

Norwegian Natural Dyeing



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Norwegian Natural dyeing: Art, Craft, Gender and Innovation - Natural dyes as a Tradition in Norway

(Views expressed in this article are the personal opinion of the Author, a narration of their experience.)

As you may know, Norway is located far north in Europe. We have a cold climate with a short summer, during which nature almost explodes. The country is sparsely populated, and because only 2 per cent of the land is suited for farming, Norwegians never supported themselves exclusively from growing crops. Multi-tasking and trading have always been necessary to survive “on top of the globe.”



Figure 1 (left): Norway during summer time, Hardangervidda.

Figure 2 (right): Winter time in Numedal. Typical pictures. Photographs by Mette Biering.

Despite the short summers, sources for all the rainbow colors can be found in nature. Plants, trees, bark, lichen, shrubs, mushrooms, seaweed and even purple snails (*Nucella lapillus*), are something the old Norsemen and women were aware of and used, not only on their home made textiles, but also as trading commodities. Sheep wool, linen, hemp and nettle were the most common fibers and from trading trips abroad (some would probably call these trips with different names) the Norwegians developed a taste for silk fabrics as well. The silk was, of course, used by the wealthiest only.

Bright colors in textiles have a long tradition in Norway. The old Viking sagas and findings show that household textiles and apparel were created in bright reds, yellows

and blues, when people could afford them. Wooden household items and interiors in churches and homes were usually painted in bright colors too. This is no wonder, since our natural colors most of the year are tones of whites, grey, black, brown, blues and dark green (where needle trees are growing.) During the times before electricity, the dark time of the year must have felt even darker.

Trading with other people, imported dyes like indigo and cochineal were introduced, but this was not an immediate success. Norwegians loved their local blue dyes made from the woad plant, which gave a yellower blue than the indigo or lichen. For some time the daring risked being killed if they were discovered using the foreign indigo blue. The risk was probably taken as a matter of taste for the color, but the regulation was probably a way to protect the domestic woad production.



Figure 3: Woad grown in Norway (3). The color is more yellow than indigo.
Photography by Emily Halvorsen, Norway 2007.

As with other new products, indigo was slowly accepted by the wealthy. In old stories from the countryside it is written that rich people showed off their dark indigo clothes when going to church, although at that time, indigo had a strong odor. The lighter blue was worn by poorer people, and the poorest were left with their undyed sheep grey or natural cloth, and were often not invited into the church.

The Norwegian Women

The Norwegian woman has always had a strong and respected position in society and, historically, men were often away for long periods, for a year or years, as fishermen, sailors, traders or professional warriors. While husbands were away, wives would take care of the main chores in the household, assisted by other relatives. Many women ended up as widows at an early age and remarriage was common.

Worth mentioning too, is that Norway never had a real aristocracy like in other European countries, and the population has been quite egalitarian, compared with other

nations. For 400 years Norway was under Danish rule, and from 1814 to 1905 the Swedes ruled, so even if Norway has been a united country during its 1100 years, our independence and freedom is recent. In 1905 Norway and Ireland were the poorest countries in Europe.

All textile work has always been considered woman's work in Norway, and the women would do the work at home. Norway didn't have the guilds which were common in the rest of Europe, at least not for what was considered women's work. And the guilds that existed came much later to Norway than to other European countries. For years, the few wealthy Norwegians would send their clothes to Europe to have them professionally dyed, or they bought dyed cloth abroad or from traders.



Figure 4: *Traditional embroidery, wool on wool, dyes from madder, lichen *Parmelia saxatilis*, St. John's wort. Photograph by Mette Biering*

An exception from the women's work was a brief period in the 18th century when a small dye industry was established in Kongsberg, where the men who previously had worked in the Danish King's silver mines were ordered to dye woollen cloth madder red for the Danish/ Norwegian army jackets. The madder was grown in Denmark in an almost industrial way. And the men at the farm could always be useful when it came to heavier work, like soaking and rinsing woollen cloth in the river or lake, carding and maybe even spinning.

The Industrial Revolution - natural dyes vs. aniline dyes

The Industrial revolution reached Norway during a very nationalistic time. We had our own constitution but were ruled by the Swedes. It was also a time of financial difficulties

and much poverty, and over the years, almost half of the Norwegian population immigrated to the United States.

If trading and importing of foreign natural dyes had met with resistance, it was nothing compared with the resistance to the introduction of the chemical aniline dyes. The Norwegian authorities tried to stop all imported goods to help the economy and protect domestic manufacturing. Unnecessary products, like chemical dyes, were taxed highly or banned (something the government still does.) Campaigns were organized labelling the new chemical dyes as ugly and distasteful, having nothing to do with the Norwegian culture.

