

BLUE

ALCHEMY OF A COLOUR

Artwork labels

Blue: Alchemy of a Colour

Blue: Alchemy of a Colour explores two of the most important blue colourants used worldwide: the mineral pigment cobalt, and botanically derived indigo. Both substances are colourless in their extracted state; it is only through chemically complex processes that their true colours, employed in ceramic and textile traditions across the globe, are revealed.

The wideranging cultural meanings associated with the colour blue are reflected in religious and ceremonial works of art created across the world. In the sixteenth century the visual appeal of the blue-and-white palette intensified the global trade between Asia and Europe resulting in an exchange of designs, materials and technology that found expression in blue-and-white ceramics and textiles.

Cobalt blue ceramics: development and trade

Cobalt has been used to colour glass in the Mediterranean world since Antiquity and to produce blue-glazed stonewares in Babylonia, an area rich in cobalt deposits, from as early as the sixth century BCE. Chinese use of cobalt to produce blue-decorated stonewares began in the Tang dynasty (618–907). The earliest Chinese porcelain decorated with underglaze cobalt blue appears to have been produced specifically for the Persian market using imported Persian cobalt in the early thirteenth century. It became popular in China during the Yuan dynasty (1278–1368), after which large quantities were exported all over Asia and the Middle East.

With the Portuguese establishment of sea routes to Asia in the sixteenth century, Chinese blue-and-white porcelain began to arrive in Europe in great quantities, sparking a craze for the wares. Attempts to imitate these ceramics in earthenware began immediately. The secret of porcelain production would remain unknown in Europe prior to the eighteenth century; however, even with the creation of European porcelain, Chinese-style cobalt decoration continued to be imitated.

PERSIAN

Tile

13th century – 14th century, Kashan, Iran
earthenware, underglaze cobalt blue, lustre glaze

Felton Bequest, 1906

601-D2

Tiles in the shape of stars and hexagons were manufactured in large quantities to decorate interior and exterior surfaces of religious and secular buildings throughout Persia. This example, made during the Il Khanid period, is decorated with metallic lustre glaze. Lustre ware originated in ninth-century Iraq, and spread to Europe via Egypt, Iran and Spain. The fact that the tile's floral decoration and calligraphy recall both Persian textiles and luxury manuscripts suggests that common visual sources were employed by artisans working in different media. The calligraphic border reflects the importance of script in Islamic art, whether used as ornament, as talisman or to communicate the word of God.

CHINESE

Dish

Ming dynasty early 15th century, Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province, China
porcelain, underglaze cobalt blue

Felton Bequest, 1946

558-D4

Ming blue-and-white porcelain of the first half of the fifteenth century shows a perfect balance between ornamental design – here a scrolling floral meander and wave border – and the space it occupies. The uneven, slightly blurred character of the underglaze cobalt decoration is caused by tiny bubbles in the thick glaze that distort the outlines. Wares of this type were avidly sought in the Islamic world; such Ming porcelains inspired the design of ceramics produced at Iznik in Ottoman Anatolia.

CHINESE

Dish

Qing dynasty mid 18th century – late 19th century,
Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province, China
porcelain, underglaze cobalt blue (*bleu de Hue* ware)

Gift of Zorica McCarthy, 2010

2010.350

From the middle of the eighteenth to the end of the nineteenth century, the Vietnamese court and aristocracy commissioned Chinese porcelain wares decorated in Vietnamese designs in underglaze cobalt blue. This style of Chinese porcelain is known as *bleu de Hue* and was produced in varying qualities. This example of *bleu de Hue* ware was probably produced in the late eighteenth century at the secondary porcelain workshops in Jiangxi province. The motif of a scholar at his desk is typical of the subjects taken from Sino-Vietnamese literature, history and geography adorning *bleu de Hue* wares.

PERSIAN

Dish

Seljuk dynasty, late 11th century / early 12th century, Iran
earthenware (*Lakabi* ware)

Felton Bequest, 1950

994-D4

The term *lakabi*, or *laqabi*, from the Persian word *la'ābī* (enamel), is a type of ware produced in Egypt, Syria and Iran on which the decoration is partly incised, the lines of the pattern preventing the coloured glazes, including a cobalt blue, from running into each other. Mainly large plates or dishes survive, and this example depicts an enthroned sovereign or dancer accompanied by two musicians and two animals. It reveals Iranian and Chinese influences, particularly in the long-sleeved robe worn by the main figure – a style also seen in Tang dynasty Chinese ceramic figures of Central Asian dancers.

TURKISH

Plate

late 16th century, Iznik, Turkey
earthenware (*Iznik* ware)

Purchased, 1968

1532-D5

The fifteenth to seventeenth centuries were the heyday of ceramic production at Iznik in North Western Turkey, the chief production centre for ceramic vessels and tiles in the Ottoman Empire. The rise of the Iznik ceramic industry was stimulated by court taste for imported blue-and-white Chinese porcelains; imitations of these vessels in an earthenware body decorated with cobalt oxide blue sourced from Iran represent the earliest phase of Iznik production. The blue-and-white palette was eventually enriched by turquoise blue, purple, a range of greens and a characteristic tomato red. The stylised wave and rock border of this plate derives from Ming ceramic decoration.

VIETNAMESE

Dish

15th century – 16th century, northern Vietnam
stoneware, underglaze cobalt blue

Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria
with the assistance of The Thomas William Lasham Fund, Governor, 1998

1998.241

The earliest kiln-fired, glazed Vietnamese ceramics were produced in North Vietnam around the first century BCE. Vietnam was subject to Chinese rule in the north until 938 and the ceramic traditions of China have greatly influenced Vietnamese ceramics, particularly in the production of cobalt blue underglaze stonewares, as seen in this example. This type of ware, decorated with locally mined cobalt, was traded throughout Southeast Asia in large numbers.

CHINESE

Tripod dish

700–750 CE China

earthenware (*Sancai* ware)

Gift of H. W. Kent, 1938

3689-D3

This Tang dynasty (618–907) three-footed offering plate or dish is decorated with *sancai* (three-colour) lead glazes. The term actually covers a palette that could include more than three colours, and in this example cobalt oxide blue glaze, a mineral pigment introduced into Chinese ceramics at this time, has been added to the standard three colours of brown, cream and green. Cobalt would later be used in blue-and-white underglaze decoration, beginning in the Yuan dynasty. The cobalt blue was probably imported from sources in Iran, reflecting the cosmopolitanism of Tang period China.

