Blue Dreams

On a farm in a remote Bali village, Sebastian Mesdag is taking an artisanal approach to the painstaking craft of making and using indigo dye.

BY TED LOOS PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRÉDÉRIC LAGRANGE

EARLIER THIS YEAR, the fashion brand founder Susanna Perini went about her life for two weeks with an unusual new look: Her hands and wrists were dyed a deep blue.

The coloration came as a result of an indigo dyeing workshop on the Indonesian island of Bali, where the Rome-born Perini, who established the Biasa resortwear line, has been based for more than 30 years.

"It's so intense," Perini says of the lingering results of her education in how to make and use indigo. "We had complete Krishna hands." Bali is predominantly Hindu, and one of the religion's major deities, Krishna, is often depicted with blue skin.

Perini had earned her temporary tint at Tian Taru studio, founded and run by her friend Sebastian Mesdag. Perini notes that she has 150 people working for her at Biasa, which made the tactile experience at Tian Taru more meaningful: "For this, I had my hands in it."

People have been making a pilgrimage to Tian Taru from as far away as England, France and Japan since the workshops, which accommodate no more than 10 people at a time, started in 2018. The studio is located in the village of Alas Sidem, deep in a lush jungle at the end of a rough road about 45 minutes from the Balinese town of Ubud, famous as a haven for expats.

Mesdag, 46, has become a guru of sorts for people interested in indigo, a niche within the niche world of textiles and natural dyes.

The studio produces a small number of indigo textiles that are sold in a shop on-site as well as in two stores in Ubud. Tian Taru also works with artists on custom projects, like dyeing Japanese paper for an architect and a sculpture for a wood-carver.

Mesdag, who is Dutch but was raised in Spain, lives with his Balinese wife, Ayu Purpa, and their two young children in an adjacent two-story home of their own design. There was no electricity or running water when he started the project. "It took me six years to build the house because of the condition of the place, and it was all recycled wood," says Mesdag, who has been living in Bali for 18 years. "It was all made by hand, no machines."

Two rivers converge below the property, and there are two waterfalls—though the jungle is so dense that you can't see them. Chickens and peacocks roam the yard. *Tian Taru* means "the tree that grows between heaven and earth," Mesdag says, and the home does have the feeling of a nest or treehouse.

Teak is everywhere, including the built-in furniture in every room that Mesdag conceived, carved by a Balinese woodworker. "We were influenced by Japanese and minimalist design," he says. The second floor mostly lacks exterior walls, with bedrooms

MAGIC KINGDOM Freshly dyed indigo textiles dry at Sebastian Mesdag's Balinese workshop and farming property, called Tian Taru. Opposite: Working with bundles of silk indigo yarn intended for a weaving project.

open to the tropical air. In the kitchen is a traditional Balinese fireplace made of mud, where the family warms up (mornings are surprisingly cold).

Outside, Mesdag and Purpa farm assam indigo plants, whose leaves, which look like a larger version of Thai basil, are turned into the deep blue dye in a laborious process. It's one that Mesdag has spent his entire adult life perfecting, including a four-year sojourn working with natural dyes in India, where indigo has been used for centuries.

"It's a very, very old form—it's quite a different color because it's alive," Mesdag says. By "alive," he means that a naturally occurring bacteria is crucial to the process, not unlike in winemaking, which relies on microorganisms to ferment. As a result, no two indigo batches are exactly the same color. "Every vat you make—even though we use the same recipe—is different," says Mesdag.

The alchemy of transformation lingers in the minds of those who spend time with Mesdag. "A green plant that turns blue, almost black—it's a magic color," says the Spanish artist Cesar Fernandez, who did the workshop earlier this year and who has been incorporating indigo into his mixed-media works.

People have been fascinated by indigo for thousands of years, says the independent decorative arts curator and consultant Emily Zilber, who has worked as a curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. "Indigo is incredible for how it's been a unifying material," she says. "It's touched almost every corner of the globe and every culture. It has thousands of years of history, and it's one of the oldest materials used for dyeing and printing."

Indigo has what Zilber calls a "high-low" appeal. "It shows up across classes," Zilber says. "Indigo is a luxury item and prized, but also a marker of the people when it comes to things like blue jeans."

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"It was called the blue gold when it came from India," says Mesdag of the European taste for the dye in the Middle Ages. "They didn't know it came from a plant, because they bought it as a dry cake."

Just as the crushed mineral lapis lazuli was the source of one of the most rare, prized and expensive colors for painters at the height of the Renaissance—the Virgin Mary was often given the highest-status blue robes—blue has had special virtues for textiles, too.

"It's one of the more stable colors," says Christina Bisulca, a conservation scientist at the Detroit Institute of Arts. "When you see the old tapestries, the green landscape parts look blue now. That's because the yellow dye has faded and the blue remains."

Mesdag didn't know any of this when he fell in love with indigo as a teenager, a discovery that stemmed from an unusually peripatetic childhood. He was born in the south of Spain. "My parents didn't like the whole Dutch thing," says Mesdag of their move southward. "They left with just a car, a parrot and a dog to set up house." Both his mother and father were furniture designers who worked on home decoration projects.