“Husfliden” and the Norwegian identity

During the same period, Norwegians wanted to find their own way of expressing themselves, not only because they had been under foreign rule for so many years, but as part of a national and romantic wave that was blowing through most of Europe. What was really Norwegian? In answering, the intellectuals and artists looked at the farmers, the way they dressed and their household items and furniture. “Husfliden”, The Norwegian Home Arts and Crafts Society was established in Oslo in 1891, and artists traveled to remote valleys to paint farmers in their country costumes, to write down their stories, to collect old natural dyeing recipes and examples of costumes from different regions.

Courses and workshops were held, and a school in Oslo was established where people learned about textile and other craft traditions. Husfliden was also established to help people earn extra income. Household items were designed centrally, specifications sent out to home crafters who made the products and sold them back to Husfliden. The arts and crafts society had stores in all villages where everything from kitchen furniture to knitted sweaters were sold, and still are.

Husfliden and the later established Heimen collected country costumes from all over Norway and constructed new ones from old findings, sometimes mixing them with new designs found on other household textiles like duvet covers. Redesign would probably be the correct description today. At the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century it became fashionable among the trendsetters in Oslo to wear folk costumes from Hardanger (fjord). Hardanger was probably chosen because the geography is spectacular and the old traditions are strong. Even the hostesses onboard the Norwegian-American line wore the costume as their uniform.

The Norwegian Folk Costume

Historic Norwegian folk costumes vary in design and color from valley to valley, embellished with rich embroideries, colorful ribbons, silk scarves and silver. The origins are usually costumes seen abroad or apparel worn by foreigners in Norway, “adopted” and made with a Norwegian twist using available or trade materials. In mining societies the inspiration would often come from Germany and German foremen. It is said that the

costumes from the valley of Setesdal were inspired by what some of the men saw in the Spanish royal court when they served as personal guards for the King of Spain.

Every farm of some size had its own patterns and colors used for apparel, weavings and coverlets. It was also a tradition that the new born baby would receive a coverlet, which would follow the person through life and finally into the grave.

The more colorful, embroidered and silver laden the costume, the wealthier the owner. Accessories were used at special occasions, for example a bride would wear extra jewelry, a red fertility skirt, extra silk scarves and a special headdress, which in many regions may be a crown. During funerals the women would wear black shawls to cover the colors.

Owning and correctly wearing a national costume during WWII was important, and the folk costume was worn by people on both sides of the war. When peace came, the folk costume was used as one of many freedom symbols.

During the 1950s and 60s the folk costumes were put away again, occasionally worn by young girls or old country women at celebrations. Most people happily embraced the arrival of chemical dyes, jeans, nylon and other easy care man made fibers and ready made garments.

In the 1970's, Norwegians voted not to become a member of the European Union and the folk costume was found again, and worn on special occasions.



Figure 5: Norwegian folk costumes. Typical family photo, 3 different folk costumes representing 3 different regions in Norway; Vestfold, Gudbrandsdalen, Telemark. Photograph by Mette Biering.

From the 1990s and still today, it is a “must” to own a folk costume. Norway has become a more multi-cultural society, and people of all ages and gender wear costumes, not necessarily originating in their home town or valley. The “bunad police” reacted when the first non-ethnic Norwegians dared to use a national folk costume.

The revival of natural dyes

Despite the campaigns for using natural dyes, the chemical dyes were so much easier to use and the dyeing process so much quicker that after a while the natural dyes were mainly used for more decorative items like tapestry weavings, embroideries, folk costumes and some coverlets. Manufactured cloth and yarn became commodities most people could afford, so home dyeing slowly disappeared.

During WWII Norway was occupied, and there was a shortage of all trading goods, so many used natural dyes again for all of their textile needs. Old knowledge was revived, and a new generation had to learn how to do the natural dyeing and home crafts, but they quickly forgot everything again after the war with the introduction of synthetics and ready-made apparel.



Figure 6 (left): Traditional pullover, wool dyed with St. John’s wort & lichen *Parmelia saxatilis*.

Figure 7 (right): Coverlet in traditional pattern, wool dyed with madder root & birch leaves. Photographs by Mette Biering.

Fashion and textile designers have for decades had a challenging job in Norway, with few exceptions. Norway has not delivered much fashion to the world either. The only item we may be known for is our knitted wool sweater in different traditional patterns. NICEF, Norwegian Initiative for Clean & Ethical Fashion, promoting environmentally friendly and ethical fashion made by Norwegian designers, was introduced at the Oslo

Fashion Week in 2007. There is hope that some of the initiatives presented by NICEF, including the use of natural dye extracts, will be recognized one day.