ITALY, Florence manufacturer
Giunta di TUGLIO workshop of

Pharmacy jar from Santa Maria Nuova

c. 1430

earthenware (maiolica)

Felton Bequest, 1936

3649-D3

The Italian maiolica (tin-glazed earthenware) industry developed in response to the popularity of ceramics imported from Spain, where a rich ceramic tradition originally developed under Islamic rule. The decoration of this handled jar produced for the pharmacy of the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova in Florence shows the continuing influence of the Hispano-Moresque pottery tradition. The underglaze blue decoration of oak leaves and rampant hound is executed in cobalt oxide most likely obtained from North Africa or the Eastern Mediterranean, where it would have arrived via overland trade routes from Iran.

CHINESE

Pouring bowl

Yi 也

14th century, Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province, China
porcelain, underglaze cobalt blue

Felton Bequest, 1962

429-D5

The earliest Chinese blue-and-white porcelains known are temple vases inscribed 1351. These display a competence indicating that the underglaze-painting technique was well established by that time, probably originating in the second quarter of the fourteenth century. Cobalt ore (named *Huihui qing*, 回回青, 'Islamic blue') was imported from Iran and ground into a pigment which was painted directly onto the porcelain body. The piece was then glazed and fired. Blue-and-white wares such as this pouring bowl appealed to the Mongol Yuan rulers and were used in temples and occasionally in burials within China. Large quantities were exported to Western Asia.

CHINESE

Vase

Ming Dynasty, Hongzhi period (c. 1500) Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province, China

porcelain, underglaze cobalt blue

Gift of J. T. Hackett, 1924

2600-D3

This vase from the mid Ming period, with Chinese-sourced cobalt underglaze blue-and-white decoration, is a classic early Ming form (*meiping*, or plum vase). A tendency to conservatism in the Chinese ceramic industries frequently saw earlier styles reproduced in later reigns. Financial difficulties had led the Hongzhi Emperor to order the cessation of official production of porcelain at the imperial kilns in Jingdezhen. This vase is a rare example of the sporadic production from this reign. The figure of a robed scholar with attendant in a cloud-wrapped landscape encircling the body of the vase is a composition which found great favour among Western copyists.

THE NETHERLANDS, Delft manufacturer

Jar

1660–80

earthenware, underglaze cobalt blue

Felton Bequest, 1939

4550-D3

The decoration of this blue-and-white delftware jar is inspired by mid-seventeenth century Chinese porcelain. A rolling landscape inhabited by robed figures is broken on either side by rocky crags, with areas left white to represent mist. The decoration is not, however, a direct copy of a Chinese original; the Dutch artist has absorbed the Chinese style and produced an original, European composition. The relationship between the Dutch ceramic and any Asian prototype is further complicated by the fact that many of these Dutch earthenware imitations of Chinese-style blue-and-white porcelain are not based directly on Chinese models, but on Japanese copies of Chinese porcelains.

JAPANESE

Jar

Tsubo 壺

18th century, Japan

porcelain, underglaze cobalt blue (*Imari* ware)

Felton Bequest, 1968

1537-D5

Porcelain was first produced in Japan in the early seventeenth century at kilns in the vicinity of Arita on Kyushu island. Underglaze blue wares such as this jar were made initially, the decorations of which combined elements of various Chinese wares previously imported to Japan. Japanese blue-and-white wares soon developed a distinctive style characterised by freely painted forms, graded ink washes and open spaces in the composition. They were exported to Europe in large numbers from 1657, following the collapse of the Ming dynasty and the disruption to the production of porcelain at the imperial kilns at Jingdezhen.

KOREAN

Dragon jar

Joseon dynasty 18th century, Korea
porcelain, underglaze cobalt blue

Purchased, NGV Foundation, NGV Supporters of Asian Art
and the Lillian Ernestine Lobb Bequest, 2007

2007.540

Porcelain jars decorated with dragons painted in cobalt blue were popular in Korea from the seventeenth to nineteenth century. Many were used as flower vases in official court ceremonies. Korea only had access to inferior cobalt sources and was forced to import the mineral from China, making it very costly. It has been suggested that this contributed to the very spare use of cobalt blue decoration typical of Joseon dynasty porcelain.

CHINESE

Formal court robe

Chaofu or *Chaopao*

mid 19th century, China

silk, fur, silk and metallic thread, gilt; slit tapestry weave
(*kesi*)

Bequest of Dr G.E. Morrison, 1921

2037-D3

In China the word *qing* is used to denote green, blue, black and shades in between these colours. As one of the five basic colours used to visualise world order (red, white, blue/green, yellow and black), blue is associated with a compass direction (east), a season (spring), an element (wood) and a constellation (green dragon), and is associated in general with plants, springtime, youth and immortality. The emperor wore a blue court garment at annual ceremonies associated with the heavens and crops, and indigo blue was the most common ground colour of Manchu clothing during the Qing dynasty (1644–1912).

WORCESTER PORCELAIN, Worcester manufacturer English c. 1751–1862

Plate

c. 1770

porcelain (soft-paste), underglaze cobalt blue

Felton Bequest, 1938

3800D-D3

The dragon motif adorning this English plate derives from a Chinese original intended for the domestic market, where the dragon was an imperial emblem. This pattern was produced over a surprisingly long period at the Worcester factory, and versions were also produced at a number of other English factories. Executed in cobalt blue imported from Saxony, the high degree of stylisation of the dragon suggests that the painter is no longer able to distinguish individual elements of the design: the eyes seem confused with nostrils and the cloud motifs in the background have morphed into strange earlike appendages.