Mesdag grew up with three brothers in the countryside on a farm with horses near Málaga, and his siblings have all embraced remote locales later in life, with one moving to the Galápagos. "As young kids, we were always traveling with my parents," he recalls. "It was go, go, go. They were basically like, 'Don't come home.'"

Mesdag feels that art is in his blood: His great-uncle was the marine painter Hendrik Willem Mesdag (1831–1915), who was famed for the *Panorama Mesdag*, a room-encircling work 46 feet high and 394 feet around that gives a 360-degree view of a beach, dunes and sea. It's housed in a purpose-built museum in The Hague that became a tourist attraction at the end of the 19th century, and remains one.

It was a relative Mesdag knew personally, however, his uncle Hans van Praag, who brought him into contact with indigo for the first time on a teenage trip to Bali. "I was fascinated by the textiles in Indonesia right away," says Mesdag. He was visiting the house that his uncle built at the end of his life, after previously living in Bali in the 1920s and '30s, when the island was a Dutch colony.

The cloth Mesdag bought on that trip was a patterned ceremonial textile made on the nearby island of Sumba, a belt or headband that would have been worn by an aristocrat; it shows three female ancestor figures, nude except for royal crowns, on an indigo ground, flanked by zigzag snakes. Handwoven in cotton, the piece was created in layers. He still has it. (Tian Taru is only 15 minutes from where his uncle once lived.)

Mesdag was at boarding school in England at the time. Later he went to Central Saint Martins art school in London and then earned a painting degree at Parsons Paris. "But I really wasn't happy with the chemical materials used in painting, so I wanted to learn about natural dyes," he says.

In 1998 he moved to Kolkata, India, to work with Weavers Studio, which specializes in high-end textiles (Mesdag has kept up his relationship with the company, and collaborates with Weavers on shawls that take up to eight months to produce). "Then I enrolled in an Indian university, but after six months it just didn't work for me," he recalls. "So I decided to live with a tribe where I was learning directly from them," he says of the Santhal people in the Indian state of West Bengal.

Single at the time and open to being far from home, Mesdag says he spent four years in a small village, in a mud house. "I learned how to live a very simple life," he says. "And to be accepted by the tribe was quite something." He also got an irreplaceable education. "We had around 80 women from the Muslim community who did embroidery," he says. "They taught me all about natural dyes. We worked with many different colors, and it was so hands-on."

NOW MESDAG is passing on some of that knowledge. The Tian Taru workshops, which Purpa has a hand in running, compress the long process of making a dye and using it into a single day, by preparing some of the steps ahead of time, as on a cooking show. Part of the fun is a lunch break in Mesdag's house. "We do an Indonesian lunch with herbs from the garden, our own coconuts," he says. "We keep it very traditional."

Mostly unseen by participants is the farming aspect, which has been more than a decade in the making. The assam indigo plants thrive in Tian Taru's clay soil but are particular about growing conditions.

"About 15 years ago, [after] we bought the property, we used to make and sell natural-dye T-shirts, and all the money went to planting trees," Mesdag says. "So we planted a forest that provides the perfect shade and humidity for this indigo to grow naturally."

Once the leaves are harvested, they are soaked for several days in water, which turns green, then blue, and then purple. The addition of lime (calcium hydroxide) causes the indigo to settle to the bottom. The water is discarded and then after several more steps, the indigo takes on a paste form that should be the consistency of Greek yogurt, Mesdag says. It goes into a vat with hot water and more lime. Then comes the addition of locally harvested palm sugar.

Once the bacteria is working its magic, the batch has to be kept at the right pH level. "If it goes under or over, then it dies, and then you don't get any more of the color," says Mesdag. "Some people can keep them alive for many years." (It may make American pandemic-era bakers think of coddling their sourdough starter.) He prefers doing a fresh batch each time, to avoid long-term constant monitoring. That's possible because of Bali's near-perfect climate, which allows for year-round harvesting of the assam indigo plants.

When it is ready to use for dyeing, Mesdag's workshop guests have one textile given to them on-site, but they can retrofit something from home, too. "I always suggest that they bring an old T-shirt or a pair of trousers to make them new," he says. Once the cloth has been dampened and prepared, it can be submerged in the blue liquid. The more times the piece is submerged, the darker the coloration.

"It's a very slow process, and it's kind of meditative," says Mesdag, a sentiment that Perini agrees with. "It's therapy for me," she says. "I will do it again and again."

As for the blue hands that the participants take with them into the wider world, Mesdag says, "It's good advertising." •

TREE HOUSE
Clockwise from left: Mesdag and his wife, Ayu Purpa, designed their house, which is in the village of Alas Sidem—*Tian Taru* means "the tree that grows between heaven and earth"; Mesdag with the couple's two children; dyed textiles in Mesdag's workshop.

HEARTH BEAT
Purpa, here wearing a textile made at Tian Taru, works on projects alongside Mesdag.

DIP DOWN
Left: Mesdag is assisted by Gusti Ngurah Arka as they dye fabric in a vat of prepared indigo. Below: Indigo-dyed paper made by Mesdag from banana-plant pulp with artisan Naruse Kiyoshi.