

EXPLORING THE HISTORY OF A COLOUR: **BLUE**

Seen on a cloudless day and experienced in the ocean, this age-old shade can be as dark as night or light as air and still inspire

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'Indigo 372' by Lynn Pollard. Paper dipped into traditional indigo dye vats

*You ain't been blue, no, no, no
You ain't been blue till you've had that mood indigo.*

Duke Ellington, Irving Mills, 1930s

Blue is truly the colour of myth, mystery and, well... the blues. Oceans, lakes, skies and faraway mountains seduce the eyes with their ever-shifting hues of sapphire, indigo, cold greys, azure, jade and turquoise. Yet scoop a handful of water from the sea, or approach those moody mountain ranges, and its blue disappears.

It is perhaps the mysteries and visual tricks played by this colour, so pervasive in the natural world, that have contributed to its great symbolic value and its very dear price. For millennia blue has been among the most expensive pigments an artist could use and the long history of the colour is one of the sacred, royal and fashionable.

The colour of the heavens, and associated with purity and divinity, for centuries blue pigments have been used to colour the glass, tiles, frescoes and paintings decorating mosques and cathedrals.

The most prized and most expensive of the blues is certainly ultramarine, the name translating to 'over the seas' as it had to be transported in its raw state – the semi-precious stone lapis lazuli – from mines in Chile or Afghanistan. Centuries ago the Egyptians produced carved jewels and ornaments from the stone and it was kneaded and ground into a pigment by European colourists who supplied Renaissance artists such as Giotto and Michelangelo.

Due to its rarity and price, ultramarine became the colour associated with the Virgin Mary from the 1200s onwards.

Another ancient pigment is cobalt blue, used to colour glass for stained glass windows in the West and for painting intricate designs onto porcelain in China. The fine blue and white porcelain was exported to Europe and Persia where the colouring and designs were coveted, copied and adapted. Dutch porcelain from Delft was one such offspring and original tiles can still be found on the walls of stately Cape buildings in South Africa.

The indigo sung about in Duke Ellington's 'Mood Indigo' is produced from a dye originally made in India from the plant *Indigofera Tinctoria*. Used in the dyeing of cloth, it was exported worldwide from ancient times and continued to supply the international fashion and arts industries until well into the modern era.

From the 8th century indigo was used by Japanese artisans to create intricate indigo patterns on silk, hemp and cotton using the technique of Shibori dyeing.

Closer to home, isishweshwe cloth was originally produced in indigo and the Eastern Cape firm Da Gama Textiles continues to supply international markets.

It is this dye that was used to colour denim, and blue jeans were patented by Jacob Davis and Levi Strauss in the 1870s. Originally the garb of workers, blue jeans became trendy with teens in the 1950s and the love for the durable blue fabric has never waned. ■