CHINESE

Tea bowl

Qing dynasty, Daoguang period 1821–1850 Jingdezhen,
Jiangxi province, China
porcelain, underglaze cobalt blue

Bequest of Dr G. E. Morrison, 1921

2051-D3

The five-clawed dragon was a motif associated with the Chinese emperor. By the Qing dynasty, robes embroidered with the five-clawed dragon became an important part of the emperor's regalia. Because of its auspicious associations, the dragon frequently appeared on objects intended for use at the imperial court. By the sixteenth century, dragons were freely used as motifs on objects intended for public consumption, provided the dragon had only four claws – the five-clawed version was reserved for court use. The dragons on the exterior of this tea bowl sport with a flaming pearl, a Buddhist emblem of wisdom.

DE GRIEKSCHE A POTTERY (ADRIAEN KOCX) – THE GREEK A POTTERY, Delft manufacturer Dutch 1687–1701

Pyramidal flower vase

c. 1690

earthenware (tin-glazed), underglaze cobalt blue

Purchased, NGV Women's Association, 2014

2014.288.a-g

The great demand for Chinese porcelain in seventeenth-century Europe saw a ceramic industry rise in the Dutch city of Delft dedicated to producing imitations of these wares in white, tin-glazed earthenware decorated with underglaze cobalt blue imported from Saxony. At first these ceramics, known as Delftware, imitated Chinese imports closely, but gradually the Dutch artists began to modify and embellish Chinese designs, often adding European elements, resulting in objects reflecting Western fantasies about China. This flower vase combining Chinese-inspired motifs with European Baroque imagery represents one of the most extravagant ornamental forms produced in delftware.

Ceramics and textiles: patterns of exchange

At the same time that true indigo was introduced in Europe from India in the sixteenth century, Chinese blue-and-white porcelain was also beginning to arrive there in significant quantities. The craze for Chinese porcelain saw the striking blue-and-white colour palette become the height of European fashion.

Blue and white were used to decorate furniture, earthenware ceramics, wallpapers and, with the help of indigo dyes, textiles. Chinese porcelain also provided Europeans with an entirely new visual vocabulary of patterns, motifs and compositional principles, and these very quickly migrated from ceramics to influence the decoration of artworks executed in other media, including textiles. The two colourants cobalt and indigo undoubtedly reinforced each other's popularity.

BAKHTA

Indian active c. 1760 – c. 1810

Maharana Ari Singh II in *darbar*

1765 Udaipur, Rajasthan, India

opaque watercolour and gold paint on paper

Felton Bequest, 1980

AS183-1980

This painting of a meeting, or *darbar*, in the Udaipur palace shows blue-and-white tiles on the wall behind the Maharana. They appear to be Dutch tiles made at Delft, although the artist has taken liberties with the designs and depicted Hindu deities and Indian scenes among recognisably Dutch motifs. The tiles probably reached Udaipur in the early eighteenth century with a Dutch embassy en route to the Mughal court, or were shipped from Surat, where the Dutch had a trading post until 1744. Small areas of blue-and-white Chinese and Dutch tiles remain in situ in the palace.

INDIAN

A prince smoking on a terrace

18th century, Rajasthan, India

opaque watercolour and gold paint on paper

Felton Bequest, 1980

AS59-1980

The luxury goods shown here, displayed on the terrace before the reclining Mughal prince include gold vessels embellished with gems alongside blue-and-white porcelain wares. The ceramics feature various forms, such as covered jars, lobed bowls, cups and saucers and dishes decorated in finely drawn floral designs. While the forms and designs appear Chinese, by the eighteenth century the Mughal court and allied Rajput kingdoms in India were receiving ceramics in this style from Persia and Europe, as well from China, in exchange for Indian textiles, spices, indigo and opium. Similar eighteenth-century Chinese porcelain wares are displayed below.

THE NETHERLANDS, Delft manufacturer

Tile

mid 18th century – late 18th century
earthenware, underglaze cobalt blue

Gift of Mrs D. Cockburn, 1972

D31-1972

THE NETHERLANDS, Delft manufacturer

Tile

18th century

earthenware, underglaze cobalt blue

Gift of Mrs D. Cockburn, 1972

D147-1972

THE NETHERLANDS, Delft manufacturer

Tile

18th century

earthenware, underglaze cobalt blue

Gift of Mrs Dorothy Kelly, 1984

D9-1984

Tiles like these, with their thick white tin glaze decorated in cobalt blue, were one of the most ubiquitous products of the Delft potteries throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They were used in Dutch interiors to decorate fireplaces and walls, especially in kitchens, where they provided an easily cleaned ornamental surface. The tiles were also exported in large numbers, both throughout Europe and across the globe, via the Dutch maritime empire.

THE NETHERLANDS, Delft manufacturer

Tile

18th century

earthenware, underglaze cobalt blue

Gift of Mr J. Ebeli, 1963

501F-D5

THE NETHERLANDS, Delft manufacturer

Tile

18th century

earthenware, underglaze cobalt blue

Gift of Mrs D. Cockburn, 1972

D149-1972

THE NETHERLANDS, Delft manufacturer

Tile

18th century

earthenware, underglaze cobalt blue

Gift of Mrs D. Cockburn, 1972

D148-1972

CHINESE

Covered jar

Ming dynasty, Tiangi period 1621–27 Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province, China

porcelain, underglaze cobalt blue

Gift of John H. Connell, 1936

3618.a-b-D3

CHINESE

Bowl

Ming dynasty, Wanli period 1573–1620 Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province, China

porcelain, underglaze cobalt blue (*Kraak* export ware)

Bequest of Howard Spensley, 1939

4339-D3

CHINESE

Vase

Ming dynasty, Wanli period, 1573–1620 Jingdezhen,
Jiangxi province, China
porcelain, underglaze cobalt blue (*Kraak* export ware)

Bequest of Howard Spensley, 1939

4265-D3

Kraak ware is a name given to a type of blue-and-white porcelain produced at Jingdezhen between 1550 and 1650 characterised by a pattern of panelled decorations in underglaze cobalt blue, either on the rim of plates or on the sides of hollow wares. The name *Kraak* derives from the Latin word for a large trading ship. This class of wares was widely exported to Europe, the Americas and sites throughout Asia. Examples have also been found in elite tombs in Jiangxi Province in China. The shape of this *Kraak* bottle probably derives from a metal form from Western Asia.

