



Textile and Dyes as Transnational, Global Knowledge

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(Graduate School participants)

In Situ Graduate School,
Leiden, 18-23 September 2022

The September 2022 In Situ Graduate School *Textile and Dyes as Transnational, Global Knowledge* brought academics, researchers, and practitioners to Leiden, The Netherlands, to engage with their shared interest in the importance of textiles in Africa and Asia and the discourse surrounding their presence in Europe. It brought critical questions about the colonial powers, pasts, and histories carried across the oceans by the textile trade. It opened debates on decolonising narratives and practices, while recognising and acknowledging the diverse lenses through which the textiles are seen and interpreted.

This in-person graduate school was an opportunity to interrogate prevailing, dominant discourses through other, less visible, and marginalized vantage points. The intense week-long event revealed to us a world of hidden, invisible, and less common debates and discussions. It was an enriching experience, that, unlike regular classroom sessions, brought together many people interested in textiles, something that does not happen often. The three sub-themes were (1) Circulations of textiles and dyes along less visible cartographies; (2) Textile and dyes as sites of precarity and meaning; (3) Testimonies of past and present subjectivities of cloth, clothing, and colour.

Convenors Jody Benjamin (University of California, Riverside, USA), Neelam Raina (Middlesex University, UK), Pedro Pombo (University of Mauritius, Mauritius) and Academic Director of the Humanities Across Borders programme Aarti Kawlra (IIAS, Leiden) each led an efficient team of participants. They had shared readings beforehand, which now offered a space for both casual conversations and meaningful discussions. Topics covered in the classroom included the trading and travel of textiles from Asia and Africa to Europe, revisiting the journeys they travelled and the textiles' meanings based on past testimonies, and records and current biases or preferences for certain aesthetics. They brought about important discussions and allowed the

participants to continue the dialogues outside the classroom.

The graduate school started with a session to introduce the convenors, participants, and themes. We were also introduced to an online portal designed for sharing our reflections and holding discussions. This was followed by a long walk through the charming city centre of Leiden. The walking tour familiarised us with the buildings and places that had made Leiden one of the hotspots for woollen cloth production in the past. Walking along the lanes and canals, both first-time visitors and those who already knew the city discovered the places best known for the woollen cloth production. The 'Lakenhal,' currently a municipal museum of fine arts, was the place where the woollen cloths were checked by the guild. 'Langebrug,' a street that once ran along a now-closed canal was where wool was felted using the water from the



Above: Examining a special textile collection in the National Museum of Ethnology (Museum Volkenkunde), Leiden.
Right: Jansen Holland African Fabric Shop.

canal. Both are just a stone's throw away from Leiden University. Each day was filled with several activities, seminars, and visits that helped the group bond together and engage in various debates. Using so-called 'accession cards,' we added our research, fieldwork, reflections, and practical work to the online portal.

Visits to local museums, the Textile Research Centre in Leiden, the Textiel Museum in the city of Tilburg and to the 'Jansen Holland' shop sparked formal and informal debates and discussions about the post-colonial influences and policies that affected the textile trade and practices. Several reflections were shared and debated throughout the sessions, bringing forward the importance of concepts like transnationalism, provenance, and the precarity of textiles in the context of colonialism and its aftermath, and how they should be discussed nowadays in the light of post-colonialism and globalization.

The Textile Research Centre is an independent research-focused centre deliberately not identifying as a museum. The research centre curates a library and a textiles archive from which the tactile and fragile world of textiles are also brought to the general audience. Dr Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood facilitated the group discussions, taking us through the centre's current exhibition of African textiles. This led to discussions about origins, stories, curations, and challenges. We also discussed what would be effective and respectful methods and strategies for the exhibition of textiles with complicated histories and narratives. Later, our visit to the colourful and exuberant shop of Jansen Holland with its amazing collection of Vlisco textiles took us to the question of colonial structures and their influence and effect on textiles, trading, ownership, display narrative(s), appropriation, and adaptation.

