

## Indigo: A Blue to Dye For

**Date :** May 6, 2007

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A major exhibition on Indigo is coming to an end at the Whitworth gallery in Manchester on 15 April 2007 , but then moves to Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery 19 May - 1 September 2007 and then Brighton Museum & Art Gallery and Hove Museum & Art Gallery 29 September 2007 - 6 January 2008. The exhibition seemed to me to be clearly inspired by the classic text on Indigo by Jenny Balfour-Paul and published by the British Museum which I would strongly recommend to anyone with an interest in the topic. Indigo is not just any old dye. Its unique properties that mean it can be fixed to cloth without a mordant has made it perhaps the most significant dye in history ranging from the woad of ancient Europe to a major player in trade routes. This exhibition brings together fine examples of textiles from all over the world. Mostly these are historical but there is a small section on fashion denim and finally a room of contemporary art work based on denim cloth. I confess I am becoming increasingly obsessed by the potential of denim as a topic for material culture studies and I have ambitions to develop an exhibition myself one day based on the wearing and significance of contemporary denim. This would have, however, very little in common with this current display which has other concerns. Firstly aesthetic. As someone not usually given to art exhibitions, I found the materials themselves ravishing and have already decided to go at least once more to feast on the visual display. Secondly there is a commitment to the survival and reconstruction of a craft that was so important historically and in many areas had almost disappeared after the development of industrial substitutes. The exhibition includes 50 minutes of film mainly based on documentaries about such restored local traditions of Indigo production and cloth dyeing in India, West Africa and elsewhere and is well worth watching in its own right. Mostly this is celebratory though there is some mention of the particularly exploitative conditions of South

Asian colonial Indigo production. Unusually this is one exhibition which does not divide between Europe and the rest, since the reliance upon Indigo for blue was as important in ancient Britain and more recently for the likes of William Morris as it was for Japanese or for West African textiles. While it could be associated with elites it has also been seen as the egalitarian dye of Mao suits, and blue jeans. Overall the exhibition is an entrancing and enjoyable way to come to an understanding of one historical material whose significance is still rarely appreciated.