CHINESE

Cup and saucer

Qing dynasty, Kangxi period 1662–1722 Jingdezhen,
Jiangxi province, China
porcelain, underglaze cobalt blue

Bequest of Howard Spensley, 1939

4340.a-b-D3

Japanese

Plate

Edo period 1690–1730, Arita Japan
porcelain

Private collection, Melbourne

Porcelain was first made in Japan in the early seventeenth century at kilns in and around Arita, in the northern part of the western island of Kyushu. The earliest pieces were designed for the domestic market. When the decline of the Ming dynasty in China in the 1650s disrupted porcelain production at Jingdezhen, the production of Japanese porcelain intended for export to Europe increased. The centre of this plate bears the VOC monogram of the Dutch East India Company, the only Europeans permitted to maintain a trading post in Japan from 1639 until the reopening of the country in the 1850s.

ENGLAND

Lady's bodice (Jumps)

early 18th century, England

cotton, natural dyes, silk: mordant painting, quilting

Gift of Miss Marion Fletcher, 1973

D210-1973

This soft, unboned bodice, or 'jumps', was worn indoors over a chemise with a jacket and petticoat. Jumps were often quilted and fastened in the front with silk ribbons. The fabric is imported Indian cotton decorated with a mordant-painted leaf design in which two different mordants react with madder dye to create red and purple-blue. The red, blue and white palette of Indian cottons was usually achieved with madder and indigo. The bodice is lined and trimmed with indigo blue silk, probably imported from China. Indigo was widely believed to have therapeutic worth, acting as a natural insecticide and having healing properties if worn next to the skin.

(ENGLAND)

Bedcover

1700–50 (England)
linen, wool (thread)

Gift of Miss Mary Bostock, 1971

D202 A-1971

Chinese blue-and-white porcelain from the late Ming and early Qing periods was immensely popular in Europe and America, and its forms and palette appear in their embroidered textiles. The lappet border of this bed curtain embroidered in blue wool on a white linen ground echoes the curvilinear medallion borders and the fashionable blue-and-white palette of Chinese export porcelain of the period. Embroidered furnishing textiles from European production centres worked in the blue-and-white palette include embroidered bedspreads derived from Indian *palampore* (mordant painted and dyed textile) decorated with the flowering tree motif, known as *colchas*, from Castelo Branco in Portugal.

CHINESE

Vase

Qing dynasty, Kangxi period 1662–1722 Jingdezhen,
Jiangxi province, China
porcelain, underglaze cobalt blue

Anonymous gift, 1980

AS5-1980

By the Kangxi period, cobalt-decorated blue-and-white wares were the most ubiquitous class of Chinese porcelain and exported in great quantities to Europe, where they were highly desired luxury objects. The form of this Kangxi vase is not Chinese in origin but ultimately derives from a Middle Eastern metal form, reminding us that Iran and the Middle East had been the first great export market for Chinese porcelain, as well as the origin of the taste for blue-and-white decoration; a palette that, even as late as the early Ming period, was considered vulgar by some Han Chinese connoisseurs.

Indigo: decorative techniques of indigo-dyed textiles

The global availability of plants bearing the indigo dyestuff has resulted in the worldwide popularity of indigo blue textiles. It is believed that methods of extracting 'true' indigo from the plant *Indigofera tinctoria* were known in India before 2000 BCE, and textiles have been consistently dyed blue from that time by the seemingly magical process of indigo vat dyeing. Cloth immersed in the pale greenish dye vat only becomes blue when raised into the air, causing the water-soluble colourless dye indoxyl to oxidise to the blue insoluble colourant indigotin. Successive dyeing and airing produces increasingly deeper shades of blue.

Direct printing with indigo is very difficult, as the dye must be repeatedly applied to exactly the same area to produce all but the palest shades. Consequently, alternative techniques are used to pattern indigo-dyed cloth, such as resist and discharge printing; resist dyeing; the incorporation of woven or embroidered blue-dyed threads; and various finishing techniques. Resist techniques include *ikat* (in which threads are resist dyed before they are woven), tie dye, and paste or wax resists, the latter widely known as batik. The resist techniques generally produce a white pattern on a blue ground, and the resist may be applied to threads before or after they are woven.

DONG people

Jacket

20th century, Burma, Guizhou province, southern China
cotton, natural indigo; calendaring

Private Collection, Melbourne

Indigo-dyed cloth may be 'finished' using techniques that impart a particular quality to the surface of the fabric. Calendaring is a finishing technique in which the fabric is sized with a paste, such as rice paste, animal glue or blood, sugar water or a solution of bark and plant extracts, then beaten with a wooden mallet or polished with a stone or shell. The resulting shiny, smooth surface may also have coppery highlights, as seen in this calendared jacket made by the Dong people. The lustrous surface signifies wealth, beauty and practicality and calendared indigo garments are worn at festivals and as everyday wear.

EGYPT

Tunic border

5th century – 7th century CE

linen, wool

Felton Bequest, 1964

790-D5

The ubiquitous garment of Late Antique Egypt was a linen tunic decorated with wool tapestry-weave borders at the edges of the sleeves and running over the shoulders in long, vertical bands. Some tunics also featured roundels and panels at the neck, shoulders and knees. Their positions at vulnerable points on the body may have had a protective function. This border fragment is decorated with a tapestry-woven indigo-dyed wool band patterned in a repeating scroll motif. Similar patterns adorned contemporary floor mosaics throughout the Roman Empire and may have been intended to ward against the evil eye, trapping its power in the complexity of the design.

EGYPT

Tunic sleeve fragment with decorated insert

5th century – 7th century CE
linen, wool

Felton Bequest, 1964

1306-D5

Indigo was imported from India into the Mediterranean basin via overland trade routes from ancient times. This woven decoration from the sleeve of a tunic was produced in Byzantine-period Egypt. A province of the Eastern Roman Empire, Egypt at this time supported a large textile industry which produced for export cheaper imitations of luxury textiles manufactured in other parts of the Mediterranean. The hunting scenes in this sleeve fragment are woven in purple-coloured thread, achieved by over-dyeing indigo blue with red. This was done in imitation of the costly Tyrian purple dye extracted from the murex shellfish.

