. We decided to work on a paper together, and presented our findings at DHA meetings where the audience is extremely rigorous, the peer review process, fairly challenging.<sup>11</sup> Takako came back to Nova Scotia after her 2004 visit to teach a dye workshop for me at NSCAD University where I was a summer faculty member. Via the 'Vesterheim connection', the two of us were also invited to Norway in August 2007 where she demonstrated murex and I worked with students on lichen dyeing. The Norway event also enabled Takako to meet Mette, who attended the event.

Mette Biering gave a presentation at the Norway dye workshop and I was stunned (and delighted) to discover that we shared a common link. *Korkje*, a Norwegian dye I had studied for my masters' thesis, was once produced in Farsund, in southwest Norway.<sup>12</sup> The family involved in this manufacture circa 1780 was 'Lund'. Mette, according to her presentation, was the direct descendant of Jochaim Lund, the dye entrepreneur. 'Who *knew*?' took on a new meaning for me that night in Norway.

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<sup>9</sup> Iowa State University, Ames; see also: S. J. Kadolph and L. Gilbertson, eds., 'Colour Congress Proceedings'; ISU, Vesterheim, and the Nova Scotia Museum.

<sup>10</sup> 'Dyes in History and Archaeology' is the annual conference and also the journal, *Dyes in History and Archaeology*. For DHA 2009 in Poland, contact [kasia@unf.poznan.pl](mailto:kasia@unf.poznan.pl).

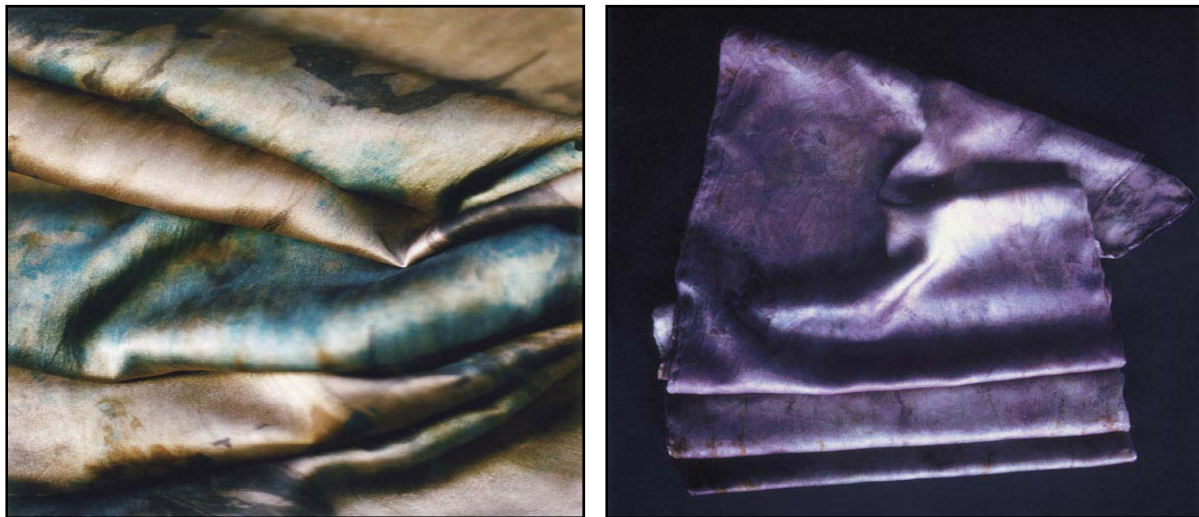
<sup>11</sup> 'Murex and orchil studies: Part 1 (DHA Vienna 2007); Part 2 (DHA Istanbul 2008).

<sup>12</sup> See note 6, above. See also: 'Scandinavian dye studies, Part 1 & 2'; *Ontario Handweavers & Spinners Bulletin*, 36/2, 1993, pp. 10-13; 36/3, 1993, pp. 5-8. See also: 'Norwegian korkje', *Norwegian Textile Letter*, 5/2, 1999, pp. 1-7.

My entire life in natural dyeing has been about such coincidences and while it is tempting to credit serendipity for what has happened, hard work and determination, as well as helpful librarians, botanists, and curators around the world, have also been key factors. My delight is in seeing the inspired work of these four talented women brought to this particular audience because natural dye research overlaps many other topics in textile history as well as in other disciplines. This is the right time to locate natural dye praxis within a wider context where others can see the ramifications and the implications for their *own* textile interests.

Each of these four women has pursued a unique and innovative form of praxis. This is important in historical terms for women have long been marginalized in craft history if and when their chosen form of textile work involved a focus on natural dyes.<sup>13</sup>

Their work does not overlap, nor do their lives, but all have a respect for the contribution of the others. I am privileged to play a small role in the fascinating trajectory of their life's path as natural dyers. Together we continue to expand the parameters and push the limits of this vibrant and compelling category of textile work.



**Figure 2.** *Waterless natural dyes create unique patterns on silk and mordants are not required.  
Dyed by Karen Diadick Casselman*

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<sup>13</sup> 'Women in colour: perceptions of professionalism in natural dyeing during the Arts and Crafts period. /Textile History/ 39/1, May 2008, pp. 16-44. For marginalization during the modern craft period, see 'Paradox and praxis,' (see note 2).