The seminars led by the convenors offered an open platform to discuss meanings and metaphors against louder and more popular narratives that have become common and have established (too simplistically) recognisable frameworks of perception. Observing the textiles in the museum archives, we further probed the questions of provenance and how to sustain the unique and distinguished stories of these textiles, here forgotten or appropriated. A specific piece of textile triggered disturbing debates. Now stripped of its relationship to place, purpose and community, it had become nothing more than an object of curiosity and souvenir.

The visits to Museum Volkenkunde, the Lakenhal and TextielMuseum in Tilburg allowed the group to examine and understand some of the rare textiles from their archives as well as put into perspective the contemporary interpretations of the African wax prints present at the Jansen Holland shop. These African wax prints and some of the finest woven and painted fabrics reiterated the importance of acknowledging and recognising cultural positions, collective identity and representation. Furthermore, our examination of the coveted and precious fabrics in the museum archives led us to consider the key actors who played influential roles in the production, circulation

and movement of these fabrics from Asia and Africa to Europe. As fabric production underwent changes over time, the changing narrative was accompanied by new visual styles. Consequently, contemporary debates often offer no deeper insight into the original meaning and cultural history of the textiles under consideration. Fabric production was the main topic during our visit to TextielMuseum in Tilburg, where the evolution of different textile technologies from the Early Modern period to today was on display. Here, we could observe how new technologies had changed the production of fabrics and garments, from the first mechanic looms to other textiles-related machinery and again to computer-designed and printed textiles.

Public Roundtable 'The Provenance Question: Blind spots in Itineraries of Museum Collections'

The graduate school concluded with a Public Roundtable titled 'The Provenance Question: Blind spots in Itineraries of Museum Collections.' Academics, museum curators, other professionals, and people with a specific interest in the topic engaged in a comprehensive discussion about issues related to museums and objects and the way museums should include discourses based on mutual cultural respect. Concluding the graduate school with individual presentations brought forth deliberations about the different lenses used by academicians, practitioners, and researchers that form their approaches and ideas. Bringing postcolonial discourse to the table proved to be an effective way to help unravel the complexity of the multiple layers of meaning associated with objects arising from culture, creative industries and economies, heritage and personal cultural intimacies. The understandings gained, along with memories and curations, can address ways to deal with the presumptions and louder narratives. Viewing and handling textiles is a tactile, sensory, intimate, and personal experience, making it a universal response. Unaware of the context in which the textile objects were created, the audience is drawn to their visual exposition, which opens the intricacies of the past and current histories, cultural, collective, and personal meanings. The fineness of the fabric making, the construction and surface development techniques and the craftsmanship involved cannot be considered apart from the discourse about belonging, authenticity, ownership, and displacement.

The International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) would like to express gratitude to its partners LeidenGlobal and Humanities Across Borders. Without their commitment, this In Situ Graduate School would not have been such a success.

We also thank the various institutions in Leiden and the Netherlands for enriching the programme with their extensive and insightful industry knowledge, namely, the National Museum of Ethnology (Museum Volkenkunde), Museum De Lakenhal, TextielMuseum, Textile Research Centre, Textiel Factorij, and Jansen Holland African Fabric Shop.

Last but not least, many thanks to the Graduate School convenors, Neelam Raina, Jody Benjamin, and Pedro Pombo, and to the participants of the Public Roundtable *The Provenance Question: Blind Spots in Itineraries of Museum Collections*. They were: AJ Salter (MA Graduate, Leiden University), Annette Schmidt (Curator Africa, Research Centre for Material Culture and Museum Volkenkunde), Jos Damen (Head Library Department, African Studies Centre), and Pieter ter Keurs (Professor of Museums, Collections and Society, Leiden University, LeidenGlobal and LDE Centre for Global Heritage and Development). We are grateful for your contribution and dedication throughout the programme.

Further information:
www.iias.asia/masterclasses/textiledyes