PAMINGGIR people

Tampan

20th century, Lampung, Sumatra, Indonesia
cotton, dyes; supplementary weft weaving

Unaccessioned item

Tampan are ceremonial textiles used to celebrate an individual's passage through life. Their decoration frequently incorporates a ship motif, referring to the individual's journey through various important stages, including birth, marriage and death. Patterns woven in the supplementary weft technique appear as positive images in a restricted dye palette of blue, yellow and red-brown derived from natural dyes, including indigo blue. The ship and serpent combined in a dragon-boat shape seen here also appears in a related type of south Sumatran ceremonial cloth known as *palepai*, in which blue ships are associated with an earthly context in contrast to red ships, which indicate the sacred realm.

JAPANESE

Summer kimono

Yukata

Meiji period 1868–1912 Japan
cotton, natural indigo; painted resist dyeing
(*tsutsugaki yuzen*)

Purchased with funds donated by the Hon. Michael Watt QC and Cecilie Hall, 2013 2013.696

Yukata are lightweight cotton summer kimonos featuring lively and popular Japanese designs. This *yukata* was created using a traditional Japanese *tsutsugaki yuzen* resist-dyeing technique, where a glutinous mix of rice flour and water is applied to the cotton fabric using a tool similar to a cake icing bag, with narrow nozzle. The kimono features more than ten different types of flowers, including hydrangeas, clematises, chrysanthemums, wisteria, irises, peonies, plum blossoms, lilies, bush clovers and bell flowers.

Traditionally *yukata* were mostly made of indigo-dyed cotton with large floral patterns suitable for younger women, and dark blue worn by older women.

Katsukawa SHUNCHŌ

Japanese active c. 1780–1801

**The courtesan Fujiwara of the house of
Tsuruya of Kyo-machi, Itchome, Shin-
Yoshiwara**

***Shin-Yoshiwara, Kyo-machi, Itchome,
Tsuruya, Fujiwara***

c. 1800 Edo (Tokyo), Japan

colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1909

431.2-2

The delicate blue in this print indicates a naturally sourced colourant, possibly *aigami* sourced from the Asiatic Dayflower (*Commelina communis*), which was light and humidity sensitive. In contrast, synthetic Prussian blue developed in Germany in 1709 and widely used in Japanese prints from the 1820s, was bright and lightfast.

Utagawa HIROSHIGE

Japanese 1797–1858

Karuizawa

from the *Sixty-nine stations of the Kiso Highway*
(*Kisokaidō Rokujūkyūtsugi*) series 1835–42
1835–38 Edo (Tokyo), Japan
colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1910

527-2

Karuizawa was a rest station on the Kiso Highway section of the Nakasendo Trail, a route through the mountains linking the former capital of Japan, Kyoto, and Edo. During the Edo period (1603–1868), the busy Kiso Highway was used by feudal lords and their servants, samurai, government officials, pilgrims, merchants, farmers and, occasionally, the *shogun* (military commander) himself, who would always travel with a large entourage. The travellers depicted in this print wear *kasuri* garments, the customary clothing of the rural worker which is dyed indigo and patterned with a resist technique. Hiroshige was one of the first Japanese artists to adopt the new synthetic pigment known as Prussian blue, seen in this print, partly because it provided for realistic depictions of water, sea and sky.

TORII Kiyotsune

Japanese active 1757–79

Early dawn in summer

Natsu no yoake

Edo period, c. 1772 Edo, (Tokyo), Japan
colour woodblock

Felton Bequest, 1909

396-2

Japanese mosquito nets (*kaya*) were traditionally made from silk, hemp or cotton and dyed with indigo which has insect repelling properties. As illustrated in this work, the nets were edged in red fabric and suspended from ropes. A sleeping figure can be seen behind the net in the background. Indigo ink, which may have been used in this print, was one of the natural blue pigments used to colour Japanese woodblock prints that were superseded by synthetic pigments, particularly Prussian blue, after 1820.

JAPANESE

Cape

Kappa

late Edo period – early Meiji period, late 19th century,
Japan

cotton, natural indigo, waxed paper, bone; weft *ikat* (*yoko gasuri*)

Purchased, 2005

2005.506

This style of cape is adapted from those worn by Portuguese missionaries in sixteenth-century Japan, and was commonly worn by rural travellers. It is a reversible garment, constructed from two different *kasuri* fabrics with a layer of waxed paper in between, making the garment wind and water resistant. The fabrics in this garment are woven using the weft *ikat* technique and dyed indigo blue; the intense, dark blue of the *kappa* requiring up to ten successive immersions in the dye bath followed by oxidisation of the cloth in the open air after each immersion.

MEIFU LI people

Woman's skirt

20th century, Dongfang county, Hainan Island, China
cotton, natural dyes; warp *ikat*

Purchased, 2006

2006.270

Hainan Island, off the coast of south China, was originally populated by the Li people who belong to the Tai Kadai/Daic language group of mainland Southeast Asia and south China. The Li grow cotton, hemp and dye plants, particularly indigo, for textile production. Indigo-dyed textiles are decorated with warp *ikat* (*ranjie*) producing a white pattern on the blue ground. Women speaking various Kadai languages across the island produced different styles of skirt cloths; this one can be attributed to a Meifu Li woman from the western part of Hainan Island, in Dongfang county.

Symbolism and function of the colour blue

The colour blue has numerous symbolic associations in different cultures and religions. In Hinduism and Buddhism blue is associated with specific deities, including the Hindu god Vishnu and his ten avatars and allies who are all coloured blue. Vishnu's colour connects him to the cosmic ocean and the sky. In Buddhist belief the Cosmic Buddha Akshobhya is also coloured blue and, like Vishnu, is associated with water and the space of the cosmos.

Blue components of garments and textiles may reflect protective and preservative properties attributed to indigo, such as the belief that the dye acts as a natural insecticide and has the ability to prevent disease or heal wounds if worn on the skin. Accordingly, Japanese mosquito nets were dyed indigo blue, and garments were lined with blue fabric. Protective properties attributed to the colour blue may account for the characteristic placement of blue appliquéd fabric on Ainu shamans' robes at areas considered vulnerable to evil forces, such as hems, sleeve and neck openings and the upper back. Similarly, the ground blue colour of a Yao Lan Tan shaman's robe may enhance the power of the protective characters embroidered on it.

