



SINGING THE BLUES; SOULFUL DYEING FOR ALL ETERNITY

by John Marshall. Saint Titus Press, c/o John Marshall, PO Box 115, Covelo, California 95428. 2018. Softcover. 90 pages. \$45.

John Marshall has distilled his extensive knowledge of traditional indigo dyeing into a recipe book for a non-Japanese speaking audience. He has translated original Japanese dye texts into simplified instructions and includes a broad range of dye techniques and preparation methods with easy-to-follow directions. There is more variety in these pages than the typical Western technique of “dip, remove, repeat” that is taught in most dye workshops.

Marshall covers the different plants containing the chemicals that make up the indigo color, how to grow the plants, preserve or store the leaves, and a multitude of ways to extract color from the leaves. These methods include using fresh, dried, cooked or fermented leaves which are then pressed, embossed, blended or immersed with fabric to produce the distinctive indigo blue.

Several versions of fermentation and reduction vats are described, as well as descriptions for freehand painting or printing with pigments, including some combined techniques, such as dyeing and painting. The book concludes with photographs of Marshall’s dyed pieces, works from Japanese artists, a discussion of fading in indigo dyed fabrics, and photos of various types of equipment used during the dye process.

The materials required for growing, drying, fermenting and extracting the indigo dye are relatively easy to obtain, though not necessarily inexpensive, depending on whether you want to simply dabble or wholly immerse yourself in this endeavor. The most basic of the dye instructions requires supplies that you may already have at home, such as a blender. The more complicated techniques, like fermentation, require a sump pump and a composter.

It would be helpful to have some dye experience before tackling the projects in this book. Also, these methods are not for those expecting quick results. Many of the recipes require more than a day (or even a week) for the dye to mature.

I have dyed with both natural and synthetic indigo, and with commercial dyes. I have also grown woad (a poor substitute) and Japanese *Polygonum tinctorium*, though my paltry four plants did not produce enough leaves for dyeing. The first thing I did after reading this book was to go online and order seeds. Although I do not expect to achieve the breadth or scope of Mr. Marshall’s work, I expect to be highly entertained by my future experiments in this realm of color.

*Reviewed by Lynn Ruggles
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