Developing my own style

Even as a devoted textile professional, who has worked as a designer in Norway, Germany, Austria and Holland, I did not learn about natural dyeing until I lived in a remote valley in Austria. There I designed active wear (not naturally dyed) in the 1990's. Returning to Norway, I learned that we actually had a very rich dyeing tradition ourselves.



Figure 8 (left): Crochet scarf, korkje dyed wool. **Figure 9 (right):** Knitwear pattern, indigo on wool. Photographs by Mette Biering.

I dug out information from museums and libraries. I learned traditional natural dyeing and experimented a lot. I later found out, after their deaths, that at least one of my great grandmothers was a teacher in weaving and natural dyeing, and that my grandmother knew all the secrets. I realized that it just takes one generation to lose cultural heritage and skills. The silver brooch I inherited from my great grandmother, which she received as a “Thank you for teaching us weaving and dyeing”, will always be a reminder of that for me and I will continue to share my knowledge with anyone who likes to learn.

For many years I lived in a sparsely populated valley in Norway, where I gave demonstrations in natural dyeing at exhibitions, cultural days and museums. Old people frequently came up to me and added information. I held courses, taught tapestry weaving, and made natural dyed products using different techniques, since many people have the limiting idea that the natural colors can only be used for weaving. I generally use silk and woolen fibers in yarn or fabrics to create my products.

Living in the United States, I met Karen Casselman, who taught a natural dyeing class at the Norwegian American Heritage Center in Decorah, Iowa. I already had been experimenting with dyeing and had recognized that people in older days would not have had exact weights, they would not have had watches to time everything and they would

not have had an even flame when heating. Some people along the coast or in drier areas would not necessarily have had access to fresh water, so I experimented. I used salt water to try out the effects. I added natural acids like oranges, lemon and lime, I added milk, alcohol and fermented the dye stuff, and yes, I dyed with urine as well.



Figure 10 (left): Butterflies. Indigo dyed wool, glass beads, Size 30" x 25".
Figure 11 (right): Red Earth. Madder root on wool, leather trim, Size 30" x 25".
Photographs by Mette Biering.

Karen has developed an adventurous and practical way to dye naturally using a zip lock bag instead of a pot. This means that we can do the dyeing everywhere and anytime and easily bring it with us, even on planes, as long as we take out the liquids. So, we were taught non-traditional ways of dyeing, using alternative mordants like sugar and window cleaner, and using zip lock plastic bags. Even if I already had my own methods for unpredictable dyeing, the zip lock method really opened up new doors for me when it comes to "stunt dyeing".

From Karen, I also recently learned that some of my ancestors, from where one of my other great grandmothers originated, the Lunds, made their fortunes from exporting "korkje" to Europe for more than a century. "Korkje" is a Lichen, Ochrolechia, which had a domestic use in Norway, but which was exported in much larger quantities because of the attractive deep red/purple color it produces. I had heard about the Lund family, the biggest trading house in Norway, their ships and export of fish and lobster,

but not the Korkje adventure and fortune which was made from that. Reading more about my Lund ancestors, it is written that one of the English princes actually visited the Lund family, to learn more about their dyeing industry and the growing of tobacco in Norway and in the Caribbean.



Figure 12: “Korkje stunt” (12) - a collage wall hanging, using the lichen *Ochrolechia* or “Korkje”. Fabrics are cotton, silk, wool, polyester, polyamide. Size 40” x 50”.
Photograph by Mette Biering.

Connecting past, present and future

Now I know that I have a natural dyeing history to be proud of too, - not only counting my great grandmothers and what they brought of cultural knowledge into the society, I have also read that even the Pope received some of the sacred purple dye from ocean snails collected along the Norwegian coast and I have the same type of snail in my

freezer, and I know how to get the dyes out of them, thanks to Karen's friend, Dr. Takako Terida (Japan), who visited Norway last summer.



Figure 13 (left): Seal of the family Lund.

Figure 14 (right): My great grandmother, Hulda Lund (1853-1940). Photo by Jens Brøndelsbo, year unknown.

Knowing some of my history, having learned and applied the natural dyes in traditional ways, in embroideries on folk costumes, in knitting traditional Norwegian sweaters, tapestry weaving in own design, stunt dyeing of silk scarves and creating collage wall hangings in mixed fibers and materials, I feel so grateful for gifts from nature I can pick, collect and use to express myself in endless ways.

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