TEKKE TURKMEN people

Woman's mantle

Chyrpy

early 20th century – mid 20th century, Afghanistan
silk, cotton, natural indigo dye, synthetic dyes; embroidery,
resist woodblock printing

Purchased with funds donated by Vivien Knowles, 2010

2010.91

The *chyrpy* is a distinctive embroidered coat with long vestigial sleeves worn by Central Asian Turkmen women as a shawl or mantle. The colour of the ground fabric indicates the wearer's age and marital status. Young, unmarried women wear a dark blue *chyrpy*, middle-aged or married women wear yellow and women over sixty wear white. The lining is block-printed with mud or flour to resist indigo dye, resulting in a white pattern on a blue ground which may be overdyed in madder. Block printing was traditionally done by men (*chitagars*) with three or four apprentices, in Bukhara.

AINU people

Robe

Attush

19th century Hokkaido, Japan

elm bark fibre (thread), cotton, natural indigo dye; appliqué, embroidery

Gift of David Bardas in memory of Sandra Bardas OAM through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2011

2011.339

The Ainu are the indigenous people of Japan and mainly live in the northern islands of Hokkaido, the Kuriles and southern Sakhalin. They practise animism and ancestor worship and observe rituals intended to please *kamui* (spirits) inherent in nature, placate the ancestors and ward off demons and other malevolent forces. Ainu garments included robes, known as *attush*, made from elm bark fibre cloth and decorated with appliqué indigo-dyed cotton imported from China or Honshu embellished with chain stitch embroidery. The decorations were placed around the openings of the garment and on the vulnerable upper back area to prevent evil spirits from entering the body.

YAO LAN TAN people

Shaman's robe

20th century, northern Laos

cotton, silk; natural indigo, natural dyes; embroidery

Private Collection, Melbourne

The Lan Tan, one of the twelve clans of the southern Chinese Yao people who migrated to northern Laos and Vietnam, practise a mixture of ancestor worship, animism and Daoism. Their shamans maintain the balance between the needs of ancestors, nature spirits and the world of the living. Their embroidered, indigo-dyed robes, based the design and construction of Chinese Daoist robes, include Daoist protective and holy symbols, including the four great supernatural creatures, the dragon, *qilin* or white tiger, tortoise and phoenix; *xian*, divine beings (on the back of the robe); protective phrases; and the eight trigrams (*ba gua*).

INDONESIAN

Man's cloth

Hanggi

20th century, Kodi, west Sumba, Indonesia
cotton, dyes; warp *ikat*

Presented through The Art Foundation of Victoria by Michael Abbott, Founder Benefactor, 1984
AS36-1984

On Sumba the skills and knowledge associated with traditional dyeing were part of occult knowledge known as *moro* (blueness), only possessed by a few female specialists. *Moro* also incorporated herbal medicines, poisons, fertility potions and drugs used to induce abortions. Expertise in these skills and in dyeing overlapped in the process of indigo dyeing which, on Sumba, is also linked to theories of human conception and the growth of the foetus within the womb. Kodi is an important centre for weaving in west Sumba where only indigo-dyed textiles are acceptable for the most important ritual and ceremonial occasions.

PORTUGAL, Castelo Branco

Valance

18th century

linen, silk (thread)

Purchased, 1958

1-D5

This valance, part of the hangings for a bed, is executed in a distinctive style of embroidery originating in Castelo Branco in Portugal. These textiles were heavily inspired by embroidered and printed cotton textiles produced in India and imported into Europe by Portuguese merchants. The Portuguese trading empire in Asia, Africa and the Americas not only provided access to Asian textiles, but also to new dye sources. In the early sixteenth century, the Portuguese began importing large quantities of indigo from India, leading to an increase in the dye's use in Europe. The blue silk in this embroidery is indigo dyed.

MIAO people

Hanging, bed cover or altar frontal

20th century, Guizhou province, southern China
cotton, natural indigo; wax resist

Private Collection, Melbourne

This textile may have adorned an ancestral, Daoist or Buddhist altar or have been displayed as a hanging on significant occasions, such as weddings, funerals and feast days. The decorations on this cloth, drawn in wax-resist batik, include auspicious symbols, such as paired and single birds, butterflies, carp, the endless knot and the flower vase. Some of the motifs are associated with Buddhism and Daoism, and many reflect the elements in the flora and fauna of southern China. In Miao culture a bird is considered a messenger from the gods which can assist in times of crisis, and the butterfly is regarded as the mother of creation, signifying rebirth.

Li people

Dragon cover

Long bei

late 19th century – early 20th century, Hainan Island, China
cotton, silk; natural dyes; embroidery

Private Collection, Melbourne

The Li people, members of a south Chinese Daic language group who migrated south, have inhabited Hainan Island since the Neolithic Age. Their renowned textiles were sent as tribute to local rulers and the Chinese imperial court. Most Hainan Li textiles have similarities with those of related Daic sub groups elsewhere in Southeast Asia, including the use of *ikat* and supplementary weft techniques and a brown and indigo blue palette. However, the ceremonial dragon covers (*long bei*) embroidered with auspicious Han Chinese symbols on a handspun, indigo-dyed ground, are unique and may initially may have been commissioned by the imperial Chinese court as a tribute textile.

INDIAN

Krishna slaying the horse demon, Keshi

c. 1640 Gujarat, India

opaque watercolour and silver paint on *wasli* paper

Felton Bequest, 1976

AS25-1976

The painting of Krishna slaying the horse demon predates the advent of synthetic ultramarine (1826) and Prussian blue (1724). The blue colourant has been identified as indigo after examination under infrared and ultraviolet light.

INDIAN

A page from a series of the *Sur Sagar*

c. 1730 Udaipur, Rajasthan, India

opaque watercolour and gold paint on *wasli* paper

Felton Bequest, 1980

AS112-1980

Sur Sagar (*Sur's Ocean [of Poetry]*) written by Sur Das (1483–1573), explores devotional love and longing for the blue god Krishna, eighth avatar of Vishnu, through the trials of Krishna's relationship with his beloved Radha. The longing (*viraha*) of the heroine (*nayika*) for her lover is eloquently evoked in this painting in which she is seen three times, her isolation emphasised by the pair of deer who linger in the foreground. The monsoon season, also associated with love and yearning, is indicated by a stormy blue sky rendered in indigo. The messenger's jacket is painted in azurite blue.

INDIAN

Hanuman, servant of Rama

late 19th century, Calcutta, India

watercolour, ink and silver paint over charcoal on paper
(Kalighat school)

Purchased, 1961

929-5

The monkey warrior Hanuman was a popular subject of Kalighat paintings, inexpensive pilgrimage souvenirs made in large numbers in the second half of the nineteenth century and sold at the Kali temple near the *ghats* in Calcutta. As an ally of Vishnu's seventh avatar Rama, Hanuman is appropriately coloured blue. By the mid nineteenth century *patuas* (painters) had access to inexpensive, commercially produced synthetic pigments and prepared paints, including ultramarine, which has been identified as the blue colourant in several Kalighat paintings of Hanuman. However, many painters continued to use traditional pigments such as indigo, the blue colourant in this painting.

INDIAN

Harihara

late 19th century, Calcutta, India

watercolour, ink and silver paint over charcoal on paper
(Kalighat school)

Purchased, 1953

3036A-4

Harihara is a composite deity combining the forms of the Hindu gods Shiva and Vishnu, each shown with their customary attributes. Shiva appears on the right side of the figure and Vishnu, coloured blue, on the left. Together they allude to life's endless cycle of creation and destruction, personified in Vishnu and Shiva respectively. In Kalighat paintings images of Vishnu and his incarnations were coloured in a range of blues derived from a variety of sources, including natural pigments such as *nilmoni* flowers, *aparajita* berries and indigo, and the synthetic blue pigments ultramarine (synthesised 1826) and Prussian blue (synthesised 1724).

JAVANESE

Shouldercloth or headcloth

Kain batik tulisan Arab

20th century, north Java, Indonesia
cotton, dye; batik

Presented through The Art Foundation of Victoria by Michael Abbott, Founder Benefactor, 1984
AS20-1984

Ceremonial batiks of north coast Javanese Muslim communities decorated with calligraphic designs based on Arabic script are named *tulisan Arab* or *kaligrafi Arab*. The writing on them is often illegible, partly because the person waxing the designs may have been illiterate in Arabic, and partly because the design needs only evoke the word of the prophet Mohammed and the Islamic scriptures to confer talsimanic properties. The blue-and-white palette also had protective power. *Kaligrafi* batiks were used as hangings over bridal thrones and marriage beds, coverings for the Koran or as garments for the upper body, such as headcloths and jackets for warriors.

INDIAN

Vishvarupa

late 19th century, Rajasthan, India
opaque watercolour on cotton

Gift of John McCarthy in memory of Edwin and Margot McCarthy through
the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2013

2013.105

The colour blue is associated in Hinduism with Vishnu, the god of preservation who maintains the cosmic balance between good and evil. Vishnu and his avatars, including Krishna and Rama, and their allies, such as Hanuman the monkey warrior, are all coloured blue. The usual interpretation for the association of Vishnu with the colour blue is the god's affinity with the great blue expanses of sky and water. As Trivikrama, Vishnu claims the firmament by stepping across it, and as Narayana he creates the cosmos while floating on a primordial ocean.

Indigo-dyed textiles: everyday wear, status and prestige

Traditionally, working-class clothing in many communities across Asia and Europe mainly comprised blue-dyed garments. This was due to the widespread availability of dye plants containing the dyestuff indigotin, a blue dye that was light- and washing-fast on both cotton and wool. In addition to these useful properties, many different shades could be obtained from one dyebath, according to the number of times the fabric was immersed. Simple techniques such as resist dyeing and appliqué could therefore transform workwear with patterns in several shades of blue.

Blue as a fabric colourant was also used for prestigious ceremonial cloths and textiles which signified the status of the wearer. These cloths were highly regarded; either for their deep blue colour – signifying the dyer's skill and mastery of the temperamental indigo vat – or their embellishment with finely wrought resist-dyed patterns and various precious materials, including gold leaf, beads and woven and embroidered silk thread. Other indicators of rank incorporated in indigo-dyed textiles include extra dye colours and design motifs restricted to the nobility or only deemed appropriate for certain types of ceremonial cloths.

JAPANESE

Rag kimono

Noragi ranru

1900–50 Japan

cotton, indigo; resist dyeing (*kasuri*), quilting, *saschiko* stitching

Purchased, 2005

2005.508

The use of cotton was widespread in Japan by the middle of the Edo period (1615–1868), as the feudal government encouraged frugality and attempted through sumptuary laws to ban the wearing of silk clothes by merchants and commoners. Indigo dye also became widely used at this time, and indigo blue cotton garments signified the working-class status of the wearer. This rag kimono, a style commonly worn by impoverished rural workers, combines many different types of resist-dyed (*kasuri*) fabrics from old garments held together with sashiko stitching, a quilting technique in running stitch used to impart warmth and strength to garments.

KHYANG CHIN people

Woman's tunic

Phyang

late 19th century – early 20th century, Rakhine State, Burma

cotton, silk, natural indigo, synthetic dyes; warp *ikat*, supplementary weft weave, embroidery

Private Collection, Melbourne

This tunic is decorated with embroidery, warp *ikat* and supplementary weft weaving. The zigzag pattern of the indigo dyed ground is made using warp *ikat*, an uncommon dyeing technique in Chin textiles only undertaken by selected sub-groups for women's tunics. Its selective use, as well as the time, preparation and skill involved in its successful execution, have contributed to the textile's status, which is further enhanced by the fine embroidery at the sleeve edges and the central seam. The supplementary weft band across the breast and back illustrate the weaver's skill, as the warp-faced ground weave transitions into a weft-faced decorative panel.

LAUKTU CHIN people

Woman's tunic

late 19th century – early 20th century, Rakhine State,
Burma

cotton, silk, natural indigo, synthetic dyes; supplementary
weft weave, embroidery

Private Collection, Melbourne

In Chin State, north Burma, status was reflected by the ownership of certain prestige goods, most of which were obtained from outside Chin society through raids or trade. The only prestige goods local in materials and manufacture were heirloom textiles, four of which are displayed here. These Chin garments are all high-status textiles which confer prestige through the skills associated with their creation. They feature indigo blue-dyed cotton fabric woven by Chin women on backstrap looms and embellished with several techniques, including embroidery, warp *ikat* and supplementary weft patterning.

TOBA BATAK people

Skirtcloth and shouldercloth for men and women; ceremonial textile

Ulos sibolang

mid 20th century, Toba region, North Sumatra, Indonesia
cotton, natural indigo, synthetic dyes; warp *ikat*, weft twining

Collection of Robyn, John and Simeran Maxwell, Melbourne

The term Batak describes several ethnic groups living near Lake Toba in north Sumatra. In Batak culture, textiles are not merely garments, but are essential elements of ceremonial life and prominent in gift exchanges and life-cycle rituals. Cloths of many types are presented as gifts on important occasions following strict rules that relate to kinship. The indigo-dyed *ulos sibolang*, woven near Lake Toba, is probably one of the oldest Batak textile styles and has the highest status of the three types of indigo-dyed textiles used for Toba Batak rituals (*ulos sibolang*, *ulos bolean* and *ulos surisuri*).

BUYEI PEOPLE

Baby carrier panel

mid 20th century – late 20th century, Guizhou province,
southern China

cotton, natural indigo; appliqué, embroidery

Private Collection, Melbourne

CHIN people

Man's loincloth

Hrern te

late 19th century – early 20th century, northern Chin State,
Burma

cotton, silk; supplementary weft weave

Private Collection, Melbourne

CHIN people

Man's blanket

Can-lo puan

late 19th century – early 20th century, northern Chin State, Burma

cotton, dyes; supplementary weft weave

Private Collection, Melbourne

This type of textile is a high-status man's blanket favoured in the northern Chin hills region. It is woven by the wives of chiefs and other important men, thus acquiring prestige which is also dependent on its function and the quality and complexity of its weave. The blankets are worn as garments and used ceremonially; for example, as wrapping cloths for the head of the ox sacrificed at a feast for the elders. A broad loincloth such as the example on display was once worn with *can-lo puan*.

INDONESIAN

Man's cloth

Hinggi

20th century, east Sumba, Indonesia
cotton, dye; warp *ikat*

Presented through The Art Foundation of Victoria
by Michael Abbott, Founder Benefactor, 1984

AS37-1984

The composition of confronting paired animal motifs on this cloth is derived from European coins and medallions and has been applied to imported motifs, such as rampant crowned lions, as well as local Indonesian imagery, including prawns and stags.

INDONESIAN

Man's cloth

Hinggi kombu

c. 1890 east Sumba, Indonesia
cotton, natural dyes; warp *ikat*

Bequest of Rose Mulock-Houwer MBE, 2007

2007.692

The colour and patterns of Sumbanese textiles were once indicators of social rank, Sumbanese cloths incorporating red dye from *kombu* (*morinda citrifolia*) traditionally reserved for nobility and indigo blue cloths worn by commoners. Animals associated with the ruling Sumbanese class (*maramba*) are chickens or cocks (animals of ritual sacrifice), deer with spreading antlers (a symbol of royalty) and prawns who shed their shells in a process of renewal (symbolic of a ruler's powers). The Sumbanese believe a person is able to acquire the special powers and qualities of certain creatures when textiles displaying such motifs are worn.

JAVANESE

Woman's waistcloth or skirtcloth

Selendang prada

20th century, north Java, Indonesia

cotton, dye, gold leaf; *batik tulis*

Presented through The Art Foundation of Victoria by Michael Abbott, Founder Benefactor, 1984
AS17-1984

The blue pattern of this cloth, created with indigo dye and hand-drawn batik (wax resist), has been completely covered in gold leaf, raising the prestige of the textile and making it suitable for ceremonial use. Cloths thus embellished are known as *batik prada* and used in Javanese bridal costumes or as hangings in a bridal chamber. The colour blue in batik production did not necessarily have a symbolic connotation; however, in Javanese society colours may relate to the age of the wearer, or may have cosmological significance – with blue/black associated with north and death.

MANGGARAI people

Tubular skirtcloth for men and women

Lipa songke jok

mid 20th century, Lambaleda district, West Flores,
Indonesia

cotton, natural indigo, synthetic dyes; supplementary weft
weaving (*songke*), tapestry weave (*jok*)

Collection of Robyn, John and Simeran Maxwell, Melbourne

Indigo blue is almost ubiquitous in traditional everyday garments across mainland and island Southeast Asia. Its visual predominance in the overall decorative scheme takes many forms, from overall blue garments and those in differing shades of blue or embellished with other dyes, to embroidered, appliquéd or woven details. The Manggarai people of western Flores produce indigo-dyed tubular skirtcloths for men and women decorated in multicoloured supplementary weft weave. Known as *lipa songke*, their quality is judged by the richness of the indigo-dyed, handspun cotton base, the intricacy of motifs and presence of triangular motifs (*jok*) along the top edge and hem.

NGADA people

Woman's ceremonial skirtcloth

Lawo butu

20th century, Central Flores, Indonesia

cotton, natural indigo dye, shells, glass beads; warp *ikat*, appliqué

Presented through The Art Foundation of Victoria by Michael Abbott, Founder Benefactor, 1984
AS31-1984

Indigo is the main colourant of cotton textiles in the Ngada region of west-central Flores. These textiles are usually patterned with warp *ikat* motifs and one class of high-status, ceremonially significant cloth is embellished with brightly coloured beads. This type of textile, known as *lawo butu*, is made as a clan heirloom and worn only by mature Ngada women belonging to the nobility at certain festivals. The tubular skirtcloth, which is dyed and woven by women and beaded by men, is fastened over the shoulders to form a long garment displaying the beaded decoration down the centre front.